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## Touchscreens, tactility, and material traces: From avant-garde artists to Instagram ASMRtists

Jennifer O'Meara

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**Keywords:** ASMR videos, avant-garde film, digital video, gesture, Instagram, synaesthesia, tactility, touchscreens

This article will identify and historicise gestural trends in ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) videos on the social media site Instagram, where media objects foregrounding touch and texture are shared via specialist accounts and hashtags such as #satisfyingvideos and #slimeasmr. Released initially for the iPhone on 6 October 2010, Instagram (owned by Facebook) offers users a way to take pictures and videos and also to apply different manipulation tools to media already saved on their smart device. As of 20 September 2019, there were almost 7.5 million posts tagged with #ASMR on Instagram, often applied to videos involving soap crunching, paint mixing, and slime shaping. The ASMR hashtag is often combined with ones like #satisfyingvideos, which has 2.5 million posts, or #soapcutting, which has over 400 thousand posts (see Figure 1).

ASMR refers to a euphoric, tingling bodily sensation triggered by specific auditory or visual stimuli. The acronym, a neologism coined on Reddit in 2010, has been noted for its conscious deployment of a scientific style of terminology – one intended to distance online communities focused around the sensation from associations with sexual fetishes and subcultural taboos.[2] In keeping with this aim of the terminology, much of the initial research on the topic has focused on understanding the psychological and physiological components of this sensation, one whose existence emerged only as a result of its popularity in digital media communities.[3] Such science-based studies, including the work of E.L. Barratt and N.J. Davis, found a high prevalence of synaesthesia (5.9%) within the sample, suggesting that ASMR is potentially a

form of this neurological condition that results in a merging of senses that are not normally connected.[4] Barratt and Davis' data suggests that individuals who engage in ASMR videos can also experience temporary improvements in symptoms of depression and chronic pain. Scientific studies such as this one tend to incorporate ASMR videos featuring common 'triggers', such as whispering and slow repetitive movement, into their quantitative analysis by measuring physiological responses to watching them.[5] But they do so without paying commensurate attention to the videos' aesthetic properties, ones that might be central to their impact.



Fig. 1: Screenshot of the public Instagram feed of 'asmr\_soap\_princess', a sample soap-crunching account.[1]

Research into ASMR from more of a media studies perspective has tended to focus on its manifestation on YouTube and the significance of gendered forms of role-playing and sound properties, particularly as they relate to whispering.[6] Indeed there is no denying the significance of such sound properties since, as Rob Gallagher notes, ASMR videos seem preoccupied with what Michel Chion terms ‘materializing sound indices’ (such as tapping and crinkling), which can allow us to “feel” the material conditions of the sound source’.[7] And yet, as I aim to explore here through reference to theories of haptic visuality and the touchscreen, the hand and eye of both the so-called ‘ASMRtist’ and the audience are equally bound up in ASMR videos’ aesthetic treatment of indexical traces. Furthermore, although Gallagher is focused on ASMR culture’s relationship to search algorithms and data mining architecture over analysis of specific videos, he describes a trend for videos in which ‘ASMRtists manipulate objects (hairbrushes, putty, pebbles, feathers)’.[8] So while Gallagher limits the function of this trend to the acoustic properties of ‘produc[ing] “tingly” sounds’, I will instead highlight the visual properties of these textures and manipulated objects, with an emphasis on the role of hands as manipulators.

In particular, I wish to historicise the filming of dexterous hands that interact with ASMR subjects like soap, slime, and paint in relation to practices of avant-garde film and women’s decorative arts, examining how these forms of media can visually represent traces of the creator’s hand in the work itself. In considering, for example, Stan Brakhage’s hand-painted films and Mary Ellen Bute’s use of the oscilloscope as a proto-touchscreen device, I aim to reveal how both kinds of creators can channel the mediums and platforms of their times towards distinctly tactile kinds of audiovisual experience. By historicising the aesthetics and technologies of ASMR in relation to the work of twentieth century avant-garde filmmakers, many of whom also experienced or aimed to express properties of synaesthesia, I will thus suggest the comparative value of incorporating such precursors into any clinical uses of ASMR videos by researchers approaching them from a more scientific perspective. Relative to those studies focused on whispering and role playing, my focus on videos that foreground hands will also reveal some more redemptive gendered properties of ASMR culture. I position the trend as a new iteration of women’s historical interest in various decorative and tactile arts (such as embroidery and decoration), while also considering how the imagined audience for such tactile videos seems more likely to be female-identifying than those in YouTube’s ASMR community.

The specifics of Instagram's touchscreen-driven interface further confirm the significance of hands – both those of so-called 'ASMRtists' and the audiences who watch and activate the videos using their own fingers – to ASMR videos.[9] By engaging with scholarship on hand-held and touchscreen devices, such as that of Heidi Rae Cooley and David Parisi, I position the hand-focused ASMR videos in relation to studies of how mobile screen devices allow for more tactile forms of vision. Initially writing on handheld devices pre-touchscreen, Cooley identifies the sensual forms of viewing that can be facilitated through handheld devices – with such forms of tactile vision intensifying since 2007 with the popular emergence of touchscreen interfaces on the iPhone and similar devices.[10] More specifically, I align hand-focused ASMR videos with Parisi's discussion of the fifth phase of haptic interfacing, that of the twenty-first century, wherein digital technology firms like Apple and Nintendo 'crafted an image of the cultural sensorium in a state of urgent crisis that touch interfaces were uniquely qualified to alleviate'.[11] As Parisi argues in *Archaeologies of Touch*, advertising campaigns for Apple iPhones and Nintendo DS game consoles presented a narrative that 'the sense of touch has been forgotten, left behind, and marginalized by a media interfacing schematic overdependent on audiovisual technologies'.[12] Parisi explains that advertisements for such products sought to 'foster a desire in consumers to reconnect with their lost sense of touch', while also fetishising the 'technologized reincarnation' of touch, one signalling towards 'a utopic future of fully embodied presence in digital worlds'.[13] As the remainder of this article will explore, the appeal and impact of hand-focused ASMR videos further extends on tactile forms of vision and on the narrative that digital technologies can facilitate a remediated reconnection with touch.

