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Eliciting Euphoria Online: The Aesthetics of “ASMR” Video Culture

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Abstract

“Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response” (ASMR) is a term that has emerged online to describe a mysterious tingling sensation that some people experience in response to particular audiovisual and interpersonal “triggers.” Initially confined to health forums, ASMR culture quickly began using platforms like YouTube, Reddit and Soothetube to swap videos found to trigger tingles. From circulating “unintentional” videos (made for another purpose but effective as triggers) they moved to creating their own “intentional” videos, produced by so-called “ASMRtists.”

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health forums, ASMR culture trigger videos. This paper describes the ways in which ASMR communities cultivate a quasi-cybernetic relationship with video. This paper argues that ASMR communities cultivate a quasi-cybernetic relationship with video. This paper argues that ASMR communities cultivate a quasi-cybernetic relationship with video.

1. Introduction

“Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response” (ASMR) is a term that has emerged from online communities who experience what medic Nitin Ahuja defines as “a reliable low-grade euphoria in response to specific interpersonal triggers, accompanied by a distinct sensation of ‘tingling’ in the head and spine.” [1] These “tingles” tend to start in the scalp before spreading in waves across the body, bringing with them a pleasurable sense of tranquility. While anecdotes suggest that different people have different “triggers,” ASMR is often associated with scenes of intimacy and concentrated attention: it might be brought on by watching someone performing a meticulous task, by the cadence of a voice, by whispering and soft sounds or by expressions of care, interest and affirmation.

ASMR has often been written off as “an Internet meme... a vast consensual hallucination” or a recondite sexual fetish—readings the community has vehemently refuted. [2] But while much about the condition remains obscure or contested, it is clear that ASMR is now the fulcrum of a thriving online video culture. Initially coalescing via discussion threads on health forums, ASMR culture quickly began using platforms like YouTube, Reddit and Soothetube to swap videos found to trigger tingles. From circulating “unintentional” videos (made for another purpose but effective as triggers) they moved to creating their own “intentional” videos, produced by so-called “ASMRtists.”

For reasons that I will explain presently, this paper mostly eschews close analysis of specific videos. For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with ASMR, however, it might be helpful to provide an example. ASMRtist Heather Feather’s “[ASMR Binaural \(3D\) Cranial Nerve Examination Role Play for Tingles, Relaxation, and Sleep](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ8EBBTEb00) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ8EBBTEb00]” is, in many respects, a typical trigger video. [3] Like many ASMR videos, this one involves the performer roleplaying as a benignly solicitous figure who helps viewers to achieve a sense of calm and wellbeing—spa attendants, shop assistants and librarians are popular choices, as are doctors. The title also announces the video’s use of binaural audio to provide an illusionistic sense of immediacy and presence: a fixed camera and microphone essentially stand in for the viewer’s head, as Heather, dressed in a lab coat and glasses, addresses them in the second person, using a hushed, girlish treble and deploying a range of props

(torch, tuning fork, optometrists’ chart) as she pretends to administer various medical tests. If the *sotto voce* address is typical (people spoke of “whisper videos” before the term ASMR arose), so too are the focus on explanation and encouragement, the foregrounding of procedural minutiae and the fascination with the textural and acoustic properties of different substances and materials. Not all ASMR videos are roleplays; demonstrations, show-and-tell displays and readings are also popular, as are videos in which ASMRtists manipulate objects (hairbrushes, putty, pebbles, feathers) to produce “tingly” sounds. Heather Feather’s YouTube Channel has separate playlists for roleplays, medical roleplays, videos focused on whispering and ones devoted to “sedative sounds... tapping scratching, clinking, brushing.” There is also a “guided meditations” playlist, symptomatic of ASMR culture’s investment in the discourse of therapy and “wellness,” mindfulness and meditation. [4][#N4] We should note, here, that the cranial nerve exam video’s title bills it as “for Tingles, Relaxation and Sleep,” offering it for *use* by a viewership constructed as fraught, insomniac or simply in need of a break. Also striking is the video’s view count: more than two million views since September 2013. As this suggests, while ASMR culture remains a niche concern, that niche is not insubstantial. Like other popular ASMRtists, Heather Feather’s subscribers number in the hundreds of thousands, and her videos receive millions of views. Also like many of the most popular ASMRtists, Heather Feather is a young woman—a fact that those convinced there is something sexual or fetishistic about ASMR often cite. While I won’t intervene in such debates here, it is important to acknowledge the degree to which mainstream accounts of ASMR have focused on sex. When artists and academics have addressed ASMR videos, meanwhile, it has often been as vehicles for thinking about intimacy, sexuality, labour and gender in the digital age. [5][#N5]



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0040.202-00000001.jpg\]](https://ffcf/images/13761232.0040.202-00000001.jpg)

