

In the House of Doing: Rhetoric and the Kairos of Ambience

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The writer writing is not at home.
—Barrett J. Mandel

Like a kaleidoscope
I turn and I'm turning
What I thought I knew
I'm just now learning
—Rain Parade

In the opening to the seventh chapter of *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture*, Mark C. Taylor writes, "I, Mark C. Taylor, am not writing this book" (196). This seems counterintuitive. I have the book; his name is listed as the author; some agent with the designation "Mark C. Taylor" at some time put words to page or screen. Is this not an author? Well, perhaps not. Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes have suggested that the author is but a discursive fiction, a mere function of discourse if not actually "dead."¹ Taylor continues this line of thinking. Words, thoughts, and ideas are never really his, he tells us; it is more that he is theirs. He becomes the vehicle for their circulation (196). The boundaries between brain and body, self and world, language and thought, beginning and end are permeable. This permeability is equivalent to flow and the dissolution of stability. When Taylor states that "thought thinks through" him in ways that are unfathomable, he traces this flow and identifies it as the spectral quality of writing (197). In this sense, all writing is ghostwriting; all writing is haunted by innumerable specters—thoughts, writings, images, events, feelings of others of which I may or may not be aware (196). The writer writing in network culture

is not alone, being always linked to or haunted by others, some familiar, some strange.

To invoke this sense of being “haunted” is also to invoke an abode. Haunting, in its conjoinment of the spectral and material, requires embodiment, incarnation, or most crucially, emplacement: a house. How can we not hear Heidegger here? We—I?—hear: “Language is the house of Being”: “[t]he being of anything that is resides in the word” (*On the Way* 63). In language we come to be as we will have been, not as masters or controllers, but as having been caught up in language’s play, as being-there within language-as-abode, as it befalls us. As Heidegger says, language speaks, and it speaks us (*Poetry* 190, 191).² If language speaks, and if it can also be understood as an abode, we intuit that dwelling and speaking are in some sense aligned. It will be one of the purposes of this essay to explore the sense of this alignment. But we should add that an abode—dare one say a home?—that “speaks” is uncanny (*unheimlich*, unhome-like), more akin to a haunted house. And Taylor now tells us: writing is haunted, for it is comprised of the “spectral interplay of parasites and hosts” (196). Writing and language-as-house-of-being thereby have in common these specters and their haunts. Spectral others are felt, uncanny presences that dissolve boundaries and origins. This touches on what Taylor finds unique about emerging network culture. Everything uses and is used, and there is no clear boundary between the one and the other.

In this sense, network culture signifies “overconnection,” akin to “overdetermination,” in which a multiplicity of connections are always ongoing and interactive, and none of which can be said to be primary. Information proliferates and accelerates, leaving us awash in a chaotic sea of discourse, sounds, and images (3). This is the moment of complexity, in which “[i]nformation and telematic technologies are recasting the very social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of life” (4). It is the moment when connectivity becomes overconnectivity, where “feedback and feed-forward loops become more complex,” and change accelerates toward a tipping point where “more is different” (4–5). Taylor attempts to chart the dynamics at work in this emergent culture and finds that the science of complexity theory supplies the best concepts and descriptions. Complexity theorists state that change occurs at points far from equilibrium and near the edge of chaos, that change is discontinuous, and that change moves from lesser to greater complexity (4, 13–14). Thus, Taylor’s description of the writer writing is an encapsulation of his general theory of network culture. The writer is caught in a network of

complex, co-adaptive threads that disrupt any sense of autonomy or boundary, and in this sense becomes an important exemplum for what Taylor describes as "nodular subjectivity" (16, 231).

Taylor, then, provides an interpretation of contemporary culture across the metaphor of the network and in accordance with the precepts of complexity theory. But I am left curious by the connection to Heidegger I noted above, in which language is thought as more than connection, but as a principle of Being. Language is the House of Being because we quite literally abide in it. When Taylor indicates that a writer is haunted, he too indicates that we have an abode. It is the logic of the network, thought in terms of incarnation. As Taylor claims, it is the "new architecture of complexity that simultaneously embodies and articulates the incarnational logic of networking" (230). The intermixture of architecture and incarnation, embodiment and articulation is striking, suggesting that complexity brings together (or gathers) language, body, and world as networking. But here we come to a curious tension, for I am left wondering where the physical world, as abode, and where language, also as abode, figure in Taylor's understanding of emerging network culture. Taylor's writer writing is alive with voices from the past and present, but to what extent is the overall environment present in such work? What would come to constitute the logic of composing in network culture if we push against the metaphors of connection to, first, metaphors of environment, place, surroundings, and second, metaphors of meshing, osmosis, blending?

With these questions, I move us to a consideration of the complex, co-adaptive relations between a subject, such as a writer, and the larger environment. For a variety of reasons, many of which will become clear below, I offer the metaphor of "ambience" to aid us in thinking through the full implications of a network logic that would be incarnational. According to most dictionaries, the term "ambient" refers to surroundings. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines ambient as "surrounding, encircling, encompassing, and environing." From a Heideggerian perspective, then, Being comes to us only insofar as language is ambient, as the discursive surroundings which give rise to what brings itself forth: "for words and language are not wrappings in which things are packed for the commerce of those who write and speak. It is in words and language that things first come into being and are" (*Metaphysics* 13). From this perspective, language and environment presuppose each other or become mutually entangled and constitutive. Further, becoming aware that there is no tidy separation of language and environment opens us up to forms of "connection" that are not solely link-

driven. Language and environment are perhaps not so much linked as they are enmeshed, and the scope of this claim would have to include us, too, if we accept fully the implications of an incarnational logic.

