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THE CONSTRUCTION OF A DIFFERENT FANTASMATIC BODY – POST-CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE BETWEEN ASMR AND MULTI--VOCALITY

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Abstract

This essay will explore how in a post-cinematic environment, the voice introduces new forms of subjectivity that are distinct from those of the traditional cinematic discourses. According to Mary Ann Doane, to an audience, the "body reconstituted by technology and practices of the cinema is a fantasmatic body, which offers a support as well as a point of identification for the subject addressed by the film." (see: M.A Doane, Yale French Studies , 1980, No. 60, Cinema/Sound (1980), pp. 33/34.) The voice, the dialogue and the sound are part of this fantasmatic body together with the image, the space and spectator in the cinema. But what happens when the framework of image production and image perception radically changes, creating a post-cinematic condition? A post-cinematic state – a condition of streams and networks that is the status quo of today's digital culture. A state that not only affects aesthetics, but also changes the relationship between viewers, images, screens – and the very idea of subjectivity. It is here that the voice emerges in new forms. Here it plays an important role in our perception and understanding of the world and of ourselves. By examining various post-cinema phenomena such as ASMR or Networked Voices, as seen in recent experimental films by artists such as Ryan Trecartin and Lizzy Fitch, this essay will demonstrate how the voice in post-cinema creates a multiplicity of perspectives that play a key role for new technologies that constitute a subject very differently.

Keywords: post-cinema, voice, multi-vocality, subjectivity, ASMR, fantasmatic body, re-sensitization, experimental film, network realities, web experience

The Construction of A Different Fantasmatic Body – Post-Cinematic Experience Between ASMR and Multi-Vocality

> In the beginning was the Word,
> and the Word was with God,
> and the Word was God.
> John 1.1, Gospel of John,
> *New Testament, The Holy Bible*

> A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices.
> Italo Calvino, *"A King Listens", Under the Jaguar Sun*

> The maintenance of a facade predisposes a person to somatic illness because it imposes a constant stress upon the body. One tries to be what one isn't which deforms the personality and the body. When the deformation (stress) persists long enough, the internal structure of the body breaks down.
> Alexander Lowen, *The Voice of the Body*

Overture

There is a mesmerizing opening scene in Lars von Trier's film *Europa* (1991) which I consider one of my most memorable cinema experiences. Sitting in the dark cinema, the sound of the slow and monotonous rolling of train wheels on railway tracks began. After a while, out of the black, these imagined tracks appeared on the screen. This sound was then joined by a similarly repetitive cello sound that chimed in on the rhythmic pattern, before finally an additional voiceover, spoken by Max von Sydow, set in. It was an eerie voice that surrounded me and the audience. Hypnotic. A voice that began to instruct "us" to listen to it, and "we" did what these words were commanding us to do. The voice told us to count to ten – and we, like following a hypnotist through instructional patterns, were led right into a hypnosis-like film. In no time I was not just hooked to a story that began to unfold, but I was actually physically fully immersed in this film environment.

If I step away from the description of this film's beginning, step away from visualizing or recalling this scene, and look at this experience from a critical distance, some questions

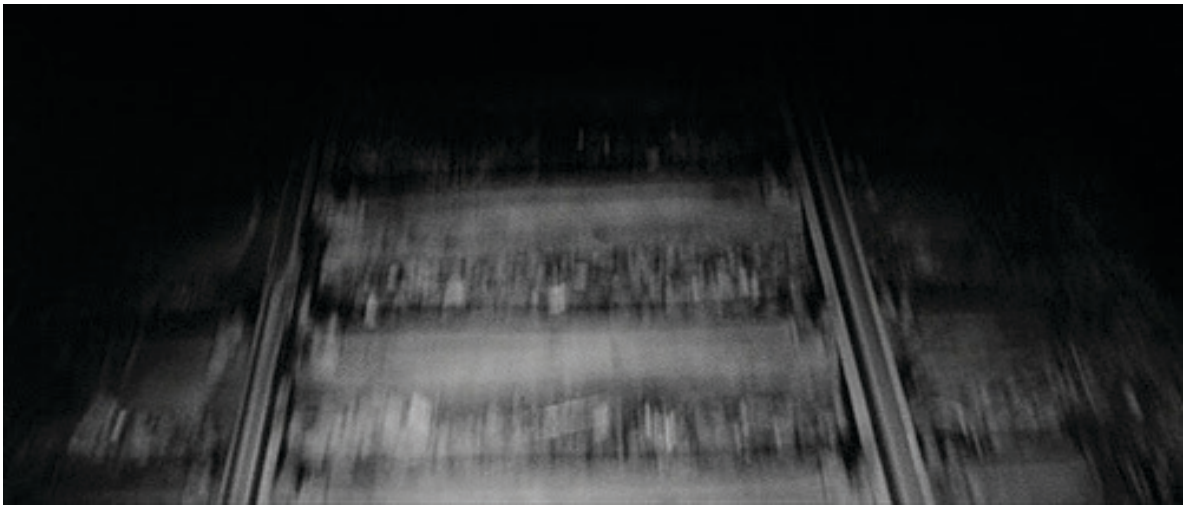

Fig. 1 Video Still from the opening scene of Lars von Trier, *Europa* (1991), 1h52min.

