

“SURVIVAL IS INSUFFICIENT”.

A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF OPTIMISM AND NOSTALGIA IN
THE POSTAPOCALYPTIC WORLD OF *STATION ELEVEN*

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Abstract. This paper presents a detailed analysis of Emily St. John Mandel’s 2014 novel *Station Eleven* within the context of post-apocalyptic literature. The study commences with exploring the world-building exercise undertaken by *Station Eleven*, focusing on investigations into the post-apocalyptic social order. The text portrays the recurrent consequences of the breakdown of civilisation, the collapse of modern technologies, and the dispersal of society into small archipelagos of survivors. The paper then examines the novel’s unique temporal and spatial structure, offering a nuanced discussion of the three distinct time frames and geographical settings that constitute the narrative. It situates *Station Eleven* within a contemporary understanding of the apocalypse that emphasises human survival amidst the ruins of the old world. It also examines the novel’s negative portrayal of religion and capitalism, challenging prevailing interpretative frameworks. Contrary to the prevalent depiction of brutal struggles in post-apocalyptic literary narratives, *Station Eleven* tactfully navigates the portrayal of violence, leaving critical aspects to the reader’s imagination. The study concludes by elucidating the thematic significance of culture and memory in the novel, emphasising the redemptive role of cultural activities in a post-apocalyptic world and its central message of fostering optimism in the face of catastrophe.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic, humanity, nostalgia, survival, modernity

INTRODUCTION: AN APOCALYPTIC LITERARY LANDSCAPE

Contemporary fiction and cinema are replete with narratives depicting the culmination of the world as we perceive it. These post-apocalyptic works envision existence in a world ravaged or profoundly altered by climate-related disasters, zombie uprisings, or

global pandemics. Within the realm of climate fiction, colloquially termed ‘cli-fi,’ literary works such as Claire Vaye Watkins’s *Gold Fame Citrus* (2016), Edan Lepucki’s *California* (2014), and Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2016) portray the United States as an inhospitable desert, where water scarcity transforms it into a contested resource. Concurrently, mainstream cinema explores analogous desert landscapes due to water scarcity, as evidenced in films like *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and *The Book of Eli* (2010).

While cinematic portrayals share thematic elements with literary works, the catastrophic consequences of global warming often manifest as immediate and expansive calamities. Examples include the abrupt onset of an ice age in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), the literal disintegration of the Earth in *2012* (2009), and the worldwide surge of severe weather disturbances in *Geostorm* (2017). A distinct subgenre within post-apocalyptic productions revolves around the zombie apocalypse, as showcased in films such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007), as well as in comedic interpretations like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *Zombieland* (2009). Noteworthy in this category are the widely acclaimed AMC television series *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022) and literary works such as Colson Whitehead’s novel *Zone One* (2011). A third thematic thread in end-of-the-world narratives involves worlds depopulated in the aftermath of pandemics or nuclear conflicts. Emily St. John Mandel’s novel *Station Eleven* (2014) and Margaret Atwood’s *Maddaddam* trilogy that includes *Oryx and Crake* (2003); *The Year of the Flood* (2009); and *Maddaddam* (2013) depict a North America bereft of human presence following fatal plagues. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) delves into the struggles of a few survivors navigating a post-nuclear war landscape for dwindling resources, while the television series *The Last Man on Earth* (2015-2018) humorously explores the largely benign aspects of solitary survival in a sparsely populated world.

While concise and not exhaustive, this literary catalogue serves as “evidence that popular contemporary narrative is haunted by dreams of a future that is a place of ruin” (Tate 2017, 2). The surge

in popularity of post-apocalyptic narratives can be contextualised by recognising that apocalypse reflects particular anxieties rooted in specific temporal contexts (Doyle 2015, 100). This heightened interest aligns with the multitude of acute challenges confronting the global community, encompassing global warming, political instability, international terrorism, large-scale migration, epidemics like the Ebola virus, Coronavirus pandemic and rapid technological advancements, among others. These challenges engender uncertainties that manifest in pessimistic visions of the future. Post-apocalyptic fiction functions as a vehicle for imaginative extrapolations of current trends into future scenarios, thereby serving as a cautionary medium for potential outcomes if prevailing trajectories persist. Moreover, it presents conceivable alternatives to the contemporary situation at a juncture where transformative change remains feasible. In a less sanguine interpretation, post-apocalyptic fiction also serves to acclimatise readers to conceivable future scenarios, potentially normalising outcomes that may be deemed inevitable.

In Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), a notably successful and distinctive post-apocalyptic narrative, the focus diverges from the conventional themes of survival, conflict, and struggle. Instead, the novel scrutinises the potential and necessity of cultural expression within a post-apocalyptic milieu, underscoring the significance and value of art and memory amid challenging circumstances. Depicting the aftermath of a global pandemic, the Georgia Flu, and life two decades thereafter, the novel embarks on an ambitious, multi-genre exploration of humanity's capacity for creation and the pursuit of meaning through art, storytelling, and communal bonds. This exploration is manifested through various narrative elements, such as the Travelling Symphony—a group of actors and musicians traversing an emptied-out North America to stage Shakespearean performances for survivors—and the Museum of Civilization, which curates and displays artefacts from the pre-pandemic world, now rendered obsolete except as poignant relics of a lost past. By “celebrating the beauty of the present, flawed world”

(Tate 2017, 22), *Station Eleven* offers an unusually optimistic and hopeful vision of an otherwise bleak future.

STATION ELEVEN: THE POST-APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE

Within the post-apocalyptic genre, *Station Eleven* encompasses distinctive elements, many of which essentially characterise this literary classification. These include the occurrence of an apocalyptic event, the portrayal of a post-collapse society, and a narrative structure seamlessly intertwining the pre-apocalyptic past with the post-apocalyptic present. At its core, the genre mandates the presence of an apocalypse, exemplified in *Station Eleven* by the advent of the Georgia Flu—a highly lethal and rapidly spreading virus described as a “flu that exploded like a neutron bomb over the surface of the earth” (St. John Mandel 2014, 37). This catastrophic event prompts societal upheaval, with television newscasters cautiously referencing an ‘apocalypse’ as the city and the world grapple with the sudden and devastating impact of the flu.

The emergence of the flu is observed primarily through the perspectives of two characters, Jeevan Chaudhary and Clark Thompson. Jeevan, forewarned by a friend about the contagion’s swift spread, strategically secures provisions and retreats to his brother’s apartment in a Toronto tower. From this vantage point, he witnesses the pandemic-induced havoc, noting the city’s gradual descent into silence: “Toronto was falling silent. Every morning was deeper, the perpetual hum of the city fading away” (St. John Mandel 2014, 177). In contrast, Clark remains oblivious to the catastrophe until significant damage has transpired. Fortuitously avoiding virus exposure during his journey to Toronto, Clark’s redirected flight leads him to Severn City Airport—a site untouched by the flu and subsequently evolving into a permanent refuge for him and his fellow stranded passengers.

Within their protected enclaves, Jeevan and Clark manage to endure the ramifications of the Georgia Flu and the subsequent

societal collapse. The global dissemination of the virus precipitates a disintegration of societal fabric, evoking an ominous unravelling of human society as we knew it, with nations sequentially descending into darkness. The hallmark of the modern period is the globalised nature of the world, and the deadly pandemic struck at the very core of modernity, that is at the globalised, interconnected nature of the modern world— “no news out of Moscow, then no news out of Beijing, then Sydney, London, Paris, etc.” (St. John Mandel 2014,177). Television, a crucial information source for the characters, undergoes a gradual breakdown, serving as a disconcerting signal of societal disarray. Concurrently, the novel underscores the multifaceted breakdown of essential services— television and the internet cease to function, and the supply of electricity and water dwindles after thirty days of the pandemic outbreak.

The narrative unequivocally underscores the significance of these transformative events, with characters acutely cognisant of the profound alterations to their lives and their surroundings. Jeevan, recognising the Georgia Flu as a defining divide, foresees that it will demarcate a profound shift: “was going to be the divide between a *before* and an *after*, a line drawn through his life” (St. John Mandel 2014, 20). This sense of a before and an after is also palpable in Clark’s perception, as he intuits an impending calamity upon witnessing crowds gathered beneath Severn City airport TV screens. Despite his uncertainty, Clark contemplates the gravity of the situation before confronting the unfolding news, signifying a poignant recognition of the impending transformation: “This is the last time I’ll stir milk into my tea without knowing what happened, he thought, wistful in advance for the present moment, and went to stand with the crowd beneath a television that was tuned to CNN” (St. John Mandel 2014, 233).

