

# ASMR Mania, Trigger-Chasing, and the Anxiety of Digital Repletion

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To the uninitiated, YouTube autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) videos are either pleurably or painfully excessive. The videos' performers—who customarily refer to themselves as 'ASMRtists'—speak directly into the camera, very close, in sibilant whispers, consonant repetitions, and with an attitude of oversollicitous caregiving. The goal of such speech often is explicitly stated by the speaker: to elicit tingling sensations in the beholder's head, neck, and spine. This response has been described as a kind of nonsexual 'head orgasm,' and devotees of ASMR return to the videos in order to reactivate the sensation. Common ASMR scenarios include enactments of 'the kind of close personal attention you get when someone cuts your hair, certain sounds like tapping or brushing, and perhaps most bizarrely of all, observing someone doing something trivial very carefully and diligently.'<sup>1</sup>

The discourse around and within ASMR videos stresses that tingles are elusive, precarious, and subject to failure—experienced to varying

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degrees, and by some individuals but not others. For those not susceptible, the effect can be the opposite of pleasure: a mildly annoying or intensely repulsive misophonia. Understood from a Lacanian perspective, these two qualities of ASMR—its evanescence and its propensity to produce both pleasure and pain—help one to situate users at a nexus of desire, drive, and anxiety. It is exactly in these terms that this chapter rethinks this emergent millennial media phenomenon. By encouraging its users to desire drive itself—to seek an encounter with the pulsating, automatized, mechanical forces that make desire cyclical and, ultimately, unsatisfiable—ASMR confronts them with the nonhuman forces that undergird their own sense of being, while at the same time providing a respite from contemporary forms of anxiety.

ASMR creators and enthusiasts persistently articulate their desire for repeatable and consistent tingles around the word ‘trigger.’ In proceeding to probe this term, a contrarian stance is taken here; that is, despite their dotting qualities and widely variable approaches, ASMR videos do not desire to fulfill a lack. Instead, ASMR trigger-chasing must be understood as symptomatic of broader digital–millennial trends in its repudiation of the *lack of lack itself*, which Lacan identifies as ‘anxiety.’ ASMR videos exist in a context in which the trusted reliability and lossless plenitude of digital technology have become problems in themselves. In pointed ways, digital culture lacks the lack on which desire is founded: It delivers too much, too quickly, too easily, and too dependably.

In this context of media overflow, ASMR offers a reprieve by temporarily transforming the beholder into a nonhuman object whose lack is absolute, whose desire for connectedness fails, and whose experience is fixedly partial. By objectifying the viewer-as-subject, ASMR mobilizes the insular, pulsatile, blindly circular trajectory of the drive against human desire’s troublesome propensity to exceed its goals and to lapse into anxiety.

As such, ASMR’s emphasis on pseudo-interactivity directly impacts the videos’ content, which typically does not involve staging encounters with lovers or actual maternal/paternal caregivers, but instead with opticians, barbers, salespeople, suit-fitters, and other functionaries whose attentiveness is rote. In ASMR videos, we behold neither a genuinely caring caregiver, nor an uncaring or sadistic disciplinarian but rather an

indifferent drone—a waxwork contraption that appears where the loving mother ought to be. It is this rendezvous with a nonhuman pseudo-partner, not connectivity or caregiving per se, that the anxious millennial subject covertly longs for—that is, seeking a connection with disconnection itself in the form of excessively proximate sounds and mechanical, objectifying verbal patter. When ASMR succeeds, the beholder is not physically or emotionally satisfied, but instead is ‘triggered’ at the level of drive, like a binary switch or sensor. At this moment of release, one physically senses desire being unseated by drive, as the subject assumes the status of a nonhuman object.

By the mid-2010s, YouTube and Reddit had become the primary social media platforms on which ASMR videos were exchanged and discussed. As a most basic form of discernment, online fans made (and continue to make) a critical distinction between two broad types of ASMR video productions. The first type is the intentional or ‘roleplay’ video, in which a performer enacts a fictional service-providing scenario, usually with the viewer occupying the customer’s point of view. The second type is the ‘unintentional’ ASMR video, often flagged as such in a subject header, in which a real-world interaction has been captured and uploaded, and then subsequently discovered by ASMR users who misappropriate the video for its tingle-triggering properties. The sections that follow focus in turn on these two types of video, and the two dominant aesthetics they embody, respectively: whispered consonance and rote patter. By correlating these aspects—both of which evacuate meaning in order to foreground noise—we can come to some conclusions about the millennial subject’s fascination with trigger-chasing; the relationship between desire, drive, and anxiety; and the new and fairly unique anxieties facing digital natives.

## Hear Hear: The Aesthetics of Proximity

A remarkable feature of ASMR videos is that their tingle-inducing stimuli tend to emerge in scenarios that are palpably native, commonplace, *heimliche*. The background for the ASMR trigger is not itself extreme or excessive; it is subtle, calm, and unobtrusive. Against this normalized backdrop, low-amplitude sounds, which would otherwise be indiscernible in their

softness, rise to the surface, arresting the viewer's attention through extreme close-up shots and microphonic amplification. In this way, ASMR videos aim to evoke a sense of *loud quietness*, or *sharp softness*, resulting in tingles. No drugs are ingested to produce this effect, nor does the beholder need to chant a mantra. No vibrators, gravity boots, carnival rides, or other apparatuses are required for tingles to occur. On the contrary, when ASMR is triggered, the trigger must pointedly come from the mundane.

