

Paul Roquet, **Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self**, Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2016, 256 pp., \$27.50 (paperback).

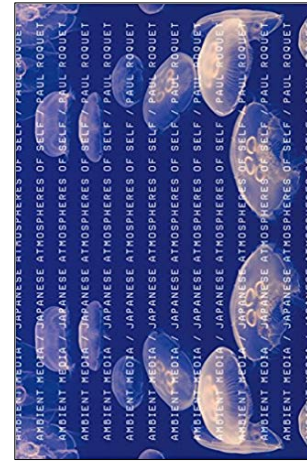
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The term “ambient,” an English adjective derived from the Latin verb *ambire* to indicate the encompassing or encircling of an atmosphere or environment, has become a popular aesthetic referent across contemporary media cultures ranging from electronic music, video art, informatics, architecture, and urban design. As Paul Roquet notes in the first pages of this monograph, a subtle emphasis on subjective mediation differentiates “ambient” from the related concept of “atmosphere,” reinjecting a certain measure of agency and embodiment into environmental imaginations and foregrounding “the mediating role of human sense perception in a person’s relationship to the surrounding world” (p. 4). **Ambient Media: Japanese**

**Atmospheres of Self** takes stock of the genealogy of its titular concept and offers a fascinating tour de force of its uptake and rearticulation in Japan, decentering the global framing of ambient media and situating it in the context of Japanese cultural production. For Roquet, ambient media are tools of atmospheric self-mediation, and the Japanese uptake of the transliteration *ambiente* to define a specific style of artistic and aesthetic production clearly indexes a distinction from atmospheric and environmental conceptions of media.

*Ambient Media* identifies varied forms of agency and embodiment in the process of “ambient subjectivation,” which according to Roquet has become “an increasingly common component of everyday life in Japan and other postindustrial societies since the 1970s” (pp. 4–5), with evident links to neoliberal governance and emerging practices of self-care. The introductory chapter offers an engrossing overview of this process, framing the creation of neoliberal media atmospheres through Foucauldian techniques of the self, Heideggerian attunements, and their rearticulation in postwar Japan by philosophers like Watsuji Tetsuro, whose notion of climate “blends weather and mood with aspects of the social environment like the family, community organizations, and communication technologies” (p. 7). In Japan, the shift from atmosphere to *ambiente* corresponded to the consolidation of a neoliberal governmentality and the diffusion of consumer electronics; alongside media formats like the cassette tape and the CD came the possibility to fine-tune the portable and personal environments that accompany everyday life in hyperdense urban areas.

Roquet links the emergence of ambient media and the neoliberal *umwelt*, underpinning them to a generalized dispersal of power into infrastructural landscapes. Coincidentally, this process was the main concern of *fukeiron*, the “landscape theory” developed by Japanese directors and film critics during the 1960s and 1970s. One of the central arguments advanced by *fukeiron* was that people are not simply produced by their environments but can actively participate in shaping their own environmental subjectivation (p. 15). Similar micropolitics of environmental agency also drive Roquet’s investigation: “Instead of attempting to flee atmospheric influence,” he proposes, “we might seek out new forms of agency via atmospheric mediation and think through the ethics of atmospheric design” (p. 16). The author’s choice



approach for this inquiry into ambient mediation is to move beyond the obvious recognition of the ubiquity of media in everyday life environments, and to trace the formal changes of media use and aesthetics across a wide variety of contexts. Cognizant of the dangers of methodological nationalism and cultural essentialism, Roquet eschews the enticing history of environmental sensibilities in early Japanese aesthetics and opts to instead contextualize the emergence of ambient media in Japan through the broader framework of neoliberal modernity (p. 20).

As promised by the introduction, the six chapters of *Ambient Media* cover a lot of ground. Paired around three domains of aesthetic production, they follow ambient mediation across music, video art, and popular culture. The first and second chapter chart the rise of Japanese ambient music from the success of the background music (BGM) industry to its critical reinterpretation by local musicians. The use of background music for workplace productivity and patriotic mood setting can be traced back to Japan's wartime governance, and it stimulated artists to articulate different environmental aesthetics during the 1960s and 1970s. Japanese environmental music drew on the vocabulary of avant-garde experimentation to unsettle the increasingly pervasive regulation of spaces, and the popularity of French composer Erik Satie's work during the following decade strongly influenced the peculiar path that Japanese composers followed as they sought to "sculpt sound as a spatial object" (p. 47). As argued by the second chapter, Japanese ambient music afforded listeners a stable and coherent sensory environment on which they could ground their ontological security (p. 52). Roquet focuses on the output of musicians like Hosono Haruomi, Tadanori Yokoo, and Ryuichi Sakamoto, and connects their relationship to new technologies and studio recording to the development of peculiar ambient aesthetics of abstraction, inwardness, and depth. Influenced by the economic recession brought by global shifts in supply chains and the uncertain atmosphere that dominated Japan during the 1990s and 2000s, ambient aesthetics moved further toward the isolationist tones and anxious moods typical of postindustrial societies (p. 74).

