The Infraordinary as Spatial Discourse
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The Infraordinary as Spatial Discourse; The Tongue of the Dry Cleaner

Arch&Lit: InterArtsDialogue(s)

Espen Lunde Nielsen

PART 1:

“What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extraordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines [...] The daily papers talk of everything except the daily [...] We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?”


The Infraordinary

Georges Perec first coined the term ‘infraordinary’ in his seminal essay ‘Approached to What?’ published in Cause de Commune, 1973. It is easily understood as the opposite of the extraordinary: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the background noise, the habitual. Perec had a key interest in the spatial structures and objects that facilitate our daily existence, but worn half-invisible by use. These are the invariables of the everyday and therefore become invisible¹.

In an urban perspective, the infraordinary could also be understood as the unregarded spaces and functions of kiosks, tabacs, dry cleaners, laundrettes, bodegas, diners, delis, etc. standing in contrast to the more spectacular and extraordinary dimension of the city, often favored by architects, planners, politicians and decision makers. These infraordinary spaces have a function apart from their practical one, being places of social coexistence and informal interaction between people, through events in real-time and depositions over time. They are coauthored by their occupants rather than a product conceived solely by its architect(s).
Forms of Attention and Transformation of Awareness

Perec is concerned with forms of attention and transformation of awareness and in ‘Approaches to What?’ he goes on:

“How can we speak of these “common things,” how, rather, can we stalk them, how can we flush them out, rescue them from the mire in which they remain stuck, how can we give them a meaning, a tongue, so that they are at last able to speak of the way things are, the way we are?”


In the later Species of Spaces he begin to answer his own question and starts to outline an approach for interrogating the infraordinary - and hence it morphs from a subject matter into a critical practice:

“You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless’

‘Make an inventory of your pockets, of your bag…Question your teaspoons…’


Frameworks of Perception

Throughout his oeuvre Perec invented sorts of optical devices for looking with, through deploying sets of formal constrains that ‘motive a kind of conceptual thinking in parallel with that of any architect’6. These offers a way of slowing down perception and by-passing the usual hierarchies of perceiving the physical world5 – and thus enables us to capture what lies in the fringe of our perception or latent in the spaces surrounding us. The constraining techniques provide a certain exteriority, while at the same time being situated within and grasped by it6.

Perec had 4 ‘modes of interrogation’ running through all of his writing: 1) Sociological / Quotidien (Sociologique), 2) The Autobiographical (D’ordre Autobiographique), 3) The Ludic (Ludique: his taste for formal, systematical and mathematical constrains) and 4) Le Romanesque. The infraordinary - as theme and critical practice - is most prominent in the works where the sociological and the ludic converge:

Species of Spaces moves linearly from the microcosm to macrocosm: starting with the page of the book, then zooming out through the bedroom, apartment, building block, neighbourhood, city and finally ends at the universe. A journey through the variations and complexity of the concept of space, that renders the spaces as bits and pieces, diversified, fragmented and ambiguous.

For the unfinished Lieux-project he returned to the same 12 places once a year for 12 years, each time to describe them from experience as well as memory, before sealing the descriptions in envelopes. Here he followed a mathematical permutation scheme that would result in 288 texts, with one of the practical constrains being that it was to be written in-situ. As Thibaud and Tixier traces out5, description is often performed while walking, entering from different angles and with changing visual orientations. Each of the descriptions provides a temporal snapshot and survey of the particular location. Where Species of Spaces moves linear through space, Lieux moves linearly and circularly through space.
through time - and by means of the accumulated descriptions it captures the changing urban morphology and on-going gentrification, as well as his own changing perception of these places.

*An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* feeds directly of the abandoned Lieux project. An Attempt works with the constrain of describing ‘what happens when nothing happens’ from stationary positions around Place Saint Sulpice during a three day period. From his liminal positions at cafés, at tabac windows and benches he records what is within his field of vision – sometimes his even pointing away from the square itself, looking at the people arriving and leaving. Perec is less interested in the actual architecture and square as such, since ‘these things have been described, inventoried, photographed, talked about or registered’ already, but rather what happens in-between the walls and spatial demarcations: the occupation, non-events and passing of people, cars, clouds and pigeons.

*Life a User’s Manual* follows the *Knight’s Tour* around a 10 x 10 grid representing a section of a fictitious apartment block in Paris while systematically describing the embedded narratives, social relations and temporalities within. Here he focalises in and out of space and time through objects and present and past inhabitants, simultaneously describing the world through this. Perec is concerned with describing the material world, objects and space rather than the internal life and psychological depth of the characters featured in his writings. Often, he describes what is within his cone of vision as a sort of camera”7 - moving through or situated in space while describing it creating a ‘simultaneity of perception and representation’. There is a reciprocal relationship between the spaces and the people that inhabits them: both is fragile and ‘melts like sand running through one’s fingers’, constantly in the process of changing.

Perec ‘decipher[s] a bit of the town’9 one step at a time, guided by the formal constrains and techniques:

A traditional screenplay proceeds for a central ‘idea,’ simple enough to synopsize in a few lines, which is then expanded and enriched through appropriate scenes. Here, conversely, it is from that play of elements derived from the initial constraint that a story is constructed.


This central idea or plot is somewhat similar to the problem of architects’ fondness of concepts, often based on preconceptions and expresses an internal stylistic logic rather that resonating with the surroundings and the people inhabiting it.

Similarly to Perec, also others have worked with formal constrains, rules and techniques to (re-)experience the spaces of the everyday. In his Paris documentaries Dali engages in a series of reports in which he records everything within a much more restricted field of vision10 - being a 25 cm² surface at the ground of a Parisian park observed from his position at a bench11 or the temporal occupation of hands, fingers and objects at table tops at a bar. Also, the Situationists’ techniques of Dérive and Détournement offered other ways of critically experiencing and representing the everyday urban geography and familiar objects. Walter Benjamin’s *One-Way Street*12 and the more recent Roissy-Express by François Maspero13 could be perceived in these terms as well.

