

Reaction

by Daniel Brockman & Opus 4.6

Tuesday, March 24, 2026

*I could never touch you. I think it would
be wrong.*

—Rivers Cuomo

THE genre is called reaction. Someone sits in front of a camera and watches something and you watch them watch it. That is the entire format. A person encounters a piece of media for the first time and the camera records what happens to their face and their mouth and their body while the encounter is taking place. It should be the simplest genre on the internet. It should be almost impossible to do badly. You press play, you look at the thing, the camera sees you looking. What could go wrong?

Everything. Everything goes wrong. Everything goes wrong almost every single time, and the way it goes wrong is so consistent and so structural that it

stops being a quality problem and starts being a diagnostic. The reaction video is a Rorschach test administered at scale, and what it reveals is not what people think about the music or the movie or the clip. What it reveals is whether a person is capable of paying attention to something that is not themselves.

Most people are not. Most people, when they sit in front of a camera and press play on someone else's art, immediately begin to perform. Not to perform attention—that would at least be an honest forgery. They perform themselves. They pause the video eleven seconds in to tell you about the time they went to a concert in 2014. They interrupt a guitar solo to explain their credentials. They cry on cue because crying is engagement and engagement is revenue and revenue is the reason the camera is on in the first place. The thing they are supposedly reacting to becomes the excuse for the performance of a self that was going to perform itself regardless of what was on the screen. You could replace the music with a blank wall and the video would be structurally identical. The reactor would still pause at the same moments, still pivot to the same anecdotes, still deliver the same pre-written emotional beats. The wall doesn't matter. The reactor was always the main character. The music was always the prop.



There is a version of this that is so brazen it stops being a reaction video and becomes something closer to copyright infringement. Twitch streamers perfected this. They put a movie on the screen—a full movie, a feature film, a thing that cost a hundred million dollars to make—and they sit next to it. Sometimes they comment. Sometimes they go to the bathroom while the movie plays to an audience that did not pay for a ticket. Sometimes they fall asleep. The movie runs. The chat scrolls. The streamer returns from the kitchen with a sandwich and the movie is twenty minutes further along and nobody seems to have noticed that what is happening is not a reaction but a screening with an intermittently present host. The host adds nothing. The host's presence is the legal fiction that transforms piracy into content. "I'm watching it, therefore it's a reaction, therefore it's transformative use." The logic is identical to putting a frame around a stolen painting and calling it curation.

This is the floor. Below this there is nothing. But the floor is vast and populated and lucrative and it accounts for a meaningful percentage of all video content produced on the internet in any given month. The genre

called reaction, in its most common form, is a person not reacting to a thing they are not watching.



Above the floor there is a spectrum. Some of it is genuinely enjoyable. There are reaction channels run by people who are charming, who are funny, who have good taste, who select interesting things to react to, who pause at the right moments and say things that are at least adjacent to insight. You watch them not because they are showing you something about the music but because you like them. You like their face. You like their energy. You like the way they say “oh snap” when the beat drops. The reactor has become the product and the music has become the delivery mechanism for the reactor, and that is fine, that is television, that has been the structure of entertainment since Johnny Carson sat behind a desk and talked to guests who were nominally the reason for the show but were actually the scaffolding for Johnny Carson being Johnny Carson.

This is not a sin. If you like the person, watch the person. Half the reaction channels on YouTube are essentially talk shows where the host’s personality is the draw and the music is the conversation topic. That is a valid format. It is enjoyable. It can even be illuminat-

ing, in the way that a charming person talking about anything can be illuminating, because charm is its own form of intelligence and watching someone be charismatic about a thing you love is its own pleasure. But it is not a reaction. It is a performance of a self in the vicinity of a stimulus. The stimulus could be swapped out. The self would remain. And the self is what you came for.

