

On *The Burning Child*:
A Conversation with
Joseph Koerner

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

B.B.: Thank you for agreeing to talk about your new—and first major—film, *The Burning Child*, made in 2014–17 and only now, almost by accident, ready for release, exactly eighty years after the infamous *Anschluss*, on March 12, 1938, the annexation of Austria by German Nazi military forces, an event welcomed by large segments of the Austrian population, as the film’s newsreel clippings show.

The film begins and ends with rather elegiac sequences of landscape images of the Vienna mountains and the Danube. One could easily mistake these enchanting images as announcing the project’s latent (or even manifest) desire for a return to a geographically and historically defined sense of home and belonging. This apparently unaltered landscape and a cyclically renewed nature seem to guarantee and mediate a possible recovery of the loss of what the German language calls a *Heimat*. Yet the sudden cuts to an industrialized train system—a frequently recurring motif in the film—rapidly rupture these initial delusions.

But it might be even better to start our conversation by discussing the very peculiar end of the film, which functions almost like a satyr play at the end of a tragedy. In an apparently accidental encounter, you converse with a very elderly and very eccentric gentleman in his bathing suit on a Danube beach. In a two-hour movie about your family’s history in Vienna, he is the only person who pronounces the word *Heimat*. Stranger yet, almost in passing, he also voices the sole reference to your mother, on first encounter a rather surprising absence in a film about a family history. Thus he performs an almost grotesque conclusion to the film’s complex network of efforts attempting to reconstruct the intersections of a traumatic individual and collective history.

J.K.: The end sequence did happen by chance. But like so much of my childhood experience of Vienna—which I wanted the film ritually to repeat—the old man’s appearance on the beach seemed weirdly fated, like we had planned it. I had a principle for all the film’s locations. We didn’t have years to shoot: just the summer of 2014, plus a few weeks the following summer to tie up the pieces. Because my father spent most of his life looking for places in Vienna



Joseph Koerner. The Burning Child. 2014–17.

to paint, I decided we'd simply use his research as our guide. So almost at the end of the second summer's shoot we made our way to the Gänsehäufel—an island in an arm of the Danube that is shut off from the main river, with beaches on three sides. My father used to take us there because it had lots of space to relax and he loved to paint there. He liked to paint nudes—not classical ones or models posed in a studio, but people outdoors, in bathing suits or nude on this island's nude beaches—and he could paint them there on the spot. He could get *anyone* to pose for him. We used to have this peculiar cabana, this *Kabine*, on the third story of one of the several “tower cabanas” there—it looks like a concrete-skeleton miniature of the three-story apartment building we lived in in Vienna, and also like the three-story building my father grew up in, the one destroyed during the war. So we went to get footage of the beach and the tower cabana. It was a cold day, and I knew no one would be there, but I liked the place that way—with the leaves of the poplars rustling nervously in the wind. I also wanted to get shots of the Gänsehäufel, because the film begins with helicopter footage of a ruined castle and me in voice-over saying how I used to write stories about that ruin at the Gänsehäufel. So we were dragging our equipment to the beach, and I explained to the team that there'd be no one there I would remember, but if there were, then it would have to be an old gigolo, because he basically lived at the Gänsehäufel. He used to claim to be Italian but his accent was Yugoslavian. He was always unbelievably tan from sitting in the sun in a skimpy bikini. I was describing this to the team, and there he was! I couldn't believe my eyes, because I assumed he had died years ago, yet he was sitting in the same spot in the same bikini on the same collapsible bed. As I stood stunned into silence, our Steadicam operator and a very experienced filmmaker, Alexander Boboschewski, started rolling the camera and interviewing the old man himself. So I jumped in, but with no expectation he'd remember anything, because he must be almost one hundred years old, and I'd never spoken with him, even as a child. The uncanny thing was, not only did he recollect everything, he started remembering things about my father that I didn't know, secrets about my father at the Gänsehäufel that I couldn't put into the film.

It was like meeting Tiresias. He had watched everything, and seemed to know my father—and my mother—almost too intimately. So we had all this footage, and I insisted we include him somehow, but I didn't know how or where.

B.B.: To have this grotesque figure appear as the conclusion of a two-hour film that moves between private, archival, and public historical exploration, between documentary research of the destruction of your family and the Jewish community of Vienna by German and Austrian Fascism and art-historical reflections on the extraordinary architecture and urbanism of modern Vienna, is a rather remarkable decision . . .

J.K.: He is a final detour, or a comical coda. This might not seem in the spirit of the film, which has a tragic structure, but it is totally in the spirit of my father and his approach to painting Vienna. His art was more comical or grotesque than melancholic. That's why he went to the Gänsehäufel, because of the gentle surrealism of people doing everyday things—playing cards, cooking meals, typing letters, playing badminton—more or less in the nude.

B.B.: The Gänsehäufel was a public beach?

J.K.: Yes. In Vienna there are more elegant public bathing places. The Gänsehäufel is the most proletarian, and the largest. Its architecture is interesting for the film's exploration of Viennese modernism. The concrete three-story *Kabinen* as well as all the other bits—the restaurants, the spiral clock tower, the tubular steel chairs and benches—were designed by the last surviving students of Otto Wagner—socialist housing experts who, after the Second World War, rebuilt the destroyed Gänsehäufel in a strict functionalist style. My father went to the old Gänsehäufel as a kid, and he was fascinated by the proximity between the nude men's and nude women's beaches—boys graduated, as it were, from being with their mother on the one beach to exile on the other. This came to have a symbolic character for him—like two internment camps. But we went there because our apartment was so tiny—four people in two rooms, with a shared toilet in the hall—and at the beach you could spread out and sit by yourself. We were like the Yugoslavian gigo—lo—who, by the way, explained on camera how he never had to have a career, because women always liked him and he liked women, and so forth. When you see him walking offscreen at the end of the film, he's actually going off to his newest partner, who was ancient, too. So his memory of my mother was interesting, because he remembers her and he perks up, and . . .

B.B.: That was a particularly painful moment . . .

J.K.: There were so many uncanny repetitions. When he says about Vienna—of his own accord—“*Es hat meine Heimat ersetzt*” (“It replaced my homeland”), it's exactly what I wanted to say about how Pittsburgh—plus painting in Vienna—replaced my father's *Heimat*. There is also something very representative about him being Yugoslavian, because the neighborhood we lived in, which used to be largely Jewish, consisted in my childhood of basically two populations: war widows and immigrants from Yugoslavia. Our apartment building was ruled by a cranky *Hausbesorger* (a very Viennese institution, by the way, these building superintendents who live in the building, in the worst apartment, and work for the owner—there's a whole literature on how they aided Aryanization after the *Anschluss*). She refused to let any immigrants into the building. My father got our apartment through some machinations, but the building was almost empty—just three senile old ladies and the *Hausbesorger*. The owner was waiting for everyone protected by rent control to die off.

- B.B.: Until the film's grotesque ending, we haven't really heard anything about your mother; we do not even know whether your mother was Austrian or American.
- J.K.: I decided not to go into my mother's history. That probably was a mistake, but I didn't want to dwell too intensely on my family's post-1945 history. She was younger than my father by seventeen years. She came from Escanaba, way in the north of Michigan, in the Upper Peninsula. She was half-Catholic and half-Protestant, and escaped Escanaba and her family by becoming a violinist and entering the music conservatory at the Pennsylvania College for Women, in Pittsburgh—now Chatham University. And that's where she met my father. He came to Pittsburgh for "aesthetic reasons," as we liked to say. When I read your book *Art Since 1900* I realized he probably headed there in the first instance because of the photos he saw of Pittsburgh taken by Walker Evans. He saw them in an important show in New York, where he lived after fleeing Vienna. When he visited Pittsburgh, he thought it resembled Vienna, with the hills, rivers, bridges, and the steel mills like Baroque palaces, and there were lots of fake Baroque churches, too.
- B.B.: This sounds rather perplexing, not to say peculiar. Does Pittsburgh really have any features that could be reminiscent of Vienna, or was this not more like a reversal, a willfully affirmative image of the sites of an enforced exile, the most alien of locations transfigured into the illusion of a real new home? Something like Herbert Marcuse claiming to feel at home in San Diego?
- J.K.: Absolutely. Pittsburgh sits on three rivers—the Allegheny and the Monongahela, which "give birth" there to the Ohio—and these rivers make it sort of like Vienna, with the Danube, Danube Canal, and Wien River. And on both sides of Pittsburgh there are steep hills, like the Wienerwald, but instead of old, quaint villages with little Catholic churches popping up among the vineyards, there are mill towns, often with Eastern European churches with onion domes made of sheet metal painted green to resemble weathered copper. The mixture of these and the steel mills looks Baroque.
- B.B.: Those reminiscences alone would have sufficed to make your father's substitutional projections of Viennese memories on Pittsburgh possible? Rather than staying in New York, which in general seems to have been much more attractive to exiled Jewish citizens from the once cosmopolitan cities of Europe?
- J.K.: Several things brought him to Pittsburgh. One was, for him, its paintability—he easily found things to paint there. It seemed like Vienna, but it was very American. Or, it looked "American" to his European eyes, with factories, billboards, highways, and garbage dumps—basically Ashcan School aesthetic plus something beautiful and sentimental. He wanted a combination that would sustain him as a painter. That's anyway what led him to accept a two-year post as artist-in-residence at the Pennsylvania College for Women. And there, one day in 1952, when he was looking for someone to pose as a violinist, he saw my mother, who cut her hair in a peculiar, sharp sort of 1920s Berlin-style haircut.



