

Hear the Tap, Feel the Scratch

The Transgressive Intimacy of ASMR

Joanna Łapińska

Peter Lang

European Connections
Studies in Comparative Literature, Intermediality and Aesthetics

How do digital experiences shape intimacy? What role do sensory stimuli play in creating connections across virtual spaces? ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response), a growing cultural and media phenomenon, invites us to reconsider the ways intimacy, care and relaxation are nurtured through immersive soundscapes and visuals.

This book situates ASMR within the landscape of contemporary affective culture, exploring how sounds, visuals and tactile elements build intimate and soothing connections in digital environments. Through a detailed analysis of ASMR videos, it reveals how posthuman perspectives and post-cinematic aesthetics blur the boundaries between human and non-human, reshaping our experience of media and creating new spaces for connection, care and emotional resonance. Ultimately, it uncovers how ASMR opens the door to new forms of transgressive intimacy, challenging traditional notions of closeness in today's world.

Joanna Łapińska, who holds a PhD in Cultural Studies, is a postdoctoral scholar who has taught at the University of Vienna and Paris Lodron University of Salzburg. She led a research project on ASMR funded by the Austrian Science Fund. Her academic interests include ASMR, posthumanism, affect theory and self-care. She has published widely in film and media studies.

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CHAPTER 1

Scratching the World: Introduction

What Is ASMR?

Posing this question to an audience gathered more than a decade ago at a panel during a scientific conference on emotions and affects in contemporary media, I did not expect an exhaustive, or indeed any, answer. At the time, I knew that scientific articles discussing the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) phenomenon could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the peculiar terms *brain orgasm* and *braingasm* were uttered with disbelief, distaste, an ironic smile or a blush on the face. 'Brain orgasm? Thanks to scratching the microphone with the fingernails? You must be joking.' To this day, the words of this professor, doubtful of my study of this odd cultural phenomenon, echo in my ears.

The audience of the aforementioned conference was more intrigued. Although no one had heard of either brain orgasm – let alone the strange pseudo-scientific term *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response* shortened to ASMR, designating the peculiar tingling sensation in the head called *head tingles* in the ASMR-centred community that occurs in response to various stimuli like repetitive movements or whispering – some of the audience members knew the sensation from their everyday lives. A woman present in the conference panel confided to me that this sensation first occurred in her early childhood when she observed a kindergarten caregiver slowly turning the pages in a thick book of fairy tales being read to children sitting on the floor. This testimony, as I later found out on several occasions, is not an isolated one; many members of the ASMR-centred community, both the artists who create the materials designed to evoke this feeling and their audience, link their first memories of the head-tingling sensation

to events from their childhood, such as listening to bedtime stories read by a parent or having their hair braided by a friend. For my interlocutor from the conference panel, the sensation, still experienced despite the passage of years, had no specific name; it was simply a feeling resembling the fizzing of bubbles under the scalp, occurring now most often in response to the stimulus of a close whisper performed by her life partner in some relaxing situations.

In a similar way – comparing the peculiar sensation to the fizzing of bubbles or to silvery sparkles bursting inside one's head – participants in discussions held on the Steadyhealth.com website forum commented on the feeling. It was here that the first significant post for the ASMR-centred online community, formed several years later, appeared in October 2007. The post was titled 'WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD' (Steadyhealth.com n.d.) and described 'a weird sensation' that seemed to occur at random intervals throughout the commenter's life. Whenever this happened, their entire body was affected by the sensation. The person sharing their story likened the sensation to a pleasant itching on the skin that one does not want to scratch because one wishes to make it last longer. The forum users responding in the thread shared their own stories with great enthusiasm about the same strange, unnamed sensation, as evidenced by the substantial number of comments left on this webpage.

The sensation was not called Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response until 2010. In addition to the well-known terms *head tingles*, *head/brain orgasm* or *braingasm*, the phenomenon had also been known as *the unnamed feeling* (UNF), *weird head sensation* (WHS) and *attention-induced euphoria* (AIE) (Klausen 2021a). Each of these terms, eventually superseded by the term ASMR, which is now gaining increasing social media prominence, sought to capture the peculiar aspect that was supposed to constitute the particularity of this strange feeling. As can be judged by the multitude of names, it was difficult to describe this sensation in words; moreover, to this day, this task remains challenging due to its highly individual character and the difficulty of comparing one's experience with that of others. The feeling is sometimes described as a mixture of euphoria and excitement: a strangely stimulating but at the same time relaxing sensation that often leads to a sense of calm, tranquillity, relaxation and drowsiness.

In addition, the sensation may seem full of paradoxes and contradictions. It is characterized, on the one hand, by a sense of alertness, since consciously heightened concentration on the stimuli in question is often a prerequisite for the feeling to occur at all. Eyes and ears become attuned to pick up certain sounds and images acting upon the body, resulting in increased sensitivity to the given stimuli. On the other hand, switching off cognitive activity and passively surrendering – or even placing trust in the person attempting to evoke this sensation – is highly desirable. The feeling of ASMR can be evoked either through something unexpected and out of the box (as will be observed later, ASMR video creators are outdoing themselves in offering their fans new surprising stimuli and fanciful video scenarios) or through something familiar (typical roleplay videos depicting a visit to a doctor or a beautician have enjoyed enduring popularity since the advent of ASMR in media).

Today, ASMR has more than one name. Over the sixteen years that have passed since the publication of the aforementioned post on the Steadyhealth.com forum, the term ASMR has increasingly become an umbrella term, covering a whole panorama of different phenomena. ASMR is no longer restricted to only describe 'a warm, tingling, and pleasant sensation starting at the crown of the head and spreading down the body' occurring 'in response to certain external (and often social) triggers, including: whispering, soft-speaking, tapping, scratching, slow and expert hand movements and close personal attention' (Poerio et al. 2018: 1–2). Today, ASMR illuminates with different colours and shimmers with various shades and it is most often used to denote a technologically mediated, audiovisual phenomenon and a newly emerging media genre associated mainly with the YouTube platform. The genre of ASMR is also part of a growing trend for sensorially immersive wellness experiences in media; it is a novel form of *mediated self-care* and a part of the landscape of so-called *self-soothing media*.

However, the use of the term ASMR often goes beyond denoting only one particular genre of audiovisual production. ASMR can no longer be reduced to a single genre of media artwork but instead defines a certain poetics of audiovisual expression and an aesthetic paradigm evident in media-based, post-cinematic artworks, which is flourishing, especially now, in the age of the culture of affects and emotions. It also no longer

seems justifiable, as was still being done a few years ago, to treat the ASMR media phenomenon as a monolith dominated by 'cisgender-appearing, young, white women' (Maddox 2020: n.pag.). They may still remain the most popular ASMR creators; however, alongside them is a whole range of ASMR creators who engage with stereotypes about gender, normative behaviours and universal values. Moreover, video clips and sound recordings created in the ASMR style are often devoid of gender markers altogether. The gender of the performer visible on the screen in ASMR artworks, whether in audiovisual texts or purely audio recordings, occasionally becomes completely irrelevant, especially where, in line with the posthuman spirit and post-cinematic techniques, humans are no longer the centre of attention within the storyline, giving way to establishing relationships and fostering interactions with non-human elements of the surrounding reality.

At this point, I would like to emphasize that the ASMR phenomenon is difficult to define. For this reason, studying ASMR is not an easy task. The boundaries of the cultural and media phenomenon of ASMR are indefinite and permeable and attempts to delineate them are often doomed to failure. With the passage of time, the phenomenon has evolved, and the relationship between audiences, creators and media products has become more complex. Interest in ASMR in the media has been growing steadily since the inception of this phenomenon, as indicated by Google Trends data (Mooney and Klein 2016), which shows a continuous rise in searches for the keyword 'ASMR' by online users worldwide on Google and YouTube since 2011. This is also evidenced by insights from my personal observations of ASMR content on YouTube, conducted since 2018. Several popular YouTube channels dedicated to ASMR have continued to post content for many years. The biggest and most successful ASMR creators publish relentlessly, and their channels have been amassing multi-million-dollar audiences for years. ASMR videos continue to break popularity records within the ASMR-centred community. Alongside the old, tried-and-true formulas in the ASMR universe, there are surprising and original videos using ASMR poetics, in the form of creative elaborations of various topics and scenarios. For these reasons, among others, it is becoming increasingly difficult to describe the unambiguously expanding world of ASMR, including videos often as diverse as South Korean mukbang-style videos

cranking up the sound of the artist's on-screen consumption of crunchy foods to the limit, or roleplay videos casting the viewer-listener in the role of a prince, an alien, an iPod or … a potato chip.

However, despite their apparent thematic distance, videos bearing the ASMR label share a common denominator: they belong to the world of affect. The ASMR phenomenon is characterized by a kind of affective transgressiveness and clinginess; it is defined by a kind of aesthetic paradigm spilling over into other cultural and media phenomena, 'infecting' them, filling the available crevices, coating and enveloping whatever it meets in its path. The contemporary immense popularity of ASMR is no coincidence. After all, ASMR videos are a testimony to what and how one feels at the beginning of the twenty-first century; they are also an affective response to the crises and anxieties present in today's world. ASMR videos show, as if under a microscope, how the world is perceived and what is important to a person at a given moment. They answer the question of what relaxation, repose or solace mean to a person, and how satisfaction, joy, safety and intimacy are understood. ASMR videos also embody the idea of self-care and provide examples of self-soothing practices in media. At the same time, they do not rely solely on the neoliberal ideal of an individual's duty to take care of themselves and their state of mind but also nurture the idea of support within an active community.

Interestingly, ASMR posits, on the one hand, slowing down and getting quiet: a kind of irreverent turning away from an ever-faster rushing world and, on the other hand, the increased attention one should nevertheless pay to the same world from which one cannot escape. One can, however, try to carve out a niche for themselves – scratch or tap their own space – perhaps circumventing the requirements of individual neoliberalism. This is in line with what Lauren Berlant urges, citing the ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986) from Chapter 3, 'What Is a Minor Literature?', of their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. According to their philosophy, people need to stop considering themselves important citizens of the world and rather steer towards *becoming minor*: 'to deterritorialize from the normal by digging a hole in sense like a dog or a mole' (Berlant 2011: 48). The strategy of living in the world, Berlant says, is about bringing about 'a space of internal displacement' that 'shatters the normal hierarchies, clarities, tyrannies, and confusions of compliance with autonomous individuality'

(2011: 48). This strategy seems promising in ASMR culture, which provides tools to foster inner movement and displacement, breaking the rhythm of life and potentially challenging the tyranny of modernity.

Becoming minor and carving one's niche, as proposed by ASMR, can mean, for example, noticing the most inconspicuous, transparent and silent elements of everyday reality and searching for their surprising, previously overlooked qualities, such as their sound properties. If one watches any ASMR video in which an ASMR artist very slowly and delicately touches various everyday objects, such as a hairbrush or a pack of tissues, meticulously examining their properties, one will notice that this type of approach puts the focus on various material elements of reality that are treated almost like relics equipped with the power of affective influence. ASMR proposes that a person immerse themselves in the familiar world, whatever it may be – loud or quiet, rushing at breakneck speed or moving slowly like a turtle – and find themselves anew in it, making themselves comfortable, settling into their niche as if in a safe space. Above all, ASMR encourages a person to attempt to get closer to the world of matter, which often is despised as less important than the 'higher' realms: spirituality or intellectual pursuits. ASMR takes the matter of the world and tells a person to get closer to it – and to do so quite literally by physically touching material objects, squeezing, scratching, knocking and stroking them. This approach leads to a physical connection between the human body and the matter, for when one feels tingles on the scalp, one knows that one exists: the body is receiving stimuli, the brain is working. One could say: 'I tingle, therefore I am'.

It is becoming increasingly clear that this philosophy appeals to many people today, perhaps not directly, but in a way that can be sensed – pun intended – under the skin. The specific tingling sensation of ASMR is the goal of millions of people around the world who consume every day specially created media products designed to evoke it. The dizzying careers of many ASMR content creators, the presence of hundreds of minor YouTube channels on the subject modelled after the biggest ones and the penetration of ASMR into mainstream media are all evidence of its great popularity. It is now possible to purchase T-shirts and mugs printed with slogans referencing the ASMR sentiment, journals to track your brain tingles while practicing ASMR and even ASMR fragrances meant to evoke childhood memories

through scents (Asmr-fragrances.com n.d.). References to ASMR, both mocking and serious, can be found in popular culture products such as television commercials, Netflix shows, films, novels, music videos, stand-up performances and podcasts.

The multitude of references to ASMR in popular culture can make one's head spin. That is why it does not surprise me that when I ask audiences at conferences, in 2024, whether they know what ASMR is, I very rarely see confusion in their eyes anymore. Most often, they smile and admit that they know 'it' from YouTube, Instagram or TikTok. A few confess that they sincerely enjoy watching such content, whereas others declare themselves to be staunch opponents of it. Over the past decade, ASMR has permeated the collective consciousness. The history of the technologically mediated, audiovisual phenomenon called ASMR is not very long, but definitely intense. How did it all begin? In what directions did it develop and why?

A Very Brief History of ASMR

The history of the technologically mediated, audiovisual phenomenon called ASMR is not long, but intense. The phrase *technologically mediated ASMR*, coined by Helle Breth Klausen, describes content published online 'in all technologically-mediated forms, whether auditory, visual or audio-visual' (2021a: n.pag.), intended to evoke a feeling of ASMR in the viewer-listener. This term refers to not only products created specifically for this purpose, such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok videos, but also audio recordings published by audio streaming service providers, such as Spotify.

The owner of the *WhisperingLife ASMR* YouTube channel is credited with creating the first intentional ASMR video, uploaded to YouTube in 2009 (Klausen 2021a). The video, titled *Whisper 1 - hello*! features only a black screen and a low-quality whispered audio recording in which a person talks about starting a YouTube channel dedicated to whispering (WhisperingLife ASMR 2009). In the description of this video, the author writes about her intentions behind creating the channel: 'I know this might

sound really weird to some, but i love hearing people whisper! So i though i would make a whispering channel. No haters please'. As can be noted, the first ASMR channel immediately introduced one of the genre's signature and most frequently used triggers: whispering.

Since then, the number of ASMR YouTube channels has grown exponentially. The owners of many of these channels have carved out their own niches over the years: some publish only roleplay videos (an example is the *Moonlight Cottage ASMR* channel, with 1.31 million subscribers where one will find only so-called *cinematic* or *historical roleplays*); others only mukbang-style videos, that is, videos in which the person visible on the screen prepares and then consumes various dishes (an example may be the *Zach Choi ASMR* channel with 28.9 million subscriptions); some create videos hiding the face of the artist at the expense of interactions with various objects shown in the foreground (like the owner of the *ASMR PPOMO* channel, with 2.65 million subscriptions, or *ASMR Bakery* channel, with 1.87 million subscriptions); while others skilfully combine various trends emerging in the ASMR universe (a good example is the owner of the channel called *Ephemeral Rift* with 1.19 million subscriptions, combining in his videos, as one can read in the description of the channel, 'comedy, philosophy, surrealism, the absurd, horror').

ASMR videos posted on YouTube also vary in length and performance technique. In addition to eight- or ten-hour-long videos intended to accompany the viewer-listener all night while he or she sleeps, one can also find short-form videos that are up to 60 seconds long, so-called YouTube Shorts, which primarily serve the purpose of advertising the channel. Most of the popular ASMR channels publish videos that are extremely technically sophisticated. Their authors use professional equipment that allows capturing sound and video in the highest quality, and they record in isolated, closed rooms to provide viewers-listeners with a high degree of immersion. However, still popular alongside videos recorded in high image and sound quality are the so-called *lo-fi ASMR* videos that capture the imperfections resulting from recording and production, sometimes considered more realistic and authentic compared to the refined high-fidelity videos. An example of an artist creating lo-fi ASMR videos is the author of the channel *asmrvilla*, who records much of her footage in public spaces such as supermarkets, drugstores and bookstores, equipped only with her cell phone.

In her materials, she also accidentally captures the sounds and images of 'real life', like traffic sounds, music coming from the store's speakers and customers' conversations.

The emergence of YouTube channels dedicated solely to ASMR is inextricably linked to the formation of the ASMR online community and to the coining of the term itself. The authorship of the term *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response* is credited to Jennifer Allen, a healthcare manager who participated in a discussion on the Steadyhealth.com website forum in 2007. Allen has made further contributions to building the ASMR-centred community: at one time, she created, among other things, the first ASMR Facebook group and the first ASMR Facebook page. She also officially coined the term ASMR in 2010. The quasi-medical sound of the term is no accident, as Allen recounted in a 2016 interview with Craig Richard:

> I knew with something as difficult to describe and as sensitive for people to open up about as ASMR that we would need something that objectively and definitively named the sensation. Using a 'clinical' word was the best option to improve how the burgeoning community would feel about using and telling others about the word. (Richard 2018: 22)

The name *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response*, described as 'mouthful of medical jargon' (Harper 2020: 95), was intended, according to its creator, to suggest the quasi-scientific connotations of what had previously been called brain orgasm. By desexualizing the original term and searching for connections between the specific feeling and concepts of relaxation and care, ASMR, after a while, was automatically incorporated into the universe of self-care, self-help and well-being mediated practices, where it is still found today alongside such activities and concepts as yoga, mindfulness or meditation. Through the use of a quasi-scientific name, the feeling of ASMR was attempted to be separated from its 'shameful'– erotic and fetishist – connotations that were regularly associated with it during the early period of the community's formation. One has to conclude with certainty that it succeeded; today I do not think that anyone can sincerely claim that ASMR videos are merely 'a quirky version of online porn' (Sadowski 2016: 158).

Indeed, this special type of abbreviation called *initialism*, which is ASMR, gradually began to be used to designate the earlier *head orgasm*; it has become the go-to phrase for individuals seeking and describing the

tingling sensation. Today, when talking about the ASMR sensation, one usually means a cluster of psychosensory effects coming directly from specific external stimuli: a feel-good tingly sensation felt primarily on the scalp. The choice of individual words in the name *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response* is interesting. According to Allen, *autonomous* refers to the 'individualistic nature of the triggers and the capacity in many to facilitate or completely create the sensation at will' (quoted in Sadowski 2016: 159). Therefore, according to Allen, the body's reaction in the form of sensations felt on the scalp is highly individualized, and the same stimuli do not affect everyone equally. Interestingly, Allen also argues that these reactions can be created to some extent according to a person's will. She notes that a person is able to react to given triggers if they wish or not react at all; this is where the autonomy of the response to a given stimulus is supposed to manifest itself. However, the word *autonomous* has a double meaning. It can equally indicate the autonomous nature of the bodily response itself, meaning that it may not be entirely controllable, contrary to what Allen is describing. As evidenced, for example, by the many user experiences described in the comments under ASMR videos posted online, the tingling sensation on the skin is often a surprise: it is an uncontrollable, unexpected and sometimes eagerly awaited very satisfying reaction of the organism.

The second word derived from the name *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response*, namely *sensory*, refers to strictly sensory perception. It is evident that all sorts of stimuli capable of evoking a feeling of ASMR, whether they come from 'the real world' or are transmitted in audiovisual materials, are perceived through the senses, mainly hearing, though not exclusively. This information is then processed by the nervous system. The word *meridian*, according to Allen, was intended to replace the problematic word *orgasm* and at the same time refer to the euphoric feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction. In an interview conducted by Richard, Allen states:

> I wanted to use a word that would *replace* the word orgasm, and referenced the dictionary definition, for which entries included the noun form, 'a point or period of highest development, greatest prosperity, or the like', and the adjective form, 'of or indicating a period of greatest prosperity, splendor, success, etc.', as indicated by Dictionary.com. (Richard 2016: n.pag.)

The last word in the name of the phenomenon, *response*, refers to the body's response to given stimuli. Helga Sadowski (2016: 160) suggests

that this word could have been borrowed from psychological language, 'in which a response is understood as a stimulus that constitutes the basis for perception'. According to this idea, the body's autonomous response in reaction to given ASMR triggers can itself be the basis for further cognition: understanding the qualities of the surrounding world or the relationships occurring in the reality. In any case, nowadays the name *ASMR*, however its legitimacy and provenance are described, has made a grand career over the years, and this abbreviation has become an indicator of relaxation, repose and self-care. And even if ASMR enthusiasts are unaware of the origin and meaning of the phenomenon's name, this does not prevent them from consuming usually not just one genre of 'quirky' audiovisual content anymore, but a whole multifaceted group of media that are supposed to produce a tingling sensation leading to relaxation, stress reduction, calming of anxiety or blissful sleep.

In the early 2000s, the formation of an ASMR-centred community witnessed the creation of various websites dedicated to the subject, online forum threads, Facebook groups and Reddit communities, where users circulated so-called *unintentional* ASMR videos (i.e., audiovisual materials created for a different purpose but still useful as triggers, such as recordings of medical exams or interviews conducted in a soothing voice) that proved useful to evoke feelings of ASMR. However, the most significant platform for the flourishing of the ASMR-centred community has undoubtedly been YouTube, for several reasons. At the time, the website began to strongly promote user-generated content, aiming to move away from being merely a digital video repository (Maddox 2021: 1123). Thus, the YouTube space became a natural environment for ASMR creators to publish so-called *intentional* ASMR videos featuring different triggers.

Moreover, as Rob Gallagher (2016: 6) points out, 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'. YouTube, with its own specific affordances and properties, became an ideal place for the growth of the ASMR-centred community. Today, YouTube constitutes an abyssal library of various audiovisual materials used by the tingles aficionados. It is 'a seemingly endless archive of possible ASMR triggers' (Smith and Snider 2019: 42), that is, a place where one can freely upload videos, save and organize materials

with favourite triggers produced by others in one's own personalized lists, watch recommended videos and find tailored content annotated with titles, hashtags and descriptions.

The possibility of commenting on content posted on YouTube is also not without significance. Thanks to feedback mechanisms in the form of comments left under the videos by the users as well as the number of views of a given video, ASMR content creators can gauge the preferences of the viewers-listeners of the published materials and adapt their work to the requirements of the audience (Gallagher 2016: 7, Smith and Snider 2019: 42). This, of course, connects audiences with creators on many levels, if only by generating a sense of intimacy, belonging to a community and caring for each other's needs. However, YouTube is not always conducive to all types of ASMR content. Videos by ASMR artists, especially so-called *sensual ASMR roleplays*, are constantly affected by demonetization for some time, even if their content is not visually sexually explicit and 'the reality of what's occurring [in the video]' is 'not necessarily sexually gratifying' (Lucas 2022: n.pag.). Additionally, there are still misplaced and inappropriate advertisements, making it difficult or impossible for the viewers-listeners of ASMR videos to relax (Maddox 2021: 1123).

As the work of ASMR artists, or ASMRtists, posting on YouTube continues to be professionalized, new venues for content promotion and, at the same time, sources of income are emerging. One of them is Patreon, a membership platform that allows creators to earn money based on subscription service. Links to Patreon sites are often included in the descriptions of videos posted on YouTube so that fans can easily access this platform to support their favourite creators. In addition, an increasing number of ASMR artists use platforms other than YouTube to publish content. Recently, an extremely popular app used for this purpose is TikTok, a platform designed for publishing short-form videos which also allows livestreaming. What is more, there are quite a few mobile apps on the market dedicated to relaxation, using ASMR as a flagship product. Another platform where ASMR has established itself is Spotify, a popular streaming service offering access to music and podcasts. ASMR soundtracks, although they do not fit completely into any music category or genre, fill numerous expanding playlists and form well-thought-out albums available on the official Spotify webpages of ASMR creators, who are treated there as regular musicians.

The ubiquity of ASMR in the online space on various well-established platforms and in newly emerging services is evidence of the clinging, 'infectious' nature of its aesthetics. This omnipresence may also indicate that the creators of such materials have found and filled a niche in the new cultural economy based on the logic of emotional-affective capitalism. ASMR content always utilizes the language of affect, taking on an affective form. It also does this when it promotes taking care of oneself and thus cocreates contemporary health and self-care discourses. ASMR always promises affects like intimacy, happiness, satisfaction or relaxation to its enthusiasts by relying on the specific form in which it wraps and sells these promises. Here, my research interest lies primarily in 'the formal dimension of affect', as Eugenie Brinkema (2014: xv) calls it, which in this case is both the form that ASMR takes and the affect that is facilitated by this form.

Research Contexts and Literature Review

Until now, the ASMR phenomenon has been approached mostly from several specific research perspectives, such as (1) biomedical; (2) socio-cultural (Smith and Snider 2021: 36); and (3) psychological. For this reason, the scholarship still lacks a broad and comprehensive view on ASMR audiovisual culture largely combining film and media studies with cultural and philosophical perspectives. Of course, ASMR is currently becoming the subject of a growing number of studies from various fields, as I demonstrate further in the literature review. In this book, I embed the phenomenon of ASMR in several contexts so far insufficiently explored in research as well as position my analyses at the intersection of several scientific fields.

The aim of this book is to investigate a technologically mediated, audiovisual, cultural and media phenomenon known as ASMR by combining different scientific perspectives. Here, I treat ASMR videos as media-based, post-cinematic artworks that explore intimacy practices of humans. ASMR is understood in this book as a certain aesthetic pattern manifested in multiple media artworks, mainly in ASMR videos published on YouTube, undergoing a massive heyday in the contemporary

culture of affect permeating modern societies. This aesthetics of audiovisual expression manifests itself in various post-cinematic media creations collectively referred to as ASMR, which primarily point to affectively charged and transgressive intimacy practices. ASMR artworks analysed in this book reveal, among others, the complex nature of intimate human–non-human interactions and interlacings, including a multifaceted interplay of aesthetic, affective and epistemological factors. All the contexts in which I embed the ASMR phenomenon in this study will be discussed in depth in the corresponding chapters of this book. At this point, I only provide an overview of the literature on the ASMR phenomenon published to date, of which I am aware, in order to enable the reader to understand my own research path meandering among existing studies.

Researchers have been highly eager to apply the biomedical perspective to approach the phenomenon of ASMR. Scholars working within this context frequently try to identify what actually causes the satisfying tingling sensation that the body experiences in reaction to varied stimuli. Initially, they would like to establish whether the neurological processes occurring in the human brain are the main source of this soothing sensation, or if other factors, including the personality of the person experiencing the sensation, play a bigger role in this occurrence. As a result, the purpose of some studies is to identify brain areas associated with the ASMR experience by using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanning performed on participants watching ASMR videos. By using this method, it has been demonstrated that ASMR videos had a distinct effect on the neural activity of individuals with the ability to feel ASMR, especially in brain areas related to sensation, emotion and attention (Smith, Fredborg and Kornelsen 2019). Another study that used fMRI scanning technique to understand the neurophysiological basis of sensory-emotional experiences evoked by ASMR concluded that regional activity in the brain involved in 'the integration of visual and auditory information followed by the mentalizing and self-referential processing' (Lee, Kim and Tak 2020: 13) can be linked to the occurrence of ASMR sensation.

Subsequent studies have focused on other bodily reactions possibly taking place when head tingles are felt. One of the studies aimed to test the neurophysiology behind ASMR by examining pupil diameter of participants watching ASMR videos (Pedrini, Marotta and Guazzini 2021).

Typically, when participants were exposed to attentional stimuli, the pupils tended to enlarge, which might indicate arousal if combined with accelerated heart rate or high skin conductance level. In the case of ASMR, in addition to enlarged pupils, there were no typical symptoms of arousal, which might have indicated, on the one hand, the non-sexual nature of the phenomenon and, on the other hand, its complexity in terms of emotions. As a result, researchers concluded that ASMR interestingly comprised feelings of both relaxation and excitement (Poerio et al. 2018).

To this day, unfortunately, there is no complete explanation of which parts of the body, especially of the brain, are responsible for producing the specific tingling sensation. Therefore, researchers in the fields of psychiatry and psychology turn their attention to the issues of personality. Are people with any specific personality traits more likely to experience ASMR sensation? What are the characteristics of ASMR-capable individuals? The results of one study suggest that a specific subset of qualities connected to mindfulness may help explain some of the experiences connected to ASMR (Fredborg, Clark and Smith 2018). The research showed that, during ASMR experiences, ASMR-capable users concentrate on an outside stimulation that makes them feel tingles. As a result, they are characterized by more increased mindful attention, awareness and curiosity than demonstrated in non–ASMR-capable individuals. Emma L. Barratt and Nick J. Davis (2015) concluded that ASMR and mindfulness may somehow be linked; both can result in a state of relaxation that improves an individual's subjective well-being. However, other researchers suggest the opposite, that is, that the two phenomena are disconnected and incompatible. According to one study, participation in an ASMR experience both assumes a passive attitude on the part of the viewer and requires their deep immersion in the world presented in an ASMR video, entailing a loss of self-awareness. These would be said to conflict with the requirement for heightened attention and active engagement characteristic of mindfulness practice (Janik McErlean and Osborne-Ford 2020).

Another personality trait of individuals experiencing ASMR is heightened sensory sensitivity (Poerio, Mank and Hostler 2022), especially when it comes to sounds, both pleasant and unpleasant. In particular, *misophonia*, or hatred of certain sounds, has been the focus of research into the ASMR phenomenon, primarily because some sounds typically

associated with misophonic sensations, such as those produced while eating, become surprisingly relaxing in the context of ASMR. It is not entirely clear why sound-related discomfort turns into a sound-related state of relaxation here. Perhaps the reason is that such sounds are embedded in the company of other influencing triggers: auditory, visual, emotional or tactile (Mahady, Takac and De Foe 2023: 6). In any case, as Barratt and Davis (2015) argue, ASMR and misophonia represent two extremes of the same sound sensitivity continuum. In their study, Agnieszka B. Janik McErlean and Michael J. Banissy (2018) used the misophonia questionnaire to test whether those experiencing ASMR also have elevated levels of misophonia – and indeed found that was the outcome. In another study, it was discovered that 49 per cent of listeners who suffer from misophonia are also more likely to experience ASMR, confirming the (over)sensitivity to certain sounds (Rouw and Erfanian 2017). Not without reason is the ASMR-centred community called the audio-centred community; it is considered to be one that is concentrated around a broadly defined notion of sound (Smith and Snider 2021).

Some researchers see a kinship between ASMR and a particular sensitivity to musical sounds manifested in the form of the body's response called *music-induced frisson*, or feelings of shivers or chills accompanied by goosebumps (Kovacevich and Huron 2018). Although ASMR responders describe the sensation of ASMR more as a tingling rather than typical goosebumps, researchers regard ASMR as a moderate form of frisson, as both sensations 'are pleasurable experiences associated with pilomotor responses' (Kovacevich and Huron 2018: 39). Of course, the contrasting nature of the stimuli evoking ASMR and music-induced frisson should be noted. Acoustic correlates – such as sudden, significant increases in loudness, a widening of the frequency range or the introduction of additional instruments – frequently cause music-induced frisson (Panksepp 1995). The feeling of ASMR, on the other hand, is more likely induced by sounds that are 'much quieter, more proximate' (Kovacevich and Huron 2018: 58); in short, sounds that are intimate in nature, like human whisper.

The medical literature on the ASMR phenomenon also points out that the potential of ASMR for therapeutic applications should be thoroughly investigated, as healthcare professionals could likely find it useful in various therapies (Reddy and Mohabbat 2020). The psychological effects caused

by ASMR are sometimes comparable to those induced in participants by mindfulness practices. The results of a qualitative study conducted on a group of university students watching ASMR videos confirm that ASMR enhanced the well-being of the study participants (Loy and Mohamad 2021). Findings of another study point to the possibility of using ASMR videos to elevate mood and lower arousal, which could have an impact on easing symptoms of insomnia and depression (Smejka and Wiggs 2022). The results of a study on the effects of ASMR on psychological cravings and anxiety of women isolated for drug detoxification indicate that ASMR indeed had a positive effect on the mental health of the participants; it regulated psychological cravings and, to a certain degree, reduced the feelings of anxiety experienced by abstainers (Hu et al. 2022).

In a cultural context, the ASMR phenomenon can be considered part of the therapy culture (Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008) made noticeable today by, among other things, the functioning of therapeutic online communities. ASMR videos are frequently incorporated into medical or quasi-medical discourses of well-being, therapy and self-care. They are interpreted as self-help tools in a neoliberal capitalist culture that places a high value on the ability to cope on one's own with all sorts of crises, including psychological ones, manifested, for example, by sleep problems. In ASMR culture, sleep can be sometimes seen as a controllable object, and ASMR videos as tools for managing it effectively (Łapińska 2022a). This is where the medical-psychological perspective meets the socio-cultural perspective, from which the ASMR phenomenon is also not infrequently looked at. Of course, it is impossible to completely separate the research fields in which ASMR manifests itself as an object of interest. The medical discourse overlaps with the psychological; the latter, in turn, not uncommonly mixes with the cultural, sociological or media discourse. This constitutes another evidence of ASMR being an interesting phenomenon with permeable and indistinct boundaries. It surely provokes reflection among researchers from various fields and those working at the intersection of disciplines.

In recent years, a significant number of articles that attempt to approach ASMR from different angles have been published, including gender, media, affect, performance and psychoanalytic studies perspectives. Scholarly papers on ASMR appear in various languages at international conferences. Numerous workshops, art exhibitions and installations, as

well as bachelor's, master's and doctoral dissertations, are devoted to the phenomenon of ASMR. It is analysed in relation to other artistic, media or cultural phenomena, pointing out the various connections between ASMR and the contemporary world. Most often, ASMR videos are treated in such examinations as cultural texts to be read and the actors seen on the screen as playing their roles in a kind of performance (Waldron 2017).

So far, the scholarly literature has focused heavily on the flagship type of ASMR: roleplay videos. Judging by this fact, this type of videos seems to be the most ubiquitous and interesting in ASMR culture. Under the term *roleplay videos*, commentators most often understand audiovisual ASMR content created by ASMR artists who perform the roles of people in professions that require some degree of so-called *emotional labour*, namely doctors, hairdressers, beauticians, librarians, spa and hotel receptionists, flight attendants, shopping assistants and others. In these performances, the artists visible on the screen are tasked with recreating some real-life experiences in highly 'ritualized and stylized' interactions (Smith and Snider 2019: 42). With an emphasis on the sounds that accompany these encounters, ASMR performers stress personal attention in these roleplay videos.

To date, it has most often been claimed that the main roles in roleplay videos are played by beautiful, thin, young, white women, that is, those who fit 'hegemonic standards of desirable femininity' (Harper 2020: 97). While it is undeniable that female performers have been the most successful in the ASMR-centred community, it cannot be concluded that ASMR creators constitute a homogeneous group. On the contrary, more and more people who hold the most vulnerable positions in society, including people of colour and members of the LGBTQ community, develop successful ASMR content. The issue of the unquestionable femininity of ASMR is therefore currently debatable. Another aspect highlighted in the literature on ASMR is the fact that female ASMR performers play the traditional roles of purveyors of emotional work (Maddox 2020), supposedly very 'natural' for them. It is claimed that women who are part of the digital culture industry that includes ASMR videos, by playing the roles of saleswomen or beauticians, fit into the traditional narratives revolving around gender standards. Supposedly, women in ASMR fit very well into the roles of caregivers, friends and comforters who perform emotional labour in a regime of capitalism.

In their analyses of ASMR roleplay videos, several scholars approach the subject through the lens of feminist and gender studies. Some draw on concepts from film theory; for example, Sadowski (2016) engages with Laura Mulvey's influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' and its theorization of the gaze. In this context, ASMR is positioned as a potentially progressive form of media representation that subverts Mulvey's logic of the gaze. Sadowski argues that women performing in ASMR videos may 'gain heightened levels of control of their representation' (Sadowski 2016: 157), offering a reconfiguration of how female bodies are mediated in digital spaces.

In social and cultural examinations of ASMR, special attention is paid to the subject of sound in ASMR videos. It is argued that ASMR-centred community and culture are focused on sound (Smith and Snider 2021: 34) and that ASMR works affect audiences through 'sonically binaural qualities and narratives [...] supported by sound, vibrations and image' (Klausen 2019: 88). When consuming ASMR audiovisual content, one is '"touched" and "moved" by sounds in both the tactile and the emotional senses' (Gallagher 2016: 10). The flagship sound associated with ASMR culture is considered to be whisper, which contributes to creating an experience of intimacy (Andersen 2015). Despite the multitude of triggers that can induce ASMR sensation (e.g., visual and tactile), sounds are generally considered the most important source of the pleasurable tingling sensation on the skin in the technologically mediated, audiovisual phenomenon of ASMR. Klausen, describing four types of intimacies occurring in ASMR roleplay videos, states that there is a so-called *parahaptic interaction*: a form of technologically mediated interaction 'in which it feels as if one is being touched by sound' (2021b: 127). Aural features of the videos, including binaural sonic recording, alongside visual close-ups and roleplay narratives, have been identified as the most important elements in building the impression of an intimate encounter with the viewer-listener of ASMR video (Klausen 2021b; Zappavigna 2023). In ASMR culture, sound and intimacy go hand in hand. For just as sound is the most essential and key trigger, intimacy 'is key to ASMR' (Maddox 2020: n.pag.).

