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## A Hiatus Between Places: Stephen Spender and David Hockney's *China Diary*

Do we meet always and everywhere  
nothing but ourselves?

S. Spender

A diary is not only a place of asylum in space;  
it is also an archive in time.

Ph. Lejeune

How does a collaborative diary help divert attention away from the internal towards the interrelational, the external? Who is “the third” that emerges from a joined act of diary writing? How shall we understand the inclusion of complex collaboratively created visual material in a textually-led diary? What is the rhetorical and generic significance of such a text? What are we to make of such a form of mediation? And finally, does the visual compete or collaborate with the thematic development? How does the photographic negotiate its own awkward identity against watercolour sketches?

I try to address these questions reading a rather neglected text by rather well-established artists. Stephen Spender and David Hockney's *China Diary* was produced following their three-week tour of China in 1982. The authors were commissioned by a London publishing house to “write” about it and to “draw” it. The result is a long, hybrid text of 200 pages, with 158 watercolors, drawings and photographs, including 84 color photographs. Spender and Hockney's *China Diary* certainly brings to mind Thomas Hensen Hines's idea of a composite work being not so much an act of collaboration by the artists, but immediately the effects of the collaboration of the arts.

The cross-pollinating of the visual and verbal relationship established in this diary is as haphazard as can be expected from such an episodic, fragmentary form of recording observations, accounting for oneself, and managing time. The

uncertain plural *we*, designates the tour participants and co-authors of the diary: Stephen Spender, David Hockney, and Gregory Evans. But on a different level, as Jean Luc-Nancy has discerned, the always fragile, indeterminate and polymorphous pronoun *we* can be read as a request for identification, a “demand, a desire, or a will to distinction” (102). It alternates with the separating *I* which forms a recognizable narrating persona. Additionally, “the less evident” pronoun *we* always “subsumes the multitude of subjects who would be the real or potential readers” (Nancy 2005: 101). In the Epilogue, Hockney attributes the diary to Spender. It is Spender, indeed, who writes, edits and breaks up the text. His presence is felt in the controlling voice in the Epilogue, in the questions Spender asks Hockney and in the expletives directed at him. Also Spender’s involvement goes beyond the verbal into the visual; like Hockney, he too takes photographs. His portraits of his companions are placed in the opening sections of the book with faces looking sideways in one direction, and on the page laid out to turn towards a portrait of Spender sketched by Hockney. Spender interprets this placement and rendition of himself as comic and almost absurd, very much “like an odd man out,” which, we may add, he is in caricatures by Hockney created before the publication of this diary. Later in the book, Spender includes Hockney and his partner in this semi-serious, self-effacing frame of referencing. “We did look rather funny,” he reiterates, always mindful of Chinese looking at them and “politely concealing their smiles” (1982: 87).

Fragmenting their self-images, removing claims to seriousness, they embark on the tour posing as Western observers on vacation. After all, they acknowledge: “our visit to China was only a hiatus between places conditioning our lives in the West” (1982: 9). The cameras with which they enter China serve as symbols of their readiness to *take* China, not to experience it. As “shadows only,” they place themselves in positions removed from visibility and from claims to truth. Such declared effacement facilitates intrusion. By bypassing the constraining claims of the self, they establish obscure relationships typical of the diary where, as Lejeune authoritatively explains, the motivating force is communication and persuasion, and not, as in proper autobiographical texts, the desire to reflect life. The diary is rather a practice, a way of life, often incoherent, always fragmentary and distinctively, even “madly” repetitious (*On Diary* 2009: 170). Spender, who, like Lejeune, does not distinguish between the diary and the journal, has cultivated the attraction to this form all his life. He has written many diaries, “German Diary,” a verse journal, *Diary Poems*, amongst them – all to be published as a collection in 2010. “The essential of the journal for me is,” he asserts “that I can put down whatever I like without consideration of fulfilling the expectations, or catering for the taste of, an editor or a reader.” Spender the diarist writes about “what is interesting to himself,” his “own truth” (*Journals* 1985: 14).

