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***Touching your Ears: Towards a Materiality of  
Sonic Intimacy in ASMR Videos***

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## Abstract

In recent years, the intimate aesthetic of ASMR videos has challenged the boundary between real and mediated performance. ASMR refers to a physical reaction as well as an online subculture. What started with a Facebook group has grown into a large online community of ASMRtists posting their self-created videos that evoke a physical reaction called Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): a tingling sensation down the spine which can be classified as “goosebumps in the scalp” or a “brain-gasm.” Within such videos, ASMRtists offer a mediated sonic experience by a set of performative techniques with their microphones such as whispering, ticking softly on objects, and microphone brushing. However, these performances produce a physical experience of a “touch” of the ASMRtist, a “tactile presence,” in which the boundary the mediated and the real seems to blur.

In this thesis, I explore the apparent paradox posed by microphone performance in ASMR videos: the production of a seemingly “real” experience through the act of recording sound. Building on scholars from science and technology studies, popular music studies, sound studies, and media studies, I show that these conditions can be uncovered through an analysis of the relationship between the ASMRtist and the microphone. First, I explore a theoretical framework through which the experience of presence and tactility can be deconstructed, arguing that these experiences are constructed through a set of historically and culturally specific human-microphone relationships. Second, I trace how these performative relationships with the microphone have developed. Through a historical analysis of the microphone in performative practices such as radio, funk, nineteenth-century theatre, and avant-garde, I show that the microphone has always served as a tool to mediate the epistemological differences that shape the intimate experience of ASMR videos today. Finally, I analyse how the current mediation of differences are channelled by the digital writing system of the microphone allow me to produce an intimate aesthetic in recording my own ASMR video.

Ultimately, I argue that it is through a process of *touching* upon these the boundary between these differences that a tactile presence is mediated. Together, these chapters aim to provide an approach that can account for the underresearched role of the microphone and the intimate listening experiences that have surrounded them. It is through such an approach that I aim to uncover the technological and material conditions through which the experience of presence and tactility through sound recording are produced.

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## Introduction

A boy and his microphone appear on my screen, “Hey there,” he says, “this is, obviously, A. S. M. R.” (while moving his mouth to one side of the microphone as he pronounces every letter). Luuk, also known as *Obviously ASMR* on YouTube, is currently one of the most prominent Dutch artists of the ASMR internet subculture. These videos are meant to provoke a bodily reaction called “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response” which can be defined as “light and pleasurable tingles,” “waves of relaxation in the head, neck, spine, and throughout the rest of the body.”<sup>1</sup> Generally, this reaction is caused by recording subtle sounds such as stroking, ticking on objects, and whispering. Luuk’s video is called “30 minutes of Personal Attention (Face Brushing, Hand Movements, and Whispering Obviously).”<sup>2</sup> What follows is a 30-minute video of him whispering intimately to the microphone, moving with his brush and hands along with the screen (see fig. 1) I hear his voice, the subtle sounds of his mouth, close to my ear. His performance causes the intimate sensation of him being proximate to me and in the same space.



Figure 1. *Obviously ASMR* “30 minutes of Personal Attention (Face Brushing, Hand Movements, and Whispering Obviously).” (2017)

<sup>1</sup> “What is ASMR,” ASMR Academy, accessed March 28, 2019, [asmrAcademy.com/whatisasmr](http://asmrAcademy.com/whatisasmr)

<sup>2</sup> Obviously ASMR, ““30 minutes of Personal Attention (Face Brushing, Hand Movements, and Whispering Obviously),” *YouTube* video, 29:34, June 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoLI3GYuB\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoLI3GYuB_A)

In this thesis, I explore the apparent paradox posed by microphone performance in ASMR videos: the production of a seemingly “real” intimate experience through the act of recording sound. Luuk’s video left me wondering about the role of these microphones in the output of ASMR videos and their listening experience. The microphone is centrally placed in front of the camera. He treats the object as he would treat another human. He strokes and tickles the mesh of the microphone, and when his finger touches the device, it “feels” like they are touching my ear as a spectator. The device does not only “record” in the literal sense of the word, but also actively seems to take part in the construction of the video and its sound effects. In doing so, it produces an experience that feels private and intimate, in which I am present and touched by the performer.

Intimacy, sound technology, and the ear share a common history. Jonathan Sterne, for instance, traces how sound technology has been connected to intimacy and sexuality. Devices such as the telephone actively constructed a “private” space between the sound source and the listener. This allowed for sound and listening to be articulated as intimate private property as it was able to block out all the other voices except for the one at the other end of the line.<sup>3</sup> Such devices allowed for people to have a conversation without having to meet with the other person. However, the intimate experiences constructed by ASMR videos extend far beyond the “private” form of intimacy, as discussed by Sterne. The sensory experiences in ASMR entail the performance of the YouTuber, their engagement with the sound technologies that afford sound to be mediated and transferred, and the material quality of sound to form a constellation through which intimacy can be experienced. The microphone in ASMR then raises the question of how we can understand the construction of this particular form of intimacy from a sensorial and technological perspective.

### **ASMR and Intimacy: A Tactile Presence?**

The term ASMR, in this case, refers both to a physical reaction as well as an online subculture. From the end of the 2000s, the internet subculture called ASMR has been gaining attention. What started with a Facebook group has grown into a large online community of artists posting their self-created videos on digital platforms such as YouTube. The term Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response was coined in 2010 by Jennifer Allen as a name for a group on Facebook.<sup>4</sup> It

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 171-3.

<sup>4</sup> The now accepted term for this “brain-gasm” begins with the word “autonomous” because it comes from within. “Meridian (meaning “middle or midday”) because they are regarded to be senses around the spine, “Sensory” for referring to a sensation and “Response” for it being a reaction to a variety of stimuli. There is no clear consensus on where or when ASMR exactly originated from. See Dr. Richard, *History of ASMR: 500 Million Years*, ASMR University, podcast audio, September 1, 2015, <https://asmruniversity.com/2015/09/01/asmr-university-podcast/>.

was supposed to refer to the “weird” sensation that she felt when listening to everyday sounds such as “brushing hair,” “a man unlocking a damaged padlock” or “whispering sounds.”<sup>5</sup> These ubiquitous and mundane sounds evoked a pleasurable and uncategorisable feeling, that is similar to “chills” or “frisson” in music but located around the head or neck.<sup>6</sup> ASMR is a euphoric sensation that could be described as a “brain-gasm” with “goosebumps in the scalp” or a tingling sensation down the spine.<sup>7</sup> Despite the different genres that have developed over the years, ASMR videos all have in common that they trigger the “ASMR” effect through sound. Such “genres” can vary from simple “massage” or “trigger” videos to costumed role play and scripted videos. Often, these videos are posted by women who are whispering, speaking softly, and acting kindly. They are often looking directly into the camera, sometimes even touching the camera to provide the viewer with the sensation of being together with the artist.

As evidenced within recent academic research, ASMR has challenged a variety of different questions concerning the technologies, psycho-physiological effects, digital networks, and online communication that permeate these videos. Within the field of the social sciences, scholars have been concerned with the neurological relations and possible health benefits of the ASMR effect.<sup>8</sup> ASMR videos are experienced as relaxing and evoking positive feelings.<sup>9</sup> Within the field of the humanities, ASMR has mainly been explored with concern to questions related to our current digital infrastructure and issues of gender, intimacy, and sexuality.<sup>10</sup> ASMR videos are argued to

<sup>5</sup> Jamie Lauren Keiles, “How A.S.M.R. Became a Sensation,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/magazine/how-asmr-videos-became-a-sensation-youtube.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Graig Richard, “Asmr-vs-Music: Similarities and Differences,” *asmruniversity*, <https://asmruniversity.com/asmr-vs-music/>.

<sup>7</sup> Keiles, “How A.S.M.R. Became a Sensation.”

<sup>8</sup> See Emma Barrat and Nick J. Davis, “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A Flow-Like Mental State,” *PeerJ* 3 (March 2015), <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.851>; Stephen D. Smith, Beverley Katherine Fredborg, and Jennifer Kornelsen, “An Examination of the Default Mode Network in Individuals with Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR),” *Social Neuroscience* 12, no. 4 (July 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2016.1188851>; Stephen D. Smith, Beverly Katherine Fredborg, and Jennifer Kornelsen, “Atypical Functional Connectivity Associated with Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response: An Examination of Five Resting-State Networks,” *Brain Connectivity* 9, no. 6 (July 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1089/brain.2018.0618>; Giulia L. Poerio, Emma Blakey, Tom J. Hostler and Theresa Veltri, “More than a Feeling: Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response,” *PloS one* 13, no. 6 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0196645>

<sup>9</sup> Barrat and Davis, “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A Flow-Like Mental State.”

<sup>10</sup> Helga Sadowski, ‘Digital intimacies: Doing digital media differently’ (PhD Thesis, Linköping University Electronic Press, 2016); Tasha Bjelić, ‘Digital care’, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 26, nr. 1 (2016): 103; Rob Gallagher, “ASMR’ autobiographies and the (life-) writing of digital subjectivity’, *Convergence* 25, nr. 2 (2019): 260–277; Joceline Andersen, ‘Now You’ve Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community’, *Television & New Media* 16, nr. 8 (december 2015): 683–700, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414556184>; Emma Leigh Waldron, “‘This FEELS SO REAL’ Sense and sexuality in ASMR videos’, *First Monday*, 2017; Eduardo Abrantes, ‘Interpenetration of vibrating thresholds’, *SoundEffects-An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 8, nr. 1 (2019): 80; Naomi Smith & Anne-Marie Snider, “The Headphone” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of the Anthropology of Sound*, ed. Holger Schulze (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, forthcoming), 7.



pose an example of an affective neoliberal aesthetic produced by algorithms and online data.<sup>11</sup> They represent a means of experiencing intimacy with an ASMRtist in times where intimate experiences are atomized and transformed.<sup>12</sup>

ASMR videos are claimed to exemplify how social media, recording technology, and sonic experience are entangled in the complex ways in which the categories of public and private, human, and non-human are challenged by technologically-induced intimacy in the twenty-first century. The experience that is produced by these videos is said to be at once sexual and asexual, real and mediated, public and private, proximate and distant. On the one hand, ASMR videos are consumed in a collective and public network of online forums and social media platforms. On the other, these videos are listened to in a highly individual and private environment. The performances and role-plays of ASMRtists are often regarded to be highly sexual, while the noisy aesthetic of these videos is highly asexual at the same time.<sup>13</sup> Watching a video feels like interacting with a human, while the computer and headphones that provide this experience are actually a machine.<sup>14</sup>

What seems to characterise the role of sound in constructing intimacy is the creation of a “tactile presence.” This aesthetic is referred to as a “hyper-presence” or “hyper-proximity” afforded by the tactility of sound.<sup>15</sup> Listening to a video can provide the physical experience of being in the same space and being touched by the fingers of the ASMRtist. This touch is argued to be produced by the material quality of sound.<sup>16</sup> Many ASMRtists pronounce their words slowly, which makes it easy to pay attention to the texture of the sound rather than what they say. It is through sound that the ASMR aesthetic seems to transgress the boundaries between human and non-human, public and private, through which intimacy is experienced.

However, it is within the analysis of sound as evoking tactile presence that scholars make some problematic assumptions on what this production of intimacy entails. Sound recording is analysed as a tool to evoke a “bodily” and “immersive” or experience of feeling an immediate connection to the ASMRtist.<sup>17</sup> It is regarded to elicit a more proximate and internal than, for instance, visual elements or language. What scholars within the field of sound studies have pointed out, however, is that the experience of sound (and the experience of tactile presence in this case)

<sup>11</sup> Rob Gallagher, “Eliciting Euphoria Online: The Aesthetics of ASMR Video Culture”, *Film Criticism* 40, nr. 2 (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Joceline Andersen, ‘Now You’ve Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community’, *Television & New Media* 16, nr. 8 (december 2015): 687, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414556184>; Emma Leigh Waldron, “‘This FEELS SO REAL!’ Sense and sexuality in ASMR videos”, *First Monday*, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Naomi Smith & Anne-Marie Snider, “The Headphone” 7.

<sup>14</sup> Waldron, “‘This FEELS SO REAL!’ Sense and sexuality in ASMR videos”.

<sup>15</sup> Joshua Hudelson, ‘Listening to whisperers: Performance, ASMR community and fetish on YouTube’, *Sounding Out*, 2012; Gallagher, ‘Eliciting Euphoria Online’.

<sup>16</sup> Andersen, “Now You’ve Got the Shiveries,” 689.

<sup>17</sup> Gallagher, ‘Eliciting Euphoria Online’.

are grounded within a set of historically and culturally specific technological practices. It is, therefore, my aim in this thesis to deconstruct a “tactile presence” not as a “touch” of the ASMRtist or sound but as a historically and culturally constructed phenomenon.

Deconstructing intimacy in ASMR videos then poses some of the broader questions concerning how the association of tactility and presence with sound has developed. The idea of the sonic as intimate, tactile, and immersive as opposed to the visual as mind, external, and static can be traced back to an ideological separation between body and soul, human as opposed to the non-human.<sup>18</sup> Aristotle was already interested in the role of sound in shaping the differences between body and soul. He traced this division within the means through which he found the voice to be able to produce both ensouled and soulless sound. Ensouled sound meant the production of words, sounds with meaning. The soulless sounds were coughs, noises, and screams, etc.<sup>19</sup> It is within defining this boundary that Aristotle laid grounds for an analysis of the development of this division. This is because both the ensouled and the soulless came from the same place: the mechanism of the mouth.

## **Recording with the Microphone**

I hypothesise that the microphone’s role in ASMR videos serves the same purpose as Aristotle’s mouth. Within this device, the boundary between soulless sound (noise) and ensouled sound (words) are negotiated. The microphone currently serves as the most ubiquitous sound device which has affected almost all musical practices and mediations of sound over the last hundred years. Nevertheless, sound, media, and music historians have paid little attention to its crucial role. As Carolyn Abbate points out, even among the high amount of sound technologies and listening practices discussed in Sterne’s *The Audible Past*, not much attention has been paid to the role of the microphone. Microphones, she argues, are the “quiet middlemen in larger technological systems that cry out for attention.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike other sound recording devices such as the phonograph, microphones were unable to “create visible inscriptions [...] they fell out of the spotlight, being unsuited for expository demonstrations of how sound becomes script.”<sup>21</sup>

I aim to account for the act of becoming “script” concerning the microphone. Studies among the few scholars that did take the microphone into account show that its power lies in its

<sup>18</sup> Emma Leigh Waldron, ““ This FEELS SO REAL””; Rob Gallagher, "Eliciting Euphoria Online."

<sup>19</sup> Aristoteles, D. W. Hamlyn, en Christopher John. Shields, *De Anima: Books II and III (with Passages from Book I)*, Repr. with new material., Clarendon Aristotle Series (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 32-33.

<sup>20</sup> Abbate, “Sound Object Lessons,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 69, no. 3 (2016): 811-2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*.

capability to function as a device that serves as the basis for performative practices through its unique sonic qualities.<sup>22</sup> The microphone is a device that can produce subtle sounds of bodies and performative instruments that support as the basis for sound recording today. I will argue that the microphone provides a tool to define boundaries that precede our conceptions within Western culture; in this case, the definition of intimacy in ASMR. The presence that is produced in ASMR is not naturally constructed through the materiality of sound but is rather grounded in historical and culturally specific modes of interactions between the ASMRtist and the microphone.

It is through an analysis of the interaction with the material qualities of the microphone that I trace the production of tactile presence. I will refer to this writing process as *sonic touching*: an intra-active process in which the writing system of the microphone serves as an interface to explore *differences*.<sup>23</sup> Through interacting with their material qualities, microphones can produce differences. This shows how the production of intimacy in ASMR videos is grounded within a Western tradition of performance techniques shaped by the sound technologies that we engage with. Throughout three different chapters, I will develop and apply this concept to show how our conception of intimacy in ASMR is grounded in interactions with the materiality of the microphone.<sup>24</sup>

## Methodology

Two different methods shape the analytical part of my thesis.

The first entails a historical analysis of the microphone within performative practices. In chapter 2, I turn to a historical analysis of the role of the microphone within a set of performative practices. As the microphone is ubiquitous today, it has become what Madeleine Akrich refers to as *black-boxed*, which means that our ways of using them have become too self-evident to be consciously noticed.<sup>25</sup> To find out how such technologies “channel” social relationships, Akrich proposes to study a device in a different cultural or historical background.<sup>26</sup> This entails re-readings of the

<sup>22</sup> Cathy van Eck, *Between Air and Electricity: Microphones and Loudspeakers as Musical Instruments* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 2.

<sup>23</sup> In what she calls a “posthumanist performative account,” Barad denounces the established dualisms such as humans and non-humans, mind and body, and matter and meaning. Rather, it is through interactions that the ends of these binaries acquire any meaning at all. Barad argues that there is no meaning of these matters prior to interaction, or as she calls it “intra-action,” referring to how the performance of interaction both represents as well as implements meaning to/of the matter. See Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (2003): 810-5.

<sup>24</sup> By interaction with materiality, I mean to refer to the process of the creation of meaning through an interaction with the materials of an entity. See Tim Ingold, “Materials against materiality,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (2007), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Madeleine Akrich, “The De-Description of Technical Objects,” in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1992), 211.

<sup>26</sup> Madeleine Akrich, “The De-Description of Technical Objects,” 208-9.

archival sources of secondary sources as well as readings of sources from my own research. While there have been many different microphones, I am mainly concerned with the ones between the end of the nineteenth century until the 1970s. It is during this time-frame that I can trace the development of human-microphone interactions that might seem self-evident today.

My analysis in chapter 3 will be based on the production of my own ASMR video and a semi-structured interview with ASMRtist Luuk, which I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction. Luuk provided me with insights on how the creation of tactile presence in ASMR videos is connected to experiencing ASMR. While I focused mainly on the aesthetic and role of visual and sonic components of ASMR video, Luuk could provide me with the perspective of ASMR videos concerning listeners, social media platforms, and other ASMRtists. Furthermore, his experience with producing ASMR videos served as the basis from which I could develop my first ASMR video.<sup>27</sup> The limit to making my own ASMR video is that it is mainly a subjective process in which I can build only from my own individual and limited experience.<sup>28</sup> This allows me to focus on the microphone not only as an object with static affordances but on the process of interacting with its materiality and its affordances.<sup>29</sup> It is in the process of making and not in the end result that I am allowed to reflect on how intimacy is produced.

## Chapter 1: Deconstructing Sonic Intimacy

What precedes the methodologies for my analysis is a theoretical framework on which my argument is based. The first chapter of this thesis will serve to deconstruct the assumptions on sound and tactility and develop the concept of *sonic touching*. The analysis of presence in ASMR can be traced back to traditions of isolating the perception of sound and tactility as from the other senses as auto-affective. Auto-affection means that these modes of perception are regarded to lie outside of the material world. Building on Derrida's concept of the *Ear of the Other*, I argue that the production of sound can be traced through the production of dualities. Derrida defines the Ear of the Other as a mechanism through which one comes to be allowed to experience presence and

<sup>27</sup> Zora van Harten, "Hairdresser ASMR Thesis Project," *YouTube* video, 23:22, August 2020, <https://youtu.be/AGJuuWvD64>

<sup>28</sup> John Freeman and Helen Taylor, *Blood, Sweat & Theory* (Faringdon, England: Libri Publishing, 2009), 185.

<sup>29</sup> The term affordance was originally coined by perceptual psychologist J.J. Gibson to refer to the organization of human environment and the embodied relationship constructed through this organization. Donald Norman adopted this concept to analyse the affordances through the design of objects. See J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1979), 127; Donald A. Norman, *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (New York: Basic books, 1988), 9. Carla Maier and Holger Schulze define the affordances of instruments as sonic affordances. Carla J. Maier and Holger Schulze, "The Tacit Grooves of Sound Art: Aesthetic Artefacts as Analog Archives," *SoundEffects—An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 7, no. 2 (2015): 23.

becomes aware of oneself as a subject. This mechanism takes place as a process that I will call sonic touching. Building on the notion of *touching* by Jean-Luc Nancy as a mode of interacting with the technè of bodies, I argue that the Ear of the Other produces presence through an interactive way between ASMRtist and technology.<sup>30</sup>

## **Chapter 2: The Microphone's Ear**

After exploring a theoretical framework through which my critique on the assumptions on sound in ASMR can be developed, I aim to explore how the *body* of the microphone serves as an Ear of the Other. I explore how the microphone's agency within a constellation of technologies, time, people, and other entities produces the differences through which intimacy is experienced. I argue that the mediation of the microphone can be found in its early history, showing how the microphone mediates sound through producing differences. It is in this mediation that the microphone serves as an Ear of the Other. Through a historical analysis of the microphone in its early history, radio, avant-garde music, and funk, I show that the microphone has served as the basis for the development of performative practices. These practices are all still present in ASMR today, highlighting the means through which tactile presence is grounded in a specifically Western cultural and historical and technological context.

## **Chapter 3: Touching with the Microphone**

In the last chapter, I analyse the role of the microphone in the production in ASMR videos through practice-based research of producing my own ASMR role-play video and an interview with Luuk/*Obviously ASMR*. Within this process, I reflect upon how the performative practices that developed around the microphone are still present in the production of tactile presence today. I demonstrate what I have argued in theory on the microphone's function as an Ear of the Other.<sup>31</sup> Tactile presence is produced by exploring the boundary between the differences within the writing system of the microphone. This writing system is marked by what Michel Serres refers to as *the parasite*, meaning the noise that functions as the basis for communication. It is within the communication between me and the digital writing system of the Blue Yeti that noise serves as the

<sup>30</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, 15; Jean-Luc. Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 63.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, 1985, 35.

basis for the development of tactile presence.<sup>32</sup> This will then lead me to conclude that intimacy in ASMR is produced from the writing system of the microphone rather than the tactility of sound.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, 1st University of Minnesota Press ed., Posthumanities ; 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), x.

