

Contraband: On the Shades of John Berger.

Abstract:

In this paper, I trace and unfold John Berger's enduring fascination with the aesthetics of places and his preoccupation with ghosts and haunting.

Starting in Bologna our itinerary takes in Lisbon, London, Paris, rural Poland and a remote village in the French Alps. In Berger's company, we are treated to the tastes and ambiances of these diverse places and to encounters and conversations with a plethora of benign spectres.

Three leitmotifs serve as our guiding spirits: *terroir* (the distinctive qualities of locales); the *rendezvous* ('here is where we meet'); and, *contraband* (the illicit crossing of borders).

In Paris, Berger enters into the paintings of a neglected artist (Rostislav Kunovsky) and invokes two figures who vainly sought to transgress that ultimate prohibition, the separation of life and death: Orpheus and Eurydice. Elsewhere, it is also for the sake of love, that Lucie Cabrol returns to haunt her one-time lover, Jean. She smuggles herself as contraband back into the world of the living. Ghosts are contraband.

For Berger, any place without ghosts is bereft of memories. The un-haunted is uninhabitable, unendurable, inhuman. To live is to join and jostle amidst a crowd, a city, of shades.

Keywords: John Berger; Rostislav Kunovsky; contraband; aesthetics; haunting.

*

Contraband: On the Shades of John Berger¹

“It’s an improbable city, Bologna – like one you might walk through after you have died.”

(John Berger)²

“There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can ‘invoke’ or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in.” (Michel de Certeau)³

*

By way of introduction ...

Introductions are needed when people meet and here is where we meet: Bologna. Here is where our words meet: ‘introduction’, from the Latin *introductio* from *intro* (‘inward’, ‘to the inside’) and *ducere* (‘to lead’). An introduction is a ‘leading into,’ an invitation, a guided movement and moment; at the same time, it is a ritual of meeting and encounter, of greeting, presenting and acknowledging. Yes, introductions are much needed, and Berger makes much use of them. We will return to this.

Here is where our words meet: English and Italian. In my title, the suggestive word:

‘contraband’: ‘goods that have been illegally or illicitly imported or exported’; introduced

¹ An earlier and abbreviated version of this paper was first presented at the ‘Historical City and Urban Aesthetics: Conceptual Frameworks and Public Spaces’ conference organised by the *Architectural Humanities* Research Group of the Department of Architecture, at the University of Bologna, 12-13 December 2024). I am very grateful to Andrea Borsari, Claudia Nigrelli and Francesco di Maio for their kind invitation to present and participate at this event.

² John Berger, *The Red Tenda of Bologna* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007/2018), 19.

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 108.

into English in the 15th century from the Italian *contrabbando* from medieval Latin *contrabannum*: from *contra* ‘against’ and *bannum* ‘decree’. ‘Contraband’: against the decree, against the proclamation, against the ban, against the prohibition).

What does it mean to say that a word was ‘introduced from the Italian’? The word has crossed linguistic borders, entered into a new realm, embarked on a new life, crossed thresholds, moved betwixt and between. Words are smuggled or smuggle themselves into other languages. They migrate, emigrate, immigrate, assimilate. Cunningly. Artfully. Unseen, unsuspected. Sometime before 1590, ‘contraband’ infiltrated the English language from Italian.

‘Contraband,’ the very word like so many others, is itself a kind of linguistic contraband.

In *Pig Earth* (1979), the first book of John Berger’s *Into Their Labours* trilogy, the diminutive yet remarkable figure of Lucie Cabrol – ‘La Cocadrille’⁴ as she is unkindly nicknamed by her scandalized and ostracizing neighbours in the tiny French alpine village where these stories are set – becomes an inveterate and accomplished smuggler. She learns to ferry all manner of foraged mountain foods and seasonal plants – mushrooms, wild berries, nuts, herbs, flowers, holly and mistletoe at Yuletide – to the markets of the city just across the border, the city of B-, some two hours away by the slow train. And then, homeward-bound, cigarettes and other taxable items are concealed about her person.

⁴ “It was in the last year at school that Lucie was given the nickname of the Cocadrille. A *cocadrille* comes from a cock’s egg hatched in a dung heap. As soon as it comes out of its egg, it makes its way to the most unlikely place. If it is seen by somebody it has not seen, it dies. Otherwise, it can defend itself and can kill anything it chooses, except the weasel. The poison, with which it kills, comes from its eyes and travels along its gaze.” John Berger, *Pig Earth* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1979/1992), 98.

Smuggling has made her rich though she lives in the dilapidated house of the former road mender, on the outskirts of the village, banished there by her neighbours who, one assumes, rely on her nevertheless for their cut-priced smokes.

