

Teresa Bruś

University of Wrocław

## The Everyday in Humphrey Spender's *Worktown* Mass Observation Photographs

**Abstract:** My proposition to approach Humphrey Spender's *Worktown* photographs (1937–1938) of urban life in an ordinary town of Bolton, Lancashire takes heed of Georg Simmel's assumption that the relationship to space is the condition of the relationship to people and the symbol of this relationship. The new instruments of vision applied in the nineteen-thirties cultural texts privileged the everyday, the common place, and the ubiquitous ordinary person. In Bolton, Humphrey Spender's zoom lenses focused on particular spatial structures of social associations like doorsteps and street corners. In my paper I show that Spender's distinctive photo-documents do not correspond to the anthropological concerns of Mass Observation, a hybrid English research organization which employed a mixture of literature and social science as a method of observing, with a nation-wide panel of voluntary informants, British life in the thirties. Spender, a highly accomplished Mass Observation photographer, made Bolton visible not as a connecting place of the everyday, but as a separating place of passivity and spatial intervals. Thus, contrary to popular opinions, we should evaluate the significance of Spender's photographs in terms of how they uphold the distinction between the extraordinary and the ordinary.

Humphrey Spender's topographic collection of photographs taken in the North West of England, in the small declining town of Bolton in the 1930s, reflects a recognizable material place. The collection, comprising as many as nine hundred photographs, was created at the time identified as a period of significant aesthetic and political reordering of the concept of the everyday across Europe, to mention, among others, Freud's revolutionary attention to the hidden meanings of the everyday and his method of collecting material and applying it scientifically. Surrealists and Dada artists also insisted on locating and reforming everyday life. In the "factographic culture" of the 1920s and 1930s, photography played a special role as it helped recover the concept of the everyday with the effect of "an extension and dispersal of not only what constituted factuality but its cultural status" (Roberts 1998: 25).

In this paper I engage with Humphrey Spender's photographs of Bolton as records which we can associate with static conceptions of social reality. Spender focuses on Bolton as a setting of established, really *extraordinary* architectural structures, less so as a territory of the ordinary. Despite their strong evidential appeal, Spender's photographs of Bolton demonstrate certain blind fields. Henri Lefebvre, one of the most engaging theorists of the everyday, argues that everyday life is both a colonized setting of oppression and the locus of potential liberating sources (1984: 14). Framing the former, Spender did not take much notice of the latter. We do not see in Spender's Bolton those everyday places where, in Lefebvre's words, "creative energy is stored in readiness for new creations" (1984: 14). Rather, we see Bolton controlled by long-established positions and its inhabitants caught up in what Lefebvre identifies as "the toils of parcellized space, but also in the web of what philosophers call 'analogons': images, signs and symbols" (1974: 98). Thus Bolton in Spender's frames eludes visibility as an ordinary town which Mass Observation founders had hoped to align with the interventionist art of the everyday.

Humphrey Spender did most of the Mass Observation photography of Worktown, the generic name of Bolton, the town chosen by the Mass Observation founders to be the Northern outpost for their surveys of the everyday. The North of England was where "the effects of the economic crisis were at their greatest, and where the symbolic identifications of industrial life were at their sharpest" (Roberts, 64). Tom Harrisson, one of the three founders of the movement, with about fifteen full-time "Participant Observers" among whom were the writers John Summerfield, Celia Fremlin, and William Empson, had tried to "go native" in this unfamiliar place, and to be scientific about recording facts of its everyday life. He had heard Bolton identified by the South Sea islanders he studied as an anthropologist. They connected the name "Bolton" with the washing-powder manufacturers, Lever Brothers, the only British company they ever heard of. In his Mass Observation project, selecting Bolton for exposition, and designating Bolton as "Worktown," Harrisson opened many more meanings than the proper name of Bolton used to carry before Mass Observation took interest in it. By giving the place a new name, Harrisson proposed to give Bolton what in *The Practice of Everyday Life* de Certeau calls a "second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal forbidden or permitted meaning" (Certeau 1988: 105). Harrison and other Mass Observers equipped Bolton with an alternative territorial identity. It seems that they hoped that such a process involving a cultural and political alliance around a territorial center could work as a potentially radical project, leading in the long run to the creation of new concepts of coming together, a form of *synoikismos*. Such transforming "tactics" can create in a place not a spatial specificity but a sense of "erosion" or "nowhere" (Certeau, 105) but Mass Observers did not express concerns about such consequences. Indeed, under Mass Observation, Bolton, in Old English "enclosure," or a "dwelling house," became not *oikos*, a home or a unit, but Worktown, a symbolic "world within world." Like *Middletown* in the American

