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*Ryby w literaturze, kulturze,
języku i mediach*

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Ewa Borkowska, Andrzej Borkowski,
Maria Długołęcka-Pietrzak, Barbara Stelingowska
Wydział Nauk Humanistycznych
Uniwersytet Przyrodniczo-Humanistyczny w Siedlcach

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Ewa Borkowska, Andrzej Borkowski,
Maria Długołęcka-Pietrzak, Barbara Stelingowska
(Wydział Nauk Humanistycznych, Uniwersytet Przyrodniczo-Humanistyczny w Siedlcach)

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Joanna Łapińska
(Universität Wien)

Tilapia Sounds Crunchy and You Wear a Fishbowl: Fish-Related Motifs in ASMR Videos in the Affect Theory Perspective¹

Introduction: On Fish and ASMR

The acronym “ASMR” usually denotes one of two phenomena. It is used to describe the physical sensation of a pleasant tingling feeling felt on the scalp, neck, nape, and even in the entire body in response to a variety of stimuli called “triggers”, including auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory or cognitive nature ones.² This feeling is sometimes referred to as “head/brain tingles”, “brain orgasm” (or “braingasm”), or “weird head sensation”³ but, at present, the most common term is “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response” (ASMR for short) coined in 2010 by Jennifer Allen, a participant in an online forum.⁴ Supposedly, this feeling leads to deep relaxation of the body and mind and, consequently, to a blissful sleep. On the other hand, the term ASMR is also commonly used to designate a rapidly developing subculture active in social media, whose members produce and consume videos created specifically to induce the described tingling sensation in the viewer-listener’s body.⁵ Such films, with their specific aesthetic strategies, constitute a separate genre of audiovisual art, popular mainly on YouTube which remains the primary platform for ASMR

¹ This research was funded in whole by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [grant number: M 3144-G]. For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a CC BY public copyright license to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

² H. Sadowski, *Digital Intimacies. Doing Digital Media Differently*, Linköping Studies in Arts and Science, 691, Linköping University Electronic Press, Linköping 2016, p. 32.

³ J. Young, I. Blansert, *ASMR (Idiot’s Guides)*, Alpha Books, New York 2015, p. 78.

⁴ C. Richard, *History of ASMR: About Jennifer Allen, the woman who coined the term “ASMR” (podcast episode #7)*, <https://asmruniversity.com/2016/09/05/asmr-podcast-about-jennifer-allen/> (accessed: 19.11.2021).

⁵ Helle Breth Klausen points out to the advantage of designating ASMR videos users as “viewer-listeners” instead of either “viewers” or “listeners”. Thus, the multisensory perception of ASMR materials is emphasized. Moreover, most ASMR videos contain both visuals and audio, which is also highlighted by the usage of the term “viewer-listeners”. See H. B. Klausen, *ASMR explained: Role play videos as a form of touching with the eyes and the ears*, “First Monday” 2021, vol. 26, no. 9, doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i9.11691>



enthusiasts.⁶ The materials published there in the ASMR style usually belong to the roleplay videos subgenre in which the artist plays the role of a professional (e.g., doctor, hairdresser, flight attendant) performing “a faux-interaction”⁷: providing a simulated treatment on an imaginary patient or client, devoting their complete attention to the viewer-listener.⁸ Needless to say, apart from roleplays, one can come across numerous other audiovisual materials fashioned with ASMR aesthetics in mind. These also include videos covering fish-related motifs.

At first glance, the idea of linking fish to ASMR may seem odd. After all, what could be the connection between pleasurable brain tingles leading to a state of extensive calm and aquatic creatures? Unsurprisingly, nothing fish-related appears in the lists of the most popular shiver-inducing triggers recognized by researchers. For example, in their study, Barratt and Davis identified whispering, personal attention, crisp sounds, and slow movements as the most common triggers.⁹ On the other hand, however, the scholars acknowledge that the number of stimuli that evoke ASMR sensations in viewer-listeners is probably extremely large.¹⁰ Each viewer-listener of ASMR videos may be affected by something slightly different and identifying the ASMR trigger that works well is a very subjective process that entails “a lot of trial and error”¹¹; therefore, fish-related motifs could easily be added to the pool of stimuli present in ASMR culture.

In this article, I will examine a selection of ASMR videos published on YouTube, in which fish-related motifs play a central role, from the perspective of affect theory. The videos chosen for analysis are divided into three subgroups. The first consists of audiovisual materials situated on the borderline between ASMR and mukbang, which is a cultural phenomenon of eating various dishes in large portions

⁶ J. Maddox, *On the Limits of Platform-Centric Research: YouTube, ASMR, and Affordance Bilingualism*, “International Journal of Communication” 2021, no. 15, p. 1120.