### **Instagram, touchscreens, and the (unsatisfied) promise of tangibility**

As noted, virtually all of the emerging studies on ASMR culture use YouTube to source videos – an understandable direction given that early ASMR communities emerged there. Yet the particularities of Instagram's social media platform can allow for distinct forms of ASMR videos being made and consumed. These can potentially result from Instagram's default square framing for videos uploaded to feeds, or from the platform's 60-second video limit

on their content and style (especially compared to much longer ASMR videos on YouTube).[14] As part of the first in-depth study of Instagram, Lev Manovich has developed a taxonomy of images focused on three photo types: 'casual', 'professional', and 'designed'. [15] Here, 'casual' photos are candid and downplay careful framing, while 'professional' photos follow the conventions of 'good' photographic compositions. The 'designed' category instead emphasises an alternative form of imagery, often driven by the conventions of graphic design and overhead 'flat lay' compositions. The designed category is most relevant to the stylised and at times formulaic nature of most ASMR videos, and though Manovich focuses on the platform's still rather than video content, his insights nonetheless provide a useful starting point for examining the aesthetics of these videos. Indeed, as it has been defined so far ASMR requires a sense of live movement or sound, meaning Instagram videos but not images can provoke ASMR responses tied to their presentation of sensorial triggers. ASMR videos, like the designed photos Manovich classifies, tend to focus on close-ups, shallow spaces, and strict dominant lines.[16] Also relevant is Manovich's discussion of the tendency for close-ups of body parts. The body in 'designed' photos is often presented in a medium shot or close-up, such as the hands or the feet.[17] Such photos can be viewed as precursors to many of the properties of the body in Instagram's ASMR videos, particularly since the abstracted, anonymised body part is often set against interesting patterns. ASMR videos tend to involve more extreme versions of the 'designed' image properties by presenting stylised hands in combination with stylised textured materials (soap, slime, paint, etc.) The videos often include extreme colour combinations and patterns, but ones that are in motion.

Unlike YouTube and other social media platforms, Instagram requires content to be uploaded directly via smartphone or tablet and so intuitively signals the potentially crucial role of the touchscreen in understanding ASMR videos that foreground hands and their tactile encounters. These hands, accessed and activated by the viewer's own hands on their touchscreen device, may present opportunities to temporarily overcome what Timo Kaerlein terms the 'irritating deficiencies' of touchscreens in their everyday use and to rework the 'promise of immediacy' that such screens suggest but do not always deliver.[18] Kaerlein identifies the *tangibility* of the touchscreen as one of its most meaningful qualities: 'In a world of cloud computing, big data, constant algorithmic interpretation of behavior, and hardware that operates on the nano scale, the touchscreen suggests tangibility where there is little to none.' [19] Focusing on projected capacitance touchscreens, the dominant

kind used in smart devices, Kaerlein discusses the promise of immediacy such screens provide; whereby the users' fingers are offered immediate access to items on a screen, in contrast to the more indirect access provided by keyboards and mouses. The finger literally serves as a conductor which distorts the electrical particles on the surface of the screen, leading to a change in the content projected.[20]

Although this set-up can offer convergence between the user's body, the screen itself, and the content displayed therein, it also sets up an undeliverable sense of tactile control over that content – one that ASMR videos can serve to exploit. While the viewer scrolls through content and touches the screen to play the selected video, the very tactile objects contained within are always out of reach. Unlike the Instagram viewer whose finger activates the video, the hands within the diegetic world of the videos exercise total control and are often remarkably dexterous: slicing a blade through soap to create perfect tiny cubes; swiftly kneading a mound of slime into a range of shapes; swirling blobs of paint into pleasing colours, or rhythmically painting strokes onto a revolving surface. Thus, such videos and, indeed, such hands, seem to overcome the 'irritating deficiencies' of touchscreens as identified by Kaerlein and other theorists of the touchscreen. These include grease spots resulting from the oil in human skin or scratches on the screen.[21]

For touchscreen users, such deficiencies are not necessarily registered as problems with the screen technology but can instead be experienced as problems with the self. As Kaerlein puts it, 'The human user is obviously not adaptable enough for the screen to utilise only its desired properties (charge) and prevent others (oiliness).'[22] The tendency for users to internalise the problems as personal flaws is perhaps best exemplified in reference to the self-description of 'fat fingers' – often used to explain typos resulting from the precision required to accurately type on a small, touchscreen keyboard.[23] As Cooley addresses, the design logics of handheld devices (particularly the utopian ideals of Apple iPhone's marketing terminology) collapse 'a plurality of individual hands into the abstract ideal' of a universal human hand.[24] The impossibility of such a one-size-fits-all-hands model further contributes to the deficiencies of such hand-held devices, including those of the touchscreen interface. By contrast, the anonymous hands of ASMR videos are perfect foils to the hands of users who leave unwanted traces of residue on their touchscreen. With such hands frequently dressed up via manicure to match the subject they are touching, we might consider this as confirmation that the hands within ASMR videos are offered up as

ideals in terms of surface and skill. Within the space of a hand-focused ASMR video, the hand leaves only intentional traces on the object being touched – something I will return to when considering how such videos present opportunities to aestheticise issues of (digital) indexicality.

