

Atmosphere as Culture: Ambient Media and Postindustrial Japan

by

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Abstract

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Ambient media are oriented towards tinting the space around them with a particular mood or emotional tone, which their users can then attune to. *Atmosphere as Culture* begins by tracing how this use of media as a mood regulator emerges in postindustrial Japan, drawing from the longer histories of background music, environmental art, and therapy culture. The dissertation then theorizes this aesthetics of atmosphere in music, animation, literature, and video art.

The analysis explores the relationship between ambient media and landscape, dreams, the cosmos, domesticity and gender, the rhythms of urban life, cosubjectivity, and information overload. In each case, discussion focuses on how the aesthetics of atmosphere reimagines subjectivity vis-à-vis the surrounding environment, shifting the postindustrial self away from a social identity based in interpersonal relations and towards a more abstract sensing body developed with and through the moods afforded by mediated space.

Each section documents how the aesthetics of ambient media serve to erase other people from the sensible horizons of postindustrial life, while at the same time expanding the environmental affordances of the human body in new directions. The dissertation follows the dynamics of this ambient subjectivity to reveal how the aesthetics of atmosphere are both radical and regressive, offering an aesthetic solution to the coexistence of diverse objects in space, yet at the same time denying the possibility of any direct encounter with difference.

[Atmosphere as Culture]

ambient media and postindustrial japan

Paul Roquet

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This dissertation grows from a long-term fascination with the aesthetics of environmental design. For this, I credit life in northern California, with its (often totally unwarranted) belief in the power of self-reinvention through lifestyle engineering, and life in Tokyo, with its endless maze of carefully curated microcultures. I admire the pragmatism and efficacy of this willingness to experiment with new forms of living, at the same time as I remain haunted by so much of what these designs cover over.

A similarly ambivalent fascination surfaces here in regards to the aesthetics of therapy culture. For this I am particularly indebted to ongoing conversations with my mother, Deborah Roquet, who brought to her time working as a massage therapist and laughter yoga instructor both an admirable enthusiasm for helping people and a smiling skepticism towards practitioners' more exaggerated claims.

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Finally, thank you for reading. Do put on some good music before you begin, preferably at low volume.

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[Fade In: Jellyfish in the City]

Jellyfish are drifting through the city. This summer evening as I write this the Sumida River in Tokyo is full of these small transparent creatures, each floating along with the current, steering itself gently while bobbing slowly out to sea.

Returning home to my apartment on the other side of the city, I put on a DVD I picked up recently from the background video (BGV) section of a nearby record store. The television glows blue, and various types of jellyfish bob into view. They pulsate languidly, gradually pushing their translucent bodies across the screen. The jellies appear in soft focus and bathed in saturated colors and light. Occasionally a more distant shot of a jellyfish appears composited with a semi-transparent close up, and a syncopated rhythm emerges between the larger and smaller of the two jellies' parallel convulsions. At moments an electrical current sparkles forth from a jellyfish and soon subsides, while at other times an overlaid color or postproduction visual effect intensifies and ripples across the jelly's porous skin. Distinctions between a jellyfish's own glistening and the ripples added through video software blur, combining to cast a shimmering light from the television out across the room.

Electronic music slowly pulses from the television speakers, adding a slow aural rhythmic counterpoint to the visual shimmer and drift. The music loops and loops, concerned with neither beginning nor end, rolling onwards with the current as long as the DVD continues to spin.

I let the DVD continue to cycle, and the album-length sequence carries on without me. I lay down on the tatami in the middle of the room, exhausted from the summer heat. I look over once in awhile at the cool shades emanating from the screen, gazing absently at the translucence of the jellies floating inside. Even without my direct attention, the blue light bathes the room, while the music pushes quietly into every corner of my consciousness. My own rhythms slowly but steadily attune to the pulse and flows of the gliding jellyfish, and to the relaxed pace and soft textures of the sound and images the television casts into the room.

The jellies are all breath, drifting like giant lungs quietly pushing backwards through the sea with each exhalation, indifferent to direction and nearly stationary, but always continuing onward. The soft textures, demure edits, and gentle pulsations of sound extrapolate outward from the jellies' rhythms, helping to make up for the absence of the river itself.

The feeling was just like the feeling of being back along the river, lounging on the bank as the jellyfish bobbed unhurriedly back out to sea and the sun continued to set. Thanks to the DVD I was back there again, soaking up the atmosphere. The liner notes report the jellies on screen were filmed at the Enoshima Aquarium in Kamakura, not far from Tokyo. The creators of the DVD supplied their own layers of feeling, drawing from the jellyfish's own unique movement patterns. *Jellyfish: Healing Kurage* is a 2006 collaboration between video artists Kikkawa Hiroshi (Nido) and Kodama Yūichi, musicians Furuya Kenji and Cube Juice, and photographer Suzuki Tokiko. *Kurage* is the Japanese word for jellyfish.

I lay there near the television, aware of the radiant tank, but I do not attend to it directly. My relationship with the jellyfish is intimate but anonymous. The sensory atmosphere wafting from the television reaches inside me to quiet my breathing and relax my posture, and yet I never get too close to the plastic and metal. There is no danger of being stung. I can move away and turn everything off at any time. But the longer I engage, the more thoroughly I attune, the more jellylike I become.

While watching the jellyfish at the river was thoroughly engaging, this DVD (and most DVDs sold under the label "background video") felt rather boring and emotionally overdetermined. The images and the music do nothing novel or exciting, merely providing soothing music and about an hour of jellyfish drift. And yet, as I lie there, I realize it doesn't matter how I feel about the work itself as a creative project. To approach it as such may not even be appropriate in this case. I attune to the jellyfish regardless. The longer I bathe in these images and sounds, the more I breathe in these rhythms, only half-consciously, and—after the initial pressing of ► on the DVD remote—unintentionally.

I realized my experience also had almost nothing to do with my ideas about jellyfish. Earlier along the river I had recalled Kurosawa Kiyoshi's 2003 film *Bright Future (Akarui mirai)*, where a species of poisonous jellyfish begin to overpopulate the Tokyo waterways after Odagiri Joe's character releases one into the sewer system. I thought of recent news articles about a giant jellyfish overturning a Japanese fishing boat in the Pacific, and reports of the rising numbers of stinging jellyfish menacing beachgoers in the San Francisco Bay. I thought about this recent tendency to portray jellyfish as a new type of monster, an alien threat appropriate to the age of cloud computing and ethereal dangers like radiation and global warming. These layers of meaning had little to say to my experience with the jellies this evening. What mattered was not signification, but rhythm and texture, the jellyfish style of movement through space and time. What responded to the DVD was less my reflective mind and more my sensory body, steadily attuning to the disc's atmosphere with no regard for my divergent associations.

What follows theorizes this process of atmospheric attunement through media, and what it means for contemporary urban subjectivity. I explore the history and aesthetics of media used to

'tint' an environment with a particular mood or atmosphere. Following Brian Eno, I call works used or intended to be used in this way ambient media, marking how ambient as a genre extends far beyond the genre of electronic music usually associated with the term. I define as ambient media any work oriented towards tinting the space around it with a particular mood or emotional tone, which sensory bodies sharing this atmosphere can then attune to. In turn, I explore the ambient subjectivity that emerges in tandem with this use of media as a kind of atmospheric perfume.

Ambient subjectivity reflexively responds to the widespread adoption of environmental mood regulation in postindustrial culture. An ambient subject both uses and is used by ambient media, as these media tint the surrounding atmosphere and in turn regulate the flow of a subject's internal moods. My experience purchasing and playing the jellyfish DVD serves as one example, but it need not be so obvious—anyone moving through urban spaces today is regularly moving through a range of designed atmospheres, many engineered to produce particular sensations in a visitor's body. In this respect we are all ambient subjects, carrying with us an ever-emerging self developed with and through the atmospheres created by the media objects populating our everyday lives.

This study brings together a range of conceptual tools for thinking through the aesthetic, social, and political implications of ambient media and ambient subjectivity in contemporary Japan. Drawing on theoretical insights from environmental psychology, media studies, and affect theory, I present ambient aesthetics as an important but as yet under-acknowledged transformation of the role of aesthetic media in contemporary life. Inspired by ecocritical theory and other thinkers attentive to the shared perceptual environment, I push for an understanding of postindustrial culture that directly addresses the sensory impact of lives spent in large, congested, and heavily networked urban spaces.

These environments crucially consist of not only subjects, but objects. While sociological perspectives become important allies here, my aim is not only to document relationships between human actors, but also the vital role of other kinds of objects—particularly media objects—in affording particular types of behavior and inhibiting others.¹

Affordances

A crucial concept for thinking the mutual constitution of subject and environment is James Jerome Gibson's notion of "affordances," introduced in his landmark study *An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979). An object's affordances consist of what it makes available to experience and to action, relative to the subject that perceives it. For example, to humans Tokyo's Sumida River affords boating, fishing, and transportation, but it does not afford breathing or walking across its surface; to jellyfish, the river affords a place to live and a current to ride back out to sea; to certain birds and insects, the river affords food, but also the perils of a polluted urban waterway. Affordances like these are both subjective and objective, or rather, emerge in the interface between subject and object. They are "both physical and psychical, yet neither" (128).

The idea of affordances emerged out of Gibson's background in Gestalt psychology, but unlike Gestalt perspectives, affordances brackets out the role of an observer's past experiences in shaping their current perspective on the world. Affordances do not change as the needs of an observer change. While this limits the explanatory reach of the concept for documenting human

¹ In addition to pioneering Japanese spatial critics like Maeda Ai, here I follow the emerging body of thought currently known as Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) in its push to displace human subjectivity from the center of our research, and instead work towards situating humans as but one element in universe of diverse objects, each with their own "perspective" on the world, what is and is not important, what can and cannot be done.

emotion, it also enables a narrowing of the gap between subjects endowed with reflection and memory, and animals and objects without such capacities for learning—narrowing in turn the conceptual opposition between ‘nature’ and ‘culture.’

The concept of affordances also provides a useful way for understanding the environmental dynamics of preconscious affect, helpfully grounding Gilles Deleuze’s influential Spinozan definition of affect as “any mode of thought that doesn’t represent anything,” and as a marker for what increases or improves “my force of existing or my power of acting.”²

Affective Comforts and Amenity Culture

As I will elaborate in the chapters that follow, concepts like “affordances” and “affect” emerge in the 1970s and 1980s precisely at a time when the sensory and affective dimensions of objects and environments became a central focus as a goal of retail marketing and urban design.

Environmental historian Nakagawa Osamu documents the more objective, scientific understanding of the environment emerging in the 1970s and 80s, one which focused on identifying generalizable properties that act on human perception in dependable ways.³ Unlike earlier concepts of landscape, which focused more on what a given landscape represented to particular individuals, the newly rationalized environments of postindustrial culture came to focus more on what they could affectively afford to a rapidly diversifying consumer population.

While earlier Japanese environments—both urban and rural—were promoted as sights of symbolic importance and cultural capital, these new rationalized spaces promised above all feelings of “comfort” [*kaitekisa*]⁴. This emerged as part of a larger transnational move towards amenity culture, a major focus of key 1970s environmental design texts like Jay Appleton’s seminal *The Experience of Landscape* (1975).

While affect and comfort have rarely been discussed together, the subjective sensation of comfort has much to do with what Spinoza declared as “the modifications of the body by which the power of action of the body is increased or diminished, aided or retrained, and at the same time the idea of these modifications.”⁵ Sara Ahmed defines comfort as a “sinking” feeling, where, both physically and psychically, “bodies can extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. [...] To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view.”⁶ Comfort involves a strong continuity between the affordances of an environment and the sensory orientations of a particular subject.

Comfort might also involve more reflective emotions, of course. For example, a bad prior experience at a restaurant can certainly discourage future visits, no matter how pleasant the setting. For environmental designers, however, factoring out individual particularities and focusing as much as possible on preconscious, predictable physical responses across populations allowed for the creation of environments able to appeal to as wide a demographic as possible. As theorists like Brian Massumi point out, such affective strategies attempt to appeal directly to the sensory body, rather than engaging the reflective mind.⁷ This prioritization of affective comfort over symbolic representation marks an important shift in postindustrial design, towards an increasing reliance on affective affordances designed to tap the “half-second delay” before conscious reflection (and

² Deleuze, “Lecture Transcripts on Spinoza’s Concept of Affect,” n.p.

³ Nakagawa, *Fūkeigaku: fūkei to keikan o meguru rekishi to genzai*, 102.

⁴ Osaka, *Kankyō ongaku: kaiteki na seikatsu kūkan o tsukuru*, 4.

⁵ Spinoza, *The Ethics, Part III*, 58.

⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 148.

⁷ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, 41.

memory) begin subjectively interpreting bodily perceptions. Nigel Thrift writes of how, “through the advent of a whole series of technologies, small spaces and times, upon which affect thrives and out of which it is often constituted, have become visible and are able to be enlarged so that they can be knowingly operated upon.”⁸

The full-scale move towards affective affordances in the 1970s and 1980s was an intensification—enabled, in the case of Japan, by a rapidly expanding economy—of a much longer modern project to more effectively recruit environmental awareness for commercial and political purposes. This took place simultaneously along two trajectories: first, transformations in social interaction as more and more people came to live in dense urban areas, and second, the development of what theorists have variously called “emotional capitalism” and “therapy culture.”⁹ Here I follow these two pathways in tracing out the environmental affordances of postindustrial Japan.

The Aesthetics of Atmosphere

In both cases, my overarching focus is what Gernot Böhme calls the “aesthetics of atmosphere.”¹⁰ The term ‘atmosphere’ has its origins in meteorology, referring to the pocket of air surround the earth which carries the terrestrial weather. From the eighteenth century the term began to be used metaphorically, referring to moods which are ‘in the air,’ the emotional tint of a space. Today the expression is commonly used in all European languages.¹¹ It entered Japanese from the German in the Edo period (1603-1867) in the term *funiki*, connecting up with a wide range of earlier expressions (many originally from China) drawing conceptual links between air and emotion.

Not unlike the work on affect and affordances introduced above, Böhme advocates the need for an ecological approach to aesthetics, one which can render intelligible an expanded field of sensory forces beyond the usual focus on a reflective human observer. He develops atmosphere as an interstitial category, unsettling the usual subject-object or subject-landscape opposition. “The new resulting aesthetics is concerned with the relation between environmental qualities and human states. This ‘and,’ this in-between, by means of which environmental qualities and states are related, is atmosphere.”¹²

Böhme argues for the necessity of an atmospheric aesthetics in part as art itself has moved beyond its more restricted modern domain, gradually “aestheticizing” all parts of daily life. He writes of how contemporary life is played out on a series of specially designed ‘stages,’ props for building a desired lifestyle, including its attendant emotions:

The attention which is now paid to atmospheres in aesthetic theory has its material background in the fact that staging has become a basic feature of our society: the staging of politics, of sporting events, of cities, of commodities, of personalities, of ourselves.” [...] In general, it can be said that atmospheres are involved whenever something is being staged, wherever design is a factor—and that now means: almost everywhere.¹³

Böhme presents three key points describing how the aesthetics of atmosphere differs from earlier models (“from Kant up to Adorno and Lyotard”). First, the older aesthetics was “essentially a

⁸ Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,” 71.

⁹ Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*; Füredi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*.

¹⁰ Böhme. “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics,” 113-126. See also Böhme, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, published in Japanese in *Funiki no bigaku: atarashii genshōgaku no chōsen*.

¹¹ Böhme. “The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres,” n.p.

¹² Böhme. “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics,” 114.

¹³ Böhme, “The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres,” 2-9.

judgmental aesthetics," concerned with adjudicating what should and should not receive a positive response, and facilitating a conceptual vocabulary for art history and art criticism.

Second, this focus on judgement and orientation towards communication led to the dominance of language (and more specifically, semiotics) in aesthetic theory, and a concomitant devaluing of sensuousness and "natural" elements falling outside this framework. Böhme challenges this framework, pushing for a more object-oriented perspective: "It is not, however, self-evident that an artist intends to communicate something to a possible recipient or observer. Neither is it self-evident that work of art is a sign, insofar as a sign always refers to something other than itself, that is, its meaning. Not every work of art has a meaning. On the contrary, it is necessary to remember that a work of art is first of all itself something, which possesses its own reality."¹⁴

Third, the focus on judgment also led to a highly normative aesthetic, attending exclusively to some works and justifying an ignorance of others. "All aesthetic production was seen from the perspective of art and its measure." This, of course, all began to shift with the art of the twentieth century. Autonomous art is now "only a special form of aesthetic work, which also has its social function, namely the mediation of the encounter and response to atmospheres in situations (museums, exhibitions) set apart from action contexts."¹⁵ Art in this older sense is folded into its larger atmospheres.

In order to understand the aesthetics of atmosphere, Böhme advocates approaching them from both sides: the side of objects (production aesthetics), and the side of subjects (reception aesthetics).¹⁶ On the production side, the aesthetics of atmosphere focuses on the provision of affordances. Böhme doesn't use the term, but speaks of "giving things, environments, or also human beings such properties from which something can proceed"¹⁷—a perspective with origins not only in the twentieth century avant-garde, but a key principle in postindustrial advertising, marketing, and environmental design.

With this expanded ecological aesthetics, a new political urgency also enters—what Nigel Thrift calls the "spatial politics of affect."¹⁸ The aesthetics of atmosphere does not privilege only certain kinds of reputable aesthetic forms, but recognizes that the sensing body doesn't discriminate nearly as much as the conscious mind does—everything sensible is affecting, whether attended to or not. Across the twentieth century this atmospheric register becomes increasingly instrumentalized by artists, commerce, and political interests.

On the reception side, the aesthetics of atmosphere focuses on perception "as the experience of the presence of persons, objects, and environments."¹⁹ Recognizing a body's constant exposure to the environment necessarily shifts our self-image, in a way bringing it back to earlier animistic awareness of the powers that surreptitiously enter our body from the outside, at the same time as recognizing that these atmospheres are increasingly socially motivated as well. Böhme writes, "We must abandon the idea of a soul in order to undo the 'introjection of feelings,' and the human being must be conceived essentially as body, such that his/her self-givenness and sense of self is originally spatial: to be bodily self-aware means at the same time the awareness of my state of being

¹⁴ Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 115. This approach echoes earlier environmental and minimalist art movements of the 60s and 70s, such as Japan's Mono-ha, which pushed for a renewed awareness of the embedded object-ness of the art object.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁶ Böhme, "The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres," 3.

¹⁷ Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 123.

¹⁸ See Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect."

¹⁹ Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 116.

in an environment, how I feel here."²⁰ This reflexive atmospheric, environmentally self-aware body is what I designate by the term ambient subjectivity.

Ambient subjectivity marks the turning of subjective awareness away from language and reflective reasoning and towards areas of the self involved in responding affectively to the environmental surround. The ambient subject exists not through a carefully defined and defended self-image, but through an ongoing engagement with the physical and psychic environment surrounding them. Ambient subjects transform themselves not through conscious thought and direct action, but indirectly, by altering their sensory surround. The ambience of ambient subjectivity serves as a stage for personal mood regulation and self-care, but also as a contested aesthetic space where the affordability of particular types of subjects, affects, and behaviors come to be determined.

This growing awareness of the inseparability of self and surroundings strains cherished Enlightenment notions of self-reliance and rational objectivity, as well as more recent modern psychological understanding of the mature self holding itself at a distance from the immediate sensory world. Of course, the relationship between subject and surrounding environment has long been a focus of cultural concern, and might even be considered a founding problem of human civilization, as societies struggled to situate themselves in relation to larger natural forces (to which they were and remain vulnerable).

In any sensory encounter between a human and an object, what seems to be the discrete focus of perceptual attention is always inevitably tinted by larger atmospheric conditions. Objects reveal the environment around them through how they are bathed in ambient light, how they reflect their colors through the brightness or the mist of the day, how they hide in the deep shadows of night or reveal a world wrapped in moonlight. In a similar way, sounds carry hints not only of the object or even that created them, but of all the surrounding surfaces and substances they have travelled through, off, and around. Smell, touch, and taste can also provide essential clues to the qualities of a space, referencing qualities unseen and unheard. In each case, the environmental register most often remains in peripheral awareness, secondary to the more contained and focused qualities of the object under study. And yet, the largely unnoticed registration of environmental qualities like ambient light and spatial reverberations often serve as crucial tools for understanding how to navigate through a larger landscape, but equally and also to locate the perceiver's own body in relation to this environmental surround. The environmental dynamics of sensory information thus come to serve as a crucial—if largely unconscious—resource for the integration of body and environment.

In his excellent study of the use of echo and reverb in recorded music, Peter Doyle refers back to Echo, a figure in Greco-Roman mythology who comes to embody this interface between self and surroundings.²¹ Echo is sometimes depicted as a daughter of Gaia. In Ovid's account, she appears as a beautiful nymph inclined to ceaseless chatter who always has to have the final word. Zeus has Echo detain his wife Hera through smalltalk while he commits adultery with nymphs. In retaliation, Hera condemns Echo to speak only when spoken to, using only the last few syllables said to her by others. Later on Echo falls in love with Narcissus, but is unable to address him and must wait until he addresses her. He eventually acknowledges her existence, but afterwards spurns her. Forlorn, she hides deep in the woods, caves, and cliffs, over time wasting away and merging

²⁰ Ibid., 120.

²¹ Doyle, *Echo & Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording 1900-1960*, 40.

with the landscape. Eventually nothing is left of her but her voice, still ready to respond to anyone who calls to her.

As Doyle notes, Narcissus' famed self-regard is first displayed in his encounter with Echo. The Ovidian version of the myth suggests a fundamental dualism: by the end of the story the human self, the Narcissus, is alienated from his compliment, Echo. As a result of this neglect, Echo is subject to a kind of atrophy. The remnants of her existence are eventually displaced into the landscape. Doyle writes,

The Echo myth suggests some important attributes of echoic sound effects: echo as feminine, echo as voice (and implicitly, mind) without body, echo as repressed functions, and echo as a kind of sentient (but in that she can only repeat the syllables of others, non-generative) spirit of place.²²

This narrative of an environmental Echo spurned by a self-obsessed Narcissus dramatizes a human disavowal of environmental influence in the quest for the self. As Doyle notes, the modern quest for self-reliance can easily be read through the modern industrial culture of self-advancement: "The renunciation of (an imagined) soft, sensual physicality in favor of the industrial work ethic recalls certain aspects of the Echo and Narcissus myth, insofar as the act of renunciation by Narcissus—his failure to recognize the other—leaves Echo lamenting, unseen forever."²³ If industrial culture urged Narcissus to leave Echo behind, however, postindustrial culture appears poised at an earlier moment in the story, when Narcissus is still interested in what Echo might offer him as an atmospheric emotional support. Just as critics are lamenting postindustrial culture's tendency towards self-obsession and social withdrawal, the affective affordances of environmental attunement are increasingly being incorporated into the domain of self-care.

The Narcissus image is often used to denounce a mediated world where individuals can surround themselves with echoes of their own self-image. In his sequel to *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch describes this postindustrial "minimal" self as emerging largely through insubstantial images and symbols that seem to refer not so much to a palpable, solid, and durable reality as to his inner psychic life, itself experienced not as an abiding sense of self but as reflections glimpsed in the mirror of his surroundings.²⁴

This use of environmental affordances to shore up the self reinstates the Narcissus-Echo relation from the self-interested perspective of Narcissus, looking to the environment only for what it can offer as a form of self-care.

At the same time, however, the postindustrial reemergence of environmental thought also raises the possibility of Echo being recognized as a force in her own right. Echo comes to be legible as an archetypal affective laborer, a woman telling a man what he wants to hear, unable to speak on her own behalf. At the same time, this recognition of Echo's plight also raises the possibility that she might break free from Hera's spell and Narcissus' attractions, and regain her power as an independent force all her own.

At first glance, the emphasis on mood regulation in postindustrial culture makes it appear Narcissus is as smug as ever, armed with an array of Echo-chambers for his personal use. Critiques of therapy culture often cast the government in the role of Zeus here, promoting this type of self-obsessions as a way to render citizens pliant and unquestioning.²⁵

And yet, the sheer prevalence of environmental mood regulation opens up the possibility of recognizing Echo as something more than a servant of Narcissus. This has led postindustrial thought (from cybernetics to postcolonial studies to ecocriticism) to seek ways for Echo to speak

²² Ibid., 138.

²³ Ibid., 132.

²⁴ Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, 34.

²⁵ See for example Oguma and Ueno, *Iyashi no nashonarizumu: kusa no ne hoshu undō no jishhō kenkyū*.

for herself—for affective labor to be recognized as such, for example, and for the natural world to be something more than a reflection of human civilization back onto itself. As thinkers in many fields have pointed out, the difficulty here is that Echo still speaks only when spoken to. When a writer attempts to speak for and through her, it is also too easy to fall back into Narcissus' position. As ecotheorists like Timothy Morton have pointed out, thinking the environment as truly other first of all means destroying the idea that it should in some way reflect our own ideas and desires.²⁶ The unavoidable paradox, then, is that were Echo to truly escape Narcissus' command, she would cease being an echo of ourselves, and become something entirely unfamiliar.

Echo (and her companion Reverb) are key laborers in the aesthetics of ambient environments. Ambient music recordings often make extensive use of echo (and reverb) to produce the sensation of large reflective spaces. Visual and literary ambience, while working with a different set of aesthetic affordances, similarly focuses on descriptions of resonant surfaces and porous environments. The timbre and duration of these reflections cue spatial perception with the acoustic image of a soft, expansive, and supportive enclosure.

For a listener, the existential security provided by this space provides affords a certain type of self-awareness, what I will call *ambient subjectivity*. Ambience is supporting the narcissistic self here, but it also simultaneously pulling that self out into the environment. To this extent, the engineered echoes of ambient music remain other to the listener, who in turn may come to echo them by attuning to their spatial cues. At the same time, like the mythical Echo, it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to grant the echo a separate existence except in relation to a listener.

If this is starting to sound like an echo chamber, then we are getting closer to the mutually constitutive relationship between ambient subjects and ambient media. The polarization of an 'active,' 'masculine,' self-obsessed Narcissus and a 'passive,' 'female,' other-focused Echo begins to blur with the spread of ambient subjectivity. The self becomes more environmental, just as the environment comes to take on a subjectivity of its own. The porous, reverberant aesthetics of ambient media lead both to a narcissistic echoing of the self, and a self aware it can emerge only with and through the echo.

Medium as Environment

Not coincidentally, this growing recognition of the atmospheric components of subjectivity happens concurrently with the emergence of media studies as a discipline. The idea of a "medium" was from the beginning an atmospheric concept. In the introduction to *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, Mark Hansen and W. T. J. Mitchell reminds us that the term "medium" originally denoted the pervasive and enveloping substance in which we humans live: the Earth's atmosphere.²⁷ In a related sense, medium also referred to the space between two actors in an environment, like the medium in a seance. The word comes from the Latin for middle, midst, intermediary. The medium is what holds the environment together as a sensible space.

Gibson bases his theory of ecological perception on the medium of air (for humans) and the medium of water (for aquatic creatures), each of which remain as invisible to their respective inhabitants as they are indispensable.²⁸ Gibson describes each medium as suffused by an "ambient light" filling the medium and reflecting off objects within it, providing sensible information allowing the medium to be navigated.²⁹ A medium is defined by its sensory continuity: "There are no sharp transitions in a medium, no boundaries between one volume and another, that is to say, no

²⁶ See Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*.

²⁷ Mitchell and Hansen, "Introduction," in Mitchell and Hansen, eds., *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, xii.

²⁸ For an interesting take on this, see Luce Irigaray's *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*.

²⁹ Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 17.

surfaces.³⁰ He opposes this to *substances*, which take on sensory qualities like hardness, viscosity, density, cohesiveness, elasticity, and plasticity.³¹

Recalling this older idea of media as the environmental in-between, Hansen and Mitchell provide a definition pinpointing the overlap between this media as air/water and media as a human technology of sensory recording and reproduction: “Media broker the giving of space and time within which concrete experience becomes possible.”³² The medium determines what can be done, what can be sensed. In other words, each medium has its own set of environmental affordances. As Marshall McLuhan famously described it, media “extend” the senses as they simultaneously “amputate” them in turn.³³ Each medium brings with it a particular sensory horizon.

From this perspective, humans have gradually introduced other media into our primary medium of air, in the process shifting the environmental affordances of the spaces we inhabit. As Jonathan Crary has documented, the gradual emergence of image and sound recording beginning around the turn of the last century have fundamentally shifted the our sensory ecology, filling the air with all manner of new sensory affordances, and leading to the emergence of sensory attention itself as a central issue in heavily 'mediated' urban environments.³⁴ With the emergence and proliferation of new electronic media in the last half-century, this process has accelerated exponentially.

While they had many antecedents, it is in this latter period especially that artists begin to respond more directly to the changing sensory environment, leading in part to the (near simultaneous) emergence of environmental art and media art. In the 1950s and 1960s many artists positioned themselves between these two movements, including the Experimental Workshop [*Jikken kōbo*], Nam Jun Paik, and Experiments in Art and Technology, each of whom created installation works engaging both electronic mediation and the medium it reconfigures: the air of the exhibition space itself.

As I document in the following chapters, ambient media emerges in the wake of this environmental media art, but with a twist. If media art generally utilizes electronic media to provide novel experiences of space and time unafforded by air alone, ambient media aspires to a more completely atmospheric aesthetic—in other words, returning electronic media to the air itself. The goal of ambient media becomes to 'tint' the air, like a perfume.³⁵ Like the now rapidly expanding ambient intelligence industry,³⁶ ambient media seek to create mediated spaces which blend seamlessly with everyday life, to the degree they do not register as separate from the larger environment. In Gibson's terms, these other media seem to blend in with the air itself, rather than standing out as distinct substances. Unlike earlier environmental art movements, ambient media aim for the seamless coexistence of different media within a larger economy of mediated attention.

A Politics of Atmosphere

My approach to atmosphere follows from the perspectives of urban sociology, particularly the work of Georg Simmel. Simmel presents the dynamics of city life by looking not just at the sensory reorganization the city foists upon one individual, but what it means to have many different

³⁰ Ibid., 18.

³¹ Ibid., 20.

³² Mitchell and Hansen, “Introduction,” vii.

³³ McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 45.

³⁴ See Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*.

³⁵ “An ambience is defined as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint.” Brian Eno, liner notes to *Music for Airports* (1978).

³⁶ For example, see Weber, Rabaey, and Aarts, eds. *Ambient Intelligence*.

people sharing a complex urban environment. Urban lifestyles and labor patterns have meant increasingly diverse types of people in close quarters, a trend that only accelerates through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This is particularly true in Tokyo, a destination for millions upon millions of people in the last century.

Urbanism and its associated consumerism bring about more and more differentiated lifestyles, with jobs becoming more specialized at the same time as people face the challenge of differentiating themselves from an ever growing mass of neighbors. The question of coexistence—at the center of politics going back to Aristotle—takes on new urgency in these high-density population centers.

This issue is particularly salient in Japan, where postindustrial culture often pushes for behavioral uniformity, and often through environmental means. This is most apparent in the set of common Japanese expressions focusing on “air” [*kūki*], particularly the distinction between “someone who can read the air” [*kūki ga yomeru hito*] and know how to respond appropriately without being explicitly told, and someone illiterate when it comes to the air [*kūki ga yomenai hito*], and ends up making both themselves and those around them uncomfortable. The expression had a surge of popularity in the late 2000s, with *KY*, a handily abbreviated form of *kūki ga yomenai*, nominated as one of the most important new terms of 2007 in U-Can's annual New Word/Buzzword Competition [*Shingo-Ryūkōgo Taishō*]. An individual's ability to sense the atmosphere and respond appropriately emerges as a crucial skill for personal and professional advancement, serving as a common theme in postindustrial self-improvement literature.³⁷

The “air” here is of course as much a social phenomena as a physical one, though the expression does seem to tie back to the ancient Chinese theories of wind noted above. The classic critique of this kind of air is Yamamoto Shichihei's 1977 work “*Air*” *Research* (“*Kūki*” *no kenkyū*, 1977). Yamamoto describes how “air” discourse has been called on since World War II as a technique to indirectly persuade people to acquiesce to the status quo, diverting attention from the underlying power structures at work. Reading the air means to quietly observe how things are done and adopt a similar pattern of behavior. Yamamoto describes this as a way for those in power to wield influence indirectly by enforcing an unspoken consensus, protecting themselves both from retaliation and—should their directives prove mistaken—from responsibility for their subordinate's behavior. Yamamoto argues that the strength of “air” in Japan stifles open dialogue and discussion, and can lead to disastrous failures of accountability. He gives numerous examples of this from World War II, where Japanese army officers could retrospectively excuse their actions (and the actions of their superiors) by blaming the general atmosphere at the time as the reason for their lapses in judgement. The atmosphere becomes here both a way to generate desired behaviors without ordering them directly (not unlike the affective half-second described above), and, if necessary, a scapegoat for later responsibility.

While the cultural and historical dynamics of ambient media in Japan are my focus here, I intend most of what follows to be applicable to other postindustrial cultures besides Japan—particularly the United States and Canada, Western Europe, and South Korea. Ambient aesthetics also appear to be on the rise in major cities elsewhere in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, as part of the emergence and transformation of middle class lifestyles. Even as the discussion is woven through with singular Japanese histories, I continually return to this larger shared frame of

³⁷ A search for books on *kūki* on Amazon Japan brings up a large list of self-help books in Japanese including titles like Kōtaru Yūji's *How to Read the Air: Power Course on How to be Called a “Can-do Guy”* (2008), Tsuchii Takagi's *Friendship Hell: Survival in the “Reading the Air” Generation* (2008), and Matsumoto Chitose's *Creating the “Air” of a Beautiful Person: 81 Beauty Secrets* (2012).

postindustrial culture as a reminded that what I describe is by and large a transnational tendency not limited to any single culture or region.

At the same time, Japan remains one of the world's primary sites for understanding ambient media, for two main reasons. First, there is perhaps no other time or place in the modern world where atmosphere is so central to the aesthetics of daily life as in the urban corridors of postindustrial Japan. As early as the late 1960s, artists and creators in Japan across a wide range of media begin embracing ambient aesthetics as both an aesthetic goal and a guiding principle, often drawing on locally designed media technology. This built to a peak in the 1980s and 90s, as I document here. While of course this was (and continues to be) only one among a plethora of styles on offer, it has become one of the most prominent, reaching out into many different areas of popular culture.³⁸

Second, as Yamamoto's work explores, modern Japanese culture relies extensively on external social pressures [*gaiatsu*] as a means of enforcing social cohesion. It is very much what Deleuze called a "control society,"³⁹ though here behavioral surveillance is often doubly displaced: from the state to other Japanese, and from other people to the "air" itself. While this system of controls is partially internalized (as an image of how a 'proper' Japanese person should behave), it is also continually reiterated on a more local level through the compulsion to "read the air," to respond appropriately not based on abstract beliefs but in accordance with immediate environmental pressures. I follow Yamamoto in pushing for more attention to the role of these unspoken environmental pressures in Japanese society, as key components of contemporary power struggles.

Atmospherically designed public spaces work affectively in much the same way as air does rhetorically: well-designed atmospheres appear open and inevitable in a way that both enforces and conceals quite stringent behavioral rules and regulations. Japanese cities are full of quasi-"public" spaces that allow for freedom of movement and commerce, but not much else. Consider, for example, the large multi-use commercial centers that have emerged in Tokyo in the last decade, like the Mori Group's high-profile retail/office complexes *Roppongi Hills* (Kohn Pedersen Fox/Jerde, 2003) and *Omotesando Hills* (Ando Tadao, 2005), and the Mitsui Group's *Tokyo Midtown* (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 2007). On the surface these are open and inviting spaces, designed to be welcoming and comfortable to wander through. At the same time, these spaces are implicitly geared towards a particular socio-economic and cultural demographic: style-conscious transnational professional elites. For those who don't fit in, these same comfort-designed spaces lead to feeling alien and out of place. Any failure to read the atmosphere properly—loitering too long, making too much noise, dressing improperly, engaging in prohibited behaviors, etc.—will soon bring out the security guards.⁴⁰

Both Yagi Kosuke and Sara Ahmed have described the indirect ways non-normative subjects come to be stigmatized for refusing to 'fit in.' Ahmed describes how social stereotypes like the

³⁸ In 2009 the long-running Japanese music magazine *Studio Voice* ran a special issue looking back at the history of ambient music. This was published in book form, as *Ambient Music 1969-2009*. This in turn sold well enough for the publishers to assemble a sequel, *Ambient Music Part II 1960-2010*. See *Studio Voice*. "Ambient and Chill Out" Special Issue, (August 2008); Mita and Studio Voice, eds. *Anbiento myūjikkū 1969-2009*; Mita, ed., *Ura anbiento myūjikkū 1960-2010*.

³⁹ Deleuze, "Postscript on Societies of Control," 6.

⁴⁰ For my part, I feel half-welcome: I have the cultural training to keep calm and look casual as I browse around, but I am acutely aware of not being able to afford most of what is on offer, and of being in nowhere near the same tax bracket as most of the people I see around me. I can read the air, but in this case only to recognize this medium is not meant for me.

‘feminist killjoy’ and the ‘unhappy queer’ frame the problem of not fitting in as one of an individual willfully refusing to just ‘go with the flow,’ making the people around them uncomfortable.⁴¹ Yagi similarly points to how within a society prioritizing comfort and positive feelings, minorities who in their very appearance remind ‘normal’ Japanese of uncomfortable realities they would rather ignore become in turn accused of failing to ‘blend in,’ as if it were a willful action on their part.⁴² Like Yamamoto’s critique of “air,” these authors point to the power structures implicit in the unspoken social atmosphere. The atmosphere becomes naturalized as simply the way things are, shifting the locus of responsibility onto the person who cannot or will not behave the way the situation demands. Those who do not fit in are then marked as an “annoyance” [*meiwaku*], to invoke another Japanese euphemism for those who refuse to bow to external social pressure. This label obscures the decisive role of the surrounding environment in determining who and what can and cannot fit in a given space.

With the proliferation of designed atmospheres, the social politics of ‘fitting in’ becomes increasingly a spatial and aesthetic issue. While writers like Yagi and Ahmed focus on interpersonal relationships, the spread of ambient media and environmental design results in a similar dynamic, but this time not just between people, but between humans and larger purposefully-designed social architectures, with their own atmospheric behavioral demands.

Every atmosphere includes an imperceptible border demarcating who can fit seamlessly into the air within, and who remains alien, making insiders uncomfortable by drawing attention to the exclusionary logic of the space itself. This atmospheric exclusion is similar to the logic of multiculturalism, when the ‘proper’ multicultural subject says to someone refusing to play by the same rules, “How dare you stick to your own culture and refuse to join us, since we are going out of our way to show how tolerant we are?”⁴³ The logic of “air” generates a similar response when a seemingly open and fluid atmosphere is forced to confront its own exclusivity. Someone who doesn’t fit in is blamed for their own divergence from the normative ambience, precisely because their presence discomfortingly reveals how these atmospheres of engineered comfort are hardly as natural or inevitable as they seek to appear.

Ahmed promotes the political necessity of producing this kind of discomfort in the process of undermining the smug complacency of the status quo. While this is a vital strategy in pushing for social change—particularly in annoyance-phobic postindustrial Japan—it does little to address the larger problem of how to structure a comfortable and inclusive society. Ahmed herself admits that the need for comfort can never be fully written off, and is itself unevenly distributed across populations:

Maintaining an active position of ‘transgression’ not only takes time, but may not be psychically, socially, or materially possible for some individuals and groups given their ongoing and unfinished commitments and histories. [...] Assimilation and transgression are not choices that are available to individuals, but are effects of how subjects can and cannot inhabit social norms and ideals.⁴⁴

Moreover, it can be argued that attempts to bring a transgressive aesthetics to everyday atmospheres has met with limited success. For example, architects Arakawa and Gins designed the *Reversible Destiny Lofts* (2005) in Mitaka (Tokyo) to, in their terms, continually challenge inhabitant’s habitual behavior patterns, keeping them mentally ‘young’ and open to the future. The floor, bumpy and uneven, attempts to throw people off balance, and the transparent bathroom doors and missing closets serve to keep people unsettled and exposed. While conceptually strong

⁴¹ See Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

⁴² See Yagi, <*Iyashi*> *toshite no sabetsu*.

⁴³ See Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*.

⁴⁴ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 153.

and undeniably unique, this transgressive orientation led in practice to a building few people actually want to live in. As the apartments reveal, particularly when designing long-term environments, comfort cannot be discounted so readily. While transgression absolutely has its place, it also brings its own quite narrow criteria for who can and cannot fully participate.

The short-lived Japanese ‘landscape theory’ [*fūkeiron*] movement provides another pertinent example here. Leftist film critic Matsuda Masao developed landscape theory in the late 1960s in relation to a set of films contrasting empty, anonymous urban and suburban landscapes with the affectless behavior of characters within them.⁴⁵ Yuriko Furuhata identifies this concern with generic manufactured landscapes with three transformations underway in late 60s Japan: “the waning of a centralized mode of political resistance (the masses versus the State); an increasing skepticism towards the centrality of the subject [*shutai*] among leftist filmmakers and activists; and Japan’s economic shift from industrial to postindustrial consumer capitalism.”⁴⁶ While Matsuda and other critics insisted on the need to battle against state power directly, for Furuhata these films demonstrate how social control is no longer “synonymous with police, military, or parliamentary power, but with transportation and infrastructure—in short, pathways of commerce and information.”⁴⁷

In pointing to the dispersal of social control into the landscape, the landscape films and landscape theorists were presciently responding to the increasing role of the designed environment in shaping social behavior. Other groups following in their wake often concluded that the best way to question the power structures implicit in everyday environments is to push back against these environmental controls directly. These transgressive responses to environmental controls have led to everything from street art and ‘occupy’ movements, on the one hand, to random acts of terrorist violence, on the other. These acts have become some of the most influential social events of the postindustrial period. In the same way, however, what falls out of view in such an oppositional framework is the continued problem of how to allow for coexistence with difference. The question posed by ambient media is of a different order: not who will control (ideologically and physically) the postindustrial landscape, but the problem of how to structure an environment to comfortably engage an irreducible diversity of objects and people.

Overview

This dissertation focuses on the role of ambient media in addressing the aesthetics and politics of this need for atmospheric coexistence. Part One, “Mood Musics,” describes the historical development of ambient sound in the 1960s and 1970s out of commercial background music and avant-garde experiments in the aesthetics of everyday life. I trace how the tension between the avant-garde’s environmental proclivities and postindustrial culture’s emphasis on comfortable design comes to coalesce in the music of Erik Satie. Satie’s softly reverberant compositions come to serve as lifestyle soundtracks in 1970s Japan, setting the stage for the electronic ambient music to follow.

Part Two, “Panoramic Interiors,” maps out the merging of ambient styles with the turn to exoticism and oceanic feelings in Japanese popular culture of the 1980s. The central figure here is

⁴⁵ Specifically, Adachi Masao’s *A.K.A. Serial Killer* (*Ryakushō: renzoku shatsuma*, 1969), and Ōshima Nagisa’s *The Secret History of the Post-Tokyo War: The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (*Tokyo sensō sengo hiwa: eiga de isho o nokoshiteitta otoko no monogatari*, 1970).

⁴⁶ Furuhata, “Returning to actuality: *fūkeiron* and the landscape film,” 347.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 361.

musician Hosono Haruomi, who after the disbanding of Yellow Magic Orchestra created a variation on ambient music more focused on exotic landscapes and new age spirituality. I trace this ‘turning away’ into internal oceanic atmospheres through one of the decade’s most enduring works of ambient cinema, Group TAC’s animated feature adaptation of Miyazawa Kenji’s classic fable *Night on the Galactic Railroad*. I read Giovanni’s voyage through the stars as a turn to the panoramic interiors offered by imagined landscapes, and the search for a more absolute cosmic background through which an embattled social identity might be dissolved.

Part Three, “Restorative Fictions,” explores a different avenue towards transcending society in the postindustrial period: the increasing focus on mood regulation as a crucial component of self-care. I first explore how Yoshiyuki Rie’s short story “The Little Lady” documents the relaxing effects of cats as ambient companions for solitary domestic living, part of the larger ‘cat boom’ of the early 1980s. After tracing the social history of “healing-style” [*iyashi-kei*] culture and its associated discourses, I turn to a more recent “healing” novel to reveal the various ways Japanese literature has turned to ambient aesthetics as a way of reinventing itself for a new culture of mood regulation.

Part Four, “Urban Attunements,” shifts the focus back out to the city to investigate the role of ambient aesthetics not merely as a withdrawal into oceanic interiors, but as a way of affording the peaceful coexistence of diverse subjects in shared public spaces. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s concept of ‘eurhythmia’ as a blend of connected-but-independent rhythms in urban space, I look at how ambient media introduces rhythm to urban atmospheres as a way to keep everyone moving along with a minimum of resistance. My focus here is on the emergence of ambient video in galleries and on large outdoor screens, and how video artists have responded to the problematic of what I call ‘coobjectivity,’ a situation where media in a vast range of styles must share the same urban perceptual space, and find some way of getting along. The final chapters then engage with the ‘subtractivist’ logic of atmospheric aesthetics, from ambient lifestyle brands like Muji to the purposefully shallow depths of contemporary video art.

In each section, my goal is to map out the aesthetic strategies and atmospheric sociality of ambient media, including both their adaptive potentials and their inexorable problems. Overall the dissertation moves from the more private, personal dynamics of ambient media use in the early sections to address more public, inter-personal and spatial questions near the end. The different sections focus on a range of different ambient media forms, from music and animation in the first half to literature and video art in the second. Throughout, I introduce key examples of ambient media from Japan, and, where important, detail their immediate historical context. Otherwise, I have taken the liberty of roaming freely across diverse histories and media contexts, in the hopes of providing a sense of the diversity and scope of atmospheric aesthetics across a wide range of postindustrial media cultures.

Ambient media can be understood most generally as the extension of environmental design into new audio, visual, and textual forms, which in turn come to contour our daily experience of the urban environment. As Simmel wrote nearly a century earlier, the metropolis is known and loved not for the particular people it contains, but for the places it offers up to move within.⁴⁸ The emotional connections inhabitants build are with these spaces, not the humans passing through them. The particular people may be different with every visit, but the contours of the environment remain relatively constant, at least long enough for a certain degree of familiarity and intimacy to develop. Space is loved for the feelings it affords, for its atmosphere. In postindustrial culture, these atmospheres are increasingly synonymous with the media designed to flow through them.

⁴⁸ Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, 335.

For many urban postindustrial subjects, the experience of the landscape is now synonymous with the experience of design. An early example of this shift comes through in a short essay by the poet and novelist Yoshiyuki Rie, about a mid-1970s trip she made with her sister to Europe and the United States. Yoshiyuki describes a range of pleasant and unpleasant experiences with strangers while moving through London, Paris, and Los Angeles. But it is only when the pair visit the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland that Yoshiyuki finds something she can really appreciate. She marvels at the variety of people enjoying the experience—families, young lovers, older couples, and quite a few solitary visitors. The essay ends with an expression of gratitude to Walt Disney for designing a place where so many people end up smiling.⁴⁹ The essay reveals much of the new postindustrial relationship to space: not concerned with historical meaning or human interaction, but rather, an appreciation for the type of emotional engagements environmental design may afford.

Jean Baudrillard famously argued in *Simulacra and Simulation* that the manifestly manufactured image of America Disneyland serves up helps visitors to imagine that there is a “real” America outside, in distinction to the “embalmed and pacified” Disney version in front of them. For Baudrillard, this allows visitors to avoid recognizing how the world outside Disneyland is just as fabricated, itself a simulacra for which there exists no original.⁵⁰ Yoshiyuki’s essay, in contrast, upends Baudrillard’s assumption that Disney visitors still have any investment in this kind of authenticity at all. She brooks no desire for an “authentic” experience of these foreign cultures, nor does she find anything objectionable in the carefully engineered landscapes of the theme park. For her, Disneyland is not an escape from “real” space, but rather, a space that is simply better designed than most. The question is not one of copy versus original, or even of a copy without an original. The question is what type of feeling the atmosphere affords visitors. What is valued here is not the ability of a space to convincingly embody historical experience, but the work of affective design itself.

Yoshiyuki describes discomfort in her visits to other places, particularly in Paris, in the moments she must deal directly with other people: she is conscious of how she is being seen, of the difficulties of communication in a foreign language, of the uncertainty of every encounter. In contrast, she praises the Haunted Mansion for enabling such a wide variety of people to enjoy their time there, even for those visiting Disneyland alone. There is no need for people to interact directly with one another, no danger of failed communication. Everyone present enjoys a communal affective encounter with the attraction.

While Disneyland has been critiqued on all manner of ecological, cultural, and environmental fronts, Yoshiyuki’s experience reminds us how spaces like the Haunted Mansion can nonetheless afford positive affect to a wide variety of visitors. Ideology-based critiques like Baudrillard’s often fail to engage with the emotional appeals of designed space, precisely because these appeals operate outside (or alongside) the realm of cultural meaning. But as Yoshiyuki’s essay implies, it is the pleasingly haunted atmosphere, the promise of inhabiting their “happiest place,” that often matters most to visitors. As we will see numerous times throughout the course of this work, this attempt to do away with everything but pleasant sensation nonetheless remains ‘haunted’ by these other concerns, which can never be fully vanquished from the scene.

Characteristic of ambient subjectivity, Yoshiyuki’s writing shows very little concern with cultural identity. Disneyland serves not as an image of America, but a work of design to be experienced by anyone and everyone. Similarly, elsewhere in her travel writing “Japan” only

⁴⁹ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 93.

⁵⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 12.

registers to the extent that communication overseas can be difficult for someone who speaks only Japanese. Rather, she describes places for what they afford her atmospherically as an anonymous visitor to a shared environment. The Haunted Mansion emerges as a surprisingly pleasant place in Yoshiyuki's account. Its atmosphere affords a particular set of affective responses, for a wide range of visitors from all corners of the world. What matters here is the feeling afforded by a space. Other more reflective and historical considerations are studiously ignored—by design. Other people become fellow travelers in shared space, rather than sites for potential interpersonal encounters. Environmental designs like these attempt to scrub away all cultural and historical specificity, to rub Japan and the weight of its history out of the picture. What is left is both impoverished and liberated, shutting down certain forms of understanding and opening up myriad others.

The following study of ambient media also, inevitably, remains haunted by this attempt to smooth away the contours of cultural specificity and reach the aerodynamic freedoms of minimal forms. Each of my examples here are both well within Japan and yet reaching to be elsewhere, towards an indeterminate horizon that promises—if not necessarily delivering—a way past the impasses of national and cultural identification. At the same time, it reaches for an emotional landscape that has done away—in perfectly efficient and rationalized form—with the mess and pain of intense feeling (euphoria, despair, rage, ecstasy). Ambient media moves towards a smoothly indeterminate global horizon, but at the cost of evacuating the textured historical complexity of the foreground; similarly, it reaches for the expanded awareness of the placid and equanimous mind, but at the cost of banishing the productive and critical energy of passion and struggle.

Our task throughout will be to try to reach towards an understanding of this process which neither dismisses these ambient desires nor forgets what they have desired to leave behind. This means a way of speaking which resists pushing these works back into a Japanese context from which they have attempted escape, but also never entirely letting them so quickly slip away from the contingencies that helped shape them. Similarly, this study attempts to take seriously the attentional expansion of ambient modes of awareness, and its potential for different modes of environmental engagement, while never forgetting the way these moods remain haunted by other feelings left unexpressed and perhaps even silenced.

PART ONE: MOOD MUSICS

[1. Background Music of the Avant-garde]

I recently spent a few days immersed in background music while staying at a hotel on the southeastern coast of Chiba prefecture, a few hours bus ride east of Tokyo. The building featured perpetual soft piano music, piped through speakers in the lobby, the downstairs café, the hallways, and in every bedroom. The same piano soundtrack would be playing each day as I returned, wafting down from a grey speaker placed above the bed near the center of the vaulted ceiling. A small dimmer next to the light switch in the wall allowed for adjusting the volume between low, very low, and off. If left on, the recording would continue until eight or nine in the evening, at which point the sound would quietly fade into silence for the night, only to start back up the following morning.

I left the music playing during my stay, curious if I could experience the sort of productivity enhancement and stress relief touted by so much of the commercial background music promotional literature. The tone of the music was sentimental without ever building to any kind of catharsis, and pleasant without allowing for any shade of ambiguity or emotional complexity. Harmonically, the piano never strayed far from consonance, moving through a series of mostly major chords in steadily resolving progressions. Occasionally the melodic line would hint at something more expressive and musically interesting: a jazz improvisation; a distantly familiar melody; a slight deviation from the steady mid-range pulse. But these hints never materialized into anything more substantial. While occasionally gesturing at further development, the music would

always soon slip back into the realm of the ignorable, retreating to a series of predictably consonant notes.

When I sat and listened for these flickers of expression, I felt a slowly rising frustration. Anything but relaxed, I found myself more irritated with the piano with each passing hour. The purposefully limited tonal, dynamic, and emotional range of the music produced an atmosphere of claustrophobia, as I felt my range of possible behaviors reduced to a narrow band of noncommittal pleasantries. The lack of musical ambiguity and complexity left no room for me to enter into the music and move around in it. The more I tried to find a place to be myself with this soundtrack, the more I frustrated I became. This was a music allowing no space for reflective thought, no gap between listener and sound that might allow a relationship to develop between the two. I was being pushed into an emotional dynamic I was not able to reciprocate, leading to discomfort and feelings of emotional alienation. Though I was by myself, I was haunted by the unsettling sensation that the feelings occupying the room were not my own.

After my failed attempt to reap the productive pleasures of Muzak, I began to understand what the influential music critic Akiyama Kuniharu (1929-1996) meant when he described this kind of background music as “other people’s music” [*tanin no ongaku*]. The narrow emotional range of background music (BGM) is easier to tolerate heard in a public setting like a café or shopping arcade. Unlike the hotel room, I can imagine that among the people around me, at least some share the feelings of the music—or rather, the music shares the space in between us, working out our relationality ahead of time.

As George Simmel points out, people in the city use precisely this narrow emotional bandwidth to engage with people they don't know—the shallow emotionality used when interacting with strangers in the city.⁵¹ When listening alone, however, this kind of emotional narrowing is no longer plausible, and the disconnect between the music’s narrow sentimentality and the inevitably more complex realm of individual emotional psychology is thrown into stark relief.

Akiyama Kuniharu was perhaps the central critic of Japanese avant-garde music in the 1960s, as well as an active event organizer and occasional composer. He was one of the founding members of the influential Experimental Workshop [*Jikken kōbō*] in 1951, and in the early sixties participated in the Fluxus movement in New York before returning to Tokyo mid-decade to help start the Environment Society [*Enbairamento no kai*]. He played a central role in the reception of both John Cage and Erik Satie in Japan, as well as the trajectory of *kankyō ongaku* in the context of Japanese art music world.

Akiyama makes his BGM argument in a 1966 essay published in *Design Criticism* [*Dezain hihyō*] critiquing “Designer Music” [*Dezain suru ongaku*]. He begins by emphasizing his general disdain for design as a field of operations, as it has—in recent decades at least—become merely a tool of commercialism. For Akiyama design is a practice that, in its obsession with functionality, has become powerless as a form of artistic expression. He notes that along with the rise of consumer electronics, design became the primary site where the aesthetics of everyday life are forged. Music was earliest amongst all the existing art fields to become absorbed into this design context, as background music rapidly expanded to fill the spaces of everyday life.

Akiyama claims that he has been critiquing this “music for design” since the mid-1950s, and sees it as a major threat to the integrity of music as an art form. Not only does background music reduce music to a tool of commerce, but musically it tends towards pale imitations of earlier musical genres. BGM arbitrarily loots music of the past, creating a shoddy mixture of classical and

⁵¹ Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, 143-9.

foreign popular music styles. Akiyama argues that unlike “pure” music, background music flattens all genres into a “mixed-blood” amalgam of ripped-off musical cues. He notes that many composers in Japan are already moonlighting as composers of commercial background music, and warns that this can be a slippery slope into mediocrity, as their entire musical output becomes contaminated by these forays into selling their music as a functional backdrop for someone else’s product line.

Up to this point in the argument, Akiyama’s essay reads as a rather reactionary plea against the miscegenation of music and design, “pure” expression and consumerism. The essay ends, however, by attempting to think past this modernist distinction between high art and base emotional manipulation.

First, he acknowledges the absurdity of the idea of artistic or musical ‘purity,’ noting that music composed for the background has a long and surprisingly distinguished lineage: Mozart made music for the dinner table, and Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* (1741) were written as a kind of insomnia medication for sleepless royalty. Further, contemporary background music does in its own way respond to the same aspects of modernity that so much twentieth century art music has grappled with: the disappearance of shared social investments, and the increasing isolation and atomization of the individual against ever-more rationalized and anonymous urban environments.

Akiyama’s issue with BGM is not that it fails to reflect this new cultural landscape, but that its response is incomplete, half-baked, too laced with vestiges of an earlier individualistic humanism based on romantic ideals of unmediated expression. The problem Akiyama has with common thinking on background music is the tendency to equate it with the creation of atmospheric moods [*funiki nūdo zukuri*].⁵² He argues his point by proposing a hypothetical case study: the design of BGM to accompany astronauts on their voyage to outer space. This was a remarkably prophetic proposal, given that Muzak would in fact accompany the Apollo astronauts to the moon just three years later.

It goes without saying that this kind of thinking [of BGM as mood creation] leads to all kinds of random makeshift designs. For example, following this line of thought, we can probably assume there should also be mood music inside the spaceship. However, inside such a narrow and solitary space, mood music would be completely useless as BGM for the astronaut. To the contrary, it might even do harm.

Imagine being in outer space, separated from earth by tens of thousands of kilometers. Astronauts have to bear the loneliness of this vacuum-like space, with their only link between self and other a few voice commands transmitted from the Earth. They must feel a disturbing amount of fear and isolation in this soundless world. These few vocal exchanges must be a tense encounter between human and sound, each exchange felt as a moment of heightened existence.

However, as the silence continues, human nerves will eventually reach their limit, and insanity sets in. The astronauts can no longer run the ship properly. This is when BGM should be utilized. But in this case, what is needed is not generic mood music, but sounds specially designed for the interior of the space shuttle.

Why is mood music inappropriate here? Because mood music is someone else’s music [*tanin no ongaku*]. By providing a virtual non-existent existence, it seems useful at first. But given an isolated context where connections with other people have been completely severed, mood music doesn’t provide anything like comfort. For it to be comforting, the person would probably have to be an extreme optimist, or at least sentimental.

Mood music, even in the instant you hear it, already does not belong to you. Precisely because it is someone else’s music, there is no responsibility involved. Even as you acknowledge its existence, you also fail to hear it. It is a kind of irresponsible music within the crowd.

Akiyama points out that BGM doesn’t engage with individual psychology, so that in an isolated situation, where an individual psychology is all that is present, it quickly becomes irritating.

⁵² Akiyama, “Dezain suru ongaku,” 17.

In contrast, BGM might be said to function as the psychology of the crowd, filling in the spaces between self and others.

As an alternative, Akiyama proposes a spaceship music that takes the isolation and atomization of the astronaut more fully into the structure of the music itself. A BGM fully responsive to the new “reality” would need to more fully absorb the cold rationality of outer space.

At this point, we have to start thinking about music specialized for use by astronauts, music designed for space flight. We should first start from scientific data on the physical and psychological effects of this extreme situation on the human body, and experiment with the influence of sound. Then we can explore combinations of different frequencies and tone colors to figure out which is the most suitable. We might also need to think about the need for different sonic compositions based on the astronaut’s gender, age, and personality type. Starting with this data, composers will be able to prepare and compose sounds much like a scientist or a doctor would. More than “music,” this would be more like “sound” prepared specially for the inside of the space shuttle, the manufactured sonic equivalent of space food.

Akiyama contrasts these hypothetical research-based sound compositions with the cold and spacey electronic music most often heard in TV commercials and science fiction dramas.

How would it be if we stop using electronic music to create these anti-social and escapist ‘moods,’ and try instead for this kind of space music, music designed for spaceships? Only then would we then face clearly the real questions posed by BGM.

This type of design music, in order to grasp the new reality that continues to emerge in today’s situation, has the job of systematizing the various new mediums. In order to do this, we must seriously wrestle with these questions both functionally and scientifically. We shouldn’t call it ‘design’ if it just appeals to a private pathos or mood.

What Akiyama proposes is to strip sentimentality from environmental music, and in so doing purify the landscape of the last vestiges of subjective reflection, of modernist interiority. Of course, he is writing not only of outer space, but of the modern rationalization of more Earthly spaces as well.

Reading Akiyama’s proposals alongside contemporaneous research on commercial environmental music, it is striking how much Akiyama’s attitude parallels the work of BGM’s own researchers. They also trumpeted their product’s superior rationality over the generic background tunes of other providers, and how it operated directly on the body, bypassing reflective feelings. There is almost no mention of private emotions or sentimental nostalgia in the highly rationalized, purely corporeal sound environments being plotted out by the commercial background music providers at the time. Emotion is stripped of its subjective qualities, becoming pure affective response.⁵³

Akiyama’s essay successfully explains why I felt so claustrophobic listening to my own private BGM in Chiba: with no others in the room to help circulate the sentimentality, I could only face the mismatch between the music’s feelings and my own. On the other hand, Akiyama’s criticism misses the mark when he portrays emotionality as a vestigial interiority with no place in a more rational age. As commercial background music makers were well aware, there is nothing inherently private or personal about mood. To the contrary, over the course of human history mood has mainly been thought of as an environmental phenomenon, and only in recent centuries was a concern with the private moods of individuals established and propagated. As affect theorists like Theresa Brennan and Sara Ahmed have argued, emotion needs to be thought of as a force that

⁵³ Affect theory of a Post-Spinozan Deleuzian mold sometimes attempts to wrest an a-subjective or pre-subjective domain of ‘affect’ in contrast to a level of ‘emotion’ more beholden to personal memory and cultural learning. Here I am less interested in the biological relevance of this distinction and more in its cultural history - why does this idea of pre-conscious, asubjective emotion emerge when it does, and what is at stake in splitting off emotion and human specificity? The historical transformations in background aesthetics I trace out here provides some context to begin to answering this question.

circulates, structuring the spaces between subjects as much or more than it informs more private individual identities.⁵⁴

With this in mind, we can recognize how the distinction Akiyama makes between a sentimental BGM and a properly scientific and objective space music is a false one. BGM is at its most objective at the same time as it is at its most atmospherically affective: when the soft piano music operates on the spaces between bodies, providing affective attunements affording coexistence rather than reflective identification.

Fear of an Emotional Science

At this point in the mid-1960s, artists still held out some faith in science as a superior alternative to emotionality—an attitude that was soon to change. Tanaka Satoshi's work on the history of healing fads in Japan notes a shift in popular attitudes towards science beginning in the early 1970s. In the immediate postwar decades, science still gave off a sheen of progress, a promise of escape from the ideological past into a more rational and efficient future. All this began to change in the postindustrial period, with its growing recognition of the social and environmental costs of decades of rapid industrialization. Up until this point, science still had the power to summon up hopeful images of the future, even as artists and writers (particularly science fiction writers) were quick to criticize its more utopian claims.

