Sincere, Authentic, Remediated:
The Affective Labour and Cross Cultural Remediations of Music Video Reaction Videos on YouTube

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"Like, comment and subscribe"- so begins almost every reaction video on YouTube which collectively constitute a strange ecology of affective labour and cultural translation that merits further attention. There have already been several studies of user generated content (UGC) and the "free labour" of user activities on digital and social media platforms.[1] Reaction videos are different from these paradigms as, if successful, these channels are potentially a source of income through advertising, monetisation, as well as in most cases Patreon or other subscription platforms that give subscribers extra 'rights' to request content. This economy and ecology of creator culture on social media platforms has only recently become the object of sustained academic research and for a range of reasons. In part, this is due to a macro focus on the political economies of platforms as a whole, or a blanket critical rejection of the significance of the activities engaged with on such platforms, as Geert Lovink has argued: it is also due to outmoded approaches based on different entertainment industries like film and television that position users as similar to mass media audiences or fans who at most might produce UGC.[2] If attention has been paid to social media creators it has been more in a promotional media context, which largely sees such activities in terms of branding and marketing of both the self and other commodities. However, Stuart Cunningham and David Craig's work *Social Media Entertainment* and their even more relevant edited collection *Creator Culture* provides a valuable framework within which the cultural economy of music reaction videos can be usefully located.[3] Nevertheless, neither of these works discuss reaction videos of any kind explicitly.

The videos themselves involve intros followed by acts of listening to and viewing a range of music videos and other musical content. In some reaction videos,

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[1] See Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labour", in *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 73-97.
[2] Geert Lovink, *Networks without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).
[3] See Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (New York: NYU Press, 2019) and Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (eds.), *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment* (New York: NYU Press, 2021).

which can be called ‘organised’ reactions videos, specific age or other demographics are selected to listen to an already chosen music genre, band or performer. The ‘React’ channel, for example has series of ‘Kids React’, ‘Teens React’ and ‘Elders React’ videos, confronting new audiences with older genres of popular music and vice versa. An extreme example of this is the ‘Trybals’ channel form Pakistan in which ‘Tribal’ people are encouraged to react to everything from Opera to Rammstein. These kinds of reaction are not the focus of this chapter, however, since they involve some level of ‘expert’ curation rather than the direct, spontaneous forms of appropriation that can be found in ‘spontaneous’ reaction videos. In these reaction videos, creators react directly to music videos of their choosing, albeit influenced by subscriber requests and suggestions, without any expert mediation. Typically, this involves minimal context being given in advance and is to genres and styles of music that are relatively unfamiliar to the creators, even if there are multiple exceptions to this tendency.

It is important to note that music video reaction videos are only a subset of reaction videos more generally, which have a complex transmedia history going back to transnational television reality and quiz formats and arguably some forms of 1970s video art involving ‘video loops’ enabling participants to watch their own behaviour onscreen. An early example of this is the *Wipe Cycle* video installation (Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, 1969), in which visitors to the exhibition space became visible on monitors in both real time and delay, and video artists like Bruce Nauman explored such processes over multiple works. On television, reality formats from *Candid Camera* (1948-2014) to *Big Brother* (1999-) devised various different mechanisms for participants to see their own recorded behaviour and in some instances for audiences to see these acts of seeing. However, it was Japanese television quiz shows that pioneered the format of using an image within an image known as a ‘waipu’ box to display reactions for example on *Naruhodu* (The World, 1981-), which featured celebrities and comedians reacting to short videos. This subsequently became a popular format globally, for example, on contemporary popular UK comedy panel shows. However, none of these televisual precursors are fully blown reaction videos since they lack the DIY element made possible by digital platforms like YouTube, and were even rare in the early years of YouTube since both the software infrastructures to support them and the associated technical skills required, were not immediately available to amateur users.

In fact, early YouTube reaction videos tended not to show what was being reacted to but only usually terrified, disgusted or other extreme reactions to material that it would be impossible to share on the platform like the infamous so-called "2 Girls, 1 Cup" scatological fetish trailer (for *Hungry Bitches,* 2007) which gave rise to multiple of these types of reaction video.[4] The next era of reaction videos tended to be to film and television and related trailers, for example to heightened moments of cult TV shows like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) which already had multiple reaction videos by 2013. These reaction videos essentially developed the format that would be followed in music video reactions. Except in the case of full-length films or TV episodes, these would often be limited to trailers or edited highlights so as not to infringe intellectual property and copyright rules that were increasingly being enforced on the platform with strong pressure from entertainment industries. Music video reactions were not immediately so common, partly because music videos were still circulating more on television than on YouTube early on, and partly because as a media form they lacked the status of high profile and cult film and television. However, this all shifted in the 2010s as YouTube became a primary location for disseminating music videos and popular music itself, while the music video form acquired a new status, both as an aesthetic and commercial product and as a marker of specific popular music eras, scenes and histories.[5]

