"Oh Such a Good Sound": Remaking the World, or a Case for a Macrocosmic Aesthetic of Grace in ASMR

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Autonomous sensory meridian response, known colloquially as "ASMR"[1] is a pseudoscientific neologism for a pleasurable physiological sensation reported by a number of people in response to soft sounds. The exact definition of ASMR is somewhat fluid, but it is most often described as a pleasant tingling sensation in the top of the head, extending down the neck and spine, and in some cases reaching outer extremities, such as fingers and toes. ASMR is generated most often by another person in close proximity creating soft sounds with their voice, or by manipulating inanimate objects, such as brushing hair, running fingernails along a wooden surface, or unwrapping paper packaging. Although ASMR can be generated in person, the most common form of dissemination is through internet videos in which an "ASMRtist" curates sounds specifically for the pleasure of her viewers.[2] Many of these videos have become very popular, some having view-counts well into the tens of millions.

Proponents of ASMR are quick to point out that the sensation is distinct from more familiar *frisson*—the "spine chill" or "shiver" felt in response to emotionally powerful or aesthetically arresting stimulus such as music.[3] One

1 In this essay, "ASMR" will refer to the "response" itself, as the acronym implies, but it will also sometimes refer to the stimulus that creates the response (as in "ASMR video" or "ASMR recording" where the noun modified is silent and implied). "ASMR" will also occasionally refer collectively to the whole phenomenon—its community of practitioners and its body of work.

2 Craig Richard, "Be an ASMR artist," *ASMR University*, accessed November 22, 2015, http://asmruniversity.com/be-asmr-artist/.

3 It should be noted that many of the references in this essay refer to ongoing conversations in online discourses containing fluid content that is subject to change. Because research on ASMR is still in very early stages, most of the evidence about it is anecdotal. I will include brief quotes from conversations from chat forums and message boards that might change between the time this essay is written and the time when the reader might wish to investigate sources further. In the case of frisson versus ASMR, many debates are ongoing, but the general consensus seems to be that they are distinct phenomena. One thread on the ASMR SubReddit postulates that frisson and ASMR can be defined as distinct in the type of chemical release that accompanies them. "Frisson/chills is pretty common, and you can find a lot of info on it. One thing is clear : it's linked to the dopamine released in your brain. Usually triggered by music/emotionally intense moments. ASMR, on the other hand, seems to be somewhat common but it's quite hard to find any documentation on the subject. But most people tend to associate it to serotonin release. Mostly triggered by close, personal attention, ambiant [sic] sounds, calming voices." mahi-mahi, "Let's settle

contributer to an ongoing conversation about the phenomenon on Reddit is quick to point out that "While [...] it is possible to get ASMR from music, it's not the most common trigger."[4] This remark already invites a comparison with music, but seems to prescribe that ASMR experiences and musical ones are separate. However, this statement always already assumes that the reader and/or the author have a clear definition of what music *is*, which we already know to be relatively plastic and mutable. In this essay, I will argue for an aesthetics of ASMR, and with it invite the possibility that specially crafted stimuli intended to evoke ASMR might be understood as veritable musical compositions. I will further ask that the reader consider that the experiential aspects of ASMR might in fact be an altogether new kind of sonic discourse that resembles music as closely (or in some cases more closely, depending on the definition) than things that are traditionally held to be unequivocally musical. At this point it is necessary to step back from the theoretical conversation and define ASMR more precisely. Its requirements are relative, but is nevertheless more complex and nuanced than simply what I have outlined above.

