The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

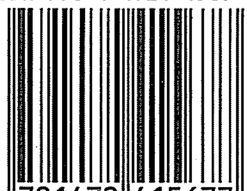
Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum *charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.*

Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Köz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.

ASHGATE
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East, Union Road,
Farnham, Surrey,
GU9 7PT, England
www.ashgate.com

ISBN 978-1-4724-1567-7



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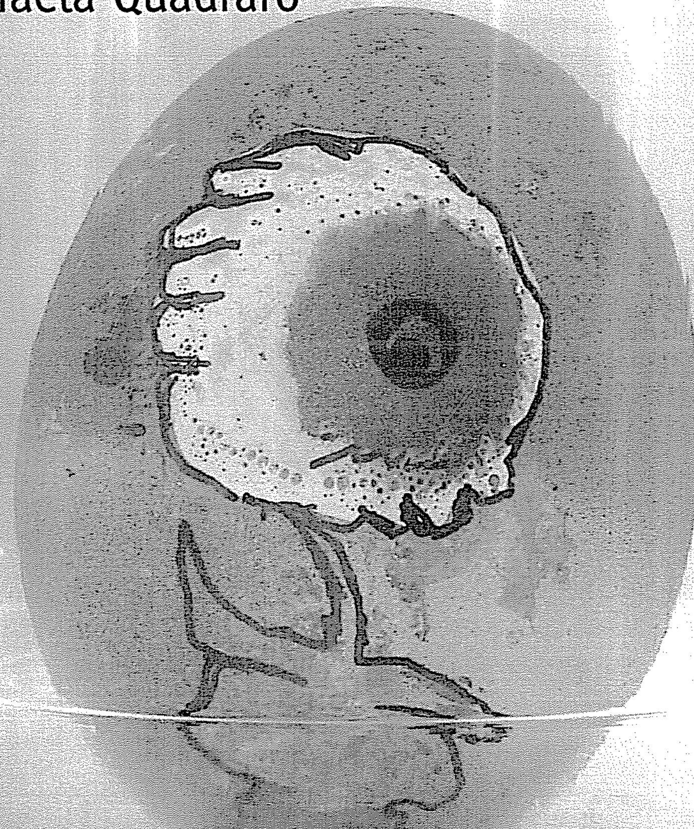

MeLa – *European Museums in an age of migrations* is a four year long Research Project (March 2011–February 2015) funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme within the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities Sector (SSH-2010-5.2.2, Grant Agreement n° 266757). MeLa is an interdisciplinary programme aimed at analysing the role of museums in the contemporary multi-cultural context, characterized by an augmented migration of people and ideas, and at identifying innovative practices and strategies in order to foster their evolution.

The research activities developed by the MeLa Project are fostered by the cooperation of nine European Partners, and articulated through distinct Research Fields.

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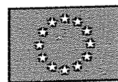

EUROPEAN COMMISSION
European Research Area

SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

Funded under Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities

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ASHGATE

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Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the editors of this work.

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East
Union Road
Farnham
Surrey, GU9 7PT
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
110 Cherry Street
Suite 3-1
Burlington, VT 05401-3818
USA

www.ashgate.com

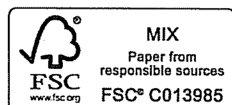
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:
The postcolonial museum : the arts of memory and the pressures of history / by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona, Michaela Quadraro.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4724-1567-7 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-4724-1568-4 (ebook) – ISBN 978-1-4724-1569-1 (epub) 1. Museums – Social aspects. 2. Postcolonialism – Social aspects. 3. Collective memory – Social aspects. 4. Museums and community. I. Chambers, Iain, editor of compilation.