Following this apocalyptic portrayal, the narrative propels itself two decades forward, meticulously constructing a compelling representation of a depopulated world post-pandemic. *Station Eleven* adeptly fulfils a second characteristic of the post-apocalyptic genre

by vividly illustrating settings marked by “decay, disaster, and ruin” (Doyle 2015, 101). The evocative depiction encompasses cinematic imagery of gridlocked streets, dilapidated holiday resorts overgrown with neglect, and remnants from the bygone world strewn ubiquitously. The narrative intricately describes a road winding towards a distant lake, bordered by miles of permanent gridlock, with trees sprouting between stationary cars and a skeletal figure in the nearest vehicle. In another scene, resort hotels along the lakeshore stand in dereliction, their broken windows reflecting the sky, while trees push through parking lots amidst rusted cars. The detritus of the pre-collapse society, rendered mostly obsolete, manifests in rusted car husks and discarded remnants—crumpled chip bags, pizza box remnants, and obsolete electronic devices with buttons and screens. These evocative images trace the profound transformations in the world since the demise of the early twenty-first-century capitalist, globalised society, constituting a substantial component of the novel’s resonant impact.

Station Eleven engages in a comprehensive exploration of world-building, extending its focus to the intricacies of the post-apocalyptic social structure. While diverse narratives portraying apocalyptic scenarios manifest in varying forms, their outcomes exhibit noteworthy similarities. Within St. John Mandel’s portrayal of a post-apocalyptic milieu, the absence of governmental structures, infrastructure, and motorised transportation becomes evident. As the narrative unfolds, the survivors, compelled by the degradation of gasoline, transition from nomadic journeys into small-scale settlements, acknowledging the impracticality of perpetual movement: “because the gasoline had gone stale by Year Three and you can’t keep walking forever” (St. John Mandel 2014, 37). Consequently, the prevailing societal framework transforms into “an archipelago of small towns” (St. John Mandel 2014, 48). As Benjamin Kunkel observes, these consequences invariably encompass the disintegration of societal order, the collapse of advanced technologies, and the fragmentation of a once interconnected community into smaller groups of survivors:

In almost every case [...], large-scale social organisation, including the state, has disappeared; the cumulative technological capability of century upon century has collapsed to the point that only agricultural knowhow, if that, is retained; and the global society we know has shattered into small tribal groups, separate families or couples, and helpless solitary individuals.

(Kunkel 2008, 93)

In *Station Eleven*, the terrain is navigated by the Travelling Symphony, a collective of actors and musicians that has been traversing the altered world's archipelagos of settlements "since five years after the collapse" (St. John Mandel 2014, 37). Spanning primarily across Michigan and Southern Ontario, their movements delineate the post-apocalyptic landscape in the novel, with journeys extending "along the shores of Lake Huron and Michigan, west as far as Traverse City, east and north over the 49th parallel to Kincardine. They followed the St. Clair River south to the fishing towns of Marine City and Algonac and back again. This territory was for the most part tranquil now" (St. John Mandel 2014, 37). Taking inspiration from the itinerant theatre companies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, the Travelling Symphony stage Shakespearean performances in the scattered settlements they encounter. Carrying the vestiges of a bygone civilisation, their caravans, once pickup trucks, are now drawn by teams of horses on steel and wood wheels. Similar to medieval and Renaissance theatre troupes, they employ makeshift stages and painted sheets as backdrops: "The caravans were parked end to end, the *Midsummer Night's Dream* backdrop—sewn-together sheets, grimy now from years of travel, painted with a forest scene—hung on them" (St. John Mandel 2014, 55). In their quest, they also pursue rumours of a "Museum of Civilization" *en route* to the settlement at the Severn City airport. However, their journey is shadowed by the presence of a character known as the prophet, introducing an element of peril to their world. As "there are always sects, conflicts, and dangers" (Doyle 2015, 103) in post-apocalyptic fiction, this notorious leader of a messianic cult instils fear in the Symphony, orchestrating the abduction and murder of several of its members.