Henry Koerner. My Parents. 1944.

B.B.: The new woman, the style of the *neue Frau*?

J.K.: Right. He chose her as his model and then they got married.

B.B.: Your father's quite moving portrait of your grandparents in their Vienna apartment, painted from memory in New York, in a manner (and a studio) adjacent to Ben Shahn, is one of the central objects of the film. But your father's subsequent painting on his regular return visits to Vienna, in a somewhat romanticizing *neusachlich* manner, also figures among your film's diverse and complex attempts to analyze how memory of sites and social belonging (and of eventual repressive exclusion and violent prosecution) are subsequently enacted and embodied, materialized and disavowed, from mnemonic recoveries. The painting of your grandparents in their Viennese interior would have been painted from your father's persistent, increasingly urgent query of "what happened to my parents?"

J.K.: Or "Are they still alive?" In 1944, he was serving as a graphic designer in the Office of Strategic Services, the agency that became the CIA. During the war, news came directly to that office. He was making posters and pamphlets—wartime propaganda, basically—within the US Army's main information-gathering agency. He would have known the incoming facts about the death camps. People serving in the OSS were a very informed group. But while he was painting the picture, in October or November 1944, it would have still been unclear exactly what had happened, and the extent of the destruction.

He would not have been able to know for certain what had happened to his parents. He only knew that early in 1942 their letters had stopped arriving. Maybe he knew, or guessed, that they had been transported out of Vienna to somewhere in the east, to the Nazi-occupied territories in Poland and Galicia. But he could have had some thought of a possibility that they might have survived, perhaps in Poland, where my father's brother had been sent already in 1941. My father's mother also had her roots in a little oil-drilling town near Lemberg (Lviv), which was then in Poland. So when he painted the painting he didn't—couldn't—know for sure, but certainly there's an intimation that they are already dead.

It was a very specific observation. And in making the film, I tried to do two things. One was to find out what exactly happened to the apartment depicted in the painting—something I really didn't know. Tracing step-by-step the story of that space—when, how, and why my grandparents were kicked out, who moved in, and what became of the building and the new inhabitants afterwards, after 1945. That was a story about neighbors.

B.B.: Your father's painting of his parents has a remarkable intensity about it, very different from all the other later, slightly more anodyne paintings that I have seen . . .

J.K.: He literally painted side by side with Ben Shahn, and he remembered always looking over Shahn's work and Shahn would try to hide it. Shahn was very competitive. He once came over to my father, who was an expert at airbrush

and had won several prizes for his airbrush poster designs, and asked him, dismissively, “Can you paint anything, Henry?” It was partly in response to Shahn’s challenge—“Can’t you paint?”—that my father created the painting of his parents. That painting anticipates the dramatic experience of their loss, but in a way all of his later paintings deal with that loss as well. The film tries to capture this not by showing his later paintings but by trying to repeat the strange research they undertook. When he began as an artist he painted from memory: The painting of my grandparents in Vienna—the painting the film is about—was done all from memory. But then, during the war, when he was a soldier in the US Army, he started to draw and to paint from life, and more and more he insisted on painting only the things he found in the real world, what he called his “motifs.” And he drew and painted them on the spot, with not a single pen line or brushstroke made from memory. So as a family, on our walks through Vienna, we hunted for these motifs, and what puzzled us—my sister and I—was the question of what constituted a motif. Much later I tried to explain the motif as his attempt to make a remembrance return as an accidental—or uncanny—occurrence. It’s a very Surrealist concept. I was reading Hal Foster on Surrealism when I arrived at that description, although what my father did was again very eccentric. Growing up, of course I didn’t understand it, but I knew from a very early age how extremely unlikely his painting was as an activity.

B.B.: You recount how your father returned to Vienna after the war with you and your sister when you were children, and that he walked through the streets often asking people to model for him. To what extent do you think his painting served as an almost compulsive attempt of mnemonic recuperation of lost sites and an attempt of a symbolic reparation of a destroyed family and social life in Vienna? Or would you rather assume that these painting rituals served primarily as tools of forgetting, of disavowing traumatic memories? At that moment in the film one almost starts to think that your film expands and completes the work of exploration and recuperation of traumatic history that your father’s paintings, for obvious reasons, could not yet achieve.

J.K.: Yes, my father’s practice was more than eccentric. It was embarrassing. It was marching—all four of us—through Vienna with heavy gear. It was setting up the gear on some unlikely spot and beginning to paint. Sometimes my father would have parts of the painting already finished—he always painted from life, but allowed himself to paint bits of the painting elsewhere (especially the figures), sometimes painting those at the Gänsehäufel. So there’d be these nude or semi-nude figures already there on the canvas while he painted the view before him, which was itself usually un-picturesque, and people would come up to us while he was painting and wonder what happened to the nudes. He was completely unknown as a painter, and if asked, he’d say he did this for fun—sometimes, though, he’d claim to be the most famous painter on

Earth—so he seemed like an eccentric amateur, but with a family in tow. The Viennese were incredibly curious: They pointed and laughed, and there was no way to explain it. Back in Pittsburgh, the end purpose of his paintings was murky, too, because he thought they were destined for an art museum, a museum via somebody's home. But they had neither the scale nor the clientele for that. Some were huge—way too large for any home. Others were scaled for a domestic interior, sort of like a Dutch genre painting, but because of their strange subjects there was no natural setting even for these. So from very early on, because of the financial difficulties he had, and because of the embarrassment I felt about him when he was painting, I couldn't help but wonder why he did what he did. Very early on I knew the history of art as that to which my father wanted to—but firmly did not—belong. He certainly had a strict and simple concept behind his way of painting.

Observing, over and over again, both the strategic and the financial failure of doing this kind of painting, I grew more and more frustrated, but also fascinated. I started thinking his problem was his medium: that if he'd been a filmmaker, his mix of people, settings, and narratives would have worked better.

B.B.: But was he not a very successful commercial illustrator, doing covers for *Time* magazine and other publications?

J.K.: In his early career as a graphic artist he was very successful, and then in his first five years or so as a painter he became rather famous in New York and beyond. Also, in his last years, again, people started to buy his paintings more eagerly, not because they came to understand them (whatever that means) but because he painted them so passionately and prolifically and over so many years, and they do look like nothing else in the art world. He had become a kind of local legend in Pittsburgh. But from the late '60s through the early '80s it was financially very difficult for my father to find a public. And he had such an inflated concept of himself as an artist. This was hard to deal with as a child. And later, when I became an art historian and got to know a bit about the contemporary art world, it became incredibly frustrating to talk to him about art.

B.B.: Can you give us a more concrete example of how the selection or the construction of "motifs" functioned in your father's process of a painterly recuperation of his Vienna past?

J.K.: Embedded in the experience of walking in Vienna was one great motif that my father never painted—it would have been too strange—but it became a kind of family motif that always made us laugh just thinking about it. Maybe five or six times over several years, we would be walking somewhere in or around Vienna and we'd bump into a certain painter. He was the only painter we ever encountered. There was only ever my father, or my father and I, when I started to paint, and then there was this other painter! He was about my father's age and size, and he'd be sitting bare-chested on his folding chair in front of his easel, ready to paint. But when we went up to him

he'd never be painting but he'd always be sitting slumped in the most incredibly depressive state, staring into space. And my father would ask him how he was doing, because after a few of these meetings he knew us, and had even watched us paint, and he'd begin to describe in this amazing way the enterprise of painting. He'd say how he had found a place to paint, set up his easel, looked at the beautiful view, and started to paint, but then "suddenly I become so tired, *so müde, so müde.*" So he'd fall asleep, and eventually wake up, look at the beautiful landscape, and again try to paint, but he'd get too tired and fall back to sleep. "*Ich werde so müde, so müde.*" We'd say those words while we walked, imitating his nasal voice, and we'd laugh and laugh.

So we called him the Sleepy Painter. He was the sort of existential foil to my father, who seems to have been completely the opposite, to have nothing but boundless, cheerful, positive energy, a completely manic energy. He would carry his canvases up to the top of major mountains in the Austrian Alps. And he never sat while he painted! He always stood, and used a big film-camera tripod as his easel. Probably he had the feeling of being misunderstood—something most artists feel. But it certainly was the mismatch between the wild enthusiasm with which he engaged in his occupation and the lack of enthusiasm with which his pictures were met that stunned him. But I also think that there was something deep and telling in the mismatch. It reminds me of what Freud says about screen memories, how in psychoanalytical practice one knows it's a screen memory rather than a real memory when something patently banal is accompanied by a disproportionate affect. The same is true of dreams. There's nothing more boring than listening to someone else's dream, but to the dreamer, when it's fresh in their mind, the dream is the most riveting thing in the world, because the dream, like the screen memory, is tied enigmatically to some powerful source. So my father's manic energy was born from the fact that he remained in touch with—or he systematically tried to get in touch with—the traumatic, which he couldn't bring fully into view but he allowed himself to encounter, as if by chance. Instead of remembering, he tried to bump into the memory by accident. There's a question about how conscious he was about the original events. He certainly never talked about them to us as children. I think that by the time I was old enough, in his mind, to hear the full story, I wasn't asking about it, or perhaps by then he had forgotten. But—aside from through his art—he once talked extensively about his childhood and his flight from Vienna in a series of taped conversations with a curator in Pittsburgh—Gail Stavitsky. There he tells the story of Am Tabor 13, his apartment building in Vienna as a child, the place where the room in the painting was and where the film ends up.

B.B.: Do you think it was done consciously, or was it done in an unconscious attempt to recuperate locations and social relations via the practice of painting? Do you think he understood at the time that what necessitated his walking and painting of people in Vienna originated in a much deeper and much more traumatic experience?

