

(Mis-)Connected: Web Series, Digital Culture, and Everyday Life in Lockdown

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Web series are, in some ways, tailored for capturing everyday life in a pandemic. As short-form episodic content distributed via online platforms, the creators of Web series commonly work with tight budgets, recruiting crew and cast from their own networks, and making use of the home as an inexpensive location, methods well suited to the conditions of creative work in lockdown. This essay examines 3 of the many Web series that sought to chronicle everyday life during a pandemic: *Cancelled*, a Spanish-Australian Web series drama; *If I Were There With You*, an experimental Brazilian Web series; and the German comedy Web series *Drinnen—Im Internet sind alle gleich* (Inside: Everyone is equal on the Internet). The essay explores the ways in which international Web series made during lockdown interrogate and expand our understanding of the role of digital culture in everyday life for a post-COVID-19 future.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has seemed to many an opportunity to learn something about processes already underway that were suddenly accelerated or made salient by measures taken to combat the pandemic. Working from home, previously an activity undertaken by a small proportion of the national workforce, suddenly became the way that most of the population had to work, for those fortunate enough to retain employment. Socializing online, once largely the province of younger generations, spread more broadly to other demographic groups as countries went into lockdown. As Steven Shapin (2020) noted in the early stages of the U.S. lockdown:

Our home life is about to become a social experiment . . . will we rediscover conversation and family dinners . . . or will we retreat to our own rooms and spend more time on Facetime? For amusement, will it be Bach or the Xbox, philosophy or Fortnite? (Shapin, 2020, para. 1)

As people around the world grappled with how to coordinate work, family, and social relations in lockdown, our interest lies in what was learned and what new questions emerged from this social experiment. We explore these issues through a study of Web series released in 2020 during the first wave of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Web series are, in some ways, tailored for a pandemic. Emerging in the United States in the 1990s and spreading globally, Web series are short-form episodic content distributed via online platforms (Christian, 2018). Web series are typically made and released independently to open access platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and, more recently, Tik Tok and Instagram to build a fan base, which the creators then leverage to secure funding and licensing deals from subscription platforms (e.g., Netflix, HBO Go) to produce further seasons. As a primarily low budget format, Web series are often filmed in low-cost locations like the home, with casts recruited from the writer and director's social networks. Once the pandemic forced entire populations into lockdown with their immediate household or family, Web series became the format of choice for many creators. Web series have other advantages for creators wanting to reflect on the pandemic. As a type of content produced for the Internet, Web series are often made and released rapidly, their rhythms governed by the relentless churn, and logics of online and social media audiences.² The highly responsive and expedited production processes are possible because Web series episodes are usually short—less than 13 minutes in length (Bassaget & Burkholder, 2019). This meant it was possible for Web series to represent life in lockdown as it was happening, giving them a quality of immediacy for audiences.

This essay explores three scripted Web series produced and released in 2020 that explicitly address the experience of everyday life during a lockdown. Of the many Web series produced about the pandemic and released in 2020, we chose three series that represent some of the different approaches to the audience taken by Web series. *Cancelled* (Eve, 2020) is a Spanish-Australian Web series filmed in Valencia, Spain,

² This is not true of all Web series. The increasing professionalization of the Web series sector has produced a small but growing number of Web series with high production values and a more traditional production timeline. See, for example, the Web series *High Life* (Eve & Fry, 2017) which was executive produced by television comedian and author Stephen Fry, and which aired on Australian free-to-air television and on streaming platform 9Now (Kornits & Wick, 2017; FilmInk).

which dramatizes the experience of Australian filmmaker, Luke Eve, and his Spanish fiancé, Maria Albiñana, following the cancellation of their wedding because of the pandemic. Written and produced by Eve and Albiñana, the series was filmed on a mobile phone during lockdown in Albiñana's apartment, with the assistance of Karen, Eve's mother, who had just arrived in Spain for the wedding. *Cancelled* was released to Facebook where the creators focused on building a relationship with their audience through comments, likes, and shares. In so doing, the audience became a part of the narrative. *If I Were There With You* (Vaz, 2020) is an experimental Brazilian Web series following a couple—separated by lockdown—who communicate to each other via audio messages. The series was made by members of an avant-garde theatre company in Brazil, who used GoPro cameras and 3D audio technology to immerse the spectator in an experimental drama unfolding across 10, six-minute episodes. Finally, and at the other end of the aesthetic spectrum, the German Web series *Drinnen—Im Internet sind alle gleich* (Inside: Everyone is equal on the Internet; Käßbohrer & Heineking, 2020) is a comedy about an advertising executive, Charlotte, whose attempts to wrangle family, work, and her sex life during lockdown are presented across 15 episodes of 8–12 minutes. *Drinnen* is more akin to a traditional television sitcom in that the audience is imagined, but not visible or visibly addressed. All three series come from countries that have been at the forefront of establishing Web series as a legitimate form in the global screen ecology.³ Each series received critical praise at Web series festivals suggesting these narratives struck a chord with audiences.

