

Species of Scriptures: An Infraordinary Methodology for Urban Observation

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Abstract

This paper analyses Species of Spaces (1974) by Georges Perec to bring into focus Perec's notion of the infraordinary. Through the lens of Michel de Certeau's and Henri Lefebvre's work on everyday life, social production of space and tactical resistance it demonstrates how Perecquian poetics of the infraordinary can facilitate practice-based research of hypermediated urban environments. While traditions of urban observation such as flânerie and psychogeography have largely remained within artistic and historical frameworks, this article repositions the infraordinary as a methodological tool for research practices. It does so by combining literary analysis with site-specific study of unauthorised urban inscriptions (stickers and tags) in the Hague. This empirical component is not illustrative but constitutive, testing how sustained attention to the infraordinary reveals patterns of spatial practice, contestation and visibility that are often obscured by digitally mediated attention economies. The combined analysis of Species of Spaces and the fieldwork shows how everyday urban environments are written, (re-)appropriated and experienced.

Keywords: everyday life, Georges Perec, infraordinary, The Hague, urban studies.

In an era defined by the ubiquity of smartphones and constant mediation of urban experience through digital media platforms, the question of what it means to truly perceive spaces we inhabit in everyday life acquires urgency. The streets of contemporary cities are no longer simple physical environments to be walked through, they are layered, annotated and restructured by the invisible infrastructures that shape what we notice, where we go and how we move through the city. Yet, before the smartphone became an extension of the urban infrastructure, Georges Perec was already preoccupied with similar concerns. In his 1974 work *Species of Spaces (SoS)*, Perec puts into use his concept of the *infraordinary* – a mode of radical attentiveness to the overlooked aspects of the everyday life.¹ This article argues that Georges Perec’s notion of the *infraordinary* – articulated through his attempt to rethink everyday practices in *Species of Spaces* – can be read alongside Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the social production of space and Michel de Certeau’s concept of tactical resistance, thereby offering a methodology for urban observation in contemporary hypermediated environments.

While other practices of urban observation such as *flânerie*² or Situationist psychogeography³ and more recent iterations of walking as research practice have been extensively discussed, they have largely remained within the domain of artistic practice or have been treated as historical curiosities. This article proposes that these

¹ Proey Liao, “An Attempt to Approach A Void, or Georges Perec, Cause Commune, and the Infraordinary” (Master’s thesis, Harvard Graduate School of Design), 7.

² The figure of the *flâneur*, first articulated by the poet Charles Baudelaire and later developed by Walter Benjamin, refers to a mode of urban observation defined by aimless wandering, a heightened sensibility to the fleeting dimensions of modern urban life. The *flâneur* is typically understood as an aesthetically detached observer of modern urban experience who is simultaneously blending into the crowd and stands outside it through occupying a position of the observer.

³ Psychogeography refers to a set of disparate artistic practices related to avant-garde movements, urban wandering, *flânerie* and critical geography. It aims to engage the disinterested spectator to reconsider the status quo of their urban environments and to analyse how infrastructures affect mental state of pedestrians. See also Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Oldcastle Books, 2018).

traditions and especially Perec's infraordinary can be rehabilitated as an interdisciplinary methodology capable of responding to the specific challenges posed by the experience of hypermediated contemporary cities. Beginning with a literary analysis of Perec's *Species of Spaces* and how it textually unravels the concept of the infraordinary, the article then formulates a methodology for site-specific study of unauthorized urban inscriptions in the Hague to demonstrate how literary principles can be transformed into methodological tools. Ultimately, the fieldwork conducted in the Hague will demonstrate the way infraordinary occurrences can be put into a relevant dialogue between urban everyday life and digital spatial practices.

The walk begins with Stationweg, a long street leading North-West from the train station to the Hague's city centre. The surfaces are mostly clean. Or rather, they appear clean at first glance. A few stickers appear on the way: two on a signpost near the cross walk, another at the back of a sign, three or four stickers appear to be partially removed from the municipal trash can, one sticker stamped on a utility box around the corner. They do not accumulate. People pass without slowing down. The movement is streamlined, nothing seems to ask for attention beyond what is necessary to cross the street, to avoid a bicycle, to follow the flow towards the station or away from it. It would seem that there is nothing to observe, yet this thought is precisely what must be resisted. I continue. On Wagenstraat, the first changes become noticeable: lampposts, utility boxes and some mailboxes in this area appear to bear more stickers of variable sizes. No clear patterns yet. Further along, on Grote Marktstraat the stickers disappear, this main shopping street is sterile. Raamstraat is a tiny street connecting Grote Marktstraat to Vlamingstraat and is covered in a large mural, some tags here and there, no stickers. I keep moving through Vlamingstraat, Schoolstraat, Dagelijkse Groenmarkt, around Grote Kerk - these streets appear to be more colourful, more layered, bearing more inscriptions. Similar elements recur: poles, signs, boxes. Some are more densely covered

than others. My task is to look, to note, to return, and to see what begins to emerge through this observation.