But in the final story, the third of the ‘three lives’ of Lucie Cabrol – a trilogy within a trilogy – she smuggles herself, becomes contraband herself, to cross a rather different threshold, one which is assumed to require no policing by border guards or customs officers, where there is no-one on duty to collect the duty.

We will return to this, too.

**

Bologna

Here is where we meet so let us begin here, in Bologna.

In the series of brief and fragmentary reflections composing his *Red Tenda of Bologna* (2007/2018), the artist, sketcher, art critic, novelist and cultural theorist John Berger offers us three intersecting and recurrent themes, leitmotifs which run through so many of his numerous writings: aesthetics; the rendezvous; and haunting.

Aesthetics

A prolific author best known for his pioneering 1972 study *Ways of Seeing*, Berger is preoccupied with the ‘aesthetics’ of the city. One must appreciate, however, that this is more than, other than, what one might see as ‘ways of seeing’ – urban ‘aesthetics’ is to be understood in the much broader sense of ‘to do with the human senses’. Yes, to be sure, there is the optical – the visual arts are never far from Berger’s thoughts – but the painter and paintings which fascinate him most in this city are principally discussed elsewhere in an

essay on Giorgio Morandi and warrant only a passing reference here.⁵ Here, in Bologna, there are other concerns: the smells, sounds, tastes, and textures of this city. His fascination is with the fabric of the city: with its colours, its sensations, its feel. And literally: with *the fabric* of the city: the red *tenda* (another word from the Italian)⁶ are the durable linen awnings of shops which provide shelter from the rain, shade from the sun. Sunshades. These are, for Berger, a characteristic of the city. So much so that that they become his title, so much so that he goes in search of the very material itself. He finds himself in Pasquinis near the Neptune fountain ordering from a bolt of the heavy red linen cloth,⁷ sensing and appreciating its many qualities with his fingertips. There are ways of touching.

There are ways of eating, too. For Berger, Bologna is a city of gastronomy, but not the fine dining of *haute cuisine* and Michelin-starred restaurants – there is no mention of such things; he has no time for them. Rather, his passion is for humble local fare. And so, elsewhere in the city, elsewhere in the text, Berger savours the exquisite taste of Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee bought on the Via Porta Nuova, flavours that lingers in the mouth for a full fifty minutes we are told; in the Via Marsala, the best mortadella in the world is to be found, meat cut, not into fine slices, but rather into thick chunks, meat still sometimes flavoured by myrtle berries from whence its name may derive, mortadella to be eaten with a glass of white wine from the Alto Adige;⁸ and to finish, perhaps the best limoncello you will ever drink in the Bocca d' Oro near the Porta S. Vitale.⁹ Berger not only mentions a light meal of *passatelli* bought in the via Caprarie, he treats us to the ingredients as well.¹⁰

⁵ See John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 139-146.

⁶ 'Tenda' also from the Swahili 'to do'. It is a Shona name often given to a baby girl to mean 'gift'. A female doing, a gift. A female like Lucie Cabrol.

⁷ Berger, *Red Tenda*, 23.

⁸ *ibid.*, 37.

⁹ *ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 35.

How might one think of this attentiveness to, and modest appreciation of, the local cuisine and ingredients that characterise a city, be it the cured pork of the via Marsala or the bowl of sorrel soup he delights in preparing and sharing in rural Poland? Of such soup he writes: “I would place *zupa szczawiowa* somewhere between Warmth and Love. When you sip it, you have the impression of swallowing a place. The eggs taste of the earth of this place, the sorrel of its grass, the cream of its clouds.”¹¹

What is it to taste, to “swallow a place”? As I have suggested elsewhere,¹² a term from oenology, the study of wine, might assist us here: *terroir*. *Terroir* refers to the very specific and distinctive qualities of a wine – its colour, aroma, taste, acidity, its feel in the mouth and finish – resulting not just from the grape variety or blend, but fundamentally from the very specific local conditions in which these were grown: microclimate, altitude, aspect, drainage, and, of course – as the term suggests – the composition of the soil. These combine to impart particularity, individuality, and – for a connoisseur with a trained, expert palate – recognisability. Cities have their own flavours: there are ways of smelling, tasting, savouring. Berger on his food *flaneries* offers us glimpses of Bologna’s *terroir*.

And to be clear: such urban aesthetic pleasures are not the preserve of some aristocratic aesthete. Berger is under no illusions as to the labours that have gone into the production of even the simplest plate of food – and the bloody violence. *Pig Earth* opens with the visceral account of the slaughter and butchery of a pig. There are ways of killing. One must have a sense of and for this, too.

¹¹ John Berger, *Here is Where We Meet* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 231.

¹² See *** in Maria Filomena Molder, Nélío Conceição and Nuno Fonseca (eds), *Rethinking the City. Reconfiguration and Fragmentation* (London: Routledge, 2025), 192-194.