that relate specifically to this voice appear: Who's voice was this that I and the audience were hearing? Who was talking? And – maybe even more interesting to ask – to whom was this voice talking? This was a disembodied voice, since at no point throughout this whole film was the audience able to see a body with this voice. A voice that, as we all saw later in the film, had a similar effect on the protagonist of the movie as well as on "us" -- the viewers, every time it appeared. As the voice commanded the protagonist of the film to go deeper and deeper into the abyss of *Europa*, the audience also experienced the same magnetic pull that made them sink deeper and deeper into the movie's narrative. Escape was impossible.

Audience, voice, and the fantasmatic body

With this opening of *Europa* Lars von Trier created an intense cinematic experience in which the audience, on one hand, has a chance to understand something about the full immersive and multimodal potential of the filmic cinema environment. With that I mean that in the cinema, right from the beginning of the film, the viewers are pulled into another world. A world where they are able experience immersion in the way that Alison Griffiths has described. As "the sensation of entering a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world and that eschews conventional modes of spectatorship in favor of a more bodily participation in the experience" (Griffiths, 2008, p. 2).

On the other hand, the audience similarly has a chance to grasp the specific potential of the voice and sound in the cinematic environment. A voice that comes from somewhere else, out of the dark, and then finds its way into us, penetrates us. The philosopher Byung-Chul Han has described a similar phenomenon when he writes about a novel by Franz Kafka. He writes: "The voice comes from *elsewhere,* from the *outside*, from the *Other*. The *voices* one hears elude localization. (…) Like the gaze, it is a medium that precisely undermines self-presence, self-transparency, and inscribes the entirely Other, the unknown, the uncanny into the self" (Byung-Chul Han, 2018, P. 50).

In both of these cases (Han's understanding of the voice in Kafka's novel as well as in the cinematic experience in *Europa*) the audiences/readers literally experience how a voice is entering them and it "penetrates the sphere that eludes conscious actions. It communicates with the Other within the I, with the I as the Other" (*ibidem*, p. 51). As a result, this voice not only creates an uncanny feeling within us, but it furthermore constitutes a body.

Obviously, the voice of Max von Sydow in *Europa* is not the voice of a body that is presented in the filmic image – it does not correspond with any subject in the film. It is instead something that starts out as what Pierre Schaeffer or Michel Chion had described as *acousmatic,* which is a sound that can be heard without the source being seen (on the screen), before it develops into what Michel Chion later calls the *acousmêtre*. The *acousmêtre* is a combination of the 'acousmatic', with the French word for 'to be' or 'being' which is 'être' (Chion, 2011).

For Chion (2011), this is a significant change, since the *acousmatic* in a film usually over time is connected to a body, thus the disembodied voice receives a body in the film. In contrast to that, the *acousmêtre* might stay in this status of disembodiment, and hence creates a completely different situation that Mary Ann Doane has described, in the following way: to an audience, the "body reconstituted by technology and practices of the cinema is a fantasmatic body, which offers a support as well as a point of identification for the subject addressed by the film" (Doane, 1980, p. 33-34).[1] For our case, this means that the subject is not constituted within the logic of the film (as a character), but

1 See: Mary Ann Doane, The Voice in the Cinema: The articulation of body and space, in: *Yale French Studies* , 1980, No. 60, Cinema/Sound (1980), pp. 33/34.

instead constituted within us: the voice, dialogue and sound, together with the image, the architectural space and us (the audience) being in the cinema, is part of this formation of a *fantasmatic* body that we produce.

We understand this immediately when we go back to von Trier's *Europa*. The voice we hear is the voice of someone who is not on screen. But in connection with the images, the space and our own bodies, a *presence* is created in the space – a body in a wider sense is configured. Doane has pointed out that one of the attributes of this expanded idea of this fantasmatic body is 'first and foremost unity (through the emphasis on a coherence of the senses)" (*ibidem*, p. 34). And yes – here in *Europa*, even when the connection between image and sound has loosened quite a bit and becomes abstract. When, as Gilles Deleuze has said, the "link between man and the world is broken" (Deleuze , 1997, p. 171-172) because we are facing certain conditions (like non-diegetic sound) that challenge the more conventional relations between sound and the body in a film (like diegetic sound). As an audience we are still able to construct a unity and with that the idea of a body - only this time fantasmatic – is kept somewhat intact. Doane emphasizes this capacity of film and writes: "Even when asynchronous or 'wild' sound is utilized, the fantasmatic body's attribute of unity is not lost. It is simply displaced", and with that we see how "the body *in* the film becomes the body *of* the film" (Doane, 1980, p.35).