In what follows, I will explore the concept of ambience, first as it has been developed in music by Brian Eno, and second as an MIT research team has applied it to information distribution. Next, I will show that what is ambient is related to the rhetorical concept of *kairos* in that time, situation, and environment are all co-adaptively enmeshed. Like Taylor, I see that complexity theory is useful for explaining contemporary culture, but I will also show that the concept of ambience gathers language and world, logos and *kairos* differently than does the concept of the network. This is not to say that the metaphor of the network is erroneous, faulty, or even to be superseded. Rather, it is to suggest some of its limitations and, accordingly, some of its advantages as a metaphor less driven by connection and more resonant with immersion. Like the metaphor of the network, ambience connotes distribution, co-adaptation, and emergence, but it adds an emphasis to the constitutive role of the overall, blended environment that the network does not. The ambient is immersive in that it is post-conscious and auratic, being keyed to various levels of attention that are nevertheless always in play at a given moment; and it is blended in that no element can be singled out as decisive, for they are all integral to its singular emergence.

Furthermore, ambient logics further the collapse—a collapse that Taylor writes most elegantly about himself—of the autonomous, willing subject. Taylor sees himself as a ghostwriter, but in the end I think we should push this thinking further. A consideration of ambience would suggest that in the writing, Taylor is written more by the environment itself, and less across an internal dialogue of voices from various times and personages (his “ghosts”). An ambient rhetoric (which attends to how we-use-language/language-uses-us, as opposed to a logic, which attends to functionalities) would begin from a theoretical space that understands the world as its own best representation, and in this sense it would accrue not only a kind of agency (much as language speaks us), but a kind of intelligence (see Ulmer). In short, ambience seeks to put place, language, and body into co-adaptive, robust interaction. It wants embodiment and situation, matter and information, while refusing to essentialize or fall back into naïve subjectivist, realist, or representationalist positions. If the network metaphor captures the logic of the hardware of emerging network culture, ambience captures the “software” logics of being and doing that arise from the network. This will also mean that the timeliness

of a given situation is crucial to ambience, giving it a specifically kairotic dimension. Every decision, every action is immersed in a situation or world, is in a sense "worlded." Ultimately, ambience seeks to connote metaphorically the incarnational network logic sought by Taylor, and thereby describe, in its singular particularity, "a unified physico-informational space" (Clark 66).

Event Space 1: Systems and the Sound of Sound

Modern humans are capable of more sophisticated cognition than cavemen not because humans are smarter [. . .] but because they have constructed smarter environments in which to work.

—N. Katherine Hayles

Currently, *ambient* is most often associated with music, which, with its attention to composing, will be a good place to begin thinking about and stretching ambient's metaphorical implications. "Music," when considered from the ambient perspective, comes to encompass much more than notes on a page, the sounds of instruments organized into patterns of rhythm and melody, the recording of such sounds, and so on. For example, ambience can refer to noticeable if ephemeral qualities of sound, such as the warmth and presence characterizing a record produced by Butch Vig as opposed to the audio verité and clarity achieved by Steve Albini. Music does not exist in a vacuum; its particular "sound" takes part in the environment in which it emerges, even if that sense of environment is produced artificially in the sound studio. As Rod Smith explains, "ambience is a spatial dimension conferred on sound through some degree of echo delay or reverberation. [. . .] It is what makes Luciano Pavarotti sound like he's grabbing you by the collar and singing into your face; it makes a Van Halen record sound like it was recorded in St. Paul's Cathedral" (qtd. in Tamm 131). Thus, one aspect of ambience is the way sound, above and beyond the tonalities of any particular instrument, takes on aspects of the spatial environment in which it was produced and recorded.

In contemporary music, *ambient* is most often associated with Brian Eno, an English musician who, in the mid-1970s, began exploring a new and highly influential direction that has since come to be called "ambient music."³ It tends to be music that is quiet, often moody, with minimal melody or structure. It often has a spatial quality, such that one gets the

impression of sound becoming a landscape.⁴ This point is crucial because it marks the move from understanding the color of sound as timbre to the qualities it takes on in an environment. Music becomes ambient when the environs become part of the music—or, anticipating my argument a bit, when the environs “play” the music, much as language speaks us or kairos wills the event.⁵

The first album Eno recorded entirely in the ambient style is called *Discreet Music*, and it is of considerable interest in terms of its composition. Although Eno’s achievement was not without its precursors, the album puts forward new ideas concerning how we conceive and listen to music. In addition, it has much to say to rhetorical theories of composing, specifically about the genesis and composition of a work as, literally, a kind of “taking place.” This phrase, a commonplace locution for an event, captures the sense that something is happening, but does so by means of a literalized spatial incarnation: the conditions of a “happening” are already inscribed in a place.

In his liner notes to *Discreet Music*, Eno explains the album’s beginnings. Early in 1975 he had an accident that left him bedridden. A friend visited him, bringing a record of eighteenth-century harp music. Eno recounts:

After she had gone, and with some considerable difficulty, I put on the record. Having laid down, I realized 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 the sound of the rain were parts of that ambience. It is for this reason that I suggest listening to the piece [the album *Discreet Music*] at comparatively low levels, even to the extent that it frequently falls below the threshold of audibility.

Eno’s inspiration for *Discreet Music*, then, included a shift in the perception of foreground and background, but beyond a simple flipping of binaries. Eno stretches the boundaries of what is/is not music, so that the “music” cannot be made clear and distinct from other factors, such as its near inaudibility, the competing sounds of wind and rain, mood setters such as light, and so on. The music, in other words, merges with its surroundings, becoming one immersive element in the overall ambience. To put it differently, we could say that Eno has allowed us to hear the environment subsuming/becoming his own activity, and in this process of

becoming the music emerges. This enlargement of musical boundaries embeds Eno's initial composition within a larger, emergent order beyond his direct control or influence.

Eno's exploration of ambience goes even further. Like Taylor, Eno had developed an interest in systems theory, and he cites early work on cybernetics by Gregory Bateson (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*) as a strong influence on his thinking and composing (Tamm 86; Prendergast 117). In making *Discreet Music*, Eno utilized tape loops of varying lengths and a long delay echo system. Eno put smaller pieces together ("two simple and mutually compatible melodic lines of different duration"), occasionally altering their timbre with an equalizer; as he pursued these roles of planner and programmer and allowed chance its role, he also became "an audience to the results" (Liner notes, *Discreet Music*). Such a compositional method brings forth the music as an emergent phenomenon—which is to say, it audibilizes what Taylor refers to as the "moment of complexity," where disparate elements combine to create a new level of order discontinuous with that of the individual elements (24). In this process, not only do the boundaries between music and environment continue to blur and blend, but the creative locus is delivered over to the environment, which thereby grants a form of agency to the technological apparatus.