Below we establish the concept of everyday life that frames our exploration of depictions of life in three Web series during a pandemic, and contextualize our analysis of each series with brief information about how the lockdown unfolded in each of the countries where our Web series were filmed. We conclude with a discussion of the ways in which these Web series interrogate and expand our understanding of everyday life for a post-COVID-19 future.

Web Series and Everyday Life

Since their inception, the definition of Web series has been the subject of debate (Christian, 2018; Taylor, 2015). If Web series are short-form content, where does one draw the line between short and long? Should one distinguish between Web series and serial forms of television? With the proliferation of streaming platforms, the distinction between a Web series and a television series produced for digital distribution has further eroded, posing a challenge for Web series festivals, which have been the main vehicle for building community and raising the profile of Web series creators. At the time of this writing, there are more than 80 festivals devoted to Web series globally; most of these operate with a requirement for submissions of

³ Brazil, an early adopter of Web series, has launched four Web series festivals since 2015: Rio Webfest, São Paulo Webfest, Rio Web Mercado and @cesso. The largest of these is Rio Webfest, which, in 2021, received more than 300 submissions from Brazilian Web series creators (Leandro Da Silva, personal communication, November 12, 2021). Luke Eve, creator of *Cancelled* (Eve, 2020), emerged from the strong Web series culture in Australia. Since 2012, the peak funding body in Australia has granted over \$25 million for Web series and online productions that have collectively generated more than 3.5 billion channel views on YouTube alone (Ellingsen & Taylor, 2019). Germany emerged as a center for Web series production following the launch of the highly regarded Berlin Webfest (in 2015) and the introduction of FUNK, a content network run by the public broadcasters to commission and distribute short-form series.

two or three episodes of maximum 20 minutes each (Ellingsen & Taylor, 2019). This article defines Web series as (screen-based) episodic series made for online delivery that include at least three episodes of 20 minutes or less.

From the beginning, Web series have frequently mined everyday life for narrative content. The first Web series, *The Spot* (Zakarin, 1995–1997, as cited in Christian, 2018), detailed the lives of a group of young adults sharing a house in California. The small moments of everyday life lend themselves to creatives working without the resources for spectacle or expensive action sequences. Because so many early Web series were self- or crowd-funded, it made practical sense for creators to use their own homes as locations and to generate interest by choosing compelling and sometimes unusual characters. Many Web series found a global audience by focusing on marginalized communities whose ordinary lives read as novel and exciting because they are so rarely seen in mainstream media, whether it was the romantic and professional lives of lesbians living in Sydney (*Starting From Now*; Kalceff, 2014–2016), the sex lives of gay men (*The Horizon*; Jones & Stark, 2009–2017), or the experiences of unabashedly sexual, Jewish women in New York (*Broad City*; Glazer & Jacobsen, 2009–2011).

Everyday life is a critical but elusive domain. It materialized as an important site of investigation in the 19th and 20th century for scholars charting the impact of modernity and its reconfiguration of time and space (Highmore, 2002). It is critical, because the minutiae of daily existence are paradoxically a good vantage point from which to trace larger social changes, in part because everyday life is not confined to one sphere of human activity. In Lefebvre's (1947/1991) influential formulation:

[Everyday life is] what is left over after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by the analysis, and must be defined as a totality ... Everyday life is profoundly related to all activities and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. (p. 97)

Lefebvre (1947/1991) argued that everyday life was the place to see how external forces mold us by becoming mundane and unconscious. This makes it also a crucial site for examining how our lives are informed by media use. The media are so seamlessly absorbed into the grain of daily existence that they almost seem to enter our lives "obliquely, behind the back of our cultural self-understanding" (Poster, 2002, p. 750).

By definition, much of the terrain of the ordinary goes unremarked. Lefebvre (1947/1991) posited that to lift everyday life into visibility, a "reverse image" would be needed: "An image of everyday reality taken in its totality or as a fragment reflecting that reality in all its depth through people, ideas and things which are apparently quite different from everyday experience and therefore exceptional, deviant, abnormal" (p. 12).

If the exceptional and the deviant can illuminate everyday life, the same could be said for the abnormal circumstances of a pandemic that have thrust everyday life into the spotlight. Commentaries on life in lockdown are filled with micro scenes of mundane encounters suddenly rendered significant by fears of contagion. Kollongowski (2020) writes of the spasms of terror provoked by her unthinking move to pick up a child's ball and return it, only then remembering her unsanitized hands. Shapin (2020) describes new

choreographies of touch emerging: “the elbow bump, the gymnastic foot shake, and the namaste hand press” that seem totally inadequate as substitutes for the handshakes and hugs that used to bookend social encounters, whose importance is realized as we lose them (para. 6). As Geoff Dyer (2020) noted in the *New Yorker* in March 2020: “Dying, that most worrisome thing, occupies less head space than the most minute things. Don’t sweat the small stuff, runs the advice—and it’s all small stuff. Except the small stuff—so small it’s invisible—is the big stuff” (para. 1). Everyday life is where the brunt of the pandemic is born, where it “hits home,” in every sense, for a population locked down.

