



Lapworth, A. (2018). Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of the Self, Paul Roquet, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN (2016), 245 pp. \$27.50 paperback, ISBN: 978-0-8166-9246-0. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 28, 67-68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.05.002>

Peer reviewed version

License (if available):
CC BY-NC-ND

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1016/j.emospa.2018.05.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.05.002)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Elsevier at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1755458618300471> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/pure/about/ebr-terms>

Manuscript Details

Manuscript number	EMOSPA_2018_38
Title	Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of the Self, Paul Roquet, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN (2016). 245 pp. \$27.50 paperback, ISBN: 978-0-8166-9246-0.
Article type	Book review
Corresponding Author	Andrew Lapworth
Corresponding Author's Institution	University of Bristol
Order of Authors	Andrew Lapworth

Submission Files Included in this PDF

File Name [File Type]

Title page.docx [Title Page (with Author Details)]

Emotion, Space& Society review.docx [Manuscript (without Author Details)]

To view all the submission files, including those not included in the PDF, click on the manuscript title on your EVISE Homepage, then click 'Download zip file'.

Research Data Related to this Submission

There are no linked research data sets for this submission. The following reason is given:
No data was used for the research described in the article

Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of the Self, Paul Roquet,
University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN (2016). 245 pp. \$27.50
paperback, ISBN: 978-0-8166-9246-0.

Reviewed by
Andrew Lapworth

School of Geographical Sciences, University Road, University of Bristol,
BS8 1SS, United Kingdom

andrew.lapworth@bristol.ac.uk

Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of the Self, Paul Roquet, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN (2016). 245 pp. \$27.50 paperback, ISBN: 978-0-8166-9246-0.

Reviewed by Andrew Lapworth, School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, United Kingdom.

‘Sit back, relax, and let your thoughts drift away...’ From ‘contemplative cinema’ to ambient electronic music, ‘healing-style’ literature to therapeutic video, our contemporary urban landscapes are increasingly populated by various forms of ‘mood-regulating’ media designed to provide those that encounter them with an affective sense of calm and security in a world defined by ever-growing anxiety and insecurity. Paul Roquet’s book offers a meditative reflection on the rise of these new media ecologies, which he groups under the concept of ‘*ambient media*’. Works of ambient media, he writes, usually function below the thresholds of our conscious attention, and are oriented towards colouring the surrounding environment with a specific emotional tone or mood that bodies can then attune to. Empirically, Roquet’s book focuses on the subjective and political implications of ambient media in Japan, highlighting how, since the 1970s, Japanese audiences and artists have increasingly turned to ambient aesthetic styles as techniques of self-care to help them weather the social and sensory bombardment of modern urban life. Today, Japan is the global centre for the production of such therapeutic ambient media, a fact that may come as little surprise to those who have found themselves on rush-hour commuter train in Tokyo. Although quite brief, Roquet reflects on the distinct set of historical, cultural, and political conditions that might help explain Japan’s enthusiastic embrace of ambient media. Central here is how ambient media’s goal of blending seamlessly with everyday life – of becoming ‘part of the background’ – resonates with the emphasis in Japanese society on ‘reading the air’ (*kuuki ga yomenai*) and the social harmonics of ‘going with the flow’.

A key aspect of the book’s argument is that the proliferation of ambient media in Japan and other post-industrial societies since the 1970s is no mere coincidence, but is instead bound up with the advent of neoliberal modes of social control and a new concept of the subject oriented around ideas of self-determination and personal responsibility. Here, Roquet productively supplements his post-phenomenological account of affective atmospheres with Michel Foucault’s later work on biopolitics and governmentality, introducing the concept of “*ambient subjectivation*” to describe the neoliberal shift towards interventions in the ‘environmental’ conditions of subjectivity, with social control increasingly oriented towards the modulation of preindividual intensities and unconscious moods. The turn to Foucault is significant because it enables Roquet to shift beyond the default critical position that would see these new media works as yet further examples of technologies of social control and pacification, to instead engage in a more ‘ambivalent’ mode of critique that is

attentive to how ambient media holds in tension both increases in personal freedom and possibilities for healing *as well as* more insidious forms of social subjection (p. 177). As he notes in relation to Kurita Yuki's novels, in order to provide a sense of embodied security and incubatory calm, ambient media "must distance itself from the outside world and the more upsetting or exciting forms of emotion that might be triggered there" (p. 169). The dangers of closing this emotional aperture to the outside too tightly can be seen in much maligned figure in Japan of the *hikikomori* (the 'acutely socially withdrawn'). The ethical question that this book poses is therefore how ambient media might function to construct more affirmative and less destructive social relations, inviting us at the same time to "take on a more active role in building the kinds of atmospheres we want to live in and through" (p.21).

Following an introduction which introduces several key concepts and theorists, the book is composed of six substantive chapters each exploring the ambient subjectivations bound up with a different genre of atmospheric media. Chapters 1 and 2 trace a genealogy of 'ambient music' in Japan from the emergence of commercial background music, to the 'Satie' boom of the 70s, and finally to the more experimental offerings of contemporary musicians like Hatakeyama Chihei and Tetsu Inoue. Chapters 3 and 4 then shift attention to the work of Japanese video artists, exploring how ambient video creatively mediates between the somatic rhythms of the body and the material rhythms and durations of the city. While the level of detail the author provides on these artists and genres is rich, I found the discussion at times to be a bit too descriptive and would have liked a stronger sense of the ethical stakes of these ambient works linking back more explicitly to the concepts outlined in the introduction. The stand-out chapters for me were chapters 5 and 6, where Roquet moves to a more explicit discussion of the broader social and subjective implications of ambient media use. Chapter 5 in particular offers a fascinating discussion of the 'atmospheric style' of the film *Tony Takitani* (an adaptation of Murakami Haruki's short story), and linking this to a more general 'subtractivist aesthetic' made popular by brands like Muji (as well as figures like Kondo Marie), involving a "smoothing of the self by designing out the need for strong emotional attachments to other people or the past itself" (127).

While obviously of direct relevance for scholars of Japanese culture and film, the book will also be of interest to a broader readership interested in theorising the relationship between media encounters and the production of subjectivity. In addition, Roquet's book contributes to a growing multidisciplinary body of literature seeking to establish creative dialogue between the hitherto separate literatures on affect and biopolitics. My main criticism of the text is the extent to which it delivers on 'both sides' of its ambivalent critique. Overall, Roquet tends to foreground the (arguably) more positive affective states of comfort, calm, security, and healing in his reflections on ambient media. While the production of therapeutic atmospheres by corporations like Muji as well as religious and far-right groups is briefly mentioned, I would have liked a more fleshed out discussion of the capitalistic and political capture of ambient desires. Here I think it is necessary to take greater heed of

Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 500) (another of the book's key references) and their warning to "never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us".

References

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. B. Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.