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'Safe and sound'

– what technologically-mediated ASMR is capable of through sound

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Abstract

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, colloquially known as ASMR, is the name of a physiological sensory reaction today most commonly found on YouTube as a video phenomenon in which auditory and visual triggers are created in order to cause a relaxing, tingling sensation in the audience. Relatively little research has examined ASMR. This article combines media and sound studies in providing a theoretical framework for understanding what technologically-mediated ASMR is – and is capable of – through sound in particular. To do so, I suggest 'para-haptic interaction' as a theoretical elaboration of the term 'para-social relation' as coined by Horton and Wohl in 1956, adding to it the concepts of 'social audio-grooming' and 'telepresence' in order to argue that ASMR can be felt as 'haptic' in more than one sense – physically as well as imagined through sonically binaural qualities and narratives (role-plays) supported by sound, vibrations and image. Throughout the article, the theoretical and analytic arguments will be supported by an illustrative sample of ASMR videos on YouTube.

Introduction

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, colloquially known as ASMR, is the name of a physiological sensory reaction that can be described as "a tingling, static-like sensation across the scalp, back of the neck and at times further areas in response to specific triggering audio and visual stimuli" (Barratt and Davis, 2015, p. 1). The peculiar sensation is also frequently referred to by the audience as *headgasm*, *braingasm* and – most commonly – *tingles* (Klausen, 2016, p. 49). Despite its bodily nature, ASMR is best known as a technologically-mediated phenomenon in the form of videos due to its presence and recent explosive growth in mediated spaces such as YouTube.

In short, ASMR videos are audio-visual recordings in which an 'ASMRtist' moves around a camera lens while performing a series of sounds and movements intended to produce a relaxing, tingling sensation in the audience. The most popular ASMR triggers include whispering, personal attention, crisp sounds and slow movements (Barratt and Davis, 2015, p. 6). While some videos concentrate on making 'sound assortments', introducing the listener to an array of ASMR sounds while showing the object in question visually (e.g. a pair of scissors or a cardboard box), other videos include different types of role-plays, imitating everyday activities such as visiting the doctor, getting a haircut or going to the library. In ASMR role-plays "the action is not merely performed for you, it's performed *on* you, as if you are actually in the room with the ASMRtist as a secondary character in the play" (Young and Blansert, 2015, p. 124; emphasis in original). In role-plays the camera lens thus resembles the viewer's eyes and (binaural) microphones serve as the listener's ears.

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I will return to ASMR role-plays, including the importance of the binaural microphones, later in the article.

ASMR first appeared online as a video phenomenon in 2007, and it has only become more and more present on social media platforms such as YouTube in recent years. In fact, the number of videos uploaded to YouTube with 'ASMR' in the title has exploded over the last two years, and more than 30 million results appear when searching for 'ASMR' on YouTube (Google Search, 2018). It is the same story, when using the data tool Google Trends to explore the number of searches for the four-letter abbreviation on all Google's services, YouTube included, as it shows that from 2012 and onwards the interest for ASMR has grown exponentially (Google Trends, 2018).

Despite its explosive growth and remaining nature, little research has been devoted to ASMR so far. The majority of published articles on the phenomenon are dealing with psychological and/or neuroscientific aspects of ASMR (see e.g. Fredborg, Clark and Smith, 2018; McErlean and Banissy, 2018; Poerio et al., 2018; del Campo and Kehle, 2016; Barratt and Davis, 2015). However, I will present my theoretical and analytical arguments in the wake of articles that have discussed ASMR in relation to some of the performative, auditory, affective and technologically-mediated aspects of the phenomenon in recent years (Andersen, 2014; Gallagher, 2016; Iossifidis, 2016; Bennett, 2016; Waldron, 2017; Garro, 2017; Smith and Snider, 2019; Abrantes, 2019/in this issue).

