# *A brilliant invention grinds to a halt: Panoramic images of the deserted city in the pandemic era and their cultural significance*

*Stankomir Nicieja*

Uniwersytet Opolski

**Keywords**

city, panoramic shot, pandemic, film, media

**Abstract**

Soon after the outbreak of COVID-19 and the imposition of nationwide lockdowns, images of empty cities have become one of the most vivid visual themes in media coverage of the pandemic. In my essay, I want to reflect on the evocative power of those pictures. On the one hand, depopulated streets made their mark because of their stark exceptionality. Something seemingly impossible happened. People and cars disappeared from the perpetually busy places. At the same time however, images of abandoned streets were strikingly familiar. We knew them too well from countless dystopian and catastrophic films. The outbreak of the pandemic also gave a foretaste of a much bigger and radical collapse that might come with the accelerating climate change. I want to use the imagery of the empty streets in the locked down cities as a starting point for a broader reflection on the growing significance of the panoramic shots and the bird's eye perspectives of the city in contemporary culture. Such images have become a staple of visual communication today. The panoramic or long aerial shot of a city, most often captured by drones, has become a ubiquitous, almost obligatory, motif in feature films, televisual series, documentaries and news programmes. Referring to a variety of examples, I argue that the panoramic shots reveal and reassert our enduring fascination with the city. They also demonstrate complex rhetorical and symbolic potential of the broad urban imagery. Shots from a distance constitute a celebration of the city but also unmask a dissatisfaction with the present and desire for a change.

Envisioning representations and responses to current social and cultural dilemmas

> Standing here, […] gazing towards Charlotte Street, towards a fore-shortened jumble of facades, scaffolding and pitched roofs, Henry thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece – millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work. And the Perownes' own corner, a triumph of congruent proportion; the perfect square laid out by Robert Adam […] an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting.
>
> Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (2005), p. 13

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the first half of 2020, four visual themes stood out in the global media coverage of the spreading disease. They included the images of health workers in hazmat suits, computer-generated renditions of the virus, mass graves of the victims and pictures of silent, deserted cities[1]. They all provided backdrops for incessant media updates simultaneously conveying the four symbolic dimensions of the pandemic. The personnel in hazmat suits, operating ambulances or attending to the severely ill, reflected the desperate human efforts to contain the virus. They hinted at its inherent insidiousness and virulence. Moreover, the protective gear obliterating people's individual features made them homogenous and almost non-human. The computer-generated renditions of the SARS-CoV-2 molecule, in dramatic colours and often vividly animated, provided a concrete visualisation of the otherwise notoriously elusive entity. Over time, and depending on purpose, those images diverged into two contrasting directions. They either grew more complex or simpler. The more intricate imagery reflected the growing scientific understanding of the virus and the disease it caused. The simplified representations have served as graphic cues and icons in reports, manuals or signs. The third type of popular coronavirus-related iconography included depictions of mass graves of the COVID-19 victims. They constituted a direct evidence of the virus' destructive power and its terrifying impact on the communities around the world[2].

---

[1]   Naturally, this does not exhaust the list of recurring images used by the media to illustrate the impact of the disease. Certainly, one can also mention the pictures of people singing or playing musical instruments from their balconies, clapping for the medical services or screen shots from conference Zoom calls. However, those images were far less frequently evoked in symbolic contexts.

[2]   The visual potency of this image was captured by the activists in Rio de Jaieiro (Brazil). In response to Presidents Jair Bolsonaro's dismissive treatment of the pandemic and to commemorate the people who died, they erected a mock cemetery of 100 graves on the famous Copacabana beach. The installation was subsequently vandalised by Bolsonaro's sympathisers. For more see T. Phillips, *Bolsonaro supporter*

Mass graves replaced the earlier, more specific footage that included military trucks transporting the dead in northern Italy, an ice stadium converted into a makeshift morgue in Madrid or refrigerated trucks parked outside New York's hospitals[3]. But the pictures from Bergamo, Madrid or New York were local and specific. Long rows of freshly dug graves and newly demarcated cemeteries, similar around the world, became much more universal in their impact.

In this paper, I want to explore the significance of the fourth group of images and the associations they have triggered. I want to look at the silent, apparently deserted cities repeatedly shown and shared in various media during the coronavirus lockdowns. Presented usually as long, panoramic takes or aerial shots, they illustrated the disruption caused by the unexpected onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In my text, I also want to reflect on the broader cultural significance of the aerial view of the city in film and media and explore how the recent experience of the enforced confinement has influenced representations of contemporary urban life.

The evocative power of the deserted streets, so frequently shown during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, cannot be separated from the increasing modern fascination with the panoramic view of the city. The aerial perspective, delineating the contours and layout of the city, has become one of the most pervasive and versatile themes. We routinely find such images in practically all media and in a dizzying variety of contexts. Fictional audio-visual narratives, documentary films, news reports as well as amateur productions on social media have consistently used and relied on them. There are also separate genres of books and documentary films exclusively devoted to the reproduction of the landscape (including the cityscape) captured from the aerial perspective. Over the years, these images have actively shaped the ways in which we imagine and think about the city.