⁷ M. Zappavigna, *Digital intimacy and ambient embodied copresence in YouTube videos: Construing visual and aural perspective in ASMR role play videos*, “Visual Communication” 2020, 2 July, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357220928102>, p. 2.

⁸ Michele Zappavigna calls the imaginary viewers “ambient” in the sense that they are members of a potential, not physical, audience. See *Ibidem*.

⁹ E. L. Barratt, N. J. Davis, *Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR): A flow-like mental state*, “PeerJ” 2015, vol. 851, no. 3, doi: <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.851>

¹⁰ As Alexandra Kovacevich and David Huron note, there is “the immense potential for variety in stimuli used to evoke ASMR in viewers.” See A. Kovacevich, D. Huron, *Two Studies of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): The Relationship between ASMR and Music-Induced Frisson*, “Empirical Musicology Review” 2018, vol. 13, no. 1–2, p. 56.

¹¹ J. Young, I. Blansert, *op. cit.*, p. 87.



on camera while interacting with viewers live on social media channels.¹² ASMR artists creating materials in the mukbang style produce videos in which they consume various foods, often in large quantities, including seafood such as fried fish (tilapia, snapper, butterfish), lobster, squid, oyster, or shrimp. The second subgroup consists of videos featuring the so-called “fishbowl effect” as an affective strategy for interacting with the viewer-listener. In such a video, the ASMR artist pretends to place a fishbowl on the viewer-listener’s head in order, apparently, to provide a pleasant tingling experience. The fishbowl can be an actual physical object or it can be imagined. Once it is on the viewer-listener’s head, the artist addresses the viewer-listener in a muffled voice, known in the ASMR community as ‘inaudible whispering’, to create an interesting effect which isolates them from the external world. The last subgroup is formed of the so-called aquarium videos. Some of these invite us to simply observe the life of aquatic flora and fauna, undisturbed by the human factor. These materials, which are a cross between ASMR and relaxation videos used as a background for sleep, study or meditation practice, often even last more than a few hours to ensure the peace of mind necessary during these long-lasting activities. In other videos from this subgroup, the aquarium acts as a prop creatively exploited by ASMR artists in their performances, being, for example, the location where a microphone catches tingle-inducing underwater sounds.

Why Affect Theory?

Affect theory has been permeating the existing order of thought in the humanities for over a decade, arriving like a fresh breeze. Having no ambition to replace the intellectual-formalistic methodologies developed in the field, it aims to propose a new, stimulating perspective from which one can look at various scientific problems, texts of culture and works of art. Unfortunately, there is no room in this essay for a detailed description of the numerous concepts and theories of affect of recent years.¹³ For the purpose of this chapter, I will briefly present the closest definition of affect which I have used for this research on the ASMR phenomenon, as well as focus on selected affective methodologies that were particularly helpful while working with ASMR videos

¹² K. Kircaburun, A. Harris, F. Calado, et al. *The Psychology of Mukbang Watching: A Scoping Review of the Academic and Non-academic Literature*, “International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction” 2021, no. 19, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00211-0>

¹³ Readers interested in affect theory may wish to consult the following texts: *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. M. Gregg, G. J. Seigworth, Duke University Press, Durham–London 2010; D. O. Schaefer, *The Evolution of Affect Theory. The Humanities, the Sciences, and the Study of Power*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019; B. Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2015; L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham–London 2011.



containing fish-related motifs. At this point, I will use the suggestions from *Affective Methodologies*, a volume edited by Britt Tim Knudsen and Carsten Stage.¹⁴ The editors of this book have made an attempt to create affective methodologies, that is, analytical strategies for discovering the affective forces present in the studied works of art, cultural texts, and social and media phenomena. I decided to treat the five strategies described by these scholars as signposts showing how to track affects in the investigated audiovisual materials.

What is affect in humanities research? There is still no consensus among scholars on a clear definition of the term. For the purposes of this essay, I will accept perhaps the most widespread proposal, according to which Baruch Spinoza and his reflections in *The Ethics*¹⁵ are considered to be the inspiration for modern affect theory. Spinoza's philosophy on affect, understood as the moving of the body by other bodies, laid the groundwork for more recent conceptions of how affect functions, such as those of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as of Brian Massumi. Here, affect is understood as a force occurring between bodies, "as an entire, vital, and modulating field of myriad becomings across human and nonhuman."¹⁶ Affect denotes potentiality, becoming, flickering between bodies, stimulation of the body, but also the creation of connections, dependencies, bonds, attunements. In the words of Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "affect marks a body's belonging to a world of encounters or; a world's *belonging* to a body of encounters but also, in *non-belonging*, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities."¹⁷ Consequently, affect is a sensation that is difficult to express in words. This extra-perceptual phenomenon with no explicit name escapes clear definitions as it does not designate a pure emotional state like joy, anger, or fear, but instead points to a certain stirring of our body that we sense when we come into contact with another body.

