Acts of Unsettling: An Immersive Adaptation of Berger and Mohr's *A Seventh Man*

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Abstract: This article examines Michael Pinchbeck and Ollie Smith's theatrical adaptation of *A Seventh Man*, the 1975 book by John Berger and photographer Jean Mohr studying the experience of migrant workers in Europe. Pinchbeck and Smith's 2020 adaptation uses immersive performance strategies in dialogue with a multi-voiced, cross-disciplinary publication that itself aims to produce an immersive or 'animated' reader engagement. In this article, Babbage and Pinchbeck present source text and performance as examples of practice-as-research, referencing Nelson's paradigm that establishes different modes of knowledge and points of connection- and dissension-between them. They discuss the book's cross-disciplinarity and the attempt to reflect this in a new creative context that is spatiotemporal, embodied, social, visual, verbal and aural. The article's theoretical context draws on writing by Barthes, Berger, Said and Sontag, applying Barthes' notion of the studium and the punctum to reflect on the dramaturgical rendering of the source text's 'interruptive shocks'. Babbage and Pinchbeck argue that, in book and performance, the juxtaposition of different formal languages elicits an encounter with the material that is productively 'unsettling'.

Keywords: performance; adaptation; *A Seventh Man*; theatre

1. Introduction

John Berger and Jean Mohr's co-authored *A Seventh Man*, first published in 1975, presents a complex representation and interrogation of migrant labour. The book incorporates reportage, Marxist analysis, reflection, and poetry, together with more than 200 photographs by Mohr, which do not so much illustrate the verbal text as provide their own visual testimony: sometimes images support the word; elsewhere, they complicate or contest it. In a study of Berger's work, Joshua Sperling observes that *A Seventh Man* was 'built on the newly rediscovered tradition of montage', with its content 'neither an argument nor a story, but a hybrid of juxtapositions'. Individual photographs like frames in a film. Montage from "monter": to build or assemble. Meaning is derived from their collective shape or arrangement' (Sperling 2020, p. 133). Significance is generated relationally, in other words, it emerges through connections and conflicts, not just internal to the text, but generated by the encounter between the text and the one who reads or receives it. The montage, as Sperling emphasises, is a hybrid form rather than a harmonious whole; it follows that the reader experience may be similarly unsettling.

This essay examines the approach taken by Michael Pinchbeck and co-director Ollie Smith in adapting *A Seventh Man* into a piece of intimate, immersive theatre.[1] The source text, as described above, might seem an unlikely source for stage translation for any number of reasons: it is an assemblage of many parts, with no overarching narrative; it is understated rather than (in any sense) dramatic; its statistics, diagrams, and maps are taxing for a reader, still more so for a theatre audience; finally, Mohr's visual records have an inherent specificity that situates them unmistakably in another time and place. Yet, it was in large part this resistance to conventional dramatisation that drove the project.

Pinchbeck and Smith's production, made in 2020, is the second in a performance trilogy of Berger/Mohr adaptations initiated by Pinchbeck that began with *A Fortunate Man* in 2018 and concludes in 2022–2023 with *Another Way of Telling*. Through these three books, using them as a lens, the company explores ways of staging the collaborative works of Berger and Mohr, finding methodologies for enacting the dialogue between image and text implicit in the originals. In what follows, Pinchbeck writes on behalf of the company about the making process; Frances Babbage writes from the perspective of both audience member and dramaturg for the project. The resulting co-authored essay is self-consciously dialogic as we negotiate the different perspectives each of us brings, reflecting on the performance from inside-out and outside-in.

As we later examine in more detail, a key decision taken early in the adaptation process was that the performance of *A Seventh Man* would take place in a shed or, rather, in a wooden structure resembling a shed.[2] This deliberately restrictive space allowed for a maximum audience of seven; consequently, to attend the show meant being unusually close to the performers and to fellow spectators. In this sense, the audience were *within* the piece, *inside* the experience. As Lynne Kendrick writes:

> The immersive is identified by its association with interiority, not just being inside certain spaces but of the experience of being inside, of within-ness of an interiority which isn't ordinarily apparent, that can only be available through performance. (Kendrick 2017, p. 40)