Spain: Cancelled (Eve, 2020)

The first wave of the pandemic came early to Spain. Following the initial case of infection on January 31, 2020, COVID-19 spread rapidly. On March 14, the government announced a nationwide lockdown. By the end of March, more than 5,000 people had died, and the health care system was strained to the point of collapse, (Rada, 2020). To combat the spread, Spain instituted one of the most restrictive lockdowns in Europe. In coastal Valencia, where *Cancelled* (Eve, 2020) was shot, the population of 800,000 was in strict 24-hour lockdown from March until late May, when quarantine measures began to be lifted (Kidd, 2020). For nearly three months, only one person per household was allowed out to shop for essential goods.

Within this context, Luke Eve and Maria Albiñana created *Cancelled* to tell their real-life story of having to cancel their wedding in Spain and spend the lockdown in a small apartment in Valencia with Eve’s mother, Karen, who had travelled from Australia to attend the wedding. Although *Cancelled* (Eve, 2020) received some funding from Screen Australia, the series capitalized on Eve’s extensive experience in Web series of all types, including a capacity to create high-quality Web series on a shoestring budget with very short turnaround (L. Eve, personal communication, October 4, 2020). Scripts for the 10 episodes were written in eight days, and the first episode filmed and released to Facebook two weeks later, on May 11, 2020. Episodes were released weekly to Facebook between May and July 15, 2020. The series succeeded in attracting a large online audience, accumulating more than 2 million views on Facebook Watch (Burkholder, Ellingsen, Evans, & Turnbull, 2021). Following its successful run on Facebook, the series was released on Argentinian TV channel UN3 and VIX Pop, the largest U.S.-based streaming platform focused on the Latino market. Its strong international showing enabled the creators to obtain funding from a range of sponsors (including Visit Valencia, Screen Australia, and UN3) for a second season, *ReCancelled* (Eve, 2021).

The opening titles inform the audience that *Cancelled* “was filmed on a mobile phone by a family of three during the strict lockdown of Valencia, Spain” (Eve, 2020, 0.05). From the beginning, *Cancelled* downplays the differences between producers and viewers. Although the series is professionally shot and edited, the implied levelling effect of making something at home “on a mobile phone” is reinforced by the fact that of the three protagonists, only Albiñana is a professional actress; neither Eve nor his mother, Karen, had ever acted before. This effort to bring viewers and creatives onto the same plane, to (in a phrase often heard in COVID-19 writing) “flatten” distinctions between groups normally separated from one another is a central theme of the series and a product of its sustained exploration of private and public spaces under lockdown.

The theme is announced early on in episode two, when Maria and Luke argue over the arrangement of chairs around a table. Maria thinks Karen should sit beside her son because they are family, and Luke thinks it too crowded. Although the exchange seems trivial, in the context of lockdown, where indoor space is suddenly at a premium, it introduces the idea that relationships are expressed through and depend on spatial arrangements. The issue of space acquires a new intensity as confinement to a small apartment and the pressures of COVID cleaning protocols dictated by Spain's alarming death rates force a reconstitution of the apartment's emotional geography. The apartment hallway becomes part of the dangerous physical space of the outdoors, a place where we see Luke or Maria return home from a food trip only to change their clothes and scrub the floor to prevent contaminants from entering the interior. On the other side of the apartment, the liminal space of the tiny narrow balcony overlooking the street becomes more valuable, a place where the couple go to feel the sunshine and to applaud the frontline health workers each evening with their neighbors. The bathroom becomes an emotional retreat, a temporary and unstable space of privacy. It is where Maria retires to cry in episode four, and where Luke hides away in episode eight to phone his best friend in Australia, as relations between the couple deteriorate under the stresses of lockdown.

As the spaces of the apartment are reimagined, the meaning and location of public and private space must be rethought. Maria records aerobics videos in the living room for posting on YouTube, but while her track pants may be acceptable for home, Luke questions the attire's suitability for the virtual world. The couple's double bed, shifted to the living room to accommodate Karen, loses its associations with intimacy. Luke refuses sex because his mother can hear them, and Maria has nightmares of waking up in bed with her future mother-in-law. Such issues might affect any couple living in the city where space is expensive and in short supply. But these issues are heightened in the context of the pandemic.

