

BOOK REVIEW

Flirting with Space: Journeys and Creativity,

David Crouch.

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Flirting with Space opens with a quotation from Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in which the writer describes flirtation as 'behaviour leading another to believe that sexual intimacy is possible...' (p.1). The sense of playful negotiation and contingent potentiality ascribed to the flirtatious act becomes, in David Crouch's hands, a means by which to re-think our understanding of space and everyday creativity as an open, embodied ontology of being and becoming. Drawing on phenomenological theories of embodiment, performativity, as well as Deleuzian rhizomatic conceptions of knowledge, affect and becoming, Crouch explores a processual conception of space – or *spacing* – that prioritises the mundane and prosaic: the everyday journeys, practices, and dispositions that render space open and pregnant with possibility. As he notes, 'we live in a world of journeys' (p.6).

The fluidities and energies of embodied space/spacing provide the basis for an epistemological framework of analysis in which otherwise fixed empirical categories of, for example, 'tourism', 'leisure', 'landscape' and 'place' are enfolded into *practice*. Methodologically this steers the emphasis towards ethnography as the principal mode of enquiry, and, to this extent, much of the arguments and analysis put forward in the book finds resonance with the work of phenomenological anthropologists such as Michael Jackson, Thomas Csordas, or Tim Ingold, although Crouch's own disciplinary background is as a cultural geographer. Drawing engagingly on empirical research conducted amongst allotment gardeners, caravanners, and artists Crouch illustrates the ways in which everyday creativity and spacing are embodied in and through practice and performance. As with the author's earlier work on parish maps, the case studies discussed in the book are closely

bound up with ideas and practices of 'lay geographies', the small-scale modalities of dwelling, way-finding and 'embodied semiotics' (p.15) that shape aesthetic entanglements of place and everyday creativity. For example, in his discussion of the work of the artist Peter Lanyon (in chapter 2), Crouch advances an essentially performative understanding of the artist and his work in which the creative process is re-framed as a *spatial practice*: a reflection and production of, in the first instance, geographical knowledge.

If tropes of 'flirting' and 'spacing' underpin the book's main theoretical focus of orientation, it is also worth mentioning 'commingling' as a keyword here insofar as, on the strength of its regularity of use, it represents a no less important semantic tool in the formulation of the ideas the author develops throughout the book: 'Spacing occurs in the gaps of energies amongst and between things: in their *commingling*' (p. 12). In a description of Lanyon's art that particularly well illustrates some of the more general themes and preoccupations of *Flirting with Space*, Crouch writes 'As Lanyon walked he felt surrounded by space but also, implicitly, he was feeling varying intensities of different moments and memories. Varying sensualities, movements and stillness merge and flow through his work, *commingle* inter-subjectively and with expressive character' (pp.86-7). This phenomenological sense of flows, commingling, entanglement, affectivity – of *becoming* creatively through everyday spatial practices – establishes a more 'grounded' counterpoint to much writing on mobility (particularly that relating to Deleuze and Guattari's writings on nomadology and deterritorialization, for example) which valorise movement, flows, networks, and displacements to the detriment of the lived and embodied dynamics of quotidian social spaces. Lacking engagement with 'the character of feeling, performativity and becoming', these more abstract iterations of mobility conjure a Latourianesque sense of the individual as 'merely caught in nets that go elsewhere' (p.67).

The emphasis on the production and negotiation of local (or tacit) knowledges, and the 'complex interplay of knowledge and [gut] feeling' (p.68) that constitutes a practical ontology of 'intuition or common sense' (ibid) articulates a theory of practice that has some affinity with Bourdieu's sociological writings on habitus, but the

