

‘Reunited Apart’: Charity Reunion Specials on YouTube in Lockdown

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the immense popularity of celebrity cast reunions on YouTube amid the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. As one of the most successful (and self-reflexive) examples of this trend, it analyses *Reunited Apart* (2020—), a lockdown web series created and hosted by actor Josh Gad, dedicated to bringing together the casts and crews of beloved Hollywood films from the 1980s and beyond. Using *Reunited Apart* as a case study, the paper evaluates the ontological security afforded by nostalgic consumption in lockdown; discusses the remediation of celebrity and nostalgic fan experiences within YouTube (as platform) and Zoom video conference (as aesthetic); and draws attention to the effectiveness of these reunions in mobilising the influence and attention generated by Hollywood celebrities to fuel the ‘affective economics’ (Jenkins 2006) of fan philanthropy—an endeavour streamlined by the series’ use of YouTube’s native fundraising affordances.

KEYWORDS

Reunited Apart, YouTube, Cast reunion, Nostalgia, Charity fundraising

In April 2020, amid the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns worldwide, Hollywood actor and Broadway star Josh Gad uploaded the first episode of his new web series *Reunited Apart* (2020—) to YouTube. Dedicated to one of Gad’s favourite childhood films, *The Goonies* (1985), the pilot episode of *Reunited Apart* reflected the aesthetic of lockdown, orchestrated and recorded via Zoom video conference. Featuring actors Sean Austin, Corey Feldman, Ke Huy Quan and Jeff Cohen, creator Stephen Spielberg, writer Chris Columbus and director Richard Donner, the episode invited *Goonies* fans to listen to recollections of the cast and crew’s time on-set, learn behind-the-scenes trivia, and observe the group’s continued rapport, almost four decades since the film’s production. The reunion was the first of many Gad would go on to organise with the casts of beloved Hollywood films released since the 1980s. Featuring an all-star line-up of celebrity guests—among them Tom Hanks, Michael J. Fox, Bill Murray, Ralph Macchio, Sigourney Weaver, Jennifer Grey, Ron Howard, Liv Tyler and Mike Meyers—Gad’s *Reunited Apart* series was a popular and critical hit. At the time of writing, *Reunited Apart* spans eight official ‘episodes’, dedicated to a variety of popular films and franchises, complemented by twenty-one supplementary videos also housed on Gad’s YouTube channel, including teasers, bloopers, outtakes and highlight reels. In just nine months, Gad’s *Reunited Apart* series attracted over 22 million video views, continuing its promise to reunite the creative teams behind Hollywood’s most beloved films into a second season.

Though one of the most popular examples, the conceit of *Reunited Apart* was not unique; lockdown inspired a multitude of cast reunions from properties spanning stage and screen(s). Responding to theatre closures and precarious production schedules, for example, American performing arts charity The Actors Fund hosted weekly ‘mini-shows’, broadcasting live

interviews and performances by Broadway and television stars as part of a lockdown web series entitled *Stars in the House* (2020—). Similarly, Netflix's comedy-focused YouTube channel (Netflix is a Joke) produced live table-reads by several of the streaming service's favourite comedic ensembles, including the casts of *Big Mouth* (2017—), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019), *Grace and Frankie* (2015—) and *Dead to Me* (2019—). Like *Reunited Apart*, this wave of virtual reunions took place on YouTube, attracting hundreds of thousands of viewers with their invitations to revisit and share memories of beloved pop culture artifacts. Their frequent fixture as trending videos on the YouTube homepage affirmed their status as a lockdown phenomenon at once borne from and celebrated by the platform itself. While designed primarily as entertainment, these videos were also united by a charitable focus, encouraging donations to organisations and communities impacted by the pandemic. In this endeavour, they were incredibly successful: as of February 2021, *Stars in the House* had raised over US\$700,000 for The Actors Fund (Home | Stars in the House n.d.); *Big Mouth*'s live table-read raised almost US\$100,000 for Feeding America (Goldberg 2020); traffic from the *Grace and Frankie* cast reunion overloaded the server for the Meals on Wheels website, with viewers raising an additional US\$30,000 through a Facebook fundraiser hastily created while the site was down (Grace and Frankie for Meals on Wheels America n.d.); and by the start of season two, *Reunited Apart* had generated more than US\$1 million in fan donations for the charities nominated throughout its first seven episodes.