Another important context in which ASMR is embedded is the social media dynamics operating both within online networks and a broader attention economy. Researchers are interested in how the affordances of

the YouTube platform have shaped ASMR culture (Maddox 2020, 2021). In addition, they inquire about the sleep or rest management techniques evident in ASMR, consistent with the rules of neoliberal economy. ASMR is considered in this context a product of contemporary therapeutic culture industry grown out of the neoliberal economy (Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008) intended to enable individuals to achieve personal happiness and success by practicing 'proper' sleep and 'correct' forms of rest. In this sense, ASMR culture may be in line with regimes of social control. Sleep in ASMR culture is perceived as a controllable and quantifiable object, managed according to the rules of capitalism and neoliberalism. At the same time, however, ASMR culture may be situated in opposition to these rules as it encourages and embraces unique sleeping rituals and habits (Łapińska 2022a).

Another interesting matter raised by the scholarship on the phenomenon of ASMR is the question of who the user of ASMR content, inscribed in the videos, actually is. How can this individual be described and situated in contemporary epoch? According to Rob Gallagher, such a person may be called *a digital subject* embedded in ASMR culture, created based on individualistic sensations 'strangely resistant to being interpreted or integrated into a coherent individual identity' (2018: 273). The irrelevance of the *meaning* of ASMR content goes hand in hand with the kind of digital subjectivity – which is undefined, 'fluid' and resistant to being interpreted – of the ASMR viewer-listener inherent in the ASMR experience. What matters for the creation of subjectivity is *how* the video acts upon the viewer-listener and their body, not the actual message conveyed by the video. A digital subjectivity of the viewer-listener exists only according to their highly individualistic sensations. Another perspective on the viewer-listener's subjectivity is proposed by the claim that the ASMR viewer-listener is mainly *a performative construct*. As Klausen (2021a: n.pag.) puts it, this construct is 'a particular kind of attuned, imaginative and interactive viewer-listener'. In addition, while describing the individual using ASMR, one must not forget that such a person is not only a part of an 'imagined, ambient audience' (Klausen 2021a: n.pag.) – a group of people copresent in the scenario unfolding on screen – but also a member of a very lively, active community of ASMR enthusiasts with a significant online presence.

From the above brief review of the literature on the subject, it can be concluded that the studies to date on the ASMR phenomenon are scattered

and located within different disciplines. This clearly demonstrates the attractiveness of this phenomenon for researchers from various fields of study as well as the apparent 'clinginess' and openness of ASMR. What is lacking in the scholarship up-to-date, however, is a comprehensive look at the phenomenon of ASMR through the lens of theories concerning the various ways in which individuals living in the first and second decades of the twenty-first century experience intimacy and perceive its characteristics, as well as the forms in which these experiences and perceptions manifest themselves. Such theories include, for example, the theories of affect, which have been making a strong presence in the humanities lately, or the theories of posthumanism, which resonate in both form and content of multiple media artworks, including ASMR videos.

In the following chapters, with the aforementioned and other theories in mind, I identify the most important keywords with which one can attempt to open the locks on the doors marked with the label *ASMR*, so as to understand why this phenomenon has become so incredibly popular in contemporary culture. Simultaneously, in this book, I pay close attention to the flagship triggers of ASMR: tapping and scratching, considering them emblematic metaphorical signifiers indicating various forms of experiencing intimacy in the world. As it is demonstrated in the book, both scratching and tapping are important emblems of experiencing contemporary reality in a sensual and intimate way. They carry, among other things, a feeling of transgressing the boundaries – including those defining an intimate experience.

Keywords

The keywords with which I approach ASMR will perhaps not be all that surprising, for they sometimes appear in studies of the phenomenon of ASMR in different contexts. In my interpretation, the chosen keywords have characteristics of 'travelling concepts' introduced by Mieke Bal (2002). Travelling concepts are understood as wandering, 'nomadic' ideas located across the disciplines and theories, never unambiguous and canonically understood but always 'fluid' in their meanings, values and richness of senses. They usually refuse to settle within any single field,

instead seeming predestined to wander freely across diverse areas of knowledge, generating different, and sometimes surprising, associations and connotations. As a result, it happens that they easily become the carriers of diverse meanings, depending on the particular cultural situation. In this regard, travelling concepts constitute a permeable and not ultimately defined set of notions sometimes resembling flickering sparks and shimmers of thoughts and affects, shining bright only under certain circumstances.

By the same token, each of the selected keywords characterizing the phenomenon of ASMR is indefinite, open and susceptible to various interpretations as well as the possibility of establishing multiple connections. Surely, these keywords are not 'firmly established univocal terms' (Bal 2002: 11) but rather are dynamic. They are able to act and perform, not just signify. As Bal points out, the strength and power of travelling concepts in the study of human culture lie not in their presumed universal resonance but rather in their potential to denote very different things across contexts. Travelling concepts often generate debate, encouraging greater awareness of difference and openness to the exchange of ideas and their shimmering meanings (Bal 2002: 13).

The most important keywords with which I characterize the ASMR phenomenon in this book include (1) performance; (2) sound; (3) affect; (4) posthuman; and (5) sleep. They all contribute to the transgressive nature of ASMR intimate experience of crossing and blurring various boundaries, including those between private and public, performance and 'reality', sleeping and staying awake and sounds that are desirable and unbearable. Although the title of each chapter of this book bears a different keyword, each of these terms is invariably linked to the others in some way, either more closely or loosely.

These keywords, as will be observed in the course of the discussion, constantly wander and enter into various relationships with each other; therefore, it is impossible to treat them completely separately. As a result, a division into chapters adopted in this book is not arbitrary and inviolable; on the contrary, I intended that the reasoning presented here be characterized by a flexibility, suppleness and openness. The form of this book is mainly to lend a particular order to the argument, which, I am aware, could have proceeded differently without significant harm to the content. This

keyword-based structure does not aim to offer exhaustive treatments of each theoretical concept in isolation. Rather, each keyword functions as an analytical lens that recurs and transforms across chapters. Concepts are intentionally allowed to accumulate, shift and interconnect throughout the book, generating a flexible and affective reading experience. This structure mirrors the ASMR phenomenon itself – layered, non-linear and multisensory – and reflects my aim to avoid rigid compartmentalization. In this sense, the chapters build on one another not through hierarchical progression, but through a distributed, dialogical unfolding of theoretical concerns, aiming to *move* the reader – possibly even their body – by encouraging them to shift freely between any parts of the book.

In addition to the main keywords, the terms *scratching* and *tapping*, which are the names of most flagship triggers in ASMR videos, are considered central terms throughout the book. They will accompany the discussion from the beginning to the end, demonstrating their relevance when it comes to understanding the contemporary intimate experiences in a world around us, including the environments of digital media. After all, what actually happens when a person *scratches* or *taps* on something? In the first case, they usually attempt to scrape off the top layer to get to the core of a particular item. By doing that, somehow, the boundaries of the object being scratched are always violated. However, in doing so, one also accepts that the particles of the scraped item will stick to the one's body, for example, to their fingernails, and, as a result, become part of them. Therefore, this occurrence can act as an approval to consider their bodily boundaries permeable. Similarly, the activity of tapping that involves gentle knocking or touching, usually accompanied with the noise made by it, embroils a person in various challenges of crossing boundaries between bodies: human and non-human or subject and object. Both scratching and tapping are intimate; obviously, one does not allow everyone to touch them this way. As will be shown, in ASMR culture, the activities of scratching and tapping are considered the most essential ways to establish an intimate relationship with the world.

Both of these activities, being an avenue to create an intimate experience, are closely linked to each of the five keywords – performance, sound, affect, posthuman and sleep – used to describe the cultural and media practices of ASMR. Scratching and tapping are an integral part of the performance by

the ASMR creators. Without the presence of these indispensable activities, most of the ASMR performances would not succeed. These activities are used to produce very specific sounds, without which most ASMR videos are practically non-existent.

Moreover, I situate the actions of scratching and tapping within the world of affect as these activities primarily affect the bodies and senses, bypassing the rational element and in no way appealing to the viewer-listener of ASMR video for complete understanding or reasonable explanation of the experienced sensation. Also, scratching and tapping are part of a posthuman philosophy that turns to the materiality of the world. The essential task of posthumanist thinkers lies in the attempts to shed a new light on the various phenomena of life, including multiple connections among various entities that are part of the nature–culture continuum. Posthumanism acknowledges that everything in the world is composed of some kind of matter. Hence, it is noteworthy that the activities of scratching and tapping cannot occur without the presence of matter in principle. One always scratches or taps on something material; therefore, the presence of matter is inherent for such actions.

Furthermore, scratching and tapping have close connections with the idea of sleep in ASMR culture. These flagship ASMR triggers are considered highly effective in providing relaxation and inducing sleep. As already mentioned, at the same time, they also constitute activities very intimate in nature that can only be performed by someone close and trusted.

Performed, indeed. As it has certainly become apparent by now, the term *performance* appears every so often in the discussions around ASMR. Since it comes to the fore so persistently, it is where the reflections on this phenomenon begin.

Methodology and Researcher's Positionality

Before turning to the analysis of ASMR as a performance practice, it is important to briefly outline the methodological framework of this study and reflect on my own positionality as a researcher. As already mentioned,

this book draws on my long-term research into ASMR cultures on YouTube, conducted since 2018. The analysis is grounded in close readings of ASMR videos as media texts, informed by qualitative and interpretive strategies. These include attention to visual and sonic elements – such as gestures, spatial arrangements, sound textures and modes of address – as well as occasional engagement with viewer-listeners' comments and community discourse, particularly where they illuminate affective responses and usage contexts. Rather than offering a quantitative overview, this study aims to explore how intimacy, care and sensory engagement are mediated through ASMR online videos.

The theoretical framing draws on a range of approaches, including affect theory, philosophy of posthumanism, performance studies, sound studies and critical sleep studies. The emphasis lies on interpreting the aesthetic, affective and cultural dimensions of content, allowing for in-depth engagement with how ASMR constructs and distributes sensorial and affective experiences.

The videos discussed were chosen based on a combination of relevance, popularity and thematic richness. Selection criteria included the prominence of certain ASMRtists within the community (measured through subscriber count, viewership and presence across platforms), the aesthetic and narrative strategies employed and their resonance with central research questions on affective, technological and performative dimensions of ASMR.

Dozens of videos were closely analysed across multiple subgenres and formats. These included both very popular videos and less mainstream content, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the diversity within ASMR practices. The inclusion of particular ASMR channels (e.g., *Gentle Whispering ASMR*, *ASMR Glow*, *Gibi ASMR*, *Tingting ASMR*, *WhispersRed ASMR*, among others) reflects their centrality in shaping the genre as well as their differing approaches in terms of sound design, visual aesthetics and performative intimacy.

While many of the videos analysed include spoken English, this was not a deliberate selection criterion. The creators featured come from a range of countries, including the United States, South Korea, Great Britain and Germany, yet the focus remains on aesthetic and affective dynamics rather than on linguistic or national variations. My own linguistic repertoire

inevitably shaped the content I could engage with more deeply, particularly in cases where spoken language played a central role. However, this book argues that spoken language is not the primary channel of meaning in ASMR. Instead, it emphasizes ASMR's non-verbal, sonic and affective dimensions, which often operate beyond semantic content. Therefore, the analysis foregrounds shared sensorial logics rather than cultural differences.

It is also important to underline that conducting long-term research on YouTube presents particular challenges. The platform's algorithmic opacity, personalization mechanisms and shifting modes of content discoverability make consistent sampling difficult. Videos suggested to a user are influenced by their previous viewing history, creating possible feedback loop that might reinforce certain content while obscuring others. As a result, the sample analysed here cannot claim to be fully representative.

This also calls for a reflection on the researcher's own positionality. As a viewer-listener and interpreter of ASMR media, I am situated within a specific cultural, linguistic and gendered framework, which inevitably shapes how ASMR content is perceived and analysed. While this book embraces interpretive subjectivity, it also acknowledges the limitations it entails – particularly in relation to platform bias, linguistic asymmetries and global diversity.

CHAPTER 2

Performance (of Intimacy)

'Doing' Intimacy Differently

What exactly is *performance*? How can *intimacy* be characterized in relation to performance? Are there many, more or less obvious, connections between performance and intimacy in Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) culture, and if so, what do they consist of? There are countless scholarly attempts to define both performance and intimacy. It is not without reason that Mieke Bal (2002) treats performance and performativity as wandering concepts that can be interpreted in various ways. However, despite the multiplicity of definitions, the ideas of performance and performativity always refer to *doing* something. According to Bal, they imply 'an activity of *mise-en-scène* that straddles the imaginary divide between private and public, and between individual and collective realms of being and living' (2002: 173). Performative undertakings that cross the imaginary and artificially created boundaries between different orders and realms are also often found 'in the work of art' and in the activities 'of the artists that make art' (Bal 2002: 173).

The same is true of the problematic concept of intimacy, which has myriad definitions. Especially today, in a world where there is growing concern about the erosion of human relationships, dealing with intimacy, despite its problematic aspects, becomes particularly relevant. As Sherry Turkle once wrote, 'we are lonely but fearful of intimacy' (2011: 1). As with the definition of performance/performativity proposed by Bal, interpretations of intimacy often refer to binary oppositions, such as inside and outside, hidden depth and visible surface, or public and private (Roche and Schmitt-Pitiot 2014; Berlant 1998). These oppositions are sometimes contractual and therefore unstable, which poses further definitional problems

for the concept of intimacy. The boundaries between the above-mentioned binaries are expectedly blurred by 'intimacy's potential for sharing' (Roche and Schmitt-Pitiot 2014: 2). According to Lauren Berlant, intimacy 'involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way' (1998: 281). As Turkle points out in a similar vein, 'sharing a feeling is a deliberate act, a movement toward intimacy' (2011: 175). Importantly, this kind of sharing intimate experience might have a transformative potential. It can provide a new perspective from which it is possible to scrutinize normative discourses and practices, as well as the means by which they seek to impose hegemony and exclude difference. In the words of Berlant:

> Rethinking intimacy calls out not only for redescription but for transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects while, at the same time, attachments are developing that might redirect the different routes taken by history and biography. (Berlant 1998: 286)

Berlant draws attention to the transformative potentialities of intimate attachments formed between subjects in close affective relationships. Intimacy is understood by Berlant as an affective connection established between subjects that might encourage a person to take an unfrequented path in their endeavours. In other words, intimacy is a force that can initiate an important change in established, normative behaviours, communications and configurations present in the reality.

As it seems, in ASMR videos frequently described as a 'set of performance practices' (Harper 2020: 98), one can often discover similar practices of 'doing' or performing intimacy, which can also carry a kind of invitation to change one's own 'history and biography' (Berlant 1998: 286). This kind of invitation, however, commences at the bodily level, as it remains linked to the affective and sensory domains. ASMR videos evidently affect the bodies of the performance participants. The bodies are being moved, stirred and shivered with the help of affect, which is like 'glimpse, flash, current, nerve, fluid, chad, energy, brilliance' (Felberg 2013: 45).[1]

1 All translations from Polish are my own unless otherwise noted.

To explore the ASMR phenomenon and its performative potential, I focus on a theory of performance that I find particularly relevant – the one shaped by Elena del Río (2022) and rooted in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as well as the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. This approach is complemented by insights from affect theory and the broader *affective turn* in the humanities and social sciences. Here, it is worth noting that the later chapter on affect and intimacy will explore the affect in ASMR even further – it will draw on two major strands of affect theory in the humanities: the psychobiological approach developed by Silvan Tomkins (2008) and popularized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995) and the Spinozian–Deleuzian–Guattarian lineage expanded by scholars such as Brian Massumi (2002) and Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010).

A theory of performance by del Río is directly related to the body and its affective possibilities in filmic performance. It inquires how the audience can be influenced by the corporeality of the actors seen on the screen and by the corporeality of the cinematic work itself. As del Río (2022: 7) notes, with an emphasis on the connection between theatre and film performance, performance studies and film studies have intersected in two key areas over the past few decades: (1) an increased attention to performance as a synonym for acting; and (2) a focus on performativity as a way to explain the social construction of identity. This means that most film researchers but also cultural studies scholars interested in the concept of performance focus either on the activity of acting as a type of performance, or on the performance of some cultural or social identity.[2] More often than not, however, such analyses are not about the body itself and its physicality. They do not focus on the affectivity or materiality of the performing body but see it primarily as a metaphorical representation of various concepts and ideas. Representation and its meaning are still key to reading a given piece of cinematic art or a cultural activity. Acting, as it were, must always be followed by something more; there is no performing for the sake of performing. Performing in this case always needs to carry a metaphor and be meaningful or symbolic.

2 del Río provides the following examples: performing femininity/masculinity, performing queerness, performing whiteness/blackness.

How a theory of film performance understands performance has a slightly different dimension, as it focuses primarily on the body – its materiality and affects – and its potential impact on subjects, both human and non-human. The type of performativity achieved by bodies can be called, following Karen Barad's thought, *a posthumanist performativity* that 'makes evident the importance of taking account of "human," "nonhuman," and "cyborgian" forms of agency', while incorporating 'important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors' (2003: 826, 808). It means that while thoroughly and fairly examining a phenomenon of the reality, one must take into account the many different agents producing and influencing it, and therefore, one should not view the world only through the very human, and thus both limited and limiting, prism of representation, language and discourse. Barad forcefully emphasizes the importance of such an approach, noting that in recent times 'language has been granted too much power', leading to a tendency to reduce everything to 'a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation' (2003: 801). As a result, people have neglected the significance of the matter of the world and their bodies and forgot what they are really capable of. They have pushed away from matter as inferior and unworthy of attention. What seems equally important is that by applying the idea of posthumanist performativity into both people's daily activities and though processes, one could destabilize the rigid boundaries between well-established but limiting concepts, including *human* and *non-human*, and expand their fields of meaning to reveal their hidden potential.

My approach to ASMR performance engages with, among other things, the thought of Deleuze and Guattari drawing on the philosophy of Spinoza. At the heart of the Spinozian–Deleuzian–Guattarian framework lies a relational and material understanding of the body and affect. It conceptualizes the body not as a static entity but as a dynamic assemblage of capacities and forces. As Spinoza puts it, 'bodies are distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of their substance' (Bennett 1984: 109). The body, in this sense, is defined not by what it is, but by what it can do – its power to affect and be affected. Affect, according to Spinoza, refers to 'the states of the body in which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or

restrained, and at the same time the ideas of these states' (Bennett 1984: 254). This view moves beyond binary frameworks (e.g., mind/body, male/female), emphasizing instead a non-dualist ontology of becoming, transformation and intensity.

In their famous treatise, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari reflect on what the body with its affects is capable of in the following words:

> We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 257)

This formulation directly echoes Spinoza's emphasis on immanent relations between bodies and their capacities. It also foregrounds the irreducibly corporeal nature of affect, which Deleuze and Guattari understand as autonomic and pre-subjective. Affects are described in *A Thousand Plateaus* as 'flows of intensity' with 'their fluids, their fibers, their continuums and conjunctions' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 162) preceding language, form, consciousness, subjectivity and representation. Affects-intensities flowing between bodies in various configurations lead to the creation of various highly 'fluid', powerful, passionate and action-packed scenarios involving different bodies.

ASMR performances, viewed through this lens, do not merely represent intimacy – they enact and transmit affective intensities through sensory channels that precede conscious recognition or emotion. The ASMR body becomes a site of resonance and relation, linking screen and viewer-listener in an intensive circuit of sensation. It seems that intimacy in ASMR is a result of the interplay between what is predictable and familiar (e.g., the specific convention of a particular subgenre of ASMR videos) and what is affective: new, intense, surprising, unfamiliar and unpredictable. The intimacy built up in ASMR videos is the result of a confluence of various elements, including unpredictable, hard-to-name intensities, combined with emotional reaction to the conventional 'story' presented in an ASMR video.

This kind of conventionality is usually linked to how both ASMR performers and viewers-listeners are placed in familiar settings, often

connected to scenes associated with 'intimacy and concentrated attention' (Gallagher 2016: 1). Primarily, this refers to playing out a typical roleplay ASMR video depicting a visit to a doctor, a beautician or a hairdresser. In some sense, ASMR videos have become, at least partly, increasingly conventional and predictable. It becomes clear while examining the keywords utilized by the ASMR content makers in the descriptions and titles of the videos, as well as standardized means of artistic expression used in the artworks. The videos are shot, edited, tagged and described in a way to enable the viewers-listeners to find their favourite type of material or trigger they are craving at any given moment. By contrast, new and original elements appearing in ASMR videos that may result in unpredictable entanglements of affective intensities, including atypical filming locations, unusual items used during performances and creative roleplay scenarios, are valued for their ability to sustain viewer-listener engagement. This is also why the ASMR phenomenon continues to flourish, like a lush tree whose countless branches reflect the remarkable diversity of this captivating culture.

Significantly, the intimacy established in ASMR performance between the various actors, that is, the people present on screen in a given video and the objects used in the performance, as well as the viewers-listeners of the video, always refers to corporeality. It is the body – or better, the bodies – that play first fiddle in ASMR culture and are the expressors, carriers, transmitters and recipients of intimacy. Without the body, there is no ASMR. Yet this body, following Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, is not a bounded, individual subject but a nexus of relations. As Barbara M. Kennedy emphasizes, 'the body' in Spinozian–Deleuzian–Guattarian terms is understood as 'a set of forces, intensities, processes' (2002: 96). In ASMR, these intensities take shape in tactile, auditory and visual cues that do not simply symbolize intimacy – they enact it through sensation.

Of course, the idea of a body existing in ASMR culture constitutes a nuanced issue. It is not just about the physical body of the viewer-listener of the video but also about the potential, imagined bodies that exist implicitly on the screen, in the blurry space in-between, connecting the medium and the 'real' world. These are often processed, digitized and dissected bodies: these are posthuman bodies.

Diverse Connections

Let us return to intimacy itself. How exactly is intimacy understood and produced in ASMR performances – in the messages and narratives constructed and conveyed by ASMR videos? To answer this question, intimacy must be defined in more detail. As already mentioned, intimacy according to Lauren Berlant, pertains to sharing a story with another person that might evolve into an intimate attachment with transformative potential, leading to a change in history or biography. However, intimacy can take several forms, ranging from mental closeness to emotional, physical and collective intimacy. The term *intimacy* may indicate the spectrum of sensations and feelings related, for example, to the closeness of a romantic partner or emotional attachment to a trusted friend, family member, pet or an inanimate object, including a souvenir, mobile phone or personal journal. Furthermore, *intimate* tabooed practices can include bodily acts, such as sex or defecating; social and cultural rituals related to death, sleep, nudity and eating; or activities performed in privacy, like watching pornographic content or, in some cases, ASMR videos. Moreover, nowadays, intimate relationships may be established among different actors who exist physically distanced from each other, may not interact with each other at the same time, may not know each other at all or may even be of different species. These types of intimate relationships are built in countless ways and their nature is complex.

Traditionally, intimacy has always been related to physical proximity, familiarity, emotional attachment, trust and closeness. Moreover, 'the development of intimacy required privacy' (Turkle 2011: 172). In today's world, however, intimacy is anything but traditional. Currently, living in an internet and technology-powered culture, one witnesses significant shifts in the intimacy paradigm. Nowadays, it is not uncommon to be forced to reconsider, reinterpret and redefine the ways in which a person relates to another person and to themselves. New narratives around intimacy at the nexus of technology, pleasure, (self-)care and (non-)human connections are emerging. Evidence of this can be seen in the plethora of new names and

terms for intimacy attempting to capture these changes, including *virtual intimacy*, *digital intimacy*, *intimacy at-a-distance*, *mobile intimacy* (Elliott and Urry 2010), *remote intimacy* (Tongson 2011), *mediatized intimacy* (Wyss 2014), *mediated intimacy* (Andreassen et al. 2017), *online intimacy* (Lomanowska and Guitton 2016), *extimacy* (Murillo 2014) and *instrumental intimacy* (Littlefield 2018). These names reflect the transformations that the concept of intimacy has undergone under the influence of the development of new technologies, the omnipresence of social and digital media in daily life and the emergence of various new concepts regarding the perception of pleasure, happiness and self-care.

Turkle believes that people are increasingly 'insecure in their relationships and anxious about intimacy' (2011: xii), which leads them to turn to technology in hope of fixing these alleged weaknesses. True or not, the various ways in which intimate connections are established, built, sustained and interrupted today, and the narratives in which one can identify these connections, are definitely omnipresent in new digital and social media genres, or, to use Lev Manovich's (2001) terminology, in *post-media*. It is noteworthy that not only does the poetics of ASMR videos draw fully on terms prevalent in the digital age when constructing relationships between various actors of the ASMR performance but also the very description of contemporary intimacy is part of the technological milieu and post-media aesthetics in the sense that it refers directly to the concepts created in the digital age. As Manovich points out:

> Post-media aesthetics *should adopt the new concepts, metaphors and operations of a computer and network era*, such as information, data, interface, bandwidth, stream, storage, rip, compress, etc. (Manovich 2001: 6, emphasis in original)

This type of post-media aesthetics drawing on vocabulary related to the contemporary technological era is omnipresent in ASMR culture, thus unavoidably influencing the narratives of intimacy expressed therein. However, nowadays, intimacy is treated as a spectrum; therefore, the narratives of intimacy borrow not only from the stories of technological enhancements. Increasingly, intimacy turns out to be something that is closely linked to each person's own experience and memory. Just as the human ability to feel characteristic tingles on the scalp is a highly individual matter, so too is intimacy becoming an immensely nuanced

and unique issue, while also, at the same time, fitting into broader cultural trends.

Intimacy in a broad sense refers to establishing close and meaningful connections by the individual with various elements of surrounding reality. However, the concept of intimacy is always ambiguous because, on the one hand, 'intimacy is seen as a spatially or metaphorically spatial[ly] organized quality, which is attributed to the inner realm of the private sphere' (Wyss 2014: 10), that is, it ought to belong to the innermost part of an individual, and, on the other hand, intimacy can be perceived as a certain artificial construct created cooperatively by the person and the object of their intimate interest. This means that intimacy in this sense is always a type of connection or a relationship; its life solely depends on the existence of both the subject and the object of the interest and their preferably reciprocal affect. Certainly, the individualistic approach and the collective approach to intimacy are not mutually exclusive but they derive from each other. The individualism of intimacy will always depend to some degree on what is collective and available in a shared consciousness and culture. Therefore, nowadays, the diversification of highly individualistic intimate tendencies and trends goes hand in hand with the growing experience of the public or collective intimacy practices, underpinned by similar experiences of people.

Digital Engagements

ASMR media culture fits perfectly into this trend. The intimacy played out in ASMR roleplay performances is based on collective ideas about what intimacy looks like between individuals involved in a close relationship of some kind. The actor playing in ASMR video assumes various roles, more or less conventional, but usually drawing from a spectrum of behaviours, gestures, attitudes, narratives and messages that are part of the universe of intimacy. In a typical ASMR roleplay video, a certain performance of an intimate nature is played out, suggesting a close familiarity between the potential viewer-listener of the video and the actor seen on the screen. The semblance of intimacy in ASMR roleplay videos is produced through

various artistic procedures and means, which most notably include the use of whispering or muffled voice; the use of gestures imitating touching the viewer-listener through the screen; the use of sounds reaching straight into the ear of the viewer-listener, thanks to very sensitive microphones and headphones imitating the existence of close proximity between actors and audiences of the performance; the use of camera in such a way that it becomes an equivalent or an extension of the viewer-listener's body; the use of stories that contain elements of close physical and emotional contact between the viewer-listener and the artist; the use of narratives that understand intimacy and closeness as the core of relationships; or the constant breaking of an imaginary *fourth wall* separating actors from the audience, to name just a few. Additionally, it needs to be noted that the described means apply mainly to the roleplay subgenre of ASMR. Depending on the type of ASMR video, the applied strategies may vary – some of them might be in use while others remain absent.

Typically, intimacy in ASMR media culture is interpreted by commentators in a rather unambiguous and homogeneous way. This stems from the long-standing association of ASMR with roleplay videos. Usually, ASMR videos are called *intimate* if they contain scenes 'in which an attractive female actor engages in quiet role-playing activities, speaking in a relaxed, low-energy voice, sometimes whispering' (Kovacevich and Huron 2018: 57). Such audiovisual materials are undeniably meant to evoke feelings of 'warmth or intimacy, occasionally exhibiting some flirtatious elements' but most often without explicitly sexual connotations (Kovacevich and Huron 2018: 57). *Intimate* in ASMR is also called a tone of voice of female actors heard in recordings (Kovacevich and Huron 2018: 39). Besides, interestingly, it is only ASMR roleplay videos that are described using the terms related to intimacy. Other types of ASMR videos – those in which an on-screen actor's roleplaying is not central – are often excluded from such discussions. This might suggest that intimacy is, by definition, reserved for the human. However, the issue appears to be more complex.

A common concept that has been identified within ASMR media culture is the idea of digital intimacy (Andersen 2015), which can be widely understood as personal connections that are mediated through digital technologies (Shields Dobson, Robards and Carah 2018). In the roleplay ASMR videos, this kind of intimacy is created by using various 'visual and aural

resources to invoke or simulate the perspective of the ambient viewers and their bodily copresence in the performed interaction' (Zappavigna 2023: 299). Digital intimacy in ASMR is built largely through the technological actors that shape the medium and enable the audience's immersion in the world depicted in the videos, including cameras, microphones, headphones, computer software and computer or mobile phone interfaces.

In addition, scholars pay close attention to the primacy of the body in ASMR in construing mediatized intimacy, stating that at the centre of the experience lies the 'visceral, carnal effects' (Harper 2020: 96) of the ASMR content. Helle Breth Klausen defined four types of intimacies appearing in ASMR roleplay videos: spatial, temporal, social and embodied. Spatial intimacy refers to the feeling of being in close proximity to the person visible in the ASMR video despite physical distance between them and the viewer-listener. Temporal intimacy denotes the sense of the 'here and now' one feels while watching an ASMR video. Social intimacy refers to the opportunity to build interaction by having the viewer-listener fill in so-called *blank spaces* in communication with the ASMR artist visible on the screen. Users fill the empty spaces in this communication by implicitly inserting their own potential answers to questions asked by the actor. Embodied intimacy present in ASMR is, according to Klausen, the most essential category of intimacy, as ASMR videos are designed to evoke a bodily response from the viewer-listener. The whispering voice of the person seen on the screen has a special role in creating any kind of intimacy (Klausen 2021b).

The performance of intimacy in ASMR can take diverse forms, as observed below in selected examples of ASMR videos representing a classic subgenre of this medium depicting an intimate treatment. Furthermore, performance in ASMR can serve various functions, which build a kind of network consisting of overlapping and interacting spheres. Performance can: (1) entertain; (2) create beauty; (3) mark or change identity; (4) create or foster a community; (5) heal; (6) teach or persuade; or (7) deal with the sacred and the demonic (Schechner 2020: 19). When discussing various ASMR videos along with the diverse forms and functions of the intimate performance depicted in them, it should be mentioned that so far ASMR videos have been catalogued in different ways, taking into account various factors. Thus, a list of both ASMR subgenres and the types, forms and

functions of the intimate performance found in ASMR culture can by no means be complete.

One of the simplest classifications of ASMR audiovisual materials divides them into *intentional* videos, which are created with the clear intention of evoking ASMR feelings in the viewer-listener, and *unintentional* videos, which are made with other intentions. This categorization shows that, as Helga Sadowski aptly puts it, 'what counts as an ASMR video lies in the ear of the beholder' (2016: 160), although in this case, the word 'ear' should be substituted for 'eye'.

Among unintentional ASMR videos, one can find audiovisual materials that have the potential to evoke a sense of being cared for or touched as well as feelings of relaxation and drowsiness in the viewer-listener. This category includes episodes of the television show *The Joy of Painting* (1983–94), where the American painter and art teacher Bob Ross taught viewers how to paint. The relaxed, gentle voice of the presenter, the repetitive movements of his hands and the sounds of paintbrushes tapping and brushing the surface of the canvas were highly valued in the early ASMR community. Videos depicting real-life visits to a doctor, barber or massage parlour; actual television interviews conducted with soothing, calm voices; videos showcasing artistic or craft activities such as carving, drawing or sharpening a knife; or instructional videos explaining processes like preparing tea or coffee are still highly regarded within the community. One reason why unintentional ASMR videos became popular is their ability to present a tranquil environment that is often difficult to achieve in real life. By focusing on and capturing the calming aspects of certain real-world situations and events, these videos have the potential to induce relaxation and tranquillity in the audience.

Other classifications of ASMR videos are based on both the triggers used in on-screen ASMR performances and the intended effect of a given video or trigger on the viewer-listener. An example of such categorization, which consists of three groups of ASMR videos, is proposed by Sadowski. The first category, termed *romantic intimacy*, includes videos featuring triggers of close personal attention, where 'the performer treats the viewer like an intimate partner or friend' (Sadowski 2016: 161). Another type of video is performances of *intimate treatments* of various kinds, encompassing roleplays where the ASMR artist assumes the role

of a professional – such as a doctor, make-up artist or hairdresser – and performs various activities on a potential patient or client. The final category is termed *repetitive relaxation* and encompasses videos that focus 'on repetitive, calming sounds or activities, like painting, woodcarving, or fingers tapping on glass' (Sadowski 2016: 161).

It is evident that these three groups do not exhaust the possibilities for categorizing ASMR videos. Indeed, the vast majority of audiovisual materials labelled as ASMR cannot be easily assigned to any of these groups. One reason is that repetitive, calming sounds or activities, which, according to Sadowski, define a separate type of ASMR video, are also present in videos classified within the first or second category, often constituting a crucial part of these materials. In fact, soothing, repetitive actions and accompanying sounds are integral to virtually all ASMR videos published online.

Another pertinent issue is the constant overlap among genres of various online audiovisual materials. For instance, it is increasingly challenging to determine whether ASMR videos featuring food-related triggers should be categorized as ASMR videos at all, or whether they belong to the mukbang genre of digital content. The same dilemma applies to the distinction between ASMR videos and so-called *oddly satisfying videos*.[3] It is commonly believed that in ASMR culture, the focus primarily rests on the auditory aspect, with the visual element typically taking a secondary role, whereas in oddly satisfying videos, the visual component is often the main attraction, rendering the accompanying soundtrack irrelevant. However, the asserted insignificance of the visual aspect in ASMR culture is not an absolute rule. To appreciate the significant role of the visual element in ASMR films, one can observe videos categorized as *cinematic ASMR*, created, for example, by Maxence Rodier, a French filmmaker and author

3 These are videos that show the visually appealing manipulation of various soft and squishy materials like slime, kinetic sand and soap, or people and machines doing repetitive tasks with skill and precision. Common motifs appearing in oddly satisfying videos include paint mixing, soap cutting, slime crunching, hydraulic presses, pattern explorations, cleaning and washing various objects and metal and woodworking. The emergence of hashtag #oddlysatisfying marked the start of this pleasing audiovisual trend in the Reddit.com forum in the early 2010s (Zagidullina 2020).

of the popular YouTube channel *Made In France ASMR*. According to Rodier, cinematic ASMR brings 'ASMR and traditional motion picture together' (Maxencerodier.com n.d.: n.pag.). Rodier meticulously plans his ASMR content, carefully selecting camera angles, lighting, filters, special effects, décor, costumes, actors and soundtracks. Consequently, his ASMR films resemble small masterpieces of post-cinematic art, where the visual aspect is prominent alongside the auditory component.

Between 'Old' and 'New'

The theory of film performance developed by Elena del Río (2022) focuses on the relationship between body, affect and performance. In this theory, the affected bodies visible on screen are characterized as 'bodies that are altered or displaced by virtue of additions or subtractions of material forces' (Río 2022: 10). On the cinematic screen, as well as in other audio-visual media, watching performing bodies and witnessing what happens to them allows the audience to perceive them as 'a shock wave of affect, the expression-event that makes affect a visible and palpable materiality' (Río 2022: 10). Performance, then, is always linked to the expression of affect conveyed through the bodies on screen and the way this is sensed in the viewer-listener's own body. As del Río further argues, *the performative* is closely linked to *the affective* in the sense that both are always the result of the interaction between the new and the familiar. Both the performative and the affective may occur only when there is 'a certain advent of the new, a certain displacement or passage from one state to another' (Río 2022: 11) – a coming together of the familiar and predictable with the new, the unexpected and the surprising. It is at this very moment that both affective and performative dimensions emerge simultaneously.