How can affect be detected in the analyzed texts or cultural phenomena? Knudsen and Stage propose five strategies to help track the presence of affective forces. In the first of them, the researchers recommend focusing on the "formal or stylistic characteristics of communication in affect (e.g., outburst, broken language, hyperbole, redundancy),"¹⁸ that is, the elements that do not belong to the intended

¹⁴ *Affective Methodologies: Developing Cultural Research Strategies for the Study of Affect*, eds. B. T. Knudsen, C. Stage, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire 2015.

¹⁵ B. de Spinoza, *The Ethics (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata)*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, May 28, 2009, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm> (accessed: 19.11.2021).

¹⁶ G. J. Seigworth, M. Gregg, *An Inventory of Shimmers*, in: *The Affect Theory Reader*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹⁸ B. T. Knudsen, C. Stage, *Introduction: Affective Methodologies*, in: *Affective Methodologies*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.



intellectual and formalistic layer of a given work or phenomenon; they are a certain addition that would often be overlooked in a standard analysis. Such excessive stylistic or formal elements may prove the existence of an affective layer in the work. Another strategy is to think in the category of “the intense building of assemblages”¹⁹ consisting of different elements. The authors list here “texts, actions, images, bodies and technologies.”²⁰ An example of the application of this strategy is to consider the studied objects as always related to other elements of reality, never functioning in a vacuum. Occasionally, when we think about non-obvious connections, for example, about the body of a researcher connected with the research material that they are exploring, the affects can manifest themselves, flowing between different elements. Another idea of Knudsen and Stage is to focus on the non-verbal language of the affected bodies, such as their gestures. As we have established, affective action often bypasses spoken language as an element of communication and engages in other ways. Therefore, one method of becoming attuned to affect is through the analysis of non-verbal communication. The next methodological strategy will be to turn to “communicative content about experienced or attributed affect”²¹ provided by, for example, informants or the researcher themselves. According to Knudsen and Stage, this type of approach may be useful in auto-ethnographic research to explore the relationship between researchers and informants. The last idea is to highlight “the rhythmic intensification, entrainment (through a common pulse) or destabilization of affective energy in relation to specific spaces and (online) sites.”²² Here, thinking primarily about the rhythm and rhythmicity of bodies, practices, and texts is a key element of the affective experience. Of course, we can discuss the validity of these proposals, nevertheless, they are an interesting attempt to create a method of how to approach the study, not only intellectually, of various phenomena. For, as Luiza Nader perceives it, affect is supposed to “link the intellect, the cognitive powers with the senses, instinct, and the biological level of human functioning on the model of a Möbius strip.”²³ A similar approach is to be found in affective methodologies.

The perspectives offered by affect theory appear helpful in approaching ASMR for several reasons. Firstly, ASMR videos elude traditional research methodologies aimed at uncovering the meaning of the elements that constitute a given cultural text or a work of art. In ASMR, it is often not the meaning of the components used in a performance that is the most crucial. Objects used in ASMR performances are frequently stripped of their original meaning and are not used for their

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ L. Nader, *Afektywna historia sztuki*, „Teksty Drugie” 2014, no. 1, p. 36.



common-sense purpose.²⁴ The goal of their presence is not to symbolize, signify or elicit meanings, but to affect the body on a primal level. Secondly, ASMR practices are based on what is of interest to scholars focused on the use of affect theory in their research, that is, tracking the mutual interactions and connections of a multitude of bodies. Non-human bodies (e.g., the bodies of objects used by artists in their performances) and human bodies (the ones that belong to viewer-listeners or artists) remain in a constant dance of interactions, where affect, in the form of pleasant tingles received by the viewer-listener, flows between them. Without affect, or without this specific tingling sensation, there would be no ASMR. Thus, ASMR practices are underpinned by the existence of affect, and eschew the supposed necessity of meaningfulness, metaphoricality or symbolic nature. Now, let us have a closer look at how this is manifested in the ASMR videos chosen for analysis.

It Crunches So Good!