As one of the most effective, long-standing and self-reflexive examples of this trend, *Reunited Apart* is used in this article as a case study for examining the prevalence and popularity of the charity reunion specials that emerged on YouTube in lockdown. Drawing on Maria Schreiber's (2017) approach to analysing visual communication on social media, this study combines 'visual analysis, text analysis and platform analysis' (38) of *Reunited Apart*'s eight episodes (including video descriptions and user comments) with close textual analysis of the series' online press coverage. This is used to explore the interrelating 'practices, pictures and platforms' (38) involved in the production and reception of the series. Setting this analysis in dialogue with scholarship on cinema, social media, nostalgia and fandom, the article begins by recognising the ontological comfort of revisiting beloved media properties from the past, and situates the appetite for YouTube's reunion specials within a lockdown mediascape characterised by nostalgic consumption. It proceeds to ask what happens when these media properties are remediated within and by the affordances of social media, and, in turn, when the nostalgic sentiment they evoke is drawn into the 'affective economics' (Jenkins 2006) of charitable fundraising. Given the substantial success of *Reunited Apart*, specifically, it also considers the dual characterisation of Josh Gad as host and 'fanboy auteur' (Salter and Stanfill 2020; Scott 2012), as well as the series' use of YouTube's native fundraising affordances to streamline its philanthropic efforts. In so doing, this article draws attention to YouTube's utility as a platform for charitable endeavours, and contributes to the growing body of research on celebrity use of social media platforms to attract, direct and monetise attention in times of need.

‘Bringing some much-needed joy to each and every one of you’: Finding comfort in consumed nostalgia

One of the defining characteristics of popular culture in the twentieth-first century, argues music journalist Simon Reynolds (2011), is its preoccupation with revisiting, recycling and revamping cultural artefacts from its ‘*own immediate past*’ (xiii, original emphasis). ‘As a trend,’ American studies scholar Kathleen Loock (2016) explains, this fascination with the past ‘pervades almost all areas of cultural production, including music, fashion, toys, food, and interior design’ (278). It is perhaps most evident, however, in the ouroboric output of the film and television industries; infamous for remaking, rebooting and reviving existing properties. The popularity of these products has contributed to what media theorist Katharina Niemeyer (2014) calls a ‘nostalgia boom’ (1) in popular culture, normalising the production and consumption of media specifically designed to evoke a sense of nostalgia, defined as a ‘feeling of loss or a yearning for an idealized past’ (Loock 2016, 292).

Nostalgia’s cultural ubiquity grew even more pronounced in 2020, swiftly flavouring the pop culture and behaviours of lockdown. Amid the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK and US, for example, heritage tourism scholars Sean Gammon and Gregory Ramshaw (2020) were quick to identify a rise in ‘leisure nostalgia’, with (mandated) time at home increasingly occupied by ‘young and old reflect[ing] on, and vicariously escap[ing] to, more predictable times’ (3) through their choice of media consumption. The trend permeated industry press releases: in April 2020, Spotify reported significant growth in nostalgia-themed playlists, and streams of music from the 1950s to ‘80s (Spotify Listeners Are Getting Nostalgic 2020); while in June and July, the US box office was dominated by a slate of classic Hollywood blockbusters, with titles such as *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Jaws* (1975), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *E.T.* (1982) and *Back to the Future* (1985) topping the charts some thirty years after their original theatrical release (D’Alessandro 2020a, 2020b). Press outlets including the *New York Times* (Campomor 2020), *The Guardian* (Rickett 2020), *Forbes* (M. Klein 2020), *National Geographic* (Johnson 2020) and *Glamour* (Macauley 2020) chronicled nostalgia’s heightened popularity in 2020, coining terms like ‘corona-stalgia’ (Macauley 2020) to characterise the retrospective sentiment and patterns of behaviour adopted in the ‘new normal’ of lockdown life.

This rise in leisure nostalgia was overtly encouraged by media industries, whose programming selections ‘appeared to both fuel and react to this apparent surge in nostalgic interest by offering reminders of the ways things were before the virus spread’ (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020, 4). US film distributors embraced the unique setting of the drive-in theatres that remained open during lockdown, organising nostalgia-fuelled screenings of classic films leading to new box office success (D’Alessandro 2020a), and for those at home, reruns of iconic sports broadcasts, music, television series and films frequented radio airplay, television schedules and video-on-demand services (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020; Verheul 2020). At once reflecting the precarity of production schedules during lockdown and the comparative accessibility of historic media titles (see Verheul 2020), the growth of nostalgia programming also seemed to indicate a recognition of the ‘psycho-social benefits of leisure nostalgia’ from industry and audiences alike (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020, 1). Contrary to early conceptualisations of

nostalgia as an illness or malady (see Boym 2001), recent studies have observed the positive psycho-social effects of nostalgia, noting its efficacy in ‘generat[ing] positive affect, increas[ing] self-esteem, foster[ing] social connectedness, and alleviat[ing] existential threat’ (Sedikides et al. 2008, 304; see also Routledge et al. 2013; Newman et al. 2020). Amid a global pandemic such benefits are all the more appealing, with the trauma of the present and uncertainty about the future combining to elevate nostalgia’s appeal and effectiveness as ‘a palliative tonic in times of crisis’ (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020, 2).