Setting the Ground: Space, Everyday Life and the Infraordinary

Published in the 1970s, around the critical moment when scholars became increasingly drawn to the exploration of everyday life, *Species of Spaces* by Georges Perec appeared alongside major theoretical works by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. The works remain cornerstones for researchers in fields related to urban studies to this day and re-discover space as a socially produced, lived, and practiced phenomenon. In this context, *SoS* is a response to a condition that Lefebvre identifies as central to urban experience—the conflict between conceived space of the urban planners and the everyday experience of the city.

Lefebvre distinguishes between three moments of space: spatial practice, representation of space and representational spaces. *Spatial practice* refers to perceived space as it appears to a user in everyday life through urban networks and routines shaped around them. *Representations of space*⁴ describe space as imagined and realised by the urban planners and architects. It also constitutes the dominant space in society because it is ideologically charged and physically shapes the spatial practice of its users. For Lefebvre, ideology can only exist because of its intertwinement with space: “what we call ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and its production and thus taking on body therein.”⁵ For Lefebvre ideology emerges once social reality is fully integrated into existing mode of production. Moreover, the dominant ideology reifies itself through marginalisation, and by denying space to some of the users standing outside its mode of production: “[a]ny ‘social’ existence aspiring or claiming to be ‘real’, but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity.”⁶ This way, production of space becomes a necessity for any community striving for recognition of its existence.

The dialectical tension between the space produced by the state that supports a certain mode of production and the space

⁴ Often used interchangeably with “conceived spaces.”

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1991), 44.

⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 53.

occupied by its users can be observed in the third moment of space proposed by Lefebvre. *Representational spaces*⁷ are subjectively experienced and expressed: “[t]his is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.”⁸ This “symbolic use of its objects” resurfaces through the everyday use of spatial arrangements, for example, through cutting corners and creating desire paths, or through the means of artistic expression and discursive practices. Departing from Lefebvre’s argument that ideology asserts itself through the three moments of space, this article interprets the language of the representational spaces in *Species of Spaces* and unauthorised inscriptions in the Hague as a form of re-appropriation of space.

A pole is placed to hold a street sign. It does not only hold a sign. The back of sign carries two stickers. Placed too high to properly see them. One seems more torn than the other, probably older. The front of the sign remains untouched. The sign continues to function. Its pole bears three more stickers at the eye level. A fourth sticker appears to be partly gone, the pole still carries its traces. The pole continues to carry the sign. An empty surface repurposed. The stickers greet a passersby’s gaze. Unless their gaze is directed downwards. The sign continues to signify and carries additional signs with it. Not destroying but adding onto it.

What would appear here to be a transformation of space in the sense of overt destruction, reveals itself to be a quieter form of temporary appropriation. Similarly to Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau is concerned with the ways urban spaces affect everyday life of its users and how these processes translate into and via culture. De Certeau counterintuitively states that “a marginal group has now become a silent majority,” with the “marginal group” here referring to a massive, non-homogeneous group of non-producers of culture (i.e., consumers and users thereof) who perpetuate the articulation

⁷ Sometimes referred to as “lived spaces.”

⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

of production through economic means.⁹ Extending the inquiry into panoptic power theorised by Michel Foucault,¹⁰ de Certeau looks into the ways that the marginal group can evade the mechanisms of control through “miniscule” quotidian actions such as reading, cooking or walking.

This preoccupation with everydayness, and the ordinary—or in Perec’s formulation, the *infraordinary*, to which I will return shortly—is at the heart of resisting the omnipresent control exercised through the means of production. For de Certeau, everyday actions with rebellious potential constitute *tactics* as a response to the *strategies* employed by the dominant order. If strategies rely on mastery of space, similarly to Lefebvre’s argument that domination reifies itself through space, de Certeau posits that tactics then “must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power.”¹¹ Stickers in this case appear to be temporal contestations of space and will therefore be considered as spatial tactics from hereon. If conceived space is understood as an ideologically charged top-down projection of spatial arrangements, then the urban stroller structures their everyday activities around specific mode of living, shaped around an inherently dialectical relationship between producer and consumer.