The narratives developed in the most typical ASMR roleplay videos are based on generalized and stereotypical ideas about closeness, intimacy, kindness and friendliness. They revolve around the ideas that would have a relaxing and soothing effect for the viewer-listener. The flagship examples of such videos are ASMR films containing scenes in which the actor, who in

most cases is the ASMR artist themselves, is seen on the screen bestowing undivided attention on the viewer-listener. This so-called *personal attention* from the artist is devoted entirely to the potential viewer-listener, embedded in the narrative – an imagined participant of the performance whose head is supposedly at the camera's location. Thus, the scenes – or only a single scene, since the editing of such a video is usually kept to a minimum – included in such a film are most often shot from the viewer-listener's point of view.

In such a typical video, the ASMR artist shows their face on the screen and maintains constant eye contact with the audience. The artist speaks softly to the camera, often whispering, and makes slow or fast, rhythmic movements around it intended to simulate touching the face of a person situated behind the camera, giving a massage, brushing hair, putting on make-up or conducting a medical examination. The artist is often surrounded by some objects of different textures, made of various materials, such as glass, plastic or wood, which they stroke with their hands, tap with their fingertips or scratch with their fingernails. By doing so, the artist extracts various crisp, squishing or crunching sounds from the items. During such a session, the artist also attempts to maintain verbal contact with the viewer-listener as often as possible, for example, by commenting on the appearance or sound qualities of objects on the fly as well as simulating dialogue. The illusion of closeness between the actor and the audience is thus constantly maintained; it is extremely rare for the ASMR artist to leave the film frame and let the person be alone in the room. The actor is constantly at the viewer-listener's disposal and gives them 100 per cent of attention. Last but not least, notably, in such a typical ASMR video, the actor visible on the screen is usually a young woman with an attractive appeal and a friendly expression, wearing delicate make-up, with manicured fingernails and dressed neatly.

Examples of these types of classic ASMR roleplay videos can be found on most popular and well-established YouTube channels at present that specialize in ASMR content, including *Gentle Whispering ASMR*, *ASMR Darling*, *Gibi ASMR*, *ASMR Glow*, *WhispersRed ASMR* and *Tingting ASMR*. The most popular videos – that is, audiovisual content viewed the highest number of times – published on the aforementioned channels fit this classic model. In October 2024, at the time of writing, the most

viewed ASMR videos published on the YouTube channels listed above that have continued to be hugely popular for several years include (1) ✂ *Sleep-inducing Haircut* 💇 *ASMR | Shampoo | Page Flipping | Scissors* from the channel *Gentle Whispering ASMR*, having 41 million views (Gentle Whispering ASMR 2018a); (2) *ASMR 20 Triggers To Help You Sleep* ❤ from the channel *ASMR Darling*, with 40 million views (ASMR Darling 2017); (3) *Fastest ASMR | Dentist, Eye, Cranial Nerve, Sleep Clinic, Lice, Ear Exam, Ear Cleaning, Makeup, Spa!* from the channel *Gibi ASMR*, viewed over 59 million times (Gibi ASMR 2021); (4) *ASMR Fixing You Whispered Roleplay (Gloves sounds, Face Brushing, Scratching sounds and +)* posted on *ASMR Glow*, viewed 7.7 million times (ASMR Glow 2016); (5) *22 ASMR Triggers | No Talking | Intensely Relaxing Sounds* published on *WhispersRed ASMR*, with 12 million views (WhispersRed ASMR 2017); (6) *[ASMR] Sleep Recovery ~ 3 Hours of Hair Treatments* from the channel *Tingting ASMR*, which has been viewed 59 million times (Tingting ASMR 2020).

Interestingly, in each of these videos, there are some modifications of the traditional ASMR video model containing the performance of intimacy. It is worth noting that, despite the fact that each of these videos follows a classic ASMR video scenario containing the performance of intimate treatment or encounter, none of them is strikingly similar to the others. Each includes something unique and in each of them the potential viewer-listener will find a component that contributes to the success of a given ASMR artist, that is, some kind of trademark of the particular ASMR content creator.

Maria Viktorovna, the creator behind *Gentle Whispering ASMR*, is known for her expressive use of hands, which, as Michele White observes, sometimes appear 'visually detached from the rest of her body' (2022: 166), enhanced by the contrast between her pale skin and the dark background. In the video ✂ *Sleep-inducing Haircut...* (Gentle Whispering ASMR 2018a), these gestures take on a heightened significance when viewed through the lens of del Río's theory. The slow, deliberate hand movements are not merely mimetic but function as what del Río calls 'expression-events' (2022: 4) – bodily gestures charged with affective intensity that act directly on the senses of the viewer-listener. While the performer's hands are not constantly in the foreground, when they do appear, they become central

to the affective-performative logic of the video. The viewer-listener's body becomes a site of sensation, drawn into a 'shock wave of affect' (Río 2022: 10), bypassing cognition and engaging visceral, pre-reflective response. The visual elegance of the performer – her softly lit face, pastel tones, gentle gaze and whispering voice – composes a carefully calibrated affective atmosphere. This intimacy is anchored not only in a familiar narrative or in a figure marked by classic femininity, timeless elegance, professionalism and good taste but also emerges through the sensory interplay between voice, gesture and camera proximity. Viktorovna's performance does not merely depict care; it *performs* care affectively, inviting the viewer-listener into a soothing, regulated rhythm. The result is a form of aesthetic intimacy marked by grace and control.

In the video *ASMR 20 Triggers To Help You Sleep* ❤ (ASMR Darling 2017), the artist known as ASMR Darling presents her recognizable *girl-next-door* style – minimal make-up, straight hair and casual clothing – which reinforces the impression of ease and approachability. The setting – a cosy, softly lit room – evokes an atmosphere of safety and familiarity. Within this context, the microphone placed at the centre of the frame becomes more than a technical tool: it takes on a performative function, central to the affective choreography of the scene. Its positioning between the performer and the viewer-listener turns it into a material interface of affect – a tactile node that does not simply transmit sound, but participates in the formation of an expression-event.

Far from being neutral, the microphone is ASMR culture's emblematic object, imbued with the power to mediate bodily sensation and emotional connection. In ASMR Darling's video, it not only amplifies sound but also materializes the affective exchange between performer and audience, making the invisible – tingles, tension, anticipation – palpably present. In this performance, the microphone functions as an externalized organ, a shared sensory device that visually reflects the viewer-listener's own vulnerability and openness. It stands as both a prop and a performative agent, enabling the displacement of affect across screen boundaries. Overall, the effect of ASMR Darling's video arises not from narrative structure but from the carefully modulated sensory interplay between body, voice and technological mediation. In del Río's terms, what unfolds here is not a

symbolic act, but an 'affective-performative event' (2022: 9), one in which bodily forces – human and technological – are aligned to provoke subtle shifts in sensation and perception.

The creator of the YouTube channel *Gibi ASMR* in the *Fastest ASMR...* video (Gibi ASMR 2021) builds intimacy in a different way. Here, the artist performs with unusual intensity and speed, deviating from the slow, soothing rhythm often associated with ASMR culture. Gibi's quick speech, rapid gestures and seamless transitions between medical roleplay scenarios (Figures 1 and 2) create a charged sensory environment. Rather than disrupting affective engagement, this heightened tempo produces a kind of intimacy based not on stillness, but on stimulation and control. Gibi's performance becomes a kinetic unfolding of affect, where gestures and props (gloves, lights, tools) are not symbolic elements but material intensities that act directly on the body of the viewer-listener.

While Gibi assumes the position of caregiver in multiple clinical settings, her performance disorients narrative logic and emotional predictability. The viewer-listener is positioned as a passive recipient, yet this passivity amplifies the affective experience by encouraging surrender to audiovisual immersion. As del Río argues, affect arises in moments of transition – 'a certain displacement or passage from one state to another' (2022: 11) – and Gibi's accelerated, performative flow enacts precisely this shift. Her body becomes a generator of affective forces that ripple outward through rhythm, gesture and repetition. What emerges is a form of intense 'affective-performative event' (Río 2022: 9), shaped by the interaction of voice, motion and technological mediation.

The kind of surrender of the viewer-listener present in this scenario may also indicate 'going beyond the human agenda regarding rationality, intellectuality, purposefulness, and reasonableness' (Łapińska 2021b: 164). It also facilitates establishing a posthuman kind of relationship. In this case, the performance is not only to entertain and heal but also to mark the kind of potential posthuman identity of the viewer-listener embedded in the narrative. The issue of posthumanism in ASMR culture will be revisited for a more detailed discussion later in the book.

In *ASMR Fixing You Whispered Roleplay...* (ASMR Glow 2016), the artist nicknamed ASMR Glow performs a first-person care scenario in which the viewer-listener is cast as a damaged robot returning from war.



Figure 1. A fast-paced ASMR roleplay with a dentist (Gibi ASMR 2021). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.



Figure 2. A fast-paced ASMR roleplay with an ophthalmologist (Gibi ASMR 2021). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

The process of repairing the machine consists of various activities designed to produce pleasant sounds, such as splashing water and cleaning the ear canals with various tools. Again, the artist's actions – tender but precise, unhurried yet deliberate – generate a 'shock wave of affect' (del Río 2022: 10) through their tactile rhythm and focused presence. These acts become expression-events that materialize affect beyond representation. Intimacy here is not based on emotional realism but on sensory choreography: the performer's body, voice and tools interact with the camera-as-eye to produce a posthuman form of care. The viewer-listener is invited into a state of vulnerability and passive embodiment, yet this passivity is affectively rich, shaped by the tactile rhythm and aesthetic of attentiveness. Instead of humanizing the robot, the performance presents affect as posthuman, emerging through the interplay of technological mediation and embodied expression to create a shared, immersive experience.

The owner of the YouTube channel *WhispersRed ASMR*, performing in the film *22 ASMR Triggers...* (WhispersRed ASMR 2017), does not utter a word in this video. The clip belongs to the category of *no-talking* ASMR videos, the hallmark of which is the absence of any sound made with the speech apparatus by the ASMR artist. Remaining silent throughout the performance is key. Therefore, in this type of video, building an intimate bond with the viewer-listener cannot involve whispering or murmuring, as in previously analysed cases, but must rely on other elements. The video constitutes a composite of various stimuli and techniques typically used in *no-talking* ASMR films.

Initially, the artist stares mesmerizingly at the camera's eye and strokes it with her hands (Figure 3). Then, after she disappears from the view, a uniquely shaped microphone moulded like human ears takes her place. Subsequently, delicate female hands clad in white latex gloves begin to clean the microphone ears with balls of cotton. The next scene presents the back of a doll's head and the process of brushing its hair. Another scene features the actress in close-up, stroking her own long hair with her hands. The blissful expression on the artist's face attests to the pleasure she clearly derives from this activity. The sounds accompanying the scene are very well pronounced. It almost feels as if the microphones were placed in the actress's hair or in very close proximity to her head (Figure 4).

In this video, there are a substantial number of unrelated scenes in which one witnesses a multitude of possible ways of positioning a microphone



Figure 3. The artist gazes into the camera, gently stroking it with her hands (WhispersRed ASMR 2017). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

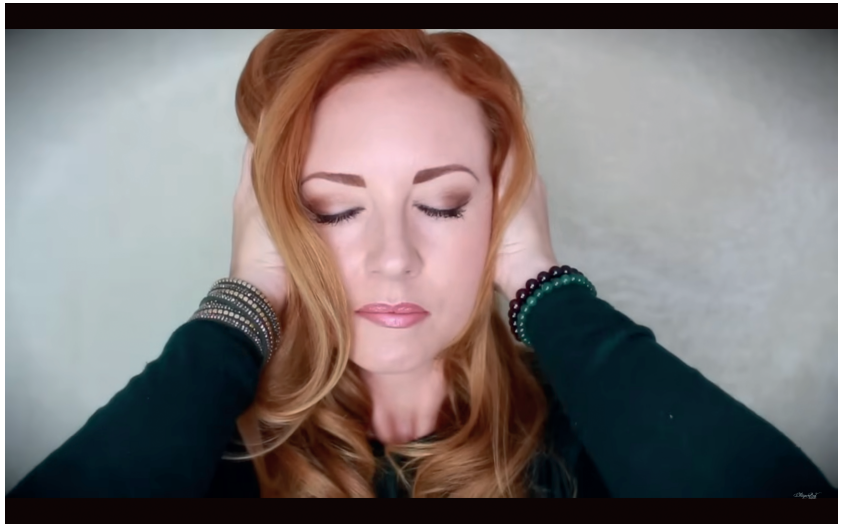

Figure 4. The artist brushes her hair, with amplified sounds enhancing the intimate scene (WhispersRed ASMR 2017). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

and a camera during the ASMR performance. These instruments are anything but immobile. Throughout the video, they contribute to the constant shifting of the viewer-listener's perspective. The fluidity of the recording equipment recalls del Río's expression-event, where affect arises through movement and displacement rather than narrative continuity. Here, the intimate, affective relationship between humans and technological entities established during the performance is fluid and indefinite, as their bodies appear, disappear and reappear, devoid of clear status, location or purpose. Likewise, the roles of the actress visible on the screen, the viewer-listener and the objects used in the performance remain vague; because they are never explicitly defined, they abound with endless potentialities.

From the video *[ASMR] Sleep Recovery ~ 3 Hours of Hair Treatments* published on the YouTube channel *Tingting ASMR* (2020), one can expect exactly what the title promises. In this roleplay, the person visible on the screen acts as a hairdresser taking care of someone's hair. Throughout the performance, the artist – Tingting herself – carries out a range of hairdressing operations on the head of a mannequin visible at the bottom of the frame, describing each procedure in detail while addressing the camera. The viewer-listener is not the direct recipient of the treatment but watches the procedures unfold, observing from a removed yet implicated perspective (Figure 5).

However, the status of the addressee is not straightforward. The artist occasionally turns to the camera to ask questions about what hairstyle to choose next (Figure 6), implying a collaborative relationship. She also uses plural forms such as 'See you, guys', suggesting a collective, dispersed audience. As a result, the recipient of the treatment becomes an unstable figure, oscillating between the mannequin, the individual viewer-listener and the broader subscriber community.

This ambiguity contributes to the video's affective and performative complexity. The intimacy it creates moves fluidly between public and private registers. Again, del Río's concept of the expression-event is useful here: affect is not simply transmitted by the performer but emerges through the interaction of gaze, gesture and embodied narration. Tingting's performance does not anchor the viewer-listener in a fixed identity or narrative position. Instead, it activates an open-ended subjectivity – one that wavers between passivity and participation. The hairdresser's body, the

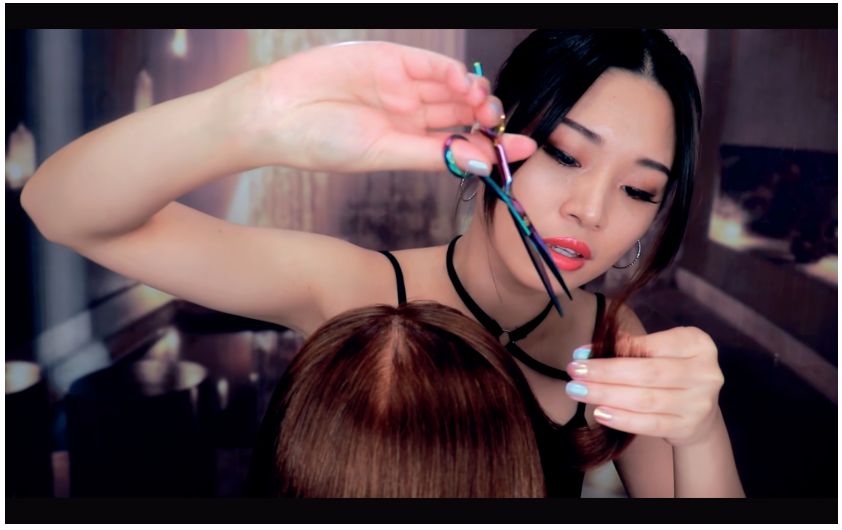

Figure 5. A hairdressing roleplay performed on a mannequin (Tingting ASMR 2020). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

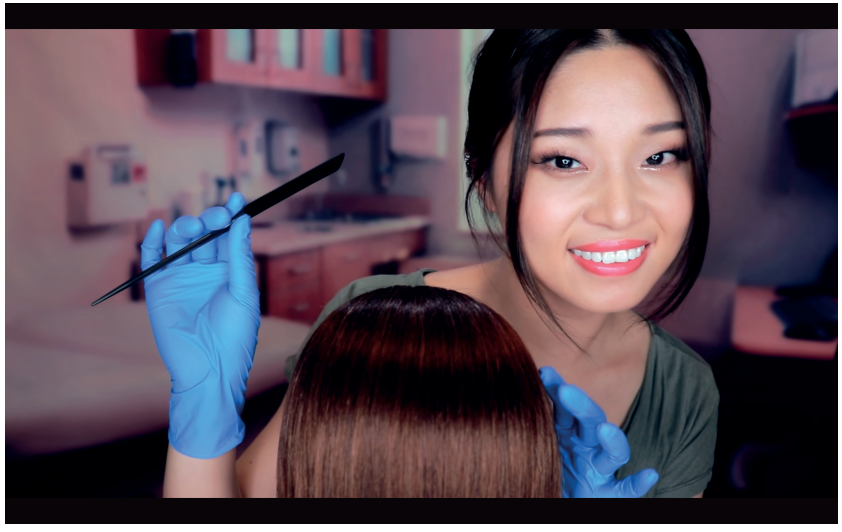

Figure 6. The artist involves the viewer-listener by asking about the next hairstyle steps (Tingting ASMR 2020). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

gestures she performs and the tools she uses compose an assemblage of sensory elements that, together, generate affective intensities not through character development or realism, but through repetition, proximity and the choreographed rhythm of care. In this way, the performance speaks to del Río's notion that both affect and performance unfold when the familiar meets the new – when the domestic ritual of a haircut becomes a stage for embodied, sensory experimentation.

Bodily Sensations Unveiled

As it was demonstrated, ASMR videos depicting intimate treatments can vary substantially, but in each of them it is possible to find elements of ideas about closeness, intimacy, kindness, friendliness, as well as relaxation and rest. In these videos, intimacy may be understood and approached in multiple ways; however, it is always grounded in a desire to build relationships between bodies that affect each other.

Bodies in ASMR culture affect and are affected, which means, among other things, that they are full of potentialities. These types of bodies in ASMR culture can never be definite and restrained. Instead, they find themselves in a state of continuous *becoming*, as understood by Deleuze and Guattari. ASMR bodies 'become' with the help of affects-intensities as they constantly act upon each other. As Deleuze and Guattari explain:

> To every relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness grouping together an infinity of parts, there corresponds a degree of power. To the relations composing, decomposing, or modifying an individual there correspond intensities that affect it, augmenting or diminishing its power to act; these intensities come from external parts or from the individual's own parts. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 256)

By the same token, it can be claimed that bodies in ASMR culture constantly establish relations with each other and these relations possess the power to create individuals by composing, decomposing or modifying them – all with the help of affects-intensities. As it has been observed earlier, bodies in ASMR videos constantly remain in motion: they are formed, reformed and deformed. They appear and disappear. Moreover, they do not even need to remain visible on the screen; on the contrary, oftentimes they become bodies that exist solely potentially, as in the case

of a patient or a robot inscribed in the story presented on the screen. This kind of potential body is an extension or equivalent of the physical body sitting in front of the smartphone or computer screen.

Nor do the bodies in ASMR culture need to be only human-like. The bodies of material, non-living and non-human entities appearing in ASMR performances of intimacy have an indefinite, 'fluid' status (human? non-human?), as exemplified by the anthropomorphic head of the mannequin that had its hair combed in Tingting's video, turned with its back to the audience so that its actual status (is it a person? is it a doll?) could not have been easily determined. Furthermore, the bodies in ASMR culture do not need to be tangible or flesh-and-blood. They might be as transparent as air but nevertheless are treated as if they could be touched with a hand. The performance of intimacy in ASMR videos is, therefore, founded on a particular suspension of disbelief, including doubt in the existence of a body with fixed and impermeable boundaries. ASMR artworks also require the suspension of disbelief regarding the illusory nature of the storyline, its narrative gaps and the unreal status of the characters depicted in the videos, in order to surrender to the affective flow between bodies.

At the same time, the performance of intimacy displayed in ASMR videos is established at the nexus of technology, pleasure and (self-)care, with technology being certainly one of the most important keys to the ASMR experience. As it was noted whilst analysing the videos cited above, modern technology is constantly present in ASMR videos in the form of not only certain devices like microphones and cameras but also words and phrases used by the ASMR artists and presence of certain characters featured in the videos, such as robots. In ASMR media culture, it is the technology that cocreates bodies that feel pleasant tingles and experience relaxation. In fact, everything in a given ASMR performance is geared towards the pleasure, comfort and well-being of the body coproduced by the technology. Interestingly, these feelings are supposed to be experienced collectively during the performance, which means that not only the viewer-listener of the video but also the performer themselves is comforted and relaxed. The person visible on the screen demonstrates multiple times to the audience, both verbally (by using phrases like 'Oh, it feels so good') and non-verbally (with gestures or facial expressions), how much pleasure and satisfaction they derive during their own performance. Similarly, through the reactions of the performer, one can judge that the

imagined viewer-listener inscribed in the video must feel a similar pleasure. All these elements contribute to the fact that the performance of intimacy played out in the ASMR video leads to the relaxation of an actual person invested in watching a particular film, which may result in a feeling that the person is actively taking care of their own well-being.

Again, it is worth emphasizing that the non-human bodies of technological apparatuses used in ASMR videos are essential actors throughout the performance, enhancing in the viewer-listener a sense of building intimate connections and fostering feelings of pleasure, relaxation and immersion in the presented world. Technological devices in ASMR culture act like substitutes or extensions of human bodies, replacing the heads, ears or eyes. The fact that, in most of ASMR roleplay videos analysed above, the bodies of technological apparatuses intermingle with human bodies and create new assemblages of indeterminate status: temporary, 'fluid', unlimited and freely modifiable, indicates the occurrence of the most intimate process in which the subject opens up, 'becomes' and embraces the influence of other elements of reality on them.

The body in ASMR always 'becomes' ready to hear something. Oftentimes, it is the body that listens attentively and anticipates sounds coming from various sources. The hearing body in ASMR is sensitive to acoustic stimuli: the sounds that make the body vibrate and cause tingles to appear on the skin. Moreover, various bodies in ASMR are often directly involved not only in listening but also in the production of sounds using various objects and techniques. During ASMR performances, the body is repeatedly struck by acoustic waves. It remains bathed in sound and gets touched by sound, literally and figuratively. Yet, what actually is *sound* in ASMR? How does it connect to intimacy? ASMR videos can be successfully called a new sound art or even a new musical genre, where sound is treated as a field of bold experiments. It appears like ASMR culture postulates establishing intimate relationships between humans, both ASMR artists and viewers-listeners, and non-humans, such as everyday artefacts and technological devices active during the performance, through the use of sound. For this reason, it is necessary to take a closer look at the intimate inclinations of sound in ASMR culture, where the sense of hearing closely meets technology.

CHAPTER 3

(Intimacy of) Sound[4]

Sonic Explorations

At first glance, the connection between Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) and sound is quite clear. The phenomenon of ASMR, despite its evident audiovisual character, is most often described as 'a sound culture' (Smith and Snider 2021: 30), emphasizing its auditory aspect at the expense of others, including the visual. There is no doubt that in many ASMR videos sound comes to the fore. It is usually the most effective stimulus for the viewer-listener, sending tingles down their body. The desired effect of sound stimulus seems easy to notice because of its immediacy – for when the stimulus functions as expected, the viewer-listener of the ASMR video immediately experiences a tingling sensation on the skin of their body, usually occurring without the person's control or participation of consciousness. It is also sound – or, as Rob Gallagher calls it, 'noise' (2016: 9) – that cocreates the atmosphere in a particular video; evokes specific associations with various emotions, subjects or ideas; and coproduces 'sticky' affects circulating between the bodies involved in the ASMR experience. As Gallagher notes, 'if [...] 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' (2016: 9).

Therefore, there is no doubt that ASMR stands for sound. However, its place, role, associated meanings and connections with other elements of

4 Fragments of this chapter were previously published in the articles 'Vibrations of Worldly Matter. ASMR as Contemporary *Musique Concrète*' (Łapińska 2020a) and 'From Cookbooks to ASMR: Significance of Sound and Hearing in Culinary Recipes' (Keating and Łapińska 2023).

ASMR culture and community are no longer so clear-cut. Sound in ASMR videos has great potential to trigger a multitude of interpretive and affective possibilities. For example, the phenomenon of ASMR can be classified as a new genre of sound art or even a new trend in music, governed by its own unique rules. Evidence of this can be recognized in the advent of the musical genre called *ASMR* on the popular digital music service Spotify, where one can find not only playlists consisting of pieces recorded in ASMR style but also web pages of the most beloved ASMRtists, who are considered regular musical performers releasing individual singles and full albums.

Moreover, sound in ASMR culture can be approached from various research perspectives. Some of these possibilities are provided, for example, by the newly emerged, interdisciplinary field of sound studies (Bull and Back 2003; Pinch and Bijsterveld 2012b; Sterne 2012; Schulze 2020), a part of sensory studies, which focuses on various issues related to sound and the sense of hearing in culture. This fairly new but flourishing scientific field examines, among other things, the material production and consumption of 'music, sound, noise, and silence' (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2012a: 7). Usually, the field of sound studies also embeds its interests in the context of the impact of technology on the hearing, production and consumption of sounds.

Another interesting research perspective emerges from treating the sound art of ASMR as shown by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, creators of *musique concrète*, who pioneered the use of 'sound recording tools, natural sounds, electronic signals, and instrumental sounds' (Holmes 2008: 45) in composing musical pieces. Schaeffer and Henry promoted using technology to actively listen to the surrounding reality, which resulted in far-reaching sound and music experiments that sought to blur the nature/culture dichotomy (Misiak 2012). Likewise, ASMR artworks can be understood as both artistic manifestations and experiments with sounds and technologies that follow Schaeffer's and Henry's footsteps, with ASMR artists perceived as composers-*bricoleurs* (Misiak 2012) working in the realm between live composing and listening, using everyday objects in extraordinary, intimate ways that often distort the *telos* (aim or purpose) of technology (Heidegger 1993: 315).

Sound in ASMR videos may also be approached using the term *deep listening* coined by Pauline Oliveros, who advocates combining openness to sound with awareness of one's own hearing body (Oliveros 2016). According

to Oliveros, deep, attentive listening to the surrounding world should always involve reflection on the metalevel, that is, it must include active thought about the act of listening itself, encompassing both external sounds and the internal bodily experiences. Both *musique concrète* and Oliveros's philosophy shed new light on ASMR sound culture. They offer insight into how intimate connections through sound are established between humans – including ASMR artists and the viewer-listeners of ASMR compositions – and non-humans, such as artefacts and technological devices, within the space of the ASMR video.

Like a Soft Gauze

Now, let us examine sound in ASMR culture more closely, focusing on the elements that contribute to the intimacy of the relationship being formed. A good example of an ASMR video exhibiting the crucial role of the sense of hearing in both the production and reception of the on-screen performance is the film *Top Triggers ❁ ASMR* (Gentle Whispering ASMR 2018b). In this video, one can observes that the ASMR artist pays very close attention to every emerging sound. During the performance, no sound occurs by mistake. The person visible on the screen gives the impression that both she and the imagined viewer-listener of the video anticipate the desired sounds with utmost tension and, once the sound is heard, they experience it with their whole body. Emotions accompanying the sound-producing activities performed by the artist are reflected not only in her face and body but also in the anticipated reactions of the viewer-listener. These emotions are of an intimate nature, oscillating between quasi-erotic joy and blissful tranquillity. The activities conducted during the performance, aimed at the fullest and most pleasant acoustic experience, contribute to building interpersonal bonds and, consequently, a community centred around shared experience.

The sensitive microphone visible in the centre of the frame of the referenced video is equivalent to the viewer-listener's ears, creating a tangible channel that allows an intimate relationship to be established with the real body of the viewer-listener by touching this symbolically depicted bodily

organ with sound. In the presented video, the microphone collects the produced sounds, which include the sound of fingernails knocking against a silver cosmetic bag made of leather-like material, the sound of rubbing a sticky substance called slime against the microphone's grill, the sound of scratching a comb wrapped in a plastic cover and the sound produced by a kind of lampshade hung over the microphone. These and other sounds depicted in the film reach both the viewer-listener and the performer at the moment of the sound's production. This gives the impression that the creator and the audience are on an equal footing as they perceive and enjoy the same phenomenon concurrently. It contributes to building a certain sense of togetherness and mutual understanding, even if ephemeral, on the basis of common experience.

ASMR videos always convey the impression that a person listens to particular sounds as if they were produced live or 'caught in the moment' by the ASMRtist. The sounds excavated at a given moment from within the matter of non-human bodies of the various artefacts used in the ASMR performance participate in establishing a momentary community, gathered there for one and the same purpose. The activities of producing sounds and listening to them can be understood as 'intermaterial vibrational practices' (Eidsheim 2015: 3) for establishing intimate connections, and the sound itself – as a vibratory force of matter capable of stirring up the members of the ephemeral community who, touched by sound, become part of this intimate experience, if only for a moment.

This kind of vibratory force of matter can be observed even more clearly in the video *ASMR DELICATE (4K 60fps, Relaxing, Slow, Sensitive, Drowsy)* published on the YouTube channel *ASMR PPOMO* (2019). The accessories presented in the film, including a facial cleansing brush, a brush for applying shaving cream, hair rollers, a plastic shopping bag and a tin of tea, are everyday objects, here unused for their customary purpose and stripped of their common-sense meaning. In this context, they are relevant only in terms of their sonic possibilities. In the video, the ASMR artist, hidden behind the frame in a close-up shot, gently, slowly, reverently and sensually touches each of the items, suggesting with her behaviour a kind of admiration for the unlimited sonic possibilities of the material objects chosen for the performance. Thus, the artist reveals her delight in the material properties of non-human entities.

Here, the intimate atmosphere is built with the help of sounds penetrating the viewer-listener's ears. From the audience's perspective, the sounds travel continuously from the right to the left. The artist uses separate microphones, implicitly positioned very close to the edge of the frame, to collect sounds from the right and left sides of the camera, reflecting the location of the viewer-listener's ears. In this nearly two-hour film, sound constantly flows from one side to the other, shrouding the viewer-listener like a veil or wrapping them like a soft gauze.

It is worth noting that the atmosphere of intimacy omnipresent in the video coexists with the so-called posthuman mode of sensibility, which will be discussed further in the book. In the *ASMR DELICATE...* film, the seemingly 'natural' and intrinsically human superiority of the sense of sight is clearly undermined. This happens when the viewer-listener's habit of looking for and focusing primarily on the human element of the surrounding landscape is challenged. In day-to-day life, non-human components of the scenery are often overlooked, mostly constituting the background of events. In the video, it is the human being who remains hidden, while the non-human subjects demand increased attention from us, filling the screen with their material bodies and emanating sounds that set other bodies in motion.

Sound Feast

In the field of sound studies, it is constantly pointed out that sound is always embedded in materiality and never exists in a vacuum, separated from other sensorial phenomena. As Steve Goodman emphasizes, sound has a 'seductive power to caress the skin, to immerse, to soothe, beckon and heal, to modulate brain waves and massage the release of certain hormones' (2010: 10). The materiality of sound and its 'vibrational forces' (Goodman 2010), which can be termed 'sonic materialism' (Cox 2011), is present in ASMR culture and determines the aesthetic form and impact of ASMR videos. Here, the activity of listening to sounds is not only always embedded in materiality but usually also involves other senses. In their theoretical and practical explorations, sound studies scholars clearly draw

inspiration from the philosophy of New Materialism, while paying particular attention both to the technical-physical qualities of sound and its sources and to the 'artistic-aesthetical imagination' (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2012a: 8) within sonic contexts. The sound studies theories inspired by the philosophy of New Materialism maintain that sound always has material roots and, consequently, often becomes tactile, perceptible and palpable. Simultaneously, it operates within the realm of artistic-aesthetic imagination, meaning that it has the capacity to evoke strong emotions and induce affective sensations in individuals influenced by it, appealing to their sensitivity, imagination and fantasies.

As an example of this approach to sound in ASMR culture, ASMR videos where the main trigger involves elements related to food and eating can be considered. This approach is justified because food is inherently linked to materiality, aligning it closely with the understanding of sound as described above. Additionally, eating is an activity that plays a significant role in the construction of intimate experiences of individuals (Probyn 2005), akin to sound in ASMR culture. Moreover, the sounds associated with food and eating are among the most prevalent triggers in ASMR culture. This prevalence may stem from the fact that these sounds are highly controversial, evoking strong, both positive and negative, reactions in people (Janik McErlean and Banissy 2018), yet they are also familiar and comforting, as food and its accompanying noises are a daily part of life for everyone.

The video published on the *Hongyu ASMR* 홍유 YouTube channel, depicting a young woman eating colourful, crunchy sweets such as cookies, jellies and candies (Hongyu ASMR 홍유 2020), exemplifies an ASMR video featuring food-related sounds. In the soundtrack of this film, viewers-listeners can hear the sounds of food consumption, including chewing, slurping, smacking and biting, captured by sensitive microphones and amplified in post-production using technological means to enhance the tingling experience for the viewer-listener.

Sounds associated with establishing and maintaining physical contact with edibles, though not always with the act of consumption itself, belong to the prominent triggers in ASMR culture. For example, a woman visible on the screen rubs, scrapes and strokes various pieces of confectionery

of varying textures with her fingertips in a video posted on the *JayLynn ASMR* YouTube channel (JayLynn ASMR 2019). Similarly, the owner of the *ASMRMagic* YouTube channel, Rhianna, is observed in one of her videos scratching, rubbing, stroking, rattling and tapping boxes of candies, sweets wrapped in decorative paper and various white and milk chocolate bars (ASMRMagic 2021). In this instance, food products are regarded as tangible objects, from which intriguing sounds can be extracted. Therefore, in both JayLynn's and Rhianna's videos, one can witness a form of artistic performance in which the main roles are played by the non-human, material elements of the reality, namely edibles equipped with hidden sonic qualities that need to be discovered, extracted and listened to.

As previously noted, ASMR artists utilize highly sensitive microphones in their performances to capture the most delicate noises produced during physical interactions with tangible food products. However, in ASMR culture, it is not uncommon for such technological devices to serve purposes beyond their primary function and conventional use. At times, to provide the audience with a delightful auditory and visual experience, an ASMR performer may lick the microphone with their tongue, akin to a popsicle. This phenomenon can be interpreted through a postphenomenological lens. In ASMR videos, the microphone, while still capturing sounds, also transforms into a stylish enhancement of various forms of intimate play. Multistability, or the variety of applications, 'stabilities or variations' (Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015: 25–26), characterizes technology in ASMR culture. The microphone not only records and generates intriguing sounds but also plays a role in establishing relationships among the various participants in the performance. By the same token, any technology used in food-focused ASMR films, whether highlighting food preparation and consumption or employing edibles for tactile play, can be considered multistable.

Moreover, some ASMR artists read aloud recipes for various dishes from books and magazines in what are known as *show and tell* ASMR videos. Because 'food and ASMR are both about comfort' (Richard 2018: 77) – not to mention fostering close interpersonal relationships – reading recipes aloud can be a potent stimulant. In a *show and tell* ASMR video, the person visible on screen typically focuses the frame around an old book or vintage magazine. The implicit goal of reading recipes is to evoke memories

of homemade, traditional meals reminiscent of cooking by grandmothers. In these videos, an ASMRtist whispers various recipes from yellowed pages in a quiet, soothing voice.

In one of her videos, the host of the *SouthernASMR Sounds* YouTube channel opens with a display of two vintage cookbooks, the *Alamance Golden Agers Cookbook* and *Country Cookin'* (SouthernASMR Sounds 2019) (Figure 7). She then delicately turns the pages of one cookbook, gently rustling the old paper, before proceeding to read recipes for potato soup, blueberry salad, chicken casserole and other dishes (Figure 8). The careful perusal of recipes while caressing the yellowed pages creates a welcoming and intimate atmosphere, with the aesthetic-artistic qualities of voice and sound playing first fiddle. Clearly, this video aims not to provide precise cooking instructions but to offer relaxation in a cosy environment.

