



Posthumanizing Relaxation in Science-Fiction ASMR

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Our existence is always bound up with affective and aesthetic flows that elude cognitive definition or capture.

Steven Shaviro [1, p. 4]

Abstract

Steven Shaviro has asked what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century, an era in which the concept of the human as a superior being towering over all others has become obsolete. It may produce a sense of dread about the unknown future, or it may fill us with joyful anticipation. A posthuman sensibility, which is both pro-active toward and affirmative of human and non-human coexistence in today's world, surfaces in contemporary intermedia phenomena and post-cinematic art forms, such as autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) videos. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze so-called post-cinematic affect, a specific emotional structure revealed through the science-fiction imagery used in ASMR videos. This structure is co-created through various post-cinematic techniques, which include non-human viewpoints, roles, and perspectives along with fragmentary and non-linear narratives. Science-fiction ASMR seeks to capture the posthuman experience of a reality in which humans, rather than being central, are merely a part of the various "arrangements, attunements and practices of being" (Willis in *Fast forward: the*

This research was fully funded 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.

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M. Michałowska (ed.), *Humanity In-Between and Beyond*, Integrated Science 16,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27945-4_6

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future(s) of the cinematic arts, Wallflower Press, London and New York, p. 87, [2]). In ASMR, this experience does not cause fear, but surprisingly breeds contentment and relaxation.

Keywords

Posthuman sensibility • Posthumanism • Autonomous sensory meridian response • Post-cinema • Post-cinematic media

1 Introduction

Produced by the Enlightenment and modernist traditions, the concept of the human as the crown of creation and the supreme being that towers over all other entities in the hierarchy of being has come to face various challenges. New existences, actors, and subjectivities that blur the nature/culture, human/non-human, and living/dead boundaries, and the state of in-betweenness, which violates the anthropocentric order, are ubiquitous in our everyday existence. Posthuman ideas about human and non-human coexistence and identities in today's reality also reverberate in culture, art, and media.

Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) culture, which is conquering the digital space, represents one of the most interesting examples of media art where thinking, feeling, experiencing, and the perception of the world are thoroughly posthuman. ASMR, which has enjoyed unwavering popularity for more than a decade now, expresses a peculiar emotional structure that I call, following Steven Shaviro, “post-cinematic affect” [1]. ASMR videos provide an answer to the question of “*what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century*” [1, p. 2; italics original]. As I seek to demonstrate in this chapter, the post-cinematic experience in ASMR videos is closely related to posthuman thinking and sensibility, consistently with Holly Willis’ insistence that:

The post-cinematic and the posthuman: together, each completes the project of the other, attempting to reckon with experience, identity and subjectivity in a networked culture. As cinema is reinvented as an intermedia form, and as we come to terms with a world in which the human is no longer the centre, artists contribute much to a conjuring of new arrangements, attunements and practices of being through works that call us forth in new ways. [2, p. 87]

In the intermedia phenomenon of ASMR, post-cinema is inseparable from posthumanism, a merger which is showcased both in the content and in the form (poetics and aesthetics) of the videos. The makers of ASMR films employ post-cinematic techniques and perspectives in their artworks, which, as I illustrate, co-create the posthuman image of the world depicted in this culture. In mapping posthuman experiences and post-cinematic transformations, ASMR artists not infrequently draw on well-known pop-cultural images, narratives, and poetics, with science fiction being one of the universes they most frequently visit.

Below, I analyze several key motifs appearing in ASMR culture, which abundantly draws from the science-fiction cultural imagery. The presence of science fiction in ASMR culture has not been extensively studied yet, which may come as a surprise given the universality and salience of the science-fiction discourse in modern times, as observed by Jameson [3] and Frelik [4]. In my analyses, I subscribe to their view that science fiction is a crucial cultural discourse that introduces and explains the ethical dilemmas, political dependencies, and economic mechanisms of the world at the turn of the century. Science fiction is perceived as such a privileged discourse because it has proven capable of looking at the world as a network: an often incredibly complex and invisible web of connections within which phenomena, events, places, and beings always influence and interact with one another. In science fiction, one begins to recognize the links and vectors of connections and intertwinings pervading our current reality. Therefore, in this chapter I identify the instances of science-fiction discourse in ASMR culture to explore how it dehumanizes and posthumanizes our points of view, and what it tells us about people's experience of the world in the early twenty-first century. I investigate how the posthuman sensibility emerging from science-fiction ASMR videos is constituted, and what techniques and transformations structure the post-cinematic dimension of this phenomenon.