AM7.P59 2014
069–dc23

2013033639

ISBN 9781472415677 (hbk)
ISBN 9781472415684 (ebk – PDF)
ISBN 9781472415691 (ebk – ePUB)



Printed in the United Kingdom by Henry Ling Limited,
at the Dorset Press, Dorchester, DT1 1HD

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Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how 'bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation' (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary 'expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety' (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of 'progress' and the racist ideology of 'white supremacy' imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Chapter 17

'The Lived Moment': New Aesthetics for Migrant Recollection

Peter Leese

Looking back from 2010, John Berger described *A Seventh Man* as 'a little book of life-stories, a sequence of lived moments – such as one finds in a family photo album' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 8). In 1975, when it was first published, writer John Berger and photographer Jean Mohr intended their 'book about the experience of Migrant Workers in Europe' as both social critique and political intervention. They hoped, not entirely in vain, 'to start a debate, and to encourage, amongst other things, international working-class solidarity' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 7). Yet while it was initially dismissed by critics in the mid-1970s as an awkward mix of poetic and polemic, this portrayal of 'lived moments' subsequently found an unexpected readership. In translation, the book was taken up in the global South. It continues to be read in Istanbul, Madrid and Damascus, in the places from which migrant workers set off, and by those who themselves become migrant workers.

The appeal to this particular audience suggests an approach, a set of aesthetic strategies, which incorporate their subject, which speak to the experience of migrants rather than merely 'on behalf of' or 'for' those whose lives they describe. In the search for richer, more meaningful presentations of migration in the context of the museum, Berger and Mohr's 'subjectivist' approach suggests a rendition of migrant experience which is meaningful because, for those who have lived it, it is recognisable. I will return to this idea at the end of the chapter, but note here that just as in 1975, the lives of labour migrant workers who arrive from beyond Europe's borders often go unacknowledged, undetailed and unexplored. *A Seventh Man*, by contrast, is filled with vivid, individual specificity as it details the 'set pieces' of migrant experience: departure, transit and arrival. The authors attend closely to the mixed emotions that accompany separation, to the disorienting sensations of arrival at an unknown destination:

> Everything looks new. The way people walk and move about at different levels, as though each level was unmistakably the ground. The surfaces walked on, or touched. The unusual sound which a usual movement makes. The seamless joints between things. Even glass looks different here, thicker and less brittle. The newness of the substance of things combines with the incomprehensibility of the language. (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 71)

In such passages, and in the composite figure of 'He: The migrant', *A Seventh Man* tells one variation of a common story, and having lived such a life, former or present migrant readers may better recall and consider their own circumstances. In addition, reviewing this account across the years since its publication, migrant readers may better measure change from generation to generation, movement from there to here, the passage of time from past to present.

The changing ways in which journalists, social commentators and sociologists, engravers, photographers or film-makers have attempted to render, or preferred to avoid, such 'lived moments' is a revealing theme in the historical exploration of migrant experience. This 'subjectivist' approach has its own traditions and conventions, but remains the concern of a politically engaged minority. To fully describe how Berger and Mohr communicate the experience of migration, and to consider more fully how it might prove useful for an archive or museum, requires an elaboration of the tradition to which *A Seventh Man* contributes, and of the artistic techniques which the authors developed. To assess the continuing relevance of the 'subjectivist' aesthetic, I here consider a more recent account within the same tradition. Michael Winterbottom's 2002 feature film *In This World* has many connections to *A Seventh Man*, but also develops its approach to reflect the new global economic system as well as more recently expanded notions of autonomy, individuality and agency which Berger and Mohr acknowledge have emerged since 1975 (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 7–10).

Berger and Mohr's Migrant Aesthetic

A Seventh Man intervenes in a protracted, highly politicised tussle over what it means to be a migrant. This mattered in 1975, as it does today, because the pooling of mobile labour has been integral to the development of global capitalism: since the time of European indenture and the emergent slave trade in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, such workers have powered the growth of transnational economies. The meaning of migrant labour is especially revealing for Berger and Mohr since an understanding of systematic exploitation morally discredits capital's profit-driven self-justifications.