## Chapter 1: Deconstructing Sonic Intimacy

As discussed above, scholars have argued that sound in ASMR videos produces an experience of a “tactile presence” for the listener. I argue that the experience of “tactile presence” in ASMR is a historically specific and technologically mediated phenomenon. In this chapter, I trace how the contemporary technologically-induced intimacy of ASMR videos requires us to tap into some of the older Western philosophical questions concerning the conditions that construct the experience of presence. The first of these questions is how presence is produced through listening. Building on Derrida’s critique of Edmund Husserl’s conceptualisation of hearing and Don Ihde’s and Sterne’s work sound, I aim to uncover the mode of listening through which ASMR experiences are produced. Experiencing “presence” through the ear is not a natural mode of perception but a historically specific and mediated phenomenon. It is along the same lines that I question the production of tactility. As a way to deconstruct “touch” in ASMR videos, I draw on the critiques of Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s definition of touch as “primordial.”<sup>1</sup> The perception of touch is not merely produced by the vibration of sound but constructed by a process which I define as *sonic touching*. Borrowing Nancy’s definition of *touching* as a mode of writing or interacting with the *technè of bodies*, I trace how the production of ASMR’s tactile presence is dependent upon the interaction between ASMRtist and the microphone, rather than the material qualities of sound. This, ultimately, allows me to set a theoretical framework for defining the role of the microphone as what Derrida calls *the Ear of the Other* in chapter 2. The microphone then serves as an interface through which modes of sonic presence are continuously produced.

### Intimacy, Sound, ASMR

Understanding the relationship between intimacy and ASMR requires an investigation into what defines one’s experience as intimate. Intimacy is an ambiguous term that is tied to the dualities that permeate Western philosophy.<sup>2</sup> The term is both associated with spatiality, referring to proximity, as well as with love, friendship, or sexuality. The adjective “intimate” comes from the Latin word *intimatus*, which is a past participle of *intimare* which means to “make known, announce, impress.” At the same time, intimacy can also be traced to *intimus*, which means “inmost, innermost, or

<sup>1</sup> With the term primordial, I mean to refer to a tradition of privileging hearing and tactility as “original” modes of perceiving.

<sup>2</sup> Eva Lia Wyss, “Introduction,” in *Communication of Love: Mediatized Intimacy from Love Letters to SMS: Interdisciplinary and Historical Studies*, 10.

deepest.”<sup>3</sup> Following this etymological history, intimacy is defined by the idea of crossing a boundary between inside and outside; the concept of one person knowing everything about another. As French philosopher Francois Julien describes, intimacy is “the revelation of a possible infinity within the innermost self [...] the possibility of overturning or a great change.”<sup>4</sup> It breaks down the boundary between self and other: “To encounter the ‘other,’ the other as such and unique: the other who, because at first perceived as completely outside, through his penetration into our inner space brings to light an inner being of oneself and from then on serves as the only reliable basis of this ‘self.’”<sup>5</sup>

Following Julien’s definition, the production of intimacy can be traced by the cultural and social practices that define the concepts of self and other. Media, for example, continuously alter our means of communicating with each other continuously mix up our public and private identities. The worldwide web now provides us with a constant connection to large audiences, providing an experience that highly public and collective and highly individual at the same time. Such developments result in a shift in how we define the boundaries between self and other. Tracing the production of intimacy in the era of such online networks, therefore, asks for an investigation into how boundaries between dichotomies such as the public and the private, sexual and asexual, or self and other are drawn.

ASMR videos challenge our conception of intimacy within Western society. As Naomi Smith and Anne-Marie Snider point out, these videos challenge us to “disentangle concepts such as intimacy and sex that often get stuck together.”<sup>6</sup> Both within popular and academic discourses, content in ASMR videos is often associated with that of pornographic websites.<sup>7</sup> Going to the dentist, or getting a massage is a popular role-play scenario in ASMR videos as well as pornography, especially since women often make these videos. However, this connection is not that rigid. ASMR is experienced as a more caring experience rather than sexual. As Graig Richard, author of *Brain Tingles: The Secret of ASMR* and founder of the website [asmruniversity.com](http://asmruniversity.com), admits that the videos resemble various sexual acts. He states that “a lot of the visuals you might see relate to how you might visualise what happens during foreplay.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, he argues, ASMR is instead

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=intimate>

<sup>4</sup> This quote was translated from French by Holger Schulze. Holger Schulze, “Intruders Touching You: Intimate Encounters in Audio,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art*, ed. Sanne Krogh Groth & Holger Schulze (New York: Bloomsbury, forthcoming (2020)), 226; Francois Jullien, *De l’intime. Loin du bruyant Amour*, Paris: Grasset, 2013), 69.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Naomi Smith & Anne-Marie Snider, “The Headphone” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of the Anthropology of Sound*, ed. Holger Schulze (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, forthcoming), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Jamie Lauren Keiles, “How A.S.M.R. Became a Sensation,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/magazine/how-asmr-videos-became-a-sensation-youtube.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



about the intimate feelings surrounding the sexual. It is like “supplementing” food with “vitamin pills,” ASMR is the pleasure and relaxation of feeling safe with another person. Instead, ASMR produces its own queer intimacy, which cannot be easily categorised as sexual or not.<sup>9</sup>

Our interaction with the technologies of these media has become central to what we define as intimate. Scholars argue that intimate connections are no longer limited to human to human relationships. Sherry Turkle, for instance, argues that the twenty-first century is an era in which we have come to expect more from our computers than from each other. She explains that technology has developed the ability to provide us with intimate connections without the necessity of human contact. The interfaces of devices such as the telephone and the computer serve to produce new relationships between humans and technology. We spend our days swiping on Tinder or chatting on Facebook rather than talking to someone in real life.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of ASMR videos, I am interested in how these boundaries can be traced within the microphone. As Paula Clare Harper points out: “even as the intimacy is heightened in the meeting of sound and body, so too is the foregrounding of technologies that enable it. Rather than being erased or obscured, the presence of particular technological objects—especially expensive, high-quality, particular-function microphones—is frequently dramatized in ASMR and deployed as part of its sonic landscape, with performers tapping on the microphone as an iconic feature of the video genre.” For Joshua Hudelson and Joceline Anderson, the microphone and headphones then become the place where sound is “literally transduced into touch.” Emma Leigh Waldron defines sound technologies in ASMR videos as the place where “the distinction between *real* and *mediated* intimacy begins to break down and performer and listener can truly touch each other.” ASMR performances are, as Waldron formulates it, a “symbiosis of human and machine” which urges us to investigate the relationship between human (ASMRtist) and machine (microphone) through their material entities.

While I agree with these scholars that the microphone takes on a prominent role in the construction of intimacy and tactile presence, the specific conditions under which the microphone affords this “tactile presence” has been mostly neglected. The analyses of the microphone’s role such as those conducted by Waldron, Andersen, and Hudelson limit the role of the microphone to that of an empty “container.” The microphone is treated as a device through which the vibration of sound is transported from the finger of the ASMRtist to the eardrum of the listener. The weakness in such observations, however, is that it is not only unclear *how* these sound technologies

<sup>9</sup> Andersen, 692

<sup>10</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone together: Why We expect More from Technology and less from each other* (New York : Basic Books, 2011), 19.

actually transduce sound into a “touch,” but also what the conditions are under which a “tactile-presence” is created.

## The Ear of the Other

What defines the mechanism through which one perceives oneself as a subject or as present? That is the thread that runs through most of Derrida’s work. As I will show, this same question needs to be asked concerning ASMR videos. Before I discuss Derrida’s well-known works such as *Of Grammatology*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *On Touching-Jean-Luc Nancy*, I would like to start with his definition of a mechanism that seems to unite the main themes that ASMR videos requires us to apprehend to the perception of sound, tactility, and writing. Derrida calls this mechanism the “Ear of the Other.”<sup>11</sup> It is the mechanism through which one is allowed to experience presence and becomes aware of itself as a subject.

The origin of Derrida’s definition of the Ear of the Other is not grounded in sound but in written words, Nietzsche’s words in *Ecce Homo*, to be exact. It is Nietzsche’s famous megalomaniac autobiography of himself as a great philosopher and man, which Derrida takes as an example to explain the conditions through which the subject emerges. Derrida argues that by writing his autobiography, Nietzsche constructs his subject. It allows Nietzsche to define himself as the great philosopher that he claims to be. However, this subject/I is not singular but double. Writing about himself means that what is alive and unique about him must be captured in the “dead” and public system of language. The subject that Nietzsche constructs can therefore never be singular but exists in-between: “I have, I am, and I demand a keen ear, I am (the) both, (the) double, I sign double, my writings and I make two, I am the (masculine) dead the living (feminine) and I am destined to them, I come from the two of them, I address myself to them, and so on.”<sup>12</sup>

For Derrida, this means that the *auto* (meaning “same”) in autobiography is less self-evident than initially might be thought: “Auto-affection constitutes the same (auto) as it divides that same.”<sup>13</sup> The autobiography is not the same as Nietzsche himself, if not the only way to reflect upon himself. His subject can never be constituted outside without a detour through the external, the written, the dead. It is therefore that Derrida reads Nietzsche’s work not as an *autobiography* but as an *Otobiography*, replacing *auto* with the Greek word for “ear.” It is through the ear of the other,

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, 1985, 35.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 166.

he argues, that all subjects are constituted: “It is the ear of the other that signs: the ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography.”<sup>14</sup> The subject cannot merely be constituted from speech or thought. It is in the interplay between the mouth and the ear, self and other that the subject is constituted.

This “ear” is does not refer to one man’s ear. It can be both those of Nietzsche himself or the people that listen to him. Derrida traces it as an organ that can channel differences that constitute the subject. It is already the structure of the ear that is double: “The ear is uncanny. Uncanny is what it is; double is what it can become; large or small is what it can make or let happen (as in *laisser-faire*, since the ear is the most tendered and most open organ, the one that, as Freud reminds us, the infant cannot close); large or small as well as the manner in which one may offer or lend an ear.”<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, the ear is an inward, invisible, and passive organ. On the other, it is just as much external, active, and visible. Derrida locates the structure of the ear as the embodiment of the boundary between the outside and the inside, making a connection between self and other. As the ear is an organ that is both inside as well as outside the body, it allows for the boundary between the inside and the outside to touch each other.

It is through this production of differences that the Ear is interconnected with how discourse is shaped and its structure evolves. Building on Nietzsche’s reflection upon education in his book *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, Derrida traces the ear as the mechanism between the position “dead” and the paternal state as opposed to the “living” student. Via Nietzsche, Derrida warns for the human ear to become a device and be subverted to the power of the paternal State (Other):

“The hypocritical hound whispers in your ear through its educational systems, which are actually acoustic or acroamatic devices. Your ears grow larger and you turn into longeared asses when, instead of listening with small, finely tuned ears and obeying the best master and the best of leaders, you think you are free and autonomous with respect to the State. You open wide the portals [pavillions] of your ears to admit the State, not knowing that it has already come under the control of reactive and degenerate forces. Having become all ears for this phonograph dog, you transform yourself into a high-fidelity receiver, and the ear -- your ear which is also the ear of the other -- begins to occupy in your body the disproportionate place of the “inverted” cripple.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Otobiographies*, 51

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 35.

However, Derrida argues, that one can only become a “living” student (self) through the ear of the State:

“Is this our situation? Is it a question of the same ear, a borrowed ear, the one that you are lending me or that I lend myself in speaking? Or rather, do we hear, do we understand each other already with another ear?”<sup>17</sup>

I included this full quote as it is essential to pay attention to the ear, not as a passive receiver, but an organ that can adjust itself and tune into differences. Derrida traces the ear and hearing as the place where power relations are shaped. One distinguishes itself from the state through listening with a particular ear. Derrida points out that this is afforded by the ear of one’s own but the ear of the other, meaning that hearing is plugged into discourse and writing.<sup>18</sup> It is the performative means through which subject positions and modes of presence emerge.

What Derrida tries to tell us with this “ear” is that the interplay with the other, the sign, the dead, the technology, etc. are often ignored within philosophical discourses. He argues that the experience of being in the world is not something that exists on its own. It relies upon a fundamental Western value of the immaterial mind (subject) as opposed to the material body (object). Experiencing yourself as present in the world then relies upon the ability to reflect upon yourself as a separate entity from the external world around you, making that world into the other and defining yourself as an immaterial self.<sup>19</sup> In research on ASMR videos, I argue, this is exactly what is done. The means through which ASMRtists write, touch and listen in producing their videos are not taken into account within research on ASMR. I argue that the construction of presence in ASMR videos should be analysed in the same way as to how Nietzsche’s “I” is produced. While his process of writing to constitute the subject took place in-between thought and words on paper, the process of ASMR takes place within a performative process in-between the body of the ASMRtist and the microphone. I will now turn to Derrida’s other works to deconstruct the conditions under which this writing takes place and is shaped in the case of ASMR.

## **Sonic Presence**

Before we can trace this process, however, it is necessary to understand how this ear became “other” in the first place. Tracing the emergence of this division allows for an understanding of

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Off Grammatology*, 71.

ASMR's intimate experience as a historically specific phenomenon. Within Western philosophy, the ear has a long history of being theorised as the means through which we can experience an unmediated presence of the self. Phenomenologist Edmund Husserl traces the conditions through which self-experience is constituted. He believes that presence is experienced not through reason but perception and action in the outside and material world. What this means is that the perception of one's subject position is grounded in how one engages with their surroundings. Nevertheless, Husserl privileges hearing and speaking over other modes of perception as the purest mode of self-experience. Both the mouth and the ear are places where the sound of speech can penetrate to the inside of the body. Speaking allows for the body to animate the dead signifier and can exist in close proximity to the soul, which prevents it from becoming a dead signifier "outside" of the body.<sup>20</sup> Hearing, in turn, is what allows for the body to speak as it is the feedback system through which the voice is corrected.<sup>21</sup>

Husserl privileges hearing as he believes that it allows for the perception of self without having to make a detour through the outside material world. What this means is that hearing distinguishes itself from vision and touch as it allows one to become aware of oneself as a present subject through hearing oneself speak. Husserl refers to this ability as pure "auto-affection." As Derrida formulates Husserl's definition of this term:

"As pure auto-affection, the operation of hearing oneself speak seems to reduce even the inward surface of one's own body; in its phenomenal being it seems capable of dispensing with this exteriority within interiority, this interior space in which our experience or image of our own body is spread forth. This is why hearing oneself speak [s'entendre parler] is experienced as an absolutely pure auto-affection, occurring in a self-proximity that would in fact be the absolute reduction of space in general. It is this purity that makes it fit for universality."<sup>22</sup>

Husserl privileges hearing, as opposed to seeing and touching, for not needing an external detour for the body to perceive its presence in the world. Seeing oneself requires the mirror to reflect an image. Touching oneself requires the body to become an external surface to itself to be touched. Hearing, however, is argued to be experienced without interacting with the materiality of the

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 76-8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

external world, without having to make a distinction between the inside and outside and body and soul, between space and time.<sup>23</sup>

While Husserl's train of thought might seem logical at first sight, his argument on hearing as auto-affection seems to be grounded in an ideology rather than the actual perception of sound. What he forgets is that sound cannot be perceived independently from the outside world. Scholars within the field of the phenomenology of sound have exemplified this by providing us with a phenomenological account on how hearing allows for a perception *shape* and *space*. Don Ihde notes that through listening to sound, we can hear the shape and textures of objects as well as locate them in space: "I hear not only the round shape-aspect of the billiard ball rolling on the table, I also hear the hardness of the table. The same "roundness" is heard when I roll the billiard ball on its felt-covered table, but now I also hear the different texture of the billiard table."<sup>24</sup>

What Ihde, shows is that sound does not exist outside of the material world. Sound, just as light, is not an object that we perceive but a medium that we perceive objects in.<sup>25</sup> Listening is, as Tim Ingold puts it is "to wander [...] paths. Attentive listening as opposed to passive hearing, surely the very opposite of emplacement [...] the sweep of sound continually endeavours to tear listeners away, causing them to surrender to its movement. It requires an effort to stay in place."<sup>26</sup> Ingold points us towards the constructedness of our perception that lies underneath listening to sound. Sounds do not travel directly from the outside world into our ears. Our ears construct a certain mode of listening. It is this "effort to stay in place" and perceive sound in such a mode that makes listening part of being an active agent. Hearing sound is dependent upon air to vibrate; it cannot exist in a vacuum. When we sing in water, our voice sounds different than in air.<sup>27</sup>

Hearing could therefore never be a form of "auto-affection" that exists outside of space as perceiving sound is dependent upon space to be perceived. Auto-affection entails an implicit covering up of the differences on which presence is built. The conception of hearing as auto-affection aims to exclude its dependency upon the other: hearing ourselves is dependent upon a space that resonates with the vibrations of our voice. Presence always carries the meaning of absence and the other way around.<sup>28</sup> Auto-affection can therefore never truly exist outside of the materiality of the body and the outside world.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice* (New York, SUNY Press, 2007), 67.

<sup>25</sup> Tim Ingold, "Against Soundscape," in *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*, ed. Carlyle Agnus (Paris: Association Double-Entendre, 2007), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Nina Eidsheim, "Multisensory Investigation of Sound, Body, and Voice," in *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies*, ed. Michael Bull (London: Routledge, 2018), 35.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *Off Grammatology*, 85.

The ideological notion behind privileging hearing as auto-affective might be best understood through the work of Walter Ong. Ong's work is often widely cited as a phenomenology and psychology of sound. He defines a historical shift from the Christian into the modern era as one from a sound-based oral culture to a sight-based literate culture. What characterises his analysis of this shift is a hierarchical notion of the sonic versus the visual. Ong identifies literate cultures as those of the modern man who has lost track of its spiritual connection with the world, as a visually and distant culture which objectifies its environment. In opposition, oral cultures are those of the divine, the spiritual which are most closely to the expression of the soul and the origin of human existence. This produces sound as the privileged mode of experiencing a phenomenon: "sound is more real or existential than other sense objects, despite the fact that it is also more evanescent. Sound itself is related to present actuality rather than to past or future."<sup>1</sup>

What Ong's account of oral cultures shows is a clear dichotomy of the soul as opposed to the materiality of the body. The aural is classified as the physical, affective, and spherical, while visuality is classified as disembodied, intellectual, and objective. Jonathan Sterne refers to this act as a "Christian spirit/letter dualism."<sup>2</sup> Within this dichotomy, both the spirit and letter are paralleled with the dichotomy between the sonic and the visual. The letter is the written, visual, and mediated object which has to be captured in a "dead" sign system. The spirit is associated with sound, speaking, listening as the voice of the human leads directly to the soul. Speech is regarded to lie "behind" the sign of the mediated word; sound then becomes the medium of pure origin. Sterne refers to these presumptions as the *audiovisual litany*. With this term, he points to an "idealisation of hearing (and by extension, speech) as manifesting a kind of pure interiority."<sup>3</sup> He points out how these assumptions on the sonic and visual are based upon a Christian and positivist conception of the body. The visual is connected to the materiality and exterior of the body. Sound is associated with the soul, the internal and immaterial. This idealisation celebrates hearing and speaking as a "natural" mode of expression, as a static mode of perception through which the essence of the soul can be captured.

In relation to ASMR videos, Ong's account of the sonic as the "natural" or "real" mode of experience seems to be blurred. It is the mediation of a dead sound technology which produces the present experience of that of an oral culture. This presence is created by what Derrida refers to as "trace." Derrida builds upon Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory and argues that the

<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, The Terry Lectures (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 111.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

meaning of a word can only be perceived in relation to its counterpart. The human, alive, and immaterial *self* is defined by the non-human, dead, and material *other*. A word always partially carries the meaning of what it is not because that is what differentiates it. This means that when we think about the concept of the self, the idea of the other is *present* as a *trace*. This means that *presence* is produced by the differences within dichotomies.<sup>4</sup>

Recorded sound can similarly be argued to carry a trace as it is both “present” and “absent” at the same time. Derrida explains this with the concept of *différance*. To explain the idea of *différance*, Derrida builds on the example of the word “pharmakon.” The word means neither remedy nor poison, it is an “undecidable” which carries the trace of both.<sup>5</sup> One side of a dichotomy therefore, always carries a part of the meaning of the other. Derrida’s deconstruction of the *différance* between presence and absence raises the question to what extent we can trace the experience of intimacy through the mediation of sound. Intimacy, just like presence, depends on the gap between self and other, or the *possibility* of the other becoming part of the self. When presence can only be perceived through absence, the experience of presence is always mediated.<sup>6</sup> Derrida takes the example of speech to explain how presence is always dependent upon the other. When we speak, we have to capture our thought in words just as we have to do in writing. Speech, which is placed as the ideal form of producing presence, is then actually constructed by what is the absent material other (language). What this means is the being “present” in the world always exists in a mediated state from which we cannot escape: “But a meditation upon the trace should undoubtedly teach us that there is no origin, that is to say, simple origin; that the questions of origin carry with them a metaphysics of presence.”<sup>7</sup> The “origin” of intimacy does then not exist but is constructed through *différan*ces which are always mediated.

