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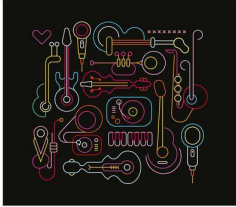
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Edited by Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith, and John Brackett

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Victor Szabo

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10

“WHAT MUSIC ISN’T AMBIENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY?”

A Design-Oriented Approach to Analyzing and Interpreting Ambient Music Recordings

Victor Szabo

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.

– *Brian Eno*¹

My first thought on presaging a list of canonic ambient records: “What music isn’t ambient in the 21st century?”

– *Keith Fullerton Whitman*²

Ambient musician Keith Fullerton Whitman’s rhetorical question echoes a common refrain in much contemporary writing on the genre of ambient music. As Mark Prendergast put it at the cusp of the 21st century, the spread of recorded media to all corners of everyday life has “rendered all recorded music, by definition, Ambient.”³ Listeners of recorded music have become accustomed to treating even the most “interesting” music as “ignorable,” and music producers now commonly craft audio with this listening flexibility in mind. As a result, historians like Prendergast and David Toop have called Brian Eno’s “ambient” concept divinatory.⁴ Others, including Anahid Kassabian and Joseph Lanza, have dismissed ambient music’s relevance given the ubiquity of flexible listening across genre boundaries.⁵ Yet, as Pitchfork’s “50 Best” list demonstrates, music listeners, producers, DJs, historians, and journalists continue to identify and curate ambient as a distinct musical genre. So why do people continue to identify music as ambient at a time when people experience all types of music as ambience?

This chapter proposes that an investigation of the ambient genre both illuminates the role of genre in today’s age of ubiquitous and flexible music listening, and suggests a useful method for analyzing and interpreting recorded music’s everyday aesthetics. What I will call a *design-oriented analysis* of recorded music reveals a socio-aesthetic logic underpinning genre terms like “ambient.” Despite claims that we have moved into a post-genre era of functional listening and stylistic hybridity, genre-oriented aesthetics still enjoy an organizing role in music discourses and practices of recorded music production, programming, and listening.⁶ As John Frow explicates, genres guide artistic creation and listening alike by providing “a set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and

interpretation of meaning.”⁷ These symbolic interpretive frames, while inherently unstable and internally incoherent, serve as an index of the social values that inform recorded music aesthetics and uses alike. Genres loosely coordinate the transmission of these values across stages of production, distribution, and consumption.⁸ By yoking recorded music’s producers and consumers into shared interpretive orbits, genres organize—without predetermining—their recordings’ markets and uses. And despite its apparent functionalism, the ambient genre, like any other music or literary genre, shapes and frames the production, distribution, and consumption of media in aesthetic and social terms. As the following analysis shows, ambient music is not just music for ambience. Ambient music raises ambience (and the use of electronics to mediate the listening self) to the level of an aesthetic theme and interpretational schema. The aesthetic and affective designs of ambient music recordings communicate particularly socialized values regarding this mediation.

In this chapter, I will briefly analyze and interpret two albums routinely categorized by their producers and fans as ambient: Brian Eno’s *Ambient 4: On Land* (1982) and The KLF’s *Chill Out* (1990). At the risk of uncritically reproducing an ambient canon, I assume the centrality of these recordings to the genre to evaluate the interplay between aesthetic design and generic ascription.⁹ As I will show, these albums are not only well suited to unfocused listening, but also interpret their own instrumentality as backgrounds through related themes, metaphors, associations, and moods. The term “ambient” warrants such an interpretation, since it simultaneously defines both an aesthetic sphere and various possibilities for use. The analysis and interpretation of some of ambient music’s most widely known and regarded aesthetic designs may thus tell us something about the way all music media organize their markets and uses “without enforcing one in particular.”¹⁰

Design-Oriented Analysis

In calling ambient music both “ignorable” and “interesting,” Eno imagined ambient recordings flexibly functioning as both mass-manufactured commodities *and* authored texts, technologies *and* artworks, atmospheres for dwelling *and* objects of contemplation. In short, Eno conceived ambient recordings as *designs*. In visual culture, the term “design” describes the aesthetic presentation of mass-manufactured commodities in a way that categorically mediates a presumed split between craft and fine art by addressing elements of both.¹¹ I adopt this usage to describe the full audio, visual, thematic, and conceptual presentation of a record, as well any one of these modes of presentation on its own (e.g. “audio design”). Though the term “design” does not often arise in music scholarship, Adam Krims has suggested that conceiving of recorded music in terms of design may reveal how recordings combine “aesthetic and utilitarian worlds under the rubric of the commercial.”¹² Recorded music’s designs work flexibly across different stages of consumption and attentional modes, remaining open to multiple interpretations and uses as people observe, select, purchase, and consume media on the basis of qualitatively different investments, and toward different ends. By regarding recorded media as designs, the music analyst can make connections across both “ignorable” and “interesting” treatments to outline how music operates in everyday life under “the rubric of the commercial.”

Attention to recorded music’s designs may help reconcile polarized treatments in scholarly approaches to recorded music media in everyday listening. On the one hand, a great deal of scholarship in musicology, music theory, and philosophy treats recordings as bounded aesthetic texts: works, images, or productions whose properties can be represented or re-described through detailed musical, technical, and/or textual analysis.¹³ This scholarship usually leaves

open the possibility of “distracted” listening and use, yet only regards the recording as a single “set of fixed relationships” whose properties remain integrated as an authored production across its contexts of consumption.¹⁴ By focusing on the worlds “in” the recording, this “deep” sort of analysis myopically disregards how recordings also work “in” the world as mediations co-authored by the programmers (like DJs or store managers) and consumers who select, play, and hear those recordings.