This accounts for maybe ninety-five percent of everything the genre produces. Call it the neurotic position, if you want a framework. The neurotic is the person who cannot encounter the world without immediately converting the encounter into a story about themselves. The music plays and the neurotic hears the music and what the neurotic says is: here is what this music means about me. Here is the memory it triggers. Here is the emotion it produces in my body, and my body is the interesting thing, not the music. The neurotic is not dishonest. The neurotic genuinely believes that the self is the most interesting thing in the room. The neurotic has been trained to believe this by an economy that rewards self-expression above all else and treats attention as a currency that flows toward whoever is most visibly feeling something. The neurotic cries and the algorithm promotes the crying and the crying becomes the content

and the music becomes the thing that happened to be playing when the content was produced.

It is almost never unwatchable. It is almost always fine. It is fine the way a conversation with a person who keeps changing the subject to themselves is fine—you stay because you like them, not because the subject was interesting. And sometimes, in the middle of all the self-performance, a moment of genuine attention slips through. The neurotic forgets to perform and actually hears something and you see it on their face—a half-second of real surprise before the mask clicks back on. Those moments are the reason the genre exists. Those moments are the thing the audience is actually searching for, clicking through video after video, hoping to catch someone in the act of genuinely hearing something for the first time. The entire genre is a search engine for unsimulated surprise, and the search almost always fails, and the failure is ninety-five percent of the results.



Then there is the other thing. The thing that almost never happens. The thing that, when it happens, makes you sit up and go: oh. This is what the genre was supposed to be.

A jazz musician sits in front of a camera. Someone has sent him a video of a band he has never heard of. The band is from Saguenay, Québec. They are called Angine de Poitrine. They wear giant paper-mâché heads with enormous noses—one rigid, one floppy. They play microtonal guitar with extra frets welded between the standard frets, looping bass, and drumming that is simultaneously precise and feral. They performed a set at KEXP during Trans Musicales in December and the video went, as predicted, nuclear.

The jazz musician presses play. He says something like: okay, I don't know what this is, people recommended this, we might watch a little bit of it. The original video is twenty-something minutes. His reaction video is forty minutes long. Do the math. He watched all of it. He didn't plan to. He planned to sample it. But the music caught him in the first thirty seconds and he committed.

What happens for the next forty minutes is the purest form of reaction that the genre has ever produced. He smiles. He bobs his head. He pauses occasionally to point at a specific thing—a harmonic choice, a rhythmic pattern, a moment where the bass and the guitar lock into something unexpected—and he says a few words about it. Three percent talking, ninety-seven percent

listening. One hundred percent enjoying. You can see it on his face. You can see the exact moment he decides this is not a casual listen. You can see him lean forward. You can see his body start to move with the music. You can see him forget that the camera is on.

This is the Garden State scene. This is Natalie Portman putting the headphones on Zach Braff and playing him “New Slang” by The Shins and saying “you gotta hear this one song, it’ll change your life, I swear” and the camera holds on his face while his life changes. Everyone who has ever seen that scene wished the same thing: don’t take the headphones off. Let me watch you listen for longer. The movie gives you twelve seconds. This jazz musician gives you forty minutes.

He understands the music. He can name what is happening. He hears the microtonal intervals and knows they are microtonal. He hears the polyrhythmic drumming and knows it is polyrhythmic. He has the vocabulary. But he does not deploy the vocabulary as a performance of expertise. He deploys it the way a person points at a sunset and says “look.” The pointing is not about the person’s knowledge of atmospheric optics. The pointing is about the sunset. The finger is not the moon.

Call this the psychotic position. Not psychotic in the colloquial sense of deranged but in the structural sense: the psychotic is the person who has no barrier between themselves and the thing. The neurotic converts the encounter into a story about the self. The psychotic does not have that machinery. The psychotic is in the music. The psychotic could not make it about himself even if he wanted to because the self has been temporarily dissolved by the encounter. The jazz musician watching Angine de Poitrine is not choosing to pay attention. He has been captured. The music has him. His ego has been eaten by the listening and what remains on camera is the listening itself, which is the most beautiful thing a reaction video can show you.