Although none of the experiential categories (e.g., doppelgangers, injuries to the eye, random numbers reoccurring, etc.) enumerated by Freud in his 1919 essay, 'The Uncanny,' strictly concur with ASMR's trigger effect, the fact that a quotidian event involuntarily causes one's scalp and neck to tingle surely does approximate the homey setting in which the *unheimliche* suddenly appears. By turning banal discourse on its head through amplification and sheer repetition, ASMR instantiates Freud's claim that 'the uncanny' involves 'uncover[ing]...secret forces,' but does so via a kind of neurological hot-wiring of the subject's body.<sup>2</sup>

When ASMR is triggered, there is a sense that one's neural pathways are being haunted by their own proto-human evolutionary vestiges; that the pleasure of the infant, or the cave-dweller, or the social-grooming primate has reignited within the millennial adult-human's sensorium, of its own accord and with real physical/corporeal effects. ASMR is always noted as being pleasurable by those who experience it, whereas those who do not experience it often find the videos painful (e.g., misophonic or offensive in other ways) to endure. This dichotomy raises the question: *Is it possible to have a pleasurable uncanny experience?* Because ASMR seems to be just that.

To explore this connection between ASMR and the Freudian uncanny—and consequently the relationship between Lacan's conceptions of desire, drive, and anxiety—it will be helpful to outline some characteristic ASMR scenarios, techniques, and structures. Perhaps most obviously, ASMR videos involve a relation of proximity between speaker and beholder. Like anxiety itself, which Roberto Harari describes as a 'border or edge phenomenon' between desire and *jouissance*,<sup>3</sup> ASMR's *mise-en-scène* of proximity exists on the knife-edge between 'not enough' and 'too much.' The beholder is constantly aware that the ASMRtist is

situated either right up against the camera, right up against the microphone, or poised to occupy these positions in a forthcoming shot. Space and sound become inextricable, as the extreme close-up of the performer's face becomes a metonymy for the amplification and excess detail a microphone affords.

A primary question, then, concerns why ASMR is so uniformly dedicated to scenarios of proximity, not some other audiovisual arrangement. The answer can be found in a second feature that is so obvious that, to my knowledge, no one has ever taken the time to note it. That is, the source of the words and sounds we hear in ASMR videos must invariably emit from a *singular* body. In any given video, whether intentional or unintentional, one single person does the talking, folding, unwrapping, or tapping, and so on, and the focus remains squarely on her or him. The very rare (always flagged as 'special') occurrences of dual-presenter or alternating 'tag team' ASMR videos only reaffirm this rule of singularity.

Moreover, in unintentional videos in which two people are necessarily present on camera (e.g., in medical exams, barbershop shaves, massages, etc.), most of the action and talking is conducted by a single person of authority, whereas the 'customer' in the exchange remains inert and semisilent. Correspondingly, on the receiving side of an ASMR video, there is only ever a singular viewer, not a group; this is something that the discourse of all ASMRtists tacitly acknowledges, all the time. Why is this? The answer has to do with the uncanny borderline status of *proximate objects*, an ambiguous phrase that bespeaks neither an obvious absolute lack on the part of the subject, nor a fully satisfying attainment.

ASMR's fundamental approach is to repeatedly stage a focused, one-on-one binary in which a series of sonic objects are successively reviewed, very closely, right on the spatial perimeter that distinguishes human subject from nonhuman object. Such tight, binary arrangements necessarily confuse the divisions between here and there, this and that, interior and exterior. In this way, the videos divide their audience into two groups: drive-seekers, who may find bodily enjoyment in ASMR sounds; and desire-seekers, who will experience a suffocating anxiety, and wish they could close their ears.

As psychoanalysis insists, there is a deceptively stark difference between nearness and actual arrival. ASMR's approach to sound lays bare the idea

that these two states (i.e., closeness and presence), which are usually conceived as synonymous, are in fact categorical opposites. For viewers who 'get' ASMR, the videos' staging of aural proximity is self-evidently not a full arrival, with the visual barrier imposed by the screen denying the very sorts of haptic connection that the videos' soundtracks consistently foreground. This ever-present lack, or gap, in the process of attainment is what lends ASMR an alleged therapeutic value that is frequently touted by both users and content-producers.

ASMR videos only seem to stage a kind of perfectly caring satisfaction; they only seem to provide a consistently accessible mother-figure at the click of a link. In place of these satisfactions, ASMR instead delivers a constant reminder of its own status as ersatz attainment, and this distanced falseness is exactly what the ASMR community craves. Although ASMR users and content providers likely will disagree with such an antihumanist assessment, Lacanian theory makes clear that ASMR trigger-chasing involves a willful commitment to go nowhere—an engagement not with desire, but with the drive, the goals of which are nonobvious and the pleasures of which are quite literally pointless in human terms.

