

COMMENTARY

Multiple interactions in new media sound art: A case study of ASMR

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ABSTRACT

The constant renewal and development of emerging technologies and new media offer more possibilities for the innovation and development of sound art. ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response), as a new product of auditory culture, is an example of the innovative development of literature and art in the context of the fusion of new technologies and new media. The dependence on the medium is a prominent feature of this kind of auditory art, and the background conditions and unique aesthetic implications of ASMR auditory art offer the possibility of a shift towards auditory culture.

Keywords: ASMR; sound art; auditory culture; new media

ASMR is a new form of cultural production in which sound art and aural culture are gradually being brought to the masses and to everyday life by new media and emerging technologies. The study of sound art can provide us with a better understanding of the background and aesthetic implications of auditory culture, as well as its significance and role for people in modern society.

1. The media dependence of ASMR

ASMR is a previously unstudied sensory phenomenon, in which individuals experience a tingling, static-like sensation across the scalp, back of the neck and at times further areas in response to specific triggering audio and visual stimuli. This sensation is widely reported to be accompanied by feelings of relaxation and well-being^[1]. It is also called “ear scratching”, “ear sound”, “brain massage” in China. There are two main types of performance in ASMR: verbal, usually soft whispers accompanied by introductions or plot interpretation, and sound effects made from objects in different ways, such as tapping on rigidly wrapped objects. ASMR relies primarily affective power of the whispered voice’s impression to create an intimate sonic space shared by the listener and the whisperer^[2]. In recent years, ASMR has entered China as an emerging art form and has gained a lot of popularity among the public.

Behind all immersive experiences in sound art is the support of advanced science and technology, which means that ASMR art has a strong media dependency. Firstly, science and technology provide the technical prerequisites to give it an immersive experience. Binaural stereo recording technology is a recording technology that can highly reproduce the true listening experience. It can simulate the shape of the human head and the distance between the left and right ears, and can reproduce a completely 3D, almost real sound

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for the listener^[3]. This gives the listener a better experience, as if they were “in the ears”. During recording and playback, the refraction, bypassing and diffraction of sound waves by the human ear, ear canal, skull and shoulders are recorded, physically reproducing the RTF (head related transfer function). The data provides a clear picture of the listener’s physical sensitivity to the sound of different voices and different objects, so that the listener’s likes and dislikes can be better understood at a scientific level, and the sound producer can make better choices of materials to provide a more refined and personal service to the listener. Secondly, internet technology has given the art of listening to ASMR an expansive dimension. Rich social media platforms and a variety of professional mobile audio platforms provide the stage for this emerging art to spread and develop, making it more accessible to audiences. At the same time, it is the convenience offered by the internet that allows listeners to gather together in a certain space of time, to talk freely about their feelings and needs in pop-ups, to interact and communicate directly with the author, and to form a certain fan base and develop a fan economy. This new art form and art medium connects users more closely to art and makes interaction more likely, allowing for a further sense of audience involvement. Especially in the new media context, the use of digital technology has given a contemporary aesthetic flavor to auditory products. The audience is not only the recipient of the language of the characters in the product, but also the giver of the connotations of sound and the control of the auditory atmosphere. Finally, headphones and other devices give the listener a personal artistic experience. The general public for the headphones a variety of effectiveness and the pursuit of higher quality prompted the headphone industry continues to develop, product updates quickly, from the development of wired headphones to wireless headphones, from in-ear development to headwear, and then bone conduction type, from 3D stereo surround sound effect development to noise cancellation. Headphones have become an essential part of today’s population, especially the youth. Headphones have provided a great opportunity for the development of aural art and an important foundation for ASMR art to better convey its unique artistic appeal. Headphones became an important final gateway to the art of binaural stereo recording, and a necessity to complete the aesthetic process. More importantly, of course, they provide the listener with a private and intimate artistic experience, free from outside interference and influence, an independent aesthetic experience.