While it is impossible to fully characterise the genres and eras of popular music involved in reaction videos, this is frequently historical material from the late 20th century, the material being processed largely coming from various forms of rock, punk, metal, indie, new wave and other forms of often 'white' music genres. While there is also considerable diversity among reactors, in terms of ethnicity, gender, age and relations to popular music styles, there has been a recent tendency towards young African American reactors, often but not necessarily coming more from backgrounds in hip hop, reggae and pop music but branching out well beyond this in their reactions. The affective labour of reactors therefore is not only in performing a 'sincere' reaction to the archival material but also translating it in various ways to a

[44] On the multiple responses to these reaction videos see Heather Warren-Crow, "Screaming Like a Girl: Viral Video and the Work of Reaction", *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 6 [Online] (October, 2016): 1113-1117. While fascinating, these kind of reaction videos have little in common technically or textually with the reaction videos discussed here.

[5] See Gina Arnold, Daniel Cookney, Kirsty Fairclough and Michael Goddard (eds), *Music/Video: Histories, Aesthetics, Media* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1-13 ff.

new and often very different time period and cultural context. This cross-cultural mediation of popular music by reacting to music videos on YouTube is both an exponentially increasing from of YouTube content in recent years, and provides the basis for this chapter. These videos can range from the descriptive, to the extremely personal, from comments on the energy, beauty and power of performances, to the meanings or meaninglessness of the song lyrics. The framings of these responses in terms of everything from video intros to the *mise-en-scène* of the reactor space and use of costume and make-up, also play an essential role in the various styles of these responses.

This chapter will engage with several of these channels including “Sincerely KSO”, “Jayvee TV”, “The Jayy Show”, “India Reacts”, “Pink Metalhead”, “Kae and Livy” and “Brad and Lex” to track how these reactors perform acts of media and cultural translation enabled but also constrained by the algorithmically determined affordances of the YouTube platform. These channels were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They are all popular channels that specialise in reactions to music videos with at least 70K subscribers
2. They are all created by non-white creators, and are largely but not exclusively African American creators
3. They predominantly react to a range of rock-related music genres (classic rock, punk, pop punk, metal, emo) that are usually coded as being made by white performers for largely white audiences

These criteria were used to emphasize cross cultural acts of listening, viewing, interpretation and appropriation’ alongside more subjective criteria such as capturing a range of affective responses, or the quality of the interpretations provided. This chapter will interrogate how this work of listening, understanding and feeling operates as a kind of affective prosthesis for subscribers by means of which they are able to re-experience familiar musical material with fresh ears and eyes, and look at a range of affective listening experiences enacted by the reactors. It will finally ask, especially given the context of Covid-19 social distancing, how the often-addictive experience of reaction videos constitutes a kind of substitute sociality, allowing for highly mediated performances of sincerity and authenticity, and constructing utopian relationships between subjects who might otherwise have little in common.

Theoretical Approach

As indicated in the title, reaction videos are definitely instances of remediation, to use Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's term, but ones that combine multiple layers of digital remediation.[6] After all, music videos are already remediations of recorded music, which attain further levels of remediation by being relocated to a social media platform like YouTube and hence are already in principle subject to commentary, sharing and modification.[7] Reaction videos, however, add another layer to this, which doesn't correspond to conventional discussions of UGC, mash ups or other social media phenomena. Reactors do not attempt to modify the content they react to, and instead tend to show it the utmost respect, treating the sometimes arbitrary combination of music and visuals as an integral whole to be felt and sometimes engaged with exegetically by intuitive interpretations or by reading out lyrics. The exception to this being the need to obscure, blur or otherwise disguise certain videos for copyright reasons. However, this incorporation necessarily takes place in a hypermediated form, in that reaction videos consist of two windows, a large one usually of the reactor and a smaller one of the material reacted to. This has several determinations both technical and economic, since 'owners' of the original content will often make claims against its remediation, especially if this might be profitable to reactors rather than to these proprietary companies; YouTube responds in various ways to these claims, from taking down videos, to eliminating the audio or video content, to even stopping reactors from uploading further material. While some of these issues will be further engaged with, the focus of this paper will be on reaction videos as affective labour which requires further explanation.

User activities online have often been seen in the context of "free labour", as developed especially by Terranova. Terranova makes a complex argument that free labour encompasses both fully voluntary activities that played an essential role in developing the internet, for example via free and open-source software development, as well as forms of exploitative unpaid labour, such as the unpaid production of content on online platforms that businesses then profit from, as she puts it:

> The new Web was made of the big players, but also of new ways to make the audience work. In the new Web, after the pioneering days, television and the Web converge is the one thing

[6] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
[7] Arnold, Cookney, Fairclough and Goddard., *Music/Video*, 12.

