

GEOGRAPHIES OF EVERYDAY URBAN LIFE: FRENCH LITERARY AND
CINEMATIC EXPERIMENTS IN THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Department of Romance Languages (French).

Chapel Hill
2014

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ABSTRACT

SARAH PETERSON: Geographies of Everyday Urban Life: French Literary and Cinematic Experiments In The Contemporary City
(Under the direction of Hassan Melehy)

This dissertation examines the city as space and place in select French texts and films from the 1970s to the early 2000s. Through the use of experimental techniques that call into question literary and cinematic conventions and genres (such as the essay, the diary, and the documentary), contemporary French authors and filmmakers offer distinctive accounts of everyday urban space. Authors Georges Perec and Annie Ernaux and filmmakers Agnès Varda and Chris Marker frequently represent the city in their works, not as a background for a narrative, but rather as a terrain upon which to explore questions about everyday social practices and relations. Conducting *in situ* experiments in observation (such as Perec's fastidious notation of the details of a Parisian square) and representation (as in Varda's focus on the physicality of the denizens of a lively French market street), these four authors and filmmakers project themselves into the city in ways that both document and interrogate everyday urban life. I argue that what emerges from these experiments is a new manner of understanding space and place in literature and film, one that has affinities with concepts in contemporary cultural geography. By examining intersections between literature, cinema, and cultural geography with respect to such topics as everyday life, scale, place, subjectivity, embodiment, and dialogue, I propose a geocritical approach that demonstrates the social and relational nature of the city in particular and space in general.

Acknowledgements

I have been fortunate over the course of this dissertation to receive support, guidance, and encouragement from many people. I owe special thanks to my dissertation advisor, Hassan Melehy, not only for his invaluable feedback and close readings of my work, but also for his advice and assistance throughout my time as a doctoral student. My committee members have each inspired me with their own scholarly work, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share my ideas and research with them. Dominique Fisher, John Pickles, Sarah Sharma, and Ellen Welch, thank you for the enlightening comments and stimulating conversations.

I am grateful to Cybelle McFadden for her friendship, advice, and company during long hours spent together at the library. Thank you to my sister Amy Peterson, whose creativity and wisdom inspire me, and to Dan D'Oca for the research tips and your infectious passion for your work.

I am forever indebted to my parents and parents-in-law: Sue Woestehoff and Chuck Dunlop; Paul and Linda Peterson; and Stanley and Geraldine Johanson. Thank you for encouraging me and for being my anchors.

I wish especially to thank my husband John Johanson for his unwavering love and support during my entire graduate career. His patience, flexibility, and humor have helped me every step of the way. Finally, to my son Milo, thank you for your perfect timing. Every day with you feels like a gift.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. Experimenting with City Space

In the pages that follow, I examine methods by which four contemporary French authors and filmmakers engage with the city in their works, offering novel accounts of urban space and how we experience it in contemporary everyday life. Writers Georges Perec (1936-1982) and Annie Ernaux (b. 1940) and filmmakers Agnès Varda (b. 1928) and Chris Marker (1921-2012) each have highly individual styles, yet they fit well together as producers of “hybrid” texts, works that fuse autobiography, fiction, social commentary, and formal experimentation. Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker all portray the contemporary city in their works, and their representations go beyond simply using the city as a backdrop. While their works fall within a long tradition of literary and filmic depictions of city space, their experimental approaches challenge romanticized visions of Paris and other cities. Their postmodern reconsiderations and reconfigurations of the city occur in part through close attention to the details of everyday urban life, not at the service of a narrative, but rather as a means of valorizing the quotidian itself as a subject of representation and investigation. In lieu of a conventional narrative, spatial practices and city experiences drive the urban works of these writers and filmmakers. Moreover, by projecting themselves into the city through literary and filmic experiments, Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker at once chronicle and question everyday experiences in the contemporary city. In so doing, they subvert

assumptions about the nature of the city and urban life.

In the simplest of terms, my dissertation is about the city in contemporary French literature and film. More precisely, however, it makes the case that by examining experimental and self-reflexive techniques of representation, we can begin to understand the city not merely as a predefined setting, but rather in terms of philosophical and geographical notions of space and place. In recent years, geographers including Doreen Massey, Ash Amin, and Nigel Thrift have offered compelling characterizations of the city that go beyond simplistic definitions based on density and population size. Massey defines cities as “large, intense, and heterogeneous constellations of trajectories, demanding of complex negotiation” (*For Space*, 155). Amin and Thrift promote an “understanding of cities as spatially open and cross-cut by many different kinds of mobilities, from flows of people to commodities and information” (3). In these perspectives, spatial practices and networks of interaction are as significant as the city’s pavements, brick, and mortar. In fact, the architecture and topography are but another part of those networks. This is an open view of the city, one that resists fixing the city with a set of predetermined characteristics, and one that I argue is apparent in the literary and cinematic works that I analyze in these pages.

The urban works in my study date from different decades of the past fifty some years, as a brief glance at some of the titles will indicate: Varda’s *L’Opéra-Mouffe* (1958) and *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), Perec’s *Espèces d’espaces* (1974), Ernaux’s *Journal du dehors* (published in 1993 but containing entries dating back to 1985), and Marker’s *Chats perchés* (2004).¹ Taken together, these works attest to the challenges of negotiating, representing, and understanding

¹ The long careers of Marker and Varda themselves bear witness of the latter half of the twentieth century and the dawn of the new millennium. Marker’s earliest release was *Olympus 52* (1952), and Varda most recently released *Les Plages d’Agnès* in 2008.

the heterogeneous contemporary city, given the enormous changes undergone in the urban sphere during the postindustrial and postmodern age. Near contemporaries Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker all produced works in the latter half of the twentieth century and (except for Perec, who died in 1982) in the early years of the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the grouping of these individuals in this study may raise questions, since all four cannot easily be classified together in one movement or genre, and they operate in two different mediums, literature and film. Rather than focusing on a narrower topic (for instance, the city in French New Wave cinema), I bring together works that foreground the social and subjective experience of everyday urban space. These works compel us to think of city as space and as place, in contrast with, for example, an idealized Paris that has been constructed throughout a long history of literary, cinematic, cultural, and touristic romanticizations.

2. Four Urban Experimentalists: Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker

Through his writing, Georges Perec explored the void left by his parents' deaths in the Second World War, his father on the battlefield and his mother in a concentration camp. Many of Perec's works are explicitly autobiographical, most famously, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975). In other works, Perec addresses obliquely his deep sense of loss, as in *La Disparition* (1969), a lipogrammatic novel in which the letter "e" is entirely absent. Indeed, lipograms, palindromes, mathematical formulas, and other ludic elements mark another side of Perec's writing, influenced as he was by his membership in the experimental writing group Oulipo. Yet I focus on a different aspect of Perec's work: his fascination with everyday urban space. In *Everyday Life, Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (2006), Michael Sheringham calls Perec "the most resourceful explorer and

indefatigable champion of the everyday” (248). Perec shares this orientation with Annie Ernaux, Agnès Varda, and Chris Marker, who likewise explore the city from the vantage point of the everyday urban practitioner.

Annie Ernaux is known for her direct, minimalist, self-described “flat” style (“l’écriture plate”), although hers is a deceptive simplicity, in which the use of irony, cliché, and understatement betray a depth of emotion and intellectual thought (*La Place* 24). In her works, Ernaux’s attention to class divisions, politics, and identity in post-war and contemporary France brings to mind nineteenth-century social novels by such authors as Balzac and Zola. However, unlike the Realists from the previous century, Ernaux avoids the stance of the omniscient narrator. Rather, she offers autobiographical accounts of quotidian life that reveal her uneasy liminal position between her provincial lower-middle class origins and her intellectual status achieved through her education and writing career. Moreover, her narrative strategy subverts the tradition of the “objective,” masterful author by infusing her seemingly impersonal style with intimate details, and by foregrounding her sense of shared cultural identity. Two works by Ernaux published a couple of decades into her career, *Journal du dehors* (1993) and *La Vie extérieure* (2000) contain Ernaux’s most overt explorations of urban socio-spatial practices and politics. In these texts, Ernaux resembles Perec in her use of ostensibly straightforward language and her focus on quotidian details of daily life.

By placing filmmakers Agnès Varda and Chris Marker in my study alongside writers Perec and Ernaux, I aim not to argue for a somewhat problematic “auteur” theory of filmmaking, but rather to show that counter approaches to the city have occurred simultaneously in both literature and cinema in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Like

Ernaux, Agnès Varda focuses on the implications of class and gender positions in the contemporary city. Like Perec, Varda presents microscopic details of everyday urban life that conventionally would be omitted from accounts of the city. With innovative works predating the creative explosion of the French New Wave, Varda has experimented with form and representation since her debut release, *La Pointe courte* (1955). Her works range from fictional narratives to self-reflexive documentaries, from shorts to feature length films. From Varda's oeuvre, I have chosen to treat one fictional film, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), two short poetic essay films, *L'Opéra-Mouffe* (1958) and *Les Dites cariatides* (1984), and one documentary, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000). These four films illustrate a key point that Varda conveys through her representations of space: the city and the human body are mutually and discursively dependent and defining, and as such, the city is composed of embodied spaces.

Chris Marker fits easily with Varda, for throughout his career he remained her friend, colleague, and kindred cinematic spirit. With Perec and Ernaux, he also shares an interest in the unexplored aspects of everyday life, yet he takes a more overtly political approach. In Marker's films including *Le Joli mai* (1963) and *Chats perchés* (2004), the everyday city is a dialogic space comprised of voices in solidarity or discord. Despite his more political tone, I align Marker with Perec, Ernaux, and Varda because of his similar conception of city space not as a mere container for everyday life events and activities, but rather as a social and political construct realized perpetually through quotidian practices.

3. Defining "Experiment" and "Experience"

The selected works by Perec, Varda, Ernaux, and Marker are not only literary and

filmic texts, but also the results of experimental projects conducted on the city streets. These authors at once celebrate, question, transgress, and even subvert everyday urban life through the dual endeavor of representing quotidian routines and rhythms in the city, and experimenting with the very urban practices that they set out to document. By “experiment,” I mean to refer to two main qualities of the works in my study. First, the texts and films that I have selected are experimental in that they play with literary and cinematic form and genre, thereby testing new methods of representation. For example, Perec uses lists and descriptions distilled to their basic elements, which, among other things, communicate a sense of immediacy of experience. In *Journal du dehors* (1993) and *La Vie extérieure* (2000), Ernaux adopts the diary form only to upend it by writing about what she notices in the outside world rather than reflecting on her emotions and experiences. In Varda’s works, a formal interest in photography and cinematography combines with self-reflexive strategies, as well as a concern for the underprivileged and the underrepresented, to create a distinctive cinematic voice. Chris Marker’s experimental films also feature innovative camera work and editing. For instance, *Le Joli mai* (1962) includes lengthy shots with handheld cameras that allow the subjects to voice their thoughts and hopes, yet the film also contains montages that serve to question or comment on the interviewees’ assertions. These brief examples of experimentation in the works of Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker touch on some of the innovative means by which these writers and filmmakers challenge conventions in their medium and address problems of representation. In this study, I focus on the implications of this experimentation for these four individuals’ representations of the contemporary city.

It is worth noting that “expérience” in French carries not only the meaning of its English cognate, but also translates as “experiment.” This duality speaks to the inherent

connection between the conscious experiment and the resulting experience. The works in my study by Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker amount to “projects” – self-reflexive, programmatic experiments – as described by Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham in their introduction to the collection *The Art of the Project* (2005). As Gratton and Sheringham explain:

Rather than responding to the stirrings of inspiration, or meeting the demands of a finished product, contemporary cultural practices often involve setting up experiments, taking soundings, carrying out sets of instructions or sticking to carefully elaborated programmes. The ‘work’ made available to the reader/viewer is then very often an account of the project or experiment, the record or trace of its success or failure, its consistency with or deviation from its initial premises. As often as not, such projects and experiments involve ‘self-implication,’ putting oneself in the frame or on the line: the writer/artist is physically, intellectually, existentially implicated in the execution and dissemination of the work. (1)

I use the term “experience” also to highlight the focus of Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker on the city as it is practiced and perceived in everyday life. The aim of these four writers and filmmakers is not to capture the essence of the city or to make overarching claims about its nature. Rather, they focus on the city as it is used and “experienced” physically, emotionally, socially, and politically by the contemporary subject.

While the city has played a key role in French literature for centuries, particularly in nineteenth-century realist works by Balzac, Zola, and others, contemporary experimentalists including Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker resist romantic and metaphorical representations of the city. Rather, their approaches to their urban surroundings invite us to question the very notions of the city and the everyday. Indeed, these experimentalists move beyond the nineteenth-century model of the detached, man-in-the-crowd urban spectator, quintessentially demonstrated in the Paris poetry of Charles Baudelaire. Their personal and self-reflexive engagement with the city involves interrogation as well as documentation. This dual act of

documentation-interrogation is characterized by experiments in methods of observation of and movement throughout the city. Consequently, these authors and filmmakers become performers in urban space as well as witnesses to it. The performative role that they adopt calls for a re-examination of the authorial stance, indeed, of the *distance* claimed by the nineteenth-century poets and novelists. In fact, as I show in subsequent chapters, Perec, Varda, Ernaux, and Marker each in their own way present a foil to the nineteenth-century urban spectator trope. Perec may rely heavily on vision to represent aspects of the urban landscape, but his many references across his works to visual obstructions and insufficiencies emphasize his situatedness, and vision becomes not a tool of mastery but rather an embodied and imperfect means of attempting to grasp everyday reality through its minute details. Despite her urban wanderings in *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*, Ernaux differs antithetically from the Baudelairian *flâneur* in her acknowledgement that she cannot help but read the city and its people through the lens of her particular social and cultural position. Varda engages directly with Baudelaire through quotations from his poetry in the voice-over to *Les Dites cariatides*. Despite her apparent affection for Baudelaire, Varda's humanization of the female figures in her film stands in contrast to Baudelaire's objectifying gaze. Marker similarly rejects such objectification by allowing his camera to document and even encourage dialogue in the urban sphere, so that the city becomes a site of communication and resistance rather than one of nostalgia and spectacle.

4. Intersections Between Literature, Film, and Theory

The primary factor motivating my selection of texts and films for this study is the role of the city in the work. All of my chosen works feature the city, not as a backdrop, but as a

focal point, and each one offers a distinct account of the city. This is not a metaphorical city, a city as character or anthropomorphism. While the authors and filmmakers endeavor to make sense of the contemporary city, they have no ambition to present a totalizing or essentialized account of it, and thus they steer clear of any grand urban narrative. Indeed, the works all tend to offer a fragmented, sometimes paradoxical view of the contemporary city highlighting subjective and collective urban experiences. These are all hybrid texts, combining styles and discourses, which can generally be likened to the literary essay or even ethnographic writing.

In the works in this study, the authors and filmmakers position themselves within urban space, which becomes both the subject represented and the terrain upon which their literary and filmic experiments unfold. This allows for a new perspective on the “city-text,” one in which the city is not so much an accumulation of signs to be interpreted as it is a space in which the actions of its inhabitants constitute its perpetual writing and re-writing. This city is constructed as much from the social practices and networks of everyday life as from its architecture and topography. Consequently, I avoid a city-as-text metaphor, since my concern is not with how we read a supposedly legible city space, but rather with how we construct and experience it through everyday practices.

Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker offer unique urban visions, yet they also demonstrate recent reorientations in conceptualizing the city. Since the 1970s, social theory and cultural geography have undergone a spatial turn based on humanistic values. Focus has shifted onto the lived experience of the everyday city, not for the purpose of defining and generalizing about the city, but in order to explore the complex relationships that characterize urban experience in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. This shift follows

from Michel Foucault's characterization of contemporary space as heterogeneous, made up of networks and relations that cannot simply be analyzed in terms of history unfolding in a linear and cyclical progression.² The works of two major theorists of everyday life, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, are equally important to changing views of space and the city. Lefebvre influenced a new generation of urban theorists with his view of space as a social product, and, conversely, his emphasis on the spatiality of social relations.³ For his part, de Certeau characterizes everyday life as an endless collection of spontaneous and potentially liberating practices. He argues that activities such as consumption are not, as conventionally viewed, passive responses to the forces of institutionalized power. Rather, these everyday practices offer the individual infinite possibilities for playful and subversive resistance to social hegemony.⁴ In their social and material accounts of urban space and its

² "The space in which we live [...is...] in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another." (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," English translation [1986] of the French article "Des espaces autres," published in 1984 and based on a 1967 lecture.)

³ In *The Production of Space* (1974), Lefebvre explains that "social space" is physical space superimposed with "successive stratified and tangled networks which, though always material in form, have an existence beyond their materiality: paths, roads, railways, telephone links, and so on. [...] Each network or series of links - and thus each space - serves exchange and use in specific ways. Each is *produced* - and serves a purpose; and each wears out or is consumed, sometimes unproductively, sometimes productively" (403; emphasis in the original). Lefebvre goes on to say: "Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space" (404).

⁴ In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984, translated from the French edition *L'Invention du quotidien* [1980], de Certeau explains: "In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called 'consumption' and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of its circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless, but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?), but in an art of using those imposed on it" (31).

practitioners, both Lefebvre and de Certeau resist a reductionist view of the city as a series of signs or representations waiting to be read and deciphered.

Drawing inspiration from Foucault, Lefebvre, and de Certeau, I argue that contemporary literary and filmic representations of the city call for new methods of criticism that move beyond nineteenth-century modernist models and twentieth-century semiological approaches. In making my case, I include but also venture beyond the poststructuralist theories of Foucault, Lefebvre, and de Certeau in order to explore the applicability of recent scholarship in urban theory and cultural geography (which, incidentally, draws ideas and influence from poststructuralism and phenomenology, as well as feminism, postcolonialism, and other strands of postmodern critical theory). For instance, in *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), Edward Soja makes a case for the foregrounding of space in geography and social theory, which he claims have subjugated space to historical concerns.⁵ Similarly, Doreen Massey argues “for space” (indeed, this is the title of her 2005 book), calling on us to question our assumptions about space in order better to understand the role of spatial imaginaries in politics, globalization, and even cities. In her influential book *Feminism and Geography* (1993), Gillian Rose takes geography to task for its exclusion of women and their concerns, and also for its dualistic thinking that separates space along familiar gendered lines. Soja, Massey, and Rose are but a few of the cultural geographers whose ideas shed light on the representations of space and the city in works by Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker.

⁵ In *Postmodern Geographies*, Soja acknowledges his debt to Foucault, observing that he “buried his precursory spatial turn in brilliant whirls of historical insight” and that his most significant ideas about space, time, and history are to be found in lesser known interviews and lectures, including “Of Other Spaces” (16).

As I examine the intersections of social theory, geography, literature, and film, I operate from the belief that the literary and filmic works in my study contain not only representations but also philosophical explorations of the city. I take my cue from Ben Highmore, author of *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* (2005), who acknowledges his own debt to Roland Barthes for an approach to analyzing the city in literature, art, and film that involves “treating cultural texts not as texts *requiring* analysis but as *analytic* texts” (Highmore’s emphasis). Highmore adds that while he does not adopt Barthes’s semiological approach, he does “share his methodological incentives: namely, the refusal to find ‘theory and method’ only in the academy; the serious consideration of literary and artistic work as sophisticated ethnographic material; and the desire to multiply accounts of the city” (xiii). In the spirit of Highmore, I propose that works by Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker offer rich contributions to contemporary thinking about the city and spatial practices.

5. Chapter Themes and Overview

Rather than looking at one urban theme or metaphor across all of the authors’ and filmmakers’ works (such as the metro or the *flâneur*), I have identified for each of them one aspect of the everyday urban experience that I argue best characterizes their vision of the contemporary city. In the works of Georges Perec, I examine the quotidian, “infraordinary” elements that make up Perec’s Paris of the 1970s and early 1980s. Annie Ernaux’s city is remarkable for its “transpersonal” quality based on collective experience and cultural codes. In her films, Agnès Varda demonstrates that cities are embodied spaces and explores the transgressions of certain non-conforming body types in the public sphere. Chris Marker’s

films contain a polyphonic quality that illustrates the multiplicity of voices and rhythms that at various times function either to perpetuate or to disrupt the routines of the everyday city, bolstering or challenging social and political hegemony. My goal in this study is not to come up with a vision of the city encapsulating all four of the individuals' works and representing a larger trend in contemporary French literature and film. Rather, I aim for a multifaceted understanding of the everyday urban experience that speaks to the heterogeneity and diversity of the contemporary city.

Chapter 2 of this study is devoted to Georges Perec, whose concept of the “infraordinary” in city spaces is a key aspect of all of the works in my dissertation. Perec’s pioneering explorations of everyday life have influenced countless authors, artists, and thinkers, from Patrick Modiano to Paul Auster to Sophie Calle and beyond. His treatment of the quotidian as a valid literary subject is revoiced by Ernaux, Varda, and Marker. Moreover, his attention to the lived experience of city space corresponds with key concerns of many contemporary urban theorists and cultural geographers who have moved away from studying the city of urban planners and architects in order to concentrate on what geographer Phil Hubbard describes as “the *textures* of the city,” particularly “those created through the social practices of the everyday” (Hubbard’s emphasis, 95). Over the course of Chapter 2, I demonstrate how Perec reimagines everyday urban spaces by inverting conceptual hierarchies of scale.

In Chapter 3, I examine Annie Ernaux’s *Journal du dehors* (1993) and *La Vie extérieure* (2000). Neither fictional nor autobiographical, Ernaux’s *journaux extimes* resist definitive categorization as they move between narrative, description, and commentary. In both texts, Ernaux describes a dynamic of urban intersubjectivity, whereby she explores her

own subjectivity through encounters with anonymous others in the city. Her notion of a transpersonal subject refers to a form of self-awareness beyond the personal, a subject constructed from markers of identity that are understood culturally and experienced collectively. In my reading of Ernaux's *journaux extimes*, I demonstrate that neither Ernaux's city nor her subject can be grasped as a discrete and autonomous entity, that both are "transpersonal" in her sense of the term. Just as Ernaux's narrator is traversed by other subjects, so, too, does her city extend beyond its marked boundaries. With this in mind, I reject the oppositional and hierarchical vision of a Paris/suburbs dichotomy in favor a more nuanced and fluid understanding of the postmodern metropolis.

Like Ernaux, Agnès Varda explores how gender and class affect the individual's experience of the contemporary city. In Chapter 4, I consider Varda's treatment of socio-economic and gender inequality as manifested in discourses about the body. In films from different points in her career, I look closely at her representations of culturally transgressive bodies – including her own – that contest social and spatial boundaries in the everyday city.

Chris Marker's poetic docu-essay films are notable for their inclusion of a vast array of voices and experimental montages resisting easy interpretation. The voices and rhythms that Marker captures, as well as those that he creates, give the impression of a polyphonic city. Yet quotidian rhythms and routines are often disrupted in his films, especially by dissident cries heard on the streets during protests and other moments of political resistance. In Chapter 5, I make the case that the dialogic and polyphonic city that emerges in Marker's *Le Joli Mai* and *Chats perchés* demonstrates the heterogeneity of contemporary urban space.

6. A Geocritical Approach

The validity of interdisciplinary research needs no defense in an age when divisions between disciplines are often obscured as scholars increasingly look beyond their own fields and discourses. Nonetheless, so as to elucidate my approach, I wish to explain some of my reasons for exploring the intersections between cultural geography and the works of Perec, Ernaux, Varda and Marker. By analyzing contemporary French literature and film in light of recent theories in cultural geography, I aim to present an original perspective while grounding my arguments in relevant scholarship. This is a unique and largely untested approach to the authors and filmmakers whom I have chosen to study.

However, this sort of interdisciplinary study of literature is not without some precedent. Alison Blunt has detailed some of the “interfaces” between cultural geography and the humanities (73). She explains that recent humanistic geographers engaging with poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial theory have turned to literature, art, and performance in order to explore questions about identity and power relations in geographical spaces (75). Blunt maintains that literary theorists have likewise made use of geography in addressing similar questions. As an example, Blunt cites Edward Said in his study of Orientalist fantasies in literature and their political consequences in the material world. Blunt is clearly more familiar with geographers using literature than literary theorists using geography, as is evidenced by the fact that Said is her only example of the latter. This begs the question as to the prevalence of literary studies that incorporate cultural geography. Hubbard et al. note that, despite a “spatial turn” in the object of study in disciplines including sociology, cultural studies, and literary studies, “geography seems to borrow far more than it is borrowed from” (59). This indeed appears to be the case, as scholars of contemporary French literature and film have been slow to delve into the rich resources offered by cultural

geography.

Nonetheless, a few notable works make the case for not merely “borrowing” from one discipline to serve the other, but instead marrying literature and geography in critical inquiry. In *Des Romans-géographes* (1996), Marc Brosseau offers insightful literary analysis from a geographer’s perspective. His goal to create a “dialogue” between literature and geography through his readings of contemporary novels (as opposed to the nineteenth-century realist ones that he asserts are typically favored by his fellow geographers) signifies an important initial step in bringing the two disciplines together.

Bernard Westphal has proposed an approach he calls “géocritique,” which he outlines in several publications including *La Géocritique: Mode d’emploi* (2000), *La Géocritique: réel, fiction, espace* (2007), and *Le Monde plausible: espace, lieu, carte* (2011). Westphal asserts that his geocriticism is novel for its union of literature and geography, but he emphasizes the expansive nature of his approach, one that encompasses more than just the two domains: “Par ses affinités avec certains pans de la philosophie, de la psychanalyse, de la géographie humaine, de l’anthropologie, de la sociologie, et des sciences politiques (en particulier de la géopolitique), la géocritique est interdisciplinaire” (*La Géocritique: mode* 18). He argues that the analysis of literature in terms of its connections with geography rather than simply its representations of particular spaces is overdue:

N’est-il pas temps [...] de songer à articuler la littérature autour de ses relations à l’espace, de promouvoir une *géocritique* poétique dont l’objet serait non pas l’examen des représentations de l’espace en littérature, mais plutôt celui des *interactions* entre espaces humains et littérature, et l’un des enjeux majeurs une contribution à la détermination/indétermination des identités culturelles? (*La Géocritique: mode* 17; emphases in original)

Putting aside Westphal’s perhaps unnecessary justification of his approach as a means of examining questions of cultural identity, his call for a more rigorous and informed

examination of geographical space in literature corresponds with my objectives in this dissertation. My approach, however, differs from the one proposed by Westphal in a couple of notable ways. First, I do not accept what I perceive to be too neat a distinction (one that might even be considered a binary opposition) between *representations of* and *interactions with* space in literature. To the extent that Westphal is warning against a superficial reading of literary spaces, I concede his point. However, I maintain throughout my study that representation is not necessarily a means of fixing or minimizing the dynamism of space. I aim, in fact, to demonstrate the opposite in the texts and films that I have chosen, in which experimental techniques of representation demonstrate the vitality and heterogeneity of space, so that analyzing representations and examining interactions are one and the same.

The second way in which I diverge from Westphal's manner of geocriticism is that I analyze the works within the context of authorship, an approach that Westphal rejects, preferring to begin with a particular space and then incorporating relevant literature:

L'enjeu principal de la géocritique n'est pas d'assurer la médiation vers une œuvre désignée. La géocritique permet d'abord de cerner la dimension littéraire des lieux, de dresser une cartographie fictionnelle des espaces humain [...] Tenter une approche géocritique à travers l'étude d'un seul texte, ou d'un seul auteur, serait périlleux" (34).

My division of this study into chapters based on individual authors and filmmakers should not be interpreted as an outdated attempt to penetrate the essential style, psyche, or psychology of those individuals, with space used as the vehicle to do so. Rather, I privilege the spaces and places themselves in a manner that corresponds with the spirit, if not the letter, of Westphal's geocritical approach. Although I emphasize in each of the authors' and filmmakers' oeuvres certain themes and motifs (the body in Varda's works, for example) that demonstrate literary, aesthetic, and personal preoccupations, I do so in order to broach larger

socio-spatial questions (in Varda's case, the notion of embodiment in space).

Robert T. Tally Jr. comes closest to expressing my own idea of an effective and productive geocritical approach. A scholar of English literature, Tally promotes his particular understanding of geocriticism, which he sees as broader than Westphal's notion. Tally explains: "Geocriticism or spatial critical theory [...] is broadly understood to include both aesthetics and politics, as elements in a constellation of interdisciplinary methods designed to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the ever-changing spatial relations that determine our current, postmodern, world" (113). He maintains that through its focus on space, geocriticism can provide insights that could be missed by other methods of literary analysis: "As a way to analyze literary texts, but also as an approach to social criticism, geocriticism can perhaps uncover hidden relations of power in those other spaces that a critical theory less attuned to spatiality might well overlook" (114). Instances of spatialized power relations permeate the texts and films of my study, and the authors and filmmakers attempt through commentary and formal experimentation to expose and disrupt social and political hegemony found in everyday urban spaces.

Related to geocriticism but not necessarily placed under its theoretical umbrella are explorations of "mapping" in literature and film, that is, the manner in which a text maps out the spaces that it represents, often countering the official maps of colonizers and other forces of domination. Mapping informs our imaginaries of the places in a text and attempts to make them legible. This approach owes its debt to Kevin Lynch's innovative work in *The Image of the City*, in which he maintains that individuals negotiate cities by forming mental maps and representations of the spaces that they traverse. Notable studies of mapping in French and Francophone literature and film include Tom Conley's *Cartographic Cinema* and a volume

of French Literature Series essays entitled *Geo/Graphies: Mapping the Imagination in French and Francophone Literature and Film*. These studies are relevant to my research to the extent that they explore issues of power relations in topographies. Rather than regarding the map as a metaphor linking together signs and symbols, I propose to foreground the lived cartographies of the subject in urban space. Geographers including Denis Wood and John Pickles have produced notable works on the politics of map-making and the development of counter approaches to mapping.⁶ The alternative mappings by these and other geographers offer intriguing possibilities in literary analysis for rethinking the relationship between cartographic representations and the social and political forces that influence everyday spatial practices.

Since its cultural turn in the 1970s, geography has drawn upon many of the same theory used in literary criticism. In an effort to develop a more people-centered and philosophically critical approach, cultural geographers have looked beyond their discipline to poststructuralism, Marxist humanism, phenomenology, feminism, postcolonialism, and other major currents in contemporary critical theory. Moreover, the theories of everyday life of such thinkers as Lefebvre, de Certeau, and Foucault found in literary studies by scholars including Sheringham and Schilling have also resonated with urban geographers. Hubbard details the influence of these Marxist humanist thinkers on geographical studies of the everyday city, citing as an example the adoption of de Certeau's views on scopic power by cultural geographers including Gillian Rose and Nigel Thrift (100).

Yet cultural geography is relevant to the works in my study not simply because these

⁶ Some of these works include: Denis Wood, *The Power of Maps* (1992) and *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (2006); John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping and the Geo-Coded World* (2004).

geographers make use of some of the same critical theory found in literary criticism. In fact, cultural geographers also raise similar ideas and describe analogous experiences as those found in the works of Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker. This overlapping includes a constant negotiation through writing/filmmaking between objective and subjective accounts of space, place, and the city. In addition, the authors, filmmakers, and geographers in my study all reject an essentialist and dualistic view of space and place, asserting that space is not an abstract realm, and place not simply a delimited site for human activity. Rather, they regard space and place in relational terms as the products and intersections of social, cultural, affective, and political forces. Thrift, for one, argues for a dynamic perspective, that is:

...an idea of space as undergoing continual construction exactly through the agency of things encountering each other in more or less organized circulations. This is a *relational* view of space in which, rather than space being viewed as a container within which the world proceeds, space is seen as a co-product of these proceedings. ("Space," 96)

Doreen Massey makes a similar assertion as she rejects a reductive view of space:

The imagination of space as a surface on which we are placed, the turning of space into time, the sharp separation of local place from the space out there; these are all ways of taming the challenge that the inherent spatiality of the world presents. (*For Space*, 7)

In my examination of their literary and cinematic works, I aim to show how Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker make a similar break with a static view of space by representing the city as a product of everyday, social practices and processes. Through this geocritical approach, we can better understand both the specific innovations of Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker within contemporary French expression, and the general contributions they make to our understanding of the postmodern city.

CHAPTER 2

GEORGES PEREC'S INFRAORDINARY CITY

1. Perec's Infra-Spatial Texts

Postwar French novelist and essayist Georges Perec produced a diverse body of innovative work before his untimely death from cancer in 1982 at the age of 45. In his 1978 *Le Figaro* article “Notes sur ce que je cherche,” Perec voiced a bold ambition: “parcourir toute la littérature de mon temps sans jamais avoir le sentiment de revenir sur mes pas ou de remarcher dans mes propres traces, et d’écrire tout ce qui est possible à un homme d’aujourd’hui d’écrire” (11). Rather than retracing his steps, Perec demonstrated creative mobility as he shifted between styles and genres. The one indisputable constant throughout his career was a playful pushing of the limits of literary forms and categories. He achieved this in part through constrained methods of writing as espoused by the avant-garde Oulipo group.⁷ His many short and long works span genres from detective fiction to autobiography and include novels, essays, poems, and even crossword puzzles. Despite the diversity of his output, Perec described his work as falling into four main categories, or better yet, “modes d’interrogation”: sociological, autobiographical, ludic, and fictional (“Notes sur ce que je

⁷ Perec was recruited by writer Raymond Queneau to join Oulipo in 1967 (Bellos 363). Still in existence today, Oulipo (short for “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle”) seeks new forms of writing through the application of literary constraints, often based on mathematical formulas. For instance, one of the most famous Oulipean texts, Perec’s lipogrammic novel *La Disparition* (1969), was written without a single use of the letter “e.”

cherche” 10). However, Perec was the first to admit that this division was rather arbitrary (“quelque peu arbitraire”) since most of his works contained autobiographical details and were subjected to some sort of playful Oulipian constraint (10-11).