Figure 1. A typical trigger video by ASMRtist Heather Feather

This paper takes a different approach. As someone who does not experience ASMR I am interested in this culture as an example of how search algorithms, data mining architectures and online publishing platforms are facilitating the emergence of new terms, concepts and communities—and of new aesthetic paradigms and moving image genres. In what follows, I address ASMR culture not as a question of intimacy but one of noise, in both the acoustic sense and the information theory sense. [6][#N6] As Olga Goriunova insists, if we are to understand how new “techno-aesthetic forms” emerge, we must address the ways in which “information encompasses and functions in relation to both pattern and noise.” [7][#N7] With this in mind, the first part of this article looks at how the trigger video form developed and at the networks through which intentional and unintentional videos circulate, using the Reddit community r/asmr as an example. Here I am mostly concerned with “noise” as information theory understands it: as randomness, that which facilitates but also distorts or interferes with the transmission of signals, and in so doing provides the inchoate raw material out of which new patterns emerge. The second part of the article, by contrast, focuses on noise in the acoustic sense, turning to sound studies, musicology and affect theory to theorise the role of sounds and voices in trigger videos.

The conclusion draws these strands together, proposing that ASMR culture should be understood as both an example and an exploration of how noise/signal dialectics shape digital culture, and of how bodies and algorithms are conspiring to bring into being cultural forms that can seem literally inexplicable on first encounter. I argue that by aestheticizing noise, ASMR communities work to foster a sensuous apprehension of code’s role in reshaping our lives, using video as a vehicle for “feeling out” phenomena that seem to thwart linguistic articulation and rational comprehension.

2. ASMR and HTTP

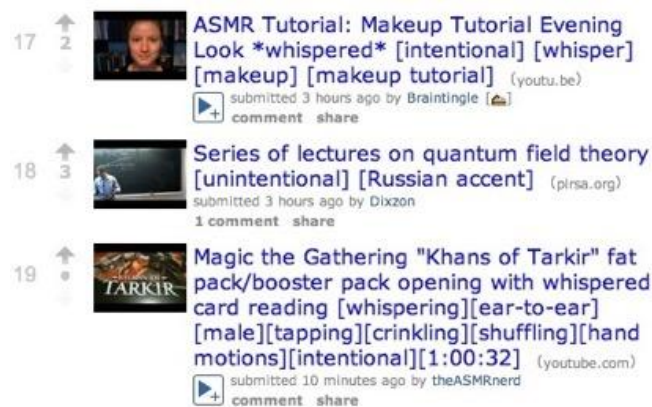
While many people have reported experiences of the tingles that long predate the Internet, ASMR as a concept, an acronym, and a claimable identity is roughly coeval with “Web 2.0”—a term encompassing changes like the move from a text-centric to a multimodal web, the massive proliferation of webcams, microphones and video editing software and the emergence of blogs, social networks and content aggregators. ASMR communities have used these tools to develop a shared terminology, publish theories and stories, and make and swap videos. Here, I will focus on one platform in particular: the content aggregator Reddit. Reddit invites users to post stories or comments that are “upvoted” or “downvoted” by their fellow “redditors.” Visitors can then view lists of new, popular and divisive posts. There are also numerous “subreddits” devoted to different topics, subcultures and kinds of content, including one devoted to ASMR: [reddit.com/r/asmr](https://www.reddit.com/r/asmr). [r/asmr](https://www.reddit.com/r/asmr) functions slightly differently from most other subreddits, however. Where normally the upvote function is used to endorse content that users found interesting or enjoyable, [r/asmr](https://www.reddit.com/r/asmr)’s guidelines ask that participants “upvote videos according to whether they trigger ASMR (i.e., not because it’s a cool video or you enjoyed the subject).” [81][#N81] Upvotes shift, here, from an all-purpose measure of approval to a metric of efficacy, so that (at least in theory) [r/asmr](https://www.reddit.com/r/asmr) becomes a dynamically updated catalogue of the most potent trigger content currently in circulation.

[r/asmr](https://www.reddit.com/r/asmr)’s front page offers both a way into the aesthetics of ASMR videos and an indicator of how ASMR culture has been shaped by the systems used to access, share, annotate and arrange videos today. As Geert Lovink insists, such systems are not merely “redundant noise surrounding audiovisual content” but rather “the core constitutive element of online video practice,” and of the “association economy” that determines how videos are mobilized and monetized. [9][#N9] While I agree that it is vital for scholars to address these systems, I take issue with Lovink’s assertion that we should do so *instead of* spending time “decoding the images” of which individual videos are comprised. [10][#N10] For one thing, this implies that amateur videos are unworthy of close attention, belying the skill and sophistication many exhibit; for another, it assumes critical analysis would necessarily be hermeneutic, as if looking for symbols to decode was the only way of analyzing videos. Thirdly, Lovink makes it seem like addressing individual videos precludes attending to digital architectures, when it is only by doing both that we can understand how interfaces, infrastructures and aesthetics shape one another.

