



**“An Attempt at Exhausting an Augmented Place in Paris.” Georges Perec, observer-writer of urban life, as a mobile locative media user**

Christian Licoppe  
Département de Sciences Economiques Et Sociales  
Telecom Paristech  
Christian.licoppe@telecom-paristech.fr

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## **“An Attempt at Exhausting an Augmented Place in Paris”**

**Georges Perec, observer-writer of urban life, as a mobile locative media user**

Christian Licoppe

Department of Social Science, Telecom Paristech

46 rue Barrault, 75013, Paris, France

christian.licoppe@telecom-paristech.fr

*“So now, at a time when others are asleep, Mr G. is bending over a table, darting on to a sheet the same glance that a moment ago he was directing towards external things ... And the external world is reborn upon his paper” (Baudelaire, 1863: 12)*

**Abstract:** This chapter describes a thought experiment in which a modern day Georges Perec, equipped with a smartphone and actively committed to the use of mobile locative media such as Foursquare, would make an *“Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris”* today. I argue that the initial project epitomized the way the neutral gaze of the onlooker is constitutive of the urban public place and the way behavior in urban public places could be described and accountable in generic terms intelligible to readers themselves framed as strangers (in the sense of strangers in public places). This analysis is used as a baseline to show how a fictive, connected Perec would have to cope with the dual accessibility of places and people, both in the physical world and on screen, and especially the ‘parochialization’ of place and individualization of digital personae online, in a way which would radically transform the initial literary project. This shows how the city augmented with mobile locative media might not be available to description in the same terms as the 20th century metropolis, and how a square in the augmented city might not be a public place in the same sense.

**Keywords:** Perec, Public places, Mobile locative media, Foursquare, Encounters

## Introduction

The modern metropolis has been aptly described as a place of, and a place for strangers (Lofland, 1973), where strangers are expected to be ‘thrown together’ (Massey, 2005). Baudelaire’s *flâneur* heralded the rise to dominance of the modern metropolis in the Western world. The way he used his leisurely gait functioned as a political sign of resistance against capitalistic and consumer concerns in the metropolis. On an experiential plane the *flâneur* could immerse himself in the joys of being thrown together with anonymous strangers, of being an anonymous body lost in the crowd, that is in the random flow of a multitude of other strangers:

*"The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world - impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito." (Baudelaire, 1863: 9)*

His delight was primarily visual, and his experience framed as an unpredictable succession of sights, which could be presented as lists of events intelligible to all, that is to any other stranger in the crowd. The *flâneur*'s conduct and the way it could be described systematically conjured up “the ‘seen’ and ‘witnessed’ character of space and particularly urban space” (Jenks, 1994: 144):

*"He delights in fine carriage and proud horses, the dazzling smartness of the grooms, the expertness of the footmen, the sinuous gait of the women, the beauty of the children, happy to be alive and nicely dressed – in a word, he delights in universal life" (Ibid., 11)*

One century later, such an experience had become banal, no longer the stuff of a deeply esthetic enjoyment. Understanding the behavior of strangers in crowds had become a topic for interactionist sociology and the nascent Urban Studies. William Whyte thus tried to document visually the embodied arrangements of passing strangers on busy urban plazas in large American cities in an interesting early use of ‘video-as-data’

(Whyte, 2001). At around the same time, Erving Goffman was trying to bring to light the ‘interaction order’ which characterizes ‘interactions in public’, and which for instance gives rise to expected displays of ‘civil inattention’ in the mingling of mobile strangers on the street (Goffman, 1963: 84). Goffman’s attention to the visual surface organization of interactions in public also testified in its way to the centrality of “the ‘seen’ and ‘witnessed’ character” of urban public places and the life forms they support. However, visibility and gaze are social constructions. Goffman showed how the fact that any event which occurs in the open could be treated as a spectacle for disengaged onlookers is a constitutive, if not the constitutive feature of urban spaces and interactions in public as such:

*“When individuals are engaged in playing a sport or a board game, repairing a car, or constructing a building, bystanders will often blatantly watch the proceedings and be suffered in this status of onlookers by those upon whom they are looking. It is this onlooker status that becomes available whenever one has an accident or creates a scene; indeed the creation of these rights of open looking constitutes one of the chief costs of getting into trouble in public” (Goffman, 1974: 225).*

At about the same time in Paris, Georges Perec was engaged in a literary project which seemed to resonate deeply with the urban sociology of the time. He decided to sit at the terrace of a Parisian café three days in a row in an “attempt at exhausting a place in Paris”. His aim was to try to describe everything that would pass or happen in front of his eyes in Place Saint-Sulpice, ‘everything’ being here taken as a string of ordinary and visual happenings:

*“My intention in the pages that follow was to describe the rest instead: that which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars and clouds” (Perec, 2010: 3).*

Though it retains a link with Baudelaire’s writer-*flâneur*, the experience of which also involved an enumeration of encounters from a disengaged perspective, Perec’s endeavor nevertheless differs in two important respects. First, it is framed as an attempt at exhaustiveness, i.e. as a consciously self-defeating effort to encompass the whole of the fleeting urban experience and to account for it in writing. Second, Perec as a writing observer

does not delight in the spectacle he recounts, nor does he glamorize his experience. Perec's inventories are written in a monotonous tone, mostly devoid of emotion. As I will discuss below, the force of his attempt is founded on the coherence of his stance as a neutral onlooker, both when gazing at Saint-Sulpice square and when writing, and the framing of the reader as a similar onlooker, precisely achieved through the 'neutral' and impersonal commonsensicality of his descriptions. In that sense, Perec's literary project parallels Goffman's urban sociology in extolling the city as a place for anonymous crowds, the conduct of which is designed to be open and meaningful to the neutral and disengaged onlooker. Both authors insist on urban locales as lived public places, and highlight the onlooker's stance as constitutive of their 'public' character.