I should mention here that I have not experienced ASMR in exactly the way that its practitioners describe—thus I am not an expert—although I do experience a kind of relaxation and some unique sensations that might resemble tingles. I have not experienced a "headgasm"—as the most typical sensation is sometimes called—and it would be fitting here to establish one of the main tenants of ASMR, which is its decidedly non-sexual function. "Headgasm," thus is something of a misnomer because while the experience is indeed pleasurable, it is not understood by most to be *sensual*—rather purely and exclusively *sensuous*. Like music, food, and other sensory stimuli, ASMR videos can be overlaid with sexuality, and indeed many are,[5] but the experience itself is not understood by most to be connected with sexuality.[6] It is easy to mistake ASMR for a sexual phenomenon because the videos include strong representations of intimacy and tenderness accompanied by detailed depictions of bodily contact. In many videos, the ASMRtist acts as if she is in the same room as the viewer, whispering "into your ear," or even reaching outside the camera frame to virtually "touch" your own body. The videos tend to happen in real time, and make only very limited

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this. ASMR = serotonin release. Frisson/chills from music = dopamine release," *ASMR Reddit*, March 19, 2011, accessed November 22, 2015, https://redd.it/g76xg.

4 mahi-mahi, "Let's settle this..."

5 There is a significant body of ASMR "fetish" videos, however those will not be a topic of discussion in this essay.

6 "A common misconception is that all ASMR content is erotic, sexual or perverted. This is not the case. However, there are some dedicated fetish videos." Discoverasmr, "Is ASMR erotic, sexual and perverted?" February 6, 2015, accessed November 22, 2015, http://discoverasmr.com/what-is-asmr/sexual-asmr/.

use of cinematic editing. Thus they can be very long, often upwards of an hour or more of continuous footage, simulating real human interactions and conversations. The emphasis on mimicking real-life experience sets ASMR apart from more stylized forms of expression such as song or film. ASMRtists often work with "3Dio binaural" microphones that are shaped like human ears, supposedly to create a representation of human hearing with perfect fidelity. They often encourage their viewers to use high-quality headphones to maximize the virtual reality of the auditory experience.

Figure 1. 3Dio binaural microphones.

In my research and conversations, I have concluded that ASMR seems to operate on the following three prerequisites: First, it is a pleasurable physiological response to largely auditory stimulus with visual accompaniment often enhancing the effect. Second, it is connected with interpersonal intimacy—ASMR does not typically happen when the source of sound is perceived to be public or generated by a non-human agent (e.g. a person blowing into your ear could create a response, but the wind outside probably won't). Third, high fidelity recording is a key enabler of the documented experience, strongly aided by new developments in digital reproduction technology and newly-formed conduits of sharing self-generated content on the internet.[7] This third feature is not as much a prerequisite for experiencing ASMR as much as it is an element of its eventual discovery and dissemination. While personal narratives often include or emphasize "real life" experiences, the online community is where the phenomenon has been described and where it has propagated. Much in the same way that orthographies reify language or notation reifies music, the online community of ASMR content production and consumption has led to a developing stylistic discourse.

7 Some argue that ASMR can be generated with virtually any stimuli. The website "ASMR University" defines it as "responses to a wide variety of stimuli" including visual, aural, and tactile. However, a close look at examples given reveal that they all would only occur in intimate settings, and all require a human agent: "light touch, massage, hair touching, grooming, physical examination, eye gazing, slow hand movements, soft, whispering, slow, gentle, increased pitch, caring, monotone, mouth sounds, chewing, blowing, tapping, scratching, cutting, crinkling, stroking, handling etc." Craig Richard, "What Is ASMR," *ASMR University*, accessed November 22, 2015, http://asmruniversity.com/about-asmr/what-is-asmr/.

This triptych of qualifications invited me to consider what makes ASMR distinct from music. It occurred to me that from an objective auditory stance, the sounds of ASMR videos are superficially similar to much of the *avant garde* canon, especially electroacoustic compositions that feature soft sounds. For example, John Cage's *Child of Tree* (1975) features highly amplified soft rustling and plucking sounds of the performer's fingers on cactus thorns. The piece sounds like just the sort of thing that ought to elicit ASMR. When I showed a video of a live performance[8] of *Child of Tree* to a friend of mine who experiences ASMR, she immediately dismissed it. While she was not able to articulate exactly why, I believe that intimacy might be key. Rather, than engaging with the viewer, the musician was "performing" for a public audience, and it was clear that the video was a record of that event, rather than an interaction between viewer and artist. It seems conceivable that in real life, or even given a different camera angle, the piece could easily evoke ASMR.