J.K.: He sometimes linked his motifs explicitly to the traumatic content by introducing photographs of his murdered parents into monumental, sixteen-panel pictures. But he painted them as photographs, the bits of paper he carried with him to America.

B.B.: Those we did not see in the film.

J.K.: I basically kept all his paintings out of the film except the very first one that he made, the one of his mother and father at home in their apartment in Vienna. That painting was painted when my father didn't yet know whether his parents had survived, so he's remembering, but with a future that's still open-ended. In the interviews, he describes the little world inside this typical rental-apartment building, and all the typical enmities and intrigues amongst the families living there. And he remembers the illegal Nazi in the next-door apartment. He didn't recall his name—that it was Josef Riefenthal, whom I learn all about in the film. But he remembers having had his sexual awakening with the daughter of this Nazi, which happened on the spiral staircase up to their apartments. And he remembers his mother and his best friend's mother, who lived down the hall, having a huge fight, after which they never spoke with one another again. So I think he had this personal understanding of the catastrophe, about how the events in Vienna in 1938 and the Holocaust had something to do with hatred between neighbors—for him, between the intimate strangers all squeezed together into the apartment building at Am Tabor 13. The one thing he did often recount—and this comes into the film only obliquely—was his experience of the *Anschluss* from inside his family's apartment. It's something many other Viennese refugees also remembered: the strange sound of people weeping for joy. He never heard that sound before and he never heard it again: not the metaphor, but the fact of people weeping for joy. He described his house and his neighborhood echoing with the sound of people, alone in their apartments, weeping and screaming for joy.

Years ago, right after college, I wrote a little text about his work. I puzzled over the fact that he painted his largest works on identically sized panels—usually sixteen of them put together in four rows of four. He did this so that he could pack them in boxes and ship them between Pittsburgh and Vienna, but also so that he could paint everything on the spot, four panels at a time. He also liked the fact that, when they were mounted together, their divisions made them look two-dimensional and broke up the illusion of space—a sort of homespun version of a grid, I guess. Anyway, I came to have a view that there was some connection between this practice and his being a Jew of the diaspora, and that, being both transportable and yet powerfully about home and belonging, they were, like the Torah, movable territory. So I wrote a sentence, which went something like, “My father always knew that he might have to pack up his bags and flee the terrible scene.” My assumption was—I was about twenty-one at the time—that there was this impulse in his practice and in what he called his motifs. Motifs could be many things—

bathers suddenly encountered in the forest, a woman selling eggs from a roadside stand, a man with a great-looking hat playing the zither in an Alpine *Hütte*, etc. The crucial thing was that they be found, there in the landscape, along the way, rather than made up.

B.B.: It seems in a way as though your film is finally doing the work that your father's paintings could not do. That is also why the title, with its reference to Freud's dream account, is very striking. The title seems to ask the question "Why did my father's work relate to that history, but could not accomplish an exploration of the trauma?"

J.K.: "The Burning Child" is Freud's most haunting dream. It heads the crucial chapter on "Dream Work" in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It is as if Freud sets himself up for failure, because, in this case, the dream is trivial compared to the reality of waking life in which it occurs. It is dreamt by a father who has—just that day—lost his child to fever. Having laid the body out on a bed, with tall candles standing around it, the father retreats into his room, falls asleep, and has a dream that the child is alive and says to the father, "Can't you see, I'm burning." The father wakes to find a candle has fallen and the arm of the child's body has actually begun to burn. For me, this idea of waking from a dream to something more horrible encapsulates the history of the Viennese interior. You have the dreamlike designs of Klimt and others, which veer towards the terrifying, in a way, but then the historical reality turns out to be much, much worse. A parent burying their child is something unspeakably traumatic, something counter to nature. I suspect the father and child are Jewish, since Freud mentions an old man "installed as a watcher, murmuring prayers"—probably a shomer of Jewish funeral custom. So the scene takes place in a cramped Jewish domestic interior, and for me it resonated with my father's painting, where the old man, my grandfather, has fallen asleep, and the child—in this case my father himself—looks into the room as if trying to reach the sleeping parents by way of a dream.

Freud's own interpretation of the dream is almost willfully trivial. For him the story proves that dreams sometimes function simply to keep people asleep—this is wish fulfillment at its most banal. The father somewhere in his mind smelled the smoke, or perceived the flame, so the dream work created a dream not just to prolong the child's life but to preserve just for that moment the father's much-needed sleep. Later, though, Freud returns to the dream to use it as proof that in dreams the mind creates a complete reality: sights and sounds that so encompass the dreamer that they feel like waking life. Dreams are filmic in that sense, and so for me, the "Burning Child" dream helped support my decision to tell the story of the Vienna interior in the form of a film rather than a book.

B.B.: The tracing of the destruction of your family and of the Jewish population in Vienna during the Nazi occupation is the primary narrative of your film. But you confront that biographical exploration throughout the film with a

counter-narrative, a second strand, which at first seems rather detached when one starts watching the film. Various art and architecture historians (including yourself) appear and reflect on the extraordinary efforts made by modernist Viennese architects, city planners, and artists to build a variety of spatial and institutional structures to make Vienna not only one of the cosmopolitan capitals of the world around the turn of the century but also to provide its inhabitants with a deeper sense of home and a place of belonging.

Initially, the almost musical paralleling and interweaving of the two strands might astonish your spectators and listeners. Yet gradually one recognizes to what extent both trajectories were already dialectically fused shortly after the turn of the century. Joseph Roth famously prognosticated that Austria's transition from an empire of different ethnicities and diverse religions to an integrated nation-state would enforce a violent homogenization of dispersed and different identities, a process which would eventually lead to their destruction according to nationalist—and finally Fascist and racist—hegemonic fictions.

Your architectural- and art-historical accounts seem to diagnose a similar historical causality: that the intense preoccupation of modernist Viennese architects originated at least partially in the desperate attempts to secure a cosmopolitan bourgeois identity and its diverse forms of organizing social spaces against increasingly imminent threats of its destruction. From Otto Wagner's city planning and public-transportation systems to the interior designs of the Wiener Werkstätte and the Secession, from the American Bar by Adolf Loos to Josef Hoffmann's sanatorium for neurological disorders in Purkersdorf, all seem to have been devoted to construct the bourgeois home, and a sense of a deeper belonging to those specific geopolitical and social spaces. Yet they are also shown to have attempted—almost apotropaically—to defend the city and its inhabitants against the emerging destruction of that sense of belonging which World War I would bring to the empire in 1918 and that the Fascist *Anschluss* would bring twenty years later to the Austrian nation-state.

J.K.: Yes, the other thing I tried to do—and the major part of the film—was to explore the wider history of the Viennese interior. Typically, this is a story about the rejection of ornament, the rise of abstraction, and the epochal birth—in this city—of modern architecture. I wanted to bring the history of Viennese interior design together with the story of the neighbor, because the neighbor has a deep but unspoken relationship to the interior. You think of the interior as having to do with shelter or protection from things outside—the weather, nature, the public sphere, politics, etc., which one can watch in safety through the window. But interiors also press up against each other, as with Josef Riefenthaler's apartment, his interior, starting just inches away—in the painting, on the other side of the book-shelved wall of my parents' apartment. The story of the Viennese interior is both the dream of homemak-

ing—the one dreamt by Wagner, Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos, Ludwig Wittgenstein—and this nightmare of the hostile neighboring interior.

There's a practical problem confronting anyone who wants to make a documentary film about Viennese interior design: None of the great achievements have survived intact, and even if they had survived, it's incredibly hard to capture them on film. You have bits and pieces of this history displayed in the Museum für Angewandte Kunst (MAK). You have reconstructed interiors, like the Secession's, but it's interesting to learn that, already there, programmatically, the interiors—in the form of the exhibitions that were mounted in the otherwise undifferentiated space inside the building—were always temporary. One of the movement's champions called the Secession a *Vexierschachtel*—a puzzle-box—each time different and always illusory and enigmatic. Now Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze* is back in the building where it first was displayed, but it's underground, in a different room, in the wrong box. Most people don't understand that it's a reconstruction. Looking at the architectural models they display there makes you dizzy. And I think there was already at that point, already around 1900, a sense within the dream of the Viennese interior that the whole undertaking doesn't work.

The Viennese obsession with interior design had to do with the fact that in Vienna, almost everyone, rich or poor, lived in rented apartments. Then there are the strange interiors they dreamt up. Think of that Beethoven exhibition at the Secession, with Klimt's frieze. It tried to showcase the best of Viennese design at its heyday, in 1902. But its symbolism and narrative predicted the impossibility of ever being at home. Beethoven, the hero, never had a fixed home in Vienna. Everyone who went to the show knew that from Beethoven's famous statement—the Heiligenstadt Testament—and from the dozens of Beethoven houses dotting the city. Vienna's artistic god was a misunderstood genius who wandered restlessly from place to place. Then there's the psychosexual story that Klimt tells about home—the one Peter Weibel talks about so cogently in the film. The frieze is about the search for happiness, which Klimt pictures at the end as a husband and wife in conjugal bliss—they're making a child, a family, in a bedroom filled with art and music. But you only get to that ending through the intervening scenes of libidinal desire and catastrophe. Bourgeois happiness is an inaccessible dream, because (Freud wrote this) the ego, the subject, isn't master in his own home. By home, Freud meant the psyche, but history shows this was true for the physical home—the bourgeois dwelling place—though for different reasons. It's funny that Beethoven himself—the statue of him by Max Klinger—was placed off in a room by himself. That's another dream. You see him through the wall opening under the frieze's final scene. You glimpse Beethoven as the *Hausvater* safe in his study, getting his work done, not being interrupted by his wife and kids. So there's no



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intact Viennese interior, but then, the most spectacular one—the Beethoven exhibition—illustrated the impossibility of such a thing.