As the physical space of the family contracted on screen, the release of *Cancelled* to Facebook produced an expansion of the "family" through virtual space. The 10 episodes of *Cancelled* released weekly on Facebook attracted more than 200,000 views each. From the first episode, many viewers used comments to tell their own stories that resonated with the events on screen. Cris Nieto (2020) wrote, "Exactly the same happened to my sister and her fiancé, both in Valencia as well. Luckily they managed to cancel on time as I was pretty much stuck in Sydney. Hope you are all safe!" Many noted that they, too, were living in a mixed Spanish-Anglo marriage in Chile (or Venezuela or Mexico) and recognized the dynamics of Eve's Australian-Spanish relationship with his fiancé, Maria. Dianne Bullen (2020) praised the show for helping her to understand what her son was experiencing during lockdown in Spain.

In response to the family they were watching on screen, viewers wrote not just about their own family, but as members of a virtual family. As is typical of the commentary field for Web series, the comments came from a mixture of genuine friends of Eve and Albiñana in the offline world and viewers who did not know them (Burkholder et al., 2021). Yet by the later episodes, the frank expression of emotion from all parties made it increasingly difficult to separate out friends from strangers, especially with the outpouring of sorrow following Karen's departure for Australia in episode eight. Caris Vujec (2020), a stranger, wrote, "This episode! I miss Karen already" and "after episode 8 I just wanted to hug everyone." Heidi Klotzman (2020) captured the feeling expressed by many commenters on the final episode, writing, "I loved this series so much. Made me feel less alone. You 3 feel like extended family now. Xo."

The formation of an audience who, over time, began to write as though they were part of an extended global family was facilitated by the speed with which the series was made and released. This enabled the series to share a temporality with the viewers, who were still going through the lockdown protocols that they saw on screen and that they often remarked upon. The importance of a shared temporality is supported by Eve's and Albiñana's own observations. As they answered comments and carefully tracked feedback, they noted that geographical distribution of the viewership mirrored the progression of the pandemic around the globe; for the first five episodes, most of the audience were from Europe, but as restrictions eased in Europe, the audience shifted to South America and Australia, which were beginning their own lockdowns (Luke Eve, personal communication, December 14, 2020).

The transformation of viewer relations into quasifamilial connections is openly commented on in the series finale. In the last scene, Maria and Luke are shown issuing an invitation to their wedding for 2021, recording it on their mobile phone in front of a beautiful Spanish church. While the scene takes place before the credits roll, suggesting it is part of the fiction, the relaxed and cheerful demeanor of the actors hints that they have stepped away from their scripted roles. Viewers were thus free to treat the invitation as one that might be real, issued to all those friends on Facebook who "are family now." Many commenters enjoyed the ambivalence, with one even asking if the wedding could be live streamed—displaying a sense of ownership usually only permitted to real family members.

Germany: *Drinnen* (Käbbohrer & Heineking, 2020)

Germany's response to the first wave of COVID-19 is considered a model for other countries (Wieler, Rexroth, & Gottschalk, 2021). The country mobilized early in January to create a national plan for contact tracing, hygiene, and testing well before the first case of infection was identified on January 27, 2020. From March 12, and with escalated measures on March 22, restrictions were imposed on public life and travel, requiring all nonessential businesses to close, and implementing physical distancing and a contact ban on any groups of more than two people (Bennhold & Eddy, 2020).

Drinnen (*Inside*; Käbbohrer & Heineking, 2020) came together when Käbbohrer's production company btf was approached by Germany's public broadcaster ZDF to create a series about the coronavirus (Heine, 2020). Käbbohrer hired a director (Lutz Heineking Jr.) and a lead actress (Lavinia Wilson) with experience in short-form content and improvisation, a fact essential for the rapid production process. Casting was dictated in part by lockdown conditions. Wilson's husband, Barnaby Metschurat, played her husband, Markus, in the series, and her parents were likewise played by two actors who lived together. The studio delivered camera and recording equipment to the actors' homes, and all the actors provided their own wardrobe and "set" for the production and did their own hair and makeup (Heine, 2020). No more than three weeks passed between the initial idea and the release of the series' first nine episodes on April 3, ensuring that the series premiered while Germany was still in strict lockdown. Each of these nine episodes were shot, edited, and released in just two days to ZDF's video on-demand channel and weekly to ZDF NEO, the broadcaster's linear channel targeting 18- to 45-year-olds (Friday, 2020). The remaining six episodes were released online within the following fortnight—a tight turnaround made possible by the experience and existing relationships between actors and crew.

As the opening credits roll for *Drinnen* (Käbbohrer & Heineking, 2020), we view a computer screen where Charlotte types in her log-on password and has it repeatedly rejected. This familiar frustration is a bonding mechanism for the audience and sets up the series' subtitle: "we are all the same on the Internet." For Charlotte, an advertising executive working from home while her husband, Markus, and the two children stay in the country, the Internet is where she Zooms with work colleagues, pitches to customers, talks to her friend, quarrels with her sister, checks in on her parents, has sessions with her therapist, advises her husband on his unsuccessful career as a musician, looks for activities for her children, and browses Tinder for dates to compensate for an unsatisfactory marriage. If *Cancelled* (Eve, 2020) drew attention to the ordinary joys of everyday life in the offline world, *Drinnen* shows us what everyday life looks like when it is lived exclusively on the Internet.

