

Performing Marginal Space: Film, Topology and the *Petite Ceinture* in Paris

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Urban scholars have long accepted that analysing and understanding urban realities involves many routes: from the repertoire associated with social scientific urban studies to the more essayistic, figurative approaches allied with the work of Walter Benjamin, knowledge about cities, their environments and people has benefitted from an immersion into a rather eclectic set of epistemic practices and cultures. The present paper aims to add to these by making use of performance-related materials to analyse a disused and marginal urban space in the city of Paris, France. It argues for the recognition and publication of key nuances, performances and practices which add greatly to our understanding of such spaces. In particular, the paper employs documented performances to analyse concrete spatial configurations *and vice-versa*; even more specifically, we will focus on the *Chemin de fer de petite ceinture*, a presently disused ring railway line encircling Paris inside the 20 arrondissements that have become, since 1860, the geographical frame for the administration of the French capital. Or rather, we focus on the space vacated by former railway-related uses in an attempt to understand better the relationship between marginal and central spaces, between spaces that function and spaces that do not or no longer have an identifiable purpose within the transformative economy of the modern city.

Inevitably, there is thus a metaphorical quality that readers will encounter in the following pages. While well established in urban and geographical discourses (Demeritt 1994; Creswell 1997), metaphors can, however, take on many forms, ranging from the

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appeal of landscape-inspired approaches to ‘layered’ structurings associated with the idea of palimpsests (Crang 1996; Huyssen 2003) and the languages of ‘flourishing’ or ‘decaying’ retail quarters employed by urban economists (Minca 1995; Vicario and Martínez Monje 2003) to perhaps less intuitively metaphorical approximations as those associated with urban ‘mosaics’ or ‘publics’ (Crang 2000); what unites these and related approaches is both their intuitive appeal to non-specialised audiences and their ability to articulate realities beyond or other than those expressed in more positivist languages. Rather than accord them a life of their own, however, the paper aims to explore means of reconnecting metaphorical meanings with the urban material from within which they emanated. We contend that one such means is provided by photography and film: using the example of the disused *Chemin de fer de ceinture* in Paris, the paper thus argues for a renewed interest and exploration of materially resonant approaches to urban realities. The space explored here is not accidentally a marginal and largely forgotten one: as the empirically-minded writings of Walter Benjamin have taught us (Benjamin 2002), it is principally in the margins that the operative forces of a socio-economic totality (capitalism in the case of present-day Western societies) lose their formative powers and that alternative practices, liminal at first, reveal themselves.

Philosophically, the use of photographic modes of representation furthermore allows for a more fruitful analytical weaving together of urban spaces and the kind of agencies enacted and performed therein; the mutual constitution of space and its associated performative uses thus becomes a further stated focus of this paper. Its empirical material consists of a stop-motion film produced by one of the authors of this paper: ‘paranthèse urbaine’ constitutes a fruitful manner of engaging the highly specific realities formed around a disused slither of space encircling Paris today. The paper is organised as follows: after briefly tracing the realities of marginal spaces in urban settings today, we introduce readers to the historical and contemporary reality that is the *Ceinture* before exploring, with the help of photography and film, how liminal spaces of this kind can be understood, analysed and performed with the help of representational technologies. We conclude with brief reflections on the materialities involved in the writing of the paper.

Marginal Urban Spaces

The growth and development of cities throughout the ages has never been uniform: obstacles, pathways and blockages all condition the possibilities for cities to expand or contract: from natural givens such as water, geology and elevation and the use made of these by humans in the form of navigable rivers, quarries and meandering road networks to culturally and historically formed — and thus more immanent — conditioning properties such as city walls do we encounter elements shaping urban realities. As a result, not only does every city differ in terms of size, shape or configuration, cities are also internally structured differently according to the idiosyncratic set of configurative constraints encountered locally. To these generic forces, urban scholars would add systemic features. For example, and especially since the 19th century, not only has the im-

portance of cities to the overall economic fortunes of nation-states grown, their internal structures have furthermore increasingly been shaped by capitalist forces. Chief amongst these latter is arguably the tendency of Capitalism to reproduce through processes of “creative destruction”, as Marxists (Sombart, Harvey and Castells) and Liberal social scientists (Schumpeter) alike have characterised the permanency of change through reconfigured spatial valorisations under capitalism.

