Stuplimitous Sticky Networks: The Psycho-politics of ASMR as Noise in the Neoliberal Context

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Introduction

Checking the YouTube description box of any Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR for short) video will inform a skeptical viewer of the object's intended use: the sole purpose, most uploaders will insist, is to evoke the unique soothing experience of 'tingles'. These meta-textual instructions are already a key marker of difference from other more typical videos on YouTube. However, the novelty, and at times controversy, of the phenomenon most clearly lies in the 'R 'of ASMR: the unusual tingle response. The 'tingles 'is a bodily sensation that is most often described as electric rippling waves traveling from the top of the head to the rest of the body that induces a 'euphoric' sense of relaxation in a person. It is sometimes referred to as 'brain-orgasms', but' tingles ' is the more euphemistic and preferred nomenclature. Advocates of the genre prefer to distance ASMR from sexuality, and claim it is a wholly platonic endeavour. Despite the erotic undertones (or sometimes overtones) that invite derision and comparison to sexual fetish , the promotion of ASMR's therapeutic applications have shifted popular opinion of the practice from bizarre niche to widely accepted as a form of 'self-help'.

Academic research potentially re-produces the therapeutic framing that aligns with a favourable framing of the intentions and benefits of participating in 'ASMR community'. The associated health benefits of the tingle reaction are increasingly being supported by the findings of psycho-somatic studies. Psycho-scientific disciplines have been quick to investigate and have developed working theories for the response as a remnant of bio-evolutionary bonding hormones. As such, ASMR has come to be conceptually defined through cognitive sciences and framed in the context of digitally-mediated intimacy and discourses of care (van Reeven). Viewers report using the videos to self-regulate medical issues ranging from sensory overwhelm to anxiety, insomnia and other sleep disorders, as well as PTSD. Comments sections of videos are full of users testifying to the benefits of ritually watching (and even falling asleep to) ASMR videos. However, the breadth of research has been limited in genre and focused on reading for discourse.

Firstly, the videos selected as cases for these studies often fall under the category of 'Personal Attention' or 'Role Play' videos. Both are styles in which a (single) human performer looks straight into the lens and addresses the viewer in the second person while enacting scenarios of caregiving (i.e. cleansing 'your' face, or braiding 'your' hair). The 'ASMRtist'- the producer-performer of the ASMR video- invites the viewer to bring their phone screen close to their face, thereby filling their field of view. The use of headphones is strongly recommended for a more immersive experience of

the intricate binaural sound designs they have composed. Researchers argue that human brains, incapable of telling in-person human proximity from the closeness of a virtual performer, benefit in both cases of the sense of intimacy necessary for human well-being. Even ignoring many of the neurotypical presumptions that these researchers leave unaddressed, there are entire sub-genres of ASMR that do not fit into these descriptions and go unaccounted for in the current research.

Secondly, the 'euphoric 'component is highlighted, while the shocking, disgusting, or boring dimensions of the experience is oft overlooked in popular discussion and academic research. Squelching, popping, sloshing and other gooey sounds seem like the stuff of horror films. They are associated with states of heightened arousal– whether pejorative in shock, fear, disgust, or positive in pleasurable eroticism. They do not however conjure the notion of relaxation and comfort. And yet, these wet sticky sounds are routinely found in ASMR videos. The connotations of horror and pornography that wet sticky sounds evoke seem at direct odds with the primary use of ASMR videos, and the 'tingly' sleepiness they are intended to induce. It is perhaps for this reason that these sounds are routinely underrepresented in mainstream discussions about ASMR, as well as the burgeoning field of academic research surrounding it.

Moreover, the 'ASMRtists' who create the videos frequently disclaim that their videos should not replace the advice and treatment of medical professionals. Nevertheless, they are lauded as benevolent caregivers. Such effusive claims may seem hyperbolic, but the caring attention that ASMRtists provide their viewership with is absent from other domains of these users' lives. Many have argued that the absence of this care is a consequence of the failings of neoliberal capitalist society which is "paving the way to disorientation and ill-being" (Paasonen 2). We may be connected more intensely through the ubiquity of networks than ever before, but loneliness remains a growing social concern. The commonly accepted description of 'tingles' make the experience sound therapeutic, cathartic, and pleasurable, and ultimately, benignant. On a societal level, these are qualities that are appreciated for the role they potentially play in rejuvenating those members of society that would otherwise not function without videos and tingles in therapeutic doses.

In actuality, the phenomenon of ASMR is full of contradictions that are often swept under the rug. Encounters with these videos can produce a wide range of affective experiences that are downplayed in favour of simplicity. Even the tingles reaction is far more heterogenous and difficult to define, as is the breadth of styles and sub-genres that exist within the umbrella category of 'ASMR'. I believe this is in part due to a lack of close reading in favour of reading for discourse and ideology.

The sounds most commonly associated with ASMR videos are 'dry': whispering, tapping, scratching, and snipping. However, ASMR there are thousands of new videos posted every day and a staggering variety of niches, with more constantly emerging. A persisting unspoken condition for the acceptance of ASMR into the mainstream is the routine downplaying of the 'wet' sounds that are the bread and butter of so many sub-genres. Squelching– a lesser cited, but equally endemic sound to the world of ASMR appetites– is rarely addressed. This paper will focus on the lesser-known sub-genres of 'Slime' and 'Ear-licking' (itself a sub-category of 'Extreme Mouth Sounds') ASMR videos where these wet squelching sounds confront the audience with ambivalence in ways 'dry' sound videos do not.

I will not be the first to use affect to read ASMR. However, this often comes at the expense of reading the materiality of the video itself. Affect in past analyses has been attributed to the semantic and discursive formations that are re-presented in ASMR videos. In such cases, the concept of affect is treated solely as an *effect* on the viewer, not a quality that is synthetically produced by material qualities in the work, nor in the encounter where the work and the audience meet. Research outside of this spectatorial-centric path has been limited. Furthermore, the digital networked context of ASMR on YouTube rarely features in the affective reading. In this respect, I will be taking note of Eugenie Brinkema's call to return to the methods of close reading; as she says, "Affect is not where reading is no longer needed" (xiv). However, acknowledging the place of subjectivity in an encounter does not necessarily limit affect theory to merely the solipsistic accounts Brinkema warns against that account only for" *her* felt stirrings, *his* intense disgust" (31). As Hillis et. al note, scholars are also capable of evoking "a strategic I" in an effort to breach "the conventions of scholarly detachment and the predominance of the disembodied, often passive, textual voice of academic narration" especially in cases where sensuality and embodiment are central (12). For this thesis I will follow the kernel in Brinkema's call to read affect in form, but nonetheless draw on the larger corpus of research in affect theory, such as Sianne Ngai and Vivian Sobchack, as well as affective research pertaining specifically on digital networks, such as Susanna Paasonen and Wendy Hui Kyuong Chun.

I will argue in this thesis that it is necessary to reintroduce ambiguity and contradiction to the analysis of ASMR as a phenomenon. As much as they are capable of being a source of relaxation and comfort, they can also disturb and bore. Attending to the formal qualities of these videos, rather than the discursive formations they reveal, brings both, the repetitive and tedious characteristics, as well as the shocking and uncanny dimensions to the fore. Instead of reiterating therapeutic framings, reading formal qualities contradicts notions of usefulness and synthesizes ambivalent affective encounters. Two close reading of exemplary case studies will ground my argumentation in this thesis; I will read boredom in Slime ASMR, and disgust in Mouth Sound ASMR videos respectively. Boredom and

disgust are treated as synthetic discursive constructions– not presumed to be natural or super-linguistic– as doing so opens these affects to legibility and contradiction.

Through dysphoric affects ASMR produces potentialities for uncomfortable synthetic encounters with its audience that 'thicken' the subjective experience of time and space. This ability to thicken time introduces resistance to the therapeutic framings which are all too easily mobilised by the capitalist discourses of productivity. The resistance that I am identifying can be reformulated in terms analogous to the electronic network in which it is situated as noise in a system imagined as immaterial and believed to be perfectly slick. The formal qualities of these videos exhibit characteristics that cultivate a non-normative mode of perception that oscillates between heightened embodied proprioceptive awareness and a diffuse embodied awareness of the digital environment. This creates an encounter that by extension, also allows the audience to become aware of the material infrastructure in which the interaction takes place- a digital space which typically seeks to be as seamless as possible. I will use Sianne Ngai's concept of 'Stuplimity' as a framework to read the mode of perception the videos invite.

Furthermore, I will adapt Pepita Hesselberth's account of 'the cinematic' and the simultaneous deictic intensification of the sense of 'Now', 'Here', and 'Me' that these affective encounters produce[1]. Hesselberth broadens the limits of where one encounters 'the cinematic' and defines it as an embodied bodily-spatial encounter with the "potential to intensify our experience of time's thickening" (17). I use the concept of deixis because encounters with YouTube videos brings out certain expectations of indexicality and modes of subjectivity through its cinematic affective encounter (Hesselberth 24). These activate the notion of the broadcaster as a transmitter, and the viewer as a receiver. This sets a deictic foundation which places the audience as a passive receptor node in the mapping of networked media. However, this needs to be addressed and critiqued, because this is imaginary. Networks are not static maps; they are tools that "actively inflects and works over that territory" (Shaviro 6).

Noise is inherent to the act of transmission, and only by attending to it can we fully contend with the materiality of the network which facilitates it. Thick temporality and spatiality create embodied attention towards the messiness that is obfuscated by the imagination of these maps.

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[1] Deixis is a term borrowed from linguistics that, in its original context, names words used as indexical referents (like: 'this', 'here', 'I', or 'you') that only take on meaning in context (Hesselberth, 21). In cinematic theory, deixis is adapted to an understanding of filmic enunciation and viewing constellations that allows for a comprehensive rapprochement of theories based in voyeurism and embodiment (Hesselberth, 22).

This paper follows Hesselberth's identification of these three co-constituting deictic dimensions and use them as a framework that allows me to interrogate the intensification of temporality ('Now'), embodiment ('Here'), and subjectivity ('Me'). The first chapter will counter the sensationalism with which ASMR is treated by outlining the inherent affective ambivalence of boredom; will read boredom from the formal qualities of a particular case study of Slime ASMR; and will argue that an experience 'thickening' temporality, and an intensification of a sense of 'Now' result from these qualities. The second chapter will use a Ear-licking ASMR video as a case study to identify disgust– which all too often is treated as innate and super-discursive– as a barrier that forecloses the openness to the experience of 'thick' time. Furthermore, the discussion of disgust will allow me to interrogate the embodied experience of watching ASMR without getting bogged down in the mysticism of the tingles. Finally, the third chapter will root these readings of the temporal and spatial dimensions in the context of ubiquitously networked media and capitalism, placing ASMR as a form of noise in such a context, and draw broader conclusions about the ramifications for subjectivity.

Critics of ASMR's subversive potential would point to its inability to disrupt the capitalist mechanisms in which it is engrained. I am also skeptical to what extent it can act as an intervention. Often framed as a therapeutic relief from the anxieties of modernity, the dependence of ASMR videos on YouTube as a platform limits its ability to act as intervention in the cycle of exhaustion and regeneration that is central to the rhythm of neoliberal capitalism. I will contextualise stuplimity as an ambivalent affect that is activated in encounters with ASMR, and which contradicts the dominant discursive narratives that are building around the phenomenon. The ambivalence in these encounters can be considered a source of noise in the system of communication capitalism seeking to streamline and commodify affective encounters.

I will briefly sketch the conditions that call for intervention before delving into the case studies in order to evaluate the prospects for disruption, contextualise this thesis in the corpus of research done until now on the topic of ASMR videos, and provide some clarifications about the selection of case studies.

