

BEYOND PHILOLOGY

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF LINGUISTICS, LITERARY STUDIES
AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

19/3

Edited by Dorota Góreczna, Joanna Stolarek
and Magdalena Sztencel

WYDAWNICTWO UNIWERSYTETU GDAŃSKIEGO
GDAŃSK 2022

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COVER DESIGN

Andrzej Taranek

ISSN 1732-1220

eISSN 2451-1498

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Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego

Contact address

Institute of English and American Studies

University of Gdańsk

ul. Wita Stwosza 51

80-308 Gdańsk

Poland

Phone: (+48) 58 523 30 49, (+48) 58 523 30 50

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Beyond Philology is published in print and online:

<https://fil.ug.edu.pl/wydzial_filologiczny/instituty/institut_anglistyki_i_amerykanistyki/czasopismo_naukowe_beyond_philology>,

<<https://czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl/index.php/beyond>>.

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Beyond Philology is indexed by

- The Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
- ERIH PLUS European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences
- Index Copernicus
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- Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers

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BEYOND PHILOLOGY 19/3

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**Tingles, sparkles, shivers:
Language of affect in online discussions
on autonomous sensory meridian response¹**

JOANNA ŁAPIŃSKA

*Received 26.01.2022,
received in revised form 16.11.2022,
accepted 17.11.2022.*

Abstract

The audiovisual phenomenon of autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), which has been present on the Internet for several years in the form of relaxing videos posted on YouTube, is enjoying growing popularity. One of the interesting elements of this phenomenon is the affectivity visible in the language used by the members of the community. In this article, I focus on the language used by the ASMR community in online spaces, putting forward the thesis that it corresponds with the language of affect present in the affective turn theories that appreciate bodily sensations as a way of experiencing the world. The article suggests that ASMR is a product of the culture of affect and that the success of this phenomenon is associated with a shift toward the importance of the body and its sensations in Western culture as key elements of the individual's experience of the surrounding reality.

¹ This research was funded in whole by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [grant number: M 3144-G]. For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a CC BY public copyright license to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

Keywords

ASMR, affect culture, affective turn, language of affect, YouTube

**Ciarki, iskry, dreszcze.
Język afektu w dyskusjach internetowych
na temat autonomous sensory meridian response**

Abstrakt

Audiowizualne zjawisko autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), od kilku lat obecne w internecie pod postacią relaksujących filmów umieszczanych w serwisie YouTube, cieszy się rosnącą popularnością. Jednym z interesujących elementów tego zjawiska jest afektywność widoczna w języku, którym posługują się członkowie społeczności. W niniejszym artykule skupiam się na języku używanym przez społeczność ASMR w przestrzeniach internetowych, wysuwając tezę, że współgra on z językiem afektu obecnym w teoriach zwrotu afektywnego, które doceniają doznania cielesne jako sposób doświadczania świata. Artykuł sugeruje, że ASMR jest wytworem kultury afektu i że powodzenie tego zjawiska wiąże się ze zwrotem ku istotności ciała i jego doznań w kulturze zachodniej jako kluczowych elementów doświadczania otaczającej rzeczywistości przez jednostkę.

Słowa kluczowe

ASMR, kultura afektu, zwrot afektywny, język afektu, YouTube

1. Introduction

For several years, the phenomenon of autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) has been the subject of scientific research by scholars from various fields: from cultural studies, through media and social sciences, to psychology, psychiatry and cognitive engineering. Academics agree that ASMR is a fascinating phenomenon that has been making waves in online digital culture for more than a decade, and that it is worth looking

at from different perspectives to show its complexity and multi-layeredness. Some of the most frequently discussed themes to date in cultural studies of ASMR videos published on YouTube include, but are not limited to, digitally-mediated intimacy and embodied copresence (Zappavigna 2020, Smith and Snider 2019), online performativity (Harper 2020), the para-haptic interaction of ASMR artists with the audience (Klausen 2019), the relevance of whispering in creating an experience of intimacy (Andersen 2015), or the audio-centered ASMR community (Smith and Snider 2021).