Rendezvous

There are ways of hearing, of listening. Berger is not inattentive to cities as soundscapes and the contrasts between cacophony and silence. Bologna is no exception, indeed here he comes across a special case of acoustics which excites his imagination. He finds himself standing among the pilasters of the Portica di Pavaglione where, leaning against one particular column, it is said you can speak in whispers and still be heard on the other side of the building. Indeed, Berger takes this further: his voice carries not only across space, but seemingly traverses worlds, the divide between the living and the dead.¹³ Berger has a “premonition – “he may come”¹⁴ – and patiently awaits an echo. He is not disappointed. Berger finds himself in the company of his father’s older brother, Uncle Edgar, who makes his characteristically unprepossessing appearance:

Suddenly he’s there. He’s perspiring. He has no jacket. His hands are gently clasped behind his back. He knows about the invisible acoustic telephone. He speak a with the quiet confidence of somebody who, talking to themselves, knows he will be heard.¹⁵

Elsewhere we find this description:

[Edgar was] a man of learning who never stopped learning, a man of ideals who never despaired, a man whom everyone, including my mother, treated as failure, a man with a wart on the middle finger of his right hand where he held his pen writing hundreds of pages of a book that nobody ever read or published.¹⁶

And Berger loved him, of course.

¹³ Berger, *Red Tenda*, 44-45.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 45.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶ Berger, *Here is Where*, 36.

And so, here in the Pavaglioni, John and his Uncle Eager hold hushed discussions: on the fates of martyrs and the martyrdom of St Ursula, as well as less elevated, less esoteric matters – the merits of the imported coffee and the local limoncello.

Edgar appears and vanishes. “Only the pilaster now. He’s gone. In my ears only the sounds of the city” – and with this departure, Berger concludes his Bologna reflections.

Such curious encounters, such serendipitous and felicitous rendezvouses – and a rendezvous is both the meeting itself and the place of meeting – are the leitmotif of the interlinked essays forming the aptly titled *Here is Where We Meet* (2005). And always and everywhere, here, there, elsewhere, in cities or on the wooded banks of quiet rivers, these occasions occasion conversations and memories. They are part colloquium and part mnemonic.

Here is where we meet and there are ways of meeting: in a park in Lisbon, Berger sees an old woman with an umbrella: “She had the kind of stillness that draws attention to itself. Sitting there on the park bench, she was determined to be noticed.”¹⁷ She stands and walks towards him employing the umbrella as a walking stick. He recognises her step immediately: it is his mother. He is astonished. It is the most unexpected and unlikely of rendezvous. What is she doing here of all places, of all cities? She is out of place. Indeed, she has never been here, she has never spoken of Lisbon, Lisbon a city which Berger tells us has a particular visual quality, a special configuration of the perceptible and imperceptible, a peculiar combination of decorative disorientation and disappearing act. He observes:

Lisboa is a city which has a relationship with the visible world like no other city.

It plays a game. Its squares and streets are paved with patterns of white and coloured stones, as if, instead of being roads, they were ceilings. Its walls, both

¹⁷ Berger, *Here is Where*, 2.

indoors and outdoors, are covered with the famous *azulejos* tiles wherever you look. ... The tiles of the city draw attention to what can be seen.¹⁸

But this is superficial, sequestering. Berger continues:

their crackly white ceramic surfaces, their vivacious colours, the mortar joints around them, the repeated patterns, all insist upon the fact that they are covering something up, and that whatever is behind them or beneath them, will remain, thanks to them, invisible and hidden forever!¹⁹

Berger was not seeking, and his mother was not hiding. Nevertheless, the game is afoot. Here is where they meet and so here is where she takes his arm and they stroll together through the city. He has questions. They converse a little, reminisce a little, relive old times – childhood trips and treats, a Croydon childhood around 1940. This is not nostalgia – “Vienna is the capital of nostalgia” Berger tells us, while Lisboetas, by contrast, “talk of a feeling, a mood, which they call *saudade*” (2005: 13).²⁰ An aged and frail *flaneuse*, she tells him of where she has been and what she has seen in this city: the trams, the lift of the Santa Justa, getting lost, wrong turns. He asks as to the whereabouts of his father – he is elsewhere it seems. Elsewhere is never far away, it is always another potential rendezvous. It is only a matter of time, and time is a secondary matter.²¹ In any case, his mother has chosen to be here, in Lisbon.

“It’s not any place, John, it’s a meeting place,” she tells him. But why *Lisbon* exactly?

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 10.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 13.

²¹ “For nomads,” Berger writes, “the notion of past and future is subservient to the experience of *elsewhere*. Something that has gone, or is awaited, is hidden elsewhere in another place” (*Here is Where*, 141), somewhere behind the other patterns of different tiles perhaps.