A second approach, dominant in ethnographic and media studies of “music in everyday life,” redresses this imbalance by eschewing musicology’s and music theory’s concern with form, semiosis, narrative, expression, meaning, and genre—categories that seem only relevant to “close listening” or aesthetic contemplation.¹⁵ As David Hesmondhalgh parrots the justification for this methodological excision, “Isn’t most contemporary experience of music too casual and distracted to involve interpretation?”¹⁶ These studies suggest that, to analyze music in everyday life, one must understand how recorded music operates not as a text, but as a medium or mediation that regulates human bodies and minds. Understood this way, music acts on a subliminal or semi-conscious plane of psychology, physiology, and affect in order to help people do things—to move, relax, concentrate, sleep, and so on. Yet while there is much to be gained by considering music recordings’ everyday mediations, this approach often loses sight of music’s specificity, agency, and social value as aesthetic productions that enrich listeners’ lives with meaning, and provoke consumer desire, identification, enjoyment, contemplation, evaluation, and/or attachment.

Attention to recorded music’s designs, I propose, can at least partly reconcile these methodological tendencies by observing how recordings suggest certain listening strategies and subjective attitudes without demanding them. An analytic framework of design neither assumes that the music rests at the center of listeners’ attention (i.e. as an artistic object, text, or work), nor at the periphery (as an atmosphere or mediation), but rather treats recorded music as an environmental feature that may sit anywhere in any listener’s consciousness at any given time. It acknowledges that aesthetics specify possibilities for use, listening, and interpretation, and that listeners exercise subjective control relative to these specifications.

The analytic and interpretive framework of design finds sympathy with ecological approaches to recorded music consumption undertaken by scholars such as Eric Clarke, Tia DeNora, Simon Zagorski-Thomas, and others.¹⁷ Such scholarship draws upon the work of psychologist James Gibson to describe how recorded music composition might afford, or furnish, listening attitudes and actions in everyday life. If, as Gibson argues, organisms subconsciously interpret objects in their environment according to what understandings and behaviors they afford, then aesthetic analysis may raise to consciousness how recorded music designs guide perception and action.¹⁸ Aesthetic interpretation, meanwhile, can translate these musical guides into cultural meaning and—when understood along lines of genre—connect these meanings to the music’s sociocultural emplacement.

The design-oriented analysis and genre interpretation that follows draws upon three extant frameworks for understanding recorded music production. First, it elaborates upon what Simon Zagorski-Thomas calls (after William Moylan and Serge Lacasse) the “staging” of the recording: aspects of spatialization, timbre, and blending that contribute to listeners’ perception of space “in” the recording.¹⁹ While these scholars typically regard staging in terms of the ambience of recorded “performances” or “events,” design-oriented analysis permits that recorded music’s composite designs may also “stage” the performance of everyday living in various ways. Zagorski-Thomas calls this “functional staging,” noting how recorded music’s virtual spaces may afford uses like focused listening, dance, or background playback.²⁰ Without assuming any

one use, design-oriented analysis examines how recorded music’s sounds are assembled, and how these sounds “set the stage” for different sorts of perceptions and experiences.

Second, design-oriented analysis investigates the ways recorded sounds combine to create musical affects. Tia DeNora and Anahid Kassabian have analyzed the ways in which recorded music’s rhythms, gestures, dynamics, and frequencies combine to create planes of intensity that provoke physiological responses in both attentive and inattentive listeners.²¹ As Kassabian explains, musical structures create “haptic images” that dynamically engage listeners’ bodies.²² Design-oriented analyses like those of Kassabian and DeNora do not assume that listeners follow musical structures in a linear fashion; instead, they observe how music creates blocks or patches of energy that produce somatic effects. The analysis that follows pays particular attention to the ways in which recorded sound generates overarching moods through combinations of timbre, timing, and pitch.

Third, following these modes of analysis, design-oriented interpretation considers the subject-positions enabled by recorded music. As Eric Clarke has shown, musical arrangements may specify and project particular subject-positions, or interpretive attitudes, that listeners may (or may not) recognize and adopt.²³ Musical material, Clarke shows, delimits a range of possible attitudes that may be taken up within certain cultural contexts to produce meaning. Depending upon listeners’ identities, backgrounds, and interests, recorded music might inspire various degrees and styles of engagement such as ironic detachment, bemusement, or disinterest. As the following analyses and interpretations suggest, ambient music’s designs produce subject-positions in a generally consistent manner along the lines of genre, and this axis of consistency provides insight into the genre’s social formation.

Analysis

When I was traveling a lot, I used to carry four or five cassettes that I knew could reliably produce a certain condition for me. I realized that 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.

Brian Eno²⁴

Ambient 4: On Land (1982), the fourth and final installment of Brian Eno’s *Ambient* series, brought to fruition a possibility scarcely hinted at in Eno’s earlier records and writings. Eno’s original description of ambient music as an atmospheric “tint” to “enhance” a given space or situation, alongside his radically simple ambient productions from the 1970s, made ambient music seem purely decorative, like interior design or lighting. In *On Land*, however, Eno sought to create richly intricate musical places that could transport listeners out of time and space and into “more desirable” worlds, regardless of the listener’s immediate surroundings. “This is escapism in a sense,” Eno reflected, “but it isn’t retreating from one world so much as advancing on another.”²⁵

The idea to transport listeners into virtual worlds via the ambient recording was, in fact, not entirely unprecedented. When *On Land* was re-released on CD in 1986, Eno reflected that he had been subconsciously exploiting recorded music’s ability to create its own sense of place for quite some time:

The idea of making music that in some way related to a sense of place—landscape, environment—had occurred to me many times over the years preceding *On Land*.