Neoliberal Capitalism and Network Flows

ASMRtists and their audiences alike claim that the videos help them to relax, feel intimacy, treat a plethora of ailments stemming from the pressures of the hyper-modern world. In these claims they also often invoke the notion of the 'ASMR community'. However, in as much as these videos are uploaded with benevolent intention, Jodi Dean asserts that, "our participation does not subvert communication capitalism. It drives it" (94). Here it is perhaps useful to note that ASMRtists are

often neither professionals, nor quite amateurs, belonging instead to the hybrid category bridging producers and consumers, the 'prosumers'. In his Marxist critique of how industrial capitalism has "mutated into neo-liberalism" (5) Byung-Chul Han argues the identifiable class struggle between proletariat and ruling class has transformed into a new psycho-political disciplinary mechanism where every individual into "auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise. People are now master and slave in one" (5). This redistribution and diffusion of power means that we are no longer, in his view, neither free, nor free "be among friends" (2). Ultimately, these are one and the same, because Han defines freedom as "self-realisation with others" (3). Han, like many others, bears witness to an increasing isolation of the individual in these conditions.

For her part, Dean is pessimistic– though not fatalistic– of the opportunities online 'communities' offer by way of social connections: "affective attachments to media are not themselves sufficient to produce actual communities– bloggers are blogging but the blogosphere doesn't exist. Conversely, the circulation of affect through multiple, networked media does not imply stimulus junkies in blank-eyed isolation before their screens. Affective networks produce *feelings* of community, or what we might call 'community without community'" (91). Considering this, the benefits to be experienced from the feelings of intimacy and community are limited, as they are far removed from actual intimacy. Though Dean's diagnosis does not completely rule out the possibility for digitally mediated intimacy, it registers the commodification of intimacy in the realm of the 'blogosphere'. The rosy intimacy and 'positive' affects produced by 'ASMR community' are not the source of what its audience actually stand to benefit from.

Diagnoses of ASMR as psych-social and bio-evolutionary substitutes for human needs for in-person connection, intimacy, and a sense of closeness paint ASMR videos as a kind of *pharmakon*- "that which is presented as a poison may, after all, turn out to be the cure, and vice versa" (Paasonen 133). The videos are good in as much as they offer a salve for an increasingly insular society suffering from loneliness; they are bad in that they reinforce the dependence on social media networks, and the 'Big Data' giants that own them, and arguably driving people further away from 'true' intimacy, and further into the depths of disorientation. This takes on particularly nefarious tones when considered in the context that people make use of the videos to sleep, a moment that evokes a state of absolute vulnerability (Crary 28). Users are cast in the role of "flat, sad, empty, anxious, unfocused, and amnesiac subjects" (Paasonen, 16) at the mercy of Big Data's tyranny[2]. As such, ASMR videos are

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[2] The characterisation of dependent users voluntarily sedating themselves with videos resonates all too readily with Huxley's dystopian vision of Soma use in *Brave New World*.

pessimistically positioned as a hypocritical form of care that offers only palliative treatment for pervasive conditions that characterise ubiquitously networked consumer society (van Reeven).

It should be noted that, despite the techno-pessimism of such readings, there has been little resistance to such conclusions from in-group members of the ASMR community. Prior to the scientific research done on 'tingles', the ASMR community was regularly the subject slanderous disparagement– often dismissed or ridiculed as a deviant sexual behaviour. The findings supporting the psycho-somatic benefits of watching ASMR bolstered mainstream acceptance and legitimacy of online viewing practices. Mainstream acceptance is a recent development and has only come about as a result of vocal in-group advocacy that pushed for scientific research. In this context, there are clear deterrents towards acknowledging sub-genres within ASMR that threaten the newfound legitimacy, either by their blatantly sexual nature, or by operating in a dangerous ambiguous grey area that could reignite the flame of criticism.

Despite some reductive approaches, the concept of *pharmakon* is a useful framework that can sustain multiplicity and contradiction. Arguably, here, it is being predominantly invoked in the sense of "bad pharmakon", which is not true to the inherently contradictory nature of the concept, where the beneficial and harmful dimensions are simultaneous. 'Bad pharmakon' focuses solely on the toxicity (130). I would argue that what is being mobilised in these critiques is the notion of digital dependency through the framework of addiction. The addiction framework is most visible in the tendency to sensationalise the embodied experience of tingles as a state of 'ecstasy' or 'euphoria'. We need to move past framings of technology as "merely instrumental" towards an understanding that recognises that they are "generative of sensation and potentiality- as agential, to use ANT terminology" (Hillis et.   al   10).

Readings of networked media culture often tend towards techno-pessimism, perhaps to the point of cliché. The harvest and monetisation of data from users makes what corporations stand to gain painfully obvious; what users themselves stand to gain is perhaps less so. Many researchers such as Han are already addressing the psycho-political mechanisms of coercion at work in this configuration (2017). However, Paasonen asserts that network connectivity is more central to the operations of daily life than it was a few decades ago; like electricity it "has grown *infra-structural*" (9, emphasis by author). Recognising network connectivity as "constitutive (and not merely as representational or ideological) in how they punctuate and organise everyday experience, sensations, emotions and sociality" (9-10) calls for reframing networks themselves as an actants in actor-network theory (ANT) frameworks. The emphasis on 'infra' in '*infra*-structural' draws attention to the material basis of

network connectivity that is "hidden from the view of most users: pipes beneath ground, wires behind walls, or satellites orbiting out of sight" (Ara Wilson, 271, qtd in Paasonen, 9). While this state of ubiquitous connectivity has become the norm, it continues to be imagined as a nebulous immaterial force, rather than a tangible structure– a misconception that undermines the ability of constitutive actors to negotiate within the interactions. The layered-ness of the affective encounters that are taking place– the passion and the specificity with which viewers self-report their sensuous experiences with ASMR video– speak to the ambivalence of the experience and stakes a claim against any one-sided account of this dynamic. In this regard, I will be proceeding from Paasonen in her call to "conceptualise dependence as inseparable from agency" (18).

The behaviour and viewing practices associated with ubiquitously networked media are most often described from a top-down perspective that maps the network, and its flows. What emerges from a top-down perspective of YouTube as a network is a static description of self-reinforcing algorithms that drive a pulsing rhythm of engagement, allowing few avenues for ambivalence nor room for acknowledgment of the agency of the actants within the structure (Chun 48). Furthermore, in the context of capitalism and the affective economy, the static network map describes YouTube as a seamless delivery system of units for affective modulation: feelings, ambivalence, and intensity are exchanged for simplified data points and packages that fit into the electronic/digital transportation of capital (Shaviro 4). Steven Shaviro writes pessimistically that media works have become nothing more than "machine for generating affect" (3) in the capitalist culture that subjugates them to commodification as "pre-defined and pre-packaged emotions" (4). I argue that ASMR cultivates an attention that constitutes an alternative navigational strategy that make perceptible (yet still ambivalent) the materiality of networks, namely, "the network of networks", the internet (Paasonen, 14). The approach I adopt in this paper will read against the grain of macro analysis, in favour of adopting a micro perspective (Chun 48), examining how the formal qualities in particular video instances can speak to molar structures.

The discourse surrounding the phenomenon of watching ASMR paints it through the sensational lens: tingles are painted as a euphoric end-goal– a sort of cathartic climax to reach. This produces a mischaracterization of ASMR videos as spectacular. In actuality, the videos are tedious, and tingles are not linear nor cathartic. While, I do not argue that ASMR has the potential to rupture any existing structures of consciousness, I will argue that it is the banal and boring qualities of ASMR that have potential to synthesize new modes of perception. The following section will an overview of the existent research on ASMR and demonstrate that currently there is a lack of acknowledgement of the

ambivalence and contradiction that characterizes these experiences.

Theoretical Context: ASMR

Fig. 1: ASMR meme- what watching ASMR videos means to different people. Source:

https://imgur.com/oeT6P

For some people ASMR activates a tingle response that is described by Nitin Ahuja as, "a reliable low-grade euphoria in response to specific interpersonal triggers, accompanied by a distinct sensation of "tingling in the head and spine" (Ahuja 2013, 443). Although ASMR can be triggered by any stimulus (i.e., any moment in daily life) in popular discourse the term is concomitant with the online videos made specifically to elicit the response. The stimuli that trigger tingles in an individual can vary widely and tend to be highly idiosyncratic. Past critics have doubted the very existence of tingles; neuro-physiological research supports anecdotal reports that not everyone experience tingles. Psychologists report that sensitivity to these forms of stimuli may be related to certain personality traits, Openness-to-experience and Neuroticism being strongly correlated to a likelihood of tingles (Fredborg, Clark & Smith 2017). The stimulus-driven reaction has been likened by researchers to other experiences that produce "chills" like, musical *frissons* (del Campo and Kehle 2016) or synaesthesia (Dovern et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2016; Barratt and Davis, 2015). Tingles are set apart from these in scientific literature for two reasons: they are felt as dynamic, like "waves" of pleasure; and unlike synaesthesia, they are autonomous reactions but can "ostensibly be stopped by intentionally choosing to disengage from the triggering stimulus" (Fredborg, Clark & Smith, 2). It should be noted that sensitivity to ASMR does not guarantee enjoyment; in fact, ASMR sounds are highly polarizing, and those who are predisposed to experience pleasurable 'tingles' are also more likely to experience unpleasant (or even, painful) misophonia (Fredborg, Clark & Smith 5; McErlean, Banissy & Agnieszka). In both the pleasurable and uncomfortable cases, these are framed as affects that are directly transmitted as intense, clear-cut or unambiguous, and embodied effects.

The most common types of videos feature a single performer whispering, and/or tapping, scratching, and manipulating objects to the ends of producing 'tingly' sounds. Some ASMRtists devise themes or create role-play situations, most typically enacting the role of "a benignly solicitous figure who helps viewers to achieve a sense of calm and wellbeing– spa attendants, shop assistants and librarians are popular choices, as are doctors" (Gallagher 2016, 1). These scenarios are often staged using a green-screen and limited props. They use a fixed camera and are minimally montaged. The recreation of these contexts (such as doctor's visits, lice check-ups, etc.) plays to an important dimension of nostalgia, but often, act merely as pretext for the engagement with visual and sonic textures that these encounters produce (Leigh Waldron, 4).

The buzz surrounding ASMR stems from the (psuedo-)scientific-sounding acronym, the term devised to replace the use of 'braingasm', which was deemed too sexualizing by in-group members (Leigh Waldron, 2). Though the new term carries an air of newfound legitimacy, the previous nomenclature

captures the fervour and rapture ascribed to the practice by its devotees. In addition to the "low-grade euphoria", tingles are usually also attended by deep relaxation and sleepiness. For this reason, it has been touted by many as a sleeping aid for those with insomnia, and a tool for those suffering from symptoms of anxiety and PTSD, and the culture surrounding ASMR is heavily invested in discourses of care and therapy (van Reeven).

In-group members of the ASMR community draw a "critical distinction between sex and therapy, thereby perpetuating the ideology that the two must be mutually exclusive modalities of pleasure" (Leigh Waldron,1). Part of maintaining this distinction between sex and therapy is the continued erasure of the overlap that exists between sex work and ASMR[3]. However, the stringently enforced in-group rhetoric aligns their practices with benevolent charity, rather than discourses of work– a refusal that puts it in direct contradiction with efforts to legitimize the (care) labour that is involved in pornography/sex work. Nevertheless, intimacy is a central component of ASMR, and it has been varying qualified by cultural analysts as a form of "non-standard intimacy" (Andersen 2015) or explicitly as a form of sexual intimacy (Leigh Waldron). Overlooking for a moment potential sexual resonance at work in ASMR, the two nonetheless invite comparison for the embodied modes of spectatorship they evoke: they are viewing practices that explicitly aim for bodily arousal. Despite the linguistic parallels such as "euphoria" and "brain-orgasm" that liken tingles to sexual climax, therapeutic discourse aims to anaesthetise the subversive potential by (re-)casting ASMR as a rejuvenating/sedating agent, rather than an agitator/activator. Yet, despite this adamant refusal, what lingers through most notions of ASMR as a "digitally-mediated intimacy" is the claim of human agents in transmitting and receiving these arousing/sedating *effects*. As such, there has been little research that attends to the formal qualities of ASMR videos as media objects capable of cinematic encounters.