In the ASMR community, a prevalent technique known as *inaudible whispering* involves creators using whispering in their artworks, including *show and tell* videos, rendering it nearly unintelligible and making individual words difficult to discern. For instance, in a video posted on the *WhisperAudios ASMR* YouTube channel, a person can be heard softly



Figure 7. Display of two vintage cookbooks (SouthernASMR Sounds 2019). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

whispering while reading a catalogue that describes food items like pumpkin spice coffee and organic white truffle potato chips available at Trader Joe's, an American grocery store chain (WhisperAudios ASMR 2017). Typically, an indistinct whisper compels listeners to focus more closely on the words spoken and instinctively lean towards the speaker to hear more clearly. This situation naturally fosters a sense of intimacy. The technique of inaudible whispering employed in ASMR videos aims to evoke such a response from potential viewers-listeners. It becomes apparent throughout the video that the effectiveness of an ASMR performance is not solely reliant on the accuracy of the product descriptions. More crucial is the atmosphere created by various factors, embodying cosiness, intimacy, warmth and relaxation. Here, it is more significant to perceive and experience the soothing sound of specific phonemes, words, phrases and sentences than to fully comprehend their meaning.

ASMR performers present recipes in front of the camera while preparing particular dishes, in addition to reading descriptions from books and magazines. In these scenarios, the material aspect of sound produced

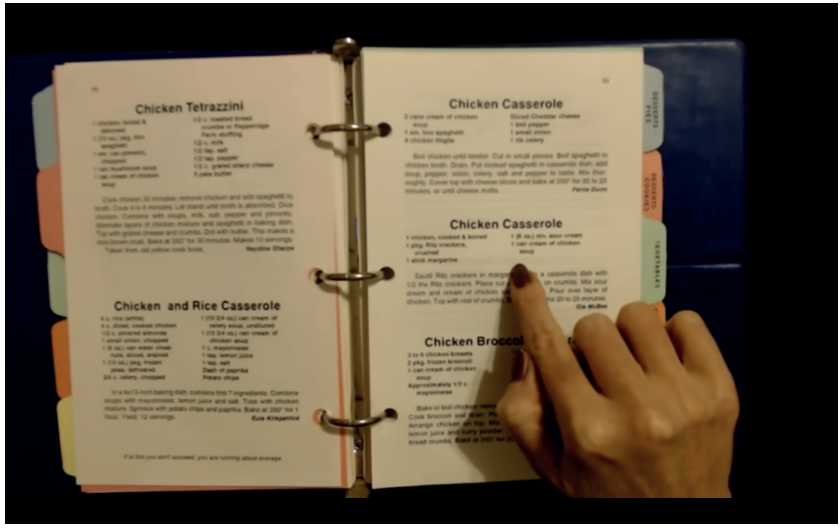

Figure 8. Reading a recipe for chicken casserole, creating a calming atmosphere (SouthernASMR Sounds 2019). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

by various kitchen tools and food handling methods is clearly visible – not to mention audible. In ASMR cooking performances, the actual source of sound typically takes centre stage and becomes the most significant element in the audiovisual composition of the video. Apart from rarely heard soft music in the background, external sounds outside the filmic frame are almost non-existent in food-related ASMR videos. The tangibility of sound and its source forms the basis for the performance of dish preparation in front of the camera. The inclusion of a specific food product and intensive focus on its treatment in a video depends primarily on its material qualities, such as its unique texture, which enhance its auditory appeal. The edibles must sound satisfying; while taste and smell might be important in other contexts, in ASMR culture, the auditory aspect takes precedence.

The creator of the YouTube channel *Zach Choi ASMR* places significant emphasis on a dish's ability to produce pleasant sounds. The materiality of sounds extracted from food products and generated by culinary techniques and technologies is highlighted in an ASMR video where the performer prepares Italian spaghetti with meatballs and cheesy garlic bread (Zach Choi ASMR 2022). Using various video production techniques, including scene cuts and temporal manipulation, Zach Choi employs what is known as 'multimodal recipe telling' (Matwick and Matwick 2019: 23–24), which integrates spoken and written ways of describing the preparation of a given dish. This mode is introduced in Zach Choi's video, which, in addition to sounds and visuals, includes subtitles providing information about the dish being prepared. At any time, the viewer-listener of the film can turn them on and off to focus solely on the audial aspect.

Despite the availability of subtitles, hearing is still the most important sense in this video. This is evidenced by the fact that all the sounds accompanying the food preparation are clearly intensified to ensure the audience experiences pleasant tingles. A range of kitchen tools, including a blender, mixer, can opener, knife and scissors, are used for cutting, chopping, crushing, blending and combining ingredients. Tasks such as cutting aromatic herbs, pulverizing spices in a grinder, grating cheese (Figure 9), slicing garlic (Figure 10), removing fresh bread from its paper wrapping and slicing it with a knife, pouring thick tomato sauce out of the can, cracking eggs, swiping a glass bowl over a wooden counter, shaping meatballs by hand

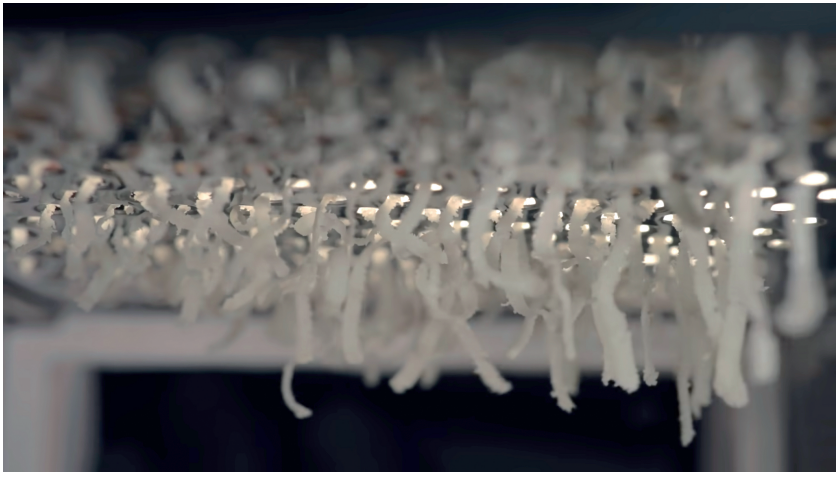

Figure 9. Grating cheese in close-up, with intensified sound enhancing the sensory experience (Zach Choi ASMR 2022). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.



Figure 10. Slicing garlic in close-up, amplifying the subtle slicing sounds for a tingling effect (Zach Choi ASMR 2022). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

and then pan-frying them, are all carried out by the ASMRtist on screen. Everything is presented in extreme close-ups, through which sound seems even more embedded in the materiality of the objects.

Material-based sound presented in Zach Choi's cooking performance is characterized primarily by its artistic-aesthetic-affective dimension. This is supported by the fact that the video is segmented into various phases of cooking and eating the meal, resembling a musical performance with the ASMR artist playing the part of an inventive chef or a conductor (Bertinetto 2020). The ASMR artist-composer intends to convey the multisensory, material-based experience of various phenomena occurring during the preparation of a dish.

In this particular ASMR show, the sense of hearing engages with other senses in a way that Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes: 'It is at least certain that it [the sense of hearing] presents us, beyond the sounds in space, with something which "murmurs," and in this way communicates with the other senses' (2005: 267). The crispness of egg shells, the hardness of grated cheese, the crunchiness of garlic slices and the weight of a frying pan are all communicated mainly through sound in Zach Choi's video. The items used in the cooking and consumption processes are located on the other side of the screen, making them inaccessible to touch, taste or smell. However, their material qualities as sources of perfectly audible sound form a multisensory and intimate experience for the audience. In this case, intimacy is fostered by the sound's closeness – a striking, even knockdown proximity between the viewer-listener and the world of matter.

Blurring Boundaries

As it has already been established, the intimate relationship between ASMR enthusiasts and the sounds produced and experienced during ASMR performances is multifaceted. The creation, processing and reception of sounds in ASMR culture constitute an intimate experience through the establishment, maintenance and reorganization of complex relationships with the world and the self. A key question arises: can the intimacy of sound experience in ASMR culture, as expressed in the

acoustic experiments performed by ASMR artists, be included in the tradition of electroacoustic music, and if so, how? One possibility is to view ASMR sound art as a descendant of *musique concrète*, the art of experimenting with sound developed beginning in the early 1940s, which is today unjustly overlooked.

Despite the fact that the ideas of French sound engineer Pierre Schaeffer, who is considered the father of *musique concrète*, are frequently marginalized and, therefore, remain more of a historical curiosity (Misiak 2012), sound studies researchers often emphasize that the concepts of *musique concrète* should remain an important reference point in contemporary electroacoustic music (Lech 2017). Discovering the philosophical roots of *musique concrète* may prove crucial, particularly in today's world of music art, which utilizes sophisticated sound processing technology. The numerous potentialities of *musique concrète*'s philosophical foundations are yet to be fully uncovered (Misiak 2012: 50). According to Tomasz Misiak (2012, 2013), the theoretical foundations of *musique concrète* might be of immense importance nowadays, as they challenge conventional notions about what constitutes and defines music. Moreover, they are relevant in the way contemporary artists perceive the role of musical exploration and engage in sound experiments. As becomes apparent later, in the artworks produced by ASMRtists, the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of *musique concrète* are readily evident. These artworks can be considered successful contemporary interpretations of *musique-concrète* pieces.

What exactly is *musique concrète* and what is considered its essence? In 1948, Schaeffer coined the term. Today, *musique concrète* refers to music primarily produced with sounds that are widely perceived as non-instrumental and non-musical. 'Sounds captured from the world around us' (Hyde 2012: 172) constitute the raw material that the *musique-concrète* composer uses in their work. Prior to composing a piece, the sounds captured from the outside world are recorded and processed using electroacoustic devices. This approach was groundbreaking as it loosened the constraints of traditional musical theories and practices. Sounds like the swoosh of wind and water, the click-clack of footsteps, the rumbling of car wheels, the piercing sound of a siren and the relaxing noise of a cat murmuring were utilized in *musique-concrète* compositions. The gathered sound material was subsequently transformed in the studio into an acoustic patchwork using various techniques. Initially, in *musique-concrète* pieces, the source of sound was

still relatively easy to identify despite the processing. However, over time, everyday sounds were extracted from their usual contexts and placed into new, unexpected ones, making the sources increasingly unrecognizable.

The *musique-concrète* composer is often likened to a *bricoleur*, a term originating from Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept, referring to a do-it-yourself (DIY) artist who exceeds the original functions and meanings of individual elements of their artwork through inventive combinations and adaptations (Misiak 2013: 98). This type of artist explores the subtle, unexpected and sometimes arbitrary sounds of reality by attentively listening to the surrounding world. By removing objects from their original contexts, the *musique-concrète* composer assigns new meanings to them (Misiak 2013: 156). Following in the footsteps of DIYers in *musique concrète*, ASMR creators similarly act as *bricoleurs*. It could be argued that ASMRtists become *musique-concrète* composers the moment they choose to disregard the usual uses of items in their performances, opting instead to use them unconventionally. Their goal is to highlight extraordinary features and draw out original sound qualities of the items.

In ASMR culture, interacting with various objects involves moving beyond their practical applications and the *telos* of the technology (Heidegger 1993: 315) embedded in these items. For example, many ASMR videos feature combs and hairbrushes that are tapped upon and scratched to provide a soothing acoustic experience, rather than being used for their conventional purpose of combing or brushing hair. Similarly, tinfoil and gift-wrapping paper, typically used for securing or covering objects, create pleasing crunchy noises when squeezed or folded in ASMR videos. Additionally, decorative candles in glass containers are usually not lit but offer a textured surface to be explored with hands. The list of examples of such objects and their unconventional use in ASMR culture is extensive.

Now, an example of a *sound assortment* ASMR video can be examined, where the ASMR artist utilizes various material objects to reveal their unexpected sonic properties. The video, published on the *ASMRSleepyHead* YouTube channel and titled 🎧*ASMR IRRESISTIBLE SCRATCHING / NO TALKING /* 💝 *pearls, textured glass, fabric, sponges, etc.* (ASMRSleepyHead 2019), is a typical representative of this subgenre. In the video, a female performer interacts with various unrelated objects, including a kitchen sponge, a string of pearls (Figure 11), a glass liquid soap dispenser, a glittery bedspread and a trivet (Figure 12). These items are clearly



Figure 11. Gently manipulating a string of pearls, creating soft sounds (ASMRSleepyHead 2019). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.



Figure 12. Scratching a textured trivet, exploring its sonic properties (ASMRSleepyHead 2019). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

heard and seen in close-up shots. An uninterrupted, unique composition of sounds is created from knocking, scratching, tapping and rubbing as the artist's hands manipulate the objects, allowing their material textures to speak in their distinctive languages. The ASMR artist transforms into a DIY composer-*bricoleur*, experimenting with velocity, acceleration and pressure during tapping, rubbing, scraping and scratching activities. The performer uses one or both hands, adjusting the force with which her fingernails touch the objects and altering the sound volume by varying the distance from the microphone. The artist seeks to extract the most satisfying sounds from the props, entering into an intimate, sound-based relationship with the objects being touched. Simultaneously, she attempts to convey this relationship to the viewer-listener of the video.

The materiality of objects and the perceivable physical effort made by the ASMR artist to create their sound-based artwork serve as a reminder of the vibrational nature of sound – a quality explored by sound studies scholars through theories originating from the concept of 'sonic materialism' (Cox 2011). ASMR culture visually emphasizes the vibrationality of sound by openly displaying the material sources of sound on the screen and featuring the artist's live performance as they physically interact with the props. Undoubtedly, the emphasis on the materiality and vibrational nature of sound forms the core of ASMR media content.

In ASMR videos, the sources of sound are rarely hidden, contrasting with classic *musique-concrète* soundtracks. This is because ASMR relies not only on sound stimuli but also on visual triggers. Consequently, ASMR media art can be examined through the lens of the burgeoning field of visual music, which combines an interest in the tangible, material side of music, including musical instruments, with the pure audio component (Hyde 2012). However, it is important to note that ASMR media art does not always feature sounds that are clearly connected to the accompanying visuals. In certain videos, known as *guess the trigger*, the ASMR artist conducts an experiment where the principle is to hide the source of the sound to amplify its impact on the viewer-listener, who must pay greater attention to the particular stimulus. Similar to ASMR performances depicting intimate treatments in roleplay videos, the creators of *guess-the-trigger* videos appeal to the (imagined or real-life) experiences of the potential viewer-listener, who should be familiar with some of the everyday sounds being produced.

The soothing feeling of ASMR results from the interplay between familiar, easily recognizable sounds and the unexpected, surprising contexts in which they are created and listened to.

A creator of *musique concrète* is always found halfway between a composer and a listener (Misiak 2013: 113). Since the author of *ASMR IRRESISTIBLE SCRATCHING...* produces her tingling soundtrack by extracting sounds from carefully selected material artifacts, she represents a type of *musique-concrète* creator. This entails that the performer can spontaneously alter the musical piece in real time by modifying the speed, acceleration and pressure applied during the actions taking place on screen. Similarly, the headphones the artist wears while filming are an integral part of the *musique-concrète* performance. Wearing headphones on set is common among ASMRtists, as it allows them to continuously hear what they are producing and, if necessary, alter their composition live.

Another crucial component of ASMR music art is sound manipulation using technical measures, which is also characteristic of Schaeffer's *musique concrète*. At this point, the distinction between 'nature' and 'culture' becomes blurred. In most cases, the sounds heard by the viewer-listener of ASMR videos appear 'natural'; however, they are undoubtedly altered by the 'cultural' instruments and technological advancements that are readily available today, such as recording devices, microphones or computer software. The ultimate form of the ASMR artistic work and the effect it can have on the viewer-listener's body – which is actually no longer a part of either 'nature' or 'culture' but instead morphs into a posthuman body challenging the nature/culture dichotomy – are greatly influenced by the use of sophisticated sound processing technologies currently available.

Vibrations, Relations, Life

Efforts to blur the boundaries between 'nature' and 'culture' are prominent in ASMR sound art. These endeavours align with theories of New Materialism advocated by Rosi Braidotti, particularly in promoting a 'non-dualistic understanding of nature–culture interaction' (2013: 3) and

urging 'to rethink our bodies as part of a nature–culture continuum in their in-depth structures' (2013: 92). Rather than framing things as 'us' versus 'them', ASMR culture encourages a New Materialist perspective by prompting consideration of processes involving various subjects, objects and the self. In ASMR videos, the artist's physical body and the imagined body of the viewer-listener interact with material items capable of producing vibrations, thereby cocreating affective, sound-based relationships among all parties involved. As Ewa Domańska reflects on human perception of material objects, they are typically viewed 'from a pragmatic point of view; the thing is important inasmuch as it serves people and can be used by them in a variety of discourses' (2006: 182). However, in ASMR practices, non-human material items often interact with human subjects in unconventional ways, sometimes transcending their intended functions and pragmatic purposes.

Creating a non-dualistic, non-binary perspective is essential to embrace a more-than-human outlook, which modifies the Eurocentric paradigm rooted in 'the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness as respectively the motor for and the cultural logic of universal Humanism' (Braidotti 2013: 15). Several influential theorists of the New Materialism approach, such as Jane Bennett (2010), Elizabeth Grosz (2008) and Karen Barad (2007), converge on similar conclusions when they describe the world through concepts like *resonance*, *vibration* and *diffraction*. These philosophers suggest that applying these categories practically entails understanding vibration as a fundamental ontological principle organizing matter, thereby transcending unnecessary distinctions between 'human' and 'non-human', 'animate' and 'inanimate' and 'subject' and 'object' (James 2019).

In ASMR sonic experiments involving vibrating material entities, the lines between what is 'naturally' given and what is 'culturally' constructed are blurred. These lines represent the boundaries between the supposedly 'natural', inherent sonic properties of a given material object and the 'culturally' processed sounds extracted from it. The futility of establishing a distinct boundary between these two is demonstrated by the multitude of ASMR sound experiments where 'natural' and 'cultural' are indistinguishable.

In ASMR culture, material objects are key to mixing conventional orders and forming relationships between different entities through vibrational forces. Nowadays, a sizable market exists for items utilizing new technologies specifically designed for ASMR, which aim to blur the boundaries between 'natural' and 'cultural' orders. Characteristic binaural microphones, such as the 3Dio, are extremely sensitive and attractively designed, often shaped like human ears and soft to the touch, resembling human skin. According to ASMR scholars, 'binaural recording made the associated tingling sensation more intense' (Barratt, Spence and Davis 2017: 8). However, the shape of the microphone also plays a substantial role in establishing an intimate relationship in ASMR performances.

The technological actors used during the production of ASMR videos are not transparent, both in the process of performing live and in the finished artwork. In fact, they play a major role in forming the connections between various subjects involved in the show. In each performance, the ASMR artist uses multiple technological devices, including microphones, cameras and headphones, that function as tangible non-human actors made of matter, usually also acting as extensions of the human body. In this context, the camera typically embodies the human head, being at the centre of action and attention, while the microphone, which is touched, caressed, kissed and squeezed, represents and extends the human ears.

Some of the more recent New Materialist perspectives on the contemporary world and the relationships between different entities inhabiting it, particularly those emphasizing the vibrationality and materiality of sound, align with the *musique-concrète* concepts focused on the underappreciated sonic aspects of the reality. The concepts of *musique concrète*, reflected in ASMR practices, demonstrate an attempt to go beyond the nature/culture dichotomy and the narrow, human-centred perception of sound and music. How do matter and sound conceptualize in the theories of New Materialism, and how do these notions resonate in ASMR artworks and practices?

The agenda of the theoretical turn known as New Materialism or Neo-Materialism, first introduced by Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti, has been evolving since the 1990s (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012: 93). This movement, characterized by a departure from the modernist and

humanistic tradition that emphasized a dualistic understanding of the world, has had a major influence on cultural theory to date (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012: 48). The so-called *turn towards matter*, which emerged from recognizing the shortcomings of both the linguistic turn and the social constructivist theory that had dominated the humanities for years, was a significant step in valuing the actions and activities of non-human actors made of matter.

In humanities research, it was uncommon for voice and sound to be considered matter-based. However, a growing number of philosophers are attempting to introduce the concept of vibration while emphasizing the connection between sound and matter. For example, Bennett characterizes New Materialism as 'giving voice to [...] vitality intrinsic to matter' (2010: 61). According to Grosz, vibrations of matter are essential to life. They can be described as 'oscillations, differences, movements of back and forth, contraction and dilation', and as 'vectors of movement, vibrating through and around all objects or being dampened by them, radiating outward' (Grosz 2008: 55). Furthermore, Grosz highlights the affective potential of vibrations that can move bodies in an enjoyable way, reminiscent of the tingling sensation of ASMR: 'There is something about vibration and its resonating effects on material bodies that generates pleasure, a kind of immediate bodily satisfaction' (2008: 32). Frequently, these worldly vibrations serve as the basis for 'the visual and sonorous' artworks that, in Grosz's words, 'capture something of the vibratory structure of matter itself; they extract colour, rhythm, movement from chaos in order to slow it down' (2008: 19).

A substantial number of researchers and artists have started to incorporate these ideas into their work. Drawn to the multisensory experience of music, Nina Sun Eidsheim hopes to 'redirect thinking toward a reconception of sound as event through the practice of vibration, as with the figure of sound, as an object' (2015: 3). In this context, the activities directly connected to producing sounds are no longer centred on human actors. According to Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich (2012), sound in this context is primarily connected to vibrations of a specific frequency that occur in a particular medium made of matter, not just to those perceptible by humans. This results in a reconsideration of the extent to which human and non-human factors collaborate in the creation of a musical

composition, as well as a shift in emphasis from aurality as the primary characteristic of sound.

The vibratory quality of sound causes both human and non-human bodies to move and connect. All bodies composed of matter can be affected by sound waves, enhancing their potential for further activity and vitality. In this manner, vibrations underscore the connections between human and non-human actors. Within the New Materialist framework, it is emphasized that 'vibrations create relations' (Fast, Leppänen and Tiainen 2018: n.pag.), indicating the establishment of connections among various bodies during a particular event. Thus, bodies, which are always open-ended and in motion, engage in a vibrational affective event with one another, forging new dynamic connections and continuously evolving rather than remaining stagnant in familiar forms.

ASMR sonorous artworks explore sound as a vibratory structure of matter captured in an affective entanglement of bodies. An ASMR 'feeling with no name' (Sadowski 2016: 160) and 'a kind of immediate bodily satisfaction' (Grosz 2008: 32) represent two forms in which this structure manifests. The tingling ASMR sensation experienced in response to various stimuli is a reaction to vibrations generated by interactions among human and non-human bodies. Consequently, stimulated by these movements produced and captured by other bodies, the bodies involved in ASMR performances – both human and non-human – remain in a state of potentiality: an incomplete phase of becoming. The material body experiencing ASMR sensations becomes alert and fluctuates in its responses, as the perceptible vibrations are typically erratic, ephemeral, changeable and short-lived.

As previously demonstrated, stimuli designed to elicit the feeling of ASMR in the physical body are typically closely linked to both audible and visible sources of vibrations. Indeed, ASMR practitioners consider the material sources of vibration to be crucial in inducing the tingling sensation. The hands of ASMR artists, visible on screen, delicately caress the physical props used during their performances, treating them almost as sacred objects endowed with quasi-magical qualities evoked through touch. Microphones capture the sonic vibrations initiated by the artist's movements, transferring them to the viewer-listener to evoke a desired physical reaction.

This dynamic is clearly illustrated in a video published on the *Caroline ASMR* YouTube channel. In the video, Caroline herself displays a childlike sense of wonder as she gently experiments with various props to explore their acoustic potential (Caroline ASMR 2019a). A pink textured pillow, a women's leatherette bag with studs, a string of wooden chili peppers, a bear figurine, a jute bag and other items all produce distinctive sounds when touched. Caroline smiles softly and tenderly caresses each prop, initiating vibrations that resonate with the viewers-listeners' bodies. Caroline's physical reactions are also evident in the video. As she begins to sense the vibrations of matter, her body subtly trembles and her smile intensifies, creating a silent connection with her audience.

Caroline's approach to matter resembles Bennett's concept of a 'childhood sense of the world' that 'draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve' (Bennett 2010: 20). This childlike wonder at the world and its entities – where the practical, adult-like, common-sense purpose of existence becomes irrelevant – allows for a deeper grasp of the vitality of matter. One of the fundamental ideas behind ASMR artistic practices guides the ASMRtist to perceive the props used in their performance in a new way, free from preconceived notions and stripped of their usual meanings. In this approach, the ASMR performer focuses solely on sensing and transmitting vibrations that travel in all directions and touch different bodies.

As previously noted, New Materialism can inspire some of the innovative ideas emerging in contemporary ASMR artworks. It suggests approaching sound as a vibrational, material-based phenomenon that fosters and develops affective relationships between bodies, connecting human and non-human entities in a given vibrational event.

Listen Deeply and Be Affected

While concepts derived from New Materialism and ideas drawn from *musique concrète* emphasize the vibratory nature of sound and its material source, the concept of *deep listening* proposed by Pauline Oliveros, an

American avant-garde composer, sonic thinker and performer, shifts the focus to the active listener. By perceiving the sounds around them, the listener becomes both the performer and the creator of a musical piece. Oliveros articulates this idea in her manifesto *Quantum Listening*, asserting that it is the listener, particularly their body, that possesses the agency to enact change. Active deep listening posits that 'what is heard is changed by listening and changes the listener' (Oliveros 2022: 30). Describing herself as 'an auditory-kinetic type of person' (Bell and Oliveros 2017: 74), Oliveros emphasizes that 'listening lies deep within the body' (2016: 75). Thus, the listener and their body become the focal points of sound reproduction, the arena of artistic engagement and the site of creative experimentation.

According to Oliveros, the listener should remain open to whatever comes to them, whether from outside or inside. They must discard preconceptions and maintain a curious attitude towards sounds, akin to a child or an animal.[5] In Oliveros's words, 'readiness to sound or receive sound means that there is no prior commitment to any sound. One has to be open to be ready. Any prior commitment will constitute a delay in response time or spontaneity' (2016: 82). The way the listener openly and without preconceptions hears and experiences a piece of music cocreates this piece, validating its existence each time. Naturally, such openness to sounds must be accompanied by openness to one's own sensual, bodily experience. As Oliveros admits, she began practicing deep listening 'to notice bodily sensations relating to sounds' (2016: 80). By being an active listener, one becomes affected by sound as part of a sensory experience that is unique, unrepeatable and powerful. Here, it becomes more important to respect 'what the body signals [...] through sensations and feelings' than what the 'verbal mind' conveys 'through thoughts and intuitions' (Oliveros 2016: 89).

Intense listening to the world around us, encompassing not only the tones found in musical compositions but also the sounds of everyday life, represents, according to Oliveros's philosophy, an active engagement and a rejection of passivity. Through listening, it becomes possible to perceive

5 Oliveros mentions that her cats are consistently fascinated by all sounds, displaying 'amazing' curiosity (Bell and Oliveros 2017: 74).

that 'each sounding has its own shape, which we might describe as attack, sustain, decay, release, or as articulation, dynamic, energy, rhythm, timbre, and frequencies or pitch' (Oliveros 2016: 87). Recognizing the uniqueness of each sound parallels actively interpreting the world almost akin to reading musical notation. Deep listening entails consistently embracing the experiences with full awareness. It can occur at any time and in any place, as human life is constantly immersed in a soundscape of the everyday.

Deep listening also appears to be a fundamental principle underlying the ASMR experience. Both the potential viewer-listener immersed in the ASMR video and the ASMR artist listen intently to every sound within their acoustic space. The experience of sounds in ASMR culture is undeniably embodied – evidenced by the tingling sensations beneath the viewer-listener's skin and the somatic responses of the artist on screen. Actively engaging in listening involves paying attention not only to the sounds themselves and their sources but also to their interactions and how they resonate within the body. These elements collectively contribute to an intimate experience of deep listening within ASMR culture.

When an ASMR artist creates a soundscape composed of everyday sounds, they invite viewers-listeners into a personal space to engage with and experience these sounds. This serves as an invitation for active participation, encouraging individuals to deeply listen to their surrounding reality and to experiment with the accompanying sounds using their own bodies and somatic responses. In ASMR culture, the listener is 'the actual performer' (Schulze 2019: 11), and sound is in the ear of the beholder.

In the majority of ASMR videos, the focus is on sound. The sonic aspect of the phenomenon captivates both fans and scholars of ASMR culture. However, another term frequently discussed in scientific commentaries regarding the ASMR phenomenon is *affect*. At the same time, countless testimonies describe how ASMR videos *affect* ordinary viewers-listeners and how they perceive this impact. Undoubtedly, ASMR videos carry an affective charge. It is not coincidental that the ASMR online media trend has flourished recently, as the current era is often characterized by a culture saturated with emotions and pervasive affects.

CHAPTER 4

Affect (and Intimacy)[6]

Mapping Affective Landscapes

The term *affect* appears to be a fitting descriptor for the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) phenomenon. It is an alluring concept, exhibiting a range of meanings that shift from one semantic context to another. However, this also means that defining it can be challenging. *Affect* is a prime example of a wandering concept, reminiscent of Mieke Bal's theory, engaging with numerous associations and integrating other terms and ideas throughout its journey. It is also a concept that generates intense debate among scholars from different research fields. As a result, the usage of the term *affect* and the theory of affect varies among disciplines. The understanding of affect and its theory differs among scholars working in media, literature, culture and art studies as opposed to the psychological sciences. It also happens that affect is treated in the humanities as an umbrella term, which is not always clearly defined, and under which other, more specific concepts and ideas are hidden.

For the sake of clarity in further analysis of the ASMR phenomenon, it is essential to attempt to define the term *affect* and its origins. This is particularly vital since the concept of *affect* frequently appears, albeit incidentally, in scholarly research exploring ASMR culture. Here, the notions of *affect* and *affectivity* often emerge as conceptually relevant elements

6 Fragments of this chapter were previously published in the articles 'Ach, śpij, kochanie. Jeśli dreszczy trochę chcesz – dostaniesz. O afekcie w ASMR' [Oh, Go to Sleep, Honey. If You Want Some Chills – You'll Get It. About Affect in ASMR] (Łapińska 2020b) and 'Tingles, Sparkles, Shivers: Language of Affect in Online Discussions on Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response' (Łapińska 2022b).

of theoretical research frameworks. For instance, Naomi Smith and Anne-Marie Snider (2019) view ASMR as a mediated affective experience, whereas Rob Gallagher (2016) places the phenomenon of ASMR in a mediascape replete with so-called affective triggers. However, the concept of affect in ASMR culture is still occasionally inadequately defined. This is, in part, a consequence of the lasting focus on affect within humanities research, stemming from the affective turn that emerged in the humanities and social sciences since the 1990s. Due to its prevalence in humanities discourse, the concept of *affect* inevitably appears even in studies of the ASMR phenomenon conducted by researchers from diverse disciplines.

In this book, I treat the concept of *affect* as one of the keywords capable of unlocking the mechanisms that set ASMR culture in motion. I believe that the concept of *affect* is essential for the existence and current shape of the ASMR phenomenon. Therefore, it is vital to recognize the significance of this concept. Additionally, in the analysis, intimacy and its transgressive nature are closely linked to affect. Affect crosses barriers and boundaries at will. Transgressive intimacy within ASMR culture, including remote or mediated intimacy, cannot exist without an affective element. Consequently, affect and intimacy are always intertwined.

The forthcoming discussion in this chapter about the vital role of affect in ASMR culture will rely, to varying degrees, on two chief traditions of research on affect theory in the humanities. Specifically, these are: (1) the psychobiology of affects founded on Silvan Tomkins's works and popularized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995); and (2) the Spinozian–Deleuzian–Guattarian tradition promoted by Brian Massumi (2002), Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010) and other scholars. As will be demonstrated, both of these traditions have much to offer in the context of studying contemporary ASMR culture.

The first tradition, the psychobiology of affects, focuses on the biological and cultural origins of affects within the human body. Silvan Tomkins, an American psychologist and philosopher, formulated one of the most important theories of affect in psychology in the 1960s. Later, his theory began to play a significant role in the broader humanities. According to Tomkins's ideas, a child is born with a set of nine affects: (1) interest-excitement; (2) enjoyment-joy; (3) surprise-startle;

(4) distress-anguish; (5) anger; (6) fear-terror; (7) shame-humiliation; (8) contempt-disgust; and (9) dissmell (Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank 1995). These affects continue to develop to varying degrees from birth until the end of life. They have a direct impact on the personality and character the child will develop in the future.

Tomkins argued that affects, which begin forming at birth, have both biological and cultural origins, distinguishing them from Sigmund Freud's purely biological drives and from emotions in the psychoanalytical sense. Freud and his followers believed, firstly, that drives were the primary motivators for all the organism's actions, and secondly, that emotions were closely linked to consciousness, including beliefs, reasoning and cognition (Leys 2011: 469). Critically opposed to these positions, Tomkins argued that Western European civilization had too hastily granted Freudian drives a crucial role in human decision-making processes, thus reducing the individual's freedom to govern their own existence. Tomkins contended that affects, not drives or emotions, primarily motivate human beings in all undertakings, resulting in their constant development. In Tomkins's theory, the innate affects present at the beginning of life are fundamentally independent of consciousness, intentionality, beliefs or the rational sphere of human existence.

To explain the mechanism of affect formation, Tomkins used the metaphor of a feedback loop originating from cybernetics. Through this loop, individuals create internal action scenarios which they use to interact with the world, react to various situations and assign personal meanings. This feedback loop defines the operational principle of affective behaviour. The ribbon principle governs the functioning of this feedback loop: an external stimulus reaches the affect residing in the human body, triggering an affective response, which then influences the person's reaction to the specific trigger. This means that a response to a stimulus depends on both biological aspects – which of the innate affects is triggered in a particular situation – and cultural influences, the 'history' of this affect that has been shaped throughout a person's existence. Tomkins posits that this feedback loop process, involving the activation of specific affects, occurs continuously and repeatedly throughout an individual's life, thereby shaping one's personality and character.

In Tomkins's theory, the motivator of human action is no longer the unconscious drive, but rather affect, which is intangible yet partially trainable and controllable. The history of a person's affective behaviour is stored in their body. The belief in one's ability to modulate, extinguish or strengthen specific affective reactions is precisely what makes Tomkins's idea intriguing in the context of investigating the ASMR phenomenon. The demand for partial control over specific affective reactions and the intention to evoke particular affects in participants experiencing ASMR are clearly observable in ASMR videos, as will be further demonstrated. Furthermore, ASMR culture often employs scenarios that feature and require specific affective behaviours, such as intimate encounters depicted in videos. These scenarios are believed to tap into the aforementioned feedback loops within the viewer-listener's body, shaping the narrative experience of each ASMR video.

Contemporary scholars have been adapting Tomkins's theory to the fields of humanities and cultural sciences for several years. However, the concept of *affect* is frequently misunderstood and colloquially conflated with emotion. In Tomkins's theory, affect is distinctly different from emotion. Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank (1995), commenting on Tomkins's ideas, emphasize that affect is not a recognized, specifically named and catalogued emotion. Rather, affect represents a potential intensity that varies among individuals. Metaphorically, affects in Tomkins's theory can be compared to shades on a colour palette, with specific emotional states, such as love or hate, represented by strong and saturated colours. This metaphor underscores the idea that, according to Tomkins, affects are highly individual and unique reflections of:

> the complex interleaving of endogenous and exogenous, perceptual, proprioceptive, and interpretive – causes, effects, feedbacks, motives, long-term states such as moods and theories, along with distinct transitory physical or verbal events. (Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank 1995: 39)

As noted, affective responses, according to Tomkins's affect theory, result from a complex interplay of various internal and external factors. They stem from reactions to both internal and external stimuli, making it difficult to define affects simply by the name of any particular feeling. According to Tomkins's theory, affective experiences of an individual are unique and may be independent of intention. Ruth Leys refers to

this concept as 'the idea of the singularity of one's affective experiences' (2011: 465). Affect is typically not directly related to an individual's conscious thoughts, control or beliefs about the stimuli that trigger the reaction. It usually involves a personal experience that is not fully bound by convention.