Experience presence is then rather the result of a constructed mode of listening than a “natural” mode of hearing. Sterne moves beyond the Christian sonic/visual hierarchy and instead approaches sound and hearing from a historical perspective to trace how our conceptions of hearing have changed over time. He explains that hearing, just as vision, is shaped over time in relation to the technologies that develop which then constitute different listening practices. Listening and our perception of sound is not always regarded as the same, that listening is a skill: Listening is a directed, learned activity: it is a definite cultural practice. Listening requires hearing

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *Off Grammatology*, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *Off Grammatology*, lxxi

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, *Speech and phenomenon*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, *Off Grammatology*, 74.



but is not simply reducible to hearing.”<sup>8</sup> Listening is, therefore, a practice that is embedded in other cultural practices, which makes it different from how it is assumed as being natural and primitive and guiding us to our soul. When speaking of presence in ASMR through sound, one should, therefore, be aware of falling into the same trap of assuming hearing as a “natural” state of experiencing presence. Instead, we should trace how this mode of listening is constructed. It is therefore that Derrida identifies hearing not as an act of primordality but of perceiving difference: “hearing oneself speak is not the irreducible openness in the inside; it is the eye and the world within speech.”<sup>9</sup>

Tracing the construction of a listening mode that is defined as presence in ASMR then depends upon how the difference between self and other is produced. According to Derrida differences are produced through the act of writing. In Western philosophy, writing has been regarded as having an inferior position as opposed to speech.<sup>10</sup> Speech is what is ultimately valued over writing because it is deemed to be the means that is closest to expressing the human soul. Writing, however, is regarded to merely capture a weak reflection as letter and symbols are never able to account for the versatility of thought. It degrades the soul that is alive and temporal into a dead object. Writing entails capturing thoughts into symbols onto the static pages of a book. When something is written down it comes to be regarded as absent, material and dead. However, according to Derrida, it is the technology of writing which produces the difference on which the experience of presence can be built. Without the act of writing, the differences that afford the experience of presence cannot be produced.

In the case of ASMR, the mode of listening as presence is not mediated through writing but through the act of sound recording as a form of writing. Analysing the production of presence through sound is therefore not connected to sound as containing ephemeral qualities but to study it from the perspective of sound reproduction technologies. Sterne argues that the development of modes of listening can be traced through studying sound reproduction technologies and the auditory cultures that have evolved around them: “But, to begin a theory and history of sound’s reproducibility, we do *not* need final, fundamental, or transhistorical answers to questions about the relations between hearing and seeing, between technological reproduction and sensory orientation, between original and copy, and between presence and absence in communication. We provide more robust answers to those questions by reconsidering them in the course of studying

<sup>8</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 86.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 18-20.

sound reproduction.”<sup>11</sup> Around these sound technologies, practices of listening and aesthetics have shaped, which then provide an auditory culture in which “presence” as an aesthetic feature can be experienced.

Studying the production of presence in ASMR then asks for a study of the sound technologies that this mode of listening is constructed with. Sound recordings have historically been associated with the ability to capture the soul of the human. As Sterne points out, the early nineteenth-century recordings of the voice were part of a discourse in which people were fascinated with preserving the body. Media such as photography, architecture, painting, and writing were seen as media through which the deceased could still live on. Sound recording was no different and was regarded to preserve the “inside” (soul) of the deceased.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it was unique in the sense that it created the illusion of being able to speak with the dead as one could still hear someone’s voice.

Within a contemporary context, sound reproduction technologies can still have the ability to produce this idea of a “present” soul. What Benjamin Piekut and Jason Stanyek show is that sound technologies can construct a “presence” of an artist. Piekut and Stanyek explore the interaction between humans and technology in their paper on posthumous performances. They point out how “sound recording-technologies have always been associated with “deadness.”<sup>13</sup> Sound recording technologies create the trace of “presence” through “preserving” the voice of an artist. While Piekut and Stanyek are mostly concerned with the linguistic “presence” of the voice, they do specifically address how the microphone plays a role. They mention, for instance, how Nat King Cole was placed in front of a Neumann U47 for the recording of his “unforgettable sessions,” and how his daughter Natalie later recorded a duet with her “father” in front of a Neumann U67 that was tailored to her voice.<sup>14</sup> By mentioning these microphones, they point towards the crucial role of the artist-microphone relationship in the construction of this “presence” of the posthumous artist.

ASMR videos, I argue, constitute a form of “presence” that is similar to the one that is discussed by Piekut and Stanyek. Sound recording is unique in that it is related to writing in producing an object but, at the same time, still containing a part of the subject. The recorded voice

<sup>11</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 298.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Stanyek & Benjamin Piekut, “Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 16. Stanyek and Piekut trace the concept of “deadness” back to the nineteenth century in which sound technologies were regarded as being able to preserve the voices of dead bodies, for humans to live on through sound. With this example, they point out that music relies on a material infrastructure of sound technologies that provide a “dead labour.”

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 27-30.

in ASMR videos blurs the distinction of soul and body, self and other. On the one hand, ASMR recordings produce a dead, mediated video. On the other, it seems to contain the lively essence of the performer who then becomes both present and absent at the same time. It is this “presence” of the artist which allows the listener to experience intimacy. Presence is produced by the difference between self and other which serves as a condition for intimacy to be experienced. However, ASMR videos differ from the sonic presences as discussed above as presence in ASMR is not constituted by the “preservation” of voice, but one where sound becomes tactile. Tracing the production of intimacy through sound, therefore, challenges us to (re)visit the means through which presence in sound recordings is produced. Only this time, it is not concerned with preserving the voice of the performer but something that is experienced as a “touch” of the performer.

What Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence teaches us is that we should be aware of the pitfall of privileging the sonic when trying to identify such a tactile presence in modern sound media. It is Dominic Pettman who seems to fall into this trap. In his book *Sonic Intimacy*, Pettman explores how listening and the voice can function as the means to establish intimate relationships between human and non-human entities. At first Pettman’s quest for a definition of listening and the voice beyond the human and the ear seems to offer a fruitful perspective for the construction of intimacy in ASMR. He aims to explore modes of hearing beyond the ear and aims to investigate our sonic interaction with non-human entities.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, he again seems to render an audiovisual litany in which sound is celebrated for its “natural” qualities. He urges us to move beyond ourselves as “abstract listening subjects” towards an original mode of listening and speaking in which we “turn inward but also listen to the wider world.”<sup>16</sup> After all, Pettman points out, “we ‘hear’ through the skin” in the womb of our mother before we can even see.<sup>17</sup> A turn to listening and voice would, therefore, allow us to explore our connection with animals, robots, and nature outside of the constructed category that is called “humanity.” Instead, he is mainly concerned with listening from a psychoanalytic and linguistic perspective. Sound is again placed in a primitive and unmarked position which is exactly what needs to be transgressed in theorising the production of sonic intimacy.

<sup>15</sup> Pettman takes listening and voice as a metaphor for restoring our connection to entities considered non-human such as animals, robots, and the environment. See Dominic Pettman, *Sonic Intimacy: Voice Species, Technics (or How to Listen to the World)* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 1.

Instead of tracing listening and the voice as linguistic properties, an analysis of sonic presence requires an investigation into how sound can construct a tactile experience. As Andersen, Waldron, Hudelson, and Schulze point out, sound in ASMR is what produces an experience of touch. Schulze claims that sonic intimacy should then be explored through the material qualities of sound.<sup>1819</sup> Sound's tactility is then examined through its ontology as material quality rather than its representational value. As Christopher Cox argues, this entails a "rigorous critique of representation" through a material approach to sound which "would altogether eliminate the dual planes of culture/nature, human/non-human, sign/world, text/matter."<sup>20</sup> The production of intimacy then becomes an inquiry into the materialist approaches to sound that does not read it in terms of meaning or representation of hermeneutic values but place such meaning in the context of the material qualities.<sup>21</sup> It is these material qualities of sound that produce that tactile experience through which we experience sonic intimacy.

On the one hand, I agree with Schulze that the sonic aesthetic in ASMR videos asks for a study of sound that moves beyond questions of representations. On the other, I think we should be cautious to assume sound's ontology to be a tactile phenomenon. Materialist accounts of sound as outlined by Cox often too readily assume the tactile material quality of sound as something which is "naturally" constructed. Such a materialist account can be found in Roland Barthes' "The Grain of the Voice," where he defines a difference between the elements of speech that are used to communicate and the elements that lie "in-between" those elements such as the texture of the voice. The "grain" is "the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs."<sup>22</sup> Listening to the "grain" is then listening to the "body" in the voice, to sounds ontological materiality. It is through this grain, the materiality of the sound of the voice, that sound is then assumed to become tactile.

As the ASMR aesthetic revolves more around the "grain" rather than the actual meaning of the words, it is tempting to read sound as having an innate quality of being tactile.

However, the problem with this idea of sound's materiality as disclosing the "body" is once again that it serves as an act of "naturalising" the experience of sound. Sound in the voice is once again

<sup>18</sup> Schulze, "Intruders Touching You," 226; Francois Jullien, *De l'intime*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Schulze, "Intruders Touching You," 235; David Pavón-Cuéllar, *Lacan, Discourse, Event: New Psychoanalytical Approaches to Textual Indeterminacy* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 661;

<sup>20</sup> Christoph Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism," *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (2011): 148.

<sup>21</sup> Will Straw, "Music and Material Culture," in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert and Richard Middleton (New York, Routledge, 2012), 228.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," trans. Steven Heath, *Image-Music-Text*, 1978, 188.

analysed as the means through which we perceive the “origin” of the body without the limitations of the visual and external signifying words that are sung. However, just because a sound in ASMR sounds *like* a tactile materiality does not mean that it actually *is* a tactile material.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore that I propose to study the grain in ASMR not as an ontology of sound but as a historically and culturally specific aesthetic. This means that I examine sound in ASMR not *as* a tactile material but rather *how* it has come to be experienced as a form of presence. Sound in ASMR should be studied as part of a culturally and historically specific sonic practices and interactions with sound technologies rather than a natural property of sound.<sup>24</sup>

## Sonic Touching

I argue that the production of tactile presence and intimacy in ASMR videos can be deconstructed and traced within a set of culturally and historically specific sonic practices called the Ear of the Other as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. These practices take shape through a process that I define as *sonic touching*. Building on Derrida and Nancy’s deconstruction of the relationship between touch and presence, I will show that scholars within the field of ASMR have rendered an oversimplified conception of what touch entails. Contrary to how tactility is mainly theorised in relation to presence, tactility in ASMR is not limited to the skin, the human, or the hand. This form of tactility is produced by an interaction between performer and machine. ASMR videos present us with the variety of different ways in which we can be touched: not the touch of the finger, but a whisper or a caress that we listen to. The concept of sonic touching aims to account for the production of tactile experiences in ASMR as it refers to tactility as a process of exploring differences instead of a static experience of the skin. Touch is then not a “natural” mode of perception of experiencing presence but a culturally constructed phenomenon that is produced in exploring the differences between self and other, through which intimacy is ultimately produced.

While scholars such as Waldron and Andersen have pointed out that sound’s tactility in ASMR produces presence, it has remained unclear how the experience of tactility is produced. When listening to an ASMR video, the performer feels proximate and seems to be able to touch the eardrum of the listener via the microphone and the loudspeakers of their headphones. The loudspeakers of our headphones seem to have the ability to transduce the vibrations of sound.

<sup>23</sup> Brian Kane, “Sound Studies without Auditory Culture: A Critique of the Ontological Turn”, *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 11.

<sup>24</sup> The term “auditory culture” is a common term within the field of sound studies. It refers to the development of a set of listening practices in relation to sound technologies. See Kane, “Sound studies without Auditory Culture,” 15.

The question that needs to be asked, however, is how this vibration of sound comes to be experienced as a finger touching the skin of the listener and how this experience seems to cross the difference between what is *real* and *mediated*. In other words, how does the “touch” of ASMR videos provide us with the feeling of being present?

Similarly to Husserl’s account of hearing, the affiliation of presence with touch comes from a Western philosophical tradition of privileging tactility as a mode of auto-affection. This tradition can even be traced back to Aristotle. For Aristotle, touch is the one sense that holds us together, we can live without the other senses, but without touch, we will die.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, touch is the only sense that is limited to being proximate. We can see or hear from a distance but touching is tied to being close to the other object or person. Touch, like hearing or seeing is also not tied to light or sound. It is not linked to a particular organ. We can “hear” or “see” through touch.<sup>26</sup> It is from these studies of touch as privileged from the other senses that Derrida identifies a “haptocentrism” in which touch is privileged from the other senses as a mode of auto-affection. Touch is then privileged as a mode of perception that draws on the idea of the indivisibility between self and other.

One of the most famous examples of touch as auto-affection is Merleau-Ponty’s reading of the touch of one’s own hand as a mode of making sense of oneself as a subject. Within the field of media studies, this conceptualisation serves as one of the most cited works on the phenomenology of our current media.<sup>27</sup> In an attempt to move beyond the dichotomy between body and mind, Merleau-Ponty aims to define the subject through lived experience. He argues that when a person touches their hand, one can experience oneself as a subject and object at the same time. The hand simultaneously touches and is being touched. It embodies a blurred dichotomy between being a touched object and a touching subject. By subverting this dichotomy, between object and subject, body and mind, Merleau-Ponty shows that our interaction with the world, and our way of making sense of ourselves as a subject in that world, is dependent upon how we differentiate touching from being touched.<sup>28</sup> This is what is called the primordially of touch.

The problem with Merleau-Ponty’s definition of touch as auto-affection, however, is that he renders a rather limited definition of what this touch entails. Merleau-Ponty’s touch is

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 47.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 140.

<sup>27</sup> See Cathryn Vasseleu, “Touch, Digital Communication and the Ticklish,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 4, no. 2 (1999): 153–162; Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 107; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 249.

specifically connected to the human “flesh.” Merleau-Ponty does not identify the “flesh” as necessarily tied to the human. He identifies the flesh as the same as that of the world, which is an essential part of being.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it is only the human flesh which can be self-reflexive and auto-affective:

“The flesh of the world is not self-sensing (*se sentir*) as is my flesh -- It is sensible and not sentient.”<sup>30</sup> It is therefore only the human flesh that is auto-affective. The “touch” that is experienced in ASMR is not one of the human flesh. It is one that is produced by sound technologies. Yet, the tactile experience in ASMR videos still allows for a perception of presence.

Understanding presence in ASMR then asks for a deconstruction of what defines “the touch.” It is Derrida who aims to tackle this question by, similarly to his metaphysics of presence, questioning the conditions under which touch as auto-affection is produced. The questions that Derrida asks to such accounts of touch are similar to those we can ask of about touch in ASMR. Can a touch only be experienced in proximity or also at a distance? Can a touch only be produced by the human finger? The answer is that Merleau-Ponty’s “touch” is only produced under specific conditions.<sup>31</sup> For Derrida, Nancy’s deconstruction of touch is what provides the basis for this answer. For Merleau-Ponty, the act of touch is something that can take place without a detour through the external world, an exception from all other modes of perceiving. It is the only means where the body can perceive itself from the inside. Nancy, however, problematises this notion by arguing that even when one touches its own skin, one would have to observe its own body from the outside rather than from the inside:

“But curiously -- and this comes up over and over again in the whole tradition--- everything always returns in interiority. The phenomenological analyses of “self- touching” always return to a primary interiority. Which is impossible. To begin with, I have to be in exteriority in order to touch myself. And what I touch remains on the outside. I am exposed to myself touching myself. And therefore—but this is the difficult point—the body is always outside, on the outside. It is from the outside. The body is always outside the intimacy [meaning inside] of the body itself. Why do we always speak of the intimacy of the body? The only veritable intimacy of the body is in silence. This is Bichat’s definition of health: health is life in the silence of the organs, when I don’t sense my stomach, my heart, or my viscera. There’s an intimacy there, but an intimacy that is merely not there, not sensible, it’s of the

<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 248.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, *On touching*, 1-4.

order of the mass. But when I sense my stomach or my heart, or my lung, I sense it, and if I sense it, it's from the outside."<sup>32</sup>

According to Nancy, the only means by which we can perceive our own body being touched is via becoming 'external' to one's own body. When we touch our left hand with our right hand, we do not experience this touch from the inside but because we have to become external to our own body. We are thus not naturally able to perceive ourselves as a subject but depend on the body as an external feature to define a subject as opposed to an object. In this sense, Nancy would speak of a "self-touching-you" or a "to feel oneself touching-you" rather than a self that is touching the self.<sup>33</sup> In touching the self, the boundary between oneself as both a subject and an object can never be overcome.

The reason that the body can never touch itself from the inside, Nancy argues, is because the "body" is not a fully enclosed mass of material. Nancy's definition of the body is fundamentally different from that of Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty defines the body as pure material. However, when the body would only be material, it would be mass without form. The body is thus always both mass and form at once. The flesh is not the means to understand the skin of an enclosed mass but as a place from which we constitute a difference between materiality and immateriality. Through the flesh, the body can be imagined as having an inside and an outside. This means that the body is always dual and the means through which we space. It is not a fully enclosed "mass" as opposed to open "space." The body *is* that open *space* from where we can perceive differences.<sup>34</sup>

The understanding of the body as *space* can be exemplified by Nancy's deconstruction of Christian thought. He is interested in how Christianity has brought us the means to understand the concept of the soul through the immanence of the body. Christianity is the ideological religion that is not only regarded as the opposite of atheism, but Christianity has also provided the means to leave religion. Deconstructivism *is*, according to Nancy, a Christian thing to do.<sup>35</sup> This is because Christianity has allowed for imagining the flesh as a separation or the contact between the body and the mind, the material, and the immaterial. As the body is imagined as the separation between body and soul, it gives birth to the concept of *spacing*.<sup>36</sup> Space is what defines us and the means

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham Univ Press, 2008), 129.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 38; Derrida, *On touching*, 278.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, 123.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 82.

<sup>36</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, 15; Jean-Luc. Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 63.



through which we can define the soul. The soul is spaceless, always and everywhere, and once the soul enters a body, it has gotten a place, a material entity. However, he argues, it is the body that has given birth to the concept of the soul in the first place. The body is the means through which we define the concept of space and through which the sense of touch can be constructed.

It is in the production *space* between the self and the other, between human and machine that touching takes place. This is the same *space* in which we ultimately experience sonic intimacy and which challenges us to uncover the differences under which the experience of touch and presence is produced. It is this perception of differences which Nancy then defines as touching: an exploration of the differences within the space of the body:

“That’s what the body is. This means we shouldn’t say, or we should try to stop saying, that being the body, the body itself, the being to itself of a body, the relation to self as sensing oneself outside, as an inside that feels it is outside—we should say not that this is the property of a subject or of an ego, but that is the “Subject.” And even “subject” is extremely fragile, since we should say, not that “I,” body, am touched and touch in turn—that I’m sensed—but rather try to say (and this is the whole difficulty) that “I” is a touch [...] The unity of a body, its singularity, is the unity of a touch, of all the touches (of all the touchings) of this body. And it’s this unity that can make a self, an identity. But it’s not a matter of a self, an identity or a subject as the interior of an exterior.”<sup>37</sup>

Tactile presence in ASMR is then not only constituted by the difference between inside and outside as outlined by Derrida in his “metaphysics of presence,” but also by how these differences are continuously explored through touching bodies. In ASMR videos, this space of the “body” that we touch in and produce the “I” with is a microphone. Nancy’s definition of the body is not limited to the human but extends to every entity that contains the difference between a mass and a form.

Producing a tactile presence means that we have to explore how we become external to our bodies. Derrida exemplifies this process through what he calls *technè of bodies* which is the central theme through which Nancy’s conception of touch distinguishes itself from others. Derrida defines this *technè* as a form of touching the body, which is by no means static or ahistorical. *Technè* refers to the Greek word for “art,” “craft,” or craftsmanship.” It is the act of producing, of using a body to create something new within every interaction. *Technè* is the opposite of *technique* as this refers to a static set of rules to interact with a material object. It is therefore that this *technè* should be analysed

<sup>37</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, 131-2.

as a process of exploring differences in which every encounter between two entities produces a different mode of interacting.<sup>38</sup> *Technè* is a recurring theme in Nancy's writing on the heart, specifically in one of his late works called "The Intruder." In this work, Nancy reflects on the process of becoming outside to the organ that is often to be the most intimate and "inward" organ of the body: the heart. The event that sparked this reflection was his heart transplant. It was only because of the surgical act of removing the heart from the body that Nancy was able to "touch" his heart.<sup>39</sup> If Nancy had had this surgery two decades earlier, the technique or mode of touching might have been different. We must therefore not speak of "the" technology, but rather trace the interaction with technology and the body as a process of writing. It is through these continuously evolving modes of touching the body that we become external that our historically specific conception of what a touch entails is shaped.

In the case of ASMR videos, it is not the hand of a surgeon which allows us to become external to our body and experience touch. Instead, it is about reading the act of recording sound as a mode of *touching*, as *sonic touching*. With this deconstruction of the touch as produced by the technique of *touching* the body, Nancy and Derrida have provided us with a means to deconstruct the tactile presence in ASMR videos. This touching is, in many ways, similar to writing. However, I prefer to use the term touching because it makes clear that the difference between self and other can never be transgressed but as what Karen Barad would define as an intra-active process through which these differences are developed.<sup>40</sup> We have learned that touch is never able to transgress the boundary between *real* and *mediated* as is argued by Waldron. Instead, it is about how these technologies afford us to touch upon the difference between these two. Nancy's conception of touch as exploring separation shows us that a touch historically and culturally produced through a set of techniques. It is not about the finger of the ASMRtist touching the skin of the listener via its technologies as an empty container, but rather about *touching* the bodies of these technologies and how it allows for the listener to become external to their bodies.

## Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, my discussion of the sonic and tactile definitions of presence have been concerned with the conditions under which this presence is produced. This production of tactile

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 273-5.

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "L'Intrus," trans. Susan Hanson, *CR: New Centennial Review* 3 (2002): 4.

<sup>40</sup> See Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (2003): 810-5.

presence takes place through the mechanism of the Ear of the Other and the process of sonic touching. Tracing the microphone as the ear of the other means that the body of the microphone should be studied as a material entity. In the following chapter, I will explore a theoretical framework from the field of musicology and Science and Technology studies on how the act of sonic touching with the body of the microphone is shaped. It is through the mediation of the microphone that I argue that the production of a tactile presence can be traced. This means that we have to trace the technè of bodies in relation to the microphone. Tactile presence in ASMR is not auto-affective but takes shape within a performative interplay between the technè of the microphone and its interaction with the body of the ASMRtist. From there, I will trace how the interaction with the microphone has shaped performative practices and aesthetic features that have laid the foundations for the tactile presence that ASMR videos produce today.