2 The Posthuman Mode of Feeling

I chose posthumanism as the overarching theoretical perspective in my exploration of science-fiction ASMR, because I share the notion articulated by the contemporary philosopher Francesca Ferrando that posthumanism is currently “the most open and sensitive critical frame to approach intellectual tasks, as well as everyday practices” [5, p. 171]. This indicates a scholarly approach that, by abandoning classically anthropocentric discourses, is sensitive to the exacerbating crisis of the human subject. This approach strives to embrace new forms of thinking about the place of the human and other beings in the world. The essential task of posthumanist scholars lies in developing openness not only to what we experience around us in our daily lives, but also, and perhaps most importantly, to the research material that we, as scientists, examine and that speaks to us. The qualities that posthumanism prioritizes in its attempts to shed a new light on the various phenomena of life include sensitivity to the multiple connections among entities, the acknowledgement that they are part of the nature-culture continuum, and the insight that everything in the world is always composed of some kind of matter. Further in this chapter, I outline the main perspectives that frame my analysis of science-fiction motifs in ASMR. First of all, I emphasize that both the posthuman way of thinking and a posthuman sensibility are closely linked to post-cinematic experience. Next, I show that post-cinematic affect in ASMR is built through a variety of post-cinematic techniques, which are clearly observable in artworks that rely on the science-fiction convention. The realization that balancing “cognition” and

“estrangement” is the basis of the science-fiction genre [6] is essential to my further argument. As will be shown, the notion of such an equilibrium also appears in ASMR and plays a significant role in ASMR culture.

2.1 Human Is Not All There Is

Since the theory of posthumanism has many facets, strains, currents, and threads, it is worth specifying what exactly one has in mind when using the term. One of the definitions that underlies my reflection on ASMR in this chapter was proposed by Ferrando in her short and apt paper from 2014, simply titled “Posthumanism.” According to Ferrando:

Posthumanism is a theoretical frame, as well as an empirical one, which can apply to any field of enquiry, starting from our location as a species, to the individual gaze. Posthumanism addresses the question “who am I?” in conjunction with other related questions, such as: “what am I?” and “where and when are we?”. [5, p. 168]

Ferrando goes on to clarify what issues are pivotal to posthumanism in answering these questions. The starting point is the human subject’s realization that “we exist in a material net in which everything is actually connected and potentially interacting” [5, p. 168]. Humans are not lonely islands. They do not stand at the top of the ladder of being, watching the subordinate lower creatures. Nor do they belong solely to “culture,” always distinguished from “nature,” but are instead part of the nature-culture continuum the way all other material beings, human and non-human alike, inhabiting the Earth are.

According to Rosi Braidotti, the common feature of the posthuman condition is “an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself” [7, p. 2]. Vitalist materialism, as Braidotti explains, “constitutes the core of a posthuman sensibility that aims at overcoming anthropocentrism” [7, p. 56]. Such a posthuman sensibility vis-à-vis the world around entails consciously opting for the vital, vibrating, and affective connections among various material entities and scrutinizing their formation and interactions with the rest of the network. On this model, a posthuman sensibility is the sensibility of human beings faced with a crisis regarding their purportedly unique position in the world, yet not treating this crisis as a reason to worry, but, on the contrary, as an opportunity to co-exist more consciously with the non-human Other. This sensibility is pro-active and affirmative, as it “combines critique with creativity in the pursuit of alternative visions and projects” [7, p. 54]. It is primarily expressed in receptiveness to non-human elements, viewpoints, perspectives, imagery, roles, and statuses, and in an attempt to address non-human subjects in cultural and artistic representations. Imagined encounters with the Other—unknown, impenetrable, and unimaginable, but at the same time astonishingly close to us—can be an exquisite opportunity to create “powerful alternatives to established practices and definitions of subjectivity” [7, p. 54].