> they have in common: their reliance on their audience/users as providers of the cultural labour which goes under the label “real life stories.”[8]

This is incredibly prescient since it predates the emergence of the major Web 2.0 platforms like YouTube or Facebook but already anticipates their digital economies based around the free labour of user activities, capitalised on immediately via various instruments from advertising to data commodification. But even prior to these developments, Terranova was able to pick up on a key distinction that informs this current research, namely that whereas earlier media like television mobilised the audience as both labour and spectacle, for example through reality and talk shows, this was always within a majoritarian and moralising apparatus of power and knowledge, framed and remediated through the channel, the host and the format. In contrast, material circulates on the Web without these frameworks, allowing for a much greater heterogeneity and excess proliferation of ‘unprofessional’ or uncoded material, of which pornography would be an obvious example. In her words: “the digital economy cares only tangentially about morality. What it really cares about is an abundance of production, an immediate interface with cultural and technical labour whose result is a diffuse, non-dialectical antagonism and a crisis in the capitalist modes of valorization of labor as such”.[9] While this might sound like an overly optimistic perspective based on the context of early 2000s web development prior to the new hegemonic platforms that would indeed take over some of the moralising functions of television, what it points to is the emergence of new forms of organisation of labour in online contexts that are highly relevant to the example of reaction videos, specifically in the ways that they mobilise the collective intelligence and “open potentiality of the many” while at the same time developing new forms of organisation and constraints of this potential in order to extract surplus value via the ways in which platforms like YouTube are constituted.[10]

The authors of a 2014 study of the creation of UGC around music videos on YouTube identified a range of possible modes of remediation of music including covers, remixes, parodies, dancing and flash mobs as well as reactions. Interestingly, it was the first four of these that were most prevalent and the numbers

[8] Terranova, “Free Labour”, 96.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 97.

of reaction videos across multiple genres was negligible.[11] While these types of UGC remain popular, reaction videos have now taken a much more prominent place on YouTube, and some genres of UGC have migrated to other platforms like TikTok which were developed precisely to facilitate this kind of content. However, discussion of the proliferation of this kind of UGC on TikTok as well as other platforms like Instagram or even YouTube shorts is beyond the scope of this chapter. Whatever the case, there has certainly been a resurgence of reaction videos over the last few years, especially during the period of Covid lockdowns as well as responses to these phenomena in mainstream media outlets.[12] Furthermore I would question whether in many cases UGC is the most appropriate term to grasp the digital economies that are involved in the production and circulation of these materials.

So if reaction videos are not yet another example of UGC as free labour then what kind of labour are we talking about? My hypothesis is that this labour corresponds to free labour in the sense that it is freely chosen online activity that is determined for reasons beyond simply being a way of making money, yet the economy behind these videos is more complex than simply being further free advertising for popular music industries. YouTube channels, if they have enough subscribers, can be monetised and there are possibilities that their creators can make money through advertising. Furthermore, creators frequently also have Patreon or similar accounts whereby subscribers can directly pay to receive 'benefits', like their requests going to the front of the queue, which is not insignificant when popular channels might have between 80K and 250K plus subscribers. Through these back-end architectures, reactors such as Jayy of The Jayy Show also sell merchandise from clothing to headphones. PinkMetalHead, for example, makes videos of her exercise routines and clothing try-ons available to paid subscribers, while Kae and Livy are using paid requests for songs for a GoFundMe fund to build their own house.

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[11] Jaimie Y. Park, et al, "Exploring the User-Generated Content (UGC) Uploading Behavior on YouTube", *World Wide Web Conference 14 Proceedings*, 2014.

[12] See Jonathan Bernstein, "How YouTube Reaction Videos Are Changing the Way We Listen: After a Viral Reaction to a Phil Collins Hit, Channel Creators Reflect on How Their Work is Re-Framing Classic Songs — and Breaking Down Cultural Barriers in the Process", *Rolling Stone* (August 24, 2020), at https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/youtube-reaction-videos-interviews-in-the-air-tonight-lost-in-vegas-1046225/.

Channel Name	Number of Subscribers	Number of videos	Month and Year Started
PinkMetalHead	98K	440	July, 2017
The Jayy Show	86.1K	1,031	January, 2020
JayVee TV	245K	1,696	July, 2019
Sincerely KSO	94.4K	680	January, 2020
Brad and Lex	163K	1,083	January, 2021
IndiaReacts	256K	2,192	August, 2018
Dean Bros/Kae and Livy	72.15K	1,531	March, 2019*
Twins the New Trend	876K	1,422	July, 2019**
BillyYouSoCrazy	280K	3,353	August, 2018
Jamel aka Jamal	852K	3,185	February, 2019***

*channel began in 2017 but featured other content like pranks and reactions to sports videos until 2019