In these ways, hand-focused ASMR videos can be viewed as an alternative to various prototypes developed by hardware companies and computer scientists with a view to providing touchscreens with the sense of tactile variability and satisfaction they currently lack. For example, in 2012 Tactus Technology began to publicise their touchscreen with dynamic keys that could raise into a standard keyboard, as enabled by a layer of fluid under the screen (Figure 2).[25]



Fig. 2: Screenshot from a 2013 promotional video for the Tactus Tactile Touchscreen.[26]

In a related experiment, in 2011 a team of Japanese researchers created the ‘FuSA<sup>2</sup> Touch Display’, which uses plastic fiber optic bundles to realise a soft and raised texture.[27] Named after the Japanese term for furry (*fusa fusa*), the developers noted that the ‘tactile sensation of this surface affords various interactions such as stroking or clawing’.[28] Such technologies, neither of which have emerged on the mass markets in the interim years, signal toward the current shortfall between touchscreens’ promise of immediacy and tangibility and their limited ability to provide a fully tactile pleasure. Indeed, as Parisi notes, ‘the popular and scientific narrative mobilized around haptic interfaces continually portray them as technologies belonging to an imminent but perpetually deferred future, with haptic researchers still questing after an elusive “Holy Grail” of touch interfacing’.[29] It is this perpetual deferral and



discrepancy between immediacy and tangibility that ASMR videos can address in more overtly mediated ways, through their formal presentation of hand-manipulated materials and their alignment with properties of haptic visuality.

## Material surfaces and haptic visuality

Writing in *The Language of New Media* in 2001, Manovich argues that ‘the computer screen becomes a battlefield for a number of incompatible definitions – depth and surface, opaqueness and transparency, image as illusionary space and image as instrument for action’.[30] While not referring to a touchscreen, several of the tensions Manovich identifies seem central to the ASMR videos under focus, tensions which are intensified further when accessed via touchscreen. In particular, the ‘satisfying’ nature of these videos often relies on the gradual revelation of the object’s depth over the course of the video. The videos generally allocate a few seconds to the object (slime, soap, etc.) in static form, allowing the viewer time to observe its surface – alluding to the plasticity of the object that will subsequently be changed into a new form. It is then the role of the hands to reveal the hidden depth of the object through an encounter with it as a material structure: slicing through layers of partially cut soap to disperse tiny cubes onto the surface below, or suddenly penetrating a neat ball of slime, kneading its texture and shape into a very different form.

As the term ‘penetrate’ might already suggest, the relationship between the hands and that which they touch can have certain erotic connotations – ones that are generally denied by those active in digital ASMR communities. Joceline Andersen and Emma Leigh Waldron explore this as part of their analyses of whisper and role-play communities.[31] Andersen notes that ‘the ASMR community is careful to police the location of ASMR along the near end of a scale of pleasure that begins with relaxation and ends with eroticism’.[32] While both scholars are focused on sonic forms of digitally-enabled intimacy, the aesthetics of the tactile-focused ASMR videos under discussion relate better to Laura U. Marks’ exploration of touch in relation to ‘multisensory’ media.[33] In particular, Marks’ concept of haptic visuality – where ‘the eyes themselves function like organs of touch’ – aligns closely with ASMR videos’ foregrounding of tactile materials.[34] In contrast to optic vis-

uality, its haptic variation ‘draws from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics’.[35] Writing on such visuality in relation to cinema and other media in 2002, Marks identifies an increased desire ‘to squeeze the sense of touch out of an audiovisual medium’, along with a desire ‘to make images that appeal explicitly to the viewer’s body’.[36] Her use of the word ‘squeeze’ seems particularly apt to the ASMR videos under discussion, given how frequently the squeezing of tactile objects is central to both the audio and visual impact of these videos.

Marks discusses the erotic capacities of haptic visuality, which she links in part to such media, which ‘[push] the viewer’s look back to the surface of the image’.[37] Significantly, given the aforementioned associations of ASMR with fetishistic inclinations, Marks argues that ‘haptic images are erotic regardless of their content’, due to the intersubjective relationship they construct between the beholder and the image, and in the way ‘a viewer engages with this surface and in dialectical movement between the surface and the depth of the image’.[38] Invoking the same tension between surface and depth as Manovich does in relation to the computer screen, Marks’ theorisation of haptic visuality applies as well to the formal style of the ASMR examples discussed previously, where everything from the close-up shot and square framing to the heavily textured object prioritises a focus on the surface of the image. These surfaces are shaped in novel ways by the intervening hands that reveal new depths to the objects.

