**Transcript of** [**An Archive of Tingles (podcast)**](file:///Users/Lisa%201/Documents/Ego-Media/new%20website/content/An%20Archive%20of%20Tingles%20%28podcast%29t)[**https://www.mixcloud.com/Resonance/modulations-26th-june-2015/**](https://www.mixcloud.com/Resonance/modulations-26th-june-2015/)

*[Pause – 0:00:00-0:00:43]*

Rob: A fizzing or a tingling sensation that starts in the head and spreads in waves across the body, producing a calming, even tranquillising effect. This is how people describe what has come to be known as ‘ASMR’, or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. In the five years since the term was coined, a rapidly-expanding online culture has emerged around ASMR, as people have begun to use blogs, video sites and social networks to develop a shared terminology, publish accounts of their ASMR experiences, and create an exchange media that trigger those elusive tingles.

*[Pause – 0:01:18-0:01:30]*

My name’s Rob Gallagher and I’m a post-doctoral researcher at Kings College London, where I work on a project called Ego Media, investigating the influence of the internet on the way that people understand their identities and narrate their life stories. I don’t personally experience ASMR, but as someone who studies sensation, identity and digital technology, I became fascinated by this culture as an example of how people use digital media to express or share feelings that are hard to put into words - and as an example of how communities can form online. Different people appear to have different ‘triggers’ when it comes to ASMR. It can be brought on by watching someone performing mundane but meticulous tasks, by the cadences of certain voices, by whispering or soft, ambient sounds or by expressions of altruistic concern and consideration. ASMR videos often take the form of show-and-tell displays, demonstrations or readings. Many involve roleplay, with performers taking on the mantle of doctors, masseurs, hairdressers or other figures meant to help viewers achieve a sense of blissful calm. Other videos focus on objects and the sounds they create. TV static, crinkling crisp packets and clacking jewellery are all favourite triggers.

*[Pause – 0:02:44-0:03:07]*

From the outside, this culture can strike people as rather strange. But, as I want to argue today, by looking more closely at ASMR, we can learn a lot about the way creativity, identity and community work online. There are also, for me, interesting parallels here with other historical moments and cultural forms. The nineteenth century saw Eric Satie creating the blueprint for minimalist music, at the same time as doctors were developing theories about nervous exhaustion and trance states. And, like those responses to the changing tempo and texture of late Victorian life, ASMR culture suggests how new technologies and forms of medical knowledge can prompt us to think differently about our bodies, our senses and our identities. To discuss these issues, I’ll be joined by two creators of ASMR videos, or, as they’re known within the community, ‘ASMRtists’.

Emma runs the popular YouTube channel WhispersRed ASMR, making videos which regularly reach hundreds of thousands of viewers. These range from roleplays to videos exploring the acoustic properties of different objects or recounting childhood experiences of ASMR. Passionate about ASMR’s potential as a therapy, Emma is something of an ambassador for the UK’s ASMRtist community. Very active on social media, she’s also made appearances on the likes of Loose Women and the Today programme to discuss the phenomenon. Ian, known as Muted Vocal, makes ASMR videos as one facet of a creative practice that also encompasses writing, music and film. ASMR videos share space on his YouTube channel with experimental shorts, travel diaries and readings of supernatural tales by the likes of H. P. Lovecraft. His videos as Muted Vocal often play with tropes and scenarios from dystopian sci-fi and gothic horror, exploring the zone where the goosebumps induced by scary movies coincide with the tingles brought on by ASMR - and demonstrating, in so doing, how ASMR culture has cross-bred with online fandoms and other forms of DIY creativity.

Emma and Ian have very graciously agreed to collaborate on what I hasten to stress is something of an experiment. I’ve asked them to read short micro-essays that I’ve written, essays which reflect the research I’ve been doing as I try to understand ASMR culture and its place in networked life. Beyond the issues addressed in these essays, I hope the readings pose their own questions about the voice, sound, language and identity, and about who gets to speak on whose behalf in different cultural spheres. Inspired as they are by the popularity of readings and role plays as ASMR video formats, I also hope the micro-essays will give something of a sense of what ASMR videos sound like for those of you who’ve never seen one. Who knows, you may even experience the odd tingle. After each reading, we’ll be talking about the issues raised and how they tally with these ASMRtists’ experiences. I was keen to hear whether the terms and theories that academics are developing ring true for those actually involved with web subcultures. And in that sense, what follows is essentially a record of research in the making. A kind of ASMR seminar from which I, at least, have learned a lot. So just to stress this again, in what follows, Emma and Ian will be reading texts that I have put in front of them. And I’m very grateful to them for dealing with all the arcane academic theories and tongue-twisting jargon that I’ve thrown at them. If you want to check out their own work, I’d urge you to visit their respective YouTube channels, WhispersRed ASMR and Muted Vocal.

**Part 1. Online identity and community**

Rob: In the meantime, Ian is going to get our conversation started with the first micro-essay, which looks at the history of the internet and its effect on ideas of identity and community.

