

VIRUS12

RADICAL MODERNS

a n o 2 0 1 6 y e a r
s e m e s t r e 0 1 s e m e s t e r

revista do Nomads.usp | Nomads.usp journal
ISSN 2175-974x | CC BY-NC
DOI 10.4237/virus_journal

SPECIES OF SPACES: NOTES ON A POTENTIAL EXERCISE

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How to quote this text: Tramontano, M., 2016. Species of spaces: notes on a potential exercise. *VIRUS*, [e-journal] 12. Available at: <<http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/virus12/?sec=6&item=1> &lang=en> [Accessed 00 Month 0000].

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the documentary 'Species of spaces', produced at Nomads.usp, the Center of Interactive Living Studies, in 2015, relating it to the homonymous novel by French writer Georges Perec and the principles that guide the actions of OuLiPo, the *Ouvroir of Littérature Potentielle*. Perec and the members of OuLiPo refer on the ideas developed in France in the early Renaissance and consolidated in the first decades of the twentieth century that question the classical forms of literature and propose the construction of writings in the manner of a wordplay, exploring different linguistic devices to express contents often trivial or deliberately misunderstanding. The video production falls within the Center interest for investigating possibilities of using documentary film as a means of reading and expressing urban realities.

Keywords: Documentary, Public space, OuLiPo, Literature, Modern

VIDEO:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmX5p_s6IbE

Video 'Species of spaces'. Tramontano, 2015. .

01

In recent years, Nomads.usp, the Center for Interactive Living Studies of the University of São Paulo, Brazil, has included in his research concerns the use of documentary film as a means of reading and expressing urban realities. Through several initiatives, the Center has sought to explore audiovisual languages and



narratives with the aim of expanding the methodological procedures commonly used by researchers of public space. If, on the one hand, documentary genre is, within the Human Sciences research, a widely studied method, validated and applied, in the academic fields of Architecture and Urbanism it is virtually a stranger.

The documentary 'Species of spaces' was produced in one of Nomads.usp actions aimed at deepening the familiarity of the group with this film genre. On the afternoon of October 9, 2015, nine researchers, divided into four groups, recorded images and sounds in eleven public spaces of the city of Sao Carlos, five of them located in the central region and the other in peripheral neighborhoods. An initial agreement defined that capture would prioritize images taken with the camera in a static position or moving in horizontal panning, searching to record, with minimal hierarchy, components of the physical space, on the one hand, and the dynamics of human occupation, on the other hand.

The video presented in this article represents one of many cutting possibilities of the audiovisual material then produced collectively. The edition narrative choice refers on the book *Espèces d'espaces* (1974), by French writer Georges Perec, which discusses the author's relationship with the spaces in which he lives. In the book, they are categorized on a scale of size and tangibility, in the following order: the space of the page, the space of the bed, of the room, of the apartment, of the building, of the street, of the neighborhood, of the city, of the countryside, of the nation, of Europe and of the world. Video editing ideas were based on the chapter *La ville* [The city].

02

Georges Perec was born in Paris in 1936 from Polish Jewish parents, both killed in World War II: the father on the battlefield in 1940, and the mother in the concentration camp of Auschwitz in 1942. Placed by his mother in a train of the Red Cross that took dozens of children to safe places in the Alps, Perec spent his childhood in villages within the Vercors massif. He will write later several books in which the themes of memory, childhood and absence are central.

His literary production, repeatedly recognized by major French national awards, was marked by a double education: his university studies in literature in Paris and Tunis, and the sixteen years period he worked as a documentalist in neurophysiology at the National Council for Scientific Research, CNRS. The glance Perec proposes on the city has both poetics and imagistic from the literature, as well as rigor, often mathematical, from documentation. It is however as a member of the OuLiPo writers association that he will build his career prematurely interrupted by his death in 1982, at 45 years old.

03

OuLiPo, or the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* [Sewing Atelier of Potential Literature], is an association founded in 1960 jointly by mathematician François Le Lionnais and writer Raymond Queneau. It was the first of many *ouvroirs* created in different disciplines, from the Queneau and Le Lionnais formulation of a generic *ouvroir*, the OuXPo, where X can be replaced by letters referring to the knowledge area in which members want to produce research: OuMuPo (music), OuGraPo (graphics), OuBaPo (comics), OuPeinPo (painting), and even a OuArchPo (architecture), established in 2001, among others (Fatrazie, n.d.). The common basis of all OuXPo is the desire to explore, especially from a formal point of view, creative processes in various fields, always using what they call *contrainte artistique volontaire*, or voluntary artistic restriction. Such restriction is a rule or set of rules

defined *a priori* to stimulate and frame the artwork, and must be strictly respected. His nature can be formal, theoretical, plastic, thematic, among others.