I realized that an important facet of the ASMR experience involves a power dynamic consisting of agent/subject or active/passive pairs. Because the mode of dissemination is usually a recording (rather than, say, a video call), its unidirectionality prescribes that one party always has all the agency and the other party merely "tunes in." This relationship is strikingly similar to performer/audience dynamics. Although the dimensions of necessity for audiences and performers are still widely discussed, the near-universal rejection of Babbit's infamous "Who Cares If You Listen" (1958) in current musical discourses indicates toward a musicality that is understood to be necessarily both sounded and heard, both produced and consumed. The very term "ASMR" implicates the listener—the term is not named for the stimulus, but rather for the *response*. Interestingly, this points in the opposite direction as the term "music" which calls up the muse, or inspiration for making. Unlike "painting," "dance," or "writing," which centralize act or actor, both music and ASMR acknowledge parties before or beside themselves, and are thus always already understood to be social experiences.

In her essay for *Queering the Pitch* (2006), Susanne Cusick outlines a framework in which sexual experience is understood to be defined as consisting of a power/pleasure/intimacy triad.[9] She argues that music can be approached with varying attitudes toward power/pleasure/intimacy, including a lesbian approach. She further speculates that music itself might operate on the same terms,

8 Kevin Dufford, "CHILD OF TREE - John Cage," *YouTube*. March 23, 2009, accessed November 24, 2015, https://youtu.be/XOtfyYDeFRk.

9 Susanne Cusick, "On A Lesbian Relationship With Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006), 71.

and thus asks "what if music IS sex?"[10] Of course, Cusick is not arguing that music is inherently erotic, rather that its operative nature might be more or less indistinguishable from that of sex. The latter two parts of the triad (pleasure/intimacy) are already understood to be requisite for ASMR, and I believe I have made a case for power as well. Thus, while ASMR is not explicitly sexual, I believe it operates along the same lines and in the same kinds of social and/or theoretical spaces as sex, and by association, music. This essay, after all, is not about sex, but rather about music. The sonic world of ASMR brings it into the puvue of music; with its particular power dynamics and response-focused economy in tow, it stands a strong candidate for a new kind of music.

The very fact of ASMR's candidacy as a musical genre is not particularly noteworthy. Indeed, musical genre is not a fixed array—it has grown and changed a great deal over the centuries, and surely will continue to do so for as long as people are making music. However, I believe that the appearance of ASMR in the cultural and social conversation of the world is of great significance in that it might upset, challenge, and remake our fundamental understanding of listening, sociality, and experience in the same way that polyphony altered the way we heard melody, or the way opera changed the way we understood narrative. ASMR is postured to call into question long-held assumptions about the role of technology in musical economies, to such a degree that I have been woefully unable to find a satisfactory theoretical framework to wholly account for its particulars. Like a wind turbine in a coal-powered world, ASMR seems to yield a familiar result, but does so in a bewilderingly unfamiliar way. In his book, *Noise* (1977), Jacques Attali discusses how music can be "a way of perceiving the world,"[11] and further how music can prefigure or even predict yet-to-come paradigms in a changing society. Attali calls music a "prophet,"[12] categorizing sound into the "norm" (or what I might call the "real") and the "festival"—an imposed ritual order or commentary expressed through sound.[13] Like almost all modern and postmodern theories of music and society, Attali's is predicated on the notion that music does violent work to cause ruptures that result in changes: "[N]oise is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder, [and] music is a channelization of noise."[14] Attali is not alone in either of these thoughts—McClary, Kittler, Ross, Turabian, Adorno, and nearly all who discuss music and technology in the

10 Ibid., 78.

11 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 4.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 22

14 Ibid., 26.

contemporary era problematize both as volatile entities that jeopardize authenticity or threaten norms. Although these theories don't necessarily posture music or recording as risky in the negative (i.e. they agree that both can and often do effect positive change), I would like to put forth the possibility of an emerging musical paradigm instead defined by tenderness, delicacy, and hyper-realism. ASMR stands at the front-lines of this possibility. Just as Cusick's "lesbian relationship" undoes the heteronormative power dynamic of music, I want to suggest that while ASMR is indeed Attali's *prophet*, it unseats music as simulacrum of murder or sacrifice and remakes it as a simulacrum of grace.

