Georges Perec’s Geographies
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George Perec was a ‘man of letters’ in more ways than one. Not only does the phrase conveniently capture the variety of literary genres in which he excelled; taken more literally it alludes to his fascination with lipograms, anagrams, heterograms, palindromes and crossword puzzles. But if this suggests that he had a particular affinity for ‘things seen’ – on the written page as well as the world around him – we should not allow it to obscure his interest in sounds and acoustic space. This interest informs his practice across various media. I begin this chapter with a discussion of Perec’s references to (mainly non-musical) sounds in his written texts, and his use of them in his work for radio, television and cinema. I then consider two examples of soundscapes explicitly influenced by him before going on to discuss the broader field of ‘everyday’ soundscapes, now being created in large numbers by amateur and professional phonographers, and consider to what extent they might be called ‘Perecquian’ too.

Perec’s soundscapes

In the published and unpublished works that derived from his Places [Lieux] project, Perec dwells on what he sees rather than what he hears, and the other senses hardly figure at all. In the early 1970s, Georges Perec selected 12 places in Paris that were of personal significance to him and set himself the task of visiting each one twice a year for 12 years, once to write an on-the-spot description, and once to recall it from memory. This project applied a rigorous system that ensured that he visited them all in every month of the year. One of his objectives was to test the limits of conventional empirical description – to document what
is generally not noticed or noted. ‘Force yourself’, he writes, ‘to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless.’

In the event, Père never got close to completing his programme, and only a handful of descriptive texts were published. The best known of them – printed separately as a booklet – was not actually composed in accordance with the rules of the project: An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris, which itemises the comings and goings in place Saint-Sulpice over three days in October 1974.

The photographer Pierre Getzler, who accompanied him on occasion, comments: ‘No smells and, even more, no scents, no urine, no sounds, no shouts, he needs a taxi driver to tell him: “it was more noisy before the war”, he’s in a silent film, and it’s in black and white (or just with some primary colours).’ To use a more contemporary image, we might compare him with someone monitoring a bank of mute CCTV screens. Sounds are not completely absent from these writings. Here and there the silence is broken by church bells, police sirens, pinball machines, snippets of reported speech or music emerging from within a building:

The Saint-Sulpice bell begins to ring (probably funeral chimes).
A child slides a toy along the windowpane of the café (slight noise).
A man stops for a moment to say hello to the big dog of the café.
A baby in a baby carriage lets out a brief squawking.
A meter man with a bad cough puts a parking ticket […]
Car horns.
Ambulance goes by, siren blaring.
I hear: ‘it’s a quarter after three.’
Barking.

But the Places project extends well beyond the written texts usually identified with it. In the preamble to one of his published descriptions, Père wrote: ‘The experiment stopped in 1975, and has been taken up and continued by other sorts of descriptions: poetic and photographic (La Clôture, about rue Vilin), cinematographic (‘Les Lieux d’une fugue’, about Franklin-Roosevelt), radiophonic (about Mabillon, in progress).’ And when describing his project in Species of Spaces, he refers to the interruption to it caused by the filming of The Man Who Sleeps – which nonetheless features most of the places he had planned to document, and may be considered within the orbit of the project too.
The radio broadcast might seem to be the most promising source for a study of Perec’s audio (rather than verbal) soundscapes. It is based on a six-hour recording made in a mobile studio parked at a busy junction with Perec itemising out loud the vehicles and pedestrians that pass by, trying to keep up with events in real time. Like a sports commentator, at times he must speak very fast indeed, at others he can enjoy pauses of several seconds, or permit himself a few words of elaboration. He then later compiled an inventory (totalling the numbers of cars and trucks of a certain colour or brand, for example) and edited the recording down to around two hours for broadcast on France Culture.11

But almost the only sound that can be heard is that of Perec’s own voice, interrupted every few minutes by extracts from the inventory read in the studio by Claude Piéplu. The braking and accelerating of traffic, the idling engines, voices and footsteps of passers-by are only faintly audible, suggesting it is the practice of enumeration itself that is Perec’s main concern here. One’s attention is drawn almost exclusively to Perec’s voice – the heroic level of concentration, to be sure, but also, and equally importantly (because not suppressed in the final, abridged, recording), the moments he lapses, betraying his fatigue with a sigh, or half-suppressing a giggle when his commentary stumbles.

