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**[Species of Sonic Spaces.](#)**

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# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Species of Sonic Spaces

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### Abstract:

Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces* (1974) offers the author's most explicit and extensive meditation on space understood as both everyday reality and source for speculation. The book is organised according to a 'visualist' logic and does not address sound as a way of understanding our environment. This article takes *Species of Spaces* as an invitation to consider 'species of sonic space', a variety of related chunks of the sonic environment we share. It asks how we might explore the sonic environment by way of Perec's text and through consideration of other spaces which Perec does not discuss. It reflects on existing attempts to think of sonic spaces and on the differences between describing sonic, visual and other felt spaces. Aspects of Perec's text lend themselves to comparison with other writers' attempts to bring sound and space together: his analysis of domestic spaces can be usefully placed alongside Gaston Bachelard's work on 'the poetics of space'; his descriptions of urban rhythms can be compared to those of Henri Lefebvre; his attention to interiority can be considered in light of Peter Sloterdijk's 'microspherology'; and his division of space into species find a potentially productive aural analogue in Brandon LaBelle's account of 'acoustic territories'. These and other thinkers are considered here as ways of setting up an 'auralisation' of *Species of Spaces*. The role of sound in Perec's *A Man Asleep* (1967), *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (2010) and *Life a User's Manual* (1978) is also discussed. These works, it is argued, extend, develop, anticipate or reverberate with *Species of Spaces* in ways that are useful for auralising that text.

**Keywords:** space, auralisation, Georges Perec, sound, rhythm.

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Contemplation of space inevitably involves the issue of where to begin and where to finish. How do we proceed to delineate space, when it might seem to start with our immediate physical environment but extend to the limitless spaces of the imagination? How do we map, differentiate, categorise and border spaces and places? Even when we think we have succeeded in doing so, there may be a nagging feeling that space is still blurry and somehow unknowable. Even then, however, space remains thinkable, tantalising and somehow tangible, a condition of our being in the world. As we move through space or reflect on it, we become aware of the possibilities to divide or expand the spaces we move through into other spaces. The French writer Georges Perec dwelt on this tendency in many of his works, most explicitly in his 1974 book *Species of Spaces*, where he gradually zooms out from the space of the page on which he is writing (and his readers reading) to the desk, the room, the house, until he imagines himself floating in space, looking back at Earth. All the time, the writer never really leaves the scene of writing, nor the reader the scene of reading, meaning that mental space – the space of memory and imagination – is as important for this exercise as physical space. ‘The spaces Perec explores, and the way he describes them, make it appear, in David Bellos’s words ‘as if the entire universe were a cone resting on the single point of the written word’ (Bellos 1995: 532).

‘I would like there to exist’, Perec writes, ‘places that are stable, unmoving, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted’ (Perec 1999: 91).<sup>1</sup> But he also knows this is impossible, just as it will be impossible, in his subsequent *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (Perec 2010), to come anywhere near to exhaustive description. The writing is the attempt and one which ultimately returns the text to where it began, with letters on a page:

Space melts like sand running through one’s fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds:

To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs. (*SoS* 91-2)

In attending to space, and the writer’s attempt to capture it, in this manner, Perec alerts us to the intimate relationships between space and time; what he is struggling with in the quoted extract is a temporal as much as a spatial problem. He is also, perhaps unknowingly in this specific text, aligning himself with a number of thinkers who have taken sound and sonic space as their subject of investigation and, in so doing, have had to account for the temporal challenges entailed in auditory geography. As George Revill (2013: 334) writes,

Sounds intensify and fade; they have distinguishing properties of attack and decay that are constitutive of our experience of them. Because sounds die away and because even as recordings they can only be held long term as some form of memory, code of practice or initiating algorithm, each instantiation of a sound is a specific utterance, a direct expression of process and practice ... Auditory

landscapes therefore lack some of the spatial and temporal structuring familiar from visual modes of experience.

The comparison being made here is between a more 'purely' visual representation of space (such as the painted or photographic landscape) and an auditory one, and Revill's aim is to highlight this customary division of sight and sound prior to challenging it. Photography, writing and sound recording, as technologies of memory and of sense extension, have the capacity to record and enrich our experience of being in the world. In his writing, Perec employs a medium that merges the spatial (the arrangement of the words on the page) and the temporal (the time it takes to write and read them) as he undertakes the challenge of tracing his species of spaces. The descriptive and conceptual methods he uses, however, tend to emphasise experiences of place that are not obviously or explicitly sonic, a fact worth noting since much of Perec's other work is attentive to the sonic dimension of lived experience. This article takes *Species of Spaces* as an invitation to consider what I will call 'species of sonic space', a variety of related chunks of the sonic environment we share as members of 'an acoustic community' (Blessner and Salter 2007: 26). This environment encompasses 'not only buildings and auditoriums that were designed according to a specific criterion, but also natural and accidental environments occupied by people and other mammals' (26-7). How might we incorporate sound into a consideration of 'species of spaces', based in part on Perec's illuminating meditation and in part on consideration of other spaces which Perec does not discuss? In approaching this question, I reflect on existing attempts to think of sonic spaces and on the differences between describing sonic, visual and other felt spaces. Aspects of Perec's text lend themselves to comparisons with other writers' attempts to bring sound and space together: his analysis of domestic spaces can be usefully placed alongside Gaston Bachelard's work on 'the poetics of space'; his brief descriptions of urban rhythms can be compared to those of Henri Lefebvre; his attention to interiority can be considered in light of Peter Sloterdijk's 'microspherology'; and his division of space into species find a potentially productive aural analogue in Brandon LaBelle's account of 'acoustic territories'. These and other thinkers will be considered here as ways of setting up an 'auralisation' of *Species of Spaces*. While *Species of Spaces* is organised according to a mainly 'visualist' physical logic (Ihde 2007: 54), a number of other works by Perec contain interesting reflections on sonic space. With this in mind I reflect on the role of sound in *A Man Asleep* (the 1967 novel and 1974 film), *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, and *Life a User's Manual*. These works, all appearing between 1967 and 1978, share space not only in their author's mind and oeuvre, but as extensions of each other. They extend, develop, anticipate or reverberate with *Species of Spaces* and address questions that might occur to a sonically curious reader. How, following Perec's journey from the space between the letters he was writing to the space in which he was writing, might one navigate a journey from the space between and within tones to the space in which one listens?

