

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Species of Spaces: Transdisciplinary Approaches to the Work of Georges Perec – Introduction

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‘... the rediscovery of a meaning, the perceiving that the earth is a form of writing, a *geography* of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors.’

Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces* (1974 / 1999)

Georges Perec’s *Species of Spaces* (published in an English translation by John Sturrock in 1999) is a key reference point for this Themed Issue, exemplifying as it does the centrality of spatial practice to his writing. Indeed, *practice* is a key concept when considering the unique perspectives offered by this collection of essays, which bring together contributions from the fields of visual arts, dance and music to examine the impact of Perec’s writing (including but not limited to *Species of Spaces*) on approaches to space and place in contemporary arts practice and theory.

An author renowned for his playful and experimental approach to writing, Georges Perec (1936-1984) is perhaps most commonly identified as the author of *La Disparition* (1969), a lipogram written entirely without the letter ‘e’ which was published as *A Void* in an ingenious English language translation by Gilbert Adair in 1995. The novel exemplifies the kind of creative ‘constraints’ adopted by the Oulipo, the post war avant-garde movement to which the author belonged. Conscious of a consequent reputation as ‘a sort of computer, a machine for generating texts’, Perec drew attention to the diversity of his output in an essay entitled ‘Notes on What I Am Looking For’, in which he suggested that four ‘modes of interrogation’ can be discerned in his work: the sociological; the autobiographical, the ludic and the novelistic (Perec 1999: 137). Indeed, the critical reception of Perec’s work within the field of literary studies is characterised by a variety of concerns: formalist preoccupations are evident in studies which seek to situate Perec’s work within traditions and taxonomies of experimental writing (see Bray, Gibbons and McHale 2012); autobiographical motifs in Perec’s fiction and non-fiction have been

considered in relation to the genre conventions of life writing (see Lejeune 1993); Perec's contribution to the Oulipo and its broader relationship to the history and legacy of the modernist and post war avant-gardes have been foregrounded in studies of radical art movements (see Ørum 2006); Perec's fictionalised memoir of a 'hidden childhood' as the son of Polish born Jewish parents in occupied France, *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (1975), has acquired canonical status in the fields of trauma and testimony studies and Holocaust writing (see King 2000). The publication of David Bellos's 1999 biography, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, the expanded reissue of a 1993 Special Issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 2009 and the recent publication of new translations and collections of Perec's writing (including *Thoughts of Sorts* 2011; *La Boutique Obscure* 2012; *The Art and Craft of Approaching Your Head of Department to Submit a Request for a Raise* 2011) are all indicative of the ongoing interest in Perec's life and work.

However, while the role of the visual and other arts in Perec's work have been explored as a theme or influence (see Gascoigne 2012), the impact of his writing beyond the literary world has yet to be fully explored. The significance of Perec's writing as a mode of artistic practice is suggested by the revival of his memory in the field of conceptual writing, which Craig Dworkin defines both as 'literary writing that could function comfortably as conceptual art' and 'the use of text in conceptual art practices' (Dworkin 2010: xxiii). Christian Bök's 2001 collection of univocals, *Ennoia*, was inspired by the Oulipo and includes poems dedicated to Georges Perec. In 2012 the conceptual writer Simon Morris published *Pigeon Reader*, a facsimile edition of *Species of Spaces* with a modified paratext and inserted photographs which play on Perec's comparison of the act of reading with a pigeon pecking on breadcrumbs. What is crucial here is the fascination with Perec's writing as a creative *practice* rather than a literary product. Indeed, an interest in Perec's artistic methods as a model for practice-based research is a unique feature of the essays collected in this Themed Issue. They testify to a Perecquian legacy which exceeds disciplinary boundaries, extending beyond literary studies to the visual and graphic arts, dance and performing arts and music and sound studies.

In 'On not staying put: Georges Perec's "inter(in)disciplinarity" as an approach to research', Joanne Lee suggests that Perec's writing offers a productive model for thinking about the unique insights and rewards of practice-based research methods. Indeed, spatial metaphors play a key role in Lee's exploration of Perec's 'inter(in)indisciplinarity' (Grattan and Sheringham 2005), which is characterised by a refusal to 'stay put' and a straying across disciplinary borders. For Lee, Perec's work exemplifies the particular merits of the 'project' (a self-reflexive endeavour characterised by a focus on process rather than outcome) and the 'essay' (understood as a creative / critical form which resists totalising imperatives). Through a threefold focus on the artist as 'knowing amateur', the simultaneity of 'creative criticality' and 'critical creativity', and the value of embracing the uncertainty and contingency inherent in 'thinking through research', Lee draws out the ways in which Perec's writing practice offers alternative models of research. Adopting an appropriately self-reflexive approach, this essay integrates commentary on Perec's writing with reflection of the author's Pam Flett Press series, a project whose provenance, format and distribution defy the legitimising conventions of academic dissemination. Lee's description of Perec's

approach to his ‘diverse curiosities’ as ‘rigorous but idiosyncratic’ captures a seeming paradox in Perec’s work on space which is further explored in subsequent essays.

