

FRAGILITY, NOISE, AND ATMOSPHERE IN AMBIENT MUSIC

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This chapter will examine how contemporary experimental ambient music engages with notions of fragility, the aesthetics of atmosphere, and the use of noise to engender a more active listening experience than that proposed by Brian Eno in 1978.¹ Although rather at odds with the generally accepted innocuous nature of ambient music – one that “tints” the environment – I propose that, through engaging with these concepts, composers can encourage different ways of listening to and thinking about ambient music, as well as reintroducing the sense of “doubt and uncertainty”² that Eno originally ascribed to ambient music. In doing so, I mean to demonstrate that ambient music is far from being a contemporary comfort blanket to block out the perceived problems, or overwhelming influx of information, in society but is a genre that, at its best, can offer a reflection of contemporary culture and thought. In order to do this, I will present a framework for discussing ambient music, drawing on, and developing Nomi Epstein’s notions of fragility, Torben Sangild’s tripartite consideration of noise and Gernot Böhme’s aesthetics of atmosphere.

‘Ambient’ Music

An ambience is defined as atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint [...] Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all

1 See Brian Eno, ‘Ambient Music’, liner notes from the initial American release of *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (USA: PVC-7908 AMB001, 1978).

2 Ibid.

genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities [...] 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.³

Since the writing of this oft-quoted manifesto-like statement by Brian Eno to accompany the release of *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978), ambient music has been developed and expanded from the initial stylistic tenets set out in the quartet of releases *Ambient 1-4* (1978 – 1982). As a genre of music it now encompasses a plethora of influences resulting in music as diverse as the post-industrial dark ambient⁴ of Lustmord, the lush synthesiser-driven work of Robert Rich, or the experimental ambient of Taylor Deupree, whose label 12k has “decisively defined and developed its own concept of minimalism in the realms of experimental and ambient music”.⁵ In a wider musical context, ambient has been used as a prefix to describe a raft of other genres including techno, rock, and house. Daniel Siepmann writes that:

Ambient music is a genre of music that focuses on coloring the listener’s sonic environment while largely disregarding other functional musical traits such as melodicism, harmonic progression, or rhythmic variation. While these qualities are certainly recognizable in the musical texture, they are all yoked towards advancing an unobtrusive, background music – a music that isn’t meant to be listened to directly.⁶

3 Ibid.

4 A term originally coined by Roger Karmanik.

5 See www.12k.com

6 Daniel Siepmann, “A Slight Delay: Agency and Improvisation in, the Ambient Sound World,” *Perspectives of New Music* 48(1), (2010): 174.

The focus on the utilitarian application of such music to engender a state of ecstasy and well-being has ignored the sonic material itself, perceiving it as subservient to its function. Such music may create a certain ‘tint’ within an environment but considering it as rendering merely a ‘functional tint’ encourages a state of non-listening – which is not how much of today’s ambient music is listened to either in performance or private listening environments.

As the genre and its various offshoots have developed over the intervening 40 years, the original intentions of ambient music, as outlined by Eno in 1978, have also transmogrified. Whilst ambient music has, like any other genre, developed a number of common stylistic or memetic qualities – such as a pervading, generally slow, pacing; often a tonal or modal framework; fragmented melodic lines or shorter ‘cells’ that imply a sense of non-closure; the use of drones; and a sense of continuity or singular ‘atmosphere’ – a composer focusing on one or only a few of these qualities can produce widely divergent sonic results. Such albums as Sarah Davachi’s *All My Circles Run*⁷, Lawrence English’s *Cruel Optimism*⁸, Tim Hecker’s *Harmony in Ultraviolet*⁹, Taylor Deupree’s *Fallen*¹⁰ and William Basinski’s *Watermusic II*¹¹ are all tagged and categorized as ‘ambient’ releases. Despite this, there has been little critical reflection on the state of ambient music today. Most critiques still take Eno’s original 1978 statement and the body of work encapsulated in *Ambient 1-4* as its starting point of reference. Lawrence English writes:

I have increasingly found myself problematizing the term [ambient].
I dislike that there is some apriori [sic] reading of the term now.
The idea that music becomes fixed and set is something I am very

7 Sarah Davachi, *All My Circles Run* (USA: Students of Decay – SOD-115, 2017).

8 Lawrence English, *Cruel Optimism* (Australia: Room40 – RM470CD, 2017).

9 Tim Hecker, *Harmony in Ultraviolet* (USA: Kranky – Kranky102, 2006).

10 Taylor Deupree, *Fallen* (Japan: Spekk – KK037, 2018).

11 William Basinski, *Watermusic II* (USA: 2062 – 20620302, 2003).

uninterested in. It goes against the very fibre of music, the evolution of sound in time and the complexity that unfolding brings.¹²

This begs a number of questions. What does ambient music mean today and what kind of listening states does it engender? What critical aesthetical insights that have developed over the past 40 years can be drawn on to inform contemporary ambient music?

The five examples cited above illustrate only some of the breadth of recent ambient music. They are perhaps representative of the more experimental outer-edges of the genre: the edges that start to permeate other genres. Davachi's work, with its slowly evolving textures, whilst reminiscent of the drone-based works of Chihei Hatakeyama¹³, has more kinship with the intense listening experience of the music of Eliane Radigue, and the "slow change music" of Laurie Spiegel. Spiegel in her notes for *The Expanding Universe* writes that "slow change music" allows,

[...] the listener to go deeper and deeper inside of a single sustained texture or tone [...] The aesthetic aim is to provide sufficiently supportive continuity that the ear can relax its filters [...] The violence of sonic disruption, disjunction, discontinuity and sudden change desensitizes the listener and pushes us away so we are no longer open to the subtlest sounds. But with continuity and gentleness, the ear becomes increasingly re-sensitized to more and more subtle auditory phenomena within the sound that immerses us [...] we open up our ears more and more to the more minute phenomena that envelop us. This is also not "ambient music", a term that came into use some years later. This is music for concentrated attention, a through-composed musical experience, though of course it also can