In this paper I will use Perec's work as a starting point for a thought experiment. I will try to imagine a high-tech reincarnation of Perec equipped with a smartphone and himself an active user of mobile locative media, who would attempt today to emulate his earlier, unconnected counterpart's project in Place Saint-Sulpice. The point of such a thought experiment is to make perceptible some of the shifts which the possible – and probable – development of mobile locative media might bring to the framing of the city as an assemblage of public places crisscrossed by large fluxes of anonymous bodies and vehicular units, always open to the impersonal and commonsensical gaze of the onlooker. Unlike the contemporary metropolis, the future augmented city will instead appear as a set of hybrid ecologies, simultaneously public and 'parochial' (Humphreys, 2010), and populated by 'pseudonymous strangers' (Licoppe, submitted for publication), that is hybrid entities who have the visual appearance of embodied anonymous strangers, but who are also simultaneously available on screen as individualized digital personae. An attempt by a connected Perec to exhaust an augmented public place would thus constitute a very different kind of project involving descriptions of augmented urban places yet to be designed, and whose literary coherence would be of a different order.

To give a concrete character to such a thought experiment, I have imagined that our connected Perec is also an active user of Foursquare. Although the mobile application evolved into a spatial search and recommendation application in 2014<sup>1</sup>, Foursquare was initially a location-

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the social networking, check-in and gaming features of Foursquare were packaged into a new application, Swarm, while the Foursquare brand was kept for a spatial search application derived from the 'Explore' feature introduced in 2011. Our study was done with the initial version of Foursquare, in which all features were available under a single application.

aware mobile social networking application in which people could formulate places in generic or personalized terms (Tang et al., 2010) localized within the application and into which they could check when nearby. The social meaning of such an action has been the object of extensive research (Cramer et al., 2011; Rost et al., 2013; Frith, 2014a; Licoppe & Legout, 2014). Moreover, the application involved some gamification of mobile social networking, as it allowed competition between users, who could become virtual ‘mayors’ of such virtual places if they were the ones to check into them the most (Lindqvist et al., 2011; Frith, 2014b). Beyond the particulars of its design, Foursquare will be taken here as a typical exemplar of location aware mobile social networking media, prominently displaying a central feature of mobile locative media, that is providing mobile urban denizens with an onscreen representation of the people and places around them (Licoppe, 2015). The data mentioned in this paper was gathered in the course of an earlier study (Licoppe & Legout, 2014), in which we actually connected to Foursquare in Place Saint-Sulpice to ‘see’ what a connected Percec of today might ‘see’ there.

### **1. The ‘familiarization’ and ‘parochialization’ of urban public places**

Percec’s opening lines involve a description of what the gaze of the sitter might encounter in Place Saint-Sulpice:

*“There are many things in Place Saint-Sulpice; for instance a district council building, a financial building, a police station, three cafés, one of which sells tobacco and stamps, a movie theater, a church on which Le Vau, Gittard, Oppenord, Servandoni and Chalgrin have all worked, and which is dedicated to a chaplain of Clotaire II, who was bishop of Bourges from 624 to 644 and whom we celebrate on the 17th of January, a publisher, a funeral parlor, a travel agency, a bus stop, a tailor, a hotel, a fountain decorated with the statues of four great Christian orators (Bossuet, Fenelon, Fléchier and Massillon), a newsstand, a seller of pious objects, a parking lot, a beauty parlor, and many other things as well”.*

The way Percec describes what there is or can be seen on a permanent basis in Saint-Sulpice square frames the relationship between him and his reader, and their mutual stance, in a very specific way. He describes the buildings and their function in categorical terms that are available and recognizable by any member of the public going there for the first time: a police

station, a café, a church, etc. The things that he mentions which he probably cannot see as a sitting character (e.g. the fact that one of the café also sells stamps) also make sense on the basis of common sense categorization. One ‘knows’ on such a basis that the cafés which sell cigarettes in France (visually recognizable through a sign) usually also sell stamps. Similarly, the historical references which Perec associates with some of these milestones are framed in the style of guidebooks, which are made for a readership of touring strangers. They also point to the *Histoire de France* manuals, which at the time still epitomized the French public primary education system, through references to the kind of famous historical figures which find their way both in such manuals and in the public space in the form of architectural milestones.