Our immediate impression is of a life lived in a constant state of interruption. Charlotte's screen is a busy hub of video calls and messages, fluctuating to-do lists and live chat moments with friends, family, and Tinder dates, accompanied by an ever-changing roster of pop song fragments signaling her frequent mood shifts and roaming attention. Communication in the digital world is consistently undermined by technological difficulties. In episode two, for example, Charlotte is twice Zoom-called by her boss, who is going into hospital with COVID-19, and directs Charlotte to take over, scarcely noticing her protests over a bad audio connection. Charlotte, worried that she has COVID-19, calls the COVID-19 hotline on her mobile phone, where she is placed in a queue with an expected "17 hours" wait time, only to miss the connection when a doctor answers early. Her annoying sister, Constanze, who preaches the importance of relaxation to her overworked sister, regularly hangs up on Charlotte, and Charlotte regularly hangs up on her husband. During one virtual family gathering, Charlotte, having what she thinks is a private conversation with her sister, accidentally discloses her desire for a divorce to her husband and parents, having forgotten that people you have muted in Zoom can still, in fact, hear you.

Drinnen (Käbbohrer & Heineking, 2020) depicts a world in which communication and connection, mediated by the Internet, have become incessant and dysfunctional. The boundaries between private and public life appear to dissolve in the virtual spaces of the Internet. Much of the humor of *Drinnen* stems from the interpenetration of work and personal life. In episode five, Charlotte is disconcerted to receive a vibrator as a "salary bonus" (Käbbohrer & Heineking, 2020, 0:46) from her boss. Nonetheless, she requests the "sexy time" (Käbbohrer & Heineking, 2020, 4:17) playlist from her digital assistant, Alexa. Subsequent video conferences are derailed when Alexa fails to turn off the sexy playlist, as Charlotte discovers her boss, who has been working from a hospital bed "with two laptops" (Käbbohrer & Heineking, 2020, 3:27), has been admitted to intensive care. In episode six, the theme of vanishing boundaries between professional and personal life is again in evidence as a virtual funeral is interrupted by the sight of a company executive dancing obliviously in front of his (live) webcam. Even the dead are not exempt from this world of ubiquitous, dysfunctional communication. In each episode, Charlotte leaves voice messages saved to computer folders for Clara, her dead younger sister. It is a convenient narrative mechanism allowing viewers to access Charlotte's thoughts, while also suggesting how even her most private thoughts are outsourced to the computer.

For 11 of its 15 episodes, *Drinnen* (Käbbohrer & Heineking, 2020) might be read as no more than an amiable, sometimes very funny Web series about the travails of life under lockdown. Something happens in the final episode, however, that suggests this series might have something more far-ranging in its sights.

In this episode, Charlotte delivers a furious monologue to camera on the absurdity of our digital lives. Charlotte's accusations run the gamut from the way we do work to the way we do leisure; she laments the loss of finite, nine-to-five workdays and their replacement by norms that see employees taking their phones to the bathroom for fear of missing a work e-mail. Charlotte denounces the accelerated pace of communications in society where we live in a state of 24/7 readiness out of a compulsive fear of missing out that tethers us to our devices. Momentarily breaking away from comedy to address viewers directly, this speech encourages us to rethink what this series has been showing us.

Drinnen's depiction of "life on the Internet" during lockdown is an uncanny mirror of trends in workplace culture that scholars have warned about for some time. Crary (2013) criticized the way humans are remodeling themselves to meet the demands of "a 24/7 markets and a global infrastructure for continuous work and consumption" (p. 3). Crary's analysis builds on the work of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) on the arrival in the late 20th century as the title of their book describes of a "new spirit of capitalism," involving a profound transformation of the workplace. The traditional boundaries between work and family life are replaced by a world in which "people are encouraged to bring all their skills including the most personal ones, not only technical skills, but also their creativity, their sense of friendship, their emotionalism etc. to their work" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 94). Workers are valued for their flexibility and multitasking skills and their adaptability to a world of short-term projects with its constant search for the "next idea". The new ideology promotes a work ethic that pushes deep into the personal territories of workers, demanding passionate engagement and commitment above and beyond the hours for which one is paid. As Gregg (2011) and Perlow (2012) show, these changes are aided and abetted by the exploitation of mobile communication technologies that lead to never-ending workdays, as workers take their laptops to bed, on holiday, or, like Charlotte's boss, to the hospital. Even in Germany, with its famed commitment to a work-life balance, constant monitoring of communication channels that create endless workdays are rapidly becoming the norm (Le Blond, 2020).

Charlotte's computer screen, teeming with open tabs, and her vanishing boundaries between work and family life, offer a vivid glimpse of an existence that places a "premium on activity without any clear distinction between personal or even leisure activity and professional activity . . . To be doing something, to move, to change—this is what enjoys prestige" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 155).