This article will discuss how ASMR videos create a sense of presence and intimacy through sonically binaural qualities and caring narratives in role-plays. In order to discuss this, I want to provide a theoretical framework for understanding ASMR as a mediated genre and with emphasis on its sonic qualities. More specifically, the article will suggest 'para-haptic interaction' as a theoretical elaboration of the term 'para-social relation' as coined by Horton and Wohl (1956), adding to it the concepts of 'telepresence' (Sheridan, 1989; Senft, 2008) and 'social audio-grooming' (Klausen and Have, 2019). This will be done through the use of an illustrative sample of ASMR videos on YouTube, intentionally and carefully selected to serve as rich exemplars for my analytical arguments, aiming at providing 'thick descriptions' for the sake of clarification (cf. Geertz, 1973).

This article is postphenomenological in its point of departure, placing the body's sensory perception in the centre of comprehending the world, and it subscribes to Don Ihde's notion that "no technologies are neutral" (Ihde, 2002, p. 111) and that "[b]y living with electronic instruments our experience of listening itself is being transformed, and included in this transformation are the ideas we have about the world and ourselves" (Ihde, 2007, p. 5). This epistemological stance is inter alia expressed through the repeated use of the term 'technologically-mediated' in the article. The article is primarily informed by media and sound studies, with an

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emphasis on media aesthetics and media sociology, in terms of theory and methodology. However, due to ASMR being a phenomenon calling for an interdisciplinary approach, I will also draw on notions and concepts from especially the psychological fields of research in order to describe the phenomenon equitably.

It is well known that one of the most common reasons for seeking out ASMR videos on YouTube has to do with bringing relief to an array of diseases and conditions such as insomnia, anxiety, depression, stress, migraine and chronic pain (Barratt and Davis, 2015; Andersen, 2014; Ahuja, 2013; Poerio, 2016; Poerio et al., 2018). By naming this article 'safe and sound', I want to point to these reasons. The phrase 'safe and sound' refers to a state of being 'unharmed or unhurt' as well as being 'in good health and well' (OED Online, 2018a). This, combined with the ambiguity of the word 'sound', made it suitable for this article, as I argue that ASMR videos – by virtue of binaural sound combined with the caring narratives in many ASMR role-play videos – provide a safe space of presence for the audience.

In the sections that follow, I begin by shortly outlining how (technologically-mediated) ASMR relates to presence and sound. I will then move on to discuss the importance of the (whispered) voice in terms of ASMR videos and how mediated ASMR can be seen as a form of 'social audio-grooming' (as introduced elsewhere in Klausen and Have, 2019). I then consider how the term 'telepresence' (Sheridan, 1989; Senft, 2008) relates to the notion of social audio-grooming with attunement, intention and immersion tied to it. In the last section of the article, I will, as already mentioned, elaborate and recontextualise the concept of 'para-social relation' by Horton and Wohl (1956) and suggest using 'para-haptic interaction'. Finally, in the conclusion, I suggest discussing the ambivalence of technology in a future context as to whether technology can be considered a helper or a hindrance in establishing intimacy and relaxation in ASMR videos.

ASMR, presence and sound

In order to acquire what is arguably the most standard physiological understanding of sound, one can refer to the Oxford English Dictionary, explaining the term as: "The sensation produced in the organs of hearing when the surrounding air is set in vibration in such a way as to affect these" (OED Online, 2019). However, in the case of ASMR videos, sound can be perceived as haptic in more than one sense – physically (heard) as well as imagined (felt). In this article, I use the term 'haptic' in order to describe the way that audio-visual content, here in the form of ASMR videos, can cause tactile sensations in the audience through sonically binaural qualities *and* through narratives (role-plays) supported by sound, vibrations and image. 'Haptic', in this sense, thus refers to both the experienced *physical* and the *imagined* sense (in terms of immersion and 'telepresence') rather than to haptic technologies such

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as touch screen interfaces, force feedback or kinaesthetic feedback technology (cf. Haans and IJsselsteijn, 2006). Or in other words: The sounds produced for ASMR videos are intended to not only create vibrations, but also transcend or at least make invisible the enabling technology – despite being made possible by exactly that. In this context, 'making the enabling technology invisible' is to be understood as *immediacy*: "A transparent interface would be one that erases itself, so that the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, pp. 23-24).

