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Joanna Łapińska

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Your writing sounds gorgeous: post-cinematic experiments in ASMR videos as a sign of posthuman sensibility

Joanna Łapińska

Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Based on the visual, textual and video analysis of selected autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) films published on YouTube, this article seeks to provide an overview of numerous roles that both the activity of writing and onscreen written elements play in sonic contexts. In line with the findings of post-cinema studies and posthumanism theories, the author aims to present the post-cinematic techniques used in ASMR videos focusing on the written element as a sign of processuality-, relationality- and experimentation-oriented posthuman sensibility. In this essay, it is demonstrated that in ASMR culture the process of writing supersedes the final product of this activity, and that listening designates multimodal reception experience. While this research draws primarily on the concepts developed within the fields of post-cinema and posthumanism studies, it is interdisciplinary in nature and can be situated within the academic fields of sound studies, new media studies, and performance studies.

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Introduction

Words and writing activity appearing in various configurations on screen, and in particular their role in cinematic and media worlds, is not a new topic, but is still insufficiently analysed. Until recently, onscreen written elements in audio-visual media have largely been neglected by media scholars, in contrast to film subtitles or dialogues in different languages, for example, which are analysed eagerly by linguists (Bedijs 2017, 150). Exceptions to this include the pioneering research carried out by Chion (2017) and presented in his book *Words on Screen*, where the author investigates the multiplicity of functions that written words and writing activities can perform in cinema. According to Chion, the roles played by the various written elements present in both the diegetic and non-diegetic layers of a film are numerous; they range from the narrative-forming to the symbolic and metaphorical. All written elements in the onscreen setting comprise the so-called linguistic landscape of the film (Bleichenbacher 2008, 189), which not infrequently contains an element crucial to the understanding of a scene, but most often simply participates in the establishment of 'the illusion of reality' (Bedijs 2017, 147).

CONTACT Joanna Łapińska joanna.lapinska@univie.ac.at

One of the reasons for the lack of contemporary interest in the written element on the screen, as well as in the functions that this type of filmed text provides, may be the fact that film, after the silent cinema era, no longer had the need for intertitles, which had hitherto been one of the most important elements of its poetics. Communication with the audience by means of written text was no longer vital, and cinema went from being a phenomenon 'of textual attractions' (Robinson 2012, 34) to an audio-visual phenomenon. At the same time, sound took a secondary position to the image, and film to this day 'is taken to be an essentially visual art' (Chion 2017, 199) and 'a visual experience that also attempts to involve our other senses' (Casetti 2015, 110–111). In the twentieth century, we lived 'surrounded by pictures' (Mitchell 1994, 5), not by the unexciting, 'slack and flabby' (Jameson 1991, 299) verbal element.

In the twenty-first century, newly emerging audio-visual media genres forming the current media landscape called 'post-cinematic' (Denson and Leyda 2016, 1) are reinventing the 'linguistic features' of different 'media offerings' (Bedijs 2017, 150). Post-cinematic media forms are generally believed to be involved in indicating and shaping new 'forms of (…) sensibility' in our experience (Denson and Leyda 2016, 6). They seek to answer the question of '*what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century' (Shaviro 2010, 2, emphasis in original). The answer may be in line with the philosophy of posthumanism; not coincidentally, these new forms of sensibility are called 'posthuman' (Willis 2016). The philosophy of posthumanism inspired by the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari (1994) opts for the concept of 'human' to be 'historically specific and contingent;' according to this way of thinking, 'human' is currently 'in the process of becoming something else, namely the posthuman' (Willis 2016, 15). The writing/written element on the screen may be looked at through the lens of processuality, relationality and experimentation, namely the categories characterising the ways of becoming posthuman. According to posthuman philosophy, 'process supersedes product' (Ulmer 2017, 6); by the same token, the very act of writing visible on screen in newly emerging audio-visual media genres is often more important than the text being created. The posthuman sensibility is not goal-oriented, but processual, relational and experimental.

Moreover, the transmedial, constantly in-motion and densely relational nature of new digital media, in which the intermingling of speech, writing and image is the order of the day, allows the 'gestures' of one media to be transferred to another (Regiewicz 2014, 54). A prime example is the medium of writing settling into other media. The act of writing and its audible and visible results appear in a variety of roles and configurations in autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) videos, a new audio-visual media genre popular on the YouTube platform. In the 'culture of the display screen word' (Regiewicz 2014, 54), this new media genre draws attention to the fact that the boundaries between word, sound and image are permeable, and that the dominance of the visual layer in the reception of the medium becomes, to say the least, questionable. This media genre is characterised by a multimodal structure, which manifests itself in the seamless interweaving of visual, auditory or even, in a sense, tactile layers, as well as a multimodal reception experience (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001).

The viewer-listener of an ASMR film is encouraged to perceive the message in a multisensory, posthuman and processual way, that is, to abandon the ways of reading the audio-visual text focused, on the one hand, on omnipresent looking, seeing and watching, and, on the other, on the construction of meaning. This kind of reception of the

message is encouraged by, among other things, the multiple post-cinematic techniques present in ASMR videos, for example, the crucial role of an interface, the use of non-human viewpoints or fragmentary and non-linear narratives (Willis 2016), as well as experiments with sound, which always plays first fiddle within this culture.