Systems and ambience are conjoined here. When Eno tells us that "I have gravitated towards situations and systems that, once set into operation, could create music with little or no intervention on my part," he thereby scrambles a variety of roles, again allowing the environment to show up in its productive role, so that we see the surroundings become a key "player" of the music. This is the ambient moment, which is also, as Taylor describes it, the moment of complexity, where the relation between culture (music) and nature (environment) are reconfigured "in such a way that neither is reduced to the other but that both emerge and co-evolve in intricate interrelations" (4). Thus, Eno is simultaneously composer and audience, active agent and passive recipient; the music is a series of simple bits that take on more complexity in interaction with each other and the environment, and it thereby emerges as something strikingly different from what is suggested in most compositional theories, like input/output or social constructivist models. Not even dialectical models are adequate, as they cannot ultimately account for the radical discontinuity between each emergent order and the power of small changes to produce disproportionately large-scale effects. That is, as Taylor remarks, such models remain closed and homeostatic (93).

Ultimately, Eno brings to fulfillment what many artists, musicians, and writers most desire: not the achievement of homeostasis, but its opposite, the creation of something that one “could never predict” (qtd. in Prendergast 126). Understanding the moment of composing as related to complexity theory unseats dramatically a stabilizing notion such as author, as Taylor, Foucault, and Barthes have all shown. And it does so in a way that brings us the gift of surprise, the unexpected, not as if it suddenly now appears, but as it was already there: we now see it, hear it, in a fresh way. Taylor remarks, quoting John Casti, that complexity theory is “the science of surprise,” and here we see such surprise brought forth into aesthetic fruition (24). The sound of sound has changed as the writing of writing has changed, feed(backing) into one’s ambient surroundings the creative impetus formerly held to reside in the creator-author-composer. As Eno explains, “The work starts to define you rather than you define it. It starts to tell you what you are doing” (qtd. in Prendergast 119).

Event Space 2: Systems and Ambient Spaces

Thought thinks through me in ways I can never fathom. Much—perhaps most—of what is important in the dynamics of thinking eludes consciousness.

—Mark C. Taylor

Eno’s ambient work transforms our understanding of the surrounding environment, showing that it itself is an integral productive element. Ambient logics scramble the customary categories of language (or music), person, world, and action. Further, ambience reconfigures our relation to an exterior that is customarily considered the objective realm in which our subjective actions play out, offering instead a highly co-adaptive understanding of activity that delivers over to the environment a large degree of productive capacity. Another way of saying this is that if we think of the ambient work as a system, certain aspects such as intelligence, creation, and production are better understood as a “spatio-temporally extended process not limited to the tenuous envelope of skin and skull” (Clark 221).

Ambience, then, is spatial—as mentioned earlier, it takes place. Eno quickly intuited something along these lines, for after doing the albums *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* and *Music for Films*, he turned to landscapes in *Ambient 4: On Land*.⁶ *On Land*’s landscapes were fictional,

created via technology in the studio, made "real" in the listening experience. In creating such soundscapes, Eno explains, his choice of sonic elements came "less from listening to music than from listening to the world in a musical way" (Liner notes, *On Land*). Drawing on the distinction between music produced versus reproduced in studios, Eno realizes that such produced music creates options concerning its own psychoacoustic space. Eno shifts from creating realistic spaces ("short repeat echoes connoting rectilinear urban spaces," for example) to creating nonrepresentational spaces:

I became interested in exaggerating and inventing rather than replicating spaces, experimenting in particular with various techniques of time distortion. This record [*On Land*] represents one culmination of that development and in it the landscape has ceased to be a backdrop for something else to happen in front of it: instead, everything that happens is a part of the landscape. (Liner notes)

In order to accomplish this task, Eno was compelled to seek other forms of sound besides instrumentation; even synthesizers proved insufficient. Instead, he recorded natural phenomena (rooks, frogs, insects, sticks and stones, pieces of chain, the outdoors at various times of the day) and combined them in the studio with natural and artificial instruments (guitar, synthesizer, and so on) as well as studio manipulation (echo, tape loops, tape speed manipulation, his own previous recorded work). Distinctions such as background and foreground cease to have meaning in this ambient experience, and the listener becomes but one more element embedded in the unfolding soundscape.

Importantly, the territory that Eno explored in musical aesthetics have had bearing on practical pursuits such as information management. Consider the work of the Tangible Media Group, working out of the MIT Media Laboratory. In the essay "ambientROOM: Integrating Ambient Media with Architectural Space," Hiroshi Ishii, Craig Wisneski et al. tackle the problem of processing large amounts of information comfortably and efficiently. In this regard, they are working within a problem central to rhetoric in the information age. Richard Lanham stands as prophetic on this issue, arguing in *The Electronic Word* that a key issue for rhetoric is no longer persuasion as such but attention span (227; see also Levy). In an era of too much information, competition merely to be heard takes precedence over other possible rhetorical concerns. The problem Lanham addresses is approached

obliquely in the introduction to “ambientROOM” where the authors state,

Humans have highly sophisticated capacities for processing multiple information streams. While a particular source of information may occupy the “foreground” of our awareness, many additional sources may concurrently be monitored in the “background.” For example, we may have a sense of the weather outside from ambient cues such as light, temperature, sound, and air flow from nearby windows. We may also have an idea of the activities of colleagues in the area from the ambient sound and the visible presence of passers-by. [. . .] Unfortunately, most computer interfaces fail to take advantage of our background processing capabilities. (Ishii et al. 1)

Like Eno, Ishii et al. understand that perception is not solely keyed to the foreground of attention. What Eno turned into a series of aesthetic projects, Ishii et al. turn into a rhetorically rich, material space. Rather than present all information through a foregrounded graphical user interface, they construct an ambientROOM as a personal interface environment. Such a room “displays information through subtle cues of sound, light, or motion easily relegated to the periphery of awareness. Many of these ‘ambient media’ displays are inspired by natural phenomena such as wind, sunlight, or the sounds of a rainforest” (Ishii et al. 1). For example, when the digital whiteboard in the workspace is in use, the sound of dry-erase pens is transmitted into the room “in a low volume, subtle way,” which the authors consider an element in the ambientROOM’s overall soundscape (Wisneski et al. 5). Other examples of ambient information include lighting ripples, changes in airflow, and so on. Like Eno, then, the ambientROOM designers embed a user/listener in an environment in such a way as to unite space, aesthetics, and information.