** channel began in 2017 but featured other content until 2019

*** not all reactions are to music videos in the beginning

Caption: Table showing the main channels discussed in this chapter, their numbers of subscribers and videos

But what value are reactors adding that might encourage subscribers to invest in their various ‘brands’? This is where notions of sincerity and authenticity come in, as well as a complex economy of affective labour. Whereas subscribers request reactions to material that they already know, and in some cases have strong fandom relationships to, reactors usually claim to have never heard the music before, or at least only in passing in a film or on the radio (which they will usually stop the video to admit to). So what subscribers are paying for, whether economically or just in terms of investing time and attention in the channel, is a first time and therefore ‘authentic’ reaction to a piece of music and/or video that they know and love but which in most cases is no longer fresh or new. For their part, reactors are intuitive archaeologists, following the suggestions of their subscribers for a variety of explicit motives from

"keeping music alive" (Jamel aka Jamal "My Favourite Music Era", [video description], August, 2020) to going on a "music journey" (IndiaReacts, Channel home page, March, 2018), or being " Your heavy metal princess in training" (PinkMetalHead, Channel About page, 2021) or some other version of an expressed love for music and the desire to extend their musical experience via this socially networked assemblage. Paradoxically this authenticity needs to be performed, usually through emotional and visceral response, some examples of which will be examined soon. While some reactors may just bop along to the music and give some indication whether or not they like it, many of the reactors are more performative and visibly embody a range of affective and energetic responses to these acts of listening. In one of the few articles on the emotional labour of these reaction videos to date, Byrd McDaniel sums this up as embodying various layers of reactivity:

> [Reactivity] describes the approach that creators take to listening, as they heighten and exaggerate their visceral experience of music media. In these reaction videos, performers treat their individual sensitivity to music as an asset, giving them unparalleled access to music's power. […] Regardless of how they react to the music, they treat their affective experience of music as a kind of asset or skill, something that yields profit, visibility, and authority for them as listeners. Second, reactivity describes their goals for creating these videos, which creators hope will provoke subsequent reactions among viewers and subscribers. Reaction videos ideally create more reactions.[14]

So reaction videos are really complex, affective chain reactions from the suggestions of the subscribers to the reactors and then from the reactors through performative acts of listening to the viewers/listeners, thereby encouraging them to react to the channel by supporting it through likes and subscriptions if not financial support. However, despite the name "reaction videos", I would see this more in terms of responsiveness than reactivity, the responsive capacities of these performative acts of listening, generating feelings, meaning and value for the subscribers, and constituting not only an affective economy but also a mode of sociality that may explain the exponential increase of reaction videos during the period of Covid lockdowns.

One important aspect of this recent wave of reaction videos is the ways they cut across social lines, especially racial ones. Of course, musical genres have never been exclusively defined along racial lines, and there are rich and complex histories of musical genres like rock and roll, blues and jazz that have incorporated and

[14] Byrd McDaniel, "Popular Music Reaction Videos: Reactivity, Creator Labor, and the Performance of Listening Online", *New Media and Society* (2020) [Online First]: 2-3.

combined forms of music originally coded as predominantly black or white. And while a lot of this movement is coded as the white appropriation of black musics, the reverse has also occurred, as black artists appropriate elements of rock, psychedelic or punk music usually seen as largely white, whether in the case of an artist like Prince, or participation in punk music by groups like Bad Brains. However, especially where it comes to classic rock, or in a different way 1980s synthpop, these forms of music have largely been seen as coded as white both in terms of their producers and their audiences. These are just the lines that music reaction videos tend to cross, adding up to an intervention in modes of listening to and participating in popular music and culture.

In a 2020 article for *Flow* Journal, María Elena Cepeda breaks down some of these issues beginning with what she calls the relatively rare phenomenon in the era of algorithmically enhanced taste cultures of the "opportunity for highly fragmented media audiences to engage each other over their shared appreciation for a common media text".[15] What this amounts to, in the context of the escalation of racial conflicts in the form of police murders of African Americans and resistance to this in the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement is "an alternative view of Blackness, one marked by an emphasis on one of the most pleasurable of human acts: listening to music".[16] While keen to point out the political ambivalences at play with reaction videos such as whether they are truly breaking down racially coded music genres and listening practices, or are overdetermined by racial power relations, in the relations that black creators have with the musical producers and with their subscribers who are assumed to be largely older and white, it is necessary to keep these complexities open, and neither make utopian claims for reaction videos as ushering in a post-racial era of music listening nor as merely re-inscribing existing relations of power. Certainly, as Jonathan Bernstein suggests, the almost complete indifference to music genres and the ways they are conventionally coded and contextualised is certainly changing the ways popular music is being listened to, and raising important questions about who it is produced by and for, while challenging racialised assumptions about the answers to these questions.[17]

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[15] María Elena Cepeda, "Race and the Unintended Consequences of Musical Reaction Videos", *Flow* (October 25, 2020), at https://www.flowjournal.org/2020/10/musical-reaction-videos/.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Bernstein, "How YouTube Reaction Videos Are Changing the Way We Listen".