This essay provides an overview of the elements associated with the activity of writing present in the online sound culture known as ASMR, positing that ASMR videos are an example of a post-cinematic media genre that deliberately re-forms existing modes of human sensibility using a number of techniques, sometimes still anchored in old apparatuses, sometimes borrowed from other media. Elements of the writing-related universe appearing in ASMR are emblematic of how the gestures of one medium, amplified or otherwise creatively modified, can establish themselves in another. One example is the activity of writing, here always visible and, above all, clearly audible. The final product of the activity, e.g. a letter, a book or a shopping list, is in the background. ASMR filmmakers experiment with onscreen written elements, treating them as a source of play and part of performance, creating a kind of linguistic–sonic–visual–tactile landscape. Here, the emphasis is on process, not product; on experimentation and play, not on meaning. The words seen on the screen are heard in the strokes of a quill pen, calligraphy marker, chalk or stylus pen. Writing in ASMR is also created using various user interfaces: a typewriter, a computer keyboard or a touchscreen tablet, which become important sonic attractions of the genre.

The article will further focus on the various roles envisaged in ASMR for both the writer and the writee, and their contribution to the depiction of forms of posthuman sensibility. An example of a role played by an ASMR video creator is that of a school teacher writing with chalk on a blackboard, with the distinctly amplified sound of chalk creaking as the focus element. Another example is the unconventional, non-human roles intended for the ASMR viewer-listener: the role of the whiteboard or the iPad on which the person visible on screen writes. In other ASMR films, the viewer-listener's only task is simply to be a witness to the performance taking place, e.g. to follow the sweeping movement of the fountain pen nib from very close up and to listen to it scraping against the rough texture of the paper. All these elements of ASMR's written universe can be seen as symptomatic attempts to answer the question of human experience at the beginning of the twenty-first century and situated within a posthuman processual ontology, which notes that 'reality is process rather than static existence and (…) that substances should give way to events' (Williams 2018, 371).

ASMR and writing

Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) is a neurological phenomenon typically characterised by a tingling sensation in the crown of the head, on the skin of the neck and sometimes in the whole body, triggered by a variety of audio-visual stimuli (Poerio et al. 2018). Stimuli referred to as 'triggers' in ASMR culture include, but are not limited to, soft oral sounds (whispering, chewing sounds), gentle repetitive sounds (tapping and scratching sounds), watching others performing some activities (painting, drawing, opening a package), touching (watching someone touch another person's hair), hand movements, personal attention, crinkling and rustling sounds (Smith, Fredborg, and Kornelsen 2020; Poerio et al. 2018; Smith and Snider 2021).

In addition, ASMR is also a media phenomenon that has been growing in popularity among the online community for more than a decade. ASMR videos published mainly on YouTube are films created by so-called 'ASMR artists,' referred to as 'ASMRtists,' with the aim of inducing a tingling sensation in the viewer-listener. In a typical YouTube ASMR video, an ASMRtist might speak to the audience, pretend to give the viewer-listener a massage or a haircut, make sharp noises, or perform a variety of slow, repetitive movements (Barratt and Davis 2015). The stimuli consist most often of technically amplified sounds that the viewer-listener of the film receives through headphones, without which 'the sound quality would be compromised' (Smith and Snider 2021, 36). The tingling sensation felt on the skin can lead to the experience of intimacy between the artist and the viewer-listener (Zappavigna 2023), as well as facilitate relaxation, and help cope with sleep problems, stress, fatigue and anxiety (Barratt and Davis 2015; Poerio et al. 2018).

ASMR culture is called a sound-centred culture for a reason (Smith and Snider 2021). The online community formed around the YouTube channels of ASMR artists eagerly watches videos created in this specific audio-visual aesthetics characterised by a soundscape composed of remarkably crisp and clear sounds produced by everyday objects; sounds that 'tend to be repetitive, methodical, gentle, made at a steady pace, and done at low and steady volume' (Richard 2018, 81). Some ASMR videos focus only on objects, materials, surfaces and the sounds they produce, showing tactile interaction with them in close-up, while others, called roleplay videos, incorporate sound elements into simple narratives showing various scenes from everyday life, such as an examination at the doctor's office, a lesson at school or a visit to the library. These types of videos are characterised by 'a stylised overemphasis on the associated sounds' (Smith and Snider 2021, 31).