If de Certeau theorises how everyday tactics resist strategic spatial control, Perec’s concept of the *infraordinary* provides concrete insights for observing those tactical practices. The spatial preposition “infra” suggests an attempt to look at that which remains under what we call “the ordinary”: “[b]y excavating what is below everyday life, the *infraordinary* shows just how unfamiliar we are with everyday life in the first place as we constantly come up against and avoid a void, and something about it—through creative acts and life itself.”¹² In Perec’s own words, the *infraordinary* aims at capturing that which remains systemically overlooked: “what is of no

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), xvi.

¹⁰ See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage Books, 1997).

¹¹ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

¹² Liao, “An Attempt to Approach A Void, or Georges Perec, Cause Commune, and the *Infraordinary*,” i.

interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless.”¹³ While the purpose of a sticker is to guide the passersby’s attention to something specific would seem to contradict the notion of the infraordinary, its omnipresence in the cities remains undertheorized since it forms something that would otherwise be considered a form of “visual noise” or an obvious truth. The choice to focus on the stickers is therefore motivated by their being an intrinsic part of the urban fabric—an infraordinary detail—whose presence is rendered too mundane to be closely observed.

Perec’s concept of the infraordinary is considered here as a methodological tool that departs from detached observation and moves towards engaged focus on the normalised aspects in everyday life. Moreover, this practice aligns with de Certeau’s tactics: both attend to what official systems render invisible, and both operate through small gestures of re-appropriating strategically built representational spaces and subjectively experienced representations of space through spatial practices. In contemporary hypermediated urban environments the infraordinary’s methodological relevance intensifies. Digital media platforms function as attention economies which follow an opposing logic than the economy of material goods: instead of relying on scarcity of matter, it relies on scarcity of the users’ capacity for reception of cultural production.¹⁴ Navigation apps optimise commercially viable routes, put forward reviewed business, social media geotags cluster around photogenic landmarks. This systemic curation of consumption patterns renders vast stretches of urban experiences infraordinary not because they lack significance but because they refuse algorithmic commodification. Yet, Perec’s literary texts offer something that escapes de Certeau’s theoretical framework: a system of textual tactics to articulate the infraordinary and render it visible. In what follows I demonstrate how these textual tactics take shape, and how they can be adapted from literary technique into a scholarly methodology.

¹³ Georges Perec, “Species of Spaces” in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. J. Sturrock (Penguin Classics, 1999), 50.

¹⁴ Yves Citton, “Introduction: From Attention Economy to Attention Ecology,” in *The Ecology of Attention* (Polity, 2017), 2.

Writing with Perec: From Literary Technique to Method

In order to better understand how Perec uses the concept of the infraordinary in his writing it is crucial to begin with the formal analysis of *Species of Spaces*. *SoS* is a multifaceted text that cannot be attributed to a single genre: it uses essayistic, autobiographical prose alongside experimental techniques, similar to those of concrete poetry, that play around with the concept of space and the space of the book itself. Perec is also very particular about the structure of *SoS*, the book follows a path of spatial expansion: it begins with pondering space opened up on a page, then moves to the bed, the room, the apartment, then apartment building, the street, and so on, until reaching the entire world. Moreover, Perec's fragmentary style of writing, especially his attention to lists, creates interesting tensions by juxtaposing fragments consisting entirely of paratactic text with those that follow the principles of hypotaxis. If parataxis omits clarification of subordination and hypotaxis flushes out syntactic relationships within the text, Perec plays with the two in order to bring into attention the curious paradoxes arising in the gap between them instead of spelling them out.

