Asynchronous Watch Alongs

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It is Sunday evening on October 29, 2023. You are adopting the spirit of the Halloween season by watching Harry Bromley Davenport's cult British horror film, *Xtro* (1982). You hear Jason mentioning that he has never seen the film, nor apparently have Brian or Erin. Before the film starts, they briefly express confusion and joke about the pronunciation of the title. You know it is pronounced "ex-tro", but you cannot communicate this to them as they are not in the room with you. You are actually watching two screens: screen one is showing *Xtro* and screen two is showing a medium full shot of Jason, Brian, and Erin sitting in recliner armchairs while they also watch. As the film's title appears on screen one, the image of Jason, Brian, and Erin on screen two cuts to the same title shot. This is to help you synchronise your viewing with theirs. One might be concerned that a fault in synchronisation would be difficult to fix with a live stream. Thankfully, one need not worry as the video of Jason, Brian, and Erin can be paused. They are not in the same room as you, nor are they watching the film "live" with you. This is a form of spatially and temporally mediated cinema in which you are watching a film while watching synchronised prerecorded footage of others watching the same film.

There are many online creators offering similar film consumption experiences, which are often uploaded to video sharing platforms like YouTube. These videos are usually held behind paywalls and made available to their audience via subscription platforms like Patreon. These creators vary in the number of members who pay to access content. At the time of writing, they range from creators like Cody Leach with 342 paying members, to "We Hate Movies" which has 7,300 registered consumers, to the 27,200 membership of "Dead Meat". Jason Brant has roughly 1,100 subscribers to his Patreon platform on tiered options ranging from €3 to €7.50 a month. His annual revenue is anywhere between €39,600 and €99,000, discounting the fees he pays to Patreon. He has been uploading various types of videos to his YouTube channel (@JasonBrant) since 2013, which include audiobook excerpts from his self-published horror novels

(Devoured Audiobook 2014) and funny videos of Erin (Eating Jalapenos 2013).

In September 2015, Brant uploaded the first of his *So Bad It's Good* (SBIG) series, which is currently up to episode 422. Each *So Bad It's Good* installation is an edited compilation of Brant and his friends and family watching and commenting upon a film while sitting on reclining chairs in his home in Abingdon, Maryland. This composing is interspersed with clips that reference the moment from the film on which they are commenting. If one examines the upload dates, we see the episode releases in the first five years were somewhat sporadic, but from roughly the beginning of 2020 they have uploaded a new episode approximately every seven to ten days. My use of the plural here is intentional: Brant watches these films with a rotating number of guests who often include his wife Erin as co-producer of the show, as well as their friends Brian, Dave, Pam, and special guests. The first question one faces when encountering such a seemingly novel form of film exhibition and consumption is, what is it called?

It is initially difficult to put language to the practice of watching prerecorded footage of others watching the same film because ascribing language can imply a certain set of assumptions about that practice. If I use the term "co-present viewing", readers may assume that physical proximity is a precondition, even if more recent research challenges these classic assumptions about co-presence (see, for example, Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013). In other words, for some scholars, "virtual" or "mediated" co-presence is a contradiction in terms. This article instead follows Julian Hanich's position that it is possible for creators like Brant to offer "virtual" or "mediated" co-present viewing experiences (2018, 276); even ones that are mediated both spatially and temporally. It will present several examples of such experiences to support this position, but it also acknowledges that clarity of language is an essential consideration if one wishes to document such an emerging practice. For the avoidance of confusion, I will refer to these as "asynchronous watch alongs", but I make no claim that this term is any more or less "correct" than the others I will discuss. This is an important distinction because as we will see, language, particularly from a legal perspective, is often used to constrain the social benefits of emerging cultural practices in favour of the commercial interests of entrenched power (Altman 2004; Lessig 2004). One might consider that the obvious strategy to identify such language would be to look for comparable precedents to the practice. The problem with this approach is that the corpus of historiographical material from which to draw is limited by the fact that it was (arguably) impossible prior to the advent of Web 2.0 to exhibit and receive films in this way, apart from rare exceptions of experimental installation art exhibition practices.

Bruce Nauman's *Video Corridor* (1969–70), Vito Acconci's *Centers* (1971), Nam June Paik's TV *Buddha* (1974), and Dan Graham's *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1975) make some comment on the recursive act of viewing. Candice Breitz' 2005 *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna*) is perhaps the closest in form to asynchronous watch alongs in that it invites

visitors to watch a moving collage of people watching and responding to the music video for Madonna's *Vogue* (1990). In a contemporaneous review of its exhibition at the White Cube, London, fellow visual artist Doro Globus highlights how Breitz' work "focuses on the mutually dependent relationship between fan and star that so often goes unnoticed or undervalued" (2005). Given that Breitz' work launched just a few months after the introduction of YouTube, we can now add a more contemporary reading about our online visual presence and the idea of being constantly observable online. Nonetheless, I can find no evidence that Brant or other creators offering similar content are making any commentary on the recursive relationships between themselves, their viewers, or the films they watch together. Consequently, I want to propose that we require a different means, beyond experimental art exhibition, to put clearer language to this seemingly novel practice.