Each time, however, I relegated it to a mental shelf because it hadn't risen above being just another idea—a diagram rather than a living and breathing music. In retrospect, I now see the influence of this idea, and the many covert attempts to realise it, running through most of the work that I've released like an unacknowledged but central theme.²⁶

For instance, Eno's earlier *Music for Airports* (1978), with its reverberant tones hovering effortlessly aloft, evoked the sleek spaciousness of airports and midair suspensions of airplanes.²⁷ Yet, in contrast to the sterile, high-ceiling rooms summoned in *Airports* as well as the Harold Budd collaboration *The Plateaux of Mirror* (1980), *On Land* conjures nature and open-air landscapes through both the titles and sounds. Throughout the album, synthesizer portamenti and spectral filtering evoke the whimsy and warp of wind and earth, from the hollow moans of "The Lost Day" to the swampy gurgles running through "Tal Coat." Throughout, multilayered textures buzz and heave with synthesized and sampled animal cries; canines howl amid a creaking din of drones in "Lantern Marsh," while "Shadow" resounds with the chirping of night animals bouncing off a forest canopy. The welter of timbral nuance presented in these soundscapes rewards high-volume, headphone, and surround-sound listeners with detail enough "to swim in, to float in, to get lost inside."²⁸

According to Eno, immersing listeners in a wash of sound was initially "the point" of making ambient music, a point he underscored by including a diagram for a quadraphonic home speaker setup in the liner notes to *On Land*.²⁹ Such a setup would augment the immersive textures and stagings already inherent to the album's audio productions, which position the listener as a subject enveloped by mutually unrelated sounds. These enveloping productions run up against the convention in which homophonic textures and a frontal stage arrangement mutually reinforce the listener's presumed linear perspective upon a localized ensemble of sounds. The stagings of *On Land*'s recordings, by contrast, simulate a nonlinear first-person perspective amidst environmental sounds that occur at different distances both from the listener and from one another. Hard panning and generous stereo delay push the stages' expanses wide and open, with constituent sounds rendered variously distant or occluded through individual adjustments of volume, reverb, filtering, and envelope shape. By appearing both uncoordinated yet endemic to the same space, these sounds position listeners "inside" the virtual worlds they present without offering strong attentional guidance toward any one feature. This positional strategy via immersive staging is characteristic of ambient music's audio designs.

On Land's sonically heterogeneous worlds afford attentive listeners the pleasures of continual surprise at subtle and unpredictable rhythmic and timbral shifts, what scholar Paul Roquet calls (after psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan) ambient art's "soft fascinations."³⁰ As Roquet explains, because the worlds of ambient art are shored up by the invariant parameters of their designs, their spontaneous contingencies reward attention without demanding it. Along these lines, the constrained modal pitch collections and narrow dynamic ranges of *On Land*'s tracks render the music unobtrusive on the whole, permitting listeners a large degree of attentional autonomy from recorded sound. Playback technology augments this autonomy, as listeners may modulate volume, playback setup, and their own focus to place the music in the background of awareness, where it can peripherally produce environmental associations, colorations, intensities, and moods. As background sounds, *On Land*'s nature-based designs may summon an outdoor setting in the manner of a nature sounds record, a large landscape photograph, or an open window. Pitched animal

cries, melodic riffs, and timbral treatments refract this air with feeling, shading the environment with what may be heard as a single extended chord or, with more sustained attention, as different chordal and modal configurations within a modally ambiguous pitch collection. Certain pitches may pop into listeners’ awareness due to amplitude modification, filtering, timbral changes, and expansions of register, possibly leading to shifting perceptions of local chord roots or the overarching modal center. Fleeting melodic figures, acoustic sounds, and chromatic inflections fleck and smear these shifting moods.

“Unfamiliar Wind (Leeks Hills)” provides a good example of *On Land*’s soft fascinations. Throughout this track, seven brief synthesizer tones of five pitch classes (A \flat , C, D \flat , E \flat , and F) continuously loop independently of one another at different time intervals (between 1 and 3 seconds). The unpredictable rhythmic patterning generated by the looping tones may or may not be apparent depending upon listeners’ attentiveness, environmental noise, and audio playback equipment. In less immersive or less focused listening scenarios, a humming, undulating first-inversion f minor breeze, sitting at mid-range, permeates the texture (see Wind Loops 1, 2, and 4 in Figure 10.1). With more attention and/or bass-friendly equipment, an airy e \flat ¹-d \flat ¹ dyad can also be heard continuously oscillating out of sync with itself

Figure 10.1 “Unfamiliar Wind” wind loops (Note: the parenthesized crotchet rest in wind loop 7 indicates a rest of variable duration)

(Wind Loops 5 and 6). Along with the f minor breeze, this dyad suggests an interweaving of streams of outdoor air. For the less-attentive listener, these interactions of pitch and rhythm may be of secondary importance to the ways these mimeses of streaming wind interact with slow-fading and partially occluded bug and bird chirps to conjure an open-skied, uneven, and inhabited terrain.

