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ASMR explained: Role play videos as a form of touching with the eyes and the ears

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Abstract

In this paper, I introduce and discuss technologically-mediated ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) in the form of role play videos. I suggest using *haptic audio-visuality* as a theoretical elaboration to describe a form of touching with the eyes and the ears through interpersonal triggers, direct address and directional touching. And I present ASMR role play videos as a category that can be viewed as *both* a shared pleasure *and* a personal experience. Despite its mediated — body-to-screen rather than body-to-body — and one-way format, research suggests that ASMR can be regarded as an intimate, present and interpersonal experience. ASMR has succeeded in integrating the viewer-listeners' physical reality with virtuality and creating a perception of presence. What is missing, however, is a more in-depth exploration of how this perception of presence is created through the performative construction of a particular kind of *attuned, imaginative and interactive viewer-listener* within ASMR role play videos. This is what I intend to explore in this paper.

Contents

Introduction

"'Have you ever had a cranial nerve exam before?' Well hell yeah, it's my 13th this week," one commenter wrote on an ASMR video titled "ASMR Binaural (3D) Cranial Nerve Examination Role Play for Tingles, Relaxation, and Sleep" by content creator and ASMRtist Heather Feather ASMR in 2013. The comment is referring to an ASMR doctor role play video on YouTube, in which 'Heather' plays the role of the doctor and audio-visually re-enacts a cranial nerve exam addressing the viewer-listener, as if he was present at the same time and space as the actions performed in the pre-recorded video. To an outsider who does not know what ASMR is, a comment like this might seem odd and pointless. Yet this video has been viewed 4.8 million times (in February 2021) and exemplifies a popular type of ASMR video: the role play.

ASMR, an abbreviation of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, refers to both a physical reaction and an Internet phenomenon. ASMR is first and foremost the name of a perceptual phenomenon characterised by a physical tingling, a euphoric sensation that typically emanates from the head or scalp and runs down the spine and out towards the shoulders (Barratt and Davis, 2015). The response, often referred to as *tingles*, is triggered by visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile and/or cognitive stimuli. ASMR can be triggered in daily life or by mediated forms like ASMR videos, a performative phenomenon most prevalent on YouTube and reminiscent of a form of "personalised theatre", designed for Internet-native audiences (Gallagher, 2016). In an ASMR video, a content creator (known as an ASMRtist) appears in front of a camera and a set of (binaural) microphones and performs a series of hyper-focused and typically overlooked, or *overheard*, everyday sounds. The sounds are coupled with gentle, slow and repetitive movements intended to trigger tingles and make viewer-listeners relax and feel at ease. This performative ASMR is what I call *technologically-mediated ASMR*. The term enfolds ASMR in all technologically-mediated forms, whether auditory, visual or audio-visual, along with meditation and relaxation apps such as *Calm* and *Headspace*. In this paper, the term will refer specifically to the ASMR video format and focus on ASMR *role play videos*, in which the ASMRtist plays the role of *e.g.*, a doctor, a massage therapist or a hairdresser, as presented on YouTube.

In addition, I refer to the individuals listening to and watching ASMR content as *viewer-listeners*. This is because I want to emphasise the multisensory nature of the audio-visual experience — what is seen, heard, felt and experienced bodily and emotionally. Furthermore, referring to someone as only a 'viewer' or a 'listener' seems too reductive, as most ASMR videos contain both visuals and sounds. The term thus points towards a phenomenological standpoint rather than a call-to-action standpoint. Terms like 'users' will be used only when referring to social media users in particular.

In this paper, I discuss technologically-mediated ASMR in the form of role play videos. In the first part of the paper, I introduce ASMR's origins, key terms, practices and categories. In the second part of the paper, I suggest using *haptic audio-visuality* as a theoretical elaboration (*cf.*, Marks, 2000) to describe a form of touching with the eyes and the ears, and I analyse an ASMR role play video as an example of this. Finally, I discuss the concept of the 'user' in a context of media reception, and conceptualise the term 'viewer-listener' in light of ASMR as a para-social, immersive phenomenon. I present ASMR role play videos as something that can be viewed as both a shared pleasure *and* a personal experience. In terms of the latter, I argue that intimacy, presence and immediacy are key features in performatively constructing an attuned, imaginative and interactive viewer-listener using interpersonal triggers in role play videos.

