

Looking From My Rear Window: Chronicles of Lockdown

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1. There is no place like home... but not in lockdown

The disturbing images about the virus had reached Europe in December 2019 and the first alarm about a new potential pandemic began to sound in the media. Wuhan (China), where it first was identified, seemed to be very far distant by that time. The masks, the protection shields and the astronaut-like suits we saw on television looked unreal as if we were looking at a sci-fi movie. In fact, we never thought that COVID-19 could cross borders, reach Europe and spread across the globe so quickly. Or ever imagined that a small virus would turn our daily lives upside down.

The sudden appearance of the virus, its unexpected virulence and dissemination speed, the uncertainty about the future, caused fear and a strong alarm reaction. The world stopped, airports closed, shops and restaurants closed, schools and universities closed, theaters and cinemas closed, traffic vanished, cities became desert. The newscast lasted hours repeating the numbers of infected people, people in intensive care units or death. The horror images from hospitals spread fear and uncertainty. We were facing a powerful enemy and the metaphor of war became recurrent in scientific and political speeches. We were living what Bernard Henry-Lévy called the “First World Fear”¹. Almost one year and a half of this pandemic caused over three million deaths, a serious global economic crisis and a radical change of individual lives. Although the digital means and scientific responses (from sequencing coronavirus to vaccines and mass production in less than one year) never have been so fast and effective. Viruses have always been here with us, but “in the war between humans and pathogens, never

¹ Lévy, B-H. (2020). *Virus in the age of madness*. Yale University Press.

have humans been so powerful”², said recently Yuval Noah Harari to the *Financial Times*: “today humankind have the knowledge and tools necessary to prevent a new pathogen from spreading and becoming a pandemic.” If it fails, it will be not a scientific but a “political failure”, he points out. But the impact this pandemic had on our individual lives and in our social and mental health is yet to be understood. In women in particular, who had to concile familiar obligations, increasing domestic tasks while working from home.

By January 2020, the first infections were detected in Europe and on the 8th of March my University in Braga, in the north of Portugal, was shut down by order of the Portuguese NHS after a student tested positive for Covid-19. On the 18th of March the President of Republic Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa announced lockdown rules for fifteen days (known as “estado de emergência”), which were renewed twice, until the second of May. On the 14th of January 2021 the President of Republic reannounced lockdown which has been sucessively renewed until this month. When the University closed its doors overnight I felt shocked. I felt confused. Incapable of understanding this sudden change and the overwhelming and contradictory information we all had to deal with everyday. Suddenly, I saw myself forced to stay at home, allowed only to go out for essential shopping or taking the dog for a walk. Everything around me seemed to be unreal. The air was heavy, the days steel grey. Silence was so dense that we could touch it.

I was feeling lost and the old saying that “there is no place like home” simply didn’t make sense anymore. Sometimes I felt a prisoner in my own home, sometimes a foreigner as if I had just arrived to an unknown place; sometimes a caterpillar in its comfortable cocoon. It was safe and strange, cozy and suffocating, at the same time: I simply couldn’t imagine the metamorphosis we all were living in. I had always been strong and determined, even in very emotional difficult situations I had to face in the past, but now my sense of self was unexpectedly weakening: I didn’t know what to do, caught in between physical world and the virtual one where I was being pushed to.

“I feel as a foreigner in my own street. The sound of an emergency ambulance cuts through the silence of the highway. I am so disturbed that I abandon my window and close myself inside my room, fleeing the lockdown sounds. The soundtrack of this new season.

² Harari, Y.N. (2021). “Lessons from a Year of Covid”. *Financial Times*. February 26.

Music, as well as books, literature, are essential goods. I need to stock up human sounds, voices, piano or bass, jazz or blues, whatever. I need to hoard words that bring me the sensations back and make me read Caeiro's poems until they burn my eyes. I need to write chronicles, petals of words thrown away in the wind one by one. I need to get back to the amazing reality of things. To the wonder of the world that I have lost. ("One touch of blues". Season 2. 03.04.2020)

As an academic, I kept working. My classes moved overnight to online but none of us had been prepared, I couldn't see my students face or I was unexpectedly invading their rooms or kitchens, webinars and emails multiplied. I discovered myself living a digital life. I was tired and unmotivated. I couldn't concentrate myself. My critical faculties needed intensive care.

As a woman, I never felt so lonely. My daughter was working in London and we both had to decide if she would return to Portugal (and probably lose her job because of the quarantines) or stay in UK, which meant we couldn't help each other if needed. My youngest son was having university classes on-line and he couldn't keep me much company. Everything I loved was distant, closed or impossible. My familiar world was collapsing. For the first time in my life I was feeling helpless and face to face with my widow condition. I was not afraid of a virus, I was afraid of loneliness, as my first journal note makes it clear:

"It worries me to think about what will happen to the lady with the dog on a leash, the woman talking to her little carrots and to the cat lady which pets her cat like a baby in the next two weeks, in a month, in the uncertain end of these days of distance. The three confinement graces.