12 Lawrence English, email to author, January 21, 2019.

13 See Chihei Hatakeyama, *Above The Desert* (Russia: Dronarivm DR-42, 2016).

be background.¹⁴

A music of sustained textures for concentrated attention of a very different kind is Lawrence English's *Cruel Optimism*. The predominantly noise-focused post-shoegaze infused sound world of *Cruel Optimism* is redolent of Rafael Anton Irisarri's *A Fragile Geography* and Fennesz's *Black Sea*. In live performance these works are anything but ambient. The listener is immersed in a sonic continuum of often intense volume that stimulates both emotional and physical/bodily responses. Such work, through both the cover imagery and videos produced to accompany the releases, although not produced under the Slow Music movement banner nevertheless shares much in common with its aims in wanting to engage with, rather than escape from, the everyday world. The Slow Music movement, though not solely aligned with ambient music has,

[...] much in common with other slow movements and fully supports and advocates a cultural shift towards slowing down life's pace and connecting more meaningfully with others, our surroundings and ourselves [...] slow music makes people reflect on modern living, not shy away from addressing many of the pressing issues of our times and encourages people to come together to make a positive difference [...] Slow music is also about active listening.¹⁵

This emphasis on active listening and reflection of "modern living" is something Eno himself encourages, writing that, "[...] the message of ambient music for me was that this is a music that should be located in life, not in opposition to life. It shouldn't be something for blanking things out,

14 Laurie Spiegel, liner notes from, *The Expanding Universe* (USA: Unseen Worlds – UW19, 2019).

15 See "What is Slow Music," accessed January 9, 2018, <https://www.theslowmusicmovement.org/blog/what-is-slow-music>

or for covering things up”.¹⁶ Irisarri’s *A Fragile Geography*¹⁷ clearly develops from a similar aesthetic standpoint in that,

[...] the record bares the marks of difficult terrains – personal, political, social and cultural. It tips its hat to the complex and unpredictable dynamics of the contemporary world, correlating concerns both macro and micro. Compositionally the music mirrors the tensions of contemporary America, contrasting passages of great beauty and calm with harrowing waves of density and pressure.¹⁸

William Basinski’s *Watermusic II* is a meditative loop-based work that slowly evolves over its extended duration. It engenders a sense of calm through its predominantly mid-frequency focused short melodic cells that gently lull the listener through their repetition. Deupree’s *Fallen*, conversely, is far more fragmented, and uses noise in a very different way to that found in English, Irisarri, Fennesz or Hecker. The broken melodies and production techniques – which include a high noise floor – suggest a fragility not found in any of the previously mentioned works.

All of these releases engage listening in different ways, but engage it they do. Often we choose to listen privately, even within social spaces. We construct our own private ‘atmosphere’ and ‘tint’. Our use of ambient music in the creation, augmentation or interruption of spaces, be they private or public, in itself expresses a desire to exercise agency within, or mediate our environment. As Daniel Siepmann writes, “Ambient music operates as a reflection of the self, a self that includes the social and technical world in which one is immersed”.¹⁹

16 Brian Eno, “Paul Merton’s Hour of Silence,” (1995) accessed August 20, 2018, http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian_eno/interviews/ambe2.html

17 Rafael Anton Irisarri, *A Fragile Geography* (Australia: Room40 – RM466, 2015).

18 Rafael Anton Irisarri, liner notes from *A Fragile Geography* (2015) accessed April 17, 2019, <https://irisarri.bandcamp.com/album/a-fragile-geography>

19 Daniel Siepmann, “A Slight Delay,” 193.

Ambient music is thus a genre that does not merely colour the listener's sonic environment but actively engages with it and in doing so stimulates a greater awareness of it and the self. Whilst ambient music may not rely on traditional functional musical syntax (melody, harmony, and rhythm) it can engender a deep listening experience through slow-moving immersive textures and drones enhanced through the use of noise and fragility to create emergent atmospheres. Lawrence English writes that,

[...] this music is a type of unspoken contract. It is about acknowledging as a matter of primacy, that the experience of the music is an open dialogue between the interiority of our affective listenership and the exteriority of the spaces and places that hold the music as we experience it. Ambient embraces the variables of the situation in which it is encountered, it forgoes any sense of control in favor of prioritizing a discrete subjective perspective [...] the music is never wholly owned, but rather it is constantly becoming.²⁰

Fragility

Whilst adjectives such as delicate, subtle, or enveloping are commonly used in descriptions of ambient music, 'fragile' is not, as it implies a potential fracturing of the sonic continuity that much of this music displays. Fragility in sound is perceptually complex and paradoxical. Fragility is a state of tension in which the sound's 'failure' is offset by its continued temporal movement forwards. Within this there is a sense of both beauty and danger. The beauty is of something prone to failure that needs attention, and the danger is of it ceasing to function musically. Oliver Thurley writes:

20 Lawrence English, "Ambient Music at 40: Lawrence English examines the future of a drifting genre," *FACT* magazine, February 4, 2018, accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.factmag.com/2018/02/04/ambient-music-at-40-lawrence-english/>

A musical situation may be considered fragile if the normal functionality of a sound – or the means of its production – is somehow destabilised and placed at risk of collapse. Fragility, then, can be understood as a precarious state in which sound is rendered frangible and susceptible to being destroyed or disrupted. To compose a fragile sound or musical event would therefore involve organising a system either a) vulnerable to disruption by some small external force, or b) positioned upon an unstable foundation such that the system collapses under its own weight.²¹

