Ambient Literature and the Aesthetics of Calm: 
Mood Regulation in Contemporary Japanese Fiction

Abstract: During the “healing boom” of the late 1990s, Japanese media promoted calming products as a way to deal with the stresses of contemporary life. Such emphasis reflected a longer-term cultural shift toward using media as tools of personal mood regulation. In this essay, I explore how contemporary Japanese literature has reconfigured its affective appeals to both compete with and reflect upon this mood-regulating culture, ultimately leading to the emergence of what I call “ambient literature.” I then situate this literature within larger debates about infantilization and self-care in contemporary Japanese media.

Near the middle of Kurita Yuki’s (1972–) novella Hamizabesu (Hamisa-beth, 2002), a young woman becomes annoyed when a former coworker calls and pesters her for a date:

I hung up the phone.
I pulled out the plug.
Angry, I went to take a shower. While wandering around the room naked, my whole body started to tingle. It seems that because I was upset my circulation had improved. (p. 66)

In Kurita’s later novel Oteru Moru (Hôtel Mole, 2005), a woman asks her boss why she was picked for the job of hotel receptionist. The boss replies:

Your features. I knew when I saw your resume photograph, and I knew for sure when you came for the interview and I saw you sitting at the front desk. Your face is a face that invites sleep, or what in the industry we call a “sleep-inducing appearance.” When customers see that face, they have a hint that they are going to sleep well that night. (p. 52)

1. All Kurita quotations here and later are my translations from Kurita Yuki, Hamizabesu (Tokyo: Shüeisha, 2002) and Oteru Moru (Tokyo: Shüeisha, 2005).
These excerpts reveal two aspects of how, I argue, contemporary Japan has steadily become a culture of mood regulation. In the first example, the woman does not dwell on why the phone call was annoying. Instead, she shifts her mood by shifting her sensory environment: “Angry, I went to take a shower.” She deals with ill feelings not with thought but through water on the body and air on the skin. She displaces irritation on the level of affect—sensory cues that do not depend on cognition for their efficacy.

In the second example, the boss employs this same technique of sensory displacement for commercial purposes. The receptionist’s face generates a calming mood for customers. In both cases, the affective cues employed are not situationally specific. Characters use the shower, the air on naked skin, and the calming face for their ability, as forms of affect, to generate calming moods irrespective of whatever else may have occurred.

Such forms of transposable calm emerged in Japan in the mid-1990s as marketable commodities, both in therapeutic guises (relief from anxiety) and more generally in contexts of relaxation and stress relief. Vendors promoted a wide range of “healing” (iyashi)² products, including “healing art,” “healing music,” iyashi-themed magazines and books, implements for a wide variety of therapeutic modalities (aromatherapy, pet therapy, color therapy, plant therapy, sound therapy, art therapy, massage therapy, sex therapy, etc.), iyashi-style television shows, relaxation DVDs, iyashi-style pornography, and iyashi robots. All of these products shared the promise of producing calm for (and in) the consumer. Market watchers began to speak of a “healing boom.”

Ironically, these “healing goods” (iyashi guzzu) could promise relaxation in part because they offered a break from all of the other affective appeals encountered daily in contemporary Japanese media. In contrast to commercially motivated affective appeals, iyashi goods offered their users the chance to construct a personal affective space free of outside intervention. At the same time, the marketing of these goods gave rise to advertising discourses of “stress relief” and “healing” aimed at the creation of new consumer desires and demands for self-care.

As journalists and cultural critics never failed to point out, the “healing

². Iyashi is a nominalization of the verb iyasu, meaning to heal or mend both physically and psychologically. The term first appeared in the context of anthropologist Ueda Noriyuki’s medical ethnography of a Sri Lankan village entitled “Akumabarai—Iyashi no kosumorojii” (later published as Ueda Noriyuki, Kakusei no nettowāku [Tokyo: Katatsumurisha, 1990]). This term was picked up by a Yomiuri shinbun journalist covering the event and emerged—seven years later—as a popular expression in advertising and other media. The term was eventually extended to include humans as well, describing an iyashi-kei (healing-type) person who radiates a feeling of peacefulness and makes all those they encounter forget their troubles and feel at ease. This use of the term first emerged in reference to female television talk-show personalities and later expanded to include actresses, fashion models, comedians, politicians, and even scholars.
“boom” emerged directly in the aftermath of the two largest traumas of late twentieth-century Japan: the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrīkyō sarin gas attacks, both in early 1995. These episodes of national trauma—along with the more widespread effects of economic recession and restructuring—were often said to have provided the emotional context for the emergence of calm as a lucrative and marketable feeling.\(^3\)

However, the explosion of “healing goods” in the late 1990s was but the most pronounced stage of a much longer-term shift toward technologies of mood regulation. As historian Tanaka Satoshi describes, the iyashi trend is the most recent in a long string of “healing booms” in modern Japan.\(^4\) Likewise, there was nothing particularly novel about using sensory cues to directly affect mood—one need only think of wartime propaganda efforts. The emphasis was on mood regulation as a “technology of the self” (to use Michel Foucault’s term), to be used by an individual to manipulate his or her own daily emotional rhythms.\(^5\) This specific manifestation of mood regulation—beginning in the late 1970s and peaking in the late 1990s—was the first to emphasize transposable calm as a personal means of coping with the contemporary.

Japanese literature has reconfigured its affective appeals in order to compete with and reflect upon this mood-regulating culture through what I call “ambient literature.” Like ambient music, ambient literature is an artistic response to the demand for transposable calm. Ambient literature rethinks the novel as a mood-regulating device. As with Brian Eno’s conception of ambient music, ambient literature (as exemplified here in Kurita

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3. The Kobe earthquake of January 17, 1995, killed, injured, and displaced thousands. As investigations progressed into the inordinate number of “earthquake safe” buildings that had collapsed, it became clear that widespread government corruption and graft had been the mainstay during the years of high economic growth. Barely two months later, doomsday cult Aum Shinrīkyō committed Japan’s worst terrorist attack to date, spreading toxic gas through rush-hour Tokyo commuter trains just steps away from the national legislature. Again, details of the attack showed that the incident had social implications reaching well beyond the event itself. Many members of Aum were highly educated young men and women from comfortable backgrounds. That such “ordinary” Japanese youth had turned against the nation reinforced the impression that Japanese society as a whole was at fault. These incidents came in the wake of intensive media coverage of a number of brutal homicides committed by young boys alongside less violent but more widespread instances of youth delinquency such as compensated dating (enjō kōsai), bullying, and chronic absenteeism from school. See David Richard Leheny, _Think Global, Fear Local: Sex, Violence, and Anxiety in Contemporary Japan_ (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 27–48.

4. Earlier trends included practices such as the all-vegetable-soup diet, the drinking of one’s own urine in the morning, and the practice of attaching coins to the body with cellophane tape, to name only a few of the book’s examples. Tanaka Satoshi, _Kenkōhō to iyashi no shakaishī_ (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 1996), p. 9.