In the words of Lacanian theorist Mladen Dolar, whose 2006 book, *A Voice and Nothing More*, compellingly informs this chapter: '[T]he voice stands at a paradoxical and ambiguous topological spot, at the intersection of language and the body, but this intersection belongs to neither.'<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, ASMR is not an interaction that aims at intimacy, but instead is a transaction driven by what Lacan calls 'extimacy'—an 'internal externality,' an 'expropriated intimacy.'<sup>5</sup> ASMR's approach to audio reminds one, sometimes painfully, that speech and voice are not the same, and that the voice is an object of the drive.

For Lacan, two factors place the voice on the side of the object, rather than on the side of the subject. First, the voice is a supplement of the body, extending outward from it; and second, the voice is a marker of 'the division into an exterior and an interior,' while not belonging to either.<sup>6</sup> This bodily margin is constitutive for the subject because it is here that lack most obviously materializes. Substances appearing at or around the body's various rim-like orifices—borderline objects that appear partially without and partially within—comprise what Lacan calls *objets petits a*.

Like the other objects of the drive (e.g., the breast, the feces, the gaze), the voice occupies the ‘zone of overlapping, the crossing, the extimate’<sup>7</sup>; in addition, Dolar is careful to note that the word ‘extimate’ is ‘the excellent Lacanian word for the uncanny.’<sup>8</sup> It is precisely in such a space that ASMR appears as a series of pleasurable uncanny sonic objects—music for non-humans, as it were.

A staple element of ASMR roleplay videos, and the one that initially allowed them to be identified as a distinct Internet phenomena, is whispering—a hyperproximate mode of speech that serves as an optimal carrier for what is hereafter called the ‘object-voice.’ In videos by successful YouTube ASMRtists, such as ‘TheWaterwhispers,’ ‘WhispersRed,’ and ‘Heather Feather,’ the soundtrack is dominated by barely phonated whispers and exceedingly gentle talking, the point of which is not to promote actual inaudibility. Rather, whispering conveys a sense of abstraction through proximity, with the microphone greatly amplifying the contours of speech. Nothing is being confided except for the hushed tonalities of confidence itself, and the excessive closeness makes one all but forget what is being said, which is suitably hollow and often patently arbitrary. Like cool drops of water landing on a hot skillet, the consonance and sibilance of ASMR whispering materializes the evaporation of meaning at the boundary between subject and object; in the case of audition, the rims of the ears themselves.

As of August 2017, with more than 18 million views, the most-viewed ASMR roleplay video on YouTube is entitled ‘\*\_\*\_ Oh such a good 3D-sound ASMR video \*\_\*\_’ by ASMRtist GentleWhispering, a Russian émigré to the United States named Maria who speaks English with a thick accent.<sup>9</sup> As many ASMR videos do, it utilizes a stereophonic microphone arrangement, placed out of sight very near the camera, to approximate a ‘3-D’ effect when played back on headphones. As Maria fondles and taps on a stiff-bristled hairbrush, her dialogue is entirely descriptive and banal—a delivery mechanism for her whispers, but not primarily a carrier of meaning:

I truly enjoy the sound of it when you run your fingers over it—over the bristles. It actually feels nice, as well as sounds nice. [Pause in speech; scratching and tapping sounds are prominent.] And if you can tap right on

the edge, just slightly, it sounds [long pause] quite relaxing. So I could do that from here [moves brush off-screen right; scratching sounds], on one side for you, and then do the same on the other side [moves brush off-screen left; tapping and scratching sounds continue]—run my fingers through the bristles—and that gentle tapping, that will feel really good. The tapping sounds remind me of the sound of the rain.

If this transcription of Maria's words reads like rudimentary, prattling nonsense, this is entirely the point. The pleasure of ASMR crystallizes when sounds eclipse meaning, when the speaker's discourse is reduced to babbling noncommunication, a pure pretense. What the general viewer cannot fail to notice in such discourse, and what the ASMR devotee actively seeks, is an encounter with the 'object-voice.'

According to Dolar, the object-voice in Lacanian terms is 'the material element recalcitrant to meaning,' 'the extralingual element which enables speech phenomena, but cannot itself be discerned by linguistics.'<sup>10</sup> The object-voice manifests not in the production of meaning but in the idiosyncratic sounds that convey it—the accent, the intonation, and the timbre.'<sup>11</sup> In other words, in ASMR, we are not hearing words or meaning, but instead *hearing hearing* itself in the form of the object-voice. A fascinating corollary to this is the conundrum of what it would mean for the ears to look rather than hear. Given the videos' heavy emphasis on sounds of tactility, clicky resistance, and abrasion, what is ASMR if not the subject reading with one's ears? To do so results in a nullification of meaningful speech, and a correspondingly blunt reaffirmation of the indifference and inertia of the voice in its pure form, as an object of the drive.<sup>12</sup>

To pursue an object of desire involves a conscious recognition of one's goal, and a movement toward it; to seek ASMR tingles entails a more precarious, arguably nonhuman pursuit in which one confronts the unconscious directly, by seeking out pleasures that are oblique, tangential, and strange. In psychoanalytic parlance, the word 'drive' is not usually employed as an active verb; however, if it were, we could more easily recognize ASMR as a 'desire to drive,' or better yet, a subcultural tactic in which users and content-providers cooperate in an attempt to drive (over) desire.