This is a significant shift. A shift that makes Michel Chion reconsider what the power of the voice is and what it means for an audience. He asks "Why all these powers in a voice?" and then points out:

> *Maybe because this* voice without a place *that belongs to the acousmêtre takes us back to an archaic, original stage: of the first months of life or even before birth, during which the voice was everything and it was everywhere (…) The greatest Acousmêtre is God – and even farther back, for every one of us, the Mother.*[2]
>
> (Chion, 2011, p. 163-164)

In Chion's example the voice surrounds us and we, since there is no visual distinction between our Self and the world, become the voice. And this idea finds its cinematic correspondences not only in the *acousmêtre*, but similarly in the technical developments of the black box (that negates the actual surrounding of the audience) and of the surround aesthetic that "has often been described as 'sound bath' - in terms of aesthetic effect, it aims at the experience of immersion and perfects an acoustic form of addressing, which tries to adjust the physical-concrete reality of the viewer in the cinema towards the cinematic illusion" (Rothoeler , 2006, p.159-165).

As we have said before, the *acousmêtre* phenomenon in itself is nothing new. Film audiences have had numerous chances to directly experience it in the cinema every time they are dealing with the phenomenon of the voice-over. Similarly, film scholars have frequently written about it[3], and in this theoretical field we can see that it is an aspect of our film experience that has been addressed quite regularly in film *and* cinema studies.[4]

Here, I would like to specifically highlight the aspect of cinema studies – since the case of *Europa* that I have described is a phenomenon related to the **cinema** as a/the spatial frame

2 Silverman has taken a critical approach to Chion's idea specifically in relation to the context of gendered voices. See: Kaja Silverman, *The Acousmatic Mirror – The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press 1988.

3 See publications like: Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers. Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film*. Berkeley 1988, University of California Press; or: Michel Chion, *Film, a Sound Art*, New York 2009, Columbia University Press.

4 I am pointing out this difference between film and cinema studies, since it seems to me of relevance to emphasize here the distinction between the medium itself and the spatial form its presentation. For further reading on this aspect see the above mentioned publication by Alison Griffiths.

of the filmic experience. But, considering how relevant the configuration of a fantasmatic body is in relation to space, we might want to take a closer look at some shifts that have happened in recent years that have impacted this discussion. Specifically, how, for example the increasing migration of filmic images into other spaces (the gallery, the museum, the film installation in public spaces – and even more, into the public/private YouTube channels and digital networks), has created very different spatial environments.

Post-cinematic Spaces and Soundscapes

When we consider the relevance of the voice in relation to the developments of embodiment and disembodiment in cinematic and post-cinematic environments, we have to remember how the cinema already has an interesting history concerning this. As Jean Châteauvert and André Gaudreault have pointed out:

> The type of space institutional narrative cinema creates between spectator and screen is, as a general rule, a decidedly private space, an intimate space of contemplation in which the screen addresses itself not to the multitude, but to a singular, individual, and personal spectator isolated in the intimate obscurity of the movie theater. (…) By contrast, if we except specific exhibition practices of moving images, early cinema commonly involved a resolutely public space between screen and spectator. It is not, then, an individualized spectator but an audience, a collective entity, that is implicated in the viewing situation specific to this period.
>
> (Châteauvert & Gaudreault, 2001, p. 183)

Miriam Hansen as well as Simon Rothoeler similarly have described this process as a "disembodiment" of the gaze (Hansen , 1995, p. 138). But what happens when we shift further away from this cinematic environment of the black box? A good example of this significant shift away from this specific spatial framework of the immersive movie house can be seen from the mid-1950s onward – the moment when television began to bring films into the domestic environment. It does not take much imagination to understand that the multiple sounds and multiple sensory realities of the domestic environment create a very different situation for the audience. An environment in which the viewer is not necessarily individualized on the one hand, but on the other hand is very often part of a family and surrounded by distracting elements (sounds, smells, actions etc.). If we understand this environment as a first post-cinematic apparatus, then it is clear that film is only one element of this this multipurpose machine. It is not impossible to create an immersive experience, but it is not as simple as in the cinema, where immersion is a key aspect.

Similarly, Juliane Rebentisch in her analysis of art and film installations, has shown how film installations in the museum as well break away from the classic projection architecture (cinema). What we can see is that spatial expansion in connection with new possibilities of electronic images have radically modified the spatial presentation format of image projections (Rebentisch, 2003, p. 179-207). Rebentisch, in a way, followed up on Gilles Deleuze's considerations, who, in view of the development of electronic images, had earlier emphasized a spatial reorganization with the new format that started appearing more frequently in the 1980s. He writes:

> The organization of space here (in video installations) loses its privileged directions, and first of all the privilege of the vertical which the position of the screen still displays, in favour of an omni-directional space which constantly varies its angles and co-ordinates, to exchange the vertical and the horizontal.
>
> (Deleuze, 1997, p. 265)

But as the conditions for the presentation of moving images change so drastically, we need to also consider how it is possible to constitute the fantasmatic body in these other filmic environments, and how they challenge this process in

new ways. It is quite obvious that the filmic installation definitely does not have qualities of intimacy nor privacy. On the contrary, walking through film or video installations means encountering the actual space that surrounds an audience and similarly other visitors.