At OuLiPo, one seeks to recombine continuously mathematics and literature. The aim is to formulate, through exercises, starting points for literary works, and not necessarily the works themselves (James, 2006). This is the idea that the potential literature concept seeks to express. The content of the work matters less than the way it is written, and especially than the application of artistic restrictions previously defined. Still, several of its members, including Italo Calvino, Raymond Queneau and Perec himself, produced books that occupy a major place in recent French literature. A stunningly beautiful and extremely popular example is *Exercices de style*, written by Queneau in 1947, which briefly describes a single Parisian urban scene in 99 different ways. Another example is the text *Un peu moins de vingt mille incipits inédits de Georges Perec* [A little less than twenty thousand unpublished beginnings of Georges Perec] (Perec, 1990), which offers a combinatorial matrix 9 x 3, composed of 27 snippets for the beginning of a romance, totaling 19,683 recombination possibilities offered to the reader (this number is informed by the author in a note on the manuscript margin). Besides *Espèces d'espace*, Perec wrote very important works that explore oulipian principles such as *La disparition* [literally, The disappearance], which emphasizes the idea of absence with the suppression of the letter 'e' throughout the text. The decision not to use the letter 'e' is, in this case, what the group members call a voluntary artistic restriction.

04

One of the main OuLiPo references are the *grands rhétoriciens*, who were poets and writers of the early Renaissance who worked to and were supported by nobles and lords to celebrate their greatness. These writers already exercised the construction of writings in the manner of wordplays, exploring various linguistic devices to express contents often trivial or deliberately misunderstanding. Pierre Badel (1984), quoting the famous study of Paul Zumthor, *Le Masque et la lumière: la poétique des grands rhétoriciens*, from 1978, writes that

'[...] the *rhétoriciens* are surprisingly modern. They were not theorists; nevertheless their practice raises profound questions relating to language, to the processes of meaning and understanding, to the text, to writing. [...] The complex rhymes, all procedures that Zumthor calls juggling, have the effect of making the given speech and its obvious meaning fundamentally ambiguous. Rare rhymes, spectacular juggling, ambiguities, release the meaning, pulverize the sense, burst the mask of representation and question from inside established values' (Badel, 1984, pp.4-5).¹

In fact, more than linguistic devices, OuLiPo and Perec appropriated the *rhétoriciens* literary approach of offering a set of elements and figures to the reader. This latter has, in turn, countless ways to recombine them and interpret them, to produce different meanings about the message they want to convey. We will see the same approach in the work of writers and modern poets of the early twentieth century, connected to artistic movements such as Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism - among them, Paul Eluard, Mario Carli, Jean Cocteau and Guillaume Apollinaire - who remain

¹ All quotes in French have been translated by the author. **From original in French:** '[...] les rhétoriciens sont d'une étonnante modernité. Ils n'ont pas été des théoriciens; néanmoins leur pratique pose de profondes questions relatives au langage, aux processus de la signification et de la compréhension, au texte, à l'écriture. [...] Les rimes complexes, tous les procédés que Zumthor nomme jongleries, ont pour effet de rendre le discours tenu et son sens obvie fondamentalement équivoques. Les rimes rares, les jongleries spectaculaires, les équivoques, libèrent le signifiant, pulvérisent le sens, crèvent le masque de la représentation et remettent en cause de l'intérieur les valeurs établies.'

an important link between the *grands rhétoriciens* and OuLiPo, as suggested by Camille Bloomfield (2013). It seems, indeed, there is a clear correlation between pictorial and graphic experiments, typical of that time, which explore the emerging idea of abstraction, and writings that consider the book page as visual field, giving up the traditional structure of sentences, foreshadowing what will be concrete poetry in the 1950s. An example is the first page of the chapter *La page* [The page], the first space scale treated by Perec in *Espèces d'espaces* (Fig. 1).

