

Frankel, Eddy, *'These videos of empty London streets are eerily beautiful'*, **Time Out London**, 21 March 2020



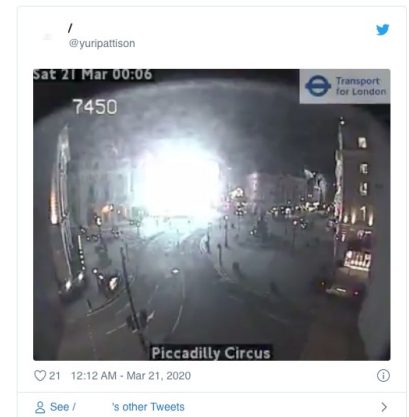
These videos of empty London streets are eerily beautiful

By **Eddy Frankel**

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Last night, the pubs, restaurants and cinemas of London all closed their doors as part of new government regulations in the battle against coronavirus. For how long, we don't know, but this was the first night of a new London, a city brought to a standstill by a terrible, terrifying virus.

At around midnight, the artist **Yuri Pattison** started tweeting images taken from Transport for London traffic cameras. Each showed a major London road. Each was empty. These roads are normally packed with traffic day and night, they're the city's arteries, the heaving, pulsating lifeblood of London. But last night, nothing. Barely a single car or bus, not one pedestrian, no revellers, no drunks stumbling out of the pub, no loved-up couples, no post-theatre strollers. Nothing.



Initially, the images feel dystopian, scary; a symbol of our bizarre times, a hint of an apocalyptic possible future, something from a zombie movie. All totally legit reactions, valid takes on a weird new phenomenon that's about to become the norm.

But the images are also incredibly beautiful. Serene, calming, alien. And there are aesthetic readings, viewpoints informed by art history, that explain what makes them so visually appealing.

Think about walking through the National Gallery or the Louvre or the Vatican and stumbling across Michelangelo's breathtaking 'Pieta', or Leonardo's 'Last Supper', or Raphael's 'Madonna of the Pinks'. These staggering masterpieces from art history were painted or sculpted with the intention of making you feel overawed by the power of God. You're meant to look at these works and see the incredible beauty of the creator, to feel dwarfed by God's power. Then think about the 'Mona Lisa' or Theodore Gericault's 'Raft of the Medusa', whatever old painting you like. When you're in front of something that beautiful, you feel like the images couldn't have been created by a human, like the artist is some ultra-talented alien communicating a beauty so profound that all you can do is stand there and drink it in, eyes wide and mouth agape.

Now, I'm not saying you can find God in the images that Yuri Pattison tweeted, or that they have the same awe-inspiring impact of the Mona Lisa. But what Pattison's images do is make you realise that something bigger than you is happening. You go through your life feeling relatively in control, right? You take the tube, go to work, buy a sandwich at Pret, go to the pub, go to Ikea, choose your clothes, order your food, etc. etc. etc. You make decisions, and they matter. And then something like coronavirus comes along and everything's thrown out the window.

Pattison's videos bring that truth crashing into your reality. You've walked those streets, puked on them, taken buses down them. And now, no one is there. You're stuck at home for the foreseeable, those streets are empty. Something bigger than you is happening, something bigger than your lunch choices and tiring commute.

Pattison is highlighting the disconnect between you two weeks ago and you now, the disconnect between what you thought was reality and what is reality. That eerie beauty isn't just from the quietness and serenity of the images, or from how weird it is to see London so empty, it's from realising that you're powerless in the face of a major event, just like standing in front of Michelangelo, Leonardo or Caravaggio.

It might seem silly, but that's what good artists do. Pattison has previous, too. His show at the Chisenhale a few years ago was an abandoned future office. Coffee cups left strewn across the desk, computers mining for Bitcoin in the absence of any human interference. Sound familiar?

Yeah, London in these images looks like a ghost town, an apocalyptic movie, but there's a reason it also looks so beautiful. Thanks art history.