Furthermore,

> *(…) the screen itself, even if it keeps a vertical position by convention, no longer seems to refer to the human posture, like a window or a painting, but rather constitutes a table of information, an opaque surface on which are inscribed 'data', information replacing nature, and the brain-city, the third eye, replacing the eyes of nature.*
>
> (Deleuze, 1997, p. 265)

I think it is accurate to say that these spatial frames for the moving image are significantly stepping away from the cinematic layout that fostered a very specific production of the fantasmatic body. With a shift into non-cinematic spaces, we have to reconsider what this configuration means not only for the relationship between the spatial dimension and the image, but as well for the formerly described idea of the production of a fantasmatic body and constitution of a Self.

But it might be surprising -- given the significant spatial difference between the cinema and exhibition spaces -- that for quite a number of film and video installations, the ability for the audience to configure a fantasmatic body as a unity can stay intact. And we can see that specifically, the impact of voice and sound is an important factor because it allows the unity to stay even in spread out spaces. Often it is the voice

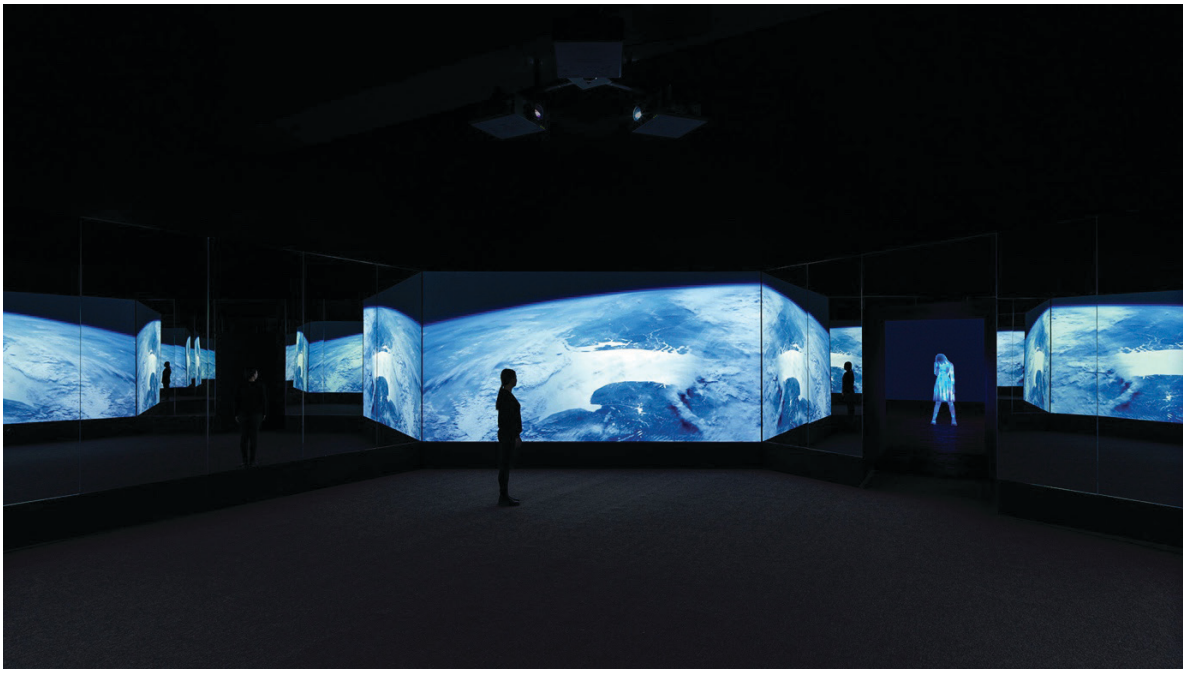

Fig. 2 Installation view of Doug Aitken's *New Era*, 2018, video-installation 10 min, 56 sec, loop; Courtesy of the artist, 303 Gallery, New York and Galerie Eva Presenhuber Zurich/New York. Photo: *Jonathan Leijonhufvud; Courtesy of Faurschou Foundation.*

and sound that keep the distributed visual parts of these non-cinematic installations together. A rhythm or a voice seems to allow the audience to keep the fantasmatic body intact, even when the visual boundaries are pushed into the post-cinematic environment of spatially distributed screens and monitors.

