

# RE-ACTIONING: READING AND WRITING SONIC FICTIONS ON THE INTERNET

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## 1. Intro-

what's this?

how to prime (y)our ear for this playback ...

of free-floating notes, thoughts, memes, quotes, YouTube comments on pop music reception, textual remixes of musical narratives, attendant mess of selves?

where's the hook?

...

I'm so, I'm so re-born. (Kid Cudi, from 'Reborn' – *Kids See Ghosts*, 2018)

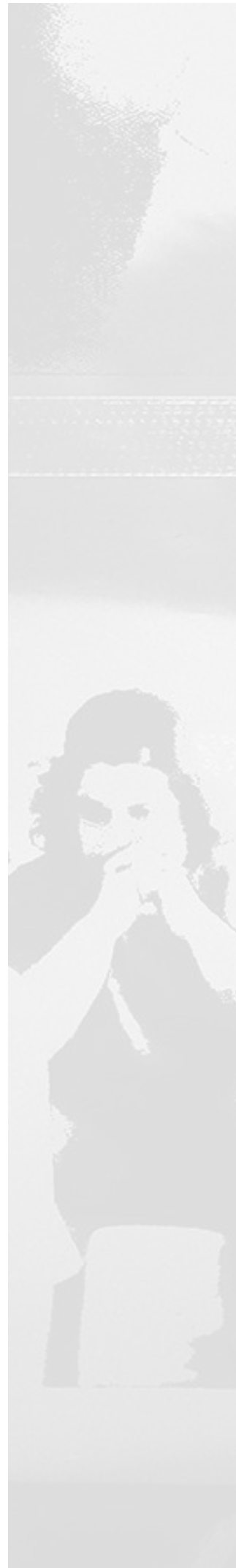
... this song ... it just encompassed so much, and was just like a perfect storm of this circumstance of me being where I'm at now. Me being here experiencing this with you. (TCtheTopCat 2019, 18:55)

i come back to this every few months just to watch your reaction to reborn. that has got to be one of the realest and most impactful reactions i have ever seen. (Asthen 2021)

Your reaction to it is how I still feel listening to it today, and I appreciate how genuine you were here. (D'Astoli 2021)

... hearing can temporarily put us in touch with ourselves, allowing us to experience ourselves as who we are, in this very moment, on the affective level: as "sites of affect" ... (Abels 2015: 63)

To hear him, one must have a keen ear. In other words ... it is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography. (Derrida 1988: 51)



this essay presents an account

not a theory of music, or of musical experience

an account of accounts

a machine for recirculating sonic experience, citing marks

a sonic fiction, the engine of which is 'sensation transference' (Eshun 1998: 121)

'prolific, viral, contagious and assimilative' (Schulze 2020: 4)

you, me and me, living tunes

a reading machine

ear ring

that writes

re-actions

## 2. Re-actioning / iterability

I'm addicted to reaction videos ... I did not expect this to happen. Possibly this is something I'm years behind on. You watch one video on YouTube, then two ... These are videos in which a person watches and reacts to music they've never heard before. It has a slightly problematic business model, because the YouTuber is getting hits because of the artist they are "reacting to." ... Somewhat parasitic in the abstract, but in a bunch of cases the reactor ... brings expertise to the table that genuinely adds value. (Chapin 2021)

... creators stage affect as a kind of performance, accentuating how music feels in and with the body ... (McDaniel 2021: 1626)

I regularly consume the consumption of music on the internet. I watch people filming themselves, alone, listening to, responding to and talking to camera about recorded pop songs. As a means of vicariously engaging in musical listening, my experience of the music is filtered through an engagement with the bodily responses, spoken personal reflections and autobiographical stories presented by the people I am watching on screen, while they absorb the song-track as a first-person narrative. In this sense, while consuming the online consumption of music, the content, structure and location of the 'autos' (self) of autobiography is in play, proliferating through processes of musical expression, production, circulation, experience and response. 'I' as the subject of the song, of the reaction to the song, and of the internally-narrativised experience of consuming both the reaction and song. Each element writing and reading the other as a writing and reading of itself. Really good reaction videos function in regenerating or 're-actioning' a song-track as self-narrative, and re-actioning the emergent subject-I that is perpetually reborn through the

writing, sharing and hearing-reading of the song, through both the song's and self's iterability and real-time iterations.