For example, Unno Jūza's 1937 short story "The Music Bath at 1800 Hours" [*Jyūhachi jikan no ongaku yoku*] provides an early, incisive satire of the idea of music as mood control, responding in part to the patriotic music the Japanese government was forcing radio stations to play as a form of mass wartime mobilization. The story describes a future society on a fictional planet where all citizens are forced to take a "music bath" every day at 1800. The music is scientifically engineered to make citizens both hyper-productive and completely vulnerable to government propaganda. Everything goes along smoothly until the planet comes under alien attack and the fearful ruler decides to play the music twenty-four hours a day. This soon melts everyone's brain, leaving the planet wide open to invasion.⁵⁵

Unno, along with Edogawa Rampo and Yumeno Kyūsaku, pioneered the proto-science fiction genre of the 'science novel' [*kagaku shōsetsu*], a genre of speculative fiction warning of the dangers of scientific development without a guiding moral authority.⁵⁶ The misuse of sound and vibrational technology was a particular obsession of Unno, who did government radio research for the Communication Ministry's Electrical Experiments Division while penning his early works. As Sari Kawana argues, while Unno was a staunch nationalist during the war decades, his stories aimed a moral critique of what he called "science without conscience." Kawana writes that Unno differed from the 'technocrats' in the government in one major way: "while Unno thought that nationalism could bring morality to science, the technocrats thought nationalism could exempt science from morality."⁵⁷

Nonetheless, Unno maintained a staunch belief in science as the key to the nation's future. As Kawana points out, Unno was the childhood hero of Tezuka Osamu, and his stories went on to be

⁵⁴ See Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*; Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

⁵⁵ Sexuality appears in Unno's story as an affective route outside government control. The story describes state-provided 'rub-dolls' (*masatsu ningyō*) which allow for the dispersal of sexual energy to avoid potential revolts. The only challenge to government mood regulation (ultimately unrealized) comes from a character who gives up the doll and performs gender reconstruction surgery on himself, affectively short-circuiting the usual circuits of heterosexual desire the state relies on for keeping citizens passive.

⁵⁶ Orbaugh, "The Genealogy of the Cyborg in Japanese Popular Culture," 64.

⁵⁷ Kawana, "Science Without Conscience: Unno Jūza and *Tenkō* of Convenience," 184-85.

a huge influence on Tezuka's own influential vision of a robotic future in works such as *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan atomu*, 1952-68) This cautionary but ultimately affirmative attitude towards scientific development is a prominent theme running across these decades. In works like "The Music Bath," Unno, like Akiyama after him, points precisely to emotional manipulation as the moment where science loses its conscience and slips towards fascism. From this perspective, science is great when it stays dry and objective, but becomes a danger the moment it starts to manipulate human emotions. That is, when it challenges the modern subject's aspirations to emotional authenticity and self-control.

This, to put it simply, is what so many critics cannot stand about background music: it forces us to confront the ambient, Echo-like dimension of our subjectivity, how our self is determined with and through the surrounding atmosphere, how our feelings can so easily be designed for. BGM makes a mockery of our quest for emotional self-reliance, and as such it becomes the target of much scorn by those who promote a doctrine of individual autonomy and self-control.

To approach BGM on its own terms, we must recognize it as an environmental phenomenon, not just a personal one. BGM does away with modern notions of a self-contained interiority, pointing instead to the role of hearing as a means of spatial awareness, one of the most crucial arbiters of our felt coexistence.

Gernot Böhme notes how over the course of the twentieth century music gradually returned to its roots as a spatial art, with an increasing focus on spatial acoustics like echo and reverb. "Today we can say that music occurs when the subject of an acoustic event is the acoustic atmosphere as such, that is, when listening as such, not listening to something is the issue."⁵⁸ This leads him to a new definition for music itself: "Music as such is a modification of space as it is perceived by the body."⁵⁹ While here Böhme is describing soundscape composition and other experimental music of the sixties and seventies, the definition serves just as well as a description of BGM.

Weak Listening

The environmentalization of music—for both experimental and commercial ends—can be understood as a collapse of distance between subject and environment, or to put it differently, a focus on music for objects in a shared atmosphere. Walter Benjamin famously described "aura" as the felt phenomenon of distance, and marked the role of mechanical reproduction in destroying this perceived gap between self and other. With BGM the loss of aura occurs not only in mechanical reproduction but in the purposeful inconspicuousness of the music. In contrast to the modern aesthetic model of a person reflexively encountering a landscape, forming their selfhood in the distance between the themselves and the external world, the environmentalization of music collapses the person and the landscape into one another, making it impossible to firmly distinguish where the feeling of the person ends and the mood of the atmosphere begins.

This collapsing of aura within modernity has often been theorized as symptomatic of larger social transformations away from aesthetic reflection and towards—in the manner of Unno's music bathers—an unthinking stupidity. In the philosophy of music, Theodor Adorno presents the argument most forcefully, analyzing how popular music fosters what he calls "deconcentration," in

⁵⁸ Böhme. "Acoustic Atmospheres: A Contribution to the Study of Ecological Aesthetics," 17.

⁵⁹ Böhme. "Acoustic Atmospheres: A Contribution to the Study of Ecological Aesthetics," 16.

stark contrast to the intensely focused listening he argues for in Arnold Schoenberg and other composers of modernist art music.

The death of focused listening has been a recurring theme throughout the twentieth century, and plays a prominent role in the writings of everyone from avant-garde composers John Cage and R. Murray Shafer to far more traditional critics defending the classical music concert tradition. From this perspective, popular music in general, let alone BGM, signifies a challenge to concentrated listening and the ‘strong’ subject it demands. The emergence the Sony Walkman and other portable audio technology near the end of the century seem to provide further means for enabling the ‘deconcentration’ of music audition.

However, if we stretch the historical framework back a few centuries, this deconcentration narrative takes on a very different contour. Hosokawa Shūhei’s *Rekōdo no bigaku* [*Aesthetics of the Record*] notes how the modern idea of an autonomous musical practice distinct from religion and everyday life has its roots in eighteenth and nineteenth century European moves to rationalize and objectify musical materials. This enables music audition to turn into more of a specialist activity, bringing it off the street and into the concert hall and the domain of high culture. This is the origin of modern art music’s notion of concentrated listening, and its Adorno-approved corollary, critical listening. In the long history of musicking, it was only for a short couple centuries that concentrated listening was established as a cultural ideal—and of course, even then the practice was restricted to certain classes and certain parts of the world. With the rise of mechanical reproduction, the cultural hegemony of concentrated listening soon began to weaken. *Aesthetics of the Record* presents the history of recorded music not only as a story of the gradual erosion of the possibility of the “pure” musical experience encapsulated in the quiet and attentive concert hall, but as a return to a form of listening long present in earlier times.

Hosokawa positions recorded music, and popular music in general, as a return to what he calls “weak listening,” riffing on Giovanni Vattimo’s concept of “weak thought:” a type of audition that doesn’t call for or even allow the kind of concentrated focus ensconced in the modern concert hall setting. Robert Fink, for example, has documented how the emergence of consumer record changers led to this music being used as background sounds for cocktail parties, in a sense returning it to its original context.⁶⁰

As becomes vividly clear in Tia DeNora’s sociological studies of music audition, recorded music enables not only the democratization and diversification of listening practices, but the movement of music from the concert hall into the background soundscapes of everyday life.⁶¹ Somewhat paradoxically, this trajectory was simultaneously spurred on by both commercial BGM and by the avant-garde push for an art of the everyday, from Erik Satie and Dada to John Cage and the environmental aesthetics of the 1960s. Despite Cage’s famous hatred of recorded music, his work is in many ways a response to the sound environment recorded music enables.⁶²

As we have seen with Akiyama’s essay, this confluence of commercial design and contemporary art music led to criticism not only from those outside these two communities, but from composers and critics seeking to distinguish and defend a properly “aesthetic” environmental music from the taint of the more straightforward mood regulation of commercial BGM. This often placed them in the paradoxical position of upholding the modernist goal of an art music separate from and critical of mainstream consumer culture, at the same time as their claims to being

⁶⁰ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*, 169-207.

⁶¹ See DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*.

⁶² Cage had early on experimented with using Muzak in his compositions. See Kahn, *Noise Water Meat*, 187.

avant-garde within the context of art music rested on their deployment of everyday environments and more distracted listening practices.

A History of BGM in Japan

Music to accompany work has a history perhaps as long as music itself, with rhythmic accompaniments and shared melodies carrying millennia of workers through their daily labors. But starting in the late-nineteenth century, the newly urbanized idea of work music began to sway to an increasingly rationalized and utilitarian beat. On the production side, there are records of various experiments with factory-site music as early as 1886, at a Chicago automobile plant. But the push for worksite productivity enhancement only fully took off in the early twentieth century under the “scientific management” theories of Frederick Taylor, part of a larger flourishing of efficiency studies and managerial psychology around the turn of the century.⁶³

One of the earliest experiments on the impact of music on physical performance took place at a 1910 bicycle race at Madison Square Gardens in New York, where researchers established that bicyclists on average shaved seventeen seconds off their mile times when accompanied by live music. Other studies demonstrated how music might lower blood pressure, improve studying, and increase the productivity of factory workers.

A scattering of Japanese manufacturers were inspired to try similar experiments in the following decades. By 1932 records were spinning to increase efficiency at the Imperial Silk factory in Yamanashi prefecture, and, around the same time, for the mostly teenage girls working to package candies at the Glico bagging facility in Osaka. Managers were looking over the girls’ shoulders with stopwatches in hand, and playing popular music over the speaker system was said to increase productivity by as much as ten percent.⁶⁴ In the postwar period BGM research in Japan was further developed by Morita Takuma of the Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, who in 1954 set his up his portable turntable to serenade dairy cows with Johan Strauss’s waltz *Stories from the Vienna Woods* (1868). Morita played the waltz every other day during milking time, and sure enough when given this musical bath the cows gave more generously of their liters.⁶⁵

On the side of consumption, it did not take long for retailers to begin deploying music in the hopes of influencing consumer behavior. Philadelphia’s John Wanamaker Store, one of the first department stores in the United States, introduced an organ player in 1876 to provide “store music,” and a group of singers performing as the “store chorus.” In Japan, traveling bands of musicians named *chindon’ya* began offering their services to businesses beginning in the late nineteenth century. Indoor store music was first introduced by Tokyo’s Mitsukoshi department store in 1907, when it brought in a youth ensemble playing in the style of a Scottish band. In 1930 the store installed a pipe organ to provide music to accompany shoppers.⁶⁶

These proved to be rather isolated experiments, however, and through the 1950s most workplaces and retail establishments in Japan remained free of music. This silence is especially notable in wartime Japan. During the Pacific War music not oriented towards the national cause carried strong overtones of leisure and entertainment, and was therefore thought to be ill-matched to the tenor of wartime mobilization. Skeptics insisted that in any case much of the standard Japanese song repertoire was rather too languid to contribute much towards increased wartime productivity. This made for a stark contrast with the enthusiastic embrace of background music in

⁶³ Osaka, *Kankyō ongaku: kaiteki na seikatsu kūkan o tsukuru*, 90.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

American wartime manufacturing, where it played to workers at thousands of factories and weapons manufacturers.

It wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that prerecorded background music became widespread in the Japanese business world (around the same time that it took off in Germany). In 1957 George Thomas Forester, an American who first arrived in Japan during the American Occupation, teamed up with the British company Readytune to form the Japan Music Distribution Corporation [*Nihon ongaku haikyū kabushiki gaisha*]. Other companies soon followed them into the emerging postwar BGM industry.⁶⁷

In the fall of 1964, Mainichi Broadcasting [*Mainichi hōsō*], with the cooperation of Nichimen Jitsugyō, signed a contract with the American Muzak Corporation to form their exclusive Japanese affiliate, the Mainichi Music System [*Mainichi myūjikkū shisutemu*, now the *Mainichi eizō onkyō shisutemu*]. Nagamatsu Akira of Mainichi Broadcasting coined the term “environmental music” [*kankyō ongaku*] as a Japanese translation for Muzak, perhaps to distinguish it from the more common abbreviation for background music, BGM. A book of the same name appeared in 1966, with scholars explaining the history of Muzak and laying out the research demonstrating its efficacy.⁶⁸

The book describes how in the 1940s Muzak introduced a number of distinctive musical innovations that would come to establish their preeminent position in the American BGM marketplace. Following directly from a Taylorist lineage, Muzak promoted the productivity-enhancing efficacy of their music through reference to a wide range of scientific studies. A favorite slogan was “Music is art. Muzak is science.” Following suit, Mainichi's *Environmental Music* is stuffed full of graphs and charts documenting the benefits of Muzak's patented mood regulation systems. Muzak often proclaimed their system's greater rationality over “regular” background music, sidestepping any discussion of musical quality in favor of quantitative psychological and physiological assessments.

All of Muzak's tracks were recorded in-house to particular specifications, categorized based on rhythm, tempo, and instrumentation, and designed for use in particular environments with particular atmospheric objectives. Alongside producing a certain type of sound within a certain range of musical criteria (adjusted to time of day and purpose), Muzak also invested a great deal of research into the ideal sequencing of tracks. The goal was to make transitions between songs both seamless and ideally fitted to the temporal progression of the workday and worker psychology. Muzak's most touted strategy, “stimulus progression,” was based on the theory that background music has its greatest effect when tracks are arranged along a gradually increasing “stimulus curve” fifteen minutes in length. In order to assemble these curves, each Muzak track received a stimulus ranking based upon a track's tempo, rhythm, instrumentation, and ensemble size.⁶⁹ The fifteen-minute stimulus curve would be followed by fifteen minutes of silence, so that the music would again be perceptually fresh when it returned a quarter-hour later.

Other techniques involved the musical content of the tracks themselves. Besides removing vocals and attempting to make each track as unnoticeable as possible (Muzak would remove tracks

⁶⁷ These include the Toyo Music Broadcasting [*Tōyō ongaku hōsō*, now *Tōyō BGM*], an affiliate of the American company Altpionic; the Tokyo Radio Service (now Comnet), an affiliate of Readytune based on a public-broadcasting model; and Asahi Broadcasting [*Asahi hōsō*, now an independent BGM provider under the name Asahi Music Service], affiliated with the American company National Musitime. Around 1963 these businesses were gradually consolidated into the Key Corporation, which became the primary provider of “sound conditioning” to banks, restaurants, and *shōtengai* (shopping streets). *Ibid.*, 96 and 113.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

from its playlists if anyone singled them out for praise), the company mixed its music within a narrow dynamic range of 20 decibels in order to better enable it to blend smoothly into the environment, with no sudden attention-grabbing shifts in amplitude.

As with the larger turn away from the particularities of individual listeners to abstract scientific principles, Muzak's heavily promoted compositional strategies emphasized the music's shallow emotional and experiential profile, making it perfectly suited to the low-affect social persona idealized by the new service industries, where strong emotions were frowned upon in favor of emotional control and the presentation of a positive, upbeat atmosphere. With Muzak, BGM embraced its role as a musical support structure for the depersonalized encounters Simmel describes as typical of life in the metropolis.

The penetration of Muzak and other BGM into Japanese cities continued steadily through the following decades, alongside continued research on its use. A sequel to *Environmental Music* was published in 1992, featuring contributions from a range of academics across the country. In the book's introduction, psychologist Osaka Ryōji notes how background music has gone from being a rather obscure idea in Japan (when the book was first published in 1966), to something almost entirely taken for granted by the 1990s. The book provides a long list of the various objectives driving the deployment of background music over the preceding decades. Most of the list foregrounds how Muzak can influence employees' physical and emotional state, such as "reducing feelings of tension and strain," "reducing the amount of idle chatter," and "eliminating emotional variability and anxiety."⁷⁰ While on the surface these results appear to be in the employees' best interest, the list also makes clear that Muzak is ultimately about increasing productivity on behalf of the management, "reducing the amount of time spent resting one's hands" and "controlling the monotonous feeling of work."

The list also includes a more recent use of background music: as a particularly effective method of emotional branding. Muzak can be used to "improve company image" and "contribute to the construction of comfortable spaces." As Osaka notes, Muzak and BGM more generally have since the 1990s largely abandoned the earlier goal of stimulus progressions in favor of providing particular atmospheres fine-tuned to a company or brand's target demographic.

In switching focus from efficiency to atmosphere, Muzak was merely catching up with developments in environmental design spurred on by Philip Kotler's landmark 1973 paper "Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool." Here Kotler coined the term "atmospherics" to describe "the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects that enhance purchase probability." A flurry of studies soon followed investigating the impact of different varieties of in-store music on sales. This evolved into a push for "sensory branding," the creation of synaesthetic atmospheres that provide positive affects for a target demographic, indirectly making customers more likely to make a purchase.

The Environmental Avant-garde

Meanwhile, at the same time as BGM was spreading across Japan, the 1960s avant-garde also had begun using the term environmental music [*kankyō ongaku*], this time as part of a wider movement towards environmental art [*kankyō geijutsu*]. In responding to the rise of BGM, artists were increasingly under pressure to define how their environmental work differed from their more commerce-oriented competitors.

Akiyama flirts with but finally abandons the idea of utilitarian space music in his "Design Music" essay, swerving near the end to make a more modernist call for the creation of challenging,

⁷⁰ Ibid., 79-80.

unpredictable environments. Here he turns to the “happenings” organized by Allan Kaprow and John Cage as a possible model for an alternative BGM. By using unpredictable sounds to introduce “magical spaces” into the environments of daily life, happenings could immerse audiences in novel sensory environments—a form of immersive experiential art.

This “happening” approach was also the method favored by Akiyama’s own Environment Society. The Society consisted of a group of thirty-eight artists in a wide variety of disciplines, including painting, music, sculpture, design, photography, and criticism. Akiyama participated in the group as both a composer and critic. The group is best known for their landmark 1966 exhibition *From Space to Environment* [*Kūkan kara kankyō e*], held at the Matsuya Department Store Galley in Tokyo, with an accompanying performance event at the Sōgetsu Art Center. The Environment Society set out to work toward an alternative notion of environment, one influenced by developments in the urban landscape but resistant to the submission of these environments to what they saw as stifling forms of control. As Midori Yoshimoto argues in a valuable *Art Journal* piece on the group, the Society’s idea of environment can be understood as a precursor to the multi-genre mixing of art forms in a shared space, an approach taken up in the late 1960s under the banner of “intermedia.”⁷¹ The artists were interested in breaking open the borders between established genres to try and create more immersive and extraordinary experiential spaces. These ideas were carried forward into the 1970 Osaka World Exposition, in which many of the Society artists participated.

Alongside these intermedia interests, however, the writings of the Society members reveal an abiding concern with the transformation of urban social space. As Yoshimoto notes, this concern with environment is contiguous with much of the environmental art and ‘happenings’ taking place in New York at the time, a context brought directly into the Society through Akiyama and artist Ay-O, both of whom were active in the New York scene immediately prior to the group’s formation. Society members also drew on a range of recent social and media theory pushing for the diagrammatic analysis of social flows and mediation, particularly cybernetic theory, the recently translated work of Marshall McLuhan (who wrote of the “new environmental communication of the electronic age”)⁷² and the Romanian theater designer and architect Frederick John Kiesler’s notions of “correalism.” All these perspectives shared the belief, as expressed in a statement presented by the Society for *From Space to Environment*, that “works are not autonomous and complete by themselves but they become open to the external world by involving viewers in their environment.”⁷³

For an example of what this environment might sound like, we can turn to Akiyama’s own piece for *From Space to Environment*, titled *Environmental Mechanical Orchestra No. 1*. The work uses sound signals drawn from transistors aimed at the surface of a basin of water, and microphones picking up the voices and footsteps of exhibition visitors.⁷⁴ Another image of this kind of volatile environmental music was provided during the exhibition’s performance segment at

⁷¹ The term was introduced in 1969 through the events *Intermedia Arts Festival* and *Cross Talk Intermedia*. See Yoshimoto, “From Space to Environment.” *Cross Talk* was also an initiative of Akiyama’s, in collaboration with Yuasa Jōji and Roger Reynolds. See Loubet, Emmanuelle. “The Beginnings of Electronic Music in Japan, with a Focus on the NHK Studio: The 1970s,” 49.

⁷² Akiyama Kuniharu, Isozaki Arata, Tōno Yoshiaki, Tōmatsu Shōmei, Fukuda Shigeo, Yoshimura Masunobu. “Kankyō kara X e: ‘Kūkan kara kankyō e’ ten kara 1 nen,” 65. As Midori Yoshimoto notes, McLuhan’s writings had just been introduced in Japan.

⁷³ Yoshimoto, “From Space to Environment,” 40. Yoshimoto’s translation.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 29. A recording of this piece is included on *Obscure Tape Music of Japan vol.6: Tape Works of Akiyama Kuniharu 1* (Omega Point Records, OPA-006, 2007).

Sōgetsu Art Center, when composer Ichianagi Toshi presented a performance piece simply entitled *Environmental Music* [*Kankyō ongaku*]. Performed by Fukuda Shigeo, Awazu Kiyoshi, Tōno Yoshiaki, Ay-O, and Ichianagi himself, the piece instructs performers to “incline your body on a chair as slowly as possible to an unbearable position.”⁷⁵ We might read this piece not only as literalizing Erik Satie’s interest in furniture as a form of environmental music (as we will explore in the next chapter), but also as a visceral attempt to push environmental design to the point where comfort and bodily support slips over into a precarious and uncertain balancing act.

For the Environment Society, this volatility served as a means of defending against the increasingly rationalized and harmonious designs emerging all around them. As we have seen, however, commercial design had also moved from ‘space’ to ‘environment,’ incorporating atmospherics to create more immersive and affecting experiences. Nonetheless, Ichianagi’s piece lays out a clear challenge to the comfort-based principles of commercial environmental design. This struggle over comfort and discomfort in social environments came to a head at the 1970 World Expo in Osaka.

Expo '70

If the Expo was commercially successful, drawing over 83 million visitors in the 183 days it was open, its high-tech corporate-sponsored pavilions also symbolized for many artists in Japan the death of the avant-garde and the advent of a new era of consumerism.⁷⁶ In this context the participants in the Expo, including many of the members of the Environment Society, were on the side of the coming corporate takeover.⁷⁷ Here I want to highlight a different rift, however, one playing itself out within rather than around the Expo grounds. A tension in the Expo between the more challenging musical environments presented by many of the participating Japanese artists, and the more harmonious, comfortable environments desired by many of the Expo visitors.

These divergent priorities become clear when contrasting coverage of the Expo in the two large tomes dedicated to electronic music in Japan, Kawasaki Kōji’s *Japanese Electronic Music* [*Nihon no denshi ongaku*], and Tanaka Yūji’s *Electronic Music in Japan* [*Denshi ongaku in Japan*]. While the former approaches the topic from the perspective of the electronic avant-garde, emphasizing the Expo works as a culmination of many of the musical experiments of earlier decades (particularly the pieces emerging from the NHK Electronic Music Studio),⁷⁸ the latter opens by presenting the Expo as the last gasp of an overly theoretical and out-of-touch art music, one about to give way to the more popular electronic music of the coming decades. Tanaka blames this on the abstract dissonance favored by many of the Expo works—including those at the Akiyama-curated Japan Pavilion:⁷⁹

With a boom in science fiction starting with the television broadcast of *Astro Boy* in 1963, along with the reverberations of the success of the Apollo moon landing, there ought to have been a lot of interest in the

⁷⁵ As Yoshimoto notes, however, the performance didn’t go exactly to Ichianagi’s instructions, with Tōno crawling under his chair and Ay-O falling off his. Ichianagi, meanwhile, is apparently pushing a piano across the stage. *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 45. For example, the Expo serves as the final chapter in Thomas R. Havens’ *Radicals and Realists*. See also the special issue of *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* edited by Yoshimoto and dedicated to the Expo.

⁷⁷ It might be argued that in Japan, the interface between ‘environment’ and ‘corporation’ has been even tighter than elsewhere, as the large corporations responsible for supporting the burgeoning electronic media culture were at the same time helping to reconstruct the landscapes of Japanese cities, through new practices of environmental design and urban restructuring set in motion during the high-growth years.

⁷⁸ See Loubet, “The Beginnings of Electronic Music in Japan, with a Focus on the NHK Studio: The 1950s and 1960s.”

⁷⁹ For more details on electronic music included in the Expo, see Loubet.

electronic music flowing at the various Expo pavilions, as one site for a new expression of these dreams of the future.

Ultimately, however, most of the electronic music played at the corporate pavilions was of the kind that sounds like *piiiii*, *garigarigari*, or *puuuuuuu* [...] difficult to understand modern music with no melody. If you listen to the few recordings still available from the pavilions [...] you soon understand why this music left no fond memories with the average visitor (compared with, say, the moon rock on view at the American Pavilion).

NHK's Satō Shigeru recounts an episode where one female attendant at the Japan Pavilion complained of suddenly having irregular menstrual cycles. According to the doctor called to examine her, the reason was likely the dissonant electronic music playing nonstop as BGM within the pavilion. Of course, the staff were quite taken aback by these unprecedented "incidents."

The German Pavilion, while featuring a live performance of electronic music by Karlheinz Stockhausen, apparently had a lot of visitors there simply to enjoy the air conditioning and escape from the disappointing chaos of the other pavilions. One heard stories of old couples, tired from walking around and finally sitting down to take a rest, who nonetheless had to quickly flee once the *garigarigari bakyuuuu* sounds of Stockhausen's performance started up.⁸⁰

Tanaka reads the unpopularity of the Expo's electronic music as a sign of the disconnect between the composers' abstruse notions of environmental music and the type of sounds the average person might actually enjoy having in their environment. These scenes from the Expo underline the tension between the environmental priorities of amenity culture—comfort, harmony, refreshment, relaxation—and the more unwieldy alternative offered by the 'happenings' of the avant-garde, with its emphasis on chance, surprise, and contingency. While the latter alternative lingers on in muted form, it is the former conceptualization of environment that grows ever stronger in the coming decades.

One of Ichianagi Toshi's pieces from the Expo goes a long way in capturing this tension between comforting and discomforting design.⁸¹ Entitled *Music for Living Space* [*Seikatsu kūkan no tame no ongaku*],⁸² the piece starts with a background layer of flowing Gregorian Chant. On top of this soft foundation, however, Ichianagi presents an electronic voice reciting a text by Metabolist architect Kurokawa Kishō on the future design of everyday life. The harsh, angular voice was produced entirely via computer, a familiar sound now but an impressive technological feat in 1970. The work was installed in the "Future" section inside the upper part of Okamoto Tarō's massive *Tower of the Sun*, the visual centerpiece of the Expo grounds. The contrast between these two layers in Ichianagi's piece might be understood to sound out the tension between the hard-edged resistance of the avant-garde, and the softer designed environments already spreading out over the horizon. The Gregorian Chant underlying Ichianagi's piece echoes Erik Satie's own strong interest in early monastic music, and anticipates the central role of the genre in the world music and relaxation music booms of the 1980s and 1990s.⁸³

Muzak (Mostly) Foregrounded

The history of the Muzak corporation reflects this shift towards comforting atmospheric as an end in itself. As already mentioned, by the late 1990s, Muzak in the United States returned to a

⁸⁰ Tanaka, *Denshi ongaku in Japan*, 27-28.

⁸¹ Ichianagi Toshi also premiered another Expo work entitled *Kankyō ongaku* [*Environmental Music*], this time a three part work for computer and tape. The work was composed from March to September of 1970, and installed at the Takara Group Pavilion.

⁸² A recording is included on *Obscure Tape Music of Japan vol.5: Toshi Ichianagi, Music for Tinguely* (Omega Point Records, OPA-005, 2006).

⁸³ The Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos recorded *Chant* in 1973. After the record was rereleased by Angel Records in 1994 the album went triple platinum in the US and sold 6 million copies worldwide, becoming one of the key records of the world music and new age music genres.

more foreground aesthetic, responding to the emergence of atmospheric branding in the late twentieth century. Unlike the productivity focus of earlier studies of environmental music, newer work on retail atmospherics argued for engaging the customer with specific cultural markers, associating the brand with particular musical styles and their accompanying attitudes and worldview.

In the early part of the century, Muzak's offerings had not been that far off from the popular music of the time, but by the 1950s, when younger generations moved towards rock and roll and a harsher sound, a firm generational wedge emerged between those who could appreciate the classic "Muzak" sound and those for whom the term was entirely pejorative. Other companies were offering "foreground" BGM in the 1970s and 80s, but Muzak was slow to come around.

Muzak's full transition to foreground music—in 1997—was led by VP and Creative Director Alvin Collis, who transformed the company's focus from background music to what he called "audio branding" and "audio architecture." He describes the latter approaches in cinematic terms:

I walked into a store and understood: this is just like a movie. The company has built a set, and they've hired actors and given them costumes and taught them their lines, and every day they open their doors and say, 'Let's put on a show.' It was retail theatre. And I realized then that Muzak's business wasn't really about selling music. It was about selling emotion—about finding the soundtrack that would make this store or that restaurant feel like something, rather than being just an intellectual proposition.⁸⁴

Muzak's new job would be to mix playlists to capture as precisely as possible a store's target demographic, working towards a "personal audio imaging profile." Muzak's foreground turn precedes the more recent emphasis on personalization and specialization, in line with the recommendation algorithms now common in internet commerce. These systems still work towards the goal of rationally understanding and predicting emotional response, although the emotional strategies are now less focused on increasing positive affects in the abstract than on resonating with a listener's current cultural affiliations.

At the time of the rebranding, however, just one regional affiliate petitioned Muzak not to completely abandon their old practice of rerecording soft instrumental versions of popular songs. Of the hundreds of new foreground channels on offer, Muzak thus maintains at least one program of the older-style music just for this market: Japan. In interviews, Muzak executives in the United States appear rather baffled at the Japanese affiliates' preference for 'elevator music'-style Muzak. One former Muzak executive in the US was quoted as recently as 2006 remarking, rather condescendingly, that "the Japanese think they love it, but they actually don't. They'll get over it soon."⁸⁵ And yet, even in 2010 Muzak affiliate MVA (*Mainichi eizō onkyō shisutemu*) still presented their services primarily in terms of traditional Muzak-style stimulus progression, using the same graphs and charts from decades before. While their promotional materials do include one brochure on the newer foreground-style Muzak channels, most of the emphasis is on BGM of the old school.

This is not to say this is the case with background music in the country as a whole, however. Most retail establishments and public spaces in Japan now feature music by original artists of a particular genre, often via satellite radio services. The type of music played has much to do with the particular atmosphere the store is aspiring to create. In this context, using the older "Muzak" style BGM carries cultural connotations of its own. Muzak is now not (or at least not only) "science"—it also carries a nostalgia for the days when Muzak could be heard as the promise of a better future.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Owen, "The Soundtrack of Your Life," n.p.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Ibid.

This promise is now woven through with irony. Efficiency as an end in itself has lost much of the moral authority it once held, even in Japan. Skepticism toward the Taylorist promise of happiness via increased productivity has only grown since the economic downturns in Japan and elsewhere, and in the wake of numerous environmental disasters and the social fallout of the high-growth period. Despite the stereotype of the high-growth period as deliriously obsessed with conspicuous consumption, such feelings of dissatisfaction are already much in evidence even during the highest highs of the 1970s and 80s.

While pockets of resistance to the regulated city persisted into the postindustrial period, the avant-garde agitation for aesthetic discomfort came to appear increasingly untenable in the post-Expo environment. Instead, a genre of music emerged to try and establish some form of synthesis between amenity culture and modernist art, between comfort and uncertainty, between background mood regulation and subjective reflection: the genre that later came to be known as “ambient music.” Several years before Brian Eno introduced what would come to be the most popular name for the genre, a kind of ambient music in all but name was already reaching a popular listenership in Japan from the mid-1970s. The composer was a long-dead *gymnopédiste* by the name of Erik Satie.

[2. The Quiet Boom of Erik Satie]

Insist upon Furniture Music. Have no meetings, no get-togethers, no social affairs of any kind without Furniture Music. Don't get married without Furniture Music. Stay out of houses that don't use Furniture Music. Anyone who hasn't heard Furniture Music has no idea what true happiness is.

- John Cage

Erik Satie (1866-1925) is an important figure for 1970s Japan, as his music comes to sit right at the intersection between a rising popular interest in relaxation (leading into the new age and ambient musics of the following decade), and a concurrent avant-garde fascination with Dada, repetition, and intermedia performance.

All discussions of environmental music in an art music context inevitably lead back to Satie. His idea of *musique d'ameublement* [furniture music, or more literally, furnishing music] is now firmly established as the first attempt to reimagine modern art music as a form of everyday environmental design.

The concept of furniture music was first introduced by Satie in 1917 in a collaborative concert with Darius Milhaud. The program includes the following:

We are presenting today for the first time a creation of Messieurs Erik Satie and Darius Milhaud, directed by M. Delgrange, the "musique d'ameublement" which will be played during the intermissions. We urge you to

take no notice of it and to behave during the intervals as if it did not exist. This music, specially composed for Max Jacob's play, claims to make a contribution to life in the same way as a private conversation, a painting in a gallery, or the chair in which you may or may not be seated.⁸⁶

Satie also writes,

We must bring about a music which is like furniture, a music, that is, which will be part of the noises of the environment, will take them into consideration. I think of it as melodious, softening the noises of the knives and forks, not dominating them, not imposing itself. It would fill up those heavy silences that sometimes fall between friends dining together. It would spare them the trouble of paying attention to their own banal remarks. And at the same time it would neutralize the street noises which so indiscreetly enter into the play of conversation. To make such a noise would respond to a need.

This emphasis on furniture music as a tool of situational comfort and way to avoid the "trouble of paying attention" to banalities strongly parallels the emotional and cognitive orientation of the commercial BGM to come, though with a refreshing sense of irony.

Satie's furniture music was barely played during his own time, and soon fell into obscurity after his death. It was not until a number of American and English composers took up his cause just after mid-century that Satie's work emerged as an important influence on the minimalist and ambient music to come. American composer John Cage was the key figure in the Satie revival. After being introduced to Satie's work by Virgil Thompson, Cage successfully applied for a grant to go to Paris to do research on Satie in 1949, with a particular focus on his idea of furniture music. From Satie, Cage developed his own theory of how music might engage with environmental sounds, becoming more fully integrated with "life" as lived in everyday environments, rather than in the concert hall. Cage writes that "for Satie, art was the art of living and through living creating artworks. Art was not separated from living or from life. In a sense, it is the same as doing the dishes."⁸⁷

At the time Satie was not taken seriously by the European avant-garde. Cage's lectures from the time see him engaged in a playful pro-Satie polemic (as in the epigraph to this chapter). To defend Satie against those who viewed his output as too slight to count him as a major composer, Cage put forth the example of *haiku* poetry in Japan as a diminutive form of enormous cultural importance.⁸⁸

Cage argues that Satie and Anton von Webern were the only two composers to significantly advance musical structure since Beethoven. Whereas Beethoven organized structure in terms of harmonic progressions, in Satie and Webern "structure is defined in time lengths." Cage believed the most fundamental aspect of music is duration. Cage based this argument on his assertion that the only characteristic shared by both sound and silence is duration, making it more fundamental than harmony as a basis for all music.⁸⁹

Key to Satie's use of duration is his refusal of the forward momentum of time, replacing regimented pulses and the teleological harmonic progressions with a more static, painterly creation of time-space. Constant Lambert describes the atemporal quality of Satie's music:

By his abstention from the usual forms of development and by his unusual employment of what might be called interrupted and overlapping recapitulations, which causes the piece to fold in on itself, as it were, he completely abolishes the element of rhetorical argument and even succeeds in abolishing as far as possible our time sense. We do not feel that the emotional significance of a phrase is dependent on its being placed at the beginning or end of a particular section.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Templier, *Erik Satie*, 45.

⁸⁷ Quoted by Cage in "Defense of Satie," quoted in turn by Schlomowitz, "Cage's Place in the Reception of Satie," n.p.

⁸⁸ Cage, "Defense of Satie" and "Satie Controversy," 89.

⁸⁹ Schlomowitz, "Cage's Place in the Reception of Satie," n.p.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Lambert goes on to emphasize the unique spatial properties of Satie's works, emphasizing how Satie's three *Gymnopédies* were conceived of as three different versions of the same piece—a radical idea at the time:

Satie's habit of writing his pieces in groups of three was not just a mannerism. It took place in his art of dramatic development, and was part of his peculiarly sculptural views of music. When we pass from the first to the second *Gymnopédie* [...] we do not feel that we are passing from one object to another. It is as though we were moving slowly round a piece of sculpture and examining it from a different point of view. While presenting a different and possibly less interesting silhouette to our eyes, it is of equal importance to our appreciation of the work as a plastic whole. It does not matter which way you walk around a statue and it does not matter in which order you play the three *Gymnopédies*.⁹¹

The three *Gymnopédies*, now Satie's most well-known pieces, are often conflated with Satie's self-proclaimed "furniture music," but were actually composed much earlier, in the late nineteenth century. Nonetheless, it is this conflation which comes to serve as Satie's legacy in the latter half of the twentieth century: an atemporal, anti-dramatic, calming music that also melds with the "knives and forks," blending into a more environmental form of subjectivity.

Satie in Japan

Akiyama Kuniharu—who was to become Japan's foremost Satie expert—first encountered Satie as a second-year student in middle school, first through reading Jean Cocteau, and after that by finding his music at a used record shop in Kanda (Tokyo). At the time Satie was relatively unknown in Japan.⁹²

There were only a few performances of Satie's music in Japan before the war. Koizumi Osamu published what appears to be the first essay on Satie in 1923, "Satie, pioneer of the style of modern free music, and his mystique" [*Kindai jiyū ongaku-ha no senkusha Sati to sono kaiki*]. This was followed by Sakaguchi Ango's translation of Cocteau's writing on Satie in the literary coterie magazine *Kotoba* at the start of the Showa period (1926). Following Sakaguchi's lead, much of the early interest in Satie in Japan would come from poets arriving at Satie via Cocteau.⁹³

Soprano Mitsuma Makiko gave the first performance of Satie's music in Japan in 1927, as part of a concert of modern French vocal music, and Sakaguchi and a few other poets invited her back to sing Satie's *Je te veux* in the spring of 1929. Composers Matsudaira Yoritsune and Hayasaka Fumio had also introduced a few of Satie's piano pieces.⁹⁴ In the immediate postwar there were a few scattered Satie concerts, including a young Takemitsu Toru introducing the first performance of the piano version of Satie's *Parade* at the opening of an Okamoto Tarō exhibition.

Another early postwar Satie performance was the *Performance of Contemporary Works* [*Gendai sakuhin ensōkai*], held at the Ichigaya Joshigakuin, August 9, 1952. This concert claimed to introduce works by "largely unknown" European composers including Satie, Samuel Barber, Darius Milhaud, and Olivier Messiaen, as well as works by three "new" Japanese composers: Takemitsu Tōru, Suzuki Hiroyoshi, and Yuasa Jōji. The latter three, like Akiyama, were members of the Experimental Workshop [*Jikken Kōbo*], which put on the event. In this pre-"Satie boom" concert, Satie is presented in the context of 12-tone music, rather than as the iconoclastic *gymnopaédist* he would later embody. In an article announcing the concert in the *Yomiuri* newspaper, Akiyama emphasizes these composers' common origins in Schoenberg's

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Akiyama. "Nashi no katachi o shita ongaku' no shikō," n.p.

⁹³ Akiyama. "Nashi no katachi o shita ongaku' no shikō." It appears Cocteau had his own "boom" in France earlier in the decade, with a flurry of Cocteau-related publications on the tenth anniversary of his death. See Miwa, "Kokutō būmu yobu: Futsu shuppankai no keikō," n.p.

⁹⁴ Akiyama, *Erikku Sati oboegaki*, 498.

twelve-tone music, a style he notes has been taken up again recently by younger composers worldwide. As with his later writing on Satie, Akiyama proposes that the continuing appeal of twelve-tone serial composition is its ability to express the “new reality” and “new humanity” of contemporary society, particularly in the systematic qualities of twelve-tone serialism.⁹⁵

Satie’s music finally began to reach the general public following the Japanese premier of Louie Malle’s 1963 film *Will o’ the Wisp* [*Le Feu follet*]. Malle’s film included much of what would come to be Satie’s most often heard compositions, including the *Gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes*. Pianist Takahashi Aki remembers that it was not long after the film’s appearance that the same pieces started popping up in Japanese theater productions, films, and television commercials.⁹⁶

In September of 1975, Akiyama began the *Complete Works of Erik Satie* concert series in Tokyo, marking the fiftieth anniversary of Satie’s death. The concerts featured siblings Takahashi Yūji and Takahashi Aki on piano, along with a wealth of other musicians, dancers, and artists⁹⁷; poetry readings; a lecture on Dada by critic Nakahara Yūsuke; and a screening of Rene Clair’s short experimental film *Entr’acte* (1924), with its Satie cameo and score. The series ran for two years, until 1977, at which point the larger Satie boom was well underway.

The parade of Satie concerts that followed this initial outing are remarkable not only for their quantity, but also for their multimedia character, as if the Japanese avant-garde’s late-1960s interest in “intermedia” environments was finding its roots in Satie’s turn-of-the-century works for theater, cinema, dance, music hall, offices and living rooms. Alongside the music, these concerts often incorporated elements of Satie’s famously idiosyncratic lifestyle. For example, a 1980 Satie concert at the British House in Yokohama included food and wine of only white colors, since Satie wrote in his diary that he only ate white-colored foods.⁹⁸ The Yomiuri newspaper dubbed this swelling interest in Satie a “quiet boom.”⁹⁹

Transformations in Audience

Reviews published of the Satie concerts often note with some surprise how the enthusiastic audiences at these concerts were not the usual classical music crowds. In an *Asahi* newspaper review of one of the 1977 Satie concerts, composer Shibata Minao notes how Satie’s accessible

⁹⁵ Akiyama, “Atarashii sekai gakudan,” n.p. The article carries the subtitle, “Japanese Musicians Will Not Fall Behind” [Nihon no ongakuka ha okurete wa naranai].

⁹⁶ Takahashi, “Erikku Satie to ‘Kagu no ongaku,’” n.p. Satie was already well-known enough by 1968 for the Yomiuri newspaper to cover the Italian publication of Aldo Ciccolini’s *Satie Complete Piano Works*. (“Sati no ‘Piano ongaku zenshū.’” Yomiuri Shimbun, March 14, 1968.)

⁹⁷ The first seven concerts were held at JanJan, Shibuya; subsequent concerts held at the Nichibu kaikan (Maison Franco-Japonaise) in Ochanomizu. □ *Asahi Shinbun*, September 16, 1975. *Asahi Shinbun*, January 11, 1977.

⁹⁸ Held on September 27, 1980, with piano by Shimada Lily and Nomura Yōko, and modern dance by Eguchi Masahiko and others.

⁹⁹ Other major Satie events included *The Essential Eric Satie* in 1977, part of Ichiyanaagi Toshi’s *Music in Museums* series; monthly Satie concerts throughout 1981 by Shimada Lily □; and a 1984 reprise of the *Complete Works* by Takahashi Aki at Shibuya’s Eurospace. A wide range of Satie books and recordings were also published around this time, including Nakashima Haruko’s *Fugue for a Sleepy Pear: On Eric Satie* [*Nemureru nashi e no fūga: Erikku Sati ron*], a reprint of Cocteau’s *Erik Satie* translated by Sakaguchi and Satō Saku, and Takahashi Aki’s bestselling recording *Son of the Stars: Aki Plays Satie* [*Hoshitachi no musuko: Aki Plays Satie*, 1985], timed to the 60th anniversary of Satie’s passing. Arai Man notes how Satie boom extended beyond records to films, television, publishing, and theater. Kusahara Machiko recalls often hearing Satie’s music piped into the main shopping street in Shibuya during the 1980s as well.

avant-garde sensibility has drawn many new young listeners to attend a classical music concert for the first time.¹⁰⁰

The more classically-trained, academically-researched, experimentally-minded participants in these concerts greeted Satie's newfound popularity amongst the general public with both excitement and consternation. There was a clear recognition early on that the younger audience attending the concerts was not the usual classical (or even avant-garde) audience, and that there was something different in their relationship to the music. In his lengthy 1990 study of Satie's work, Akiyama recalls the eager anticipation and packed crowds that greeted each concert, a memory I have heard echoed in speaking with others who were in attendance. Recalling the first *Complete Works* concerts, he writes,

Each time there was a feverish response from the packed audience of young people. I think this was a period where we were starting to see, alongside an empathy with Satie's music, a new transformation in the audience itself. At the time I really felt this was the birth of a newly active (rather than passive) audience, one that wanted to participate in the music they had chosen for themselves. This was still an age with no relation to what came to be called the "Satie boom."¹⁰¹

Akiyama, previously active in both Fluxus and the Experimental Workshop, was often at pains to emphasize Satie's more avant-garde side, and notes here his hopes Satie's work might provoke the creation of a more 'active' listenership. As the "Satie boom" progressed, however, he became increasingly chagrined at how his favorite composer became known only for the relaxing melodies of his early compositions like the *Gymnopédies*, *Gnossiennes*, and *Nocturnes*, and not the absurdist provocation of a piece like *Vexations*.¹⁰²

At the same time, even early on Akiyama recognized Satie's popular appeal had much to do with his music's softness and compatibility with contemporary lifestyles. Akiyama explores this idea in a 1977 article in the *Yomiuri* newspaper, where he ponders why Satie has become so popular among the younger generation in Japan. He proposes that much of Satie's music—which he describes as "naked music, white music, pure music, poetic music"—is now in "metaphysical alignment" with the "everyday gentleness" aspired to by the younger generation. In this it outdoes even pop music and folk music. Satie's music seemed to speak directly to the problems of contemporary life. At the same time, Akiyama urges that the harder edges of Satie's "acerbic critical spirit" not be forgotten, including the works born from the composer's personal and financial struggles and his later work as part of the Dada movement.¹⁰³ Eight years later, in an interview connected with her 1985 Satie recital, pianist Kamiya Ikuyo sounds a similar note, telling the *Yomiuri* that Satie was no minor composer, and that despite the strange titles his music has deep feeling. "Don't listen to it as BGM, okay?," she pleads.¹⁰⁴

In her reminiscences on the Satie boom, Takahashi Aki gives a somewhat different perspective on Satie's popularity, one more accepting of his position in Japanese popular culture.

¹⁰⁰ Asahi Shinbun, December 28, 1977.

¹⁰¹ Akiyama, *Erikku Sati oboegaki*, 498.

¹⁰² *Vexations*, a minor but extremely influential composition never performed in Satie's lifetime, is the major touchstone for later composers asserting Satie's credentials as an avant-garde agitator. The piece calls for 840 repetitions of a short piano phrase, and demands "serious immobilities" (*immobilités sérieuses*) on behalf of the performer(s). The first full performance of *Vexations* in Japan took place on December 29, 1967, the second worldwide after Cage's. Held at the American Culture Center in Akasaka-mitsuke, Tokyo, fifteen avant-garde composers participated, including Mayuzumi Toshirō, Ichihyanagi Toshi, and Irino Yoshirō. The concert started at 11 a.m. and was scheduled to last over twenty hours. Pianist Shimada Lily later adopted *Vexations* into a sort of public performance art, performing the piece multiple times through her career as a type of personal musical endurance test.

¹⁰³ Akiyama, "'Nashi no katachi o shita ongaku' no shikō," n.p.

¹⁰⁴ "Sati eranda Kamiya Ikuyo-san," n.p.

These simple and quiet melodies that seemed to wrap up and heal the tired soul were soft and beautiful—and sad. Satie’s music didn’t bother with imagery or story, but turned drama into the creation of atmosphere. At the same time, it was polished until there was almost nothing left, leaving a musical structure made of few sounds, a wafting aroma with beauty hard like a diamond.¹⁰⁵

After Takahashi released a number of Satie recordings, she describes strangers approaching to thank her, saying things like “Even when I am tired, when I listen to Satie my mind goes blank and my spirit relaxes, and I can go on working.” Takahashi says she is always glad to hear this, as she feels it is a realization of Satie’s original ideal of furniture music: “Music like a chair, or wallpaper, or other furniture, that can comfort and relax people even if they are not focusing on it.”¹⁰⁶

Softness & Fog

Takahashi is writing these reflections in the midst of the so-called “healing boom” of the late 1990s, when the emphasis on relaxation was at its peak (see Chapter 8). Satie’s softer music laid the foundations for the arrival of the American genre of “new age music,” which reached the Japanese market in the late 1980s and often featured Satie’s softer compositions in its repertoire.¹⁰⁷ The Satie boom captures in many ways this transition towards softness from the 1970s on, in contrast with the sharper lines being drawn in the previous decade.

As noted in the last chapter, environmental artists of the 1960s still pushed for a discomfiting element in their engagement with space. Yoshimoto notes that the works presented in *From Space to Environment* “shared the industrial and hard-edge aesthetics of concurrent trends in the West such as Minimalism, Op art, light art, and kinetic-art.” This emphasis on discreet lines and sharp juxtapositions was also central to the Environment Society members’ work on various pavilions at Expo ’70. However, it was difficult to find a hard edge over at the Pepsi Pavilion, where Nakaya Fujiko was exhibiting her first fog sculpture in collaboration with the American group Experiments in Arts and Technology. Curator Nakai Yasuyuki has suggested that it was actually the Pepsi Pavilion that most successfully carried forward the quest for dynamic environmental experience aimed for earlier by the Environment Society, even though Nakaya and E.A.T. were not associated with the group.¹⁰⁸ While I agree with Nakai that the Pepsi Pavilion most successfully bridged the transition from the environmental aesthetics of the mid-sixties to the new decade of comfortable environmental designs, we might also note the aesthetic differences between Nakaya’s fog and the former Environment Society members’ installations elsewhere on the Expo grounds. Nakaya’s fog

¹⁰⁵ Takahashi, “Erikku Satie to ‘Kagu no ongaku,’” n.p.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Windham Hill Records, based out of Palo Alto, California, is often credited with establishing the new age genre. The company was founded in 1976 and grew steadily into the mid-1980s. It was only around 1986 when they began to apply the term “new age” to their releases.

Mainstream and independent record stores in the United States were adding New Age sections around 1985 as well, whereas in the previous decade it was only available through specialty metaphysical bookstores. Radio also began to take notice, and in the late 80s new age and ambient radio programs began to proliferate. Stephen Hill’s *Music From the Hearts of Space* (first created in 1973 at KPFA in Berkeley California), had the greatest success, entering syndication in 1983 and being picked up by NPR and sent out to 230 national affiliates by 1986.

In Japan, Kitaro (real name Takahashi Masanori) begins his solo career in 1977, and soon became a key player in the early days of new age music. He began achieving international notoriety after his soundtrack for NHK’s *Silk Road* (1980-90), a long-running documentary series that “gradually revealed how ancient Japan was influenced by the other cultures along the Silk Road.” The project took shape in the mid-1970s with the intention of improving Sino-Japanese relations, and ultimately involved an unprecedented amount of Sino-Japanese collaboration in the shooting of the series. □ Building off this success, Kitaro signed a contract for worldwide distribution with Geffen in 1986, pushing him into the forefront of the New Age music scene just as it was reaching its apex.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Yoshimoto. “From Space to Environment,” 44.

here embodies a softer kind of landscape, a more permeable border than the one policed by Akiyama, with his concerns over the blending of art music and commercial design.

In a sense the hard edges of the Expo become a last-ditch site of aesthetic resistance, a final foothold for artists to brace themselves against the accelerating dissolve of media into ‘inter-media,’ of art into design and commerce, and of the artist into the larger machinations of mass mediated society.

The piano notes of Satie’s *Gymnopédie No. 1* sound out this tension between the harder contour of the right hand melody as set against the much more dispersed background of the sustained chords of the left hand. Takahashi captures this contrast in her description of Satie’s work as “a wafting aroma with a beauty hard like a diamond.”¹⁰⁹ While this piece was written almost nine decades earlier, the sculptural way the piece dissolves the hard edge into the foggy background allow it to serve as a worthy successor to 1960s environmental art, at least for its many listeners in the 1970s.

Satie’s softer works, such as the famous first *Gymnopédie*, offered a way for BGM to incorporate the aloofness of postindustrial subjectivity. It is an environmental music that is not simply functional, but reaches towards a highly individualistic solitude that reflects contemporary atomization even as it soothes it simultaneously. In the terms of Akiyama’s discussion of BGM, this is not the insincere sentimentality of “other people’s music,” but a more idiosyncratic mixture of comfort and loneliness expressly suited to the increasingly ironic and solitary consumer lifestyles of the 1970s and 1980s.

It is not difficult to imagine how these Satie soundtracks, wafting stylish solitude, minimal-yet-poignant, were eagerly taken up as preferred listening for those attempting to thrive within the new postindustrial amenity culture. Satie’s music allowed the presentation of an emotionally unfazable exterior surface hinting that deeper mysteries lie within (while relieving the anxiety of ever having to actually produce them). This is perhaps the source of the remarkable ubiquity of the first *Gymnopédie*, used to sell all manner of products and prop up all manner of visuals from the seventies onward, making it one of the most often-heard classical compositions of the late twentieth century.

Satie’s music helps the lonely feel better about being alone, but also better about themselves—whether in a car commercial, aimed at the would-be owner of a luxury automobile picturing themselves driving free and easy across the countryside, or in Kitano Takeshi’s *Violent Cop* (*Sono otoko, kyōbō ni tsuki*, 1989), where a wayward police officer lumbers down the street socially isolated but accompanied by Kume Daisaku’s version of Satie’s first *Gnossienne*.¹¹⁰ From the Satie boom onward, ambient music becomes a music for affording the emotionally ambiguous peacefulness of solitude, even and especially when (as in Tokyo) there might be plenty of other people all around.

Satie Celebrity

Alongside the solitary atmospheres of his music, Satie’s public persona also emerged as a favored model for the end of the century, particularly in Japan. The articles covering the Satie boom tirelessly portrayed him as an odd but affable loner—as illustrated by his eccentric fashions (his identical velvet suits, his huge number of umbrellas), his acerbic wit (in ample evidence in his *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*), his famous friends (Cocteau, Claude Debussy, Tristan Tzara...), and his

¹⁰⁹ Takahashi, “Erikku Satie to ‘Kagu no ongaku,’” n.p.

¹¹⁰ Thanks to Anne McKnight’s blog post of February 15, 2012 for reminding me of the (rather strong) Kitano-Satie link. <http://www.annemcknight.com/?p=792>.

Dadaist provocations (like publishing real-estate advertisements for non-existent, imaginary buildings).

Alongside his quirks, Satie also serves postindustrial Japan as an archetype of the contemporary inter-media celebrity. As noted, Satie often shuttled between commercial contexts (composing tunes for music hall and cabarets) and avant-garde, conceptual works. He provided musicians a new task: to produce auditory backdrops for everyday life, musical paintings hanging quietly on the wall—but paintings that could also be taken seriously as art in a more modernist sense. On this point, his career served as an influential precedent for later artists hoping to move fluidly between art music and pop music.

The prime example is perhaps Sakamoto Ryūichi, who has fashioned himself as a kind of Satie-esque ambient celebrity for the new century. He writes pop songs and operas, appears in whisky and cell phone advertisements all over Japan, scores various independent films, puts in appearances for various activist causes, and interviews the Dalai Llama: each activity folded easily into the orbit of his status as a sort of elder statesman of Japanese electronic pop. He is usually seen wearing minimalist black Yamamoto Yōji-style attire, his music and public image presenting a model of ambient mobility that slips easily between contexts but remains itself unmarked.

A case in point is Sakamoto's surprise 1999 hit "Energy Flow," the first instrumental track ever to reach the number one spot on the Oricon charts (the Japanese equivalent of the *Billboard* rankings). The song was produced for a TV commercial for the energy drink Regain EB. The commercial shows Sakamoto playing his grand piano in the center of a busy intersection, soothing the fatigued office workers hurrying by all around him. Industry media at the time attributed the unexpected sales to how the ad "has apparently struck a chord with middle-aged people coping with Japan's lingering recession and the end of the country's work-obsessed, high-growth era."¹¹ What is being sold in each case is primarily a sensation of calm, rather than a drink or a CD single. There is more than a little Satie in the melody here, and in the way the track can offer both the detached refinement of the classical piano and the rational utility of the energy drink, without either seeming to compromise the integrity of the other.

The ambient aesthetic here allows Sakamoto to travel as a sensory brand in diverse markets. Satie emerged in the 1970s as a model for these lateral artistic strategies, well suited to a popular culture that emphasizes a calm and flexible subjectivity. As the 1970s drew to a close, the Satie boom would merge with the rapidly transforming world of electronic music, leading to a new transnational genre of synthesized ambient landscapes oriented towards atmospheric drift. The next chapter travels over this emerging terrain, from a pair of Walkman headphones on out to the foggy horizon.

¹¹ *Billboard*, July 2, 1999.

[3. Ambient Horizons]

The solitary *gymnopédiste* was a model that Brian Eno (1948-) would also emulate in his formulation of ambient music and video, which took place at the same time as the Japanese Satie boom.¹¹² While he might seem an odd fit for a study focusing on Japanese media, his work looms large in postindustrial culture and is essential for understanding how ambient aesthetics unfolded in Japan.

Eno's innovation was to bridge the solitary avant-BGM of Satie and Cage with pop and electronic music. Best known at the time for his glam-rock persona as a member of Roxy Music, Eno's swerve to delicate atmospheres shocked fans used to seeing him as a rock star. Given time, however, his astutely packaged concept of "ambient music" caught on, becoming the popular name for background music inhabiting the interspace between artistic integrity and BGM functionality. In 1978 Eno released what remains to this day the most well-known ambient album: *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. In the liner notes to the album, Eno describes ambient music as

¹¹² Eno notes that at the time he was working on the *Ambient* series he was heavily influenced by 'Japanese thought' - particularly the concepts of *wabi* (austere refinement and spiritual solitude) and *sabi* (quiet simplicity). Brian Eno, "Brian Eno: The Quality of Sensitivity." Interview with Gotō Shigeo and Sawa Fumiya. In Code, eds. *Unfinished*, 132.

an attempt to expand the mood-shifting possibilities of BGM in a way that moved beyond the functional commercial orientations of Muzak:

The concept of music designed specifically as a background feature in the environment was pioneered by Muzak Inc. in the fifties, and has since come to be known generically by the term muzak. The connotations that this term carries are those particularly associated with the kind of material that Muzak Inc. produces—familiar tunes arranged and orchestrated in a lightweight and derivative manner. Understandably, this has led most discerning listeners (and most composers) to dismiss entirely the concept of environmental music as an idea worthy of attention.

Over the past three years, I have become interested in the use of music as ambience, and have come to believe that it is possible to produce material that can be used thus without being in any way compromised. To create a distinction between my own experiments in this area and the products of the various purveyors of canned music, I have begun using the term Ambient Music.

After declaring his desire to rehabilitate environmental music from the taint of Muzak, Eno goes on to specify where his ambient music departs from commercial BGM:

Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these. Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas their intention is to “brighten” the environment by adding stimulus to it (thus supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and leveling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms), Ambient Music is intended to induce calm and a space to think.

Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.¹¹³

Here Eno provides a succinct articulation of how ambient music sets out to have it both ways, satisfying both the modernist model of aesthetic absorption (the ‘interesting’) and the ‘weak listening’ model of background mood regulation (the ‘ignorable’). Drawing directly on Satie and Cage, he taps into the cultural space they carved out for an alternative BGM, one more comfortable with uncertainty, and thus more palatable to those listeners nauseated by commercial BGM.

Eno argues that the immersive atmospheres of ambient music not only provided relief from the influence of others, but also a break from one’s own social identity. Ambience enables a forgetting of the self. Attention can then move more freely, attending to the more subtle sensory details of the surrounding world. Following Satie, ambient music embraces atmospheric solitude as an ideal for postindustrial subjectivity

By the 1980s, Eno’s name for this alter-BGM genre—*ambient music*—would catch on and come to define the style for decades to come. Eno’s story of how he invented the style, since established as a kind of ambient music origin myth, captures both the genre’s relation to therapy culture and environmental music’s fraught relationship with more ‘active’ forms of (masculine) identity. In the story Eno tells of ‘discovering’ ambient music, Eno is in bed in his apartment, convalescing after being run down by a taxi some days before. A friend comes by and puts a record of harp music on the record changer on low volume and leaves while it is still playing. Eno wants to adjust the volume but due to his incapacitated state cannot get up to do so. Instead, he discovers how the low-level music blends with the sounds of the street outside, mixing together into an ambient background.¹¹⁴

This often-told story connects ambient music directly with the earlier use of baroque ‘easy listening’ records as home mood music in the 1950s.¹¹⁵ The trauma and healing narrative of Eno’s taxi accident connects with the therapy culture emerging at the time (and the later new-age genre of

¹¹³ Brian Eno, “Music for Airports/Ambient 1” liner notes. PVC 7908 (AMB 001). September 1978.

¹¹⁴ Toop, *Ocean of Sound*, 139.

¹¹⁵ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*, 169-207.

‘healing’ music). At the same time, this founding story provides a dramatic disavowal of the seemingly ‘passive’ state of Eno as a listener here. After being run over by a taxi, moving is out of the question. Nonetheless, Eno regains an active intellectual mastery over his situation by seemingly ‘inventing’ a new genre of music while lying in bed. He thus becomes a type of strong weak listener, making the position more palatable to potential listeners who might normally scoff at the idea of musical mood regulation.

The story also diverts attention from the immediate and strong influences on Eno’s ambient work - Satie, Cage, and American minimalist music—particularly Steve Reich’s tape delay works. Even the story itself has strong overtones of Cage’s interest in intentional non-intentionality, as when he writes in *Silence* (1976) of “bringing one’s intended actions into relation with the ambient unintended ones.”¹¹⁶ Seeming passivity is paired with a sense of personal agency.

As it happened, technology came along just at the right moment to help this transition along. The first Sony Walkman was released just months after *Music for Airports*, setting off a radical transformation in the way music was used. Suddenly recorded music was not tethered to living rooms and automobiles, but could be carried on a person’s body as they walked out into and through the city.¹¹⁷ One effect this had was to bring Eno’s discovery of harp music blending with street noise to the level of an everyday experience. Individuals could now wrap their ears with their chosen audio accompaniment, and were in a position to regularly experience the influence of different musical attunements on their passage through public space. This was in many ways the technological analogue to the aesthetic freedom offered by ambient music. For what Yamaguchi Katsuhiko called the “walkman generation,”¹¹⁸ music comes even closer to Böhme’s definition of postindustrial music: “a modification of space as it is perceived by the body.”¹¹⁹

Ambient music and embodied security

Tia DeNora describes how music produces a map for how listeners might move and feel, how a subject might “fit in” to an environment. Music establishes patterns of tension and resolution, timbre, harmony, melody and rhythm, all of which can serve as an “entrainment device” allowing a body to latch onto the aural-tactile environment around it, both consciously and unconsciously.¹²⁰

The “calm, and a space to think” aimed for by ambient music translates into a particular set of affective environmental affordances. With ambient music, soft drifting surfaces lay out a set of coordinates for the listener to expand into. Ambient music reshapes the hardness of uncomfortable externalities into comfortably flexible drift. As this attunement progresses, the resonance between objects (including humans) increases, and the border between body and world and between object and object becomes inconspicuous, incidental. In the case of portable listening, this real-time process of immersion aligns against the alienation of a body moving through a possibly threatening set of environmental obstacles. Potentially discomforting realities are masked through calming drones, affording the feeling of moving through a like substance, a world without

¹¹⁶ Cage, *Silence*, 80. As Eric Tamm notes, Cage’s notion of the ‘ambient’ in *Silence* was the likely source for Eno’s use of the term. See Tamm, *Brian Eno: His Music and the Vertical Color of Sound*, 20.

¹¹⁷ There is a rather extensive literature on the culture of the portable audio player. See for example Hosokawa, “The Walkman Effect,” Thiebauld, “The Sonic Composition of the City,” Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*.

¹¹⁸ See Yamaguchi and Shimizu, *Tsumetai palōmansu*.

¹¹⁹ Böhme. “Acoustic Atmospheres: A Contribution to the Study of Ecological Aesthetics,” 16.

¹²⁰ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 67.

sharp distinctions between self and other. The softly immersive atmosphere supports the listener's ease of the movement, providing the ground for embodied security.

The experience of ambient music is based on what we might call an affective contract with the listener, one promising to maintain a mood of calm, restricting any emotion that may impair feelings of peaceful reflection. This promise of security eliminates chance on an affective level by establishing a dominant mood to tint all sound events—even contingent ones. Paradoxically, however, due to this overdetermined mood a greater degree of chance and disorder can occur within the soundscape without disrupting its tenor, as long as the overarching mood is maintained.

