Watching *The Circle* and *Love Is Blind* while practicing social distancing

Two reality TV shows remind us why physical connection matters.

by Kathryn Reklis in the April 22, 2020 issue

SIGHT UNSEEN: On the Netflix reality show *Love Is Blind*, contestants date each other from within separate, isolated pods. (NETFLIX)

Just in time for national quarantine and shelter-in-place orders, Netflix released two reality television shows that explore how we relate to each other through both virtual technologies and embodied, social spaces. Both *The Circle* and *Love Is Blind* imagine a world where physical connection doesn't matter. Then they both remind us just how much it does.

In *The Circle*, eight contestants are isolated in private apartments where they have no contact with the outside world and can only interact with each other on a private social media platform (called the Circle). The contestants are playing for the chance to win $100,000 by becoming the most popular person in the game, as voted on by the other contestants. They play quiz games and chat with each other on private chat and carefully curate the photos they show to other contestants. They never get to see each other in real life, or even via live video stream. We, as viewers, watch them navigate their mundane lives—cooking meals, brushing their teeth, doing

push-ups—while they narrate their feelings and reactions to the game.

The players know they are playing a game, and they strategize aloud about how to get “likes” and win influence. Some of them pose as people they are not—like Seaburn, a man who pretends to be Rebecca using his girlfriend’s photos, and Karyn, a lesbian who poses as a much thinner straight woman named Mercedeze. Everyone is posturing, but these “catfish” (people who make up online identities to win others over) are more extreme examples of people calculating how strangers will respond to them online.

Even as they strategize, however, contestants seek connections beyond the game. Over time they develop strong friendships. These are finally validated in real-life meetings. When a player is voted off, they are allowed to visit one other player of their choice—and we can feel their palpable delight to see, hear, and hug each other. This is magnified in the final episode, when the original players who have survived to the end meet face-to-face. The intensity of their connection is infectious, and they pick up like old friends at a reunion.

Love Is Blind doubles down on the importance of embodied connection, but with a twist. The stakes of this reality game show are finding a spouse and getting married, not winning a lot of cash. The participants (all looking for heterosexual partners) spend the first ten days of the experiment “dating” each other in small, isolated pods where they can hear each other but never see each other. By the tenth day, five couples have gotten engaged, sight unseen, based on nothing but the conversations they’ve had through a thin wall.

Once engaged, they move out of the pods and into the real world. They meet each other’s families and friends and plan their weddings, scheduled for three weeks later. We listen in as they discuss their views on sex, gender roles, race, finances, and future parenting. They have their first arguments and discover each other’s annoying habits. They keep staring at the camera and saying things like, “This is so crazy; we are getting married in two weeks!”

It is undeniably crazy but also wildly addictive. The premise of the show is to test if couples can fall in love without the distractions of physical attraction, race, ethnicity, or social circumstance. It is clear that many of them believe strongly that there is a core to their connection that was forged before they saw each other face-to-face—a core that will be strong enough to withstand skeptical parents and budgets to

balance. But all those “distractions” are also what make human life real and livable. The attraction of the show is watching them come to recognize just how much embodied social life forms the people we love, how it can’t just be brushed away for some disembodied essence.

A month ago, I would have written these shows off as wacky reality TV stunts or warning signs of societal collapse. Watching them while under self-quarantine, they seem like touching, hilarious portraits of all our lives right now. My five-year-old has learned how to send silly emojis to her friends while Skyping them, but she has not seen another child in real life in weeks. My son video chats his friends while playing video games. We have FaceTime happy hours with friends where we all watch each other drink at home while chatting over our screens. We are remembering how to build intimacy on the telephone or through written letters. The thought that one day we will all get to leave the isolation of our apartments and meet up with these people at some glorious dinner party—or even fight with our in-laws over an awkward dinner—sounds like the eschaton. These shows make scintillating virtual companions while we wait.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Reality TV for the socially distanced.”