Perecquian textual techniques in *SoS* reveal the infraordinary aspects of spatial experience. As noted previously, *Species of Spaces* assumes a rigid taxonomic approach with the self-ascribed premise of producing a totalising understanding of space beginning with the page and consequently enveloping the entire world. Such premise is inherent in the title itself—the word “species” suggesting a study of the different kinds or types of spaces. Perec allows his mind to wander even in this enclosed self-imposed system. For instance, the chapter dedicated to the street attempts to define precisely what a street is: it begins with a description of the alignment of the buildings along with their system of numbering, how the streets are separated into pedestrian and vehicle zones, the traffic lights, the gutters and surveillance cameras. The second subchapter then abandons this idea completely and moves onto observing two blind people walking down the street.¹⁵ This attempt to provide an exhaustive taxonomy of space constantly falls back onto the limitations imposed by the style of writing; something that also

¹⁵ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 46-49.

manifests in the difficulty to ascribe the book itself to any single genre. Aiming for an exhaustive and completed taxonomic system only draws attention to the artificial contractedness of categories and questions their boundaries. This way, Perec's taxonomy is generative because by undermining the very notion of categorisation, it allows for porousness between categories and creates space for doubt which is a crucial moment for analytical work to happen.

First distinction between different types of unauthorised inscriptions one can encounter in the city - there are tags and there are stickers. I focus on stickers; among them there are those that contain text, those that contain images, and those that contain both. The latter is the most popular kind. Among those with text: band names, slogans, tattoo shop titles, online shop titles, artists' websites or social media handles, memes, illegible fragments that resist being read. Among those with images: brand logos, recognisable symbols, flags, memes, seemingly random pictures, unfamiliar things; the image of a cat is used more than that of the other animals. The third category uses at least one element from each aforementioned category. Condition varies: new, faded, partially removed, layered over other, written over with a marker, reduced to traces of glue. Longevity depends on placement as well as on content. Placement differs too: at the eye level, above eye level. It is rarer to encounter stickers below eye level - they are usually on utility boxes, municipal trash cans or extremely densely covered lampposts. Stickers rarely appear on façades or walls, even more rare on the asphalt. Quantity: an isolated lonely sticker, a couple dispersed stickers, a cluster, dense accumulation. More categories could be added: commercial, personal, political. Is a personal sticker a political one? Is a commercial sticker a personal one? Is a political sticker commercial? The system expands. The categories layer one on top of the other. Distinctions begin to dissolve.

Another notable aspect of Perecquian writing is his penchant for cataloguing. *SoS* contains a large amount of lists, in the chapter dedicated to the bed, for example, there is a list that takes up almost the whole page to list objects scattered on the bedhead and consists entirely of everyday items, such as stacks of books, pens, paper, a glass of water, aspirin bottles, or banal souvenirs such as “a pebble picked up on the beach at Dieppe.”¹⁶ This poses a question: why would such a mundane list even exist? Yet, a lengthy list of unsurprising items that take up so much space on the page points to the importance of the bed as an intimate dwelling place. In addition, accumulation of the objects considered of the utmost importance reveals the mundanity of everyday life, as the piling effect created by jumping from one item to another drowns the reader in a detailed inventory of banal trinkets making none of them stand out particularly bright against the backdrop of the surrounding clutter.

Lastly, while the list contains cliché items the extreme detail still garners the reader’s attention:

...a hard brush that enabled me to give my (female as it happens) cat’s fur a sheen that was the admiration of all, a telephone, thanks to which I was able, not only to give my friends reports on my state of health, but to inform numerous callers that I was not the Michelin Company...¹⁷

Such descriptions render each object almost tangible and distinct, marked by the author’s insistence on cataloguing even the most quotidian and boring items—each object here becomes a valuable part of one’s existence. In other words, Perec’s persistent play with parataxis and hypotaxis constitute a significant aspect of the infraordinary. As the author confesses: “everything I couldn’t do without was to be found assembled there in the areas of both necessary and pointless.”¹⁸ But it is precisely the decision to write down something as mundane and banal that ascribes the importance to the objects that one way or another take up certain mental or physical space either in the realm of the crucial or in that of the useless, to paraphrase Perec.

¹⁶ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 19.

¹⁷ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 18.

¹⁸ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 18.

A black cylindrical pole coated in a glossy paint. On it: a faded poster for a music event, layered with stickers that are either equally faded or ripped, glue marks, tape, some of the contents remain partially legible. At eye level: a bright red square sticker, a red fist that is also a flower, text states “JS in de PvdA¹⁹”, the edges still crisp, recently applied, or at least more recent than the surrounding ones; it refuses to blend in with its surroundings because of its larger size and bright colour. Below it: a square, mostly purple sticker, text stretched across it – “je bent geen capitalist, je bent een arbeider met stockholmsyndroom”²⁰ and an indication to an internet website. Lower still: a faded round blue and pink sticker, partly scratched off at its edges, the only partially decipherable word being “Münster.” The rest of the stickers on this side of the pole are illegible, faded, ripped off.