Most pertinent to my study are those works that Perec qualifies as “sociological,” a series of short experimental nonfiction texts published mostly in literary and cultural journals during the early to mid 1970s. In these works, Perec endeavors to register and understand social phenomena, but his “sociology” is, as one would expect, more poetic than scientific. Yet underlying his approach is a perspective that resonates with recent criticisms and redefinitions of the sociological field. Sociologist John Urry emphasizes “movement, mobility and contingent ordering rather than [...] stasis, structure and social ordering” as he redefines his discipline in terms of the emergent quality of space and social relations. As we shall see in *Espèces d’espaces* (1974) and *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* (1975), Perec too focuses on mobilities, be they the shifting meanings ascribed to lived spaces or the perpetual movements of bodies and objects that he observes in the urban landscape. Moreover, self-references and autobiographical elements render Perec’s texts positionally reflexive. Likewise, recent attempts have been made in geography and other social sciences to demonstrate that knowledge about space and society is always situated, and thus the observer brings her own experience to bear on the object of inquiry (Gregory; Haraway; Pile and Thrift). Although Perec stops short of examining the politics of his positionality, the self-reflexivity of his epistemological approach offers a poetic challenge to the objectivist and positivist stance of traditional Western scientific surveys of space.

Rather than maintaining the ambiguous term “sociological,” I opt in this study to refer to the works in question as Perec’s “infra-spatial” texts. My neologism alludes both to

Perec's concept of the "infraordinary" (which I examine in later pages of this chapter) and to his close attention to small, lived spaces of everyday life. I have narrowed my investigation to three texts that best demonstrate Perec's attention to the infraordinary of everyday urban spaces. In the short essay "Approches de quoi?" (1973), Perec presents his case for the infraordinary, critiquing sensationalist journalism before proposing a method of inquiry that focuses on banal objects and practices that better typify quotidian reality. This approach emerges in two texts wherein Perec explicitly engages with urban space, *Espèces d'espaces* (1974), a book of essays contemplating a range of spaces from small to vast, and *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (1975), a sixty page account of his close observation of daily activity in a city square. In my treatment of these texts, I argue that Perec's experimental techniques allow for a reimagining of urban spaces in three main ways. First, he undoes spatial hierarchies that favor large, alienating spaces as he promotes engagement with the spaces of everyday experience. Second, he challenges conventional thinking about space and the city by offering counter-images that invite us to rethink not only how space is lived and invested with meaning, but also how it is represented in literature and popular discourse. Third, in these texts Perec offers a model for a new form of representation and observation that better captures the relational and heterogeneous nature of (city) space.

In recent years, critics have begun to acknowledge the significance of Perec's nonfiction essays, not as digressions from his major novels, but rather as signposts in his literary career and, in a larger sense, as contributions to twentieth-century cultural and philosophical discourse. Michael Sheringham, for one, places Perec amongst Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, and Michel de Certeau as influential theorists of everyday life (*Everyday Life* 5-6). Central to Perec's exploration of the quotidian is his concept of the infraordinary.

The sheer innovation of this concept and the novel manner in which he documents infraordinary details have been noted by Gilbert Adair and elaborated by Sheringham, Schilling, and James. Yet connections between Perec's concentration on the infraordinary and his reimagining of urban space remain largely unexamined. In critical treatments of Perec's infraordinary texts, the city tends to be of secondary importance to other topics, such as everyday life (Sheringham, Schilling), perception (James, Veivo), and memory. This latter topic has been investigated by critics including Lejeune, Bertharion, Schilling, Huglo, and Reggiani in their analyses of Perec's abandoned "Lieux" project, for which he set out to describe twelve personally significant places in Paris, two per month, one on site and the other from memory. As these critics have shown, the fragility of memory and the search for personal *lieux de mémoire* are central to the "Lieux" project, as evidenced by the excerpts published by Perec as well as in unpublished, archived ones. I have opted not to examine these texts because questions surrounding memory are beyond the scope of my study, which concentrates rather on Perec's representations of the everyday, embodied city. My ultimate goal in this study is to foreground the dynamism of the city and urban/spatial practices in Perec's texts through close readings informed by relational understandings of space, in which space is understood not as a container for human activity, but rather as produced and reproduced by those practices as physical and social bodies come in contact with one another.

The three works by Perec that I have chosen for my study demonstrate many of the challenges of representing space in general and the city in particular. Geographer Doreen Massey argues that prevalent conceptions of space reveal "just how *little*, actually, space is thought about explicitly," and that essentialized views of space and place amount to a sort of

“failure (deliberate or not) of spatial imagination” (*For Space* 7-8; emphasis in the original). She wonders: “What happens if we try to let go of those, by now almost intuitive, understandings?” (8). In a sense, Perec is seeking to answer the very same question. In *Espèces d’espaces*, he plays with received notions of space, as when he uses them as structuring devices that he proceeds to subvert, thereby allowing for alternative ways of imagining space. Since Perec’s spaces in his infra-spatial texts are predominantly urban, the city becomes the particular example of the representational challenges posed by space. The qualities of the city that Perec highlights most notably in *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* - its dynamism and multiplicity - are more broadly attributable to space. Perec’s interrogations of city space thus serve as “case studies” of his larger project of capturing the realities of space and everyday life.

2. Space and Everyday Life in Perec’s Works

It is in his infra-spatial texts, particularly *Espèces d’espaces* and *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*, that Perec engages most noticeably with questions about space in general and urban space in particular. As Derek Schilling has noted, these and other works from the same period mark a spatial turn in Perec’s writing (*Mémoires* 104). This is not to suggest that representations of space in Perec’s previous works are infrequent or unimportant. His early novels notably contain scenes of urban wanderings. The protagonists of *Les Choses* (1965) traverse Paris in search of the material pleasures of urban consumer culture. *Un Homme qui dort* (1967) features a university student who abandons his studies for a life of detachment, drifting aimlessly through the Paris streets at night. In both works, the urges of the main characters drive them onto the streets. Consequently, their

perambulations reconfigure the city to suit their compulsions. These two novels reveal Perec's engagement with city space from the very beginning of his writing career.

Conversely, Perec's "spatial turn" in his infra-spatial texts does not result in a singular focus on space in his late works. *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) comprises parallel and alternating threads: the autobiographical account of his childhood in Paris following the death of his parents during the Holocaust, and the dystopian narrative of the fictional island of W, finally revealed to be a concentration camp. The intermingling of autobiographical and imaginary details, along with descriptions of real, invented, and allegorical places, reminds us that Perec's spaces are infused with personal and novelistic concerns. His masterpiece *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978) reads as both a collection of stories about the inhabitants of a fictional Parisian apartment block and an exercise in Oulipian constraints, with an elaborate mathematical organization and a narrative progression through the apartments that imitates the trajectory of a knight on a chess board. While this and other novels indicate that the city plays a complex role in works throughout Perec's oeuvre, it is nonetheless the case that Perec's short nonfiction texts tend to interrogate more directly and overtly the spaces that they represent. The city becomes a principal subject of interrogation in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* and *Espèces d'espaces* not only discursively but also performatively, as Perec performs urban interventions in order to reimagine his everyday surroundings.

As Perec notes, the texts than he calls "sociological" primarily address ways of looking at everyday life ("comment regarder le quotidien") ("Notes" 10). This task is made difficult by the hiddenness of everyday life, for its familiarity and banality have made us inattentive to it ("Approches" 11). Through his attempts to grasp the ever elusive quotidian, Perec

demonstrates also that everyday life necessarily occurs in space, and that the everyday subject is thus a spatialized subject. Everyday life and space are, in fact, co-constitutive: space is a product of everyday practices which themselves are spatially contingent. This dialectical process was first explored by Henri Lefebvre in *La Production de l'espace* (1974), published in English translation in 1991 and thereby revolutionizing Anglo-American cultural geography. A preeminent thinker on both space and everyday life, Lefebvre coupled these two within his concept of “social space.” Space, he argued, is the product of social actions (*The Production of Space* 26). This does not deny the existence of “natural space” but rather complicates it, since nature cannot be imagined separately from its human interventions (30-31). Social space is produced through both political forces seeking to dominate and order space (and hence its subjects); and the everyday practices of users who appropriate lived space for their own imaginative ends (38-39). This notion of a “perceived-conceived-lived triad” resonates with Perec’s exploration of the tensions between dominant spatial representations and our lived, bodily experiences of everyday spaces.

Perec’s central challenge in his infra-spatial texts deals as much with how to represent space as with how to represent everyday life. In fact, he makes this connection explicit in his comments on the cover flap of *Espèces d'espaces*: “Le problème n’est pas d’inventer l’espace, encore moins de le ré-inventer ... mais de l’interroger, ou, plus simplement encore, de le lire; car ce que nous appelons quotidienneté n’est pas évidence, mais opacité: une forme de cécité, une manière d’anesthésie.” Space and everyday life are opaque and difficult to represent for the same reasons: we take them both for granted as underlying more notable, historic events. This aspect of everyday life informs Perec’s critique of news media in “Approches de quoi?” According to Perec, daily news reports focus on sensational events

and are thus disconnected from our real, lived experience of everyday life. In *Espèces d'espaces*, Perec contests more faulty understandings of everyday life while turning his attention to essentialized conceptions of particular spaces. The very organization of *Espèces d'espaces* sets up the book as a challenge to assumptions about space. Perec categorizes the spaces of his book according to a conventional notion of scale before undermining those divisions by showing the artificiality and social construction of spatial borders, labels, and hierarchies. He goes on to question various forms of representation, including the map, in order to denaturalize hegemonic representations of space. In both “Approches de quoi?” and *Espèces d'espaces*, Perec proposes alternative methods of observing and representing everyday life. This counter-approach, based on scrutinizing “infraordinary” details normally dismissed as banal, becomes the *modus operandi* of *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (1974), a poetic transcription of everyday life witnessed in a public square. This Parisian *place*, the titular “lieu,” takes on a radically new identity by virtue of Perec’s emphasis on the multiplicity and variability of the people, actions, and objects of the urban landscape.

3. “Approches de quoi?” Perec’s Case for the Infraordinary

A productive starting point for examining Perec’s representations of everyday life and spaces is “Approches de quoi?” which first appeared in the February 1973 issue of the literary and philosophical journal *Cause commune*. Characterized by straightforward language and a persuasive style, “Approches de quoi?” is part media critique and part plan of action for a new manner of representing real life. Perec begins by articulating the difficulties of capturing everyday life and making it intelligible. He then proposes a counter-approach to

conventional, illusory representations of the real that pervade popular discourse. He distinguishes between the notable events featured in daily news reports and the common everyday events that escape our attention but are more illuminating of our collective experience. He seeks to explore the latter by according to micro-events a degree of attention commensurate with their central role in our lives.

Perec begins his essay by criticizing daily news media for failing to represent our true experience of everyday life: “Les journaux parlent de tout, sauf du journalier” (10). Rather than addressing what really happens in day-to-day life, news media focus on unusual and morbid events: derailed trains, hijacked airplanes, political scandals, and generally speaking, the spectacular (9-10). The exclusion in the media of non-sensational events implies their inexistence. Trains and cars, for instance, are only part of the mediatized quotidian when they derail or crash into trees (9). Perec offers a brief political criticism of the tendency to report on catastrophes rather than the conditions that led to them: “le scandale, ce n’est pas le grisou, c’est le travail dans les mines”; “Les ‘malaises sociaux’ ne sont pas ‘préoccupants’ en période de grève, ils sont intolérables vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre, trois cent soixante-cinq jours par an” (10). He attributes this focus on the extraordinary to our hastiness to determine the historical significance of events (“notre précipitation à mesurer l’historique, le significatif, le révélateur”) (10). In so doing, he calls into question what counts as history while also revealing media representations of events to be paradoxically ahistorical, excluding substantial consideration of context. Ultimately, media accounts seek to reassure us with a fatalistic sense of life as a series of ups and downs over which we have little control: “Le journal nous a-t-il dit autre chose que: soyez rassurés, vous voyez bien que la vie existe, avec ses hauts et ses bas, vous voyez bien qu’il se passe des choses” (10). Here Perec

does not speculate as to the motivations driving such a reductive account of life, but he does remind us that the information presented is a discursive construct.

Yet Perec does not ultimately strive to rethink history or expose social injustices, and his approach is not overtly ideological. Rather, he concerns himself with capturing the everyday in all its forms: “le banal, le quotidien, l’évident, le commun, l’ordinaire, l’infra-ordinaire, le bruit de fond, l’habituel” (11). Not only is all of this missing from the dominant media discourse, but it is more fundamental to everyday life, a point made evident by Perec’s query, “Ce qui se passe *vraiment*, ce que nous vivons, le reste, tout le reste, où est-il?” (11; emphasis added). Perec’s distinction between the extraordinary and infraordinary, between the banal and the event, merits discussion. At first glance, he appears to be reinforcing the binary opposition between history and everyday life that has resulted in widespread inattention to the latter. However, the opposition that Perec signals is not between the extraordinary and the infraordinary, but rather between that which is *deemed* extraordinary – the incomplete representation of an event, or perhaps even the re-presentation of an event in the form of an established narrative – and that which is left out – the everyday details that are less scandalous but more revelatory of the truth and circumstances of the event. In an interview in 1979 with Jean-Marie Le Sidaner, Perec describes his project in what he calls his “sociological” texts: “Il s’agit d’un déconditionnement: tenter de saisir, non ce que les discours officiels (institutionnels) appellent l’événement, l’important, mais ce qui est en dessous, l’infra-ordinaire, le bruit de fond qui constitue chaque instant de notre quotidienneté” (*Entretiens II* 94).

Despite Perec’s clear critique of “les discours officiels” for faulty representations of everyday life, he does not see this strictly as a matter of discursive deception. Rather, he

identifies a larger attentional phenomenon underlying our tendency to privilege the exceptional over the banal. Discussing the concept of “l’infra-ordinaire” in a 1978 interview with *Le Monde*, he observed: “On s’aperçoit que l’événement est ce qui casse cette espèce de tissu dans lequel on est pris. Par exemple, les gens commencent à se regarder le jour où le métro s’arrête entre deux stations” (*Entretiens I* 214). His main proposition in “Approches de quoi?” is that any accurate account of reality must include the habitual elements of daily life, since they are more central to our experience than exceptional events. Yet the regularity and familiarity of the habitual make it difficult to grasp. We fail to question it; indeed, we have become anesthetized to it. Consequently, we have ceased to grasp the materiality and spatiality of everyday lived experience: “Mais où est-elle, notre vie? Où est notre corps? Où est notre espace?” (11). Perec’s aim is thus to awaken us to the “infraordinary” not as an abstract concept, but as a feature of embodied experience.

The neologism “l’infra-ordinaire” did not originate with Perec, but rather was first proposed by the editors of *Cause commune*, who gave the double title of “l’infra-quotidien” and “l’infra-ordinaire” to the issue in which “Approches de quoi?” first appeared (Schilling, *Mémoires* 55). Nonetheless, the concept of the infraordinary has been so closely associated with Perec that a collection of his articles (including “Approches de quoi?”) was published posthumously in 1989 under the title *L’infra-ordinaire*. Regardless of its origins, the term encapsulates the microscopic attention to commonplace details that pervades Perec’s oeuvre. Neither *Espèces d’espaces* nor *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* contains mention of “l’infra-ordinaire,” yet in both Perec speaks synonymously about the notion: “ce qui n’a pas d’intérêt, le plus évident, le plus commun, le plus terne”; “ce que l’on ne note généralement pas, ce qui ne se remarque pas, ce qui n’a pas d’importance” (*Espèces d’espaces* 70;

Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien 12). Likewise, the final pages of "Approches de quoi?" contain a series of directives to examine and question that which seems given: "ce qui semble tellement aller de soi que nous en avons oublié l'origine" and "ce qui semble avoir cessé à jamais de nous étonner" (12). A few lines later, Perec gets slightly more specific, calling on us to interrogate all sorts of things: "la brique, le béton, le verre, nos manières de table, nos ustensiles, nos outils, nos emplois du temps, nos rythmes" (12). He envisions this interrogation taking place through such exercises as describing a street and comparing it to another, listing the contents of one's pockets, and contemplating the gestures required to dial a telephone number (12-13). As we shall see next, similar infraordinary exercises in *Espèces d'espaces* and *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* allow Perec to reimagine everyday spaces.

4. Reimagining Everyday Spaces in *Espèces d'espaces*

Commissioned by architect and theorist Paul Virilio for the Galilée series "L'espace critique," *Espèces d'espaces* (1974) is a "journal d'un usager de l'espace," as Perec refers to it on the front flap of the book. The search for the infraordinary as a means of reconceptualizing everyday spaces is central to *Espèces d'espaces*. Perec's comments in a 1979 interview establish a direct link between his propositions in "Approches de quoi?" and his techniques in *Espèces d'espaces*. He describes his task as a writer: "donner à voir, [...] demander aux gens de regarder, peut-être différemment, ce qu'ils sont habitués à voir" (*Entretiens* II, 59). He continues:

Espèces d'espaces vient de là: on m'a demandé de me définir par rapport à l'espace et j'ai essayé de décrire une ville comme si je la voyais pour la première fois de ma vie, comme un objet étrange et non comme un objet auquel on est tellement habitué, anesthésié, qu'on n'a plus de perception du

monde par l'événement, par le spectaculaire, le sensationnel. On ne regarde pas ce qui est l'ordinaire, ce qu'on appelle, dans *Cause commune*, 'l'infra-ordinaire.' (59)

What results from his infraordinary approach in *Espèces d'espaces* is an exploration of the problematic relations between representation and the lived experience of space. As 'un usager d'espace,' in both a literal and metaphorical sense, he contemplates the geographical and literary spaces that he inhabits. His prose contains first-person accounts of the inscription of social practices onto space while also exploring the influence of writing on our spatial imaginary. Nowhere in *Espèces d'espaces* does Perec theorize explicitly about space; nonetheless his observations reveal nuanced and dynamic views. The language itself stands in contrast with theoretical discourse, for his impressions are presented in accessible, unpretentious terms, prompting David Bellos to credit Perec with "invent[ing] a uniquely democratic literary style" (*Georges Perec* 532). The deceptive minimalism and simplicity of tone in *Espèces d'espaces* can be understood as a demonstration of the method proposed in "Approches de quoi?" of seeing the everyday differently by calling into question its most minute elements.

Perec names the chapters of *Espèces d'espaces* after various spaces, each one larger than the previous, from "le lit" to "la ville" to "le monde," and many others in between. This is a relationship of *emboîtement*, with each space nested inside its larger successor: "la rue" is contained within "le quartier," which in turn fits within "la ville." This structure is clearly an organizational strategy meant to, as Bellos puts it, "address the technical problem of fragmentation" in an experimental text lacking the framework that a conventional narrative would otherwise provide (*Georges Perec* 360). Yet the organization of *Espèces d'espaces* manages also to play upon certain received notions and images of space. At first glance, the

chapter progression would seem to conform to a traditional conception of scale that, until recently, has dominated geographical thinking aimed at making space legible by dividing it into manageable units. Geographer Andrew Herod describes this idea of scale as “a taken-for-granted concept used for imposing organizational order on the world” (230). One of the metaphors of scale that Herod identifies, Russian nesting dolls, also turns up in Perec scholar Claude Burgelin’s discussion of *Espèces d’espaces* (Herod 239; Burgelin 16). In this analogy, spaces are like a set of nesting dolls in that each one stands as a unique entity while at the same time forming part of a larger whole: the world comprised of continents, nations, states, cities, neighborhoods, and so on.

In general terms, the organization of space according to scale is problematic when it results from a hegemonic process that naturalizes and essentializes socio-spatial constructions, what Natter and Jones identify as “the structural impulse that undergrids the theorization of space as a stabilized and stabilizing product ... [that] result[s] in the *appearance* of totalization in the form of a structured coherence of space” (“Identity” 150; emphasis in the original). Moreover, organizing space according to scale frequently engenders a hierarchical ordering that subordinates the local to other, “larger” spaces, most particularly the global. In their essay “Beyond Global Vs. Local: Economic Politics Outside the Binary Frame,” feminist geographers Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham (writing together under the pen name J.K. Gibson-Graham) speak of “the denigration of the local as small and relatively powerless, defined and confined by the global” (27). Perec’s subversion of the principle of *emboîtement* in *Espèces d’espaces* destabilizes the hierarchy embedded in our notion of scale as organizing the spaces of our world. Just as the micro-event is neither inferior to nor isolated from the extraordinary event reported by the media, the local is not

subordinate to the global. If anything, Perec reverses the hierarchy, since he privileges the local in his interrogation of everyday life, examining the infraordinary in his immediate surroundings. This is reflected by a suggestion in “Approches de quoi?”: “Décrivez votre rue. Décrivez-en une autre. Comparez” (12). In *Espèces d’espaces*, Perec’s privileging of the local is one of the main ways in which he undermines the hegemony of scale. The bulk of his attention is placed on localized spaces, with some of the longest entries in *Espèces d’espaces* devoted to “L’appartement,” “La rue,” and “La ville.” His entry on Europe is comical in its brevity, reading simply “Une des cinq parties du monde” (102).

Another indication that Perec’s structure of *emboîtement* resists the ostensible hierarchy of scale is his curious inclusion of the Paul Éluard poem, “Chanson enfantine des Deux-Sèvres” near the beginning of *Espèces d’espaces*:

Dans Paris, il y a une rue;
 dans cette rue, il y a une maison;
 dans cette maison, il y a un escalier;
 dans cet escalier, il y a une chambre;
 dans cette chambre, il y a une table;
 sur cette table, il y a un tapis;
 sur ce tapis, il y a une cage;
 dans cette cage, il y a un nid;
 dans ce nid, il y a un œuf;
 dans cet œuf, il y a un oiseau;

L’oiseau renversa l’œuf;
 l’œuf renversa le nid;
 le nid renversa la cage;
 la cage renversa le tapis;
 le tapis renversa la table;
 la table renversa la chambre;
 la chambre renversa l’escalier;
 l’escalier renversa la maison;
 la maison renversa la rue;
 la rue renversa la ville de Paris. (16)

Like the spaces of *Espèces d'espaces*, the places and objects in Éluard's poem form a relationship of *emboîtement*, indicated by the progressive shift in scale and the repetition of the preposition "dans" in all but two lines. Yet the domino effect instigated by the bird emerging from the egg results ultimately in the *renversement* of the city of Paris, illustrating the force of the infraordinary (for the bird – an *espèce* if not an *espace* – is both "infra" and "ordinary") and Perec's "bottom-up" approach to understanding everyday life. His placement of this poem directly before the first entry of his nested spaces ("La page") signals that he aims to disturb commonplace understandings of these spaces. Just as the bird, the egg, and the rest overturn that which contains them, in the pages that follow Perec will turn upside down conventional notions of the spaces that we inhabit.

The gradual deconstruction of the *emboîtement* that structures his text demonstrates Perec's strategy for unsettling problematic assumptions about space. As Michael Sheringham explains:

... rather than indicating a subservience to pre-existent systems and ideologies, this logical orderliness flouts them all the more effectively as we recognise its arbitrariness, the way the order adopted merely provides a framework for a play of ideas generated from the interaction between inner needs and exigencies and outer constraints and pressures. (49)

Perec taps into shared, generalized understandings of particular spaces, using them as a starting point that orients the reader, but as he proceeds, he disorients the reader by de-essentializing the spaces in question. As we shall see, Perec accomplishes this mainly by showing the constructedness of what are essentially "social spaces" in Lefebvre's sense of the term. In addition, Perec emphasizes the materiality of the spaces, focusing on lived, spatial experience, and calling into question functionalist definitions. In so doing, Perec brings to light the tendency to fix space conceptually, an immobilization in line with what

Massey identifies as “an association between the spatial and the fixation of meaning” through representation that deprives space of its inherent dynamism and multiplicity (*For Space* 20). Such a view constrains our thinking about not only space, but also representation. Perec’s experiments in representation are thus intimately tied to how we view and think about our everyday spaces.

It is tempting but erroneous to characterize Perec’s first *espèce d’espace*, “la page,” as strictly a metaphorical space, or as indicative of a reductive space/text conflation. Rather, Perec makes clear in this chapter that the spatiality of the page owes to its materiality. As Natter and Jones explain, space and the text are both material products “produced by and constitutive of society and embedded in a system of social practices” (“Signposts” 169). Perec’s entry on “La page” consists of digressive and fragmentary observations connected not by a linear thought progression, but instead by virtue of the fact that they all situate writing in material and social space. He opens the chapter with playful typography, jumping from the left to the right side with his repetition of the words “J’écris,” thereby drawing attention to the dimensions of the page itself (17). He remarks that as he writes, “une ligne assez strictement horizontale se dépose sur la feuille blanche,” a convention that he defies by dropping down the word “horizontale” at a vertical diagonal, below which he continues the sentence (17). With his typographic illustration of writing from the left to the right (“de gauche” and “à droite” at the extremes of each side) and from top to bottom (“de haut en bas” presented vertically), he shows that writing conventions are steered by the materiality of the page (18). At the same time, writing defines the elements of the page itself, and all we need are but a few words: “il n’y a pas grand-chose, quelques signes, mais qui suffisent pour qu’il y ait un haut et un bas, un commencement et une fin, une droite et une gauche, un recto et un

verso” (18). This establishment of coordinates reinforces Perec’s notion of writing as a spatial practice, what Sheringham calls a “paradigm of orientation (and disorientation) in space” (50). Later in the chapter, Perec echoes his opening phrase, “J’écris” before describing his writing in terms that connote dwelling and movement: “j’habite ma feuille de papier, je l’investis, je la parcours” (19). Within the section, he inserts blank spaces, places in the margin the phrase “J’écris dans la marge...”, and adds a footnote that provides no information other than “J’aime beaucoup les renvois en bas de page, même si je n’ai rien de particulier à y préciser” (19). As he does with the playful topography at the opening of the chapter, he demonstrates once more that while the page is circumscribed by convention, it can also be a site of creative resistance and mobility.

Both the materiality of the page and the social practice of inscription constitute writing, and writing in turn defines the contours of the page and defines the practitioner as a writer. This dialectical relationship is analogous to a relational view of space as “constituted through social relations and material social practices” (Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* 254). Perec moves beyond a text-space analogy to consider connections between writing as a material practice occurring in social space, and space as it is affected by the practice of writing. The emphasis in “La page” on the graphic nature of words and language exemplifies what John Sturrock, in the introduction to his translation of *Espèces d’espaces*, calls Perec’s “unregenerate materialism” (XV). This materialism extends to Perec’s interest in the page as a tangible substance in and of the physical world. Shifting focus from the surface features of the page to the sheet of paper itself, he reminds us that it occupies physical space, estimating: “on pourrait, en dépiautant tous les ouvrages conservés à la Bibliothèque nationale et en étalant soigneusement les pages les unes à côté des autres, couvrir entièrement, soit l’île de

Sainte-Hélène, soit le lac de Trasimène” (18). If this is but an imagined paper-covered landscape, in subsequent comments Perec concretizes the relation between writing and the material world: “On pourrait calculer aussi le nombre d’hectares de forêts qu’il a fallu abattre pour produire le papier nécessaire à l’impression des œuvres d’Alexandre Dumas (Père)...” (19). Perec adds that Dumas had built a tower with the names of his books inscribed on each stone. These examples demonstrate Perec’s nuanced understanding of writing as a practice embedded in space yet also capable of impacting both nature and the built environment.

It can thus be argued that Perec recognizes the textuality of space and the spatiality of the text without reducing either to closed system of signs to be decoded by a reader situated outside of the socio-spatial process that construct both. To understand this better, it is useful to consider James Duncan’s distinction between *textuality* and *textualism*. Textuality for Duncan refers to a poststructuralist understanding of cultural productions and activities in terms of the “performativity of discourse: the ways in which meanings and objects are produced, contested, negotiated and reiterated.” This view “brings into play indeterminacy, and involves both the denial of an unmediated access to the world and a critical questioning of notions of authenticity and essentialism” (751). On the other hand, textualism is guilty of insularity, what Duncan in paraphrasing Edward Said calls “an overemphasis of the mechanics of the text at the expense of the material world outside the text” (751). Perec’s textuality manifests itself in his acknowledgement of the materiality and spatiality of writing. He invites the reader to consider his text in relation to everyday practices rather than removed from them, a point emphasized by his self-referential repetition of “J’écris” in the first few pages of the chapter (17-19).

Writing is not only implicated in everyday life but also omnipresent in social space. As Perec observes: “Il y a peu d’événements qui ne laissent au moins une trace écrite” (20). He proceeds to illustrate this claim with a long list of items that trace daily life (“sur lequel vient s’inscrire ... l’un ou l’autre de divers éléments qui composent l’ordinaire de la vie”) from the writing appearing on everyday items like metro tickets and cigarette packs, to notes jotted down spontaneously (“une adresse prise au vol,” “un rendez-vous noté à la hâte”), as well as more painstaking compositions (“la rédaction laborieuse d’une lettre administrative,” “[le] remplissage fastidieux d’un formulaire”) (20). Perec moves from these general examples to ones specific to his experience, arriving inevitably at the literary work. At this point in the list, he offers parenthetically a list within the list, a series of infinitives, verbal phrases denoting the gestures, objects, and steps of writing: “... se mettre à sa table et écrire, se mettre devant sa machine à écrire et écrire, écrire pendant toute une journée, ou pendant toute une nuit, esquisser un plan, mettre des grands I et des petits a, faire des ébauches, mettre un mot à côté d’un autre,” and so on (20). The list then becomes an account of various tasks involved in Perec’s other work as a scientific archivist. The sheer scope of the activities in Perec’s list, from the general to the specific, demonstrates Walter Benjamin’s assertion that “[t]o live is to leave traces” (*Reflections* 155). The traces of daily life by which writing registers space recur throughout *Espèces d’espaces* and, indeed, throughout Perec’s œuvre.

The sections of “La page” discussed thus far indicate that Perec views writing and space as inextricably linked at a fundamentally material level. This ever-present materiality prevents Perec’s emphasis on writing from resulting in a reductive view of space as a text. We must thus acknowledge the nuanced meaning of the statement opening the concluding section of the chapter: “L’espace commence ainsi, avec seulement des mots, des signes tracés

sur la page blanche” (21). When Perec speaks of space as a blank page, he does not mean to suggest that space is an empty container waiting to be filled by human activity. After all, in the avant-propos of *Espèces d’espaces*, he explains: “L’objet de ce livre n’est pas exactement le vide, ce serait plutôt ce qu’il y a autour, ou dedans” (13). Moreover, by asserting that space begins with words added to a blank page (“avec seulement des mots, des signes tracés sur la page blanche”) he reiterates the point made earlier that the page comes into being through the marks made by writing that establish its dimensions and orientations. As Sheringham explains, “To begin with a blank page is not to begin with abstraction, but with inscription ... If something primordial is involved, it is the act of making an inscription since this is where human, lived space starts” (*Everyday* 50). The notion of a blank page or a spatial void is thus paradoxical, an impossibility since space comes into being through human activity and representation, but necessary for a nonessentialist understanding of space. Natter and Jones make a case for the latter point: “... in contrast with a category of space as self-present social essence, it is more useful to start with a conception of space that ... is a *lack* to be filled, contested, and reconfigured through contingent and partially determined social relations, practices, and meanings” (“Identity” 149; emphasis in the original). Such a perspective differs from a container view of space by its belief in the indeterminacy of space, perpetually coming into being through social relations and material practices. For Perec, this indeterminacy, openness, and fluidity is what makes it like a text, a comparison that he demonstrates through his play with typography, the meanderings of his prose, and his references to the materiality and spatiality of writing.

In the final pages of the “La page” chapter of *Espèces d’espaces*, Perec touches on how our geographical imagination informs our understanding of space. He notes that space is

at once inventory and invented (“inventaire” and “inventé”), as in the case of a map in an old *Petit Larousse Illustré* with pictures elucidating a number of geographical terms. This map cited by Perec presents an imaginary space that brings together areas as divergent as the desert, the sea, the mountains, and the volcano (21-22). The geographical terms illustrated on the map are abstract, yet the inventory becomes invention in the reader’s imagination: “il n’est pas même nécessaire de fermer les yeux pour que cet espace suscité par les mots, ce seul espace de dictionnaire, ce seul espace de papier, s’anime, se peuple, se remplisse” (22). The long list of items that Perec imagines in this space include locomotives, barges, sail boats, children playing ball on the beach, cars in the streets, cows in the fields, farm women feeding chickens, café patrons, a cat warming himself in the sun, students and teachers in school, and, self-referentially, writers in deep concentration (23). In the last line of the chapter, Perec comments on the effect of his idealized vignettes: “Image d’Epinal. Espace rassurant” (23). The notion of the reassuring nature of a controlled representation of the world recalls Perec’s critique in “Approches de quoi?” of the pacification of readers by news accounts trivializing the particularities of everyday life as a series of ups and downs. Dominant representations of everyday life and spaces, whether offered by newspapers or maps, are discursive and visual constructs that grow out of social practices and in turn affect spatial and cultural imaginaries. John Pickles has explored the implications of cartography for the contemporary subject, noting that “[t]he map has emerged as a tool (or technology) embedded in a set of practices and institutions that affect the ways in which we live our lives in the modern world - a way of cataloguing the ‘important’ (and ignoring the ‘unimportant’) features of the earth’s surface and the social world” (20). Perec’s expansion on the inventory of the *Petit Larousse Illustré* map demonstrates the power of cartographic representations on

our geographical imagination. At the same time, the reductive nature of this “cataloguing the ‘important’” gives a false sense of order that, while reassuring, fails to register the ‘unimportant,’ infraordinary aspects of the socio-spatial landscape.

Throughout his chapter on “la page,” Perec offers a view of both spatiality and textuality that is dynamic and materialist all while recognizing the power of the imagination. This nuanced understanding of space and writing underpins his practical exercises in infraordinary observation that follow in *Espèces d’espaces*. The first half of his section on “La rue” offers a generalized topographical account of the street. However, as I shall demonstrate in the following pages of this chapter, a close reading of what seems to be neutral description reveals a complex network of objects and practices indicative of the heterogeneity of space and the tensions between systems of control and everyday practices. Perec’s technique demonstrates his proposals in “Approches de quoi?”: “Interroger ce qui semble tellement aller de soi que nous avons oublié l’origine ... Interroger ce qui semble avoir cessé à jamais de nous étonner” (12).

Initially, Perec describes the street in the most basic of terms as the product of two parallel lines of buildings (*Espèces* 65). In this and subsequent observations he seems to be stating the obvious, but as he proceeds, he teases out the constructedness of the street by social, cultural, political, and natural forces. He points out that the buildings not arranged in straight rows are faulted for being misaligned (65). Indeed, it is worth noting that the even alignment of buildings has been requisite since the Second Empire transformations of Paris overseen by Napoléon III and Baron Haussmann, who together enacted what David Harvey calls “the tyranny of the straight line” (*Condition* 204). Haussmann’s straight lines served an aesthetic function, imposing symmetry in place of the labyrinth of twisted medieval streets.