When it comes to unlocking these psycho-social benefits, ‘[m]edia, and new technologies in particular, function as [central] platforms, projection places and tools’ for nostalgic expression (Niemeyer 2014, 7). Indeed, social media platforms (and YouTube especially) are in large part designed to encourage this retrospective mode of media consumption, offering a plethora of affordances that streamline access to archives of historic content, interactions and (mediated) memories (see Areni 2019; Burgess, Mitchell, and Münch 2018; Niemeyer 2014). Historian Gary Cross (2015) captures this mode of consumption with his notion of ‘consumed nostalgia’, describing the impulse to revisit (and consume) ‘those goods and media experiences (toys, dolls, movies, etc.) associated with brief periods of their own personal childhoods’ (15). This has parallels in fan studies scholar Rebecca Williams’ (2015) analysis of behaviours that occur when beloved fan objects end; such as when a television series is cancelled, a character exits a show or a band announces their separation. In such instances of ‘post-object fandom’, Williams notes that fans often return to mediated texts from the(ir) past as a way to reconcile their sense of self-identity. Like Cross, who suggests that consumed nostalgia is most likely to occur when people feel ‘that their selfhoods’ have been ‘threatened’ (11), Williams positions media as an intermediary between nostalgia and ‘ontological security’ (24) in times of crisis; in other words, when one’s sense of ontological security—defined by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) as ‘the confidence that most humans have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of [their] surrounding social and material environments’ (105)—is challenged or threatened, consumed nostalgia can provide a way of (re-)affirming one’s sense of safety, self-identity and environmental continuity. During the early months of in the COVID-19 pandemic, especially, when worldwide lockdowns were first demanding their unprecedented reconfiguration of daily life, consumed nostalgia became an attractive and ubiquitous method for regaining a sense of ontological security: as Gad observed in an interview about *Reunited Apart* with AP News, ‘I think nostalgia is so important right now because we all want to go back to simpler times. We all are hoping for something we can connect with that reminds of us better days’ (qtd. in Elber 2020).

Directly responding to this retrospective lockdown mediascape, *Reunited Apart* makes little pretence of the nostalgic sentiment it intends to elicit, immediately evoking retro aesthetics with the ‘80s-inspired colour palette, visual style and soundtrack of its title sequence. Each episode of *Reunited Apart* opens with a close-up of an animated film strip, its many ‘frames’ stamped with different years in bright pink digits (a visual nod to *Back to the Future*’s DeLorean time machine). ‘Long, long ago,’ its theme song begins, a soprano voice singing atop a synth-heavy pop beat, as the film strip begins to flicker, visually denoting a shift from 2020 back to the year 1974 – ‘when,’ the singer continues knowingly, ‘life was just hunky-dory...’ Two film reels roll across the screen, and a rotating 3D-model of a Super 8 camera

appears, ‘A group of people made a piece of cinematic glory...’ The screen splits in two, with a thick black line separating a cellular phone (styled after the Motorola DynaTAC), and vintage Ray Ban sunglasses paired with a one-way plane ticket. ‘Now they’re getting back together...’ A plane flies across the screen before an old Macintosh computer appears, swiftly splitting in two, its two mirrored monitors joined at the CPU, as the singer clarifies, ‘Not in person, only virtually—but it’s a start! They’re reunited apart!’ The series’ title appears on-screen as the song ends, a post-script ‘with Josh Gad’ scrawled underneath. Setting the tone for the episodes to come, this visual parade of analogue technologies (Schrey 2014), neon gradients, self-referential lyrics and energetic soundtrack immediately conjure a playful and rose-tinted vision of the past, foregrounding products and aesthetics that both trigger and indulge the audience’s desire for consumed nostalgia in lockdown (Reynolds 2011).

The series’ nostalgic intent is also clear from the filmic focus of its episodes. With the exception of the more recent *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), *Reunited Apart* reunites the casts and crews of films released from the mid-80s to early ‘90s. Beginning with *The Goonies* (1985), the first season reconnects the casts of *Back to the Future* (1985), *Splash* (1984), *Ghostbusters* (1984) and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986), returning after a brief hiatus to reunite the casts of *Wayne’s World* (1992) and *The Karate Kid* (1984) in season two. Taken together, this selection of films privileges a particular era of filmmaking, and a specific generation of cinematic audiences. As Loock (2016) observes, popular culture from this period has retained a particular hold on the collective consciousness of Hollywood and its audiences as ‘an entire generation of today’s filmmakers, actors, and cinema goers grew up with and still remembers television shows and films of the 1980s’ (278; see also Ewen 2020). The success and influence of this period of popular culture can be found in the form, style and content of countless productions since, at once codifying their status as ‘classic’ texts and inculcating younger generations to their legacy through an omnibus of spoofs and intertextual references (Loock 2016).