Likewise, while Lovink correctly asserts that the online attention economy exists to deliver viewers “more of the same,” we should take this not as an excuse to dismiss online video culture as derivative, formulaic, and monotonous, but as a spur to think about how platform holders and video producers cultivate audiences looking not for singularly original individual works but for regularly updated streams of content that will reliably help them feel a certain way. [11][#N11] An insomniac who uses ASMR videos as a nightly sleep aid, for example, will value performers, channels and communities precisely because they offer “more of the same.” In this sense, ASMR culture resonates with Lauren Berlant’s account of cultural forms and practices that help audiences to sustain what she calls the “pulsations of habituated patterning that make possible getting through the day,” and with Anahid Kassabian’s work on the use of sound to promote or induce certain states, moods or behaviors. [12][#N12] ASMR videos reflect the growing importance of networked devices as a means of self-medicating with media, of creating “bubbles” of pleasure, solace, concentration or belonging within spaces otherwise experienced as oppressively overpopulated or disconcertingly empty. They are products of an era in which Costa argues that “new technologies finally make a domestication of the sublime possible” so

that “for the first time in the history of aesthetic experience sublimity can be the object of a controlled production and a socialized and repeatable use”—awe, pleasure, serenity and catharsis, all at the touch of a button. [13][#N13]

To the uninitiated, however, r/asmr’s archive may seem less sublime than ridiculous, encompassing as it does everything from physics lectures and poetry readings to cosmetics tutorials and shoeshine videos. During November 2014, r/asmr’s front page hosted an explanation of tarot, a Korean coffee making tutorial, white noise, cricket commentary, an interview with Yohji Yamamoto, anecdotes about pipe smoking and a video of a machine crushing soft drinks cans. The seventh of October 2014 saw a recording of “lectures on quantum field theory” (tagged “unintentional” and “Russian accent”) sandwiched between “ASMR Tutorial: Makeup Tutorial Evening Look” (tagged “intentional,” “whisper,” “makeup” and “makeup tutorial”) and “*Magic the Gathering* Khans of Tarkir fat pack/booster pack opening with whispered card reading” (tagged “whispering,” “ear-to-ear,” “male,” “tapping,” “crinkling,” “shuffling,” “hands motions,” “intentional”).



[\[f/fc/images/13761232.0040.202-00000002.jpg\]](https://i.imgur.com/13761232.0040.202-00000002.jpg)

Figure 2. Selection of videos appearing on the first page of the r/asmr subreddit on October 7th 2014.

While these lists and tags may be baffling on first sight, even an outsider can see that the genres and categories usually employed to organize video content do not apply here. Instead, other classifications come into play, such as “intentional” and “unintentional.” Whether a video was intended as a trigger is often the first thing redditors tell us, and if this fact suggests the importance of the distinction for the community (some of whom are only triggered by unintentional videos) it also gestures at the evolution of a culture and aesthetics of ASMR videos. For at first there were, of course, *only* unintentional trigger videos, videos that were recontextualised by ASMR communities in ways that provided blueprints for ASMRtists’ subsequent experiments. Looking at popular unintentional videos formatted in terms of people showcasing or explaining something, for example, we see the templates for ASMRtists’ roleplays. In an ASMR context, the original purpose of a video will often fade into the background, while incidental features (crinkling or crackling sounds, vocal timbre or accent) and ostensible flaws (monotony, muffled or unintelligible speech, static or interference) come to the fore, acquiring fresh significance. These features have in turn been isolated and hyperbolically amplified by ASMRtists to develop a coherent “tingly” aesthetic.

These lists, then, afford a microcosmic glimpse of how something called ASMR and an aesthetics of “ASMRtistry” cohered out of the noise of online video culture, the very disorderliness of which allowed for new patterns, new principles of navigation and organization, to form. Platforms like YouTube are not just new delivery mechanisms for the same old genres and content, nor even just breeding grounds for new forms. Rather, because more or less anything can be uploaded (even if it is subsequently taken down) and because YouTube’s interface juxtaposes clips with little regard for genre, provenance or context, new ways of sorting and seeing become possible, rendering apparent hitherto hidden

commonalities and inspiring new approaches to video production. As the history of ASMR culture shows, YouTube is, among other things, a reservoir of effects, stylistic traits and tactics from which new aesthetic paradigms, defined by particular conventions of reception and production, can emerge.