In 1966, Edward T. Hall coined the term *proxemics* to describe the culturally dependent ways in which people use interpersonal distance to understand and mediate their interactions with other people (Hall, 1966). 25 years later, Mark Weiser described proxemics as technologies that disappear, that "weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it", where computers are integrated "seamlessly into the world" (Weiser, 1991, p. 94). Today, this 'seamless weave' is perhaps even more prevalent than ever before. And with phenomena like ASMR, the seamlessness not only applies to the ways in which we use smartphones, tablets, laptops etc., but also to the *experience of presence* defined as "a mediated experience that seems very much like it is not mediated [...; it] creates for the user a strong sense of presence" (Lombard and Ditton in: Boyns and Loprieno, 2013, pp. 38-39).

But why are presence, ASMR and sound so closely connected? Despite its audiovisuality, sound is the key factor in the ASMR experience, and a lot of the most popular triggers are auditory (Andersen, 2014; Gallagher, 2016; Iossifidis, 2016; Barratt, Spence and Davis, 2017). Furthermore, the technologically-mediated variety of ASMR has entered a stage where the technological improvements – and especially the ones that have to do with sound – have become so prevalent that one could argue that watching and listening to ASMR videos is becoming more and more of an *immersive*[1] sonic experience. The immersion is made possible by the use of recording devices such as binaural microphones, a technique designed to elicit three-dimensional tactile sounds by recording from two microphones shaped like human ears (in some cases in terms of 'dummy head recording', in which the shape of human ears is also to be understood literally) – and spaced accordingly – in order to mimic and represent the auditory resonance chamber of the head, resulting in an 'internal' form of sound. Diego Garro here explains why (binaural) microphones are essential to ASMR videos:

> The microphone is at the heart of 'ASMRtistry'. It functions not only as an acoustic-electric transducer and recording device; it is utilised as the sonic equivalent of a magnifying glass, a vehicle to the inner fabric of the subtle sound events that are cornerstones of the ASMR language: whispers, unintelligible vocal sounds and artefacts that are part of speech activity (lip and tongue sound, breathing), ruffles of fabric,

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> voluntary and involuntary tapping and scratching, etc. *Close-up and even closer* is the imperative here. (Garro, 2017, p. 3; emphasis in original)

The clear, crisp and complex close-up sound has thus consequently become an essential part of many ASMR videos, designed to improve the (quality of the) ASMR experience.[2] Garro's point on being 'close-up and even closer' is key, and in the section below, I argue how this closeness is obtained by whispering. I also argue why the act of whispering – the most popular trigger in ASMR videos – is of particular importance to the ASMR experience, including how unintelligible (by the ASMR community however mostly referred to as 'inaudible') whispering elements are able to invoke a form of reduced listening (cf. Chion, 2012).

'Whispering at the top of my lungs' – the importance of the voice

In terms of sound, the voice coming from the ASMRtist is particularly important to the ASMR experience, as a lot of videos use triggers emanating from the voice, e.g. whispering, inaudible/unintelligible speaking, soft spoken and mouth sounds. The voice has long been under scrutiny within sound studies (see e.g. Ihde, 2007; Dolar, 2006; Neumark, Gibson and Leeuwen, 2010; Lønstrup, 2004). And within ASMR research in particular, this article is guided by Andersen (2014), Iossifidis (2016) and Smith and Snider (2019) who have written articles on the importance and power of the whispered (female) voice and the digitally-mediated intimacy that follows in regard to mediated ASMR.

But what qualities does the human voice bear with it when mediated, and why is it important? Audio formats such as the audiobook are known to produce effects of presence and intimacy by providing a sense of social company (Have and Pedersen, 2016, p. 70). This, I argue, is very much the case with ASMR sounds as well – and perhaps even to a greater extent, as the social company in ASMR videos is provided by not only voice, but whispered voice, and also by imitating social interaction audiovisually. Following the logic of Li, "the voice is the genuine revelation of the inner corporal self [...] whispering is 'vocal self-revelation' *par excellence*" (Li, 2011, p. 21; emphasis in original). The act of whispering in the form of ASMR, one could argue, thereby creates an even bigger sense of presence and intimacy than other auditory formats. Whispering is, by definition, to speak softly 'under one's breath' without the resonant tone produced by vibration of the vocal cords, to talk or converse in this way, especially in the ear of another, for the sake of secrecy (OED Online, 2018b). Listening to an ASMRtist whispering in an ASMR video thereby resembles what would otherwise – if not mediated technologically – require being in near proximity of the whisperer. The act of whispering thereby mimics closeness and brings with it associations of emotional concepts such as secrecy, trust, familiarity and inti-