Immersivity in performance, as defined by Kendrick, has found increasing popularity in contemporary practice, but its roots are longer, evident most obviously in the avant-garde experimentation of the mid-20th century. In the US, Allan Kaprow's Happenings (in the 1950s) and the Environmental Theatre pioneered by Richard Schechner (in the 1960s) influentially showed how distinctions between performer and audience, representation and reality, could be destabilised literally and figuratively (Kaprow 1966; Schechner 1973). For instance, *Dionysus in 69*, a reimagining of Euripides' *Bacchae* staged (in 1968) by Schechner's Performance Group in New York City, had actors and spectators occupy the same playing space, bringing them into intimate and unsettling proximity.[3] Immersive theatre practices in the 21st century are rarely so invasive, but they similarly test the boundaries of performance and the role and responsibilities of audiences. Theatre described as 'immersive' can encompass the creation of ambitiously scaled 'worlds', exemplified by the work of Punchdrunk or dreamthinkspeak, through meticulously constructed, large-cast productions spread across multi-floored buildings.[4] However, the premise of immersive practice—that the performance environment wholly encircles the audience—means that, more typically, events take place in smaller spaces for limited numbers.[5] This was the case with *A Seventh Man*, designed as a 'micro-performance' that would enclose its tiny audience not only in a physical space but a narrative and aesthetic one too.[6] Such an approach had not previously been adopted in relation to Berger's work; prior adaptations or stagings of his writings have been variously experimental, but without situating audiences within the piece in this way.[7] One distinctive mounting of a Berger text was Brith Gof's *Boris* (Gof 1985), which took place in an old barn, Hendre Wen, at the Welsh Folk Museum, using hay bales as seats and featuring farm animals whose presence helped capture the sounds and smells of the short story that inspired it. This production brought spectators into close—occasionally interactive—proximity with characters and action, but was arguably not 'immersive' in the sense we use here through designation of an audience area clearly distinguished from the playing space.[8] By contrast, immersivity was a central strategy of Pinchbeck and Smith's production: in common with its source, this adaptation aimed to disallow the possibility of remaining 'outside' the text.

We begin by setting out the context for Berger's collaborations with Mohr, showing how their cross-disciplinary experimentation challenged academic orthodoxy in its creation of a shared vocabulary that bridged abstraction with specificity, the poetic with the factual, to reveal the different articulate capacities of word and image. From there, we move

to examine the undertaking of the adaptation, the issues that *A Seventh Man* posed for theatrical translation, and, particularly, the challenge of thinking and narrating through visual images; here, our consideration of photography's potential as a form of storytelling is supported by the writings and theories of Edward Said, Susan Sontag, and Roland Barthes. Finally, we consider retrospectively the ways in which the performance might be said to 'speak back' to the book.

Central to our argument is the claim that source text and theatre adaptation—each exploiting (and testing) the formal capabilities of their medium—work similarly to cultivate a sometimes jarring, multi-voiced articulation of their subject, in an 'act of unsettling' and that this in turn shapes an encounter between reader and text, audience and performance, that is rooted in an attentive, ethical space of looking and listening. Specifically, we aim to show that the performance found radical new ways to reflect and reinvent the provocative, collage-like qualities of the book, fostering an animated, implicated audience able to recognise this account of migrant labour from 1975 as immediate, politically charged, and current.

2. Setting the Scene: Unsettling Disciplines

John Berger's name perhaps remains most strongly associated with art criticism, influenced by his important and then controversial 1972 BBC television series *Ways of Seeing*. In his youth, Berger had been a practising artist, art teacher, and lecturer in art history, as well as an exhibition curator and radio presenter. But to a British public, he was known primarily as an art critic and, throughout the 1960s, as a prolific writer in wider-ranging contexts and genres. He published three novels between 1958 and 1964 and provided the screenplay for Swiss director Alain Tanner's film *The Salamander* (1971). Berger's fourth novel, the experimentally non-linear and picaresque G. (1972), came out the same year as *Ways of Seeing* and won the Booker Prize; notoriously, its author gave half the award money to the British Black Panthers, a movement active at the time in the fight against racial discrimination.

Berger had left England a full decade earlier, first for Geneva and later settling in rural France, where he remained until his death in 2017. The move was driven in part by disaffection with British intellectual circles that he increasingly found stifling, hostile to his Leftist politics, or (worse) disengaged. In France, Berger continued to produce novels, screenplays, stage plays, and poetry. Pursuing his fascination with the communicative potency of the image, he embarked on a series of innovative collaborations with Swiss photographer Jean Mohr. The first book they created together was *A Fortunate Man* (1967), a meditative, visually poetic text charting the life of a country doctor. In 1975, they published *A Seventh Man*, which boldly juxtaposed fiction and poetry with diagrams and statistics, journalism and photomontage, to dissect the economics and politics of migrant labour. In 1982, their co-authored book *Another Way of Telling*, subtitled 'a possible theory of photography', turned critical attention directly to the practice and politics of image making, much as *Ways of Seeing* had done for the British viewing public ten years before.

