



¡Ni te me acerques! (Stay Away!) *Negotiating Physical Distancing in Hispanophone Corona Fictions*

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ABSTRACT: In March 2020, more than 100 governments around the world imposed partial or full lockdown policies prohibiting people to leave their homes except for activities deemed essential (e.g. procuring food, going to work) to reduce SARS-CoV-2 transmissions. Furthermore, authorities, media and peers encouraged people to adopt physical distancing behaviors, requesting not to touch each other and even keep a distance of at least one to two meters from one another.

Cultural and literary productions—so-called Corona Fictions—represent and process the multitude of ways the population perceived and coped with the lockdown situation during the pandemic and its diverse effects. While literary texts written during confinement and published in anthologies focus on emotional states enhanced by the psychological impact of the lockdown, the narratives in films such as Norberto Ramos del Val's *¡Ni te me acerques!* (2020) focus on negotiating the process of physical distancing itself.

This contribution will, thus, look at the representations of physical distancing in written and audiovisual productions from the first lockdown and analyze the similarities therein. From a cultural studies point of view, we are particularly interested in the ways these Corona Fictions negotiate physical distancing, isolation and self-reflection in their narratives of the respective medium.

KEY WORDS: pandemic; narrative; physical distancing; literature; film

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INTRODUCTION

After the proclamation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus as a worldwide pandemic on 11 March 2020, more than 100 governments (cf. Dunford *et al.*; Ritchie *et al.*) imposed physical distancing policies by the end of the same month.² The measures implemented ranged from school closures to travel restrictions or complete lockdowns of entire business sectors and also included (self-)confinement mandates to ensure better containment of the virus (cf. Fig. 1).

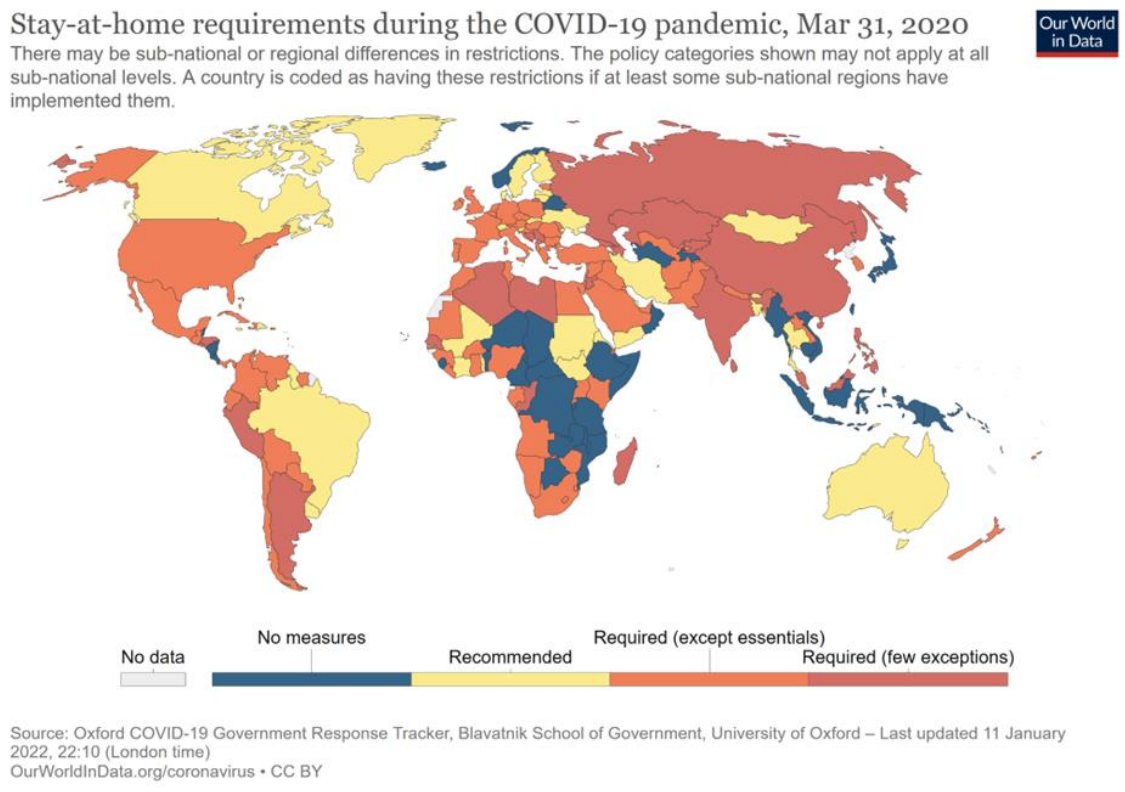


Fig. 1 Stay-at-home-requirements, 31 March 2020 (cf. Ritchie *et al.*).