*desecrates Brazil beach memorial for 40,000 coronavirus victims*, "The Guardian", 11.06.2020, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/11/bolsonaro-supporter-destroys-brazil-beach-memorial-40000-coronavirus-victims..

[3]   In mid-April 2020, the media around the world circulated the chilling images of crews burying bodies of the unclaimed COVID-19 victims in freshly dug mass graves on the New York's Hart Island, see for instance J. Yuan, *Burials on Hart Island, where New York's unclaimed lie in mass graves, have risen fivefold*, 16.04.2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/hart-island-mass-graves-coronavirus-new-york/2020/04/16/a0c413ee-7f5f-11ea-a3ee-13e1ae0a3571_story.html, 29.06.2020; C. Kilgannon, *As Morgues Fill, N.Y.C. to Bury Some Virus Victims in Potter's Field*, "The New York Times", 10.04.2020, sec. New York, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/nyregion/coronavirus-deaths-hart-island-burial.html..

Obviously, the popularity of the panoramic views has deep historic roots and is much older than photography or film. Suffice to mention here the oeuvres of such artists as Canaletto (1721–1780), William Turner (1775–1851) or Camille Pissarro (1830–1903). However, thanks to the development of photography in the second half of the 19th century, depictions of the city became more popular, accurate and much easier to produce. Thanks to the inherent qualities of photography, like verisimilitude or suitability for mass reproduction, city photos started to proliferate and drive even greater demand for them. The emergence of film marked the next decisive step in the evolution of depicting the city. The movie camera, Denis Cosgrove observes, proved unrivalled in its ability to capture the kinetic aspects of the aerial view[4]. As Cosgrove further notes, "the quasi-simultaneous invention and development of powered flight and cinematic photography in the early twentieth century has had a profound impact on global images"[5]. Film could reveal to the city dwellers their milieu in a fresh light. At the same time, it provided new modes of chronicling and celebrating urban life. The spectacular achievements of the movie camera were further reinforced when combined with technologies that grew together with photography and film, namely aeronautics and high-rise architecture. The first panoramic pictures of cities were taken from balloons and aeroplanes. Today, the collection of technical inventions is significantly wider and includes satellites and drones. Each of these technologies renewed interest in capturing the city panorama and added original vantage points.

As many crucial inventions, aerial photography and later film was originally developed for military purposes, to aid reconnaissance or create more accurate maps. However, the results proved so immediately captivating that they quickly found their way into the public domain, into print publications, documentary films and actualities. At first, the aerial perspective was evidently linked to power and privilege. Access to aeronautic technology or high-rise buildings was fairly restricted. Viewing a familiar landscape from above further enhanced a sense of omniscience and detachment. In his already quoted study, *Apollo's Eyes*, Denis Cosgrove wrote about

> a divine and mastering view from a single perspective. That view is at once empowering and visionary, implying ascent from the terrestrial sphere into the zones of planets and stars. The theme of ascent connects the earth to cos-

---

[4]    D.E. Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD, 2003, p. 242.

[5]    Ibid.

mographic spheres, so that rising above the earth in flight is an enduring element of global thought and imagination[6].

When in 1966, one of the key figures of the Silicon Valley counter-culture, Stewart Brand, learnt that NASA had obtained satellite photos of the sphere of Earth as seen from space, he initiated a public campaign to make those photographs public[7]. He was convinced that the picture of the entire planet was not just another interesting image. He believed it could transform the way humans thought about the environment and be used as a tool to convince people to adopt more practical and ecologically-friendly attitudes. Subsequently, Brand put the photo on the cover of the influential *Whole Earth Catalog*, his part-manual, part magazine, viewed today as a prototype for the world wide web and Google[8].

From the perspective of the early 21st century, writing about an aerial view of the city as exclusively tied to the position of power would be a major oversimplification. In fact, the aerial perspectives have become more accessible than ever and to view the city from above is no longer a sign of privilege. Instead, we could witness what David Gilbert describes as a "significant democratization of the view from above in recent years" that is "associated with new high buildings, air travel, and digital technologies"[9]. Mark Dorrian deems such perspective not "God-like but [...] vertiginous, betraying a mixture of mastery and anxiety in the relationship between viewer and city[10].