In another essay, the authors state that ambient media have a learning effect, so that “like driving a car, after a while, a person’s perception changes based on his or her familiarity with the environment” (Wisneski et al. 10). Further, they foresee potentially far-reaching implications for the introduction of ambient media into future environments, so that, for example, “[t]he function of many common appliances may be extended to connecting people with information they otherwise would not be able to perceive, or at least not be able to get in such an easy fashion” (10). Thus, common appliances like lamps or air conditioners could be networked and re-engineered to supply various kinds of information, like using changes in airflow or lighting to signal something (10). The solution

Wisneski et al. offer to the rhetorical problem of attention as sketched by Lanham, then, is not to compete at the level of foregrounded attention, but rather to disperse information, creating an informationally rich ambient environment for an embedded subject engaged at varying levels of attention.

The examples of Eno and the ambientROOM demonstrate that what ambience connotes is not simply surroundings, but a dynamic, immersive environment comprised of many co-adapting elements. In that sense, it can only be understood as emergent. This further means that while the embedded subject is a crucial element, the activities of the subject are not co-extensive with the ambient environs, even though the subject is caught up with and becomes part of it. This dissolves the neat boundary between the subject and the subject's world. In fact, Andy Clark remarks, "we confront a vision of mind as a grab bag of inner agencies whose computational roles are often best described by including aspects of the local environment," which include informational transformations and manipulations (à la the ambientROOM) and complex control loops (221). Not only does the local environment "start to tell you what you are doing," as Eno would have it, but we begin to see that what a subject thinks and does is not simply a response to that environment. Rather, an environment is always a situation, and that situation, in its absolute singularity, calls a subject into being—or, put differently, carves out the panoply of actions possible in real time engagement. As Clark argues, the environment constitutes itself within the subject as a host of agencies, which will in turn, in complex, co-adaptive interactions, generate effects in the ambient environs. This attention to situation suggests that one of the keys—not the sole key, but nevertheless a crucial if not decisive one—to understanding ambience is the particularity of a situation, which is to say, its timeliness. Things take place, but only insofar as they take part in the unique specificity of their time. Ambience, in other words, is inseparable from a consideration of kairos.

Event Space 3: Kairos and Network

Language is itself "intelligent."

—Gregory L. Ulmer

In 1983 James Kinneavy gave a conference paper (later published in an edited collection entitled *Rhetoric and Praxis*) showing that kairos was a neglected concept and arguing for its continued relevance to rhetoric.

In the twenty years since, however, *kairos* has come to be seen—in part due to Kinneavy's efforts—as an important concept, and the literature has grown extensively. I cannot cover here all the various interpretations of *kairos*, but Kinneavy's initial, provisional definition is still pertinent: *kairos* is "the right or opportune time to do something" (80). Simplifying a good deal, we can say that this understanding of *kairos* is Plato's, and that it continues to be the dominant understanding of *kairos* to this day. There are, nevertheless, a growing number of dissenters who understand the concept differently, preferring Gorgias' rather than Plato's understanding of *kairos*.⁷ Among this group are a small number who have explored connections between Gorgias' understanding of *kairos* and Heideggerian thought. In a conference paper from the 1987 Rhetoric Society of America conference, published in *Visions of Rhetoric*, Bernard Miller argues that, similar to the way Heidegger sees language as speaking us, so *kairos* in a sense makes decisions for us (177). Miller points out that such an understanding of *kairos* is quite explicitly at odds with the more traditional, Platonic notion of *kairos* as the opportune time for maximizing the effectiveness of one's rhetorical act (173; see also Hawhee). This traditional notion depends on an autonomous, willing subject who capitalizes on a moment, seizes control of a situation when it is timely, and externalizes something internal in a rhetorical act. In contradistinction, Miller relies on Mario Untersteiner's claim that for Gorgias, a decision is "willed by *kairos*" (Untersteiner 181).⁸ Miller thereby sees *kairos* as considerably more than a concept; it is an experience or encounter (169). *Kairos* in this sense designates not only the unmasterable aspect of the timely situation, but its force. Thus, Miller takes Gorgias' defense of Helen to be a *kairotic* moment of appropriation, in which the time and the choosing are not that of an "involved subject" but that of the *kairotic* situation itself (177).

Miller's reading is not simply the flipping of binaries, moving the force of agency from the person (as the Platonic understanding of *kairos* has it) to the situation, so that the person is in turn mastered. There is a sense in which these notions of interiority and exteriority are deflected by means of attention to the middle. For example, Debra Hawhee, who also looks to Gorgias' understanding of *kairos*, seeks a form of *kairotic* invention that is in the middle, in which "one invents and is invented, one writes and is written, constitutes and is constituted" (18). This understanding of *kairos* is one that depends on "the rhetorical encounter itself and the forces pushing on the encounter" (25). While there is much here that is congruent with my own argument, I am pushing for a different

inflection of the kairotic middle, one that sees the ambient environment in terms of a robust interaction that folds—and in folding, dissolves—subjectivity within it. Or, to put it differently, I want to pursue as far as possible the implications that obtain from dismantling the interior/exterior opposition, which perhaps means that the concept of middle is itself transformed, or perhaps even effaced. We might see this effacement as another permutation of the ambient, but again, this does not make it a monolithic entity. Helen may have been ensnared in a fated situation and willed by kairos, but not in the sense that it stood over and above her. Kairos is not a form of externalized mastery. Miller explains that we “should see the ‘situation’ not as pre-determined but as one of a unity with the person involved” (177). This is entirely in keeping with Miller’s Heideggerian path. Kairos is linked with logos to the extent that it is within them that we come to be: kairos wills us and logos speaks us, but only insofar as we are also taking part in them. If language, as Heidegger claimed, is the House of Being, in which anything that is resides in the word (*Language* 63), then perhaps we can think of kairos as the “House of Doing,” in which anything that happens resides in the situation. In this sense, logos and kairos become intricately intertwined. As Lynn Worsham writes, “Language is a situation, a world, brought forth and disclosed in words” (226).

