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Poetics of Attention and the Experience of Ambient Literature

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing techniques derived from contextual and ubiquitous computing, works of "ambient literature" highlight connections between literary texts and the wider contexts of their engagement. As such, a necessary aspect of these works is the modulation of readers' attention between the text itself and the context within which it is read. Building on Charles Bernstein's account of the role readers' attention plays within poetic texts, this paper examines the connections that exist between new forms of digital writing (such as ambient literature) and the poetic traditions stemming from language-centered writing. For each, attempts to locate (both literarily and theoretically) the poetic text within broader networks of social, material, and historical context serve as anchor to the relationship between the linguistic artifice and reception of the work. In focusing on the role a reader's attention plays in both existing pre-digital and digital writing, a general model of readers' attention is able to be developed. By bringing discussions of ambient literature together with existing traditions of avant garde practice, it becomes possible to critically engage the question of attention as it comes to be expressed in post-digital forms. In recognizing the permeability between classical analog and contemporary digital forms of writing as they both exist within a wider world, attention comes to be inscribed as a fundamental aspect of not only the reception of a work, but within the work itself. By drawing these connections between new forms of digital media and aspects of the historical landscape of avant garde textual practices, it becomes possible to both critically engage the territory of post-digital writing and develop strategies for the analysis and creation of ambient literature.

Introduction

What I want to do in this paper is to lay out an account of the ways in which attention is formally

present in works of digital literature, focusing in particular on a set of emergent practices

clustered around the term "ambient literature" (Dovey, 2016). In doing this, I want to focus on

how both textual and extratextual aspects of a work of literature interact toward supporting potentially absorptive reading experiences. For something like ambient literature in particular, there is a concern with the way in which the linguistic text of a work is able to contribute to a wider experience of something that might be considered "ambient." In order to trace this specific question of how a text might contribute to the development of participants' immersion with a work, I am going to follow an argument made by Charles Bernstein (1992) concerning 20th century American poetry and the ways in which sometimes difficult or opaque texts court the attention of readers. In following Bernstein's account of absorption and impermeability in poetic texts, I hope to consider how this might align with certain conceptual veins concerning immersion, absorption, and ambience as they appear in ambient literature.

In the end, I want to put forward a critique of the viability of the concept of attention, moving it away from a psychological consideration and toward a wider conceptual field of social and material occurrence.

Ambient literature

As it is understood here, the term "ambient literature" points toward an emerging cluster of literary practices that engage the situated and contextual relationship that exists between the reader and a literary text.

As works of ambient literature frequently make use of contemporary digital technologies and communication infrastructures in order to create dynamic works which build links between the

digital literary text and the continuous and really existing context of their use, such works can be understood as being a radical example of a post digital aesthetic (Cramer, 2014) in which the material form of digital work is fully recognized and considered just one possible configuration among others and one that exists alongside, interweaves with, but does not replace, other ways of being.

To further situate it, it is considered here within the frame of the still ongoing ambient literature research project, which is focused around the commissioning of three different works of contextual literature from three different authors. Of these, so far one has been completed, a piece by Duncan Speakman, whose *It Must Have Been Dark by Then* (2017) combines a smartphone application and a printed book in order to guide readers along a set of coordinates overlaid atop their immediate surroundings. As readers physically move along a route that is both of their own design and algorithmically generated, the audio of the app guides readers' attention as they are directed to read passages from the book and explore their surroundings. Through this interaction, the stories told in the work serve as relief to the reader's experience of their actual location.

As a work which is focused on allowing participants to carve their own path in the experience of the work and which relies on the particular surroundings of the reader in order to produce the emotional and intellectual force of the work, *It Must Have Been Dark by Then* gestures toward the kind of co-creation discussed by Patrick Jagoda's (2016) conception of a Network Aesthetic which highlights recent developments across media toward works which are interactive and

co-constituted by the engagement of their audience. In Speakman's work and in ambient literature in general, while this kind of interaction can be engaged in various ways, it is most directly present in the way in which the reader's attention plays a key role in the thematics developed by the works, particularly as their attention moves between the literary text and the surrounding context of its consumption.

For ambient literature, this consideration of attention comes framed in two ways. The first comes, in a rather obvious way, from ambient music and its origins in the work of Brian Eno. As Eno (1978) put it, "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." In its ability to sustain a variation within the field a listener's attention, ambient music opens up the possibility for a hermeneutic model of attention for ambient literature, in which attention might go out to the surrounding world and back toward the work itself in order to create a more satisfying experience.