Words and the activity of writing take on different faces in ASMR. They can be found both in roleplay videos, e.g. videos immersing the viewer-listener into the world presented on the screen, showing the work of professionals connected to the written word, including a librarian or a teacher, and in films without even a vestigial plot, oriented towards the exploration of the sonic qualities of writing instruments (chalk, pens, pencils, typewriters, computer keyboards) or surfaces (letter paper, iPad screens, blackboards, whiteboards). Writing is also present in videos described as 'ambience ASMR,' conceived as a non-distracting sonic background for relaxation, study or work, trying to convey the atmosphere of a writer's office or the serenity of a reading room. Finally, there are videos that are difficult to place in any of the above categories, as they make use of resources drawn from different subgenres of ASMR. They may be assisted by narration, but only to a small extent, focusing mainly on experimenting with the interface or different camera viewpoints, or casting the viewer in an unconventional role. Always of great importance, however, is the focus on processuality, relationality and experimentation which are both the characteristics of posthuman sensibility and the core features of ASMR videos using the writing/written element.

Posthuman sensibility: processuality

The process of writing words on paper can be seen and heard in a video titled *[ASMR] 长视频/哄睡/写字音 [EPIC没烦恼]* (*[ASMR] Long Video/Coaxing Sleep/Writing Sound[EPIC No Worries]*) (EPIC没烦恼 2021), in which different types of writing instruments are used, with over one and a half million views. The hand seen in the frame writes various

words with a fountain pen, calligraphy marker, ballpoint pen and highlighter, among others. The types of writing accessories and the moment each appears in the video are informed by timestamps placed in the commentary below the video. The words are written on paper of different textures and print: blank, squared and lined. The camera is always very close to the action: in the frame we usually see only a fragment of the paper and the tool used to write on it, and sometimes the hand of the person writing. The hand often leaves the frame, giving the impression that the pen moves across the paper spontaneously, without any human factor involved. The written words visible on the screen resemble the result of asemic writing; they seem to be a sequence of random words, mainly in English and occasionally in Chinese, without specific contextual meaning. The way in which the scenes are shot does not encourage one to read the entire text, but if one were nevertheless tempted to try to piece together the successive words being transcribed, one might realise that the first part of the video shows the writing of an extract from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. However, this information is shared by one of the commenters, not by the ASMRtist themselves. The subsequent parts of the video consequently show the writing of completely random phrases. The fact that the video ends abruptly while one of the sentences is being written down also testifies to the lack of focus on the content of the notes.

The viewer-listener of this video is not only able to follow the mesmerising movement of the pen nib or pen tip on the paper, but also to listen to it. And while it requires sustained attention to make sense of the written text, listening to the scraping of the writing instrument against the paper is not a challenge. For it is these sounds that are the main actors in the unfolding scenes. The sounds of writing are part of the ASMR video, which is designed specifically to capture our attention and affect us, sending tingling shivers down our skin. The same is true of the *Pure Writing Sounds ASMR Satisfying • Glass • Fountain • Ballpoint • Gel* video published on one of the most famous ASMR channels, 'Gentle Whispering ASMR' (2020). This video is divided into chapters whose main characters are various writing tools, including a crystal glass ink pen or a fountain pen, making, according to the description, 'pleasant and satisfying' pure writing sounds. As Pauletto (2017) writes on foley artistry in cinema, 'any object and body can be sonically explored (…) Objects and bodies are given substance (…)' (341). In *Pure Writing Sounds* video, the artist gives voice to writing paraphernalia and explores their sonic qualities in an attempt to bring out those that will most move the viewer-listener's body.

Interestingly, the point of view of the camera changes with the successive tools; once we observe the scene from above, then from the right or the left, but always in extreme close-up. Chion (2017) notes that this type of camera work used in cinema 'doesn't even pretend to imitate human sight since unlike our eye it is deprived of peripheral vision' (125). Seeing in ASMR can be described as fragmented and focused on observing a slowly unfolding process rather than embracing the whole with the eye. Chion (2017) states that this type of looking at the world 'is neither objective (too fragmented for that) nor subjective (no one looks at writing this way),' and links it to the gaze 'of the cinematic machine itself' (126). We will call this specific way of looking at the reality 'posthuman.' The posthuman viewpoint of the camera allows us to closely observe the process of establishing relationships between human and non-human actors and to pay attention to how the two sides relate to each other. The human element, visible in the form of a hand that produces a written text (which may or may not make sense), establishes a direct,

corporeal relationship, focused on constant movement, with the pen, the sheet of paper, the camera and the microphone.

This type of relationship between different surfaces 'plays a central role in the correspondence between sound and image' (Donaldson 2017, 86). During the writing process, a new visual and sonic quality is created from this assemblage, which reaches the viewer-listener and, if everything has worked properly, causes a physical stirring in the form of shivers on the skin. As Donaldson (2017) notes, 'sound is to be experienced, appealing to the body as much as the ear' (85), and nowhere is this truer than in ASMR. Posthuman sensibility manifests itself not only in the fact of listening more and more intently to the world around us and its non-human elements. Its sign is also an acceptance that the written text itself, which has always been linked to human thought and creativity, does not only act on the viewer-listener at the level of meaning, metaphor or symbolism. It can also affect our bodies when we scrape the pen or pencil against the paper.