Yuki’s work) has two major aims: to generate calming moods and to provide a space to think relatively free from outside affective manipulation.

Japanese fiction began to reflect the new culture of mood regulation as early as the late 1970s, when Murakami Haruki (1949–) published his first novel, *Kaze no uta o kike* (Hear the wind sing, 1979). In a 2002 book on “post-Murakami” literature, literary critic Nakamata Akio cited *Kaze no uta o kike* as the first major example of what would become a dominant thread in Japanese literature of the 1980s and 1990s: the “healing novel” (*iyashi-kei shōsetsu*). Murakami’s narrator states at the outset of the book that his reason for writing was a “small attempt at healing himself.” Nakamata elaborates:

Murakami Haruki starts writing as a “small attempt to heal himself,” but at the same time he also heals *iyasu* many of his readers. It is well known that Murakami managed a jazz bar during his student years. It might be too much to imagine Murakami as a barkeep, soothing the souls of his customers by listening to their worries. But in fact, Murakami’s writing can be read as one kind of “healing-style” fiction *iyashi-kei shōsetsu*.

While the term *iyashi-kei* dates to more than a decade after Murakami’s debut novel, Nakamata’s anachronistic use of the term is apt. Murakami’s early work charts much of the affective terrain of what came to characterize later ambient literature, including, as Nakamata points out, an avoidance of psychological interiority and a preference for light, transparent diction.

Yoshimoto Banana (1964–) has also often been noted for the calming effect of her writing, beginning with her debut novel, *Kitchen* (1988). For example, Ann Sherif quotes Tokyo psychiatrist Machizawa Shizuo’s description of how his patients—even suicidal ones—are able to find in Yoshimoto’s novels “an optimism and brightness absent in their own lives.” Sherif writes that Yoshimoto’s narratives concern “the process of grieving and healing and exhibit a steadfast belief in the possibility of reintegration into society, even after extreme alienation or trauma.”

In the wake of the popular (and international) success of Murakami and Yoshimoto, a number of younger novelists developed styles that utilize mood regulation and *iyashi* themes more directly. These include Kurita Yuki (1972–), Seo Maiko (1974–), and Ōshima Masumi (1962–). To a greater extent than either Murakami or Yoshimoto, these novelists began

7. Ibid., pp. 32–34.
9. Literary critic Yoshida Nobuko discusses these three authors in her article “Banana Girls: Three Storytellers Carry on Yoshimoto Banana’s Tales of Healing and Renewal,”
their careers at a time when literature was competing for affective space with the more directly mood-oriented practices of the iyashi industry.

Japan was not the only place where portable affective calm became popular in the late twentieth century, and literature was not the only art form to respond to the rise of commercial forms of mood regulation. In the very same year that Murakami Haruki was at his kitchen table writing his first novel, Brian Eno (1948–) was in England formulating his idea of ambient music. Intrigued by the way companies such as the American Muzak Corporation were deploying low-volume instrumental music as a means to emotionally condition shoppers, Eno began exploring how the calming aesthetics of such “atmospheric” music might be extended beyond a commercial setting. In 1978, just months before the release of the first Sony Walkman, Eno recorded what remains to this day the most well-known ambient album: Ambient 1: Music for Airports. In his liner notes to the album, Eno describes ambient music as an attempt to expand the mood-shifting possibilities of background music in a way that moved beyond the functional commercial orientations of Muzak:

The concept of music designed specifically as a background feature in the environment was pioneered by Muzak Inc. in the fifties, and has since come to be known generically by the term muzak. The connotations that this term carries are those particularly associated with the kind of material that Muzak Inc. produces—familiar tunes arranged and orchestrated in a lightweight and derivative manner. Understandably, this has led most discerning listeners (and most composers) to dismiss entirely the concept of environmental music as an idea worthy of attention.

Over the past three years, I have become interested in the use of music as ambience, and have come to believe that it is possible to produce material that can be used thus without being in any way compromised. To create a distinction between my own experiments in this area and the products of the various purveyors of canned music, I have begun using the term Ambient Music.

After distinguishing his “experiments” from the more commercial reams of “canned music,” Eno goes on to elaborate more specifically where his ambient music departs from commercial background music:

Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these. Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas their intention is to
“brighten” the environment by adding stimulus to it (thus supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and leveling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms) Ambient Music is intended to induce calm and a space to think.

Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.10

Eno’s conception of ambient music—accommodating different levels of awareness and yet maintaining uncertainty—envisions a mode of affective engagement that encompasses both aesthetic contemplation (“a space to think”) and affective relaxation (“intended to induce calm”). Such music is no longer “canned,” no longer reduced to the simple purpose of placating shoppers, but instead works toward a calm mood as an end in itself.

With ambient music, Eno attempted to recoup the aesthetic ambitions in the works of earlier modernist composers (such as Erik Satie’s Musique d’ameublement, John Cage’s aleatory compositions, and the works of American minimalists such as La Monte Young, Morton Feldman, and Philip Glass) at the same time as he incorporated the newer trend toward creating individual affective environments. In bridging these discourses, ambient music struck an uneasy balance between the latent modernist goal of liberated affect and the mood-regulating utility of calm and relaxation.

While Eno’s ambient music was drifting through global musical circuits, and the Sony Walkman was emerging onto city streets, Japanese fiction writers were beginning a parallel renegotiation with the role of literature in a mood-regulating culture. To highlight the parallels between the aesthetics of ambient music and these new literary forms, I find it useful to coin the term “ambient literature.”11 Just as ambient music sought to bridge modernist aesthetics and Muzak, several of the most popular writers in Japanese of the 1980s and 1990s began developing a literature focused on calming affect.

The creation of such an ambient aesthetics extends beyond the borders of any single national culture or region. David Toop has traced the origins


11. The definition of ambience I employ in this essay is specific to Eno and is distinct from the use of the term in design fields such as Ambient Intelligence, where it acts as a more general marker of a dispersed sensory environment. The only other usage of “ambience” in English-language literary criticism I have found is Timothy Morton’s conception of the Romantic “ambient poem,” although his elaboration of what he calls an “ambient poetic” differs considerably from what I put forth here. Morton unfortunately buries the specificity of ambience by troping it primarily as another mode of deconstruction (as in the undoing of binary pairs, of figure/ground relations), which he posits as key to a kind of deep ecology. See Timothy Morton, “‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’ as an Ambient Poem: A Study of a Dialectical Image; with Some Remarks on Coleridge and Wordsworth,” in James McKusick, ed., Romanticism and Ecology, Romantic Circles Praxi Series, November 2001.
of Eno’s ambient music back to Claude Debussy’s visit to the epoch-making Paris Exposition of 1889, where he first witnessed performances of music and dance from Java, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Japan. The more dispersed modes of attention called for in this looping, atmospheric music, particularly in the Indonesian gamelan, emerged soon after in Debussy’s compositions. Toop cites this as a crucial moment in the lineage of ambient sound leading up through Eno and on toward the present day. Debussy was not alone in his growing interest in an atmospheric “Asia,” an aesthetic trajectory shared by many of the most influential European writers and artists of the period. Later ambient musicians in Japan, meanwhile, drew freely from the work of European and American composers as well as from the work of pioneering Japanese electronic musicians, including Tomita Isao’s early synthesizer renditions of Debussy.