## Chapter 2: The Microphone's "Ear"

In chapter 1, I have argued that the experience of tactile presence in ASMR videos is a technologically mediated phenomenon that is culturally and historically specific. The construction of tactility in ASMR videos is not merely dependent upon the material qualities of sound but also an interaction between ASMRtist and the microphone. This microphone should then function as an *Ear of the Other*: an interface through which modes of sonic presence are produced.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I explore how we can account for the role of the microphone as such an Ear of the Other in mediating this tactile presence. Through a historical analysis of the early microphone and its applications within film and radio, avant-garde music, funk and rock 'n roll, I show that the microphone, like the Ear of the Other, has served as a device that channels the differences on which the experience on which presence is built. On the one hand, the microphone has functioned as an imitation of the human ear. On the other, it has always produced what I refer to as *the parasite*, meaning a by-product, an unwanted phenomenon. This parasite has served as the basis for the performative practices which have evolved around the microphone. As I will show in chapter 3, these performative practices serve as the basis for the mediation of tactile presence in ASMR videos today.

### Mediating with the Microphone

The role of the microphone as the Ear of the Other can be found in its mediation. However, analysing the role of the microphone in the mediation of tactile presence poses a couple of different challenges. The mediation of tactile presence is distributed over a variety of different entities that share an equal part. Moreover, such mediations are never stable but continuously evolve over time. Within this collection of entities, the role of the microphone can be found through the agency of its material qualities. It is around these material qualities that practices of interacting with the microphone are formed, which shape the basis for the mediation of tactile presence today. I argue that the agency of the microphone can be found in its early history.

The mediation of ASMR videos is one that produces the differences on which presence is built. As discussed in chapter 1, this is a process of *sonic touching* in which both the microphone and ASMRtist interact with each other. The concept which allows me to define such a process is

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, 1985, 35.

Richard Grusin's concept of "radical mediation" as it is able to account for both the intra-active nature of sonic touching as well as the link to tactile presence as epistemology.<sup>2</sup> With this concept, Grusin argues for mediation as a link between ontology and epistemology: "By now it should be clear that the concept of mediation, as developed in the history of Western thought, depends upon stable dichotomies like those between subject and object, representation and reality, or human and nonhuman, as a starting point. I contend, however, that such dichotomies are instead outcomes of mediation, not its source, and that we need therefore to start in the middle, with radical mediation."<sup>3</sup> Mediation is, therefore, a process which can be analysed as a process of interaction between material entities rather than from the perspective of representation.

Within ASMR, the mediation of sound is distributed over a variety of different entities. Sounds are, for instance, produced by the ASMRtist, specific objects. These are recorded with the microphone which is then listened to with headphones and a computer screen. As Georgina Born points out, a mediation of sound consists of an *assemblage* of different entities.<sup>4</sup> This entails not only people and objects but also other entities such as time and space.<sup>5</sup> What binds these different entities together is that they have their agency through their material qualities through which they shape mediation. The creation of a tactile presence is then distributed and generated by a variety of different entities that cooperate through their material agency.<sup>6</sup>

What this means is that the role of the microphone should be analysed as a part of a constantly evolving network of entities. It is Lisa Gitelman who is equally interested in uncovering the role of technology in cultural practices. She argues that we can analyse the role of technologies in such mediations not static object but as part of a set of interactions called protocols: "I define media as socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collection of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged

<sup>2</sup> Richard Grusin, "Radical Mediation," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2015): 126-8.

<sup>3</sup> Grusin's concept is similar to Barad's concept of intra-action Ibid, 142-3.

<sup>4</sup> The term "assemblage" that Born employs is translated from the term 'agencement' by Deleuze and Guattari who use the term to refer to a display or window full of objects. As Tim Ingold has pointed out, there is a difficulty in translating this term as it can be interpreted as both a collection of entities that is assembled from the outside as well as a collection of entities that form a coherent unity from within their own agency. I follow the term as defined by Ingold, which traces assemblage as unity instead of a collection of different independent parts. See Tim Ingold, "On Human Correspondence," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23, no. 1 (2017): 17-8; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988); Georgina Born, 'On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity', *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (2005): 8.

<sup>5</sup> Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity," *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (2005): 1.

<sup>6</sup> Born, "On Musical Mediation," 16; Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

with popular ontologies of representation.”<sup>7</sup> She refers to the habits that have evolved around the telephone as an example: “inventing, promoting, and using the first telephones involves lots of self-conscious attention to telephony. But today, people converse through the telephone without giving it a moment's thought. The technology and all of its supporting protocols (that you answer “Hello?” and that you pay the company, but also standards like touch-tones and twelve-volt lines) have become self-evident as the result of social processes, including the habits associated with other, related media.”<sup>8</sup>

From these protocols evolve cultural traditions that make certain interactions self-evident and stabilised. How these protocols are shaped evolves from both the affordances of the technology as well as the communities that engage with these affordances.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes a protocol evolves from how the designer made the device, sometimes from how the device was adopted by certain networks of practices and groups of people. These protocols of engaging with a device then stay around. Using media means that certain “inscriptions” are made which stay around a device within a specific time and culture. These interactions are both shaped by the technological affordances of the device as well as how it is appropriated within a specific network of people, objects and things. The function of the microphone is then not only determined by its technological characteristics but upon its interactions within a network of entities. It is through the interaction with the agency of the microphone that functions can evolve and stabilise around a device. In order to understand how these functions have evolved from this early history up to the practices in ASMR today, the interactions must be understood as developing protocols which are adopted and adjusted within specific networks. It is through the interaction with the technical qualities of a medium that such scripts develop and evolve.

What this means is that in order to trace the agency of the microphone itself within this network, we should trace its history. It is in the historical development of technology that the dynamics of a technology's agency can be found. Madeleine Akrich shows that technologies are embedded within social networks and function not as stable objects, but “plastic” bodies that come into being through interacting with the people that use them. Technologies then “may not only lead to new arrangements of people and things but may also generate and ‘naturalize’ new forms of orders of causality and, indeed, new forms of knowledge about the world.”<sup>10</sup> Akrich proposes

<sup>7</sup> Lisa. Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA ; MIT Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Carla J. Maier and Holger Schulze, “The Tacit Grooves of Sound Art: Aesthetic Artefacts as Analog Archives,” *SoundEffects—An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 7, no. 2 (2015): 23.

<sup>10</sup> Madeleine Akrich, “The De-Description of Technical Objects,” in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1992), 207.

to study a device in a different cultural or historical background where its use has not become self-evident yet or might be different than assumed. She develops the concept of *de-description* as an analytical tool to uncover these dynamics. On the one hand, this involves the *script* as an instruction of how the technology should be used according to the designer. On the other, this involves the de-description of the object to account for how that script is discarded and manipulated by its user.<sup>11</sup>

It is via Akrieh's discussion of the relationship between social networks and technology that the production of historical movements can be traced by analysing the interaction between the ASMRtist and microphones as a horizontal process. As I will show in the analysis of this chapter, it is through such a historical analysis of the microphone that we can find how the microphone functions as an Ear of the Other. The microphone, like the Ear of the Other, is a device that processes and transforms differences. The concept which allows me to trace the microphone as an Ear of the Other is *cultural techniques*. With this concept, German media theorist Bernhard Siegert expands Derrida's notion of *writing* to other (technological) "operative" chains such as counting, and making music but also entails objects such as "gadgets, artifacts, and infrastructures all the way to skills, procedures, [and] technologies."<sup>12</sup> It is through the material qualities of these interactions that dichotomies such as self/other, human/machine, presence/absence are shaped. One example, for instance, is the invention of the door. Siegert reads the door as a device that gave birth to the concepts of the *inside* and *outside* in our language.<sup>13</sup> With this example, Siegert shows how actions and technologies such as a door can give birth to concepts in our symbolic world like the "Ear of the Other." Such differences are constantly processed and transformed by the materials, objects, and technologies that we interact with.

In the case of the microphone, it is not a door but the material qualities of the microphone which serve as an "Ear" that can process and transform differences. Through the act of recording sound, a difference between presence and absence is channelled. The device not only *reproduces* differences but also transforms them. It is because of the material qualities of the microphone that differences between presence and absence are mediated in their own way. In such a way, the mediation of sound is a process which precedes Western dualisms rather than being part of discourse itself.<sup>14</sup> An analysis of the construction of tactile presence in ASMR then entails an

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 208-9.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Material World: An Interview with Bernhard Siegert," *Artforum Magazine*, Summer 2015, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201506/material-world-an-interview-with-bernhard-siegert-52281>.

<sup>13</sup> Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015): 192-4.

<sup>14</sup> Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (2003): 810.5.

analysis of how the material qualities of the microphone and its usage within different contexts produces these differences.

## The *Parasite* of the Microphone

In this chapter, I trace mediation of the microphone that comes into existence through the material qualities of the microphone. Within histories of sound technologies, the mediation of the microphone has often been ignored. As Carolyn Abbate points out, even among the great number of sound technologies and listening practices discussed in Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past*, not much attention has been paid to the role of the microphone.<sup>15</sup> Microphones, she argues, are the "quiet middlemen in larger technological systems that cry out for attention," because they were unable to "create visible inscriptions [...] they fell out of the spotlight, being unsuited for expository demonstrations of how sound becomes script."<sup>16</sup> Abbate dives deeper into the role of the microphone through an analysis of the history of the device itself. Tracing the microphone's development allows her to critique the rather deterministic investigations of sound scholars into how sound technologies have shaped modes of listening and attention.<sup>17</sup> She accuses the field of having focussed too much on devices that can be classified as technical "curiosities," hence, the unprivileged place of the microphone.<sup>18</sup> A device as mundane as the microphone forces an alternative perspective on our interaction with sound technologies. Abbate argues that such mundane devices have been guilty of "technological wizardry:" their mundaneness hides how they shape modes of listening and sensory perceptions.<sup>19</sup>

I argue that the agency of the microphone can be found in the production of a *parasite*. The differences that the microphone produce in imitating the human ear is something which I refer to as the *parasite*. The parasite, theorised by philosopher Michel Serres is:

"A microbe, an insidious infection that takes without giving and weakens without killing. The parasite is also a guest, who exchanges his talk, praise, and flattery for food. The parasite is noise as well, the static in a system or the interference in a channel. These seemingly dissimilar

<sup>15</sup> Abbate, "Sound Object Lessons," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 69, no. 3 (2016): 811-2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 794; Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 137-54; Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Abbate, "Sound Object Lessons," 794.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 799.



activities are, according to Michel Serres, not merely coincidentally expressed by the same word (in French). Rather, they are intrinsically related and, in fact, they have the same basic function in a system.”<sup>20</sup>

As identified by Serres, this parasite is always present in communication, it is the third element, the other, the machine to a body, the noise to a signal. The importance of the parasite to communication is often forgotten, just as absence is to presence, the other to self and the machine to define the category of human. The parasite is always present in the process of mediation which means that every writing system contains one. However, the production of this parasite is not one that emerges out of a static process. In every form of corresponding, there is a connection that consists of a parasite from which the signal, the message has to be separated. The parasite emerges out of a process of writing. Siegert exemplifies this by arguing that prior to every form of meaning, there is a separation between signal and noise. This separation takes place through writing: “Writing is filtering out signal from noise.”<sup>21</sup> These signals are like words, they come prior to their meaning.<sup>22</sup> This noise is what is the parasite, emerging out of an active process of separating sign from signal as signals are the physical materiality of signs. Every writing system then produces its own version of the parasite.

The microphone is often assumed to have been developed for the reproduction of sound, making it into a device that was modelled after the ideal to make sonic experiences into an object.<sup>23</sup> Sterne, for instance, discusses how the ear phonograph and successors such as the telephone, phonograph and microphone are modelled against the ear and its origin of seeking a device that could hear for the deaf and how the ear was used as a model to reproduce sound.<sup>24</sup> It is from there that a teleological line was traced in which the microphone from then on was used to support the singer or instrument through amplification and was then later used to generate sound in the 1950s. However, what Sterne did not take into account is that, before the 1920s, sound recording was still done with a horn in which they had to sing against a flexible membrane made out of mica or glass which transduced the vibrations onto a roll.<sup>25</sup> When tracing the de-scription of the

<sup>20</sup> Michel. Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, 1st University of Minnesota Press ed., Posthumanities ; 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), x.

<sup>21</sup> Siegert, *Cultural Techniques*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Cathy van Eck, *Between Air and Electricity: Microphones and Loudspeakers as Musical Instruments* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 61.

<sup>24</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 31-40.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 41.

microphone from before it was stabilised, it becomes clear that the microphone did not immediately serve the purpose of recording as outlined above. Instead, it was believed to provide the listener with the ability to reveal sounds of silent objects. It is therefore that my historical analysis starts before it was self-evident that the microphone was used in a certain way.

It is already from within its early history that the microphone proved to be a device that channels differences out of which protocols can evolve. One of the first versions of the microphone was invented by David Edward Hughes in 1878, who had discovered that carbon was sensitive to vibrations and came up with the idea to use it to record sound. His prototype consisted of a wooden box with a carbon membrane that was connected to copper wire to transduce the sonic vibrations. The wooden box served as a resonator on which a short glass tube was placed which was filled with tin and zinc. The ends of the glass tube were closed with two pieces of charcoal which were connected to the wires and a small, three-cell battery which led to a telephone in another room.<sup>26</sup> In that way, people could listen to sound being picked up by this device.

Hughes was not the only one who had developed a prototype of the microphone. Charles Wheatstone, for instance, had developed his version of a microphone in 1827 that contained two metal rods which were placed in the ear. However, what made Hughes' model stand out was that it actually did not function as the human ear. This device, as opposed to the ear, had a great sensitivity to sound and was indiscriminate of what it heard, meaning that it picked up on all sound equally.<sup>27</sup> Hughes demonstrated the ability of the microphone to "magnify" silence by using flies. The audience could then hear when flies touched the wood, making "silence" audible. Moreover, it picked up sounds from all kinds of directions.

What the early advent of the microphone shows is that the device has always occupied a double position. It is a device that was initially meant to be used for the transduction of sound but soon became performative device which served as an instrument to produce sound. These applications are the ones we see developing throughout time and be adopted by different networks which are still present in ASMR today. From the beginning, the microphone has been a device that hears sound in a different way than we do. It is indiscriminate and sensitive to the sound it hears and picks up sound from different directions than the ear does. In that way, the microphone did not listen to sound as the subjective human ear, but was able to be used as a performative instrument. Because it was different from the human ear, the device taught us that the perception of sound is perspectival.

<sup>26</sup> Abbate, "Sound Object Lessons," 808; Theodor Schwartze, *Telephon, Mikrophone un Radiophon: Recent Developments in Acoustical Science* (Vienna: A. Hartleben 1883), 156.

<sup>27</sup> Abbate, "Sound Object Lessons," 816.

The ability of the microphone to listen in a different way than the ear served on some wild imaginations on what the device would allow people to listen to. The microphone immediately functioned as a device that could manipulate sound and feed on the imagination of what could be heard. Hughes thus adopted the term “microphone” which was already introduced before any physical form of a “microphone” was produced. Narcissus Marsh, a clergyman, used the word “microphone” in his “Introductory Essay to the Doctrine of Sounds” to refer to some kind of “Magnifying Ear Instruments.” Marsh imagined these instruments to be the sonic equivalent of the microscope, as they were able to “manifest sounds that cannot otherwise be heard.”<sup>28</sup>

The microphone heard sound in a different way which could then serve as a performative tool. The microphone, with its different perspective on sound than the human ear, has shaped the imaginations on what we would be able to hear. The noise of the microphone can be used for what Abbate refers to as “tricks,” in which sounds become a substitute for another. The microphone was, for instance, imagined to enable to hear vibrations of the stars and the growth of trees and plants, or even as a lie-detector or a “Kosmograph” which was a giant microphone that would enable the human to hear entire soundscapes of large geographical areas at once.<sup>29</sup>

What the early history of the microphone shows is that, in imitating the human ear, it ultimately turned out to become something else. The microphone did not only transduce sound from one place to the other. It also amplified and perceived sound in an entirely different way. The parasite of the microphone has become appropriated for staging entire representations of spaces, sounds, interactions, and voices. The writing system of the microphone has created a division between the recorded and the virtual, lo-fi and hi-fi, mediated and unmediated, which can be performed with. It shows that microphone performance has been a technology in which definitions of the human ear are produced.<sup>30</sup> The microphone has therefore from the beginning been used as a creative tool that has shaped the idea of the “refined” ear that served as a representative of the aesthetic culture of the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Abbate, “Sound Object Lessons,” 807; Narcissus Marsch, “An Introductory Essay to the Doctrine of Sounds, Containing Some Proposals for the Improvement of Acousticks,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 14 (1684): 482.

<sup>29</sup> Abbate, “Sound Object Lessons,” 812; Charles John Pumptré, *The King’s College Lectures on Elocution* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and, Ci 1985), 456; George B. Waldron, “New Steps in Science,” *Illustrated American* 21 (June 1897): 756; Richard Batka, “Stimmen der Stille,” *Der Kunstwart* 21, no. 20 (July 1908): 73.

<sup>30</sup> Adrian Curtin, “Recalling the Theatre Phone,” in *Theatre, Performance, and Analogue Technology: Historical Interfaces and Medialities*, ed. K. Reilly (New York: Springer, 2013), 227; Philip Auslander, “Live and Technologically Mediated Performance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. Tracy C. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 107–8.

<sup>31</sup> Melissa van Drie, “Listening Through the Théâtrophone: Sonically Constructed Spaces and Embodied Listening in Late Nineteenth-Century French Theatre,” *Sound Effects* 5, no. 1 (2015): 77.

I will discuss the performative applications that developed from the parasite of the microphone through the four different functions as identified by Cathy van Eck: *reproducing*, *supporting*, *generating*, and *interacting*. Reproducing refers to recording sound and preserving it in the way that is as “true” to reality as possible. The second is *supporting*, which is the means by which microphones are employed to amplify certain sounds for people to hear. The third function is *generating*, which means creating something with the sound of the microphone which has not been produced before. The fourth one she identifies is *interaction*, which means the way in which the microphone is performed with in practice.<sup>32</sup> Together, they show the means through which the parasite of the microphone comes into being. I will discuss the four functions and the way in which they are highlighted within a specific network through a discussion of radio, theatre, funk, rock ‘n roll, and the avant-garde.

### ***Supporting the Voice***

It was during the end of the 1920s, with the uprise of radio, that the electric microphone became more widely used. However, the high sensitivity of the diaphragm means that the microphone is suited to supporting only specific “softer” kinds of voices. This protocol of using the microphone’s sensitivity in a performative way can already be traced back to the point in history when the microphone first became more popular to be used for the radio. It was during this time that the sensitivity of the microphone gave way to a whole new generation of singers and singing techniques. These were women and men whose softer voices that were considered to be more appropriate to the affordances of the microphone. Moreover, it allowed for a different group of singers to gain popularity as their vocal style was more suited to the device and the radio studios songs were recorded in. It was a time in which the microphone took a more prominent place and seemed to shape a new aesthetic that is similar to how we perceive ASMR today around a hundred years later.

During the early days of the microphone did not serve many more applications other than functioning as an “Ear Trumpet.” However, in between the 1920s and 30s, the device started to become stabilised, and the first larger protocols of engaging with the device started to develop. This had to do with the development of an electrical microphone. This way, the microphone was able to amplify the vibrations of sound and allow for sound to travel distances. The microphone could now be used to amplify the voice in the theatre or on the radio. The electric microphone was equipped with a diaphragm that was sensitive to the vibrations of the singer’s voice which

<sup>32</sup> Van Eck, *Between Air and Electricity*, 38-50.

allowed audiences to hear more the subtle differences. Moreover, they allowed for the voice of the singer to be amplified. The voice of the singer, therefore, did not have to reach across the entire theatre anymore which allowed them to sing in a different way.

The adoption of the electric microphone shows the rise of an aesthetic that we today might classify as similar aesthetics in ASMR videos. The electric microphone demanded a different mode of singing often classified as “crooning.” This singing technique is known for its “warm,” “soft” and “intimate” aesthetic in which the texture of the singer’s voice is audible. This has caused for an entirely different generation of singers to become known for their voice such as, for instance, Frank Sinatra. He started as a big band singer but gained fame through how the microphone was able to capture his distinctive voice which allowed for more attention towards the performer rather than the band that supported it.<sup>33</sup> Similarly to debates in ASMR today, the crooning aesthetic was also regarded as soothing and relaxing and moving along the boundaries of what is classified of what is regarded as intimate and sexual.

Nevertheless, these developments did not have an easy start. From the beginning of its introduction in the realm of popular music, the microphone was already regarded to challenge the connection between the artist and the audience. Simon Frith argues how crooning and the microphone decentralised music-making and performance from the singer itself. Placing a microphone in between the audience and performer was regarded as artificial and oppositional to the “natural” mode of singing of the performer. Moreover, it was argued that the microphone would create a distance between the listener and the audience as their music could now be heard from different locations. Crooning through the microphone was regarded to disconnect the singer from self-expression.<sup>34</sup> According to Frith, these debates on the electrical microphone are an example of three recurring dichotomies surrounding technology in the history of popular music: technology as opposed to nature, community, and art. The ideal singer embodied an “authentic” ideal of a direct connection with the audience and true self-expression. The microphone would, through its technological affordances, interfere with the skills of the singer and take away its own control over their voice and artistic ideal.<sup>35</sup>

It was no coincidence that these singers gained fame on the radio and not on stage. 1922 was the year of the “Radio Craze” in which companies, universities, hotels, and many others applied for radio licenses. Before, the radio was still regional and noncommercial. The market was

<sup>33</sup> Simon Frith, “Art versus Technology: The Strange Case of Popular Music,” *Media, Culture & Society* 8, no. 3 (1986): 270.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 272.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 264-5.

still largely demanded by the competitive phonograph companies. However, radio became more widely used once it was no longer dependent upon headphones when it used loudspeakers that produced enough volume to fill a room with sound.<sup>36</sup> However, what boosted the consumption of radio was the Great Depression that began in 1929 and caused a large decrease in record companies and an increase in radio consumption.<sup>37</sup> The vocal skills of singers such as Vaughn De Leath and the Song Pluggers suited a radio performance in a studio setting. Radio broadcastings depended upon singers who did not require a full band for support and the crooning singing style that fitted these sensitive microphones.