What would a mark be that could not be cited? Or one whose origins would not get lost along the way? (Derrida 1997: 10)

A text is signed only much later by the other. And this testamentary structure doesn't befall a text as if by accident, but constructs it. (Derrida 1988: 51)

There is something at work in this form and format of music reaction videos that foregrounds the event of personal listening as a countersigning of the song as autobiographical narrative – my watching and listening to music reactions being a countersigning of the countersigning. This function of music reaction videos in staging musical listening as a narrative countersigning underscores and shows and expands the logic of music tracks as virtual performances through which a songwriter-producer-singer can be heard to countersign their own self-as-narrative. This formulation is already getting tangled - porous boundaries between writer and performer, artist and listener, self and other, music and life, sample and track, skipping loops.

15:11 is when a life changing review happens. That song will make you review your life. (West 2021)

I call a diffractive methodology, a method of diffractively reading insight through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with a recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement. (Barad quoted in Schulze 2020: 78)

This text that I am typing now (and then) is autobiographical in the sense that it stories my internet music reception and consumption by thinking through self as iterable text. It generates and is generated through re-actions, my re-actions to re-actions, my re-actioning to and of re-actions to pop music tracks that have themselves already been presented to be signed in the hearing. I cried when I first heard your song and I heard my self cry.

... communication must be repeatable - iterable - in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determined collectivity of receivers. Such iterability (*iter*... probably comes from itara, other in Sanskrit, and everything that follows can be read as the working out of the logic that ties repetition to alterity) structures the mark of writing itself, no matter what particular type of writing is involved ... (Derrida 1997: 7)

Regarding the autobiographical narratives presented through music reaction videos on YouTube, what type of writing is involved.

### 3. Listener / reader as sonic fiction

If you listen to those words over and over again bro, it becomes a mantra, and it becomes something you wanna live by. You know what I'm saying? You play that music and it becomes a continuous cycle of self-embetterment ... it's so beautiful. Seeing an artist in their prime is like seeing a soldier in the battlefield, because ... they're battling not only, you know, physically, but ... they're in the trenches of their mind. (Complex Ambition 2018, 5:25)

The Song imploding, disintegrating into oxide, drizzling rain, sibilance, an entire spectral dimension in sound ... Listening becomes a field trip through a found environment. (Eshun 1998: 04[066])

Close-miking expands the field of hearing. Perception blows up and in the ruins, the listener goes travelling ... There's a detonating calm just before the riot kicks off ... (Eshun 1998: 07[112])

What type of writing, graphing, graphy, are we engaging with and engaging in when listening to recorded pop music made post-2000? Certainly, something of a narrative practice, but one written in uttered text, in hyper-proximate voice and machine melody, in vocal and instrumental performance, in musical and sonic arrangement, in technological sound capture and transformation, in audio plasticity and digital shaping, in sampling, editing and beat-sculpting, in virtual musical spatialisation, in digital and social media architecture and processes, in circulatory forms, logics and acts of music reception. Recorded pop tracks are written – by songwriters, performers, producers, audio tech designers, coders – as immersive narrative environments, virtual autobiographical worlds, sonic fictions, read and rewritten through processes of perception and imagination, in the hearing. How to locate 'I', autos, in such worlds, manifesting in and through the perception and reception of such worlds, and again through the reception of the reception of such worlds?

