

Paul Virilio on Georges Perec

Interview by Enrique Walker

The text that follows is based on an interview carried out in Paris on 28 June 2001.

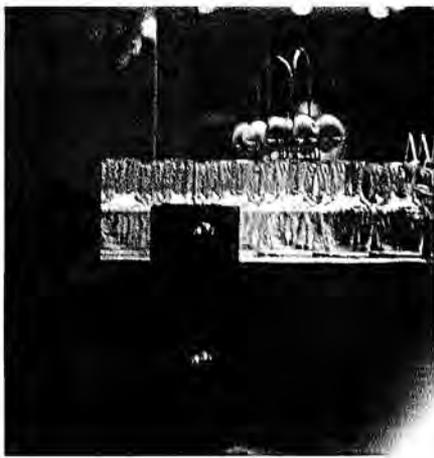
PW: You met Georges Perec at the beginning of the 1970s, when you were both invited by Jean Duvignaud to join the editorial board of the new journal *Cause commune*.¹ This took place in the aftermath of the events of May 1968, which were undoubtedly a key precedent in the definition of your agenda. On the one hand, you opened up a forum for debate that was expressly outside of the ideologies of the time; on the other, you placed your object of investigation at the margins of prevailing discussions. What was the journal's programme?

PV: *Cause commune* attempted to decipher events. But instead of looking at the political scene, we looked at facts – facts of various kinds. We looked at films, at works of art, at consumer goods. In other words, we looked at the world through its new symptoms. We had emerged from the events of May 1968 with a deep sense of disappointment – I had been very much personally involved, particularly in the storming of the Théâtre de l'Odéon – and consequently we set out to create a journal that had what we might call a 'post-1968' agenda. We were aware that we could not simply follow the predominant discourses, ideologies that had just failed before our very eyes. We had witnessed the collapse and abandonment of the leftist vision. It was not yet the implosion of communism, but it was the implosion of leftism. And it was precisely our experience of the post-1968 period that made the journal extraordinary. To some extent we represented the idea that May 1968 was a literary rather than a political revolution: Cohn Bendit and all the rest were just play-acting – political play-acting. That is to say, it had all ended up being a farce. In 1968 nothing changed in political terms, but everything changed in cultural terms. (The stress has too

often been put on the political aspect.) It is not by chance that writers such as Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari appeared immediately after 1968. They embody the poetics of post-1968 man. And so did our work at *Cause commune*. Hence our approach to the city, for instance, no longer connected to traditional notions of urban geography (cadastral survey, social classes, concentration, density and other phenomena); rather, it connected to what we termed the 'infra-ordinary', i.e. what we do when we do nothing, what we hear when we hear nothing, what happens when nothing happens. Outside of the city nothingness can perhaps exist – or almost nothing as Vladimir Jankélévitch² used to say – but it certainly does not exist in the city. In the city there is never a void. There is always background noise, there is always a symptom, a sign, a scent. So we were interested precisely in those things which are the opposite of the extraordinary yet which are not the ordinary either – things which are 'infra'.

EW: The notion of the infra-ordinary only emerged in the fifth issue of *Cause commune*, but in retrospect it seems to have been at the core of your programme. We can actually find it in embryonic form in one of your goals at the outset of the journal: 'to undertake an investigation of everyday life at every level, right down to the recesses and basements that are normally ignored or suppressed'. It was also particularly influential on Perec's descriptive texts.

PV: The name of the journal was another way of connecting to the common, to the banal, to the quotidian. In fact, our goal was to be journalists of that which did not seem to interest anybody, to talk about things that were not obvious. In other words, we wanted the journal to be political, economical, cultural, but we would still talk about the things which were to one side of these categories. The infra-ordinary was already precisely that. For example, I wrote an article on Watergate.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WALKER

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Obviously everybody at the time was writing about Watergate, but I wrote about the building. In other words, I said that Watergate was an architecture, and an extremely interesting one. I focused on the building to show that although we talk a lot about the events we do not talk enough about their setting. Events take place, Watergate was a place. The term event was very important at the time; the rediscovery of the notion of the event was one of the themes of the post-1968 period. So, if every event takes place (that is to say takes place somewhere), there had to be a space in which the events of the city – the political events or events of other kinds – would be analysed in relation to their place, where they would be linked to their own situation.