Posthuman sensibility: relationality

A considerable amount of research has been devoted to the role of 'surfaces, screens and interfaces' in providing 'new opportunities for storytelling, exploration and wonder' (Willis 2016, 132) in the context of new digital media. In particular, interfaces in the posthuman context are considered to play a more important role than that of a mere mediator 'between a faciality of an abstract subject and a machine within information transmission and communication' (Del Val 2021, 288). In posthuman theory, interfaces are understood as a sign of 'intercorporeality within the relational body' and 'relational fields for affect formation' (Del Val 2021, 288). Thus, interfaces participate in the production of affects that co-construct the posthuman sensibility of the embodied and situated human subject living in the twenty-first century. This happens in a variety of ways. A user interface, the meeting point between human and machine, is a dynamic zone of interaction that requires engagement. Particularly in expanded post-cinematic forms, the interface 'acts as the marker of the shift from linear cinematic storytelling to interaction' (Willis 2016, 125). At the same time, interface has more than one name; Willis (2016) notes that when exploring the various roles of interfaces, it is important to consider their 'diversity' and 'particularity' (125).

In ASMR culture, exploration of the functions of various user interfaces is very common. The keyboard interface of a typewriter or a computer, as well as the touchscreen of a tablet, are objects used in ASMR videos to produce sounds that have a relaxing effect on the viewer-listener. The keyboard interfaces called writing machines traditionally constituting an 'interface for transmitting written language' and representatives of 'technologies of the fingers' (Raykoff 2014, 22), in ASMR culture unleash the creative potential of touch bringing out the tingling sonic element. In the ASMR video *ASMR Satisfying Writing, Page Turning, Keyboard Typing 이건 수면제 영상입니다* published on the 'Vito ASMR' channel (2021), both the sounds of writing with a pencil in a notebook and with fingers on a wooden keyboard become filmic agents instead of remaining in the background. In this film, we no longer see the words being written down, but focus only on the sonic qualities of the depicted scene. We are also a little further away from the act of writing itself. The distant camera allows us to see more of the person sitting at the table than just their hands, as well as the objects on the tabletop, including the oil

lamp, the candles, the carved bust of a woman and the glass water bottle, which, together with the soft lighting of the scene, create a cosy atmosphere of intimacy.

The keyboard interface is used here as a gadget with sound potential. We do not believe that the movement of fingers on the keyboard actually results in a written text on a screen hidden somewhere. The typing process is simulated; it takes the form of a performance, the aim of which is *not* to produce semantically meaningful content. Tapping on the keys of the keyboard triggers a performative sound that has the potential to evoke an affective response in the body of the viewer-listener. It is worth noting that ASMR is said to have developed from both theatrical practices and sound art (Lindborg 2020). The performative potential of a loosely scripted 'personalised theatre' (Lindborg 2020) comes from the amplification of sounds that have previously been an unnoticeable part of the background in our everyday reality, but to which we become attuned in ASMR.

ASMR videos of the 'study with me' subgenre feature a narrative that provides a pretext for further exploration of the numerous interfaces. The author of the video *study with me // 1 hour asmr keyboard typing (no talking)* published on the 'claudy' channel (2020) takes notes for a business law quiz using her MacBook Pro, and the viewers are invited to listen to the relaxing sounds coming from the screen for over an hour. In the frame, we see only fragments of the surrounding setting: a body in the form of manicured, slender hands running across a keyboard, and a desk with a handful of fragmented objects, including the base of a lamp and a water glass clipped across the top line of the frame. Fragmentation also characterises the film's 'storyline,' which has no definite beginning or end, so we can join in at any point to peep at this slice of a life. To make the narrative more believable, the randomness of the tapping on the keyboard from the previous video is replaced by actual typing, the results of which we can observe in real time in the open text editor visible on a cropped laptop screen.

Onscreen studying in ASMR videos always involves an object that must produce pleasant sounds. This could be a tactile interface, such as a computer keyboard or tablet screen, or the surface of a blackboard, on which the artist writes with chalk. In a video titled *ASMR iPad writing *satisfying* | engineering notetaking* from the 'Destiny Whispers' channel (2021), the person visible on screen writes notes on an iPad using a tablet stylus. From the description in the video, we learn that the device's screen is covered with a 'paperlike' screen protector that allows writing as if on paper. For this reason, the sounds of writing on the digital surface accompanying this scene are softer and more pleasant than the sounds of writing directly on a slippery and hard tablet screen. As the 'story' unfolds, the frame of the video becomes tighter and tighter, until finally all we can see is the iPad screen and a woman's hand with an Apple pencil. We are mesmerised by the activity of underlining words, numbers and mathematical equations, which, almost as if by magic, light up in different colours under the touch of the pencil.