From the air, the city reveals its majesty and the true sense of scale, it also presents urban space as an ecosystem and a multi-layered network. Thus, the aerial panoramic perspective has the capacity to evoke diverse emotional responses. The urban sprawl might seem calming in its endlessness, but also threatening and unsettling. Very often the bird's eye perspective is juxtaposed with that of a *flaneur*. As someone immersed in the city, the *flaneur* is primarily concerned with the social. The aerial view turns a *flaneur* into a voyeur. It offers a sense of omniscience, of hovering above the quotidian concerns, with architecture as the most important point of reference[11]. Technologies, apart from making the bird's eye perspective more democratic, also helped to

---

6  Ibid., p. xi.
7  A. Kabil, *Seeing the Whole Earth from Space Changed Everything*, 22.05.2018, https://medium.com/the-long-now-foundation/earth-and-civilization-in-the-macroscope-82243cad20bd.
8  Ibid.
9  D. Gilbert, *The Three Ages of Aerial Vision: London's Aerial Iconography from Wenceslaus Hollar to Google Earth*, "The London Journal", 2010, t.35, no 3, p. 289.
10  Ibid., p. 296.
11  M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Oakland CA 2011, p. 93.

A brilliant invention grinds to a halt…

transform modern cities into the hyper-visual zones. Modern urban centres became the daily spectacles of eye-catching architecture, colourful displays, signs and advertisements and thus even more photogenic. Moreover, the panoramic view could offer illuminating vantage points. The seemingly familiar city could reveal new qualities, hidden areas, concealed infrastructure or otherwise obscure spaces. From above, cities can look distant, depersonalised and static, but also vulnerable, easy to attack or destroy.

It did not take long for filmmakers to discover the narrative and symbolic potential of the panorama. At first, panoramic city views were used as dazzling establishing shots and backgrounds for opening, as well as closing credits. Prominent examples of such application of the panoramic shots include glimpses of Chicago in John Auer's *City that Never Sleeps* (1953), London from Robert Stevenson's *Mary Poppins* (1964) or New York from Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979). Relatively quickly, however, the panoramic sequences became more than visual attractions and got integrated into the very fabric of the plots[12]. They started to function as distinct punctuation marks and thematic motifs actively contributing to the atmosphere and substance of the narrative.

The reliance on the panoramic shot has become particularly prominent in crime and detective audio-visual narratives. Practically, the bird's eye shot has become a compulsory recurring element of any crime story, appearing as interludes between chapters, scenes or sequences. Through the panoramic city sequences, the audience can grasp the urban space as an area of hiding for criminals as well as the space of surveillance for the working detective. A good example of how the motif of the city viewed from above can be used in contemporary cinema is Nicolas Winding Refn's widely celebrated motion picture *Drive* (2011). While most of the action in the film is set in confined, even claustrophobic spaces that include car interiors, cramped apartments, lifts or tacky diners, those scenes are juxtaposed with magnificent, slow-moving panoramic shots of Los Angeles. Viewers in *Drive* are periodically regaled with impressive takes of the high-rise buildings surrounded by meandering and notoriously congested highways. Those shots provide important aesthetic balance to the main line of action, slowing down the pace and contributing to the contemplative, even melancholic mood of the entire film.

For most of the cinema and television history, the panoramic shots have been used to celebrate the most recognisable cityscapes, those of New York, Paris, London, Rome, Moscow or Chicago. But the process of the democratisation of the panoramic perspective mentioned earlier means that the less ob-

---

12    V.F. Cordes, *New York in Cinematic Imagination: The Agitated City*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York 2020, p. 51.

vious urban locations also get featured. Numerous examples of the extensive reliance on panoramic sequences can be found in the popular Nordic Noir television crime serials. They all feature obligatory, repeatedly evoked aerial shots of the urban spaces. During the opening credits as well as throughout the series we can see aerial views of Copenhagen (e.g., in *The Killing / Forbrydelsen*, 2011–2014, and *The Bridge / Bron / Broen*, 2011–2018), Malmö (*The Bridge / Bron / Broen*), Helsinki (*Deadwind / Karpi*, 2018) or Reykjavik (*The Valhalla Murders/. Brot*, 2019–2020). Even seemingly much more obscure locations like Algonquin Bay, featured in a popular Canadian crime series *Cardinal* (2017–2020), or Mantova, presented in an Italian crime sires *Il Processo* (*The Trial*, 2019), receive similar treatment and visual significance. In all those examples, the panoramic shots of urban landscape are routinely used as narrative junctures and contributors to the general atmosphere of the series. Thanks to them, the city assumes the role of another character that actively shapes the mood and plot of the narrative.

The images of cities, especially the long takes and aerial shots, were also frequently evoked during the coronavirus outbreak. This was yet another framework within which the panoramic shots of cities have been extensively used and reproduced. At first, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the deserted streets in big cities were news in themselves. Later, as they became more familiar, even normalised, they started to serve as backgrounds in the news reports, expert analyses, updates or alerts. They fulfilled a similar role to the cityscape shots in crime dramas. They were used as interludes and transition markers that guided the viewers from one story to another or provided backdrop to the spoken or textual information displayed via infographics. Nevertheless, they were also crucial in the creation of the atmosphere and wider emotional context for the news. Notably, with time, pictures of abandoned streets changed their character. From pure curiosity they evolved towards imagery inducing a more contemplative and reflective moods. We could also witness the process of democratisation of those shots. First the national media showed the footage of deserted streets from the biggest cities. Then, the theme was picked up by the local outlets and private individuals on social media. They presented the empty streets in the smallest and most remote towns.