In experimental ambient music, which is mostly consumed as digitally mediated sound, this is a deceit we willingly enter into as listeners. For even though we know that the recorded ‘permanent’ file will not change from one playing to the next, we nevertheless return to it over and over to re-listen to and re-experience the tension inherent in this fragility. It is therefore a figurative or metaphorical fragility, but one that does not perceptually diminish even after repeated listening. In this situation fragility is “entwined with objecthood, tied up in the notion of the object: there must be an object that is prone to failure for this tension to exist”.²² This ‘failure’ could be an old instrument (such as a hand-pumped harmonium), record or tape player, or in the case of Stephan Mathieu and Taylor Deupree’s *Transcriptions*²³ – 78 rpm records and wax cylinders. Much of the time this fragility is a carefully controlled conceit by the composer. It is only in rare examples, such as in Basinski’s *Disintegration Loops*, where the quasi-anthropomorphised magnetic tape actually does ‘die’ and fail as its surface crumbles through each loop in the transfer process from analogue to digital preservation recording

21 Oliver Thurley, “Disappearing Sounds: Fragility in the music of Jakob Ullmann,” *Tempo*, 69 (274) (2015): 6.

22 Daniel Wilson, “Bergson, Mourning and Memory: The Fragility of Time in Klaus Lang’s Trauermusik,” *Tempo* 71 (281) (2017): 53.

23 Stephan Mathieu and Taylor Deupree, *Transcriptions* (Japan: Spekk – KK019, 2009)

in real-time. Such decay or metaphorical decay encourages us “to think about those things that become something else when they fall apart”.²⁴ One particularly poignant example is the depiction of dementia through the increasing looping, fragmentation, and processing of old dancehall records in The Caretaker’s *Everywhere at the End of Time*²⁵ – an epic work in six parts spanning some six and a half hours.

In much ambient music, a steady-state dynamic, gestural behaviour, timbral palette and modal/tonal framework are often maintained throughout. Such a stability of continuity is a pervading quality of ambient music, and yet such ‘stability’ is not without tension – Eno’s “doubt and uncertainty”. Within this overall sense of stability, a perceptual fragility can occur on a moment-to-moment surface level or at a deeper structural/temporal level. Akin to a tightrope walker, the slow graceful progression across a divide when viewed from a distance betrays the continuous muscle tension and micro adjustments needed to maintain balance. Similarly, sound objects can lack a stable pitch contour or be subject to various types of micro-distortions to suggest the decaying of a sound belying the permanence of the digital sound file. Nomi Epstein writes that, “Fragility, then, offers a sonic experience where both the possibility of stability and the possibility of its obliteration have been demonstrated”.²⁶

In her article *Musical Fragility: A phenomenological examination*, Epstein identifies ten categories of fragility in contemporary music: 1) performative; 2) material; 3) acoustic; 4) structural; 5) notational; 6) psychological; 7) temporal; 8) tuning; 9) spatial; and 10) multi-dimensional.²⁷ In our discussion of ambient music not all of these are pertinent, partly due to the recorded

24 Saini Manninen, “The art of Leftovers: Memory, Matter and Decay,” *Journal of Media Practice* 12/3: (2011): 246.

25 The Caretaker, *Everywhere at the End of Time*, <https://thecaretaker.bandcamp.com/album/everywhere-at-the-end-of-time>

26 Nomi Epstein, “Musical Fragility: A phenomenological examination,” *Tempo* 71 (281(2017): 40.

27 Ibid.

nature of the genre. However, we can adapt various of Epstein's headings and apply them to ambient music as well as refining and adding to this list. I will consider in detail *material*, *structural* and *temporal* fragility in ambient music as well as two newly proposed concepts: *technological* and *gestalt*.

For Epstein, *material fragility* is damage to the object or instrument used in sound production so it can no longer carry out its normal sonic function. In recorded ambient music, from a Schaefferian perspective, we hear sound objects transmitted via records or other (digital) technology. James J. Gibson's ecological approach to perception maintains that such objects afford certain types of actions.²⁸ It is the potentiality of such objects' fragility that creates the tension experienced by the listener. This could be in the way a sound object is developed or processed, or in the treatment of the technology used to play the music. Deupree states that:

I often make my music balance on the edge of fragility, which comes from a specific design of the sounds and the composition. When it's successful you have this very gentle, hushed music that has a lot of tension in it. It's a very strange, but effective contrast. The tension keeps you engaged, in a way fearful that at any minute it's going to fall apart, while the gentle qualities can relax you and ease that tension. It's playing with this dichotomy that I find the most interesting music can live.²⁹

Similar tensions can also be found in Philip Jeck's music. In Jeck's work (which is most often constructed by mixing multiple records on old Dansette players) as in Basinski's, there is a local micro-tension produced by a repeating 'loop' yielding a differing sonic outcome through the unpredictable qualities

28 See James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH), 1979), 127.

29 Infinite Grain 13, Interview with Taylor Deupree, accessed May 7, 2019, <http://sonicfield.org/series/infinite-grain/>

of the technology being exploited - resulting in surface distortion or temporal fracturing. Miguel Carvalhais writes:

From recording and valuing the artist's actions, we come to the development of processes that are exogenous to the artist, and that often may not be totally under their control. Two other artworks allow us to understand the allure of these semi-autonomous processes of erosion and degradation, Andy Warhol's 1978 *Oxidation Paintings*, and William Basinski's *Disintegration Loops* [...] The oxidation in Warhol's paintings was artificially halted by processes of conservation. If that had not happened, the works would have eventually been destroyed by the oxidation. As they are, they freeze a moment in time, a particular stage of the process. Basinski's tapes were transferred to digital, and thus the fully destructive process of *disintegration* was recorded for posterity, becoming central to the compositions and defining their titles.³⁰

Material fragility can be linked to *technological fragility* especially where the technological medium as material is brought into focus by the composer. Although such technological fragility has commonly been associated with glitch music³¹ its use in ambient music is somewhat different. Technological fragility can be heard in the pitch warping of tape loops, hiss, wow, flutter and dropout of Taylor Deupree & Marcus Fisher's *Twine*³² and Deupree's *Somi*³³ and *Fallen*. There is also a current trend, employed by both Taylor