Research context

ASMR has been around for over a decade and has remained a trending topic since appearing as a subcultural curiosity online (Google Trends, 2020). Yet relatively little research has been devoted to ASMR, and most of it was produced in the 2010s. Aside from peer-reviewed articles on ASMR from a psychological and/or neuroscientific point-of-view (see *e.g.*, Fredborg, *et al.*, 2018; McErlean and Banissy, 2018; Poerio, *et al.*, 2018; del Campo and Kehle, 2016; Barratt and Davis, 2015), not much research has been carried out to investigate the technologically-mediated aspects of the phenomenon. Instead, recent research has explored themes such as gender, sexuality, Internet culture and mediated intimacy (see *e.g.*, Andersen, 2015; Gallagher, 2018, 2016; Iossifidis, 2017; Bennett, 2016; Waldron, 2017; Smith and Snider, 2019; Klausen, 2019, in press; Zappavigna, 2020; Spencer, 2020; Hudelson, 2020; Łapińska, 2020; Maddox, 2021a, 2021b).

Research on ASMR as a mediated, bodily phenomenon taps into a developing field of embodiment-based mediation research, which is prevalent across the social sciences, cultural studies, media studies and elsewhere (see *e.g.*, Sobchack, 2004; Barker, *et al.*, 2018; Andreassen, *et al.*, 2018). Despite being unidirectional and mediated — body-to-screen rather than body-to-body — research suggests that ASMR can be regarded as an intimate, present and interpersonal experience in which "the screen finds a way into the body and the body a way into the screen" [1]. Sounds can feel like touch (Klausen and Have, 2019) and there (the actions on screen) can feel like here (the location of the viewer-listener). Despite physical distance and temporal displacement, ASMR integrates the viewer-listeners' physical reality with virtuality and creates a perception of presence (Waldron, 2017; Zappavigna, 2020; Spencer, 2020; Klausen, in press). What is missing, however, is a more in-depth exploration of how this perception of presence is created through the construction of the viewer-listener in a context of media reception. This is what I intend to explore in this paper.

This research is informed by more than six years of academic and personal interest in technologically-mediated ASMR (Klausen, 2016; Klausen and Stephensen, 2017; Klausen, 2019; Klausen and Have, 2019; Klausen, in press). I have engaged in empirical, analytical and phenomenological work on Facebook, Reddit and especially YouTube since 2014. Specifically, I have collected, line-by-line coded and mapped 102 pages of empirical material from 2014–2016 and engaged in conceptual work from 2017 and onwards. I consider myself an active viewer-listener and participant within the ASMR community, and my background knowledge about ASMR is informed by not only the published academic papers on ASMR, but also academic articles, journalistic features and popular science (*e.g.*, ASMR University, 2021; Young and Blansert, 2015; Nicholls, 2017; Richard, 2018; Emma WhispersRed, 2019; Gentle Whispering ASMR, 2014; Gibi ASMR, 2020a). Most of these resources originate in the U.S. and Europe, which naturally skews the research towards a Western perspective. This limits what my research can say about ASMR in other cultural contexts.

The origins of technologically-mediated ASMR

One of the earliest online mentions of ASMR was in a forum thread on the Web site Steadyhealth.com in 2007, in which a user asked about a "weird sensation feels good" [2]. The post received a lot of responses from people who felt the same and could relate to what later, in 2010, became known as ASMR. Up until then, the phenomenon had been referred to as The Unnamed Feeling (UNF), Weird Head Sensation (WHS) and Attention Induced Euphoria (AIE), besides the more popular (head)tingle(s), head orgasm or braingasm (Klausen, 2016). The first intentional ASMR video was uploaded to YouTube by WhisperingLife ASMR in 2009 (Garro, 2017). Titled "Whisper 1 — hello," the video consists of a black screen and a whispered, lo-fi sound recording of the ASMRtist talking about

making a YouTube channel dedicated to whispering (WhisperingLife ASMR, 2009). This was a rather untrodden path at the time. ASMR subsequently "emerged, evolved, and exploded on YouTube" (Waldron, 2017). In fact, a YouTube search of the four-letter abbreviation retrieved 21 million results in February 2021 (Google Search, 2021). And one of the ASMR videos with the most views on YouTube is a three-hour-long trigger video with over 82 million views (ASMRMagic, 2018).

Some of the most popular ASMRtists — by number of views and subscribers (on YouTube in November 2020) — include Zach Choi, SAS-ASMR, Gibi ASMR, ASMR Darling, ASMR PPOMO and Gentle Whispering ASMR. Zach Choi ASMR and SAS-ASMR have 10 and 8.8 million subscribers respectively, and both are known for their mukbang shows [3]. Gibi ASMR has gained 2.7 million subscribers for her soft-spoken role plays, in which she takes on the roles of *e.g.*, an interior decorator (Gibi ASMR, 2020b), a first-class flight attendant (Gibi ASMR, 2017) or a doctor doing a cranial nerve exam (Gibi ASMR, 2016). Ear-to-ear whisperer ASMR Darling has 2.5 million subscribers on her channel, followed by ASMR PPOMO, who has 2.3 million subscribers and specialises in auditory triggers such as tapping, scratching and mouth sounds. Gentle Whispering ASMR, also known as 'Maria', has 1.9 million subscribers and is regarded as "the first superstar of the ASMR community" [4]. Maria is especially known for her many role plays and for whispering in both English and Russian in her videos.