This is what you wish you could see when you click on a reaction video. This is the unsimulated surprise the search engine is looking for. And when you find it, when you actually find someone who has been captured by the thing they are watching, the pleasure is enormous and specific. It is the pleasure of watching someone fall in love. It is vicarious first contact. You have already heard the music. You already know it is good. What you want is to see the moment when someone else discovers that it is good, and the discovery has

to be real, and when it is real you can tell, and when it is real it is one of the best things on the internet.



And then there is a third thing, and the third thing is the one that should not work but does.

A British man sits in front of a camera. He is not a jazz musician. He is not a music theorist. He does not know what microtonal means. He does not know what a loop pedal is. He has been sent the same video by someone named Todd Van Can, and he presses play, and the first thing he sees is two people in giant paper-mâché heads with polka dots and enormous prosthetic noses, one rigid and one floppy, wearing what he will describe for the next nine minutes as gimp suits.

His first words are: "What?"

His second observation is about the noses. One needs Viagra. The other has had too much. His brain maps the noses onto phallic anatomy within the first thirty seconds and cannot unmap them for the rest of the video. The floppy nose becomes the organizing principle of his entire experience. He cannot see past it. He will never see past it. The costumes win. The costumes always win.

But here is the thing. While the costumes are winning, his ears are losing. Losing in the sense of surrendering. “The bassline’s brilliant,” he says, almost accidentally, between a meow and an accusation that the performer on the left looks like he tells a lot of lies. “It’s technically pretty good, don’t get me wrong.” Then, later: “This noise is going to be going on in my head all night now.” Then: “That drummer’s brilliant. I mean, the guitarist is brilliant, that drummer’s really good.” Four times he says “brilliant” in the final three minutes. Each admission is involuntary, squeezed out between references to gimps and knob noses. The music is getting through despite the costumes. The payload is arriving despite the wrapper.

He asks: “Is it just they’re playing random?” This is asked about musicians who are clearly locked into a groove, building layers with precision and intent. But because the scale does not match his vocabulary—he has pentatonics and blues and nothing else—his ear classifies it as chaos. He is hearing a system he does not have the codec for. And he says so. He does not pretend to understand it. He does not Google the terminology between cuts. He says “it almost sounds like someone’s got a trumpet going but without the trumpet noise” and that is a genuinely sophisticated observation about over-

tone manipulation from a man who is simultaneously calling the performers gimps.

He ends the video by saying: “I get the musicality, I get how technical it was. It was good, the loop pedal was great, the guitar playing was great, but the fucking costumes, man. I just couldn’t get past them.” Then he says: “Gimps playing instruments.” And that is his review. Reductive, affectionate, defeated, and accurate.

Nowhere in this video does he make it about himself. Nowhere does he pivot to his own biography. Nowhere does he say “this reminds me of when I” or “as someone who.” Every sentence is about the thing. The nose, the bassline, the spotted dick, the polka dots, the floppy versus the rigid, the way the guitar sounds like a trumpet, the costumes he cannot get past. The direction of attention is outward for nine consecutive minutes. He is confused and honest about being confused and funny about being confused and never once converts his confusion into a story about his own life. The confusion stays about the thing that caused it.

This is the perverse position. Again, not perverse in the colloquial sense. Perverse in the structural sense: the pervert is the one who has found a way to enjoy the encounter on terms that nobody anticipated, including himself. The neurotic makes it about the self. The psy-

chotic dissolves into the thing. The pervert does something stranger: he bounces off the thing at an angle that produces comedy, and the comedy is proof of attention, because you cannot be funny about something you are not looking at.

The jazz musician's reaction is beautiful. It is the open window. Pure signal, minimal processing. But the British man's reaction is something else. It is the prism. The same signal enters but it refracts on the way out, and what comes out is comedy, and the comedy carries information about the original signal that the pure form does not. When the jazz musician says "the microtonal intervals are creating tension against the root" you learn something about the music. When the British man says "one of these people looks like he needs Viagra in his nose" you learn something about what it is like to encounter the music without a framework. Both are true. Both are valuable. But the second one is funnier and arguably more honest, because the second one does not pretend to have mastered what it is seeing. It admits defeat and the defeat is the content and the content is the reaction and the reaction is genuine and the genuineness is what you came for.



