

Love as a rebellious discourse

By Christophe Giraud

Based on a collective survey, Christine Détrez intends to deconstruct the term ‘crush’ and explores the social meanings underlying the many ways young people aged between 12 and 25 form relationships and learn about love.

About: Christine Détrez, 2024, *Crush. Fragments du nouveau discours amoureux* (Crush. A Lover's New Discourse: Fragments), Paris, Flammarion, 186 p., €21, 9782080264534

This sociology book turns seemingly anecdotal objects into sources of broader reflection on contemporary society. With its light-hearted tone and direct style, it is aimed primarily at a cultured readership interested in contemporary intimate relationships, but it will also be of interest of sociologists of private life, as it sheds light on the recent use of a term and a set of practices that have hitherto been overlooked. The result is the fruit of a collective investigation carried out over two years as part of a research seminar led by Christine Détrez, a professor at the ENS in Lyon, with the help of several interns. Another version of this work was published in the journal *Réseaux* by Christine Détrez and the student interns who contributed to the survey (Détrez *et al.*, 2023).

The crush: a product of popular and youth culture

The book begins with the author discovery of the term 'crush', a generational term that Christine Détrez, a specialist in the sociology of culture, body and gender, says she discovered through contact with her students. Christine Détrez explains how this term, which has only recently appeared in France and is a very circumscribed subject with little social legitimacy, can be a source of general sociological reflection (Chapter 1). Sociology constructs love as a normative discourse that affects men and, primarily, women. This discourse is disseminated through a wide variety of cultural productions, with various films, series (the gay series *Crush*), songs (*I've got a crush on you*, 1928), books (the children's series *Crush*) and graphic novels (*Crushing*, by Sophie Burrows) disseminating the norms that govern private relationships between individuals. The term 'crush' appeared in popular culture at the end of the 1990s, but how does the 'crush' challenge and even renew the culture of romantic love relayed by the media? This is the angle Christine Détrez has chosen to adopt (Chapter 2).

The 'crush' takes on its full meaning when viewed in the context of the history of romantic relationships over centuries (Chapter 3), and in particular when compared to flirting, a form of courtship that developed over the course of the twentieth century. Flirting consists of bringing male and female bodies together for personal pleasure but with some limits, such as the refusal of penetrative sexuality and the opposition to a conjugal form of relationship. Has the 'crush' emerged as the new form of flirting, freed from the moral shackles that distance it from penetrative sex?

The term appeared at the end of the 19th century in Anglo-Saxon single-sex colleges and refers to the mutual attraction of certain young women for their fellow students. It was also present in popular English novels of the same period, which set out the rules to be followed when young girls felt emotional excitement. If this excitement lasted beyond school, instead of being absorbed into heterosexuality, it was then pathologised by psychology.

Chapter 4 then turns to an analysis of the uses and practices associated with the term 'crush'. A crush is first and foremost a generational cultural practice, central to the lives of teenager groups. It starts as a discursive reality and exists insofar as it is disclosed and discussed among friends. It fills the lives of groups and nurtures friendly relationships. In return, friends are required to react to these revelations by validating or invalidating the choice of the dream partner and undertaking 'emotional work' i.e. regulating feelings, emotions and actions. This discursive work is amplified by social

networks where young people stage their sentimental excitement and track down information about the life of their crush (a practice known as ‘stalking’).

This central chapter of the book is full of compelling ideas. It highlights the secret romantic excitement of teenagers, which do not necessarily lead to real intimate relationships because the feelings they have for the object of their crush are never disclosed to the person concerned. But crushes are no less useful: specific rules are passed on in conversation (no crush on a girlfriend’s ex, no crush if you are already in a relationship, etc.). Feelings become better coded as one navigates through romantic excitement. The work of Isabelle Clair (2023) could have been usefully applied here in that, since crushes do not lead to real relationships, they are part of what she calls a courtship ‘display’ that stages gender identities. Crushes function as a way of making love preferences explicit to peers with little cost in terms of self-esteem (there is no involvement with the object of the crush). Young women can show their affection and young men their interest in an individual of the opposite sex while asserting themselves in their own gender.

The gendered emotions of the crush

The crush is primarily seen in adolescence, with its presence waning after this period, but some young women continue to feel them later in life. For these women, crushes involve constant work: the mind is focused on the loved one, while stalking requires a continuous search. The crush can turn into an obsession and young women can feel sick and guilty about this obsession with an individual (Chapter 5). Christine Détrez sees the crush as the product of the normative pressure that weighs primarily on women, making them exist only through the eyes of a (male) partner. Girls have been socialised into a “normalised and stereotyped emotional regime” (p. 120) that closely associates them with romantic feelings. Conversely, boys, who are less socialised when it comes to love, show a certain detachment from their crushes.

‘Crush’ is therefore a polysemous term, associated with strong emotional investment for women and lighter feelings for men. In the new dating economy theorised by Eva Illouz (2020), the term ‘crush’ can be used metaphorically by boys to name these new relationships that lack a clear label or definition and to express a form of attraction to an individual. Using the term in a new context is also a phenomenon observed among older people who find a new partner without necessarily living

together. They reuse vocabulary from their youth, such as 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend', to name their new romantic relationships, which are not like their old ones and which they want to dissociate from conjugal relationships (Benson, Coleman, 2016). Where girls are concerned, crushes are therefore thought of without distance, as romantic excitement and emotional commitment; where boys are concerned, the term is used metaphorically, for want of a better word, to euphemise emotional commitment and thus protect themselves against the uncertainty of romantic relationships.