Agnieszka Jelewska noted that the artwork spectator can be called “a somatic interface,” that “receives, transmits, and decodes various impulses and stimuli that arise in the situation of contact with a work of art.”²⁵ By the same token, the viewer-listener of ASMR content receives impulses coming, for example, from the computer screen and reacts to them primarily affectively and less intellectually. This claim is perhaps at its truest in the case of the first subgroup of ASMR videos to be discussed in this essay, which are those that draw inspiration from the mukbang phenomenon.

Mukbang originated in South Korea and became popular in Western culture in the first decade of the 21st century. The already quite rich literature on the subject²⁶ interprets the phenomenon in different ways.²⁷ The term “mukbang” is derived from the Korean words for “eating” (“meokneun”) and “broadcast” (“bangsong”), and it initially came to mean live shows during which the host ate large

²⁴ I have discussed this topic in: J. Łapińska, *O zmysłowych przygodach w ASMR z perspektywy posthumanizmu*, “The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series” 2019, vol. 10, no. 2, doi: 10.4467/24506249PJ.19.012.11984

²⁵ A. Jelewska, *Somatyczny interfejs. Zwrot afektywny w sztuce*, “Didaskalia” 2012, no. 109–110, p. 114.

²⁶ A review of the academic and non-academic literature on the mukbang phenomenon is provided in the article: K. Kircaburun, A. Harris, F. Calado, et al., *The Psychology of Mukbang Watching: A Scoping Review of the Academic and Non-academic Literature*, *op. cit.*

²⁷ E.g., by feminist researchers it is perceived as an expression of rebellion against the taboo imposed by Eastern societies on women’s natural appetites, which is sometimes considered shameful and unattractive. See A. Schwegler-Castañer, *At the intersection of thinness and overconsumption: the ambivalence of munching, crunching, and slurping on camera*, “Feminist Media Studies” 2018, 11 June, doi: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1478694



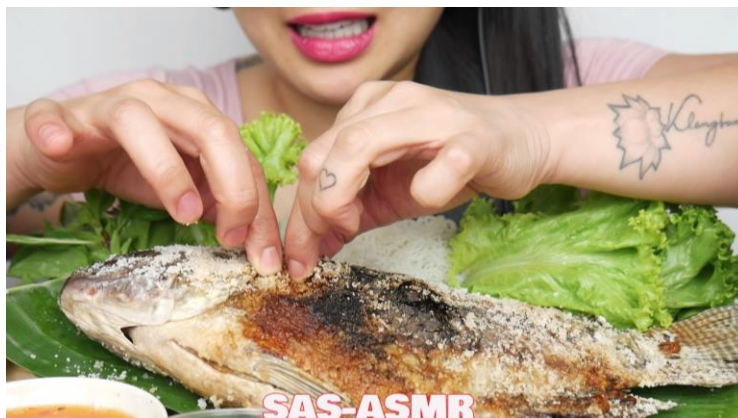
amounts of mostly unhealthy food and chatted with viewers. Later, mukbang appeared in YouTube videos, soon becoming a separate, now exceptionally popular, audiovisual genre. Nowadays, the merging of mukbang style with ASMR aesthetics is not unusual on YouTube. In such videos, the mere fact of eating something in large quantities is not the most relevant anymore; the main role is played by the sounds that accompany the preparation and consumption of food (chewing, smacking, crunching, slurping), amplified by sensitive microphones in such a way as to increase the pleasant tingling effect in the viewer-listener's body.

As we will see in the example, videos that utilize mukbang aesthetics combined with ASMR style might be staged as "culinary overconsumption"²⁸ performances. Not uncommonly, the phenomenon of ASMR is characterized by excessiveness; for example, the ASMR artists work with various objects, exploiting their sound properties, often to the extreme, in order to make the audience shiver. A typical ASMR session lasts a long time, because the artist devotes a lot of attention to each of the objects that plays its role in the performance: they tap them with fingertips, scratch them with fingernails, lively squeezes and stroke them, etc. All these actions cause a kind of sensory bombardment for the viewer-listener. This fact might be of particular importance in the videos in which the ASMR artist eats food in front of the camera, as taste, touch, smell, sound and image are supposed to harmonize here.