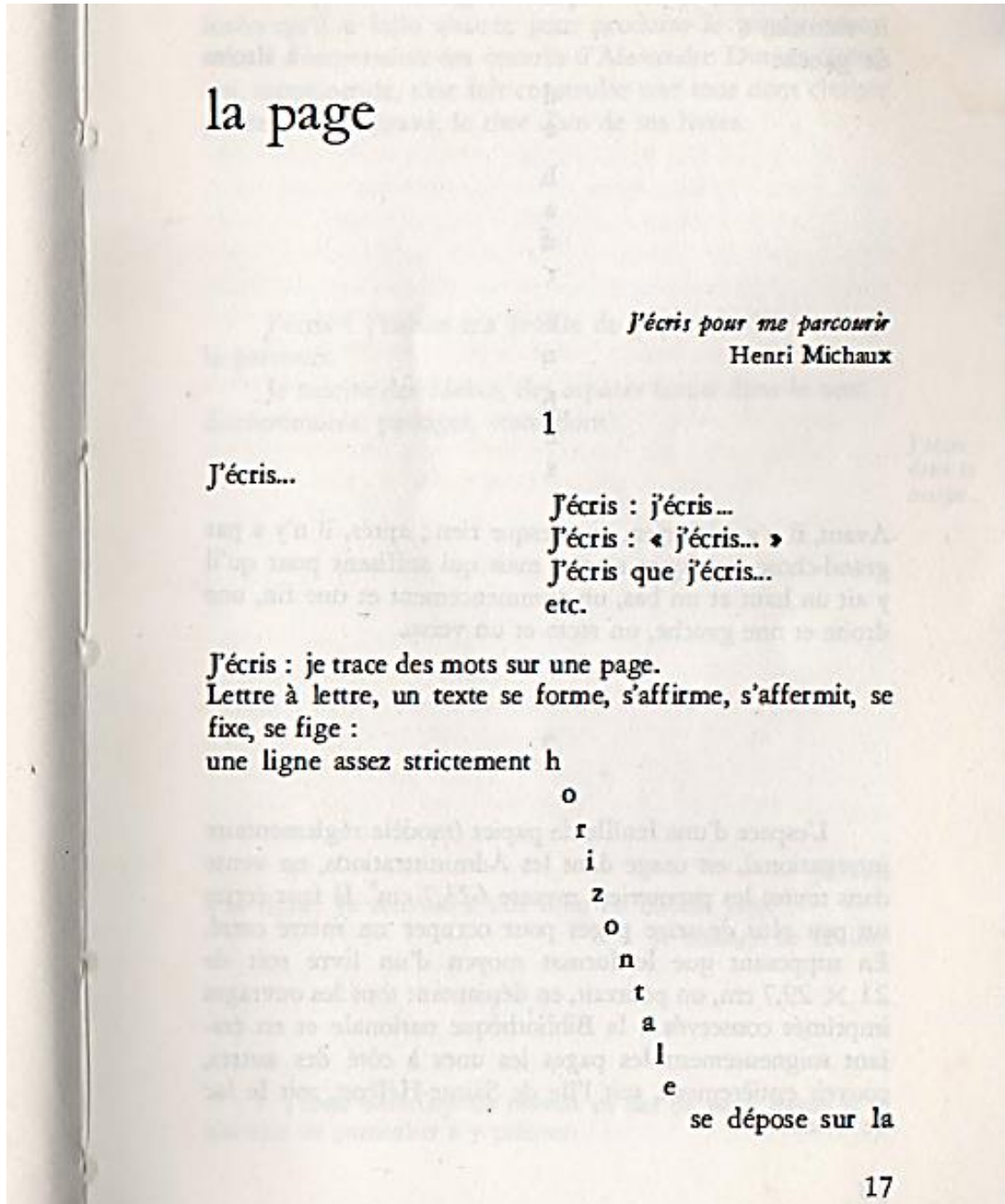


Fig. 1: La page. First chapter page.
 Source: PEREC, 1974.

05

The structure of the chapter *La ville* [The city] is more like a set of sparse notes on how to observe cities than actually a text which seeks to elaborate on the subject. The first paragraph already sounds like a warning: 'Do not try too quickly to find a definition of the city; it's too big, one has every chance of being wrong'². Follow new instructions for those who want to approach the urban object. Percec urges the reader to avoid assign meanings to what he or she sees, allowing oneself to grasp the visible with an almost documentalist attitude: 'First, take inventory of what you see. Identify what you are sure. Establish basic distinctions: for example, between what is city and what is not the city'³. Implicit in his speech is an understanding of the city based on the center-periphery dichotomy, even though he doubts its durability, given the historical expansion processes of the urban network. He recalls how Paris has expanded including in its territory villages that were located outside its walls. He points out that these physical boundaries no longer exist, but there are others, of different natures: 'Be interested in what separates the city of what is not the city. Watch what happens when the city stops. [...] Recognize that suburbs have a strong tendency not to remain suburbs'⁴.

Finally, Percec suggests a briefest method, as he himself calls the following paragraph:

'It should, either give up to speaking on the city, to speaking about the city, or to force oneself to speak the simplest of the world, to speak obviously, familiarly. Drive off all preconceived ideas. Stop thinking in all prepared words, forget what was said by urban planners and sociologists.'⁵

06

The Nomads.usp video 'Species of spaces' corroborates, illustrates and develops in audiovisual medium some of the issues set out in the paragraphs above.

1. The action agreed by researchers was formulated as an exercise expected to produce ideas for the development of documentaries about the city, and not as a film itself. The video brings some possibilities, imagined in the editing process for audiovisual works on the construction of urban readings.
2. In almost every shot, the camera was maintained steady or in panning, which means, in film jargon, moving the camera slowly and horizontally around its own vertical axis. These choices were aimed at emphasizing the search for a certain neutrality of the look to the observed places. That is, a look which does not hold particularities of the observed scene, but obeys predefined restrictions.

