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# The ASMR Paradox: Scientific Discourse and the Enchanting Ephemeral Body of ASMR

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## Abstract

This paper explores tensions between scientific understandings of the internet phenomenon known as Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) and accounts of the experience put forth by people who experience ASMR (also known as ASMRers). While current scientific research into the therapeutic affordances and the physiological, neurological, and psychological determinants of ASMR have failed to produce satisfactory accounts of the experience, ASMRers label and describe the phenomenon in scientific terms to give the experience scientific validity. So far, this strategy has worked, infusing a series of scientific inquiries into the strange uniqueness of the experience. That said, efforts to understand the ASMR experience through modern scientific, technological, and conceptual strategies is not only limiting, but futile. ASMR is incomprehensible from the standpoint of modern scientific discourse because of the unique, posthuman constitution of the ASMR body. This has led to what I call the ASMR Paradox: growing efforts to describe ASMR, a scientifically inaccessible experience, in purely scientific terms. In consideration of this paradox, the following reflection piece explores the tension between scientific discourses regarding ASMR and the seemingly diametrical experiences of ASMRers. I conclude that, while the former is indebted to western humanist thinking, the latter expresses a posthumanist configuration that is incompatible with the scientific rhetoric currently being used to describe it.

## Keywords

ASMR, body, science, phenomenology, posthumanism

## Introduction

In recent years, media-sharing platforms have seen the proliferation of content production meant to stimulate pleasant sensory and affective responses in their viewers. This internet phenomenon has been labeled Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR). ASMR content producers (also known as ASMRtists) create content in which they manipulate various forms of visual and audio stimuli to induce sensory responses in their viewers. Users (or ASMRers) tend to describe the experience as *braingasms*: feelings of intense relaxation accompanied by tingling and static-like sensations that begin at the scalp and move down the back of the neck, sometimes travelling down to the viewer's arms and legs.

ASMR media content varies in themes and production styles. While some ASMRtists try to induce the experience by whispering gently into microphones, others tap, scratch, cut, and crinkle various objects and materials. The videos are typically shot in a point of view manner and often "depict role play situations, in which the viewer is placed in a position of 'close proximity' to another person in order to be cared for in some manner" (Barratt & Davis, 2015, p. 2). In such cases, ASMRtists try to trigger more complex affective responses by accompanying visual and auditory stimuli with feelings of what Andersen (2015) describes as simulated, distant, or nonstandard intimacy (e.g., massage ASMR and ASMR porn).

Interestingly, ASMRers also tend to experience ASMR-like responses in everyday settings. For instance, when describing their experience during a hairdressing appointment, a participant in a study by Barratt and Davis (2015) explains:

I was totally amazed, I can only describe what I started feeling as an extremely relaxed trance like state, that I didn't want to end, a little like how I have read perfect meditation should be but I never ever achieved (p. 6).

Accounts like this are not uncommon among

ASMRers. As observed by Andersen (2015), those who experience ASMR regularly trace their first ASMR-like responses back to their early childhood (e.g., to the times they would watch the art show *The Joy of Painting* and listen to the soothing voice of the host, Bob Ross). Accordingly, it could be said that part of the ASMRtists' task is to induce these sensations of relaxation, emotional wellbeing, and contentment, but in a richer and more controlled environment. An effective ASMR experience can be said to be one that *moves* the listener, temporarily altering not only their moods and experience of sensory and affective stimuli but also their general relation to the immediately surrounding world.

Theoretically speaking, this means that the initial subjecthood of the listener is not the same as the one generated through the ASMR experience. As I show later in this reflection, ASMR appears to summon an altogether different worlding, meaning that ASMRtists' role is, in a way, to de-subjectify and reconfigure ASMRers' subjective configuration for the duration of the experience, disclosing to them new properties of the surrounding world. From then on, crinkles, scratches, cracks, jingles, etc., are no longer the trivial by-product of a particular action, but heavily charged with previously unacknowledged potentialities for attachments, sensation, affect, and noticing. One might go so far as to describe the ASMR experience as a form of *enchantment*: an encounter with "the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday" and which *strikes* and *shakes* us in fascinating and ethically relevant ways (Bennett, 2001, p. 4).