“This is not a city, my boy, which fucks itself up. That’s why I’m here.”²²

And so this is where they meet, John and his mother, meet again and again, in the course of the following days. She comes and goes – amidst the crowds watching a half marathon she is a small child who takes his hand. Later, she is – or at least speaks with the voice of – a seventeen-year-old girl. There are smiles and there are tears; there are discussions of her first marriage to ‘Alfred’, there is some philosophizing on freedom, fearlessness, and much more on fish recipes. Together they go “botanizing on the asphalt” as Benjamin once put it.²³ And each time, just as suddenly as Uncle Edgar vanishes, she too is gone and Berger finds himself alone. Here is where we meet, here is where we part and depart.

Here is Where We Meet begins on the banks of one river, the Tagus, and ends on the banks of another, the Szum, a tributary of the Tenew River in south-eastern Poland (or ‘Little Poland’). One leads to another, one recalls yet another: the Szum reminds Berger of the Ching, the brook near which Berger spent his first six years living on Gordon Avenue in Highams Park: a Chingford childhood around 1930. Rural central Europe flows into inter-war London, his relations with his father who took him fishing, and the girl next door, Camellia, who took him on adventures in nearby Epping Forest and taught him the names of natural living things, the flora and fauna, the *terroir* of the Essex border.²⁴

Here by the Szum, in an old wooden house, Berger finds an old pamphlet in a cupboard drawer, ‘Centralism and Democracy’ by a young Polish woman known by the name of Rosa

²² *ibid.*, 18.

²³ See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4 1938-1940*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 19.

²⁴ My own memories are set in train – I grew up here too. Such a coincidence makes for a *punctum* (see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1993).

Luxemburg, a chance find that sets in train yet more reflections on other waters – the Landwehr Canal in Berlin where her body was so callously dumped in January 1919.

Here by the Szum, he picks the sorrel for the soup he is preparing for his friends Mirek and Danka and their baby (Olek). At their recent wedding, while taking a turn outside, Berger chances upon a musician who has come hoping to play, none other than the saxophonist Felix Bertier, a member of the local brass band from a village near Berger's French alpine home.

Motorbiking along a main road, Berger comes to a stop at traffic lights in the town of Kielce. A car draws alongside. At the wheel, shoes kicked off, driving barefoot, is "Liz", a former lover.²⁵ He remembers the wordless evenings, "Hundreds of evenings"²⁶ they spent together listening to "Bartok, Walton, Shostakovich, Chopin, Beethoven."²⁷ He passes her car, she follows for a stretch and then they stop, reminisce a little, and then ... and then Berger is back in the house, happy to be taking off his thick biking boots.

A few miles to the south, in Krakow, another rendezvous, another bowl of soup – borsch this time – eaten sitting at a wooden table outside on the Place Nowy. He is joined by Ken, a New Zealander, a man he has seen only once in the last forty years:

When I first met him I was eleven and he forty. For the next six or seven years he was the most influential person in my life. It was with him that I learnt to cross frontiers. In French there is the word *passeur* – often translated as ferryman or smuggler. Yet there is also the connotation of guide, and something of the mountains. He was my *passeur*.²⁸

We will return to the *passeur* and, indeed, to a *passeuse*.

²⁵ Berger, *Here is Where*, 167.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 169.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 168.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 80.

Haunting

Here is where we meet – time and time again, in the most unlikely places. And what do these seemingly random, yet oft repeated rendezvouses have in common? What do they share?

These unanticipated assignations – with his mother in Lisbon, his Uncle Edgar in Bologna, Liz in Kielce, with Felix at the wedding, with Ken in Krakow and with many others too (Tyler, “Sir” while waiting for a friend, Juan, in the bar of the Ritz Hotel in Madrid) – these are all encounters with the long dead. They are all ghosts. These are visitations. Berger visits these places, these cities, and he is in turn visited by figures from his past. The curious acoustic ‘telephone’ in the Pavaglione connects not only the ‘here’ and the ‘there’, but also the ‘now’ and the ‘then’. Not just long-distance, ‘long-time’ too. The here and the hereafter to be precise.

‘Rendezvous’ is both a verb and a place. ‘Haunt’ shares this felicitous doubling: ghosts haunt the living and the living frequent their favourite haunts. Berger is himself fond of such ambiguities, such ambivalences, such equivocations. On one occasion, he writes of what he terms a ‘Hamlet-object’: a father fashions his beloved daughter Eve a pocket-knife, but he is fearful and so makes it with two blunt edges to ensure she will never accidentally injure herself. Blades designed not to cut. An object of indecision, at odds with itself.