A third pivotal aspect of the post-apocalyptic genre pertains to the narrative structure, a facet meticulously explored in *Station Eleven*. The novel unfolds across three distinct temporal frames: (i) the events involving the Travelling Symphony and the Severn City airport twenty years after the apocalypse; (ii) the night of the flu's onset and its immediate aftermath; and (iii) glimpses into Arthur Leander's life in the decades preceding his demise, particularly focusing on his relationship with his ex-wife, Miranda. The flu's arrival coincides with a stormy winter night in America, marking the same night actor Arthur Leander succumbs to a heart attack during a production of *King Lear* in Toronto. This event serves as the frame narrative, dominating the initial and concluding chapters and recurring throughout the novel. Spatially, the narrative threads of Arthur's life span locations such as Toronto, New York, London, and a small island near mainland British Columbia. The once-globalised realm of accessible air travel undergoes considerable contraction following the collapse of the infrastructure essential for navigation. The Travelling Symphony, navigating the terrain by foot and horseback, confines its journey to the relatively modest expanse between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. The narrative oscillates seamlessly between various temporal and spatial settings, featuring five protagonists across the novel's nine chapters, culminating in a complex narrative structure. However, the reader's experience remains lucid and unambiguous, given the meticulous introduction of each change in scenery, ensuring clarity regarding the current setting and focal character.

The diverse narrative strands coalesce through the central figure of Arthur Leander, whose heart attack initiates the exploration of events spanning the past and future of characters intimately or tangentially linked to him. Kirsten, a central character in the novel's post-apocalyptic segment and now a member of the Travelling Symphony, witnessed Arthur's death as a child actor in the *King Lear* play production. At the novel's conclusion, she encounters Clark, the second protagonist in this time frame, at the Severn City airport. Clark, once Arthur's closest friend, had become estranged long

before Arthur's demise. Jeevan Chaudhary, the third protagonist, maintains a more distant connection to Arthur as a former paparazzo and entertainment journalist. Present in the theatre when Arthur dies, Jeevan leaps onto the stage to administer first aid and later becomes a focal character in scenes depicting the societal breakdown after the flu's onset. Although Miranda, the fifth protagonist, does not survive the flu, her role in Arthur's life remains pivotal. As Arthur's former wife and creator of the *Dr. Eleven* comic, Miranda's relationship with Arthur receives extensive narrative attention, resonating into the future, particularly through gossip magazine clippings collected by Kirsten about Arthur.

Through the character of Arthur, the years following the flu are intricately connected to the pre-collapse world, establishing narrative links between events that, in isolation, appear unrelated to the subsequent catastrophe. Such connections, bridging the pre- and post-apocalyptic settings, are characteristic of the genre, where "novels have narratives that move back and forth between a past world before the catastrophe happened, however, they imagine that event, and the wasteland of the present. This contrapuntal narrative structure gives a narrative richness to the novels that their more diagrammatic future worlds prohibit" (Christ 2015, 152). Notably, Arthur's final performance of *King Lear*, revisited throughout the novel, emerges as the pivotal moment in *Station Eleven*. In this moment, "we are presented with a microcosm of the post-apocalyptic genre; the simultaneous movement forward and back encircling the moment of Armageddon" (Smith 2016, 290). As the novel concurrently alludes to the world's demise and heralds the commencement of a profoundly transformed future, the post-apocalyptic mode becomes integral to the novel's narrative structure.

THE OPTIMISTIC POST-APOCALYPTIC VISION OF *STATION ELEVEN*

Established unmistakably as a post-apocalyptic text, *Station Eleven* prompts an exploration into the underlying motivations inherent in

adopting what Jacques Derrida identifies as the “apocalyptic tone” (Derrida 1992, 53). This prompts the essential question posed to those who assume such a tone: “to what ends” do they declare “the end of this or that, of man or the subject, of consciousness, of history, or the West or of literature” (Derrida 1992, 51)? Commonly, post-apocalyptic narratives find grounding in two explanatory frameworks—eschatology and critiques of capitalism. A potential third framework involves science, often pivotal for humanity’s salvation or its impending demise within this genre. Yet, within the context of *Station Eleven*, its role appears too insignificant to warrant further discussion.