2.2 Recognizing the Post-Cinematic

We currently live in a post-cinematic age. Today, cinema increasingly appears in new contexts and settings, which Francesco Casetti identifies as “borderline situations” [8, p. 35]. No longer what it used to be, cinema is transforming into what can be called post-cinema: ridden with imperfection, open to new possibilities, and prompting viewers to undertake “a penetrating reading” [8, p. 40] of various “borderline” texts, artworks, and discourses. To recognize cinema’s spilling, sticky, clinging, affective, and ubiquitous presence in such new situations “is a complex and risky task” [8, p. 40], and it takes a peculiar sensibility which, following Willis, I call posthuman [2].

Multifaceted as it is, post-cinema defies definition. It is also a challenge to identify and name all the post-cinematic techniques employed by contemporary creators of media art embedded in borderline situations. Malte Hagener, Vinzenz Hediger, and Alena Strohmaier describe post-cinema as “a multitude of (re-)configurations of film” [9, p. 4], and Dominique Chateau and José Moure add that ambiguity is one of the signature features of post-cinema [10, p. 14]. Shane Denson further argues that, with the transition from analog to digital media environments, moving images have undergone a “discorrelation” from human embodied subjectivities and perspectives, including phenomenological, narrative, and visual ones [11, p. 193]. Therefore, to efficiently navigate the maze of new (re-)configurations of cinema, we need to develop new frameworks and research tools that go beyond the human perspective, if possible.

In this regard, it may be fruitful to pay attention to the various non-human mediators within the post-cinematic horizon, including multifunctional screens, interfaces, and sophisticated equipment, such as cameras and microphones, and treat them as accelerators of the metamorphosis of human perspectives and subjectivity. In this context, non-human elements are transformative mediators in the network of human/non-human connections that establish new configurations and parameters of previously impossible perception and agency. Willis identifies the three major post-cinematic techniques involving non-human actors in the contemporary media landscape: (1) a crucially important interface that ceases to be transparent and becomes meaningful; (2) the foregrounding of non-human viewpoints, roles, and perspectives; and (3) fragmentary and non-linear narratives [2]. As will be shown, these techniques are widely applied in the newly emerging media genre known as ASMR, and they contribute to evoking a specific feeling called post-cinematic affect in video viewers-listeners.

2.3 Why Science Fiction?

Science-fiction poetics is often adopted by the creators of ASMR videos. The motifs drawn from science-fiction culture are omnipresent both in the content and in the formal layer of the videos, which opulently feature conventional iconic characters and major tropes associated with the genre, including starships, space

travel, scientists, computers, aliens, and robots [6]. However, the genre of science fiction, especially in its cinematic version, is not defined by these popular themes alone. Rather, it tends to be described as a mirror of our human anxieties: possible extinction, alien invasion, ecological disaster, or nuclear war [12, p. 855]. At first glance, it may seem rather paradoxical to include the science-fiction discourse, which epitomizes human fears, in ASMR culture, whose main object is to make the viewer-listener relax. However, a closer inspection will reveal that science fiction and ASMR indeed have much in common.

According to Darko Suvin's well-known definition, the science-fiction genre is characterized by "the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition" [13, p. 66]. In other words, in science fiction, what is familiar and cognizable to humans at a given historical moment is intertwined with what is uncommon and unknowable. "Novum" is among key terms used by science-fiction scholars. Adapted by Suvin from Ernst Bloch's notion of "a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied addressee's norm of reality" [13, p. 76], novum refers to the "point of difference," or "the thing or things that differentiate the world portrayed in science fiction from the world we recognize around us" [6, p. 6]. It is precisely this kind of alterity—understood as something different, unusual, and puzzling—that is explored in science-fiction productions. As shown below, science-fiction ASMR videos are also underpinned by this premise.