At the same time, they were meant to facilitate social control, forestalling surprise attacks and street barricades as seen in prior revolutions (Benjamin, *Arcades* 23-25). Although Perec makes no mention of Haussmann, the question of alignment nonetheless speaks to hegemonic urban planning that has normalized ideological spatial arrangement. Lefebvre condemns the perpetuation of “authoritarian and brutal spatial practice” from Haussmann to Le Corbusier: “The space that homogenizes ... has nothing homogeneous about it ... it subsumes and unites scattered fragments or elements by force” (*Production* 308). Perec hints at this violence as he characterizes the reaction to misaligned buildings: “c’est une faute grave pour eux quand ils ne sont pas alignés: on dit alors qu’ils sont *frappés d’alignement*, cela veut dire que l’on est en droit de les démolir, afin de les reconstruire dans l’alignement des autres” (emphasis in the original, 65). Such demolition haunts Perec, who laments at the end of *Espèces d’espaces*, “Mes espaces sont fragiles: le temps va les user, va les détruire” (122).

Throughout the opening pages of “La rue,” Perec speaks in broad, even generic terms, distilling the street to its common elements. Yet far from being reductive, his account of the street indicates the sheer abundance of activities, gestures, and objects to be found there. Perec illustrates this multitude with a long list of people and things typically seen on the street. His use of the list serves not to essentialize the street from certain necessary components. Rather it provides a sampling of familiar street sights in order to create a sense of profusion. Alison James remarks that Perec’s enumerations in *Les Choses* and other works always contain an implicit “etc.” since lists are by nature partial, selective, and unfinished. She concludes that this “openness of enumeration ... can be seen as an acknowledgement of the infinite multiplicity of the real” (212). Such is the case as well in *Espèces d’espaces*.

Perec's list in his street chapter moves between short designations (e.g. "des cabines téléphoniques," "des bancs publics," "des feux de circulation") and longer descriptions that draw our attention to the use and functions of the objects (e.g. "des arrêts auprès desquels les usagers peuvent attendre l'arrivée des autobus ou des taxis," "des boîtes dans lesquelles les citadins peuvent déposer des lettres que le service des postes viendra collecter à heures fixes") (67). This alternation dynamizes his enumeration, infusing the topographical inventory of the city street with instances of quotidian practices. These practices do not simply conform to the ostensible functions of the objects, but also reveal transgressions on the part of urban practitioners. So while there are bus stops where individuals can wait and mailboxes for their outgoing letters, there are also wastebaskets into which passersby glance furtively ("jettent compulsivement ... un regard furtif") (67). If it were not for metal posts erected at certain spots, cars would park on the sidewalks, and one-way streets are needed to control the overflow of traffic (67). Painted lines at crosswalks no longer suffice to guarantee the safe crossing of pedestrians, hence the proliferation of traffic lights, which themselves require coordination through complex logistical systems (69). These examples all show that neither urban design nor our very conception of the city can be divorced from street-level practices. No matter how generally Perec describes the urban landscape, his city is never idealized, but is rather constituted through the acts of its practitioners.

Perec follows his topographical description of the street with a brief account of two blind pedestrians, a middle-aged woman and a young man navigating the street arm-in-arm with their canes:

J'ai vu deux aveugles dans la rue Linné. Ils marchaient en se tenant par le bras. Ils avaient tous deux de longues cannes extrêmement flexibles. L'un des deux était une femme d'une cinquantaine d'années, l'autre un tout jeune homme. La femme effleurait de l'extrémité de sa canne tous les obstacles

verticaux qui se dressaient le long du trottoir et, guidant la canne du jeune homme, les lui faisait toucher également en lui indiquant, très vite, et sans jamais se tromper, de quels obstacles il s'agissait: un lampadaire, un arrêt d'autobus, une cabine téléphonique, une corbeille à papiers, une boîte à lettres, un panneau de signalisation (elle n'a évidemment pas pu préciser ce que signalait ce panneau), un feu rouge... (69)

The “obstacles” encountered by the *aveugles* – street and traffic lights, bus stop, phone booth, mailbox, waste basket – include some of the very same objects listed a couple of pages earlier, items designed to facilitate safety, order, and convenience. Through this recontextualization, a functionalist conception of the urban landscape is rendered problematic since its objects and spatial arrangements do not function equally well for all practitioners. This passage demonstrates further that vision is not the only means by which one can know the city, for with a touch of her cane, the woman identifies without fail all of the objects in her path. Nonetheless, vision remains Perec’s primary instrument for capturing the urban infraordinary, as evidenced by his introduction of this anecdote with “J’ai vu deux aveugles...” and the opening phrase of the next section, “*Observer la rue...*” (69, 70; my emphasis). Despite his reliance on vision as a means of discerning the infraordinary, his account of the *aveugles* demonstrates that an intimate knowledge of space and the city can result from various sorts of embodied experience beyond the visual register.

This subsequent section of the chapter appears under the heading “Travaux pratiques” and contains Perec’s attempts to enact his proposed technique of interrogating the infraordinary. The shift to this section is inaugurated by the account of the two *aveugles* that illustrates the possibility of an alternative embodied understanding of the city. However, Perec does not abandon vision entirely as the means by which to come to know the city, but rather he seeks a way to look differently. Rejecting a totalizing, modernist gaze focused on the spectacular, he seeks a more basic mode of seeing (“voir plus platement”) (71). Grasping

the infraordinary requires overcoming our predisposition for the extraordinary and instead valorizing the mundane. Early in the passage, Perec touches on this difficulty:

Noter ce que l'on voit. Ce qui se passe de notable. Sait-on
voir ce qui est notable? Y a-t-il quelque chose qui nous
frappe?
Rien ne nous frappe. Nous ne savons pas voir (70)

This excerpt exemplifies Perec's style in the passage, which alternates between infinitive verbs offering directions for perceiving the infraordinary of the street, and questions arising from his observations. The back and forth between infinitives, questions, and observations amounts to an inner dialogue reflecting the dual acts of looking and interrogating, as when Perec turns his attention on the shops in his sight:

Que vend-on dans les magasins? Il n'y a
pas de magasins d'alimentation. Ah si, il y a une boulangerie.
Se demander où les gens du quartier font leur
marché. (70)

Throughout the passage, the repetition of infinitive verbs at the beginning of sentences gives the text a poetic rhythm while establishing it also as prescriptive. By offering his directions to both the reader and writer, Perec implicates himself in a shared tendency to overlook features of everyday life embedded in infraordinary objects and actions. The infinitives dominating the passage refer frequently to acts of looking (e.g., “observer,” “voir,” “regarder”) and writing (e.g., “noter,” “décrire”) (70, 71). Several verbs are qualified with other infinitives so as to indicate the arduousness of the task and the need for focus: “*se forcer* à écrire ce qui n’a pas d’intérêt,” “*essayer* de décrire la rue,” “*s’obliger* à voir plus platement” (70, 71; my emphasis). Despite his intense effort, at times he falls back to noticing the exceptional rather than the ordinary. After spotting a Land Rover fully equipped for the desert but out of place on the streets of Paris, he adds parenthetically: “malgré soi, on ne note que l’insolite, le particulier, le misérablement exceptionnel: c’est le contraire de ce qu’il faudrait faire” (73).

Elsewhere, verbal phrases highlight the acts of selection, ordering, and classifying inherent in both looking and writing: “distinguer les immeubles d’habitation et les bâtiments officiels,” “Distinguer les voitures immatriculées à Paris et les autres,” “Essayer de classer les gens: ceux qui sont du quartier et ceux qui ne sont pas du quartier” (70, 71, 73). Occasionally, Perec offers a judgment (“Beauté des femmes/La mode est aux talons trop hauts” [71]) or betrays an emotion (“s’attendrir au souvenir des autobus à plate-forme...” [72]), all while staying in a generalized realm of easily recognizable city sights.

On the surface, Perec’s approach may appear to be an attempt to read and decode the city from a masterful, objective position. At one point he enjoins: “[d]échiffrer un morceau de la ville, en déduire des évidences” (71; my emphasis). Yet this rhetoric cannot be taken entirely at face value, for it illustrates what Sheringham identifies as Perec’s “ludic, quasi-scientific approach” employed in *Espèces d’espaces* and other works (52). Perec even mocks his own technique in his “travaux pratiques”: “Se forcer à épuiser le sujet, même si ça a l’air grotesque, ou futile, ou stupide” (71). As James notes, “Perec’s use of enumeration is a totalizing gesture, but the list is nevertheless a semiotic system that always points beyond itself and remains open [...] Perec’s enumerations rarely claim to be exhaustive; they are merely *attempts* at exhaustivity or at drawing up inventories” (212; emphasis in the original). Perec’s efforts at totalization are facetious, serving to demonstrate the opposite, that the material world always to some extent resists fixation through representation. The significance of Perec’s enumerations rests in the process, in the impression that it creates of the multiplicity of the city.

Any semblance of a comprehensive list is further undone by a turn to the imaginary in the last few paragraphs of the passage. Having noted a number of familiar city sights, Perec embarks on a process of defamiliarization as he enjoins us to:

Continuer

Jusqu'à ce que le lieu devienne improbable

jusqu'à ressentir, pendant un très bref instant, l'impression d'être dans une ville étrangère, ou, mieux encore, jusqu'à ne plus comprendre ce qui se passe ou ce qui ne se passe pas, que le lieu tout entier devienne étranger, que l'on ne sache même plus que ça s'appelle une ville, une rue, des immeubles, des trottoirs (74)

Perec's imagination invades the visual terrain: "Faire pleuvoir des pluies diluviennes, tout casser, faire pousser de l'herbe, remplacer les gens par des vaches, voir apparaître, au croisement de la rue du Bac et du boulevard Saint-Germain, dépassant de cent mètres les toits des immeubles, King-Kong, ou la souris fortifiée de Tex Avery!" (74). After these flights of fancy, his imagination descends below the earth's surface when he compels us to imagine sewers, metro passageways, electrical and gas lines, water mains, and other underpinnings of everyday life above ground. The final paragraph of the section considers the natural substances even farther down: limestone, gypsum, chalk, clay, and the like. Perec's consideration of the imaginary and the subterranean in these last few paragraphs seems incongruous with his project of noting the most unremarkable sights directly before him. Yet, like the *aveugles* anecdote, it provides another challenge to the supremacy of vision in our everyday experience of the city. Whereas the *aveugles* experience the matter of everyday life through bodily negotiation, Perec appeals to our imagination in order to conceptualize the out-of-sight substructures fundamental to society. In his surrealistic turn in the previous paragraph, imagination functions not to picture what exists beyond our immediate vision, but rather to propose a counterfactual vision that draws attention to the inherent constructedness of any representation of the city.

In his chapter devoted to “La ville,” Perec repeats the observational and descriptive techniques used in his “travaux pratiques.” Before doing so, he explores other ways of understanding the city. He warns at the onset: “Ne pas essayer trop vite de trouver une définition de la ville; c’est beaucoup trop gros, on a toutes les chances de se tromper” (83). In place of a definition he prefers enumeration, suggesting to make an inventory of visible items. He instructs us to note at a basic level what does and does not constitute a city (“ce qui est la ville et ce qui n’est pas la ville”) (83). This proves to be harder than it seems. Checking the numbers of the buses might help: those with two numbers circulate within Paris and those with three numbers operate outside of the city. Perec calls this “une méthode absolument infaillible” of establishing whether one is in Paris or its exterior, but a bit later he admits, “ce n’est pas aussi infaillible que ça, mais en principe ça devrait l’être” (83). Numbers are referential, and within the context of a man-made system, they provide an imperfect means of orienting oneself.

Perec prompts us to consider the historical development of Paris as another possible way of characterizing the city, but this too is an imperfect method. The boundaries of Paris reveal themselves to be historically contingent, and Perec’s examples relativize the city/country, interior/exterior dichotomy:

Reconnaître que la ville n’a pas toujours été ce qu’elle était. Se souvenir, par exemple, qu’Auteuil fut longtemps à la campagne...

...

Se souvenir aussi que l’Arc de Triomphe fut bâti à la campagne (ce n’était pas vraiment la campagne, c’était plutôt l’équivalent du bois de Boulogne, mais, en tout cas, ce n’était pas vraiment la ville).

...

Se souvenir que tout ce qui se nomme « faubourg » se trouvait à l’extérieur de la ville...

Se souvenir que si l’on disait Saint-Germain-des-Prés, c’est parce qu’il y avait des prés. (84)

Just as the distinction between the city and its exterior is man-made and historically contingent, so too is the organization of space within the city a result of social and economic forces. Perec reminds us that chic neighborhoods in Europe and America are always situated upwind of foul city smells (“les odeurs nauséabondes des villes”) (84).

The city as a built environment and as a social agglomeration is emphasized by a series of familiar urban terms invoked poetically by Perec:

Une ville: de la pierre, du béton, de l’asphalte. Des inconnus, des monuments,
des institutions.
Mégalopoles. Villes tentaculaires. Artères. Foules.
Fourmilières? (85)

The last term conjures a familiar image of the hive-like bustle on city streets and also reminds us that nature (signified by the synecdochical ant hills) constitutes a part of the city. Still, these urban terms and images lead Perec no closer to a definition of the city, and he generates more questions than answers: “Qu’est-ce que le cœur d’une ville? L’âme d’une ville? Pourquoi dit-on qu’une ville est belle ou qu’une ville est laide? Qu’y a-t-il de beau et qu’y a-t-il de laid dans une ville? Comment connaît-on une ville? Comment connaît-on sa ville?” (85). At this point, Perec announces his “Méthode,” which entails unburdening our speech and thinking about the city: “en parler le plus simplement du monde, en parler évidemment, familièrement. Chasser toute idée préconçue. Cesser de penser en termes tout préparés, oublier ce qu’ont dit les urbanistes et les sociologues” (85). Perec seeks to open up our understanding of the city, not through the discourses of the social sciences, but through a two-fold process of focusing on the most quotidian aspects of the city, and using everyday language to represent this everyday city. This opening up of our urban imaginary contrasts with the closure inherent in certain preconceived notions: “Il y a quelque chose d’effrayant dans l’idée même de la ville; on a l’impression que l’on ne pourra que s’accrocher à des

images tragiques ou désespérées: Metropolis, l'univers minéral, le monde pétrifié..." (85). Finally Perec renounces any attempt at a totalized account of the city: "Nous ne pourrions jamais expliquer ou justifier la ville. La ville est là. Elle est notre espace et nous n'en avons pas d'autre" (85). Our inhabitation of the city means that we invest it with qualities that do not exist in it intrinsically: "Il n'y a rien d'inhumain dans une ville sinon notre propre humanité" (86).

Two subsections of the chapter entitled "Ma ville" and "Villes étrangères" offer insights into Perec's sense of how one comes to know a city through practical experience. In "Ma ville," he demonstrates not only that he is a man of the city, as he admits when contemplating the countryside in a subsequent chapter, but even more particularly that he is a child of Paris (93). Generally speaking, *Espèces d'espaces* and Perec's other infra-spatial texts are "Parisocentric," as Gilbert Adair asserts, to the extent that they take place in Paris and often contain references to specific locations (100). I would argue, however, that this Parisocentrism does not function to reinforce the dominance of the capital over other cities or regions. As Perec explains in the avant-propos of *Espèces d'espaces*, Paris is but one of many spaces. Its growth in size and importance resulted from historical contingency, not from any inherent qualities distinguishing it from neighboring towns such as Pontoise (14). Paris is the setting of Perec's texts because it is *his* city. Derek Schilling explains: "ce parigocentrisme [sic] que bien d'autres tâcheraient de désavouer, Georges Perec [...] le revendiquait, non pas à cause d'une quelconque supériorité de la Ville-Lumière, mais tout simplement parce que l'histoire a voulu que ce soit là 'sa' ville" ("Tentative" 140). Paris is the familiar terrain that Perec interrogates in order to reach a broader understanding of the infraordinary city, of everyday urban life. If anything, he subverts received notions and

impressions of Paris by emphasizing the mundane aspects of the city rather than those typically used to romanticize or privilege it. As Adair notes, Perec seeks out the “invariables” in quotidian life, and thus his method has a “near-infinite adaptability” (98-99). I would add that the distinctiveness of Paris melts away as Perec focuses not on the Eiffel Tower or Haussmann’s *grands boulevards*, but rather on gestures and objects that could easily be located elsewhere. In fact, for Perec to investigate the everyday at the level of the infraordinary, he needs to situate himself in his habitual surroundings so as not to be distracted by the novel sights of a new place. Thus, it is Perec’s Parisocentrism that allows for a radical re-imagining of the city and a counter-representation of overly mythologized Paris. In “Ma ville,” he admits his indifference to the iconic sites of Paris: “Je suis trop habitué au monuments pour avoir envie de les regarder” (87).

Perec’s reflections on his city belong to the strand of *Espèces d’espaces* in line with the personal essay. This is made all the more clear by the contrast between the use of the personal pronoun “je” in “Ma ville” and “on” in “Villes étrangères.” The latter signals the commonality of our experiences as strangers in a foreign city. We study the map, locate museums, churches and other recommended attractions, walk around the city center taking care not to get lost: “On aimerait bien se promener, flâner, mais on n’ose pas; on ne sait pas aller à la dérive, on a peur de se perdre. On ne marche même pas vraiment, on arpente” (87). This image of movement constrained by fear of an unknown city contrasts with Perec’s fearless mobility as he wanders around his own turf: “J’aime marcher dans Paris. Parfois pendant tout un après-midi, sans but précis, pas vraiment au hasard, ni à l’aventure, mais en essayant de me laisser porter” (87). As opposed to the tourist whose itinerary consists of visiting typical destinations (“les endroits que l’on vous a fortement recommandé d’aller

voir”) easily found with the help of a map, Perec envisions counter methods of exploring his city, relying on either chance, as when he takes the first bus that stops, or a plan concocted with Oulipo-inspired constraints, such as crossing Paris via streets whose names begin with the letter C (87). In the subsequent section “Du tourisme,” he excerpts passages from a 1907 Baedeker guide with detailed directions for using the London metro (89-90). Later he suggests following the Baedeker’s directions, not in London, but in the present-day Paris metro (91). These ludic attempts to experience the city differently may seem to generate exceptional experiences rather than the banal ones that Perec is so keen on understanding, yet they still engage aspects of everyday life. As such, they parallel his literary experiments, so that both being in and describing the everyday city are performative and interrogative.

These ideas put forth by Perec for experiencing Paris differently are indebted to, but differ significantly from, the urban experiments of the Situationists. In fact, Perec’s proposal to use the London Underground directions in the Paris metro recalls a similar venture relayed by Guy Debord his 1955 article “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography”: “A friend recently told me that he had just wandered through the Harz region of Germany while blindly following the directions of a map of London” (7). However, Debord promptly dismisses his friend’s experiment as a “game” and “only a mediocre beginning” to a radical restructuring of the urban landscape (7). Among his preferred urban practices was the *dérive* – drift, or spontaneous wandering – performed by Debord and other revolving members of the avant-garde group Situationist International between the mid 1950s and the early 1970s.⁸ Like Perec’s proposed experiments, the *dérive* allowed the mobile subject to experience the city in

⁸ Debord describes the *dérive* as “a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances... In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there” (“Theory” 50).

ways other than those foreseen by urban planners or dictated by social convention. The urban explorations of both Perec and the Situationists contrast with the utilitarianism of post-war urbanism, when movement throughout the city was increasingly circumscribed by traffic patterns. Debord complained in 1955 that contemporary urbanism was concerned primarily with “ensuring the smooth circulation of a rapidly increasing quantity of motor vehicles” (“Introduction” 5). In his topography of the street in *Espèces d’espaces*, Perec describes the system of parking zones, crosswalks, traffic lights, and even surveillance cameras serving to regulate the movement of drivers and pedestrians while also complicating their mobility (67-69). Whereas Debord launches into a critique of capitalist hegemony that promotes private ownership of cars, Perec focuses on the automobile as but another material object figuring in our experience and practice of everyday life (Debord, “Introduction” 5). For instance, in his “travaux pratiques,” Perec proposes to decipher a small part of the city (“[d]échiffrer un morceau de la ville”) by listing the observable gestures involved in parking a car (71). In these examples, we find a key way in which Debord and Perec differ. Whereas Debord is overtly critical as he pursues a revolutionary agenda, Perec approaches contemporary life from the perspective of a curious observer attuned to the smallest of quotidian details. If a critical angle emerges from Perec’s observations, it is concerned primarily with breaking the mind free from received notions about the nature of reality and everyday life.

Perec’s urban subject is thus a performer of micro-gestures indicative of the infraordinariness of everyday life. On the other hand, Debord and the Situationists aim to use the *dérive* to make the urban practitioner aware of the affective dimensions of space. In his “Théorie de la *dérive*” (1956), Debord emphasized the importance of “psychogeography” during urban drifts. This key Situationist concept involves, in Debord’s words, “the study of

the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (“Introduction” 5). For Debord, the practice of psychogeography means to counteract a general oversimplification of the connections between spaces and emotions:

People are quite aware that some neighborhoods are sad and others pleasant. But they generally assume that elegant streets cause a feeling of satisfaction and that poor streets are depressing, and let it go at that. In fact, the variety of possible combinations of ambiances, analogous to the blending of pure chemicals in an infinite number of mixtures, gives rise to feelings as differentiated and complex as any other form of spectacle can evoke. The slightest demystified investigation reveals that the qualitatively or quantitatively different influences of diverse urban decors cannot be determined solely on the basis of the era or architectural style, much less on the basis of housing conditions. (“Introduction” 7)

Eschewing the visual spectacle of the built environment, Debord concentrates rather on visceral reactions to city spaces, and the *dérive* is his preferred method of subjective urban exploration. He explains that the trajectory of the *dérive* is not entirely random, since wanderers would be guided affectively as they responded to the psychogeography of the urban landscape:

The element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the *dérive* point of view cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones. (“Theory” 50)

Whereas the *dérive* entails attending to subjective experiences while moving through spaces with different ambiances, Perec’s experiments reveal the patterns of habits and gestures that characterize the practice of everyday life in the city. At one point in his “travaux pratiques,” he creates an internal dialogue about the cafés within his sight: “Combien y a-t-il de cafés? Un, deux, trois, quatre. Pourquoi avoir choisi celui-là? Parce qu’on le connaît, parce qu’il est au soleil, parce que c’est un tabac” (70). This penetration of the commonplace contrasts with

the dérivists' scorn for the banal, which manifests itself in their desire to lose their bearings in the city. The Situationists envisioned the *dérive* and psychogeography as tools for reimagining the city in terms of *dépaysement*, or disorientation, described by David Pinder as a "sense ... of being out of place according to the dictates of a city governed by principles of utility and efficient circulation" (151).

Perec, on the other hand, is more concerned with reorientations than disorientations, the many ways in which we can redirect our attention and reshape our representational discourses of the city, from the topographical description and enumeration in *Espèces d'espaces* to autobiographical accounts of the city of his youth in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. In his chapter on "le quartier" in *Espèces d'espaces*, Perec exemplifies his strategy of using the commonplace to rethink everyday spatial practices. He describes the *quartier* as the most familiar and intimate of places: "la portion de la ville dans laquelle on se déplace facilement à pied ou [...] la partie de la ville dans laquelle on n'a pas besoin de se rendre, puisque précisément on y est. Cela semble aller de soi..." (79). A couple of pages later, he wonders why we live in just one neighborhood:

Pourquoi ne pas privilégier la dispersion? Au lieu de vivre dans un lieu unique, en cherchant vainement à s'y rassembler, pourquoi n'aurait-on pas, éparpillées dans Paris, cinq ou six chambres? J'irais dormir à Denfert, j'écirais place Voltaire, j'écouterais de la musique place Clichy, je ferais l'amour à la poterne des peupliers, je mangerais rue de la Tombe-Issoire, je lirais près du parc Monceau, etc. (81)

The novelty of this idea stems not from a drastic upheaval of urban space, but rather from its foregrounding of the spatial context of daily practices. Perec's bottom-up method of challenging conventional understandings of everyday spaces involves changes in habits, from our perceptual tendencies (what we notice in our surroundings) to our daily routines (how we occupy those surroundings). As we shall see in the next section, reorientation is a key device

in Perec's most innovative urban experiment, *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, in which he repeatedly changes location and shifts his attention in an attempt to capture the urban infraordinary.

5. *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*: The Event of Place in a Parisian place

First appearing in 1975 in the journal *Cause commune*, then republished as a sixty-page book by editor Christian Bourgois in 1982, *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* records Perec's observations during three consecutive days spent in Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris. Perec installed himself alternately in cafés and on a bench, meticulously recording details and events within his field of vision. The result is a fragmentary text, demonstrating Perec's penchant for classifications, as he enumerates the various numbers, symbols, colors, people, vehicles, and even animals that create the patterns and rhythms of daily life carried out on the street. The attention that he gives to microscopic details (pigeons perched on a gutter, a woman stamping and mailing letters, a young child playing with a toy car, etc.) challenges the tendency to take the everyday for granted, to let it proceed unnoticed and unmentioned. His transcription of these everyday details creates formally and thematically a sort of urban poetry, with phrases laid out as if in verse:

Une jeune femme est assise sur un banc, en face de la galerie de tapisseries
« La demeure » elle fume une cigarette.
Il y a trois vélomoteurs garés sur le trottoir devant le café
Un 86 passe. Un 70 passe.
Des voitures s'engouffrent dans le parking
Un 63 passe. Un 87 passe.
Il est une heure cinq. Une femme traverse en courant le parvis de l'église.
Un livreur en blouse blanche sort de sa camionnette garée devant le café des
glaces (alimentaires) qu'il va livrer rue des Canettes.
Une femme tient une baguette à la main
Un 70 passe (20)

The extreme present-ness of the text owes to the fact that Perec's observations presented as happening in the moment, not as being recalled later from memory. Fragment sentences intermingle with statements in the present tense to bolster the reader's sense of being there in the square. Perec the subject emerges on the pages, not only by virtue of his distinctive style, but also through references to his own physical and mental responses to his literary experiment, as well as to his activities like eating and drinking. Rather than simply describing the objects and events that surround him, he presents his lived experience of the sights and rhythms of everyday life in this corner of the city. His poetic prose reads as an implementation of the technique he proposed previously in "Approches de quoi?" and the "travaux pratiques" of *Espèces d'espaces*. Despite the perpetuation of the list form in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, gone are the infinitive verbs offering directions on how to register the urban infraordinary. In their place we find mostly common nouns, the objects of scrutiny, that which is discerned when Perec enacts his propositions.

A number of articles and book chapters on *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* have emerged in recent years. Most of these highlight the novelty of its representation of everyday life. Adair, Schilling, and Veivo recognize a "semiotic dimension" to the text (Adair 106). Schilling likens Perec to the urban semiologist offering a de-romanticized vision of the city and partaking in a "suppression volontaire de la force mythique de la ville célébrée par les poètes de Paris" (*Mémoires* 119). Diverging from studies of *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* that tend to portray urban space as a collection of signs, I emphasize Perec's representation of the city as it is experienced bodily and affectively. Sheringham makes the case for a similar reading of *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*: "...its aim is not to arrive at abstract knowledge but to explore the lived experience of an individual

subject seeking to apprehend a dimension of his own reality that is inseparable from his participation in the wider currents of the everyday” (271). While I share Sheringham’s understanding of the function of the text, in my study I redirect focus from Perec’s vision of everyday life to his portrayal of urban space and practices. In doing so, I consider the implications of the urban “lieu” of the title with respect to the notion of “place” as it has been redefined by contemporary cultural geographers.

Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien concerns “place” in two senses of the term. First, it offers a reimagining of the centuries-old Parisian *place*, an open public square bordered by buildings and serving as a site for meeting, dwelling, and mobility. Second, a geocritical reading of *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* allows us to reconceptualize “place” – the *lieu* of the title – in more dynamic and open terms. Just as *Espèces d’espaces* prompts a reconsideration of taken-for-granted notions of literary and geographical space, *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* can be productively read in light of another prominent concern in contemporary cultural geography, that is, how to understand the sense of place that we as humans experience as we situate ourselves in the world. The key words in these two Perec works – *espaces* and *lieu* – are coincidentally echoed in the title of a geographical work published a just few years later, Yi-Fu Tuan’s seminal *Space and Place* (1977). Tuan helped inaugurate a new humanistic geography in reaction to traditional scientific approaches that dehumanized its spatialized subjects and disregarded human experience. Influenced by such philosophical currents as phenomenology and existentialism, Tuan, Edward Relph, and other humanists revolutionized the notion of place by insisting on its centrality in how we inhabit and experience the world. However, humanistic geographers like Tuan and Relph tended to maintain a problematic space/place dualism, essentializing

space as an abstract and infinite realm, and place as the locus of human engagement, affect, and attachment. This binary opposition is evident in Tuan's assertion that

'Space' is more abstract than 'place.' What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. [...] if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (6)

Summarizing the theories of Tuan, Relph, and their contemporaries, Tim Cresswell points out that their essentialized views of space and place made them, like their predecessors, guilty of a post-Enlightenment totalizing approach that failed to account for particularities and difference: "...place was seen as a universal and transhistorical part of the human condition. It was not so much places (in the world) that interest the humanists but 'place' as an idea, concept and way of being-in-the-world" (20).

Subsequent theorizing about space and place has attempted to overcome binary conceptualizations by showing both to be contingent entities produced by social, cultural, and political forces, relations, and practices. Consequently, place can no longer be differentiated from space as a container inhabited and invested by an autonomous subject. Instead, place, like space, is understood in terms of interrelations expressed geographically. This relational understanding of place has been articulated most convincingly by Doreen Massey in works including "A Global Sense of Place" (1991), *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), and *For Space* (2005). She views "[p]laces not as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as *socio-temporal events*" (*For Space* 130; emphasis in the original). She continues:

This is an understanding of place – as open ..., as woven together out of ongoing stories, as a moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space, and as in process, as unfinished business... (*For Space* 131)

Drawing on Massey's characterization of place as open, unfinished, and in perpetual process, I shall argue in the following pages that in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* Perec offers a radically de-essentialized view of both place and the Parisian *place*. His close attention to the activities and movements enacted in the square reveals it to be a "meeting place" of trajectories, both human and non-human, and thus always open and emergent (Massey, *For Space* 68). His references to bodily gestures and sensations remind us that the experience of place is always embodied and practiced. As such, it resists hegemonic efforts to represent it in bounded and essentialized terms. The body references in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* are frequently *self*-references in which Perec contextualizes his observations in terms of his own physical state or act of consumption. For example, seated in a café, he writes:

Je suis assis ici, sans écrire, depuis une heure moins le quart; j'ai mangé un sandwich au saucisson en buvant un ballon de bourgueil. Puis des cafés. A côté de moi une demi-douzaine de marchands de prêts-à-porter jacassent, satisfaits de leurs petites affaires. Je regarde d'un oeil torve le passage des oiseaux, des êtres et des véhicules. (45)

Perec's self-references, along with his occasional metadiscursive musings on the project itself, relate to another aspect of place revealed in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*: the situatedness of any epistemology of place. Knowledge about any particular place is always situated and thus circumscribed by the position of the subject.

Before examining these qualities of place evident in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, it is worth considering the manner in which Perec reimagines *la place*, that is, the typical Parisian square. His intention to offer a counter approach is made clear in the preamble of his text, which he opens with "Il y a beaucoup de choses place Saint-Sulpice" followed by a list of examples, all undermined in the last paragraph by his declaration that

these things hold no interest for him (11-12). Comprising this list are generic establishments that could be found in just about any European square, including a police station, movie theater, bus stop, hotel, newspaper kiosk, municipal and financial buildings, and cafés (9). Also included in the list are landmarks unique to Place Saint-Sulpice - the church, whose architects and dedicatee Perec mentions by name, and the fountain adorned with statues of four Christian orators, also named. These historical details add an element of specificity; nonetheless, churches and fountains are common features of squares. In all, Perec's list evokes the built environment of the quintessential Parisian *place*. He notes that the constructions in Place Saint-Sulpice have already received much attention: “Un grand nombre, sinon la plupart, de ces choses ont été décrites, inventoriées, photographiées, racontées ou recensées” (9-10). For his part, Perec aims to describe what he calls “le reste”: “ce que l’on ne note généralement pas, ce qui ne se remarque pas, ce qui n’a pas d’importance: ce qui se passe quand il ne se passe rien, sinon du temps, des gens, des voitures et des nuages” (10). Perec’s use of the term “le reste” signals that *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* will attempt to answer his own questions raised in “Approches de quoi?": “Ce qui se passe vraiment, ce que nous vivons, *le reste, tout le reste*, où est-il?” (“Approches” 11; my emphasis). In focusing on the residual elements of urban space, he will present a portrait of Place Saint-Sulpice based not on the physical features that typify it as a Parisian square, but rather on the micro-gestures, details, and events, characterized by their impermanence and contingency. The Parisian *place* becomes a place as understood in relational geographies, open and in a constant state of becoming, as we shall see in examples to come.

Doreen Massey argues forcefully for this relational view of both space and place. She maintains that the two are, in fact, interdependent, following from the relational nature of space, where space is “the dimension of multiple trajectories, of stories-so-far, ... the dimension of a multiplicity of durations,” and place is a momentary expression of the intersections of those trajectories (*For Space* 25). This perspective contrasts with a “surface” identification of place, reducing it to a point on a map, or any other static, essentialized characterization of place that fails to acknowledge the continual and contingent processes and relations that occur there (130). In his preamble to *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*, Perec rejects just such an essentialized view of Place Saint-Sulpice when he dismisses its built edifices, both famous and generic, and turns his attention instead to the variable activities performed in the square that perpetually reconstitute this place.

Massey’s relational view of place is clearly indebted to Foucault. In his 1967 lecture “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault argued:

Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites ... we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things ... we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another (23).

