

## **All I know is how little I know: a personal reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic**

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The question this pandemic forces us to ask is: what truly matters? It makes us re-evaluate the divisions we have created amongst ourselves, and rethink our relationship with authority, information and certainty. It casts doubt on the political and economic choices that have enabled the exploitation of the very people we now rely on so desperately: healthcare staff and gig economy workers. Many things we took for granted all our lives are now precarious—we are even left questioning whether all the people in our lives will be here a year from now. And we are struggling to search for the right mindset and emotional frame to hold during this time.

I am a rare person for whom there have been some positive consequences amid the devastating impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. While doing my screenwriting MFA in Los Angeles, I have been apart from my fiancée, who lives in back home in London. The mid-March ban on travel to the US from the EU, and UCLA's move to online instruction, meant that my spring break visit home rather suddenly turned into my moving back to England. This meant I could finish film school *and* be with my fiancée. During this bewildering time, I'm in the place where I feel at home. We have had to postpone our wedding from this July to a year later. But to be more than mildly disappointed about that feels rather naïve and absurd.

Hundreds of thousands have lost their lives. They were loved ones to myriad people who have as a result suffered devastating loss. As entire industries crumble, tens of millions have had their livelihoods plucked away in a matter of days. For hospital, grocery, pharmacy and delivery

workers, every day is a risk. The suspension of schooling is a huge loss to many kids and disruption to their families, and where online classes are offered, not everyone can count on the necessary resources at home. My heart breaks for so many people. And as someone who quit a career in public interest law to become a screenwriter, I feel useless. But when I think of my 25-year-old doctor cousin who braves the respiratory ward every day, I'm reminded that he and his fellow medics find their joy and comfort in watching movies and TV. My teacher, filmmaker Tim Kirkman, said to me: "it has always been the artist who documents and witnesses and helps the world heal. We have work to do."

One of the most valuable things that stories can do is help us make sense of our emotions. At the moment, we are all feeling a constantly changing and overwhelming mass of different emotions. Concern for ourselves. Concern for others. Disappointment at changes in life, and boredom, but also shame at grumbling about little things. Immense anger at negligent and deceitful leaders and their apologists, but also the desire to pull together. Fear and wariness of strangers as disease vectors, but also guilt for viewing our fellow human beings as threats. The general insistence that things will eventually return to normal—but also the little voice of doubt that wonders if it ever can. And the disbelief that we could find ourselves in a situation like this, where life was upended rapidly, without fanfare or warning.

There have been reports of people with anxiety and depression feeling *better* during this time.<sup>1</sup> The thinking is: when you spend your days mentally besieged by catastrophic projections of upcoming events in your daily lives, a situation where you are suddenly in fact powerless provides odd clarity. I identify with this to some extent. The situation is distressing, and going outside to a ghost town can feel apocalyptic, to say nothing of the frightful fear this invisible

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<sup>1</sup> Farrah Jarral, "The lockdown paradox: why some people's anxiety is improving during the crisis", *The Guardian* (Apr 29, 2020).

threat instils in us, and the exhausting perpetual siege state. But what remains within my control—sitting indoors in a room and writing—happens to be the very thing that makes me feel like myself—so I have that to hold onto during this time.

That said, I am a month away from graduating. And I don't know what the future holds. Before the pandemic, I managed to land a meeting with Netflix to pitch them a show. Things looked exciting. However, the film and TV production industries have been crippled by the obvious inability to film anything. A world that is already pretty hard for a new writer to break into just got perhaps even more impenetrable. Then again, that's life for everyone else at the moment—why would the entertainment industry be immune to that?

We're told that this virus is the "great leveller"—but it's plain to see that its impacts are not suffered equally. People of color are more likely to be infected, due to greater likelihood of working in frontline roles.<sup>2</sup> It's been suggested that the protests decrying lockdowns should be viewed against the backdrop of this disparate impact.<sup>3</sup> The US Supreme Court put Wisconsinites in the appalling position of having to risk their lives to vote; this was reported to mostly affect Democrats and minorities.<sup>4</sup> Essential workers are being rightly lauded for their courage in taking risks to help the general population get what they need. But those workers have seen themselves more and more exploited over the past decades. The UK health sector's funding was slashed in the name of austerity.<sup>5</sup> Delivery drivers have been forced to work "zero-hour" contracts that technically count as employment but offer no guarantee of work or any protections at all.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Oliver Laughland & Lauren Zanolli, "Why is coronavirus taking such a deadly toll on black Americans?" *The Guardian* (Apr 25, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Adam Serwer, "The coronavirus was an emergency until Trump found out who was dying" *Atlantic* (May 8, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Ed. Board, "Wisconsin voters faced an impossible choice: it should not happen again" *N.Y. Times* (Apr 16, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Alfredo Saad-Filho, "Has austerity led us to the COVID-19 pandemic?" *Kings College London* (May 13, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Tom Wall, "Gig economy: 'If you can't work, you don't eat' – despair of the zero hours workforce" *The Observer* (Mar 21, 2020).