Such a description of a Parisian square therefore eliminates all traces of personalization and possible familiarity with the place. It frames the writer as an onlooker for whom the events in the street are a public spectacle and the place a public space container for such events which are supposed to unfold ‘in’ it. The square appears as an objectivized vessel for passing strangers, who are to remain somehow disconnected from, and potentially unaffected by, the place itself. In that frame, Place Saint-Sulpice as described by Perec appears as a juxtaposition of buildings, places and things visually available and reportable in a depersonalized way, which tightly fits the kind of perception that is expected of a readership endowed with the same competences and experiences as passing strangers. The onlooking writer-stranger thus addresses other urban strangers, who are expected to view the city and understand urban places in, through and as generic descriptions and common sense or institutional categorical terms. From the start the authorial voice frames itself as being also one of these strangers, albeit one sitting at an outside café, and with the power to tell and write. The sitting author seems to be watching from a stylized distance which also insulates him from what may be going on. In all these respects, Perec’s stance epitomizes the 19th and 20th century representations and experience of the western metropolis as a place of and for strangers (Lofland, 1973).

### **1.1. ‘Seeing’ places which might be ‘here’, but not there**

What might a 21st century Perec, connected to a location-sensitive mobile social networking (LMSN) application like Foursquare ‘see’ sitting on a café terrace, which, though ordinary, would still be worthy of a literary inventory? The difference between the actual, unconnected



Perec and the connected Perec is that for the latter places may not only be available through gaze, but also through the screen of his smartphone. Based on the technology-mediated awareness of the user's location the Foursquare interface provides a list of the places nearby. These appear on screen in a different way than they do to the sweeping gaze of the onlooker. First, 'places' are available on screen in a pre-organized fashion: they are already presented as an ordered list (as opposed to the list designed and provided by the unconnected Perec) with the 'trendiest' at the top, that is, first those which several other users have already checked into, then those which the user has marked as 'favorite' and then the rest, ranked by proximity. The connected Perec does not have to select places to create a written list any more, one is provided to him from the start, with which he can elect to align his own written list or which he might decide to resist by elaborating another, distinctive, written list of places. Second, the criterion for the onscreen presence of these places is not that they should be visible to a sitting observer, but that they have been created within the application (either by the designers or the users), and that they are close enough in terms of geolocation. Figure 1 shows an example of what appeared on screen when one connected to Foursquare at a café in Place Saint-Sulpice at the time of our study. While some of the onscreen places are indeed visible from the café, others are not, being as they are features located in surrounding streets. The places which appear on screen to the connected Perec thus 'spill' beyond the immediately visible Saint-Sulpice vista available to the sitting beholder.



a

b

*Figure 1: a) and b) are scans from parts of the list of places which became visible on screen in 2013 when one connected to Foursquare from the same café terrace used by Georges Perec. The places in Figure 1a are in the top part of the list and those in Figure 1b appear after some amount of scrolling down. Of note are the locations in nearby streets in both figures, and the highly indexical-relational formulation “soeur” (‘sister’) in Figure 1b.*

Third, and most importantly, surrounding places, whether actually visible or not, appear on screen in a textual and iconographic fashion. They come pre-packaged with descriptions or formulations, as well as categorizing icons (Figure 1). While such formulations may occasionally take the form of the formulations by strangers for strangers used by Perec, some other formulations embed and index the familiarity of their creator with a given locale (such as “sister” in Figure 1b or elsewhere “Roger’s flat”, “home sweet home”, etc.), or they may even take the shape of a localized event, rather than a place. To capture this distinction, researchers in the Human Computer Interaction field (HCI) have used the distinction between ‘geographical’ formulations of places (guidebook-like and identifiable by all) and ‘relational’ formulations of places (indexical, and often only intelligible to a selected few), and shown that a significant proportion of places ‘created’ in the application by users had a relational character (Tang et al, 2010).

So the connected Perec beholds onscreen places which he would not be able to see with his naked eyes and which ‘spill’ beyond the square that presents itself to his gaze as he sits. Some of these places are digitally formulated in non-generic and personalized terms, which would not fit the perspective of a stranger and would not find a place in a traditional tourist guide book. “Sister” makes relevant and enacts a separation between those who understand the reference, who know who is being referred to here and whose sister she might be, and those who are strangers, not just in the sense in which pedestrians in the streets may be strangers with respect to one another, but in the sense of being strangers with respect to the social group for which such a formulation is meaningful. Such formulations are relational for they enact an ‘in-group’ (encompassing all those for whom “sister” is personally meaningful) and an ‘out-group’ (all the others). Because of the performative power of such formulations, the gaze of the connected Perec, who reads them on screen loses the neutrality which characterized the unconnected Perec gazing at publicly available urban fixtures. If he is unrelated to this particular ‘sister’, the connected Perec is turned into a member of the out-group with respect to the relational formulations of places which appear on his screen. Should he prolong his gazing and his explorations into , his gaze would now run the risk of turning voyeuristic (the

voyeur gazes at intimate scenes that a stranger should not see or not stare at in this way), in a way that the gaze of the sitting and unconnected Perec contemplating strangers on the square could not become.

The public availability of such familiarity- and relation-oriented formulations of places is one aspect of the kind of ‘parochialization’ of public places which is performed by mobile locative media (Humphreys, 2010), and which makes it difficult to maintain the stance of the Goffmanian stranger gazing at public places perceptible and reportable as generic guidebook-like descriptions. This could even undermine Perec’s project in a radical sense, since the latter is founded precisely on the possibility of such a stance, and its intelligibility to a reader who is posited as a stranger and socialized as such to the use of the city. Would a list which ran like “Place Paul Claudel, Au Bon Saint-Pourçain 10 rue Servandoni, Sister, etc.” still be a list of the things that are in Place Saint-Sulpice, or even of the things that are near Place Saint-Sulpice? And for what kind of reader would it be such a list?