Renata Salecl explains that '[d]rive and desire each have a different relation to the symbolic structure':

Desire is essentially linked to the law, since it always searches for something that is prohibited or unavailable. The logic of desire would be: 'It is prohibited to do this, but I will nonetheless do it.' Drive, in contrast, does not care about prohibition: it is not concerned about overcoming the law. Drive's logic is: 'I do not want to do this, but I am nonetheless doing it.' Thus, we have a contrary logic in drive since the subject does *not* desire to do something, but nonetheless enjoys doing exactly that.<sup>13</sup>

We know that the whispered speech of the ASMRtist is triggering an enjoyment of the drive because we sense a palpably 'off' quality in the experience; these sounds should not be producing pleasure but are doing so nonetheless. In Lee Edelman's helpful formulation: We know the drive is at play because 'we experience our enjoyment despite ourselves.'<sup>14</sup> The vibratory head-and-neck buzz enjoyed by ASMR users is a signal that this goal of engaging the drive has been attained, and correspondingly that desire's fundamental crisis-point (i.e., the absence of lack itself that Lacan identifies as anxiety) has been quelled, put on pause.

Having defined the most basic ASMR aesthetic, proximate whispering, as an instantiation of the Lacanian voice as *objet petit a*—as well as a site of drive-based pleasure for those who partake—the following section addresses the ways in which the disinterestedness of a speaker, exemplified in a celebrated 'unintentional' ASMR video, contributes to a radical objectification of the ASMR viewer. In doing so, it also provides a second opportunity for the subject to drive (over) desire, and thus find temporary relief from millennial forms of anxiety.

## Lip Service: Desubjectifying the Subject

In his essay 'The Uncanny,' Freud notes that children are 'especially fond of treating their dolls as if they were alive,' which can lead to certain uncanny effects.<sup>15</sup> ASMR is a reverse arrangement in which real people have the uncanny sense that they are being treated like dolls; or, more

specifically, like children treat dolls: by combing their hair, speaking quietly to them, and devoting excessive care to what is obviously a nonhuman toy. Indeed, much ASMR content is centered on this keyword ‘care’—caregiving, taking care, carefulness, and so on. Nonetheless, the crucial conceptual leap, and the one that the limited existing scholarship on ASMR fails to make, is that ASMR care is most always *care for an object*, even when that object is a human subject (i.e., the viewer and/or listener).

In ASMR, the beholder’s own body is treated as a passive sensor, bristling reflexively to certain stimuli, the same as a Venus flytrap responds to the landing of an insect. In such moments, the subject is conferred with object status—not loved but instead groomed, maintained, serviced. In turn, ASMR devotees come to relish, and not avoid, their own capacity for nonhuman reactivity, celebrating the Freudian subject’s uncanny sense that there exist ‘automatic—mechanical—processes [...] hidden beneath the familiar image of a living person.’<sup>16</sup>

Outsiders not familiar with ASMR’s modus operandi almost invariably view the YouTube genre as a thinly veiled exercise in on-demand maternal care, a supposition that the predominance of female ASMRtists does not repudiate. For example, in a 2014 [today.com](#) article, a journalist makes the following observation:

People might associate these triggers with pleasant experiences. That whispering might remind someone of mom lulling her to sleep. A haircut might spark fond memories of Saturdays spent with dad at the barbershop.<sup>17</sup>

Such commentary misses the mark by failing to discern that ASMR is ontologically noninteractive, foregrounding not care and attentiveness, but its blockage. Everything the ASMRtist says and does is fundamentally a form of disinterested prattle, and although the trope of the solicitously concerned maternal figure enables the genre, it is ancillary to its effects.

ASMR discourse is nothing at all like the personalized, adaptive attention of the sensual voice of Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), the computer operating system in Spike Jonze’s 2013 film *Her*, that responds in new and different ways with each passing interaction. The problem with Samantha is not that she is nonhuman, but that her artificial intelligence

has developed to the point of being *too* human. In contrast to Samantha's free-flowing, truly dialogic interactivity, which she learns through practice, the ASMR voice optimally addresses its beholder in an all-too-slick sales pitch that betrays endless prior rehearsal, an inflexible preordained agenda, and an overall lack of humanistic concern.

In a 2013 GentleWhispering video called '~••~Relaxing Physical Therapist Visit~••~,' Maria tellingly portrays both a deskbound office receptionist and the physical therapist herself, never acknowledging any difference or point of transition between these mutually exclusive forms of employment.<sup>18</sup> The reason for this strained continuity is that, for ASMR's purposes, all caregiving personnel are identical by virtue of their ability to objectify their customer. When, early on, receptionist Maria says, 'I'm sorry about the accident. ... I hope you're feeling better,' she delivers these words in a rote, phony manner that suggests that the words are part of a quasi-scripted routine she goes through with all patients.