Chapter 6 focuses more on masculinity and its relationship with the crush. For the aforementioned young men who come from social backgrounds with high cultural capital, 'crush' can be used to designate a real story that is neither sex for sex's sake nor coded as a conjugal relationship. In this sense, it is quite similar to another term that has recently appeared in France: 'situationship', i.e. a relationship for which there is not yet a clear label. Talking about crushes would seem to be a way for the most highly educated young men, who take longer before settling down in a relationship, to 'reinvent love' by refusing one-night stands and sharing more than just sex. For young men from intermediate social backgrounds, on the other hand, 'crush' is a term reserved mainly for teenage girls. They prefer a settled conjugality or pragmatic sexuality outside the couple, while nurturing sentimental dreams. According to the author, the rejection of a certain sentimentality is associated with some virilist male models and is opposed to male models from more cultivated backgrounds. The use of the term reveals the variety of forms of masculinity that exist.

Finally, the last (and very short) chapter takes an original look at what we keep from the crushes of the past, how we record them, what we retain from them and how they can be a source of creation (literary or artistic) later on.

Studying the crush

The book is a pleasure to read, both lively and full of cultural references and quotations. However, it can sometimes confuse the academic reader. Some parts ("Jenny's first crush", 6 pages at the end of Chapter 4, or the section entitled "Crush and crush", which concludes Chapter 5) contain only quotes with no commentary.

Methodologically, Christine Détrez pulls out all the stops. She uses everyday situations to explore her subject. Until Chapter 3, the crush is approached on the basis

of the work of other colleagues, examples from cultural production (series, novels) and a few websites. The scope of the literary examples given and the websites consulted is not really explained. From Chapter 4 to the end, the report is based on a qualitative survey of interviews, mostly individual and sometimes collective (as explained in Chapter 5). For information on the corpus, please refer to the more academic version of this work, published in the journal *Réseaux* (Détrez *et al.*, 2023). The sample consists of 40 secondary school students and 10 young adults aged between 13 and 25 and comprises more women than men. The age of the respondents is not always mentioned (we don't know the ages of Myra, Mathilde, Violette, Alma and Quentin); sometimes it is, but inaccurately (Mehdi is 24 on p. 68, 25 on p. 99). A quick overview shows that the quoted young men are older than the young women: only two boys are under 20 (Alexis, 16, and Hector, 17), while there are eight girls under 20. To show that young men take crushes less seriously than young women, it would have been interesting to compare the testimonies at the same age, and in particular to have the testimonies of younger boys.

The end of the crush period

The analysis quickly moves on to the issue of women giving up crushes after a certain age. The latter are criticised by the same girlfriends who, a few years ago, supported this idealised and romantic relationship with love. Women seem to be moving towards a different sentimental model that is not analysed in the book.

However, this development has already been described in part by the sociology of sexuality and couple formation. Michel Bozon (1998) has shown that women can become disillusioned with love over the course of their romantic lives and adopt emotional and sexual behaviours similar to those of young men. Conversely, men are becoming more sedate and are looking for longer-lasting, more emotional relationships than during their first intimate experiences. In a previous study (Giraud, 2017), I also tried to show that in the first few months of a new relationship, young female students, who had other previous affective experiences, had relationships that were neither sex for sex's sake nor involved being in a couple – relationships that were both 'serious' and 'fun'. They also developed a critique of romantic love and lyrical declarations and used understatement and euphemism in lovemaking—a behaviour very similar to that which the author identifies in boys from backgrounds of high cultural capital. One might wonder whether the marked gender difference observed

by Christine Détrez is not due to the fact that boys interviewed from this cultured background are quite old (often 25), whereas the young women mentioned are younger (and perhaps less experienced). It would have been useful to know the love biography of these young respondents (had they ever been in a relationship? Had they had their first experience of penetrative sex?). The experience of first break-ups in love appears to be decisive in women distancing themselves from the romantic model of love. Further research, as outlined in the book, will make for interesting reading on this point.

Leaving aside this open-ended question, the book sheds light on a little-studied phenomenon connected with major transformations in contemporary intimate relationships. 'Crush' appears to be a polysemous term that raises questions about gender relations, masculinity and adolescent culture. It is at the heart of the courtship that shapes gendered identities in adolescence, as illustrated by its beautiful pink cover and emoticon.

Bibliography:

- Benson, J. J. and Coleman, M., 2016, 'Older adult descriptions of living apart together', *Family Relations*, 65, pp. 439-449.
- Bozon, M., 1998, 'Désenchantement et assagissement : les deux voies de la maturation amoureuse', *Le journal des psychologues*, July-August, n°159, pp. 45-51.
- Clair, I., 2023, *Les choses sérieuses*, Paris, Seuil.
- Détrez, C., Banning, O., Barbier, S., Dossa, C., Errate-Piper, S. and Yzern, B., 2023, 'The crush: a new sentimental education?', *Réseaux*, 6, 242, p. 51-88.
- Giraud, C., 2017, *L'amour réaliste*, Paris Seuil.
- Illouz, E., 2020, *La fin de l'amour*, Paris, Seuil.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, May 1, 2024. Translated by Tiam Goudarzi with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, November 27, 2025.