Ian: Cyberspace isn’t what it used to be. For web researchers like Geert Lovink and danah boyd, early online culture “was driven by a shared desire to become someone else”[[1]](#endnote-1) and “escape the so-called real world”.[[2]](#endnote-2) As cultural historian Margaret Wertheim writes, in this era, people talked about the internet as if by logging on they could leave their earthly bodies behind and enter an ethereal realm beyond the screen.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Today, by contrast, the web is just another part of our everyday lives. This shift is often associated with the birth of Web 2.0, the internet of social networks, blogs and video-streaming sites. When these emerged, the talk was of a friendlier, easier-to-use internet. But while Web 2.0 was described in terms of connection, communication and sharing, Lovink argues that it was actually inspired by two catastrophic upheavals. On the one hand, the 9/11 terrorist attacks “gave rise to a global surveillance and control industry”, to which “Web 2.0 tactically responded” by encouraging us to use our real names and faces online.[[4]](#endnote-4) On the other, the collapse of the dotcom investment bubble pushed web businesses towards a model where users pay for services like search engines or social networks not with money, but by providing personal information, attention and content.

Online ASMR culture emerged in step with these developments. Gradually, via blog posts forum threads, comments and links, networks began to form. From these grew a shared terminology and archives of trigger content. As the term ASMR began to climb Google’s search rankings, sites and videos became easier to find - an example of how things can snowball in algorithmic culture.

YouTube has been particularly important for ASMR culture, which emerged at an interesting time in the site’s history. As Jean Burgess argues, YouTube’s early success was built on other companies’ copyrighted TV content. In recent years, however, the site has made an effort to foster its own “homegrown” video producers, introducing initiatives like the profit-sharing partner programme.[[5]](#endnote-5) For Hector Postigo, such measures show YouTube is keenly aware that amateur video-makers have the ability to “hold and grow large follower bases”, and, by doing so, to drive advertising revenues.[[6]](#endnote-6)

This has raised concerns over the “potential exploitation” of both the video-makers and viewers. Some also worry that social media are becoming less about friendship and more about entrepreneurial competition. Drawing on Maurizio Lazzarato’s ideas, academics have even argued that commenting, favouriting and linking should be seen as forms of “affective labour”: activities that are not normally recognised as work but which benefit companies like Google by shaping and revealing “fashions, tastes and consumer norms”.[[7]](#endnote-7)

But if the internet has spawned new forms of exploitation and surveillance - and, for that matter, bullying and harassment - it has also, as Ferreday argues, fostered meaningful experiences of community and connection.[[8]](#endnote-8) For those who experience ASMR, watching, making and discussing videos can become part of what Laurent Berlant calls “the habituated patterning that make possible getting through the day”.[[9]](#endnote-9) Not an escape from real life, but a way to make it friendlier, less frantic, more liveable.

Rob: That was Ian, aka Muted Vocal, reading our first micro-essay. Having looked back at the rise of search engines and social media, I opened the discussion by asking how Ian and Emma first discovered online ASMR culture and which sites or platforms were important entry points for them.

Ian: Yes... I stumbled upon it via the website Soothetube that, I think, has more or less been discontinued now. But the creator of the site would submit all kinds of content, unintentional and intentional ASMR videos. But they didn’t tend to be dubbed as ASMR in the early days. At least not from my point of view. They did categorise them as whispering videos, soft-spoken videos.

Emma : Yes. It’s the whisper movement, wasn’t it, to start with.

Ian: Yes. That’s right. Yes. Male, female, and then all the other categories on top.

Emma: In 2006, that was when the first whisper video was made in the UK, by Whispering Life.

Rob: I get the sense that for you, Emma, Facebook was a really important platform for becoming involved in this scene***.***

Emma: Yes. Definitely. Well, I’ve always experienced the tingly feeling. All my whole life. But when I was a teenager I started listening to podcasts and things to fall asleep to. Just to quiet my mind so that I could sleep. I’ve always had a really busy mind at night time. So I didn’t find it because I was finding something to give me the tingles. I found it because I was looking for things to calm me down. Because of stress. Then I had a car accident and I was diagnosed with PTSD. And so I was more stressed. And I was looking for relaxation videos on YouTube with my phone. Through my phone app. And I think I put in ‘relaxation video’ or something or other. And I wasn’t a regular YouTube viewer so I didn’t know how to search for things even then. And then, after a while, I was thinking I’ll find... Oh, I know, I’ll find whale music or something. But then I found ASMR videos. And the first one I watched, I thought, first of all, what’s ASMR? And what’s this nice girl going on about? And I just listened to her. And then after a while, I started to get my tingly feeling. And so, it was only through researching what ASMR is that I realised that there was a name for this feeling I’ve always had. And I did used to use it to calm myself down. But I didn’t put the two and two together. I didn’t think, well, I could get that feeling and it could help me sleep.

Ian: I certainly used it for sleep as well. I’m a night owl anyway, so I don’t go to bed until four or five AM most nights. So, when it gets to four AM and I’m still wanting to create or whatever it is I’m doing, I have to find a way of winding down. And that was the primary reason for me to seek these videos out in the first place.

Rob: And you also had this experience of having had this sensation but only later finding that there was this...

Ian: Yes. Absolutely. I think I mentioned in some of the questions that you sent to me initially, that there was an old Hammer Horror movie, ‘The Creeping Flesh’, Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee. And there’s a particular autopsy scene in this film. And it’s not particularly gratuitous but the actions, the performance of this autopsy and the quiet setting, it was just kind of hypnotic to me at that point. And I certainly wouldn’t have given it the classification that we give it today as ASMR, but it was certainly very relaxing and I kind of experienced that from a few different films. And then, of course, there’s this huge community now that’s kind of... It feels as though it’s appeared out of absolutely nothing in a very short period of time.