On the Way Out to the Horizon

In much ambient music composition, sound is sculpted as a spatial object. Sonic envelopes are smoothed by stretching out attack and decay. Sudden transitions are avoided in favor of gradually fading in and out different sound layers. Vast open spaces are implied through lush echo, reverb, and delay. A mood of calm drift emerges from drones based around the fifth of a chord rather than the tonic, or by keeping tonality consonant but always slightly ambiguous, or by repeating a basic pattern in constantly shifting permutations. Rhythm gives way to a slow pulse, a gradual ebb and flow of sonic elements. Near the edge of audibility, a quiet hum of white or pink noise masks extraneous environmental sounds, expanding and blurring the acoustic horizon.¹²¹

The extension of the landscape over the edge of the frame relates directly to Eno's interest in a horizon that extends beyond the limits of perception:

I like to work with all the complex sounds on the way out to the horizon, to pure noise, like the hum of London. If you sit in Hyde Park just far enough away from the traffic so that you don't perceive any of its specific details, you just hear the average of the whole thing. [...] There are foreground events [...] there are events that are not so close to the ear, there are ones that become misty and indistinct, and then occasionally comes a hint of something that is practically out of earshot. I like this idea of a field of sound that extends beyond our senses.¹²²

Paralleling earlier landscape theorists like Guy Debord and Matsuda Masao, Eno's dispersed figure roams endlessly through unidentifiable topographies, with no destination and no orientation.¹²³

Acoustic Mediation of the Environment

This softened sense of spatiality is equally central to the popularity of portable audio technology, emerging contemporaneously with Eno's *Ambient* works. Studies of the impact of portable audio often focus on the implicitly privatizing act of covering the ears with headphones in an otherwise public space. As John-Paul Thibaud writes in his ethnography of the use of the Walkman,

The walking listener uses it not only to protect himself from the sonic aggressions of the city but also to filter and enhance events [...] The sound volume of the Walkman is used in order to listen to or mask conversations, bells ringing, children's screams, traffic noise, and so forth.¹²⁴

With the manipulation of volume, listeners can choose to ignore particular parts of the environment, shifting foreground elements into the background.

This potential for blocking out the listener's surroundings has long been a point of contention surrounding portable media technology: one of Sony's original Walkman designs

¹²¹ See Tamm's chapter "The Ambient Sound" (131-150) for a more detailed musicological study of Brian Eno's ambient compositions. I draw from his analysis here.

¹²² Korner, "Aurora Musicalis," n.p.

¹²³ On Debord's rather ambient situationist practice of 'psychogeography,' see Debord's "Theory of the dérive." <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.derive.htm>.

¹²⁴ Thibaud, "The Sonic Composition of the City," 330.

featured two sets of headphone jacks, with an orange button enabling the sound source to be “shared” between two listeners. Morita Akio, one of Sony’s co-founders, noticed that when he listened to the research models at home his wife became annoyed, as she felt shut out. So he ordered a second jack to be installed.¹²⁵ This desire to share persists—just recently on the subway I sat across from a mother and daughter sharing a set of earbuds and listening together. But what about a room full of people together listening to different music on their headphones, as some “bring your own music” dance parties have experimented with? The issue here is less one of public versus private than it is one of how individuals are able to interact. Personal music in public spaces still affects the dynamic of exchange between individuals, even if only one set of ears can hear the music.

Noah Vawter’s *Ambient Addition* (2006) claims to address the “isolation” of the portable music player. *Ambient Addition* is a Walkman-style device Vawter designed at the MIT Media Lab as an attempt to reintegrate mobile headphone listeners into their surrounding environment. As the listener walks around a space, an onboard microphone records environmental noise, and an audio processor uses various techniques to soften the sounds and make them more ‘musical’ before transmitting them to the headphones. The device gives these found sounds a sense of rhythm, by repeating samples, filtering and transposing tones to approximate melodies, and filtering or masking frequencies that do not fit into the dominant musical harmonics. Vawter hoped *Ambient Addition* would add a sense of curiosity and interactivity to a listener’s relationship to their landscape. For example, they may alter their path through space in order to explore novel sounds for the *Addition* to process. According to surveys distributed to Vawter’s test subjects, however, most reported that the *Ambient Addition* was a socially isolating experience.¹²⁶ *Ambient Addition* treats sound in the tradition of Satie and Cage, aestheticizing (and in this case literally softening) environmental noise so that the landscape becomes individually musical rather than interpersonally communicative.

As the public soundscape became increasingly mediated through the use of recorded music, Cage’s earlier reevaluation of environmental sound was both extended and transformed. Cage earlier defined “ambience” as what drifted in through the windows of his apartment from the street below, and not what is played on the record player, a form of listening Cage rallied against as inauthentic and mindless. In contrast, ambient music and the Walkman bring the soundscape partly back under the listener’s control. Recorded musical atmospheres reintroduces intention into Cage’s environmental soundscapes, turning the ambient record into a tool for the purposeful production of personal atmospheres—but always in tandem with other objects in the environment.

For Cage, the place wholly provided the music. For Eno, recorded music assists in providing the place. This perspective emerged from Eno’s experiences while living the peripatetic life of a traveling artist:

I realized while I was living this nomadic life, the one thing that was really keeping me in place, or giving me a sense of place, was music. [...] We can use recordings to insert a sense of place in the various locations we end up in. They repeat identically each time—they’re reliable portable experiences.¹²⁷

The music may repeat identically, but the locations the recordings mediate are constantly shifting, leading to a new form of subjectivity based around an atmospheric interface composed of repetition and difference.

In the late 1970s listeners of Satie, Eno’s ambient music, and the Sony Walkman all worked out an increasingly reflexive use of audio objects as forms of environmental mediation,

¹²⁵ Vawter, *Ambient Addition: How to Turn Urban Noise Into Music*, 15.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹²⁷ Komer, “Aurora Musicalis,” n.p.

both personal and public. The move of recorded audio into a wide range of public spaces ran in tandem with technological developments, not just the Walkman but also, in the 1980s, the Compact Disc. In 1984 Sony commissioned Eno to produce the 61-minute ambient track *Thursday Afternoon* to show off their new long-playing format. Meanwhile on the production side, all genres of music were increasingly relying on studio techniques of electronic sound manipulation as part of a search for new sounds—a technique pioneered by Eno, among others, furthering the spatialization of recorded music.¹²⁸

Not surprisingly, this movement of audio media into new landscapes also led reflexively to a vast increase in music *about* landscapes, particularly in the genre of ambient music. With the liner notes to *On Land*, Eno began using “landscape” as a figure for ambient music itself—or more specifically, depopulated landscapes.¹²⁹ He writes that starting with his studio experimentation in *Another Green World* (1975),

the landscape has ceased to be a backdrop for something else to happen in front of; instead, everything that happens is a part of the landscape. There is no longer a sharp distinction between foreground and background.¹³⁰

Eno describes this shift in listening in terms of landscape painting:

An aspect of this landscape concern is to do with the removal of personality from the picture. You know how different a landscape painting is when there is a figure in it. Even if the figure is small, it automatically becomes the focus—all questions of scale and depth are related to it. When I stopped writing songs I took the figure out of the landscape.¹³¹

By removing the central figure from the landscape, the composition becomes open to other orientations: other listeners and other objects in the space. Ambient music purposefully leaves the focus of the work undecided, so that it can remain open and responsive to other objects in its shared atmosphere.

Attunement for Ambient Subjectivity

At the same time, ambient landscapes do attune best to a particular type of figure—one that is mobile, dispersed, and ambiguous. Ahmed’s model of comfort still holds. For ambient subjects, comfort is not merely a side-effect of fitting-in, but a dispersive technique for moving seamlessly through a world where to assert a more figural, bounded subjectivity would be to restrict personal mobility. For the nomadic subject traveling between different cultures, between different figurative norms, ambient music appears to offer the tantalizing potential to disappear, and to thereby avoid the potential discomforts of having one’s appearance or behavior be recognized and judged by others. Ambient subjectivity appears, paradoxically, to offer the listener the ability not to be a subject at all. The ambient subject becomes an unbounded creature, and the world, a comfortable, seamless place. An increasingly appealing position in a world of competing norms, but also, as Eric Tamm points out in his analysis of Eno’s ambiguous song lyrics, one that forecloses more direct forms of social participation:

Eno’s lyrics are strong in their aesthetic impact, and occasionally in their mysterious, quasi-spiritual quality; they have less to say about the realm of the ethical, the realm of human realities and relationships. [...] One senses that Eno sometimes is indeed holding back too much, is perhaps too nervous about making a real statement.¹³²

Taken pessimistically, Eno’s “removal of the figure from the landscape” might be understood as an attempt, like the “air” discourse in Japan, to disguise his position as creator and controller and

¹²⁸ See Doyle, *Echo & Reverb*.

¹²⁹ Cage is again an important precursor here, with his “Imaginary landscape” compositions.

¹³⁰ Liner notes, *Ambient 2: On Land*.

¹³¹ Quoted in Tamm, *Brian Eno*, 4

¹³² *Ibid.*, 83.

create the impression that his works were simply emerging organically from the environment itself. Eno claims his music reflects “the decision to stop seeing yourself as the center of the world, to see yourself as part of the greater flow of things, as having limited options and responsibility for your actions.”¹³³ This performance of giving oneself over to the greater flow raises imperceptibility into a personal philosophy portraying unintentionality as selfless, in the manner of cybernetic thought and Cage’s self-pronounced Zen aesthetic, as if the music were simply reflecting the impersonal complexities of spontaneous becoming. And yet the last part of Eno’s statement is particularly revealing: as with blaming everything on the ‘air,’ positioning one’s actions as simply ‘going with the flow’ displaces the responsibility for the actions’ impact, however limited this may be.

In this way, ambient media provide a framework for disavowing responsibility towards others: it allows individuals to establish a feeling of merging with the landscape, of dissolving the self into the “greater flow of things,” and this in turn allows both creators and listeners of ambient media to sidestep the complexities of interpersonal engagement in favor of the safe anonymity of communal belonging. Above all, the refusal to take a stand can be a technique for maintaining mobility, in a world where mobility more than ever means power.

Ahmed points to how this goal of becoming fluid can mistake this freedom of movement as something distributed equally to all objects, rather than located with the privileged few who, like Eno, find themselves in highly nomadic existences of their own choosing. She asks, “Is the subject who chooses homelessness and a nomadic lifestyle, or a nomadic way of thinking, one that can do so, because the world is already constituted as its home?”¹³⁴ As discussed earlier in the context of retail environmental design, atmospheres can appear to be open even when they maintain their exclusivity, with the advantage that those who are expelled appear to be transgressing not against those with power to design, but against ambient comfort itself, and its ideal of invisibility.

The apparent porousness and unboundedness of ambient styles helps conceal a hidden barrier, one all the more impenetrable for its invisibility. On the other side of ambient calm lies all that is discomfiting, unfamiliar, and unwelcome. What is kept out of the comfortable atmosphere is precisely what reminds ambient subjects of their own immobility, their own still-rooted subject position, the firm boundaries of their own embodiment. As a feeling, ambient calm has everything to do with the forgetting of the border between the self and the world. As mentioned earlier, Ahmed describes comfort as

the promise of a ‘sinking’ feeling. It is, after all, pain or discomfort that return one’s attention to the surfaces of the body as body. To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. The disappearance of the surface is instructive: in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies. The sinking feeling involves a seamless space, or a space where you can’t see the ‘stitches’ between bodies.¹³⁵

Seamlessness, in the context of ambient atmospheres, results from the covering over of the parts which don’t quite fit by blanketing them with an aesthetic of calm. Ambience brings with it its own subjective norms, focusing on easy mobility, porous surfaces, and subjective dispersion.

Calm and comfort, of course, do have their place. Ironically, it is often the socially uncomfortable who are most in need of refuge and relaxation. Elizabeth Le Guin writes of using “relaxation music” as a retreat from the stresses and pressures of a patriarchal society—even though she simultaneously recognizes the music itself does little to remedy the situation.¹³⁶ Understanding the way atmosphere shapes behavior need not lead to attempting to do away with background

¹³³ Ibid., 91.

¹³⁴ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, 83. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 148. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁶ See Le Guin, “Uneasy Listening.”

music in the hopes of reaching some unmediated and unmanipulated state of being. As I have argued, this merely takes up a pose of self-sufficiency that denies the way human existence is extensively shaped by environmental affordances. Rather, recognizing the political dimensions of atmosphere can push us to pay more attention to the environmental dynamics of subject formation, questioning the normative investments of the air itself. As DeNora writes,

To the extent that music can be seen to get into or inform subjectivity and action [...] the issue of aesthetic control and its relation to the constitution of agency is serious, particularly as organizations and marketers are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their deployment of music.¹³⁷

When music becomes spatial and moves out into the shared landscape, it also becomes more political, shaping public spaces in particular ways, making and breaking atmospheres of exclusion and inclusion. This line of ignorability becomes ever more seamless over the next several decades of atmospheric design.

Late Century Ambient

The August 2008 “Ambient/Chill Out” special issue of Japanese music magazine *Studio Voice* puts forth a rough history of the last three decades of ambient music. Beginning with Eno’s *Music for Airports*, the issue divides ambient music history into three periods. The first is the “Classic Ambient Era,” (1978-1987) when Eno and others carved out a new genre of atmospheric music in the space between popular music and the avant-garde. In the second period, the “Club Culture Era,” (1988-1997) ambient music linked to the thriving rave and club scenes, becoming the ‘chill out’ partner to trance, house, and other forms of techno music. Finally, the editors frame 1998 to the time of publication (2008) as the “Electronica/Drone Era,” where ambient music follows the emergent Electronica scene out of the club and into a context of intensive home listening, becoming in the process more aligned with independent experimental music and its small-scale, more personalized circuits of exchange.

In the 1990s, as home recording became more affordable, the main locus of ambient music production shifted away from the ‘chill out’ rooms of the club scene. Beginning around the mid-decade, electronic music producers such as Autechre and the Black Dog inspired a migration towards what became known first as ‘IDM’ (‘Intelligent Dance Music’), and later marketed as ‘Electronica.’ The ambient scene followed this shift. One central figure in this transition is ambient music producer Tetsu Inoue. Tetsu Inoue recalls gradually becoming frustrated with the drugged-out audiences at clubs, and seeking a more focused and meaningful relationship with his listeners. The ideal listening environment became, in Inoue’s terms, a quiet domestic space, with lights off and headphones on.¹³⁸

In contrast to Eno’s physically mimetic landscapes, in the ambient music of the 1990s, the ambient landscape moved even further from a mimetic relationship with the given world, becoming entirely a mental creation. This is how Inoue described the motivation behind his 1996 album *World Receiver*: “I have a landscape in my mind that I had to express.”¹³⁹

The image of the “world,” and more specifically, the planet Earth, appears repeatedly in Inoue’s work. The cover designs for the first three volumes of *2350 Broadway* (1993-1996), a collaboration between Inoue and Pete Namlook, pair circular photographs of New York street scenes with an image of the planet Earth. Both images float in a larger circle of empty black

¹³⁷ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 163.

¹³⁸ Cooper 2008, n.p. Inoue moved from Tokyo to New York as a teenager in the mid-1980s and soon after began releasing a series of highly influential ambient works on Pete Namlook’s label FAX +49-69/450464. More recently, he is back in Japan working on ambient albums in rural Hokkaido, in the far north of the country.

¹³⁹ Cooper, “KALX Berkeley Interview,” n.p.

space.¹⁴⁰ The emergence of the globe as a discreet image of the ambient landscape brings the ambient subject closer to what Ahmed describes as the fetishization of ‘globality’ itself, of self-identifying as a global subject.¹⁴¹ Inoue’s home listener is immersed within imaginary landscapes, but can withdraw into this abstracted, “global” perspective at any time, simply by turning off the music. Unlike the listener at an installation or club, the ambient home listener always maintains control, manipulating the database of mediated ambient landscapes to suit their desired style of emotional drift.

The “Ambient Otaku”

The weightless sounds and images scaffolding Inoue’s internal spaces make a marked contrast with the more physically-embodied horizons of earlier ambient works. As a representative example, consider the title track to Inoue’s *Ambiant Otaku* (1994).¹⁴²

“Ambiant Otaku” is based on three loops: a short descending four-note pattern in a middle register that repeats roughly every two seconds, a higher three-note pattern that intersects it on a similar rhythm, and a lower note that pulses twice, morse-code like, also roughly once every two seconds. There is a slight difference in duration between the first two and the last of these three patterns, however, so that they offset each other in syncopation as the loops reiterate. The amplitude of their reverberations slowly grows as they cycle onward for the first few minutes of the piece. Around the one-minute mark another element appears: a synth tone sliding up and down playfully through the lower-mid frequencies. The contour of the slides recalls the shape of whale song, swimming up and down in a smooth arc through a reverberant ocean. This singing continues throughout almost the entirety of the piece. In contrast to the tightly structured loops, this voice has a gestural and improvisational quality, a freedom that plays across the pulsations of the more rhythmic layers. About a minute and a half into the music, an even higher pitched cluster of wavy tones enters, shimmering and bright as they slide over one another. Around the three-minute mark, something resembling a rhythm appears—an occasional thumping bass drum. These scattered thumps, together with the offset rhythms of the ongoing loops, often appear to be on the verge of coalescing into a steady beat. Instead, they continue to shift around, sliding across one another without ever falling into sync.

At nearly five minutes, a contrasting three-note loop comes in louder in a lower register, responding to the opening patterns. This complex assemblage of sliding loops and shimmery layers continues until near the end of the piece, almost eleven minutes after it began. Different voices continue to emerge and drop out as the music progresses. The original two loops gradually disappear about halfway through, only to reappear in the final two minutes to take the piece to its concluding fade-out.

As is evident here, Inoue’s ambient style has absorbed a great deal from techno (and the minimalist music before it)¹⁴³, particularly its emphasis on interlocking looped patterns and the building up and breaking down of textures layer by layer across the length of a piece. Unlike the

¹⁴⁰ This small image of the globe appears on all the releases of FAX’s “world” sublabel, home to artists Namlook releases from outside Germany.

¹⁴¹ “The very detachment from a particular home grants the nomadic subject the ability to see the world, an ability that becomes the basis for a new global identity and community. In such a narrative, identity becomes fetishized: it becomes detached from the particularity of places which allows for its formation as such.” Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 86.

¹⁴² Inoue uses the French spelling of ambient (*ambiant*) perhaps as one way to assert his work’s departure from the ambient music that preceded it.

¹⁴³ On the influence of American pulse-pattern minimalist music on techno, see Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*.

more continuously present sound elements of earlier ambient compositions (where pieces feel like they could begin and end at any moment without losing their overall structure), Inoue's compositions have discreet sections, and a definite beginning and end, even if their open structures could easily be spun out longer with additional voices. The periodic introduction and elimination of elements draws a listener's attention with each modification. In this respect, Inoue's work is not nearly as "ignorable" as Eno's more homogeneously contoured compositions.

The emphasis in "Ambient Otaku" is on high frequency shimmering textures. Along with the whale song and the expansive reverb, my impression as a listener is very much one of being under the ocean, looking up at the light flickering off the surface of the water above as various sizable sea creatures swim weightlessly by. I am perhaps influenced by the image of a large stingray floating across the sea floor in the booklet to Inoue's following album, *Slow and Low* (1995). But the deep seas often come to mind listening to Inoue's resonant textures. Or if not the sea, then at least the depths of space. Unlike the more cluttered topographies of earlier ambient works, Inoue's landscapes are smooth, spacious, and pulsing with regular patterns. The spaces they refer to are oriented more toward floating than walking, standing, or sitting; more zero-gravity than earth-bound.

This shift from potentially inhabitable landscapes into more abstracted spaces is evident in the artwork accompanying the albums as well. Unlike the quasi-cartographic images that adorn Eno's *Ambient* series, Inoue's FAX +49-69/450464 label releases all feature highly symmetrical covers, with circular images organized in empty black fields. The mandala on the cover of *Ambient Otaku* is characteristic of the music's conceptual organization: a highly detailed geography, but one without reference to any human-scale landscape. Rather, the mandala offers a simultaneous guide through the mind and the universe as a whole. On the reverse sleeve, meanwhile, is a striking image of a fetus wired into a microchip. Here Inoue hints at the kind of psychedelic mood regulation producing these abstract patterns and oceanic sensations. Are we drifting under the sea, or tucked away inside an electronic womb? The title of the album similarly riffs playfully on the image of the Japanese *otaku*, devotees of various subcultures who strive for expertise in their chosen field, even if it leaves them rather out of touch with the wider world. While the valence of the term has shifted somewhat since, the stereotype of the *otaku* in the mid 1990s imagined them as isolated at home, surrounded by and in some sense surviving off of electronic media: a state not unlike the circuit-board fetus pictured here.

While Eno sought "reliable, portable" music for those in transit, Inoue's ambient *otaku* might never desire to leave the house at all. This increasing interest in more private, listener-controlled atmospheres becomes clearer when looking at the production context for Inoue's work. While Eno was known for his studio-based productions, Inoue's work is part of a larger shift toward the control and independence offered by home-based recording.

Pete Namlook's FAX +49-69/450464 came to serve as the premier *otaku*-style ambient music label. Started in Germany in 1993, the label was known for its highly systematic packaging (where different icons and colors denoted minutely differentiated sub-genres); highly limited editions (usually from 500 to 2,000 copies per release—*Ambient Otaku* was first released in an edition of 500), and prolific output (at its height in the mid-to-late 1990s, the label was releasing one album every two weeks). FAX +49-69/450464 was successful in developing a small, dedicated audience of devoted ambient listeners, some even taking out a subscription to the label to ensure they did not miss a single release.

The equipment used in the production context of Inoue's work reflects a similar shift toward a greater amount of control over the sounds produced. Several of Eno's early ambient works were built from tape loops of other artist's improvisations, and his interest in "generative"

music led him often to take a hands-off approach to creating sounds, focusing instead on developing programs that could produce their own musical sequences. He often describes this approach as planting “seeds” that go on to sprout and grow in their own unexpected directions.¹⁴⁴ In his recent software-based work like the iPhone application *Bloom*, the compositional process consists of putting together open-ended algorithms for the production of tones, a process the listener can also indirectly participate in by tapping the screen. In many ways, this is the logical extension of the continual permutations of “A Clearing.” Like the earlier piece, *Bloom* produces ignorably interesting iterations. In contrast, Inoue has moved from his earlier analog atmospheres to working with mainly digital sound synthesis, an approach that allows a far greater degree of precision in sound editing. In the process, his work has moved closer to the microscopic sound manipulations of artists like Taylor Deupree, Carsten Nicolai, and Ikeda Ryōji, developing psychoacoustic effects unrealizable without digital technology.

While both artists continue to explore musical spaces where the listener is effectively dissolved into the landscape, Eno’s work remains more grounded, in the perceptual sense of often having a low drone and earth-bound imagery, but also through his interest in music for those moving through existing physical spaces: music for airports, museum installations, and portable music technologies like the iPhone. Inoue, in contrast, continues to produce a more private music, largely untethered to any recognizable site of human habitation.¹⁴⁵

These differences, of course, are in part related to Eno’s greater access to funding and his aspirations to reach a wide audience. Inoue’s *otaku* orientation aims instead for a more focused, intensive engagement with a more circumscribed number of dedicated listeners. But this difference in scale and communicative intensity is interwoven with differences in their respective aesthetics, in the spaces their ambient musics both imagine and produce. With projects like *Bloom*, Eno continues to explore new public landscapes for his “ignorable” music, still holding on to perfumed cybernetic dreams of global nomads “tinting” their environment as they glide through unfamiliar spaces.¹⁴⁶ Inoue’s music is much closer to the orientation of most of the ambient music produced today, registering the transformation of the genre from a social experiment in semi-attentive listening into a musical subculture catering to its own audience and internal aesthetic criteria. In the process, the “landscapes” produced by ambient music have come to reside more exclusively within the albums themselves—and between the ears of the listeners who float within them.

This is not to say that those making or listening to this kind of music are necessarily isolated or any less socially engaged. Collaboration between musicians (often across great distances, via post office or Internet) is a regular feature of both Eno’s and Inoue’s discographies.¹⁴⁷ Collaboration is a central aspect of contemporary electronic music, including ambient styles. Eno and Inoue’s discographies are all marked by extensive collaborations with other musicians, and many key recordings of the genre are by small collaborative ensembles. Ambient music also

¹⁴⁴ Eno quite appropriately describes the concept of “ambient music” itself as one of those seeds. Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices*, 293.

¹⁴⁵ One exception is the album *Waterloo Terminal* (1998), though it is not necessarily designed to be listened to in connection with its original site. The album, created for Caipirinha’s *Architettura* series, draws its sounds from scanned schematics of London’s Waterloo International Terminal (Nicholas Grimshaw, 1993).

¹⁴⁶ The *Bloom* software allows the “mood” of the generated tones to be chosen (or randomized) from a list of scent-derived names familiar from Eno’s other work: Neroli, Vetiver, Labdanum, Ambrette, etc.

¹⁴⁷ To give just a few examples: Eno’s collaborations with Harold Budd; Andy Partridge and Harold Budd’s work on *Through the Hill* (Gyroscope, 1994); David Sylvian’s collaborations with Holger Czukay; Inoue’s numerous collaborations with Pete Namlook, Uwe Schmidt (Atom Heart), and Hosono Haruomi; and, more recently, Sakamoto Ryūichi’s collaborations with Alva Noto, Christian Fennesz, and others.

became increasingly transnational, as mapped out in the title of a release by the ambient ‘supergroup’ HAT (Haruomi Hosono, Atom Heart, and Tetsu Inoue): *Tokyo Frankfurt New York* (Daisyworld, 1996). Collaborations across continents soon became a regular practice, particularly as technology allowed for an easy exchange of musical material, first through the mail and later over the Internet.

Inoue describes the value of collaborative work precisely in terms of his interactions with other musicians: “Collaboration is more like vibration and feedback. . . I get bored sometimes working by myself, because there’s no feedback.”¹⁴⁸ Inoue’s comments hint that perhaps one impulse for an *otaku* style turn toward more private forms of music is a dissatisfaction with the modes of interaction available in contemporary urban environments, and a desire for the more significant person-to-person exchanges available within subculture groups formed around particular hobbies and interests. This dissatisfaction with the public landscape is reflected in the texts accompanying Inoue’s FAX projects. The liner notes to *2350 Broadway* describe the contents as “Music for a city that is unlivable.”

While rejecting the public landscape, the FAX label demonstrates a renewed interest in fostering personal accessibility and direct communication. Namlook’s actual fax number is included in the label name for easy reference, and 2350 Broadway was the address of Inoue’s apartment in New York, where the music was produced. The (sometimes controversially) limited print runs of FAX releases also allowed Namlook to grant artists more control over their releases, and facilitated contact between a small community of artists and listeners.¹⁴⁹ Inoue’s recognition of the facile sociality of public listening in the club environment, paradoxically, entailed a return to private space, capable of sustaining potentially more satisfying interpersonal and artistic interactions. Finding the given landscapes unlivable, ambient artists from the 1990s onward have increasingly decided to invent their own.

We might understand Eno and Inoue’s work as two ways ambient music models the ambient subject’s movement through a landscape. Eno’s listener is dissolved within a soft urban anyplace, while Inoue provides, as the liner notes to *Slow and Low* put it, “Muzak for random sculptures and Mixmedia mood swing”—a more privatized atmosphere, but in its own way one that reintroduces the possibility of inter-subjective communication. What they share is an aspiration to foster the freedom of attention found in a figureless landscape—a music that doesn’t force the subject to assume a recognizable and fixed position in relation to the outside world.

The history of ambient music reveals how media can provide portable subjective landscapes, providing embodied security within a highly nomadic, pluralistic world. Ambient subjectivity promises listeners the chance to have complete mobility, to be at home “anywhere,” but at the cost of giving up the ability to define oneself in relation to others. These ambient landscapes provide a comfortable feeling of calm, and a space to think. But it is a home that—aesthetically at least—demands invisibility as its price for entry.

These connections between imaginary landscapes, electronic music, and social self-removal are explored music most thoroughly by Hosono Haruomi, a key figure in Japanese pop music over the last half-century and the most influential proponent of ambient music in Japan. The following chapter maps his turn to ambience in the 1980s, locating it in one particularly atmospheric place: a subterranean sea from several million years ago known as the Pliocene Coast.

¹⁴⁸ Cooper, “KALX Berkeley Interview,” n.p.

¹⁴⁹ The advent of video art groups in the 1970s prefigured this move towards smaller communities distributed around shared affective affordances.

PART TWO: PANORAMIC INTERIORS

[4. On the Pliocene Coast]

In the mid-1970s Hosono Haruomi (1947-) shifted from his influential California-styled folk rock project Happy End (Happii endo, 1969-72) towards an interest in the Exotica and Tropicalia of musicians like Martin Denny and Van Dyke Parks.¹⁵⁰ At the end of the decade he merged these interests with newly emerging electronic music technology, most famously in the highly influential Yellow Magic Orchestra (1978-83), a trio with Sakamoto Ryūichi and Takahashi Yukihiro.¹⁵¹

Hosokawa Shūhei argues that Hosono's solo projects in the mid-1970s sought to complicate images of exotic Asia through complex forms of mimicry and auto-orientalism. Describing Hosono's "Soy-Sauce Music" trilogy (Hosono purposefully uses the English term rather than the Japanese), Hosokawa writes that "what is central to the Trilogy is less the North American approach to exoticising Japan and the Japanese then the Japanese way of exoticising

¹⁵⁰ Martin Denny (1911-2005) was an American pianist best known popularizing the "exotica" sound, a style of lounge music featuring tropical remixes of popular songs using "exotic" touches like bird calls and singing frogs. Van Dyke Parks (1943-) was a composer and musician known for his Americana-influenced conceptual pop records, as well as his lyric contributions to the Beach Boy's *Smile*.

¹⁵¹ Along with Germany's Kraftwerk, YMO was one of first synth-pop bands to achieve global fame. See Bourdaugh's, *Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon*.

American exoticism.”¹⁵² This self-consciously exoticising approach continued in his subsequent ambient invocations of other cultures—particularly in his use of images and sounds from Okinawan, Caribbean, Pacific Islander, South and Southeast Asian, and Native American cultures.

In 1978, the same year as Eno's *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* was released, Hosono collaborated with graphic artist Yokō Tadanori on two landmark albums, the tropicalia-styled *Paraiso* (Alpha) and the electro-exotica experiment *Cochin Moon* (King Record). The later was the product of a trip Hosono and Yokō made together to India. The covers, featuring Yokō's signature collage aesthetic, share a number of features with Eno's contemporaneous *Ambient* albums. Like the pseudo-maps of *Ambient 1-4*, the surface of Yokō's images are cluttered, and perspectival depth is carefully avoided. The covers are cartographic in a way, but what they map is cultural icons rather than physical space—icons drawn from exotica, movie posters, and, increasingly, religion. Unlike Eno's quasi-scientific anonymity, Yokō's maps draw freely from popular culture and the rapidly-developing world of global tourism. The *Paraiso* cover imagines a seacoast where hula dancers, floating Buddhas, the Taj Mahal, the Manhattan skyline, a Polynesian choir, palm trees and cherry blossoms all come together on an equal plane. Rather than ambiguous borders, these maps are centered and balanced in a way that assumes a totality of representation, reaching all the way to the horizon. This is especially clear on the cover for *Cochin Moon*. A tribute to South Indian cinema posters, the cover also mimics the vertical and horizontal symmetry of a mandala (foreshadowing Inoue's later FAX covers).

Hosono was first introduced to Eno's Obscure Music label by Yokō during their *Cochin Moon* collaboration, but describes first seriously listening to ambient music through Sakamoto Ryūichi's influence during the early 1980s.¹⁵³ While Sakamoto had long been steeped in contemporary classical music, Hosono describes the early 1980s as the point where even a “pop music person” like himself began to listen to people like John Cage and Steve Reich in earnest.¹⁵⁴ The fourth YMO album, *BGM*, was released in March of 1981, and marked a shift to a darker and more atmospheric sound. Hosono notes this was in part due to criticism of the band's lightweight “cuteness,” and partly out of a desire to embrace the darker sounds coming out of Europe at the time. Hosono looks back on the album as one of the band's most important, a move away from the simple Kraftwerk-style technopop and towards something more complex and subtle.¹⁵⁵ *BGM* is still a pop album, but the more abstract electronic touches running throughout mark out a more ambient dimension of the bands sound, particularly on “Happy End” and “Loom.” The latter track closes the album with three minutes of soft echoing synth chords and distantly dripping water that would not be out of place on one of Eno's *Ambient* albums.¹⁵⁶

For Hosono, the “extremely free time” [*hijō ni jiyū na jikan*] of Eno's music made it an important part of his own musical self-care:

¹⁵² See Hosokawa, “Soy Sauce Music: Haruomi Hosono and Japanese Self-Orientalism.”

¹⁵³ Eno began the EMI sublabel *Obscure Music* (1975–1978) as a way to use his popularity to secure the distribution of then-unknown British composers like Gavin Bryars and Michael Nyman, as well as releasing recordings by Cage and his own early ambient experiment, *Discreet Music* (1975).

¹⁵⁴ Hosono, *The Endless Talking*, 209–10.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁵⁶ “Loom” features the work of YMO's sound programmer Matsutake Hideki, who in the early 1970s was an apprentice to the groundbreaking Japanese electronic composer Tomita Isao. Matsutake was reportedly turned onto electronic music at the age of 18 when hearing Walter Carlos's *Switched On Bach* at the American Pavillion at Expo '70. Tomita is often considered Carlos's Japanese equivalent, producing electronic interpretations of composers like Debussy and Stravinsky. Matsutake was reportedly turned onto electronic music at the age of 18 when hearing Walter Carlos's *Switched On Bach* at the American Pavillion at Expo '70. Tomita is often considered Carlos's Japanese equivalent, producing electronic interpretations of composers like Debussy and Stravinsky.

When the *Ambient* series came out, the music had a very psychological, healing effect on me, sort of like a tranquilizer. At that time in YMO we were doing really complicated, noisy music, but when I came home and listened to music, I would only listen to ambient. From that point on I suddenly started going much more in that direction, playing the synthesizer on my own and going to a very private place with the music. [...] I would put the *Ambient* series on auto play and let it run all day. I really listened to it as ambient music. It was incredibly refreshing. At the same time, among the so-called New Wave in London, there was a lot of this kind of thing, with musicians like Michael Nyman and the Flying Lizards. I was really influenced by this type of style. While on the one hand this was contemporary classical music through a pop filter, it also had a strong psychological pull. For me it was a really mysterious music, and other styles just couldn't compete.¹⁵⁷

One unique aspect of Hosono's public persona is how at the very same time as he was moving towards making extremely relaxing music, he was forthcoming about his own difficulties dealing with stress, particularly after achieving fame with YMO. In a 1984 interview with cognitive scientist Yoshinari Mayumi, he is starting to sound rather desperate:

Lately, I tend to get neurotic. There are some difficult times when I feel emotionally oppressed. At the same time as I feel it mentally, it also tends to manifest physically, and my stomach starts to hurt. I feel how the body and mind are connected. [...]

The only thing that helps me for stress relief is making music. I don't have any other way. It's like music is a place to deposit stress [laughs]. During YMO, I used to joke that music was my 'fatigue deposit box,' but lately this has become even more true, and it feels like it's reaching a critical stage. I really want to find some way to help use up all this tension [laughs].¹⁵⁸

Like Eno, Hosono has his own restorative backstory to explain his turn to ambient aesthetics, and like Eno, it involves broken bones and immobility after a fall. He discusses this in a very informal conversation from 2000 with former YMO bandmate Sakamoto:

Sakamoto: Speaking of YMO, I am wondering why you were so uptight in those days...

Hosono: I don't know. We were young.

S: [laughing] That's it?

H: Hmm, looking back now I think that was what 'youth' meant.

S: You were in your thirties then, Hosono. You were pretty high strung.

H: I wonder why I was so tense. Now I'm easy going. I think I've mellowed out after I broke my leg fifteen years ago. Until then I maintained that tense state from YMO. The environment around me was like that too... including the record label staff and the fans. I felt like I had to respond to that pressure all the time. But when I broke my leg, they gave up. If it had just been a fever or broken arm, they wouldn't have.

S: You couldn't walk [...]

H: I had just started thinking that I had no other choice but getting sick to get out of there, when I slipped and broke my leg in heavy snow. I had to take more than half a year off, and the people surrounding me just vanished. That's when I felt relief, you know. One month after I broke my leg, I took a 'real' rest for the first time in my life. I just stayed home, playing Nintendo and being goofy. One day I found whitish spots on my eyelids. My doctor told me that I had been under excessive stress and the spots were a kind of sign. Intracranial cholesterol is discharged from the eyelids via the hypothalamus. If it is not discharged, you retain it in your body, which is dangerous.¹⁵⁹

I have not been able to pin down the exact date of Hosono's accident, but fifteen years before this interview works out to 1984 or 1985—spookily, not long after the conversation with Yoshinari just quoted. As with Eno, a personal injury forces Hosono to slow down and rethink his music career, just as he was getting into ambient music as a style.

Hosono—born just ten months before Eno—decided to follow Eno's lead in shifting from vocal-based pop music to more abstract instrumentals. The similarities with Eno do not end there:

¹⁵⁷ Hosono, *The Endless Talking*, 236-38.

¹⁵⁸ Hosono and Yoshinari, *Gijutsu no higi, Shūkanbon (The Weekly Fluctuant Book)*, 66-67.

¹⁵⁹ Code, ed. *Unfinished*, 31-33.

both consider themselves more dabblers and experimenters than professional musicians¹⁶⁰. Both have cultivated an androgynous public image, working to undermine the machismo of the traditional rock star.¹⁶¹ And finally, both have lengthy resumé's not just as musicians but as producers of other bands, where they use electronic sound technology to work at length with the spatial and textural qualities of an artist's sound. Eno is often noted for developing the idea of the studio as a primary (sometimes *the* primary) instrument for creating atmospheric recordings. For Hosono, the computer was what allowed him both to step outside of the pop music scene and produce music by himself (for himself), and also to in a sense collaborate with the computer, using its complexity to introduce surprises into his usual compositional habits. For both, it was precisely the sculptural non-linearity of the studio/computer-based technology that allowed for a greater exploration of atmospheric styles. All of these qualities—the distance from traditional forms of musicianship, androgyny in both style and musical attitude, and the producer's ear for musical space—have helped define the ambient sound, echoing traits already found in earlier ambient predecessors like Satie and Cage.

In 1984, soon after Yellow Magic Orchestra disbanded, Hosono launched a series of recordings and books under the names “Non-Standard” and “Monad” (both as sub-labels of Teichiku records). The Monad series became his ambient label, where, like Eno, he released a series of four ambient works: *Coincidental Music*, *Mercuric Dance*, *The Endless Talking*, and *Paradise View* (all Teichiku/Monad, 1985). The first is a collection of Hosono's music for television commercials, the second, a score for an ambient video by Arai Tadayoshi, the third, music for an installation in Genova, Italy, and the fourth a soundtrack to the eponymous film by Takamine Go, part of the “new Okinawan cinema.”

In these albums Hosono mixes Eno's ambient influence with the exoticism of his 1970s work, all of which is infused with his own spiritual interests in the work of Carlos Castaneda and a range of indigenous cultures.¹⁶² In the book Hosono released to announce the new labels, *Globule* (1984), he introduces his aspirations to “dialogue with the earth:”

Non-standard also develops the ambient music started by Brian Eno to a global level and to converse with and respond to a dispatch from the earth.¹⁶³

This image of the “earth” emerges here in the mid-1980s as a marker of globality absent in Eno's more proximate and partial landscapes of the preceding years. Hosono introduces the term *sightseeing music* [*kankō ongaku*] to describe his ambient works, as a variation on *environmental music* [*kankyō ongaku*], the phrase most often used to translate Eno's 'ambient music' into Japanese.¹⁶⁴ With these shifts Hosono brought ambient music into dialogue with the emergent genre of “World Music” and the larger boom in spiritual tourism occurring in Japan in the mid-1980s.

¹⁶⁰ Eno lacks formal musical training, and Hosono, despite playing the bass, says even after decades in the industry he still feels like music is just a hobby. Hosono, “Taidan: Nakazawa Shinichi - Yutaka ni torikomu ‘joseisei,’” 73.

¹⁶¹ Eno often performed in drag during his Roxy Music years, while Hosono plays with his gender appearance in images like the cover image on Haruomi Hosono with Friends Of Earth's *S.F.X.* (Another Record Company, 1984). Nakazawa proposes that Hosono's music is about exploring femininity from the guise of a male musician. *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁶² Hosono would later make a trip to the United States to visit Hopi reservations as part of a television documentary.

¹⁶³ Hosono, *Globule*, 175 (originally in English). Cited in Thaemlitz, “GLOBULE of NON-STANDARD,” 97.

¹⁶⁴ Here Hosono is possibly referencing Nakamura Hiroshi's Sightseeing Art Research Laboratory [*Kankō geijutsu kenkyūjo*], a project running from 1964-66 along the Tama river near Shinjuku (Tokyo). With Sightseeing Art Nakamura aimed for a similar variation on the “environmental art” [*kankyō geijutsu*] genre emergent at the time.

Marilyn Ivy has documented the rising interest in rural sites in Tōhoku (Northeastern Japan) like Tōnō and Mount Osore in the 1970s, all part of a larger desire for atmospheres of primal mystery and folk cultures resistant to the rationalizations of modernity. The empty rural landscapes featured in Dentsū's long running *Discover Japan* domestic travel campaign transformed into more explicitly other-worldly sites with the introduction in 1984 of the *Exotic Japan* [*Ekizochikku Japan*] campaign, focused on esoteric destinations like Mount Kōya. Travel beyond Japan's borders was also increasingly available as a means to engage these exotic realms. New tourist infrastructures and increasing purchasing power in the 1970s and 1980s allowed unprecedented numbers of Japanese to leave the country and explore. The mass media was eager to show the way, as in NHK's popular series *The Silk Road* (1980-84, 1988-89).¹⁶⁵ Hosono had just completed his own more literal forms of spiritual tourism, traveling around Japan to various religious sites as part of a project with religious studies scholar Nakazawa Shinichi (discussed in the following chapter), as well as to record *Mercuric Dance*.

The landscapes on offer in Hosono's ambient works shift from the hazy New York fossils of Eno's early ambience to the "paradise view" of global tourism, offering up the imaginary atmospheres of exotic cultures for affective consumption by the urban listener.¹⁶⁶ With the rise of the tourist landscape, the world became affectively mapped, with certain locations deemed more calm and atmospheric than others. In this respect Hosono's sightseeing music stands as an early precursor to the cultural appropriations of major label 'ambient world music' releases of the 1990s like Enigma's *MCMXC a.D.* (Virgin, 1990) and Deep Forest's self-titled debut (*550 Music* (Sony), 1993).

In a recent discussion with Nakazawa Shinichi in a *Studio Voice* issue devoted to Hosono, the two of them look back on ambient music as a precursor to contemporary environmental movements, noting how the genre presented a more integrated perspective of the Earth as a whole. The image of the Earth from space gradually entered into consciousness as a new form of self-awareness. This new subjective awareness envisions the human life less as isolated individuals and more as part of an integrated ecological system. Nakazawa also points out that ambience allowed for a form of spirituality and religion that wasn't tied to any particular tradition, seeking instead to bring everyone together under the sign of the "Earth."¹⁶⁷

While the 'whole Earth' image was new, exoticism and atmosphere have long been close associates. David Toop has traced the origins of ambient music back to Claude Debussy's visit to the Paris Exposition of 1889, where he first witnessed performances of music and dance from Java, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Japan. The more dispersed modes of attention called for in these musical styles emerged soon after in Debussy's compositions. Toop cites this as a crucial moment in the lineage of ambient listening leading up through Eno and on toward the present day. Debussy was not alone in his growing interest in an atmospheric "Asia," an aesthetic trajectory shared by

¹⁶⁵ Ivy argues that this switch to the "exotic" was spurred on in part by the popularity of campaigns around the time to mark the 1,150th anniversary of the passing of Kūkai (Kōbō-Daishi), the founder of Shingon esoteric Buddhism and a highly influential importer of continental ideas into Japan. Mount Kōya, the center of Kūkai's religious legacy, was chosen as Exotic Japan's first featured destination, as the site features a rich mix of early Indian and Chinese religious influences rarely seen in Japan. See Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*, 48.

¹⁶⁶ See Marilyn Ivy's discussion of the *Discover Japan* campaign for more on the introduction of empty landscape imagery into Japanese tourism discourses. *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁶⁷ Hosono, "Taidan: Nakazawa Shinichi - Yutaka ni torikomu 'joseisei,'" 73. Hosono released his own remix/remake of Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalogue* in 1986, entitled the *F.O.E. Manual*. F.O.E. stands for Friends of Earth, one of his environmentally-themed ambient music side projects of the mid-80s. (Hosono Haruomi, *F.O.E. Manual*). On the history of the Earth image, see Garb, "The Use and Misuse of the Whole Earth Image."

many of the most influential European writers and artists of the period.¹⁶⁸ Later ambient musicians in Japan, meanwhile, drew freely from the work of these European and American composers as well as from the work of pioneering Japanese electronic musicians drawing on their work, such as Tomita Isao's early synthesizer renditions of Debussy, *Snowflakes are Dancing* (1974).

The Pliocene Coast

At the same time, Hosono's take on ambience brings the genre further out of the mimetic urban landscape, and closer to a landscape of pure fantasy and imagination. Hosono's ambient styles range from psychedelic improvisations based on alchemical concepts (*Mercuric Dance*); atmospheres inflected by traditional music (particularly gamelan, north Indian classical music, Okinawan folk, and early Japanese music); abstract synth workouts (as on *Cochin Moon*, *Paradise View*, *Naga*); dub (*N.D.E.*); and collaged field recordings ("Birthday Party"). Here I want to introduce one track sitting at the junction of Hosono's ambient tracks and his more pop-format work, "Pleocene." The track reappears in various forms on a number of Hosono releases over the course of the 1980s, serving as a kind of musical manifesto of his approach to ambient atmospheres.

"Pleocene" appears as the final track on Hosono Haruomi's *omni Sight Seeing ~ A Guide for Astral Trip* (1989 Epic/Sony, 1989). The track adds lyrics and a new arrangement to a cue originally scored for Hosono's soundtrack to *Night on the Galactic Railroad* [*Ginga tetsudō no yoru*], Sugii Gisaburō's 1985 animated adaptation of the classic Miyazawa Kenji novella. The original cue accompanies Giovanni and Campanella's visit to the mysterious Pliocene Coast, a subterranean beach full of glowing crystals and fossilized walnuts, where time seems to have collapsed upon itself. Hosono's deeply relaxing melody for the Pliocene sequence is one of the most memorable parts of his score for the film, and it is easy to understand why he would decide to bring the theme back several times in his later work.

The 1989 version adds a relaxed hip-hop beat and slap base, and backs up the melody with a keyboard wrapped in warm reverb and tailed by a long decay. A sample of singing peacocks opens and closes the track. Hosono's voice is at its softest here. The relaxed melody pauses for a moment after every few notes, as if in no hurry to decide where to go next. At the bridge, a seamless range of 'world-music' sounds flow by: shakers and a kalimba, then a koto, a female Japanese chorus singing in a traditional style, and finally a sarangi. The peacocks come back in to close out the piece.

As the lyrics make clear, for Hosono the "Pleocene" (he uses a variant spelling) serves as an idyllic site of tranquility and relaxation [*Italicized lyrics originally in English*]:

The door opens in the depths of a dream
Towards where the peacocks are headed
Glittering sea, Pleocene

¹⁶⁸ David Toop, *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds*, 18. For a history of these interests, see J. J. Clark, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. This proclivity to locate ambience in a more illegible and unfamiliar foreign locale—be it the exotic East or the exotic West—continues into ambient literature. Ann Sherif writes of Yoshimoto Banana's interest in the "supernatural potential of exoticized Asian otherworlds," pointing to the Bali setting in *Amrita* (1994). At other times, the healing exotic is located in Europe, as in Murakami Haruki's Greek isles in *Sputnik* (*Sweetheart Supuo toniku no koibito*, 1999) or the Francophile hotel of Kurita's *Hôtel Mole* (see Chapter 8).

*What a silent lagoon, peacocks are dancing
The sea lit by the moon, in Pleocene*

On the quiet shore peacocks are dancing
Quiet soul wrapped in waves
Home of the Gods, Pleocene
*What a tranquility
This oceanic feeling
Feel a spirit behind, in Pleocene*

*Walking through the door
To the subterranean shore
I follow the peacocks as they sing like
Ooh la la la*

The quivering song, endless spring
Swaying quietly, the internal beach
Subterranean sea, Pleocene

The lyrics clearly reference the scene in *Night on the Galactic Railroad* when Giovanni and Campanella open the door to leave Swan Station and descend a long staircase down to the Pleocene Coast. As the animated version makes clear, the Pliocene is a space where the ordinary laws of physics have been replaced by a more “free” time-space where multiple planes of reality exist side-by-side, and each is topologically coextensive with Giovanni’s personal memories and inner consciousness. This malleable internal space is Hosono’s image of ambient music: an exploded interiority where arcane memories are rendered sensible as deep cosmic time. The music itself is like a door down to this alternate space, a passage affording an esoteric journey towards quiet mysteries.

In the liner notes to *omni Sight Seeing*, Hosono contrasts the tranquility of the inner Pliocene with the harried pace of the contemporary world, and describes the former as a “peacock’s path” leading to an unknown oceanic feeling. Peacocks appear in Kenji’s original text for *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, albeit not in the animated version Hosono scored. In the pop version Hosono mixes Kenji’s peacock image with another potent symbol of tranquility, the peacock found in esoteric Buddhist iconography, who is said to eat the poisonous thoughts of humans, bringing them peace.¹⁶⁹

Hosono, with his longstanding interest in esoteric spirituality, comes to ambient music as a way to afford peaceful oceanic feelings in both listeners and in himself. As Yoshinari notes in her 1984 conversation with Hosono, in the distant past music was a form of therapy, a way to create spaces where people could come and feel better. In response, Hosono claims this rediscovery of music’s role as an environmental healer is the most interesting aspect of recent electronic music.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ The esoteric Buddhist deity Mahāmāyūrī [*Kujyakumyōō*] is depicted riding a peacock [*kujyaku*]. Explanations of this connection explain how the peacock was originally considered compassionate towards humans, as it would eat insects and snakes dangerous to them. This became metaphorically associated with the idea of young peacocks eating the poisonous thoughts of humans as well. The deity came to Japan in the Nara period and can be found in certain Shingon rituals. □ One of the most famous Mahāmāyūrī figures is on Mount Kōya in Wakayama prefecture.

¹⁷⁰ Hosono and Yoshinari, *Gijutsu no higi, Shūkanbon (The Weekly Fluctuant Book)*, 66-67.

For Hosono, ambient represents much more than a genre of music, designating a larger way for thinking informed both by spirituality and environmental concepts like LOHAS and ecology.¹⁷¹ Nakazawa Shinichi notes that like minimalism, ambient thinking doesn't want anything extra included, focusing more specifically on the feelings involved in religious experience.¹⁷² As Hosono describes in the recent essay collection *Ambient Driver*, "ambient is less a particular style of music, and more a word designating a certain mental state."¹⁷³ In a 1998 panel discussion on "Neo-Shamanism" at the NTT InterCommunication Center, Hosono describes the subsequent spread of ambient styles in the 90s as rooted in this "very private place" of ambient aesthetics:

Since the beginning of the 1990s I had been doing mostly ambient music, which was like an ocean of music to me. The people from the younger generations of the pop music world began creating their music from an "oceanic feeling" sensibility from the beginning of the '90s. Ambient was originally associated with a more ecological context, but this was mistaken. Ambient is the musical form with the greatest reach, or periphery of attraction—in short, from the expanses of one's deeper interior. And in making ambient music I came to the realization that it is definitely not an external environment, but rather the internal ambience that has this "oceanic feeling."¹⁷⁴

Here Hosono comes close to admitting that despite all of the trappings of exotic cultures that adorn his ambient work from the 1980s, in a sense these are all merely serving as aesthetic affordances for his own (and his listener's) inner feelings of limitless calm.

Oceanic Isolationism

The term "oceanic feeling" is associated most strongly with Sigmund Freud, but actually comes from his friend and interlocutor, the religious studies scholar Romain Rolland. Freud had sent a copy of his *The Future of an Illusion* to Rolland after its publication. Rolland responded in a letter that though he agreed with Freud's comments there on religion, he felt the "true source of religious sentiments" had been left out: a feeling of limitless, unbounded eternity Rolland called the "oceanic feeling." In the opening pages of his following work, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud describes being greatly troubled by the letter, and admits to being unable to discover this oceanic feeling within himself. He then attempts an explanation, describing a process where by the ego begins with this feeling of wholeness, with no distinction between inside and outside, but as it matures "gradually separates off an external world from itself."¹⁷⁵ What remains of the oceanic feeling for adults is a remnant of this original feeling of eternity. While the remaining oceanic feeling "might seek something like the restoration of limitless narcissism, it is ousted from its place in the foreground." Notably, Freud ends the discussion on a conciliatory note, admitting that there may indeed be something more to Rolland's feeling than the "feeling of infantile helplessness," but that "for the present it is wrapped in obscurity."¹⁷⁶

As William B. Parson's suggests in his study of the concept, two contrasting attitudes are proposed in Freud's reading: the oceanic feeling as "regressive and defensive," on the one hand, or "therapeutic and adaptive," on the other.¹⁷⁷ The atmospheres afforded by ambient media lean

¹⁷¹ Hosono, "Taidan: Nakazawa Shinichi - Yutaka ni torikommu 'joseisei,'" 73. LOHAS (*rohassu*), a key marketing term in Japanese eco-branding, stands for Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Hosono, *Ambiento doraivā*, 18, author's translation.

¹⁷⁴ "Towards a Culture of *Ex-stase*: The Appearance of *Intensive Expanse* in the Digital Realm," panel discussion at the NTT InterCommunications Center, Tokyo, with Minato Chihiro, Nakazawa Shinichi, Hosono Haruomi, and Itō Toshimaru, 168-179.

¹⁷⁵ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 15.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

¹⁷⁷ Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism*, 109.

towards this feeling of oceanic limitlessness, and it is not surprising that debates over the social implications of the style play out along similar lines to the Freud-Rolland exchange.

Miyadai Shinji argues in *Living the Endless Everyday* that the turn towards religion (and particularly apocalyptic religious visions) across the 1980s in many animated works was driven by a psychological desire to transcend ordinary everyday struggles and live in a heightened state of awareness. Miyadai reads this in retrospect as a key to understanding the appeal of 1990s apocalyptic cults like Aum Shinri Kyō as well as the psychological desires fueling the disaster volunteer boom in the wake of the 1995 Kobe earthquake: a desire for the clutter and complexity to be swept away in order to usher in a post-apocalyptic fresh start.

Ambient music often has its own post-apocalyptic dimensions. Simon Reynolds published a remarkable analysis of ambient music in *Artforum* in 1995. He describes a shift from a warm and fuzzy Eno-esque ambient style towards what Kevin Martin has dubbed “isolationism.”¹⁷⁸ He notes that while isolationism maintains the general ambient emphasis on texture and timbre, as well as a lack of rhythm and musical events, the new isolationist ambience introduces a more explicit feeling of unease. Following David Toop, Reynolds describes this sensation of “nonspecific dread” as the flip side to the more utopian ambient styles’ “nonspecific bliss:”

With isolationism, the absence of narrative signifies not utopia but entropy, paralysis. But there's still a neurotic jouissance to be gleaned from this music; it's a victory over what Brian Massumi calls "ambient fear," the omnipresent low-level anxiety of the late-20th-century mediascape. By immersing yourself in the phobic, you make it your element.¹⁷⁹

As Reynolds goes on to argue, isolationism envisions utopia as an empty space, where all signifiers of social life have been evacuated. He cites literary critic John Carey on the modernist fantasy of apocalypse, which Carey sees as a response to overpopulation. Reynolds sees in this a “kind of estheticized death wish,” a “near-monastic impulse” to flee the endless turnover of pop culture, turning away from an already weakened social solidarity to “revert to an inanimate, inorganic state, free of the irritation of fleshly, animal desire.” Pushed a bit further, the music seems to point towards a sublime death-drive, “caught between terror and private aesthetic rapture, resulting in a near mystical experience.”¹⁸⁰

While Reynolds sets up a contrast between nonspecific bliss and nonspecific dread, as a way to distinguish the two styles of ambience, in practice most ambient music falls somewhere in between: peaceful, but woven through with a muted “nonspecific” sadness, and with implications, if indirect, of a kind of post-apocalyptic cleansing.

Bliss and dread both refer to feelings too intense to describe the low-affect drift that most ambient music settles into. But Reynolds is prescient when he notes how ambience is a curious sort of anesthetic that relieves pain and anxiety at the same time as it registers the loss of what had to be given up in order to achieve this relief (namely, social identity and belonging). This nonspecific feeling of uncertainty is cited again and again by ambient artists as the difference between their work and the more truly blissed-out self-contentment of works marketed as “new age” or “healing.”¹⁸¹ Much ambient music seems to say “it may be lonely here, but at least it is peaceful.” It is understandable then that to many critics this kind of isolationism feels like a retreat, a flight from the painful work of social engagement.

¹⁷⁸ Martin went on to curate the landmark fourth volume in Virgin UK’s “A Short History of Ambient” series, also called *Isolationism*.

¹⁷⁹ Reynolds, *Artforum*. See also Brian Massumi’s preface to *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, vii-i.

¹⁸⁰ Doyle, *Echo & Reverb*, 77.

¹⁸¹ As in Brian Eno’s initial comments in the liner notes to *Ambient 1*: “Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities.”

As I am arguing here, however, it is dangerous to read ambient aesthetics purely in psychological terms, as this obscures the larger social pressures pushing the desire for the soft fascinations of the nonspecific. For example, the desire for the experience of “free time” [*jūyū na jikan*] afforded by ambient aesthetics must be understood in a larger contemporary context where time is increasingly regimented and controlled. Generally speaking, following on from post-nineteenth century industrialization what Deleuze and Guattari call the “wage regime” serves to “impose the work-model upon every activity, translate every act into possible or virtual work, discipline free action, or else (which amounts to the same thing) relegate it to ‘leisure,’ which exists only in reference to work.”¹⁸² In response, a strong desire emerged across the twentieth century for spaces of refuge from this enforced productivity.

Joe Milutis points to this desire in his history of the cultural imagination of ‘ether’ as an “anesthetic fetish” that unites all this seeming complexity and isn’t beholden to ordinary temporal pressures.¹⁸³ This evacuated space brings the eternal calm of the eternal Now, affording an atmosphere where everything feels like just so much water under the bridge. Hosono’s Pleocene Coast is such a place.

Eno makes this connection explicit in his comments on creating *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. He recalls thinking that a BGM for airports

has to have something to do with where you are and what you’re there for—flying, floating, and, secretly, flirting with death. I thought, “I want to make a kind of music that prepares you for dying—that doesn’t get all bright and cheerful and pretend you’re not a little apprehensive, but which makes you say to yourself, ‘Actually, it’s not that big a deal if I die’.”¹⁸⁴

Ambient aesthetics affords this “it’s not that big a deal” attitude of calm integration to be used when encountering the world at large. Following from Cage’s Zen-associated emphasis on non-intentionality, ambient media helps cultivate a low-affect subjectivity, where even death is not such a crisis.

Peter Doyle notes the environmental dimensions of this kind of oceanic self-dispersal:

The experience of music perhaps is at its most intense for both listener and musician when this oceanic sense of immersion is invoked, when the listener is simultaneously contained within a larger, extrapersonal sonic regime, and contains the music within him/herself, where the external music and the most private, personal affect are in accord. The listener/musician immersed in his own ocean of sound is simultaneously agent and object of the music. The listener is contained within the (nondespotic) territory of the music; simultaneously, the music intimately resides within the territory of the self. The satisfactions associated with the “oceanic mode” of musical apprehension might be seen as either a reaching back—a (temporary) recuperation of a long-lost imaginary—or as a reaching forward, a momentary breach of the quotidian sense of the small “self” irrevocably alienated from the larger world, a temporary participation in larger worlds. Both constructions are consistent with a notion of participation, the integration of the self into suprapersonal cybernetic networks.¹⁸⁵

While Doyle is describing a recorded musical performance here, he could just as easily be describing the experience of a headphoned listener wandering the city while mixing her own personal soundtrack on the fly. In this situation, however, the acoustics of the recorded music mix with the acoustics of the physically inhabited space, enhancing or undermining each other in various ways. Whether or not the music directly integrates the immediate environment (as in Vawter’s *Ambient Addition*), the sonic architecture of ambient music helps to render felt space

¹⁸² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 490.

¹⁸³ Milutis, *Ether: The Nothing that Connects Everything*, 72.

¹⁸⁴ Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices*

295; Quoted in Sun, *Experiments in Musical Performance: Historiography, Politics, and the Post-Cagian Avant-Garde*, 85

¹⁸⁵ Doyle, *Echo & Reverb*, 77.

oceanic, opening up a listener to impersonal forces circulating about her as she moves in and among them.

Following on from this more ecological perspective, we might conceive of the oceanic feeling as not (just) a withdrawal into "infantile narcissism," but as one variety of phenomenological experience achieved with and through the atmospheric affordances of the surrounding environment. For example, a classroom lecture situation is usually oriented explicitly towards interpersonal oral and visual communication, structured by the orientation of the desks and chairs, the walls largely blocking out external noise and visual stimulation, the overhead lighting and climate controlled air focused on alert concentration. But if we turn off the lights, open the windows, remove the desks, and ask people to slowly move around the space without speaking and with eyes half-closed, the affordances of the space shift away from social interaction and towards a sensation of the body as part of a larger environment. Neither set of affordances are more 'real' than the other; rather, they each work to encourage a particular set of responses and discourage others.

As this example indicates, these differences in orientation are something that can be deliberately designed for. Atmospheres—including the more imaginative spaces generated by ambient music—fall somewhere on a continuum between subjective and objective, private and public. As in the classroom example, all that may be needed to switch from one side to the other is to flip the light switch. Some environments are more likely to afford social interaction and interpersonal exchange, while others more easily afford an oceanic perspective. This depends not only on the psychic needs of the observer, but on the aesthetics of the surrounding atmosphere.

In a discussion of Hosono's ambient work, Nakazawa describes ambience as a process whereby each person "returns home and reconnects with their self," set aside from their immediate social subjectivity, "transforming into an individual drop, facing the ocean and returning impersonalized to this larger flow."¹⁸⁶ This is, in a few words, the narrative of *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, where Giovanni leaves his waking social identity behind to spend a night exploring his ambient self in his dream of a train crossing the heavens. Hosono composed the score for the animated film version in the winter of 1984, at the height of his ambient period. The story, particularly in its animated form, follows Giovanni to an oceanic space where, similar to what Doyle describes above, impersonal environmental sensations and internal emotions can come into alignment. The next chapter charts out the film's atmospheric rendering of emotion, one of the high marks of Japanese animation and a masterpiece of ambient cinema.

¹⁸⁶ In Nakazawa's words, "*hitori hitori ga ko ni kaetteitte, ko ni modotta eki ga umi ni mukatteiku tōtō to nagareteiku.*" Hosono, "Taidan: Nakazawa Shinichi - Yutaka ni torikomu 'joseisei,'" 73.

