***Lonely Streets*: A Short Reflection**

Agnes Czajka argues that by drawing a poignant connection between Covid-19 and the devastation wrought by the Anthropocene, the film *Lonely Streets* implores us to awaken from dangerous delusions.

Created by Syrian refugees living in Malaysia, this beautiful film of lonely streets under lockdown is framed around [Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar’s](https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/culture/2020/06/20/world-refugee-day-syrian-writers-book-of-poems-reflects-his-time-in-exile-in-malaysia) poem to ‘Mother Earth’. It brings together reflections on multiple overlapping crises around inequality, migration, health and environment in the empty streets of Kuala Lumpur where the homeless, the excluded and feral cats now reign.



@[The Star](https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/culture/2020/06/20/world-refugee-day-syrian-writers-book-of-poems-reflects-his-time-in-exile-in-malaysia) courtesy of Terence Toh

As I was watching the film *Lonely Streets*, I couldn’t help but think of Covid-19 as a reckoning – an agonising, heart-breaking reckoning with what we have done to our planet and to ourselves. The post-apocalyptic imagery evoked by the film – of empty streets; of abandoned factories; of trees blossoming without us; of seasons changing, unwitnessed – seemed also a foreshadowing, not of the death of the planet, but of the death of us. Nature, as the film’s narrator remarked, was having an unexpected party, one from which our species was conspicuously absent. Give us another chance, the narrator implored. We’re sorry for the abuse we’ve inflicted, we’re regretful for the damage we’ve done. Mother Earth, give us a second chance.

But are we really regretful? And if we are, has the regret translated into action? Are we now willing to do what is needed, to make the radical changes to how we live that are required if we are to avert an apocalypse?

Some have lamented that the Covid-19 pandemic has taken away from efforts to respond to the climate emergency. As British journalist [Jonathan Gornall observed](https://www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/opinion/climate-change-will-still-be-a-threat-after-covid-19-is-gone/) ‘There is no room in global news coverage right now for headlines about melting polar ice caps and rising levels of carbon dioxide’ even though the concentration of greenhouse gasses is at its highest in three million year and the Earth’s temperature 3°C hotter than it has ever been. This is not to minimise the impact of the virus, Gornall continued, ‘but it will pass’. The climate emergency will not.

Others have seen the pandemic as a glimmer of hope – a chance to re-evaluate our lifestyles, to revalue our values, to live more quietly, leaving a gentler footprint. Covid-19 [temporarily cut global carbon dioxide emissions by 5-8%](https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-coronavirus-set-to-cause-largest-ever-annual-fall-in-co2-emissions) last year. Yet even this does not bring us anywhere near the reduction needed to keep the Earth’s temperature from rising beyond the maximum sustainable level of 1.5°C. As [Simon Evans writes in *Carbon Brief*](https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-coronavirus-set-to-cause-largest-ever-annual-fall-in-co2-emissions), to achieve this, global emissions would have to fall by 7.6% every year for the next ten years. Emissions are also likely to rebound, perhaps even increase, if life returns to the pre-pandemic ‘normal’. Previous recessions and crises have all but [confirmed this](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-52485712). And even it doesn’t, it might still not be enough. As streets have emptied and flights were grounded, our lives have moved online, where they continue apace. In 2019 internet accounted for [6-10% of global energy consumption, contributing to 4% of global greenhouse emissions](https://www.greenjournal.co.uk/2019/08/the-untold-truth-between-our-internet-usage-and-its-contribution-to-climate-change/). Prior to the explosion of our online worlds, this was already predicted to increase by [5-7% each year](https://www.greenjournal.co.uk/2019/08/the-untold-truth-between-our-internet-usage-and-its-contribution-to-climate-change/).

Others still have pointed to the intersecting nature of the crises – to the deep-seated connections between climate change and pandemics, and to the likelihood of more to come if we do not take notice and take action. It is this intersection to which *Lonely Streets* also gestures. Scientists have long pointed out that climate change increases the risk of pandemics. The loss of habitat, due to rising temperatures, deforestation and human encroachment forces animals that would normally never encounter each other into contact, [creating an opportunity for pathogens to enter new hosts](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/subtopics/coronavirus-and-climate-change/). As they search for food and shelter on an increasingly anthropocentric planet, animals also are coming intro greater contact with human beings, likewise increasing the likelihood of transmission. Studies have also shown that [people who live in places poor air quality are more likely to die from Covid-19](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/subtopics/coronavirus-and-climate-change/). As Aaron Bernstein, Director of the Harvard Centre for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment remarks, [‘the separation of health and environmental policy is a dangerous delusion’](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/subtopics/coronavirus-and-climate-change/). By drawing a poignant connection between Covid-19 and the devastation wrought by the Anthropocene, *Lonely Streets* implores us to awaken from this dangerous delusion.

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