Rob: We heard in the essay that some people worry that these social media platforms are becoming more about self-promotion and competition. And I wanted to ask, I suppose, whether gaining subscribers and views is important to you. Whether it’s tempting to see other ASMRtists as competitors or whether that camaraderie you’re talking about has survived that?

Ian: I definitely feel there are, what I would refer to as, bandwagon jumpers that don’t particularly contribute very well to the community. It’s very easy to just switch your mobile phone on and just kind of improvise something on the spot. But, for example, Emma’s videos that are very well-developed and the channel’s well-developed and it has its own identity. So, I think, personally, in terms of profiting from it, I don’t have a problem with that at all. I think if you do something, you do it well, then you can expect to be financially rewarded even in a minor capacity. I’m quite comfortable with that.

Emma: I think, as far as the subscribers thing goes and the views, it’s not something that feeds your desire to make videos, for me. It’s exciting to see subscribers go up and views. And it’s exciting to get more comments and that kind of thing. But it’s not enough to keep you going because of the amount of work that it takes. You have to be really, really passionate about it and want to do it and understand it and know exactly what you’re doing in order to put that much work in. When you see videos, you think, oh, I could do that. That looks really cool. But then you have no idea how much work it’s going to be until you do it.

Ian: Yes. Absolutely. When I started out and I did a few readings, I would say that was easy to do. I just picked up a book and I read a couple of paragraphs. But then as the channel began to develop and I found my niche, as it were, then it would involve a lot of writing, a lot of pre-planning. Again, software, microphones. A quiet environment in which to record. And you can spend days and days just planning a video.

Emma: When I’m making my videos, I feel like I’m talking to my friends. And I feel like every comment that I get is from a friend. And I am deeply passionate about it. And I really, really enjoy what it is that I’m doing. And I learn... I’m learning with the community and I’m learning with the viewers. And they tell me, that thing that you did with your hand, that was really nice. And I think, oh, I didn’t even think about that. So, it’s a natural process.

Rob: So, the feedback is that specific and granular, and the relationship is that kind of close with subscribers, that you’re incorporating those suggestions or..?

Emma: Yes. I see everyone who watches the videos as a friend. It’s our little world, I suppose.

Rob: One of the critics who was mentioned in that essay, danah boyd, has this idea of “context collapse”.[[10]](#endnote-10) The way the internet connects everyone means that something that’s put out there with one intention for one audience can easily reach a completely other audience. I wonder if you have a sense of those people who stumble on your channel. I guess with analytics you have some sense of where they’re coming from or what brought them. Or is that not the case?

Ian: 50 per cent of the content that I produce isn’t ASMR anyway. The horror readings I wouldn’t class as ASMR videos. But as we’ve discussed, people do listen to it for the voice. And then, for example, I’ll have new subscribers that have subscribed after listening to, for example, a H. P. Lovecraft reading and then they’ll discover the ASMR videos and I’ll get a message afterwards, what is all this? What is all this other thing that you’re doing?

Emma: Every now and again there’ll be a message saying, can you do a foot massage video or can you wiggle your toes in your shoes or something like that. I’ve probably had one of those every six months. And the answer is either no or you just don’t bother answering. And that’s it. They don’t come back again. They’re not going to find what’s not there. It can develop into something else if we’re talking about a sleep-aid. It wasn’t particularly aimed at being a sleep-aid; wasn’t particularly aimed at being a relaxation aid. But the nature of the tingles, of the ASMR feeling, is a relaxing feeling. So the two and two match together. That they match and they work. So, it’s becoming a therapy.

**Part 2. Medicine, therapy and the arts**

Rob: With Emma’s mention of ASMR as therapy, it seemed like an opportune time to move onto the next micro-essay. This is Emma, WhispersRed, reading about the relationship between the arts and medicine.

Emma: First emerging from online health forums, ASMR culture can also be viewed from a medical perspective. While there has been hardly any scientific research into ASMR,[[11]](#endnote-11), [[12]](#endnote-12) this has not stopped online communities from developing their own terminology to describe the sensations they experience, nor from putting forward theories about how ASMR might help to relieve anxiety, insomnia or migraine.

In doing so, they followed the pattern observed by scholar Christopher Fletcher, who discusses how people with conditions not recognised by the medical establishment will often invent new terms to affirm the “social validity” of their “bodily experiences”.[[13]](#endnote-13) As Fletcher notes, the internet has made this process much easier. And, today, the status of the doctor as “utmost authority and expert gatekeeper” is being challenged by “online communities and healthcare support groups” who swap stories, tips and jargon, “providing social and emotional support.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Such communities are quick to point out that medical knowledge is not static. Theories, diagnoses and treatments vary across different cultures over time. As Susan Sontag argued, medical knowledge is always bound up with cultural metaphors and “mytholog[ies]”,[[15]](#endnote-15) from the eighteenth century idea that tuberculosis purified the soul to the cliché of the autistic child genius. Medical practice can also be highly creative; as Montgomery Hunter has argued, it is not a coincidence that Sherlock Holmes was invented by a doctor. After all, detective stories, like diagnosis, are all about using “the senses to discriminate among clues”.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Such cases show that, as Classen and Howes put it, there is always a “cultural dimension” to medical knowledge.[[17]](#endnote-17) This insight underpins the new hybrid field of the medical humanities, which looks at the various ways in which medical knowledge and social conventions shape one another. For academics, it has meant thinking about the culture and history of medicine. For doctors, understanding that effective treatment is not just about performing the right procedures or prescribing the right drugs, but also understanding the patient as a person. For patients, meanwhile, it has meant exploring how art, literature, drama and music can play a role in the healing process.