Historically, the usual form of migrant representation is 'documentarist': observation from afar. The less common form, of which Berger and Mohr are among the most compelling advocates, is 'subjectivist': intimation from 'up close'. Both approaches are continually present in the long tradition of migrant representation and life-story-making: for example, in the indistinct boundaries between 'observer' and 'migrant' accounts, the 'fictional histories' of the eighteenth century, or in the engraved portraits and reportage of the nineteenth century (Bannet 2011, 1–3; Leese et al. 2002). In the latter part of the twentieth century, Berger and Mohr capture a moment of rising interest in subjectivity as they re-work an older set of aesthetic strategies which give weight to particularities of time and place, to specific social relations and mentalities. As *A Seventh Man* puts it: 'to try to understand the experience of another it is necessary to dismantle the world as seen from one's own place within it, and to reassemble it as seen from his' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 96–7). The difficulty is, then, to imagine the absence of opportunity, dignity and choice which confronts the underfed. Yet any naming of the task itself misleads, since there can be no straightforward evocation of another's state of mind: 'The subjectivity of others does not simply constitute a different interior attitude to the same external facts. The constellation of facts, of which he is the centre, is different' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 98).

A Seventh Man emerges from a growing post-Second World War interest in culture as ethnography and the democratising possibilities of the mass media. The parallel rise of oral history in the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, is both as historical discipline and as grassroots activist movement (Abrams 2010, 3–9). Berger and Mohr add to these concerns their scepticism of conventional evidence, documentation or archives, and their acute awareness of intersubjectivity between author, audience and subject. Both these themes are explored in their restless working out of avant-garde techniques: for instance, in the single- or double-page spreads which juxtapose a holiday poster with a snapshot of elderly women and young children in a village, or in a photograph of workers waiting on a railway station platform (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 184–5 and 220–21). Other kinds of contrasting, re-contextualising visual evidence are employed: work manual diagrams, historical or publicity photographs, and paintings; a wide-angle view of a factory worker on a shop floor on one page, and a close-up of that same worker's face on the following page (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 108–9, 114 and 172). This mixing and matching of images to create new visual contrasts as well as to suggest new meanings is enhanced by the lack of identifying references to time or place. Without such references, each picture takes on an artificial or 'fictional' quality, and heightens the reader's awareness of how the subject, the migrant, might see or even stand inside such a scene. Similarly various written sources are quoted in the text, but for the most part they are only cited in the 'Acknowledgements': Attila Jozsef's poem 'The Seventh', which gives the book its title; Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*; economic and political commentaries; Joyce's *Ulysses* on people and trams in the city, and Karl Marx and Henry Ford, with their diametrically opposed views on repetitive labour. Here again the authors explain their intention not to 'divert attention from a larger truth' by reference to specifics of time or place, but rather to achieve for their account a 'universality' (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 241).

A Seventh Man emerges from Berger's engagement with the oppositional artistic and political theory of the inter-war years. Its authors are interested in wider notions of truth that can be gleaned from a particular consciousness, but at the same time, in the consciousness of migrants there is a symptom of a more commonly felt estrangement inherent in modern capitalist society. Hence, for instance, the cultivation of a 'dialogic' relationship between image and text, or creation of image/text contrasts in genre and typology, which finds its antecedents in Tucholsky and Heartfield's *Deutschland, Deutschland über*

Alles (1929). Likewise, Berger's model of meaning production, his awareness of how to allude to the consciousness of migrant workers, is informed by Lukacs's exploration in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) of social relations as 'reified' (Roberts 1998, 129–34; Merrifield 2012, 62–4). *A Seventh Man* is in this sense a profoundly political work. It attempts to disrupt the apparently objective relations between migrant worker and host society by visualising the experiences and expressing the emotions of those who are otherwise hidden, thereby exposing the 'production' of their human awareness. Simultaneously, *A Seventh Man* seeks to disrupt and remake the awareness of readers, from whom the common human experiences of movement, mobility and displacement, the economic basis of human relations, are equally hidden. Berger's opening statement plays out this thought:

> In a dream the dreamer wills, acts, reacts, speaks, and yet submits to the unfolding of a story which he scarcely influences. The dream happens to him. Afterwards he may ask another to interpret it. But sometimes a dreamer tries to break his dream by deliberately waking himself up. This book represents such an intention within a dream which the subject of the book and each of us is dreaming. (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010, 11)