All of these processes interact in a locally specific manner, resulting in a highly precise but structurally comparable uneven development of spatial potentials (Smith 1984): at any given time, such interaction will create spaces that attract interests, care and investments while by-passing others; it will also create spaces that are all but completely dis-connected from their surrounding fabric for a variety of reasons. And while these processes take place across many scales, they are particularly felt in urban environments, perhaps due to the relative proximity and visible fluidity of the resulting spatial configurations. It is at the scale of the city, too, that spaces that have temporarily been neglected or ‘left behind’ a general development trend have attracted special attention from planners, investors and citizens alike. As part of a structurally unavoidable process of urban evolution and decay, they continue to form the very basis of and motivation for urban re-development processes, including top-down re-development of large urban areas, gentrification and locally operating manners of reclaiming, redesigning and reinvesting urban space with new meanings and practices, nowadays including say urban community gardens (Schmelzkopf 1995; Lossau and Winter 2009). Such spaces also often become ‘ambivalent’ repositories for both ecological diversity and possible meanings in the context of increasingly commodified and gentrified urban environments (Jorgensen and Tylecote 2006).

And yet, it would be wrong to imagine urban space as a continuous fabric providing both the conditions of possibility for and the expression of societal change; woven into the processes mentioned above are pockets of space that resists — often for highly idiosyncratic reasons and for protracted periods of time — their re-incorporation into the everyday workings of urban capitalism. Such spaces persist, often on the periphery of urban infrastructural arrangements, behind railway tracks, besides ports, around airstrips or between nodes and lines served by public transportation systems. One of them, the dis-used space of the former ring railway around Paris, will provide the material substance of our present engagement. Spaces like the *Ceinture* — extensive, uninterrupted, and left vacant for a long period in time — are exceptional; it is their very exceptionality, however, that allows for insights of the kind proposed in this paper: here, in the absence of enforced claims to ownership and lacking a presently clearly defined usefulness, Lefebvre’s infamous ‘right to the city’ (1968; see also Harvey 2008) becomes a selectively enacted reality. It is here, too, that urban potentials materialise in the form of often unexpected performances, activities and practices. In short, we see the *Ceinture* as a space of topological qualities — a trope we shall return to later in this paper.

The *Chemin de fer de ceinture* in Paris

In its past and present configurations, the *Ceinture* lived and lives many lives. Officially put to rest in 1993 after having been decommissioned from regular service in 1939, the line has since become a refuge for many clandestine and official uses. Its original designation, however, was anything but ambiguous: it formed part of the Haussmannian transformation of Paris aiming to introduce space-time compression (Harvey 1990) into the newly annexed parts of the Parisian periphery, greatly increasing mobilities, accessibilities and speeds for goods, military equipment, animals and people alike in and around Paris.¹ Built in the years following 1852 after years of planning and completed in time for the 1867 World's Fair held in Paris (Carrière 2003), the 35 kilometre long ring railway thus allowed a growing community of Parisians to connect across space without having to travel via the centre of Paris using one of 25 horse-drawn omnibus lines operated by the *Compagnie générale des omnibus* (created in 1855; from 1873 onwards, horse-drawn tramways were added to the system, see Papayanis 1997); its 29 stations included the Gare du Nord and the Gare St Lazare, thus affording reasonable connections to the world beyond the French capital. It reached its peak passenger numbers around the turn of the twentieth century (39 million travellers in 1900, the year that another World's Fair was held in Paris) and gradually fell into decline thereafter. As Paris began to spill beyond its 1841 ramparts built by Thiers — which were cleared from the 1920s onwards to allow for the construction of the Boulevard Périphérique in the 1960s — and as a new mode of transportation in the form of the Métro shortened travel times within and across Paris considerably, the *Ceinture* increasingly lost its appeal and usefulness (Pitrou 1981; Carre and Cortot 1985; Berton and Ossadow 1998; Carrière 2001). Crucially, however, it was retained as an intact railway line first for the movement of freight and rolling stock and later, from 1993, as a strategic reserve space held in public ownership through the SNCF, the state-owned national rail company of France.