With the new media, ASMR artworks of sound are different from what we have seen before. In terms of recording the sound material, ASMR works require the voice to be close to the pickup, even close to the pickup, at a low volume, with particular attention to signal-to-noise ratio control. ASMR occupies a liminal space between the boundaries of affect, feeling and emotion and complicates the tidy theoretical categorization we lay out for thinking about feelings, emotion, and affect^[4]. In contrast, ordinary sound productions usually require the sound source to be at a certain distance from the pickup, the amount of distance depending on the actual situation and the recorded content. In the later production process, the ASMR works are more inclined to use the better sound source characteristics obtained in the recording, and less manual intervention (such as effects unit processing) can also achieve better results. Ordinary sound works, on the other hand, have more content and more complex production techniques, and are not limited to any technique. The emphasis and tendency depend on the specific situation^[5]. In terms of the selection and avoidance of sound qualities, ASMR productions highlight lip-synching, breathing and even harsher sounds, which are avoided as much as possible in the case of normal sound productions. ASMR art is a groundbreaking experiment in new media and literature, exploring the many possibilities of literature and art, and further demonstrating the powerful influence and creativity of science and technology, offering new ideas for the future development of literature and art.

2. Changes of the subject-object relationship in ASMR

Sound always existed in a strongly mediated situation, without much opportunity to present itself on its

own. However, ASMR art breaks this traditional status of sound and allows it to be presented and expressed as a relatively independent form of existence.

ASMR art has largely expanded the aesthetic space of art, a space that is facilitated by the audience. In ASMR art, there is a greater emphasis on sound itself, the perceived object being the noise of everyday life. ASMR art is also applicable to “summoning structures”, creating a space of meaningful gaps by choosing to remove the meaningful noise of everyday life. This creates a hazy and ambiguous video maverick space for the audience, promoting an explosion of emotions in the imaginary environment inspired by the sound, invisibly promoting the audience’s aesthetic participation and filling in the gaps and uncertainties of the works’ meaning. The auditory art of the digital age is awakening the sensory structure of the audience in an infinitely open manner, promoting their active participation in bridging the gap and obtaining a new aesthetic field through imagination^[6]. In addition, this expansion of the aesthetic space is reflected in the uniqueness and diversity of the aesthetic experience; the meaning of ASMR art is constantly being refined and enriched by the audience, with each audience having its own unique experience.

The transformation of the relationship between the video maker and the work is reflected in three main ways: firstly, the video maker becomes an assistant to the presentation of sound. In the past, art forms that used sound as a medium were largely centred on the ideology of the creator and expressed only the emotions of the creator, but in ASMR art, different sounds are made by tapping on the surface of different objects and so on. It is also a process of further understanding and perception of the world. There is no longer a dominant and dominated relationship between the video maker and the work. Secondly, the video maker’s innovative thinking provides new directions for the work, for the experience and exploration of the sound world. Browsing through the ASMR artworks spread online, one will find many original types of works. One of them is a blogger called “Zhizhi Zhumian (gardenia’s sleep aid)”, which has 116,000 followers on the Xiaohongshu platform, and the existence of scene simulation and role-playing forms can be clearly felt in her works, which is also an important characteristic of ASMR art. The third is the shift from elitist to populist interpretation of art, which means that there is no necessary prerequisite between the video maker and the work, and that the work is no longer the preserve of those with the highest levels of literacy and aesthetic ability. Drawing on extant research that identifies reciprocity as a key cultural dynamic on YouTube, some scholars argued reciprocity in the ASMR YouTube community, as well as the relationship between creator and viewer, can best be understood as transactional tingles: relaxation in exchange for likes, clicks, and views within the attention economy. Transactional tingles is also a contemporary blending of more traditional art patronage and dealer-critic systems, which offers insights into the role viewers and platforms play in content creation, digital labor, and precarity^[7]. Professional bloggers usually use professional equipment, expensive binaural stereo recording equipment, and custom-made props. However, there are also many rudimentary versions of ASMR art on the internet. The publishers of these works are often enthusiasts of ASMR art, and the recording equipment they use is simply a traditional headset, with the microphone end held to a flat surface with tape to create a radio platform. The tools they use are everyday objects and the scenes are common places in life. One blogger, “Yoghurt vi”, was just a student when she was introduced to a variety of sleep aids and voice-activated videos from outside China. All of her work is made using traditional wired headphones, with the microphone side fixed to the table with transparent tape, and the sound is then made on top of the tape by rubbing things against the tape to produce the work. At the same time, the presentation of ASMR works does not require complex editing and sound recording methods, nor is there a strict need for a recording environment, making it possible for more ordinary people to produce this type of artwork. From the perspective of the relationship between video maker and work, I would argue that sound and human beings become equal in ASMR art, and even become mutually fulfilling to each other.