As “Unfamiliar Wind” progresses, listeners with either soft or intense focus on the music may find interest in the music’s gradually shifting moods. The modal ambiguity of the track’s pitched material—mostly suggesting F Aeolian, A \flat Ionian, and/or D \flat Ionian—provides an unstable harmonic framework. Because of the prominence of the F4 and the persistence of the light, first-inversion F minor breeze, F Aeolian can seem to dominate a single listening. However, intermittently looping pairings of an A \flat -D \flat perfect-fourth dyad suggest a $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{1}$ configuration in D \flat Ionian. This interpretation is supported by a low plucked bass glide from A \flat_1 up to D \flat (e.g. at 0:29) and a soft sawtooth synth cluster on a \flat^1 -c-d \flat (e.g. at 0:48). It remains underdetermined whether listeners would hear these moments as a global shift of mode or a local chordal shift to D \flat maj \flat 9 within a global F Aeolian (or A \flat Ionian); different interpretations may arise depending upon a listener’s intensity, direction, and continuity of attention toward the music’s sounds. The choral “oohs” wafting in on an A \flat 7 chord during the middle third of the track (most prominently 1:50–3:50) alternatively raises A \flat Ionian (or A \flat with added 11 and 13) as another possibility. Although it appears infrequently and briefly (e.g. at 2:10), a G \flat of the A \flat 7 also lends a chromatic inflection toward Mixolydian (or D \flat Ionian/F Phrygian) interpretations. Peeking through the mysterious grey of the F Aeolian wind, these angelic “oohs” offer brief peeks of heavenly sunlight while the D \flat Ionian inflections of the bass and sawtooth synth inject uplifting wafts of warmth into the mild melancholy of the f minor draft.

While a gentle, flitting sadness penetrates “Unfamiliar Wind,” other tracks suggest what Eno calls a “psychological cataclysm” through darker moods like haunting or dread. “You get the pastoral prettiness on top,” he explains, “but underneath there’s a dissonance that’s like an impending earthquake.”³¹ Commonly, such “disturbed landscapes” are summoned through pitch-bending, ominous-sounding bass lines, depictions of nighttime, and unstable modes (like Phrygian). On “The Lost Day,” for example, a whirring sub-bass rumble below 150Hz unsettles the track, while a subdued din of crickets suggests night. At 0:27, metallic sheets of sound (light gong tremolos, perhaps) evoke the sound of wind howling through a tunnel-like space. The wind rises, then eerily recedes into the distance through a pronounced downward pitch bend. This sonic trope of the downward pitch bend—not uncommon in horror and suspense films—reemerges periodically over the entire track, for instance at the end of the high-G whistle at 0:57 or the C \sharp moan at 1:01. Amid eerie chimes and tinkling bells, a recurring synthesized string melody of C \sharp -D-G \sharp -B rises from the deep (for instance, starting at 1:39) to lend the track a C \sharp Phrygian modality. As with “Unfamiliar Wind,” different modal interpretations emerge; the clanging g \sharp bells at 2:30 suggest G \sharp Locrian while the electric piano’s bubbling e around 6:30 suggests E Ionian. Unlike “Unfamiliar Wind,” though, these modal inflections inevitably return to the unstable Phrygian mode, which in the nighttime setting lends a sinister mood.

In *On Land*, as with many of Eno’s other ambient projects, affective mixtures of personal intimacy and impersonal estrangement arise from ambiguous, multi-modal arrangements of quasi-familiar sounds. “One of the things I was often doing in music was trying to recreate

that sense of being wide-eyed in a surrounding that was both familiar and new,” he later articulated.³² *On Land*’s sounds blend the familiar and the strange not only through modal and harmonic ambiguity, but also by processing or synthetically mimicking sounds like animals, bells, or wind to place them on “the borderline of familiarity.”³³ Smooth, periodic waveforms betray the music’s unnatural provenance, while impossibly thick reverberation clouds and muddies the depicted landscapes. These timbral defamiliarizations make it seem as though the depicted sounds, although observed from a first-person perspective, are not observed directly, but rather vaguely recalled or experienced through the misty haze of time and blue tint of nostalgia. Journalist Frank Rose in 1977 presciently noted how Eno’s music, much like a memory that dilates the gap between one’s own past and present, “reflects warmth but does not seem to generate it.”³⁴ *On Land*’s alien virtualizations of nature match Rose’s characterization, softening and depersonalizing the intimate moods of wonder, bittersweetness, and disturbance crafted throughout.

Ambient music enjoyed a massive resurgence during the early 1990s as a second wave of ambient artists reimagined the genre as a style of electronic dance music for hip young listeners. At the cusp of this resurgence was The KLF, a British pop duo whose 1990 album *Chill Out* brought the sounds of the rave’s “chill-out room” to home listeners. The KLF member Jimmy Cauty had been a DJ for over a year in the first “chill-out room,” the VIP White Room at London nightclub Heaven. Cauty—along with fellow residents Alex Paterson (DJ LX-Dee) and Martin Glover (DJ Youth)—provided White Room ravers a respite from the hard-hitting dance floor music by blending house and techno records with psychedelic and space rock, dub, new age, ambient, soft soul, and samples from sound effects records. By 1989, Cauty and Paterson (at this point producing records together as The Orb) described their style of DJing as “ambient house,” a label that reflected both their genuine admiration for Eno’s earlier synthesizer explorations and their incorporation of house music’s samples and percussive rhythmic grooves into the ambient calm. Following Cauty and Paterson’s split, electronic dance music producers such as The KLF (Cauty’s duo), The Orb (Paterson’s group), Aphex Twin, Irresistible Force, Future Sound of London, System 7, and Ultramarine all successfully marketed records as ambient during the early 1990s.