The diversity of Berger's creative and critical practice was for him a natural extension of his perspective on the world. Joshua Sperling cites a 2001 interview in which Berger remarks: 'If I've written about a lot of different kinds of things [...] it's because I'm interested in a lot of different kinds of things. So are most people' ([Sperling 2020](#), p. 16). However, it is plain from the preceding (inevitably reductive) summary that he did not only write about the world but drew and painted it; in collaboration with Mohr, Tanner, and many others, he immersed himself deeply in practices of visual and sensory representation. It was Berger's art-centred and collaborative approach as much as his rhetoric that prompted Edward Said, in a 1982 essay, to represent him as a model from whom other critics could usefully learn. Said had just reviewed *Another Way of Telling*, which had powerfully impressed him for its revelation of 'the way one could narrate with pictures' ([Mitchell and Said 1998](#), p. 15). Said's essay for *Critical Inquiry*, titled 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community', attacked the inward-facing activity of scholars

who wrote, it seemed, essentially for one another; whose approach to text analysis was resolutely non-political and who rarely challenged—or even acknowledged—the borders of their individual disciplines. Said advocated precisely the opposite strategy, urging that '[i]nstead of noninterference and specialization, there must be *interference*, a crossing of borders and obstacles ... ' (Said 1982, p. 24). In other words, the humanities had to acknowledge its embeddedness in the social, just as literary and wider critical practices should proactively explore those places where disciplines overlap.

In Said's view, one way to escape the spiralling insularity of academic writing was to explore the dynamic capabilities of the visual. Doing so was important for at least two reasons. First, such an approach—exemplified for Said by the collaboration of Berger and Mohr—would reflect the visuality that distinctively characterised modern cultural communication forms; engaging with photographs and film alongside and in conjunction with the verbal would 'restore the nonsequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity as fundamental components of meaning in representation' (Said 1982, p. 25). Second, Said reasoned, images had the capacity literally to make visible subjects and experiences that had hitherto been obscured: photographs could 'tell other stories than the official sequential or ideological ones produced by institutions of power', in this way 'opening the culture to experiences of the Other which have remained "outside" [...] the norms manufactured by "insiders"' (ibid.). Word and image, literary critical and creative, could work together effectively to tackle themes that were contemporary and urgent. This would be by no means an easy fusion; however, Said adds, echoing Berger, that self-conscious disciplinary border-crossing meant 'risking all the discomfort of a great unsettlement in ways of seeing and doing' (Said 1982, p. 26).

Said practised the interdisciplinary method that he preached. Indeed, 1986 saw publication of his own co-production with Mohr, *After the Last Sky*, which combined Said's reflections on Palestinian identity and history with photographs Mohr had taken in the Middle East over several decades (Said and Mohr [1986] 1999). In an analysis of this work, Krista Kauffman argues that its hybrid text–image form effectively generates thematic and disciplinary disturbance and is 'fundamentally concerned with the act of unsettling: unsettling preconceptions, including those about what, whom, and how we see; unsettling positions; and unsettling established forms' (Kauffmann 2012, p. 117). Kauffmann's terms—reflecting on *After the Last Sky*, itself inspired by the collaborations of Berger and Mohr—highlight precisely those qualities of *A Seventh Man* that prompted the theatrical adaptation of the book in 2020 that will be our focus here.

3. Unsettling Forms in *A Seventh Man*: Page to Performance

Across a span of 15 years, Berger and Mohr's co-authored books variously experimented with the different ways in which verbal and visual vocabularies might be combined. In *A Fortunate Man*, they used images to evoke a time and place, in this instance, the New Forest in the 1960s. In *A Seventh Man*, they juxtaposed reportage and visual documentation to construct a layered understanding of migrant labour—historical, economical, and ideological—and convey the force of its impact on the workers themselves. The larger question that such projects represented was framed by Berger like this: 'What are the possible relations between images and text? How can we approach the reader together?' (Berger and Mohr [1982] 2016, p. 85) In collaboration with Mohr, he pushed those possibilities until, towards the end of their partnership in *Another Way of Telling*, the authors allowed the images to speak for themselves: finally, they sought to 'narrate through pictures', as Said observed.

Berger was in dialogue with other writers of the time on the subject of storytelling. When he met Susan Sontag in 1983 for a televised conversation, the two argued about the way stories emerge. As Lily Dessau puts it, reflecting on their discussion:

> Sontag considers the storyteller as inventor, in control of the material, out of which the 'people come'. Berger conversely takes the form of the story as the

result of the language coming out of the people, but he does characterize their differing views as arriving at the same place: the scene of the text. (Dessau 2016)

It is at this 'scene of the text' that, as makers, Pinchbeck and Smith found themselves working: this was simultaneously a theatrical scene, a *mise en scène*, the scene of a book exploring migration in 1975 and the scene of an immersive adaptation of that book in the 21st century. The production the company made, with Mohr's photographs projected onto, nailed into, and scattered within the walls of the tiny wooden space used for the performance, created an opportunity for the audience to arrive at the scene of the image too.