## The Science of ASMR

Due to the novelty of the phenomenon, the current literature on ASMR is limited, with much of it focusing on the experience's therapeutic affordances (Del Campo & Kehle, 2016; Fredborg et al., 2018; Poerio et al., 2018). One of the earliest peer-reviewed articles on ASMR examines its affective triggers, suggesting a possible link between ASMR and neurological sensory conditions, like synesthesia and

misophonia (Barratt & Davis, 2015). The paper concludes that although it is not clear whether “ASMR and misophonia are two ends of the same spectrum of synaesthesia-like emotional responses” (p. 13), ASMR does seem to produce positive effects in its viewers, supporting “[the] suggestion that ASMR may be of use for providing temporary relief to individuals with depression, stress and chronic pain” (p. 1).

Similarly, Del Campo and Kehle (2016) argue that because ASMR triggers “positive emotions, relaxation, serenity and attenuation of symptoms of anxiety, stress, chronic pain, and depression” (p. 100), it promotes feelings commonly associated with happiness and wellbeing. Their article also draws a distinction between the ASMR experience and other comparable mental states, like mindfulness and *frisson* (a musically induced pleasurable sensory and emotional experience commonly resulting in chills, goose bumps, and tingling sensations). They conclude that although ASMR, mindfulness, and *frisson* share some similarities (e.g., attention requirements and feelings of contentment), ASMR has some discernible features. For one, *frisson* only lasts a few seconds, while ASMR can be sustained for several minutes. Meanwhile, mindfulness requires participants to focus on a particular stimulus and to focus inward on their body’s responses, while ASMR can happen spontaneously in a wide range of external settings.

Other researchers have tried to identify the specific physiological, psychological, and neurological determinants of ASMR. For example, Fredborg et al. (2017) investigated “whether individuals with ASMR differed from matched control participants on five broad personality domains: Openness-to-Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism” (p. 2). Their results showed that the ASMR group scored higher than the control group on the domains of Openness-to-Experience and Neuroticism, but lower on Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Agreeableness, pointing to reliable personality differences that may contribute to the

phenomenon. These findings are further supported by a study done by McErlean and Banissy (2017), whose ASMRer participants scored higher than the control group on Openness to Experience, Fantasizing, and Empathic Concern. Similarly, a study by Fredborg et al. (2018) found that individuals with ASMR report higher levels of curiosity and mindful attention, suggesting “that ASMR may be a cognitively ‘active’ process rather than a more automatic response to stimuli” (p. 10).

Taking a different route, Smith et al. (2017) used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to explore the neural architecture underlying ASMR. Despite some evidence of minor differences between the brains of the ASMR group and the non-ASMR group, Smith et al. (2017) found that their “group differences in DMN [default mode network] activity are statistical differences, [and] not necessarily biological ones” (p. 364). These findings point to larger difficulties that researchers have encountered when trying to identify the brain or neural conditions that make someone susceptible to ASMR. Although research into the neural and psychological determinants of ASMR seems to link the experience to specific forms of neural activity (e.g., increased connectivity between regions in the occipital, frontal, and temporal cortices) and personality traits (e.g., Openness-to-Experience), it has not been able to link specific biological (e.g., neuroanatomical) traits to ASMR susceptibility. Indeed, a later study by Smith et al. (2020) found that sensitivity to most ASMR triggers was negatively correlated with brain areas related to the perception of that type of stimulus and thus triggered unexpected forms of brain activity.