These measures ruptured the daily life of billions of people. From one day to another, huge parts of the population worldwide found themselves suddenly confined to their homes—from tiny one-bedroom-apartments in the city to large houses in the countryside. Others, like India's many migrant workers, lost their jobs and income and, thus, had to travel back to their hometowns, creating another humanitarian and health security challenge (cf. Lal).

² We use the term 'physical distancing' instead of 'social distancing', similarly to Ryan (cf. 2), since the viral transmission is sought to be lowered by reducing physical contact rather than by reducing social contact, which may still be very active due to social media or shared outdoor activities. On the vital human need for social and physical contact, see next section.



This rupture of daily life also entailed an abrupt change in contact behavior because everybody could potentially be spreading the virus. Not knowing about the danger and contagiousness of the virus in the beginning, the physical distancing measures were accompanied by, often mandatory, face coverings such as masks. Numerous countries around the world have maintained such pandemic management measures (cf. Fig. 2) until recently (Omicron at the beginning of 2022). Moreover,—using social and more traditional media—politicians expected their citizens, including children, to stop embracing each other, particularly regarding the high-risk groups, e.g. the elderly.

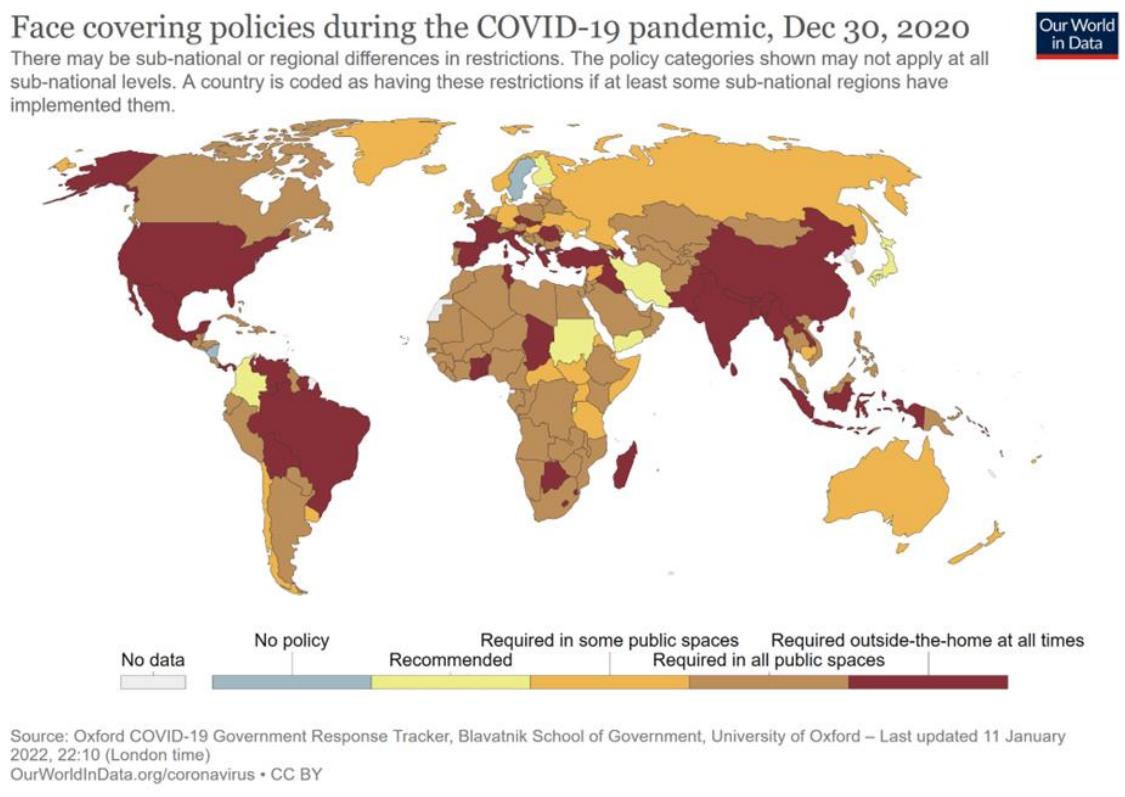


Fig. 2 Face covering policies, 30 Dec. 2020 (cf. Ritchie *et al.*).

In Western parts of the world, contact restriction measures led to many citizens³ remaining physically and/or mentally isolated from the outside world for weeks and even months. Sociological and psychological studies conducted during the first

³ This group encompasses all age groups, from school children to residents of retirement homes, as well as professional groups which were not deemed 'systemically relevant', such as health care workers, salespersons or police men and women.



lockdown have shown that the restriction of physical mobility in general and physical contact more specifically led to an “acute increase in depressiveness, anxiety, loneliness and stress” (Singer *et al.* 10; cf. Rothmüller; Tourette-Turgis and Chollier, “L’impact”; Tourette-Turgis and Chollier, “Modifications”; Budimir *et al.*). The policies impacted the mental health of all age groups: “children and adolescents (disruption to schooling), adults (unemployment, poverty, debt) and elderly people (isolation)” (Ciucci 3) and disproportionately affected gender and sexual minorities (cf. Moore *et al.*; Gato *et al.*).

