Ambient Poetics and the Sublime in Tan Lin's "A Field Guide to American Painting"

by Lucia Kan-Sperling

Contemporary poet Tan Lin has described his writing style as "ambient textuality" (Lin). The works in his book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking*—the genre of which seems to fall somewhere between poetry, fiction, and blog post, or, as the subtitle of the book states, "*[AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]*"—make statements about poetry, namely that it should aim to be like "wallpaper," "a thermostat," and "yoga" (Lin 20, 22). Like an air conditioner which "regulate[s] the room's energies," the poems-slash-aesthetic-treatises in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* have self-proclaimed aspirations toward an object whose function is to be forgotten, a sort of background noise, constantly modulating its atmosphere to maximum homeostatic, relaxing effect (22).

This concept of ambience can be traced back to Timothy Morton's "ambient poetics," which he defines as a "depthless ecology," a kind of environmental consciousness wherein poetry enacts "a state of nondual awareness that collapses the subject-object division" (52). The "weak … sense of warmth towards one's world" Morton describes seems diametrically opposed to the feeling of the sublime, illustrated by Kant as "a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object" due to a perception of extreme power (the dynamic sublime) or infinite magnitude (the mathematical sublime)—"excessive for the imagination … an abyss, in which [imagination] fears to lose itself" (Morton 52, Kant 141). Morton's project may also at first seem to be in contradiction with Lin's: while Morton positions ambience as a possible resolution of humans' tendency toward ecological destruction, thus carrying an explicit

political valence, Lin's description of air conditioner poetry can appear radically apolitical. However, a closer analysis of the final poem[1] in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, "A Field Guide to American Cinema," along with critical works on contemporary technological power and the postmodern sublime, will reveal an ambient poetics that not only takes on the political, but also allows for the development of something akin to what Fredric Jameson calls the "technological sublime."

Morton outlines his concept of ambient poetics through an analysis of the work of Romantic writers, specifically the ecological poetry of William Wordsworth. He cites writings of Thomas De Quincey in which Wordsworth is quoted, describing an experience of trying to hear in the ground "any sound of wheels that might come down upon the lake" (94):

> …at the very instant when I raised my head from the ground in a final abandonment of hope for this night, at the very instant when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing from their tension, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated by capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the infinite that would not have arrested me under other circumstances. (De Quincey 94)

Though Morton declares that Wordsworth here illustrates "the state that I have been describing as evoked by ambient poetics" (53), Wordsworth's focus on the condition of his bodily organs and the sudden apprehension of a perceived infinity brings to mind both Edmund Burke's eighteenth-century *Philosophical Enquiry* into the sublime and beautiful, which includes extensive postulation on the two feelings' physiological effects, and Kant's notion of the mathematical sublime. Morton goes on to cite De Quincey during his analysis of the line "Has carried far into his heart the voice / Of mountain-torrents" in Wordsworth's poem "There was a Boy": "This very expression, 'far,' by which space and its infinities are attributed to the human

---

[1] For the sake of clarity, I will usually refer to the works in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* as poems.

heart, and to its capacities of re-echoing the sublimities of nature, struck me as with a flash of sublime revelation" (De Quincey 94). While using this excerpt to support his reading of the poem as ambient, Morton completely disregards its explicit mention of the sublime, thus failing to make any comparison of or distinction between the two concepts.

Taking into account these discrepancies, it would also be careless, however, to equate Morton's ambient poetics with the Romantic sublime, seeing as the "soothing" sensation Morton describes lacks the element of danger which usually accompanies Romantic depictions of sublime objects (52). The problematic opened up by this clear, yet unaddressed, link between the two is one that I will attempt to clarify somewhat through my own interpretation of Lin's ambient poetics.