Addressing the kinds of subjects that lend themselves to haptic visuality, Marks cites Michael O’Reilly’s experimental film *Glass Jaw* (1991), wherein ‘[s]mall objects become tactile universes that have a visceral pull’, as when ‘a shot of the vortex in a blender where O’Reilly concocts his liquid meal takes on engulfing proportions’.[39] Many ASMR videos can equally be described as creating tactile universes within which the visceral pull is often tied to the movement of these universes – as activated by hands and/or other means (such as a spinning surface). Though the small touchscreens on which ASMR videos are typically exhibited seem to oppose the impression of ‘engulfing proportions’, the magnification of an object through an extreme close-up nonetheless lends the materials a sense of proportion they do not have off-screen. In this and other ways, ASMR videos link back to avant-garde practices, such as the play with scale and duration in Hollis Frampton’s *Lemon* (1969). This seven-minute long film is composed of a single shot of a still lemon, in close-up, with the changing of light and shadow revealing and concealing different parts of the fruit’s texture. Frampton’s choice of subject was

directly tied to the scale of the exhibition screen: in this case, Frampton explains that *Lemon* was ‘distinctly made for a very large screen’.[40] ASMR videos are oriented instead towards the conventions of digital media consumption in general (often via a small screen) and Instagram’s platform in particular (with its default square frame and one-minute limit for videos). Yet they share a certain haptic visuality with films like Frampton’s as well as a tendency for their sensuality to be viewed as sexual. Much as *Lemon* was frequently interpreted as erotic, with the silhouette of the lemon viewed as that of a breast,[41] ASMR videos often have fetishistic associations projected onto their malleable surfaces.

### **Synaesthesia, tactility, and dexterity from early avant-garde cinema to ASMR videos**

This link to Frampton’s *Lemon* is part of a much broader series of comparisons one can make between the sensory aesthetics of ASMR videos and historical avant-garde media. One might draw a line back to Vienna Actionists like Otto Mühl, whose Dadaist films like *6/64 Mama und Papa* (1964) placed an emphasis on bodily engagement with tactile materials including clay, paint, feathers, and balloons.[42] Resulting from the controversial Actionists’ concept of *materialaktion*, engagement between the filmed bodies and these materials was similarly interpreted as sexual and led to police intervention at their artistic events.[43]

But the ASMR antecedents go back further still, to the likes of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray’s *Anémic Cinéma* (1926). The film was made by filming nine rotating cardboard disks with spirals drawn on them and ten rotating disks inscribed with verbal puns (Figure 3). Alternating on screen, these disks turn in different directions and at varying speeds, with the spirals seeming to pulse in and out as though three-dimensional.[44] Both kinds of disks were seen to make sexual allusions, those showing spirals through their visual pulsation and those showing texts through the frequent sexual connotations of their puns. Thus, although we are only watching moving shapes and words, the repetition and the speed aim to have a hypnotic or even arousing effect on the viewer’s body – not unlike the apparent tingling sensation ASMR videos can have on those who respond to the videoed triggers. One thus wonders how clinical studies of ASMR could benefit from such comparisons and from

more consultation with media studies scholars who can pinpoint such aesthetic precursors. For example, might those who experience a sense of euphoria or relaxation from ASMR videos also experience this when watching aesthetically similar avant-garde films?

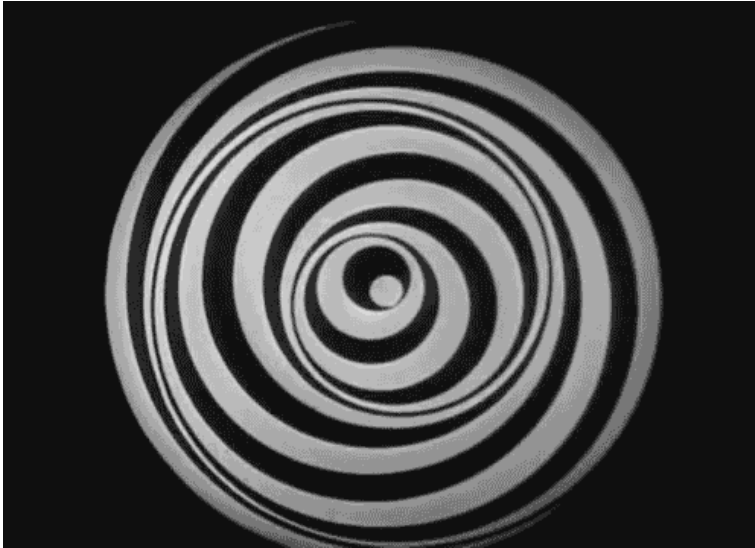


Fig. 3. GIF of rotating spiral disks in *Anemic Cinema* (1926).

The imperative for such clinical comparisons is more urgent given that ASMR and early avant-garde media are also linked through their ties to synaesthesia. Across the twentieth century, numerous artists and experimental filmmakers have cited synaesthesia as something they experience or aim to express through their creative works. Wassily Kandinsky, a founding member of Der Blaue Reiter expressionist group, spoke of the influence of synaesthesia on his abstract and rhythmic merging of music, imagery, and colour.[45] According to Michelle Leigh, Kandinsky would hear tones and chords when he painted, with '[t]he synaesthesia with which Kandinsky purportedly painted also function[ing] in the mind of the viewer'.[46] Stan Brakhage's concepts and artistic practices are more relevant still to ASMR videos, including his various forms of hand-processing and cameraless films: from hand-painted films like *Polite Madness* (1966) to Brakhage's final work, *The Chinese Series* (2003), made up of 35mm film that he scratched with his nails and with the intention that the film would end wherever he stopped scratching.[47] Randolph Jordan notes the filmmaker's 'desire to blur the

boundaries between the senses’, and describes Brakhage as a ‘synesthesia enthusiast’.[48] On the streaming site Vimeo one can now access a behind-the-scenes video of Brakhage’s tactile filmmaking methods, recorded and shared by filmmaker Phil Solomon.[49] Indeed, were it not for the horizontal framing one could mistake the video of his hands painting the filmstrip for that of an Instagram ASMR video (Figure 4).