Berger and Mohr's intention is, then, to refuse the distinction between fiction and history, between word and image, between subject and object. By placing all of these within a dialogic framework, writer and photographer seek to expand their working method, which has at its centre the humanistic values of 'empathy, exile and metaphor'. As Nikos Papastergiadis suggests in his discussion of Berger's work: 'We need a form of recognition that is neither sentimental nor abstract, a code of interaction between the self and the other that admits the reflexivity of both positions and a mode of criticism which opens that potential space within society for responding to alternatives' (Papastergiadis 1993, 5)

The purpose of Berger and Mohr's visual and textual strategies, as John Roberts argues in *The Art of Interruption* (1998), is the creation of a counter-archive. Through this process of gathering and displaying, a collective, democratic expression of 'the lived moment' becomes possible. The effect of this counter-archive is also to disassemble and remake our interpretive framework, our sense of who migrants are and how they live, which in turn allows us to better grasp 'the experience of another' (Roberts 1998, 133). As Berger writes in the third of his major collaborations with Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (1982), it is by this process that the deceptive 'now-ness' of photographs achieves a truth-telling quality: 'It allows what they [photographs] show to be appropriated by reflection. The world they reveal, frozen, becomes tractable. The information they contain becomes permeated with feeling. Appearances become the language of a life lived' (Berger and Mohr 1982, 289). By jamming the wavelengths of normal transmission, by amplifying, repeating and de-familiarising, Berger and Mohr draw attention to viewer, subject and audience. Objectification gives way

to possible interiorities, so that the audience may see a version of the migrant's own 'image-memories'.

Michael Winterbottom's Migrant Aesthetic

A Seventh Man is part of a larger set of concerns expressed by Berger and Mohr across three books. It is preceded by *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor* (1967) and followed up by *Another Way of Telling* (1982). All three books address the lived experience of impoverished rural people. This loosely connected trilogy also examines the aesthetics of photography, the wider social world of visual experience and expression, as well as the 'meaning of appearances' (Berger and Mohr 1982, 7). Another central theme is the cultural deprivation of significant portions among any given population, particularly their lack of resources to interpret, articulate or transmit their own experience. Yet, as Berger argues in *A Fortunate Man*, this lack of resources should not be taken to mean that the inner experience which cannot be expressed is straightforward or simple. Rather, each holds within her- or himself a 'complex convergence of philosophical traditions, feelings, half-realised ideas, atavistic instincts, imaginative intimations, which live behind the simplest hope or disappointment of the simplest person' (Berger and Mohr 1967, 110). In this view, those who suffer physical and cultural deprivation are unable to 'translate' their feelings into words which clarify experience. Behind this carefully framed statement is the political rage which drives *A Seventh Man*: the analysis of inequalities in the global economic system, the romantic Marxist view of labour alienation, the disgust at Western Europe's persistent, unthinking neo-colonialism (Merrifield 2012, 62–4).

A more recent instance of the 'subjectivist' tradition, a rare example to rival Berger and Mohr's account, is Michael Winterbottom's 2002 feature film *In This World*, which its director has described as an explicitly political response to the 'asylum seeker' debates of the early 2000s in Britain:

> *In This World* responds to a chronic virulent strain of anti-immigrant scaremongering in the right-wing British tabloids like the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* .... Whenever I come across them, I'm always astonished by the huge amount of space given to stories about bogus asylum seekers and people invading our country .... It's an obsession. We were lucky with *In This World* – in Britain it got a lot of press coverage and sparked discussion about immigration, and maybe someone who saw it would spend an hour thinking about what it's like to be a refugee. (Winter 2010, 62–3)

To better convey 'what it's like to be a refugee', the film blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction, creating a singular tale which can at the same time describe the experiences of many. The film complements and enhances the achievement of *A Seventh Man*. Its less rigid structuring of experience lets in more of the fluidity

of real-world events; where Berger and Mohr's migrants seem powerless, *In This World* grants event and personality greater space to manoeuvre.

