



Georges Perec's experimental fieldwork; Perecquian fieldwork

Richard Phillips

To cite this article: Richard Phillips (2016): Georges Perec's experimental fieldwork; Perecquian fieldwork, *Social & Cultural Geography*, DOI: [10.1080/14649365.2016.1266027](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1266027)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1266027>



© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Dec 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 254



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Georges Perec's experimental fieldwork; Perecquian fieldwork

Richard Phillips

Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper traces key themes in contemporary experimental fieldwork – explorations of ordinary places by artists, writers, activists, enthusiasts, students and researchers – to the works of Georges Perec. Preoccupations of this work – including playfulness, attention to the ordinary, and writing as a fieldwork practice – are all anticipated and elaborated in Perec's oeuvre, where they converge around an 'essayistic' approach. Exhibiting these traits, some contemporary fieldwork is more convincingly Perecquian than psychogeographical or Situationist, despite the tendency to identify it with the latter. Through Perec, it is therefore possible to bring contemporary experimental fieldwork into focus, identifying a coherence and sense of project within it, while speaking to the question of what it means and could mean to conduct fieldwork experimentally. Particular attention is paid in this paper to Perec's most accomplished and sustained field texts, both of which have been translated into English: *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (2010, from 1975 original in French) and *Species of Spaces* (1999/1974).

Le travail de terrain expérimental de Georges Perec; travail de terrain perequien

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article rattache les thèmes clés dans le domaine du terrain de travail expérimental contemporain – explorations de lieux ordinaires par des artistes, écrivains, activistes, étudiants et chercheurs – aux travaux de Georges Perec. Les préoccupations de ce travail, y compris l'esprit ludique, l'attention à l'ordinaire et l'écriture pratiquée sur le terrain, sont toutes anticipées et élaborées dans l'œuvre de Perec, où elles convergent autour d'une approche « essayiste ». Manifestant ces caractéristiques, une partie du travail de terrain contemporain est plus convaincante en tant que perequienne que psychogéographique ou situationniste, malgré la tendance à s'identifier comme situationniste. A travers Perec, il est donc possible de mettre le travail de terrain expérimental contemporain en exergue, d'y identifier une cohérence et un sens du projet en même temps que de poser la question de savoir ce que cela signifie ou pourrait signifier de mener un travail de terrain de façon expérimentale. On prête ici une attention particulière aux textes de Perec les plus réussis et les plus soutenus écrits sur le terrain, les deux ont été traduits en anglais: *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (2010, original en français de 1975) et *Species of Spaces* (1999/1974).

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 February 2016
Accepted 10 November 2016

KEYWORDS

Perec; fieldwork; ludic; endotic; psychogeography; everyday

MOTS CLÉS

Perec; travail de terrain; ludique; endotique; psychogéographique; quotidien

PALABRAS CLAVE

Perec; trabajo de campo; lúdico; endótico (*endotic*); psicogeografía; cotidiano

CONTACT Richard Phillips  r.phillips@sheffield.ac.uk

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

EL TRABAJO DE CAMPO EXPERIMENTAL DE GEORGES PEREC; EL TRABAJO DE CAMPO DE PEREC

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo aborda los temas claves del trabajo de campo experimental contemporáneo – exploraciones de lugares comunes por artistas, escritores, activistas, entusiastas, estudiantes e investigadores – sobre las obras de Georges Perec. Las preocupaciones de este trabajo – incluyendo el juego, la atención a lo ordinario y la escritura como práctica de trabajo de campo – son anticipadas y elaboradas en la obra de Perec, donde convergen en torno a un enfoque ‘ensayístico’. Exponiendo estos rasgos, algunos trabajos de campo contemporáneos son más convincentemente perecquianos que psicogeográficos o situacionistas, a pesar de la tendencia a identificarlos con este último. A través de Perec, por lo tanto, es posible hacer que el trabajo de campo experimental contemporáneo se convierta en el centro de atención, identificando una coherencia y un sentido de proyecto dentro del mismo, mientras se habla de lo que significa y podría significar llevar a cabo el trabajo de campo experimentalmente. En este trabajo se presta una atención especial a los textos de campo más prestigiosos y valederos de Perec, ambos traducidos al inglés: *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (2010, a partir de 1975 original en francés) y *Species of Spaces* (1999/1974).

Introduction

A proliferation of experimental fieldwork involving a spectrum of writers, bloggers, artists, activists, enthusiasts, students and researchers is bringing new energy to the exploration of ordinary places. This involves individuals and organisations who are conducting and reporting on fieldwork and/or supporting or encouraging others to do so. This fieldwork is exciting but I will suggest that it risks becoming repetitive and lacking a coherent sense of project. It tends to be positioned either as original and zany – breaking with fieldwork tradition – or as a form of psychogeography, a term that is sometimes applicable, but which is used too liberally and loosely. To bring some elements of this eclectic movement into focus, tracing themes within it and considering the definition and development of each of these, I will turn to a figure who is significant but under-appreciated in this context: Georges Perec. Preoccupations of contemporary fieldwork – including playfulness, attention to ordinary places, and writing as a fieldwork practice – are all prominent in Perec’s oeuvre.

Fortunately for readers in the Anglophone world and in academic disciplines in which there is limited investment in language skills, Perec’s most sustained and accomplished field writings have been translated into English. Key titles in this context are *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (originally published in 1975 as *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*, translated by Marc Lowenthal, 2010), *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (*Espèces d’espaces*, 1974, translated by John Sturrock, 1999, and published alongside translated excerpts from other works including *L’Infraordinaire*, Perec, 1999a). Other works with a fieldwork component – involving observations and descriptions of places, buildings, rooms and things – have also been published in translation. These include *Life a User’s Manual* (1988, from *La Vie mode d’emploi*, 1978) and *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (1999, from *Les Choses: Une histoire des années soixante*, 1965). It is therefore possible to access Perec’s fieldwork writing in English, though as explained below it will be necessary to remember works that remain

partially or wholly untranslated, and to read the English Percec with an eye to how he has been translated.

Reading contemporary experimental fieldwork against key works by Percec, and setting my readings of Percec alongside those of his critics, I ask how this fieldwork takes up – sometimes reiterating, not always acknowledging, sometimes developing – a Percecquian fieldwork tradition. I argue that Percec anticipates and informs key themes in contemporary fieldwork – playfulness, attention to the ordinary, and writing as a fieldwork practice – and the essayistic approach that underpins each of these. This approach is signalled in the title of *An Attempt* (or, in the French, *Tentative*). In French, *essayer* ‘means to try out, assay, probe,’ with ‘overtones of tentativeness’ and exploration (Forsdick & Stafford, 2006, p. 14). I go on to ask where this has taken us and where it can take us yet.

Responding to these questions, I argue that, while Percec is often cited in Geography and cognate fields including Urban Studies and Architecture, there has been little sustained reading of his work, and that opportunities to learn from his ideas and methods have yet to be grasped. Too often, Percec has been skim-read, mined for quotations, and subsumed within a vaguely defined psychogeography in which the Situationists take centre stage. A closer engagement with Percec will be rewarding in itself – his writing rewards close and repeated readings – and it will also help to develop more precise understandings of some broader ideas, methods and traditions including different forms of psychogeography and urban exploration. I conclude that there is much to learn from Percec but that this should not mean simply replicating his now-half-century-old projects and practices. I consider ways in which an ongoing Percecquian fieldwork tradition can inform and inspire experimental fieldwork today.

Experimental fieldwork

By experimental fieldwork, I refer to ideas and methods for field research that are presented as innovative and experimental in terms of their approaches to observation and/or description and their choice of objects and/or themes. This fieldwork is broad, but it can meaningfully be considered as a whole, comprising as it does a series of overlapping theoretical spheres and methodological practices.