Analyses of the online ASMR phenomenon occasionally include the notions of affect and affectivity as conceptually relevant elements of theoretical research frameworks. For example, Gallagher (2016) locates the ASMR phenomenon in a mediascape full of so-called affective “triggers”, Smith and Snider (2019) consider ASMR a mediated affective experience, and Łapińska (2020a) analyzes from a posthuman perspective the affective properties of the material objects used in the performances led by ASMR artists. At the same time, it is even rarer to come across scholarly analyses of the language used by members of the ASMR community, be it in online forums, in the comment sections of YouTube videos, in video descriptions and titles, or in other places in the online space where tingles enthusiasts share their thoughts and experiences. To my knowledge, only one text examining ASMR from a linguistic perspective has been published so far (Ozga 2020), dedicated to, among other things, the vocal and non-verbal sounds used by artists in their videos to elicit tingles in their audiences. In addition, Ozga focused on the names of channels publishing ASMR content on YouTube and the communicative forms used by artists in their videos to simulate the personal dimension of the experience. Equally important is the fact that, as Smith and Snider (2021) note, research on the ASMR community is still sparse, as researchers to date have focused primarily on critical analysis of video content.

In an effort to fill this gap, in this article I intend to focus on the ASMR community and analyze selected entries made by ASMR aficionados in online forums and in the comments sections of videos posted on YouTube channels. I will also explore how individuals experiencing ASMR – not necessarily viewers of intentionally created ASMR videos that more than a decade ago were not yet available – described their feelings at a time when the phenomenon had not yet been identified and referred to by its current name. As research material I will use, among other things, a thread on the forum of the website Steadyhealth.com set up in October 2007, considered to be the beginning of the exchange of experiences on the Internet about the phenomenon of tingles felt on the skin of the head, neck, nape and sometimes even the whole body in response to various stimuli, later called ASMR. In the article, I observe that the language used by individuals who experience a specific tingling sensation on their own skin, not necessarily thanks to dedicated audiovisual materials, as well as by users of ASMR content published on the Internet, has a lot in common with the language of affect, which has operated for several years now in the humanities as part of the so-called affective turn. This essay argues that ASMR can be called a product of the culture of affect and that the success of this phenomenon is linked to the popular contemporary turn toward materiality and “embodied life” (Schaefer 2019: 1) as essential elements in experiencing the reality surrounding the individual, and the turn away from cognitivism, language, and reason as the most fundamental determinants of human cognition, existence, and subjectivity. In this essay, I point out that ASMR is a symptomatic phenomenon and cultural lens through which we can view contemporary changes regarding what constitutes humans’ subjectivity and their experience of the world. An individual’s affective experience of the world using the body – alongside rational-cognitive perception – is now becoming valued and promoted precisely in affect theory, which is interested in “*what bodies do* – what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide” (Schaefer 2019: 1). In ASMR, rational-

cognitive perception is displaced by bodily experiences and sensations. The tingling sensation felt on the scalp, and thus in the body, can be indicative of many things: for example, a person's belonging to the material world, to the nonlinguistic world, and to the world "of nature." As I argue later in this article, affect in humanities research is sometimes referred to as a non-understandable, nontextual, "nonlinguistic and non- or paracognitive" element (Schaefer 2019: 1) – as are tingles, sparkles and shivers, whose distinctiveness and peculiarity also challenge their perception in rational and intellectual terms.

2. Affect theory and affective language

Before I proceed to analyze the source material, I would like to consider how scholars and philosophers theorize about affect. What terms and words do they use to best represent what they think affect and affective experience are? To what phenomena and elements of reality is affect compared in the theoretical reflections of those who identify with the affective turn in contemporary humanities?

Evidently, there is no consensus among theorists as to what affect actually is and how it should be understood. It is not uncommon to equate it simply with emotion or feeling, emphasizing that the differences between these three states are fairly minor. These concepts, according to Sianne Ngai, are not characterized by "a formal difference of quality or kind" but rather "a modal difference of intensity or degree" (2005: 27). Ngai's assumption is that affects are not as formed and structured as emotions, but, at the same time, they are "not lacking form or structure altogether"; they are "by no means code-free or meaningless" and also not "entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers" (2005: 27). Justyna Tabaszewska (2018) speaks of affect in a similar way, noting that it would be fruitful to conceive emotions and affects in a phasic and relational way: as about different stages of the same process, interacting with each other and overlapping. In this context, affect would be some-

what less structured than emotion and feeling, but would still be closely related to them.