This happens in the video *ASMR GRILL TILAPIA FISH with VEGGIES WRAP (EATING SOUNDS) | SAS-ASMR* published on the SAS-ASMR channel which has over nine million subscribers.²⁹ The video shows the process of eating tilapia, a fish very popular around the world for its delicate, low-fat meat. The female host of the video greets the audience and starts presenting what is on her plate today. This is grilled tilapia marinated in sea salt and lemongrass, which takes center stage in the film frame, as well as various side dishes: noodles, crushed peanuts, lettuce leaves and sweet chili sauce. Interestingly, we do not see the artist's entire face in the frame; perhaps because the only thing that matters is her mouth, into which she will be placing the food. Of course, she will be using her hands during the process, not bothering with cutlery.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

²⁹ SAS-ASMR, *ASMR GRILL TILAPIA FISH with VEGGIES WRAP (EATING SOUNDS) | SAS-ASMR*, <https://youtu.be/bx9etymOtlM> (accessed: 19.11.2021).



Il. 1

The film is shot in such a way that the viewer-listener gets a sense of the multi-sensory nature of the experience. The protagonist of the film touches all the ingredients as if we can almost feel their texture (e.g., the rough skin of the fish, the rustling leaves of lettuce, the density of the liquid sauce). At the same time, touching the food is not limited to the contact necessary for consumption, that is, taking the ingredients in one's hand and putting them in one's mouth. On the contrary, the woman visible in the frame spends a lot of time on excessive touching of the fish and the other ingredients so as to transfer appropriate impulses flowing through the screen to the viewer-listeners. Here, we witness typical ASMR excessiveness. We observe slow enjoyment of a sensual experience with almost all our senses and, in a way, become a part of it. After all, the artist is addressing us directly: she presents the main and side dishes to us so that we can see them clearly. And although smell and touch cannot yet be rendered by means of a video published on YouTube, we, the viewer-listeners, immerse ourselves in the created experience. A vital role is played here by the sound layer amplified by super-sensitive microphones. Thanks to these we can very clearly hear both the sounds connected with direct consumption (licking fingers and lips, chewing or smacking) and other sounds, such as the ones made by the contact of various parts of the artist's body, especially fingers and fingernails, with the crunchy fish, noodles or vegetables, as well as the artist whispering and laughing.

The affectivity that we feel emanating from the screen is intense. Knudsen and Stage have written about the non-verbal language that affect uses.³⁰ Words, textual content, and verbal messages are frequently irrelevant in ASMR videos whose authors and audience may even speak different languages.³¹ The same is true in the

³⁰ B. T. Knudsen, C. Stage, *Introduction, op. cit.*, p. 9.

³¹ It is claimed that ASMR videos in foreign languages are a very good source of tingle triggers. The viewer-listener does not focus on the verbal content of the message, but on the sound



SAS-ASMR video. The artist talks little here; it is obvious that spoken language will not be the main mode of communication in the film. It clearly gives way to the voice's characteristics: its timbre, tone, volume, pitch, tempo. Another interesting element that Knudsen and Stage point out when describing strategies for tracking affect is the so-called rhythmic intensification. In ASMR it is manifested in a specific ritualization of the performance played on the screen and in the artist entering a kind of trance while eating food at a concrete pace. It is clear that the artist derives great pleasure from the act of eating on screen; she smiles a lot, moans with satisfaction after swallowing a particularly tasty bit, or licks her fingers. The rhythm of ASMR film involves a certain predictability which is connected with the affect transmission. There will be no great surprises here in terms of dramaturgy: the artist will certainly eat her food in front of the camera to the very end. Therefore, we do not focus on "the plot development", but rather on other elements such as the non-verbal language of the gestures of the artist's affected body, which, thanks to technological solutions, transmits the affect further to us. Here, I, as a viewer-listener, am a somatic interface, which on the primal level receives the affects flowing to me and revealing themselves in the form of tingling sensations.

And Now, Please, Be a Fish!

To the second subgroup of ASMR videos featuring fish-related motifs belong those using the so-called "fishbowl effect" as an affective strategy of interaction with the viewer-listener. This strategy relies heavily, as with the mukbang-style ASMR videos, on non-verbal communication: on gestures, voices, and the whispering patterns characteristic for ASMR culture, the so-called "inaudible/semi-inaudible whisper", in which individual words cannot be distinguished. As in the previous example, in the videos featuring the "fishbowl effect" the language layer is not central. The moment the artist covers the camera with a real or imaginary fishbowl, they stop speaking intelligibly, and the viewer-listener is supposed to feel a pleasant sensation in their body because of this.