[5. A Blue Cat on the Galactic Railroad]

As the story opens, Giovanni is struggling. His father is away on what appears to be an illegal hunting trip and is late returning home, something his classmates at school never tire of teasing him about. On top of this his mother is bedridden with illness, so that Giovanni must work before and after school delivering papers and setting type at a print shop. As a result he has no time left to study or to make friends. On the night of a town festival, Giovanni escapes the festivities (and further teasing) to head alone up to a nearby hill, where he lays down on the grass and nods off to sleep while gazing at the stars, thinking about the astronomy lesson on the Milky Way he heard in class earlier that day. Moments later he finds himself a passenger on a giant railroad moving across this very same galaxy. On the seat facing him he finds Campanella, the only one of his classmates to stand up for him at school and the closest thing he has to a friend. As the train progresses across the galaxy it passes through a wide range of mystical landscapes, each tied to a particular star constellation, as well as the Christian and Buddhist heavens. As the boys encounter a wide range of mysterious characters and sights along the way, Giovanni gradually realizes that the train serves in part as transportation to the afterlife for the dead. This includes Campanella, who Giovanni later learns had drowned in the town's local river during the festivities that evening while trying to save their classmate Zanelli. Giovanni wakes from his dream with a vow to follow Campanella's self-sacrificing example and work for the happiness of all people.

This is roughly the story of Miyazawa Kenji's fairy tale *Night on the Galactic Railroad* (*Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, 1934; also known by the Esperanto title *Nokto de la Galaksia Fervojo*; hereafter, *Ginga*), which follows Giovanni as he leaves his worldly troubles behind and embarks on a mystical voyage across the heavens. At the same time, Giovanni drifts off into a lucid dream, drawing elements from his past memories on the fly to generate new imaginative landscapes through which he can work through his emotional relation to the individuals and objects he shares the world with. This dream aspect of Giovanni's evening—and how his dreams generate ambient atmospheres giving spatial form to Giovanni's more worldly emotions—helps articulate just how these imaginary galactic landscapes relate back to the opening and closing of the story, where Giovanni is enmeshed in a set of fraught social relations back on Earth. This is especially evident in the 1985 animated film version, which vibrantly manifests Kenji's¹⁸⁷ sparsely described landscapes using a full range of ambient visual and sound techniques. Strangely enough, the vast existing literature on the original *Ginga* text pays scant attention to how Giovanni is dreaming during his travels, preferring to pick apart the complex mythological and religious iconography Kenji weaves through the tale.¹⁸⁸

My approach here is different: drawing on recent dream research, I explore how the animated *Ginga* deploys ambient dream atmospheres to allow Giovanni—and, in a different way, filmgoers—to integrate affect and percept, feeling and environment, through the dream creation of panoramic interiors. Within dream landscapes, personal emotions are seamlessly merged with porous imaginative atmospheres, and the two seem to be constantly feeding back into one another. This, I argue, is key to both ambient aesthetics and to the social-emotional dynamic of the dream.

Imaginative landscapes have an intimate relationship with dream states. Writing on the exotic spatial imaginary of Hawaiian music, Doyle notes how its

primary mode is the hypnagogic state, the intermediate zone between full consciousness and deep sleep, in which the rational "daytime" mind-set and the surrealistic succession of dream images briefly coexist. Hypnagogic states are typically experienced for a brief period as one drifts off to (deeper) sleep, or immediately after waking, before full consciousness takes hold. Defenses are down. Anything could happen. Anything might be imagined.¹⁸⁹

The hypnagogic state in-between waking and sleeping becomes legible in *Ginga* as the place where the mundane pressures of everyday life merge with the most rarified and exotic landscapes imaginable. The half-asleep state of lucid dreaming allows for a subject to merge with an atmosphere built out of memory and mediated by the objects and individuals encountered during waking life.

Kenji wrote *Ginga* near the end of his life, and was still revising it when he passed away of tuberculosis at the age of 37. The work was published posthumously, and quickly gained a following that has only grown since. The story has been adopted many times, including television, dance, and opera productions.¹⁹⁰ Among the many adaptations the most influential is the theatrical

¹⁸⁷ I follow Japanese custom here in referring to Miyazawa by his personal name.

¹⁸⁸ Academic approaches to Kenji's work, such as the detailed study of *Ginga* by Irizawa and Amazawa, have understandably devoted their efforts to unraveling the many elusive strands of Kenji's complex and idiosyncratic mixture of Buddhism, Christianity, global folklore, astronomy and biology. Much of this research helped inform visual details within Group TAC's film, such as where in the train car Giovanni and Campanella were seated (a question Amazawa and Irizawa address with a remarkable number of charts). Irizawa and Amazawa, *Tōgi: "Ginga tetsudō no yoru" to wa nani ka*.

¹⁸⁹ Doyle, *Echo & Reverb*, 131.

¹⁹⁰ For example, I attended a butoh performance based on *Ginga* held in a Buddhist temple in Nara in 2002. More recently, a *Ginga* opera opened in 2010 in Setagaya, Tokyo. The story is also the source of the prevalent "space

anime version released by Group TAC in 1985. The film helped spur *Ginga*'s popularity to even greater heights in the 1980s, and cemented the importance of the work among a younger generation of viewers.¹⁹¹

At the time of its release the film was advertised as a high-profile project bringing together well-known creators from a number of fields. The director was Sugii Gisaburō, a disciple of Osamu Tezuka who had worked under him on *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu*) in the 1960s and later received accolades as animation director for Mushi Pro's provocative if commercially unsuccessful *Belladonna of Sadness* (*Kanashimi no Beradona*, 1973). Seminal avant-garde theater director and playwright Betsuyaku Minoru wrote the script adapting Kenji's story. Hosono Haruomi composed the melodious electronic score, fresh from the global stardom of YMO.

The film was well received at the time and has remained popular in subsequent years. Over a decade after its original release the film was revived for a Tokyo theatrical screening in 1996, and a remastered DVD version appeared in 2002.¹⁹² The film has also been screened in planetariums alongside star shows teaching the constellations featured in the film.¹⁹³

While on one level *Ginga*, like much of Kenji's work, features a rich mix of Buddhist and Christian imagery, folklore, and science, above all the work is an exploration of emotion: Giovanni's feelings of loneliness and grief, and their transformation over the course of one night of dream-travel, where the dream state allows Giovanni to explore both the internal cosmos and the external cosmos simultaneously. Otō Yōko alludes to this in her review of the film in *Kinema Junpō*, where she notes that the most important thing about *Ginga* is the feeling it gives that "every cell of our bodies is part of the universe, while our bodies constitute a universe in themselves."¹⁹⁴

This expansive feeling emerges early in the film each time Giovanni turns away from the pain of immediate social exclusion in order to gaze up at the stars soaring above him. Giovanni performs this gesture many times throughout the film. Every time he is teased he looks up at the sky as if looking for consolation from the heavens. When he is once again mocked during the festival dancing in the town square, he runs away to find solitude on a hill overlooking town and ponder the expanses of the galaxy above.

This turning away from the pain of social encounters towards a type of cosmic solitude is a central feature of Kenji's work. In her dissertation on Kenji's poetry, Sarah M. Strong describes Kenji's vision of the sky as "an oceanic vastness, a sacredness into which he hoped to merge his own limited identity."¹⁹⁵ The cosmology put forth in his work moves from a social, emotionally painful realm near the Earth's surface into gradually purifying layers of increasing "brightness, pleasantness, and ecstasy." This culminates in the far reaches of the Milky Way, where Kenji locates the Christian and Buddhist heavens.

train" imagery of many manga and anime, most notably Matsumoto Leiji's *Ginga tetsudō 999* (*Galaxy Express 999*, 1977-1987).

¹⁹¹ If the viewer comments that scroll across clips from Group TAC's *Ginga* on Nikoniko dōga are any indication, many of the film's current fans first were introduced to it as children, either in theaters or on video. Nikoniko dōga is a popular Japanese video website similar to Youtube, but with the notable feature of users being able to sync their comments to the timecode of the video, and watch other's comments stream across the top of the screen as the video plays.

¹⁹² "Ginga tetsudō no yoru' tokubetsu jyōeikai" (*Night on the Galactic Railroad* Special Screening), *Asahi Shinbun*, July 16, 1996. Central Park Media released an English-subtitled version on VHS and later on DVD.

¹⁹³ The most recent screening of this kind was in the city of Jōyō, outside of Osaka, in 2006. "Seiza o bakku ni 'Ginga tetsudō no yoru'" (*Night on the Galactic Railroad* Against the Stars), *Asahi Shinbun*, July 4, 2006.

¹⁹⁴ Otō Yōko, "Ginga tetsudō no yoru' Sugii Gisaburō kantoku ni kiku" (Speaking with *Night on the Galactic Railroad* Director Sugii Gisaburō), 64.

¹⁹⁵ These and the following quotes are from Strong, *The Poetry of Miyazawa Kenji*, 198, 380, 390.

In addition to the ethereal realms of the Milky Way, Kenji posits an intermediary realm of shifted perception at the Earth's surface, an "atmospheric" environment superimposed on the everyday reality of human life. Strong describes this atmospheric surface layer as "a realm of the imagination where the brightness and magic [Kenji] associates with the upper space can work upon the objects of everyday reality, transforming them in subtle ways." This transformed reality brings a sensitivity to "intricate convulsions of light," entailing a "process of seeing the world with new or strange eyes." In his poetry, Kenji first names this space "Atmospheric Japan" [*kiken Nihon*], though he later took to identifying this alternate world with the Esperanto-derived name Ihatov [*Ihatōvu*], Kenji's name for his own Iwate prefecture "transformed by imagination."¹⁹⁶ In the preface to his first book of stories, Kenji describes Ihatov as

a dreamland that really exists in the mind of the author [...] There, everything is possible. One can instantly jump over the field of snow and ice to travel toward the north, riding the great wind that circles around the earth, or one can talk with ants that crawl under the red cups of flowers....¹⁹⁷

This move into imagination is both macrocosmic and microcosmic. The atmosphere here entails an expansion of the frame from immediate human concerns to ecologies both larger and smaller, from the impersonal forces of the universe to the most private personal emotions.

Travel Beyond the Familiar

While Kenji's interests were unusual among Japanese narratives at the time he was writing, by the time of Group TAC's film in the 1980s the type of ambient animation found in *Ginga* was very much in vogue. The film can be placed in a distinguished line of mid-1980s theatrical anime drawing on both religious imagery and scientific discovery to depict human civilization as but a small part of an expanded emotional ecology, often one with heavy atmospheric overtones. To name but a few: the sombre ruminations on time and evolution in Oshii Mamoru's directorial debut, *Angel's Egg* (*Tenshi no Tamago*, 1985), the first Gainax feature, *Royal Space Force: The Wings of Honneamise* (*Ōritsu uchūgun Oneamise no tsubasa*, Yamaga Hiroyuki, 1987), and the interspecies explorations in Miyazaki Hayao's *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* (*Kaze no tani no Naushika*, 1984). The first two films in particular present quiet, ethereal, post-apocalyptic spaces as sites of ethical renewal and emotional purity. While their animation styles are diverse, all of these films present characters moving beyond familiar social contexts to find emotional meaning in the abstract forces of a larger cosmos.¹⁹⁸

These films were part of a rising number of works featuring ambient sequences or interludes, often drawing on enhanced sound reproduction technology to deploy more spatialized and immersive theatrical experiences.¹⁹⁹ The ambient elements of later animated films like *Akira* (Ōtomo Katsuhiro, 1988) and *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kōkaku kidōtai*, Oshii Mamoru, 1995)²⁰⁰ came

¹⁹⁶ Strong notes how Kenji emphasizes the spatial volume of this vastness in his poetry by using the more scientific word for atmosphere, *kiken*, rather than the more everyday *kūki* [air] or *sora* [sky]. Strong, *The Poetry of Miyazawa Kenji*, 193.

¹⁹⁷ Quoted and translated in Hagiwara, "Innocent and the Other World: The Tales of Miyazawa Kenji," 244.

¹⁹⁸ We must also mention here the other important animated Kenji adaptation from the period, Takahata Isao's *Sero hiki no Gōshu* (*Gauche the Cellist*, 1982). While thematically and stylistically distinct from these other works, *Goshu* presents another version of Kenji's enchanted Iwatov atmosphere.

¹⁹⁹ On the rise of Dolby in 1980s science fiction, see Whittington, *Sound Design and Science Fiction*.

²⁰⁰ The famous rain sequence in *Ghost in the Shell* marks the apex of ambient animation in Japanese features, coming a full decade after *Ginga* and *Angel's Egg*. The sequence features numerous landscape shots of a dense East Asian city reminiscent of Hong Kong, full of neon signs drenched in pouring rain and woven through with canals and other bodies of water. The music, "Ghost City" by Kawai Kenji, features warmly reverberant synths, watery chimes, and taiko drums. A female chorus mixes traditional Japanese vocal styles with the spectral vocal microintervals of Le

to draw on the exotic and dystopian ambience of a future cybernetic city with marked “East Asian” overtones, as introduced in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), with its ambient Vangelis-scored soundtrack.²⁰¹ This was a clear departure from earlier sci-fi animated features like the *Ginga*-inspired *Galaxy Express 999* (*Ginga tetsudō surii nain*, Rintaro, 1979) and *Macross: Do You Remember Love?* (*Chōjīkū yōsai Makurosu: Ai oboete imasu ka?*, Kawamori Shōji and Ishiguro Noburo, 1984), both of which primarily paired pop music with their space-opera settings.

Ginga itself had acquired an exotic allure in the six decades since its discovery among Kenji’s papers after his untimely death, and the authors work matched up well with the larger exotic interests of the “Exotic Japan” campaign (noted in the last chapter). Not only was Kenji from Tōhoku (not far from Tōnō), but he was also a marginal author outside the literary establishment who devoted his attentions to obscure pursuits like children’s stories, astronomy, vegetarianism, Esperanto, and his own highly personal synthesis of religion and science. Both Kenji’s life and his stories emerged in the 1980s as rich material for newly mobile Japanese hoping to summon up the exotic within the everyday.

This larger search for emotional salience in exotic landscapes is intimately tied up with *Ginga*’s appearance in theaters in 1985. The production of the film was thoroughly informed by a set of similar journeys through exotic landscapes. The original story has its imaginative origins in a train and ferry trip Kenji made in August of 1923 to Sakhalin (then under Japanese rule). This voyage was ostensibly for work-related purposes, but Kenji’s writings from the trip make it clear it was also a voyage of mourning for his beloved sister Toshiko, who had passed away the previous November of tuberculosis.²⁰² This image of a train voyage to remote regions as a vehicle for mourning would later form the basis for Giovanni’s galactic excursion in *Ginga*.²⁰³

Seven decades later, the director of Group TAC’s animated adaptation, Sugii Gisaburō, arrived at the project after spending ten years traveling around rural Japan and learning about the folklore of different regions. According to Sugii, these travels were something he felt he needed to do to recharge his creative energies after many years spent locked away in anime studios.²⁰⁴ Travel was a way to open up space within himself for new ideas and inspiration. He describes subsequently bringing these experiences of openness into the design of *Ginga*. He notes, “I could

Mystère des Voix Bulgares. Major Kusanagi, whose self-dispersal into the informatic landscape serves as the major narrative of the film, here sees herself reflected throughout the urban environment, in mannequins, in strangers, and in the waters that seem to seep through everything in the porous metropolis.

Oshii has spoken of his preference for these “dull scenes” [*dareba*], a Japanese term for the more subdued atmospheric scenes in a film where nothing happens to move the plot forward. For Oshii these scenes are important for depicting “not the drama itself, but the world that the characters inhabit.”□

Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares was an album of Bulgarian folk songs performed by the Bulgarian State Radio and Television Female Vocal Choir, recorded by Swiss ethnomusicologist Marcel Cellier. First released in 1975 on Cellier’s Disques Cellier label, it became one of the key recordings of the global “World Music” boom in the 1980s after its rerelease on larger labels like 4AD (1986), Nonesuch (1987), and Philips (1987). Hosono notes it as an influence on his later ambient recordings. “Dareba” quote from Jonathan Ross’s interview with Oshii in Episode 1 of the BBC documentary *Asian Invasion* (aired 10 January 2006). From Jonathan Ross’s interview with Oshii in Episode 1 of the BBC documentary *Asian Invasion* (aired 10 January 2006).

²⁰¹ On *Blade Runner*’s soundtrack, see Hannan and Carey. “Ambient Soundscapes in *Blade Runner*.”

²⁰² Kenji wrote a series of poetic elegies referring to their relationship during the trip. See note by Sarah M. Strong in Miyazawa, *Night of the Milky Way Railway*, 129.

²⁰³ Kenji was also influenced by the local Iwate Light Railway. See note by Strong in Miyazawa, *Night of the Milky Way Railway*, 159.

²⁰⁴ After finishing directorial work on *Jyakku to mame no ki* [Jack and the Beanstalk], Sugii, at age 35, was feeling like his creative energies were spent. He had worked in anime nonstop since the age of 19, and was ready for a change of pace. “Animation Meister,” n.p.

make *Night on the Galactic Railroad* precisely because I had traveled. My style of visual expression greatly expanded after those experiences.”²⁰⁵ Like Giovanni leaving the village to tour the cosmos, Sugii describes leaving a social context where he was feeling exhausted in order to find fresh inspiration by entering a world where not everything is familiar or easily understood.²⁰⁶ These travel encounters opened up new experiential dimensions for Sugii, not so much in terms of Japanese tradition—his *Ginga* effectively subverts any easy national identification—but as a newfound appreciation for how animation can, like travel, folklore and esoteric religion, hint at much more than it reveals.

Hosono came to the film at the apex of his long-term engagement with the musical exotic, first emerging in the 1970s in albums like the aforementioned *Cochin Moon*. In December of 1984, the same month he was composing the *Ginga* soundtrack, Hosono gave a concert with Yasuno Tomoko at Roppongi’s CineVivant entitled “La Musique Exotique,” a harbinger of the emerging World Music boom.²⁰⁷ This followed his own more literal form of spiritual tourism, a trip Kadokawa publishers arranged for him to go on with Nakazawa Shinichi, the religious studies scholar and icon of “new academicism” in the early 1980s. Earlier in the year Nakazawa had published his popular first book, *The Mozart of Tibet (Chibetto no Mōzaruto)*, 1983), based on his experiences studying Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal. Hosono and Nakazawa travelled to a series of remote holy sites around Japan, recording a conversation at each location. Kadokawa published the transcripts as a collection titled *Sightseeing: Pilgrimage to the Sacred Places of Japan (Kankō: Nihon reichi junrei)* in June of 1985, just before *Ginga*’s theatrical release.²⁰⁸

Travel in each of these three cases served as a way towards ambient subjectivity. Each was simultaneously a form of psychological release and recovery, an adaptive escape from the pressures and stagnations of the social self, a search for an expanded sense of belonging, and a way to become receptive to larger environmental forces. Group TAC’s *Ginga* gives animated form to these experiences.

In describing his vision for the film, Sugii emphasizes how Kenji purposefully left the original story open to interpretation, refusing to explain everything to his readers. Sugii relates this aspect of Kenji’s aesthetic to his formative years working under Tezuka Osamu, who practiced a similar form of understatement. Sugii recalls being skeptical when he came to work on *Astro Boy* and found Tezuka developing a style of animation where characters barely moved anything but their eyes and mouths. This was the birth of limited animation, a term referring both to limiting animation’s usual focus on movement as well as a limiting of animation cels. A standard 20-30 minute animation at the time would use around 30,000 cels, whereas *Astro Boy* only used around 4,000 to fill the same time. Tezuka insisted that this limited style was an altogether different art

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Echoing an experience described by many of his generation, Sugii recalls realizing that growing up after the war he had been exposed to a wide range of stories in translation, like the *Arabian Nights*, but knew hardly anything of Japanese folklore. This unfamiliarity with older Japanese narratives – so much so that Japan itself had become “exotic” to many younger Japanese – was much discussed in the popular media at the time. The trait was often attributed to the third post-war generation (just after Sugii’s), the so-called *shinjinrui* [new humans] who grew up with no experience of the struggles of the immediate postwar. Along with many other artists and creators in the 1970s, Sugii set out to acquaint himself with these stories for the first time. The travel was interspersed (and likely connected to) his work directing episodes of the Group TAC television series *Manga Nihon mukashi-banashi* [Manga Tales of Old Japan]. At the time he set out on his journey he was also toying with the idea of an animated version of *Heike Monogatari* [The Tale of the Heike, 14c.] based on the original *e-maki* [picture scrolls]. Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Suzuki, “non-standard & monad,” *Hosono Haruomi OmniSound*, 208.

²⁰⁸ This kind of cross-platform media campaign was typical of Japanese media industries at the time. See Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*.

form distinct from earlier forms of animation, and insisted on calling it not *animēshon* but *anime*. He argued that limited animation was not simply more economical, but that the reduced use of movement afforded an enhanced focus on story and feeling. Sugii recalls skeptically watching the first completed *Astro Boy* episode and being shocked at how moving this limited movement could be.²⁰⁹

While *Ginga*, as a prestigious theatrical animation, had higher production standards than television anime, Sugii upheld the basic less-is-more lesson of these early years working with Tezuka. In some ways, *Ginga* goes even more limited than limited animation,²¹⁰ focusing even more on what is left unsaid and unseen, what lies just over the horizon, and the pauses in between movements.²¹¹ The emphasis here is not so much on silence or stillness in itself, as in the way limited animation opens up gaps (Sugii uses the term *sukima*) in the visual and narrative fabric of the film, like the uncertain distances between the stations on the Galaxy Express.²¹² Sugii describes his desire to capture the mood [*nūdo*] of Kenji's original story by leaving plenty of space open for viewer interpretations, and by focusing on environments and atmospheres rather than characters and plot.

The Dream Stage

One way of understanding more clearly the logic of *Ginga's* construction is to remember that most of the film takes place as a dream. While it only gradually becomes clear on first viewing, by the end of the film it is revealed how the entire train journey is the product of Giovanni's dreaming brain.

According to current dream research, during R.E.M. sleep the chemical climate of the brain shifts dramatically, releasing some chemicals usually unavailable during waking consciousness, and inhibiting others. These shifts account for the altered quality of consciousness within dreams: inhibited self-reflection, problem-solving, and memory formation, paired with exaggerated emotionality, greater access to long-term memory, and greater reliance on instinct. External perception and muscle control are blocked, whereas internal bodily perceptions are enhanced, leading to what seems like continuous motion for the dreaming subject. Dream environments themselves are composed on the fly by the brain, built up out of memory fragments and driven by basic affective responses.²¹³

²⁰⁹ "Animation Meister," n.p.

²¹⁰ To be clear, *Ginga* is not "limited animation" in the strict sense. It includes brief uses of computer animation (to simulate the camera tracking in through the 'oil drops' of the galaxy and the fields of the New World), which at the time was a highly laborious and time-consuming process. *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 58.

²¹¹ Animation director Maeda Tsuneo describes setting out to make *Ginga* unlike an "anime anime," departing from usual anime conventions. *Ibid.*, 52.

²¹² As Thomas LaMarre has argued, the aesthetic contrast between 'full' and 'limited' animation to some degree parallels Gilles Deleuze's distinction between the 'movement image' and the 'time image' in cinema. Deleuze's movement image, found in classical Hollywood cinema, is structured around a tight linear plot driven by series of character actions and reactions. The time image, in contrast, breaks up these circuits of action and reaction, moving away from linear causality to explore the complex dimensions of time itself. This does not imply that movement does not remain important to in 'time image' cinema, but that these movements are not subsumed within larger goal-driven behaviors. Deleuze's memorable example here is the many seemingly unmotivated theatrical gestures of Jean-Luc Godard's characters as they rub their lips and blithely lean in doorways. Certainly much of what Deleuze writes of the "time-image" overlaps with the aesthetics of *Ginga*, particularly the emphasis on wandering, sensory exploration, and, as I discuss later, the "crystal-image" of the Pliocene Coast. See LaMarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*; Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 194.

²¹³ Hobson, *Dreaming: A Very Short Introduction*, 24-5.

The subjectivity the dreaming brain generates has much in common with what I have been describing as ambient subjectivity: a blurring of subject and environment, with no clear distinction between internal emotion and external atmosphere; a turn away from the reflective social self and teleological narratives and towards more primal feelings of oceanic absorption; a near constant sense of motion despite no clear trajectory from one point to another; a diminishment of focused attention in favor of the soft fascinations of textures and surfaces. Unlike dreams, however, ambient atmospheres avoid intense emotions, avoiding objects which elicit strong affective reactions. Rather, ambient media cultivates a hypnogogic state between waking and dreaming, where “defenses are down” and subjectivity relaxed, but the free (and potentially frightening) release of powerful emotions remains inhibited. This hypnogogic state affords a particularly disaffected relation to uncertain environments. Giovanni’s half-awake and half-asleep voyage through the galaxy puts him in a similarly non-plussed state of mind, broken only late in the film when his friend’s death finally sinks in.

Despite this important difference between waking ambient atmospheres and full REM sleep, dream research has much to offer our understanding of *Ginga*, particularly as a way of understanding the practicality of ambient subjectivity as a means of emotional consolidation.

Dream researcher J. Allan Hobson argues that dreaming is an adaptive human behavior not because it reveals hidden truths from the unconscious, but because it offers a chance for the brain to rehearse and experiment with how we feel in response to particular types of perceptual stimuli. Hobson describes the goal of dreaming as “the seamless integration of percept and emotion.”²¹⁴ While any given dream may or may not hit on an insightful mix of environment and emotional response, over time dreams work to gradually disentangle the brain’s affective responses to perceptual stimulation. The highly sensory and highly emotional environments summoned by dreams allow for a fine-tuning of the fight-or-flight mechanisms of affective response. Hobson argues that this increase in emotional competence in turn serves survival during waking life, helping us to know “when to mate, when to be afraid, and when to run for cover.”²¹⁵ Instead of keeping track of every particular past experience and matching them to each incoming situation before deciding how to act, a highly inefficient method, the brain instead networks memories “into a much more general fabric of inclinations to act and feel in certain ways in response to certain stimulus conditions.”²¹⁶ Dreaming plays the key role of continually integrating new experiences into this generalized set of emotional response patterns, by simulating potential environments and trying out potential reactions.

One name Hobson gives to this virtual arena of self-consolidation is the “dream stage,” reflecting its inherently creative dynamic.²¹⁷ This staging of possible selves in dreams can be understood as the biological correlate for the staged atmospheres of ambient media. This in turn is part of a larger turn towards dreamlike ‘staging’ in other areas of postindustrial culture. Böhme, in “The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres,” notes how “The attention which is now paid to atmospheres in aesthetic theory has its material background in the fact that staging has become a basic feature of our society: the staging of politics, of sporting events, of cities, of commodities, of personalities, of ourselves.”²¹⁸ Yoshimi Shunya writes of the push by the Parco department store in the 1970s to ‘stage’ urban spaces in Shibuya (Tokyo) allowing consumers to act out new identities in accordance with “a linked series of compartmentalized,

²¹⁴ Hobson and Wohl, *From Angels to Neurons*, 15.

²¹⁵ Hobson, *Dreaming*, 78.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

²¹⁷ Hobson and Wohl, *From Angels to Neurons*, 55.

²¹⁸ Böhme, “The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres,” 8-9.

multi-layered, themed spaces,” leading to the transformation of entire neighborhoods into “integrated advertising environments.”²¹⁹

This mediated space of self-reinvention, like the dream stage, seeks a more dispersed form of subjectivity at a distance from ordinary social identities. The immediate pressures of social life are bracketed off, and emotions attached to personal and primal memories are elaborated into a landscape an individual consciousness can then explore, seeking new ways to integrate perception and emotion.

The Panoramic Interior

The expansive ambient environments presented in *Ginga* serve as a similar type of dream staging, not only for Giovanni but for audiences as well.²²⁰ In *Ginga* Giovanni is constantly engaging with and exploring the novel perceptual environments around him, rather than reflecting inward and trying to make sense of his experiences. This is central to both ambient subjectivity and dreaming consciousness. In both, environmental perception and emotional response are intimately linked in a reflexive circuit. Sugii focuses on the role of environmental emotion in Group TAC’s *Ginga*:

I think film is overwhelmingly powerful in how audiences respond to everything in the image, including the landscapes, not just to what is described by the characters that appear within them. I do not want to make films that “make you understand” [*wakasareru eiga*], but films that “make you feel” [*kanjisaseru eiga*]. Take Giovanni’s loneliness, for example. For a film to articulate this feeling, what matters is less Giovanni’s actions and more the type of darkness that envelops him, the colors and shapes of the surrounding trees and grasses. These become the more important elements. We need to rid ourselves of the thinking in anime up to this point that believes that all meaning must come from the characters. By approaching landscapes and characters as equals, a film comes to naturally absorb the audience’s attention. I want to give the feeling that humans are part of the landscape. This is the aim of *Night on the Galactic Railroad*.²²¹

Sugii describes the film as Giovanni’s internal world “made panoramic,”²²² transformed into immersive environments so that audiences can experientially join Giovanni in his emotional journey. As in dreams, ambient cinema here becomes a means of exploring the panoramic interior, an impersonal emotional internality transposed on to a virtual yet immersive exterior media environment.²²³ The difference here is that the viewer is immersed in Giovanni’s interior,

²¹⁹ Yoshimi, “The Market of Ruins,” 290.

²²⁰ Note that here I am not simply reiterating Roland Barthes’ assertion that cinemagoing structurally resembles sleeping and dreaming when it wraps the spectator in darkness and quiet and bathes them in fanciful images. I am speaking more specifically of the orientational instability, diminished self-reflection, episodic structure, expansive horizons, hyper-associative emotionality, and orientational instability of *Ginga*’s imaginative landscapes.

I resist claiming this as property of film in general, as this is clearly not true of all forms of film viewership. For example, Brian Larkin notes that “Barthe’s theory of the cinema theater, where ‘slipping’ into the cinema seat is like slipping into bed, a prehypnotic condition that prepares one for the dream state of cinema” hardly applies at all to the roofless and raucous cinemas he finds in Kano, Nigeria. See Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, 162.

²²¹ *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 54.

²²² *Ibid.*, 54.

²²³ Ranjani Mazumdar uses the term “panoramic interior” to describe how many high-profile, high-budget Hindi-language films of the 1980s avoid external street scenes in favor of luxuriating in the palatial interiors of upper class mansions, in the process rendering the poverty of the streets just outside invisible. Echoing Sugii’s comment, I am using “panoramic interior” here in a more specifically psychological sense, to mark how both dreams and ambient cinema draw on perceptual memory to create vivid internal environments of expansive scope and complexity. Giovanni’s particular viewpoint is also panoramic in the sense that his dream landscapes are mainly viewed through the window of a train, creating the technologically-mediated panorama described by Wolfgang Schivelbusch. See Ranjani Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, 148; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, 24.

not their own—though the 'gaps' opened up by *Ginga's* limited style allow plenty of room for viewers' personal emotions to emerge as well.

In sum, I propose that in *Ginga* (and particularly in Group TAC's more atmospheric version), Giovanni's lucid dream is not a set of disguised meanings asking for interpretation, but, to the contrary, a random assemblage of diverse memory fragments, tied together through an emotional rather than rational logic, accompanied by the loosening of spatial and temporal continuity endemic to both ambient and dream consciousness. We will now look more closely at how the film accomplishes this atmospheric staging of emotions.

Enveloped in Uncertainties

Both the film and Giovanni's dream proper begin with disorientation.²²⁴ The opening shot of *Ginga* shows Giovanni nodding off surrounded by darkness. This image passes by in a glimpse, followed immediately by a cut to an overhead long shot of an empty landscape with a small school building in an open field. The camera moves in a disorienting arc back and forth across this image, as the schoolhouse grows larger. Perspective here sways back and forth like a falling feather, out of balance and in constant movement. This is the film's opening "establishing shot," but while introducing the classroom sequence it simultaneously has upset any expectations of familiar movement patterns, substituting an off-balance and almost dizzying perspective.

Later, after lying down on the hill and witnessing the arrival of the Galaxy Express, Giovanni suddenly find himself riding in the train. We never see him board, and later on he tells Campanella he doesn't remember either. Like Kenji's story and many other filmic portrayals of dreaming, it only gradually becomes clear that Giovanni is dreaming as the film progresses, and only completely clear when Giovanni wakes up and finds himself back on the hill where he began. For the first-time viewer, not knowing for sure this is a dream makes the viewing experience even more dreamlike.

When Campanella first appears on the train, he materializes on the bench across from Giovanni, as if out of thin air. Other passengers and their belongings similarly fade in and out of view. The usual rules of physics do not apply here. Instead, the environment appears to transform with the speed of thought. Strong argues that in Kenji's work "the train travels through a world informed by Buddhist cosmological concepts of layered heavens marked by increasing liberation from physicality."²²⁵ While the Buddhist associations are interesting to note, for a simpler explanation we need only turn to the extraordinary physical transformations commonly found in dreams. In *Ginga's* dream stage Giovanni and Campanella are not so much 'liberated' from physicality as granted a physicality that follows the dynamics and speed of affective response. When they are worried about returning to the train on time after the Pliocene Coast stopover they suddenly discover they can "run like the wind" without their knees getting sore.²²⁶ Other material objects present a similarly responsive physicality, like the apples that multiply as desired. "Around here, things just seem to grow on their own, without effort," as one of the train passengers says. Similarly, as soon as Giovanni begins to understand that Campanella has already died back on Earth, Campanella vanishes from his dream, as if responding directly to Giovanni's (unspoken) realization.

²²⁴ Dreams always begin *in medias res*, with the observer enmeshed in a situation with little understanding of what happened to arrive there. They also tend to feature continuous movement, as dreaming consciousness responds to the internal movements of the body. This results in the episodic, fragmented narratives of dreams.

²²⁵ Miyazawa, *Eigo de yomu Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, 106.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

This tight circuit between brain and environment follows on from the hyper-associative logic of dreams. Many of the objects Giovanni encounters on the voyage echo things half-consciously perceived during the first part of the film, when Giovanni is more fully awake. This includes the teacher's lesson on the Milky Way, the toy stream train Giovanni remembers playing with at Campanella's home, the article about a shipwreck Giovanni sets while working at the print shop, and numerous other small details. Each reappears transformed within Giovanni's dream, fragments assembled on the fly to give perceptual form to Giovanni's dynamic emotions.

These fragments are couched not in a coherent narrative logic, but within cavernous spaces full of loose ends and inexplicable encounters. The film's episodic structure, with nineteen chapters marked by intertitles, expands on Kenji's original chapter titles, which follows first Giovanni and then the train in their movement from place to place, station to station. The transition from episode to episode each contains an elision of an unspecified amount of time, covered over by an intertitle. The forward momentum of the film comes to a brief rest at each of these transitions, often with no strong narrative link between one episode and the next. This open form allows the details that do emerge to be less tightly structured than in a more plot-driven work. Sugii describes a preference for films that are not "nice and tidy," but have a certain looseness as to what gets included. "The film is put together in such a way that you can throw in various elements and it would still hold together."²²⁷

This in turn affords a shift to more ambient forms of attention, a move away from goal-driven actions and social identities. Editor Furukawa Masashi (who also worked with Sugii on *Astro Boy*) describes focusing in the film on the pauses in between actions, as a way to generate mystery and suspense.²²⁸ This focus on the unseen and indeterminate is replicated on many levels in the film's design. Art director Magoori Mihoko notes the animators focused on developing "a way of drawing so that objects seem to float up out of the light emerging within darkness."²²⁹ The film's almost entirely nocturnal setting aids this atmosphere, with the limited lighting implying a far larger landscape than it reveals.

The sound design of the film furthers this emphasis on unseen horizons, producing an acoustic image of the galaxy as a reverberant empty space. The key sound of the film, what we might call its tonic note, is the slow, stately, and reverberant *goton goton* of the train as it makes its way across the Milky Way.²³⁰ The chugging sound is both lower and slower than the usual rhythmic gasps of a steam train. It is drenched in reverb, with a long decay appropriate to an echo returning from across a great empty expanse. This *goton goton* gives the impression the train is moving through vast cavernous heavens. This is not the silence of deep space, but the reverberations of an enormous object bouncing off an even more enormous enclosure, as if the galaxy were ultimately an interior space of prodigious and unspecified dimensions—not unlike the space of the dream stage.

The train's *goton goton* returns over and over during the galaxy portion of the film, fading during conversations but always returning to recontextualize these exchanges within a larger impersonal frame. The massive presence of this sound echoing from the outside serves as a stark contrast to the hushed acoustics inside the train, where even the soft rustling of the characters'

²²⁷ *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 67.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²³⁰ For sound designer Kashiwabara Mitsuru, this was the most labor-intensive sound he was tasked with for the film. He strove to produce a recognizable steam engine-like sound that also had a steam whistle like the "glass flute" Kenji describes in the original text. *Ibid.*, 49. The glass flute-like sound is mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 8 in Miyazawa's text.

clothing is clearly audible. Visually, the train appears to be moving quickly, and yet the slow pace of the sound gives the contrary impression the train is nearly stationary. These contrasts all point to the fluid dimensions of ambient subjectivity: inner quietude bathed in vast echoes, immense spaces rendered intimate, great speed impossibly paired with near stillness.

Transparent Emotions

This sensory disorientation coincides with a simultaneous emptying out of the subjectivity of the dreamer, Giovanni, who turns into a sensory vessel for viewers' experience of the landscape. Interviews and reviews published around the time of the film's theatrical release focused on the film's most radical departure from the original story: the use of anthropomorphic cats in almost all of the major roles. Sugii had wanted to adapt Kenji's story for a long time, but was stuck on how to portray the characters. Part of the uniquely exotic appeal of Kenji's stories is the visual ambiguity of many of his characters. The original tale provides almost no description of the boys' appearance, despite vividly detailed depictions of so much in their environment. Some characters have Italian names and eat European-style food while remaining recognizably Japanese in their attitudes and behavior, while other characters have Japanese names but resemble early-industrial Europeans or Americans in their manner and dress.²³¹ The Italian-sounding names of the main characters led NHK to use young Italian-looking actors in an earlier live-action production. Sugii was unsatisfied with this approach, as he wanted to preserve the indeterminacy of Kenji's characters, rather than letting the name alone determine their appearance.

Sugii was unable to find a way to maintain Kenji's descriptive ambiguity until encountering Masumura Hiroshi's 1983 manga adaptation of *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, which featured anthropomorphic cats in all of the roles.²³² Sugii had found his answer. He announced to his staff they would be making *Ginga* "as acted by a troupe of cats" (a *neko gekidan*). Of course,

²³¹ The architecture of Giovanni's town was based closely on real-world models the staff found in a research trip to rural Spain: everything from the cobblestone streets to the layout of classroom tables and chairs to the grasses in the fields. The film draws on Kenji's interest in Esperanto to imagine a vaguely rural southern European village of cats who speak in Japanese but write in Esperanto and have mostly Italian-sounding names (with a few exceptions, like Kaoru). The fluid mixture of cultures here echoes the universalist aspirations of the Esperanto movement.

Similarly, a wide range of musical styles enter into the music in a way that captures the culturally dislocation of Kenji's original. On the one hand Hosono's score is heavily influenced by Christian hymns (echoing the strong influence of Gregorian Chant and gospel music on Eno's ambient work), as well as the influence of hymnody on songwriters important to Hosono's career, such as Van Dyke Parks. Antonín Dvořák is the other major source here, not simply through his Symphony No. 9 in E Minor ("From the New World"), which makes an appearance in the film and in Kenji's original story, but in Dvořák's rich mixture of the folk music of his native Bohemia with elements of Native American music and African-American spirituals. All of these elements combine in the *Ginga* score to weave the warmth of these religious genres with the reflective sadness of the requiem, filtered through more recent techniques of minimalist composition and audio processing. The New World symphony itself is slowed down and distorted when it appears in the film, as if being warped through the shifts in dream temporality.

Another likely source of inspiration here, particularly on the way hymns are used surrounding the shipwreck sequence, is Gavin Bryar's *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1969), a landmark work of British minimalism that hypnotically loops "Nearer My God to Thee" in ways that suggest a watery death by drowning. (Hosono also has a more personal connection to this part of Kenji's story: his grandfather was a survivor of Titanic disaster.) Hosono pays tribute to Bryar in "Columbia" on *omni Sightseeing*, and earlier attempted to capture Bryar's 'sunken orchestra' sound in his production work for Inoyama Land's *Danzindan - Pojidon* (Yen Medium, 1983). (Suzuki, "non-standard & monad," *Haruomi Hosono Omni Sound*, 231)

²³² Masumura notes that Kenji's Iwahtov was on his mind when he was first imagining Atagoul (the setting of his manga based on his own stories), where humans and cats live mutually together. After *Ginga* he continued on with an entire series of manga adaptations of Kenji stories, all featuring cats. *Ibid.*, 9; Masamura Hiroshi, *Ginga tetsudō no yoru saishūkei shokikei "Burukaniro hakasehen."*

anthropomorphic animal characters were nothing new to anime, and often featured in Kenji's other stories as well. But to suddenly turn human characters in a classic story into animals was a bold move. Yet the cats turned out to be a perfect solution to the visual non-specificity Sugii desired. By placing cats in the lead roles, viewers would finish the film without a concrete image of particular boys, and their attention would be led more to the environment surrounding the characters.²³³ Compared to human figures and all the associations particular faces bring with them, these more anonymous and unfamiliar cats blended easily into their surroundings.²³⁴

While early character designs for Giovanni and Campanella were close to Masumura's originals, character designer Eguchi Marisuke eventually transformed the cats into even more ambiguous creatures than Masumura had used. Giovanni's skin became blue, and Campanella's pink. Their faces took on a more distant, and as one review points out, vaguely sad expression.²³⁵ To the extent that emotions can be discerned on these faces, they rest somewhere between wonder and sadness, a fascination with the external world crossed with withdrawal into an internal one. These flat expressions stare out at the audience for most of the film, reflecting the surrounding environment more than hinting at internal depths.²³⁶ In the central portion of the film, Giovanni and Campanella's heads are often seen reflected in the windows of the train, set semi-transparently against the darkness of the deep space outside.²³⁷ The starkly graphic quality of the figures' outlines likewise reveals little through contour or shading. Instead, the cats are formed from thick black lines enclosing a uniform blue or pink. The inscrutability of these feline actors²³⁸ adds to the story's mystique at the same time as it emphasizes its emotional indeterminacy. As Sugii puts it, the cats have a certain "mysterious transparency."²³⁹

Blinda Radiotelegrafisto

²³³ *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 65.

²³⁴ Not only the cats' faces but their entire physiognomy is an uncanny distortion of human dimensions. With a short lower torso, wide legs and tail, and tall sloping upper bodies, the cats have a lower center of gravity than humans, visually rooting them more solidly to the ground.

²³⁵ Tanaka, "Ginga tetsudō no yoru' Sugii Gisaburō kantoku ni kiku," 160.

²³⁶ Here the common association of large anime eyes with increased expressive potential is inverted.

Kim Brandt's recent work on Japanese beauty culture points to the strong association of "expressive" eyes with a "modern" appearance beginning in the postwar period. Thinking of the work of George Simmel, we can understand this in part as an extension of modern forms of urban sociality, where strangers are routinely encountered and first impressions are critical. (Kim Brandt, lecture at Fulbright Foundation, Tokyo, June 18, 2010. See also Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*.)

In this context, the unexpressive eyes in *Ginga* and the turn to the exotic more generally in the 1980s might be understood as part of a challenge, however partial, to this modern imperative of easy intelligibility, the easy-to-understand [*wakari-yasui*] quality that characterizes so much contemporary popular culture in Japan and abroad. The slowness of the film operates in related fashion against the increasing pace of most image culture at the time. This is limited animation in a time of excess. As a response to an information-driven society saturated in media, this esoteric response locates meaning and emotion not in what is readily apparent, but in the gaps [*sukūma*] the film forms through hinting at what remains concealed.

²³⁷ The reflection of a character in a train window is a classic image in modern Japanese literature, as in the famous opening scene of Kawabata Yasunari's *Yukiguni* [*Snow Country*, 1935-37]. This type of double exposure often leads critics to dwell on the relationship between face and landscape, and can be understood as a key figure for the panoramic interior I am outlining here.

²³⁸ As I argue in the Yoshiyuki chapter, interest in cats in the 80s can be understood in part as part of this desire for atmospheric affordances.

²³⁹ *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 9. This quality is captured in one of Hosono's more reflective musical cues for the film, entitled "Giovanni's Transparent Sadness" ("Jobanni no tōmei na kanashimi").

This transparency of emotion is embodied in the film through the character of the Blind Wireless Operator, a new character Betsuyaku introduced when adapting the script. The Blind Wireless Operator is an elderly man we first see stumbling through the train on his way to a small radio room in another part of the train. Once there he listens intently to radio signals the train is picking up from the ether. He hears distant singing and asks Campanella to transcribe the lyrics. It turns out to be the hymn “Nearer My God to Thee,” a “prayer to be carried away to heaven” as they learn afterwards from a fellow passenger who appears to be a nun.²⁴⁰

Betsuyaku’s idea for the character was a wireless operator whose job is to hear all of the misery in the world.²⁴¹ An elderly blind man sits alone in a small windowless cabin of the train as it hurdles across space, stretching his ears to pick up and transcribe the invisible collective suffering of the universe. How these transcriptions will be used is unclear. What matters is this act itself of listening intently to the emotion in the air, transparent and detached from any particular individual. The operator listens to the emotion drifting across the galactic expanse amidst the static.

Along with the wireless operator, the bird catcher’s call to “open your ears and listen to the swans outside” and the cats’ gigantic ears each serve as a reminder of the importance of listening in the film. Like the reverberant *goton goton*, these images of persistent environmental listening serve as a constant reminder of distant unseen horizons, the larger darkness that surrounds the visible.²⁴²

La Pliocena Marbordo

There are other hints in the film of this larger darkness, the underlying emotional infrastructure of Giovanni’s dream stage. While *Ginga’s* galactic landscapes are structured around the panoramic interiority produced during REM sleep, clearly Giovanni’s dream is of a special kind. As we learn only later in the story, Campanella appears in Giovanni’s dream immediately after his death by drowning. This either gives Giovanni remarkable intuitive powers, or hints at an earlier understanding of dreams as a realm of spiritual visitations.²⁴³ *Ginga* includes numerous hints that the vivid environments the train passes through are being generated within fluid and abstract cognitive space. Occasional openings emerge in the hyperassociative emotional fabric of Giovanni’s imagination where the workings of the dream stage can be glimpsed more directly.

Revealing this deeper structure of the dream stage may be the central purpose of the “Pliocene Coast” episode, a mysterious interlude near the middle of both the film and Kenji’s original text. When Giovanni and Campanella disembark for a 20-minute stopover at Cygnus Station, they enter a cavernous hall absolutely devoid of people but full of temporally energized

²⁴⁰ The hymn is by 19th century English poet Sarah Flower Adams and loosely based on a dream recounted by Jacob in Genesis 28:11-19. The lyrics pick up on *Ginga’s* theme of self-sacrifice within a particularly Christian context:

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!
E’en though it be a cross that raiseth me;
Still all my song shall be nearer, my God, to Thee...

It is reputed to be the last song played by the band on the Titanic as the ship was sinking, and indeed after three drowned humans from a sinking ocean liner appear on the train we infer the Operator was hearing the sound of the ship’s passengers singing together as they awaited a watery death.

²⁴¹ *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 48.

²⁴² Through the Blind Wireless Operator Betsuyaku also introduces a key theme from his theatrical works: the idea that the loss of sight leads to the ability to more clearly hear the suffering of others. This aspect of the Operator also hints at limited animation technique of leaving the most important things unseen. As Betsuyaku puts it, “not being able to see allows for various things to be seen more clearly.” *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 48.

²⁴³ The concept of dream visitations was prevalent in premodern Japan and many other parts of the world, where the appearance of an acquaintance in a dream was taken as a literal movement of their spirit in sleep from one body to another. The dream visitations of Lady Rokujō in *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*, 11c.) are the most famous example in Japanese literature.

objects like a ticking metronome and a still-smoking pipe. Magoori notes that while it seems people were just there, they might just as well have disappeared a hundred years earlier. Like a painting by René Magritte or Giorgio de Chirico, the hall merges the everyday moment with the infinite that enfolds it.²⁴⁴

On entering the station the dialogue between the two boys takes on a particular rhythmic quality, a call and response where Campanella continually echoes Giovanni's proposals:

Shall we disembark? [Campanella nods.]

Shall we walk around a little? [Campanella nods.]

Which way should we go? Lets run straight ahead. Okay, let's run.

Shall we open the door? Sure.

Shall we try going down the stairs? Let's try going down the stairs.

The interpersonal rhythms of the Japanese language are highlighted, but at the same time the repetition seems to collapse the distance between the two cats' perspectives.²⁴⁵ The speech has a back-and-forth quality not unlike the metronome ticking away in the hall. This oscillation has the effect of blurring the distinctions between Giovanni and Campanella as discreet characters.

Through the hypnotic repetition of the questions, they become two halves of the same consciousness as it splits upon itself.²⁴⁶

The cavernous and highly reverberant spaces of the Pliocene Coast further blur distinctions between self, other, and environment. As Giovanni and Campanella pass through the station and descend a long staircase into the subterranean environs of the Pliocene Coast, they move further inside a complex time-space of interminable architectures and a curiously evacuated town square resembling a fossilized version of Giovanni's hometown. As the boys reach down to the banks of an underground river, they come across an archeologist hard at work leading a team to carefully excavate the fossilized remains of a *vos*, a giant ancestor of the modern cow alive during the Pliocene period.²⁴⁷ He appears deeply concerned the workers will accidentally damage the fragile remains. Giovanni asks him whether the fossils will eventually be displayed in a museum. His explanation, while at first oblique, points directly to the orientational fluidity of the dream stage:

No, we are here to provide evidence. For us, this looks like a thick, rich, fossil stratum. We have various evidence that these rocks are 1.2 million years old. But others might see this region as something completely different—it all depends on who is looking. That is, it could appear as water, or air, or even an empty patch of sky.

Here the Pliocene Coast serves as an image of the world glimpsed through the purifying forces of deep memory, where the last vestiges of reflective identity have been stripped away with the passing of time.²⁴⁸ It is an image of a cosmos both infinitely expansive and infinitely particular to the observer. A similar personalizing of the void occurs in Kenji's text as Giovanni is staring at the night sky just before drifting off to sleep: "The sky didn't seem to be a cold and empty place like

²⁴⁴ Magoori describes the Station as a representation of time itself, and the original storyboard drawings show an M.C. Escher-like maze of staircases not used in final production. See *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 37 and 53; *Animēshon 'Miyazawa Kenji Ginga tetsudō no yoru' settei shiryōshū*, 53.

²⁴⁵ This rhythmic repetition echoes the type of phrasings often heard in experimental theater of Betsuyaku and other playwrights of the preceding decade, like Terayama Shūji. The performative dimensions of the statements here also echo Kenji's interest in the workings of mantra.

²⁴⁶ Strong notes Ono Ryūshū's proposal that Campanella's name may be in part referencing the Italian word *compagno*, or "companion." Miyazawa, *Night of the Milky Way Railway*, 156.

²⁴⁷ The Pliocene epoch comes at the end of the Neogene (later Tertiary) period, and currently is dated to 5.332 million to 2.588 million years ago (earlier than the date Kenji gives here). The earth's climate cooled at this time, leading to the emergence of relatively larger herbivores.

²⁴⁸ Strong notes that Kenji associates not only outer space but also the subterranean with more 'purified' emotions. Strong, *The Poetry of Miyazawa Kenji*, 380.

his teacher had said. The more he looked, the more he couldn't help feeling like it must be full of fields with woods and farms."

The Pliocene Coast sequence provides a remarkably lucid example of what Deleuze names the "crystal-image," the moments in certain films where time is revealed as an infinite series of forking temporalities produced from a virtual realm of potentiality that itself remains latent until actualized in some form. Deleuze writes of how in the crystal-image "the crystal's fire will have to connect with the whole range of manufacturing for the world [...] to stop being a flat, amorphous environment which ends at the edge of a gulf, and to reveal infinite crystalline potentialities in itself." Kenji seems to be working with the very same idea, as he goes so far as to describe the innumerable sands of the Pliocene Coast as crystals, "with a tiny fire burning inside each one."²⁴⁹ Within Deleuze's argument both dreaming and the cinematic crystal-image serve as "partial circuits" restricted in their reach but pointing towards a more complete image that reaches beyond individual experience to a larger virtual "Whole" that is the cosmos itself. "It is from the inside that the small internal circuit makes contact with the deep ones, directly, through the merely relative circuits."²⁵⁰ My sense is this comes close to what Kenji was also reaching for in his integration of dreaming with death and his portrayal of both as intricately enmeshed within a larger universe.²⁴⁹

Ginga highlights the way internal memories and external environments are topologically fused in dreams by linking them through a series of nested rivers: the subterranean river of deep interiority on the Pliocene Coast, the "silver river" [*ginga*] of the Milky Way, and the "black river" [*kuroi kawa*] running by Giovanni's town, where Campanella drowns.²⁵⁰

While the exact form of the Pleocene may be relative to the observer, it remains intensely real as a vivid manifestation of the emotional self, a type of panoramic interiority capable of excavating deeply buried memories of both individual and species. Perhaps this is the reason the Professor takes such care in excavating in the remains of the vos, even though from other perspectives this entire site may be nothing more than an empty patch of sky. What his team is digging through is nothing less than the buried layers of Giovanni's emotional life, illuminated traces of both his own past and the ancient cosmic energies through which it evolved.

This emergence of the self from within the currents of a larger cosmos is central to the "phenomenon called 'I'" [*Watakushi to iu genshō*] described in the opening poem of Kenji's *Spring and Asura* (*Haru to shura*, 1924), an excerpt of which appears in voiceover during the credit sequence at the end of Group TAC's film:

The phenomenon that is myself
Is one of the imagined organic lights;
One of its blue illuminations,
Consisting of all kinds of transparent ghosts.
While it flickers energetically,

²⁴⁹ Some Kenji scholars associate this temporal-spatial flux, which the text describes as "4-dimensional," back to the author's familiarity with Einstein's theory of relativity. By focusing on dream science here I have admittedly sidelined these larger ontological questions, though I believe a focus on the structure of dreaming helps to clarify just what these more ambitious arguments might entail for subjectivity and social life. Miyazawa, *Eiga de yomu Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, 62 and 92; Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 75 and 81. On *Ginga* and Einstein, see Mita, *Miyazawa Kenji: Sonzai no matsuri no naka e*, quoted by Strong in Miyazawa, *Night of the Milky Way Railway*, 161. See also Saitō, *Ainshutain to Ginga tetsudō no yoru*.

²⁵⁰ "Black river" is the name of the final episode of the film. This river in turn appears to be based on the Kitakami river near Kenji's hometown of Hanamaki in Iwate, which like the Pliocene Coast contains an abundance of fossilized walnuts. See note in Miyazawa, *Night on the Milky Way Railway*, 160.

With the scenery, with everyone,
It is a blue illumination of a lamp,
Whose alternating currents are indeed burning very brightly.
While maintaining the light, the lamp is lost. [...]

It all flickers within me. Everyone can feel it, at the same time.
A piece of the shadow and the light that I have kept until now,
As you see, a mental sketch.²⁵¹

As with *Ginga*, this poem has been interpreted through its complex religious and scientific references. But Kenji's poem also serves as a lucid description of the hypnagogic dream stage, and the way this translucent and flickering "mental sketch" wavers between private and public. When the Pliocene anthropologist says he is "providing evidence" [*shōmei suru*], he gives a homonymous echo of the practice of illumination [*shōmei suru*] Kenji describes here as the central phenomenon of self.

Ginga is suffused with these flickering currents, all reaching back to this vision of an ethereal, electrical universe on the trembling edge of life and death, waking and dreaming. Sugii's only instruction to Hosono for the soundtrack was to "please make it tremble" [*yurete kudasai*].²⁵² Both Hosono and Kashiwabara make the film reverberate with a wide range of quivering, vibrating sounds, poised somewhere between the mechanical and the alchemical. Underneath the train's *goton goton* is a barely audible oscillating waveform, somewhere between wind and the hum of electrical wires. Other wavering synthesizer tones run throughout the soundtrack, both in the sound design and the musical cues, as in the wobbling low note of Hosono's "Phantasmic Fourth Dimension Theme" [*Gensō yonjigen no tēma*],²⁵³ and the distorted rendition of the Antonín Dvořák's *Symphony No. 9 in E Minor "From the New World."* This all rhymes with the repeated visual motif of electric lights pulsing in and out as if from a metaphysical power surge.

All this gives physical form to Giovanni's wavering between life and death, isolation and engagement, the radically personal and the radically panoramic. Like Eno's airport music, *Ginga's* galaxy feels warmly inviting at the same time as it hints at the environmental dissolution of death.

Emotional Consolidation and the Return to the City

Recognizing the affinity between Giovanni's journey and the ambient aesthetics of the dream stage, we can point more precisely to what is at stake in Giovanni's turn away from immediate social pressures into the panoramic interior. Recall Hobson's argument that dreaming, by providing an opportunity to synchronize percept and affect in the virtual environment of the dream

²⁵¹ I am quoting here the translation given in the English subtitles included on the 2002 Japanese DVD. Sugii goes so far as to describe *Ginga* as "the fairy tale version of *Spring and Asura*." *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 65.

²⁵² Sugii Gisaburō, "Bimyō na ongaku sekai" (A Subtle Musical World), in liner notes to Hosono Haruomi, *Nokto de la Galaksia Fervojo* soundtrack album (Teichiku, 1985).

²⁵³ Due to his trip to Genova, Italy, to work on *The Endless Talking* (Teichiku, 1985), Hosono had only one day in the studio to record the *Ginga* soundtrack. As a result, the tracks were all performed improvisationally using a digital synthesizer and sampler recorded by a Studer 2-track, foregoing the usual overdubbing and mixdown stages of the recording process. One book on Hosono's music notes how Hosono's "techno" sound is particularly warm due to the influence of his many other styles (latin, classical, jazz, pops, etc.) on his compositions, the blend of analogue and digital synthesizers, the use of synthesizer presets often without any additional manipulation, and the use of vacuum tube compressor/limiters like the famous Fairchild. The latter is particularly important for producing the reverberant atmospheres of the *Ginga* score. Suzuki, "non-standard & monad," *Hosono Haruomi OmniSound*, 182-3 and 193.

stage, allows for the brain to experiment with emotional salience and develop new strategies for responding to the world. This is exactly what happens to Giovanni.

When Giovanni turns to the stars and drifts into his hypnagogic reverie, he reframes his affective perspective on the social world. By remapping existential certainty onto more stable objects in his environment, Giovanni becomes able to absorb change on the local level without losing his way. For millennia the stars have offered important navigational markers precisely because they were among the most dependable of perceptual objects. By relying on the night sky, the immediate landscape could change dramatically and the journey could still remain on course.²⁵⁴

By relocating his existential certainty to the cosmos, Giovanni is able to recontextualize his father's absence, his mother's illness, and the death of his best friend as transformations within a larger system—a system much larger than himself. His emotional response to these social facts becomes embedded in a more existentially secure framework. This pulls Giovanni out of the intense isolation he was feeling at the start of the film, when his fragile social identity was all he had to work with. Instead of Campanella simply disappearing and leaving Giovanni without a friend in the world, Giovanni understands him as simply moving to another part of the cosmos, becoming as ever-present as the Milky Way floating above his head. Giovanni's sadness is rendered transparent through the feeling that he is now together with the cosmos, an emotional realignment afforded by his dream journey across the galaxy.²⁵⁵ Finding refuge in ambient subjectivity, he becomes comfortable in his solitude, at home with the larger impersonal environment that enfolds him.

This extends, in turn, to Giovanni's recognition of the needs of other people, as he moves beyond his own personal isolation and strife to think about how he might fit into a larger social ecology.²⁵⁶ This shift in interpersonal relations first emerges during Giovanni's encounter near the

²⁵⁴ This might be understood through J. J. Gibson's concept of the *perceptual invariant*: elements of a perceived object that remain consistent even when the object is encountered from different angles and at different points in time. Gibson stresses that lived human perception happens not from a fixed point, but in motion, as an observer moves in and around her environment. For Gibson perceptual invariants are the basis of human navigation of the world, and the way different individuals can come to perceive the "same" environment: the world appears differently from every point of view, but with movement an invariant world comes to be distinguished from the transient particularities of any single static orientation. Invariants provide structure and certainty, and without them we are lost. This does not mean these invariants are absolute, but that they are relatively stable within the context of environmental perception and action. I find this model echoes the activation-synthesis dynamic of the panoramic interior in tantalizing ways. Dreaming appears to seek emotional invariants as consciousness explores different emotional situations within the simulated environment of the dream stage, in order to develop and refine a general set of affective response patterns. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 73.

²⁵⁵ In a sense the cosmos comes to substitute for what in other contexts might have been nation or homeland. Joe Milutis describes how over the course of the twentieth century outer space increasingly came to serve as an image of wholeness, particularly as the cultural certainties holding life on Earth together became less and less certain. The cosmos provided a largely still unified background to hold everything together. In Kenji's story space is likewise the final frontier, with that original modern frontier-breaker, the steam engine, playing the technological role later taken up by the spaceship. *Ginga* makes an interesting contrast with "frontier science fiction," where the Western myth of leaving the past behind and forging a new masculinity amid the wilds takes place against a virgin backdrop of pure space (as in *Oneamise no tsubasa*). While Kenji similarly imagines outer space as emotionally pure, Giovanni's galaxy is not untouched space waiting to be colonized – it is already populated and stratified (the "Indian" even puts in an appearance in Kenji's text, in the "New World" sequence). Likewise, this is not a story of allaying fear by reestablishing the rule of the (missing) father, but of recognizing the larger cosmos as the underlying context for all social activity. See Milutis, *Ether*, 108-44.

²⁵⁶ The practice of reframing human existence away from the social and towards the cosmic is a familiar theme going back to Stoic philosophers like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. It plays no less a role in Kenji's beloved Lotus Sutra and its emphasis on situating earthly beings within an immense cosmological order. In both traditions, this reframing serves an ethical purpose, by shifting concern away from self-interested social desires and understanding the self instead as inextricably interwoven with larger, profoundly impersonal forces at work in the universe.

end of his train journey with the Tutor and his two charges, a girl of about fourteen and her younger brother. This trio appears after Giovanni dramatically (and surrealistically) witnesses the sinking of their ocean liner as it crashes into an iceberg (an unmistakable reference to the Titanic disaster). It becomes clear the three have drowned and are on their way to the Christian heaven, after the Tutor determined it was better to sacrifice their lives than to prevent others from having a spot on the lifeboats. The Tutor is calm and almost smug about having discovered a way to get them into heaven by giving their lives for others (an act, we learn later, that parallels Campanella's dive into the river to save his friend Zanelli). Up until this point in the dream Giovanni has oscillated between being selfishly happy to have an opportunity to spend time alone with Campanella, and utterly absorbed in self-pity and loneliness. He gets annoyed when other passengers interrupt his private time with Campanella, so much that he even rages with silent jealousy when Kaoru, the dead girl from the ship, engages Campanella in friendly conversation.