Drinnen (Käpbohrer & Heineking, 2020) stops short of drawing attention to the broader political and economic infrastructures that contribute to this transformation in the everyday lives of working professionals. Charlotte's rant against what "we" do with the Internet situates the problem and the solution firmly with the individual. The final episode pretends that the answer is for Charlotte to close the laptop and step outside, where we see a camera in motion for the first time, as Charlotte films herself walking the streets. The shallowness of such individualized solutions is consistent with the way in which institutions have sought to frame these problems as issues of individual time management. Changing this culture requires institutions to redesign work environments and develop strategies for reducing use of communication technologies (Klotz, 2017; Perlow & Kelly, 2014).

In our final glimpse of Charlotte before she puts away her phone, she rips off her mask with a broad smile like a latter-day Mary Tyler Moore, throwing her hat into the air in a moment of ecstatic

emancipation on the streets of New York, a metaphorical tip of the hat from digital comedy to its television forebears.⁴ Despite the superficiality of both the critique of everyday life on the Internet and the proposed solutions, *Drinnen* (Käbbohrer & Heineking, 2020) succeeds in giving us a visceral feel for the deep perversity of the hyperconnected, always-on digital world and the emptiness of a life confined to computer screens. The experience is sufficiently uncomfortable to make it a relief when the screen finally goes black.

Brazil: *If I Were There With You* (Vaz, 2020)

Following the first case of COVID-19 reported by the Brazilian Health Ministry on February 26, 2020, Brazil instituted quarantine and lockdown measures in March (Nascimento, 2020). Although Brazil has a history of moving early and swiftly to contain pandemic outbreaks, open opposition to quarantine displayed at the federal level by President Bolsonaro produced a chaotic and ultimately disastrous response in the case of COVID-19 (Conde, 2020). By June, Brazil had the highest rate of infection in the world and a daily death toll higher than any country except for the United States (Londono, Andreoni, & Casado, 2020).

If I Were There With You (Vaz, 2020) was filmed in São Paulo, the most populous city in Brazil and the hardest hit by COVID-19. In the first three months São Paulo accounted for 85% of all COVID-19 infections (Nicolelis, Raimundo, Peixoto, & Andreazzi, 2021). Gustavo Vaz wrote, directed, and acted in the Web series with his real-life partner, Debora Falabella, a Brazilian actress famous for her work in telenovelas, a popular form throughout Latin America. Although Vaz had never made a Web series, he had a background in directing and writing for the theatre. The use of 3D audio in the Web series drew on his experience as a playwright with the avant-garde theatre company, ExCompanhia de Teatro. The series was filmed by the actors themselves in their own apartment, with each actor wearing a GoPro camera attached to the head to simulate a first-person perspective for the spectator, with the other actor filming third-party shots on a mobile phone. Gabriel Spinoza, a fellow member of ExCompanhia de Teatro collaborated to create the 3D audio effect. The series was self-funded by the actors and filmed between March and May. Falabella's status as a high-profile actress under contract with TV Globo, the dominant television network in Brazil and in Latin America, helped to secure the Web series a launch on Gshow, Globo's portal for online entertainment content including Web series and television clips. The 10 episodes were released on Gshow between June 5 and July 3, 2020, and have amassed more than 300,000 views, a high number for an experimental Web series (G. Vaz, personal communication, September 23, 2021).

If I Were There (Vaz, 2020) focuses on an estranged couple living apart in lockdown. Every episode consists of one partner listening to the voice messages left by the other, so that in the first episode, the woman listens to her boyfriend's voice, and in the second, the man listens to his girlfriend answer. Each pair of episodes is located in time and space, the first two beginning in "São Paulo, March 2020" (Vaz, 2020, Ep. 1, 1:01) and the last two in "São Paulo, June 2020" (Vaz, 2020, Ep. 10, 1:02), inviting the viewer to link the narrative journey of the couple to the journey taken by Brazil through lockdown over the same period. The series was recorded in 3D audio, and episodes begin with instructions to the viewer to put on headphones, "paying attention to the left and right sides" (Vaz, 2020, 0:11), to close and open their eyes,

⁴ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* ran from 1970–1977. The famous toss of the hat came before every episode at the end of the opening sequence.

synchronizing with the character on screen, because “you are about to become the central character of the scene” (Vaz, 2020, 0:31). Following an initial shot of the man or the woman that locates them in one of the apartment rooms, we thereafter adopt the point of view of the actor wearing a GoPro headset for most of the episode.