### ***Species of Spaces: A Brief and Partial Inventory of Spaces Included or Not***

Perec starts *Species of Spaces* with quoted references, games, a one-page play and a foreword in which he writes that ‘spaces have multiplied, been broken up and have diversified. There are spaces today of every kind and every size, for every use and every function. To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your best not to bump yourself’ (*SoS* 6). It is worth briefly listing which of these multiple, connected spaces Perec chooses to devote chapters to in the ensuing work. They are: The Page, The Bed, The Bedroom, The Apartment, The Apartment Building, The Street, The Neighbourhood, The Town, The Countryside, The Country, Europe (incorporating Old Continent and New Continent), The World and Space. This organisation echoes the way that addresses are written, and especially the exaggerated addresses beloved of children; Perec confesses that he used to conclude his address with ‘France, Europe, The World, The Universe’ (84). Perec’s chapters often range beyond the strict borders of the spaces to which they are devoted and many are subdivided into other spaces. The chapter on the Apartment has five sections, the last of which contains subsections on ‘Moving out’, ‘Moving in’ (both entirely comprising lists of verbs like ‘rolling up’ and ‘ripping out’), ‘Doors’, ‘Staircases’ and ‘Walls’. In the chapter on The Page, we are asked to imagine a set of spread-out pages that would ‘cover the whole, either of the island of St Helena or of Lake Trasimeno’ (10). This is perhaps a playful reminder that all of the spaces discussed in *Species* are contained within the bound pages of the book itself; a similar conceit appears in the section ‘On tourism’ where we are instructed to not visit London, but rather to ‘stay at home, in the chimney corner, and read the irreplaceable information supplied by Baedeker (1907 edition)’, from which Perec then quotes extensively (64-6).

The end result of this multispatiality is that, as readers, we feel we have travelled far and wide in Perec’s relatively short book. Although the visual logic of the structure would encourage us to imagine a camera steadily zooming out from the writer’s desk to a wide-angle view of outer space, there is so much darting around with Perec’s references, memories, schemas and flights of fancy that this steady trajectory is constantly undermined. Inevitably, for all its brilliantly cross-pollinating ideas, there are many spaces which Perec neglects to focus on at length or at all. Among these we might include, in pseudo-Perecian manner, The Vehicle (a space moving within and across other spaces – the mobile home is briefly covered on pp. 86-7, but more could be said of the car, the lorry, the bus (whose routes are briefly discussed on p.52), the tram, the train, etc.), The Shop, The Mall, The Arcade, The Warehouse, The Factory, connecting spaces such as The Bridge, The Elevated Walkway, The Subway (pedestrian and train), The Corridor, The Escalator, The Lift (although the last two might equally feature in The Vehicle), The Motorway-Highway-Interstate, The Railway Line, The River, The Canal, The Depot (Rail, Bus, etc.), The Port (maritime – the Airport is already considered on pp. 26-7).

My point is not that Perec has been deficient in neglecting such spaces; indeed, their omission is quite understandable given that many of them might be thought of as ‘non-places’ (Augé 2008), unamenable to the kind of intimate dwelling behaviours with which Perec, like Gaston Bachelard, is mostly concerned. When Perec does include an anecdote about a friend who ‘had the idea of living for a whole month in an international

airport' (*SoS* 26), it is as an intellectual exercise rather than an event caused by international travel restrictions (as it would be in Steven Spielberg's 2004 film *The Terminal*). When Perec notes that 'the activities essential to life, and most social activities, can be carried out without difficulty within the confines of an international airport' (26), it is a reminder of his interest in creating an anthropology of everyday life. As many readers have noted, much of the compelling readability of *Species of Spaces* resides in Perec's ability to write about ordinary and overlooked things and to do so in a manner that is both matter-of-fact and wryly amused. An airport as a dwelling place, then, would only be of interest for 'its exoticism: a displacement, more apparent than real, of our habits and rhythms' (27). In seeming anticipation of the Spielberg film that would be released three decades later, he imagines the situation as 'the point of departure for an umpteenth comic screenplay' (27). However, an airport is also an 'acoustic arena' of a very particular kind and one which produces an equally distinctive 'acoustic community' (Blessner and Salter 2007: 26). Such an extreme case encourages us to reflect on the acoustic arenas mentioned above, whether included or not in Perec's anthropology of space. The same might be said for the soundscapes encountered in the car (Bull 2001), the train (Certeau 1984: 111-4), the lift (Lanza 1995) or the shopping mall (Sterne 1997; LaBelle 2010).