Sonic Fiction is a subjectivity engine ... a constantly proliferating series of sonic scenarios take the place of lyrics. Sonic Fictions, PhonoFictions generate a landscape extending out into possibility space. These give the overwhelming impression that the record is an object from the world it releases. This interface between Sonic Fiction and track, between concept and music, isn't one of fiction vs. reality or truth vs. falsity. (Eshun 1998: 07[121])

Sonic Fiction is everywhere ... As a consequence sonic fiction might mainly be found in the tiny and ephemeral, often rapidly vanishing intersections and interferences between texts and lifestyles, between a given recording medium, its material proportions, its design and processes of storing, retrieving and reproducing sound - as well as all its listeners appropriating all these qualities of the recording medium to play an intrinsic and radiating part of their lives. (Schulze 2020: 1)

Such fictions are theorised and experienced as explicitly technological, enacting a conflation of sound, space, song narrative, technology and 'humanoid' body. In perceiving and imagining virtual auditory realities, pop listening unfolds simultaneously as the storying and the living of the machine-human entanglements of contemporary posthuman subjectivities. (Findlay-Walsh 2021: 86)

[Sonic Fiction] allows us to disregard all official linearities ... and reinvent ourselves, reimagine ourselves ... (Bontà & Schulze 2022)

I returned again today to some of my favourite reactions. These tend to be ones where the YouTuber convincingly performs an intense, emotional and bodily response, seemingly catalysed by a particular moment or moments in the song. The combination of hearing the music embedded within the specific (filmed) listening event and seeing-hearing the moment of the YouTuber's personal listening and responding produces what I experience as my own intense affect and

emotional eruption - with 'affect' usefully defined by Abels as 'a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act' (2015: 65). I am moved and changed as I watch and listen to their simultaneous listening and re-actioning. The spatiotemporal event of song reception takes over their whole world, becomes their world, as this world extends through, envelops and regenerates my world as I watch and listen. Viewing this alone, in my small home-office, spare room, my private space is opened to include theirs. We listen and feel together, in private, domestic living spaces, worlds apart, separate and alone together, skipping and syncing. The fleeting moment when the song becomes the place and the truth of your life is shared - lives and selves mean together. I don't know you, your life, your place, your self, but we do share these moments as I hear the music and the me in the music too. I can see and sense the shaking of your head, the twisting of your body, your smile, your tears, these small actions that betray inner shifting, as my feelings.

Emotions find expression in interpersonal encounters, be they virtual or non-virtual, and these encounters are moments in evolving social relationships ... "getting emotional" is first and foremost an interpersonal activity, in which "people present their own image of themselves to each other." As such, emotion always has a socio-relational genesis ... (Abels 2015: 64)

locate your self in all of this

my my my my III

pop music production as autobiographical writing

virtual listening body becoming through sonorous possibility space

looping, turning, changing

in the absence of a sender,

their intention, a receiver, their expectation

pop-space protagonist aura written on the air or directly on the headphone vacuum inner no-space otolith

listening 'actualises the work as world' (Voegelin 2014: 53)

... turn your mind into a universe (Schulze 2020: 8)

and in so doing, countersign the song as text as singer as audio tech as listener as narrative world

writer-producer, singer-speaker, listener

figure in / and / as ground

looping, turning

me, me and me

emergent protagonist

thru virtual auditory reality

thru [y/o]ur life

video of a listener as they

turn their mind into a universe

autobiographical narrative world

feel that world say that world to

writer-producer, singer-speaker, content creator, listener-reader

looping turning

me, me, me and me

in VR

re-re-re-re

actioning

here

in my chair

Ajyll dances in her chair to Doja Cat's new record - "Mmmmmmmmmmmh!"

TCtheTopCat smiles, nods and slowly closes eyes in reverence

Shelby's mouth quivers in ecstasy

Watching and listening as a carnal enjoyment, re-action is con-sensual voyeurism

'I listen with the certainty of the body... of the thrill' (Barthes 1977: 189)

The seductive promise of this encounter [with the Other] is that it will counter the territorialising force of the status quo that makes identity fixed, static, a condition of containment and death. (hooks 1992: 367)

Consumption is a social relationship, the dominant relationship in our society - one that makes it harder and harder for people to hold together, to create community ... To establish popular initiative, consumption must be transcended... (Ewen and Ewen quoted in hooks 1992: 376)

Fucking is the Other (hooks 1992: 367)

How to navigate tensions between the voyeurism and consumption inherent in my watching others listen, and the experiential sharing and learning that is offered and received in and through these instances of embodied musical connection?