For Patrick Brodie this is a result of the fact that the audience can be understood like a kind of author, a voice articulated in space as he has pointed out:

> The gallery visitor, then, briefly 'occupies' the author, because the author exists as a formation of visual and audial ideas rather than as a unified subject, becoming a subjectivity whose destination is the spectator. The author exists as a figure, as a collection of values, as an assemblage of images or devices, and always as a process, articulated in some way as a 'voice' that can manifest in space in a shifting and expanding relationship with others. The aura is transformed as the voice engages in a game of hide-and-seek with the viewer, who inhabits or casts away subjectivities offered, enacting essayism in an open apparatus of meaning. The author can then be re-inscribed into the corporeal by the interactive spectator engaging with the work through space. By re-inscribing the author into the work of art as a dispersed rather than unified individual voice, the discursive boundaries etched into space by institutional divisions can be transgressed. The author-acousmêtre, in a game of hide-and-seek, is once again made mobile by spectators moving through the exhibition spaces.
>
> (Brodie, 2016)

Let's sum up: even if in the post-cinematic environment the image is able to appear on the floor, on the ceiling, and it no longer has to be perceived on a wall by a seated, front-facing audience, the voice can still create the unity of a fantasmatic body. In these installations, the voice moves through the installations and allows us to explore the relationship between space, pictorial space and viewer. And because of this, as Deleuze points out, we experience a new situation in which finally, "sound (is) achieving an autonomy ...., sound and visual, enter into complex relations (....). In all these senses, the new spiritual automatism in turn refers to new psychological automata" (Brodie, 2016, 265-266). Voice and sound are set free – not only from the connection to the visible body, but even more general from the subordination to the image.

Realizing the impact of this spatial shift we have to ask ourselves: What happens to the constitution of the fantasmatic body when the frames of image production and image perception change even more in a post-cinematic condition? Which spaces do we have to consider and which new role can the voice or sound play there? What new forms and phenomena appear? How do they configure us as an audience? And can we see new conditions that severely impact not only aesthetics, but change the relationship between viewers, sounds, images, screens – and the very idea of the fantasmatic body and with that of subjectivity?

In the following part of this essay I would like to take a short look at two different examples that I think are particularly interesting in relation to these questions: On the one hand the popular media phenomenon of ASMR videos that have been flooding not only YouTube channels over the last decade, but that have increasingly become a research topic. On the other hand, I would like to take a closer look/listen at some of the videos by American artist Ryan Trecartin and his collaborator Lizzy Fitch. Both artists have together created a body of video works and installations that over the last few years have opened up interesting questions crucially related to the role of the voice and the fantasmatic body.

The sound of a brush and my whisper - Voices in ASMR Videos

When we leave the frame of the museum and gallery and head into newer spatial frames of film perception, we are often confronted with the realities of digital networks and their manifestation on our computers and on our mobile phones. And these assemblages, as Steven Shaviro has said, these "[d]igital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience" (Shaviro, 2010, p.2). While film installations in museums asked the audience to constitute the fantasmatic body when moving through the images, the internet and its film platforms create a new environment. Even though I will mainly address questions related to these platform formats, it is of course relevant to keep in mind that these digital spaces are always connected to the technological spaces of our phones and computers. While the stationary computer might still resonate with a spatial situation similar to that of the home TV, the mobile phone is a different ballgame. We don't just carry that screen around with us -- the screen is always wherever we are. The new spatial environment of the mobile screen then seems to become more and more an extension of the self.[5] The mobile phone conversation in itself is already a field with a discourse on presence and embodiment (Rettie, 2005), but it is the same tool that is used as an access point to film platforms like Netflix or video sharing and social media formats like YouTube. So, let's take a look into a phenomenon like ASMR videos, that has only appeared through these platforms, and consider how they open up the question of the fantasmatic body.

ASMR videos are a young cultural phenomenon that over the last decade has gained increasing interest from various academic fields ranging from media studies to psychology, and from cultural studies to neuro- and the social-sciences.[6] The phenomenon first appeared around the year 2007 through a forum on the website www.steadyhealth.com. From there, the theme quickly developed further into ASMR discussion sites, the first ASMR blogs, the first ASMR research websites, the first sharing of YouTube links for stimulating ASMR, as well as to several terms for the sensation before it was called ASMR and finally the coining of the term 'ASMR'.[7]

Subsumed under this name are usually videos mainly distributed through the YouTube platform. The videos aim to cause experiences that are often described as a "silvery sparkle in the brain" or a "weird head sensation" (Young & Blansert, 2015, p. 78). Joanna Łapińska perfectly summarized the descriptions of several researchers in the field when she wrote:

> This feeling is most often referred to as brain/head tingles, and it appears as a response to various stimuli, especially of visual, auditory, olfactory, and/or cognitive nature (Sadowski 2016, 32). The most popular

5 See: Chang Sup Park and Barbara K. Kaye. "Smartphone and Self-Extension: Functionally, Anthropomorphically, and Ontologically Extending Self via the Smartphone." In, *Mobile Media & Communication*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 215–31; Shari P. Walsh and Katherine M. White. "Me, My Mobile, and I: The Role of Self- and Prototypical Identity Influences in the Prediction of Mobile Phone Behavior." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 37, no. 10, 2007, pp. 2405–34;

6 In 2012 the director for General Neurology at the Yale School of Medicine Steven Novella stated whether ASMR is a real phenomenon, "In this case, I don't think there is a definitive answer, but I am inclined to believe that it is. Several people seem to have independently experienced and described" it with "fairly specific details. In this way it's similar to migraine headaches – we know they exist as a syndrome primarily because many different people report the same constellation of symptoms and natural history". See: Steven Novella, (12 March 2012). "ASMR". Neurologica Blog. New England Skeptical Society. See: https://theness.com/neurologicablog/index.php/asmr/ Retrieved: 11.09.2022. or: Steven Novella, (12 March 2012). "ASMR". Skepticblog.org. See: https://www.skepticblog.org/2012/03/12/asmr/ Retrieved: 11.09.2022.