The early major precedents for ambient literature in Japan, meanwhile, appear to have been English-language sources. Murakami Haruki has often cited American authors such as Richard Brautigan as the source of his lightweight, economical style, while Kurita Yuki, who holds a degree in English Literature from the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, has also described American and British writers as a primary influence on her writing.

Kurita’s works are particularly compelling in their exploration of ambient aesthetics. Winner of the 2002 Subaru Literature Prize for her debut work, Hamizabesu, and a three-time nominee for the Akutagawa Prize, Kurita has often focused on themes of healing and mood regulation. This is particularly true of Oteru Moru, a novel that deploys all the calming resources of ambient literature.

Oteru Moru tells the story of a young woman, 23-year-old Honda Kiri, as she begins her first real job, a night-shift attendant running the front desk of the Hôtel de Mole Dormons Bien. She soon learns that the Hôtel Mole is unlike the average business hotel. Interviews are conducted with

13. For a history of these interests, see J. J. Clark, Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought (New York: Routledge, 1997).
14. This proclivity to locate ambience in a more illegible and unfamiliar foreign locale—be it the exotic East or the exotic West—continues into ambient literature. Ann Sherif writes of Yoshimoto Banana’s interest in the “supernatural potential of exoticized Asian other-worlds,” pointing to the Bali setting in Amrita (1994). At other times, the healing exotic is located in Europe, as in Murakami’s Greek isles in Supûtoniku no koibito (Sputnik sweetheart, 1999) or the Francophile hotel of Kurita’s Oteru Moru.
16. Kurita’s Onaiko Terumi (2003), Oteru Moru (2005), and Maruko no yume (2005) were each nominated for the Akutagawa Prize.
potential guests concerning personal sleep history. Everything about the hotel is geared toward providing the highest-quality sleep possible. Check-in occurs immediately after sunset and checkout at sunrise. The rooms are entirely underground—13 floors down—and have regulated light timers to ensure ideal levels of darkness. The lobby, described in great detail, is also designed to generate relaxing, soporific moods as guests make their way to their rooms. As the human face of the hotel’s relaxing promise, Kiri is trained to impart a warm and soothing welcome to visitors. The novel follows Kiri from her job interview, through her training with manager Toyama, and on to her first weeks alone on the job. Along the way, she begins to unravel the mystery of how the hotel generates such quality sleep. Interspersed with these episodes are scenes set at Kiri’s home, focused on her complicated relationship with her sickly identical twin sister.

Like that of Yoshimoto’s work, the popular reception of Kurita Yuki’s fiction has been marked by an emphasis on the soothing quality of her writing. In a review of Oteru Moru in the literary journal Bungakukai, Higashi Naoko reports on the powerful physiological effect the novel had on her: “Several times while reading this mysterious story, I was overcome with sleepiness. This certainly was not because I was bored. . . . In the same way that a delicious description of food triggers hunger, the qualities of sleep were so powerfully portrayed here that I became quite sleepy.”

Higashi ends the review by noting that she plans to keep the novel near her pillow at night to function as a sort of talisman to prevent insomnia and promote restful sleep. In a review of an earlier Kurita work, Onuiko Terumii (The seamstress Terumii, 2004), critic Yoshida Nobuko writes in a similar vein, reporting that just after reading she felt full of warmth. Novelist Kakuta Mitsuyo likewise feels her spirit is lifted after reading Kurita’s novels. The ability of Kurita’s texts to soothe her readers is not accidental. Asked about her first work, Hamizabesu, Kurita recalled that during the course of writing a close friend became hospitalized. As Kurita imagined her work being read by this sick friend, themes of illness and healing began to seep into her writing.

According to Eno, ambient music also had its origins in a period of convalescence. He describes how he came upon the idea of ambient music while in bed recovering after a car accident. One day he was lying there listening to a record of harp music playing at low volume in an adjacent room. Unable to get up to adjust the volume, he eventually began to focus on how the harp intertwined with the sounds of rain and traffic coming in

through the windows. Eno realized that this arrangement of softly blended sound spread a delicate ambience over the room, putting him in a calm and thoughtful frame of mind. From this point on, he began to envision a less commercial style of “background” music, one that generates atmospheric moods both calming and contemplative.

Ambient novels like *Oteru Moru* function in much the same way as Eno’s harp-rain-traffic discovery. While the act of reading demands at least a minimum degree of attention, ambient literature like Kurita’s also works to generate spaces of soothing affect. As I describe in the next section, ambient literature draws upon on all levels of textual form to generate these moods, beginning with the most minute elements—individual words—and expanding outward to build up the atmosphere of the novel as a whole.

*The Aesthetics of Ambience*

The words in *Oteru Moru* are mostly common, familiar terms. The vocabulary is not the sort to give readers pause or confusion. This does not mean the words express simple meanings, simply that they are simply put. For example, to describe mystery, Kurita sticks to the most familiar adjective available: *fushigi* (mysterious). The novel does not engage in the loop-ing refinement of emotional tone through descriptive variety and layering. Instead, *fushigi* remains *fushigi*—familiar but nonetheless still mysterious. Common words like *fushigi* cue the emotions associated with mystery but do so in a nonspecific way. While every reader of Japanese has a familiarity with this word, the word is at the same time general enough to be unlikely to cue any particular details or images. This allows it to invoke a general atmosphere of mystery while maintaining a dispersed, amorphous state of attention. *Fushigi* is an ambience.

This same aesthetic of ambiguity-through-transparency is replicated on the level of the sentence. The text on the back of *Oteru Moru*, likely the first sentences readers will encounter upon picking up the book, summarizes the novel in three straightforward lines:

> Every night, people in search of sleep gather at Hôtel Mole.
> A mysterious hotel that offers happy sleep.
> A story taking place in a world just a little separated from everyday life.

*Maiban, Oteru Moru ni wa nemuri o motomete hito ga atsumau.
Shiawase na nemuri o teikyō suru fushigi na hoteru.
Nichijō kara hon no sukoshi kairi shita sekai de motarasareru monogatari.*

The words employed here—with the minor exception perhaps of *kairi shita* (separated)—could hardly be more “everyday.” This is a mysterious story about people who gather at a hotel to find happy sleep. Its curious premise

is stated as matter-of-factly as possible. As the final line signals, this is a type of mystery just a tiny bit (hon no sukoshi) separated from the familiar. There is no gaping anxiety of a mystery that threatens to topple the known world. Instead, just a touch of mystery surfaces, contained and vaguely familiar, not unlike a daydream.