With this Heideggerian perspective on kairos and logos in mind, let us return to where we began, with Taylor meditating on writing. Taylor tells us that the time of writing is not a linear flow, since “past, present, and future are caught in strange loops governed by nonlinear dynamics”; this further means that they are continually intermixing, knotted together in the present and simultaneously conditioning and transforming each other (198). The connection to Heidegger seems clear, as we listen to Taylor relate how, residing in the logos, he is written in the very act of writing. But what of kairos? Here things become more complex. For Taylor, kairos is aligned with the tipping point, a concept taken from complexity theory that indicates the moment at the edge of chaos when a transformation occurs, leading to a new level of order. Taylor explains:

Since thinking is a complex process in which images, concepts, and schemata are always struggling to adapt to each other, the pieces of the puzzle form networks of relations in which changes in a particular time or place ripple throughout the web. [. . .] When a growing number of experiences and ideas can no longer be adequately processed, thought is pushed far from equilibrium and approaches the tipping point. In this

moment, danger and opportunity intersect. Driven to the edge of chaos and sunk in confusion, thinking either dissolves in madness or transforms in unexpected ways. The tipping point is the boiling point. [. . .] If change occurs, new patterns emerge and organize themselves spontaneously. In this moment when thinking happens, I do not so much write as I am written. (198)

For Taylor, the act of writing conforms to the precepts of complexity theory and is thus best understood as an emergent phenomenon. We, as writers, are not “in control” as we write; rather, we are written in the act of writing. And thinking, as the bringing together of different ideas and experiences from different people, places, and times, also conforms to the logic of complexity: all these strands combine and recombine, continuously adapting and re-adapting to each other, moving to points far from equilibrium, perhaps to a tipping point where transformation, and a new (albeit temporary) level of order emerges. It’s less that the writer writing is in the middle than he or she is in the muddle—which is to say, the writer is caught up in ambience.

For Taylor, as for Eno, composing becomes a process whereby one is spoken or played in the speaking or playing, and the kairotic moment is less one of willing than having been willed. Further, they share the idea that what exists is best understood as emergent. Everything is intertwined and involved with everything else, twisting, changing, and co-adapting: nothing is stable. This is, for Taylor, the defining moment of network culture, in which formerly secure walls become permeable, the notion of information is expanded, and change accelerates toward a tipping point where more is different (4, 5, 20). The result of these and other forces—social, economic, political, epistemological, technological—is to move us toward a world where everything is distributed and linked. Any connection, no matter how small, has potentially far-reaching consequences, as the proliferation of and acceleration of information ensure increases in the overall complexity of the environment.

Key to understanding network culture, and in turn the transformations it calls forth in our understanding of ourselves, is the metaphor of the network. For Taylor, subjectivity becomes nodular, which means the subject comes to be defined in terms of links and linking metaphors (231). The information that gives rise to the nodular subject is likewise seen in terms of connection: there are streams and rivers of information, interfaces between subject and world, plugs into webs and objects. Taylor explains, “I am—the I is—a moment of complexity” (232). He continues:

My identity—literary as well as otherwise—is parasitic upon the ghosts haunting me. [. . .] As I screen their words, their thoughts and words are reborn through me. [. . .] The networks that make me what I am are always networks within networks, which, while never complete, are nonetheless global. As a node in networks that are infinitely complex, I am the incarnation of worldwide webs. The fiber of these webs, I now realize, is not merely optical, for networks always operate in many channels and multiple media. Webs and networks can no more exist without me than can I without them. (232)

The full implication of network culture is that individuals, society, and environment can no longer be clearly separated. The explosive proliferation of connection accelerates change, moving things toward points far from equilibrium and near chaos, the tipping point where change happens (see 13–14, 123, 143, 191). Such change transforms the world and the categories that emerge to make sense of it. Insofar as we come to be what we are within language, this amounts to a transformation in the human and its relation to the world. Thus, Taylor states, “Mind is distributed throughout the world. Nature and culture, in other words, are the objective expression of mind, and mind is the subjective embodiment of nature and culture” (230).

Event Space 4: The Ambient Duplex: Relocating the Houses of Doing and Being

The world is its own best model.

—Rodney Brooks

Taylor demonstrates that, at the level of the writer writing in network culture, language, subject, and objective environment lose their formerly secure distinctions. And, as the discussion of Heidegger and Miller indicates, we see that, from another tradition, *kairos* and *logos*—timely situation and language—blur into one another as well. The dissolution of these boundaries, I have argued, is suggested in applied form in what is ambient. The work of Eno and the MIT Tangible Media Group are both instances where various productions—music and an information-rich room—achieve their agentive locus not in the producer (musician, writer, designer, and so on) but in the environment itself, an ambient muddle that continually scrambles middle and pole, interior and exterior, recursively refolding them one into the other. However, the full import of this position remains to be understood. Taylor provides a remarkable excursus on writing as an exemplum of the moment of complexity, quite possibly

pushing the metaphor of the network as far as it can go in realizing the implications of complexity theory. If this is the case, perhaps we already need metaphoric resources that go beyond what the network can offer.