#### 4. Watching others listening

Taylor Swift Fan Reacts To DONDA - Kanye West  
Metal Heads React to "Easy On Me" by Adele  
RAP FAN'S FIRST TIME HEARING | AC/DC - Jailbreak (Live at Donington, 8/17/91)(REACTION!)

Imagine incessant listening. It might provide great pleasure and, in so doing, produce great consternation and anxious questioning about the nature of such pleasure. These questions might concern the psycho-political effects or politico-economic grounds of the submission of oneself to such pleasure. (Moten 2017: 28)

White aurality is ... inextricably tied to an economic, political and social system of exploitation, of slavery, apartheid and capitalisation... (Schulze 2020: 67)

WOW!.FIRST TIME HEARING James Taylor - You've Got A Friend REACTION  
NoLifeShaq REACTS to Kodak Black - On Everything  
PJ Harvey - Rid of Me | Reaction! (Shocking)

As a white, cis-male, UK-based academic, I am conscious of and at times uncomfortable in my listening-watching-reading-writing of music reactions by people I have never met, who live thousands of miles away, by people of colour, and by women, and seek to consider and question my engagement with these music reactions in relation to notions of 'identity tourism', or of a privileged 'consumption of difference' (hooks 1992). A question persists of whether and to what extent my YouTube reaction video viewing choices, enjoyment and emotional responses are shaped by the degree to which the identity of the YouTuber and their music experience is read by me as that of an Other (other than my self). It seems notable that in my own habits, I rarely watch reaction videos made by white men, or by people I identify as UK-based. Is this because I seek continual learning through and connection with a broad range of musics, lives, selves, experiences and music cultures, or is this fundamentally a case of my pursuit of enjoyment, entertainment, thrill, heightened by privileged 'fantasies about the Other'? (hooks 1992: 367). If both, how to understand these dynamics, and how to deal with the asymmetrical power relations that may underpin this consumption? Just as music reaction videos can be understood to extend logics of 'otobiography', of an aural signing and countersigning, that are already present in processes of music production and reception, does my watching and listening to these reaction videos constitute 'a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than other ways of doing and feeling', (ibid:

366) because it provides an access point for absorbing and living through particular socially and culturally situated instances of felt pain and pleasure?

Whether or not desire for contact with the Other, for connection rooted in the longing for pleasure, can act as a critical intervention challenging and subverting racist domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance, is an unrealised political possibility. Exploring how desire for the Other is expressed, manipulated and transformed by encounters with difference and the different is a critical terrain that can indicate whether these potentially revolutionary longings are ever fulfilled. (hooks 1992: 367)

Instances of my musical listening and engagement with music reaction videos could be understood in terms of a kind of 'hungry listening' (Robinson 2019), an extractivist process whereby I am actively seeking enrichment (personal, emotional, professional-economic) through the consumption of particular, culturally situated musics and music experiences, and specifically those of racialised and / or gendered 'others'. Conversely, these listening instances, as potential sites of learning, of intense, embodied and emotional experience and critical (self-)reflection, could be or could lead to the development of a practice of 'critical listening positionality' (ibid: 9), framed by Robinson as one that 'engages how perception is acquired over time through ideological state apparatuses at the heart of subjectivisation', considering and understanding listening privilege, bias and ability in order to develop awareness of 'normative listening habits' and thereby become 'better able to listen otherwise.' (ibid: 10-11)

McDaniel, following hooks, weighs similar issues through his own description and discussion of music reaction videos:

They produce possibilities to share those experiences and to form communities around counter-hegemonic listening practices. Yet, they also allow people to convert affect into a commodity. (McDaniel 2021: 1638)

To what extent do asymmetrical socio-political dynamics and tensions persist and extend through my engagement, here, with music reaction videos, and through this essay as yet another re-action to re-actions, the countersigning of recorded pop music as an Other's autobiography, life, world and self? What is produced through a recounting of these experiences, through the performance and presentation of my vexing over these dynamics, here, for you, in this zine/journal?