In his discussion of the inherent problems of historicising an evolving cultural practice like cinema, in *Silent Film Sound* it is possible that Rick Altman has already provided such a means by suggesting that:

> Each new representational technology traverses a period when contemporaries reveal a great deal of hesitation as to its identity. Is it just another variety of the same old thing? Or is it something new? (Altman 2004, 16)

For Altman, this identity crisis is emblematic of three sequential but overlapping stages that we can use better to understand the kind of viewing experiences that Brant and others create:

> 1. A new practice emerges that is subject to an initial moment of multiple identification in which multiple nomenclatures are ascribed to it.
> 2. As the potentialities of this practice begin to emerge, those industries that might stand to lose, and those industries that might stand to gain, engage in a metaphorical and oftentimes literal jurisdictional conflict to constrain its potentialities according to their best interests.
> 3. These multiple competing industrial interests combine with its users' gradual social construction to produce a somewhat stable nomenclature, identity, and features, which will likely evolve more over time. (19–23)

The difference between Altman's work and this study of asynchronous watch alongs is that Altman is arriving at his object of study roughly one hundred years after the birth of cinema. Asynchronous watch alongs are arguably only at the early stage of their development. We have yet to see any notable evidence of a second phase whereby jurisdictional conflicts from film distributors seek to curtail this practice according to their copyright interests. Moreover, when we consider that Brant and others are generating considerable profit by producing this content, I would argue we are likely to soon witness attempts to constrain its potentialities.

This is a crucial intervention that points to the goal of this article. In the 2004 work *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity*, legal scholar Lawrence Lessig highlighted two of the key means by which media industries with entrenched power constrain the potential of emerging practices that could threaten their profits. They are to either define the new practice as something illegal or define it as something they already own. However, Lessig makes clear that this protectionism is not motivated by a desire to protect commercial creativity:

> It is instead a protectionism to protect certain forms of business. Corporations threatened by the potential of the Internet to change the way both commercial and noncommercial culture are made and shared have united to induce lawmakers to use the law to protect them. (9)

It is understandable that industries threatened with new practices would seek to protect their interests, and it is consequently the responsibility of policy makers "to assure that the changes they create, in response to the request of those hurt by changing technology, are changes that preserve the incentives and opportunities for innovation and change" (128).

This responsibility is important because history has shown how the nomenclature ascribed to a practice can have important legal implications. The idea of "time shifting" provides an interesting example. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, by 1960, the verb to "time shift" meant "to move forward or backward with regard to timing". On an August 26, 1979 episode of *Meet the Press*, journalist Bill Monroe demonstrated its common understanding in the field of American television broadcasting when he explained to viewers that "in an annual time shift geared to the football season" the following week's show would "come to most of these stations half an hour earlier, that would be 12 noon Eastern, 11 Central Time". By 1981, broadcast industry analysts (Glazer quoted in "New Scene Stealer") and consumer electronics columnists (Fantel) had begun using time-shifting to describe the capacity for VCR players to grant users a similar power to "shift" television broadcasts by recording them and viewing them at a more convenient time.

In 1984, Universal City Studios and Walt Disney Productions responded to this emerging technology by suing Sony Corp. of America for enabling the unauthorised reproductions of copyrighted works through the manufacture and sale of VCRs (then called videotape recorders or VTRs). Sony's lawyers used the term time-shifting, already understood in television broadcasting, to explain how their machines simply enabled people to a view a programme "at a later time, and thereafter eras[e] it". The court agreed, which in part allowed VCRs to proliferate in the country. In 1998, the Recording Industry Association of America sued Diamond Multimedia Systems for manufacturing the Rio PMP300, a portable MP3 player. The RIAA likewise argued it enabled unauthorised reproductions of copyrighted works, but Diamond's lawyers successfully adapted the now

legally “safe” nomenclature of time-shifting to explain that the “Rio merely makes copies in order to render portable, or ‘space-shift,’ those files that already reside on a user’s hard drive”. The court agreed, which in part encouraged a significant increase in the sales of MP3 players in America. Evidently, applying legally “safe” nomenclature, like time-shifting, to emerging technologies or practices helped curtail certain risks of legislative scrutiny or litigation. It did not eliminate these risks, however, as was seen when A&M Records sued Napster in 2001. The defendants’ lawyers argued they were protected because their technology also allowed space-shifting. The court did not agree. In their decision, the presiding judges explained that the newly developed nomenclature was inappropriate because the Rio MP3 player “did not also simultaneously involve distribution of the copyrighted material to the general public”. Evidently, applying legally “safe” nomenclature to an emerging technology or practice only works if that nomenclature is determined to be apposite.