EW: Most of your articles in *Cause commune* deal precisely with the meeting of these two components – events and spaces – particularly with the effect of the former on the latter, an issue that architecture was then starting to address. This is the case in articles such as 'Habiter l'inhabituel', 'Le Mû' and 'Ailleurs commence ici', all of which deal with notions of *détournement*.

PV: At that time I was particularly interested in the notion of transgression in architecture. So I analysed buildings that had somehow been transgressed in terms of their use – churches that had become garages, garages that had become museums, and so on – as well as in terms of more specific actions, such as entering a church on horseback, or riding down a flight of stairs on a motorbike, or driving a car over rooftops (incidentally at the time there was a film in which cars did drive over rooftops). So I investigated transgressive situations in every possible realm, and deployed them so as to emphasize that they are part of the territory of architecture, and that there is no single object that might resist being some day transgressed in one way or another. 'Habiter l'inhabituel' meant to inhabit the

mutations, rather than merely to inhabit the buildings. In other words, every building is implicated in a process of constant transformation and at some point architecture must address this phenomenon. I was also interested in other forms of *détournement*, such as the urban riots in America – Detroit, Newark, and so on. On the one hand, they connected to my interest in war; on the other, they were, for me, a pathological sign of what I thought would emerge in Europe, a whole new urban reality that we had not yet witnessed. 1968 was not, of course, an urban riot; it was merely events – 'les événements de soixante-huit' as they are usually called in French.

EW: A couple of years prior to the outset of *Cause commune*, Perce had started a project named *Lieux*, which tackled the description of twelve Parisian sites in two different modes – memory mode and *in situ* mode – over a span of twelve years. On the one hand, this connected to an overall autobiographical project he had been carrying out; on the other, it connected to an emerging interest in space. I would say the project was actually reshaped during the *Cause commune* years, when the interest was displaced from the former to the latter, before the project was definitively forsaken in the mid-1970s. By then, most of Perce's projects were actually concerned with space, notably *Tentative d'épousé d'un lieu parisien*³ – the description of a thirteenth site which, as a matter of fact, was published in *Cause commune* – and *Espèces d'espaces* – the first volume of your collection *L'espace critique*, published by Éditions Galilée.

PV: As you said, *Espèces d'espaces* was the first book of my collection *L'espace critique*, and was actually commissioned by me. I invited Perce to write a text by asking him to do with space what he had earlier (when he wrote *Les Choses*) done with objects, because 'things' take place, just as events do. The question of space was of course central to my



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collection, so Perec produced a 'bestiary of spaces', as he first termed it. And he planned to give me a sequel in which he would carry out a similar project, but with mathematical spaces. *Lieux* was a rather personal project – Perec did not talk much about it to us. He mentioned it, showed us two or three things, but did not really share it with us at all. But I would say that his project aimed at exhausting time. Perec would periodically return to these places in order to see what would change, to see whether he could see time grow in space just as we see it grow in the images of Painlevé (those pictures of the accelerated sprouting of a plant, for instance). He wanted to unveil, through a periodical survey of each of the twelve different places he had chosen, what we might term the 'growing of the real'. That is, to see the 'real' (*réel*) grow out of the 'present' (*actuel*). Each return to the site would set the present in motion and make it become another 'real'. It was an attempt at a new kind of voyeurism, one in which what was at stake for Perec was actually the chance to see himself age. *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* was different – there he was trying to exhaust a place rather than time. He would not return to it, so he took three consecutive days to grasp everything that passed through the range of his perception. (You may know I appear in the text as I passed by place Saint-Sulpice while Perec was carrying out this project.) So he attempted to record everything, as would a surveillance camera: to record the ordinary, the banal, the habitual. That is, the signs of an event to which we may not have paid any attention, that we may not even have perceived. What interested Perec was the potential of the banal to become remarkable, how an ordinary sign can become extraordinary. At the time we were rediscovering the values of observation – the fact that looking is not self-evident. We look but we do not see; so how *must* we look in order to see? (Which means not just to see but actually to penetrate things.) We were very much aware that there are unknown things concealed by what is

visible, things that are hidden not in the obscure, but in the obvious. At the time there was actually a much more broad-based rediscovery of the visual, which was influenced by photography and the cinema in particular. The cinema, for example, was then inventing a new hand-held camera – the steadycam. And the steadycam had emerged from the Vietnam war: a device that was used to support American machine guns that were too heavy to hold unaided was now being used to support a camera. Cinema culture would, in turn, make us all cameramen. So there was an emerging cinematic and sequential vision that would open up for literature a new way of writing. The *nouveau roman* had already sketched this out, but in a purely literary way. This time, however, it was much more visual; in fact, literature would become more and more visual. This also explains our interest in drifting. For me – and I would say for Perec too, in his own way – the city is a film, one in a state of continuous metamorphosis, one in which not only is everything animated but everything is also incessantly accelerated. Everything passes by, everything is always in the process of unreeling. And you cannot see this film if you stand still – walking is the *tête de lecture* of this film.