While this idea has proven to be important in building out the uses of ambience in music, art, and here with ambient literature, this is not to say that we should take these ideas onboard in an unproblematic fashion. As Seth Kim-Cohen (2016) has it in his critique of the concept of "ambience," with "ambience" comes a host of concepts and properties to be questioned ranging "from 'spherical,' to 'places you inside an event,' to 'brings us into the living world,' to affective, temporal, and immersive" (p. 6). The invocation of the concept of ambience does not solve the question of the material involvement of literature in the question of attention, so much

as it encourages further questioning.

The second model of attention that ambient literature starts with comes from the initial utopian vision for ubiquitous computing in which computing blends into the background of everyday life and the difficulties of interacting with new technological systems are eliminated by an "ambient intelligence" able to adapt to and accommodate users' needs. In this, a user is able keep their attention on important issues, while automated systems take care of mundane tasks: users are able to skillfully move through the world without distraction.

In each of these cases, the question of attention is given a binary or at least directional form: attention is there or it is not. Each of these foundational approaches encourages the idea that there is a possibility of the perfectibility of the programmatic question of attention, in both cases highlighted by a negative falling away and considered through a hermeneutic differentiation of figure and ground. For ambient literature, however, any attempt toward an application of either of these forms of "ambience" is complicated by the role that the linguistic text of literature plays in the work. As opposed to either music or the kind of on-rails computing proffered by ubiquitous computing, the movement of reading (or even listening to speech) is impossible without some minimal form of attention. Reading, except in perhaps the most incidental of ways, is an active pursuit. How are we to think of this as text comes to be situated in the world and the fact of this situatedness comes to play a role in the work?

To follow this question, I want to look at the the function of absorption in a literary text as it is considered by Charles Bernstein in his poem-essay "The Artifice of Absorption" in regard to forms of avant garde writing which force the issue of attention in unique ways. In doing so, I want to problematize the link between attention and the enveloping and immersive nature of ambient works in general, particularly as Kim-Cohen highlights that an an acceptance of ambience "downplays other situational relations: issues of interiority and exteriority, real versus mediated experience, and how these relations instantiate power in one location, one actor, or another". As we will see, the realness of the literary text will play a key role in Bernstein's argument.

While Bernstein's focus on late 20th century language-centered writing is in some ways distant from the present concerns of electronic literature, it is helpful to note that like the conditions established by ambient literature, language writing is also considered to be, as the poet Lyn Hejinian (2000) put it, "multiply referential" and "densely contextual" (p. 8). Language centered writing, in its frequent application of the dense page of often elliptical text, heightens the role played by an interactive reader's attention in the same way that ambient literature does. In both, active reading and the co-construction of the final meaning of the text takes prominence over a supposed direct and transparent representation of a positive reality.

It is important to note that both in Bernstein's text and here, the question of the immersive nature of a text is, for reasons that will hopefully be clear, not necessarily cast at the level of the psychology of a reader, but rather as part of the material or artifice of the text itself as it exists

within a field of social reciprocity. That is, there is a focus on the mechanics of the text and not

the organ of its reception. It is this system of the artifice of the poetic text that distinguishes the

poem from a simple realist account of the world, with the artifice of a poem being

> primarily marked

> by the quality of the poem's language that makes it

> both continuous & discontinuous with the world of

> experience. (p. 10)

Taking this artificiality as the form of a poem resonates with the interaction between the

contextual and really-existing world of the reader of the work of ambient literature and the

fiction of the work which is overlaid (in various ways) atop that reality.

As it resists and invites a transparency of reading through the employment of poetic devices, the

artificiality of the text of a poem invokes a thematic that is distinct from the content of the poem

itself. For Bernstein even "such elements as line breaks, acoustic / patterns, syntax, etc., are

meaningful" in that "they contribute to the meaning / of the poem" (p. 12) with there being

> no fixed

> threshold at which noise becomes phonically

> significant;

> ....

The semantic strata of a poem should not be

understood as only those elements to which a

relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning

can be ascribed, for this would restrict meaning to

the exclusively recuperable elements of language—a

restriction that if literally applied would make

meaning impossible. After all, meaning occurs

only in a context of conscious & nonconscious,

recuperable & unrecoverable, dynamics. (p. 12-13)

This is something that is particularly important for thinking about ambient literature as the

meaning of such works extends beyond the graphical linguistic mark, including the non textual

of context immediately within the text itself. It is also here that a classically psychological

understanding of attention is put aside in favor of a more broadly set and situated understanding.

What this consideration of the artifice of the poem sets up is an analysis of the ways in which

readers are allowed into (or kept out of) the poem. For Bernstein, this movement is founded upon

two different, though neither oppositional nor distinct, formal modes of the absorptive and the

anti-absorptive. For Bernstein, the former is engrossing, engulfing, engaging, hypnotic, and

enthralling, while the latter is distractive, transgressive, unintegrated, and fractured.