Reunited Apart’s episodes are similarly punctuated with clips of iconic scenes, quotes and memorable songs from the films, at once highlighting their continued cultural currency, and encouraging what Loock (2016) calls the ‘pleasure of recognition’, offering viewers numerous opportunities to acknowledge their familiarity and reflect on their personal histories with the films. Some viewers share these recollections in the comments beneath each episode, observing that the film was the first they ever saw in theatres, recalling the experience of renting it on VHS, or reflecting on the countless youthful hours they spent in its company. The longevity of these fan-object relationships (Williams 2015) is visually emphasised throughout the series, with guest introductions paralleled with clips, stills and icons from the original productions, in turn literalising literary theorist Linda Hutcheon’s (1998) description of nostalgia as ‘what you “feel” when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight’ (22). The series’ intention to access this ‘emotional weight’ is acknowledged in the first episode when Gad explains, ‘It is my sincere hope that catching up with some *old friends* of all of us will bring some much-needed joy to each and every single one of you’ (emphasis added, S1E1 0:58). True, too, of the wider catalogue of virtual cast reunions that appeared on YouTube in lockdown, *Reunited Apart* foregrounds content and aesthetics specifically designed to engage and distribute the psycho-social benefits

of (consumed) nostalgia, offering audiences the sense of relief, refuge and connection that may be accessed by revisiting media(ted) memories from the past.

'I can sit back and fanboy like my audience': Josh Gad as fanboy auteur

Reunited Apart was not Gad's first lockdown project: prior to the series' release, Gad pledged to create nightly Twitter video broadcasts reading children's bedtime stories, featuring the voice of his most popular animated character, the snowman Olaf from Disney's *Frozen* (2013), as a source of entertainment for families in lockdown (Blackwelder 2020). In comparison, *Reunited Apart* was a significantly more ambitious undertaking. In an interview with ET, Gad recounts that inspiration for the series struck while he was (re-)watching *The Goonies* with his own family in lockdown:

I [had] been doing a lot of revisiting of movies that were so important to me during my childhood. [...] One night [my family and I] were watching *The Goonies*, and it's always been a dream of mine to reunite that cast. I sort of just decided on a whim that I'm gonna do this, [so] I started reaching out individually, one by one. (Gad, quoted in Willis 2020)

Undertaking a project so intimately involved with such beloved films was not without its risks, however. As Loock (2016) highlights regarding the many 'retro-remakes' of '80s movies since the early 2000s, the significant sentimental weight attached to the original films means 'there is a general apprehension among audiences that cinematic remaking will destroy [their] personal ties to the past' (279); accompanied by the possibility that their (mis-)handling could instead evoke 'that all-too-familiar feeling that accompanies the desecration of a childhood memory: anger, resentment, and a deep, almost primeval sense of sorrow' (Adams 2010, qtd. in Loock 2016, 293). It was therefore crucial that *Reunited Apart* quickly and effectively build a sense of trust with its audience, assuring viewers of its intentions to pay tribute to the films and the fond, formative memories associated with them – a responsibility that primarily fell to Gad himself.

Throughout the series Gad repeatedly emphasises his own fannish history with the films, a motif that serves to assure viewers of his intention to respect and preserve the films' legacies. Often visually accentuated by childhood photographs (e.g. S1E1 2:09; S1E2 1:41; S1E3 2:07; S1E6 2:03; S2E1 1:29), Gad opens each episode with his earliest recollections watching the films, estimating, for example, that he has seen *Back to the Future* 'no less than 350 times' (S1E2 1:32); admitting to sneaking into a restricted screening of *Wayne's World* as a pre-teen at his local cinema (S2E1 1:29); and stating that 'no other film in [his] earliest childhood memories made a bigger *Splash*' (S1E3 2:44). These anecdotes help to explain Gad's visible excitement and incredulousness when meeting the casts and crews that produced them. 'If I were to tell my younger self that this was happening,' he marvels in the series' first episode, staring at the virtual window of *Goonies* cast members populating his computer screen, 'I would probably have, like, a 1980s Hodor fit' (S1E1, 5:43). The same sentiment is echoed later in the episode, when Gad concludes simply, 'Today has brought me more joy than any day of my life' (S1E1 24:26). These recurring displays of 'performative fannishness' (Stewart 2019) characterise Gad as what media studies scholar Suzanne Scott (2012) calls a 'fanboy auteur', an authorial figure whose 'fan credentials [...] are narrativized and (self) promoted as an

integral part of their appeal' (44). When attached to a new project, these fan credentials are often used as shorthand for 'a guarantee of quality media-making' (Salter and Stanfill 2020, ix), evincing the auteur's interest in preserving the integrity of the text (see also Scott 2012). Indeed, Gad's fannish identity is both recognised and accepted by viewers, who regularly mention that they 'get the feeling' or 'can tell' Gad is a passionate fan in the comments, sometimes pointing to specific elements of Gad's performance, such as his 'giddiness' or that he appears to be 'about to cry' each time he introduces a new guest. The numerous moments evidencing Gad's fannish identity combine to affirm his status as a fanboy auteur and assist in legitimising his role as the series' host, assuring viewers of his intentions to honour (and delicately handle) the films' substantial (affective) legacies.