On the evolution of his published works, and his own approach to writing, Berger remarked: 'When people ask me about the plan for a book, I can never answer them properly. What I see in my mind's eye is a coming and a going, a widening and a narrowing, breaks and congestions, and diagonals and a way through' (Berger 2013, p. 27). Tackling *A Seventh Man*, the company explored these moments of coming and going, first widening—which meant reading Berger and Mohr's work—and then narrowing—which meant selecting, editing, and refining the text. Adaptation and theatrical devising are processes that always involve finding 'a way through' and navigating terrain that is, initially, unknown. Approaching this material necessarily from the vantage point of the present day, Pinchbeck and Smith worked with a company of three—Gabrielle Benna, Olwen Davies, and Hayley Doherty—to find the story behind migrant workers in the 1970s as framed on the page through Berger's words and Mohr's images.

This effort to negotiate across gaps, to find points of connection rather than seek the immediacy of 'identification', was reflected in the make-up of the company. As noted above, the devisor–performers were female; all three can also be perceived as co-creators, because they were part of the process that shaped the work rather than coming to the script in its finished state as actor–interpreters. It might appear idiosyncratic at first that this narrative of male migrant labour should be conveyed in performance by three young women. Indeed, Berger makes explicit in a 'Note to the Reader' that *A Seventh Man* focuses exclusively on the experience of men, because while in Europe at that time the migrant workforce included 'probably two million' women, to treat their case adequately would have 'require[d] a book in itself' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, p. 12). Sperling observes that '[g]ender was an acknowledged if glaring blind spot' of Berger's work that this casting choice sought, in part, to rectify (Sperling 2020, p. 130). In practice, the evident disjunction between the performers and their material functioned positively to acknowledge and emphasise the difference between an act of presenting on the one hand and lived historical experience on the other. Although dressed in the (non-specific) uniform of overalls, the women made no attempt to impersonate male workers, or even to assume characters; instead, they remained essentially 'themselves', moving almost neutrally through the phases of performance as if through a series of tasks.

Berger and Mohr's book is thus gendered in its exclusive focus on the male migrant worker but additionally in the choice made throughout its pages to term the migrant labourer 'he'. This pronoun is not a passive reflection of the identities of those studied; rather, it operates intentionally to render the human subject of scrutiny simultaneously individual and symbolic. When Berger writes, for instance, 'After nine days he reached Paris. He had the address of a Portuguese friend, but he knew no directions' or 'A worker one day threatened to shut him in a cooler. He did not understand the words the man was bellowing, but it turned out to be a joke', the effect of those lines is oddly disorientating (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, pp. 49, 138). No one worker can have had all the experiences attributed throughout the book to this 'he'; hence, the reader infers that the histories of many are being filtered through a representative figure. At the same time, it is a strategy that implicitly draws attention to the anonymising tenor of reportage that categorises and generalises, bypassing the specificities of individual lives. The use of 'he' might keep the reader at a certain remove, but nonetheless, 'he' is very different from 'they': the former humanises and personalises, dismantling the barrier towards an empathetic knowing that the latter would reinstate.

Early on in the adaptation process, the decision was taken to change this pronoun from 'he, the migrant worker', in the book, to 'you, the migrant worker', in the script. This was a small yet significant change, which strongly shaped the feeling and focus of the performance. The second-person address extended an invitation to audiences to journey into the world of *A Seventh Man* together with the three actors, as observer and, implicitly, as subject. This designation—'you, the migrant worker'—did not elide the distinction between spectator and 'character' or between the reader and historical subject read, but rather negotiated the tensions in that relationship. Because the circumstances of the audience were *not* aligned with the 'you' who is the labourer, this form of address sought both to invite and preclude identification. To say 'you' points to the topicality of *A Seventh Man*; it opens up parallels between a text written many decades ago and the situation today; it locates the audience in that ambiguous space between then and now, there and here. In the performance, the actors addressed the spectators: 'You have arrived. You are here'. In this way, the adaptation aimed to speak across and between times.

The company was keen to preserve the distinctive compositional and aesthetic qualities of the book as much as its thematic content. To this end, the early stages of the devising process explored ways of 'turning pages' onstage using digital projection, as well as seeking other means by which Mohr's photographs could play a dynamic role in the narrative, including being manipulated physically by the actors, or cast onto surfaces, such as the shed wall. The juxtaposition of image and text in the adaptation process was driven by Berger and Mohr's description of their own collaborative method: 'A book has to advance on two legs. One being the images. The other being the text' (Berger 2013, p. 167). The practical experiments undertaken towards theatrical translation placed emphasis on the dialogue between visual and textual, ultimately using this to progress the narrative. Nonetheless, the performance's translation of the source material intentionally resisted rendering this fully cohesive. In the absence of consistent characters (even named figures), sustained stories, or dramatic action and presented instead with an unfolding montage of fact and fiction, speech and image, and live action and overlaid film, audience members were required to seek patterns of connection in order to 'make sense' of the piece and their own position within it.