In another video, titled *ASMR Writing Your Names On iPad* (ASMR Dream More 2021), from the very beginning we do not see the edge of the device on which someone's hand is writing. We are as close to the interface as possible. The entire frame is filled with a white, glossy surface, on which words seem to magically appear. Here, the screen resembles 'a light surface that, unlike paper, is unfeeling and amnesic, on which everything comes to be drawn and to move without ever leaving its trace' (Chion 2017, 191). The traces of the written words disappear from the surface of the digital screen as quickly as they appeared, and all that remains is a sound effect that causes a shiver

on the skin of the viewer-listener. In addition, at the top of the frame we can see the fragments of other user interfaces emblematic of ASMR culture: two microphones catching every sound of a pencil tapping against a smooth surface. The microphone in ASMR culture is treated like a totem at the centre of affective experience (Łapińska 2020, 30); it 'serves as the listener's ears' and enables immersion 'resulting in an 'internal' form of sound' experienced by the viewer-listener (Klausen 2019, 88, 91). In this way, the viewer-listener is also fragmented; their ears reach where the microphones reach.

In ASMR culture, what Schrey (2014) has called a 'deep affection for outdated analogue media' (28) appears frequently. One of the favourite analogue user interfaces is the typewriter, which in the cinematic world often carries a symbolic quality. The fragmentation of the text produced by the typewriter is conducive to building tension in a film. As Chion (2017) observes, 'the letter isolated from the word, the word excised from the line, the line detached from the rest of the text, all taunt us with the many meanings they can take on, or with their unhinged non-sense' (100). In ASMR, the typewriting process is also stripped of meaning, but this is by no means a reason for despondency. In ASMR, the 'typewriter in its capacity as a mixture of human being and machine' (Chion 2017, 102) is a source of satisfaction derived from tactile interaction with a material non-human actor. Analogue media 'contain a certain amount of life' (Schrey 2014, 35), for which flawless digital media yearn. This nostalgia may also be linked to the human longing for something authentic: for truly touching (e)motion. The constantly touched keys of a typewriter 'transmit intimate messages once reserved for voice or pen' (Raykoff 2014, 22). In ASMR, these messages become even more intimate, as their purpose is to touch the viewer-listener on a primal level: to literally *move* their body.

In the video titled *ASMR Typing on 1950s Typewriter (No Talking) Real Typing [Repetitive, Predicable, Mechanical Sounds]* (UndergroundASMR 2021), we observe a person typing on a vintage typewriter purchased from an antique store, as we learn from the description. For most of the film, the eye of the camera observes the writing process from very close range. The frame is filled entirely with close-ups of the sheet of paper being moved in the machine and the keys transferring ink to paper. All the elements we witness are in constant motion; they work without rest, producing repetitive mechanical sounds. We follow the energetic movement of the typebars hitting the paper laid out on the platen, and, after a moment, we receive a satisfying acoustic experience that is the result of 'real typing, not just clicking random keys,' according to the artist's declaration. Again, the video is an attempt to get closer to 'real life' through multimodal interaction: attentively observing and listening to the sounds that affect us.

Willis (2016) posits that by 'tapping, dragging and caressing' the touchscreens, a kind of intimacy is built between the user and their mobile device, 'subtly making us aware of the tactility of our interactions' (134). Apparently, this type of intimacy can also be established when using tools from the pre-digital era. Tapping the keys, pushing and pulling the platen knob, releasing the pressure on the feed rolls so that paper can be removed – all these activities are associated with specific sounds that participate in the construction of a relationship between the machine, the writer and the viewer-listener. Cinematic representations frequently centred on visual close-ups of the actual mechanism of the typewriter, which was meticulously broken down part by part (Chion 2017, 99). However, in ASMR videos, the increased attention of the viewer-listener is primarily

concerned with how the mechanism sounds rather than what it looks like. Therefore, the building of intimacy is linked to the feeling of sound.

Posthuman sensibility: experimentation and no human bodies

Pleasant sounds are crucial in creating an atmosphere that is suitable for activities requiring increased concentration: studying or reading a book, but also relaxing and sleeping. The presence of human bodies, however, is not essential. Videos published on YouTube with the expression 'ASMR ambience' in the title are intended to effectively relax the viewer-listener by using the right combination of sounds and images, allowing them to be immersed in the 'comfortable, inviting atmosphere' (Ambience of Yesteryear 2019) of the environment recreated in the video. Interestingly, these films usually do not feature people.

The YouTube channel 'Ambience of Yesteryear' specialises in producing videos in the ambience subgenre of ASMR. Among the many films published on the channel, one can find a four-hour example showing an animated image of a Victorian greenhouse bathed in rain, a video capturing the atmosphere of a scribe's chamber in a medieval monastery, or a five-hour film recreating the soundscape of a seventeenth-century summer kitchen. The soothing images and sounds of ASMR ambience videos are not only intended to serve as a background for relaxation, study, or work. As the channel's owner points out, these types of videos can help us 'personalise sparse, colourless, or impersonal environments (…), enliven spaces where we live or work alone' and 'fill silence with more subtlety, ease, and warmth' (Ambience of Yesteryear 2019). The description of the possible uses of videos demonstrates the recognition of a contemporary human need that such films seek to address. Combating loneliness is identified as one reason for the use of ASMR videos (Poerio et al. 2018) by those who are 'starved for touch' (Ahuja 2013, 450). ASMR films are meant to fill silence with their soothing sounds, to pour life into empty rooms, as well as to transform impersonal work environments into welcoming ones.