First, a number of writers and artists have published and posted fieldwork ideas in the form of exercises for readers to follow, with some field reports by those who have completed these activities. Examples include: *How to be an Explorer of the World* by Keri Smith (2008); the Lonely Planet *Guide to Experimental Travel* (Antony & Henry, 2005); *O Comely*, a magazine that ‘inspires people to be creative, talk to their neighbours and explore new things’ (<http://www.ohcomely.co.uk>); and Mookychick, a style and culture website with a psychogeography page containing exercises and suggestions for further reading (www.mookychick.co.uk). These contributions overlap with the experimental fieldwork of activists and enthusiasts. The Geography Collective, a group of ‘Guerrilla Geographers’, publishes manuals and runs workshops that encourage young people ‘to get exploring and questioning the world’ (Geography Collective, 2010, p. 196). Enthusiasts join and lead events coordinated by organisations such as Jane’s Walks (in memory of the urban explorer and campaigner Jane Jacobs) as well as conducting fieldwork independently. Other, more professional experimental fieldworkers include geographical writers such as Iain Sinclair, Will Self and Karl Whitney. Sinclair’s *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997) and Self’s *Psychogeography* (2007) describe attempts to walk

along the major roads around London, while Whitney's *Hidden City* (2012) explores equally eccentric geographies of Dublin. Experiments in fieldwork are also taking place within formal education and research. These experiments – a subset of the larger body of academic work that is devoted to developing innovative and creative methods of field observation and description – include multi-sensory, adventurous and playful fieldwork (Phillips, 2015). Examples of this work are found in: smellscape research (Henshaw, 2013); field studies of sound, noise and music (Butler, 2006; Revill, 2013); and investigations of tactile geographies through touch and through contact with textured surfaces during activities such as climbing, running, skateboarding and parkour (Garrett, 2013; Rodaway, 1994).

Despite their differences, these spheres of experimental fieldwork have much in common: ideas and practices run across and between them. But this eclectic body of work still lacks coherence and conceptual clarity. There is a perpetual sense of beginning afresh. References are made to a wide range of sources – from composers to poets, mathematicians to philosophers – though there is a tendency to sample and quote rather than really engage with these. Keri Smith states that many of the ideas in her book 'have been pilfered, borrowed, altered, and stolen from great thinkers and artists' (Smith, 2008, p. 2). She quotes Jules Verne's call to 'Look with all your eyes, look' (Smith, 2008, p. 83), Italo Calvino (on finding magic in the everyday), Kate Bingham-Burt (on recording everything consumed in a day), Jennifer New (on observing tiny objects) and John Cage, who is identified as the inspiration for a particular kind of shopping trip:

Grocery shopping with John Cage: Collect things in your basket based on one variable of your choosing (such as colour, shape, size, packaging, foods you've never eaten, things you don't understand, food that are flat, etc.) You do not have to purchase them unless you want to. Document them somehow. (Smith, 2008, p. 105)

More detailed discussions of these would have been out of place in this book, but Smith illustrates the tendency to sample rather than deeply engage with sources and influences. Across the spectrum of experimental fieldwork, only one source of inspiration is acknowledged in detail: the Situationists.

Situationist influences on contemporary experimental fieldwork have been overstated, while other influences have been under-estimated or under-explored. In fieldwork manuals (Antony & Henry, 2005), academic papers and textbooks (Bonnett, 2012) and non-fiction (Day, 2015; Sinclair, 1997) alike, it has become common place to cite the Situationists, to summarise their work and to claim to walk in their footsteps – as psychogeographers. As a result, the terms Situationist and psychogeography are used loosely, liberally and as synonyms, which they are not. Self has admitted as much, quoting a friend who says 'the psychogeographic fraternity' are 'really only local historians with an attitude problem' (Self, 2007, p. 12). Whitney, who has been called 'Dublin's best psychogeographer since James Joyce' (Breathnach, 2015), is equally ambivalent about this label, favoured by his publisher's marketing department, which guessed that the book-buying public were more likely to have heard of psychogeography than of Whitney's other influences: Perce and Henri Lefebvre (Gorse, 2014).

By attending more directly to Perce and by distinguishing a Percequian fieldwork tradition, it will be possible to identify more specific and precise intellectual foundations and ongoing directions for experimental fieldwork. It will be particularly important to ask what Perce had in common with his Situationist counterparts and to explore the ways in which he diverged from them. I go on to identify three main differences between the two, pointing out that

Perec was more an artist than an activist; that his methods were more structured and disciplined than those of his Situationist counterparts; and that unlike the Situationists he was primarily a writer.

Georges Perec's experimental fieldwork

Georges Perec is not absent from the literature on experimental fieldwork but he is largely reduced to a footnote and to a source of choice quotations. The large and sophisticated critical literature on Perec does not extend to his fieldwork *per se*. Perec's critics have focused upon his experimental writing (Motte, 1984); his attention to everyday life, place and space (Schilling, 2006; Sheringham, 2006a); his examination of the relationships between literature and mathematics (James, 2009); and his part in the cultural scene of the Parisian Left Bank between the 1960s and 1980s (Bellos, 1993; Sheringham, 2006a). Perec's fieldwork intersects with all these themes and debates and yet it forms a distinct dimension in itself, which has yet to be brought into critical focus.

In academic Geography – despite some promising expressions of interest in Perec, and despite some promisingly Perecquian work – there is little sustained reading of his texts. He is quoted in books and essays on urban social theory (Tonkiss, 2005) and postmodern geographies (Doel, 2004, p. 454), but these references are fleeting, suggesting but not realising the potential of a Perecquian approach. Similarly, a professor of Architecture has expressed frustration with students who dip into Perec: 'I tend to dissuade young researchers from using Perec,' he claimed. 'The dissertations of so many architecture students reveal how strong the temptation is to quote wildly from *Species of Spaces*' (Jean-Charles Depaule, in Depaule & Getzler, 2001, p. 1127). Happily, as I discuss later, it is possible to find field studies that demonstrate an understanding of Perec. This Perecquian sensibility is evident in studies of everyday life and space (Bendiner-Viani, 2013; Kullman, 2015), for example the ways in which people carry things in cities (Cochoy, Hagberg, & Canu, 2015), as well as in studies of landscape and place (Hobbs, 2015; Matless, 2015). Particularly outstanding in this emerging literature is David Matless's poetic geography of the Norfolk Broads, which takes its epigraph and point of departure from Perec while fitting in a pun on the topography of this low-lying English region: 'Force yourself to see more flatly' (Perec, quoted in Matless, 2015, p. 5). What is still lacking, though, is a sustained, geographical reading of Perec. Consequently, he remains a rather tantalising figure in this context: inspiring and influential but ambiguously so, with too little understanding of ideas and methods that might be traced to and understood with him. Those who are interested in experimental fieldwork will benefit from reading Perec carefully and repeatedly. This is the only way to take him seriously, and it will be rewarding.

Perec's geographical writing addresses a wide range of themes, at once substantive and methodological, which speak to fieldwork ideas and practices. Substantively geographical themes and ideas in his work include: cities and streets; homes and apartments; conceptions of space and place; mathematical and textual spaces; imagined, utopian and dystopian spaces; time and the city; landscapes of memory and trauma; consumption and material culture; everyday life, the everyday, and the quotidian; and ordinary and infra-ordinary places (Virilio, 2001, p. 15). Methodologically too, Perec has much to offer: from methods of urban exploration and observation, classification, categorisation and taxonomy (Boyne, 2006; Featherstone & Venn, 2006; Maciel, 2006) to forms of geographical and ethnographic

description (Becker, 2001). These relate most directly to the strand of Perce's mode of writing or 'questioning' that he described as 'sociological' (Bellos, 1993, pp. 649, 650).

Perce explained that his 'sociological' works, most directly represented in his first novel, *Les Choses* (1965, translated into English as *Things*, 1967, and again in 1999) (Perce, 1999b) and *Species of Spaces* (1999a) were most closely concerned with 'the world around' him (Bellos, 1993, p. 650; Walker, 2012). *Species of Spaces* includes spatial observations and essays exploring scales that range from cities to rooms and from institutions to streets.

This 'sociological' strand demands some clarification in the context of this paper, focused as it is upon Perce's geographies. He distinguished the sociological from the ludic, the autobiographical and the narrative – the other dimensions of his work, which overlapped and intersected – rather than from other disciplinary terms. In this context the sociological is an umbrella term, encompassing a range of broadly social scientific approaches. Perce used the sociological to signal interests that he shared with his early employer, Lefebvre, and with his collaborator in the journal *Cause Commune*, Jean Duvignaud. In a street scene, which he describes in the *Attempt*, Perce claims to have spotted Duvignaud walking past. Whether or not this coincidence really occurred, the sight of a sociologist signals an important strand of his thinking. The sociological also distinguishes Perce's interest in the endotic, distancing it from an Anthropology that was identified with the exotic. The sociological, associated with figures such as Lefebvre and Duvignaud, was also more overtly intellectually ambitious and therefore more appealing to Perce than another cognate discipline: Geography. Promising developments were afoot – Yves Lacoste founded *Hérodote* in 1976 (Dodds & Atkinson, 2000) – but Sociology was the higher profile and more exciting social science discipline working in the medium of French at the time, and the natural reference point for Perce's exploration of 'the world around' him (Bellos, 1993, p. 650).

