

The New York Times
Watching

March 18, 2020



By Margaret Lyons
Television Critic

Dear Watchers,

I hope you are all staying safe and stable. Given how much more time we'll all be spending at home in the immediate future, we're going to bring you this newsletter three times a week instead of the usual two. We hope you find the additional recommendations helpful.

See you Wednesday. Here's [a golden retriever with one ear](#) who is definitely making the most of it.

Stream These PBS Shows Free



Cristina Córdova on “Identity” episode of “Craft in America.” Denise Kang

Ken Burns [announced over the weekend](#) that he had asked PBS to make his documentary series [“Baseball” available free](#). If you’ve never watched it, this really is the perfect time: It scratches the sports itch and the history itch, it’s hopeful but not naïve about American institutions, and it’s one of the quintessential “I always meant to watch this” shows. The nine episodes are each about two hours long, which feels like the right length for an evening of social distancing.

Even if you are not interested in “Baseball,” the PBS app has a lot of terrific free shows. (The functionality of the app itself is pretty lousy, and it confusingly lists all the free-to-stream shows *and* the pay-to-stream shows together. Boo! You can [download the app here](#), or just watch episodes on your computer.)

Here are some of my favorites:

[“Circus”](#) is a six-part behind-the-scenes documentary from 2010 about the Big Apple Circus, and it’s fantastic. The series covers both the romantic and the ramshackle aspects of circus culture: You can run away and join it, but wherever you go there you are, and now a bunch of acrobats are there, too. If you like listening to “This American Life,” you will like this. (Then [read this](#).)

For a real dose of hard-core PBS-ness, go for [“Finding Your Roots”](#) and [“Craft in America,”](#) and remember that even though some of the episodes sound boring, none are. There’s also something so triumphant baked into both shows, reminders that human suffering and cruelty and ignorance are not new, but neither are compassion, solidarity and hope.

If you are considering using some of your at-home time to explore your creative side, or if you are trying to provide some kind of educational viewing for younger members of your household, [watch “Art School.”](#) The episodes are only about 5 minutes long, and the artists profiled on the show work in a wide variety of disciplines and media. They’re all great starting points for “let’s watch this person, and then we are going to try something inspired by what they do” projects, too.



Scott Yoo on “Now Hear This: ‘The Riddle of Bach,’” which is under the “Great Performances” umbrella. It’s great! Courtesy of Yusef Svačina

For those of you missing cultural outings in particular, a few episodes of [“Great Performances”](#) and [“Live From Lincoln Center”](#) are available, and you can crinkle your candy wrappers to your heart’s content.

Finally, if you were a theater kid or are hunkered down with one, [“Broadway or Bust,”](#) a three-part mini-series from 2012, is required viewing. It follows high school performers competing for the Jimmy Awards, which are sort of the Tonys of teendom. I wish this series happened every year.

Movies: Newly Available This Week



Daisy Ridley in a scene from “Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker.” Lucasfilm/Disney

Movies: Newly Available This Week

The end of a blockbuster trilogy, an illuminating rivalry and an instant so-bad-it’s-good classic are among the films debuting online this week. Unless noted, the films can be purchased on the usual platforms — Amazon, Apple TV, Google Play, Vudu and YouTube — but a rental option is usually available within a few weeks.

Here’s what our critics had to say about this week’s selections:

‘Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker’ (Released early, last week)

At least since “The Return of the Jedi” (1983), the point of each chapter has been consolidation rather than distinction. For a single film to risk being too interesting would be to imperil the long-term strategy of cultivating a multigenerational, multinational fandom. “The Rise of Skywalker” — Episode IX, in case you’ve lost count — is one of the best. Also one of the worst. Perfectly middling. It all amounts to the same thing. — *A.O. Scott* ([Read the full review here.](#))

‘Cats’ (Available Tuesday)

A doctoral thesis could be written on how this misfire sputtered into existence, though there’s nothing new about the movies’ energetic embrace of bad taste. One problem is that “Cats” was directed by Tom Hooper, a well-behaved journeyman (“The King’s Speech”), who is nowhere near vulgar enough for the challenge he was hired for, which is to translate Andrew Lloyd Webber’s money-printing musical to the big screen. — *Manohla Dargis* ([Read the full review here.](#))

‘The Current War: Director’s Cut’ (Tuesday, [iTunes only](#))

[Benedict] Cumberbatch cleverly embodies the ambitious [Thomas] Edison, who’s not above sacrificing a few pesky morals for success, nor using his fame to manipulate the media. [Michael] Shannon is restrained yet charismatic in a role that could have easily been overplayed. For sure, everyone here is fun to watch, making it all the more irksome when, perhaps a half-hour before the end, the film runs short of things to say. — *Ken Jaworowski* ([Read the full review here.](#))

Also This Week



At least “Top Chef” is back. Nicole Weingart/Bravo

- “**The Plot Against America,**” based on the novel by Philip Roth, starts Monday at 9 p.m. on HBO.
- Season 2 of “**My Brilliant Friend**” starts Monday at 10 p.m. on HBO.
- The first three episodes of “**Little Fires Everywhere,**” starring Kerry Washington and Reese Witherspoon, arrive on Hulu Wednesday; new episodes appear weekly after that.
- “**Brockmire,**” one of my mega faves, returns for its fourth and final season Wednesday at 10 p.m. on IFC. It has a very intense case of bad timing: The new season has a time jump 15 years into the future, where everything is quite horrible. It feels a lot less funny this week, but that’s not the show’s fault.
- “**Top Chef**” returns with an all-star season Thursday at 10 p.m. on Bravo. Truly I have never needed “Top Chef” more.

EXTRA-CREDIT READING

What to Watch, Listen to and Cook During Your Coronavirus Self-Quarantine

You're staying home and you need a distraction. We're updating this recommendation list every weekday.

By **The New York Times**

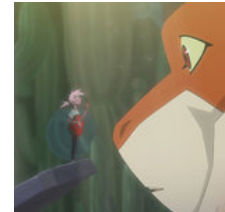


Critic's Notebook

Home but Not Alone? Here Are Four New Shows to Watch With Your Kids

Between working and learning, enjoy these animated series, from the superhero parakeets of "Powerbirds" to the homegrown anime of "Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts."

By **Mike Hale**



9 Shows for Social Distancing

What do a musical mockumentary, an addiction sitcom, two true-crime docs and a pottery competition have in common? They can all help you remove yourself from society.

By **Margaret Lyons**

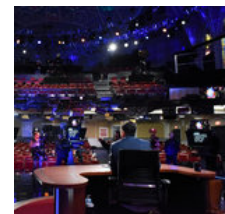


Critic's Notebook

The Night TV Went It Alone

Late-night's coronavirus-driven goodbye to the studio audience was a reminder of how much we're used to that virtual connection.

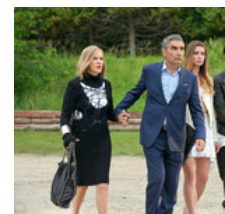
By **James Poniewozik**



Comforting Streaming TV Shows for Stressful Times

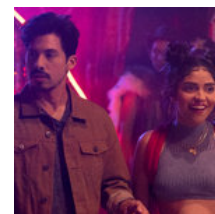
When the world feels exhausting, sometimes you want shows that offer a simple escape. Here are a few shows that will envelop you in their warm embrace.

By **Eleanor Stanford**



12 Recent Netflix Originals Worth Streaming While Stuck at Home

The streaming service constantly pumps out new original TV series, making it tough to keep up. These are the best from the past few months.



By Noel Murray

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