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**An Attempt to Approach a Void, or
Georges Perec, *Cause commune*, and the Infraordinary**

By

Proey Liao

Bachelor of Architecture, University of Southern California, 2016

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master in Design Studies
History and Philosophy of Design and Media**

At the Harvard University Graduate School of Design

May 2021

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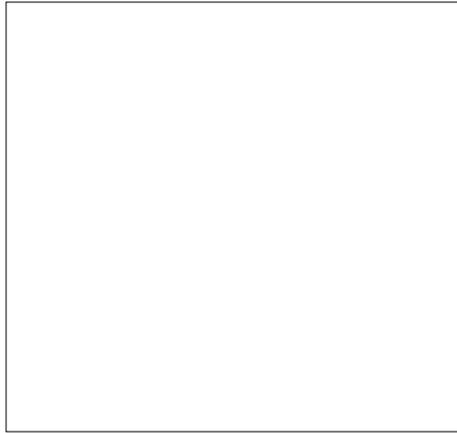
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Ed Eigen

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• AN ATTEMPT • TO APPROACH • A VOID •



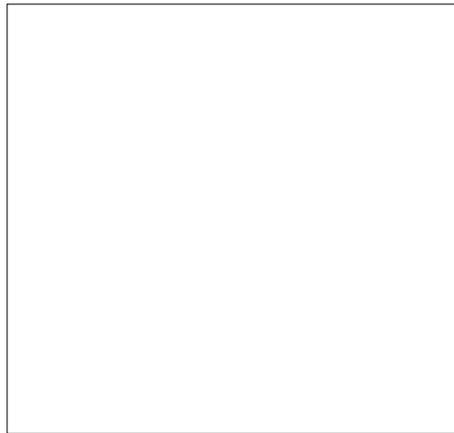
• GEORGES PEREC • CAUSE COMMUNE • INFRAORDINARY •

No. 54
February 1971

The masters thesis

It might have been at Jean Duvignaud's or maybe at Paul Virilio's.

I notice a mimeographed work on the table and open it. It's a masters thesis—devoted to [the infraordinary] it seems—written by [P.] while she was in [Harvard University Graduate School of Design]. I hadn't heard about it, but I am at once surprised and pleased that she did something during her long stay.



There is a particular detail: the title page was composed by [Ed Eigen] on an IBM 307 (let's say).

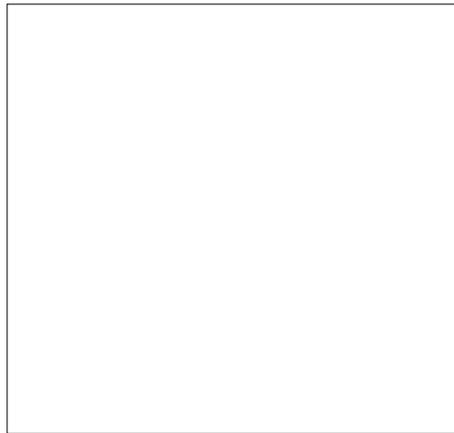
I remember, on that note, that Pierre G. had once spoken to me of automatic composition.

*This might take place at a cocktail party where things like this make for good conversation.**

*Original text from Georges Perec, *La Boutique Obscure*: 124 Dreams.
Translated by Daniel Levin Becker. 1973. Reprint, Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012, 87.
Text in brackets replaced by author.

• AN ATTEMPT • TO APPROACH • A VOID •

Georges Perec, *Cause commune*, and the infraordinary
by Proey Liao at Harvard University Graduate School of Design



Advised by Ed Eigen

In February 1973, Jean Duvignaud, Paul Virilio, and Georges Perec introduced the *infraordinary* in the fifth issue of their small journal, *Cause commune*. The *infraordinary* subsequently became attributed mostly to Georges Perec, to describe his keenness for the everyday in his prolific literary works. *Infra-*, a spatial preposition, meaning under or below, modifies *the ordinary*, or everyday life, in a call to action “to question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us.” Such a simple, local act can have immense consequences. Rather than removing “the everyday” from its context in order to defamiliarize it, as *Cause commune* critiques of mass media, the *infraordinary* studies the context itself, a seemingly blank space, or void, upon which the everyday is written.

By choosing interdisciplinary essays to include in *Cause commune*, with a vast array of subject matters, the editorial team demonstrates the *infraordinary* is not just applicable to the literary, sociological, and architectural disciplines, but formulate an art of living upon a blank background.

The following thesis is an attempt to approach the *infraordinary* not only as the subject of exploration, but as a method of writing itself. The aim of this thesis is to trace the *infraordinary* conceptually through the immediate textual context of *Cause commune* issue No. 5, the work of Georges Perec, and the work of *Cause commune*'s other contributors. It is not an origin story, but a text enumerating ideas and forms of thought on everyday life that coalesce in this journal. By excavating what is below everyday life, the *infraordinary* shows just how unfamiliar we are with everyday life in the first place as we constantly come up against and avoid a void, and how we are equipped to do something about it—through creative acts and life itself.



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Jean Dujaignaud, Pascal Lainé, Françoise Mallet, Georges Perec, Paul Virilio,
Jean Dujaignaud, 19, rue Anielie, Paris VIIe



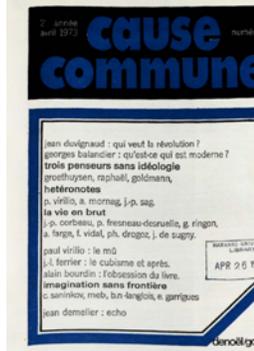
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*: “Repères et repaires” is the title of the index of Georges Perec’s book *La boutique obscure: 124 rêves*. The English translation calls this “layers and lairs” to preserve the homonymic wordplay, but a more accurate translation would be landmarks and caves—that above ground and that below, that visible and invisible. This title is pertinent to the infraordinary through its conflation of levels: the index is at once the easy-to-read sign, telling us what to look for because it is a “mark,” but also sublimating connections between words, concepts, locations (in a book) and dropping hints at its latent meanings. Everyday life serves as this index, as this thesis explores, and Georges Perec’s methodology of lists, inventories, and enumerations proves to work much like these repères/repaires. See Georges Perec, *La Boutique Obscure: 124 Dreams*. Translated by Daniel Levin Becker. 1973. Reprint, Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012, 241.

 A FEW NOTES

A NOTE ON THE PRESENT

The year spent researching and writing this thesis, 2020, has been filled with extraordinary events. For many, it also brought a focus on everyday life as we “stayed-at-home,” a momentary pause to a world moving at full speed. Yet a halted normality was not a peaceful meditation—many everyday practices of systemic violence and political manipulation bubbled to the surface, building awareness and solidarity between social identity lines and hardening the divide between others. This is not news: we have been living with these injustices under our noses, under our everyday, and our indifference is not neutral. It is unfortunate that we must rely on “life reveal[ing] itself by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal...”¹ Revisiting the 1970s in the guise of *Cause commune*'s

1 Georges Perec, “Approaches to What?,” in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock, Penguin Classics (1973; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2008), 209.

infraordinary has presented itself as an opportunity to find parallels between the world that *Cause commune* was critiquing and our own.

These essays, written nearly fifty years ago, feel like they could have been written yesterday—as is any study of a history, as “history simply confirms, as a bibliographical fact, that quite new versions of a work which is not altogether

dead, *will* be created.”² Our design practices—be it architecture, writing, or other—have only just begun, belatedly, to confront our avoidance of the study of what is below: the infraordinary, the social issues that provide the scaffold for our own precarious comfort on the

2 D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37. Emphasis in original.

backs of others, whose everyday experiences have not yet become numb to the politics that push them down.

A NOTE OF THANKS

Especially during an unexpected pandemic that strained everyone personally, I am incredibly grateful for the wide network of individuals who have given time and energy to help me through this thesis, and this is by no means an exhaustive list. First and foremost, for my advisor, Ed Eigen, for your wealth of knowledge, for entertaining my interests, and pushing me to make them happen. For other professors who went out of their way to take time to read my work and offer your thoughts, especially K. Michael Hays and Lisa Haber-Thomson. For other amazing mentors and professors I have had in my time at the GSD who contributed to and influenced my frame of mind, including but not limited to, Mack Scogin, Tatiana Bilbao, Iwan Baan, John May, Michael Meredith, Hilary Sample, Michael Herzfeld, Jesse McCarthy, Bernhard Siegert, Kate Balug, etc.—thank you. Also immensely grateful for mentors outside of the GSD: Eric Haas, for introducing me to the wonderful world of Georges Perec in

my undergraduate degree and encouraging me to pursue graduate studies, and Enrique Walker, for the amazing summertime conversation on Perec and architecture. I hope these conversations can continue beyond this writing as I am only beginning to scratch the surface.

To all the M.Des program administrators, thank you. To the Harvard University librarians, especially those who have been tirelessly scanning books and answering emails when physical access became unavailable, and the Los Angeles Public Library for providing local support, as public institutions do best. Huge thank you to my peers and many cohorts at the GSD in HPDM, M.Arch II, and beyond for being fantastic interlocutors, editors, and moral and mental support—Hiroshi Kaneko, Bailey Brown, Kevin Liu, Blake Mitchell, Vrinda Kanvinde, Samantha Vasseur, David Kim, Andy Chau, Zack Matthews, among others. A lot of ideas came out of conversations and reflections with you all. And, of course, big thank you to my family for supporting me through years of academic pursuits, and Alex Weisfeld and our dog Ed for living everyday life with me.

A BRIEF ACCOUNT
OF CAUSE COMMUNE
NO. 5 AND THE
INFRAORDINARY

ON *CAUSE COMMUNE*

Cause commune was one of many leftist journals that sprung up in the post-war period, and more specifically after the revolutionary year of 1968. These journals were prevalent across the globe in both radical and mainstream form,

but a particular situation in France gave rise to *Cause commune*. The relevance of Marxism was in question: French universities became a hotbed for “revisionist” Marxism, and those who joined the French Communist Party (PCF) during or after the war left just as quickly.

Jean Duvignaud—a sociologist and anthropologist who supposedly coined the famous graffiti phrase “Be realistic! Demand the impossible!” during the May 1968 student protests—had trouble with the anachronistic aspects of Marxism that lingered in the PCF both before and after 1968, asking a critical question: “Is equalitarian socialism—a dream of the last century, contemporary with the beginnings of capitalism—still a reasonable ideal, or does it now belong to the museum of imaginary politics?”³ While the “revolution” of May 1968 was an attempt to accomplish the dream, and was in part successful for the workers’ unions in France, it still left many questioning the effectiveness of any sort of revolution on the status quo of society. Duvignaud called this “the vulgarization of intellectual subversion,” as he found the intellectual left “too often

³ Jean Duvignaud, “France: The Neo-Marxists,” in *Revisionism: Essays on the History of Marxist Ideas*, ed. Leopold Labedz (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 316.

[using] barricades [as] the springboard for careerism.”⁴

From this mentality, *Cause commune* was conceived in the winter of 1971/72 in an effort to reignite the passionate revolutionary in a world after 1968. Two of Duvignaud’s younger colleagues, Georges Perec and Paul Virilio, were among the few scholars who participated in the protests that supposedly did not succumb to the general disillusionment with revolutionary thought, so Duvignaud invited them to co-edit the journal. Instead of a formal intellectual endeavor, *Cause commune* was “organized and run at convivial meetings of an editorial board that was open to all with contributions to make.”⁵ It was decidedly nonpartisan, nonpartial to any philosophical traditions, just a space for those acquainted with the three editors⁶ to discuss topics pertinent to French society and culture in their time.

In the first issue, the editors laid out their aims in an editor’s note, which

became the declaration on the back cover of each issue—signed C.C.:

To grasp at the root and to question the ideas and beliefs on which the workings of our “civilizations” and “culture” are based, and to undertake an anthropology of contemporary mankind;
To elicit the bases of a new critical position so as to constitute a modern political theory free of the suffocation of outdated prejudices

and traditional humanism;
To undertake an investigation of everyday life at every level, right down to the recesses and basements that are normally ignored or suppressed;
To analyze the objects offered up to satisfy our desires—works of art, cultural objects, consumer goods—in relation to our lives and to the realities of our social [commune] existence,
To restore the free discussion of attitudes and ideas, outside

of sectarianism, ideologies, and schools of thought.⁷

The text reads like a manifesto, declaring the aims of the journal, yet the infinitives are relatively soft—“grasp,” “elicit,” “undertake,” “analyze,” and “restore.” Their hypothesis sought to avoid the radical revolutionary methods employed by their immediate predecessors in 1968—by creating more spectacle—but to fight against any sort of acceleration or intensification with pause. It was a politicization of all their disparate fields that often operated in disciplinary silos, critiquing how academics commonly treated their subjects of study as objects. In the context of post-1968 France, in 1972, the focus of the editors’ ire was spectacular mass media—as popularly critiqued by their contemporaries, the Situationists—which was the obvious symptom of larger institutional issues within the intellectual circles that studied society and society itself.

In its journal form, *Cause commune* was short lived, only publishing 9 volumes in a little more than 2 years under the publisher Denöel Gonthier, plus an adjacent book in the same series,

⁷ Alain Bourdin et al., eds., “Cause Commune,” *Cause Commune*, no. 1 (May 1972): 1. As translated in Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 492. Brackets of the original French by author.

⁴ As quoted in David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (London: The Harvill Press, 1999), 491–92.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 492.

⁶ Jean Duvignaud, Georges Perec, and Paul Virilio are only three of the editors credited on the covers of the *Cause commune* journals. Others include Alain Bourdin, Christine Brunet, Pascal Lainé, and Françoise Mailler. Secondary literature on *Cause commune*, as well as other texts written by Duvignaud, Perec, and Virilio, attest that they were the core three editors—thus I focus on their editorship.

Georges Perec's *124 Dreams (La Boutique obscure: 124 rêves)*. Duvignaud spoke of his grievances with the publisher after the journal was nixed, saying *Cause commune's* cut from circulation was a political enterprise.⁸

However, another opportunity arose in 1975, and *Cause commune* was revived in a small paperback book format, under a new publisher—10/18. In the first volume, titled *The Decay of Societies (Le Pourrissement des sociétés)*, Duvignaud introduces the new format with an “apocalyptic” tone, echoing the words included in the manifesto of the original journals. For *Cause commune*, the state of society is sounding their own death knell: “French society is falling apart, our culture is in dissolution, our institutions are hollow: we don't even need to call ourselves nihilists anymore because we are living inside nihilism.”⁹ Duvignaud states, in the introduction to the new volume, that much criticism of *Cause commune* was against their “catastrophism,” though he responded that

catastrophic writing does a catastrophic society justice.¹⁰ Their attitude questions what is more nihilistic than nihilism, which, as we will see, is an attempt to approach a void.

This first book underscores the highlights of the first nine issues published by Denoël Gonthier. Duvignaud wrote that these works best exemplified the continuing aims of the *Cause commune*

editorial board, and the concerns were still prevalent in French and global society even more so two years later. These *Cause commune* books went on to be published in 6 more volumes, before discontinuing in 1979.¹¹

Only containing three new articles, including an excerpt of Perec's forthcoming book *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, the majority of the first 10/18 volume reprinted a few works over the years of *Cause commune*: almost exclusively those authored by the editors themselves, and including all three essays by the editors included in the particular issue of the journal at hand in this thesis, a testament to its importance in the overall run of the journal.

This issue, No. 5, was published in February 1973. While the journals were not typically named, this one was titled “*infraordinaire / infraquotidien*,” a set of neologisms from which I take the subject of this thesis. As a journal, *Cause commune* did not insert itself in the established history of ideas that it was clearly rounding out—but had it done so, it would have violated one of its tenets of alignment, even in the lineage of avant-garde theories. But this served the editors' purpose—at the time, in the years following the May 1968 protests, the Communist Party dominated leftist politics; the editors

8 “À propos de ‘cause commune,’” *Le Monde*, May 31, 1974, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1974/05/31/a-propos-de-cause-commune_2523267_1819218.html. The editors of Denoël responded saying the reasons were not political, but economical.

9 Part of the Cause Commune back cover “manifesto.” Bourdin et al., “Cause Commune.” As translated by Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 493.

10 Paul Virilio et al., eds., *Le pourrissement des sociétés*, vol. 1, Union générale d'éditions (Paris: 10/18, 1975).

11 These volumes were *Le pourrissement des sociétés* (1975/1), *Nomades et vagabonds* (1975/2), *Les imaginaires* (1976/1), *La ruse* (1977/1), *Qui a peur de*

l'autogestion ? (1978/1), and *Les imaginaires 2* (1979/1). Two other books were published by 10/18 under the series *Cause commune*, *La Chambre à bulles : essai sur l'image du quotidien dans la bande dessinée* by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle (1977) and *Art sociologique* by Fred Forest (1977).

of *Cause commune* rejected aligning themselves with a particular ideology or doctrine, yet remained determined that “the effort of radical criticism is perhaps the only solid ground available to us,” yet their most radical critique is on radicality itself.¹² *Cause commune* was one of many journals by the radical left that embraced revisionist trajectories of Marxism as a means to critique not only the burgeoning neoliberal capitalist states, but also the mainstream left. In the context of theories on everyday life, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau are much more widely influential; in the study of spectacle and participation in the 1968 protests, Guy Debord and the Situationists have established (perhaps exaggeratedly) their place in the canon; in the world of leftist French journals of the 1960s and 1970s, *Tel quel* and *La nouvelle revue française* journals that are referenced before *Cause commune* comes to mind; in avant-garde literature, Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman* were first and foremost. It seems that *Cause commune* is, by all counts, the smaller fish—but by design.

As stated in their opening manifesto, one of *Cause commune*'s aims was “to

12 Bourdin et al., “Cause Commune.” Translation by author.

undertake an investigation of everyday life at every level, right down to the recesses and basements that are normally ignored or suppressed.”¹³ This becomes one of the primary tenets of their manifesto, as the everyday is the premier site for nonradical radicalism. To circumvent the constant envelopment of experimental ideas into the fold of the bourgeois culture, *Cause commune*

embraces the “infraordinary” as a tactic (in the de Certeau sense),¹⁴ as elucidated in issue number 5 of the original run of the journal (herein referred to as *Cause commune* No. 5). Why add “infra” to

13 Ibid. as translated by Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 492.

14 See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 35–39. “The space of a tactic is the space of the other... In short, a tactic is an art of the weak.”

just the ordinary, or everyday life? To see everyday life at “every level,” as *Cause commune* asks in its soft manifesto, we often see the “extra”-ordinary, and then the regular “ordinary,” but we rarely aim to see what is below. At or above the surface, everyday life was otherwise riddled with means of recapturing; objects were there for the taking, out of their contexts; rituals became myths, which became the mystical alternative to, at first, religion, and then, scientific thought. Instead, the infraordinary attempts to delve underneath all of this, unearthing the meaning—or, more often, lack of meaning—behind banalities, below what we consider to be our everyday.

ON GEORGES PEREC

Of the three main editors of *Cause commune*, this thesis will focus on Georges Perec, as the afterlife of the infraordinary has resided mostly in the secondary literature around his work. In the first text Georges Perec wrote for *Cause commune*, he imagines “an answer to a few questions concerning myself”: “To begin with, it all seems simple: I wanted to write, and I’ve written. By dint of writing, I’ve become a writer,

for myself alone first of all and for a longtime, and today for others... I'm a writer, that's an acknowledged fact, a datum, self-evident, a definition... It goes without saying that when you start having ideas like these (even if they are only a caricature), it becomes urgent to ask yourself a few questions."¹⁵ The answer to who Georges Perec is, and why he writes, is indeed an impetus for more questions.