This idea that places are composed of relations leads Massey to insist on their radical openness and changeability. Place, she argues, is a “particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings” (*Space, Place and Gender* 5). The “uniqueness” of place results not from a fundamental essence, but rather from the specific and variable interrelations therein expressed. In *For Space*, Massey illustrates this point with many examples of different places across the globe, including a

Parisian café. Sitting in the café, you may have a strong sense of this specific locale.

However, as Massey points out:

neither the coffee nor all the food on your plate is grown in France. They're not exactly indigenous. Quintessential France is already a hybrid (just as is Hamburg, etc. etc. ... as is any place). ... the open relational construction of place in no way works against specificity and uniqueness, it just understands its derivation in a different way. (169; 1st ellipsis in orig.)

Since relations articulated in a particular place necessarily extend beyond that specific locale (be it a Parisian café or another site), the boundaries of the place can never be fixed, despite the sense of uniqueness which it inspires. As a means of characterizing the intersections of relations, Massey qualifies place as a “meeting place” in order to emphasize its heterogeneity and to cast it in terms of provisional connections rather than a predetermined identity. This heterogeneity, described by Massey as the “throwntogetherness of place,” results from diverse activities and processes whose socio-spatial assemblage creates what she calls “the event of place” (*For Space* 140-41).

For Perec, “the event of place” is two-fold. First, there is the event staged for *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, that is, Perec's three days of observation and transcription in Place Saint-Sulpice. Second, in his text, he bears witness to the “event of place,” to momentary assemblages and intersecting trajectories. Indeed, he offers a list under the heading “Trajectoires” that includes not only buses following a set course, but also animals, people, and even slogans presumably glimpsed on the side of passing vehicles:

Le 96 va à la gare Montparnasse
Le 84 va à la Porte de Champerret
Le 70 va Place du Dr Hayem, Maison de
l'O.R.T.F.
Le 86 va à Saint-Germain-des-Prés
Exigez le Roquefort Société le vrai dans son
ovale vert
Aucune eau ne jaillit de la fontaine. Des

pigeons se sont posés sur le rebord d'une de
ses vasques.

Sur le terre-plein, il y a des bancs, des bancs
doubles avec un dossier unique. Je peux,
de ma place, en compter jusqu'à six. Quatre
sont vides. Trois clochards aux gestes clas-
siques (boire du rouge à la bouteille) sur le
sixième.

Le 63 va à la Porte de la Muette

Le 86 va à Saint-Germain-des-Prés

Nettoyer c'est bien ne pas salir c'est mieux

Un car allemand

Une fourgonnette Brinks

Le 87 va au Champ-de-Mars

Le 84 va à la Porte Champerret (14-15)

Perec's fragmentary observations, punctuated by repetitive sentence structures evoking the regularity of the buses, serves to mimic both everyday urban rhythms and the perception of those rhythms (203). The reader becomes, along with Perec, a witness to the event of place. The description of the pigeons and the *clochards*, along with the inserted slogans, may seem parenthetical, as they disrupt the pattern of the buses. Typographically, the hanging indent reinforces the sense that these observations are parenthetical. However, unlike bracketed comments elsewhere in the text (and even within the above passage), they lack *actual* parenthesis marks. In fact, it is the regularity of the buses that becomes parenthetical later in the text:

Passe un 70 plutôt vide

Passe un 63 presque plein

(pourquoi compter les autobus? sans doute
parce qu'ils sont reconnaissables et réguliers:
ils découpent le temps, ils rythment le bruit de
fond; à la limite ils sont prévisibles.

Le reste semble aléatoire, improbable, anar-
chique; les autobus passent parce qu'ils doivent
passer, mais rien ne veut qu'une voiture fasse
marche arrière, ou qu'un homme ait un sac
marqué du grand « M » de Monoprix, ou qu'une
voiture soit bleue ou verte pomme, ou qu'un

consommateur commande un café plutôt qu'un
demi...)
Passe un 96 il est presque vide (34)

The regularity of the buses is, in fact, an anomaly given the inconsistency of the other elements in this place. Rather than existing simply as a side note, the pigeons, *clochards*, and slogans demonstrate the multiplicity of place. Massey asserts that the “throwntogetherness” of place is in a perpetual process of social and geopolitical negotiation (*For Space* 151). Perec’s account makes clear that it must also be negotiated at the level of perception and attention. He may set out to register bus trajectories, but other details attract his eye, providing respite (for both the author and the reader) from the near-monotony of repetitive enumeration. Moreover, the pigeons and *clochards* are described in active terms: the pigeons having landed on the edge of a basin, and the *clochards* performing what Perec calls “gestes classiques,” like drinking red wine from the bottle. This denotation of action creates the impression that the pigeons and *clochards* are also in motion. Like the buses, they are in the midst of a trajectory, albeit a less systematic one at a smaller scale. Furthermore, in a wider sense, Perec’s prose registers the trajectory of his eye, as he surveys the event of place, the meeting-up of these various elements.

Perec’s list of trajectories reminds us that the buses move within a larger network. They are not simply features of this place but are also travelling beyond it, to the Montparnasse train station, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the Champ-de-Mars, or elsewhere (14-15). The slogans from ads for the likes of Danone and Roquefort Société, as well as references to particular brands of cars, including Fiat, Deux Chevaux, and Mercédès, demonstrate that places figure in a system of production and consumption with a global expanse. While the individuals observed by Perec generally lack cultural and ethnic designations, Japanese

tourists appearing periodically throughout the text hint at the increased multiculturalism of place made possible by twentieth-century innovations in transportation (17, 18, 27, 41, 48, 49, 50). These tourists also point to what I will call the “beyondness” of place, the way in which people and things assembled in a place will always carry a trace of other places.

This beyondness of trajectories meeting momentarily but extending outside of the square is acknowledged implicitly by Perec’s repeated references to his perspective, which make clear that his portrait of this place is constrained by what he can see, which often depends on chance: “Un 70 passe (c’est seulement par hasard, de la place que j’occupe, que je peux voir passer, à l’autre bout, des 84)” (21). While it may be tempting to essentialize a place based on what one perceives there, this would be a false essence derived from one’s limited position. If this place seems to have discrete boundaries, Perec makes clear that they result from the limits of his visual field, and thus his positionality. In his first entry at the onset of his project, he offers the heading “Esquisse d’un inventaire de quelques-unes des choses strictement visibles” followed by a list subdivided into categories including letters, words, graphic symbols, and numbers. The term “esquisse,” like the “tentative” of the work’s title, emphasizes the provisionality of his inventory, for it, like the “lieu parisien” itself, can never really be exhausted. Even seemingly fixed elements like signs and buildings are destabilized by the shifting position and attention of the subject. Writing from a café on the second day, Perec remarks: “C’est à peine si je peux voir l’église, par contre, je vois presque tout le café (et moi-même écrivant) en reflet dans ses propres vitres” (38). His glimpse of his reflection in the café windows reminds us of his presence in the urban landscape — he is not a disembodied observer — while also reinforcing his point that his position determines his visual experience of the city. His presence is highlighted throughout the text by references to

the experience and limits of seeing, as when he speaks of “mon champ visuel” (14, 27), of what “je peux voir” (21, 38), and the perspective “de ma place” (15) or “de la place que j’occupe,” (21). Yet he also acknowledges that vision is subject to both physical and mental constraints, remarking:

Il n’y a plus que deux vélomoteurs garés sur
le trottoir devant le café: je n’ai pas vu le
troisième partir (c’était un vélosolèx) (*Limites
évidentes d’une telle entreprise: même en me
fixant comme seul but de regarder, je ne vois
pas ce qui se passe à quelques mètres de moi:
je ne remarque pas, par exemple, que des voitures
se garent*) (25-26; emphasis in the original).

In light of Perec’s emphasis on the limits of observation and representation, his use of constraints seems less an effort to control the variables of his experiment and more an acknowledgement of the act of selectivity that goes into any attempt to represent reality. One could never note every detail of a place, let alone in three days, since vision is not all-encompassing. Rather, it is embodied, and as such, is governed by not only the eye that sees, but also the cognitive and emotional forces that direct attention. On his second day in Place Saint-Sulpice, Perec stops watching the buses, noting: “Des autobus passent. Je m’en désintéresse complètement” (40). At various points, his physical fatigue spreads to both his vision and his writing: “Il est quatre heures cinq. Lassitude des yeux. Lassitude des mots”; “Lassitude de la vision: hantise des deux-chevaux vert pomme” (30, 45). Despite the detached tone of his remarks, his subjectivity clearly frames his vision and experience of this urban place, and he recognizes embodiment as a determinant of both observation and representation. His project would seem to privilege vision epistemologically, yet he repeatedly demonstrates the limitations of vision, as the previous examples illustrate.

In *L'Invention du quotidien*, Michel de Certeau famously contrasted the panoramic view of the spectator at the top of the World Trade Center with the writing of the city by the pedestrians below as they appropriate the streets through their perambulations, reconfiguring urban space from among an infinite variety of possibilities (140-42). Perec complicates this distinction between looking and acting, for although his writing of the city is accomplished through vision, his street-level position, self-conscious inclusion in the urban setting, and peripatetic observations align him with de Certeau's pedestrians. Vision, in Perec's account, is performative, an embodied practice. His demonstration of the inexhaustibility of Place Saint-Sulpice, with its perpetual reconfigurations of social activity filtered through the imperfect lens of the observer's eye, ultimately proves the impossibility of an all-encompassing account of city space. This sense of incompleteness is reinforced by the final phrases of the text, which provide no conclusion whatsoever and even lack a period at the end: "Quatre enfants. Un chien. Un petit rayon de soleil. Le 96. Il est deux heures" (60).

If *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* is a vigorous application of the technique proposed in "Approches de quoi?" and *Espèces d'espaces* for accessing the infraordinary of everyday life, then it is also a test of that technique. The success of the project owes not to the realization of the goal expressed by its title. *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* does not ultimately offer a totalized, exhaustive account of a quintessential Parisian square. Instead, Perec registers what he calls "plusieurs dizaines, plusieurs centaines d'actions simultanées, de micro-événements dont chacun implique des postures, des actes moteurs, des dépenses d'énergie spécifiques" (18). By documenting these normally unnoticed details, Perec creates an experimental text that illustrates the event of place as witnessed by an engaged and embodied urban subject, one whose observations are framed by references to his

own visual perspective, physical sensations, and acts of consumption. From his argument for the infraordinary in “Approches de quoi?” to his reimagining of everyday spaces in *Espèces d’espaces*, to his demonstration of the unfinishedness of place in *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*, Perec’s urban interrogations in his infra-spatial texts offer a de-essentialized vision of the city in all its dynamism.

CHAPTER 3

ANNIE ERNAUX'S TRANSPERSONAL CITY

1. Common Ground: Perec and Ernaux

A mere four and a half years Perec's junior, Annie Ernaux debuted her first work, *Les Armoires vides*, in 1974, the same year Perec's *Espèces d'espaces* was published. Perec was an established Oulipian midway through his brief career when Ernaux made her literary debut. Ernaux's writing demonstrates Perecquian qualities, including an attention to small details of quotidian life and an exploration of the self in social rather than psychological terms. Indeed, she mentions Perec as an influence (Ernaux and Fort 991). In terms of the subject matter of her works, this influence is apparent, as both Perec and Ernaux valorize aspects of everyday life that seldom receive literary treatment. In her preface to *Journal du dehors* (1993), Ernaux voices her desire to discover the reality of her time by examining seemingly insignificant details of collective daily experience. Her insistence on what she refers to as "tout ce qui semble anodin et dépourvu de signification parce que trop familier ou ordinaire" brings to mind Perec's case for the infraordinary, as when he urges: "Interroger ce qui semble avoir cessé à jamais de nous étonner" (*Journal du dehors* 9; "Approches de quoi?" 12). The attention of both Perec and Ernaux to the infraordinary of contemporary French culture is in itself notable, but perhaps more important is their shared belief that the means of representing the everyday determines the author's fidelity to reality. Ernaux makes this clear in an interview comment in which she quotes Perec:

l'important, c'est d'essayer d'apporter un peu plus de vérité et de choisir, même dans l'écriture littéraire, les "moyens" les plus surs pour atteindre cette vérité. Perec avait mis comme épigraphe aux *Choses* cette phrase de Marx qui me semble résonner avec ce que je dis: "Les moyens font aussi partie de la recherche de la vérité." (Ernaux and Fort 988)

Ernaux's means of representing the reality of everyday life involve her distinctive narrative position and style of writing.

Following her first three novels, *Les Armoires vides*, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (1977), and *La Femme gelée* (1981), Ernaux turned from autofiction to autobiography, that is, from third-person narratives of true events transposed to a fictional character, to a more direct form of life writing in which the unnamed first-person narrator is understood to be Ernaux herself. However, the narrative voice in these subsequent works is paradoxically impersonal, as she explains in her essay "Sur l'écriture" (2003): "à partir de *La Place*, le 'je' va renvoyer à l'auteur, c'est la personne de l'auteur, et en même temps, c'est une voix le plus souvent impersonnelle: un 'je' qui est vidé d'affect" (19). As we shall see shortly, this "je," which Ernaux qualifies as "transpersonnel," anchors her subject in collective everyday life and thereby demonstrates the social construction of the self.

When *La Place* emerged in 1983, Ernaux inaugurated not only a new narrative position but also a writing style that somewhat recalls Perec's tone in his infraordinary texts: short sentences of ostensibly objective observations unfettered by linguistic and symbolic flourishes. In *La Place*, Ernaux explains the motivation behind the use of what she calls "l'écriture plate" to memorialize her working class father:

Pour rendre compte d'une vie soumise à la nécessité, je n'ai pas le droit de prendre d'abord le parti de l'art, ni de chercher à faire quelque chose de 'passionnant,' ou d'émouvant.' Je rassemblerai les paroles, les gestes, les goûts de mon père, les faits marquants de sa vie, tous les signes objectifs d'une existence que j'ai aussi partagée. (24)

Whereas in his infraordinary texts, Perec uses simple, distilled language as a means of presenting, without linguistic ornamentation, the micro-details of everyday life, Ernaux's "écriture plate" derives from a sense of moral obligation to portray her life and family without the romanticization that novelistic writing inevitably imposes. Underlying her stylistic choices is an ambivalent social consciousness, for she is an intellectual distanced by education from her lower-middle class provincial origins, yet bound to those origins by family ties, personal history, and a political sense of solidarity.

In their works, Perec and Ernaux have both refashioned the autobiography by situating their personal experiences within a broader cultural framework based on common everyday practices and events. Perec did so most notably in *Je me souviens* (1978), a short book comprised of a list of nearly five hundred phrases, each introduced with the titular phrase followed by a mention of some famous person, event, or detail of French quotidian life that any of his contemporaries might recognize.⁹ Ernaux's autobiographical writing also challenges the conventions of the genre by insisting on the social and cultural construction of the self. Throughout her texts she uses the pronouns "on" and "nous" to recount collective experiences, including quotidian activities like shopping and riding the metro, as well as more historic events like protests and elections. Even when speaking as "je," Ernaux seeks to emphasize the social inscription of the subject through shared practices and identities. She comments in the essay *L'Écriture comme un couteau* (2003): "L'intime est encore et toujours du social, parce qu'un moi pur où les autres, les lois, l'histoire ne seraient pas présents est inconcevable" (152). This understanding of a socially constructed and relationally configured

⁹ For example: "Je me souviens des trous dans les tickets de métro"; "Je me souviens de *Mister Magoo*"; "Je me souviens des libraires d'occasion qu'il y avait sous les arcades de l'Odéon" (52, 94, 112).

self lies at the heart of Ernaux's narrative voice, the "'je' transpersonnel," which she outlines in her essay "Vers un *je* transpersonnel":

Le *je* que j'utilise me semble une forme impersonnelle, à peine sexuée, quelquefois même plus une parole de 'l'autre' qu'une parole de 'moi': une forme transpersonnelle en somme. Il ne constitue pas un moyen de me construire une identité à travers un texte, de m'autofictionner, mais de saisir dans mon expérience, les signes d'une réalité familiale, sociale ou passionnelle. (221; emphasis in the original)

From her self-referential yet socially contextualized subject position, Ernaux seeks through collective experiences to grasp the external reality of her personal situation.

In *Journal du dehors* (1993) and *La Vie extérieure* (2000), Ernaux's search for personal and collective truths occurs in an urban environment. Despite the years that separate these two texts by Ernaux from Perec's explorations of space in *Espèces d'espaces* and *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, we find in both authors' works a similar interrogation of the city based on the commonplace activities of its practitioners. As I will argue in this chapter, the urban context of Ernaux's texts distinguishes itself as a "transpersonal" city whose key feature is the facilitation of collective experiences shared between spatialized subjects.

2. Ernaux's *journaux extimes*

The two texts by Ernaux that I have chosen for my study, *Journal du dehors* and its follow-up *La Vie extérieure*, differ from many of Ernaux's other works in that they focus not on her personal history and her ambivalence over her deviation from her social and familial origins but rather on her daily life amidst anonymous others as she moves throughout Paris and Cergy-Pontoise, the young new town ("ville nouvelle") where she lives. Comprised of a seemingly arbitrary series of passages ranging in length from a brief paragraph to a couple of

pages, *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* gather small city scenes in what Ernaux calls “une collection d’instantanés de la vie quotidienne collective” (*Journal* 8). In her detailing of this collectively shared culture, from the impressions evoked by popular songs on the radio to the experience of shopping in a big-box grocery store, Ernaux offers a close look at everyday life in contemporary urban France. Of all her works, *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* contain Ernaux’s most compelling explorations of urban socio-spatial practices and politics.

In her *journaux extimes*, the term that critics use in referring collectively to *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*, Ernaux documents her observations in various city spaces as well as her subjective reactions to what she observes.¹⁰ Chronicling her urban experiences between the years 1985-1992 (*Journal du dehors*) and 1993-1999 (*La Vie extérieure*), Ernaux both presents and comments on sights and sounds of people and things in the metro, supermarkets, streets, and other locations around Cergy-Pontoise and Paris. Her accounts of everyday city life are permeated with feelings and memories provoked by the ephemeral scenes she witnesses. In one episode in *La Vie extérieure*, her description of a couple embracing on a metro platform before running after a train demonstrates the facility with which she weaves personal reflection with distanced observation. Reaching the platform with time to spare before the arrival of her train, she remarks:

On a le temps de voir, en bas, le long du mur bleu, un couple se serrer, s’embrasser. Tous deux la quarantaine. Le grondement d’une rame qui arrive. L’homme et la femme se séparent et courent vers le train. Ils étaient juste à l’endroit où, un soir de l’année dernière, vers minuit, j’étais avec F. Comme la femme, j’avais le dos au mur. L’escalier mécanique descendait interminablement, vide, dans un cliquetis continu. (24)

¹⁰ The term “journal extime” coined by Michel Tournier has been applied to Ernaux’s two texts by a number of critics, including Siobhán McIlvanney, Robin Tierney, and Fiona Handyside. For a discussion of Tournier’s use of the term for his own writing, see Fui Lee Luk, “Extimate Self-Portraits: The Inversion of the *Journal Intime* in Michel Tournier’s Essays.”

Ernaux elaborates on neither “F” nor her relationship with him, foregrounding instead the scene in the present moment that conjures a brief memory from the past. This moment exemplifies the uniqueness of *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* within the autobiographical oeuvre of Ernaux. The incidents she observes in her *journaux extimes* trigger memories of the past to which she alludes without elaboration, making her autobiography secondary to the present day event, and reaffirming the snippets of everyday life as the structuring mechanism of the works.

Within *Journal du dehors* Ernaux refers self-reflexively to the text itself as an “ethnotexte,” a comment she echoes later in *La Honte* (1997) when she describes herself as “en somme ethnologue de moi-même” (*Journal* 65; *Honte* 40). These two comments point to a key element of the works of Ernaux, namely the blurring of boundaries between personal and collective experience, and, as such, between the self and the other. In *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*, Ernaux inverts the diary form by focusing primarily on the outer rather than inner world of the narrator. Ernaux herself labeled *Journal du dehors* “un anti-journal intime” (Ernaux and Tondeur 43). Through this inversion, Ernaux illustrates her belief that, in the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau provided as an epigraph to *Journal du dehors*, “Notre vrai moi n’est pas tout entier en nous” (6; emphasis in the original).¹¹ Identity for Ernaux does not emanate from deep within the individual but rather is formed socially and culturally, so one must look to the outside world for clues about one’s self.

¹¹ Ernaux explains in her interview with Tondeur: “Cette citation de Jean-Jacques Rousseau a été mise après, dans une intention polémique. Ce texte se veut un anti-journal intime. Et je crois que le moi, notre moi, nous est révélé par la fréquentation des autres, non seulement par le regard qu’ils portent sur nous, mais aussi par l’intérêt, les souvenirs, qu’ils éveillent en nous” (43).

Ernaux's genre-breaking "anti-journal intime" has inspired many academic articles and book chapters. Much of the scholarship has been devoted to studying the implications of a diary based on exterior, public encounters rather than solitary introspection. Whether framing the *journaux extimes* in terms of the (anti-)diary (Baisnée, McIlvanney), the autobiography (Miller), or the "ethnotexte" (Ionescu, Mall, Lancaster), critics have tended to focus on Ernaux's exploration of her identity, as both a socio-cultural construct and a narrative stance, and as a complicated negotiation between self and other.

In his writings on *Journal du dehors*, Michael Sheringham has contextualized Ernaux's text within literary and philosophic discourses on everyday life, finding in it echoes of Barthes's cultural semiology and de Certeau's performative model of cultural memory (*Everyday* 323; "Cultural" 49, 56-57).¹² Robin Tierney picks up on the question of memory, proposing a connection between social memory and emotions registered bodily during Ernaux's anonymous encounters (113). Tierney focuses specifically on the physical experience of the emotions of fear, shame, and desire. Tierney's study and those by Sheringham are notable for their considerations of the embodied, social, and performative model of everyday life that appears in Ernaux's *journaux extimes*. I seek to add to this scholarship by studying the spatial dimension of Ernaux's unique representation of everyday life.

A number of articles on Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* have

¹² Sheringham distinguishes Ernaux's study of signs from Barthes semiology by noting that in *Journal du dehors* "there is an added level provided by a complex play of identification and subjective reaction. Inflected by issues of gender, class, sexuality, and personal identity, the semiological gaze is conscripted into a wider network" (*Everyday* 323-24). Ernaux brings such issues also to the Certeauian concept of cultural memory, showing that "[t]he layers of class, history and social structure are revealed through an act of recognition involving a dynamic relation between subject and cultural memory" ("Cultural" 56).

focused specifically on urban aspects. What seems to be largely missing from this scholarship is a dynamic notion of the city, where the city is seen as anything more than the setting of the works. I wish to contest the assumption that, in Ernaux's works, urban space is simply a stage for the theater of everyday life. For instance, Rosemary Lancaster calls Ernaux's urban space "an intricately wrought backdrop for the multitude of little human dramas the author observes" (402). Most criticism on the *journaux extimes* neglects to recognize the vital role that urban space plays in the experiences and identities described by Ernaux. At the same time, this criticism overlooks the ways in which diverse subjects come together to create urban space through their provisional and shifting relations. Too often, Ernaux's Paris and Cergy-Pontoise are assumed to be fixed entities, products of postwar urban planning. In his analysis of *Journal du dehors*, Edward Welch reviews the urban development history of Cergy-Pontoise and the other new towns surrounding Paris. He concludes that through her experiences in the new town, Ernaux is gradually conditioned to a new, modernized way of life (135-36). He casts Ernaux as "someone who has become part of the system put in place by the post-war planners, and who, moreover, shows herself to be complicit with that system" (135). I would argue that by concentrating on the overdetermined city of urban planners, this reading does not take into account the complexity of the relationship between the subject and the city resulting from everyday practices and the social construction of space. In treatments of *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*, the city tends to be portrayed as having a one-way, negative effect on the subject, causing postmodern alienation through social stratification and rampant consumerism. This effect certainly exists in the contemporary city, and critics like Horvath and McIlvanney appropriately credit Ernaux with giving a voice to those marginalized through processes of

urbanization. However, a static view of the city is insufficient for addressing complex urban dynamics wherein the city is continuously constructed through social, discursive, and bodily practices.

One notable exception to scholarship that glosses over Ernaux's depiction of urban space is Fiona Handyside's analysis of Cergy-Pontoise in the *journaux extimes* and Eric Rohmer's 1987 film *L'Ami de mon amie*. Handyside contrasts the perceived sterility and functional efficiency of the new town with the "messy process of living everyday life" that Ernaux and Rohmer demonstrate as they "assert the value of the margin as a place with the potential for re-thinking identity" (54). By complicating certain assumptions about the new town that have limited prior analyses of Ernaux's *journaux extimes*, Handyside has initiated an important conversation in which I shall take part.

Critics discussing both *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* have generally treated them together as though they comprised one work. For the sake of readability, I do the same in my analysis, despite the fact that there are intriguing differences between the two texts. *La Vie extérieure* contains far more references to media stories and current affairs, as evidenced by, for example, Ernaux's ongoing commentary on the apathy of the French public towards the Bosnian War.¹³ This greater focus on events of historical importance likely owes to the impending end of the century, since this second journal extime covers 1993-1999. McIlvanney notes that "*La Vie extérieure* demonstrates a more acute awareness of the passing of time than *Journal du dehors*, an awareness entirely fitting of the historical period

¹³ In one entry in *La Vie extérieure*, Ernaux imagines how Europeans could react to a news story about an attack in Sarajevo: "La seule chose à faire serait que tous les gens de France et d'Europe se rassemblent sur les places et exigent des gouvernements la solution du conflit. Si on ne le fait pas, c'est que cette guerre et ces enfants morts sur le marché de Sarajevo sont pour nous moins importants que le loto, le film du soir à la télé, qu'ils ne nous sont qu'un bruit de fond tragique" (38).

it records” (143). Indeed, an entry from 1997 underscores Ernaux’s preoccupation with fleeting time in *La Vie extérieure*, as she quotes Van Gogh, who wrote in a letter: ““je cherche à exprimer le passage désespérément rapide des choses de la vie moderne”” (81). Her enhanced perception of precise moments in time is even reflected in the organization of the book, with entries not only divided by year, as was the case in *Journal du dehors*, but also headed with the date. Ernaux’s increased concern with historical time in *La Vie extérieure* could arguably indicate a larger direction in her writing, particularly given the 2008 publication of her “autobiographie impersonnelle,” *Les Années*, in which she explores her personal history through French collective memory and culture (*Les Années* 240). However, such questions about autobiography and memory are beyond the scope of this present study. For this reason, I will set aside the intriguing differences between *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* to focus instead on their overlapping representations of everyday urban life.

3. The New Town and Contemporary Urban Experience

Cergy-Pontoise, the setting for most of Ernaux’s urban explorations, is a new town (“ville nouvelle”) without history, what Ernaux describes as “un lieu sorti du néant en quelques années, privé de toute mémoire, aux constructions éparpillées sur un territoire immense” (*Journal* 7). As a modern phenomenon of urban newness, Cergy-Pontoise provides fertile ground for Ernaux’s attempts to grasp the reality of the contemporary moment. The French new towns were a product of postwar urbanization aimed at meeting the economic and housing needs of a rapidly expanding population in the Paris region. The initial proposal for the new towns appeared in a 1965 plan by Paul Delouvrier, *délégué général* of the Paris region, in answer to President de Gaulle’s directive to bring order to the

sprawling *banlieues* (Welch 126, Orillard 120). Following Delouvrier's "Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la région de Paris" and subsequent plans, five new towns were eventually created on undeveloped land outside of Paris.¹⁴ While these satellite cities were designed to be more autonomous than the Parisian *banlieues*, they were built on axes that allowed them to be directly connected to the capital by freeways and the new R.E.R. (*Réseau Express Régional*) rail lines. The French new towns were descendants of the British "garden cities" modeled after the ideas of Ebenezer Howard in his book *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898, reedited in 1902 as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*) (Boucher 24). Boucher describes two of Howard's main principles that influenced the design of French new towns:

D'une part, il faut décongestionner les grandes villes industrielles, surpeuplées, anarchiques, inorganisées et sources, selon lui, de tous les maux possibles pour leurs habitants [...] d'autre part, cette déconcentration des grandes unités urbaines doit être maîtrisée et organisée, de manière à éviter la dispersion urbaine et industrielle sur l'ensemble du territoire. (24)

The latter desire for containment and control is what distinguished the British and European new towns from American suburbs, which were developed chiefly by private developers receiving government subsidies. David Harvey says of the British and European method of expansion:

Under the watchful eye and sometimes strong hand of the state, procedures were devised to eliminate slums, build modular housing, schools, hospitals, factories, etc. through the adoption of the industrialized construction systems and rational planning procedures that modernist architects had long proposed. And all this was framed by a deep concern, expressed again and again in legislation, for the rationalization of spatial patterns and of circulation systems so as to promote equality (at least of opportunity), social welfare, and economic growth. (69)

¹⁴ Cergy-Pontoise was, according to its *directeur d'aménagement* Bernard Hirsch, established on "un des grands sites naturels de la région parisienne," near the crossing of the Oise and Seine rivers (Hirsch 42-43).

Pierre Merlin sees this rational planning as distinguishing the new towns from all others:

“Pour la première fois, elles [les villes nouvelles] ont représenté *une réponse volontaire, planifiée, à la croissance urbaine*” (123; emphasis in the original).

Whereas Merlin, Harvey, and others credit the creation of new towns and other postwar urban projects with improving economic and social conditions, Henri Lefebvre wrote less optimistically about them in “Notes on the New Town.”¹⁵ In this 1960 essay, Henri Lefebvre critiques the functionalist urbanism of Mourenx, a small new town predating Cergy-Pontoise by some 20 years.¹⁶ Lefebvre objects to the bourgeois logic behind the spatial ordering of the new towns:

...the bourgeois era was characterized by a colossal analysis – indispensable, effective, terrifying – which has been turned into objective reality and projected on to the new towns. Everything which could be has been separated and differentiated: not only specific spheres and types of behaviour, but also places and people. (120)

According to Lefebvre, what is missing in the compartmentalized new town is the possibility for improvisation that comes from the integration of different spheres, “the interwoven texture of the spontaneous places of social living” (120). Objects are reduced to their function and consequently signify nothing but themselves, which robs the new town of creative potential:

¹⁵ It should be noted that Harvey recognizes the ideological impetuses for postwar urbanization while nonetheless acknowledging its accomplishments: “the overall effort was reasonably successful in reconstituting the urban fabric in ways that helped preserve full employment, improve material social provision, contribute to welfare goals, and generally help preserve a capitalist social order that was plainly threatened in 1945.” (70)

¹⁶ Mourenx is just a few kilometers from Navarrenx, the medieval town where Lefebvre lived. The new town was built for refinery workers after the discovery of oil in the region. In a 1984 interview with Kristin Ross, Lefebvre describes his witnessing of the building of the new town in 1953-1954 as a defining moment, one that caused him to refocus his studies from agriculture to urbanization (76).

Everything is clear and intelligible. Everything is trivial. Everything is closure and materialized system. The text of the town is totally legible, as impoverished as it is clear, despite the architects' efforts to vary the lines. Surprise? Possibilities? From this place, which should have been the home of all that is possible, they have vanished without trace. (119)

Lefebvre wonders how the functionalism behind the design of the new town will influence the behavior of its inhabitants:

Will people be compliant and do what the plan expects them to do, shopping in the shopping centre, asking for advice at the advice bureau, doing everything the civic center offices demand of them like good, reliable citizens? ... Can spontaneity be revitalized here, can a community be created? Is the functional being integrated into an organic reality – a life – in a way which will give that reality a structure it will be able to modify and adapt? ... Here in Mourenx, what are we on the threshold of? Socialism or supercapitalism? Are we entering the city of joy or the world of unredeemable boredom? (119)

Lefebvre's questions speak ultimately to whether creativity is possible in the overly determined spaces of new towns. As Ernaux shows in her *journaux extimes*, people certainly will shop at the shopping center, but this activity in and of itself does not render them cogs in a machine, as an episode in *La Vie extérieure* makes clear. Shopping at the Auchan hypermarket, Ernaux changes her mind about a package of bread that she had earlier put in her cart. Rather than returning the bread to its proper shelf, she slyly stashes it with the bags of cat litter. Despite her sense of guilt over this minor surreptitious act ("Honte de me conduire ainsi"), the transgression unleashes her imagination:

J'imagine alors des centaines de produits abandonnés un peu partout, charcuterie dans les chaussures, yaourts, desserts, dans les bacs de légumes, etc. Les clients ne se soumettant plus à l'ordre imposé par l'hypermarché – prendre un panier ou un caddie, arpenter les rayons, tendre la main vers l'objet, le saisir, le déposer dans le caddie ou le remettre en rayon, se diriger vers la caisse, payer mais ouvrant les boîtes de gâteaux, les bouteilles de parfum, se nourrissant çà et là selon leurs envies, instaurant la pagaille dans tous les rayons et sortant sans payer naturellement. Je me suis demandé pourquoi cela n'arrivait jamais. (93-93)

Ernaux's fantasy of disobedience and chaos clearly exaggerates the misbehavior of shoppers, but it nonetheless suggests that the functionalism imposed on spaces will not necessarily result in the compliance of the users of those spaces. Throughout her *journaux extimes*, Ernaux finds creativity in the city, as in the tactics of beggars performing a sort of theatrical routine, the metro passengers telling each other stories that unfold like literary narration, and the music performed by subway buskers or piped over a store loudspeaker that trigger memories in Ernaux.