### Species of Sonic Spaces

There are no doubt countless ways in which Perec's text could be extended, connected to and reflected on, just as there are endless ways to build on the systems of constraint and invention developed by the Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or Workshop for Potential Literature), of which Perec was a member. Elements of *Species of Spaces* and Perec's 1978 novel *Life a User's Manual*, for example, are developed in dazzling new ways by Chris Ware in his ambitious graphic novel *Building Stories* (2012). Ware, influenced by the Oulipo-affiliated Oubapo (*Ouvrir de Bande Dessinée Potentielle*, or Workshop for Potential Comic Strips – see Mathews and Brotchie 2005: 319-25) created a multi-part story based around the residents of a Chicago apartment building that is told via a variety of bound and unbound comic strips, brochures, books, newspapers, a poster, a board and the box in which all these are contained. As well as telling the stories of the people connected to the building, Ware has the building offer its own observations, at one point sharing recollections of 'the pink pitter-pat of freshly showered feet' (Ware 2012: np). Perec had imagined his block of flats in *Life a User's Manual* as a grid similar to those found on chess or go boards and prefaced the novel with a reflection on the art of jigsaws. All of these metaphorical connections find analogues in Ware's building in a box, a concept Perec would doubtless have relished.

My own particular interest lies in extending Perec's 'species of spaces' into the realm of sound and considering the relationship between the sonic and the spatial. Writing in this journal, Sheila Hones has emphasised the relative lack of concentration on the aural in literary geography. Addressing this gap, she offers useful ways to consider the 'auscultation' and 'auralisation' of literary texts (Hones 2015) and provides interesting reflections on the typology of space, highlighting the importance of who in a text or

narrative is listening and how they are doing so, which characters can hear which sounds, and so on. One way to attend to the relative silence of *Species of Spaces*, then, might be to analyse the text according to methods that Hones models. Yet Perec's pseudo-scientific delineation and categorisation of spaces, along with the relative lack of specific characters engaged in specific actions, would seem to resist such an approach. A complementary method, therefore, might be to devise an Oulipian project that considers the sound of the spaces described, whether by speculating with Perec's own examples or – perhaps more excitingly – attempting to recreate them according to one's own experience and locale in a connective act of sonic fieldwork.

While there exist models of sonic fieldwork related to species of spatial and temporal experience that one could attempt to emulate (hear, for example, Watson 2011 and see Revill 2013), in what follows I have decided to focus mainly on the relationship between writing, space and sound. This is because the bulk of *Species of Spaces* does not rely on the spatial qualities of text (i.e. it is not primarily a visual work) but instead offers description of space that could just as easily be spoken and heard as written and read. A written description of sonic space(s) thus becomes a more reasonable comparative undertaking. Attending to sound in the 'alien' medium of writing can act as an encouragement to think more widely about the sonic environment, as evidenced by the growing number of books dedicated to sound studies. There is also the vexed question of whether sound or written text can get us closer to the experience of sounds that have long ago disappeared (Smith 2015).

My initial thoughts on what an auralised *Species of Spaces* might look and sound like involved a speculative transcription of Perec's text that opened with an account of a musician 'hearing' the silent musical notes of a score, then playing some notes – setting them in motion – and considering how they positioned themselves in the space immediately available to her. From this initial account of hearing someone hearing, I imagined the text moving outwards to the room in which the protagonist is playing and listening, taking in the sounds of the objects in the room, the room itself, the building, street, and so on. As we travelled through the species of sonic spaces, we could set in motion the mute objects that filled Perec's chapters, bringing them to sonorous life. And we could take his exhortation to let words set things in motion and *listen* closely as 'a long goods train drawn by a team locomotive passes over a viaduct; barges laden with gravel ply the canals; small sailing boats manoeuvre on the lake; a big liner escorted by tugs enters the anchorage' (*SoS* 14). However, after a few false starts, I rejected this particular method of auralisation as I realised that it would take a work at least as extensive as *Species of Spaces* itself to do justice to the sonic dimensions. It would also, of necessity, be as much a work of speculative audio-literary geography as it would a brief critical reflection suited to an academic journal. In place of such a creative project, I have opted instead for an attempt at auralising *Species of Spaces* by way of, firstly, connecting its themes to insights shared by existing studies of sound and space and, secondly, attending to Perec's more explicit recognition of the sound of spaces in his other work.