Physical distancing policies and their impact on mental health are represented similarly in both written and audiovisual Corona Fictions—i.e. fictional productions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic—drawing on everyday media and political discourse as well as on previous pandemic fiction.

Pandemic fiction includes works such as the antique description of the Athenian plague by Thucydides, the *Decameron* (1349-1353) by Boccaccio or *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) by Daniel Defoe. Also, more recent cultural productions such as the movie *Outbreak* (1995) or a Canadian series called *Épidémie* (2020/2021) and novels like, for example, *Los días de la peste* (2017) by Edmundo Paz Soldán all fall under the category of pandemic fiction (cf. Research Group Pandemic Fictions 2020; Hobisch *et al.*). Corona Fictions, however, emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic and negotiate the latter in their stories, continuing in parts the tradition of creating pandemic fiction. We argue that Corona Fictions reactivate certain structures and elements in the form of metanarratives.⁴ The pandemic produced collective experiences which can be understood as transnational and transcultural phenomena translating into the crisis while simultaneously tapping into existing pandemic narratives. Based on early examples from hispanophone Corona Fictions depicting the first lockdown, this article, on the one hand, is concerned with the narrative representation of physical distancing and, on the other hand, with the negotiation of isolation and self-reflection. Thus, the objective is to demonstrate (a) how physical distancing is narrated in the written and audiovisual media, (b) in what ways it affects the protagonists, and (c) how they cope with these effects.

Against the background of psychosocial approaches, we will start elucidating the importance of social and physical contact, as well as a lack thereof, for human beings and their behavior. Furthermore referring to the concept of narrative (cf. Nünning and Nünning 12; Scheffel) as a means to structure and represent the pandemic experience, we will show how life in confinement is narrated, depicted, and perceived by the protagonists in three distinct literary hispanophone snapshot examples of Corona Fictions (“Departamento con balcón”, “Vivir no era lo que pensaba”, “La vida en cuarentena”) and in the first Spanish feature film *Ni te me acerques!*. The selected corpus embraces the similarities of their collective lockdown experiences while each story also demonstrates how different (groups of) people are affected differently by the obligatory containment measures.

⁴ For further details, see Hobisch *et al.*, Völkl *et al.*, and Obermayr *et al.*



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL CONTACT

Human beings are individual and social beings at the same time. As individuals they are always in a (potential or actual) relation to communities and societies at large, and can be identified by their particularities and peculiarities, their distinctive characteristics, individuality, and individual existence. As social beings, individuals are part of various intersecting social circles. Human beings not only exist in, but also interact with their surrounding sociocultural environment. Just like food intake or sexuality, personal social contact and face-to-face interaction rank among vital human needs (cf. Vester 25-27).

As studies from Germany (cf. Singer *et al.*) as well as from the UK (cf. Borkowska and Laurence) have already demonstrated, the first pandemic lockdown provoked a so-called “acute first lockdown effect”, meaning that depression, anxiety, loneliness and stress were on the rise while “mental well-being, resilience and social cohesion declined” (Singer *et al.* 102). Similarly, Vögele and colleagues concluded that, a lack of social contact led to feelings of social isolation, hereby differentiating between subjective and objective social isolation. The former, also described as “loneliness, pertains to the perception of social isolation, which is commonly thought to reflect the gap between the actual and expected number, or quality, of social interactions and relations” (Vögele *et al.* 433; cf. Rothmüller 6). Objective social isolation “occurs when individuals actually lack contacts and relationships” (Vögele *et al.* 434). This makes social inclusion and stable intimate relationships essential components of people’s psychosocial well-being and quality of life (cf. Rothmüller 6).

Holl and colleagues describe the change in media usage during the time of physical contact restrictions and its psychological effects during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although during the lockdown many people continued to socialize via social media platforms and technology-based communication tools, the latter could not replace face-to-face interaction since “direct personal contact offers important additional factors, such as smell, warmth, and touch [...]” (Holl *et al.* 495), hence, being essential for survival. Hinderk M. Emrich points out the importance of physical contact in the form of touch by the following:

Longing for touch now arises not only out of loneliness, out of the isolation of the individual, but also in particular out of the virtualization of our relationship to the world through technical media, ultimately through abstinence from touch. The phenomenon of touch, in fact, has to do with our relation to reality [...], and is thus a profoundly philosophical topic. What we can touch appears real to us.⁵ (Emrich 2-3)

The following sections will discuss literary and filmic narrative strategies used in recent Corona Fictions to recreate and/or process the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown experiences.

⁵ Translation by the authors.