For Ernaux and the anonymous others she encounters, there are still, as Handyside puts it, "playful moments and everyday pleasures that form part of the fabric of everyday life in the New Town" (47). Yet Ernaux admits to having struggled at first with how to write about Cergy-Pontoise, failing in her initial attempts: "Je voulais écrire sur la ville nouvelle de Cergy quand j'y suis arrivée en 1975. Ça été un échec, sans doute parce que je voulais saisir la globalité de la ville" (Ernaux and Tondeur 40). Cergy-Pontoise was unlike the towns and cities in which Ernaux had lived before, and she found herself unable to understand this new town in its entirety. Like Lefebvre, she was initially disoriented by the very newness of the new town. Lefebvre juxtaposes Mourenx with Navarrenx, the medieval town where he lives: "I know every stone of Navarrenx. In these stones I can read the centuries, rather as botanists can tell the age of the tree by the number of rings in its trunk" (116). Ernaux similarly remarks on the traces of the past that are missing in the new town:

Auparavant, j'avais toujours vécu en province, dans des villes où étaient inscrites les marques du passé et de l'histoire. Arriver dans un lieu sorti du néant en quelques années, privé de toute mémoire, aux constructions éparpillées sur un territoire immense, aux limites incertaines, a constitué une expérience bouleversante. J'étais submergée par un sentiment d'étrangeté, incapable de voir autre chose que les esplanades ventées, les façades de béton rose ou bleu, le désert des rues pavillonnaires. L'impression continuelle de flotter entre ciel et terre, dans un *no man's land*. Mon regard était semblable

aux parois de verre des immeubles de bureaux, ne reflétant personne, que les tours et les nuages. (*Journal* 7)

Ernaux's sense of what she calls "schizophrénie" provoked by the sight of the sprawling landscape of the new town indicates the insufficiency of apprehending a city strictly in terms of its topography (7). By rejecting a globalizing view of the *ville nouvelle*, she is able to capture its surprises, the likes of which elude Lefebvre in his singular focus on bourgeois functionalist design. As she explains in the preface, Ernaux eventually turned her attention from the surface features of the alienating landscape to the humanized social spaces of the new town, consequently finding Cergy-Pontoise to be pleasingly cosmopolitan: "J'ai aimé vivre là, dans un endroit cosmopolite, au milieu d'existences commencées ailleurs, dans une province française, au Viêt-nam, au Maghreb ou en Côte-d'Ivoire — comme la mienne, en Normandie" (8). Rather than fixating on the impenetrable buildings and disorienting cityscape, she set out to notice instead the everyday activities of those individuals within the urban infrastructure:

J'ai regardé à quoi jouaient les enfants au pied des immeubles, comment les gens se promenaient dans les rues couvertes du centre commercial des Trois Fontaines, attendaient sous les Abribus. J'ai prêté attention aux propos qui s'échangeaient dans le R.E.R. J'ai eu envie de transcrire des scènes, des paroles, des gestes d'anonymes, qu'on ne revoit jamais, des graffiti sur les murs, effacés aussitôt tracés. Tout ce qui provoquait en moi une émotion, un trouble ou de la révolte. (8)

By shifting her attention away from the alienating topography of the new town, Ernaux recognizes that the city can only truly be apprehended through its people and their daily practices. As geographers Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift explain:

it is only by moving beyond the slower times of the city's built fabric - which seem to form a container - to the constant to and fro of the movements which sustain that fabric that we can begin to understand what a city is and how it constructs us through the medium of 'everyday life.' (83)

In her *journaux extimes*, Ernaux directs her attention primarily to the people around her whose practices are the threads of the fabric of everyday life.

It is this focus on everyday activities and events that brings out the vitality of Cergy-Pontoise, for Ernaux depicts it not as a bland suburban wasteland but rather as expressive of the nature of contemporary urban life. To this extent, she collapses the distinction between the city and the suburb. In their book *Cities and Gender*, Jarvis, Kantor, and Cloke comment that “[i]n Western postindustrial cities the distinction is popularly made between a masculine ‘core’ (‘the city’) and a feminine ‘periphery’ (the suburbs)” (24). In her *journaux extimes*, Ernaux undermines the city/suburb binary opposition, in which the former plays a superior role, by focusing on everyday practices in the new town. The common activities she depicts, like shopping in department stores and *hypermarchés*, taking the subway, and visiting a chain hair salon, are not exclusively suburban, nor are they performed strictly by women. For instance, Ernaux describes a man at the cash register of a supermarket in terms that could apply equally to a woman: “Un Arabe regarde constamment l’intérieur de son caddie, les quelques choses qui gisent au fond. Satisfaction de posséder bientôt ce qu’il désirait, ou crainte d’en ‘avoir pour trop cher,’ ou les deux” (*Journal du dehors* 13). The fact that this man is Arab demonstrates further Ernaux’s interest in the commonality of certain experiences in contemporary urban space. These universal experiences contrast with other moments in the *journaux extimes* in which Ernaux brings attention to difference and inequality, examples of which I analyze later in this chapter.

In a larger sense, Ernaux’s illustrations of common activities in public space point to processes of contemporary urbanization that have blurred the lines between the city and its periphery. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift comment:

If the urbanized world now is a chain of metropolitan areas connected by places/corridors of communication (airports and airways, stations and railways, parking lots and motorways, teleports and information highways) then what is not the urban? Is it the town, the village, the countryside? Maybe, but only to a limited degree. The footprints of the city are all over these places, in the form of city commuters, tourists, teleworking, the media, and the urbanization of lifestyles. (1)

With respect to Paris and its surrounding new towns, including Cergy-Pontoise, architect and author Deyan Sudjic argues:

[I]t is wrong to see the five Parisian new towns as distinct entities in their own right. Rather, they are essential parts of the city itself. They could not exist without the network of motorways, airports, and above all metro lines that constitutes Paris just as much as the picturesque crust of masonry buildings of Haussmann and his predecessors. [...] The fact that you can get to the shopping malls of Les Halles in less than twenty minutes and on to the other new towns on the far side of the city without changing platforms, has transformed the mental map of the city that Parisians carry in their heads. (296-97)

Indeed, many of the scenes in both *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* take place on the R.E.R. train between Paris and Cergy-Pontoise, where the old city and the new town are linked through urban mobility. In terms of the built environment, Paris of course contains its share of centuries-old edifices, but it has nonetheless seen renewal projects in line with suburban constructions. In fact, the architects and real estate company responsible for the shopping center in Cergy-Pontoise were subsequently hired for the initial work on Les Halles (Orillard 132). Conversely, as Orillard explains, “Cergy-Pontoise can be seen as the direct heir of La Défense through its *urbanisme de dalle*,” as seen in its city center built upon a concrete slab (127). The similarity does not escape Ernaux in one particular scene as she looks out the window of the R.E.R. train:

Un mouvement d’intense satisfaction m’envahit à reconnaître les signes de la banlieue parisienne. Le même que j’éprouve quand, en arrivant par l’autoroute A 15 sur le viaduc de Gennevilliers, s’ouvre d’un seul coup un immense paysage d’usines et d’immeubles, de pavillons d’avant-guerre, avec en

muraille de fond, la Défense et Paris. (*Journal* 105-106)

The comparison of these two arrivals, one in Paris and the other in the suburb, reinforces the point that the structures and processes of urbanization have made these two spaces more alike than different.

If, as I argue, Ernaux's focus on contemporary urban experience eclipses superficial differences between the new town and the established city, then how can this urban experience be characterized? It is tempting to frame Ernaux within a history of literary representations of *flânerie*, the practice of urban wandering that involves what Keith Tester describes as "the observation of the fleeting and the transitory which is the other half of modernity to the permanent and central sense of the self" (7). As I will demonstrate shortly, Ernaux challenges this very notion of a "permanent and central sense of the self" who views the city with an objective and detached eye. Yet at first glance, Ernaux seems to be following closely in the footsteps of the *flâneur*, the leisurely male stroller who wanders the city streets, observing the spectacle of modernity. A prominent figure in urban literary studies, the *flâneur* was poeticized by Charles Baudelaire in the nineteenth century and revisited by twentieth-century German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin.¹⁷ Ernaux's own desire to transcribe the ephemeral signs of modernity is evident in her description of her project in the preface of *Journal du dehors*:

Il ne s'agit pas d'un reportage, ni d'une enquête de sociologie urbaine, mais d'une tentative d'atteindre la réalité d'une époque – cette modernité dont une ville nouvelle donne le sentiment aigu sans qu'on puisse la définir – au travers d'une collection d'instantanés de la vie quotidienne collective. (8)

¹⁷ As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson notes, versions of the *flâneur* began appearing in popular French literature in the early nineteenth century, although his later incarnations are better known: "Since Baudelaire and especially since Walter Benjamin's meditations on nineteenth-century Paris, social and literary analysis has fixed upon the *flâneur* as an emblematic representative of modernity and personification of contemporary urbanity." (22)

Ernaux's description of modernity as a collection of fleeting images certainly recalls Baudelaire's definition of modernity as "le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent" (695). However, Ernaux's mobile urban subject does not pay homage to the flâneur, but instead subtly destabilizes his stance by contesting the primacy of the male, authorial subject. Ernaux self-consciously rejects the model of the detached observer epitomizing the Baudelairian flâneur when she realizes that unmediated access to the reality of one's times is impossible. In the last paragraph of the preface, she recalls quickly abandoning her goal of objectively capturing the city in a sort of photorealistic writing ("écriture photographique du réel") once she discovers that she cannot remove herself from the text: "...finalement, j'ai mis de moi-même beaucoup plus que prévu dans ces textes: obsessions, souvenirs, déterminant inconsciemment le choix de la parole, de la scène à fixer" (9-10). Ernaux recognizes that the photographic ideal cannot function as a model for writing.

Ernaux's journal entries contain both pseudo-objective observations of brief encounters and brutally direct commentaries on the violent and sexual undercurrents of those encounters. *Journal du dehors* opens with the startling image of a woman on a stretcher being carried across the street. In a later entry, Ernaux recalls an ominous underground parking garage: "En sortant de l'ascenseur, dans le parking souterrain, troisième sous-sol, le vrombissement des extracteurs d'air. On n'entendrait pas les cris en cas de viol" (*Journal* 29). Elsewhere, an exhibitionist in the metro tests the limits of women's unfettered movement in the urban sphere, for his victims have no defense against his obscene gesture except to pretend not to see him: "On ne peut pas lui donner d'aumône, juste feindre de n'avoir rien vu et garder en soi cette vision jusqu'à l'arrivée de la rame" (*Journal* 36). These threats of violence demonstrate that, despite their increased access to the public sphere,

women still face dangers on the street of the sort that limited solitary female strolling a century ago. According to Janet Wolff, women in the nineteenth century were not as free as men to wander the city streets not only because of the threat of being accosted, but also because of the risk of being labeled a “public woman,” or prostitute (40-43). Whereas Wolff presupposes a clear distinction between the prostitute and the flâneuse, Susan Buck-Morss has identified prostitution as “the female version of flânerie” (119). Ernaux evokes this “public woman” in one of her journal entries when, struck by an emotional conversation between a young couple, she comments: “Je suis traversée par les gens, leur existence, comme une putain” (*Journal* 69). Interestingly, in contemporary Paris, it is Ernaux’s anonymous encounters with others that cause her to feel like a prostitute, whereas a century earlier, her mere presence as a single woman in the public sphere would have branded her as such. In Ernaux’s case, the branding is self-imposed and a direct consequence of her flânerie. She cannot wander through the city without being “traversed” by others, so the flâneuse and the prostitute are analogous.

Moreover, for Ernaux, being “traversed” by others is key to her notion of the contemporary social subject. She finds that her own memory and identity are contingent on her encounters with other anonymous city dwellers. She explains:

je suis sûre maintenant qu’on se découvre soi-même davantage en se projetant dans le monde extérieur que dans l’introspection du journal intime [...] Ce sont les autres, anonymes côtoyés dans le métro, les salles d’attente, qui, par l’intérêt, la colère où la honte dont ils nous *traversent*, réveillent notre mémoire et nous révèlent à nous-mêmes. (*Journal* 10; emphasis in the original)

In the concluding pages of *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux reiterates this idea of locating herself in her interactions with others, particularly when they remind her of her past and thereby become manifestations of her personal history. Sights of individuals resembling her sons as

young boys and her mother in the supermarket unclench memories in a Proustian fashion, conflating past and present. Yet she goes on to suggest that others are equally “traversed” by her:

C’est donc au-dehors, dans les passagers du métro ou du R.E.R., les gens qui empruntent l’escalator des Galeries Lafayette et d’Auchan, qu’est déposée mon existence passée. Dans des individus anonymes qui ne soupçonnent pas qu’ils détiennent une part de mon histoire, dans des visages, des corps, que je ne revois jamais. Sans doute suis-je moi-même, dans la foule des rues et des magasins, porteuse de la vie des autres. (106-107)

It is in this notion of traversal, where anonymous individuals recognize themselves and their history in others as their trajectories intersect, that most distinguishes Ernaux’s urban subject from the impenetrable flâneur, who retains his ontological distance from the others in the crowd.

Amin and Thrift speak of *transitivity* as a fundamental quality of the city, one that Walter Benjamin sought to grasp in his incarnation as a flâneur as he wandered cities including Paris, Berlin, and Moscow: “Benjamin used the term transitivity to grasp the city as a place of intermingling and improvisation, resulting from its porosity to the past as well as varied spatial influences” (10). Amin and Thrift go on to argue that “[t]he flâneur’s poetic of knowing is not sufficient. The city’s transitivity needs to be grasped through other means” (14). At issue for Amin and Thrift is the fact that the sprawling contemporary city is experienced these days not just on foot, but also through many other modes of transportation, including the car and the bus. Moreover, the flâneur’s accounts of the city do not acknowledge their “distinctive subject positions,” which tend typically to reflect male bourgeois experiences generalized as universal (13). It would seem that the flâneur in search of the transitivity of the city fails to recognize his own transitivity, that is, how his position in urban space is configured in relation to others. This notion of transitivity shares with

Ernaux's "je transpersonnel" the prefix "trans," which the Oxford English Dictionary equates "with the sense 'across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another'" (385). The transitivity of the city parallels the porosity of the subject as illustrated by Ernaux's "'je' transpersonnel." For Ernaux, the urban spaces she travels become depositories of her past self ("existence passée"), but that past is shown to be very much present in the bodies, gestures, and languages of her fellow carriers of collective French life (107).

Ernaux thus characterizes the city as a relational space where transpersonal experiences occur through encounters with others. The subject's mobility – in both a literal and a figurative sense – is a prerequisite for the occurrence of these encounters. It is to the notion of movement, and its counterpoint, rest, that I turn to next as I consider Ernaux's observations of the interpersonal dynamics of urban social space.

4. At-Homeness and Out-of-Placeness in Urban Social Space

The entries in *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* show Ernaux at various moments of movement, rest, and encounter, the components of environmental phenomenologist David Seamon's "triad of environmental experience" (131).¹⁸ Seamon uses the term "movement" to mean "any spatial displacement of the body or bodily parts initiated by the person himself or herself" including not only intentional motions but also "such involuntary actions as blinking, breathing, itching, etc." (33, 36). Seamon includes these

¹⁸ In my analysis, I focus on the concepts of movement and rest, setting aside the notion of encounter, which Seamon defines as "any situation of attentive contact between the person and the world at hand" (99). Although Ernaux's encounters are the basis for her journal entries, Seamon uses the term mostly to explore the phenomenon of perception, which is not a particular theme for Ernaux.

latter “involuntary actions” so as to emphasize the fact that not all movements are a result of a conscious initiation; many are pre-cognitive. Some movements are certainly reactions to outside stimuli, but others involve bodily knowledge gained through routine and repetition: “the body holds within itself an active, intentional capacity which intimately ‘knows’ in its own special fashion the everyday spaces in which the person lives his [sic] typical day” (35). Ernaux’s description in *Journal du dehors* of a crowded shopping center illustrates the sort of instinctive movements of bodies reacting to each other in space:

Dans les rues couvertes du centre commercial, les gens s’écoulent avec difficulté. (On réussit à éviter, sans les regarder, tous ces corps voisins de quelques centimètres. Un instinct ou une habitude infailible. On n’est cogné dans le ventre ou le dos que par les caddies et les enfants. ‘Regarde où tu marches!’ s’exclame une mère à son petit garçon. (14)

Here only children not habituated to navigating through dense crowds and shopping carts encumbering the bodies of shoppers disrupt the circulation. Ernaux’s scene is messier than Seamon’s idealized “place ballet,” his vision of the intersection of bodies performing routinized activities in the same physical space (54-59). Nonetheless, in Ernaux’s account she recognizes that knowledge of everyday city spaces is registered not only cognitively but also bodily.

Seamon’s focus on the experiential aspect of movement thus corresponds with Ernaux’s firsthand accounts of everyday lived space. In an entry in *Journal du dehors*, she describes how the return route to Cergy-Pontoise prompts a curious sensation that the trip is split into two distinct periods of time. The first duration is unremarkable, but the second one – the last ten minutes of the trip – is one of complete expectation (“pure attente”) (116). At this point, the traveler’s inner clock (“horloge intérieure”) takes over, bringing with it the anticipation of arrival and of the happiness that arrival is expected to bring:

Rien ne peut être pensé dans cette durée. N'aspirant qu'au moment où l'on descendra du train, où l'on franchira le tourniquet, l'air frais du parking, la voiture. À peine des images claires, juste une poussée instinctive vers ce qui est une forme de bonheur. (116)

Despite her use of the pronoun “on” to generalize this phenomenon as a shared experience, Ernaux steers clear of theorizing about her observations, preferring instead to register the affective dimensions of the physical and social body in space. Another entry clearly demonstrates her desire not to distort everyday experience through romanticization and intellectualization. Ernaux begins the entry by quoting historian Jacques Le Goff: “Le métro me dépayse.” She goes on to wonder: “Les gens qui le prennent tous les jours seraient-ils dépayés en se rendant au Collège de France?” Although she admits “On n’a pas l’occasion de savoir,” by her very question Ernaux communicates her disdain for a depiction of mobility that removes it from its social, cultural, and material context.

Although Ernaux’s mobility is the impetus for her *journaux extimes*, since the entries depend on her outward excursions, dwelling is also an important aspect of her project, for it permits a more sustained attention to what is before her eyes. Often in her *journaux extimes*, Ernaux pauses in a particular space, illustrating Seamon’s definition of rest as “any situation in which the person or an object with which he or she has contact is relatively fixed in place and space for a longer or shorter period of time” (70). According to Seamon, rest occurs not only at one’s domicile, but also in short-term centers created by individuals in transit. Seamon illustrates: “A car, for example, may become a temporary centre on a shopping trip” (73). Seamon’s concept of rest hinges on the experience of “at-homeness,” which he describes as “the usually unnoticed, taken-for-granted situation of being comfortable in and familiar with the everyday world in which one lives and outside of which one is ‘visiting,’ ‘in transit,’ ‘not at home,’ ‘out of place’ or ‘travelling’” (70). While it would seem that this

definition limits itself to places of residence, Seamon asserts that “[t]he specific physical extent and boundaries of at-homeness are not so much the concern here as the overriding experiential structures which make them possible” (70).

For Ernaux, the subway car recurs as a center of rest. In her subway car scenes, we find that although she is “in transit,” she and those around her are momentarily at rest in a place whose familiarity enables an experience of “at-homeness.” In one episode, Ernaux is quite literally at rest, waking from a doze as the train approaches her town. Her subway car becomes like a sleeping cabin on a train passing through a town at night: “impression d’un train de nuit arrêté dans une ville où tout le monde dort” (*Journal* 105). Looking out the window, she remarks: “Un mouvement d’intense satisfaction m’envahit à reconnaître les signes de la banlieue parisienne” (105). Her sense of at-homeness is twofold, manifesting itself both in her relaxation inside the car and her contentment as she spots the familiar sights of her town. The tranquility of this moment contrasts with the disorientation that Ernaux describes in another series of entries. An impending change in her regular R.E.R. route means that she will no longer arrive at the above-ground Saint-Lazare station in Paris, but that instead her train will pull into underground stations. It occurs to Ernaux: “Neuf années de ma vie vont se refermer par un changement de parcours Cergy-Paris, il y aura le temps du train Cergy-Saint-Lazare et le temps du R.E.R. A” (75). The extent to which this change disrupts her sense of at-homeness on the train becomes evident two entries later, when, riding the new route for the first time, she wistfully recalls the sights of the Saint-Lazare station, and then laments: “Maintenant on arrive à Paris en sous-sol, dans les lumières artificielles, sans savoir où l’on est” (76). What was once a center of familiarity has become a space where she feels adrift.

Ernaux may feel lost without the aboveground markers of the Saint-Lazare station, but her “out-of-placeness,” to borrow geographer Tim Cresswell’s term, pales in comparison to that of another woman (“Weeds” 334). In an entry that falls immediately between the two devoted to the R.E.R. route change, Ernaux describes a scene of everyday racism involving a black woman wearing an African tunic who enters the chic Hédiard boutique in Cergy-Pontoise:

Immédiatement, l’œil de la gérante se transforme en couteau, surveillance sans répit de cette cliente qu’on soupçonne en plus de s’être trompée de magasin, qui ne sent pas qu’elle n’est pas à sa place. (75)

At first look, the placement of this entry within the text seems arbitrary, corresponding with an apparent randomness throughout the *journaux extimes* that mimics the fragmentary nature of the personal diary. However, because of its insertion between the two entries describing Ernaux’s disorientation resulting from her route change, a general theme of out-of-placeness emerges that contrasts with the at-homeness evoked in other entries. This out-of-placeness can occur at a relatively superficial level (the change in routine that disorients Ernaux) or at a much deeper social level resulting from racist and exclusionary attitudes (the black woman who is assumed to be in the wrong place).

Several metro scenes in Ernaux’s *journaux extimes* evoke the domestic realm, with depictions of activities normally done in private, or emotionally charged interactions between family members that undermine a simple vision of “home sweet home.” Ernaux’s frequent scenes in subway cars featuring a parent and child are unsentimental in their exposure of the fraught dynamics that kinship can entail. In some cases, an adult child is overly critical of his or her mother, as with the young man who derides his mother with “Tu deviens sourde!” or the daughter who suspects that her mother’s neutral responses dissimulate her true feelings:

“chaque phrase de la mère – qui s’efforce de garder un ton neutre – est relevée par la fille qui y détecte aussitôt un sens caché, le vrai sens, à savoir la mauvaiseté de la mère” (*Journal* 35; *Vie* 31-32). In other cases, it is the parent who reacts – the grandmother who reproaches her grandson for his desire to move away – or fails to react – the mother who ignores her preadolescent son’s questions as she reads an article headlined “L’âge n’est plus un obstacle à l’amour” (*Journal* 12-13; *Vie* 15). These examples illustrate the limitations of a idealized conception of “at-homeness” since the home is not merely a site of comfort and ease, as Seamon implies, but also the locus of complex familial relations.

It would seem that the terms “at-homeness” and “out-of-placeness” correspond respectively to interiority and exteriority, and thus to the private and the public. However, in her *journaux extimes* Ernaux contests the easy distinction between public and private spheres in ways that put at-homeness and out-of-placeness in tension. An early entry in *Journal du dehors* demonstrates that at-homeness and out-of-placeness can coexist when an individual gets overly comfortable and behaves in a manner deemed inappropriate for public space. A man identified only as “il” boards the train, stretches across two seats, and begins clipping his fingernails, admiring his handiwork as he proceeds: “Il sort de sa poche une pince à ongles et s’en sert, regardant après chaque doigt traité la beauté produite, étendant la main devant lui” (14). Although in general personal hygiene is a necessary element of social conformity, this man breaks the unwritten rule that grooming be concealed from public view. Ernaux notices that the other passengers pretend not to see him, but their tacit disapproval does nothing to diminish the man’s satisfaction: “Les voyageurs autour font mine de ne pas voir. Il semble posséder une pince à ongles pour la première fois. Heureux avec insolence. Personne ne peut rien contre son bonheur de – comme signifie l’air des gens autour – mal-

éduqué” (14-15). The unschooled man’s ignorance of the rules of social etiquette prevents him from participating in the internalized policing that self-regulating subjects are expected to perform in social space.

In a subsequent entry in *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux recounts another instance of out-of-place behavior. Once again, the episode begins when a man enters the train car. Ernaux deduces that the man is homeless from the plastic bag he carries (“un sac de plastique, caractéristique des s.d.f.”) (100). His conduct shows him to be unconcerned with propriety. He raises a pant leg, exposing his skin and hairs, pulls up his sock, and then does the same for his other leg. A short while later, he lifts his tee shirt and inspects his stomach at length. Ernaux sees no malice in his behavior, but instead considers his uncouthness to be a result of his demoralizing situation:

À partir de quand, lorsqu’on n’a plus de domicile ni de travail, le regard des autres ne nous empêche plus de faire des choses naturelles mais déplacées au-dehors dans notre culture. Par quoi commence l’indifférence à un ‘savoir-vivre’ appris enfant à l’école, à la table familiale, quand l’avenir était un grand rêve le soir en s’endormant. (100)

Ernaux establishes a connection between herself and the homeless man by evoking their common socialization, the *savoir-vivre* learned by all children. Her empathy for the man arises also from her recollections of people in her own early life. Lyn Thomas attributes Ernaux’s sympathetic inclusion of marginal figures in *Journal du dehors* to the lasting memory of her own humble origins:

the poor and destitute are brought into literature, but from the perspective of someone who has herself experienced degradation. The narrating voice always identifies with those whose public behavior is outside the norms of bourgeois politeness, and indicative of a level of powerlessness where these norms become irrelevant. (20)

Ernaux’s own comments in an interview support Thomas’s point:

Dans l'enfance j'ai vécu parmi ces gens-là, les exclus, les alcooliques. Il reste toujours cette peur. Moi aussi je pourrais retomber dans la pauvreté. Ça ne m'a jamais quitté. Qu'est-ce qui me sépare d'eux? Tout le malheur du monde, vivre et non-vivre sont toujours présents en moi comme un reproche. (Ernaux and Tondeur 43)

Ernaux's transpersonal connection to the homeless man is thus based on both her exposure in childhood to those in a similar situation, and her instinctive knowledge of the shared cultural codes to which he is indifferent. Her fear of falling back into poverty and her self-reproach for any feelings of social superiority serve to remind us of the tenuous and arbitrary nature of social class.

Each of these two examples of out-of-place public behavior indicates an act of transgression whose deviancy owes specifically to its socio-spatial context. Tim Cresswell points out that geographical space plays a vital role in the creation and maintenance of ideology, since places are bound up with norms and expectations about appropriate behavior. Transgression occurs when an individual's conduct deliberately or unintentionally crosses a certain perceived border between what is and is not acceptable. Cresswell credits transgression with calling attention to hegemonies at work in everyday life.

transgression is important because it breaks from 'normality' and causes a questioning of that which was previously considered 'natural,' 'assumed,' and 'taken for granted.' Transgressions appear to be 'against nature'; they disrupt the patterns and processes of normality and offend the subtle myths of consensus. These deviations from the dominant ideological norms serve to confuse and disorientate. In doing so they temporarily reveal the historical and mutable nature of that which is usually categorized 'the way things are.' The way the world is defined, categorized, segmented, and classified is rendered problematic. (*In Place* 26)

In the preceding examples from *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux shows the paradox of "natural" grooming activities rendered "unnatural" by their performance in public. The underlying assumptions about these men – the former is ignorant because of his lack of social initiation

while the latter's descent into homelessness makes him indifferent to etiquette – reveal a fundamental tension between two types of center. Following Seamon's notion of a center as place of rest, the two men feel enough at ease in their temporary dwelling space to act as they would in private. This experience of "at-homeness" collides with another center, that is, the normative space from which peripheral figures (including the uneducated and the homeless) are excluded. As Cresswell asserts: "By studying the margins of what is allowed we come to understand more about the center – the core – of what is considered right and proper" (*In Place* 21). In the case of the homeless man, his improper behavior results from the fact that he must make himself "at home" in public for lack of a private home.

While the two examples cited above demonstrate ignorance of and indifference to societal expectations of spatially appropriate behavior, a third example takes Ernaux's focus on *mœurs* in a different direction. A short entry in *Journal du dehors* shows a young couple making a spectacle of their intimacy:

Dans le métro, un garçon et une fille se parlent avec violence et se caressent, alternativement, comme s'il n'y avait personne autour d'eux. Mais c'est faux: de temps en temps ils regardent les voyageurs avec défi. Impression terrible. Je me dis que la littérature est cela pour moi. (91)

By equating the exhibitionism of the couple with her own self-exposure through literature, Ernaux taps into the discomfort produced by the seepage of the private realm into the public. The couple is performing an act of "intentional transgression," to use Cresswell's term, as they flaunt their intimacy in defiance of a code of conduct forbidding such public display of affection (*In Place* 23).¹⁹ Ernaux's writing is likewise intentionally transgressive, conflating

¹⁹ It is in differentiating between "resistance" and "transgression" that Cresswell introduces the idea of "intentional transgression." He explains: "Transgression, in distinction to resistance, does not, by definition, rest on the intentions of the actors but on the *results* – on the 'being noticed' of a particular action [...] Transgression is judged by those who react to

the private and the public as she exteriorizes her subjectivity by insisting on its social and cultural construction. In the next section, I will consider the implications of Ernaux's spatialized transpersonal subject.

5. Ernaux's Mobile Transpersonal Subject

Ernaux's distinctive "je transpersonnel" has come at a time when assumptions and conventional thought about the nature of subjectivity have been vigorously questioned by theorists throughout the humanities and social sciences. With the emergence of poststructuralist theory, there has been a drastic rethinking of subjectivity and a move away from what geographers Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, in their contribution to the anthology *Mapping the Subject*, refer to as the "monological conception of the subject," a "disengaged first-person singular self" (15, 14). Pile and Thrift add that "new, more open figurations of the subject" are often conceptualized through metaphors of movement and mobility (19). Such metaphors surface in the work of feminist theorists and geographers who have been at the forefront of reconceptualizations of the subject. Kathy Ferguson, for instance, posits:

Mobile subjectivities are temporal, moving across and along axes of power (which are themselves in motion) without fully residing in them. They are relational, produced through shifting yet enduring encounters and connections, never fully captured by them. They are ambiguous: messy and multiple, unstable but persevering. (154)

The relational nature of subjectivity and identity is at the heart of contemporary understandings of the subject, as Gillian Rose succinctly explains: "Who I am depends on me establishing in what ways I am different from, or similar to, someone else. We position

it, while resistance rests on the intentions of the actor(s) [...] Intentional transgression is a form of resistance that creates a response from the establishment – an act that draws the lines on a battlefield and defines the terrain on which contestation occurs." (*In Place* 23; emphasis in the original)

ourselves in relation to others” (5). Drawing from the ideas of Louis Althusser, Elspeth Probyn describes this positioning as “a process and a production” involving ideological interpellations (294). Probyn argues against a conception of “fragmentary, floating subjectivities,” maintaining instead that “we may be hailed by different ideological apparatuses, but we also seek some coherence even in the face of multiple interpellations” (296).

The mobility of the relational subject is thus not a haphazard drift. Rather, subjectivity is continuously rearticulated according to context. Amin and Thrift see the subject as moving through various relational networks:

human subjects which we conveniently describe as a unity of body and purpose are in fact aggregates of numerous subject positions which are parts of numerous networks. At any time, a ‘subject’ will therefore be a result of switching in and out of particular positions in particular networks, shuffling between particular spaces and times. (29)

The spatial component of subjectivity has long been neglected in theories of the self. Probyn seeks to compensate for this oversight by making a case for the “spatial imperative of subjectivity”:

Thinking about subjectivity in terms of space of necessity reworks any conception that subjectivity is hidden away in private recesses. What we hold most dear, as an individual intimate possession, is in fact a very public affair. Thinking about how space interacts with subjectivity entails rethinking both terms, and their relation to each other. (290)

Doreen Massey likewise argues for a “subjectivity which is spatial..., outwardlooking in its perspectives and in the awareness of its own relational construction” (*For Space* 80). Such a focus on the external construction of subjectivity corresponds to Ernaux’s “‘je’ transpersonnel” and her belief, articulated in the Rousseau epigraph in *Journal du dehors*, that “Notre *vrai* moi n’est pas tout entier en nous” (6; emphasis in the original).

We have seen how the subway car functions as a temporary space of rest in Ernaux's *journaux extimes*. She shows it also to be a site for interpellations of the subject, particularly with respect to class identification. Just as the subway car allows the body to rest momentarily, class identification provides the subject with a metaphorical dwelling space. Ferguson explains: "Class, like race, gender, erotic identity, 'etc.,' can be a crucial but still temporary and shifting resting place for subjects always in motion and in relation" (177). Ernaux's own class mobility is a theme throughout her works, as she grapples with conflicting feelings over her working class origins and her acquired status of middle class intellectual. Yet her class identification shifts depending on the socio-spatial context. At times, she shows what Sheringham calls "an enduring solidarity with working-class or culturally deprived people" (*Everyday* 324). Such is the case when Ernaux reflects on the colloquial language used by a woman in the pharmacy: "Paroles transmises de génération en génération, absentes des journaux et des livres, ignorées de l'école, appartenant à la culture populaire (originellement la mienne - c'est pourquoi je la reconnais aussitôt)" (*Journal* 70). In *La Vie extérieure*, recurring scenes of *chômeurs* selling street newspapers reveal Ernaux's sympathy for these downtrodden individuals, as well as her scorn for social attitudes towards the homeless:

De plus en plus, ces journaux de la charité – que personne ne considère comme de 'vrais' journaux, ni leur vente comme un 'vrai' travail — apparaissent comme une mesure dérisoire pour accommoder la pauvreté, voire empêcher qu'elle ne devienne dangereuse. (40-41)

Ernaux's own anti-diary project in *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* potentially opens her up to accusations of not producing legitimate works ("de 'vrais' journaux"). Her connection to the street newspaper sellers is reinforced when a young man selling "La Rue" introduces himself as Éric to the R.E.R. passengers. "J'ai un fils qui s'appelle aussi Éric,"

Ernaux remarks.

In contrast with these momentary connections, in other situations Ernaux's encounters with marginalized individuals accentuate class difference. Ernaux frequently portrays herself as complicit in the indifference of her fellow travelers toward the *mendiants* in subway cars and stations. In a scene at the Bastille station, Ernaux passes a panhandler kneeling on the ground with a cup in his outstretched hand: "Le flot des gens s'écarte en deux branches devant lui. J'étais dans celle de droite" (*Vie* 44). In another metro station, Ernaux witnesses a woman chastising the crowd for overspending on Christmas gifts rather than helping the needy:

Descendue sur le quai, elle se heurte aux gens qui portent des sacs de cadeaux pour Noël, elle les invective, 'vous feriez mieux de donner de l'argent aux malheureux plutôt que d'acheter toutes ces conneries.' Encore la vérité. Mais on ne donne pas pour faire le bien, on donne pour être aimé. Donner à un SDF juste pour l'empêcher de crever tout à fait est une idée insupportable et il ne nous en aimera pas pour autant. (*Vie* 69)

Despite Ernaux's agreement with the homeless woman's point, she aligns herself with the crowd through her use of the pronouns "on" and "nous." Her complicity may in part be ironic, given her caustic comment that we give in order to be loved rather than out of altruism. Nonetheless, throughout her *journaux extimes*, Ernaux's identification with marginalized figures is complicated by her awareness of class differences and her ambivalence over her own history of upward social movement.