## Sound and/as Space

Sound provides significant information for an understanding of space, as Peter Doyle notes: 'If place, space and physical form were to be perceived or described in terms of their acoustic and aural properties, a rich substratum of signification might be accessed. This layer of meaning might contain, in surprisingly unproblematic form, many of the attributes of place that lie just below the surface of conscious perception' (Doyle 2005: 39) The aural does not replace the visual, tactile or olfactory – it may even be a 'subtext' – but it offers a useful 'counterpart' (40). Don Ihde refers to a 'visualism' that 'may be taken as a symptomatology of the history of thought' (Ihde 2007: 6) while noting that a visualism which considers only the visual will always be incomplete: 'If we suppose that any metaphysics of worth must be one that is at least comprehensive, then a total visualist metaphysics must find a way to account for and to include in its description of the world all those invisible events that at this level seem to lie beyond the reach of the visible horizon, but are nevertheless present within experience.' (54) This bringing together of the visual and the aural is also addressed in R. Murray Schafer's exploration of the 'soundscape', an aural accompaniment to the visualist concept of the landscape (Schafer 1994).

The field of vision contains many things that comprise 'the realm of mute objects' (Ihde: 50) and because these hold a greater proportion of our attention and comprise much of the description of the world, the sonic dimension is often neglected. While there are also events in the world that, like the wind, can be heard and not seen, much that can be found in the field of vision can be paired with what can be found in the field of hearing either because it is making a noise, because it has the potential to do so or because the result of an invisible process can be seen (the trees blown by the wind, for example). In this way we become aware of what Ihde calls the 'pairing' of the visual and the aural, a process which is often realised via movement – the dropped coin, the rustling leaves, the needle on the record. Mario Maffi underlines the role of movement in one of his sonic portraits of New York City:

In certain subway stations ... a rolling rumble that almost induces feelings of panic as the trains draw near ... honkings, sirens, skiddings, and brakings [of] the traffic ... hurried scurrying along the massive sidewalk stones, the wooden thud of skateboards leaping up steps, the intermittent whirring of helicopter blades, the metallic frizzle of police car radios, the full-throated singing of a passerby ... the vibration of the air as it sneaks its way about the stairways of the high-rises ... the wind that whistles through cracks in the guillotine windows; the deep droning of the air-conditioning system of the supermarket below the house; the sound of a phrase muttered in the narrow streets that echoes all the way up to the top floor ... (Maffi 2004: 104-5)

This passage includes sounds heard in many different spaces, from underground to street to apartment. In doing so, it offers a reminder not only of the way that sounds from one space can permeate others (such as the voice in the street entering the high-rise

apartment through the window), but also of how all these sounds can be almost simultaneously present in the moment of reflection, just as Perec's spaces are all present as he writes his text. Sound thus makes itself present in the memory just as it does in the moment of initial perception; it inhabits or informs the imagination too, as when Maffi speculates on whether the 'voice of New York' has changed 'now that the Elevated no longer cuts across *all* Manhattan ... and the agonizing siren songs of massive ocean liners docked along East River and the Hudson are no more' (Maffi 2004: 103).

Diane Ackerman underlines this relativity when she writes that '[s]ounds have to be located in space, identified by type, intensity and other features' (Ackerman 1996: 178). The 'geographical quality' she attaches to listening is another approach to species of sonic spaces, as is Henri Lefebvre's work on 'rhythmanalysis'. 'Let us insist', Lefebvre writes, 'on the relativity of rhythms' and he goes on to observe that '[a] rhythm is only slow or fast in relation to other rhythms with which it finds itself associated in a more or less vast unity ... This leads us to underline the plurality of rhythms, alongside that of their associations and their interactions or reciprocal actions' (Lefebvre 2013: 96). We can extend these observations to spaces, which are only small or large in relation to each other and to the bodies that inhabit them; the polyrhythmic thus relates in important ways to the polyspatial. From the microscopic spaces of the phonographic groove (a veritable sonic landscape when magnified) to the gravel given new audibility by the car's wheel and the stones on the shore as the wave hits, objects and landscapes are potential rhythmscapes, and species of spaces are species of rhythm in which our experience of the world is written.

There is clearly and audibly a soundscape wherever we are. But our ability to tell one soundscape from another may be less successful than our ability to tell one landscape from another. For all our effort in distinguishing the sounds of spaces within a local environment, sound rarely has the power to fix particular places in the more extensive scoping ways that sight does. One would have to be unusually attuned to bird noise, for example, to tell the seagulls of Lisbon from those of Brighton. As Trevor Wishart has claimed from his British perspective, 'you'd have to go to Australia to hear a completely different soundscape' (Stone-Davis 2015: 6), though there would surely be gradations on the way. The noise and blare of one city is more identical to that of another city than are its visual icons. The visual styles of common French or German buildings may be less specifically identifiable than those of the Eiffel Tower or Brandenburg Gate, but they are more distinctive from each other than the sounds of these countries' cities. An exception is the sound of voices, a marker of human presence that is far more accurate in determining location.

This vocal presence is important because when we discuss space, we almost inevitably discuss people in space, or at least space in terms of human presence or absence, including people's objects in space, what people have done in or with certain spaces, and how people form, maintain and disband communities through speech. This relates to what Adriana Cavarero (2005: 7) calls 'the relational valence of the vocal sphere', an arena in which mutual relationships are established by voices and listeners. Cavarero initiates her philosophy of the voice by analysing Italo Calvino's story 'A King Listens', in which the titular monarch appears as a paranoid, distant ruler, cut off from

his subjects by isolation within his throne room. Everything has been carefully planned to avoid his having to leave the room or to have contact with the outside world. With little to do other than retain his regal posture, he listens to the sounds of the palace: doors slamming, the shuffling of feet, stifled cries. In between these sounds, it is the silences that cause anxiety, for they seem heavy with the threat of rebellion. He becomes obsessed with listening and finds himself able to extend his perception to the sounds of the city beyond the palace walls, 'a distant rumble at the bottom of the ear, a hum of voices, a buzz of wheels' (Calvino 2002: 50). From the anonymous buzz, he detects the voice of a woman singing and embarks on a relationship built on recognising human individuality through vocal uniqueness.