Notice that the latter two sentences in the summary are incomplete. The copula is implied, but its absence emphasizes the final nouns in both lines. A mysterious hotel. A story detached from everyday life, but only by a little. The nouns are invoked in parallel as if the hotel and the tale (monogatari) were one and the same. Here the familiarity of the hotel and the evocation of gathering for a pleasant sleep provide the iyashi cues for calm. At the same time, the little bit of mystery—the curiosity of a hotel designed entirely for sleep—promises a degree of unfamiliarity and a space for the mind to wander.

This basic equation of translucent simplicity plus comfortable mystery governs the emotional architecture of ambient literature. Sentence structure, like diction, tends toward the straightforward and evocative. The phrasing is short, light, and succinct. Nakamata Akio connects this easy-to-read style with the healing qualities of Murakami Haruki’s novels.21 Readers of Kurita Yuki likewise often comment on the sense of ease accompanying the lightness and precision of her language. Ishii Shinji, in the afterword to Hamizabesu, describes Kurita’s language as exact (seikaku), avoiding vague nuance and “using the ordinary meanings shared by everyone” (p. 203). He notes that surplus exposition is studiously avoided, as is any belabored explanation of characters’ emotional states. The story flows by smoothly and easily.

But Ishii senses that something more than simplicity of language has contributed to the smoothness (surusuru) of his feelings after reading Kurita. Here he turns to the mystery part of the equation and in the process uncovers precisely what is healing about Kurita’s style:

Kurita doesn’t write about unknowns as if they were knowns. The unknown is enshrined in the depths of the novel as it is [sono mama] and expressed with exquisite precision, as if affixed with a pair of tweezers, in a language everyone can understand. For the reader, the meaning of the various words is easily understood. But at the same time, just beyond this surface covering of language, the structure and meaning of the “unknown”—as an “unknown”—becomes thoroughly absorbed. (p. 204, emphasis added)

What Ishii describes here is the way ambient literature reaches at mystery through, paradoxically, a language that does not reach at all. Unlike the Kantian sublime, where the subject is confronted with the enormity of the unknown in a moment of shock and terror, the ambient approach to mystery

is simply to leave mystery as mystery, transmuting the unknown not by attempting to arrest it in language but by a careful evocation of the familiar qualities that lead in its (unspoken) direction. Instead of violently attempting to plumb the depths directly, ambient literature’s sparklingly placid language evokes the depths through the translucency of its surface.

*Sensory Invocation.* Achieving a sense of clarity while maintaining semantic uncertainty often entails an emphasis on sensory detail. As Elaine Scarry describes in *Dreaming by the Book*, writers may achieve a high degree of perceptual vivacity by instructing readers to imagine the material conditions necessary to produce a given sense perception. When reading literature, “what in perception comes to be imitated is not only the sensory outcome (the way something looks or sounds or feels beneath the hands), but the actual structure of production that gave rise to the perception.”

Ambient literature makes extensive use of this technique, with detailed mimetic depictions of the act of encountering *iyashi* qualities in sensory objects—the soothingness of sound, texture, color, light, temperature, and so on.

Many of these encounters focus especially on the tactile qualities of objects. Gilles Deleuze writes, “it is the tactile which can constitute a pure sensory image, on condition that the hand relinquishes its prehensile and motor functions to content itself with pure touching.” The hands here operate not as tools for the completion of actions but as viewers in a nonvisual plane. They enact the encounter with *iyashi* affect for the readers of the novel.

During Kiri’s first visit to the hotel, she waits for her interview and investigates the chair behind the front desk:

The chair was nice. Tall enough to support the back of the head, with armrests as well. The surface had a velvety feel, making me want to keep stroking it. I reached out my hand to touch the back of the chair. My fingers felt something hard. Taking a closer look, I saw a plastic plate about the size of my little finger. It said “Cowhide.” Was this to explain what the chair was made of? I tried sitting down. Even through my clothes, my skin could sense the suppleness of the leather. I closed my eyes and soon felt my body yielding to the softness. A moan of comfort began to bubble up from deep within my throat. (p. 13)

This is a prototypical example of the type of tactile encounter that reappears throughout the novel. While this paragraph does not move the plot forward in any significant way, it plays the crucial function of invoking a calm affective orientation toward the world and in turn reinforcing the overall ambient mood.


As Ishii points out, Kurita’s depictions of such seemingly unimportant objects as the desk chair are characteristically careful and precise. This is thematized in the novel by the small plastic plates Kiri finds affixed to various objects throughout the hotel, each revealing the material used in its object’s construction. At first Kiri is puzzled by such attention to detail, but when she later asks her boss about them, she receives the rather oblique answer that they are there “so the employees do not become confused” (p. 36). As Kiri eventually comes to recognize, part of generating a relaxing atmosphere in the hotel involves paying attention not only to outward appearances but also to the sensory qualities of the materials themselves.

However, more occurs in this passage than simply the introduction of precise material details. The vivacity of this description comes through how Kiri does not so much tell us how the chair feels but rather guides us through the perceptual experience of her body coming into contact with the material. We sense not the chair as an isolated visual object but the caress of the hand against its surface, the feeling of support along the head and arms, the cool yielding of the leather under the weight of the body. Scarry notes in *Dreaming by the Book* that such passages are made vivid by how “the people on the inside of the fiction report to us on the sensory qualities in there that we ourselves cannot reach or test.”24 Kiri’s sensory contact evokes readers’ own haptic responses. Notice how differently the passage reads with Kiri’s presence removed: “The back of the chair was tall, with armrests. The surface was velvety. On the back was a hard plastic plate that read ‘Cowhide.’ This may have been to explain what the chair was made of. The leather was soft.”

In this impoverished description, we receive just as much information about the chair, but it has almost none of the sensory and emotional resonance of the original. As Scarry emphasizes, the moments of contact give textual objects their sense of solidity and weight: the hand on the leather, the body on the chair, the head on the headrest. Such moments bring a sensory immediacy to the chair that it otherwise lacks.

But what makes this chair experience so soothing? This paragraph in microcosm contains all the kernels of an *iyashi* encounter: the combination of a sense of suppleness and ease combined with a stable sense of security and support. The headrest and armrests are crucial here. What enables Kiri to relax into the chair, even closing her eyes, is not only the velvety softness of the leather but also the sense of safety, of being held. Scarry describes John Locke’s notion of the vital emotional role played by this perception of solidity: by promising to stop “our further sinking downwards,” solidity “establishes the floor beneath us that, even as we are unmindful of it, makes us cavalier about venturing out.”25 The same tactile sense of solidity is cru-

25. Ibid., p. 12.
cial for creating an ambient space. In ambient literature, a feeling of safety provides the foundation for thought to venture out and encounter the unknown. If, as in Scarry’s argument, this sense of solidity is central to perceptual vivacity in general, it becomes even more central in the generation of an ambient mood. Being safely held, a reader can venture forth into areas (physical and emotional) that might otherwise be too unfamiliar or too frightening.