“The diary,” Lejeune finds “offers a space and time protected from the pressures of time,” it presents an opportunity to “take refuge in its calm” (2009: 195), it is also a pleasant hiatus in the process of working on other texts. For Spender and

Hockney diary writing becomes a form of creative behaviour leading to purification and individual strengthening, a hiatus to make other spaces possible. *China Diary* ends in the midst of a conversation following “an extremely pleasant and thrilling three weeks” (1982: 189).

Prior to their trip, both Spender and Hockney travel extensively abroad, in the words of Spender more like “soft-class travellers” than tourists (1982: 122). In his autobiographical works, Sir Stephen Spender, the brother of the world-recognized photographer Humphrey Spender, betrays a strong predilection for the visual, frequently writing reviews of travel photography. In his autobiography *World Within World*, published for the first time in 1948, he admits: “Certainly I think the chief purpose of my own travelling was to form a gradually enlarging picture in which the countries were the paints which went to form the world” (1951: 164). But in *China Diary*, he creates two personae: the first, a fellow Englishman on a tour, the older diarist and a travel companion and, rather unexpectedly, the second, a serious photographer. Additionally, trying to make sense of China, he reaches for a visual set of references, especially for photographic metaphors. It comes as a surprise that a politically engaged writer like Spender tries to manipulate China into a form of picturesque visibility. Unable to communicate the experience of China, to narrate it, he exploits visual transmutations. China is impenetrable and so writing about China involves collecting what elsewhere he referred to as “great ever present pictures of experience” (1951: 292). His diary entries are like multiple snapshots intended to convey some multidimensionality. Although flat and self-conscious in their operations, they carry a promise of some illusion of depth. Yet, the consequence of such decisions for readers and viewers is primarily aesthetic pleasure, not intellectual approximation to China. “Strictly speaking,” to gloss Sontag’s powerful revisions on photography, “one never understands anything from a photograph ... understanding is based on how [something] functions.” She adds that “functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand” (1979: 23).

An acclaimed English pop artist, David Hockney shares Spender’s belief expressed in *World Within World* that “travel is an art which has to be created by the traveler” (1951: 163). His art is always tinted by awareness of the strength and durability of childhood impressions: “One never gets away from the first years of one’s life,” he writes: “I never get away from those dark streets and the dark atmosphere of Bradford.” The colours of foreign places are always more vivid because of “Bradford behind them” (in Spender and Hockney, *Journals* 1985: 447). Spender clearly thinks highly of his collaborator and friend. Hockney in his eyes is “honest and clear and decent” and, above all, a superb artist with an “unerring eye” and a wonderful character (1985: 448).

Overwhelmed by speed and density of visual stimuli, Hockney modified his initial plan to only “draw” China and resorted to fast-drawing with camera. He looked primarily for ways of describing pictorially what he saw on the move and

then experimenting with this medium. As they make their way through vast space of China, Hockney finds the camera a satisfying tool for rapid note-taking but also for abandoning the singular perspective. At the time of their tour, Hockney was already known for juxtaposing multiple images and reassembling them to create unexpected unities. In his *Journal*, Spender acknowledges Hockney's invention of "a way of juxtaposing multiple Polaroid photographs as part of a subject ... so that they produce an effect of many superimposed images of the subject taken from various angles." This method of inserting "the dimension of passing through time" into photography, of including "minute transitions in the lighting as well as observation of things from different angles," what Hockney calls "drawing with photography" is, Spender comments, the artist's experimental response to decline of standards in modern art, decline in the public's ability to see and know the truth (1985: 446–447).

