Until a few weeks ago it was the movies we looked to for haunting spectacles of great cities suddenly stilled by epic events, their streets and squares devoid of visible life. Now we needn't look farther than our own doorsteps. We're living inside a frightening drama with an indeterminate running time, beset by barely imaginable special effects. What films we choose to watch when we're able to pry ourselves away from the news are likely to be uppers, reliably entertaining and life-affirming. Yet another category might be worth checking out every now and then—movies celebrated for their scenes of eerie emptiness or stylized solitude, their evocation of negative spaces. By heightening and clarifying our perceptions, they can do what art has always done, help us understand what we're feeling in our all-too-real lives.

One of the most startling such scenes—and all the more remarkable since no CGI was involved—is the dream sequence near the beginning of “Vanilla Sky” (2001), with Tom Cruise as an overprivileged egomaniac named David Aames. Pulling out of an underground garage in his black Ferrari coupe, David gradually realizes that there's no one in sight. It's 9:05 a.m. by the chronograph on his wrist, yet the traffic lanes and sidewalks of Central Park West are empty. Then he reaches Times Square, which is empty too, a bewildering vista that leaves him screaming in terror. (Next we hear his therapist telling him, and us, “Well, I suppose the empty streets meant loneliness.”) It's worth noting that the script was adapted, mostly shot for shot, from a much superior Spanish film, “Open Your Eyes” (1997), in which the hero leaves his apartment in a Volkswagen convertible at 10:04 a.m.—everything happens later in Spain—and discovers the total depopulation of Madrid's Gran Vía. No shrink is employed to tell us what the dream means.

Los Angeles is as empty as Tom Cruise's New York in the early stretches of “The Omega Man” (1971), and it's not a dream; that is to say, within the narrative structure Charlton Heston's Dr. Robert Neville, a survivor of a global pandemic that wiped out most of our species, is actually driving through a city from which all humanity has vanished, leaving only zombies. The film hasn't aged well, unlike “WALL-E” (2008), the peerless Pixar masterpiece that opens with a vision of the entire planet as an abandoned garbage dump.
An argument could be made against including another zombie movie; slouch-shouldered slobberers resemble one another so closely that they allow us humans to detach from the full impact of the horror. That said, Danny Boyle’s “28 Days Later” (2002) is a triumph of cross-genre craftiness. It’s a horror film, yes, in which most survivors of a cross-species pandemic are classic zombies. But it’s also an elegant end-of-civilization fantasy with breathtaking shots of London bathed in soft pink sunlight, and not a living soul to be seen on its silent, breeze-swept streets.

An apocalyptic war has left Paris shattered and uninhabitable in “La Jetée,” the immeasurably influential sci-fi short, set forth in still photos, that Chris Marker made in 1962. (Among the many features it inspired was “12 Monkeys.”) Yet films don’t need to depict devastation of that magnitude in order to resonate with the anxiety and isolation we’re experiencing now. Open spaces with people in them will do the trick, depending on the tone of the scene,
cinematography being a powerful emotional tool.

In Fred Zinnemann’s stirring though all but forgotten “The Search,” a 1948 drama about a lost Czech boy reunited with his mother in postwar Berlin, a lone woman walked, in long shot, alongside an autobahn on which no traffic flows. In Carol Reed’s darkly resplendent “The Third Man” (1949), set in the wreckage of postwar Vienna, the camera tilts and a zither plays as an ancient balloon-seller crosses the wet cobblestones of a little plaza at night; the scene bespeaks, quite unaccountably, deep solitude. “L’Eclisse” (1962), a meditation on loneliness in contemporary life by Michelangelo Antonioni, the cinema’s poet laureate of social distancing, ends with a visual survey of emptiness—on streets, in fields, in an upscale residential area on the edge of Rome. The few people drifting by seem lost to the world, and to themselves.

Even movies that say nothing about spiritual isolation can convey it strongly. Alexander Mackendrick’s “Sweet Smell of Success” (1957) is a classic study of ambition and venality, with Burt Lancaster as J.J. Hunsecker, the despicable gossip columnist modeled on Walter Winchell, and Tony Curtis as the craven press agent Sidney Falco. Yet there’s a climactic moment of exquisite aloneness when Sidney, set up and cast out by J.J., makes his way in the dead of night to Times Square, where he’s the only person visible—it’s a foreshadowing of “Vanilla Sky”—until a couple of cops come along, beat him up and haul him off. And, in a counterpoint that could serve as a hopeful symbol for these times, J.J.’s younger sister, Susie (Susan Harrison), frees herself from his suffocating clutches, leaves his apartment and walks out onto a Broadway that’s almost empty but starting to fill up in the rising light of dawn. Back in the world at last, she’s ready for a new life.