After adjusting to the hushed dimness of the hotel, Kiri realizes the tension she was feeling about her job interview has dissipated, and she feels relaxed to the extent that she might even start yawning. However, in the novel itself no causal relation is ever asserted between the hotel and Kiri’s relaxed state. Despite the detailed nature of Kiri’s perception of the space, she never offers any explicit reflection on how sensory aspects of the hotel are working to make her sleepy. Instead, as readers we are gently led through a number of sensory experiences with her and then told how Kiri is feeling. Even this latter descriptive moment becomes a physiological cue for readers, much in the way that the thought of yawning is often enough to make a person begin to yawn.

The high redundancy of emotional cues in *Oteru Moru* pointing toward a relaxing mood helps ensure that even if every reader does not respond to every affective cue, and even if individual cues are of varying vividness based on the individual sensory history of each reader, the cumulative effect will still be to firmly establish an ambient mood. This additive process is especially crucial in the early pages of the book. Setting a strong emotional framework early on orients readers’ expectations for the remainder of the novel. Later, even if comparatively non-*iyashi* emotional cues appear, the strength of these earlier sensory experiences helps to weight the novel’s affective focus toward a dominant mood of calm. Moods have a great deal of inertia. Already in a relaxed mood, we are apt to focus on elements that reinforce, rather than interrupt, this calmness.26

This is not to say that a shift in emotional tone later in the text will have no consequences. To maintain a mood, emotional cues must be reintroduced periodically. This is precisely what happens throughout *Oteru Moru*. Over the course of the book, Kiri makes her way deeper into the hotel (the elevator, the bedrooms, and finally the lowest floor in the building), each time describing in detail her sensory and physiological experiences. Each scene reinforces the mood-space of the familiar unknown.

**Establishing an Incubatory Space.** Ambient literature builds an enveloping space around readers as they read. The “healing” aspect of *iyashi*

refers not to the technical alleviation of a particular ailment but to the incubation structure through which most healing occurs. The structure of incubation involves a heightened level of protection from exterior threats. This creates the nurturing, regulated space within which the assailed individual can begin to redirect the energies usually devoted to coping with the outside world onto the interior tasks of physical and emotional healing. This structure is found (at least ideally) in inpatient hospital care, in the protected emotional space of the therapy session, and perhaps in its oldest guise in the concept of the spiritual retreat.27

Many aspects of the design of Hôtel Mole focus on nurturing this sense of envelopment, of being held within a warm, safe, womb-like space. To reach the front door of the hotel, Kiri first passes through an inconspicuous alleyway hidden between two buildings. The alley is so narrow that it seems it will be impossible to pass through to the other side, but by turning sideways and slithering across, Kiri is just able to slide through. She announces her name over the intercom and the doors slide smoothly open to welcome her.

Upon entering the building, Kiri feels the automatic doors slide shut silently behind her. Before her is a long hallway. The walls are beige, the ceiling a deep wine-red. As Kiri walks forward, her every step sinks softly and inaudibly into the carpet. She hears no sounds. The lighting is faint, and she cannot see her wristwatch through the darkness. As she looks up, she realizes the ceiling is unusually low.

After some time, she reaches the end of the hall and emerges into a large reception area. Long curtains, made of a thick and heavy material, hang from the ceiling. They are also a dark and rich shade of wine. There are no windows behind them. To one side sits the front desk and the comfortable leather chair. On the other side hangs a large painting, about the size of a double bed. The image is abstract and composed entirely of dark colors. Nearby, a small source of light flickers near one of the walls. It wavers now and then, like a candle. Kiri smells a faint hint of wax in the air.

Below the painting sits a sofa. Or rather, something like the seating area of a sofa curves directly out of the wall, born from the building itself. The walls are concavely curved, giving the room a round shape.

These descriptions, related through Kiri’s perceptual experiences, instruct readers to conjure up a vivid sensory experience of entering the space of the hotel. Everything is designed to be womb-like, a place of perceptual softening and incubated security. The initial obstacles to entrance experimentally produce a sense of set-apartness from the world of everyday Tokyo. The low lighting, absence of sound, and faint smell allow the senses to relax

27. The spiritual retreat is described among Sri Lankan healing traditions in Ueda, *Kakusei no nettōwaku*. 
and open, while the rich fabrics and colors, along with the round walls and low ceiling, provide a sense of being enveloped, held.

These descriptions appear within the first 20 pages of the novel, establishing a vivid sensorial space within which the more fleeting, almost ghostly presence of the characters can drift. Again, the building provides a precise mixture of familiar comfort combined with an edge of the uncanny—an unknown safe enough to drift through calmly. Immediately after these initial encounters, Kiri relates her experience of the space in just this manner:

My impression of the entrance hall is that it is rather different from other hotels I have visited. It isn’t like a resort hotel, nor is it like a city hotel, nor is it like a love hotel. However, it also isn’t so strange as to feel completely unfamiliar. I have the sense that I have set foot in this kind of place before. But then it isn’t quite like any friend’s house, or any lover’s room—of course, this isn’t a house at all. Why does it feel familiar, I wonder? (p. 15)

Kiri is intrigued that despite the lack of windows (and plants), the space does not feel at all lonely. The hotel is a strangely comforting space.

At the same time as being incubatory, however (and here it differs from a more strictly therapeutic architecture), the ambient space is portable and porous. Like the in-between spaces invoked by Eno’s “music for airports,” the Hôtel Mole is a space of social circulation, with a new population every night. It is familiar and yet transitory, comfortable and yet temporary. Both airports and hotels are public spaces to the degree that they welcome any individual who can afford access and agree to follow the rules. While they establish a space set off from the street, they still maintain a conduit open to the outside, unfamiliar world.

This is also true for ambient literature as a physical object. The small format of most Japanese novels—especially paperbacks—makes them ideal companions, like the Sony Walkman, during the long train commutes of many urban Japanese. The physically transitory spaces of commuting resonate with the transient spaces within the novels, allowing the incubatory attitude within the text to seep out into the space surrounding the book. In this way, readers of ambient literature are made comfortable about venturing out while in the very act of venturing out—creating, perhaps, a new way of relating to public space.

Ambient Subjectivity. Readers may also find here a new way of relating to routine. Another way ambient literature moves through the familiar to

28. Thanks to Andrew Jones for pointing out this connection.
the unknown is by tapping into the estranging qualities of everyday repetition. As with ambient music, ambient literature avoids spectacle and drama, producing a sensation of drift rather than event. The time of ambient literature follows the tempo and repetition of banal modern life.\textsuperscript{30} The pace of \textit{Oteru Moru} is organized around the workday. Kiri applies for a job, has her interview, commutes back and forth to work, and slowly becomes adjusted to working at the hotel. She wakes, goes to work, comes home, dreams, wakes, and goes to work again. Adhering to the temporality of the workday evacuates narrative momentum from the novel and replaces it with a sense of expansive, nondirectional time.