30 Miguel Carvalhais, "On Emptiness (or, on finishing with a blank canvas)," Proceedings of xCoAx 2017 Conference, Lisbon, accessed April 15, 2019, <http://2017.xcoax.org/pdf/xCoAx2017-Carvalhais.pdf>

31 See Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-digital tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music,'" *Computer Music Journal* (2000): 12-18. <https://doi.org/10.1162/014892600559489>

32 Taylor Deupree and Marcus Fisher, *Twine* (USA: 12k - 12k1086, 2015).

33 Taylor Deupree, *Somi* (USA: 12k - 12k1087, 2017).

Deupree and Ian Hawgood (see 光³⁴), amongst others, of mastering with a higher noise floor than usual. In their work, noise, particularly arising from analogue equipment used in the recording process and mastering chain, becomes a timbral or textural constant – a non-space for isolated musical objects to occur – *le bruit de fond*. The high noise floor also provides a sense of sonic continuity. Whilst not dissimilar from the pink or brown noise often used for relaxation, this noise floor provides a faux patina of age – a distancing of the sound from the listener. As such, it not only contributes to the creation of atmosphere but also of temporal distance. In addition, we are invited to listen technologically to the materiality of the medium supporting the auditory signal itself. Tape pitch bends in Deupree and Fisher’s *Twine* is a complex example of sonic fragility of the sound heard carried through tape – a technological fragility, yet fixed in a digital and permanent audio file. The destabilisation of the tape recorder’s regular functionality, through the spooling of tape too quickly or a loop slipping, renders it fragile, and it becomes precarious. Our attention is actively drawn to such events as the temporal quasi-regularity of the loop is fractured.

What Oliver Thurley writes about Ullmann’s scores could equally apply to Taylor Dupree, Marcus Fisher, or Ian Hawgood’s recent work:

At the macroscopic level the structure often seems static, avoiding any formal *telos* or expression; close-up the music is, in fact, in perpetual motion beneath its surface. It is the constant movement of these tiny variables in performance that causes fragile disruptions, as musical events are constantly tampered with and undermined or destabilised. Pitches are never allowed to settle, but instead waver uneasily; dynamics are not even, but shake erratically.³⁵

34 Ian Hawgood, 光 (France: Eilean Records – 073, 2018).

35 Oliver Thurley, “Disappearing Sounds,” 10.

It is this tiny movement, often variations of pitch or within a repeated decay tail that is transformed in some way (see Deupree's *Fallen* or Ian Hawgood's *Impermanence*³⁶), that demands an acuity of listening in order to comprehend fully the subtlety of the destabilisation of the sonic materials. It is an intentionally composed fragility. It is the transience of the sound to which attention is drawn. The warping of a decay highlights the moment of capturing the embers of a sound. We listen to a composed impermanence, as if to half-remembered memories or some brittle exhumed sonic artefact. As such we listen to crafted 'atmospheres' that suggest decay and ageing (often achieved through the subtle mixing of mono and stereo recordings).

In much ambient music, there is a perception of *temporal fragility* not only evident at the moment-to-moment level in the use of repetition or asynchronous looping techniques, but also through the use of textural materials and drones which result in the suspension of the listener's consciousness of time passing. The form and slow, sometimes almost glacial, pacing of ambient music deliberately sets out to destabilise the listener's perception of time. The extended duration of many ambient works, their structural stasis and often fragmentary pitch content prevent easy recall and separation of distinct sections in the work. This leads to a perceived temporal stasis in which sonic placement is often unpredictable. Thurley's writings about the work of Jakob Ullmann are again applicable more widely here:

This apparent temporal stasis [...] makes it difficult for audiences to pick out moments by which to orientate their fragile listening experience; further obfuscating and distorting the temporal experience.³⁷

36 Ian Hawgood, *Impermanence* (UK: Slowcraft Records – SR16, 2019)

37 Oliver Thurley, "Disappearing Sounds," 19.

In discussing this distortion of the “temporal experience” the writings of Edmund Husserl are pertinent. Husserl developed the notion of a subjective time-consciousness that is distinct from objective time. From this, Husserl went on to propose the idea of ‘inner time-consciousness’, the main focus of this being an individual’s ‘temporal span’. Husserl maintained that the temporal span comprises three main parts that are inseparable: primal impression, retention, and protention – our anticipation of the moment. In ambient music, particularly long-form, drone-based work, the music is devoid of directionality and curtails the possibility of protention. More realistically (and interestingly) perhaps, ambient music pluralises protention so that there is never just one clear path of continuation as there is so often in tonal music. Fitzell writes that:

Devoid of substantial directionality, a nonlinear temporal experience permits no protentions of closure, only nondirectional protentions of continuance. Unlike linear music, which features readily apparent and often predictable temporal trajectories, nonlinear music curtails a listener’s ability to anticipate conclusion. The effect is one of enduring present awareness.³⁸

Siepmann applies the Deleuzian model of the rhizome to ambient music as an example of this “present awareness” and networked openness. He writes:

[...] there are no beginnings from which a linear sequence may emerge, but rather densifications, intensifications, reinforcements, injections, showerings, and other intercalary events [...] there must be a distribution of inequalities in the system so that the musical contents shift and flow in attempts to gain stability and equilibrium

38 Gordon Fitzell, *Time-Consciousness and Form in Nonlinear Music* (PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2004), 22.

in the ambient world.³⁹

Even when closure is implied as in the use of ‘loops’ – in Deupree and Fisher’s *Twine* and Basinski’s *Disintegration Loops*, the dropout, wow, and flutter, create ever-changing loops that are temporally fragile. This process disrupts the subject’s perception of time as a constant linear process.