Medic and literary critic Nitin Ahuja argues that similar thinking was already at work in physician Walker Percy’s 1971 sci-fi novel *Love in the Ruins,* a book which describes sensations that sound very like ASMR. Ahuja discusses Percy’s belief in the power of “concentrated acts of attentive altruism” to promote a particular “kind of healing”, linking this to the way that ASMR roleplays can help certain viewers deal with stress or sleeplessness.[[18]](#endnote-18)

If many in the ASMR community are still waiting to scientists to investigate the phenomenon, Ahuja’s research takes a different tack. Like cultural theorist Tobias Raun, he is interested in how online videos can function as “therapeutic tools”.[[19]](#endnote-19) Rather than asking what medical science can teach us about ASMR, he suggests that ASMRtists might be able to teach doctors a thing or two. More proof that art and medicine are not as incompatible as we sometimes think.

Rob: So that was Emma, who makes videos as WhispersRed ASMR, reading to us about the sometimes blurry distinction between art and therapy. I began the discussion by asking where on that artistic-therapeutic continuum Emma and Ian saw their ASMR videos.

I’m interested in the way that ASMR falls somewhere between a kind of traditional fan culture, in some ways, and these kinds of health communities that are forming online that we’ve heard about. People sometimes use the phrase ‘ASMR sufferer’ even though it’s a pleasant sensation, because there seems to be this analogy to a medical condition. And people also talk about using videos to help them sleep or to alleviate pain or anxiety, which you said, Emma, is an element for you. Given that, do you see the videos more as a mode of expression or as a mode of helping people feel better? Or can it be the same thing?

Ian: All of the above, I would have said.

Emma: Yes. It can be the same thing. Mostly, the reactions I get to mine are mostly comments with regards to healing. And they have a big impact on people’s lives. I think part of that is... a big part of that is helping people sleep. If you can sleep, you’re regenerating your body. And you’ve got much more energy to deal with whatever situations you may come across the next day. They also teach you how to *be*. They teach presence. And if you can be present in most situations, you can deal with them easily. Anxiety is a big problem for lots of people.

Rob: It seems like in all sorts of ways, innocuous or more serious, people think about media and about artworks as ways almost to medicate themselves, whether it’s bingeing on a boxset or...

Ian: Yes. I would say that I’ve come to refer to it as ‘the caffeine of the screen’. I need... I would refer to it as a fix maybe. I find it very difficult to go to sleep without having scrolled through YouTube for something appropriate to wind down to. And I’ll find myself in a position where I exhaust a particular subject. No examples spring to mind, but there might be an individual I’ve been listening to for several nights and it’s perfect, it’s sent me to sleep. And then the triggers fade away and I have to look for something else. And if I can’t find anything, I’m not getting my fix that’ll send me to sleep, essentially.

Emma: Maybe you shouldn’t join Facebook then!

Ian: [Laughter] Yes. Maybe not.

Emma: ‘Cause then after that there’s Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, the lot…

Rob: Some members of the ASMR community are very keen for it to be studied, medically. And I’m interested in whether this is a priority for you and how you think it would change things.

Emma: Well, as time goes on, we know for definite that it exists.

Ian: Absolutely.

Emma: But quite often, when I’m interviewed, they say, what qualifications do you have to do this? Obviously, none. Just experience. And they say, where’s the medical proof? Especially in this country. Americans don’t seem too bothered. But the English press really are concerned about that. They want to see the proof. And they want to see what qualifications you’ve got.

Rob: You’ve mentioned that, looking at your analytics, a lot of your viewers seem to be from the West Coast, where there’s maybe more of a culture of wellbeing and mindfulness.

Emma: Yes. I feel like moving there.

Ian: But then again, if you’re the pioneer of any given industry, then where do your qualifications come from to be a pioneer?

Emma: Yes. I don’t know. Time will tell. Maybe... There’s a Dr. Richard who does [the website] [ASMR University](https://asmruniversity.com/). We chat every now and again. And we said maybe we should set up some kind of training school and just give people a badge and then everybody would feel better.

Rob: Why do you think so many ASMR roleplays involve performers taking on these roles of doctors or masseurs or dentists or opticians? Do you think this idea of altruistic attention maybe begins to explain that or talk to that?

Emma: For me, roleplays are just re-enactments of real-life situations where you get the tingles. So, an eye test, I used to get tingles really strongly having an eye test.

Ian: As did I. Yes.

Emma: When I was little. I loved it. Absolutely loved it. And thankfully, I’ve got a mum who was always taking us down the doctors and opticians. She loved all that kind of thing. So I enjoyed that.

Ian: Yes. I adore all that kind of stuff.

Emma: That’s why we do them. They’re re-enactments of situations where you would, in real life, get that feeling. So, that’s why we would roleplay that situation. And plus they’re loads of fun to do. I love doing those. They’re great.

Ian: Did you find that you start to hear the world differently?

Emma: Yes.

Ian: When I’ve been... Let’s say I visit a shop. I was in Germany recently and I went into an old shop and he had lots of trinkets lying about the place. But the only thing I was concerned with was the sound of the floorboards. So I go into a place now looking for those sorts of opportunities to record an atmosphere or to capture an atmosphere to then relay to somebody, say, I was in this shop. This is what it felt like.