This history at once bolsters and complicates Bourdieu's influential account of how aesthetic innovations emerge from within "field[s] of cultural production." Eschewing Romantic notions of genius in favor of setting out "in massive detail, precisely the social and historical structures within which [artistic, curatorial, commercial and critical] choices are made and what he terms 'cultural products' are created," Bourdieu frames cultural works as the products not of singularly inspired "great individuals," but of "structural relations between social positions" informed by academic orthodoxies and generic conventions, networks of funding and patronage, journalistic factions etc. [14] [#N14] These and other factors (including material and technological ones) shape the "field" or "space of positions" within which individual cultural actors jockey to claim a place, accumulating, investing and wagering cultural, social, educational and/or economic capital in the attempt to attain dominance and effect "symbolic revolution[s]" which shift "the terms... use[d] to produce and comprehend representations" in their favor. [15] [#N15]

Contentious for its iconoclastic privileging of the cultural field over the creative individual, Bourdieu's model has arguably become easier to swallow in the era of social networks, memes and remixes. But if this suggests that ASMR's emergence merely follows a well-worn pattern, it is important to note what is distinct about the dynamics of online aesthetic innovation. For one thing, there is the way that platforms like YouTube and Reddit de- and re-contextualise works from different points in the history of different fields by placing them side-by-side. Treating album rips and amateur video essays, syndicated sitcoms and guided meditation videos alike as "content," such platforms offer petri dishes in which hitherto distinct forms are crossbred and reconfigured. Secondly, there is the way that the Internet is bringing bodies and machines, human and nonhuman agents into new kinds of correspondence, fostering modes of engaging with cultural works that are more about cybernetics than hermeneutics: on r/asmr videos become "inputs" judged not as messages to be understood or interpreted but by their ability to elicit particular affective and somatic "outputs." This ability is measured via feedback mechanisms (comments, views, "likes," upvotes) linking audiences to uploaders and ASMRtists. Such feedback helps ASMRtists to feel out the kinds of input likeliest to elicit the desired output and tune their aesthetic strategies accordingly. These mechanisms are also, of course, the means by which the acronym ASMR became apparent to the algorithmic "spiders" that trawl the web updating Google's search index. It became visible not, naturally, as a sensation or a culture, but as an n-gram, a sequence of alphabetic characters under the auspices of which statistically significant numbers of videos were suddenly being made and exchanged, liked and linked. And as this culture became perceptible to these algorithms, so search and sidebar suggestions altered to reflect this, in an example of how the systems that deliver online content to viewers (or, perhaps, viewers to content) enable jargon to spread and solidify, styles to crystallize and cultures to snowball.

As an illustration of how quickly a funny feeling can be parlayed into a revenue-generating online video genre, ASMR culture highlights the affective dynamics and algorithmic underpinnings of consumer capitalism in an era when, as David Howes asserts, markets are increasingly governed by "sensual logic" rather than rationality. For Howes, consumer capitalism's drive to invest products with sensuous appeal and to inculcate aesthetic literacy among consumers has culminated in a regime of "hyperaesthesia" whereby we now engage with commodities "in all sorts of non-commercial, 'non-rational,' but aesthetic ways, like using Lifebuoy soap to give a sheen to one's skin, or deploying Kool-Aid as a hair dye." [16] [#N16] As with these examples, ASMR video culture involves repurposing media and commodities to "hyperaesthetic" ends—but it also suggests the economics of hyperaesthesia have changed in the decade since Howes' essay. Writing in 2004, Howes proclaims the absence of a "theory of value" that "could possibly capture the 'aesthetic plentitude' of the current conjuncture" and "measure the value of the endless innovation in the 'senses' (meanings and uses) of things worked by latter day consumers." [17] [#N17] Howes even suggests that, unless some means of recuperating innovative forms of consumption is found, we may be faced with "a looming crisis in the circuits of

capitalist production and exchange.” [18][#N18] These presentiments were realized to some extent with the global financial crash of 2008, a crash that only intensified the drive to find ways of capitalising upon consumers’ sensuous relationships with media and commodities, as evidenced by the explosive proliferation of computational techniques for logging, aggregating and exploiting data on web users’ activities, opinions, habits and preferences. One of the first YouTube videos to “go viral” back in 2006 showed two men dropping Mentos candies into a bottle of Coca Cola to create a carbonated geyser. Eliciting its own eruption of views, shares, comments and copycat videos, the video now constitutes a prime example of how online publishing platforms allow for “hyperaesthetic” acts of consumption and production to be integrated into an attention economy that, while it has not solved the underlying economic issues Howes highlights, has nonetheless spawned new and immensely lucrative business models based on targeted advertising, algorithmic content curation, data mining and sentiment analysis. [19][#N19]