The film *Ambience/ASMR: Writer's Library from the 1930s, 4 Hours* (Ambience of Yesteryear 2019) features an image that is a representation of a 1930s writer's room. The image visible on the screen is almost completely static. The only moving elements are the fire buzzing in the fireplace in the lower right-hand corner of the frame, and the slight smoke, perhaps from a cigarette, enveloping the scene. In contrast to the static visual layer, the audio layer is in constant motion. The video description lists the sounds appearing here, constituting the film's changing soundscape. It includes, among others, the sounds of flipping through antique hardback books, perusing and sorting papers, jotting notes with a pencil, sketching in charcoal, drawing with pastels and writing by hand with a fountain pen.

There is no easily recognisable human element in the video, either in the visual or the audio layer. In ambience ASMR videos, human factor is reduced to a minimum and often absent altogether. Even when we do hear snippets of conversations on the soundtrack, these only resemble acoustic noise from which we cannot make out individual words, much less their meaning. The writer's library presented in the video reverberates with sounds in a way that could be called posthuman. The sounds are not produced by any visible source on the screen, but seem to come out of nowhere. We also do not know where the writer is located. Are they sitting at a desk hidden behind the edge of the

frame or lying on an invisible fragment of beige sofa? Or maybe the person who draws and scribbles sits in the place of the camera, where the potential viewer is?

In support of this argument, it can be stated that the sounds surrounding us are crystal clear so that we have the impression of being at the centre of the action. This impression, of course, may be misleading, and the sounds produced, for example, by the activity of 'writing by hand with a fountain pen' might just as well be, for example, the result of a stick scraping against a wooden desk. The sounds, despite being listed in the film description, cannot be identified without any doubt or attributed to the source. They refer neither to any depiction of a human being in the film, nor even to a fragment of them, such as the aforementioned writing hand visible in the other ASMR videos. Nor are they the result of an activity leading to a clearly defined goal. The featured sounds of writing or drawing are not a by-product of a human activity leading to the production of a letter, a book, a sketch or a painting, but become an objective in themselves. They contribute to the pure material aesthetics of the video.

The same is evident in an hour-long video titled *Writing Letters ASMR Ambience* (Miracle Forest 2018), which depicts the imagined sounds that accompany the activity of writing letters. The viewer-listener of the video observes a static scene in which the only moving elements are the flame of a petroleum lamp standing on a desk, a feather quill writing down in a notebook, the flickering moonlight casting a glow through a window, the leaves of a tree swaying slowly, and raindrops running down the glass. Here, however, unlike in the previous film, we clearly see the most important place from which sounds should emerge: the largest part of the frame is occupied by a wide desk with numerous books, notebooks and several writing quills stacked on it, where a writer might sit.

The chair at the desk, however, is empty; no people appear in the scene at any point. The animated quill that is the focal point of the frame, catching our attention immediately like Roland Barthes's *punctum*: 'the most active element, which sets all the rest in bewildering movement' (Jameson 1991, 171), hovers by itself over the paper in a magical way. In the soundtrack, we also fail to hear any sign of people. The soundscape of the scene consists of scraping, scratching and rustling noises, which, one must admit, could just as well connote activities other than writing, especially as they do not go hand in hand with the image. Repeatedly, the animated quill moves vigorously across the paper but we hear some other sound, e.g. of a letter rustling. It is apparent that both the embodiment of a writer and learning about the result of their hard work are not the most essential aspects here.

In the video *Writer's Room ASMR Ambience (with lots of typing^^)* (Miracle Forest 2019), the human element is visually represented only by a framed photograph showing a woman standing backwards with her long hair blowing in the wind. Apart from the animated woman in the photo, there is no human being in the darkened room. The visuals of the film are 'a bit on the spooky side,' as the author admits in the video description. The empty chair in front of the writer's desk and the self-appearing text on the laptop screen, accompanied by the sounds of clicking on the keyboard and trackpad and the howling wind, create an unsettling atmosphere of 'the soft creepiness,' as one viewer of the video noted. Others claim in their comments that the atmosphere, straight out of a horror film, does not prevent them from relaxing. The clever combination of sounds and images makes it easier for viewer-listeners to immerse themselves in the world presented. One commentator even stated: 'I feel I am there.'

Ambience-type ASMR videos that minimise the role of the human factor often attempt to convey the atmosphere of places to which, for various reasons, we do not have access. Occasionally these places are centuries old, exotic or imagined, such as a bedroom in a medieval castle, a Victorian cottage kitchen, William Shakespeare's room or a secret fairy garden. Sometimes such films invite the viewer to interact, allowing them to look around the place. In a video showing the courtyard of a school known from the *Harry Potter* novels and films (ASMR Weekly 2021), the viewer-listener can take a close look at what is around them. All they have to do is start moving their mobile device, swipe with finger on the touchscreen or click and drag over the video on computer, to see different parts of the Hogwarts courtyard. This type of interface usage carries the possibility of 'mov[ing] us towards action or distraction; [of] engender[ing] pleasure or anger' (Willis 2016, 134). The multimodal structure of a given media creation constitutes an invitation to the viewer-listener to tactilely interact with the interface, supporting a multimodal reception experience.