As the making process continued, other strategies were adopted that emphasised this immersed, implicated spectator position. As previously noted, the eventual production was presented in a shed-like structure, the tiny size of which characterised the event as a micro-performance. In so enclosed a space, and facing one another, an audience is inevitably made vulnerable. That said, the production of *A Seventh Man* did not seek to be actively confrontational so much as gently discomforting. Audience members were each handed suitcases when they arrived. Chalk crosses were marked above the head of this one or that one to signify that they had not passed the medical tests; yet, without this meaning made explicit, spectators were left to wonder why some of them were 'chosen' and others not: was it good or bad to receive a cross? Concurrently with this action, images from the book were projected onto the shed walls. The audience's task was to piece these elements together whilst, at the same time, playing a part in the storytelling. This approach to staging aimed to reflect the way in which *A Seventh Man*—and not least, Mohr's photography—seems to offer up pieces of a puzzle that the reader is obliged to connect. Berger suggests: 'Every photograph presents us with two messages, a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity' (Berger and Mohr [1982] 2016, p. 88). The performance worked to provide an experience that was similarly discontinuous. Berger asks: 'And the narrative [or] the plot? The question must be returned: the plot is that *you* read' (Berger 2013, p. 27). In the context of performance, this 'you' became the audience.

This account aims to establish that book and performance alike structured a nuanced, dynamic relationship with their 'readers': both found ways to draw those readers inside the text, non-confrontationally but nonetheless insistently, in an encounter that is interactive and ethically weighted. The position of the reader/audience can be said to reflect Berger's 'aesthetic of radical hospitality', to cite the novelist Ben Lerner (Lerner 2017). Here, 'hospi-

tality' suggests a generosity and openness in making space for one's visitors; to describe such hospitality as 'radical' conveys both the profundity of that gesture and the implication of democratic exchange. In other words, as reader/audience, you are made welcome, but to be brought *inside* means you necessarily forego the safety of the margins. With reference to the performance, video documentation reveals how audience members initially held on tightly to their suitcases for comfort, for reassurance, as they were seated next to strangers in the tiny space. In rehearsal, it was discovered that banging on the shed walls from the outside, as well as shouting in other languages, created an effect that literally and figuratively 'rattled' those on the inside, mimicking the points where the text talks about how—in the makeshift accommodation assigned to migrant labourers—'you' can always hear noises from the next room. At other moments, the performers took the suitcases from the audience at one point to represent them being passed out through a train window, gave them hard hats to wear, and shared bread with them, so that everyone in the space was cast similarly as a worker. In this way, the event built a sense of community, with the audience taking part in the lived experience of the storytelling in a kind of embodied, collective reading of the text. Yet, this sensation of inclusivity was periodically disturbed by the use of dramaturgical devices including the use of jarring sirens or speech delivered through a megaphone: such elements constituted what Sperling refers to as 'interruptive shocks' in the original, adding that for its authors 'Brecht was certainly a model' (Sperling 2020, p. 130). The purpose of these 'shocks'—exemplified in the book by photographs whose subjects seem intently focused on something beyond the frame, or a poster promoting European holidays, or a list of terms that will be variously jarring according to whatever discourse you find 'normal' (glass fibre, övertid, cellulose acetate, and dödsfall) (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, p. 71)—is, Sperling notes, to 'wake the reader from the dream' (Sperling 2020, p. 130). The 'dream' perhaps stands both for the cocooning state of quiet reading and the serenity built on the assumption that *what* you read does not directly affect your own life. At one point in the performance, a member of the company walked around the shed hitting it with a hammer, making audience members jump as the impact reverberated where they sat. In this way, the adaptation translated the book's effort to shape an encounter that was welcoming and intimate, but simultaneously potentially unsettling for its audience.

4. Unsettling Aesthetics: Visuality, Photograph and Image

The performance began with an image being torn up. The image was a photograph, by Mohr, of a migrant whose experience is documented in the book; each spectator was handed a fragment of a face on their arrival. This gesture was inspired by a ritual action that Berger and Mohr recorded: when migrants were escorted across the border by a guide, the guide would show the torn photo to their family as proof of transit. As the opening of the performance, this understated, coded action was intended to exert a form of gentle pressure on the audience from the outset. To be handed that photo fragment was immediately a responsibility: the torn face—half a real someone—is a piece of history you were being tasked to mind. The unassuming scrap appeared all-too-loseable, but its import was clear. And during the performance, Mohr's photographs steadily accumulated in varying manifestations: nailed onto walls, flickering across the panelling. Towards the end, the actors constructed a metropolis in miniature at the audience's feet, a night-time city in bird's-eye view of train-track roads, toy cars, and strings of lights. More pictures were placed around its edges: these faces brought the conurbation alive, even as the ritualistic laying down underlined their originals' passing. The addition of photographs to this model revealed the role of the migrant workforce in powering the capitalist 'machine', simultaneously re-instituting and underlining the humanity of individual members.