It is therefore no coincidence that the microphone initially gave way to a different group of singers. Allison McCracken discusses how, around the 1900s, singing was still regarded to be a masculine activity of the middle class which required “technical mastery and bodily control.”<sup>38</sup> However, amplification through the microphone required an entirely different set of skills. As Frith has pointed out, “the microphone allowed us to hear people in ways that normally implied intimacy—the whisper, the caress, the murmur,” which meant that a different style of singing needed to be adopted.<sup>39</sup> Singers’ voices did not have to reach across the entire theatre anymore. Instead, a more “conversational” mode of singing was preferred which did not come from the chest of the body but more from the head and throat which was also more intelligible and which as regarded as more intimate.<sup>40</sup>

Most singers who initially gained fame with crooning were singers that came from marginalised positions. Before the microphone, crooning was associated with the black Mammy stereotype: an asexual Black woman who worked as an enslaved nanny of a white family who crooned with her caring voice. On stage, “crooning Mammy” character was, often in blackface, performed in minstrel, vaudeville, and variety shows by female singers around the world.<sup>41</sup> After the introduction of the microphone, the singer that is known as the first person to have crooned on the radio was Vaughn de Leath. In 1921, she was hired by the first radio announcer Tommy Cowan to perform on the radio.<sup>42</sup> De Leath was specialised in dialect and character singing and performed a couple of different characters in her songs, among which the Mammy character.

<sup>36</sup> Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375326>, 89.

<sup>37</sup> Paula Lockheart, “A History of Early Microphone Singing, 1925–1939: American Mainstream Popular Singing at the Advent of Electronic Microphone Amplification,” *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 3 (2003): 374.

<sup>38</sup> McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 79.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 187.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 80.

Allison McCracken points out that radio historians often classify De Leath's characters as mammy types that were "asexual, crooning, and nurturing."<sup>43</sup> However, she argues that her characters were performed as much more sexual and produced a "sexualised Mammy figure" as a combination of the stereotypical Mammy and the Jezebel.<sup>44</sup>

However, the "soft singing" aesthetic of these artists was described in terms that we now associate with ASMR. Other male performers that gained more attention through crooning were the so-called "Song Pluggers."<sup>45</sup> These singers were young men who often performed romantic Tin Pan Alley songs which were supposed to appeal to female listeners.<sup>46</sup> These singers were, for instance, Art Gilham, Little Jack Little, Jack Smith, and Nick Lucas who were promoted by phonograph companies such as Victor, Columbia, and Brunswick. Initially, the singing style of these singers was described as *novel* and *peculiar*. Art Gillham, for instance, was promoted by Columbia as "the whispering pianist" and Jack Smith by Victor Records as "The Whispering Baritone."<sup>47</sup>

The conversational and intimate aesthetic was from there adopted to the radio. Singers became well-known for their soothing voice instead of the bands that they were singing for. From interviews with seniors who were born by 1921, Paula Lockheart argues that it was the radio that served as a comfortable and "intimate" experience for listeners. She draws on the example of president Roosevelt who used the radio for his "fireside chat" which had to provide the experience of a "one-to-one chat" in a room with the president.<sup>48</sup>

What this shows is that the microphone afforded an intimate aesthetic, an idea of a personal connection with a personality to evolve. The microphone did not only amplify the voice of the singer but also its focus on the singer as a separate entity and personality, just like ASMRtists still build their own personalities around their voices. What the advent of the electrical microphone shows is the development of a protocol in which a new signing technique has developed that is similar to the vocal techniques in ASMR today. While ASMR videos are mostly whispered, both styles have a focus on the texture of the voice. Moreover, both show a focus on the texture and personal characteristic of the performer and their voice.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>44</sup> The "Jezebel" can be defined as a stereotype of a Black woman with an appetite for sex or prostitute.

<sup>45</sup> McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 84.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 84-5.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>48</sup> Lockheart, "A History of Early Microphone Singing, 376.

## Reproducing Space

It is within the history of spatial recording that it becomes evident how recording space with the microphone involves a *staging* of a space rather than recording an actual space itself.<sup>49</sup> The perception of proximity can only be produced when a specific listening position is staged. Today, it is self-evident that there are binaural and stereo microphones. Stereo microphones record sound from two directions. Binaural microphones use dummy ears to reconstruct the exact location of a sound source in space. Before the advent of binaural and stereo microphones, early microphones did not pay attention to sound from specific directions like the human ear does. One microphone only picks up sound from one direction. These devices did not make a distinction between left and right which is needed to perceive space. Consequently, the history of spatial recording starts at the end of the 19th century with the development of another device, the théatrophône, which uses multiple microphone channels to produce a spatial effect. The first théatrophône was invented around 1881 by Clement Ader in Paris. This device consisted of a pair of headphones connected to a set of microphones which were distributed across the stage. Listeners could then tune into a performance without having to attend the “live” performance. They listened from a distance in their own home or the salon. Because there were multiple microphones, this was one of the first instances in which aural perception of space was created. By using multiple microphones, people were able to hear where performers were walking, which gave listeners the perception of spatiality.

The théatrophône was supposed to mimic the experience of being *present* at a live performance while being at a distance. This device was developed at the same time as the invention of the microphone. This is the era which Theberge, Kyle Devine, Tom Everett classify as the era of “spatialisation of thought and experience.”<sup>50</sup> There was an increasing interest in the perception of sound. The perception of sound provides information about where a source is located in space as if one is allowed to “see” through the ears when hearing sound sources move through space. The théatrophône was supposed to imitate this perception. “Seeing” was already enclosed in the etymology of the word. *Theatro* means “seeing place” while *phone* refers to voice, tone, sound, and speech. Ader’s device was invented to provide the listener with the illusion of being a present

<sup>49</sup> Paul Théberge, Kyle Devine, and Tom Everett, “Introduction: Living Stereo,” in *Living Stereo: Histories and Cultures of Multichannel Sound*, ed. Paul Théberge, Kyle Devine, and Tom Everett, 1 online resource vols (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 7.

<sup>50</sup> Théberge et al., “Introduction: Living Stereo, 15; original quote in David Gross, “Space, Time and Modern Culture,” *Telos* 50 (1981-2): 59.



spectator.<sup>51</sup> Through listening, the audience was supposed to imagine to be “present” at the performance.<sup>52</sup>

By imitating presence, the théatrophône served as a device which allowed for making a distinction between an “ideal” listening position and actual listening positions in the theatre. In theory, the théatrophône was supposed to mimic a presence at a live performance. In practice, the device worked differently. The listening experience with the théatrophône was different than in the actual theatre. In the theatre, there would be noise from the audience, lights, and other elements that would disturb the performance. The théatrophône provided a means of observing the theatre from a more focussed, refined ear that was free from all visual distractions.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the different microphones created a space that could never exist in the real world, a space in which the listener had such a perspective that one could never hear from a chair in the theatre.<sup>54</sup>

While the théatrophône was connected to a live performance, it came to be associated with death and the feminine. Women and the disabled were more often bound to the house. The théatrophône therefore marketed to women who could listen from the private sphere of their homes.<sup>55</sup> From there, people who did not take as much part in public life could listen to the performance. Proust was not healthy enough to attend to the “live” performances. He installed the device close to his bed so he could listen while being taken care of. The listening experience was one without any other distractions. In order to wear heavy headphones, one would have to remain in a static position.

Like the microphone, the théatrophône became used as a performative tool rather than a technology to reproduce “live” performance. Maurice Maeterlinck wanted to use it to give a performance of the inaudible in the theatre. Sacha Guitry wrote about the théatrophône as an acoustic microscope to make audible in the theatre what could not be heard with the bare ear.<sup>56</sup> The théatrophône offered a listening experience that was unique on its own. The device would first be listened to with a telephone and later with a pair of headphones which shaped a private listening experience. The telephone was the device of arousal, of being alone in a private “space.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Curtin “Recalling the Theatre Phone,” 216-7.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Van Drie, “Listening Through the Théatrophône,” 82.

<sup>54</sup> Théberge et al. “Introduction,” 8

<sup>55</sup> Curtin, “Recalling the Theatre Phone,” 221-2.

<sup>56</sup> Van Drie, “Listening Through the Théatrophône,” 87.

<sup>57</sup> D. Travers Scott, “Intimacy Threats and Intersubjective Users: Telephone Training Films, 1927-1962,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 489.

Gross 1981-2: 59, emphasis in original; cf. Kern 1983). in Theberge 15

Marcel Proust was one of the first people to purchase a théatrophône and wrote about the new insights on theatre it provided to him. He notes that through listening with the device, he mistook a section of music for another section of the piece<sup>58</sup> For him, listening with the théatrophône produced an entirely different experience of sound than listening in “real life.”

Spatial sound recording stabilised when it could be used in a performative way. After the théatrophône, it took until the late 1940s for spatial sound recording to become widely adopted. Spatial sound recording was further developed during the first world war. During the first world war, binaural sound recording was used to locate U-boats. Both the French and the English, as well as the Germans, were interested in detecting underwater noise of the U-boats of the opposing parties. Binaural sound detection was then tested on patrol boats. Nevertheless, it was not fully developed for U-boats before the war ended.<sup>59</sup> It was stereo sound recording which became most widely used which was due to the entertainment industry. It was adopted for the Disney production *Fantasia* which was the first film production that required stereo sound. By using different loudspeakers, it provided the viewers with a stereo surround sound experience in which sound seemed to come from different directions.

It is important to note that it was specifically stereo and not binaural sound recording which was adopted within cinema. It is up to this day that binaural and stereo sound recording compete with each other in which stereo remains the most popular. Binaural sound recording would have been just as appropriate for *Fantasia*'s surround sound as stereo sound recording. This was already developed during the 1930s in the Bell labs. In order to achieve the binaural effect, they developed a Dummy head called Oskar with two small microphones in its ears which were connected to a set of headphones. During the World Exhibition, visitors could listen to the device and were fascinated by hearing from another auditory perspective. Nevertheless, Oskar never became more than a spectacle. The main issue was that binaural was dependent upon headphones which were expensive and wearing them still carried the connotations of the first world war. This made it more difficult for headphones to be widely adopted.

However, the most important reason why binaural sound recording has been having difficulties to stabilise is due to a reason that is central to the argument of this entire chapter. Producing “presence” is not dependent upon creating a “true” or “realistic” listening position but one that is not true to reality at all.<sup>60</sup> Microphones are devices which allow for a differentiation

<sup>58</sup> Van Drie, “Listening Through the Théatrophône,” 86.

<sup>59</sup> Roland Wittje, *The Age of Electroacoustics: Transforming Science and Sound* (MIT Press, 2016), 89.

<sup>60</sup> Théberge et al. “Introduction: Living Stereo,” 27.

between human and artificial listening positions which make them great tools to *stage* non-existent spaces with. The idea of a point of audition became a highly demanded throughout a variety of musical practices which this thesis is not able to cover. However, what the history of spatial sound reproduction shows is that the protocol of staging space within ASMR videos can be traced back to a long tradition of engaging with the microphone's spatial difference in a performative way. This is the historically and culturally specific means through which presence is produced.

## Generating Signal

Besides recording and amplifying sound, the microphone is a device that generates sound on its own. While the microphone has always been used for the sounds it generates, it was around the 1960s that the musical potential of the microphone came to be fully explored. Composers that were part of the Avant-Garde movement such as John Cage and Pauline Oliveros, were interested in the potential of technology and electricity to produce sounds. As I will show in this section, these developments are connected to the invention of the Electret microphone which highlighted how microphones channel the difference between signal and noise. It is the noise in the sound of the microphone which then served as the basis for generating sounds with the microphone.

There are many ways in which the microphone can produce its own sounds. Every microphone has an amount of self-noise which is produced by an electric signal moving through its diaphragm. When a microphone is placed close to the loudspeaker, it can produce a howling sound because of the acoustic feedback. A sound may also be too loud for a diaphragm which causes a “distorted” sound. Furthermore, when a microphone is too sensitive, it can transform sound in such a way that it sounds completely different when listened to via a loudspeaker. Most sounds of the microphone are considered to be a “mistake” in recordings and performances as these are normally filtered out by a subjective ear. However, it were exactly these qualities that made the microphone into an object that could be used as a creative tool.

The ability of the microphone to produce generate its own sounds has been used as a creative tool right from the start. Sometimes when recording a sound, the microphone transformed it in such a way that it did not sound like the object anymore. In film, for example, sound technicians found out that the microphone's sound could be used as sound effects on screen. Tearing a piece of paper in front of the microphone could serve as a substitute for the sound of a building collapsing or the flame of a candle which could serve as fire.<sup>61</sup> For the film *Alexander*

<sup>61</sup> Abbate, “Sound Object Lessons,” 817.

*Nevsky*, Sergei Prokofiev let the fanfares play into the microphone directly. The loud brass sounds caused for a damaging of the takes which produced a scratching noise that was uncanny enough for what he wanted to portray on screen.<sup>62</sup> In such a way, the noise of the microphone served as a performative device.

However, the most explicit examples of artistic employments of the sound of the microphone developed around the 1960s and 1970s in both the fields of sound art and popular music. Avant-Garde composers and sound artists such as John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Pauline Oliveros had an interest in what defined the ontology of musical work and the distinction between what was considered to be a sound as opposed to noise. Furthermore, artists such as Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie and Sonic Youth used acoustic feedback and static and distorted sound in their music.<sup>63</sup> The microphone no longer mainly served as a device to reproduce sound but was intentionally used to contribute to the aesthetic value of a song or piece.

There are two developments which could have contributed to the adoption of these sonic elements. It was during the 60s and 70s that the microphone became even more ubiquitous in everyday life. Inventor James West and physicist Gerhard M. Sessler developed a highly sensitive and compact microphone which converted sound into electrical voltages without an external charger which made it lower in cost to produce. Because of its small size and low production costs, the microphone was quickly adopted in a variety of home and office devices such as telephones, tape recorders, camcorders and hearing aids. This then served as the perfect conditions for an inquiry into the new sounds that were then produced. A second explanation would be that the noises acoustic feedback of the microphone became much more controllable which turned it paradoxically into a creative tool.<sup>64</sup>

A recording of a microphone is never completely “silent” as every signal comes with an amount of noise. The microphone therefore serves as a device which constructs this “silence.” An example of a piece that reflects on the construction of a signal is Steve Reich’s *Pendulum Music*.<sup>65</sup> This work consists of a couple of loudspeakers with microphones hanging above them which move like a pendulum. When the microphone’s move around, sounds of acoustic feedback are produced, making the signal of the microphone’s audible.<sup>66</sup> What this piece shows is that microphones are never silent but always depend upon an amount of self-noise in order for sound

<sup>62</sup> Katz, *Capturing Sound*, 43.

<sup>63</sup> van Eck, *Between Air and Electricity*, 84.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

<sup>65</sup> Philippe LANGLOIS, “Pendulum Music Steve Reich 1968,” *YouTube* video, 9:28, May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fU6qDeJPT-w&t=355s>

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

to be transduced. What comes out of this transduction is a sound of noise which can serve as a musical source on its own.

In addition, microphones can provide objects with a new spectrum of sound through amplifying them. Pauline Oliveros' *Apple Box* shows an example of such an inquiry.<sup>67</sup> This work from 1965 is centred around the microphone's ability to transform the sounds of everyday objects. In this piece, Oliveros performs with two crates which were used to store apples. Attached to the crates are contact microphones. Together, the apple box and the microphone then serve as a sonic resonator. During the performance, Oliveros plays with multiple different metal and glass everyday objects such as cups and chains to produce sounds. The crates then serve as a resonator. In this piece, the microphone does not only function as an amplifier but as an instrument that sounds can be produced with.<sup>68</sup> The microphone turns the crate and the objects into new instruments to perform with, just like the microphone can turn everyday objects into instruments in ASMR videos.

Furthermore, the materials of the microphone itself which produce sound and have the ability to make different textures audible. In several of his works, John Cage employs the microphone to provide seemingly "silent" objects with a sound. One such a work is for instance, *Cartridge Music* in which musicians perform with cartridges from record players that are attached to a variety of objects.<sup>69</sup> In addition, Cage instructed his musicians to use contact microphones. This type of microphone does not transduce sound from air vibrations but from mechanical vibrations of materials. The sensitivity of the cartridges and microphones was convenient for producing noisy sounds. In such a way, a variety of objects such as cans, foil, and pipes could then be used as musical instruments through touching, scraping, and striking them in a variety of ways. In another work called *Child of Tree*, Cage uses plants as musical instruments with these microphones.<sup>70</sup> On tour with a dance company in Arizona, one of the dancers brought Cage a cactus which Cage then amplified with contact microphones.<sup>71</sup> Through their electric signal, they turned everyday objects into musical instruments.

<sup>67</sup> University of California Press, "The San Francisco Tape Music Center, video 10," *YouTube* video, 12:45, June 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exNwJnhWNd4&t=662s>.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 110-12.

<sup>69</sup> Helentonic, "Film by Helen Petts. Langham Research Centre Perform Cartridge Music by John Cage," *YouTube* video, 10:31, February 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaNHAswN2hU&t=208s>

<sup>70</sup> Northern Illinois University School of Music, "John Cage-Child of Tree," *YouTube* video, 8:28, January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=890EicRB4LA&t=129s>

<sup>71</sup> "Child of Tree," John Cage Org, accessed August 5, 2020, [https://johncage.org/pp/John-Cage-Work-Detail.cfm?work\\_ID=40](https://johncage.org/pp/John-Cage-Work-Detail.cfm?work_ID=40)

What these examples show us is that the interaction with the microphone's own noises to produce tactile presence in ASMR videos come from a long tradition of exploring its differentiation between sign and signal. The ability of the microphone to reproduce sounds has come with an ability to produce sounds on its own which has been adopted into performance practices. During the decade in which microphones became even more ubiquitous in daily life, protocols of interacting with the device have developed which make the microphone into a musical instrument. It constructs sounds of electric signals, objects and cactuses which construct an aesthetic of sound as a material quality.

### ***Interacting with the Body***

Besides its sonic characteristics, the microphone serves as an Ear of the Other through its external structure. Microphones come in different particular shapes which all have a different visual appeal. They all have their own "body" consisting of a cord, mesh, colour, stand, etc. which channel the difference between that of a human body versus that of a machine. This body can serve as an attribute to perform and interact with a human body. Older examples of such protocols of engaging with the microphone on stage can be found in Elvis Presley's and James Brown's performances with the microphone in which they use the microphone as a visual prop on stage. This shows how the body of the microphone has been serving as a performative device to produce modes of masculinity.

What the early introduction of the microphone shows, however, is that the production of sound requires the singer to perform differently than they were used to. When the microphone was first introduced on stage, it took some time for artists to get acquainted with the device. Performing with a tool on stage was regarded to be strange and unnatural as an operatic mode of singing was still common. In radio performance, singers were often intimidated by the device. Therefore, the microphone would then be covered with a lampshade in order to make the performer feel more at ease.<sup>72</sup> The microphone served as a tool to amplify the voice of the performer for the audience but at the same time seemed to draw a division between the performer on stage and the audience as they would not directly sing into the theatre.<sup>73</sup> In order to amplify their voice, they were now dependent upon a device which they had to sing into.

Nevertheless, it was exactly this "limiting" body of the microphone which turned out to serve as a tool channel performative techniques of sexuality. The microphone consisting of a head

<sup>72</sup> Lockheart, "A History of Early Microphone Singing," 371.

<sup>73</sup> Frith, "Art versus Technology," 265.

and stand were a great device to choreograph movement with. Young Elvis Presley used the microphone in many of his early live performances not only to sexualise his voice but also his body. The artist is known for displaying a large spectrum of different forms of masculinity, varying from a very masculine and rebel-like one during his rock 'n roll years (1958-60) all the way to his “camp” like non-heterosexual persona (1969-77).<sup>74</sup> During his early rock 'n roll years, Presley's sexual depiction embodied the American dream of success which was embodied by his skilled live performance and distinctive dance moves.<sup>75</sup> In his many live performances, his mic stand afforded for this distinctive performative style to emerge as it served as an extension of his body. The stand supports his body while moving around on his toes, continuously adjusting the length according to the amount of space he needs to move around (see fig. 2)<sup>76</sup> The microphone follows Presley's every movement, conversing with his body to perform a sexual persona.



Figure 2. Elvis Presley Performance "Hound Dog" (1956)

<sup>74</sup> Freya. Jarman-Ivens, in *Ob Boy!: Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya. Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 167-9.

<sup>75</sup> Mark Duffett, 'Elvis Presley and Susan Boyle: Bodies of Controversy', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no. 2 (2011): 175-6.

<sup>76</sup> ForbiddenInGermany4, "Elvis Presley - Hound Dog (1956) HD 0815007," *YouTube* video, 2:26, December 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMmljYkdr-w>.