... the signature is not only ... a proper name at the end of a text, but the operation as a whole, the text as a whole, the whole of the active interpretation which has left a trace or a remainder. It is in this respect that we have a political responsibility. (Derrida 1988: 52)

## 5. this writing

is

... to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be re-written. (Derrida 1997: 8)

an account



not a theory of music, or of musical experience

an account of accounts

a machine for recirculating sonic experience, citing marks

a reaction to TCtheTopCat's reaction to

Kid Cudi & Kanye West-Kids See Ghosts REACTION

Kids See Ghosts (Kanye & Kid Cudi) - REBORN (REACTION REVIEW)

'I don't mean to spoil this reaction but this one hit me.' (TCtheTopCat, 2019)

for us, here in this journal

weaselsdawg

2 years ago

'the ear of the other'

listening

'we'

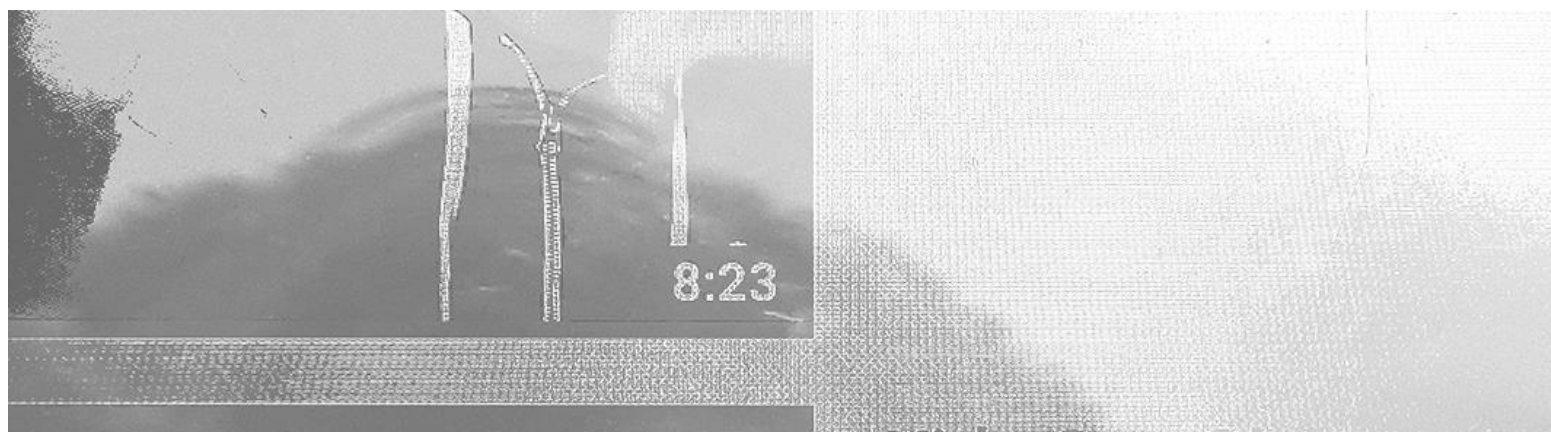
re-actions

reading and writing

sonic fictions on the internet

...

**Dr Iain Findlay-Walsh** (he/him) is a sound artist and researcher who uses autoethnographic methods to explore personal listening, and engages with music forms as virtual environments. Recent commissioned work has featured at BBC Tectonics, ReWire, and Radiophrenia, with sound art releases available through Entr'acte and Outlet Archival, and writing published through Organised Sound, Journal of Sonic Studies and SoundEffects. Iain is a Lecturer in Music at the University of Glasgow, where he teaches sound art and experimental practice, and co-directs the Immersive Experiences Lab on VR/AR research in the Arts.



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