Perec's writing was self-declared, albeit with a big disclaimer of fluidity and arbitrariness, as divided into four categories: sociological, autobiographical, ludic, and novelistic.¹⁶ Although these categories span many groups of friends he was involved in—most notably the Oulipo, or the “Workshop for Potential Literature”—as we will see, the infraordinary relates to all four of these parts of Perec's life, even though *Cause commune* and his relationship with Jean Duvignaud may have only been one aspect.¹⁷ It

is impossible to recount all the cyclical references that Perec makes to his other works in his writing, or to his world of friends and historical events that surrounded his mind during the writing of his texts. It goes without saying, though, that his texts are engagingly simple, yet contain a deeply heavy baggage that we cannot finish digging up—for example, the title of this thesis, “An Attempt to

Approach A Void,” weaves together the titles of three of his texts that are both integral to the understanding of the infraordinary and at once adjacent

to it and seemingly unrelated.¹⁸ This attitude toward himself and his writing echo in *Cause commune* and the issue on the infraordinary, even though Bellos describes Virilio's recollection of Perec during *Cause commune* meetings as one who was present in body but not necessarily mind.¹⁹

The fifth issue of *Cause commune* was published in 1973. The year '73 holds a special place in Georges Perec's self-image: he would turn 37 this year, on March 7th (3/7, or rather 7/3 by European convention). I apply here, also, special consideration for all projects conceived, terminated, or imagined in the year 1973—his mythologized self would choose such a year as a lynchpin moment of his life and career. For a man of mathematical word play, the significance of this palindromic alignment plays out in several of his writings—one could even say that '73 is more important than his birth year of '36.²⁰ The

15 Georges Perec, “Autoportrait: Les Gnocchis de l'automne Ou Réponse à Quelques Questions Me Concernant,” *Cause Commune*, no. 1 (May 1972): 19–20; As translated in Georges Perec, “The Gnocchi of Autumn, or an Answer to a Few Questions Concerning Myself,” in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock, Penguin Classics (1972; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2008), 119–23.

16 Georges Perec, “Statement of Intent,” trans. David Bellos, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 29, no. 1 (2009): 31–32.

17 Duvignaud was one of Perec's secondary school teachers; the two kept in touch, and Duvignaud

helped Perec kickstart his writing career by connecting him with the right people. Duvignaud seemed to be almost a stand-in father figure for Perec (he had many of such people). See Jean Duvignaud, *Perec, Ou, La Cicatrice* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1993), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3924182>; Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*.

18 Georges Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, trans. Marc Lowenthal (Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2010); Perec, “Approaches to What?”; Georges Perec, *A Void*, trans. Gilbert Adair (1969; repr., Boston: Verba Mundi, 2005).

19 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 493.

20 In his imagined childhood, Perec “misremembers” Hitler's invasion of Poland as the same day as his birthday. He then proceeds to end *W* with chapter 37. See Georges Perec, *W, or a Memory of Childhood*, trans. David Bellos (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 1988). See also Georges Perec, “I Was Born,” in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*,

combination of *Cause commune* No. 5 and the written works of Georges Perec show the infraordinary as a potential method of approaching the world with more consciousness, more empathy, more indignation against the many questionable societal codes we avoid confronting.

ON METHOD

There are two levels of inquiry here: one, of *what* this thesis is about (the infraordinary), and another, on *how* it is presented—through the book, in both its original form in *Cause commune* No. 5, and in the form I have placed it in now, in my own writing of them. It is a bibliographic study, which D.F. McKenzie calls a “sociology of texts”—the study of a collection of texts under the circumstances of their becoming, their locale, their social context, their affinities, their contents, and their form... texts are not only the media in which these thoughts are channeled, but are another ecosystem of thought themselves.²¹ The first and foremost goal, then, that this thesis entails, is to take the “book,” or

ground, of the *Cause commune* journal as a “form” of the term, “infraordinary,” that this term could not exist without. Although the term is mainly attributed to Perec, it is often noted that it was conceived in the context of *Cause commune*—not Perec’s own brainchild, but a collaboration with Duvignaud and Virilio. This is not the headline version of Perec’s biography—David Bellos,

in his tome on Perec’s life and work, dedicates 3 or 4 pages to this endeavor, first mentioned along with several other works in progress in the chapter titled, “A Year in Splinters.” Yet, at the same time, Bellos emphasizes this moment’s importance: “All of Perec’s subsequent writing is to some degree a prosecution of the aims he first formulated in February

1973.”²² It would be against the nature of Perec’s life and work to say there was a single titular moment, a literary style, or a conceptual theme that encompassed entirely a single notion of what he stood for—any instance of categorization is instantly problematized. Despite this, Perec’s writing is undoubtedly influenced by his peers in *Cause commune*, especially from issue No. 5.

Herein is the hypothesis that became my own working method for this thesis: the texts in issue No. 5 of *Cause commune* (a particular collection)—published in February 1973 (a particular time), by a cast of diverse thinkers from media theory to anthropology to mathematics (a particular cohort)—became the starting point for an insignificant concept in the prolific intellectual lives of the contributors before and after their involvement with issue No. 5. The concept of the infraordinary was insignificant in the biographical course of *Cause commune* contributors’ eyes—the word “infraordinary” does not appear notably in our contributors’ texts after this issue, save the title of one of Georges Perec’s posthumous collections—so we look to this issue as our collection of case

trans. John Sturrock, Penguin Classics (1988; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2008), 100–101.

21 McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*.

22 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 522.

studies. Despite the particular concept of the infraordinary becoming—perhaps aptly—the background of these intellectual works, *Cause commune* issue No. 5 was important to the continued exploration of the contributors' work; for example, Marc Paillet credited his essay on journalistic language in *Cause commune* as the impetus of his larger book written a year later on the same subject.²³ Just as Bellos attributes this moment to Perec as an interpolating splinter in his life, I take *Cause commune* No. 5 as such a splinter in the other contributors' lives, which brings the concept of the infraordinary into a more cogent, yet more lo-res definition.

The format of this issue of the journal, differing from other volumes of *Cause commune*, divide up the essay into 3 sections: "I," "II," and "Xerox, Simulacrum, and the Death of Books." The first section is a set of introductory essays by the editors, Duvignaud, Perec, and Virilio, and a conversation about the infraordinary; the second, a selection of contributor essays on an array of topics (none of which mention the word

"infraordinary"); the third, a dialogue on the future of the book.

This list of essays can read as a disparate set of thoughts. Rightly so. What could journalism, a bed, immigrants, and comic strips possibly have in common with the future of the book, and how is all this related to the infraordinary? The commonality here is their inclusion in *Cause commune* No. 5, which serves

as a bibliography of texts constructing a semblance of the "infraordinary." Thus, I assume the supporting essays in the latter two sections to be a purposefully curated collection, that exemplify at least one if not all the definitions the editors provide in the first section of *Cause commune* No. 5, and can also in turn be related to Georges Perec's "infraordinary" works. While not using every

Sommaire

L'infra quotidien ordinaire

J.D. Le Code et l'hystérie.

I

Georges Pérec : Approches de quoi
Paul Virilio : La défaite des faits
Boris Rybak, Jean T.Desanti, Jean Duvignaud : La structure déchirée.

II

Marc Paillet : Le journaliste et ses langages
Vilém Flusser : Du lit
Annie Guedez : La quotidienneté bricolée.
Pierre Fresnault-Desruelle : Le quotidien en bandes
Jacques de Sugny : Les yeux des filles
Jean-Philippe Butaud : Le corps, le temps...

Xerox, Simulacre et Mort du livre.

Marshall Mc Luhan : L'avenir du livre.
Pierre Schaeffer : Le livre et l'avenir.

23 See Marc Paillet, *Le journalisme: fonctions et langages du quatrième pouvoir* (Paris: Denoël, 1974), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015014449105>.

single essay in the issue, the following text exemplify the connections that can be made between Perec's work and the work of *Cause commune*.

Unfortunately, at the time of collecting research, Jean Duvignaud's archive was closed to even its archivists due to the Covid-19 pandemic—a look into the meeting minutes of *Cause commune* will either corroborate this hypothesis or demolish it in one fell swoop. This thesis seeks to define the “infraordinary” by oscillating between the more widely read Perec essays and novels and the *Cause commune* issue that neologized the term. These are the materials I had at hand when resources were limited, a happenstance constraint that happily feeds into the structure of the following text. Another constraint is my lack of French—so any translation by myself will be noted, with trepidation, and published English translations will be used wherever possible.



In the first section of *Cause commune* No. 5, the three core editors of *Cause commune* lay out their definitions of the infraordinary. From these essays, we see three approaches to the same subject that we could imagine being discussed in their “round table” discussions: Jean Duvignaud, as an anthropologist, is concerned with life that is suppressed by the surface of everyday society; Georges Perec, as a writer, finds writing about daily events not truly about the everyday; Paul Virilio, as head of an architecture school, challenges historical facts and colonial mindsets.

*“The infraquotidien is what we are always embedded in, by our very singularity. But our singularity is a common singularity, it is not my singularity, it is also the singularity of the other. The fact, for example, that in the metro I have sweaty hands, and people next to me are sweating. I have sweaty hands with them. That’s it, it’s this way of being in common because of the particularity of our entrenchment which manifests the infraquotidien.”*¹

¹ Jean T. Desanti, Boris Rybak, and Jean Duvignaud, “La Structure Dechiree,” *Cause Commune* 1, no. 5 (February 2, 1973). Translation by author.

*examination of “background,” [arrière-plan] or “cellars” [cavernes]. Lefebvre studies the forms of the “code” and how this “code” could enter into the composition of life. Yet this code constricts or masks the nascent emergence of this “something” which we will separately call “hysteria.”*²

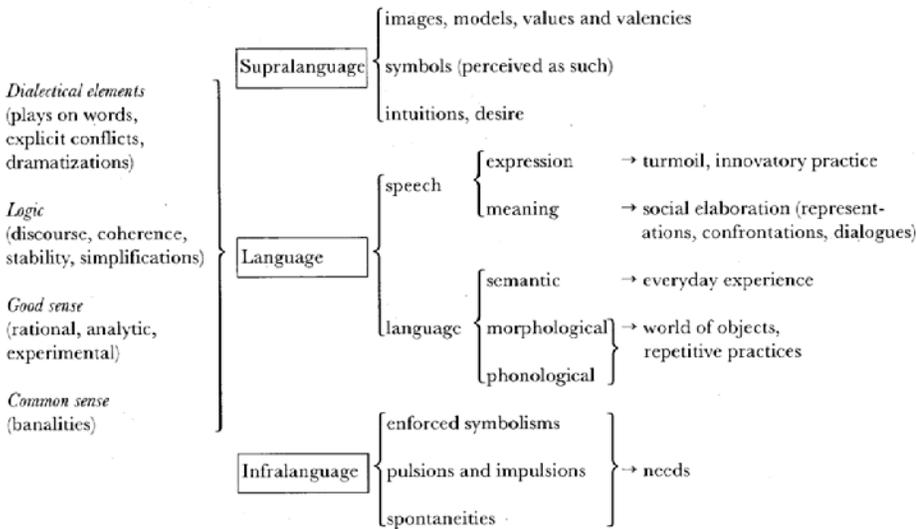
As the opening essay in *Cause commune* No. 5, Jean Duvignaud’s piece called “Code and Hysteria (*Le code et l’hysterie*)” solidifies the infraordinary’s ties to theories of everyday life by evoking an influential figure (who writes for *Cause commune* occasionally) in the study of everyday life. Yet, Duvignaud states that the infraordinary is *not* the study of everyday life à la Lefebvre—rather than looking at the visible parts of everyday life as Lefebvre does, the infraordinary looks at the “background.” While Duvignaud claims their focuses are different, the aims of *Cause commune* (“to undertake an investigation of everyday life at every level”) seem to add to Lefebvre’s visual everyday and expand on what is

JEAN DUVIGNAUD, “CODE AND HYSTERIA”

Henri Lefebvre, some twenty years ago, proposed a “critique of everyday life,” an analysis of events and scenarios that comprise the fabric of economic and social life. H. Lefebvre examined the visible and no one has contested his acuity. However, the study of everyday life is not to be confused with that of the “infraordinary,” which involves the difficult

² Jean Duvignaud, “Le Code et l’hysterie,” *Cause Commune* 1, no. 5 (February 2, 1973). Translation by author.

Another fragment of a grid of levels in everyday life



below it, getting to an unapproachable core, within which we find an “infinitely latent potential” that allows for creative acts of “invention.”³ In the *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre charts a “fragment of a grid of levels in everyday life,” in which he describes “levels” as frames of reference that clearly denote their limited purview with both differences

and similarities between other “levels.”⁴ He deems that the “last struggle” for existence is between those who are complacent with the codes they live with and those who aim to find the “something” that is constricted by the codes. As a response to this, Duvignaud states that the “something” is called the infraordinary, which does not appear on Lefebvre’s grid of levels, but is perhaps a riff on the term “infralanguage,” which appears at the bottom of Lefebvre’s diagram.

3 Ibid. Translation by author. “La vie n’est pas faite de réel, uniformément, mais aussi de toutes les possibilités, les virtualités: tout ce qui pourrait être somnole au-dessous de ce qui est. Et l’existence finie est pressée de toute part par cette infinité latente. Infinité sans laquelle il n’existerait aucune possibilité d’invention, qui pousse en avant ceux qu’on appelle ‘artistes’ ou ‘écrivains,’ souvent les déviants, les hétériques et certainement certains savants.”

4 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life II: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, trans. John Moore (1961; repr., London; New York: Verso, 2002), 118–25.

The French word used here by Duvignaud to describe the infraordinary is “*arrière-plan*,” literally “back-plan,” which implies a certain surface flatness—either of an architectural floorplan or a map—to the “ground” upon which everyday life is perused.⁵ With the alternate word, “*cavernes*,” literally “caves” but implying the underground of the floorplan aforementioned, Duvignaud adds another dimension below the surface of the *arrière-plan*, implying that the uniform flatness of the background surface is actually a porous obscurity, a dark and unknowable cellar space upon which the floorplan is drawn. This word also appears in the original manifesto of *Cause commune* printed on each issue’s back cover—not yet given the neologism of the infraordinary, but already metaphorically referred to as cellars.

Duvignaud revises these words as “code,” in Lefebvre’s terms, which in fact does not appear prominently in *Critique of Everyday Life*, but in *The Production of Space*, which was not published until 1974, a year after this issue of *Cause commune*. It is likely that Duvignaud was aware of this project in the works, and also likely that Lefebvre was in some way

5 See the last chapter for more on the *arrière-plan*, as used by Marshall McLuhan to describe the book.

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informed by his involvement in *Cause commune* (he contributed several essays to the original run of the journal). Here, Lefebvre's "codes" define a semiological relationship between space and the representation of space, such that societal codes inform, and often ossify, spatial codes, such that the hardened surface of society (*arrière-plan*) no longer allows access to the *cavernes* that exist below it.⁶

The emergence of the so-called "hysteria" from a fissure within the *arrière-plan*

seems to be represented by Fred Forest's opening illustration on the inside cover of the *Cause commune* issue, where a crowd of people is depicted streaming out of a dark threshold—perhaps the entrance (or exit) to the cavernous world cut out of the blank and flat background beyond—only to be stopped at a cliff. Those at the front of the crowd are gesturing upwards, or downwards, with forlorn faces that look much calmer than their present situation. While we could disparage the use of *l'hystérie* in all its "coded" discriminatory significance, I take it in its most baseline medical definition, which also describes the Forest image of a "mass hysteria": a physical manifestation of psychological stress, which "secretly inserts itself into the unknown."⁷ When that stress is expressed *en masse*, the physical manifestations will not be on the outside surface of bodies, but on the outside surface of the surrounding space, or the *arrière-plan*, which no longer gives us the *tabula rasa* situation that we would expect from any sort of "background."

Perhaps the most apt summation of Lefebvre's "everyday life" at the fragmentary level of *Cause commune* is Maurice

Blanchot's review of the second volume of *The Critique of Everyday Life*, "Everyday Speech." Here, Blanchot deems that

"the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes. It belongs to insignificance, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secret, but perhaps also the site of all possible signification. The everyday escapes."⁸

The connection between insignificance and significance is key here—while Lefebvre talks about the "significant in the insignificant,"⁹ Blanchot sees a level of everyday life that revels in its insignificance. The moment one points to a significant aspect of a banality, it is no longer a part of the everyday and instead becomes mired in momenthood. Our grasp of the infraordinary is slippery at best; its tendency to escape us makes it a difficult investigation to take, thus only allowing us to approach it and never truly get there—the moment we do, we encounter yet another void. In sum, Duvignaud sees the study of the infraordinary as a diagnosis of invisible symptoms of a societal disillusionment, providing a metaphorical image of a

6 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; repr., Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991).

7 Duvignaud, "Le Code et l'hystérie." Translation by author.

8 Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," trans. Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies*, no. 73: *Everyday Life* (1987): 14.

9 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life II*, 4.

blank ground breaking open to reveal something akin to Pandora's box—at the bottom of the heavily “catastrophic” attitude lies not apathy, but some amount of hope that there are people (he calls out largely writers and artists) who will aim to dig for this infraordinary.

GEORGES PEREC,
“APPROACHES TO WHAT?”

But how does one do the “difficult task” of diagnosis? The practice of the infraordinary is best captured in the second essay in the issue, Georges Perec's well-documented “Approaches to What?” This essay has become the de facto definition of the infraordinary, as Duvignaud and Virilio's works outside of *Cause commune* have had less direct of a relationship to the infraordinary than Perec's, hence the popular attribution of the term to Perec. The infraordinary defined by other Perequian scholars is largely based on his posthumously compiled volume of essays, *L'infraordinaire*. Beginning with his essay from *Cause commune* No. 5, the collection includes samples of detailed urban and domestic descriptions, of his own everyday life, including an excerpt from *An Attempt*

at Exhausting a Place in Paris, which appeared in the first issue of the republication of *Cause commune* under 10/18. Assuming the editor of *L'infraordinaire* was at least partially correct in diagnosing specific Perec texts as containing “the infraordinary,” the common thread through each of the essays is describing everyday scenes with a journalistic attitude, focusing on the journalist's immediate experience, crafted to draw a “general line” in the void left behind in descriptions of the everyday. By describing these places, with no structure other than the rigor of reporting what he sees in real time, Perec begins to build an aura of space. It doesn't require thick description, but rather a repetitive observation, constrained by the singular eye but not beholden to subjectivity.