7 A good summary on the phenomenon can be found at the ASMR University, see: https://asmruniversity.com/2015/09/23/podcast-birth-history-asmr-community/. Retrieved: 11.09.2022

> triggers include: whispering in a soft voice, slow and calming hand movements, clicking and brushing sounds, crisp sounds, paying attention to another person, sounds made by lips (e.g., while eating or speaking), and other (Barratt and Davis 2015, p. 1; Sadowski 2016, p. 32). In their works, ASMR artists use a combination of various popular stimuli designed to have a relaxing and calming effect on the viewer who usually watches their favorite videos before bedtime, treating them as a way to relax but also as a cure for insomnia and depression (Poerio et al. 2018).
>
> (Łapińska, 2021, p. 153-168)

Even though they are mostly described as positive effects (calming, relaxing, even orgasmic), in recent years some audiences have had similarly strong negative reactions. For the latter, the videos were too intense and hence resulted in an opposite effect (disgust or creeping horror). On these occasions, the phenomenon then has been referred to as *misophonia* and is often addressed in close proximity to ASMR.[8] What is interesting to see is that most of the analysis (whether related to positive or negative responses) look usually into the effect of the sound component itself (*what* do the whisper or the quiet sounds evoke). Occasionally there are analytical approaches that look into the visual narratives of these videos (What are created stories, and characters? Who is speaking or making the sounds, etc?). And what is often absent is an analysis which takes a closer look at the mediation and spatial environment that constitute these experiences. But this is an interesting aspect since it opens up numerous factors related to the fantasmatic body that we have addressed before.

So let's start by looking at what specifically triggers the positive and negative responses to the ASMR videos. When we analyze the blogs and commentaries on the webpages that present ASMR, it is mainly the experience of a close voice, swallowing, breathing, sounds of hair being combed, etc, that creates a response. These are all narrow sound experiences that create the feeling of extreme intimate spaces. The cinema knew this phenomenon as well and it is again Michel Chion who formulated some thoughts concerning these intimate sounds of the voice. For the specifics of what he calls the filmic I-Voice experience he expands:

> We might call this an effect of corporeal implication, or involvement of the spectator's body, when the voice makes us feel in our body the vibration of the body of the other, of the character who serves as a vehicle for the identification. The extreme case of corporeal implication occurs when there is no dialogue or words, but only closely present breathing or groans or sighs. We often have as much difficulty distancing ourselves from this to the degree that the sex, age, and identity of the one who thus breathes, groans, and suffers aren't marked in the voice. It could be me, you, he, she.
>
> (Chion, 2011, p.53)

What Chion (2011) is pointing out here again is that hearing an intimate voice/sound in a public space like the cinema can create a collapse of the separation between the self and the world. It is again something comparable to pre-natal or early childhood situations he mentioned before. But we have to remember that the YouTube environment is not the dark individual space we have in the cinema. And most importantly, in relation to ASMR videos, there is a significant difference since instead of a disembodied voice, we see the opposite -- a voice that is radically embodied. In ASMR videos we experience a body, an intimate voice or a sound, that is not only there, but that addresses the audience directly. This very actively breaks the 4th wall.

8 See the blog entry "ASMR and Misophonia. Sounds Crazy" related to the seminar at Penn State. See: https://sites.psu.edu/siowfa15/2015/09/16/asmr-and-misophonia-sounds-crazy/, Retrieved: 11.09.2022.

Fig. 3 Stream caption of Maria one of the ASMR protagonists on YouTube.

We see a variety of protagonists speaking to "us" in a soft voice, whispering, mediated by a high-end microphone, which creates an immediate back and forth between the performer on screen and the sensations that the audience is experiencing. Invoking ideas of therapeutic sessions, bedtime moments (motherly or eroticized), and often roleplay. The so called "Fixing you" videos, in which we see a person in the video addressing us the audience as children, or even 'poor androids' that need to be fixed, are good examples that Joanna Łapińska has pointed out (2021).

What is clear is that all these videos create a subjective point-of-view situation. They put us – the audience – through the narrative and camera position, in a fixed position of the child, patient, or "the android" that undergoes a series of processes in which the bodily sensorium is activated and with that – configured. In other words: it is the combination of camera angles (that creates a face-to-face situation quite similar to our Face Time and Zoom experiences) and the established narrative (speaking 'directly' to us) that invites the audience not just to create an intimate private space, but to configure itself as a regressive subject that is, depending on the storyline, a child, patient or non-human android. Here it is not the story or the image that is putting the audience back in the archaic or original space where 'mommy' or 'daddy' now has taken the lead: it is mostly the voice and the intimate sound of fingernail tapping or hair brushing that does that. And in contrast to the active movement that we saw before in the gallery space, ASMR voices offer not only a fantasmatic self that we know from classic film and cinema, but instead a situation that resonates that early childhood space and where the audience creates a fantasmatic self that is like that old childhood Self: helpless and passive.