That ASMR culture has arisen in this climate is no surprise. Ours is an era of austerity and political volatility, in which the shift to a post-Fordist culture of precarious work and the dominance of neoliberal healthcare policies oriented toward “responsibilizing” individual citizens rather than supporting state welfare programmes have fostered pervasive uncertainty and stress. [20][#N20] In this context it makes sense that web users increasingly look to platforms like YouTube for solace, affirmation and relaxation; indeed, for artist Clare Tolan, ASMR is best understood as an attempt to ameliorate “anxiety, depression, insomnia” and other such “chronic contemporary ills” characteristic of life under “late capitalism.” [21][#N21] From the perspective of those running the attention economy, meanwhile, ASMR culture is an example of how users can turn apparent dross into gold, as videos that might once have languished unwatched and unloved suddenly become objects of veneration for a burgeoning subculture. Cross referencing r/asmr’s front page with the daily view counts for videos featured there, it is not unusual to see sudden and dramatic spikes in popularity around the time videos appear there. While it is difficult to establish a direct correlation (YouTube’s graphs make it hard to determine exactly when spikes occur, while videos often appear on r/asmr having been posted elsewhere) it is clear that ASMR communities can act as cultural relays, boosting the visibility and profitability of content. “ASMRtistry” also emerged at a time when YouTube was keen to curb its reliance on hosting others’ content and to exploit the ability of enterprising amateur video makers to “hold and grow large follower bases,” drive advertising revenues and foster community engagement—a strategy manifest in the introduction of a Partner Programme allowing “home-grown” video producers to monetize their content. [22][#N22] ASMR, in short, is a profoundly contemporary form of moving image culture, helping stressed and sleep-deprived viewers to chill out even as it enlists them in forms of “cultural/affective labor” that benefit companies like Google by shaping and revealing “fashions, tastes and consumer norms.” [23][#N23]

3. Sound Effects, Sound Affects

Thus far I have traced ASMR culture’s emergence, relating it to the advent of algorithmic systems which monitor the noise of online cultural activity looking for opportunities to capture attention, recuperate creativity and create value. Having done this, I want now to say more about how ASMR videos use sound. One of the most striking characteristics of ASMR videos is their preoccupation with what Michel Chion calls “materializing sound indices” (MSIs)—tapping, crinkling, lip smacking and other such acoustic details “that cause us to ‘feel’ the material conditions of the sound source.” [24][#N24] Indeed, we describe ASMR videos as experiments in what Chion calls “rendering”—the attempt to “convey [the] effect or feeling associated with [a] sound source.” [25][#N25] Rendering depends on the fact that “through a magnetism related to all the vagueness and uncertainty surrounding them, sounds ‘attract’ affects for which they are not especially responsible”—so that, despite using just sounds and images, films are capable of conveying “perceptions that belong to no sensory channel in particular...clumps of agglomerated sensations.” [26][#N26]

Following Chion, we can posit that by aestheticizing MSIs, and by using mixing and recording techniques that create almost hallucinatory distortions of scale and illusions of hyperproximity, ASMR videos explore and exploit sound's capacity to "render" atmospheres, associations and messily "clumped" affects. Indeed, Chion's account of emotional clumping and affective attraction is not far from the reading of ASMR videos offered by Michael Connor, for whom the videos' "affective charge" is attributable to their enlisting viewers in the "cognitive linking together of diverse sensory events" so as to affirm the interimbrication of different sensory modalities and affective states. [27][#N27] If, in other words, ASMR videos are "about" anything, they are about how noise (the arbitrary, the random, the indistinct or inchoate) can become moving and meaningful, as experiences of aesthetic plenitude emerge from sensory flux.

We can see this too in ASMR's fascination with vocal textures and the voice's role as "a mediator between body and language" that both "serves and exceeds the semiotics and syntax of the spoken word." [28][#N28] In a theorization of the singing voice that has intriguing implications for ASMR culture, Freya Jarman-Ivens reads Roland Barthes' notion of vocal "grain" in tandem with his differentiation between "texts of pleasure" and "texts of bliss." [29][#N29] If many pop musicians train their bodies and technologically manipulate their voices to mitigate grain and achieve a pleasurable "effect of unity," Jarman-Ivens is more interested in singers who create "blissfully" unsettling effects by foregrounding visceral sounds that remain teasingly (or troublingly) "under-assimilated" to meaning. [30][#N30] The parallels with ASMR videos (which emphasize exactly the kinds of "grainy" glottal, buccal and respiratory noises pop often eradicates) are obvious, and suggest that ASMRtists' starkly audible gulps, lip-smackings and jaw clickings might be understood as passports to a kind of Barthesian "bliss" that involves skirting that borderline where sounds verge on meaning, where hearing mingles with haptics, where mediated bodies "touch" ours across spatiotemporal gulfs. And as with Barthes' "readerly" texts of bliss, ASMR videos transport some listeners even as they strike others as dull, strangely repellent or oppressively claustrophobic. [31][#N31]

ASMR aesthetics, then, hinge on the pervasive and recursive qualities that, for Frances Dyson, render sound "the immersive medium par excellence." [32][#N32] While accounts of digital technology tend to privilege the visual, Dyson holds that, in fact, "new media reconstitute experiences characteristic of the aural"—a "three-dimensional, interactive, and synesthetic" medium, "perceived in the here and now of an embodied space." [33][#N33] We are "touched" and "moved" by sounds in both the tactile and the emotional senses, and this is perhaps why scholars working on the affective and carnal dimensions of online culture often employ a sonic rhetoric of resonance, refrains and feedback even when they are discussing images and texts. [34][#N34] Such terms suggest that we have underestimated the importance of sound, both to audiovisual media and "the formation of affective connections." [35][#N35]

