



*Hicham Gardaf*

## **Interroger l'espace**

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The following are fragments of a longer text written for a presentation I gave at the Atelier Kissaria in Tangier in 2019. Throughout the presentation, I shared a selection of photography projects I made between 2010 and 2018, for which Tangier was the backdrop for the situations I photographed. For the purpose of this publication, I disposed of the intertitles, which have been used to divide my presentation into chapters. There are no footnotes either. Only fragments of texts, brief and succinct.



I have chosen to talk about Georges Perec, not only because he is the author par excellence for describing the spaces of our daily lives in a methodical and exhaustive way, but also because this presentation itself has been thought out and structured to echo his 1974 book *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*.





For Perec, he is interested in the question of time, freezing it in a few snapshots, like textual photographs. The choice of urban space allows him to depict the extraordinary banality of daily life, to describe the insignificant, the ordinary, and the trivial. He methodically inventories these banal spaces and points of passage, interrogating the paradoxical link between the city we no longer see and the way we look at it.





In his introduction to *Species of Spaces*, Percey writes:

The space of our lives is neither continuous, nor infinite, nor homogeneous or isotropic. But do we know exactly where it breaks off, where it curves, where it disconnects and comes together? We confusedly experience cracks, gaps and points of friction, sometimes vaguely aware that something is stuck, that it breaks loose or collides. Though we seldom seek to learn more about it and more often than not, wander from one spot to another, from one space to another, without measuring, without taking into account or considering the course of space. The issue is not to invent space and certainly not to re-invent it (too many well-intentioned individuals are already there to reflect upon our environment...), the problem is rather to question space, or more exactly, to read space; for what we call everydayness is not the obvious, but opacity: a kind of blindness, or deafness, a sort of anesthesia.

Every summer for several years, when I arrived at my grandparents' house for my school holidays, I would go into their bedroom, get down on the floor and remove an old cardboard suitcase. This suitcase, as old as the photographs inside, contained familiar portraits and faces (those of my mother, my uncle and my grandparents), but also unfamiliar faces (former neighbours, for example, or distant friends). My fascination with these photographs was mainly related to the way my family members dressed, decorated their interiors, or simply how they looked at a given time.

The very first people I photographed, before I had the courage to go and photograph people in my neighbourhood, were my mother, my cousin and my close friends. My aim was not to produce perfectly composed images, but to create a kind of "family album" almost similar to that of my grandparents. Moreover, the quality and aesthetics of these very first photographs taken at home or in my neighbourhood are reminiscent of those found in the family albums from the sixties...



Later, after a long period of frequenting cafés in Tangier's medina with my friends, I decided to go back alone and photograph these spaces where hardly anything was happening. I spent long hours watching people smoking, playing parcheesi and cards, drinking their tea and coffee, talking about politics, watching television and sometimes just doing nothing, much like me, watching the other people sitting in the café, or looking out.

What attracted me to these spaces at first was their pictorial and cinematic quality - the soft light, the pastel colours of the interiors, the old furniture marked by the passage of time, and the regulars in the café, who seem to be there every day, a bit like extras in a film location, who end up being absorbed by the setting.









In his 1995 book *Generic City*, Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas wrote:

the recent and belated discovery of the periphery as a zone of potential value - a kind of pre-historical condition that might finally be worthy of architectural attention - is only a disguised way of emphasising that the centre is the priority and everything else depends on it: without the centre, there is no periphery; the interest in the former presumably compensates for the emptiness of the latter.

As for me, my interest in exploring the periphery was not only limited to its 'potential value', but also to the fact that the periphery is an intermediate space in the city where one can find some form of "freedom". Ignasi de Sola-Morales argues that these "empty spaces", "become fertile ground for artists who take refuge on the outskirts of the city precisely when the city imposes an abusive identity, a stifling homogeneity, a freedom under control."



For example, whether on the *corniche*, in my neighbourhood in Marchane, or in the centre of Tangier, I have often been stopped by a *mokadem* – that is to say, a soldier, a policeman, or another agent of the state. I have been taken to the police station, questioned, and often asked not to return to the area without formal authorisation. These arrests are less likely to happen in the suburbs. And this, I think, is what allows for the emergence of new forms of informal urbanism in these peripheral areas as opposed to the (more controlled) central areas of the city.







Drawing on the notion of *terrain vague* as defined by the Spanish architect Ignasi de Sola-Morales, I began to document abandoned and isolated spaces in the surrounding areas of Tangier. *Terrain vague* (or wasteland in English) is an entry-point for deeper reflection on indeterminate spaces. Sola-Morales' essay begins with a discussion of the idea of photography, which the author considers essential to our understanding, particularly through photomontage and its inventive juxtaposition of forms, which helps us in our ability to explain the urban world.

The first part of the term, *terrain*, is a broader concept than territory, with more diverse spatial connotations, like the idea of a plot of land that can be built upon, which therefore has a more direct link to the urban landscape. The second part of the term, *vague*, on the other hand, evokes a range of ideas such as instability, uncertainty, ambiguity, vagueness, among others. In French, the roots come from the Latin adjectives "vacuus", which speaks of vacancy, emptiness and availability, and "vagus" which is related to the movement of the seas, and connotes both "movement, oscillation, instability and fluctuation" but also the 'indeterminate, imprecise, vague and uncertain'. These latter meanings are those which are most closely associated with urban and landscape planning considerations.





In *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, Perec methodically divided his book into distinct sections corresponding to different spaces of our daily lives, starting from the smallest to the largest: the page, the bed, the bedroom, the apartment, the apartment building, the street, the neighbourhood, the town, the countryside, the country, the world, and the universe. In doing so, he created an analogy between the most intimate of spaces (the page) and the farthest among them (the universe). Two spaces which may seem too far apart, but hold equal and endless possibilities.

It was through reading Perec that I became aware of the potential of my everyday surroundings. Spaces that I overlooked or took for granted, all of a sudden opened up and turned into a place of infinite possibilities. An apartment building was not just an apartment building. It was the people who built it, inhabited it, cared for it. It was the land it was built upon and the materials it was built from. It was the furniture and the objects in each of its apartments, rooms, cupboards, and the histories and memories they carried. It was almost as if there was a world before Perec and another one after. In the former, the world mirrored its own image, one that was flat, static and deprived of any meaning except for when there was an exceptional event, a tragedy. In the latter, the world was multidimensional. The eyes scrutinised the *infraordinary*. Every object represented a gateway to another universe.

Before, there was nothing, or almost nothing; afterwards, there isn't much, a few signs, but which are enough for there to be a top and a bottom, a beginning and an end, a right and a left, a recto and a verso... This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page.

Perec's description of the page evoked other spaces which I call here: *rectangles of open potentiality*: a projection screen in a movie theatre, a painter's blank canvas, an empty billboard, a car's windscreen, a camera's viewfinder... all of which are available to receive, contain, frame and reflect the world around us.