This research shows that the ASMR experience is neither a psychopathology nor a purely neurological condition (Smith et al., 2017). In fact, ASMR seems to trigger distinct and measurable responses, such as a significant decrease in the viewer’s heart rate, increased skin conductance, and enhanced feelings of relaxation and social connectedness (Poerio et al., 2018). As such, the difficulty encountered by scientific

research has not been that of establishing a consensus regarding the validity or reality of ASMR's effect on the body, brain, or experiencing subject. Rather, the problem has been the identification of the experience's physiological, psychological, and neurological determinants. Deploying a wide range of methods (fMRI, questionnaires, physiological correlates) and cognitive and experiential models (*frisson*, misophonia, synaesthesia, mindfulness, flow state), this research has tried (unsuccessfully) to render the experience intelligible within established scientific models and parameters, while drawing a line between those who experience ASMR and those who do not. However, this is not to say that no reliable conclusions about ASMR have come out of this research. If there is anything that this work has consistently found evidence for, it is that:

- 1) ASMRers demonstrate unusual or unexpected forms of neurological and bodily activity when undergoing ASMR;
- 2) ASMRers are generally curious and subjectively open to new experiences;
- 3) ASMR has the potential to improve the lives of people facing various social, physiological, and psychological challenges.

Because of this, Poerio et al. (2018) suggest that more research ought to be done on the positive potentials of ASMR. As they put it, given the substantial negative effects of inadequate social connection on health and longevity, "research examining the potential benefit of ASMR videos for relieving loneliness would be a worthy line of enquiry" (p. 14).

### Limitations of Scientific Research

It is not surprising that current scientific efforts to isolate and unravel the ASMR experience have failed to produce satisfactory explanations of the phenomenon. A key limitation of scientific inquiry into ASMR is the inadequacy of the objects of study. Drawing on the postpositivist

bend of the western intellectual tradition, research on ASMR has relied on a series of technological and conceptual strategies unfit for making sense of the experience. As I explain below, ASMR is ultimately characterized by an experiential subject whose corporeal structures, capacities, tendencies, and possibilities do not adhere to the abstractions of scientific discourse.

Relying on Cartesian dualist assumptions about the ontological status of mind and body, western scientific efforts to understand bodily experiences like ASMR have taken a modernist, scientifically described body as their point of departure: a passive and mechanically constituted "material object whose anatomical and functional properties can be characterized according to general scientific law" (Leder, 1990, p. 5). This conceptualization of subjecthood is organized around western humanist understandings of subjectivity, and a corresponding biological essentialism, that posits that the human body is fixed, coherent, calculable, predictable, and universal. Accordingly, much of the scientific research on ASMR has focused primarily on determining the experience's physiological and neurological determinants, playing close attention to ASMRers' triggers and underlying neural structure, but little, if any, to what the experience *feels* like – as if understanding the novelty and complexity of ASMR is simply a matter of identifying previously unacknowledged mechanics of corporeality and sense perception. Such an approach posits an almost ontological chasm between those who can and cannot experience ASMR, with biology acting as the determining factor of distinction (even if said factors have not yet been identified).

Studies of this paradigm also tend to link susceptibility to ASMR to ASMRers' personality or "active" attentive efforts to undergo the experience, with an intellectual mind or abstract subjectivity at the root of the experience. Ultimately, these subjectivity-centric models assume a disembodied subject that can, in a way, *will* the experience into being through various cognitive or psychological strategies. Yet, ASMRers' own account of the experience – in

particular, its spontaneity and unpredictability – tells us that efforts to root the experience in personality traits and other mental states are limiting, since ASMR seems quite impervious to these cognitive efforts and subjective dispositions. Not to mention that these studies do not say much, if anything, about the *bodily* experience of ASMR.

In all these different scientific approaches, we find an underappreciation of what it is that makes the ASMR experience radically different from western understandings of the body and sensory experiences: the unique capacities and constitution of the ASMR body. Instead of exploring these, most research on ASMR has taken a strictly scientific route, leaving out important questions regarding the uniqueness and socio-historical contingency of the ASMR body and experiencing subject. Importantly, part of the reason for this is ASMRers themselves, who named the experience *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response* in an effort to make it sound more scientific. As observed by Andersen (2015), the name ASMR “dates back to 2009 when the founder of asmr-research.org coined the term as ‘a more polite term for ‘orgasm,’” and used scientific jargon to link “the ASMR community to a tradition of fringe science” (p. 686-687). In other words, ASMRers intentionally gave the ASMR experience a scientifically oriented name to distance it from sexually suggestive language and related negative societal connotations, while also giving the phenomenon scientific validity. Unfortunately, the strategy worked *too* well, and what has been lost in the process is ASMRers’ key discovery: the enchanting and ephemeral body of ASMR