On the other hand, in the Spinozian–Deleuzian–Guattarian tradition, affect clearly eludes any ultimate classification, unlike emotion, which Massumi describes as 'the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning' (2002: 28). In this tradition, affect is a kind of 'protosensation', a 'precognitive sensory experience' (Cvetkovich 2012: 4), while emotions such as joy, anger or fear are cultural constructs, allegedly separate from it. In Massumi's theory, affect is the experience of 'how intensities come together, move each other, and transform and translate under or beyond meaning, semantics, fixed systems, cognitions' (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010: 147). Affect refers to a bodily sensation, such as unrest, tension, trembling or stirring, that can transform into specific emotions once cognitively recognized and successfully processed.

However, it is important to note that, in contrast to prevailing tendencies to explicitly treat affect as more primordial than culturally constructed emotion, the distinction between affect and emotion may be blurred. These terms are not characterized by 'a formal difference of quality or kind' but rather by 'a modal difference of intensity or degree' (Ngai 2005: 27). It is important to emphasize that affects may 'not [be] lacking form or structure altogether'; they are 'by no means code-free or meaningless' nor 'entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers' (Ngai 2005: 27).

Understood in this manner, the category of *affect*, as presented by Tomkins and drawing on the Spinozian–Deleuzian–Guattarian tradition, can be a very useful tool for studying culture. This fact has already been widely recognized by scholars. For example, according to Bal (2007), affect mediates between the viewer and the work of art, forming the basis of the interaction in which the viewer engages as a participant. Bal references Deleuze's concept of *affection images*, which Barbara M. Kennedy (2002) discusses in her book *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation*. This concept offers an alternative perspective on cinema and film viewing as

an embodied and embedded experience. Kennedy argues that traditional poststructuralist and psychoanalytic analyses of cinema, which focus on meaning or representation, are no longer adequate. Instead, she proposes an approach based on Deleuzian–Guattarian concepts such as *affect* and *becoming*. The viewer's body and mind are intended to merge into a unified whole when experiencing the work of art. This requires the viewer's physical reactions, such as an accelerated heartbeat and sweating palms, to be perceived as inseparable from and intertwined with their mental reactions, such as contemplation, thought and conscious reflection. According to Kennedy, the division of mind and body into two separate realms does not make sense when studying cinematic art because the intellectual and mental experience of watching films is always tied to the bodily experience.

Magdalena Podsiadło adds a posthumanism-based reflection to these observations, noting that 'the affectively reacting body of the viewer reminds them that they belong to the non-human organic world' (2017: 21). Greg Singh (2014) takes a similar approach, claiming that the physical sensations experienced by the film viewer are the most important element that engages them in the viewing experience. Bal argues, 'Art appeals to the senses as much as it does to the intellect', and adds, 'the one boundary most in need of melting is that between intellectual and affective work' (2007: 21). Kennedy, Singh and Bal call for opening the artwork to interpretations beyond mere reduction to meaning and for recognizing the importance of non-human, or even posthuman, factors in the overall affective experience of perceiving art. Theories on posthumanism and its relationship to intimacy and affect in ASMR videos will be explored in more detail further in the book.

The location of innate affect in the human body in Tomkins's theory of affect does not stand in contrast to another understanding of affect: as protosensation, being the effect of the entanglement of different forces originating from the interaction between elements of reality rather than from a single source. Affect is derived from the interaction of bodies, both human and non-human. It is an intensive force that flows between bodies; 'it goes up and down gently like a tide, or maybe storms and crests like a wave' (Massumi 2015: 4). Gregg and Seigworth, contemporary popularizers of affect theory in the humanities explicitly aligned with the Spinozian–Deleuzian–Guattarian tradition, describe affect as a force that either drives movement towards the body or suspends this movement. In this tradition, the body takes centre stage because of its ability to experience affective

force, to be affected by it and at the same time to affect other bodies. To describe affect, Gregg and Seigworth use the picturesque term 'shimmers' (2010: 1), which happen between bodies, vividly conveying the idea of being constantly illuminated by various 'flickering' forces in a network of myriad connections. Gregg and Seigworth argue that the affective abilities of the body are always linked to the other bodies with which the body interacts by stating:

> Affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*. [...] Affect can be understood then as a gradient of bodily capacity – a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations – that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility, an incrementalism that coincides with belonging to comportments of matter of virtually any and every sort. [...] Affect marks a body's *belonging* to a world of encounters [...] (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 2, emphasis in original)

In a similarly vivid manner, Luiza Nader writes about affect, asserting that it signifies 'the ability to transcend bodies and things' and is infused with 'the potency of events, movement and vibration' (2014: 21). Affect in artistic works is also characterized by 'ambiguous strangeness' (Dauksza 2014: n.pag.). Artworks saturated with affect are described as '"clingy" [...] "sticky," relentlessly "adhering" to the reader's consciousness' (Dauksza 2014: n.pag.).

Affect manifests itself in moments of ambiguity. This vibrancy, shimmering, potentiality and ambiguity of affect, along with its capacity to draw bodies closer or push them apart, constitutes a fundamental and underlying component of ASMR videos and is one of the pivotal elements upon which ASMR culture is founded. Here, the glimmers and shimmers between bodies, whether human or non-human, are fully present in their glory.

Dynamics of Matter

This section turns to non-human bodies within ASMR culture. In ASMR videos, these encompass various props, accessories and other material artifacts crucial to creating, reinforcing and sustaining affective experiences on screen. As previously discussed, these non-human elements

produce sounds that, due to their vibrant and tangible qualities, directly stimulate the senses of the viewer-listener. It has also been noted that, concurrently, the ASMR viewer-listener actively engages with these materials, co-producing the ASMR experience. Throughout this process, primary power and agency typically reside with the human participant. Subsequently, the following discussion shifts focus to matter, aiming to acknowledge its agency and its capability to evoke affect.

Following the pathway paved by Jane Bennett, who adeptly combines the Spinozian–Deleuzian–Guattarian concept of *affect* with the theory of vibrating, active and effective matter, I aim to closely examine the affectivity and agency of the material, non-human artifacts involved in the ASMR performances presented in selected videos. The intimate connection with material objects depicted in ASMR videos can serve as 'means to become more sensitive to the inherent qualities of things themselves', in the words of Bjørnar Olsen (2010: 18), thus helping to reveal their remarkable agential qualities. Bennett directs attention 'toward the agency of the things that *produce* (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies' (2010: xii, emphasis in original), endorsing the view that 'organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects [...] all are affective' (2010: xii), capable of eliciting 'stirrings' in other bodies and receiving them with their own body. Opening the human subject to such dynamics of matter and paying special attention to the forces operating outside and inside the human body can significantly enrich one's experience of the world.

What can help a person with this opening? According to Juhani Pallasmaa, renowned for his collections of essays on embodiment in contemporary architecture and art, including *The Eyes of the Skin* and *The Thinking Hand*, it is crucial to acknowledge and appreciate the roles of human senses beyond sight in a daily life. Sight has long dominated human experience, cultural practices, artistic endeavours and research. Conversely, senses like hearing have gained prominence in fields such as sound studies, while others still await recognition in humanistic discourse.

Pallasmaa argues that if one were to identify the most relevant yet neglected sense in human experience, it would be touch. He posits that all sensory experiences are fundamentally tactile, suggesting that 'all senses, including vision, can be seen as extensions of touch – specializations of

the skin' (Pallasmaa 2007: 42). Therefore, touch plays a pivotal role in integrating the perception of the world.

Evidently, the sense of touch plays a crucial role in ASMR videos. Here, materiality becomes the focal point of tactile attention, capable of agency and evoking emotions. In the introduction to a video titled *ASMR 6 all NEW Sound Experiments for Sleep!* 💝 (Caroline ASMR 2019b), which has garnered over half a million views, the artist greets viewers-listeners with a soft whisper directed towards two microphones placed on the right and left sides of the frame. The artist, Caroline, whose face remains mostly hidden behind the top edge of the frame, allows viewers-listeners to see only her lips moving and her long red hair. Throughout the film, Caroline avoids showing her eyes, seemingly to diminish the dominance of sight and encourage immersion in the tactile and auditory experience, free from unnecessary visual distractions.

The performer engages in friendly conversation for a few minutes, gently stroking fluffy microphones and her hair with her hands. She shares the concept for a new video, mentions scratches on her right hand (a result of a recent encounter with an aggressive cat) and playfully shows her amusing T-shirt and new nail colour. The main segment of the video follows: experimenting with various props. In this session, Caroline uses the following items as ASMR triggers: cork square plates adorned with shiny beads, a rolled-up tube of cork sheet, make-up brushes, two sheets of foil with bubbles of different sizes and a blue hand-shaped massager with rotating metallic balls.

The tactile sensations experienced by the artist are translated into auditory impressions received by the viewer-listener. During her performance, Caroline speaks sparingly; when she does, the actual content is less significant than the soft timbre of her voice, which aims to induce a pleasant numbness and drowsiness in the listener. However, what holds greater importance is Caroline's handling of the material objects essential to her work. These items are treated with reverence, resembling sacred artifacts cherished with respect and fondness.

Bennett, in her quest to develop a research approach for exploring vibrating matter and its agency, argues that a crucial starting point is 'a certain willingness to appear naive or foolish' (2010: xiii) when interacting

with material objects. It is essential to set aside preconceived notions and embrace the 'otherness' of the experience, which may defy rational judgment. Bennett also emphasizes the necessity of cultivating 'patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body' (2010: xiv) when exploring phenomena rooted in materiality.

The behaviour of the ASMR artist observed in the video exemplifies a profound patience and curiosity towards matter and its potential for agency and affect. This meticulous and attentive approach to the props used in the film aligns with the New Materialist perspective, which advocates for heightened sensitivity to the affective capacities of matter and its non-intentional and non-cognitive agency.

The physical contact established between the material items (triggers) and the artist's hands, along with the emerging friction of the surfaces – one might add, of the 'skin' – as the objects rub against each other, evokes sensations that clearly satisfy the artist and hopefully please the audience. Rolling make-up brushes over a cork tube wrapped in shimmering bubble wrap creates a harmonious blend of auditory and haptic sensations.

At this point, the potential viewer-listener perceives – and perhaps even feels – in a synesthetic manner, that each prop in use possesses distinct textures, colours, weights and sizes, each offering sonic, haptic and consequently affective and agential possibilities. As observed, the softness of the brush bristles gliding across the slippery surface of the wrap evokes pleasant sensations in Caroline's body. In the background, the artist involuntarily smiles, clearly content with the effect achieved through interacting with these artifacts. The performer's responsive body thus serves as a mirror for the viewer-listener, who similarly enjoys the tingling sensations.

During the session covered in Caroline's video, which lasts over forty minutes, matter and its affective and agential qualities take centre stage. Neither the items used in the performance nor the words uttered by the ASMRtist conform to their traditional roles and functions. The spoken words do not inform, convey meaning or describe reality. The objects do not merely serve human needs but instead play a prominent role in forming an affective assemblage of diverse entities. Such assemblages have fluid boundaries; what binds them is the flow of affect and its unique quality of 'stickiness'. As Ahmed defines it, affect is 'what sticks, or what sustains

or disrupts the connection between ideas, values, and objects' (2010: 29). It is something that flows from the screen directly to the viewer-listener and lingers.

This sense of 'stickiness' arises from the interactions – Caroline's fingernails tapping against the cork tablet, her hands gliding along the edges of shiny beads, the softness and resilience of the wood and numerous other elements whose precise roles in the process defy strict delineation. What is certain, however, is that these forces 'stick' to the viewer-listener, binding more or less tightly depending on the ideas and values attributed to and resonating with them.

It's a Kind of Magic

Another video that highlights the affective and agential qualities of the matter being touched is *ASMR⁴ Quadruple Trigger Intensity to Make YOU Tingle Like Never Before* (asmr zeitgeist 2019). Michael Richter, creator of the YouTube channel *asmr zeitgeist*, promises in the title of the video that this film, which lasts just over twenty-three minutes, will make viewers-listeners tingle with unprecedented intensity. In the video's introduction, the artist welcomes the viewers-listeners to his self-described 'mysterious little trigger lab' and proceeds to unveil his latest creation, the 'tingle drone': a cube equipped with microphones shaped like human ears on its four sides, designed to offer viewers-listeners an unparalleled 'four-layer' sound experience (Figure 13).

The artist uses various everyday objects, such as plastic and paper beverage cups (Figure 14), mesh body wash, ear cleaning sticks, rubber gloves, disposable mascara applicators, scissors, silicone sponges and others, to bombard the recipient's senses with various sensations. This approach aims to confuse their minds, blurring the distinction between different types and sources of sound. The artist wants the audience to be swept along by the sensory experiences delivered throughout the performance.

These everyday accessories are tactically used by Michael to interact with 'the tingle drone' placed on the table at the centre of the film frame.



Figure 13. The artist's hands engage with the 'tingle drone', creating a mysterious, magical atmosphere (asmr zeitgeist 2019). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.



Figure 14. Paper cups are tapped near the cube's ears to create a sensory overload (asmr zeitgeist 2019). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

Throughout the video, this item consistently occupies the middle of the table, making it the primary focus of undivided attention. The cubic 'tingle drone' is a non-human, material object seemingly imbued with unique, almost supernatural qualities. In the performance, this item temporarily assumes agency, representing 'not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurations of the world' (Barad 2003: 818). Clearly, all of the artist's efforts in the video are directed towards the microphone cube. The cubic 'tingle drone' serves as the focal point for wandering affective forces that adhere to the bodies participating in the performance.

The atmosphere in Richter's film contrasts significantly with that created in the video *ASMR 6 all NEW Sound Experiments for Sleep!* 💝 (Caroline ASMR 2019b), which was characterized by intimate softness and gentle affective flow. In Richter's video, the main focus is on interacting with props, where the only human-like elements immediately recognizable are the artist's hands – often appearing as two pairs (!) – simultaneously stimulating the four ears on the cube. These hands seem autonomous and detached from the rest of Richter's body, almost performing magical tricks in front of the viewers-listeners. The cubical artifact, lying on the table covered in black cloth, appears to succumb to magic tricks performed by the hidden magician. These elements contribute to creating a dreamlike atmosphere of mystery in the video, enhanced further by the chosen colour scheme and the composition of the frame enveloped in a purple glow throughout the performance.

Viewers-listeners of Richter's video have appreciated the almost magical experience of complete immersion and sensory overwhelm, leaving witty remarks in the comments section like: 'My brain is confused / But my ears are satisfied / All four of them'. Interestingly, the ASMR artist acknowledges at the beginning of his video that the human experience of quadruple audibility remains a dreamlike concept. The reference to this phenomenon in the title of the film ('quadruple trigger intensity') serves primarily to attract an audience seeking increasingly powerful sensations in the realm of ASMR.

This kind of imaginative speculation presented in the video, about the future potential to experience sounds in a different (perhaps better or fuller) manner than before, can also be interpreted from a posthuman perspective. It reflects a desire to push the boundaries of human experience and explore beyond the confines of the human body, including the expansion

of the human sensorium. Likewise, it signifies the curiosity about exploring non-human and posthuman practices and cultures.

Thus, material objects take centre stage in both analysed videos. Here, it is the props made of matter that are valued and handled with great care. The artist seeks their hidden properties and endeavours to extract and channel their surprising sonic qualities. Participation in an ASMR performance reveals a reversal of the usual human and non-human roles: the human subject visible on the screen typically functions as a tool – a sort of radar and transmitter combined – to uncover and transmit affective and agential properties of matter. In other words, during the ASMR performance, the human subject acts as a subordinate guided by the potentialities of the material world.

This reorganization of human and non-human roles is primarily achieved through touch. During tactile interactions among the various elements that constitute an ASMR performance, specific affective and agential forces come into existence. The physical contact between human and non-human entities in ASMR videos gives rise to powerful forces that impact the bodies involved, 'sticking' to them and thereby producing desired effects like tingles on the scalp or a sense of relaxation.

On the other hand, in ASMR culture, affect should not solely be viewed as an ephemeral force that operates quasi-magically, flowing through human and non-human bodies like an uncontrollable current of air. Drawing from Tomkins's theory of affect, affect can be understood as a feeling that motivates specific actions, is partially controllable and is rooted within one's body. This form of affect can be subject to manipulation, including amplification and suppression.

Even though affect in ASMR culture is often described as elusive and difficult to grasp – like a flowing fog, a current of air, the vibration of a membrane or a flickering light – it can also be understood in a more systematic and logical manner. ASMR culture embraces the Tomkinsian concept of bodily affect as a driver of scripted behaviours exhibited by individuals in their daily lives. This is evident in the shared belief among ASMR artists and their audience regarding the ability to elicit a concrete, measurable tingling response to specific triggers.

Both Tomkins's theory and ASMR practices support the idea that certain stimuli can activate ingrained behavioural scripts shaped by a person's memories and past reactions to similar situations. ASMR culture

posits that a person's history of affective responses is stored in their body, and by triggering the right stimuli – preferably through techniques like scratching or tapping – a tangible affective response can be induced.

In ASMR culture, it is believed that triggering bodily tingles, which lead to feelings of bliss, relaxation, comfort, intimacy or a sense of being cared for, can be relatively straightforward to achieve. Specifically, activities such as tapping and scratching, ubiquitous in ASMR videos, are seen as a universal key to eliciting tingling sensations.

Furthermore, the ASMR artist has the ability to not only evoke an affective response in the viewer-listener of an ASMR video but also modulate their reaction. The creator of the video *ASMR⁴ Quadruple Trigger Intensity to Make YOU Tingle Like Never Before* promises an exceptionally intense tingling experience right in the title of the video – a sensation that the audience has never before encountered. For this message to resonate effectively, it inevitably taps into the viewer-listener's past affective experiences. They already understand what tingles feel like and can discern varying degrees of intensity within their own bodies, whether in specific life situations or when watching particular videos.

Moreover, the word *intensity* included in the title of this video can be interpreted in two ways: either as 'the quality of being felt strongly or having a very strong effect' or as 'the strength of something that can be measured' (*Cambridge Dictionary* n.d.: n.pag.). In ASMR culture, it is believed that the level of head tingles can be quantified on a scale of intensity – from complete absence of sensation to a maximum, abstract and almost unimaginable state described as 'to tingle like never before'.

To Name the Unnameable

Direct and indirect references to the concept of *affect* also appear in various spaces connected to ASMR culture, where community members share their thoughts and experiences. These include online discussion forums, surveys and the comments sections under YouTube videos visited by ASMR enthusiasts. In these online spaces, it is common for the feeling of ASMR to be described as peculiar, inexplicable, indescribable

and unspeakable. As will be demonstrated below, the language used by members of the ASMR community in their statements and comments often aligns with the language of affect employed by both the theory of affect and the so-called *affective turn* in the humanities and social sciences.

Overall, it will be argued that ASMR can be considered a product of the culture of affect, as evidenced by the language used by ASMR users. Moreover, the success of the ASMR phenomenon is closely linked to the affect-related turn towards 'embodied life' (Schaefer 2019: 1) and, simultaneously, a turn away from reason, logic and thought as the primary determinants and validators of human existence.

A person's experience of the world through bodily and embodied affects, alongside rational-cognitive perception, is valued and promoted in affect theory, which is interested in '*what bodies do* – what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide' (Schaefer 2019: 1, emphasis in original). This perspective is also true for ASMR videos and the language used by ASMR aficionados in their affectively charged statements and comments online. In ASMR culture, bodily experiences and sensations often take precedence over rational-cognitive perception of reality. The tingling sensation felt in one's body can signify a person's *becoming* and *belonging* – to the world of matter and to the world of 'nature'.

Affect, referred to as a non-understandable, non-textual, 'nonlinguistic and non- or paracognitive' element of reality (Schaefer 2019: 1), aligns with the tingling sensation detailed by members of the ASMR community. As becomes clear later, the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the tingling sensation, according to online statements and comments, challenge attempts to perceive the experience in a purely rational and intellectual manner.

Examining ASMR culture from a linguistic perspective can be challenging because the literal meaning of verbalized messages in ASMR-related content often is not the primary focus. This is why linguistic scholarship on ASMR typically concentrates on the vocal and non-verbal sounds produced by ASMR artists rather than the meaning of their spoken statements. Additionally, research often focuses on the names of ASMR YouTube channels and the communicative forms used by artists to simulate a personal experience (Ozga 2020). Furthermore, as Smith and Snider (2021) observe, research on the ASMR community, including the language used

by its members, is sparse. Most investigations of ASMR thus far have primarily focused on critical analyses of video content.

Therefore, the focus now shifts to selected contributions made by members of the ASMR-centred community in online discussion forums, surveys and the comments sections of videos posted on YouTube. The following analysis demonstrates how descriptions of the ephemeral tingling sensation resonate with Massumi's characterization of affect as 'not yet a fully formed thought' and 'a movement of thought, or a thinking movement' (2015: 10). Additionally, it explores how people who experienced ASMR expressed their emotions before this phenomenon was widely recognized and named. A valuable source of information on this topic is a forum thread on the website SteadyHealth.com, started in October 2007 (Steadyhealth.com n.d.). This thread is considered to be the initial point for the growing online exchange of experiences related to the tingling sensation felt on the skin of the head, neck, nape and sometimes the entire body in response to various stimuli, which is now commonly referred to as ASMR.

As already noted, for a long time the ASMR-centred community struggled to find an appropriate name for the complex tingling sensation. This challenge was partly due to the difficulty of accurately expressing this specific sensation in language. Since 2007, the community has worked together to create a suitable term for the feeling. Finally, in 2010, a more professional, quasi-medical term, *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response*, was coined to dissociate the phenomenon from the sexual connotations previously linked to it.

The first significant contribution in the ASMR-centred online community was a post titled 'WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD' (Steadyhealth.com n.d.) published in October 2007 on the aforementioned online forum. The post reads as follows:

> i get this sensation sometimes. theres no real trigger for it. it just happenes randomly. its been happening since i was a kid and I'm 21 now. some examples of what it seems has caused it to happen before are as a child while watching a puppet show and when i was being read a story to. as a teenager when a classmate did me a favor and when a friend drew on the palm of my hand with markers. sometimes it happens for no reason at all that i can tell, though. I'll just be sitting or whatever doing whatever and it happens. its like in my head and all over my body. if i get an itch when I'm experiencing the sensation i won't scratch it cause the itch helps intensify it. i also

> like to trace my fingers along my skin because it feels good when experiencing the sensation. sometimes my eyes will water. when the sensation is over i will sometimes feel nauseous, but not that bad. just a slight hint of nausea. what is it?? I'm not complaining cause i love it, but I'm just wondering what it might be ... help.[7]

One user responded to the entry, stating that they also feel 'this strange sensation in [their] head [...] this tingling in [their] scalp'. They vividly described the sensation as 'a silvery sparkle through [their] head and brain', before using a sexual metaphor, calling it 'a sort of head orgasm'. In other comments on the SteadyHealth.com forum, users compared the tingling sensation to 'goosebumps' experienced all over the scalp, which 'fades in and out in waves of heightened intensity'.

At this point, it would be helpful to recall the ongoing debates among academics interested in affect theory regarding how to distinguish and separate affect from emotion based on intensity. The comments made by individuals who experience ASMR sensation appear to blend descriptions of emotions linked to memories, such as the joy a child feels when drawing with a marker on a friend's skin or listening to a parent reading a bedtime story, with descriptions of an affective sensation that remains challenging to name and classify according to familiar patterns and established structures.

As mentioned earlier, some scholars maintain that affect and emotions are distinct domains. For instance, Massumi argues that 'emotion is qualified intensity [...]. It is intensity owned and recognized' (2002: 28), contrasting it with affective intensity itself.

For members of the ASMR-centred community, maintaining such a distinction is not only difficult but often perceived as pointless. In their contributions on the Steadyhealth.com discussion forum, there is a persistent tendency to associate certain sensations with familiar emotions related to intimacy, such as childlike joy and carefreeness. This inclination may stem from the perception that emotions, compared to affect itself, are easier to grasp as 'conventional or coded expression' (Massumi 2015: 32). As a result, forum participants are eager to capture affective intensities in a semantic and semiotic form that is recognizable and nameable.

Nevertheless, the ephemeral and elusive sensation that manifests as tingles takes on an ever-changing form that is difficult to fully understand and articulate. Affects 'rather happen than exist' (Tabaszewska 2018: 272); they remain elusive and in constant flux.

7 In all quoted posts and user contributions, the original spelling has been preserved, where possible.

People who experience the peculiar sensation of tingles on their skin were invited to participate in a survey titled 'Voices of ASMR' by the owner of the ASMR University website (Asmruniversity.com n.d.). The survey began with the question 'What does ASMR feel like?' followed by more detailed and intimate inquiries such as 'What physical sensations do you feel?', 'Where do you feel these sensations on your body?' and 'What emotional and psychological sensations do you feel?'

Now turning to the responses provided by participants, the aim is to understand how individuals who experience ASMR tingles characterize this sensation. For instance, one user described their feelings in a picturesque manner:

> It feels like a fountain of relaxing sensation in the middle of my brain, that shoots upwards against the ceiling of my skull and cascades down evenly around the inside of my head [...] Also, knowing something of the mechanical nature of the ear and the sense of sound, I feel asmr is like the vibration of your inner ear when struck by just the right frequency.

The sensation likened to water pouring out of a fountain beneath the skull's vault and flowing down the interior of one's head embodies the fluidity, evanescence and tenacity of affect. Just like water, which typically flows freely, seeping into every crevice and influencing everything in its path, the respondent's detailed description illustrates their attempt to accurately capture this unique bodily sensation. They aim to seize this pivotal moment when one perceives what their body does, its capabilities, and consequently its desires – a desire to grasp affect. Ultimately, affect is a form of 'thinking, bodily' (Massumi 2015: 10).

The use of the concept of *vibration* to characterize the ASMR experience is equally intriguing. The user's 'inner ear' begins to vibrate when the right frequency is reached. Here, the vibrational nature of sound becomes evident. The acoustic wave of the appropriate frequency touching the user's body resembles Gregg and Seigworth's affective '*force* [...] *of encounter*' (2010: 2, emphasis in original), effectively utilized in ASMR artworks that explore sound emanating from vibratory matter.

Another respondent contributed to the survey by describing their tingling experience in the following words:

> [It feels] like there is a tiny hole drilled in the back center of my skull that someone poured a sugar packet into. Tingling sensation that radiates from the brain stem to the scalp, down my spinal cord and through the back of my arms and front of my legs (if I'm lucky).

Here, the main focus is on drawing a comparison between the new and the familiar. The indescribable tingling sensation is likened to an everyday object placed in a surprising context: sugar pouring out of a sachet through a tiny hole in the skull into one's head. This feeling is characterized by a specific fizziness and sparklines resembling 'shimmers' (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1), as described by affect theory scholars. The user experiences this sensation extending all the way down the arms, spine and even legs. In line with the user's description, the human body becomes a somatic interface that receives and distributes affective impulses.

Several personal testimonies aligning with the language used within the affective turn can be found in the responses to the 'Voices of ASMR' survey. According to one respondent, ASMR is likened to 'a warm, slightly fuzzy, tingling energy' moving through the body. Another individual shares a similar sentiment, describing ASMR as having varying 'degrees of severity': sometimes resulting in a calming sensation that 'washes away' worries and anxieties, and other times producing a much stronger feeling akin to a 'warm chill' or goosebumps. Emphasizing the gradual nature of the ASMR sensation can be linked, on one hand, to the elusive nature of affect, and on the other hand, to the abstractness of the feelings that accompany the experience.

Some scholars engaged in affect theory caution against unnecessary distinctions between affects and emotions, asserting that emotional states, regardless of their categorization, should be viewed as 'processes that endure, evolve and seamlessly go through various stages' (Tabaszewska 2018: 262). A similar perspective is evident in the statements of individuals who watch ASMR videos on YouTube, such as in the comments section of the video *What is ASMR? (ASMR TEST & EXPLAINED!)* (New Rockstars 2015). Here, expressions related to affectivity, highlighting the ambiguity, fluidity and incomprehensibility of the ASMR experience (e.g., 'kinda fuzzy feeling'), appear alongside terms describing concrete, well-recognized and semantically expressible emotional states (e.g., 'being super relaxed'), as exemplified in one of the comments:

> For me the best way i could describe the feeling is something of a cross between being super relaxed but also completely absorbed and focused on the sound/visual and i guess kinda fuzzy feeling in the head.

It is important to note that the purpose of the *What is ASMR?* video is to impartially explain the phenomenon to all interested parties rather than to induce pleasurable shivers in the audience. Therefore, the video appeals to both supporters and opponents of ASMR. As a result, the discussion in the comments section has become quite heated. Examining published statements that assess the ASMR phenomenon negatively is vital, as it allows for the consideration of opposing viewpoints. Interestingly, ASMR sceptics also appear at a loss when confronted with the phenomenon, as evidenced in the comments below:

> When I've heard those sounds I wanted to throw my computer outside the window. I don't get it.
>
> I agree. All those sounds and sights do nothing whatsoever for me. In fact some of it pisses me off and causes anxiety.
>
> Same here. There's nothing relaxing at all in this. It's exactly the opposite for me. It could be used for torture.

Both a lack of knowledge about the odd phenomenon of ASMR and insufficient language resources to adequately describe the sensation purportedly associated with it result in the use of bold descriptions of emotional states accompanying the consumption of ASMR content. Examples include statements like '[ASMR] causes anxiety' and '[ASMR] could be used for torture', as well as straightforward remarks such as 'I don't get it' or 'It pisses me off'.

Affect often manifests through the intensity of reactions and the diverse interpretations of cultural texts or artworks (Dauksza 2014). Massumi notes that 'there's a unique feeling to every experience that comes along, and the exact details of it can never be exhausted' (2015: 13). One outstanding example of a phenomenon that elicits distinct emotional reactions and almost never leaves anyone indifferent is ASMR culture. It is noteworthy that ASMR often demands a clear response from its audience, whether admiration or repulsion. This contrast is evident between those who praise the relaxation potential of ASMR videos and those who describe ASMR as torturous.[8]

8 Even harsher comments can be found under ASMR YouTube videos that contain sound triggers associated with food (munching, crunching, slurping and

Moreover, according to Massumi, a 'stronger sense of embeddedness [...] – a heightened sense of belonging, with other people' (2015: 6) is associated with affect-infused situations. Undoubtedly, the ASMR-focused online community, which tirelessly seeks to characterize the power of ASMR sensation, is united by the intensity of affect.

The ASMR phenomenon, along with the online community that surrounds it, represents the contemporary culture of affect. The affective turn that has long pervaded the humanities and social sciences is characterized by the appreciation of bodily sensations in the process of experiencing the world and forming one's subjectivity. As observed, the ASMR-centred community is permeated with an appreciation for the affective perception of reality in addition to a rationality- and cognition-based worldview. Members of the ASMR-centred community share their most private and intimate experiences about how different stimuli make them feel within their own bodies. They make an effort to identify, describe and label these feelings in a way that is understandable to both themselves and others. However, they often feel linguistically powerless in the face of fleeting and shimmering sensations coursing through their bodies. As a result, in their commentaries, they use, on the one hand, terms associated with concrete, well-known emotional states and, on the other hand, phrases related to the indefiniteness and ambiguity of affective experience. In other words, the language of affect and the language of emotion become blended.

What Does It Feel Like ...?

The ASMR-centred community provides its own response to Steven Shaviro's inquiry, '*what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century' (2010: 2, emphasis in original), by exhibiting signs of what may be referred to as the modern culture of affect. Shaviro highlights the expressive

lip-smacking), which may elicit strong feelings of disgust and anger instead of a pleasant sensation. This can be related to the feeling of misophonia, easily induced by certain sounds popular in ASMR culture (McGeoch and Rouw 2020).

qualities of contemporary media, describing them as '*machines for generating affects*' (2010: 3, emphasis in original) with the ability to reflect a particular 'free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today' (2010: 2). Media artworks, including ASMR videos, participate in creating the so-called *affective maps* of contemporary society's 'social relations, flows, and feelings' (Shaviro 2010: 6). Notably, the affective body remains omnipresent on these maps. The ASMR-centred community consistently proves that the idea of total disembodiment in today's digital media landscape is a delusion and that the body retains great importance. The ongoing attempts of ASMR culture participants to articulate their intimate physical sensations most accurately suggest that the affective and bodily experiences go hand in hand.

What else can help answer the question, what does it feel like to live in the early twenty-first century? The philosophy of posthumanism, similar to the theory of affect, also turns to the body. It emphasizes the materiality of the world and the experience of it through all the senses. Posthumanism values connections with non-human subjects, treating human–non-human assemblages as part of the nature–culture continuum. Additionally, it seeks to answer what characterizes the particular 'free-floating sensibility' (Shaviro 2010: 2) that permeates contemporary society and why viewing the world through a non-human lens could be most valuable today.

Though perhaps *viewing the world* is a misnomer, as it suggests experiencing reality primarily through sight, which is not the case in ASMR culture. Here, one does not merely view the world but approaches it in an intimate, tactile manner – preferably by scratching or tapping, or by listening attentively. The creators of ASMR media artworks employ various post-cinematic techniques and experiments to allow the potential viewer-listener to enter a posthuman mode of experiencing the world, where the human element is no longer the focal point. ASMR culture suggests that by simply shifting one's position or changing one's location, a person can experience far more than by remaining still at the centre of the universe. The following chapter illustrates how this operates in practice.

CHAPTER 5

Posthuman (Intimacy)[9]

Remaining Open

The terms *posthuman* and *posthumanism* have many facets, and their relationship with both the concept of intimacy and Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) culture is neither straightforward nor easy to grasp. However, it seems indisputable that ASMR videos, exemplifying post-cinematic media forms, manifest a new form of sensibility that can be called *posthuman*, attempting to answer the question of human experience at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This sensibility is difficult to describe, as it consists of various components and manifests itself in several ways. It is not a monolith but rather a malleable and ephemeral construct, composed of hunches, indications and affective or emotional states. The posthuman mode of experiencing reality can be activated in ASMR artworks using tools, techniques and methods that are called 'post-cinematic' (Willis 2016).

The philosophy of posthumanism finds fertile ground in contemporary thought. The concept of the human as the highest being in the hierarchy of creation, produced by Enlightenment and modernist traditions, currently faces various challenges. The everyday existence is now populated with new entities, actors and subjectivities that blur the boundaries between 'nature' and 'culture', human and non-human and living and non-living. This state of in-betweenness challenges the anthropocentric order. Posthuman ideas regarding the coexistence and identities of humans and non-humans in

9 Fragments of this chapter were previously published in the article 'Your Writing Sounds Gorgeous: Post-Cinematic Experiments in ASMR Videos as a Sign of Posthuman Sensibility' (Łapińska 2023b) and in the chapters 'Posthuman and Post-Cinematic Affect in ASMR "Fixing You" Videos' (Łapińska 2021b) and 'Posthumanizing Relaxation in Science-Fiction ASMR' (Łapińska 2023a).

contemporary society are also reflected in culture, art and media, including ASMR videos.

In this chapter, while exploring ASMR culture, the philosophy of posthumanism is treated as one of the most crucial theoretical perspectives, as it currently offers 'the most open and sensitive critical frame to approach intellectual tasks, as well as everyday practices' (Ferrando 2014: 171). Francesca Ferrando's remark points to a scholarly approach that, by abandoning classically anthropocentric discourses, is sensitive to the deepening crisis of the human subject. This approach aims to embrace new ways of thinking about the place of humans and other beings in the world. According to Ferrando, the primary responsibility of the posthumanism-oriented scholar is to remain open and sensitive not only to daily experiences but also, and more significantly, to the studied material that communicates with the researcher while being analysed. Furthermore, the philosophy of posthumanism prioritizes qualities such as sensitivity to the multiple connections among entities, acknowledgment that they are part of the nature-culture continuum and the insight that everything in the world is composed of matter.

As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the posthuman way of thinking and the posthuman sensibility are closely related to the post-cinematic experience in ASMR videos. This is consistent with Holly Willis's argument that:

> The post-cinematic and the posthuman: together, each completes the project of the other, attempting to reckon with experience, identity and subjectivity in a networked culture. As cinema is reinvented as an intermedia form, and as we come to terms with a world in which the human is no longer the centre, artists contribute much to a conjuring of new arrangements, attunements and practices of being through works that call us forth in new ways. (Willis 2016: 87)

In the phenomenon of ASMR, post-cinema is intimately linked to posthumanism. This connection is evident in both the content and form of the videos. Creators of ASMR films repeatedly utilize post-cinematic techniques and perspectives in their artworks, which contribute to the posthuman experience of the world portrayed in this culture. Moreover, as will be shown further, ASMR artists often draw on familiar and relatable contexts derived from popular culture, including science-fiction narratives and imagery, when mapping posthuman experiences and post-cinematic transformations.