Visuality is another issue that has received increasing attention for some time now, as the image-orientedness and spectacularity typical of science-fiction cultures often overshadows the plots of texts and films [4]. Frelik emphasizes that science fiction can be perceived as a "visual megatext," which he envisions as "a collective repository of the genre's optical signs: icons, elements, symbols, and tableaux that circulate, merge, evolve, and become spliced and remixed" [14, p. 228]. In fact, scholars insist that it is visuality, rather than narrativity, that has been the hallmark of both cinema itself and the cinematic leanings of the science-fiction genre since the invention of moving images. Tom Gunning notes in his acclaimed essay "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde" that, until around 1906, filmic storylines and plots were mostly incidental, and moving images were primarily intended to demonstrate "the magical possibilities of the cinema" [15, p. 383]. ASMR videos, in which the audiovisual element is axial while the narrative is merely supplementary, revisit this tradition and draw on it to the fullest.

Apparently, science-fiction poetics used in ASMR renders the posthuman condition not only through the use of conventional characters and motifs sourced from the capacious gallery of fantastic worlds, but also by affective means, as it throws viewers-listeners into borderline situations and casts them in unusual roles. Putting viewers-listeners in the middle of "affective and aesthetic flows" [1, p. 4] enables them to experience the world in a posthuman way, with cognitive and rational outlooks temporarily pushed aside.

3 Relax and Enjoy the Futuristic Tingles

The term “ASMR” designates both “a warm, tingling, and pleasant sensation starting at the crown of the head and spreading down the body” [16, p. 1] in response to certain audiovisual and interpersonal stimuli (“triggers”) and “a thriving online video culture” [17, p. 1] that has been winning the public around the world for more than a decade now. The extraordinary popularity of ASMR videos, which are mainly published on YouTube, is fostered by the peculiar universality of their audiovisual messages and the irrelevance of the linguistic layer, since what matters in them is the tingle-inducing sound of the spoken words, rather than their meaning. The audiovisual techniques used by ASMR creators are intended to help the viewers-listeners of the videos to “instantly unwind and relax” and “get a good night’s sleep at last” [18, p. xi]. Successful relaxation is premised on specific shivers, called “tingles,” which are felt on the skin in response to the stimuli provided by various types of ASMR videos.

The science-fiction subgenre is a very popular ASMR video variety, where videos extensively rely on science-fiction conventions. For the purpose of this research, fifty ASMR videos featuring science-fiction themes, publicly available on YouTube channels, were analyzed. These videos were described and classified by popular science-fiction motifs employed in them. The following sections of this chapter focus on the frequently recurring motifs identified in my study, which only represent a sample of a much larger catalog of science-fiction trappings used in ASMR videos. For example, I do not address “Fixing You” ASMR videos, where the viewer-listener is cast as a broken robot to be repaired by an artist playing the role of a futuristic mechanic, which I have discussed elsewhere [19]. The selectiveness is deliberate as the purpose of this chapter is not to identify all the science-fiction motifs in ASMR culture, but to qualitatively analyze the most typical ones which are relevant from a posthuman and post-cinematic point of view.

Apparently, the employment of science-fiction motifs in ASMR is linked to the experience of the contemporary crisis of the human subject, which results in attempts to approach the world around us in a posthuman—that is, more open and sensitive—way. ASMR culture is marked by the production of “post-cinematic affect,” which is focused on the fluidity and transience of impressions evoked by given stimuli and on their material and physiological provenance. The sensations viewers-listeners feel in their bodies appear to be caused by biological and cultural factors; they arise in the body in response to a mixture of stimuli in the setting where cognition and estrangement are balanced (Fig. 1).

3.1 Relaxation Specialists in Sleep Clinics

Sleep is one of the most important elements intrinsic to ASMR culture. Researchers have found that ASMR videos are primarily used by viewers-listeners to facilitate relaxation and falling asleep [16, 20]; other reasons include coping



Fig. 1 An ASMR artist produces “tingly” sounds (Photography by Karolina Grabowska, Pexels)

with conditions as varied as depression, anxiety, insomnia, headaches, and chronic pain [21]. Not coincidentally, so-called clinical roleplays [21] are among the most popular ASMR roleplay videos, or content “designed to capture (...) ‘real-life’ experiences” [22, p. 31], where ASMR performers engage in ritualized and stylized professional encounters. In these videos, the ASMR artist on the screen enacts a medical professional or a scientist, such as a sleep specialist, committed to helping the patient to manage some health issues. Giving the viewer-listener undivided attention, the ASMR artist uses a variety of techniques to help them, usually directly addressing “the patient” from the screen in a warm and reassuring voice. In the science-fiction subgenre, such roleplay videos feature characters from the world of the future, as indicated by their appearance, behavior, language, and the surroundings filled with often computer-generated futuristic imagery.