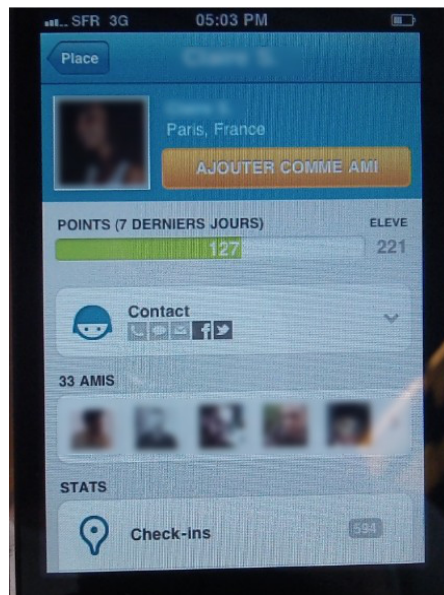
## **1.2 ‘Owned’ public places**

Goffman remarked that one of the properties constitutive of a ‘public’ place is that what happens there, and who happens to be there, is always available as a potential spectacle for onlookers (Goffman, 1974). Conversely, an onlooking participative stance, whenever straightforwardly assumed by anyone present, constitutes places and events as ‘public’ in that sense: the gaze of the onlooker, his/her character as a stranger and what he/she beholds as ‘public’ are mutually elaborative. Moreover, the onlooker watches from a distance, and he/she is not involved in any other way in the unfolding events (this would mean reframing oneself in another participative status). The onlooker behaves as a disengaged observer, which also allows him/her to separate the place where an event happens from the event itself and to treat the former as a context ‘containing’ the latter. Perec’s effort to provide an ‘inventory’ of what happens in Place Saint-Sulpice, of what is generally ‘not taken note of’, is grounded in the possibility of disengaged forms of watching. Such a distance is required to categorize urban occurrences in terms which, as we have started to see, are generic and tailored to be intelligible to readers-strangers. The disengaged stance of the onlooking unconnected Perec is central to the way his discursive project functions, and it is already visible in his opening description of the buildings in Place Saint-Sulpice, and the way the very positioning of such a

description as a preface turns these buildings and places into a containing context for the entities and events he will describe later.

The experience and participative stance available to the Foursquare-connected Perec would be different. First, the connected Perec would have his smartphone turned on, and as a Foursquare user in urban public places he would often switch from the stance of an embodied onlooker to some more active form of involvement with the screen. Unlike the places that are available to his disengaged onlooking sight, those which appear and are made active on screen are not just there to be seen, but also to be acted upon: they are actionable, like ‘affordances’ for clicking. Should he indeed elect to click upon one of these ‘places’, then he would get another page including comments from other users who have checked into there before, an indication of whether there is a ‘mayor’ for that particular digital formulation of a locale, and who that might be, etc. Foursquare is more than just a social network, it involves some ‘gamification’ (Frith, 2014b), which is manifest in the way the application tries to engage users in competition to become the ‘mayor’ of its various places: several forms of notifications have been designed to induce such competition. Such notifications are performative (Licoppe, 2010). They also project further action and involvement on the part of the user and shape the forms this might take. In that sense, remaining apparently disengaged requires some form of active resistance to their appeal.

Central to such gamification is the possibility for users to claim places which become visible when they check in, and to compete for digital features such as the title of mayor by checking into this digital locale as often as possible, whether it be a café or something like “*soeur*”. Digital locales are thus ‘owned’, and such ownership can be claimed by disembodied users, visible through nametags and digital profiles, who thus differ from the anonymous and embodied strangers who roam the real metropolis. Even Place Saint-Sulpice’s digital namesake had its mayor (Figure 2). Such an apparently innocuous form of ownership, designed to make the use of the LMSN more playful, may still interfere with ‘real life claims’. Some inhabitants of private places they had created as “home” or “sister” on Foursquare declared to us in interviews that they had felt an unpleasant pinch when it had happened that a complete stranger had claimed mayorship of their virtual ‘home’, even though such claims had no consequence on their material residence there.



*Figure 2: One 'mayor' of "Place Saint-Sulpice" at the time of our study, as she appeared when we clicked first on this 'place' on the Foursquare list, and then on the 'mayor' active link.*

Such an interference shows how local places which become available to connected Foursquare users, are not just surrounding buildings whose description can be separated from the events which happen in and around them. They are irreducibly entangled with people, whether those who have commented on that locale or those who are competing for mayorship, and making claims. They thus appear as multi-layered and multimedia texts combining, names, pictures, profiles, comments, hyperlinks, etc. And they appear as affordances for action, amidst a web of performative events, such as notifications inviting users to get involved further. The expected or default stance of the Foursquare user is therefore an involved one in which it is made easy, relevant and appealing to see surrounding 'places' on screen, to click on them, and possibly check in there and claim mayorship of them. Of course, Foursquare users do not have to do any of these things, but then they have to ignore the way the mobile application may appeal to them and project further engagement. Such an experience is radically different from that of the 20th century metropolis, where the buildings and surrounding locales seemed to be there just to be beheld by an onlooker, and not to make relevant or project any kind of next action to be done regarding them. The connected Pereg is a differently and more actively involved figure than his onlooking unconnected counterpart. For the connected Pereg, onscreen features of his surroundings are made available to him as

an entanglement of places, particular people and text, designed and presented to be acted upon.