Alison James, in *Constraining Chance*, sees Perec's study of the infraordinary as a study of “interpretive” constraints and their epistemological limits when presented with a seemingly random list of everyday happenings, an effect of his membership in the Oulipo (Workshop of Potential Literature). Michael Sheringham connects the infraordinary and Perec's text in *Cause commune* to his early sociological works, as well as later ludic works that were more urban, enumerating a definition of the infraordinary via the many projects that Perec undertook to investigate it—only a few of which are mentioned here.¹⁰

Particularly in the context of *Cause commune*, Perec's essay focuses mostly on the method by which the infraordinary would be found. Disparaging the state of the media, particularly the newspaper, for only publishing the “extra-ordinary,” the “spectacular,” the “Awful! Terrible! Monstrous! Scandalous!” Perec instead aims to question “the rest” of life, enumerating, “the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infraordinary, the background noise,

10 Michael Sheringham, “Georges Perec: Uncovering the Infra-Ordinary,” in *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 248–91.

the habitual...¹¹ In this laundry list of nearly synonymous terms, Perec has yet to define the infraordinary clearly—perhaps the fuzzy definition is the point, which makes it incredibly hard to fight the urge to quote the entire work. Rather, what is necessary to describe in detail, with several examples, is *how* to study the infraordinary:

What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true; we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Where? When? Why? Describe your street. Describe another street. Compare. Make an inventory of your pockets, of your bag. Ask yourself about the provenance, the use, what will become of each of the objects you take out. Question your tea spoons. What is there under your wallpaper? How many movements does it take to dial a phone number? Why? What don't you find cigarettes in the grocery stores? Why not?¹²

These directions contain two key components to the infraordinary: the

method of questioning and the method of inventory, or listing. Perec's list may appear elementary, but it is precisely these "obvious" parts of life that constitute the infraordinary, and such obviousness often slips through the cracks unless we make it a point to question it. In addition to describing, quite didactically, the *how*, Perec's prose already tells us *what* we should then be understanding from all we have questioned. He oscillates, as we will see in his literary works, between what seems to be objective truth to reality, the anecdotal situations that become the subject of study, and the truly infraordinary—that which he calls "our truth."¹³ His lists appear personal—an inventory of things that surround me, not anyone else, not a

generalized assumption of a person. The infraordinary does not assume to know more than what it knows, which is the particular condition that one is in: a singularity. Yet, the particulars in our lives are unlikely to be completely unique, lest we fall into crippling solipsism. As we will see in Perec's grasp of realism, the precision of the list of questions and its subsequent answers is exactly what gives rise to a general sense of solidarity between people. By holding everyday life at arm's length, Perec achieves what we will find to be a post-objective truth, one that relies on the relationships between people and people, people and things, rather than focus on the things themselves.

Rather than let these everyday things be, Perec asks us to employ the questioning methods that would otherwise be reserved for journalists covering the big headlines—a few people asking only a few questions about a few things. In the end, even for the most well-intentioned journalist, "social problems" aren't 'a matter of concern' when there's a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.¹⁴ With

11 Perec, "Approaches to What?"

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

this, Perec turns everyday life into a site for social activism, or nonradical radicalism—reallocating the economy of attention, and even the economy of his words, which must be taken as a whole in order to grasp a more complete empathetic understanding of the infraordinary. He also asks that this empathetic curiosity should be turned inwards, towards our own societies, which we often overlook as if it was a given—background noise. He calls this “endotic,” as opposed to “exotic,” encompassing our understanding of what is other as already within ourselves. This postcolonial sense of otherness will be seen in the *Cause commune* engagement of migrant workers, as well as within an inner dialogue of reading. The treatment of the other is inextricably tied to the questions that we must ask in order to excavate the infraordinary.

PAUL VIRILIO, “THE
DEFEAT OF THE FACTS”

This question of “our truth” is what Virilio is most concerned with in his essay, rounding out the editors’ preface to the fifth issue of *Cause commune* with his piece “Defeat of the Facts.” He

describes our lives as a colonized by the reign of “facts,” which are

“torn from the anonymity of the banal, analyzed, and purified by the tomb raiders, and is finally sublimated in the museum of the journal or the book... a visual necropolis, the history of the event replaces the general history, the landscape is altered but does nothing but deepen the same culture: that of plundering the anonymous... The movement towards the infraordinary includes moving the whole of our movement. From the afterlives of yesterday, tourists of the extraordinary, of ruins, of facts; to refuse to move because we lack the means of communication... because what is silence, is dominated, colonized...”¹⁵

Virilio’s language clearly aligns the infraordinary with anticolonial issues, which, circa 1973, France was still grappling with in the aftermath of the fall of the French Empire and the Algerian War. To Virilio, and the rest of *Cause commune*, these issues traced far deeper than territorial bounds, but in historicizing of events—even events where the freedom of the “other” was victorious. The historical event is to Virilio what

the newspaper headlines are to Perec—regardless of the intention, the mere “fact” of the narrow view renders all else, everyday life, to a subservient silence.

Paul Virilio had a prolific career in critical theory, though in his oeuvre of works, *Cause commune* sits between two notable eras of his career: after his architectural endeavors and before he gained notoriety as a prolific critic. In the years prior to his involvement with the journal, and prior to any of his significant writings on dromology, Virilio and architect Claude Parent ran an architectural practice called Architecture Principe, most notable for their theoretical work on the “oblique function,” which explored architectural obliques—sloped floors, walls, roofs, etc.—as a means of destabilizing the body, which is

¹⁵ Paul Virilio, “La défaite des faits,” *Cause commune*, no. 5 (February 1973): 4. Translation by author.

perpetually in motion.¹⁶ The practice was in the process of constructing “The Pendular Destabilizer” at the University of Nanterre in 1968 as the student protests broke out, which Virilio and participated in, and caused the practice to dissolve after 1970. Though they shared a common concern for destabilizing space, Parent thought that the “oblique” function they had been theorizing was aesthetic and not political, whereas Virilio believed it to be both aesthetic and political.¹⁷ Unlike Claude Parent, the editors at *Cause commune* shared his politics, and his view that architecture serves more than an analogue to politics, but has the potential to change it. The study of the infraordinary, in the context of the oblique function, helps to destabilize the floor upon which we think we stand safely and comfortably, as we will see explored in Vilém Flusser’s “To Bed”; the oblique function aids the emergence of “hysteria.”

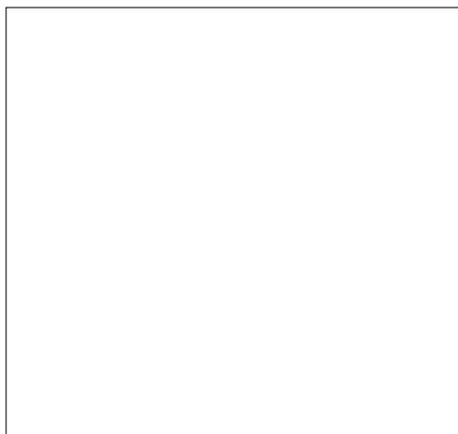
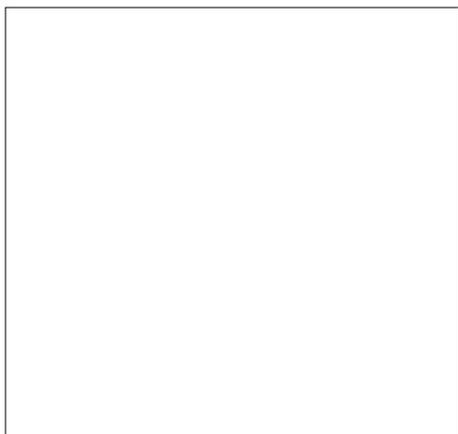
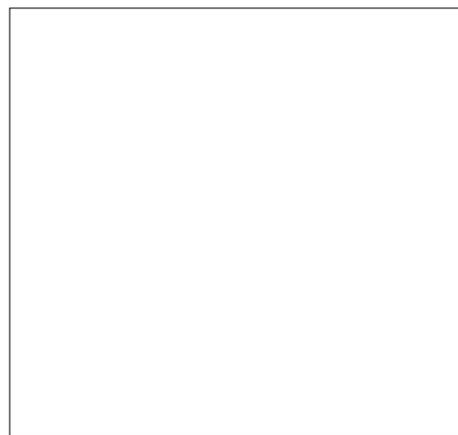
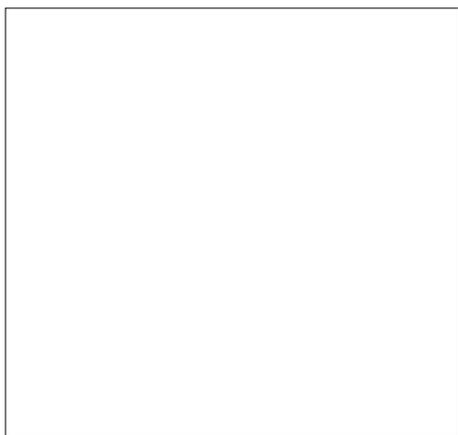
Twenty years later, Virilio’s book *The Art of the Motor* is introduced by the same epigraph that introduces his essay in *Cause commune* No. 5: “For now, only the facts matter, and not for long.”¹⁸ His article in *Cause commune* has premonished the “defeat of the facts” in the early internet age—“Whence not only the infamous and sinister ‘revisionism’ or negationism that seeks to invalidate events occurring from the Second World War on, but, more insidious still, the computerized undermining of reality that has today wound up in the defeat of the facts, since information now wins out over the reality of the event.”¹⁹ Like Perce, Virilio is disillusioned by the loss of focus on reality in terms of the unadulterated and uncensored account of facts. The French student and worker protests were only one of the many social upheavals around the globe in its moment—and along with its contemporaries, journalism played

a huge role in proliferating competing attitudes towards the protests. Mass media became both the prosecuted and prosecutor, during “a great battle against the consumer society... [and] in the society of spectacle, social protest itself was now appropriated as a consumer product...”²⁰ Recorded in its moment, and aggressively interpreted and reinterpreted after the fact, May 1968 becomes the epitome of the spectacle it wishes to displace.

16 Irene Scalbert and Mohsen Mostafavi, “Interview with Claude Parent,” in *The Function of the Oblique: The Architecture of Claude Parent and Paul Virilio, 1963-1969*, ed. Pamela Johnston, AA Documents 3 (London, 1996), 49–57.
17 Ibid.

18 Virilio, “La defaite des faits.”
19 Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, trans. Julie Rose, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

20 Ibid.



Across mediums and disciplines, the concerns of the infraordinary are found to be underlying any “common things.”¹

MARC PAILLET, “THE JOURNALIST AND THEIR LANGUAGES”

*Every journalist knows full well that this distance between the language of reporting and reality in fact affects every aspect of the world. More and more.*²

The postwar period saw a rise in “little magazines” from several fields, as they were testing grounds for original work before diving into the institutionalized world of publishing. The fleeting nature of these “little magazines,” printed on cheap paper and distributed often to a small intimate group caused their aims to be called into question constantly—the “little magazines” that gained enough readership and traction to stay

The following four essays were chosen as starting points from which we can see the influence of *Cause commune* on Perec’s infraordinary. Two pieces (Paillet and Guedez) show how Perec’s writing style and politics go hand in hand; the other two (Flusser and Fresnault-Deruelle) draw parallels between Perec and the work of *Cause commune* participants, namely Vilém Flusser and Fred Forest.

afloat long enough ultimately saw transformations in their constituents, politics, or both.³

Cause commune was but one of the “little magazines” that Georges Perec was involved in. For the purposes of this text, the “little magazines”—which go by many names even within the same language—will be referred to as “journals.” These French “little magazines” are usually called *revues*, or reviews. Reviews “are made, generally, top-down, from a master to collaborators; this one would exist only through our conviviality.”⁴ However, in the text on the back of every issue of *Cause commune* are the words: “*Cause commune n’est pas une revue.*” Instead, Duvignaud calls the publication a “tribune,” a forum, and one of the primary mediums to be critiqued is that of the newspaper, or “journal” in French. The other “journal” in French translation is a diary, which, along with the newspaper, implies “dailiness”—true to its Latin root “diurnal,” or Anglo-French “jurnal.” When talking about

1 “Common things” in French, *choses communes*, is similar to *Cause commune*—a play of words used in much of Perec’s writing, and is also the title of his newspaper column. See Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*.

2 Marc Paillet, “Le journaliste et ses langages,” *Cause commune*, no. 5 (February 1973): 15–20. Translation by author.

3 See Eric Bulson, “Introduction,” in *Little Magazine, World Form*, Modernist Latitudes (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.7312/buls17976>; Ben Mercer, “The Paperback Revolution: Mass-Circulation Books and the Cultural Origins of 1968 in Western Europe,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72, no. 4 (October 2011): 613–36.

4 Bourdin et al., “Cause Commune”; Duvignaud, *Perec, Ou, La Cicatrice*, 27.

these reviews and “little magazines” as a journal, though, the daily is no longer relevant to its publication cycle, but its subject matter. This makes “journal” the most apt descriptor for *Cause commune*, which aims to “undertake an investigation of daily life”—which the editors find is missing, and even antagonized, in dailies of the newspaper.

For Perec, these journals became important collections of intellectual thought—a record of work in progress, excerpts from larger works—usually as the fruit of discussion groups among friends, made possible by often self-published, cheap paperback media. For a young aspiring writer like Perec, in the late 1950s, the possibility of being published hinged heavily on who you knew, and for Perec, that who was Jean

Duvignaud. Duvignaud brought him into the fray of *Arguments* journal—a leftist journal active from 1957 to 1962, headed by Edgar Morin, Roland Barthes (for a time) and Duvignaud himself. At the same time, Perec was pursuing his own venture into journals, *La ligne générale*, which never took off. *Arguments* was a “revisionist” journal “liberated from the Marxist ‘taboos,’” in search for a new politics unadulterated by secular partisanship.⁵ Duvignaud carried this program into *Cause commune*. Duvignaud had offered Perec a spot at the “round table,” where the *Arguments* team congregated. The young Perec turned it down, however, supposing that he would rather become a writer than be cast in the role of intellectual by association with a journal. These three journals—*Arguments*, *La ligne générale*, and *Cause commune*—were the testing grounds for Perec’s social and literary ideas throughout his career, reaching full maturity at the infraordinary.⁶

Though he never actually wrote for *Arguments*, Perec managed to attend a recorded meeting session as a guest of

Duvignaud’s, resulting in a drunken speech, published posthumously as “The Parachute Jump” in collection *Je suis né*. In the recording, he described his experience as a *parachutiste* (paratrooper) conscript amidst the Algerian War. The parachutistes were publicized as the most grueling part of the French military, glorified by the right and demonized by the left, which “teenage Rambos sought to join”—certainly no place for a budding writer to draw his inspiration.⁷ During the short months of his military experience, he narrowly avoided being enlisted in the parachutiste troops that staged a military coup against the then-president Charles de Gaulle in 1958, before Algeria was liberated. His audience at *Arguments* were among those leftist intellectuals (none of whom at that point were associated with the French Communist Party anymore) who signed “The Manifesto of the 121,” which denounced the Algerian War,

7 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 184. For more on paratroopers’ role in the media presence of the Algerian War, see John Talbott, *The War Without a Name: France in Algeria, 1954-1962* (New York: Knopf, 1980), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015035309023>. “The Gaullist *Courrier de la colère* lavished its hysterical brand of praise on the paras [paratroopers]. The left-wing press, on the other hand, portrayed the leopard men as a reincarnation of the SS... The *para démonique* and the *para angélique* were telling projections of attitudes toward the war, but neither was a very good representation of reality.” p. 88-89.

5 Duvignaud, “France: The Neo-Marxists,” 317.

6 See Alison James, *Constrainting Chance: Georges Perec and the Oulipo* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 22–23 for a brief discussion on Perec’s involvement in leftist journals.

saying “the cause of the Algerian People, which is contributing in a decisive way to ruining the colonial system, is the cause of all free men.”⁸

Perec, like many of his contemporaries, was no stranger to war: he lost his parents to World War II, his mother to the camps, and his father in the line of battle. Instead of writing off his complicit actions in what Perec deemed had

beginning... it really was trusting in life... You're facing into the void and you have suddenly to throw yourself out.”⁹ However, that answer was not quite enough for Perec. “Why,” asks Perec, on several occasions in his writing, and on more than one of those to a seeming void, to which the resounding response is one of optimism—that the void is not void, but a space of meaning ripe for investigative “why”s. He claims, toward the end of “The Parachute Jump,” that the answer to “why jump?” lay in its optimism that within the void, there lay latent meanings, that would otherwise be inaccessible if he had not jumped. Thus, to reach these meanings, it was necessary to jump.

After the Algerian War, the term *parachutiste* became representative of the terror the troop reigned on a decolonizing power: the physical imposition of men dropping in from the sky, in arms, claimed a dark space in the French imaginary. *Parachutiste* was a term used by factory workers to analogically describe a certain sort of intellectual attitude towards them a few years later, around the events of May

1968, as described by Kristin Ross in *The Afterlives of May 1968*. For academics studying the sociopolitical plights of the triumphant union, it was imperative to do field research, but some drop-ins “conjured up old associations of the *parachutistes* of colonial wars” (such as very fresh Algerian War) due to their uninvolved questions and eagerness to draw conclusions, often reinforcing stereotypes that were already perpetuated by the state-censored French media. On the other end of the spectrum, “militant journalists” were positively referred to as *enquêtes* (investigators), a different sociological method that did not look at the workers from the outside in—which Ross calls “the logic of the police”—but instead takes the role of “production of the text acting as a unifying force” around which the workers can unite.¹⁰

Despite having served as a literal *parachutiste*, Perec’s intellectual rejection of the military action was more like an *enquête*: the constant line of investigative (“endotic”) questioning was empowered to represent a meaningful “general line.” In fact, through his experience of jumping into the void, Perec transformed an otherwise “fascist” and “macho” service

“fascist overtones” not unlike those his family had suffered, he confronts the rote military script that he acted in thirteen times with the difficult question of “why,” which he posed to the *Arguments* group: “I’ve always asked myself why I jumped. At first, to start with, it wasn’t a problem... It really was optimism

8 Talbott, *The War Without a Name: France in Algeria, 1954-1962*, 172.

9 Georges Perec, “The Parachute Jump,” in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock, Penguin Classics (1959; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2008), 113–18.

10 See Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 109–14.

into one that was deeply contemplative, and much more related to his everyday experiences, merely by attaching the question “Why jump?” to the otherwise rote activity. The difference between a *parachutiste* and a *enquête* is similarly minute—the broad goal of investigation is the same, but the line of questioning one might expect from a journalist empowers the *enquête* to dig beyond

enquête must listen. The choices made by *enquêtes* marks Perce’s infraordinary writing as inherently political, merely by the fact of its truly investigative nature, which blends the “real”—the everyday life that is the subject of observation—with the “imaginary”—the writer’s extraction of meaning within the everyday. This description of a militant journalist in post-1968 France very well could be a description of Perce’s writing throughout his life, and captures the mentality of his *parachutiste* self, throwing his writerly body out of the plane hoping there is meaning in the void in front of him.

Perce also engaged in a capitalistic form of investigation as a market research surveyor. He later ascribed this profession nearly autobiographically to his characters, Jérôme and Sylvie, in *Things*, his first novel, published in 1960, immediately following his time as a *parachutiste*. He writes the questions that Jérôme and Sylvie were asking their consumers:

Do people like cheese in squeezy tubes? Are you for or against public transport?... Describe a man who likes pasta. What do you think of your washing machine?... Would you rather have a washing machine that dries as well? And safety in

coal mines, is it alright or not good enough, in your view, sir?¹²

In an entire page of questions, the survey questions on everyday objects are sprinkled with pointed questions on social issues. To Perce, there is no distinction to these questions: they show that questions on everyday objects are not innocent, but on par with those that are directly addressing the “true scandals” that are often left out of the newspapers.¹³ Similar to his military experience as recounted to the *Arguments* crew, Perce must have questioned the scripted, capitalist “investigation” with another investigative *why*. Perce participated in Henri Lefebvre’s research team, where Perce interviewed coal miners that were about to lose their livelihoods, but even the secretive nature of an academic research project prevented any sort of truly instrumental journalism from taking place.¹⁴ Instead, Perce reserved his “investigative journalist’s power of insight” for his own writing, even alluding to the coal miner investigations in

their assumptions: “the *enquêteur* cannot, of course be neutral... Listen all the way to the end: only then does the *enquête* take on all its meaning... with all the explosive force that words represent when the imaginary and the real as lived from day to day become the basis for words...”¹¹ In order to write, the

¹¹ As spoken by a militant journalist, quoted in *ibid.*, 112.