- B.B.: Were the collective desires for a cohesive home and a homogeneous interior not also impossible because of the increasing conditions of industrialization and proletarianization, the conflicts of class? Or were they only increasingly precarious because of the imminent breakdown of the empire and its imagined national community?
- J.K.: Well, there’s one key thing I tried to bring into the film, but I could only show it obliquely. When you think about the interiors that Otto Wagner, Hoffmann, Loos, and others designed, in so many cases the clients were Jewish, or at least of Jewish descent. Everybody in Vienna at that time recognized this fact, the popular anti-Semitic press especially, but also the inner circle of Viennese modernism. Alma Mahler, in her diaries, refers to the Secession as the place where the “Elders of Zion” hang out. And Karl Kraus attacks Secessionist style as the “new kaftan.” He’s trying to wake up the assimilated Jews who dress themselves and their homes in that style and to tell them, “You stand out as glaringly as the poor Hasidic Jews arriving from the east, whom you abhor.” Adolf Loos had exactly the same understanding. It’s one of the main reasons he championed abstraction and raged against ornament, because he wanted Jewish Vienna not to stand out but to blend into the crowd.

B.B.: Did we not always assume that Viennese modernism articulated a desire for secular assimilation?

By contrast, you now argue that Secession style, which we had always considered modernist and internationalist, actually represented—or was at least also perceived as—a hallmark of ethnicity?

J.K.: Yes, in a way. Secession style stood for Jewish ethnicity, even if its clients couldn't see this. But so did Loos's modernism. The difference between the two styles was mainly political. Moderate and conservative clients engaged Josef Hoffmann, and left-wing clients engaged Adolf Loos.

There's a simmering and hovering anxiety around the dream of home-making, and it all comes into the open, suddenly and terribly, in 1938. In the film, this gets told through the Riefenthaler story. In just two or three days, while Hitler marched into Austria, the Viennese did something that surprised even the Nazis. No one said they could do this, and in Germany it hadn't really been done: pounding on the door of Jewish neighbors and taking stuff—sometimes their apartment. Suddenly, overnight, no Viennese Jew was safe in their home. The German leadership actually fought against this first, “wild” Aryanization—not for the sake of the Jews, of course, but because property was grabbed privately, without paying taxes. But this violent, grass-roots enmity taught Hitler you could kick Jews out of their apartments, and if you did that you could move them anywhere. It's a huge step to what the Nazis would eventually call the “Final Solution.” That's been overlooked, and I wanted to bring it back into memory.

B.B.: After March 1938?

J.K.: After March 1938, Jews who were kicked out of their apartment came under the jurisdiction of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde, which tried to house them by squeezing them into the apartments of other Jews in the neighborhood—all this overseen by the Gestapo. And from there they either escaped or, after about 1940, they were transported to the east to be exterminated. With 1938 in mind, the Viennese interior—the dreams of Hoffmann, Loos, etc.—becomes completely unstable. The film visits interiors, but they are treated as places of transit. I used here Otto Wagner's idea of the *Stelle*, which means “place” but also “station,” like a train station. It has all sorts of connotations, about movement, trains, and technology.

B.B.: You also divided the film into thirteen different sites or stations, or *Stellen*.

J.K.: Right. Otto Wagner had this idea of the *Stelle* as a new element in urban design. He saw how Vienna expanded exponentially from its ancient core, circle around circle, first using the footprint of the old fortress walls to form the Ring Street, then using the outer walls to create a new ring road, with radiating roads running out from the center. He worried about the loss of place in the unbounded metropolis. There are these interesting moments in his writing when he talks about the need to find human markers of any kind in the landscape—an old milestone, a forest path, even a midden or dung

heap—and use these markings to structure urban development. But he also admits that such markers aren't sufficient to create a sense of place. So he postulated that the new transport network he was building engendered infrastructural nodes, concentrated spots of urban life where trains, trolleys, canals, electricity, gas lines, sewage, snow removal, local morgues, would all have to coalesce. People traveling to and from work would have to pass daily through these nodes. Wagner called these *Stellen*, and he wanted to design them so that people could feel at home in Vienna through them. They're like piazzas, except you never relax in them.

- B.B.: Under the conditions of an increasing urban transience and daily dislocation, these *Stellen* or “stations” were supposed to provide a sense of groundedness in increasingly complex trajectories of labor and daily life. Yet one wonders also, when you present Wagner and Loos in great historical detail, whether you think that their attempts to construct the city as a home had not been doomed from the start. After all, you contemplate their achievements from the hindsight of the total destruction of identity in the wake of the historical, social, and political transformations which were about to emerge, i.e., the loss of the empire, the eventual loss of national identity to Fascism, and most of all to the racism that these political changes brought about. Are you not rather programmatically juxtaposing the art historian's analysis of the architects' visionary preoccupation with identity and spatial constructions of an urban home with your subjective contemplation of the actual historical processes that destroyed your parents' home and those of many other citizens?
- J.K.: Exactly. The interiors that the film visits are *Stellen*, not closed spaces but places of passage. And they all have water running past or even under them. Remember that Wagner set his Stadtbahn beside the city's waterways—the Wien River and Danube Canal—and not just to save money, but because he wanted people to feel that their nervous movement was natural, like the rivers' flow. That's why the film begins with the Stadtbahn station that Wagner built for Kaiser Franz Joseph to take the train to work—it's the *Stelle* where the past was supposed to enter the modern age.
- B.B.: As the film's reflections on architecture, on public and private spaces, proceed, it becomes increasingly dubious whether you still believe that architecture actually could have provided a sense of place, of social identity and geopolitical grounding, even at the time of the great Vienna modernist architects and urban planners. After all, it was not just the Vienna of the bourgeois cosmopolitan city and the bourgeois interior, but also the Vienna of an emerging proletarian class identity, like the socialist “Red Vienna” of the Karl-Marx-Hof of 1927–1930, which was an attempt to provide a proletarian public space and its specific interiors of utilitarian and leisure functions.
- J.K.: The Karl-Marx-Hof is important. Karl Ehn—a student of Otto Wagner—created these huge apartment blocks that, in their layout and look, tried to do away with the kind of home pictured in my father's painting, the rented flat

inside an old building, with meaningless ornaments on the façade, useless padding inside, and hostile neighbors next door.

It is interesting that Karl-Marx-Hof is where Red Vienna ends, since it was there that in 1934 the city's socialist insurgents holed themselves up and ultimately surrendered. The February Uprising was a siege of the Vienna interior, or at least the battle raged between people locked inside rent-controlled apartments and the Austro-Fascist paramilitary that called itself the *Heimwehr*. So Karl-Marx-Hof's dream ends in the nightmare of the beginning of Nazism. It is also interesting that in the eyes of its right-wing opponents, the Karl-Marx-Hof looked like a fortress, as if it was designed to withstand a siege, but with its garden courtyards, pompous entrance doors, and private balconies, it looks to me like another version of what my father called *das schöne Heim*. And the film shows that the "beautiful home" was catastrophic for Viennese Jews, because they imagined they would be safe inside its padded interior, and so many of them didn't leave when they could.

B.B.: Most people even in Germany in the first few years after 1933 didn't think they had to escape . . .

J.K.: Some people, like my father's brother, couldn't escape, because he didn't have the money and he had been arrested in the February Uprising, and with a police record you couldn't get a visa to the States. But many people thought it would all blow over and didn't leave because they loved their beautiful home. That's the story told by Edith Brickell at the end of the film, when she says that her parents' problem was they had it too well. She reports this in the interview conducted inside her *schönes Heim*, which—unlike my father—she was able to reclaim after the war. It's only when she returns to that space that her murdered parents disappear from her dreams. The beautiful home has political implications, as a space—like Walter Benjamin's *intérieur*—that was removed from the political, a place where private life could flourish through art and music, but it was fated to be invaded by the political.

B.B.: Was the *schönes Heim* up to that moment not also the city of Vienna itself, or even the nation-state of Austria at large?

J.K.: It's the private interior, but yes, it's also Vienna itself. Because the city has a secret interior, the object of yearning and love that, again catastrophically, kept people in its thrall and later caused some of them, like Brickell, to return after the war.

B.B.: After its lengthy reflections on landscape, nature, and the city, and the discourses on architecture and the Viennese home, the film introduces a third set of rather heterogenous mnemonic models, at first sight rather peculiar ones at that. These encounters with individual figures currently living and working in Vienna are rather striking meditations, pondering the question of how and whether geographical and physical location and a sense of grounded identity can even be mediated any longer, let alone be maintained. The first of these initially rather perplexing encounters is with a dapper young man opening his

workshop for distinguished custom-made shoes. The second is an extensive dialogue with an ecologist who studies the traveling patterns of the nearly extinct *Stör* in the Danube, the wandering sturgeon fish which travels for its breeding period from saltwater to freshwater in streams like the Danube. The third is the conversation with the sculptor and architectural historian Bernhard Leitner.