Rather like Calvino's king, Julien Gracq describes his initial spatial awareness of the city of Nantes as an aural and olfactory experience rather than a visual one. He perceived the city from within the cloistered world of a public school from which access to the outside world was prohibited. 'Twice a day, like the tide, the sounds of Nantes poured in' as the doors were opened for the day students (Gracq 2005: 3-4). These sonic snippets were fuel to the young Gracq's imagination, as urban space was produced through clamour: 'Life just outside the school gates ... animated the streets of the city, but all I could do was listen obsessively to its sounds: it is the memory of those noises, so close, electrifying, and nevertheless impossible to reach, which remind me more than anything of certain poems by Rimbaud' (6). Sound, smell, touch and taste all feed the imagination and, despite the image being so important, we might say that it is sight – explicit, unobstructed sight – that is most deadly to the imagination. Edward Casey defines the act of imagining as 'the conscious projection and contemplation of objects posited as pure possibilities' (Casey 1971: 476), a definition that retains the visual (via projection and contemplation) while excluding that which is admissible to sight at the moment of imagining. If we think of recorded or broadcast audio, we can posit a subject who fills in visual details as they listen and who could potentially be surprised if confronted with visual evidence of the studio from which sound is emanating. As Peter Doyle (2005) explains, the fabrication of imagined space was a crucial element of recording from its earliest days.

### **Interiority, Exteriority, Territory**

Gaston Bachelard, writing about the experience of poetry, makes reference to a 'dialectics of large and small' and another 'of within and without' (Bachelard 1994: xxxviii, xxxix), notions which are echoed by both Perec and Henri Lefebvre. As Lefebvre will later, Bachelard contrasts imagined space with the space of positivistic disciplines, emphasising the former as 'space that has been lived in' (xxxvi). Like Perec, he is keenly attuned to the intimacies of dwelling and to the ways in which bodies and minds inhabit or accommodate a variety of spaces in and out of the home. Both writers focus mainly on what Bachelard calls 'intimate space' and avoid 'the space of hatred and combat' (xxxvi). While Bachelard speaks of echo, reverberation and resonance, in the main his text presents these concepts as temporal relationships with the poetic image rather than explorations of the sonority of space. However, he does position his poetics of space as

indebted to the phenomenology of Eugène Minkowski, who theorised an explicitly sonorous experience of being in the world.

Where intimacy and interiority are issues, as they are for Bachelard and Perec, an awareness of sonorous intimacy might be a useful additional perspective. To move towards such a possibility, we might consider Peter Sloterdijk's account of sonority in the first volume of his trilogy *Spheres*, focussed on the 'microspherology' of bubbles and 'thinking the interior'. Sloterdijk notes that the intimacy implied by sonic communication is already established before communication begins: 'How can it be that for billions of messages, I am a rock on which their waves break without resonance, while certain voices and instructions unlock me and make me tremble as if I were the chosen instrument to render them audible, a medium and mouthpiece simply for their urge to sound?' (Sloterdijk 2011: 479). This unlocking posits sound as a way of opening up new spaces within the subject and here sound seems to go further than vision as it resonates within the body. The classic example of aural unlocking, and the forced obedience that may accompany it, is the Siren. Sloterdijk presents the Sirens' song not as a melody or tonality unique to the Sirens themselves, but rather as a reminder of the intimate sonic spaces that their auditors have left behind them. To give oneself up to the lure of this music is to give oneself over to a fatal homesickness. 'The sirens found eager victims in all listeners ... because they sing from the listener's own place'; to listen to them is enter 'a core space' (487). The Siren moment is presented in *Spheres* as a set of shifting, or shrinking, spaces: the reduction of the world to the Aegean Sea, the transformation of the sea to a concert hall, the spatial relationship between the listener's interiority and that which comes from without. To paraphrase David Bellos's description of *Species of Spaces*, it is as if the whole world becomes a cone held to the ear of the rapt listener.

Such theories of interiority are most usefully accompanied by theories of exteriority, as Sloterdijk illustrates with a second volume of *Spheres* focussed on 'macrospherology'. From an aural perspective, we might posit such a shift as a move from the sonorous interiority of the body, via the inter- and intra-relational spaces of tones, towards an exterior world of spaces, arenas or territories produced and reflected by sound. Brandon LaBelle's (2010) work on 'acoustic territories' provides an extensive example of how this might be achieved. LaBelle uses a taxonomy of space that would doubtless make sense to Perec, organising his book via chapters entitled 'Underground', 'Home', 'Sidewalk', 'Street', 'Shopping Mall', and 'Sky'. LaBelle is concerned with the interrelation of a variety of sonic spaces and with the ways in which sound is not merely something that occupies space, but rather one of the main ways in which space is constituted and, in turn, constitutes its occupants. LaBelle's acoustic territories are 'specific while being multiple, cut with flows and rhythms, vibrations and echoes, all of which form a sonic discourse that is equally feverish, energetic and participatory' (xxiv). The emphasis here is on the dynamic and kinetic qualities of sound, a reminder that movement, while potentially *informative* in the perception of visual space, is more obviously *foundational* to the understanding of sonic space. Echo, as example of moving sound, is illustrative here. Sound, like light, bounces back from surfaces but where images are generally perceived as contemporaneous with what they reflect or refract, sounds return more slowly in echo, making time and movement more apparent to a stationary