classic by Robert and Helen Lynd, *Worktown* was equipped with certain attributes, organized temporally and spatially. Bolton became metamorphosed into a formulable place of activity, of “work” and thus of potential historical significance. In their questionnaires, diaries, and photography, Mass Observers exposed Worktown not as a common place dependent upon real formation of new civic ideas. Worktown was written with descriptions of passivity and engulfing monotony. Decades later, as “boltonworktown” web pages show, Bolton identifies itself most strongly with the aesthetic valency it was accorded by Mass Observers in the 1930s.

Julian Trevelyan, the surrealist painter, and Humphrey Jennings, another founder of Mass Observation and also a surrealist poet, responded to the movement's high purposes making very accomplished collages of manipulated images of Bolton. Frizzell notes that Trevelyan saw Jennings's work in Bolton as “an extension of his Surrealist vision of Industrial England; the cotton workers of Bolton were the descendants of ... the dwellers in Blake's dark satanic mills reborn into a world of greyhound racing and Marks & Spencer” (1997: 25). William Empson was “dispatched to study the contents of sweetshop windows” and, as Nick Hubble writes, the poet was “making collages of the Bolton streetscape from newspaper reports of the coronation” (2010: 134). Humphrey Spender was invited to provide information about Bolton; his photographs were expected to buttress the distrusted “value of mere words” (Frizzell 1997: 26). Mass Observers intended to make visible through “the direct observation and close contact” (Harrison 1961: 278) the real town, its pubs, pools, institutions, and its people. Some categories and themes under which Spender's photographs are filed in the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex, also displayed on the Bolton Museum web pages, include: ceremonies, children, church, leisure, sport, politics, industry, and shopping. The object of observation in Worktown was thus a culture, a “distinct bounded network of human relationships and meanings,” as it is defined by early twentieth-century ethnography (Buzard 1997: 102). Jeremy MacClancy establishes that Harrison believed that it was “the seeming trivia of the present day” that “could be significant tomorrow,” and that history, “crippled by the absence of information as to what was happening that was not climax, new, ‘historical’” needed the details of the ordinary (MacClancy 1995: 506). Like Harrison, Spender arrived in Bolton intrigued by ordinary relationships and “indecisive” moments happening in a place which he could not possibly identify with. Nevertheless, he hoped he could expose Bolton, frame it, and in the long run contribute to the emancipation of Bolton: “We all wanted to help in a way, and certainly with Mass Observation we were trying to help” (Spender 2002: 175). Indeed, the founders of Mass Observation emphasized that they were not interested in the humblest facts of the everyday for their own sake, but in “exposing them in simple terms to all observers, so that their environment may be understood, and thus constantly transformed” (Baxendale and Pawling 1996: 33). The initiative to seek knowledge, to expose and change the apathy and passivity of the masses in order to begin to understand their mentality

and change their lives was welcomed by Bronisław Malinowski, one of more vocal Mass Observation supporters. Though not convinced about Mass Observation methodologies, Malinowski defended the endeavour which he felt could bring the “promise of countering the increasing threat of totalitarianism” (MacClancy, 504).