The next dyad of chapters offers a similar analysis of video-based ambient media, connecting its embodied production and consumption to the rhythmic cadences typical of urban environments. According to Roquet, the embodied rhythms marked by video interfaces anchor ambient subjectivation to a specific form of sociality, which "atmospherically affords engagement with a wider range of environments and people, enabling movement through a diverse and complex world" (p. 83). Tracing the origins of this ambient sociality back to pioneering video artists like Andy Warhol, Bill Viola, Hagiwara Sakumi, and Yamaguchi Katsuhiro, the third chapter details the pervasive weaving of audiovisual media across Japanese cities, convincingly demonstrating how videos are increasingly consumed in a dispersed and mobile fashion. From portable screens and streamed clips to media art displays and projected advertising, ambient video affords "more dispersed and flexible forms of attention" (p. 88). Roquet delves into the interpretation of a selection of representative pieces of Japanese video art, arguing that the dispersed rhythms woven by ambient video allow audiences to fine-tune their engagement with the cadences of everyday life (p. 102). A similar proposition drives chapter four, dedicated to the aesthetic of "shallow depth" and the kind of "soft fascination" it exerts on viewers (p. 111).

If ambient music and ambient video remain—for all their everyday pervasiveness—niche genres of media content, cinema and literature in Japan have also been influenced by the atmospheric subjectivation described by *Ambient Media*. In chapter five of this volume, Roquet identifies the continuity between the

mood regulation function of background music and the tonalities espoused by a generation of East Asian directors, positing the concept of ambient cinema. Centered on the fine-tuning of ambiances (for both their protagonists and their audiences), ambient films exemplify a “subtractivist” aesthetic through which neoliberal subjects shed affective engagements in order to maintain a modicum of mobility and agency. For the author, the subtractivism of ambient cinema is directly related to the intensive cohabitation characterizing contemporary East Asian metropolises and to the demands of defeatist depersonalization imposed by emotional capitalism. On a resonant note, the sixth and last chapter is dedicated to the portable enveloping spaces created of ambient literature, which is connected to the *iyashi-kei*, “healing style” trend that emerged in the late-1990s Japan (p. 152) and foregrounded as an example of ambient media affording both self-care and social critique (p. 174).

The six chapters of *Ambient Media* succeed in developing the enthralling arguments woven together by this volume’s introduction, and do so by combining provocative theoretical insight with evocative interpretation of creative works across different genres. Roquet’s sparse use of autoethnographic vignettes—following the author from a solitary viewing of jellyfish videos to a sensory trip to Nakano—helps connect abstract concepts to the everyday experience of environmental media in Japan. Unfortunately, not all domains of ambient media discussed in this book manage to offer a convincing rationale for their inclusion. For example, while the two chapters about Japanese ambient music come through as a solid historical account of aesthetic shifts in the local articulation of atmospheric agency, the two chapters on ambient video are grounded on much thinner assumptions regarding a relationship between the rhythmic sociality of urban life and the affordances of audiovisual media. Occasionally, the strength of Roquet’s theorization of ambient subjectivation is put into question by less convincing correlations between specific technologies (e.g., compositing video software) and their sociocultural epiphenomena (e.g., “the larger biopolitical drive for environmental surveillance and control”; p. 122). Regardless, thanks to its refreshing combination of media theory, cultural history, and sensory experience, *Ambient Media* is a highly original monograph that will find a broad readership across academic disciplines and creative practices. The book’s succinct conclusion suggests that the investigation of ambient subjectivation has only just begun; as this process results in “both actual gains in personal freedom [...] and more insidious forms of social control” (p. 177, emphasis in original), tracing the interdependent tangles of agency through which people and objects produce and shape shared atmospheres becomes increasingly urgent.