Fig. 4: Screenshots from Vimeo footage of Stan Brakhage hand painting a film.

Mary Ellen Bute's technologically-grounded works are perhaps the ultimate precursor to touch-based ASMR videos. As even the title of Bute's abstract shorts series, *Seeing Sound*, suggests, her films were underpinned by synaesthesia-based properties. With films like *Rhythm in Light* (1934), Bute's subjects for abstraction were hand-drawn geometric figures and three-dimensional objects such as egg beaters and bracelets; subjects whose representational character were altered through lighting and camera effects.[50] Yet it is Bute's pioneering use of oscilloscope technologies in her work that provides the most intriguing historical link to ASMR videos that merge touchscreens and tactile subjects. *Abstronic* (1952) was made in conjunction with a cathode ray oscilloscope machine, with the 35mm film capturing and amending the shapes of electron beams manipulated through the machine (Figure 5). Combining technology with hand colouring and traditional animation techniques, the end result was a dynamic combination of moving shapes, colours, and patterns. With a consistent use of swirling circles and a candy-coloured palette of bright pink and green, the film's formal properties seem designed to simultaneously calm, hypnotise, and visually stimulate the audience, much like those of ASMR videos and other Bute films like *Color Rhapsodie* (1948) (Figure 6).

As noted, the functioning of touchscreens depends on a finger that serves as a conductor which distorts the electrical particles on the surface of the screen and thus leading to a change in the content projected. As I have suggested, hand-focused ASMR videos build on audiences' shared experience of using touchscreens in this way, but they also seem to compensate for the inherent frustrations this setup can result in: touching objects through a screen, but never touching them in a concrete way. ASMR videos can represent a response to this limitation, in the sense of creating videos focused on hands that do get to touch (and crunch, and mold, and swirl) the objects. Bute used the technologies of her time to a similar effect, working directly with Bell Telephone Laboratories to adapt an oscilloscope for artistic rather than scientific purposes.[51] Much as the ASMRtist molds the main subject of the video, Bute's creative application of the machine depended on her dexterity and ability to work the machine with her hands to achieve the shapes she desired (Figure 7). As Bute explains in her 1954 essay: 'By turning knobs and switches on a control board I could "draw" with a beam of light with as much freedom as with a brush.'[52]



Figs 5, 6: Screenshots from Mary Ellen Bute's *Abstronic* (1952) and *Color Rhapsodie* (1948).



Fig. 7: Mary Ellen Bute using her hand to 'draw' with an oscilloscope adapted for artistic purposes.

Thus, while there are clear distinctions between the ASMR videos under focus and Bute's artistic use of the oscilloscope, they share a number of important traits: an interest in visually representing traces of the creator's hand in the work itself, and an understanding of how to adapt the technologies and platforms of the time for this purpose. Bute effectively adapted the cathode ray oscillograph into a proto-touchscreen that could record her hands' traces. And though touchscreens are now ubiquitous technologies, their inability to deliver on the promise of tangibility means that they are still not capable of providing the kind of tactile impressions Bute achieved with an oscillograph – in turn leading to the popularity of tactile ASMR videos that can at least record and replay that level of tactile control.

Beyond the dependence on creators' dexterity and the media focus on tactile materials, even the use of square-framed videos aligns Instagram content with diverse experiments within twentieth-century visual culture. As Miriam Ross explains: 'Although visual culture has produced art in a variety of forms (square, circular, oval, portrait rectangle, landscape rectangle) and across different media, moving-image production has been mainly confined to a landscape rectangular format that is most commonly found in either a



4:3 or 16:9 aspect ratio.’[53] By encouraging videos to be presented in a square frame, Instagram’s formal conventions gesture back not only to the likes of Polaroid photographs (a frequent reference point for the platform) but to early cinema when, as Ross notes, ‘there was no obvious technological precedent for this standard [horizontal framing]’.[54] Writing on vertical framing in relation to online videos, Ross explores the negative responses to such videos as inherently amateur and flawed, since ‘they depart from the professional standard of horizontal composition’.[55] Ross’ insights regarding the unofficial regulation of digital video framing are useful to reconsider in relation to Instagram’s default square format for posting videos and images on the main ‘feed’. Though users have the option to manually alter the format to a horizontal frame, this remains a relatively uncommon strategy for videos, including those within the ASMR genre. Ross identifies a trend for talking characters to be presented in vertically framed videos, noting that ‘the vertical mode frames events in ways that suit the subject matter’.[56] Similar to traditional narrative filmmaking, the emphasis is thus placed on the human figure as the focal point – with the background space deemed less important. By contrast, square-framed ASMR videos are directly opposed to presentations of the human as a cohesive figure. Instead, the abstracted body is further aligned with the abstracted body parts of Dadaist films like *Ballet Mécanique* (Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, 1924) and *Ghosts Before Breakfast* (Hans Richter, 1928), where hands and mouths are routinely detached from the body as a whole (Figures 8, 9).