MACROCOSM

The effect of mass media transmissions on the thoughts and behavior of audiences is well-documented and richly theorized. Friedrich Kittler's monograph on sound and visual production technologies lays a foundation for thinking about recording that does for them what Attali (and others) have done for music. Kittler is quick to problematize the advent of recording technologies as heralding the death of human memory[15] in much the same way that Benjamin was concerned with the loss of artistic space in the age of mechanical reproduction. Kittler's argument draws on long-held assumptions about the nature of recorded material, dating back to Romantic thought, ones that I believe are easily traceable to ancient philosophy. Kittler quotes Goethe, saying that literature is but "a fragment of fragments,"[16] which sounds suspiciously like ancient Platonic warnings about art as an imperfect imitation of an already imperfect world. Kittler thinks that reality might be "arrested" by the limits of language, and that in the age of recording, this tradition continues with reproduced sound and image:

> Time determines the limit of all art, which first has to arrest the daily data flow in order to turn it into images or signs. What is called style in art is merely the switchboard of these scannings and selections.[17]

Kittler further argues, like Attali, that sound (along with sight) are particularly well-situated to define human experience and fashion worlds. Thus, he fears that media has gone "beyond aesthetics" when "eyes and ears have become autonomous."[18] In 1986, Kittler could not have predicted an autonomy of eyes and ears

15 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 36.

16 Ibid., 6.

17 Ibid., 3.

18 Ibid.

now seen in the silicone ears of 3Dio binaural microphones and the omnipresent eyes of front-facing cameras on every laptop and smartphone. To be sure, Kittler articulates the fear now resounding in conversations everywhere—what does the ubiquity of recording do to the human experience? When everything can be and is recorded, what is archived? To which recordings are we to ascribe meaning and significance?[19]

Unlike Kittler, I do not believe that media is beyond aesthetics. Quite the opposite, I believe that media encourages us to hear in different ways, and works to alter our perception of time and space. Contrary to a popularly held belief that the always-connected generation is falling out of touch with reality, I believe that ASMR videos indicate toward an understanding of time that is arguably more "real" than expressive mediums of past generations. In the art music world, we are already beginning to see music with temporal dimensions closer to macrocosm than microcosm. The work began by minimalists Glass, Reich, and others in the 1970s and 1980s and continued today in the work of acoustic ecologists including John Luther Adams and R. Murray Schafer. This ecology of sound enacts an aesthetic that denies reduction of temporality in favor of recreation or retelling. Adams's *The Place Where You Go to Listen* (2006) is an ongoing sound installation that responds in real time to weather events and seismic disturbances in Alaska. Precisely the opposite of a Wagnerian depiction of time (condensing epochs into hours), for Adams, minutes are minutes and years are years. The same is true, for online video content, much of which remains largely unedited. ASMR videos do not cut from scene to scene, and employ none of the limiting conventions to create *style* in the way Kittler describes. But ASMR videos *do* have style, and an easily identifiable one at that, as do the musical compositions of the acoustic ecologists. Here I intend to introduce a macrocosmic aesthetics of real-time sound, and consider how a body of sound compositions are rapidly being consolidated into a musical identity that operates outside stylized time.