A further example of such temporal fragility that leads to a sense of structural fragility can be found in the looping patterns of Janek Schaefer’s installation *Extended Play*. In this installation the violin, cello and piano parts of a pre-composed piece are recorded separately onto custom vinyl. Three versions of each are presented at different speeds. In addition, the looping records, arranged in groups of three under a suspended red light, can be stopped and started by proximity sensors triggered by those in the gallery. The result is a work in a state of continual flux, whose structural integrity is constantly interrupted and fractured.

An extension of this concept of temporal fragility is what I term gestalt fragility – a quality that is particularly evident at the moment-to-moment surface level of the music. In Deupree’s *Somi* and *Fallen*, isolated pitches or fragments of a suggested melody are presented – often isolated across the stereo field and through pitch tessitura separation imply multiple auditory streams progressing simultaneously. The listener is drawn to make connections between these elements. Often temporal connections in one auditory stream are stretched out so a sense of musical line is difficult to perceive. The listener is left with a melodic line in which a quasi-traditional polyphonic melodic syntax is implied but never actually stated. The disconnected melodic elements serve to disorientate the listener further through the negation of expected gestalt principles.

In ambient music the five concepts of fragility discussed encompass specific aesthetic and sonic qualities of ambient music including notions of

39 Daniel Siepmann, “A Slight Delay,” 191.

impermanence, disintegration, the emergence and decay of sonic materials, evidence of the corporeal captured in the sound production, studio artefacts, and the temporal transcendental quality of ambient music. All of these qualities invite an acuity of listening to appreciate how they are being used and manipulated, and how they contribute to the creation of atmosphere. One aspect of technological and material fragility touched on in this section is the perception of, and role of noise. The next section discusses this in detail outlining specific approaches to noise in ambient music.

Noise

Noise is as a territorialising form of sound: one that masks, obliterates, is transgressive and overpowers. At a certain level noise, interpreted as volume, becomes a physical sensation rather than auditory signal. Torben Sangild writes that, “Noise can blow your head out. Noise is rage. Noise is ecstatic. Noise is psychedelic. Noise is often on the edge between annoyance and bliss”.⁴⁰ For Sangild, the “distorted guitar is a metonymy of ‘abrasiveness,’ of something torn, shattered, and decomposed. Noise expresses physical, emotional and mental instability”.⁴¹ Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century we talk about noise pollution and noise abatement. Since Luigi Russolo’s manifesto *The Art of Noise* (1913) and his *intonarumori*, noise has been an increasing part of music, evident in the work of Merzbow, Pharmakon, Tim Hecker, Ben Frost and Maja S. K. Ratkje amongst many others.

Torben Sangild considers noise as “a de-centering [sic] of subjectivity” in sound. To perceive this de-centring involves listening closely to what is at the heart of such a sonic event. Sangild identifies three categories of noise derived from acoustics and information theory:

40 Torben Sangild, *The Aesthetics of Noise* (2002) accessed April 16, 2019, <http://www.ubu.com/papers/noise.html>

41 Torben Sangild, “Noise – Three Musical Gestures – Expressionist, Introvert and Minimal Noise,” *The Journal of Music and Meaning*, vol. 2 (2004), accessed April 17, 2019, http://www.musicandmeaning.net/issues/pdf/JMMart_2_4.pdf

1. Acoustic noise - In the field of acoustics the concept of noise is in principle purely physically defined. Noises are sounds that are impure and irregular [...]
2. Communicative noise – In communication theory, noise is that which distorts the signal on its way from transmitter to recipient. [...] In music noise is often originally a malfunction in the instruments or electronics (a disturbance of the clear signal), which is then reversed into a positive effect. The distortion effect of the electric guitar, for instance, which is now ubiquitous, was originally an overload of the amplifier [...] When you reverse a disturbance into a part of the music itself, it is not smoothly integrated but infuses the music with a tension. There is still a play on the formerly negative relation between noise and signal when a noise is legitimated. This tension is an important part of the musical power of noise.
3. Subjective noise – ‘Unpleasant sounds’ – this is the common and colloquial, but also the most intricate, meaning of noise. And it is obviously a subjective definition [...]⁴²

In our consideration of noise in ambient music, it is the second of these (communicative noise) that is the most pertinent. However, noise does not always have to be perceived as something overpowering or abrasive. One only has to think of the noise generators to assist sleep used to mask ‘unwanted’ distracting sounds or the countless YouTube sites playing hours of waves crashing on an unidentified beach or just actual noise signals.⁴³ Christoph Cox writes that the difference between a signal (intended) and noise (unintended) “is *relative* rather than *absolute*”,⁴⁴ and cultural theorist

42 Torben Sangild, “The Aesthetics of Noise.”

43 See “Ten hours of Pink Noise,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXtimhT-ff4> or “Smoothed Brown Noise,” accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcWgjCDPiP4>

44 Christoph Cox, “Sound Art and the Sonic Unconscious,” *Organised Sound* 14(1), (2009): 20.

Abraham Moles writes that,

[...] there is *no* absolute structural difference between noise and signal. They are of the same nature. The only difference which can be logically established between them is based exclusively on the concept of intent on the part of the transmitter. *A noise is a signal that the sender does not want to transmit.*⁴⁵

In much dark ambient, as well as the more post-shoegaze noise-infused ambient of composers such as Tim Hecker, Erik Levander, Christian Fennesz and Rafael Anton Irisarri, impure and irregular ‘noise’ sounds – often derived from the guitar – are a prominent characteristic of their sonic palette. In their work, noise is not the antonym of a pure tone in the acoustic sense. Rather it is the primordial sonic state that suffuses the music with a fragile tension, a tectonic shifting plate, out of which other textural or gestural elements emerge. This ‘legitimated’ noise arises from the technology these composers use but is also used to fragment, distort and interrupt the signal further, as in “Caecilia” and “Happy Audio” from Fennesz’s *Endless Summer*⁴⁶ or “Live Room” from Tim Hecker’s *Virgins*⁴⁷. The use of noise creates an ecstatic intimacy and musical immateriality – masking an afterglow of musical gesture. Such work can clearly be considered as arising from the second part of Sangild’s tripartite model. It also moves beyond the traditional signal/noise dichotomy and clearly uses noise as part of the compositional intent; as a disruption to the musical flow and as a technological artefact. Therefore, in order to discuss this and other ambient music repertoire in more detail I propose a refinement of Sangild’s ‘communicative noise’ into three subsections: 1) noise as intention; 2) noise as interruption; and 3) noise as artefact in experimental ambient music.