The goal of this article is to help determine what nomenclature is apposite and, in doing so, to offer a greater understanding of this emerging cultural practice to film and media theorists and historians, as well as to policymakers. The risk of not doing so is that this determination of what is or is not apposite will be made purely through jurisdictional conflicts with media industries who are motivated to protect their commercial interests. This article aims to mitigate this risk by documenting the ongoing “crisis of identity” (Altman, 19) faced by asynchronous watch alongs. The documentation process thus requires a discussion of the “codes of reality” (*ibidem*) this emerging practice borrows from watch alongs, reaction videos, and film commentaries, while making important theoretical interventions into Julian Hanich’s idea of “affective we-experiences” and Jonathan Gray’s work on paratexts. This article ultimately aims to give greater theoretical and historical detail to help preserve the incentives and opportunities for innovation and change presented by this emerging practice. It argues that asynchronous watch alongs are an emerging practice of film consumption that create socially beneficial and affective we-experiences for audiences. However, the growing profitability of the practice leaves its creators at risk of jurisdictional (legal) conflicts with media industries: one of the principal reasons for why they code these experiences through legally “safe” nomenclature like “watch alongs”, “reactions”, and “commentaries”.

To help achieve this aim, I will rely on Jason Brant’s instance as a central case study, while offering examples from other creators. The selection of Brant reflects the various criteria by which an ideal case study for this practice should arguably be chosen. He has been producing content since before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic, which was fundamental to its emergence. Brant was also chosen because he has amassed a large repository of content from which to base our analysis, and he often uses language directly relevant to our discussions of nomenclature. Lastly, his selection highlights a potential limitation of this research by foregrounding my personal experience of the field. Brant’s

content was my first introduction to asynchronous watch alongs. However, I argue this limitation invites opportunities for further research to negate any subjective biases that may have resulted. There are various terms that are currently ascribed to this emerging practice. Let us begin, therefore, with the term that seems to be most prevalent in contemporary discourse: the "watch along".

Crisis of Identity: Watch Alongs

Like many others, Brant often invites viewers to "watch along" (SBIG 380, 2025) with him and his framed spectators, even though from spatial and temporal perspectives, we are not literally watching "along" with them. We are similarly watching from a different place and time than Cody Leach, despite his frequent "watch along" invitations (CROCODILE - Patreon Watch-Along 2013). I suggest that the application of the term "watch along" to this emerging practice is unsurprising given that "watch alongs" are already an established form of film consumption that have comparable elements to the viewing experiences offered by Brant. It is unsurprising because "new technologies are always born nameless" (Altman, 19) and just as what we today call "cinema" coalesced out of a variety of different elements before we arrived at a broad cultural consensus of the meaning of the term, this practice of watching synchronised prerecorded footage of others watching the same film coalesced from a variety of different practices. This new exercise therefore borrows "codes of reality from existing technologies" as users and practitioners try to understand the new practice based on the various practices they already understand (*ibidem*).

"Watch Alongs" have been a prevalent form of cinematic exhibition since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Moore 2022). They involve spatially dislocated, but (crucially) not temporally dislocated use by viewers of online platforms to watch films simultaneously "along" with others online. A "live stream" is another term often attributed to this practice. There are many software applications that support such experiences. For example, Teleparty, which was formerly called Netflix Party, is a software company founded in 2016 that allows one to synchronise video playback freely adding text chat to online streaming services like Netflix, YouTube, Hulu, Disney Plus, HBO Max, and Amazon Prime. Paying premium users of Teleparty can additionally communicate via audio and video. Regardless of whether you are a free or premium user, if you share a subscription to any of these platforms with any of your friends, Teleparty allows you (in their words) to "watch together". The "others" with whom one watches could be friends or unknown members of a shared community. In fact, Teleparty supports up to 1,000 simultaneous viewers, and has therefore been used by both individuals and communities to create a variety of co-watching experiences.

For example, the LGBTQ society of the University of Limerick organised a "Queer Hangout" in 2021 in which they watched *Deadpool* (Tim Miller, 2016) through Teleparty while there was "a zoom call happening as

well so that we can chat away while we're watching the movie" (From Out in UL). Maynooth University's student Film Society programmed several screenings throughout 2021 via Teleparty and Discord. To mark the launch of the sports documentary *Rising Phoenix* (2020), Paralympics Ireland hosted a "Netflix Watch Party" (Kinnevey 2020). Likewise, Tolland Public Library in the United States invited members of their community to celebrate together with a "Black History Month Watch Party" (2021). As one may have noticed by the dates of these screenings, Teleparty seems to have become especially popular during the Covid-19 Pandemic, which is an inference supported by the work of Andy Moore on "Digitally Present 'Watchalongs'" (2022).

I argue that Covid-19 watch alongs present an interesting example of the potential of new forms of Internet-enabled film exhibition and consumption that is useful for achieving a greater understanding of asynchronous watch alongs. This is because many scholars traditionally argue that physical proximity is a precondition of co-present viewing (Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013). Indeed, the central thesis of Julian Hanich's *The Audience Effect* is that "once we watch a movie with others, we become part of a collective constellation that has some kind of effect on our film experience, be it positive or negative (2018, 3). He argues that co-present viewing can create an "affective we-experience" in which audience members share some degree of shared emotion about a film they mutually care about, thereby creating alignment between their subjective emotional experiences (168–181). This is not quite the same as Sianne Ngai's idea of taking pleasure from "Other People's Aesthetic Pleasures" (2012, 28), which are circumstances in which someone shares a video of their affectual response to an object, to which others have their own affectual responses.