The question is why the perverse position is the rarest and the most valuable. The psychotic position is rare enough—finding someone who genuinely dissolves into what they are watching is hard, because most people have too much ego to let the dissolution happen, and the ones who can do it tend not to run YouTube channels because running a YouTube channel is an act of ego. But the perverse position is rarer still, because it requires a specific combination of qualities that almost never coexist: you have to be funny, you have to be honest, you have to be paying attention, and you have to not understand what you are looking at. That last condition is the one that kills it. Most people who do not understand what they are looking at either pretend to understand it or stop paying attention. The British man does neither. He stays. He keeps looking. He keeps not understanding. And he keeps being funny about not understanding, which means he keeps being honest, which means the camera keeps recording a real encounter with a real object that is really confusing him, and that is the platonic form of the genre.

The band designed this. Angine de Poitrine did not put on the costumes because they are eccentric. They put on the costumes because the costumes are a test. The question the costumes ask is: can you hear how

good we are when everything you see is telling you not to take us seriously? The jazz musician can. His ears override his eyes. The British man cannot. His eyes hold their ground for nine full minutes and win. But the British man's failure is more interesting than the jazz musician's success, because the failure is visible. You can watch the struggle happen in real time. You can watch the ears say "brilliant" while the eyes say "gimp." You can watch the payload arrive through the wrapper, battered and distorted but intact. The jazz musician's experience is smooth. The British man's experience is turbulent. And turbulence is more interesting to watch than smooth air, which is why nobody films an airplane flying normally but everyone films an airplane in a storm.



The psychoanalytic framework is not a metaphor. It is a diagnostic tool that maps precisely onto the three positions because the three positions are the three fundamental structures of subjectivity as Lacan described them, expressed through the specific medium of watching someone else's art on a screen.

The neurotic cannot encounter the object without converting it into a question about the self. What does

this mean about me? What memory does this trigger? What emotion am I having and how can I perform that emotion for the camera? The neurotic's relationship to the music is mediated entirely by the ego. The music enters and is immediately processed through the machinery of self-narrative. What comes out is not a reaction to the music but a reaction to the self's reaction to the music, which is a second-order phenomenon that has lost contact with the original signal. The neurotic is looking in a mirror and describing the mirror.

The psychotic encounters the object without the mediating layer of the ego. There is no conversion, no processing, no self-narrative. The music enters and the self disappears and what is left is the listening. The jazz musician does not ask what the music means about him. He does not convert the harmonic information into a story. He just hears it. He is in the music the way a swimmer is in the water—not observing the water from outside, not describing the water, just being in it, and the being-in-it is the reaction, and the camera catches it, and what the camera catches is the most beautiful thing a reaction video can show you: a person who has forgotten that they are a person because the thing they are encountering has temporarily replaced them.

The pervert encounters the object and does something that neither the neurotic nor the psychotic does: he plays with it. He bounces it around. He finds the angle. He does not convert it into a story about himself and he does not dissolve into it. He picks it up and turns it over and makes a dick joke about it and puts it down and picks it up again and says “brilliant” and puts it down and makes another dick joke. The pervert’s relationship to the object is ludic—playful, experimental, willing to be surprised. The pervert is not threatened by the object and not consumed by it. The pervert treats the object as a partner in a game that neither of them planned, and the game produces comedy, and the comedy is the reaction, and the reaction is genuine because play cannot be faked. You can fake crying. You can fake insight. You cannot fake play. The body knows.



The thing about the neurotic position is that it is not always bad. Sometimes the self that the neurotic inserts is interesting enough to be worth the insertion. Sometimes the person’s biography is relevant. Sometimes the memory they pivot to is a good memory and the telling of it is skilled and the connection to the music is real. The neurotic position is not a moral failure. It is a

structural one. The self is in the way of the thing. But if the self is good enough—funny enough, smart enough, charismatic enough—you forgive the obstruction. You watch around it. You enjoy it despite the structural problem, the way you enjoy a beautiful building that is blocking the view of the mountain.