PinkMetalHead (Mona Platt), for example, grew up listening to Nu Metal, so exploring artists like Black Sabbath, Slayer or Metallica was not such a great leap for her, even if it was seen as initially surprising on the part of the subscribers attracted to her channel.

In the rest of the chapter, I examine some of the specific strategies and affective performances of listening of reactors, organised not according to music genres or individual channels but rather affects. It will be impossible to discuss in detail all of the channels and reactors mentioned so I have also assembled a YouTube playlist of reaction videos that can be consulted for further examples (this can be accessed via the QR code for this chapter). This list also includes some additional examples that operate quite differently such as the “React” channel which organises reactions of different demographic groups, and “expert” review channels that trade on various forms of “subcultural” capital such as “Album Review TV (ARTV, Beyond ARTV)” or even more obviously the “Punk Rock MBA” or “The Color Fred”, the channel of former member of Emo band Taking Back Sunday who typically reacts both to his own and other emo videos. While covering reactions to several different genres of music, the focus is on forms of alternative rock music conventionally coded as white such as pop punk or emo, as well as some classic rock. This is because while classic rock has often been seen as making claims to universality, even if this was often in reality a very white form of universality based on appropriating black popular music genres, punk related genres are usually perceived as made by and for highly specific subcultures, and arguably have only circulated beyond this due to the affordances of digital platforms like YouTube.

Sadness/Tears/Nostalgia

One of the affects most at work for YouTube reaction videos subscribers is nostalgia, not only for specific songs, but also periods of their lives, which also often implies feelings of sadness and loss. It is therefore unsurprising that one of key affects performed in reaction videos involves various degrees of sadness. This can be shown in everything from crying emojis in thumbnails, and titles like “Pink Floyd-Wish you were here (1985) Reaction (they made me cry again)” (PinkMetalHead), or “I Cried like a Baby, Blink 182 ‘Adam’s Song’ REACTION!” (IndiaReacts). In the former, PinkMetalHead dedicates the song to a patient of hers who recently passed

away, welling up in the process of talking about him, while the somewhat light treatment of suicide in Blink-182's "Adam's Song" (1999) results in an even more personal performance of confessional emotion on the part of IndiaReacts, including talking about her own experiences of feeling suicidal (5.00).[19]

Similar reactions can be found to songs as different generically as REM's "Everybody Hurts" (1992) or Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car" (1988). Regardless of the genre of music, this form of reaction ratchets up the authenticity level by both affective performance of the body overwhelmed by emotion while listening, and the divulging of highly personal experiences, which in turn enable viewers who perhaps felt these intense emotions when they first heard the tracks in question but after decades these resonances have inevitably faded away, to fully feel them once again. Several reactors describe themselves as empaths and vehemently deny that anything about their live emotional reactions to music is fake. Reactors, therefore, through their own performances of affective embodied listening, give back to viewers their own past affectivity through these prosthetic acts of listening and feeling. Here the racialised aspects of these affective ecologies as emotive reactions of largely younger people of colour for largely older, largely white users could be raised but it would be a mistake to over generalise and see this as simply a paid or unpaid servicing of nostalgia- clearly the reactors get more out of these experiences than simply economic compensation, or the sense of giving subscribers what they want- they instead have a cathartic experience which many of them refer to in terms of "love" that they feel both for their subscribers and from them.

It is important to point here to the seeming contradiction of contemporary digital platforms being a vehicle for nostalgia, a paradox recently explored by Grafton Tanner. Pointing to the nostalgia mobilised in the rise to presidency of Donald J. Trump, Tanner points out that this is hardly surprising, given that nostalgia frequently arises in periods of "social, political and even personal unrest".[20] But this is not merely a phenomenon external to technological platforms but one that they actively produce and circulate so much so that he argues that the attention economy of

[19] India Reacts, "I CRIED Like a Baby! Blink-182-Adam's Song REACTION!", YouTube video, 8.24 (2 December 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCzrpvQHVKw&list=PLJT_IMCv7TkgrNVeG8-331xLh4ZVbSerp&index=4&t=359s.
[20] Grafton Tanner, *The Circle of the Snake: Nostalgia and Utopia in the Age of Big Tech* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2020), 8.

social media is complemented or expressed via a "nostalgia industry".[21] In addition to there being many incentives to escape into an imaginary past, essentially the Internet is a vast repository of artefacts from the past, of which music videos on YouTube would be a prime example, given that it is the videos from the late twentieth century, the era of the ascendancy of music television, that tend to recirculate the most on reaction channels. But nostalgia is not just the intersection of the desire to escape the present into an imaginary better past, and archival platforms, but, as Tanner writes, is also actively cultivated by algorithmically driven platforms:

> the structures of social media and online advertising encourage nostalgia to circulate. Recommender systems and predictive analytics – the very tools that allow our contemporary media to function – zero in on quick reactions, such as a flash of anger or a swell of nostalgia. These reactions are noted by algorithms, which then make recommendations based on them […] the result is a nostalgic feedback loop wherein old ideas travel around.[22]

Like most writing on nostalgia, of which there is a rich tradition including authors like Fredric Jameson, it is generally seen as inherently reactionary, hence the indexing of nostalgia to the Trump phenomenon, for example. Other authors use terms like "retromania" (Simon Reynolds),[23] or the cancellation of the future (Mark Fisher),[24] to point to similar phenomena of popular music and culture in digital contexts having abandoned any form of "progress" and reverting to the mere empty recycling of the past. Nevertheless, music reaction videos also prompt us to call these notions of nostalgia into question, especially the idea of whether nostalgic relations between the present and the past are necessarily so many forms of cultural amnesia and the annulment of historical awareness. Instead, it could be argued that the relations between the present and the past that reaction videos set up could in certain instances constitute non dialectical constellations in a Benjaminian sense, capable of undoing the certainties of the present through the unexhausted potentialities of fragments and artefacts of the past: perhaps music videos are our equivalent of Walter Benjamin's outmoded arcades, and reactors intuitive media archaeologists of

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[21] Ibid., 9.
[22] Tanner, *The Circle of the Snake*, 10.
[23] Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).
[24] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

these popular culture ruins.[25] As a counter-example that fully embodies the reactionary nostalgia that critics in the Jamesonian tradition identify, we could look at the reaction channel created by Cat Sarai, “Gen X Rewind”. The problem here is not the ethnicity of the reactor but the fact that she is reacting to the same music she loved and enjoyed twenty years earlier. There is no element of surprise or discovery here, just the presentation of an historical era of popular music from the 1980s and 1990s as intrinsically superior to music produced today. This form of nostalgia comes across as smug and elitist as well as empty of anything but a comfortable and unchallenging exercise in reactionary nostalgia. The music might overlap considerably with that reacted to in the channels discussed in this chapter, but it is the relay and affective exchange between these reactors and their subscribers that changes everything; yes cross cultural reaction channels do activate nostalgia, but it is not based on the reactors’ long entrenched tastes but rather on a process of mutual discovery between the reactors, their subscribers and the network that makes nostalgia function differently, as part of an assemblage of cross cultural remediation.

Humour/Laughter

Humour is another key affect performed by reactors and several reactors who respond to music videos also respond to televisual or stand-up comedy, sometimes on a separate channel. But it is not necessary to go to explicitly defined comedy genres when there are videos by pop punk bands like The Offspring that receive a disproportionate number of reactions considering their significance in popular musical history. While this applies to several of their videos, the vast majority of reactions are to “Pretty Fly (for a White Guy”) (1998) whose humorous roasting of a white ‘wannabee’ could be seen as problematic for multiple reasons, such as its use of African American and Latino/a stereotypes in both the song and the video. In fact, a recent article in *The Quietus* by J R Moores re-evaluated the band’s output especially songs like this from the *Americana* album as so many expressions of “punching down” claiming that the group is punk’s equivalent to the contemporaneous TV series *Friends*:

[25] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* , trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

> They may not have been so guilty at first, but by the time of their fourth album (1997's *Ixnay On The Hombre*), The Offspring had adopted the rich's undignified habit of sneering down at those less fortunate and far weaker than themselves. […] 1998's *Americana*, is practically a concept album on how […] implicitly loathsome sad sacks need to snap out of it, get a grip, sort themselves out, pull their fingers out and their socks up, stop whining, pull themselves together, etc., etc., etc.[26]

Instead of this difficult to dispute re-evaluation of the band which is only made more evident in its music videos like the one for "Pretty Fly (for a White Guy)", most reactors seem to fully appreciate its humour, and tend if anything to feel sorry for the white wannabe protagonist's failed attempts to appropriate black culture. Certainly the idea that The Offspring's critical presentations of white 'wannabe' behaviour might be no less racist in its reproduction of stereotypes is something that is not generally mentioned. Rather than being about critique of racial representations (which does appear in some reaction videos but more often in hip hop related ones like to Joyner Lucas's "I'm not Racist"(2017)), this video is usually responded to as pure comedy. But this avoidance of critique is more to do with the affective functions of reaction videos than any naivete on the part of the reactors. While 'review' channels like *The Punk Rock MBA* point to similar shortcomings as at best cheesy both musically and conceptually, reaction videos are not there to pass judgement but respond affectively to a first time listening and viewing experience. And Offspring videos do definitely lend themselves to a response of humour and laughter, however problematic their lyrics might be on closer investigation.