The cinematographic descriptions offer richer sonic textures. *Scenes of a Flight (Les lieux d’une fugue)* (1976), made for television, is based on a semi-autobiographical piece written a decade earlier recalling the day the author ran away from home at the age of 11 and his wanderings in the vicinity of the Franklin-Roosevelt metro station.12 The soundtrack is dominated by the overlain narration by Marcel Cuvalier (reading a barely edited version of the original text) and the recording of a pianist going over the same passages in Schumann’s *Kreisleriana* that punctuate the film. Nevertheless, diegetic sounds (traffic, birdsong, train doors, typewriters, footsteps, the ticking of a watch, the shuffling of paper on a desk) are prominent at certain points, all the more so because they do not always match the images on screen or the words of the narrator but seem to belong to segments already – or not yet – seen. Sometimes, environmental sounds are unexpectedly withheld altogether, the activity on screen paired with an austere studio silence.

The opening of *The Man Who Sleeps* (1974), a film discussed in this volume by Julia Dobson, foregrounds a wide range of interior and exterior sounds – church bells, dripping tap, alarm clock, people at work in the street, *pommes frites* sizzling in a fryer – many of which feature prominently in the novella on which it is based, an edited version of which is spoken by a female narrator.13 As in *Scenes of a Flight*, these
sounds are often repeated, and do not always match the images and text, but in the film these motifs take on a musical as well as thematic significance. The diegetic sounds are gradually manipulated and absorbed into the more abstract electroacoustic score by Phillipe Drogoz and Eugénie Kuffler, the rhythmic drips, ticks and taps losing their distinctive timbres and eventually melding in a studio-created composition that incorporates separately-recorded vocal and instrumental motifs.

While this treatment of sound has some narrative justification – reinforcing both the sense of passing time and the way the unnamed protagonist (‘you’), at first sharply defined in his room, slowly fades into the encroaching shadows of the metropolis – it also forces the audience to become listeners as much as viewers, to attend more closely than they would normally, to the presence and absence of sound. It should come as no surprise that the soundtrack has been broadcast independently on French radio.¹⁴

Perec was more than usually alert to the ways in which spaces and places nest inside each other. His extended essay *Species of Spaces* proceeds from the blank page before him to Alpha Centauri by way of (as the chapter titles have it) ‘The Bed’, ‘The Bedroom’, ‘The Apartment’, ‘The Street’ and so on. But he also reminds us that ‘spaces have multiplied, been broken up and have diversified. There are spaces today of every kind and every size, for every use and every function. To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your best not to bump yourself.’¹⁵

Of course, space is not just visible (to those who can see) but audible (to those who can hear). Sounds can enable us to map our surroundings, not only by means of sophisticated technologies such as sonar and radar, but also by the naked ear, especially for the blind or partially sighted.¹⁶ But Perec’s interest in sounds, no less than his interest in things seen, derives not from their ability to help him navigate three-dimensional space but rather for the personal and collective associations they elicit. As the two aspects of his *Places* project suggest, his phenomenological approach to space (transcribing sense-impressions as plainly as possible) is combined with a recognition of the emotional power of particular places; in Perec’s case the familiar, safe, reassuring places he would inhabit and traverse every day. Even the apparently detached spoken and written enumerations seem to be suffused with a yearning to limit their unpredictability.

To understand this apparent paradox, it may be helpful to compare Perec’s soundscapes with those recorded and theorised by the Canadian composer and acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schafer, who coined the term, on an analogy with the land- and seascapes apprehended by the
eye. Schafer proposed a vocabulary that could be used to analyse soundscapes – ‘keynotes’, ‘signals’, ‘soundmarks’ – and proposed methods of notating and classifying non-musical sounds, and of understanding habits of listening and improving ‘sonological competence’. But his overall approach is shaped by a nostalgia for natural and pre-industrial soundscapes whose disappearance he mourns.  

By contrast, Perec’s preference is for contemporary sounds: his ‘everyday’ is very much in the here and now. To be more specific, the ‘everyday’ is the ‘background noise’ of ‘what happens every day and recurs every day’ – the ‘infra-ordinary’ – rather than ‘the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary’, such as, to use Perec’s examples, train crashes and car accidents, ‘tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, tower-blocks that collapse, forest fires, tunnels that cave in’, all of which have sonic signatures that are almost completely absent from his soundscapes.