Case Study Selection

Slime ASMR often straddles the intersection of ASMR and "weirdly satisfying" videos, and thus treated as a niche, but ultimately innocuous, past time. However, Mouth Sounds videos regularly trigger (calls for) censorship– from both the YouTube algorithm as well as users themselves commenting in discussion sections. Although Ear-licking videos are a sub-genre within this controversial category, the discussion will use this case study to reflect on some of the broader commonalities as well.

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[3] There are however many ASMRtists who also have OnlyFans or Twitch accounts where they post NSFW content that they promote in tandem with their YouTube channel.

I have chosen the video titled, "1 HOUR DIY CLAY SLIME ASMR 💖 HUGE SLIME COLLECTION" by Slimeowy[4] as the anchoring case study for the first chapter of this thesis. I selected this video because it is representative of the genre of Slime ASMR, although it should be noted, even within the sub-genre there exist further differentiation and niches that entail formal, procedural, visual, and auditory variations. However, the case study I have selected is an exemplary of a long-form 'collection video'– so named because in such videos one performer showcases their collection of slimes– which is by far the most common type of Slime video. Typically, these videos begin with a short clip providing overview of all the pots, and then proceeds to showcase each pot– and more importantly, the slime contained within them– one by one through intensive manual manipulation on a (well-lit, flat) surface. These 'collection videos' are created by both (amateur) enthusiasts and professional producers of slime– which it should be noted, was until only recently considered merely a children's plaything but has since the explosion of Slime ASMR videos become an incredibly profitable industry for adults and children alike. As such the videos functions both as a product demonstration video and as a video rich in visual and sonic textures made for enjoyment in and of itself.

The second chapter will come to bear on the sub-genre of Mouth Sound videos, of which there are an enormous amount of sub-sub-genres that exist. For the purpose of this thesis, the focus will be on ear-licking videos. The commonality of these videos is the use of a specialist binaural microphone cast out of silicone to resemble a pair of ears, placed on a support structure approximately the width of a head (see image below). Binaural audio is a kind of synonym for stereo-sound. Each unit consists of the silicone ears that house a microphone each within them (two microphones total); this allows the ASMRtist to create a dynamic, spatially motivated, sonic experience for users listening through their headphones. In ear-licking videos (as the name implies) performers will typically whisper, lick, nibble, suckle, or tongue the ears themselves to make intense, and often loud, stick wet noises. The physical configuration of the microphone means that when wearing headphones, the viewer-listener has the feeling these sounds are being produced on their own ears sans the actual physical sensation of the nibbling, etc, taking place on their own body. The video, "ASMR Ear Licking ~ Extreme Mouth Sounds for Tingle Immunity" by FrivolousFox ASMR[5] will be taken as an exemplary case of the

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[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIGtVh2-wm8

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BdSCcmJKJk

genre as it is the most popular Ear-licking ASMR video, having garnered 259K views as of this writing[6].

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[6] 'Tingle Immunity' is a growing subcategory in ASMR videos treating against the psuedo-scientific condition named after which it is named. The phenomenon refers to when an individual stops experiencing tingles for an extended duration.

1. Stuplimitous Slime

The purpose of Slime videos, as with all ASMR videos, is to induce tingles, relaxation, and even sedation. However, the content of the videos is highly counter-intuitive: the videos are composed by punctuating loud squelches, bright lighting, vivid colours, glitter, and abrupt hand movements. Slime itself is a non-Newtonian substance, prone to seeping into a languid puddle. It is the handling of the Slime, and its filming and subsequent editing and distribution, that transforms these elements into an unsteady, yet rhythmic, pulsation that cultivates a particular quality of boredom.

The focus on the exceptional and bizarre has resulted in a routine under-examination of the protracted, repetitive, and recursive qualities of ASMR videos. The experience of watching ASMR videos is often tedious. This contradicts the dominant framing of ASMR tingles as event-like and cathartic. However, boredom need not be synonymous with disengagement. As Paasonen provocatively asserts, "boredom, as flatness of affect may yield excitement as well as stupor, just as distractions can bore, fascinate, irritate, enchant, possibly simultaneously so" (*Dependent, distracted, bored* 13).

This chapter will argue for the temporal 'thickening' that encounters with ASMR slime videos can produce and allude to the ramifications this has for the felt perception of space and subjectivity. A strategic pivot towards Slime ASMR videos circumvents many of the ideological pitfalls (i.e., circumvents the temptation to project discursive formations onto the practice) and allows new dimensions at work in the genre to emerge. Formal qualities of duration, rhythm, and sonic textures are fundamental to the construction of the affective encounters these videos produce. Furthermore, not all (sub-)genres, or videos belonging to them, produce the same constellation of affects. Although this chapter will argue against the trend of sensationalising the practice, and read boredom in the form of these videos, this does not entail conceptualising boredom as a 'flat' affect. Limiting understandings of boredom as a nondescript 'flatness' upholds a misguided ascription of homogeneity and absolute absence to it[7].

Firstly, the quality of boredom that it cultivates is perhaps best conceptualised along the lines of Sianne Ngai's notion of 'Stuplimity'. 'Stuplimity' is a concept of Ngai's own devising, that she develops in her work *Ugly Feelings* (2005) where she explores ambivalent 'dysphoric' affects (3), or 'minor '

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[7] To be bored in in the hyper-individuated, capitalist, neoliberal context is a lack of moral fibre– a lack of discipline or, a symptom of innate boring character. But worse still, to be bored it to choose to be so, and constitutes a slight against society striving for efficiency and productivity.

feelings[8], that she asserts are "explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic, offering no satisfaction of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release" emphasis of the author, 6). Nevertheless, while these affects may not activate political subjects in traditional ('major') ways (like anger and fear), it is precisely in their ambivalent and slippery nature which Ngai locates their productive qualities. The word 'Stuplimity' is a contraction of 'stupor' and 'sublimity' and describes affective encounters in which an inability to immediately comprehend a work, or its meaning, temporally stupefies or immobilises a reader. The process of watching slime is marked equally by tedium as it is by shock. Although affect theorist Silvan Tomkins' would contend that boredom and shock may seem to have "diametrically opposite" affective profiles (qtd. in Ngai 261), nevertheless "both are responses that confront us with the limitations of our capacity for responding in general" (Ngai 261-2).

Unlike sublimity, stuplimity does not lead to any higher state of mind or selfhood, but it also refuses "anti-absorptive" cyclical tedium of ironic distance (278). Ngai uses the tradition of American poetry to qualify the power of 'stuplimity', drawing specifically on the work of Gertrude Stein's work. Stein's work *The Making of Americans* (1906-1908) is enormously long, taxonomic in scope and repetitive in style, and triggers overwhelm in its reader. Stein asserts that these works require from the writer and reader alike[9] a test of duration and endurance, putting to the test where one can go "far enough with this thing" (qtd. in Ngai 253). I contend that Ngai's conception of Stuplimity, and its focus on repetition and form(lessness), can inform a close reading of Slime ASMR videos. Doing so, has potential to reframe the capacity of boredom to play a productive part in suspending judgement and opening avenues for non-normative sense-making strategies in the face of alterity.

Secondly, these affective structures must be read in the context of electronic networked media. Sobchack argues that electronic video media do not have the same cinematic ability to thicken time and space as film. Summarising Sobchack's perspective, Hesselberth writes that electronic media "[flatten] time and turns it back onto itself, establishing a being-in-itself in which time and space are disembodied and randomly dispersed across a network, intentional agency is distributed, and referentiality is turned into intertextuality" (18). Hesselberth argues that this basis of the

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[8] Minor feelings in that they are contrasted with the tradition of 'major' affects. Ngai frames her focus on 'minor' affects in contrast to the longstanding philosophic tradition of privileging 'major' affects. Grander emotions like anger and fear, but also the potentially "ennobling or morally beatific states like sympathy, melancholia, and shame" (6)), are contrasted with.

[9] Stein's work was dismissed by her own brother (Leo Stein) as "stupid" language for its deceiving simplicity, as well as its recursive and atypical form (Journey into the Self qtd. In Ngai 253).

differentiation is contradictory to Sobchack's larger project affirming embodied experience. However, in the context of networked media on YouTube, there are parts of Sobchack's perspective that resonate. What ASMR videos can do is give density to the experience of 'flat' time, thicken the experience of 'now', and produce an embodied encounter with this otherwise diffuse mode of engagement. The qualities particular to ASMR videos cultivate an affective quality of boredom that is embodied, deeply ambivalent and non-prescriptive, and thereby invite a meta-perception of form that extends past the frame of the video and provides a point of access towards the consideration of the materiality of the network it exists in.

This chapter will first read Slimeowy's "1 HOUR DIY CLAY SLIME ASMR 💖 HUGE SLIME COLLECTION" in dialogue with Sianne Ngai's concept of 'Stuplimity' to explore the boredom particular to ASMR slime videos. Ngai's notion of 'stuplimity' opens boredom up into a multivalent affect rooted in form(lessness) and capable of accounting for the contradictions and nuances that exist within boredom, and the ways in which it can arouse non-prescriptive strategies in affective encounters with alterity. Following this analysis, the chapter will go on to link this to broader concepts of temporal 'thickening' in (cinematic) audio-visual works, and how this differs in the context of ASMR– a digital video form. Finally, this will inform a discussion of the kind of perception is cultivated in 'thick' time, and the ramifications this entails for confronting alterity. These are all qualities that will be taken up in the third chapter of this thesis, when considering ASMR as noise in this cultural context.

1.1 Case Study: "1 HOUR DIY CLAY SLIME ASMR 💖 HUGE SLIME COLLECTION" (2022)

Fig. 2: Screenshot from Slimeowy video, Halo Halo slime mid-assembly, chunky green and pink jellies being drooped.

Fig. 3: Screenshot from Slimeowy video, Halo Halo slime fully assembled.

Fig. 4: Screenshot from Slimeowy video, starting the 'Sliming' process with prodding and squishing.

Fig. 5: Screenshot from Slimeowy video, Halo Halo slime now fully homogenized, being feverishly manipulated and squelched.

Slime ASMR videos come in many forms but by far the most popular are these kinds of demonstrative compilation videos. "1 HOUR DIY CLAY SLIME ASMR 💖 HUGE SLIME COLLECTION" (2022) by Slimeowy on YouTube is one such video. As the title announces, the video will showcase the wide variety of clay-based slimes[10] this one ASMRtist has in their (private) collection. Each slime is differently themed, textured, coloured and named: the username, shop name, title and type of the slime is listed in the bottom left corner of the frame in bubbly pink font. The 'DIY' aspect of these slimes is that they have multiple components that are shipped and delivered to the customer, whereupon their arrival they can be assembled into a suggested composition– made to look either like a serving of food, or a novelty character, or other. A high-definition camera records a top-down view of a parade of several pots of transparent plastic brought before the lens, accompanied by a light piano melody. Each pot is brought briefly brought into frame label-first by the pale, unpainted, hands of a performer. In this opening sequence, we catch glimpses of pots topped with all sorts of clay slime shapes: lollipops, croissant-waffles, bunny figurines, a block of cheese. Blurry swiping transitions create a montage that skim from the view of one pot to the next. The hands of the performer are the only human body parts on screen– a noticeable deviation from many other ASMR styles in which faces are a main subject. The hands will appear and disappear from frame throughout the video. Even the performer's shadow is eradicated by the bright flat lighting that illuminates the hands and pots out of the camera's line of sight from the left and right. The lights also foreshorten the lack of depth in the frame: behind (or is it underneath?) the pots is a disorienting plane of marble. The video is serving a feast for the senses, and this gooey slime is the main course.