It is not actual consistent care that ASMR aims to produce, but instead a self-evidently artificial going-through-the-motions of what care is supposed to look and sound like. Virtually any scenario in which a speaker might go through the motions can be a potential ASMR trigger site, with the caregiver's empathic stance relegated to little more than a coattrack on which to hang the empty, objectifying patter of the drive.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the noun 'patter' means two distinct things, both relevant to ASMR. Patter is 'a rapid succession of light taps, or similar slight sounds'<sup>19</sup>—an effect that is the central subject of hundreds of ASMR videos—and also 'smooth, persuasive talk; especially the rapid speech used by a street trader, salesperson, etc., to attract or cajole customers.'<sup>20</sup> The second meaning of 'patter' etymologically derives from Catholic prayer rituals, specifically 'from the rapid and mechanical way in which the paternoster was often repeated, e.g. in the rosary.'<sup>21</sup> The crucial element here is that in a salesman's patter, as in the 'paternoster' recited by churchgoers, the materiality of speech tends to obscure the signifying content of the words, rendering the speaker's discourse strangely nonhuman, and thus (under non-ASMR circumstances) worthy of skepticism or disdain. In patter, we are more aware of the sound of what is being said than we are of the meaning; more aware of the delivery mechanism than the goods being served.<sup>22</sup>

The rote, patter-driven aspect of ASMR is best exemplified in the second major category of videos, known by users as ‘unintentional ASMR.’<sup>23</sup> A cornerstone in the conceptual development of unintentional ASMR is the North American public television program, *The Joy of Painting* (1983–1994), hosted by calm-talking landscape painter Bob Ross. Although Ross clearly operates with teacherly intent, viewers are free to siphon off some surplus enjoyment from the gentle deliberateness of his voice and his methodical application of paints using brushes and palette knives. All unintentional ASMR is premised on such misappropriations of real-world source material.

One of the most celebrated unintentional ASMR videos on YouTube is entitled ‘Cranial Nerve Test with Pat LaFontaine & Dr. James Kelly.’<sup>24</sup> Taped in 1998, the video presents an extensive, noninvasive nerve exam, with lots of bodily and facial touching, along with many questions and answers between doctor and patient.<sup>25</sup> The doctor in charge is clearly a skilled neurologist, and the subject of the examination is a well-known professional hockey player whose career on the ice was ended by a series of concussions; they are the only people on screen in a typically bland examination room. The video is professionally recorded with a tripod-mounted camcorder and microphone boom (sometimes visible), and its nine-plus minutes unfold in a standard, third-person medium shot. The office is quiet and the two men are rarely more than four feet apart, permitting much of the doctor’s dialogue to be spoken in hushed, calm tones.

The video is part of a series sponsored by [BrainLine.org](http://BrainLine.org), ‘a national multimedia project offering information and resources about preventing, treating, and living with TBI [traumatic brain injury],’<sup>26</sup> and it is easy to imagine that it has served well its intended purpose of educating people affected by traumatic brain injury regarding what to expect during such an exam. Still, knowing that the video’s high view count (more than 3.3 million at the time of this chapter’s writing) is largely the result of the video being exploited for unintended tingles can help to clarify its trigger points. It is easy to imagine, for instance, that ASMR-susceptible viewers experience shivers at the point when Dr. Kelly speaks softly—in an almost voiceless consonant whisper—the words ‘okay, good,’ affirming that LaFontaine has responded normally to a test of his peripheral vision and

that the exam will proceed. There are a total of 12 instances of ‘okay, good’ in the nine-minute video, all spoken in this manner.

Similarly, viewers may be triggered by the subtle, but entirely audible rubbing of Dr. Kelly’s sleeve against the body of his wool suit during the strength-testing portions of the exam, or by the crinkling of the sanitary paper that lines the examination table. As Rob Gallagher notes in his outstanding essay on ASMR aesthetics, such noises are forms of what Michel Chion calls ‘materializing sound indices’ (MSI); that is, they render a kind of primordial, felt sense of the object producing the sound.<sup>27</sup>

Most distinctive however—and much remarked about in the YouTube video’s comments section—are the points during the examination when Dr. Kelly engages in a benign doctorly patter, clearly developed over many years of administering such exams. In his well-rehearsed examination procedure, one element follows very quickly after another, with each new exercise and command delivered calmly and dispassionately. At one point early on, Dr. Kelly instructs LaFontaine to ‘close [his] eyes real tight—real tight, like you got soap in ’em.’ The doctor presses his thumbs onto LaFontaine’s eyebrows, forcing them upward. ‘Don’t let me open ’em up,’ he says, followed by a quickly enunciated ‘fight fight fight fight fight.’ This unexpected command to ‘fight’ makes sense when we consider Kelly’s work with athletes and combat veterans.