Berger’s writings take us on a tour of his favoured haunts and of those who haunt him, his favourites. Here at least, the dead appear to him not as figures of trauma, suffering and catastrophe – even those like Tyler around whom the suspicion of a sorrowful end, suicide, hangs heavy – but rather as benign ghosts, gentle spirits, the shades of intimates and acquaintances. Indeed, they are good company; they are, and they make for, good spirits. And

they are untethered to places and spaces. These are fancy-free ghosts. Let us call them *free spirits*.

In Lisbon, John's mother takes care not to trip as they approach the top of the Mãe d' Agua stairway, though one wonders what harm she could come to. She tells him:

"There's something, John, you shouldn't forget – you forget too much. The thing you should know is this: the dead don't stay where they are buried."²⁹

"The dead when they're dead," she continues, "can choose where they want to live on Earth, always supposing they decide to stay on the Earth."³⁰

He wants to know more.

"How do the dead choose where they want to stay? She didn't' answer, instead she gathered up her skirt and sat down on the next step of the staircase.

"I've chosen Lisboa! She said, as if repeating something very obvious."³¹

And Father? Berger enquires.

"I don't know and I don't ask him. I fancy he may be in Rome.

"Because of the Holy See?

"For the first time she looked at me, the little triumph of a joke in her eyes.

"Not at all: because of the tablecloths!"³²

Berger responds in kind:

²⁹ *ibid.*, 3.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 4.

³¹ *ibid.*, 4.

³² *ibid.*, 5. There must be something about the fabrics of Italian cities: tablecloths in Rome, *tenda* in Bologna.

“So time doesn’t count, and place does? I said this to tease her. When I was a man, I liked teasing her and she went along with it, consenting, for it reminded us both of a sadness that had passed.”³³

These hauntings, these spirits, are of a past sadness and a sadness that has passed. Figures more of former mourning than of unending melancholy.

There are ways of seeing spectres. There are ways of haunting. Not all spirits are free. There are other ghosts and ‘ghostly matters’, too. And these are not playful but play a different role – serious spirits, unquiet spirits. Back in Bologna, the conversation with Uncle Edgar about martyrs is occasioned by a particular encounter: *en route* to Pasquinis Berger chances upon:

a long high wall with several thousand black and white photographs, behind glass, displayed on it. Portraits of men and some women, with their names and dates of birth and death printed across the bottom of their chests, where one might listen to their hearts if one had a stethoscope. They are arranged in alphabetical order. Mid twentieth century. How many foresaw their portraits being placed along with thousands of other martyrs, side by side, row above row, on a public wall in the city centre? More than we might guess. In alphabetical order they knew what was at stake: in this area of Italy one out of every four anti-fascist Partisans was to lose her or his life.³⁴

How might one think of this memorial mural, this photographic album of the partisan dead? It attests to the essential sense of past struggles and sufferings, of history as catastrophe and trauma, of contestation and courage, a sense of and sensitivity to what Benjamin in his famous theses ‘On the Concept of History’ terms the ever-endangered “tradition of the

³³ *ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ Berger, *Red Tenda*, 24.

oppressed.”³⁵ Such sober senses are essential to urban aesthetics and histories. This precious and precarious “tradition of the oppressed” must be smuggled into the present for it is precisely that which is forbidden, prohibited; it is that which defies the ban, contravenes the rules, pays no duties. It is contraband.

Yes, there are ways of remembering, ways of redeeming. But there are also ways of forgetting. And here is where they meet: in Pierre Nora’s (1989) *lieux de memoire*. These are places of a certain kind of memory, of commemoration sanctioned by government, forms of collective, public recollection in the service of nation-building which in so doing may obscure and occlude – like those decorative tiles in Lisbon – other, more critical, transgressive modes of remembering and reflecting, ones that do not consider the past to have passed, ones attuned to haunting.

Might such spaces risk consigning these partisans and their fight against Fascism to the *then*, as if Fascism itself was only a thing of former times, as if Fascism were finished, over and done with? In his 1940 theses, Benjamin also cautions us: “The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.”³⁶

Fascism has it ways too, its worming ways back into the present. There are ways of forgetting this and ways of allowing such forgetfulness.³⁷ Nora’s *lieux de memoire* are places of both memory *and* amnesia, of equivocation and ambivalence: they are ‘Hamlet-places’.

³⁵ Benajmin, *Selected Writings* 4, 392.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 391.

³⁷ In an essay entitled ‘How to Resist a State of Forgetfulness’, Berger writes: “around us, the planet is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands; the majority are underfed, junk-fed or starving. More and more millions of people are being forced to emigrate with the slimmest hopes of survival. Working conditions are becoming more and more inhuman.

The aesthetic, the rendezvous, the ghost, and the never to be forgotten – here is where they meet, here in Bologna.