Two pots and a holographic plastic sachet come into focus in centre frame. The larger pot bears an opaque label that reads "OHMYSLIME – HALO HALO", obscuring the contents of the pot; the second pot is smaller, and purple clay. The sachet contains mini-tubs of jelly slime and a collection of indistinguishable knick-knacks. The main players of the scene have been introduced, and a swift cross-fading transition alerts the start of the assembly process. The hands now re-enter from the bottom of the frame and begin carefully unpacking the various pots. The purple putty is rolled into a ball, then placed atop the surface of the other pot, a white slime. Chunky green and pink jellies are emptied from the mini-tubs and drooped onto either side of the ball. The finishing touch is a squeeze of pale-yellow paste resembling a creamy icing.

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[10] That is to say, the slimes have a high-clay content giving them a high density and low viscosity. This means the video is entirely limited to one slime 'type' and does not include any of the other kinds, such as crunchy, icee, jinzu, clear, butter, cloud, etc., slimes. Slimeowy has separate videos dedicated to collections of some of the types mentioned.

The sounds of assembly have been soft; each component makes a slightly different smearing sound. The sights and sounds trigger a haptic visuality, the eyes and ears begin to act as organs of touch, moving over the surface, as Laura Marks' says, "not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture" (162). But while watching I cannot help but feel myself searching and scanning; I grasp at similes and metaphors to make any sense of what appears on-screen. Jello, jellies, pudding, gum, paste, chunks, pellets, putties– for a flash it looks like food, but the sheen and elasticity tells my tongue that it is not and reads as uncanny.

Sobchack spends a brief passage in the chapter "What My Fingers Knew" (*Carnal Thoughts*) to address the uncanny in cinema sense-making. In the chapter she uses it as a foil to her central argument that the bodies' sense-making strategies are commensurable with those in cinema (74) and allows us to be "incorporated *systematically* as embodied and conscious subjects who both "have" and "make" sense *simultaneously*" (75). However, as Lesley Stern asserts, when we are unable to 'have' or 'make' sense through our incorporated sensorium, the cinema opens up a feeling of "non-knowing, a sort of bodily aphasia" which produces the mixture of horror and soaring euphoria of the uncanny (qtd. in Sobchack 75). The uncanny is the moment when the commensurability of cinema with our sensorium breaks down. Sobchack uses this to highlight that this experience is rare enough to further reinforce how automatic and simultaneous the linguistic and the bodily freely mingle when knowing the scene. However, in this video, the wide variety of artificial textures are *like* many things I have known before but fail to quite recognise. The hands in the bottom of the frame both act as a prosthetic extension of the audience's sensorium, and a visual reminder that full knowing is just out of arm's reach.

The whole procedure feels unsettling and disorienting. Containers, pots, slimes, blobs, etc, enter and leave the frame. Disorientation is further compounded by each step of the 'unboxing' being shown in short snippets; fast cuts elide over lulls between steps. While I am free to move in my chair, the camera and microphone remain resolutely fixed in place; all the focus is directed to the slime. The busy hands finally slow down to lift the composition up closer to the camera, tilting the gloopy sculpture this way and that for admiration. The DIY assembly process of the slime now complete, the design rests neatly in its pot back down onto the marble tabletop. For a split moment it sits isolated and untouched. Only now does it the assemblage become recognisable as a serving of the classic Filipino dessert halo halo after which it is named. Like a dish, it is plated and ready for consumption.

The light music finally fades away. The pot is not destined for consumption in the traditional sense. Instead, two fingers plunge together through the gooey mass and into pot, dragging the dense purple

paste into the depths of the wetter, crunchier white slime, the sound gaining intense amplification in the newfound silence. It sounds almost like footsteps in slushy snow. Pressing into the slime the sound is slow and witnesses the material resistance the fingers meet against the thick goop. It looks like pink-purple-green rice pudding. Pulling brusquely out of the slime, the fingers produce a dry *thwack*-ing pop. The two fingers continue to move as one unit, sometimes tentatively, as when pulling and stretching the material at the perimeter of the pot, and then aggressively re-plunging material on the surface back into the depths through the centre of the pot. No movement can be isolated from the rest. The steady flow of cacophonous pops, scrapes, and rips picked up by a highly sensitive microphone (ostensibly placed somewhere just out of frame) transforms into an ebb and flow. Pinching moves into squashing, and then into stretching, and builds towards a choreography wherein the slime is under constant transformation; look away and the slime will be unrecognisable. My eyes stay glued, trying to anticipate what it will become next, still trying to grasp what it just was. The contents of the pot– so delicately assembled into their various components– are now forcefully being made to co-contaminate one another, and slowly emulsifying into a homogenous blob.

The gelatinous blob is removed from its pot with a ceremoniously loud squelch. Now freed from its container, the patchy slime is stretched out to engulf the frame of the screen. The two hands pull and fold, pull and fold the slime in on itself- like one would taffy or bread dough- aerating it. The slime balloons in size. It fizzes, gurgles, foams, groans and belches. The longer it is handled, the more it grows. It is now uniformly purple, but becoming paler with bubbles. The original pot is brought back into the frame, which, now dwarfed by the ballooning slime, testifies to its metamorphosis. Unlike chewing gum– which seizes up and becomes more rigid and immobile as it is masticated– the slime takes on an uncanny liveness as it is handled. It seems to breathe. When it is left untouched, the slime oozes out backward (or is it down?) onto the surface of the marble, as if exhaling, before being feverishly grabbed and inflated once more.

The video suddenly swiftly cross-fades, and the halo-halo slime is gone and replaced with a different pot altogether. The contents of this new plastic pot are different in texture and colour: this one is white and Elmer's glue-like in the pot but is topped with a large thick cylinder of yellow clay slime shaped like a wheel of Emmental cheese. Two miniature charms- an even smaller slice of cheese and a mouse- are encrusted in the clay surface. The Emmentaler slime is made to undergo the same process as its predecessor. Unboxed, assembled, prodded, mixed, and intensively kneaded. The slime goes from symbolically recognisable, to an uncanny gurgling mass.

And so it goes for a total of 57 different pots of slime. For each, the hands use the same repertoire of movements to squeeze from each slime a symphony of different sounds that correspond to each of their unique qualities (i.e.: glittery, thick, more slippery or sticky, clay based, etc). The standardised techniques allow for a taxonomic comparison of the textural and sonic qualities particular to each pot. The video delivers on the long duration it promises in the title clocking in at 59 minutes and 59 seconds long.

1.2 Shocking Slime

What unfolds from the hour-long procedure is a disorientating meditation on form and texture. People most often express shock when shown slime ASMR for the first time. The consensus being *what the heck am I even looking at?* And *why on earth does this exist?* Reasonable reactions to the uncanniness of slime. The material and sonic texture exceeds linguistic comprehension and, at times, is shocking to see move in and of itself. I am sometimes able to grasp it through metaphor or simile (i.e., it looks *like* gum, or *like* halo halo, etc) but the any movement highlights yet how *unlike* anything else it is. Even the squelches are often too loud for the high-sensitivity microphone and causes frequent clipping of the mic, making literal that it is beyond the reach of our perceptual faculties. It oscillates between recognisability and alien artificiality; between banal and shocking. The oscillation in perception becomes a rhythm that defines the engagement with the video, a slow peristaltic (Ngai 274) movement of starts and stops in sense-making, both shocking and tedious. The shocking dimensions are perhaps the most immediately perceptible, and this is what I will address first.

Slime is in constant transition: whether moving from one container to another, altering the colour through mixing, or changing texture through manipulation, the slime is continuously transforming and thereby impossible to assign stable qualifications to. The slime oscillates between being recognisable through metaphor[11], and formless goop. The constant instability of form results in semiotic instability (the development of slime-specific terminology in the comments section testifies to the inadequacy of language). The procession of one slime after another in the Slimeowy video creates a taxonomic record of each of the slimes in the designated 'DIY clay slime' category and develops an ontological framework for the type. Slime and the language of American poetry may seem as dissimilar as two mediums could be. However, the comparison is allows for the appreciation of form and repetition.

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[11] I.e., for a moment the assembled DIY slime at the start of the video looks like a serving of halo halo dessert.

In the poetic tradition, words, sentences, and syntax in general are stretched and compressed and their forms twisted for form's sake. Ngai argues via Deleuze's notion that "repetition is what lies between two differences" (qtd. in Ngai, 252), that the insistence on repetition creates a cumulative effect of overwhelming schematisation. This overwhelm forces the reader to stay with each particular instance; "all repetition is repetition with an internal difference" as such people intent on "getting completed understanding must have in them *an open feeling,* a sense for all the slightest variations in repeating, must never lose themselves so in the solid steadiness of all repeating that they do not hear the slightest variation" (283). Instead of offering pleasurable mastery, the experimental tradition tests the limits of conventional (linguistic) syntax, thereby revealing its inadequacies, and casting doubt upon traditional sense-making strategies in the face of alterity. The result is a negative affective stupefaction in the face of "not-yet-qualified or -conceptualised difference" (252) which points to the need to reflect on methods for responding to "the different" (i.e., sexual or racial difference) before it becomes structurally qualified (252).

Ngai's takes the work of Stein to show the recursive nature of this manipulation: in striving for taxonomy of type, Stein simultaneously develops a taxonomic language agglutinating micro- into macro- and molar formations. In slime ASMR synthetic goop is the material being manipulated on screen. The immediate sensory engagement is through the sights and sounds of how each texture is different from the next. The immediate focus remains on the particular– the particularly sandy granules in *this* fold of the slime, or the heaviness of each wet particle falling as the slime is 'drizzled' to look like neon falling snow on the tabletop. The sounds are loud and unexpected, the movements feverish, and the visuals overwhelming and bright.

There is an additional level that draws attention to the hypothetical; 57 slimes of every texture already seems ludicrous, but represents only the tip of the archival iceberg of slime ASMR content. Slimeowy alone has uploaded nearly 250 slime videos at the time of this writing and is only one of thousands of 'Slimers' creating this kind of content on YouTube. In addition to the thickening of any particular slice of time, there is an agglutination of the cumulative effect of these moments, as Ngai puts it, "to encounter the vastness of Stein's system is to encounter the vast combinatory of language, where particulars 'thicken 'to produce new individualities" (264). It is in this tendency to accumulate density that Ngai attributes a certain kind of sublimity; "not so much the sublimity of information, but the sublimity of its ability to thicken and heap up" (265).

I attribute a similar quality of 'thickness' and ability to 'heap up' that Ngai locates in American poetry to slime ASMR videos such as the one by Slimeowy. Slime after slime is brought out of it pot,

thoroughly manipulated before the lens and then replaced by the next in the seemingly endless procession. The 'pulling', stretching, 'drizzling', squelching, poking of slime maintains a tenuous connection to cause and effect. The formlessness of the slime drives its manipulation and becomes its own logic. Movements are turned into recursive phrases, or "long strings" (250) of improvised choreographies. Instead of comprehensible units, like sentences, these phrases refuse normative sense-making strategies, and become the kind of "enormously long sentences" in Stein's work. Taken alone, any one slime featured in the video resists legibility; the seemingly never-ending procession of Slimeowy's extensive collection allows for the agglutination of the differences that accumulate from one slime to the next. The particularities of the wet crushing crunches of the saturated bouncy tapioca-style pearls emerge when followed by the fizzing fake snow texture of an 'Icee Slime'. Sliming becomes an epistemological method. However, an inevitable sense of fatigue settles in when confronted with the "taxonomic rather than comprehensive" quality of such an organisation.