LITERARY NARRATIVES OF PHYSICAL DISTANCING DURING LOCKDOWN

In this part, we will take an in-depth look at the narrative depiction of the confinement within three short texts as well as at the strategies implemented by the protagonists in order to cope with this new situation. The analysis starts with the micro-story "Departamento con balcón" by Paula Natalia Cairoli from Argentina, continues with the narrative "Vivir no era como lo que pensaba" by Maria Magdalena Barreto González from Tenerife (Spain) and finishes with the diaristic text entitled "La vida en cuarentena" by Maria del Rosario Lara from the United States/Mexico. We have chosen these narratives from three different anthologies because they represent distinct snapshot examples of how the stay-at-home policies impacted three different groups of people. They depict an elderly man, a single woman, and a single mother realizing the need for social and physical contact during the first lockdown.

"DEPARTAMENTO CON BALCÓN"

In this two columns long micro-story by Paula Natalia Cairoli (Argentina), the third-person narrator presents the elderly couple José and his wife Elvira in their city apartment during a time which is solely described as "el encierro" (21), but which can be identified as the first lockdown in Argentina that inspired all 30 stories within the anthology *Historias de cuarentena* (cf. prologue, 4).

In Argentina it was mostly forbidden to leave one's home during the more than three months long lockdown period. This "encierro" weighs heavily on the characters mentioned in the micro-story. Some of them already plunged into the greatest of sorrows and anxieties ("sumido en las mayores de las tristezas y angustias", 21) whereas the main protagonist José seems to have found a way to counter the psychological effects of the objective social isolation. José's physical and mental 'way out' of the lockdown is to sit on his balcony watching people passing by on the street every now and then. Following a strict daily routine, he steps out onto the balcony every afternoon after lunch at 2 pm. On rainy days, he continues this routine inside the apartment, putting his chair next to the window from where he also looks out onto the world.

Situated between the narrowness of the apartment and the vastness of the city, the balcony, which for José was of rather marginal significance in pre-pandemic times, becomes an important site during lockdown, as is already suggested by its prominent accentuation in the title of the story. During times of confinement and physical distancing, the projection on the wall even takes up a triple function as a site of refuge, freedom, and hope. As we discover at the beginning, José likes to leave the inner walls of the apartment and steps out on the balcony for physical reasons: to breathe fresh air and to enjoy the sun ("se sentaba en el balcón a respirar el aire y nutrirse de vitamina D", 21). Moreover, since his marriage with Elvira does not seem to be the happiest one anymore, the balcony allows him to escape her presence while watching the outside world turn into his great entertainment ("el afuera era su gran entretenimiento", 21). Finally, the balcony also becomes a place of hope, where José can dream about leaving



the apartment (“él se pasaba las horas soñando en salir”, 21). Here, the balcony converts into a liminal space, where the protagonist can escape the reality and imagine the future simultaneously. His state of being in-between bears resemblance to Victor Turner’s contemplations on the transition phase when undergoing a passage from one state or status to a higher one. Similar to cultural and social rites of passage, during the period of confinement the protagonist transitions on his balcony from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic life by physically and mentally withdrawing from the pandemic world. Not knowing what lies ahead, stepping onto the liminal space allows him further to imagine a possible future once the confinement has been lifted.

Moving explicitly towards this site of refuge, freedom, and hope, may also be understood as a coping strategy, as José repeatedly ‘leaves’ the burdening situation of being confined to the apartment with his wife. Because he cannot bear being close to her in their home, he regularly retreats on a physical and mental level. Both ways of distancing are underlined by the use of vocabulary from the semantic realm of the senses with terms such as ‘tomar’ (to take), ‘sentar’ (to sit), ‘respirar’ (to breathe), ‘nutrirse’ (to feed on), ‘escuchar’ (to listen), ‘recostar’ (to lay down), ‘medio sorda’ (half deaf), ‘mirar’ (to look), ‘deambular’ (to saunter), ‘llevar’ (to get up), ‘sentarse’ (to sit down), ‘soñar’ (to dream), or ‘salir’ (to leave). With these sense-focused terms, the narrator not only describes what José does in his apartment but more so how his sensory perception of the world functions during the Argentinian lockdown. Focusing on the male protagonist, the narrator concisely scrutinizes on the one hand the lack of social contact during the lockdown, and on the other hand tackles the question of what it means to feel alone in the presence of others (family/partner), thus evoking the question of subjective social isolation.

“VIVIR NO ERA COMO LO QUE PENSABA”

This short text was written by Maria Magdalena Barreto González from Tenerife (Spain) and presents an anonymous female first person narrator during the first lockdown. The title already suggests the reflexive stance of the subsequent text, in which the ‘narrating I’ ponders over her perception of life. This female narrator presumably spends the lockdown alone in her four walls, since no other characters are mentioned throughout the four-page long narrative. She uses this time of social and physical isolation to reflect and write about her lockdown experience on the one hand and the significance of life in general on the other.