In the context of the exceptionally civilized and nonviolent exchange between the two men, the word ‘fight’ becomes an ASMR trigger precisely because its idiosyncratic phrasing belies repeated past use. All such patients, one assumes, are told by Dr. Kelly to ‘fight fight fight fight fight’; it is easy to see that there is nothing genuinely personal in this apparently personal touch. The fact that Pat LaFontaine is a real individual, with real past medical problems specific to him (i.e., the now-resolved facial paralysis noted by both), only underscores the fact that Dr. Kelly is for all purposes disengaged, dispassionate, and ‘clinical’ in the most literal sense. He certainly appears attentive, intelligent, and kind, but even these attributes are a strategic part of his bedside manner, and thus somewhat false.

The difference between patter and speech finds its somatic equivalent in the difference between the word ‘touch’ (something a caregiver, friend, or lover does to a partner) and the word ‘palpate’ (something a doctor

does to a patient). The content of ASMR videos does not involve touching, which in real life may be employed to produce various forms of pleasure, but instead *palpation*, which by definition is indifferent to the production of pleasure. The source of ASMR tingles resides precisely in this monodirectional indifference. Something is being done *to* us, rather than *for* us.

By way of contrast, consider how alarming it would be if a hair stylist, a suit-fitter, or a door-to-door salesperson cared too much about their client—touching rather than palpating—thus crossing the line of social propriety. ASMR videos do not take liberties in this way; they are the furthest thing possible from the representation of desire one witnesses in 1970s pornography, the dominant trope of which involves a doctor, a plumber, or a pizza delivery person violating cultural taboos by engaging in sex acts with a patron. At once rejecting and offering an alternative to such straightforward acts of desire, ASMR appears at first glance to move in the direction of desire's consummation; however, very quickly it stops short, fetishizing the 'customer experience'—a memorized and rehearsed, mock form of care with entirely nonromantic, vaguely apathetic connotations. In this way, ASMR videos only pretend to deliver the staging and satisfaction of a desire, making clear through rote patter that the viewer is (or should be) watching solely for the drive.

YouTube is the ASMR format par excellence. To my knowledge, there are no real-life ASMR clubs featuring hands-on interaction, nor are there pay-to-play, webcam-based live ASMR sessions. There is a good reason for this. Were an ASMRtist to perform routines interactively, or in the presence of a real-life subject, the performer would likely respond in a personalized way to the subject's responses and would be less able to continue in a manner that is rehearsed, rote, dispassionate, and thus effective in nonhuman terms. Any truly interactive form of an ASMRtist's roleplay would subjectify the subject rather than objectifying the individual, thus nullifying one of ASMR's primary tingle-inducing vectors.

To be clear, ASMR can and does appear in certain real-life situations, but when it does, it emerges in accidental and tangential ways. A Reddit user, known as 'AwsumSaus,' reveals a telling example of how ASMR's subject-objectifying tingles can develop vis-à-vis one's daily work routines:

I honestly don't watch ASMR for the relaxation, I watch it for the tingles. These will never beat the real-life tingles I get, for example while watching someone interact with something of mine (it's weird, but when people used to browse the section I 'owned' at work = tingles).<sup>28</sup>

To clarify, the user is describing a former retail sales position, in which certain employees were responsible for maintaining individual sections of a large store. Her tingles were the result of individual customers entering her quasi-proprietary retail territory, her 'section.' The word 'owned' here denotes a quasi-anthropomorphic link, felt by many in retail, that they function as a part of the store-as-body and are somehow indistinguishable from it.

In the cited example, ASMR tingles result not from a personal interaction between worker and customer, but from the staff member 'watching' the customer perusing a well-maintained 'owned' area, one in which the border between subject (the retail clerk) and object (the store and its merchandise) has been blurred. The meticulously straightened and carefully organized items for sale are both 'something of mine' and decidedly someone else's (i.e., the property of the corporation that owns the store). The clerk's tingles result from the sense that she is physically jacked-in to the store-as-object—a kind of nonhuman extension or appendage of it—and that the customers are perusing her own (inert, passively displayed) body, as much as they are perusing the objects for sale.

Similar effects reportedly have been triggered by medical magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans, by automatic car washes, and by getting an oil change at a facility where the driver remains in the vehicle.<sup>29</sup> In such real-world circumstances, as in unintentional videos, ASMR pleasure is the result of an 'uncanny' collision between subjectification and objectification, humanity and the nonhuman; tingles are a sign that one is presently occupying both states at once, vibrating rapidly between them in an oscillation that purposefully goes nowhere.

## Conclusion: Driving Away Digital Anxiety

As someone who does not experience ASMR, I must confess that I have never understood, never *felt*, any validity in users' constant refrains about ASMR's therapeutic value for sufferers of anxiety,

insomnia, depression, and migraines. How could a tingly head-buzz possibly eradicate or assuage such problems? Nevertheless, if ASMR engages subjects in the way suggested here—not at the level of desire, which is the trajectory on which anxiety develops, but at the level of drive—then it accords that ASMR's drive-focused enjoyment could temporarily excuse the subject from experiencing anxiety in desire's terms, as a lack of lack itself.