Emphasizing the primacy of reality, collectively, Mass Observers approached the everyday as a level of life. They insisted on invisibility of their equipment and their operations. A “mackintoshed figure with a pad and paper peeping through a keyhole,” which introduced Tom Harrison to the *Daily Mirror*, captures best the image of the Mass Observation cameraman as a “spy in the world” (Mellor 1978). Such a figure was surveying the streets, trying to capture the banality of the unorganized life in the city, observing “leeks growing in allotments,” “annual flower shows,” “rearing and caring for pigeons,” as some captions of Spender’s photographs identify the ordinary. In an interview conducted years later, Spender remembered that Harrison “did say: go into public lavatories and take pictures of people peeing” (Crain 2006: 3). But such an observing figure was also the observer of himself. The founders of Mass Observation believed that the practice of observing and recording information offered “the possibility of heightening [the practitioners’] ... powers of observation, of expressing otherwise unexpected feelings, of giving them new interest in and greater understanding of their own lives, and maybe even bringing about a permanent change in the observers themselves” (MacClancy, 510). The everyday became inflected with a liberating personal content. Mass Observers reported that engaging with the field of the everyday, helped them shape their sense of selfhood. Doing self-documentation and “subjective” reportage, sorting out their identities and difference, candid, visible-invisible observers expressed interest in formulating their own experiences with what Spender called “waves of identification and sympathy with certain people and situations” (Frizzell, 25). Nevertheless, involved in a very special form of interaction, Mass Observers remained strangers to the subjects of their interest. Objective and free, the stranger is the one who is “near and far at the same time” (Simmel 2009: 604).

Spender’s middle-class culture, a culture of public service, his commitment to mobility, his exigency to enclose this certain space we understand as being everyday, define the nature of his efforts to illuminate the habitats of those who, unlike him, were always *there*, and who, unlike him, did not see themselves as ordinary. Spender’s unobtrusive camera allowed him to photograph unobserved, to be an eye, to look where he pleased. Spender certainly shared with other observers this fervent ideal of visibility. Responsible for the *Daily Mirror*’s centre-pages of photographs, modernistically-oriented poet Charles Madge thus anticipated the movement’s development: “We shall be differently aware, we shall see all things new / Not as a craze or a surprise, but hard, naked, true” (1933: 2). Yet, entranced as he was with his subjects, Spender did express discomfort and even pain he felt when confronted with very active “social differentiations and distinctions” in Bolton (2002: 174). He came to recognize that observing others unobserved was

morally and ethically alarming. Spender also said he could not get over the sense of “the class distinction, the fact that I was somebody from another planet, intruding on another kind of life” (Cunningham 1988: 250). He suspected the violence and futility implicit in our desire to see: “it is said that I gave ordinary man his place in history. Absolute rubbish” (Frizzell, 25). In the history of Mass Observation, Spender’s critique of the exultation of a scopic drive propelling its projects, his critique of what de Certeau calls “the fiction of knowledge” (Certeau, 92) created by his photographs of the working classes and their lives stands as a rare admission.

Though often identified as British in character, Spender’s photography is clearly determined by European fashions in visual art; it is aligned with European ideas of emerging social practices of documentation and specific visual possibilities. His photography responds also to a sense of political and social changes happening in Europe. Travelling in Europe, Spender encountered a “small camera street vocabulary that came to pervade journalistic documentary photography.” Used by the surrealists, among others, this vocabulary had an identifiable “element of the snooper” (Badger 2007: 78). An explorer of the life of a different culture, Spender acted like a social explorer, defined by James Buzard as one who was “both flexible enough to ‘immerse’ in the alien and proof against that destructive element into which he has plunged” (Buzard, 105).