And yet, Perce's work was implicitly geographical. One of his most sustained projects involved the systematic description of *lieux* (hereafter *places*) from direct observation in the field and from memory. Perce announced the project (not for the first time) in *Species of Spaces*:

In 1969, I chose, in Paris, twelve places (streets, squares, circuses, an arcade), where I had either lived or else was attached to by particular memories.

I have undertaken to write a description of two of these places each month. One of these descriptions is written on the spot and is meant to be as neutral as possible. Sitting in a café or walking in the street, notebook and pen in hand, I do my best to describe the houses, the shops and the people that I come across, the posters, and in a general way, all the details that attract my eye. The other description is written somewhere other than the place itself. I then do my best to describe it from memory, to evoke all the memories that come to me concerning it, whether events that have taken place there, or people I have met there. Once these descriptions are finished, I slip them into an envelope that I seal with wax. ...

I begin these descriptions over again each year, taking care, thanks to an algorithm I have already referred to (orthogonal Latin bi-square, this time of order 12), first to describe each of these places in a different month of the year, second, never to describe the same pair of places in the same month. (Perce, 1999a, pp. 55, 56, pp. 55, 56)

As Perce explained, this system ensured that each place would be described in a different month each time, and that in each month a different pairing would be selected. Several of the *places*, based on field notes which Perce transcribed and polished later on, were also published individually (in titles such as *L'Humanité*). Some of these were later published in

English, thanks to Andrew Leak's translations including 'Scene in Italie' and 'Glances at Gâté' (Perec, 2001a, 2001b). These pieces were compiled from observations at intervals dictated by Perec's system. They are organised around single locations but spread out temporally over the period in which observations took place.

Perec abandoned this project in 1975, but by then he had completed many descriptions, which formed the basis for elements of *Species of Spaces* and refined the methodology employed in *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (2010). *Attempt* describes observations of a square in Paris – place Saint-Sulpice (not one of the sites in Perec's *places* project) – over three consecutive days in 1974: from Friday 18 to Sunday 20 October. This piece was originally published in *Cause Commune* (1972–1977), the interdisciplinary journal he edited with Duvignaud and Virilio. *Attempt* was conceived and written in the spirit – adopted by the editors of *Cause Commune* in their mission statement – of exploring and documenting everyday life (Schilling, 2009, p. 197; Sheringham, 2006a, p. 249). Perec explained:

A great number, if not the majority, of these things have been described, inventoried, photographed, talked about, or registered. My intention in the pages that follow was to describe the rest instead: that which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds. (Perec, 2010, p. 3)

Though *Attempt*, *Species of Spaces* and fragments of *places* are Perec's most accomplished field-based texts, they are by no means his only works of this type. A large amount of his fieldwork remains untranslated, or translated into languages other than English, and this ranges from his written work to the tapes he produced in May 1978, in which he sat in a parked vehicle at Carrefour Mabillion, verbally recording his observations.¹ A complete study of Perec's fieldwork would ultimately need to work with sources in French, and it would benefit from attending to critical studies in languages other than English (on *lieux*, e.g. Lejeune, 1991; Schilling, 2006). Still, readers who rely upon the medium of English will nevertheless benefit from scholarly translations by David Bellos, John Sturrock, Marc Lowenthal and Andrew Leak in particular. These translators have produced a version of Perec that stands tall among the 'other Perecs' that appear in French and other languages, and this English Perec forms a legitimate object of study in its own right.

I have suggested that Perecquian fieldwork is marked by an essayistic quality. The essay assumes different forms in different times and places and in the hands of different writers, but the modern essay is commonly traced to Michel de Montaigne (France, 2006, p. 24). Montaigne's *Essays* – in French, *Les Essais* – exhibit a number of genre-defining traits. Peter France argues that these combine 'self-examination' and 'self-portraiture' (France, 2006, p. 32) with an 'apparently tentative, self-deprecating' modesty (France, 2006, p. 32). Introducing Montaigne's *Essays*, M. A. Screech (in de Montaigne, 2004, p. xii) reflects upon this intellectual modesty, signalled by the terms *attempt* (*tentative* in French) and *essay* (*essai*), of which he writes:

It is nearer to 'assay' than to 'essay' as used today. The term was used of schoolboys' 'attempts' or 'exercises'; it was used when apprentices tried out their skills, well before producing their masterpiece; it was used when gold or silver was 'assayed' to find out its worth. What Montaigne was 'assaying' was both his 'self' and his opinions.

Perec writes against as much as within this tradition of the essay – for example in his approach to the autobiographical, which departs from Montaigne's personal introspection – though he remains within this differentiated form in other ways. With Perec, as much as Montaigne,

the *essai* remains 'a tentative, unsystematic exploration' which is provisional rather than comprehensive and is characterised by 'anecdote, illustration and humour' (Forsdick & Stafford, 2006, p. 8), by reflective thought and 'toying with ideas' (Forsdick & Stafford, 2006, p. 9). The essay explores its subject in a meandering way, which Max Bense once explained as follows:

He writes essayistically who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind's eye collects what he sees, and puts into words what the object allows to be seen under the conditions established in the course of writing. (Bense, 1947, quoted by Adorno, 1984, p. 164)

Montaigne reflected that meandering or mobility within his own essays was not just rhetorical and metaphorical, even though it was both of these things (Starobinski, 1985). 'My wit will not budge if my legs are not moving,' he wrote (de Montaigne, 2004, p. 258). Developing this point, Charles Forsdick (2006, p. 45) reads the modern French essay as a 'peripatetic genre', recounting 'the perambulation of an idea' (Forsdick, 2006, p. 46). Whether or not it describes or is distilled from an actual walk, the essay is comparable with this particular form of movement: it can be non-linear, rhythmic, provisional, tentative and spontaneous rather than systematic or circumscribed (Forsdick, 2006). He argues that, like a walk, the essay can 'be seen as the collection of fragments – reflections, ideas, sights, visions, sounds' (Forsdick, 2006, p. 52).

Perec's fieldwork is essayistic without always being so literally peripatetic. He tends to observe from fixed rather than mobile points – cafes and other vantage points – walking through his subject matter on a metaphorical level. His fieldwork is essayistic in a broader sense than this, though, in the sense that it does not always assume the form of the essay. His fieldwork intersects with other modes of writing including lists, indexes and diary entries, as well as ethnographic and geographical descriptions (Armstrong, 2015; Becker, 2001; Magné, 2004).

The remainder of this paper reads key themes in contemporary field work against Perec's field-based writing. In some cases Perec has influenced this fieldwork, introducing themes that have since been developed, whether or not he is explicitly acknowledged. In others there is simply a convergence of interests. The following sections discuss three themes in contemporary fieldwork, all of which are anticipated by Perec, beginning with the ludic and moving on to consider explorations of ordinary places, and writing as a fieldwork practice. In each of these, an essayistic approach emerges.

Playful and ludic fieldwork

Perec's fieldwork developed and explored playfulness, bringing this approach into view and showing how and why it can be productive. Similarly, much contemporary fieldwork that is presented as experimental is also presented as playful. This is overtly distanced from other fieldwork, which is portrayed as orthodox or mechanistic. Many contemporary fieldwork manuals, missions and exercises present fieldwork as a kind of game. For example, The Geography Collective suggest that playing hide-and-seek in shops can make it possible to see such places through fresh eyes (Geography Collective, 2010, p. 145). Other playful field activities include getting lost by flipping a coin at street intersections to decide whether to go left or right (Antony & Henry, 2005), and letting a dog take you for a walk (Geography Collective, 2010). These techniques have been adopted and adapted in a variety of settings,

from children's informal learning to undergraduate fieldwork (Phillips, 2015). These illustrate but also begin to complicate the possible meanings of playful fieldwork, conforming to some commonplace understandings of play but departing from others.

But what does it mean to conduct fieldwork playfully? Where do games fit into this? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to differentiate the terminology surrounding playful fieldwork. Play is a contested term with many different – sometimes conflictual – meanings (Woodyer, 2012). Some argue that play is always *for* something; others that it is defined through its lack of purpose. Some find play in discrete times and places, others regard it as a thread running through many aspects of life. Various attempts have been made to identify characteristics of play (Huizinga, 1949), forms of play (Caillois, 1961) and rhetorics of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Most instances of play conform to some but not all of these definitions, which means they seem playful in some ways but not in others. It is possible to think of a spectrum of play with structured and rule-bound games and ludic practices at one end, and more open forms of playfulness at the other.