However, in ASMR ambience films, it is more often the camera itself that guides us through a particular place, as in the video *Shakespeare's Writing room In the morning [Immersive Ambience Experience]* (T E R A V I B E 2021). The action of this three-hour film takes place in the English writer's room, which we examine from different perspectives. We find ourselves close to the desk, where we can look at the author's notebook, and afterwards we move towards the fireplace and look out of the window. The unhurried movements of the camera are accompanied by the sounds of the fireplace, the rustling of pages, the muffled sounds of animals and people coming from the courtyard, and, obviously, the scraping of quill against paper. Needless to say, we do not see Shakespeare himself at any time, but that is okay; as the video's author notes in the description, the purpose of the film is simply to let the viewer-listener participate in the process of experiencing 'a great writer's room.'

It is worth noting that literary inspirations often appear in ASMR roleplay videos, along with the pleasant sounds of writing on different surfaces, using different tools. Examples include ASMR films acting out scenes of letter or diary writing derived from famous literary works, such as the video published on the YouTube channel 'ASMR Dream More' (2020) recreating a letter-writing scene from Alexander Pushkin's novel *Eugene Onegin*. Maxence Rodier, a French filmmaker and author of the popular YouTube channel 'Made In France ASMR,' has turned the so-called cinematic ASMR, i.e. ASMR videos using professional cinematographic means, into his trademark. On the artist's website, Maxencerodier.com, we can read that Rodier's lifelong passion and goal is 'bringing ASMR and traditional motion pictures together.' Rodier carefully plans his films down to the smallest detail. When working on a project, he needs to find the answers to questions such as which camera angles and lightning will work best, what filters and special effects to use, how to match decor and design to the scene, which actors fit the story and, of course, what to fill the soundtrack with. An example of the amount of commitment and effort Rodier puts into shooting his cinematic ASMR videos is the film *Writing in Voldemort's Diary ASMR Harry Potter* (Made In France ASMR 2022), which recreates a scene from J. K. Rowling's novel *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and the film of the same title directed by Chris Columbus, where the title character is writing in Tom Marvolo Riddle's diary.

This ASMR video focuses on the sounds that accompany the activity of writing on crinkly paper using feather nib pen and ink. The original scene from the novel/film is

here recreated so that the sound aspect of the scene comes to the fore. Interestingly, the human protagonist of the ASMR video says almost nothing, allowing the non-human actors to ring out in full force. The viewer-listener of the video is reached by the distinct sounds produced by the contact of the protagonist's hands with the feather nib pen, paper and inkwell. One hears the rustling of the pages in the notebook as Harry Potter flips through and squeezes the diary with both hands; then the sound of the rough texture of the dry paper erupts as the protagonist writes something on it, and, finally, one can hear the metallic thumps as he soaks the writing utensil in the inkwell. The sequence of these actions is repeated several times in the video without much change.

It is worth mentioning that the scene shot by Rodier lasts more than half an hour, while the original from Columbus's film runs a little less than two minutes (Wizarding World 2017). The length of both scenes best demonstrates the difference between the cinematic medium and the ASMR genre. In a feature film, it would be completely unnecessary to focus on Potter's repeated process of writing in a notebook, but in Rodier's video it is essential. Interestingly, while in the original scene we witnessed the protagonist engage in a dialogue with the owner of the diary using questions and answers that disappear from the paper, in the recreated scene we do not once see either what Harry writes in the diary or what the diary responds. In fact, in ASMR video this is irrelevant. Onscreen written elements in the form of the transcript of the conversation between Harry Potter and Tom Riddle play an important role in the development of the plot of Columbus's film, but in Rodier's clip they become redundant. ASMR seems to confirm that '*language has been granted* too much power' (Barad 2021, 208, emphasis in original). We call this type of approach to reality 'posthuman,' as it does not focus on the typically human search for the meaning of every action related in this case to the act of writing.

Posthuman sensibility: experimentation and non-human bodies

A posthuman sensibility not necessarily oriented towards purpose and meaning, but rather to play and experimentation, is also manifested in ASMR films casting the viewer-listener in unconventional roles. ASMR artists draw the viewer-listener into a game of placing them in the role of an object on whose surface they can write, producing tingling sounds. In these types of videos, the camera takes on the non-human viewpoint of the person in front of the computer screen, while the ASMR artist treats the viewer-listener as a static object of a playful experiment.

The video, titled *ASMR Writing on You & Chubby Hand Movements* (ASMR PPOMO 2018) and with almost two and a half million views, begins with a scene showing hands slowly stroking various notebooks lying on a table. The person visible on the screen begins each stroking movement out of frame, slightly above the camera, so that it appears as if they are touching someone on the other side of the screen. Then, the ASMRtist's hand moves smoothly to an object lying on the table: a paper notebook, calendar or hardcover sketchbook, to stroke them further. This passage is called in the timestamps listed in the description of the video 'caressing *you* with hand movements' (emphasis mine – J.Ł.). The main part of the film focuses on writing with various tools including a traditional pencil, a mechanical pencil, a ballpoint pen, a fountain pen, a nib pen and a marker pen, with the artist always starting the writing activity in the same way: by tapping with a given tool on the lens of the camera. After a few moments, the hand holding the pen or pencil moves

seamlessly to the actual writing surface lying on the table, being an extension of the viewer-listener's body.