Evidently, this latter context matters: there was and continues to be considerably less pressure onto the space occupied by the *Ceinture* than on other, comparable spaces within an urban context: areas zoned for commercial or residential real estate and incorporated into for-profit organisational structures do not, on average, stay vacant for as long as the *Ceinture* did. Being held in public ownership (if through a private corporation), however, has attracted a series of plans over the years, ranging from those advocated by a vocal and quite active civic association (the “Association Sauvegarde Pe-

¹ The reference to military equipment and animals is not just anecdotal: considerations relating to the former formed a clear objective of the construction of the *Ceinture* from the moments of its inception while the possible movement of livestock along the *Ceinture* informed the emplacement and construction of two 19th century abattoirs in La Villette (19th arrondissement; opened in 1867) and Vaugirard (15th arrondissement; opened in 1898). Both these functional spaces were closed down in 1975 and 1976 respectively, giving way to the current Parcs of ‘La Villette’ and ‘Georges Brassens’, with the latter still bordering onto the abandoned space of the *Ceinture*.

tite Ceinture”, see www.petiteceinture.org) to public enquiries about the suitability (subsequently negated) of the old terrain for future tramway-related purposes and beyond to its possible contribution to broader urban ideas and projects (see APUR 2011). Such activities notwithstanding, the Ceinture has for some years now remained largely unchanged. The exception to this general state of affairs was the incorporation of parts of its (now underground) terrain into the construction of the ‘C’ line of the Parisian suburban train system known as the RER from 1979 onwards and the transformation of a 1500 metre stretch of the Ceinture into a ‘sentier nature’ (a ‘natural path’) in 2007, both of which are located in the wealthier 16th and 17th arrondissements located in the West of Paris. As one commentator writes:

Perhaps the wealth, and consequent security of this area of Paris means that the Ceinture - this no-man's-land - is a viable open space; it is easier for the neighborhood to take ownership. It seems that poverty has preserved the Petite Ceinture elsewhere in Paris. (petiteceinture.blogspot.com)²

What thus remains is an elongated stretch of space, 23 kilometres long, extending from the Batignolles area in the north-western 17th clockwise around Paris to the Seine in the 15th arrondissement; a walk along its entire length, although officially prohibited (if mostly tolerated; access points are openly discussed on the internet; see our list of relevant internet sites below), is furthermore impossible due to some closed-off tunnels and crossings with in-use railway infrastructures.

What is possible for anyone not fearful of the odd trespass is to access the line at various points along the way and to walk on, along or besides its tracks. The rewards for such activity are manifold: even though nominally the space of the Ceinture must count as a key example of what Georges Perec called ‘uninhabitable space’ (1974); it has and continues to provide an opportunity for numerable forms of existence, ranging from distinct animal and plant communities (Foster 2010, 320-321) to homeless nomads and all sorts of human activities, some marginal, others merely in search for a space to occupy. And although these uses could be seen simply to occupy a non-continuous stretch of land, their arrangement is not like pearls on a string but more akin to a series of realised opportunities.

Interestingly, given the nominal power of the fence surrounding and securing the Ceinture, most activities currently co-exist peacefully side-by-side, encompassing legalised squats and artistic activities as readily as they allow for a proliferation of graffiti and tags along the line. But there’s more to the way the space of the Ceinture and its immediate surroundings are used for the occasional visitor of both spaces and their representations on-line will easily stumble upon bee-keepers, tennis players (and their

²To some extent, this is also reflected in the urban morphology of Paris, where the original Ceinture was much more integrated into the urban landscape in the 16th and 17th arrondissements where parts of the streetscape moulds itself around the line — as compared to its Eastern placement, which often appears to cut right through urban morphologies. Ironically, however, it is in the West that the Ceinture has mostly given way to parking lots, green paths and tennis courts.

