COVID-19 is not just a disease; it is also a state of mind, a psychosis, a fear. It is an event that, all over the world, unleashed irrational behavior by the governments, individuals, and media. It triggered speculations, bizarre analyses, and selective ‘cut-and-paste science.’

Result: while there are, undeniably, few optimistic success stories, including the Russian vaccine, China’s and Vietnam’s ability to contain the pandemic without ruining economy and livelihood of the citizens, the great majority of the world is undoubtedly in disarray. Hundreds of millions of people are literally tossed into a gutter. Other billions, all over Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and to some extent, the United States and the UK are locked in, unable to travel abroad, and unwilling to accept visitors from other countries.

All this is pure insanity. Families are divided, broken apart. People are locked out of their homes in other countries. Lovers are told they cannot see each other, perhaps for years.

Extreme right-wing governments that are ripe to fall, like those in Thailand or Chile, are hiding behind the COVID-19, not allowing anyone to enter and face their downfall.

International life patterns of billions of people are ruined. Which leads to suicides, deep depressions, violence, as well as COVID-19 unrelated but lockdowns-related health issues.

In brief: The world is screwed! Most likely, billions of human lives are.

Apart from my work in several parts of the United States after the murder of George Floyd, and then in Aruba, from where the NATO is threatening Venezuela, I spent almost five months in a brutal lockdown in Chile. Truly brutal, because I arrived there after covering several conflict zones in Asia, with the COVID-19 at my heels. One airport after another was closing behind me, after my departure. A journey took eight days: Hong Kong to Bangkok, then Seoul, Amsterdam, Suriname, Brazilian Belem, Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, and finally, Santiago.

At the conflict zones, including when I was filming in devastated Borneo, my guts and eyes got attacked by some vicious parasites (or was it COVID-19, after all?), and something happened to my feet; I could hardly walk. Well, once in a while, I have this tendency to run myself to the ground, after the excessive doses of Afghanistan, Syria, Indonesia, Iraq, DR Congo, Kashmir, Gaza... I never stop until it is too late, or more precisely, until I fall on my face.

But then, after I do, after I find myself flattened on the ground, I know precisely what to do. Which is: a few months of rest, rigorous exercises, foot massages, sea, diet, sun. Until I can move again, and return to performing duties, I have towards humanity.

But this time it was different. With a single digit of popularity, Chilean Pinochet-style regime utilized COVID-19 in order to stay in power, to crack on the opposition and to rob indigenous people of that little they still had left. Result: bizarre, total lockdowns with tanks on the streets, with the meaningless curfews, with even a small park at the back of my building out of reach to the tenants.

My only ‘walks’ were inside the apartment. I needed to get to my place in Bangkok; small, but with a gym and pool and with a garden. But Thailand’s rulers made sure to keep the foreigners out, too. Clearly, for political reasons.

And so, I was forced to spend the longest time in my life in one place. The longest since I was 15 years old if I
And instead of improving, my health deteriorated in that monstrous lockdown, where I was facing bare, depressing winter Andes, and the 160-average pollution levels (US AQI). When I was finally departing, I could hardly walk and had to use a cane.

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I ran away on one of the first re-introduced non-stop Iberia flights to Madrid. I was lucky that I could, as one of my passports was that of the EU.

It had to be Madrid or Italy. I would also happily run to Russia, but in August, it was still closed.

When I was very young, I used to escape to Madrid, in order to be as far away as possible from New York. I despised my life in the United States. I couldn’t write there. In Italy and Madrid, I could easily. For months I would be saving, and then disappear from the United States, for 5-6 weeks. My plan was to travel all over Spain, but Madrid was so absorbing, so fascinating that in the end, I lost all my desire to leave it. Cafes on Plaza de Olavide were where I used to write my fiction.

And now, beaten, hardly able to move, I returned. Before my interviews in Turkey and Serbia, and before at least some parts of Asia would be re-opening, Madrid became my logical destination.

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I anticipated what would be waiting for me here. And all of my expectations came through.

In Madrid, life didn’t stop. It slowed down, to some extent, yes. Some visible and invisible barriers were erected. Many precautions have been taken. But there was no ‘full stop.’ Unlike in New York and Santiago, colors were everywhere, and so was beauty, elegance, and harsh Castellan sense of humor.

First of all, Madrid was clearly demonstrating that life is much stronger then death, but only if life is pitched against death, and lived with unwavering strength and passion.

In Prado Museum, I rediscovered one of the greatest and most frightening artworks of all times: Pieter Bruegel’s the Elder: “The Triumph of Death.” I searched for it, and I found it in one of the main halls.

Here, in this surreal, powerful, and highly perverse artwork, it was depicted all. Yes, Death is frightening. Yes, it has tremendous strength, and it has its own ‘army of skeletons.’ And yes, in the end, it always wins.

But you look out, through the windows of Prado, and you see the ancient, green, and beautiful trees, you see the splendid architecture, and lovers holding hands. Death may have the last word for all human beings, but life goes on, too. It never gets defeated, and it never surrenders. There is time to live and time to die.

Bruegel, who painted his macabre masterpiece c. 1562, wanted us to live in constant fear of death.