broader socio-political frameworks of production and consumption in relation to aesthetics, taste and mobility/tourism practices are not the main focus of concern in *Flirting with Space*. It is rather the micro-processes of flirting and commingling and what Crouch refers to as the 'gentle politics' of play, creativity and becoming that lie at the core of the arguments developed in the book. Similarly, theorisations on social space such as those developed by, most notably, Henri Lefebvre are afforded only minor attention; again, it is the fine-grained phenomenological analysis of spacing and the embodied subjectivity of the subject that remains the key focus of debate. Indeed, in reference to Lefebvre's phenomenological perspectives on space, time and social rhythm, Crouch argues that there is ground for developing further critical interpretation of this work around Deleuzian approaches (p.14). In this regard, one of the questions that is prompted by the discussion of spacing as a process open to 'possibility, disruption, complexity, vibrancy and liveliness' (p.105) is the extent to which the non-dialectical philosophy that underpins Deleuzian notions of becoming finds correspondence with a Lefebvrian spatial dialectics: i.e. the scope for creative practices of spacing to contest, challenge and shape hegemonic spatial formations and the structures of power-knowledge which they both constitute and are constituted by. This is a question that is perhaps better re-framed in terms of the ways a 'gentle space and politics' (p.3) might be brought into critical alignment with a 'harder' politics of space and affect that reflects the social, cultural and economic dynamics of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism and the ways these too are imbricated and implicated in the 'flesh' of the everyday world (p.131).

On this latter question, one of the further points of consideration prompted by the discussion on spacing is the extent to which the gentle spaces and politics that are cultivated through creative practices of mobility are tied to, or the product of, specific landscapes and spaces; e.g. rural, urban, coastal, industrial, suburban, theme parks and other hyper-real environments, haptic/interactive spaces, borderzones and liminal landscapes, edgelands, non-places, and so on. Although Crouch problematizes theoretical understandings of 'landscape', 'space' and 'place', highlighting some of the shifting meanings (disciplinary and epistemological) attached to these concepts (see chapters 1 and 6), the case studies he draws on are

geographically based in largely rural settings or organic landscapes such as community gardens or allotments. The phenomenology of spacing and creativity that Crouch fleshes out in *Flirting with Space* therefore raises interesting questions as to the ways in which the embodied subject might commingle with the energies and affects of cities and (hyper-modern) built environments – what geographer Steve Pile refers to as the ‘phantasmagorias’ of the modern urban imaginary. In this regard, exploring emotional geographies of leisure, travel, art and creative practice, *Flirting with Space* contributes to a growing literature on space, affect and mobility practices; much of which, from Baudelairean *flânerie* to Situationist-inspired forms of psychogeography or de Certeau’s writings on walking the city, has hitherto focused on the urban landscape as a space of flow, drift, creativity, tactics, subversion, enchantment and embodiment.

In the conclusion to the book, Crouch extends the idea of gentle politics to that of ‘gentle hope’: an ethical prescription for the cultivation of a culture (and space) of open, progressive thinking and feeling (p. 124). Acknowledging that Deleuze and Guattari’s writings on immanence, affect, forces of intensity, etc. are, at times, suggestive of a sense of spirituality (with which I would certainly concur), Crouch’s gentle politics of hope are, as he concedes, also bound up with what he describes as ‘something like spirituality’, which is attributed in part to his being a ‘loose Quaker’ (ibid):

‘My thinking is inflected more by the notion of ‘enchantment’...; feeling beyond the materially-constituted and beyond the socially-culturally constructed... Flirting with space enables breaking through continuing meta-thinking to attend to people’s living in the world, partly as quiet or gentle politics; partly as profoundly significant influence and affect on the meaning and value of things and the way things happen’. (p. 125)

Reflecting in part on his own flirtations with space in his work as an artist (reproductions of three of the author’s paintings are included in the book), Crouch’s

writings on embodiment and everyday creativity are thus strongly informed by and resonant with his own artwork and practice. If the discussion around gentle politics and hope at times raises questions as to how ideas of spacing might engage a more critical, dissonant (and more explicitly urban) politics of space and place, it is nevertheless the case that the structures of feeling that Crouch sets out to tap in *Flirting with Space* are in no small way expressive of the entangled and embodied spaces of becoming, creativity and affect that have defined his own journeys as a practitioner and theorist. Although the book is slightly let down by the rather sloppy copy editing on the part of the publishers Ashgate, *Flirting with Space* offers an illuminating insight into the lay geographies and practices of performativity, travel/tourism and creativity and an important contribution to theorisations on space, the body and emotions, and everyday life.

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