However, the ASMRtist community is not a winner-takes-all constellation. Because ASMR triggers are highly personal, some ASMR performers on YouTube have dedicated themselves to providing customised triggers for specific people, which might not be reflected in their view count or number of subscribers. Even so, they have a tight-knit community of fans and viewer-listeners dedicated to watching their videos. ASMRtists Gibi ASMR, Heather Feather ASMR and Ephemeral Rift are examples of this. They all upload a variety of innovative role play videos in which they implement intertextual references to music, books, movies, TV series and computer games to connect with their viewer-listeners through jargon and pop cultural references. For instance, Gibi ASMR has created a playlist called "TV/Movie/Video Game Character Roleplays" on YouTube, in which the ASMRtist embodies the visual, auditory and narrative characteristics of 29 different personas. Examples include Shrek, the beloved green troll from the computer-animated comedy film from 2001 (Gibi ASMR, 2020c), and Mercy, a character appearing in the 2016 video game Overwatch (Gibi ASMR, 2018). Heather Feather ASMR indirectly implements intertextual references into her role plays. She quotes song lyrics or drops the names of characters from movies or TV series while indulging in a detailed role play setup such as "Candy Queen" or "CSI Crime Scene Investigator" (Heather Feather ASMR, 2013a; 2014).

ASMRtist Ephemeral Rift creates some of the most peculiar ASMR role plays on YouTube, including "The Plague Patient". In these videos, the ASMRtist plays the role of Dr. Corvus D. Clemmons, a plague doctor. Costumed in a beak mask, and appearing in a dimly lit room, Clemmons directly addresses viewer-listeners while attempting to treat their plague symptoms (Ephemeral Rift, 2017). Ephemeral Rift is also the architect behind the "Manly ASMR" series, in which the ASMRtist humorously portrays a character named Iggy M. Manley. According to the description text, these videos offer a stereotypically masculine alternative to the predominately feminine ASMR video narratives: "From boots to video games and tools, youll find nothing but manly ASMR here. None of that female stuff!" (Ephemeral Rift, 2014). The video series by Ephemeral Rift is likely a comment on the fact that most popular ASMRtists, by number of views on YouTube, are predominantly young, white, female and good-looking. In addition, ASMR role plays often recreate gendered and domestic roles of care, social service and nursing, thus reproducing normative gender norms. I acknowledge the important questions following this gender bias, including discussions of 'the male gaze', affective labour and the implications for the ASMR community in terms of inclusivity and growth. However, these fall outside the scope of this project, but is partially addressed by *e.g.*, Andersen (2015), Waldron (2017) and Ruberg and Lark (2021).

The community surrounding ASMR is of great importance to the phenomenon itself. Technologically-mediated ASMR would not exist in its current form if not for the number of content creators and viewer-listeners who join forces to create a *community of practice* on social media such as Reddit and YouTube, of which "people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" [5]. According to Maddox, the creator-viewer relationship within the ASMR community is best understood as an affordance bilingualism, defined as "[...] the ability to move back and forth between the relations of creator affordances and the relations of viewer affordances" [6]. I argue that the ASMR community combines these two ways of viewing a community online. Viewing the community as a unit that "interacts regularly" and "moves back and forth between the relations" accentuates the interactive and action-driven nature that is also tied to the ASMR community as something which is networked, ambient and shared.

In other words, joining the ASMR community is, for at least some users, also an integral part of seeking out ASMR content, as ASMR is not only about videos with triggers. It is also a stomping ground for fan practices and a culture of sharing (and caring). As pointed out by Joshua Hudelson: "ASMR videos involve the viewer in a virtual space, a set of concerns, a community of commenters, a fan club for the producer, an informal economy, and a set of listening practices" [7]. This community of commenters seems to be particularly essential to ASMR, as the comments on ASMR videos provide a space for viewer-listeners to share their feelings and opinions, and to engage in ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2021). Except for the unavoidable cases of swearing, flaming, drama and trolling practices in the comments feed on YouTube, the ASMR community largely employs a positive interactional practice. Users request triggers, share ideas for future video narratives, compliment videos, express gratitude towards the ASMRtist(s) and exchange information about their struggles and life stories (Zappavigna, 2021; Klausen, 2016).