The free-float/repetition of the everyday carries over into the drift of subjectivity in ambient literature, where identities are shadowy and rarely asserted with force. While Kiri’s physiological state is described, and the subplot concerning her troubled twin sister serves as the emotional trauma upon which the healing qualities of the hotel are revealed, when it comes to directly expressed personalities, the characters in \textit{Oteru Moru} remain preliminary, only barely outlined, never quite coming into view. As Nakamata Akio points out, this type of “empty” characterization is common in contemporary Japanese literature from Murakami onward. Nakamata proposes that this downplaying of psychological interiority has something cinematic about it, as if the narrator was a free-floating camera-eye, unreflective but highly sensitive to sensory detail.\textsuperscript{31} It might also be argued, however, that such an unreflective perspective allows the ambient character to become a vessel through which readers might wander and explore these unfamiliar spaces. Deleuze writes that with such an empty subjectivity, “The connection of the parts of space is not given, because it can come about only from the subjective point of view of a character who is, nevertheless, absent, or has even disappeared, not simply out of the frame, but passed into the void.”\textsuperscript{32} Whereas earlier forms oriented themselves around “identification with the characters,” in the aesthetics of ambience “identification is actually inverted: the character has become a kind of viewer.”\textsuperscript{33} Kiri acts less as a self-conscious subject than as a sensing body, lending her perceptual organs to the reader.

In Japan, the emergence of such forms of decentered subjectivity has often been explained by referring to the collapse of larger narrative orientations, which is itself linked back to the traumas of modernization, the loss of


\textsuperscript{32} Deleuze, \textit{Cinema 2}, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 3.
World War II, late capitalism in general, or specific events of the mid-1990s. However, this mode of dispersed subjectivity might also be described not only as a symptom of social collapse but also as a creative form of affective engagement in its own right. The technologies of individualized mood control have spurred a recognition that affective environments play a fundamental role in humans' sense of being in and amidst the world. These affective modes of being run parallel and in some ways prior to more narrative, interiorized forms of identity. Anahid Kassabian has noted the important role personalized background music has played in helping individuals construct and navigate a decentered, “nodal” subjectivity, suitable to navigating diverse, complex, ever-transforming information societies. Ambient literature likewise enables readers to dissolve discrete identities into moods of open-ended affective exploration, free from the usual demands of their social and discursive selves.

Compared with more narrative-oriented genres, where sensory spaces are mapped onto a relatively rigid architecture of plot and character, ambient literature prefers the flexibility of the incubatory space, allowing readers to enter in, feel around, and let their own emotions seep into the work. Echoing Roland Barthes’s distinction between writerly and readerly texts, Kurita, in dialogue with Kakuta Mitsuyo, discusses the difference between novels that are more geared toward a writer expressing himself or herself and texts that ask the reader to step into the novel’s space and collaborate in the production of meaning. Kakuta observes how, compared with other writers, Kurita expressly writes for her readers, consciously opening a line of communication with them. Kurita responds by emphasizing the need to leave a space open for the reader to become involved in the text: “I like novels where I can think while I am reading. The novel is there, and I am there. I like things that create this space [ma] for me. [laughs] Novels where, in this space, we can begin to influence each other.”

Kurita here identifies a key function of her writing: providing a space. The combination of the incubatory envelope and the blurring of subjective specificity allows readers to engage with the novel not as discrete and bounded individuals but as equally malleable bodies that can roam the space and be transformed. Deleuze writes that in such amniotic spaces, “we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, in the situation, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask.”

relaxes the usual borders of self and not-self, allowing for a more porous and improvisatory engagement with the senses.

This ability to engage in a free play of selves, however, comes with a trade-off: in order to develop an incubatory calm, the ambient novel must distance itself from the outside world, especially from more upsetting or exciting forms of emotion that might be encountered there. Incubation demands the conduit with the outside world be closed down in order to focus on the interior. So while ambient literature may provide a “space to think,” it does not necessarily provide a space to think anything uncomfortable. Eno’s claim that ambient music “must be as ignorable as it is interesting” also signals the social boundary of ambient media. We return to consider this boundary in the final section of this essay.

*Narrative-Ambient Counterpoint.* Crucially, however, ambient literature never completely abandons the structural potential of narrative—the buildup of tensions and their eventual release. Instead, it draws upon the absorptive and rhythmic qualities of narrative description in order to fold these moments back into the ambient mood. *Oteru Moru* oscillates between more explicitly ambient scenes of *iyashi* evocation, set in the hotel, and more narrative character-driven scenes, set in Kiri’s home. The home scenes serve two main functions. First, they identify just enough about Kiri’s character for readers to begin to empathize with her, creating an emotional bond between Kiri’s being and their own. We learn that she is selflessly and caringly raising her sister’s child, after the sickly sister again entered the hospital for a long-term stay. We learn that working at the Hôtel Mole is her first real job after graduating from school and that her career has so far been postponed in order to care for her sister and her sister’s child. Without getting into complex psychological motivations, this home context helps develop a more intimate affective relationship with Kiri and establishes a resonance between her feelings and the reader’s own.

The second function of this subplot is to set into motion a gradual narrative of illness and healing. (“Healing” itself, after all, is a narrative concept, moving from sickness into health.) Simultaneously, Kiri gradually comes to terms with her twin’s continued ill health and gradually achieves competence in her position as front desk manager. The novel ends as the tension of both these challenges is finally and fully released.

The general outline of the novel, then, is something like a steadily smoothing sound wave. The novel begins by oscillating between scenes of high *iyashi*-cuing density in the hotel and less ambient scenes of Kiri and her family in their home. While these latter scenes allow us to get to know and empathize with Kiri outside work, they also offer emotional interludes—comparatively familiar and normative spaces that offer counterpoint to the strange ambience of the hotel. Over the course of the book, these two realms merge, first through Kiri’s dreams (she has a particularly
vivid dream of childhood while testing out one of the hotel beds) and finally by introducing the ill sister into the healing space of the hotel itself. The peaks and troughs of ambient/nonambient oscillation slowly level out and eventually synthesize in the harmonious sense of integration that ends the book. Kiri’s troubled relationship with her sister begins to improve precisely as she gains competence in running the hotel. In this pendular structure, characteristic of the ambient novel, we experience—and we feel in the slowing rhythm of the text—how ambient moods unravel all narrative tensions. Everything merges with the night.

Affective Contracts. The novel’s emotional journey might have turned out differently. One of the candles in the lobby might have tipped over and burned the hotel down, shifting the emotional trajectory of the novel and displacing the ambient mood. But this would take it out of the genre of ambient literature. It would break the affective contract implicit to the form.