Games may be understood as one form of ludic practice, and the latter as one form of playfulness (Perkins, 2012). In this spectrum, Perec falls at the most structured or constrained end, away from freer forms of play and playful fieldwork, with which others – including his Situationist contemporaries – might be identified (I expand upon this in the Conclusion). Indeed, Perec had a high tolerance for what might be regarded as institutionalised play: play that has become so bound by rules and conventions that it no longer appears playful. And yet, Perec's own play was never too institutionalised because, as discussed below, he shaped, changed and sometimes broke the rules. Perec's play was in fact fluid, never set in stone.

As I have pointed out, Perec identified the ludic as one of his four overlapping modes of writing or questioning. In his work, the ludic is expressed through devices including puns, literary jokes, scientific parodies and spoof indexes. Critics have shown how Perec used these playful tactics for serious purposes. Playing around with indexes, for example, he explored classification systems (Featherstone & Venn, 2006), disrupted readers' expectations of a text and interrogated textual conventions (Magné, 2004, p. 88). Perec could be funny but he was not generally a funny writer, nor was he generally improvisatory or free. His playfulness and his ludic mode of writing were characterised above all by a preoccupation with rules.

Play explores social rules, variously mimicking, normalising and experimenting with them (Woodyer, 2012, p. 322). Play also has rules of its own, which players variously respect and reject, inherit and invent, through ritual and repetition (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Perec explored rules in the form of constraints, which he imposed upon and explored through his work. He invented and explored constraints through collaboration with fellow members of Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérateur Potentielle* or Workshop for Potential Literature), the collective of writers, mathematicians and artists (Grimstad, 2012; Roubaud, 2004). Through constraints, Perec found structures through which he was able to design projects and compose written work (Bellos, 1993). He learned, respected, broke, negotiated and ignored these constraints, but his biography and readings of his work suggest that he kept them in mind and found that they helped him to write (Bellos, 1993). His constraints ranged from disciplined ways of making and recording observations (discussed below) to detailed plans for when and where those observations would be made. Perec referred to this as 'scaffolding' (Walker, 2012).

Scaffolding provided just enough room to move, a structure in which events could take shape, nudged by chance – itself an important aspect of play (Caillois, 1961). In *Attempt*, chance is manifest in encounters with acquaintances, the movement of pigeons, the passing

of certain cars, dog walkers and tourists, Perce's selection of a particular café at a point in the day, shaping his vantage point and the things and people that he sees and hears. 'It is only by chance,' he writes, 'that I can see 84s pass by at the other end from where I'm sitting' (2010, p. 11). Seemingly chance meetings or sightings also take place with Jean Duvignaud and Paul Virilio (Virilio, 2001, p. 15). Chance is also central to the games and exercises that are prominent in Perce's ludic fieldwork. For example, he suggests exploring 'the building you live in' by trying different ways of moving around within it (Perce, 1999a, p. 44):

notice how unfamiliar things may come to seem as a result of taking staircase B instead of staircase A, or of going up to the fifth floor when you live on the second;

Perce does not make any great promises about where this kind of exercise might take us in terms of knowledge and understanding. On the one hand, he appears to disown some proposals almost as soon as he puts them forward. He proposes 'living for a whole month in an international airport, without ever leaving it' but speculates that this 'would be too easy' (Perce, 1999a, pp. 26, 27). Perce follows through on some of his own exercises, though, and his prediction that 'we could hardly draw any practical conclusion' from an exercise does not prevent him from attempting it (Perce, 1999a, p. 27).

Speaking of where Perce's playful fieldwork may lead, Zygmunt Bauman (1993, pp. 170, 171) argues that play involves a fundamental 'as-ifness': the cultivation of an imaginary sphere, which provides a window on its more directly lived counterpart. Woodyer (2012, p. 317) expresses this as a 'refraction and transformation of the everyday'. This way of seeing otherwise-familiar things and places speaks to Perce's interest in the everyday and the ordinary. As Michael Sheringham (2000, p. 193) put it: 'the project or modest proposal, often apparently pointless or footling, is a device, tactic, or constraint designed to let something else be apprehended obliquely. The project in Perce often has the status of a *ruse* ...' (Sheringham, 2000, p. 193). And as Woodyer (2012, p. 320) argues, play 'exploits the openness and circumstance of the everyday' since, 'when playing, one adopts an openness to the world in the moment' (Woodyer, 2012, p. 320). Perce's ludic fieldwork guides the observer-writer 'to stay tuned to an elusive frequency' where they might 'remain reflexively vigilant' (Sheringham, 2000, p. 196). As such, it leads to some other knowledge or understanding, particularly for ways of observing places and recording those observations.

Perce's playfulness stands to inform experimental fieldwork in at least three ways. First, some of his ideas have been borrowed or replicated by others, and as such they identify a canon of playful fieldwork, within which any new work in this spirit should ideally be located. The airport exercise, for example, has been widely copied in experimental fieldwork (Antony & Henry, 2005) and attempted by social scientists (Urry, 1990), journalists and writers (de Botton, 2009). Perce has also influenced a formula for playful fieldwork in which the reader is presented with questions, exercises, explorations and missions, which they can attempt or simply imagine. This is a minor literary genre and it is a Percequian genre. Secondly, Perce's approach to playful fieldwork interrogates some orthodox field methods. His sampling frames and elaborate plans, containing systematic and randomised observations of selected locations, converge with the sampling methods of scientific geography. At best, this does just what Perce did for the index: de-familiarising and interrogating fieldwork techniques that have sometimes been adopted and practiced mechanistically. Thirdly, Perce's playful fieldwork – in which rules and constraints may be constant, but events unfold in unique and unrepeatable ways, driven by chance and circumstance – elaborates an essayistic approach to fieldwork. Like the essay, which 'proceeds ... methodically unmethodically' (Adorno, 1984,

p. 161), driven by 'luck and play' (Adorno, 1984, p. 152), unfolding in circumstantial and unrepeatable ways (Forsdick & Stafford, 2006), Perce's fieldwork eschewed the mechanical and the formulaic and suggested how and why other fieldworkers might do the same, even as it refined and suggested methods that they might attempt. The challenge, in doing so, would be to take inspiration from Perce without simply imitating his methods, which would then become pointlessly repetitive and institutionalised.

Exploring ordinary places

A second strand of experimental fieldwork which finds parallel and precedent in Perce is the exploration of ordinary places. Of course, Perce was not alone in attending to ordinary places nor did he profess to be. He collaborated with other explorers of the hitherto-unseen ordinary (or infra-ordinary) through *Cause Commune*. His ideas about ordinary places were equally collaborative, influenced by Henri Lefebvre, exchanged with Paul Virilio and influencing Marc Augé (2008), to name a few of many possible examples. But if Perce was not alone in his attention to ordinary places, he did make a distinctive contribution to their exploration. He did this through a kind of endotic fieldwork.

The endotic refers to unspectacular ordinary things and happenings. This endotic is closely related to the quotidian: in French, *le quotidien* (see Sheringham, 2006a). Endotic fieldwork tends to involve revisiting familiar places and finding ways to see them afresh. As Keri Smith puts it: 'observe the world around you as if you've never seen it before' (Smith, 2008, p. 1). Developing this theme, she takes inspiration from Perce and from some of his influences. Quoting Verne's call to 'Look with all your eyes, look' (Smith, 2008, p. 83), she echoes the epigraph to *Life a User's Manual* (Perce, 1988, p. xiii). This form of observation can be attempted through methods outlined above such as getting lost close to home or by noticing ordinary places such as motorways, out-of-town shopping centres and housing estates, all of which are explored in alternative travel books by Self, Sinclair, Whitney and Bradley Garrett. Garrett's *Explore Everything* tells how the author-explorer scaled half-finished buildings, trespassed construction sites and infrastructure facilities, above and below ground, in each case finding unusual vantage points on otherwise familiar cities (Garrett, 2013).

Perce's approach to endotic geographies involved a 'method of training the gaze' which involved seeing flatly, 'slowly, almost stupidly' (Perce, 1999a, p. 50), in order to see ordinary places afresh:

Observe the street, from time to time, with some concern for system perhaps.

Apply yourself. Take your time.

Note down the place: the terrace of a café near the junction of

the Rue de Bac and the Boulevard

Saint-Germain

the time: seven o'clock in the evening

the date: 15 May 1973

the weather: set fair

Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on.

Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you?

Nothing strikes you. You don't know how to see.