Gad's fannish identity also enables him to traverse the boundaries of industry, text and audience, lending him a sense of relatability (Scott 2012). As Gad explains to the cast of *Back to the Future*, 'I like to let you guys ask each other questions, which allows me to sit back and *fangirl like my audience*' (S1E2 7:22, emphasis added). Here, and throughout the series, Gad 'equates his close proximity to the fans with an understanding of their textual desires and practices' (Scott 2012, 44), in turn characterising his visible joy, wonder and surprise as a model for the viewer's response. However, there is a disparity between Gad's fan identity and that of his audience. As fan studies scholar Mark Stewart (2019) observes, celebrity fan performances differ from those enacted by non-celebrity fans due to the privileged level of access their 'celebrity capital' (Driessens 2013) affords; their public visibility and influence unlocks opportunities unavailable to the wider fan population, such as interactions with the cast and crew, private interviews, set visits, and/or access to rare memorabilia. Gad's privileged celebrity fan position is evidenced by his ability to organise and host *Reunited Apart*'s star-studded reunions in the first instance, an undertaking requiring an extensive network of exclusive contacts, as well as his own celebrity persona and prominent public platform. The exceptionality of his fan access is further reinforced by appearances from other celebrities throughout the series, including 'ultimate *Back to the Future* fan' writer and director JJ Abrams (S1E2, 18:08), *Karate Kid* 'superfan' Amy Schumer (S2E2 29:58), as well as 'special guest[s]' Jake Gyllenhaal (S1E6 29:43) and Taika Waititi (S1E4 39:33), as quizmasters in short segments testing the casts' knowledge of their films. Like Gad, the fan credentials of these celebrity guests are highlighted from the outset, and quickly evidenced by their emotive response to seeing the other participants on the call, modelling the awe and excitement extended by the series' invitation to reunite viewers at home with their childhood cinematic heroes.

'Someone was apparently under water during this recording': Remediating celebrity with(in) a Zoom aesthetic

Recommending *Reunited Apart* in a roundup of nostalgic programming for *Forbes*, journalist Matt Klein (2020) remarks, 'If watching or re-watching [films] wasn't enough, *The Goonies* [recently] came together for a virtual reunion, better scratching that itch.' Klein's recommendation implies the potential insufficiency of returning to media object by nature static and unchanging, and presents *Reunited Apart* as a solution to this stasis. Offering behind-the-scenes commentary and insights from those directly involved in the films' production,

Reunited Apart functions as a form of intertextual ‘annotation’ for audiences to layer onto the original film, offering a new lens through which to view (and enjoy) well-known texts (Kalir and Garcia 2021). In the process of creating new ‘paratexts’ for these classic Hollywood films (Gray 2010), the series evokes new media theorists Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin’s notion of ‘remediation’, a representational shift from one medium to another, characterised by the ‘twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy’ (1999, 5), which at once erase and draw attention to the specific mediums involved. In the case of *Reunited Apart*, remediation can be observed in two regards: in both aesthetic (as Zoom conference call) and form (as YouTube video), together achieving in relocating (and mobilising) the audience’s nostalgic attachments to beloved Hollywood films (and their stars) within the networked affordances of social media.

COVID-19 lockdowns have heightened scepticism of celebrity platitudes—best encapsulated, perhaps, by the viral backlash to the celebrity singalong of John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’—but *Reunited Apart* seeks to collapse the sense of distance (and difference) between its celebrity guests and non-celebrity audience by remediating the former’s fame within a social media environment. Whereas cast reunions would typically take place on a talk show or at a fan convention, with lockdown restricting physical gatherings and travel, *Reunited Apart*’s celebrity casts and crews, in Gad’s words, ‘still have no choice but to be reunited apart’ (S1E2, 0:34). As a result, the gatherings of *Reunited Apart* are conducted virtually, orchestrated and recorded via Zoom video conference. Reproducing a sight familiar to many required to work or socialise from home under lockdown, *Reunited Apart*’s Zoom aesthetic involves a densely populated pane of virtual windows, its manifold split-screen view aesthetically and symbolically transcending the guests’ physical separation through their ‘visual and/or aural closeness’ on-screen (Hagener 2020, 37).

By mirroring the interface seen live by the celebrity guests, *Reunited Apart*’s Zoom aesthetic encourages viewers to feel as though they themselves are participants in the call, investing their viewing experience with the same immediacy characteristic of this form of virtual communication. This invitation is reinforced by the domestic backdrops and appearance of the celebrity guests: speaking from the comfort of their own homes (adhering to the same lockdown and shelter-in-place orders as the audience), most of the celebrities wear minimal make-up and casual clothing, substituting their usual ‘perfection [...] with good-enough to make these performances happen’ (Hatfield 2021, 175). These behind-the-scenes glimpses of the ‘ordinary’ people behind the celebrity personas (Marshall 2013) heighten the plausibility of participating in such an exclusive assembly. At the same time, however, the series’ technical composition repeatedly interrupts this fantasy with reminders of the series’ mediation: the Zoom interface shown, for example, has been manipulated in post-production, replacing the regular black background with a bright pastel gradient (recalling the series’ colourful title sequence). Moreover, the stream is often interrupted by cuts to secondary camera views offering higher-quality close-ups of the celebrity participants from additional angles (see Shoard 2020). Perhaps the most overt reminders of the series’ mediation, however, are the technical glitches that occur throughout, with participants wrestling to connect their microphones, adjust their camera quality and focus, and falling victim to lag from poor internet connections. However, whereas *Reunited Apart*’s stylistic post-production techniques disrupt the verisimilitude of the Zoom aesthetic, the participants’ technical difficulties act to reinforce

its credibility, resonating with the unpredictable ordeal of participating in an important video call, and further bridging the usual distance between the celebrity guests and the audience at home by highlighting that—in this capacity, at least—they are ‘just like us’.