In contrast to the story above, which describes the impact of the lockdown on the senses and the emotional consequences through the example of the character José, the self-reflexive ‘writing I’ (“escribo”, 2)⁶ in Barreto González’ text, consciously tells us that the health crisis has changed the way people are and how they feel (“La crisis sanitaria [...] nos ha cambiado la forma de ser y de sentir”, 1). The woman perceives the

⁶ Since this narrative (as well as the anthology as a whole) does not show any page numbers, we have used the numbers 1 to 4 to reference them.



coronavirus as enemy (“enemigo”, 1), as this invisible animal (“el bicho invisible”, 1) that took away people’s freedom for a handful of days (“nos arrebató la libertad durante un puñado de días”, 1) and wiped out the smiles of so many people (“y arrasó con la sonrisa de tanta gente”, 1).

The narrator also mentions that being in lockdown and observing the physical distancing policies evoke feelings of anxiety, pain, and sorrow in her. This feeling of anxiety is contrasted with the sensation of freedom. In this case, freedom is not only associated with moving around freely (whenever, wherever, with whomever) but also with the freedom to embrace, touch, kiss, and caress the people one cares about: “Ser libres de abrazar, de tocar, de besar, y de acariciar a quienes nos importan” (3). Similar to the narrator in the first story, the ‘narrating I’ employs vocabulary from the semantic field of senses to describe her definition of life: “[...] tomarnos con los amigos ese café [...], ponernos la ropa que guardamos ‘para salir’, [...], cocinar lo que se nos antoja, caminar por donde nos apetece [...]” (4). Her description of what it means to be alive finally reaches the point, where the definition of life is merged first, into touch (‘abrazar’), i.e. physical proximity, and, then, into feelings (‘sentir’), i.e. emotional closeness: “La vida es abrazar a quienes queremos y sentir que no hay un lugar más seguro que esos brazos” (4).

This text continues to pursue José’s dream at the end of Cairoli’s text mentioned above. The ‘writing I’ not just dreams of leaving her home, but also enunciates several wishes or visions for the post-pandemic world: She hopes, for example, that the pandemic crisis will hold a transformative power for individuals as well as for communities leading one day to more solidarity and social cohesion among people.

Moreover, consciously writing down her perception of the pandemic crisis is her way to cope with this exceptional situation. Writing hereby fulfills a testimonial and therapeutic function: Especially in (or after) times of crisis of individual or collective dimension—e.g. after the death of a beloved one or after surviving a war—people tend to resort to testimonial narration to bear witness to the crisis and thus to remember what happened (cf. Boerner 17). In this regard, the narrator herself notes that she writes these lines as someone who is in self-isolation and has lost her job: “Yo sólo escribo como alguien que, al igual que otros [sic] miles de personas, tiene que estar recluida en su casa. Alguien que ha perdido temporalmente su puesto de trabajo, [...]” (3). As someone who is afraid of what happens outside her ‘comfort zone’ and who fears that this virus will hurt one of her beloved ones: “Alguien que tiene miedo de lo que pasa fuera de su ‘zona de confort’ y que teme que este maldito virus le haga daño a alguna de las personas que quiere” (3).

The testimonial narration can also help to assimilate a traumatic experience, because the act of narration induces a cognitive coping with the crisis situation (cf. Cyrulnik 194; Tourette-Turgis and Chollier, “L’impact”). In that respect, the ‘narrating I’ already perceives her own writing as a means of coping strategy acknowledging its therapeutic function, since she cannot think of any better way to release the anxiety, pain, and sadness the current situation is causing her: “Escribo porque no se me ocurre una manera mejor de liberar la angustia, el dolor y la tristeza que me provoca lo que está pasando” (3). Finally, through the act of writing, she is able to let go of internal fears



at the thought of health, economic, and social consequences of all this: “Para dejar escapar el miedo que me acorrala las entrañas al pensar en las consecuencias que tendrá todo esto a nivel sanitario, económico y social” (3).

“LA VIDA EN CUARENTENA”

The third text composed by Maria del Rosario Lara, a Mexican-American University professor, showcases life (“la vida”, 43) during the (first) lockdown (“en cuarentena”, 43) as the title already indicates. Its structural composition into chronological fragments indicates the form of a diary to realize the description of ‘la vida en cuarentena’. Using a classic first person diaristic perspective,⁷ the female narrator, who is a university professor and single mother, describes in 10 irregular entries between March 23 and April, 2020, how she lives through and copes with this exceptional experience of the lockdown with her two daughters in a two-bedroom apartment in a small town in New York State.

In her first entry (“23 de ”, 43), she starts by describing the sudden closure of her children’s schools and their different reactions: While the younger daughter takes the news of the school closings in stride, the older one is upset about being bereft of her graduation event. The mother’s workplace, a university campus, closes a week later and she struggles with switching over to online teaching for the first time in her life. In fact, she even remarks that in this first week of the confinement, she is more worried about her online teaching obligations than about the dangers of the coronavirus itself.