Not a single word is spoken in the film, and all we hear for most of the video are the enveloping sounds of writing utensils scraping against various surfaces. Those who would like to find out what the artist is so meticulously writing down are going to be disappointed. From our perspective, it is difficult to read the words coming out of their pen, as the notebooks are placed upside down; moreover, the lower part of the screen, where they are placed, is blurred, and the artist often goes out of frame with their writing. There could hardly be better evidence that it is not the content of the notes that is crucial here, but the affective stimuli that the viewer-listener's body, fragmented and 'spilled' beyond rigid boundaries, is capable of receiving.

The non-human body can also take on other shapes: the tactile interface of an iPad, as in the video *[ASMR] You Are an iPad* (ASMattR ASMR 2020), or a whiteboard, as in the video *ASMR You're My Whiteboard (Real Writing on Camera)* (fastASMR 2020). In the first film, with more than four million views, the artist taps on a transparent glass placed in front of the camera using his fingertips and a stylus, mimicking the action of writing and drawing on a tablet screen. As we have already realised from the title of the video, we are cast here in the role of the touch interface used by the man who is visible on the screen. The very beginning of the video leaves no doubt about this, as the first element we notice is a simple graphic showing the locked screen of the device seen as if we were inside the tablet. The man quickly unlocks the device with a vigorous hand movement and begins his performance of clicking on selected icons and buttons. The almost thirty-minute session of tapping, clicking, swiping and stippling on the imagined iPad takes place at night, in a room where the only source of light is the viewer-listener's body: the glowing touchscreen.

In the video *ASMR You're My Whiteboard*, the owner of the YouTube channel 'fastASMR' envisages a similar role for the viewer-listener: this time, they are the whiteboard that the ASMRtist uses for her notes. The residual plot is based on an attempt to find the perfect ASMR formula. Of course, this requires 'lots of trial and error, which means lots of scribbling and wiping sounds,' as we can read in the video's description. The artist does exactly that, nothing more; she uses a marker to write down simple equations like 'ASMR + TRIGGERS = TINGLES' and 'TRIGGERS + ASMR = SLEEP', then wipes them off with a soft towel to immediately move on to the next formula.

The potential viewer-listener of the aforementioned videos, set in the unusual role of an object on which someone is scribbling and doodling, should feel calm, relaxed and destressed. This, after all, is the overarching aim of ASMR videos. Here, the viewer-listener's body becomes a non-human body: fluid, permeable and unbounded. Nevertheless, it does not dissolve completely, as the person sitting in front of the screen can still perfectly feel the tingling sensation on the scalp: evidence of the body's physical existence, rooted in materiality. And while the sense of being immobilised, even trapped, in a body that is not one's own and of being at the mercy of others is often a source of horror in cinematic stories, in ASMR this feeling is primarily associated with the joy and relaxation. As Łapińska (2021) notes, in these scenarios the viewer-listener can for a moment 'shed the burden of living as a human being' (166) and go beyond the human agenda, valuing 'rationality, intellectuality, purposefulness, and reasonableness' (164). Apparently, this constitutes a source of great pleasure.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the onscreen elements associated with words and the act of writing present in the newly emerging post-cinematic media genre known as ASMR. This audio-visual Internet phenomenon was shown to be involved in indicating and shaping new forms of sensibility called 'posthuman,' characterised by processuality, relationality and experimentation. The essay identified the most important post-cinematic techniques present in ASMR culture using visual, textual and video analysis of ASMR films published on YouTube showing in different configurations the activity of writing and its effects. The post-cinematic techniques discussed included, among others, the key role of an interface and its sound properties, the use of non-human viewpoints and roles, and fragmentary or non-linear narratives. The ASMR films portray writing as a sonically engaging activity, appealing to the senses and stimulating the body, rather than being semantically relevant. Sounds interacting affectively with the body of the viewer-listener of ASMR videos play a key role in the multimodal reception of the processes depicted in the videos and, more broadly, in the construction of a multimodal experience that is symptomatic for the person living in the early twenty-first century.

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Notes on contributor

Joanna Łapińska, PhD in Cultural Studies, MA in Film Studies. The author of many articles in the collective monographs and journals, as well as the monograph entitled 'To kocha! Związki miłosne ludzi i maszyn w filmie science fiction' (2020) about the love relationships of humans and machines in science fiction film. Her interests include the phenomena of contemporary cinema, the theories and practices of posthumanism and the new practices of intimacy. Currently, she works at the University of Vienna in the Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies as a project leader of FWF Lise Meitner postdoc project 'ASMR as a New Intimacy Practice in Western Culture.'

ORCID

Joanna Łapińska http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6634-1778

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