The microphone has not only served to perform hegemonic white male forms of sexuality such as Presley's. It has been used to perform liminal male modes of sexuality as well. One prominent example of the microphone in the performance in masculinity is James Brown's engagement with the mic stand. James Brown was known for having special dance performances on stage in which the microphone was often used as a prop. During his "cape routine," for instance, Brown would perform that he was exhausted and collapse on stage while clenching his hands around the microphone (see fig. 3). Two other men would then come over and escort him off the stage while draping a cape over his shoulders just as during professional wrestling games. While walking off stage, he would stop and triple with his feet as he wants to go back to the microphone. He walks back and says: "please, please, please" again. The song is about him begging for his wife to stay with him. The microphone takes the role of him not being able to walk away from his wife. He lays on his knees with the mic stand horizontally over the stage.<sup>77</sup>



*Figure 3. James Brown Cape Routine*

Brown's engagement with the microphone shows us how the microphone in the tradition of funk music has been developed into a protocol of performing liminal modes of male sexuality. Funk music is to be regarded as evoking alternative modes of knowledge. LaMonda Horton-

<sup>77</sup> James Brown, "Please Please Please' at the TAMI Show (Live)," *YouTube* video, 6:16, March 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vruy2GRUsV8>.



Stallings is the one to remind us of the etymological origin of the word “funk” and points out that it originally referred to smell or odour, or a “force.” The word was originally most commonly used for a “strong odour.”<sup>78</sup> She adopts that etymological meaning of the word and reads funk as a subversive means of knowledge: “Funk produces alternative orders of knowledge about the body and imagination that originates in a sensorium predating empires of knowledge.”<sup>79</sup> The “empires of knowledge” Stallings refers to is the means through which Western philosophy has built on a Cartesian mind/body dualism on which traditional conceptions of sexuality and intimacy have been built. Funk, Stallings argues, produces knowledge and sexuality through a different means. One that is grounded in the material for which the separation between mind and body can never account because an immaterial mind could never imagine the kind of knowledge produced through the aesthetic of funk.<sup>80</sup> Funk music is therefore regarded as establishing a presence, a sense of being that cannot be captured in a mind/body dualism.<sup>81</sup>

Paying close attention to the microphone in on-stage performance exemplifies that the interaction with the external features of the microphone in ASMR videos stems from a protocol of staging the microphone as a performative body. The role of the microphone in the on-stage performances of James Brown and Elvis Presley shows how the adoption of the “body” of the microphone on stage has afforded a mode of performing alternative modes of male sexuality. This device does not only contribute through its sonic qualities but also through its external body and form. Designed to imitate the sensitive ear of a listener, the microphone again distinguishes itself through the qualities that distinguish it from the human ear. In combination with the musical genres of rock ‘n roll and funk, they served as a new protocol to enhance the position of the individual performer. These protocols have been adopted by other performers as well. Later on, the mic tricks by James Brown were adopted by Prince, who used it to perform different kinds of sexuality.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced the development of the performative practices of the microphone through the production of the parasite. Through a historical analysis of the development of the

<sup>78</sup> LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7.

<sup>81</sup> Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 204-5.

microphone, I have shown that the microphone functions like an Ear of the Other; a device that channels differences. Being designed to serve as a human ear, the microphone shaped what I have called a parasite. It is within this parasite, a noise to a signal, a machine to a body, an other to a self, which has served as the grounds through which the performative practices of the microphone have evolved within the discourses of the theatre, funk, rock 'n roll, the avant-garde scene, and radio. Microphones have been developed as an imitation of a human ear but instead have taught us new ways of imagining and performing with sound. Through producing differences, an other to a self, an outside to an inside, a mechanic ear to a human one, the microphone affords artists with the power to stage listening positions, sounds, voices and personas.

In chapter three, I will trace the protocol of engaging with the microphone as an Ear of the Other is still present in the practice of producing ASMR videos today. It is the parasite which serves as a tool to mediate the experience of tactile presence and intimacy within ASMR. The ASMRtist engages with the differences produced by the microphone which I have defined as sonic touching. As I will show, this process takes place within the process of *sonic touching* between the microphone and the ASMRtist. Ultimately, this will exemplify how the experience of intimacy in ASMR videos is produced through the mediation of differences of the microphone.

### Chapter 3: Touching with the Microphone

In chapter one, I have argued that the act of *sonic touching* takes place through an interaction with the *technè of bodies* of the microphone. This body consists of the materiality of the microphone. In chapter two, I have traced that the *technè* of the microphone has produced differences. The microphone is a device that produces a *parasite* around which performative practices are shaped. In this chapter, I show that the production of the parasite serves as a base for tactile presence through the writing system of the microphone. About a hundred years since the invention of the first microphones, the digital writing system of the microphone re-mediate the differences and transforms the protocols of the microphone. I argue that the *parasite* of the writing system of the Blue Yeti microphone that I use affords this tactile presence.<sup>1</sup> As I will show, tactile presence is produced by the elements in a sound recording, which one would usually not prefer. This shows that the ear of the other determines the experience of presence. This ear is defined by the machine of the microphone and produces the mode of presence that we experience.

My analysis of the interaction with the microphone consists of three different elements. The first element is an affordance analysis of one of the most common microphones that are used for ASMR purposes today: the Blue Yeti (see fig. 4) Reading the affordances of the microphone provides information on the design of the device and how the device can be used.<sup>2</sup> This provides an idea of the boundaries that one can perform with. The second part of this analysis consists of an interview with Luuk, who goes under the name *ObviouslyASMR*. He is one of the most famous ASMRtists in the Dutch ASMR community. His channel has over 386.000 subscribers and over 286k subscribers have watched his videos. My interview with him functions both as a resource to draw on his experience for making my own video as well as his perspective on his relationship with the ASMR community, ideas on his videos, and his connection with his viewers which draws a context for my own video.

<sup>1</sup> Michel. Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, 1st University of Minnesota Press ed., Posthumanities ; 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), x ; Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015): 192-4.

<sup>2</sup> Carla J. Maier and Holger Schulze, "The Tacit Grooves of Sound Art: Aesthetic Artefacts as Analog Archives," *SoundEffects—An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 7, no. 2 (2015): 23.



Figure 4. Blue Yeti Microphone

As the third part of my analysis, I have produced an ASMR video myself as a way to reflect upon the choices and actions that have to be made in order to perform a role-play video with the scenario of going to the hairdresser.<sup>3</sup> I decided to make an ASMR role-play video as it would allow me to reflect upon how it feels to try to make a direct connection with an audience. Role-play ASMR videos are one of the most popular types of videos among ASMR content. In making this video, I reflect upon what is preferred when listening to an ASMR video and how it must be prepared. Engaging with the device allows me to explore how the ASMR aesthetic is shaped by the combination of performer, microphone, and the sound that it produces. By reflecting upon my choices and experiences with ASMR, I demonstrate how the Ear of the Other decides the mode of presence that I create. The “listener” is created through a connection of the space that I exist in, the choices that I make, its skin is formed through the technology, and the body of the listener is created through its software, my recording space, and my interaction with the

<sup>3</sup> Zora van Harten, “Hairdresser ASMR Thesis Project,” *YouTube* video, 23:22, August 2020, <https://youtu.be/AGJuuWvD64>

microphone. I can imagine the listener and anticipate the ear of the other and create my, as Derrida has formulated it, *Otobiography*.

These three parts of my analysis are intertwined and applied in a non-chronological order. I discuss them according to the four types of functions of the microphone and the differences they produce, as discussed in chapter 2: voice, space, signal, and body. This allows for a reflection on the differences created by the functions of the microphone and how they are involved in the process of sonic touching. Combining these modes of analysis provides me with a framework of the constellation in which an ASMR video is produced and how a current mode of *tactile presence* comes into being. As will become clear, it is the Blue Yeti's digital writing system that affords for a tactile presence of ASMR videos to emerge.

## Writing with the Blue Yeti

The microphone which I used for creating the tactile presence in my ASMR video is the Blue Yeti microphone. Luuk, the Dutch ASMRtist who I interviewed uses a Blue Yeti to record his videos as well. He uses the Blue Yeti because he then already owned it for a couple of years as he had wanted to make record YouTube videos for a longer period of time. What makes this microphone produce tactile presence is the way in which its writing system fits within our current digital infrastructures. Its versatile applications and combined analogue and digital motherboard allow for the four different functions, as discussed in chapter 2, to intersect in one device. This means that the Blue Yeti affords four types of differences. It is within a "touching" upon the boundary between its differences that tactile presence is produced.

The current digital infrastructure is marked by a hypermobility of information. Georgina Born notes how digital sound technologies and the internet have accelerated the distribution of music over space and time. The digital codes through which music is mediated allows it to become hypermobile. This gives birth to new modes of collaborative authorship online, which, at the same time, can take place on an individual level from behind a computer.<sup>4</sup> It is an era in which the computer sometimes contributes just as much, or even more, to the performance as the performer itself.<sup>5</sup> A microphone within this network should therefore to easily intertwine with the online networks, which the Blue Yeti does.

<sup>4</sup> Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity," *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (2005): 25.

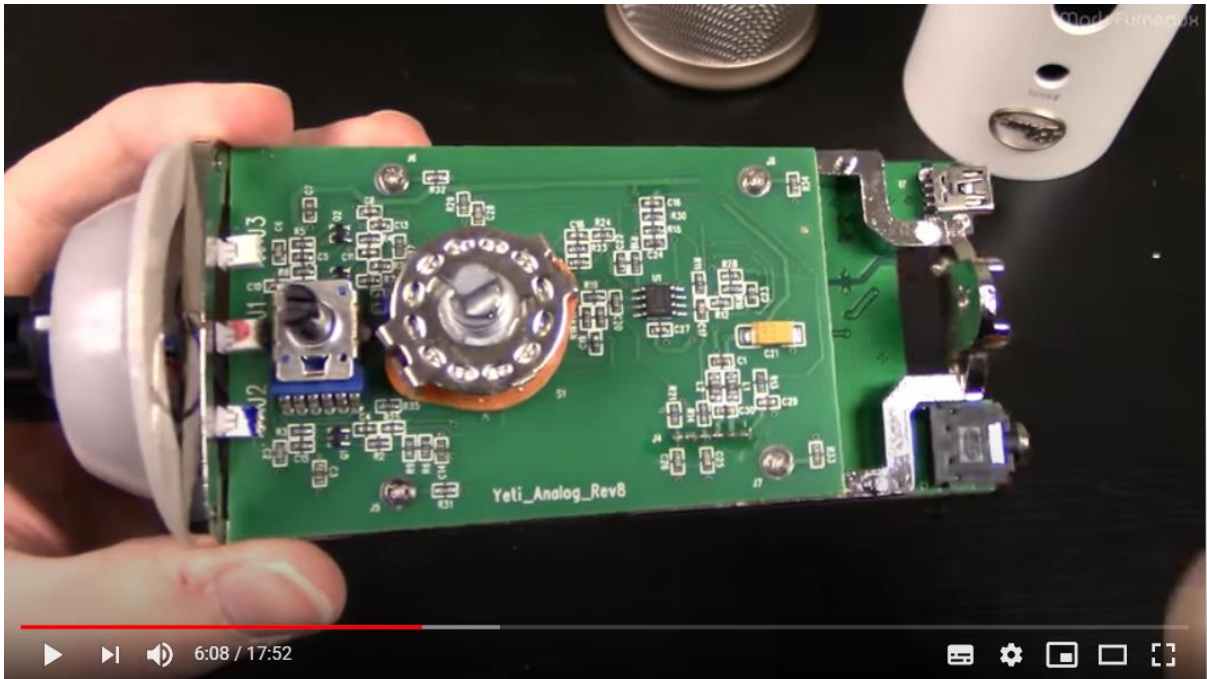
<sup>5</sup> Born, "On Musical Mediation," 30-2.

It was exactly when ASMR became more popular that the Blue Yeti was first developed. The first Blue Yeti was developed in 2009 and was highly rated on its excellent quality and versatility among critics. With a price of about 120 euros, the Blue Yeti is one of the most affordable microphones in comparison to other ones of the same class. The company Blue microphones was founded in 1995. From the beginning, the company developed a low-cost condenser microphone which was designed for domestic use. Their first microphone, the snowball, was a great success amongst amateur musicians. The Blue Yeti is now the most commonly used microphones for ASMR videos but is also used for a variety of other online applications such as podcasts, streaming, and YouTube videos. The Blue Yeti easily intertwines with the online networks through its affordability and versatile applications. It can record from different directions, and its sensitivity can be easily adjusted.

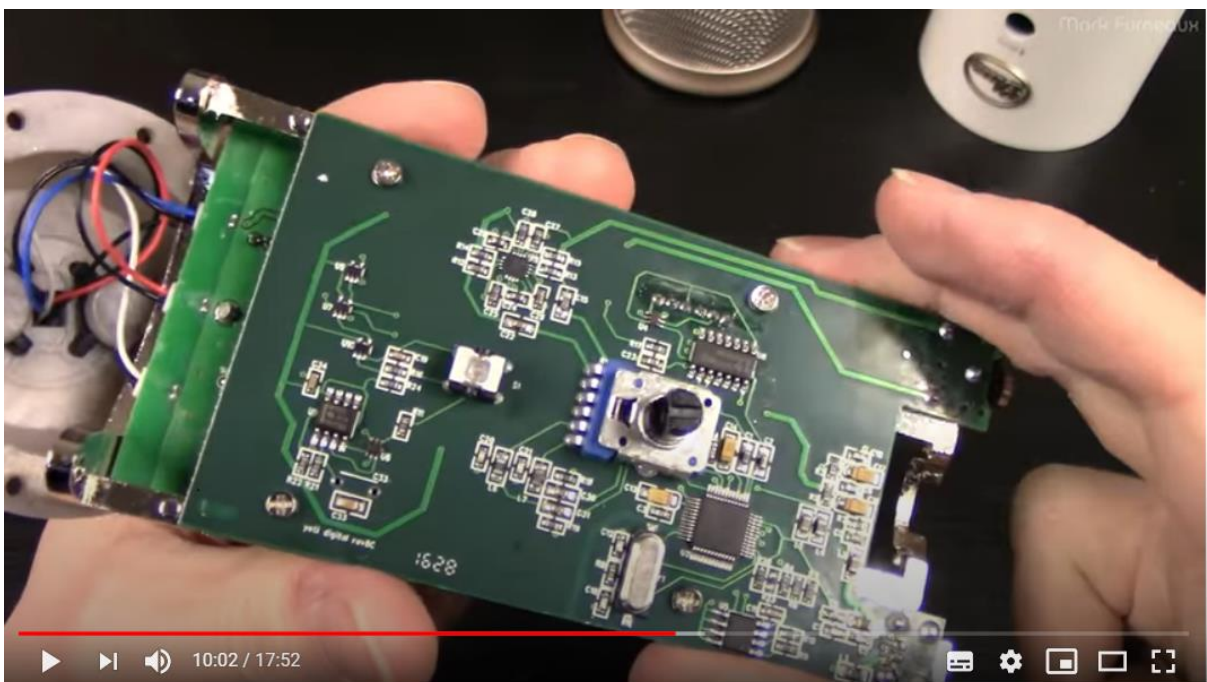
Furthermore, its audio interface allows for it to communicate with other devices easily. The Blue Yeti is a microphone that consists of a combined analogue and digital motherboard (see fig 5 and 6). It is a device that Eliot Bates would refer to as a *hybrid* that is constituted by how digital code interacts with the analogue through its interface. These hybrids constitute “hybrid workflows, techniques, sensoriums, kinesthetic practices, and instruments simultaneously analogue and digital.”<sup>6</sup> Instruments, Bates argues, then become “indirect interfaces of DAWs and instrumentalists their indirect users.”<sup>7</sup> What this means in practice is that the Blue Yeti is able to connect and communicate with a variety of other devices. With its USB connection, it can be directly connected to the computer without an audio interface. The audio interface can usually be used to provide power to a couple of different devices and is the device that converts the analogue signal of sound into a digital signal to record the sound on the computer. The Blue-Yeti has a built-in audio interface meaning that it is a hybrid analogue and digital device which converts the analogue signal into a digital one by itself. This makes the microphone easy to use for consumers who do not own a separate audio interface. The built-in audio interface makes it simple to connect the microphone to my phone and record the video as it amplifies and converts the analogue signal from its small diaphragms.

<sup>6</sup> Eliot Bates, *Digital Tradition: Arrangement and Labour in Istanbul's Recording Studio Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 273.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 277.



*Figure 5. Blue Yeti Analogue board*



*Figure 6. Blue Yeti Digital board*

As I will show in this analysis, the parasite on which tactile presence is built stems from its digital writing system. Now again, the Blue Yeti serves as an imitation of the human ear. Only this time, it does not only produce this ear through an analogue signal but through a digital one. It is through this digital signal that a new parasite is produced. What makes the Blue Yeti very suitable

for the production of tactile presence and ASMR purposes is the means through which it embodies four different modes of producing the parasite. The Blue Yeti microphone is a device that is able to record from different directions. It uses a condenser microphone to record subtle sounds, is able to amplify the voice, and has a form that is suitable to fit on a screen. This parasite comes into existence through four different distinctions: voice/texture, static/movement, signal/noise, body/machine. It is the production of these distinctions through the writing system of the microphone that I will show that the production of tactile presence takes place. It allows me to explore the different boundaries through which presence is produced.

### **Voice/Texture**

What my interaction with the microphone in producing my ASMR video shows is that the microphone, again serves as an Ear of the Other through which I can *touch* upon differences. Like in radio, the microphone serves as a performative tool that mediates presence through the interaction of its writing system with the ASMRtist. Similar to its role in radio, the microphone again highlights a texture in sound in recording my voice. ASMR videos seem to embody a twenty-first-century embodiment of the characters performed in twentieth-century radio plays. Still, it is mainly women who become popular through role-play videos.<sup>8</sup> They use the microphone to become “present” to their listeners who are now not only listening but watching on YouTube via a computer screen. The presence of the ASMRtist voices has to sound as proximate as possible. The microphone serves as an instrument to achieve this aesthetic through touching on the boundary between matter and form: the boundary form where a voice becomes nothing else than noise. It is in such a way that the protocol is performed through the writing system of a microphone.

It is within the type of the role-play video the production “tactile presence” in ASMR becomes most evident. Role-play videos are currently one of the most popular among the different types of ASMR videos. The role-play video was the first type of video that gained more views on Luuk’s channel. When he started his ASMR YouTube channel on his own, it was his doctor-role play video for which he suddenly received a couple of thousand views instead of a hundred. In this particular type, ASMRtists perform a certain role, which is often based on everyday scenarios such as going to the doctor, dentist, or massage therapist. Within these videos, the ASMRtist is

<sup>8</sup> Now You’ve Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community’, *Television & New Media* 16, nr. 8 (december 2015): 693.



often dressed up as one of such characters and act like they are a real doctor. Sometimes they also perform in front of a green screen to heighten the realistic setting of the video.

This personal experience is enforced by the platform of YouTube. Like radio, as exemplified in chapter 2, it is now YouTube which provides the microphone with a place to highlight personality and the voice of the ASMRtist. For Luuk, this double-sided experience is reflected in YouTube where most ASMR videos are consumed in relation to other platforms:

“Maybe its more my peronal feeling, but I think that [on YouTube] there is more emphasis on comments than on Instagram. On Instagram, one really has to click to see the comments and on YouTube that happens automatically which is, of course, a really small difference, but I have the idea that that already pushes one into reading the comments. [...] On Instagram TV, I think, there is no possibility to stop the video by clicking on it so it will automatically move on to the next video. Furthermore, the videos are shorter, so it will feel like you are looking at a set of videos and on YouTube, you can really stick with one person.”<sup>9</sup>

YouTube then provides his fans with an experience that can be both private and public at the same time. It both allows them to connect with Luuk as an online persona as well as with each other. Together, this provides the experience of having an interaction with an individual experience with one ASMRtist while watching together.

What characterises the role-play video is that they mimic personal attention. As Luuk points out, this is constructed through movement and sound rather than symbolic qualities of the video:

“For this doctor role-play video, I studied for three days on the terms and the outcomes of certain medical conditions. This turned out to be not necessary at all as that is not why people watch.”<sup>10</sup>

Instead, building from his own experience, Luuk argues that role-play videos are popular because they encourage you to listen with focus:

<sup>9</sup> All quotations from my interview are translated by me: “Misschien is het meer mijn gevoel maar ik denk dat bij YouTube meer de nadruk ligt op comments dan op Instagram. Bij Instagram moet je echt op een knop klikken om de comments te zien en bij Youtube gaat dat automatisch. Dat is natuurlijk maar een heel klein verschil maar ik heb het idee dat dat al een kleine duw geeft in die richting. Volgens mij kun je op Instagram tv de video niet stopzetten, dan gaat hij automatisch door naar de volgende video. De videos zijn volgens mij ook korter dus dan gaat het echt om een rij van videos kijken. Op YouTube kun je meer echt bij één persoon blijven.”

<sup>10</sup> “Voor die dokter role-play video heb ik drie dagen zitten studeren voor de termen en wat eruit zou komen bij bepaalde aandoeningen. Uiteindelijk bleek dat helemaal niet nodig was want dat is niet waar mensen voor kijken.”

“Especially the cranial nerve exam is a type of video which is very popular. I don’t know exactly why. In the beginning, I did not feel that much for it, but I think I just did not watch the right video because now I find it really relaxing to look at those sorts of videos. I think it is especially relaxing as it feels as if someone gives you personal attention and is investigating you. You have to focus on tasks which you have to follow through which you can focus on simple things which make you feel relaxed.”<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, the individual qualities of the ASMRtist are highlighted, which is not necessarily valued for their actions or what they say but in what makes them unique. Luuk explains that this lies in the sounds which the ASMRtist makes unconsciously:

“For me, it really matters who [makes the ASMR] video as everyone has a slightly different manner of speaking or acting. Some speak at a faster pace, others at a slower one, which could provide more ASMR. It is the things that they do unconsciously that make them unique.”<sup>12</sup>

In making my own ASMR video, I aimed to reflect upon the means through which the microphone highlights my individual voice and movements, and with it, the elements that make role-play videos popular. My video is supposed to provide the experience of receiving personal attention, and physical touch for viewers that are all distributed over a variety of different locations. They have to experience a hair colouring treatment that is supposed to make them feel relaxed and alone with me. At the same time, watching this video is something that is publicly accessed and a shared experience. My interaction must therefore account for an “ear” that is both the one of one specific listener and the ear of every potential other listener at the same time. This means that my microphone has to highlight my voice as a personal characteristic in order to produce an individual experience.