Exhaustive listing allows a closer look at the surroundings: the description of the stickers on a pole, for example, shows what is or was considered a relevant message and allows to notice patterns. Some scholars, however, interpret Perecquian impulse for cataloguing, that permeates his work beyond *SoS*, as a move towards depersonalisation. Anna-Louise Milne argues that despite all the descriptions Perec provides, he fails to appropriate place.²¹ In the chapter “The Bedroom,” where Perec provides a “typology of bedrooms” he inhabited, he encounters a problem: “[w]hat does taking possession of a place mean? As from when does somewhere become truly yours? Is it when you’ve put your three pairs of socks to soak in a pink plastic bowl? [Perec then lists some more quotidian details of inhabiting a room]”²² Milne in turn reads “the pink plastic bowl” as an object that anyone could acquire for their laundry, the

¹⁹ A Dutch social-democratic youth organisation, affiliated with the Dutch Labour Party.

²⁰ “You’re not a capitalist, you’re a worker with Stockholm syndrome.”

²¹ Anna-Louise Milne, “Accumulation versus Dispersion: Perec and ‘His’ Diaspora,” in *Georges Perec’s Geographies*, ed. R. Phillips, A. Leak, and Ch. Forsdick (UCL Press, 2019).

²² Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 24.

description is simultaneously detailed enough to create an impression of a possible fact from Perec's life and yet it is a generic, mass produced everyday item that can easily be imagined at any household.²³ Milne then concludes that conversely to de Certeau's idea of tactics for re-appropriating space, Perec hints at the impossibility of truly "taking possession of a place."²⁴

Moreover, Milne argues that Perec's scepticism towards re-appropriating space extends to larger urban contexts, because Perec treats neighbourhoods as places inhabited out of necessity rather than networks of interpersonal connections and community practices.²⁵ Milne claims that de Certeau promotes "poetisation of everyday life" through practices such as frequenting the same butcher's in order to escape strategic spatial control.²⁶ Simultaneously, she argues that Perec is cynical towards gestures such as greeting employees of local businesses, regarding it merely as "a way of dressing up commercialism."²⁷ However, I argue that this is not the case: Milne's misinterpretation stems from misreadings of both Perec and de Certeau rather than from Perec's cynicism towards the notion of community. De Certeau posits that "[h]aunted places are the only ones people can live in—and this inverts the schema of Panopticon."²⁸ Hence, going to the same butcher's is not considered a poetic act, rather it is a question of what makes (or rather, what forces) one to go there and not somewhere else. Likewise, Perec is clearly against "putting a mawkish face on necessity."²⁹ Further he goes on to say that it is important to unite people by other-than-commercial means—"you could start an orchestra, or put on a street theatre [...] Weld people of a street or a group of streets together by something more than a mere connivance"³⁰—suggesting that arts offer more longevity in

²³ Milne, "Accumulation versus Dispersion: Perec and 'His' Diaspora," 85.

²⁴ Perec, "Species of Spaces," 24.

²⁵ Milne, "Accumulation versus Dispersion: Perec and 'His' Diaspora," 82.

²⁶ Milne, "Accumulation versus Dispersion: Perec and 'His' Diaspora," 83.

²⁷ Perec, "Species of Spaces," 58.

²⁸ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108. Here, "haunting" refers to personal narratives that turn otherwise denotative, function-oriented physical spaces into a meaningful location.

²⁹ Perec, "Species of Spaces," 58.

³⁰ Perec, "Species of Spaces," 58.

community formation than a mere arrangement springing out of necessity. Seen this way, stickers cease to function as “visual noise,” becoming instead an example of shared narratives haunting urban spaces.

Species of Spaces, therefore, exhibits a preoccupation with the everyday beyond personal relationship to urban environments. As the chapter “The Neighbourhood” has shown, Perec is critical towards communities built around commerce and consumption habits that are ideologically shaped and often reify themselves through creating a necessity to consume one type of product over the other—or, in Perec’s case, buying cigarettes at the tobacconist around the corner because he stays open on Sundays.³¹ Perec insists on necessity of music, theatre and cinema go beyond mere connivance and are crucial for a sense of true belonging to a community. In line with de Certeau’s assertion that “dispersion of stories points to the dispersion of the memorable,”³² emphasising the importance of shared narratives that foreground the very notion of belonging far more than the disparate individualised stories.