J.K.: That is accurate as a reading. These things developed out of an intuition. I wanted the film to begin in the early morning at the point where the Danube enters the city, at Otto Wagner's great sluice in Nussdorf, and to end in the evening downstream, where the river exits Vienna. That's the way one enters the city by the slow train from the west and north, and it's how people moved to and from the city from the earliest times. This entrance and exit form the sharp end points of the Leopoldstadt district, the long, narrow island between the Danube and Danube Canal that was once home to Jewish Vienna—it was nicknamed Matzo Isle—and where my father was born. This plan for the film made me think about the long history of Vienna, how it began as a Roman garrison built to prevent incursions from the east and how it remained a fortress town through the Middle Ages, as the defensive bulwark of the Holy Roman Empire—and by extension of "Europe" as it was coming reactively into consciousness—especially against an expansive Ottoman Empire, which twice besieged Vienna. I was also reading the poem "The Ister," where Hölderlin writes of the Danube, "Hier aber wollen wir bauen"—a kind of primordial place of settlement, especially in Heidegger's understanding of the line. So I wanted to find a water specialist, in a way to demythologize the idea, or to rethink it in terms of contemporary ecological thinking. He or she was supposed to appear in the concrete bed of the Vienna River, because Otto Wagner had engineered that huge tract of the city as part of his Stadtbahn design. We found this remarkable water scientist, Stephan Schmutz, who was involved in the project of getting the great sturgeon to repopulate the Upper Danube, and that's when I heard the term "homing instinct," which is the technical term, in German, for how the sturgeon go upstream to spawn. The idea was somewhat obvious, but the setting—Wagner's most spectacular *Stelle*, where the two main lines of the Stadtbahn converge above the river—and the motif of homing worked well together, as a kind of ironical play on Heidegger's ideas about technology and what he calls—playing on the buzzword *stellen*—*das Gestell*.

B.B.: As a parallel to your meditations on landscape, the film seems to repeatedly pose the question: To what degree can mnemonic forms of identity be reconstructed outside of any continuity of spatial relationships? Can a sense of home and belonging even be imagined after the destruction of the architecture of the home and the sociopolitical and ideological destruction of the nation-state? What does it mean to reconstruct memory with filmic means alone, since the architectural sites, the landscape or the city, the people or the apartment of the family and the family who lived there, have all been



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destroyed and are no longer accessible? That chasm between the desire to reconstruct, to work through and to remember, and the lack of any spatial correspondences seems to be one of the key theoretical questions of the film. In other words, how can memory and insight be psychoanalytically reconstructed in the absence of social and spatial relations that had historically determined the formation of the subject, or, worse yet perhaps, if all spatial and material parameters have been contaminated by the ideologies of the perpetrators of that destruction?

J.K.: The film tries to explore this enigmatic interior as well. It visits two *Stellen* that are almost at the geographical center of the city. One is the workshop of the shoemaker Marcus Scheer, because it was meant to stand smack in the middle of old Vienna. The other is the American Bar designed by Loos. It, too, is located almost exactly in the middle of Vienna, and Loos attempted to create in it a kind of cosmopolitan center.

There is a beautiful passage in Joseph Roth's *Radetzky March* in which the vast expanses of the Austro-Hungarian Empire are all imagined as forecourts and fore-forecourts of the imperial court—the Hofburg. Of course this is ironic, because the Loos bar is a center for nomads—people coming and going who dress the same way in Vienna as in England, or Chicago, where Loos got his idea. The architect Hermann Czech speaks about how Loos's architecture is designed not just for movement but also for displacement or disfiguration of the interior by the "other." But Scheer's shoe store

is in fact even closer to the center than the Loos bar, since it literally stands a block away from the side or service entrance to the Hofburg. It was established there so that Scheer's great-grandfather, as the official "imperial and royal shoemaker," could have easy access to the emperor. Also, unlike the Loos bar, which has undergone many changes since it was built, Scheer's shoe store is an almost perfectly intact interior.

- B.B.: This is exactly how it comes across now in the film. Your extensive engagement with Marcus Scheer and his very distinguished custom-shoe shop—at first sight in the film slightly bewildering—appears as the first of several subsequent reflections on the question of how the subject can still experience historically and geographically defined identity after the destruction of social space. Almost literally in this case—after total dislocation—the subject's sole and last grounding seems to be offered in custom-made shoes. Did you discover this wondrous shop by accident? How did you find Mr. Scheer?
- J.K.: For years I was fascinated by the showroom of Scheer's shop, which you can glimpse through windows on a little backstreet, the Bräunerstrasse. It was a completely untouched Jugendstil interior, with parquet floors, Thonet furniture, and glass cases filled with amazing old-fashioned handmade shoes. I never saw anyone entering or leaving the store, and the display room itself looked abandoned. One day I ventured in and climbed the stairs to a reception shop, where I was greeted by Rudolf Scheer himself: an elderly man, tall and handsome, who held himself incredibly erect and was wearing a starched white smock, like a doctor's scrubs. (The idea was that handmade shoes are more orthopedic than stylish.) Having made it this far, it wasn't easy to escape, so I started to discuss ordering shoes, and eventually I had a pair made. The years went by, my shoes had to be repaired or resoled, Rudolf Scheer grew older, and a younger guy, who I first thought was an employee, came into the picture. This was Marcus, Rudolf Scheer's grandson and my foil in the film. Anyway, I was showing a friend the shop and I started asking Marcus about shoemaking, and all of a sudden out came these philosophical reflections about shoes as little interiors, and also about Marcus's own family history, and Meg, my wife, looks at me and says, "He has to be in your film!" I had no idea how I'd build him in, so I actually built the film around him. He was the first interviewee we lined up, and his store was our first location. His *Stelle* was also the first bit we edited, to establish the film's style and pace.
- B.B.: But the display of the collection of the shoe lasts and the models of feet and shoes of the past clients give these spaces also an eerie dimension, more like a museum, if not a morgue . . .
- J.K.: Scheer says about his huge collection of shoe lasts that it is kept for "our scientific research," our *wissenschaftliche Arbeit*, about how feet have changed, and about changing styles of dress and of walking. He has this idea that you can affect the way people walk by how you build a shoe—whether you hurry



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through the city or stroll casually and elegantly depends on the shape of your shoe, where the heel is set, and so forth. Scheer wants people to walk energetically but be able to take in the city visually along the way.

Marcus held forth to Meg and I in front of that amazing pile of old wooden shoe lasts. In the film he defines a shoe last as “an orthopedically correct representation of a foot,” so when you see all these effigies heaped up in his shop—most of them unlabeled—it’s hard not to make the connection with the shoes displayed in Holocaust museums, all those intense contact relics of anonymous victims. That was just one among many associations that Scheer’s workshop brings to mind, because Marcus is this fascinating person with a powerful, conflicted family history. Unfortunately, that part of the interview had to be cut, because the film was getting too long, but Marcus recounts his almost life-and-death struggle with his authoritarian grandfather, who kept on dangling the promise of giving the business to Marcus, then snatching it back and seeing to it that nothing changed. The grandfather has a stroke and Marcus takes over, and the first thing he does is to try to renovate everything, and it’s then that he discovers that some of the rooms in the building, the ones next to the Jugendstil showroom, once belonged to a Jewish tailor. And digging down into the foundations under the building, he finds this deep well, which he is told—and he believes—is the remnants of a Jewish ritual bath, or *mikveh*, set back from a Jewish prayer room. In the interview, he calls the well *eine Erdung*—a ground or earthing, almost Heideggerian, but also scientific, like a lightning rod serves as ground—but of course it’s just the opposite: It’s not ground but water. It’s part collective trauma, part uncanny discovery.

B.B.: Would that be running water? Like groundwater?

J.K.: It is groundwater that runs in subterranean canals throughout Vienna. Think of the sewer scene at the end of *The Third Man*. In the oldest parts of the city, these are ancient channels that come to light when the city tried to build things like new subway lines. When I first heard Marcus’s story of the *mikveh*, I thought it must be a fantasy. Peter Weibel laughed and said that it is typical Viennese “traumata,” that under every *Heim*, under every *Heimat*, there’s going to be the fantasy of a Jewish well undermining the foundations. But talking to my friend Noah Feldman, who knew the story and saw an early edit of the film, I’ve become more convinced that it might actually be a *mikveh*, since there’s no other reason to build such an elaborate well at the back of the store, and since the requirement of a *mikveh* is that the water has to be moving, like the rivulet under Scheer’s shop. The water can’t be stagnant. We let our Go-Pro descend into the well, and although we didn’t get it to reach all the way down, you can see that the water is flowing.

B.B.: It is quite striking how your film confronts its spectators with a sequence of alternate, very compelling and credible models of theorizing the potential of spatial experience in the present. At first it is the extensive dialogue with the

shoemaker, followed by the conversation with the ecologist on the homing of the sturgeon. Subsequently you introduce yet another figure who contemplates the seemingly inescapable abstraction of spatial experience. In your conversation with the sculptor and architectural historian Bernhard Leitner, we encounter his sculptures, which one could describe as phenomenological devices that conceive of a sense of spatial correspondence and psycho-physiological situatedness as being inevitably formed outside of any conventional sociopolitical, let alone geopolitical, constructions.

Leitner speaks about the fact that the body itself memorizes in its entirety. Not only the ears hear the sounds, the body absorbs sounds with all its parts: That is how he is constructing and explaining his sculptures. And in the sculptural models that your film presents, we are confronted with a very peculiar affirmation of that theory, since bodily perception, mnemonic and somatic experience are completely detached from any kind of actual historical space.