The relationship between the video maker and the audience also changes in ASMR art; the video maker and the audience of an ASMR video are completely equal and intertwined subjects. The video maker is no longer the sole creator, the whole video maverick process is open. The video producer can clearly understand the audience's physical sensitivity to different vocalizations and to the sound of different objects, so that he or she can better understand the audience's preferences and needs on a scientific level, and offer the personalized services. It is also possible to use audience's comments on the Internet to understand the needs of them and their reactions to specific works, so that adjustments can be made in time. In other words, in ASMR art, the video maker and the audience interact and adapt as a whole, communicating and expressing their demands and ideas rather than simply outputting and receiving as is the case with traditional artworks. The video maker aims to discover meaningful sound, leaving the aesthetic space to be filled by the audience.

3. The possibility of a shift to auditory culture

At a time when visual culture is growing rapidly and overwhelmingly in contemporary times, aural culture has emerged and is rapidly taking over the cultural market. In an era when the visual used to dominate, the aural trend seems to have decayed with it. The continuing push for "noise reduction" has created a split between the silence of the soundscape in public space on the one hand, and the noise of the soundscape in private space with the help of devices such as headphones, which also fill the sound gap in public space. Unlike ostensibly similar emotional experiences such as "aesthetic chills" from music and awe-inspiring scenarios, the psychological basis of ASMR has not yet been established. Some scholars presented two studies (one large-scale online experiment; one laboratory study) that test the emotional and physiological correlates of the ASMR response. Both studies showed that watching ASMR videos increased pleasant affect only in people who experienced ASMR^[8]. The ASMR is, to some extent, actively reclaiming the everyday noise. It evokes the listener's attention to sounds of daily life and enables them to listen to natural sounds.

The headphones isolate the external world from the external sound, constituting an exclusive private space and creating an exclusive artistic atmosphere. The listener is able to take a break from the real world in the private space of the headphones. The object of presentation is mostly the sounds of everyday life, especially noise, it is in fact an aesthetic turn from traditional art to daily life, emphasizing the aesthetic value of the universality of things. The extensive application of electronic music composition technology has made the elements of the auditory art become unprecedented diversified. In addition to the traditional music, people's auditory aesthetics accept more noise as the elements that cannot be ignored in the environment. Some forms of noise gradually evolve into the music that people expect^[9]. ASMR art is a good example of the new aesthetic needs and values of the audience, and also a new cultural label that is not only found on online video platforms, but is already being used in many other areas. This includes the combination with advertising and marketing, as in 2017 IKEA uploaded a weekly commercial video on its YouTube channel incorporating ASMR as the back-to-school season approached. The sound is similar to that of ASMR productions with a sleep aid theme, with the use of hands rubbing or tapping on the surface of the product, accompanied by a gentle voice, creating a comfortable advertising atmosphere. The combination with online TV series, the 2017 web series "He Shen (river god)" also features ASMR effects such as lots of water bubbles and the whispering voice of the main character. A dedicated channel for ASMR gamers has also now appeared on YouTube channels. Combined with realistic game graphics and realistic sound environments, it is the ultimate immersion.

One clear characteristic of urban environments is the intensity of sensory information that city dwellers are exposed to on a daily basis. In particular, urban auditory overstimulation is a pressing and persistent

concern... In summary, modern urban soundscapes seem to be associated with a range of negative sequelae but our understanding of exactly what is going on is limited. However, ASMR and misophonia act as paradigms for understanding the auditory-insular mechanisms connecting hearing and wellbeing, which is of direct relevance to the health of all city dwellers. Indeed, a better understanding of the link between hearing and wellbeing would have consequences for both individual health and society at large^[10]. In the process of breaking down inherited structures and counter-strategizing against the traditional over-inflation of the visual, it is also important to avoid falling back into the same traps that visual culture has fallen into. It is important to prevent excessive and random ASMR creation and to improve the quality of the works. Nowadays, ASMR is sometimes negatively labelled as “soft porn”, which reminds us that the internet has played a significant role in the development of art, and it is also important to be aware of the crisis that lies behind it. Some scholars proposed that the consumption of some ASMR videos can be seen as a sexual practice and the configuration of ASMRtist, viewer-listener, and digital technology can be seen as a sexual relation^[11]. In the free space of the internet, anyone can doodle on it. It provides a place for new media to live out dreams of audience, but also a paradise for cultural rubbish to be thrown around.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, YW and SZ; methodology, YW; software, SZ; validation, YW and SZ; formal analysis, SZ; investigation, SZ; resources, SZ; data curation, YW; writing—original draft preparation, SZ; writing—review and editing, YW; visualization, YW; supervision, YW; project administration, YW; funding acquisition, YW. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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