ASMR videos support this conclusion by borrowing—or subverting—various techniques for contouring acoustic and affective space familiar from commercial, pedagogical or medical contexts. By so doing, and by freeing voices from the need to convey information (many ASMR enthusiasts prefer videos in which speech is unintelligible or in a foreign language), ASMR culture brings to light the aesthetic and affective substrates that undergird interaction and communication. In considering ASMRtists' exploration of the affective potential of "underassimilated" vocalizations, for example, we may become newly attuned to the way that performers and advertisers use "noisy" vocal effects that don't so much communicate as grab or grate, from adverts that employ "ear-catching" non-standard accents to the interplay of words with yelps, growls and gulps in the music of, say, Michael Jackson, Pusha T or Nina Hagen. Mobilizing the capacity of the English second person pronoun to mediate between "the solitary and the multiple," ASMRtists' roleplays echo radio DJs' use of the word "you" to at once interpellate the solitary listener and create "connections among listeners.... network[s] across which multiple subjectivities are connected;" [36][#N36] roleplaying as doctors, ASMRtists affirm that good clinical practice involves developing "interpersonal capacities" and fostering healing through "concentrated acts of attentive altruism" as well as memorizing medical textbooks; [37][#N37] the abundance of shops, spas and salons in ASMR videos, meanwhile, points to the importance of "emotional labor" in the

retail and service industries, where staff are briefed to grease the wheels of commerce by making customers feel affirmed and included. [38][#N38]

Borrowing these techniques in the attempt to create a sense of connection and contact, ASMR videos have sometimes been understood as proxies for those who are "lonely or starved for touch." [39][#N39] But while we can certainly see ASMR in terms of new forms of networked intimacy arising in societies that are (thanks in part to digital technologies) becoming ever more atomized and anomic, framing these videos as substitutes for "real" experience is, I would argue, misguided—not least as, while this explanation might conceivably hold for a video in which a performer pretends to give the viewer a spa treatment, it is less easy to apply to a video in which a performer brushes a tray of sand with a peacock feather. Rather than see them as simulations of or substitutes for real face-to-face encounters, then, we should see ASMRtists' videos as their own genre, one that deploys various aesthetic techniques designed not just to bridge the gap between performer and viewer, but to blur the boundaries between language, sound and gesture. Through video, ASMRtists create "noisy" zones of indeterminacy, where scales, spaces, affective states and sensory channels seem to run together.

4. Conclusion

ASMR videos pose important questions about video culture in the era of online networks and neoliberal economics, and about where the discourse of "aesthetics" in the sense of styles, formal properties and expressive strategies shades into that of "aesthetics" in the sense of embodied viewers' engagements with cultural texts. By transplanting the notion of media as affective "triggers" from what Halberstam calls "the Neoliberal rhetoric of harm, danger and trauma" into a register of pleasure and escape, [40][#N40] ASMR prompts us to rethink the relationship between art and instrumentality: insofar as it sees videos as a resource that can be *used* to modulate moods and induce physiological states, ASMR culture contravenes the Kantian ideal of disinterested aesthetic appreciation; at the same time, however, platforms like r/asmr could be called highly aesthetic insofar as they remove videos from their usual contexts and purposes in order to judge them according to forms of "sensuous knowing" that override all other criteria. In forums like r/asmr, questions of provenance, content, meaning and intention are irrelevant. Debates over symbolism, subtext and irony are abandoned. Only one question matters: does it trigger you or not?

In this respect ASMR video communities constitute a perfect example of how contemporary networked culture privileges both the visceral claims of intuition *and* the putatively neutral evidence of "big data." [41][#N41] While this twofold appeal (to the subjective stuff of individual felt experience on one hand and the notionally objective, abstract realm of demography and statistics on the other) might seem contradictory, for Mark Andrejevic it speaks to a growing sense of "information glut." [42][#N42] He argues that, far from spreading enlightenment, the abundance of information available online has made it impossible to satisfactorily resolve any debate, eroding our faith in traditional forms of interpretation, analysis and argumentation and spurring a turn toward forms of evaluation and arbitration that promise to bypass rhetoric, ideology and theory altogether. [43][#N43] ASMR culture demonstrates that these different approaches to negotiating infoglut, far from being mutually exclusive, are in fact highly complementary: when it comes to judging trigger videos, ASMR communities insist that the body knows best, privileging aesthesis over rational cognition or interpretation; videos are valued not for what they might mean or say but for what they *do* to certain bodies. But ASMR culture also asserts that this embodied knowledge can be witnessed and put to work via "likes," "upvotes" and other metrics that help to shape both future videos and the algorithmic systems that organize online content.