In *China Diary* Hockney's practice of drawing and taking photographs is less a matter of splintering of subjects, and more an attempt to expose and reorder fragments picked up on the way while sightseeing, what Spender calls "a kind of prismatic effect" (1985: 457). Certainly, seen sequentially, his Polaroid snapshots map the space visited and the time lived by the photographer as distinct from the space created by Spender. His cameraworks produced in 110 format with colour reversal film render the colours flat and crude, very distinctive from, for example, Cecil Beaton's photograph-and-sketch diary *Far East*, published in 1945, a comparison that merits a study of its own. In *China Diary* the photographs are intensified and distorted, and, as Batchen aptly put it, in them "we also move through space, questing through a given scene in concert with Hockney's own eye" (2001: 111).

It is significant that Hockney's relevant verbal observations are directly reported by Spender, who decided early in the journey that the two men were necessary "corrective to each other" (1985: 12), both in terms of their personalities and the way they looked at things. While Spender may like to pose as an intellectual who attempts to explain, Hockney is to be the one who glimpses things, who sees. Critically, Spender felt that Hockney's vision of China stood apart, "quite independent of the text" (1985: 191). Securing this autonomy for Hockney's contribution, Spender yet again betrays some insecurity about the verbal. Hockney must have realized that, for often he reminded Spender that a lot of texts that come out of China tell you too much. Spender's usually wordy pronouncements are redefined by Hockney's economical images, which aspired to the purity and freedom from unnecessary details that Hockney admired, as well as cubist effects. Hockney, through the titles and the progression of images, introduces compositions which often bring to mind Gertrude Stein's portraits.

It is important to note that Spender and Hockney are themselves observed by their native guide. Mr. Lin, who is questioned and often ridiculed by them, remains, verbally and visually, in focus. Curiously, it is Lin's image which appears on the front and back covers of the first edition of the book. If we include the

company of Gregory Evans, Hockney's partner to whom the book is dedicated, this diary becomes not a "story in singularization," as Sturrock positions this personal subgenre of autobiography, but rather an exercise in uneasy plurality.

Hockney arrived in China equipped with cameras, Pentax and Polaroid for instant pictures to please Chinese, and with his drawing pads. As an experimental photographer, he anticipated the viewers' vital contribution in the acts of bringing images to life. He did not pretend that photography was simply documentary. On the other hand, Spender's amateurish relationship with photography is, nevertheless, a "serious" attempt at strict documentation of the trip. According to Spender, the visual component of the diary consists of "literal background photographs, so that you are surrounded by the real photographic reality; illustrations of it being our trip" and the independent artistic photos of Hockney (1985: 191). We sense here an interesting emphasis in which the snapshots of the inexperienced camera user are credited with more documenting power than the takes on reality executed by a well-equipped, professional photographer. Yet, despite Spender's authoritatively-guarded distribution of roles, much more emerges from Hockney's photographs than prosthetic tropes, than some artistic vignettes of reality, hyper-real as some of his captured objects are. In his pursuit of spaciality, for example, Hockney struggled to overcome the "intense immobility," "heaviness" and "fullness" that Roland Barthes attributed to the nature of photography. The photographs in *China Diary* show, for example, Hockney's choice to turn the edge of the photograph into a "prominent feature and the ground of his image, its negative unoccupied space, a vital part of our visual experience" (Batchen 2001: 111). While Spender looks at the center of things, Hockney often captures the off-center. In China, on the other hand, the idea of catching a subject in movement, or dismembering it to show possibilities of reassembling its space, as Hockney loves to do, is alien.