Orpheus

Thresholds are ‘Hamlet-places’, too: they are boundary markers of separation and, at the same time, spaces to be crossed. In *Confabulations* (2016) under the title ‘Pieces of Silver’,³⁸ Berger recalls a visit to a Paris-based artist whose work he has long revered, one whose studio is not to be found in some shabby-romantic garret in Montmartre, but rather in a tiny apartment lost amidst a banal housing complex far out in one of the city’s unprepossessing *banlieue*. Stepping into a room measuring just thirty square metres, crammed with large canvases, Berger introduces us to the Czech-born painter Rostia Kunovsky and his artworks. Berger writes:

Entering the studio was like entering a bunker for soiled linen. Against all four walls were stacked canvases and gigantic sheets of thick paper, all the images painted on them facing the wall. The floor was covered with other paintings laid face down no question of strolling around. I sat on a chair by the door.³⁹

He is enthralled by Kunovsky’s works, ones which, in three series – *Fenêtres Lettres* (2011), *Derniers Travaux* (2013) and *from Nowhere* (2015) – repeat, reiterate and reconfigure the

Those who are ready to protest against, and resist, what is happening today are legion, but the political means for doing so are for the moment unclear or absent. They need time to develop. So we have to wait. But how to wait in such circumstances? How to wait in this state of forgetfulness?”. In John Berger *Confabulations*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2016), 140-141. He adds: “sustained by what we have inherited from the past and what we witness, we will have the courage to resist and continue resisting in as yet unimaginable circumstances. We will learn to wait in solidarity” (ibid., 142-143).

³⁸ ibid., 125-131.

³⁹ ibid., 125-126.

same background motif. One sees row upon disorganised row of boxes of various dimensions, a manic multiplicity, an unending favella or high-rise suburb, a banlieue, seemingly climbing up a hillside, filling the canvas entirely, sprawling beyond its frame to encompass everything and everywhere. There are no spaces, no gaps, no crevices. The crowd and confusion of cubes obliterates everything, like the tiles in Lisbon but without the mortar joints and cracks to suggest something hidden beneath. Stacked one upon the other, Kunovsky presents us with a white city of blank, miniature towers bearing black slits for windows and splashed with bright, vibrant colours, all huddled together in ramshackle layers, tier after tier as if these buildings were somehow perched upon one another, rising skywards. There is a suggestion of unkempt bookshelves here, pages with ink penned by a careless hand, textual fragments of an unknown language, storeys of stories. In a short text accompanying an exhibition of *Fenêtres Lettres* in 2011, Berger perceives something of Breughel and refers to them as veritable ‘Towers of Babel’. He writes:

We look down from the altitude of a surveying helicopter. We see roofs, windows, cul-de-sacs, flyovers, streets, roundabouts. No people. But the buildings converge and come together like people and the way they are painted (often in white) is as animated as any street talk you can come across. Then, on to these street-life images, are stencilled, in paint, the syllables and abbreviations of words which cannot be decoded, and these letters are close-up, as if scrawled on the helicopter’s windscreen.

He adds:

Kunovsky’s paintings are about disturbance, folly, chaos and survival but they are not sinister. In their mood and painterly energy they remind me of certain

Breughels, whose subjects were human folly - such as The Tower of Babel, the haphazard nature of human endurance and collective laughter.⁴⁰

They may not be 'sinister' artworks but there is, nevertheless, an air of the dead about them. Perhaps, in monochrome, they would resemble the serried ranks of photographs of the partisan dead forming the memorial mural in Bologna; they certainly call to mind gravestones, some broken, some askew, piled one upon the another bearing illegible inscriptions. Bleached of colour, they would be suggestive of an ossuary or catacomb, where the dust-covered skeletal remains of the long-dead are heaped, skull set upon skull in endless rows, dark sockets for eyes. Not 'sinister', perhaps, but these paintings have an unsettling, unruly and uncanny quality: such cities may be the chosen haunting grounds frequented by boisterous ghosts, free spirits.

And although there are no people, no inhabitants – indeed one wonders if there is any space for them? – there is still much of the living and the lively about them, too. Stencilled upon these chaotic cityscapes are other images, outlines, contours, as if this compressed conurbation were but a backdrop, a curtain or screen for the superimposition or projection not just of enigmatic outsized lettering, but also of signs of everyday life and vitality: wine bottles and glasses; correspondence, papers and books, scripts and musical instruments; flowers, bouquets and budding branches; and sometimes outsized human figures too - of street and folk musicians and of children. A small boy becomes a colossus as he stands amidst the hurly-burly of the megalopolis, transforming its edifices into Lilliputian building blocks. In his hands the city becomes a panorama of playthings, a toytown.

