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## Encountering Strangeness

*Strange Spaces: Explorations in Mediated Obscurity*, edited by Andre Jansson and Amanda Lagerkvist. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, pp. 356, ISBN: 978-0-7546-7461-0, £65.00.

By Chris Rumford

Understanding change, and more particularly understanding our experience of change as it is happening is a seriously under-researched dimension of social and political life. Transformations are usually reflected upon long after the dust has settled, when life has returned to stability or normality, and when trusted categories of interpretation can be brought to bear on events. This book aims to understand how we experience change, and to this end explores the feelings of estrangement, uncertainty and displacement associated with an encounter with 'strangeness'. It aims to throw light on a variety of bewildering or bizarre spaces which we may encounter in our societies resulting from moments of transformation and interruption which make us somehow feel out of place. Places where the familiar is revealed as a site of exile, discomfort or awe. Places which leave us speechless or bemused. Places which disrupt the smooth running of everyday existence. What is strange about strange spaces then, the editors of this book inform us, is that they evade the explanatory fixity of perceptive and theoretical categorizations (p. 7). Such places are more often than not opaque and not easily knowable and/or open to many interpretations. The obscurity of such places is increasingly mediated, in the sense that they are revealed to us via media technology, and it is possible that the obscurity is actually a product of this mediation. In other words, strange spaces disrupt our

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understanding of normality because representation of them is mediated in such a way as to render them strange.

The editors' introductory chapter 'What is strange about strange spaces?' is the stand-out piece in the collection and sets out a demanding agenda which the contributing authors in the very varied chapters which follow do not always manage to rise to. Phil Carney and Vincent Miller's contribution, 'Vague spaces' is one chapter which does succeed in keeping up with the editors' challenging pace. They develop a theme also taken up by several other authors; the ways in which modernity is associated with control and rationalization of space. The chapter explores certain anomalous spaces, in particular the 'terrain vague' revealed by early C20th photography; the wastelands, abandoned sites and derelict areas thrown up by industrialization and urban development. The 'eruv' is another anomalous space, a bounded space created on the Jewish Sabbath, a symbolic (biblical) space which overlays the routine urban fabric. Carney and Miller's interest is in the ways that certain spaces can resist the rational control of modern urban life which seeks to eliminate the unknown, the obscure, the vague, and the strange.

Orvar Lofgren (Chapter 3) deals with the interesting topic of 'dead media'. What happens to 'media stuff' (old computers, video recorders, games consoles etc) when it is outmoded or broken down? Why do we hang on to old media technology rather than get rid of it? As the author states the chapter is a contribution to the study of disposal, the under-studied flip-side of consumption. The author's personal reflections on his own 'dead media' I found surprisingly engaging, but this chapter is one which does not engage too successfully with the demanding agenda set by the editors. Also, Lofgren neglects the possibility that we are reluctant to discard dead 'media stuff' because it is often quite expensive and its acquisition is a serious investment. It follows therefore that disposal becomes an equally serious business. In contrast, Lisa Parks' chapter on the importance of orbiting media satellites draws out the obscurity theme to great effect. Parks successfully argues that satellites are crucially important in terms of facilitating knowledge communication but remain obscure objects, perhaps simply because of their lack of visibility.

Will Straw explores 'film soleil' in Chapter 8 and in particular the way in which representation of criminal spaces in film noir (shadows and concealment) has given way to the exposed settings and bright sunlight preferred in many contemporary movies which create a sense of menace through 'beached out emptiness' and spaces exposed to the sun. The focus here is on the "menacing strangeness of brightly lit space" (p. 182) – sometimes represented by the hospital or laboratory – and the more positive contemporary interpretation accorded to shadowy obscurity, a zone in which human freedom can thrive (p. 182). The case for 'film soleil' may be overstated – it is possible to think of many films which employ conventional shadow/light motifs - but the argument is an interesting one, and works to develop the case for the importance of studying

mediated obscurity.

Perhaps the contribution that takes up the themes developed by the editors most fully is Johanne Sloan's chapter on early C20th fantasy postcards of the moon. The Reutlinger postcards under discussion emerged in a period in which air travel and aerospace technology were developing rapidly and during the 'golden age' of the postcard, which at this time was primarily a form of popular urban communication rather than a holiday souvenir. The postcard is a very early example of mass-consumed media: a form of communication which was both mass produced and personalized. Sloan makes the case for the Reutlinger images of elegantly dressed women reposing on the moon as a form of 'in-betweenness'; an encounter between the "sublimity of nature and the promise of the modern technological world" (p. 293).

The book is ambitious, stimulating, and provocative. It ventures into uncharted territory and deals well with the complexity of cultural strangeness. For these reasons alone it deserves to be read widely across the social science disciplines. There are three areas which could be explored further. One of these is the relationship between change, transformation, and interruption and 'strange spaces'. The assumption here is that transformation leads to estrangement. But transformation is a constant in the societies of modernity and not all change leads to an experience of strangeness. The second area which requires further research is the very nature of strangeness. As presented in this book strangeness is a cultural phenomenon to be found in the margins of the everyday, particularly in spaces of mediated obscurity. This does not make strangeness appear important enough, in my view. It would be interesting to read the editors' account of the nature and dynamics of social and political dimensions of strangeness, and how these are also the product of mediated obscurity. The third area which could be the subject of further exploration is the extent to which the creation of strange spaces may be the product of deliberate policy choices. The assumption in this book is that strange spaces are more or less an accident, or an unintended outcome or side-effect, existing only where strangeness, obscurity and in-betweenness have somehow evaded rationalization. What is not acknowledged here is that 'terrain vague' may be the result of design not accident, and may be the result of a strategy of governance. The position voiced by the editors is that strangeness is seen as a threat to order; but strangeness may in fact be the 'new order', under conditions of globalisation.