In ‘Perecquian Perspectives: Dialogues with Site-Dance (Or, ‘On being *here* and *there*)’, Victoria Hunter explores the significance of Perec’s work in relation to site-specific dance practice, with a particular focus on subjectivity, space and place. Drawing variously on pioneering works in human geography and spatial practice (including Doreen Massey 2005 and Henri Lefebvre 2014), Hunter finds a productive resonance between Perec’s ‘scoring’ of space and the ‘embodied movement enquiry’ which characterises site-dance practice. Noting that Perec’s attempts at ‘exhausting space’ may at first sight seem to resemble quantitative modes of data collection, Hunter argues that on closer consideration this approach reveals the ‘illusory and mobile’ nature of space and place. In this way Perec’s ‘fieldwork’, with its focus on what he calls the ‘infra-ordinary’, can be understood as an embodied event: as such, it provides a suggestive model for site-dance practice, with its phenomenological emphasis on the body as our primary means of knowing the world. Hunter’s reflection on two site-dance projects influenced by and responding to Perec’s work, *Exhausting Place* and *Hidden Dip* (both 2014), serve to illustrate the ways in which the impact of Perec’s work extend beyond the written word. Like Lee, Hunter explores the affinities between Perec’s practice as a writer and contemporary practice-based research in the arts, arguing that his work brings a renewed ‘spatial consciousness’ to the ‘frame of play’ in which the complex encounter between human and environment is explored in site-dance practice.

In her essay ‘Georges Perec and On Kawara: Endotic Extravagance in Literature, Art and Dance’, Leslie Satin explores parallels between Perec as an experimental writer and Kawara as a conceptual artist, introducing questions of temporality to the consideration of space. Like Hunter, Satin brings the embodied inquiry and spatial consciousness of a dance practitioner to her discussion of Perec and Kawara. Lee and Hunter both remark on Perec’s disinterest in ‘colonising,’ ‘dominating’ or taking ownership of a specific space or idea, and Satin further applauds Perec’s approach to space as motivated by a spirit of ‘curiosity’ not ‘conquest’. Indeed, Satin notes that Perec and Kawara’s shared fascination with what Perec calls the ‘endotic’ coincides with the entry of the ‘everyday’ – in the form of bodies, movements and performance spaces - into the pioneering postmodern dance practice of the 1960s. The ‘profound importance of seeing and noticing’ is a key concern for Satin who finds a shared ‘devotion to the everyday’ in the accumulative and compositional strategies adopted by these two very different post war artists, with Kawara’s *Date Paintings (Today, 1966–2013)* seemingly attempting to ‘exhaust’ time in the way that Perec attempted to exhaust space. The temporal and the spatial are brought together in Satin’s essay in its consideration of the ‘monumental’ nature of some of Perec’s and Kawara’s durational projects and the relationship between space and time is also taken up in Richard Elliott’s essay, with a unique focus on sound.

In ‘Species of Sonic Spaces’, Richard Elliott attempts an ‘auralisation’ of Perec’s work through a focus on ‘sonic spaces’. In response to the relative neglect of the aural in literary geography (see Hones 2015) Elliott enlists Bachelard’s work on the ‘poetics of space’ (1994), Lefebvre’s ‘rhythmanalysis’ (2013), Sloterdijk’s ‘microspherology’ (2011) and LaBelle’s ‘acoustic territories’ (2010), to provide innovative frameworks for the

consideration of the ‘sonic-spatial relationship in writing’. Noting that while the largely ‘visualist’ logic of *Species of Spaces* does not preclude a reading foregrounding the aural, Elliott turns to *A Man Asleep* (1967), *An Attempt at Exhausting a Space in Paris* (1975) and *Life a User’s Manual* (1978) to explore the relationship between writing, space and sound. Indeed, refashioning David Bellos’s comments on *Species of Spaces*, Elliott imagines the ‘whole world as a cone held to the ear of the rapt listener’. Like Satin, Elliott finds parallels between Perec’s writing and contemporary conceptual art practices, citing Kenneth Goldsmith’s 2015 work *Capital* as an example of the ways in which strategies of ‘exhaustive description’ have been applied to what Blesser and Salter term ‘acoustic communities’ (2007). The importance of paying attention to the ‘ordinary and overlooked’ is central to all of the essays collected in this volume and here Elliott turns that quality of attention to sound, listening as intently to the ‘relative silence’ of *Species of Spaces* as to the ‘auditory geography’ (Revill 2013) of Perec’s other work.

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