



Ambience

TRAVIS MATTESON

Department of English and Humanities, SUNY Alfred State College, USA

In the final lines of the poem “The Snow Man,” Wallace Stevens invites us to tune into “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”¹ The definite article here adds gravity and specificity to the second “nothing,” while the clipped final phrase—“that is”—hovers between the adverbial (the unspoken “there”) and the ontological “is.” There is also an anthropomorphic subject in this final stanza: “the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds.”² Nothing, then, is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder, not ontic but phenomenal: the acoustic experience of listening in the snow is nothing for the listener, but in fact it may be something. The listener, being “nothing himself” seems to be in a heightened state of awareness, an attunement to something lingering just beyond the edge of sensibility. The name of this something is ambience.

Ambience: “the nothing that is.” Colloquially, *ambience* is another word for an environment or atmosphere and is often associated with acoustic phenomena (as in Stevens’s poem). Brian Eno, who coined the term “ambient music,” defines it as “an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint.”³ In the environmental humanities, ambience has long been regarded as a generative influence, a perceptual shift that resists the subject-object duality that is the foundation of humanity’s environmental exploitation. In *Ecology without Nature*, Timothy Morton embraces ambience, which “suggests something material and physical, though somewhat intangible, as if space itself had a material aspect,” as a more constructive alternative to an idealized “Nature.”⁴ For Morton, ambience is a paradoxical

1. Stevens, “Snow Man,” 11.
2. Stevens, “Snow Man,” 11.
3. Eno, “Ambient Music.”
4. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 34.

focus on the peripheral: “the margins of a page, the silence before and after music, the frame and walls surrounding a picture, the decorative spaces of a building (parergon), including niches for sculpture.”⁵ Deprivileging what we typically interpret as content creates space for an experience of the ambient.⁶

Like “the nothing” for Stevens’s listener in the snow, ambience is beheld by a subject who through some force of will or circumstances is reduced to “nothing” to perceive the ambient. As Karen Pinkus notes, “While Morton’s central point is that ambience surrounds, it is important to remember that ambience is perceived, written about, and comprehended by a subject.”⁷ And for a human subject, this attentional posture is complicated by the political habit of mind Jacques Rancière terms “the partition of the sensible,” which privileges human subjectivity to the exclusion of the nonhuman world.⁸ Rancière defines the partition of the sensible as “the cutting-up of the world and of ‘world.’”⁹ In this definition, sensibility hinges on the definite article—“the world”¹⁰—an echo of Stevens’s “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Ambience is only perceived as nothing because our existing political frameworks seem unable to accommodate the other-than-human.¹¹

Our ability to apprehend the ambient is complicated not only by our politics but by our basic neurology. “Sensory gating” is an attentional mechanism that filters out, or “gates,” irrelevant or meaningless stimuli.¹² Using this part of our evolutionary security system, the brain looks at the quotidian, ambient world and labels it “nothing.” Of course, we would not be able to function without this mechanism, which prevents us from becoming literally overstimulated. But the utilitarian nature of sensory gating may play a role in filtering out so-called irrelevant stimuli that could otherwise facilitate a sense of ecological humility. As mechanism and metaphor, sensory gating reveals how we repackage the world in ways that are meaningful, maintaining the illusion of human mastery over nature. From the perspective of ecological humility, exploding our sense of what is “meaningful” might reveal an ambient intimation of the world that is, rather than the world as it is for us.

First-person narratives of dissociation depict the experience as a self-negating leak in one’s sensory gating. In an autobiographical essay aptly titled “The Trees Step Out of the Forest,” Barbara Ehrenreich describes her first dissociative experience, which happened while she was in the woods: “Something peeled off the visible world, taking

5. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 34.

6. Morton and others associated with object-oriented ontology (OOO) draw on a phenomenology of the ambient that originates with Martin Heidegger, which is given extended treatment in Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric*.

7. Pinkus, “Ambiguity,” 93.

8. Rancière, Panagia, and Bowlby, “Ten Theses.”

9. Rancière, Panagia, and Bowlby, “Ten Theses.”

10. This observation holds true even in the original French: “du monde et de monde.” See Rancière, “Onze thèses,” 99.

11. Sociological research, such as Zerubavel’s *Hidden in Plain Sight*, interrogates the social structures of attention that similarly filter out the “irrelevant” from the perceptible.

12. Zabelina et al., “Creativity and Sensory Gating,” 77.

with it all meaning, inference, association, and words.”¹³ What Ehrenreich describes as a kind of abstraction seems like a breakage in the sensory dam, as if pure stimuli were flooding through without regard for their irrelevance or meaninglessness. She continues, “I was alarmed to discover that when you take away all human attributions—the words, the names of species, the wisps of remembered tree-related poetry, the fables of photosynthesis and capillary action—that when you take all this away, *there is still something left*.”¹⁴ While dissociation is commonly thought of as a detachment from reality, it might be more accurate to consider it an encounter with the ambient. Dissociation inverts the solipsism of selfhood. It is a crack in the partition of the sensible—properly, a disruption of “continuity in subjective experience.”¹⁵

How can we tune into ambience? Like Stevens’s listener, sound studies can lead the way in moving ambience from the margins to the center of critical practice, from David Toop’s prescient study of ambient sound in twentieth-century music to Kate Crawford’s theorization of ambient listening as a metaphor for social media engagement.¹⁶ Approaches such as acoustic ecology and soundscape studies can probe the affective dimensions of the ambient—treating the perceptually inert or intangible as “vibrant,” in Jane Bennett’s terms—to confront the most urgent of ecological crises.¹⁷ For example, an installation by the sound art collaboration Luftwerk’s sound simulates the acoustic effects of melting Antarctic icebergs to present climate change data to the public in an immersive environment.¹⁸ As we continue to raise questions about humanistic meaning in a more-than-human world, ambience presents the opportunity to radically redefine what is meaningful to our disciplines. We may find, as Ehrenreich did, that after dismantling our anthropocentric filters, there is still something left.

TRAVIS MATTESON is an assistant professor of English and humanities at SUNY Alfred State College. His work focuses on the intersection of poetics, media theory, and ecocriticism.

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13. Ehrenreich, *Living with a Wild God*, 47.

14. Ehrenreich, *Living with a Wild God*, 48.

15. American Psychiatric Association, “Dissociative Disorders.”

16. Toop, *Ocean of Sound*; Crawford, “Following You.”

17. Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, 3.

18. Luftwerk, “Requiem.”

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