Leitner's sculpture seems to suggest that spatial memory follows purely somatic and phenomenological functions that operate in utter independence from linguistic and sociohistorical conditions. So he provides yet another theoretical model that seems to be totally at odds with the project that you attempt to achieve in the film, to reconstruct the possibility of individual, social, and political memory. When you engaged with Leitner and his sculptures, did you want to affirm that memory itself will ultimately transcend historical conditions, and thus it will eventually even transcend trauma? Or did you introduce Leitner's sculptures as a contemporary opposition to your own conception of mnemonic reconstruction of traumatic history? Do you consider his sculptures as truly viable and credible contemporary monuments that transcend all traumatic destruction, or are they the very embodiment of the destruction of experience, when the phenomenology of mere bodily memory has become the consequential reduction of all earlier mnemonic capacities?

J.K.: It is definitely the latter.

B.B.: So there is a tragic dimension in Leitner's model?

J.K.: Right! There was a big question of where the film's history of Viennese interior design would go, whether to push forward, past World War I, to the Karl-Marx-Hof, or whether to limit it to the designs of Wagner, Olbrich, Hoffmann, and Loos. Originally, I went to interview Leitner because I wanted to bring the story forward to the Wittgenstein House—the amazing interior the philosopher designed for his sister in the late 1920s. It was Bernhard Leitner who really discovered that building, and he single-handedly saved it from destruction. But he refused to be interviewed in the Wittgenstein House itself, because of its horrible renovation: It isn't anymore the perfect interior that Wittgenstein worked obsessively to achieve. The idea was to interview Leitner in his studio, and use the incredible photographs he took



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of the Wittgenstein House as the visible evidence. But entering his studio, and watching him move around as he spoke, I realized it might be better if he talked about—and inside—his own sculpture. And suddenly, he summarized in a single sentence everything about the Viennese interior, in its original formation, that I wanted to convey: how it had been a “safe space,” with padding, and two or three layers of carpets, etc.

B.B.: The way Walter Benjamin writes about velvet surfaces that record and retain the residue of physical touch in the Parisian interiors of the nineteenth century?

J.K.: Exactly. That’s what he is thinking about. And then he turns around and says, “My starting point is more abstract.” And I’m thinking to myself, yes, way more abstract! It’s nothing but sound—static, really, carried through bizarre plastic tubes.

B.B.: After all other dimensions of material, spatial, and social reality have been annihilated, Leitner’s sculpture embodies the last remnants of a phenomenology of spatial experience, making the observation of his sculpture an almost painful experience . . .

J.K.: Right. When he walks through his sound sculpture, it looks like a frightening, eccentric dream, not unlike my father’s walking, unconsciously remembering, and painting. Leitner takes his walk inside his atelier, which he set up in a converted grain elevator in the middle of nowhere, in the flatlands of Upper Austria. He changes from an expert on the history of Viennese architecture to a remarkable character in and of himself, like Scheer or the old

gigolo. But he's also a last avatar of Viennese modernism: He creates an almost completely abstract architecture, a room without walls or ceilings. Klimt's frieze already proposed walls that no longer protected but instead exposed and threatened. The images painted into the wet stucco told a story about the libidinal body, about subjectivity located in nervous perturbations, in skin subjectivity. Right from the beginning, Viennese modernism called itself a new "nerve Romanticism." It wanted to create a Romanticism located not in some inside—the inner self, the mind, the soul—but on the surface network of nerves, like the sounds piped through Leitner's tubes.

B.B.: Which becomes even more obvious once you take your spectators out to an actual modernist Viennese clinic . . .

J.K.: Yes, Purkersdorf—Josef Hoffmann's masterpiece—was a "nerve clinic," like Otto Wagner's Steinhof. It was built to cure the nervousness of the modern metropolis through Secessionist abstraction. When Leitner walks through the tubes of his abstraction, it felt like he was navigating a nervous system, with electrified sound—noise, really—as the transmitted charge. This also supported a key aspect of the film. I wanted to push music into the foreground of the experience. The masterpiece of Viennese interior design, after all, was the Beethoven exhibition at the Secession. The film's soundtrack consists partly of original music composed by Anthony Cheung—atonal, but with some harmonies suggesting homecoming—and partly of pieces my father remembers having whistled to himself while he walked around ruined Vienna in 1946, especially Schubert. When we pass from his childhood apartment to a photo of mine, you hear a faint recording of his singing "Ich bin ein Fremdling überall" ("I am a stranger everywhere") from Schubert's *Der Wanderer*. I used to accompany my father on the piano. Music carries with it bodily memory, and Schubert, who is the quintessential Viennese composer, creates in songs like *Der Wanderer* and in the *Winterreise* cycle a series of memory images unfolding within someone walking, who sings to himself while he wanders into the abyss of homelessness at the end. Schubert established a perfect connection between music, memory, shoes, and walking, with the piano sounding the footsteps. And then there is the fact that Leitner's sculpture has all these tubes, which rhyme with the trains rushing through and under the city, and with the waterways: the Danube, the Jewish well, the canal with the sturgeon. Leitner's performance of the sculpture, explaining it while walking through it, was also close to what I myself tried to do in Vienna in the film. Walking through a city where everything has changed, but the music, as bodily sensation, stays with you. His tour of his implausible sculpture was like a dance that, to me, looked like what I was trying to do.

B.B.: Another crucial contribution theorizing the interdependence of spatial structures and the recuperation of historical memory is your friend Adam Phillips, an English psychoanalyst who introduces the film's spectators to the functions of the psychoanalytic process. Yet he also initiates an important epistemological contradiction concerning the various concepts of truth value

in the film itself. We generally assume that the process of psychoanalysis reconstructs access to the crucially repressed moments in the formation of a subject's identity . . .

J.K.: Phillips says that psychoanalysis reconstitutes not a true history but a counter-history. In the padded interior of Freud's consulting room, his patients construct stories—true or false, it doesn't matter—that are different from the one that they have learned. And these stories are largely about home and about family: Patients bring their domestic interior with them into the psychoanalytic space—which is itself a domestic interior—in order to rewrite their story about family and home. Freud eventually accepted that finding the true story doesn't actually help. Using hypnotism and free-association in the 1890s, he got patients to remember their traumatic memories, but then found that nothing changed. Or he found that, instead of remembering, they repeated, unconsciously in the psychoanalytic session, the past, so he tried to make them realize what they were doing. But in the end, he discovered that what mattered was what was being constructed in the present, in the usually erroneous but healing working-through of the past. In the film, you have histories and counter-histories. You have the stories Scheer's grandfather tells him, or doesn't tell him, and then you have the discovery of the well, and the story Scheer tells about it, which allows him to take possession of his interior. In my case, I knew a story about the fate of the interior portrayed in the painting, but it was the wrong story. According to that story, they disappeared into the east, in Poland, perhaps. The words Theresienstadt and Auschwitz were sometimes mentioned, but never confirmed. My father, I believe, knew where they were killed, but he chose never to tell us.

B.B.: Obviously he wanted to protect you from the knowledge of his own traumatic experience.

Yet the very powerful counter-figure to the psychoanalyst in the unfolding process of reflection of how history and memory can or cannot be reconstructed—probably the most important of all—turns out to be the archivist of the Israelische Kultusgemeinde in Vienna, who will eventually trace and verify every detail of the actual history of the deportation and murder of your grandparents. His account reminded me of Georges Didi-Huberman's discussion in his book *Images in Spite of All*, where he argues against Claude Lanzmann that the eternally unresolvable questions about the (un)representability of the Holocaust have to be answered by an emphasis on the utter necessity of specific and concrete representation: in his case proven by the four photographic images that were taken by inmates in Birkenau and then smuggled out to the Polish resistance. You pursue a similarly specific project, stating: "I am going to the archive and I am going to trace the history of the apartment and I will be finding out what happened to my grandparents when they left the apartment and what the neighbor was doing as they were forced to leave."

J.K.: My father told a story that it was his Nazi neighbor—Riefenthaler—who burned down the apartment building on Am Tabor 13 (where my grandparents' apartment used to be) when the Russians marched into Vienna in April 1945. The idea was, he wanted to destroy the property before the enemy could claim it, sort of like Hitler's scorched-earth policy.

And in fact Riefenthaler knew he would get in trouble. The real story is much more complicated than what I could squeeze in the film. Riefenthaler's claim, which appears in the letter written to the authorities about "the Jewess Appel," was that he had been a National Socialist consistently before 1938. But that claim was rejected by the authorities both because Riefenthaler lied about why he hadn't kept up his party membership between 1934 and the *Anschluss* (a witness reported he was afraid of getting caught), and because he at some point cheated on his taxes. So his attempt to get a lower party-membership number failed, as did his attempt to seize the whole building. When the war ended, he was not only terrified by the Soviet occupiers but also worried that the Appels, the former Jewish owners of the building whom he had swindled, would return, testify against him, and reclaim their property—as indeed happened, though with many more strange twists and turns.

In the late 1940s, Riefenthaler used the Nazis' rejection of his claim to have been an old comrade as proof he had never been a Nazi at all—the court of course rejected the argument, as the documents proved that he fervently claimed to have been Vienna's first Nazi: the founder of the Hitler movement in the city. So my father's story was it was he who burned Am Tabor 13 down. But according to the city records, the building had been hit by a bomb. In the end, there's no knowing which is the true story. And was it really Riefenthaler's daughter, on the staircase up to their neighboring flats, with whom my father had his first "sexual investigations," as he called them? And is Scheer's well really a Jewish well? There are only memories and counter-memories, not *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. But it's also the case that without the archives, the story about the Vienna interior makes no sense.

B.B.: The compassionate yet calm discourse of the archivist in the film has a similarly striking function, since his detailed account of the actual circumstances, the time and date, of the deportation of your grandparents, drawn from documents in his archive, strikes the listeners as a decisive answer to these questions. This is another of the great chasms and contradictions in the film: that you start as an art historian and tell us about Viennese culture as a culture of space and the cult of the privacy of the home, and then you trace the historical and political events that annihilate all of this.