Medics have described dire shortages of protective equipment.<sup>7</sup> The US invocation of the Defense Production Act for meatpacking plants has put those workers at risk while immunizing employers from liability for safety failures.<sup>8</sup> And Amazon warehouse workers and drivers consistently express worry about the safety of their working conditions.<sup>9</sup>

The pandemic has hit during a time when some major countries are governed by populist, nationalist leaders. More than ever, in a time of crisis, we look to our leaders for, well, leadership. Both in terms of directing action to save lives and livelihoods, and also in setting the tone for the nation's attitude. The virus has exposed the limitations of men who ran on platforms of blame and jingoism. They continue to deflect, lie and smear to distract from their dearth of ideas. History will judge whether the world's leaders responded in the right way, but it should not be deemed unpatriotic to criticize failings by our governments that are causing needless deaths. Some countries seem to be doing much better than others. The greater success of countries with women leaders is notable, and may be indicative of "a political culture in which there's a relative support and trust in the government"<sup>10</sup> as opposed to what we've seen in the UK and US which is the constant undermining of trust in public institutions by strongmen.

Trust in science and expertise was also undermined in recent years. In this pandemic we are remembering how much they matter—while being reminded of their complexity, which is uncomfortable in an era of soundbites and braggadocio decisiveness. What seems like flip-flopping (for instance advice on masks)—which detractors instantly seize upon to try discredit experts—is often really a revised conclusion based on new information. Absence of evidence is

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<sup>7</sup> Claire Press, "Coronavirus: The NHS workers wearing bin bags as protection", *BBC News* (Apr 5, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Eric Schlosser, "The Essentials: Why we're killing the people who feed us" *The Atlantic* (May 12, 2020)

<sup>9</sup> Louise Matsakis, "9 Amazon workers describe the daily risks they face in the pandemic" *WIRED* (Apr 10, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Helen Lewis, "The pandemic has revealed the weakness of strongmen" *The Atlantic* (May 6, 2020)

not the same as evidence of absence.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes we can only have a partial picture. To have accuracy, we have to be tolerant of uncertainty and not demand comforting but misleading absolutes. But nuance is a scarce commodity in today's public discourse.

The pandemic is exacerbating the social changes we have seen brought about by technology: increasing replacement of in-person interaction with online communication; shopping online rather than going to stores; streaming TV rather than going to the movies. Paradoxically, these changes have provided the very infrastructure that keeps us going socially, economically and psychologically at the moment. But as Naomi Klein notes, tech giants are seizing upon this temporary fix to drive a “permanent – and highly profitable – no-touch future.”<sup>12</sup> It's the coronavirus equivalent of “disaster capitalism,” the subject of Klein's influential book *The Shock Doctrine*. Just as Hernan Cortés took advantage of a devastating smallpox epidemic to break the beleaguered Mexica, the virus may be followed by attempts at deregulation, privatization and merciless austerity along the lines of the structural adjustment programs the International Monetary Fund imposed on developing and struggling nations.

Teofilo Ruiz explains that after the Black Death, feudal lords in Iberia sabotaged opportunities for improving peasants' working terms and social mobility, despite how much the economy depended on them.<sup>13</sup> We need to reject post-pandemic solutions that either leave unchecked or exacerbate our economies' most unfair tendencies (learning from the aftermath of the 2008 crisis). Above all, we need to take care of the people who are taking care of us. The enormous debt that we owe healthcare and other frontline workers must not end up being a platitude: it must be repaid with meaningful action to improve their pay and working conditions. There's a meme going round with a nurse saying “I can't eat applause. Maybe vote for someone

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<sup>11</sup> Ed Yong, “Why the coronavirus is so confusing” *The Atlantic* (Apr 20, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Naomi Klein, “How big tech plans to profit from the pandemic”, *The Guardian* (May 13, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> TEOFILO RUIZ, *SPANISH SOCIETY, 1348-1700* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2017) 53.

sensible next time, eh?” In the UK, on Thursday nights at 8pm, we all stand on our doorsteps and clap for medics and care workers as a thank you. The meme is right: applause must not end up being a self-satisfied gesture. Still, observing this weekly ritual is humbling and reminds us of the suffering and risks being borne by our fellow Brits. It’s incredibly moving, and I think it does bring us all together spiritually.

Will the pandemic ultimately unite us more than divide us? The entire world is suffering from it, but lockdown makes us feel more insular. We have seen blame heaped on China (with the virus being referred to as Chinese), and racist attacks have ensued. Admittedly the Chinese Communist Party leaders bear responsibility for inaction and concealment, in a way that is eerily reminiscent of the Chernobyl disaster. Some argue that the lesson of this pandemic is to reduce global dependency on China (a solution whose efficacy is debated). The only initial action that Trump took in response to the virus was to close the borders to Chinese and European travel. Perhaps the pandemic will accelerate the trend of increasing nationalism and disdain for global interdependency. Countries may pursue zero-sum strategies. But I write with an Anglo-American frame of reference. Calls for global cooperation are sounding elsewhere: at the EU, and the UN. International institutions may end up recovering some of the relevance they have lost since 9/11. On a more local level, we are seeing people find ways to help each other: volunteering to deliver groceries to self-isolating vulnerable people, fashioning masks and other protective gear, running long distance to raise money, and (in the case of entertainers) putting on special shows for free.

All of this conjures up a medley of different and contradictory emotions—like life in general, only dialled up to eleven.<sup>14</sup> Isolation forces moments of reflection upon us. We are all learning about ourselves. Amid the eerie calm of lockdown, I have a sense of clarity that all I can do is be myself—while also having humility about my place in relation to my fellow humans.

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<sup>14</sup> *This is Spinal Tap* (1984).