Posthuman and Post-Cinematic Realms

Before delving into an analysis of specific videos from various ASMR subgenres that manifest posthuman sensibility, it is essential to provide a more detailed explanation of what will be understood here by the terms *posthumanism* and the *posthuman condition*, as well as what is meant by *post-cinema* and *post-cinematic*.

There are several dimensions, currents and threads within the theory of posthumanism. A term that serves as a keyword in the discussion of ASMR in this chapter was examined by Ferrando in her paper simply titled 'Posthumanism'. According to Ferrando:

> Posthumanism is a theoretical frame, as well as an empirical one, which can apply to any field of enquiry, starting from our location as a species, to the individual gaze. Posthumanism addresses the question "who am I?" in conjunction with other related questions, such as: "what am I?" and "where and when are we?" (Ferrando 2014: 168)

Ferrando continues by outlining the primary concerns of posthumanism in response to these inquiries. The human subject's recognition that 'we exist in a material web where everything is interconnected and potentially intra-acting' (Ferrando 2014: 168) serves as the starting point here. Human beings do not exist in isolation nor do they view 'inferior creatures' from atop a hierarchy of beings. They also do not exclusively belong to 'culture', which is often perceived as separate from 'nature'. Rather, humans are part of the nature–culture continuum, alongside all other entities that inhabit the Earth, both human and non-human.

A posthuman condition is defined by 'an assumption about the vital, self-organizing, and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself', as stated by Rosi Braidotti (2013: 2). Additionally, Braidotti clarifies that vitalist materialism 'constitutes the core of a posthuman sensibility that aims at overcoming anthropocentrism' (2013: 56). Adopting a posthuman approach to the environment entails actively emphasizing the vital and affective connections among diverse actors and closely analysing how these relationships are established and operate within the broader network.

A posthuman sensibility, according to this paradigm, entails humans recognizing and embracing an inevitable crisis concerning their ostensibly unique position in the world rather than viewing it with apprehension. This crisis is seen as an opportunity to coexist more consciously with the

non-human 'other'. This sensibility, in the pursuit of new ideas and initiatives, 'combines critique with creativity' (Braidotti 2013: 54), thus being proactive and optimistic. It primarily manifests in efforts to acknowledge the role of non-human actors in various cultural and creative activities and in being receptive to non-human perspectives, visuals, roles and statuses. Envisioned engagements with the unknown and ineffable 'other' offer a valuable opportunity to cultivate 'alternatives to established practices and definitions of subjectivity' (Braidotti 2013: 54).

The posthuman sensibility strongly intersects with the contemporary post-cinematic era. Willis highlights that the present moment is marked by 'the myriad reconfigurations of the cinematic', with contemporary, post-cinematic, media-based artworks grappling with 'new forms of subjectivity and interpellation' (2016: 17). Francesco Casetti describes the novel contexts and environments of modern cinema as 'borderline situations' (2015: 35). Today, cinema is transitioning into a new form termed *post-cinema*, which encourages audiences to engage deeply with 'a penetrating reading' (Casetti 2015: 40) of various borderline texts, artworks and discourses. Identifying cinema's expansive, 'sticky', clinging, affective and pervasive presence in these novel contexts is 'a complex and risky task' (Casetti 2015: 40), requiring a sensibility that can aptly be termed *posthuman*.

Post-cinema is a multifaceted concept, which makes it difficult to define precisely. Similarly, identifying and categorizing the diverse approaches used by contemporary artists who create ambiguous cinematic and media works presents its own set of challenges. Post-cinema is often described as 'a multitude of (re)configurations of film' (Hagener, Hediger and Strohmaier 2016: 4), characterized by ambiguity (Chateau and Moure 2020: 14). It increasingly refers to a mass of moving pictures that call for 'new taxonomies of images, genres, and patterns' (Hagener, Hediger and Strohmaier 2016: 9) rather than a canon of celebrated works or a single dominant cinema *dispositif* (Chateau and Moure 2020: 14). Post-cinema can also be situated within a realm of 'post-art' characterized by the formula: '*art, otherwise than art*' (Chateau and Moure 2020: 21, emphasis in original). This notion refers to the ways in which certain cultural objects – such as films or digital media practices – are presented in artistic contexts while inviting responses that do not conform to traditional aesthetic attitudes.

Post-art thus destabilizes fixed categories and creates a shared space where cinema and contemporary art challenge each other, making room for hybrid forms, such as ASMR, that blur the lines between artistic creation, utility and performance.

It has also been argued that post-cinema is characterized by the transition from analogue to digital media that has caused a form of 'discorrelation' with human experience, including phenomenological, narrative and visual one (Denson 2016: 193). Post-cinematic media often present a breakdown of a 'consistently and coherently designated spectating-position' which becomes 'incommensurate with human subjectivities and perspectives' (Denson 2016: 196, 216). For example, in ASMR videos, the camera can simulate direct eye contact or ambiguous POVs, and the performer's whisper may travel binaurally around the viewer-listener's head, generating a sensory experience that resists spatial coherence and unsettles conventional modes of embodied perception.

Clearly, post-cinema is not a unified phenomenon; it refers to a plural, fragmented and hybrid field. New cultural forms such as ASMR emerge and flourish in these conditions. They sit between performance, affective media and aesthetic production and, at the same time, remain intensely 'haunted by the cinema' (Chateau and Moure 2020: 15) – that is, they retain traces of classical cinematic elements in their framing, lighting or modes of address, even as they operate outside traditional filmic contexts.

What is new in these cultural forms is the multitude of techniques and strategies they employ, which offer audiences a posthuman perspective and enable viewers-listeners to engage with reality in alternative, affective ways. Within the post-cinematic horizon, numerous non-human actors such as multifunctional screens, interfaces and advanced apparatuses like cameras and microphones play pivotal roles in transforming human subjectivity and perspectives. These non-human elements within the human–non-human network act as transformative mediators, establishing new configurations and parameters of perception and agency.

According to Willis (2016), there are three primary post-cinematic techniques or strategies involving non-human actors in contemporary media: (1) interfaces that cease to be transparent and acquire significance; (2) emphasis on non-human roles, viewpoints and perspectives; and (3) deployment of fragmentary and non-linear narratives. These tools are

also frequently employed in ASMR videos, enabling viewers-listeners to experience a distinct sensation known as *post-cinematic affect* and to enter a posthuman mode of engaging with reality.

This kind of sensation often emerges through what Shane Denson calls 'metabolic images' – images that intertwine 'the organic (the material substrate out of which human subjectivities are formed) and the technical (computational processes in particular)' (2016: 216), prompting a mode of engagement that acts on the body rather than the intellect. Denson observes that 'the images of post-cinematic media operate and impinge upon us at [...] a "metabolic" level' (2016: 194) – a fitting description for the bodily responses, such as tingling sensations, that ASMR videos evoke through various techniques.

One of the most notable subgenres of ASMR videos demonstrating these concepts relies on science fiction conventions and cultural imagery. This subgenre provides a lens to explore how science fiction discourse posthumanizes perspectives and reveals insights into people's experiences in the early twenty-first century. Below, I identify examples of science fiction discourse within ASMR culture, examining how science fiction ASMR videos cultivate a posthuman sensibility and shape the post-cinematic aspects of this phenomenon.

I chose the science fiction subgenre of ASMR videos for analysis for several reasons. Science fiction elements are frequently employed by creators of ASMR videos, permeating both their formal and thematic content. Themes such as starships, space travel, scientists, computers, aliens and robots are prominently featured in these videos. Generally, science fiction narratives serve as a reflection of human hopes, but more often fears, encompassing events like potential extinction, extraterrestrial invasion, ecological catastrophes or nuclear wars (Dinello 2006). The inclusion of science fiction narratives, which symbolize these human aspirations and anxieties, in ASMR culture – whose primary aim is to induce sleep and relaxation in viewers-listeners – initially appears incongruous and therefore intriguing. Closer examination reveals numerous connections between science fiction and ASMR.

The well-known description of science fiction is that it involves 'the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition' (Suvin 1988: 66). In other words, science fiction combines the unusual and unknown

with what is known and recognizable to people at a particular historical period. One of the primary concepts used by science fiction researchers is the *novum*. It refers to the 'point of difference' or 'the thing or things that differentiate the world portrayed in science fiction from the world we recognize around us' (Roberts 2006: 6). This concept is derived from Ernst Bloch's idea of 'a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied addressee's norm of reality' (Suvin 1988: 76). Science fiction works explore this type of alterity, which is recognized as uncommon, odd and perplexing. This idea also serves as the foundation for science fiction ASMR videos, as demonstrated below.

Another topic that has been receiving more attention lately is visuality, as science fiction culture's propensity for spectacularism and image-oriented storytelling frequently overshadows the storylines (Frelik 2017). The importance of science fiction as a 'visual megatext' – 'a collective repository of the genre's optical signs: icons, elements, symbols, and tableaus that circulate, merge, evolve, and become spliced and remixed' (Frelik 2016: 228) – is often emphasized. Indeed, academics maintain that since the invention of moving pictures, visuality, rather than narrativity, has been the defining characteristic of both science fiction as a genre and of cinema itself. In his widely read essay 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', Tom Gunning points out that up until roughly 1906, the main purpose of moving images was to illustrate 'the magical possibilities of the cinema', with storylines and plots being largely incidental (2006: 383). ASMR videos revisit and fully utilize this heritage, with the audiovisual component being central and the narrative aspect essentially supplementary.

In addition to drawing on traditional conventions, motifs and characters from the expansive universe of fantastical worlds, ASMR culture depicts the posthuman condition by placing viewers-listeners in ambiguous scenarios and assigning them unusual roles inspired by science fiction poetics. Immersed in 'affective and aesthetic flows' (Shaviro 2010: 4), viewers-listeners are invited to suspend cognitive and rational frameworks and perceive the world in a posthuman way. This perceptual shift also reflects the broader contemporary crisis of the human subject. A key feature of this experience is post-cinematic affect – affective responses that operate 'at a metabolic level' (Denson 2016: 194). In ASMR, these sensations are

rooted in the materiality of the body as well as the technical processes of mediation and they are marked by their fleeting, fluid nature. In a context where cognition and estrangement are delicately balanced, viewers-listeners experience bodily reactions shaped by both organic and cultural forces. The following examples from science fiction ASMR videos illustrate how this operates in practice.

Enjoy the Borderline Experience

Some of the most characteristic films in the science fiction ASMR subgenre are the so-called *clinical roleplays* (Ahuja and Ahuja 2019), where the ASMR artist plays a futuristic doctor or technician aiding the viewer-listener with sleep or health concerns. These performances offer full attention and soothing gestures, often set in speculative environments populated by holograms, synthetic assistants, and unfamiliar devices – visually and aurally enriched through post-cinematic techniques.

One notable example is *ASMR Sleep Clinic in Outer Space – The Future of Sleep Technology [Sci-Fi]*, available on the *asmr zeitgeist* (2020) YouTube channel. The video opens with a calm female voice belonging to a sleep lab's AI, Rachel. Shortly after, a man in a pristine white uniform appears – this is Michael, a 'personal holographic sleep technician' (Figure 15). He introduces the sleep pod experience that awaits the patient. The interaction unfolds slowly, using soft-spoken dialogue, gentle object manipulation and comforting tapping sounds from silicone toys and plastic cups. Eventually, the viewer-listener is enveloped in the virtual pod, lulled by ambient lighting, smooth textures and the rhythmic purring of a holographic cat (Figure 16).

Rather than merely functioning as science fiction pastiche, this roleplay channels a distinctly posthuman sensibility. The main characters of the 'story' are posthuman beings. Michael can be seen as an example of the science fiction genre's most overused figure, the mad scientist (Roberts 2006: 11), who spins a pseudo-scientific tale about the cutting-edge sleep technology employed in his lab. Meanwhile, Rachel is the female voice of the operating system, appearing briefly to make the futuristic environment even more plausible. They are also non-human mediators of care. Instead of inducing fear – as many dystopian science-fiction motifs tend



Figure 15. Michael, the holographic sleep technician, introduces himself in a futuristic sleep clinic roleplay (asmr zeitgeist 2020). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

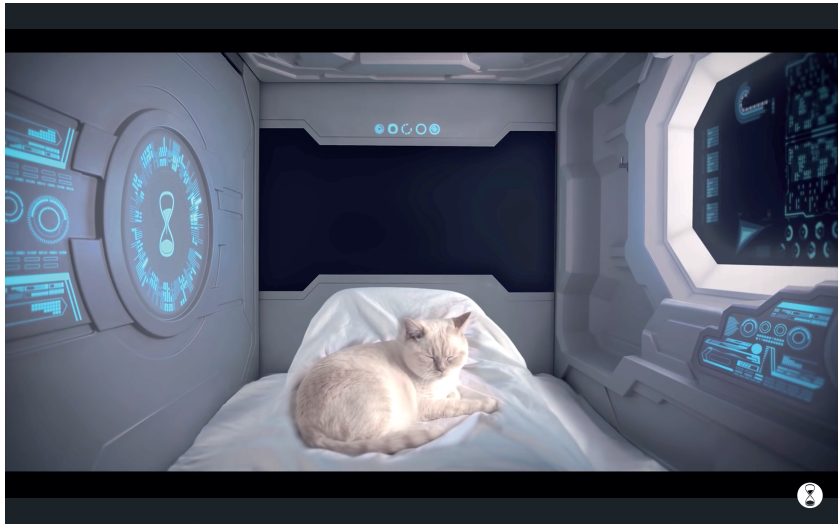

Figure 16. A hologram cat purrs on the bed during a relaxation session in the futuristic sleep clinic (asmr zeitgeist 2020). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

to do – these figures offer serenity and companionship. In ASMR, technology serves and assists people, and being posthuman is not portrayed as 'the horrific harbinger of the long twilight and decline of the human species' (Dinello 2006: 2).

The image of a viewer-listener, simultaneously positioned in front of a computer screen and inside a sleeping pod, completes the ensemble of posthuman characters. Wearing headphones that function as a wire connected to an organic port, the viewer-listener becomes fully immersed in the experience. At times, the camera adopts a cybernetic perspective often seen in science fiction cinema, making the viewer-listener feel either confined within a small, technologically saturated space or endowed with enhanced, cyborg-like vision. This creates what Denson (2016: 193) calls a 'discorrelated' spectating-position – a sensory field no longer aligned with classical human perception.

A different kind of roleplay appears in *YOU ARE AN ALIEN ASMR MEDICAL EXAMINATION | Starling Files: EPISODE 1 a.s.m.r. roleplay*, a video posted on the *Starling ASMR* (2020) YouTube channel, where the viewer-listener is cast not as a human but as an alien under observation. A female FBI agent greets the viewer-listener with a gentle 'Here you are, beautiful creature', before consulting a bulky index of alien species (Figure 17). She performs the examination using soft gestures and various medical props – metal spatulas, pipettes, etc. – treating the viewer-listener's body with delicate care, as though it were unfamiliar yet fascinating (Figure 18). By shifting the viewer-listener from human subject to non-human object of interest, the video exemplifies a posthuman perspective in which agency is dispersed across performer, interface and ambient environment.

This shift elicits both estrangement and fascination, encouraging the audience to occupy a passive, receptive role. Classic science fiction motifs – such as laboratories, strange instruments and interspecies documentation – are not framed as threats but as affective triggers guiding the viewer-listener into a state of relaxation. Immobility, typically associated with restraint or surveillance, is here refigured as a condition of receptive vulnerability. The ambiguity of this setting and scenario – is it care, fiction or a form of embodied art? – mirrors what Dominique Chateau and José Moure (2020) describe as a core trait of post-cinema: its tendency to blur and unsettle traditional distinctions between cinema and other forms of media and artistic practice. Rather than signalling the end of cinema, such



Figure 17. An FBI agent examines a top-secret database to identify an alien species (Starling ASMR 2020). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.



Figure 18. The FBI agent performs a medical examination on the alien pilot using various tools (Starling ASMR 2020). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

hybrids, however, remain 'haunted by the cinema' (Chateau and Moure 2020: 15), drawing on its aesthetic codes while reshaping them into new, uncertain forms.

The conventional trope of alien examination is inverted in *ASMR | 👽 Alien Uses You As Classroom Visual Aid (You Are Frozen!)*, a video available on *The White Rabbit ASMR* (2022) YouTube channel, where a humanoid alien teacher gently presents the viewer-listener (a human specimen) to her students (Figure 19). She describes a human being's anatomy – eyes, ears, nose – while never showing their body. Instead, gestures, whispers and glances maintain the illusion that the viewer-listener is being studied off-frame.

Numerous popular science fiction works explore the difficulty of adequately representing the 'other' in such meetings with aliens (Roberts 2006). This video adds an extra twist to this motif by portraying the human as the extraterrestrial *other*. Consequently, this results in a renewed experience of the combination of estrangement and cognition typical of the science fiction universe. The iconic alien encounter scenario is immediately

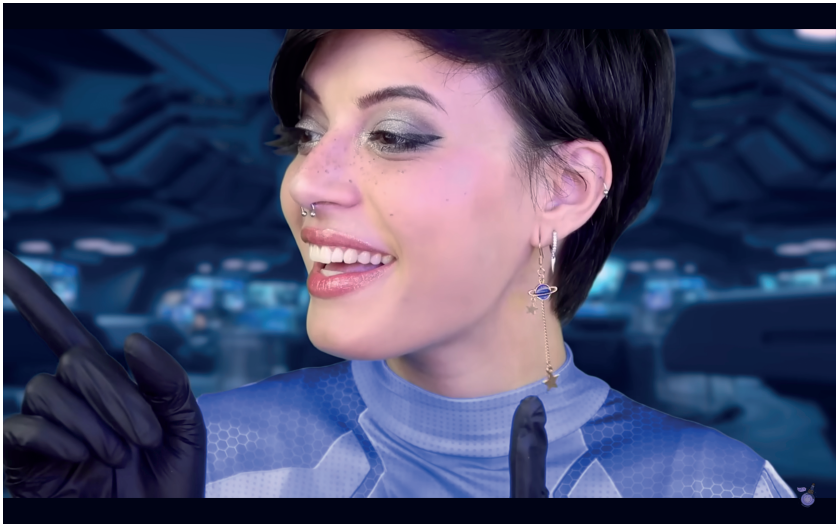

Figure 19. An alien teacher presents an Earthling as a visual aid in a classroom (The White Rabbit ASMR 2022). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

recognizable, yet the reversal of roles between the alien and the Earthling introduces an element of surprise.

The video lacks the eerie or uneasy atmosphere that typically surrounds such narratives. Instead, it renders a proactive and affirming posthuman sensibility through the teacher's warm and endearing tale about an intriguing foreign race. This situation exemplifies a borderline scenario in which the human perspective is decoupled. Notably, there is no visual representation of the human who is the subject of the lesson. The only clues about the Earthling's presence come from the teacher's descriptions of the subject's body parts. Viewers-listeners fall into a pleasant state of relaxation as the invisible and 'dismembered' human body is conveyed through the ASMR artist's whispered descriptions.

In all three videos, the science-fiction ASMR experience thrives on disorientation without distress. These are borderline experiences, situated between familiarity and strangeness, embodiment and disembodiment, subject and object. Post-cinematic and posthuman aesthetics converge to offer alternative modes of intimacy and presence, where viewers-listeners are invited to surrender to speculative scenarios that reframe care through multisensory, affective exchanges beyond the human.

Relaxation Strategies of Tomorrow

Another fascinating example of ASMR videos drawing on science-fiction poetics, combining features of both clinical roleplays and ASMR films in which the viewer-listener is cast in a non-human role, are the *Fixing You* videos. In this type of ASMR content, the performer visible on screen plays the part of a futuristic physician, engineer or mechanic tasked with fixing a malfunctioning machine, typically a human-like robot. To repair the broken device, the performer meticulously carries out various activities on the robot, aiming to identify and fix all of its flaws.

At the beginning of the video titled *ASMR Fixing You: Before You Go On Sale (Ear exam, Cranial nerve exam, Ear massage, face brushing...)* (ASMR Glow 2019a), a black screen can be seen. A soft female voice speaks from a distance, accompanied by approaching footsteps. Then, the

voice shifts to a close, intimate whisper, as if someone is leaning over the viewer-listener's head, offering comforting words. The voice says it is time to activate. A flickering sign appears – 'Initializing ASMR' – followed by the image of a young woman with extravagant make-up, glitter-covered skin and purple lips. Behind her, a digitally generated corridor glows with purples and oranges, while ten identical black-and-white humanoid robots stand motionless along the walls. The futuristic atmosphere immediately establishes the video's immersive tone.

The woman explains that the humanoids in the background are companions of the broken robot – that is, the viewer-listener – who must be repaired before being sold the next day. Sporadic appearances of transparent digital interfaces enhance the high-tech setting, as the ASMR performer inputs data into an imagined system.

The futuristic engineer spends forty minutes checking the robot's basic functions – hearing, vision, motor skills – and restoring it to optimal condition. The procedures resemble a hybrid of skincare treatments, medical exams and software diagnostics. Using a range of tactile triggers – shaking liquid-filled bottles near the ears, flashing lights into the eyes, rubbing rubber gloves together, brushing the face – the performer activates ASMR tingles. Throughout, the robot remains perfectly still, submitting to the engineer's care. The viewer-listener is both the passive body and the recipient of highly attentive treatment, reinforcing the ASMR aesthetic of soothing control and programmed intimacy. This direct sensory engagement also exemplifies what Denson calls 'metabolic images' – audiovisual forms that 'have a direct impact on "the way we tick"' (2016: 216). They primarily act on the viewer-listener's body rather than through narrative or symbolic meaning.

A similar scenario unfolds in *Android Analysis ASMR* (VisualSounds1 ASMR 2018), where a young woman, styled as a mad scientist, leans into the camera and says, 'Hello? You're awake?' She taps the android's face, initiating its activation. The robot, a damaged combat unit returning from war, powers on but stays immobile.

The woman performs a series of diagnostic tasks on the robot's head. These include taking precise measurements, guiding eye movements with a laser light and even applying fake eyelashes to enhance appearance. The blend of function and aesthetic care continues until she announces

she will administer a sedative via a large syringe. While this could seem alarming, the doctor's tone remains calm and reassuring. As with *ASMR Fixing You …* video, the interplay of authority, intimacy and care frames the viewer-listener as both vulnerable machine and cherished object.

As demonstrated above, ASMR *Fixing You* videos often adopt posthuman perspective. This is evident from the abundance of visual elements that appear on screen, designed to simulate what the robot perceives at any given moment. In the analysed videos, the cybernetic point of view facilitates posthuman perspective on the world. According to Anneke Smelik, in science fiction films, '[cyborg's] eye functions like a camera with superior vision enhanced by technology' (2017: 111). Such shots allow the audience to empathize with the filmic character by 'simultaneously establishing both the mechanicity and the subjectivity of the cyborg' (Smelik 2017: 111).

The cybernetic point of view is also utilized in the *Annual Checkup Robot Mechanic ASMR🔧 홈로봇 정기검사 수리공(자막O)* video (Dana ASMR 2018), which has garnered over eleven million views on YouTube at the time of writing. Unlike the previously analysed examples, the viewer-listener is first portrayed as the human owner of a robot, addressed by a customer service agent, a mechanic named Dana. A simulated online chat between the viewer-listener and the consultant, spanning over seven minutes of the fifty-four-minute video, creates a sense of interactivity. Dana presents several machine upgrade options and the viewer-listener confirms the selection by placing a unique wristprint on the screen.

Only in the second part, set in a workshop, does the viewer-listener's role shift to that of a robot requiring maintenance. The moment of viewer-listener's perceptual disorientation exemplifies what Denson calls 'discorrelation' (2016: 193) – a break between traditional human perceptual norms and digitally mediated visual regimes. Dana activates the robot and the screen shows a blurry image signifying awakening from 'sleep'. Once powered on, the viewer-listener sees the workshop through the robot's eyes and briefly hears mechanical speech before Dana disables this function to prevent interruptions. She is clearly in control, while the robot remains passive and receptive to her care.

The repair takes place in a cluttered workshop, with tools like screwdrivers, saws, wrenches and pincers visible in the background. Some of them

are used to produce ASMR-inducing sounds near the robot's ears. Dana focuses on examining the robot's hearing using a rectangular box with two silicone ears – a 3Dio binaural microphone popular among ASMRtists, functioning here as an extension of both the robot's and the viewer-listener's ears. Again, the affective response of the viewer-listener in the form of tingles is induced 'at a metabolic level' (Denson 2016: 194). The organic body of the viewer-listener becomes entangled with the technical apparatus of mediation, illustrating how ASMR performance blurs the boundaries between biological perception and machinic sensation, producing affect through a posthuman sensorium.

Overall, what is noticeable in the *Fixing You* ASMR videos discussed above is that they differ significantly from the classic ASMR roleplay videos analysed in previous chapters, where a female artist was usually cast in a stereotypically feminine role, performing an intimate treatment. The science fiction *Fixing You* ASMR videos do not feature the artist in the role of a sensitive friend, a parent-like caregiver, a tender lover, a make-up artist, a hairdresser, a stewardess or any other profession associated with emotional work performed by women. Instead, *Fixing You* ASMR videos attempt to offer representations of females in spaces and professions usually reserved for men in the science-fiction universe. In the *Fixing You* ASMR videos, women appear as inventors, mechanics or engineers, and their surroundings are far from homely, set instead in repair shops, laboratories or storehouses.

Therefore, the viewer-listener is encouraged to revise the preconceptions acquired through watching typical ASMR content. This shift can be understood as an affective strategy employed by the ASMR performer. It evokes a state of alertness and curiosity in the viewer-listener, who is thrust into a situation that diverges sharply from familiar conventions or ingrained affective patterns shaped by personal memories and past experiences. This deliberate disorientation disrupts the viewer-listener's habitual expectations, opening up space for alternative sensory narratives to unfold.

These sensations experienced by the viewer-listener co-constitute a posthuman type of sensibility permeating the performance. In this case, the posthuman sensibility is connected to the unspecified feelings related to the questions implicitly posed by the audience: 'What is actually happening?', 'What am I doing here?' and 'What is my role in this process?'

At first glance, nothing familiar can be observed, as the viewer-listener has been cast in an extraordinary role, usually with a limited field of vision. The very position of being immobilized is confusing, as it can be associated with various extreme circumstances, ranging from imprisonment to sexual practice. As a result, the proper code of conduct and reception protocol in these situations are, at least partially, unknown and therefore flexible. This ambiguity invites playful or subversive interpretations, aligning with posthuman interest in blurring categorical boundaries.

Additionally, in the *Fixing You* ASMR videos, the verbal interactions between the performer and the viewer-listener embedded in the story seem meaningless. Here, the connection is established outside human spoken language – it is based on sensations not directly related to '*what* something is, but how it is – or, more precisely, *how* it affects, and how it is affected by, other things' (Shaviro 2009: 55, emphasis in original). Therefore, both the content of the incidental conversations and the plot of the video (the 'whats') do not matter as much. The audience is invited to enter the world of ASMR at any time and to create their own storyline within the video, which is facilitated by ASMRtists who include timestamps in the video descriptions to enable viewers-listeners easy navigation throughout the film.

The *Fixing You* ASMR videos analysed above exhibit a posthuman-like sensibility that emphasizes alternative modes of approaching and experiencing reality. Here, the connection between the person visible on the screen and the viewer-listener embedded in the storyline is established not only outside human spoken language but also through one of the most significant tools of post-cinema: an interface.

In the analysed examples of science fiction *Fixing You* ASMR videos, the interface appears as a tangible, natural and integral part of the presented world. In many instances in the aforementioned videos, a transparent object resembling a touchscreen (de)materializes in front of the viewer-listener or a film character. The performer then pretends to use this interface to connect with a computer system, a database or a person on the other side of the screen. The interface is one of the key elements of the posthuman scenery in the *Fixing You* ASMR films, which are filled with futuristic devices, tools and entities, whether physical or in the form of computer-generated images.

In a post-cinematic context, an interface serves as a marker of transition from classic linear storytelling to interactive communication in contemporary media. The primary function of the interface in ASMR culture is to establish and enhance connections between the ASMR artist, the audience and non-human entities. Within posthuman and post-cinematic frameworks, the interface signifies 'intercorporeality within the relational body' and creates 'relational fields for affect formation' (Del Val 2021: 288). In ASMR culture, the interface is a dynamic zone of interaction where human and machine converge, thereby contributing to the formation of affects that shape posthuman sensibilities.

To enter the world of ASMR, the viewer-listener interacts with the interface in the form of a screen or touchscreen on their laptop, smartphone or similar device. This interface, coupled with headphones commonly used by ASMR fans, acts as an amplifier of affective intensities-tingles transmitted through technological devices. In ASMR videos, the interface often appears to operate in an interactive mode, even if this interactivity is only illusory. This is most evident in moments when the viewer-listener is prompted to make a choice that supposedly influences the course of events in the storyline. For instance, they may be asked to select an upgrade option for a robot being fixed by tapping a button visible on the screen with their hand.

Closely tied to this interface-driven experience is the role of the camera, which in *Fixing You* ASMR videos transcends its conventional function as a tool of 'authorial perspective' (Willis 2016: 144). Rather than merely documenting events, the camera captures ongoing actions, immersing the audience in the unfolding narrative. In this configuration, the camera functions as a conduit for viewer-listener engagement, often aligning its perspective with theirs. As Denson (2016) observes, post-cinematic media destabilize the spectating position, rendering it unstable and fragmented. In ASMR videos, the camera's close proximity and embodied viewpoint unsettle traditional viewing relations, inviting a more visceral, affective mode of engagement. In *Fixing You* videos, this perspective emphasizes the present moment and contributes to a portrayal of time as non-linear, static and without inherent purpose – disrupting conventional human frameworks.

Another post-cinematic technique used in the *Fixing You* ASMR videos that contributes to the posthuman mode of experiencing reality is the fragmentary narrative, which 'does not presume the human as the central axis for both agency and perspective' (Willis 2016: 142). The logical, linear progression of events, typical in narratives centred on human-like stories contributing to anthropocentric discourses, is challenged here, thus disrupting accustomed approaches to understanding the world. Undoubtedly, ASMR videos prioritize elements other than the storyline. Viewers-listeners are not expected to watch an ASMR video from beginning to end; instead, they are free to leave and return as needed.

Finally, the depiction of various non-human perspectives and experiences constitutes one of the most prominent post-cinematic strategies used in ASMR culture. As mentioned earlier, many science fiction ASMR films cast the viewer-listener in non-human roles, such as a robot or an alien. This invitation to temporarily inhabit a non-human identity may reflect a desire to escape the burdens of human subjectivity – an impulse that, perhaps counterintuitively, serves as an effective relaxation strategy within ASMR culture. These posthuman perspectives also open up alternative modes of engaging with the world – modes grounded in 'affect and senses' (Willis 2016: 142) rather than logic and rationality.

Ambient Hum

A similar principle applies to another category of ASMR films, often termed as *ambience videos*, which emphasize the timeless 'here and now' to evoke a sense of posthuman sensibility. These artworks intentionally avoid narrative elements, focusing instead on cultivating affective experiences. Set in surreal environments devoid of rational explanations and designed to provoke emotional bewilderment, viewers-listeners of ambience videos rely predominantly on sensory and affective responses rather than cognitive reasoning. Furthermore, these videos deliberately remove any human presence from the visual landscape, implying that human beings occupy a peripheral role within the depicted universe. This harmonizes

with Denson's concept of 'discorrelation' (2016: 193), which describes a break from human-centred perception in post-cinematic media.

One ambience video, posted on the *Relaxing Feed* YouTube channel, is titled *Rain Sounds in Cyberpunk City | ASMR | SCI-FI SPACE | Ambience Sounds for Relaxing, Sleeping, Focus* (Relaxing Feed 2020). The film, which lasts an hour, depicts a night-time scene in a futuristic city lit by artificial lamplight and bathed in rain. Remarkably devoid of human presence, the cityscape appears eerily deserted, accentuating its dystopian atmosphere. Nonetheless, distant streaks of passing vehicles traverse the city. Periodic flashes of lightning illuminate the sky, casting an ethereal glow, while ropes sway gently in the breeze within a deserted hangar. The audio accompaniment to the video combines tranquil melodies, urban ambient noises and the sounds of a thunderstorm, crafting a serene auditory background for viewers-listeners. Evidently, this sensory composition caters to diverse purposes, whether to induce a state of relaxation conducive to sleep or to enhance focus during activities such as studying or reading.

A three-hour film titled *ASMR Sci-Fi / Ambience: Interstellar Passenger Shuttle*, uploaded to the *Frostglow ASMR* (2022) YouTube channel, offers another example of an ambience ASMR video. In this film, viewers-listeners embark on a virtual journey through space aboard an interstellar passenger shuttle, enveloped by the tranquil ambience of the cabin and the subdued chatter of the flight crew (Figure 20). The film unfolds with minimal visual variation and negligible narrative progression. Upon taking a seat within the shuttle, the viewer-listener is surrounded by an array of screens, including circular windows, offering views of drifting cosmic stardust, and a television screen affixed to the seat in front, displaying futuristic moving images. Remarkably absent are any discernible human figures, rendering the interior of the interstellar passenger shuttle devoid of occupants and evoking a sense of depopulation and desolation.

However, sounds, unlike people, are the core of ambience ASMR videos. Ambient music and sounds have been empirically shown to alleviate anxiety, instil a sense of security and contentment (Sayin et al. 2015; Fenko and Loock 2014) and enhance concentration across a spectrum of activities (Mehta, Zhu and Cheema 2012). The prevalence of science fiction motifs within ambience ASMR videos can be attributed to a multitude of factors, including the auditory realm. Science fiction's rich visual and

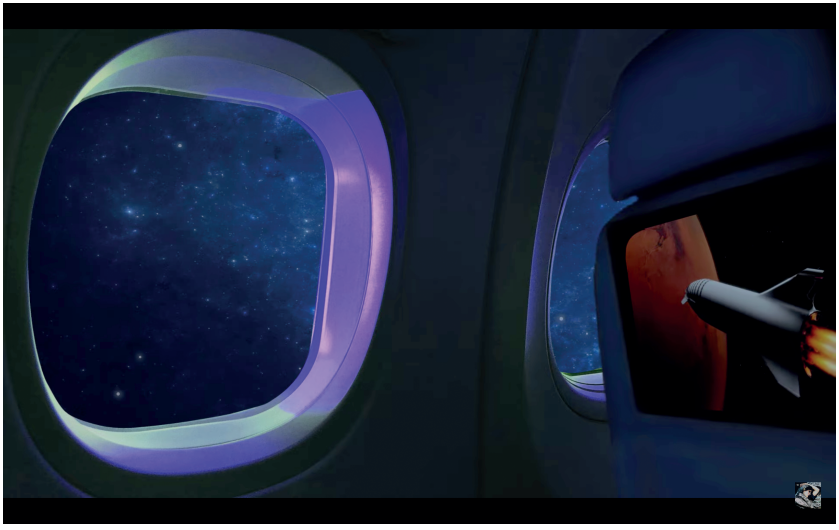

Figure 20. A serene journey through space aboard an interstellar shuttle (Frostglow ASMR 2022). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

aural megatext serves not only as a reservoir of imagery depicting boundless cosmic spaces and desolate landscapes but also as an inexhaustible source of serene sounds associated with interstellar voyages and the ambient hum of gravitational waves reverberating throughout the cosmos.

Paradoxically, the absence of human presence in the vast expanse of the infinite cosmos – a notion accentuated by the complete omission of humans from ambience ASMR videos – can induce a sense of relaxation in viewers-listeners. This absence allows the audience to experience a temporary state of 'dehumanization', liberating them from the burdens associated with human existence. Through the lens of posthuman philosophy, this experience fosters an openness to new social arrangements and unforeseen modes of interpersonal engagement.

Typically, science fiction discourse aims to provide answers to the most urgent questions of worldwide importance by viewing the universe as a complex web of interconnections (Jameson 1991; Frelik 2017). Ambience ASMR videos attempt to demonstrate that the very human need to create coherent and meaningful stories with a clear beginning

and conclusion is not the only way to experience the world. After all, the web of different interconnections existing in the reality is by no means a linear story. Therefore, the typically human expectations of meaning, logic and rationality when approaching the world need to be lowered – or even completely suspended – as ambience ASMR videos suggest.