One example of a video from this subgroup is a film posted on the artist April's ASMR channel titled *ASMR | Fast & Intense Fishbowl Effect Trigger | Tingle*

layer of the foreign speech, which might cause a pleasant tingling sensation. According to Joceline Andersen, the popularity of foreign language ASMR videos illustrates that the voice is the primary carrier of attentiveness as an ASMR trigger. See J. Andersen, *Now You've Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community*, "Television & New Media" 2015 vol. 16, no. 8, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414556184>

Time.³² From the first seconds of the video we are confronted with typical ASMR excessiveness, this time associated with an emblematic ASMR trigger, the so-called “personal attention” trigger. The female ASMR artist makes very fast sweeping movements with her fingers (a trigger called “finger fluttering”, also characteristic for ASMR) around the camera, suggesting a place for the potential viewer-listener’s head. She does this very energetically, gazing intensely at the camera. Then, she greets the audience by quickly repeating each of the words such as “hello”, “Friday afternoon” or “fishbowl effect” as if in a trance. She articulates them at an accelerating speed, giving the impression that the borders between the words are blurred and their meanings are no longer relevant. They simply become mere audible noise. April continues tapping the camera lens with her fingernails, imitating touching the spectator. Within two minutes, a fishbowl appears in our sights and the artist explains the effect she intends to cause. Then, the main part of the performance begins in which the fishbowl is repeatedly lowered over our heads, which causes disturbances in the reception of sound and image.



Il. 2

In this experimental way, the artist wants to evoke a pleasant tingling sensation in the viewer-listener’s body. April’s strategy for establishing an affective connection with the viewer-listener is based, among other things, on what Knudsen and Stage have called the “formal or stylistic characteristics of communication in affect.”³³ Broken language, or the nonstandard, non-traditional or alternative version of the language, is an ASMR characteristic stretched to the extreme. The verbal messages of the spoken lan-

³² April’s ASMR, *ASMR / Fast & Intense Fishbowl Effect Trigger | Tingle Time*, <https://youtu.be/rCi2WXzC8ro> (accessed: 19.11.2021).

³³ B. T. Knudsen, C. Stage, *Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.



guage are completely displaced by the total redundancy of the meaning of the spoken words.

In the ASMR performance featured in the video published on April's ASMR channel, an affective assemblage consisting of various elements is built up. These include the activity of the artist, the activity of the viewer-listener, and the involvement of non-human performative devices (props like the fishbowl, as well as technological objects intended to amplify the transmission of image and sound, i.e., microphones, camera, headphones). The bodies, both of the artist and the viewer-listener, take part in a kind of affective dance, an "interplay of human and nonhuman agency, a *dance of agency*."³⁴ In addition, my body becomes duplicated, as, at one end of the screen sits my physical body, and my other potential body is implicitly present on the screen. This kind of duplication contributes to the physical affective sensation of tingles felt in my body.



II. 3

This is also very engagingly demonstrated in a video published on Gibi ASMR, a popular YouTube channel with over 3.8 million subscribers, under the title *ASMR | Face Boops & Fishbowl Effect | 60fps*.³⁵ Here, an artist nicknamed Gibi lifts an imaginary aquarium bowl above the viewer-listener's body (the physical object used previously by April is missing) and drops it on the viewer-listener's head, as if putting the viewer-listener inside the aquarium. While doing this, Gibi spreads her hands across the width of the screen as if to embrace us at the same time. She does not stop talking or making eye contact with the audience. She is also constantly

³⁴ A. Pickering, *Preface*, in: *The mangle in practice: Science, society, and becoming*, eds. A. Pickering, K. Guzik, Duke University Press, Durham 2008, p. vii.

³⁵ Gibi ASMR, *ASMR | Face Boops & Fishbowl Effect | 60fps*, <https://youtu.be/RWOjEfKwd8I> (accessed: 19.11.2021).



smiling in a soothing way and chatting about various matters, which, one must admit, are not relevant. After all, half of the information does not reach us at all when we keep our heads inside the fishbowl.



II. 4

Then something else happens: the YouTuber gently touches the surface of the “water” in which we, the viewers, are supposedly submerged. And even though, according to Gibi, this kind of touching a potential viewer-listener’s face during the video is a separate trigger (called “face boops” in the ASMR community) not necessarily related to the “fishbowl effect trigger”, it is no coincidence that both of these triggers are used here in the same film. This is because they resonate with each other in a surprising way, evoking interesting associations.

When Gibi touches the camera lens causing the “distortion of the waves”, the viewer-listener gets the bizarre sensation of becoming a fish swimming in an aquarium, as any characteristic alteration visible on the screen, resembling ripples in water, is seen from their point of view. Thus, we are drawn into an imaginative play that forms, on this occasion, an assemblage composed of the bodies of various actors, some only imagined, like a non-existent fishbowl, connected with the affect in the form of tingles. In this situation, I, the viewer-listener, am supposed to succumb to the non-verbal impulses coming from the screen and just feel like I am in the right place, being a fish in water: comfortable, calm, relaxed.