In his "Postscript on the Societies of Control," Gilles Deleuze argues that while Michel Foucault's conceptualization of modern institutional power in a "disciplinary society" posits an individual whose subjectivity is defined by its passage through different "environments of enclosure" such as the school, prison, or factory, which each reconstitute the subject in turn according to specified rules, the contemporary incarnation of institutional power is the control society, which produces not an individual but a "dividual," a fragmented and constantly recalibrating subjectivity spread across many simultaneously existing networks, a collection of data points heavily monitored by "a universal system of deformation" in which "the corporation, the educational system, the armed services [are] metastable states" that "[coexist] in one and the same modulation" (Deleuze 4, 5). This phenomenon has only intensified since 1992, when Deleuze's text was published; we are not only constantly, inescapably tracked and monitored based on countless metadata taken from our technological devices and digital footprint, but we

are subjected to an utterly overwhelming, ever-growing inundation of information from the internet that follows us throughout daily lives, necessitating an increasing level of simplification and speed of consumption of the media we encounter. In Vilém Flusser's book *Does Writing Have a Future?*, he analyzes the state of literature in information society, writing: "Our literature is not monumental … It does not demand consideration and contemplation … It is written quickly to be read quickly. And this speed explains the dynamics of the ever-increasing flow of literature in which we are swimming" (18).

Fig. 1. Tan Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking*, pp. 194-195.

Tan Lin clearly evokes this diffuse subjectivity in Part II of his poem "A Field Guide to American Cinema," which spans the last 26 pages of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, comprised of lines of text on the top half of each page and black-and-white images on the bottom half (see fig. 1). The poem contains frequent line breaks and is made up of extremely fragmented phrases that seem to collapse together several different (people's) memories, or else one memory incompletely re-remembered over a duration of time. The opening lines make this scattered narration evident:

> looking kissing voting
> Peter was
> dancing with his shirt around his waist, which he tied to them //
> they had something
> like pollen on their teeth,
> I sat //
> It was 1969. They owned
> In
> a Pinto.
> the door //
> (Lin 194-196; // indicates page break)

The unfinished thoughts, as well as the spreading of lines across several pages, make any possible "story" told by the poem extremely hard to follow; it reads as a series of quick, partial glimpses of an inaccessible past, as though imparting information perceived by an eye—or a camera shutter—opening and closing at predetermined intervals. A piece of a narration on someone's past relationship is interrupted by two pages containing unexpected combinations of letters and numbers:

> They bit //
> fk 3
> fo 45 //
> 2 mins 56 secs
> 4 mins 17 secs //
> each other occasionally during intercourse.
> (Lin 201-204)

Here, the intrusion of numbers and timestamps, the significance of which is unclear, breaks apart the traditional sentence structure of subject-verb-object and renders the relationship between the two phrases that fall before and after uncertain: they could be "meant" to belong together, or they could be completely separate snippets of text—taken from completely different contexts—that happen to make sense when placed alongside one another. This method of textual fragmentation is evoked in Craig Dworkin's description of conceptual writing in the digital age:

> The very procedures of conceptual writing, in fact, demand an opaquely material language: something to be digitally clicked and cut; physically moved and reframed; searched and sampled and poured and pasted … the guiding *concept* behind conceptual poetry may be the idea of language as quantifiable data. (Dworkin 44)

Lin's distracted, cut-and-paste-style listing of words evokes the iterative nature of an information processing system, spitting out scraps of memory one at a time. Sianne Ngai describes a similar phenomenon of "agglutination," or "the mass adhesion or coagulation of data particles or signifying units," to build upon her notion of the "stuplime," a combination of the sublime with "stupid" or "stupefying" (263). She defines stuplimity as "reveal[ing] the limits of our ability to comprehend a vastly extended form as a totality, as does Kant's mathematical sublime, yet not through an encounter with the infinite but with finite bits and scraps of material in repetition" (271). This experience of an overwhelming "heap of fragments" of language is one which she believes was incorrectly classified under the framework of the "hysterical sublime" by Fredric Jameson in his influential text "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." Jameson's a- or post-historical examples of postmodern art, such as Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* and Duane Hanson's extremely lifelike sculptures, are "glossy" surfaces,

simulacra without historical referent (77). They exemplify "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness" in culture, which produces a "euphoria, [a] high, an intoxicator or hallucinogenic intensity" that replaces "the older affects of anxiety and alienation": this is the postmodern "hysterical" sublime (Jameson 60, 73, 74). Ngai argues, however, that these artworks are *not* "heaps of fragments"—a phrase Jameson uses to characterize this new cultural production separated from history—but instead "slick wholes, held tightly and *seamlessly* together, as Jameson himself notes, by a 'glossy skin'" (Ngai 287). In contrast, the writing Ngai uses as examples of the stuplime, such as Gertude Stein's *The Making of the Americans* and Samuel Beckett's *How It Is*, do consist of masses of highly repetitive scraps of language that simultaneously elicit in the reader a shock at their sheer volume and extreme boredom at their monotony.