In *The Ticklish Subject*, Slavoj Žižek argues that drive is presubjective, head-less, a kind of nonhuman 'acephalous force which persists in its repetitive movement' and thus involves neither a goal that can be pursued, nor a sense of anxiety after reaching that goal.<sup>30</sup> This, however, leaves the question: Can drive itself be pursued? Or more precisely: Can subjects strategically put themselves in a position where drive might tend to emerge? ASMR, I conclude, is a quintessential example of such active drive-seeking, a fact that becomes clear when we view ASMR's peculiar practices both within and against a backdrop of excessive digital connectedness.

To make sense of contemporary modes of anxiety, and of ASMR's purported therapeutic value, one final question is posed: What has happened to desire-inspiring prohibition in the era of digital transmission? Certainly, the potential for technology-fueled interactivity has vastly increased during the twenty-first century, and I want to claim that rather than increasing our enjoyment in turn, digital technology exposes users to a tyranny of connectedness, instantaneity, and perfectibility—three qualities that sound like laudable attributes, but that ultimately serve as the platform on which an anxiety-inspiring lacklessness takes shape.

In the era of the digital, the spatiotemporal delays built into past communication technologies have been eradicated. Letters are delivered in microseconds, not days or weeks. Images arrive instantaneously from around the world, and in vibrant high-definition color. Perfect copies are derived from other perfect copies without loss of clarity. Two-way audio conversation is possible in unprecedentedly remote locales. 'Selfies' are viewed on screen as they are taken, optimally framed, with mistakes deleted instantly and filters applied, to arrive at a perfect image of oneself to send to friends. Perhaps most significantly, all technology has become affordably 'in reach' for average consumers.



Having a high-definition, web-integrated video camera in one's pocket imbues daily life with an expectation of unfailing connectedness rather than intermittence, isolation, and lack. In all these ways, Lacan's dictum that 'anxiety isn't the signal of a lack, but [...] the failing of the support that lack provides' returns with a vengeance.<sup>31</sup> In this context of digital suffusion and the excessive perfectibility of millennial media forms, ASMR is a hallmark counterpractice wherein the subject short-circuits desire by demanding *jouissance* directly, thus circumventing any necessity for prohibition as a support and nullifying the anxiety that comes with too much attainment.

Enabled by digital transcoding, fiber-optic networks, and high-speed processing, the millennial subject's developing investments in trigger-chasing exist precisely as a drive-based, anxiety-busting response to the oversaturation of digital culture itself, including social media's injunction that no one should ever 'miss out' on what is happening in her or his absence. In the context of free-flowing, digitally catalyzed interactivity between subjects, ASMR purveys the opposite: a belabored, mechanized, one-way transaction in which the viewer is acted on but not active. Whereas any such objectification of the beholder would seem at first glance to *create* anxiety by reducing the subject to something less than human, on the contrary, the drive-based pursuit engendered by ASMR works to upend anxiety by remaining indifferent to prohibition's role in the dialectic of desire.

In the words of Jacques-Alain Miller: 'The drive couldn't care less about prohibition; it knows nothing of prohibition and certainly doesn't dream of transgressing it. The drive follows its own bent and always obtains satisfaction.'<sup>32</sup> In being triggered, or even in having toyed with the idea that triggers exist, we are instantaneously mobilized not as humanistic Cartesian subjects consciously pursuing enjoyment, but as nonhuman objects that instantaneously have it or do not, as the case may be. In such an arrangement, there is no obstacle to surmount, and thus never any question of anxiety beyond attainment. There is only the capricious, all-at-once buzzing of *jouissance*.

Both as an aesthetic and a practice, ASMR is emblematically millennial. Regardless of whether culture is broadly aware of ASMR's existence, it is certainly on the rise, and for those who partake, it is a definitive

marker of twenty-first century living. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, it is perhaps the ‘not for everyone’ aspect of ASMR that is ontologically definitive, precisely because the evanescence and inconsistency of ASMR’s trigger-culture cuts directly against digital technology’s hegemonic aims. Facebook works for everyone. Netflix works for everyone. Smartphones work for everyone. On the contrary, however, ASMR only works for a limited few. Individual videos (and parts of videos) trigger certain individuals but not others, for reasons no one can fully explain.

Functioning for many as a do-it-yourself form of therapy, ASMR is not a matter of regularizing or standardizing triggers. Rather, the point of the genre is to perpetuate the notion that some triggers work for some people and not others. As Rob Gallagher notes: ‘In [Reddit] forums like r/asmr, questions of provenance, content, meaning and intention are irrelevant. Debates over symbolism, subtext and irony are abandoned. Only one question matters: does it trigger you or not?’<sup>33</sup> The seeming impossibility of unifying around a singular ‘master trigger’ is exactly what makes a trigger a trigger: *We mostly do not agree* because we mostly do not respond to ASMR in the same way.

Indeed, it would be correct to say that ASMR ‘works’ even for viewers who have never felt any tingles. What is pleasurable is not the tingles themselves, but the fact that they cannot be pursued along the well-trodden paths of desire. Appearing in the border-zone between subject and object, human and nonhuman, the pleasure of ASMR triggers are unspeakable, as all pleasures of the drive must be. It remains to be seen how new technologies, such as virtual reality headsets, will reorient ASMR’s subject-objectifying practices, as well as to what extent ASMR’s drive-focused subculture might speak to mainstream audiences.