ASMR videos in which a futuristic specialist takes care of our restful sleep are exemplified by *ASMR Sleep Clinic in Outer Space—The Future of Sleep Technology [Sci-Fi]* [23] posted on *asmr zeitgeist*, a YouTube channel with more than two and a half million subscribers as of November 2022. The off-screen female voice in the first seconds of the video belongs to the computer operating system of a sleep lab. The soothing voice invites us inside the lab, where a male figure in a white uniform appears a moment later, introducing himself in a whisper as Z-0288 (however, we are encouraged to familiarly call him “Michael”): “your personal holographic sleep technician for tonight.” Translucent Michael—after all, he is a hologram—prepares us for a relaxing session in a sleeping pod, which is meant to cure our insomnia. He connects sensors to our body and then runs tests

to see which stimuli will work best on us; at this point, we hear the sounds of pouring water, scratching various materials, and the like. After a while, the setting changes: we are now inside our personal capsule. We lie comfortably in a white bedding, and our legs, curled up under the quilt visible at the bottom of the screen, move gently from time to time. A “personalized” relaxation session begins, during which someone’s hands on the screen in the rear of the capsule tap, squish, and scratch various objects, such as plastic cups, cling film, and a cat-shaped silicone toy, producing pleasant sounds. The session lasts about twenty-five minutes. Towards the end of it, a holographic cat appears on our bed, purring while we sleep.

The author of this video draws on the visual megatext and well-known motifs of science fiction, putting the conventional icons and characters of the genre on the screen. The action takes place in a spacecraft that serves as a futuristic sleep clinic, equipped with sleeping pods. The title of the video indicates that we are somewhere in outer space. The protagonists are technological and posthuman beings: Michael, a holographic sleep technician, and Rachel, a virtual assistant only furnished with a voice. Sporting his professional uniform and telling a pseudo-scientific story about the advanced sleep technology used in the lab, Michael is a variation on the mad scientist character, one of the most hackneyed icons of the science-fiction genre [6]. We do not see much emotion in his face, as most of the time he only wears a professional smile. Consequently, there may be something both friendly and disturbing behind this mask. In the twelfth minute of the video, Michael reappears, this time on the monitor in our sleeping pod, but now half of his face is outside of the frame. With his eyes no longer visible, he is only a piece of virtual flesh in the form of a mouth speaking to us. Until the end of the video, we will not see a human face again. Instead, other parts of the disembodied body will appear in our room, including hands manipulating various objects to produce soothing sounds intended to induce relaxation.

The ensemble of posthuman characters is completed by the image of a viewer-listener situated simultaneously in front of their computer screen and in a sleeping pod. The human shape outlined under the quilt belongs to a patient of the futuristic clinic conjured up in the story, who allows a scientist to conduct experiments. At the same time, the patient is a viewer-listener of the video who steps into this world by using headphones, which serve as a cord plugged into a bio-port in the body. Resembling the solutions used in countless science-fiction stories, such as David Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ* (1999), the connection enables the viewer-listener to fully immerse in the experience. Futuristic technology is omnipresent in the video: the sleep capsule glows with dozens of diodes of various devices (it is a wonder, by the way, that so much light does not interfere with sleep), and Michael uses a touch interface to communicate with the lab’s computer system. Interestingly, the camera’s point of view at this moment resembles the cybernetic point of view, which is often utilized in science-fiction films. This gives the impression that the viewer-listener can be either a cyborg endowed with “superior vision enhanced by technology” [24, p. 111] or a prisoner in a confined space surrounded by non-human mediators, such as the interfaces Michael uses to input data. In both cases,

the point of view, rather than being human, is one that makes it possible to see the world in a non-human way. Not only seeing is at stake, though, since listening is also altered as our sense of hearing is extremely sharpened to catch even the quietest of sounds.