However, there are tendencies among researchers who explicitly treat affect as something more primordial than feeling and preceding culturally constructed emotion. In this understanding, affect is a kind of “protosensation”, a “precognitive sensory experience” (Cvetkovich 2012: 4), as scholars inspired by Gilles Deleuze’s thought wish. Emotions such as joy, anger or fear, as conscious and cultural constructs, allegedly would be separate from affect. Affect, for example in Brian Massumi’s theory, is the experience of “how intensities come together, move each other, and transform and translate under or beyond meaning, semantics, fixed systems, cognitions” (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010: 147). Affect is a kind of unrest, tension, trembling, or stirring felt in the body, which only when cognitively processed and realized can trigger specific feelings such as joy, fear, disgust, shame, or anger. For Benedict de Spinoza (2009), whose philosophy is a great inspiration for researchers interested in the affect theory, the potentiality of bodies is the ability to stimulate and be stimulated, “to affect or to be affected” (Massumi 2015: 4). Affect acts like an endless flow between interconnected bodies, “it goes up and down gently like a tide, or maybe storms and crests like a wave” (Massumi 2015: 4). Spinoza’s philosophy resonates, for example, in the notion of affect that emerges from the analyses of Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010: 2), who define it with the picturesque term “shimmers”, evoking something fleeting, flickering, sparkling, while claiming that “affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*.” As in Spinoza, this is about the encounters of bodies interacting with each other in a kind of dance of belonging and detachment.

“Shimmer” is not the only appealing word used by researchers to describe the experience of affect. Karolina Felberg (2013: 45), when writing about the affective turn in art, vividly depicts that affect can be imagined as “a flicker, a flash, a current, a nerve, a fluid, a damp, an energy, a geniality”: something

unrepresentable, something intangible, something that eludes words. Agnieszka Dauksza (2014), on the other hand, describes affect in terms of “ambiguous strangeness”, “clinginess”, “stickiness”, and “attaching” to the viewer’s consciousness. Dauksza also argues that affect, or this particular intensity, often manifests itself in different, very divergent receptions of a given cultural text or artwork by the audience. The affect makes itself known in moments of ambiguity.

It is important to note that the affective turn often valorizes precisely the viewer/listener, who, in the words of Agnieszka Jelewska (2012: 114), serves as a “somatic interface”: someone who “receives, transmits, and decodes the various impulses and stimuli that arise in the situation of contact with a work of art”. Impulses acting on both the conscious and subconscious of the viewer/listener constitute the affective reception of a given cultural text or work of art, primarily so-called sensory art. As Jelewska claims, reception is always a result of bodily functions, and the active involvement of the viewer/listener on the micro-level of perception is accomplished through the affects flowing between the creator, the work of art, and the audience.

3. The unnamed feeling²

ASMR, until recently of interest only to a small circle of initiated enthusiasts and an even smaller circle of researchers, is a relatively new cultural and audiovisual phenomenon, present on the Internet mainly in the form of videos published on YouTube. ASMR is an acronym for the pseudo-scientific name “autonomous sensory meridian response”, used to describe the pleasant tingling sensation felt on the skin of the head, neck, shoulders, and even sometimes the entire body, in response to various stimuli: primarily visual and auditory (in the case of videos posted in virtual space), but also tactile or olfactory (when

² I borrowed this phrase from “The Unnamed Feeling” Internet blog bringing together the ASMR community, accessible between 2010 and 2013 at <http://theunnam3df33ling.blogspot.com>.

experiencing ASMR in the real world). The sensation would be expected to lead to deep relaxation of the whole body and calming of the mind, and, according to some commentators, to provide relief for those suffering from anxiety, depression or struggling with sleep problems (Barratt and Davis 2015).

The term “ASMR” does not only denote that blissful tingling sensation that induces drowsiness, tranquility and calmness. It is also a term used to describe the Internet subculture and community associated with specific authors of ASMR-dedicated YouTube channels, where artists upload audiovisual materials created exclusively for the purpose of inducing shivers, containing a multitude of stimuli and thus having a salutary effect on the well-being of the viewers/listeners of these videos.³ The ASMR community has not been widely researched to date; it is most often considered to be a community centered around a broadly defined notion of sound (Smith and Snider 2021). Without a doubt, the ways in which individuals, who experience ASMR firsthand in the real world as well as users of ASMR videos, speak about their own experiences may shed new light on the phenomenon and place it in a broader cultural context.