The commenting culture thus constitutes a significant part of the ASMR phenomenon; what makes a video an ASMR video is "arguably less about the content of the video, and more about the responses of viewers" [8].

A YouTube equivalent of the slow (media) movement

ASMR videos are essentially designed to trigger tingles. But there is more to this than meets the eye (and ear). ASMR videos exemplify a tendency to turn technological media into therapeutic tools or self-medicating media as part of a mindfulness movement (Gallagher, 2016; Nathoo, 2016). The phenomenon is born from the economy of attention (and distraction), while at the same time attempting to bring (along with meditation and relaxation apps such as *Calm* and *Headspace*) tranquility, focus, relaxation or sleep. ASMR videos thus offer a slow alternative to the so-called age of distraction (Klausen, 2016). Some ASMR videos are up to one or two hours long, or even longer, and can easily be regarded as a YouTube equivalent of the slow (media) movement. Although not within the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that ASMR may have therapeutic benefits, and some viewer-listeners anecdotally report that listening to and watching an ASMR video can soothe the pain and help reduce symptoms of depression, stress, anxiety and chronic pain (Ahuja, 2013; Barratt and Davis, 2015; Andersen, 2015; Poerio, 2016; Poerio, *et al.*, 2018).

The many potential benefits of ASMR is perhaps the reason why the phenomenon has gotten increased attention within the news media in recent years (*e.g.*, Keiles, 2019; Maxouris, 2019; Ferguson, 2018; Fowler, 2018). The phenomenon has also been featured in talk shows (Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2018; Saturday Night Live, 2019; TheEllenShow, 2019), podcasts and documentaries (Pappas, 2018). And while some of these media outlets define and contextualize ASMR in a somewhat objective way, others use ASMR as a gag or as easy parody fodder (Maddox, 2021b) — especially when described using attention-grabbing terms such as "braingasm" or "whisper porn" (Tufnell, 2012; Marshall, 2018; Russell, 2019). ASMR has also been featured in commercials due to its ability to intentionally amplify, accentuate and sonically frame some of the unknown triggering pleasures of everyday products (Klausen and Stephensen, 2017; Patterson and Larsen, 2019). In 2019, during the Super Bowl, the phenomenon was featured in a commercial for Michelob, a U.S. beer brand. The commercial was a 45-second video featuring actress Zoë Kravitz tapping on and drinking from a chilled glass bottle of Michelob beer surrounded by an idyllic landscape. This commercial attracted a lot of attention, and it took ASMR "fully into the mainstream", according to a journalist at the American magazine *Rolling Stone* (McDonell-Parry, 2019).

Binaural recording

ASMR videos often feature auditory proximity due to amplified 3D binaural recording, "A form of headphone-targeted audio that aims to reproduce accurately the acoustic properties of the space in which it was recorded, therefore situating the listener at the site of the audio capture" [9]. Although some ASMR videos still offer so-called *lo-fi* auditory properties with harsher sounds, there is a tendency towards recording with binaural microphones within the ASMR community. This is probably because as technology improves so do the tingles. In a study from 2017, 58 percent of 130 participants from the U.S., U.K., mainland Europe and Canada said they felt binaural recording was more effective than regularly recorded audio for ASMR media consumption (Barratt, *et al.*, 2017).

These binaural microphones not only record the sounds, but also function as props for the ASMRtist. One of the most popular binaural microphones, the 3Dio, literally has human-shaped ears, spaced about six inches apart, to mimic the average width of the human head, causing them to capture and replicate how we hear the natural world (3Dio, 2021). By adding a physical pair of ears to the sound recording, the ASMRtist is able to actually "brush your ears" or "give you a scalp massage" (as stated in some ASMR video titles) in accordance with the artificial head and ears. By coupling a narrative, *e.g.*, "brushing your ears", with the directional sound recording, the ASMRtist is able to create auditory proximity. In continuation of this, there is a general consensus among ASMRtists that ASMR videos should be listened to through earphones, preferably in-ear earbuds, to heighten the sound and make it more immersive and intimate. Combining binaural recording with headphone listening, then, creates a private virtual space and a hyper-presence by affording "audiotactile" (Spencer, 2020) or "para-haptic" sounds, in which embodied presence and tactile sensations merge through sonically binaural qualities (Klausen, 2019). Both notions point to the qualities of sound that vividly mimic what actual touch would sound — and feel — like.