In doing so, these works reflect the broader transformations discussed by Hagener, Hediger and Strohmaier (2016), where film is reconfigured beyond classical narrative structures into new, post-cinematic forms. ASMR ambience videos, with their open-ended duration, lack of protagonists and emphasis on affective states, demand new taxonomies of images, genres and patterns.

Here, the viewer-listener must accept that a video lasting longer than three hours will not be enlightening, informative or even engaging. There is nothing to be 'learned' from this type of content. Instead, the viewer-listener is invited to feel relaxed and satisfied in the face of the video's blunt meaninglessness. In this moment of surrender, the posthuman mode of sensibility is activated and the peculiarities of post-cinematic affect begin to emerge.

Sonic Scribbles, Fluid Forms

It is worth noting that the posthuman mode of sensibility can be activated not only through ASMR videos using science fiction narratives and imagery. Ultimately, posthumanism extends beyond mere science fiction. In depicting posthuman experiences and post-cinematic transformations, ASMR performers are often limited only by their imagination. The final part of this chapter focuses on ASMR films portraying activities related to on-screen writing. The act of writing and the written element are omnipresent in ASMR videos that employ multiple post-cinematic techniques, such as interface use, non-human viewpoints and fragmentary, non-linear narratives.

The writing or written element present in ASMR videos can be characterized with the help of posthuman philosophy, which asserts that 'process supersedes product' (Ulmer 2017: 6). Posthuman processual ontology emphasizes that 'reality is process rather than static existence and [...] that substances should give way to events' (Williams 2018: 371). In ASMR films,

the act of writing visible on the screen prioritizes process and event over the literal content being produced. Here, the focus is on playful sonic–visual–tactile experimentation, rather than on conveying a specific textual meaning. The interplay between hand, pen, paper, screen and sound also exemplifies what Denson calls 'metabolic images' (2016: 216) – audiovisual forms that intertwine the organic (the body and its gestures) with the technical (writing tools, microphones, recording devices), prompting affective engagement at the level of the senses. Overall, posthuman sensibility is oriented towards processuality, relationality, experimentation and affectivity.

ASMR filmmakers creatively manipulate on-screen written elements in various ways within their artworks. In ASMR videos, the words being written are typically not read but are instead primarily experienced through the distinctly amplified sounds of a calligraphy marker, stylus pen or chalk scraping against paper or a blackboard's rough texture. The act of writing in ASMR videos utilizes a range of user interfaces, such as typewriters, computer keyboards or touchscreens. Furthermore, roleplay videos depicting writing-related activities are common in the ASMR universe. For instance, videos may showcase professionals connected to the written word, like librarians or writers, exploring the sonic qualities of writing instruments and surfaces. Another approach involves films that immerse the viewer-listener in an unconventional, non-human perspective, such as that of a blackboard or an iPad on which someone visible on screen writes or doodles. Moreover, the activity of writing features prominently in ambience ASMR videos that capture the ambience of a writer's office or a quiet reading room.

The process of writing words on paper can be seen and heard in the video *Pure Writing Sounds* 🔪 *ASMR* 🔪 *Satisfying* • *Glass* • *Fountain* • *Ballpoint* • *Gel* (Gentle Whispering ASMR 2020), in which a hand seen in the frame writes various words and sentences using different types of writing instruments, including a rollerball pen, a fountain pen, a ballpoint pen, a gel pen and a crystal glass ink pen. According to the video's description, the purpose of using various writing paraphernalia is to create 'pleasant and satisfying' sounds. The timestamp for each writing accessory's appearance is provided in the video description.

The words visible on the screen resemble asemic writing. They appear to be random sequences, possibly some positive affirmations. However, the way the scenes are shot does not encourage reading the text. The camera is

always very close to the action, showing only a fragment of the paper, the writing tool and the hand of the person. Additionally, the point of view changes with each tool. Sometimes the scene is viewed from above, other times from the right or left, but always in close-up. This type of camera work 'doesn't even pretend to imitate human sight since unlike our eye it is deprived of peripheral vision' (Chion 2017: 125). Seeing in ASMR is, therefore, posthuman: fragmented and focused on observing an unfolding process rather than embracing the whole event with the eye.

The viewer-listener of the *Pure Writing Sounds...* video is encouraged to listen carefully to the mesmerizing sounds of the pen tip scratching the paper. As Lucy Fife Donaldson (2017: 85) notes, 'sound is to be experienced, appealing to the body as much as the ear'. A sign of posthuman sensibility is not merely the heightened attention given to non-human elements in the surrounding world. This is also evident in the recognition that the written word may affect the viewer-listener not necessarily through meaning, metaphor or symbolism, but on a bodily level – through the sound of a writing utensil scratching the surface of paper. In ASMR videos, bodily sensations are invoked by the experiments with and exploration of user interfaces – and not only touchscreens. Interfaces present in ASMR videos vary tremendously. For example, a keyboard interface is often used to produce sounds that cause a tingling effect in the viewer-listener.

Keyboard interfaces have conventionally been regarded as the embodiment of 'technologies of the fingers' (Raykoff 2014: 22). Within ASMR culture, however, they serve to unleash the affective potential inherent in tactile interaction, thereby accentuating the prominence of the auditory dimension. This is illustrated by the video titled *ASMR Satisfying Writing, Page Turning, Keyboard Typing 이건 수면제 영상입니다* (Vito ASMR 2021), where the distinct sounds produced by a wooden computer keyboard being manipulated by fingertips are prominently featured, while the visual representation of typed words is notably absent. In this instance, the emphasis is squarely placed on the sonic attributes of the keyboard itself. The act of typing thus evolves into a sonic performance devoid of any resultant semantically meaningful text. The scene's performative and affective efficacy stems from the heightened amplification of background sounds that are typically overlooked in the quotidian reality.

A laptop keyboard is another interface eagerly depicted in ASMR videos. In the video titled *study with me // 1 hour ASMR keyboard typing (no talking)* (claudy 2020), a person takes notes using a MacBook Pro laptop for over an hour, inviting the audience to focus on the clear sounds of typing. This video is characterized by the fragmentation of the world, including the actress's body, the props used in the scene and the film's storyline. Throughout the video, only fragments of the surrounding world are highlighted. For example, the body is represented solely by the hands moving across the keyboard, and the desk is shown with a handful of fragmented items, such as a lamp and a water glass clipped across the top line of the frame. Similarly, the video's storyline, depicting a random part of the person's studying activity, encourages the viewer-listener to join at any point and enjoy the sounds of 'real life'. To enhance the credibility of the storyline, the random tapping on the keyboard is replaced with actual typing, the output of which can be seen in real time on a cropped text editor displayed on the computer screen.

User interfaces do not need to be digital. What Dominik Schrey refers to as a 'deep affection for outdated analogue media' (2014: 28) is an ongoing phenomenon in ASMR culture. A popular example of an analogue user interface is a typewriter. The video titled *ASMR Typing on 1950s Typewriter (No Talking) Real Typing [Repetitive, Predictable, Mechanical Sounds]* (UndergroundASMR 2021) features close-ups of fragments of a paper sheet being used in a vintage typewriter and the tips of keys touching the paper (Figure 21). In this film, every moving element produces the mechanical noises of 'real typing, not just clicking random keys', according to the artist's description of the video. The film aims to bring the viewer-listener closer to 'real life' and to encourage attention to the usually neglected sounds of the surrounding world.

In cinematic worlds, the fragmentation of text produced by the typewriter effectively builds tension. The isolated sequences of letters and words 'taunt us with the many meanings they can take on, or with their unhinged non-sense' (Chion 2017: 100). Conversely, the 'plot' of an ASMR video featuring typewriting activity is stripped of both meaning and the ability to create suspense. Here, the typewriter, 'in its capacity as a mixture of human being and machine' (Chion 2017: 102), may be perceived as a posthuman

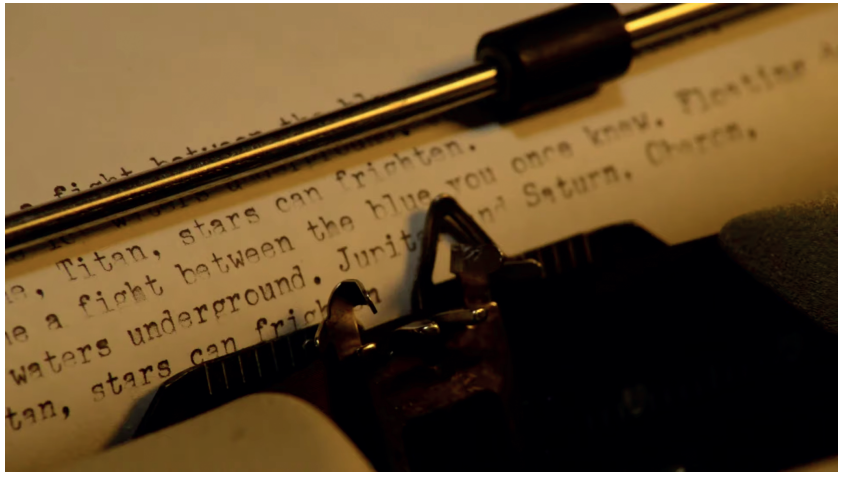

Figure 21. Close-up of a vintage typewriter producing mechanical typing sounds (UndergroundASMR 2021). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

entity embedded in an analogue medium. In the world depicted on the screen, the non-human element in the form of an antique typewriter is the only actor capable of moving other bodies.

As Schrey notes, nostalgia for analogue media that 'contain a certain amount of life' (2014: 35) may be connected to the human yearning for anything genuine, for truly touching (e)motion. According to Ivan Raykoff, the keys of a typewriter 'transmit intimate messages once reserved for voice or pen' (2014: 22). Given that the objective of ASMR videos is to elicit a tactile response from the viewer-listener – to literally move their body – the conveyed messages assume an even greater degree of intimacy.

According to Willis, users can develop a sense of intimacy with their mobile device by 'tapping, dragging, and caressing' the touchscreen, which 'subtly makes us aware of the tactility of our interactions' (2016: 134). In ASMR videos, both pre-digital and digital interfaces are harnessed to foster a similar intimate rapport with the surrounding world. In this context, tactile activities such as tapping and scratching produce auditory stimuli that facilitate the establishment of a non-linguistic, affective connection involving multiple entities participating in the ASMR

performance – namely, the artist, the viewer-listener and the inanimate objects. Consequently, within ASMR culture, the multisensory experience of sound intertwines with the cultivation of a posthuman sensibility characterized by relationality, or the capacity to forge connections with various elements present in daily surroundings.

Another distinguishing feature of posthuman sensibility is a departure from the conventional perception of humans as the primary frame of reference and pivotal agents in the functioning and development of the world. In ambience videos produced by ASMR culture, there is a notable trend towards minimizing human presence and accentuating the non-human elements of reality and their sonic qualities. Notably, the ambience videos previously cited, drawing from the visual and auditory conventions of science fiction, exclude human subjects from the reality presented in the films.

This pattern extends to other ASMR ambience videos available on YouTube, showcasing diverse temporal and situational settings. These productions aspire to convey the atmosphere of various distant or imaginary places, such as the bedroom of a medieval castle, a secluded cabin in an enchanted forest, a kitchen from the seventeenth century or the workspace of William Shakespeare. These films aim to induce relaxation through a combination of hypnotic auditory stimuli and visual imagery, facilitating the immersion of viewers-listeners into the tranquil milieu recreated in the video.

The YouTube channels *Ambience of Yesteryear* and *Miracle Forest* specialize in producing ASMR ambience videos that also include themes related to writing. Within their extensive catalogue of films, these channels offer a diverse range of content, including depictions such as a writer's library from the 1930s, a scribe's chamber in a medieval monastery and the auditory landscape of a vintage solicitor's office. The tranquil imagery and sounds featured in these ASMR ambience videos serve multiple purposes beyond providing a background for relaxation, study or work.

As articulated by the owner of the *Ambience of Yesteryear* channel in the description of the video *Ambience/ASMR: Writer's Library from the 1930s, 4 Hours*, such videos have the capacity to personalize 'sparse, colorless, or impersonal environments' and to invigorate spaces 'where we live

or work alone', infusing them with 'subtlety, ease, and warmth' (Ambience of Yesteryear 2019). This description aligns with one of the significant motivations for users engaging with ASMR videos, specifically combating loneliness (Poerio et al. 2018) among those who are 'starved for touch' (Ahuja 2013: 450). Accordingly, ASMR ambience films are designed to not only fill silence with soothing sounds but also breathe life into empty spaces, transforming sterile, cold environments into hospitable settings.

An hour-long ambience video titled *Writing Letters ASMR Ambience* (Miracle Forest 2018) depicts a vintage office of a solicitor and includes the sounds accompanying the activity of writing letters. Within the video, viewers-listeners are presented with an almost static scene featuring the flickering flame of a petroleum lamp atop a desk, a feather quill meticulously inscribing letters into a notebook, the gentle illumination of moonlight seeping through a window, the slow sway of tree leaves and raindrops cascading down the glass. The focal point of the scene, occupying the majority of the frame, is a spacious desk adorned with an assortment of books, notebooks and numerous writing quills, typical of the setting in which a writer might be seated (Figure 22).



Figure 22. The tranquil ambience of a vintage solicitor's office, featuring the soft sounds of letter writing (Miracle Forest 2018). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

The chair positioned at the desk remains unoccupied throughout the scene, with no human presence depicted at any point. The animated quill captivates the attention of viewers-listeners akin to Roland Barthes's notion of the *punctum* – a dynamic element that animates the entire composition (Jameson 1991: 171) – as it hovers autonomously over the paper in a seemingly magical manner. Notably, the soundtrack accompanying the visuals lacks any discernible human sounds. Instead, the auditory landscape is characterized by scraping, scratching and rustling noises, which, admittedly, could potentially signify activities beyond writing, particularly given their lack of synchronization with the image. Despite the vigorous movements of the animated quill across the paper, the sounds heard do not always correspond to the depicted actions; for instance, the rustling of a letter may be heard instead. Evidently, the embodiment of a writer and the tangible outcome of their work are not the most essential elements within this context.

Literary themes often pervade ASMR ambience videos that depict the sounds of writing on various surfaces using an assortment of tools. In the three-hour video titled *Shakespeare's Writing room In the morning 📜 [Immersive Ambience Experience]* (T E R A V I B E 2021), viewers-listeners are welcomed into the intimate workspace of the English writer, meticulously explored from multiple perspectives. Initially positioned near the desk, viewers-listeners are offered glimpses into the author's notebook before moving towards the fireplace and then gazing out of the window. The deliberate, unhurried movements of the camera are accompanied by a medley of sounds: the crackling of the fireplace, the gentle rustling of pages, the subdued murmurs of animals from the courtyard and, notably, the rhythmic scraping of a quill against paper. It is worth noting that while Shakespeare himself is conspicuously absent from the scene, this absence does not detract from the immersive experience. As emphasized by the video's creator in the accompanying description, the film's primary objective is to provide viewers-listeners with the ambience of a great writer's room.

Literary inspirations are also evident in cinematic ASMR videos produced by filmmaker Maxence Rodier and featured on his YouTube channel, *Made In France ASMR*. One such video, *Writing in Voldemort's Diary 📖✍🏻ASMR Harry Potter* (Made In France ASMR 2022), recreates a scene of writing in Tom Marvolo Riddle's diary from J. K. Rowling's novel *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Rowling 1998), as well as its film



Figure 23. Writing in Tom Marvolo Riddle's diary creates soothing sounds, emphasizing the sensory experience in this ASMR adaptation (Made In France ASMR 2022). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

adaptation directed by Chris Columbus (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* 2002) (Figure 23).

In Rodier's video, the focus is on the auditory elements that accompany Harry Potter's writing, diverging from the dialogue typically used to advance the narrative. The video is a perfect example of what Hagener, Hediger and Strohmaier (2016: 4) describe as '(re)configurations of film' in a post-cinematic era, where classical narrative forms give way to experimental structures and sensory arrangements. Throughout Rodier's film, the protagonist remains silent while viewers-listeners are immersed in the sounds of crinkling paper, the delicate scratching of the feather quill pen and the metallic thuds of dipping ink. This sequence repeats several times with little variation, spanning over half an hour, thereby emphasizing the ASMR genre's prioritization of sensory experience over narrative progression. This departure from the original scene in Columbus's film, which lasts around two minutes, highlights the genre's focus on everyday activities. Furthermore, unlike the original portrayal, the ASMR adaptation

does not show any visible writing in the diary, reflecting ASMR's divergence from language as the primary driver of the narrative. This shift aligns with a posthuman perspective that challenges the traditional emphasis on assigning meaning to every action undertaken.

Furthermore, a posthuman sensibility, characterized by a departure from the primacy of purpose and meaning, finds expression in ASMR videos through unconventional roles associated with the writing activity presented to the viewer-listener – roles that are even more unconventional than those of an alien or a malfunctioning robot often featured in the science fiction subgenre of ASMR films.

For example, ASMR artists engage viewers-listeners in playful interactions by immersing them in scenarios where they take on the role of objects upon which writing occurs, such as a blackboard, whiteboard or iPad. In *ASMR Writing on You & Chubby Hand Movements* ✍️ (ASMR PPOMO 2018), the camera adopts a non-human perspective, simulating the viewpoint of an object being gently touched and written on. The artist's hand begins with soft gestures just outside the frame, suggesting interaction with the viewer-listener, and then transitions to writing in a series of objects on the table, including a paper notebook, calendar and sketchbook. Various tools – a traditional pencil, mechanical pencil, ballpoint pen and fountain pen – are used to perform these tasks. Each sequence begins with tapping the camera lens, reinforcing the sensation of direct contact with the viewer-listener's body as the writing surface.

The video is devoid of spoken words; instead, the soundscape centres on the textures of writing, which heighten the sensory immersion. Upside-down notebooks, blurred lower screen sections and the artist's intermittent absence from the frame destabilize visual coherence, drawing attention away from the meaning of written words and towards affective stimuli. These strategies fragment bodily perception and foster a fluid, non-fixed embodiment, allowing the viewer-listener to experience a posthuman sense of being acted upon without stable form or agency. The writing becomes an act of sensory inscription rather than communication.

The theme continues in *[ASMR] You Are an iPad* (Mattastic ASMR 2020), in which the ASMRtist taps and scribbles on a transparent surface with fingers and a stylus, mimicking interaction with a touchscreen. From the outset, viewers-listeners are placed in the role of the interface:

the first image is a locked tablet screen seen from within, reinforcing the internalized gaze. The device is then 'unlocked' with a swift hand gesture, initiating a session of rhythmic tapping and stippling in a dark room where the only light emanates from the screen – that is, the viewer-listener's glowing body. Here, technological mediation becomes a source of sensory intimacy. The viewer-listener is not only an object but also a surface of emotional resonance, mirroring the dual function of digital interfaces in everyday life.

In both videos, the viewer-listener is transformed into a writable, touchable, reactive surface. This kind of roleplay draws attention to how ASMR content displaces the human subject, inviting a mode of engagement grounded in affective and sensory. While narratives of bodily confinement often evoke discomfort or horror, these ASMR scenarios repurpose such imagery to create a calming and intimate affect. Immobilization here is not traumatic but sensorially rich, enabling closeness with tools, textures and technological rhythms. ASMR thus offers a way of exploring non-human embodiment that foregrounds sensation over structure, and proximity over identity.

Normal? Minor!

Overall, within ASMR culture, assuming the role of a non-human entity does not provoke fear; instead, it involves cultivating a posthuman sensibility that allows individuals to interact with their inner selves and environment in unconventional ways. Embracing a posthuman perspective towards the world means prioritizing affective relationships among diverse subjects and exploring how these connections are formed, developed and expressed within a network of associations. It also entails embracing the idea of *becoming minor*, which means letting go of notions of 'sense' and 'normalcy', carving out a niche for oneself 'like a dog or a mole' (Berlant 2011: 48) and accepting non-human ways of engaging with the world – precisely the kind of exploration encouraged by ASMR culture.

There is another activity within ASMR culture that inspires the carving out of such a niche, potentially challenging the dominance of 'sense' and 'normalcy'. To some extent, this activity also pays homage to the philosophy of posthumanism, equating all living beings in their basic needs.

The activity of sleeping, besides being profoundly intimate in nature, embodies a state of *becoming minor*. During sleep, the human body is temporarily rendered passive, unproductive and indifferent to social hierarchies and structures. Sleep also remains resistant to rational explanation; its precise meaning eludes easy comprehension despite ongoing attempts to delineate the boundary between normalcy ('normal sleep') and dysfunction ('abnormal sleep', 'sleep disorder'). Consequently, ASMR culture navigates through a myriad of often-contradictory ideas, narratives and discourses surrounding the status and role of sleep in the modern world. The following chapter examines some of these perspectives.

CHAPTER 6

(Intimacy of) Sleep[10]

To Sleep or Not to Sleep

In an age where sleep is often compromised by the demands of modern life, Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) has emerged as a unique and potentially effective tool for inducing and managing sleep (Barratt and Davis 2015; Lee et al. 2019; Hardian et al. 2020; Woods and Turner-Cobb 2023). Sleep, an intimate and essential biological process that affects health and is crucial for determining the quality of life (Walker 2008), has become a source of struggle for many in today's world. Environmental and cultural changes, such as increased environmental light pollution, growing industrialization, the rise in shift work and the advent of television and radio, have all contributed to reduction in total sleep (Chokroverty 2017: 29). Additionally, overall pressures of a fast-paced lifestyle, the pervasive influence of digital technology and the relentless demands of neoliberal capitalism, have all led to a widespread epidemic of sleep deprivation and disorders. Within this context, ASMR culture offers a fascinating case study providing both a remedy for 'abnormal sleep' and a subject for critical inquiry.

The intimacy of sleep is a crucial aspect that is often overlooked in discussions about sleep disorders, their roots and possible solutions. Sleep is inherently 'one of the human body's most vulnerable states' (Pigott 2016: 100), in which individuals seek comfort, safety and a reprieve from the day's stresses. It is a deeply personal experience, influenced by a range of factors from individual and emotional states to social and societal conditions including globalization, 24/7 society, public policy and national

10 Fragments of this chapter were previously published in the article 'Capitalism Ate My Sleep but ASMR Brought It Back. Sleep as a Manageable Commodity in the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response Online Community' (Łapińska 2022a).

geography (Grandner and Mian 2017: 41–42). Put simply, the quality of sleep achieved each night is continuously shaped by a complex interplay of physiological, psychological and socio-environmental factors. The following discussion explores how ASMR culture, as an intimate form of media consumption, aligns with and enhances the personal nature of sleep.

I begin with a literature review on sleep and ASMR, providing empirical insights into its effectiveness and potential applications. The review explores various studies that have examined the role of ASMR videos in enhancing sleep quality, comparing it to other non-pharmacological sleep aids such as white noise and binaural beats. The literature on sleep and ASMR underscores the need for more rigorous scientific investigation to validate ASMR's efficacy, while also highlighting its promise as a tool for promoting relaxation and sleep.

I then look into the possible role of ASMR videos in the practice of sleep through the lens of a new subfield in the humanities: critical sleep studies (Reiss 2013). This interdisciplinary approach considers sleep not merely as a biological necessity but as a socially constructed and culturally mediated phenomenon (Reiss 2014). Critical sleep studies examine the social, cultural, political and economic factors that influence sleep, challenging the traditional biomedical model that views sleep problems solely as individual health issues.

Next, I explore ASMR's difficult position within neoliberal capitalism. In an economy that prizes productivity and efficiency, sleep has often been relegated to the margins, seen as an obstacle to be minimized rather than a vital component of health. ASMR videos, which help individuals manage their sleep, can be seen as part of the contemporary therapy culture (Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008) prominent in self-care and wellness industries (Grénman, Hakala and Mueller 2019). These industries commodify the ideas of self-care or wellness and its practices, offering products and services that promise to quickly alleviate the stresses and anxieties of modern life. However, the culture of ASMR also embodies a paradox: while it is a product of a fast-paced neoliberal culture, it simultaneously offers a counter-narrative that emphasizes slowing down, relaxation and embracing an unrushed way of living.

Thus, ASMR culture can also be considered within the context of the slow movement, a cultural trend that advocates for deceleration in various aspects of life, from food to work to leisure (Honoré 2005). The slow movement challenges the speed and efficiency ethos of neoliberalism,

promoting a more measured and mindful approach to living (Freund 2010). The culture of ASMR, with its emphasis on gentle, soothing stimuli and the creation of intimate, unhurried experiences, aligns with this philosophy. By encouraging viewers-listeners to take time for themselves and prioritize their well-being, ASMR videos contribute to a broader cultural shift towards valuing rest and relaxation.

Finally, in this chapter, I analyse two *Tucking You In* ASMR videos and the comments left in their comments sections as a case study to understand how ASMR content functions as a sleeping aid. These videos, which simulate the comforting experience of being tucked into bed by a person close to you, are particularly popular for their ability to induce a sense of safety and tranquillity. Through content analysis, I examine the specific elements of these videos that contribute to their effectiveness, such as the use of whispered speech, soft lighting and nurturing gestures. Breaking down the components of *Tucking You In* videos offers insights into the mechanisms through which ASMR operates to promote sleep. Similarly, investigating user comments reveals ASMR's role in enhancing sleep quality, influencing sleep patterns and bedtime rituals, fostering intimacy and care and helping individuals cope with sleep-related pressures in a productivity-driven society.

In essence, this chapter offers a multifaceted exploration of ASMR culture and its relationship with sleep. By integrating empirical research, critical theory and cultural analysis, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how ASMR culture functions as a tool for sleep management and its broader implications within contemporary society. Navigating through these diverse perspectives helps illuminate the complex interplay between media, culture and the human experience of sleep, highlighting the profound intimacy inherent in the act of sleeping and the ways in which ASMR culture nurtures this intimate experience.

Sleepscape of ASMR

Given the significance of sleep for a person's well-being, numerous researchers have explored diverse methods to enhance sleep quality, with sensory stimulation emerging as a promising avenue

(Harmat, Takács and Bódizs 2008; Chan, Chan and Mok 2010). Among these stimuli, ASMR has attracted attention for its potential to induce relaxation and promote sleep.

Early studies, such as those conducted by Emma L. Barratt and Nick J. Davis (2015), have provided insights into the potential of ASMR videos to facilitate sleep by inducing relaxation and reducing anxiety levels. This research, based on subjective questionnaires of individuals, indicated that people experiencing ASMR sensation reported improved sleep quality and decreased insomnia symptoms. Similarly, investigations by J. W. Williamson (1992), Hardian Hardian et al. (2020) and Juliet Christy Gunawan Umbas et al. (2021) probed specific auditory stimuli associated with ASMR culture and their impacts on sleep patterns, providing detailed insights into the efficacy of ASMR-triggering sounds.

Williamson's (1992) pioneering study, predating the formal recognition of ASMR, explored the effects of ocean sounds on sleep quality among postoperative patients. Through detailed observations and subjective assessments, Williamson revealed that exposure to ocean sounds led to improved sleep quality, characterized by reduced sleep disturbances and increased relaxation. Another study (Hardian et al. 2020), this time already utilizing ASMR YouTube videos, was conducted to investigate the impact of ASMR auditory stimulation on sleep. The participants watched the ASMR videos featured activities like providing haircuts or cooking, incorporating whispers, rubbing sounds, delicate hand movements and the trigger of personal attention. The findings of the study suggest a tangible link between ASMR-triggering auditory stimuli and significant improvement in sleep quality. Similarly, Umbas et al. (2021) employed an experiment to investigate the effects of rain sounds, a common ASMR-inducing auditory stimulus, on sleep quality. Their study revealed a subjective improvement in sleep latency among participants exposed to ASMR-inducing auditory stimuli, providing further evidence of ASMR's positive impact on sleep patterns.

In addition, Heenam Yoon and Hyun Jae Baek (2022) investigated the efficacy of external auditory stimulation as a non-pharmacological sleep aid, exploring the impact of diverse auditory stimuli, including ASMR sounds, white noise, pink noise and nature sounds, on sleep quality, in particular sleep initiation and continuity. Their research concluded that ASMR, characterized by tingling sensations and feelings of calmness triggered by specific auditory and visual stimuli, offered a unique approach to

sleep induction: through relaxation, in addition to the function of sound masking typical for other sound types like white or pink noise.

A qualitative study by Nicole Woods and Julie M. Turner-Cobb (2023) explored the usage patterns and perceived benefits of ASMR videos in a student population. The findings indicated that ASMR videos were primarily used as a tool to induce sleep or distraction during periods of mental distress. Varying frequencies of ASMR content use were reported, with some individuals feeling strongly dependent on ASMR videos to fall asleep. Moreover, some students indicated that sufficient sleep facilitated by ASMR content indirectly enhanced their academic success by helping them wake up feeling well-rested and more productive. Overall, the study underscored the role of ASMR culture in promoting health and mental well-being among students.

Exploring the potential of combining binaural beats with ASMR sounds for inducing sleep, Minji Lee et al. (2019) found promising results. Their research investigated the synergistic effects of binaural beats and ASMR sounds on sleep induction, revealing subjective experiences of relaxation and improved sleep onset among participants. Furthermore, physiological measurements showed signs of relaxation and reduced arousal level, supporting the potential of combined stimuli to induce sleep.

Last but not least, some practical applications of ASMR in product design and development for sleep enhancement have been explored by Miao Wang and Bo Li (2020). In their study, it has been suggested that by meeting consumer expectations and providing effective solutions for better sleep, ASMR-based products have the potential to make a significant impact on the sleep industry. By embedding ASMR principles into their products, manufacturers can offer innovative solutions for addressing sleep-related issues. For instance, pillows with built-in speakers for ASMR experiences can attract consumers looking to enhance their sleep through sensory stimulation.

Bedtime Bliss in Tech Age

Having reviewed the empirical literature on ASMR and its effects on sleep, I now turn to critical approaches that explore sleep beyond its

biological or medical dimensions. Critical sleep studies offer important insights into how sleep is culturally and politically framed (Reiss 2013, 2014), providing a context for understanding ASMR not only as a sleep aid but as a media practice shaped by broader social forces.

Critical sleep studies scholars such as Benjamin Reiss (2013, 2014, 2017) and Jonathan Crary (2013) argue that sleep is deeply embedded in systems of control, productivity and capitalist time. From this perspective, sleep is framed as a resistant or endangered space – a non-productive zone that must be managed, medicalized or optimized under neoliberal pressure. These studies highlight the commodification and regulation of sleep and raise critical questions about its cultural marginalization.

Of course, it is important to realize that while critical sleep studies are insightful, they offer limited tools for analysing the mediated affective dynamics of ASMR. Instead of framing sleep only as a site of crisis or discipline, I primarily consider sleep in ASMR culture as an aesthetically and emotionally mediated experience. ASMR content does not merely reflect the commodification or erosion of sleep; it actively performs and curates sleep as a sensorially rich moment of intimacy, calm and care. This perspective shifts the emphasis from structural critique to embodied media experience, where sleep emerges as a tactile, auditory and emotional interface.

Still, ASMR culture can be analysed using dominant cultural narratives surrounding sleep. In contemporary Western societies, the figure of the ever-efficient, always-productive individual often clashes with the need for rest. Media portrayals reflect this tension, depicting sleep as both a necessity and a luxury. Crary (2013) argues that late capitalism views sleep as an impediment to productivity and thus seeks to manage or minimize it through sleep aids and technological interventions. What is interesting, ASMR culture offers a subtle counter-narrative – one that values rest, slowness and personal attention in sleep-related micropractices.

Technological mediation plays a key role in these micropractices. From sleep tracking devices and apps to digital content, technology shapes the perception and experience of sleep. Scholars such as Simon J. Williams (2005) and Steve Taylor (1998) argue that the technological mediation of sleep reflects broader trends in the management and optimization of human life under capitalism. Sleep tracking devices and apps, for instance, allow

individuals to monitor their sleep patterns and receive recommendations for improvement. These devices, as noted by Eun Kyoung Choe et al. (2011), provide opportunities for enhancing sleep hygiene by offering insights into sleep behaviours and patterns. However, Ping-Ru T. Ko et al. (2015) highlight that while these technologies can promote better sleep hygiene, they also commodify sleep, transforming it into a quantifiable and marketable product.

This technological mediation aligns with the capitalist imperative to optimize every aspect of life, including rest. The study by Ian Li, Anind K. Dey and Jodi Forlizzi (2011) discusses how these technologies encourage self-monitoring and reflection, yet also raise concerns about personal data management and privacy. Additionally, research by Kelly Glazer Baron et al. (2017) introduces the concept of *orthosomnia*, where the pursuit of perfect sleep metrics leads to anxiety and counterproductive outcomes. This phenomenon illustrates the paradoxical effect of sleep tracking technologies, where the intention to improve sleep can sometimes lead to increased stress and poorer sleep quality. Therefore, while technological mediation offers tools for better sleep, it also embeds sleep within the capitalist framework of efficiency and commodification, reflecting the broader societal forces driving the optimization and marketization of all aspects of life.

ASMR videos represent a slightly different form of technological mediation. Unlike sleep tracking devices that emphasize optimization, ASMR content focuses on relaxation and sensory pleasure. ASMR videos use sound and visual triggers to create a calming atmosphere, helping viewers-listeners achieve a state of relaxation conducive to sleep. This technological mediation of sleep through ASMR content offers an alternative to the productivity-focused approach of sleep tracking technologies.

At the same time, ASMR clearly operates within the digital attention economy. Content creators use platforms like YouTube and Patreon, optimizing content through algorithms and analytics to reach global audiences. This integration of ASMR into the digital economy exemplifies how even practices of rest and relaxation are mediated, curated and circulated within contemporary media systems. While in ASMR culture sleep appears principally as an emotional interface, it simultaneously functions within dominant cultural narratives regarding sleep and rest in modern Western societies.

Capitalizing on Relaxation

Without a doubt, while ASMR culture prioritizes sensorially rich moments of intimacy, calm and care, it is also deeply entwined with the neoliberal narratives, particularly through its economic dimension and its role in the management of sleep and relaxation. Within this framework, the culture of ASMR serves as both a response to and a product of neoliberal values, offering customizable solutions for stress and sleep management.

Neoliberal capitalism, characterized by individual responsibility and market-driven approaches, struggles to reconcile the unproductive nature of sleep with its productivity-centric ethos. Scholars such as Crary (2013) and Reiss (2014) highlight how capitalism views sleep as a barrier to consumption, aiming to manage and commodify it as a productive asset. The neoliberal emphasis on productivity and efficiency (Dardot and Laval 2014) has profound implications for sleep management. In the relentless pursuit of productivity and efficiency, individuals often sacrifice sleep, viewing it as a negotiable commodity rather than a biological necessity. In this context, the culture of ASMR arises as a digital remedy, reflecting the commodification of relaxation and sleep in a globalized, digitally mediated world. Market forces significantly shape the development and distribution of sleep technologies and aids, including ASMR videos. Content creators strategically utilize platforms like YouTube and Patreon to monetize their ASMR videos (Maddox 2021), tapping into the market for relaxation aids and self-care products and highlighting their role in boosting personal productivity and efficiency.

At the same time, ASMR culture aligns with neoliberal values of personal empowerment and responsibility for one's own health and well-being (Ayo 2012; Brown and Baker 2012), providing individuals with autonomy over their bedtime routines and offering them a means of managing stress and promoting relaxation on their own terms. The emphasis on self-management and personal empowerment present in ASMR culture resonates deeply with neoliberal discourses that prioritize individual choice

and autonomy in health-related matters, albeit always within socially approved and politically sanctioned frameworks (Ayo 2012).

Furthermore, within the agenda of neoliberal capitalism, the culture of ASMR emerges as a prominent player in the therapeutic culture and self-help industry (Illouz 2008; Furedi 2004), providing individuals with customizable tools for managing stress and sleep. Both ASMR artists and users usually frame the ASMR videos as self-help remedies for insomnia and anxiety (Gallagher 2016), positioning them as alternatives to traditional pharmacological interventions like 'sleeping pills' (Woods and Turner-Cobb 2023). A common objective of an ASMR content recognized by all interested parties is to assist viewers-listeners in managing their sleep. Viewers-listeners themselves frequently highlight this goal, commenting on the positive impact of ASMR videos on their sleep quality in the comments section. This intention is further reflected in the titles and descriptions of ASMR videos, where ASMR creators often promise quick and uninterrupted sleep or relief from insomnia. For instance, the ASMR artist behind the *asmr zeitgeist* YouTube channel affectionately refers to his followers as 'insomniacs' or 'sweet insomniacs', offering them a self-help remedy for the sleeping troubles.