¹² Georges Perce, “Things: A Story of the Sixties,” in *Things: A Story of the Sixties; A Man Asleep*, trans. David Bellos (Boston: Verba Mundi, 2004), 38.

¹³ See Perce, “Approaches to What?” 209.

¹⁴ See Bellos, *Georges Perce: A Life in Words*, 234–37. Also see Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, “Introduction: Lost in Transposition - Time, Space and the City,” in *Writing on Cities*, by Henri Lefebvre (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 3–60.

both his novel *Things*, as quoted above, and in his *Cause commune* No. 5 article, as an example of the importance of the infraordinary combatting the headlines: “what is scandalous isn’t the pit explosion, it’s working in the coalmines.”¹⁵

While Perec was a *parachutiste* con-

script, he was taking part in his own meetings of young intellectuals, *La Ligne générale* (Lg). Their name was inspired by a 1929 Sergei Eisenstein movie, “Old and New,” which was originally titled “The General Line.” Eisenstein was forced to change the name of this film

15 Paul Virilio, “A Walking Man,” in *AA Files No. 45/46*, ed. Mark Rappolt, trans. Clare Barrett (London: Architectural Association, 2001), 136–37; Perec, “Approaches to What?”

when Stalin came to power, as the film proposed a “general line” for a proletarian-led, decentralized communism that was more sympathetic to Leon Trotsky, who fell out of favor as the film was in progress. Perec’s group of young friends championed the romantic idealism of Eisenstein’s imagined dairy cooperative and his innovative filmography which focused on an everyday occurrence that symbolized a “general line” of an entire political movement.¹⁶ This early reference already shows Perec’s cogs turning in an infraordinary direction, oscillating between the everyday and the “general line.”

Several articles Perec originally planned for Lg—some of his first published works outside of book reviews that were mostly for a source of income—were subsequently published in *Partisans*, a journal started by Francois Maspero, owner of the group’s favorite bookshop, La Joie de Lire. Maspero’s bookshop contained books for those left of left, literature and current events

16 The most famous scene in *The General Line* is one that focuses on a butter churning machine, flashing back and forth between various machinic parts and peasants eager and amazed faces. See Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*. and Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man*, trans. Lorraine Mortimer (1956; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

in “colonial issues” in French-occupied territories, books often censored by the state powers in order to quell dissent during the Algerian War.¹⁷ Maspero had his own publishing house, which was also responsible for the Petite Collection Maspero, “published in distinctive pastel covers, and priced at 6.15 francs apiece... people simply bought (or stole) each book in the series as soon as it came out.”¹⁸ These books contributed to a young generation of leftist scholars who avoided university-condoned readings in lieu of what they found to be much more poignant, contemporary topics in books from La Joie de Lire. The shop “gave tangible form to [Lg’s] political view of the world.”¹⁹ Similar to *Arguments* and, later, *Cause commune*, Maspero was partial to a revisionist Marxism that had no party affiliations, and thus could explore ideological potential for a postcolonial France through its revolutionary library.

Lg was never published as its own journal: the French Communist Party (PCF) made sure of it in 1960.²⁰ The

17 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 269. See also Raymond Kuhn, *The Media in France* (London: Routledge, 1995).

18 Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*. See also Mercer, “The Paperback Revolution.”

19 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 269.

20 Interestingly, a new review similarly called *Cause commune* was started in 2018—“la revue d’action politique du PCF (the review of

young aspirational Perec and his colleagues were barred from publishing their review, as it would have been in direct competition with other PCF sponsored journals, and the group had made the decision that approval was necessary. Perec also declined Maspero's offer to sit on *Partisans* editorial board, and *Arguments* was disbanded in 1962 before Perec had an opportunity to join.

Perec was set up squarely to continue with his critical investigation into the relationship between everyday life and writing with *Cause commune*, a decade

political action by the PCF)." As far as I can tell, they do not call out any direct relationship to Duvignaud, Perec, and Virilio's *Cause commune* in the 1970s, which, again, was explicitly anti-partisan. See https://www.causecommune-larevue.fr/dialogue_autour_de_cause_commune

later, when, "in politics, at least, Perec had hardly grown up at all."²¹

It was in the several essays originally written for the unpublished Lg, ultimately published in *Partisans*, that Perec began to elucidate the infraordinary as a mode of writing on the "everyday." In a review for Robert Antelme's *The Human Race* (*L'espèce humaine*), written in 1962, elements of the infraordinary were brewing in Perec's mind without a name:

"Solidarity is neither a metaphysical given nor a categorical imperative. It is linked to precise circumstances. It is necessary to the survival of a group because it ensures that group's cohesiveness, and it only has to be outlawed for the world of the camps to appear in all its logic. *L'espèce humaine*, being an everyday description, is also the most general description of a camp."²²

For a book to be both everyday and general seems like an inextricable paradox, but Perec here empowers the everyday with solidarity. That solidarity arises from the everyday objects of a concentration camp, unlike other Holocaust novels that "multiplied the

21 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 270, 493.

22 Georges Perec, "Robert Antelme or the Truth of Literature," in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock, Penguin Classics (1962; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2008), 254–66. Emphasis in original.

exhaustive descriptions of episodes it believed to be intrinsically meaningful by virtue of its extraordinary circumstances."²³ Instead, Antelme excavates the "endotic" aspects of his experience, questioning his "precise circumstances," attaching the "why." He never allows the camp to escape as a given, and also does not allow the reality of the Holocausts' "extraordinary circumstances" overtake the "reality" of Antelme's everyday experience in Gandersheim, which consisted overwhelmingly with the need to count, hold, peel, boil, eat, steal, and watch potatoes.²⁴ The paradox of the general and the everyday become an important seed of Perec's idea of the infraordinary, acknowledging that solidarity is a necessary effect of realist writing—a hotly debated topic in literary circles at the time. Writing, meant to convey, meant to be shared, provides a space of connection between reader and writer in which the precise conditions of Antelme's concentration camp experience translate to general conditions for all readers without patronizing universalism, in the same way that Eisenstein's film introduces everyday objects as instrumental

23 Ibid.

24 See Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (1957; repr., Marlboro: The Marlboro Press, 1992).

in transforming the lives of the proletariat. It is through this everydayness, or the infraordinary, that Antelme is able to build the solidarity that would otherwise be uncommunicable in its extraordinary horror.

To communicate this solidarity, Antelme's "desire for simplicity, for a previously unknown everydayness... goes so far as to *betray* the 'reality' in order

to express it more effectively and prevent us from finding it 'unbearable.'²⁵ From this came the redefinition of "realism" that Perec hoped to instill in literature. Realism was a hot topic of debate in French literature during the late 1950s, when Alain Robbe-Grillet released *For a New Novel*, establishing the *nouveau*

25 Perec, "Robert Antelme or the Truth of Literature," 256. Emphasis in original.

roman as the avant garde literature that critics loved to hate. In a response to those who called Robbe-Grillet's novels too far flung from reality to be called realism, Robbe-Grillet wrote, "I do not transcribe, I construct," thus, his novels were "somehow more real *because* they were now imaginary."²⁶ He defined his version of realism as one that "respect[s] the truth."²⁷ So long as his imagination respects the truth, "without having to lean on anything external to the work," then they must in fact be realism.

Roland Barthes, who obsessively reviewed Robbe-Grillet's work while "too busy" to review Perec's,²⁸ finds the effectiveness the *nouveau roman* realism in its *écriture blanche*—literally "blank writing," though translated into English as the "zero degree of writing."²⁹ A blank writing achieved literary realism by approaching the complete absence of literature—largely through the absence of

26 Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Realism to Reality," in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (1955; repr., New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965), 162.

27 *Ibid.*, 160.

28 See Roland Barthes and Claude Coste, *Album: Unpublished Correspondence and Texts*, ed. Éric Marty, trans. Jody Gladding, *European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 261–6.

29 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (1957; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).

style, writing that no longer was literary, writing that became purely writing.

Perec's realism is not completely contradictory to Robbe-Grillet's—in fact, it fits perfectly in the definition of respecting truth. Whose truth, though? For Robbe-Grillet, and other *nouveau roman* writers, the truth was that of literature, and ultimately, that of the writer, who needs to be nothing but "construct" a story faithful to himself. For Perec, that truth is also constructed, albeit with "precise circumstances," which aids in the necessary program of solidarity he asks of literature, especially that which attempts to reconcile the horrors of the Holocaust with the fact that it indeed did happen. The precision of existing circumstances is described not for the sake of being as true-to-life as possible, but for the sake of exposing a truth, or, as David Bellos writes, of Perec's definition of realism, "it presents a coherent and 'totalizing' vision of the world."³⁰

Referring to the *nouveau roman* trend, Perec writes, "No sooner are everyday gestures described than they become lies... Between the lines we are invited to read that inaccessible end toward which every genuine writer owes it to

30 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 276.

himself to tend: silence.”³¹ While similarly approaching “the silence of writing,” Robbe-Grillet’s “constructions” begin and end at the object of language; the infraordinary, on the other hand, aims to use silence as a reflexive mirror that casts the “precise circumstances” onto readers, in order to evoke the program of solidarity. The intention of silence, strikes a difference between two

realisms, between the *parachutiste* and the *enquête*—do you stay silent to say nothing, or let others’ voices speak “our [collective] truth?”³²

The *nouveau roman* operates like the *parachutiste* journalist, selective in its representation of reality. Its version of

the everyday object is one that is “constructed” in the image of the author. Meanwhile, Perec’s version of “realism” finds the “general line” in the *parachutiste*’s void, or the author’s silence. There’s a strand of optimism here—by aiming for solidarity, Perec’s realism hopes for substance in the void of the everyday, a substance provided by the general line, a collective care, but needing the excavation of writing and the platform of publishing in order to be brought to light. Though everyday gestures and objects may serve as a common starting point, Perec finds only the *enquête* achieves the true potential of literature.

It is this form of writing that *Cause commune* advocated for, but could not find in the state of journalism in its day. According to Marc Paillet’s article in *Cause commune* No. 5, journalists speak multiple languages—that of their subject matter, their editors’ styles, the state’s censorship, the digestible content for the reader... By including Paillet’s essay, editors of *Cause commune* were reflecting on the previous two decades of censorship in France, especially against the left, most egregiously during the Algerian War: “There appeared no limit to the government’s determination to suppress news that it did not like and to

discredit or destroy professionally any correspondent who resisted this policy.”³³ Maspero’s bookshop was set on fire during this time, because it had no institution backing it.³⁴ A decade after the Algerian War, the French media was subject to much less state censorship, but with the collapse of a common enemy, the left was much more prone to disagree on what should be published, such as the PCF’s refusal to publish Lg’s work under their own flag. Much of the issue that the *Cause commune* team took to journalism was its supposed objectivity, which conflated lived “reality” with “constructed” journalistic language. The state’s prosecution of media critical to their actions caused the media providers themselves to self-censor in order to retain their business, pandering to a right-wing (or even centrist) reader base. So, the journalists of this time were writing for the state, as well as for their editors, for a readership that wished to disengage from the fervent politics of antinationalism, and for themselves to keep their jobs (and in some cases, their lives)³⁵—speaking these multiple

31 Perec, “Robert Antelme or the Truth of Literature,” 265.

32 See Perec, “Approaches to What?” “...we’ve tried in vain to lay hold on our truth.”

33 Kuhn, *The Media in France*, 58. See also Talbott, *The War Without a Name: France in Algeria, 1954-1962*.

34 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 271–72.

35 Kuhn, *The Media in France*.

“languages” that distorted journalism into propaganda.

Such is the popular conception of journalism: writing that means to be objectively journalistic—in French this reportage is called *compte rendu*, literally “rendered account.” If taken in its pure form, this would be exactly the *écriture blanche* that Barthes sees literature approaching: “writing at the zero degree

is basically in the indicative mood, or if you like, amodal; it would be accurate to say that it is a journalist’s writing, if it were not precisely the case that journalism develops, in general, optative or imperative (that is, emotive) forms.”³⁶ The issue thus far taken up by the realism debate in literature is a contestation

on what the most truthful *compte rendu* is. Paillet, in the book *Le journalisme: fonctions et langages du quatrième pouvoir*—which was inspired by his essay in Cause commune No. 5—considers *compte rendu* only one side of an opposition that exists within the journalistic profession. The other side is *ressaisissement critique*, which includes more hotly political journalism—cartoons, opinion columns, polemical debates.³⁷ The French translates, loosely, as critical “recapturing,” implying that there was something lost to journalism in its other half, the *compte rendu*, that necessitates replacing the missing opinion. The infraordinary takes these two parts and sees them as one—or, rather, that the *ressaisissement critique* inherently is present in any truly *écriture blanche* “rendered account,” by the valuation of becoming rendered in the first place.

This is exemplified by the posthumous collection of writings, *L’infraordinaire*. Unlike the headlining *compte rendu* of big events, this particular collection of Perec’s work focuses on, aptly put by Gilbert Adair, “phenomena that ‘do not deserve’ to be seen in print.”³⁸

³⁷ Paillet, *Le Journalisme*, 31–32.

³⁸ Gilbert Adair, “The Eleventh Day: Perec and the Infra-Ordinary,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 181.

These would fall under the category of *faits divers* in the newspaper, or the “miscellaneous” section, events of no notoriety. For example, in *Rue Vilin*, Perec describes a street he lived on over a few years, stating what stores are where, which shutter up one by one, until 1974, where much of the block went from closed to demolished: “At No 25, opposite, a house with a double porch opening on to a long, gloomy courtyard and a shop that appears closed but from which a regular sound is coming... / At No 25, a shop, closed. / Nos 25, 27, shops, closed. Starting at No 27, fences. / No 25, a shop, closed. / Nos 23 and 25 have been gutted. Past No 25, nothing any longer. / Almost the whole of the odd-number side has been covered with cement fences. On one of them a graffito: WORK = TORTURE.”³⁹ These descriptions are listed indiscriminately—surely each description was not worthy of any statement at all. However, Perec’s *enquête* eye dares, optimistically,

³⁹ Georges Perec, *L’infra-Ordinaire*, La Librairie Du XXe Siècle (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 15–32. As translated to English in Georges Perec, “The Rue Vilin,” in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock, Penguin Classics (1981; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2008), 212–21. This piece was published as an excerpt of a larger project that Perec undertook but never completed, *Lieux*, in which he was to visit twelve places in twelve different months across twelve years. “The Rue Vilin” only includes six entries, each one shorter than the last.

³⁶ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 76–7.

to dwell on a seeming void, in order to excavate from the void the meanings that it holds. It is the choice to journal indiscriminately that allows such truth to be uncovered. Here, the initial view of the Rue Vilin is a surface reading of the street and its adjoining shops. Each year, however, a new view presents itself—by no impetus of Perec’s own, a story of a familiar city, occupied by an everyday life, is demolished building by building, word by word, until there is nothing left to be excavated but construction fences.

Was this “deserving” of print? For the infraordinary, the answer is yes. Perec “constructs” the reality by asking the right questions to places that look like there is nothing to ask. The mentality of the infraordinary, on surface level, seems to only have to do with the enumeration of banalities, which contrasts the “big event” of spectacle that is typically reported on in a newspaper. However, in line with the program that *Cause commune* set out for itself, the infraordinary challenges, by way of a reality studied at arm’s length, the assumption that these banalities written in *écriture blanche* have no politics. Indeed, they do—and to write about them is to create potential opportunities for solidarity vis-à-vis words on a page.

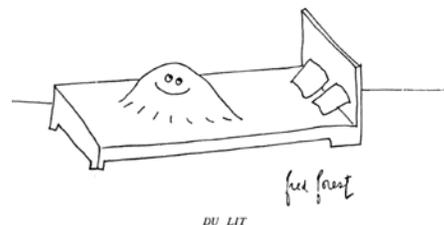
VILÉM FLUSSER, “TO BED”

*I fell asleep. I know that I fell, because I let myself fall. I know that I shall be back, because I shall be called. But there is an abyss between these two knowings. I cannot speak about that abyss, because I am beside myself whilst I cross it. I am in bed whilst I cross that abyss.*⁴⁰

Vilém Flusser’s contribution to *Cause commune* No. 5, “To Bed (*Du lit*),” is seemingly the only essay that has to do with an object of everyday life. The essay was taken from *A coisas que me cercam* (in Portuguese, “Things That Surround Me”)—originally published in Brazil

40 Per a short biography of Vilém Flusser by Finger et al., this collection of essays in particular was written in Portuguese, translated into English, edited in English, and then translated into French for publication. However, in C.C. No. 5, the essay is said to have been translated directly from Portuguese. Neither of the English versions have been published (see Anke K. Finger, Rainer Guldin, and Gustavo Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser: An Introduction*, Electronic Mediations, v. 34 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).) For my purposes, I reference the second English manuscript, which corresponds directly to the French text in *Cause commune*: Vilém Flusser, “Beds” (1973), <http://flusserbrasil.com/arte27.pdf>. For the published French version, see Vilém Flusser, “Du Lit,” *Cause Commune*, no. 5 (1973): 21–27.

in 1970, and republished in French as *La force du quotidien* (“The Force of the Everyday”) the same year as Issue No. 5 of *Cause commune* in 1973, but in slightly different versions.⁴¹ The original title more aptly captures the phenomenological attitude that Flusser takes to his explorations: that “things” is plural and concrete, rather than captured in the singular vague concept of the “every-



day,” and they comprise an environment in which all “things” exist under equal importance. The bed is but one of these things, so the resulting essay in *Cause commune* No. 5 in fact has little to do

41 Flusser’s texts often exist in several forms, a product of his nomadic life. For more on Flusser’s multilingual writing, see Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser*, chap. 3: Translation and Multilingual Writing.

with the bed at all, but rather, all else that surrounds it.

“How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day...?” Perce asks. Flusser answers, at the beginning of “To Bed,” by asking a series of questions evocative of the *enquête* questioning that was explored last chapter—i.e., “Where is the center of our world? Are our surroundings really a world?”—to which he follows (but does not answer):

The questions corrupt the answers.
They gnaw, rational rats that they are,
the irrational basis of our dwelling.
They destroy *infra-structures* and
they give birth to new questions.
Our dwelling rests on the teeming
backs of explosively fecund questions.
The fecundity of the questions is the
floor of our dwelling. An oscillating
and undulating floor... We dwell
in the restriction of beds.⁴²

Flusser packs into these few sentences a similar sentiment that Perce expresses in “Approaches to What?” Harkening back to the opening essays of Issue No. 5, the destruction of current *infra-structures* is precisely the aim of the *infra-ordinary* (per Duvignaud), and the ammunition is indeed the “question”

(per Perce). The elusive “codes” delude us to believe we lead rational lives that are founded on immovable answers—but for Perce and Flusser, it is in fact irrational to assume the solidity of the “floor” (read: *arriere-plan*) upon which we “dwell.” Instead of the solid ground, we rest upon unknowable fecundity (read: *cavernes*). With this text, Flusser sets up the meaning of beds to be explored: an unstable restriction full of potential, slightly above what is *infra-*, and excavated by way of questioning. Our understanding of everyday life is based on living itself—the bed, a supposedly stable object, is made unstable by our living in it.