The very first images of the deserted, silent streets, of radically disrupted urban life, came from Wuhan. It is worth noting today how the pictures from China were framed in much of the Western media. Rather than glimpses into the immediate future, which indeed they were – the future so close it would materialize in Europe within barely several weeks – they were presented as exotic curiosity, even instances of some oriental folly. The coronavirus out-

break seemed determined by the peculiar Chinese conditions. Overpopulation, loose hygiene standards and primitive culinary tastes for bats, snakes or pangolins sold at repulsive "wet markets" demarcated the Chinese from the Westerners. The old orientalist tropes received further reinforcement from popular beliefs about authoritarian China vis-a-vis democratic Western societies. Apparently, the mysterious disease finally exposed the cruel, repressive and paranoid regime bent on lying and denying. By contrast, Westerners fed on a solid diet of free speech, transparent and democratic procedures, independent media and proper food safety standards should not feel anxious. After all, intensive farming practices and food factories operating in the West are usually kept well out of sight. Their produce, before reaching the supermarket shelves, is properly treated with antibiotics, washed in chlorine and deep-frozen. Certainly, no nasty virus could survive in such conditions.

Today we reluctantly recollect the detached amusement with which much of the Western world observed the dramatic events unfolding in China in early 2020. Rather than focusing on humanitarian relief and preparation, on securing face masks, developing testing facilities and instilling new sanitary regimes, Western politicians and media pundits started basking in *schadenfreude*. Many commentators openly contemplated the imminent demise of the Chinese communist party and speculated about China's "Chernobyl moment"[13]. Kevin Rudd, a former Australian prime minister and a prominent China watcher wrote about "audible popping of champagne corks in certain quarters of the U.S. foreign policy establishment", inspired by the conviction that the "giant geopolitical bubble had finally begun to deflate and China's Communist Party leadership, […] was at last coming apart"[14]. Obviously, within weeks, the initial smugness of the Western elites disappeared without any trace[15].

---

[13]   R. Truex, *China's Chernobyl Never Seems to Arise*, 17.02.2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/coronavirus-wont-be-chinas-chernobyl/606673/, 28.08.2021; J. Anderlini, *Xi Jinping faces China's Chernobyl moment*, "Financial Times", 10.02.2020, https://www.ft.com/content/6f7fdbae-4b3b-11ea-95a0-43d18ec715f5; *Coronavirus 'cover-up' is China's Chernobyl – White House adviser*, "Reuters", 24.05.2020, sec. World News, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-usa-china-idUKKBN2300P3.

[14]   K. Rudd, *The Coming Post-COVID Anarchy*, 4.06.2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-05-06/coming-post-covid-anarchy.

[15]   Few examples seem better suited to illustrate the change of mood than the comparison between two pieces of journalistic commentary. One is the podcast from *The Guardian* "Could coronavirus be China's Chernobyl moment?" from 25 February 2020 (L. Kuo and R. Humphrey's, *Coronavirus: could this be China's Chernobyl moment? – podcast*, "The Guardian", 25.02.2020, sec. News, https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2020/feb/25/could-coronavirus-be-china-chernobyl-moment-podcast)

In *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek applied Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' concept of the five stages of grief (i.e., denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance)[16] to describe the reactions to crises in contemporary capitalist societies[17]. The analogy seems particularly pertinent in the case of the COVID-19 emergency. First was denial. Although China had been intimately linked to the West by numerous global channels, many deluded themselves that the deadly disease would not spread beyond Asia. When denial became untenable, aggression followed. Racial abuse, prejudice and discrimination against Asians (not just the Chinese, but all Asians) exploded throughout the supposedly civilised world.

Similar patterns of prejudiced thinking and crude stereotyping emerged (on a smaller scale, but still) when northern Italy became the first major European cluster of the pandemic. Europeans seemed reluctant to recognise the obvious facts concerning Lombardy and its capital Milan. As a major global business centre, closely cooperating with China and densely populated with many senior citizens, Lombardy was uniquely exposed to COVID-19. But other reasons appeared more convenient to explain the particularly bad Italian outbreak. Italians were hit so hard because of their supposed carefree attitudes, propensity to talk loudly, kiss and embrace strangers at meetings or because of their predilection for spending excessive amounts of time on social gatherings, especially over food and drink. Only after the first images of the Chinese planes landing in Italy with humanitarian aid appeared in the media, the European elites realised that instead of focusing on inventing excuses, they should concentrate on delivering effective help.