You must see it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless. (Perc, 1999a, p. 50)

There are two parts to Percec's method of seeing flatly. The first is to interrupt perceptual habits which draw the eye and other senses towards the novel and the interesting. In *Attempt*, Percec turns away from all the things that are easy to see – spectacular, beautiful, historically and culturally interesting things, which tourists tend to notice – dispensing with these in a brief prologue. Rather than focus upon a 'fountain decorated with the statues of four great Christian orators' and other features that had 'been described, inventoried, photographed, talked about, or registered' (Perc, 2010, p. 3), Percec notices that which tends to be ignored, such as tourist coaches:

Two 'Parisian Coach' type of buses with platforms pass by with their cargoes of photophagous Japanese. A Cityrama bus (of Germans? Japanese?) ... (Two buses of tourists, the second is called 'WalzReisen'): might the tourists today be the same ones as the tourists yesterday (does a man who goes round Paris on a Friday want to do so again on a Saturday?) (Perc, 2010, p. 30)

This illustrates the second part of seeing flatly, which involves attending to that which usually goes unnoticed and unremarked. Influenced by Lefebvre's work on the *quotidien* and the taken-for-granted rhythms of everyday life, Percec, Duvignaud and Virilio called this sphere the 'infra-ordinary' (Virilio, 2001, p. 15), 'the forgotten remainder' (Schilling, 2009, p. 197). Pierre Getzler, the photographer who worked with Percec in the *places* project, has described Percec's method of observing the infra-ordinary as involving equal attention to things and buildings, regardless of their visual interest or personal significance. In Percec's description of *rue Vilin*, which appears in *L'Infra-Ordinaire* (Perc, 1999a), there is no indication that he had lived there as a child, nor that his mother had been taken from there when she was deported to Auschwitz (Depaule & Getzler, 2001). Percec's childhood home does not stand out in his description of the street.

Still, as Percec's critics have noted, his descriptions are not as flat or stupid, nor objective or aimless as he claimed. He focuses upon particular things and happenings. Having identified a number of colours early on the first day of the *Attempt* (Perc, 2010, p.7), Percec pays more attention to particular colours. There is a lot of apple-green in his observations, variously attached to a 'Citroën van' (Perc, 2010, p. 10), 2CVs (Perc, 2010, pp. 33, 34, 42), 'another car' (Perc, 2010, p. 43) and a Rolls Royce. More generic greens are also present, for example when something green sticks out of a shopping bag (Perc, 2010, p. 42). Percec's focus also changes over time. He is most interested in colours on Day 2, for example. There are also fluctuations between lists and descriptions, classifications and categorisations (James, 2009). The first of the nine diary entries in *Attempt* is organised through bullet points and subheadings, which identify and exemplify kinds of things and happenings: from 'letters of the alphabet' (Perc, 2010, p. 5) to 'modes of locomotion' (2010, p. 10). In successive diary entries, some but not all of these categories are mobilised, and some are differentiated. In this way, Percec explores the instability, asymmetry and incompleteness of the taxonomies that organise and interpret experiences, grouping ideas, things, events and activities (Boyne, 2006, p. 28; James, 2009, p. 206; Maciel, 2006, p. 50). This highlights the dynamics between perception and cognition in which sensory experiences are ordered and interpreted, patterns are

registered, and deviations from those patterns are noted. The latter are manifest in the form of absences, such that one sighting of a tourist bus informs another: 'A Paris-Vision bus goes by. The tourists have headphones' (Perec, 2010, p. 33); later, 'Some Japanese on a bus; they don't have headphones' (Perec, 2010, p. 36). These observations are structured, purposive and selective, even when the observer is consciously trying to resist this.

Perec's attempt to see flatly also shows how perceptions are shaped by memories and traces of previous experiences. This is particularly inevitable in the *places* project, in which Perec selected sites that meant something to him, and which he would be able to describe from memory. The well-known back story to *rue Vilin*, in what had been the Jewish immigrant neighbourhood of Belleville in north-eastern Paris, gives Perec's flat description of the street a poignancy that would be difficult to match in the most sentimental of accounts. His observations are also shaped by his background and cultural literacies, which lead him to compare a dog to Snowy (from *Tintin*) and at least to guess at the meanings of church bells. The translator of *Attempt* comments that, as an American, he might have noticed 'very different details' (Lowenthal, introduction to Perec, 2010, p. 52).

As an attempt to see flatly, Perec's field description might therefore be regarded as a failure. As Sheringham suggests, it 'does not produce any real knowledge' of the place it ostensibly sets out to describe (2000, p. 196). But, as an experiment in the possibility of seeing flatly and as an exploration of fieldwork itself, it is illuminating. Perec's title – *Tentative*, or *Attempt* – indicates that he is not concerned with 'revealing the city in the here-we-are, here-it-is sort of mode' (Whitney, quoted by Breathnach, 2015). Rather than an unsuccessful attempt to reveal the city, Perec's *Attempt* interrogated fieldwork itself. In the traditions of the essay it failed – or rather refused – to come to any 'final conclusions' (Adorno, 1984, p. 165), though it offered fragmentary insights along the way. It also revealed the centrality of documentation and above all writing within 'fieldwork itself' – a theme developed in the next section.

Perec's fieldwork was shaped by two forces: the places in which he conducted his observations; and the systems and constraints that structured those observations and the ways in which they were recorded. Constraints, some of which were devised and developed with fellow writers and mathematicians in Oulipo, were important to Perec's geographical descriptions: from the rooms in a house to the houses in a street. These constraints took a number of different forms, which ranged from simple rules to elaborate mathematical systems. Perec wrote an entire novel without the letter 'e'. He used a mathematical formula to determine the composition of *Life a User's Manual*, the same formula he had used to schedule the 'places' project. And, though this may be seen as more a discipline or protocol than a formal or mathematical constraint, Perec devised a system for observing street scenes, which he spelled out in *Species of Spaces* and put into practice in the *Attempt*. This involved prescribed tasks such as sitting in a cafe for an hour and attempting simple, flat descriptions of what he observed; walking up a street and making notes on each house; and so on. This 'opening out of Oulipian constraint into the world' – as Karl Whitney puts it – was therefore composed of different levels and forms of constraint. These tactics provided 'a constrained strategy for dealing with the endless material generated by everyday life ... a kind of filter for experience' (personal communication, 2 November 2016).

Perec's descriptions were therefore heavily mediated, shaped by his methods. And yet, they continued to bear the imprint of the places they describe and their geographical details continue to matter. Perec's attention to the infra-ordinary, the often-unseen ephemera of

urban life, enabled him to develop vivid – if rather eccentric – descriptions of place. Perce's constraints defined and limited the scope of this, such that elements of places were excluded, but they also trained his gaze, illuminating elements of those places that usually went unseen.

These projects, revolving around fieldwork in ordinary places, have been taken up and echoed by others. First, in unsettling a habitual way of seeing manifest as a touristic vision, Perce has influenced a series of fieldwork projects, which attempt what *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel* calls 'counter tourism' and involves doing 'the opposite of what you think a traveller should do' (Antony & Henry, 2005, p. 101). And, in their fieldwork teaching, Alan Latham and Derek McCormack follow Perce – doing so explicitly and critically – through exercises in de-familiarisation, with the aim of heightening awareness of the everyday (Latham & McCormack, 2007).

Another strand of Percequian fieldwork explores the possibility of seeing the extraordinary within the ordinary. An exercise proposed by Keri Smith explores Perce's insight that, by seeing them as extraordinary, it is possible to see ordinary places more clearly, and thus to apprehend previously unseen ordinary and everyday things and places. This involves imagining a familiar place as 'magical, exaggerated, or slightly altered from reality' (Smith, 2008, p. 2). Smith attributes this idea to Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, which was published in 1972 and so before Perce's *Attempt* (first published in 1975) and *Species of Spaces* (1974). She also borrows from graphic design and the visual arts, where her work is primarily positioned, and where it diverges from Perce's primarily literary approach. Perce also took inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's insight that 'the act of describing the world undoes its familiarity to produce wonderment' (Schilling, 2009, p. 198). So, when he suggested observing and describing the street 'until the scene becomes improbable' and strange (Perce, 1999a; p. 50), Perce developed literary and philosophical ideas: that when we learn to see and to describe them, ordinary things, happenings and places can become extraordinary. As Virilio put it, 'what interested Perce was the potential of the banal to become remarkable' (Virilio, 2001, p. 17; also see James, 2009, p. 208). The 'paradox of the everyday' is that it goes unnoticed; when it has been noticed, it is no longer unseen (Blanchot, 1962, quoted by Sheringham, 2000, p. 188). Once it has been de-familiarised, then, it is possible to see the 'profound, strange and significant' within the everyday (James, 2009, p. 208), transforming the infra-ordinary into the visibly-ordinary and in turn, the extraordinary.

