



The pleasures of the mouth

Description

The soft human voice signifies comfort. Some would say that parental cooing and burbling sends babies to sleep. That affinity with the voice persists into later life. Thanks to telephones and mobile phones, the voice-in-your-ear is ubiquitous in contemporary life â?? compounding opportunities for the voice to do its work.

The soft voice, breath, the click of the tongue, the sound of moisture in the mouth, breathing and swallowing: in the right context these are sounds of intimacy and comfort. (Iâ??ll ignore those other mouth sounds that evoke distress, discomfort and disgust.) The voice gets a good airing in my book [The Tuning of Place](#), and on several blog [posts](#).

The psychologist Jacques Lacan even thought that we should satisfy the needs of the mouth ahead of the need to fulfil our base appetites. The mouth is a suitable signifier of demand, and desire.

â??Even when you stuff the mouth â?? the mouth that opens in the register of the drive â?? it is not the food that satisfies it, it is, as one says, the pleasure of the mouthâ?• (167).

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response

As if we needed evidence of this, there are hundreds of online videos dedicated to the pleasures of the mouth. These are ASMR videos â?? which stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, a reference to a tingling sensation that some people experience in the scalp when in a relaxed state. These videos and audio podcasts feature someone whispering into a microphone at close quarters. The specialists who do this are known as *ASMRtists*.

Those for whom â??the tinglesâ?• are a rarity are content to think of ASMR as simply a state of deep relaxation, comparable to a meditative state, or being on the verge of sleep. ASMR videos put you to sleep.

Triggered

Having someone whisper in your ear, in the right context, provides the necessary ASMR *trigger*. ASMRtists typically deliver a range of triggers in their videos, only some of which may hit the mark (sic). Some of these videos can run for an hour.

Sounds constitute the main set of triggers, such as whispers, ticks, clicks, clucks, smacks, slurps and breathing made by the mouth. These sounds are often combined with other trigger sounds such as tapping, crinkling, scraping and rubbing made with everyday objects (bottles, paper, brushes). The experts don't seem to labour this point, but I'm prepared to conjecture that these sounds remind us of the sounds the mouth makes when in intimate mode.



Personal attention

The second set of triggers hover around the impression that the ASMRtist in the video is paying you, the listener, special attention. The whispered sounds are for you and directed at you. The video medium seems to suit this condition well, as the presenter can look directly into the camera at you. Binaural (stereo) microphones enable the whisperer to get up really close.

Audio-only ASMR recordings are available as podcasts, but I suspect the video helps focus attention, and you don't want to be doing something else while going through the experience.

ASMR videos are a bit like sound art performances, but it seems to be important in ASMR that you can identify the performer. There's a person there, addressing you, giving you their attention.

Analogue ASMR

But the ASMR is not exclusively a video phenomenon. People report an ASMR response when undergoing low-stress interviews, e.g. market surveyors asking you about your preferences in coffee, and ticking off your responses on a clipboard, as if your opinion, and you, really matter.

Other more tactile contexts include a visit to an optometrist for prescription glasses or contact lenses, with the inevitable close eye contact and the attention, especially when the specialist speaks close to your face, and quietly.

ASMR enthusiasts report that the process is effective if you don't understand exactly what's going on, or understand the jargon, as long as you put your faith in the specialist who's attending to you.

Role play

Role play ASMR videos attempt to deliver ASMR triggers by simulating the specialist carrying out these kinds of functions, with you as the patient. They will make sure you hear the sound of their pen or pencil writing down your responses, the sound of Latex gloves rustling against flesh, equipment and clothing, and sterile implements being removed from cellophane wrapping.

An ear examination is a particularly acute role play setting for ASMR. You don't see it, but it's apparent the ASMRtist is speaking into either side of a binaural microphone arrangement.

Apart from any relaxation, the spatial effect of binaural playback can be overwhelming, particularly if the listener is wearing high quality headphones or ear pods. It's as if someone else is in the room with you.

Noises off

These ASMR scenarios don't need to have you the listener as the obvious focus. As well as being soothed by parental voices we relax when being attended to, i.e. someone is there, preparing our food, bedding, medicines, looking after us, even out of sight.