Genre functions as a mood-orienting frame. Film theorist Noël Carroll argues that “some genres seem to traffic in certain specifiable emotions essentially. That is, certain genres appear to have as their abiding point the elicitation of specifiable emotional states in audiences.” Different genres also promise different ranges of emotional diversity. Epics, for example, often mix elements of romance, action, tragedy, suspense, and comedy, all within the same narrative. Other genres are more focused on delving deep into one specific emotional register. This focus is true of ambient literature, where readers are coming to the texts with the expectation of a thoroughly calming affective experience.

As Kurita points out in her discussion with Kakuta Mitsuyo, these emotional expectations are present not only in the way readers approach particular genres but also in their expectations of particular authors. A regular reader of ambient literature knows from experience the limits on the type of episodes (and the type of emotions) a writer will invoke. Readers can thus trust that the author will see them through to the end of the story without breaching these boundaries. They are then safe to open themselves emotionally to the novel, reading with a sense of ease and security and knowing their emotional investment will not suddenly be betrayed as the story progresses. They must trust, for example, that the author will not get them to sympathize with a character only to suddenly kill this character off two-thirds of the way through the novel.

Paradoxically, this trust allows for some freedom in terms of what occurs in the course of the story. As Kurita points out, as long as this trust is


maintained, the author can include some rather troubling (hidoi) episodes, and readers will still be able to entrust themselves to the author’s care (mi o makaserareru). There are some fairly traumatic episodes even in Oteru Moru. In one of the few elaborations of Kiri’s past within the novel, we learn that she returned home one day to find her boyfriend having sex with her twin sister, leading to the sister’s pregnancy and the birth of a daughter. At the hotel, Kiri at times becomes nervous about performing her new responsibilities while managing the front desk. However, all this takes place within a general context of iyashi and ambience, and readers of the genre may feel certain that these obstacles will not eventually derail the emotional trajectory of the novel.

Ambient literature, as represented here by Kurita Yuki’s Oteru Moru, generates calm through the accumulated effects of all the techniques described here: transparent diction and sensory invocation, the generation of incubatory spaces of the everyday through which amorphous subjectivities can roam, and the gradual release of tension within the safety of the affective contract structuring the work as a whole. All of these small- and large-scale calming rhythms additively form the enveloping mood of the ambient work. Emergent within such spaces is the dispersed subjectivity of a drifting reader made ready to explore through the stable foundation of affective calm.

The approach to literature outlined here treats mood regulation as the primary work done by a text—literature creates mood spaces through which identity can become more malleable and a degree of relaxation and repose can be achieved. Needless to say, adapting literature to be a tool of mood regulation marks a great shift away from earlier models of literary production. The final section considers the arguments of those who pushed against the dominance of iyashi themes in Japanese literature and situates ambient literature within larger debates over the use of calming affect in contemporary Japanese culture.

Iyashi Debates

In a well-known complaint about Murakami Haruki, Ōe Kenzaburō directly laments the Muzak elements in his writing:

Murakami doesn’t take an active attitude toward society, or even toward the immediate environment of daily life. He works by passively absorbing influences from various genres, as if he were listening to background music. He just goes on spinning within his interior fantasy world.

40. Ibid.

Oe’s comments show that the aspect of ambient literature most troubling to critics is its apparent “passivity” with regard to political and social issues. Literary critic Kuroko Kazuo, in an article critiquing both Yoshimoto Banana and the iyashi trend, worries over Yoshimoto’s steadfast belief in the powers of mood regulation. Kuroko cites Yoshimoto’s description of how sometimes, when she is feeling bad, simply eating a piece of cake is all that is necessary for her to turn her feelings around and be happy for the rest of the day. Kuroko points to this comforting use of food as an example of Yoshimoto’s apathy toward wider social struggles. Similarly, Ann Sherif ends her own essay on Yoshimoto with a broad denunciation of Yoshimoto’s optimism: “While her works entertain us and give us a temporary sense of hope for the world, the nuclear threat that Yoshimoto Banana so blissfully ignores remains steadfastly by our sides, for other authors to recall.” These critics regard iyashi media as a solipsistic practice, a way of using close-at-hand positive affect to block out the more disturbing aspects of the world at large.

These critiques take on added weight when placed in larger debates surrounding the rise of iyashi discourse in late twentieth-century Japan. Sociologist Oguma Eiji has warned against the use of iyashi discourse in the recent campaign by right-wing groups in Japan to have depictions of Japan’s wartime atrocities removed from school textbooks. The argument put forth in the campaign is that students will be better off without the added stress and trauma of confronting Japan’s past—allowing emotional concerns to trump historical knowledge. In a parallel argument, Yagi Ko’suke argues in his book on “iyashi as discrimination” that an overemphasis on avoiding uncomfortable feelings can lead to avoidance rather than tolerance of others different from oneself. Meanwhile, Tanaka Satoshi, in his history of healing techniques in modern Japan, identifies various instances throughout the last century of what he terms “health technique mania”: a media-led obsession with perfect health, to the point of denying the aging and frailty of the body. Such examples raise troubling questions about the impact of a culture driven by iyashi and therapeutics.

Relevant questions also remain concerning the deeper currents fuel-

42. Ibid., pp. 160–61. Gustatory metaphors seem to circle around the debate. Murakami’s characters relish their meals as much as Yoshimoto enjoys her cake. In both cases, advocates of a purely rational politics cannot seem to stomach bringing literature “down” to the level of a proximate (and supposedly less rational) sense such as taste.
46. Tanaka, Kenkōhō to iyashi no shakaisha, pp. 256–57.
ing the sudden desire for *iyashi* in late twentieth-century Japan. Sociologist Micki McGee, in her recent critique of the American self-help industry,\(^{47}\) points out that self-help became popular in America at the very same time that employers were systematically cutting back on benefits and services geared at employee development and well-being. With fewer social supports in place, employees were left to their own devices when it came to emotional issues, social strains, retraining difficulties, and forced career change. The ideology of self-help, McGee writes, helped naturalize this reduction in social supports. Through personal effort in positive thinking, self-knowledge, and private study, the self-help logic argued, nothing was beyond reach. Should a person fall short of his or her wildest dreams, it was to be seen as a personal failure, not something to do with the system as a whole.

The *iyashi* boom in Japan was born in a similar moment of industrial reform. After the economic downturn in the early 1990s, many Japanese businesses moved to restructure along the lines of the model McGee identifies in America. The pervasive lifetime employment of the bubble years began to be replaced by more flexible, temporary, cheaper forms of employment. On-the-job training—a mainstay of the previous model—declined, and workers were often on their own in the struggle to remain competitive.

Oguma, Yagi, Tanaka, and McGee each point to instances where the discourse of personal mood regulation is exploited to achieve political and economic ends. Within this context, it becomes easy to locate ambient literature as one more example of infantilization, of the pacification of individuals through anesthetizing popular media.