Not surprisingly, it is photography, not painting, which placed alongside the photographs and duplicating some of the objects, proves more immediate in keeping up with the speed of impressions received on "the little tour," with Chinese magical natural beauty becoming "visual music." The photographic response is also more direct, not just alluding to the context for the photographs but summoning it from vast and incoherent world they are visiting. And photography, not drawing, reveals the fundamental and estranging differences in optics, in seeing the other. Comparing the practices of Western and Chinese painters, Hockney notices that the Western artist "subdues his instruments" more. But looking at the way photographs are received and constructed, he cannot find a common platform for any comparison. Mr. Lin, for example, may be "smiling, with commanding, intelligent features," but he nevertheless looks like other faces in China and like obscure images displayed in public spaces. Mr. Lin reminds him of "those photographs of Mao Tse-tung which one sees everywhere in China" (1985: 16). The idea of a striking contrast, instead of expected similarity, in the use of photography is also captured in photographic terms. Whenever cameras appear, perceptions are splintered. On

the boat in Kwelin, Spender noticed a couple of Chinese. "These two never stopped photographing one another, jumping about on deck to find suitable backgrounds, parodying us more serious photographers" (1985: 163). Drawing on her experience, Sontag grasps powerfully this contrast in the way of seeing and recording. "In China," she says

only two realities are acknowledged. We see reality as hopelessly and interestingly plural. In China, what is defined as an issue for debate is one about which there are 'two lines,' a right one and a wrong one. Our society proposes a spectrum of discontinuous choices and perceptions. Theirs is constructed around a single, ideal observer; photographs contribute their bit to the Great Monologue. For us ... photography is a polylogue (1979: 173–175).

At this point I would like to focus on an entry in this diary where the photographic is set to collaborate with the textual. The boat trip through Wusih is an ordinary episode reported by Spender in the first person. Both Stephen and David were on a boat tour watching the bank of the canal. First of all, they were aware of a physical and mental gap between them and their observers. "Our boat was like a cage full of gaudy tropical birds," says Spender, thus blurring any claims to clarity of his distinctions in their observing, at the same time reserving for themselves the privilege of not being surprised. The "Chinese masses" cannot but stare at this flamboyant boat. This set-up precludes meaningful exchange of looks. Spender ironically asks himself who represents "the higher form" in the stages of evolution. In the meantime, the diarists "flash by" while the Chinese on the shore are engaged in their usual occupations (1985: 124).

As they move, the diarists accrete "separate scenes," "vignettes of this life." The scenes, like framed pictures, acquire a life under Spender's pen. They carry photogenic appeal with them as well as color, for example, when he describes "Bamboo staves blown by the wind to shapes of balloons, even calligraphy" (1985: 125). There are some documentary photos showing women on the river, wearing masks to avoid spreading cold germs. There are a lot of pictorial elements, short and always connecting with Western visual signs, for example, red flags remind Spender of Renaissance touches. The river connects the flow of these dissociative pictures.

The photographic descriptions occupy the center of the page, while Hockney's photos under the unrevealing caption "Canal-side scenes" are placed at the top and bottom of the page. The textual commentary, like the river, flows from scene to scene. The photos which symmetrically envelop the text are intended as a kind of an essay, or a "joiner," as Hockney calls it. The photographs are full and arresting. Hockney does not follow a chronological sequence, as the photos with the skipped numbers on the houses show. Black and white, taken straight on, tightly framed, they do not aim to illustrate the trip but to animate it. Hockney's photographic essay is about space, about windows, walls, doors, borders, and stairs. Human figures in them are barely perceptible, they are either in the shade or incomplete. There is a sort of muteness about the obscure blurred presences. Spender writes

of “brilliant smiles” or waving children he sees from the boat, he attempts to energize his description, Hockney plays with the photographic conventions, captures patterns and similarities. Spender grants the Chinese more active involvement in the act of observing. He wants to preserve white plaster walls on the houses at the canal. Hockney’s walls are grey and off-grey. Where Spender sees men, women, and children, Hockney captures walls of houses. Spender says they block the view, Hockney’s eyes seem captivated by them, his vision is concentrated, geometrical and prompts the viewer to ask questions about the cultural resonances, about openings and closures. Doors and windows we see in these pictures are blackened. His technique of taking pictures leads him to diminution in trust. “The problem of going to a place and taking photographs is this,” he says “you are looking through a frame, seeing separate pictures framed up, peripheral vision stops. You don’t see everything if you take photographs. It’s a paradox” (1985: 22). Hockney undermines photography’s claim to any privileged relationship to the real world, the photographic for him is not the window onto the world but “an opaque, resistant surface volumetrically unfolding in space,” “bleeding” into other media and contributing to an overall ephemeral effect (Batchen 2001: 109).