So, there is a doubling of shock at work. Firstly, the embodied sensorium does not know what to do about slime: the uncanniness of the slimes calls forth a craving for a resolution of our non-knowing of it that can only be contended with through recognising difference through repetition. But secondly, it shocks the imagination, and speaks to a broader meta-perceptive hunger for the malleability artificial materials (whether language or slime) as such. Both poetry and slime speak to the fascination with form and texture, and the creative potential contained in their formlessness.

1.3 Tedious Slime

The uncanny and shock factor of slime keeps me in a state of tentative arrest: once in the video, I can all but only stay static as rock, and let the audio-visuals of the slime wash over me in thick languid mud-like waves. The fast-fading transitions between slimes entreat us to promptly forget the slime that came before and renew our attention for the slime that *now* fills the screen. The arms of the performer act as our prosthetic sensory apparatus. In Sobchackian fashion, the cinematic prosthetic opens the possibility for us to first, feel through them the sounds and textures on screen; secondly, feel ourselves feeling these actions and texture; and in a final recursive move, simultaneously, feel ourselves feeling their feeling. The logic of the events on screen becomes entirely secondary to the density of experience that is packed into, what becomes, 'thick' time.

Another slime will come, and another slime will go, but at any given moment it is the slime before me, in its particularities that captures my whole attention. The Slimeowy video is extremely long–

and is remarkable in the context of the ever-shortening length of the average YouTube video[12]. The video is so long that it tests the endurance of the viewer. (Perhaps even following along with this close reading has tested the reader's attentive endurance.) And although it compels the audience, I contend that it does *not* entail a "mesmerising, hypnotic tedium aimed at the achievement of higher states of consciousness or selfhood" (278). Instead, the boredom in Ngai's stuplimity, and I argue the amalgam sensation when watching slime ASMR "resides in relentless attention to the finite and small, the bits and scraps floating in the "common muck" of language" (278). Stuplimation does not entail a transcendental feeling, rather, as Lacan puts it, there is a "synthesis of awe (evoked by "the truly imposing") with what *refuses* awe (the "wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superfluous, and quasi absurd") (qtd. in Ngai 280)[13]. This is of particular importance, because the lack of transcendental feeling is due to this thickening of the present moment, the *now*, that refuses to offer the viewer a safe overviewing distance from which to witness and consider. The viewer-listener/user is pulled down into the bog and forces one to orient oneself from within its dense particularity and murkiness.

These qualities of Slime ASMR resonate with Ngai's argument that the tradition of avant-garde American poetic experimentalism mobilise tedium as a radical force capable of temporally immobilising and shocking the subject-reader, using techniques such as "hyperbolic uses of repetition, reflexivity, citation, and cliché" as well as a, "doubling-over of language that actively interferes with the temporal organisation dictated by conventional syntax" (261). Being unable to classify the object, our attention stalls judgement, and thereby foments, as Stein puts it, an "open feeling" (qtd. in Ngai 261) in the subject and arrests the urge to immediately qualify the unknown. This is the minor dysphoric affect that Ngai calls 'stuplimity' that opens the subject to a potential of "utter receptivity in which difference is perceived (and perhaps even 'felt') prior to its qualification or conceptualisation" (Ngai 261). Ngai argues that the recursive, "enormously long sentences" in Stein's poetry refuse any causal structure, and thus create a temporal 'thickening'. The effect of these sentences is the overwhelming imposition of duration on the reader: undifferentiated into comprehensible units, time becomes thick because the lack of traditional punctuation reads like a flow of 'simultaneous' layers of words, phrases or paragraphs. The subject is temporally arrested by a thick– 'muddy' (Ngai 249)– present moment.

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[12] This is difficult to confirm with empirical sources, due to the lack of information shared by YouTube, but it some sources claim an average of 11.7min.

[13] Ngai contrasts this with the conception of a Kantian sublime, which does entail a transcendental euphoria that attends the cognitive mastery (or at least attempted mastery) that prevails over the initial dysphoric awfulness.

1.4 Slime in Thick Time

Despite the likeness the slime has to different kinds of food, the metaphor fails because the (audio-visual) consumption of slime will never sate. Unlike hunger– and counter to the climax that 'braingasms' conjures– there is no moment of catharsis or endpoint to the consumption. Instead, slime ASMR creates a sort of epistemological procedure out of procession. Every slime becomes an instance, a repetition of type, that agglutinates to each other, thereby mutually defining itself through variations and small differences. The shocking immediate sensory qualities of both the slime itself, and ultimately the video, get subsumed into the tedium of the procedure. However, the tedium offers no transcendence, or euphoric uplift, because the video keeps the audience thoroughly attuned to detail, without resolving into a masterful position that could reduce instances into their platonic forms. Nonetheless, our whole embodied sensorium reaches out to the slime on-screen to try to know what it is; metaphor and prosthetics are lacking the faculties to provide resolution. But what they do is turn the sensing back onto itself: we sense ourselves sensing, and then sense ourselves sensing ourselves sensing every gurgle, pop, and squelch. Getting lost in the goop is disorienting. The senses lose sight of clock-time, and instead sync up with the thick, muddy putty as both are stretch out to their limits, and then folded back in on themselves. The affective experience is peppered with dysphoric shock and tedium, frustration even perhaps, as much as it is with pleasurable curiosity and tingles. The experience is one of an intensified *now,* a redirection of our attention towards the fleeting contingent. Temporality takes on density, and becomes thick.

 The 'open feeling' of stuplimity is felt as an echo of the dysphoric sensations of shock and boredom should not be confused with a lack of affect, but rather as an "indeterminate affective state that lacks the punctuating 'point' of an individuated emotion" (284). The afterimage of stuplimity is the 'open feeling' and is characterised as "a kind of affective static or noise" (283). For Ngai, the 'open feeling' leaves a residue that over time cultivates a particular affective posture in the subject, one that regulates the instinct to attack the unknown, and instead inhabit a constant state of resistance that allows for the sensation of openness in the face of difference. Because of the historical privileging of cognitive mastery, and a highly punctuated sublime[14], experiencing this radical openness can itself feel shocking, boring, or stuplimifying in and of itself (284).

The 'open feeling' in slime ASMR is created through the unusual amalgam of shock and boredom that is central to its formal qualities: the unexpected and feverish movements, sharp wet squelches and pops, and bright colours; as well as its long duration, and lack of causal, or linear, unfolding, and

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[14] Ngai directly contrasts the open feeling of stuplimity against the Kantian sublime which resolves in mastery and awe.

disorientating, recursive flow. These keep the video's audience thoroughly stuck in the particularities of any given moment by refusing to provide a perspective 'outside' of the muddy flow. This deprivileges the position of the subject through the rejection of the masterful cognitive perspective. Instead, the audience is plunged into disorientation and invited to adopt a posture of openness in response to their shock/boredom that can be experienced as a lack of any punctuating affective 'point'. The result is a diffuse ambivalent affective state characterised by oscillation. These oscillations are between forms of attention, as well as the objects of these attentions– because the detail creates a 'thick' experience of time that keeps us in the muck, but the recursive, long form also folds the feeling back onto ourselves feeling too.

It is impossible to separate the temporal experience from the spatial[15]. In the chapter that follows I will address embodiment– the *here* in the deictic triad. In this first chapter I have touched on the ambivalent embodied sensory experience particular to slime ASMR, and I would contend that this can be theoretically extended to other ASMR sub-genres. However, as mentioned at the start of this chapter, these ambivalent, enormously long, stuplimitous works require a certain commitment from the reader; it requires a reader, as Stein says, interested in whether one can go "far enough with this thing". This is a potential limitation to the experience of stuplimity that these works are capable of evoking.

In the next chapter will use a video of Ear-licking ASMR– a different, more polarising, sub-genre– as a case study to interrogate how disgust can interrupt the experience of 'openness' that stuplimity can cultivate. Ear-licking videos produce a spatial confusion through their sonic distribution, that explicitly breach the audience's feeling of sitting at a 'safe' distance from the performance. The sounds feeling overly close, and for many, are felt as disgusting. The chapter will analyse the shape of the space created in Ear-licking videos, and how this creates an embodied intensification of *here*. Formal reading of the video will ground a discussion of disgust countering the discursively designated innateness of such a reaction. Finally, the chapter will call into question the presumed inevitably of disgust by seeing how nonetheless Ear-licking videos can also become stuplimitous.

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[15] Both Hesselberth and Albuquerque draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the literary chronotope which he writes is, "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed" (qtd in Hesselberth 20).

2. Disgusting Ear-licking

Ear-licking videos fall into the broad sub-category of 'Extreme Mouth Sounds' (EMS) ASMR[16]. As the name implies, mouths, tongues and breath are manipulated close to a sensitive microphone to produce sounds; 'extreme' signals the exaggerated, and unusual nature of the sounds, as well as alluding to the digital augmentation of the sounds by the microphone which records them. The subcategory of EMS ASMR shares with Slime ASMR the propensity to foreground wet squelching sounds. However, the squelching of wet mouth sounds is considered far more offensive in EMS than the same sounds in Slime. While these sounds are often just dismissed as weird, but innocuous, in the context of latter, they are often labelled as disgusting in the former. Ear-licking ASMR videos make a particularly interesting sub-sub-category case study because, despite the videos posted to YouTube frequently reassure viewers that the purpose is in no way sexual, they do overtly operate at the intersection between ASMR and fetish. Operating in this intersection makes the videos particularly prone to censorship from the platform and commenters alike. Even its proponents reluctantly express their enjoyment in comment sections– many long-term viewers report having started watching the videos as a joke. Researchers have noted that in ASMR role-play videos "that action is not only performed for you, it's performed *on* you, as if you are actually in the room with the ASMRtists as a secondary character in the play" (Young and Blansert 124, qtd. in Klausen 88). For many critics, their disgust stems from moral outrage, but in other cases it seems to come from the adverse experience of ear-licking videos as fundamentally 'icky'. It is this 'ickiness' that is too often left unread, and that I attribute to uncanny forms. In Ear-licking ASMR the action is not- cannot be- performed '*on* you' because you are able to see the very ears it is being performed on. Part of the adverse reaction that Ear-licking ASMR videos, such as the case study I have chosen here, is triggered by the intensified, and uncanny, embodied sense of *here* that it creates. As such, this chapter will analyse the spatial and proprioceptive distribution that Ear-licking ASMR creates and interrogate how disgust functions as an affective impasse when confronting alterity, and the ramifications this entails for the affective posture that this cultivates.

The central focus of many Ear-licking ASMR videos are the ears that give the genre their name. A pair of silicone ears[17] sit head-width apart on a T-shaped microphone stand; each ear houses a microphone, so that together they create a binaural recording. The binaural recording captures spatially nuanced 3-D stereo quality sound. When the audience listens with headphones, they get the

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[16] Extreme Mouth Sounds is the umbrella category for many oral sounds and sub-sub-genres including, but not limited to, Mouth Clicks, 'Mukbang' aka Korean Eating Shows, and Gum Chewing. I have chosen Ear-licking in part because of how explicitly it demonstrates the spatial distributions I want to discuss, but also because it is a sub-genre that does not involve performers ingesting anything, which would pull focus from the points I want to address.
[17] Anatomically speaking, only the pinnae are represented in silicone.

sensation of being in the same room as the source of the sound. These microphones have adjustable sensitivity: ASMRtists will typically adjust the settings to their most sensitive, amplifying even the softest of murmurs into 'mic-clipping' range. In the Ear-licking genre, the performer licks and nibbles the silicone ears– either smacking on the lobe, sometimes chewing the helix, or otherwise tonguing down into the aperture of the ear canal. Because of the binaural properties of the recordings, the listener has the sonic sensation that these actions are being performed on their own ears– only without the wetness of the licks themselves.