Triggers

An ASMR trigger is, in short, what causes the pleasurable, euphoric ASMR feeling, the tingles, to occur. But ASMR is a complex and fickle phenomenon, as some individuals with ASMR are sensitive to some triggers but not to others. This suggests that ASMR in general is an individualised and attention-driven process (Smith, *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, not everyone derives any pleasure from ASMR videos, and some even find them annoying or misophonic, when seemingly innocuous sounds elicit a strongly negative emotion such as anger, anxiety, discomfort or disgust (Waldron, 2017; McGeoch and Rouw, 2020). For those who *do* find pleasure in listening to and watching ASMR videos, the most popular trigger types include whispering, personal attention, crisp sounds and slow movements (Barratt and Davis, 2015). This is probably why the ASMR community is also known as The Whisper Community. Many auditory triggers come from the voice of the ASMRtist, and include, besides whispering, inaudible speaking, soft speaking and mouth sounds. Like other audio formats, such as the audiobook, ASMR videos are capable of producing effects of presence and social company. The element of whispering amplifies the bodily immersion and brings with it associations of emotional concepts such as secrecy, trust, familiarity and intimacy. In other words, being close in both a physical and emotional sense (Klausen, 2019).

Many ASMR videos combine auditory and visual triggers. Some videos are *unintentional ASMR*; clips which are not intended for ASMR but have triggering features. For instance, instructional massage or meditation videos, or clips from "The Joy of Painting", in which Bob Ross paints "happy little accidents", and the sound of his brush on the canvas causes people to tingle. However, *intentional ASMR*, videos created specifically to trigger tingles, is by far the most widespread form of ASMR. Intentional ASMR videos come in a variety of ever-expanding subcategories and include roughly two types of triggers: *non-person-centric triggers and interpersonal triggers* (Barratt, *et al.*, 2017).

Videos with non-person-centric triggers include "sound assortments" (Klausen, 2016), in which the viewer-listener is introduced to a variety of crinkly, clicky, scratchy, sticky, squishy or soapy sounds, and focused tasks such as towel folding or organising nail polishes. In these types of videos, inanimate objects are presented up close (visually and sonically), and we might only see the hands of the ASMRtists. By contrast, interpersonal triggers such as whispering and personal attention often show the faces and bodies of the ASMRtists and are often included in role play videos, which remain one of the most popular and recurring ASMR subcategories on YouTube. I focus on role play videos, as these make up an illustrative subcategory to ASMR videos containing interpersonal triggers that invite the viewer-listeners to immerse themselves in an aesthetically intimate narrative. However, this categorisation is by no means exhaustive, and more analytical work is needed in order to fully categorise ASMR videos.

ASMR role play videos

Role play videos are visually and sonically one-sided re-enactments in which everyday activities like getting a haircut, a massage or visiting the doctor's office are performed "face-to-face" by an ASMRtist. In an ASMR role play video, visual proximity (close-up point-of-view shots with eye contact [10]) and auditory proximity (amplified 3D binaural recording) are often coupled with caring, intimate narratives (Andersen, 2015; Gallagher, 2018; Harper, 2020). The role play is thus performed not merely *for* the viewer, but *on* the viewer, "as if you are actually in the room with the ASMRtist as a secondary character in the play" [11]. In some role plays, the ASMRtist employs a range of "multimodal resources to stimulate dialogic interaction" [12] — a simulated (or faux) interaction. Besides mimicking visual and auditory clues from face-to-face encounters, the interaction is also simulated through a linguistically direct address. Here, the ASMRtists ask, answer and react as if a viewer-listener is in fact physically co-present with them (Klausen, in press; Zappavigna, 2020; Bennett, 2016; Gallagher, 2018). Role play videos often include personal attention triggers such as eye contact, direct address (verbally, or by looking directly into or reaching out towards the camera/the viewer-listener's face) and whispering. And not without reason. In a 2015 study of the prevalence of particular features of ASMR, in which 475 individuals from the U.S. and Western Europe volunteered, 75 percent of the participants reported they were triggered by whispering. Sixty-nine percent were triggered by personal attention (Barratt and Davis, 2015).

In terms of narrative, role play videos include a large variety of themes. Some introduce caring and nurturing themes such as "tucking you in" and "personal attention". In these videos of digital care (Bjelić, 2016), the ASMRtist touches, strokes and caresses your hair, assures you that everything is going to be alright, and visually and sonically "tucks you in". The ASMRtist might read you a bedtime story, hum in a relaxing way and carefully tuck a blanket under your body, positioned according to the camera and microphone(s). Typically, the ASMRtist whispers or talks in a supportive lower-pitched voice and at a slower pace than normal. These videos can be viewed as gendered (as suggested earlier in this paper and by *e.g.*, Bjelić, 2016; Bennett, 2016; Waldron, 2017; Iossifidis, 2017). And as pointed out by Joceline Andersen: "ASMR has a clear gender bias, recreating heteronormative models of care and intimacy directed by women toward men" [13] — at least this is true of the most popular ASMR videos on YouTube. Additionally, the videos with tucking-you-in narratives have clear thematic ties to the mother-child relationship. ASMR enthusiasts have described the experience as a recreation of maternal intimacy in which a soft, whispered voice obviates the need for physical presence. In the context of ASMR, this specifically translates into a maternal communication, which "[sends] us straight back to when we were infants and needed the attention and care from a parent or caretaker to feel safe enough to go to sleep" [14].