² All quotations of Georges Percec refer to his book *Espèces d'espaces*, 1974. **From original in French:** 'Ne pas essayer trop vite de trouver une définition de la ville; c'est beaucoup trop gros, on a toutes les chances de se tromper'.

³ **From original in French:** 'D'abord, faire l'inventaire de ce que l'on voit. Recenser ce dont l'on est sûr. Etablir des distinctions élémentaires: par exemple entre ce qui est la ville et ce qui n'est pas la ville'.

⁴ **From original in French:** 'S'intéresser à ce qui sépare la ville de ce qui n'est pas la ville. Regarder ce qui se passe quand la ville s'arrête. (...) Reconnaître que les banlieues ont fortement tendance à ne pas rester banlieues'.

⁵ **From original in French:** 'Il faudrait, ou bien renoncer à parler de la ville, à parler sur la ville, ou bien s'obliger à parler le plus simplement du monde, en parler évidemment, familièrement. Chasser toute idée préconçue. Cesser de penser en termes tout préparés, oublier ce qu'ont dit les urbanistes et les sociologues'.

3. The images in panning chain together without interruption, always taking the look from the left to the right hand of the observer, continuously. Although the shot locations are distant sometimes a few kilometers from each other, the sequence checks the possibility to visualize a way of understanding the city as a whole entity, as a large public space open to the use of its inhabitants, periphery and center merged.
4. The colors of the images captured were replaced by a gray scale or scales combining shades of gray and red. This raises the assumption that many of the assigned value, function and significance in the landscape are highlighted through the use of colors, on buildings as on the various elements composing physical space. From this perspective, also the green tones of vegetation and the varied colors of the individuals clothes attract the observer's attention unequally, depending on his or her own interest and the values he or she gives to each color. It was wanted, therefore, to test the relevance of using this strategy to see urban areas and objects as mainly plans, masses and volumes, to emphasize their movements and displacements under different lighting conditions, avoiding the usual daily understandings.
5. With the same intention, directly recorded sound was replaced in most scenes by a continuous soundtrack composed of a single musical piece, written by Iánnis Xenákis. The use of Xenákis's experimental music sought to add to the watching experience a sound ambience completely different from usual, targeting at minimizing local sound references and reinforcing a stretching of the observer's familiarity relationships with his or her everyday spaces.
6. Video scenes offer either an observation prioritizing physical space and its constituent elements, or invite one to observe human occupation of this space. This categorization leads into a nearly documentation attitude of what can be seen, almost descriptive, of identification and recognition, suggesting a procedure for readings that dismember the complexity of observed places in layers thus simplified.
7. Human activities are displayed in quadripartite screens, into images treated in red and gray scales, evoking the observation through surveillance cameras. This feature reminds the observer the panoptic attitude of the seeing-without-being-seen urban surveillance, suggesting that this is also a characteristic of the attitude of someone who films anonymously convivial scenes in public places. The observer is not part of the games nor of sporting or commercial activities but still, standing in that place with the camera, is part of this system.
8. In the process of cutting and editing, the speech of the single person interviewed on the video was cut in sentences, and some of his expressions were isolated from the speech. The various parts were recombined suggesting new understandings of his speech, thus testing possibilities to reinforce certain ideas expressed in the interview. The use of this feature also intends to point out that, in a documentary film, the production of knowledge recorded in an interview is a construction by several hands, involving the one who speaks, the listener, the one who registers, and the one who edits the records in image and sound from his or her own beliefs and understanding of the subject addressed in the interview.

07

We finalize these brief notes remarking that the choice of Iánnis Xenákis' song to the video soundtrack contains some modern quotations. Born in 1922 in Romania, from



Greek parents, Xenákis lived in Paris from 1945 to 2001, the year of his death. He was a musician, engineer and architect, and worked at Le Corbusier's office as the head of La Tourette Convent (1957) and the Philips Pavilion (1958) projects. His concerns about possible links between music and architecture, mediated by mathematics, resulted in numerous musical pieces whose completely new sonorities are, to this day, major references in electronic music.

La Légende d'Eer, the musical piece chosen for the video 'Species of spaces' was first performed publicly in 1977, at the opening of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, in the piazza in front of the Center, which is one of the most celebrated public places on the planet.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the eight Nomads.usp researchers who had been interested to launch with me this collective glance on public space, in a tropical spring afternoon: Anibal Pereira Junior, Dyego Digiandomenico, Flavia Dias, Gabriele Landim, Guilherme Mayrinck, Jessica Tardivo, Maria Julia Martins and Nayara Benatti.

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