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Flirting with Space: Journeys and Creativity

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Book review

David Crouch

Flirting with Space: Journeys and Creativity
Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.

154 pp., STG£50 hardback (ISBN 978-0-5467-3738-1), STG£50 e-book (ISBN 978-0-7546-9103-7)

Czech author Kundera, who is quoted in the prologue of the poetic and thought-provoking *Flirting with Space: Journeys and Creativity*, once compared the phenomenological to the Cartesian by contending that ‘Man and the world are bound together like the snail to its shell: the world is part of man, it is his dimension, and as the world changes, existence (in-der-Welt-sein) changes as well’ (1988: 35). Crouch’s participation in community gardening, recreational caravanning and appreciation of the perspectives which painting and literature can bring to geographical thought and perception has shaped his study of landscape and culture in a similarly profound manner. The germination of his text’s journey to fruition commenced during his early studies on allotments over two decades ago. Crouch writes that at the time he felt an unease about the critical division between humanistic geography’s engagement with phenomenology and the ‘very English and critically Marxist reading of the ideological power of landscape making’ (p. 103). Crouch’s own work threads a needle between these two schools of thought and his studies sidestep the more restricting forms of social

constructivism, as he dirties his hands in the earthy loam of the ‘poetic’ geographies discussed and illustrated in his text.

Considering space as a ‘loose entity or mixing of features, movements, energies; ideas, myths, memories, actions, an active ingredient in the processes of feeling’ (p. 2), Crouch seeks to examine how the ‘flirtive’ character of a ‘complex relationality with space inflects significance in our lives through our journeys and creativity’ (p. 6). His particular concern ‘surrounds the cultural and geographical knowledge of fluidities, contingencies and complexities: a practical, embodied ontology of living and the feeling of its doing and becoming’ (p. 1) and maintains that ‘flirting offers a means through which to explore the character of living spacetime through a number of threads that connect everyday living and our feeling and our thinking’ (p. 1).

The self-cultivated garden and idiosyncratic theoretical palette characterize Crouch’s *modus operandi*. He acknowledges that his foci ‘not poised in a particular labeled area of big theory’ (p. 2), rather he seeks to ‘cut through the vice of reductive politics to try to and get closer to the politics of lives and things; nuance and feeling, both in the sense of feeling and being in the world sensuously’ (p. 2). The book, comprised a prologue and seven chapters, takes the reader on various journeys that examine the relationship between creativity and landscape. These include the geographical knowledge contained in the art of Peter

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Lanyon; the impressions, reflections and experiences of community gardeners and caravanners; as well as the spacetime journeys with which W.G. Sebald frames his novel *Austerlitz* (2001). Crouch also employs the lenses of social anthropology, cultural geography and performance theory to think outside the abstract box of art theory, and reconceptualizes and sensualizes the acts and places that inspire and produce art. As a gardener, Crouch adopts botanical metaphors employed by Y.F. Tuan and Deleuze and Guattari. He contrasts the situated 'rootedness' of Tuan with the Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizomatic curling and branching, exhorting that the latter reaches beyond the 'human-centric grasp of the world that characterizes phenomenology, to offer a "loose meshing of directions and connectivity", beyond the fixity of a situated root' (p. 3). However, Crouch mixes the colours on his theoretical palette with hues and tints derived from the contesting ideas associated with phenomenological schools of thought and Deleuzo-Guattarian transcendental empiricism. In doing so, Crouch arrives at the view that 'landscape is situated in the expression and poetics of spacing: apprehended as constituted in a flirtatious mode: contingent, sensual, anxious and awkward' (p. 105). He further

contends that 'landscape would seem to emerge in the poetics and expressivity of engaging space in complex, uncertain and widely affected ways ...' (p. 114).

The book is illustrated by impressionistic oil-on-canvas renderings by the artist Peter Layton, as well as by the author himself. These beautiful paintings in the book seem to bleed Crouch's concepts onto its very pages. The text is a breath of fresh-air in an academy intent on churning out turgid prose and the vapid studies that keep up with research assessment models and other metrics but contribute to the 'forgetting of being' in geography. The garden of Crouch's book is well cultivated and will stand the test of time; as in art, a reflective reader will be able to glean new meanings and perspectives from each consecutive read.

References

Kundera, M. (1988) *The Art of the Novel*. London: Faber and Faber.

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