Haptic audio-visuality

I suggest turning to the notion of haptic visuality as presented by Laura U. Marks in terms of conceptualising what is at stake in role play videos. In haptic visuality, Marks argues, "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch [...] drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body as a whole" [15]. With ASMR, audio is added to the mix, as sound is a key factor (Andersen, 2015; Gallagher, 2016; Iossifidis, 2017). I argue that what is established in ASMR role plays could be called *haptic audio-visuality*, a form of touching with the eyes *and* the ears (*cf.*, also developing further the "hearing is a way of touching at a distance" notion by Schafer, 1993). This haptic audio-visuality can be regarded as the audio-visual counterpart to the above-mentioned notions of "audiotactility" (Spencer, 2020), "para-haptic" sounds (Klausen, 2019) along with "social audio-grooming" (Klausen and Have, 2019), in which sounds *feel* like touch.

An example is the medical role play video "ASMR Binaural (3D) Cranial Nerve Examination Role Play for Tingles, Relaxation, and Sleep" (Heather Feather ASMR, 2013b), in which 'Heather' re-enacts a so-called cranial nerve

exam. As the video begins, we are visually introduced to a table with a sink, a transparent plastic bag containing Latex gloves, an eye chart clipped onto a clipboard and a sphygmomanometer, also known as a blood pressure monitor. Entering from the left, Doctor Feather introduces herself, nods her head as a sign of active listening, makes eye contact and positions herself in the foreground of the video. Dressed in a white lab coat and wearing large black glasses and crinkly blue Latex gloves, Heather Feather carefully places her hands on the binaural microphones, resembling the viewer-listener's ears, while "doing a check-up" and making sure "everything is okay".

During the 51-minute long video, the ASMRtist performs a variety of tests related to the cranial nervous system. These tests include "what did you smell", "follow the light" and the traditional eye chart test, in which she asks the viewer-listeners to read aloud a number of letters. During the role play, the viewer-listeners are also told to "close their eyes". Featured in the video are several interpersonal triggers, including personal attention and up-close ear whispering. This video by Heather Feather ASMR is an illustrative example of haptic audio-visuality; a role play video directed towards the viewer-listener's body despite physical distance and temporal displacement. Not only does the narrative suggest that the viewer-listener has entered the "cranial nerve examination" as a patient, the viewer-listener is also made co-present, as a secondary character in the play. As mentioned earlier, this is accomplished in the ways in which Heather addresses them, makes eye contact, asks them questions or reaches out to touch or get in close proximity of their eyes and ears.

The medical role play seemingly caters to viewer-listeners in need of nurture. The popularity of ASMR videos as a whole can even be viewed as "symptomatic of an existing social need to be cared for, loved, and connected with [...] through digital technology" [16]. Not necessarily in lieu of unmediated person-to-person care, but as a non-committal alternative at a (comfortable) distance. Unlike a real-life cranial exam, Heather takes her time and has toned the whole experience so that it conveys only vibes of care, intimacy and attention. The performance plays on feelings of intimacy and comfort, which are accomplished by the use of binaural up-close sounds in particular. As Smith and Snider put it: "Through its use of sound, ASMR embodies micro-social interactions of care, affection and intimacy" [17]. Not the rush, superficiality, nervousness or uncertainty which might occur in a doctor's office. The viewer-listener is not expected to act on or respond to any of Heathers requests and questions, as the lack of corporeal co-presence "allows viewers to relax into the sounds offered by ASMR without having to account for, or navigate, social interactions" [18]. The viewer-listener is thus not *actually* a patient, and they are not *actually* present, with their body, in the examination room: "ASMR in its virtual manifestations entails no actual touch; all participants are, in reality, alone" [19]. Even so, a certain bodily presence, intimacy and sense of immediacy are established, although not in the traditional sense.

The multisensory experience is somewhat similar to having a synesthetic experience, a joined sensation in which each sensory modality is not separate in its origin or perception, but joined instead (Cytowic, 2002). Synaesthesia is usually characterised by the capacity to experience sensory fusions such as hearing colours or tasting shapes, and ASMR focuses in particular on the connection between and merging of touch, sight and hearing. In the medical role play video reviewed above, the viewer-listener is regarded as an interactive participant who is bodily and narratively immersed. The viewer-listener is directly addressed, "touched" and narratively included in the imaginary situation. But where does this leave the viewer-listener?

