

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response

by Silvia Bombardini



It is said to come upon you in waves. From the scalp through the spine it swims your body downward, not quite a chill for it is warm, yet still leaving goose bumps in its wake. Then a feeling of low-key euphoria, of profound relaxation and sleepiness in turn in the wake of those. Still the ones who experience it – and that’s not everyone who watches – for the most part insist that there’s nothing sexual about ASMR. Sensual, surely, intimate, most certainly: but ‘the tingles’ ASMR videos want to stimulate in the limbs and minds of their millions of viewers are intended to soothe and shush rather than arouse. The afterglow without the glow, if you will. Of course there are those who are turned on by these films: but this can perhaps be said, it’s almost to be expected, of anything anyone ever has found on the internet. And ASMR, though of course it occurs and always has offline too, in its current form, its given name and in the high demand there is for it today, as should immediately be obvious from its inherent weirdness, is indeed born and bred wholly on the web. This despite the fact that the sensation the acronym stands for, affects and belongs most definitely to the body in real life. As Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, the term was coined in 2010 by Jennifer Allen, aka Jenny3481, in a forum post on steadyhealth.com. Another user, okaywhatever51838, was struggling to describe a pleasurable feeling he got in response to a diverse set of stimuli, sort of like an itch, but so good it sometimes made his eyes water. This prompted a long thread of replies: the sensation was recognised by many, like Allen, who had until then thought they were the only ones who experienced such a thing. There and then the internet, in its infinite wisdom, revealed they were not.

As the online community grew over the past decade, it was discovered that one of the most common triggers for an autonomous sensory meridian response is whispering: to date on streaming platforms, countless videos tagged with the #ASMR hashtag feature young women – they’re mostly female – murmuring sweet nothings into their microphones in such a way that, if your brain is not predisposed to enjoy it – alas, mine isn’t – can come across as almost a little unpleasant. When it isn’t explicitly sultry, foreplay with no play, it sounds at best like a stranger mouthing and breathing very close to your ears. I gravitate for the purpose of this research, rather toward those #ASMR videos, fewer in number yet still extremely popular, where no one talks: audiovisual recordings of people writing with a pen, painting with a brush, shaving a bar of soap with a razor or breaking bread, chewing on honeycomb, crackling eggshells. No tingle yet, but it’s no longer so difficult to imagine why some people may find this viewing experience, sometimes colloquially referred to as a ‘brain orgasm’, comforting if nothing else. The videos are long, many running upwards of 50 minutes, longer than one could have guessed our reduced attention spans would have allowed for. But that’s it perhaps: they don’t require any attention, nor however do they let it

wander back to one's own daily troubles. Attention stalls upon them. When done well, ASMR videos have a lulling quality to them, like digital hypnosis.

There's a lot of lip smacking that goes on in these films, a lot of hair brushing and tapping of manicured nails on hard surfaces. The close-ups necessary both to better capture the sounds and to visually convey the intimate atmosphere that ASMR videos all share, aesthetically aligns them with make-up tutorials. Occasionally these two genres overlap, and whispering tips on how to contour, niche influencers rise to online fame. But beauty products may feature in less obvious ways. Posted less than a week ago as I write this, the latest Instagram video by @emilydougherty, Editor-in-Chief at *NewBeauty* magazine in New York, nears 20K views. In it she uses a small toothed shovel to slice through two expensive lipsticks – a Bobbi Brown pink and a Lancôme orange – and forge a new shade in between, as the microphone records the mellow sound of metal chopping wax. The simplicity of the instruments involved in the making of these works is another common ground, and perhaps what's most interesting about ASMR videos. Although professional ASMRtists might avail themselves of advanced recording technologies, the sounds they record with these are hardly ever caused by anything more complex than fingertips on cork. The viewers' ears will pick them up as familiar, and therefore unthreatening, pleasing even if you aren't blessed with tingles. As Jamie Lauren Keiles writes for *The New York Times*: "*lots of things in everyday life throw off incidental rays of affirmation*". In her article she shadows Gibi, whose ASMR channel on YouTube counts to date 2.37M subscribers, on a shopping trip at a convenience store. The everydayness of these instruments – tinsel, candy wrappers, soap and gum and brushes – their cheapness too, reminds us that when life is dull, there's aural pleasure at least to be found at every corner. In a less corny, more subliminal way, ASMR videos send an oddly uplifting message without spelling it out loud. In fact, there's nothing loud at all to them. But on the digital plane, commendatory like an ode to its forgotten concreteness, they re-enact what was marvellous about the IRL world.

Though ASMR can be, and often has been even unintentionally triggered offline, the filter of the screen seems fundamental to rekindle our appreciation of common things: paradoxically it draws us closer, it lets us listen in in surrounding silence to their calming sounds. The distance that the internet affords is fundamental too, to appreciate the ASMRtists whose work whips up tingles onto their viewers. In an episode of the Follow This docuseries on Netflix, titled *The Internet Whisperers*, a reporter from BuzzFeed asks a fan of ASMR videos, Joanna, if a live one-on-one ASMR session with one of them would be a ultimate wish. But no: she likes the privacy of the web. Like the authors under pseudonym of posts detailing their health concerns on forums such as steadyhealth.com, there's a peculiar openness for the ASMR viewership that comes to light online, from the comfort of anonymity, conducive to the relaxation and sleepiness that are these videos ultimate goals. Part of the appeal of the conjured, platonic intimacy of ASMR films is in the distance between those who watch and those on camera. This sort of thing is bound to set off the alarm bells of those who see this generation's pursuit of intimacy without investment as morally fraught, and our online habits as both the cause and effect of a disconnect from the real world that has caused us to grow up both unaccustomed to vulnerability, and so desensitised that the only cure to our chronic loneliness and insomnia seems now to be watching and listening in to the sounds of someone on the opposite side of the planet, quietly folding towels.

Well, ok boomer. So we might have entertained ourselves into sleeplessness and solitude, that's on us, and if we now need to listen to and watch a motherly figure perform a boring and repetitive task to balance it out, we only have ourselves to blame. Maybe. But still they work: Joanna says they cured her depression and anxiety, that ASMR videos are like "*free therapy*". And even when the results are not as outstanding as in her case, why should we renounce any little that helps? ASMR is a safer addiction than most. Young people today have higher expectations but fewer certainties than ever before: life routinely disappoints. It's older generations who are at fault for this. But for the generation who came of age in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, there's a lesson to be learnt there: in this alcove of the world wide web, among ourselves, not everything is given a price to. Therapy, pleasure, or comfort can be free. Of course there are ads, and successful ASMRtists are likely making fortunes – but you know what I mean. Mental health issues among the youth are on the rise throughout the world, and 2019 everywhere has been a more stressful year than most. Without losing sight of the bigger picture, we ought to take what we can, to take care of ourselves as best we can, even if that involves a late-night spell of binge-watching a woman smashing her face against loaves of bread and trays of pastries. As humans we evolve before we can make sense of it. We adapt to our environment and situation. Perhaps the ability to experience an autonomous sensory meridian response, that science still has to explain, is something we're developing as a species to equip ourselves against the challenges of our time. Or perhaps we're just asking too many questions, and we should try to be less suspicious or surprised when something happens that makes us feel good. The internet is a wild place, but occasionally there's diamonds to be found in the rough. At least, there's diamond rings covered in slime as the fingers that wear them satisfyingly plunge into goo.