“I would hug you, that’s what I’d do, if I were there” (Vaz, 2020, 1:11). The first words of episode one, spoken by the man, introduce the themes of tactility and sensory pleasure that course through this series. As the man continues to sketch an imagined scenario of finding his partner in the living room and wanting to make love to her, his voice shifts from the tinny recording of the smartphone in the diegesis into the full-bodied sounds entering our ears via the headphones. A momentary black screen as the woman blinks her eyes cues us that we are listening to her *imagination* of his voice. Subsequently, the voice floats free of its diegetic source, dancing in and out of our left and right ears, sometimes sounding close to us, sometimes distant, investing the spoken word with additional layers of meaning. When the man’s voice comes close, seeming to breathe in our ears through the headphones, it takes on a sensual, whispery intimacy; the woman responds with her body, smoothing her legs, feeling her arms, as though reminding herself how it felt to experience her partner’s caresses. Such “dialogues” between the recorded voice of one character and the body of the other occur in every episode. Sometimes voice and body work in concert; in episode five, as he talks about rediscovering the pleasures of looking at a photograph in an old album, “to hold it with our hands and feel the smell of that stored away thing” (Vaz, 2020, 3:15), her hands drift over photo albums covered in material, fingering the old photos inside, as he continues to talk about “this physical and concrete feeling . . . we can’t live without . . . holding a book, turning the page, placing a vinyl record on the stereo, cutting a tomato” (Vaz, 2020, 3:21). Sometimes voice and body collide with one another. In episode four, for example, she is furious on the voice recording, and he is drunk and has cut his finger, rolling around on the floor of his bedroom, barely able to take in what she is saying. In episode six, she remembers fondly how they used to play guitars at parties, and the perfect nonverbal communication between them: “And you just looked at me and I already knew you didn’t remember the next part of the song” (Vaz, 2020, 01:41). Ironically, this memory of perfect communication is accompanied by the man’s exasperated sighs as he listens to her while doing the laundry, swearing as he catches his finger in the drying racks, a reminder of the challenges of asynchronous communication at a distance. Such embodied dialogues train us to listen and watch in several registers, focusing on what we hear the body of the actor say through movement and gesture and not just words, drawing our attention to the meaning that inheres in the tone, texture, and spatial location of the voice.

The value that *If I Were There* (Vaz, 2020) invests in a sensuous reading of everyday life is reinforced by the sustained attention to color, objects, and surfaces throughout the series. In our first glimpse of the apartment, we see a vibrant purple mat and matching purple bottle on the table; the bright red of the chairs to left and right of the table is echoed by a cherry flask to the right and the deeper red of a vase of yellow flowers on the sideboard. The voice on the recording, meanwhile, continues the appreciation of color, commenting on the fantastic pink of the sky and the orange fruit he liked to buy at the market pre-COVID. The sense of touch is similarly foregrounded as the characters express emotion through their handling of objects. The way the man grasps the side of the sink as he listens to his girlfriend talk about the pleasure of dancing reveals how much *he* misses her. “Funny how we remain in the objects we use,” the woman muses in episode six “we kind of . . . turn into them” (Vaz, 2020, 2:34).

This attentiveness to the senses and the material environment extends to the way *If I Were There* reemphasizes the pleasures of material, analogue media. Although the apartment contains a television and laptops, we rarely see them. Instead, the camera lingers on the covers of books and films that resonate with the couple's experiences. A glimpse of *La Nausée*, Sartre's (1938) famous novel about a recluse who develops new and strange relationships with objects, has an affinity with the way these two people newly appreciate the objects around them in quarantine. The image of headphones that begins each episode's instructions for listening in 3D is an image not of the small, sleek buds of digital culture, but the large, clunky, over-the-ear headphones of an earlier time. Significantly, each image shows us the headphones arranged in a group with everyday objects, hanging from a drying rack in one episode, nestled inside folded clothes in another, surrounded by a carrots, eggs, and kitchen implements in a third, making these old media objects a part of the everyday pleasure this series finds in the material life of the home.

In the "Sounds of the Lockdown," Ward (2021) describes new listening habits emerging during the American lockdowns. Ward (2021) singles out, in particular, a vogue for listening to the sounds of empty public squares and deserted city streets of cities under quarantine, where music often plays from "the open doors of a restaurant to no one" (p. 1). *If I Were There* evokes this cultural trend and intensifies it by moving to the home, showing us an apartment empty of people except for the solitary character listening to their partner's disembodied voice. While Ward connects this trend to intense feelings of nostalgia for our pre-COVID lives, she also notes that a version of this sound culture was already visible before the pandemic in a viral meme in which people rerecorded music to sound as though it were coming through a locked door, thus linking them to themes of loss more generally, prompted by the spread of digital media. For people living their lives in the virtual spaces of digital platforms, the loss of physical encounters and face to face sociality was already being mourned before the pandemic made digital isolation a feature of many people's lives under lockdown.