### The ASMR Paradox

Despite efforts to give the experience scientific validity, ASMR appears to be scientifically elusive.<sup>1</sup> Although some aspects of the experience

have proven scientifically measurable, ASMR’s physiological, psychological, and neurological determinants have been difficult to identify, while existing cognitive models, concepts, and practices have been unable to fully capture the experience (e.g., mindfulness, misophonia, synesthesia, *frisson*). These tensions between scientific efforts to understand the ASMR experience and ASMRers’ own account of it make visible a conceptual tension that has haunted ASMR since the very beginning, one which I call *the ASMR paradox*: growing efforts to identify and describe ASMR, a scientifically inaccessible experience, in purely scientific terms.

This is not to suggest that ASMR could be better understood through a traditional phenomenological model of embodied experience, which arguably operates on the opposite end of scientific inquiry and theorization. Although the approaches of thinkers like Merleau-Ponty (1962) bypass some of the analytic limitations of scientific discourse by putting less weight on human agency, intentionality, and reason, they nonetheless fail to fully capture the ASMR experience as a multilayered reality. To understand ASMR, it is not enough to take as our starting point the lived body as the locus of experience, nor is it enough to take ASMR as evidence of the world coming into being through the body. ASMR is more than this.

The ASMR body is neither the object/thing-in-itself of scientific discourse nor limited to the sensimotor and intentional capacities of phenomenology’s embodied subject. Instead, the ASMR body comes into being momentarily and from without, challenging the Cartesian and humanist logics of the fixed body of scientific discourse, as well as the experiential centrality of phenomenology’s embodied subject. Thus, to

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<sup>1</sup> A striking difference between scientific researchers and ASMRers is their attitude towards the general accessibility of the experience. While researchers tend to claim that ASMR is accessible to a group of uniquely constituted individuals (drawing a quasi-ontological divide between those who experience ASMR and those who do not),

ASMRers claim that anyone can access the experience if exposed to the right triggers. In fact, some ASMR videos are explicitly made to help people ‘discover’ their triggers by featuring a wide range of different sounds, objects, and scenarios. This also points to an egalitarian dimension of ASMR that is absent in scientific research.

better understand the ASMR experience, we have to move away from these anthropocentric commitments and adopt a post-anthropocentric viewpoint that does not give special privilege to either the *human* individual or to *human* powers. Importantly, the work of queer of colour affect/phenomenology scholars, like Sara Ahmed (2008) and Mel Y. Chen (2012) has taken important steps in this direction. In their work, we encounter efforts to “queer the line that leads from one body to another” (Ahmed, 2014, para 22) in ways that highlight bodies’ indebtedness to one another, while also unsettling the hierarchical and ontological boundaries dividing human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate. To borrow from the phrasing of cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis (2017), these works provide a theoretical lens that is particularly helpful for understanding the ASMR experience precisely because they “divest from the idea of bodies as only humans, as contained within our skins, as beginning and ending in the ‘I’”(p. 41).

A good starting point for such a line of enquiry is the work of figures like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Their work provides a conceptual repertoire with which the affective and bodily capacities and constitution of embodied subjects can be differently articulated in ways that resonate with the complex affectual-sensory-bodily realities of ASMR. For one, Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of bodies is incompatible with the static homogeneity that characterizes the biological essentialism of dominant scientific discourse. Contra to the modernist body of the western metaphysical

tradition, these bodies have thresholds, flows, borders, boundaries, intensities, effectivities, and modalities; they are encounter-prone bodies entangled with and disturbed by materiality, characterized by what these materialities can do or have done to them.