How should we understand the parallel entries on the boat tour? Clearly, *China Diary* as “patchwork” or polysemantic composition, a verbal-visual sandwich is a personal response to strong visual experiences. The diarists do not register any new relationships or connections arising from them. They write their diary. But the focus of their attention is away from the intimate and into the external. Personal and telling details, they hope, are what will interest the readers and observers of their visual material. Belittling their significance as acute observers, “feeling that we were minute dots and crosses on an aerial photograph,” really “hollow men,” shadows only “they exercise multiple metaphoric and real acts of visualization” (1985: 58).

They follow a “diurnal passage” of recording not always serious events of their just three-week long tour. The record sustains a tone of “scoutism” which strengthens the provisionality of this diary. China is treated spatially and temporally as a “gap” open to the adventitious, the inconsistent, and the irrelevant. The *Diary* is a discontinuous subgenre of autobiography and, Spender and Hockney likewise call their text “a patchwork diary ... a bit bitty-like life-patched up in some way” (1985: 7). The patching up of the verbal and visual is an anxiety-provoking project though not devoid of what Hockney terms “vicarious pleasure.” He means by it the pleasure of writing, writing with light, and the pleasure of “a sense of things you can go forward to” (1985: 200), a contact with which both artists conclude their diary.

The co-existence of the textual and photographic in the structure of this diary can be termed, after Mary Ann Caws, “interference.” It “involves a dialogue, which the reader or observer enters into and sponsors, and which with other dialogues forms part of a more general conversation” (in Bryant 1996: 14). This collaborative

model, as Bryant notes, privileges “homogeneity.” In Spender and Hockney’s diary there is no duplication of information in the verbal and visual, no blending into “textual ones” that Bryant finds problematic in a collaborative model. When speaking to Spender, however, Hockney says that reading “your diary ... is like looking at the photographs we took” (1985: 190), he is speaking of their diary as a shared activity, not as exercises in self-portraiture. This self-effacing equation in which looking is effortless for the reader and brings about only some semblance of understanding of the place is further diminished when the reader reads other texts about China. Spender realizes how much they really missed and, at the same time, acknowledges not the disappointment but rather a completion of the diary’s personal, interrupted traces.

As diarists, Spender and Hockney in *China Diary* try to authenticate the experience of looking. “On nearly all occasions the tourist visiting China has the feeling that he is looking at people (the masses) through a pane of glass and that they are looking through it back at him” (1985: 104). Photography, metaphoric and real, is used by the diarists as a tool in their attempt to demolish frontiers. Nevertheless, the reactions of viewers to the visual material remain distinct. Photography really shows without explaining, creates an illusion of participation while depersonalizing relations. Chinese are “fascinated by the whirr with which the Polaroid emits its little piece of shiny white paper,” they pose and ask to be photographed (1985: 135). Those who peruse the pages of *Chinese Diary* are struck by the sharpness and cleverness of Hockney’s shots. But in the end the readers are faced with a patchy diary and left with an indelible impression which Hockney himself, speaking of frozen images, describes: “that’s not what’s like to live in the world, or to convey the experience of living in the world” (*Cameraworks* 1984: n.pag.).

The elaborate visual component in *China Diary* is used to do more than authenticate, record and communicate. The obviousness of some illustrational images includes, what Barthes called “obtuse” or third meaning. It is what is not linguistically explainable but what induces anxiety, a “visual counter-narrative ... disseminated, reversible, set to its own temporality.” Written diary entries and fragments of reality captured by cameras conceal the wholeness they can never reveal. For Barthes such moments are a “laudable disruption” (in Jay, 444), a hiatus.

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