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macy – in other words: being close in both a physical-bodily and emotional sense. Andersen puts the importance of the whispered ASMR voice in accordance with intimacy: "Although there is no physical contact, ASMR video intimately connects two bodies, that of the whisperer and the spectator, and allows them to impress upon each other" (Andersen, 2014, p. 691). The whispering voice then gives rise to a kind of *distant intimacy* – or what John B. Thompson calls 'non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance', which is a mediated quasi-interaction that is relatively open-ended and predominantly monological, however constituting a form of interaction that creates distinctive kinds of interpersonal relationships, social bonds and intimacy (Thompson, 2005, pp. 33-34).

By whispering, the bodily immersion is amplified, enabling the listener to get real close to the details of the sound, cf. the points on proxemics as mentioned earlier, while allowing the ASMRtist to get 'all up in the ears' (Gibi ASMR, 2018) of the listener. The fact that most ASMR videos come with a recommendation to listen with headphones also adds to the closeness, as argued by Smith and Snider: "It becomes nearer as the sound is now heightened, and can be increased in volume and more closely experienced through the use of headphones" (Smith and Snider, 2019, p. 5). The ASMRtist thus has the listener turning the volume in her headphones up in order to make the ASMR sounds audible, making the listener vulnerable to loud noises, while having her attention and focus locked in (and even shielded from the world outside of the headphones), ultimately establishing a relation of trust. In this regard, naming this section 'whispering at the top of my lungs' therefore has to do with the contrasting facts in whispering '*under* one's breath', yet getting the audience's attention *as if* one were screaming at the *top* of one's lungs.

An illustrative example of how ASMR videos succeed in getting the listener to tune in and *listen* – as opposed to simply hearing – is the so-called inaudible/unintelligible videos. Like the video called *ASMR 2 Hours of Layered Inaudible Whispers | Ear Cupping | Mic Brushing| Rubber Gloves |Kisses* (Cosmic Tingles ASMR, 2015), in which the ASMRtist Cosmic Tingles ASMR spends two hours virtually doing what the title of the video indicates, to a pair of binaural microphones. The video is part of a cluster of ASMR videos on YouTube labelled with words like 'inaudible' or 'unintelligible' in the title, indicating that the video contains either foreign language or subdued incomprehensible jibber-jabber, constituting one of many triggers that have to do with voices in ASMR videos. In these videos, the talking is stripped of linguistic meaning, conveying only the information that comes with the voice itself, focussing on the materiality of the voice, or as Andersen argues: "Rather than focusing on the meaning of speech, the listener's attention can turn more easily to the quality of the voice itself [...] The impression it makes on the ear is greater than that of the normal voice because of the intensity of the attention given to it" (Andersen, 2014, p. 690).

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Following French composer and film theorist Michel Chion, one could argue that ASMR videos with inaudible/unintelligible speaking elements invoke a form of *reduced listening*, one of three modes of listening, describing a conscious attention towards the sounds themselves: "Reduced listening [...] focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning" (Chion, 2012, p. 50). This mode of listening complies with ASMR in terms of the focus and attention that goes with it, as reduced listening opens up our ears and sharpens our power of listening (Chion, 2012, p. 51). The acts of 'opening up our ears' and 'sharpening our power of listening' are perhaps also why ASMR has been compared to phenomena like meditation and mindfulness, as it too offers a focussed, attentive and slow alternative to the age of distraction. As journalist Winifred Gallagher points out, in order to reach a mindful state of mind, one has to filter, select and focus (Gallagher, 2009, p. 8). Listening to an ASMR video with inaudible/unintelligible whispering likewise forces the listener to focus and concentrate on the sound (and voice) itself, 'reducing one's listening' in relation to understanding semiotically – while also reducing extraneous impressions from her surroundings – for relaxation purposes.

