



ESPÆCE

INTERVIEW WITH AURÉLIEN BORY

How long has Georges Perec's book *Species of Spaces* been a companion of yours?

Aurélien Bory: For the past ten years or so. Our relationship to space was already—and still is—the question at the heart of my shows. The title therefore caught my attention; Georges Perec's books all have great titles. I had long wanted to make a show based on it. For a while, I thought about creating a laboratory for each of the thirteen chapters of the book: the page, the bed, the bedroom, the apartment, the building, the street, the neighbourhood, the city, the countryside, the country, Europe, the world, space. But I gave up on that idea. I realised that it wasn't just *Species of Spaces* I was interested in, but all of Georges Perec's work, and more precisely the relationship between his writing and his personal history. *Species of Spaces* was for me the perfect entry point into his world.

Georges Perec is known mostly for his novels. *Species of Spaces* belongs to another genre entirely.

Georges Perec wrote novels, essays, plays, poetry, but also recipes, postcards, games: he tried to write everything. *Species of Spaces* is indeed an essay, at least at first glance. But it is actually a juxtaposition of various elements, sometimes with no apparent relationship to one another, a puzzle made up of sociological reflections and autobiographical references, some encrypted, others not. It is a reflection about space that uses notions of geography, urban planning, architecture, geopolitics, painting, and history, and links them to his own writing projects, which also have something to do with space: *Places*, *Places I Have Slept* (two projects he eventually abandoned), and of course *Life a User's Manual*, his masterpiece. *Species of Spaces* sometimes looks like a first draft, as if he were taking notes. Yet it features all the characteristics of his writing: a taste for sociology, a certain playfulness, a love of fiction, and an autobiographical aspect. All his references are there, as shown by the systematic way in which he uses quotations. In 1974, Perec is buzzing with excitement. He's been working for years on *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, his most openly autobiographical book. And the fact that all his work is in some way autobiographical is what interests me the most.

What do the drafts you mentioned consist of?

Géométrie de caoutchouc (Rubber Geometry), *Plexus*, and *Azimuth*, my last three creations, formed a cycle. I wanted to start a new one. The research I led for three years around Perec was punctuated by *Les B(r)ouillons*, public presentations of what I was working on. It was actually a little more than just that: each *B(r)ouillon* was a constraint we'd created for ourselves. The idea was to spend one week working with my team with no preparation, before presenting the result of that research over the following week. The experience turned out to be very stimulating. I wanted this long-term project to still have some sort of urgency. The method was also a nod to Perec, who experimented with the serial format for *W*, before giving up on it.

How do you make Perec's work yours?

The show isn't an adaptation of the book, it is inspired by it. *Espæce* is a way I found of inhabiting the text, just like the "e" inhabits the "a" or, at the theatre, human space inhabits the space of the stage. *Espæce* is the result of the superposition of two words, while Perec juxtaposed them. That superposition implies layer and strata, leads to an exploration of the idea of depth. It would be a sort of homage to Georges Perec, to the story of his childhood and of his mother, who died in Auschwitz. He talked a lot about his own story, but it's not always the part that's remembered. We tend to focus on his playful relationship to language. Yet Perec's writing was entirely built around that void. A huge inner void, a chasm. His relationship to his own history was like a game of hide-and-seek, in which the fear of being found out was as big as that of not being found out.

The death of Perec's mother is at the heart of his work. Can you tell us what happened?

Georges Perec was 5 when his mother sent him to the free zone aboard a Red Cross train. She was planning on joining him later, thinking herself protected as a war widow, but she was arrested in a raid and sent to Auschwitz on 11 February 1943. Perec was in Villard-de-Lans at the time, then moved to Lans-en-Vercors. He was adopted by his aunt and uncle at the end of the war. He became an orphan in the worst possible way: his mother just vanished. She has no grave, no date of death. In the 1950s, the French administration produced a death certificate, choosing 11 February 1943 as her date of death. How did he learn about it as a child? What was he told? What words were said? What kind of relationship to reality could he have built? Later, Françoise Dolto probably saved him as he was facing a complete breakdown. She encouraged him to anchor himself into reality through representation, suggesting he could paint or write.

In what way does *Species of Spaces*, which takes the form of an essay or a treatise, deal with this inner chasm you mentioned?



The book begins with this sentence: "The object of this book isn't exactly the void, but rather what exists around or inside it." I sort of took that sentence literally. I focused on those ideas of "around" and "inside," associating the void with writing. What's around Perec's writing manifests itself through quotations borrowed from his favourite writers. What's inside it manifests itself clearly through his obsession with letters. The inner void that haunted Perec cannot be separated from his writing. Actually, the real subject of *Species of Spaces* is indeed writing. Just look at the last sentence of the book: "Writing: to try meticulously to retain something, to make sure that something survives: to extract fragments from the growing void, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark, or a few signs."

How did you make the shift from the page to the stage?

By simply using the stage as a page. Theatre is a superposition, a palimpsest, a writing of ephemeral forms that write themselves on the traces of those that came before. *Espæce* follows a sort of programme, according to four main axes: the literal interpretation, the trompe l'oeil, the disappearance, and the trace. Those devices all belong to the theatre, and I found them in Perec's writing as well. I use the void of the stage as a starting point. That "species of space" contains all forms, all shows. Like Perec and his machines made to invent stories, I first invented myself as an explorer of the machine that is the theatre: my role was to find the stories it contains to then move to another space, that of representation. To move from language to imagination, from the world that surrounds us to our own history. To move from life to death, "to pass." And to go back to this sentence by Perec in the foreword to *Species of Spaces*: "To live is to move from one space to another, while trying real hard not to stub one's toes."

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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