The film traces a journey made by Jamal and Enayat, two displaced Afghan boys, ethnic Pashtun, who live about twenty-five miles from Peshawar in northwest Pakistan, in the Shamshatoo refugee camp. Through family connections and finances, they arrange to have themselves smuggled out of Pakistan in order to head for what they hope will be a better life in Europe. To achieve this, they have to travel across Iran and into Turkey, go from Istanbul to Trieste hidden with others in a freight container, then get to Marseilles. Their journey eventually leads to the Sangatte refugee centre in France, and then on to London. Like *A Seventh Man*, *In This World* is loosely structured around a series of intense, lived moments. It shows those who have already been moved on once as refugees displaced for a second time, now from what little remains of their family. They are set adrift, but also strive to better their lives. To make the film, production crew, director and non-professional actors travelled along one possible route that refugees were known to take. Moreover, the two main actors, Jamal Udin Torabi (Jamal) and Enayatullah (Enayat), were recruited from the Shamshatoo camp, and so were likely candidates to make the journey in reality.

Like *A Seventh Man*, *In This World* plays with distinctions of artifice and actual: devices such as voiceover, text and map on the screen make the film in some respects document-like, but as Winterbottom said in one interview:

> The film does play with what's true and what's not .... Take Jamal. He's an Afghan refugee; his parents are refugees; he's young enough that he was actually born in the camp. Most of his family live in one of the camps next door to the one we filmed in. His brother and sister in the film are really his brother and sister. His mum is alive, but in the film she is not, so that is fictional. (Winter 2010, 61)

Just as Berger and Mohr draw on the political and artistic tactics of a compressed, tense historical moment, the inter-war era, so Winterbottom turns to an earlier filmic scene to generate his own creative play between fiction and document. The director has in particular stated his admiration for early post-World War Two film-makers such as Andrzej Wajda, Jean-Luc Goddard and Lindsay Anderson (McFarlane and Williams 2009, 12). These directors shared, at least early on, a self-consciously artificial realism: a mixing of film stocks, an unpredictable contrasting of visibly 'mobile' camera shots, hand-held, or vehicle-moved, for instance; each is at times improvisatory too, using non-professional actors, outdoor cityscape locations and oblique storytelling techniques. Moving back further, Winterbottom's film reflects Roberto Rossellini's 'neorealist' trilogy of the middle 1940s – *Rome, Open City* (1945), *Paisà* (1946) and *Germany, Year Zero* (1948). Both directors display an intense awareness of locality and landscape, both record situations within which 'social actors', as opposed to professional actors, respond to their surroundings, and finally, both are engaged in an urgent search for a means to respond to, argue

against and explore more deeply the drama of large-scale contemporary events (McFarlane and Williams 2009, 31).

Yet while *A Seventh Man* and *In This World* use interposed section titles, and while each cuts from the location of one key scene to the next along their route, *In This World* has a less obviously schematic structure. Where Berger and Mohr have 'Departure', 'Work' and 'Return' as the three section headings of their account, Winterbottom uses place names to locate his series of 'lived moments'. Where Berger and Mohr create a disruptive collage of visual and textual material, Winterbottom has his own vocabulary of disruptive devices: harsh, digital shots of barren landscape precede a difficult negotiation with a border guard; a blurry outdoor sequence is rendered with night-vision to express the danger and panic of an illegal border crossing between Iran and Turkey. In one extraordinary scene, light is all but abandoned in favour of shouts, bangs and increasingly desperate cries as the travellers are trapped in a cargo container. These devices are often associated with moments of stress, fear or danger, especially when moving out of one country and into another (Farrier 2008, 229–30). In addition, the sense of social constriction which increasingly burdens Jamal and Enayat as they travel away from the world they know is signalled by a continual narrowing of physical spaces. The two protagonists become physically and emotionally boxed-in as they move from their relatively open refugee camp onto a succession of buses, pickup trucks and lorries, dark concealed hiding places and railway undercarriages, backrooms and basements.