Obviously, no measure of denial or aggression could impede the spread of the virus. Especially, that the social and political responses to the disease proved far more universal than anyone wanted to admit. When COVID-19 cases exploded across the West and other parts of the world, the charges initially aimed exclusively at the Chinese authorities resurfaced in many other

and the other is Branko Milanovic' article in *Foreign Affairs* "Is the Pandemic China's Sputnik Moment?" (B. Milanovic, *Is the Pandemic China's Sputnik Moment?*, 13.05.2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-05-12/pandemic-chinas-sputnik-moment). The two pieces not only illustrate the incessant predilection to view contemporary China in the West through comparisons to the Soviet Union, but most fundamentally a change in perception of the way the coronavirus pandemic has been handled. *The Guardian*'s podcast highlights China's alleged structural weakness. Milanovic's text "The Sputnik moment" indicates the transition of China's perception in the USA from a mere antagonist to a formidable technological and military rival.

[16]  The five stages come from Kübler-Ross' influential book *On Death and Dying* (1969).
[17]  S. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, Verso, London and New York 2011, p. ix; S. Žižek, *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*, John Wiley & Sons, New York 2020, p. 49.

A brilliant invention grinds to a halt…

countries. Organisation of coverups, exploitation of the disease for crude political propaganda, intimidation of the medical personnel, manipulation of the data and statistics became a disturbingly common practice.

In the second half of March 2020, the images first seen in Wuhan became a reality across Europe[18]. Country after country started enforcing strict lockdowns. Overnight, the cities that ostensibly never slept succumbed to deep hibernation. The imposed slumber was to last not for hours, like it was sometimes the case on national holidays or during brief technical disruptions, but for weeks. Supposedly perennial cities proved surprising vulnerability to a humble pathogen. To quote Slavoj Žižek again, "the most intricate human structures became paralysed by the most primitive, stupidly repetitive, pre-sexual biological form of a virus that many scientists believe does not even deserve to be called life"[19]. The images of the silent and empty cities affected viewers in the simplest and most direct way. They offered a pure exemplification of what Richard Grusin called mediashock, "the simultaneous remediation and pre-mediation of shock or disaster" that "makes the media public feel anxious and reassures them […] so that they continue to return to their social media networks and devices, to television or online news sources, and are reassured to find their networks still operating"[20]. Without any need for explanation or context, the pictures revealed some dramatic and unexpected change. The impact on the audience was direct and visceral. The dramatism of the incoming images was further enhanced by the phenomenon's universal rather than local character. Within a couple of weeks, few places in the world could declare to be COVID-free. However, the reproductions of empty cities were effective also because apart from immediacy, they carried with them a wealth of connotations and associations. They animated a diverse, often contradictory string of narratives that could be easily picked up by the audience. The silent cities under the COVID-induced lockdowns touched upon what Raymond Williams labelled the "structure of feeling", that is, they revealed some subtle or even subconscious feelings in cultural practices that registered a deep insight into the emotions laid just under the surface of life[21]. Put differently, their effect was based on the invocation of the sublime, the ability to deliver a message of profound affective and aesthetic impact and multiple layers of meaning that were often contradictory. The empty cities also worked as a memento of the apocalypse in its original sense,

---

18    With the commonly known exceptions of Sweden and Belarus.

19    *Pandemic!…*, op. cit., p. 52.

20    R. Grusin, *Mediashock*, [in:] *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, De Gruyter 2015, p. 34, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110365481.29/html.

21    Ibid.

denoting not just annihilation, but revelation of some deeper truth. Joshua Gunn and David Beard called it the apocalyptic sublime that had resided in the narratives and then entered the realm of reality and news[22].

The most fundamental contradiction carried by the pictures of the abandoned streets was their simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity. The imagery was striking because it reflected an occurrence without a precedent within the living memory of the audience. Yet, the empty cities were not entirely new. In fact, they were commonly-known from numerous apocalyptic and dystopian narratives. Films like *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007) or television series such as *The Walking Dead* (2010-) or *The Rain* (2018–2020) are just a few of the more recognisable examples. Moreover, apart from being alarming, the images could also induce a sense of perverse aesthetic pleasure. As Eva Horn has observed, modern humans are distinguished by their predilection for consuming depictions of their own destruction[23]. In what Horn perceives as the inversion of the modernist belief in progress, contemporary humans often cherish fantasies of collective suicide and the relief it might bring. The attraction to the images of destruction or marks of failed civilisations is naturally not limited to contemporary apocalyptic narratives. It was already prominent in the Romantic era. The Romantics greatly amplified popular fads for ruins, empty cathedrals and desolate abbeys. Today the same predilections are present in the fascination with abandoned industrial and commercial structures. The so-called ruin porn and dark tourism have drawn people to such places as Pripyat (the deserted city in Ukraine close to the Chernobyl power plant) or deindustrialised Detroit. For a few weeks, COVID-19 brought the spectre of Pripyat right to the heart of the bustling global capitalist hubs.