Whereas earlier ambient records like *On Land* frequently depicted open spaces wherein listeners might dwell contemplatively, this second wave of ambient records more often depicted imaginary journeys or trips through open space. When Cauty and his bandmate Bill Drummond recorded The KLF’s *Chill Out* at Cauty’s South London studio, they wanted to depict an excursion from the southern tip of Texas up the Gulf Coast to Louisiana. They based their depiction in utter fantasy: “I’ve never been to those places,” Drummond once reflected. “I don’t know what those places are like but in my head, I can imagine those sounds coming from those places, just looking at the map.”³⁵ The duo fancifully spun together riffs and rhythmic arpeggios from Cauty’s Oberheim OB-8 synthesizer with samples of pop music and the rural outdoors. Graham Lee added pedal steel improvisations to signify spatial expansion via the frontier music of the itinerant cowboy.³⁶ Many of *Chill Out*’s other sonic signifiers, however, are only occasionally specific to the cultural geography of the US South and West, and not necessarily by way of Texas or Louisiana. The album includes a diverse set of samples such as Tuvan throat singing, Elvis Presley singing “In the Ghetto,” tropical birdsong, ocean waves crashing, and Fleetwood Mac’s “Albatross.” As with the many ambient house records that would follow, *Chill Out*’s far-flung sonic signifiers do not specify particular locations so much as simulate vacation and movement across

vast expanses, in this case a vaguely rural and equatorial musico-geographical terrain. The album, as the saying goes, is about the journey and not the destination.

Although the record opens with the rumble of a train and a clattering railroad, *Chill Out* does not straightforwardly depict or simulate the sounds of a journey from one place to another. Rather, an assortment of sampled sounds, musical grooves, and melodic riffs overlap and intersect to recreate the affective trajectories of a train traveler's "inner" perceptual world. The railroad samples establish an aural "first-person" perspective analogous to an extended point-of-view camera shot. These sounds fade in and out as Lee's pedal steel, Cauty's Oberheim, and other recorded samples take over, simulating the train's disappearance and reappearance within the traveler's perceptual schema as their attention drifts towards other external sounds and internal feelings. Quick panning and slow, gradual crossfades indicate a traveler lost in their own head, while heavy echo and reverb conflate spatial distance with psychological reverie. Body-shaking bass rumbles and patterned rhythms momentarily appear and disappear. Angelic choirs signal flight through open space while the howling of wolves and the bleating of sheep in the distance identify a rural setting. Occasionally, Doppler-effected planes pass overhead and cars zoom by. The sounds of planes, trains, and automobiles can be conceived as aspects of the scenery and as metaphors representing the traveler's attention taking flight from an awareness of their own physical grounding and vehicular extension.

Chill Out's listener might take on the traveler's perspective as though they, too, were on a fantastic voyage; or, they might take the traveler's attentional drift as a cue to disregard the music and evaluate their own surroundings, as well as their mental and bodily states. The KLF designed *Chill Out* to provide motionless listeners an opportunity to enjoy their stillness, soften their concentration, and lose themselves to reverie, absorption, or introspection. As The KLF asserted in the press release advertising *Chill Out*: "Don't bother trying to listen to this LP if you have neither first switched off the lights and then laid your body to rest on the floor. Hopefully then the trip will be complete."³⁷ The variegated design of the vehicular journey, with its crossfading flights of fancy, assists listener-travelers' mental departure from the music into their own thoughts. Thin textures and ample silences (particularly during the middle third of the album, such as toward the end of "Elvis on the Radio, Steel Guitar in My Soul") spur even the most fully absorbed listener-travelers to momentarily detach from the musical trip. Less absorbed record listeners, including those who do not directly follow The KLF's instructions, may also find the music's smooth flow in and out of energetic techno grooves a pleasantly relaxed, "chill" form of motivation. The recurrent sonic trope of the vehicle not only provides listeners an imaginary means of physically disengaging and going on a sonic voyage, but it also, as with *Chill Out's* traveler, metaphorizes the vessels (the train, the music, their own body) from which listeners' attention might drift along the way.

Vehicular sounds often interact with the tropes of electronic dance music both to assist and to reflect the grounded stillness of the ambient drifter. These sounds alternately set listeners aloft and bring them down to earth by providing stark contrasts of register and momentum in comparison to the recordings' composite sonic textures. In the case of "Madrugada Eterna," a non-percussive track serenely floating along for nearly eight minutes on a $b\flat^1$ - f^2 choral pad drone, car sounds produce a grounding effect. The track opens with the sound of a stock car zooming across the stereo field followed by furious honking. Fifty seconds later, following a dreamy pedal steel and electronic organ interlude, another Doppler-effect "zoom" careens across the stereo field from left to right (0:57). Unlike the

opening sample, this sound is chopped up into a whirring rhythmic pulsation, appearing synthetically generated rather than sampled. The zoom repeats at 1:03, then passes by one more time—now chugging—as it is slowed down to half speed (1:09). Was that a techno track going by? The slowing effect makes a connection between the grounded vehicle, the grounded body, and bodily movement, as this slowing of the race car zoom reveals itself to be a hi-hat and low-pitched synth lead, timbres that would not be out of place on the dancefloor. The momentary appearance of this bass-heavy pulse in The KLF’s trip sharply contrasts with the lightness of the drift that surrounds it; the listener is briefly grounded by the motorized sound, only to be released again to floating. In an inversion of this move, distant motorcycle and plane sounds act as autonomous, distant sonic figures untethered from the propulsive, melodic techno groove that repeatedly cuts out during “Wichita Lineman Was a Song I Once Heard” (for instance at 1:16 and 3:43), signaling the listener’s release from the groove’s entrainment into mental drift.