45 Abraham Moles, 1966 *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*, trans. Joel E. Coen. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966), 78.

46 Christian Fennesz, *Endless Summer* (Austria: Mego – MEGO-035, 2001).

47 Tim Hecker, *Virgins* (USA: Kranky – KRANK-183, 2013).

As well as in the Fennesz and Hecker examples above, *noise as intention* can be found in both instrumental and electronic ambient music. The development of Western instruments has for the most part sought to eliminate the noise of its sound production, whereas Japanese instruments like the Biwa or the Shamisen actively seek the inclusion of noise into their sound as an additional expressive quality. These instruments are designed to generate additional buzzing tones and achieve a ‘beautiful noise’. The Japanese call this new sound, generated by the sum of the noise and the sound of the instrument itself, *sawari*. Over the past decade ambient/modern classical albums that use the piano, although not specifically intended as *sawari*, nevertheless make use of additional ‘noises’ to enhance the expressive quality of the music. In contrast to classical piano recordings in which a clarity of tone is sought that eliminates the mechanical noises of the piano itself, albums such as Deupree’s *Fallen*, Jason van Wyk’s *Attachment*, Otto Totland’s *Pinô*, Olafur Arnalds’ *Living Room Songs*, Nils Frahm’s *Encores 1* and Joep Beving’s *Solipsism* all use extraneous close mic-ed piano noises such as pedal noise and the sound of the hammers and key mechanisms to add to the sonic texture of their work. Such additional sounds create a sense of intimacy, immersion and fragility.

Noise as interruption can be perceived as a sonic signifier commenting on the fragility of structure and sonic materiality through its breaking of musical coherence or perception, as well as sonic aggression. Fennesz and Hecker exemplify the latter. Examples of the former can be found in Taylor Deupree’s *Northern*⁴⁸, “family tree” from offthesky’s *form.creek*⁴⁹ and Sogar’s “Monohr” from *Apikal.Blend*.⁵⁰ In these latter examples, *noise as interruption* is both metaphorical and literal. Glitch artefacts are deliberately-used ‘noise’ to fracture the sonic continuum, to destabilise melodic and harmonic content

48 Taylor Deupree, *Northern* (USA: 12k – 12k1037, 2006).

49 offthesky, *form.creek*, (2007), <https://noise.offthesky.com/track/family-tree>

50 Sogar, *Apikal.Blend* (USA: 12k – 12k-1022, 2003).

both temporally and functionally. This glitch can be a click, noise, or other abruptly edited sound that draws attention to the continually shifting sonic surface. Whilst there may well be a steady quasi-tonal framework or a continuity of synthetic or instrumental timbre, the moment-to-moment interruption of this creates a restless surface that draws the listener's attention to these micro-fractures in the temporal continuity. 'Noise' and 'fragility' are perceptually conjoined.

Noise as artefact can be found in more experimental electronic ambient music. Philip Jeck's practice of not using covers on his vinyl exposes the fragility of the medium, allowing it to acquire a 'history' of scratches, dust and other detritus, whilst effacing the original content. In Basinski's *Disintegration Loops*, the very recording of the tape loops actively destroys the material substrate that holds the audio signal. Basinski's pieces were composed in the process of digitising recordings made on magnetic tape that, having aged and degraded, were destroyed by the transfer process. The final 'preserved' work is a simple auditory witnessing of this wilful destruction of the fragile original. Noise is introduced in each loop as the material surface of the tape breaks down with each successive loop. The recording is the "remains and embodied memories within performance"⁵¹ as Basinski recorded them.

Atmosphere

The three different forms of communicative noise I have proposed have a key part to play in the creation of atmospheres in ambient music. Eric Tamm writes that Eno's ambient music is characterised by the maintenance of a single, pervasive atmosphere.⁵² Eno himself defined an ambience, "as atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint".⁵³ This is beautifully suggestive as a description. It is instructive however, to delve a little deeper into the

51 Saini Manninen, "The art of Leftovers," 245.

52 Eric Tamm, *Brian Eno: His Music and the Vertical Color of Sound* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1995).

53 Brian Eno, "Ambient Music."

meaning of ‘atmosphere’, and how atmospheres are formed and perceived. To develop an understanding of atmosphere in ambient music, the writings of Gernot Böhme are useful. The phenomenology of atmospheres is often discussed in relation to reception theory and was first critically discussed by Gernot Böhme.⁵⁴ Mikkel Bille writes that by,

“[...] approaching atmospheres from both a consumption and a production side, Böhme indicates [...] how atmospheres may seem [...] commonplace and work as a premise for engaging with the world, but there is a production aspect with political potential when atmospheres are staged [or constructed sonically]. That is, atmospheres are active in shaping the world, thus showing the two sides of atmospheres where the environment ‘radiates’ a quality of mood and the person participates in this mood with his/her own sensitivity.⁵⁵

The aesthetics of atmospheres that Böhme proposes encompass our everyday experiences, our (fragmentary) memories of past events as well as our appreciation of physical spaces and art. Böhme writes that in order to define the character of an atmosphere “one must expose oneself to them, one must experience them in terms of one’s own emotional state. Without the sentient subject, they are nothing”.⁵⁶ This implies an active engagement on the part of the listener. Or, at the very least an active engagement at some point to establish the perception of atmosphere. The music may then be

54 Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics*, trans. David Roberts, Thesis Eleven (36), (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1993), 119.