In general, pop punk as a genre is fairly suitable for this kind of response, for example, reactions to most Blink-182 videos such as their boy band parody video for "All the Small Things" (2000). As the band has pointed out in the video "Blink-182 Reacts to Kids Reacting to Blink-182", this video has outlived the objects of its parody like N' Sync, so that the absurd costume choices and onscreen behaviour will now be read as if they were themselves a boy band or at least scramble the differences between them. Another good example of this is the track by 2000s pop punk band The All-American Rejects "Gives you Hell" (2008) that BillyYouSoCrazy reacts to. In this video the lead singer and would-be Hollywood actor Tyson Ritter plays two roles of both an uptight straight suburbanite and a louche rock star inexplicably living next door who come into conflict and taunt each other in various

[26] J R Moores, "The One With The Conservative Agenda: Why The Offspring Is Punk's Equivalent Of *Friends*", *The Quietus* (November, 2018), at https://thequietus.com/articles/25686-offspring-americana-review-anniversary (accessed 28 January 2022).

ways before sleeping with each other's wife or girlfriend. But the heart of the song is based on bitterness about a previous relationship while pretending not to care about it, disguising feelings of loss through condescension and ridicule: "Tomorrow you'll be thinkin' to yourself/Yeah, where'd it all go wrong?/But the list goes on and on" (2008). In this reaction video, Billy sees right through the light-hearted video and the bittersweet humour of the lyrics that is also reflected in its relatively pop musical style, and points out how this surface humour is a thin disguise for deep feelings of loss and resentment, describing it in the video subtitle as "THE MOST BITTER SONG I EVER HEARD LMAO". This can be seen in reactions to other music videos, for example to the B52s which while not meant or reacted to as mere comedy, nevertheless communicate across genre differences by incorporating humour both into the musical style and especially the lyrics and their delivery, as well as music videos. As these contrasting examples show the communication enabled by humour can just simply end there or promote the reading of deeper underlying meanings in the course of the reaction.

Shock/Surprise

Another key affect performed by reaction video is shock or surprise. While this can be on the level of having expectations from the name of a group or song and then the track turning out to be quite different but more dynamically it is when a song changes dramatically at a given moment. No song is perhaps more dramatic in this regard than Ukrainian metal band Jinjer and their song "Pisces" (2016). Beginning as a mellow jazzy tune with emotional and strong but sweet feminine vocals on the part of vocalist Tatiana Shmailyuk, at a given moment a rising squall of feedback gives way to heavy metal riffage and an extraordinary vocal performance of growling vocals by the female singer that has caused more than one reactor to virtually fall out of their seat, as can be seen in the example on the playlist from Brad and Lex who began their reaction channel by most often reacting to hip hop, including UK hip hop but also selected other rock music groups like Tool (they have now considerably expanded their range and cover the full spectrum of different rock genres as well as other popular music genres). This kind of reaction video in a way harks back to early more prank-like reaction videos on early YouTube or even television shows like *Candid Camera* especially when reactors then subject other family members like

siblings and especially parents to this music video, in order to enjoy their shocked reactions.

Something similar if less dramatic happens when JayVee of JayveeTV reacts to Weezer's "Say it Ain't So" (1994), which he had turned up because it was so quiet only to be floored by the sudden explosion of power pop noise after the first verses. Or alternatively Kae and Livy's reaction to My Chemical Romance's "Welcome to the Black Parade" (2006) is one of being energised synaesthetically by all the elements from the vocals to the *mise-en-scène* of the video, to the dramatic 'switch up' of the music into a more punk style in the bridge, leading to multiple interruptions of the video and listening accompanied by energetic movement and even singing along to the chorus despite this supposedly being a first experience of the music video. These reactions and more generally these reactors while very different share a tendency to react less in terms of emotion than energy, whether or not this is accompanied or triggered by shock or surprise. However, this is no less affective labour than crying or laughing and similarly translates music associated with a specific largely white subculture, in this case emo, to a differently racialised act of listening, informed by a previous history of reactions.