Francis Bourgeois excitedly filming a passing steam train (2024) would be an example of Other People's Aesthetic Pleasures, as would reality television series like *Gogglebox* (Stephen Lambert, 2013–present). However, they are incomparable to asynchronous watch alongs because in Ngai's terms, Bourgeois' joy becomes the aesthetic object that attracts people to his videos, not the trains he is viewing. Or, in the case of *Gogglebox*, the reaction of the people on-screen to the television show they are watching becomes the aesthetic object, not the television show itself, which we cannot see. I argue that asynchronous watch along viewers take as much pleasure from the spatially and temporally mediated co-"presence" of Brant as they take from simultaneously viewing the film. These viewers are not "short-circuiting the original object of aesthetic appreciation and leaving it behind" (*ibidem*) because the original film remains fundamentally important to the overall social experience. How then might we explain this kind of cinematic pleasure theoretically and historically?

Expanding upon the work of Horton and Wohl, Chris Rojek argues for a kind of "para-social familiarity" that exists between Brant and his Patreon subscribers originates from the growth of media production and

consumption in the second half of the twentieth century. This implies that we can now enjoy "second order relationships with people with whom we never communicate" (2016, 15). He uses news readers, TV show characters, musicians, sports and film stars as examples, but to this list we can add online content creators like Brant. Rojek highlights that these para-social relationships raise important theoretical questions about the nature of "co-presence". He argues that in the West, and perhaps globally, our existence is often "mediated through technologically informed relations of co-presence" (135). This would seem to apply to the para-social familiarity between Brant and his Patreon subscribers, but mediated co-presence is equally applicable to our social relationships, because the affordances of social media enable us to develop and maintain social relationships through our screens "in spite of the absence of physical co-presence" (15).

Hanich instead uses the term "medial co-presence" to describe this "form of human co-location in which both individuals remain present at their respective sites and at the same time come into each other's electronic proximity" (280). He does not discuss watch alongs specifically, but he does make it clear that he considers them to be a social form of film consumption (276). He instead uses Virtual Reality (VR) as an example of how one might achieve such medial co-presence. While I believe we should welcome greater theoretical focus on these emerging practices, I argue that Hanich nevertheless does imply an explicit and subjective hierarchy that values physical over medial co-presence when he asks:

> Does anyone seriously want to deny that there are striking differences between watching a film in other persons' physical or in their medial co-presence? To mention only one important difference: Physical co-presence grants more opportunities to show attentiveness and commitment, and at the same time allows you to detect when others are much less committed. (280)

My response would be no. I do not deny that there is a difference between physical and medial co-presence, but I argue our aim should not be to highlight the greater opportunities that physical has over medial. If weighing the benefits of one over the other was our aim, then one could counter that the "looser social regulations" he ascribes to medial co-presence are arguably easier to control in a medial rather than physical co-present environments. For instance, you can mute unruly audience members while watching a film "together" in VR apps like Bigscreen Beta: you cannot do this at the Liffey Valley VUE.

Indeed, the capacity to control the social nature of one's viewing experience is one of the primary features of watch parties. Ham *et al*. argue that platforms like Netflix would better serve their users by fostering and maintaining their social networks, rather than just serving as a distribution and exhibition platform (2024, 457). Interestingly, many major platforms have been experimenting with offering these kinds of services since the pandemic. Hulu's Watch Party, for example, is a feature that allows up to eight Hulu subscribers to watch thousands of on-demand films and TV

shows from Hulu's streaming library. Notably, some platforms offered these services but subsequently withdrew them. Plex ceased support for their "Watch Together" feature in February 2025 without citing a reason. Rakuten Viki, which specialises in South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese film and television, introduced their "Watch Party" feature in 2020 to help their community stay connected during the Covid-19 pandemic (Viki Support Help Center 2024). Audience uptake was initially slow, so in 2021 they commissioned research that suggested one of the barriers to popularising their feature was that most Rakuten Viki users were based in the US, Europe, Middle East, and Africa where South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese film and television were less popular (Yee 2021). Usage of the Watch Party feature increased after they enabled publicly accessible rather than just private screenings, so that more geographically dispersed users could find likeminded co-viewers. This is notable as it may explain audiences' motivations for consuming asynchronous watch alongs. As soon as they were able to watch with an audience that mutually cared about the material, they were able to enjoy affective we-experiences more readily.

The company owners have since claimed that "viewer habits have shifted", which is why in 2024 they chose to discontinue the service and "focus on developing new features and enhancements that better meet the evolving needs of our viewers" (Viki Discussions 2024). This decreased demand may be true, although they have not released any data, and judging by their Community Discussions there are a lot of fans bemoaning the loss (Rescue the Watch Party Feature 2024). One might also consider that the higher server and QA costs of synchronising multiple streams for a global multilingual platform like Rakuten Viki may have influenced their decision, as well as perhaps avoiding any complications brought about by sharing across territory-restricted boundaries and licenses.