3.2 Soothing Encounters with Aliens

Visions of a posthuman future in ASMR videos do not fill the audience with dread. This distinguishes ASMR from the catastrophic and dystopian mood that dominates in cinematic science-fiction productions, which as a rule frighten the audience with the annihilation of humanity and warn viewers against the pernicious influences of technology [12, 25]. In ASMR, technology benefits humans, and an individual's transformation into a posthuman being is not portrayed as "the horrific harbinger of the long twilight and decline of the human species" [25, p. 2]. Similarly, the encounters with aliens pictured in ASMR videos do not evoke fear expected to be felt when facing a non-human Other, but kindle the feeling of comfort and relaxation.

The most common tropes used in ASMR videos featuring extraterrestrials, many of which are roleplay videos, include abductions by aliens and tests conducted both by and on non-humans. In such videos, the viewer-listener can be cast either in the role of an abducted human or as an unidentified extraterrestrial being. In the former case, the character on the screen is an alien running tests on the human, and in the latter the ASMR artist enacts a human scientist or a medic studying the alien. The efficient juggling of human and non-human roles and points of view in videos has become standard in ASMR culture, and this device contributes to promoting a posthuman experience for the viewer-listener. When one is cast in an unusual role, it takes a kind of posthuman vigilance to obtain a good grasp of the situation: one needs to remain alert to all elements, both human and non-human, in the frame and to all other signals from the screen.

Published on the *Starling ASMR* YouTube channel, *YOU ARE AN ALIEN ASMR MEDICAL EXAMINATION | Starling Files: EPISODE 1 a.s.m.r. roleplay* is an excellent case in point [26]. In its opening frames, the female FBI agent on the screen approaches the camera, strokes it gently, and whispers to the microphone with a half-smile: "Here you are, beautiful creature!" She looks closely at something behind the camera (by implication, an alien figure or the viewer-listener of the video) and then reaches for a thick book with descriptions of extraterrestrial beings, trying to identify the mysterious creature. The viewer-listener is not entirely sure what to expect of this unusual moment; they must remain alert to comprehend what is happening. This scene exemplifies the balancing of cognition and estrangement in science-fiction ASMR, as the viewer-listener recognizes certain typical elements of science-fiction culture, but can never rule out that something unexpected will happen the next moment. Subsequently, the FBI agent briefly describes the crash of a spacecraft and the rescue of its sole pilot, with the viewer-listener being this individual. In the subsequent step, the agent carries out medical

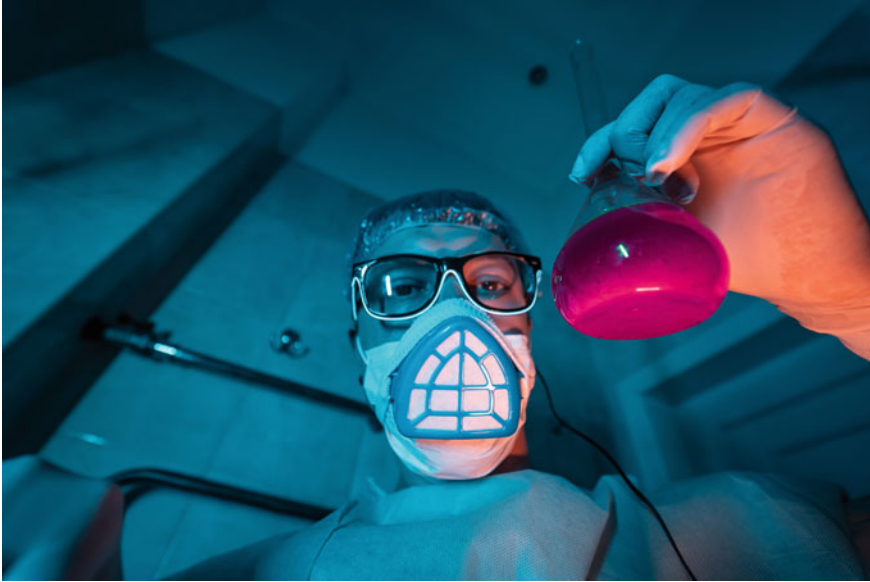


Fig. 2 In ASMR videos, the viewer-listener is often an object of close examination (Photography by teksomolika, Freepik)

tests on the pilot’s hibernated, immobilized body, using various objects, such as metal spatulas and rubbery substances (Fig. 2).