55 Mikkel Bille, “Review of Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*,” ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud. (London, Routledge, 2017), *International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture, and Urban Space*, <https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/1065>

56 Gernot Böhme, “The Art of Staging as a paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres,” *Atmospheric Architectures. The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, ed. & trans. A. Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 159.

background until a change in atmosphere is perceived and is so brought to the fore of the listener's attention again. Atmospheres provoke an emotive and unique response in the recipient. Hermann Schmitz defines such feelings as "unlocalized, poured forth atmospheres [...] which visit (haunt) the body which receives them [...] affectively, which takes the form of [...] emotion".⁵⁷ Atmospheres are everywhere and condition our listening experience of ambient music (exterior locus) as well as the atmosphere emanating from the ambient music itself (interior locus). They are indeterminate and intersubjective, occupying an interstitial position between object and subject and so their ontological status is fragile and to some extent re-made anew on each listening. To paraphrase English, they are in a 'constant state of becoming'. Böhme considers atmosphere "an almost objective sensation spilled into space"⁵⁸ writing that,

[...] atmospheres are neither something objective, that is, qualities possessed by things, and yet they are something thing-like, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities - conceived as ecstasies. Nor are atmospheres something subjective, for example, determinations of a psychic state, And yet they are subject-like, belong to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space.⁵⁹

Böhme's blurring of the object-subject dichotomy, of "objective sensation", renders traditional notions of representation and signification problematic,

57 Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics*, trans. David Roberts, Thesis Eleven (36), (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1993), 119.

58 Gernot Böhme, quoted in Simone Brogna, "The Meaning of A Sound Place. G. Bohme, The Aesthetics of The Atmosphere," *DIGICULT* 52, 31-32, accessed August 20, 2018, <http://www.digicult.it/digimag/issue-052/the-meaning-of-a-sound-place-g-bohme-the-aesthetics-of-the-atmosphere/>

59 Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 122..

in that for Böhme such considerations or interpretations are subservient to the creation of atmospheres. In the creation of atmospheres in sound we are therefore not primarily concerned with source-sound bonding to generate meaning. This emancipation of identity renders interpretation open, requiring the listener to complete an understanding. It is the individual's phenomenological experience of sound in ambient music that affords an interpretation of atmosphere. In moving beyond a semiotic analysis of sound in ambient music, Christoph Cox's proposition of a "sonic materialism" that goes beyond representation and signification is useful. Cox writes that:

This materialist theory of sound, then, suggests a way of rethinking the arts in general. Sound is not a world apart, a unique domain of non-signification and non-representation. Rather, sound and the sonic arts are firmly rooted in the material world and the powers, forces, intensities, and becomings of which it is composed. If we proceed from sound, we will be less inclined to think in terms of representation and signification, and to draw distinctions between culture and nature, human and nonhuman, mind and matter, the symbolic and the real, the textual and the physical, the meaningful and the meaningless. Instead, we might begin to treat artistic productions not as complexes of signs or representations but complexes of forces materially inflected by other forces and force-complexes. We might ask of an image or a text not what it *means* or *represents*, but what it *does*, how it *operates*, what changes it effectuates.⁶⁰

Atmospheres are, Böhme writes, "spaces insofar as they are 'tinctured' through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations, that is, through their ecstasies".⁶¹ This could almost be an elaboration of

60 Christoph Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism," *Journal of Visual Culture*, accessed April 19, 2019, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1470412911402880>

61 Ibid.

Eno's original liner notes to *Music for Airports*. If we carry on this adaption of the aesthetics of atmosphere to ambient music specifically we can state that "the particular quality" of an ambient work "lies in the fact that it not only communicates to us that a certain atmosphere prevailed somewhere else but that it conjures up this atmosphere itself".⁶² Furthermore, to paraphrase Böhme, ambient music that depicts a melancholic state of mind, is not merely an exercise in musical semiology but produces this state itself. We can go so far as to state that the logic within an ambient piece of music is not to be found in a meaningful combination of sonic objects but in the creation and communication of atmosphere. Simone Broglia writes that,

[...] compared to the theories of association that have characterized the relationship between music and emotiveness, the theory of atmospheres starts from a given body-sound report that is as basic as essential: sound is the modification of the space investigated by the body, a sound which is able to shape the emotional position of listening in an environment.⁶³

and continues that,

[...] the innovative aspect of the aesthetic approach by Gernot Böhme is to try to weave the possibility that the subject has to perceive the environment as an interaction mediated by the same spatial sounds that cross it and characterize it through a primary state of policy-situational context [...] it redefines the meaning of music as an experience whose core is listening to a particular

62 Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 124.

63 Simone Broglia, "The Meaning of A Sound Place. G. Bohme, The Aesthetics of The Atmosphere," *DIGICULT* 52, accessed August 20, 2018, <http://www.digicult.it/digimag/issue-052/the-meaning-of-a-sound-place-g-bohme-the-aesthetics-of-the-atmosphere/>

acoustic atmosphere.⁶⁴

If we consider Brian Eno's *Thursday Afternoon* in this context, with its isolated piano tones and subtly changing background, atmosphere is created through the individual's identification with the piano as a solitary 'figure' situated within an atemporal, other-worldly sonic frame. An *interior* and *external locus* is present in the music itself as well as between the listener and their environment. The other worldly quality of the synthetic backdrop for the isolated piano tones suggests something ungrounded in its lack of bass frequency content. The music seems to float. In Deupree's *Fallen* the same blueprint gives a very different atmosphere – a high noise floor and emphasis on the idiosyncrasies of the analogue tape technology gives the sense of something aged – not something other-worldly, but fragile and communicated through a vast distance of time, captured and relayed to us in the present. This communicates an atmosphere of nostalgia, the ecstasy of melancholy. Here the background 'noise' attunes the listener to a certain perception of the music. It demonstrates that atmospheres can be designed and quasi-objective, and perceived as a subjective experience. In choosing sounds the composer creates the conditions for a certain atmosphere to become manifest. As Böhme considers atmospheres "conjured" in artworks rather than metaphorically communicated, the sonic content of ambient music is what he terms the "generator" of atmosphere.