Dessau suggests that, for Berger, 'the story exists somewhere between fiction and truth', and this is true of *A Seventh Man*, which treads a fine line between documentary and poetry in its depiction of the dream/nightmare existence of the migrant worker (Dessau 2016). Images are used both functionally in the text, for example, through an instruction guide and 'Motion and Time Study' for workers checking bottles in a factory, or the inclusion of

'Anthropometric Data of the Standing Adult Male' designed to show how repetitive manual labour impacts on the human frame, and evocatively, as with the torn photograph that operates as a kind of ticket across the border (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, pp. 49, 101, 109). In the latter case, the white space on the page around that half photo speaks to the distance the men travelled, or perhaps the fact they were torn from their families—by conflict or poverty—and adds a dramatic pause to the last line of text: 'Mostly they travelled by night. Hidden in lorries. And on foot' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, p. 49). This is what we might call a 'beat' in a play, but here, on the page, it is enacted by an isolated photograph fragment. This careful visual framing of the line of text serves as a reminder that Berger and Mohr worked on the layout together and considered the 'dramaturgy of reading' through the placement of image, words, and the space in between. On one page, above a picture of two men sharing a barracks far from home, after listing the reasons for the high accident rates for migrant workers, there is a sentence surrounded by white space: 'The terms of the equation should now be clear' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, p. 131). The blankness that frames the words suggests that this 'equation' should be clear both to the men in the photograph and to the reader of the book. The shot itself speaks of the bleak existence faced by the migrant workers. This image, like all Mohr's photographs for the book, was processed in the darkroom, and its graininess or haze mediates the scene distinctively, the greyness and blurred lines emphasising the air of joylessness and impoverishment. At the same time, there is a quality of delicacy to the image tied both to the subjects depicted and the photographic aesthetic itself. The darkroom method renders the photograph peculiarly fragile: the picture's eventual lucidity depends on its patient development. In the performance, actors and audience were engaged in something similarly painstaking, as together they looked for a living history in records and statistics, to explore what relationships could be forged with subjects no longer there to speak for themselves. As Sontag writes in *On Photography*: 'All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt' (Sontag 1979, p. 15).

Other images in Berger and Mohr's study can be seen to demonstrate what Barthes termed the 'punctum'. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes suggests that in interpreting a photograph there are two key elements to consider: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* enables the viewer ' . . . to participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings and the actions' (Barthes [1980] 1993, pp. 26–27). By contrast, the *punctum* 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces . . . ' Barthes' use of theatrical vocabulary—'the settings and the actions'—to describe the composition of a photograph readily lends itself to a dramaturgical context, prompting the question of how performance might be similarly interrupted. If the *studium* is found in a broader reading of a piece's 'settings and actions', then the *punctum* might operate to disrupt, puncture, or punctuate the performance. Barthes describes the *punctum* as ' . . . this wound, this prick, this mark . . . sting, speck, cut, hole' and concludes that ' . . . a photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'. He uses the example of a picture of a child (*studium*) holding a gun (*punctum*) (ibid.). The mechanics of the immersive performance operate within the parameters of the 'scene of the text' suggested by Berger and the punctum from Barthes that 'rises from the scene'. In doing so, the performance of *A Seventh Man* sought to find a way to stage the image as well as the verbal text, to approach the two together.

5. Unsettling Encounters: 'Unseating' the Reader/Audience

As a work of immersive theatre on the micro scale, *A Seventh Man* disallows the security of a separated viewing position. Situated inside the playing space, intimately close and facing one another, the audience may be said to experience the piece rather than 'spectate'. Structure and scenography make them part of the work, their presence jostling against the other elements of which it is composed: the actors, their gestic sequences, passages of

spoken text, and that abundance of photographs. In this way, the adaptation sought to generate impact and insight via what Robin Nelson terms the 'relational encounter', rather than locating knowledge and meaning within the locus of an author's or director's text (Nelson 2006, p. 115). This proposition itself reflects the methodology of the production as one rooted in practice-based research, a mode of creative working, which privileges embodied knowledge, direct experience, and dialogical engagement. Beyond this, practice-based research accepts the tenet that immersion and immediacy elicit discoveries that cannot be reached by other means. For *A Seventh Man*, this does not simply mean that the audience were plunged into the performance so that they felt it, as well as receiving it on an intellectual level; it meant that the audience became implicit actors, affecting and affected by the event as a whole.