Once again, we are presented with a set of conventional icons familiar from the science-fiction universe: an alien, a spaceship, and an experimenting (mad?) scientist. The visual paraphernalia of the setting complement the narrative. A poster with a flying saucer and warning signs of possible environmental contamination can be seen on the wall behind the woman, while the tabletop is littered with bottles, vials, pipes, beakers, and test tubes. We are invited to imagine ourselves inside a typical futuristic laboratory. What is unusual is that we are supposed to feel satisfaction from being immobilized and experimented on. This sensation stands in contrast to the plethora of horrifying cinematic and literary depictions of humans imprisoned and tested by extraterrestrial beings.

The other situation, one in which an alien studies humans, is staged in *ASMR | Alien Uses You As Classroom Visual Aid (You Are Frozen!)*, a video posted on *The White Rabbit ASMR* YouTube channel [27]. Here, the ASMR artist plays the role of an alien teacher who shows an unusual creature—an Earthling—to the students in her classroom. The lesson becomes a pretext for spinning a story about the bizarre human race, whose members “come in all sorts of shapes and sizes” [27]. This type of encounter with difference and the difficulty of representing the Other are thematized in several celebrated science-fiction texts [6]. In an additional twist, the video crafts an interesting situation in which it is the human who is treated as an alien. As a result, what we experience is, again, a mixture of estrangement and

cognition. Our surprise at the reversal of the roles of the alien and the Earthling intermingles with our recognition of the iconic alien encounter situation a staple in the science-fiction universe.

However, the atmosphere of horror or anxiety that usually accompanies such representations is not to be found in the video. The teacher's warm and affectionate story about an intriguing foreign race epitomizes the artistic rendering of a pro-active and affirmative posthuman sensibility. The situation orchestrated in the video is a borderline situation in which disconnection from the human embodied perspectives occurs. Specifically, the human being discussed in the lesson is not shown on the screen; the only evidence of their being there is the teacher's subjective description of their body parts, including eyes, ears, hair, mouth, and nose, which are gestured at off-camera. As the imagined and dismembered human body is diffused in the whispered description, we, the viewers-listeners of the video, dissolve into a pleasant sense of relaxation.

3.3 Leave It All Behind and Drift Through Space

Ambience videos are another example of ASMR videos that heavily draw on the science-fiction cultural imagery, while exhibiting the performance of the peculiar affective structure that is a posthuman sensibility. Videos of this type entirely deprive the narrative and give pre-eminence to the affective. Experiencing affective bafflement when thrown into certain circumstances without any explanation, the viewer-listener of an ambience video has to rely on their sensory rather than cognitive responses. Moreover, such videos altogether eliminate the human element from the visual sphere of the reality they fashion. Human characters appear very rarely in ambience ASMR videos, which implies that humans are but a marginal concern for the universe.

Some ASMR videos of the ambience subgenre mobilize science-fiction poetics. One of such videos is entitled *Rain Sounds in Cyberpunk City | ASMR | SCI-FI SPACE | Ambience sounds for Relaxing, Sleeping, Focus*; it was published on the *Relaxing Feed* YouTube channel [28]. The one-hour-long video shows a city of the future at night, bathed in rain and artificial lamplight. Above the city, we spot vehicles flying by. The sky flares up with lightning from time to time, and ropes hanging from the ceiling of an abandoned hangar swing in the wind. The soundtrack combines the sounds of the city, the sounds of the storm, and soft music into a whole that has a soothing effect on the viewer-listener of the video, who can either relax and fall asleep or concentrate on an activity, such as reading or studying (Fig. 3).

Another example is provided by a three-hour-long video entitled *Sci-Fi/Ambience: Interstellar Passenger Shuttle*, posted on the *Frostglow ASMR* YouTube channel [29]. In this video, we traverse space as passengers of an airplane to the accompaniment of a relaxing cabin noise and the hushed voices of the flight crew talking to each other. Not much happens during the three hours, and the visuals change very little. We sit in our seat on the plane, surrounded by



Fig. 3 A journey through space is a common topic in ambience ASMR videos (Photography by Pixabay, Pexels)

a multitude of screens, including round windows through which we can see the movement of cosmic stardust, and a TV screen mounted on the seat in front of us, which displays some futuristic moving images. In both ambience videos, no people appear on the screen. Both the space of the megacity of the future and the space of a cosmic passenger shuttle seem depopulated and deserted.