club facilities), storage facilities, trainee programme deliverers and their interns, squatters, musicians, painters, community gardens, architectural and landscape students and children playing on the tracks after school. Since we have mentioned Perce before: it is through his writing that the Ceinture invites reflections on those crucial boundaries that surround (and thereby contextualise) a range of everyday performances deemed to be 'normal': by virtue of its existence 'outside' of common spaces of reference and yet being right beside them, common gestures of access, the speed of movement, a strangely directed gaze along the tracks, the uniformity of an underpath all acquire an uncanny quality aided further by dubious legalities and unenforced trespasses. At the same time, the Ceinture is an everyday space: there is nothing exceptional about it as an exemplar of currently non-utilised urban space. It is thus the proximity of habituated and non-habituated space that makes the Ceinture what it is: a space of possibilities, potentialities; it is on the Ceinture — or on spaces *like* the Ceinture — that everyday space is both near and far, familiar and unfamiliar, bearing traces of past and present uses that never were designed to co-exist. Walking on the tracks, a body fights the impulse to look back, to make sure, while being presented with materialities that ought not to be there (and which normally aren't).

We contend that it is such performances that allow us better to understand what role marginal space occupies within the urban fabric: here even 'normal' everyday urban activities (playing tennis, walking, being creative, gardening, looking across a fence or for a way out) acquire new meanings because the assumed correspondence between activity and space just is not there or is strangely rendered uncommon by the proximity to tracks and related railway infrastructures. The relationship between embodied performance and space is, of course, a complex one that has occupied a central role in the musings of geographical and performance-related studies (Schechner 1985, 2002; Hetherington 1998; Rose 1999; Wiles 2003; Thrift 2003; Crouch 2003). Of relevance for our present context is the mutually constitutive nature of both performance and space — or rather, of 'spacing' as a practice born of performative engagements (Crouch 2003, 1948; see also Dodge and Kitchin 2004) — as it allows us to rethink the everyday, lived space of the Ceinture as a space productively conceptualised not as a geometrically shaped entity (23 kilometers long; approximately 75 meters wide on average; tunnels occupying 12.6 kilometers of its overall extension, *etc.*) but in topological terminologies instead. Here, a topographic given since the 1850's — the track and its surrounding, strip-like landscapes — is continuously folded, Moebius-like onto itself as a space of uncharted possibilities that emerge precisely where old uses, restrictions, materialities and the like no longer determine contemporary practices, performance and newly emergent structures. Woven into this topological strip are past, present and future uses and their associated performances, fusing what is with what might or could have been — or could be (see Allen 2011; Malpas 2012; Blum and Secor fold this logic inwardly in their 2011 paper on Freud) — into a newly emergent assemblage or constellation of realised events.

Ascribing a topological quality to the Ceinture, we contend, is more than a mere metaphorical approximation of a space that has presently lost those pre-structuring

properties associating performances in the past with commuting and rail-travel more generally; rather, it is a way of appreciating marginal spaces beyond an all-too often prevalent aesthetics of ruination. Even though the Ceinture and its present uses — as we will show — are clearly marked by hauntings of all sorts within a landscape of decline, they do not share the stable meanings attributed to such spaces within a previous era preoccupied with ruins in poems and on canvasses; not for the Ceinture to display the case of a Romantic (and Benjaminian) ideal of a material world out of joint, fragmented and left behind; in its stead, dis-placed performances, unfamiliar, uncanny perhaps but most certainly not authentic as such literally *take place* (see Huyssens 2010).

‘Paranthèse Urbaine’³

La Paranthèse Urbaine : Circle is a short stop-motion film produced in 2009 by French photographer Jipé Corr  during the course of 2 weeks in May. Technically, the film consists of 2633 mostly black-and-white photographs shot at regular five meter (or 10 step) intervals from a similar, crouching position — all linked at the speed of 8 images per second to form a continuous whole suggestive of a full trajectory around the Ceinture in present-day Paris. The idea behind the film was a simple one: how to capture a linear and mostly unbroken space that was and continues to invite a multitude of uses and users.