Il. 5

Underwater Encounters

The last subgroup of the ASMR films featuring fish-related motifs consists of the so-called aquarium videos. As already mentioned, in some of them the most important role is played by the aquatic flora and fauna, uninterrupted by the human factor. These kinds of videos, lasting even up to a few hours, can be classified as a cross between ASMR content and the relaxation videos used frequently by internet communities as background noise for quotidian activities: sleeping, studying, practicing yoga or meditating. In other videos belonging to the last subgroup, the aquarium and its equipment are creatively exploited by ASMR artists as “performative instruments”³⁶ in the underwater shows.

Admittedly, it is the aquarium videos of all those analyzed in this chapter that perhaps best indicate the aesthetic element of the “aesthetic-practical”³⁷ role of fish in human culture. Beautiful, ornamental fish are to this day eagerly displayed in ponds and aquariums to satisfy the aesthetic need of the viewer, to provide entertainment and artistic excitement. A home aquarium is recognized as interior decoration, and the fish swimming in it should please the observer.³⁸ A similar role, among others, is played by ASMR aquarium videos displaying the underwater world on the screen and treating its inhabitants as a source of artistic inspiration.

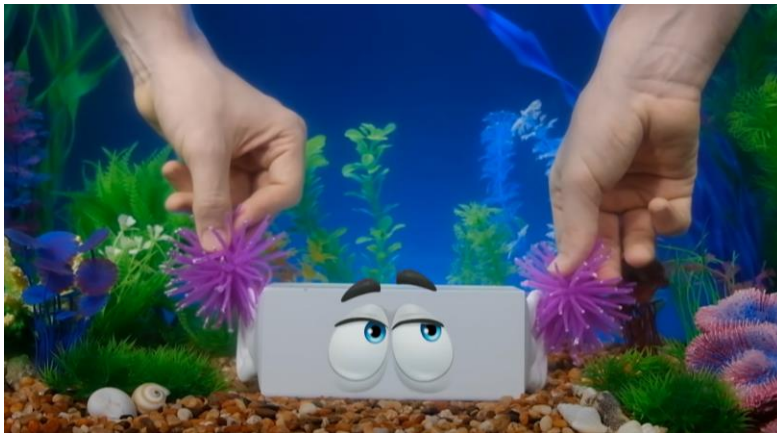
³⁶ N. Lem, *BDSMR: Velcro as a Sensory Material and Erotic Interface*, in: *BCS Learning and Development Ltd. Proceedings of EVA Copenhagen*, Denmark 2018, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14236/ewic/EVAC18.27>, p. 1.

³⁷ According to Aleksandra Drzał-Sierocka, fish provide food for people, but they also serve other functions in culture. See A. Drzał-Sierocka, *Kulinarny (i kulturowy) status ryby w Polsce. Między mięsem i nie-mięsem, między symbolem i obojętnością*, “Kultura Popularna” 2014, vol. 42, no. 4, doi: 10.5604/16448340.1159486, p. 36.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.



A prominent example of an aquarium film is a video posted on asmr zeitgeist, a popular YouTube channel with over 2.2 million subscribers, under the catchy title *ASMR UNDERWATER for Deep Sea Tingles*.³⁹ At the beginning of the video, somebody's hand, probably belonging to Michael, the owner of the channel and the artist-performer in one, places the binaural microphone on the pebbly bottom of the aquarium. This microphone is a figure well known to ASMR enthusiasts from other videos published on Michael's channel. Its name is Frank, and its "face" – the front of the microphone case – is adorned with large animated eyes accompanied by expressively moving eyebrows. Frank is the main character of the aquarium video, and also the personification of the viewer-listener. All the sounds that Frank perceives with its characteristic ears also reach the viewer, who can compare their own reactions to various stimuli to Frank's animated reactions visible on the screen.