I do not want to diminish the effect of ASMR by providing excessively detailed descriptions of the videos in this essay. The reader is encouraged to seek out the videos on her own to experience them firsthand. Just as music and image do not lend themselves well to the constraints of prosaic descriptions, so ASMR is even more resistant to verbal explanation: it is ineffable in every conceivable sense. However, for the sake of documentation, and more importantly argumentation, I would like to describe some of the ways that ASMR accomplishes the

19 A fascinating (and more informal) conversation about the ubiquity of recording technology and how it might change the way people posture themselves and behave socially can be heard on the radio program *RadioLab*, from October 6, 2015, "Smile My Ass." http://www.radiolab.org/story/smile-my-ass/.

work that I have described above. First, it should not be assumed that the social aspects of ASMR place it outside a politics of canon formation. The ASMR community has its "great composers" just like other communities of aesthetic discourse. One such "superstar" of the ASMR world is Maria, a Russian expatriate living in Maryland.[20] Maria's YouTube channel is called "GentleWhispering," and features several landmark videos, including one that defines ASMR and invites viewers to join the community.[21] One of her most popular videos is called "*_* Oh such a good 3D-sound ASMR video *_*"[22] from which I derived the title for this paper. As of today, the video has about 13 million views. Maria apologizes in the video description for the "low quality" because although she is using her binaural microphone for a stereo effect, the video is only recorded at 480p (standard, rather than high definition). She gives a detailed playlist of events in the video:

0:53-wooden brush sounds
3:00-smoke blowing
6:20-temples rub and scalp massage
10:07-shoulder rub
12:28-feather tickle

Two of the items in the list, "temples rub and scalp massage" and "shoulder rub" seem impossible to transmit via recording. Nevertheless, Maria attempts to reach "outside" the camera frame to "touch" the viewer, and creates accompanying sounds in the microphones that resemble what you might hear were she actually massaging your head. Now we arrive at one of the most perplexing elements of ASMR transmission—the attempt to exceed the limits of the medium itself. It is here that Kittler's definition of style is shattered. This might sound metaphysical, but consider for a moment that when Maria mimics a scalp massage, the viewer might experience a tingling sensation on her head. Suddenly the viewer is not only having an audio/visual experience, but a tactile one as well. Unlike sound and picture which create an objectively observable simulacrum of real experience, ASMR creates a subjective sensory experience that literally exceeds the physical capabilities of the medium. It passes beyond simulation and simulacrum and becomes real in the body of the viewer. At one point in the video (during "smoke

20 Caitlin Gibson, "A whisper, then tingles, then 87 million YouTube views: Meet the star of ASMR," *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2014, accessed November 23, 2015, http://wpo.st/-WLr0.

21 GentleWhispering, "What is ASMR?" *YouTube*, December 15, 2014, accessed November 23, 2015, https://youtu.be/Kb27NHO_ubg.

22 GentleWhispering, "*_* Oh such a good 3D-sound ASMR video *_*," *YouTube*, September 7, 2012, accessed November 23, 2015, https://youtu.be/RVpfHgC3yeo.

blowing") Maria wafts fragrances at the viewer from a bowl of scented oil, and says she wants to "hopefully create an aura." Although she is certainly not talking about "aura" in a Benjaminian sense, she unknowingly gets to the heart of what ASMR accomplishes: it challenges the notion that art objects lose their unique position in time and space when they are reproduced. Here, the very medium of transmission through a computer screen and headphones, combined with the invocation of a sensory response, creates a space—ASMR fashions its own aura, which is infinitely reproducible and infinitely varied.

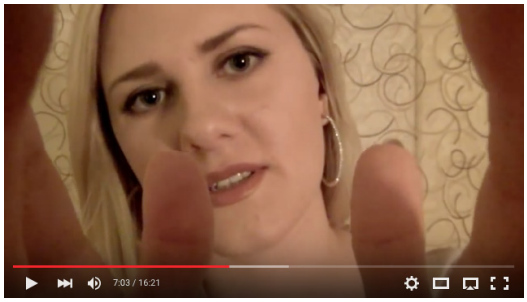

Figure 2. Maria gives you a scalp massage.