On the surface, then, the camera here performs (and thus re-enacts) a traditional urban activity most closely aligned with 19th century bourgeois commerce and associated performances: in 1900, around 85.000 passengers per day would have made at least part of the journey you have just seen, although it would have taken them a full eighty minutes, rather than five, to complete the loop around Paris (Bretelle 2009). Truth be told, however, differences don’t stop there: although the journey taken during the *paranth se urbaine* is ostensibly one mimicking an older journey and is, in fact, vaguely reminiscent of Georges Melli s’ short and unstaged 1898 phantom ride, ‘Panorama pris d’un train en marche’ (partly shot along parts of the Ceinture—see Ezra 2000, 46), its perspective is not one shared by anyone bar an imagined conductor of a train some 70-odd (and more) years ago: forward looking for most of its journey, rather than sideways, the film usurps an authoritative stance not shared by those journeying around Paris in the modern past. It is authored, in control of its movements that thus becomes akin to that of the *fl neur*, that mystical creature born in the abundance of 19th century boulevards, detached yet capable of directing his gaze across the city (Benjamin 1973). Like the *fl neur*, the *paranth se urbaine* parts company with a prescribed path when sensations lurk outside an established routine: bridges and waterways, graffiti, passing trains all seemingly invite the camera to turn from its forward-looking trajectory. More than that: once turned, graffiti and tags also appear capable of convincing the camera to break with its adopted routine of shooting images in black-and-white only, allowing for

³ The film can be viewed on *Liminalities* at <http://liminalities.net/8-4/ceinture.html>, and also on Corre’s Vimeo channel at <http://vimeo.com/22946666>.

an occasional splash of colour to change the appearance of *paranthèse urbaine*. In short, what we can witness during those five minutes (and counting) is not a train journey but a perfectly rendered walk, artificially accelerated to mimic an older performative practice.

Such at least is the illusion; the performance itself, of walking with a camera and fixing images every five meters is not exactly akin to the experience of walking as such (Lund Hansen 2008); nor is the resulting composition of images to form a non-fluid yet film-like sequence akin to the expression of an imagined flâneur's walk along a dis-used railway track. Flâneurs, we remember, were attracted by the dazzling lights emanating from the spaces creating an aura of individuality around mass-produced goods, and could thus be encountered most readily in the inner city of metropolitan urban environments. Not a figure for the margins, it would seem, unless consciously deployed to evoke a *verfremdet* or alienating distancing effect of the kind customarily deployed by Bertold Brecht in his theatrical plays (see Jameson 1998). In fact, the very act of seemingly riding train-like on the tracks — note the use of a train-simulating soundtrack throughout the compositional arrangement — where trains appear mostly as ruins along the path (or as intrusions as if from another world); the detached, observer-like position taken on by the images; and finally the stop-motion technique itself all become part of the *Verfremdung* by creating a distance to past and present uses (and users) of the Ceinture. Present uses are inquisitive, curious and thus eager to look with a freely roaming eye. Granted, walking along tracks requires constant attention: the flâneur of the Ceinture is constantly forced to redirect her attention towards the tracks in order not to slip or walk out of joint but refuses to stay focussed on the tracks; the resulting oscillation between two decisive forms of attention is thus indicative of contemporary performances on the Ceinture. Part of this attention would undoubtedly be directed towards other users of the tracks, encounters along the way in the form of a number of distinct presences along the Ceinture. In the *paranthèse urbaine* these seemingly appear in the form of ghost-like appearances along the way — between the frames, as it were, in an effect not unlike the one established in early photographs or daguerrotype-like renditions of people in space caused by extremely long exposure times. Here a kind of performed life in the shadow of a world city is consciously materialised in its urban margins. In the performance that is the *paranthèse urbaine*, 'ghost-like' or 'haunted' impressions invite us to question the stability of presences and absences (Davis 2005; Dixon 2007; Jacques Réda makes a similar point with regard to the Ceinture when he speaks of 'phantom trains' haunting the line; see Réda in Pitrou *et. al.* 1981, 7) — a key feature of marginal spaces as we have argued above. In addition, such 'spectral' traces of *things* or *people* that are not quite what they appear to be also puts into question the idea of neatly organised space where order prevails and *things* or *people* can be placed in appropriate spatial confines; in their stead, unexpected and inappropriate events appear (Maddern and Adey 2008).