perceiver. Another way of putting this would be to say that there is greater stability to image than to sound, so while image appears to be fixed sound is always evidence of movement. Mario Maffi captures this well in his account of New York noises: ‘Sounds burst forth, they move in the streets, rebound off the walls, fill the houses. You can almost touch them. The day will be full of them ... a concert of ostensibly discordant sounds that eventually settles and amalgamates, and tells the metropolis’ (Maffi 2004: 112).

Maffi’s reflections have been included in Kenneth Goldsmith’s epic compilation *Capital* (2015), a book which attempts to ‘tell the metropolis’ of New York City through quoted fragments, taking Walter Benjamin’s unfinished *Arcades Project* as its model. Goldsmith has a chapter called ‘Sound’ that includes nearly three hundred extracts dealing with the sonic experience of the city, categorised either generally under the ‘Sound’ label or as ‘Air, Wind’, ‘Silence, Quiet’, ‘Snow’, ‘Rain’, ‘River’, ‘Nature’, ‘El, Train, Subway’, ‘Traffic’, ‘Garbage’, ‘Radiator’, ‘Construction’, ‘Street’, ‘Music’, ‘Radio’ and ‘Speech’ (262-89). The cumulative effect of these impressions is to create a sound symphony that rings the music of the city in polyspatial and polyrhythmic dimensions. Goldsmith’s collection as a whole – containing fifty-two chapters on topics such as ‘Empire’, ‘Architecture’, ‘Crowds’, ‘Body’, ‘Smell’, ‘Central Park’, ‘Mapplethorpe’, ‘Gentrification’, ‘Crime’ and ‘World Trade Center’ – creates through its scavenging and weaving of secondary sources a literary example of how space is produced. In doing so, it brings to life Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) theories on the production of space, in which perceived space (‘spatial practice’) is understood to act in dynamic tension with conceptualised space (‘the representation of space’) and lived space (‘spaces of representation’ – see also Soja 1996). Certain of Goldsmith’s chapters – particularly those on crowds and sound – illustrate Lefebvre’s later writings on ‘rhythmanalysis’ and Michel de Certeau’s account of walking in the city, in which urban life is understood through practices that are rhythmic, musical and improvisatory, if not always explicitly aural (Lefebvre 2013; Certeau 1984: 91-110).

The work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari corresponds, to an extent, with that of Perec, Lefebvre and Certeau, while also anticipating and sometimes influencing much recent work in the discipline of sound studies. Using the sonority of space as a way of introducing their chapter on the refrain in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write of sound as enabling a comforting and/or reassuring centre for individual subjects and of the exploratory possibilities for subjects to extend themselves beyond the relative comfort of the home. They first posit the figure of the ‘child in the dark, gripped with fear’ who ‘comforts himself by singing under his breath’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 343). The child orients himself through song, learning as he does so the comforting and ‘territorialising’ properties of sound. The next stage referred to is domestic territorialisation, which Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge through the role of technical ability to build homes and furnish them with further territorialising devices: ‘radios and television sets are like sound walls around every household and mark territories’ (343). These territories are finally those from which ‘one launches forth, hazards an improvisation’ (343), an observation similar to that posited by Perec at the outset of *Life a User’s Manual*, where the residents of the apartment building ‘entrench themselves in

their domestic space' and 'would prefer nothing to emerge from it' except 'the dog on a lead, the child off to fetch the bread, someone brought back, someone sent away' (Perec 1990: 3). Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion that 'One ventures from home on the thread of a tune' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 344) finds resonance in Certeau's account of walking in the city as an improvised practice of everyday life and in Lefebvre's rhythm-analytical account of urban life.

### Sonic Experience in Georges Perec's Work

Having explored some of the ways in which sound maps onto our understanding of space, I want to focus again on Georges Perec by considering how sound – notably absent for most of *Species of Spaces* – is presented elsewhere in his *oeuvre*. To begin with, let us consider *A Man Asleep*, Perec's second novel, published in 1967. While not as successful as his 1965 debut *Things*, it clearly had a place in his heart as he returned to it twice in the 1970s, first as a film in 1974 and then as a chapter in his widely acclaimed 1978 novel *Life a User's Manual*. *A Man Asleep* tells the story, in second person narration, of a young unnamed student who gradually removes himself from his normal life and enters a solitary, limbo existence mainly 'lived' in the confines of his room, a spartan flat in a Paris apartment building. When he does venture out, it is to walk the streets of the city, sometimes aimlessly and sometimes with a fixed but mysterious purpose. There is an episode in the countryside, at the home of the protagonist's parents, and this passes in as hallucinatory a fashion as the original transformation and the subsequent return to the city. The book ends in Place Clichy with the young man waiting for the rain to stop.