It appears that the language used by the aforementioned individuals has much in common with the language of the affective turn in humanities. It is not uncommon for a sensation felt on the skin, referred to for convenience as ASMR, to be described in online forums and blogs as something peculiar, inexplicable, indescribable, unspeakable. Such descriptions resonate with Massumi’s characterization of affect as “not yet a fully formed thought. It’s a movement of thought, or a thinking movement” (2015: 10). Evidence of the impossibility of accurately expressing in language this specific sensation and the constant movement of thought around it can be seen in the fact that the fledgling ASMR community has long been unable to give the

³ More extensive definitions and descriptions of the ASMR phenomenon can be found in other publications (e.g., Gallagher 2016, Klausen 2019, Łapińska 2020b), therefore, I will not repeat them in this paper, wishing to focus primarily on the language used in the online ASMR community.

phenomenon an appropriate name that conveys its complexity. Since about 2007, the community has been working together to come up with a perfect term for the feeling. Early working names for the sensation included, among others, “attention induced euphoria” (AIE), “attention induced observant euphoria” (AI-OEU), “attention induced head orgasm” (AIHO), “head tingles”, “brain tingles”, “braingasm”, or the aforementioned “the unnamed feeling.” Finally, in 2010, a more professional, “medical” name of “autonomous sensory meridian response” was coined to dissociate from the sexualization of the phenomenon.⁴

The first significant post in the ASMR-centered online community is considered to be a post published by a user with the pseudonym okaywhatever51838 in October 2007 on the Steadyhealth.com website forum.⁵ The post was titled “WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD” and was written as follows:

i get this sensation sometimes. theres no real trigger for it. it just happenes randomly. its been happening since i was a kid and I'm 21 now. some examples of what it seems has caused it to happen before are as a child while watching a puppet show and when i was being read a story to. as a teenager when a classmate did me a favor and when a friend drew on the palm of my hand with markers. sometimes it happens for no reason at all that i can tell, though. I'll just be sitting or whatever doing whatever and it happens. *its like in my head and all over my body. if i get an itch when I'm experiencing the sensation i won't scratch it cause the itch helps intensify it.* [emphasis mine – J.L.] i also like to trace my fingers along my skin because it feels good when experiencing the sensation. sometimes my eyes will water. when the sensation is over i will sometimes feel nauseous, but not that bad. just a slight hint of nausea. what is it?? I'm not complaining cause i love it, but I'm just wondering what it might be... help.⁶

⁴ The story of the origin of the name “ASMR” can be learned at www.asmr-university.com, where a video was posted introducing Jennifer Allen, who coined the term “autonomous sensory meridian response” (Richard 2016).

⁵ The discussion with the original forum posts can be found at <https://www.steadyhealth.com/topics/weird-sensation-feels-good>.

⁶ In all quoted posts and user contributions, the original spelling has been preserved, where possible.

A forum user shared an experience of a strange sensation that seems to happen randomly at different times in their life. The sensation is felt not only in the head, but affects the entire body. The person communicating their experience compares the sensation to a pleasant itching on the skin that one does not wish to scratch because one desires to prolong its duration. Forum participants responding in the thread created by okaywhatever51838 speak very enthusiastically about this peculiar, nameless feeling and highlight their own comparable experiences. For example, a user named bean487 reports “this strange sensation in [their] head” and “this tingling in [their] scalp” and then describes the sensation very vividly (“a silvery sparkle through my head and brain”) before using a sexual metaphor (“a sort of head orgasm”). On the forum one can also find significant comparisons of the tingling sensation to goosebumps all over the scalp, which “fades in and out in waves of heightened intensity”.

It is worth recalling at this point researchers’ discussions of the issue of differentiating and distinguishing between “affect” and “emotion” in terms of the degree of intensity and structuring. The comments of people experiencing ASMR apparently combine descriptions of affective sensations, which they find difficult to name and correctly classify according to familiar patterns, with depictions of emotional sensations, such as those associated with the happiness experienced as a child when drawing with a marker on a friend’s skin or listening to a parent reading a bedtime story. Massumi firmly separates the realm of affect from the realm of emotions stating that “emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized” (2002: 28).

However, for the members of the ASMR community this distinction is not very easy to sustain. In statements on the discussion forum, we recognize a striking desire to link an affective sensation to familiar emotions, primarily the happiness and

carefreeness of childhood. Perhaps it is because emotions are seemingly easier to comprehend as “conventional or coded expression” (Massumi 2015: 32) of affect than the affect itself. Therefore, forum users wish to encapsulate the affective intensity into familiar semantic and semiotic forms. Still, the fleeting and indefinable affect in the form of tingles is subject to constant transformation; it is hard to grasp and not easy to describe. As Tabaszewska notes, affects “rather happen than exist” (2018: 272); they remain elusive and in motion.