Is the virus of loneliness more dangerous than the one we have locked down ourselves against to? Are women a gender at risk? Will there be a possible isolation against the virus of isolation? I know loneliness by heart. I know its colour. I know the smell of each syllable on the hot summer nights. In the café, on the train, in the room or by the window, I am the anonymous woman that Edward Hopper painted. I am not afraid of the coronavirus but I am afraid of the coronafear. I am afraid of selfishness and indifference fever. I fear the suffocating nudity of the word loneliness" ("Women at the verge of a nervous breakdown". Season 1. Day 1. 19.03.2020).

2. A rear window of one's own: writing lockdown

Writing (and reading) had always been my shelter and strength. My own way of breathing out of the increasingly bureaucratic asphyxiating academic world and the scientific impersonality of academic writing. Instinctively, spontaneously, I started writing a journal on facebook on the first day of lockdown, March 19. By the time my University closed its doors I was reading *Incidental Inventions* which have recently been published in Portugal, a volume with the year-long columns Elena Ferrante wrote in the *Guardian* between January 2018-2019³. The italian novelist's advice about the urge to write was still echoing in my head: "If you feel the need to write, you absolutely should write. (..) We shouldn't put off writing until we've lived enough, read sufficiently, have a desk of our own in a room of our own with a garden overlooking the sea, have been through intense experiences live in a stimulating city, retreat to a mountain hut, have had children, have travelled extensively." I didn't have a garden overlooking the sea, but a small terrace overlooking my street and a rear (or front) window of my own made me decide. I decided to write not *after* pandemic and lockdown, but *during* lockdown, within the uncertainty and instability of the days. Trying to collect images for future memory and to read the signs of change around me. Trying to keep myself together, close to others and close to the world suddenly gone. Trying to put into words, to think and to feel this unexpected reality.

Initially, I thought it would be for fifteen days, ignoring that lockdown would be renewed twice, before summer. I wrote forty five accidental journal notes and I found myself living with words, waiting anxiously for the moment of seating at my desk and start to write. It was my moment of freedom, my mental fitness. I discovered then that writing was a way of keeping proximity with others and otherness in these days of social distance for sanitarian reasons. As I went on publishing my journal notes, my readers encouraged me to collect them in a book after lockdown. They were finally published in December under the title *Rear Window: Chronicles of Lockdown*.

³ Ferrante, E. (2019). *A Invenção Ocasional* (trad. Miguel Serras Pereira; ilustr. Andrea Ucini). Lisboa: Relógio d'Água. (*Incidental Inventions*, transl. Ann Goldstein, Europa Editions, e-book, 2019).

I would like to clarify that, since the term is not very used in the UK, “chronicle” refers to an ancient literary genre with no form, a short narrative porous to other genres (diary, journal, autobiography, memoir, essay), based on daily facts and an intimate point of view. A mutant and ephemeral form, as the name suggests, originated from Chronos, the greek God of time. Writing chronicles seemed to me particularly adequate to capture these days of change, this formless time. Ferrante said that a “writer’s talent is like a fishing net catching daily experiences”; writing these chronicles was my fishing net to capture quotidian gestures, voices, characters, sensations, images.

Being locked down, confined to my own home, my window (my rear and front window) was all I had left of the vanishing and distant world and the street where I live in the only world I could look at and share with others. When our hands can’t reach out for a compliment, we can only approximate one another from the inside”, says Slavoj Zizek⁴. Only from the “internal eye” that our pandemic way of wearing masks paradoxically seems to enlight. An internal lens. Two powerful images crossed my mind. One from my childhood in a small city, the highest in Portugal, located at Serra da Estrela. It was so cold in winter that when I woke up in the morning the window glasses were covered with an ice layer making it impossible to look outside. It seemed I was isolated inside, there was no way out. I was locked down in my own room. So I cut one potato in half and with this half potato on my hand I drew myself a small starch magic circle in the iced window glass. A magical lens from which I could see the world outside, the trees, the garden, the street and the houses, some people passing by. This original image reminded me of Jeffries, Hitchcock’s quarantined photographer with a broken leg confined to observe the backyard from his rear window with his camera or binoculars. I had no broken leg but like Jeffries or the child I once was I was confined indoors and have to observe the world outside from my rear (or front) window. My window was my lens, my “internal eye” from where I could see the far distant world. I focused myself to observe the windows and terraces around me, the empty park, people’s changing routines, gestures, voices and words, all the external signs of life:

⁴ Zizek, S. (2020). *A Pandemia que abalou o mundo* (trad. João Moita). Lisboa: Relógio d’Água. (*Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World (Chronicles of a Time Lost)*). Cambridge: Polity Press).

“From my window I can see the world. I’m writing this sentence leaning on each word, on each syllable, looking from that same metaphorical distance Vergilio Ferreira has spoken in Brussels when he said: “From my language I can see the sea”. A window is my own language these days. The place from where we can see the world, give form to our thoughts, express our feelings; the place from where we can communicate with the outside world, that is, with others. From my window I can see the whole world.