As this discussion progresses, however, Kaoru tells the story of a Scorpion who escaped a predator by leaping into a well, but died there regretting that its life could not have at least help feed others rather than being wasted in isolation. Soon after the girl, her brother, and their tutor are disembarking to enter into the Christian heaven at the Southern Cross. In Kenji's original text, Giovanni objects: "Who says you have to go to Heaven? My teacher says we have to create a place that's even better than Heaven right here."²⁵⁷ This leads to an unresolved argument about which God is the "true" God and which is the "fake" God, where the text contrasts the transcendent Christian heaven with Kenji's Bodhisattva ideal of continual self-sacrifice. This religious debate is omitted from the film, and Giovanni's pledge to follow Campanella's model of self-sacrifice is transferred to the end of the story, when Giovanni pledges to be like the scorpion and give his body for the happiness of others. Sugii says he thought about cutting out every reference to religion, but also felt it was important to clearly state Giovanni's newfound resolve.²⁵⁸

While the film avoids placing Giovanni's resolution in the context of any particular religious tradition, it implicitly rejects the idea of Heaven as an alternative paradise arrived at through leaving this world behind. Instead, through the various emotional encounters within his dream journey, Giovanni comes to understand Campanella's death as a call to work towards building a better world for the living. If Giovanni initially runs away from society to seek solitude on the hill, his dream affords him the emotional perspective to discover a social consciousness. He returns to town eager to serve others rather than continue to lament his place in society. Sugii says it very clearly: "What I'm saying to Giovanni through the film is this: If you want to find true happiness, go back to the city."²⁵⁹

The expansion of ambient subjectivity into the environment reaches back towards a point of consolidation in the final episode of the film where Giovanni, now fully awake, finally confronts the reality of Campanella's death. Many people from town are gathered on the riverbed in the evening darkness while searchlights look in vain for Campanella's body. On hearing Campanella's father decide to call off the search, Giovanni's expression is suddenly cross-hatched with the tension of oncoming tears. His face literally quivers, as alternating animation cells pull his features back and forth into spasms of emotion. The panoramic emotional journey of Giovanni's dream condenses back down into his waking life in this final moment of the film, as his grief passes through him and drives his transformation into an active social subject. He looks up at the sky one

²⁵⁷ Miyazawa, *Eigo de yomu Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, 212.

²⁵⁸ *Fantasutikku korekushon supesharu*, 65.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

last time, makes his prayer to work for the happiness of others, and then takes off running back to town.

Giovanni's emotional passage in the film demonstrates the (potentially) socially adaptive side of ambient subjectivity, the indirect social payoff of the "calm, and a space to think" provided by the temporary turn away from social identity into the panoramic interior. Moreover, Group TAC's *Ginga* hints not only at the importance of dreaming, but the role of ambient aesthetics in providing waking experiences approximating the dreaming brain. While certainly not every passage through ambient subjectivity will end with Giovanni's social resolve, *Ginga* demonstrates how emotional salience might emerge precisely at moments when self-reflection is inhibited and consciousness is at its most environmental and atmospheric. In fluidly mixing affect and atmosphere, the dream environments of *Ginga* show how emotion is never purely "inside" an individual, but develops with and through environmental perception—so much that the only way the brain can rethink feeling is to generate entire fabricated sets, cosmic interiorities for consciousness to explore and experiment with. The unique affordances of the dream stage highlight how rational and irrational forms of consciousness may be complimentary to each other, and demonstrates how social isolation and social engagement are both necessary for the development of a mature emotional self.²⁶⁰

The Absolute Horizon

At the same time, however, what has transpired in the film is not so much a resolution of Giovanni's problems as a character, but a reorientation of questions of existence away from the social and onto the cosmos. In this sense, even if Giovanni returns to the city, that city has been inexorably reframed by his encounter with the cosmos. The frustrated boy of the beginning of the film explodes across the horizon, and the small blue body of the cat only barely seems to contain it.

Giovanni's relocation of existential certainty to the cosmos deploys a strategy common to ambient media: the polarization of the contingent foreground and the absolute background in order to reground self-awareness in the later's expansive embrace. By drawing attention to foreground ephemerality, ambient media paradoxically affords an atmosphere of existential security.

This connection at first seems puzzling: why should contingency be calming? On further consideration, however, contingency turns out to be a form of misdirection, a way to imply an absolute background by pulling attention to the seeming fragility of the foreground.

Elaine Scarry describes this use of 'rarity' as a prominent technique for achieving the vivid literary description of weight. She describes how Proust and other writers produce a feeling of solidity through the description not of the solid object itself, but through the passage of fleeting, weightless objects over the surface of the object. The solidity of the object emerges by contrast with the ephemeral, the latter being much easier to call forth through the near weightless medium of the written word.²⁶¹

Robert Wicks makes a similar point in his discussion of the idealization of contingency in premodern Japanese aesthetics.²⁶² Wicks points out the error in describing impermanence and imperfection as the central focus of classical Japanese aesthetics, as this ignores how

²⁶⁰ On this point, further consideration of the role of emotion in dreaming seems to have much to offer recent attempts to theorize the social transmission of emotion, helping to clarify the connections between percept and affect, emotion and subjectivity.

²⁶¹ Scarry, *Reading by the Book*, 89.

²⁶² See Wicks, "The Idealization of Contingency in Traditional Japanese Aesthetics."

impermanence is almost always presented in contrast to an implied stability. Impermanent qualities are highlighted against a background of permanence. The fragility of present conditions contrasts with the implied “now” that persists from moment to moment. Imperfect objects are placed against perfect backgrounds (like stars against the night sky). Wicks describes this in terms of calm: a heightened awareness of the contingency of existence is “tempered peacefully by the perfected background that highlights those contingent things.”²⁶³

Not only does the perfect background (absolute space, absolute time) highlight the contingency of the objects placed within it, but conversely, the contingent, limited objects serve to highlight, via the very same contrast, the perfection and permanence of the space and time surrounding them. In other words, rather than, or at least alongside, the “idealization of contingency” Wicks identifies, we might see here the use of a contrast with contingent objects to assert the background as absolute and unchanging.

In the earlier historical context that is Wicks’ focus (including, for example, the writings of Dōgen from the 13th century, and Sen no Rikyū from the 16th), this might be understood as a way to afford the “peaceful” consolations of the absolute background by developing a contrast with the contingent quality of the objects at the perceptual focus of the composition.

This desire for an absolute background persists even as modern science renders the perceptible world less and less certain. In a similar argument, Joe Milutis documents the ongoing desire for an absolute “ether” that might continue to subtend everything in a fragmented and rationalized modern world. Ether becomes a horizon of sensory integrity, and attempting to stitch together and pacify what would otherwise be turbulent and threatening. In his analysis of Japanese animation from the 1990s, Milutis finds a simultaneous desire for the sensory plenitude of the oceanic feeling, and the admission of its impossibility (followed by nostalgia for its loss). Milutis points to a nostalgia for the “pre-Einsteinian form of space-time,” not to mention the oceanic time before the discovery of sexual difference, bodily decay, and other markers of personal finitude.²⁶⁴

Time and space themselves become contingent after Einstein and the development of the cinema,²⁶⁵ a development that Milutis links to the growing global appeal of bodily spiritual disciplines like yoga and Zen Buddhism in the early twentieth century United States. The postindustrial popularity of healing trends, cybernetics, exotic landscapes, and ethereal imagery can be understood as a further elaboration of this ongoing desire for the ontological stability of an absolute horizon.²⁶⁶

Foreground misdirection in ambient media allows for the assertion of the absolute without having to argue for it directly—an argument that the contemporary awareness of chaos and contingency makes more and more difficult to make. Instead, by demonstrably ‘exposing’ the contingency of the social and material world, these aesthetics on the surface appear to be aligned with contemporary science emphasizing just that. And yet, the more thoroughly everything within focus is proven to be impermanent and contingent, the more an absolute background can be implied as the material within which all this contingency arises and passes away.

In this way, misdirection through rarity grants access to the peaceful reassurances of the absolute, while grounding these feelings in the self-congratulatory assurance of being current with scientific perspectives on the manifest contingency of the perceptual world. As long as the peaceful

²⁶³ Ibid., 96.

²⁶⁴ Milutis, *Ether*, 67.

²⁶⁵ See Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*.

²⁶⁶ Adam Curtis’s documentary series *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* provides an entertaining if at times overreaching overview of more recent attempts. See in particular Episode 2.

absolute remains in the background, it escapes the fragmenting perspectives of rational thought. The continuous exposure of fragmentation and contingency in the foreground only serves, via an ever-starker contrast, to shore up the stability of the enveloping periphery.

Deleuze and Guattari read atmosphere as an "encompassing element" that renders diversity homogenous: "an ambient space in which the multiplicity would be immersed and which would make distances invariant."²⁶⁷ At first an empty landscape appears to be open to a wide range of potential actions; and yet this emptiness might also be narrowed through the environmentally homogenizing force of an atmosphere. In the chapter on "The Smooth and the Striated" in *A Thousand Plateaus*, striated space is defined in part through "interlinkage by immersion in an ambient milieu," which itself comes to define the horizon against which the space is organized:

The absolute is now the horizon or background, in other words the Encompassing Element without which nothing would be global or englobed. [...] The desert, sky, or sea, the Ocean, the Unlimited, first plays the role of an encompassing element, and tends to become a horizon: the earth is thus surrounded, globalized, "grounded" by this element, which holds it in immobile equilibrium and makes Form possible.²⁶⁸

It is crucial to notice here how this departs from the usual distinction between single-point "Cartesian" perspective and its presumed opposite, "flatness" or the distributed surface. Deleuze and Guattari's "ambient milieu" striates space not by reining at the center of perception, but by slipping into the background.

This is, in short, the main sensory maneuver of ambient media: foreground certainties present the world as ephemeral and fleeting, but the atmosphere at the distant horizon persuades the body to keep calm nonetheless.

After his passage through the panoramic interior, Giovanni finally fully wakes up, not from his dream, but from his emotional confusion. He reaches this point of departure as a result of his initial turn away from his immediate struggles with the social world and into ambient subjectivity. He returns with a newly expanded perspective on this same world. As the end title says in the very final moment of the film:

Now it begins
Koko yori hajimaru
Nun komencigás

²⁶⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 493.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 494-5.

PART THREE: RESTORATIVE FICTIONS

[6. Cloudiness as a Way of Life]

Ambient media teaches us how to live in city of clouds.

I live close to one of the elevated highways that crisscross Tokyo, built in the 1960s to bring traffic quickly in and out and over the city. Walking on the street running below the highway means bathing in the sounds of the highway traffic above as they reverberate off the surrounding buildings. The unending hum masks the individual sounds of my body as I walk, submerging my footsteps in the wash of sound from above. The sounds of other nearby people also fade from attention, masked in the larger wash of noise.

When I first moved to the area, this massive roar of noise from above felt heavy and oppressive. Then I started reading the stories of Yoshiyuki Rie, all set in and around a small Tokyo apartment, depicting a lifestyle awash in noise and yet strangely quiet, calm, and cloudy. Inspired by her ability to find a more abstract peace amidst the human crush and car exhaust of the metropolis, I began consciously trying to see Tokyo as a more ambient city. I willed myself to hear the highway not as the roar of combustion engines pushing mercilessly onward, but as the sound of waves breaking on the seashore—a sound surprisingly close to the slowly pulsing roar the highway produces. This act of self-deception immediately eased my natural antipathy towards the traffic noise, turning it instead into something almost peaceful. I have almost—almost but not quite—started to enjoy my walks down the street. At the same time, of course, this is never anything other than an act of self-deception, a willing disavowal of the

ugliness of the city in order to feel it as something more beautiful and welcoming. In this shift lies both the potential and the promise of ambient media as an approach to mood regulation. This section turns to literary examples of ambient media in order to explore in greater detail how atmospheric mood regulation allows for calm in the midst of urban congestion—and the fraught nature of this quest for environmental control of the self.

The stories of Yoshiyuki Rie (1939-2006) explore her characters' attempts to live in an ambient Tokyo of lapping waves and drifting clouds. To accomplish this, they focus on their ambient companions: cloudy cats that drift in and through their lives. Cats in Yoshiyuki's work function as ambient domestic companions, keeping their human keepers calm and collected. Her stories document both the desirability and the danger of using the ambient affordances of the city to maintain a cat-like calm—a lifestyle based in the *reisei*, the “cool and still.”

In Yoshiyuki's “The Little Lady” (*Chīsana kifujin*, 1981),²⁶⁹ urban self-soothing becomes a way of life. Sensitive to noise and socially awkward, the story's protagonist mostly keeps to herself, living quietly with her cat Cloud in a small apartment in central Tokyo. The narrator's quiet life models a form of domestic solitude based around keeping social interaction at a minimum. The way cats relate to each other becomes an ideal alternative to the brusque dynamics Yoshiyuki documents in the human realm. While the humans in this story tend to quickly lose their cool, the calm cats keep their distance, softly purring nearby.

Domestic Solitude

The quiet life sought by Yoshiyuki's narrator can be situated within a larger movement towards domestic solitude in urban Japan, beginning in the postwar period and continuing on today. We might first ask why someone in Tokyo might come to prefer a solitary life in the first place. In Yoshiyuki's writing, the reasons her characters choose to keep society at a distance are clear. In “The Little Lady,” the moments of quiet the narrator is able to achieve are continually offset by hostile interruptions from society at large. The narrator describes living for eleven years in what seems to be a cursed apartment building, constantly accosted by noise from ongoing nearby construction work and the busy street outside. Random drunks come by and urinate on the walls, and she even has to ward off a stalker, making her the subject of neighborhood gossip. When she leaves home and enters public space, she feels she is constantly being judged negatively. More than once in the story she describes a sudden shameful awareness that shop owners and passerby are probably looking at her with suspicion. On top of all this, the narrator suffers from a chronic and severe psychosomatic illness, made worse by environmental and social stressors. All of this leads to a situation where domestic solitude must be understood as nothing less than a much needed and hard-won refuge from the pressures of daily life.

At the same time, it is clear Yoshiyuki's narrator is never completely alone even when she wishes to be. Yoshiyuki and her narrators have not fled out to the mountains somewhere, but are trying to maintain their solitude while living in a busy area at the center of Tokyo, at the time the largest city in the world. In Yoshiyuki's work the scarcity of quiet in Tokyo combines with the intense social pressures of Japanese society, making for a situation where the problem with social engagement is often too much rather than too little.

²⁶⁹ This work won Yoshiyuki the Akutagawa Prize, Japan's most prestigious literary award, in early 1981. Her more famous older brother, novelist Yoshiyuki Junnosuke (1924-1994), was on the jury. The older Yoshiyuki had received the same award in 1954, making the two of them the first pair of siblings to have both received the prize. For an English translation of “The Little Lady” see Yoshiyuki Rie, “The Little Lady.”

For Yoshiyuki's characters, home is often the only space where they can develop a self less subject to ongoing social pressures to conform. Stories like "The Little Lady" explore an alternate set of principles for urban living, more supportive of this need for personal space.

At the same time, Yoshiyuki and her characters' domestic solitude is thoroughly informed by a consumer logic: the mutual penetration of emotional and economic discourses, particularly among the middle class.²⁷⁰ Yoshiyuki's emotional attachments are organized around pets, art, and tourism. In a non-fiction essay, she writes, "When it comes to people, I do not feel sustained feelings of love. I love Cloud, the cat I raised. I love things like books, films, music, paintings, and places discovered while traveling."²⁷¹ Yoshiyuki reserves her deeper feelings for those *ownable experiences* supporting her need for sustained calm: Claude Debussy records, reproductions of paintings by Paul Klee, visits to the sea. But it is the domestic cat, above all, that serves as her ideal companion. And at the root of this attachment is an attachment to the way Cloud allows the narrator to feel: having him around helps keep her calm, emotionally detached from everything else.

Clouds and Cat Booms

In Yoshiyuki's short stories, it is cats, not humans, who best provide a model for the social and emotional calm needed to sustain a quiet life. While her earlier poetry collections (1963-67) and first short story collection (1970/72) make no mention of cats, felines come to play an increasingly important role in Yoshiyuki's writing, eventually emerging as the main theme of her work. After she first raised a cat herself, cat characters began to appear with increasing regularity in her work, beginning with the fairy tale "The Magical Kushan Cat."²⁷²

Yoshiyuki's newfound fascination coincided with a larger "cat boom" starting in the 1970s, where Japanese pop culture turned to all things feline.²⁷³ This included a small community of women writers publishing stories in the "cat literature" [*neko bungaku*] genre. Yoshiyuki's works occasionally make reference to this larger trend, and, as we will see, they play ironically with the cliché of the cat-obsessed "high miss" [*hai misu*, an unmarried woman of marriageable age], an image Yoshiyuki was well aware she was playing into and playing with.²⁷⁴

The pop culture of the cat boom can be divided into two groups. The first group of works focus on everything "cute" [*kawaii*] about the cat. Here Hello Kitty (introduced by Sanrio in 1975) and the Namennayo cats (1980-2) play a starring role.²⁷⁵ The second group imagines cats as graceful, clean, and noble, and in these terms often compares them favorably to (male) members of the human species. The refined and quiet qualities of the latter group are clearly the major draw for Yoshiyuki and her literary community of cat-lovers. The cats they describe are often beautiful, but rarely are they "cute" in the usual helpless and bumbling way. Kittens are nearly absent, whereas more mature cats figure prominently. These noble cats play two specific roles in

²⁷⁰ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 60.

²⁷¹ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 164.

²⁷² Yonaha Keiko. "Yoshiyuki Rie," 155; Yoshiyuki Rie. *Mahō tsukai no kushan neko*.

²⁷³ "Shizuka ni neko bûmu - ureru kanren shôhin, rekôdo ya shashinshû mo tōjō (keizai repôto)" [Quietly, a Cat Boom - Related Goods Selling, Records and Photo Books also Introduced (Economic Report)], *Nihon keizai shinbun* (4 March 1978).

²⁷⁴ For example, "Cat Murder" makes fun of a woman who suddenly starts raising a cat and declaring cats are better than men around the time of the cat boom, despite having no interest in them prior to this time. Yoshiyuki, "Neko no satsujin," 132.

²⁷⁵ The Namennayo [Don't Lick Me] cats were real cats dressed in miniature human outfits, photographed in front of scale dioramas depicting human scenes. Pioneered by Tsuda Satoru, the trend quickly spread in the early 1980s, no doubt to the dismay of pet cats everywhere.

Yoshiyuki's work. They generate a calm ambience for their owners, and they model a type of distanced sociality that characters wish might carry over to the human world.

For the narrator of "The Little Lady," the preference for cats over people can be traced back to a particular episode in her youth. One day, not long after hearing a middle school teacher declare that she had no social skills and no ability to make friends, she notices a cat wander casually in through the door of her family house. She is surprised to discover that while watching it a strange calm has descended over her.²⁷⁶

The narrator's own recently deceased cat, Cloud, had a similar ability to calm the narrator's stresses and allow her to focus on her work:

As I was writing I would suddenly sense a pair of eyes on me, and from some tall place or dark area there would be Cloud gently watching over me. When I grew tired I would gaze at Cloud. The haze in my mind would dissipate and I would soon feel the strength to go on writing gathering inside.²⁷⁷

In moments like these, Cloud serves her as a mood regulator and a muse, providing a gentle atmosphere conducive to poetry and imagination.

Cloud was a rather large charcoal-grey stray cat. He lived with Yoshiyuki through most of the 1970s, until passing away at the age of 9 from a spleen disease. He appears under his own name in "The Little Lady," as the pet of the unnamed narrator, a writer of cat fiction with clear parallels to Yoshiyuki herself. The story opens about two years after Cloud's death, as the narrator happens upon a stuffed animal in a local store with an uncanny resemblance to him. She purchases the stuffed cat, leading to a series of extended reflections about her time living with Cloud.

Cloud's name comes from a line in an essay by poet Hagiwara Sakutarō, where Hagiwara praises "the free time of looking at clouds" [*kumo o miteiru jiyū no jikan*].²⁷⁸ The narrator experiences this same open-ended temporality when gazing at her cat, hence the name.

This blurring of Cloud the cat and clouds in the sky serves as a recurring theme in the story's depiction of the calming feline. This overlap is enhanced by the Japanese language, which has no special case for distinguishing proper nouns, and allows for ambiguity between the singular and plural. The resulting potential for polysemy is greatly exploited in Japanese poetry, and here Yoshiyuki draws on her background as a poet to play with the blending of Cloud and cloud(s) in her prose. In this passage, she recalls an episode from exactly one year after Cloud's passing:

The crows were especially noisy on the day Cloud [*kumo*] died, but on that day not a single one came to visit. I went up on the roof in the evening. The clouds [*kumo*] were a light pink overlapping a pale grey, looking so much like the roof of a building in the woods that I couldn't believe they were clouds [*kumo*] in the sky. The atmosphere resembled a painting by Klee. I want to live quietly with Cloud [*kumo*] in a house like that, I thought.²⁷⁹

Not only do the different clouds overlap here, but cat and environment also seem to share the same qualities: the sky is quiet in the same way Cloud is quiet, and the narrator dreams of living quietly with Cloud in a house that is made of clouds. She stands on a roof looking at a sky that looks like a roof, made of clouds the color of Cloud's nose overlaid on the color of Cloud's fur. Elsewhere, his coat is described as "a pale charcoal grey like the sky before sunrise," connecting him not only to the clouds but to the larger night sky that surrounds them.²⁸⁰ In moments like these, a series of similes render Cloud's body coextensive with the calming landscape that was his namesake.

²⁷⁶ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 296

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 272-3.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 269. Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886-1942) was a major figure in the development of free verse poetry in Japan, and one of Yoshiyuki's key influences.

²⁷⁹ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 279.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

At other times, the text links Cloud with the narrator's other favorite calming environment, the seashore. Cloud's light blue and pale-violet eyes are said to be the color of the sea.²⁸¹ Like the sky, the shore serves as a relaxing landscape for the protagonist. She describes early on in the story her practice of leaving the bustle of Tokyo behind and traveling out to the coast whenever she needs to clear her mind. The sea here is therapeutic primarily for its soundscape, with the leisurely pulse of the waves helping to slow the narrator's breathing. Thinking back on Cloud's life, the narrator links his purring with this restorative rhythm: "Whenever I heard that rumbling, a sound that reminds me of waves, I used to feel unaccountably calm."²⁸²

Cloud is associated not only with calming environments, but with the aesthetic landscapes of the narrator's (and Yoshiyuki's) favored artworks, especially the paintings of Paul Klee and the music of Claude Debussy. The story revels in quintessential Paul Klee colors: charcoal greys, desaturated pinks and blues, light violets, and grey-greens. Like a Klee painting, Yoshiyuki's lush atmospheric backgrounds seem coextensive with the characters and objects that appear within them. Similarly, the impressionistic contours of Debussy's music allow Yoshiyuki's narrator to bring a little bit of the ocean back into the domestic environment with her. After Cloud's death, the narrator stays up all night listening to a recording of Debussy's "Fêtes" (1899), apparently one of the cat's favorite works.²⁸³

Cloud and his associated aesthetics allow the narrator (and Yoshiyuki, and her readers) to merge the domestic space of the apartment with these larger restorative environments. In a non-fiction essay about Cloud, Yoshiyuki writes: "I love how this animal is completely free, with eyes that change shape, and a body, particularly as a kitten, as fluffy as a cloud."²⁸⁴

These amorphous qualities of the cat connect not only to Yoshiyuki's favored landscapes, but to her literary style itself. Just as Cloud is constantly melting into the sky and sea, Yoshiyuki's writing is marked by an extreme degree of porousness between characters, between objects, between scenes, and even between publications.²⁸⁵

The flow of "The Little Lady" is marked by an almost constant slippage between different times and locations, between waking and dreaming, and between everyday life and the world of imagination. The temporality of the story is constantly shifting, jumping backwards and forwards to different episodes in the narrator's past and present at least once every few paragraphs. The present of the story is thoroughly interlaced with memories from Cloud's life, his death two years prior, the events of the intervening years, and more distant childhood episodes, as well as the stories of the other characters and the alternate world of a fairy tale serially excerpted within the story itself. These shifts in scene often have only the slightest transition between them. The narration often slips back and forth mid-paragraph between an account of what another character said and the narrator's personal recollections, blending them into one larger imaginative space.

Like Cloud, clouds, and these personal recollections, characters also often appear to blend into one another in Yoshiyuki's fiction. The main characters in "The Little Lady" all share similar traits. G, an older female writer of cat fiction the narrator meets at the stuffed animal store, appears to be a type of doppelgänger: the narrator hints at one point they may in fact be the same person.²⁸⁶

²⁸¹ Ibid., 291.

²⁸² Ibid., 282.

²⁸³ "Fêtes" is the second of three "Nocturnes" Debussy composed inspired by the eponymous impressionist landscapes of painter James McNeill Whistler.

²⁸⁴ Quoted in Yonaha, "Yoshiyuki Rie," 155.

²⁸⁵ Agnus Fletcher describes a similar quality in American poetry using what he calls the "middle-voice." Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, 120 and 164.

²⁸⁶ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 297.

The cats also overlap a great deal: Cloud, G's late cat Diana, and the stuffed cat all look alike, and G's characters for "Cat Murder" (the fairy tale she is writing, excerpted in the story as the narrator reads it) are based on a photograph of Cloud and his "little sister." A more minor character, the mother of the stuffed animal store owner, also parallels G and the narrator, having once owned a charcoal-grey cat of her own looking just like Diana and Cloud. As one character states, "it's said everyone has two identical twins somewhere in the world."²⁸⁷ One critic perceptively describes the three women as "sensitive variations" of Yoshiyuki herself.²⁸⁸ In the end, all the characters in the story appear to be acting out different versions of the same basic relationship, between an introverted, sensitive, and socially insecure woman and a more beautiful, noble, sexually androgynous feline—a pairing we will return to later in this essay.

Moreover, as Yoshiyuki Junnosuke notes, "The Little Lady" is characterized by a great deal of fluidity between the human world and the cat world.²⁸⁹ The narrator jokes that she is aging faster than usual because she is turning into a cat, while the cat in G's fairy tale tries to become human to slow down her life cycle.

This use of repeated themes and images is the central atmospheric technique of Yoshiyuki's literary style. Repetition is central to the impact of her poetry, which often repeats phrases and entire lines verbatim, allowing shifting contexts to shade the language differently with each iteration. Repetition reemerges as a central interest in her prose works, though here the repetition also works intertextually across her various publications. Personal experiences described in her memoirs regularly reappear verbatim within her fiction, couched within larger narrative constructs. Meanwhile, her narrator is almost always a figure clearly identifiable as a version of Yoshiyuki herself. Okuno Takeo describes Yoshiyuki's style as "somewhere between poetry and novel and essay,"²⁹⁰ and even "The Little Lady" seems to be operating in several genres simultaneously, freely mixing fairy tale, poetic reverie, and personal memoir.

A few years before this story appeared Yoshiyuki published a story of her own with the same title as the fairy tale excerpted in "The Little Lady," a work titled *Cat Murder* [*Neko no satsujin*]. The original "Cat Murder" is not the same as the fairy tale excerpted in "The Little Lady," but instead tells the story of a woman who works at a post office. A woman named G also figures prominently in this work, seemingly the same character that appears in "The Little Lady." In both stories, G is working on a fairy tale titled "Cat Murder," though it is only excerpted in "The Little Lady."

This overlap of episodes and characters between autobiographical and fictional formats and between seemingly different stories lends to the atmosphere of amorphousness characterizing Yoshiyuki's work. The world of imagination and the real world of lived experience appear inextricably intertwined. Both Yoshiyuki and her characters are constantly lapsing into daydreams [*kūsō*], and this half-dreaming and half-awake state is the mode of awareness to which her poems and stories often aspire. Yoshiyuki has her narrator somewhat ironically reference these qualities in "Cat Murder" as she is listening to G ramble on incoherently: "The way she spoke it was hard to distinguish between people and cats, dreams and reality, but her stories were interesting and I found myself listening intently."²⁹¹

In her poetry, Yoshiyuki often features similar moments of shape-shifting, using the precise ambiguities of the Japanese language to produce a remarkable blending of figure and landscape:

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 284.

²⁸⁸ Kōno and Saeaki, "Joryū shinjin no genzai - taidan jihyō," 204.

²⁸⁹ "Dai 85-kai," 341

²⁹⁰ Quoted in Yonaha, "Yoshiyuki Rie," 156.

²⁹¹ Yoshiyuki, "Neko no satsujin," 131.

Hiding somewhere in the sky...

You
climbed up the cypress tree
“wait for me”

Though I began to sob
you
transformed into a bird of violet
and flew away

I wander lost in this graveyard

Hiding somewhere in the sky
you suddenly transform into rain
as if imitating me and my tears, back then²⁹²

Here Yoshiyuki deftly realigns an ostensibly human subject of address into a more impersonal and dispersed environment: the “you” of the poem shifts from an implied other (perhaps dead) to a departing bird, then to an enveloping rain. This rain in turn comes full circle to express the initial internal emotions of the speaker, subsuming ‘you’ into the I of the poem through metonymic liquidation. ‘You’ become the rain blending with me and my tears, just as time suddenly folds back onto itself at the poem’s end. This sudden alignment of emotion and atmosphere, of affect and percept, serves as a moment of catharsis for the speaker. The rain falls as a gift from ‘you’ both acknowledging and dispersing the speaker’s grief. Through these substitutions, the poem works to shift the discomfort of loss into a scene of immersion where the landscape cooperates with the speaker’s emotions, affording a space for their release and dispersal.

In a discussion of contemporary women’s fiction, writer Kōno Taeko and literary critic Saeki Shōichi note the paradoxical spaciousness of Yoshiyuki’s work: though her stories seem to take place in small and enclosed worlds, these prove to be especially “reverberant” settings, hinting at a much larger universe lying beyond. Noting the overlapping voices in Yoshiyuki’s fiction, Kōno compares her work to a performance of chamber music, where the acoustics allow just a few players to produce a sound much larger and more layered than the small number of players would seem to imply.²⁹³

This type of dispersal is key to the cloudy quality of Yoshiyuki’s stories. Like the poem above, “The Little Lady” constantly renders emotions atmospheric. Everyday landscapes remind the narrator of Cloud, and Cloud reminds the narrator of sky and sea. The sensorium of domestic life is constantly steered, through the soothing properties of the cat, towards a more porous world of soft colors and calm emotions.

The Ambient City

This atmospheric calm is replicated on the larger level of the urban environment, the city as the overarching frame for the narrator’s small little world. Yoshiyuki herself spent most of her life

²⁹² Yoshiyuki, *Yoshiyuki Rie shishū*, 40-41.

²⁹³ Kōno and Saeki. “Joryū shinjin no genzai - taidan jihyō,” 204.

near Yasukuni Street in Chiyoda ward, in the center of Tokyo. Her stories and essays provide a strong sense of her life in this neighborhood: walking up and down its hilly streets, a mixture of busy arterial traffic roads and empty back alleys. On her walks around town she notes passing neighbors, but most often keeps her distance. Particularly as a writer with no regular commute, her life remains relatively contained to a small section of the city. And yet, as in “The Little Lady,” the city is more than the concrete and asphalt that make up its infrastructure, and more than the residents who populate its houses and apartment buildings. Tokyo is also the wind, the sky, the clouds passing by overhead—or at least it can be imagined as such. In a poem included in her essay “Slope” [*Saka*], Yoshiyuki imagines the winds coming from uphill and the winds coming from downhill greeting each other on her sloping street:

As in the spring the winds snack on the scent of flower petals
Each time they talk there is a scent of flowers

However in winter with no scent of flowers
Each time the winds exchange greetings they exhale only cold breath²⁹⁴

The city becomes here and elsewhere in Yoshiyuki’s imagination less a site of human habitation than an open space where air and water can gather and transform. She quickly thinks past the crowded aspects of the city, reimagining it as a playground for the forces of nature.²⁹⁵

In “The Little Lady,” Cloud serves as a portal into that world for the narrator, a living existence that references the sky and the ocean in his voice, color, and movement. If Tokyo is damp, dirty, and crowded, the ocean and the clouds are pure, clean, and expansive. If the city is full of other people, for the narrator primarily a source of discomfort and stress, the ocean and the sky are depopulated sites of solitude. As the narrator sits at the window and looks out onto the world, Tokyo becomes an ambient and empty place, just her and the air.

The clouds and the sea and the cats are what help make Tokyo bearable, but they are also integral aspects of what make the city appealing. Yoshiyuki and her narrator inevitably have a love-hate relationship with Tokyo. On the one hand the city is polluted, crowded, and anything but restorative. At the same time, the convenient proximity of everything necessary for daily life enables the narrator, paradoxically, to live a more isolated existence than she would be able to in the countryside, where people are more dependent on interpersonal communication for survival. In Tokyo other people are largely ignorable. Today a majority of households in Tokyo are single-occupant, and even in Yoshiyuki’s time Tokyo was a mecca for those desiring a more individualistic life relatively free of the burdens of family and community. Yoshiyuki’s narrator needs the city, then, even as she dreams of an environment free from the pressures of human

²⁹⁴ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 53.

²⁹⁵ This imagination of Japan as the immaterial site of liquid flows has a distinguished lineage, including Okakura Tenshin and Shige Shigetaka.

Shiga’s *On the Japanese Landscape* [*Nihon fūkeiron*, 1894], emphasizes the importance of humidity in the perception of landscape within the Japanese islands, sitting as they do at the conflux of multiple sea and air currents. This leads to an aesthetic known as *miegakure* [“hidden from sight”]), which Shiga describes with the following:

Water vapor is like a great ocean, a distant haze across the heavens, from which there appear and then disappear temples, palaces, and pagodas, with the peal of a temple bell pressing its way through now and again.

The work became one of the most influential works on landscape ever published in Japan, and went through fourteen printings within its first eight years. Drawing heavily on British landscape narratives, the book is most often read as an attempt to locate national pride in the uniqueness and aesthetic superiority of Japanese landscapes.

Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 248; Shiga Shigetaka, *Nihon Fukeiron*.

interaction. Even though Tokyo is full of people, it is full of people collectively dreaming these dreams of pure sensory space uninhabited by others, a dream of the empty city, a metropolis under a sea of clouds.

As inhospitable as it can be, Tokyo also supports these efforts at calmly imagining oneself alone at sea. For those for whom social interaction is a strain, this ability to feel alone yet not be deprived of social services and maybe even a few friends—when and if they are desired—is central to the appeal of modern big city life. Tokyo fits someone like Yoshiyuki's narrator, paradoxically, because it contains so few people—if by people we mean recognizable individuals with distinct personalities who must be dealt with one by one, on a personal level. Georg Simmel, the first great analyst of the impersonal city, captured this quality of the metropolis when he noted that unlike smaller scale human habitations, no individual human figure is important enough to come to represent the metropolis as a whole—the metropolis' sheer size engulfs even the most imposing and impressive personalities.²⁹⁶ No human can rise to the level of equivalence with Tokyo (not even Ishihara Shintarō, however many years he remains the mayor). Because of this, Tokyo's impersonality persists and allows persons to meld with it, forgetting themselves. For many, this relative freedom from the burdens of social identity is one of Tokyo's primary appeal, particularly for those, like Yoshiyuki's parents' generation, moving in from more rural areas.

In this sense, the dream of a city of clouds and sea is not so much an alternative to the city, but a fantasy driving those who make up the city itself. This is easy to miss at first glance. But this empty amorphous city appears every time the metropolis moves from being a collection of discreet human actors to being something larger than human scale, a porous collection of flows and rhythms that dissolve discreet human bodies into larger forces beyond themselves. This dream of a city of disembodied flows has a long history, but emerges with renewed force around the time of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, just as the city's infrastructure was being rapidly transformed. Tokyo was lacing itself with new transportation and communications networks, new ties to rural regions and to the rest of the world. Tokyo's inhabitants were exploring new degrees of personal mobility and mutability. New theories of cybernetics and New Age connectivity provided an intellectual framework and conceptual vocabulary for these new flows.

By the 1970s and 1980s this dream of the metropolis as a space of amorphous energy transcending the human could be found in a wide range of aesthetic movements inside and outside of Japan. I will give two brief examples here that intersect in unexpected ways with Yoshiyuki's story. The first is *AKIRA* (Ōtomo Katsuhiro, 1988, based on Ōtomo's original manga, 1982-1990). This was a key work, along with *Blade Runner* (1982), in setting the tone for many of the quietly dystopic urban landscapes presented in the cyberpunk science fiction to follow. *AKIRA* on its most theoretical level revolves around a powerful energy subtending all life, which scientists have finally learned to unleash but not necessarily control. As the energy gradually escapes, great destruction ensues, and the crowds and debris of Neo-Tokyo are dispersed via a series of apocalyptic battles. What is left is a wide open and surprisingly quiet metropolis. In the film, the initially energetic soundtrack gradually transforms into a gently pulsing choral requiem, along with the sound of wind softly blowing in from a long way off. Films like *AKIRA* might be understood as a kind of extroverted mirror to Yoshiyuki's introverted apartment life. "The Little Lady" attempts to ignore most of the other people in town, while *AKIRA* more dramatically removes them through a series of large explosions. But they reach a remarkably similar place in the end: a focused, purified, empty site where natural forces can mingle quiet and unbounded.

²⁹⁶ Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 335.

Other ambient visual works from this period share Yoshiyuki's interest in reimagining the city through its skies. Brian Eno's first foray into "ambient video," an extension of his ambient music work, presents an image of New York focused more on the passing clouds than on the traffic and hustle below. Eno's *Mistaken Memories of Medieval Manhattan* (1981) and Yoshiyuki's "The Little Lady" appeared in the same year, mutually unknown to one another but sharing a similar dream of the vaporized city. The "mistake" in Eno's work emerges through the willful rescaling of the urban horizon away from the scale of the human body and towards the more amorphous and relaxing fluctuations of weather patterns drifting over the New York skyline. Eno recorded the original landscapes for the work from the window of his Manhattan apartment starting in the late 1970s. The work might be understood as Hagiwara's "time for looking at clouds" literalized as a video recording affording just that. Notably, Eno discovered this free time deep in the middle of the metropolis, looking out the window of his upper-story apartment. The perspective of sitting quietly at the window and looking out at clouds passing over the city appears several times in Yoshiyuki's story as an archetypal moment of pleasurable calm, one strongly associated with Cloud the cat (the narrator finally writes a story titled "Cloud at the Window" in the final chapter).

Like the narrative in "The Little Lady," color receives a great deal of attention in Eno's videos. Eno's image manipulations pry color away from narrative or symbolic meanings and develops it as a non-specific emotional resource. The colors often invoked in Yoshiyuki's work—charcoal greys, desaturated pinks and blues, violets, grey-greens—overlaps considerably with the palette of *Mistaken Memories'* modulated video images.

The "medieval" in Eno's title, at first surprising, works to shade the work with an extra bit of mystery, an unfamiliar and seemingly contradictory temporality further removing this image of Manhattan from the familiar modern city. This unknown medieval quotient also helps reimagine the city as a wild space, though at a safe remove—the wildness is down below, covered over with the blanket of clouds above.

Yoshiyuki's characters establish a similar relationship to the city, watching the transformation of colors and the passage of the winds. They seek to experience the city as a sensory wash. The far horizon consists of the sea, which the narrator in "The Little Lady" visits when she is feeling down and in need of some time away. Like Eno's ambient works, Yoshiyuki's narrator seeks to transform her experience of the city into a place of "calm, and a space to think." Not unlike the ambient video placed within a room to flavor its mood, Cloud the cat provides these atmospheres in microcosm.

Threats to the Daydream

But there is always tension in this quest to create and sustain a porous environment, a place of self-dispersal. The very material with which Yoshiyuki creates these moods is wrapped within histories of its own. Cloud sits at the intersection of these conflicting longings for boundlessness and control, at the crossing of dreams of freedom and desires for quiet domesticity. This crossing often takes familiar forms: the undulating waves lulling back and forth across the seashore, and the vapors gliding and transposing their way across the sky. Waves and clouds share a number of important traits with Cloud the cat. They are predictable in their general form but not in their details. They present an image of boundlessness and porousness that promises not to overwhelm their human observers—these are not tsunamis or storm clouds. They are soft and welcoming while hinting at the powerful natural forces lying dormant within.

Unlike the cat, however, clouds and waves were at the time of Yoshiyuki's writing for the most part safely beyond the realm of human control. This has changed in recent years as we have entered the age of cloud seeding and wave-pools, and these technologies, I expect, will by necessity

change our relationship with these once-natural features as they become more familiar. This is to say, waves and clouds are also on their way to being domesticated. This domestication will be greeted, I expect, with a mixture of relief for the safety provided and nostalgia for the emotional resource lost.

At the same time, due to global warming and a range of tsunami disasters we are also faced with a situation where ocean and weather patterns are felt to be threatening and unpredictable, pushing what was once safely and pleasantly variable into something more wild and unwieldy.²⁹⁷ All this is to say that the availability of the sea and the sky as imaginative resources for calm and reassurance is vulnerable from both sides: there is a risk of them becoming either too wild or too domesticated, and in either case ceasing to function effectively as an image of calm uncertainty.

Kimberley C. Patton traces this history of the sea as an imaginative resource in *The Sea Can Wash Away All Evils: Modern Marine Pollution and the Ancient Cathartic Ocean* (2007). Patton describes how the long-held imaginative resource of the ocean as a site of cathartic cleansing and sublime immensity—found in many cultures from the beginning of recorded history—is losing ground to the gradual awareness that the ocean has been transformed in many cases into, on the one hand, a large trash-heap, and on the other, into a place that threatens horrific natural disasters like tsunamis. The ocean can no longer be imagined as beyond human corruption, and can no longer be passively enjoyed for its unthreatening beauty. Those actually working in or near the ocean, of course, knew this all along. But for the occasional visitor, like Yoshiyuki's narrator, the emotional resonance of the sea has started to shift in less reassuring directions. The same can be said for the sky, if we think of long-held desires for the untouched realms of outer-space, and how this all began to change as humans and all their vested interests began to fill it with rockets and satellites. As Joe Milutis describes in his work on the concept of "ether," modernity might be understood as the gradual loss of this fantasy of pure untouched space, leading humans to work ever harder to imagine some invisible substance still beyond their reach.

Feline Sociality

Shifting our focus back to cats, we find a similar tension between the calm and noble image of felines and the more mundane and mortal reality of their existence as domestic pets.

There is a specific quality to the company of cats—as opposed to the company of humans—that allows Yoshiyuki and her characters to cultivate a calm dispersion. Cats offer an appealing mirror of Yoshiyuki's quiet lifestyle, providing positive reinforcement of her own distance from society: "Because cats instinctively hate things that make loud sounds, it seems they like me as an owner, as I hardly make a noise and do not restrict them."²⁹⁸ In her study of cats in the work of writers like Rudyard Kipling, Natsume Sōseki, and Charles Baudelaire, Katherine M. Rogers notes the repeated use of the cat as a symbol of individualism and distance from social influence: "imagining ourselves as cats, we can imagine ourselves free of impractical aspirations, moral inhibitions and social pressures to conform."²⁹⁹ Yoshiyuki's cats are well within this tradition of outsiders. As Yonaha Keiko writes, Yoshiyuki finds in cats an ideal form of relationality, where individuals

²⁹⁷ By chance I happened to be in Mumbai immediately following the Indian Ocean tsunami in late December 2004. Like many others in the city, I walked out to the beach to stare into the sea, a sea which overnight had been transformed from an object of leisure and relaxation into an object of fear and potential disaster. Looking around me, I saw many Mumbiakers staring with empty expressions off into the distant water, trying to make sense of this new relationship with the ocean. Similar coastal scenes were common in Japan following the Tōhoku tsunami in March 2011.

²⁹⁸ Quoted in Yonaha, "Yoshiyuki Rie," 155.

²⁹⁹ Rogers, *Cat*, 150.

maintain a respectful distance from one another.³⁰⁰ While social standards of the time might have look askance at her lifestyle choices (particularly her decision to remain unmarried and live alone), in her work Yoshiyuki uses feline sociality to portray domestic solitude in a more dignified and poetic light.

The humans her stories favor are always careful not to impose too much on one another. The narrator describes how “people who don’t avert their eyes when talking to another person usually embarrass me, but with Shino [the owner of the stuffed animal store] it is as if she is looking at the air between us.”³⁰¹ As Rogers describes, “Cats have a habit of looking at us steadily without showing any sign of emotional engagement.”³⁰² Here Shino reproduces this feline quality, as noted approvingly by the narrator.

The stuffed animal shop also serves as a displacement of feline relations onto the world of humans. Alongside stuffed animals the store is full of cat-related goods, including journals of cat literature featuring the narrator’s own works. The store serves as a gathering site for women to reminisce about their dead cats and purchase cat-related merchandise. This intentional community models cat-human relations in its interpersonal relationships, as the women get to know one another in way that, like Shino’s gaze, always carefully refrains from getting too close.

As described earlier, the line between cats and humans often blurs in Yoshiyuki’s work. This blur often serves to locate sympathetic characters’ appeal precisely in terms of their feline qualities.³⁰³ These qualities are contrasted favorably with the majority of humans in Yoshiyuki’s works, so much so that she even bases her positive human characters on cat models. As the narrator of “The Little Lady” notes, “There were always plenty of real people to model my thick-headed, insensitive, mean-tempered characters on, but in cases where I was writing of a kind and gentle child, I would draw on Cloud.”³⁰⁴ As Sachiko Schierbeck writes, “Yoshiyuki is not comfortable with people who are insensitive, greedy, or egocentric.”³⁰⁵ But as this quote from the story hints, there is an element of infantilization mixed in with the narrator’s relationship to Cloud. He serves the narrator both as a source of calm affect and a model of social restraint. But both of these affordances depend on the disavowal of her role as Cloud’s master and domesticator. In the final part of this chapter, I focus on unravelling these unspoken power structures that threaten to upset the narrator’s carefully cultivated calm.

Nobility, Domesticated

A large part of Cloud’s appeal for the narrator clearly lies in his implicit otherness, the mystery of encountering a creature of another species. And yet at the same time, the narrator herself has domesticated him, turning him into an apartment cat there to serve her with companionship and consolation. Aware of this aspect of their relationship, she feels guilty for having robbed Cloud of his freedom to roam, particularly after he passes away having spent his life largely confined to the interior of her apartment.

These conflicted feelings manifest in repeated comments about Cloud’s “noble” appearance. As mentioned earlier, one aspect of the cat boom was the attribution of a noble character to cats. More specifically, cats were associated with a reticent but morally resolute masculine ideal, akin to the chivalry found in European fairy tales. This princely cat image emerged in Japanese popular

³⁰⁰ Yonaha, “Yoshiyuki Rie,” 155.

³⁰¹ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 277.

³⁰² Rogers, *Cat*, 49.

³⁰³ Yonaha, “Yoshiyuki Rie,” 156.

³⁰⁴ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 272-3.

³⁰⁵ Schierbeck, *Japanese Women Novelists in the 20th Century: 104 Biographies, 1900-1993*, 248.

culture in the 1970s, feeding off a general Rococo turn in influential manga like *The Rose of Versailles* (1972-3, television anime 1979-80) and building off a longer European fairy tale tradition of royal cats in stories like Madame d'Aulnoy's *The White Cat* (*La Chatte Blanche*, 1698).³⁰⁶ These noble cats recall an older upper-class masculine model of emotional control, emphasizing pure, resolute feelings, carefully concealed.

Crucial to the noble cat image is a sense of contained ferality, a surface gentleness paired with hints of a wild tiger under the surface. Cloud manifests this quality in the story when on rare occasions he turns fierce, as when he is on his deathbed being attended to by a veterinarian. Otherwise, and especially when interacting with the narrator, Cloud is never anything but genteel.

And yet, while invoking these chivalrous fantasies, the story makes clear that the relationship between a domestic cat and its owner is never one of equality. Despite the important role of the cat's strength of character and understated wildness to the narrator's masculine ideal, she submits Cloud to a series of domestications that can only be described as emasculating. Besides being physically neutered, he is restricted to remaining inside the apartment at all times, and after his death is eventually replaced by a stuffed version of himself nicknamed "The Little Lady."

At the beginning of the story, the narrator is out on a shopping trip when she happens upon Shino's store, and finds a stuffed cat for sale that looks exactly like her lost Cloud. She somewhat anxiously purchases the doll and brings it home with her, not exactly comfortable about the idea of replacing Cloud with a stuffed animal, but unable to resist the urge to do so. At first she enjoys the doll's uncanny resemblance to her lost cat, feeling as if Cloud has returned to the apartment at last. As the narrator points out, the stuffed cat is frozen in Cloud's most noble pose. Gradually, however, the inertness of the stuffed cat begins to haunt her, making her long even more for Cloud when he was alive. She attempts to distance the stuffed doll from its origin as a consumer object, returning to the store to make sure another identical copy has not appeared to replace the one she purchased, hoping to deceive herself into believing the stuffed cat she is growing attached to is not merely a mass-produced item. She later sews a scented sachet onto the doll's tag to cover up the words "Made in England." These ongoing efforts to treat the stuffed animal as a replacement for the real thing appear more and more futile as the story continues.

Sitting perched on the narrator's dresser, the stuffed cat increasingly appears to make a mockery of the once-living Cloud. The lifelessness of the manufactured cat fails to produce the same atmosphere as Cloud once did, as only the living cat successfully embodied the wide ocean and the open sky. Cloud was calm and domesticated, but also maintained a degree of independence and aloofness that the narrator found alluring and endearing. The stuffed cat lacks the capacity to echo and respond to the narrator's feelings—even at a distance—and lacks the sense of tempered wildness so crucial to Cloud's calming effect. What the narrator ultimately misses is the sound of Cloud's breathing, a soft purring she relates to the sound of ocean waves, the mark of an energy both infinite and sublime. This sound—of a living creature in all its otherness—is ultimately undomesticatable. The stuffed Cloud, we might say, passes from being cool to just plain cold. The narrator finally wraps him up and packs him away.

Cat Murderers

Alongside her disillusionment with the doll, the narrator's attitude towards Cloud's memory begins to shift in response to her developing relationship with G, an older writer of cat stories who also frequents the stuffed animal store. Like the narrator, G is also mourning a dead charcoal-grey

³⁰⁶ Feline nobility resurfaces in two later Studio Ghibli animated features, *Whisper of the Heart* (*Mimi o sumaseba*, Kondō Yoshifumi, 1995) and *The Cat Returns* (*Neko no ongaeshi*, Morita Hiroyuki, 2002).

cat, albeit one lost decades before. G intended to purchase the same stuffed grey cat, and is chagrined to discover it suddenly missing from the shop. Desperate for a link to her beloved cat and unaware that the doll is now in the narrator's possession, G goes so far as to place an advertisement in the newspaper looking for the buyer. She also expresses regret that she did not taxidermy her cat when she had the chance.³⁰⁷

The emasculation and infantilization of the domestic male cat is even more explicit in G's case. She describes calling her cat "Diana" even after discovering his gender, and approvingly compares him to the young boys in paintings who never sexually mature and remain in a state of perpetual androgyny. The narrator eventually adopts this approach, using G's name for the stuffed animal—the Little Lady—although not without a trace of irony.

In "The Little Lady" (and in the separately published "Cat Murder," where she also appears), G comes across as a warning to the narrator and perhaps to Yoshiyuki herself: a delusional old woman lost in her memories and unable to get over the loss of her cat from decades prior, she makes for a rather pathetic image of where the narrator could end up if she refuses to accept Cloud's passing.

As noted earlier, a second "variation" on the narrator emerges later on, again a cautionary model for where the narrator might be headed should she continue frequenting the doll store. The narrator learns that the original owner of the stuffed doll was Shino's mother, who died insane. In her madness the woman used to wrap the doll in cellophane and stare at it for hours. When the narrator finally decides to put the doll into storage, she wraps the doll in a clear plastic bag to keep him from becoming dirty (since she "didn't have any cellophane"), again ironically mimicking one of her *doppelgängers* in her efforts not to turn into them.³⁰⁸

The narrator comes to feel that her desire to control and keep Cloud may have similarly played some role in hastening his death. G's fairy tale, "Cat Murder," excerpted serially within "The Little Lady," obliquely manifests this fear. In the fairy tale, the inter-species desire to domesticate the loved one is indirectly implicated in the loved one's death.

In G's tale, cats have the power to possess humans temporarily, but must return to being a cat due to their much shorter lifespan. To live a full human life, however, cats can murder a human and assume their form permanently. The story follows a cat princess who sets out to do just this, but ends up falling in love with the young man she had originally intended to kill. Instead, she sets out traveling the world in search of a woman she can kill and become in order to win the young man's love. She travels to New York, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong, only to return home without having found a suitable target. Back at the palace, she slips while climbing a tree and falls into a nearby river. The young man happens to be walking nearby as this happens, and jumps into the river to save the cat, unaware it is his lover he is trying to rescue. He dies trying to save her, and the princess, quite accidentally, ends up turning into him after all.³⁰⁹

Here the fatal attraction moves in the opposite direction, from cat to human, although here too the story is told from a female perspective. If the only way for the narrator to be with Cloud permanently is to replace him with a stuffed likeness, the only way for the female cat in G's story to

³⁰⁷ There are echoes in G's story of Edogawa Ranpo's *Crawling Bugs* [*Chū*, 1929], though here the genders are reversed.

³⁰⁸ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 298.

³⁰⁹ While G's fairy tale is cosmopolitan, referencing everything from Chinese snake potions to Janice Joplin, Yoshiyuki was no doubt also drawing on the history of shape-shifting cats [*bakeneko*] within Japanese folklore. Like foxes, cats in Japanese folk tales are often shapeshifters, killing humans to possess their bodies. In the well-known seventeenth century tale "The Demon-Cat of Nabeshima" [*Nabeshima no bakeneko sōdō*], for example, a cat kills a prince's love interest and assumes her form in order to try and seduce him.

be with her lover long-term is to kill a human and assume their form. In both cases, the lover's desire for ownership and control—the desire to be with the loved one forever—indirectly seems to bring about the loved one's death. The narrator feels guilty for domesticating Cloud and, in her mind at least, hastening his demise, while in G's tale the cat princess quite inadvertently ends up killing the man she wished to be with all along. As the princess's father writes in one of his books on the subject of feline murder techniques, "you must always deeply love the one you kill."³¹⁰ This tale-within-the-story of "cat murder" mirrors the complexity of the human-cat bond between the narrator and Cloud. Both relationships register the potentially fatal desire to both be with and become the other species, even as, in each case, both sides also desire to keep their distance.

For the other species to function as an aid for domestic calm, the fantasy must remain of a truly free creature that just happens to choose to hang around. When in "The Little Lady" Cloud appears in the narrator's dreams to speak to her, it is as a separate individual with his own power to come and go as he pleases—the dependency of the cat on his human caretaker, and the unequal power relations this involves, is stealthily bracketed out of the scene, allowing the narrator and the other women to pretend their relationship with their cats is one of freedom and mutual respect. In "Cat Murder," however, it is harder to ignore how the cat princess's approach to becoming human is based entirely on the murder of other humans to get there.

The human-cat relationship is in this way laced with contradictory desires. The narrator imagines Cloud to hide a feral chivalrous strength within him, a wildness that persists despite his domesticated and emasculated existence. At the same time, in his trajectory from wild cat to stuffed animal wrapped in plastic, Cloud is submitted to her desire for permanence and stability. She wants to protect him from getting dirty, from the noise and ugliness of the outside world. Ultimately he is reduced to serving as a mood-regulator for the narrator, involuntarily participating in forms of emotional labor historically most often performed by women in human society.³¹¹

Yoshiyuki's narrative implicitly registers these conflicts: the highly independent women in her stories feel guilty about taking away the independence of their cats, ironically through disempowering forms of female domestication that they themselves have resisted. The narrator secretly wants Cloud to remain untamed even as she participates in his taming. Her desire for ownership mixes with guilt and nostalgia over what this ownership has destroyed.³¹²

Here the role of ambient affordances in daily life becomes more complicated. Like the Klee paintings and Debussy records, Cloud serves the narrator as a tool of affective mood regulation. And yet, as a living creature called upon to perform affective labor, his role as mood regulator is found (to some degree) to subordinate his own emotional needs to those of his owner.

This might be understood as one of the paradoxes of calm in the domestic arena: the narrator desires the cat as a reliably calming affective servant, but at the same time this capacity for emotional regulation in part depends on the fantasy of the cat as spontaneously and freely performing this behavior on her behalf. Her ability to keep calm depends on her imagination of the cat's own (seemingly natural) repose. His immutable wildness transposed into noble restraint echoes back and informs her own position, rendering it more noble in turn. From the narrator's perspective, she and Cloud perform their coolness for each other, each affording the other calm

³¹⁰ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 304.

³¹¹ See Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*.

³¹² Renato Rosaldo once coined the term "imperialist nostalgia" to describe a process of "mourning for what one has destroyed." In his case the phrase described imperialist nations fantasizing over the purity of cultures they were in the process of demolishing. Here, in the context of consumer lifestyles of the 1970s and 80s, we find a similar "noble savage" fantasy brought into the home: The longing of the domesticator for the wildness their domestication efforts were in the process of destroying. Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," 107.

through a distanced form of companionship, an affection couched in disaffection. This interspecies gap allows the narrator the capacity to stay composed in her apparent solitude, but only to the extent Cloud is there to reflect this solitude back to her as a noble bearing.

As noted above, over the course of the story the narrator begins to discern at least some of the fantasies involved in her desire for Cloud, particularly as she sees her domesticating impulses reflected back to her in extreme form through the characters of G and Shino's mother. Mindful of not ending up as out of touch as these women, the narrator finally begins to accept the reality of Cloud's death. She begins to understand that underneath all his apparent cloudiness he was a finite creature after all, facing his own pains and struggles during their time together.

As a result, the narrator's attentions start to shift to the other cat she has been living with, a less attractive cat with a squashed face she has simply been calling "Cloud's little sister," neglecting even to give her a proper name. In stark contrast to Cloud's noble air, this cat more resembles the narrator herself in her awkwardness and homely appearance. But in Cloud's little sister, the narrator comes to find a more realistic mirror of her own position, one based less in fantasy and more in the struggle for day-to-day domestic survival. When she tells Cloud's little sister "You are capable, and resilient," the statement carries hints of a newfound self-acceptance.³¹³

Yoshiyuki's "The Little Lady" traces the fine line in ambient subjectivity between calming emotional disaffection and the implicit narcissism of personal mood regulation. Cloud serves the narrator as an ownable version of sky and sea, bringing their amorphous expanses into the narrator's otherwise circumscribed life. This "free time for looking at clouds" at first appears to be a solitude with no connection to anything beyond itself, and one privately ownable in the form of a cat. But as Yoshiyuki's story implicitly acknowledges, to own this freedom is always to take away the freedom of others. The calm of urban solitude can only be sustained through their continued sacrifice.

As the narrator begins to move beyond her refusal to acknowledge Cloud's passing, she becomes more aware of the less attractive cat with the smashed face, so far neglected. With this she turns slowly to a measure of self-acceptance and a way out of grief. She may continue gazing out at the clouds, finding relief in the imagination of a boundless existence. But she might also come to value the less immediately endearing parts of the world around her, including those parts of herself less boundless and free.

Yoshiyuki's work was an early example of what in the following decades would emerge as a major focus of much Japanese fiction: how environmental affordances (from people, objects, and pets) allow for restorative moods in both characters and readers. The following two chapters, explore in more detail the role of ambient mood regulation in this emerging culture of self-care.

³¹³ Yoshiyuki, *Yubune ni ochita neko*, 275.

[7. Healing Style]

While diverse, premodern conceptions of subjectivity generally began from the assumption of a human body radically open to external environmental influences. Shigehisa Kuriyama describes the ancient Greek body as constantly struggling to balance the humors haunting the body from the outside, while ancient Chinese saw outside winds as the primary agents of physical illness and disease.³¹⁴ Emotions, likewise, were in Homeric times considered something environmental that infected bodies from the outside, circulating through a landscape and entering into the body, rather than springing from the depths of an unconscious (which at that point had yet to be invented).³¹⁵ Then, with the emergence of Christian notions of the soul, and later, Enlightenment objectivity, a more isolated self-image emerged, priding itself on its individualism and independence from the world around it.

With the emergence of both the industrial revolution and psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century, however, science was once again becoming cognizant of how human emotions are susceptible to environmental influence. Now, however, the focus was on workers at assembly lines rather than winds at the crossroads.³¹⁶

³¹⁴ See Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*.

³¹⁵ Schimdtz, quoted in Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 119.

³¹⁶ See Cray, *Techniques of the Observer*.

Eva Illouz traces the importation of Freudian ideas into American management practices in early twentieth-century United States, leading to what she dubs *emotional capitalism*, or the business of “harnessing the emotional self more closely to instrumental action.”³¹⁷ Under the influence of new efficiency studies pioneered by Frederick Taylor and others around the time of World War I, career success gradually began to be understood less as the result of an individual’s personal capacity for hard work, and more as the product of a complex assembly of traits and skills that any given individual might possess or make their own. It no longer mattered if these traits were innate or acquired, and in most cases, the management literature argued, they could be taught.³¹⁸ The criteria for social success was no longer personal determination but the careful fine-tuning of individual and group psychologies.

While earlier management principles favored blunt demonstrations of authority to keep underlings in their place, new practices of “management psychology” equated power and influence with self-mastery and emotional control. The new “expert” psychological consultants advised against the expression of strong or divisive emotions in the workplace, with the aim of ensuring the smooth and efficient flow of interpersonal communication. A positive morale was to be preserved at all costs. Illouz identifies the advent of this reflective emotional distancing as the introduction of therapeutic techniques into the realm of everyday mood regulation:

The therapeutic ethic of self-control presents itself as a vast cultural attempt to install in actors a way of playing the game without seeming to be moved by it. Its aim is to instill an indifferent attitude, an attitude of not being taken in by the game, with the goal of securing one’s best interests. While the therapeutic person dwells excessively on his or her emotions, he or she is simultaneously required not to be moved by them. [...] The therapeutic ethos fosters a procedural approach to one’s emotional life as opposed to a thick or substantive one.³¹⁹

The procedural approach to emotions found in management psychology gradually shifted from the workplace to more private contexts, leading to the internalization of emotion regulation in personal life as well. While emotional control had long been a manner of distinction among the upper classes, with emotional capitalism it became a tool of personal advancement, proffered in countless self-help books as a way anyone and everyone could better their social standing.

Unlike the United States, emotional capitalism made little headway in Japan until after the end of the Pacific War in 1945. There was, however, a strong emphasis on self-help early in the modern period. As in the United States, the larger emergence of self-help aimed at personal advancement had its origins in shifting employment patterns and various self-improvement programs appearing around the turn of the century. The 1870 Japanese translation of *Self-Help* by Scottish author Samuel Smiles during the rapid industrialization of the Meiji period (1868-1912) became the era’s best-selling book, setting off a popular boom in personal advancement [*risshin shusse*] literature spurred on by the rapidly expanding mass media. Smiles’ success was replicated in 1911, with Nitobe Inazō’s best-selling *Self-cultivation* [*Shūyō*].³²⁰

These books promised limitless advancement for the persevering and enterprising male worker. Until 1900 or so, the rapidly expanding job market supported such aspirations, creating an upwardly mobile class of newly educated workers. Around the turn of the century, however, the number of educated young men going out onto the job market began to outpace the production of new jobs. Advancement was no longer secured, and an atmosphere of conformity took hold as the only way to slowly work one’s way up the corporate ladder.³²¹ Nevertheless, the discourse of

³¹⁷ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 82.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

³²⁰ Maeda, *Text and the City*, 203.

³²¹ Kinmonth, *The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japan*, 46.

self-improvement persisted even as the career benefits it promised became increasingly hard to attain. Maeda Ai has argued that in response to the shrinking economic possibility for rapid upward mobility, the self-improvement disciplines promoted by self-help transformed into “valid personal goals in themselves,” exceeding their original aim of success in the workplace.³²²

Moving into the Taishō period (1912-1926) and the subsequent lead-up to the Pacific War, discourse surrounding Japanese subjectivity came to be increasingly focused on the social advancement of both the individual and the nation as a whole—even if in material terms this contribution remained abstract. Around this time the impetus for self-improvement was incorporated as a national policy, and expanded to the other side of the gender divide. Harry Harootunian has documented the “daily life reform movement” [*seikatsu kaizan undō*], a 1920s Japanese government program aimed at persuading female homemakers to work towards greater efficiency and rationality in their domestic labors, as a way to indirectly support the productivity of the nation as a whole.³²³ The personal, only recently made legible as a political space, was by the 1920s already becoming overlaid with a whole set of disciplinary imperatives, abstractly dedicated to notions of increased social productivity.