On the ASMR University website collecting various resources on ASMR, a “Voices of ASMR” survey was conducted among people who experience this sensation.⁷ The first general question was: “What does ASMR feel like?” and supporting, more specific ones included the following: “What physical sensations do you feel?”; “Where do you feel these sensations on your body?”; “What emotional and psychological sensations do you feel?”. Respondents left 68 comments under the first question, which I analyzed to determine how people experiencing ASMR describe the sensation. For example, a user nicknamed Kim recounts in a picturesque way:

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

The comparison of the sensation of ASMR to water shooting out of a fountain under the vault of the skull and flowing down the inside of the head evokes the sense of fluidity, phasiness, and clinginess of affect that some theorists point out. Indeed, the water usually flows uncontrollably, fills every crevice, and affects everything in its path. In such a meticulous description

⁷ User responses can be found at <https://asmruniversity.com/voices-what-does-asmr-feel-like/>.

one can see the user's desire to best convey the specific experience that takes place inside their body. The wish to capture that crucial moment when they feel what their body is doing, what it is capable of, and therefore what it wants – this is the wish to capture the affect. As Massumi states, “the way we live [...] is always entirely embodied” (2015: 6) and affect is a way of “thinking, bodily” (2015: 10).

Equally appealing is the use of the concept of vibration to describe the ASMR experience in the quoted statement. Hitting the right frequency that makes Kim's “inner ear” vibrate is akin to a dance of intensities that “come together, move each other” (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010: 147). It is like a Spinozian affective wave of appropriate frequency flowing through stimulating and stimulated bodies connected by the “forces of encounter”, as Gregg and Seigworth (2010: 2) describe.

Another comment in the “Voices of ASMR” survey was left by Andy, who wrote the following about their ASMR experience:

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

Here the emphasis lies again on comparing the indescribable with something familiar and everyday – with sugar pouring out of a sachet. ASMR tingling is like the effervescence of pouring sugar from a small bag into the head through a tiny hole in the skull. It is something fizzing and sparkling, like Gregg and Seigworth's (2010) shimmers. The sensation radiates along the arms, spine, and even Andy's legs! The body, thus, becomes a somatic interface receiving impulses and distributing them. It is the material, not the intellectual element, that plays a major role in the constitution of the experiencing subject. It is the body that feels affected on a primal level.

In the contributions to the “Voices of ASMR” survey, we can find a number of other expressions that resonate with the language of the affective turn. One person admits that the

sensation of ASMR can be compared to “a warm, slightly fuzzy, tingling energy” flowing in the body. Someone else shares their thoughts, stating that ASMR has different “degrees of severity”: sometimes it produces only a relaxing sensation that “washes away” fears and anxieties, and at other times it is much stronger and causes goosebumps or a so-called “warm chill.” Emphasizing the gradualness of this sensation is correlated with the previously described blurriness of boundaries and the specific elusiveness of the affect.

Some commentators on affect theory (Tabaszewska 2018) warn against unnecessary and forced differentiation of affect and emotion. This type of postulate can also be detected in the statements left by viewers of ASMR videos on YouTube, for example, in the comments section under the video *What is ASMR? (ASMR EXPLAINED & ASMR Test!)* (New Rockstars 05.08.2015). Here, oftentimes vocabulary revolving around affectivity (i.e., phrases indicating the indeterminacy, fluidity, and incomprehensibility of ASMR sensation, such as a “kinda fuzzy feeling”) and descriptions of specific, commonly known, and semantically indisputable emotional states (e.g., “being super relaxed”) are intertwined. One of the commenters uses terms from both resources:

[...] for me the best way i could describe the feeling is something of a cross between *being super relaxed* [emphasis mine – J.Ł.] but also completely absorbed and focused on the sound/visual and i guess *kinda fuzzy feeling* in the head [emphasis mine – J.Ł.].