Spender’s visual consciousness and his sense of relationship with the subjects betray familiarity especially with the “aesthetic experiments of the German and Russian avant-garde” (Frizzell, 9). Spender attended Bauhaus at Dessau; he studied architecture in Freiburg where he encountered the outstanding photo-journalism of *Münchener* and *Berliner Illustrierte* as well as the Communist *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (Mellor 1978: 115). As Humphrey’s younger brother, the poet Stephen Spender writes, Berlin inspired many English writers and artists of the thirties who, exploring and photographing Berlin, found this “authentic” city to be like “spaces in time” (Spender S. 1951: 125). The new German “newsreel-like display of chance human arrangements and evanescent events” as found in *Berlin: The Symphony of a Great City* (Mellor 1978: 117), also the work of the “New Vision” photographers shooting in Germany, like Martin Muncasi, Hans Casparius, Erich Salomon, or Helmar Lerski unquestionably helped create foundations for Spender’s art of the mundane. As Frizzell argues, this influence “formed a matrix of aesthetic styles and approaches from which Spender developed a visual vocabulary and eventually came to discover his own sensibility through experimentation” (Frizzell, 14).

Frizzell emphasizes that the founders of Mass Observation were members with strong ties to places outside Britain. Harrison had been born and raised in Argentina. Charles Madge, a South African, was “also brought up on the fringes of empire” (Frizzell, 25). The Leica, the miniature camera used by Mass Observers, was a German camera, the most precise and vital precondition for the development of keyhole observations. Spender’s youngest brother Michael, also a photographer who worked in Germany for Leitz, the manufacturer of the Leica, was the official

photographer to the 1933 Oxford University Expedition to the New Hebrides when he met Tom Harrison. Also the link between Humphrey and Mass Observation happened as a result of anthropological work done outside of England (Mellor 1978: 120). Though the concept of Mass Observation took its form as a response to the monarchical crisis in Britain in 1937, though it focused on the study of physical behaviour and mental phenomena of the British, though — as some critics argue — it can be linked to Britain's imperialist legacy, much of what defined the movement had its sources in major debates about the shifting class forces in Europe that influenced all spheres of culture.

These massive changes “brought the term ‘the everyday’ directly into the spheres of politics, science, art and social theory” (Roberts, 15). Yet despite its “critical content,” the category of the everyday possesses a sense of obliqueness and indistinctness. The everyday is what happens to everybody as a sort of “restless quietude” (Roberts, 16). A symptom of modernity, it occurs in the city but even there, as de Certeau argues, various complicated networks prevent rather than facilitate the visibility of the practices of the everyday. Unlike the “imaginary totalizations produced by the eye,” also unlike finished spaces of the visual constructions (Certeau, 93), the everyday operates with a sort of “*opaque and blind*” mobility. De Certeau says that the everyday is “*migrational*,” it escapes (Certeau, 93) allowing no grasp.

Mass Observers struggled with the identities of the everyday, experimented with ways to identify and expose it. They tried to link the everyday to dynamic conceptions of connectivity with some determined places. Photography was chosen by the movement as a popular method that suited “the Man in the street.” Drawing on approaches to photography taken by its European practitioners, in de Certeau's words, observers embraced photography's newly-discovered potential to “invent” itself by “*poaching* in countless ways on the property of others” (Certeau, xii).

Mass Observers focused primarily on watching intensely and recording the places where the everyday could be experienced, in the city. “They walked the streets with ‘a strange sense of dedication, of quest’” (MacClancy, 499), searching for signs of ordinary life. Harrison, however, kept reminding his followers that asking about and debating the everyday — interpreting it — was of secondary importance to looking. He believed “much of life has little or no speech pattern” (1961: 19). In the city, seeking the everyday, Observers were encouraged to negotiate their own mobility and visibility with the mobility and visibility of the city. But, as de Certeau argues, the city, created from “fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces” (Certeau, 93), is a visual complexity which its walkers experience but do not rationalize. Users of the space of the city engage in practices which produce not representations of the city space, but what de Certeau calls “another spatiality.” These practices happen “below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (Certeau, 93); they produce figurative meanings, the “inaccessible beyond” which cannot be written with light. Illegible and invisible to the non-users

of the city space, the everyday denies capture. Non-users only metamorphose the city, they are strangers who allow what Georg Simmel calls “accidental displacements and accentuations” (Simmel, 602).