One might wonder: do these motifs overlay the cityscape? Are they dreamlike emanations, phantasms emerging somehow from an urban unconscious? Are they, like the geoglyphic

⁴⁰ [Rostia Kunovsky : 'Fenêtres Lettres'](#)

Nazca Lines of southern Peru, mysterious inscriptions carved into the city itself but only visible from a bird-eye viewpoint, Berger's "surveying helicopter"?

Such outlines fascinate Berger. They are reminders of, and resonate with, his enduring penchants and preoccupations, ones we have already identified here: wine suggests *terroir* and the senses; manuscripts, texts and scores connote writing and the arts; flora recall both the flourishing of nature and Berger's own still-life botanical sketches. And the various figures themselves have a certain mnemonic quality, summoning childhood games and times – even if, to be sure, Berger is no child of the *favella* or the *banlieue*. These cityscapes are imbued with ghostly apparitions.

Berger introduces us to these paintings which are themselves, for him, nothing less than, nothing other than, *introductions*, *ways in*: they are *entrancing* and *entrances*. They are meeting places, on the cusp of the 'then' and the 'now'. They are introductions to the threshold – *not* the one-way street – of life and death. These are haunted and haunting canvases, pictures of porosity, 'Hamlet-paintings'. Here is where we meet. They are like the spectres Berger did not expect to encounter, the ones that waylay him in cities, that ambush him in the countryside. Little wonder that his reaction is one of shock, the shock of recognition. These, then, are not just repeated representations of cities: they are, for Berger, suffused with the dizzying, disquieting experiences of metropolitan existence as an everyday living with and among ghosts.

"I was standing in front of a painted image," he explains, "measuring two metres by two, of paradise. And, after a moment, standing still, gasping a little, I entered it."⁴¹

⁴¹ Berger, *Confabulations*, 125.

In these images Berger is brought face-to-face with his own past and passions – this is why he “enters into them” since they are born of him. In the same moment, the same movement, *they enter into him*. There are ways of entering.

Here, in these artworks strewn around a cluttered studio, is where Berger meets his memories, rendezvouses with his remembrances. Yes, as their title states, these are windows, these are apertures. *They look out*. But they open back, they gaze inwards, too – they are mirrors. Berger is introduced to himself. And Kunovsky is his guide in this clandestine undertaking, as much *passeur* as painter.

Berger claims he has seen nothing like these artworks – but, surely he has: in the repeated geometry of the city, in the play of light and shade, in the palette of colours, he must see the connection to the paintings of Robert Delauney and his many windows onto the city – the works of the short-lived art movement and moment known as Orphism. But Berger remains silent on this. Referencing art histories and tracing aesthetic genealogies and lineages are not his concern here. Tellingly, while Berger makes no mention of Orphism, he nevertheless refers to Kunovsky as Orpheus, the archetypical figure not just of art but also of the redemption of the dead.

In a text dated 5 March 2009 reproduced on Kunovsky’s website (under ‘Lexicon, 2009’), Berger reflects:

When something asks to be written, as happens with
some writers, it arrives not in words, but in a pre-verbal,
forbidden way, like a newborn born from the womb of the mother tongue. These
fabulous paintings describe the landscape of the
preverbal with great precision. There are faces, music, flowers, whatever
you want, but not yet the words. To my knowledge, no painter

has painted a landscape like this so far. It is in its pure state, but today it is subject to a continual bombardment of noises. Information, disinformation.

Through this landscape, my friend Rostia Kunovsky is like a guide who reminds me of Orpheus.⁴²

And more: for the figure of Orpheus returns us to smuggling and contraband: for is not Orpheus the primordial smuggler, the most daring crosser of forbidden thresholds, the ultimate transgressor of the prohibited, and Eurydice the most profound, most beloved contraband? He leads her through the bleak and hostile landscape of Tartarus, guides her to the banks of the River Styx. And then? Must they bribe Charon to transport them back to the other side, the realm of the living? After all, the crossing of the Styx is only ever a one-way journey. Return tickets are not available. Must they pay the ferryman to pay no attention to them? Must they plead with and cajole him, Charon the border guard, the river police, to turn his back for just a moment?

Orpheus charms Charon with his song, with his music, his art. Smugglers too must be practiced in their artfulness if they are to pass and pass over, to succeed as a *passeur*. In the absence of a suitable craft, one must perfect one's craftiness.

And perhaps there are other ways of crossing. The Styx, like every other river, just like the Szum and the Ching, must have its source. Far upstream, it is perhaps a mere trickle or brook, one which one can easily traverse in a simple skip or jump. One careful confident step might suffice so long as no-one is looking.