While the stuttering, splintered language in "A Field Guide to American Cinema" certainly does not constitute a "slick whole" that elicits hallucinogenic euphoria, it is also neither highly repetitive nor extremely tedious, defined by Ngai as conditions for the stuplime object. In fact, the poem seems to emulate what Jameson illustrates as the very condition for the postmodern "technological sublime": the encounter with an object "whose outer shell has no emblematic or visual power," but which, like a computer, is

> fascinating, not so much in its own right, but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp—namely the whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself. (Jameson 79-80)

Jameson makes no explicit distinction between the technological and the hysterical sublime, but it seems evident upon reading "A Field Guide to American Cinema" that the many,

incomprehensible, fragmented pieces of information it offers gesture at "the incapacity of our minds … to map the great global multinational and decanted communicational network" of power in which we "find ourselves caught" (Jameson 84). The poem's textual data amalgamate into a haze of violent images: "talking about the parking garage with 14 people dead" (Lin 198); "the building on top didn't collapse" (199); "etc. etc. / had miscarriage" (200), "they watched TV about a bomb going through / a parking garage" (204); "a white Pinto, with a bomb under the tire" (209); "Latino Because They hated me / They had thought about the Republic that way" (206).

Though Lin has stated in an interview that the poem is loosely "about" the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the mention of a bomb going off in a parking garage matches the true circumstances of the event, there are many more details that obviously do not: the year 1993 is never mentioned, whereas "1969" and "1987" are (Lin 196, 201), and the phrase "It was not February" occurs twice (204), though the bombing took place on February 26, 1993 at 12:17 PM (also not one of the timestamps that occur in the poem—"2 mins 56 secs" and "4 mins 17 secs"). Instead, the poem seems to create a system of "language as quantifiable data" that evokes a violence rendered unspecific through fragmentation (Dworkin 44), imparted upon the reader in a manner just as diffuse and undifferentiating as the collection and dispersal of information in a society of control: literally, a "controlled vocabulary."[2] This reveals a backdrop that goes hand in hand with the "great global multinational and decanted communicational network" of our time,

[2] "Controlled vocabulary" usually refers to an organized set of words or phrases used to index knowledge or data (University of Texas Libraries). When discussed in the context of Deleuze's control society, it takes on a dual meaning. Lin's use of the term in his book's title is clearly at least somewhat ironic; the front cover of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* shows a fake set of Library of Congress Subject Headings for the book that, according to an interview with Lin, he made up himself.

and which Jameson mentions at the outset of his essay: that "global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world" (57). (State-sanctioned) Violence is inherent to postmodern systems of technological power, and therefore also the culture that is produced within them. "A Field Guide to American Cinema" makes this evident.

This development raises the question: can the poem still be classified as "ambient"? Lin seems to undermine his poems' own stated goals to be as relaxing and forgettable as air conditioning, revealing a critical, ironic valence to his own ostensible project. However, drawing upon Steven Shaviro's article on "post-cinematic affect" may offer a possibility for maintaining the designation of ambient poetry. Shaviro uses Brian Massumi's definition of affect to reconcile Jameson's postmodernity with what Shaviro calls the "ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today, although it cannot be attributed to any subject in particular" (3). Jameson claims that postmodern culture and the "end of the bourgeois ego" has produced a "waning of affect," which means "not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling"; what he calls "intensities" are now "free-floating and impersonal" (64). Massumi, however, distinguishes between *affect* and *emotion*: "affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying … while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified and meaningful, a 'content' that can be attributed to an already-constituted subject" (Shaviro 3). While the postmodern era has led to a waning of emotion, it has produced a "magnification of affect, whose flows swamp us, and continually carry us away from ourselves … it is precisely by means of

such affective flows that the subject is opened to, and thereby constituted through, broader social, political and economic processes" (Shaviro 5).