EW: As a matter of fact, in your recent article 'Un homme qui marche' (a pun on the title of Perec's third novel, *Un homme qui dort*) you refer to him as 'a man of the crowd', a drifter: 'In my memory', you say, 'Georges Perec appears in motion'. You also suggest a connection to the Situationists that had, up to that point, remained unacknowledged. To some extent, Perec does belong to a long-standing tradition of Parisian drifting, one that can be traced back to Baudelaire, the Surrealists (Aragon and Breton) and Debord, amongst many others. It is also a tradition that is somehow continued after him by Réda and Maspero.

PV: I would say that rather than a situationist drifter, Perec was a drifter



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who hid. He who hides is often obliged to walk aimlessly on the streets because (like the 'man of the crowd' – I deliberately referred to Poe in my text)⁵ that is where he best goes unnoticed. As you may have realized, my text denounces the infantilization of Perec – there are some who seek the goal of transforming him into the *Le Petit Prince*. For me, instead, there is a sociological and political dimension to his work that has been systematically ignored – or rather censored – under an excessive insistence on the aspect of play. The Perec with whom I drifted was connected to a deep knowledge of the city, a knowledge that was atavistic to him. He was the *passé-murailles*, he existed but did so just through his drifting – as all his work shows. To start with, Perec was a man of the city, not a man of the countryside – he profoundly disliked the countryside. He was, in fact, what we might describe as an urban nomad, and the urban nomad is by definition political. That was the case with Restif de la Bretonne, the first drifter, as well as with Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord. And I would say that there is a tragic dimension in Perec's work, not simply one of play and poetics. Perec and I were children of the war. Children do not take part in wars, but they do look – they are voyeurs, they are bystanders. So Perec and I were voyeurs of war. For us war was an enormous spectacle. He took refuge in the Alps, in the region of Vercors, and I took refuge in Nantes. (And then he discovered that he was Jewish and that he had to be hidden. I was not hidden but my father was because he was an Italian communist.) So our relation to war was one of pure spectacle: we watched the world collapse. Therefore, we learnt how to look. This is certainly at the root of our interest in the infra-ordinary – those signs and symptoms that he and I learnt to interpret in order to survive. In my opinion this is a very important element of Perec's work, and also of my own. If I am interested in speed and in war (though speed and war were one and the same thing at the time – *blitzkrieg*) it is perhaps because I

was trained to read signs when there was not enough time to analyse them. One had to be fast and perceptive, one had to understand everything in the blink of an eye.

EW: War was in fact at the origin of Perec's work – the construction of the memories of a childhood of which he said he had been deprived.

PV: As I said, we were children of the war. Which means that it was quite natural for us to return to this tragic past. That is the reason why I fight against the way Perec is read today; we cannot understand Perec without the tragic. I believe there is something extraordinarily violent in Perec's poetics as there is something extraordinarily violent in my own work. In fact, without war I probably would not have written. This is an aspect of our past that we cannot erase, and our past is monstrous.

Notes

1. *Cause commune* was published nine times between May 1972 and February 1974. Its editor-in-chief was Jean Duvignand, while the editorial board included Alain Bourdin, Christine Bruner, Pascal Lainé, Françoise Maillet, Georges Perec and Paul Virilio. Other contributors included Henri Lefebvre and Marshall McLuhan. The publication ceased in 1974 when the publisher underwent a change of ownership. From 1975 it appeared in the form of a paperback series as part of Christian Bourgois's 10/18 collection.
2. Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903–85) was a prominent philosopher and musicologist. A member of the Resistance during the Second World War, he joined the students in May 1968. The three volumes of *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque rien* form one of his best known works.
3. *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* was first published in *Cause commune* (Collection 10/18, no.936, 1975), pp. 59–108, and republished as a book in 1982.
4. Paul Virilio, 'Un homme qui marche' in Paulette Perec (ed.), *Portraits de Georges Perec* (Paris, 2001). Translated on pp. 136–7 of this volume.
5. Virilio is referring here to Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'A Man in the Crowd'.