Hermann Schmitz refers to a 'technology of presentation' (*Eindruckstechnik*) particularly with reference to theatre works. However, the technology of presentation is equally applicable in a sonic context in ambient music's use of noise and fragility. It is the 'staging' of the sounds – their context, that allows us to listen to them as generating a particular atmosphere. Böhme develops Ludwig Klages' 'eros of distance' which, "unlike the Platonic Eros does not desire closeness and possession but keeps its distance and is fulfilled by

64 Ibid.

contemplative participation in the beautiful".⁶⁵ Deupree's use of disembodied melodic cells and tape noise gives this sense of distance. As Demers notes, the use of a tonal framework within such 'noise' provides the 'beauty'.⁶⁶

The interpretation or communication of atmospheres is complex due to the subject-object dichotomy and what I have termed the *interior/exterior locus* of their construction. An individual's reception and construction of atmosphere is of course mediated through their own memory. Christoph Cox writes,

[...] each of our conscious perceptions is grounded in a vast swarm of elements that do not reach conscious thought. Such unconscious perceptions have what Leibniz calls a virtual existence. They determine conscious perception but are not present to it. Leibniz notes that memory, too, has such a virtual existence. Our present experience takes place against the backdrop of a vast reservoir of memory, which for the most part remains unconscious. Yet [...] a photograph, a song or a chance encounter can draw a portion of this reservoir into actuality, temporarily illuminating it and offering a glimpse of the totality.⁶⁷

This "glimpse of the totality" is why atmosphere in ambient music is so important and draws listeners back to it over and over. It is not a 'closed' music that is syntactically complete. Rather it is open. Its temporal, structural, and gestalt fragility create an incomplete space which atmosphere fills. It is the listener alone that completes this totality of experience. This is what the fragmentary melodies of Taylor Deupree's *Fallen* and the cyclically haunting

65 Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 118.

66 Joanna Demers, *Listening Through The Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103.

67 Christoph Cox, "Sound Art and the Sonic Unconscious," *Organised Sound* 14(1), (2009): 21. doi:10.1017/S1355771809000041

cello melody lines of *Faintly Recollected*⁶⁸ by Ian Hawgood and Danny Norbury achieve – an open-endedness that, through its gestalt fragility creates an atmosphere of melancholic reflection. In their incomplete ‘traditional’ musical syntax, they create the impression of something half remembered. It is as if their incomplete presentation presents a portion of our unconscious reservoir of memory brought into actuality, offering a glimpse of the totality that is completed by the listener.

Noise also has its part to play in the creation of atmosphere. Deupree’s use of tape noise as a continuum in which to situate foregrounded pitch content on *Somi* is akin to filmmakers’ recording room tone noise for “a subconscious sonic field without which dialogue and diegetic sound would seem artificial and unmoored”.⁶⁹ This sonic field – a sonic continuity which is punctuated by surface features – is the key aspect of ambient music’s ability to generate atmospheres. Böhme writes that atmospheres “seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze”.⁷⁰

In ambient music we can identify a number of key elements that generate atmosphere many of which are to do with the lack of functional syntax identified by Daniel Siepmann. The use of noise, drones, or slow textural evolution provides a sonic field or haze from which sonic events can emerge and disappear. This continuity creates a singular atmosphere within which ecologies of sound can develop but do not establish an over-riding functional discourse or structural logic of their own – rather they act as surface features of a landscape – creating their own fragile geography. The five aspects of fragility identified (technological, gestalt, material, structural and temporal) also contribute to the creation of atmosphere, often in combination with one another. These approaches to fragility provide a framework for the composer to consider, process, and present their sonic material in a particular way, that

68 Ian Hawgood & Danny Norbury, *Faintly Recollected* (Poland, Home Normal – HN102, 2018).

69 *Ibid.*, 24.

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

act as ‘generators’ of atmosphere and elicit in the listener their own memories and hence unique manifestation of atmospheres within any given work.

Conclusion

In drawing attention to fragility, noise and atmosphere in experimental ambient music I have sought to outline a framework or terminology for discussing such work. I have also attempted to refocus discussion away from the *ignorable-as-it-is-listenable* mantra, and more towards concepts of subject agency, and listening. It is my contention that whilst much experimental ambient music possesses many of the qualities originally outlined by Eno, these are works to be actively listened to – few performers aim to present their music at similarly low levels to those that led to Eno’s ‘epiphany’.⁷¹ Ambient music does not assert an identity for interpretation. Rather, through the creation of atmospheres it manifests an environment from which, through conscious engagement, meaning may emerge – meaning that is both a reflection of the self and the society in which we live.

71 See: Ivan Hewitt, “How Brian Eno created a quiet revolution in music,” *The Telegraph*, January 5, 2016, accessed April 23, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/artists/how-brian-eno-created-a-quiet-revolution-in-music/> Eno having been knocked down by a cab was recuperating at home, “to amuse him an old girlfriend took an LP of harp music round to his flat. “[...] After she had gone, and with considerable difficulty, I put on the record,” he recalls. “After I had lain down, I realised that the amplifier was set at an extremely low level, and that one channel of the stereo had failed completely. Since I hadn’t the energy to get up and improve matters, the record played on almost inaudibly. This presented what was for me a new way of hearing music – as part of the ambience of the environment just as the colour of the light and sound of the rain were parts of the ambience.”