

BOOK REVIEW

***The Tuning of Place: Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media*, by Richard Coyne. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010. 344 pp. \$37.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-262-01391-8 (hardcover).**

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Like the idea it advocates, *The Tuning of Place* begins with the suggestion that “the influences people exert on one another go beyond those between two agents seeking to affect each other’s behavior” (xviii). From here, the text repeatedly appeals for an attendance to the “subtle shifts secreted within apparently bold moves” (185) that are “the currency that enables innovation” (240). In particular, Coyne notes the ways in which our contemporary culture of ubiquitous media amplifies the importance of these “incremental operations.” To this end, *The Tuning of Place* mobilizes myriad ideas and examples around the central concept of “tuning,” a metaphor that Coyne successfully stages as a tension between its status as (on one hand) a means of collecting the hugely disparate disciplines and ideas that he discusses and (on the other hand) an engine of difference that continually undermines any positive-substantial definition of itself. Put simply, by exhaustively considering pervasive digital media through the kaleidoscopic lens (sic) of tuning, the micropolitics and complex causalities of the former are desublimated.

There is much to recommend in this text, not least of which is the elegant and playful style in which it is written. In particular, Coyne’s keen attention to puns and shared etymologies frequently folds together surprising combinations of ideas and cultural artifacts. To cite only one of many such examples, *tag* and *tap* are brought together via the former’s derivation from the northern UK dialect word *tig*, which denotes “a kind of light touch” (129); this connection is topped off with typical aplomb in a footnote that draws a relation between these tactile metaphors and aurality (the latter a prominent theme throughout the text) by noting the provenance of the musical term *toc-cata* in the Latin *toccare* (to touch). The point in these

bursts of creative coupling, here as elsewhere in the text, is not to prove anything per se, but rather to show how the metaphoric webs that Coyne weaves resonate across established disciplinary, medial, and material boundaries, often denaturalizing elements of the artifacts that are brought together.

Indeed, the myriad concrete examples on display throughout *Tuning* allow it to avoid the material vagueness that sometimes accompanies the types of disciplinary transgressions that it performs. However, the broadness of the argument that Coyne mounts does sometimes risk losing sight of its particularity. Thus, for example, the invocation of aurality that animates key components of the text could attend more closely to the strange causalities that are specific to sound. That is, Coyne’s mobilization of tuning aligns perhaps a little too neatly with what is often discussed under the rubric of “micropolitics”; I yearned instead for an investigation of how the aural provenance of the metaphor might rub against its visually rooted sisters. Put differently, how does aurality fail to align with optics, and what is at stake in choosing between their respective physics (as it were)? That is, at times I wished that the metaphors of tuning were played out a little more strongly as an engine of a *specific kind of difference*, namely, one that resists being recuperated into the normalizing discourse of difference as such. Paraphrasing Bateson (1972), how does the difference of Coyne’s metaphor constitute a difference that makes a difference relative to the sizable scholarship that already exists on the topics of micropolitics and the everyday? This is not to say that *Tuning* simply recapitulates existing literature, but only that it could have taken slightly more theoretical risks. Sonic art practices, for example, might be thought

less as a dialectic between structure and practice and more in terms of complex intermediations of agencies, materialities, and cultural situations.

Similarly, while I appreciate the stunning breadth of theorists that Coyne so aptly draws into his conversation, I nonetheless feel somewhat ambivalent about the way in which these encounters are staged. In the “Taps” chapter mentioned earlier, for example, he glances briefly at Michel Serres’s use of the parasite as an “allegory for the social relationship between the host and the guest, the gift giver and the recipient, major and minority groups, [and] production and consumption” (2007, 134–35). While there is nothing in his reading of Serres that is incorrect, the reader is left wondering how this discussion lends any new insight into Serres’s work. That is, while a prolonged engagement is by no means a prerequisite for citing a concept, a deep engagement between texts should in some way offer insight into both parties . . . but the function of Coyne’s reference to Serres specifically—as well as to certain other authors throughout the text—is not clear, beyond a certain rhetorical value. In this sense, Coyne’s account is (ironically) rather too structural in that it seems to engage with “the parasite” independent of the richly textual prose through/in which the latter is mediated in Serres. In brief, there are a number of instances where supplementing a conceptual fold with a sustained close reading may have served to better draw out the particular stakes of the argument at hand.

To be clear, I raise these issues because they speak as much to the breadth of the investigation that Coyne offers (as well as to the thought-provoking style in which the text is written) as they do to any shortcomings. This is, in the best sense, a book that is brimming with the type of factual scholarship that is too often missing from theoretically inclined investigations, and this research is propagated via a spirit of curiosity and a flurry of ideas that would recommend any text. Indeed, the difficulties I have suggested may be symptomatic of precisely these commendable qualities: no text is perfect, and *The Tuning of Place* stands out for its willingness not only to discuss the multivariate intensities of the everyday in pervasive media, but to also perform them. If this results in a text that—like all tactical approaches, in the sense mobilized by de Certeau that Coyne cites—cannot quite keep what it wins (de Certeau 1984, 37), there is a strong sense in which the book is all the better for it.

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