## Notes

1. Hannah Maslen and Rebecca Roache, ‘ASMR and Absurdity,’ *Practical Ethics* (blog), University of Oxford, July 29, 2015, <http://blog.practical-ethics.ox.ac.uk/2015/07/asmr-and-absurdity/>
2. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 150.

3. Roberto Harari, *Lacan's Seminar on Anxiety: An Introduction*, trans. Jane C. Lamb-Ruiz (New York: Other Press, 2001), p. 36.
4. Of concern in the drive are precisely such border-like bodily rims: not the stomach that digests food, but the lips and teeth; not the ear canal and eardrum that registers sound, but the external auricle and the void it surrounds. Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), p. 73.
5. Ibid., p. 96.
6. Ibid., p. 81.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 96.
9. '\*\_\* Oh Such a Good 3D-Sound ASMR Video \*\_\*', *YouTube.com*, last modified September 7, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVpfHgC3ye0>
10. Dolar (2006), p. 15.
11. Ibid., p. 20.
12. Michael Connor makes a similar claim about ASMR's tendency to substitute one sense for another: '[W]atching ASMR videos of people folding towels is more pleasurable for many people than the real act of folding towels. It's almost like what is satisfying about them is not the tactile sensation itself, but the fact that this tactile sensation is triggered by other sensory inputs'; that is, the up-close sights and sounds of the act of towel-folding. Michael Connor, 'Notes on ASMR, Massumi and the Joy of Digital Painting,' *Rhizome* (blog), May 8, 2013, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/may/08/notes-asmr-massumi-and-joy-digital-painting/>
13. Renata Salecl, *Umbr(a) I* (Buffalo, NY: The Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis & Culture, 1997), p. 106.
14. Lee Edelman, 'Stop Thinking about Tomorrow: Queerness, Ideology, and Anticipatory Democracy,' Lecture, Higgins School of Humanities Dialogue Symposium (Worcester, MA: Clark University), March 3, 2016.
15. Freud (2003), p. 141.
16. Ibid., p. 135.
17. 'Tingleheads' claim videos help ease stress,' *Today.com*, last modified October 15, 2014, <http://www.today.com/health/tingleheads-claim-videos-help-ease-stress-2D80174447>
18. '•••-Relaxing Physical Therapist Visit-•••', *YouTube.com*, last modified January 6, 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hso5\\_Glnyx8&t=396s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hso5_Glnyx8&t=396s)

19. 'patter, n.2,' *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://goddard40.clarku.edu:2547/view/Entry/138972?rskey=F0NS1M&result=2#eid>
20. 'patter, n.1,' *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://goddard40.clarku.edu:2547/view/Entry/138971?result=1&rskey=F0NS1M&>
21. 'patter, v.1,' *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://goddard40.clarku.edu:2547/view/Entry/138973?>
22. An interesting variation on classic ASMR roleplay patter is found in a video by YouTuber AccidentallyGraceful. Rather than improvising her dialogue, the speaker seems to have written out directions for making a cup of coffee using a French press, and then recites back the absurdly simplistic scripted directions in a calm, customary, perfectly enunciated monotone. Here again, the sense of rehearsal overrides that of real, caring interactivity. In similar videos by other YouTubers, mispronunciations and exaggerated foreign dialects only exacerbate this effect.
23. Historically, unintentional ASMR videos appeared first, and were collected in user lists before anyone thought to develop intentional roleplays. In 2017, however, roleplays clearly predominate.
24. 'Cranial Nerve Test with Pat LaFontaine & Dr. James Kelly,' *YouTube.com*, last modified April 28, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrKbOF3vHo8>
25. Cranial nerve exam videos are among the most popular forms of intentional ASMR roleplay, but various unintentional versions—including cranial nerve exam compilations—have long circulated in ASMR lists, on message boards, and so on.
26. 'About Us,' *Brainline.org*, accessed February 15, 2016, [http://www.brainline.org/function\\_pages/about.html](http://www.brainline.org/function_pages/about.html)
27. Rob Gallagher, 'Eliciting Euphoria Online: The Aesthetics of "ASMR" Video Culture,' *Film Criticism* 40(4), 2016; accessed 15 Feb 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0040.202>
28. '[Discussion] Misconceptions about ASMR Caused by High Participation of People Not Actually Experiencing It,' *Reddit.com*, accessed 15 Feb 2017, [http://www.reddit.com/r/asmr/comments/4kkh1e/discussion\\_misconceptions\\_about\\_asmr\\_caused\\_by/](http://www.reddit.com/r/asmr/comments/4kkh1e/discussion_misconceptions_about_asmr_caused_by/)
29. Steven Novella, 'ASMR,' *SkepticBlog* (blog), The Skeptics Society, March 12, 2012, <http://www.skepticblog.org/2012/03/12/asmr/>

30. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), p. 297.
31. Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014), p. 53.
32. Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Commentary on Lacan's Text,' in *Reading Seminars I and II*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), p. 423.
33. Gallagher (2016), np.

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