SoS also grapples with the overwhelming focus on the functionality of space. For instance, the chapter dedicated to the apartment results in two conclusions: the apartments consist of rooms, and each of the rooms has a function.³³ Perec approximates the movements of traditional middle-class family members across the apartment throughout the day and summarises the result of his observation: “I don’t know, and I don’t want to know, where functionality begins or ends. It seems to me, in any case, that in the ideal dividing-up of today’s apartments functionality functions in accordance with a procedure that is unequivocal, sequential and nycthemeral.”³⁴ This list is an attempt at critiquing the late capitalist insistence on functionality of spatial practice conceived through architectural planning. Perec notices that society is structured through the prism of productivity understood via the lens of production processes. That is, the room exists insofar as it performs a certain function, and by extension, space exists insofar as it

³¹ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 57.

³² de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.

³³ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 28.

³⁴ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 28.

generates profit. In other words, the fixation on the mundane details of everyday life propels Perec to question their givenness.

If the aforementioned episode focuses on the functional relationship to lived spaces, then the following chapter attempts to conceive of a place without use, which ends on a rather ambiguous note: "... I don't think I was altogether wasting my time in trying to go beyond this improbable limit. The effort itself seemed to produce something that might be a statute of the inhabitable."³⁵ Here, the author approaches a void, the ineluctable modality of being stuck within a function-oriented system that puts epistemological bounds on our very conception of space; a space is thus either something to be in possession of, or something to come in contact with upon a practical need. This way, Perec shows how the infraordinary aspects of daily life can reveal themselves as intricate ideologically charged constructions despite the overwhelming extraordinary consumable narratives propelled by capitalist system of production.

As demonstrated through the close readings of select passages, Perec uses several writing techniques to approach the question of space. First, Perec's use of lists and taxonomies stands out as one of the main principles of his poetics in *Species of Spaces* and other writings. For instance, his book *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (1975) is composed entirely of lists of things he observed in place Saint-Sulpice on three consecutive days. According to the translator of *An Attempt*, Marc Lowenthal, this book is the clearest example of the infraordinary.³⁶ Indeed, a large portion of the book is dedicated to listing busses passing by, following a remark: "no one ever sees busses pass by unless they're waiting for one, or unless they're waiting for someone to come off one."³⁷ The amount of space dedicated to busses here performs a function that goes beyond a quirky remark, it creates a sense of constant movement across Saint-Sulpice that would otherwise remain unnoticed. The actual listing of each bus that passes gains more importance than a descriptive sentence stating that "a lot of buses stop at place Saint-Sulpice," which in addition to being

³⁵ Perec, "Species of Spaces," 35.

³⁶ Georges Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting A Place in Paris* (Wakefield Press, 2010), 51.

³⁷ Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting A Place in Paris*, 34.

unremarkable would be a glanced-over as a self-evident truth to anyone familiar with Paris.

List-making, according to Joanne Lee, can be described as a technique for creating a sense of defamiliarisation.³⁸ In the chapter “The Street,” one of the sub-sections provides some “Practical exercises” where Perec explicitly writes about his method of observing: “Don’t say, don’t write ‘etc.’. Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, or pointless, or stupid [...] Force yourself to see more flatly.”³⁹ Moreover, Perec urges to look at the mundane and to “carry on until the scene becomes improbable.”⁴⁰ This technique of “exhausting a place,” or defamiliarising the infraordinary, be it busses or breeds of dogs passing by, allows to bring the most banal occurrences and question their taken-for-grantedness. This technique is in line with the objective of a researcher to analyse what kinds of everyday practices remain overlooked, how they occur and what shapes them.

Ultimately, Perecquian techniques that render visible the infraordinary aspects of everyday life can be adapted into three protocols for urban observation. Firstly, list-making to excavate that which remains overlooked. Then, defamiliarisation through exhaustive description allowing to question the habitual, and finally, generative taxonomy which points to the social constructedness of classification systems and becomes a productive self-reflexive textual device. These writing tactics enable the refusal of the extraordinary elements of spatial experience which is the main driving force of the strategic control over urban environments: the less one is concerned with looking at the mundane—the more they are propelled to participate in consumption patterns that sustain the apparatus of control. If consumption patterns are shaped around attention ecologies, then the move towards the infraordinary and the overlooked aims at circumventing the algorithms supporting strategic control over shared environments.