When Perce explored and illuminated ways of seeing ordinary places he did so in a particular – literary, and broadly essayistic – way. Sheringham argued that there is 'something mutually illuminating about the essay and the everyday' (Sheringham, 2006b, p. 87) since 'the essay shows an affinity with the concrete, the here and now, the run of the mill experiences of the ordinary mortal, the everyday' (Sheringham, 2006b, p. 87). The essay also takes its shape from concrete experiences such as these, rather than imposing an argument upon them. Charles Forsdick explains that the essay eschews abstraction and springs instead from 'the coincidence of language, philosophical reflection and bodily sensation', rooted in the everyday (2006, p. 46). This coincidence of words and everyday experiences, which textual critics identify within the essay, finds expression in Perce's field writing, which I call essayistic in the broad sense that it does not always assume the form of the (modern French) essay, but includes other forms of writing such as notes and lists, as in the *Attempt*. This provides a broadly defined literary genre in which to position fieldwork writing. But what does it mean to think of fieldwork as a literary form, or of writing as a fieldwork practice?

Writing as fieldwork practice

A third theme in experimental fieldwork, which a deeper engagement with Perec stands to inform and bring into focus, is a preoccupation with documentation and writing. As indicated above, emphasis is placed upon the manner in which many field projects are proposed and reported. Proposals emphasise the importance of documenting findings. The exercise mentioned above, which involves making a 'portrait' of a city or town in which everything is magical, revolves around selecting and attempting a 'documentation method' (Smith, 2008, pp. 98, 99). Similarly, a 'sound map' exercise asks the explorer to 'document' sounds (Smith, 2008, p. 56).

Many contemporary fieldworkers underline the significance of documentation – including but not limited to writing – as a fieldwork practice. For example, Self and Garrett opt for informal, lively authorial voices, using the first-person and the present tense to reinforce the message of their ostensibly unorthodox methods and to signal their awareness of the provisional and positional nature of their findings. Smith's *How to be an Explorer* explores the significance of writing – not only the words that are chosen, but also the typefaces employed, their layout and accompanying graphics – within fieldwork. Others, working at the interface of cultural geography and creative writing, and in cultural criticism and landscape studies, have continued to explore these themes, recognising that the ways in which we write shapes the ways in which we see and understand places. In some cases, such as David Matless's studies of Norfolk, Perec is explicitly referenced as an inspiration. Others, exploring similar themes without necessarily referencing Perec, include Sarah de Leeuw, whose *Unmarked: Landscapes Along Highway 16* (2004) explores northern British Columbian landscapes. The insight that underpins this work – that writing can be a form of fieldwork practice in itself, not simply a way of reporting fieldwork findings – is something that Perec brought into particular focus.

Just as he explored the possibilities of seeing flatly, Perec also experimented with *writing* flatly. In practice, since his observational methods can only be accessed through what he wrote, it is difficult to separate Perec's methods of observation from those of his writing. Accordingly, in discussing Perec's writing, some of what I will say echoes the previous discussion of his observations. But since Perec made his strongest and most original contribution to experimental fieldwork through his writing, it is important to consider this directly.

The flatness of Perec's field notes and descriptions is pursued through an apparently factual, simple, descriptive, unvarnished, empirical style. As I have illustrated, things and actions are noted in the briefest terms, through lists, phrases, bullet-pointed observations and short sentences. Leak compares the on-site descriptions or 'reals' in the *places* project with 'transcriptions of reality' (Leak, 2001, p. 26). The immediacy and reality of the scenes he describes – 'what is seen' at that moment 'and nothing more' (Leak, 2001, p. 31) – are conveyed through the use of the present tense. This 'empirertext' is at once empirical and textual (Armstrong, 2015). As James (2009, p. 204) puts it, *Attempt* 'is clearly as much an exploration of language, and of its ways of representing, as of the real in itself'.

Writing flatly, like seeing flatly, may seem unmodulated at first, but repeated, closer readings reveal a subtle texture (Becker, 2001; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1999). This texture does more than mirror its object since it draws distinctions, searches for order and patterns, explores relationships, and actively interprets. Perec's attempt to write flatly interrogates the ways in which writing imposes its own texture and shape. This is signalled on Day 2 of *Attempt*

through a rare subheading: ‘In search of a difference’ (Perec, 2010, p. 30) and through the questions Perec raises. ‘What has changed here since yesterday? At first sight, it’s really the same. Is the sky perhaps cloudier?’ (Perec, 2010, p. 29). The differences that he goes on to document are a function of variations in what he observes – different rubbish on the ground on different days, for example – and differences within his own observational practices, which demonstrate wavering concentration and changing preoccupations as well as the texture of his writing. All these factors structure his observations of buses, for example. On Day 1, a weekday, more numbered bus lines are mentioned (the 96, 63, 84, 87, 70) than on the third day, a Sunday, when only the 96 and 63 are recorded. These observations reflect bus schedules, but they are also driven by the shape of the text. We do not learn which buses are running on Saturday (Day 2), though we know that Perec arrives on one. The uneven reference to buses – with named services on Days 1 and 3, and tourist buses on Day 2 – sets up the rhythms and the shape of the text, in a form that is as much poetic as empirical. The rhythms, segmentation and shape of the text is also indicated through dates and times which appear periodically but unevenly. In some diary entries time is mentioned only in the heading; in others, such as the second day, the time is told repeatedly, frequently but irregularly.

There is also fluctuation and differentiation in the precise details of how things and events are recorded. Perec speaks of ‘micro-events’ in his observations: ‘tens, hundreds of simultaneous actions, micro-events’ such as the ‘movement of lips, gestures, gesticulations’ involved in conversing or parking a car (Perec, 2010, p. 10). Sheringham observes stylistic micro-events in Perec’s writing, in which ‘shifts of register, phase-structure, or sentence length ... create a field of difference where all at first seemed the same’ (Sheringham, 2000, p. 197, 267). This is illustrated through the slight shifts in how Perec records the passing of buses. In the first entry, for Day 1, Friday 18 October ‘The 96 goes to Montparnasse Station’ (6); in the second, ‘A 96 passes by’ (Perec, 2010, p. 11) and then ‘A 96’ (Perec, 2010, p. 13); in the third, ‘I again saw buses ...’ is all the mention that buses receive (Perec, 2010, p. 16); ‘A 96 goes by, almost empty’ (Perec, 2010, p. 22) in the fourth, and then ‘A 96 goes by, full’ (Perec, 2010, p. 23). These semantic variations do not correspond to variations in the substance of Perec’s observations: *they simply vary the ways in which these observations are recorded*. In other examples, small differences between words indicate subtle variations in what they describe, as for example in lists of people’s movements: ‘sauntering, dawdling, wandering, going’ and so on (Perec, 2010, p. 10).

As these near-synonyms indicate, writing is fundamental to another fieldwork practice: the identification of individual observations with classes of things and actions through categories and classes, categorisation and classification. Perec used lists and inventories to explore the taxonomies that are commonly deployed in the experience and interpretation of the everyday. *Attempt* is introduced as ‘an inventory of some strictly visible things,’ some of which are listed under headings. ‘Letters of the alphabet’ include “KLM” (on the breast-pocket of someone walking by), an uppercase “P” which stands for “parking”; “Hôtel Récamière,” “St-Raphaël, ...” (Perec, 2010, p. 5). Lists such as these highlight the asymmetry, inconsistency, instability and incompleteness of taxonomies. There is a difference between ‘Some sort of basset hound’ (Perec, 2010, p. 6) and the more generic but no more precise ‘A basset hound’ (Perec, 2010, p. 13). Similarly, one dog ‘looks like Snowy’ (Perec, 2010, p. 12) while two others are ‘Snowy types’ (Perec, 2010, p. 20). These categories, wobbling and shifting in front of the reader’s eyes, underline the significance of an often-unnoticed, textual (as well as cognitive)

process: the grouping of observations (James, 2009). 'A young father goes by, carrying his sleeping baby on his back (and an umbrella in his hand)' (Perec, 2010, p. 46) is very particular, for example, while other statements of this kind are much more general and distilled: 'there is always a passer-by in the distance' (Perec, 2010, p. 47).