Affect is, therefore, ambient, even when it is negative, in the sense that it exists in the absence of a fully constituted subject, indicating a flow between the interior and exterior, between subject and object. And ambience is affective: toward the end of the poem, Lin writes, "A book should reflect the symbols that pass before it before they become emotions" (213). The fragmented memories he places together do not attempt to convey or elicit any specific feelings; there are barely any adjectives in the entire text. The images simply occur, scattered seemingly randomly between accounts of what can barely be called different "characters." "Peter," "I," "they," "she"—the lack of specific information about any of these figures renders them interchangeable, all swimming in a pool of data points that cannot truly "mean," that cannot be made to refer to anything other than the vague fog of violence that seems to link them.

Lin's poem also mirrors the violence inherent to the objects of Shaviro's analysis, cinema: just like filmic montage, which literally cuts and reassembles previously continuous images, "A Field Guide to American Cinema" puts alongside one another phrases that do not fit together grammatically: "Some said moving the car / some said in the sink that morning / The picnic table / littered with Dove Bars, etc. etc. wiring casings etc etc. / It was 1987" (Lin 201).

The only explicit mention of cinema in the poem, other than in the title, is toward the end, on one of a pair of opposing pages that contain the only series of consecutive sentences not separated by line breaks (see fig. 2). The images below each passage are exactly the same, save for the fact that the photo on the right side shows a view shifted slightly to the right of the one on the left. Over the course of the poem, not only does it become evident that the black-and-white

L: Cinema should aspire to the most taciturn forms of expression such as greeting cards, photographs of outer space, video monitors turned off, slightly incandescent lightbulbs, automobile windshields at night, billboards, cheap but glossy high-quality reproductions (of photos or paintings), banners, employment manuals, flags. The best movies would consist only of words or letters. Unlike images, letters never change.

R: A book should reflect the symbols that pass before it before they become emotions. In the ugliest of books, all emotions become the symbols of things that they are not. Like the Pantone color chart, the beautiful book is a diagram of "historical inexactitude" which reflects (by turning) something "not there." What is "not there" is opposed to what appears in a mirror. It should never be necessary to turn a page when reading. The page should turn before you got there. This is known as history.

END

212

213

Fig. 2. pp. 212-213.

photographs at the bottom of each page are all differently cropped details from the same image, but, as the text advances, the two opposing images on either page also contain more and more overlapping visual information, seeming to show viewpoints directly next to one another. Here, with the two photographs almost—but not quite—identical and the two paragraphs labeled "L" and "R," the pages seem to depict the information being taken in by a pair of eyes, an image separated into two different channels. A simultaneity of the two pages is thus implied, though this is only truly possible to experience with images—one cannot read two pieces of text at the same time.

On the left page is a prescription for an ambient cinema, which "should aspire to the most taciturn forms of expression": "The best movies would consist only of words or letters. Unlike images, letters never change" (Lin 212). On the right side sit instructions for the "beautiful book" (213, see fig. 2). Both passages seem to describe the project of the entire poem itself, a kind of textual-cinematic montage that reflects an affect, rather than telling a story: "the beautiful book is a diagram of 'historical inexactitude' which reflects (by turning) something 'not there'" (213). This phrase describes exactly what the fragmentation of language in the rest of the poem produces—an explosion of time that removes the referents of its words from all coherent historical signification, thus mirroring the experience of the postmodern subject who "has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold, and to organize its past and future into coherent experience" (Jameson 71).

Under this right-hand paragraph is the word "END" (see fig. 2). However, a turning of the page reveals otherwise; the next two pairs of pages contain yet more text, in which any signifying thread between words has been completely eradicated. Three terms are placed in a row at the top of each page: "polio / implants / Wal-Mart // 2348-456-98000 / garden / 3DEDC // HAWAII / OLFACTORY / GAS // WEDGE / SPL / SINGLE" (214-217). It is as though there is a bug in the system; the end is not the end; data points are ejected from a hidden memory-bank in (nearly) the smallest possible units, seemingly at random.