Discussion: The viewer-listener

Technologically-mediated ASMR is about close-*looking*, close-*listening* and close-*feeling*. As mentioned above, I refer to ASMR users as viewer-listeners, as I am interested in exploring ASMR as a situated, multisensory audio-visual experience. The visual, auditory and tactile senses are thus closely interwoven in an interplay in which the viewer-listener imagines the presence of another body (the ASMRtist's), and the distinction between *here* and *there* becomes blurred or entangled. However, to reach this level of immersion, a combination of personality characteristics, imagination, attunement and para-sociality must come into play. According to a study from 2017, being an ASMR-sensitive individual comes with a set of personality characteristics that differ from those of people who are unable to experience ASMR. These characteristics include a higher score on openness-to-experience, which is associated with curiosity, unconventionality, artistic or aesthetic tendencies and neuroticism (Fredborg, *et al.*, 2017). Being able to experience ASMR thus comes with personality traits that play well together with *attunement* (in short, the ability to make the body open to affective impact, whether human or non-human) as well as *imagination*, that is "the power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses" (*OED* Online, 2021). What is interesting in this context is that to the viewer-listener, the situation *feels* present to the senses by virtue of tingles, despite the fact that it is mediated and performed on screen.

Empathy is also an important component in the ASMR experience, as "[...] the more you connect and empathize with a particular trigger, the stronger the ASMR reaction you will have to that triggering event" [20]. However, to gain the full potential of ASMR videos, the viewer-listener must not only possess a certain set of predisposed personality traits. They must also be able to go along with the role play narrative and attune themselves to it, as a form of willing suspension of disbelief or a contract of fiction: an (implicit) agreement between the ASMRtist and viewer-listener that the narrative of the video is fictional (Klausen, in press). Despite being aware that the actions on screen in an ASMR video are mediated and recorded asynchronously, the viewer-listeners are required to use their

imagination to get the tingles — a highly embodied and visceral experience. As pointed out in an article in 2021 (Klausen, in press), ASMR is reliant on several conditions to create intimacy, immediacy and a feeling of (co-)presence. Combining the (a)liveness of the voice of the ASMRtist with binaural recording and haptic audio-visuality, the media-enabled feeling of being there or being touched is established. Furthermore, role plays add to what I would call the *ASMR thickness* by providing a *para-social intimacy* through the use of direct address, in which the ASMRtist leaves open a linguistic and performative blank space into which the viewer-listeners can insert themselves.

Alone (or) together? Shared pleasure or personal experience?

The question is, however, whether this para-social intimacy is experienced primarily as a connection between a viewer-listener and an ASMRtist. Or whether the experience can be described as far more networked, ambient and shared. Are the viewer-listeners in reality alone (together)? One could argue that ASMR videos constitute a form of "shared pleasure" [21] in the sense that an intimate audio-visual space is shared by the viewer-listeners and ASMRtists, a space that is elucidated in the comments, in which a community of pleasure providers and seekers meet and share the experience of tingles induced by the video. The tingle-inducing videos are one-to-many communication, and the relationship between the viewer-listeners and ASMRtists may perhaps even be an example of micro-celebrity: "a state of being famous to a niche group of people" [22]. Interesting enough, this 'state of being famous' is not only tied to the ASMRtists' online personae, but just as much the 'social service' that they provide by creating tingle-inducing ASMR videos. Additionally, and as discussed above, the videos are a part of a community of practice, in which viewer-listeners become part of an imagined, ambient audience. They constitute a group of people co-present in the fictional scenario taking place on screen, although not necessarily (indeed, probably not) at the same time or place. In other words, and in the words of So-Rim Lee, tuning into ASMR is "far from being alone with a guy in a room; instead, it is to join a global tribe of ASMR users for an experience of shared intimacy, community, and accountability that often proves elusive in real life" [23].

However, the overall narrative of most role play videos affords a certain intimacy and what is called *tosomhed* in Danish (the intimate, sometimes romantic relationship between two individuals). The role play category, which in this context includes the viewer-listener as a secondary character and not merely a third-person spectator, sets the scene for one-to-one interaction, although this is done in a para-social (*cf.*, Horton and Wohl, 1956) and para-haptic (*cf.*, Klausen, 2019) way, in which a form of social and haptic interaction is accomplished at a distance. In the medical role play reviewed above, the narrative is a one-to-one cranial exam, and all the participants are, in reality, alone, as established earlier. The visual gestures (nods, eye contact, directional looking), the accompanying sounds (crinkling Latex gloves and huffing sounds from the blood pressure monitor) and the direct address ("close your eyes", "follow the light" and "what did you smell?") confirm that this is a one-to-one narrative. Additionally, the use of binaural recording combined with earphone listening affords a solitary one-person-space in terms of acoustics (*cf.*, Roquet, 2021).