Understanding ASMR requires precisely such an ontological point of departure. For instance, we could think of the ASMR body along the lines of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) *Body without Organs (BwO)*,<sup>2</sup> and argue that this body is “organ-ized” differently: it senses, reacts, and – more generally – *exists* in a manner that is incompatible with the bodies of phenomenological and scientific discourse. Like the BwO, the ASMR body comes into being when thrust by sensory and affective stimuli out of fixed bodily relations, capacities, and structures, momentarily exposing the experiencing subject to new modes of embodiment and relational and experiential configurations. Accordingly, the ASMR body does not *hear with its ears* or *see with its eyes*, but rather, lets itself be *touched* (sometimes in its entirety) by sounds and images.

As already gestured to, such a perspective registers with the work of Mel Y. Chen (2012), who rejects both the modernist body of western scientific discourse and the localized body of traditional phenomenology. Instead, Chen’s (2012) work highlights the inseparability of bodies from other forms of matter, matter’s irreverence to dominant ontological hierarchies, and the precarity and possibilities of embodiment, life, and existence that characterize our current socio-historical context. Their bodies are characterized by incalculable slippages and

<sup>2</sup> Although the argument could be made that the ASMR body is a type of BwO, the logics that inform the production of the ASMR body appear to be somewhat different from those of Deleuze and Guattari’s BwO. While the BwO is a site of experimentation and its becoming tied to internal principles of organization, processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and the actualization of previously unknown or only implicit connections and capacities among bodies in accordance with a line of flight, the ASMR body comes into being in a much more spontaneous and open-ended manner. More specifically, the ASMR body appears to be *summoned* by encounters with sensory stimuli in ways that do not quite

fit with the BwO and its bursts out of the fixed relations that contain it. In fact, the ASMR body does not appear as interested in the subversive and destabilizing sense of embodiment that characterizes the BwO. Instead, the becoming of this body is less a matter of what a body can do than a spontaneous, a-subjective, and encounter-driven process of becoming triggered from the outside by nonhuman bodies and forces (e.g., sounds) in nonlinear, nonhierarchical and non-subject centered ways. This is why I think the vital materialist (Bennett, 2010) strand of posthumanist thought is particularly helpful for analyses of the ASMR body and experience.



contaminations, raising important questions about the affective capacities of matter, and the contingency, porosity, and material (i.e., nonhuman, inorganic, etc.) constitution of human bodies. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2013) puts it, “Chen creates a conceptual archipelago where we can think anew about the quotidian commodities that make up our daily lives in the West” (p. 680). As such, Chen’s (2012) work provides an important theoretical framework through which the posthuman characteristics of the ASMR body and experience can be articulated.

To conclude, the ASMR body and the abstract body of modern science are radically different, featuring incompatible organs, sensations, structures, capacities, and temporalities. In Rancière’s (2009) terms, the former is a body that adheres “to a sensorium different to that of domination” (p. 30), while the latter is where domination occurs. Specifically, the ASMR body can be said to express a *posthuman* configuration, one brought into existence relationally, and only during the duration of the encounter that produced it. As such, ASMR opens the experiencing subject to new corporeal, subjective, and relational configurations, while also disclosing radically different worldings. Understood in this way, the ASMR experience can be said to be one of enchantment: an encounter that *hits* us, but that can also be *fostered* through us, via deliberate strategies that “resist the story of the disenchantment of modernity” (Bennett, 2001, p. 4) and affirm our embodied existence in a shared, planetary context. In other words, ASMR points in the direction of a post-anthropocentric corporeality that recognizes bodies’ indebted to other bodies, vibrant materialities, and endless future possibilities.

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M. F. Collao Quevedo is a Ph.D. candidate in Social & Political Thought at York University. He holds an MA in Social & Political Thought from York University and a BA in philosophy from the University of Calgary. He is interested in environmental politics, the history of social and political thought, and the 'posthuman turn' in critical theory. Through a genealogical-historical exploration of the concept of the Anthropocene, his research looks at what happens when humans become self-reflexive as an undifferentiated global force in a time of ecological crisis, trying to shed new light on understandings of the climate crisis while challenging hegemonic framings and responses to this concern.