[Pause] [0:29:19-0:29:49]

Emma: I think it’s a common trait with people who experience ASMR to be highly sensitive to lots of things anyway. And then the more you watch the videos, the more sensitive to sound you become. And small movements.

Ian: Yes. It definitely does amplify over time.

Emma: It does. Yes.

Ian: Which is... I’m kind of wondering where it’s going to stop. How hyper-sensitive am I going to be?

Emma: But it also accentuates your misophonia. Do you know what that is?

Ian: Misophonia.

Emma: That’s the hatred of sounds. So the nails on the chalkboard and people eating and bashing their cutlery on the... Oh... It makes me so angry. I want to hit them. There’s nothing calming about that. I can feel it now.

Rob: So kind of with regards to... [Laughter]. Ahuja argues that Walker Percy might have experienced ASMR but not have had this language available. In a way that sort of echoes this speculation over whether artists like Rothko or Kandinsky might have had synaesthesia and whether they were literally seeing these symbols and colours as a response to sounds or other sensations. Are there artworks or books or movies where you are tempted to look at it and diagnose that artist with ASMR?

Ian: Yes. I think so.

Emma: That rings a bell and I can’t think...

Ian: Especially the film-makers that tend to stick to the certain routine. So, for example, like Stanley Kubrick. Whenever you watch a Kubrick movie, it looks like a Kubrick movie because of the way that he’s framed the shots and all that kind of thing. So, his approach to that is always very similar.

Emma: Attention to detail.

Ian: Yes. So his attention to detail never changed. i.e. he found a niche and perhaps was drawn towards a certain way of doing things, for what reason, I don’t know.

Emma: The film *Amelie* is known in the ASMR community to be a tingly film.

**Part 3. Sound and the voice**

Rob: Having talked about how ASMR has heightened their sensitivity to acoustic atmospheres and vocal textures, we moved on to the topic of our next micro-essay: sound. Here’s Muted Vocal reading to us about the nature of hearing and the strange power of the voice.

Ian: As musicologist Anahid Kassabian reminds us, listening is a “contact sense”;[[20]](#endnote-20) a matter of tiny hairs, bones and membranes being agitated by oscillating air molecules. We are quite literally ‘touched’ and ‘moved’ by sound. And this, for Frances Dyson, makes it “the immersive medium par excellence”. A “three-dimensional, interactive and synesthetic” medium, “perceived in the here and now of an embodied space”.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Listening to voices can be a particularly immersive and strangely intimate experience. For sound theorist Freya Jarman the voice “links bodies together” as it “makes the journey from my body to yours” - a journey that might involve crossing a room or navigating a digital network.[[22]](#endnote-22) We can lose ourselves in listening so that it becomes hard to tell where ‘you’ end and ‘I’ begin. This, for scholars like Susan Douglas, is what makes the best radio DJs so good at creating a sense of connection and belonging.[[23]](#endnote-23)

As these researchers understand, it is not just the words we say that convey information, but also the way we say them. Sociolinguists have studied the “language ideologies” that build up around particular accents so that we are more likely to see speakers as trustworthy, silly or snobbish.[[24]](#endnote-24) Film theorist, Michel Chion, meanwhile talks about “emanation speech”, which express a character’s personality even though their actual words are inaudible.[[25]](#endnote-25)

As Roland Barthes has argued, the voice always exceeds meaning. Every voice has textural features that, while they might have what Jarman calls “a potential for some kind of meaning”, ultimately resist interpretation.[[26]](#endnote-26) Barthes talks about this in terms of the “grain” of the voice, those features that testify to the presence of the speaker’s body but don’t really *mean* anything.[[27]](#endnote-27) These features of a voice can be strangely compelling or weirdly off-putting, moving us in ways we can’t explain.

As Jarman notes, certain singers go to great lengths to eliminate grain: training their bodies and technologically manipulating their voices, they strive to produce notes that sound pure, disembodied.[[28]](#endnote-28) ASMR videos, by contrast, tend to revel in grain. Many videos foreground the noises that lips, teeth, tongues and throats make. Others highlight the sounds that objects make as they’re brushed, tapped or kneaded. While such videos might have a story, a scenario, or an argument, their appeal has at least as much to do with how they use sound. In this respect, ASMR videos resemble certain kinds of avant-garde music, even as they aim to induce waves of pleasure, as immediate as the most addictive pop music.

Rob: That was Ian, otherwise known as the ASMRtist Muted Vocal, reading a micro-essay about sound and the voice. In the wake of the essay, I asked Ian and Emma whether any of the terms and ideas it discussed, the notion of vocal grain or the voice’s capacity to make very visceral connections, struck a chord with them as ASMR performers.

Emma: I really like this one. Because I do think that... I do feel that voices do make connections and you can tell a lot by someone’s voice. A lot about their personality and what kind of person they could be to you. So, I like to communicate as honestly as I possibly can. So that I reach the people that I’m trying to reach. And make connections with the people who are most like me.

Rob: And that’s almost less a matter of content than it is the tone and the cadence and other qualities to the voice you’d say - or it’s both?

Emma: I just try and be as honest as I possibly can. So I’m quite happy to leave mistakes in. ‘Cause that’s... It’s how I speak. I make mistakes all the time. And I’ve got a funny accent as well. I’ve got two different accents because I’ve lived in two different places for equal amounts of times. So I’m a bit mixed up. But I just love the idea that a voice can connect personally with someone.