³⁸ Joanne Lee, “Force Yourself to See More Flatly: A Photographic Investigation of the Infra-Ordinary,” in Georges Perec’s *Geographies*, ed. R. Phillips, A. Leak, and Ch. Forsdick. (UCL Press, 2019), 230.

³⁹ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 50-51.

⁴⁰ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” 53.

An Infraordinary Observation: Who has the Right to Write the City?

As shown through the practical application of the infraordinary methodology for urban observation, this method is not an act of passive observation of the *flâneur*. The literary topos of the *flâneur* was first theorised by Walter Benjamin as a new socio-economic subject whose existence is first and foremost conditioned by capitalist rhythms of production.⁴¹ Conversely, the observer of the infraordinary resists the political ambiguity of the *flâneur*, whose privileged socio-economic position allows them to exist in-between strategies of spatial control on one hand and its users defined through production-consumption processes on the other. Instead, Perecquian tactics oppose this ambiguity by consciously rejecting the spectacular and the mediated: “‘Social problems’ aren’t ‘a matter of concern’ when there’s a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.”⁴² This logic contrasts with what Benjamin calls “an unconscious protest against the tempo of the production process” inherent to the *flâneur*.

Furthermore, the infraordinary methodology offers something that has previously escaped the practitioners of psychogeography, associated with the movement of Situationist International (SI).⁴³ The aim of a psychogeographer is to overcome “the process of ‘banalisation’ through which the experience of our familiar surroundings is rendered one of drab monotony.”⁴⁴ Psychogeographers, rejecting the political ambiguity of the *flâneur*, insisted on counter-cultural aims, however due to the internal intellectual disagreements within the SI group, Debord’s focus on

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 337-338.

⁴² Perec, “From ‘L’Infra-Ordinaire’ (1989),” 209.

⁴³ Situationist International (SI) was an international organisation, active from 1957 to 1972, composed of avant-garde artists, scholars and political theorists based around the critique of capitalism and society of the spectacle, theorized by Guy Debord. SI was concerned with ideas of resisting commodity fetishism and alienation through everyday actions, such as practicing psychogeography.

⁴⁴ Coverley, *Psychogeography*, 17.

political theory rather than the potentials of practicing the *dérive*,⁴⁵ and his insistence on “objectivity” in psychogeography, there is a lack of literature that can really attest to the effectiveness of the method.⁴⁶ Debord and SI were exploring a Paris that was on its way towards privileging motor vehicles, and Lefebvre, de Certeau and Perec confronted those changes and the disillusionment with rebellion after the nation-wide student protests in May of 1968. Perec’s Paris is thus not only a part of the capitalist apparatus of control, but it is also a Paris that has reified its strategic control and successfully undermined the tactics of the opposition. Thus, Perec’s writing techniques are treated here as a more relevant, concrete and politically engaged tools than earlier iterations of urban observation such as *flânerie* and psychogeography.

Through documentation of stickers in the Hague, certain patterns emerged. Firstly, inscriptions tend to form clusters in spaces where spatial control is weaker—in backstreets, transit nodes, or in areas with less security cameras. On one hand, this has to do with practical reality of writing in public areas being an illegal activity. On the other, it creates a visual map of surveyed urban areas thus distinguishing between privileged and under-privileged zones of the city. Graffiti is more abundant outside the central zone of the city, whereas tags that are quicker to write and require less skill are still present on such infrastructural details as electric utility boxes rather than walls. Stickers, however, are more abundant in the city centre than in residential areas, appearing more often than tags or graffiti due to their easier application process. Utility boxes, street signs and lamp poles become their main habitats.

Moreover, the taxonomic principle applied during the observation process reveals that stickers constitute the vast majority of urban inscriptions. Their abundance stems from their smaller size, quick application and no skill required for placing them.

⁴⁵ *La dérive* refers to a psychogeographer’s method to stray away from habitual function-oriented paths, following instead the ambiance or the attractions of the cityscape. It is often translated as “aimless drift,” however such translation risks downplaying the importance of intentionality while drifting, which is essential for the practice of psychogeography.

⁴⁶ Coverley, *Psychogeography*, 117.