Spender certainly desired to make Bolton visible. His camera captured the town at many locations; he struggled and obtained more than one point of view. He employed his lens at an elevated privileged vantage, often at an eye-level. This level of “the thick and thins of an urban ‘text’” (Certeau, 93) is the street-level of the diversity and multiple kinds of untidiness. Yet, rather than ultimate reality and a human dimension, Spender found some highly-organized prospects. In his close-ups, Bolton is a town of very clear geometry, Bolton’s surfaces are coherent and its routes functional. There are no accidental arrangements in Spender’s Bolton, no mirages, no urban confusion. His details do not particularize. For example, Spender renders road signs and graffiti not as symbolic images but as callous reminders of some other territories disconnected from the Bolton he looks at. Graffiti, those “analogons,” which Mass Observers like Madge believed offered signs of the collective unconscious, for Spender are series of photographic possibilities to emphasize his privilege of the established, permanent character of the city. A big sign, attached to a large dark wall of a building standing at the corner of a street in a photograph captioned “Christ is Risen” reads: “A thought for you! Christ is Risen Heaven above is sweeter blue. Earth around is sweeter green.” A small sign attached to a lamppost facing the building right at the turn of the street has an arrow pointing left and the word “PARK” written on it (1982: 32). A group of people with very focused faces are heading towards the turn, but clearly about to miss both signs. This photograph is suggestive of options not taken by the users of the city; though foregrounded, these promised locations of relief are too far. The current of the everyday seems impervious to this Mass Observer.

In his photographs, Spender foregrounds the overwhelming massive urban architecture, the unity of its vertical and horizontal poles, the curvature of its streets, their intricate patterns and rational serene functions. In the Bolton collection, the streets turn, often sharply. Spender’s camera repeats these linear arrangements as if gesturing to some anticipated change. Turns accumulate in their visual effect to create trails of possibility. Yet human interaction rarely occurs at vast empty public space Spender records. These territories do not produce a space of encounter for any local community. Spender’s trails are official, carefully planned trails of urban designers. For de Certeau, who relies on comparisons with the speech act, such arrangements exemplify the status of the “faceless ‘proper’ meaning,” a normative level of communication — not the “drifting of ‘figurative’ language” (Certeau, 100). For Lefebvre, who locates the everyday in space, not in language, official trails are clearly colonized space. Unless the distinction between such space and ordinary space is eradicated, we cannot grasp the everyday.

In Spender’s *Worktown*, the streets of Bolton, the chosen region of the everyday activities like walking and eating and talking, provide settings for the extraordinary

in the everyday; they show life in the grasp of patterns. Spender also disguises the cyclical repetition of nature and its processes. Seeking out the busy disjunctive paths of Bolton walkers, Spender, the architecturally-trained Mass Observer, avoids discord and does not disclose contact. His subjects' gestures of separation testify to missed communication; they mark distinctions between the observing and the observed. Focusing on walkers trying to cover their faces or turning their backs at him, Spender seems to be showing that the elementary form of experiencing the city, walking, entails disruption, discontinuity, and uncertainty. The figures in many of his photographs are so small that they appear almost faceless. A decision to frame them thus is suggestive of Spender's sense of their anonymous status and their lack of freedom. The everyday in these photographs happens in mundane gestures organized within very constraining and imposing structures.

In Spender's *Worktown* there is very little of the ordinary. Spender himself testifies that he was "too much concerned with good composition" to tap the reserves of the ever incomplete everyday life. He says he was attracted by the Mass Observation directive to document the subject of change and decay in the industrial landscape, but in his viewfinder he always "had to see a good balanced composition," this mysterious thing (2002: 346). Aesthetically very accomplished, *Worktown* photographs do not relate to ordinary Bolton but they do continue to shape our perception of Bolton in the 1930s. Removed from their place of origin, collected and bound in albums, Spender's Mass Observation photographs unfold like stills from an extraordinary town.

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