2.1 Case Study: "ASMR Ear Licking ~ Extreme Mouth Sounds for Tingle Immunity" (2018)

Fig 6. & Fig 7: Screenshots from FrivolousFox ASMR video, ASMRtist licking the binaural 3Dio silicone ear microphone unit.

FrivolousFox ASMR's "ASMR Ear Licking ~ Extreme Mouth Sounds for Tingle Immunity" (2018) is in many senses representative of the genre. Much of the video is dedicated to FrivolousFox's performance of licking and nibbling silicone ear-microphones. What is somewhat unusual about this video is the lengthy preamble at the start of the video. After these, ten seconds of static informational slides[18], the video quickly opens on a performer partially hidden behind a 3Dio binaural ear microphone- a microphone that is easily the most popular and recognisable consumer-prosumer brand featured in videos. The background behind the performer is a solid, depthless, black. The microphone and performer are placed very close to the wide-angle lens, and together they fill most of the flat, brightly lit, foreground. FrivolousFox dedicates the first five minutes to whispering a mix of housekeeping messages, instructing her followers to support her account on the alternative ASMR platform (an app called "Tingles") especially because as she says, "YouTube is really iffy about extreme mouth sounds like licking, or ear-eating… despite the fact that I do not intend these videos to be sexual at all… at the end of the day I just want to help you guys, and the messages that I've gotten from people, and the tingles that they get, and the relaxation that they feel and how it helps them sleep… it makes it worth it". All the while she is speaking, her hands stroke the top of the microphone stand. She alternates between long languid blinks and staring straight into the lens of the camera; the pupils of her grey-green eyes reflect halos from the ring-light placed behind the camera, directed straight at her face. She stops stroking, and instead uses her two hands to lightly cup each of the ears. She says she doesn't like promoting things[19]. She announces she's going to get started with the video now; she instructs the viewer to just "relax, relax, relax" as she swifts her mouth from one ear to the other, the words produce a thick smacking sound as she whispers them. For a moment longer (without using her vocal cords) she mouths mumbled, unintelligible, sweet nothings.

And then begins the licking. The high sensitivity of the microphone amplifies every deliberate wash of sticky saliva the tongue delivers over the aperture of the ear. The squelching echoes down into my own ear canal. Watching with headphones in means no matter which way I turn I cannot retreat away from her approach, from the inevitable smacking (save, of course, turning down the volume or exiting the video altogether). The visual closeness of the performer's face to the lens combines with the sonic intensity culminates in a cloying closeness. However, the closeness is difficult to read. When I close my eyes, (it is as if) FrivolousFox is licking *my* ears (recalling Young and Blansert's description that

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[18] The first ten seconds of the video are two static slides with an animated avatar (a character dressed in a fox costume) paired with the usernames of her various social media accounts.

[19] Perhaps worth noting that, she says it in the context of encouraging people to follow her on a different platform, an alternative subscription platform. She follows the quote below with a note that "she hasn't really promoted it too much, I don't really like promoting things, you know?"

it feels like *you* are in the same room as the ASMRtist). But when I open them, I can clearly see FrivolousFox attentively licking *the* ears, and I am reminded that they are decidedly not *my* ears. And then she looks up and smiles straight into the lens– looking straight at 'me'. The binaural sound creates the feeling of being surrounded around my body, of being inside the scene. But the visual experience of the screen asserts its unidirectionality. There is an incongruity that my mind cannot grasp: it feels unnatural to be able to see 'my own' ears (even when they are clearly acting as prosthetic placeholders of my flesh pair). It is a constant reminder that 'I' am receded out of the scene, even when I feel present to it; my sensorium tells me my physical body is dislocated.

The confusion between 'my' and 'the ears' echo the tension in cinematic experience between the 'real' and the 'as if real'. Sobchack argues in "What My Fingers Knew" that in the context of narratively classical films there is a congruity between the lived modes of the body and cinematic representation. However, the typical congruity of cinema's modes with our own lived modes, deviations from these norms makes for startling encounters. Sobchack asserts there always exists a chasm between the body's ability to 'make sense' of cinema through synaesthetic sensuality and the ability of language to account for these non-hierarchical modes (69). The idealist tradition of cinema frames sense-making as a fundamentally cognitive engagement, which elides the sense-making of the body (Sobchack 58)). Sobchack argues that this charges encounters that we experience "as if real" with a heightened tension; the phrase itself, she says, "plunges us into a *mise en abyme* of experiential undecidability" (58). She proposes Richard Shiff's use of *catachresis* which is, "sometimes called false and imperfect metaphor, … [that] mediates and conflates the metaphoric and the literal" (qtd. in Sobchack 81)– to explain the semantic gap and account for the dynamic and reciprocal exchange between 'my' literal body and the bodies onscreen. Nevertheless, the pivotal tension at work in Ear-licking ASMR seems to be in this chasm that exists between my literal body and the metaphorical prosthetic body onscreen. My body and my sensorium have been hacked up into bits[20].

Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* ends with an "Afterword on Disgust" to create a contrast with the minor dysphoric affects that she puts forward through the rest of the book as "explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic, offering no satisfaction of virtue… nor any therapeutic or purifying release" (6). In contrast to these minor dysphoric affects, disgust is "perceived as dangerous and contaminating and thus something to which one cannot possibly remain indifferent" (336) and thus "urgent and specific" (337). This framing makes the object of disgust an issue of tolerance by casting the disgusting as

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[20] I will break form for a moment: personally, I am kept here only by morbid curiosity– the misophonia in triggers for me borders (and sometimes becomes outright) intolerable. And yet, the comments are filled with people for whom this is a source of tingles.

something absolutely intolerable (Ngai 337). As many theorists of disgust have shown, disgust is often mobilised to naturalise the boundaries of tolerance along certain discursive agendas (i.e. racist, homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, etc), and in doing so continues "to be instrumentalized in oppressive and violent ways" (Ngai 340). The danger of disgust is that it precludes ambivalence in the affective encounter and eliminates the possibility of other aesthetic or critical avenues toward the object of its attention. At the centre of Ngai's project is precisely to point to "what obstructs aesthetic of critical response…astonishment and boredom ask us to ask what ways of responding out culture makes available to us, and under what conditions. The shocking and the boring prompt us to look for new strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible" (262). Insofar as disgust is innate, it is also a kind of shock-reaction, and one that in its perceived urgency precludes any possibility of ambivalence. However, acknowledging the discursive and shocking dimensions of disgust can open it to new critical and aesthetic strategies of engagement.

Ear-licking ASMR videos, such as FrivolousFox's, create an uncanny incongruous audio-visual experience of space. Metaphor alone cannot reconcile the incongruity of seeing 'our 'ears, while the performer addresses our eyes through the lens. The ears in the scene act not merely as props but act as our prosthetic sensorium, which is felt as intimate and direct because of the placement of the microphone. Spatial and proprioceptive awareness are boggled by the unusual visual and sonic distribution in the video, making it jarring, and limiting, for the body's sense-making capabilities. Returning the Sobchack's insistence on the commensurability of our 'lived modes' and cinematic representation: the video plays with our expectations of our body's sense-making capabilities, forcing the audience to acknowledge the limitations to the sense that *can* be made of it. Shockingly, what we witness in the video is a kind of disembodiment that is nonetheless felt as close. Although it does not pose any immediate threat to our physical limbs or appendages, it does create through the catachrestic exchange an embodied experience of our disbanded sensorium, and thereby threatens the bodily integrity of the subject. Disgust is neither inevitable nor absolute, but sometimes understandably felt in the shocking encounter.

2.2 Openness to Disgust

However, beyond the shock of the catachretic uncanny that I describe above, there is also a kind of 'gross' sensational excess. The 'grossness' goes beyond this; Russell Brand inflamed the ASMR community by likening it to a "women's porn" and framing it as an "overly sensual" genre. Linda Williams writes about body genres, genres that are defined by "their power to excite" and often dismissed for their use of "gratuitous sex, gratuitous violence and terror, gratuitous emotion" (3). The

layered, multivalent, synaesthetic engagement that this subgenre invites seems self-referential and indulgent, a call towards gratuitous sensation of sensation[21]. It is perhaps unsurprising considering William's notion of the body genre that (even when, as FrivilousFox says, not intended to be erotic) Ear-licking ASMR videos, and others in the EMS sub-category, are compared to fetish pornography. These framings capture the dimension of the genre that offers the viewer an encounter with indulgently (feminised) embodied sensationalism– sensation for sensation's sake.

However, it is also the two kinds of disgust– jarring threats to bodily integrity and indulgently excessive sensationalism– that imbue Ear-licking videos with an intensified sense of *here*. This sense of here is highly ambivalent. The high sensitivity of the microphone creates an intimate feeling of proximity. While the squelchy wet licks being administered to my ears feel too direct, too immediate, and horribly close, they are in fact being carried to me, distributed over an immense network serviced by enormously long cables under the sea. The visually dominant prosthetic silicone ears are a constant reminder of the act of remediation that it at work- the *tele-* in televisual. When FrivilousFox stares 'at me' through the lens, I am reminded that the same video is in a constant state of travel; her gaze never quite settles anywhere, even when directed at a fixed point.

Whatever the initial impact of the squelching may be- even at its most jarring and uncomfortable- it can be transformed over the course of the twenty-minute video by the attention it draws to its simultaneous acts of remediation and the attention it brings to form. The first horrible jolt transforms into a rhythm of minor shocks. I can begin to consider the languid, thoughtfulness with which FrivilousFox delivers her licks to the ears. One lick becomes differentiated from the last. Her tongue laps in repetitive waves, the ears become a surface. Although the video is significantly shorter than Slimeowy's Slime compilation video, it is still longer than the average YouTube video, clocking in at 23min long. Another difference between the two case studies is the lack of montage in the Ear-Licking video: although shorter, the continuous arrhythmic cacophony quickly becomes tedious and testing. The squelching sound of each lick is slightly different in timbre, tone, and rhythm every time. Over time, the video itself occasions the consideration of sensation, and folds our sensorium back onto our proprioceptive faculties, cultivating a kind of stuplimity.

Where in slime ASMR, it is the slime itself that has uncanny material qualities that elude both our linguistic and sensory grasp, instead in Ear-licking it is the viewer-listener's own body that becomes

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[21] FrivilousFox evokes a double indulgence when she instructs the viewer to "relax, relax, relax": an invitation to pure sensation as well as an indulgent sincerity, along the lines of gratuitous emotion that people unfavourably associate with melodrama.

an ungraspable shape. Ungraspable because metaphor cannot preserve the integrity of the subject's body, and because the viewer-listener's body is an essential component of the video object. Any video created with the intention of eliciting tingles would be remiss without a body to feel them. As such, the video invites the viewer to feel and sense their position in relation to other objects. Therapeutic, or purely cognitive, perspectives could frame the viewer as a passive recipient to the video. However, to consider one's own body in the moment of the video is to grasp at the wider shape of the space it is operating in, even a part of– the internet. Broadening the notion of who/what can be actants in this network entails a reconsideration of the presumed passivitiy of the audience as mere receptors. The recursive embodied structure of feeling it cultivates draws conspicuous attention to the distributed nature of the experience of 'here', thereby pointing to our role as actants, not just nodes, in the agential YouTube network. The 'here' that it cultivates is ambivalent and vague- perhaps even hazy- however this is true to the shape of the network generally, which cannot be reduced to static nodes. An ambivalent, uncomfortable sensation of 'here' is most true to what I seek to describe.