Less concerned with symbols, narratives or ideas than it is logging and cultivating a propensity towards a certain kind of involuntary response, ASMR culture provides support for those critics who claim that hermeneutics' "stalwart interpretive techniques" are of little help when it comes to contemporary media cultures more concerned with feeling than sense. [44][#N44] Thus, rather than seeking to "interpret" ASMR videos, I have used them to show how digital interfaces and algorithmic

agents are enabling new aesthetic strategies and cultural genres to emerge out of the furious hubbub of the net, and to begin thinking about the implications of this process for traditional cultural categories and hierarchies. More could be done here. The extent to which ASMR videos resemble various non-commercial, notionally "difficult" forms (artists' film, ambient music, field recordings, sound art, etc.), for instance, begs a closer analysis of how scrolling, streaming, algorithmically-curated columns of "content" are, by stripping away many of the contextual prompts that used to condition reception, enabling surprising similarities between apparently remote cultural domains to emerge.

For now, though, it is enough to say that ASMR is an example of how brains, transfer protocols, woofers and tweeters, eardrums, larynxes, languages, servers and keyboards form relays out of which new genres, concepts and collectives—and new domains of online video practice—emerge. This process can be understood in relation to Michel Serres' framing of everything from bodies and computers to ecosystems and cultures in terms of 'nested levels of integration that form a black box full of black boxes.' [45][#N45] It is the "energies... lobbed back and forth" between these nested "boxes... molecules, cells, organs, systems" that "gradually, over boundaries and through twists and turns, resolve into information," enabling patterns to emerge. [46][#N46] As a study in how signal is born from noise, form from formlessness, ASMR culture reminds us that ultimately "a black box is ignorance, interrupting a chain of knowledge"—but also that encounters with the unknowable can have the salutary effect of putting us back in touch with those forms of "sensation" and aesthesis that, for Serres, "stand behind knowledge" but cannot themselves be known. [47][#N47] This encounter can be disturbing, especially for cultural critics trained to recover latent meanings from apparent arbitrariness. ASMR culture opts for enthusiasm over trepidation, however; faced with the chaotic promiscuity of online video archives, it reimagines them as sites of bliss, portals to that liminal zone where signals and structures crystallize out of, and lapse back into, flux.

Author Biography

Rob Gallagher is a postdoctoral researcher at King's College London. His current work addresses the relationship between the voice, language and identity in online culture. It forms part of the Ego-Media project, a five-year multidisciplinary research initiative funded by the European Research Council, investigating the effect of digital technologies on practices of self-representation.

Notes

1. Nitin K. Ahuja, "It Feels Good to Be Measured': Clinical Role-Play, Walker Percy, and the Tingles," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 56.3 (2013): 443. ♦ [#N1-ptri]
2. Michael Conor, "Notes on ASMR, Massumi and the Joy of Digital Painting," *Rhizome*. May 8, 2013, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/may/08/notes-asmr-massumi-and-joy-digital-painting/> [http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/may/08/notes-asmr-massumi-and-joy-digital-painting/] ♦ [#N2-ptri]
3. Heather Feather ASMR, "ASMR Binaural (3D) Cranial Nerve Examination Role Play for Tingles, Relaxation, and Sleep," *YouTube*, September 27, 2013, accessed 15 April, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ8EBBTEb0o> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ8EBBTEb0o] ♦ [#N3-ptri]
4. ASMR is often heralded as a means of combatting insomnia, anxiety and migraine, and of cultivating presence; see, for example, my conversation with ASMRtist WhispersRed for the podcast "An Archive of Tingles," *The Arts and Culture Unit*, June 26, 2015, accessed April 15, 2016, <http://theartsandcultureunit.com/portfolio/an-archive-of-tingles/> [http://theartsandcultureunit.com/portfolio/an-archive-of-tingles/] ♦ [#N4-ptri]
5. Joceline Andersen, "Now You've Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community," *Television and New Media* 16.8 (2015): 683-700; Clare, Tolan, "Always Here for You: On ASMR," *Cst.yt*, 2015, accessed 15 April, 2016, <http://cst.yt/cst/always/alwayshereforyou> [http://cst.yt/cst/always/alwayshereforyou]; Emma Leigh Waldron, "Mediated Sexuality in ASMR