*Rob: And I think the way you both use your voices is very different, in a way. Ian, you kind of have these personae...*

Ian: I was going to say, mine’s probably very dishonest. I think that’s the fear - because I started with these various different personas - that if I’m exposed now to the subscribers that I have as being something different, just Ian, the guy Ian, that it might be... It might put people off or it might encourage people. I don’t know. But, no, not so much dishonest, but I’m trying to perform with an alter-ego, essentially.

Emma: Yes. You’re coming at more of the...

Ian: More of a performance.

Emma: ...artistic aspect of things.

Ian: Yes.

Rob: Whereas by contrast, Emma, you’ve suggested that making the videos is a way to discover something closer to what you’d consider your natural voice.

Emma: When I was a child, I was always told to speak up, ‘cause I was very naturally quiet. And then, over time, you learn to shout. Or I did. And then when I discovered ASMR, and realised it’s okay to be who I am, I felt a lot more comfortable with myself. There are people who’ve got better friends within the ASMR community online than they have in their day-to-day lives. Because, I think, when you’re in a work situation, you’re in an office situation, it’s celebrated to be powerful, to be successful, to be loud, to be the best, to work really hard. You have to be that way to survive sometimes. If you want the promotions so that you can afford your house, you have to be like that. And not everybody is like that. In fact, most people aren’t like that. They’re just behaving that way in order to do what they think they have to do or to be who they think they need to be.

Rob: I wanted to ask as well, because there is a UK ASMR culture which you guys are both representatives of, which is growing and it’s quite close-knit. But there’s also, seemingly, a much larger American culture. Do you think there are ideas of Englishness that viewers who might be watching from abroad find in your voices that they find pleasing or...

Ian: I think so.

Emma: Certainly accent-wise.

Rob:And are there preconceptions? Ian, you use this very stentorian, Received Pronunciation-type voice that people seem to really love and to want to describe, whether they call it ‘posh’ or whatever they think it is…

Ian: Yes, yes. If only they knew the truth.

But you are obviously playing with some of these preconceptions, right, in a way?

Ian: Yes. Absolutely. It’s just the idea of taking the... Again, where Emma’s very open, honest. I’m trying to get as far away as possible from the day-to-day me. Not because I want to be... I want to hide away or anything like that. But because it’s an exploration of characters and how I can be perceived when I’m not truly being myself, in a way.

Emma: It’s an artistic outlet for you, isn’t it? Yes.

Ian: Yes. That’s literally all it is. So that’s probably why there’s been less engagement with the community at large, on my part.

Emma: For me, it was an amazing feeling to find out that I wasn’t on my own. And that there were people just like me, feeling this thing every day. I just thought it was the most amazing thing. And I never set out to be an ASMRtist. I just wanted to meet people. So that’s when I started the ASMR UK Facebook group, before I started making videos and got to know people that way. I was in the Lake District at the weekend at this really cool place called Brockhole, where you can go rock-climbing and stuff. It’s brilliant. And I was just in the cafe, ‘cause, as you do, you head straight to the cafe first.

Ian: Absolutely.

Emma: Wherever you go, there’s got to be a cafe. So I ordered a burger and the girl who served me said, are you the lady who does the videos? And I said, yes. And my cousin’s stood there and she was like, oh my God, I’m with someone famous. But she said to me, I watch your videos all the time. And she said, I’m really pleased, because when... I’ve been watching them for ages and I always thought that I was a bit weird. I thought that I was strange because I didn’t know why I was enjoying them so much. Obviously she was getting the tingles but she, like me, would have said things to people growing up. Oh, do you get that thing? And they’d go, no. So you don’t talk about it any more. So then you are... A lot of people do end up thinking that they’re strange or weird. And then once you... And we spoke about it and we went on to say that once you find out that people get it as well, you feel less weird and you find your people. It’s really, really cool.

[Pause] [0:41:23-0:41:36]

Rob: One of the people who’s been really, really helpful as I’ve been trying to research ASMR is an artist called Melinda Lauw. And we’ve been talking about voice up to now. But she’s very interested in how ASMRtists use objects to produce sounds. To give a sense of texture and tactility. I wonder if either of you could say a bit about that element of the culture as well?

Ian: I suppose I haven’t really experimented with the use of objects too much, to be absolutely honest. I’ve tried a few clichéd things like bubble wrap but...

Rob: Some of your videos seem to be trying to capture the ambient sound of a space though, I suppose. You make videos about train journeys or...

Ian: Yes. ‘Cause I’m a kind of out-and-about, in the real world and then trying to present that in a kind of ASMR environment. Which is a difficult thing to do. But I have done the kind of show-and-tell style videos where I might rummage through a box and find something that has an especially nice sound. And I find it very inexplicable. Very difficult to describe.

Emma: For me, talking about objects, it would be the feeling behind those things and it would be something like a jewellery box with trinkets in there that I’ve saved over the years and I can talk about them. Talk about family. Empathy’s a big trigger for me, tingle-wise, So, I like to hear people’s stories and how they feel about things. So I can show the objects and make the sounds but I can talk about them as well.

Rob: That’s interesting that the objects are sort of embodying that kind of affective quality, maybe.

Ian: Yes. That kind of video... That’s the kind of content that appeals to me, I think. The kind of voyage of rediscovery. You open up an old box and some of the things you might not have seen yourself for years and years.

Emma: That’s it. Yes. And it’s a genuine reaction.

Ian: And all the memories that are associated with that. And, again, there is an emotional response there rather than just the sensory response.