The algorithms and user interface design of the YouTube strive for seamlessness and automatization, preferring (like many online corporate-owned platforms) to operate as a black box for its users. Drawing attention to the materiality of the network is difficult to do with such a massive active archive that is imagined to be immaterial. One of the ways of doing so is to direct awareness to one's own embodied connection within a network. As mentioned in the past chapter, characteristic of the 'stuplime' posture is the 'open feeling' that Ngai defines as a "state of undifferentiated alertness or responsiveness– a kind of affective static or noise" (283) that Stein further attributes to a "kind of being that has resisting as its natural way of fighting rather than… that kind of being that has attacking as its natural way of fighting" (qtd. in Ngai 283). Acknowledging the stuplimity that these ASMR encounters invite admits the possibility to cultivate this kind of open feeling. Despite the inherent limitations to the ways these watching practices can constitute resistance to the hegemony they claim, framing ASMR through stuplimity provides a framework of attention that is ambivalent, rather than techno pessimistic. The stuplimifying attention that these videos bring to our role as actants within the network create opportunities to invite moments of resistance to the increasingly seamlessness of their design, and to draw attention to the material substrate of the digital sphere.

This chapter analysed some of the ways in which FrivolousFox's Ear-licking video may trigger feelings of disgust. They can do so in the uncanny sensory distribution. This sensory experience directly contrasts to normative cinematic modes, which as Sobchack argues, are congruent with our lived modes. Furthermore, Ear-licking videos push ASMR's indulgently sensual agenda to the extreme, which aligns it with popular discourses that would dismiss 'body genres' overall, which are

often accused of existing only to excite. Despite the dismissive approach, these critiques identify precisely the non-normative, potentially disruptive potential that I locate in these videos. They invite their audience into a stuplimitous encounter that uses repetition, endurance and shock to create a recursive structure of feeling that intensifies their embodied awareness, which extends past the physical body (which is disturbingly disincorporated) and into the broader digital sphere they are enmeshed in. However, as I have argued, the ambivalence, and possibility of resistance that the 'open feeling' cultivated by stuplimity is too often eclipsed by univocal disgust. Disgust, as a less ambiguous 'major 'affect is often naturalised and presumed easy to read– certainly in the context of surveillance capitalism that relies strongly on legibility of affects to profit on their predictability. ASMR, and the ambivalence that it introduces, can therefore be seen as a source of affective noise. The next chapter will address the *me* in the deictic framework by considerations of the ramifications of ASMR as noise on subjectivity in the broader neoliberal context in which these videos are being viewed.

3. Noise in a Neoliberal Context

As mentioned at the start of this thesis, the dependence of the ASMR phenomenon on quintessentially 'Big Tech' platforms like YouTube is a potential inhibitor for the relief advocates claim the videos can provide. The phenomenon's existence on the platform entails certain implications for how the videos are produced and how users engage with them and can dictate limits of their subversive potential. However, close readings of ASMR videos resist the therapeutic discourse that is applied to them in popular and critical imagination. By reading this wide spectrum of dysphoric affects where there allegedly should be only rosy intimacy muddies the clear-cut imagined use of ASMR as therapy. It is not a seamless delivery system of rejuvenating neurochemicals that will aid in the maintenance of an efficient workforce. What this therapeutic framing does, however, is shed light on how neoliberal logic benefits from the imagined immateriality of the 'network'. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun asserts, "networks have emerged as a universal concept… because they encapsulate neoliberal collectivity"; networks are a mapping strategy that "[renders] the world into nodes and edges" (39). As much as they are effective as a tool for the individual to "cognitively map their relation to others, networks also confuse and obfuscate" (Chun 39). Networks, as maps, obfuscate their own materiality. As a pillar of neoliberal imagination, networks are said to help map and locate the individual and yet their imagined immateriality seems to aggravate the disorientation of "post-modern hyperspace" that theorist Fredric Jameson claims "has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself" (qtd. in Chun 41). This immateriality is however an illusion, and it is the materiality that is revealed in the perception of noise in the system that offers a new mode of attention. I will use the cybernetic definitions of noise as a starting point to explore how stuplimitous encounters can constitute a form of noise in the affective economy of communication capitalism, and how this can disrupt normative patterns of engagement.

Firstly, ASMR participates in the new configuration of affect-as-commodity production in that it is alleged to relieve from the banal stressors of labour, but it is also itself a form of labour[22]. Paasonen refers to the structures that treat affects as commodities as "affective economies" (58). As mentioned in the introduction, ASMRtists are often pro-sumers; the hybrid category between consumer and professional. Hardt and Negri would identify this kind of labour with the tendency towards informatization where affect itself is transformed into a commodity that can be produced and manipulated (qtd. in Dean 94). Han follows this train of thought and continues that the logic that this neoliberal system submits itself to takes capital as "a new kind of transcendence" and claims that we

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[22] This is a highly feminized type of labour that, in the context of the participatory/amateur production of ASMR, can constitute an extension of women's unpaid labour (Dean 94).

are increasingly "being expelled from the sphere of lived immanence" (7). Echoing Dean's bleak assertion about the engine of communication capitalism, in Han's formulation communication as a commodity perpetuates communication for the value that can be derived from the very act of transmission. Following from this, it is untenable to place ASMR videos as operating outside of this capitalist commodification, which leaves only being a source of disruption operating from within the system it purportedly works against as its only route of possible recourse.

Secondly, Paasonen argues that the rhythm of networked media consumption, central to neoliberal capitalism, is characterised by oscillations between attention and distraction (70). Effectively, these oscillations can be understood as a flow of interruptions, made up of what Silvan Tomkins calls 'surprise-startle' (qtd. in Paasonen 135), and micro-events (Paasonen 135). This rhythmic composition subsumes any potential shocking media into its macro structure; it takes on "the pattern of an errant electrocardiogram: the flatline of disaffective lull punctuated by pulses of affectivity" (Paasonen 130). The hegemony of capitalism makes the possibility of disrupting the patterns that are created by these platforms become elusive and potentially altogether illusory. After all, how can a flow of interruptions be interrupted?

However, accepting the inevitability of such a predicament is an unproductive succumbing to the 'strong theories' of techno-pessimism that can be itself a self-reinforcing tautology, feeding the broad-strokes sound-bite culture that precludes any nuanced analysis: "firm in their premises, they also tend to be totalising in their outcomes (these being very similar to the premises), even when lacking in evidentiary basis" (Paasonen 107). Instead, I propose that despite this enmeshed relationship with the YouTube platform (and by extension, Big Data and communication capitalism) the stuplimity of these encounters and the 'open feeling' that ASMR video create can constitute resistance in this system by being a source of noise. In order to consider the possibility of this, I will offer interdisciplinary frameworks of noise.

Mark Nunes asserts that the disciplines of cybernetic and electronic engineering depart from the position that networks have the "imperative to communicate" and measure their success by a "regime of efficiency and maximum performance" (4). This is important to keep in mind because Tiziana Terranova offers a genealogical account of network culture, by tracing its foundations in the telecommunications field developed across interdisciplinary fields by physicists, mathematicians, cyberneticists, and electrical engineers. By historicising the technology and models of interconnectivity and communication that were developed from these perspectives Terranova proffers the specific notions of information that "is defined by the relation of signal to noise" that continue to

underpin the workings of the systems in place today (9). The telecommunications industry is chiefly concerned with reproducing message, or content, from one point to another with speed and accuracy– "information is what stands out from noise" (10). Distortion or corruption of the signal– that is to say, the noise that cannot be negated and removed from the reception of a message's 'content' makes a communication unsuccessful (10). In order to comply with the imperatives of efficient communication "technical networks cut continuous space and time into slices of connectivity: they project links and cut noise to create neat lines between transmitters and receivers" (Chun 50).

When framed through therapeutic discourses tingles are positioned as a useful signal that can transmit euphoric affect from an ASMRtist and be received by the audience across the network. However, this framework rests on two questionable notions. The first being that ASMR results only in clear-cut relaxation and euphoria; it is presumed that this is a 'clear' signal free of noise. And secondly, that this transmission is desirable insofar as it meets the goals of aiding self-regulation, and masquerading as the guise of neoliberal "self-empowerment" (Chun 1).

To the first point, Chun echoes Terranova's skepticism of signal 'purity' when she writes that, "electromagnetic noise… does not always come from the outside, for it is also generated by the very act of transmission" (51). Ignoring the material basis of networked communication obfuscates its material preconditions. Only in the imagined version of networked communication is a signal transcendently sent from one node to another with no errors or distortion. Chun goes further in asserting that, "in terms of networks, leaks are not accidental; they are central. Without leaking information, there could be no initial connection" (51). These definitions demonstrate how fundamental noise is in any communication. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the affective experienced produced in encounters with ASMR are multifaceted and ambivalent, and sometimes dysphoric. The act of uploading a video, and having it be watched on YouTube is an act of communication, but, is not compatible with the any intentions of high-fidelity affective transfers (as is implied by the intentions of ASMRtists to teleologically transfer positive affects to their viewers).

The second presupposition seems to be the basis for the acceptance of ASMR into the mainstream; if it helps people function better it must be desirable. However, this can be seen as just an extension of neoliberal logic that turns subjects into 'projects', where "as a project deeming itself free of external and alien limitations, the *I* is now subjugating itself to internal limitations and self-constraints, which are taking the form of compulsive achievement and optimisation" (Han 1). The notion that ASMR can be used for self-help is rooted in the psycho-somatic studies that supports the framing of videos as a virtual substitute for the innate human need for connection and intimacy- painting it as a viable,

even 'dose-able', supplement of endorphin-loaded tingles. However, as mentioned above, this is clear-cut transmission is not a realistic model of the actual encounters these videos bring about.

Bringing these two inconsistencies together in the cybernetic-ally engineered conception of the network, the ambivalence inherent to the affective encounter with ASMR-at least the slime and ear-licking varieties that I have studied here- are best expressed as a form of noise in the affective economy of communication capitalism. Put another way, in the context of communication capitalism and the affective economies that seek to predict and monetise affect and communication as data-commodities, muddy or unclear affects can be considered a kind of "uncaptured error that refuses to signify within a system of feedback control…the statistical abject" (Nunes 14). These are statistically abject encounters that confuse the boundaries of neat affective categorisation, that submit to the logic of informatization. However, Marie Thompson writes on noise and affect and asserts that affect is inherently noisy, because it deals with relations, thus "the in-between of the encounters of subjects, objects and environments" (12).

In insistently making texture (sonic and visual) the central point of the encounter Slime and Ear-licking ASMR videos embrace the "asignifying poetics of noise, marked by these moments of errant information, simultaneously refuses and exceeds the cybernetic imperative to communicate" (Nunes 14). These make the audience pay attention to this noisiness of communication by enveloping them in noise. The noisiness of these communications clouds the intelligibility of the 'message' and draw attention to "what should be invisible- the medium of the message" (*50 Key Terms in Contemporary Culture* 210). Paying attention to the noise, rather than the signal that one expects to arise out from it, entails a radical shift. Thompson writes that attending to "noise is productive insofar as it is transformative- no matter how minor or fleeting that transformation is" (8). These communications are not "optimized [for] message intelligibility" (Thompson 53). The asignifying, or non-representational, focus on texture and form create encounters that test the limits of both the endurance of attention and the embodied sensorium's sense-making abilities in the face of alterity.