Almost immediately after the imposition of the lockdowns, the fictional postapocalyptic narratives started to seep into the collective perception of reality. In a truly postmodern manner, people stuck in their homes turned to different fictional representations of the pandemic to help them process their experiences. Books such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (c. 1350–1353), Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) or Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), appeared on the Amazon bestseller list. A similar phenomenon happened on many streaming platforms. They registered a sudden surge of interest in such forgotten titles as *Outbreak* (1995) or *Contagion* (2011). Life began to imitate fiction and fiction began to illuminate life. For instance, in Italy, various officials quoted familiar apocalyptic narratives to urge the public to

---

[22]   J. Gunn and D.E. Beard, *On the apocalyptic sublime* "Southern Communication Journal", 2000, t. 65, no 4, pp. 269–286.

[23]   *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*, Columbia University Press, New York 2018, ebook.

A brilliant invention grinds to a halt… **181**

follow lockdown restrictions. Famously, the mayor of Calabria, Giuseppe Falcomatà berated his fellow citizens on social media: "Look, this isn't a film. You are not Will Smith in *I Am Legend*. So, you have to go home"[24].

Naturally, there were also other differences between the apocalyptic narratives and the reality of the lockdowns. The streets of the cities could look deserted, but in fact the cities themselves were not. They still contained people, as most of the inhabitants stayed in their homes. Urban life was not annihilated, only forced into hiding. The cities were still teaming with life. Just the inhabitant's energy had to be contained inside. Naturally, there were many disastrous consequences of the prolong confinement. Social isolation and anxiety took its toll on many people's mental health. Most worryingly, prolonged seclusion precipitated the explosion of domestic violence. But the lockdowns that emptied the streets also evoked many acts of human solidarity. Paradoxically, the most common way of expressing that solidarity was through practicing social isolation. There were many signs of social breakup: panic buying, anti-masking protests, COVID denialism and aggression towards the infected or people of Asian descent. On the other hand, we could see the outpourings of positive feelings and numerous instances of cooperation and sacrifice.

Pandemic not only exacerbated many inconveniences of modern urban life but also exposed the previously disregarded perils of economic deregulation and excessive individualism. The virus has proven equally deadly to the vulnerable and the dogmas of the neoliberal mindset. Earlier strengths suddenly turned into major weaknesses. The very same conditions that made the global urban centres influential and wealthy, rendered them extremely vulnerable during the pandemic. Because of their very connectedness and openness to the world, big cities became red zones and no-go areas. The cult of efficiency, outsourcing, tight supply chains and lean manufacturing underwent a radical stress-test. In the earlier decades, corporations as well as the entire states focused on eliminating "inefficient waste". Margins and reserves had been relentlessly cut, buffers for emergency eliminated. But when confronted with crisis, the supposedly super-efficient economies found it astoundingly hard to readjust and deliver even such basic products as facemasks, gloves or sanitary gel.

Under the pandemic conditions cities had to readjust. Almost overnight, from the epitomes of freedom and independence they turned into traps. The endless, unconcerned crowds that in normal conditions provided protection

---

24    A. Giuffrida, '*This is not a film*': *Italian mayors rage at virus lockdown dodgers*, 23.03.2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/this-is-not-a-film-italian-mayors-rage-coronavirus-lockdown-dodgers, 23.05.2020.

from ostracism, intolerance or contempt, became the source of the greatest threat. The experience of lockdown and images of empty streets shifted the horizons. Isolation from nature facilitated by modern cities suddenly became problematic, even unbearable. Lockdowns also forced people to seek strategies of coping and defiance. Many turned to artistic expression to funnel stymied energies. People hung paintings or self-made posters and coordinated night-time light displays. They also staged regular sessions of singing or playing musical instruments on their balconies. Others just clapped to honour the medical staff or banged their pots to vent frustration at bungling politicians. Silenced cities could not stay silent for very long.

After the initial shock, the images of empty cities started to work as a de-familiarizing force, jerking the city-dwellers out of their daily routines and mundane concerns. With the schedules, travel plans and engagements suddenly rescinded, many were forced to re-examine their lives. Most fundamentally, the disruption to the seemingly incessant follow of the city life gave people time for reflection and rest. Long before the pandemic, Carl Ceder-ström and Andre Spicer described the unlikely pleasure that may come from enforced idleness. They called the phenomenon the freedom of the sickbed. Being incapacitated is normally an inconvenience, but sometimes it offers a unique, guilt-free relief from work and chores. Cederström and Spicer evoked the celebrated Norwegian novelist, Karl Ove Knausgaard, to illustrate their insights. As they summarise,

> being violently ill or injured are the only two moments in four years when Karl Ove feels any sense of relief. Being ill releases him from the daily demands and finally allows him to live. For Knausgaard, true living does not seem to be found in being active or going out of his way to maximize his health and happiness. Instead, it is in moments of passivity and surrender that he begins to enjoy himself[25].

For many people, lockdown worked similarly to Knausagaard's incapacitating injury. It offered an escape from the hamster wheel of daily duties and gave the permission to remain idle.