*A Man Asleep* is rich in references to sound, all of which bring additional meaning and resonance to the spaces in which the tale unfolds. Perec prefaces the text with an epigraph from Kafka on listening and the text – like Kafka's famous tale of Gregor Samsa – relates a metamorphosis, or rather the gradual realisation of a change (when the story of the young man is briefly re-told in chapter fifty-two of *Life a User's Manual*, he is given the name Grégoire Simpson in a clear homage to Kafka's transformed man). Certain sounds of the apartment building, such as coughing, dripping water, furniture being moved, footsteps and street sounds drifting through the window, provide a refrain that appears throughout the novel. Perec also attends to the sounds of the countryside during the visit to the parents' home and, when the young man returns to his Paris room, we read of 'the hosts of ever-present noises ... which are now all that keep you attached to the world', before being subjected once more to the catalogue of apartment sounds (*AMA* 160). Later, the student is found listening to his neighbour through the walls of the apartment building: 'you prefer to listen to him and to be free to imagine him as you wish' (*AMA* 206). This imagination involves the space the neighbour lives in, the volume and design of which can be estimated from the sound of his movements. Aware of the possibilities for deception available to such a relationship, Perec's unknown narrator offers these observations:

You may well listen, prick up your ears, press them against the wall, but when all is said and done you know next to nothing. It seems that your confidence in your interpretations diminishes in inverse proportion to the precision of your perceptions. Certainly, he opens and closes drawers all the time, but even that isn't proven, it is not entirely out of the question, for example, that for some reason best known to him, he is rubbing together two pieces of wood, or that he is indeed opening and closing one or several drawers, but for no particular reason, that is to say, without putting anything in or taking anything out, simply for the sake of making some noise, or because he likes the sound of opening and closing drawers ... Certainly, he draws water from the tap on the landing, certainly his kettle whistles when the water reaches boiling point, but perhaps it is he who is whistling – there is no way of knowing. (*AMA* 208-9)

Even if these are false impressions, they are 'true' in another sense in that these sounds have given meaning to the listener's life and have given him a reason to live. In this sense, he enters an existence determined by listening and imagination. Perce also outlines the possibility that the neighbour might be doing the same thing, imagining the protagonist from his sounds and silences. In this sense, both neighbours are bound together in an intimacy of sound, like Calvino's king and the singer with whom he finds himself in musical conversation.

One might expect that the film of *A Man Asleep* would provide the 'evidence' for the sources of the sounds mentioned in the text, and to an extent it does. The second person narration, which will form the only speech in the film, does not enter until more than six minutes have elapsed. The opening of the film instead consists of a series of sounds and images, only some of which are synced together (or 'paired', to use Ihde's term). The opening shot of the cityscape is accompanied by what seems to be a combination of mechanical hum and running water, though no visual pairing is provided for this. An alarm clock rings and coughing is heard, but we do not see the sources. On the other hand, we see *and* hear a car driving along a street, a cigarette being put out in an ashtray, pigeons landing on a rubbish bin, a man filling a metal bucket with water, a tap dripping, bins being collected and another alarm clock ringing and being switched off. This early part of the film – which we subsequently realise is a representation of the protagonist's normal everyday life, before his transformative depression draws in – thus offers a changing dynamic of the seen and heard, not unlike many other films. Things get rather more confusing when the female voiceover enters, signalling the onset of the young man's alternative life. From this point various sounds from the original text of *A Man Asleep* are mentioned – such as the knocking on the door, the buzz of insects and the noise of the neighbour – but these are not synchronised to the images in the film. As David Bellos relates, this was a deliberate strategy by the film makers (Bellos 1995: 531), allowing them to exploit and exaggerate an awareness we already possess as experienced spectators while also amplifying the protagonist's increasing removal from 'normal' everyday rhythms.

*Life a User's Manual* presents another working out of species of space. In fact, Perec provided a summary of the novel's conceit in the chapter of *Species* on 'The Apartment Building':

*Project for a novel*

I imagine a Parisian apartment building whose façade has been removed – a sort of equivalent to the roof that is lifted off ... so that all the rooms in the front, from the ground floor up to the attics, are instantly and simultaneously visible.

The novel – whose title is *Life a User's Manual* – restricts itself ... to describing the rooms thus unveiled and the activities unfolding in them, the whole in accordance with ... a polygraph of the moves made by a chess knight. (*SoS* 40)

The governing logic initially appears to be visual, with Perec's imagined apartment building sliced so as to *view* all the occupants. This is understandable as the eye could be said to see such a totality more easily than the ear could hear it, albeit that both can also be 'focussed' on certain details. It is thus interesting to realise that, in opening his great novel not in one of the rooms but on one of the staircases, Perec is drawn to emphasise the *sound* of the building. He describes the stairs as being 'where the life of the building regularly and distantly resounds' (*LaUM* 3) and notes that 'what happens behind the flats' heavy doors can most often be perceived only through those fragmented echoes, those splinters, remnants, shadows, those first moves or incidents or accidents that happen in what are called the "common areas", soft little sounds damped by the red woollen carpet' (3). Perec then describes the way in which all the building's inhabitants live parallel lives behind thin partitions, performing those same actions that had been amplified in *A Man Asleep*: 'turning on a tap, flushing the water closet, switching on a light, laying a table, a few dozen simultaneous existences repeated from storey to storey, from building to building, from street to street' (3).