As discussed, situating the audience inside this performance world did not produce a combative encounter, but nor was it a comfortable one. The adaptation's fragmented structure insisted that they work continuously to make sense—if not necessarily coherence—of its components and their interrelation. In its intentional and at times discordant multivocality, the performance thus imitated the heterogeneous qualities of the book. As co-authors using different aesthetic languages, Berger and Mohr explored ways that word and image could speak in concert. *A Seventh Man*'s disparate strands of contemplative narrative, Marxist analysis, poetry, statistics, and photographs combine in a study that simultaneously stands back from its subject, to examine the phenomenon of migrant working in broad terms, and draws unsettlingly close, as it asks you to meet the gaze of individuals. Berger used the word 'sequence' to describe how Mohr's images cluster in their many joint publications, but the term is also, he acknowledged, a misnomer: for while the photographs manifest inevitably as a series of memories, there is no chronology or narrative to bind them. Writing elsewhere of the way the photographs work, Berger explains: 'There is, as it were, no seat supplied for the reader. The reader is free to make his own way *through* these images' (Berger and Mohr [1982] 2016, p. 284). This in turn produces a challenging reading 'situation', in which the one studying the text becomes, Howard Becker argues, 'an active participant, not just the passive recipient of information and ideas constructed by an active author' (Becker 2002, pp. 4–5).

Pinchbeck and Smith's immersive adaptation of *A Seventh Man* likewise encouraged active participation from the audience, requiring them to find their own route through the piece, thinking and narrating its story or stories for themselves, through actions, images, and words. Within this wooden shed, there was no traditional seat provided to be a passive spectator, but only a temporary vantage point where they were prone to 'interruptive shocks' that periodically unsettled the narrative that unfolds. The production takes the audience—or rather, 'you'—on a journey through the Berger and Mohr book: 'your' experience mirrors this narrative arc through your proximity to the material and your reception of it. You are on a journey; you, the reader; you, the migrant worker; and you, the audience.

6. Conclusions

'This is not a migrant story with a happy ending' (Sperling 2020, p. 131).

As we write this, more migrants have died attempting to cross the English channel in rubber dinghies. The promise of opportunity and reward persists, but the happy ending sought rarely comes to pass. If they do arrive, migrants may be exploited, enslaved, relocated to rundown regional hotels, or returned by a government currently planning to outsource their 'illegal immigrants' to Rwanda. Accommodation in migrant detention centres in the UK is in the news, with diseases spreading and people sleeping in cramped and unclean conditions, mirroring those described in the book. Children have been pictured playing in cages. Politicians have demanded change to placate their voters whilst at the same time showing little sympathy for the migrants' plight. Berger took a dim view of the British establishment, and it is not difficult to imagine how he would see this stance. He would perhaps have been found telling stories in the pop-up theatre set up in The

Jungle outside Calais and campaigning against the conditions of those kept in camps whilst waiting for a better life. It is this political pulse the book takes, at a time nearly fifty years ago, that still resonates today, especially post-Brexit when immigration was used as a central plank of the Leave campaign.

A Seventh Man, documenting an ever-evolving phenomenon in the later twentieth century, can be read in the new millennium both as a prophecy and a warning. Berger and Mohr's book depicts a Europe where people are free to cross borders to seek work but at the same time shows the realities of hardships faced, the economic exploitation to which they are subject, the lack of welcome received, and the alienation experienced. As Berger writes in the Preface to its 2010 edition, 'The thrust of the book was political' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, p. 7). The jolting clash between the photographs and the verbal text adds to its sense of urgency. Sperling remarks that for Berger and Mohr '[t]he divided loyalty between word and image was now abutting a very real political dialectic', a coalescence encapsulated in *A Seventh Man*, 'the book [Berger] remained proudest of until his death' (Sperling 2020, p. 128). Its continued—perhaps increasing—pertinence is summed up, in the new Preface, in Berger's remark: 'It can happen that a book, unlike its authors, grows younger as the years pass' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, p. 7).

Using verbatim interviews and photography, Pinchbeck and Smith's version of *A Seventh Man* was part slideshow, part documentary, and part adaptation; it explored and exploded its source text, as it marked its 45th anniversary and is still touring today. Its three female performers quoted directly from the book as if both narrating and acting out its portraits of a generation of young men who travelled across a continent in search of new opportunities that would benefit their families and themselves. By shifting the voice of the original text from third person to second person, as well as complicating its gendered perspective, the content became more accessible to and resonant for a contemporary audience. Translating the book into an immersive, interactive form was a 'way of staging' that aimed to be 'radically hospitable' whilst also enabling acts of 'unsettling' to take place. Simon McBurney, founder of theatre company Complicite and one of many directors to be inspired by Berger's work, wrote this social media post on the anniversary of Berger's death, referencing an interview:

> John Berger died today two years ago ' . . . the underlying theme of my work? What comes to mind is—Emigration. Exile . . . '
>
> If you have time, listen . . . from 1995. For me his words are like a roof, a building providing shelter, long after the owner has left.[9]