'The Lived Moment'

One anecdote from Winterbottom captures his wider sense of how migrants can partly tell themselves rather than wholly be told by others. During the post-production of *In This World*, Jamal, the story's main protagonist and the film's main actor, returned from Pakistan to Britain, this time as a real refugee, to claim official asylum status. Winterbottom describes editing the scene in the film where Jamal leaves his family in Shamshatoo camp:

> Jamal was actually in the cutting room watching [the editing]. So by that point he'd actually become the character in the film and didn't know when he'd ever see his brother again; didn't know when he'd go back there, and it was one of the strangest things to see the way in which the film that was supposed to be a fiction based on reality had then become a reality itself. (Farrier 2008, 224)

This fluidity of circumstance and sense of possibility is not much present in Berger and Mohr, but even in Winterbottom's film, the portrayal of agency has its limits. Enayat, after all, dies inside the shipping container which ought to have taken him to Trieste. So, while it is possible to read *In This World* as an unusual variation on the 'road movie', in which an appealing, cheeky protagonist travels

with his companion through danger and adventure towards the final achievement of success and manhood, the story is more complex. Within the larger structure of the film, one action – border crossing – is constantly repeated in a succession of episodes. After each crossing, Jamal and Enayat are left apparently closer to their destination, yet they are still faced with the fear, danger and exhaustion of moving forwards, still not at their final destination, still compelled to repeat the same difficult task under slightly different conditions, each time with no apparent gain. Likewise, in *A Seventh Man* political, economic and legal forces conspire against the migrant so that his experience can be read only as tragedy. Since migrants cannot articulate their own lives, Berger and Mohr have no need to quote their words directly. They listen intently, but do not report in straightforward direct speech what they hear. *A Seventh Man* disregards the ways in which speaking a migrant journey can elicit new versions of the autobiographical self. It fails to acknowledge that by recycling, reworking and rethinking former events, the migrant may consider not just how the past could have turned out differently, but also how a changed future might still be.

What Berger and Winterbottom *do* suggest by their explorations of subjective migratory experience is an alternative archive for cultural memory. This archive no longer resides in the physical space of the museum, but in the imaginative space of the audience; it exists in their sensations and thoughts responding to word/image combinations on the page or to the movement of light on a screen. Such an archive is constituted by creating aesthetic experiences which allude more effectively to the subjective sensations of the mobile displaced, by the accumulation of precisely detailed, collective, 'lived moments' which are continually reinterpreted in retrospect. Gathering and preserving this index of experiences – the act of archiving – here means registering in the audience an interpretation of the destabilised self. Each entry in this archive answers questions like 'How does it feel to travel and live beyond the boundaries of a settled society?' or 'What happens to migrants who become misplaced in international welfare and legal systems?' Where existing archival practices merely register objects or voices as distant remnants, this 'subjectivist' memory system constitutes the postcolonial museum through aesthetic analysis. What Berger and Winterbottom finally register is an inner sense of the mental, physical and geographical instabilities within the spaces of otherness. What the postcolonial museum might seek in its imaginative engagement with the heterotopic is a closer intellectual *and* aesthetic engagement with 'the choices of the underfed'.

The objections to Berger and Mohr's vision of migrant experience are well expressed by Salman Rushdie, who acknowledges the compassion and originality of *A Seventh Man*, but is less convinced by its despondency:

> To migrate is certainly to lose language and home, to be defined by others, to become invisible or, even worse, a target; it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul. But the migrant is not simply transformed by his act; he also transforms his new world. Migrants may well become mutants, but it is out of such hybridisation that newness can emerge. (Rushdie 1991, 210)

Nevertheless, Berger and Mohr's achievement is substantial, and remains a rich source of aesthetic strategies for the portrayal of migrant experience. By visualising a common migrant 'family' of blood relatives, of experiences and of continual recycled images, *A Seventh Man* creates a family life-story portrait, a photographic *aide-mémoire*, a fictional history in snapshots, which is itself now passed down across generations to re-make future lives.

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