As a result, for Steven Shaviro, these "machines for generating affects" are very interesting. He points out: "I am interested in the ways that recent film and video works are expressive: that is to say, in the ways that they give voice (or better, give sounds and images) to a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today, although it cannot be attributed to any subject in particular." Furthermore he states:

> *Films and music videos, like other media works, are machines for generating affect, and for capitalizing upon, or extracting value from, this affect. As such, they are not ideological superstructures, as an older sort of Marxist criticism would have it. Rather, they lie at the very heart of social production, circulation, and distribution. They generate subjectivity; and they play a crucial role in the valorization of capital.*
>
> (Shaviro, 2010, p.2-3)

What does this mean now for our ASMR example and the idea of the fantasmatic self? For this it is helpful to see how Shaviro connects to the ideas of Brian Massumi and says:

> *For Massumi, affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful a 'content' that can be attributed to an already-constituted subject. Emotion is affect*

> *captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject. Subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they have or possess their own emotions*.
>
> (Shaviro, 2010, p. 3)

If we follow this idea, we understand the ASMR format as affective, which means that it constitutes a fantasmatic self that is intensive, non-conscious and overwhelmed.

Similarly, we have to consider that this situation is not only a single screen or installation experience, but that these works fall under a wider spatial frame of *new media*. Therefore it is not so much the single ASMR video as a single work that we have to understand, but we need to see them as part of a wider environment – the global YouTube environment that is distributed into myriad spaces both public and private. Again it is Łapińska who points out that

> *(…) the 'post-cinematic moment' we are currently living in provides 'the myriad reconfigurations of the cinematic', and the media-based artworks 'that grapple with new forms of subjectivity and interpellation' […] are more common than ever. Willis sees these facts as a reflection of a kind of broadly understood post-human sensitivity revealed in post-cinematic artworks being a testimony to 'a culture in transition' – a culture switching, as the researcher wants, from representation to information, 'from the visual to the networked, from the seen to the tracked'. Such understanding also means that it is a slow, but inevitable, move from a very humanist, rational, anthropocentric reality that is centred around humans as the crown of all creation, to one that is more inclusive, affective, assemblage-like, hybrid, and, last but not least, posthuman.*
>
> (Łapińska, 2021, p. 156)

With the example of the ASMR videos we shift from a fantasmatic body to something that seems more like a fantasmatic post-human field, which brings us directly to our second example.

The voices of Ryan Trecartin & Lizzy Fitch

Ryan Trecartin is a contemporary performance-based video artist from the USA who works in close collaboration with Lizzie Fitch.[9] Their performances and videos are often subsumed under the headline 'postinternet art', which is understood as

> (…) a movement that is consciously created in a context which assumes the centrality of the internet as a network. All things internet are used as its source material, including aesthetics and social implications (or ramifications) are fair game. The post internet engages in and comments on the changing nature and saturation of the image, the circulation of cultural objects, the politics of participation, the new understandings of materiality and of the self, the idea of a hyperreality and the obsolescence of the physical.
>
> (Rooney, 2022)

The works of Trecartin and Fitch can be described as super intense cacophonies that bring together multiple layers of visual and acoustic spheres in which digital effects, constantly changing narratives and similarly constantly changing characters create a very challenging environment for the audience. As Rooney puts it:

> His [Trecartin's] multifaceted works focus on the way technology is changing our perceptions of ourselves as 'people simultaneously negotiate divergent presentations of themselves for a variety of contexts.' Such concepts are played out onscreen in the language of millennial teen culture, as self-aware actors

9 I would like to highlight that both artists are not constantly collaborating but work individually as well.

Fig. 4 Still from Ryan Trecartin & Lizzy Fitch, I-BE AREA (2007), digital color video with sound, 2h8min.

> play to the camera, reflecting a generation shaped by media over-stimulation and hyper-capitalist consumption. [… They] are the highly stylized extreme digital representations of the social media "personas" we have been trained to adopt. We created social media, but in turn it has "created" a new "us" right back.
>
> (Rooney, 2022)

The characters we see can wear masks, face paint, or are constantly alternated through a diverse range of digital modifications – they shift colors, genders, identities and forms, or have digital add-ons. Furthermore, these multiple character positions interact while they are changing. They involve each other in bizarre conversations that seem to make no sense, and similarly address the camera which slightly resembles the form of reality TV or YouTube channels (here more advice formats than the formerly described ASMR).