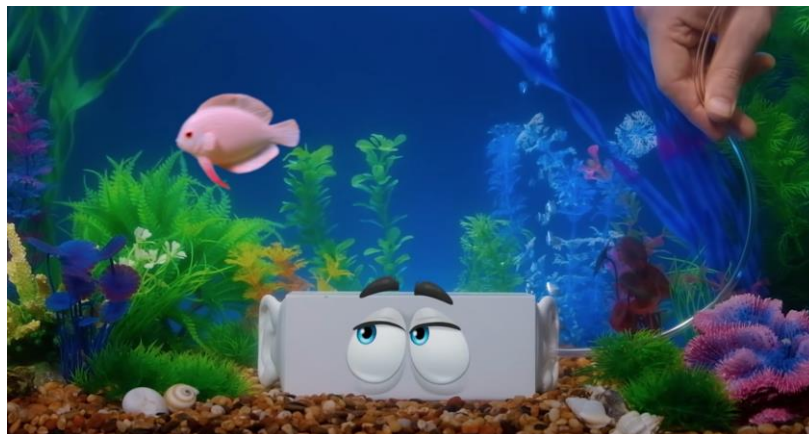
Il. 6

Interestingly, in this video Michael does not show us his face, or any other part of his body except his hands and forearm, but allows the expression on Frank's face to speak to us (and for us). Non-human actors play the main role here: first and foremost, of course, the microphone with its unique ears, but also other animated objects designed to induce relaxing shivers that interact directly with Frank's body. These include underwater plants rubbing against his ears, fish nibbling on them from both sides, bubbles sweeping past them, silicon balls resembling anemones stroking them, and floating jellyfish deceptively similar to real creatures touching them with their limbs. This place resembles a real aquarium with its distinctive bubbling sounds, as well as its pleasant, bluish lighting. From time to time, even

³⁹ asmr zeitgeist, *ASMR UNDERWATER for Deep Sea Tingles*, https://youtu.be/1D8rek6e_DI (accessed: 19.11.2021).



a plastic pink fish swims freely in the foreground and Frank follows it with its eyes. However, the aquarium with its inhabitants no longer only has an aesthetic function. It becomes the birthplace of affective flickering between bodies.



II. 7

The underwater performance requires no words; the affective communication with the audience is non-verbal. For this reason, I, the viewer-listener of the show, receive, with the help of my own affected body, the affects flowing to me through images and sounds only. The appealing technique of personifying the microphone allows, on the one hand, my reactions to be gently controlled, as I am on my side of the screen (after all, Frank's face is potentially my mirror image), and, on the other hand, it encourages me to immerse in the experience of encountering another body, thus marking my "body's belonging to a world of encounters."⁴⁰ As in the case of the videos using the fishbowl effect, I, the potential viewer-listener, find myself in the world presented on the screen, inside the aquarium, like a fish swimming in its natural environment, even if only for a brief moment. In this way, I belong to a temporarily established, fluid, flickering affective assemblage, undefined in its boundaries.

Conclusion

Using the concepts proposed by affect theory researchers, I examined selected ASMR videos published on YouTube in which fish-related themes played a key role. Three subgroups were formed from the videos selected for the study. Representative of the first subgroup, consisting of videos that fall between ASMR and

⁴⁰ G. J. Seigworth, M. Gregg, *An Inventory of Shimmers*, in: *The Affect Theory Reader*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.



mukbang, was a film published on the SAS-ASMR channel in which the artist ate crispy grilled tilapia. The sounds accompanying consumption were amplified to evoke a pleasant experience for the viewer-listener and to emphasize the overall multisensory nature of this experience. The second group included videos published on April's and Gibi's ASMR YouTube channels that used the "fishbowl effect" as an affective strategy to interact with the viewer-listener. The last subgroup was formed by the so-called aquarium videos with its representative, the film published on the asmr zeitgeist channel. Here, within the framework of non-verbal communication, the viewer-listener's body found itself in assemblage with other objects bound by the affect.

My goal was to demonstrate how selected affective methodologies can be applied to research practice concerning a cultural-media phenomenon such as ASMR. As I wished to suggest, the ASMR phenomenon resists intellectual-formalistic research attempts. It is a phenomenon whose non-verbal and multisensory character invites unconventional scholarly approaches, including the use of the affect category as a kind of theoretical lens. Fish-related motifs in ASMR videos were stripped of the meaningfulness, metaphoricity or symbolicity often attributed to these underwater creatures, and instead participated in engaging the viewer-listener's body and its affects on a primal level.

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Summary

Tracking the affective dimension of cultural texts and artworks is the goal of affective methodologies present in the humanities in recent years. This paper examines the fish-related motifs that appear in videos belonging to an online audiovisual cultural phenomenon called ASMR in the context of affect theory. The presumed symbolic or metaphorical aspects of the motifs described recede before the dominant affective dimension, namely the ability to move the body of the viewer-listener of the video on a primal level. The chapter focuses on artistic strategies for establishing affective connections between human and non-human bodies in ASMR experiences.

Keywords

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, affective methodologies, multisensory art, YouTube subculture, mukbang

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