Fig. 8: GIF of an abstracted close-up of a mouth in *Ballet Mécanique* (1924).



Fig. 9: GIF of a detaching hand in *Ghosts Before Breakfast* (1928).

The tendency for ASMR videos to foreground detailed precision is also well-suited to a square frame – one that is inherently symmetrical. Such framing fits well with the effect of ASMR videos as typically dependent on a short controlled disruption to a tactile subject matter.

### **Indexicality and (filmed) fingerprints**

As discussed, the fundamental role of hands in many ASMR Instagram videos can be linked to their ability to make manifest the tactile immediacy implicitly promised by the touchscreen interface – if only in mediated form. Such videos can provide a useful case study for thinking through various theories of indexicality in relation to digital video, by considering how the imprints of the creators' hands serve as literal traces on the recorded object. Understanding such a trend again requires looking back to analogue antecedents, whether the thumbprint of Marcel Duchamp that appears on the closing copyright card of *Anémic Cinéma* (Figure 10) or, decades later, the Pinscreen toys which allowed users to create 3D imprints of their hands using a screen-based surface.

As Nanna Verhoeff and Cooley note, '[a]s both a material and performative navigational interface the mobile touchscreen confronts us with a constitutive paradox involving the status of the indexical trace'.<sup>[57]</sup> They

acknowledge the skepticism that predominates in relation to indexicality within the context of digital technologies, resulting from both the possibility of digital manipulation and from the lack of concrete indexical properties inherent to photography/film; where light-sensitive chemicals ‘inscribe a material substrate with a referent’s imprint’, thus offering proof of the represented object’s past presence.[58] While noting that fingerprint residue on touchscreens offers a traditional indexical marker, they highlight the relative lack of meaning detectable from such marks. Verhoeff and Cooley instead suggest a move towards acknowledging *gesture*, a broader approach than indexicality, which they conceive as ‘part of a category of the index of a techno-practice that entails an intertwining of technology and subjectivity’.[59] Here they refer to the ‘gesture of the navigator which involves bodily orientation and positioning as well as tactile interactions with the touchscreen’ that traces presence ‘whether or not a physical trace remains’.[60]

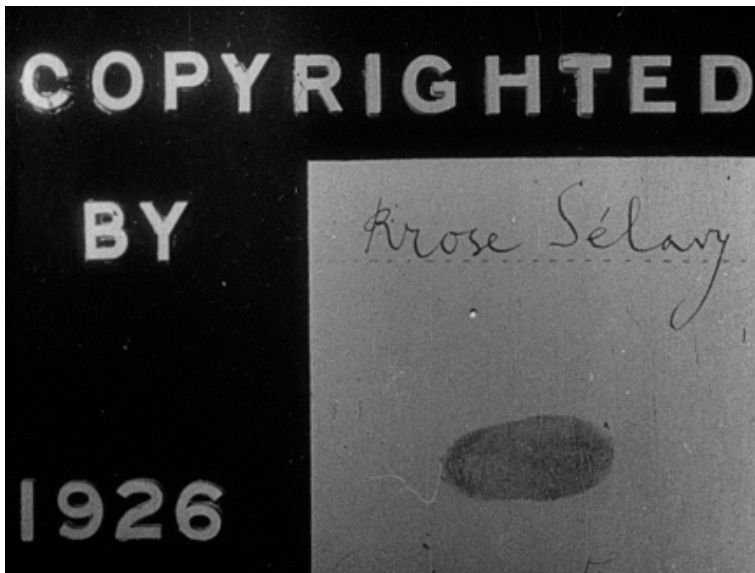


Fig. 10: Marcel Duchamp's thumbprint as presented in the copyright card of *Anémic Cinéma* (1926).

What is notable about tactile, hand-focused ASMR videos is the way they seem to renegotiate both forms of indexicality (material imprints and gestures of the screen navigator) through a combination of the media content and the way that it is accessed – via the Instagram app and generally via a touchscreen. Significantly, videoed imprints of the recorded hands on the

various objects (slime, paint, soap) seem to verify the status of said object as something tangibly *real* – as opposed to being computer-generated imagery, or real-world materials that have subsequently been digitally manipulated. While the videos may be digitally edited in terms of colour saturation, square framing, and video speed, the recorded imprints of the videoed hands on the slime, soap, or paint provide ‘proof’ that this interaction took place, as do the commensurate sounds from it happening: the material sound indices that Gallagher has already observed in relation to ASMR videos.[61] With both the visual and sonic properties, the correspondence between the hands and the changes to the material are too entwined to be rendered digitally. There is also the significance of what Verhoeff and Cooley attribute to the ‘gesture of the navigator’ – the person who interacts with their touchscreen and leads to an intertwinement of technology and subjectivity as related to bodily orientation and positioning. With ASMR videos, the act of a finger literally *pressing* play might reveal a bodily orientation that seeks vicarious touch: I can touch my touchscreen and set the displayed, surrogate hands in motion, *even though* I cannot touch the tactile objects that these surrogate hands can touch.

With this notion of gesture in mind, I wish to consider the Pinscreen toy as an intermediary point on the wavy historical line I am suggesting between the role of hands and tactility for twentieth century avant-garde artists and twenty-first century ASMRtists. First patented in 1987, a Pinscreen consists of a boxed surface made up of an array of pins that slide in and out against a clear screen in order to create a three-dimensional imprint.[62] Although any kind of object can be pressed up against the pins to create a shape, the size of the toy frequently led to the pins being pushed against hands, leading to the 3D imprint of a hand, composed of hundreds of pins pushed up against a Perspex screen (Figure 11).