Today’s Madrid, with its passion, wants us to forget about death, at least for that short but brilliant moment, which is called life.

This new and hopefully short-lived era of COVID-19 terror is throwing us, human beings, back to the middle ages, where continuous anxieties and images of horrors were masterfully manufactured, even mass-produced, in order to poison our existence and strip us of dreams, of power, and joy.

Throughout the middle ages, at least in Europe, suffering and fear were habitually glorified. Joy and desires were suppressed, often chastised.

In the middle ages, Christianity reached perfection in scaring humans to death, in stripping life of almost all delights, and in administering brutal, grotesque punishments. And this is when the Muslim armies arrived, liberating a large part of Spain from the religious fundamentalism. Glorious Caliphate of Cordoba was erected, synonymous with the Golden Age of Islam; Caliphate admired for knowledge, poetry, playfulness, the quest for freedom and beauty.

There, Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together; they freely mingled together, building one mighty, tolerant, and creative society. It was a society without fear, society full of hope.

Caliphate of Cordoba also defeated Death, at least from one’s birth till demise. Great Pakistani thinker, Tariq Ali,
wrote beautifully about that era, many years before COVID-19 appeared on the horizon.

I took Talgo, highspeed train, to Cordoba. I had to revisit the old mosque, where the fight for tolerance began. All this was now relevant. It was not just the medicine, not just the science, which had to be mobilized.

The battle against COVID-19 has to be also fought by thinkers, by artists, by all those who can make life meaningful, or at least bearable.

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Spain and its capital Madrid can easily ‘go either way.’ The city can be oppressive and harsh when it goes through the ‘bad wave.’ It can ruin millions of lives, as it did when it embarked on the horrid colonialist expeditions, religious fundamentalism, or fascist dictatorship.

But Madrid can also be highly enlightened, creative, and forward-looking. It can be light and reasonable, embracing life.

In the age of COVID-19, Madrid decisively refused to lock up millions of people in the proverbial cages. Few weeks of confusion and enough! The government tried, half-heartedly, but failed to impose full oppressive order.

By the middle of August 2020, the number of Covid-19 cases was higher in Spain, then in many other EU countries. Madrid made it to the ‘red list’ in such countries as Germany and the UK.

But walk through the streets of the city, sit in its cafes, look at children playing in the elegant parks, and then compare all this with terrible stress in those societies full of rules and regulations, such as Germany or Macron’s France.

Brueghel’s skeletons are clearly depicting destruction and death. Scenes are full of nihilism. They fit perfectly well into the devastated landscapes of the excessively locked down, terrified cities.

Some cities with a relatively small number of infections, like Bangkok, already died. How come? They lost, they handed victory to Death. They threw up their hands without the battle. They surrendered, offering to Death precisely what she has been demanding: Voluntarily, they stopped living.

In the United States or such places like Southeast Asia, Facebook, Amazon, Apple have been making fortunes. Bookstores, museums, theatres all surrendered; they closed down.

Madrid introduced social distancing, imposed masks regulations, a limited number of visitors, but rapidly reopened cinemas, gardens, galleries. Cafes are functioning, too, and so are the restaurants. Soon, after the summer holidays end, the city’s theatres and concert halls will reopen.

It is not because the city is reckless. Not at all. Disinfectants are everywhere, and when walking or in public places, people are wearing masks. The streets of Madrid are meticulously clean. Various safety regulations are imposed. But life goes on. Airplanes are taking off towards many parts of the world. Madrid is an open city. Not yet to all, but at least to many.

And as a reward, there are smiles. There are politeness and kindness. People do not look suicidal. They do not explode at the slightest conflict. No honking, no shouting. No animalistic, all-consuming fear.

Madrid understands that there is a certain degree of danger. But it deals with this state of siege with admirable dignity and courage.

After the panic and ugly behavioral patterns that I observed in the United States and Chile, Madrid impressed me enormously. COVID pandemic brought economic and social hardship to some, but there was no national agony so clearly noticeable in New York, Washington D.C., or Santiago.

Even if they struggled, people made sure to put on their best, to behave with dignity, and confront danger with both strength and heart.

When my still weak feet let go on the third day, when I stumbled and fell on an ancient sidewalk, several people immediately ran to my rescue. They fought for me. In my own way, I came here in order to fight for them, too.

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Madrid is not a perfect city. Actually, I keep repeating it again and again: there are no ‘perfect cities’ in this world.

And Madrid’s way is not the only example of how to fight and defeat the latest deadly pandemic.

But perhaps it is the most agreeable one: full of smiles, support from friends and families, with the exposure to the sun, to excellent food, nature, culture, and arts.

It is the Latin spirit, joie de vivre, which is put to work here, in order to overpower Brueghel and his army of skeletons, together with the excessive religious asceticism of El Greco.

We still don’t know how to defeat COVID-19, scientifically, but in such places as Madrid, we are learning how to prevent it from defeating us.

Nine days in Madrid did not fully ‘cure me,’ but it gave back the optimism to my scarred soul. It gave me the strength to fight again. As well as the desire to walk forward!

Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He’s the creator of Vltchek’s World in Word and Images, and a writer that has penned a number of books, including China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Connecting Countries Saving Millions of Lives. He writes especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”