For this reason, I prefer the metaphor of the ambient. What is ambient is immersive, osmotic, post-conscious. Ambience is not so link driven, being suggestive of many other forms of connection besides contact between two or more points. The link is in its connotative scope, giving us little leeway with the more ephemeral, auratic modalities of everyday life. Indeed, the network is ultimately still invested in the binary, even if that binary is wrenched by the strange loops of emergent behavior. The richly osmotic character of ambience suggests numerous forms of engagement and interaction beyond the link, and it fully situates human being within absolutely singular moments. If the posthuman has an abode, that dwelling is ambient. Certainly, the network wires this ambient house. In saying this, I mean that we are not confronting an either/or: both metaphors have their uses. But the concept of ambience better suggests the gathering together of *kairos* and *logos*, situation/environment and language, showing how they take part in us even as they will/speak us.

It should come as no surprise that these ideas concerning production, in whatever form—aesthetic, rhetorical, scientific, political—should show up for us abundantly once we start looking for them. Nevertheless, it may still be the case that it is entirely unclear what it means to say that the ambient brings together language and *kairos*, making a duplex of the Houses of Being and Doing. As I turn toward my conclusion, then, I would like to explore a few examples of how the environment in a sense comes to speak or will us. Again, I need to emphasize that this is not a return to the subject-object split, in which an objective, exterior environment is primary over a subject. As I have argued above, subject and object become quite limited, perspectival terms for what is better conceived as a “mutual taking part in.” But insofar as this “taking part in” is ultimately the ambient order, it simultaneously includes and exceeds the “subject”—only in this sense can we understand the *kairotic* environs as willing us. Nor, as should become clear, am I merely collapsing distinct realms into an abstract unity; this is equally impossible, as ambient is an emergent level of order discontinuous from the individual elements. Thus, I am attempting to show how the subject-object split is dissolved in robust interactions in singular ambience. Distinctions emerge dynamically and fluidly within the situation, rather than having some a priori ontological status, and are ultimately only an additional modality in the overall ambience. We see that this is so when we think about what

happens as a writer writes, or indeed with any form of material production.

Barrett Mandel's 1980 essay "The Writer Writing Is Not at Home" stands as a remarkably prescient essay for our consideration. He opens his essay with an intriguing slice of an interview with the American painter Jasper Johns, conducted, oddly enough, by Michael Crichton:

The author [Crichton] asks Johns why he has just made a change in the handle of a spoon in a lithograph on which he is working. Johns answers, "Because I did." The author asks, "But what did you see?" Johns: "I saw that it should be changed." Author: "Well, if you changed it, what was wrong with it before?" Johns: "Nothing. I tend to think one thing is as good as another." Author: "Then why change it?" Johns, after a sigh and a pause: "Well, I may change it again." Author: "Why?" Johns: "Well, I won't know until I do it." (Mandel 370)

This is high comedy, no doubt, with Crichton coming off as a clueless interviewer.⁹ Mandel notes this and defends Johns as being as honest as he can. The artist, Mandel argues, creates "out of no prior knowledge, thought, plan, or expectations" (370). That does not mean that plans and thoughts do not come into play, but "the work of art does not arise from them; they do not cause the work of art to materialize" (370). It is easy enough to see where I am headed with this: the work of art, like the work of writing as described by Taylor and the work of music described by Eno, is emergent. As Johns works, and Crichton questions, we see a pattern develop. Johns is less the creator than a co-creator, or, even better, Johns is brought into being by the work of art in his attempt to create it. All the elements that could be singled out as contributing to the artwork—and they are innumerable—cannot in the end add up to what the artwork is. So, not only is there a discontinuity between the elements and the new level of order that arises from their interactions, but we see that this discontinuity radically unseats our notion of what a creative agent is.

Mandel sees some of these implications, but in the end he upholds a straight and narrow expressivist line that is quite at odds with the conclusions I am drawing. Even if the writer writing is not at home, still for Mandel the artist/writer is the responsible agent of creation, and he thereby maintains an expressivist interest in the autonomous, willing self.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Mandel has much of interest to say about the role of consciousness. Like Taylor, Mandel sees consciousness not only as emergent phenomenon, arising out of interactions themselves impermeable to thought, but as an active impediment to rhetorical action. Conscious aspects of writing, such as logic and facts, emerge as such only

after the act of writing and cannot themselves produce it. Thus, the more one is conscious of creating or doing, the more hampered one can be; for this reason, Mandel calls on us, in a distinctly Heideggerian locution, to “drive the student out of the House of Self-Consciousness” (375).

While I am more or less in agreement with Mandel on this point, I still think he misses something essential in what Johns relates about the creative process. When Johns tries out something new or makes a change in the lithograph, he is doing so actively. Johns does not imagine or hypothesize the changes he makes; he simply makes them, and after making them, considers them. Both Crichton and Mandel miss this crucial aspect of creation—that it arises out of robust interaction with the environment. Eno says something similar about the creative process: “As soon as you externalize an idea, you see facets of it that weren’t clear when it was just floating around in your head. You say something and you suddenly think, ‘So, that’s what I mean’” (Grant 28). Indeed, it is this line of thinking that leads Eno to stress one of his most important maxims, “Honor thy error as a hidden intention” (Prendergast 119).¹¹ In this view, error is just one more move to be made because, in a very real sense, there is no error. Error is a perspective illusion supplied by a subject who thinks he or she is in control of the word, situation, action, or event. It is precisely here that we locate the ambient moment: it is in the kairotic moment of action that situation comes to will Johns, Eno, whomever.

Of course, we are accustomed to reversing the direction of action, folding what has appeared in the ambient environment back into a “creator,” but this mystifies the role of the ambient. The lithograph emerges out of an innumerable series of concrete, absolutely singular kairotic encounters that have little to do with any notion of conscious control or intelligence, because that which is properly emergent is discontinuous with the co-adaptive elements that constitute the new object or level of order. In this way, the characteristics of intelligence and control that we tend to assign to a creator-subject are better considered ambient—that is, they reside in the Houses of Being and Doing, in logos and kairos as they speak and will us in our engagements.