La petite ceinture - 19th arrondissement, Paris

But if the images that add together to form the *paranthèse urbaine* are thus akin to a distancing kind of performance, they also tell a blatant lie. The illusions they invite, illusions of being continuous, of being complete, of being a train ride in the first place — all created through optical and sonic means — are themselves false images. Although

unnoticeable to the viewer (if aptly reflected in the named adopted for the film, with its allusion to an incomplete and broken geometrical figure), an abundance of breaks and fissures in the film point to the fact that it does not, after all, complete the journey all the way around Paris. As we have seen, such an ambition would have been impossible to complete in 2009 (and before); the film, however, retains precisely this particular illusion. The same could be said for the fantasy of being a film in the first place, an illusion only permanently broken when the plethora of individual photographs is assembled one shot at a time on a series of contact sheets and thus returned to an original materiality.

Thus transformed, *paranthèse urbaine* becomes a no less interesting exercise in apparent repetition that resembles the mechanic assemblage of a railroad track more than its eventual transverse in the form of a journey; akin to a genuine Derridaen deconstruction, it makes visible the gaps between not merely our perceptive appreciation of represented forms of reality and reality itself but points towards the unknown materialities — stories, labour, people and ‘stuff’ — that are constitutive and supportive no less for being unappreciated and rendered invisible in everyday life. Between individualised images, the ghosts that are fellow travellers on the tracks, individual pieces of graffiti, trees, rubbish and remaining pieces of urban infrastructure all acquire a presence that a stop-motion process continuously folds into an iterative process that appears to be directed only because it follows an example set in a past. Part of this process of weaving together inside and outside is the already mentioned ‘opening up’ of the film towards a no less constitutive outside by occasionally turning its gaze across a quite real border between the Ceinture and its surrounding Parisian quarters. In the film, then, or better: through *performing the Ceinture*, the traditional, historical order of things, the relationship between the city and its infrastructures is inverted, folded: we look at the city from a key part of its erstwhile supporting skeleton now rendered obsolete; here, ‘inside the city’ becomes ‘outside’ the Ceinture in more than one sense. The ambiguity of the resulting relationship between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ — and thus the ambiguity of both of these concepts — translates into the novelty adopted by the camera position while shooting the individual images that combine to make the film. Although it requires an unusual degree of discipline and a continuously disciplined body to come into existence — one would (wrongly) imagine a handcar being involved in the production of these images — this particular inside to the Ceinture is also rendered invisible in the accelerated process of the film, its eventual outside: whereas the individual images leave space for the contorted act of crouching to be imagined, the film does not. Here, too, a *Verfremdung* of sorts takes place that finds its equivalent in the speed adopted for the ‘flow’ of images — which at 8 images per second is slightly shorter than the normal retinal retention pegged at 12 images per second: a viewer is invited to ponder a certain artificiality surrounding the *paranthèse urbaine*, an artificiality that points back to its original mode of production. Kneeling on the Ceinture at regularly repeated intervals mimics older gestures of respect and approximation akin to those regularly performed on pilgrimages, if now performed in a post-industrial space.

To conclude, what we would suggest is that *paranthèse urbaine* not only is not a film, it furthermore becomes its own performative space, rather than following any of the accepted customs for any kind of film-making, including the genre of documentary. The complete absence of both plot and commentary allows the images to mark a completely non-economical space that is marginal in the truest sense imaginable. It is in this form that the ‘parenthesis’ becomes mimetic to the spatial structure of its object: it, too, leaves space for space to be twisted and turned into itself precisely where the ‘open brackets’ fail to meet. Moreover, it, too, becomes topological in form and expression.

Conclusions

One of the defining qualities of topological spaces is their unfinished character, combined with the absence of a defined beginning or end. Technically, the Ceinture of old possessed both in the form of its youngest station at ‘Courcelles Ceinture’ in the 17th arrondissement, which appears as the beginning and end to all journeys along the Ceinture on printed timetables. Operationally this may have mattered but for passengers using the line — a majority of which did not use the entirety of the line in their daily routines — it clearly did not: trains encircled the French capital in both directions, interrupted only at night. In its present configuration, however, which sees the Ceinture fragmented, partly redesignated, partly abandoned, but never not used. Its spatial extension is best described as twisted, topological. *Paranthèse urbaine* performs both realities: on the one hand it dwells on the illusion of a continuous take around Paris; on the other hand, its very own fissures and breaks accentuate its own illusions as being just that.