Recently, however, a number of critics have begun searching for alternative social potentials within the seemingly compromised worlds of popular culture. Anne Allison and Thomas LaMarre have argued for the socially redemptive potential of Japanese toys and anime, respectively. Allison, building on the views of anthropologist Nakazawa Shin’ichi, argues that the expertise on offer to children in Pokémon and other youth-oriented Japanese products is precisely “a way of imaginatively engaging a world beyond that dictated by the rules and rationality they must usually abide by.”\(^{48}\) Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Allison emphasizes that the logic of endless play and fantasy present in toy worlds like Pokémon reflects the nomadicism of everyday postmodern life and at the same time offers the potential of an imaginative reconstruction of that life. Following Benjamin, Allison calls these worlds “dialectical fairy scenes,” and, while still skeptical of the business interests involved, she holds out hope that such play


might not only soothe but allow for a reimagining and eventual reshaping of the world beyond.\textsuperscript{49}

Thomas LaMarre puts forth a similar cautious optimism in his analysis of the devoted anime subcultures of \textit{otaku}.\textsuperscript{50} He focuses on the way the non-perspectival qualities of the anime image results in a “breakdown of perceptual distance,” generating a “purely affective relation to the image.”\textsuperscript{51} In this moment, relations of figure/ground collapse, the hierarchically bounded structure of social desire is set loose, and the potential for new modes of social relation emerges. Again drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, LaMarre seeks to find something liberating in how the “pure immanence” of presubjective affect overrides and disrupts “received hierarchies of organizations such as historical relations, organizations of labor in anime production, and producer-consumer hierarchies.”\textsuperscript{52} Turning to \textit{otaku} fan culture, he searches for evidence of this disruption in the way anime fans become cultural producers themselves through dismantling, reshuffling, and reconstituting new anime worlds by creating and distributing amateur productions. This has also been the main thrust of earlier critical attempts to radicalize \textit{otaku} consumer practices, particularly in the work of Ōtsuka Eiji and Azuma Hiroki.\textsuperscript{53}

Allison’s and LaMarre’s discussions end with the invocation of potential hope for the power of a dispersive and playful aesthetics to somehow provide a way beyond the simple mapping of affect onto commercial discourses. In a 2005 interview, Kurita Yuki similarly argues for the importance of hopefulness in contemporary literature. She believes authors must provide some feeling of positive affect toward the future, particularly at moments when the present has become a struggle:

When I read a novel or see a film, and it displays tragic events just as they are, I think “but I already knew that. . . .” I want to say “but even then there are people who are trying to move forward.” . . . Even amidst all this sadness, it is a positive action to find a way to lift your spirits by enjoying novels or films or music. When you are really feeling bad, you don’t have those kinds of good feelings. Because of this, though I don’t want to affirm reality just as it is, I feel like it is natural for me to somehow calm down and write stories with a hope for the future.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., pp. 30–31.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 368.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Interview with Nakazawa Akiko, http://books.yahoo.co.jp/interview/detail/31614071/01.html (accessed November 22, 2005).
Hope, in this case, comes through a partial withdrawal from the sadness of worldly events, allowing the space, perhaps, for something new to emerge.

The perspectives described above position popular media such as ambient literature as either passively narcissistic or imaginatively hopeful. How such arguments differ is not in their conception of the new media itself. Both recognize in popular culture from the 1980s onward a withdrawal from direct engagement with social issues and a shift in focus toward personal imagination and positive affect. What is at stake, rather, is the role literature is to play in society. Older critics such as Óe and Kuroko insist on a socially committed literature and warn against the solipsistic dangers of an excessive iyashi focus. The (mostly younger) authors of ambient literature, meanwhile, emphasize the therapeutic benefits of iyashi for those in need of healing and are more comfortable situating literature alongside other iyashi media.

The older generations’ concerns about iyashi media point to instances where the practice slips from a form of temporary escape into a habit of perpetual withdrawal. As the above critics assert, this is much more likely to happen when the iyashi industry, the government, and the workplace all become invested in an ideology of self-care and personal well-being. If the story of iyashi is the story of trauma and the need for healing, then it is also a story of the ideological manipulation of these needs for commercial and political ends.

However, just as Brian Eno marked ambient music by asserting its critical distance from the commercial interests of Muzak, ambient literature also contains the seeds of a critique of the iyashi industry as a whole. Ambient music takes hints from modernist aesthetics in order to rethink mood regulation—though it always courts the danger of falling back into being merely background music. Ambient literature, likewise, absorbs the techniques of mood regulation but not necessarily on the terms set for it by commercial or political discourses.

In Oteru Moru, Kurita satirizes the way a hotel that is geared entirely toward generating calm can be still be stressful for its employees. Kiri’s struggle during her first week of work is to try to stay awake in such a sleep-inducing space. At one point during an early-morning shift Kiri simply cannot keep herself from dozing off and replaces the relaxation music playing in the lobby with a punk album. She then dances wildly to keep herself awake. Her boss later complains to her about this (worrying the punk-rock energy will seep into the hotel and disturb the sleepers down below). But even the hotel rules guard against sleep becoming an end in itself. Interviews ensure that guests have real sleep issues they need to address, and whenever guests become able to sleep well even outside the hotel, they are politely asked to cancel their membership. Higashi Naoko picks up on this in her review on the novel: “What must be understood is that the novel is not
saying humans live in order to sleep. The hotel also hints at that. After all, in order to make waking life as rich as possible, the body and brain need to be well rested.”

Kurita, whose own experience working as an overnight hotel receptionist helped inspire the novel, shows the non-iyashi side of the iyashi industry. Kiri’s boss is strict and demanding and anything but iyashi toward her employees. Kiri’s position—staying up all night working and getting anything but restful sleep—serves as a reminder of all the non-iyashi labor that goes into creating a “healing” space for others.

The ability to include this larger perspective on the iyashi industry is an advantage ambient literature has over other, more exclusively nondiscursive iyashi goods. Unlike many other forms of iyashi media, ambient literature can sometimes take on the more critical techniques of earlier models of literary practice, depicting the complexities and contradictions of a mood-regulating culture at the same time that it fully participates as a mood regulator itself. Of course, this is no easy balancing act, and it might be argued that no serious form of social critique can be leveraged in a mood environment that has carefully pacified all forms of negative feeling.

Such a contradiction is present in Eno’s original demand for ambience to produce both “calm” and “a space to think”: the only way to ensure both is to make sure to not think of anything that will destroy the sense of calm. This space to think—while as amorphous and creative as I have described it above—nonetheless has particular contours that limit where such thoughts may travel. Recognizing these limitations, however, may help lead to a better understanding of what role such mood-regulating media might play in the future. Whether healing or infantilizing—or both—ambient literature engages with the vexing question of what role mood regulation is to play in contemporary media culture.

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