## **2. Encounters with (pseudonymous) strangers in public places**

Perec's project, as we have seen above, is not just to draw up a list of places. His list of the things which may be seen in Place Saint-Sulpice is framed as an opening tableau, preliminary to the more ambitious project of describing and listing all that visibly passes or happens while he is sitting at his café and gazing away at the square. What would the connected Perec, taken as an active user of mobile locative media, have to cope with if he were to tackle a similar project today?

### **2.1. Encounters with strangers in Place Saint-Sulpice from a stranger's perspective**

A typical list runs like this:

*"I again saw buses, taxis, cars, tourist buses, trucks and vans, bikes, mopeds, Vespas, motorcycles, a postal delivery tricycle, a motorcycle-school vehicle, a driving-school car, elegant women, aging beaus, old couples, groups of children, people with bags, satchels, suitcases, dogs, pipes, umbrellas, potbellies, old skins, old schmucks, young schmucks, idlers, deliverymen, scowlers, windbags. I also saw Jean-Paul Aron, and the proprietor of the 'Trois Canettes' restaurant, whom I had already seen this morning".*

Perec's descriptions mix people with related things, as seen from an onlooker's perspective (the things they wear, the things they carry, the things they drive and are transported in). People are literarily captured as passing strangers, unknown to the disengaged observer, and they are described according to common sense categories, visually available to and recognizable by anybody (i.e. any reader socialized to the position of passing stranger in public places, and therefore able to read from such a category-based stance). Perec's perspective is that of the ordinary onlooker, proposing a stranger's perspective on passing strangers in an urban public place to readers-as-passing strangers themselves. Even the people he knows by name are enunciated in a way which reinforces that particular framework of ordinary urban events. Jean Paul Aron is known by sight and described by name, but as a

celebrity the name of which, and perhaps the visual appearance of which, might be known to (almost) anybody. The restaurant owner is someone who is visually recognizable to Perec's onlooking narrator, but he is framed as someone whose name is not relevant, either because the author does not know it or because the intended reader would not know it. Although he has met him before, he describes him just as a fleeting acquaintance lacking personal details: he appears exactly as one of Stanley Milgram's 'familiar strangers', who do not know one another but share some reason for occasional encounters, and which is "an aspect of urban anonymity" (Milgram, 1992).

Perec's descriptive stance therefore enacts the urban public place as a place where strangers are 'thrown together' (Massey, 2005), and the city as a place of and for strangers (Lofland, 1973). Such strangers appear reportable and accountable under generic and shared categorization, mostly as anonymous and equivalent bodies (their equivalence being here embedded and enacted in the enumerative form of the text). Some may be pinpointed according to more precise descriptions, but which still point back to recognizable and common sense participation statuses relevant to the occupation of urban public places as loci for passing strangers, such as children, drivers, policemen or delivery men. There might be the occasional celebrity or 'familiar stranger' but their presence even highlights the description of Place Saint-Sulpice as a place for strangers observed from a stranger's perspective.

Erving Goffman has shown how encounters between strangers in urban public places were expectedly minimal, and based on 'civil inattention'. The participation status of strangers in public places is endowed with a 'right to tranquility' (Joseph, 1999), a mutual expectation from strangers that their 'negative face' (Brown & Levinson, 1987) should be preserved in urban encounters. Such expectations are also foundational to the very possibility of Perec's stance as a narrator: his literary project is completely founded upon and embedded in the recognizability and meaningfulness of his posing and behaving as an onlooking and disengaged stranger watching other strangers. In that sense Perec's narrator is on a par with the '*flâneur*' or Goffman's 'civilly inattentive passerby' as one of the figures who best epitomize the experience of the 19th and 20th century metropolis.

Only twice during the course of Perec's enumeration does he see personal acquaintances. These occurrences reveal yet another aspect of urban life. First someone he seems to know vaguely greets him:

*“The café is packed*

*A distant acquaintance (friend of a friend, friend of a friend of a friend) passed by in the street, came over to say hello, had a coffee.*

*A Paris-Vision bus goes by. The tourists have headphones*

*The sky is gray. Fleeting sunny spells.”*

Later on, he happens to see a friend from afar:

*“Passage of a 63 bus*

*Genevieve Serreau passes by in front of the café (too far away for me to get her attention)*

*Project: a classification of umbrellas according to their forms, their means of functioning, their color, their material ...”*

These two brief occurrences in the course of sustained observations over three days testify to the relative scarcity of such chance encounters with acquaintances in the street. The default expectation for the urban denizen is that he will continuously encounter strangers in the street, so that a chance meeting with an acquaintance may appear as a rare and unexpected treat. Perec’s description also points to the normative organization which governs such encounters with known acquaintances: the ‘discovery’ of mutual proximity between visual acquaintances makes relevant a meeting, if only a minimal one (Licoppe & Inada, 2009; 2010). This accounts for the apparent ordinariness of the act of Perec’s friend of going over to see him and greeting him in the first instance, and makes relevant Perec’s excuse in the second. Just his mentioning that he saw a friend passing raises the expectation that they should greet each other. An excuse thus becomes relevant to account for why this has not been the case, and the sudden appearance of a first person justification is highly noticeable in a text which aims primarily at a neutral and disengaged authorial stance in describing taken-for-granted occurrences in the street.