Flusser explores the bed as his “other,” in a phenomenon he calls “mutual reification”:

For the moment, it is just a point in my field of vision. It is my object. But soon it will no longer permit me to reify it that way. It will try to make of me an object of its own. By this *mutual reification* we shall recognize each other... We shall talk and dialogue. The great conversation of culture will program that thing over there. Culture will become the net in which that thing will be captured, and it will exist within the net.⁴³

This dialogue transforms the traditional relationship between subjects and objects, the object being, importantly for Flusser, a fluid definition of “bed” that is constantly modified by its cultural context. In the case of Flusser’s exploration, the “bed” is seen in different stages of life, from infancy, to sleep, to sleeplessness, to bedridden sickness, to death. The mutually reifying process,

where one self considers the other self as an object of study, is a product of an internally driven questioning—precisely the “endotic” process that Perce uses to excavate the *infraordinary*.

When reification becomes a mutual phenomenon, it becomes what Edmund Husserl calls *intersubjectivity*. Flusser takes his definition of subject and object mainly through Husserl’s

42 Flusser, “Beds.” Emphasis added.

43 Ibid.

phenomenology: instead of subjective thought driving our interpretation of the world, we rely on *intersubjectivity*. Metaphorically, “society will be seen as a net composed of intersubjective intentional relations... If the knots are unknotted, the net will collapse and disappear: it comprises of the knots. ‘I’ and ‘society’ are abstract extrapolations [the knots] from concrete intersubjective relations [the net]. And these relations are ‘intentional’. They ‘mean.’”⁴⁴ This intersubjectivity illustrates the effect that the study of the infraordinary should achieve. To Flusser, and the *Cause commune* team, the subjects and objects, the knots, comprise the ordinary, but the intersubjective relations are that which is unseen—this is what requires “endotics,” the excavation of the infraordinary. Flusser believes that Husserl’s phenomenology evokes a new politics, “‘a universally dialogical’ vision sometimes called ‘information society,’” which places intersubjectivity at the forefront of understanding the difficulty in seeing past subject and object to see the concreteness of the relations themselves.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Vilém Flusser, “On Edmund Husserl,” *Philosophy of Photography* 2, no. 2 (2012): 237. Emphasis in original. It is well noted that Flusser’s biggest philosophical influence is Husserl: see Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser*.

⁴⁵ Flusser, “On Edmund Husserl,” 238.

Unfortunately, this information society is a premonition of the Internet, and suffers exactly the attitude that Virilio feared in *The Art of the Motor*—that information and reality live in parallel and separate worlds.⁴⁶ A bed is not a bed as object, but a *space*—or, in Flusser’s words, an *abys*—for the particular contemplation that he ensues in his essay: between himself, the “I,” and the other, the conception of the bed—in other words, the bed is the concrete, intersubjective “net” of the subject “I” and the object of the culturally-defined other, which are “knots.”

This intersubjectivity defines our relationship to the world around us with an attitude in which our being is receptive to constant dialogue with the culture by which we are surrounded: the “I” itself is not a stable knot. The abyss of sleep is crossed over again and again, and with that crossing comes change, which Flusser analogizes with reading, another transformative act. How do I read when asleep, in bed? What is there in an abyss that can be read? “To read” is a moment when the author, rather than claiming authority as the subject, engages in dialogue with culture: “I read in order to

be changed.” Flusser admits, however, “I cannot read without prejudice. My prejudices discriminate.” The intention to receive the outsider, the other, as a part of “the floor of our dwelling” is unable to achieve total change. Instead, the intersubjective attitude accepts the “oscillation” between the stable prejudice and the change via reading, or, dwelling on the bed.

Here we can engage with the source of the title, “to bed,” an infinitive caught in the moment between sleeping and waking. At the end of each section of Flusser’s essay, he quotes a passage from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*:

To bed, to bed:
there’s knocking at the gate.
Come, come, come, come,
give me your hand.

⁴⁶ See Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*.

What's done, cannot be undone.
To bed, to bed, to bed.⁴⁷

Lady Macbeth says this passage while she sleepwalks, a moment in between sleeping and waking, ruminating over the murders she took part of as a manifestation of her irreconcilable guilt. The action that replays in her head, though, is this “knocking at the gate” which interrupts, suddenly, a heightened moment drunk with darkness. As literary critic Thomas De Quincey wrote of this seminal moment in the play, an ordinary and concrete action, in the context of extraordinary circumstances, is a “parenthesis” that is necessary to see the act of murder as what it is, to “insulate” it as such. The reminder of ordinary life brings Lady Macbeth back to her senses, that transformative, infraordinary moment, in which she crosses over the abyss “to bed.”⁴⁸ For Flusser, and for the *Cause*

commune group, it is not a horrendous act of murder that needs “parenthesis,” but everyday life: the parenthetical curve must be turned on its side and used to excavate what would have otherwise been “background noise.” By separating herself from the act of murder, treating it as her other, a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth creates the same intersubjective recognition that Flusser does with his other by way of reading.

For Georges Perec, that reading is dreaming—which, not unlike sleepwalking, is a moment in between sleeping and waking. During the years leading up to and during his involvement with *Cause commune*, the themes of sleep, dreams, and beds are a poignant part of his personal life, which inevitably become sources of inspiration for his literary work, culminating in an essay for one of the later volumes of *Cause commune*, “The Stratagem (*La Ruse*),” under the new publisher. This essay was called

“The Scene of a Stratagem.”⁴⁹ In it, Perec recounts a series of visits to a psychoanalyst, along with a project on dreams.

He recorded 124 dreams between 1968 and 1972 and published the collection as a book called *La boutique obscure*. The last recording is incidentally dated as just after the first two issues of *Cause commune*. These records oscillated between memory and dream, aided by

“the coenesthetic certainty of my body in the bed, the topographical certainty of the bed in the room ... Just as a word

47 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. A. R. Braunnmuller, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1997) Act V, Scene I.

48 See Thomas De Quincey, “On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth,” in *De Quincey's Literary Criticism* (1823; repr., London: H. Frowde, 1909), 149. “The murderers, and the murder must be insulated-cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice; time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly

passion. Hence it is, that when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.”

49 “The Scene of a Stratagem” was published in another English translation elsewhere, titled “Backtracking.” However, translator (and, Perec’s biographer) David Bellos notes the translation of the French title *Les Lieux d’une ruse* “means both ‘The Site of a Ruse’ and ‘the Rhetoric of Deception,’ since Perec often used the word *lieu* (“place”) in its older rhetorical sense.” See Georges Perec, “Backtracking,” trans. David Bellos, *Grand Street*, no. 44 (1993): 194–202.

brought back from a dream can, almost before it is written down, restore a whole memory of that dream...⁵⁰ This is an intersubjective dialogue between Perec himself and his memories that become informed, modified, or completely fictionalized by his time in bed, in sleep. Perec here acts out Flusser's dialogic narration—he is a man asleep, in bed, falling into the abyss.

Both Perec's dream world and his living world is affected by this dialogue. For him, the act of dreaming, unlike Freudian psychoanalysis, is not one's subconscious speaking what the subconscious has suppressed. Instead, by virtue of being recorded on paper, the dreams could easily be fabricated, not "lived in order to be dreamt, but dreamt in order to become texts."⁵¹ His act of creation is far from intending to be deceptive: instead, the dreams become potential material

for writing. The materialization of his dreams on a page is the intersubjectivity that excavates his truth. The bed *is* the page, both being "a rectangular space... in which, or on which, we normally lie longways," in order to read, or "gaze at the ceiling with a tranquil eye," which he found to contain "labyrinths, woven from phantasms, ideas and words."⁵² In *Species of Spaces*, which is divided into chapters based on "spaces" increasing in scale, the bed immediately follows the page, as the first three-dimensional space, the "elementary space of the body."⁵³ For Perec, the dialogue between the bed and the ceiling—the blank page and the "Muse"—suspends between it the abyss in which Perec sleeps. In this abyss he "reads" labyrinths of meaning, which he is compelled to fill with his dreams.

Toward the end of his dream diary, in 1971, Perec began to visit famous psychoanalyst J.B. Pontalis, in which these dreams became a focal point of his visits. The quickened pace of recording his dreams in 1971 was in no small way affected by his relationship with

renowned French psychoanalyst, J.B. Pontalis, whom he visited from 1971 to 1975, apparently to cure his writer's block.⁵⁴ Pontalis often described Perec as his "other," exchanging notes between psychoanalysis and literature, overcoming the traditional doctor-client dynamic, and becoming a more dialogic relationship. While it is expected that Perec wrote about Pontalis, Pon-

talis also wrote of Perec often in both his clinical analyses and his personal writings, albeit under the confidentiality of false names "Simon," "Pierre G." or "Stéphane"—demonstrating a reciprocal relationship that dismantles

50 Georges Perec, "Species of Spaces," in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock, Penguin Classics (1974; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2008), 21–22.

51 Georges Perec, "The Scene of a Strategem," in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 172. He directly confronts the problem he has with the Freudian conception of dreams in this text: "Beneath the ephemeral glitter of these verbal collisions, the measured titillations of this little illustrated Oedipus, my voice met only its own emptiness... responses that were ready-made, an anonymous ironmongery, and all the exaltation of a ride of a scenic railway."

52 Perec, "Species of Spaces," 16–18.

53 *Ibid.*, 16.

54 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 475–77. This was also after an attempted suicide, so the reasons for starting these visits to Pontalis are not necessarily clear. If it was truly to solve his writer's block, though, it was successful: he had his most productive years immediately following.

psychoanalytical hierarchy.⁵⁵ Perce used “a stream of words” to compulsively fill an *abyss* in his life—namely, as assessed by Pontalis, that of losing his parents at a young age—which was a recurring theme in Perce’s writings, especially in his text *La disparation, or A Void*.⁵⁶ There was also the void of silence during the psychoanalysis sessions that require the patient to speak, which also drove Perce to compulsive speech, as when he “tried to be silent... the silence all of a sudden became unbearable.”⁵⁷ In *Species of Spaces*, Perce includes the psychoanalyst’s couch as one of the few moments outside of the bed where we lay in a “horizontal posture.” In the words of Perce’s favorite humorist Roger Price, “the chair is placed behind the couch, so that the patient cannot see the analyst... This is so that once the patient begins talking, Dr. Dorsey can sneak out the door, telephone friends, and take

care of customers in his haberdashery downstairs.”⁵⁸

The apparent vacancy left by Pontalis’ silence is filled vicariously by the couch, similar to Flusser’s bed, a site for dialogue between Perce and his other, in order to excavate the void. With Perce serving as Pontalis’ own source of inspiration and self-analysis, and Pontalis serving as the silent “other” that Perce attempted to fill with writing, the dialogic relationship followed no rules, but benefitted both subjects symbiotically from the “mutual reification” they performed on one another, illustrated by Perce as “a tedious game of mirrors in which the Möbius strip of images reflected one another endlessly.”⁵⁹ They each were changed by the reading of the other (think back to Flusser’s reading). But, like Perce illustrates, the “other” is really just a reflection of the self: the need to step outside oneself in order to see what otherwise would be unseen—the *infraordinary*—by way of “reading” the dialogic other, excavating the blank page, the abyss of the bed, to create, to write.

Perce asks, in “The Scene of a Stratagem,” “The stratagem is something that circumvents, but how to circumvent the stratagem?”⁶⁰ Rather than a dialogue between Perce and Pontalis, these psychoanalyst trips were really a dialogue between two Perces: one, whose dreaming for the sake of writing helped him fill the abyss (the stratagem), and the other, whose impulse instead was to excavate

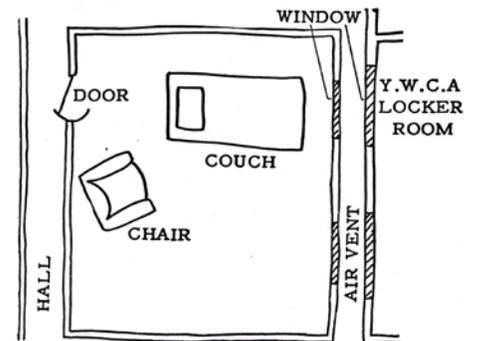
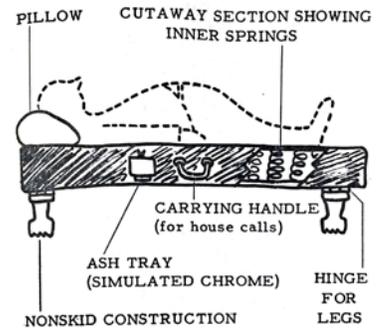
55 Henry P. Schwartz, “On the Analysts Identification with the Patient: The Case of J.B. Pontalis and G. Perce,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2016): 133. See also Bellos, *Georges Perce: A Life in Words*, 475–76, 518.

56 See J.B. Pontalis, “Boundaries or Confines?” in *Frontiers in Psychoanalysis: Between the Dream and Psychic Pain*, trans. Catherine Cullen and Philip Cullen (London: Hogarth, 1981), 155–66.

57 Perce, “The Scene of a Stratagem,” 171.

58 Roger Price, *In One Head and Out the Other* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 47–49. Perce wrote the introduction to the French version of this book. See also Bellos, *Georges Perce: A Life in Words*, 356.

59 Perce, “The Scene of a Stratagem,” 170.



60 *Ibid.*, 166.

what already existed within the abyss (the stratagem against the stratagem). Perec countered the creative impulse of the dream journal with what he called a “*journal intime*” (French for diary, or literally, “intimate journal”) with an obsessively “objective” journal. In this, Perec “remembers” the “ordinary side” to analysis: its regularity, its coming and going, the routine that he and Pontalis played each session, which required certain performances, like opening the double doors, or laying down a new handkerchief on the pillow to lay down.

The seeming opposition between the intimate and the objective is renounced by Pontalis, in his Perec-inspired writing. Pontalis refers to Perec’s excessively precise “objective” journaling as the hypermnnesia and his text-dreams as the insomnia. Both of these are infraordinary in practice: they record repetitively by design, circumventing the abyss of silence, and by doing so, excavate meaning from it. The bed is the concrete site of the “abyss” between the dream world and real world, but rather than taking this in the Freudian sense, the dream world, to Perec, is the world of writing, the elucidation (and even the creation) of memories that are even more true to reality than the real world itself.

The moment memory is spoken, or the moment forgetting is given fictional voice—the moment the ordinary gives way to the infraordinary—they escape.

In January 1973, one month before the publication of *Cause commune* No. 5, Georges Perec and director Bernard Queysanne began collaborating on an adaptation of Perec’s 1967 novel, *A Man Asleep* (*Un homme qui dort*). According to David Bellos, Perec’s article for *Cause commune* No. 5 “was as much the fruit of his work with Queysanne as a French reinvention of ethnomethodology.”⁶¹

The film follows the life of an unnamed student—referred to in the second person as “you” by yet another unnamed narrator—who performs, repeatedly, various gestures of living an urban life, often never leaving their room, or their bed. They are characterized as a “sleepwalker.” Their concerns mirror that of Perec’s own self, on Pontalis’ psychoanalysis couch—for example, an obsession with reading the ceiling as a labyrinth. This is restated several times in both the novel and the film, most poignantly when “you learn how to look

at painting in art galleries as if they were bits of wall or ceiling, and how to look at the walls and ceiling as if they were paintings whose tens and thousands of paths you follow untiringly, endlessly retracing your steps, as if they were merciless labyrinths...”⁶²

“Indifference to the world is neither ignorance nor hostility. You do not propose to rediscover the robust joys of illiteracy, but rather, in reading,

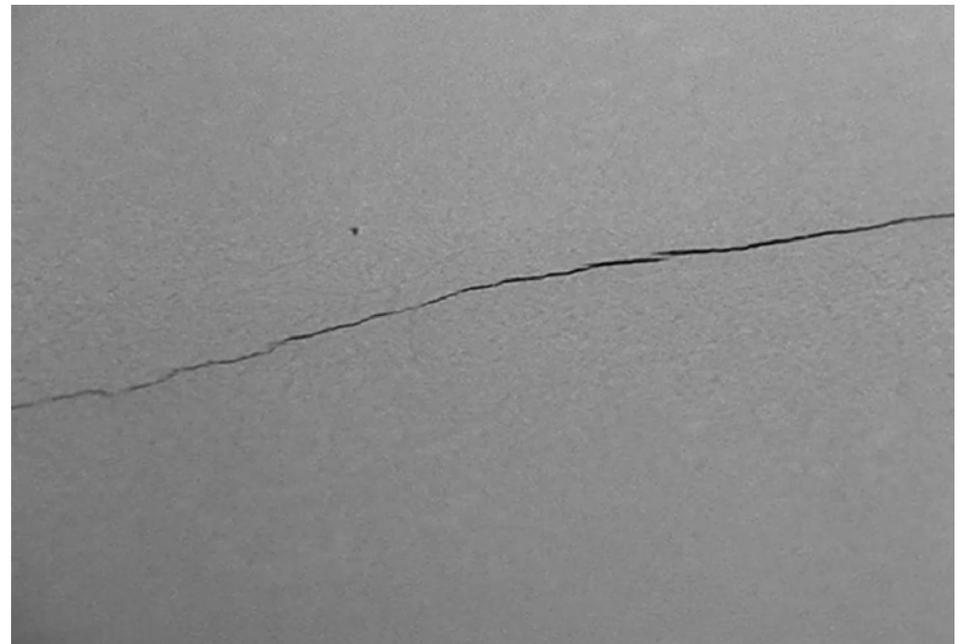
not to grant a privileged status to any one thing you read... It is not exactly that you seek to accomplish these actions in total innocence, for innocence is such a loaded term: but merely, simply (if this ‘simply’ can still mean anything) to relegate these actions to some neutral, self-contained territory, a space cleansed

61 Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, 521. See also the booklet insert to the 2007 DVD copy of *A Man Asleep*: Bernard Queysanne and Georges Perec, *Un Homme Qui Dort*, DVD (1974; repr., La vie est felle editions, 2007).

62 Georges Perec, “A Man Asleep,” in *Things: A Story of the Sixties; A Man Asleep*, trans. Andrew Leak (Boston: Verba Mundi, 2004), 164.

of all value-judgements, but not, especially not, a functional space: the functional is the worst, the most insidious, the most compromising of all values. No, let this space be self evident, factual, irreducible.⁶³

The value of “indifference” here hearkens back to Flusser’s reading: by allowing ourselves to be changed by what we read, we place value judgment on the subject of reading—one of no privilege. Perec’s “you” becomes “the master of the world” upon achieving maximum indifference, overcoming the systemically instilled prejudices that Flusser battles in reading. Such an ideal mind calls all things insignificant—both ceiling and painting stand on the same ground. “You” lists the titles in the newspaper systematically, deliberately, such that “all hierarchies and privileges must crumble and collapse.”⁶⁴ This seems to be what the editors of *Cause commune* call for: the stripping of privilege of the extraordinary, especially in the media. Yet, “you” struggles with living in such indifference. At the climax of the movie adaptation, “you” is looking at the city, which he had so indifferently wandered and indiscriminately aimed to enumerate, and instead begins to



63 Ibid., 169–70.
64 Ibid., 169.

judge with prejudice: “Putrid city, vile, repulsive city. Sad city, sad lights in the sad streets... Like a rat looking for a way out of his maze. You pace the length and breadth of Paris.”⁶⁵

Like the rat in Flusser’s “To Bed,” the rat here suddenly realizes that he is stuck, and must “gnaw that the irrational basis of our dwelling” to get out. Like Lady Macbeth, “you” relies on the concreteness of everyday life to knock your way out of sleepwalking. As Flusser rightly assesses, there is no avoiding prejudice. Indifference is no longer “in-“ as

without, but “in-“ as within: to dwell *in* difference. To dwell in difference is not only to read things simply as “irreducible facts,” but also to allow the “oscillating and undulating floor of our dwelling” to move us, and encourage it to do so by questioning the circumstances, the codes, the infra-structures on which it lays. To dwell in difference is to practice the infraordinary.