And yet, for all that, the Ceinture is not a dystopian space. *Pace* a statement made in one particular entry of an on-line blog we would maintain that this is no “post-apocalyptic world invaded by vegetation” (kafarblog.free.fr/petite-ceinture/index.php/2007/09/18/1-petite-ceinture), no Stalker-like Tarkovskian landscape, but a functioning, if differently employed space instead — and most certainly a threatened space. The incorporation of un-used parts of the Ceinture in the 16th arrondissement into a green path and the publicized ambitions to turn a large chunk of its elevated tracks in the 15th arrondissement into a ‘High line’ type of promenade,⁴ all but cause the dream of a resurrected *Chemin de fer de ceinture* to become illusory. A further move undermining the probability of future rail-related uses came in the form of successive decisions by the RATP, the Parisian public transport organisation, to invest into the construction of a new circular series of tramlines circumnavigating Paris’ 20 arrondissements along the

⁴ In the Parisian context, the planned development in the Southern part of the city is hoped to emulate the success of the Passage Plantée in the 12th arrondissement, where tracks leading trains to the Gare de la Bastille up until 1969 have been transformed into a ‘green-style’ promenade from 1993 onwards. On the development in the 15th arrondissement, see www.apur.org/sites/default/files/documents/APAPU241_03.pdf and www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2011/11/16/01016-20111116ARTFIG00716-paris-sentier-nature-sur-la-petite-ceinture-dans-le-xve.php.

trajectory of the old Boulevards des Marechaux,⁵ effectively depriving the space of the Ceinture of any future mobility-related functionality.⁶ If the future for the Ceinture appears thus to be decidedly ‘green’ in functional orientation, we need to remind ourselves that such a future is clearly linked to topographic, rather than topological ambitions. As Jennifer Foster’s recent critical contextualisation of re-naturalised spaces in urban environments in New York and Paris has demonstrated, such re-configured spaces

play integral roles in the advancement of contemporary capital accumulation strategies, a central concern of which is exclusion of valued space from socially undesirable urban inhabitants in the name of safety (2010, 317).

An integral part of such strategies is the ‘normalisation’ of behaviours through the imposition of order that attach centrally to anticipated performances. A current free-flow between potential and realised performances on the Ceinture threatens to be replaced by standardised expressions of identity, creativity and work. Like earlier attempts to ‘reclaim’ marginal land in Paris (see Strohmayer 2006 and 2012), the Ceinture, too, appears destined to be re-incorporated into a spatially operating logic dominated by economical concerns determined to stamp out a certain utopian quality often embedded in a “geography of the elsewhere”, as Hetherington observed of similar spaces some time ago (1998; 124). Highlighting the general fluidity of urban spatial valorisations within (often cyclical) capitalist accumulation processes, performances thus become increasingly ritualised (see Schechner 1985) by increasingly being embedded in a more clearly legible space, a ‘flat’ space incorporated into maps (see Schechner 2002, 32-34) and regulated forms of ownership, of which the privatisation especially of two ‘gares’ or train stations along the line into a higher-end restaurant (Gare la Muette: ‘Restaurant la Gare’; 16th arrondissement) and a music hall and night club (Gare de Charonne: ‘La Flèche d’Or’; 20th arrondissement) are perhaps but indicators of contexts to shape future performances.

Here, then, the relationship between a spatial configuration, performance and a historical ‘given’ reveals itself to be cast in a precarious form. In other words, the fre-

⁵ Also known as the ‘inner périphérique’, these are the boulevards that emerged when the old ‘Mur de Thiers’ fortification wall from 1841-44 — the last ever to choke development in Paris — was disbanded in the 1920s. The *périphérique* or ring motorway technically marks the space of the glacis of old.