‘Only together can we make a difference’: Translating celebrity attention into charitable action

Inviting fans to revisit a beloved, nostalgic media object with an innovative twist proved a highly successful formula for *Reunited Apart*: the series attracted more than 16 million views with its first eight episodes, with an additional six million views across the supplementary videos posted to Gad’s YouTube channel. However, the series was not solely designed for entertainment; each episode of *Reunited Apart* was aligned with a different charitable organisation promoted by Gad at the opening and conclusion of each episode, often accompanied by screen recordings of the charities’ websites, promotional videos and stills. As Gad recounts in the series’ second season: ‘When we started *Reunited Apart* at the beginning of quarantine, we did so for two purposes: to bring a little joy in these incredibly hard times, and most importantly, to help raise money for charities in desperate need of those resources’ (S2E2, 0:42). Over the course of the first seven episodes, he continues, the viewers of *Reunited Apart* together raised over US\$1 million for charity (S2E2, 0:55), benefitting the Centre for Disaster Philanthropy, Project HOPE, DigDeep, No Kid Hungry, the Equal Justice Initiative, CORE (Children of Restaurant Employees) and Children of First Responders.

The series’ success in generating these funds aligns with a long tradition of celebrity involvement in philanthropic projects (see Hunting and Hinck 2017; Jeffreys and Allatson 2015; Van Krieken 2012); a trend celebrity studies scholar Chris Rojek (2014) has labelled ‘celanthropy’. In these instances, celebrity figures draw upon their recognisability—conceptualised by celebrity theorist Olivier Driessens (2013) as ‘celebrity capital’—to convert their command of public attention into increased awareness of and (financial) support for charity and relief efforts (see also Hatfield 2021). While clearly aligning with this tradition, *Reunited Apart* more specifically intersects with a growing tendency for celebrities to utilise digital platforms to inspire collective philanthropic action from their fans (Bennett 2014). However, unlike previous scholarly accounts of fan activism by communities such as the Nerdfighters (Lillqvist 2020), fans of actor Ian Somerhalder (Hunting and Hinck 2017), or Lady Gaga’s Little Monsters (Bennett 2014), the charitable efforts of *Reunited Apart* do not call upon an established fandom centred around a stable fan object or figure. Rather, by focusing on a multitude of classic films and franchises, *Reunited Apart* encourages the formation of ad-hoc and ephemeral fan communities, united by their (historic) enjoyment of disparate media texts. As Cross (2015) observes: ‘Today nostalgia binds together not communities or families but scattered individuals around seemingly ephemeral things that are meaningful to them personally’ (14). Combining Hollywood celanthropy with the noted success of nostalgia-based charity appeals (Ford and Merchant 2010; Merchant, Ford, and Rose 2011), *Reunited Apart* at once foregrounds the celebrity capital of its guests and ‘harness[es] fan nostalgia’ (Booth 2015, 156) for a catalogue of beloved Hollywood films to attract and translate audience attention into charitable action.

This process, I argue, exemplifies what celebrated media and fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) calls ‘affective economics’, a term he uses to describe ‘a new configuration of marketing theory [...] which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions’ (62-63). Fellow fan studies scholar Matt Hills (2015) expands this concept in his discussion of fan crowdfunding, observing the ‘collision of fan affects and neoliberal consumer logics’ (184) that underscores this collaborative approach to financing new creative projects. Viewers of *Reunited Apart* highlight a variety of physical manifestations of their affective responses to the series in the comments; noting, for instance, that they were unable to stop smiling throughout; that they had ‘goosebumps’ or ‘chills’ hearing cast members re-enact iconic dialogue; and admitting that the episode made them cry (sometimes multiple times). Aligning with the process of affective economics, the series’ overtly nostalgic design and retro aesthetics explicitly ‘draw on the affective memory of the fans’ interactions with the original media entity’ (Booth 2015, 154) to elicit affective responses that may be translated into support for the episode’s fundraising efforts.

To mobilise this philanthropic action, *Reunited Apart* uses the fundraising affordances native to YouTube’s interface—including description boxes detailing the charities’ missions, call-to-action buttons and a ‘totalizer’ of the funds raised to-date—framing its episodes with the visual language of the telethon (Lury 2020). Gad explicitly references these features, gesturing to the position of YouTube’s blue ‘Donate’ call-to-action buttons in his opening monologues, and even clarifying that viewers ‘can either donate below, if you’re using a mobile device, or if you’re using a desktop, click right over there’ (S1E2 1:05). These fundraising affordances at once streamline the act of donating and affirm the efficacy of these efforts. Like the comment sections where viewers share affective, nostalgic and supportive responses to the episodes (and each other), the totalizer displayed alongside each episode attests to the sense of community inspired by the series, prominently displaying the combined result of individual viewers’ charitable action. Interestingly, however, despite YouTube’s incorporation of fundraising features into its interface as early as 2007, there is little scholarship detailing their history. As such, it is worth pausing briefly to recount YouTube’s efforts to establish itself as a tool for promoting and crowdsourcing charitable support.