ANNIE GUEDEZ, “THE EVERYDAY BRICOLEUR”

*It is the “bricole” aspect that captures their everyday existence: from the acquisition of vocabulary to the arrangement of their space, to the establishment of new social relationships to the development of their dreams, each of their behaviors or their beliefs is preceded, like bricolage, by juxtaposition and the assemblage of heterogeneous elements borrowed from different social frameworks.*⁶⁶

When speaking of the infraordinary, let alone the ordinary, a very apt question would be to ask, “whose ordinary life are we talking about?” It is often the “everyman,” a universal subject, an average man, increasingly seeing through an urban, mechanized lens driven by new modes of production. This is a notion that *Cause commune* aimed to challenge, primarily through its “new anthropology of contemporary humankind.” Contemporeneity here, for *Cause commune*, was an inclusive humankind: Jean Duvignaud, who had just completed an ethnographic study of a Tunisian village, broke from Claude Levi-Strauss’ structuralist mythologizing in search of a method to study societies without an assumed underlying framework that these societies needed to fit into. Rather than the myth preceding the particular groups, each society can be seen in its own structure in the same way the general line gives way to everyday realism.⁶⁷ Backgrounded by a decolonizing France, the revisionist Marxists that *Cause commune* associated with sided with movements for independence, but in a step further, Duvignaud was stepping away from the French tradition

65 Ibid., 203. See also, Queysanne and Perec, *Un Homme Qui Dort*. Approximately one hour and six minutes into the movie, a crescendo of both the narrator’s voice and background music pair with an image increasing in contrast of the student struggling to move through a suddenly crowded city, when he had previously been completely deserted. *Un Homme qui dort* is filmed entirely in black and white, so the high contrast image begins to abstract the forms of the crowd, such that they dissolve in the overexposed brightness into a blank screen.

66 Annie Guedez, “Le quotidienneté bricolée,” *Cause commune*, no. 5 (February 1973): 27–30.

67 See Chapter 4 for the discussion on realism and *La ligne générale*.

of anthropology towards a study of “others” *not* as reinforcing a structural fact as does Levi-Strauss, but “as living organisms which have a right to a life of their own within a new framework, and which have a contribution to make to the new society of which they form part through the re-discovery of their own authentic personality.”⁶⁸ *Cause commune* aided this aim, advocating for “endotic” rather than “exotic” studies—emphasizing the differences that exist within what may appear to be, at first glance, one’s own society comprised solely of the “everyman.”

The impetus to study within our own societies as a “new anthropology” debunks the thought that those outside

68 Cecil Hourani, “Foreword,” in *Change at Shebika: Report from a North African Village*, by Jean Duvignaud, trans. Frances Frenaye (1968; repr., New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), xiii.

of our society are lesser than ourselves, an attitude of the *parachutiste*. Levi-Strauss, in his seminal text on structural anthropology, draws a distinction between the bricoleur and the engineer in anthropological studies of other cultures; Jacques Derrida makes no such distinction in his review of Levi-Strauss’ work, instead determining that the engineer is a myth created by the bricoleur, thus only bricoleurs exist.⁶⁹

How does the bricoleur fit into the infraordinary? Rather than leaving out these marginal social groups that are deemed “other,” it was precisely those same groups that would provide oblique access to the otherwise opaque social “codes”—the labyrinthian cellars latent in the *arriere-plan*—that surround “us.” The margins are much better equipped for a study of the infraordinary.

In *Cause commune* No. 5, Annie Guedez writes of a couple, under pseudonyms Trinidad and Paulo, who migrated from Portugal to enjoy a better life in France than they would have in their home country. They dream of someday returning to Portugal with

69 Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (1966; repr., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 285. See also Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (1962; repr., London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 16–33.

enough money to “become someone,” and own a farm of their own—that money being made by picking up odd jobs (*bricoler*) that required neither a command of the French language nor a proper work permit. But as they pieced together (*bricoler*) their wealth, they also pieced together a new dream, with “‘real wood’ furniture (she is currently doomed to use laminate) as beautiful as those she shines for her employers.”⁷⁰ The exchange of one dream for another could be seen as, in terms of Levi-Strauss’ *bricoleur*, “making do with ‘whatever is at hand’... which is always finite,” but would such a claim also not be true of the employers that they try to emulate? Again, as Derrida says, there are only bricoleurs. If the employers questioned their own wants (why wood furniture?) they would discover they are no different from the migrant workers that they consider “other.”

One could say, “they were progressively mastering their desires: they knew that they wanted; they had clear ideas. They knew what their happiness, their freedom would be,” but one could also say, “they were wrong all the same. They were beginning to lose their way... they

70 Guedez, “Le quotidienneté bricolée,” 29.

were wanting to live, they were waiting for money.”⁷¹ Such was Georges Perec’s description of Jérôme and Sylvie, the protagonists of his novel *Things*, who moved away from Paris to Tunisia, in order to find what it meant to “live,” outside of their desirous Parisian society. Though they were in a much less marginal position than laboring immigrants, the flagrant consumerist culture they were immersed called out similar dissatisfactions with their current situations: whether it was the right or wrong way to live, it was clearly a codified system of thought that controlled their “desires” in the same way that Trinidad and Paulo unknowingly found their dreams changed.

Jean Duvignaud, writing on Perec’s *Things*, wonders whether the

71 Perec, “Things: A Story of the Sixties,” 34.

commodity-oriented milieu points toward Lefebvre’s idea of “mystified consciousness” or Barthes’ “mythologies.”⁷² Though Duvignaud does not answer his own question, the answer is a matter of attitude—and in the “catastrophic” fashion of *Cause commune*, Lefebvre’s presaged pessimism overcomes Barthes’ structuralist splendor. A very early work of Lefebvre’s, *Mystified Consciousness* (*La conscience mystifiée*) was published in 1936, a dangerous time for imagining a phenomenological politics that alienated both the Communist Party and the incoming Nazi regime. “Mystified consciousness” critiqued the ability of institutions such as those to entice the public into following their codes without question—explaining why Hitler was able to be elected into office by popular vote.⁷³ Mystification is what covers up the infraordinary and erases its traces, leaving people with the semblance of a beautiful (or so they say) blank slate.

From the notion of the bricoleur, as well as from Lefebvre’s “mystified consciousness,” the infraordinary is not anything new—it is merely advocating

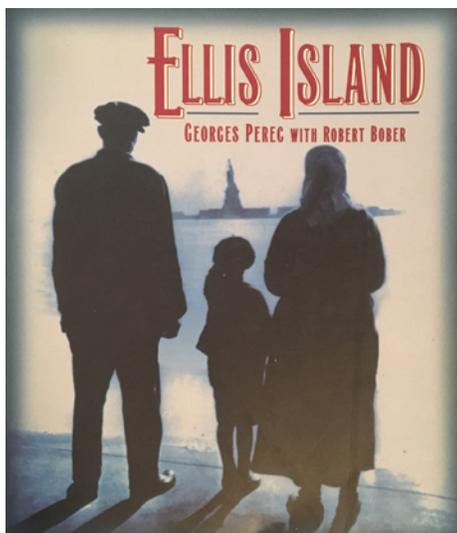
72 Duvignaud, *Perec, Ou, La Cicatrice*.

73 This particular point is exceedingly relevant to today’s world. See Andy Merrifield, “Mystified Consciousness,” *Monthly Review* 71, no. 10 (March 2020), <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/03/01/mystified-consciousness/>.

for the everyday to be looked at with as scrupulous of an eye as one looks outward to the fantastic and hyperbolized *fait divers* in the newspaper headlines. The anonymity of the codes by which we live would continue to be unknown to us if we were to ignore them, as the “mystified consciousness” of wartime politics exemplified. The simple question of “how is it that I want to live?” and then, “why do I want to live this way?” would expose the commodity systems that both couples—Trinidad and Paulo and Jérôme and Sylvie—are caught in, a net that would remain invisible had they not questioned it.

But as we see in *Things*, Jérôme and Sylvie did question their circumstances. They attempted to make a change, move away from Paris without all of their things to a lifestyle that was further away from what they dreamed of, only to move back to their old lives and resume the status quo, and accept their indifference to the meaning behind their dreams. Thus, we oscillate from a “mystified consciousness” to “mythologies.” The difference between a myth that remains unquestioned and a myth that is perpetuated, knowingly, even after questioning, is an acceptance that the myth, indeed, exists. It has imprinted into our

minds, rooted as prejudice, and its significance is removed from existence. In fact, it could be said that the myth—in the case of *Things*, that the best life is made by the things at the height of Parisian fashion—now bears something we can call *in-significance*. Only the material signifier remains; just *things*. A myth can only be perpetuated if a significance is locked in—one cannot question a myth beyond its first order signified. Lefebvre’s “mystified consciousness” follows these myths blindly; Barthes’ “mythologies” revels in the knowledge of these myths by remaining indifferent; *Cause commune*’s infraordinary wishes to question myth by treating it endotically, rather than as an “other”—we are much less likely to give up on our questions if



we believe we have a personal stake in the answers.

The unconscious everyday choices of cultural adaptation, done in *bricoleur* and paradoxically tied to consumerist dreams, then comes in sharp contrast to Perec’s much later but overtly anthropological work on American immigration space. “Ellis Island,” originally a film project with his friend Robert Bober, later made into a book that collected Perec’s writings on the method and reasons for making such a project in the first place. According to Perec’s research, the immigration process on Ellis Island consisted of twenty-nine questions:

What is your name?
 Where are you from?
 Why have you come to the United States?
 How old are you?
 How much money do you have?
 Where did you get this money?
 Show it to me.
 Who paid for your crossing?
 Did you sign a contract in Europe for a job here?
 Do you have any friends here?
 Do you have any family here?
 Is there anyone who can vouch for you?
 What kind of work do you do?
 Are you an anarchist?
 —and so forth.⁷⁴

74 Georges Perec and Robert Bober, *Ellis Island*, trans. Harry Mathews and Jessica Blatt (1994; repr.,

The process of immigration, in the sense of the infraordinary, exposes—with the simple questions and automated judgements that immigration officers ask incoming foreigners—a prejudicial structure that has locked in the myth of the other, and can be held away from the city through the armature of the island, shrouded by the mystified consciousness of the foggy Atlantic coast. The island is a spatialization of the myth of the other, of mystified consciousness. Floating between Europe and America, allowing a view of Lady Liberty (figure) but not access, the island signifies the prejudice against the other at the turn of the century and into the postwar era, holding immigrants in “the ultimate place of exile, that is, the place where place is absent, the non-place, the nowhere...” in the middle of the ocean.⁷⁵ These questions, read from a script, are not the endotic questions of the infraordinary, but questions of processing humans through a set of codified qualifiers that deem them worthy of exiting the abyss they had entered on Ellis Island. Each threshold was, in essence, filtering a surface-deep good health and a pronounceable name; upon further excavation,

New York: The New Press, 1995), 16–17.

75 *Ibid.*, 58.

they operated as shibboleths, demanding assimilation, as cultures that differed from the American one was also seen as a disease to be treated. Each threshold was performed ritualistically as if on an assembly line, and the immigrant is reified in the process of capitalization.⁷⁶ Even the alphabet was bastardized as a method of coding health issues in immigrants. This systematized differentiation feigns indifference—in fact, it holds difference with an iron fist, as an instrument against solidarity, emptying immigrants of identity.

Perec's infraordinary answer to this diaspora is to question the difference that is ingrained in the immigration system and its space, especially by leaning into his autobiographical thoughts:

76 Flusser, "Du Lit"; Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (1968; repr., Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

"In some way I'm estranged
from myself;
in some way I'm 'different,' not
different from others
but from 'my own people':
I don't speak the language my parents
spoke,
I share none of the memories they
may have had,
something that was theirs and made
them what they were
—their story, their culture, their
hope—
was not handed down to me."⁷⁷

With his lack of connection to a particular category, a people he was related to, Perec deemed the myth of "Jewishness" as insignificant. None of the usual signs were there to show his Jewish heritage, nor was it Perec's interest to spin his tale into one that fit into the structure of Jewish diaspora. His only prejudice was his lack of memories. Thinking back to Perec's review of Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*, he avoids the trap of the Jewish myth and instead opts for a stripped down text, which is exposes the experiences most in its "realist" conditions, conditions that one cannot say is just a horrendous injustice to others, but a horrendous act by the very normalcy by which it was

practiced.⁷⁸ "For the returning deportee, to speak, to write, is a need as strong and immediate as is his need for calcium, for sugar, sunlight, meat, sleep and silence. It's not the case that he can remain silent and forget. He has first of all to remember."⁷⁹ Yet this memory is hard to achieve with so much placelessness—to be shoved into a truly blank space, one that is marginal to other spaces, leaves very little to excavate. The infraordinary addresses the plight of immigrants by demanding there be answers to the questions of marginality, bringing the invisible space of Ellis Island floating in the ocean out of the fog and to the fore, exposing the intricate "cellars" of immigration to the public who had been floating along happily on the surface. Vilém Flusser's conception of homelessness requires immigrants to find a home within themselves:

"The secret code of homes are not made of conscious rules, but rather spun of unconscious habits. What characterizes the habit is the fact that one is not conscious of it. The person without a home must first consciously learn the secret codes and then forget them, to be able to

78 See Chapter 4 for the discussion on Antelme's *The Human Race*.

79 Perec, "Robert Antelme or the Truth of Literature."

77 Perec and Bober, *Ellis Island*, 61.

immigrate into a home. However, if the code becomes conscious, then its rules turn out not to be sacred but banal. The immigrant becomes even more unsettling to the native, uncannier than the traveler out there, because he reveals the banality of the sacred to the native. He is hateful; he is ugly, because he exposes the beauty of home as nothing more than pretty kitsch. His immigration causes a polemical dialogue between the ugly stranger and the beautiful native.⁸⁰

The othering of the other is a defensive strategy employed by a “we” that would like to avoid conversation about our own habitual everyday lives—this avoidance, or indifference, causes mystified consciousness to take over. Paul Virilio’s concerns for the “plundering of the anonymous”⁸¹ is most obvious here: for many immigrants, rather than being able to create a life from the *arrière-plan*, they are instead considered to be under the *arrière-plan* themselves, residing in cellars that remain invisible to an undiscerning society. A study of the infraordinary, which can reach out directly to the other through Flusser’s *intersubjectivity*, can also reach the other indirectly through the “endotic” study of ourselves

80 Vilem Flusser, *Writings*, ed. Andreas Strohl, trans. Erik Eisel, *Electronic Mediations 6* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 95.

81 Virilio, “La défaite des faits.”

in lieu of “pillaging from others” the mystification that allows the stable floor of our dwelling.

PIERRE FRESNAULT-
DERUELLE, “THE
QUOTIDIAN IN STRIPS”

*If everyday life is “the unconsciousness (...) of modernity”, the refusal of current events, whether perceived as a news flash or a (repeatedly) historic moment, certain comic strips clearly refer us to the image of a sleepwalking society stuck in entertainment.*⁸²

82 Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, “Le Quotidien En Bandes,” *Cause Commune*, no. 5 (February 1973): 30–34. The ellipsis in his Lefebvre quotation leaves out some interesting text: “It might be truer to say

The common appearance of everyday life in comic strips is not necessarily for the sake of putting the everyday on display, but for the sake of the aiding the narrative, acting as a rhetorical device, a shroud of reality, which allows readers to accept the goings-on of the comic as plausible and relatable. Whether it occurs in a domestic object or in speech bubble banter, ordinary things and occurrences exist in many comics as a means of situating the reader in the fictional world of the strip, within the lines on the page.⁸³ In these cases, everyday objects slip into the background.

The comic strip also conversely depicts everyday life within its frames, as the foreground. Creativity in the comic strip is subservient to its audience and materiality: mass consumption and greyscale printing (save the color in Sunday weeklies—by its very nature not an everyday

that everyday life is a crust of earth over the tunnels and caves of the unconscious and against a skyline of uncertainty and illusion that we call Modernity...”

Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life and the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 109. This environmental metaphor encapsulates the “infra” character of everyday life that Lefebvre, and later *Cause Commune*, begets; see Jean Duvignaud’s text opening the first issue of the journal, where he outlines the aims of the journal, including “... to undertake an investigation of everyday life at all levels in its folds or caves generally disdained or repressed...”

83 See Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, *La Bande Dessinée; l’univers et Les Techniques de Quelques “Comics” d’expression Française*. (Paris: Hachette, 1972).

comic). Thus the everyday must be drawn with broad strokes, or “offer the image of a world that... is always necessarily schematic.”⁸⁴ The schematic is reflexive of each individual’s everyday—while a headline in the newspaper “reveals itself only by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal,”⁸⁵ the comic strip acts as a funhouse mirror, both reflecting everyday life and distorting it.⁸⁶ From the sociological perspective,

the typological “everyday man” becomes the critic’s imaginary audience, even though the strip itself may have been inspired by a particular person or set of events. The “necessary schematics” of the comic creates characters that readers may all see themselves in—but because of the broad strokes, the alignment with reality is never complete.

Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts* series is used here to demonstrate the everydayness of comics, as it is used in both Fresnault-Deruelle’s comic theory work and in Perec’s personal essays. Perec invokes *Peanuts*’ ability to insert pensive, supposedly universal questions in the daily banter of the comic characters: “Let’s keep tapping the topic: What Who? When? Where? How?... Why? That’s a good question, as Lucy Van Pelt would say.”⁸⁷ “Everydayness” is far from a crippling constraint and becomes an opportunity to use banal repetition to a strip’s advantage, creating easy-to-digest formulae that keep readership coming back for more of the same fictional world: “Illusion—for [*Peanuts*] characters are constantly trying to turn their dreams into reality—and habit—they keep behaving in the same way—guarantee their survival.”⁸⁸ The daily comic strip must necessarily must be printed daily, the characters try each day to reach for their dreams, and each day they are prevented from doing so by the very nature of the medium, requiring both the substance of the comic and

84 Fresnault-Deruelle, “Le Quotidien En Bandes.”

85 Perec, “Approaches to What?,” 209.

86 Fresnault-Deruelle, *La Bande Dessinée*, 137.

“Mais à l’instar de la technique graphique, permettant d’intégrer sur un même plan de représentation les êtres caricaturés et les choses chez Hergé, c’est surtout la peinture du quotidien qui réussit à parfaitement faire « passer » les actions dites invraisemblables

menées par les protagonistes: technique narrative et technique graphique s’associent pour combler toute solution de continuité entre un univers plausible et un monde impossible. Toutefois, la quotidienneté fait plus que représenter une situation historique précise ou désigner l’actualité des fictions contées, elle est un facteur de dépaysement. Comme l’eau dort, elle reflète notre monde, mais elle cache aussi derrière ce qu’elle prétend refléter, une réalité beaucoup plus floue. L’expressionnisme de Jacobs, l’humour chez Hergé, l’héroïque chez Martin gauchissent le réel. La conformité au référent n’est qu’un repoussoir pour ces auteurs.”