⁶ It would be dishonest not to mention one plan that contradicts such a likely scenario: the incorporation of the Eastern part of the Ceinture into massive current redevelopments in the 19th arrondissement (‘RER E’; Gare Évangile-Rosa Parks’) through a possible prolongation of the new ‘T8’ tramway line connecting Saint Denis in the North with the RER network at ‘Rosa Parks’ towards the Parc des Buttes Chaumont and beyond (see APUR 2011, section 2.4.2) — but it would appear to be a safe bet that such plans will not immediately, if ever, rise to the top of urban priorities. Note, too, that the most authoritative of histories of urbanism in Paris (Lavedan 1993) lamented in its first edition (1975) the drop in connectivity and speed achieved in the Parisian periphery as a result of the demise of the Ceinture (see 543-545).

quency of un-anticipated, un-planned, spontaneous or even ‘shadowy’ (Tanizaki 2001) performances that conform less to pre-cast social and cultural moulds and their internal modes of structuration — although, as we have seen in the case of some community gardens, these are not altogether absent along the Ceinture presently — gives way to communally recognisable performances where (crucially) transgressions can be more clearly demarcated from ‘normal’ and acceptable forms of behaviour congruent with the needs of a bourgeois public sphere.

The current threat to the Ceinture and countless other ‘marginal’ urban spaces becomes even more tangible when consciously thematised through analytical lenses crafted by what could be called *topological performances* or performative practices that do not conform to the usual norms of displaying clear contours around their edges: both temporal contours (beginning and end) and spatial contours (extension and depth) are conspicuously flexible on the Ceinture; by contrast, ‘high line’ type of spaces of the kind proposed for the 15th arrondissement are defined largely through exclusionary tactics — opening hours, spatial design and its accompanying exclusions, any number of shared activities requiring regulation, as well as various forms of policing combine to lend shape to a markedly different frame or urban stage. The fact that the former largely take place without an audience while the latter are designed to invite many a gaze further adds complexity to the situation.

In this sense, then, topological performances — amongst which we would like to include the *paranthèse urbaine*, as well as the numerous non-represented performances that make the Ceinture what it is today — invite a different conceptualisation of the marginal city as providing a ‘nomadic,’ rather than ‘stable,’ forum for public engagements (Cupers 2005; see also the series of photographs assembled in Cupers and Missen 2002) that can subvert binary oppositions of the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ or of the ‘belonging’ and ‘immigrant’ kind. For us this ‘nomadic’ space is different still from the ‘non-places’ described by Augé (1995) in that it offers the possibility of temporary possessions, event-like but decidedly material in their manifestations. Returning to one of our guides throughout this paper, we may say with Perec that the space of the Ceinture

[L’espace] est un doute : il me faut sans cesse le marquer, le désigner, il n’est jamais à moi, il ne m’est jamais donné, il faut que j’en fasse la conquête.

("[] is a space of doubt: it requires relentless acts of marking and designing and will still not belong to me; it is never given but always requires that I make it mine;" Perec 1974, p.122; our translation).

Perhaps spaces like the Ceinture, spaces temporarily suspended from any direct involvement in the reproduction of capital, render this obligation to ‘doing’ more visible than other spaces. Either way, it is this insistence on the importance of ‘doing’ and thus of ‘performing’ that summarises best the importance of the Ceinture: other than topographic spaces with their clear co-ordinates (or colour-coded planning attributes), the Ceinture is what its users make of it. At the same time, it is a genuinely egalitarian space — in the originary and ‘active’ sense elaborated by Rancière (1991; also Dillon 2005 and May 2008): anyone is free to follow the path taken by the video just as anyone who

finds her- or himself wandering on the Ceinture is restricted to the pre-given speed of walking (see Careiri 2002). One may indeed marvel at the irony of a modern commercial space once conquered by speed having become the antithesis to commodified spaces through its incorporation into a haste-free, un-economical context once lauded by an older chronicler of Paris as being the true site of genius: “Il y a de l’esprit dans les voitures; mais le génie est à pied.” [“There is wit in vehicles but to walk embodies genius.”] (Mercier 1994, Vol. 2, 406).

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