Music writers Michael Jarrett and Kodwo Eshun have interpreted the sonic trope of the vehicle in popular musics in terms of the vehicle’s conditioning of human experience during the 20th century, a phenomenon Jarrett refers to as “the railroading of music.”³⁸ Electronic dance music and ambient music, Jarrett proposes, both summon in listeners a “deconcentration” not unlike that of the train traveler. Borrowing from Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s writings on train travel in the 19th century, Jarrett explains that travelers, at first unsettled by the inability to focus on nearby entities, learned to enjoy the way train travel “mechanizes” visual and aural perception by adopting a “panoramic” gaze of distant scenes and the wash of colors and textures that pass. The noise of the railroad, Jarrett argues, imposes a similarly “deconcentrated” quality of perception upon the train traveler’s ear. “Encased in a womb of steel, a sonorous envelope,” Jarrett explains, “the chronically distracted rail passenger bathes in patterned noise.”³⁹ Electronic music producers have since recreated the conditions for this blurring of sensory experience through mechanical grooves and arrhythmic drifts, producing what Kodwo Eshun refers to as “automotion effects” like groove-based entrainment and aural deconcentration.⁴⁰ *Chill Out*’s vehicular sounds motivate similar “automation effects” in their listeners, whether or not their listeners are on board with the depicted “trip.”

As with *On Land*, *Chill Out* registers an ambivalence via the disengagements it provides, but in a different way. Whereas *On Land*’s impersonal and mutable moods undercut the possibility for emotional certainty, *Chill Out*’s mixed vehicular metaphors and stop-and-start grooves belie listeners’ presumed inert physicality and full awareness. From start to end, The KLF’s journey constantly shuttles between physical activation and dis-activation, bodily motivation and passive drift, entrainment and enplanement. With regards to its own utility as a vehicle for chilling out, *Chill Out* seems scattered, perhaps even misleading. Equal parts goofy and banal, starting and slack, and ever aimless, the album can leave listeners wondering whether the music was genuinely meant to take them on a psycho-geographic odyssey, or whether it had just made game of their inertia, satirizing the fact that they evidently had nowhere better to go.

Genre Interpretation

The preceding analyses illustrate how both Brian Eno’s *On Land* and The KLF’s *Chill Out* produce first-person perspectives within a virtual environment seemingly devoid of other humans. The isolated and asocial designs suggested by these records enable listeners to remove themselves from the demands of public life, lose awareness of their immediate surroundings,

still their bodies, and retreat into potentially expansive personal or mental zones. This imaginary reprieve from subjective participation symbolically affirms the utility of ambient recordings as vehicles of social disaffiliation and corporeal disengagement. The open vistas suggested by these recordings allow for, what Philip Koch calls, the “virtues of solitude,” a freedom to cogitate and reflect, and time to access the “revelations” of self and nature.⁴¹

As exemplified through these two records, the empty virtual environments created through ambient music may most obviously be understood as part and parcel with its mediating function as, in Eno’s words, “an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint.”⁴² Listeners often describe the atmospheric functionality of ambient music’s open fields of sound through comparisons with film or television music. As one fan put it, the absence of “personality” in ambient music “allows each listener to put themselves in it and make the music their own personal soundtrack.”⁴³ This potential usage is not unique to ambient music. As Michael Bull describes, listeners may hear music with an identifiable persona or “personality” as though it issued from their own environment or person.⁴⁴ Yet the non-linear, uncoordinated textures of ambient music encourage listeners—by design—to attribute recorded sounds to their own perception of an encompassing atmosphere, rather than to a unified artistic or musical persona. In the case of *On Land*, these alternately idyllic and discomfiting sound worlds might inspire bittersweet attitudes towards a listener’s own surroundings, while *Chill Out*’s sonic juxtapositions of the blissful and banal alternately inspire and spurn listener enthusiasm.

Yet these recordings do more than just mediate listener space and mood with feelings and energies. Their designs also synthetically recreate spaces and moods that metaphorize the mediations performed by the records. In both *On Land* and *Chill Out*, the conceptual designs represent the imaginary departures from physical space and movement they provide by virtually emulating pastoral or rural scenes. The sounds of animals and wind locate the virtual worlds far away from (sub)urban space, workaday time, and busy embodiments, in effect affording listeners this very distance. In the case of *On Land*, these virtual worlds stabilize listeners within limited, largely predictable textures, thus reproducing the ways recorded music reliably provides listeners with a “sense of place.” On *Chill Out*, by contrast, vehicular samples represent the recordings’ transportive functionality, as well as the attentional mobility they afford. In both cases, the mimesis of real-world sounds provides resonances with recorded music programming and listening.

Significantly, both albums symbolically and affectively convey their own technological functionality via sonic markers of technology. Synthesized sounds, periodic waveforms, production effects, loops, and sustained tones translate the recording’s “hidden nature” as a disembodied, dehumanized, and discreet electronic mechanism into musical sound. Sustained tones and drones double the automated constancy of electric currents and synthesized waveforms. Looping aurally reproduces the music’s underlying materiality in circuits and oscillators. Such production techniques make the album playback’s automaticity audible, elevating the very technological factors that allow ambient record consumers to program music themselves, then treat it as if it were objectively part of their listening environment.