Importantly, the discussed video was not created to evoke pleasant shivers in viewers, but to objectively explain the phenomenon to all interested parties. Therefore, we find a relatively large number of comments describing ASMR in a pejorative manner. The reflection on such statements is as important as the analysis of the praise left by ASMR enthusiasts, because it allows us to see the other side of the coin. Interestingly, as can be observed in the comments below, non-ASMR fans also use a characteristic combination of affective and emotional language in

their remarks. A lack of understanding of the peculiar phenomenon, but also insufficient language resources to characterize ASMR effectively, result, on the one hand, in helpless comments like “I don’t get it” or “it pisses me off”, and, on the other hand, in the use of highly imaginative names of concrete emotions and unambiguous emotional associations (“[it] causes anxiety”, “It could be used for torture”).

Here are examples of negative comments left under the video *What is ASMR? (ASMR EXPLAINED & ASMR Test!)*:

When I’ve heard those sounds I wanted to throw my computer outside the window. I don’t get it.

I agree. All those sounds and sights do nothing whatsoever for me. In fact some of it pisses me off and causes anxiety.

Same here. There’s nothing relaxing at all in this. It’s exactly the opposite for me. It could be used for torture.

We remember Dauksza’s (2014) thesis on the intensity of receptive reactions and the divergence of interpretations of cultural text or artwork in which affect manifests itself.

However, differing reactions and interpretations are inextricably linked to any experience. As Massumi reminds us, “there’s a unique feeling to every experience that comes along, and the exact details of it can never be exhausted” (2015: 13). ASMR is a great example of a phenomenon that evokes a unique feeling that rarely leaves anyone indifferent. One may risk the statement that ASMR even demands an unambiguous reaction from the audience: either admiration or repulsion. This is confirmed by the deep gap between, on the one hand, praising reactions to ASMR videos, and, on the other, voices at the other end of the spectrum, describing ASMR as torture, for example.⁸ In both cases, there is an intense affect that comes with “a stronger

⁸ Even more blunt comments can be found under YouTube videos that feature controversial triggers, for example, eating-related sounds (munching, crunching, slurping, lips smacking), which can evoke both pleasant ASMR sensations and intense anger and disgust in the viewer. On the relationship between ASMR and misophonia, see, for example, McGeoch and Rouw (2020).

sense of embeddedness [...] – a heightened sense of belonging, with other people” (Massumi 2015: 6). One can argue that the power of affect binds the ASMR-centered online community, which stays relentless in its efforts to describe the intensity of ASMR reactions in the best possible way.

4. ASMR as a product of the culture of affect?

Is the ASMR phenomenon and the online community centered around it part of the contemporary culture of affect? Undoubtedly. The appreciation of bodily sensations in the experiencing of the surrounding reality and in the creation of one’s subjectivity is symptomatic of the affective turn that has permeated contemporary humanities for years. As has been observed in the course of analysis, the valuation of the affective reception of the world, alongside rational-cognitive perception, pervades the ASMR community. Its members describe what they feel inside their bodies in response to various stimuli. They attempt to name these feelings in a manner that is understandable to themselves and others, but often they seem linguistically helpless against the fluid, shimmering, and ephemeral sensations flowing through their bodies. Thus, they combine the language of affect and emotion – indeterminacy and concreteness – in their expressions. The ASMR community demonstrates symptoms of what we might call the contemporary culture of affect, offering its own answer to the question once posed by Steven Shaviro: “*what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century” (2010: 2). The ASMR community seems to be stating that it is impossible to exist without the body, and that the fiction of disembodiment in digital culture is a mirage. The body is still not a thing of the past, and the continuous efforts of ASMR users to best describe their bodily sensations point to a renaissance of an affective experience of the world around us.

This raises the question of what comes next. What role does affect play in the ASMR culture that is becoming increasingly commercialized and mainstream? Are we once again witnessing

affect being harnessed to work by a contemporary culture of consumption? There is no denying that the ASMR community participates in a kind of business model: by watching videos on YouTube, it indirectly provides a living to the artists who create and publish content on this platform. Without a doubt, ASMR culture has rapidly become a powerful money-making machine. Perhaps in this way we are being offered a commercialized affect: an affect that is conceptualized, produced, beautifully packaged and marketed... But this constitutes a topic for a separate discussion.

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Joanna Łapińska
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-6634-1778
Universität Wien
Philologisch-Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät
Institut für Theater-, Film- und Medienwissenschaft
UZA II-Rotunde
Josef-Holaubek-Platz 2
1090 Wien
Austria
joanna.lapinska@univie.ac.at