‘Click the donation button, right now, on your screen’: The evolution of YouTube’s charitable affordances

Paralleling the incorporation of fundraising features across other social networking sites, as well as the rise of dedicated crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter and GoFundMe, the 2010s saw YouTube developing and expanding of a toolbox of features to facilitate charity fundraising. YouTube’s Nonprofit Program first launched in 2007, encouraging non-profit organisations to use video storytelling to reach and engage new audiences and donors. Organisations in the program could overlay call-to-action prompts on their videos and include buttons on their channels, streamlining the path to donation for viewers of their content (Raghavan 2009; Raghavan and Toff 2012; Streit 2012). In 2014, the site’s monetisation features expanded significantly with the launch of the Fan Funding program. While initially conceived as a way for audiences to ‘support’ their favourite creators with financial donations,

the program's release teased at the eventual roll-out of charity-focused features: according to a press release in *Forbes*, 'the Fan Funding section on any given page will eventually have a space where creators can link to Kickstarters, Change.org and similar sites, so as to help them in their cause' (McIntyre 2014). This vision was realised in 2016 when YouTube rolled out a new donation card feature, allowing creators to associate their videos with prompts to donate to US-based non-profits, ideally '[t]ransform[ing] a view into a donation' (Hamdy 2012; see also Cotcamp and Hamdy 2016). Two years later in 2018, the platform introduced YouTube Giving, 'a suite of features designed to strengthen the way creators and fans can make a difference through charitable giving on the platform to over 1M non-profits' (Turner 2018). Incorporating features with a greater degree of interactivity than preceding releases, the YouTube Giving beta allowed a select pool of prominent users to add donate buttons directly to their videos and livestreams, eradicating the need for third-party crowdfunding services and transforming the content itself into digital fundraisers (complete with 'totalizer' progress bars) for charity.

YouTube claims to have modelled these new features after organic behaviours and trends from the site's community of users. 'Our inspiration for building YouTube Giving tools has been you,' wrote Erin Turner (2018), Product Manager for YouTube Giving, in its launch announcement blog, '[and] the way you use your voices to create impact on important issues, whether helping out in a crisis or championing a cause'. In recent years, a number of high-profile YouTube fundraisers have assisted in showcasing YouTube's efficacy as a site for charitable action. In October 2019, for example, Jimmy 'MrBeast' Donaldson celebrated reaching twenty million YouTube subscribers by launching a fundraiser for US\$20 million in support of the Arbor Day Foundation, supporting them to plant as many trees. In addition to a vlog announcing the initiative, Donaldson ran several fundraising livestreams, making full use of the platform's affordances to raise awareness of the project and incentivise donations. Assisted by contributions from high-profile backers such as Tesla CEO Elon Musk and YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki, as well as hundreds of the platform's top creators, the #TeamTrees campaign met its fundraising goal in just two months (Leskin 2019).

Creators have also found many of their own, innovative methods for mobilising the attention of the YouTube community to support worthy causes. Indeed, *Reunited Apart* and the other charity reunion specials that lockdown inspired emerged at the same time as some activists were leveraging the site's algorithmic logics (Bishop 2018) as a form of fundraising. In a grassroots trend inspired by beauty vlogger Zoe Amira in June 2020, for example, several YouTubers aligned with the Partner Program began uploading lengthy videos, containing little content but multiple ad breaks. Encouraging viewers to play the videos in the background, the creators promised to donate all AdSense proceeds derived from the videos' in-stream advertisements to community bail funds supporting the Black Lives Matter movement (Holmes 2020). The initiative was quickly intercepted by YouTube, who claimed the videos were 'gaming' the algorithm and were therefore against the platform's Terms of Service. Warning that the use of similar tactics in future would see users' accounts (and membership to the Partner Program) suspended, YouTube nonetheless recognised the positive intent behind these videos, pledging to match the contributions of the most successful of these grassroots campaigns with donations of their own (Hale 2020). Perhaps recognising the limitations of the

restricted YouTube Giving beta in an increasingly urgent socio-political climate, the program received a slightly wider roll-out in December 2020, granting fundraiser access to all channels in the Partner Program across the US, UK and Canada (Mishra 2020). Users from more than forty countries also became eligible to donate, signalling the growing potential of future creative projects like *Reunited Apart* to attract and monetise the attention of the YouTube community for philanthropic endeavours.