However, their capacity to remain intact due to sun and rain damage is lesser than that of graffiti or tags that usually require intervention of municipal cleaning services. This means that large portion of stickers are barely visible or legible. In addition, stickers often form large clusters which creates a sort of “visual noise,” and makes it difficult not only to distinguish between them but also to observe them as single entities.

Stickers also demonstrate a complex relationship with digital media. Some include social media handles or QR codes re-directing the gaze to the screen. Others ignore it entirely and display only text or visual imagery. Stickers embracing digital media often direct to social media profiles of the artists or webpages of small businesses. This demonstrates that public spaces are saturated with production-consumption processes, and stickers as a tactic tend to serve less established enterprises as a free-of-charge advertisement placement. If promotion of certain physical spaces such as local night clubs and less established cultural venues has always been the case, the possibility to advertise an enterprise separate from the spatial reality of the city, increases the number of people who participate in creation and distribution of stickers. Promotional stickers do not advertise well-known and culturally recognisable venues or products or brand names and mostly feature underground and subcultural ones instead, proving that stickers constitute tactics in de Certeau’s sense—they appropriate infrastructure of conceived spaces and transform those into lived spaces of everyday users.

Stickers can also be categorised in terms of their content: usually they feature a brief textual message alongside an image, however, some rely solely on either text or image. Those relying solely on visuals are less common, although they usually are easier to recognise. Reliance on the visual language requires the use of recognisable symbols, making the communicative function more efficient than that of textual messages. Unlike images, textual inscriptions require the observer to come into a close contact with a small inscription which becomes difficult in the already oversaturated and busy streets of the Hague. Purely visual stickers often feature flags and subcultural icons, thus the most visible ones usually constitute a political statement—they are not selling a

product, and by abandoning textual referencing they employ recognisable imagery to spread the message.

While hypermediated navigation renders the city legible primarily through commercial interest and algorithmically optimised, functional routes, Perecquian infraordinary method of observation reveals an entire layer of tactical spatial production: unauthorised inscriptions mark political contestations that remain a largely invisible part of the mediatised image of the city. If the mediatised image coincides with the Lefebvre's notion of conceived spaces, then a tactical response to that in form of unauthorised inscriptions allows lived spaces to emerge and contest the way cities are fragmented into different zones of priority. The central areas with historical landmarks, commercial streets, business centres receive more attention in terms of surveillance and upkeep, while residential areas remain outside the zone of high maintenance when it comes to curating the image of the city (despite the fact that residential areas are denser in terms of inhabitants than the ones being prioritised). This coincides with the capitalist interest to construct everyday life around the production processes. Ultimately, the inscriptions analysed in the Hague function as a form of tactical resistance because they occupy the realm of the infraordinary: too small, too ephemeral, too numerous for strategic power to fully exercise its control over. Yet their presence, absence and traces reveal an ongoing struggle over who has the right to write the city.

The Infraordinary as a Method

This article shows that Perec's concept of the infraordinary combined with Lefebvre's and de Certeau's theoretical contributions to understanding spatial interactions in everyday life can function as a methodology for observing hypermediated urban environments. Perecquian approach successfully renders visible spatial practices that the overabundance of algorithmically curated spatial experience often excludes from the city imaginaries of its users. Exhaustive inventory of stickers found in the Hague reveals patterns of movement across the city: clusters at transit zones, avoidance of surveillance cameras and tactical appropriation of strategically conceived spatial arrangements. The object of this fieldwork, which is usually ignored as a form of visual noise, has

resurfaced through the practice of exhaustive observation not as an unmappable chaos, but rather as systematic tactics allowing for contestation of conceived spaces through the acts of everyday resistance.

The methodology also exposed some productive tensions. Sustaining attention and “seeing more flatly” proved to be challenging. The pull towards larger, more visually striking imagery reveals how deeply hierarchies of attention are embedded, even for the researcher committed to the notion of the infraordinary. Moreover, even if the methodology’s focus on physical inscriptions might risk romanticising resistance, it also points towards hybrid tactics that merge physical and digital spaces. The analysis of results gathered during the fieldwork indicates a direction for future research, namely, the convergence between the physical and the digital spaces that shape urban imaginaries. Despite these minor limitations, future applications of this methodology could extend its scope to spatial formations shaped by digital media, particularly in contexts where mediascapes converge with physical urban space. Ultimately, various modes of sustained attention practices resist commodification of attention through algorithmic curation, and the infraordinary method of observation is a possible tactic that aims to reclaim the right to notice that which cannot be monetised.

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