The inconsistency of these identifications demonstrates the mobility of Ernaux's transpersonal subject. She locates herself at different moments in various passersby, as when she comments about a woman on an airplane preparing herself for a rendezvous with a man: "C'est comme si j'étais elle" (*Vie* 12). Other times, Ernaux's mobile subject recognizes herself through differences rather than similarities with anonymous others. On the Paris-

Cergy train, Ernaux spots a working-class African man whose discolored hands twitch compulsively while the rest of his body stays still. “Être un intellectuel,” she comments self-reflexively, “c’est cela aussi, n’avoir jamais éprouvé le besoin de se séparer de ses mains énervées ou abîmées par le travail” (*Journal* 44). Ernaux’s transpersonal city is thus a social space of complex interpersonal relations, from shifting class identifications to codes of behavior followed by some and transgressed by others.

CHAPTER 4

AGNÈS VARDA'S EMBODIED CITY

1. Agnès Varda: A Cine-Writer of Spaces and Bodies

In her films spanning over 50 years, Agnès Varda explores a number of different spaces, from the fishing village in her debut *La Pointe courte* (1954) to beaches and other personally significant places in *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008). Despite the geographical and cultural variety of Varda's locales, ultimately they are all "embodied spaces," that is, spaces inhabited and experienced by human bodies that engage their environment on physical, social, and affective levels. In this chapter, I examine the embodied urban spaces that Varda presents in two short films, *L'Opéra-Mouffe* (1958) and *Les Dites cariatides* (1984), and two features, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961) and *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000). I consider how different types of bodies (such as the female body, pregnant body, the sick body, the hungry body, the aging body) "interface" with their spatial locations, to cite the term used by Elizabeth Grosz to describe the two-way relation between the body and the city (248). Varda's spatialized bodies constitute an integral part of their geographies while at the same time resisting the social hegemony that these geographies impose. Her emphasis on the material aspects of the body (as in her representations of nudity and bodily functions in the public sphere) is transgressive, exposing and contesting socio-cultural boundaries. Moreover, her spatialized bodies and embodied spaces transgress physical boundaries, problematizing the conventional distinction between the body and the space that it inhabits.

Like Georges Perec and Annie Ernaux, Varda is interested in the social rather than psychological or sensational aspects of everyday spaces and practices. Her films have an essayistic quality and can be productively analyzed next to Perec's and Ernaux's nonfiction texts. Timothy Corrigan explains that "the essayistic describes the many-layered activities of a personal point of view as a public experience" and goes on to situate Varda's works in the category of the essay film. Varda herself takes a transdisciplinary view of her craft, and her self-coined term "cinécriture" invites us to "read" her films as we would literary works. In her book *Varda par Agnès*, she compares elements of filmmaking to those of writing:

Le découpage, les mouvements, les points de vue, le rythme du tournage et du montage ont été sentis et pensés comme les choix d'un écrivain, phrases denses ou pas, type de mots, fréquence des adverbes, alinéas, parenthèses, chapitres continuant le sens du récit et le contrariant, etc.
En écriture c'est le style. Au cinéma, le style c'est le cinécriture. (14)

As Valerie Orpen points out, Varda's "cinécriture" is similar to Alexandre Astruc's notion of the "caméra-stylo," despite Varda's assertion that she had been unfamiliar with Astruc's concept when developing her own idea of a writerly form of filmmaking (12). In his 1948 essay, "The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: The Caméra-Stylo" ("Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: la caméra-stylo"), Astruc argues that a new filmic language was emerging from works by directors such as Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, and Robert Bresson. He asserts that, through the use of the camera as a metaphorical pen, "the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language" (qtd. in Graham 18). While Varda and Astruc share a holistic view of filmmaking as analogous to written expression, in practice, Varda's appreciation for "the image for its own sake" is apparent throughout her filmography. Contributing to the

transdisciplinarity of her approach, in fact, is her training in photography, her first career. Her films showcase her photographer's eye in the artful composition of their shots, as well as in her use of still images and close-ups. Her lack of knowledge about films and filmmaking at the beginning of her career allowed her to create what Susan Hayward calls "a new film language," one that is less driven by an attempt to elevate cinema to the status of literature (a motivation underpinning Astruc's case for the *caméra-stylo*) than by an experimentalism born from her passion for a variety of creative disciplines (31). Through her unique filmic language, Varda offers compelling accounts of contemporary spaces and relations that, like those of Perec and Ernaux, affirm the validity of everyday life and people as subjects of representation.

Varda has frequently taken her camera to the city streets to record not only her surroundings but also her playful urban interventions. I borrow the term "urban interventions" from David Pinder, who is interested in artistic and cultural practices that, among other things, "are involved in but frequently disrupt everyday urban life," and that "make use of artistic and creative means to question and explore social problems and conflicts without necessarily prescribing solutions" (731). The films treated in this chapter demonstrate ways in which Varda's urban interventions, combined with cinematic experimentation, address embodiment in city space. Thinking in terms of embodiment takes us beyond a strict constructivist view of the body by accounting for the importance of the body's materiality not only as it presents physical markers that lead to its definition in social and cultural terms, but also as that physicality serves to define the spaces that the body inhabits (Hubbard et al. 99). The body itself is difficult to define. As feminist geographer Robyn Longhurst explains: "the body [...] is a surface of social and cultural inscription; it

houses subjectivity; it is a site of pleasure and pain; it is material, discursive and psychical” (“The Body,” 91). In the films I have selected, Varda addresses the body from both the exterior and the interior, showing how its inscription from the outside affects subjective experience, with space playing a central role in this dialectic.

2. *L’Opéra-Mouffe*: Transgressive Bodies on a Parisian Street

Falling chronologically between Surrealism and *la Nouvelle Vague*, Varda’s 16-minute lyrical-essay film *L’Opéra-Mouffe* was made for inclusion in a screening of experimental films at the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels (*Varda* 114). Having just finished a commissioned documentary (*Ô saisons, Ô châteaux*, 1958), Varda revealed at the opportunity to make a more personal film (*Varda* 114). The sequences in *L’Opéra-Mouffe* occur mostly on the rue Mouffetard, where Varda set up her camera the previous winter and filmed the people and things that caught her eye. Day after day, Varda stood atop a folding chair at the end of the ancient narrow street, eventually blending in with her setting: “Personne ne me remarquait, car j’étais là tout le temps et qu’au bout de deux jours, au même titre que la marchande de citrons et que la marchande de pains, je faisais partie du décor” (*Varda* 230). Varda took this raw footage and intercut shots from the street with staged sequences and composed images. A series of intertitles throughout the film offer broad themes and an ostensible structure. For instance, “Les amoureux” introduces a fictional scene between young lovers; “joyeuses fêtes” precedes shots of frolicking children in carnival masks; and “de l’ivresse” is followed by images of men drinking in bars and passed out on the street.

The combination of spontaneously captured real-life images combined with carefully composed shots and staged sequences render the film a “subjective documentary,” a term

applied by critics and Varda herself to her work (*Varda* 230). The subjectivity in question in *L'Opéra-Mouffe* is ambiguous. The film presents itself as a “carnet de notes filmées rue Mouffetard à Paris par une femme enceinte.” Varda was pregnant at the time, although she maintains that while making *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, she imagined what might be the experience of a pregnant woman from the rue Mouffetard (*Varda* 230). Two strands run through the film corresponding with the terms “subjective” and “documentary”: staged scenes and montages evoking the memories, feelings, and perspective of the pregnant woman; and images captured *sur le vif* of life on the market street. At the time, the rue Mouffetard was not the popular destination site that it has since become, but rather served its local low-income population. As Varda explains: “Il n’y avait pas comme maintenant des restaurants grecs et des vendeurs de nippes, il n’y avait pas non plus de tout-à-l’égout ! On y voyait beaucoup de vieux, beaucoup de cloches et des ivrognes” (114). As Varda filmed the denizens of the rue Mouffetard, she reflected on the stages of life, thereby connecting the down and out street dwellers to her imaginary protagonist, as well as to her own pregnant self: “tous ceux-là, les vieux, les borgnes et les clochardes, tous avaient été des bébés, des nouveaux-nés souvent aimés à qui on avait embrassé le ventre et talqué le derrière” (*Varda* 115). The interweaving of the two strands, documentary and subjectivity, creates a space for Varda’s social criticism implied through juxtapositions rather than stated outright.

The subjectivity expressed is not solely that of the filmmaker herself, but is rather complicated by the fact that she has invented a protagonist. The “femme enceinte” of the film’s subtitle is imagined as a poor woman from the rue Mouffetard neighborhood whose physical state does not represent Varda’s own pregnancy but rather corresponds with and is informed by it. Despite her insistence that the perspective of the “femme enceinte” is not her

own, Varda's mental, emotional, and even physical presence is clearly felt in the film. The opening shot is a close-up of Varda's own nude pregnant belly, although she does not identify it within the film as her own, much to the difference of her self-reflexive strategies in later films.²⁰ The anxious tone of the film, with quick-paced montages and jarring images including a bird trapped in a glass bowl and a small plastic doll in the scooped out center of a halved squash, serves to illustrate the fear and unease of the pregnant woman. Varda, on the other hand, makes clear that she felt none of this disquiet during her pregnancy: "J'ai eu moi une grossesse très heureuse, j'ai traduit celle que pourrait être celle d'une femme de la Mouffe. La sensibilité n'est pas ce qu'on éprouve, mais ce qu'on peut éprouver" (*Varda* 230). It is Varda's empathy, her ability to communicate what can be felt, not necessarily what she herself has felt, that connects her own subjectivity to the imagined subjectivity of her protagonist.

As useful as the term "subjective documentary" may be for understanding point of view in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, it does not fully describe the film, which also contains theatrical and avant-garde elements notably connected to the human body. The film is theatrically framed at the beginning with a hand-drawn curtain superimposed over the opening shot of a nude woman viewed from behind, and with a final shot of a rolling storefront closure followed by an ending title with the word "rideau." As critics, including Steven Ungar and Alison Smith, point out, the title *L'Opéra-Mouffe* alludes to "l'opéra bouffe," the nineteenth-century French musical comedy genre following from the Italian "opera buffa" (Ungar 31;

²⁰ For instance, in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000), Varda films her wrinkled hands and her thinning hair as she contemplates her aging body. For more on self-reflexivity and representation in Varda's films, see Cybelle H. McFadden, *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras: Varda, Akerman, Cabrera, Calle, and Maiwenn*.

Smith 93-94). “Mouffe” both refers to the colloquial name for the rue Mouffetard and plays on the French term “bouffe” used familiarly for food.²¹ The theatricality of *L’Opéra-Mouffe* serves to cast the street as a performative space, where the viewer can find entertainment in small scenes of everyday life, with actors ranging from gossiping women to children running around in carnival masks. Varda herself is among the performers as she adopts the role of the “femme enceinte” in imagining the subjectivity of the film.

In addition to the theatrical guise of *L’Opéra-Mouffe*, avant-garde elements of the film draw attention to its aesthetic construction. High contrast shots of food and other objects, including the cross section of a cabbage, budding branches, smashed light bulbs, and a chick breaking the shell of its egg, are given thematic unity by intertitles (“du sentiment de la nature” for the former two, “des angoisses” for the latter two). Nonetheless, they break with the other two main strands of the film – the street scenes and the lovers’ romp – and focus on formal elements (particularly shape and lighting) nearly to the point of abstraction rather than serving primarily documentary or narrative purposes. *L’Opéra-Mouffe* can also be considered avant-garde in its use of surrealist tactics. In interviews, Varda has acknowledged the strong influence of Surrealism on her work. Yet unlike the Surrealists’ urban wanderings or the later *dérive* of the Situationists, Varda’s urban exploration in *L’Opéra-Mouffe* happens primarily from a stationary vantage point, the rue Mouffetard market where she stood on a chair and filmed. By concentrating on what Georges Perec would call the “infraordinary” of everyday life, Varda affectionately creates a sense of place. She need not move beyond this

²¹ In *Varda par Agnès*, Varda elaborates on the connection she sees between “Mouffe” and “bouffe,” inspired by sights on the market street: “...à cause de toute cette nourriture exposée, y compris les têtes de veau, les abats, les lapins et les rognons, un thème s’imposait à moi, qui joignait le jeu de mots à la sensation entretenue par le décor: la confusion entre le gros ventre de bouffe (de la Mouffe) et le gros ventre de femme (un moufflet rue Mouffetard)” (115).

corner of Paris in order to observe the marvelousness of everyday life (“le merveilleux du quotidien”) if we accept Aragon’s assertion, “Le merveilleux, c’est la contradiction qui apparaît dans le réel” (30). The central contradiction of *L’Opéra-Mouffe*, the hopes and joys of pregnancy versus the despair of the downtrodden, is expressed through contrasts between cheerful images of bountiful market stalls, bouquets of flowers, young lovers, and grim shots of the elderly, infirm, and destitute.

Whether or not *L’Opéra-Mouffe* is strictly speaking an example of “Surrealism *au féminin*,” as Alison Smith maintains, in the film Varda appropriates and subverts certain well-known Surrealist images (29). The opening shot presenting the back of a nude woman echoes Man Ray’s famous photograph “Le Violon d’Ingres,” yet Varda’s female figure is by comparison unglamorous, with slumped shoulders and all four limbs visible. The allusion reemerges later in the film, during the lovers’ romp, when a nude back of the young woman is shot behind scrolled bars of a bed frame that mimic the f holes of a violin superimposed on the figure in the Man Ray photograph. These two shots in *L’Opéra-Mouffe* pay homage to Man Ray’s photograph while reproducing it from a feminist angle. In the first shot, the unidealized presentation of the woman’s body contrasts with Man Ray’s emphasis on the shapely, hourglass figure of his model. In the second case, the allusion appears in a scene in which the nude male shares equal screen time with the nude female, neutralizing the objectification of the woman by naturalizing nudity.

Varda’s feminist subversion of Surrealist images in *L’Opéra-Mouffe* has gone unnoticed by critics, some of whom have faulted her for what they perceive in the film as a reduction of women to their biology. In her seminal 1990 book *To Desire Differently*, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis asserts that “*L’Opéra-Mouffe*’s importance for feminists lies not so much

in the fact that it is a film both from and about the body of the woman (an essentialist trap, for sure); rather, it is the emphasis on subjectivity as point of view – on the structuring function of ‘the look’ – that makes this film a significant landmark in feminist cinema” (227). Flitterman-Lewis presupposes a mind-body dualism that in more recent years has been deconstructed by feminist theorists and geographers, including Elizabeth Grosz and Gillian Rose. Grosz endeavors to move beyond the mind-body (male-female) binary by reconceptualizing the body as a “socio-cultural artifact” (103). She employs the term “corporeality” to mean “the material condition of subjectivity” (103). In *L’Opéra-Mouffe*, Varda explores the corporeality of an imagined woman whose pregnancy conditions her subjectivity through the anxieties and preoccupations expressed in the imagery.

Refusal of Cartesian dualism underscores the very premise of *L’Opéra-Mouffe*, that subjectivity is always necessarily embodied and spatialized. Whereas Surrealists similarly rejected this dualism that privileged rationality over the desires and impulses of the body and the unconscious, Varda goes further by hinting at the body’s social and cultural inscription. With her opening images, she situates the pregnant body not only in the public realm, but also in cinema itself, thereby resisting confinement from both the city street and the film screen. Geographer Robyn Longhurst identifies a culturally deep-rooted discomfort with pregnant women in public: “Feelings of unease are caused not only by shifting bodily boundaries but perhaps more importantly by the fact that these boundaries threaten to break” (“Corporeographies” 467). Varda seems to suggest this fear of breakage when she follows the opening images of the pregnant belly with close-up shots of hands cutting open a large gourd and removing its seeds and pulp. The comparison of the pregnant belly to the gourd serves to remind the viewer that pregnancy is a natural state, yet its visibility in certain

contexts (be they urban or cinematic), is received as disruptive and disconcerting.

Moreover, the opening shots of the belly and gourd bear a resemblance visually and in their evocation of violence to the famous prologue of Buñuel and Dalí's 1929 Surrealist film, *Un Chien andalou*, in which the image of a full moon is intercut with a close-up of a woman's eye pried open by a man's hand and split by a razor. Linda Williams has read this prologue as an expression of castration anxiety. A different sort of anxiety underpins the opening montage in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, as Varda herself explains:

L'image a quelque chose de choquant et de dégoûtant, mais si vous questionnez les femmes, elles vous disent toutes: "Au fond, inconsciemment, sans y penser, même un peu, on a peur de l'éventration." Et de voir ça comme ça, cela libère. Je crois que le cinéma, c'est libérateur au sens où ça permet de vivre ses sensations. (*Varda* 231)

The cathartic potential of Varda's manner of filmmaking, and of this scene in particular, is reinforced by the fact that the hands slicing the gourd are those of a woman. The misogynistic opening of *Un Chien andalou*, which Alison Butler calls "an intentionally horrifying simulated assault on female vision," is refashioned by Varda so that its shock value owes to the suggestion of bodily seepage (58). This unsettles romanticized discourses of pregnancy and evokes the materiality and physicality of the human body.

The pregnant body is not the only transgressive body in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*. Varda juxtaposes images of ideal beauty, represented by a pair of happy young lovers, with the elderly, frail, and sickly people on the street. In one of the most direct counterpoints, she follows a shot of the nude, young couple asleep in their bed with images of men passed out on the street. Between these two shots comes the intertitle "De l'ivresse," which comments in both directions on the intoxicating young love of the couple and the numbing inebriation of the vagrants. Moreover, this juxtaposition highlights the ingrained assumption that sleeping –

a bodily need – is a natural activity when performed in a private room, yet transgressive when done on the street, as it recasts the sleepers as social outcasts for whom the pavement can never attain the respectability of the bedroom. Private and public spaces are thus defined in relation to what the body does and does not do in each of these realms, with bodily acts becoming transgressive according to their spatial context rather than the action itself. This serves to perpetuate the false private/public dichotomy that reinforces not only gender roles, but also social and economic divisions.

Other natural bodily functions become transgressive when represented on the street and on the screen in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*. Varda offers montages of men and women blowing their noses, wiping their eyes, scratching their heads and faces, limping, stumbling, and so on. These activities are certainly ones that we might see on any city street if we studied the passersby, but their inclusion in a cinematic city counters filmic and photographic representations of a postcard perfect Paris. The seepage of bodily fluids evoked throughout *L'Opéra-Mouffe* signals the porosity of the body in both physical and socio-cultural terms. The body is permeable to discursive influences determining the appropriateness of its functions within its social and spatial context.

The final sequence of *L'Opéra-Mouffe* provides yet another example of a transgressive body and moreover permits Varda to make one last feminist statement in the film. The episode begins innocuously enough with a young woman exiting a flower shop with a bouquet in her hands. A close-up shows the woman sniffing a rose sweetly before opening her mouth wide and sinking her teeth into it. She tears off the petals with her teeth, chews them up, and then moves on to another part of the bouquet. This surprising action undermines any potential for the rose to function conventionally as a symbol of feminine

beauty. The woman shows herself to be hungry and deviant as she transgresses social and gender norms. She consumes the symbol of beauty rather than allowing it to represent her as a docile object of the gaze. Her behavior is aberrant not only in its subversion of the woman-rose cliché, but also because it deviates from expected behavior in public. The flower shop takes on a new meaning as a site of resistance and transgression in order to satisfy a hungry body. As one of the many transgressive bodies in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, that of the young woman demonstrates Varda's humor and defiance as the filmmaker explores the socio-spatial-physical landscape of an everyday Parisian street.

3. Mapping Spatialized Subjectivities in *Cléo de 5 à 7*

Whereas *L'Opéra-Mouffe* explores the corporeality of a pregnant woman and other bodies inscribed as spatially and physically transgressive, Varda's subsequent film *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962) considers the paradoxical situation of a woman who is externally beautiful yet internally sick. Illness prompts Varda's heroine to reject her role as a cliché of femininity and to seek out spatial contexts that favor a more fluid subjectivity. As its title indicates, *Cléo de 5 à 7* covers two consecutive hours – or more accurately an hour and a half – during the first day of summer as a glamorous singer roams Paris while awaiting the results of a cancer test. When Varda first entertained thoughts of making a low-budget feature film set in Paris, she reflected on her initial reaction as a provincial transplant to the city: “Qu'évoquait pour moi Paris? Une peur diffuse de la grande ville et de ses dangers, de s'y perdre seule et incomprise, voire bousculée. Pensées de provinciale, certes, et liées à des lectures” (51). These fears of a young *provinciale* with little more than a literary knowledge of Paris morphed in her mind into a fear of cancer, a prevalent anxiety of the time: “Ces peurs

minimes sont très vite devenues la peur du cancer qui, dans les années soixante, s’installait dans l’esprit de tous” (51). While the gravity of Cléo’s situation contrasts with the routineness with which those around her go about their daily business, the threat of cancer that looms over her is contextualized as another reality of modern existence, a fear embedded in society’s collective consciousness.

Cléo de 5 à 7 is thus a film that straddles the line between the ordinary (everyday life in Paris) and the extraordinary (the potential cancer diagnosis of a beautiful young *chanteuse*). Varda takes a near documentary approach to depicting daily Parisian life. Exterior scenes with crowds, traffic, pedestrians, street performers, vendors, and more are captured in natural lighting as Cléo travels in a loop from the first to the thirteenth arrondissement. Contrasting with the realism of the exterior sequences is the idealization of Cléo, who stands at first as a figure of beauty in both a classical sense (as her elaborately curled wig illustrates) and a pop sense (epitomized by her polka dotted dress). This stultifying idealization is what Cléo seeks to escape over the course of the film as she embarks on her journey throughout Paris. If the film is split between fictional and documentary elements, then it seems that Cléo strives to embed herself in the latter as she plunges into the everyday city.

Beginning with the title, which signals the approximate duration of the film, Varda makes the structure of *Cléo de 5 à 7* apparent to the viewer. The film’s self-reflexivity brings the structure to the forefront so that it becomes as important to analyze as the narrative events. The film is divided into thirteen chapters, each announced with a subtitle that sometimes appears several minutes into a scene, thereby playing with the expectation that a scene change will correspond with the beginning of a chapter. Each title consists of the

chapter number, the name of a character featured in the segment, and the period of time covered. The film begins with a “prologue,” not indicated with a subtitle but labeled as such in the screenplay (15). “Chapitre 1” begins about five minutes into the film, with the rest of the subtitle reading “Cléo de 17h.05 à 17h.08.” Cléo is featured in six of the thirteen chapter titles, sharing the last one (“Cléo et Antoine de 18h.15 à 18h.30”) with a young soldier on leave from Algeria with whom she bonds during the final twenty minutes of the film. Other chapters are devoted to her assistant Angèle, her composer Bob, her friend Dorothee, Dorothee’s lover Raoul, and “quelques autres,” designating the anonymous others she encounters at the café Le Dôme. These characters are occasionally granted a point of view shot or presented with another technique that indicates their perspective, as when Angèle expresses a thought in voice-over. Throughout the film, however, the focus remains essentially on Cléo. While the characters are featured in their titular chapters, their role is largely limited to advancing Cléo’s story and trajectory. The chapter titles, thus, serve primarily to indicate these characters’ momentary connections with Cléo. In a general sense, the organization of the film into chapters invites us to think of the film as a work of literature, recalling Varda’s concept of “cinécriture” and showing her writerly hand on the screen.

As Florence Martin points out, the progression of the film through thirteen chapters occurs as Cléo moves from the first to the thirteenth arrondissement (114). This analogy is not perfect, as Cléo spends a considerable amount of time in the fourteenth arrondissement, the location of her apartment and the café Le Dôme, yet she does end up at the Salpêrière hospital in the thirteenth arrondissement at the close of the film. In any case, the analogy highlights a strong socio-spatial element at the heart of the film. Cléo’s itinerary takes her through various sets of relations (via her contact with the characters of each chapter) as it

moves her through the physical space of the city.

Varda quite literally maps Cléo's journey in supplemental materials to the film – namely, in her screenplay and in a chapter on *Cléo de 5 à 7* in *Varda par Agnès*. Steven Ungar speaks of “Varda the cartographer,” noting that the map in *Varda par Agnès* and another in her screenplay “plotted the film in two ways; first by disclosing its structure in the mode of static image; and, second, by marking the spatial direction of the narrative within the city of Paris” (36-37). On her map in *Varda par Agnès*, Varda highlights Cléo's trajectory and superimposes stills corresponding with the places where the events of the film take place. Her manipulation of the map, a collage with colorful crayon circles indicating Cléo's stops, parallels the playful cartography produced by the film itself, which uses the graphic tools of cinema to create a visual representation of space created by Cléo's movement through the city.

In *Cartographic Cinema*, Tom Conley considers both the presence of maps within films and the ways in which a film functions like a map. Articulating this latter point, he explains: “A film, like a topographic projection, can be understood as an image that locates and patterns the imagination of the spectators. When it takes hold, a film encourages its public to think of the world in concert with its own articulation of space” (1). He asserts moreover that “films *are* maps insofar as each medium can be defined as a form of what cartographers call ‘locational imaging,’” a term referring to techniques used to position the viewer within the places rendered on the map, or in this case, in the film (2; emphasis in the original). Conley's view of film as a kind of map resonates with many geographers' expansive characterizations of maps and how they are created. J.B. Harley and David Woodward, whose multi-volume series *The History of Cartography* played an early and

crucial role in the development of critical cartography, wrote in 1987: “maps are graphic representations that facilitate a spatial understanding of things, concepts, conditions, processes, or events in the human world” (xvi). Dennis Cosgrove echoes this definition in asserting that mapping involves “acts of visualizing, conceptualizing, recording, representing and creating spaces graphically” (“Introduction: Mapping Meaning” 1). Cosgrove elaborates in another essay:

In some respects all spatial activities might be regarded as ‘mappings,’ and all maps as metaphorical to some degree. Mapping is always a performative act, a spatial activity incorporated into the creation and communication of individual and group identity, leaving a trace or mark in the world.
 (“Mapping/Cartography” 32)

What is notable about these descriptions by Cosgrove and Harley and Woodward is that they redirect focus from the material and utilitarian aspects of the map to its ability to shape thinking and imagination about space and its inhabitants. In this respect, film has much in common with maps. One could argue that, unlike maps, films do not generally claim the representation of space as their ultimate goal. Filmmakers tend to be concerned rather with constructing a narrative, documenting a particular experience or view of the world, or creating a poetry of images. Besides the fact that all of these motivations can also be attributed to mapmakers, none of them operate in a void. They are always spatialized on and off screen, as Varda’s maps in *Varda par Agnès* and the *Cléo de 5 à 7* screenplay demonstrate by locating both the narrative and the shooting of the film in real spaces.

In addition to Varda’s mapping of Cléo’s journey on screen and in print, her prologue to the film serves a cartographic function. The film opens with close-ups in color of tarot cards being shuffled and laid out on a tapestry tablecloth as Cléo and the tarot reader Irma converse in the voice-over. As the camera cuts to the faces of Cléo and Irma, the film shifts

to black and white. Varda has commented briefly on her use of color:

Comme un court prologue inséré dans le récit, ce début de *Cléo de 5 à 7* est en couleurs. Ou plus précisément le tapis de table et les tarots. Le générique s'y inscrit. On annonce en couleurs le film, ce que voit la cartomancienne est une fiction, puis on voit le visage affolé de Cléo en noir et blanc comme la suite du film. (*Varda* 62)

Reversing conventional associations of color with realism and black and white with stylization, Varda distinguishes between the “fiction” of the tarot card reading and the real (albeit mimetic) world of the rest of the film. The content of the tarot card reading, however, troubles the fiction/reality distinction, as it accurately maps out the characters and main events of the film. One card clearly represents Cléo; another seems to depict Angèle, judging from Irma’s description: “vous avez près de vous une veuve qui vous tient compagnie, qui n’est pas très scrupuleuse pour la conduite de votre vie. Mais elle vous est très dévouée.” Other cards evoke Cléo’s lover José and her doctor. Irma predicts from yet more cards that Cléo will undertake a journey, and that she will meet a young man whose description matches Antoine (“un bavard, un bonimenteur, il vous amusera”). The arrangement of the cards on the table, accompanied by Irma’s interpretations, causes them to resemble a storyboard, which indeed is how they function by diagramming the film. Irma thus moves from “cartomancienne” to “cartographer” as she maps Cléo’s journey, if not through the precise spatial locations, at least through the social territories that she will traverse as she comes into contact with the characters of the film. As is the case with the chapter titles, the tarot cards representing characters whom Cléo will soon encounter serve to designate the stops along her route as not merely physical locations, but as socio-spatial “constellations of interrelations,” to borrow Doreen Massey’s phrase to describe the nature of place (*For Space* 68).

The tarot cards and chapter titles that Varda uses to map and organize *Cléo de 5 à 7* indicate that the film will be episodic in nature, as it well turns out to be, with scenes depicting various incidents during Cléo's excursion through the city. This episodic organization is at odds with the dualistic structure generally attributed to the film. It has become axiomatic to analyze *Cléo de 5 à 7* in terms of two parts that together depict a transformation in Cléo from superficial and narcissistic to socially engaged, self-aware but no longer self-obsessed. This change in Cléo has been read by critics as a feminist message, an articulation of women's need to deflect the male gaze cast upon them, to become subjects rather than objects of the gaze. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis has been especially influential with her account of Cléo's transformation from "woman-as-spectacle" to "woman as social being" (273). For Flitterman-Lewis, the vain question "How do I look?" is diverted in the film to take on the active meaning of "How do I see?" (269).

For Flitterman-Lewis and subsequent critics with similar interpretations, the turning point for Cléo comes midway in the film, when Cléo's discontent crystallizes during a rehearsal with her songwriters in her apartment. After singing a tragic song, "Cri d'amour," that fills her eyes with tears and her voice with angst, Cléo lambasts her songwriters and personal assistant for treating her like a doll. She then disappears behind a screen, emerging moments later in a plain black dress in place of her frilly white dressing gown. She tears off her posh wig and quits her apartment to roam the streets of Paris in what Janice Mouton calls her "afternoon of flânerie" (3).

There is no question that the rehearsal scene marks a pivotal moment in the film, when Cléo gets fed up with her pampered lifestyle and those who fail to take her (and her illness) seriously. Critics have seized on this moment in order to explain Cléo's personal

trajectory in the film. Jill Forbes, who views a dualistic reading of *Cléo de 5 à 7* as reductive, summarizes Flitterman-Lewis's "canonical" interpretation: "the film [...] has a chiasmic structure – that is, it is divided into two halves so that the propositions in the first half are reversed in the second – and this shift, or transformation, is predicated on the idea that when Cléo takes off her wig (i.e. gets rid of her 'disguise') she appropriates the gaze" (83). Phil Powrie notes that analyzing the film in terms of binary oppositions "to some extent undermin[es] the sense of fragmentation and fluidity" in Varda's cinema (71).

I would add that a dualistic reading of the film underestimates Cléo's own agency while at the same time fails to take into account the socio-spatial factors that shape her subjectivity. We need look no further than the taxicab ride in the first half of the film for evidence that the two halves of the film are more cohesive than has usually been acknowledged. This scene clocks in at more than six minutes, making it a notable part of Cléo's journey as a whole, not merely in the first part of the film. Having left the café *Ça va ça vient*, Cléo and Angèle catch a cab to take them from the first arrondissement to Cléo's apartment in the fourteenth. The theme of female mobility, which clearly underlies the second half of the film but tends to be ignored by critics in the first half, is personified in this scene by the female driver. As a woman behind the wheel, the driver is echoed in the second half by Dorothée, who transports Cléo in Raoul's convertible. Furthermore, the taxi driver's control over the displacement and trajectory of the women foreshadows Cléo's own mobility as alone she takes to the city streets. While in this scene, Cléo is not the direct agent of her own mobility, for it is the driver who physically moves them, she is nonetheless part of a trio of women who together cross the city, unaccompanied by male chaperones. In fact, the only men in this scene are menacing rather than protective. A young man in a passing car ogles

Cléo and reaches for her hand resting on the open window. A group of male art school students in costumes surround the cab, momentarily stalling its passage. The driver tells Cléo and Angèle a story of two young men who refused to pay for her ride and then assaulted her when she came after them for the fare. While the cab scene may not stand as an obvious example of female empowerment, it shows women in control of their own movement despite the interference of men.

It is hard to deny that Varda's inclusion of the "Cri d'amour" scene at the exact midpoint of the film encourages us to analyze the film in two parts, before and after Cléo sheds her wig and other signifiers of vain artificiality. Critics have noted that the prevalence of mirrors and close-up shots of Cléo in the first half contribute to a portrait of the singer as narcissistic, having internalized the superficial manner in which others see her. Florence Martin observes:

We see Cléo's face frequently during the first part of the film (in close-ups, and/or reflected in multiple mirrors), but less so in the second part, during which we see Paris and other people through Cléo's eyes, in long, fluid shots. The viewer is no longer contemplating Cléo as an object but productively observing *with* Cléo" (116; emphasis in the original).

However, the cab ride scene once again counters the narcissistic portrait of Cléo, since the scene includes extended subjective shots through the windows of the ride across Paris streets, indicating that Cléo's active looking occurs earlier in the film than is generally acknowledged. The fact that, as Jill Forbes points out, *Cléo de 5 à 7* is "a film about Paris as well as about a woman" is evident in its early scenes and not merely in the second half, as in Varda's use of overhead tracking shots following Cléo at various locations throughout the film. For instance, her walk down the rue de Rivoli after leaving the tarot card reader's apartment in the prologue is filmed from a similar distance and camera angle as when she

makes her way down the rue de Huyghens after storming out of her apartment. Thus, while critics are correct that Varda's mise-en-scène in the early scenes often serves to reveal Cléo's overinvestment in her physical beauty, at other moments the camera work proves to be more consistent between the two halves of the film, rendering them more alike than different.