87 Perec, “I Was Born.”

88 Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, “From Linear to Tabular,” in *The French Comics Theory Reader*, ed. Ann Miller and Bart Beaty (1976; repr., Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 125.

the literal page to repeat itself again and again. Despite this repetition, each day must be different, and the difference can only be perceptible insofar as it brings the reader back tomorrow: “there is no sense of narrative stagnation, but rather a renewal hard won against the ever-present danger of going down the same old street: when the paradigm is extended, the syntagm has to submit!”⁸⁹ Fresnault-Deruelle pinpoints the contradiction of the daily comic strip by comparing it to urban space: its schema, myth, or paradigm, is broken down by its very medium, spacing, or syntagm.

But this difference, as Fresnault-Deruelle says, is “deferring, not differing.”⁹⁰ Here, by invoking an aspect of Derridian “différance” in relation to both the comic strip and the city, Fresnault-Deruelle ties the semiological to the architectural and social by way of spacing—it differs in space and identity and defers in temporality, “maintains” its paradigm, but also “flirts” with its own redundancy.⁹¹ The schematism of the everyday comic strip is complexified by

its very everydayness—the blank space both between frames and between days. When brought into a chronological collection as many comics do, we immediately see the repetition when these strips that should be spaced out are placed on a single page, and their narrative loses engagement. The everyday, here, does not hold its own, requiring the context of the rest of the newspaper, and the spacing of each reader’s lived lives, to make it interesting.

Urban space works similarly to the initial instance of schematization of the comic—the space is universalized into a single story that is representative of the multiple experiences of that “necessary schematic.” The experience of such a space replicates the schematic—but adds back the particulars of its situation. Like the comic, urban space is the space

for potential happenings, the schematic mirror from which we excavate the labyrinths of the everyday. Unlike urban space itself, though, the comic is necessarily constrained by the page on which it appears, and by the frames which fragment the narrative. Such a space must be placed into a certain medium as well, in order to be seen in both its schematic and fragmentary natures.

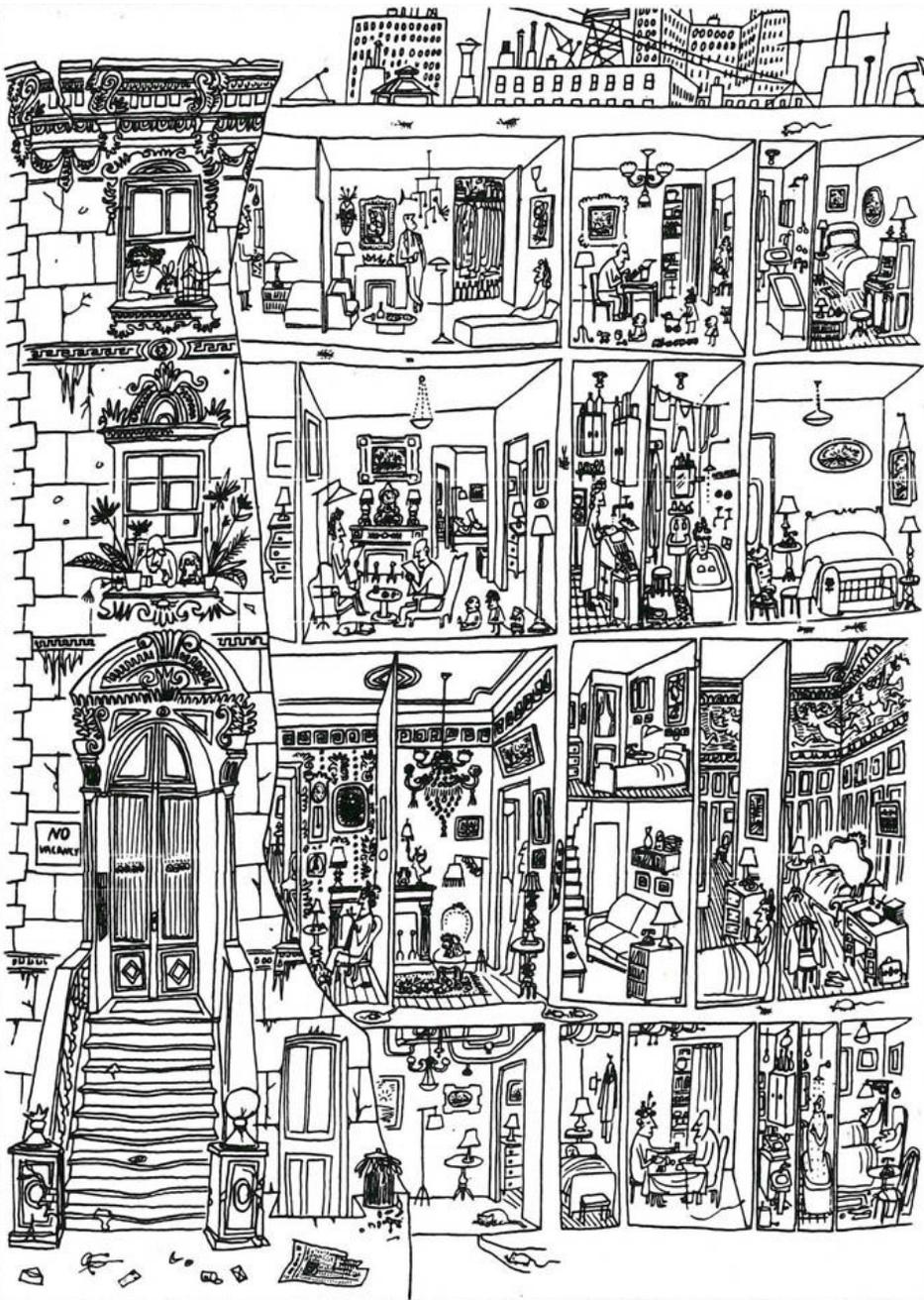
Here is where we return to Georges Perec’s writing projects, namely his 1974 book *Life A User’s Manual* (*La vie mode d’emploi*). His inspiration for the novel was a cartoon section cut through an apartment building drawn by Saul Steinberg in his postwar publication, *The Art of Living*. What enamored Perec in the first place was Steinberg’s ability to create depth from the two-dimensional page, “the mere inventory—and it could never be exhaustive—of the items of furniture and the actions represented has something truly vertiginous about it...”⁹² Thinking back to *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, the never-ending project of “exhaustion” is the excavation of the infraordinary. It necessitates that when the surface is seen, it is not yet truly read—the Steinberg

89 Fresnault-Deruelle, “From Linear to Tabular.” See also Fresnault-Deruelle, “Le Quotidien En Bandes.”

90 Fresnault-Deruelle, “From Linear to Tabular,” 128.

91 Fresnault-Deruelle, “From Linear to Tabular.”; See also Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play.”

92 Perec, “Species of Spaces.”



apartment building section cuts away the façade to expose the inner lives of the building, fragmentary in each contained room, everyday in the scenes that it depicts, and therefore materially similar to the comic strip. In preparation of this novel, Perec dedicates the majority of “The Apartment Building” chapter of “Species of Spaces” to an attempt at exhausting the Steinberg drawing. The list becomes an indiscriminate manifest of activities and objects in the drawing, jumping between what can be seen repeatedly but not discriminately calling out a larger or more obvious thing over another: “3 bathrooms... / 3 fireplaces... / 6 candelabra and one Calder-style mobile / 5 telephones / 1 upright piano with stool / 10 adult individuals of the male sex...”⁹³

Unlike “The Apartment Building,” in “The Apartment” chapter of “Species of Spaces,” the private apartment is enumerated in a procedural fashion, by circadian rhythm or other. While also simply a container for innumerable objects in the drawing, the Steinberg apartment inspires a non-linear narrative in Perec’s novel, allowing the space of the Apartment Building to rise above

93 Ibid., 41.

the Apartment's structure of the schematic "elementary rightness" of a father, mother, and child moving through function-based spaces, which Perec disparages in an aside: "no one lives exactly like that, of course, but it is nevertheless like that, and not otherwise, that architects and town planners see us as living or want us to live."⁹⁴ The comic artist of the daily strips operates in a similar mode of schematic thought, assuming that the masses for their mediums in fact are a mass of the archetypal, universal family, living in this archetypal, universal way.

Steinberg's drawing argues the opposite: the schematic cartoon human is not the "everyman," nor is it trying to be. The singular façade of a boardinghouse building already allows its multiple characters show through the windows (a mother and daughter with a bird, or a bearded fellow smoking a pipe with his dog and plants), and in revisiting the "work built from fragmentation and diversity... [we] overcome the disparity of viewpoints and achieve a unified construction."⁹⁵ This "construction" is the difference between the apartment and

the apartment building—the interior life of each frame is held together by the construct of the building, or in the case of the drawing, *the blank page*. Looking at the Steinberg section as a humorous drawing (a comic), and even further one that contains its narrative in multiple frames (a strip), we can start to analyze the drawing as a comic strip containing everyday life, or vice versa.

The section takes the entire space of the page, save a few urban buildings in the background above the roofline, which only adds another layer of fragmentation from the building to urban space, a bricolage of narratives. These narratives occur in blank spaces between the rooms—some walls have doorways which lead to other spaces fading back in perspective, rather than leading to the room next door. The plausibility of

each highly articulated interior makes the in-between rooms more interesting than confusing—of course, also aided by Steinberg's schematizing cartoon style, which cartoonishly implies depth without succumbing to the tyranny of perspective, elasticizing the margin as the daily comic strip does. And it was Steinberg who chose, in the galaxy of his imagined boardinghouse, where to set the frames (or "arbitrary set of signifiers" in Fresnault-Deruelle's terms) of each inner life, with the page as his constructed constraint.

With all this talk about constraints, it is hard to ignore the relationship that Georges Perec had with the literary group *Workshop of Potential Literature* (*Oeuvre d'Literature Potentielle*, or *Oulipo*). Perec uses constraints in some form or another in all of his writing, some strict (lipograms, anagrams), some as scaffolding (latin bisquare), some undiscovered. The Oulipo group found self-imposed constraints in writing were the way to expose writing's true potential.⁹⁶ While

94 Perec, "Species of Spaces," p. 31.

95 Fresnault-Deruelle, "From Linear to Tabular," p. 130.

96 See Warren F. Motte, ed., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, 1st Dalkey Archive ed, French Literature Series (1986; repr., Normal, Ill: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998). Perec's relationship with the Oulipo group is often conceived of as more central to his biography than *Cause commune* was; Raymond Queneau, who was the group's leader during Perec's membership, was similar to Jean Duvignaud as an almost-father figure to Perec.

Perc himself had determined that the “ludic” and the “sociological” aspects of his writing were separate categories, his conception of categories themselves was arbitrary and incomplete: the Oulipian is tied closely to the sociological, especially when we look at *Life A User’s Manual* and the Steinberg section. The Oulipian dictum is to find creative potential through these constraints did not always manifest themselves overtly in their writings.

The consequent design of *Life, A User’s Manual* includes the non-linear surface reading of Steinberg’s apartment, done in classic Oulipian style—the befuddled image is in fact guided by several arbitrary constraints. The translation from page to narrative occurs in the form of a knight’s tour, emulating the knight’s L-shaped movement around a chess board, which must visit every square of a 10x10 grid, which Perc transposes over the façade of a Parisian apartment building. Perc only writes ninety-nine chapters, however, with the last room left unvisited and unknowable; this room was the bottom left square of the knight’s tour grid, or if projected onto the elevation of Steinberg’s building, is the very location of the entry stairs.

Aptly, Perc refers to this as a “cellar” space.

The beauty of the novel, however, is that one does not necessarily need to know Perc’s complex structures in order to enjoy the narrative of the book. This is not unlike how Perc liked to move through a city—unlike the Situationist *dérive*, which relied on the spontaneous aura of “situations” to direct their wanderers through the city, Perc imposed arbitrary structures that would then draw out the creative potential from the supposedly blank page in front of him—which, of course, is no longer blank. The structure merely lends itself to be read as plurally in literary terms as it already does in sociological terms, which “foreshadows the brutal unveiling of a dwelling place, the breaking of the ties that were formed here and there, and

through the history of a minor zone now abandoned by everyone.”⁹⁷ The work of Perc and *Cause commune* was to bring these minor histories to the fore.

Even the narrative within the novel is one that confronts the insignificance of actions in everyday life that are made by choice. Bartlebooth, one of the residents in the apartment building of *Life A User’s Manual*, makes a lifelong activity to paint watercolors in different locations, send it out to Gaspard Winkler (another resident) to cut them up into a puzzle, ultimately to be sent back to the locations they were painted to be dipped in detergent to “return to the blank whiteness of their original non-being.”⁹⁸ Sent back to Bartlebooth in this blank state, after having gone through all the insignificant motions, the blank sheet would still retain the lines of the puzzle, a nascent reminder of a history that need not be remembered, yet can inform the future life of the blank sheet of paper. This is exemplary of the form of *écriture blanche* that is the infraordinary.

We have now encountered this blank page in numerous occasions in *Cause commune* issue No. 5: the *parachutiste’s*

97 Virilio, “A Walking Man,” 137.

98 Georges Perec, *Life, a User’s Manual*, trans. David Bellos (1978; repr., Boston: Verba Mundi, 2009), 490.

trust of the void, the journalist's removed enumeration to capture reality, the abyss of the bed between sleeping and waking, the indifference of *A Man Asleep*, the lack of identity in immigrants, the placelessness of Ellis Island, the margins between comic strip frames, the space between rooms in the apartment building. While not an exhaustive list of the subjects mentioned in *Cause commune* No. 5 nor in Georges Perec's works, the manifestation of an ever-escaping void in these essays shows that this blankness is irrevocably tied to the infraordinary. Blankness spans mediums of paper, information, human gestures, and urban space. To question what is under the ordinary, we must assume that the ordinary is above *something*. The blankness of the background is, paradoxically, not blank at all.

This is not the first time that blank pages make an appearance in *Cause commune*. We look to issue No. 2, in an art action by Fred Forest, illustrator of *Cause commune*, called *Space-media*. On January 12, 1972, silence aired on French radio channel "Europe No. 1" for fourteen minutes and thirty-five

seconds. That same day, the front page of the arts section of *Le Monde* contained, in the bottom right corner, 150 square centimeters of blank space. The description invited readers to send the clipping of this blank rectangle, populated with whatever they pleased to send, back to Fred Forest, who requested participants to "Express Yourself! The entire page of this newspaper will become a work of art. Yours."⁹⁹

Forest republished this disruptive rectangle in *Cause commune* No. 2 a few months later, along with an interview and review of the exhibition where the 702 responses he received were placed adjacent to one another. The "action," as he later calls it, is one of his earliest works of participatory art, which he

⁹⁹ Fred Forest, as translated by Michael F. Leruth, *Fred Forest's Utopia: Media Art and Activism*, 2nd ed. (MIT Press, 2017), 3, muse.jhu.edu/book/55966.

continued in his Sociological Art Collective. In the *Cause commune* version, Forest states that the page is a color plate insert (which it is not), and that color would be added via the contents of the rectangle, which the reader was to provide. In stating that it is already in color, Forest implies that the reader is already in dialogue with the media, rather than just receiving it.

At the beginning of this discussion, the comic strip was juxtaposed with its surroundings: the constant barrage of text and images, in line with the extraordinary, sensational stories covered by professional journalists. A blank space on the radio, newspaper, and television, is the antithesis of its context. Vilém Flusser, who began a collaborative streak with Forest during these years in "sociological art," including their work in *Cause commune*, wrote a passionate review of the *Space-media* project. With a single line, Forest "poked holes" and pushed the marginality of white space into an advertisement space, dulling the black text into the background.¹⁰⁰ Here, confronted with sudden agency, the masses could mediate themselves.

¹⁰⁰ Vilém Flusser, "L'espace communicant: l'expérience de Fred Forest," *Communication et langages*, no. 18 (1973): 80–92, <https://doi.org/10.3406/colan.1973.4010>.

Forest's call for the public to regain control of media took a more physical, urban form at the 1973 Sao Paulo Biennale, a few months after the publication of *Cause commune No. 5*. Here, Forest executed yet another "art action," this time as a live performance, called *The City Invaded by Blank Space*. During the biennale, he marched through the streets of Sao Paulo with signs that had nothing written on them, rendering them "more provocative than actual antigovernment slogans would have been, since they simultaneously dramatized state censorship and represented the pure possibility of free speech, while taunting leaving content up to each person's imagination."¹⁰¹ *The City Invaded by Blank Space* literalizes the connection between urban space and the comic strip, with the "necessary schematic" of blank signs that could be read as whatever the public needed it to read. Any passersby are thus encouraged to encounter their everyday lives with more scrutiny as the blank space becomes a medium of questioning rather than a medium of communication.

After *Cause commune No. 5*, Georges Perec published *Species of Spaces*—the

introductory page which contained none other than a blank rectangle. The context here, though, was his citation at the bottom of the rectangle—could one cite a blank rectangle?—a children's poem by Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*. The blank rectangle originally appeared as one of nine illustrations in the book, which depicted "a map of the ocean":

He had bought a large map
representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased
when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.

"What's the good of Mercator's
North Poles and Equators,
Tropics, Zone, and Meridian Lines?"
So the Bellman would cry:
and the crew would reply
"They are merely conventional signs!"

Other maps are such shapes,
with their islands and capes!
But we've got our brave
Captain to thank"
(So the crew would protest) "that
he's bought us the best———
A perfect and absolute blank!"¹⁰²

While the absurd map may be absolutely useless as an instrument of navigation, it is entirely "perfect" in its rejection of "conventional signs" to represent the open sea in the Snark world. The Bellman bought this map in which directional words surrounding the rectangle, though recognizable dyadic signs to the ordinary reader, are not placed in their expected locations around the box, or even placed in opposition to their antipode—save the cardinal directions, though the map is missing "SOUTH." Though the meaning of these navigators is removed, the blank map still has a "scale of miles," though the numbers are replaced with dots (Could it represent Morse Code? If so, it would still spell out a nonsensical "II ES I"). The scale requires measurement to be relational, situational, and therefore requiring no knowledge but the ability to correlate physical space to the space of a page. The reductive map allows for

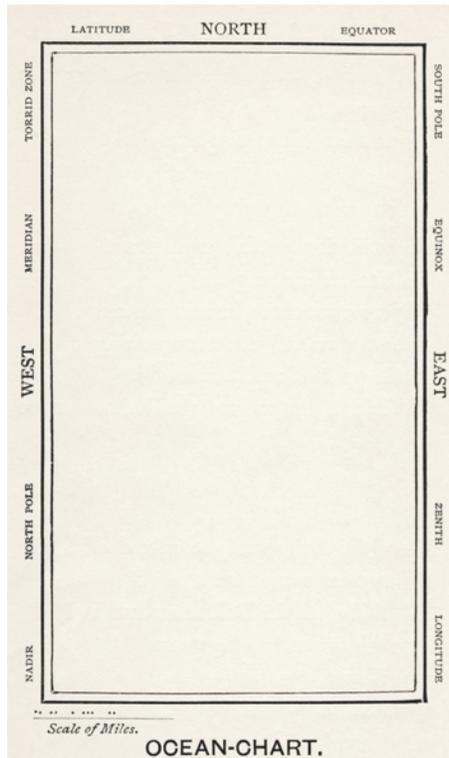
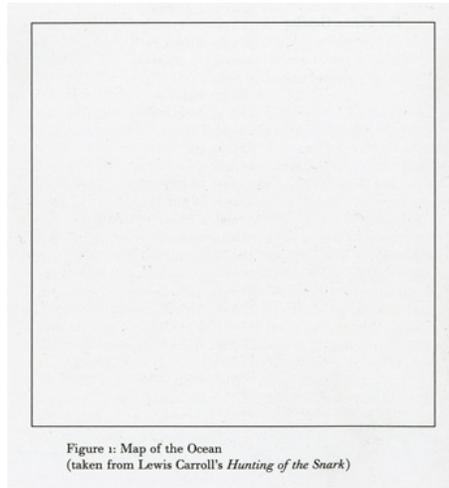
101 Leruth, *Fred Forest's Utopia: Media Art and Activism*, 4.