This way of thinking has impressive practical import. For example, the MIT researcher Rodney Brooks has made surprising advances in robotics by using an orientation strikingly similar to what I have been discussing in terms of Eno, Johns, and the ambientROOM. Brooks was faced with the problem of programming robots to perform tasks in an environment, such as going about the lab picking up cans, or simply “walking” over uneven terrain. He found that central mapping and

intelligence were not only prohibitively difficult, but that they actively interfered with the accomplishment of the tasks. Brooks dispensed with central intelligence altogether, opting for something he termed "subsumption architecture." N. Katherine Hayles offers this description:

The idea is to have sensors and actuators connected directly to simple finitude-state machine modules, with a minimum of communication between them. Each system "sees" the world in a way that is entirely different from how the other systems see the world. There is no central representation, only a control system that kicks in to adjudicate when there is a conflict between distributed modules. Brooks points out that the robot does not need to have a coherent concept of the world; instead, it can learn what it needs directly through interaction with its environment. The philosophy is summed up in his aphorism: "The world is its own best model." (236)

Clark offers further explanation, noting that "the goal is to have the complex, robust, real-time behavior emerge as the result of simple interactions between relatively self-contained behavior-producing sub-systems," which are, in turn, "controlled rather directly by properties of the encountered environment" (14).

Clark's point is stunning. The emergent behavior of Brooks' robots stems not from the robot as agent, but from its external encounters. Agency is attributed to the environment.¹² And yet, Johns was telling us much the same thing (though Mandel tended to deemphasize the role of the environment to focus on the limitations of conscious subjective activity): Johns's lithograph, in his interaction with it, rather directly controlled what he was doing. This is the ambient moment, when we recognize in the environment the work of thought and action that we bring to it, not as a call to which we passively harken or submit, but as the uncanny space in which the most concrete, singular Being and Doing unwind endlessly.

This leads us to Brooks' aphorism: the world is its own best model. We see here that Brooks is engaged in applied nonrepresentational thinking. There is no need to model a world that a robot—or some other entity—would then use as a resource for generating the proper behavior. Rather, the environment itself becomes the essential component of immersed, embedded activity, comes to "will" the behavior that then emerges. Intelligence, consciousness, planning, and the like are beside the point (in the case of the robot) or subsidiary/supplementary (in the cases of Eno and Johns). Problem-solving of this kind is an ambient

phenomenon. Indeed, once we note its basic characteristics, we can see it at work in every aspect of our lives, from making a jigsaw puzzle to making love, from learning to walk to learning to write.¹³

Let us look back to where we began, with Taylor meditating on the complexities of writing. Taylor sees writing as ghostwriting, and he sees himself as much written as actively writing. He sees the writer at the nexus of various intersecting strands of time—past, present, and future. He is aware that as a writer, most of what is occurring during his activity is removed from conscious apprehension. Such is the writer writing in network culture: a semi-aware nodal point, a conduit for a wide, complex array of forces. And yet, when we consider the writer from the ambient perspective, we see that nothing Taylor states about the writer is challenged. What remains is a further addition, a complexification, centered on ambience. The writer is not merely in a situation. From the ambient perspective, the writer is written by the environment, considered as the most singular, concrete moment. Right now, for example, as a writer, I am aware (and simultaneously unaware) of my thoughts, and how I am attempting to get them down on the computer screen. But even more importantly, I am aware of what I have written and how that profoundly shapes whatever I might write next. Indeed, it shapes what I strive to say next so profoundly that in a quite literal sense I must say that I am being written by what I have written. And that previous writing was itself in response to an innumerable series of thoughts, sensations, affects, texts, inter/actions, discussions, and my own words, only some of which I can be aware of at any given moment, but most of which I will remain largely unaware.

In this essay, I have argued for a rhetorical consideration of ambience as a means to supplement and move beyond the metaphor of the network. The ambient brings together several strands of thought that have much in common with Taylor's description of network culture but extends them further. It does so by focusing on the shift in agentive locus that comes from a full consideration of action as emergent. Taylor calls attention to the way network culture stores memory and disseminates knowledge for us, thereby accelerating the rates of production and circulation of information (4). In this way he also argues for the centrality of information and informational networks in our lives and the necessity for having the proper theoretical tools to understand what is occurring and to respond more effectively (5). His use of complexity theory demonstrates the extent to which the emergent properties of co-adaptive systems of information describe the logic of network culture, such that information

"is limited to neither minds nor computational machines but is distributed throughout all the networks passing through us" (230). As Hayles reminds us, emergence replaces teleology—ends are only compost for rebeginnings (288). Middles are scrambled with poles, everything uses and is used. Within this situation, Taylor calls on us, as the task for thinking, to adopt "a new architecture of complexity that simultaneously embodies and articulates the incarnational logic of networking" (230). That incarnational logic, I suggest, is precisely ambient, for that logic only achieves its fulfillment when we realize that it is in the moment of the moment of complexity that we come to be as we are, that we come to do as we do—for it is in the uncanny moment of the moment of complexity, the emergent, kairotic moment, that we abide.¹⁴

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Notes

1. In his famous essay "The Death of the Author," Barthes claims that as soon as a fact is narrated "outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (142). For Barthes, Mallarme stands as the exemplar of "the necessity to substitute language for the person" (143). The "author" is dead to the extent s/he is effaced in the symbolic, and it is at this point that the reader takes over: "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination," and this birth of the reader comes at "the cost of the death of the Author" (148). In his equally famous essay "What Is an Author?" Foucault reduces the author to an author-function; taking a cue from Samuel Beckett, he asks "What matter who's speaking?" (115, 138). The author is to be stripped of his/her originary, creative role and "analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse" (138). Both Barthes and Foucault see the author as something complexly constructed, to the extent that the traditional boundaries of the "author" dissolve so that what the term designates can no longer be said to exist. The author is a node, and as Taylor claims, "The moment of writing is a moment of complexity in which multiple networks are cultured" (198).

2. Much of Heidegger's middle and late work takes up the problem of unpacking these dense, difficult locutions. See in particular the essays collected in *On the Way to Language* and *Poetry, Language, Thought*, or the way Heidegger connects these ideas to technology in *The Principle of Reason*, especially the twelfth lecture. There are numerous, extensive, and readily available commentaries on Heidegger's thought and theories of language (they are inseparable), and I will not list them here, with two exceptions: Charles

Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology" and Lynn Worsham, "The Question Concerning Invention." Barthes too invokes Heidegger's views on language (without citing Heidegger, interestingly enough) in "The Death of the Author," saying "it is language which speaks, not the author" (143). This mirrors Heidegger's statement in *The Principle of Reason* that "language speaks, not humans" (96).