J.K.: Yes, Wolf-Erich Eckstein worked at the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde. He showed me the slip of paper saying "nach Minsk abgemeldet." From the slip of paper and the train schedules, which were kept in an archive just around the corner, I found the exact day and time of their death.



Koerner. The Burning Child. 2014–17.

This was completely unknown to me as a child. But when I began to do some research, I found almost instantly the answer, like it was staring me in the face. I thought it would be a long process, but you just had to go to the right authorities in Vienna and they told you. I went to the Kultusgemeinde, where births and deaths are recorded, and Wolf-Erich looked it up and showed me this thing that said my grandparents had been “deregistered to Minsk,” and he explained what such a phrase meant—that they had died in the extermination camp called Maly Trostenets. I got some photocopied articles about the camp. It was not a concentration camp, because there was no actual camp there. The rail tracks came to an end and people were killed there on the spot, either in the gas vans or, in the beginning, they were shot. It is obscure because when the Russians captured Minsk they built Maly Trostenets up into a kind of secret concentration camp for political prisoners, so for decades it was closed to historians. The film tries to play history against counter-history.

B.B.: Thus one can say that you juxtapose once again two dialectically opposed models of mnemonic reconstruction, the psychoanalytical process to illuminate repressed traumatic experience and the actual knowledge of the archivist and historian, who recounts and documents the historical reality of physical destruction. And the two strands don’t ever seem to come together, since the historical processes are unimaginably incommensurate with the dimensions of what the psychoanalytical process could possibly recuperate or

explain. That seems to be one of the most powerful insights one gains from seeing your film.

In one particular sequence you discuss Freud's home when visiting the Freud Museum, and the current curator of the museum relates the history of Freud's apartment. She describes how Freud lived a modest life in an almost petty-bourgeois home, whereas his office foregrounded a grander bourgeois style displaying his collection. Then the curator tells us the widely unknown and deeply disturbing story of how Freud's apartment (along with many others) was itself transformed into a *Sammelwohnung* where displaced Jewish families were gathered.

J.K.: And it is also not unrelated to the story of the interior represented in my father's painting.

Either you were kicked out of your apartment, squeezed in with others into a *Sammelwohnung*, and then, via one of the infamous *Sammelstellen* (note that word), deported to the east, or else your apartment was turned into a *Sammelwohnung*, a communal apartment through which the victims passed. In my grandparents' case they were kicked out and then sent away, but in Freud's case, after he escaped, his apartment became a *Sammelwohnung*, or *Stelle*, from which his three sisters were sent to their deaths. And yet the space he created for his psychoanalytic practice, the famous space of working-through—and a metaphor for the whole film—is that peculiar protective domestic interior that, of course, isn't domestic at all, being the discovery-place of the *Unheimlich*.

B.B.: It sets a stage, but for whose expectations? Was he primarily trying to comply with the demands of bourgeois subjectivity?

J.K.: The details are fairly conventional, but the concept as a whole is astonishing—that you create for patients, for people going to a doctor, a simulacrum of their private home. You would expect something like an examination room, an exam table with a crepe-paper roll, a sink, some sterile instruments—everything a hygienic white. But what if you're treating the mind, not the body? Or a body afflicted solely by the mind? So Freud creates an *intérieur* that's not clinical but domestic: a living room that's not quite a living room. There's a bed, but it's turned away from an overstuffed chair, so that there's no face-to-face, only speech floating in space. Then there are those Oriental rugs. Vienna was in the midst of a rage for Persian carpets following the World's Fair, and the young discipline of art history arising just then in Vienna (think of Alois Riegl) was obsessed by the "arabesque," its origins in nomadic life and its subsequent wanderings. So those rugs and their patterns are meant both to cushion and to transport, like magic carpets. Everyone had them, including my grandparents. But they are of special help to the work of psychoanalysis, which is a dream world, like the Orientalist "East." And finally there are the antiquities, Freud's personal passion, but they also helped the patient (filled with images) to free-associate with mythical themes—Oedipus, etc. Freud

thought psychoanalysis was a lot like archaeology, dredging up the past. There's another, very specific, feature, though, which I couldn't bring into the film. Almost all of his patients were Jewish, and before Jung's association with Freud, all psychoanalysts were Jewish as well. Freud worried psychoanalysis would be deemed a "Jewish science," which in a sense it was. And yet, when he created his archaeological assemblage, there are almost no Jewish antiquities in it. Freud thinks of the interior in Secessionist terms—not as the stylistic idiom of Olbrich, Hoffmann, Klimt, etc., but as the cultural identity behind that idiom. Like the Secession, there's Greek and Roman, there's Cyprus, Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Islam. It's everything Freud and his patients are not: not Jewish, not bourgeois.

One bit of Judaica did manage to enter the ensemble—accidentally, when Freud was about to escape Vienna. Two late-nineteenth-century kiddush cups snuck into some photographs of Freud's consulting room. They stand displayed on a table in front of some Egyptian statuettes, but they're not in all the photos of that table. Anna Freud probably placed them there at the end of the photo shoot, not to put them in the picture but just to make sure they would be packed up with the rest of Freud's things. Movers arrived just days after Edmund Engelman shot his last roll of film at Berggasse 19.

B.B.: Did these cups make it to London?

J.K.: No, they vanished. It's telling, this absence of Judaica. Freud's patients probably wanted to feel they were being treated by a modern, scientific method and not by something specifically Jewish, and Freud himself wanted to project a cosmopolitan identity, again to ward off the "Jewish science" charge.

In the film, Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial appears as the hinge between the various personal stories, including my own, and the revelations in the archives of the "Final Solution." Whiteread created a monument and an archive, merging the two divergent instruments of collective memory into one. And reversing them: The books—the casts of the library—are unreadable, and the materials and structure are deliberately non-monumental. Quite brilliantly, she also installed, at the geographic and traumatic center of the city, an un-enterable Viennese interior. The roof of the monument is the negative cast of an ordinary apartment ceiling, complete with a chandelier medallion like the one, I would guess, in the equally un-enterable interior of my father's painting. Meanwhile, the physical interiors of the archives I enter in the film: These are paradigms of Wagner's *Stellen*, knotted spatiotemporal passageways at the very heart of the city.

B.B.: The film begins and ends with landscape. One wonders to what degree you conceive of landscape as a space of mnemonic recuperation, or whether you show landscape as a highly dubious representation of home and *Heimat*, asking how landscape could ever feel again as a space of cultural continuity when history has totally disrupted any continuity. Thus, the landscape images, as beautiful and seductive as they are, appear ultimately as uncanny, undermined by the film itself.



Koerner. The Burning Child. 2014–17.

- J.K.: Landscape was an essential part of the story, because it's so integral to the experience of the city. The Prater, the Wienerwald, the banks of the Danube, the Augarten, the Gänsehäufel: These places were what my father and his family loved about the city, and not in fact the cramped private interior. When asked why he took us back to Vienna, my father always answered that it was the beauty of Viennese nature that drew him back, and it took me a long time to find anything in Pittsburgh, indeed in the whole US, as naturally beautiful—which is of course absurd. The “wonder” of the scene—this is how my father understood it—was above all about beauty, about *fatal* beauty.
- B.B.: It was your father's recuperation of the spaces of Vienna while avoiding the actual structures of architecture as historical realities . . .
- J.K.: Absolutely. He painted only “from life,” rather than from memory. He painted out of doors, like an Impressionist, or more like an amateur Sunday painter—the Sleepy Painter was his foil. From the moment we started filming, I wanted to make sure that there would be space for beauty—at least as a motif. We used to say the B-roll is the A-roll. There were times I wanted to dispense with all the interviews and make the film nothing but landscape and disruption (the dredging boat, which comes and goes through the film, was the kind of rupture I liked). I was always very taken by Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*.
- B.B.: Yet from the beginning it seems evident that your father's relationship to nature, as well as the sense of the reconciliation with nature or the identity of landscape, would not be possible, since there was also the strong sense of not belonging anymore.
- J.K.: Absolutely. Even my father's father would take his children out to the industrial wastelands, and that's what my father loved most: a dystopian landscape as secretly beautiful. It prepared him for Pittsburgh. And when he goes to paint beautiful nature, picturesque nature, it has to contain some element of the grotesque for it to work for him. In the making of the film, we tried to find a similar balance between the beautiful and the strange. Christian Bruun, my co-director, shot in a super-wide-screen format, in 4K. We looked for lush views of Vienna, but within these views we tried to find usual people, like the old man on the beach in the Gänsehäufel. The idea was also to make all the interviews seem—at least potentially—to be episodes encountered accidentally on a stroll through the city. At first, these look entirely like scenes in a historical documentary—the architect and the historian speaking in the Imperial Pavilion—but then comes Markus Scheer with his philosophy of shoes, who *was* an accidental interviewee, after all, and Peter Weibel (a close friend) practicing “nervous sketching” in the Secession. They are meant to speak for the interior, or rather for the *Stelle* in which they appear, but they unsettle the convention of the interview and its setting.

B.B.: Could it be that the film ultimately conveys a sense that landscape and nature cannot mediate identity any longer? Or, even more contradictory, precisely because nationalist and eventually Fascist politics had mobilized claims for landscape and nature as foundations of their politics, as literally “grounded,” they had become the basis of the destruction of identity? To rephrase it, can claims of home and desires for belonging any longer be mediated by imploring the terrestrial grounds of nature?