102 Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1891).

an egalitarian understanding amongst the entire crew, which would typically be interpreted only by the Bellman’s captainship. While situated within the text of directionality, thus making it a “map,” the arbitrary cartography placed upon the earth is no more accurate than the blankness of the ocean.

The foreword of *Species of Spaces* immediately following the pictorial epigraph concludes with one short playscript and one poem—neither of which are *The Hunting of the Snark*, but do describe the same pleasure the Bellman’s crew took to his blank map. The playscript, in three acts, repeats: “To the North, nothing. / To the South, nothing. / To the East, nothing. / To the West, nothing,” reinforcing these codified conventions as decidedly useless to the telling of the tale. However, in the last act, the script says what is in the center (a tent) and what is *next to* the center (shoe shine).

The key here is the preposition, describing relationships rather than absolutes. The following poem operates similarly, relating two objects in each line, building up from a single egg to the city of Paris, and then mirroring the relationships in the next stanza, reducing



the city of Paris down to a single egg.¹⁰³ As in *The Hunting of the Snark*, both of these short tales show concrete, direct relationships situating their audience in the described spaces than the universally codified signs. While we may have an abstract understanding of our cardinal directions, “next to the tent” is the language of the everyday.¹⁰⁴

Had Percec cited Forest’s *Space-media* instead, the reason would not be so different—in fact, Percec’s encounter with Forest’s work in *Cause commune* must have at least subconsciously informed his choice of pictorial epigraph. Instead of codified, significant cartographic words surrounding the blank space, *Space-media* is surrounded by the clamor of mass media, which gives the context to which the reader may respond. The context, though, may not stop at the edges of the page, the screen, or the start and end of

103 Percec, *Species of Spaces*, p. 7-8.

104 Later, in *The Scene of a Strategem*, Percec notes, of his psychoanalyst’s office: “Yes of course, I was in Paris, in a neighborhood I knew well... and I could have amused myself by working out my longitude, latitude, altitude and which way I was facing (my head west-north-west, my feet east-south-east). But the ritual protocol of the sessions extruded space and time from these landmarks.” Percec, “The Scene of a Strategem.” The concern for cardinal directions—and therefore for the semiological use of abstract words—repeatedly occurs in theories on everyday life: the envoi of Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* is a poem by Octavio Paz describing the cardinal directions as four walls, to which “I wrote messages, but received no reply.” See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

a radio segment—it may be expanded to the readers’ lives, what was happening (“it is raining”) or where they were (“a drawing of a woman in a bath”) at the moment, which thus locates this blank space for the reader—or, a captain hunting a snark.¹⁰⁵ These blanks urge their spectators to no longer passively receive mass media, but to actively participate in dialogue with the medium by asking them to reflect their lived reality, which would otherwise be considered insignificant against the headlines of a newspaper. The blank space becomes a mirror, and as such, becomes an image of everyone’s reality. Any universalized statement is ultimately less intelligible, less dialogic than the mirror of a blank space.

In an analysis of Forest’s *Space-media* work, Flusser uses the mirror as a metaphor for the epistemological challenge that it poses for everyday life: “Just as there is no ‘supreme mirror’ to mirror all of the other mirrors, there is no reality that is not mirrored... The abyss of mirrored mirrors opens up in every direction.”¹⁰⁶ The mirror is a cogent

metaphor for Forest’s dialogic work, but also hearkens back to Flusser’s own article in *Cause commune* No. 5, “To Bed,” where the bed also is an abyss, between yourself and your “Other.”¹⁰⁷ By opening these dialogues up in “every direction,” the abyss of mirrors or of the bed allows the innumerable individual reflections to replace the synthetic universal “everyman,” and thus serves as a tool for excavating the infraordinary.

Space-media is a premonition of Perce’s hope to find a way to invigorate the questioning of the habitual, a refocusing “from discourse into dialogue” in the space where the infraordinary is otherwise crowded out. However, the emphasis on dialogue in Forest’s artistic practice is performed within the utopian bubble of art, and its existence outside of

107 Flusser, “Du Lit.”

that bubble would preclude mass media “breaking the discursive barrier around us.”¹⁰⁸ That discursive barrier is that of abbreviation, or *tout court*, where mass media is limited in its medium space, and thus must truncate any possible conversation to the point that there seems to be no space for public reflection at all. The mirror becomes opaque, no longer an obvious reflection but one that requires “endotic” excavation.

While the blank space begins its work in the context of a public, Perce’s choice of Carroll’s map opening *Species of Spaces*, from which he removed the surrounding text and scale and opposite a page with a list of phrases containing “space,” situates the blankness in a private realm of extreme subjectivity, where “space” can act either as the modifier or the modified. What matters, in the classification of species, is the action of classifying; and rather than relying on predetermined “conventional signs,” Perce thinks, “we ought to ask ourselves where exactly we are, to take our bearings... simply concerning our topographical position, not so much in relation to the axes cited above, but rather *in relation* to a place or a person

105 See Yann Pavie and Fred Forest, “Ça Veut Dire Quoi, Space-Media?,” *Cause Commune*, no. 2 (June 1972): 29–33.

106 Flusser, “L’espace communicant.” As quoted in Leruth, *Fred Forest’s Utopia: Media Art and Activism*, 71–72.

108 See Flusser, “L’espace communicant.”

we are thinking about, or that we shall thus start thinking about.”¹⁰⁹ Signs, then, are reduced to insignificance, and that which was considered insignificant is that which is used to describe relations and conditions. This relational method, intersubjectivity, or dwelling *in-difference*, is the method of the infraordinary.

¹⁰⁹ Perec, “Species of Spaces,” p. 83. Emphasis added.



MARSHALL MCLUHAN,
“THE FUTURE OF THE
BOOK”

*To write about the present of the book, with a keen eye on the changing ground (arrière-plan) for the book as a figure, is to realize how many new forms the book has assumed even in our time. In all patterns, when the ground changes, the figure, too, is altered by the new interface.*¹

Looking at the last section of *Cause commune* No. 5, it is hard to know exactly where “Xerox, Simulacra, and the Death of the Book” (*Xérox, simulacre, et mort du livre*) fits in with the overall theme of the infraordinary. The constellation of seemingly disparate intellectual voices and topics in *Cause commune* No. 5 cohere a meaning for the infraordinary and the consequent (and some prior)

1 Marshall McLuhan, “L’avenir du livre,” *Cause commune*, no. 5 (February 1973): 41 as translated in; Marshall McLuhan, “The Future of the Book,” in *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews*, ed. Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines (1972; repr., Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 180. I use this English translation moving forward.

works of its participants. And rightly so does this volume of *Cause commune* end with a written dialogue between Marshall McLuhan and Pierre Schaeffer on the role of the book in the early 1970s, with the prevalence of the Xerox machine allowing anyone to become their own publisher, in theory. As is my hypothesis, this portion’s inclusion must, regardless of intention, be of some amount of importance in understanding the infraordinary. “The Future of the Book” projects the prevalence of readership in authorship in the early 1970s when Xerox democratized the means of production of print.

An apt place to start is the term that McLuhan uses as the medium of the book, the “ground,” or background upon which the form of the book could be imprinted on—the *arrière-plan*, the same term that Duvignaud uses in his definition of the infraordinary at the beginning of the journal. McLuhan uses *arrière-plan* to describe both the temporal context of the book-form, and the page of the book itself, upon which forms of text are printed. The time that McLuhan and *Cause commune* No. 5 was grappling with was 1973, where cheap paperback, artistic “little magazines” (which I have called journals here

in this thesis) and sensationalized newspaper was flourishing, not just in France, but around the world—we had already seen in the “New Left” journals like *Arguments* and (almost) *La ligne générale* arising out of critiques of the Algerian War and the “mass movement” in 1968.² *Cause commune* was the product of the disillusioned remaining “New Left” that continued to strive for anti-partisanship in the post-1968 world.

For McLuhan, the printing press was transformative to this “promised cultural democratization,” beginning with the Gutenberg Press, which “made every man a reader.”³ The process of repeated reproduction causes “the book world [to be] confronted with an image of itself that is completely revolutionary...

2 Mercer, “The Paperback Revolution,” 613–14.

3 Ibid., 615; McLuhan, “The Future of the Book,” 179.

concerned with process rather than product, with effects rather than content.⁴ The “ground” is transformed and distributed widely to a larger public and thus expands, while the “form” remains a repeated element, bound in its figuration to be simulacra. The wide net of readership extends beyond the medium of the cloth-bound or paperback-bound book: Fred Forest’s Sociological Art already demonstrated the media of radio, television, and urban space can similarly be democratized such that readers become authors, given the *arrière-plan* can be presented without a “form.”

The difficulty, though, is bringing these “art actions” into everyday life, rather than just within the artist’s oeuvre. The Sociological Art Collective, whose first manifesto was written in 1974—just as *Cause commune*’s first run came to a close—claimed “‘sociological art’ is not art. Nor is it the sociology of art. It is an ethical and practical approach to life that bases its methodology on the empirical development of sociological praxis operating under the pretense of art, of if one prefers, under the cover of art.”⁵ Such an “approach to

life” ultimately is placed into a utopian situation where the participation of the public is choreographed and constrained by the artists’ intentions. A blank page is not provided to all; Forest had to pay for the advertisement space to print nothing. In the 1970s present in which *Cause commune* was written, the Xerox machine was the transformative technology, which made “every man a publisher” to McLuhan.⁶ Recalling the mirror world of Fred Forest and the intersubjective abyss of Vilém Flusser, the xerographic copying of text provides yet another analogue of the reflexive nature of the *arrière-plan*, which was both literal in the materiality of paper and metaphorical in the cultural “background” upon which these copies were printed. McLuhan places the future of the book in the hands of the public, where the democratized “book” can be produced by anyone provided with the “miracle” of a Xerox machine.

Mass readership alone could not bring the cultural revolution that the “New Left” journals expected out of 1968—that mass readership needed to become implemented into mass authorship. While “the death of the author”

was proclaimed by Roland Barthes in the late 60s,⁷ *Cause commune* instead embraced a viewpoint where the reader’s and writer’s selfhoods are equally important in creating the necessary solidarity of infraordinary “text.” Assuming Duvignaud’s editorial article “Code and Hysteria” was written after having assembled the other essays including McLuhan’s, Duvignaud’s response to McLuhan’s *arrière-plan* is the missing “infra-” component—the cellars. While not everyone will fill out the blank space in Space-media to send back to Forest for exhibition, everyone does sleep. Vilém Flusser’s abyss of sleep, the “floor of [his] dwelling”—also known as the *arrière-plan*—causes him to “read in

7 See Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.

4 McLuhan, “The Future of the Book,” 178.

5 Sociological Art Collective Manifesto 1974, as quoted and translated in Leruth, *Fred Forest’s Utopia: Media Art and Activism*, 49.

6 McLuhan, “The Future of the Book,” 179.

order to be changed... but not without resistance.”⁸ The intersubjective dialogue created between the self and the “other,” mediated by the *arrière-plan*, achieves a democratic outlook—provided that readers are willing to be changed by what they read, and seek out “others” to read. The “resistance” is real: ridding oneself of learned codes and prejudices—a demystification process—is not easy nor always right, but the optimistic call-to-action of Flusser’s abyss accepts this realism as a product of the intersubjective net. The depiction of a specific realism of the “other,” as we have seen in the comic strip, feeds into the “schematic” nature of comics through its specificity in everyday conditions. Thus, this “reading,” in the “future of the book,” spans mediums—the book is not necessarily a bound book, but, in its most schematic sense, an *arrière-plan* ripe for excavating the cellars of the infraordinary.

For *Cause commune* No. 5, the newspaper provided no such intersubjective text, since, according to Perec, it would describe “everything except the daily.”⁹ Nearly eighty years earlier, Stéphane Mallarmé wrote the seminal essay “The

Book, A Spiritual Instrument” as the newspaper was reaching maturation, questioning whether the newspaper could contain a similar poetic reverence that the bound book affords us as they hit a critical point of drifting apart in two different definitions of “Press.” Similar to Perec, Mallarmé concludes that the newspaper could not. It is missing, in its “unbearable columns,” the necessary “divine” nature of the flipping of the page: “in vain does this extraordinary, gathered in like a wing about to unfold, intervention of the folding or the rhythm concur, initial cause for a closed sheet to contain a secret, where dwells the silence, precious, in pursuit of evocative signs, quite literally abolished for the spirit.”¹⁰ The consideration of the “extraordinary” effects of unfolding a page, as a form of excavating the miraculous book, gives too much weight to the precious objecthood of the book for the aims of *Cause commune*; Mallarmé does, however, aptly question “whose vision?” when reading the “daily” (*journal*, or newspaper), is the concern of the poetic license of the author.¹¹ *Cause commune*

takes a decidedly more prosaic approach, in a “post-objective epistemology,” to borrow a phrase describing Forest’s Sociological Art. Georges Perec’s call for us to look deeper into our everyday lives than the surface of the newspaper, to excavate the infraordinary from under the seemingly blank *arrière-plan*, is at once all of his categorical imperatives: sociological, autobiographical, ludic, and novelistic.

As Perec says, “Let’s keep tapping the topic: What? Who? When? Where? How? Why?”¹²

12 Perec, “I Was Born,” 100.

8 Flusser, “Du Lit.”

9 Perec, “Approaches to What?,” 209.

10 Stéphane Mallarmé, “The Book, A Spiritual Instrument,” in *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg, trans. Michael Gibbs (New York: Granary Books, 1982), 17.

11 *Ibid.*, 15.

“Journalists and Their Languages” is a two-fold essay, dealing with Perec’s biographical “journal” involvement among the French intellectual left circles of the 60s and 70s on one hand, and with the journalistic style of his infraordinary writing on another, which is otherwise referred to as “realism.” Perec’s concerns with “realism” stretch from *La ligne générale* into *Cause commune* through the method of recording that he developed in his “sociological” writings. Journalism is the method of “how” the infraordinary is revealed—but rather than the mass media *parachutiste* “journalism” that *Cause commune* is critical of, it is *enquête* journalism in Perec’s “realism” sense of the term, which places all items, all news, big or small, on the same playing field, not allowing the headlines to crowd out the anecdotal.

“To Bed” considers the psychoanalytical interior world of the infraordinary and of Georges Perec—describing the “when” of the infraordinary. The bed could be just a concrete ordinary object, but here it is the moment in between sleep and wake, the “abyss.” In such a state of limbo, all one can do is take

action in one direction or the other; the infraordinary requires this constant oscillation, a constant practice of approaching the unknowable everyday life. The bed is a notable feature in several of Perec’s works, especially as the psychoanalyst’s couch where he began his objective, journalistic recordings in the face of having to talk about his most subjective, journaling ones.

“The Everyday *Bricoleur*” shows “who” makes everyday life most apparent—those whose identities and situations are unaccounted for in social forms. Though everyday life is typically banal enough to escape our purview, it becomes a stark borrowed and collaged feature in the lives of those who approach society from the outside, such as marginalized migrant workers. The infraordinary, unlike a typical anthropological method, is a look at societies we are most familiar with as if we were approaching it from the outside, so the marginal experiences bring to light the marginal conditions that arise under the code of society itself (read, the “infra” of the ordinary)—in Perec’s novel *Things*,

this is precisely the transformation (and reversion) that his protagonists undergo.

“The Everyday in Strips” shows the spaces in between comic strips, the spacing between frames, between daily or weekly issues, in which information is hidden, but assumed to exist—“where” the infraordinary takes place, which is often in a non-place. Infraordinary is already prefixed by its spatial modifier, being “under” the ordinary, and what is under all this writing about ordinary life? The blank page. Amidst the perpetual barrage of everydayness that we experience, well, every day, the insurgent moment is when the blankness surfaces, when the infraordinary becomes apparent. It often requires this moment to be

framed as a moment, as in the blank map epigraph of Perec's *Species of Spaces*, or the Sociological Art actions of Fred Forest, illustrator of *Cause commune*.

“The Future of the Book” shows the mass produced book as the medium representative of the infraordinary, the medium by which the particularities of everyday life is recorded, and multiplied by a Xerox machine to its simulacra—the same way that *Cause commune* No. 5 was issued itself. The inclusion of the Marshall McLuhan essay, especially under its own heading, brings to the forefront the role that mass media plays in the infraordinary: it is both the object of its critique and the object of its own dissemination. The future of the book is in the act of the book: through the act of collecting these essays in *Cause commune* No. 5, and now, through my own collection of essays, the infraordinary is brought into slight focus, hovering within the pages of the journal, or between the columns on the broadsheet.

Then, what is the “why” of the infraordinary? From the words of Perec himself:

“I feel confusedly that the books I have written are inscribed and find their meaning in the overall image that I have of literature, but it seems to me that I shall never quite grasp that image entirely, that it belongs for me to a region beyond writing, to the question of “why I write,” which I can never answer except by writing, and thus deferring forever the very moment when, by ceasing to write, that image would visibly cohere, like a jigsaw puzzle inexorably brought to its completion.”¹³

Indeed, Blanchot's assessment of the everyday still holds, and holds even more true for the infraordinary: “it escapes.” It is defined primarily by its adjacencies, by what it is under, what it is between, what is not written *about*, but *around*. It is, above all, a humbling practice, requiring the elliptical act of questioning both one's own personal circumstances and the general circumstance of the world, and using these answers (better yet, more questions) to excavate the infraordinary from blank space, or to attempt to approach the void.

13 Perec, “Statement of Intent.”

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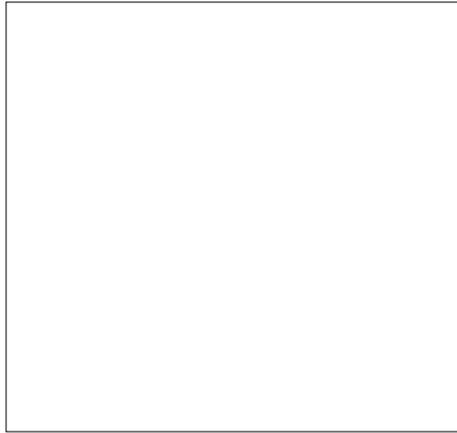
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