For Lisa Åkerval this

> (…) operation corresponds with postcinematic media cultures' broader tendency to abandon naturalistic perceptual norms in favour of voices, rhythms, editing styles and stories that exceed and overwhelm perceptual and cognitive faculties. In this way, Trecartin and Fitch's postcinematic aesthetics renders tangible the deconstruction of the human sensorium as well as its uncomfortable expansion and supplementation

> in contemporary media cultures, revealing a kind of digital and medial reconstruction of everyday sensibilities.
>
> A postcinematic aesthetics necessarily relates to changes in subjectivity. What kind of a subject are we dealing with here? I have suggested that we think about this new subject as a networked self, which is fractured and multiple.
>
> (Åkerval, 2016, p. 42)

Thus, when we are confronted with multiple windows that constantly pop up or disappear, where all identities and characters that are introduced become fluid, and the narrative strategies collapse, it is clear that any traditional attempts to deal with this experience and to constitute a fantasmatic self must fail.

Trecartin himself said in relation to his video I-BE AREA (2007):

> There is this character I-Be 2, whom I play, and he's a clone who's trying to find his independent identity. The basic idea of the film is that what identifies people is not necessarily their bodies anymore; it's all the relationships they maintain with others. You are your area, rather than you are yourself. If someone describes you, that description becomes a part of your area, whether you like it or not.
>
> (Tomkins, 2022)

Art scholar Cassandra Tytler has highlighted in her doctoral thesis that she reads specifically I-BE AREA therefore as a parafeminist approach. This means "when Trecartin speaks of one's area, I take it that he means the online identity positions we align ourselves with." (Tytler, 2021, p. 41). We flip through identities like flipping through YouTube channels. And even though it is not really possible for the audience to configure a fantasmatic body as we have considered it before, the body - through this intensified new form - is always present. Only this time more along the lines of queerness that Tytler with reference to Angela Jones has described as a

> (…) disruption of 'any fixed identity/subject/body' categories. Through a reading of Donna Haraway, she calls for an unfixing of subject categories through the cyborg or technological body: The cyborg or techno-body opens up the possibilities for asking new questions about subjectivity and destroys essential categories of organization. … On a micro-level individuals can force society to slowly change merely by behaving 'queerly.' The hybridization of bodies and technologies forces people to rethink how they understand and perceive human life.
>
> (Tytler, 2021, p. 41)

Trecartin and Fitch seem in alignment with this strategy, since their works are more interested in a constant disruption of these preconfigured body (and hence self) categories. He and Fitch demonstrate that subject categories are flexible not only in *I-BE AREA*, but in numerous other works like *(Tommy-Chat Just E-mailed Me.)* (2006), or *Roamie View: History Enhancement (Re'Search Wait'S)*, (2009-2010). And Maggie Nelson points out that all these works are a:

> (…) riotous exploration of what kinds of space, identity, physicality, language, sexuality, and consciousness might make possible once one leaves the dichotomy of the virtual and the real behind, along with a whole host of other need-not-apply binaries (the everyday and the apocalyptic, the public and the private, the utopic and the dystopic, male and female, gay and straight, among them).
>
> (Nelson, 2011, p. 48)

The question that remains is how do we deal with this challenge? Because "*I-Be Area* takes incapacity -- to absorb, to make sense, to cohere, to sort, to concentrate -- as its starting point. . . then it amplifies this incapacity by turning up the

speed, the color, the hysteria, the flicker" – and last but not least the sounds and voices. This demands our attention. But it is worth it. The blogger Dawn, in one of her posts called 'distraction,' perfectly sums up why that is (as painful and challenging it sometimes might be) and writes:

> (…) to stay with I-Be Area all the way through - to listen to every word, to follow every decision and cut - requires a keen effort. you'll get the most out of it if you, too, can concentrate on distraction. of course you may not remember much of what happened; you may not remember any of the characters; you may not even be left with an image. if your experience resembles mine, you'll be left with something far more amorphous - a kind of vibrating memory of the unnerving psychic state the work induced, or captured, or invented."
>
> (Dawn, 2022)

Rather than attempting to configure a fantasmatic body, the audience is thus offered the opportunity to create and become a radically new form – a fantasmatic *area* or a zone open to development and constant change.

It is a challenge to embrace this shift towards a new form. To create a fantasmatic zone instead of a body. Hence, an immediate experience of the radical nature of Fitch and Trecartin's works will therefore often lead to situations of irritation or helplessness due to their form and complex structure. But it might help to step back and understand this development as the result of the interplay of audience, voice, and the concept of the fantasmatic body in the context of cinema and post-cinematic spaces. If we can see the historical connections and know how the cinematic experience immerses the audience in an alternative world and explore the impact of disembodied voices on the audience's sense of self, it is possible to connect the dots. And similarly, if we can recognize the shifting spatial environments of film and video installations and emphasize the role of voice and sound in maintaining a sense of unity in non-cinematic settings, a challenging environment like a Fitch/Trecartin installation can open new perspectives. Recognizing these developments allows us to understand the transformation of the embodied voice in gallery spaces and digital environments. But then again, – the proof of the pudding is in the eating, meaning that no matter how much we theorize about what is happening and how to make sense of these experiences, ultimately these works are about immersion, and they challenge us to get into a zone and even further to become a fantasmatic area.

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