The metaphorical shelter McBurney describes still stands, providing an accommodating space within which new interpretations can, and surely will or must, take place. The original audio interview with Berger that McBurney refers to in his Twitter post was played as audiences left the wooden structure at the end of the performance. In that interview, Berger emphasised the importance of *A Seventh Man* for him and his pride in the book's achievement. Playing his words in performance served as a coda to the adaptation's contemporary revisiting of a historical yet still pertinent documentary text. In the performance, interviews with migrant workers today were juxtaposed with archival recordings from the 1970s and Mohr's images to present a new, experiential perspective on migration through a 21st century lens. Audience feedback following the event suggested that the piece drew attention to the plight of migrant workers post-Brexit and the journeys of all those seeking asylum today. The performance undertook to expose resonance, as well as to acknowledge dissonance, with the contemporary migrant experience. In doing so, the adaptation endorsed the position that *A Seventh Man* continues to 'grow younger' through its own act of textual unsettling.

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Notes

1   *A Seventh Man* was commissioned by Lincoln Performing Arts Centre, Nottingham Playhouse and New Perspectives and was devised between January and March 2020. The production, supported by Arts Council England, was co-directed by Michael Pinchbeck and Ollie Smith. It opened at Nottingham Playhouse on 15 February 2020. See http://michaelpinchbeck.co.uk/a-seventh-man/ (accessed on 28 February 2023).

2   The original venue was S.H.E.D., Social Higher Education Depot, a flat-pack mobile research centre curated by Dr Rhiannon Jones, University of Derby. See https://www.derby.ac.uk/business-services/innovation-research/shed/ (accessed on 28 February 2023).

3   A seminal work of environmental theatre, *Dionysus in 69* was also controversial not least in the way its themes of eroticism, use of nakedness and encouragement of interactive freedom placed some participants particularly at risk. Interviewed 50 years later, Schechner acknowledged that '[s]ometimes people felt, the women in the Group, felt it went too far and we instituted new rules', adding: '[g]enerally, there was very little beyond mild touching and caressing. Sometimes, it went further.' (Aronson 2018, p. 3).

4   Characteristic examples of Punchdrunk's work include the hugely successful and long-running *Sleep No More* (2005-), a reimagining of *Macbeth* mounted in New York City's McKittrick Hotel: the building was condemned and sealed off during World War II but found a new lease of life as the production's permanent home. On almost the same scale, dreamthinkspeak's *Before I Sleep* (2010–2011), inspired by Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, took the form of a vast performance installation spread across the floors of a disused department store in central Brighton.

5   Immersive theatre's emphasis on audience experience has also inspired productions without any formal actors: for example, the London-based company Coney's *A Small Town Anywhere* (2009) builds a drama about a divided community by means of allotted roles and instructions given to thirty participants.

6   'Micro-performance' is not widely established as a generic term but is frequently used by artists who create theatrical events on an intimate scale. This could mean a performance in a tiny space for very few people (as with *A Seventh Man*); a one-to-one encounter between actor and spectator (see for example the influential practice of the late Adrian Howells); or even a piece generated for a single participant on their own (as with Silvia Mercuriali's 2020 *Swimming Home*, which uses aural instructions to structure a 'private meditation' in a bathroom where you are 'the swimmer'). See (Heddon and Johnson 2016; and Mercuriali 2020).

7   Simon McBurney, director of the British-based company Complicite, has twice adapted texts by Berger as well as collaborating with him to create new work. The company's acclaimed *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol* (1994), based on Berger's 1979 short story of the same name, used actor physicality and simple props to expressively convey the rural world of 'cows, chickens, ploughs, barns and yards' (Ayers 1994, p. 20). In 1997, McBurney adapted Berger's 1995 novel *To the Wedding* for BBC Radio 3; and in 1999, Berger and McBurney came together as writer and director to make *The Vertical Line*, an audiovisual installation in a disused underground station that took its audience 'on a downward line through time 30 m below central London'. See http://www.complicite.org/productions/TheVerticalLine (accessed on 28 February 2023).

8   Mike Pearson, founder of Brith Gof, wrote to Berger in 1985 to express his interest in staging *Boris*: Berger's short story had already been adapted into a script in France, with the title *Les Trois Chaleurs*, for a production mounted in February 1985 at the Théâtre l'Est de Paris (TEP). Berger was happy to share the script and gave Brith Gof's project his blessing, although he was unable to travel to Wales to see the production. Pearson describes the decision to contact Berger directly as 'the inevitable outcome of mounting enthusiasm' for his work; several of Brith Gof's earlier shows had been influenced, directly and indirectly, by his poetics and the photographs of Jean Mohr. (Pearson 2017, p. 434).

9   Simon McBurney [@SimonMcBurney] 2 January 2019. *John Berger died today two years ago . . .* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/SimonMcBurney/status/1080491106297700352?s=20&t=SIEKcPr3ngFmwWay_z0Cyg (accessed on 28 February 2023).

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