The sudden withdrawal from normal preoccupations also provoked some deeper reflections about the nature of contemporary work. We had to reconsider which of our actions were useful and sensible and which were simply pointless. In 2018, David Graeber in his *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* described the contemporary phenomenon of proliferation of employment that was devoid of practical purpose or social worth. Graeber defined bullshit jobs as a "form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or perni-

---

25   C. Cederström and A. Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome*, Polity, London, 2015, p. 118.

cious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case"[26]. Graeber included HR consultants, communications coordinators, PR researchers, financial strategists, telemarketers, corporate lawyers in this category and, as he put it, "the sort of people (very familiar in academic contexts) who spend their time staffing committees that discuss the problem of unnecessary committees"[27]. Graeber also described the widespread modern pathology of "bullshitisation" of otherwise worthwhile professions. By that he meant the increase in the amount of time required in various positions to fill forms, evaluation sheets, reports, reviews and other kinds of tedious distracting bureaucratic work. Because of the escalating red tape, teachers have less time for teaching students, doctors for treating patients and police officers for patrolling the streets. Everybody seems to complain about the mounting administrative load and almost everyone admits it is counterproductive. However, the new bureaucratic requirements only keep piling up like some unstoppable force of nature. Graeber made an important distinction between bad, "shit" jobs and bullshit jobs. The former are characterised by difficult, unpleasant or health-damaging conditions and yet are required for normal functioning of societies. Bad jobs are usually unpleasant and poorly paid. Surprisingly, bullshit jobs are often easy to do and offer relatively generous remuneration. This is how Graeber vividly explained the difference between the two kinds of employment:

> Shit jobs tend to be blue collar and pay by the hour, whereas bullshit jobs tend to be white collar and salaried. Those who work shit jobs tend to be the object of indignities; they not only work hard but also are held in low esteem for that very reason. But at least they know they're doing something useful. Those who work bullshit jobs are often surrounded by honor and prestige; they are respected as professionals, well paid, and treated as high achievers – as the sort of people who can be justly proud of what they do. Yet secretly they are aware that they have achieved nothing; they feel they have done nothing to earn the consumer toys with which they fill their lives; they feel it's all based on a lie-as, indeed, it is[28].

He even suggested an inverse correlation between indispensability of a job and financial rewards offered for it. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a ruthless unmasker which professions were truly essential and which could be suspended without any impact on society. Frustratingly however, there is little evidence that the scourge of bullshit jobs and pointless procedures will

---

[26]    D. Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Penguin Books, London, 2019, pp. 9‒10.
[27]    Ibid., p. xiii.
[28]    Ibid., p. 15.

be mitigated by the COVID-19 experience. Probably, even more profound shock is required to change that aspect of our society.

Another surprising effect of the lockdowns, known from apocalyptic and catastrophic narratives, was the phenomenon of nature reclaiming urban spaces. The silent streets, vacated by people, did not stay empty for very long. Soon after the imposition of the lockdowns reports started popping up from around the world about nature taking its course. In Wales wild goats were photographed roaming the streets in a coastal town of Llandudno. In Italy sea birds and dolphins reappeared (after a long absence) in Venice's canals. Condemned to watching television, we could enjoy pictures of a puma wandering lazily through the streets of Santiago in Chile, or lions napping on a deserted asphalt road in South Africa's Kruger National Park[29].

There have also been some more tangible implications of the lockdowns. The experience of streets free from congestion soon inspired major rethinks about the organisation of cities. Most famously, Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris used the opportunity of reduced car traffic to extend cycle lanes and pedestrian areas in her city. In some cases, she even ceded the entire streets to bikes. Soon, the authorities of the French capital embarked on implementing the *ville du quart d'heure* (quarter-of-an-hour city) initiative[30]. The aim was to make Paris more liveable by rendering the key facilities connected with shopping, education, physical exercise or work to remain reachable within a maximum 15-minutes walking distance for any resident. Many similar initiatives were considered around the world before 2020, but only after the pandemic and prolonged lockdowns, they started to be taken more seriously[31].

Today, it is too early to speculate about the enduring socio-political outcomes of the pandemic. Certainly, COVID-19 unmasked the fragility of the modern city and drew attention to many previously ignored problems. The pandemic also reaffirmed our fascination with urban life and its visual representations. The images of empty, deserted streets would remain powerful

---

[29]   *The urban wild: animals take to the streets amid lockdown – in pictures* "The Guardian", 22.04.2020, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/apr/22/animals-roaming-streets-coronavirus-lockdown-photos; W. Lanzoni and K. Almond, *With cities on lockdown, animals are finding more room to roam*, 1.05.2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/01/world/gallery/animals-coronavirus-trnd/index.html, 23.05.2020.

[30]   P. Yeung, *How '15-minute cities' will change the way we socialise*, 4.01.2021, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201214-how-15-minute-cities-will-change-the-way-we-socialise, 6.09.2021; M.M. Euklidiadas, *Paris wants to become a '15-minute city'*, 18.05.2020, https://tomorrow.city/a/paris-15-minute-city, 6.09.2021.