Pinscreen impressions can be made in two ways, depending on whether the object is pushed into the pins that have been tipped out from against the clear screen, or whether the object is placed against the toy before the pins are tipped out. Although the hand imprint created may turn out exactly the same, the former requires the user to exert a lot more pressure: literally pushing in each of the pins. Yet the easier option, wherein the hand is immersed in all the pins at once (simply by being placed against the flat surface and then tipping the toy) can be just as sensorially satisfying. The hand itself has to do a lot less, benefiting from just placing itself against the flat surface and activating the rest of the pins with a single flip of the other wrist. A gestural analogy with the ASMR videos thus comes into focus: for the hands in question,

a receptiveness to the available tactile stimuli can be enough for the experience to be pleasurable. In both cases, the feeling of tactile stimulation does not require that the receiving hands do much of the work. Just as the Pin-screen can create a 3D impression of the hand, without the hand itself pushing forth the pins, the hand that activates a tactile ASMR video can feel *at one with* the material substance they set in motion with a single touch of the video screen.



Fig. 11: GIF of a hand creating a 3D pinscreen impression.

The idea that the hand can become a part of the object it literally or technologically touches can be further understood in relation to media philosopher Lorenz Engell's explanation of how touch can overcome 'the deep split between the subject and the object'.<sup>[63]</sup> As Engell explains, touch 'does not separate subject and object' because '[i]n touch, subject and object are experienced at the very same time'.<sup>[64]</sup> As I will now explore, in ASMR videos this impression can be strengthened by a tendency for colour coordination between the hands (generally belonging to women) and the objects that they touch. So although the subject is typically the person or thing doing some-

thing, and the object is having something done to it, in both Pinscreen imprints and hand-focused ASMR videos these lines are blurred. This aspect of the hand-focused videos further supports my argument that their *visual* aesthetics are significant to their impact. It also allows for some consideration of how the gendered dynamics in such videos can depart from their YouTube-based variations.

### **Feminised hands and ASMR videos as (digital) decorative arts**

As part of Andersen's study of YouTube's ASMR whisper community she examines the distinct gendering of whispering ASMR performers and relates this to the scenarios performed for the camera – which usually take place in domestic settings and involve scenarios of intimate care like massages.[65] For Andersen, 'ASMR has a clear gender bias, recreating heteronormative models of care and intimacy directed by women toward men.'[66] In the YouTube whisper videos under discussion, the performer's gender identification is generally made clear by their presence in front of the camera, as well as their vocal qualities. Instagram's shorter, hand-focused ASMR videos could potentially allow for more ambiguity – were it not for the account names (as with 'asmr\_soap\_queen') and the fact the hands themselves are often notably feminised with jewellery and manicured nails that are often colour-coordinated to complement the main subject of the video. Equally remarkable is the tendency for the objects touched to be 'dressed up', even if the object is quickly destroyed by the hands in the video. Soaps are often painted or dipped in glitter, and carefully curled shards of soap are arranged in intricate patterns. Similarly, in slime-based videos, the slime is often mixed with glitter or other tiny decorations in order to make it look almost edible, like a carefully constructed ice cream sundae. In such instances, the synaesthetic properties go beyond those of touch, sight, and sound, to also appeal to that of taste, and in ways that align with David Howes' concept of 'hyperaesthesia', whereby products are invested with 'sensuous appeal' and are used in 'non-rational but aesthetic' ways.[67] As Gallagher rightly notes, 'ASMR video culture involves repurposing media and commodities to “hyperaesthetic” ends’.[68] and this is especially apparent in Instagram's hand-focused videos where materials like soap and paint are used wastefully.

As part of this hyperaesthetic trend, one might interpret the feminising of the hands of ASMRtists as a reinforcement of gender binaries: by suggesting that even a woman's hands must be beautified in order to be worthy of the gaze of the camera and audience. Though a degree of this may be present I would instead position the trend as a new iteration of women's historical interest in various decorative and tactile arts (such as weaving, embroidery, and decoration), as theorised by scholars of aesthetics such as Naomi Schor.[69] Marks also addresses this history in relation to touch and multi-sensory media, noting that such traditions involve 'intimate, detailed images that invite a small, caressing gaze', and that art history has tended to deem such practices as secondary to grand compositions and important subjects.[70] From the careful preparation and decoration of soap, slime, and paint to the carefully painted nails, hand-focused ASMR videos instead make a feature of intricate detail and decorative skill while ignoring 'grand' compositions and 'important' subjects.