To complete the movement away from digital media toward the riches of embodied communication, it remains for this Web series to enact an erasure of its own digital form. This occurs in the final episode of *If I Were There* in which the series moves into science fiction territory by revealing that the existence of the couple may itself be a digital illusion. As the man and the woman meet for the first time in the flesh, they discover that all sound has disappeared from the outside world, and even their own words make no audible noise. As they embrace in that longed-for hug, the woman says, "It feels like a simulation" (Vaz, 2020, 7:51). The suggestion recalls a fleeting glimpse of an article on her laptop screen in episode five, the headline reading (in Portuguese), "Are we living in a simulation? MIT scientists say 'yes'" (Vaz, 2020, 2:45). The idea that our world may be a computer simulation invented by a future civilization was the serious proposal of Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom in 2001. The popularity of this theory has continued to grow during the pandemic. *If I Were There* reminds us of the capacity of digital media to create virtual simulations so seductively real that we are in danger of forgetting the joys of embodied life, joys that this narrative has sought to evoke for us.

Conclusion

In response to COVID-19, media creators gravitated to the Web series, a format whose conventions conveniently mirrored the conditions for production accessible during a lockdown. That creatives from broadcast television (*Drinnen*; Käßbohrer & Heineking, 2020) and experimental theatre (*If I Were There*;

Vaz, 2020) were able to adapt quickly to making a Web series showcases the format's attractiveness to those seeking a way to enter or pivot careers in the screen industry. What may be particular to Web series made during the pandemic was a heightened emphasis on the shared temporal space between viewers and the narrative on screen. *If I Were There* made use of 3D audio technology to draw the viewer into the sound space of the main character. The first episode of *Drinnen* immediately locates us in the present by surfing videos that were currently trending on TikTok. The copious use made of computer sounds in *Drinnen*, such as the log-on sound from an Apple computer or the "ping" of an arriving message further intensified the sense of a shared reality; watching this series on our own computers at home, it was, at times, difficult to know if a sound signaling a message was interrupting our viewing on the computer, or Charlotte's. The producers of *Cancelled* (Eve, 2020) raced to release their episodes as close to the beginning of the quarantine in Valencia as possible, and the emphasis of the narratives on the small everyday rituals evolving in a quarantine from washing groceries to applauding health workers ensured that their viewers on Facebook were conscious of moving through time together.⁵ The effects of this unabashed presentism may be especially powerful as a mechanism of bonding audiences during a pandemic when perceptions of time warping, moving slower or faster than expected were widely remarked on (Wittman, 2020).

A second feature that distinguished these pandemic Web series is paradoxically a reorienting of attention away from virtual life and toward the material pleasures of the physical environment. In some ways, the title of the Brazilian Web series describes all the series examined here. The wistful subjunctive of *If I Were There*, the longing to be there "with you," communicates the yearnings of communities under lockdown for those experiences of connection characteristic of the offline world and that an intense confinement to online communication has perhaps taught us how to value. *Cancelled* reminds us of the delights of sharing food and our intense affective relations with the material spaces of home. *If I Were There With You* expands our sense of communication and connection to the tactile, auditory, and embodied dimensions of intimacy. *Drinnen* goes in the opposite direction by emphasizing the dysfunction and jarring discontinuities of doing sociability online. That each series pitches their claims about the offline world at the visceral level, drawing on the ordinary sensuous experiences of everyday life makes their case that much stronger. Amid much talk about embracing digital transformation of work and education and moving *more* of our lives online, these Web series forcefully remind us of what we might lose in that process.

It is ironic of course that Web series, a form made possible by the Internet, should be advocating for life outside the Internet. But while these series encourage us to revisit our assumptions about technologies, they are not simple indictments of digital culture. *Cancelled* demonstrates how the best Web series can become hubs of online culture, generating an emotional experience of connection all its own. Even *Drinnen*, which is most explicit about the problems of living through a computer screen, still manages to point us toward the humanizing potential of digital technologies; even if we have not experienced employers dancing in front of the webcam, as Charlotte did, glimpses of work acquaintances on Zoom calls at home with their pets and families carry the potential to help us see professional colleagues in a new, more empathetic light. Even as each series questions digital culture, they also work with its technological affordances, making use of the 3D audio, mobile phones,

⁵ In early literary responses to COVID-19 authors abandoned the novel in favor of short stories shared on Twitter, and testimonials circulated through WhatsApp and Facebook to address the pandemic in real time. See Medina Cordova (2020).

GoPro cameras, and the production processes developed by that same digital culture for the fast-paced creation and distribution of content to global audiences.

Nonetheless, these series make an important point about digital culture.

Each Web series illustrates that the challenge of life in lockdown is, in part, an intrinsic problem of digital culture and communication. Isolation was a concern for those exploring loneliness and the virtual world before the physical distancing demanded by the pandemic, as were issues of unending workdays, conversational dysfunction, and the hollowing out of social relations by facile digital substitutes (Turkle, 2012). The three Web series place digital media to the forefront of deliberations about what life will look like after pandemic. Like the COVID-19 virus itself, digital culture is unlikely to be erased, but the way in which we live with it is still up for discussion.

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