From this, Bernstein sustains two lines of argument that are useful in considering the function of

attention as it is built into works of ambient literature.

First, Bernstein argues

> that impermeable textual
>
> elements may actually contribute toward
>
> absorptive effects, & that such textures
>
> may be particularly vital at a time when readers
>
> are skeptical of the transparency effect. (p. 29)

So, while a certain level of transparency of the text might help on the development of an absorptive effect (such as avoiding a breaking of the 4th wall), absorptive functions in a text can also be engendered through impermeable techniques as well. This can be seen in dadaist and surrealist works in which the poem is "completely caught up in / its own internal acustic & semantic / dynamics" (p. 46) by which they are able to reach a "'deeper', more absorbing reality" (p. 49).

Second, building on this, Bernstein argues that what might be considered absorptive in a work is largely dictated by a *sensus communis* of how absorptive material is understood. That is, the idea of what might contribute to an immersive experience of a text is socially-constructed.

Just as in the past strict meter might have been used to heighten a sense of absorption in a work,

the employment of such a technique today

> may backfire on pragmatic grounds since such
>
> works run a high risk of being tediously
>
> repetitive & witlessly contrived, that is,
>
> nonabsorbing. (p. 39)

This is something noted by Kim-Cohen (2016) in regard to ambience as well as it is seen to follow "socially constructed rules and not transhistorical universals" (p. 14).

What these two lines of argument add up to is a rejection of the universal and psychological firmness of the concepts of attention, absorption, or immersion as they might be used in some way to describe the form of a work. While there may exist some psychological state that can be considered "immersion," any literature which attempts to take on this idea as a formal conceit is subject to the historical conditions of its creation and the various possibilities of its construction. As Bernstein puts it:

> Today's antiabsorptive works are
>
> tomorrow's most absorbing ones, & vice
>
> versa: the absorbable, accommodationist devices
>
> of today will in many cases fade into arcanity.
>
> The antiabsorptive, insofar as it is accurately

understood as essentially transgressive, is

historically & contextually specific. (p. 85)

In positioning works in relation to contexts of their experience, what comes to be highlighted is

the "interrelation / of cultural distance & opacity as played out in language" (p. 55). That is, the

distance between the text and what it enacts is both crucial and fully on display.

Synthesis / Politics

As we consider the material conditions of the text of ambient literature and its modulation

between absorption and distraction through the lens given by Bernstein, we are left only with a

fragmented and partial understanding of the way in which an ambient text relies on its social,

historical, and relative forms of absorption.

Faced with this dearth of any possible formalized account of attention in electronic literature, we

are left to resort to a pragmatist view of the role of theory in the creation and guidance of such

works: any model of attention is not meant to be involuable, only that it might help us continue

to understand as new situations arise. In this, attempts toward the reckoning of the form of

attention within a work comes to be held within the scientific form of hermeneutics given by

Gianni Vattimo (1997), rather than the more staid hermeneutics of attention in ambient music or

ubiquitous computing. For Vattimo, in taking a position that has much in common with the

American pragmatist Richard Rorty, he puts forward a vision of hermeneutic interpretation as

being foundational to our understanding of reality. As Vattimo's appropriation of Nietzsche

goes, "there are no facts, only interpretations, and this too is an interpretation" (Vattimo, 2011, p. 34). Conditioned along a historical and cultural terrain, the question of attention comes to be answerable only in this anarchic fashion. In this, there comes to be recourse only to an invocation of the idea of "weak thought" given by Vattimo and Santiago Zabala (2011) and turn it toward attention and ambient literature: "the capacity to live without legitimizations or grounding values" (p. 97).

For those making and experiencing ambient literature, this means a dropping of any allegiance to what might be tried and true modes of immersion in favor of a more experimental approach: the question of immersion or absorption in a work is not a straightforward proposition able to be cowed by some set of universal dictums regarding how attention within such works should function. For ambient literature, the concepts of immersion or absorption are meaningless in a practical sense. Even the idea of attention is complicated by the variable and dynamic role that it plays in the interactive experience of the work.

What comes to be necessary is a careful and iterative approach to attention based on the situated cultural and historical conditions of any work of ambient literature. In this, the very idea of the function of ambient literature is itself given a situated rendering.

This dissolution of the armature of concepts in looking to understand the formal question of attention ultimately has political and transformative implications. As Bernstein has it:

Understood

as a dynamic in the history of a work's reception,

absorption & repellency will shift with new contexts

of publication, new readers, & subsequent formal &

political developments." (p. 85)

In the end, the meaning here is thus: The use of a linguistic text in an ambient work changes the

terms by which we should understand the concept of ambience. It enforces the need for an

inclusion of social and historical values, values which are themselves subject to be altered

through the function of literary works.

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