J.K.: No, belonging can’t be mediated by nature.

B.B.: But they thought it could be?

J.K.: They thought it could be, in as intense a way as they thought they would be safe in their apartment. They thought they could at least walk the Wienerwald unimpeded—that the woods wouldn’t be forbidden to the Jews—as eventually they were.

The film works on the principle of repetition. My father repeated, with us, the walks his parents took him on, and the film repeats those walks yet again. Walking becomes a form of working-through, in the Freudian sense that repeating can be a form of remembering and of healing. Meanwhile, neither my father nor (I hope) the film accepts the beautiful view. The motifs he found in the landscape were almost always, in one way or another, grotesque. For example, in the Lainzer Tiergarten—a huge nature reserve in the southwestern corner of the city—we came upon a tiny old woman who every morning brought bread rolls to feed to the wild boars that wandered in the forest. She’d toss down the bread and then, with this big stick she carried with her, she’d smack the pigs, screaming at them for being so greedy.

B.B.: But she instigated first?

J.K.: Yes, she did. The whole scene—the huge adult boars, the swarms of striped little piglets, the beautiful woodland setting, and the old lady, who looked about four feet tall but was more angry and aggressive than the animals: It was mesmerizing. My father of course immediately took out his painting gear and painted her. She was willing to pose among the pigs every morning for several days. When I think back on what was a “motif” for my father, it had something to do with finding an impediment, something that stops you, sometimes comically, sometimes violently, and that clashes with the natural beauty. The woman beating the pigs tells you there’s something wrong in the landscape. In the film I wanted the audience to keep asking, why the shoemaker, why the sound artist, the water expert, and so forth. There should be a certain dislocation, because I wanted you to feel that you are casually wandering the city, but at every point you confront something that tells you something terrible is going to happen, so you should leave.

B.B.: Could one explain this concern with a “motif” also as his motivation to produce any painting at all under the circumstances of his return to Vienna? Do you think that it was his attempt to recuperate places, sites, and to probe or even renew basically impossible social relations? Was painting for

him not a manner of coming back to Vienna without necessarily confronting the personal and the political history of the Holocaust at every moment of his being there?

J.K.: Sometimes obliquely, sometimes overtly, his motifs pointed back to their violent cause. The Vienna he was looking for wasn't the place of his childhood but (like the title of Hans Karl Breslauer's prophetic 1924 movie) the "city without Jews." It was the Vienna now only of the neighbors, the people who were either onlookers to the catastrophe or perpetrators. In our film, in my father's voice, you hear about Frau Busch still minding her grocery store, and how it's she who tells him that his parents were murdered. Her voice has "an undertone of satisfaction," he reports, "but tears rolled down her cheeks." In around February 1946, when I believe the scene took place, her tears weren't for his parents. Hence the satisfaction—she enjoyed telling him that news. The tears flow automatically, for herself. These were the people he painted: a crabby grocer, a street cleaner, a husband and wife pruning the apricot tree in their tiny allotment, their *Schrebergarten*. He'd find these characters on location, as it were, in a zone I like to call *tiefes Österreich* ("deep Austria"). Now, when I wrote that my father always lived with the possibility that he might have to "pack up his bags and flee the terrible scene," that was my interpretation of his art, not his. Years after I typed that sentence, after my father died and I was going through his papers, I found a photocopy of my old text, which I must have mailed to him. I discovered that he'd crossed out the words "terrible scene" and written over them, in bold black capitals, WONDROUS SCENE. So the experience he wanted to express, the secret kernel of the motif, was about violence, a bit about comedy, but also centrally about wonder. Wonder is part of the uncanny, too. When I told my father about Freud's theory of the uncanny, he loved the idea and completely agreed that his was an *unheimliche Heimat*, an "uncanny home"—even though he otherwise had no interest in Freud. Because what he sought in the Viennese landscape weren't just recollections of his childhood or afterimages of home, but an inscrutability within the familiar—the *Unheimlich*. For him, his paintings—every brushstroke made from life—revealed that structure hidden in the visible. That was one reason he started to paint in a style reminiscent of Cézanne: to find and create the uncanny as a structure.

B.B.: This is my last question. Throughout your film I sensed, perhaps erroneously, a desire for the recuperation of geopolitical belonging, since it pursues the question of Viennese identity and the history of your father's family in Vienna. At the same time you are working from the perspective of exile, not only because you are an American. Yet it was precisely the Fascist German-Austrian nation-state that caused the traumatic destruction of your family. So any attempt to conceive even residual forms of continuity within the culture of that nation-state has to either totally disavow the insight that all forms of continuity had been fundamentally ruptured. Or it has to reconceive identity formation from a fundamentally different, post-national position, which is of course exactly what the



Henry Koerner. Ruined Building on Schillerplatz. 1945–46.

film attempts to perform from multiple perspectives. That seems to be the chasm of the film, or its tragic condition, in that it tries to sustain models of a potential continuity of thought and experience via the languages of architecture and music, and at the same time it has to constitute itself at every moment in the full awareness that all forms of cultural continuity have been destroyed, since that is the foundational moment of your family's and even your own experience, a very crucial condition to reflect on the discontinuities of nation, language, and culture in the twentieth century.

J.K.: As a child, I experienced the trauma of family history through blind but productive repetition. In painting everything "from life," stumbling on motifs as if by accident, my father *consciously* turned remembering into unconscious repeating, and paintings were the result. Perhaps this affected me as a person, but it certainly shaped how I do art history, which has always been in some large measure presentist, in that I begin with the work's reception in the here and now and reach back towards the past from lacunae experienced in the present. But I also observe how the work sends shock waves from the past, or how it acts like a time bomb set to detonate in an unforeseen future. I've assumed that past and present are as entangled, and that original intentions and future effects are as reversible for all works of art as they have been for me in my father's portrait of his parents inside their Viennese interior. My first concept for the film was simply to recover the story of that lost space in the painting. That took me to the archives, but given that the living room in the painting was like hundreds of thousands of similar ones in Vienna, I wanted to explore its underlying idea and to answer the question: What did people in that city at that time expect from their interiors? And this sent me to the history of modern interior design, with its birthplace in Vienna, where homemaking was the red thread through that city's critical form of modernism. This story I told not in my own voice—there are better voices than mine here—but through expert interviews conducted on-site, in the various *Stellen*. But the personal and the historical stories intertwine as the monuments of Viennese modernism reveal themselves to be already implicated in the catastrophic end, when, in the *Anschluss*, Vienna's most fervent dreamers of homemaking are awoken by their nightmare neighbor. There was also the brute fact that the film really couldn't enter the interior that motivated it. There could be no arrival to or entrance into Am Tabor 13, only the cinematic anticlimax of strolling past, or standing blind and dumb before, the absent end point. So the final move was outward again from the personal. Edith Brickell had a story similar to my father's, but she was able to return to her original home. She has the last word.

B.B.: She is also a real Viennese citizen who returned from exile in New York . . .

J.K.: Yes, and, very unusually for a Viennese Jew, she both wanted and was able to reclaim her apartment. She utters a sentence that was very important and moving to me, that she had often dreamt that one of her parents was alive, but once she reentered her childhood home, once she slept there in her old bed, those



Henry Koerner. My House. 1945-46.

dreams disappeared and she knew her parents would never return. My mother always understood my father's not telling the story of his parents' death as a sort of pathological disinterest. It left us with the unsatisfying answer "Who knows?," which held up the possibility that they might have somehow survived, suffered amnesia, and lived now somewhere in Israel, South America, etc. My father would dismiss the conversation. And yet the fact is, we ended up living so close to his old apartment that we could see Am Tabor 13 from our window. And more uncannily, in the painting, in the view through the window it depicted, you can already actually see our apartment: My father got that far-off building right, from memory! The fact that this lack of home abided so bizarrely close to us kept my father's parents powerfully alive to us as a family. Brickell's putting the dead to rest by reentering the interior made her story so powerful to me. It's not as if I think anything would have been cured had we been able to return, but she presented a very different destiny.

B.B.: Because she is not engaged in repression of that kind.

J.K.: She says, after a moment of hesitation, she's at home in Vienna. If my father were asked, he would say his home is Pittsburgh. He would never say Vienna.

B.B.: And she said for long time New York was home . . .

J.K.: Yes. She reports that, living in New York, she would think Vienna was her home, but then, in Vienna, she would think of New York as her home. But she speaks of this "terrible feeling" in her old apartment, and that gives the film some kind of closure.

B.B.: It is not evident that the film aims to provide closure either to you or its spectators . . .

J.K.: I'm not sure I want too much closure, either for myself or for the film. The first plan was to end the story in the cemetery, with Eckstein scrapping ivy from the tombstones, as he frequently does. Genealogy is his passion and his profession. But it seemed too clichéd, so the guy at the Gänsehäufel came to the rescue. I wanted to end with an image of the next generation, backed by the return of the *Gurre-Lieder*. Schoenberg's "Orchestral Prelude" sways between major and minor keys, like wavy waters. *Gurre* is also a mythic castle, like the ruin in the film's opening sequence, so the story wraps back around to the beginning, with the flowing Danube.

B.B.: I'm not quite sure that I ultimately understood why you called the film *The Burning Child*, even though I had initially assumed I knew. Was it about the child accusing the father of not addressing the condition of traumatic memory, which is partially what your film finally does? One of the questions the film seems to ask the father is: Why did you or could you not do the work of memory that I have to work through now?

J.K.: Yes, at one level the film is about a generation burning with this question: Why were the parents so blind? It's Brickell's question, and Scheer's in a different way . . .

B.B.: And apparently also your own.