Even though ASMR role play videos such as the cranial exam are presented in a monological one-way video format, there seems to be a certain interactivity at play. Viewer-listeners can consciously attune to and bodily engage in the video and thus become more interactive than passive. The viewer-listener is invited to co-perform, and if they accept, tingles await. Also, as discussed previously, ASMR is an individualised process with individual triggers, which also indicates the one-to-one interactional nature of the role play format. Returning to the comment in the introduction, I argue that watching and listening to an ASMR role play is in fact both a shared pleasure *and* a personal experience. The community of commenters and the public availability along with the popularity of the videos on YouTube indicate that ASMR is a shared practice. ASMR was first mentioned in a forum thread on a niche Web site in 2007; it has since become increasingly widespread due to the above-mentioned community of commenters. However, keeping in mind the directional sounds, accompanying visuals, direct address and interpersonal triggers, often wrapped in a performative caring narrative, the role play category indicates the presence of a more intimate, personal and individual experience. An experience that affords a private virtual space, in which a haptic audio-visuality is established.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced and discussed technologically-mediated ASMR, focusing on ASMR as presented in a video format. I have explained and outlined some of the origins and basics of ASMR, including how the Internet phenomenon started and how it builds on a community of commenters. I have explained the basic features of binaural recording and triggers, and in an effort to demonstrate the tangible ways in which technologically-mediated ASMR works in terms of making sounds (and visuals) feel like touch, I have closely examined a medical role play video by ASMRtist Heather Feather ASMR as an example of haptic audio-visuality.

I have argued that the visual, auditory and tactile senses are highly interwoven in ASMR role play videos, and I have suggested using *haptic audio-visuality* as a theoretical elaboration to describe a form of touching with the eyes and the ears through interpersonal triggers, direct address and directional touching. I have shown that intimacy, presence and immediacy can be established through the performative construction of a particular kind of *attuned, imaginative*

and interactive viewer-listener in role play videos. But I have also demonstrated that role play videos can be viewed as *both* a shared pleasure, due to the ASMR community, popularity and public availability, *and* a personal experience established through haptic audio-visuality in a private virtual space.

With this paper, I have sought to add to the existing body of research discussing ASMR, and also research on how sounds can feel like touch. In terms of future research, it would be interesting to unpack some of the notions mentioned in this paper. Specifically, the ASMRtists as an example of micro-celebrity, in which one could ask whether the ASMRtists are famous mainly for the services they render rather than just for being the characters that they pretend to be in role play videos? Additionally, it would be interesting to investigate further the concept of the attuned, imaginative and interactive viewer-listener. Specifically, this could entail exploring whether the concept of the viewer-listener as presented in this paper is consistent with empirical ASMR users' viewer (and listening) behaviours and practices.

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Notes

1. Cremona, 2020, p. 26.

2. Garro, 2017, p. 397.

3. 'Mukbang' refers to the audio-visual broadcast, in which content creators eat excessive amounts of food in front of the camera, while producing eating and mouth sounds — sometimes intended to trigger ASMR.

4. Young and Blansert, 2015, p. 81.

5. Wenger, 2006, p. 1.

6. Maddox, 2021b, p. 1,133.

7. Hudelson, 2020, pp. 197–198.

8. Kovacevich and Huron, 2019, p. 49.

9. Scott in Zappavigna, 2020, p. 13.

10. Close-up point-of-view shots are similar to, although not to be confused with, online POV pornography, which is a style of porn that places the viewer directly into the scene, as if he was present with his own body. Both genres share a carnal response. ASMR is however not associated with sexual arousal (Poerio, *et al.*, 2018). What is shared is the POV mode of filming, which gives the viewer(-listener) a sense of experiencing the act that they are watching, as opposed to simply watching (for elaboration, see *e.g.*, Brodesco, 2016).

11. Young and Blansert, 2015, p. 124.

12.Zappavigna, 2020, p. 4.

13. Andersen, 2015, p. 692.

14. Klausen, 2019, p. 96.

15. Marks, 2000, pp. 162–163.

16. Bjelić, 2016, p. 102.

17. Smith and Snider, 2019, p. 45.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Ahuja, 2013, p. 445.

20. Young and Blansert, 2015, p. 90.

21. Andersen, 2015, p. 683.

22. Marwick, 2013, p. 114.

23. Lee, 2021, p. 13.

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