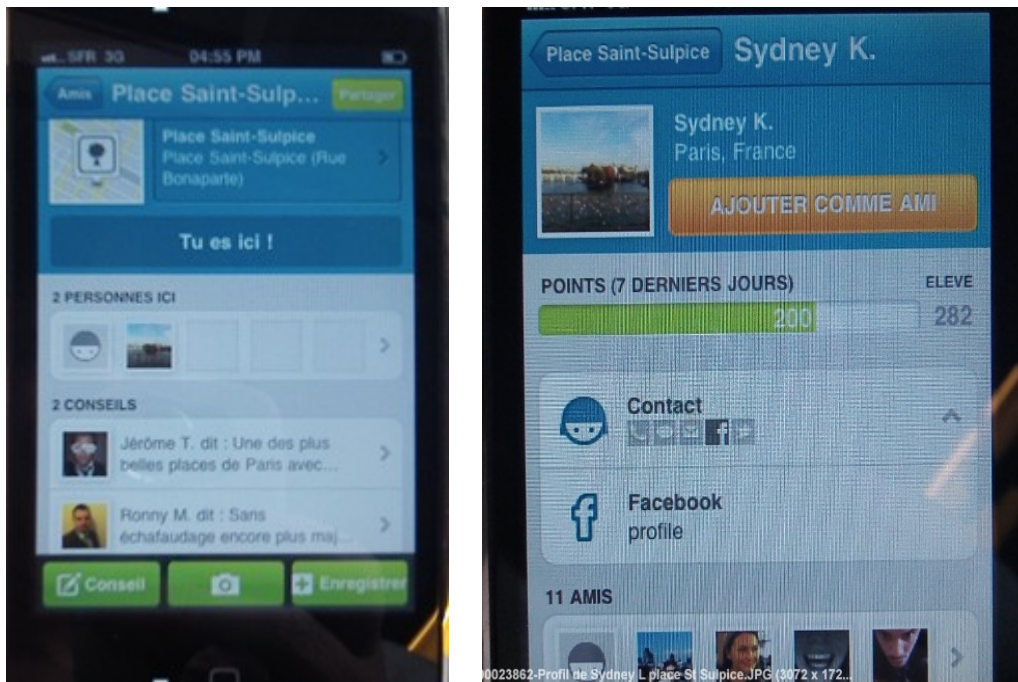
## **2.2 Connected appearances in Place Saint-Sulpice**

A connected Perec would still have to cope with the same kind of visual occurrences. However, connected users nearby would also become visible to him in a different manner, on



screen. A crucial feature of social networking mobile locative media is that it makes users aware of the presence of other connected users nearby, either automatically, through the (passive) use of geolocation technology, or because they have actively ‘checked in’ their location in the mobile application (as is the case with Foursquare). In this case, their embodied figures may either be visible to the sitting onlooker on Place Saint-Sulpice or remain unavailable to the latter’s gaze, because they are inside a building or outside but in a nearby street. As was the case with locations, the sense of the presence of others provided by mobile locative media involves a kind of awareness which extends beyond the boundaries of usual sensory experiences, and particularly sight. Producing a literary inventory of what happens ‘in’ Place Saint-Sulpice then becomes a completely different kind of endeavor for the connected Perec.

For him, others, whether they be strangers or acquaintances (and the mobile application will provide its own sense of acquaintanceship as well), frequently appear on screen when he is localized by the mobile technology. The way a connected observer engages with the mobile application shapes the form of such an appearance. At the time of our study, when one checked in in Place Saint-Sulpice, one would get a location notification (“you are here”), a list of the “persons here” taking the form of personal icons (friends declared as such in the application would be highlighted if present), and some recommendations from other users (Figure 3a). Should the connected Perec leave it at that, those other “persons here” he sees on screen would remain strangers to him although ‘here’ takes on a different meaning than to the older and unconnected Perec. However, the interface offers the connected author the option of engaging a bit more with these strangers simply by clicking on their icon, in which case he might get something like Figure 3b which appears on his smartphone.



a

b

Figure 3: a) A typical screen which would appear after checking in in Place Saint-Sulpice. b) Clicking on the icon of one of the users present 'here' unveils further personal information.

This shows that other users are 'clickables', who will unveil more of their digital selves to the more involved user (in the sense that he/she must click on their icon). Their onscreen appearance is endowed with personal information: a name tag, some information on their previous history of use, and a list of their friends. Other location-aware sites provide even more detailed profiles. Users who appear on screen are therefore not just anonymous strangers, they are 'known' as singular individuals even though one may never have set eyes on them before, and would be unable to recognize them by sight. Therefore, the connected Perec would 'encounter' in Place Saint-Sulpice all kinds of individuals, mostly strangers with perhaps a few acquaintances, but who are singularized by the personal knowledge which their onscreen appearance makes available.