As pointed out earlier, sound can be perceived as haptic in more than one sense – physically as well as imagined. This point will be discussed in the following section, in which I will elaborate on the term 'social audio-grooming' and provide a close analysis of an ASMR video in order to exemplify the term.

Social audio-grooming

> We tend to think of touch as one of the most direct, physical senses that binds us and connects us to others. From the caregiver's touch to their infant, or the touch expressed by lovers through the caress and hug, touch is a form of tactile communication that shows our primary interconnectedness with others. (Blackman, 2008, p. 85)

Lisa Blackman here describes how touch – as a direct, physical sense – is very much related to interconnectedness. In this article, I argue that this interconnectedness can be achieved in an alternative way: through an embodied, yet technologically-mediated presence, mimicking the sense of touch, but through the sense of hearing. 'Social audio-grooming' (coined by Klausen and Have, 2019) is a generic term describing a mediated sensory social grooming, in which linguistic, visual and audible impressions are conveyed by another human in what feels like close proximity via binaural microphones.

I argue that ASMR can be characterised as a form of 'social audio-grooming', as the ASMR videos provide not only soothing sounds, but also first-person-like social attention and care in the form of technologically-mediated grooming – much as

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argued by Smith and Snider: "As ASMR is a sensory response is it also an emotional one, as it plays on feelings of intimacy and comfort. Through its use of sound, ASMR embodies micro-social interactions of care, affection and intimacy" (Smith and Snider, 2019, p. 5).

This quote thus points towards 'social' and 'audio'. In the case of 'grooming', psychologist R.I.M. Dunbar points to the fact that *grooming* – in its original and non-mediated sense – stimulates some of our most basic natural mechanisms:

> Grooming is simply a pleasurable experience. Studies of captive monkeys have shown that grooming makes them more relaxed, reducing their heart rate as well as other external signs of stress. They sometimes become so relaxed that they fall asleep. In fact, we now know that grooming stimulates the production of the body's natural opiates, the endorphins; in effect, being groomed produces mildly narcotic effects. (Dunbar, 2004, p. 36)

Like in grooming situations, ASMR videos also make the audience more relaxed and cause them to fall asleep and tingle – the latter being somewhat comparable to the 'narcotic effects' mentioned in the quote above. Following this line of thought, a study recently looked into the more specific therapeutic benefits for mental and physical health in terms of ASMR, in fact associating the phenomenon with reduced heart rate, adding to the similarities between ASMR – in this article argued as a form of 'social audio-grooming' – and grooming in the evolutionary sense:

> ASMR simulates a form of social grooming (e.g., being calmed and soothed by another through the tactile tingling sensations induced by ASMR triggers), which facilitates well-being and interpersonal bonding (e.g., through reductions in heart rate and release of endorphins). (Poerio et al., 2018, p. 14)

Turning our attention to the videos from which the abovementioned neuropsychological effects are triggered, a significant number of ASMR videos offer a kind of 'personal attention' (Barratt and Davis, 2015, p. 6), providing the audience with a special role-play setting in order to get them to relax and fall asleep. ASMRtist WhispersRed ASMR uploaded a video titled *Sleep Time ᶻᶻᶻ Tucking You In | ASMR | Massage, Facial, Humming* (WhispersRed ASMR, 2017), in which we (the audience) are allegedly lulled into sleep. In the video we are introduced to an auburn-haired woman with a disarming smile, attentive eyes, slowly stroking hands and a soft voice promising to pamper us until we fall asleep. The camera angle is slightly tilted, as if we were lying down and looking up at 'Emma' – or WhispersRed ASMR – getting ready to enter never-never land. The sounds of a crinkling duvet getting tucked in under our body combined with the dimmed, soft lighting and the slow movements of 'Emma's hands remind us of a bedtime situation. 'Emma' promises to keep us "safe and warm" (at around 4.05), and after virtually tucking us in, stroking our hair and giving us a relaxing massage, she starts humming a slow version of the song 'Dream

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a Little Dream of Me'. The humming functions as a kind of music therapy related to the wordless lullaby or cradle song which in this particular setting translates into a maternal communication in the form of a soothing voice action that a lot of us might not have been exposed to since childhood, sending us straight back to when we were infants and needed the attention and care from a parent or caretaker to feel safe enough to go to sleep (Silverman, 1988; Conrad et al., 2011; Brooks, 2016).