On close reading, Perec's field writing is textured rather than flat. Becker (2001, p. 71) reads it as 'a lesson in the impossibility of the kind of aimless description Perec aimed at' (Becker, 2001, p. 72). This means that while there is an empirical element to *Attempt* this is also a literary work, in the sense that it is both poetic and essayistic in form. Motte (1984, p. 82) is persuasive when he concludes that 'the primary concern now is the poetic' – that the empirical has given way to the textual – though he overstates the case when he claims that 'external phenomena become almost incidental' in this. Perec's fieldwork is literary, but it is not purely imaginative literature; the field still matters.

Conclusion: Perecquian fieldwork

In this paper, some themes in contemporary experimental fieldwork have been traced to earlier works by Georges Perec. This contradicts some claims about the originality and creativity of this work, but more positively it positions such work in relation to a series of connected, Perecquian fieldwork projects.

To use the term Perecquian fieldwork with any precision, it is necessary to clarify what is distinctive about Perec's fieldwork. Perec's fieldwork intersects with that of others, not only the Situationists but also Oulipo, Lefebvre, Barthes, Queneau and a host of literary figures including Verne and Calvino. The concept of the infra-ordinary, for example, emerged from debates between these figures and from their readings of Benjamin, Heidegger, Lukacs and others (Morris, 2008). Perec's investigations of ordinary places were also informed by ethnographic methods (Becker, 2001; Schilling, 2009), mass observation (see Hall, 2015) and market research techniques (Bellos, 1993; Jacobsen, 2009). And it took place in a wider context, marked by a turning from exotic to endotic subjects, against a backdrop of decolonisation. Perec was open about all of this, signalling his borrowings through quotations from and references to sources in literary and popular culture. In one exercise, for example, he invites the reader to 'Reconsider some of the proposals made by the Surrealists for embellishing the town' (Perec, 2010, p. 66) and elsewhere his influences and inspirations are never far from the surface. Notwithstanding this intertextuality, it is possible to draw out some qualities that Perec brought to the fore through his fieldwork, in part by identifying the points at which he diverges from others.

To understand Perec's contribution to fieldwork, it is particularly important to distinguish it from a closely related but over-used term – psychogeography – and the group with whom it is most closely associated: the Situationists. Both were part of a common if differentiated Parisian intellectual context, and engaged with many of the same ideas and figures. Guy Debord studied under Lefebvre in the 1950s, while Perec was employed by him as a field researcher (Bellos, 1993, pp. 280–282) and both shared that sociologist's interest in everyday life, among other things (Schilling, 2009, p. 198; Sheringham, 2006a, p. 159). But they also had differences.

The first way in which Perec parted company with the Situationists is that he did not share their political radicalism (Bellos, 1993, pp. 206, 207, 272, 400, 401). More an artist than an activist, he pursued what Schilling has called 'open-ended questioning' and

'consciousness-raising divorced from revolutionary politics' (Schilling, 2009, p. 198) and eschewed prescriptive political posturing (Bellos, 1993; Schlesinger, 2004). The Situationists' politics help to explain their appeal to generations of politicised intellectuals including academics and writers. It is not clear what this politics really delivers. For Sinclair and Self, Situationist-identified fieldwork sometimes comes across as a license to rant, sometimes against supermarkets and property developers, sometimes apparently against the modern world (e.g. Sinclair, 1997). Similar charges could be levelled against Situationist-identified field teachers (e.g. Bassett, 2004; Bonnett, 2012) and at enthusiasts who assert a revolutionary agenda but struggle to follow through. One suggests an afternoon of urban fieldwork *with* 'no shopping until the *dérive* is over!' (www.mookychick.co.uk). But, regardless of what they actually deliver in practice, their contrasting politics are one point at which Perce and the Situationists diverge. A second difference between Perce and the Situationists is methodological. The Situationists' signature method was the *dérive*, an experimental method of freely and critically drifting through the city (Pinder, 1996). In contrast, Perce did not drift. Though he wandered, he did so with purpose and precision, guided by his self-imposed constraints, in the manner 'of a geometrical surveyor making notes in a notebook' (Depaule & Getzler, 2001, pp. 127, 128). Thirdly, though the Situationists produced a number of influential documents and were involved in the publication of a journal entitled *Potlatch*, they were more doers than writers, and they were more active in proposing projects than in writing them up. Perce, in contrast, was first and foremost a writer. As Whitney puts it: Perce 'differs from the Situationists ... in his intense preoccupation with notation and transcription' (Gorse, 2014). In this way, Perce illuminates the significance and potential of experimental *writing* within fieldwork, and of writing as a fieldwork practice.

On these terms, some contemporary experimental fieldwork is more convincingly Percequian than Situationist, despite the tendency to identify with the latter. This includes fieldwork without a prescriptive political agenda, methodical and disciplined fieldwork, and fieldwork in which emphasis is placed upon documentation and experimental writing, with particular attention to the essay (e.g. Day, 2015).² Some experimental fieldworkers, attuned to these concerns, do already identify as Percequian. Some do so superficially, as I have argued, quoting or alluding to Perce. Others distil a more precisely Percequian tradition, and in so doing they suggest how Percequian fieldwork might be understood and where this tradition might be taken. Perce is more explicitly the point of departure for studies of things and places that go unnoticed (Bendiner-Viani, 2013; Kullman, 2015) such as the changing ways that people carry bags in cities (Cochoy et al., 2015). His methods of seeing and writing flatly are explicitly borrowed in research on rural landscapes in England (Matless, 2015) and on the 'mundane patterns of urban life' on the Ground Zero site in Manhattan (Hobbs, 2015, p. 88). Hobbs attempted to record 'everything [he] overheard during an hour at the 9/11 memorial' (Hobbs, 2015, pp. 88, 89).

One final example of Percequian fieldwork illustrates what I have suggested is its defining characteristic: an essayistic approach to the field. Karl Whitney's *Hidden City: Adventures and Explorations in Dublin* (2012) is Percequian in the threefold sense identified in this paper: it experiments with a structured form of play in which constraints and rules are evident; it involves detailed and sometimes apparently exhaustive documentation of ordinary things; and it takes the writing side of fieldwork seriously. Underpinning these specific preoccupations, Whitney also alludes to something more fundamentally Percequian. Fieldwork, conceived as an 'attempt,' searches for something that is unlikely to be revealed, but in which

the act of searching may be enlightening. Whitney explains: 'What I like about Perec is that his work is an engagement. It attempts to reveal this essential city, and in a way, through this process, it actually sets itself an endpoint that it can never reach' (Breathnach, 2015). It is the searching that matters, the exploring, rather than the findings. This is the essence of essayistic fieldwork.

But where can an ongoing Perecquian fieldwork tradition take us? There is no definitive answer to this question, of course, though there may be some wrong or inadequate answers or responses. One of these might be simply to mimic what Perec did and what he wrote. But I have argued that there is nothing very experimental about replicating half-century-old projects and practices. Another 'wrong answer' might be to prescribe where Perecquian fieldwork should lead, to specify how it should advance upon previous work. Rather than leading forward in a progressive or linear way, genuinely experimental Perecquian fieldwork will continue to explore and to attempt, proceeding tentatively, essayistically, experimentally.

Notes

1. Tentative de description de choses vues au carrefour Mabillon le 19 Mai 1978. See: <http://ubu.com/sound/perec.html>; <http://syntone.fr/georges-perec-et-la-radio/>; and <http://some-landscapes.blogspot.co.uk/2007/12/things-seen-at-mabillon-junction.html>.
2. For example, Jon Day's *Cyclogeography* (2015) is published by Notting Hill Editions, an imprint 'devoted to the best in essay writing' (Day, 2015, p. 164). This beautifully written book is another example of Perecquian work – with a nod to Oulipo and evidence of generative constraint – which is misrepresented as a *dérive*.