Emma: And you can hear that in your voice as well. You can hear the emotion in your voice. And that’s a nice thing. It’s a comforting thing, isn’t it?

Ian: It’s very genuine, again. As you said before, it’s very you. And I suppose, in those videos of mine then it has to be at least a little bit genuine because I’m pulling out relics.

Emma: Yes, of course. That’s it.

Ian: From an older time.

Rob: And we’ve talked about the fact that ASMR videos can sometimes be very akin to certain kinds of music that tends to be considered difficult or cerebral. Ambient music or drone or field recordings. But ASMR videos, people respond to, seemingly, in a very direct and immediate way. Why do you think this is, when these are sounds that might normally be considered alienating or abstract?

Ian: I think it’s certainly the overall sound quality as well, I think. I don’t know how to describe it. If you have bubble wrap with you in person and you’re popping away at the bubbles, that there is certainly a different sound once it’s been digitalised on a computer. And perhaps you manipulate that sound a little bit afterwards and add delays, reverb, like I might do. Then you end up with a sound that’s very different to the one that you might experience in first person.

Emma: For me, it’s the different aspects of that sound because the microphone is very close. So, if I was playing with some paper in this room and you would just hear the paper on its own. But when the microphone’s very close to it, you hear the different levels of that sound of paper and you find comfort in that. I have synesthesia so I can hear music in... I can see music. I can see music in colours.

Ian: I have that. Yes. Music is represented by colours. Absolutely.

Emma: Yes. And I’ve mirror touch as well. So if someone was tickling your back now, I would feel it. Not in exactly the same way, but I feel the sensation go down my back.

Ian: Now that’s interesting.

[Pause] [0:45:32-0:46:00]

**Part 4. Art, attention and atmosphere**

Rob: With the discussion turning to questions of creativity and sensitivity, it felt like a good moment to move on to our fourth and final micro-essay. Here’s Emma of WhispersRed ASMR reading to us about arts, attention and atmosphere.

Emma: It has been long argued that ‘real’ art demands close attention and analysis, that it should challenge viewers. Idealising this kind of ‘deep’ engagement, we have tended to look down on the idea of using a book, a song or a movie to pass the time, to help us relax, to set the mood.

The reality, as Anahid Kassabian insists, is that no-one is ever “fully attentive" or "fully inattentive.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Even the keenest critics are prone to daydreaming, clock-watching and lapses of concentration. And as N. Katherine Hayles notes, “recent work across neuroscience, psychology and cognitive science indicates that the unconscious plays a much larger role than had previously been thought in activities normally associated with consciousness.”[[30]](#endnote-30) In the words of Laurent Berlant, “whether or not we think we are thinking, the brain chatters on, assessing things in focused and unfocused ways.”[[31]](#endnote-31)

For these scholars and for others like Steven Shaviro[[32]](#endnote-32) or Ken Hillis,[[33]](#endnote-33) this makes it important to think not just about what cultural works mean or say but also how they make us feel. They point out that media today are often less interested in telling stories or communicating ideas than they are texture, style and mood, operating on the level of intuition and emotion. Such works are carefully tuned to be spine-tingling, tear-jerking, calming or exhilarating.

These thinkers reject pessimistic claims that digital media are eroding our attention spans. They do, however, agree that technologies influence the way we feel and think. Hayles, for example, argues that the sheer volume of information available online has given rise to a new form of “hyper-attention” that has a “low threshold for boredom, alternates flexibility between different information streams and prefers a high level of stimulation.”[[34]](#endnote-34)

Unlike some critics, Hayles doesn’t necessarily see this as a bad thing, though she does argue we need to work to retain the kinds of focused concentration other media demanded. Here, she echoes cultural historians like Jonathan Crary[[35]](#endnote-35) and Kenneth Rogers.[[36]](#endnote-36) They hold the ability to pay attention is “not a ‘natural’ condition” [[37]](#endnote-37) at all but an ability that humans have cultivated, measured and manipulated in different ways across history, from papyrus to the cinema to caffeine and exam grades.

One of the most intriguing aspects of ASMR videos is that while they are very much a product of the internet and of our modern culture of feeling, they reject the logic of hyper-stimulation. Instead, viewers are invited to pay close attention to hushed and unhurried readings, roleplays and demonstrations. In a culture of speed, distraction and fragmentation, ASMR videos show that other kinds of attention can still flourish.

Rob: That was Emma, better known as WhispersRed ASMR, with a reading about the fate of artworks and attention spans in networked culture. I began the discussion by asking why Emma and Ian thought that, in an era when people often claim attention spans are withering, ASMR videos, which tend to be long, slow, quiet and uneventful, seem to have built up such a fanbase.

[Pause] [0:50:14-0:50:29]

Emma: We watch them late at night when we’re tired. We do so much in the daytime. We’re flicking round our phones all day long. We’re deciding on things that we have to do, talking to people. Everything’s a lot more fast-paced these days. So I think we have to be told to calm down. And if you’re watching a video and it’s taking the ASMR artist ten minutes to get out a couple of sentences and you really like them and you want to know what they’ve got to say, you’re going to have to listen. And, in the meantime, you’re calming down.

Ian: I would use it as a background... as background noise as well. Say I’m working on some kind of mindless or mundane task, I would... the length’s a great thing because you can just stick a two hour video on in the background and then get on with what you want to do. And there’s that kind of relaxing voice, the drone of it that continues whilst you plough away and it keeps...

Emma: It helps you to focus.

Ian: ...it keeps my mind relaxed.