Eschatology aligns with the tradition of biblical interpretations of the apocalypse, interpreting it as “revelation,” with the etymological roots signifying “to uncover” or “to disclose.” This mode, rooted in biblical eschatology, continues to exert significant influence on texts that may otherwise be construed as “secular” or even atheistic (Tate 2017, 12). Sarah Dillon’s examination of *The Flood* (2004) exemplifies how a post-apocalyptic novel can both engage with and depart from the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition. She notes how it “produces a contemporary apocalyptic narrative of consolation and revelation,” yet simultaneously “breaks with this tradition in its refusal of final judgment and in its intimation that justice remains to come” (Dillon 2007, 375). *Station Eleven*, engaging in “eschatological preaching (predication),” entails the act of telling, foretelling, or preaching the end, the extreme limit, and the imminent last, according to Derrida (Derrida 1992, 47). However, by prominently featuring the world two decades after the catastrophe, the novel asserts that the apocalyptic event is not humanity’s ultimate demise. As a post-apocalyptic text, *Station Eleven* does not adhere to a teleological endpoint but aligns with Briohny Doyle’s notion of “a contemporary modification of apocalypse which withholds revelation in favour of playing out scenarios of human survival in the ruins of the old world” (Doyle 2015, 100).

Furthermore, the role assumed by the Bible and religion within the novel takes a distinctly unfavourable turn. The Bible surfaces

prominently only in connection with the prophet, the chief adversary of the Travelling Symphony. This self-proclaimed prophet leads “a messianic doomsday cult that enslaves those it captures” (Christ 2015, 153) and governs through “a combination of charisma, violence, and cherry-picked verses from the Book of Revelation” (St. John Mandel 2014, 280). His presence underscores that, in the novel’s context, religion does not offer solace or comfort; instead, his character accentuates the harmful potential inherent in religious thoughts and actions. Alternatively, post-apocalyptic fiction can be interpreted as a critique of neoliberal capitalism. In this vein, narratives unfolding amid the remnants of contemporary civilisation serve as examinations of capitalism’s breakdown: “the explorations of the post-apocalyptic imagination are properly explorations of the various breakdowns of capitalism itself” (Doyle 2015, 101). Given the widely recognised aphorism that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” Frederic Jameson proposes that post-apocalyptic texts facilitate envisioning “the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (Jameson 2003, 76). Furthermore, post-apocalyptic settings implicitly convey a critique of the prevailing neoliberal conditions, leveraging their alienating effects to underscore the negative facets of the present world we inhabit.

While *Station Eleven* can be scrutinised for these critical perspectives, framing the novel as an overtly anti-capitalist text may not be entirely persuasive. In portraying a future where people reside in small rural settlements devoid of electricity, the narrative seems to evoke a certain yearning for a pre-capitalist pastoral existence, envisioned as harmonious with nature. The novel also subtly hints at positive repercussions arising from the breakdown of modernity, acknowledging the end of the “era of light pollution” (St. John Mandel 2014, 251) and the absence of countries with unmanned borders. Additionally, *Station Eleven* may be interpreted as alluding to “the apocalyptic logic that underpins capitalism itself” (Doyle 2015, 101) by emphasising the virus’s heightened impact facilitated

by global connectivity. While the characters marvel at the miracle of planes, air travel simultaneously accelerates the contagion's spread. Nevertheless, the novel is permeated by a profound fascination with, and even a gentle nostalgia for, elements of the vanished modern world, encompassing the allure of air travel, the internet, and the sounds of electric guitars. This pervasive nostalgia complicates the consideration of the novel as a thorough critique of capitalism. The wistful yearning for the pre-collapse society is notably evident in a concise chapter that essentially comprises a list of lost elements:

No more cities. No more films [...]. No more screens shining in the half-light as people raise their phones above the crowd to take photographs of concert stages. No more concert stages lit by candy-coloured halogens, no more electronica, punk, electric guitars. [...] No more flight [...]. No more aeroplanes [...]. No more spacecraft rising from Cape Canaveral [...] burning paths through the atmosphere into space. (St. John Mandel 2014, 32)

Station Eleven's catalogue of lost objects reveals a proclivity for lamenting the loss of amenities and pleasures of the early twenty-first century rather than critiquing the excesses and destructive effects of the capitalist system that facilitated these indulgences. The novel refrains from directly addressing the array of issues associated with neoliberal capitalism, encompassing prominent concerns such as environmental destruction, global warming, and global inequality and conflict, which conventional buzzwords inadequately encapsulate. If the novel portrays the end of capitalism, it does so not with the aim of identifying viable alternatives but rather to envision the experience of the collapse of civilisation from the perspective of those who derived the most benefit from its comforts and pleasures. Consequently, interpretative frameworks grounded in biblical or anti-capitalist perspectives prove to be of limited utility in comprehending *Station Eleven*. Instead, the novel adopts a positive stance toward the post-apocalypse, presenting a vision characterised by nostalgia, hope, and optimism. This optimistic outlook, setting it apart from other post-apocalyptic works, is communicated in two

primary ways: it manifests a positive view of humanity and underscores the importance and value of culture and memory.