The means through which the Blue Yeti serves to highlight the subtle movements and texture in my voice can be found in how it is programmed. The Blue Yeti is programmed to highlight a specific range of frequencies. This range of frequencies (around 3kHz up to 6 kHz) is

<sup>11</sup> “Mensen houden van rollenspellen en dan vooral cranial nerve exams. Ik denk dat het vooral heel ontspannend voelt om te voelen alsof iemand aandacht heeft voor jou persoonlijk en jou een beetje aan het onderzoeken is enzo, dat je op taken moet focussen zoals dat ze een lampje op je schijnen en dat je die moet volgen of dat je gewoon simpele dingen doet waardoor je zelf tot rust komt.”

<sup>12</sup> “Voor mij maakt het heel erg uit wie het doet want iedere persoon heeft net iets andere manier van spreken of dingen doen. Sommigen zijn heel langzaam of rustig en sommigen kunnen sneller spreken Het zijn de dingen die echt eigen zijn van die mensen. Hetgeen wat ze niet bewust doen maar wat van hun eigen is. Dat is wat een ASMRtist uniek maakt.”

referred to by sound technicians as the “presence band.” By highlighting the “presence band,” the microphone provides an imitation of the human ear. This is because human hearing, which typically lies in between 20Hz-20kHz, is specifically sensitive to the range of frequencies that the voices of people operate in. Lower frequencies are then perceived more clearly. When a microphone is able to highlight the frequencies within this band, the listener is able to detect more texture in sound, causing it to sound “fatter” and full of texture.

However, the construction of tactile presence in my ASMR video is not constructed by the way in which the Blue Yeti highlights the “presence band” but rather its ability to amplify the texture/noise within this band with a digital signal processor. The construction of presence in my ASMR video is shaped by amplifying the signal of the microphone as much as possible. Contrary to microphones without a built-in audio interface, the Blue Yeti has a knob to adjust the gain of the microphone. When the gain of the microphone is turned up, the amplitude of the microphone signal is increased. This means that when vibrations are picked up by the diaphragm, the signal is amplified. The gain interferes with the circuit through which the electrical signal is circulated. The gain is applied to the analogue signal. The gain in the microphone is built in to bring the analogue audio signal up to the line-level before it is converted into a digital signal. The mic level signal is usually around -60dBu and -40 dBu. 0 dBu = 0.775 volts. The line-level is +4 dBu signal. Because the mic level is often less, it should be brought up to line level. USB microphones convert from analogue to digital and therefore have a built-in preamplifier that should have adjustable gain to bring the signal up to line level. This provides the ASMRtist to adjust the gain without any extra equipment and determine the amount of texture they would like to hear in the recording.

When I produce my ASMR video, it is my goal to turn the gain up as high as possible right before the point where my voice becomes mere noise. With the Blue Yeti being sensitive, it is able to pick up on subtle sounds that are known for producing the ASMR effect. When I listen to myself via my earphones, which are plugged into the device, I hear the crackling of my shirt. I keep on making sounds to hear myself as to how I am perceived by the signal circuit of the microphone. Listening to myself via the microphone makes me able to experience my own presence in relation to another “ear.” Every movement of my mouth produces a sound of which the texture is strange and comforting at the same time. When I turn up the gain too high, my voice and movements become all noise. When it is too low, it is only the sound of my voice. What produces tactile presence, however, is touching upon the boundary between these two. I have to touch upon the Yeti’s parasite of creating texture through its sensitivity.

## Signal/Noise

In the production of ASMR videos, we see how this high sensitivity of the microphone serves as a device to provide objects with sound and produce sounds of their own. Building on protocols developed within the avant-garde scene, as discussed in chapter two, the microphone produces a difference between signal and noise. In ASMR, this ability is used to explore the boundary between a clear and distorted signal. It is in *touching* upon this boundary that the tactility of sound and materials of the objects in the video are produced. Presence is then created through the self-noise of the microphone in the sound recording. In ASMR, the microphone is often stroked or brushed to produce the sound of an object on screen. In addition, the microphone amplifies sounds in such a way that they sound very different from how they would sound without it. This can then produce the sound of skin being touched. ASMRtists sometimes use the microphone itself to generate sounds for the video, often by stroking the microphone with a brush, finger, or other objects. These sounds then produce the experience of contact.

As the Blue Yeti uses a condenser microphone, it highlights the central position of subtle sounds in ASMR videos. Generally, there are two mechanisms for microphones. The older “dynamic” microphone mechanism work through a mechanism of a large membrane that connects to a voice coil. When the sound waves hit the membrane, the voice coil moves around the magnet. The condenser microphone was later invented in 1916 by Edward Christopher Wentle in the Bell laboratories. This type registers sound waves through a membrane (or diaphragm) that records sound by touching an electronically charged backplate. Compared to the older “dynamic” mechanism, the condenser allows for a listening experience that is claimed much closer to the actual sound of the recorded sound source. The sensitive membrane is able to pick up more subtle sounds and deals well with higher and lower frequencies, such as those of the voice and whispers. This characteristic is what makes the condenser microphone more suited for ASMR videos in which such subtle sounds are preferred.

It is the way in which the Blue Yeti records sound, which requires me as an ASMRtist to develop a technique of recording sound. As Wheatstone’s microphone did in 1878, my microphone points towards the selectivity of my own hearing. Only this time, the amplification circuit of the microphone allows me to determine the sensitivity by myself which, as mentioned before, must be as high as possible. It is when I connect my microphone to my computer that I immediately hear sounds that I did not notice before. I hear my clock ticking. I hear the church bell a couple of streets away, my neighbours build a garden shed and are chatting in their gardens. My environment suddenly sounds much louder than with my bare ears. For my ASMR videos, however, it is important that the environmental sounds of the video remain “quiet.” The “quiet”

aesthetic which I have to stage for my video, can probably be best described as “comfort noise.” In sound recording for filmmaking and television productions, for instance, “comfort noise” means the “silence” that is recorded at a location when there is no dialogue that is spoken.<sup>13</sup> Without the noise of the environment, there is no presence to be experienced in the recording as it would sound uncomfortably silent. This is also added to audio equipment such as the telephone. When calling via the telephone, often a “comfort” noise is added which also produces the idea of presence, meaning that there is someone else present at the other end of the line.

In order to produce this comfort noise, it is important that the volume and noisiness of the sound sources are as equally as possible. Luuk often edits the volume peaks out of his videos:

“Sometimes there is a scooter or motorcycle. I do not know specifically what it is. It will race by and cause a thunderous sound. That is the kind of sound that I would cut out of the video because that would be a sound that is not relaxing for me. Cars, for example, are usually not too loud. In my last couple of videos there was a lot of wind noise and noise of airplanes, which is difficult to cut out. [...] I only hear this when the wind is in a certain direction. Now you do not hear them but with the storms over the past time, they came over every three minutes so I could not record without hearing it.”<sup>14</sup>

Luuk’s way of dealing with the cars and planes flying by shows how ASMR shapes its own definition of what is considered to be “noise.” What would normally be considered to be a signal in the sound recording (a peak in volume) is now what needs to be avoided and considered to be noise. Instead, noisy sounds that would normally function as “background” noise in a recording are the main focus. This means that for my ASMR video, I had to record during the night in which there were only a few cars driving by outside. I closed all the windows, made sure that my flatmates were asleep, and took down my clock. It is in such a way that the microphone could produce a “present” aesthetic a small difference in volume and noisiness between the different sound sources.

<sup>13</sup> Tomlinson Holman, *Sound for Digital Video* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 161-2.

<sup>14</sup> “Hier heb je soms eens scooter of een brommer. Ik weet niet precies wat het is. Die komt dan voorbij scheuren en dat het echt een enorm hard geluid. Dat soort geluiden zou ik eruit knippen want dat zou niet ontspannend zijn voor mij. Autos zijn meestal niet te hard. In de laatste paar videos zat veel windgeluid en geluid van vliegtuigen. Dat is heel moeilijk eruit te knippen. [...] Ik hoor dit alleen als de wind een bepaalde richting in staat dus nu hoor je ze niet maar bij de stormen afgelopen tijd toen kwamen ze dus steeds hierover heel vliegen en toen kon ik dus eigenlijk niet opnemen zonder dat je het hoorde.”

What becomes clear in ASMR, the protocol of using the microphone's self-noise is still present. Like a twenty-first century John Cage, Luuk explores how the sensitivity of the microphone which allowed for using objects as musical instruments in his first video:

“I don't have a clear plan beforehand. Usually, I improvise a lot. It's not really planned what I do in my videos.” [...] “For my first video, I walked around the house all day. Back then, I still lived with my mother. I just walked around tapping on things, grabbing objects, and figure out what kind of sounds I can make with them. At that time, I was really into ASMR sounds instead of whispering or something, so the ASMR style that I wanted to make was just with sounds. I was looking around for objects that made comforting sounds, and eventually, I found a fake cactus, and then, yes, I stroked the cactus' fake needles, which produced a sound I liked.”<sup>15</sup>

By stroking the skin of his fingers along with the needles of this fake cactus, Luuk found out that he wanted to incorporate that sound in his video. The ability of Blue Yeti to produce new sounds turned his home decoration into a device to create a tactile presence with.

It is in producing my own ASMR video that the microphone inspires me in a similar way. While I listen to the microphone, I try out some objects that I find around the house that sound satisfying. The first is the wrapper of my microphone's USB cable that still lies on my table. When I touch the plastic, it makes small crackling sounds. The second one is the sound of opening and closing my mouth and moving my tongue around. I take a makeup brush and brush it over my skin and the wired mesh of my Blue Yeti. My microphone sheds new light on objects that I encounter almost every day. It is, however, not until I find an old bottle of shampoo that I decide to try out some sounds for a “hairdresser” video. The sounds of towels, scissors, shampoo, and combs can all be made around the head, which makes it a perfect scenario for a role-play video.

The sound that distinguishes itself from the other ones is the sound of touch. During the beginning of my video, I pretend to inspect and touch the hair of my imaginary viewer. Rubbing my fingers together, however, does not produce the sound experience of a finger rubbing the scalp

<sup>15</sup> “Ik heb van tevoren niet echt een plan. Meestal improviseer ik ook veel en het is dus niet heel erg gepland wat ik in mijn video's doe. [...] Voor mijn eerste video heb ik de hele dag in het huis rondgelopen. Toen woonde ik nog bij mijn moeder en ben ik een beetje op dingen gaan tikken, dingen vastgepakt en gekeken wat voor geluiden ik ermee kon maken. Op dat moment was ik heel erg fan van ASMR met geluiden in plaats van fluisteren of iets dergelijks. Ik was dus heel erg op zoek naar objecten in het huis die fijne geluiden maakten en uiteindelijk kwam ik bij een nep cactus. Toen ik de cactus een beetje over de nepnaalden strookte vond ik dat wel een prettig geluid.”

or skin or the ear. With the Blue Yeti, this is solved by using a different object. Like a foley artist, I use my makeup brush to brush along the mesh of the microphone, which produces much more texture, mimicking my touch on someone's head. It is here that the mesh of the microphone becomes a substitute for a "skin" and the brush for the touch of a finger. It is about different textures rubbing together, producing a noisier sound that would normally be unwanted. Together, the difference between the texture of the microphone and the brush creates a noise that is perceived as a "touch." The sonic experience in ASMR videos is produced by an ambiguous boundary between the material of the microphone and its processual engagement with other objects. It is through exploring the differences in the interaction between textures that tactile experiences are produced.

The other "touch" of sound in my eardrum is produced not with a brush but with the distortion of the microphone. By whispering very close *into* the microphone, it is where I experience the "touch" of sound on my eardrums. I test the microphone and keep on whispering to filter out the specific moment where this touch is experienced. I find out that my own voice feels most proximate to myself when my whisper is *almost* distorted. The Blue Yeti filters out the vibrations from its membrane that move beyond a certain range. When the signal becomes too loud, it is cut out of the recording by the Digital Signal Processor. This is referred to as "clipping." My experience of proximity within my ear is constructed when the volume of the signal becomes too "hot" and "touches" the threshold of the clipping range. The experience of "touch" is therefore produced by moving along the boundary between where sound is still considered to be a signal and where it becomes registered as noise by the digital signal processor of the microphone.

Building on the tradition of using the sound of the microphone as a musical tool, the sensitivity of the Blue Yeti functions as an inspiration for the script of my video and the production of tactile sounds. It is within exploring the differences between signal and noise that the microphone comes to serve as a tool to produce the tactile aesthetic of the ASMR video.

The sensitivity of the Blue Yeti can be easily adjusted and provides me as an ASMRtist with the ability to produce sounds of objects and the sound of "touch." This shows how tactile presence comes out of the noise of the microphone.

## **Static/Movement**

Producing my own ASMR video has taught me that the production of presence through spatial recording depends upon the boundary between static and movement rather than recording space realistically. Within the construction of movement in ASMR videos, the tradition of constructing space is still continued. Again, there are both binaural and stereo recordings in which binaural is

argued to produce a much more realistic listening experience. Nevertheless, it has become more common to record ASMR videos in stereo as fewer videos are recorded with binaural microphones. In ASMR, the staging of space via the microphone in which performers have to produce a clear difference between the left and the right ear is more important than where it is exactly located in space.

What makes the Blue Yeti microphone suitable for the construction of movement, is its ability to record with different polar patterns. A “polar pattern” refers to the ability of the microphone to record a certain amount of decibels on a 360-degree scale. Generally, four types of polar patterns can be distinguished: omnidirectional, cardioid, stereo, and bidirectional (see fig. 7). A cardioid microphone picks up sounds from only one direction and is able to focus on one sound source clearly. Its polar pattern looks like a heart-like shape and allows for less leakage of sound into other microphones when you are moving the sound source closer to it. The omnidirectional microphone picks up an even amount of decibels over the entire 360-degree scale. Bidirectional focuses on two directions, which is useful for interviews. Stereo can also record in-between both sides of the microphone. The Blue Yeti is able to record within all four polar patterns as it contains three separate diaphragms. Two diaphragms at the front are on top of each other, facing diagonally towards different directions (see fig. 8) Behind these two is one other diaphragm facing towards the other side of the microphone. A switch on the back of the microphone then determines which diaphragms transduce signals.

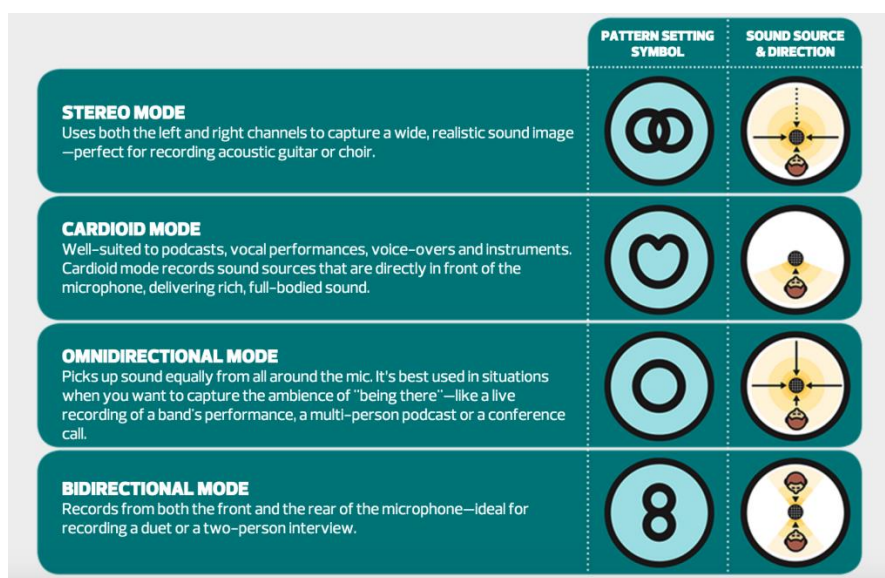


Figure 7. Blue Yeti Polar Patterns





*Figure 8. Blue Yeti Diaphragms*

While the omnidirectional mode of the Blue Yeti can record sound from all angles, they are not exactly replicating how the human hears from all directions. The human ear is designed to highlight the frequency of the human voice and to give information about the spatial location of a sound source. The dummy ears are supposed to replicate the way the human ear breaks sound waves. In doing so, the technology mimics the number of decibels heard on a 360-degree scale by the human ear resulting in an “ear” polar pattern. The most common binaural microphones are the Neumann- KU series (see fig. 9). The way Neumann KU-100 describes its binaural microphones, which was launched in the late nineties, shows a clear aim to simulate “presence” of the listener: “[w]hen using the KU-100 dummy head, the binaural stereo experience moves the listener into the scene of liveness, in contrast to other space-related recording techniques, where the acoustic event is moved to the listener.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Georg Neumann GmbH, *The Dummy Head - Theory and Practice* (Heilbronn/Neckar: Georg Neumann & Co, 2010), 4.



Figure 9. Neumann KU-100

In contrast to older models, the KU-100 builds on data and algorithms as well to produce the realistic listening experience of being “present.” The current shape of the “universal” dummy head is based on data collected about the size and shape of the human ears and head. This data is collected by using a measurement system called Head-Related Transfer Function (HTRF). This system describes how the sound wave is altered by the head, ears, and torso before it reaches the inner ear. While the HRTF differs per individual, algorithms are used to calculate a general average out of large amounts of data stored in the SOFA file format, which is created by the Audio Engineering Society.<sup>17</sup> These HRTF storage systems are used to alter the output of headphones to adjust sound to the shape of the body of the listener; for example, the ratio between the size of the neck and ears. Many sound device manufacturers use HTRF data to compensate for how our bodies receive sound from their devices, also referred to as *diffuse field equalisation*. The HRTF data are incorporated in a Digital Signal Processor (DSP) that is built into them. These processors consist of algorithms that are programmed to filter out distortions and enforce the replication of the average human ear. The Neumann KU-100 came with such a DSP to increase the dynamic range (range of decibels to be recorded) and to improve diffuse field equalisation. The algorithms used in the DSP are oriented towards “problems” of sound recording and compensate for how space should sound.

<sup>17</sup> Durand R. Begault and Leonard J. Trejo, 3-D Sound for Virtual Reality and Multimedia (Moffet Field: NASA Ames Research Center, 2000), 121.

The incorporation of HTRF and DSP shows a shift in sound technology towards anticipating and simulating human hearing through digital writing systems, arguably providing a more practical microphone than théatrophônes or Oskar from the 1930s. Nevertheless, binaural sound recording is still not as common as stereo recording. On the one hand, this might be due to the difference in the expense and sound quality of both microphones. The least expensive binaural microphone costs at least \$400, which is significantly more expensive than the Blue Yeti (\$120). On the other, this might be due to the fact that realistic spatial recording is not important for presence to be experienced.

The construction of movement in my role-play video exemplifies this second argument. When I speak into the microphone or make a sound with an object, I already move close to the microphone. This means that it is less relevant where the sound source is located in space. The listener feels present as my movements sound as if they are *in* their ear, the place where sound waves are normally not broken by the shape of the ear anymore. Instead, what is important is that the listener can distinguish differences between sounds on both sides. Luuk always records within stereo mode with his Blue Yeti. It is not about the idea of hearing in either one ear or the other or the way we hear on one ear or the other. It is rather the movement and alternation between the two that produces the ASMR effect than the actual ability to hear “like” a human being. The idea of space is produced by the difference between two ears rather than *how* it moves between two ears. Alternating between them is what produced an experience that allows for a focus on different sides of the head. I don't have to hear a sound coming from a place in my room. I rather want to produce a difference between the two, which the Blue Yeti allows me to do. The production of movement within ASMR videos is rather determined by the difference between left and right than the construction of a realistic space. This difference is the point where one is able to explore the distinction between being static and moving, producing presence through space.