The more active the connected Perec is (thereby behaving less as an uninvolved onlooker), the more digital personae from connected strangers nearby will present themselves to him on screen. As such they would deserve a mention in his 'augmented' inventory of what happens in Place Saint-Sulpice, albeit with a literary format yet to be determined. Because those urban denizens nearby who appear digitally do so in a form that is pervaded with personal knowledge, they cannot be accounted for in terms and categories that are generic and

meaningful to readers themselves formatted as strangers equipped with similar descriptive and interpretive resources. The descriptions of the connected Péric would have to be shaped in a way that would account for the personal character of their appearance, and that would also engage the readership in a different stance from that of the fictive passive and embodied stranger. Such a literary project has yet to be done, but we can already perceive how it would be completely different from the original one, and would have to build another form of coherence between experience and description.

The tension between appearing as a passing and embodied stranger and appearing on screen as a nearby, disembodied and individualized digital persona are particularly salient in situations in which a passerby appears both on the square and on screen. This gives rise to a specific form of augmented encounter in urban public places, that is ‘encounters with pseudonymous strangers’ (Licoppe, 2015), to the particulars of which we will now turn.

### **2.3. ‘Encounters with pseudonymous strangers’ in Place Saint-Sulpice**

The connected Péric may ‘see’ on screen other users who have checked in nearby. The mobile application also makes such appearances potentially mutual: the nearby user who appears on Péric’s screen may reciprocally see the connected Péric on his/her own screen when he/she attends to it. So users usually know that when they see someone appearing on the screen as a nearby user, they may also be available to the other in a similar way. In that sense they treat such onscreen appearances which index physical proximities as a kind of encounter. Such an orientation takes a concrete form when they act upon it, initiating greetings and some form of conversation through the mobile chat modules that are usually associated with the location-aware mobile social networking applications.

However, such encounters are different from those between anonymous passing strangers in terms of membership categorization (Sacks, 1992). When Péric as a sitting onlooker sees a stranger passing by in Place Saint-Sulpice, it opens up the possibility of a mutual gaze and interaction (the unmarked form of which would be Goffman’s ‘civil inattention’, i.e. just an ostensibly brief exchange of gazes) performed in a way which makes relevant their categorization as a relational pair of ‘anonymous strangers’ (Sacks, 1992). When the connected Péric ‘sees’ another connected Foursquare user nearby, it opens up the possibility of mutual screen-mediated awareness. However, such a particular form of mutual sighting highlights mutual personal knowledge and ensures it will be shared. Both participants in the

onscreen encounter are thus construed as a different type of relational categorical pair, something we might describe as a relational pair of ‘pseudonymous users’ (who know each other as pseudonyms and online profiles, even though they may never have been in one another’s presence) to which are bound specific types of conduct (such as a mobile chat exchange acknowledging the onscreen encounter, for instance through greetings).

These differences may develop into specific tensions in the particular case in which the strangers who may be seen on the street might also be a connected stranger visible on screen, and vice and versa. Let us suppose for one moment that during one of the connected Perec’s days of observation in Place Saint-Sulpice, a gathering of Foursquare users had been planned there. Then most of the passing strangers on the square would also be connected users who have checked in in the mobile application. The embodied strangers he would see (and who would be able to see him) with their eyes would also be mutually available on screen as pseudonymous Foursquare users. Encounters would then take the very particular form of an ‘encounter between pseudonymous strangers’ (and not just pseudonymous users).

Such encounters are characterized by several constitutive features. First, connected users who appear on screen have checked in nearby, so that they are deictically related to the embodied ‘here-and-now’ of the observer. The situation is ‘folded’ (Licoppe, 2015), and the onscreen avatar indexes the presence of a body nearby. Second, participants may engage in them in two distinctive ways which make relevant different membership categorization devices (‘anonymous strangers’ vs ‘pseudonymous users’, equipped with some amount of personal knowledge), with different category-bound activities, and which involve two different ways of producing mutual awareness (i.e. the gaze vs the screen). Third, encounters with pseudonymous strangers are situations which involve a crucial ‘evidential boundary’ in which what is done on screen by one participant may not be seen by the other’s eyes.

This makes possible some particularly characteristic forms of conduct. Because appearing on screen automatically makes relevant the nearby presence of an associated body, it raises the possibility that such a body might also be visible. Identification and recognition concerns reflect the duality that is inherent to the encounter. A connected Perec seeing other Foursquare users appearing ‘here’ when he checks into the virtual Place Saint-Sulpice would try to identify them visually, and try to match their physical appearance with the digital information available about them. Glaring mismatches would become noticeable and reportable in his literary account. Moreover, the onscreen ‘discovery’ that someone of whom we have some

digitally available personal knowledge, be it a stranger, is close enough has some normative implications regarding a possible face to face encounter. We have shown elsewhere that the mutuality of such a discovery projects its acknowledgement and expectations regarding a possible co-present meeting (Licoppe & Inada, 2009; 2010). And because of the presence of a sharp evidential boundary, different trajectories of encounter become possible. One such possibility is the actual physical greeting of one another. This can be done either while acknowledging onscreen mutual awareness, in which case both channels of awareness become aligned, or without acknowledging such onscreen mutual awareness in the physical world,, which then constitutes what I have described elsewhere as a ‘timid encounter’ (Licoppe, 2015a; 2015b). Another option is ignoring one another both physically and on screen. And there are many other possibilities besides, but we cannot develop all of the subtleties of such encounters and all the possible interactional trajectories here for lack of space.