At least in these days of confinement where nothing else seems to exist apart from what the eyes can reach from our terraces and windows. Nothing happens on the street, except someone who is putting the garbage in the dustbin or walking the dog, someone crossing the sidewalk to go to the supermarket. One car passing by. A woman smoking a cigarette in her terrace. There are no children in the park. There are no hairdressers or fish markets open. There are no cafes. There are no pastries shops, except the one where I get my coffee in a disposable cup to drink outside which cheers up my soul and senses. There is nothing. This is a time of steel.

The woman in the pink bathrobe gave up on moving her home to the terrace and now hangs her indolent arms off the terrace rail, brokenhearted with a view to an empty street. A terrace can be a home, Dulce Maria Cardoso already said it and the woman in the pink bathrobe knows it, but the virus has postponed her will to change.

The old woman on the ground floor is losing shyness. She now dares to look at the street and to face the monstrous enemy with her face glued to the window’s glass as if it was stucked by a suction cup. The same invisible suction cup that sticks her to life.

Two astonished faces, frozen, suspended, looking at the present in a desert street. Nothing happens in my street while everything is happening. We only need to see.” (“Maluda’s Window”. Season 1. Day 12. 30.03.2020).

Writing became my watch-tower, my fishing net of daily images, my own way of being connected to people, to communicate with others and experience alterity. It allowed me to travel in time and space, beyond the closed borders and airports, to overcome the suffocating quotidian life during lockdown. Feeling inside me the pain of a desert city:

“The city hurts me. Its streets without people. The shop’s windows that no one stares at anymore. The unscented linden trees on the avenue. The helplessness of the bandstand. The piled-up chairs of Brasileira’s cafe, lined up against the outside walls, hurt me as if the heart of

the city has stopped. The pain is so intense that I can't go any further. I can't look at it anymore. I decided to return home." ("*Vanitas* is the shop window's name". Season 3. 26.04.2020.)

Writing allowed me to find myself smelling, tasting, hearing, and touching the world daily, as I registered in this brief note:

"Today, Good Friday, I need some colour in my life. The life that goes beyond my terrace. I need to feel the smell of oregano, coriander, basil and mint. Cinnamon, ginger and pepper. The flavour of saffron and lemon thyme. The colour and pulp of the fruit. The blue of the fish and the mystery of the shells. I need to feel the sea flavour of the Azorean barnacles". ("A terrace of colours and smells". Season 2. 10.04.2020).

Writing allowed me to feel the distant nature, to empathetically vibrate with a bird's song, with the trees I love, especially my distant araucaria in Bom Jesus or the flowers in my terrace after a windy day:

"Petunias look ruffled, dull, like someone who didn't sleep at night. The petunias and her dresses. They are great actresses, the petunias: it won't be long until a ray of sunlight shows up, and they will exhibit their velvet dresses making them swirling as if nothing happened. They pretend to be fragile to escape the fury of the wind or seduce the eyes of those who pass by. They were luckier than cyclamen. If I could, I would iron their dresses just to see them smile". ("The whole world is in a book shop". Season 2. 06.04.2020)

Of course, the lens of literature (and arts, in general) is always present in these chronicles. Since I am a literature professor and strongly believe that literary texts are powerful lenses that enable us to see the world even in its most insignificant or invisible details and to look at ourselves and others. Images from my memory archive, from movies, music, paintings, photos, poems, novels or from the media (like the image of the Pope praying alone in St Peter's Square, in Rome) are constantly summoned up in this creative process, as well as humour and caricature. In some of these chronicles, I tried to draw different characters from the observation of my own street during lockdown: the lady with cloud hair, Popeye the sailor man, the salesman keeper, Dupont and Duponda are some of them, narrative embryos of future short stories or novels.

At the end of her collaboration with the *Guardian*, Elena Ferrante highlighted the risks and the challenges of this kind of journal or chronicle writing, "the permanent

exposure of fragments of myself". Clarice Lispector pointed out the same regarding her collaboration with *Jornal do Brasil*: "being a chronicle writer is too personal".⁵ This permanent public exposure of the self is the reason why the feminine presence in the portuguese chronicle writing tradition is not significant, in spite of the remarkable (and sometimes revolutionary) contribution of a few women writers, like Irene Lisboa, Maria Judite de Carvalho, Maria Ondina Braga or Maria Teresa Horta. This daring mixture of intimate reading and seduction for reality, this particular way of seeing facts and actuality with poetic inner eyes is what attracted me. As well as an escape to the impersonal and scientific writing as an academic I am supposed to do. Writing these chronicles made me overcome loneliness and uncertainty. Each one of them switches on a presence light in these confusing dark days.

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⁵ Lispector, C. (2013). *A Descoberta do Mundo (Discovering the World)*. Lisboa: Relógio d'Água.