Perec invites us to interrogate what we habitually do – as if asleep or anaesthetised – and if this questioning might take us in the direction of a certain sociological critique, it also awakens us to its positive value. For this infra-ordinary can only thrive under certain conditions. For those living in extreme circumstances, which give rise to fear, anxiety and hyper-vigilance, where the extraordinary is the everyday, the infra-ordinary becomes highly attenuated. Perec’s quotidian is implicitly set against the very different everyday of the Second World War, to which it obliquely alludes. There is a poignancy to his almost obsessive fascination with the regular rhythms of traffic and pedestrians, the hourly peals of church bells, the timetabled circulation of buses and trains, signifying as they do a world free of the terrors of Nazi occupation and the unrelenting threat of imminent exposure, detention and transportation. In this respect, the ‘background noise’ Perec records and describes evokes something very precious and life-affirming. While Schafer rails against the sonic vandalism of the internal combustion engine, displacing the richer soundscapes of an earlier age, Perec luxuriates in the itemisation and classification of motor vehicles, idling, braking, accelerating and changing gear, joyously celebrating the – precarious – normality of civilian routines.

**Perecquian soundscapes**

Perec’s fascination with sound and the procedures he used to document his surroundings have influenced a new generation of field recordists and sound artists. Two examples may be indicative. One is explicitly inspired
by Perec; the other, if not referencing Perec specifically, is probably unthinkable without his example.

Des Coulam, who describes himself as a ‘professional listener’, is the author of a blog, *Soundlandscapes*, which, over several years, has built up an impressive phonographic record of the French capital. In 2015, he marked its fifth anniversary with an homage to Perec’s *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* by posting a field recording he made outside the Café de la Mairie in place Saint-Sulpice, in a seat possibly once occupied by Perec himself.20

Acknowledging Perec as the main inspiration for his own ‘detailed exploration and documentation of the contemporary sound tapestry of Paris’, Coulam explained that Perec’s ‘quest for the infra-ordinary: the humdrum, the non-event, the everyday “what happens when nothing happens” could be replicated equally compellingly in sound’. As he sits he notices that the numbers of the buses have not changed since Perec meticulously recorded their movements 40 years before. Listening to it, we can also recognise many of the kinds of sounds Perec identified, if only sparsely. But there is one, almost continuous, sound that hasn’t changed much since the 1970s and that is the sound of cups, saucers and glasses being washed, carried and delivered. And yet, while it dominates Coulam’s homage, neither the sounds – nor even the activities that generate them – are acknowledged in Perec’s descriptive text, beyond an occasional reference to the drinks he ordered.

While Coulam chooses to honour Perec with a fairly straightforward – apparently unedited – recording linked to him metonymically through place Saint-Sulpice, Mark Peter Wright’s is a more indirect homage, which takes the form of a writing and recording project that echoes his love of constraints, particularly the rules he set himself for *Places.* *Tasked to Hear* takes the form of an illustrated booklet and downloadable soundfile documenting activities undertaken by Wright in 2013–4, which involved visiting the same location on the last Saturday of each month, noting the sounds he hears and some other particulars.21

To each visit are devoted two facing pages of the booklet. The right-hand page consists of two photographs (of the sky and a few inches of ground); the left-hand page offering a quasi-technical log that specifies the date and time, temperature, windspeed, some laconic ‘physical’ and ‘psychological’ observations (for example, ‘pulsing in left eyebrow’, ‘thinking about other things’), and a short prose fragment that includes a different, repeated neologistic onomatopoeia for each visit. Thus, for 25 May 2013, we get: ‘Tremulous liquid songs rising and falling above deep
waves, emitting through and across, wailing, alarming, barking, close buzzing, peet peet peet, my throat croaking, heat rising in my left knee.’

As a soundscape, this has a more decidedly Oulipian flavour than Coulam’s, nodding to the more playful, rather than ethnographic, aspects of Perec’s work. The sensations it records are relatively decontextualised. While images of the café (then and now) are embedded in the blog post, here the place is not named, cannot be identified from the photographs, and only by looking up the given longitude and latitude can the listener-reader discover that the location he chose was the south side of the Tees estuary near Redcar in the north-east of England. The accompanying sound recording is not easily linked to any one of the logged events and seems to be a montage from several visits. But like the recording in Paris, there is something noticeable here that is, as it were, edited out of Perec’s verbal soundscape: the sounds made by the listener himself, in this case, moving equipment on the grass, turning the pages of a notebook, or the rearrangement of his clothing as he shifts position. Indeed, listening to field recordings can often provide a salutary reminder of how easy it is to miss ‘what is most obvious, most common’, even for someone as attentive as Perec.