Chapter seventeen of *Life* again uses the stairs as a way of taking a sounding of the building, its inhabitants, events and objects. The focus here, however, is on memory and the past, on what has passed through the building as the character Monsieur Valène attempts 'to resuscitate those imperceptible details which over the course of fifty-five years had woven the life of this house and which the years had unpicked one by one' (*LaUM* 61). As the chapter progresses, the focus moves from events and people to objects and finally to sensed perceptions, most of them sonic in origin:

a gesture, a noise, a flicker, a young woman singing operatic arias to her own piano accompaniment, the clumsy clickety-clack of a typewriter, the clinging smell of cresyl disinfectant, a noise of people, a shout, a hubbub, a rustling of silks and furs, a plaintive miaow behind a closed door, knocks on partition walls, hackneyed tangos on hissing gramophones ... (*LaUM* 62)

If these last recalled perceptions are the most obvious sonic references in the chapter, the entirety has an aural logic to it in that it relies on lists and repetitions, providing the text

with a rhythmic feel. In the first section, Valène's recollections explicitly echo the rhythmic logic of Perec's *I Remember* (Perec 2014), albeit that the starting point of each recalled event has changed from 'I remember ...' to 'he remembers ...'

In his short book from 1975, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, Perec set out to describe 'that which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds' (*AEPP* 3). His method for doing so was to station himself in Place Saint-Sulpice and to note down as many instances of the 'infraordinary' as he could in order to compile an exhaustive description of what could be perceived at this location. Thus, among the events observed from 12.40 pm on the first day (18 October 1974), we read:

Three people are waiting near the taxi stand. There are two taxis, their drivers aren't there (hooded taxis)

All the pigeons have taken refuge on the gutter of the district council building.

A 96 passes by. An 87 passes by. A 70 passes by. A 'Grenelle Interlinge' truck passes by.

Lull. There is no one at the bus stop.

A 63 passes by. A 96 passes by.

A young woman is sitting on a bench, facing 'La demeure' tapestry gallery; she is smoking a cigarette. (*AEPP* 10-11)

Perec's witnessing follows a predominantly visual logic – the first task he sets himself is an 'outline of an inventory of some strictly visible things' (*AEPP* 5) – but, due in part to the type of objects and events he records and in part to our own experience of cities as places of constant movement, the text lends itself well to auralisation. Where *A Man Asleep* unfurls with what Harry Mathews called 'a slow, hallucinatory music' (Mathews 1983: 140), *Attempt* relies more on rhythm, especially the kind of rhythms of everyday life that Lefebvre sought to analyse. The recurring buses provide the most common rhythm as 'they cut up time' and 'punctuate the background noise' (*AEPP* 22). They are vital to the running of the world and are comfortably 'foreseeable' (22), and, we may assume, forehearable.

The writer who sets out to exhaust a place in Paris performs the deliberate action of recording everything around him, yet knows the impossibility of total capture and ultimately does little to *produce* the space he wishes to record. He offers no refrain but is rather the witness to other refrains of city life, the passing of citizens, the recurring buses, the endless pigeons.

Any attempt at exhaustive description is, inevitably, doomed to failure, a theme that Perec returned to again and again. Just as the main characters in *Life* are doomed to failure in their endeavours, so is their creator in this and his other works. Reflecting on the fragility of Perec's fiction, Mathews wrote that the author 'knew perfectly well that even if he committed himself utterly to remaking the world through writing, his new world would be no less doomed than the one into which he had been born' (Mathews 1983: 144). But if utopia is unreachable, even in the imaginative spaces of literature,

Perec also teaches us the value of ludic imagination and, with his restless, relentless curiosity, encourages extensions to the puzzles, riddles and games he set in motion.

## Conclusion

The starting point of this article was a question which arose while reading George Perec's *Species of Spaces*, namely where and how sound might be included in an analysis of multispatiality. While the temptation to add new dimensions to Perec's essay through the medium of sound recording remains strong – not least through the potential for Oulipian constraints and strategies that could be applied to the project – I have opted for a written response which seeks to highlight, or make resonant, affiliations between *Species of Spaces* and a range of theoretical and literary attempts at capturing sonic-spatial relationships in writing. I have also wanted to show that Perec was far from deaf to the sound of spaces, as evidence in other works more or less contemporaneous with *Species of Spaces*. These works show how Perec himself might have incorporated sound into his 1974 text had he decided to do so. A poet and theorist of the everyday such as Perec would no doubt have been alert to the point made by Blesser and Salter when they write that 'we can enhance our ability to hear space by choosing to exercise that ability in our daily lives' and that this has important benefits for our culture more broadly (Blesser and Salter 2007: 362). This goes as much for adding new dimensions to familiar texts as it does for engaging more thoroughly, as Perec taught us, in analysing the seemingly unremarkable.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Subsequent references to *Species of Spaces* will be given as *SoS*. References to other Perec texts will be given as follows: *A Man Asleep* (Perec 1991) as *AMA*; *Life a User's Manual* (Perec 1990) as *LaUM*; and *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (Perec 2010) as *AAEP*.

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