This reflects critically on the translation of Perec’s literary project to a more contemporary and connected setting. The connected Perec would have to make many choices which were foreign to the unconnected Perec’s public experience, and this would impact the kind of literary inventory he might produce. The connected Perec would thus have to find a way to describe the onscreen appearance of other connected users as he is sitting at the café, users who appear with a halo of personal information, which contrasts with the generic way in which one might describe them as passing strangers in a public place. Moreover, he might have to determine whether or not to make his readership aware of the fact that some of the strangers on the square may be identical to some of these onscreen users. And if he chooses to do so, how then can he combine the two sets of categorizations and descriptions which become available for these ‘hybrid’ strangers and acquaintances in his written account? If the connected Perec remains faithful to the initial project of an exhaustive account of what is happening ‘here’, he should also take care to write about what happens on screen. This would threaten the initial project to exhaust a Parisian location in writing, which rested on the remarkable coherence between the onlooking stance and the generic, common sense categorizations of urban public life, with a radical fragmentation. Moreover, the connected Perec as an author would necessarily be an involved and personalized figure, the explicit agency of which would contrast with the apparent distance and lack of involvement of the sitting Perec as (just) an onlooker of public urban life.

## Conclusion

I have used here Georges Perec's "*Attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*" as a starting point for a thought experiment in which I have tried to imagine what would become of such a project if urban denizens were to become active users of mobile locative media (here exemplified by Foursquare). In the light of this imaginary displacement, I have highlighted how the representation of the 19th and 20th century western metropolis as a 'city of strangers', which has been so central in urban sociology and anthropology studies, was foundational to the remarkable literary coherence of Perec's "*Attempt ...*" Perec's original voice was that of the onlooker apprehending people and places as a stranger amidst other strangers in a public place. Such a stance was performatively construed by the guidebook-like characterization of places and common sense descriptions of people and events, which his inventory is made up of, and which were meant to be meaningful to any reader reading from a stranger's perspective. Even the format of the list and the inventory itself points to the management of people as identical and depersonalized types and cases, and towards a bureaucratic zeitgeist which bears some kinship to the city as the site of fluxes of anonymous bodies, the circulation of which needs to be bureaucratically disciplined. Perec's observer and the literary project which it underlies are therefore as much an epitome of the urban experience as the earlier and better-known 'flâneur' and Simmelian 'blasé'.

What the modest thought experiment I have tried to conduct here vividly shows is the extent to which such a typically metropolitan onlooking stance is unsustainable for a post-modern Perec reborn as an active user of mobile locative media. First, the sense of what is 'here', 'in' Place Saint-Sulpice is completely different for this latter Perec. For him, 'here' would no longer merely refer to the location of the people, places and vehicles he may sight from his sitting perspective, but also to all of those nearby enough to appear on the screen of his smartphone, even should a fair number of them not be visible from the café in Place Saint-Sulpice. The connected meaning of 'here' spills beyond the boundaries of the sitter's gaze for those locations which become perceptively available through a different socio-material chain of mediation. Second, and most importantly, their presentation on screen involves not only descriptions meaningful to all, but also formulations and references which are designed to be meaningful to a handful of familiar readers. In the case of locations, a significant number of

those would thus have been formulated and archived by other users in ‘relational terms’. For the connected Perec Place Saint-Sulpice no longer has the impersonality of the public place, for it now entails some familiarity. Place Saint-Sulpice 2.0 is a layered place, in part a public place, in part a parochial location. Regarding the people ‘here’, and particularly those who appear on screen, they mostly do so in a disembodied fashion and within a digital halo of personal information (e.g. names, whether real ones or digital tags, profiles, prior history of uses, friends, etc.). As such, they cannot just be looked upon by other strangers, they appear as what I have called ‘pseudonymous strangers’: they are layered as well, appearing in part as strangers open to the public gaze, and in part as digitally individualized personae. Should the use of mobile locative media become pervasive, the expectation would be that cities would become loci for encountering ‘pseudonymous strangers’ instead of just strangers. Third and finally, for pseudonymous strangers to appear on screen, some active engagement is required from the part of the author *qua* user of mobile locative media. The connected Perec can no longer assume the disengaged stance of the observer, which was both central to the original project and constitutive of the possibility of experiencing the city as a place where one encounters and is expected to encounter strangers, and to impersonally manage urban public life as such.

For all these reasons, a future “*Attempt at exhausting an (augmented) place in Paris*” would take a very different form. It would no longer be able to build on the resources of form (e.g. list and inventory) and of generic, common sense categorizations to provide for the coherence of urban experience as a reportable public matter: the author as an anonymous urban onlooker, the public character of the places and events he may gaze at, the writer describing publicly accountable anonymous strangers and ordinary events from a stranger’s perspective (that of the authorial character *qua* onlooker), and the reader as a stranger grasping the description of remote events from that perspective. A future “*Attempt*” would have to come to terms with the parochialization of places which their digital formulation may entail, and the individualization of the online personae which appear on screen as ‘nearby’. It would have to cope in a literary way with the new duality of passing strangers, who would potentially be simultaneously available as anonymous passing bodies and as personalized and individualized digital figures. It is difficult to presume how the original Perec would have handled an attempt to describe a public square experienced as a place of and for pseudonymous strangers, or even if this exercise would have remained meaningful to him. However, one may surmise that any “*Attempt 2.0*” would necessarily involve some fragmentation of descriptive categories and

character-author-writer-reader participative stances to account for the layered nature of the augmented city.

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