The video is an illustrative case of 'social audio-grooming', as 'Emma' is giving both our minds and ears personal attention – and that even in the safety of our own home and bed, which is the setting preferred by most users (Barratt and Davis, 2015, p. 6). By role-playing, and thus imitating, a normally quite intimate situation and by using her voice – "the most familiar thing" (cf. Dolar, 2006, p. 13) – not only to verbally address us and let us know that everything is alright, but also as a musically pleasing vocal activity, by humming, we are being groomed. Returning to Lochte et al.'s 'affiliative behaviors' and Poerio et al.'s 'interpersonal bonding', technologically-mediated ASMR causes its audience to relax and tingle – not only by providing familiar sound triggers (audio), but also by mimicking some of the human contact (social) that is needed for humans to actually feel safe and sound. This too relates to the notion of intimacy, as this grooming aspect also enables (distant) intimacy, connecting to one of the core features of human interaction and classical needs as defined by Maslow, belonging to a group and feeling loved by others (Brito and Dias, 2018, p. 180). One could go as far as to speak of a 'bonding experience', as the grooming aspect also has a motherly spin to it, reminding us of the ways a mother communicates with her infant, much like it is the case with 'Emma' – relating to the quote on 'touch' by Blackman – as she is humming us into sleep. A maternal communication so identifiable to all of us – since we have all been children once – that we are perhaps carnally, emotionally and chemically hardwired to feel relaxed and safe as soon as we find ourselves in a state of giving in to the caregiver and feeling beatific, just as the experience with ASMR is intended to make us feel. Returning to Dunbar, he too has a point about giving in and being taken care of in describing a grooming partner as someone who deserves particular attention when in need of it (Dunbar, 2004, p. 22). This particular attention is exactly what is provided to us by 'Emma' in the 'Tucking You In' video.

In this section, it has been explained how sound can be felt as touch in ASMR role-play videos like the one by WhispersRed ASMR through the use of the term 'social audio-grooming'. In the section that follows, I will move on to consider the merging of 'here' and 'there' ('telepresence') in ASMR videos, while adding to it the importance of concepts such as attunement, intention and immersion, while suggesting 'para-haptic interaction' as a theoretical elaboration of the term by Horton and Wohl from 1956.

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'Telepresence' and 'para-haptic interaction'

> Of course, she's an image on a screen: an inscription. And she's stroking not my face, but my computer screen from the inside. But I strongly feel the contiguity of our rooms, hers opening on to mine with this as the window – *this*, my screen, my face. (Bennett, 2016, p. 130; emphasis in original)

Here, Bennett describes her experience with an ASMR role-play video, trying to grasp what is going on when perceiving ASMR content, knowing that it is technologically-mediated and asynchronously recorded, yet feeling *as if* the actions performed on the screen are actually happening 'IRL' and 'here' – rather than 'there' – and now. The term 'presence' was introduced earlier in the article in regard to sound and immersion. In the following, I will explore the term 'telepresence' in depth in order to describe why technologically-mediated ASMR can be considered 'para-haptic interaction'.

The term 'telepresence', which is somewhat comparable to Thompson's term 'non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance' (as explained later), was originally coined by Thomas B. Sheridan (1989) and was meant to describe the experiential sense of presence at a distance. The term has also been adapted by, among others, Theresa Senft in *Camgirls* (2008) explaining the term as "the mediaenabled feeling of 'really being there' with someone else, over a physical distance" (Senft, 2008, p. 56). The feeling of 'really being there' is essential to the case of technologically-mediated ASMR, I argue, as ASMR videos essentially exist because of the technological possibilities present in this day and age. Returning to the point made in the beginning of the article, the technologically-mediated variety of ASMR has entered a stage where immersion has become more and more of an inherent part of the videos, and bodily intertwinement, in which the physical body interacts and plays along with the technology, is desired. This intertwinement is made possible by especially the use of binaural microphones amplifying the sound in order to make the experience seem lifelike, close-up – and even closer – when using headphones or earphones, as argued by Böhme: "[...] the feeling or atmosphere emerging through the use of earphones creates a perceptual presence that is mainly acoustic" (Böhme in: Have and Pedersen, 2016, p. 51). The sense of presence in ASMR videos is however primarily created through attunement, intention and immersion rather than time. Let me elaborate.