Although *Reunited Apart* was conceived as a vehicle for charity fundraising, unsurprisingly, the interest it generated was quickly recognised for its commercial potential: its fundraising efforts were aligned with corporate backers in S1E4 (cereal brand Cheerios), and S1E5 and S1E6 (Californian winemakers Barefoot Wine). Most notably, however, the second episode of season two was designed as a mash-up reunion for the original *Karate Kid* film franchise and the contemporary Netflix series *Cobra Kai* (2018—), a reboot of the original film franchise featuring many of the same cast and characters thirty years on. The episode was also uploaded to Netflix's YouTube channel, and featured ringing endorsements of *Cobra Kai* throughout, differentiating it from other episodes by positioning it as clear 'transmedia promotion' for *Cobra Kai*'s forthcoming third season (Grainge and Johnson 2015). Moreover, unlike the other *Reunited Apart* episodes, its fundraising efforts (dedicated to Action Against Hunger) were also hosted off-site, rather than within the YouTube interface – a decision perhaps related to the US\$25,000 kick-off contribution made by *Cobra Kai*'s production studio, though perhaps more generally reflecting the incongruity of YouTube's fundraiser features with content so overtly commercially aligned.

'You're not the only reunion show in town, Josh': Remembering the lockdown charity reunion special

Reunited Apart's release from April to December 2020 coincided with a steady stream of celebrity collaborations online, including director Taika Waititi's (2020) star-studded reading of Roald Dahl's 1961 novel *James and the Giant Peach*; director Jason Reitman's scene-by-scene re-enactment of *Princess Bride* (1987) for (now shuttered) smartphone streaming platform Quibi; and NBC's one-shot episode 'A Parks and Recreation Special', bringing the sitcom's (2009-2015) cast back together for a glimpse of the characters' lives in 2020. Much like *Reunited Apart*, these specials were produced remotely, relying on favours from celebrity friends (and friends-of-friends) and largely filmed without professional equipment, relying on webcams and smartphones to quickly film and distribute new material that could provide entertainment and comfort in lockdown. These specials were also often designed to satisfy consumed nostalgia—variously returning to beloved stories and characters from literature, film and television—as well as to encourage philanthropic action, directing their audiences to support, in the case of the examples listed above, charities such as Partners in Health, World Central Kitchen, and Feeding America, respectively.

Of this wave of lockdown charity reunions, however, *Reunited Apart* was undoubtedly the most self-reflexive, overtly responding to the rise of leisure nostalgia in lockdown, and unabashed in its aim to widely disseminate the ontological comfort of consumed nostalgia in a time of great uncertainty. Remediating fan nostalgia for classic Hollywood films and franchises within a Zoom video conference aesthetic, and in the form of a YouTube charity fundraiser, the series

engaged the process of ‘affective economics’ (Jenkins 2006) to motivate collective charitable action from its audience, utilising the platform’s native fundraising affordances to raise more than US\$1 million in donations to its nominated charities. As of early-2022, although the comments sections of existing episodes and Gad’s personal Twitter mentions remain inundated with fan requests for new episodes, whether *Reunited Apart follows* in the footsteps of fellow lockdown web series *Some Good News* (2020—) in a network acquisition (Hatfield 2021), or, indeed, whether it continues at all, is unclear. Markedly more certain, however, is the series’ success in engaging and translating the attention (and affection) of the YouTube community into collective philanthropic action in lockdown.

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Filmography

Films

Back to the Future (1985)
E.T. (1982)
Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)
Frozen (2013)
Ghostbusters (1984)
Jaws (1975)
Jurassic Park (1993)
Princess Bride (1987)
Splash (1984)
The Empire Strikes Back (1980)
The Goonies (1985)
The Karate Kid (1984)
Wayne's World (1992)

Television

Big Mouth (2017—)
Cobra Kai (2018—)
Dead to Me (2019—)
Grace & Frankie (2015—)
Parks and Recreation (2009-2015)
Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (2015-2019)
Veronica Mars (2004-2019)

Web Series

James and the Giant Peach with Taika & Friends (2020)
Reunited Apart (2020—)

S1E1: *The Goonies Are Back!! | Reunited Apart with Josh Gad*. Available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SF_VyXQpyo [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S1E2: *It's Time to go BACK TO THE FUTURE! | Reunited Apart with Josh Gad*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crdYIUDUOhc> [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S1E3: *Reunited Apart Makes a SPLASH – with Tom Hanks, Daryl Hannah, and more!* Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbFIgQoHSJM> [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S1E4: *One Zoom to Rule Them All* | Reunited Apart *LORD OF THE RINGS Edition*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_U0S6x_kCs [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S1E5: *GHOSTBUSTERS Reunited Apart*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JtOhr4IJHQ> [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S1E6: *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* | Reunited Apart with Josh Gad. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOaa3Znh75w> [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S2E1: *Wayne's World Reunited Apart – PARTY TIME!* Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4rKd9xB6cE> [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S2E2: *The Karate Kid and Cobra Kai REUNITED APART*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYwPHqKvdJM> [Accessed 17 September 2021]

Stars in the House (2020—)

Some Good News (2020—)

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