Maria's most recent video, ".o.o.Tap That Glass.o.o. ASMR / Tapping" was published just three days prior to my writing this essay. In it, sounds are curated and organized by timbre and pitch, and Maria manipulates the resonance of sonorous objects by dampening them and applying various types of percussive action. When she plays glass beads hanging around her own neck, she remarks, "I can play it like a musical instrument."[23] The world of ASMR continues to expand into ever more complex shapes and elaborate aesthetic configurations. The edges of the two-dimensional video frame are already being opened with new "spherical" videos that allow the user to freely explore a representation of 360° space. One of the most compelling of these "3D" videos is *The K3YS*, a collaboration between three of the most popular ASMRtists: GentleWhispering (Maria), HeatherFeatherASMR (Heather), and ASMRrequests (Ally).[24] Each artist created her own traditional video, which appeared on their respective channels, and the three then co-created another video in a three-dimensional virtual environment where they interact. This project comes close to employing a narrative structure—the women have matching costumes, props, and a virtual "set" that conjures the appearance of a forest at night. The video features poetry, music,

23 GentleWhispering, ".o.o.Tap That Glass.o.o. ASMR / Tapping," *YouTube*, November 19, 2015, accessed November 23, 2015, https://youtu.be/lwe7Rrb_FEA.

24 ASMRrequests (Ally), HeatherFeatherASMR (Heather),
and GentleWhispering (Maria), *The K3YS* (Online: LittleStar, 2015), accessed November 24, 2015. http://littlstar.com/videos/6d352a4b.

tactile triggers, and spoken word: by most estimates it looks like an experimental opera. When defining where and how *The K3YS* exists, it becomes clear that it intersects and transcends its own world(s) in multiple dimensions—the video itself is three-dimensional (despite being on a flat screen), and it resides in four virtual "places" (channels) at once. Projects like *The K3YS* explode the genre of ASMR into increasingly more complex spaces with ever more stylized aesthetics. Still, the videos retain a profound sense of personal attention, intimacy, and realness: the viewer is always already at the center of a spherical video.

A SIMULACRUM OF GRACE

An argument for an aesthetics of ASMR will not be complete without consideration of its politics. It is a unique politics that I believe most strongly invites the possibility for a radically new kind of sonic tradition, one that poses significant problems to theories of violence and rupture that dominate modern and postmodern musical discourse. In her book, *The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), Elaine Scarry discusses how bodily sensation, especially pain, is fundamentally inexpressible.[25] Language stands in as transmitter of information about sensation, a medium that Scarry argues is wholly inadequate for pain because suffering so often renders the speaker inarticulate. A huge quantity of expressive art and literature, then, must represent an effort against this inexpressibility, having informed thought about human experience across art, philosophy, politics, religion, medicine, etc. It is worth noting that the same is true for intense pleasure: indeed, most people become wordless during moments of intense gratification, joy, excitement, etc., and a great deal of artistic and literary work surely also addresses these pleasurable experiences. I think Scarry's virtual omission of pleasure from her discussion is no accident, though, and I think it stands entirely in line with what I have said earlier about discourses surrounding self-expression—especially sonic ones—that define meaning in terms of painful destruction. Literature (in both theory and practice) tracing its origins all the way back to Aristotle's *Poetics* positions tragedy as the most meaningful and communicative form of dramatic expression. Indeed, music is no stranger to this thinking—theories of music have all identified dissonance as the sole style-generating structural feature. "Tension and release" has historically been the primary means by which music is understood to create drama, and by association, to evoke a human response. Works of art that enact no tension or conflict are regarded as drama-less and thus rendered unable to create a response: effectively marking them as meaningless.

25 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

ASMR directly challenges the supremacy of drama for the simple reason that it is not predicated on conflict, yet creates a measurable qualitative response. The videos are expressly and explicitly designed to invoke a relaxed state, and the sounds they employ tend to be consistent, unified, and non-dynamic. *ASMR initiates release without creating tension.* Here it would be very easy to begin to speculate about the reasons for the appearance of a tension-less music at this particular historical moment—perhaps our world has become so incredibly saturated with tensions that music no longer needs to simulate them. I will not venture at such conjecture, and will leave the reader to ponder those questions. However, I do not think the radical and fundamental counterpoint of ASMR against traditional notions about music can be under-emphasized. Attali's and Scarry's worlds are made and unmade out of murder, sacrifice, violence and pain, but the world of ASMR is remade with tenderness, affection, clemency, and peace. It asks nothing of the viewer, and doesn't come at the expense of the performer. Yet it generates a very real and powerful response. ASMR, then, must be seen as post-apocalyptic: it stands in the aftermath of a destructive world-war of music that took place in the twentieth century, one which now sees its end in a new paradigm of sharing and caring on the internet.