These problems may not be such a hindrance to larger media corporations, however, who have exercised greater power in any jurisdictional conflicts that might arise. Apple's SharePlay feature, for example, allows users to stream TV shows, films, and music in sync with friends and family while on a FaceTime call, and YouTube Premium members can instead use Google Meet to watch YouTube videos with others. Discord likewise offers their Go Live and Screen Share option, which allows users to screen share any application window, or their entire screen in a server or voice call with up to fifty people. The growing prevalence of these software services arguably helps code the reality of "a watch party" (live stream) for both users (audiences) and practitioners. Interestingly, these live stream watch parties are themselves coded according to the reality of in-person co-viewing experiences that were suddenly made unavailable during the pandemic (Moore 2022). It is perhaps no surprise that asynchronous watch along audiences are borrowing the codes of reality from existing watch parties (live streams) to understand and articulate this emerging practice.

There is also a vibrant supporting industry that incentivises practitioners specifically to borrow codes of reality from watch parties by providing them with products and services to facilitate the new practice. These are often business-to-business software as service (B2BSaaS) companies like Nerd or Die, OverlayOn, OWN3D, Stream Builder, and Overlays Uno. These producers specialise in providing customisable, real-time graphic overlays that connect to a content creator's Elgato Stream Deck (a specialised audio mixer, studio controller, production console for online content creators). Overlays Uno promote their service to watch along content creators specifically by suggesting that:

> People love watchalongs because they're an authentic, interactive, and even validating experience. They can connect to someone who is as excited about something as they are, often sharing their opinions... You don't have to stick to what's hot, new and trending. Some of the most popular watchalong podcasts focus on cult classics, critically acclaimed shows, or nostalgic hits like Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Whatever you choose, you'll scratch the particular itch people get when they want to talk about their latest obsession, but nobody in their life is watching that film or show anymore. Give them that outlet by sharing your breakdown of what's happening in real time. (Overlays Uno. 2025)

This emphasis on the greater communicative potential of online film exhibition and consumption mirror the broader desire for social media companies to foster "productive" word-of-mouth interactions (Hewitt 2023, 37–95). ("Productive" in this sense refers to the production of social, cultural, symbolic, and importantly for companies like Overlays Uno, economic capital.) This emphasis on productivity further explains why practitioners like Brant are borrowing codes of reality from watch parties to apply to this emerging practice.

If we look at this emphasis on productivity from a critical perspective, we can see how platforms like YouTube and Discord support these practices of both watching others, and be watched ourselves, because "commercializing and standardizing affect" (Rojek 2016, 136) is a lucrative business model. José van Dijck makes a similar historical point in *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* when she argues the underlying assumptions made by early Internet pioneers: the Web's goal was to make the World more social, and it now supports "the ideology of making online sociality salable" (2013, 14). In simple terms, the codes of reality that Brant and others are borrowing from watch parties provide a useful model by which they can monetise this new content. Thankfully, we should note that it also provides a model by which audiences can use the content that Brant and others produce as cultural resources potentially helping them produce social, cultural, symbolic, and even economic capital for themselves. This likely indicates the motivations of audiences engaging in this practice, although more research is required in this area.

In terms of the social advantages of these developments, existing research shows there are demonstrable benefits offered to audiences by digital communication technologies that can create a form of mediated co-presence in which they can use platforms like WhatsApp and FaceTime to communicate with each other while they watch the same content (Kim *et al*. 2021). This research involved surveying 367 undergraduate students across Pennsylvania, New York, Missouri, California, Washington, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Ohio, and it found that such experiences were enjoyable for their participants "because of the feeling of social presence of virtual coviewers" (7). An important survey of two thousand American adults who had used an SVOD service between December 2020 and January 2021 was commissioned by The Diffusion Group (TDG). It showed that as a result of the social isolation and lack of available in-person co-watching experiences caused by the pandemic, six in ten SVOD users in the country had heard of co-watching, and three in ten reported having used the feature (Kozak 2021). Among these co-watchers, more than half had used Teleparty (*ibidem*). More recent research further highlights the social benefits of these practices for spatially dislocated viewers. A November 2021 study, for example, surveyed 320 South Korean adults and found that co-watching with friends and family significantly reduces Covid-19-related depressive symptoms (Ham *et al*. 2024).