They may just be going about their own business, quietly and conscientiously. That's also safety and security. So we can relax.

In my research into moods ([Mood and Mobility](#)) I recall how some researchers conjectured that rubbing a sore arm (after a mild burn for example) tends to reduce the pain, not least as it tells the body it can tone down its pain response.

Something is being done to ameliorate the cause. Your pain receptors can stop sending signals. I assume something happens with other stress related body defences. When we are assured that some trusted other is taking care of things then we can relax.

ASMR videos that show someone preparing a dinner may have such a relaxing effect, as long as the activity is not frantic and we worry we may be called on to help. In ASMR role play all is calm, so there's no need to feel anxious.

ASMR and attention stress

I've looked into this with colleagues exploring the benefits of being outdoors. [Restoration theory](#) maintains that for good reason our bodies try to prevent us from being too engaged in a task. After all if a forest or savanna dweller is so engrossed in preparing a meal she may become oblivious to potential threats. So growing weary, fed up or bored with the task is an adaptation that helps survival.

Under ideal circumstances we would switch to another task. In a modern day work environment we typically work at a task beyond the point where weariness and stress set in. We become less effective and lose concentration.

Another way of looking at this condition is to consider *attention*. We are always *attending* to something. Work tasks generally operate against time and other pressures, compounding the stress. So after a

while we need to attend to something else.

Restoration theorists think a walk in a park, attending to the things of nature provide this attention relief. There are many things to attend to in nature settings, but they don't *demand* our attention. I've explored the applicability of this theory in my book [Network Nature](#), and in a blog [post](#).

Like many relaxation techniques, we can assume that ASMR scenarios provide attention relief. You attend to the artists and what they are doing, and imagine they are attending to you. Their actions are trivial, undemanding and even silly. Like someone peeling potatoes, it's not about skill but focus of attention – without stress.

My next post will examine ASMR as a phenomenon of the Internet age.

References

- Barratt, Emma, and Nick J. Davis. 2015. Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): a flow-like mental state. *PeerJ*, (3) e851, [DOI 10.7717/peerj.7851](#).
- Lacan, Jacques. 1979. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin
- Lopez, German. 2018. ASMR, explained: Why millions of people are watching YouTube videos of someone whispering. Vox, 25 May. Available online: <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/15/8965393/asmr-video-youtube-autonomous-sensory-meridian-response> (accessed 14 December 2019).

Key articles on restoration theory include:

- Kaplan, Stephen. 1995. The restorative benefits of nature: Toward an integrative framework. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, (15)169-182.
- Ulrich, R. S. 1999. Effects of gardens on health outcomes: theory and research. In C. C. Marcus, and M. Barnes (eds.), *Healing Gardens: Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendations*: 27-86. New York: John Wiley.

Books by me on sound, mood and nature

- Coyne, Richard. 2010. *The Tuning of Place: Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Coyne, Richard. 2016. *Mood and Mobility: Navigating the Emotional Spaces of Digital Social Networks*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Coyne, Richard. 2018. *Network Nature: The Place of Nature in the Digital Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic

Documentary

- Jessop, Scott, and Matt Bell. 2015. ASMR Documentary [road trip]. *[informal] films*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ri4SVWz0s6c> (accessed 17 December 2019).

Recent ASMR video examples

- Whispering in Slovak (EasyASMR 2016): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1laF3r7LyZs&t=681s>
- Eating lettuce (JoJo's ASMR 2019): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PQsUnPRgHA>
- Ear clinic examination role play (LiziASMR 2019): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsPD7FoVtJ4&t=1086s>
- Preparing dinner (ASMR Therapist 2013): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Z8lsZK79QU>

Notes

- The picture above is a crushed avocado and watercress sandwich I tried to record.
- In case you wonder what ASMR has to do with architecture â?? think of intimate spaces, also Mygdali, Stella. 2018. *Walking With: Spatial Approaches to Intimacy (PhD thesis)*. Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh.
- There is a lot of ASMR information, and resources, on WordPress.com. See <https://asmruniversity.com/>.

Category

1. Voice and text

Tags

1. ASMR
2. food
3. nature
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Date Created

December 21, 2019

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