What solidifies this argument further is that the ASMRtists who do use binaural microphones in their videos often use it for other purposes than spatial recording. The most commonly used brand by ASMRtist is the 3Dio microphone, which is much more affordable than the Neumann KU-100 (around \$400) (see fig. 10). On their website, founder Jeffrey Anderson states that the 3Dio was born when he removed the “head” of his prototype speakers. The diffraction of removing what usually simulated the head and torso is now compensated by implementing HRTF data through a Digital Signal Processor. As opposed to the Neumann microphone, this new design opened up for a range of possibilities that fit the common functionality of the microphones in ASMR and other practices in which the sounds are used to create a specific presence. For instance, the head of the microphone can be replaced by a box

which can be connected to a stick and a camera, so that the device can be held while walking and filming and recording role-play videos. This compact new form allows for new uses, for example, “field recording,” “filmmaking with spatial relevance and acoustic immersion,” “YouTube videos,” and “hobbyists looking to record in full 360-degree audio,” as suggested on 3Dio’s website.<sup>18</sup>



*Figure 10. 3Dio Free Space Binaural Microphone*

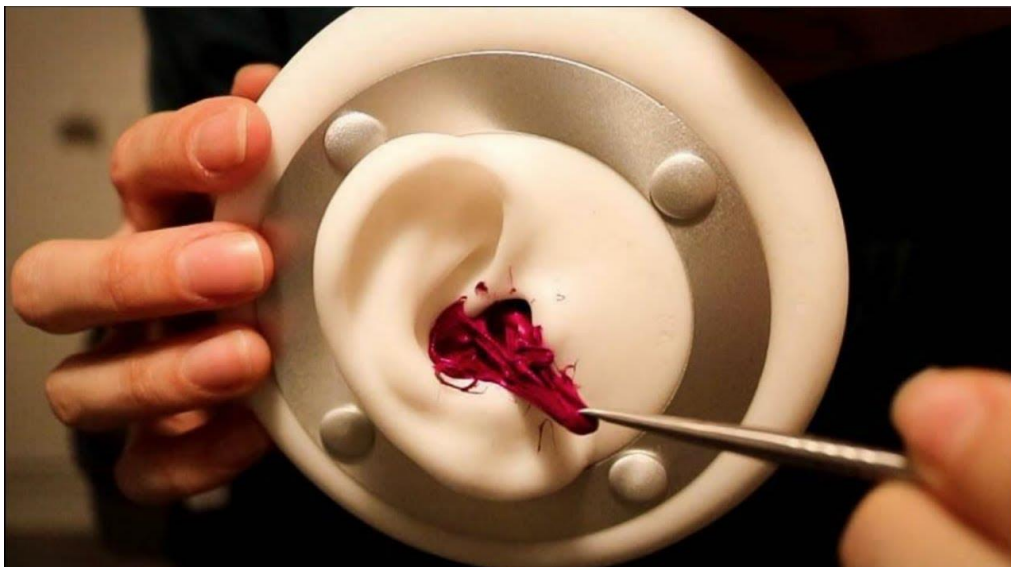
The way in which ASMRtist use the 3Dio shows that it is used for different purposes than its “spatial relevance.” One example of these artistic applications is TingleBelle ASMR, who tests the 3Dio microphone in one of her videos. In this video, she unpacks the new 3Dio microphone that she recently purchased. With the 3Dio microphone, this can be produced with the foam of the prosthetic ears. When her fingers touch the foam, it feels like she is touching my ear. She is cupping the ear with her hands, and for me as a listener, it feels as if my head is underwater, and her hands touch my ears. Again, this shows how the material of the microphone is used to produce a sense of “touch.” She is tapping the material in the middle of the ears and the packaging and uses the microphone itself to record ASMR triggers rather than that she records sounds *of*

<sup>18</sup> Free Space Binaural Microphone,” 3Dio, accessed May 30, 2019, <https://3diosound.com/products/free-space-binaural-microphone>.

triggers.<sup>19</sup> The difference of the microphone lies in how it differs from the ear of the human. Binaural microphones then serve as an artistic tool for producing sound and images rather than their “immersive” qualities.

TingleBelle and many other ASMRtists seem not to use the 3Dio not for its binaural recording, but for its visual qualities. The ears of the microphone function as a visual stimulator to imagine how the ears of a microphone are touched and how hands are being moved around it. The most extreme example of this is an “ear cleaning” video in which the ear is cleaned through the microphone (see fig. 11).<sup>20</sup> The microphone is designed as an ultimate way to mimic the human ears through DSP’s and the shape, but it is exactly the features through which the microphone differs from the human ear that the tactile experience is produced. This shows that the 3Dio is used with a different purpose than its ear polar pattern.

Within ASMR videos, the production of presence through the spatiality of sound is determined by the difference between left and right rather than the exact location of sound in space. It is at the boundary between the ASMRtist being and static that “tactile presence” emerges. The incorporation of digital data and algorithms has enabled relatively affordable and amateur-friendly binaural microphones to emerge. Nevertheless, the roles of binaural and stereo microphones are similar to their relationship within history. Binaural serves for artistic purposes rather than a realistic construction of space.



*Figure 11. fastASMR "Rough ASMR: The Most Intense Ear Cleaning." (2018)*

<sup>19</sup> TingleBelleASMR, “ASMR3Dio Test - Ear to Ear, Case Tapping, Mouth Sounds, Unintelligible Whispering, MORE,” *YouTube* video, 44:35, September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Orv5RXfWDg&t=2344s>.

<sup>20</sup> Fast ASMR, “The Most Intense Ear Cleaning,” *YouTube* video, 19:15, January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ4HDFrUqI>.

## Body/Machine

It is within *touching* upon the difference between the microphone and the human body, the presence of the listener is produced. In ASMR videos, the “body” of the microphone or the movements of the ASMRtist around the microphone have a clear visual position in the video. They often visually stroke and engage with the device. Furthermore, the images show the listener the movements of the ASMRtist as well. Together with the images on the camera, the microphone serves as the Ear of the Other to explore the boundary between human flesh and a machine. This takes place within the movement between my body, that of the camera, and that of the microphone.

It is through movement with the machines that both sound and image can contribute to the effect of the ASMR video: For Luuk, the visual has a crucial role in ASMR videos:

“I think that [the sonic and visual] complement each other. I think that if there would only be visuals and not sound, I would never experience tingles. From only sound, it is very rare for me to experience tingles. Maybe that is why I never have tingles when I lie in bed because then my eyes are closed so it could be that sound and image have to work together. With hand movements, for instance, you hear the slight crackling of a shirt. That is something which can already cause tingles, so I think that sound and image work well together.”<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes, he can even experience tingles when there is no sound at all but only the visual suggestion of a sound:

“A while ago, I saw a video of someone who was just moving with his hand around the microphone. He didn’t touch it, so there wasn’t a sound. However, the movements of his hands around the microphone caused tingles.”<sup>22</sup>

Producing my own ASMR role-play video entails creating a visual and audible experience that has to feel personal for the listener. Luuk points out that recording an ASMR video feels as if he is addressing a person:

<sup>21</sup> “Ik denk dat [geluid en beeld] elkaar echt aanvullen. Als er bijvoorbeeld geen geluid bij zou zitten denk ik nooit tintelingen ervaren en van alleen geluid is het voor mij heel zeldzaam om tintelingen te ervaren. Misschien is dat waarom ik nooit tintelingen krijg als ik alleen in bed lig want dan ben ik gewoon met mijn ogen dicht. Het zou dus best kunnen dat het voor mij in ieder geval echt gepaard moet gaan. Met handbewegingen hoor je bijvoorbeeld de lichte kringelingen van een shirt. Dan kan bij mij al echt tintelingen veroorzaken dus ik denk dat geluid en beeld heel goed met elkaar gepaard gaan.”

<sup>22</sup> “Ik zag laatst een video van iemand die met zijn hand rond de microfoon bewoog. Hij raakte de microfoon niet aan dus er was geen geluid, maar hij hield ze rond de microfoon. Het was door het zien daarvan dat ik tintelingen kreeg.”

“What I eventually do is speaking to my camera as if it is one of my viewers. It does not feel like I am standing in front of a public. It feels like I am talking to a person.”<sup>23</sup>

However, this person is not a person that he knows or someone that he has in mind.

“It is very strange to describe. It happens almost automatically. It is not really a person but more an idea of a person. Like I am speaking to someone I do not know but someone who watches my videos. Not that I have a certain person in mind, it’s just sort of an idea of a person.”<sup>24</sup>

In producing my ASMR video, I aimed to explore the conditions under which this “idea”/body is produced. The microphone and the camera together function of the body of the listener. In making my own ASMR video, I aim to explore the conditions under which this “idea” or body of a person is produced. Within role-play videos, the microphone is not visible on screen. The listener is supposed to imagine that my hands are moving around its head. In recording an ASMR video, this public and private connection can be found in the way in which the performer is interacting with the camera and the microphone. There are, however, no eyes to look at, scalp to massage my shampoo into, or ears to move around. What this means is that I have to explore the means through which the microphone and camera can function as a body.

The production of a form of the body for the listener lies within my own movement with the form of the microphone. I imagine the camera of my phone to be the eyes of the person in my hair salon. The diaphragms of my microphone serve as the eardrums of my viewers’ ears. I try to look directly *into* the “eyes” of my person and speak *into* the ears of my microphone. My hands move around the camera as if they are the edges of the listener’s head. My Blue Yeti serves as the ears which I move my hands around. With these movements, I aim to give the listener the impression that I am looking at their body.

The challenge in making a role-play video, however, is to produce a sound that matches the image on camera. Luuk uses a camera stand under which he places the microphone. Luuk tells me there are different ways to produce a visual and aural experience of sound:

<sup>23</sup> “Wat ik uiteindelijk doe is dat ik praat tegen mijn camera alsof het één van mijn kijkers is. Het is dus voelt voor mij niet alsof ik voor een publiek sta. Het voelt voor mij wel gewoon alsof ik tegen een persoon aan het praten ben.”

<sup>24</sup> “Het is heel apart om te beschrijven. Het gebeurt een soort van automatisch. Het is niet echt een persoon. Het is meer een idee van een persoon. Alsof ik het wel tegen iemand heb die ik niet ken maar wel iemand die mijn video’s kijkt. Het is ook niet dat ik een bepaald persoon heb bedacht. Het is een soort van een idee van een persoon.”

“There are not necessarily sounds connected. When there are sounds connected to [the video], they are added afterwards. Another option is that you are brushing the microphone with your other hand while brushing the camera.”<sup>25</sup>

He himself prefers to brush the camera with his other hand at the same time:

“I never added sounds afterwards because I always find it very obvious when that is done unless it’s done really well even though that is actually too difficult because as it will always be a little out of sync. I usually find it more realistic to produce these sounds while recording the video. Even when you’re working with both hands separately, you can still anticipate more on the movements you are going to make than when you are watching a video. When you choose to add the sounds afterwards while watching a video and you suddenly stop in the video, then you first have to see it before you stop in real life. This causes a gap in between the image and the soundtrack.”<sup>26</sup>

It is therefore that my movements occur in relation to both the microphone and the camera at the same time. I try to record both sound and image during the same recording. I put my camera on a pile of books in front of a white background to make sure that the viewer is not distracted by any objects in my room. It takes me quite some time to decide on the right height for my camera.

The video was recorded in my own home, where most ASMR videos are recorded. Here, I set up a small “studio” consisting of a Blue Yeti microphone, a white background, and my phone, which was placed on a pile of books for the right height. I want to move the microphone as close to the camera as possible to make sure that my microphone is still able to record sound when I move around the camera. I also have to take into account that the microphone is not in the image as that would decrease the realistic effect of the video (see fig. 12) As I have turned up the gain, the microphone can still hear sounds from my hands moving around even when I am moving above the camera on screen. This way, my movements are noticeable on a visual as well as an audible level.

<sup>25</sup> “Daarbij zitten niet perse geluiden bij gepaard. Als er wel geluiden bij gepaard zitten dan zijn ze naderhand toegevoegd. Een andere optie is dat je met je andere hand de microfoon zit te borstelen terwijl je de camera borstelt.”

<sup>26</sup> Ik heb het nooit naderhand toegevoegd omdat ik het altijd heel overduidelijk vind als dat wel gedaan wordt, tenzij het supergoed is gedaan maar dat is eigenlijk te moeilijk. Het loopt dan net niet synchroon. Ik vind het meestal realistischer als het tijdens de video gedaan wordt. Ook al zit je met twee losse handen, dan weet je nog in te schatten welke bewegingen je gaat maken dan als je de video aan het kijken bent. Als je dat niet zou doen dan maak je achteraf geluiden terwijl je de video kijkt maar dan stop je bijvoorbeeld ineens en dan moet je dat eerst zien dus daar zit dan net die reactie tussen wat er voor zorgt dat beeld en geluid niet meer synchroon zijn.





*Figure 12. Me while recording my ASMR Video*

What the production of the body of a person through the microphone and camera shows is that the microphone and camera come to serve as an interface to produce the body of the listener itself. What unites them is my own movements, which are shaped through how they sound in the audio recording. This way, the listener is able to imagine itself as shaped through movement. The body of the microphone has become a performative tool. It is both the body of a listener, as well as a machine to record sound. I can touch upon the boundary where it becomes a skin or the ears of the listener, which makes the listener feel present.

## **Conclusion**

At the intersection of its affordances, Luuk's experience, and the process of recording my ASMR video, my Blue Yeti discloses its ties to the performative practices that have preceded it. The individual voice is still highlighted, its appearance is still used as a body, noises are still being made, and spaces are being staged. Just as the microphones in radio, the avant-garde scene, funk, rock 'n roll, and the theatre, the Blue Yeti produces a parasite with which we can perform. With algorithms and digital signal processors, this microphone is programmed to determine where to draw the boundary between a human ear and a parasite. It is this particular twenty-first-century parasite which provides the basis not only for an unconventional instrument such as Cage's amplified

cactus or a whispering pianist but the production of a tactile presence. Through its versatility afforded by its digital as well as analogue form, the Blue Yeti channel's four functions and differences that construct the tactile presence of the ASMRtist. It is on the verge of my voice becoming texture, my microphone becoming a human body, a signal to become noise, mono becoming stereo, that my "touch" and "presence" are constructed.

## Conclusion

A girl appears on my screen. “Hi, nice to meet you, I’m Zora,” she says. “Welcome to our hair salon.” This time, it is not Luuk performing hand movements and ASMR triggers on my screen. Zora, the ASMRtist, is talking to me, trying to produce an intimate ASMR experience. This means that I am supposed to feel present and touched by her fingers. With her earphones, she listens to the microphone listening to her. She massages shampoo and conditioner into my scalp or potentially every scalp out there that might come across her video. The microphone captures her subtle sounds, the sounds of her mouth, her room, which produce noises and hisses. Sometimes, she makes a mistake and produces a lot of noise by moving around or using a noisy object. Sometimes, these sounds and movements cause me to feel an intimate connection with her in which I experience her presence and touch.

This Zora on my screen is both me and not me. The Blue Yeti microphone allows me to experience myself as a double: “I have, I am, and I demand a keen ear, I am (the) both, (the) double, I sign double, my writings and I make two, I am the (masculine) dead the living (feminine), and I am destined to them, I come from the two of them, I address myself to them, and so on.”<sup>1</sup>

While making my first ASMR video, I had the opportunity to briefly reflect upon what it means to produce an aesthetic that can be experienced as intimate. Within the production of my ASMR video, the microphone is a device that serves as an *Ear of the Other*. Its writing systems, diaphragm, and materials mimic my own ears when interacting with me as an ASMRtist. In doing so, they provide me with an image of myself through a set of completely different ears. The means through which the microphone listens is a mechanism in which presence, sound, movement and tactility intersect. It produces differences by which the idea of being present and experiencing touch can come to existence. The production of these differences takes place within a constellation of different entities that cooperate to produce a mediation of the microphone. Out of this, mediation develops a *parasite*, a noise. It is within a *sonic touching* upon the boundaries between this signal and noise, self and other, that the microphone's parasite serves as the basis for the experience of tactile presence today. It is this noise with which we can explore our own ears, bodies, and human subjectivities in relation to those of others and in which the “touch” and the “presence” of me as an ASMRtist is produced.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, 1985, 35.

Within the three chapters of my thesis, I have aimed to dissect how the mechanism of the Ear of the Other, the process of sonic touching, and the production of the parasite are embodied within the microphone. In the first chapter, I have challenged the assumptions made on the role of sound in ASMR videos. Via a critique on Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's conceptualisation of hearing and touch as auto-affection, I have aimed to deconstruct some assumptions on the production of tactile presence and sonic intimacy in ASMR videos. These assumptions entail hearing and touching as modes of making sense of oneself as a subject without having to make a detour through the outside world. Scholars within the field of ASMR have neglected the means through which these experiences are produced. Listening and tactility share a common history of being classified as a-historical modes of perceiving one's presence in the world. What lies behind these assumptions is an ideological notion of privileging the mind, the immaterial, the self, the man as opposed to the body, the other, the woman. What we hear in an ASMR video is determined by the mediation of the microphone. Furthermore, the experience of touch is not necessarily tied to the human hand but can be perceived in many different ways. It is dependent upon the external world through which the touch has to travel. The body has to become external to itself in order to touch itself. The conditions through which the experience of presence, and therefore intimacy, comes into being is the difference between self and other. In ASMR, it is technology that produces this difference between self and other.

What allowed me to uncover these assumptions was Derrida's notion of the Ear of the Other, in which he traces the production of a subject as one that is double, shaped by the dead, the written and the other as well as the living, the spoken. Presence is then produced through an act of writing. Building on Nancy's theorisation of the act of *touching*, I have argued that this process of writing can be found in exploring the space between the differences produced by the Ear of the Other. *Touching* is the exploration of space that is innate to a body. In the case of ASMR, this means that the construction of presence can be found in my interaction with my microphone. This interaction can be found in what I called *sonic touching*. It is an interactive process in which our subject positions (me as a human) and that of the microphone (as a machine) still have to come into being. What is essential to that coming into being is the materiality of the microphone's body. Sonic touching is exploring the differences, the space between the ASMRtist as a human and the microphone as a machine which is embodied by this microphone. In this interaction, the microphone took on a different form. It was not merely a recording device nor an instrumental tool. It took on the form of a human ear through which an intimate bond can be constituted.

The role of the microphone as the Ear of the Other can be found within the way in which the microphone mediates sound. In chapter 2, I have traced how this mediation takes place.

This mediation takes place within a constellation of different entities that interact with all interact with each other. As part of this constellation, the microphone has its own material agency. The microphone is a device that is able to function as a technology for what Bernhard Siegert refers to as a *cultural technique*: meaning that it can shape *differences* within our language that shape our Western culture. The cultural technique that I have traced is the emergence of a *parasite*, meaning a noise, an Other, and all other things that one would not prefer in a recording.

This parasite comes out of the microphone as it imitates the human ear. The early history of the microphone already shows that the device serves as much more than a device to record and preserve sound. The microphone can serve as a tool to produce audible spaces that do not exist. It can function as a visual tool to portray sexuality, as evidenced by James Brown and Elvis Presley. Moreover, the microphone can highlight the voice of the vocalist through its ability to capture subtle sounds, making way for a whole new generation of singers to enter the radio stage. The noises of the microphone provided John Cage's cactus with a sound in the avant-garde music scene. Together, these "mistakes" of the microphone produced a parasite around which a variety of performative practices of a scope that this thesis would not be able to cover. However, what they show is the development of a set of practices that serves as the basis for the production of tactile presence in ASMR videos today.

In chapter 3, it became clear how these modes of performing with the microphone are still present in ASMR today, showing how the production of tactility and presence through sound is grounded within a mediation of human-technology interactions. In this final chapter, I have argued that the production of tactile presence can be found in the exploration between of the boundaries produced by the differences embodied within the Blue Yeti microphone. We saw that the digital writing system of the microphone re-introduces some of the practices surrounding the early adoptions of the microphone in performative practices. The digital writing system of the microphone shapes a new set of differences between the voice/texture, static/movement, signal/noise, body/machine. As the Blue Yeti is partly digital, as well as partly analogue, it is able to easily communicate with other devices and connect with the digital platform of YouTube. It is within this digital writing system of Blue Yeti that all four performative modes of engaging with the microphone are able to intersect and a tactile presence can be produced.

In my ASMR video, I have traced the boundaries between these dichotomies by the act of *sonic touching*. It is within this process that the tactile presence of ASMR videos is produced. The microphone is able to highlight the texture of my voice in which I pursue to find the boundary between where my voice touches upon becoming purely texture. The sound of touch and proximity is produced by using the sound of the mesh of the microphone as a "skin." I feel a touch

at the point where my voice is cut off by the digital signal processor and cause for distortion. The sensation of space is produced in stereo, by exploring the difference between movement and being static rather than recording reproducing the location of a sound source in space. Altogether, this shows how the *parasite* of the microphone serves as the source for tactile presence. It is in my interaction with the microphone that it serves as an *Ear of the Other* which allows for the experience of presence and touch to emerge.

While recording my own ASMR video has provided me with a means to analyse the production of tactile presence through the microphone, my approach merely serves a brief reflection upon the many functions that ASMR videos can fulfil. My exploration of the microphone in ASMR videos was limited to the production of one video and an interview with one ASMRtist. Before writing this thesis, I was not yet experienced with recording and editing ASMR videos. My interview with Luuk served as a means to provide both me as well as the reader with information on the ASMR community, the ASMR effect to place my video within a larger context. As Luuk pointed out, the visual component in ASMR videos is equally important as sound. My role-play video mainly contained an image of my own head with no further background or costumes. My microphone was not visible for the listener.

Besides, role-play videos, there are many different types of ASMR videos to be explored. The ASMR aesthetic is becoming more mainstream and more cross-disciplinary types such as ASMR cooking videos, and celebrity ASMR videos (made by actors, models, and singers such as Margot Robbie, Cara Delevingne, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Rosalía) have started to emerge. Furthermore, Dutch ASMRtist *Isabel Imagination* has moved ASMR videos to the during the fall of 2019. This great variety of videos pose a challenge in defining the boundaries of what ASMR as a subculture entails and the types of equipment that are used, especially since a great variety of microphones is used in these videos. My video was limited to that of the Blue Yeti, which still serves as one of the most popular microphones for ASMR videos. Nevertheless, more attention could be paid to others such as the high-quality Audio Technica AT2020USB+ or the Rode NT or the low-quality microphone that is built into phones and earphones, which are also popular today.

The microphone, just as other devices, is assembled by different parts that change over time. Different types of microphones are used for different kinds of purposes, which deserve their own analyses. My historical exploration of the microphone within this thesis entailed a limited amount of case studies focussed on the historical background of ASMR videos. However, the microphone is involved in performative practices in many other ways. A study of the microphone in live vocal and instrumental performance, for instance, would entail an analysis of a microphone

with a less-sensitive dynamic diaphragm such as the famous Shure-SM58. This microphone requires different vocal techniques. A study of the microphone in the construction of spaces would deserve an analysis primarily dedicated to high-quality binaural microphones, such as the Neumann KU-100, which are used for VR videos and games.

However, in the case of ASMR, it becomes clear that the intimacies and queering aesthetics that often surround this great variety of microphones and sound practices come from a long tradition of culturally and historically specific human-technology relationships. Whether it concerns a conversation on the phone, a soothing voice on stage, or a whisper in our ear, we should always be aware of the conditions that allow us to define them as intimate experiences. It is at that moment that we have to turn to the “quiet middlemen in larger technological systems,” the microphone’s Ear, which uncovers the conditions of intimacy, the parasite to the signal, the other to the self, the absence to presence. It is by listening closely to this Ear that we can understand how these differences are formed, that we can *touch* upon what the boundaries that define them.

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