[31]   V. Walt, *Paris' Mayor on How Lockdown Gave Glimpses at a Greener City*, 9.07.2020, https://time.com/5864707/paris-green-city-2/, 6.09.2021.

and enduring mementos of the collective experience of the lockdowns. They will solidify the cultural significance of the panoramic representations of cities by further extending their symbolic and affective impact.

## Bibliography

Anderlini J., Xi Jinping faces China's Chernobyl moment, "Financial Times", 10.02.2020, https://www.ft.com/content/6f7fdbae-4b3b-11ea-95a0-43d18ec715f5.

Cederström C., and Spicer A., The Wellness Syndrome, Polity 2015.

Certeau M. de, The Practice of Everyday Life, University of California Press 2011.

Cordes V.F., New York in Cinematic Imagination: The Agitated City, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York 2020.

Cosgrove D.E., Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination, Johns Hopkins University Press 2003.

Euklidiadas M.M., Paris wants to become a '15-minute city', 18.05.2020, https://tomorrow.city/a/paris-15-minute-city, 6.09.2021.

Gilbert D., The Three Ages of Aerial Vision: London's Aerial Iconography from Wenceslaus Hollar to Google Earth, "The London Journal", 2010, t.35, no 3, pp. 289–299.

Giuffrida A., 'This is not a film': Italian mayors rage at virus lockdown dodgers, 23.03.2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/this-is-not-a-film-italian-mayors-rage-coronavirus-lockdown-dodgers, 23.05.2020.

Graeber D., Bullshit Jobs: A Theory, Penguin Books, London 2019.

Grusin R., Mediashock, [in:] Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture, De Gruyter 2015, pp. 29–39, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110365481.29/html.

Gunn J., and Beard D.E., On the apocalyptic sublime, "Southern Communication Journal", 2000, vol.65, no 4, pp. 269–286.

Horn E., The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age, Columbia University Press, New York 2018, ebook.

Kabil A., Seeing the Whole Earth from Space Changed Everything, 22.05.2018, https://medium.com/the-long-now-foundation/earth-and-civilization-in-the-macroscope-82243cad20bd.

Kilgannon C., As Morgues Fill, N.Y.C. to Bury Some Virus Victims in Potter's Field, "The New York Times", 10.04.2020, sec. New York, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/nyregion/coronavirus-deaths-hart-island-burial.html.

Kuo L., and Humphreys R., Coronavirus: could this be China's Chernobyl moment? – podcast, "The Guardian", 25.02.2020, sec. News, https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2020/feb/25/could-coronavirus-be-china-chernobyl-moment-podcast.

Lanzoni W., and Almond K., With cities on lockdown, animals are finding more room to roam, 1.05.2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/01/world/gallery/animals-coronavirus-trnd/index.html, 23.05.2020.

Milanovic B., *Is the Pandemic China's Sputnik Moment?*, 13.05.2020, https://www.for-eignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020–05–12/pandemic-chinas-sputnik-moment.

Phillips T., *Bolsonaro supporter desecrates Brazil beach memorial for 40,000 coronavirus victims*, "The Guardian", 11.06.2020, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/11/bolsonaro-supporter-destroys-brazil-beach-memorial-40000-coronavirus-victims.

Rudd K., *The Coming Post-COVID Anarchy*, 4.06.2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020–05–06/coming-post-covid-anarchy.

Truex R., *China's Chernobyl Never Seems to Arise*, 17.02.2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/coronavirus-wont-be-chinas-chernobyl/606673/, 28.08.2021.

Walt V., *Paris' Mayor on How Lockdown Gave Glimpses at a Greener City*, 9.07.2020, https://time.com/5864707/paris-green-city-2/, 6.09.2021.

Yeung P., *How '15-minute cities' will change the way we socialise*, 4.01.2021, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201214-how-15-minute-cities-will-change-the-way-we-socialise, 6.09.2021.

Yuan J., *Burials on Hart Island, where New York's unclaimed lie in mass graves, have risen fivefold*, 16.04.2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/hart-island-mass-graves-coronavirus-new-york/2020/04/16/a0c413ee-7f5f-11ea-a3ee-13e1ae0a3571_story.html, 29.06.2020.

Žižek S., *Living in the End Times*, Verso, London and New York 2011.

———, Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World, John Wiley & Sons 2020.

*The urban wild: animals take to the streets amid lockdown – in pictures*, "The Guardian", 22.04.2020, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/apr/22/animals-roaming-streets-coronavirus-lockdown-photos.

*Coronavirus 'cover-up' is China's Chernobyl – White House adviser*, "Reuters", 24.05.2020, sec. World News, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-usa-china-idUKKBN2300P3.

**Address:** Stankomir Nicieja, Uniwersytet Opolski, Instytut Językoznawstwa, Katedra Nauk o Kulturze i Religii, Plac Kopernika 11, 45–040 Opole, Poland.