Cléo's self-absorption in the early scenes is nonetheless demonstrated by her preening and reinforced by the mirrors that surround her, but she is not simply a living doll, and she exerts more agency in the first part of the film than is commonly acknowledged. The scene in the *chapellerie* Chez Francine features Cléo admiring herself in various hats, her thoughts provided at one point in voice-over: "Tout me va, ah, c'est agréable, je me saoulerais d'essayer des chapeaux et des robes."²² In the screenplay, Varda describes Cléo's activity in this scene as "coquetterie rassurance" (29). Playing dress-up is not without purpose for Cléo; she seeks physical reassurance of her vitality by concentrating on her exterior rather than interior condition. However, Cléo's ultimate choice of hat proves surprising, as it seems to go against the vanity she displayed just moments before. She insists on purchasing a simple pointy black fur hat, despite Angèle's protestation that it is out of season, and having passed over a number of more conventionally feminine hats. By having Cléo pick this particular hat, Varda indicates Cléo's independence of thought, hinting at her future rebellion from the confines of constructed femininity.

A dualistic reading of *Cléo de 5 à 7* thus overstates Cléo's differences in the first and second half of the film, and in scenes where there are obvious differences, neglects to take into account the socio-spatial factors that help construct Cléo's subjectivity. It views Cléo's

²² This voice-over refers us back to Cléo's thought expressed while looking in a mirror on her way out of the tarot reader's building: "Etre laide, c'est ça la mort... Tant que je suis belle, je suis vivante et dix fois plus que les autres" (22).

changes in a linear fashion, an evolution occurring over the course of the ninety minutes of the film, rather than understanding that her subjectivity is articulated in a series of spatial contexts, and that embodied time eventually takes dominance over clock time. Forbes attributes critics' overemphasis on the temporal aspect of *Cléo de 5 à 7* to their eagerness to credit the film with anticipating the women's movement. She asserts: "It is by simultaneously travelling through time and space, rather than just time, as the feminist reading suggests, that Cléo comes to knowledge and self-knowledge" (85). Forbes finds fault not just with critics but also with Varda herself, for "[t]he time axis of the film appears massively overdetermined both by the title and by the use of time-checks to segment the diegesis" (85). However, by the end of the film, Varda has managed to subvert the official time of the film in favor of a more subjective time experienced at the level of the body. When Cléo arrives at the hospital only to be told (erroneously) that her doctor has left, she protests that he is supposed to speak with her at the end of the day, to which Antoine quips: "Il a dit 'en fin de journée' comme ça, mais un premier jour d'été, comment savoir l'heure vraiment?" Antoine's levity perturbs Cléo, but his comment speaks to the sense of temporal disorientation that a long summer day can provoke. A few moments later, as the two sit on a bench wondering what to do next, Cléo remarks "On a tout le temps," a comment that both mitigates the film's preoccupation with time and reaffirms the unhurried, meandering feel of Cléo's journey.

Ultimately, analyzing *Cléo de 5 à 7* in terms of Cléo's movement through various spaces, each with their own dynamics and sets of relations that help to shape her subjectivity, proves more fruitful than viewing her journey as a personal evolution that progresses linearly and temporally as she moves through the city. As cultural and gender theorist Elspeth Probyn

explains: “subjectivity is not a given but rather a process and a production. It is also undeniable that the sites and spaces of its production are central. In other words, the space and place we inhabit produce us” (294). Take, for instance, Cléo’s apartment, which has been presented by critics as a space reflecting her narcissism and childishness, both symbolized by her romping kittens evoking her feline demeanor. However, it is in her apartment where Cléo is least able to define her own subjectivity, since she is confined to predetermined roles, be it the kept woman waiting for her lover’s call, or the pop starlet rehearsing her next hit single with her composers. Even though Cléo slips into a robe and slippers, her apartment is an area of work, not leisure. The robe itself, long and flowing with a feathery trim, suggests that Cléo must work to hold the interest of her lover, whose visit lasts but a few minutes. Showing Cléo to be more liberated in the streets of Paris than in her own apartment goes against the nineteenth-century association of women with the private sphere and men with the public sphere, a gendered division that was more ideological than actual. Elizabeth Wilson notes: “in practice the private sphere was – and is – also a masculine domain; although the Victorians characterized it as feminine, it was organized for the convenience, rest, and recreation of men, not women, and it has been an important part of feminism to argue that the private sphere is the *workplace* of women” (98; emphasis in the original). The two central pieces of furniture in Cléo’s apartment – the bed and the piano – attest to the extent to which this realm is structured around her relations with men. Cléo’s apartment is thus not the ultimate representation of a narcissistic and childish self shed in the second half of the film, but rather a site for the production of a male-defined subjectivity that fits the roles assigned to her in this space.

In contrast to her apartment, the Parc Montsouris is a space where Cléo can explore a

different subjectivity, one not based on codes of femininity, but rather on a non-gendered sense of humanity. Following the suggestion of her friend Dorothée, Cléo makes an impromptu stop at the park, where she encounters Antoine, a young soldier filling the last few hours of his three-week leave from Algeria. Annoyed at first by the chatty Antoine's efforts to strike up a conversation, Cléo eventually finds herself won over by his charm and humor. She admits to him that normally she does not engage in conversation with the men who approach her: "D'habitude, je ne réponds pas, mais là, j'ai oublié. J'avais l'esprit ailleurs. Puis vous avez l'air si calme." Despite Antoine's forwardness, the exchanges between the two become more friendly than flirtatious. Cléo speaks openly about her fear, mentioning the word cancer for the first time in the film. Antoine confides his distress at the thought of dying for nothing in the war; he would much rather die for love. Cléo and Antoine are on equal footing in the scene. The gender dynamics seen in the apartment are gone. Varda shows the park to be more than simply the setting where these two characters meet and connect. Instead, place and subjectivity are inexorably linked. A note in Varda's screenplay shows a concordance between Antoine and his surroundings: "Antoine impose sa présence avec gentillesse. Il est un des éléments de cette nature où s'est réfugiée Cléo, aussi leur rencontre est-elle naturelle" (87). Cléo also comes to personify an element of nature when she reveals her true name, Florence, which Antoine shortens to "flore" in comparing her to a rose. "Je préfère la flore à la faune," he tells her, the "faune" indicating the tigresses he associates with the name Cléopatra. By harmonizing her characters with their surroundings, Varda creates a safe zone for Cléo and Antoine to reveal their vulnerabilities and to explore and express subjectivities beyond those conforming to predetermined roles.

Varda's Paris in *Cléo de 5 à 7* is thus not a mere collection of arrondissements

through which she tracks Cléo's movement. Rather, Varda's cartography illustrates the manner in which space, the body, and subjectivity intertwine. Cléo's experiences in the city are shaped by both her external beauty and her internal malady. In seeking to escape the shackles of both, she submerges herself in the everyday city in a journey not so much about self-discovery as spatial exploration. In her footage of quotidian Paris, Varda herself is as much an explorer of different sorts of spaces, bodies, and subjectivities. Such is the case not only in *Cléo de 5 à 7*, but in many of Varda's films, including those that I call her "scavenger documentaries."

4. Scavenger Documentaries: *Les Dites cariatides* and *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*

Along with acclaimed fictional films such as *Cléo de 5 à 7* and *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), Varda has created several celebrated documentaries in short and long form. Many of these documentaries have urban settings, including *Les Dites cariatides* (1984) and *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000). I qualify these films as "scavenger documentaries" because they track Varda's search throughout everyday spaces for items or practices abandoned by a wasteful or inured society. The images and scenes she collects during her search become both the content of the films and the documentation of the filmmaking itself. Varda thus engages with city and other spaces as both observer and participant, creating documentaries about not only the topic but also her self-reflexive exploration of it. In my analysis of Varda's scavenger documentaries, I begin with an examination of the feminist overtones of *Les Dites Cariatides*, demonstrating how Varda both honors and subverts certain nineteenth-century urban tropes in order to raise questions about bodily transgressions and female objectification. Next, I turn my attention to *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, a film that collects

images of collecting. The various forms of gleaning that Varda documents shed light on unconventional strategies of survival, resistance, and expression in an increasingly globalized and regimented consumer society.

Whereas in *L'Opéra-Mouffe* and *Cléo de 5 à 7*, Varda indicates some of the social forces and discourses that construct and regulate the body, in *Les Dites Cariatides* she reflects on bodies that are quite literally cultural artifacts. In just under twelve minutes, *Les Dites cariatides* showcases Varda's fondness for the nineteenth-century neo-classical statues of nude women adorning buildings around Paris. "J'aime les statues servant de colonnes humaines," she proclaims early in the film. This love is despite the fact that (or perhaps partly because) the statues are an idealization of the female form ("la cariatide est une idée, une certaine idée de la femme en architecture"). This ideal is juxtaposed throughout the film with actual bodies of Parisians going about their daily lives amidst the caryatids on buildings around them.

Despite its overall emphasis on the commonplace, the film opens with a surprising sight, a nude man emerging from a building, walking past a street lamp propped up by a female statue, and proceeding down the center of the boulevard. Transitioning to the caryatids, Varda comments "la nue dans la rue est plus souvent en bronze qu'en peau humaine, plus souvent en pierre qu'en chair. Et l'on voit sans étonnement des dames dévêtues éclairer des trottoirs ou décorer des immeubles de façons gracieuses et lascives." The naked man traversing the boulevard is thus a transgressive image of out-of-place nudity that contrasts with the naturalization of idealized female body types exemplified by the caryatids incorporated into the urban landscape. This opening sequence implicitly critiques the disproportionate emphasis on the female nude body in cinema and art, typified by the

nude female statues that Varda subsequently features in her film. Yet this naked man on the street is also transgressing real-life social norms and rules about nudity in public. The sequence thus signals Varda's feminist perspective, her desire to subvert the gaze, and her comingling of flesh and blood bodies and their idealized counterparts in art and literature. This last point is made clear when her journey across Paris ultimately takes her to the grave of Baudelaire, thereby implicitly connecting the caryatids to the urban women gazed upon by the poet in such pieces as "À une passante."

Varda prefaces her Baudelaire detour with her observation that the revival of caryatids between 1860 and 1870 coincided with a prodigious era in art and literature that included the publication of *Les Fleurs du mal*. She displays a reverence for Baudelaire while nonetheless recognizing him as a womanizer. She calls him "le poète des poètes," laments his sad decline, and recites from his poems as her camera pans across caryatids. Yet she makes a point also to mention his cruel treatment of Madame Sabatier, whom he seduced after years of pursuit, only to jilt her the very next day.

Varda's wanderings across Paris in search of the caryatids can be read against the figure of the Baudelarian *flâneur*, whose gaze objectified the anonymous woman on the street during fleeting encounters emblematic of the experience of modernity. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson characterizes the *flâneur* in terms of his detached observation. As a disengaged spectator, he objectifies what he sees and "copes with urban diversity by reducing it to a marvelous show" (31). Baudelaire's *flâneur* is a man *in* the crowd, but not *of* the crowd, and he assures his dominance – particularly of women – through his masterful gaze. Varda's gaze, on the other hand, manages to humanize rather than petrify the caryatids, as when she recalls the enslaved women of ancient Karye who, according to the Roman architect

Vitruvius, were rendered in statues on public edifices by Greek architects avenging the village's collaboration with the Persians.

Les Dites cariatides is a novel work of urban filmmaking because of both its theme and its approach. Varda brings attention to an architectural feature so ingrained in the fabric of the city as to go mostly unnoticed in the everyday life of Parisians. She acknowledges that the caryatids represent an idealized and objectified version of women. Yet through a process of *détournement*, she subverts that objectification by aligning of the statues with women past and present, as when she evokes Madame Sabatier with a gravestone figure of a crying woman as the voice-over recounts her heartbreak at the hands of Baudelaire. Through such alignments, Varda shows her solidarity with women, be they real or represented. Moreover, in her sensitive filming of the caryatids, she reframes objectified female bodies in a way that celebrates their presence in the urban landscape and, more generally, women's occupation of city space. As Susan Hayward notes about Varda, in her films "she renders both the process of invisibilization and the invisibility of women visible" (31). If Parisians have grown inure to the caryatids in their surroundings, Varda's task in *Les Dites cariatides* is to open their eyes to the stone beauties while at the same time challenging the tendency to naturalize female objectification to the point where women's humanity is obscured.

Varda's affection for nineteenth-century art and culture links *Les Dites cariatides* to her acclaimed documentary *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, which, despite being released more than fifteen years later, continues her practice of scavenger filmmaking. In *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, Varda contemplates the heritage of gleaning ("glanage"), which began as the gathering of wheat and other leftover crops by peasants – figures put on canvas by nineteenth-century painters like Jean-François Millet – and has metamorphosed into the

present day practices of “dumpster diving” and sifting through refuse in open air market stalls. Varda identifies with these food collectors, seeing herself as their artistic equivalent, and thus the “glaneuse” of the title. She weaves another thread into the story as she reflects upon her aging self and includes shots of her thinning hair and wrinkled hands and face. The film can be said to focus on at least two types of marginalized bodies: the hungry body and the aging body. The hungry body in Varda’s film is marginalized for not participating in the economy of consumption from which this body has already been excluded, just as the aging body is exiled from conventional aesthetics of beauty.

Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse depicts gleaning at a range of levels, not only social but also representational. Gleaners include those gathering leftover food for survival, but also a celebrated chef raised by his parents to glean, who justifies the practice by pointing out that he knows where his food has come from and how fresh it is. Some gleaners are small-scale entrepreneurs, like the man who collects potatoes left behind by the harvesting machine and sells them to restaurants. Others are down-trodden individuals, like Claude, a middle-aged man whose drinking problem cost him his trucking job and family, and who now lives in a small trailer community. For some, like François from Aix, gleaning is an ethical choice. Neither jobless nor homeless, François relies for his meals entirely on food recuperated from the trash, not out of desperation but rather in protest of a wasteful system wherein still edible products are discarded by their package expiration date. Driven also by a moral impulse, but in other ways, is Alain, who picks up produce left under market stalls and retrieves day-old bread from bakery trash cans early in the morning. Unlike François, Alain gleans more to satisfy his nutritional needs than to rebel against consumer conformity. His social activism takes form rather in the homeless newspapers he sells at metro entrances and in the French

classes he provides nightly to immigrants living with him in a shelter. Underlying Varda's tender documentation of Alain's French lessons is a conception of gleaning as a means of attending to the margins of society, to not only the objects but also the people who have been cast aside by systems that perpetuate socio-economic inequality.

Varda's broad understanding of gleaning makes room also for artists working with found objects. She tracks down the amateur artist Hervé, who incorporates salvaged materials into his paintings. Hervé shows her an official map that tells him which days he can recuperate items from the different city sectors. When Varda points out that the map is actually meant as a guide for residents putting their items on the street rather than for those collecting the castoffs, he admits to reading it for his own purposes. In an act of *détournement*, Hervé uses the map in a contrary fashion and thereby creates his own counter-cartography. Varda also visits Bodan Litnianski, a retired Ukrainian brickmason who built a palace with columns of discarded dolls and other items. As an outsider artist, Litnianski differs in cultural status from Louis Pons, a successful and established collage artist interviewed by Varda who works all the same with refuse. Through all of these examples of gleaners from various social levels, Varda shows gleaning as a practice that, much like the gleaned objects themselves, takes on different roles and significance depending on its cultural context.

Varda herself fits into the artist-gleaner category she establishes in the film, and she self-reflexively acknowledges her gleaning within the first five minutes of the film. Her point of departure is the nineteenth-century painting *Les Glaneuses* (1857) by Jean-François Millet. Remarking that, whereas gleaners nowadays typically work alone, those in paintings by Millet and others are portrayed in groups. She identifies one famous exception, Jules

Breton's solitary figure in *La Glaneuse* (1877). In a playful and revealing episode, Varda aligns herself with the subject of Breton's painting, which she has traveled to see at a museum in Arras. Mimicking the pose of the lone female gleaner, Varda films herself next to the painting, standing before a cloth backdrop held up by two museum employees, a bundle of wheat on her shoulder. "L'autre glaneuse," she tells us in voice-over, "celle du titre de ce documentaire, c'est moi." Dropping the bundle of wheat, she lifts a video camera to her eye and points it directly at the camera filming her. Varda's voice-over continues: "Je laisse tomber volontiers les épis de blé pour prendre la caméra." This humorous moment introduces Varda's strategy of visual self-reflexivity, whereby she will over the course of the film resist a disembodied *auteur* stance and instead present up close her own aging body as through her filming she gleans images of fellow gleaners.

In the sequence that follows, Varda marvels at the features of her new digital camera, demonstrating its effects through various close-up shots of herself. Through these and other close-ups throughout the film, she contemplates images of her aging body. Filming herself as she combs her thinning hair, or her wrinkled hand stretched before her car dashboard, Varda offers a form of self-portraiture that attests to the materiality of her elderly body rather than one that glosses over the textures of the flesh with soft focus lenses and other cinematic tricks of the trade. The connection between Varda's contemplation of her aging body and her documentation of modern gleaners is implied rather than stated explicitly by the film. Yet her treatment of both of these topics returns us to the idea of gleanings as a means of bringing the margins to the center, of recuperating that which is past its externally determined expiration date, of gathering up what others have deemed too mature or misshapen. Viewed in this light, Varda the elderly filmmaker offers herself as not only the gleaner but the gleaned, as she

turns her camera on herself.

Varda takes a meandering approach in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, in which sequences are ordered either as they occur during Varda's journey by car, or by associations established visually and in the voice-over. What connects the figures in her film, in addition to (or indeed as demonstrated by) their acts of gleaning, is their marginal status in contemporary French society, whether they are marginalized socioeconomically, culturally, or artistically. Social marginalization necessarily has a spatial component, as many theorists have pointed out, including Edward Soja in comments on space and class:

[...] a space-class homology can be found in the regionalized division of organized space into dominant centres and subordinate peripheries, socially created and polarized spatial relations of production which are captured with greater precision in the concept of geographically uneven development. This conceptualization of the links between social and spatial differentiation does not imply that the spatial relations of production or the centre-periphery structure are separate and independent from the social relations of production, from class relations. On the contrary, the two sets of structured relations (the social and the spatial) are not only homologous, in that they arise from the same origins in the mode of production, but are also dialectically inseparable. (78)

Despite the relations between the margin and the center resulting from an uneven economic development that has established them as “dialectically inseparable,” Soja nonetheless maintains a binary opposition between the two. Kevin Hetherington seeks to trouble this binary in his examination of “alternate spaces” (a term he prefers to “margins”), otherwise known as “heterotopia” (27). Foucault outlined his concept of heterotopia in a 1967 speech to architects. His published remarks have generated much interest in scholars throughout the humanities and social sciences, despite the fact that his notion of heterotopia is, as Peter Johnson puts it, “briefly sketched, provisional and at times confusing” (81). The concept of heterotopia is nonetheless useful in examining spaces that deviate in one way or another from

normalized socio-spatial realms.

Foucault describes heterotopias as the inverse of utopias, “real” spaces, “counter-sites” in which other real spaces are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24).²³ His examples include boarding schools, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, retirement homes, cemeteries, festivals, and brothels. What seems more important in Foucault’s account of heterotopia than the type of space is its relation to other spaces. He likens this relation to a mirror:

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (24)

A heterotopic space, thus, creates a sense of disorientation that leads to a questioning of the nature of the space or spaces that it reflects. In his analysis of margins, Hetherington emphasizes this interrelation between heterotopic and dominant spaces: “Heterotopia [...] are margins in the sense of the unbounded and blurred space-between rather than the easily identified space at the edge. Margins are spaces of traffic. They are spaces that contain both the central and the ‘marginal’ in ways that unsettle social and spatial relations” (27). Key to his understanding of heterotopia is the assertion that margins and centers are not distinct spaces, and that some spaces can be both central and marginal at once (his most developed example being the Palais Royal at the time of the French Revolution) (28).

²³ Peter Johnson faults Foucault for a limited view of utopia and points us to the works of Ruth Levitas for a more nuanced understanding of utopia not as the expression of hegemonic ideals, as Foucault suggests, but rather as a way of conceptualizing a better society (82).

The “alternate” spaces occupied by Varda’s gleaners maintain a relation to “central” spaces since the act of gleaning itself expresses a connection between margin and center, as gleaning involves collecting the residuals of commercial production. Thus, the field onto which misshapen, green, and damaged potatoes are dumped becomes heterotopic when the gleaners fill up their bags with edible (if commercially unattractive) potatoes. Consequently, the central spaces of production – the crop fields and the processing plant – are disturbed by the alternate space that exposes the contradiction between the wastefulness of consumer society and a limited access to food and other necessities of survival for those victimized by uneven economic development. Many of the gleaners in Varda’s film move from one heterotopic space to another. Such is the case with Claude, one of the potato gleaners, whom Varda follows home to his trailer. The community in which he lives mirrors more established residential regions while also drawing attention to the relation between space and class, exposing the precariousness of economic conditions that causes someone like Claude to lose a stable home and family.

Among Varda’s examples of urban heterotopias, the most revealing is the open air market that she films after the vendors have disappeared. According to Hetherington, the market place of the past was a heterotopic space. Drawing from Bakhtin’s description of the carnivalesque at the time of Rabelais, Hetherington describes the pre-eighteenth century market place, a site of festivals in addition to commercial transactions, as a “paradoxical space,” one that “has always been associated with the ambivalent, the profane, the strange and the disrespectful as well with trade and commerce.”²⁴ He identifies in the carnivalesque

²⁴ In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the medieval carnival as a period of temporary suspension of hierarchical order, during which play and popular (often profane) speech in the market place overtook the official discourse of church sanctioned events.

atmosphere of the market place “a strategy of resistance [...] utilizing the body, which celebrates the categories of Otherness through acts of transgressive wastefulness, eroticism, bad language and the rejection of taboos. The grotesque body becomes a site of heterogeneity, waste and excess” (29). This grotesque body has an effect on the space it inhabits: “situating this body in space makes the familiarity of that space appear uncertain and ambivalent. The space of the market takes on the character of the social spatialization of hybridity and transgression as a consequence” (30).

In *L'Opéra Mouffe*, Varda's scenes among the stalls lining the rue Mouffetard may evoke the carnivalesque, with children in masks and an overall emphasis on the crude materiality of body, but the market place in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* suggests a very different sort of heterotopia. The modern market has been overtaken by its commercial function. Waste and excess are not on display but are instead masked by the orderliness of the market. Rather, abundance of goods at a stall represents plenitude and consumer choice. It is only after the period of monetary transactions is over that the space becomes heterotopic, as the wastefulness of capitalist production becomes apparent, disturbing the illusion of order and efficiency. Piles of boxes and crates remain amidst other debris. Varda's camera captures a few lone figures rummaging through the refuse for food left behind. Her interest is peaked when she spots Alain, filling his bags with vegetables and fruit, but also eating on the spot. A slim, not quite middle-aged man with a Master's degree in biology who, for unexplained reasons, now earns his living by selling street newspapers, Alain praises parsley for its vitamins and bread for its protein and carbohydrates. In an interesting reversal from the grotesque market place body described by Bakhtin and situated heterotopically by Hetherington, Alain's modest figure and preoccupation with health contrast with the excesses

of the market and thereby unsettle the ideology of production and supply that results in waste despite the hunger of those in the margins. It is through individuals like Alain that Varda establishes a moral center in her film from marginal figures and practices.

From her mobile gleanings in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* back to her street-level exploration of material and subjective bodies in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, Varda has playfully used urban interventions in her films to navigate and interrogate the physical, social, cultural, and intertextual terrain of the contemporary city. Such is the case in films throughout her career, not merely in those that I have considered in this chapter. For instance, in her most recent film, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008), she brings the beach to a Paris street, covering it with sand and then recreating upon it the office of her production company. Varda's films situate themselves within a long history of writing and filming the city. What distinguishes her approach is her attention to the various ways in which bodies inhabit, alter, inscribe, and co-constitute urban space. Her emphasis on the material aspects of the body (as in her representations of nudity and bodily functions in the public sphere) is transgressive, exposing and contesting socio-cultural boundaries. Her spatialized bodies render problematic conventional distinctions between body, mind, and space, and it is through her explorations of corporeality and embodiment that Varda adds an original voice to both female and urban filmmaking.

CHAPTER 5

CHRIS MARKER'S POLYPHONIC CITY

1. Situating Chris Marker

From his writings and films in the late 1950s to his video documentaries and multimedia installations in the new millennium, Chris Marker (1921-2012) brought a distinctive personal voice and political consciousness to French visual and media culture. A publicity shy filmmaker and essayist, Marker avoided being in front of cameras, be they those of the press or his own. In contrast with his contemporary and friend Agnès Varda, Marker eschewed physical self-representation, but he managed nonetheless to make his presence strongly felt in his films, as in voice-over commentaries including first person references but spoken by someone else, or in images throughout his works of owls and cats, his favorite animals and personal emblems. Indeed, in Varda's 2008 film *Les Plages d'Agnès*, Marker appears in animated form as his alter ego, an orange tabby named Guillaume-en-Egypte, to converse with Varda, his voice digitally altered. It is with similar humor and cinematic experimentation in his own films that Marker tackles serious issues of social, economic, and cultural inequality in contemporary France.

Marker, along with Varda and fellow filmmaker Alain Resnais, is situated by critics within the "Left Bank" cinematic movement, thus named because of the bohemian reputation of the *Rive gauche*, a nexus for literary and artistic avant-garde activity. Richard Roud credits the Left Bank filmmakers with an interest in formal experimentation, a desire to explore

political and social questions through art, and a merging of personal and collective concerns (26-27). As is the case with Varda, Marker displays these characteristics in his vast array of films and videos varying in subject and style. Despite his long and varied filmography, most attention has been paid to Marker's best-known films, the science fiction short *La Jetée* (1962) and the philosophical travelogue *Sans soleil* (1983). Although both contain urban elements, I have chosen instead to focus on *Le Joli mai* (1963) and *Chats perchés* (2004), two lesser-discussed films that bookend Marker's career and illustrate his interest in urban voices, rhythms, and transgressions.

Le Joli mai and *Chats perchés* both demonstrate Marker's view of the city as a political and politicized realm in which everyday practices in the public sphere are indicators of, on the one hand, ideology and conformity and, on the other hand, social resistance and transgression. They contain a polyphonic quality that illustrates the multiplicity of voices and rhythms in constant dialogue within and beyond the films. My discussion of *Le Joli mai* considers the film in light of the concepts of "dialogue" and "polyphony" as put forth by Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). I propose that *Le Joli mai* contains a form of what I call "urban dialogics," in which a multiplicity of voices presented non-hierarchically demonstrates the heterogeneity of the contemporary city. Despite appearing some forty years later, *Chats perchés* recalls *Le Joli mai* in its footage of everyday Paris and Parisians in dialogic interaction. Yet *Chats perchés* delves more deeply into questions of political resistance, documented in street protests, and civil disobedience, seen in the graffiti comprising the film's central topic. In my analysis of *Chats perchés*, I propose that the film, described by Marker as a sort of "street-movie" about Paris, amounts to a search for a sense of community and solidarity – at both a local and a global level – in a

fractured world. Taken together, both *Le Joli mai* and *Chats perchés* illustrate Marker's vision of the city as a social and political realm encompassing a polyphony of voices (*M. Chat* 30).

2. Urban Dialogics in *Le Joli Mai*

Le Joli mai consists primarily of informal interviews wherein Marker asks his subjects various questions pertaining to personal happiness and political events. During these exchanges, Marker gives his subjects room to speak openly about their everyday lives, experiences, and hopes and fears for the future. The interviewees hail from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and include a shopkeeper, an impoverished mother of a large family, adolescent boys aspiring to be businessmen, a tire repairman and amateur painter, a Catholic priest turned Marxist, an African student, and a young Algerian man working in France. Many of these individuals belong to marginalized populations rarely represented in French media, and even more rarely given the opportunity to speak for themselves.

Marker and his camera operator Pierre Lhomme shot *Le Joli mai* in May of 1962, and the film was released in French theaters one year later. The historical moment of its production is acknowledged at the end of the opening credits sequence: "La scène se passe au mois de mai 1962 désigné par certains, à l'époque, comme 'le premier printemps de la paix.'" The previous March, President de Gaulle had signed the Evian accord ending the war in Algeria. If Marker gives pause and adds the qualifier in quotation marks "désigné par certains," it is evidently because war-related tension and violence had ceased in neither Algeria nor France. The topic of Algeria comes up throughout the film to such an extent that

Sam Di Iorio calls *Le Joli Mai* “one of the key works about the French reaction to the Algerian war” (46). The fact that these reactions are contextualized within everyday life in Paris demonstrates Marker’s view of the city as a realm for political dialogue, where opinions and attitudes become public stances rather than remaining private thoughts and feelings.

In terms of subject matter and style, *Le Joli mai* follows in the footsteps of, yet diverges significantly from, another French documentary made a year earlier, *Chronique d’un été* (1961) by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin. *Chronique d’un été* consists of interviews with young Parisians about their everyday lives and opinions. The differences between the two films result from the manner in which the filmmakers approach their subjects. An ethnologist and a sociologist respectively, Rouch and Morin explore contemporary French attitudes and relations by following the same group of participants for several months. Marker, on the other hand, shot fifty-five hours of footage, including interviews with acquaintances as well as strangers on the street, which he edited down to approximately two and a half hours for the French theatrical release.²⁵ During the editing, Marker organized his film around themes that emerged spontaneously in conversations:

In the beginning a plan developed with themes according to which the interviews would be conducted, then during the editing process, it was revealed that on certain occasions a theme yielded something completely different than what I had envisioned abstractly. In life new connections turned up, sometimes due to an image. The film began to have a life of its own, and suddenly it had rules of its own. My work now consisted in curbing these self-imposed rules. The unexpected alluded [subject] that emerged in reality, in the interviews, had to be put into order according to the laws that arose out of the material. (qtd. in Alter 132)

An example of a topic emerging spontaneously in an interview and subsequently developed

²⁵ The American release was trimmed by another thirty minutes. See Di Iorio for an overview of the scenes cut from the French version in an effort to appeal to American audiences.

by Marker through editing involves the theme of women and politics. During a discussion with three young bourgeois sisters about whether one can be happy living in a dictatorship, the most vocal of the sisters proclaims that women should not participate in politics, for they lack a sense of civic duty. She considers women who are politically active or even vote to be ridiculous and suggests moreover that they lack good reasons for supporting a particular candidate: "...écoutez-les, enfin! Ecoutez pourquoi elles sont pour untel et pas pour un autre." The film changes scenes, cutting to a working class woman who seems to finish the sister's thought: "Parce que vous savez, dans un atelier de femmes, si untel est beau, oui, mais c'est surtout ça, la femme regarde ça [...] La femme regarde pas uniquement la politique, savoir si telle ou telle personne est capable de bien diriger. [...] c'est un petit peu... la beauté de l'homme ou... quoique ce soit." The woman's husband adds that women are too easily influenced in their voting by their husbands and friends. By editing these two conversations seamlessly together, Marker demonstrates that sexist attitudes towards women and politics cut across class and gender lines, as the arguments offered by the young bourgeois woman and the working class couple are essentially the same.

While such theme-driven editing distinguishes *Le Joli mai* from *Chronique d'un été*, both films benefitted from technological advances in cinematography, most notably the introduction of lightweight, handheld 16mm cameras that permitted the synchronous recording of images and sound. The use of these cameras allowed filmmakers to follow their subjects more closely and with greater spontaneity of movement. The stylistic effect of the mobile and spontaneous handheld camera combined with an unscripted engagement with nonactors in real-life spaces prompted Rouch to coin the term "cinéma vérité," a translation of Dziga Vertov "kinopravda," meaning film truth. With respect to the thorny notion of truth,

Rouch makes understood that he seeks cinematic rather than objective truth, calling “kinopravda” “an ambiguous or self-contradictory expression, since fundamentally film truncates, accelerates, and slows down actions, thus distorting the truth.” He continues: “For me, however, kinopravda is a precise term, [...] and it designates not ‘pure truth’ but the particular truth of the recorded images and sounds – a filmic truth (*ciné-vérité*)” (98).

Although *Chronique d'un été* and *Le Joli mai* have both frequently been held up as early examples of *cinéma vérité* (see, for instance, Barnouw 255), Marker rejected the term in favor of “cinéma direct” (“Marker Direct”). Direct cinema was, in fact, a movement in its own right, initiated by American journalists in the early 1960s (Barsam 300, Beattie 83). Erik Barnouw’s comments differentiating *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema sum up the distinction generally made between the two movements: “The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; the Rouch *cinéma vérité* artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of uninvolved bystander; the *cinéma vérité* artist espoused that of provocateur” (255). Whether *Le Joli mai* falls in the category of *cinéma vérité* or that of direct cinema is debatable. Marker seeks invisibility insofar as he stays behind the camera, yet his voice is still heard in the prodding questions he poses. Geneviève Van Cauwenberge and Sarah Cooper both hold the position that *Le Joli mai* does not fit neatly into either category (Cooper 40-41; Van Cauwenberge 95-98). Perhaps the best way to sidestep the loaded terms and narrow definitions of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema is to adopt Bill Nichols’s classification “participatory documentary,” a mode that “emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews and other forms of even more direct involvement from conversations to provocations” (31).

On the spectrum of participatory cinema, *Le Joli mai* falls on the lighter end, with

Marker engaging in conversations and occasionally asking provoking questions, but never allowing more than his voice to enter the diegesis. An interview outside the Bourse stock exchange with two adolescent boys demonstrates Marker's technique of skillfully yet unobtrusively guiding the conversation. The boys express their desire to become businessmen and rise in the ranks, earning money and power. Marker asks them what they would do with the money, and they mention dining, the theater, and the cinema. Marker presses them to go further: "Quoi encore? C'est un peu limité ça, en fait." He then wonders if they are interested in things other than work and pleasure, such as world affairs. One of the boys answers yes, they are obligated to take an interest in things happening elsewhere in the world. As Marker continues to question him, it becomes clear that his interest in events in Algeria and elsewhere depends on their effects on the stock market. Over the course of the discussion, Marker manages subtly to steer the conversation to one of the themes of his film, French attitudes towards Algeria. Yet he remains a disembodied voice, all but for a couple of quick moments when the corner of his head enters the frame, a consequence of the handheld camera rather than an intentional desire to be filmed.