Healing Booms

It was not until the post-World War II reconstruction and the full transition to a postindustrial economy that Japanese self-improvement discourses shifted to prioritize emotional control along the lines of American management psychology. In the latter half of the twentieth century, consumer culture in Japan embraced a pantheon of self-care practices aimed at the private cultivation of personal comfort and emotional control. Unlike the earlier hard-work and perseverance school of self-help, this was a personal advancement for the age of emotional capitalism, full of emotional, physical, and nutritional disciplines promising to create the calm, efficient, productive persona favored by a service-oriented economy.

Tanaka Satoshi’s *Social History of Health Methods and Healing* [*Kenkōhō to iyashi no shakaishi*], a book documenting the history of modern Japanese health fads, notes a shift in the 1970s towards a new era of “natural” healing products promising to provide restoration and relaxation guarding against the stresses of “modern life.” Companies introduced a remarkable string of supplements and exercise trends around this time, particularly once the mass media recognized personal health as a perennially popular (and low-cost) focus for television and print media. Early commercial successes included the comfrey boom in the year following the Tokyo Olympics (1965), and the bestselling 1973 book on “garlic healing methods” by Watanabe Tadashi. This was followed by a whole parade of new products from 1975-1980, most of them still on the market today: goji berries, *umeboshi*, shiitake, kombucha, maifan stones, bamboo foot massage, rice vinegar, Manchurian wild rice, hydrangea soup, pollen, deep sea shark liver oil, chlorella, pickled chicken eggs, aloe, reishi mushrooms, geranium, digestive enzymes, magnetic necklaces, treadmills [*rūmurannā*], and equipment for hanging upside down [*burasagari kenkōki*].³²⁴

³²² Maeda traces this shift towards self-improvement as a goal in itself by following its emergence in popular fiction, particularly the popular novels of Kikuchi Kan. He demonstrates how this strand of popular literature gradually abandoned larger social themes and narrowed its focus to documenting upper-class familial concerns. This brought Meiji social imperatives increasingly into the private sphere, just as the private sphere was becoming increasingly visible as a topic for public discussion and government regulation. Maeda, *Text and the City*, 203.

³²³ Harootunian, *Overcoming Modernity*, 192.

³²⁴ Tanaka, *Kenkōhō to iyashi no shakaishi*, 30.

Candy-maker Kotobuki opened up Natural House, the first natural food supermarket in Japan, in Jiyūgaoka, Tokyo, in 1978. Politicians also began taking a renewed interest in personal health management, with the government starting a major children's health campaign and establishing long-term national health goals the same year. Japan's first fitness club, Nakano's Tokyo Athletic Club, started in 1969, and soon started opening around the country with the arrival of the Big Box fitness center in Takadanobaba, Tokyo, in 1974.

The stated goal of these new supplements and exercise programs was often less gaining a competitive edge, and more simply “coping” with the perceived stresses of contemporary society. ‘Social illnesses’ [*shakaibyō*] emerging out of stress and fatigue emerged as symptoms of a failure to adapt successfully. One of the principles Tanaka notes at the heart of this transformation is a tendency to equate human civilization [*bunmei*] with illness, and nature [*shizen*] with health, a core tenet of romanticism updated for the age of therapy culture.³²⁵ This emphasis on the “natural” was a significant shift in focus from health fads earlier in the century, which often touted their origins in science and engineering to prove their futuristic powers to overcome sickness.

It is in these postwar decades that public awareness of human-generated environmental problems first surfaced in Japan. The hard sciences lost much of their futuristic allure, as attention turned towards the creation of environments felt to be more ‘organically’ suitable for nurturing human health. Advertisements shifted to promote internal and external environments based on supposedly more natural, ecological, and holistic principles.

What was on offer in most cases here is not what was explicitly stated: a return to a more “natural” way of living or a return to a state of health before the onset of stress or illness. Rather, what the new health products implicitly promised was the ability to manage one's personal comfort and energy levels. Once ‘illness’ became generalized into a failure to adapt to the demands of city living, ‘healing’ transformed into a euphemism for this ongoing pursuit of increased well-being. Healing was no longer only a temporary need in an otherwise healthy life, but turned instead into a core principle of ongoing subjective maintenance.

These early health trends eventually snowballed into the “healing boom” [*iyashi būmu*] of the mid to late 1990s, when the market for healing products and therapies reached its apex, spurred on by the gloom of the recession and widespread anxiety over the future of Japanese society in the wake of the Kobe earthquake and the country's worst terrorist attack to date, both taking place in early 1995.³²⁶

With this most recent healing trend, a new persona emerged in the media: the healing-style [*iyashi-kei*] individual: a person, often but not always female, who puts those around them at ease. This use of the term first emerged in reference to female television talk-show personalities and

³²⁵ This was the main thrust of the book that kicked off the kombucha boom, Nakamitsu Sumako's 1974 bestseller *Kombucha Healing Methods* [*Kōcha kinoko kenkōhō*]. Ibid., 32-34.

³²⁶ The Kobe earthquake of January 17, 1995, killed, injured, and displaced thousands. As investigations progressed into the inordinate number of “earthquake safe” buildings that had collapsed, it became clear that widespread government corruption and graft had been the mainstay during the years of high economic growth. Barely two months later, doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyō committed Japan's worst terrorist attack to date, spreading toxic gas through rush-hour Tokyo commuter trains just steps away from the national legislature. Again, details of the attack showed that the incident had social implications reaching well beyond the event itself. Many members of Aum were highly educated young men and women from comfortable backgrounds. That such “ordinary” Japanese youth had turned against the nation reinforced the impression that Japanese society as a whole was at fault. These incidents came in the wake of intensive media coverage of a number of brutal homicides committed by young boys alongside less violent but more widespread instances of youth delinquency such as compensated dating (*enjō kōsai*), bullying, and chronic absenteeism from school. See David Richard Leheny, *Think Global, Fear Local: Sex, Violence, and Anxiety in Contemporary Japan*, 27-48.

later expanded to include actresses, fashion models, comedians, politicians, and even scholars.³²⁷ In more private circles, to dub someone healing-style became shorthand for a personality type particularly adept at making others feel comfortable. Before long self-help books emerged, usually for woman, on how to embody the healing-style persona for advancement both professionally and personally. For example, Hanebayashi Yūzu's 2005 *Hints on Becoming a Woman with Healing Power* [*Iyashi-kei josei ni naru hinto*] gathers one hundred relationship counselors to advise readers how to “make him feel relieved and fall in love.” As demand rose for more and more opportunities for sustained comfort, demand for “emotional labor” of a healing cast increased exponentially.

Japanese toy companies began moving towards a healing-style [*iyashi-kei*] aesthetic at this time as well. Desperate for an expanded demographic to make up for the declining birthrate in Japan, companies like Bandai began marketing relaxation toys directly to adults. One example is the million-seller Primo Puel series of talking dolls, introduced in 2000. The toy was initially marketed to twenty-something working women, but soon found popularity among the middle-aged and elderly as well. A recent version can produce 400 phrases such as “kiss me” or “I’m lonely,” as well as recognizing spoken phrases like “I’m home” and “let’s play.”³²⁸

To summarize, from the 1970s onward ‘healing’ became increasingly severed from any specific individual ailment, serving instead as a codeword for achieving comfort within contemporary urban society. The marketing of “healing” goods often relied on a promise of a balanced lifestyle, as if these forms of privatized self-care might work as a counter-weight to a society consistently portrayed as too fast and too stressful to be healthy.

The Agitation for Discomfort

Understandably, this emphasis on comfort as an end in itself has been the subject of a great deal of concern among social critics. When I have questioned various academics inside and outside of Japan on the history of comforting culture, more than one has replied along the lines of “well, *I* think people should be more uncomfortable.”

This attitude has many subscribers among writers on contemporary Japan. A common (if rarely fully articulated) position sees the prioritization of material comforts during and after the high-growth years as a way for individuals to avoid more serious matters: dealing with the legacy of the Second World War, assuming political responsibility both locally and globally, and actively participating in the democratic process.

These arguments come in many sizes and shapes. Philosopher Morioka Masahiro describes contemporary Japan as a “painless civilization” that carefully screens out the pain and suffering he sees as essential for developing personal meaning and identity.³²⁹ Asada Akira, following Félix Guattari, has described postindustrial Japan as a culture of “infantile capitalism,” where ordinary people are content to not question those in power as long as their comfortable environments and personal pleasures continue to be provided.³³⁰ Tomiko Yoda notes Asada's description of Japanese

³²⁷ *Iyashi* is a nominalization of the verb *iyasu*, meaning to heal or mend both physically and psychologically. The term first appeared in the context of anthropologist Ueda Noriyuki's medical ethnography of a Sri Lankan village entitled “Akumabarai—Iyashi no kosumorojii” (later published as Ueda Noriyuki, *Kakusei no nettowaku* [Tokyo: Katatsumurisha, 1990]). This term was picked up by a Yomiuri shinbun journalist covering the event and emerged—seven years later—as a popular expression in advertising and other media.

³²⁸ McNicol, “Designs for Life: Toy Story,” 35.

³²⁹ See Morioka, *Mutsū bunmeiron*.

³³⁰ See Asada, “Infantile Capitalism and Japan's Postmodernism: A Fairy Tale.”

society as a “passive maternal medium,” a “noncoercive force that controls individuals by ‘wrapping’ and ‘embracing’ them in its fold.”³³¹

A similar discourse was emerging simultaneously in the United States and Europe, in critiques aimed at “therapy culture,” which many saw as a turn away from self-discipline and the moral imperative to attend to others in favor of a single-minded pursuit of personal sensory gratification. Christopher Lasch’s *The Minimal Self* (1984) cautioned about the emergence of “a self uncertain of its own outlines, longing either to remake the world in its own image or to merge into its environment in blissful union.”³³² He describes a post-1960s withdrawal from a threatening, complicated, and increasingly fractured world, and a subsequent flight into self-care:

Confronted with an apparently implacable and unmanageable environment, people have turned to self-management. With the help of an elaborate network of therapeutic professions, which themselves have largely abandoned approaches stressing introspective insight in favor of “coping” and behavior modification, men and women today are trying to piece together a technology of the self, the only apparent alternative to personal collapse.³³³

I will not attempt to sort out the subtle but significant differences between these arguments, only to point out how they tend—at their most rhetorical, at least—to imply an ethical choice must be made between an active, responsible, political subject, and a passive, therapeutic, mood regulating one. It has become common to hear complaints of the “peace-drunk” [*heiwa-boke*] stupor of Japanese youth, implying that comfort itself is to blame for the nation’s cultural, economic, and political stagnation.

While the question of ‘too much comfort’ remains important, there is a danger here of reducing complex social and affective contexts to a simple divide between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ social participation, upholding ‘more discomfort’ as a corrective in and of itself. As noted in the introduction, this overlooks the varied access particular individuals have to ‘active’ and participatory social roles. Further, by tainting ‘painless civilization’ as regressive and irresponsible, it risks falling into a vapid nostalgia for a more difficult time. In this it comes curiously close to therapy culture itself, in its equation of contemporary civilization with illness and some prior era as more human and true.

I follow Eva Illouz here in offering not a defense of therapy culture, but a call to take it seriously as a model for subjectivity and society as a whole—one which has over the last half-century proven itself robust and resilient, if far from sustainable. Illouz writes (from the perspective of sociology):

By insisting that the therapeutic lexicon “depoliticizes” problems that are social and collective, many sociologists have made it difficult for themselves to understand why the new middle classes and women have enthusiastically endorsed the therapeutic discourse—other than by presuming, somewhat implausibly, that theirs is a “false” consciousness or by presuming that modern societies are governed by a seamless process of surveillance equally embodied in computerized control of citizens and in the therapist’s office.³³⁴

Illouz does not necessarily argue against those who emphasize the ideological dangers of emotional capitalism, but rather insists that researchers be willing to set aside this critique long enough to understand how and why such a culture developed in the first place—and why it has remained so popular for so long. Illouz describes this as a model of “immanent critique” which “must emerge from a ‘thick’ understanding of people’s desires and goals and cannot bracket the actual understandings and strategies of lay actors.”³³⁵

³³¹ Yoda, “The Rise and Fall of Maternal Society,” 884.

³³² Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, 19.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 58.

³³⁴ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 19.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

Studies focusing on these ‘lay actors’ have tended to produce a more balanced perspective on postindustrial culture. John Clammer’s *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption*, for example, acknowledges the role of desire and emotion in Japanese consumer culture, situating it as a project as much about inventing new forms of self as it is about complacency and conformity. Clammers describes the advent of consumerism in Japan as “an entire reorientation to life, to what is possible and to the realization of the idea of the making of the self as an at least partly autonomous project rather than as simply the plaything of history or of social forces beyond the control of the individual.”³³⁶ Clammers gives a critical-yet-sympathetic portrayal of Japanese consumerism as a combination of “reciprocity with low-intensity symbolic warfare.”³³⁷

A more structural understanding of transformations driving postindustrial culture also helps develop a more subtle articulation of what is driving the move towards therapeutic models of self. Sociologist Micki McGee, in her recent critique of the American self-help industry, points out that self-help became popular in America at the very same time that employers were systematically cutting back on benefits and services geared at employee development and well-being. With fewer social supports in place, employees were left to their own devices when it came to emotional issues, social strains, retraining difficulties, and forced career change. The ideology of self-help, McGee writes, helped naturalize this reduction in social supports. Through personal effort in positive thinking, self-knowledge, and private study, the self-help logic argued, nothing was beyond reach. Should a person fall short of his or her wildest dreams, it was to be seen as a personal failure, not something to do with the system as a whole. The healing boom in Japan was born in a similar moment of industrial reform. After the economic downturn in the early 1990s, many Japanese businesses moved to restructure along the lines of this streamlined American model. The pervasive lifetime employment of the bubble years began to be replaced by more flexible, temporary, cheaper forms of employment. On-the-job training—a mainstay of the previous model—declined, and workers were often on their own in the struggle to remain competitive.

The trend can be traced back further, however, into the transformations of the high-economic growth years. Tomiko Yoda has argued that Japanese industries’ emphasis on cooperation and togetherness in the 1970s and 1980s masked a particularly ruthless approach to workers, keeping them powerless and coercible under the name of company loyalty and mutual support.³³⁸ These shifts in labor practices begin to describe some of the shift to self-help disciplines, as part of the struggle to remain competitive (or at least afloat) in such a system. A thorough analysis of these structural histories is beyond the scope of my study, but I hope my investigation of the ambient aesthetics of therapy culture will contribute to a fuller understanding of the desires and demands underlying this turn to comfortable atmospheres in postindustrial culture.

As a way to explore the therapeutic dynamics of atmospheric self-care in more detail, the following chapter focuses on one particularly salient example of ambient literature. The story follows a young woman as she reflexively navigates a designed environment full of calming objects, responding both as a sensing body and as a novice affective laborer in the healing industry.

³³⁶ Clammer, *Contemporary Urban Japan*, 9.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

³³⁸ Yoda, “The Rise and Fall of Maternal Society,” 896.

[8. The Aesthetics of Calm]

Near the middle of Kurita Yuki's (1972-) novella *Hamisabeth* (*Hamizabesu*, 2002), a young woman becomes annoyed when a former coworker calls and pesters her for a date:

I hung up the phone.

I pulled out the plug.

Angry, I went to take a shower. While wandering around the room naked, my whole body started to tingle. It seems that because I was upset my circulation had improved. (66)

In Kurita's later novel *Hôtel Mole* (*Oteru Moru*, 2005), a woman asks her boss why she was picked for the job of hotel receptionist. The boss replies:

Your features. I knew when I saw your resume photograph, and I knew for sure when you came for the interview and I saw you sitting at the front desk. Your face is a face that invites sleep, or what in the industry we call a "sleep-inducing appearance." When customers see that face, they have a hint that they are going to sleep well that night. (52)

These two scenes reveal two aspects of ambient subjectivity in postindustrial Japan. In the first example, the woman does not dwell on why the phone call was annoying. Instead, she shifts her mood by shifting her sensory environment: "Angry, I went to take a shower." She deals with ill feelings not with thinking but through water on the body and air on the skin. She displaces irritation on the level of affective sensory cues that do not depend on cognition for their efficacy.

In the second example, the boss employs this same strategy of sensory displacement for commercial purposes. The receptionist's face generates a calming mood for customers, helping them to forget their worries. In both cases, the affective cues employed are not situationally

specific. Characters use the shower, the air on naked skin, and the calming face for their ability, as forms of affect, to afford calming moods irrespective of context.

Kurita's work can be situated in a growing body of literature that, like ambient music, embraces the affordance of calming moods as a primary objective. Japanese fiction began to reflect the new culture of mood regulation as early as the late 1970s, with the debut novel of Murakami Haruki (1949-), *Hear the Wind Sing* (*Kaze no uta o kike*, 1979). In a 2002 book on "post-Murakami" literature, literary critic Nakamata Akio cites this work as the first major example of what would become a dominant thread in Japanese literature of the 1980s and 1990s: the "healing novel" (*iyashi-kei shōsetsu*). Murakami's narrator states at the outset of the book that his reason for writing was a "small attempt at healing himself." Nakamata elaborates:

Murakami Haruki starts writing as a "small attempt to heal himself," but at the same time he also heals [*iyasu*] many of his readers. It is well known that Murakami managed a jazz bar during his student years. It might be too much to imagine Murakami as a barkeep, soothing the souls of his customers by listening to their worries. But in fact, Murakami's writing can be read as one kind of "healing-style" fiction.³³⁹

While the term "healing-style" dates to more than a decade after Murakami's debut novel, Nakamata's anachronistic use of the term is apt. Murakami's early work charts much of the affective terrain of what came to characterize later ambient literature, including, as Nakamata points out, an avoidance of psychological interiority and a preference for light, transparent diction.³⁴⁰

Yoshimoto Banana (1964 -) has also often been noted for the calming effect of her writing, beginning with her debut novel, *Kitchen* (1988). Ann Sherif writes that Yoshimoto's narratives concern "the process of grieving and healing and exhibit a steadfast belief in the possibility of reintegration into society, even after extreme alienation or trauma."³⁴¹ She quotes Tokyo psychiatrist Machizawa Shizuo, who describes how even his suicidal patients are able to find in Yoshimoto's novels "an optimism and brightness absent in their own lives."

In the wake of the popular success of Murakami and Yoshimoto, a number of younger novelists developed styles utilizing mood regulation and healing themes more directly. These include Kurita Yuki (1972-), Seo Maiko (1974-), and Ōshima Masumi (1962-).³⁴² These novelists began their careers at a time when literature was competing for affective space with the more directly mood-oriented practices of the healing industry.

To highlight the parallels between the aesthetics of ambient music and these new literary forms, I find it useful to coin the term "ambient literature."³⁴³ Just as ambient music sought to bridge modernist aesthetics and Muzak, several of the most popular writers in Japanese of the 1980s and 1990s began developing a literature focused on affording calm and "a space to think."³⁴⁴

³³⁹ Nakamata, *Bungaku: Posuto-Murakami no Nihon bungaku*, 32.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-34.

³⁴¹ Sherif, "Japanese without Apology: Yoshimoto Banana and Healing," 279.

³⁴² Literary critic Yoshida Nobuko discusses these three authors in her article "Banana Girls: Three Storytellers Carry on Yoshimoto Banana's Tales of Healing and Renewal."

³⁴³ The definition of ambience I employ in this essay is specific to Eno and is distinct from the use of the term in design fields such as Ambient Intelligence, where it acts as a more general marker of a dispersed sensory environment. The only other usage of "ambience" in English-language literary criticism I have found is Timothy Morton's conception of the Romantic "ambient poem," although his elaboration of what he calls an "ambient poetic" differs considerably from what I put forth here. Morton unfortunately buries the specific city of ambience by troping it primarily as another mode of deconstruction (as in the undoing of binary pairs, of figure/ground relations), which he posits as key to a kind of deep ecology. See Morton, "'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' as an Ambient Poem: A Study of a Dialectical Image; with Some Remarks on Coleridge and Wordsworth."

³⁴⁴ To be sure, the creation of such an ambient literary aesthetics extends beyond the borders of any single national culture or region. While Yoshiyuki's writing was heavily informed by Japanese free-verse poets like Hagiwara

Kurita's works are particularly compelling³⁴⁵ in their exploration of ambient aesthetics. This is particularly true of *Hôtel Mole*, a novel that deploys all the calming resources of ambient literature. *Hôtel Mole* tells the story of a young woman, 23-year-old Honda Kiri, as she begins her first real job, a night-shift attendant running the front desk of the Hôtel de Mole Dormons Bien. She soon learns that the Hôtel de Mole is unlike the average business hotel. Interviews are conducted with potential guests concerning personal sleep history. Everything about the hotel is geared toward providing the highest-quality sleep possible. Check-in occurs immediately after sunset and checkout at sunrise. The rooms are entirely underground—13 floors down—and have regulated light timers to ensure ideal levels of darkness. The lobby, described in great detail, is also designed to generate relaxing, soporific moods as guests make their way to their rooms. As the human face of the hotel's relaxing promise, Kiri is trained to impart a warm and soothing welcome to visitors. The novel follows Kiri from her job interview, through her training, and on to her first weeks alone on the job. Along the way, she begins to unravel the mystery of how the hotel generates such quality sleep. Interspersed with these episodes are scenes set at Kiri's home, focused on her complicated relationship with her sickly identical twin sister.

The popular reception of Kurita Yuki's fiction has been marked by an emphasis on the soothing quality of her writing. In a review of *Hôtel Mole* in the literary journal *Bungakukai*, Higashi Naoko reports on the powerful physiological effect the novel had on her: "Several times while reading this mysterious story, I was overcome with sleepiness. This certainly was not because I was bored. [...] In the same way that a delicious description of food triggers hunger, the qualities of sleep were so powerfully portrayed here that I became quite sleepy."³⁴⁶ Higashi ends the review by noting that she plans to keep the novel near her pillow at night to function as a sort of talisman to prevent insomnia and promote restful sleep. In a review of an earlier Kurita work, *The Seamstress Terumii* (*Oniiko Terumii*, 2004), critic Yoshida Nobuko writes in a similar vein, reporting that just after reading she felt full of warmth³⁴⁷. Novelist Kakuta Mitsuyo likewise feels her spirit is lifted after reading Kurita's novels.³⁴⁸

The ability of Kurita's texts to soothe her readers is not accidental. As with Eno's 'discovery' of ambient music while convalescing from a traffic accident and Hosono's embrace of relaxation with a broken leg, convalescence and healing serve as major themes in ambient literature. Asked about her first work, *Hamizabesu*, Kurita recalled that during the course of writing a close friend became hospitalized. As Kurita imagined her work being read by this sick friend, themes of illness and healing began to seep into her writing.

Reading a novel like *Hôtel Mole* affords the subjective dispersal of ambient subjectivity. While the act of reading demands at least a minimum degree of attention, ambient literature deploys a range of literary techniques to develop emotionally calming and environmentally immersive atmospheres. As I describe in the next section, Kurita draws upon all levels of textual form to generate these moods, beginning with the most minute elements—individual words—and

Sakutarō, composer Claude Debussy, and painter Paul Klee, anglophone literature was a major influence on other writers exploring 'healing' styles. Murakami Haruki has often cited American authors such as Richard Brautigan as the source of his lightweight, economical style, while Kurita Yuki, who holds a degree in English Literature from the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, points to American and British writers as a primary influence on her writing. Rubin, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, 30; Matsuura, "Dai 26-kai Subaru bungakushoo jushoosha intabyuo: Kurita Yuki," 187.

³⁴⁵ Kurita won the 2002 Subaru Literature Prize for her debut work, *Hamizabesu*, and has been nominated three times for the Akutagawa Prize (for *Oniiko Terumii* (2003), *Oteru Moru* (2005), and *Maruko no yume* (2005).

³⁴⁶ Higashi, "Hihiyoo 'Oteru Moru' Kurita Yuki—toshi no soko yochuo no nemuri," 347.

³⁴⁷ Yoshida, "Hihiyoo 'Oniiko Terumii' Kurita Yuki—tarareba no nai sekai," 291.

³⁴⁸ Kakuta, *Yotte itai yoru mo aru*, 102.

expanding outward to the level of narrative flow and dynamics, gradually building up the atmosphere of the novel as a whole.

Ambient Literary Aesthetics

The words in *Hôtel Mole* are mostly common, familiar terms. The vocabulary is not the sort to give readers pause or confusion. This does not mean the words express simple meanings, simply that they are simply put. For example, to describe mystery, Kurita sticks to the most familiar adjective available: *fushigi* (mysterious). The novel does not engage in the refinement of emotional tone through descriptive variety and layering. Instead, *fushigi* remains *fushigi*—familiar but nonetheless still mysterious. Common words like *fushigi* cue the emotions associated with mystery but do so in a nonspecific way. While every reader of Japanese has a familiarity with this word, the word is at the same time general enough to be unlikely to cue any particular details or images. This allows it to invoke a general atmosphere of mystery while maintaining a dispersed, amorphous state of attention. *Fushigi* is an ambience. This same aesthetic of ambiguity-through-transparency is replicated on the level of the sentence. The text on the back of *Hôtel Mole*, likely the first description readers will encounter upon picking up the book, summarizes the novel in three straightforward lines:

Every night, people in search of sleep gather at Hô_tel Mole.
 A mysterious hotel that offers happy sleep.
 A story taking place in a world just a little separated from everyday life.
Maiban, Oteru Moru ni wa nemuri o motomete hito ga atsumaru.
Shiawase na nemuri o teikyō suru fushigi na hoteru.
Nichijō kara hon no sukoshi kairi shita sekai de motarasareru monogatari.

The words employed here—with the minor exception perhaps of *kairi shita* [separated]—could hardly be more “everyday.” This is a mysterious story about people who gather at a hotel to find happy sleep. Its curious premise is stated as matter-of-factly as possible. As the final line signals, this is a mystery just a tiny bit [*hon no sukoshi*] separated from the familiar. There is no gaping anxiety of a mystery that threatens to topple the known world. Instead, just a touch of mystery surfaces, contained and vaguely familiar, not unlike a daydream.

Notice that the latter two sentences in the summary are incomplete. The copula is implied, but its absence emphasizes the final nouns in both lines. A mysterious hotel. A story detached from everyday life. The nouns are invoked in parallel as if the hotel and the tale [*monogatari*] were one and the same. Here the familiarity of the hotel and the evocation of gathering for a pleasant sleep provide the cues for calm. At the same time, the little bit of mystery—the curiosity of a hotel designed entirely for sleep—promises a degree of unfamiliarity and a space for the mind to wander.

This basic equation of translucent simplicity plus comfortable mystery governs the emotional architecture of ambient literature. Sentence structure, like diction, tends toward the straightforward and evocative. The phrasing is short, light, and succinct. Readers of Kurita often comment on the sense of ease accompanying the lightness and precision of her language. Ishii Shinji, in the afterword to *Hamizabesu*, describes Kurita’s language as exact [*seikaku*], avoiding vague nuance and “using the ordinary meanings shared by everyone.”³⁴⁹ He notes that surplus exposition is studiously avoided, as is any belabored explanation of characters’ emotional states. The story flows by smoothly and easily.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁹ Kurita, *Hamizabesu*, 203

³⁵⁰ Nakamata Akio connects this easy-to-read style with the healing qualities of Murakami Haruki’s novels. Nakamata, *Bungaku: Posuto-Murakami no Nihon bungaku*, 32.

But Ishii senses that something more than simplicity of language has contributed to the smoothness [*surusuru*] of his feelings after reading Kurita. Here he turns to the mystery part of the equation and in the process uncovers precisely what is healing about Kurita's style:

Kurita doesn't write about unknowns as if they were knowns. The unknown is enshrined in the depths of the novel as it is [*sono mama*] and expressed with exquisite precision, as if affixed with a pair of tweezers, in a language everyone can understand. For the reader, the meaning of the various words is easily understood. But at the same time, just beyond this surface covering of language, the structure and meaning of the "unknown"—as an "unknown"—becomes thoroughly absorbed.³⁵¹

What Ishii describes here is the way ambient literature reaches at mystery through, paradoxically, a language that does not reach at all. Unlike the Kantian sublime, which seeks a confrontation with the enormity of the unknown in a moment of shock and terror, the ambient approach to mystery is simply to leave mystery as mystery, transmuting the unknown not by attempting to arrest it in language but through a careful evocation of the familiar qualities that lead in its (unspoken) direction. Instead of attempting to plumb the depths directly, ambient literature's placid language evokes the depths through the translucency of its surface.

Sensory Invocation

Achieving a sense of clarity while maintaining semantic uncertainty often entails an emphasis on sensory detail. As Elaine Scarry describes in *Dreaming by the Book*, writers can achieve a high degree of perceptual vivacity by instructing readers to imagine the material conditions necessary to produce a given sense perception. When reading literature, "what in perception comes to be imitated is not only the sensory outcome (the way something looks or sounds or feels beneath the hands), but the actual structure of production that gave rise to the perception."³⁵² Ambient literature makes extensive use of this technique, with detailed mimetic depictions of characters encountering calming qualities in sensory objects—the soothingness of sound, texture, color, light, temperature, and so on.

Many of these encounters focus especially on the tactile qualities of objects. The hands here operate not as tools for the completion of actions but as viewers in a nonvisual plane. They imbue the encounter with calming affect for the readers of the novel. Deleuze writes, "it is the tactile which can constitute a pure sensory image, on condition that the hand relinquishes its prehensile and motor functions to content itself with pure touching."³⁵³

During Kiri's first visit to the hotel, she waits for her interview and investigates the chair behind the front desk:

The chair was nice. Tall enough to support the back of the head, with armrests as well. The surface had a velvety feel, making me want to keep stroking it. I reached out my hand to touch the back of the chair. My fingers felt something hard. Taking a closer look, I saw a plastic plate about the size of my little finger. It said "Cowhide." Was this to explain what the chair was made of? I tried sitting down. Even through my clothes, my skin could sense the suppleness of the leather. I closed my eyes and soon felt my body yielding to the softness. A moan of comfort began to bubble up from deep within my throat. (13)

While this paragraph does not move the plot forward in any significant way, it plays the crucial function of invoking a calm affective orientation toward the world and in turn reinforcing the overall ambient mood. This type of tactile encounter reappears throughout the novel.

As Ishii points out, Kurita's depictions of such seemingly unimportant objects as the desk chair are characteristically careful and precise. This is thematized in the novel by the small plastic plates Kiri finds affixed to objects throughout the hotel, each revealing the material used in the

³⁵¹ Kurita, *Hanizabesu*, 204, emphasis added.

³⁵² Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 9.

³⁵³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 12.

object's construction. At first Kiri is puzzled by such attention to detail, but when she later asks her boss about the plates, she receives the rather oblique answer that they are there "so the employees do not become confused" (36). As Kiri eventually comes to recognize, part of generating a relaxing atmosphere in the hotel involves paying attention not only to outward appearances, but also to the immediate sensory qualities of the surfaces themselves.

However, more occurs in this passage than simply the introduction of precise material details. The vivacity of this description comes through how Kiri does not so much tell us how the chair feels but rather guides us through the perceptual experience of her body coming into contact with the material. We sense not the chair as an isolated visual object but the caress of the hand against its surface, the feeling of support along the head and arms, the cool yielding of the leather under the weight of the body. Scarry notes that such passages are made vivid by how "the people on the inside of the fiction report to us on the sensory qualities in there that we ourselves cannot reach or test."³⁵⁴ Kiri's sensory contact evokes readers' own haptic responses. Notice how differently the passage reads with Kiri's presence removed: "The back of the chair was tall, with armrests. The surface was velvety. On the back was a hard plastic plate that read 'Cowhide.' This may have been to explain what the chair was made of. The leather was soft." In this more objective description, we receive just as much technical information about the chair, but it has almost none of the sensory and emotional resonance of the original. As Scarry emphasizes, moments of imagined contact give textual objects their sense of solidity and weight: the hand on the leather, the body on the chair, the head on the headrest. Such moments bring a sensory immediacy to the chair that it otherwise lacks.

But what makes this chair experience so soothing? This paragraph in microcosm contains all the kernels of a calm encounter: the combination of a sense of suppleness and ease combined with a stable sense of embodied security and support. The headrest and armrests are crucial here. What enables Kiri to sink into the chair, even closing her eyes, is not only the velvety softness of the leather but also the sense of safety, of being held. Scarry describes John Locke's notion of the vital emotional role played by this perception of solidity: by promising to stop "our further sinking downwards," solidity "establishes the floor beneath us that, even as we are unmindful of it, makes us cavalier about venturing out."³⁵⁵ The same tactile sense of solidity is crucial for creating an ambient space, a 'womb room,' a Pliocene Coast. In ambient literature, this feeling of ontological security provides the foundation for thought to venture out and encounter the unknown. Being safely held, a reader can confidently explore imaginative areas (both physical and emotional) that might otherwise be too unfamiliar or too frightening.

After adjusting to the hushed dimness of the hotel, Kiri realizes the tension she was feeling about her job interview has dissipated, and she feels relaxed to the extent that she might even start yawning. However, in the novel itself no causal relation is ever asserted between the hotel and Kiri's relaxed state. Despite the detailed nature of Kiri's perception of the space, she never offers any explicit reflection on how sensory aspects of the hotel are working to make her sleepy. Instead, as readers we are gently led through a number of sensory experiences with her and then told how Kiri is feeling. Even this latter descriptive moment becomes a physiological cue for readers, much in the way that the thought of yawning is often enough to make a person begin to yawn.

The high redundancy of emotional cues in *Hôtel Mole* pointing toward a relaxing mood helps ensure that even if every reader does not respond to every affective cue, and even if individual cues are of varying impact based on the individual sensory history of each reader, the

³⁵⁴ Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 25.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

cumulative effect will still be to firmly establish an ambient mood. This additive process is especially crucial in the early pages of the book. Setting a strong emotional framework early on orients readers' expectations for the remainder of the novel. Later, even if comparatively discomfiting emotional cues appear, the strength of these earlier sensory experiences helps to weight the novel's affective focus toward a dominant mood of calm. Moods have a great deal of inertia. Already in a relaxed mood, we are apt to focus on elements that reinforce, rather than interrupt, this calmness.³⁵⁶

This is not to say that a shift in emotional tone later in the text will have no consequences. To maintain a mood, emotional cues must be reintroduced periodically. This is precisely what happens throughout *Hôtel Mole*. Over the course of the book, Kiri makes her way deeper into the hotel (the elevator, the bedrooms, and finally the lowest floor in the building), each time describing in detail her sensory and physiological experiences. Each scene reinforces the mood-space of the familiar unknown.

Establishing an Incubatory Space

Ambient literature builds an enveloping space around readers as they read. The "healing" aspect of healing boom refers not to the alleviation of a particular ailment but to the incubation structure through which most healing occurs, involving a heightened level of protection from exterior threats. This creates the nurturing space within which the assailed individual can begin to redirect the energies usually devoted to coping with the outside world onto the interior tasks of physical and emotional healing. This structure is found (at least ideally) in inpatient hospital care, in the protected emotional space of the therapy session, and perhaps in its oldest guise in the concept of the spiritual retreat.³⁵⁷

Many aspects of the design of *Hôtel Mole* focus on nurturing this sense of envelopment, of being held within a warm, safe, womb-like space. To reach the front door of the hotel, Kiri first passes through an inconspicuous alleyway hidden between two buildings. The alley is so narrow that it seems it will be impossible to pass through to the other side, but by turning sideways and slithering across, Kiri is just able to slide through. She announces her name over the intercom and the doors slide smoothly open. She enters and feels the automatic doors slide closed silently behind her. Before her is a long hallway. The walls are beige, the ceiling a deep wine-red. As Kiri walks forward, every step sinks softly and inaudibly into the carpet. Everything is quiet. The lighting is faint, and she cannot see her wristwatch through the darkness. As she looks up, she realizes the ceiling is unusually low.

After some time, Kiri reaches the end of the hall and emerges into a large reception area. Long curtains made of a thick and heavy material hang from the ceiling. They are also a dark and rich shade of wine. There are no windows behind them. To one side sits the front desk and the comfortable leather chair. On the other side hangs a large painting, about the size of a double bed. The image is abstract and composed entirely of dark colors. Nearby, a small source of light flickers near one of the walls. It wavers now and then, like a candle. Kiri smells a faint hint of wax in the air. Below the painting sits a sofa. Or rather, something like the seating area of a sofa curves directly out of the wall, born from the building itself. The walls are also concave, giving the room a round shape.

³⁵⁶ Cognitive film theorist Greg M. Smith describes how the repeated presentation of similar emotional cues in a film produces in viewers an overall mood and how this mood in turn begins to steer sensory attention, priming the brain to favor sensory cues that reinforce the already established emotion. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, 149–51.

³⁵⁷ The spiritual retreat is described among Sri Lankan healing traditions in Ueda, *Kakusei no nettoowaku*.

These descriptions, related through Kiri's perceptual experiences, instruct readers to conjure up a vivid sensory experience of entering the space of the hotel. Everything is designed to be womb-like, a place of perceptual softening and incubated security. The initial obstacles to entering produce a sense of a space set apart from everyday life. The low lighting, absence of sound, and faint smells allow the senses to relax and open, while the rich fabrics and colors, round walls and low ceiling provide a sense of being enveloped and held.

The novel evokes this within its first twenty pages, establishing a vivid sensorial space within which the more fleeting, almost ghostly presence of the characters can drift. Again, the building provides a precise mixture of familiar comfort combined with an edge of the uncanny—an unknown safe enough to drift through calmly. Immediately after these initial encounters, Kiri relates her experience of the space in just this manner:

My impression of the entrance hall is that it is rather different from other hotels I have visited. It isn't like a resort hotel, nor is it like a city hotel, nor is it like a love hotel. However, it also isn't so strange as to feel completely unfamiliar. I have the sense that I have set foot in this kind of place before. But then it isn't quite like any friend's house, or the room of a lover—of course, this isn't a house at all. Why does it feel familiar, I wonder? (15)

Kiri is intrigued that despite the lack of windows and plants, the space does not feel at all lonely. The hotel lobby is a strangely comforting space. At the same time as being incubatory, however, this space is portable and porous. Like the in-between spaces invoked by Eno's *Music for Airports*, the Hô_tel Mole is a space of social circulation, with a new population every night. It is familiar and yet transitory, comfortable yet anonymous.

Both airports and hotels are public spaces to the degree that they welcome any individual who can afford access and agree to follow the rules. While they establish a space set off from the street, they still maintain a conduit open to the outside, unfamiliar world.

This is also true for ambient literature as a physical object. The small format of many Japanese novels—especially paperbacks—makes them ideal companions during the long train commutes of many urban Japanese. Here the paperback and the portable audio player come together as mobile affective technologies. The physically transitory spaces of commuting resonate with the transient spaces within the novels, allowing the incubatory attitude within the text to seep out into the space surrounding the book. In this way, readers of ambient literature are made comfortable about venturing out while in the very act of venturing out—affording, perhaps, a new way of relating to public space.

Ambient Subjectivity

Readers may also find here a new way of relating to routine. Another way ambient literature moves through the familiar to the unknown is by tapping into the estranging qualities of everyday repetition. As with ambient music, ambient literature avoids spectacle and drama, producing a sensation of drift rather than event. The time of ambient literature follows the tempo and repetition of a regulated modern life.³⁵⁸ The pace of *Hôtel Mole* is organized around the workday. Kiri applies for a job, has her interview, commutes back and forth to work, and slowly becomes adjusted to working at the hotel. She wakes, goes to work, comes home, dreams, wakes, and goes to work again. Adhering to the temporality of the workday evacuates narrative momentum from the novel and replaces it with a sense of expansive, nondirectional time.

The free-floating repetition of the everyday carries over into the drift of subjectivity in ambient literature, where identities are shadowy and rarely asserted with force. While Kiri's

³⁵⁸ On drift in everyday modern life, see Leo Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift*.

physiological state is described, and the subplot concerning her troubled twin sister serves as the emotional trauma upon which the healing qualities of the hotel are revealed, when it comes to directly expressed personalities, the characters in *Hôtel Mole* remain preliminary, only barely outlined, never quite coming into view. As Nakamata Akio points out, this type of “empty” characterization is common in contemporary Japanese literature from Murakami onward. Nakamata proposes that this downplaying of psychological interiority has something cinematic about it, as if the narrator was a free-floating camera-eye, unreflective but highly sensitive to sensory detail.³⁵⁹ It might also be argued, however, that such ambiguity allows the ambient character to become a vessel through which readers might wander and explore these unfamiliar spaces, like the cats on the galactic railroad. Whereas earlier narrative forms oriented themselves around identification with characters, in the aesthetics of ambience “identification is actually inverted: the character has become a kind of viewer.”³⁶⁰ Kiri acts less as a self-conscious subject than as a sensing body, lending her perceptual organs to the reader.

In Japan, the emergence of such forms of decentered subjectivity has often been explained by referring to the collapse of larger narrative orientations, which is itself linked back to the traumas of modernization, the loss of World War II, postindustrial culture in general, or specific events of the mid-1990s. However, this mode of dispersed subjectivity might also be described not only as a symptom of social collapse but as a creative form of affective engagement in its own right. The technologies of individualized mood control have spurred a recognition that affective environments play a fundamental role in humans’ sense of being in and amidst the world. These affective modes of being run parallel and in some ways prior to more narrative, interiorized forms of identity. Anahid Kassabian has noted the important role personalized background music has played in helping individuals construct and navigate a decentered, “nodal” subjectivity, suitable to navigating diverse, complex, ever-transforming information societies.³⁶¹ Ambient literature likewise enables readers to dissolve discrete identities into moods of open-ended affective exploration, free from the usual demands of their social and discursive selves.

Compared with more narrative-oriented genres, where sensory spaces are mapped onto a relatively rigid architecture of plot and character, ambient literature prefers the flexibility of the incubatory space, allowing readers to enter in, feel around, and let their own emotions seep into the work. Echoing Roland Barthes’s distinction between writerly and readerly texts,³⁶² Kurita, in dialogue with Kakuta Mitsuyo, discusses the difference between novels that are more geared toward a writer expressing himself or herself and texts that ask the reader to step into the novel’s space and collaborate in the production of meaning. Kakuta observes how, compared with other writers, Kurita expressly writes for her readers, consciously opening a line of communication with them. Kurita responds by emphasizing the need to leave a space open for the reader to become involved in the text: “I like novels where I can think while I am reading. The novel is there, and I am there. I like things that create this space [*ma*] for me. Novels where, in this space, we can begin to influence each other.”³⁶³ Kurita here identifies a key function of her writing: providing a space.

³⁵⁹ Nakamata, *Bungaku: Posuto-Murakami no Nihon bungaku*, 29. Murakami Haruki explicitly invokes the camera-as-narrator in *Aiutao daoku* (2004) (translated by Jay Rubin as *After Dark* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007]).

³⁶⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 3. Deleuze writes that with such an empty subjectivity, “The connection of the parts of space is not given, because it can come about only from the subjective point of view of a character who is, nevertheless, absent, or has even disappeared, not simply out of the frame, but passed into the void” (8).

³⁶¹ Cited in Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 205.

³⁶² See Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

³⁶³ Kakuta, *Yotte itai yoru mo aru*, 102.

The combination of the incubatory envelope and the blurring of subjective specificity allows readers to engage with the novel not as discrete and bounded individuals but as malleable bodies that can roam the space and be transformed. Deleuze writes that in such amorphous spaces, “we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, [...] not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask.”³⁶⁴ Ambient subjectivity relaxes the usual borders of self and not-self, allowing for a more porous and improvisatory engagement with the senses.

As noted earlier, this ability to engage in a free play of selves always comes with a trade-off: in order to develop an incubatory calm, the ambient novel must distance itself from the outside world, especially from more upsetting or exciting forms of emotion that might be encountered there. Incubation demands the conduit with the outside world be closed down in order to focus on the interior. So while ambient literature may provide a “space to think,” it does not necessarily provide a space to think anything uncomfortable. Eno’s assertion that ambient music “must be as ignorable as it is interesting” also marks the limitations of ambient media as a form of social critique.

Atmosphere-Narrative Counterpoint

Crucially, however, ambient literature never completely abandons the structural potential of narrative—the buildup of tensions and their eventual release. Instead, it draws upon the absorptive and rhythmic qualities of narrative description in order to fold these moments back into the ambient mood. *Hôtel Mole* oscillates between more explicitly ambient scenes of calming evocation, set in the hotel, and more narrative character-driven scenes, set in Kiri’s home. The home scenes serve two main functions. First, they reveal just enough about Kiri’s character for readers to begin to empathize with her. We learn that Kiri is selflessly raising her sister’s child, after the sickly sister again entered the hospital for a long-term stay. We learn that working at the Hôtel Mole is her first real job after graduating from school and that her career has so far been postponed in order to care for her sister and her sister’s child. Without delving into complex psychological motivations, this home context helps develop a more intimate affective relationship with Kiri and establishes a resonance between her feelings and the reader’s own.

The second function of this subplot is to set into motion a gradual narrative trajectory from illness to wellness. “Healing” itself, after all, contains a narrative momentum, from sickness into health. Kiri gradually comes to terms with her twin’s continued ill health and gradually achieves competence in her position as front desk manager. The novel ends as the tension of both these challenges is finally and fully dissolved. The general outline of the novel, then, is something like a steadily smoothing sound wave. The novel begins by oscillating between scenes of calm sensory evocation in the hotel and less ambient scenes of Kiri and her family at home. While these latter scenes allow us to get to know and empathize with Kiri outside work, they also offer emotional interludes—comparatively familiar and normative spaces that serve as a counterpoint to the strange ambience of the hotel. Over the course of the book, these two realms gradually merge, first through Kiri’s dreams (she has a particularly vivid dream of childhood while testing out one of the hotel beds) and finally by introducing the ill sister into the healing space of the hotel itself. The peaks and troughs of this ambient/non-ambient oscillation slowly level out and eventually synthesize in the harmonious sense of integration that ends the book. Kiri’s troubled relationship with her sister begins to improve precisely as she gains competence in running the hotel. In this pendular structure, characteristic of the ambient novel, we experience—and we *feel* in the slowing

³⁶⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 7.

rhythm of the text—how ambient spaces can unravel all narrative tensions. Everything merges with the night.

Affective Contracts

The novel's emotional journey might have turned out differently. The candle in the lobby might have tipped over and burned the hotel down, shifting the emotional trajectory of the novel and displacing the ambient mood. But this would take it out of the genre of ambient literature, breaking the affective contract implicit to the form. Genre functions as a mood-orienting frame. Film theorist Noël Carroll argues that “some genres seem to traffic in certain specifiable emotions essentially. That is, certain genres appear to have as their abiding point the elicitation of specifiable emotional states in audiences.”³⁶⁵ Different genres also promise a different emotional dynamic range. Epics, for example, often mix in elements of romance, action, tragedy, suspense, and comedy, all within the same narrative. Other genres are more focused on delving deep into one more narrow emotional register. The latter is true of ambient literature, where readers often come to the text expecting a calming affective experience.

As Kurita points out in conversation with Kakuta Mitsuyo, these emotional expectations are present not only in the way readers approach particular genres, but also in readers' expectations for specific authors.³⁶⁶ A regular reader of an author's works knows from experience the limits on the type of episodes (and the type of emotions) a writer will invoke. Readers can trust that the author will see them through to the end of the story without breaching these boundaries. They are then safe to open themselves emotionally to the novel, reading with a sense of ease and security and knowing their emotional investment will not suddenly be betrayed as the story progresses. As in ambient music, cinema, and other time-based media, atmosphere in ambient literature depends on the gradual building up of trust between audience and text, through the continual reinforcement of calming affect in a variety of registers, allowing them to relax into the narrative space.

Paradoxically, the overarching trust of the ambient atmosphere allows for some freedom in terms of the precise details of the story. As Kurita points out, as long as this trust is maintained, the author can include some rather disturbing episodes and readers will still be able to entrust themselves to the author's care [*mi o makaserareru*].³⁶⁷ There are some fairly traumatic episodes even in *Hôtel Mole*. In one of the few flashbacks to Kiri's past within the novel, we learn that she returned home one day to find her boyfriend having sex with her twin sister, leading to the sister's pregnancy and the birth of her niece. At the hotel, Kiri at times becomes nervous about performing her new responsibilities while managing the front desk. All this is narrated within a general context of ambient calm, however, ensuring these obstacles do not derail the emotional trajectory of the novel.

Ambient literature generates calm through the accumulated effects of all the techniques described here: transparent diction and sensory invocation, the generation of incubatory spaces around which ambient subjects can roam, and the gradual development of embodied security within the safety of the calming affective contract. All of these small- and large-scale calming forces additively form the enveloping mood of the ambient work.

The approach to literature outlined here treats mood regulation as the primary work done by a text—literature creates mood spaces through which identity can become more malleable, affording relaxation and repose. Needless to say, adapting literature to be a tool of mood

³⁶⁵ Carroll, “Film, Emotion, and Genre,” 34.

³⁶⁶ Kakuta, *Yotte itai yoru mo aru*, 103.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

regulation marks a shift away from earlier models of literary production. The final section considers the arguments of those who pushed against the turn towards healing orientations in Japanese literature and situates ambient styles within larger debates over the use of calming affect in postindustrial Japanese culture.

Healing Debates

Criticism of ambient literature tends to reflect the larger criticisms of postindustrial culture discussed in the last chapter. In a well-known complaint about Murakami Haruki, Ōe Kenzaburō directly laments the “Muzak” elements in Murakami’s writing:

Murakami doesn’t take an active attitude toward society, or even toward the immediate environment of daily life. He works by passively absorbing influences from various genres, as if he were listening to background music. He just goes on spinning within his interior fantasy world.³⁶⁸

As Ōe’s comments indicate, the aspect of ambient literature most troubling to its critics is its apparent “passivity” with regard to social and political issues. Literary critic Kuroko Kazuo, in an article critiquing both Yoshimoto Banana and the larger ‘healing’ trend, worries over Yoshimoto’s steadfast belief in the power of mood regulation. Kuroko cites Yoshimoto’s description of how sometimes, when she is feeling bad, simply eating a piece of cake is all that is necessary for her to turn her feelings around and be happy for the rest of the day. Kuroko points to this therapeutic use of food as an example of Yoshimoto’s apathy towards wider social struggles.³⁶⁹ Similarly, Ann Sherif ends her own essay on Yoshimoto with a broad denunciation of Yoshimoto’s optimism: “While her works entertain us and give us a temporary sense of hope for the world, the nuclear threat that Yoshimoto Banana so blissfully ignores remains steadfastly by our sides, for other authors to recall.”³⁷⁰ These critics regard healing media as a solipsistic practice, a way of using close-at-hand positive affect to block out the less comfortable aspects of social and political life.

These critiques take on added weight when placed in larger debates surrounding the influence of therapy culture on Japanese educational models. Sociologists Oguma and Ueno have warned against the use of “healing” rationales in the 1990s campaign by right-wing groups to have depictions of Japan’s wartime atrocities removed from school textbooks. The argument put forth in the campaign is that students will be better off without the added stress and trauma of confronting Japan’s past—allowing therapeutic concerns to trump historical understanding.³⁷¹ In a parallel argument, Yagi Kōsuke argues in his book on “healing’ as discrimination” that an overemphasis on avoiding uncomfortable feelings can lead to avoidance rather than tolerance of others different from oneself. Such examples raise troubling questions about the impact of a culture driven by therapy and self-care above all else.

Ambient media in postindustrial culture have largely moved away from addressing these questions directly, preferring to focus instead on affording particular affective moods. In a 2005 interview, Kurita argues that authors must provide some feeling of positive affect toward the future, particularly at moments when the present has become a struggle:

When I read a novel or see a film, and it displays tragic events just as they are, I think “but I already knew that...” I want to say “but even then there are people who are trying to move forward.” [...] Even amidst all this sadness, it is a positive action to find a way to lift your spirits by enjoying novels or films or music. When

³⁶⁸ Quoted in Kuroko, “‘Iyashi-kyō’ ni kogareru wakamonotachi—Yoshimoto Banana no bungaku wa ‘kyōsai’ no kanō ni suru ka?” 158. Emphasis added.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 160–61. Gustatory metaphors seem to circle around the debate. Murakami’s characters relish their meals as much as Yoshimoto enjoys her cake. In both cases, advocates of a purely rational politics cannot seem to stomach bringing literature “down” to the level of a proximate (and supposedly less rational) sense such as taste.

³⁷⁰ Sherif, “Japanese without Apology,” 299–300.

³⁷¹ See Oguma and Ueno, *Iyashi no nashonarizumu: kusa no ne hoshu undō no jishō kenkyū*.

you are really feeling bad, you don't have those kinds of good feelings. Because of this, though I don't want to affirm reality just as it is, I feel like it is natural for me to somehow calm down and write stories with a hope for the future.³⁷²

Hope, in this case, comes through a partial withdrawal from the pressure of worldly events, affording the space, perhaps, for thinking and feeling something new.

What is at stake here is the role of media in relation to society: is it to be a reflective critique, or an emotional tool? Older critics such as Ōe and Kuroko insist on a socially committed literature and warn against the solipsistic dangers of an excessive therapeutic focus. The (mostly younger, mostly female) authors of ambient literature, meanwhile, emphasize the therapeutic benefits of calm for those in need of healing, and are more comfortable situating literature alongside other therapeutic objects.

However, just as Brian Eno marked ambient music by asserting its critical distance from the commercial interests of Muzak, ambient literature also contains the seeds of a critique of the therapy industry as a whole. Ambient music takes hints from modernist aesthetics in order to rethink mood regulation—though it always courts the danger of falling back into being merely background music. Ambient literature, similarly, adopts the strategies of therapeutic mood regulation, but not necessarily on the terms set for it by commercial or political discourses.

In *Hôtel Mole*, Kurita satirizes the way a hotel that is geared entirely toward generating relaxation can be still be stressful for its employees. Kiri's main struggle during her first week of work is to try to stay awake in such a sleep-inducing space. At one point during an early morning shift Kiri simply cannot keep herself from dozing off and replaces the relaxation music playing in the lobby with a punk album, dancing wildly to keep herself awake. Her boss later complains to her about this (worrying the music's energy will seep into the hotel and disturb the sleepers down below). But even the hotel rules guard against sleep becoming an end in itself. Initial interviews ensure that guests have real sleep issues they need to address, and whenever guests become able to sleep well even outside the hotel, they are asked to cancel their membership. Higashi Naoko picks up on this in her review on the novel: "What must be understood is that the novel is not saying humans live in order to sleep. The hotel also acknowledges this. After all, in order to make waking life as rich as possible, the body and brain need to be well rested."³⁷³

Kurita, whose own experience working as an overnight hotel receptionist helped inspire the novel,³⁷⁴ documents the discomfiting side of affective labor. Kiri's boss is strict and demanding and anything but "healing" toward her employees. Kiri's position—up all night working and allowed little restful sleep herself—serves as a reminder of all the labor that goes into creating a restful space for others.

As *Hôtel Mole* demonstrates, ambient literature can sometimes practice the more critical reflection of earlier models of literary practice, depicting the complexities and contradictions of a mood regulating culture at the same time that it fully participates as a mood regulator itself. Of course, this is no easy balancing act, and it might be argued that no serious form of social critique can be leveraged in an atmosphere that has carefully pacified all strong forms of negative feeling.

Such a contradiction is present in Eno's original demand for ambience to produce both "calm" and "a space to think": the only way to ensure both is to make sure to not think of anything that will destroy the sense of calm. This space to think—while as amorphous and creative as I have described it above—nonetheless has particular contours that limit where such thoughts may travel. Recognizing these limitations, however, may lead to a better understanding of what role such

³⁷² Kurita, Interview with Nakazawa Akiko, n.p.

³⁷³ Higashi, "Hihyō 'Oteru Moru' Kurita Yuki," 347.

³⁷⁴ See Matsuura, "Dai 26-kai Subaru bungakushō jushoosha intabyū," 186.

mood-regulating media might play in the future. Whether healing or infantilizing—or both—ambient literature engages with the complex relationship between environmental media and therapy culture in postindustrial Japan.

PART FOUR: URBAN ATTUNEMENTS

[9. Companion Media]

In postindustrial culture media increasingly come to be used as an extension of the self, affording new ways of being and behaving in the world. In *Music in Everyday Life*, Tia DeNora describes the various ways in which recorded music is used by humans as an “entrainment” device. Not only can particular music call up particular memories and emotions among listeners, but music also provides a spatial and temporal framework for bodies to move through. Bodies naturally align themselves to rhythms—a practice that goes back to the orientation of the unborn child around the mother’s heartbeat. Developers of background music have long studied the impact of various rhythms on listeners, whether aimed towards increased productivity or increased sales. DeNora describes a group aerobics class, where the rhythm provided by the electronic dance music can allow a person to much more easily ride out a workout, the provided beats pulling their body along in time. DeNora’s investigations of contemporary music audition describe how contemporary listeners increasingly turn to music for the affordances it offers for their daily lives—as background music to enhance an activity (exercise, study, work, relaxation), rather than for the inherent value of a more focused listening experience.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁵ DeNora’s field sites are mainly in Britain, although there is high likelihood her findings may be extended to Japan with only minor alteration.

Michael Bull extends DeNora's emphasis on musical entrainment to look at the ways personal music listening fits into the larger rhythms of daily life.³⁷⁶ He describes how personal audio players seems to allow the private individual 'control' over their daily auditory soundscape. Bull presents examples of listeners who have shifted from radio listening, with its less predictable mixture of advertisements, favored and unfavored songs, to iPod listening, which for many listeners offers the potential for desired content on demand. As listeners utilize this media during their commute to and from work, while behind their desk, while walking the city, or listening at home, in each case they are able to generate their own set of musical affordances independent of the programming of available mass media channels like commercial television and radio. If background music continues to be used to regulate employees and consumers to produce desired behaviors, the more private playlists enabled by portable music technology seems to allow individuals to reclaim some power to play DJ to their own daily rhythms.

However, as Bull emphasizes, in many cases the individual listener's programming choices throughout the day simply mirror the rhythms commercial media culture has already established. For example, upbeat music in the morning while preparing for work; focused, efficiency-friendly styles during the day; more relaxed tracks for the ride home and cooling down in the evening. Individuals, after all, still seek to match themselves to the same set of social rhythms that popular media sought to respond to, organized around the daily wage regime. The particular musical choices may have shifted, but the attunement demands the playlists respond to are largely intact. In this sense, what Bull calls 'iPod culture' merely allows for the personalization and self-administration of Muzak's 'stimulus progression.'

Rhythmanalysis

Bull's discussion rightfully insists that an understanding of contemporary listening habits must be understood in the larger context of the rhythms of everyday life. This dynamic between listening and daily life is most completely theorized in Henri Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* (1992).

For Lefebvre, a complex set of interlocking cycles structure city life, from the rhythm of the stars and the seasons, to the rhythm of workweek and media broadcasting, the rhythms of daily life large and small, and on downward to the most basic rhythms governing life—those of the body's various processes. He proposes four ways in which these multiple rhythms of urban space can relate to one another. *Polyrhythmia* refers to diverse rhythms occurring simultaneously without synthesis or interaction. *Eurhythmia*, in contrast, finds multiple different rhythms sliding together in a kind of loosely syncopated assembly. *Isorhythmia* occurs when one single isolated rhythm imposes itself on all others. *Arrhythmia* refers to the opposite extreme, when individual cycles are unable to find any kind of mutual syncopation, and the larger environment dissolves into cacophony.

In Lefebvre's model, isorhythmia marks the totalitarian attempt to bring diversity under the sway of a single authority, while eurhythmia provides a less hierarchical model of actors coalescing into shared space without eliding the differences between them. Eurhythmia allows different objects to get along together without any one interrupting or commandeering the others. The oscillation between eurhythmia and arrhythmia mark the vicissitudes of joy and pain, of being enmeshed in the rhythms of surrounding life or being at odds and out of time. The tensions between these different forms of temporal engagement can help us to understand the role of environmental atmospherics in contemporary urban Japan. Background music in commercial settings often attempts to impose its own isorhythm upon the diverse individuals moving through

³⁷⁶ See Bull, *Sound Moves*.

its surround, trying to pull everyone into a specified range of movement and behavior (lingering to shop, perhaps, or eating quickly and moving on). Individuals, meanwhile, might draw on portable ambient media to establish their own self-contained isorhythmic environments, perhaps attempting to fold the movements of the external world into their music's orbit. And yet these isorhythms are rarely completely isolated: they resonate with varying intensity with the movements transpiring in and around them, giving rise to moments of synchronization, occasions for these competing rhythmic orientations to move together in time, none canceling out the singularity of the others. In these moments of synchronicity, eurhythmia emerges.

To the extent that the diversely metered city manages to go on functioning smoothly, such eurhythmic flourishes are bubbling up all of the time. For an individual moving through the city, eurhythmia must be summoned with every successful crossing of the street, every navigation through the crowd, every encounter with each new environment—otherwise, collisions are inevitable, and the system would soon break down. To give some sense of this, I will briefly sketch out the rhythmic patterns of the city around Nakano Station, a busy stop on the Chūō line in Tokyo (northwest of Shinjuku, Tokyo).

Rhythms of Nakano

Nakano's rhythms are oriented, first, around the Japan Railways and Tokyo Metro trains that stop briefly at the Nakano Station platforms on their routes between central Tokyo and the western suburbs. From the first train in the morning (around five a.m.) to the last train late at night, regular and express trains arrive in syncopated intervals at more than a half-dozen platforms. Prerecorded voices signal the immanent arrival of a train. After the blast of air and the opening of the doors, a spontaneous choreography emerges: those in line to board move to take their places adjacent to the doors, timing their entry to the moment the train car has finally disgorged all its disembarking passengers. The melody—unique to each station—plays on the loudspeakers, sounding a warning that the doors are about to close. For those still running up the stairs to catch the train, this melody is enough to trigger an immediate bodily response—an increased heart rate as someone rushes to cross the train's threshold before the doors slide shut. By the time they catch their breath, the train is already moving out of the platform and picking up speed, as the standing and sitting passengers adjust their bodies to the rocking of the carriage as it speeds along the tracks. The same scene repeats every two to seven minutes. Above, looped recordings of chirping birds play softly from overhead speakers. Set against the urgency of the other platform noise, the birds recordings introduce a slower, more relaxed temporality amidst the strict metering of the arriving and departing trains. Whatever daily and yearly rhythms these birds may have originally had—dawn choruses and rainy day retreats—are eliminated in favor of ensuring a perpetual chirping presence.

The station itself disgorges its users through two sets of gates, each again setting up a micro-rhythmic ritual as people cue, swipe, tap, or insert proof of payment, and slide through the now opened gates (another set of doors about to close). Outside the exits, a circle of taxis and several lines of busses edge forward length by length, as their automatic doors open and close to allow passengers to board. To the north, past the daily lottery stand and the seasonal vendors, an island of smokers gathers around the designated area, their time there measured by the length of the burning sticks between their fingers. Off to the side, there may be some performance—perhaps the tap dancer, the jazz band, or the teenage girl singing the theme song from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* with her Casio keyboard, serenading her older male audience. Moving past them into the main covered shopping arcade, Nakano Sun Road, two or three people hand out advertisements and repeat their marketing entreaties to passerby, only to be mostly ignored. Once into Sun Road the crowd usually maintains a brisk walking pace up through the rows of brightly lit

shops. Pacing this procession is music played throughout the shopping arcade, an unpredictable (though usually weather-appropriate) mix of dramatic motion picture soundtracks, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, steel drums, and the occasional disc of easy-listening hits for sitar. On both left and right, automated doors slide open and close at irregular intervals, triggered by the forward march of feet up and through the arcade.

The intensity, crowdedness, and exact speed of the procession shifts across the course of the day, peaking during rush hours. It also shifts across the week, with the weekend leisure crowd bringing an entirely different energy than the weekday commuters. Holidays pull even more people to Nakano, while rainy weather diverts those who prefer the side roads in towards the covered shopping street. Immediately off to the eastern side, narrow streets crowded with bars and small restaurants follow a slower rhythm—more attuned to lingering over small plates and the evening ritual of alcohol consumption—while on the larger streets to the west and north, traffic lights regulate a more stuttering velocity of cars and pedestrians.