- Videos," *Sounding Out!*, December 14, 2014, accessed April 15, 2016, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/12/14/affect-and-sexuality-in-asmr-videos/> [\[https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/12/14/affect-and-sexuality-in-asmr-videos/\]](https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/12/14/affect-and-sexuality-in-asmr-videos/). ♦ [\[#N5-ptri\]](#)
6. Emerging from Claude Shannon's work in the 1940s, information theory is a branch of mathematics dealing with signal processing. Shannon's framing of communication in terms of the relationship between noise and signal was enormously important in 'the development of information technologies' thanks to which 'the interplay between pattern and randomness [has] bec[o]me a feature of everyday life' (N. Katharine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 25. ♦ [\[#N6-ptri\]](#)
 7. Olga Goriunova, "The Ragged Manifold of the Subject: Databaseness and the Generic in Curating Youtube," in *Media After Kittler*, ed. Eleni Ikoniadou and Scott Wilson. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 158, 161. ♦ [\[#N7-ptri\]](#)
 8. Reddit. "ASMR: Sounds that Feel Good," *Reddit*, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.reddit.com/r/asmr/> [\[http://www.reddit.com/r/asmr/\]](http://www.reddit.com/r/asmr/) ♦ [\[#N8-ptri\]](#)
 9. Geert Lovink, *Networks without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 138-9. ♦ [\[#N9-ptri\]](#)
 10. Ibid. 136. ♦ [\[#N10-ptri\]](#)
 11. Ibid. 138. ♦ [\[#N11-ptri\]](#)
 12. Lauren Berlant, "Thinking about Feeling Historical," *Emotion, Space and Society* 1 (2008), 6; Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention and Distributed Subjectivity* (London: University of California Press, 2013). ♦ [\[#N12-ptri\]](#)
 13. Vito Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics: How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers; Institute of Network Cultures, 2010), 55. ♦ [\[#N13-ptri\]](#)
 14. Arthur C. Danto, "Bourdieu on Art: Field and Individual," in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 214; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 29. ♦ [\[#N14-ptri\]](#)
 15. Ibid. 30, 238-9. ♦ [\[#N15-ptri\]](#)
 16. David Howes, "Hyperaesthesia, or The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Empire of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 298. ♦ [\[#N16-ptri\]](#)
 17. Ibid. ♦ [\[#N17-ptri\]](#)
 18. Ibid., 299. ♦ [\[#N18-ptri\]](#)
 19. Greg Jarboe, "When Mentos and Diet Coke Went Viral," *ReelSEO*. February 13, 2014, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.reelseo.com/mentos-coke-viral/> [\[http://www.reelseo.com/mentos-coke-viral/\]](http://www.reelseo.com/mentos-coke-viral/) ♦ [\[#N19-ptri\]](#)
 20. Ben Andersen, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 124-30. ♦ [\[#N20-ptri\]](#)
 21. Tolan, "Always Here." ♦ [\[#N21-ptri\]](#)
 22. Jean Burgess, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 55; Hector Postigo, "The Socio-Technical Architecture of Digital Labor: Converting Play into YouTube Money," *New Media & Society* (2014), 14. ♦ [\[#N22-ptri\]](#)
 23. Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labour." *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 133. ♦ [\[#N23-ptri\]](#)
 24. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 114. ♦ [\[#N24-ptri\]](#)
 25. Ibid. 109. ♦ [\[#N25-ptri\]](#)
 26. Ibid. 112. ♦ [\[#N26-ptri\]](#)
 27. Connor, "Notes on ASMR." ♦ [\[#N27-ptri\]](#)

28. Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4. ♦ [\[#N28-pt1\]](#)
29. Ibid. 5-7, 78-80. ♦ [\[#N29-pt1\]](#)
30. Ibid. 82, 7. ♦ [\[#N30-pt1\]](#)
31. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, NY: Hill and Wang 2009), 26. ♦ [\[#N31-pt1\]](#)
32. Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 4. ♦ [\[#N32-pt1\]](#)
33. Ibid. 3-4. ♦ [\[#N33-pt1\]](#)
34. e.g. Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (London: MIT Press, 2011); Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback & Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010). ♦ [\[#N34-pt1\]](#)
35. Freya Jarman. "Relax, Feel Good, Chill Out: The Affective Distribution of Classical Music," in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, ed. Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 185. ♦ [\[#N35-pt1\]](#)
36. Ibid. 187. ♦ [\[#N36-pt1\]](#)
37. Ahuja, "Measured," 448. ♦ [\[#N37-pt1\]](#)
38. Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), ix. ♦ [\[#N38-pt1\]](#)
39. Ahuja, "Measured," 450. ♦ [\[#N39-pt1\]](#)
40. Jack Halberstam, "You Are Triggering Me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma," *Bully Bloggers*, July 5 2014, accessed July 10 2015, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/> [\[https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/\]](https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/) ♦ [\[#N40-pt1\]](#)
41. Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 24-5. ♦ [\[#N41-pt1\]](#)
42. Ibid. 12. ♦ [\[#N42-pt1\]](#)
43. Ibid. 35. ♦ [\[#N43-pt1\]](#)
44. Alexander R. Galloway,, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark, eds. *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 29. ♦ [\[#N44-pt1\]](#)
45. Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London: Continuum, 2009), 106. ♦ [\[#N45-pt1\]](#)
46. Ibid. ♦ [\[#N46-pt1\]](#)
47. Ibid. 138-9. ♦ [\[#N47-pt1\]](#)

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