At the same time, however, the faux-natural textures, tuneful melodies, mixed moods, and variegated energies of these albums promote emotional involvement in their worlds. The depersonalized and automatic sounds of the synthesizer, sounds of ocean waves, tunes by Elvis Presley, and harmonious sawtooth swells register nostalgia for unspoiled nature and human sentiment. Similarly, unsynchronized loops and the spontaneous juxtaposition of sampled material simulate the organic, uncoordinated textures of the natural world. Alien electronic

sounds do not just mirror the means of listeners’ withdrawal from the natural and social world, they also recall this lost world fondly and replace it with faint echoes of feeling and fauna.

If these albums may be taken as indicative of the genre, then ambient music can be said to register ambivalence across various symbolic binaries at once: technological/natural, synthesized/organic, impersonal/personal, nonhuman/human, and stable/transient. Combined, the ambivalence of ambient music’s designs across this traverse axis may be interpreted on two levels. First, on a symbolic level, this ambivalence may be understood as destabilizing and questioning the application of recorded music as a constant environmental presence. While ambient music’s recorded designs self-reflexively mirror their own atmospheric instrumentality by promoting technologized nature as a theme, they also convey a mixture of affirmation and skepticism around the temporary disengagements they deliver. The music’s mercurial, bittersweet moods may be understood as reflecting uncertainty upon the consumer’s engineering of place and the technological management of the listening self that the record’s playback equipment makes possible. The titles *On Land* and *Chill Out* register some irony under this reading, falsely giving gravity to the ungrounded, unstable, and impermanent environments provided by the underlying musical technology. Uses of the term “ambient,” in this light, may hence be understood to recognize an ambivalence pervading the “soft fascinations” and social disengagements that its own recorded environments afford.

Secondly, ambient music’s ambivalence can be interpreted sociologically and culturally as a passage for listener identification. The impersonal detachment of its quasi-natural environments may be understood as appealing to certain listeners as a means of making the environmental trips personal. This appeal partly arises from a listener’s self-recognition in the calm autonomy from humanity imparted by these environments—an autonomy from the social world of “the masses”—and partly from sharing an ambivalence about this disengaging operation. Hence, the withdrawal or absence of human personas in ambient music may be understood to facilitate rather than inhibit subjective identification with the sounds therein. Ironically, the appeal of identifying with a nonhuman environment can be understood as very much socially conditioned (though not determined): subjects disposed to such an appeal might include individuals conditioned to self-identify independently of their bodies and emotions (a mode historically, but not exclusively, readily available to educated and/or elite white men) and individuals given to seeking detachment from the crowd (introverts, hipsters).⁴⁵ Ambient’s ambivalence can also be read as a masculinist defense against the feminization of background or inattentive listening and of its related genres like new age and easy listening.⁴⁶ By allowing listeners to sink into a skeptical, detached nature, ambient music’s aura of doubt affirms listeners’ robust awareness of their own personal boundaries and subjective agency, and reinforces their separation from a “mother” earth/cosmos by identifying with an impersonal technology. This sociological interpretation appears consistent with ambient music’s markets and fan communities, although it warrants further empirical research.⁴⁷

Conclusion

This design-oriented genre interpretation, as well as the preceding analysis, offers a blueprint for analyzing the roles of recorded music production and genre in our 21st century media ecology. Recorded music’s designs and discourses of genre alike influence and guide everyday music making and listening, appearing as “ambient” features of our musical ecologies and soliciting listener involvement without demanding it. Genre terms translate

recorded music design's intertwining of affects and affordances in terms of musical categories, which in turn serve as malleable interpretive frameworks that organize socio-aesthetic patterns and ideologies of music production and consumption. By remaining agnostic about recorded music's uses and listeners' investments, design-oriented analysis offers a flexible position from which to study these audible transmissions and translations. It illustrates recorded music's functional, affective, and subjective affordances as mediations, while also considering the meanings and values inherent to the music's particular aesthetic effects and discursive worlds. In short, design-oriented analysis and genre interpretation treats all music recordings as both ignorable and interesting—for after all, what music isn't ambient in the 21st century?

Notes

- 1 Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," liner notes to *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, Editions E.G., AMB 001, LP, 1978.
- 2 Keith Fullerton Whitman, "The Nameless, Uncarved Block," Introduction to "The 50 Best Ambient Albums of All Time," *Pitchfork Magazine*, 26 September 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9948-the-50-best-ambient-albums-of-all-time/> (Accessed 4 August 2017).
- 3 Mark Prendergast, *The Ambient Century: From Mahler to Trance: The Evolution of Sound in the Electronic Age* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2000), 4.
- 4 David Toop, *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995), v.
- 5 Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 5; and Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong* (New York: Picador, 1995), 197.
- 6 Claims that we have entered an age of practical and post-genre listening can be found, for example, in Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, 19; and Thiago R. Pinto, "Our Changing Relationship with Music and Its New Practical Function," *Medium*, 18 August 2016, <https://medium.com/music-x-tech-x-future/our-changing-relationship-with-music-and-its-new-practical-function-32bd0e56eac#.ex89rmsg6> (Accessed 4 August 2017). Various scholars have argued that claims of "omnivorousness" and "post-genre" are themselves socially conditioned and limited. See, for example, Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (October 1996): 900–7; Bethany Bryson, "Anything but Heavy Metal: Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (October 1996): 884–99; and Robin James, "Is the Post- in Post-Identity the Post- in Post-Genre?," *Popular Music* 36, no. 1 (2017): 21–32.
- 7 John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.
- 8 David Brackett underscores the instability and incoherence of genre across levels of production and consumption in *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).
- 9 For examples of the presumed centrality of these albums to the ambient genre, see Kevin Renick, "Classic Ambient Recordings: The 2001 Survey," *Hyperreal*, January 2002, http://music.hyperreal.org/epsilon/info/2001_classic_ambient.html (Accessed 4 August 2017), Kiran Sande, "The 20 Greatest Ambient Albums Ever Made," *FACT Magazine*, 19 July 2011, www.factmag.com/2011/07/19/20-best-ambient/ (Accessed 4 August 2017), and Whitman, "The 50 Best Ambient Albums of All Time."
- 10 Eno, "Ambient Music."
- 11 See Jane Forsey, *The Aesthetics of Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 12 Adam Krims, "The Changing Functions of Music Recordings and Listening Practices," in *Recorded Music: Performance, Culture and Technology*, ed. Amanda Bayley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 69.