This is not to say that all users seek out communal cinematic experiences for social benefit. The impact of solitary at-home film consumption on communal spectatorship at the cinema has been subject to much criticism, with many commentators deriding so-called "binge watching". However, Zlatina Nikolova argues that for people seeking "elective states of loneliness", their relatively easy access to handheld devices and abundant media content

> offers a new form of self-care that is better suited to a way of life, profoundly transformed by ubiquitous computing, which alters our understanding of moving image's presence in the physical world, binding it to the digital device. (Nikolova 2023, 76)

By extension, I propose that asynchronous watch alongs enable people who do seek communal cinematic experiences for social benefit, but have "either chosen a more socially-distanced life or have had no other option but to embrace such forms of elective solitude" (*ibidem*, 75), to use the affordances of digital platforms to create a spatially and temporally mediated form of film consumption that provides a comparable affective experience to physical co-present viewing. Consequently, I suggest that while Hanich focuses on in-person co-present viewing experiences rather than "medial co-presence", its demonstrable benefits show that by borrowing the codes of reality from watch alongs, audiences and practitioners of asynchronous watch alongs can potentially foster similarly socially beneficial affective we-experiences. Although, again, more research on audience motivations is required here.

Kim *et al*. close their study with a similar call for further research by pointing out that more work needs to be done on how viewing habits changed after Covid-19 lockdown restrictions were eased. This article partially responds to that call by suggesting that some audiences have become more accustomed to spatially and temporally mediated co-viewing experiences. Moreover, thanks to the growing archive of such material on the likes of Patreon – Brant's SBG series for instance is currently at episode 422 – audiences have a considerable repository of co-viewing experiences from which to draw. In summary, I argue the codes of reality that audiences and practitioners derive from watch alongs (live streams) have been subsequently recognised in this emerging practice because of several factors. These include: the growth of watch alongs during the pandemic, the supporting industry of products and services designed to facilitate them, the social benefits for audiences seeking affective we-experiences, and the economic benefits potentially offered to practitioners of a lucrative online industry. These inferences go some way to show that asynchronous watch alongs are to some extent an adaptation of watch alongs. Nevertheless, they also include features that are entirely novel. We shall see this process of adaptation and innovation in the following discussion of the other two terms currently ascribed to this practice: "reactions" and "commentaries".

Crisis of Identity: Reactions and Commentaries

This article aims to give greater theoretical and historical understanding to scholars and policymakers by documenting the language ascribed to this new practice. Doing so is important because this language may one day feature in jurisdictional conflicts that are intended to curtail the incentives and opportunities for innovation and change provided by the new practice, in favour of the commercial interests of an entrenched power. With this definitional objective in mind, the final two terms to discuss are "reactions" and "commentaries". There are several creators who apply these terms. Run to the Movies, for example, describes the viewing experiences they offer as "Full Length Movie Reactions" that are also "in watch-along format" (2023). They use the words "Full Length" to differentiate their paywalled Patreon videos from their freely available "movie reaction and commentary" videos on YouTube, which are edited compilations formally similar to Brant's SBIG series. Rob Squad Movie Reactions likewise offer "Full Length Watch Alongs" on Patreon to differentiate from their "YouTube Edits" (2025). Mellow McK-Jordan's channel also mixes the concept of a watch along with a reaction video in his introductory blurb on Patreon:

> You Want Someone To Watch Movies With? TV Shows? Anime Even? Join Me And The Community Of MellVerse, Get The Opportunity To Personally Interact With Me And Decide What We Get To Watch. Here You Get To See My Full Uncut Reactions To All Things Entertainment! (MellVerse 2025)

The earliest example I can find of what might now be called a “reaction video” was uploaded on December 6, 2005 (JinRoh), but the mode did not enter public discourse until roughly 2011 (Rowe 2018, 198).

In his article on “Reaction value: affective reflex in the digital public sphere” (2024) sociologist and political economist William Davies gives greater insight into how the term reaction has developed since then, by providing a typography by which we might classify them. He posits three types. “Feedback” is an instantaneous form of reaction enabled by digital platform affordances (300–302). Davies argues that affordances such as the “like” and “dislike” buttons, emojis, and reaction GIFs function as affective expressions that are communicated without the human face. While these elements are a key means by which YouTube content creators like Brant measure engagement, they are not necessarily relevant to our understanding of the asynchronous watch along experience. Unlike danmu experiences provided by websites like AcFun and Bilibili, likes, emojis, and reaction GIFs are not visible on the screen during asynchronous watch alongs. Moreover, the human faces of those reacting are very much visible and important.

Davies’s second type, “Reaction As Content”, is a form of reaction that foregrounds the importance of the human face (303–304).

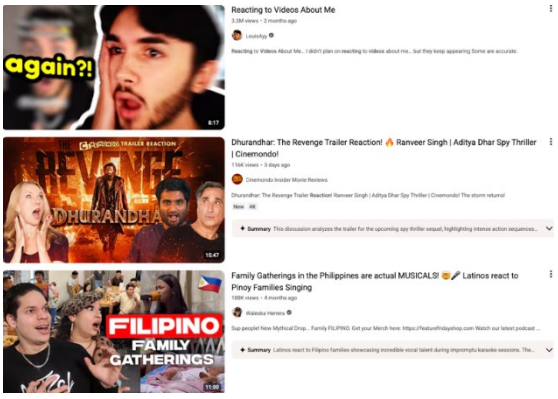

Figure 1. An Assortment of Reaction Video Thumbnails from YouTube.