The last two pages of the poem show the full photograph from which the images on all of the previous pages have been taken—or, almost the full photograph: it is split into halves, one on the left page and one on the right (see fig. 3). The top of the left page reads "exit]" (218). The access to the photograph in its entirety that the final pages provide—though the significance of

exit]

218

219

Fig. 3. pp. 218-219.

the photograph remains unclear—signals the possibility of totality in images (Ngai notes that the "slick wholes" in Jameson's set of examples of the postmodern sublime are all visual ones). However, the text is given no such opportunity. There is no solution to the problem of signification posed by the fragmented language of the poem, no final sentence that links the previous four pages of ostensibly random signs. The "END" that occurred a few pages earlier has been revealed as false, thereby negating any linear conception of narrative or temporality: as Lin writes, "The page should turn before you got there. This is known as history" (213). Even the actual final page of the poem[3] shows not an end at all but only an "exit," thus leaving open the

[3] unless the "About the Author" page that follows is part of the poem—which is possible, seeing as the Acknowledgements section of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* is placed in the middle of the book, on page 166.

possibility of a re-entry. “Exit” is also a command in many computer operating systems that terminates a current execution of a computer process. Lin thereby confronts the reader with the realization that the text, though encountered as a “heap of fragments,” is not a “heap” at all, as it has no defined limit or scope: it could, potentially, be restarted or re-iterated at any time and would continue to spit out signs, perhaps for eternity.

The last pages of “A Field Guide to American Cinema” thus not only distinguish the poem from Ngai’s stuplime texts, which are explicitly finite, but also present a moment of the postmodern technological sublime as described by Jameson—one both mathematical, in that it gestures at an infinite quantity of information, and dynamic, because this informational overload lies within “the world space of multinational capital” whose technological power is too great for the mind to comprehend (Jameson 92). The affective experience of ambience, then, as the emotional state fitting for a postmodern, post-subject control society, can still give way to a sublime—though one that perhaps does not fit neatly into an already-existing theorization of the postmodern sublime, as Jameson makes no clear distinction between the glossy, hallucinogenic hysterical sublime and the insidious, implicitly infinite excess of the technological sublime.

Morton writes that ambience can “[open] up space *between* thoughts, a sense of gap that suggests a more radical gap, the space that is not separate from things” (54). If ambient poetics, by indicating a “perceptual field, prior to any distinguishing of subject and object … troubles those processes of differentiation that are elemental to forming the subject,” then the reader of an ambient text could have equal constitutive power in it as the words on the page (Morton 52). The system of language processing created by “A Field Guide to American Cinema” (of which we see only the output) must thus be mutable, leaving possibility for intervention of the

consciousness of the reader. Shaviro writes that the "distinction between affect and emotion, like the distinction between labour and labour power, is really a radical incommensurability: an excess or a surplus" (6).

If the "historical inexactitude" that Lin's poem posits "reflects … something 'not there'" (Lin 213), this "something" could be read as a sort of liminal, excessive affect that cannot be incorporated by linear historical thinking, and which is opened up in postmodern culture in which "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (Jameson 66). What the reader is to *do* with these texts, with the gap between fragments waiting to be filled—and whether meaningful intervention, rather than incorporation, into a system of control is possible—remains unclear.

Works Cited

Deleuze, Gilles, “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” *October*, Vol. 59 (Winter, 1992), 1992, pp. 3-7.

De Quincey, Thomas. “The Works of Thomas De Quincey, Vol. 15: Articles from Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine and Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, 1844–6.” 2003, https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9781138764965.book.1.

Dworkin, Craig, and Andrea Andersson. “From ‘The Fate of Echo’ [Introduction to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*].” *Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2018, pp. 41–51.

Flusser, Vilém, et al. *Does Writing Have a Future?* University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991.

Kant, Immanuel, and Paul Guyer. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Lin, Tan. *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking : Airport Novel Musical Poem Painting Film Photo Landscape*. Middletown, Wesleyan University Press. C, 2010. Print.

“Metadata Basics: Controlled Vocabularies.” *University of Texas Libraries LibGuides*, 5 Apr. 2022, https://guides.lib.utexas.edu/metadata-basics/controlled-vocabs.

Morton, Timothy. “Why Ambient Poetics? Outline for a Depthless Ecology.” *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2002, pp. 52–56., https://doi.org/10.1086/twc24045032.

Ngai, Sianne. “Stuplimity.” *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007, pp. 248–297.

Sanders, Katherine Elaine. “Interview: Tan Lin.” *BOMB Magazine*, 2010. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/tan-lin/

Shaviro, Steven. *Post-Cinematic Affect*. 0 Zero Books, 2010.