Acknowledgements

Charles Forsdick has been an inspiration and a Perecquian friend. I am grateful to him and to others who joined a reading group and then a symposium on Georges Perec's Geographies, in particular: Kiera Chapman, Joanne Lee, Morag Rose, Malcolm Tait, Karl Whitney, Derek Schilling, Andy Leak, Amanda Crawley-Jackson, David Matless, Joanna Walsh, Matthew Gandy, Tim Edensor, Peter Jackson, Jessica Dubow and Eric Olund. Thom and Phoebe Sullivan: thank you for help in editing this paper, also for prompting me to read and re-read Michel de Montaigne. Finally, it has been a pleasure to work with John Horton at *Social and Cultural Geography* and with three knowledgeable, constructively critical, anonymous reviewers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1984). The essay as form. *New German Critique*, 32, 151–171.
- Antony, R., & Henry, J. (2005). *The lonely planet guide to experimental travel*. London: Lonely Planet.
- Armstrong, J. (2015). Empiritexts: Mapping attention and invention in post-1980 French literature. *French Forum*, 40, 93–108.
- Augé, M. (2008). *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. (J. Howe, Trans.). London: Verso.
- Bassett, K. (2004). Walking as an aesthetic practice and a critical tool: Some psychogeographic experiments. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 28, 397–410.
- Bauman, Z. (1993). *Postmodern ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Becker, H. (2001). Georges Perec's experiments in social description. *Ethnography*, 2, 63–76.
- Bellos, D. (1993). *Georges Perec: A life in words*. London: Harvill.
- Bendiner-Viani, G. (2013). The big world in the small: Layered dynamics of meaning-making in the everyday. *Environment and Planning D, Society and Space*, 31, 708–726.
- Bonnett, A. (2012). Postcard. In R. Phillips & J. Johns (Eds.), *Fieldwork for human geography* (pp. 201–202). London: Sage.
- de Botton, A. (2009). *A week at the airport: A Heathrow diary*. London: Profile.
- Boyne, R. (2006). Classification. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23, 21–30.
- Breathnach, K. (2015). *A1 in psychogeography: Interview with Karl Whitney*. Retrieved from <http://totallydublin.ie/arts-culture/arts-culture-features/karl-whitney-a1-in-psychogeography/>
- Butler, T. (2006). A walk of art: The potential of the sound walk as practice in cultural geography. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 7, 889–908.
- Caillois, R. (1961). *Man, play and games*. New York, NY: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Cochoy, F., Hagberg, J., & Canu, R. (2015). The forgotten role of pedestrian transportation in urban life. *Urban Studies*, 52, 2267–2286.
- Day, J. (2015). *Cyclogeography: Journeys of a London bicycle courier*. Honiton: Notting Hill Editions.
- de Leeuw, S. (2004). *Unmarked: Landscapes along highway 16*. Edmonton: NeWest Press.
- de Montaigne, M. (2004). *The essays*. (M. A. Screech, Trans., Ed., and Introduced). London: Penguin.
- Depaule, J. C., & Getzler, P. (2001). A city in words and numbers. (C. Barrett, Trans.). *AA Files*, 45/46, 117–128.
- Dodds, K., & Atkinson, D. (2000). *Geopolitical traditions*. London: Routledge.
- Doel, M. A. (2004). Waiting for geography. *Environment and Planning A*, 36, 451–460.
- Featherstone, M., & Venn, C. (2006). Problematising global knowledge and the new Encyclopaedia project. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23, 1–20.
- Forsdick, C. (2006). De la plume comme des pieds: The essay as a peripatetic genre. In C. Forsdick & A. Stafford (Eds.), *The modern essay in French* (pp. 45–60). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Forsdick, C., & Stafford, A. (Eds.). (2006). *The modern essay in French*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- France, P. (2006). British and French traditions of the essay. In C. Forsdick & A. Stafford (Eds.), *The modern essay in French* (pp. 23–44). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Garrett, B. (2013). *Explore everything: Place-hacking and the city*. London: Verso.
- Geography Collective. (2010). *Mission: Explore*. London: Can of Worms Kids Press.
- Gorse. (2014). *Introducing Karl Whitney*. Retrieved from <http://gorse.ie/introducing-karl-whitney/>
- Grimstad, P. (2012). Anticipatory plagiarism. *London Review of Books*, 34, 31–32.
- Hall, D. (2015). *Worktown: The astonishing story of the project that launched mass observation*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Henshaw, V. (2013). *Urban smellscape*. London: Routledge.
- Hobbs, D. B. (2015). An attempt at an inexhaustible site in lower Manhattan. *Critical Military Studies*, 1, 88–98.
- Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo Ludens. A study of the play-element in culture*. (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). London: Routledge/Kegan Paul.
- Jacobsen, M. H. (Ed.). (2009). *Encountering the everyday: An introduction to the sociology of the unnoticed*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- James, A. (2009). *Constraining chance: Georges Perec and the OuLiPo*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Kerbrat-Orecchioni, C. (1999). *L'Énonciation* [Enunciation]. Paris: Armand-Colin.
- Kullman, K. (2015). Pedagogical assemblages: Rearranging children's traffic education. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 16, 255–275.
- Latham, A., & McCormack, D. P. (2007). Developing 'real-world' methods in urban geography fieldwork. *Planet*, 18, 25–27.
- Leak, A. (2001). Paris created and destroyed. *AA Files*, 45/46, 25–31.
- Lejeune, P. (1991). *La Mémoire et L'Oblique: Georges Perec autobiographe* [Memory and the Oblique: Georges Perec as Autobiographer]. Paris: P.O.L.
- Maciel, M. E. (2006). The unclassifiable. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23, 47–50.
- Magné, B. (2004). Georges Perec on the index. *Yale French Studies*, 105, 72–88.

- Matless, D. (2015). *The regional book*. Axminster: Uniformbooks.
- Morris, K. (2008). Perec's alternative topography: Figuring permanence and the ephemeral in *Lieux*. *Octopus*, 4, 31–59.
- Motte, W. (1984). *The poetics of experiment: A study of the work of Georges Perec*. Lexington: French Forum.
- Perec, G. (1988). *Life a user's manual*. (D. Bellos, Trans.). London: Collins Harvill.
- Perec, G. (1999a). *Species of spaces and other pieces*. (J. Sturrock, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Perec, G. (1999b). *Things: A story of the sixties*. (D. Bellos & A. Leak, Trans.). London: Vintage.
- Perec, G. (2001a). Scene in Italie. (A. Leak, Trans.). *AA Files*, 45/46, 34–41.
- Perec, G. (2001b). Glances at Gaité. (A. Leak, Trans.). *AA Files*, 45/46, 43–53.
- Perec, G. (2010). *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*. (M. Lowenthal, Trans.). Cambridge: Wakefield Press.
- Perkins, C. (2012). *Playful mapping: The potential of a ludic approach*. International Cartographic Association Conference, Paris.
- Phillips, R. (2015). Playful and multi-sensory fieldwork: Seeing, hearing and touching New York. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 39, 617–629.
- Pinder, D. (1996). Subverting cartography: The Situationists and maps of the city. *Environment and Planning A*, 28, 405–427.
- Revill, G. (2013). Points of departure: Listening to rhythm in the sonic spaces of the railway station. *Sociological Review*, 61, 51–68.
- Rodaway, P. (1994). *Sensuous geographies: Body, sense and place*. London: Routledge.
- Roubaud, J. (2004). Perecquian Oulipo. *Yale French Studies*, 105, 99–109.
- Schilling, D. (2006). *Mémoires du quotidien: les lieux de Perec* [Memories of the Everyday: Perec's Places]. Villeneuve: Septentrion.
- Schilling, D. (2009). French sociologies of the quotidian. In M. H. Jacobsen (Ed.), *Encountering the everyday* (pp. 187–210). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Schlesinger, P. (2004). W.G. Sebald and the condition of exile. *Theory Culture & Society*, 21, 43–67.
- Self, W. (2007). *Psychogeography*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Sheringham, M. (2000). Attending to the everyday: Blanchot, Lefebvre, Certeau, Perec. *French Studies*, LIV, 187–199.
- Sheringham, M. (2006a). *Everyday life: Theories and practices from surrealism to the present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sheringham, M. (2006b). The essay and the everyday: Reading Perec with Adorno. In C. Forsdick & A. Stafford (Eds.), *The modern essay in French* (pp. 87–100). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Sinclair, I. (1997). *Lights out for the territory*. London: Granta.
- Smith, K. (2008). *How to be an explorer of the world*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Starobinski, J. (1985). *Montaigne in motion*. (A. Goldhammer, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tonkiss, F. (2005). *Space, the city and social theory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Urry, J. (1990). *The tourist gaze: Leisure and travel in contemporary societies*. London: Sage.
- Virilio, P. (2001). Interviewed by Enrique Walker. *AA Files*, 45/46, 15–18.
- Walker, E. (2012). *The scaffolding (Georges Perec's Lieux)* (Unpublished PhD thesis). Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Whitney, K. (2012). *Hidden city: Adventures and explorations in Dublin*. Dublin: Penguin Ireland.
- Woodyer, T. (2012). Ludic geographies: Not merely child's play. *Geography Compass*, 6, 313–326.