As we can see in *Figure 1*, hyperbolic expressions of shock, horror, disgust, excitement, and amusement commonly feature in YouTube content creators’ thumbnails. Williams traces this type of reaction to TV shows like “Candid Camera” from the 1940s, which allowed us to see how ordinary people react in extraordinary circumstances. In his typography, Davies suggests a key formal feature of reaction videos is viewers’ filming themselves reacting to media content which they are supposedly watching for the first time (303). While this is relevant to many of the examples that he chooses, it is not so relevant to asynchronous watch alongs as many of the films that Brant’s channel features are films that he or his guests have already seen. Arguably, this kind of repeat viewing and familiarity is less emblematic of “reaction as content” and more akin to the kind of repeated consumption necessary to build subcultural capital within cult film communities (Jancovich 2002).

Formal differences aside, reaction videos are now “an essential part of the YouTube creator economy” (Ghosh and Tripathi 2025, 230). Like

watch alongs, they have been shown to offer tremendous social benefit to their audiences, especially when those audiences were subject to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions (Ghosh and Tripathi). They also potentially offer tremendous economic benefit to their practitioners and have thus been subject to much jurisdictional conflict. For example, in 2016, The Fine Brothers, who had developed highly profitable online channels like Kids React, Teens React, Elders React, and YouTubers React, tried unsuccessfully to trademark the concept of a "reaction video", and in doing so, issued many content ID claims that resulted in other users having their reaction videos taken down by YouTube (Fine Brothers Ent.).

Although Run to the Movies, Rob Squad Movie Reactions, and MellVerse do not put great emphasis on the idea of reacting to a film for the first time, in presenting the asynchronous watch along experiences they offer through the codes of reality established by reaction videos, they are grounding their user-experience in a mode of consumption with which many audience members are likely already familiar. For practitioners wishing to monetise their reaction videos through advertising revenue rather than Patreon subscriptions, this familiarity is potentially beneficial when pitching one's content to advertisers. Lastly, by coding the experience of this emerging practice through reaction videos, it might be possible to avoid the jurisdictional conflicts to which reaction videos have already been subjected (Hosseinzadeh v. Klein 2017). The possibility of coding the experience through a well-established practice is also evident in the third and final phrase by which this emerging practice is often referred: "the film commentary track".

As well as calling them "reactions", Run to the Movies often refer to their content as "commentaries" (PREDATOR 2 2024), as does Cody Leach who asks his Patreon followers to "vote below on what movie you want me to do a commentary on" (2017). According to Barbara Klinger, the concept of a "film commentary track" emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s when American distributors needed to justify to consumers the higher cost of LaserDiscs by creating added "value" through "special editions". These included attractive features like digitally remastered versions of the film, trailers, outtakes, "making of" documentaries, and commentary tracks (Klinger, 60). As DVDs became the dominant home video format in the 1990s, extra features like commentaries became a "major drawing card for consumers" (*ibidem*, 70). By the time online content creators began making film commentary tracks of their own – a practice common for roughly the last two decades – the codes of reality of that emerging practice had been long established for both audiences and practitioners. Interestingly, the practice of content creators providing commentaries has now fed back into the industry. For example, Jarret Gahan from the Good Movie Monday podcast recorded a commentary track for the Vestron Video Collector's Series re-release of *Dream a Little Dream* (Marc Rocco, 1989), and Nathaniel Thompson of Mondo Video and Ryan Turek of Shock Till You Drop likewise recorded a commentary track for Vestron's re-release of *Chopping Mall* (Jim Wynorski, 1986). By borrowing their codes of reality

from commentary tracks, Run to the Movies and Cody Leach are once again grounding their user-experience in a mode of consumption with which audiences are already familiar. Moreover, by labouring to produce extra features for films in the form of commentaries, they create new texts that benefit the distributors of the "original" texts by incentivising people to purchase adapted versions of those films. This intervention highlights the final theoretical means by which we might better understand this emerging practice: the paratext.

In Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately* (2010), he calls for an "off-screen studies" to reevaluate the meaning that film blogs, posters, reviews, social media discussions, toys, trailers, video games or, in our case, watch alongs, reaction videos, and commentaries, can have on one's overall textual experience. As one common example, Gray identifies film trailers as "tangible" paratexts. With the common feature that that are readily circulated, seen, and shared other examples are posters, reviews, and social media discussions. Genre on the other hand, is an "intangible" paratext. *Chopping Mall* is a horror comedy film about malfunctioning security robots that hunt and kill young people in a mall. Its genre works paratextually by framing the viewer's expectations. One is likely to see comedic portrayals of violence in *Chopping Mall*, but one is unlikely to see a nuanced exploration of the potential for technology to destroy its creators.

The content that Brant and others create is interesting because it operates paratextually in three overlapping ways. The feature-length videos of Brant watching a film are, in and of themselves, tangible paratexts. We can download them, we can share them, we might even choose to watch them on their own. However, when screened simultaneously with the "original" film, they facilitate a change the audience's textual experience. This operation creates a third and entirely new kind of intangible paratext in which Brant's audience can share some degree of shared emotion about a film like *Chopping Mall* that they mutually care about, and in the process foster an alignment between their subjective emotional experiences. This new kind of intangible paratext is the affective we-experience audiences receive from asynchronous watch alongs.