If, as Luce Irigaray suggests, 'women take pleasure more from touching than from looking' then the gender dynamics of tactile ASMR videos are something of a coup.[71] Unlike the intimate care dynamics of the ASMR whisper community videos, those focused on hands are potentially as pleasurable for the (female) creator to make as they are for the audience to watch. Furthermore, while Andersen's study implies that the (imagined) audience of the YouTube whisper videos is a heterosexual man who takes pleasure in receiving – or at least perceiving – care from the woman in the video, the imagined audience for the tactile videos would appear to be female-identifying. This view is supported by statistics on Instagram demographics, which suggest that the social media platform is dominated by women, who also strongly influence patterns and trends on the site.[72] As such, I would position this ASMR trend as another instance of haptic forms of visual culture being part of what Marks terms 'a feminist visual *strategy*' and underground visual tradition.[73] What has changed, however, is the relative ease with which women can make and share such decorative works. As part of the broader democratisation of media creation and distribution enabled by digital cameras and platforms, we might thus see a commensurate rise in the value – or at least the visibility – of smaller, more decorative forms of visual art. Conversely, given that there is little to no monetary reward for creating such videos, ones that can equally be used to relax or soothe those who watch them, such videos are still not ideal in terms of rewarding their (female) creators for their labour and talent.[74]

## Conclusion

Trends in Instagram's ASMR videos have emerged in part due to a confluence of technological factors, including the ubiquity of touchscreens and the interface of the photo-based app. Yet like so many so-called 'new media' trends, such videos can be viewed as a revisiting of much earlier analogue practices, particularly when attention is paid to the role and requirements of hand-made traces in selected twentieth century avant-garde film, along with other analogue precursors. ASMR videos share formal and thematic features with traditions within experimental cinema, with both concerned with tactile forms of vision and the pleasure of patterns, colours, and material textures rather than narrative, as well as being associated with a merging of senses that connects scientific understandings of ASMR as a form of synaesthesia to avant-garde artists who also experienced it. As such, future science-based studies could benefit from also measuring comparative responses to the kinds of twentieth century films explored in this paper.

Like their avant-garde forbearers, ASMRtists can demonstrate notable dexterity. The performing hands are increasingly recorded as they leave indexical traces on the soap, slime, and paint. Such ASMR videos thus reveal new trends in tactile vision, and new ways of blurring lines between object and subject and capturing indexicality where the digital recording lacks analogue indexical traces. With Instagram videos activated through the finger on a touchscreen, the anonymous surrogate hands allow for a vicarious kind of tactile pleasure, one that can lead to digital forms of embodied screen experiences related to relaxation and sensory stimulation.

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## Notes

- [1] 'asmr\_soap\_princess' 2019.
- [2] See Bjelić 2016, p. 101 and Waldron 2017.
- [3] For examples, see: Barratt & Davis 2015; del Campo & Kehle 2016; Poerio & Blakey & Hostler, et al, 2018.
- [4] Barratt & Davis 2015, pp. 10-11. Subsequent scholars have delved further into the connections with synaesthesia. See Cash & Heisick & Papesh 2018.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [6] See, for example: Andersen 2015; Bjelić 2016; Gallagher 2016; Waldron 2017.
- [7] Chion 1994, p. 114, cited in Gallagher 2016.
- [8] Gallagher 2016.
- [9] Used by those in the ASMR communities, the term 'ASMRtist' is also employed by scholars including Gallagher (2016) and Waldron (2017).
- [10] See Cooley 2004, 2014.
- [11] Parisi 2018, p. 9.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- [14] For examples of YouTube ASMR videos of one hour or more see 'Gibi ASMR' 2019 and 'Karuna Satori ASMR' 2019.
- [15] Manovich 2017, pp. 24-70.
- [16] *Ibid.*, pp. 67-69.
- [17] *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.
- [18] Kaerlein 2012.
- [19] *Ibid.*
- [20] *Ibid.*
- [21] See Kaerlein 2012; Verhoeff & Cooley 2014.
- [22] Kaerlein 2012.
- [23] For an early example of this language see Barras 2008.
- [24] Cooley 2014, p. 28.
- [25] Ribeiro 2012.
- [26] 'WIRED' 2013.
- [27] Nakajima & Itoh & Tsukitani, et. al 2011, pp. 35-44.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

- [29] Parisi 2018, p. 3.
- [30] Manovich 2001, p. 90.
- [31] Andersen 2015; Waldron 2017.
- [32] Andersen 2015, p. 692.
- [33] Marks 2002.
- [34] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
- [35] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
- [36] Ibid., p. 4.
- [37] Ibid., p. 4.
- [38] Ibid., p. 13.
- [39] Ibid., p. 11.
- [40] Carnegie Museum of Art 2015.
- [41] For example, see Osterweil 2005, p. xxxix.
- [42] 'Acquarello' 2017.
- [43] Ibid.
- [44] MoMA 2013.
- [45] Leigh 2012, p. 241.
- [46] Ibid., p. 241.
- [47] Frye 2002.
- [48] Jordan 2003.
- [49] Solomon 2012.
- [50] Jutz 2009, pp. 76-83.
- [51] Leigh 2012, p. 242.
- [52] Bute 1954.
- [53] Ross 2014.
- [54] Ibid.
- [55] Ibid.
- [56] Ibid.
- [57] Verhoeff & Cooley 2014.
- [58] Ibid.
- [59] Ibid.
- [60] Ibid.
- [61] Gallagher 2016.
- [62] United States Patent 1987.
- [63] Engell 2013.
- [64] Ibid.

- [65] Andersen 2014, pp. 692-694.
- [66] Ibid., p. 692.
- [67] Howes 2005, p. 298, cited in Gallagher 2016.
- [68] Gallagher 2016.
- [69] Schor 1987.
- [70] Marks 2002, p. 6.
- [71] Irigaray 1985, p. 26.
- [72] See Seligson 2016.
- [73] Marks 2002, p. 7.
- [74] For more on the labour and care logics of ASMR culture see *Bjelić 2016* and *Waldron 2017*.