Soundscapes, constraints and the everyday

If these two examples are evidence of a continuing engagement with Perec, one might also consider ways in which his concerns have acquired a renewed salience in the creation of recorded soundscapes more generally. This is less a case of ‘influence’ than a sign of Perec’s perspicacity, one which invites us to revisit his work and explore how it can illuminate these developments. Two (related) concerns seem to be of especial interest: the use of constraints, and the concept of the ‘everyday’.

The constraints Perec sets himself in his Places project are partly designed to break the habit that usually draws our attention to the unusual rather than the ordinary. If there is a musical analogue for this, it would be the constraints of 12-tone or serialist composition without which the composer would easily slip into conventional melodies and harmonies. But the constraints adopted for Places only relate to the broader choices of determining when the sites would be visited. What he does when he is there – what he attends to and how he chooses to write it down – is rather more informally guided by a series of illustrative imperatives: ‘Describe your street. […] Make an inventory of your
One of the pleasing aspects of his descriptions is the way he allows himself to interpolate comments on the physical and mental demands of the process: ‘I want to clear my head [...] I’ve lost all interest in them [buses] [...] Weary eyes, weary words [...] (fatigue).’

The microphone relieves the sound recordist of comparable effort – and indeed can be left in place while the recordist goes off and does something else. It also, as we noted above, has the benefit of being able to capture sounds not noticed at the time. But still, difficult choices remain: when and where to record, what equipment to use, how to crop or otherwise manipulate the resulting sound file.

As affordable, digital, hand-held recording devices have become widely available, there has been an explosion of amateur phonography, if not quite as spectacular as that of amateur photography. Both might be said to have a special relationship to the ‘everyday’ – their affordability, ease of use and speed of dissemination mean that they are no longer restricted to special occasions. But the conventions of phonography are more fluid than those of photography – which for a long time now have been codified in mass-market magazines and advertising. For this reason, field recordings are open to a more diverse conception of the quotidian.

But this relative lack of conventions – concerning what to record – actually inhibits many practitioners who are spoilt for choice. Perhaps this is why many soundscapes which are posted online are often created within the set of self-imposed rules (‘one-minute vacations’, ‘one sound each day’) or as contributions to a collective project organised around a common theme or objective, most notably in the crowd-sourced ‘sound maps’ of towns, cities or countries.

One such map is the British Library’s UK Soundmap from 2010–11, which invited people to contribute short geo-tagged field recordings that together would form ‘a permanent public record of everyday sounds’. Over 2,000 recordings were uploaded by some 350 contributors. A browsing listener might begin by drinking coffee at Heathrow Terminal Three, then catch the sound of dogs in Suffolk and Arctic terns in Shetland, overhear bikers outside a café on the A4074 and someone opening a garage door on the Black Isle. They might go on to take a ghost train ride in Blackpool and a boat cruise in Cardiff Bay or wait for Prince Charles in Todmorden before baling hay in Gloucestershire.

The British Library tried to be as un-prescriptive as possible, but it is striking that the overwhelming majority of recordings were made in public spaces (transport hubs, cafes, shops, seaside resorts, etc.); very few
in workplaces (those off limits to the public, that is) or the home (itself another workplace for many). The map’s basic guidelines encouraged contributors to think of ‘what your home, leisure and work environments sound like’. And yet, in practice, leisure trumped the other two – perhaps because the governing paradigm of ‘the map’ pre-disposes people to think primarily of public spaces (and notions of ‘Britishness’ probably played a part too).\(^{27}\)

We might detect a similarity between these preferences and the sounds described or recorded by Perec, who chose, in the main, to describe and record the sounds of outdoor public spaces, echoing his fascination with the soothing and unthreatening aspects of everyday life. While this similarity does not in itself, perhaps, make these recordings ‘Perecquian’ – and we should be cautious of eliding the specific biographical and historical forces that shaped Perec’s work – they offer a glimpse of where his concerns can lead us.

Two final examples of infra-ordinary soundscapes, more carefully crafted than the contributions to the UK Soundmap but informed by the same kind of preoccupations, hint at further possibilities. One develops the documentarist aspect of his work, the other is more aesthetic and playful, though they overlap.