Thus, personal agency and 'do-it-yourself' approach in managing sleep are emphasized, fitting neatly into the neoliberal narrative of individual responsibility for health and well-being. In general, ASMR's emphasis on self-soothing and stress reduction resonates with neoliberal ethos, framing relaxation and sleep management as matters of personal responsibility and choice. ASMR content thus becomes integrated into the neoliberal narrative of individual well-being, emphasizing the importance of self-care and personal agency in navigating the demands of contemporary life.

However, while ASMR culture aligns with the fast-paced, productivity-driven ethos of neoliberal capitalism, it also intersects with the principles of the slow movement advocating for deliberate living, prioritizing mindfulness, quality over quantity and reconnecting with natural rhythms. The following section explores how the culture of ASMR serves as a bridge between the demands of neoliberal capitalism and the ideals of the slow movement.

Slowly, Gently, Softly

ASMR videos users and members of the ASMR community are often encouraged to defy the principles of 'turbo-capitalism' (Honoré 2005). This involves decelerating their daily routines and cultivating greater mindfulness and attentiveness in their everyday lives. The extended rituals of sleep preparation featured in ASMR videos reveal a latent resistance to the rules of productivity imposed by neoliberal capitalism.

The deliberate deceleration promoted by ASMR culture is not just about physical relaxation but also about mental and emotional rejuvenation. In a world where speed and efficiency are often equated with success, the culture of ASMR offers an alternative narrative that values the quality of experiences over the quantity of achievements. The meticulous care with which ASMR creators produce their content – whether it is the gentle rustling of paper, the soft tapping of fingernails or the soothing cadence of whispered words – reflects an emphasis on savouring the moment. This attention to detail and intentional pacing aligns with the rules of slow living practices and slow movement's philosophy, advocating for a more measured and mindful approach to life (Parkins and Craig 2006).

The slow movement, initially sparked by the Slow Food movement in Italy during the 1980s in response to the opening of a McDonald's restaurant in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome, has expanded to various aspects of life (Andrews 2008). The protest and the ensuing movement were rooted in a critique of the superficiality and industrialization of food production, reflecting broader societal concerns about the erosion of cultural and culinary heritage. As Geoff Andrews elaborates in *The Slow Food Story: Politics and Pleasure*, the *Slow Food Manifesto* was first published in 1987, challenging the 'virus of fast life' (2008: 11) and advocating for a return to the pleasures and wisdom of traditional food practices. This manifesto laid the groundwork for what would become a global movement, extending its principles of mindfulness and sustainability to various aspects of life beyond food.

Carl Honoré, one of the most prominent voices in the slow movement, argues in his seminal book *In Praise of Slowness* (2005) that society's obsession with speed undermines well-being and that by slowing down, individuals can improve their quality of life and rediscover their connection

to the world around them. Honoré's critique of 'roaring turbo-capitalism' (Luttwak 2000: 1) underscores how the relentless pursuit of efficiency and productivity erodes the depth and richness of lived experiences.

ASMR culture, in its unique way, embodies this philosophy by offering a sanctuary from the pressures of constant activity. The slow and deliberate nature of ASMR content encourages viewers-listeners to engage fully with the present moment, promoting mindfulness and a deeper awareness of the surrounding environment. This mindful engagement reflects a core principle of the slow movement, which advocates for living in a way that allows each moment to be fully experienced and appreciated (Parkins and Craig 2006).

Moreover, ASMR culture encourages a reconnection with natural rhythms. The sounds and visuals commonly found in ASMR videos – such as the rhythmic tapping of rain, the gentle rustling of leaves or the calming hum of a soft voice – mirror the soothing patterns of nature which 'has its own timetable' (Honoré 2005: 222). These sensory experiences help viewers-listeners attune themselves to a slower, more organic pace, promoting a sense of harmony and balance that is often disrupted by the demands of modern life. This 'surrendering to the rhythms of nature' (Honoré 2005: 222) has a therapeutic value and is a core tenet of the slow movement, which advocates for living in harmony with the surrounding world.

ASMR's subtle resistance to neoliberal values is further evidenced in its promotion of relaxation and self-care, challenging the pervasive notion that success is solely defined by speed and efficiency. By providing a space where slowing down is not only permissible but encouraged, ASMR culture offers a form of quiet rebellion against the relentless drive for productivity. This aspect of ASMR is particularly significant as it underscores the slow movement's challenge to the notion that continuous productivity is the ultimate goal.

The dual nature of ASMR culture is what makes it particularly compelling. While it operates within a capitalist framework that commodifies sleep and promotes productivity, it also creates a space for individuals to slow down, relax and engage in mindful practices. This duality reflects a broader tension within society between the pressures of neoliberal capitalism and the desire for a more balanced and fulfilling life. The culture of ASMR exemplifies this tension, offering both a means of enhancing

productivity through better sleep and a pathway to a more deliberate and mindful existence.

Thus, ASMR culture occupies a unique position within the landscape of modern life. By embracing the ideals of the slow movement, it encourages individuals to re-evaluate how they approach sleep, relaxation and daily living. It challenges the pervasive narrative that equates success with speed and efficiency, proposing instead that true well-being lies in the ability to slow down, savour the moment and reconnect with the natural rhythms. This philosophy is echoed in the writings of other slow movement proponents like Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini (2001), who argues that the fast-paced, industrialized food system erodes cultural and ecological diversity and that a slower approach to food can restore balance and sustainability. Similarly, a slower, personalized, more intimate and flexible approach to sleep will help achieve and maintain well-being, as conveyed by ASMR culture.

In this way, ASMR stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of the slow movement in a world increasingly dominated by the relentless march of neoliberal capitalism. By providing a bridge between these two paradigms, ASMR offers a perspective on how individuals can navigate the complexities of contemporary life, finding balance and fulfilment amidst the pressures of a fast-paced world. The culture of ASMR suggests that the slow and mindful practices depicted in the videos not only enhance personal well-being but also serve as a subtle critique of the values underpinning neoliberal capitalism. ASMR culture offers a way of imagining a different way of sleeping (and living) that aligns more closely with the principles of the slow movement.

Tucking You In

Now, two examples of *Tucking You In* ASMR videos are examined, where the performer simulates the act of tucking the viewer-listener into bed to promote restful sleep. The videos selected for analysis represent some of the most prominent and typical examples of this roleplay subgenre,

featuring both female and male performers. These particular videos have been chosen to analyse the visual and auditory elements designed to induce relaxation and comfort as well as to identify the techniques and themes employed in sleep-related ASMR content. Additionally, comments left under these videos will be examined to explore how viewers-listeners discuss their sleep experiences, focusing on ASMR's role in improving sleep quality and influencing sleep patterns, its integration into bedtime rituals, the intimacy and care it fosters and its impact on coping with pressures related to proper rest in a productivity-driven society.

The video from the YouTube channel *ASMR Glow* (2019b), titled *ASMR Tucking You In (Fire crackling, Skin care, Soft Sounds, Ear Brushing, Hair Play...)* and published on 22 April 2019, begins with a close-up of a young woman in a grey, fluffy sweater, adorned with silver chains and her brown hair pinned back slightly messily. The setting is a warm peach-coloured room, and the first words the young woman utters are, 'Are you feeling comfortable?' addressing the viewer-listener directly through the camera.

With a gentle smile and a soothing voice, the woman evokes a friendly, neighbourly persona, akin to a comforting *girl-next-door* type. She reaches behind the camera, simulating the act of draping a blanket over the viewer-listener, enhancing their feeling of being tucked in. The woman's demeanour exudes warmth and intimacy, resembling a caring mother figure. The room's warm, muted lighting, cast by a metal lamp with crystal ornaments, creates a cosy ambience, enhancing the sense of a personal sleep environment. The woman, in whispered tones, implies that the space is meant to represent the viewer-listener's bedroom. She recalls a previous conversation about the viewer-listener's sleep troubles and reassures them that, as a sleep specialist, this evening she will ensure a comfortable, restful night.

Viewed over 2.5 million times and commented on more than 1,600 times, the video progresses with the performer expressing familiarity with the viewer-listener's preferences, suggesting a close, trusting relationship. The session takes place in the intimate setting of a bedroom, with actions designed to induce relaxation and promote sleep. The woman lights a candle with a wooden lid, reminiscent of a crackling fireplace, and offers

a cup of warm milk, promising its effectiveness as a sleep aid. Throughout the tucking-you-in session, she focuses on the viewer-listener's head and face, wrapping them snugly in a pink blanket, brushing the viewer-listener's hair, applying a warm towel and cream to their face and placing a gel mask over their eyes. As the session nears its end, the woman reads out loud a bedtime story from an old, gilded book, with the gentle tapping of fingernails adding a soothing auditory element. As the video concludes, the imagery becomes blurrier and the woman's whispering grows indistinct, utilizing the ASMR trigger known as *inaudible whispering*, where words merge into a stream of soothing sounds. This technique is supposed to help viewers-listeners drift off to sleep.

ASMR Glow's video exemplifies the *Tucking You In* roleplay subgenre within ASMR culture, where the performer takes on the role of preparing the viewer-listener for sleep. In the video, Sharon, the creator of the *ASMR Glow* YouTube channel, frequently hints at her role as a sleep specialist, emphasizing her efficiency and experience in the sleep industry. Her comments about the usefulness of this kind of job and the delightful idea of 'just pampering people' underscore the quasi-professional care and therapeutic aspects of ASMR Glow's role within the ASMR community. This video not only attempts to provide a comforting sleep environment but also incorporates various sleep aids and forms a bedtime ritual that viewers-listeners can adopt to improve their sleep quality.

The emotional labour evident in Sharon's performance reflects long-standing societal expectations placed on women. Arlie Russell Hochschild, in her influential book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (2012), discusses how women are often socialized to perform emotional labour, suggesting a natural propensity for care and emotional support. ASMR videos often mirror these societal norms, with many female artists embodying roles that emphasize caregiving, tenderness and emotional reassurance.

However, in ASMR Glow's video, the artist's portrayal transcends these traditional roles by integrating various personas: a nurturing mother, a supportive friend, a professional caregiver and a sleep specialist. This multifaceted approach subtly challenges the stereotypical narrative that confines women to domestic and nurturing roles. Instead, it places them within

a professional context, highlighting their expertise and authority in the growing sleep industry. This nuanced depiction suggests a shift in how emotional labour is perceived, moving towards a more complex understanding that values women's contributions both in personal and professional spheres. This blending of roles in ASMR content indicates an evolving recognition of the diverse capabilities of female performers, extending beyond traditional expectations and highlighting their importance in a professional realm like sleep therapy.

Of course, the genre of ASMR videos, where the performer pretends to prepare the viewer-listener for a restful sleep, is not exclusive to female ASMR artists. The realm of male ASMR is continuously expanding, featuring prominent *Tucking You In* videos created by male artists. The *ASMR Boyfriend Puts You To Bed – Loving Boyfriend Comfort – Male Whisper* video (Tyson ASMR 2021) serves as another exemplary model in exploring the ways ASMR fosters intimate connections related to sleep. This particular video, with its duration of just over sixteen minutes, fits neatly into the average mean sleep latency[11] of 11.7 minutes in adults (Iskander et al. 2023) making it an effective aid for those seeking relaxation before entering sleep. The video has garnered significant attention, with around 115,000 views at the time of writing, indicating its popularity and the resonance it has with the fans of growing realm of male ASMR.

The setting is immediately inviting and intimate. A man visible on the screen, Tyson himself, greets the viewer-listener with a warm, 'Hi babe, how are you?' The soft, warm lighting in the dimly lit bedroom sets a calming atmosphere and enhances the viewer-listener's sense of comfort and intimacy. The bedroom itself is depicted as a shared personal space, with a silver lamp in the corner and slightly ajar white doors visible on the right side of the frame. The props are minimal yet purposeful, with a distinctive heavy grey blanket, adding to the cosy, personal feel of the setting (Figure 24).

11 *Sleep latency* is 'the time from lights out to the start of the first epoch of sleep' (Berry 2012: 79). *Mean sleep latency* is determined by averaging the time it takes for an individual to fall asleep from the start of daytime nap periods to the onset of sleep (Iskander and others 2023).



Figure 24. A calming bedtime atmosphere, with soft lighting and a cosy, masculine touch (Tyson ASMR 2021). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

Tyson's appearance further contributes to the intimate ambience. He sports a sleeveless grey shirt, which exposes his muscular arms and a large forearm tattoo. His slightly rugged look, with a few days' beard growth and a short, stylish haircut, combined with a silver chain and a bracelet of wooden beads, conveys a masculine yet approachable vibe. This careful attention to personal detail helps create a relatable and comforting presence.

Throughout the video, Tyson embodies the role of a caring boyfriend. He gently wraps the viewer-listener (his girlfriend) in a blanket, whispering reassurances like, 'I just want you to be comfortable … Be quiet, relax'. His actions are slow and deliberate, designed to maximize relaxation. He touches the camera, simulating rhythmic tapping and caressing the viewer-listener's face, and makes soft, onomatopoeic sounds with his tongue – a common ASMR trigger known for its calming effects (Figure 25). This physical and auditory engagement fosters a deep sense of personal attention, a hallmark of many ASMR videos focused on bedtime routines.

Tyson's conversational style further enhances the sense of intimacy. He asks about his girlfriend's day and shares details of his own, simulating a dialogue that feels both personal and comforting. He recounts his daily



Figure 25. A caring boyfriend figure gently caresses the viewer-listener's face (Tyson ASMR 2021). Image used with permission. Copyright held by the creator.

routine – working, lunching with a friend, going to the gym and finally the joy of coming home to his girlfriend. This narrative of daily life, shared in a soothing whisper, grounds the viewer-listener in a shared reality, making the interaction feel authentic and relatable.

A notable aspect of this video is its careful avoidance of sexualization. Tyson frequently compliments the viewer-listener, calling them 'cute' and 'beautiful', but always within a safe, affectionate context. For example, he humorously comments on needing lip balm for his lips and discusses a conspiracy theory about the ineffectiveness of lip moisturizing products, which subtly shifts the focus away from any potential erotic undertones. Even when he compliments his girlfriend's physical appearance, it is done in a manner that emphasizes admiration and care without crossing into sexual territory.

This careful balance is maintained when Tyson mentions a female high school fellow student he once knew who complimented his hands. He asks if it makes the viewer-listener jealous but quickly reassures, 'I'm kidding'. This interplay of teasing and reassurance underscores the platonic nature of the interaction, reinforcing the idea that intimacy does not have to be

sexual to be meaningful. Tyson's approach in this video exemplifies how ASMR content can create a space for non-sexualized intimacy, focusing instead on comfort and emotional connection.

Despite the apparent success in creating a comforting and intimate atmosphere, there is an underlying tension that warrants a critical examination. It is somewhat surprising and arguably incongruous that, despite portraying a boyfriend–girlfriend relationship, the video meticulously avoids any sexual elements. The relationship dynamics depicted are markedly platonic, which might seem counterintuitive given the romantic context implied by a boyfriend's presence. This deliberate desexualization raises questions about the boundaries and expectations within ASMR content. Of course, one of the potential reasons for desexualization of ASMR videos published on YouTube is the platform's stringent policies against sexual content. Admitting that ASMR content is meant for sexual gratification or to promote explicit material could result in creators having their videos banned or their accounts deleted (Lucas 2022). The creator of the *Tyson ASMR* YouTube channel has stated multiple times that the asexual style of most of his videos is a necessary response to YouTube's regulations, yet this has not prevented his channel from receiving strikes from the platform. YouTube's restrictions compel creators to carefully navigate content boundaries to avoid potential shutdowns, reflecting the broader challenges faced by ASMR artists on digital platforms and sometimes forcing creators to move their efforts to other places, such as internet content subscription service OnlyFans.[12]

This strategy of avoiding any sexual elements is evident, for instance, when Tyson's character in the video comments on his girlfriend's 'nice and juicy' lips and immediately backtracks, saying again, 'I'm just kidding', as if to avoid crossing an invisible line. This moment reveals an almost reflexive aversion to sexual references, suggesting that such topics are perceived as taboo by most of the ASMR community – and as unwelcome by YouTube's policy. While this avoidance can be seen as a means to maintain a safe and

12 At the beginning of 2024, Tyson also turned to this service to publish materials that circumvent YouTube's content restrictions. This strategic move allows Tyson to maintain creative control over his content while avoiding the risk of strikes or account deletions imposed by YouTube's guidelines.

universally comfortable space, it highlights an underlying discomfort with integrating romantic and sexual intimacy in ASMR narratives shaped by the multiple constraints.

The video's approach to intimacy without sexualization can be interpreted as both a strength and a limitation. On one hand, it provides a space where viewers-listeners can experience care and affection devoid of any sexual connotations, which can be profoundly comforting and inclusive. For example, this is evident in much of the highly praised ASMR content produced by South Korean male ASMRtists, who focus on role-playing the ideal male companion characterized by a subdued and sensitive nature to provide emotional comfort rather than relying on sexual appeal (Lee 2022).

On the other hand, this approach might seem to artificially constrain the portrayal of a boyfriend–girlfriend relationship, omitting a natural aspect of romantic partnerships, often connected to the bedroom setting. This duality underscores the complex interplay between intimacy and ASMR, where the need to foster a universally safe environment sometimes necessitates the exclusion of elements that would be considered integral to romantic intimacy in other contexts.

As the video progresses, Tyson continues to encourage relaxation. He urges the viewer-listener to close their eyes and repeats, 'Relax, relax, relax'. At one point, he also touches his own face, expressing self-consciousness about blemishes, and seeks reassurance from his girlfriend, asking, 'Am I still beautiful?' This moment of vulnerability fosters a reciprocal sense of care, enhancing the emotional connection between Tyson and the viewer-listener of the video.

The conclusion of the video maintains this gentle, caring tone. Tyson plans to take care of practical tasks like walking the dogs and lowering the bedroom temperature, reinforcing his role as a caretaker. He promises to return after a shower, ensuring the viewer-listener that he will be back to provide comfort. The final gesture is a gentle kiss on the cheek, delivered from the side of the camera, which serves as a symbolic goodnight. This subtle sign-off underscores the non-sexual, nurturing nature of the relationship being portrayed.

Both of the analysed *Tucking You In* videos highlight the nuanced ways in which ASMR culture can foster deep intimacy connected to peaceful sleep preceded by various bedtime rituals. Through a combination of

personal attention, roleplay, non-sexualized affection and the use of various sleep aids, creators build a safe space for relaxation and emotional comfort. Their approaches exemplify the unique appeal of ASMR content, providing viewers-listeners with a sense of connection and care that is both intimate and profoundly soothing. The videos stand as a testament to the power of ASMR to create meaningful, non-sexualized relationships that offer comfort and relaxation to its audience. Yet, they also invite a critical reflection on the boundaries and definitions of intimacy within this genre, prompting contemplation of the emotional labour performed by women and men in ASMR caregiving roles and consideration of what is gained and what might be lost in the deliberately desexualized portrayals of intimacy in ASMR culture.

What is more, user comments left under both analysed *Tucking You In* ASMR videos also serve as a testament to the power of ASMR to create meaningful relationships that offer comfort and relaxation to its audience. These comments provide rich, anecdotal evidence of how viewers-listeners use these videos to manage their sleep. These testimonials reveal patterns in how individuals experience the effects of ASMR on anxiety, stress reduction and the establishment of bedtime rituals, underscoring the intimate and personalized nature of these experiences.

Getting a Good Night's Sleep

Many viewers-listeners of ASMR videos express gratitude for the calming and soothing effects of ASMR content, highlighting its role in combating sleep difficulties. For instance, one viewer-listener writes in the comments section of ASMR Glow's (2019b) video:

> For quite some time now, I've struggled with sleeping. Sometimes I sleep like a log, other times I have a hard time falling asleep. Now I'm in one of those periods where I have trouble sleeping. I heard about ASMR and thought I'd check it out. It worked on me. I fell asleep quickly that night.

This comment reflects a common theme among ASMR users who find these videos effective in alleviating sleep problems. The user highlights how ASMR videos served as an unexpected but effective solution to their

fluctuating sleep patterns, demonstrating the potential of ASMR content to reduce pre-sleep anxiety. Similarly, another viewer-listener succinctly states under Tyson ASMR's (2021) video, 'This is better than therapy', underscoring the therapeutic benefits of ASMR in promoting relaxation and sleep.

The previous commenter further elaborates on how ASMR videos have become a crucial part of their nightly routine, emphasizing their benefits in relieving sleeplessness:

> I checked out more of your videos, and now I'm hooked. I need your videos every night. [...] So now you're responsible for me getting good night's sleeps, and I'm very grateful.

This testimony underscores the perceived intimacy and personal connection fostered by ASMR content. The viewer-listener's description of the ASMR artist as a comforting presence in their bedroom suggests a significant reduction in anxiety and a sense of being cared for, which are critical factors for restful sleep. This sentiment is echoed by another individual who comments on Tyson's video, 'This by far is the most comforting ASMR, I feel so safe and relaxed with you', highlighting the deep personal connection and sense of security that ASMR content can provide.

The comments also reveal that ASMR videos help viewers-listeners establish and maintain bedtime rituals, which are essential for good sleep hygiene. Another user explains in their comment left under ASMR Glow's analysed film:

> Each time I watch your videos, not even ten minutes in, I'm falling asleep. This is the effect your asmr videos have on me, and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate that.

This statement illustrates the efficiency with which ASMR content can induce sleep, facilitating the establishment of a consistent bedtime routine. The regular use of ASMR videos as part of a nightly ritual helps condition the body and mind to prepare for sleep, fostering a more structured and predictable sleep pattern. Supporting this, another person mentions under Tyson's analysed video, 'I look for this every night. I subscribe to it and turn on notifications to it. Very satisfying 💓💓💓', indicating how integral ASMR has become to their nightly routine.

Another fan of ASMR Glow's analysed film shares a similar experience, stating, 'I've always worked 3rd shift and had issues sleeping and relaxing. ASMR has helped so much'. This comment highlights the role of ASMR

culture in addressing sleep issues related to irregular work schedules. This person's reliance on ASMR content to overcome the challenges posed by shift work underscores the effectiveness of ASMR videos in creating a conducive environment for sleep, even under less-than-ideal circumstances. In line with this, another user notes under Tyson's video, 'This is amazing, you can put me to sleep anytime, it always works!', showcasing how ASMR is perceived as a reliable aid for those with challenging schedules.

The improvement in sleep quality and reduced time to fall asleep reported by viewers-listeners are recurring themes in the comments. Multiple testimonies highlight the perceived enhancement in sleep quality attributed to regular viewing of ASMR content. The dependency on these videos for a good night's sleep suggests that ASMR not only facilitates quicker sleep onset but also enhances the overall sleep experience. One fan of ASMR Glow's video shares their experience of sleep disruptions caused by professional responsibilities, stating:

> As a teacher, I have to be up early and it's very difficult for me to get to sleep at an appropriate time because of all the grading I do.

The viewer-listener's struggle to balance work-related tasks with adequate sleep is alleviated by ASMR videos, which help them fall asleep more quickly and maintain better sleep hygiene. Similarly, another of the users of Tyson's video exclaims, 'Omg perfect timing I'm gonna use this to fall asleep now', demonstrating the immediate relief and convenience that ASMR provides in managing sleep schedules.

Comments frequently mention the demanding schedules imposed by work or school, highlighting the importance of a consistent sleep routine. For example, another viewer-listener of ASMR Glow's video notes: 'Thank you, it's the day before school and I need sleep, this is helping'. Here, the ASMR video acts as an essential aid, providing immediate relief from pre-sleep anxiety and facilitating rest before a significant day. This reflects a broader trend where individuals use ASMR content to cope with the pressures of a productivity-driven society, which demands a normative and structured sleeping pattern. Additionally, another fan comments on Tyson's analysed video, 'This is pleasant with a warm human touch. Love this', emphasizing the human-like comfort and care emanating from this particular content, which is crucial for relaxation and preparing for sleep.

Overall, the comments cited and analysed above, drawn from a total of 1,917 comments left under the examined videos (1,652 comments for ASMR

Glow's video and 265 for Tyson's video), effectively capture the prevailing sentiment within the ASMR community. They highlight ASMR's utility in assisting users to personalize their sleep environments and routines, accommodating diverse work schedules and demanding lifestyles, thereby enhancing overall sleep quality. Additionally, these comments underscore the comfort and care aspects of the ASMR content, which are crucial for promoting relaxation and well-being, essential for a good night's sleep.

Rest Well!

The intimate form of media consumption encouraged by ASMR videos and the most vulnerable state for humans, which is sleep, intersect in ASMR culture in a truly unique way. Exploring ASMR's influence on sleep reveals a realm where soothing sounds blend with the intimacy of bedtime tranquillity. ASMR is not merely a passing trend; it proves to be a valuable tool for deepening the understanding of good rest and improving sleep in today's digitally connected world.

From early studies showing its ability to reduce anxiety and induce relaxation, to newer research combining different sounds to help people fall asleep faster, ASMR's benefits are becoming clearer. This phenomenon, most often experienced through online videos, resonates deeply in contemporary culture by offering a counterpoint to the fast pace of modern life. It encourages slowing down and savouring moments of calm and emotional well-being.

Our investigation places ASMR within larger social frameworks. In a world where capitalism often turns sleep into a commodity, ASMR stands out. It provides personal comfort and connection, fostering intimacy and emotional ease through gentle role-playing and triggers that soothe the senses. This is particularly evident in the *Tucking You In* ASMR videos, exemplified by the works from the YouTube channels *ASMR Glow* and *Tyson ASMR*. However, while ASMR culture largely challenges the notion that sleep should be optimized solely for productivity, it must still operate within the confines of neoliberal capitalist culture.

At the same time, ASMR is not just about improving sleep. It encourages a rethinking of how rest is approached in a world constantly

buzzing with activity. It extends a heartfelt invitation to cultivate a balanced, mindful approach to nightly – and daily – routines. It also highlights the power of sensory experiences to restore well-being.

Last but not least, ASMR culture invites appreciation of quiet moments and the fostering of affective bonds with the surrounding world in all its complexity. Amid the challenges of modern living, the ASMR phenomenon serves as a reminder of the ongoing search for intimacy – a barely audible whisper, gentle scratch and rhythmic tap guiding the way towards a more harmonious mode of being.

CHAPTER 7

Tapping You: Conclusion

In concluding this exploration of the phenomenon of ASMR, it is essential to encapsulate the intricate and multifaceted nature of transgressive intimacy – the central concept of this book. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the areas that have not been addressed here: other research directions and perspectives that offer further potential for investigating ASMR. By doing so, this conclusion aims to open up possible future avenues for exploring this fascinating phenomenon.

The discussion presented in this book has examined the numerous philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of transgressive intimacy present in ASMR culture, clarifying how the interplay of performance, sound, affect, posthumanism and sleep contributes to this unique phenomenon. A wide range of ASMR artworks, along with contributions from the ASMR community, has been analysed. Key ideas and concepts identified as central to understanding ASMR have been shown to interweave in meaningful ways. Above all, transgressive intimacy has been approached not only as a concept marking the transcendence of conventional boundaries of intimate practices and narratives but also as one that redefines them – creating new spaces for intimate experiences in the digital age.

The origins and definitions of ASMR were the starting point, revealing how this once-obscure phenomenon entered mainstream consciousness worldwide, crossing artistic, cultural and geographic boundaries. On the one hand, ASMR has developed globally into an artistic practice with its own aesthetic conventions. On the other hand, as a form of digital self-care, it is deeply entangled with the wellness industry, shaped by the dynamics of consumption, commodification and commercialization. Soon, ASMR came to be recognized by the scientific community as a legitimate subject of study, regardless of whether it leans more towards artistic expression or commercial production. Although it was initially met with scepticism, ASMR has gradually gained acceptance among scholars from various disciplines – including psychology, neuroscience, media studies and cultural

studies – as its effects have been increasingly reported, documented and analysed.

Then, the investigation presented in this book focused on the concept of *performance*. Performance in ASMR constitutes an act of doing intimacy differently. It involves meticulous, ritualistic actions such as scratching and tapping, creating a sensory experience that feels intimate and direct despite being mediated through a screen. This kind of performance evokes a visceral response, fostering a sense of closeness and care. In the broader context, the ASMR community, through shared narratives and collective participation, has created a rich mosaic of intimate connections that defy traditional notions of physical proximity. This communal aspect of ASMR underscores its role in cultivating a sense of belonging and shared affective experiences, further reinforcing the concept of transgressive intimacy.

The discussion then turned to what lies at the heart of ASMR: sound – gentle whispers, rhythmic tapping and subtle scratching that connect ASMR artists with their audience on a deeply intimate level. These sounds dissolve the boundaries between digital and physical worlds, creating an immersive experience where viewers-listeners feel the performer's presence. Sound in ASMR videos has great potential to trigger a multitude of interpretive and affective possibilities, classifying ASMR as a new genre of sound art or even a trend in contemporary music. In the analyses, this perspective has been enriched by concepts such as *musique concrète* and *deep listening*. ASMR artists, in their attempts to create intimate soundscapes using everyday objects and sophisticated recording technologies, resemble *musique-concrète* composers who blur the nature/culture dichotomy in their compositions. The philosophy of deep listening, on the other hand, resonates in ASMR, enhancing the sensory and emotional engagement of ASMR users, as it highlights how establishing intimate connections through sound involves active listening to both the external world and one's inner self.

Within this study, also the concept of *affect* was integral to the understanding of the ASMR phenomenon. Affects are becomings and potentialities, described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987: 162) as 'flows of intensity' that precede language, form and consciousness. In ASMR culture, a unique form of intimacy arises from the interplay between predictable, familiar conventions and moments of surprise that spark affective

intensities. The Spinozian–Deleuzian–Guattarian perspective on affects demonstrates how these intensities flow between human and non-human bodies, forming intimate connections and contributing to the transgressive nature of intimacy. In this process, the materiality of objects used in ASMR performances plays a significant role. The interaction with non-human elements made of matter triggers affective responses linked to touch and sound, highlighting the bodily and sensory nature of the ASMR experience.

The exploration then moved into the realm of the *posthuman*, examining how ASMR culture challenges anthropocentric perspectives and decentres the human subject. By including non-human actors, ASMR videos broaden the understanding of intimacy, blurring boundaries between the human and non-human to explore new forms of connection in today's world. The posthuman sensibility in ASMR is closely related to the post-cinematic experience in contemporary culture. ASMR artists frequently utilize post-cinematic techniques such as interfaces, non-human viewpoints and fragmentary narratives, which contribute to a posthuman mode of experiencing reality. These techniques allow for the portrayal of non-human perspectives and challenge conventional human frameworks, providing new ways to engage with the world.

The next part of this book highlighted the close connection between ASMR and sleep, with particular emphasis on the nurturing dimension of the phenomenon, making the intimacy of sleep another key element in ASMR culture. In an age marked by overstimulation and irregular schedules, ASMR videos emerge as an effective tool to soothe and lull viewers-listeners into restful states while addressing modern anxieties and sleep problems. Through roleplays like *Tucking You In*, ASMR fosters a deeply personal experience, integrating elements like gentle whispers, nurturing gestures and calming sounds to create a sense of safety and care. This focus on a good night's sleep underscores ASMR's role in self-care and mental well-being, reflecting broader societal trends towards managing sleep amidst the pressures of a fast-paced world.

Throughout this book, the triggers of scratching and tapping have been emphasized as emblematic of the ASMR experience. These activities are not only central to the creation of ASMR content but also metaphorically significant in understanding the nature of transgressive intimacy. Scratching represents the penetration of surface layers to reach deeper, more

intimate spaces. This act of breaking through the superficial to access the core resonates with the way ASMR content seeks to create a deep, sensory connection. Similarly, tapping involves a gentle, rhythmic interaction that provides a soothing effect, with its repetitive nature fostering a sense of comfort. In this study, these emblematic elements served as metaphors for the deeper connections and intimate spaces that ASMR seeks to cultivate and explore.

Overall, ASMR's pervasive influence in today's culture reflects a broader trend towards seeking new forms of intimacy and connection – with the self, others and the surrounding world. This phenomenon provides a lens for examining the evolving nature of intimacy in the contemporary era, suggesting that intimacy is not confined to physical presence or traditional relationships but can be experienced in diverse ways. The transgressive intimacy of ASMR points to a future in which interactions become fluid, open and indeterminate – yet potentially more inclusive and deeply felt.

That said, addressing the future also entails outlining potential paths for further research on ASMR – the ones that extend beyond the conceptual frameworks explored in this book. One such path involves examining ASMR through the lens of intermediality, understood as 'the diverse relations between specific media and their historical and critical contexts' (Durcan 2021: 6). While ASMR has largely been analysed in relation to YouTube culture, wellness discourses or affective communities, it remains understudied in terms of its intermedial resonances – how it intersects with, borrows from, or influences other cultural and media forms such as experimental film, spectral music, video art, and even advertising. Scholars focusing on intermediality, such as Kim Knowles (2020) and Sarah Durcan (2021), as well as Knowles in collaboration with Marion Schmid (2022) and with Jonathan Walley (2024), show how various artistic and media phenomena foreground embodied perception, hapticity and sensorial presence – concerns that also resonate strongly with ASMR's aesthetics. ASMR's use of close-up framing, measured pacing, soft lighting and intricate sound design indeed invites a reconsideration of its status – not merely as a vernacular digital genre but as a sensorial practice that traverses media boundaries and contributes to what Knowles and Schmid (2022: 3) define as 'cinematic intermediality': a space of 'in-betweens of different artistic media'.

More attention could also be given to the historical precursors and anticipations of ASMR-like strategies in earlier aesthetic practices. While

the term *ASMR* only entered public discourse in the early 2010s, techniques associated with it – such as whisper, close sonic proximity or affective attention to gesture and texture – can be identified in experimental cinema or performance art well before its use in ASMR culture. These continuities are not merely incidental. As Durcan (2021) argues, artists' moving image very often operates as a space for sensory experimentation, memory work and bodily engagement. Exploring how such practices might align with or foreshadow ASMR aesthetics could deepen the understanding of how affective embodiment has been articulated across different media traditions and how ASMR may be seen as an emergent node in a longer genealogy of sensory experimentation.

In parallel, research should continue to investigate how ASMR practices and aesthetics are evolving today. This includes critical engagement with their increasing commodification, integration into commercial branding strategies as well as algorithmic optimization. By now, ASMR aesthetics have already appeared in numerous commercials across lifestyle, food and fashion sectors (including campaigns by IKEA, Nescafé, McDonald's, Michael Kors and many other companies), in beauty promotions (with videos tagged as #ASMR posted on TikTok by brands such as Huda Beauty and Sephora), in relaxation-focused mobile applications (such as *ASMR – Brain Tingles*) and even in videos generated by artificial intelligence (AI) via platforms like <asmr.so>. Among these, AI-generated content is particularly intriguing, given the current unpredictability surrounding how AI and ASMR might evolve together. In any case, the emergence of ASMR content designed for diverse purposes and environments – including virtual reality – points not only to the characteristic 'stickiness' of ASMR aesthetics but also to an ongoing shift towards increasingly immersive and technologically sophisticated forms of media. At this point, the focus moves beyond mere perception and consumption of ASMR videos to the ways in which ASMR culture may reconfigure relations between human and technological agents.

Finally, another promising direction for research lies in examining ASMR as a global media practice that is nevertheless shaped locally by cultural values, audience tastes and current events. While ASMR aesthetics often rely on shared sensorial logics that transcend linguistic and national boundaries, closer attention to local styles, platforms and viewers-listeners' expectations may reveal interesting cultural specificities. For instance, South

Korean mukbang–ASMR hybrids, portrayals of rural life in a South African village featured on the *AFRICAN XHOSA ASMR* YouTube channel or the widespread popularity of *Indian scalp massage* videos – all point to diverse affective economies and aesthetic preferences. What is more, current affairs can also influence ASMR. It seems that periods of political or social tension – such as national elections, public protests or pandemic outbreaks – often coincide with a surge in ASMR content, ranging from calming videos aimed at alleviating anxiety to more explicit references to topical issues. All of the above underscores that ASMR is no longer merely a soothing media form but a culturally embedded practice shaped by local contexts and global forces.

Laura U. Marks (2002: ix), at the margins of her theory of *haptic visuality*, suggests that the most powerful experiences usually cannot be fully captured in written words but only 'brushed' by them. This book has attempted to brush the powerful experience of ASMR with words. At times, ASMR resisted: it defied the grasp of language. Yet in return, it offered its own unique mode of brushing. Through the gentle strokes of a simple hairbrush or the caress of fingers across a microphone, it left its traces – showing how to *hear the tap* and *feel the scratch*, proposing new gestures of care and intimacy in the digitally connected world we inhabit.

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