Paired with all these auditory cues, visual rhythms help orchestrate the flow of passengers. This includes, most crucially, the constantly updated train arrival information appearing on overhead signs in the station and over the doors inside the trains themselves. The ubiquitous bumpy yellow lines mark the edge of the platform and form a walking path for the visually impaired, while the color-coded horizontal bars on the platform's edge serve as guides to where to cue for each arriving train.

As Lefebvre emphasizes, rhythms always involve measures. The rhythmic measure of everyday life is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the structure of the commuter train itself—regularly divided into numbered cars, then numbered doors, each of which slide into the platform and lock into alignment with the horizontal bars marked on the platform and the parallel lines of waiting passengers assembled behind them. Posted on a nearby pillar is a vertical chart of stations the train will stop at and the exact number of minutes that will transpire before reaching each. This detailed graphic presents the rhythm awaiting passengers as they line up in spaced intervals synchronized to their chosen length of train. More recently, graphic scores have appeared on JR train platforms marking the location of exits and elevators at each subsequent station, allowing passengers to choose which train car to board in accordance with the movements they will perform at the other end of their journey.

These descriptions could continue on in ever greater detail. They could move inward to the individual rhythms of shops and down to level of individual walking styles (more quick and determined among the suited businesspeople, more relaxed along the fringes where the children and the elderly trod along). They could pull back to consider the seasons, the rise and fall of the local economy; the history of Nakano station and the city that grew up around it; the consolidation of the area's twelve villages into two in the late nineteenth century; the transformation of the region from farmland to residential area after the migrations following the Kanto earthquake in 1923; the more recent influx of people from other parts of Asia; the destruction of nearly half the neighborhood after an American bombing raid in 1944; the forests that once covered the area when humans first arrived around 23,000 years earlier.

This description of Nakano's rhythms barely begins to scratch the surface of the complexity of the movement of people and objects moving through and around the station each day. But even this brief overview demonstrates how much movement through the city is primarily a rhythmic activity. Moving successfully through such complex spaces demands continual attunement to the cycles pulsating through them, and to find a way to fit one's own rhythms within them in a kind of eurythmic syncopation. Compared with the jellyfish, the rhythms are quite different—but the process of attunement is much the same.

Crucially, this does not demand complete submission to preordained rhythms of the city. As a passenger, the coming and going of trains may be largely out of my control, but inside and around them I am constantly enacting my own small compositional choices in and through the other rhythms I encounter: do I swerve or stop, take the escalator or take the stairs, stand or sit, keep near the doors or try or move further into the train, look around or pretend to sleep?

There is something enjoyable in all of these choices, despite the daily repetition. Why isn't submission to timetables and machines more alienating than it is? Why is there a degree of pleasure in all this, despite the hurrying crowds? Rhythm provides an answer. In addition to the four different forms of rhythmic compatibility, Lefebvre also identifies two integrated modes of urban temporality: cyclical and linear. Linear time increases with modernization, and is characterized by unchanging repetition, the ongoing and endless ticking of the clock. But cyclical time persists, for example, in the hands of the analogue station clocks that circle around and around, in the shops and gates and doors that open and close, open and close, and in the leisurely looping of the birdsong.

Lefebvre notes how it is possible to transform linear time into cyclical time by making it rhythmic, by giving it meter. "Cycles invigorate repetition by cutting through it." Lefebvre defines rhythm as "differentiated time, qualified duration"—in other words, repetition made meaningful by introducing the capacity to move through it in various ways. To improvise a dance over the top of it, to have the freedom to explore the differences that emerge in every passage through repetition.

Cyclicity connects rationalized urban time with the rhythms of the plants, the animals, the body, the planets: in each case, a repetition from which differences emerge. No two jellyfish or train passengers move in quite the same way. The introduction of difference results in the release of a pleasurable energy that is in the excess of the directed movement needed to get to and from work.³⁷⁷ In this way, Lefebvre writes, rhythm helps compensate for the linearity of everyday modern life. Instead of everyone falling zombie-like into absolute lockstep, rhythm emerges in the interstices of organized movement, raising the possibility for countless individual patterns within the overall orchestration. The eurhythmia of difference.

Staying Open to Other Rhythms

It is this improvisational ability to open oneself to the diverse rhythms traversing the self that is explored by the aesthetics of ambient subjectivity. The flexibility of interlocking rhythms provides a framework for learning to navigate between the millions of people, other creatures (crows, cockroaches, jellyfish...), and other objects (trains, phones, sliding doors...) sharing space in postindustrial Japanese cities. This conception of sociality makes little distinction between humans and other "more or less animate" bodies (including media objects),³⁷⁸ for everything manifesting in cyclical time engages rhythmically with this larger environmental dynamic.

What is needed is a capacity to enter the larger flows of the metropolis and at the same time attend to the smaller flows moving within, both above and below the narrow concerns encapsulating reflective personal identity. This is where ambient subjectivity comes in. It serves as a training in how to sense and sway to the syncopated cycles that emerge with every new mixture of people and place, bringing one's own rhythms into circulation with others and through this mixture finding a comfortable way forward.

To find a way to dance here amidst the crowd is to resist falling back into the isorhythm of a sedimented social identity (of the state, of the company, of the family), and to resist tripping

³⁷⁷ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 65.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

forward into the isorhythm of the isolated body, a form of social withdrawal radically severed from other cycles of life.

Of course, it is not always so easy. As noted earlier, falling forward into isolation has become a major concern within contemporary Japanese society, reminding us just how difficult and emotionally taxing the constant navigation of these complex environments can become. Increasing numbers are unable to manage, falling into various forms of social withdrawal. For someone living isolated in their room, only the barest of external temporalities enter in—the abstracted and highly controllable time of the Internet, and, if they are lucky, the rhythm of food being regularly deposited at their door by a relative or delivery service. Even these threads may be shattered, leading to the near absolute isorhythmia of those who die alone in their homes and are not found for weeks or even months—their participation in larger rhythms already so curtailed that their silence barely registers at all. The rising number of such cases reminds us of the cruel fate awaiting those who will not or cannot follow the demand to keep moving along. The depersonalization involved in ambient subjectivity is intimately linked to this danger of complete depersonalization: giving oneself over to larger social flows always at the same time raises the risk for a fall into utter immobility. The process of aspiring to impersonal mobility, spreading oneself out over greater and greater areas, brings with it the risk of ‘spreading oneself too thin,’ as the saying goes, courting subjective collapse.³⁷⁹ The more complex society becomes, the more difficult it is to reconcile one's personal rhythms with wider social flows.

And yet, equating ambient subjectivity too closely with social isolation risks obscuring the socially adaptive side of self-dispersal: how it affords the potential to engage with a wider range of environments and people, to move smoothly through a diverse and complex world. Commentary on social withdrawal in Japan often skips over the initial motivations for depersonalization, as if the choice individuals were faced with was simply between identifying with the local community or rejecting society and turning inward. But the guiding desire of the ambient subject is not simply to be alone, but to find other, more expansive worlds beyond the immediate social context, to move freely past the pressures and confines of the local community. This freedom, the appeal for so many of an anonymous metropolis like Tokyo, is not simply an illusion.

Yet commentary tends to focus, perhaps understandably, on cases where this desire for freedom has pushed too far, past the loosening of social bonds and towards their complete destruction³⁸⁰. In response, some advocate for the need to unite around political and historical issues, while others call for the strengthening of local and national identity—both of which risk merely substituting one form of isorhythm for another. Reading an impersonal ambient orientation as evidence of social irresponsibility and selfishness avoids the need to take seriously the desire held by many to move beyond what in many cases are oppressively narrow cultural norms and expectations, to find a personal way to move differently.

Not all attempts at transcending the local end by falling into a black hole of self-absorption. The desire to move out towards wider impersonal horizons needs to be taken seriously, for alongside its considerable risks it simultaneously reaches earnestly towards developing an

³⁷⁹ Deleuze and Guattari describe how attempts to depersonalize the self and reach the level of the "cosmos" (achieving a kind of elemental mobility akin to wind and water) always bring with them the danger of dispersing oneself "too quickly," leading to a fall into an isolated vacuum, what they call a "black hole." Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 344.

³⁸⁰ Miyadai, *Owari naki nichijō*. Saitō Tamaki makes a positive argument for a socially withdrawn ‘otaku’ sexuality, though his model still posits this as an isolated individual's relationship with their private media. See Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*.

expanded circle of engagement, beyond the family, nation, and species, towards a form of subjectivity based on coexistence rather than identity and exclusion.

Attending to rhythmic alignment is absolutely essential to any project hoping to enable communication and cooperation between disparate and diverse populations, without collapsing their differences into a form of greater or lesser adherence to the local standard. Far from being a symptom of psychological collapse, this is a deliberate form of depersonalized mobility, part of a larger move away from shared forms of social identification and towards a way to move within and between diverse attunements, an attempt to reach beyond cultural and personal isorhythmias towards a polyrhythmic world. To understand self-dispersal, we must attend to the crucial dynamics of movement, rhythm, sensation, proprioception; the many ways material bodies encounter one another through space and time in ways that cannot be reduced to reflective forms of human identity and sociality.

Certainly this dance is full of dangers, not only of contributing to social isolation, but also, as a number of critiques of multiculturalism have established, of overlooking how even a dispersed self can still impose standards of inclusion and exclusion onto those around them, and how opportunities for environmental subjectivity are themselves dispersed across populations in highly uneven ways. Further, as critics of postindustrial culture often point out, this type of loose rhythmic alignment is central to the "just in time" delivery structure of global capitalism, just as impersonal affect is a key tactic in marketing emotion across national and cultural boundaries.³⁸¹

And yet, acknowledging this does little to solve the original problematic of ambient media—how to move calmly and effectively through a complex world—nor does it keep us from considering how far contemporary Japan has come in developing atmospheres amenable to this goal. In the backlash against the excesses and failures of the high-growth period, the current tendency in Japanese Studies is to critique depersonalization on ideological grounds and in turn romanticize an earlier cultural moment of greater cultural commitment and solidarity. I wish to work instead towards a renewed understanding of the impersonal atmospheres of more recent decades, precisely because the self-dispersal first explored at this time remains so crucial to our continued struggle to think beyond the nation and the self-same.

The final three chapters set out to test the possibilities of ambient comfort produced through ambient video, and what it might offer for a diverse community of drifting subjects. This is driven by an optimism that proceeds, as Lefebvre puts it, "in spite of everything."³⁸²

As we have seen, ambient media play an important role in sensory attunement, affording cosubjective atmospheres for both groups and individuals. Used on a regular basis, these works become a companion to the ups and downs of everyday life, a way to attune in different and more desirable ways to the larger rhythms surrounding the self.

Increasingly, ambient media include moving images as well. Sound matched with visuals has a power to capture and center attention that often eludes music alone. In a 2007 lecture at UC Berkeley, the San Francisco-based electronic music duo Matmos described how they began using video in their shows. Early on in their career, they often played gigs in small, noisy bars. Their largely instrumental, free-form music rarely compelled people to stop talking and pay attention, and they found themselves competing with random bar chatter for the audience's attention. With nothing to look at except musicians fiddling with small machines, the audience could situate the

³⁸¹ Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 51-84.

³⁸² Lefebvre *Rhythmanalysis*, 12.

performance perceptually as a background phenomenon, and continue to talk over the top of it. Once Matmos began projecting a video behind them as they played, however, the audience quickly fell silent, and turned obediently in the direction of the screen.³⁸³ The audience, perhaps trained through watching films in quiet theaters, associated public audio-visual media with a demand for spectatorial silence.

In an effort to provide a visual focus for the concert experience, electronic musicians have increasingly turned to video artists to provide live or pre-programmed visuals to accompany their live shows. Hori Junji has pointed out that producing imagery for concerts may in fact have been the first form of “expanded cinema” in the 1960s, as groups like the Grateful Dead began incorporating background visual material into their concerts.³⁸⁴ The concept itself was introduced by Gene Youngblood as a way of pointing to exhibition practices that move beyond the pairing of audience and screen to interact with other dimensions of theatrical space.³⁸⁵

In more recent years, concert visuals have evolved alongside visuals to accompany DJ performances in clubs. In this later context, video artists, often called VJs (video jockeys), have often emphasized the live mixing and production of imagery, in concert with the improvisational techniques of the DJ. Concert video is more often preprogrammed, though in recent years there has been an increase in experiments in syncing visual tracks directly to the sound coming through the mixing board, a technique seen in the visuals for the Alva Noto and Sakamoto Ryūichi collaborations, and the playful syncing of drum kit and video image in the work of Japanese unit “DVD.”

In the live performance context, video serves as accompaniment, a form of background video. At the same time, however, background video (BGV) serves to focus attention on the music itself, or the music-image continuum. Cinema and television often aims for a soundtrack that folds unnoticed into the stream of images, supporting and shaping the emotional tone of the visuals without drawing attention to itself. With BGV, these roles are nearly reversed. The video track supports and lends images to the music.

Used in this ambient manner, video moves closer to functioning like a painted backdrop for foreground events, much like the backgrounds used in animation. The background images determine the emotional and spatial horizon, affecting the space in a contextual sense even when audiences are not consciously attending to it. The video establishes a mood in tandem with other elements in the space (such as music, architectural details, and other proximate objects). At the same time, the video supports more directed attention as well—it is as interesting as it is ignorable—but only if and when the viewer decides to attend to it.

A Brief History of Ambient Video

Background video draws on an alternate history of moving image aesthetics, which places film as an extension of painting and sculpture rather than theater and the novel. This trajectory goes back to the early days of experimental film, when painters like Hans Richter and Oskar Fischinger began using film to animate their abstract art practice. In the fifties and sixties, the Whitney

³⁸³ Matmos, “The Rematerialization of the Art Object,” talk at the University of California, Berkeley, 12 February 2007.

³⁸⁴ Ueno Toshiya, Hori Junji, and Lev Manovich, “Aesthetics of Media - Through Action and Theory,” Symposium at the NTT Intercommunications Center, Tokyo, 13 December 2003.

³⁸⁵ See Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*.

brothers began expanding the territory of the abstract film,³⁸⁶ introducing more psychedelic forms of sound and imagery. John Whitney later became one of the earliest proponents of computer-based “visual music.”

The experimental cinema movements that followed in the 1960s saw a great deal of crossover and collaboration between artists working with both moving and still visual media. This was especially true in places like America and Japan, where there experimental film often meant a painterly emphasis on craft, design, and materiality.³⁸⁷ However, with the exception of some early ambient experiments (such as Warhol’s *Empire* (1964) and *Sleep* (1963)), most filmmakers stayed within a theatrical exhibition model even when their works had long ago abandoned narrative constraints.

This began to shift in 1970, marked by Gene Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema*, the first book to consider video as an art form. Youngblood argued that television has taken over the role of providing realist narratives, freeing cinema to abscond from drama and explore what he called synaesthesia, a kind of melding of affects.³⁸⁸ Concurrently, filmmakers like Anthony McCall began paying more attention to the space surrounding the screen, devising new mobile ways of relating to moving images.

In Japan, as elsewhere, filmmakers and video artists began exploring more atmospheric aesthetics, as in Hagiwara Sakumi’s landscape film *Kiri* (1972) and Idemitsu Mako’s *At Yukigaya 2* (1974). By the late 1970s, the department stores owned by the major railroad conglomerates like Tōkyū, Tōbu, and Seibu had begun installing their first jumbo outdoor video screens outside their flagship stores in high-traffic Tokyo hubs like Shibuya, Ikebukuro, and Roppongi. At the same time, galleries and museums housed within these department stores began presenting programs of video art and video installation, consciously blurring the prestige of art with the sensory fashions of consumerism.

Brian Eno was brought to Japan in the summer of 1983 to present his ambient video and electronic music works in a large installation at the newly built Laforet Museum in Akasaka (Tokyo), under the title *Brian Eno: A World of Video Art and Environmental Music*. Video as a form of abstract mood regulation became more explicit from the late 1970s, as Eno, building off his experiments with ambient music from a couple of years earlier, began experimenting with his own reconceptualization of the television set as an ambient device. The first step was to shift television away from discursive, often hyperactive forms of commercial broadcasting, and towards something closer to electronic music or abstract painting. To do this, Eno placed the television on its side, inverting the aspect ratio. According to Eno, the 4:3 horizontality of traditional television emphasizes dialogue between a pair of characters, who can easily fit into such a frame. The upended 3:4 ratio, in contrast, tapped instead into a lineage of portraiture, of stillness rather than movement, contemplation rather than action.

Eno then hooked up this vertical television to a camera pointed outside his window towards the New York skyline. As the clouds drifted by, Eno developed a technique of altering the video colors to create the effect of a slow-moving painting, as used in *Mistaken Memories of Medieval Manhattan* (1981). Around this time Eno began describing the television set as a “light organ.” That is, the television was not simply a device to transparently reproduce images, but rather, a sophisticated tool to organize bits of light on an array with great accuracy. In this way, light could be

³⁸⁶ ‘Visual Music,’ as it is often called, has experienced something of a revival in recent years, through the work of institutions like the Iota Center in New York, the Visual Music Center in Los Angeles, and visual music festivals like Punto y Raya.

³⁸⁷ Wollen, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies*, 94.

³⁸⁸ Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, 84-86.

for video much like sound was for ambient music—pre-subjective, atmospheric, and endlessly malleable. Eno began asserting that the most important controls on a television set were not channel or volume, but hue, saturation, and color.

In rethinking television as a light organ Eno invented an alternative TV history based on light and color rather than theatrical storytelling and perceptual realism. Implicitly referencing the long history of 'color organs' experiments in visual music, in 1991 he sets out a new aesthetic taxonomy that inverts the usual submission of affect to narrative realism:

TV is a way of controlling light
Images are a subset of controlled light
Narratives are a subset of images.³⁸⁹

Later in the same essay he asserts that “Information and stimulus are not separate,” and asks, “Why not regard [television] as the late 20th Century’s way of making paintings?” As with ambient music, Eno’s role here is to take an experimental tradition and attempt to reconcile it with the popular form of television.

Eno’s subsequent works continued in this vein, building more complex projection techniques to enable the slow shifting of images through time. In 1984 Sony released his 82-minute *Thursday Afternoon* ambient video on VHS, and the following year Polydor released the work’s ambient soundtrack to showcase their new long-playing, high-fidelity format, the Compact Disc.

Through these and other experiments with atmospheric film and video, ambience gradually emerged as a central concern to video aesthetics—no longer an epiphenomenon of narrative or representation, but an aesthetic basis for video in itself. The idea of “painting” was often deployed in this emergence to turn towards an aesthetic focused on novel forms of sensation and affect. Here painting is held in contrast to the traditional idea of “television,” a medium purportedly so addicted to narrative realism that there is no room for affective experiment.

This overstates the case, of course. By the early 1980s, MTV had introduced a format exclusively geared towards largely non-narrative music-oriented visuals. Most of these videos, of course, focus more on presenting the artist and granting them a particular look or cultural attitude, rather than on the abstracted audio-visual relations that obsessed Fishinger or the Whitneys. Nonetheless, the fringes of MTV programming allowed for popular access to a video format that was not simply about telling a story.³⁹⁰

With the rise of the culture of personal mood regulation in the last decades of the twentieth century, as well as the infrastructural and technological changes that accompanied it, this tradition of abstract video merged with new technological possibilities for presentation (screen savers, gallery projections, flat screen televisions) to find new venues for ambient moving images.

Video Therapy

The aesthetics of ambient video are intimately related to larger shifts in the sensory ecology of the city. As dwellers in information-driven societies became increasingly immersed in a barrage of disparate media—often media with increasingly sophisticated emotional and affective appeals—the management of personal affect via media stimuli became an important site for the care of the self. As Mark Hansen describes, with this immersion in information the physical body has increasingly

³⁸⁹ Eno. “My Light Years,” in liner notes to *77 Million Paintings*.

³⁹⁰ Eventually, in the following decade, directors began to gain fame for their music videos, and music video began to be considered a springboard to larger projects. The release of DVD collections of “directors series” music video works by Chris Cunningham, Spike Jonze, and Michel Gondry marked the arrival of the television music video for television as a (somewhat) respected art form. Personally, as a child my interest in abstract video was piqued staying up late to watch the more experimental video offerings played from midnight to 2 on MTV’s *120 Minutes*.

become the frame through which the more-and-more unframed world of information and sensation comes to be organized. One way to accomplish this is through the many techniques of personal mood regulation. The emergence of calming commercial media happens simultaneously with the so-called therapeutization of culture—the proclivity to speak of social and political events in psychological and traumatic terms, and to turn to self-medication and mood-regulation not only via drugs but via media—first music, but increasingly visual technologies as well.³⁹¹

The story of the rebranding of moving image media as personal mood regulators begins with the moment moving images escape theatrical exhibition and begin spreading throughout the spaces of daily life. With this spread of moving image media, new viewing practices soon began to emerge. In *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*, Anna McCarthy describes the diversification of viewing styles that accompanied the spread of television screens into domestic and public spaces. Many writers on television have pointed out the often times distracted nature of television viewing in the home—viewers are often multitasking, having simultaneous conversations, running off to the bathroom, and going off to do other activities during commercial breaks. McCarthy adds to this an awareness of all the ways television screens now serve to shape concentration in public spaces as well, with televisions in bars, in hospital waiting rooms, in airport lounges, and in restaurants.

Television in these contexts slips fluidly between being a foreground and a background medium. As Canadian media theorist Jim Bizzocchi notes, clip-based programming like commercials, the opening sequences of television shows, and music videos are designed to remain effective not only on first viewing but on subsequent views. YouTube has reinforced this trend towards the quick and repeatable. However, these short forms are still based around foreground attention—an attention even harder to retain given that viewers can so easily move away or change the channel.

Bizzocchi points to the recent rise of a different model of repeated viewing aesthetics, what he calls, following Eno, ambient video.³⁹² Ambient video plays in the background, setting up an atmosphere in the surrounding space, always ready to absorb a viewer's concentration, but never demanding it.³⁹³ Rather than relying on editing and narrative to maintain interest, ambient video focuses on establishing an atmosphere through the slow shifting of image layers.

Bizzocchi argues that the emergence of this new genre of moving image media is tied in with the proliferation of large high-definition plasma televisions. The flatter screens merge more easily into their surroundings, while the higher resolution allows enough detail to begin to rival painting or still photography in terms of visual detail, reducing the need for constant movement and variety to sustain interest. Finally, following the predications of Lev Manovich, Bizzocchi argues that larger and larger screens will shift video aesthetics towards an emphasis on wide, tableau-style shots, and will focus on shifting attention around within the frame rather than cutting from one shot to another.

While ambient video existed long before flat-screen televisions, judging by the proliferation of companies producing ambient DVDs for the home market, Bizzocchi is right to mark the plasma television as a critical stage in the development of ambient moving-image media. Many of these companies orient their products precisely towards designing a soothing affective space, a calming

³⁹¹ Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*; Furudi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*.

³⁹² See Bizzocchi. "Video as Ambience: Reception and Aesthetics of Flat-Screen Video Display."

³⁹³ This echoes Eno's famous description of ambient music: "Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting." Eno, *Ambient 1: Music For Airports* liner notes.

ambience. Companies like Colorcalm, Soothing Environments, Digital Atmosphere, and Waves DVD offer series such as the “four elements,” the *Virtual Vacation* series of beaches around the world, as well as kittens, puppies, and the now classic virtual fishtank and virtual fireplace.³⁹⁴ These products often reference another form of ambient visual aesthetic rooted in the computer screensaver (pioneered by After Dark in Berkeley, California, in 1989). Some companies in fact explicitly pitch their DVDs as “screensavers for your Plasma TV.”

Other more high-profile uses of Plasma TV ambience have emerged at the crossroads between interior design and video art, including the commission of custom ambient video works for environments such as high-end restaurants and hotel lobbies. The first cable channel entirely devoted to ambient video, *Souvenirs from the Earth*, made its broadcast debut in Germany in 2006, after initial outings at arts festivals in the late 1990s. The company also produces specially commissioned works for stores, lounges, and home interiors, as well as selling DVDs at places such as the Tate Modern and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. On their website, the channel promises subscribers the ability to “transform any flat-screen into a futuristic painting. [Souvenirs from the Earth] is slow moving and very contemplative, an entertainment concept the very opposite of what TV offers today.”³⁹⁵

As with Eno, *Souvenirs from the Earth* aims to reclaim television as a medium for art, moving it away from the taint of commercial broadcasting. As with earlier ambient video artists, a central strategy here is to tap into the alternate history (and greater cultural prestige) of painting. *Souvenirs from the Earth*’s trademarked slogan makes these aspirations clear: “Video replaces paintings!”³⁹⁶

Like the jellyfish DVD documented in the introduction, audiovisual media enter in here as tools for establishing eurhythmic environments both for personal and public use. Environmental music and video in public spaces showers transient populations with carefully selected moods, helping bring strangers into temporary rhythmic alignment. A reader on the subway dips into an atmospheric novel, closes their eyes while listening to a backing track on their earbuds, or gazes disinterestedly at the nature footage playing on a video monitor above the doors. They later emerge back at street level still wrapped in the media’s emotional glow.

Ambient media deployed in this way releases another set of rhythms into the existing mixture, helping to slow the overall rhythm of the city and introduce more eurhythmic possibilities between urban space and slower body rhythms, like the inhalations and exhalations of the breath.

Energy in the Tedious Repetition

These smoother flows are a central focus of video artist and photographer Ise Shōko (1969 -). Ise’s *+Intersection* (2002-2003) set of videos contains four English phrases that repeat at intervals throughout the series, outlining the relation of Ise’s images to the everyday it engages:

Memory, oblivion, and imagination.
Energy in the tedious repetition.
Crossing point of air and mind.
World in the other side of daily life.

Taken together, these four phrases outline the relationship Ise’s work establishes between its rhythmic visuals and the routine landscapes of everyday existence. The works acknowledge both the tedium of contemporary urban life at the same time as they work to transform that same

³⁹⁴ Some are site-specific, such as *Virtual Trip: Moon over Tokyo*. One particular genre of ambient DVD unique to Japan is the “Train Journey” genre, recording the landscape seen from a particular train line, often shot from the front car.

³⁹⁵ *Souvenirs from the Earth*. <<http://www.souvenirsfromtheearth.com/>> Accessed Oct. 26, 2007.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid*.

tedium into something mysterious and intriguing. In this way the work reveals the bland banality of contemporary urban landscapes, while at the same time attempting to generate a new relation to these same spaces that might allow for another “world” to come into view. This combination allows the works to avoid becoming a simple denunciation of the status quo, and at the same time refuses to use art as a means to conceal or distract. Neither critique nor escape, the work takes up a more complex relationship to the contemporary urban environment, recognizing its current state, and at the same time its ability to transform into something more imaginative (a mutability enacted out through Ise’s image manipulations). In affective terms, this complexity registers through the rigorously ambiguous mood of Ise’s work: the nearly indiscernible oscillations between melancholy and hope, pensiveness and tranquility.

Both the music and the montage organizing Ise’s videos are structured around the loop and the repeated gesture. Only the rare segment, such as *Through*, has a recognizable ending. Most works are structured around a slow pulsing rhythm, a gradual ebb and flow. Musically, the rhythms tend towards the slow range, often 70bpm or lower. Visually, the pacing in Ise’s works is governed by images such as automobiles sliding at a relaxed pace down the highway, flamingoes walking across a pond, a primate blinking, jellyfish drifting, ripples across a pond, and escalator moving up and down and up again, and birds taking flight one at a time. The pacing is calm without being self-consciously slow.

As Robert Fink argues, repetition in contemporary electronic music (drawing on the tradition of American minimalism) must be understood in a larger context of the automation and regulation of industrial and post-industrial societies.³⁹⁷ Ise’s work makes this connection explicit, matching the “tedious repetition” of highway driving with matching downtempo beats (provided by the electronic/hip hop producer Speedometer). At the same time, however, these automated rhythms often open out to a less predictable world. Just as images of the highway in *+intersection* draw attention to much less regulated cloud formations floating in the sky above them, the music accompanying Ise’s videos often slides between leisurely low-speed beats and completely beatless ambient styles. The beats often evaporate just as the images disperse into the ethereal, as concrete becomes cloud.³⁹⁸

Adding Groove to the Environment

What do these rhythmic videos do for the viewer? Looped over and over during their exhibition, the videos create a rhythm of their own. In Ise’s case, most of these works premiered in gallery or museum installations, and were then made available on DVD where they could be looped along based on the whims of the viewer. One distinctive factor of this kind of abstract video is its high “replay value,” to borrow a term from video game culture. While some narrative films do find viewers willing to watch again and again, narrative film overall does not approach the replay culture of recorded music, where repetition is standard and expected. In the case of popular music, this repetition is already built into the structure of the music itself. Replay value is essential to pop music’s appeal, and this replay value extends to video works organized around this same repetitive structure. Playing the piece again, we return to the groove, re-attuning to its rhythm.

One way to understand the rhythms of video, then, is to consider the relation of the video rhythms to the existing rhythms the video enters into. This is more complex than simply opposing

³⁹⁷ See Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*.

³⁹⁸ This is true of both Speedometer’s music and Ise’s later collaborations with Steve Jensen.

“slowness” to “speed,” as in the various ‘slow’ movements of the last decade.³⁹⁹ As Lefebvre emphasizes, rhythms are always understood in relation to other rhythms, particular the rhythms of my own body:

A rhythm is only slow or fast in relation to other rhythms with which it finds itself associated in a more or less vast unity. ... Every more or less animate body and a fortiori every gathering of bodies is consequently polyrhythmic, which is to say composed of diverse rhythms, with each part, each organ or function having its own in a perpetual interaction which constitutes a set [*ensemble*] or a whole [*un tout*].⁴⁰⁰

Ise focuses on the rhythms visible in the urban landscape: water ripples, windmills rotating, elevators rising and falling, autos slinking along the raised highways. Then there are the superhumanly smooth rhythms of motion graphics software like After Effects, the source of the smooth pans and sliding effects so central to the work of Ise and other contemporary motion graphics artists. These rhythms, both found and fabricated, serve to syncopate the landscapes of everyday life, adding energy to the "tedious repetition."

Ise’s *Summer Afternoon* (2001) demonstrates this process of ambient rejuvenation with great clarity. The text (superimposed in English, subtitled in Japanese) describes a leisurely summer day in the life of someone living in an apartment with a cat near a large suburban park. The narrator thinks about various topics, walks to the store to buy a few things, encounters random strangers, and considers the day’s news. She or he (the narrator’s gender is indiscernible) provides various lists. A shopping list:

Razor ¥560, shaving cream ¥700,
two packets of cigarettes ¥500,
five cans of cat food ¥900.

Later, a list of thoughts and the time spent on each:

-Convenience store robber shouldn’t pay compare to its risk. (5 min.)
-That record shop is too noisy with loud music to chose records taking time. (30 sec.)
-About the internal organ transplantation. (2 min.)
-About equality of men and women. (4 sec.) [sic]

This is followed by some thoughts on how “this country is deeply in debt” and yet “people go to the rock music festival paying ¥80,000 for the ticket in this country.” Passing thoughts, floating by—a world made up equally of slow elevators, cat food, weather patterns, and global economic news. This is not a dramatic world, but neither is it an unpleasant one. The series of images of the park (mostly uninhabited except for a few humans seen at a distance) provides a relaxed, lush setting for these wandering thoughts. The narrator’s mention of various smells (water, the potential for rain, the heat) infuses the ordered yet abundant greenery of the images.

Paired with these visuals, most crucially, is Speedometer’s easy-going downtempo instrumental hip-hop, imbuing these everyday wanderings with a relaxed head-nodding beat. The music gives this summer afternoon its bounce. Late in the piece, a sample of a local Kansai-area weather report surfaces, tying the music into the narrator’s life and the park visible in the photographs (most likely in Ise’s hometown of Takarazuka).

As with other ambient media, the world of *Summer Afternoon* is largely a solitary one. The narrator remains unseen, and the text reports only a brief encounter with a tattooed man in the elevator of the narrator’s apartment. The rest of the world is mediated through the radio and newspaper headlines. The proximate world consists of a cat, a park, a bridge or two—a world along the lines of Wallace Steven’s “two or three hills and a cloud.” The central tension here is the

³⁹⁹ For example, see Tsuji, *Surō izu byūtifuru: ososa toshite no bunka*.

⁴⁰⁰ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 89.

lingering pause before a summer rainstorm, and the breezy downtempo mood of the music. These relaxed rhythms drive the ambient affordances of Ise's work.

Ise's *Summer Afternoon* also conceals many of the rhythms of the city, however, keeping the overload from spilling out into an arrhythmia of too much information too much of the time. In the next chapter, we will focus not simply on entrainment in general, but a specific type: the use of ambient media to push back on this overabundance of rhythms and carve out an evacuated space for the ambient subject to rest undisturbed—a space of less.

[10. The Aesthetics of Less]

Thomas H. Davenport has pointed to an ‘attention crisis’ emerging as a result of the rapid growth of information exposure in everyday life, particularly with the rise of networked digital media. Davenport argues contemporary information culture is moving towards an ‘attention economy.’ His logic runs like this: it is wrong to speak of an ‘information economy,’ since information is overabundant. The main resource information consumes is attention, and thus in an age oriented around information, attention becomes the true commodity. Davenport thus sees the currency of this new economy gradually shifting from money to attention. Users of online social networking sites, for example, agree to give their (partial) attention to advertisements in exchange for access to desired goods and services.⁴⁰¹

As Jean Baudrillard has argued, if alienation was once characterized by physical distance (being isolated from the everyday), it now emerges from an overwhelming informational proximity to everything. Swamped in data, we lose the ability to separate figure and ground. We are "reduced to pure screen: a switching center for the networks of influence."⁴⁰² The increasing scarcity of

⁴⁰¹ For more on the attention economy, see Davenport, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*.

⁴⁰² Quoted in Chandavarkar, “The Death of the Avant-garde in the Attention Economy,” posted to the <nettime> mailing list on 10 January, 2012, and, appropriately, distracting me from the writing I was doing at the time.

attention leads not only to new forms of economics, but new forms of attentional aesthetics. Richard Lanham notes how the attention economy puts a greater emphasis on rhetorical style:

The devices that regulate attention are stylistic devices. Attracting attention is what style is all about. If attention is now at the center of the economy rather than stuff, then so is style. It moves from the periphery to the center. Style and substance switch places.⁴⁰³

Baudrillard's dire hyperbole notwithstanding, this isn't as bad as it sounds, as long as we can set aside the usual value judgement implicit in the contrast of substance and style, of content and form. Like the distinction between subject and object, or foreground and background, the more highly valued and more seemingly independent of these pairs, upon closer inspection, turns out to be a lot more reliant on its lowly other than it might first appear. Not surprisingly, media theorists were the first to point this out, most famously Marshall McLuhan's campaign to think more about how a medium inevitably shapes whatever messages move through it.

Attentional aesthetics take many forms. Two of the most prominent strategies for drawing attention are novelty and scale: make your object something nobody has ever experienced before, or at least make it bigger and louder than everything else. Copious examples could be put forth here, but I'll stick with one that clearly works with both principles: the exploding sound [*bakuon*] film screening. Pioneered by rock critic Higuchi Yasuhito and the Baus Theatre in Kichijōji (western Tokyo), exploding sound screenings brings large speaker stacks into the movie theater and presents films with the volume turned up to 11, and (often) a soundtrack reengineered to make the added loudness more effectively visceral and pummeling.⁴⁰⁴ As way to draw film viewers back into the theater, exploding sound brings scale and novelty home viewing cannot hope to compete with (of course, the novelty wears off, and hearing damage might eventually dull the edge off exploding sound's volume advantage).

In stark contrast with this scramble for audience attention, ambient media aim for the polar opposite. Purposefully diminutive, ambient media's primary selling point in an attention economy is something nearly as scarce as attention itself: ignorability.⁴⁰⁵ Rather than competing for the increasingly scarce commodity of focused attention, ambient media respond by accepting distracted attention as their starting point.

Cosubjectivity

Seeking to understand ignorability as an aesthetic category forces us to question older criteria for aesthetic quality, like craft and a critical relationship to the status quo. On the *Polis* website Peter Sigrist blogged what he called an "Embarrassing Ode to McDonald's as an Open Public Office Space."⁴⁰⁶ He describes spending long hours working at McDonald's branches in Moscow, despite thinking McDonald's is "completely lame." Why? Wireless connectivity, no pressure to buy anything, the energy of having other people around, efficiency, cleanliness, low-prices, and no cigarette smoke. As Nick Kaufman pointed out in the ensuing discussion, "whereas at the indie coffeeshop you might feel like you are imposing or that someone is breathing down your neck, at big chains you can find anonymity [and] a lack of guilt."

⁴⁰³ Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*, xiii-xii.

⁴⁰⁴ See Higuchi, *Eiga wa bakuon wa sasayaku 99-09*.

⁴⁰⁵ In some instances, this led advertisers to devise new ways of influencing human behavior that do not demand focused attention, including the more subtle affective measures alluded to above. For example, Steven Goodman has written of "earworms," advertising jingles designed to wiggle their way into a person's unconscious without the need for them to actively pay attention to the sounds themselves. Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 141.

⁴⁰⁶ <http://www.thepolisblog.org/2011/06/embarrassing-ode-to-mcdonalds-as-open.html>. June 11, 2011.

An independent café might offer a more creative interior, higher quality coffee and tea, and an atmosphere of refinement, calm, and self-satisfaction. In contrast, as Kaufman points out, the appeal of the big chain is quite different: it serves as a mostly anonymous container for doing your own thing, a short-term rental space, the more generic the better. The store design, and the people who temporarily inhabit it, provide a baseline energetic vibe but otherwise remain as ignorable as possible, and in turn you yourself can expect to be ignored as long as you contribute a restrained but friendly energy to the space.

Rather than continue to write off these generic containers as the soul-less non-places that they are, Sigrist proposes we might also acknowledge what this anonymity affords. As Alex Schafran notes in a post elsewhere on *Polis*, often the most ethnically and socioeconomically diverse locations in a city are chain restaurants and shopping malls. Schafran notes the irony in how those who pride themselves on being culturally aware and pro-diversity tend to avoid these sites in favor of neighborhoods they see as more culturally “authentic,” even though these bohemian enclaves are often more socio-economically homogenous than the generic sites they flee. One commenter dubs this the “hipster paradox.”⁴⁰⁷

What these generic sites afford is the chance for open social participation based around very different principles from the more exclusive and self-conscious hipster spots. While low prices certainly are one factor, these standardized and generic environments also allow for very specific forms of public engagement—or perhaps more accurately, public disengagement; disengagement in public.

In her work on music in public space, Tia DeNora describes this as the difference between environments of intersubjectivity and cosubjectivity. Cosubjectivity is a form of relationality where two or more individuals may come to exhibit similar modes of feeling and acting, constituted in relation to extra-personal parameters, such as those provided by musical materials. Such co-subjectivity differs in important ways from the [...] notion of ‘inter-subjectivity,’ which presumes interpersonal dialogue and the collaborative production of meaning and cognition. Inter-subjectivity [...] involves a collaborative version of reflexivity. [...] By contrast, co-subjectivity is the result of isolated individually reflexive alignments to an environment and its materials.⁴⁰⁸

Cosubjective modes are most prevalent in crowded urban spaces supporting highly mobile lifestyles. Avoiding intersubjective encounters allows for the smoothest journey and the most efficient workspace. McGuinness and Overy gloss this as the difference between “communion” and “communication,” hinting at the important role religious architectures once played in affording cosubjective experience.⁴⁰⁹

Georg Simmel, in his seminal 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” points out that unlike less densely populated communities, where only a small number of familiar faces are encountered over the course of any given day, life in the metropolis is characterized by countless daily interactions with strangers, most of which are brief and based on the exchange of goods and services. As a strategy for effectively dealing with so many strangers so much of the time, Simmel writes, abstract mental categories emerge within which different individuals can be quickly and efficiently slotted: here’s a cashier; there’s a homeless person; over there, someone reading an e-book.⁴¹⁰ There is little time or incentive for getting to know all but a few selected individuals beyond the level of the functional category into which they have been quickly filed. What this means, among other things, is that the more textured emotional engagements that characterize

⁴⁰⁷ Schafran, “The Diversity Paradox.”

⁴⁰⁸ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 149-150.

⁴⁰⁹ McGuinness and Overy, “Music, consciousness, and the brain: music as shared experience of an embodied present,” 245.

⁴¹⁰ Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 336.

human interaction in smaller communities are in large part replaced by an ongoing series of brief and trivial interactions. Instead of encountering each other as persons, each with a complex and singular interiority, the stranger becomes a fellow traveler in peripheral vision. The goal is often to simply not get in each other's way in order to let each arrive at their destination as quickly and smoothly as possible.

At first, these cosubjective environments are understood as but an outer shell facilitating the more important business of individual development and selected inter-personal encounters. Natsume Sōseki promotes something like this view in his famous 1914 lecture *My Individualism* [*Watakushi no kojīnshugi*], when he writes: “If society is going to allow you such regard for your own individuality, it only makes sense for you to recognize the individuality of others.”⁴¹¹ The anonymity of public space is in this perspective a trade-off for the freedoms of private individualism. This is the idea at the root of the designer café or bar: you may have to travel through the blandest of spaces to get there, but the place itself serves as a highly specific cocoon within which the assertion of difference can take place.

While Sōseki emphasizes how this allows for the flourishing of individual difference, Simmel points out how the development of this cherished individuality simultaneously demands the production of an ever more anonymous public self. High-density individual diversity paradoxically creates the need for a highly regulated public anonymity, in order to keep all these “individuals” from imposing on one another.

Tokyo is one of the world's great cosubjective spaces, packing millions of people in right next to one another while for the most part relieving them of any need to actually speak to one another. Edo (the name for the Tokyo before it was renamed in 1868) was quite different in this respect. Looking at travel guides to the region, Maeda Ai notes a shift in focus from Edo to Meiji period publications. While Edo guides led visitors to places where people gathered to interact with one another in work and play, Meiji guides pointed to where the individual traveler can go on their own and see the sights.⁴¹² If Edo's appeal focused on inter-subjective encounters, Meiji Tokyo offered urban sights for the solitary tourist. In this Meiji model of sightseeing, however, a visitor is still attending directly to the space itself. A different relationship to the environment emerged moving into the postwar period, when Japanese cities gradually became more rationalized through the emergence of spaces designed first around mobility and efficiency, and later around the comforts of amenity culture.

While proponents of individualism (including most contemporary advertising) insist that public cosubjectivity is ultimately subordinate to private intersubjectivity, as the decades pass the distinction has grown increasingly unclear. With the emergence of “lifestyle” as a pillar of middle-class identity in the 1960s and 70s, techniques of scientific management were increasingly transformed into forms of self-care, often with the assistance of environmental design. The distinction between public and private self was steadily eroding. The anonymity of co-subjectivity came to be seen as enjoyable in and of itself—and one of the primary reasons to move to a big city like Tokyo. In the metropolis, it is easier for the private individual to co-exist with others who share their ideal of comfortable invisibility. The urban self comes to be defined less through inter-personal relationships and more, to return to DeNora, through “isolated individually reflexive alignments to an environment and its materials.” Through ambient subjectivity.

The ambient subject sees the city not as a site of possible intersubjective encounters, but as an assortment of possible selves afforded with and through the surrounding atmospheres. From this

⁴¹¹ Natsume Sōseki, “Soseki on Individualism,” 40.

⁴¹² Maeda, *Text and the City*, 83.

perspective, the café is of value not because of the particular people who inhabit it, but because of the variant of self afforded by its atmosphere. The emotional connections inhabitants build are with the atmosphere, not the humans passing through it.

Intersubjectivity and cosubjectivity allow for a markedly different set of emotional responses. Intersubjective encounters involve confrontation and the potential for strong emotional reactions. They offer an encounter with difference where deeply held beliefs may be challenged. In contrast, spaces of cosubjectivity focus on the avoidance of strong emotion, in favor of the efficiency of cordiality and mild-mannered friendliness.

Cosubjective environments like the chain café and the public transportation networks are notable for being able to accommodate many and alienate few. They are designed to allow as many as possible to move into a space of co-subjective comfort with relative ease. Of course, these places too have their own particular rules and regulations, and it is certainly possible to feel unwelcome and out-of-place. Every overcrowded rush-hour train is a reminder of how fraught and fragile the orchestration of impersonal comfort actually is. But when successful, spaces of cosubjectivity allow for individual differences to be maintained while living, working, and traveling peacefully in close proximity to one another.

This brings us back to Peter Sigris's embarrassed ode to McDonald's as an Open Public Office Space. While there are still plenty of reasons to think going to McDonald's is "completely lame," as a cosubjective environment it is clearly offering something highly sought after in the city: the chance to rent a little bit of anonymous public space for communing without getting too close. As easy as it is to be skeptical about what this means for social relations, I propose there is also something immensely practical going on here—and that for understanding contemporary urban life the contours of cosubjectivity cultivated in these spaces may be just as important, if not more important, than the molding of the more distinctly bounded and reflective interpersonal subject.

The increasing premium on cosubjectivity can be understood through transformations in Japanese consumerism over the final decades of the twentieth century. Writing on the cultural transformation of Shibuya (Tokyo), one of the key sites of youth fashion and consumer culture during this period, Yoshimi Shunya reads the transformation from the consumer fantasies of the 1970s to the everyday information aesthetic of the 1980s through two of the premier retailers of the period, Parco and Mujirushi ryōhin (known as Muji in English),⁴¹³ at the time both owned by the larger Seibu conglomerate. The Shibuya branch of the Parco department store was the epicenter of female consumer culture in the 1970s, with its carefully 'staged' fantasy spaces which transformed the central area west of Shibuya station into an "integrated advertising environment" based on the premise of allowing consumers to escape the pressures of their everyday lives (a pose Yoshimi reads as looking backwards to the attitude of the late 1960s student protests).⁴¹⁴ Parco's advertising campaigns pushed women to assert their freedom and break away from traditional domestic spaces, if only to shop. In contrast, the strategy for Muji in the 1980s was

the absolute opposite of Parco's distancing from the everyday and its 'moral education.' It was based on comprehensively supplying the materials that would allow customers to live with a reasonable degree of

⁴¹³ Muji ryōhin (literally "no label quality goods") began operations in December of 1980 as a subsidiary of Seiyu, and opened its first dedicated Muji store in Aoyama (Tokyo) in 1983. In 1989 it left Seiyu to become independent, and by 2005 had a total of 290 stores worldwide. Holloway and Hones, "Muji, materiality, and mundane geographies," 557.

⁴¹⁴ "Far from being postmodern, the extremely independent and provocative spirit foregrounded in Parco's advertising was an avant-garde as if it had been directly inherited from the young radicals of the '60s." Yoshimi, "The Market of ruins," 293.

aesthetic satisfaction. These materials were things that could be found anywhere, that were absolutely ordinary, and made no attempt to lecture to the customers. [...] What we find here is a burnt-out future that affirms only what is private and commonplace.⁴¹⁵

Yoshimi associates Muji's designs with the increasing mediatization and fluidity of Tokyo as an environment in the 1980s, part of a global transformation towards what at the time was coming to be called the 'information society.' Yoshimi argues that this transformation led to the third major overhaul of the Tokyo landscape in the twentieth century. The first followed the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, which led to the urban structure based on "living in a residential suburb, commuting to a city-centre office on one of the private railway lines spreading out from central termini, and shopping in Ginza at the weekends." The second emerged during the period of rapid economic growth spurred on by the massive infrastructure projects accompanying the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, like the bullet train and the Metropolitan Expressway.⁴¹⁶ Unlike these first two transformations, the third consisted not of large-scale construction projects, but the dissolution of specific neighborhoods into a larger international information culture built around global capital. The terrain of once-distinct neighborhoods like Shibuya became overrun with discount national and transnational chains of the type once found only in the suburbs.

While the 1980s are often imagined as the height of consumerism in bubble-era Japan, in actuality consumption was already in decline following its heyday in the 1970s (well before the larger bursting of the economic bubble and Japan's entry into a full recession in the early 1990s). While overall the economy was still rising, by the early 1980s personal consumption had entered a steep decline. It was said young people were "no longer buying things." While private investment was still on the increase, the share of personal consumption in Japan's GNP was actually going down.⁴¹⁷

While Yoshimi describes this moment pessimistically, as the arrival of a "burnt-out" future, it can be argued that companies like Muji have inherited Parco's role as a "commercial avant-garde," this time for a very different type of consumer. A new design imperative emerged in the 1980s, led by companies like Muji: the increasing need to design media objects capable of *coobjectivity*—that is, objects able to get along with other like objects in a shared environment. If coobjectivity serves as a way for diverse individuals to coexist, coobjectivity serves as a way for diverse objects to get along aesthetically, a need intensifying with the increasing mediation of urban space. Ambient media's emergence served as an attempted aesthetic solution to the increasing attentional fatigue of postindustrial culture.

Muji's stripped-down, muted designs are emblematic of the new coobjective ambient styles emergent in the 1980s. Muji chief advisor Tanaka Ikko describes Muji's emphasis on 'everyday' and 'basic' products like this:

You may feel embarrassed if the person sitting next to you on the train is wearing the same clothes as you. If they are jeans, however, you wouldn't be worried, because jeans are what we could describe as 'basic' clothing. All Muji products are such 'basic' products.⁴¹⁸

Muji's catalogues emphasize how its products are anonymous and adaptable. Muji designs are formed through the "careful elimination and subtraction of gratuitous features." As Holloway and Hones point out,

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 298-9.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 297.

⁴¹⁷ Tanaka Naoki, *tezawari no media o motomete*. Tokyo: Mainichi shinbunsha, 1986. Cited in Yoshimi, "The Market of ruins," 296-7.

⁴¹⁸ Quoted in Holloway and Hones, "Muji, materiality, and mundane geographies," 557.

Muji objects are designed to blend into non-Muji surroundings. This aspect to the Muji design aesthetic is emphasized in the company's catalogues with repeated assurances that the objects are anonymous, adaptable, and useful. What the Muji UK catalogue text says of the Muji use of colour, for example, is extended by implication to its product range as a whole: it is 'guaranteed to blend and never dominate.' Thus, throughout its catalogues, Muji commodities are presented as 'discreet,' 'muted,' 'never visibly branded,' 'transparent,' 'understated,' 'unobtrusive,' and 'unostentatious.'⁴¹⁹

As the authors go on to point out, Muji can be understood as part of a larger shift towards the minimal, the bare, and the undecorated in lifestyle design, to the point where this modern minimalism comes to serve as a "normative disciplining aesthetic" for the middle class.⁴²⁰ The sleek and unobtrusive comes to be equated with the modern and/or contemporary, whereas ostentation and decoration are degraded.⁴²¹

By the 1990s, something approximating the Muji style became one of the defaults of the new age of digital media. In a prescient aside in *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich describes a "no-style style" popular with new media artists in the 1990s: "no labels, no distinct design, no bright colors or extravagant shapes."⁴²² While Manovich points to designer labels Hugo Boss and Prada as emblematic of this style, he is close to articulating the basic design philosophy of Muji.

Manovich locates the "no-style style" as a response to a superabundance of choice and the resulting reluctance to side too much with any one option:

In a society saturated with brands and labels, people respond by adopting a minimalist aesthetic and a hard-to-identify clothing style. Writing about an empty loft as an expression of a minimalist ideal, architecture critic Herbert Muschamp points out that people 'reject exposing the subjectivity when one piece of stuff is preferred to another.' The opposition between an individualized inner world and an objective, shared, neutral world outside becomes reversed.⁴²³

Following Muschamp, Manovich reads the no-style style as a refusal to choose one identity over another, a preference for remaining indeterminate and thus always ready to engage with the next aesthetic to come along.

Social critics have often read the apparent self-abnegation of ambient styles as indicative of a personality prone to psychological problems. A recent issue of the bilingual Japanese fine art magazine *ART iT* focused on a group of younger Japanese artists (all born in the 1970s) working in ambient styles, which the magazine dubs "the floating generation." To analyze the group, the

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 558. As the authors go on to argue, there is an apparent paradox here: Muji's products are simultaneously claiming not to attract attention to their presence, and yet this mundaneness itself "becomes the keynote of its recognizable Mujiness."

⁴²⁰ Further, the coding of Muji products as mundane and minimal allows for further strengthening of this social and cultural distinction. Thus, Muji products are positioned as being distinctive in their everydayness or ordinariness. It follows that those who incorporate these objects into a minimalist 'look' for their home spaces (or their own appearance) are able to make a distinction between themselves, for whom minimalism is ordinary, and those for whom the minimal is extraordinary. It thus becomes possible to argue that the minimal as a normative aesthetic performs a social distinction in its very mundanity: there is a valorization of the minimal as mundane and of the mundane as minimal which leads to a stigmatization of those for whom the minimal is extraordinary and different. This equation of the minimal with the mundane renders other aesthetics as not only different but abnormal.

In this way the minimalist Muji imperative functions in the same way as the atmosphere in a place like Tokyo Midtown: for those who can move effortlessly within it, the ambience recedes into the background. Those who cannot are not become pathologized: they are not simply diverging from a particular style, but seemingly fail to read the air itself. Holloway and Hones, "Muji, materiality, and mundane geographies," 561.

⁴²¹ Sedgwick makes a similar point in her analysis of surface. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 15.

⁴²² Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 271.

⁴²³ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 128-9. Quote is from Herbert Muschamp, "Blueprint: The Shock of the Familiar," *New York Times Magazine* 13 December 1998: 66.

magazine calls in Saitō Tamaki, the Lacanian psychoanalyst famous for his work describing the social recluse (*hikikomori*) phenomenon.

Saitō goes so far as to connect the ambient styles of these younger Japanese artists with a diagnosis of "depersonalization disorder," referring to someone unable to express strong opinions and more comfortable floating in indeterminate space.⁴²⁴ He rather vaguely asserts that this apparent form of social withdrawal, at least when "used intentionally in an artistic context," is not necessarily negative, but "does reality a service." Saitō doesn't elaborate what this means, but gives a clue in his description of Ōmaki Shinji's works, which "bring discontinuity to the experience of the observer and force a mood change."⁴²⁵ Nonetheless, his clinical diagnosis implicitly defines this "floating" aesthetic through its refusal of social participation.

Instead, we might consider the practical side of refusing to choose: as Manovich notes, it serves as a way to remain flexible and open at a time when these qualities are highly valued by the larger culture. Ambience allows the cultivation of a more simple framework for coexistence in the face of an overly complicated and unpredictable larger world.

One place the aesthetics of coobjectivity emerge first is in the visual realm, where traditionally focused aesthetics were at first ill-prepared to deal with the new attentional economy. In the world of computers, for example, Lev Manovich notes that with the emergence of the graphic user interface, the self-contained image lost its privileged position at the center of attention. "No longer completely filling the screen, it is now just one window among many."⁴²⁶ With this proliferation of windows, a new aesthetic imperative arises: "the peaceful coexistence of multiple information objects on the computer screen, exemplified by a number of simultaneously opened windows."⁴²⁷ Manovich doesn't elaborate, but I want to expand upon his observation here: what does "peaceful coexistence" mean in practical design terms? How can a media object effectively coexist with the others that surround it? This is the central question for ambient ignorability.

Arai Man

The ambient video of the 1980s sought to embody Manovich's 'no-style style' of coobjectivity, serving as companion media for ambient subjects hoping to find a way out of stimulus overload. One of the most active proponents of ambient video in Japan was Arai Man (1946 -), a prize-winning novelist,⁴²⁸ commercial producer for Dentsu, and singer-songwriter of nostalgic easy listening pop songs. Arai began producing background video after ten years as a producer of television commercials for Dentsu, using a message-dense visual style he describes as the information equivalent of condensed milk.⁴²⁹ He convinced Dentsu to let him produce a series of what he called *ambient videos* [*kankyō bideo*].⁴³⁰ which the company released on VHS, videodisc, and laserdisc. Arai's dozen or so ambient video releases focus on Japanese nature scenes including Mt. Fuji, a sakura tree at Lake Biwa, waterfalls in Minowa, and cedars on Kitayama, but also settings further afield like an early morning on Tianenmen Square, the Grand Canyon, the shores of the Ganges in Benares, and a coral reef in Micronesia.

⁴²⁴ Saitō, "Floating and dissasociation," 87.

⁴²⁵ Saitō, "Floating and dissasociation," 85-87.

⁴²⁶ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 157.

⁴²⁷ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 143.

⁴²⁸ Arai won the Noma Literary New Face Prize for *Vexations* [*Vekusashion*, 1987] and the Akutagawa Prize for *The Time of Missing Persons* [*Tazunebito no jikan*, 1988].

⁴²⁹ Arai, *Kankyō bideo no jidai*, 10.

⁴³⁰ The Japanese term literally means *environmental video*, but I am translating it this way as Arai clearly had in mind a variation on the usual Japanese term for Brian Eno's ambient music, *kankyō ongaku* [environmental music].

Arai's ambient videos are governed by a strict set of rules. Each piece must be captured in real time. No camera movement is allowed, and the final product must consist of one extended take. If possible, the soundtrack should consist only of synch environmental sound. There should be no humans in the shot, and no major changes in the image from beginning to end. Anything overtly dramatic should be avoided.⁴³¹ In his 1990 book promoting the aesthetic, *The Age of Ambient Video* [*Kankyō bideo no jidai*], Arai writes,

BGV doesn't demand to be seen or heard. In most cases, it has no beginning or end, and only rarely does a figure appear. If we were to compare it to something, it is close to furniture that sits quietly in a room. We could say it resembles curtains, flooring, or wallpaper. Well, ultimately it erases your own appearance, dissolving you into the atmosphere—this is what BGV does.⁴³²

Arai is riffing here on Erik Satie's notion of furniture music, which Satie envisioned as music to effortlessly blend with the sounds of daily life, covering over lulls in the dinner conversation.

In an attempt to make this somehow more "Japanese," Arai refers to his works as "video hanging scrolls," or "21st Century landscape paintings [*21-seiki no sansuiga*]." He explicitly relates the intended use of his BGV to the nature scenes that would traditionally be hung in the alcove [*toko no ma*] of Japanese homes:

Sometimes I let one of my BGV of Japanese landscapes play all day. Once in a while I look over at it. Sometimes I do something else. When I get tired of that I start watching it again. [...] There is no need to stare at it for an hour or two at a stretch. Just like there is no one who would sit and stare at a hanging scroll, there is no need to watch BGV continuously. If you did, it might actually be a little dangerous... Just try letting some BGV run. Live with it like a Japanese landscape painting hanging somewhere in your room. Once in awhile you look at it, at other times you don't. But as you live your life, you feel it somewhere there in the back of your mind. If you do this, I think you will achieve a balanced mind and body. You might call it one way to provide a sense of equilibrium.⁴³³

Arai writes of the ability of these largely unaltered long-takes to reunite time and space, even when not consciously attended to. Over time, BGV appears to soothe even agitated viewers, quietly creating an atmosphere of peace. Arai claims that like sleep, BGV increases the volume of relaxing alpha waves in the brain. Speculating on why this happens, he notes that BGV are created by stripping away everything extra from the landscape. No camerawork, no characters, no extra sound or music. Arai calls this stripping away the "subtractive arts" [*hikisan geijutsu*].⁴³⁴

Arai promotes BGV as "a friend always by your side and easy to get along with; a new media for people living in the city."⁴³⁵ Like the media of the "healing boom," Arai's BGV is meant to soothe. Not unlike Eno and Hosono, Arai describes how his interest in ambient aesthetics as emerging out of a period of convalescence: during his years as a student at Sophia University in

⁴³¹ Arai, *Kankyō bideo no jidai*, 13-14.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-20. Arai's long-take aesthetic has plenty of antecedents, including Andre Bazin's valorization of the integrity of long-take decades earlier as well as John Cage's interest in nonintentionality, captured in his famous explanation of his work, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it." More than anything, perhaps it is Satie's day-long piano piece *Vexations*, with its 840 repetitions of the same short phrase, which inspired Arai's sense of background viewing. Coincidentally, it was Cage's premier of this Satie work in New York that is rumored to have inspired Andy Warhol's infamous long-take films like *Empire*. Arai earlier paid homage to this Satie work by naming one of his novels after the piece. Arai's *Vexations* the novel tells a love story with its fair share of exasperation, however, whereas Arai's video works are determined to eliminate all sources of tension.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

Tokyo, he fell seriously ill. Losing half his body weight before recovering, he realized his life had been too much about “adding,” and not enough about “subtracting.”⁴³⁶

The Age of Subtraction

Arai describes the 1980s as the arrival of “The Age of Subtraction.” As evidence for this he notes the popularity of Erik Satie’s music, the focus on the minor and inconsequential in novelists like Murakami Haruki, Ikezawa Natsuki, and Yoshimoto Banana, and the “subtractive merchandise” made popular by Muji.⁴³⁷ He also ties it in with a general feeling of too much *stuff* and too many *people*, leading to a desire for emptied out environments with no one around. In the turn to subtractivism Arai sees the younger generations of Japanese rejecting both the hubristic self-assertion of earlier ideologies and the “greediness and materialism” of the high growth generations. Instead, they choose “impotence” [*funō*], showing little interest in either physical or cultural reproduction. Their only desire is to empty out their lives in the hopes of achieving some kind of “balance.”⁴³⁸

As hinted at earlier, a number of video artists were beginning to work in ambient styles in the early 1980s, with Yamaguchi Katsuhiro exhibiting large-scale environmental video installations, and high-profile exhibitions by visiting artists like Brian Eno, Bill Viola, and Nam-Jun Paik.⁴³⁹ Arai describes how the logic of BGV puzzled people at first, but by the 90s BGV could be found in many locations: department stores, airports, large video displays in museums, hospital waiting rooms, bank lobbies, cafes, and bars.⁴⁴⁰ What unites all these places, Arai notes, is that the people visiting them do not have time for storytelling or narrative, whereas the non-narrative, unstructured time of background video functions regardless of length of stay. BGV works well for shopkeepers, allowing them to casually establish an atmosphere while folding newcomers easily into the existing space.⁴⁴¹

This rejection of attention-grabbing aesthetics and shift into more atmospheric styles takes place in many artistic fields during the 1980s and 90s. Arai proposes that what occurred was not so much a spreading influence, but a kind of shared cultural “overripeness” that led to similar forms of artistic expression, not only in Japan but in other postindustrial societies as well.⁴⁴²

The Satie revival appears to have started the trend, with his music becoming a touchstone of the new solitary urban lifestyles emerging in the 1970s. By the beginning of the following decade, both Brian Eno and Hosono Haruomi turned away from their pop-star careers to immerse themselves in ambient atmospheres.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 92-94.

⁴³⁹ Yamaguchi moved full-scale into environmental video sculpture in the 1980s. Following on the heels of Eno’s *La Foret* exhibition, he began a series of what he called “artificial gardens,” each subtitled “A Yamaguchi Katsuhiro Video Spectacle.” These included “Future Garden” (1983), and “Galaxy Garden” (1986), the latter using holography and lasers in addition to copious video monitors.

Other more straightforward ambient videos released at the time included Arai Tadayoshi’s video work, including his collaboration with Hosono Haruomi, *Mercuric Dance*.

Meanwhile, as part of the “new age music” boom, leading new age label Windham Hill collaborated with Paramount Home Video and Pioneer Laserdisc to release four one-hour videos in the fall of 1985: *Water’s Path*, *Western Light*, *Winter* and *Autumn Portrait*. Windham Hill Records.

http://www.onamrecords.com/Windham_Hill.html. Accessed April 7, 2010.

⁴⁴⁰ See McCarthy, *Ambient Television*.

⁴⁴¹ Arai, *Kankyō bideo no jidai*, 28-29.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 9.