The first is the work of Felicity Ford, who researched a PhD thesis on the ‘domestic soundscape’ and went on to devise and contribute to a wide range of projects – a sonic advent calendar, recordings of vending machines, and, more recently, Knitsonik, which explores the worlds of wool, textiles and knitting from the point of view of sound and vice versa – by means of installations, workshops, podcasts, and printed publications. One particularly Perecquian posting to the Knitsonik blog was not about wool at all. ‘Adventures in Washing Up’ is a collage of sound recordings of people doing the dishes and talking about the implements they use, the sequences they prefer and the objects they find especially hard to clean. The sounds of running taps, of brushing, of placing and stacking cutlery, cups and plates are prominent in the mix, and the whole piece is introduced by a specially composed tongue-in-cheek jazzy jingle.\(^{28}\)

The second is a contribution to the Disquiet Junto, a project run by Marc Weidenbaum in San Francisco. Since January 2012, he has set a weekly challenge to which anyone is free to respond by posting a sound recording made in accordance with the constraints he specifies: ‘Play your favourite musical instrument wearing gloves’, ‘Make a one-minute recording of a library’, ‘Combine four recordings of yourself walking’, ‘Make music from the ticking of a clock’, and so on. One challenge, which
Weidenbaum dubbed ‘Zola’s Foley’, invited participants to produce an ‘artificial field recording’ that sounds as if it was made in a large department store, but in reality is constructed from segments recorded elsewhere. Mark Rushton’s response was ‘In Our Dream Department Store’, which sampled extracts from a voice mail from a friend demonstrating a noise-cancelling microphone, recordings of a swimming pool, merry-go-round and political meeting, and various synth sounds. Rushton creates the illusion of a sound recordist wandering around a large store, approaching and then moving away from what might be an escalator, a lift, people in conversation, a security guard, a room in which music can be heard.

Both these everyday soundscapes feature activities – housework, shopping – which might prompt reflections on their oppressive character. The title ‘Adventures in Washing Up’, together with the jingle, parodies the idealisation of feminine domesticity once common in television advertisements. And despite its attempted verisimilitude, ‘In Our Dream Department Store’ has an artificiality that can only underscore the alienation of the corporate retail experience, as its equally ironic title suggests. But what makes them Perecquian is the evident – and, to some extent, redemptive – pleasure they take in sonically enumerating familiar rituals so carefully that they begin to sound like something else. Music, perhaps?

Notes

1. ‘Things seen’ is the declared subject of his radio broadcast, Tentative de description de choses vues au carrefour Mabillon le 19 mai 1978, discussed below. For more general studies of sound and spatiality see, for example, LaBelle, Acoustic Territories, and Gandy and Nilsen, The Acoustic City.
7. Several shots of surveillance cameras appear in the film The Man Who Sleeps (1974); and surveillance is also a theme of the film he planned afterwards, L’Oeil de l’autre: see Virilio, ‘A Walking Man’, 136; Bellos, Georges Perec, 558.
Dimanche, 1997), a set of four CDs and two booklets with useful supplementary documentation, including the text of the inventory, and an essay ‘Carrefour Mabillon: “ce qui passe, passe”’ by Bernard Magné.


14. Bellos, Georges Perec, 739. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, Perec’s interest in music was extensive, indicated by, for example, his collaborations with composers, his own compositional experiments, his reflections on jazz, and the systematic references to music in his novel, Life: A User’s Manual. See Drogoz, ‘Perec et la musique’; Bouchot, ‘De la musique dans l’oeuvre de Georges Perec’; James, Constraining Chance, 115–21, 138; Perec, ‘Je me souviens du jazz’; Perec, ‘La Chose’; Perec, ‘Souvenir d’un voyage à Thouars’, 303–8.

15. Perec, Species of Spaces, 6.


17. Schafer, The Soundscape.


19. For a discussion of the relationship between Perec’s ‘everyday’ and the history and memory of the Holocaust, see Schilling, Mémoires du quotidien, 9–27.


21. Wright, Tasked to Hear.


27. For reflections on the UK Soundmap project, see Pettinger, ‘Listening to Britain’; Rawes, ‘Listening to Britain’.


30. Rushton, ‘In Our Dream Department Store’.

31. For further reflections on contemporary practices of listening and recording, see Carlyle and Lane, On Listening; Lane and Carlyle, In the Field; and Voegelin, Listening to Noise and Silence.

Filmography

Les lieux d’une fugue (France, 1978, Perec)
The Man Who Sleeps/Un homme qui dort (France, 1974, Queysanne)

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