One might question if one can share an emotional response to an event with someone who is not experiencing the event simultaneously. However, according to Hanich, one of the "most important enabling conditions for shared emotions" is "diachronical relations" (174). In other words, emotional responses can overcome temporal separation. Fear, for example, is not a response that is rooted in the present. In her study of "Affective Economies", Sarah Ahmed argues that fear "responds to that which is approaching rather than already here" (2004, 125). It is also possible to have a shared emotional response to a major news event, positive or negative, long after others have learned of it, and responded to it online (Garcia and Rimé 2019). It is useful to follow Gray's call not to dismiss these paratexts as purely add-ons to an "original" text like *Chopping Mall*. We should instead consider the totality of the textual

meanings and subsequent emotional responses they produce. The first of those is the capacity for them to function as affective we-experiences that have been shown to have potential social benefit to their audiences. The second is their capacity to function as promotional resources for the content creators offering the experiences, as well as to publicise the films with which they are synchronised.

Films like *Xtro* have long exhausted any promotional funds that their distributor New Line Cinema applied to them. This is made clear by Gray's observation that while audience members can privilege certain modes of exhibition and consumption that will impact their reception, as well as perhaps impacting the reception of those within a shared community, "we must avoid the trap of seeing these as necessarily of equal presence and power as those created by film and television producers and their marketing teams" (162–163). Gray uses the examples of media-related wikis like the Fandom.com page for *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) to show how fan communities can receive media in ways unintended by their copyright holders. In this case, he would argue New Line Cinema retains more presence and power to affect reception by their continuing investment in the franchise through releases like their 4K Blu-Ray. This is noteworthy because many films that Brant features for his watch alongs have no marketing teams currently assigned to them. This would have been the case upon their original releases, and if they were later distributed by Boutique labels like Vinegar Syndrome, however these have ceased operation. In the instance of Vinegar Syndrome, for instance, they would have promoted their releases of *Hellmaster* in 2019 and *New York Ninja* in 2022, but Brant's watch alongs in 2024 and 2023 were circulated without the "presence and power" of Vinegar Syndrome's marketing team. The affective we-experiences that Brant created for *Hellmaster* (Douglas Schulze, 1992) and *New York Ninja* (John Liu, 2021) privilege a certain mode of exhibition and consumption that impacts their contemporary reception. These reincarnations are potentially more impactful for one of his Patreon subscribers than the film's original promotional paratexts. This highlights the third and final textual meaning produced by this emerging practice. It relates to the greater degree of agency afforded to audiences by how certain films are exhibited and consumed. Rather than relying on distributors to promote these films theatrically or on home video, the audience offer continual recommendations to Brant, Leach, and their peers through their respective communities, whether conveyed through Discord, YouTube, or to Patreon directly. In doing so, they mirror the capacity for emerging distribution mechanisms like Crowdsourced Cinema to enable audience members to participate in a counterhegemonic process of film distribution (Hewitt, 184–185).

Conclusion

This article has argued that asynchronous watch alongs are an emerging practice of film consumption that can create socially beneficial affective

we-experiences for film audiences. However, due to social media platforms' capacity to commercialise and standardise affect, they can also create lucrative financial opportunities for platforms like YouTube and Patreon, as well as content creators like Brant. Faced with such growing profitability, asynchronous watch alongs are potentially at risk from media industries that have historically reacted to any emerging practices threatening their profits by engaging in jurisdictional conflict to constrain their potential and, consequently, the social benefits of that practice. Effectively, content creators are coding the experiences they provide through legally "safe" nomenclature like watch alongs, reactions, and commentaries.

The goal of this article was to give greater theoretical and historical understanding to policymakers and film and media scholars regarding these coding practices, ensuring that the social benefits resulting from the exhibition and consumption of asynchronous watch alongs are not ultimately subjugated to commercial interests of entrenched media industries. In doing so, I have suggested that asynchronous watch alongs represent an as-yet unidentified form of intangible paratext in which the audiences of content creators like Brant synchronise their film consumption with Brant's, thereby creating a form of medial co-presence in which there is an alignment between their respective subjective emotional experiences. This article highlights the many potential social benefits of this practice, but it also highlights the potential benefits for film distributors. In monetising the affective we-experiences they create, online content creators like Brant promote home video and VOD releases of films that have likely long exhausted any promotional funds their distributors applied to them. Indeed, rather than constrain this practice, this may suggest why distributors might choose to support it.

In making tentative inroads into this as-yet undocumented cultural practice, this article has offered calls for further research on audience motivations. One might approach this from several perspectives. One might offer deeper exploration of how para-social relationships function within asynchronous watch alongs. One might also look at the practice in terms of gender or race, or perhaps consider how asynchronous watch alongs function within non-Anglophone online platforms.

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