In all of these, the frameworks of perception deployed provides ways to ‘get at distance at the well known and observe it through an analytic apparatus in order to gain new knowledge’. The explorative potential of literature provides alternative ways of gaining insight on the subject of these unregarded spatial structures of everyday life – and ultimately in the production of new knowledge.
An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris

Perec's positions at Place Saint-Sulpice

Café de la Mairie
18. OCT 1974
12:40 PM
2
18. OCT 1974
5:10 PM
4
20. OCT 1974
11:30 PM
8
20. OCT 1974
1:05 PM
9

Tabac St. Sulpice
18. OCT 1974
10:00 AM
1
19. OCT 1974
10:45 AM
5
19. OCT 1974
2:00 PM
2

(Former) Brasseri-Bar
La Fontaine Saint-Sulpice
18. OCT 1974
3:20 PM
3

Bench
19. OCT 1974
12:30 PM
6
PART 2:

‘Right here the external world implodes into itself. It thickens in this very point. The intricate web of trajectories, of movements, of people, of past, present and future non-events is entangled and anchored to this space, as if spun by a spider’

Tongue of the Dry Cleaner, p. 5

Tongue of the Dry Cleaner

By setting up my own framework of perception, I interrogated a London dry cleaner as an infraordinary urban function: Tongue of the Dry Cleaner uses creative writing and critical spatial practice as tools for gaining insight. It moves through the elements of the space and production line of the dry cleaner in 12 tableaux, unfolding it one bit at a time.

The structure of the book is fragmented and ambiguous, thus reflects the way one ‘reads’ the dry cleaner itself. Apart from the photographs, it contains coded messages in 3 columns. These present different coded messages. The first being the utilitarian function of the objects encountered described through dictionary entries. Secondly, there is the other voices being quotations from literature and academic papers that provides a context and intertextual dialogue. Finally, there is the main narratives running through the book. From the friction of these a sort of viscosity gradually emerges and meaning appears.

The project was conceived in a dialogue between two parts: besides becoming part of the book the text of the main narrative circulated the dry cleaner on tickets attached to the hangers, to start a dialogue or feedback loop and reintroduce the dry cleaner to its users. Gradually, the users themself also found their way into the book: Mr. and Mrs. A, O, V, The Hs and K.

12 Takes on the Dry Cleaner:
PROLOGUE, VITRINE, REPOSITORY, LANGUAGE OF BODY
PARTS, CARTOTHEQUE, ENTWINED, SHARED DIRT, UNTRACED,
ACCUMULATING AND FORGETTING, CITY AND BODY,
NEIGHBOURS, EPILOGUE

‘This is a place of depositions over time. An accumulation of matter, like sediments washed up ahore, just to be engulfed again by the sea soon after. People deposit their personal belongings, leaving them for full display in a partly public space. A day or more goes by, where the items travels the space of the dry cleaner and the hands of the staff until finally they return to their destined wardrobe, walk-in-closet, coat stand or hook somewhere behind locked doors and solid walls. Just to wait for dust and dirt to accumulate and stains to appear yet again.’

Tongue of the Dry Cleaner, p. 11

First and foremost, Tongue of the Dry Cleaner was conceived and performed as a tool to gain insight, rather than a final product. The process of writing and the work of montage within the deployed framework opened up the space to new meanings and potentials. The dry cleaner has functions apart from its utilitarian one and practical use (echoing Asger Jorn and the situationists):
It is not simply cleaning clothes, but a social vertex through which people coexist and interact on an informal level and events unfold, in real-time and through time. The dry cleaner could be understood as a physical interface, facilitating indirect conversations through objects and material (as a sort of writing, perhaps), in addition to face-to-face encounters. The window of the shop front itself can be perceived as an urban vitrine, from where one can read the surrounding neighborhood like a chart or diagram. Maybe most important of all, the dry cleaner allows for occupation. Architects created the outer walls, but the content is brought by the inhabitants - in this case the users in its twofold sense: the owners of the dry cleaner and the transient occupation by costumers and their items. Hence, the dry cleaner is an implosion of the external neighborhood and the inhabitants are co-authors of space.

This is my interpretation of my own work and of the dry cleaner - myself being both the reader and writer in parallel. Other will get other meanings and conclusions, potentially. The openness of the work allows for interpretation and asks for an investment by the reader (as does Perec’s list forms etc.).

The space is constantly changing, yet it remembers and forgets and thus works as a miniature version and allegory of the city. Like in Georges Perec’s Life a User’s Manual where the grid refers simultaneously to its centre and to its periphery, also this project is both about the dry cleaner itself as well as the city in general - and thus works as a sort of urban biopsy:

'presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric [...] compelling our acknowledgment of a world beyond the frame'


The Infraordinary as Spatial Discourse

The infraordinary as a spatial discourse interrogates and acknowledges the latent qualities of the common and seemingly banal, yet vitally important, spatial materiality of everyday life, as an alternative to architects’ and planners’ often rational and reductive idea of function and programme. To make way for spatial invention we need to question and reinvent our tools and modes of perceiving our surroundings. Writing and formal constrains lend themselves to by-pass the usual hierarchies of perception and access what is habitually unnoticed - as well as surveying and open-ended questioning of what happens when architecture is occupied. Because despite what architects think, it does not end with occupation.
Dust cover with text that rubs off

Fragments of text at hangers at the Dry Cleaner

Ticket on hanger
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