Areas For Further Research

Having sketched out some but by no means all of the key affective registers deployed in reaction videos across the reaction channels I have focused on, what kind of conclusions can be drawn and what further areas for research can be identified? I would first make the caveat that I have not yet researched even these channels systematically, and the reaction videos I have seen and selected for analysis are as much about my own musical tastes and preferences as any claim to represent any individual channel in an exhaustive way. It is also important to point out that the nature of reaction videos is to be quite fluid and reactors have often made substantial changes to their whole approach, whether in terms of the genres of music selected, strategies to evade issues of intellectual property and censorship by the platform, or finding different way to communicate with and include audiences whether through live reaction shows or off platform Patreon and other secondary platforms, or through the selling of merchandise. All of these strategies and their modulation over time are complex and can lead to some reactors becoming more

and more popular, while others disappear entirely or reduce their activity drastically. Nevertheless, it is possible to isolate several key areas for further investigation as itemised below:

Techniques of reactivity: this covers everything from verbal introductions, to the décor and setting of the reaction, to the use of graphics by some reactors, to the incorporation of secondary material like Wikipedia or Genius lyrics information about the music. Sincerely KSO, for example, pays a lot of attention to colour in terms of both décor and her outfits, accessories and make up which are all part of the reaction. Even the two paintings on the wall of a yellow flower and a bee are there specifically to refer to her subscribers who she refers to as “my hunnies”. Kae and Livy, who are much younger, have a kind of call and response catchphrase “the grind don’t stop till it hits the top, to the what, to the top, to the tippety tippety top” accompanied by a graphic explosion to hype up their viewers, while others like JayVee TV and The Jayy Show have quite professional audiovisual opening sequences with music, graphics, and in the latter case, the highlighting of material also available as merch. While IndiaReacts will supplement her intuitive “homegirl” interpretations of the meanings of songs through Wikipedia or Genius Lyrics, Sincerely KSO does performative readings of the lyrics of every song she reacts too, using these readings as a springboard for interpretation.

Cross Cultural Border Crossings: While I gave some indication of the crossing of racialised generic boundaries of music listening this was somewhat generalised as African Americans with hip hop and R and B backgrounds listening to ‘white’ music genres. In fact even in my examples there is much more diversity; KSO is of a Nigerian background and is living in Canada, with no hip hop background, as an African American teenager, PinkMetalHead was a nu metal fan so her reactions only built on this background, and other reactors give a truly global perspective to reaction videos like Enoma (Easygoing native outsiders making assessments), an Indian couple who often preface their reactions with an extreme emphasis on unedited authenticity, as well as listing their multiple degrees, or AfricaReacts who describes herself as “an African girl responding to music, comedy and stories from around the globe”. More recently a Pakistan based channel called “Trybals” present subjects who are situated as

"tribal people" with a range of mostly Western musical phenomena from classical opera to Rammstein. But boundaries can also be closer to home, for example in Brad and Lex's reaction to UK Hip Hop artist LowKey's "Ghosts of Grenfell" which, while still ostensibly within a familiar genre, involves a local historical tragic fire taking place within the borough of Kensington and Chelsea in London. This video and its sequel therefore becomes an impetus for learning more about this tragedy and what it represents in terms of multiple forms of inequality. As such these videos and the reactions to them can function as a form of citizen journalism, even if this is a relatively rare phenomenon in the world of reaction videos.

Affective Ecologies and Economies: This is really the main theme of this whole chapter- there is a lot more to reaction videos than meets the eye from complex relations between reactors and subscribers that are both affective and economic, to the performance of authenticity as a value adding brand, to the battles that reactors engage in with the algorithmic governance of the YouTube platform. The view of this presented by the *Rolling Stone* article is quite misleading in this regard: yes a few of the most popular reactors might catch the attention of some music, fashion or other companies and be offered some kind of more legitimate career path but this is a tiny minority. Even reactors who are very productive and might produce three videos a day, and have approaching 100K subscribers, get little or no corporate support or income from the platform and are just as likely to see the results of their work subject to take downs, silencing or other punitive actions on behalf of purported copyright holders for what is on one level the sharing of advertising (for example, the famous "Twins the New Trend" Phil Collins "Something in the Air Tonight" reaction led to a 1000% spike in sales of the track). They therefore develop a whole range of strategies to avoid detection and blocking by the algorithm from smaller windows, or windows with distracting framings, or multiple windows within windows and so on.

At the very least, reaction videos are a complex phenomenon of digital remediation of music and listening that as the *Rolling Stone* article does get right are changing the online landscape of popular music by crossings and even complete indifference to genre, as well as contesting ideas that specific musical genres belong to racially

delineated listeners whether that be of classic rock, metal, punk, indie music or even hip hop and R and B. While not explicitly political beyond this, reaction video makers have frequently been politicised by the lack of support and outright interference from the platform in wholly siding with copyright holders against their creative practices in unjust and arbitrary ways. This has been expressed through videos directly addressing viewers (see also in the playlist), but also YouTube as well and both calling out the unfairness of its practices and underlining the value of these channels for the appreciation and circulation of a wide variety of popular music. Underlying this are utopian aspirations for alternative forms of sociality made possible by digital platforms in which there is not only a post-racial sharing and circulation of music and affects but the formation of a sense of community or family embodied in many of the reactors' discourses. The role and significance of reaction videos is only likely to increase in the future, in tandem with new modes and platforms of digital remediation.