- 13 Various scholars on popular music analysis adopt a text-based approach while discussing the central role of recordings to popular music. See, for instance, Philip Tagg, “Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice,” *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 37–67; Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Bristol, PA: Open University Press, 1990); Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001). On the role of production in the analysis of recorded music, see William Moylan, *The Art of Recording: The Creative Resources of Music Production and Audio* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992); Albin Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Virgil Moorefield, *The Producer as Composer: Shaping the Sounds of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005); and Simon Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014). See also Amanda Bayley, ed., *Recorded Music: Performance, Culture and Technology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Simon Frith and Simon Zagorski-Thomas, eds., *The Art of Record Production: An Introductory Reader for a New Academic Field* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012); and Nicholas Cook, Eric Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, and John Rink, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 14 Zak, *Poetics of Rock*, 24.
- 15 Susan D. Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi, Charles Keil, and The Music in Daily Life Project, *My Music: Explorations of Music in Daily Life* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993); Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (New York: Berg, 2000); Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*; and Elena Boschi, Marta Garcia Quiñones, and Anahid Kassabian, eds., *Ubiquitous Musics: The Everyday Sounds That We Don’t Always Notice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).
- 16 David Hesmondhalgh, “Popular Music Audiences and Everyday Life,” in *Popular Music Studies*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002), 125.
- 17 Eric F. Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Tia DeNora, *Music-in-Action: Selected Essays in Sonic Ecology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*; and Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production*.
- 18 James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), 127–8.
- 19 Moylan, *The Art of Recording*. See also Serge Lacasse, “‘Listen to My Voice’: The Evocative Power of Vocal Staging in Recorded Rock Music and Other Forms of Vocal Expression” (PhD diss., University of Liverpool, 2000).
- 20 Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production*, 84–6.
- 21 Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, xxvi–xxix and 33–50; DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 75–108.
- 22 Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, xvi–xvii.
- 23 Clarke, *Ways of Listening*, 62–125.
- 24 Brian Eno, “Aurora Musicalis,” interview by Anthony Korner, *Artforum* 24, no. 10 (Summer 1986), 78.
- 25 Mick Brown, “Life of Brian according to Eno,” *Arts Guardian*, 1 May 1982, 10.
- 26 Brian Eno, liner notes to *Ambient 4: On Land*, Editions E.G. EEGCD 20, 1986, CD.
- 27 On how Eno’s *Airports* evokes airport space and airplane suspension, see Victor Szabo, “Unsettling Brian Eno’s *Music for Airports*,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 14, no. 2 (June 2017): 305–33.
- 28 Brian Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 294.
- 29 Eno, liner notes to *Ambient 4: On Land*.
- 30 Paul Roquet, *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 111.
- 31 Don Watson, “Man out of Time,” *Spin*, May 1989, 42.

- 32 David Sheppard, *On Some Faraway Beach: The Life and Times of Brian Eno* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2009), 357.
- 33 Eno, "Aurora Musicalis," 79.
- 34 Frank Rose, "Four Conversations with Brian Eno," *The Village Voice*, March 1977, 72.
- 35 Ian Roullier, "Spotlight: The KLF, Chill Out," *Clash Magazine* 2, issue 5, November 2006, www.ianroullier.com/interviews_and_features/klf_chillout.htm (Accessed 4 August 2017).
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- 38 Michael Jarrett, "Train Tracks: How the Railroad Rerouted Our Ears," *Strategies* 14, no. 1 (2001): 38; Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998). For more on the thematization of vehicles in modernist music, see Hans-Joachim Braun, "Movin' On': Trains and Planes as a Theme in Music," in *Music and Technology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Hans-Joachim Braun (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 106–120; and Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 63–104.
- 39 Jarrett, "Train Tracks," 35.
- 40 Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 82.
- 41 Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1994), 99–135.
- 42 Eno, liner notes to *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*.
- 43 Victor Szabo, "Ambient Music as Popular Genre: Historiography, Interpretation, Critique" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2015), 25.
- 44 Bull, *Sound Moves*, 38–49.
- 45 On bourgeois embodiment, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). On white embodiment, see Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–68; and Robin James, "In but not of, of but not in: On Taste, Hipness, and White Embodiment," *Contemporary Aesthetics* Special Volume 2 (2009), www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=549 (accessed 4 August 2017). On hip embodiment and disaffiliation, see Phil Ford, "Somewhere/Nowhere: Hipness as an Aesthetic," *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 49–81; and Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).
- 46 Keir Keightley, "Music for Middlebrows: Defining the Easy Listening Era, 1946–1966," *American Music* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 309–35.
- 47 For a sociological survey of ambient music's online networks, see Szabo, "Ambient Music as Popular Genre," 342–64.

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