Marker's near lack of onscreen presence contrasts with Rouch and Morin's higher degree of participation in the world that they are filming. They begin *Chronique d'un été* with footage of themselves conversing about their goals for the film with Marceline Loridan, an interviewee who becomes interviewer in the following segment. Loridan and another young woman attempt to stop passers-by on the street to ask them the simple question, "Are you happy?" The women must assert themselves with pedestrians who frequently brush them off or give a brief answer before resuming their brisk pace. *Le Joli mai*, on the other hand, does not show Marker approaching his subjects. Nor does he, for the most part, simply stand

back and record events unfolding before him, as in the case of what Nichols calls the “observational mode” of documentary filmmaking (31). One notable exception is footage of a wedding party, at which the bride and groom look unamused as their raucous guests celebrate. Marker does not contextualize the scene, but rather intercuts it with a conversation between two young lovers who gush about their happiness and imagine a blissful marriage. The wedding footage serves thus not a primary function but a concurrent or even secondary one, contrasting with the couple’s comments as if to expose their naivety about love and marriage, or perhaps more optimistically to distinguish between sentiment and ceremony. Marker’s role in this example is participatory in that he comments through montage on the interview being conducted and thereby takes part in the messages being presented.

In remarks made to a cinema club in 1964 after the projection of *Le Joli mai*, Marker summed up his stance in the film as “une objectivité passionnée” (“L’Objectivité”). Before introducing the concept, he warns of two temptations that will lead a filmmaker astray in a film like *Le Joli mai*. On the one hand, a filmmaker might be tempted to seek confirmation through interviews of his own beliefs, which would result in a reductive representation of the interviewees that fails to acknowledge the inherent complexity of people. On the other hand, the filmmaker might strive for complete objectivity, seeing his project as a sort of sociological study whose conclusions will be determined by viewers of the film. Marker rejects this approach as well, explaining that it cannot possibly yield accurate results since a film is limited in the number of human subjects it can include. Furthermore, the scientific and the cinematic do not make good bedfellows when it comes to people and their feelings: “une espèce d’appareil austère, scientifique, statistique [...] ne colle pas avec un spectacle: car il s’agit quand même de parler à la sensibilité des gens” (12). Marker’s notion of “une

objectivité passionnée” encapsulates his technique of guiding his conversations towards certain themes about which he is passionate (as in the question of civic engagement) while giving people room to answer honestly according to their own convictions: “j’ai essayé [...] de les écouter, de les ramener bien entendu à un certain nombre de thèmes qui me paraissaient importants et qui étaient les thèmes dont j’avais envie de parler; mais enfin de les laisser être eux-mêmes” (13). Following from his comments, “objectivité” translates not as “objectivity” in a scientific sense, but rather must be interpreted together with his adjective “passionnée” to designate a liminal space between the filmmaker’s perspective and motivations and the subject’s free expression. It is in this space that dialogue occurs, and in the case of *Le Joli mai*, this dialogue comes to illustrate the heterogeneity of the city as represented in the film.

This connection between heterogeneity and dialogue that I aim to draw out of *Le Joli mai* is informed by Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, which he develops in works including *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929) and “Discourse in the Novel” (1934-35). According to Bakhtin, language is inherently dialogic. Every utterance is aimed at a listener and prefigures a response, and it is likewise informed by other utterances that preceded it (“Discourse” 280). Bakhtin considers language to be fundamentally social: “verbal discourse is a social phenomenon – social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning” (“Discourse” 259). Such a view accords with relational understandings of space. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre outlines the ways in which space is socially produced and imagined. For Lefebvre and Bakhtin, space and language respectively cannot exist apart from human activity and relations. Following Lefebvre, cultural geographers such as Nigel Thrift have

made the case for “a relational view of space in which, rather than space being viewed as a container within which the world proceeds, space is seen as a co-product of these proceedings” (“Space” 96). The relational aspect of Bakhtin’s theories has not escaped cultural geographers, a handful of whom have turned to his writings on dialogue, the chronotope, and the carnival in examining the dynamics between space and such areas as identity, gender, and transgression, sometimes even adopting “dialogism as method” in an effort to break free from authoritative discourse (Holloway and Kneale 83-84). For his part, Marker can be seen as practicing “dialogism as method” in *Le Joli mai* (and indeed other films) by virtue of the fact that dialogue is the means by which the film comes into being. This dialogue is necessarily situated spatially, and thus the relationality of city space is demonstrated by the assemblages of urban practitioners in dialogue. Yet it is not merely the exchange of voices that renders *Le Joli mai* and the city it presents as dialogic. Marker’s attempt to achieve an “objectivité passionnée” demonstrates his desire to represent a non-hierarchical realm of communication in which a multiplicity of voices subverts monologic authority.

From the sound montage of radio voices and vehicle noises accompanying shots of Paris early in the film, to the vast and diverse array of interlocutors engaged in conversation with the filmmaker, his fellow interviewers, and each other, Marker creates the impression of a Paris that is “polyphonic,” in Bakhtin’s sense of the term. Borrowing the word from music, Bakhtin uses “polyphony” to describe the presence of many independent voices within a novel that exist on equal footing with, rather than being subsumed by, the voice of the author. Bakhtin sees the polyphonic novel as the ideal means of expressing the discursiveness of language and the social world. He credits Dostoevsky as the master of the polyphonic novel:

The character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky's finalizing artistic vision. In the consciousness of the critics, the direct and fully weighted signifying power of the characters' words destroys the monologic plane of the novel and calls forth an unmediated response – as if the character were not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual word. (*Problems* 5)

The polyphony visible in Dostoevsky's novels contrasts with monologic discourse that attempts to suppress voices not in tune with the main speaker: "a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization" ("Discourse" 271).

Although Bakhtin applies his concepts of dialogism and polyphony to the novel, it is nonetheless fitting to consider them with respect to film and other mediums. His definition of the novel seems accommodating to other forms of expression: "The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types [...] and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262). Wayne C. Booth argues that rather than applying Bakhtin's theories to the novel alone, we should seek out "representation, at whatever time or place and in whatever genre, of human 'languages' or 'voices' that are not reduced into, or suppressed by, a single authoritative voice: a representation of the inescapably dialogical quality of human life at its best" (xxii). In a similar vein, Martin Flanagan defends his application of Bakhtin's theories to Hollywood cinema: "If part of Bakhtin's 'message' was to identify the animating power of 'novelness' as a medium for the distribution of cultural ideas and voices, then film can be seen as another mode of textualization that enacts its own changes, and produces its own type of semiotic energy" (20). It is in light of Flanagan's emphasis on "textualization" and Booth's broad understanding of dialogical representation that I put forward *Le Joli mai* as a

polyphonic film capturing the dialogism of everyday urban life.

The dialogic nature of a documentary consisting of interviews is perhaps self-evident. However, Bakhtin's concept of polyphonic dialogism does not amount simply to conversation, but rather to a multiplicity of voices allowed to be heard for themselves, not simply to reinforce the world view of the author. The presence of these voices thereby undermines discursive authority in the text, just as in society at large the inherent polyphony of the world challenges hegemonic authority that would suppress divergent voices. Bakhtin recognizes that these voices are contained within a novel (the product of an author) but sees them as coexisting dialogically in what he calls "heteroglossia."²⁶ Marker's notion of "objectivité passionnée" discussed earlier demonstrates his aim to encourage speakers to express themselves freely, creating heteroglossia within the framework of Marker's overarching themes. Furthering the polyphonic effect of the film is the multiplicity of speakers standing in for the filmmaker. Marker interviews many of the subjects, but other unidentified interviewers frequently take his place. Yves Montand provides voice-over commentary at the beginning and ending of the film, and occasionally in between.²⁷ The elusiveness of a single narrator – or even *auteur* – demonstrates Marker's rejection of monologic representation and unitary language.

Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel may seem idealistic, but polyphony in this case (unlike in music) does not necessarily involve harmony between voices. He explains:

²⁶ In Bakhtin's words: "Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [...] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)." ("Discourse" 263)

²⁷ In the U.S. release, Simone Signoret delivers the voice-over in English translation.

all languages of heteroglossia [...] are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. (“Discourse” 291-92)

Le Joli mai contains instances of each of these types of relations. The blissful young couple discussed earlier is “juxtaposed” with the sullen bride and groom at a boisterous wedding party. The working class couple and the bourgeois sister “mutually supplement” each other’s narrow-minded view of women and politics. All of the speakers (interviewers, interviewees, narrator, and the rest) can be said to be “interrelated dialogically” in that Marker brings their voices together in treating the themes of his film, from the meaning of happiness to the role of the individual in world affairs.

Speakers who “contradict each other” abound in *Le Joli mai*. Some confrontations are more or less direct. A politically minded woman refuses to be interviewed, mistaking the interviewer for a radio reporter and insisting angrily: “Elle est prostituée au gouvernement, la radio.” She proceeds to argue heatedly with three male bystanders who suggest she go see how things are in Russia. In another scene, a street poet provides a rejoinder to capitalists like the stockbrokers interviewed outside the Bourse. His poem begins: “Il y a qui jouent en Bourse et gueulent comme des serins. / D’autres font fortune en escroquant leur prochain. / Moi, de tout cela, croyez-moi, je m’en fou, / Car je suis heureux [...] quand je suis sans le sou.”

Other interviewees are placed in opposition through Marker’s sequencing and montage, as when he contradicts comments made by the three sisters with those in a related discussion with another interviewee. His conversation with the three sisters leads to the topics of religion and politics. The sisters favor Christianity to communism, characterizing

the latter as fueled by anger. This prompts Marker to observe: “J’ai l’impression que quand vous parlez du christianisme, vous pensez à la forme sa plus élevée, qui est noble, et quand vous pensez au communisme, vous pensez à la forme sa plus basse, qui est la rage.” The interview immediately following this discussion is with a former priest, now a militant communist and workers’ union activist, who gave up the cloth when the church forced him to chose between his religion and his political affiliation. The man’s calm, thoughtful demeanor and clear commitment to the betterment of society contrast with the sisters’ characterization of communists as angry and destructive. Rather, in his account, it is the church that emerges as the divisive agent. He confesses his struggle at first to reconcile the atheism of communism with his religious faith, yet in the end, the church marginalized him with its ultimatum. Through this opposition between the perceptions of the sisters and the account of the unionist, Marker shows the conflictual side of textual dialogue.

The ordering of segments serves throughout the film as a method of providing implicit commentary. A discussion between two architects who imagine an idealized community with inhabitants surrounded by nature and happy to be living together is followed by interviews with denizens of a dense, working-class neighborhood. One woman complains of gossip amongst her neighbors. When asked if those in her neighborhood would leave given the chance, she replies that many would, including herself, but housing keeps them there. Another woman tells the interviewer about her small garden, revealing that she plants plastic flowers during times when real ones will not grow. In the longest interview of the segment, a mother of nine speaks excitedly about her family’s imminent relocation from a one-bedroom apartment to a subsidized three-bedroom lodgment. These three interviews highlight the frivolity of the architects, whose utopian description borders on the absurd

when one of them compares it to Célesteville, the imaginary city built by the children's book character Babar the Elephant. The architects' vision is rendered all the more quixotic when juxtaposed with actual living conditions of poor Parisians.

Later in the film, Marker speaks to a young Algerian man about the racism he has experienced in France, having lost a job when a lower skilled worker complained about his higher position, and having landed in the hospital after being beaten by colonial sympathizers. Footage following the interview shows a military procession commemorating the birthday of Jeanne d'Arc, with President de Gaulle in attendance. The placement of this footage after the interview with the Algerian man points to the disparity between French patriotic views of its national strength and history, and the deplorable reality of colonialism and its aftereffects, including lingering racism and violence. A similar reminder of French delusions about its colonial past occurs when an African student recalls a dispute with French priests when he was an adolescent recently relocated to Paris. After reading in an assigned history book that his homeland of Dahomey had been easily defeated by the French at the end of the nineteenth century, he became furious, having learned from his grandmother that the battle was long and difficult, and that his ancestors had ardently defended their territory. The priests, charged with educating him, defended the French version of events, thereby reinforcing the unitary language of rhetoric that served France's colonialist ideology. Through his anecdote, however, the African student creates a fissure in the façade of French supremacy long used to justify colonialism. These two examples demonstrate Marker's use of both juxtaposition (as with the military ceremony footage) and testimony (that of both the Algerian man and the African student) to express his own anticolonial views and his criticism of myopic views of French history.

Marker's urban dialogics in *Le Joli mai* arise from voices found in and across the city in dialogue with each other directly or through juxtaposition. The diversity of voices demonstrates the heterogeneity of space. Marker may appear more sympathetic to some interviewees than others, apparent in his use of montage as commentary. However, he is never heavy-handed in his approach, and respectfully allows all of the speakers the space to express themselves. This is what makes the film – and by extension, his representation of the city – polyphonic. Yet Marker's Paris is not a utopian space, as the voices are more often in conflict than in harmony. In a film made some forty years later, *Chats perchés*, Marker again takes to the city streets to consider questions of community and activism in a Paris that falls short of utopian ideals. It is to this film that I now turn.

3. In Search of Cats and Community: *Chats perchés*

In his 2004 poetic documentary-essay film *Chats perchés*, Marker embarks on the trail of the graffiti phenomenon “Monsieur Chat,” a grinning yellow cat appearing mysteriously on structures throughout Paris. M. Chat emerges as if of his own volition and seems to watch over the French people during moments of political and historical crisis. Marker aligns this cartoon cat with other felines captured by his camera: strays, pets, images on billboards, Egyptian statues in the Louvre, and so on. The implied solidarity of these cats (be they real or represented) stands as a utopian ideal for humans in search of unity in a divided and divisive world. Moreover, as graffiti, M. Chat is a transgressive figure, defying urban whitewashing and social control, and thereby playing a role in Marker's broader theme of political resistance. Elsewhere in the film, Marker documents street protests over a range of issues and political events on national and international stages, most notably far-right

nationalist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen's infamous 2002 presidential campaign, and the onset of the Iraq War in 2003. While the protests mark moments of solidarity among the participants, on a larger scale, they signal explosive divisions in contemporary society. In this section, I will track appearances of Marker's celebrated cats in the film's urban and cultural imaginary. To map the cats in this way is to locate their place in Marker's imagination as well as their presence in social spaces at critical moments in the early years of the twenty-first century. Yet this mapping should not - and cannot - fix and delimit the cats, for they are ultimately uncontrollable and unco-optable. Rather, in the spirit of counter-cartography, I wish to suggest that Marker's cats act to denaturalize social spaces by serving a juxtapositional function, offering a model of hope, liberty and community during a turbulent period of social unrest.

The 59-minute *Chats perchés* was originally broadcast in France on the Arte television network in 2004, with concurrent screenings at the Centre Pompidou and Bibliothèque nationale de France. The appearances of M. Chat around Paris in the first few years of the new millennium serve as the point of departure for Marker's socio-political meditations. The graffitied cats help to anchor and structure the film, but as I mentioned earlier, they are not Marker's sole focus. In fact, they disappear for long stretches at several points in the film when the camera instead follows street protests over various concerns, from workers' and immigrants' rights, to national and international politics. Marker's two main interests in the film, M. Chat and the street demonstrations, converge when the grinning yellow cats make a surprise appearance at an anti-war protest. From this moment, the cats begin to play a symbolic role in the film, representing the harmony, solidarity and liberty at the core of an ideal society.

The film covers a distinct period of time – the first few years of the twenty-first century – and it unfolds more or less chronologically, with occasional jumps back in time. By digressing to follow a sudden thought or association, Marker structures his film more like an essay than a conventional cinematic narrative. In the original French version of the film, Marker provides commentary on his images in two main ways: through editing, which, as in *Le Joli mai*, creates connections and juxtapositions; and with a series of intertitles inserted into the montage, recalling those from early silent films yet frequently more expressive than informative. A 2004 DVD release for Anglophones renames the film *The Case of the Grinning Cat* and includes voice-over commentary in English by Gérard Rinaldi, who speaks from the perspective of the filmmaker. This voice-over provides cultural and historical details that might escape a non-French audience. In addition, it makes Marker's ideas and opinions more explicit and adds an element of retrospection. What is perhaps diminished in the English language version is a sense of immediacy, the feel of a poetic street movie, the rhythm established by the diegetic sounds of the city punctuated by music and occasional media clips. Nonetheless, in analyzing the film, I find it useful at times to acknowledge the English commentary when it adds interest to the point being made by the images.

Chats perchés begins with footage of a Parisian flash mob. The camera tracks participants as they gather at the *parvis* de Beaubourg and then follow anonymous directions to circle the square while opening and closing an umbrella at 10 second intervals, and then sing a particular text in a monotone voice. Marker reveals on an intertitle that all of this takes place under the watch of a cat (“sous le regard d’un chat”), which he subsequently illustrates by zooming to an image of M. Chat high up on a wall overlooking the square. This opening sequence introduces two themes that recur in the film: collective social action, where

individuals gather together in public for a greater purpose, and the transgressive use of urban space, in which the meanings and purposes of structures in the built environment are diverted in playful, Situationist-like manners. The opening sequence also establishes M. Chat as an observer, or even guardian, of the French people as they attempt to navigate together a treacherous national and global political terrain. As such, M. Chat is diametrically opposed to *Fantômas*, the fictional urban sociopath and master of disguise featured in a series of early twentieth-century French crime novels and films. Marker references this criminal figure in *Le Joli mai* by entitling its second half “le retour de Fantômas.” In *Le Joli mai*, Marker uses Fantômas to evoke the threat of terror felt by the French people following a string of bombings and assassinations in Paris in early 1962. M. Chat is the antithesis of Fantômas: immediately recognizable, retaining his basic form and character despite his surroundings, and reassuring the people rather than terrorizing them.

Part of this reassurance comes from the sheer visceral pleasure from looking at these cheerful figures. Marker reveals in the English voice-over of *Chats perchés* that, at first, the grinning yellow cats popping up all over the city were for him merely “signs,” albeit “comforting ones” in the difficult days following 9/11. In a piece that Marker wrote after the release of *Chats perchés*, he describes his original intention to create a sort of non-political urban mood piece: “une espèce de *street-movie* dans le Paris après le 9/11. Un petit film d’atmosphère, simple et sans prétention, et surtout, pour une fois, pas de politique” (*M. Chat* 30). In this Paris street movie, he explains, the cats would function like punctuation marks, or like the vignettes between chapters in a romantic novel, providing a cheerful, calming image for the spectator’s eye. Indeed, this is the impression made in the first part of the film, when the yellow cats remain diegetically distinct. However, M. Chat enters the political landscape

when Marker spots him on a rally sign in news footage during an anti-Le Pen demonstration at the time of the second round of presidential elections in 2002.

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent bombing of Bagdad, Marker focuses his camera on anti-war protestors. The fractured nature of the protests, subdivided into different camps, leaves him wistful for stronger cohesion around the anti-war message. In the midst of this fragmentation, he longs for the presence of M. Chat, who has been missing for a good portion of the film. Marker explains: “Depuis le coup du second tour, on se demande quand le Chat va (se) manifester.” By slipping in the pronominal pronoun “se,” Marker paints M. Chat as both an autonomous being, one who can appear at will, make his presence known; and an activist, one ready to demonstrate and enter the political fray. In the segment that follows, shots of demonstrators are intercut with Marker’s query: “où sont les chats?” repeated three times. The fourth time, his question is left unfinished, “Où sont” followed by an ellipsis. The cats have finally appeared, accompanied by triumphant music and long shots of crowds noticeably calm and cohesive. For Marker, and seemingly for those in the crowds, M. Chat’s presence has a pacifying and unifying influence.

Another long absence of the grinning yellow cats causes Marker to fear that they have abandoned the French people for good, the latter having failed to get the cats’ message. In an intertitle, he imagines the cats saying: “Nous étions les Chats de la liberté. Si vous ne comprenez pas ce qu’on vous dit débrouillez-vous tous seuls.” Yet Marker does not end the film on this pessimistic note. The cats appear once more, this time in circles on the sidewalk, as sorts of guardians (“pour veiller sur le sommeil du voisinage”). The wings on some of the cats reinforce the notion that they are watching over humankind, and the circle, a symbol of unity, seems to encourage us to continue in our efforts to come together for the sake of a

better tomorrow. Marker ends the film by thanking the cats and telling them: “Nous aurons bien besoin de vous.”

M. Chat differs from much graffiti art in that he is not considered the mark of one particular artist. Despite the fact that we can trace his origins to Franco-Swiss artist Thoma Vuille, he has been replicated by graffitists on walls across the world. A fan website tracks M. Chat’s globetrotting on an interactive Google map. The reproduction of the grinning yellow cat far and wide gives the impression that he has taken on a life of his own. Indeed, Marker treats him as an autonomous being, referring to him throughout the film as “le Chat,” with a capital C, or, when multiplied, “les Chats,” and never mentioning the word “graffiti” or even the name “M. Chat.” Over the course of *Chats perchés*, Marker alludes only a few times to the hand behind M. Chat, such as when he remarks on two intertitles: “Ainsi quelqu’un, la nuit, risquait de se rompre le cou” “pour faire flotter un sourire sur la ville.” He continues in the English voice-over: “I wondered who the painter could be. A crossbreed of Charles Shultz and Spiderman. He was performing in the most unexpected places. You’d swear he’d need a third arm – or was it paw? – just to keep his balance between buckets and brushes.” Even in his brief musings about the intrepid creator of M. Chat, Marker hints with his mention of a “paw” at the independent existence of the cat.

Elsewhere in the film, M. Chat becomes the agent of his own mobility. Some of the cats “climb down from their roofs to appear at humanly eyes level,” as the English voice-over tells us. One of the cats nestles in a tree, reminding Marker of his other favorite animal/emblem, the owl. When mentioned in intertitles, the cats are usually the subject of the sentence. M. Chat even has a genealogy – which Marker traces in a light-hearted sequence – and bears a strong resemblance to his ancestors, including the Cheshire cat and Japanese

manga cartoons. Yet Marker also playfully locates M. Chat in several famous works of art. The humorousness of these images stems from the out-of-placeness of M. Chat, despite his excellent camouflage, in works belonging to the established cannon and caught up in a system of artistic commodification. Perhaps Marker is hinting at the absurdity of moving graffiti from streets to galleries, as has been a trend in the past few decades. In any case, what is clear is that Marker attributes to M. Chat an ability to infiltrate cultural and social spaces and thereby challenge their established meanings. The grinning yellow cats even “steal cat-like” into Marker’s own film, as he tells us in the English voice-over.

In their ensemble, the many cats in *Chats perchés* symbolize a form of togetherness that Marker suggests is largely lacking in contemporary society. Represented cats and real cats are conflated into one category, the “chats” whom Marker seeks out and captures with his camera. Connected by association, cats rendered in paint or print and those constituted by flesh and blood form a sort of utopian community in Marker’s imagination, for they coexist peacefully and in a state of perfect liberty. This utopian community serves to point out shortcomings and fractures in contemporary social relations, and as such, illustrates David Pinder’s notion of utopia as “an expression of a desire for a better place of being and living [...] a desire that moves beyond the limitations of aspects of the present, seeking spaces and worlds that are qualitatively different from what exists” (18).

As powerful as they may be symbolically, Marker’s cats are nonetheless physically and materially vulnerable. M. Chat is erased from walls, and some of the real cats in Marker’s film suffer unpleasant fates. A tabby named Caroline gets stuck in a tree. Firefighters called to her aid fail to lure her down. It takes an energetic Parisian bystander to climb the tree and rescue her. Things do not go so well for Boléro, Marker’s feline friend

who frequents the metro with his “human” Élizabeth. At one point Boléro sports a bandage after getting his paw caught in the escalator. Reminding us that misfortune never comes alone (“un malheur n’arrive jamais seul”), Marker connects this “catastrophe” befallen Boléro to the shocking victory of Le Pen in the first round of elections. Near the end of the film, Marker remarks that he hasn’t seen Boléro in some time, the suggestion here being that Boléro has disappeared like the grinning yellow cats from the urban landscape.

It is worth noting that, while M. Chat does not have the power of the Cheshire Cat to disappear at will (for others instigate his erasure), the very fact that he appears illicitly on exterior walls indicates that he has accepted in advance his own ephemerality. Paradoxically, this is what accounts for his liberty. The cultural geographer Tim Cresswell has described graffiti as a form of de Certeauian creative resistance to dominant structures of power, commenting that:

Its criminality lies in its refusal to comply with its context: it does not respect the laws of place that tell us what is and what is not appropriate. Graffiti is a crime because it subverts the authority of urban space and asserts the triumph (however fleeting) of the individual over the monuments of authority [...] Graffiti can be described as a ‘tactic’ of the dispossessed – a mobile and temporary set of meanings that insert themselves into the interstices of the formal spatial structure (roads, doors, walls, subways, and so on) of the city. (46-47)

It is thus in his mobility and his impermanence that M. Chat remains free from domination, for he does not remain anywhere long enough to become absorbed into any hegemonic structure. As Margaret Flinn explains, M. Chat resists co-option and maintains his political promise by remaining “a nearly empty signifier, allowing anonymous artists of the everyday and their viewers to invest him with their own readings” (111). In *Chats perchés*, Marker attributes to M. Chat and the other cats in his feline utopia nothing less than the potential to guide humankind toward a better future.

In their transgressiveness, Marker's cats contribute to the multiplicity of voices making up the polyphony of the city as presented by the filmmaker in both *Chats perchés* and *Le Joli mai*. Like the voices of interviewees in *Le Joli mai*, the cats cannot be contained and suppressed by monologic authority, for no sooner are they erased from one surface than they appear on another. Marker may express a longing for more social unity in *Chats perchés*, but not at the expense of dialogism and heterogeneity. Rather, he expresses "the unique and unified event of being," Bakhtin's conception of existence (qtd. in Holquist 23). Marker's urban voices each maintain their individual position and situation, yet they share a socio-spatial context that is necessarily relational because of its perpetual emergence through dialogue.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this dissertation, I have endeavored to show not merely how four contemporary authors and filmmakers have represented the city, but, more interestingly, how they capture and engage with our subjective experience of the city as space and place. Through his infraordinary approach to the city as both a mental concept and a site for experimentation, Georges Perec demonstrates how our understanding of urban spaces is rendered incomplete by an imagination relying on predetermined notions and a system of observation that depends on our inherently limited sense of vision. Annie Ernaux articulates how we situate ourselves in space and place through our transpersonal contact with others, a process that involves connection as much as disconnection as we alternately identify with and distance ourselves from others. Agnès Varda remains forever conscious of the body in space, and her urban representations illustrate a body-city dialectic in which bodies make up and are made by the city, but are also deemed transgressive when they fail to conform to social norms regulating the display of physical states and behaviors in the public sphere. Chris Marker highlights our vocal participation in the contemporary city as he indicates through constant dialogue the polyphonic nature of the heterogeneous urban spaces he represents.

While examining the urban spaces of Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker, I have attempted to resist characterizations and interpretations that would delimit and essentialize

the city. Instead, my aim has been to bring out the ways in which their texts and films attest to the relationality and mutability of space in general and the city in particular. What has become clear to me over the course of writing this dissertation is Doreen Massey's assertion that cities are "particular forms of spatiality" in which such aspects as mobility and multiplicity are not qualities intrinsic to the city but instead amplify properties of space itself (Lury and Massey 231). With respect to the question of multiplicity, for example, Massey explains:

On the one hand, if we really agree that space is the *product* of spatial relations (not just an arena within which social relations take place) [...] then for there to be relations there must be coexisting multiplicity. And on the other hand, for there to be multiplicity, there must be space. Space is precisely the sphere of the possibility of coming across difference. [...] So again, I would argue, cities are an intense form of (certain aspects of) spatiality in general. (231-32; emphasis in the original)

Nonetheless, the city in literature and film is worth distinct consideration for intertextual reasons, owing to its long history of representation in print and on screen. The works of Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker offer important counter-representations to essentialized and romantic visions of the city that persist in popular culture, as seen in a film like Jean-Pierret Jeunet's *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, and certainly also in American treatments of Paris (Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* comes instantly to mind). What I have attempted to show in my analyses of the works in this study is that close readings of urban spaces in experimental literature and film can, in addition to bringing insights on how we experience and imagine the contemporary city, lead to wider understandings about space and place.

One significant commonality between Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker is that they all express the relationality of space most effectively through an emphasis on positionality

and situatedness, in social, spatial, and bodily terms. In *Espèces d'espaces*, Perec acknowledges limitations placed on our conceptions of space and the city, endeavoring in turn to imagine other possibilities than received, historically and socially contingent notions. *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* is itself a meditation not only on the Place Saint-Sulpice, but also on the question of positionality, as he repeatedly references his visual perspective and becomes quite literally exhausted (“épuisé”) by the attention he exerts in attempting to draw up an exhaustive list of the sights of the square. For Ernaux, positionality remains at the forefront of her mind, as she examines her own shifting positions with respect to her observations and interactions in social space, as well as the positions of others who cross her path. Varda's films feature embodied positionality in space, in both her considerations of the interplay between gender roles and subjectivity (as seen most strikingly in *Cléo de 5 à 7*), and her demonstrations of the transgressions that are seen to occur when a body is deemed nonconforming simply by acting on its physical needs (as with the homeless men on the streets in *L'Opéra-Mouffe* and the gleaners in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* who feed their hunger by picking through refuse). Marker's dialogic filmmaking brings together people speaking from a number of different social and class positions to show a polyphonic city in which even the voices of the lesser heard (those, for instance, of the African and Algerian immigrants and the impoverished mother in *Le Joli mai*) contribute to an urban landscape that is too often glossed through representation.

Moreover, Perec, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker are all situated within the “space” of their mediums, literature or cinema. Their contextualization within certain movements or currents (Perec in the Oulipo, Ernaux as a writer of autofiction, Varda and Marker as Left Bank filmmakers) owes to the historical and cultural moment during which they produce(d)

their works, yet it does not completely account for the nature of their experiments.²⁸ It is through studying their unique experiments – more specifically, urban experiments – that I have sought to perform a geocritical reading of literature and film that touches on some of the most compelling aspects of space and the city. My study has focused on two poles that, on the surface, seem contradictory: experimentation and the everyday. Yet by rejecting the association of the everyday with the banal and by embracing the dynamism with which theorists including Lefebvre and de Certeau view the quotidian, we can come to understand that experiments in everyday life and spaces are not exceptions to the commonplace but rather means of interrogating it and attending to its perpetual state of becoming.

This dissertation has offered a particular approach to the selected authors, filmmakers, texts, and films, and in these pages I have presented my own specific manner of geocriticism. Yet there are certainly many other possibilities for future avenues of study and methods of analysis related to the individuals, works, and topics that I have examined. For instance, one could delve more deeply into particular urban spaces, using a particular place type as a starting point, such as the café as featured in both Perec's *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* and Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7*. The city street is rife with possibilities for an examination of spatial relations and intersecting trajectories, and it appears in different manners in the works of all four writers and filmmakers of my study. Their depictions of the city street could be analyzed geocritically in light of, say, the *grands boulevards* in works by

²⁸ Whereas Perec considered himself an Oulipo member, Ernaux is less embracing of the “autofiction” designation. For a discussion of Ernaux and autofiction, see Shirley Jordan, “Autofiction in the Feminine.” Likewise, the “Left Bank” group was not a formal one but was rather named as such by critics. For an overview of the history of the term, see Robert Farmer, “Marker, Resnais, Varda: Remembering the Left Bank Group.” Nonetheless, Ernaux, Varda, and Marker have all been situated literarily and cinematographically, and are thus creating from the perspective of, or perhaps even in reaction to, a certain artistic position, whether they have readily adopted it or not.

Balzac, Zola, and Baudelaire. Indeed, perhaps such a study would reveal that the spatiality of the worlds depicted by nineteenth-century writers (or authors or filmmakers from other eras) is more relational and dynamic than, for example, Balzac's thick description or Baudelaire's nostalgia would suggest at first glance. To take a more philosophical approach, it could be fruitful to consider Althusser's use of the street to illustrate his notion of interpellation.²⁹ Such a study would resonate with Ernaux's and Varda's explorations of the intersections between social roles (particularly gender and class) and subjectivity. In any case, an approach that privileges a particular space or place as an analytical departure point would correspond with Westphal's call to minimize questions of authorship that could stand in the way of an effective geocritical reading (*La Géocritique: mode 34*). While I believe (and indeed have attempted to demonstrate in this dissertation) that beginning with the author or filmmaker does not necessarily preclude a nuanced analysis of spatiality, a shift in starting point to the particular space or place could offer another perspective that compliments the work that I have initiated in these pages.

Future geocriticism on the authors and filmmakers in my study could also certainly address works not included in this study for thematic reasons. For instance, Ernaux's *Les Années* and Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* explore questions of history – personal, social, and historical – while at the same time offering a strong sense of spatiality, with both authors tying autobiographical reflections situated in Paris to broader questions about collective and cultural memory. Ernaux and Perec succeed in weaving together time and space in ways that avoid the predominantly temporal reading of history critiqued by Foucault, Soja, and other theorists of space. Varda's social drama *Sans toit ni loi* and

²⁹ For an overview and critique of the street as Althusser's exemplary site for interpretation, see Kristin Ross, "Streetwise: The French Invention of Everyday Life."

Marker's imaginary travelogue *Sans soleil* would lend themselves suitably to an exploration of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of nomadology, wherein the nomad occupies space without dividing, ordering, and demarcating it, thereby moving within a "smooth space" that contrasts with the hegemonic "striated space" of the modern state (380-87). As nomads, Varda's young homeless drifter Mona and Marker's world-travelling narrator resist both the ideological and cinematic confines of space and, as a result, perform a sort of deterritorialization. As Deleuze and Guattari increasingly attract attention in geography as well as in literary and cinema studies, their theories about space offer many possibilities for productive geocritical conversations across disciplines.³⁰

It is, fundamentally speaking, this sort of a conversation that I have sought to initiate within these pages. Cultural geography yields itself well to the study of spatial representations in literature and film, since certain conceptions about the nature of space and place necessarily underscore those representations. Geocriticism offers a way not only to rethink how space manifests itself in literature and film, but also to question the very divisions between scholarly and academic disciplines. As Perec, Ernaux, Varda and Marker have shown us, experimenting with the taken-for-granted spaces of our everyday lives can lead to new understandings of the physical, social, and conceptual worlds that we inhabit.

³⁰ For a geographical perspective on Deleuze and Guattari, see Marcus Doel, *Poststructuralist Geographies* (27-79).

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