In the second week (“26 de marzo”, 44), the ‘narrating/writing I’ realizes the first changes in her behavior provoked by the social isolation, like getting up later than she used to, taking fewer showers, or doing less house-cleaning. She justifies these behavioral changes by not having to go anywhere and by not being allowed to receive any visitors. In the subsequent entries, she continuously observes changes in and around her, in particular by contrasting them with pre-pandemic habits and behaviors.

She also notes changes in her physical condition first, followed by changes in her psychological condition as a consequence of the physical distancing policies to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. She consciously realizes how with every week in lockdown, her energy vanishes even more: “[H]e notado que el encierro ya empezó a consumir nuestras energías” (47). Furthermore, she remarks that her anxiety level has continuously augmented since the beginning of the lockdown: “Desde que empezó el encierro, mis niveles de ansiedad han aumentado no sólo por la nueva situación laboral y los posibles efectos de la pandemia, sino a raíz de unos sueños extraños [...]” (49-50). She has become afraid of multiple more things, like having a heart attack and needing

⁷ In many cases, the narration of a traumatic experience is expressed in testimonial, and especially in diaristic form. From a historical point of view, the use of the diary is not unusual. An increase in diaristic narratives could already be observed at the beginning of World War I and at the end of World War II, so that the diary of the 20th century was conceived as a ‘medium of crisis’ (cf. Kalff and Vedder 239; Boerner 63f.).



to go to the hospital, where she fears that they might not treat her because she does not have COVID-symptoms; or the fear of having undetected cancer because she cannot do her routine medical examinations (cf. 50-51).

Another salient change perceived by the diary writer is her altering sense of time. Already in her third entry ("30 de marzo", 45), she notices the first changes in the perception of time, when she writes that the confinement has transformed life into a repetition of events identical to themselves day after day, colored with a dark hue that not even the few sunny days in New York can change: "El encierro ha transformado a [sic] vida en una repetición de hechos idénticos a sí mismos día tras día, tiéndola de una tonalidad oscura [sic] que ni los pocos días soleados de Nueva York pueden cambiar" (45-46). Although the narrator keeps close social contact with her sister in Juárez (Mexico), with whom she talks twice a day on the phone at the beginning of the "encierro" (45), she notes that after some time into the lockdown she does not know what to tell her anymore. To illustrate the reduced and monotonous content of their calls, she even renders one of their reduced conversations.

Due to the monotony of the long and unstructured time ("monotonía del tiempo largo y desestructurado", 48), a veil starts to cover the weekdays, whose names she even forgets: "Sus nombres se me han ido escapando" (53). This increased temporal fuzziness manifests itself through fewer as well as irregular entries and even leads to the dissolution of any sense of time, as can be seen in the diary entries of the month of April 2020, which already largely miss day and/or date specifications: "Miércoles, abril" (46), "Domingo, abril" (47), "Abril" (49; 50) "¿Abril?" (51), "Domingo" (53). Eventually, the 'narrating/writing I' only just perceives the time of the day, when she entitles her last entry: "Madrugada" (53). This last entry underlines the dissolution of her time perception also on the narrative level by the frequent use of ellipsis, which is often used in narrative texts to mark an intentional silence. Accordingly, instead of a coherent sentence structure, the last part of the diary entry represents sentence fragments which are loosely held together by suspension points. This morning, the narrator stands next to the window and stares outside onto the world similar to Barreto González' protagonist José in the first story, mentioned above. Observing her neighbor through the window, she lets her mind wander into various directions without a specific frame or destination. Yet, while for José looking outside is a way to optimistically dream about his post-pandemic life, for the mother of two the look outside only sets her thoughts back to the current situation asking herself: When did I get here? ("¿En qué momento llegué aquí?", 53).

At large, this diary—similar to Barreto González' text above—represents an individual testimony (cf. Boerner 17) of the lockdown, which interrupted the course of life in a striking way and affected all aspects of life. In this example, the altering time perception stands out, becoming an important and constant reference throughout this diaristic description of the lockdown effect (cf. Singer *et al.* 10f.) on the mother and her two daughters.



AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVES OF PHYSICAL DISTANCING DURING LOCKDOWN ON THE EXAMPLE OF *¡NI TE ME ACERQUES!*

This section will focus on Norberto Ramos del Val's (2020) Spanish feature film *¡Ni te me acerques!* (Engl. *Stay Away!*), representing the first of its kind within the hispanophone Corona Fictions' corpus, as it depicts physical distancing and its challenges in the countryside of a village called Ariño in Aragón, Spain.

Similarly to the literary examples mentioned above, the lockdown affected creators within the film and media landscape and their fictional characters alike. While writing a screenplay may be a task fitting for the isolation of a lockdown, shooting a feature film usually is a more collective task, involving cast and crew interacting on location while being exposed to potential viruses. Keeping the cast small and on few locations, the movie *¡Ni te me acerques!* was shot during the pandemic in summer 2020.