What is of particular interest in regard to technologically-mediated ASMR is that in order for it to fully work, the ASMR audience must take an aesthetic – or affective[3] – attitude to the video as 'the perceived object' (elaborating the thoughts of Dufrenne, 1973, p. 426 ff.). In other words: The audience must *fully tune in* to the ASMR experience in order to get it – despite it being inherently 'autonomous', as part of the name suggests. Bennett, whose comment opened this section, continues

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to describe her experience, emphasising this exact fact: "It is not only her performance, it is mine, too. I have to go along with it, even just a tiny bit, for it to work" (Bennett, 2016, p. 131). This point relating to the state of being fully tuned in, 'to go along with it', in order for ASMR to work, seems to be significant in experiencing ASMR, as more articles emphasise the importance of aspects such as intention (Andersen, 2014, p. 686), expectation (Poerio et al., 2018, p. 15; Cash, Heisick and Papesh, 2018, pp. 13-14) and focus (del Campo and Kehle, 2016, p. 101) as crucial to the ASMR experience. In continuation of this, most ASMR trigger sounds are sounds already present in our everyday environment, however yet not being perceived as 'ASMR sounds' until framed and labelled as such[4] (Larsen and Patterson, 2018, p. 7). Sonically reframing the sounds perceived during an ASMR experience is therefore another way of putting attunement.

When then being in an 'ASMR state of mind', the distinction between 'here' and 'there' becomes blurred, merged or entangled, as described by Senft (2008, p. 62 ff.) and as touched upon earlier in regard to proxemics. ASMR is thus an example of how intimacy, mediated through technologies, is implicated in the "entanglement and indivisibility of proximate and distance spaces" (Pain and Staeheli in: Smith and Snider, 2019, p. 5). An illustrative example of ASMR videos actively trying to entangle the 'here' and 'there' are the so-called 'mirrortouching' videos, in which the ASMRtist on screen meticulously touches her own face while at the same time touching the camera lens (i.e. the faces of the audience) laterally reversed, creating a mirror effect of touching (BrightRiver ASMR, 2018; Gentle Whispering ASMR, 2018). In these videos, what is obtained is a form of social audio- (and visual) grooming, as introduced earlier. Also, the mirrortouching videos prompt a quite specific variety of what Horton and Wohl (1956) originally coined a 'para-social relationship' to describe the perceived personal relation between a 'host' and a 'viewer'. In 1956, the term was defined as:

> One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media – radio, television, and the movies – is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met *as if they* were in the circle of one's peers; the same is true of a character in a story who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and arresting way. We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a *para-social relationship*. (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p. 215; emphasis in original)

The term – in the forms of 'para-social relationship', 'para-social relation', 'para-social interaction' and 'para-sociality' – has later been used in various contexts and can be described more colloquially as "[...] a form of social interaction that is accomplished at a distance, primarily through mass media, and is characterized by the creation of an 'illusion of intimacy' with mediated personas" (Boyns and Loprieno,

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2013, p. 36). I, however, would like to suggest using 'para-haptic interaction' as a theoretical elaboration of the term by Horton and Wohl from 1956 in order to describe what technologically-mediated ASMR is capable of through 'telepresence', 'social audio-grooming' and sound. 'Para' here points to the fact that 'haptic' is not to be understood only in a physical sense, but also in an imagined sense – with attunement, intention and immersion tied to it. And the combination of 'para' and 'haptic' adds to it the concept of 'telepresence' as well (Sheridan, 1989; Senft, 2008). Using 'para-haptic' instead of 'para-social' thus emphasises how ASMR videos create a form of embodied (technologically-mediated) presence, tactile sensations and distant intimacy or closeness through sonically binaural qualities (the use of binaural microphones) as well as through narratives supported by sound (in the form of ASMR role-play videos), vibrations (in terms of sound) and image. The notion of 'para-haptic interaction' is very much like Thompson's notion of 'mediated quasi-interaction', however adding to it a more bodily element in the form of tingles, thus covering not only the social, but also the sensorial and physical aspects of interaction. The 'para-haptic interaction' can also be considered an auditory version of Laura U. Marks' 'haptic visuality', in which Marks provides a definition of haptic images as inviting "a multisensory, intimate, and embodied perception, even when the perceptions to which they appeal are vision and hearing alone" (Marks, 2002, p. 133). Likewise, the audience of ASMR videos is invited to become immersed in the audio and images on the screen as well as the sensations they produce, which in the case of ASMR would be tingles.