Nitin Ahuja's short article for *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* is the only other scholarly essay I have been able to find on the topic of ASMR. Ahuja, an MD, examines ASMR through a literary lens in order to glean what it might teach doctors about clinical medical practice. In his discussion, he describes a "Postmodern sensitivity" that might be borne out in the customs of ASMR. I tend to see the phenomenon as rather more connected with Post-postmodern movements like so-called "New Sincerity" that shed Postmodernism's ironic exterior in favor of greater emotional authenticity and personal transparency.[26] Ahuja also considers that ASMR might "present a vision of the problematized relationship between technology and modern loneliness sorting itself out."[27] With this latter point, I wholly agree. Rather than enforcing body-negativity, distance, or cool impersonal acrimony, the very mediating interface of the internet seems to be bringing people into more intimate and human spaces, and increasingly more embodied awareness. Musical response, now, can be felt in the head, skin, and limbs, and not only in the ears, and the internet seems to be just the place to do it. Comment threads on ASMR videos are filled with rapturous dialogue of deep affection, appreciation, and gratitude. To anyone familiar with YouTube

26 Jonathan D. Fitzgerald, "Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age's Ethos," *The Atlantic*, November 20, 2012, accessed November 23, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/sincerity-not-irony-is-our-ages-ethos/265466/.

27 Nitin K. Ahuja, "'It Feels Good to Be Measured': Clinical Role-Play, Walker Percy, and the Tingles," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 56, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 448.

culture, a comment thread not brimming with hostility is a rare sight.

Nick Messitte wrote for *Forbes* earlier this year, wondering what could happen if ASMR became a *bona fide* musical genre, able to be commercialized.[28] Messitte invites the reader to imagine a world where ASMR is a category on Billbord charts. Although this might at first seem like the stuff of science fiction, superstars like GentleWhispering have already monetized their YouTube channels. Maria expressed concerns about what that income might mean for the authenticity and sincerity of her work, saying in an interview that she has maintained a day job even though she could produce a higher volume of videos and live off money from advertisements.

> I've realized that I just cannot do it as a job; I almost start to resent it. If this is the only thing I have to do, it's going to be very hard to do it on the genuine level I want.[29]

The problem of economy brings us back to Attali, and his hope for a music that can end the pattern of objectification and violence enacted by organized sound since antiquity. McClary elegantly articulates Attali's prophecy in her afterword to *Noise*, identifying in his text a desire for a new music, "controlled neither by academic institutions nor by the entertainment/recording industry."[30] If ASMR communities can successfully circumnavigate the danger of what happens when

Figure 3. A sampling of typical comments on a GentleWhispering video (from "*_* Oh such a good 3D-sound...").

28 Messitte, Nick. "Is There Any Money To Be Made In ASMR?" *Forbes*. March 31, 2015, accessed November 23, 2015, http://www.forbes.com/sites/nickmessitte/2015/03/31/is-there-any-money-to-be-made-in-asmr/.

29 Gibson.

30 Attali, 38.

people "listen to it in silence and exchange it for money"[31] (although the former is of course already true) they stand ready to enact this new music in a way unimaginably different from what Attali anticipated. While he calls for an end to repetitive rituals of recording and performance, which he believes imprison sound though violent enclosure, ASMR videos seem defined by their very reproducibility, indeed ritualistically so. The medium of recording itself builds private chambers of quiet grace that are forever inhabitable, mutable, nurturing, and mellifluous. Rather than inflicting lethal wounds of change, the space, people, time, and aesthetic of ASMR all seem to hover weightlessly in suspension, reviving our senses to life over and over as we patiently look, listen, and feel.

31 Susan McClary, "The Politics of Silence and Sound," afterword to *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, by Jacques Attali (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): 149.

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