The protagonist Juan (sometimes mistakenly called Jorge)—played by Catalanian born actor Eduardo Ferrés—coming from Madrid, a highly COVID-19 infected area, arrives in the countryside and is supposed to look after the empty Hotel Balneario de Ariño. Thus, throughout the movie, other main characters such as Juan's romantic love interest Alicia, a young woman working at the local supermarket, as well as Antonio, the village's policeman, keep calling him 'infectao' (e.g. Ramos del Val 00:18:23), the infected, even though he seems healthy.

¡Ni te me acerques! particularly focuses on negotiating spatial and social proximity, as well as emotional closeness (in German all called 'Nähe', cf. Eder 725) by contrasting the main characters in e.g. different locations (outside vs. inside the hotel), in different social situations (alone/together as a pair/together in a group) with a different amount of physical distancing or no distancing at all, and in different emotional states (trust, connection, feeling attracted to someone). At the beginning of the film, as Juan arrives alone in the village, coming from Madrid, he even puts on a mask and gloves when getting out of his car all alone in a local street. He is the only one wearing one when entering the local bar where Antonio and Evaristo, the local mechanic, come really close to him, even shaking his hand and hugging him from behind (cf. Ramos del Val 00:04:14-00:04:28).

In this small Spanish village surrounded by nature, while the protagonist is writing on his novel as Spain goes into lockdown, the viewers start doubting the initial narrative as multiple characters seem to interact in a certain way but negate it later on, leaving numerous uncertainties and confusion for the audience to make sense of. The hereby depicted effects isolation and solitude can have on people's mental health stand out, as discussed earlier as the lockdown effect. This Spanish comedy even points towards Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* in terms of taking care of a hotel (and by on occasion also using similar frames and shots) and even introduces the appearance of a ghost in the form of Antonio: Evaristo and Juan at one point end up sitting in the hotel's indoor pool together smoking a joint and drinking alcohol when it suddenly occurs to them that Antonio is missing. They find him floating in the water face down and try to save him, but he has already passed away (cf. Ramos del Val 01:05:30-01:06:57). Both quickly realize that they cannot call anyone for help since they are not supposed to meet during



quarantine (cf. 01:06:57-01:07:40), so they agree to a “pacto de silencio”, as Evaristo calls it, where he spits in his hand, shaking Juan’s hand, officially wanting to blame Antonio’s death on Covid (cf. 01:07:40-01:08:14). This extreme bodily proximity resulting in touch, indicating a certain lack of hygiene under the circumstances, underlines the established bond amongst the protagonists and how strongly they have come to trust and rely on each other. This repeatedly appearing fantastic element of Antonio’s ghost adds to the fact that the line between the previously established filmic reality and interwoven elements of dreams and imaginations gets even blurrier throughout the 96 min. movie. Interestingly, Antonio’s ghost chooses to appear again exactly when Juan finally gets close to Alicia who works at the supermarket and keeps bringing him his groceries. While starting out with a physical distancing measure of two meters and both wearing masks (cf. 00:18:01), the stronger the emotional bond and trust between Juan and Alicia become, the closer both physically get, as shown in the following sequences:

When delivering Juan’s groceries to the hotel, he steps outside in front of the main entrance, greeting Alicia from afar and asking her to step inside. As she enters the hotel lobby, she tells him to stay back: “Vale, quita quita. Qué te quitas” (Ramos del Val 00:18:56-00:18:58). Both strongly committed to keeping their physical distance, on another level of human interaction they start flirting with each other, which can be noticed by their body languages (despite the masks and gloves), tone of voice and choice of dialogue (cf. 00:19:30-00:19:36). While flirting, Juan and Alicia approach each other a little bit, lowering the two-meter distance between them (cf. 00:19:30-00:19:36).

Finally, towards the end of the movie, Alicia comes by to meet Juan again. Both wear masks but as date night continues, get physically closer to each other (cf. Ramos del Val 01:19:03), even trying to kiss each other with masks on (cf. 01:19:08-01:19:14). Alicia finds this rather dangerous, commenting “Es muy peligroso, Juan” (01:19:14-01:19:55). Juan, rather playful, puts her mask above her mouth, over her eyes, turning its function into something different for their foreplay (cf. 01:20:20-01:21:14). He prepares a room with candles and flower petals to transform it into a romantic setting. As they enter it together, he lifts her mask from her eyes, they make fun of “distanciamiento social” by integrating it into their foreplay by undressing themselves apart from each other. Both remove their masks completely, kiss, touch, and spend an intimate night together. However, when hopping underneath the bed sheets, Alicia pulls out a hand gel for disinfection first which they both use by erotically and somewhat comedic rubbing it on each other’s hands. Alicia even asks Juan for a thermometer to measure his temperature. Suddenly, their romantic night is disturbed as Antonio’s ghost appears to Juan while it remains invisible to Alicia (cf. 01:21:14-01:24:46).