3. Eno began his public career with the rock band Roxy Music in 1972. He had undergone extensive training in British art schools prior to this, however, soaking up various ideas from famous Minimalist composers like John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. Eno never achieved any sophisticated technical proficiency on a musical instrument, even the keyboards and synthesizers he is most often seen as playing, and often describes himself as a "non-musician" because of this. Even early in his career, Eno was fascinated by the tonal qualities of music, like timbre—another aspect of "sound color," which makes "the same note, played on a violin, a trumpet, or a xylophone, sound different" (Tamm 3).

4. David Toop provides a comprehensive explanation of the scope of ambient music. He writes:

Various forms of this music have been called, with varying levels of appropriateness, ambient, environmental, deep listening, ambient techno, ambient dub, electronica, electronic listening music, isolationist, post-industrial ambient, space music, beautiful music, sound art, sound design, electronic music without beats, brainwave music, picture music, ambient jungle, steady state music, holy minimalism, Fourth World, New Age, chill out, or, the useless one to cap them all, new music. (22)

Although in this essay I am singling out Brian Eno, the above list should indicate that this is merely a beginning place for thinking about this approach to music and the implications it has for understandings of composing, listening, environment, technology, and culture.

5. I must emphasize, however, that this is not a simple binary switch, à la radical social constructivism, where the social environment takes on all productive/agentive force, but rather an extension of arguments concerning the dissolution of the subject/object dichotomy that underwrites Western metaphysics. Among many books on the subject, Heidegger's *Being and Time* stands as a key document in dismantling this separation. The concept of Dasein, for example, literally means "being-there," which suggests that a subject is always in a world and cannot be "thought," cannot be said to "be," apart from that world. Likewise, when I claim here that the environment "plays" the music, that environment should not be thought separately from the instruments, time, equipment, atmosphere, ideas, or Eno himself—all these things and more comprise the overall ambience and cannot be sundered. Furthermore, this "bringing together" cannot be thought of as a unity of abstract wholeness. Each element has its particularity, but this particularity is neither absolute nor abstract. Instead, each element is

caught up with the others, co-adaptively entangled, such that distinctions emerge and fade as perspective and situation change. We might say that this permeability of boundaries indicates the osmotic quality of ambience.

6. In actuality, *Music for Films* was already a precursor to *On Land*, because the films that the short pieces were composed for were entirely imaginary. In the 1990s, Eno and the band U2 collaborated under the name Passengers to explore further the idea of music for imaginary films on the album *Original Soundtracks* 1. The liner notes go so far as to include synopses for the films—most of them imaginary—that the music is to “accompany.”

7. Some characteristically Platonic understandings of *kairos* include Kinneavy and Baumlin. For some characteristically Gorgian understandings, see Untersteiner, Poulakos, White, Vitanza, Davis, Hawhee, and Muckelbauer. For some suggestive connections between *kairos* and posthumanism, see Brooke. Miller’s book, *Heidegger and the Gorgian Kairos*, is forthcoming from Parlor Press.

8. Vitanza, Davis, and Hawhee have written on Miller’s reading of Untersteiner and *kairos*. See Vitanza 243, 252; Davis, 26–28; and Hawhee, 16–35. I will note that Vitanza is leery of Miller for being overly indebted to Heidegger’s passivity before Being, his waiting for the call or revelation from the logos. Vitanza reminds us that the logos is not necessarily a safe guide (199). Heidegger, that is, who understood all too well the uncanny nature of language (he even called it insane; see *Metaphysics* 11), nevertheless forgot that insofar as language is the house of being, it may also be *unheimlich* (unhome-like: strange, uncanny, haunted). This leads Vitanza to claim that “[w]e are not at home in the logos” (203). Heidegger forgot this. Yet, in another sense we are all potentially Heidegger (198). The logos may be neither guide nor home, but with it we must tarry, and in it we must dwell.

9. See also Sirc, who discusses Mandel’s use of Johns.

10. For more on the still-relevant conflict between expressivist and socially-oriented rhetorics, see Olson.

11. In his capacity as musician and producer for other musicians, Eno has developed (with the help of Peter Schmidt) a large number of maxims that he collected as a series of cards, which he calls *Oblique Strategies*. Musicians stumped about what to do next draw a card or two and act accordingly. The cards are not unlike an I Ching deck for creativity. They are available at Eno’s website (http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian_eno/), but are also widely available online (here is an easy to use Flash version: <http://www.dimensional.com/~jthomas/oblique/>). Numbering over a hundred at this point, they include statements such as: “Disconnect from Desire”; “Don’t break the silence”; “Is it finished?”; “You are an engineer”; “Would anybody want it?”; and “Go slowly all the way around the outside” (Tamm 77–78). Eno considers their cryptic quality essential to their inventive usefulness.

12. Hayles describes Brooks’ robots as having an “emergent gait”: she adds, “They are remarkably robust, are able to right themselves when turned over, and

can even learn a compensatory gait when one of their legs is bent or broken off" (238). For further descriptions, see Brooks and Kelly. See also Haynes, who discusses Mata Mataric's experiments at Brandeis Univeristy with subsumption architecture robots.

13. Clark provides numerous examples of ways in which the environment comes to play the key role in activity, including a baby learning to walk and a dolphin swimming. The case of the dolphin is especially interesting: until recently, scientists were puzzled by the fact that the dolphin simply was not strong enough to reach the speeds it has been seen to reach. Researchers have found that dolphins and some other fishes have "an evolved capacity to exploit and create additional sources of kinetic energy in the watery environment," which would include aquatic swirls, eddies, and vortices, and the like (219). Thus, the environment is not an obstacle or problem to be surmounted, but an integral if not decisive element in the overall pattern of emergent behavior.

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