Rob: Interesting.

Ian: Yes.

Rob: One of Žižek’s ideas about culture in the age of the internet is that we have these jobs where we just click a mouse all day and then we have to go to the gym to make up for the fact we’ve been inactive, and we shower all the time and then put on perfume or aftershave to try and get back some of the smell we’ve washed away…[[38]](#endnote-38) It’s interesting to think that ASMR might have arisen as a kind of corrective to this culture of being busy and stimulated and distracted all the time.

Emma: A lot of comments on my videos, they say the way that you blink calms me down. And I just have this natural... just when I’m calm myself, I blink really slowly. And I think I developed that because someone told me that... ‘Cause I’m a cat person. When I’m old I’ll have loads of cats. And someone told me that the way you tell a cat that you love it is by blinking slowly at it. So every time I see a cat, I do that. And every time I’m talking to my friends and just relaxed, that’s what I do. So I do it in the videos, by accident, and people say the way that you blink slowly calms me down. So I think it’s the slow movements as well.

Rob: Going back to this idea that a lot of culture today, for better or for worse, seems to be much more about texture and atmosphere maybe than meaning or interpretation or story… In different ways, both your videos seem to be about creating atmospheres. Ian, it’s interesting to me that you’re very interested in gothic literature and Hammer Horror movies.

Ian: Oh, yes.

Rob: And that some of your movies are exploring these tropes and these texts when you might think that was kind of diametrically opposed to the kind of relaxation that many ASMR videos are doing. Do you think there’s an overlap between that kind of eerie or spooky atmosphere and the feeling you might be trying to create with an ASMR video?

Ian: Again, the only thing I can compare it to is being engaged in something that could be perceived as being frightening or stressful but to know that there is a resolution at the end that, when the resolution is achieved, it’s all the more rewarding. Sort of...

Emma: I can’t even go on that journey. I can’t watch horror films.

Ian: The idea of communicating that, as I think I mentioned to you before, it’s the idea of establishing company on that journey. So you’re not going alone. You take it through the stages. If you read a book, it’s just you and the book. If it’s an audio book, it’s you, the reader and the book. And then, for example, with my videos, it’s then... I would create the relaxing journeys in which I would say, right, it’s you and me, we’re going on a very specific journey catered to you and me. And it’s moving in that direction all the time. So, whether or not the subject matter becomes a little bit creepy, then you still have your company to kind of fall back on and to be reassured by at the end, when it’s all over and...

Emma: It’s quite a nurturing thing, isn’t it?

Ian: ...you look forward to the next one. Yes.

Rob: Ideas of childhood nostalgia are very central to some of your videos, Emma, and to the atmosphere of them. You’re setting out to kind of induce ASMR but also to evoke these memories.

Emma: Memories. Yes.

Rob: So I wonder if you could talk about the atmosphere of those videos?

Emma: I started a series called ‘Childhood Triggers’ and I’ve still got loads more to do on that. But it’s just, for me, I lived a long, long time before discovering the name for my tingles and the community and videos. And I kind of want to document all the things that happened in that time that gave me the tingles and lots of other people. Because it’s a new thing, isn’t it? There are so many people around the world who’ve had it since childhood and lived with that. We’ve lived a life without videos but we’ve still enjoyed that feeling and used that feeling for meditation, for staying calm, for drifting off. I used to just get it in school all the time. I didn’t really learn much ‘cause I was always daydreaming. Looking out the window, tingling away. Listening to paper and listening to the teachers talking in the background. And I want to document it. I want to... I want it to be there for everybody to comment and say, yes, I used to get that at school. And this happened as well. And will you make a video on that one. And I also... the other side of it is, I want to show how normal and natural it is. Because people keep... It’s happening less and less now but at the time when I created it, people were talking about it being a sexual thing. And how can so many millions and millions of four-year-olds get it and it be sexual? It just isn’t. So I want to show that it’s not.

Rob: Attention is a word that comes up a lot in the discussions of ASMR online. Viewers paying a certain kind of attention to performers. Artists paying a certain kind of attention to viewers. How would you describe that dynamic? And are we talking about a kind of deep, focused concentration or is there something more trance-like?

Ian: I think, again, it depends on the content because I think you’ve got ASMR and then you’ve got the variety of... well, the different varieties that it consists of, right from the roleplays through to the storytelling and that kind of thing. And I suppose it can then be either/or. That it can be trance-like. And you can relax and drift off.

Emma: Lots of people say it’s hypnotic and that we’re...

Ian: The hypnotic aspect.

Emma: ...intentionally hypnotising people.

Ian: Whereas some people are just listening to it because they like the sound of the voice and it’s relaxing. Then the others really do want to get immersed in that other world.

Rob: On that note, it’s time to say that I hope we’ve managed to keep our listeners, if not outright immersed, then at least interested over the last hour or so. Talking to Ian and Emma, it’s clear that ASMR culture opens onto all kinds of fascinating questions. Questions about the role of media consumption and creativity in our day-to-day routines, about non-verbal communication and emotional wellbeing and about how online and offline identities work in a world of social media, micro-celebrity and algorithmically-curated content. I’m Rob Gallagher and I’d like to say thanks, once again, to my guests, ASMR artists Ian and Emma, aka Muted Vocal and WhispersRed. If you’re intrigued by what you’ve heard, please check out their YouTube channels. Thanks too to the European Research Council and to the Ego Media team at Kings College London, who’ve made this project possible.

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