The attempt to create emotional and cognitive closeness despite of all the physical distancing and hygiene measures remains a central theme throughout the movie. Unsurprisingly, in human development, particularly when it comes to developing the self, proximity-distance regulation is a primal phenomenon (cf. Emrich 2). During adulthood, young people commonly experience two persisting states: the longing for security and closeness, while at the same time needing autonomy and independence, leading them away from the other. (cf. Emrich 2). Emrich (2-3) argues



that the longing for physical contact, for experiencing the world through touch, holds great significance insofar as that it functions as reality check, as reassuring oneself of the perceived reality e.g. when rubbing your eyes. This is also why touch falls under the first of four of Emrich's categories for understanding touch ambiguity (cf. Emrich 3). The second one focuses on the increase of the usage of virtual reality and a depersonalized, dissociated, surrounding where the visual impressions rule over touch and dominate all other senses. As can be observed in the selected Corona Fictions' corpus mentioned above, both written and audiovisual, the narratives highly focus on bodily experiences, including confused mental states. The third category, renunciation or deferral of touch, simultaneously feeling security and autonomy, creates a tension between people which can be equally observed in our before-mentioned examples. This state offers numerous opportunities for audiovisual representations, as it is the most fruitful playground for fictional characters in movies and series. Lovers who indicate closeness but have not yet touched, take storylines to extremes to keep the audience interested. The fourth category of transcending touch comprises the

highest level of the touch phenomenon, touch does not merge into being touch, does not merge into being a reality check, nor does it merge into being sensual. It does not dissolve into being a reality check, nor does it dissolve into being sensual. Rather, in this stage touch hereby is the opening of another reality, meaning to crossing over, transcend towards the other, towards the opening, towards the future. Touch is encounter here! (Emrich 5f.)⁸

Filmic methods narrating the last category may be found when the levels of narration, of fiction and reality, blur or even more so, are purposefully ruptured. Breaking the fourth wall (imaginary boundary between the film's action and its audience) in *¡Ni te me acerques!*, for example, results in the protagonist Juan directly looking into the camera at the end of the film, directly addressing his words to the viewers by telling them how annoyed he is due to the constant inner monolog (a narrating voice) throughout the movie: "Joder con el monólogo interior" (Ramos del Val 01:33:29). Moreover, this Spanish feature film underlines the fact that its story is based on real pandemic events by reinforcing its testimonial character, randomly indicating the days of the lockdown, e.g. "Día 32" (01:08:15). Juan breaks out of this action, this fictional storyline. By looking directly at the spectator(s), he acknowledges the meta level of reality, including a real audience, thereby merging the pandemic fiction and reality.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The first acute lockdown shock effect in 2020 has translated into the fictional narratives of both, literary as well as filmic creations during the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the so-called Corona Fictions. The Corona Fictions examined in this article represent different characters during the first lockdown and their coping mechanisms triggered by the lack of social and physical contact. While the literary examples foreground the

⁸ Translation by the authors.



emotional state of the protagonists due to the experience of social isolation, the film example depicts the evolving negotiation of the physical distancing measures within a community of mostly strangers.

Using the example of an elderly man, a single woman, and a single mother, the hispanophone literary narratives depict similar repercussions on mental health due to the restriction of physical contact and mobility. By emphasizing feelings of anxiety, sorrow, or loneliness, these literary examples reflect results of psychological studies from the first lockdown (cf. Budimir *et al.*; Holl *et al.*; Rothmüller; Singer *et al.*; Tourette-Turgis and Chollier, "L'impact"; Tourette-Turgis and Chollier, "Modifications"). Furthermore, the depiction of two writing narrators in these Corona Fictions suggests the power of words and storytelling in order to cope with crisis and trauma, which has been foregrounded in psychological trauma studies (cf. Cyrulnik).

Norberto Ramos del Val's (2020) feature film *¡Ni te me acerques!* (Engl. *Stay Away!*), set in a small Spanish village called Ariño and shot during the pandemic, openly negotiates measures of physical distancing during the lockdown and the lockdown effect (cf. Singer *et al.*) on mental well-being as such. The physical distancing itself is represented very authentically by linking the levels of emotional closeness and physical/spatial proximity (cf. Eder; cf. Emrich) between different characters. Physical distancing measures to contain the transmission of the virus, as demonstrated in the movie, can be strictly upheld when emotional bonds between people are weak and the level of trust is low.

To conclude, emotional closeness evokes physical proximity in the analyzed characters. However, too much proximity and closeness within a confined space may have the opposite effect on social cohesion, such as mentioned in the literary example of Cairoli's "Departamento con balcón", demonstrating that the protagonist escapes his wife to the only space left: the balcony. The power of Corona Fictions' narratives—regardless of the medium, format or genre applied—simultaneously lies in the testimonial and therapeutic function of their creation as well as their consumption, supporting the individual's self-reflection process, ultimately fostering resilience, thus, resisting the unfortunate pandemic side effects.

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