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**Dettke, Julia (2021): *Raumtexte. Georges Perec und die Räumlichkeit der Literatur*. Paderborn, Germany: Fink.**

"ESPACE LIBRE" are the first words on the cover of Julia Dettke's *Raumtexte*. They peek out from between stripes of blue that have the conventional information one would expect on a book cover: the author, the title, the publisher. The graphic comes from the typescript of Georges Perec's 1974 *Espèces d'espaces*. "FREE SPACE.<sup>1</sup>" A contradiction, surely, but as Dettke shows, a productive one that sets the agenda for her monograph. *Raumtexte* (Spatial Texts), subtitled *Georges Perec und die Räumlichkeit der Literatur* (Georges Perec and the Spatiality of Literature), delineates how in the hands of authors like Perec the literary space becomes an expanded stage for expression and exploration that goes beyond conventional mimetic or even simple structural(ist) readings.

The book, published as a sumptuous hardcover complete with a silver, bound-in ribbon bookmark is 303 pages long. Dettke's footnoting is extensive and well-researched, though stays fairly conventional in its impulses. The book is structured in three main sections: *Literatur als Raum*, (Literature as Space) *Wohnen im Seitenraum*, (Inhabiting the Margin) and *Lesen im Puzzlehaus* (Reading in the Puzzle House). The first is a rigorous theoretical discussion which strives to systematize the understanding of spatial *Raumtexte* and locate them historically. Dettke aims to provide a "systematic investigation of the different levels on which the self-reflective relations in literature take place within space" and then bring this to bear in her "own analysis of texts" (29). The book succeeds in taking seriously the literary implications and possibilities of space-as-literary-device—convincingly rejecting the idea that spatial literature simply represents space, instead seeing it as a constitutive element of certain texts' poetics.

At over a third of the volume, the theoretical section of the book is substantial and in a sense outweighs the two following analytical sections. While sections two and three of the volume illustrate Dettke's theoretical conclusions, the theoretical section could also stand alone. Or perhaps a clear focus on one of the two books would have been welcome and could have created more balance in the volume as a whole. Still, these concerns set up what is both the merit and potential drawback or at least ambivalence of the book: it is neither a solely theoretical work on spatial literature, nor a Perec monograph. Marrying these two aspects in one volume, however, offers a lot to both the Literary Theory as well as the French Literature camp—these of course not being mutually exclusive. As for the specific Perec texts selected, Dettke's impulse to apply her ideas to both the understudied, overtly spatial, 1974 *Espèces d'espaces* (Species of Spaces), and cast the over-studied—in terms of plot and intertextuality—*La Vie mode d'emploi* in a new spatial light makes for exciting analysis.

In the theoretical section of *Raumtexte*, Dettke outlines criteria for the spatial text. It is characterized by "discontinuity, simultaneity, materiality, performativity, intermediality, and an openness to the reader" (29). In addition, she identifies three critical levels of literary spatiality: paratextual declaration; (textual) construction;

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from the German and French are my own, while most of Perec's books already have earned well-established names in English from the work of translators like David Bellos and Ian Monk.

and deconstruction (typified by *mise-en-abyme* and metalepsis). The critical undergirding here is based on French poststructuralists, who, fittingly, were largely contemporaries to Perec like Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault. This formidable theoretical arrangement is then brought to bear on Perec's texts. Section two, *Wohnen im Seitenraum* initially provides a *raumtextual* close-reading of *Espèces d'espaces*, paying special attention to "declarative" paratextual elements like Perec's quixotic *prière d'insérer*<sup>2</sup> that have been generally overlooked in their importance in literary analysis. The second section of the chapter looks at Perec's intensive play with the space of the page in the book. The third section of the chapter goes into a sharp discussion of *mises-en-abyme* in the work. Dettke lucidly analyzes the tension between the constructive elements of *Raum* (identified in sections one and two), and Perec's skepticism of these very elements, a deconstructive tendency she identifies convincingly as key to *Raum*'s poetic tension. "In the first chapter [of *Espèces d'espaces*] it still seems as if a sheltering place could be found in the margin [...]. But the larger the spatial dimensions become, the greater the uncertainty seems as to how the fragile balance of limitation and transgression can be maintained" (197).

Section three of the book, *Lesen im Puzzlehaus*, takes a similar tack to section two, with Dettke now time applying her *Raumtext* ideas to Perec's magnum opus, *La Vie mode d'emploi*. The much-studied book indeed has more to offer through Dettke's analysis and application of her theories. In three sections, she tackles the paratextual elements, the constructive, and finally the "de(con)structive" elements of the book. The first section perhaps tends slightly towards being too much of a summary of the complex paratextual presentation of the book. In the second section, Dettke singles out understudied graphic elements in the book: "What they all have in common is that they change the reading movement: linearity that follows the signified is replaced by a pause, a reorientation that requires more flexibility and openness in the perception and attribution of meaning" (256). This identification of the opening and flexibility held within spatial text's approach to meaning-making is certainly key and has been too-often ignored by the obsession with Perec's biographical details. But it is section three, the concluding analytical section of the book that takes an excursion into Perec's semiautobiographical *W ou la souvenir d'enfance* (1975) which packs the most punch. Dettke identifies the missing or destabilized letters in Perec's poetics as an "ideal spatial figures" which reflect the structure of *La vie mode d'emploi*. "Here the signified and the signifier are both meant" (293). The space of the letter opens up a biographical space of reflection that complicates the sign in a productive way.

Overall *Raumtexte* is a successful contribution to both spatioliterary and Perec studies. It succeeds in its goal to sharpen and apply the idea of literary space as a poetological device for (de)construction operations. Dettke's analysis of Perec's *meisterwerk* and most spatial text are enlightening, yet what could a *Raumtextual* analysis of Perec's highly spatial and metaleptic *Un cabinet d'amateur* (1979) turn up? What about the charged, nightmarish space of the island as explored in both *W* and *Ellis Island* (1990)? Furthermore, Dettke's argument beckons the analysis of many other spatial texts by other writers along the same lines. Hopefully, we will soon hear more from Dettke and see the tools she develops in the book applied to

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<sup>2</sup> A promotional leaflet inserted into books that is often similar to the flap copy. Perec uses this feature in an unusual way to extend his *Espèces d'espace*. Dettke's footnotes discuss the many editions of Perec and their drawbacks, including the omission of this critical item in many translations of the book.

further work by Perec as well as many other authors who employ similar spatial poetics.