Unlike people, sounds are omnipresent in ambience ASMR videos. It is believed that ambient music can create an atmosphere that helps one to study [30]. Ambient sounds have a comparable effect and can help people to focus while performing various activities [31]. There are several reasons for the ubiquity of science-fiction poetics in ambience ASMR videos. The visual and auditory megatext of science fiction is a goldmine of images of infinite spaces, uninhabited areas, the soothing noises of interstellar travel, and poignant cosmic silence. The fact that the cosmos is silent and infinite, and that humans are only a tiny element, in it can paradoxically have a soothing effect on the audience, allowing them to shed the burden of being human as the crown of creation. This awareness dovetails with posthuman thinking and enables one to open up to new arrangements and practices of being with others. The discourse of science fiction perceives the world as a complex web of interconnections and attempts to suggest solutions to various dilemmas [3, 4]. By marginalizing the narrative, ambience videos indicate that the human urge to construct meaningful and logical stories, with a well-defined beginning and ending, is not always enough to experience the world. When one

sits down in front of a computer screen and turns on an ambience ASMR video, one should reject the typically human expectations of meaningfulness, rationality, and logic. Instead, one needs to accept that the video may last even more than three hours, and that one will learn nothing from it. As the cognitive is eschewed, we must embrace the affective as our lens. As a result, we allow ourselves to feel relaxed facing the meaninglessness and humanlessness of the video. We drift through space feeling like a part of an affective and aesthetic flow. Perhaps this is when we grasp the peculiarity of the emotional structure that is post-cinematic affect.

4 Conclusion

Being relaxed is understood as the state of being free from tension and anxiety. By being ready to relax and choosing ASMR video to this end, one opens up to an experience designed to bring one into this state. One knows that experiencing relaxing tingles is always a bit of a coincidence, because one can never know for sure whether the stimuli in a given video will work for one's body. This notwithstanding, one takes the risk and opens oneself to a new experience. Tingles felt on the skin tangibly attest to one's being part of the world of matter. Feeling tingles is always beyond a person's rational, cognitive control; the sensation proves that a vital, vibrating connection has been established between the person and another element in the network of relations. In this sense, the relaxation promised by ASMR is posthuman; it puts humans on an equal footing with other components of the world, abolishing the human sense of having complete control of their own experience.

In ASMR culture, posthumanism meets post-cinema. In the twenty-first century, post-cinematic intermedia forms are the site of experimentation with posthuman experience. Post-cinematic structures provide the impetus for rethinking "new arrangements, attunements and practices of being" [2, p. 87] in today's reality. In science-fiction ASMR, this impetus is fueled by combining the familiar and the novel, by creatively reworking iconic motifs in surprising ways. The dehumanization and posthumanization of viewpoints, the juggling of human and non-human roles and perspectives, the insertion of non-human, technological mediators into the center of human experience, the dispersal and fragmentation of bodies in a network of affective connections—these are but a sample of factors that contribute to the formation of contemporary posthuman subjectivity in ASMR. The realization that humans have lost their unique position in the world can breed a sense of crisis and insignificance. However, ASMR demonstrates that it can be otherwise, as humans may turn the loss into an opportunity to rethink their place in the world, in the network of interrelations with other beings. Humans are stepping down from the pedestal, but this does not mean that they are disappearing; rather, they are proactively and optimistically opening up to what lies ahead.

Core Messages

- Posthuman sensibility manifests itself in contemporary intermedia phenomena and post-cinematic art forms, such as autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) videos.
- Post-cinematic techniques in ASMR videos, including the use of non-human viewpoints, roles, and perspectives, along with fragmentary and non-linear narratives, contribute to the mapping of posthuman experience.
- An emotional structure called “post-cinematic affect” is revealed through the science-fiction imagery used in ASMR videos.
- Accepting that humans are only one element of a vast network of interconnected beings does not fill ASMR culture with anxiety, but is a source of relaxation for the viewers-listeners of ASMR videos.

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