Noise asks us to attend to the fundamentally ontological. Taking a philosophical approach, theorist Greg Hainge says noise, especially when sonically felt, "makes us attend to how things come to *exist*, how they come to stand or be (*sistere*) outside of themselves" (23), after all, as he begins his manifesto: "all matter produces sound… sonically speaking, then, there is no such thing as inanimate matter" (1). However, this does not limit his assertions to the realm of the sonic, because as Thompson

argues, "noise is often felt as well as heard, and known through feeling" (11)[23]. Attending to noisiness is a potentially disruptive act because it calls into question what is being cut out, what is deemed 'information' and what is deemed excess, and thereby "serves as a reminder of the provisional nature of these identities, and that other relations are always possible" (*50 Key Terms in Contemporary Culture* 210). Perhaps most interestingly, Hainge positions noise as a substance that (even when it remains nebulous), "serves not to disrupt but, rather, to provide a sense of fixity and stability that counters the contingency of the protagonist's visual and tactile space, to furnish what appear to serve as anchoring points of reference- even if these auditory expressions are ultimately just as non-localisable" (73). When experiencing the nausea that attends existential disorientation Hainge asserts that, in lieu of other methods of anchoring oneself, at the very least the individual can locate themselves as being inside the non-localisable "fog, mist, smoke" (77). He borrows the term "haecceities" from Deleuze and Guattari to qualify the phenomenological experience of having nothing to anchor oneself by the "[capacity] to affect and be affected" (78).

Combining these philosophical conceptions of noise with its electro-cybernetic materiality offers a framework that gives shape to the disorientation of the individual in the context of disorientation that attends neoliberal subjectivity. In haecceity it is the mutual receptiveness to affective encounters that offers any options for locating oneself; the individual experience is reduced to a volatile mobile node. This goes beyond a psycho-somatic explanation that frames the value of this moment of connection as a neuro-beneficial moment of intimacy. Writing on the network experience Chun writes that, "the pulsing of energy and affect… cannot be reduced to nodes and edges, for networks are *about* edging: pulsation that frustrate neat separations and create sticky connections between the molecular and the molar" (49). As I argue in earlier chapters, these mutuals affectations are not clear, nor cathartic- they do not offer stability. Instead, what it does provide is a shape through which to conceptualise the muddy dizziness of networked affects that allows for the embodied feeling of the mutual precarity shared between the actants and their tenuous interconnectedness. It is the stuplimity that one experiences in the attempts to orient oneself- replete with frustration, shock, and tedium- that makes palpable the noise and material resistance that foments a change in perception about the network.

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[23] Hainge's own analysis agrees with Thompsons broader existential scope as he himself is speaking to the context of relating sonic *noise* to existential *nausea*.

Conclusion

Stuplimity offers a framework to reframe the analysis of ASMR videos away from discourses of care and digital intimacy, and towards a focus on its characteristic formal qualities. By attending to the formal qualities of Slime ASMR videos through close reading the long duration and repetition come to the fore. The visually and sonically shocking squelching slime become subsumed into a tedious rhythm that constantly evades the grasp of the sensorium's sense-making abilities. The slippery-ness refuses our grasp, stupefying and frustrating, while its stickiness keeps our attention glued to the particularity of texture at any moment. Our experience of time stops being linear and becomes a flow of simultaneity. Our sense-making abilities are arrested in the dense temporality of the moment of encounter and synthesises an embodied experience of 'now'. This temporal simultaneity and overwhelming stupefaction is minorly dysphoric, but potentially productive in its ability to synthesise a posture of resistance, which allows difference to be perceived in 'utter receptivity', experienced in an embodied, non-hierarchical way. Instead, the differences perceived agglutinate and heap up. However, this mode of engagement does not offer catharsis, nor mastery over the subject of its attention. It cultivates only an 'open feeling' that allows for the perception of frustrating dimensions that would otherwise be dismissed. In the case of ASMR, this creates a chance to perceive its own invitation into thick temporality, and the material digital space that it is enmeshed in.

The stuplimity that I read in Slime ASMR can be extrapolated to encounters in other sub-genres, however, disgust can sometimes shut down the ambivalence of other affective possibilities. This is in part because disgust and other 'major' affects are naturalised and treated uncritically, as if they are pre-discursive. However, the uncritical approach to these affects creates an epistemological dead-end, and precludes further consideration of, or ambivalence towards, the object or experience. As Ngai says, "the shocking and the boring prompt us to look for new strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible" (262). While more polarising genres of ASMR, like Ear-licking, may seem unavailable for stuplimitous encounters, this is not the case. Acknowledging the (at least partly) discursive root of disgust means it can also be encountered as a kind of shock. A shock which, in turn, can also be transformed into a tedium of texture that fosters a different mode of attention, including one that is characterised by 'open feeling' that is receptive to alterity. In Ear-licking ASMR videos, this open-feeling is directed towards the uncanny experience of space created by the unusual distribution of sound and visuals. The normative distribution would not call into question the composition of 'my own body', whereas seeing disembodied prosthetic ears, while being enveloped in sounds, cannot be made sense of, not even through metaphor or catachresis, and resolves only in uncanniness that casts doubt on the indexicality

that the deictic structure of cinematic encounters provide. However, the shock of this confrontation, when submitted to repetition and ultimately tedium, allows for a receptive consideration of the body as a form.

Experiencing the shocking uncanniness and stupefying tedium of ASMR (whether slime, ear-licking, or other) videos intensifies the sense of 'now' and 'here', but not in senses that confirm one's subjectivity or provide relief. Instead, the experience only exasperates the existential crisis that neoliberal disorientation occasions by drawing attention to the failures of the sensorium's sense-making abilities which would allow the audience to grasp their temporal and spatial bearings. What then, in the context of neoliberal subjectivity, and overwhelming disorientation, can intensified senses of 'now' and 'here' really claim to offer?

Through close readings I do come to believe that the formal structure imbues the videos with the abilities to thicken time and space and cultivate an unusual mode of attention in its viewers. These encounters do not offer a way 'out' of the everyday "flatline" (Paasonen 130), or "haze" (Chun 40) of navigating the ubiquitous network. What they do offer are recursive ambivalent encounters in their stuplimity. Stuplimity is about adopting the posture of resistance in its subject. This is an embodied frustration with one's sense-making capabilities and contradict the narrative that places the viewer ('Me') as merely a receiver of transmission by drawing attention to the affective experience of participating in noisy synthetic reception. By extension, these noisy encounters dispute normative deictic mappings produced by cinematic experiences. In ASMR videos, the noisiness of the experience comes from the ambivalent affective encounter, and fosters awareness towards the materiality of network in which they exist. The network substrate of these encounters is thought to be immaterial, but also static. It is a mapping tool, which obfuscates its own workings and ultimately exasperates disorientation because it does not account for the material realities of the technology, nor the inherently ephemeral nature of connection- which is not a point-to-point system, but a pulsation of energies that is "about edging". Both the sense of 'now' and 'here' evade grasp in part because of the routine obfuscation of the material basis of networked communication. It is not necessarily the case that people think YouTube and more broadly, the Internet, are immaterial, but perhaps more that it is not thought of at all. The shape and consistency of their existence is left virtual and vague. However, counterintuitively these frustrating ambivalent encounters point to the noisiness inherent to the connections between nodes. The logic of communication capitalism benefits from the confusion and disorientation native to this experience. All the while, affect is increasingly being forced to submit to informatization to the ends of commodification.

Nevertheless, there I would be reticent to endorse this as a fool-proof method for disrupting the hegemony of the systems I critique here. Not least of all because as Thompson writes,

> "While there has been a notable optimism surrounding affect, specifically regarding its capacity to transform, restructure and, subsequently, facilitate alternative modes of being, it is also 'a central mechanism of social reproduction', implicated in the desires and delights of consumerism, the terror, disgust and hatred manifest in racism, the feelings of collective belonging that are present in fascist rallies and patriotic ritual. So affect cannot be simply taken, politically speaking, as a 'way out'" (10).

The 'open feeling' that stuplimity cultivates foments a receptiveness to alterity, but, for better or worse, remains non-prescriptive in doing so. Furthermore, the scope of this thesis is necessarily limited, and there are many more dimensions that need to be addressed, and avenues to do so. I will briefly note some of the gaps in existent research that I think will be worthwhile for future inquiries.

Firstly, while I have employed the concept of stuplimity to directly argue against the notion of the "flat, sad, empty, anxious, unfocused, and amnesiac subjects" (Paasonen 16), there needs to be further investigation into the moments where ASMR and networked media creates mesmerising or hypnotising encounters. Secondly, the stuplimity I have argued in favour of here foments an embodied shocking awareness, but there is a growing genre of ASMR that targets, the pseudo-scientifically dubbed, "tingle immunity". There is a lot of say of the popularity of this genre in the context of ASMR as pharmakon, especially in the context of a time of a pandemic, and the limits of stuplimity in the face of sensory overwhelm. Thirdly, what this tingle immunity also pulls attention to is the importance of regarding ASMR through frameworks of labour. This is a topic that is already being picked up in research but continues to be artificially separated from discussions surrounding sensuality and sexuality. If we are to develop nuanced understandings of the mechanisms of embodiment and affective labour that are taking place these cannot be divorced from one another. Fourthly, the technological affordances and features of platforms are constantly evolving and difficult to account for. YouTube is rolling out a new feature at the time of this writing that allows users to see a visual distribution graph (placed just about the progress bar) which portions of the video have been "Most Replayed". This is interesting regarding Chun's attention to the 'stickiness' of networked media, and how affect or intensities have the potential to agglutinate. Finally, the case studies that I selected for this thesis have been limited to YouTube, but ASMR is cropping up in a plethora of other spaces- in 'short' forms on Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, as well as on live-streaming

platforms such as Twitch. There is much more to be said about how the dynamics in these spaces have ramifications for the experience of time and space these cultivate.

In conclusion, what I am proposing is potentially counterintuitive. There is an element that echoes Stein's impulse in her work to push form to its extreme to find out if we can go "far enough with this thing". A strategy that Shaviro also proposes when he quotes McKenzie Wark in his writing on Post-cinematic Affect and bringing consciousness to the "structures of feeling" (2) that permeate our current cultural moment: "only by going further and further [in] might one come out the other side of it" (qtd. in Shaviro 130). This potentially sounds vague, and that may be because it is. Discussing networks is difficult, precisely because they are not solid shapes, but rather these pulsations of energy or intensity that refuse stable mapping. Hillis et. al preface the anthology "Networked Affects" by quoting John Law who instructs theorists of networks to resist "the imperatives of coherence and neatness when addressing phenomena that are complex, diffuse, and messy, and on incorporating some of this messiness into scholarly practice, since "much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn't really have much of a pattern at all" (qtd. in Hillis et. Al 11). It is Jameson who formulates a rebellious imperative "to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible dimensions" (qtd. in Chun 42). Instead of offering a way 'out', the cinematic experience described here is only capable of offering a way further into the depths. ASMR videos push the sense of disorientation that attends neoliberal subjectivity and network affect even further. Only by wading in the depths of noise and disorientation can we hope to learn to acclimate our sensorium and develop new faculties of attending to them.

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(van Reeven; FrivolousFox ASMR; Slimeowy; McErlean et al.; Klausen; Shaviro; Hillis et al.; Hainge; Crary; Brinkema; Thompson; Nunes; Terranova; Han; Sobchack; Williams; Marks; Ahuja; Gallagher; Fredborg et al.; Hesselberth; Albuquerque; Paasonen; Deleuze; Ngai)