Conclusion

This article has argued that technologically-mediated ASMR – in the form of videos on YouTube – is capable of establishing a sense of presence and intimacy through sonically binaural qualities and caring narratives in role-plays. By providing a theoretical framework, based on the concepts of 'para-social interaction' (Horton and Wohl, 1956), 'telepresence' (Sheridan, 1989; Senft, 2008) and 'social audio-grooming' (Klausen and Have, 2019), the article has suggested the term 'para-haptic interaction' as a framework for analysing and understanding ASMR as a non-neutral (cf. Ihde, 2002) technologically-mediated and audio-visual phenomenon.

By combining media and sound studies, the article has discussed how ASMR sounds in YouTube videos can be felt as haptic in more than one sense, both physical and imagined, and how certain ASMR sounds, namely the inaudible/unintelligible ones, invoke a form of reduced listening (cf. Chion, 2012). In continuation of this, the article has stressed the importance of attunement, having an intention of being relaxed, expecting to be relaxed and focussing on the particular ASMR video in order for ASMR to fully work its magic. If we do this, we are able to enter a 'para-

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haptic interactional' relation with the ASMRtist, letting the audio-visual stimuli create a tactile sensation of tingles, while obtaining a form of presence and intimacy and helping us to fall asleep.

With this article, I hope to have provided a starting point for developing theories, concepts and methods to analyse multimodal sensory phenomena on YouTube aiming to establish forms of intimacy, presence and/or tactility. ASMR videos are only one example of recent technologically-mediated phenomena, which would be interesting to dive more into analytically. Other phenomena could be *oddly satisfying* videos, *unboxing and haul* videos, *mukbang* videos as well as *online pornography*.

The current study has examined ASMR and sound theoretically in relation to notions of, amongst other things, distant intimacy and 'telepresence'. However, further research should be done to more broadly investigate and discuss the ambivalence of technology in regard to ASMR, namely whether technology can in fact be considered a helper or a hindrance in regard to establishing intimacy and relaxation in ASMR videos. In particular, it could be fruitful to discuss whether the lack of physical co-presence (in both time and space) inherent in ASMR video consumption is in fact contradictory to feeling 'safe and sound', as the technology thus stands in the way of true intimacy, providing only an 'ersatz attainment' – or whether the noninteractive nature of ASMR videos instead allows the audience to relax by virtue of the lack of expectation of being involved socially, which then serves as an important part of the ASMR experience.

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Notes

1 'Immersive' or 'immersion' is here understood as "a process or condition whereby the viewer becomes totally enveloped within and transformed by the 'virtual environment'" (Dyson, 2009, p. 1).

2 It should be noted that despite an overall tendency to feature binaural recordings in ASMR videos on YouTube, there is a contrasting fluctuation of 'lo-fi' (low fidelity) videos occurring. Lo-Fi ASMR videos are generally a faster, more everyday-like and less edited alternative to the binaural ASMR recordings. The videos typically feature harsher sounds, recorded with cheaper microphones, and they are sometimes marked as videos for 'people without headphones'.

3 'Affect' is a well-developed term within a variety of research fields. In this article, the notion of affect is understood as "gut reactions, intensities of experience, bodily sensations, resonances, and ambiguous feelings" (Paasonen, 2011, p. 26).

4 A more general point on tuning in on everyday sounds and distinguishing between 'hearing' and 'listening' is also made by Højlund and Riis in regard to their research project on *The Overheard* (Højlund and Riis, 2015).

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