Other genres would follow a similar trajectory. Noise musicians in the 1990s gradually began abandoning their immersive high-volume chaos and focusing instead on the near-silent improvisational music that worked at the limits of expressive action. This came to be known as *onkyō* in Japan, led by musicians like Otomo Yoshihide and Sachiko M.⁴⁴³ Around the same time a small group of sound sculptors in North America and Europe began to be grouped under the name lowercase sound. These producers shared a fondness for micro-sounds at low volume, often sourced from found objects and improvisational electronics. The lowercase name, coined by California musician and artist Steve Roden, referred to a desire to focus on minor aspects of an environment otherwise overlooked, in a way that, like Arai's work, doesn't draw attention to itself.⁴⁴⁴

The "quiet theatre" movement of the late 1980s, initiated by writer/directors like Iwamatsu Ryō and Hirata Oriza, moved Japanese theatre away from the boisterous spectacles of the 70s and 80s and towards a more subdued, anti-dramatic style evincing a "preoccupation with the quotidian and ordinary." Actor frequently speak quietly with their backs to the audience, dialogue is sparse, strong emotional expression avoided, and pauses interminable.⁴⁴⁵

In film, Aaron Gerow has noted the "detached style" prominent in a wide range of 1990s Japanese film, portraying "empty selves" devoid of desire or motivation.⁴⁴⁶ Emblematic here are the works of Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Aoyama Shinji, both influenced by critic Hasumi Shigehiko's formulation of a cinema of surface detail rather than psychological interiority. In Koreeda Hirokazu's debut work *Maboroshi* [*Maboroshi no hikari*, 1995, based on the novel by Miyamoto Teru] the main character undergoes a less violent but no less devastating process of self-emptying after her husband's sudden suicide. Koreeda describes her state as reflective not just of this traumatic incident, but a more general "lack of certainty about anything—a universal undefined feeling of loss."⁴⁴⁷ The film work of Kitano Takeshi provides another example of purposeful anti-drama and expressive fatigue. Casio Abé's *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* proposes that Kitano developed his stoic film persona as a way to balance out the loud brashness of his "Beat Takeshi" television character.⁴⁴⁸

Like Abé, Arai sees subtractivist aesthetics primarily as a balancing force, a cultural response to decades of overproduction, hyperstimulation, consumer overindulgence and overblown egos. The age of subtraction serves as a process of what Arai calls "ventilation," emptying out the surrounding environment and letting in some fresh air.⁴⁴⁹ Like Mamiya in Kurosawa's *Cure* [1997], the subtractive subject only desires to become empty, letting the cool winds of the surrounding environment blow through them.

But just as *Cure* ends up to be a film about the horror that follows when self-denial becomes a form of self-medication, there is an undeniable sadness to the subtractive age. As Christopher Lasch argued in *The Minimal Self*, the stripped-bare aesthetic emerging in the 1980s appears to be the product of a culture at the point of exhaustion, one just barely holding it together.⁴⁵⁰ Yoshimi,

⁴⁴³ The genre emerged in the late 1990s in the aftermath of Otomo Yoshihide's noise improv ensemble Ground Zero, centered around the Shinjuku performance space Off Site. See Novak, "Playing Off Site: The Untranslation of *Onkyō*."

⁴⁴⁴ The lowercase sound community formed around a mailing list, <http://launch.groups.yahoo.com/group/lowercase-sound/>.

⁴⁴⁵ Hirata and Poulton, "Tokyo Notes: A Play by Hirata Oriza."

⁴⁴⁶ Gerow, "Recognizing 'Others' in a New Japanese Cinema," 4.

⁴⁴⁷ Koreeda Hirokazu, interview included as extra on the American DVD release of the film.

⁴⁴⁸ See Abé, *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano*.

⁴⁴⁹ Arai, *Kankyō bideo no jidai*, 95.

⁴⁵⁰ Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, 16.

as noted, similarly describes the emergence of Muji in the 1980s as the arrival of a "burnt-out" future, that gives up on larger ideals. Unlike earlier ideologies, like the political projects of the 60s or the consumer fantasies of the 70s, Yoshimi sees the culture of subtractivism as one of lowered expectations and creative bankruptcy. For these critics, subtractive aesthetics cross the line from aesthetic into anesthetic, operating merely as a form of self-medication without offering anything constructive for the future.

While on the one hand ambient video is aimed at providing relief from information overload, it also can also provide an alternative to no stimulus at all. Arai points out how silence can be just as uncomfortable as noise, how it can be agitating and even lonely. The ignorable and non-threatening background hum of BGV, in contrast, offers an easier way to 'space out.'⁴⁵¹ As John Cage famously noted, there is nothing particularly silent about silence—rather, it leads to noticing other sounds that were otherwise concealed, such as quieter environmental noise, the sounds of the body, and the ceaseless chatter of the mind. Background media help muffle out these more subtle stimuli.

If this all sounds rather numbing, well, that is the point. While Eno's ambient music manifesto rallied against the "canned music companies" who regularized environments by "blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies"⁴⁵² (and may other proponents of quieter aesthetics in the 80s and 90s felt similarly), other background media producers like Arai were far more comfortable with the idea. While Eno attempted to maintain at least a veneer of uncertainty and critical unrest, Arai's *Age of Ambient Video* enthusiastically promotes electronic media as a form of self-medication, a way to drown out the hum and exist in a peacefully blissed-out landscape of one's own choosing.⁴⁵³

The reassuring end to this story, if there is one, is that Arai's "Age of Subtractivism" only ever partially came to pass. His BGV releases quickly disappeared from the market, a process helped along by technological changes. But his VHS and Laserdiscs have given way to new high-definition blue-ray background videos, with an ever-expanding range of styles and locations to choose from. At this point it seems clear that BGV will never be a major genre—especially now that we are more aware of how much electricity our screens consume whether we are watching them or not. Nonetheless, the subtractive impulse Arai identified appears alive and well, and perhaps even spreading with the rise of heavily networked visual cultures in other parts of the world.

At the same time, it is easy to be overly critical of this emptied-out culture. Arai argued not for the elimination of productive and proactive media in favor of subtractivism, but for a more balanced position between these two extremes. At its most politically relevant, Arai's ambient video points towards the "limits to growth," to borrow the title of the influential 1972 publication warning of the social and environmental dangers of a culture based on continual expansion.⁴⁵⁴ At its best, subtractivism works not towards a burnt-out future, but a more sustainable one. On a more personal level, it asserts the value of rest and unstructured time.

⁴⁵¹ Arai, *Kankyō bideo no jidai*, 79.

⁴⁵² Eno, *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*.

⁴⁵³ If there are discomforts to be found in these BGV works, it is in their production. Arai notes how difficult his subtractive aesthetic is for the cameramen he works with on these projects, who desperately want to move the camera and experiment setting up different shots. He writes, "Nowadays, it appears that 'doing nothing' is much more difficult than 'doing something.'" Arai, *Kankyō bideo no jidai*, 14.

⁴⁵⁴ See Meadows, Club of Rome, et. al. *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*.

[11. In Shallow Depth]

A five-meter wide panoramic image in high-definition, almost four times wider than it is tall. The upper and lower edges of the image are blurred, softening the border between the projected light of the image and the blackness that hugs it from above and below.

Fade from black to a series of lush floral compositions in soft tones. The white petals of a flower fill the entire frame, the image sliding slowly to the right. This dissolves into two more images of the same flower, differently framed and now drifting slowly downward, pulling into view a large assembly of mint-green stamen rising from the center of the blossom. As the images slide across each other the diagonally radiating petals mesh with each other and cast complex shadows all around.

The cropping of the image is close: the flower is never glimpsed in its entirety. Disallowing a distanced view, the image pulls viewers in towards the haptic curves of the petals themselves. Some appear slightly transparent, giving a partial glimpse of the surface underneath. The texture of the petals appears as soft and porous as felt, poised uncannily somewhere between photorealism and impossible digital purity.

Suddenly dark reflections appear across the surface of the image, sliding unformed shadow patches that eventually coalesce into the outline of a face. More shadows appear, again slowly drifting horizontally across the surface of the work. A title appears superimposed across the bundle

of stamen as the music swells for the first time: *Swimming in Qualia*. The flower images fade to black, and then, slowly, the title follows them into the darkness.

These are the opening moments of *Swimming in Qualia*, an ambient video installation displayed as part of the *Still/Alive* collaborative show at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography (22 December 2007–20 February 2008). The visuals are by Osaka-based video artist and photographer Ise Shōko. The music is by Steve Jensen (1959-), former percussionist for (the band) Japan and current ambient music composer. In installation form, the work is in two parts: the first, “Ascent,” consists of a loop of around twenty minutes in length, with slow pacing and no discernible rhythm. A second projector runs a much shorter loop, “Glimpse,” this one around six minutes and organized around a steady (but still slow) pulse, with images cycling a little faster than one transition per second. Both sequences are mixed from the same source material. The two parts are projected on adjacent perpendicular walls, meeting flush in the corner of the room. The longer section, “Ascent,” was later projected as a single-channel work as part of a live concert by Steve Jensen at the Meguro Persimmon Hall in Tokyo (29 February 2008). Live musicians arranged in front of the screen performed an improvisatory version of Jensen’s score.

From the felt-like flower petals to the gently rippling water appearing later in the piece, most of the material in *Swimming* registers to vision as soft to the touch. What is not soft in itself is wrapped in a material that is: trees in the forest are bathed in fog, while train tracks appear coated in soft evening light. Colors are saturated and smoothed through shading and added grain, and ambient light wraps the objects in warm tones. The visuals glow gently in the darkness of the projection space. Soft focus blurs hard lines, particularly around the edges of the image itself. Hard cuts are rare, replaced by gradual dissolves. Rhythm, particularly in the “Ascent” section of the work, takes the form of a slow ebb and flow as sound and image gradually coalesce and slip away. With this undulating rhythm, the images appear to softly breathe as they drift across the surface of the wall.

Swimming achieves its floating feeling through the permeability of each of its constituent parts. Transparency, softness, drifting fog, rippling reflections, and gentle lighting make permeable the boundaries between the different material elements sliding around the screen. As I will argue below, this interest in exploring the porousness of composited imagery is central to the development of contemporary Japanese ambient video.

In the second sequence of “Ascent,” black silhouettes of human bodies pace left and right in a dimly lit space, outlined by the glowing turquoise background glimpsed behind them. The slowly moving bodies are arranged in superimposed layers, with some occasionally diffusing into transparency, becoming semi-permeated by the blue-green light glowing behind them. The figures shrink in size with each receding layer, giving the perspectival impression of shallow depth against a background color field.

The figures’ sliding is situated in an uncanny space between human and computer generated movement, familiar but always a little too smooth. This also holds for the dolphin that swims by through the blue-green background late in the sequence, with its almost but not quite realistic tail thrust. Just as the transparent objects are permeated by the light, photorealism and computer-generated movement patterns are also mixed beyond the point of visible discernment, creating an uncanny dream space of indiscernible origins.

In both museum and concert versions of the piece, the larger structure of the work further undermines any clean distinction between its constituent parts. In the museum, identical source material is recast in varying combinations as the two adjacent loops continually shift between the different sequences, scrambling attempts to discern an overarching narrative. The perpendicular structure of the projections forces museum-goers to either approach both walls from an oblique

angle, or to favor one in a frontal approach and relegate the other to peripheral vision. In either case, as Ishida Tetsuro points out in the exhibition catalogue, it is impossible to focus fully on both screens at once.⁴⁵⁵ Meanwhile, in the concert setting, a slight *mise en abyme* is set up in the echo between the space of the concert hall (audience facing musicians arranged in front of a large screen) and the layered silhouettes shuffling in shallow depth before a screen of their own. This becomes even more complex with the appearance of the dolphin, as the silhouettes suddenly become legible as an audience in the darkened space of an aquarium, and the glowing turquoise becomes a window on a tank filled with water. The tank's light wraps the dark frames of the audience members in front of it, much as the theatrical audience see those in the rows before them bathed in the light of *Swimming's* projected glow.

The work's title succinctly captures the fluid nature of this sensory imagery. Qualia are generally defined as the subjective content of sensory stimuli, the various qualities that may be perceived in objects. The soft porousness of *Swimming's* stimuli produces a blurring effect on this subjective sensory level. The feelings produced are highly sensual, but the objects of those feelings shift and shuffle as the piece progresses, never stabilizing around a single focus. These impersonal qualia come forward as the proper subject of the piece, rather than the discreet objects which give rise to them. These fleeting responses, completely subjective, are impossible to fully locate within the work itself. Nonetheless, the piece is organized around bringing forward these drifting sensations.

In this final chapter of the dissertation, I use this piece to think more specifically about the implications of ambient aesthetics for the relationship between art (in this case, video art) and the urban space it both reflects and enters into. Before moving further into an analysis of *Swimming's* contingent structures, however, I want to take a moment to think about the development of Japanese video art and its symbiotic relationship to the larger urban horizons within which it emerged.

The English word 'horizon' comes from the Greek, meaning 'separating circle.' The New Oxford American Dictionary gives two main definitions:

1. The line at which the earth's surface and the sky appear to meet.
2. The limit of a person's mental perception, experience, or interest.

The overlap between the first and second definition here points to an understanding of space that refers simultaneously to particular physical features of a landscape (hills and mountains, tall buildings, etc), *and* to the perceptual and cognitive reach of an individual emplaced *within* this same environment. Horizon points to how a body extends out into the space around itself—and how far.

As noted in Chapter 3, ambient aesthetics often serve to blur this sensory horizon, rendering the perceptual limits of the surrounding environment uncertain. This blurred horizon gives the impression of sensory plenitude, as if perceptible space extended onward indefinitely unimpeded by physical constraints. And yet, at the same time, ambient media always bring with them specific horizons of their own, even if these are not immediately perceptible.

The sensory horizon can be understood as one of the central sites where postindustrial media cultures work to reconfigure subjectivity. Every piece of media brings with it its own perceptual horizons, which map onto and recreate existing realities in distinct ways. As the urban horizon becomes more and more mediated, the perceptual horizons which this media opens up and forecloses become all the more important as a foundation of lived experience. Before moving to a

⁴⁵⁵ Ishida, "STILL/ALIVE: Life, Time, and Possibility Captured in the Present Moment," 99.

close analysis of *Swimming*, I will briefly introduce three other works of Japanese video art to better elucidate what I mean here.

One key example of early Japanese video art addressing these shifting postindustrial horizons is Kawanaka Nobuhiro's 1974 video *Kick the World*. Kawanaka was a member of Video Hiroba and an active proponent of community video in the mid-1970s, and went on to found what would eventually become the main resource center for independent video and experimental film in Japan, Image Forum. *Kick the World* is his best-known work, and has recently been featured in several retrospectives of early Japanese video. The work consists of the artist holding a video camera with his hands and shooting his feet as he kicks an empty Coca-Cola can around a park full of scale replicas of famous world architecture. Kawanaka claims to have made the video wanting to explore the newfound ability to record synchronous video sound in real time—a technical capacity he exploits by recording the crunch of the tin can as his flip-flops send it hurtling around the puddle-strewn park.

Over the course of the video, about twenty minutes in its entirety, the sound of Kawanaka's kicking frequently competes with the sound of a woman's voice making announcements about the monuments on view, broadcast loudly across the park through a closed-circuit public address system. The video structurally documents the relationship between this isolated man with a camera, grunting as he aggressively if ineffectually kicks an empty aluminum corporate-logo around a bunch of concrete monuments to power, and this faceless but composed female speaker, blanketing the space with the official instructions on how this world should be approached. *Kick the World* stages this unequal dialogue between the female announcer, harnessed as a passive-aggressive reminder of who owns the space, and the man with the camera, flailing in his attempt to register the sound of his own bodily attack upon the acoustic horizon of this corporatized world.

Electroacoustic composer Barry Truax, one of the original researchers behind the World Soundscape Project in the 1970s, defines the acoustic horizon as the “the most distant sounds that may be heard in a soundscape.”¹⁵⁶ He draws particular attention to whether an environment is quiet enough for the sounds of one's own body to be audible to oneself—if not, the acoustic horizon has shrunk down even below the size of the physical body, a form of sensory estrangement from the self. In this regard, Kawanaka's repeated kicking serve to try and reestablish the horizon of his own physical sensorium against the blanketing noise of the public address system. Visually, the work also sets up conditions for Kawanaka to register his physical impact upon the surrounding “world:” the camera in his hands follow the impact of his sandaled feet as they come into contact with the can, launching it out into the wider world. In this way Kawanaka is able to carve out his own acoustic and visual horizons within the larger postindustrial horizons of this heavily regulated space.

With the transition towards software-based audiovisual media production occurring over the last two decades, video art continued moving into new corners of the city, using new production and projection technology to take on increasingly environmental dimensions. With the increasing power of digital motion graphics software like Adobe's *After Effects*, both the visual and auditory horizons or urban space became further open to aesthetic conditioning, resulting in both increased environmental mediation and new phenomenological horizons.

¹⁵⁶ Truax, *Acoustic Communication*, 67.

One product of these transitions is the emergence of motion graphics as a field of audiovisual media production encompassing everything from live VJ performances, the production of background visuals for music concerts and public events, and the many interstitial logo animations used on broadcast television and increasingly on closed-circuit television programming found in quasi-public spaces like the Tokyo subway.

Tsuchiya Takafumi is one such motion graphics producer, working in all of these contexts simultaneously. The visuals of Tsuchiya's *Apoptosis* (2008), a music video produced for Japanese electronic music producer Caelum (Tsukahara Kōtaru), are based on a simple but striking effect of wrapping the horizontal axis of a set of landscapes around on itself, creating a kaleidoscopic visual effect and collapsing the horizon into a point in the center of the image. The spinning footage is accelerated and decelerated, generating the impression that the landscape is being sucked into and/or spat out of this central point in the center of the frame. These landscapes appear at times to be pouring forth from the screen itself, and at other times, to literally go down the drain. The video provides an ambivalent connection to these fleeting environments, referencing both a more subdued natural environment that seems to be slipping away, but also indulging in a more accelerated whirlpool of digital media. The horizon here is not visible in itself, but nonetheless serves as a center of gravity which pulls everything into its orbit.

Caelum's music here is characteristic of popular Japanese electronic music from the mid-2000s: sombre piano chords pedaling slowly under a flurry effervescence of glitchy percussion in the higher registers. While the restless arpeggiations, skidding loops, and frothy feedback layers provide a brightly entrancing foreground, tickling the ears with lots of up-close detail, the much slower cycling of the low end underpins all this activity with a much more subdued foundation. As with Tsuchiya's visuals, all the frenetic foreground activity is set against a much more sombre horizon—an unresolved tension characteristic of postindustrial culture's ambivalent feelings towards the ongoing transformation of the urban landscape. There is nostalgia for a more peaceful moment, surely, at the same time as there is a head-long rush for new sensations. What makes the work interesting is how it attempts to integrate these contrary feelings by reconfiguring the horizon line itself into an uncertain point around which everything revolves.

J. J. Gibson notes the absolute centrality of the perceptible horizon in governing how humans navigate their world: “the textured region below the horizon specifies the solid earth, and the homogenous region above it specifies the empty sky.”⁴⁵⁷ Fundamental to Gibson's conception of ecological perception is a radical break from the idea that human perception works like Renaissance perspective, with lines converging in the distance indicating depth. Instead, Gibson argues that perception is based upon how surfaces in an environment overlap with one another, with the “occluding edge” providing crucial information about distance and proximity. He also rejects the tradition of studying perception from a fixed point, arguing that human's perceive the layout of their environment primarily by how the surfaces of objects shift in size and contour as people move among them. In the case of the horizon, the way the ground occludes the sky—and how this changes with movement—become a crucial factor in spacial orientation and navigation. Perhaps not surprisingly, Gibson's work has a particularly strong following in Japan, where an overall aesthetic preference for graphic surface over perspectival depth has a long history and has persisted up to the present.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁷ Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 106.

⁴⁵⁸ See Sasaki. *Reiauto no hōsoku: Āto to alōdansu*, and Sasaki, ed. *Āto/hyōgen surushintai: Alōdansu no genba*.

Gibson's work is useful for thinking about contemporary video art, which is so often built from software based on a similar logic of layers and occluding edges, though—as in Tsuchiya's work—not necessarily obeying the usual orientation of sky on top and earth on the bottom. More recent video, including much of Ise's work, increasingly undermines the centrality of the earth's horizon as an organizing feature of the physical landscape, and instead seeks out other forms of spatial orientation based around shifted sensory horizons.

Gibson's work, while fascinating and radical in its own scientific context, tends to assert a standardized human ecological perception as the final word on environmental perception. The more immersive strand of recent digital media works, however, seeks to tinker with exactly these fundamental perceptual cues. While this approach risks crossing the line into sheer physical novelty, it can also reach towards new horizons of sensation that unsettle habitual patterns of environmental awareness.

Ikeda Ryōji remains the best-known proponent of this aesthetic in Japan, known for his austere and sometimes physically taxing audiovisual installations utilizing psychoacoustics and high-frequency light and sound. Ikeda began his career producing audio for the pioneering mixed-media experimental performance group Dumb Type in the 1990s, expanding out into solo installations and CD releases mid-decade. He was also among the first to produce works for ICC's anechoic chamber, an reverb-less space capable of radically disorienting listeners by stripping away the acoustic clues we usually rely on for spatial navigation. Ikeda and a cohort of like-minded international producers have continued to produce works rethinking audio-visual media—traditionally called “visual music”—using new digital processing techniques.

Rheo: 5 Horizons (2010) is a “time sculpture” by a younger artist very much in this tradition, Kurokawa Ryōichi. This piece was shown in a dark room with five large-screen plasma displays at the Japan Media Arts Festival at the National Art Center in Tokyo in 2011. Kurokawa has also presented a 3-channel concert version. The work won the Golden Nica prize last year at the ARS Electronic Festival in Austria, the most important international competition for media art. Kurokawa develops installations and concert performances subjecting audiovisual material to detailed digital manipulations, often drawing sound and image from the same digital source data. The title, *rheo*, means ‘to flow’ or ‘to stream’ in Greek.

In his acceptance speech for the ARS prize, Kurokawa describes attempting with this work to enhance his audience's ability to spatially locate objects through sound by synchronizing audio input with moving visual cues.⁴⁵⁹ The behavior of the visual image echoes directly the gestures of what is going on sonically, creating a powerful synesthetic effect. In this section the sound of the *shō*, a medieval mouth organ familiar from the Japanese gagaku ensemble, underpins tense digital noise creaking in tandem with the shifting visual horizon.

This idea of mapping the visual landscape onto the “flowing” properties of digital sound experientially produces new possibilities for spatial orientation. While the sonic mapping of cities has been an object of research ever since the World Soundscape Project began mapping Vancouver soundmarks in the 1970s, little attention has been paid to sound as an alternate means of spatial navigation, a different perceptual horizon for movement through a landscape. Kurokawa's work here rethinks the visual horizon *through* the acoustic one, in the process creating a marked shift in our means of sensory orientation.

⁴⁵⁹ ARS Electronic Festival 2010: Prix Forum Digital Musics and Sound Art, <http://vimeo.com/15351256> (Accessed 29 November 2011).

Hosono Haruomi once noted that one of the unique things about the Tokyo landscape was that due to all the tall buildings and the absence of a grid system, there is little sense of a ‘background’ landscape against which urban life transpires. Instead, people have the sense of being immersed in a fluid and malleable environment with constantly shifting horizons.⁴⁶⁰ This perceptual situation is close to that found in a densely tangled jungle environment—one reason jungle crows love Tokyo so much. With this complexity of visual information, sound increasingly serves as an important alternate channel for humans to locate themselves in space. This channel too, of course, remains a hotly contested terrain in contemporary urban environments, as Truax’s concept of the ‘acoustic horizon’ points out.

Kurokawa describes *Rheo* as an attempt to render the dynamic sonic energy of landscapes into digital processes. Like the original “Environment Society” group, the goal here is to render the built landscape of digital media as dynamic and chaotic as the environment that surrounds it, reintegrating larger environmental forces into the sensible horizon of contemporary art.

As Mark Hansen has argued, as new media render the horizon more and more malleable, the physical body itself increasingly becomes the frame we rely on to make sense of the world.⁴⁶¹ This interface between body and environment, whether we call it phenomenology, affect studies, ecological perception, or environmental design, has become increasingly the central interface ambient media seeks to both register and reconfigure.

As Kurokawa’s experiments in synaesthesia hint, however, there is no particular reason why the human body as it usually functions needs to remain the dominant perceptual framework for media art. As Deleuze famously paraphrased Spinoza, “We never know in advance what a body can do.”⁴⁶² Recent work by philosophers investigating the possibility of an “object-oriented ontology” (as opposed to the usual human-oriented one)—have further opened up theoretical avenues that break open the human body into a complex set of forces that radiate across it—forces that are, on a very basic level, environmental and embodied at the same time.⁴⁶³ Each of these trajectories reworks the sensory horizons of an environment—how and how far perception links up to a world beyond. Like air affords breathing and water affords swimming, these works seek out different horizons for environmental engagement.

Sliding Between Spaces

This returns us to the more explicitly ambient aesthetics of *Swimming in Qualia*, a piece which engages the senses in ways which, like the three works just introduced, uses video technology to reconfigure our perceptual horizons.

In architectural terms, the ambient space of *Swimming in Qualia* can be described as a pool of shallow depth. The visible space of the imagery is, with few exceptions, focused on layered surface textures continually slipping between 2D and 3D space. Petals fold on top of one another, silhouettes slide in front of other silhouettes, trees stand scattered in the near distance. One seeming exception is the railroad sequence, where two rails of parallel track zip by horizontally at high speeds, with no overlays. Here, however, the image splits into three channels, pulling this initial depth back into the two-dimensional arrangement of a triptych on a wall. A similar cutting up of the image occurs in a later lotus flower sequence. Here the flowers break up into a series of

⁴⁶⁰ Hosono, *Ambiente doraivā*, 45.

⁴⁶¹ Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 22.

⁴⁶² Deleuze, “Deleuze/Spinoza,” n.p.

⁴⁶³ See for example Harman, *The Quadruple Object*.

vertical bands that slip and congeal as they slide laterally across the surface of the image. *Swimming in Qualia* constantly plays with the tension between two-dimensional graphic surfaces and a shallow three-dimensional depth of field. This latter depth is itself created not through linear perspective (lines moving from near to far, from viewer into a visible horizon) but through accumulated layers of objects that gradually become smaller as they recede into the virtual distance. In this way the work's spatial logic has more to do with older traditions of painting that render depth not through orientation to a distant horizon, but through a layered accumulation of surface textures. Gibson, notably, argues that this perceptual layering is actually closer to how human visual cognition actually works: "What we see is not depth as such but *one thing behind another*."⁴⁶⁴

Movement in *Swimming*, similarly, is mainly movement across rather than between the 2D surface layers. The few dives into the image, as in the forest sequence, consist of zooms rather than camera movement: the relative size of the trees gets bigger, giving the impression of moving forward in space, and yet the perspectival relations between the trees does not shift.

Both the sliding and zooming emerge from the software-engineered movement of image layers. But they also have a particular movement quality in themselves: drift. The trajectories lack directedness, a marked beginning and end. They lack a visible instigator within the image. They often dissolve or congeal before the pieces settle into any new static formation. Finally, the sheer number of moving surfaces in certain sections of the work, and the variable speeds and directions of these surfaces, makes it difficult to see all of the surface events as a single whole. Perception drifts among the qualia. Despite the swimming of the title, *drift* might be a better verb for the experience of the piece, in at least two of its main definitions:

- To be carried slowly by a current of air or water.
- (Of a person or their attention) digress or stray to another subject.⁴⁶⁵

At points the image reveals an invisible instigator: water droplets hitting the surface of a lake; wind pushing small waves across its surface. At the same time, however, the image planes are pushed by an unknown hand, an absent creator, and (above all) a software instruction in some invisible program somewhere.

Compositing

This brings us to one of the primary aesthetic problematics in *Swimming in Qualia*, and indeed in ambient visuals in postindustrial Japan more generally: how to meld the flat, two-dimensional principles of graphic design with the perspectival depth of three-dimensional photographic space.

This tension between 'surface' and 'depth' has haunted decades of discourse on modern Japanese aesthetics. The contrast is often narrated as an encounter between an earlier mode of sensing space ("in which depth comprises layers of planes without regard to graduated perspective"), and techniques of perspectival depth derived from European sources.⁴⁶⁶ This claim of a particular Japanese depthlessness reemerges in discourse on 'postmodern' Japan. This range of discourses positions 'surface' and 'depth' as distinct choices, as if a cultural practice must ultimately be structured by one or the other. Often a reverie of depthlessness and pure surface is drawn up as an escape from the dull norms of 'Western' perspective. Even recent theories more attuned to specific histories of graphic design and film technology, such as Thomas LaMarre's

⁴⁶⁴ Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 77 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁶⁵ New Oxford American Dictionary, 2nd Edition.

⁴⁶⁶ The quote is from Isovaki, *Japan-ness in Architecture*, 8. See also, for example, Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

analysis of ‘full’ and ‘limited’ animation, persist in setting up this either/or dichotomy and proceeding to (at least rhetorically) take sides.⁴⁶⁷

Stepping to one side of this oppositional model, I propose looking instead at how ambient video like Ise's attempts to build an aesthetic *between* two-dimensional and three-dimensional styles: spaces of shallow depth. In some ways, this possibility of 2D and 3D porousness is only just becoming visible, and might even be understood as a recent synthesis of these earlier oppositions. The last decade of developments in media art have enabled artists to work towards a more intricate blurring of surface and depth. Ambient video constitutes a primary site where these negotiations are taking place, as computer software increasingly brings the layering techniques of two-dimensional design into contact with the three-dimensional spaces of architectural and digital cinematic effects.

From Montage to Composition

In *Software Takes Command*, Lev Manovich provides a concise overview of this convergence.⁴⁶⁸ Focusing on developments in visual design software, Manovich describes a period of “visual hybridity” beginning in the late 1990s where previously incompatible techniques of media design were integrated into a hybrid workflow. This workflow enabled the integration of a range of different design programs, including Photoshop, Illustrator, Flash, Final Cut, After Effects, and Maya.⁴⁶⁹ The techniques and traditions of previously distinct fields—for example, graphic design and digital video—were suddenly available in a mutually-intelligible software format. The consolidation of these varied design tools into a small number of compatible software platforms began to blur the professional boundaries between different fields as well, allowing even small firms and individual designers to operate in several different media simultaneously.⁴⁷⁰

Manovich argues that a crucial element enabling the mixing of visual registers is the development (from 1993-1998) of the ability for software like After Effects to digitally composite multiple layers of imagery with the ability to precisely adjust the transparency level of each layer.⁴⁷¹

Before the capacity to adjust transparency, the addition of multiple layers inevitably took on the texture of photomontage or photocollage, a “mosaic of fragments” look, a conglomeration of

⁴⁶⁷ LaMarre, *The Anime Machine*, 19.

⁴⁶⁸ Available online from Manovich's website at http://lab.softwarestudies.com/softbook/manovich_softbook_11_20_2008.pdf.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 111-3.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 112. This consolidation and blurring is readily apparent in the context of Ise Shōko's work. Ise began her solo art practice in 1998, producing album design and photography for Speedometer, Takayama Jun's solo ambient electronic music project. She went on in the early 2000s to branch out into music videos and live moving image projections, first for fashion brands like Carhartt and later for a wide range of bands, including YMO and associated projects like HASYMO and Pupa). In 2003 Ise began her own series of installations with a show at NADiFF Harajuku in Tokyo. She continues to produce both photography and design work alongside her video productions, and these still formats often become source material for the videos.

The labels Ise works with have a similarly diverse approach to media production. In Japan, Ise is represented by Epiphany Works, a company started by Hayashi Guchisari in 2005 focusing on “arts projects production and coordination,” artist management, and retail sales. Their roster includes video artists, photographers, painters, musicians, and fashion designers, with half of their artists working in more than one of these fields. In the United States, Ise has collaborated on several occasions with David Sylvian's Samadhisound label. Ostensibly focused on recorded music, Samadhisound's website also features a large “artfile” of video artists, painters, and photographers who have collaborated with Samadhisound artists on package and website design, music videos, and live concert visuals. Almost half are from Japan, reflecting the long term involvement of both Sylvian and Steve Jensen (Sylvian's brother and fellow label artist) in the Japanese art scene.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 128-9

different but still-distinct image types.⁴⁷² Similarly, the compositing of different media types within a single work (for example, hand-drawn animation, live action recordings, and typography) was for a long time reduced to the juxtaposition of these forms over time. Manovich calls this “media montage,” and points to the work of Jean-Luc Godard and Paul Ferro. (In the Japanese context we might add here Ōbayashi Nobuhiko’s early work). Meanwhile, early motion graphics innovators like Ferro and Saul Bass were experimenting with combining titles and recorded imagery within a single frame. But these experiments remained difficult, and were often restricted to static imagery.⁴⁷³ With the advent of computerization, however, artists gradually gained access to the processing power and software compatibility necessary to mix numerous levels of moving imagery within the same frame, precisely adjusting (across the time axis) transparency and movement around and between image layers. As Manovich notes, in this way visual technology in a sense catches up with the studio revolution in recorded music, where multi-channel recording had revolutionized musical aesthetics from the 1970s onward.⁴⁷⁴

Following these developments, Manovich argues for a transition from a time-based mode of moving-image construction, where the frame is a kind of “black box” arranged in a linear montage sequence, to a composition-based approach, where a moving image sequence is understood as a group of independent objects in a spatial field, each of which may be modified over time. The hard cut becomes less important in this new aesthetic, in exchange for a visual narrative organized around the “continuous transformation of image layers,” what Manovich calls a rhythm of “rewriting, erasing, superimposition.”⁴⁷⁵ Again, as in the rise of studio-based musical aesthetics, references to 2D media (painting, drawing, photography, and design) took on an increasingly prominent role as structural influences. From the late 1990s onward, composition-based software like After Effects enabled a more detailed manipulation of the spatial dimensions of time-based media.⁴⁷⁶

Objects and Relative Values

In the early 2000s, the capacity for spatial manipulation in software gradually incorporated 3D computer graphics and architectural modeling as well, enabling artists to directly manipulate 3D shapes. As Manovich argues, this is a qualitatively different approach from the earlier 2D layers of a program like After Effects.⁴⁷⁷ While compositing in After Effects treats everything as a 2D layer, 3D compositing treats even 2D layers as objects to be positioned in 3D space, not unlike the arrangement of screens in a gallery. These two modes of compositing each foreground a different set of aesthetic concerns: the former draws heavily on the history of 2D cel animation, although with increased degrees of manipulability. The latter draws more from architecture.

In both cases, however, the software remains object-oriented, or what Manovich calls “modular.” Each element in a composition, whether placed on a 2D layer or in a 3D space, is defined as an ‘object’ with particular values such as size, orientation, transparency, and any array of visual effects. Every object within a composition may be situated in virtual depth in relation to other objects. Instead of the ‘black box’ of the frame (or the cel, in cel animation), the malleable ‘object’ becomes the irreducible core of compositional structures within these compositing

⁴⁷² Ibid., 141.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 129-30.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 127-8.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 142.

programs.⁴⁷⁸ Manovich does not emphasize this point, but I want to draw attention to the persistence of the object here as the one element that is not dissolved within these new modes of visual compositing. Everything about the object may be transformed, and the object may leave little visible trace of its origins. But within the internal aesthetics of the compositing software, the object remains absolute. The software positions the object as an indissoluble building block, there to be manipulated but never compromised in itself.

Outside-in / Inside-out

This brings us back to *Swimming in Qualia* and how the video manifests the drive towards porousness in ambient media. This drive might be understood as an attempt to dissolve the object-oriented borders instituted by the compositing software used in the videos' creation. More precisely, works like *Swimming* constitute a search for ways to open up the border between the material 'inside' of the object (be it a photograph, drawing, or video), and the various effects (layering, transparency, movement, etc.) used to transform the object from the 'outside.'

At first glance this appears to be a purely spatial problem: how to mix 3D source material into 2D virtual layers in a way that dissolves visible distinctions between the two. As we move through the various responses video artists have found to this problem, however, it becomes clear that there is something larger at stake: how ambience might undercut the postindustrial push for computer-aided control by attempting to render the borders between things more malleable and porous.

Manovich's discussion of 2D and 3D compositing builds towards what he recognizes as the current apotheosis of visual hybridity, a technology entitled "Universal Capture" best known for its use in the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003). Universal Capture aims to seamlessly fuse live action recording and 3D computer animation. In purely technical terms, this appears to be a solution to the problem just posed, of how to more seamlessly merge source material into the virtual compositional space of the software. For Manovich, Universal Capture marks a moment where the photographic image is at last completely displaced by computerization as the "base" (in Marxist terms) of the visual world.⁴⁷⁹ When it one day becomes streamlined and standardized enough to become more commonly used, Manovich argues, Universal Capture will lead to a "completely virtualized cinema,"⁴⁸⁰ where the photographic source may be dispensed with entirely. Everything becomes modular in this model. Objects become collections of attributes completely malleable through software.

But in subsuming the object completely into the software, Universal Capture provides only a false solution to our problem. In attempting to digitize everything, universal capture fails to develop a more open relation between the inside and outside of the captured 'object.' Instead, it colonizes the 'inside' of the object to the point where there is no inside left: the object dissolves into a set of variables, fully open to manipulation by the software user. What drops out is precisely the contingency inside of the object, the parts that register the complexities of a world outside the fully coded virtual space. In other words, the parts that might resist, or necessitate changes, to relations within the airless vacuum of the software's virtual space. The horizon disappears in a world of seemingly complete visibility.

Recognizing the false solution of "universal capture" helps to restate our original problematic in more precise terms. The problem is not so much how to seamlessly mix 'source' material into

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 223.

the virtual space of compositing, but how to introduce unforeseen contingencies, via the imported 'objects,' into the coded space of the software. This question pulls us away from Manovich's teleological progression towards Universal Capture and what he calls "deep remixability."⁴⁸¹ Instead of bringing objects more and more fully into the malleable world of code, this question seeks ways to open up the predictable and enclosed virtual space of the software to more fully register the contingencies of the wider (analogue) world, what persists beyond the edge of the perceptible (i.e. renderable) horizon. In other words, a way to allow an object to contour the virtual space inside the software, an otherwise hermetic space. This means allowing an object retaining its ambient qualities, the 'echoes' of its original environment, from which it remains inseparable even when brought into the coded world of the software as a seemingly discreet object.⁴⁸²

Contingency in Found Footage

To reference a more historically immediate context, the interplay between photographic contingency and postproduction control is a well established theme in the camera-based arts. Ise is also a photographer, and despite her reliance on compositing her video work in many ways shares more with the techniques of spontaneous street photography than it does with feature filmmaking or more composed forms of moving-image media.

Ise's work begins with her wandering around the landscape looking for imagery. Much of her work begins with 'found' material, whether from the city street, the zoo, or the woods. Whereas a still photographer might be searching for found compositions frozen in time, with video the search is not only for compelling images but interesting movement patterns. There is an abiding interest in Ise's work in found rhythms, in unscripted movement events surreptitiously recorded as they occur in public spaces. Ise focuses on the spontaneous patterns created by automobiles, animals, and pedestrians as they move through the city, and in this way her videos present a visual rhythm analysis of the urban Japanese landscape.

This use of the video camera has close parallels in both photography and 'found sound' musical compositions based on field recording. In all three areas, the open-ended hunt for interesting material enables a heightened sensory mode of engaging the existing environment. Many artists using found material, including Ise, situate these techniques as a way to return an element of fascination and mystery to the predictable images and sounds of daily life. Ise describes this as a "world in the other side of daily life," as described in her *+Intersection* series.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁸² The aesthetics of environmental contingency of course have a long history, particularly in Japan. Many examples might be brought forth here, but the most relevant in the immediate context may be one of the oldest: the gardening practices of roughly 1,000 years ago documented in the *Sakuteiki*. Literally translated as *Records of Garden Making*, the *Sakuteiki* is the world's oldest known text to treat the aesthetics of gardening. Written by Tachibana no Toshitsuna (1028-1094) sometime in the middle to late eleventh century, the work focuses on the selecting and placing of stones as the primary act of garden design. The author advises the would-be gardener to "follow the request of the stone" [*ishi no kowan ni shitagahite*] in choosing where to place it. In Toshitsuna's time, a stone's shape was thought to express its own intention, and dictate its proper use and position in the garden. For example, taking an upright stone from a mountain and placing it upside-down in a garden was considered taboo, and thought to lead to the death of the garden's owner. However, if a stone had landed upside down after tumbling off a mountain, and enough time had passed for it to weather and settle in its new position, the stone could be used in this altered orientation without the threat of evil spirits. "This weathering is not the work of man. Because the stones have weathered naturally, they can be set or laid in the garden as they are found in nature without impediment." While contemporary compositing practices do not necessarily share this reverence for 'nature' as it is found, in Ise's work we find a similar productive tension between the spontaneous quality of the found materials and the highly controlled space of the digital 'garden.' See Takei and Keane, *Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden*, 54 and 189.

Technically, this found footage is enabled in part by the development of ever smaller, lighter, and more portable video cameras. Moriyama Daidō, a Japanese photographer well known for his street photography, described in a recent documentary his preference for shooting photos in the streets with a small, point-and-shoot style camera. While it may not have all the manual controls and high image quality of larger models, Moriyama points out that it has the crucial advantage of being unthreatening to those random passerby on the street he chooses to photograph.⁴⁸³ Similarly, the small, highly portable camcorder allows the spontaneous recording of moving images in spaces where a larger setup would be disruptive. At the same time, this style of working has affinities with the ‘actualities’ of the early days of filmmaking, when the camera setup was similarly self-contained and lenses were often trained on the everyday movements of humans, autos, and animals, as in the films of Thomas Edison.⁴⁸⁴

In what follows I briefly outline a partial catalogue of ways in which video artists in Japan have attempted to develop porous horizons between contingent or ‘found’ source material and the layered aesthetics of 2D compositing into which it is introduced.

Overlaid Rotations

The joining of movement within source video material and the graphic effects overlaid upon it quickly emerged as a central method of synching 2D layers with a live-action 3D space. Video artist and composer Takagi Masakatsu (1979-) began developing these techniques early on after disbanding his initial live video project, Silicom (with Aoki Takamasa). The *Journal For People* series of video works (2001-2002) utilizes an array of heavily effected imagery of figures sliding smoothly through space: ice skating, swimming, jumping and running, among other styles of movement. The most provocative combination of 2D and 3D in the collection does not feature human movement, however, but the circular rotation of a carnival ride. *Light park #2* begins with medium and close up shots of a rotating swing ride, the kind where individual swings hang by chains from a carousel shaped like a large spinning top. As the top picks up speed and lifts off the ground, the swings (and the legs of the riders) are pulled centrifugally outward. The video presents images of the swirling swings in high contrast, with the swings, chains, and riders presented in glowing and slightly ghosted white outlines, against a background of solid black. The removal of nearly all visual texture from the image, save for the uniform grey blurring at the border between the two colors, simultaneously flattens the composition while at the same time revealing the 3D rotational movement with all the more clarity.

Video artist Kawamura Yuki (1979-) explores these overlaid rotations further in a series of video works from 2005. *Slide* and *Port* draw upon footage of a spinning doorway, rotating on an axis tilted away from the flat surface of the image. The first eliminates most visible traces of the original image, a medium shot of a spinning door. The only remaining elements are the grey outlines of light reflected off the spinning glass doors, rotating at various speeds through empty white space. Near the middle the piece shifts pace to introduce a strobe effect, with individual figures walking towards and away from the camera. The figures themselves are turned into washed out fields of color, overlaid one on the next with various layers of transparency, while over each figure various reflections (akin to lens flares) float around like air particles. *Port* begins with a similar spinning door, but here the image is close up on only one section of the doorway, with the

⁴⁸³ See the documentary *Daido Moriyama: Stray Dog of Tokyo* (Fujii Kenjiro, 2001).

⁴⁸⁴ Furuhashi notes the connections between actualities and the later landscape film tradition. Furuhashi, “Returning to actuality: *fūkeiron* and the landscape film,” 347. As Mary Ann Doane describes in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, these early films might also be understood as an exploration of contingency in a social environment both increasingly chaotic and increasingly controlled.

spinning axis off to the right. The figures and the outlines of the door itself are again drained of detail, the passers-by becoming shadows reflected within the spinning glass. Depth is obscured to the degree that it is difficult to discern which direction the door is spinning. The border of the doorway itself appears to be sliding left and right in 2D space, despite the visual cues signaling rotation. Yet a different work, *Jour de Reve*, returns to the carnival theme, this time focusing on a spinning carousel heavily overlaid with layers of colour and translucent water droplets. Again, the original footage is heavily obscured, but the revolutions themselves organize the deep structure of the swirling colors and shapes.

Spontaneous Movement

These four works, while opening up greater degrees of porousness between 2D and 3D space, simply replace the mechanics of the software with the geometrical mechanics of an object in front of the camera. A different approach to this same problem prevalent in contemporary Japanese video art is to bring in movement less predictable than the rotations of objects on a stable axis. Takagi's work often focuses on the more fluid and improvisatory physicality of young children. Works such as *Rama* (2002) and *Aura* (2003) organize a complex series of 2D color and pattern layers around footage of running, playing, skipping, and tumbling kids, as they move towards, away from, and around his camera.

Animal movement, and particularly bird movement, emerges as another prominent source of spontaneous motion. Takagi's *Birdland* (2001-2) plays with the partial revealing and erasing of images of birds on electrical wires and in trees. As in *Light Park #2*, the images are reduced to solid black and white fields, though this piece features black silhouettes against a white background. The tension in this piece centers on the active drawing and erasing of the original image (lines emerging and branching off from each other, growing rhizomatically into new shapes and connections, only to disappear again). Amidst this 2D chaos, attention falls on the occasional glimpse of the 3D movement of the birds themselves—a turning head, or a leap into flight.

Ise also has a range of pieces organized around the contingencies of animal behavior. In *Number of Blinks* (*Mabataki no kazu*, 2003), the eyelid movements of a primate shot in close up and presented in heavily saturated pinks determine the editing of the piece itself. A main section of *+Intersection* (2002) features overlaid images of semi-transparent flamingoes wading around a shallow pond. In these, as with the above examples, the blurring of color and the shifting of semi-transparent layers blends the animal's movements through 3D space with the shifting of their flattened outlines on the surface of the image.

The emphasis on movement seen in these earlier videos begins to decline with the gradual turn to high-definition formats. With more detailed images, video artists are developing more detail-oriented approaches to 2D/3D porousness. As Manovich predicted in *The Language of New Media*, larger screens and higher resolutions appear to be generating a more still aesthetic of "spatial montage," where only parts of an image may be moving at any given time, and attention slowly shifts to different parts of the frame.⁴⁸⁵ Along with *Swimming in Qualia*, Ise explores this new style in a series of four looped pieces entitled *Passage* (2008). Birds reappear here in the final piece, *Noema*. The loop consists of a single close-up shot of the upper part of a nearly leafless tree against a dull grey background. Large and small branches fork out to fill up the entirety of the frame. Dozens of black birds are scattered around the branches. Again, color is reduced to two tones, black on light grey. In stark contrast with the earlier works, however, the 2D effect layer is here extremely minimal: Every time a bird alights from the tree, or returns from out of the frame

⁴⁸⁵ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 322.

to alight on a branch, a thin red line appears in their wake, tracing their movement through space across the surface of the image. These lines persist even after the birds have disappeared, such that the screen gradually begins to fill up with a tangle of threaded flight patterns.

Noema makes for a stark contrast with Takagi's *Birdland*, where bird movement emerges only in brief glimpses, as the image layer undergoes continual manipulation by the virtual brush of the software. In *Noema*, the brush itself is led by the contingent movement of the source footage. Ise sets up relations between the 2D and 3D layers to allow the contingencies of the 3D field to determine the development of the 2D surface.

If Universal Capture provides the spectacle of the infinite manipulability of the object, ambient videos like these chart out ways for the rhythms of the world to push back against the coded space of software, introducing the contingencies of found footage into the modular rationale of layered compositing. In this way, ambient video reintroduces the contingency of the aleatory world back into the controlled vacuum of designed space, modeling new forms of atmospheric entrainment.

Works like *Swimming in Qualia* gesture towards what still lies outside the realm of postindustrial control, just beyond the constraints of subjective awareness and social identity. They render this as an atmosphere of free-floating drift, a porous realm reassuringly peaceful if not without uncertainty. As with the other ambient media encountered in this dissertation, it is a world of quiet animals, porous objects, drifting clouds and flowing water, where the horizons of human existence have relaxed and dispersed into something more anonymous and atmospheric. In so doing, they provide a lush glimpse of sensory plenitude to loosen the tightly coded grid of postindustrial life—even if this ambient vision remains no more substantial than a layer of projected light sliding across the flat surface of a wall.

[Fade Out: Enough Media]

The entire aesthetic was an existential prettiness [...] mindless, shallow and utterly devastating.
- Harold Budd, *The Pavilion of Dreams*

By way of conclusion, I want to think a little further about what the atmospheric affordances of ambient media might imply as an alternate model for how to live in a mediated postindustrial world.

In *Acoustic Communication*, Barry Truax laments many people's inability to drive an automobile without playing music, as if the simple noise of the road has become too much to bear for most people. He disparages what he calls the use of audio media as a background surrogate for more personally meaningful experiences:

The sound is used to fill a gap or deficiency in the environment, whether psychological or physical. [...] If an activity is boring or frustrating, pleasant music will make it seem easier to endure. Loneliness and lack of personal contact may be countered by the use of radio. (169)

As with Yagi Kosuke, Michael Bull, and numerous other commentators, Truax warns that while these media surrogates may indeed 'brighten' the tedium of everyday tasks, they actually make it less likely that an individual will be moved to address the tedium itself:

The problem, if there is one, with the role of background sound as a surrogate in these situations is that, at the very least, it does not change the problem or fill the deficiency – it only appears to. The intruding noises are still there, the jobs are still unfulfilling, time only seems to pass more meaningfully through the artificial structure of radio, and the “friends” that radio offers are the same for thousands of others, with no possibility of a real, personal relationship. However, more serious perhaps, is the fact that the surrogate relationship often becomes a dependency that prevents, or at least discourages, the person from taking any action that will lead to a lasting solution. The media in particular feed on these needs and seek to perpetuate their audience’s allegiance. (169-70)

Truax's approach to media as a surrogate or distraction brings with it a negative attitude towards the role of the ambient media in contemporary life, as if the use of technology necessarily implied a more distracted, less dedicated mode of existence. We might contest this attitude in itself, particularly by asking what the relationship with technology is in these critiques. There is a strong emphasis on technology-free 'self-reliance' in these arguments, positioning any kind of use of external help as a weak capitulation. We might propose instead a less oppositional relationship to technology, one more willing to experiment with integrating it as a central part of the self. Why not be "friends" with media too?

This is perhaps the central issue for any argument for or against the use of media as an emotional companion. The attitude may hinge upon whether it is realistic to expect a change in the ‘tedium’ of most individuals’ everyday lives. It is easy to argue for abandoning the symptomatic relief of media surrogates and surging forth to address the root causes, but much more difficult to accomplish in practice. Further, this refusal to accept tedium and boredom as inevitable parts of existence may in itself lead to stronger feelings of dissatisfaction.

This problem may be more complicated than it at first appears. Kayama Rika has argued recently against the governing ideology of many best-selling self-improvement books in Japan, such as the works of Katsuma Kazuyo.⁴⁸⁶ Katsuma and others urge readers to strive to improve themselves in order to achieve their dream job, overcoming tedium and changing the world in the process. Kayama notes how these elevated expectations often turn into a source of depression for the many who are unable to achieve such lofty goals:

I think only a limited number of people get the jobs they actually want. And even those people later find the jobs are not that interesting. I think it is difficult to define what you think you like and what you think you don't like. Of course, it is fortunate if you find you really love your job. But if not, you don't need to be frustrated. Why do you work in the first place? I think you work to live. If you earn your livelihood, you succeed.⁴⁸⁷

For all their (important) differences, optimism about the ability to change one’s own life and the surrounding society is something critics of media surrogacy share with proponents of self-improvement, and both movements have their origin in 1960s/1970s countercultures. This hope for improvement can be a crucial tool for political and personal change.⁴⁸⁸ On the other hand, as Kayama notes, it can also set up unattainable benchmarks where any given group or individual will never be satisfied with their life as it is, and always compelled to search for a more satisfying, more self and socially awakened, more exhilarating and meaningful existence than the tedium they usually are faced with.

While coming out of very different contexts, Kayama’s approach shares much with other criticisms of postindustrial psychology, such as the arguments put forth in Miyadai's *Living the*

⁴⁸⁶ See Kayama, *Shigamitsukanai ikikata*. Kayama also notes amongst her patients an increased willingness to blame other people (society) for their own problems: "Waruina Watashijana Shokogun" ("I-Am-Not-to-Blame Syndrome").

⁴⁸⁷ Arita, “Finding Satisfaction in Being Ourselves” (interview with Kayama Rika), n.p.

⁴⁸⁸ See, for example, the “Hope Studies” [*kibōgaku*] project at Tokyo University. <http://project.iss.u-tokyo.ac.jp/hope/>.

Endless Everyday, or Lars Svendsen's *A Philosophy of Boredom*. These writers each describe their contemporary societies as places where individuals have been urged (whether through mass media advertising or post-structuralist theory) to never accept the status quo and always try to reinvent themselves and society. They link this trend to various forms of narcissism (basically, the inability to distinguish the border between self and others), and above all, to an inability or unwillingness to recognize the limits of any single individual's power to change themselves and the world. It should be emphasized that there is nothing passive or complacent about any of these writers—rather, they advocate a more realistic appraisal of the limits of human action and social malleability, as a means to make more considered (and patient) appeals to social change, and to avoid getting lost in unrealizable aspirations and the depression that may set in after failing to achieve such unattainable goals. Svendsen argues against the emphasis on self-remaking in postindustrial culture, pointing to the role of boredom as an essential part of coming to terms with the world as it is: “To become mature is to accept that life cannot remain in the enchanted realm of childhood, that life to a certain extent is boring, but at the same time to realize that this does not make life unlivable. This does not, of course, solve anything, but it changes the nature of the problem.”⁴⁸⁹ Svendsen's rather unfashionable defense of maturity and stability is a provocative one in a critical context where even critiques of 'infantilism' usually still advocate some form of transgression in its place. What would it mean to stop running away from boredom, and to confront the type of problems that the endless everyday continually throws up? Svendsen is not, it bears repeating, urging we resist change or cease working towards larger social transformations. Rather, in boredom he finds a training for the patience to keep working towards important tasks that do not provide immediate sensory satisfaction.

By absorbing Svendsen's plea for boredom, ambient media might shift from being Truax's 'emotional surrogate' to something less transcendent and more mundane. Tedium runs through any kind of furniture music, soft fascination, subtractivism, therapy culture, and ambient media: in order not to arrest the attention, a certain element of bored déjà vu must be present. I've seen this all before, and that in itself gives me a certain freedom to let my attention wander. The painting on the wall that hangs there day after day after day, rather than the eagerly awaited new release that either thrills or disappoints, but refuses to just blend in.⁴⁹⁰

In a 2000 interview in the Japanese quarterly *Code*, Eno envisions a future where not only have many aspects of life sped up, but many aspects of life have also slowed down. That is, the future contains a general movement towards both extremes. As part of the slowed-down future, he envisions a holiday destination whose main allure is that nothing interesting will take place:

A boring package tour where the only thing promised is that nothing at all will happen. Nothing entertaining, no music, the same food everyday. But a place where nothing needs to be chosen. A holiday where you can completely renounce all responsibility.⁴⁹¹

Of course, this kind of desire is coming out of a position of considerable privilege: having enough entertainment and enough responsibility in daily life to want to take a vacation from both. Nonetheless, the needs are real, and tightly connected to the surplus of choices and hard fascinations in the everyday life of increasing numbers of people.

⁴⁸⁹ Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 151-52.

⁴⁹⁰ This is similar to the experience of watching a slowly paced experimental film (for example, a number of works by James Benning). In my experience, once it becomes apparent the image is not going to change dramatically anytime soon, I go through a phase of wanting to escape, but soon come to enjoy the free time to simply look at length at an image, with no need (and no freedom) to move quickly on to the next one.

⁴⁹¹ Eno, “Brian Eno: The Quality of Sensitivity.” Interview with Gotō Shigeo and Sawa Fumiya. In *Code*, eds. *Unfinished*, 149. Unfortunately only the Japanese version has been published; this is my back-translation of Eno's comments.

A related component to the importance of boredom here is the idea of *enough media*. Particularly in the current age of file sharing and digital personal archives, the simple question of how much media one person actually needs is rarely broached.⁴⁹² Even the *idea* of having 'enough' media seems to undermine the entire premise of the media industries, where value and novelty appear inextricably blurred. More music, more films, more literature, more books, more critiques, more studies, more discussion, more activity: all this is usually considered an unquestioned good.

Ambient media easily plays into these same principles: Eno was promoting ambient as his new style, innovation is valued in ambient media just as much as in other genres. My discussion here is just as guilty of trying to introduce new ideas and new terms. And at the same time, an acceptance of tedium doesn't mean simply reversing this emphasis on novelty and upholding the old, as if age itself was some kind of guarantee. Rather, whether old or new, to approach an object as companion media means to set out to live with it for the long-term, rather than sucking it dry and moving on. In a sense, it is to treat objects more like subjects, not simply to toss them away when they lose immediate interest. Once media is taken seriously as a component of subjectivity, it may not be so easily swapped out, sped through, and archived.

This isn't necessarily such a new idea. Attachment to objects, and landscapes, comes along through time spent together, like a musician and an instrument, or a commuter and a smart phone, a tired body and a familiar chair. This kind of companionship is built on familiarity rather than transgression, communion rather than constant stimuli. Boredom allows an object to pass into background awareness, even as it affords humans an expanded capacity for personal action and subjective dispersal.

This approach would take Eric Satie's influential image of furniture music at its most literal: music for home use, geared towards enabling and enhancing social and bodily activities at the level of the everyday. The history of consumer sound reproduction has increasingly enabled musical material to be deployed (and carried) in tandem with everyday activities—making it even more everyday than furniture, in the sense that it can travel constantly with an individual while carried on their person.

Visual media has an even longer history of use as furnishings, from the earliest seasonal rituals of home decoration to the ubiquity of visuals for interior design culled from the breadth of contemporary image culture, from the magazine clippings of film stars glued to the dashboard of a rickshaw, to the proudly displayed painting hanging in the office.

How to describe the type of relationship that develops with lived-with materials? Amidst what is often decried as a world flooded with disposable and ephemeral images, the decision to live with an image or sound over an extended period becomes ever more significant. Writing on painting has pointed most clearly to this type of sustained engagement. Tom Conley's essay at the end of the English translation of Gilles Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* ponders the role that the Bacon painting hanging over Deleuze's desk played as the writer encountered it day after day while setting down to work. In *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*, T. J. Clark explores the value of repeated and sustained engagement of an artwork by visiting, day after day, the same two Poisson paintings over the course of a year. Certainly, part of Clark's admiration for the Poissons is that they are anything but ordinary—they have a depth and a complexity that demands repeated engagement:

Paul Valéry says somewhere that a work of art is defined by the fact that it does not exhaust itself—offer up what it has to offer—on first or second or subsequent reading. Art-ness is the capacity to invite repeated response.⁴⁹³

⁴⁹² Once in a while it is. See the Taoist poet Kashima Shōzo's bestselling *Motomenai* (Don't Desire), 2007.

⁴⁹³ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 115.

What is most striking about Clark's diary entries (covering a roughly two year span spent intermittently writing about the Poissons – sometimes intensively, sometimes occasionally) is the way the two paintings emerge as inexhaustible interlocutors for his own passage through time. He encounters them in different lighting and weather, different frames of mind, and different trajectories in his personal history. Each time they offer him a new variation. The repeated viewings establish their own rhythm in the context of a life lived with them.

This inexhaustible engagement might be understood as a form of eurhythmia, or at least a form of rhythmic exchange—one which can never be fully mastered. Note that this quality does not set up an analytical challenge leading to a single answer (the painting can never be fully and finally 'read'⁴⁹⁴). The appeal is somewhere else—and this somewhere else emerges precisely in the relationship between a human body and its companion media.

This becomes clear if we move beyond Clarke's rarified museum contexts to look at the type of "inexhaustible" materials more commonly encountered in contemporary life. Compared with narrative cinema, patterns of engaging with musical materials are organized much more extensively around repetition and gradually deepening familiarity. One of the highest forms of praise available to contemporary record reviewers is to praise an album's 'attention to detail,' leading to the pleasures of 'repeated listening.' The concept of replay value, introduced through video game culture, might be understood in tandem with Valéry's inexhaustible 'art-ness.' While Clarke has reason to decry the current "regime of visual flow, displacement, disembodiment, endless available revisibility of the image, endless ostensible transparency and multi-dimensionality and sewing together of everything in nets and webs,"⁴⁹⁵ clearly a contrary (if far less attended to) tradition of sustained, ongoing coexistence with artistic materials has managed to persist as well. If the museum's permanent collection is one site where it shelters, the furnishings of everyday life might be understood as another. And yet, contrary to older assumptions of the necessity for aesthetic 'depth' in relation to aesthetic inexhaustibility, here it is precisely the artwork's shallowness that ensures its affective persistence.

In the case of ambient media, this depthlessness is as important as the assumed depth and complexity found in other aesthetics. What is left out is ultimately more important than what is included. The object that comes to mind is the *erudā sūtsu* (elder suit): a radical reformulation of an individual's environmental horizon available for free rental at many Japanese ward offices. The elder suit—also sometimes referred to as an "empathy suit"—consists of sound-attenuating earmuffs, goggles with a highly obfuscated visual field, weights to be attached to arms and legs, and sometimes attendant crutches. Middle and high-schoolers are asked to put on the suit and walk around their neighborhood—riding the train, shopping in the convenience store, etc.—and experience in some perceptual form what it feels like to be in the upper registers of Japan's greying population. If "empathy" emerges here, it is notably precisely by cutting off access to the environment, shutting down the horizons in order to experience them through a less able form. Like *Ginga's* Blind Wireless Operator, not being able to see becomes transformed into a potentially powerful force for understanding. While not exactly relaxing in its effects, I point to the elder suit as a reminder that foreclosed horizons can be just as important as extended ones—and that making do with less can, in its own paradoxical way, be a form of learning to live with others different from oneself.

As noted in Arai's subtractive aesthetic, this embrace of 'less' carries with it a radical—if rarely realized—critiques of a culture based on consumption. The ambient response to consumerism

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 118-9.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 121.

says: I don't need anything more, rather, I already have too much. Of course, this promise of less can easily become a marketing strategy to sell more products, as Muji and a pantheon of other ambient lifestyle design companies make clear.

In a discussion between former YMO bandmates Sakamoto Ryūichi and Hosono Haruomi, both admit to having long harbored the fantasy of owning nothing. As successful artists, they describe being exhausted from social demands to constantly produce new work for the market. Sakamoto declares he is tired of the pressure to put new albums out all the time, and says he is thinking of paying people 100 yen to return his CDs, so that he can reprint them with new music and return them to their owner. "We don't need so many kinds of music like now. We're absolutely over-consuming music," he pleads.⁴⁹⁶

In a world of too much *stuff*, more is not necessarily a good thing. From this perspective, ambient media, in their dullest, most everyday form, might provide valuable companions for a life lived with less. By the tenth, twentieth, thirtieth time the jellyfish DVD cycles by, my fascination with the electric glow of the strange creatures on my television has faded. In fact, it was never all that interesting in the first place. But there is a point in our attunement where that no longer matters. Here I am with the jellyfish, coexisting, drifting along together.

And that is enough.

⁴⁹⁶ This plan doesn't ever seem to have been executed, and it is difficult to imagine Sakamoto's record label was too supportive of this idea. He seems to have quickly forgotten about it judging by his subsequent release schedule. Interview in Code, ed. *Unfinished*, 61 and 67.

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