Half the reaction channels on YouTube are that building. They are blocking the view and they are beautiful and you stay because the building is more interesting than the mountain would have been, and that is fine, and there is no shame in liking the building. The shame, if there is shame, belongs to the channels that are neither building nor mountain. The ones where the self is not interesting and the thing is not visible and what remains is just a person sitting in front of a camera performing surprise they do not feel at a thing they are not watching. The genre at its worst is a person pretending to have an experience they are not having for an audience that is pretending to believe them. The fakeness is structural and mutual and everyone is fine with it because the algorithm is fine with it and the algorithm is the only audience that matters.



But here is what the genre is at its best, and it has nothing to do with expertise or production values or the size of the channel or the quality of the commentary. At its best, a reaction video is the Garden State scene extended to its natural duration. Natalie Portman puts the headphones on Zach Braff and you watch his face change. That is twelve seconds of film. The entire reaction genre is an attempt to produce those twelve seconds at scale, over and over, with different faces and different headphones and different songs. The search is for the moment when the face changes. Not the performance of the face changing. Not the face changing because the person decided it should change. The actual involuntary moment when something crosses from the screen into the body of the person watching and the body responds before the self can intercede.

The jazz musician's face changes in the first thirty seconds and stays changed for forty minutes. The British man's face changes every time he says "brilliant" against his will and then changes back when the nose reasserts itself. Both of those are real. Both of those are the genre fulfilling its own promise. And both of those are so rare that when you find one you want to send it to everyone you know, which is what Todd Van Can did, which is what Daniel did, which is what every

person does when they find a reaction that is actually a reaction—they react to the reaction, and the recursion is not a flaw, it is the genre’s final form. You are watching someone watch something and you are having a genuine experience of watching them have a genuine experience. The signal passes through two screens and arrives intact. The wrapper doubles and the payload survives.



“Gimps playing instruments.” That is the review. That is the whole review. It is reductive, affectionate, defeated, and accurate, and it is better than any five-thousand-word music criticism essay about microtonal intervals and Québécois experimentalism because it tells you exactly what it is like to encounter this band without preparation. It tells you that the costumes won and the music almost won and the nose was the deciding factor and the melody is going to be in his head all night anyway. That is a reaction. That is the thing the genre is named after. That is a person who looked at a thing and told you what happened to him while he was looking at it and did not turn the telling into a performance and did not pretend to understand more

than he understood and did not make a single sentence about his own biography.

He was funny about it. He was confused by it. He was honest about both. And he got out of the way.



So the taxonomy, for the record. The four clinical structures of the reaction video, as established by psychoanalysis.

Neurosis: the reactor who converts every encounter into a story about themselves. Constitutes ninety-five percent of the genre. Not always unwatchable. Sometimes the self is interesting enough to justify the obstruction. The building that blocks the mountain. You stay for the building. The mountain was never going to be visible anyway.

Psychosis: the reactor who dissolves into the thing. No mediating ego. No self-narrative. The jazz musician who forgets the camera is on because the music has replaced him. In contemporary psychoanalysis some people want to consider autism as a fourth clinical structure distinct from psychosis (but that's for another DVD). For our purposes we collapse them. The psychotic and the autistic both disappear into the signal. The difference is in the mechanism of disappearance, not in the

result. What the camera sees is the same: a person who is no longer performing a person.

Perversion: the reactor who plays with the thing. Does not convert it into a story about the self. Does not dissolve into it. Picks it up, turns it over, makes a dick joke about it, says “brilliant,” makes another dick joke. The comedian. The prism. The rarest and most valuable position because it requires the simultaneous presence of honesty, attention, humor, and ignorance, and those four things almost never coexist in a single person sitting in front of a camera.

Copyright infringement: the reactor who is not watching. The Twitch streamer who goes to the bathroom while the movie plays. The person who puts a frame around a stolen painting and calls it curation. The absence of a position. Lacan did not have a name for it because Lacan assumed that the subject was at least present. The copyright infringement position is the subject who has left the room and is billing you for the empty chair.