⁴² [Texte de John Berger 5.mars 2009](#)

Contraband

Orpheus the smuggler, the guide, the *passeur* – this figure guides us, finally, after much detour and digression, to that tiny village in French alps, and to the third of the ‘three lives’ of Lucie Cabrol, La Cocadrille, and the astonishing final pages of *Pig Earth*. ‘Detour’ and ‘digression’ should be readily forgiven here: such circumnavigation, such secret paths, are assuredly the only routes through the landscape, through the cityscape. They are the ones that smugglers must know and exploit. There are ways of smuggling and smugglers’ ways.

In her ‘third life’, her afterlife, the murdered Lucie Cabrol returns from the dead and haunts Jean, her one-time lover from years ago, a man who now, after mixed fortunes and misfortunes in Argentina, has finally returned home. He assumes the role of narrator, of storyteller. They meet; they converse; they walk together. She calls him her *contraband*.

"Pleasure is always your own," he muses, "and it varies as much and no more than pain does. I had become accustomed to pain, and now to my surprise the hope of pleasure, the hope I had known when I was eleven, was coming from the old woman with the unlit cigarette who called me her *contraband*. Where had my life gone? I asked myself".⁴³

But she is only teasing. *She is the contraband*. She has accomplished her most audacious smuggling venture – as all ghosts do – namely, she has smuggled herself back from the dead and into the realm of the living. She has defied the prohibition, repudiated the ban, outwitted and outfoxed the customs; she has managed the impossible crossing by ways and means that are her secret. She is a *passeuse*. And she is not alone.

⁴³ Berger, *Pig Earth*, 172.

She leads Jean high up through the forested alpine slopes where she had once made her home, guides him like Orpheus does Eurydice, and then they descend into a secluded vale where a wooden-framed house is being erected. There are many at work – sawing timbers, hammering nails, fitting posts and joists. They cast themselves ‘into their labours’. Over there is Marius Cabrol, Lucie’s father, whom Jean had seen on his deathbed many years before.⁴⁴ Here is Armand, drowned in the River Jalent, and alongside him, Gustave who had fallen to his death. With them are Georges who had hanged himself, Adelin, crushed by a tree, Michel killed by the kick of a horse, Joset swept away in an avalanche, Mathieu struck by lightning.⁴⁵ And there are others too – Marius a Brine, Pierre, whose body had been broken beneath a frame, and a young resistance fighter, Saint-Just, a member of the Maquis executed by the Nazi soldiers. It is a sylvan gathering of ghosts, a forestry phantasmagoria. They have all smuggled themselves here, every one of these free spirits.⁴⁶ And they are joined for a while by some of the villagers, by the living, who have come to lend a hand. Here they meet: to build a chalet, to celebrate the wedding which should rightly have taken place so many years before – the marriage of Lucie and Jean. Silently serenaded by a ghostly band,⁴⁷ one revenant weds another. Let us leave them there to their afterlives of love.

Back in the city, the living and the dead keep company, too. On the streets, in the parks, on benches and walls, on thresholds, the dead, like shadows, are only ever one step behind, or just one step ahead. Our shades do not allow themselves to be banned; they refuse to be banished. Contraband, contra-banishment. Here is where we meet. We should at least

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 163

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁶ “We can become anything. That is why injustice is impossible here. There may be the accident of birth, there is no accident of death. Nothing forces us to remain what we were” (*ibid.*, 165).

⁴⁷ “How can I tell you what the band played. I could hum the melody and you would not hear it. The bandmen were dead and they played the music of silence” (*ibid.*, 174).

introduce ourselves for, as Michel de Certeau reminds us, we cannot live without them:

“There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can ‘invoke’ or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in.”⁴⁸

But we should grant John Berger the last word: “It’s an improbable city, Bologna – like one you might walk through after you have died.”⁴⁹

Bologna: improbable or not, here is where we meet; here is where we part.

References

Barthes, Roland *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1993.

Benjamin, Walter *Selected Writings. Volume 4 1938-1940*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.

Berger, John *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.

..... *Pig Earth*. New York, NY: Vintage International, 1979/1992.

..... *The Shape of a Pocket*. London: Bloomsbury, 2001.

..... *Here is Where We Meet*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005.

..... *The Red Tenda of Bologna*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007/2018.

..... [Texte de John Berger 5.mars 2009](#)

⁴⁸ de Certeau, *Practice*, 108.

⁴⁹ Berger, *Red Tenda*, 19.

..... ‘Towers of Babel,’ 2011, [Rostia Kunovsky : 'Fenêtres Lettres'](#)

..... *Confabulations*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2016.

de Certeau, Michel *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

Molder, Maria Filomena, Nélío Conceição and Nuno Fonseca (eds) *Rethinking the City. Reconfiguration and Fragmentation*. London: Routledge, 2025.

Nora, Pierre ‘Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*’ in *Representations*, No 26 Spring, 1989, 7-24.