Typically, narratives set in a post-apocalyptic milieu convey a pessimistic outlook on humanity, portraying a world post-catastrophe characterised by violence, where human survivors grapple with the challenges of mere survival. Although *Station Eleven* unmistakably incorporates the conventions of post-apocalyptic fiction, it stands as an exception within the genre due to its distinctive perspective on mankind. Notably, the narrative refrains from attributing the pandemic, a mutated and highly perilous strain of the bird flu, to any specific anthropogenic activity. Moreover, it deliberately steers clear of providing detailed portrayals of the breakdown of civilisation and the tumultuous years that ensue. Instead, it presents the initial days of the flu through the lens of characters safely ensconced in sheltered environments. Subsequently, the narrative leaps forward by two decades to a period where the world has become markedly less hazardous than the preceding years, deliberately bypassing the violent interlude that characterised the journeys of many survivors. The “first unspeakable years” (St. John Mandel 2014, 37), marked by struggles against ferals, the burial of neighbours, shared experiences of living, dying, and enduring the blood-drenched aftermath of the collapse, are alluded to but not explicitly depicted.

The divergence of *Station Eleven* from other works in the post-apocalyptic genre is evident in its deliberate avoidance of explicit depictions of violence. In contrast to McCarthy’s *The Road*, which portrays the initial post-apocalyptic years in a bleak and gruesome manner, *Station Eleven* chooses not to delve into the extremes of brutality. McCarthy’s world is depicted as scorched, lifeless, and covered in ash, creating a Hobbesian state of nature where survivors contend fiercely for dwindling resources. The characters in *Station Eleven* appear to have endured similar nightmarish circumstances, yet the narrative remains reticent about the specifics. Unlike other post-apocalyptic texts, such as *The Road* or *The Walking Dead*, which extensively detail the challenges and conflicts faced during the early

years on the road, St. John Mandel's novel treats this period as a half-suppressed memory.

Kirsten, a character who spent her early years on the road, acknowledges her inability to recall the worst aspects of that time, stating, "I can't remember the year we spent on the road, and I think that means I can't remember the worst of it" (St. John Mandel 2014, 195). She is also hesitant to discuss past atrocities, like the two people she killed, represented by knife tattoos on her arm. Even in an interview with a rudimentary newspaper, she explains the symbolism of the tattoos but insists on remaining off the record to avoid being remembered for those actions. Consequently, *Station Eleven* sketches a post-apocalyptic world where inhabitants are acquainted with struggle and violence but are not defined by it. While their lives may lack complete safety and peace, as illustrated by the conflicts with the prophet in the narrative, Kirsten perceives the world as "much less dangerous than it used to be" (St. John Mandel 2014, 114) twenty years after the apocalypse. This shift is highlighted in an encounter with a man carrying a rifle, emphasising the calmer age of Year Twenty. The novel takes the risk of proposing that an ethical and cooperative society is achievable, suggesting alternatives to the notion that the future is predetermined. This optimistic portrayal of the post-apocalyptic future might be the central objective of *Station Eleven*, declaring the end of modern society while presenting a more positive outlook.

SURVIVAL, MEMORY AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE AS INTEGRAL CORE OF HUMANITY

Given the absence of a postapocalyptic state of nature in *Station Eleven*, where survival is not the sole focus, characters find the latitude to engage in cultural pursuits. Unlike depictions in *The Road* or *The Walking Dead*, which emphasise struggle and conflict, St. John Mandel's novel proposes that humanity, even in the constrained circumstances of a postapocalyptic world, can redeem itself through

cultural endeavours. Early on, as the virus spreads globally, characters draw on their cultural familiarity to interpret their situation, drawing parallels with disaster movies: “They’d all seen the post-apocalyptic movies” (St. John Mandel 2014, 256). While the song is not explicitly named, Jeevan has REM’s “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” (1987) stuck in his mind, a fitting soundtrack for a world that is ending as he knows it: “it’s the perfect song” (St. John Mandel 2014, 176).

Notably, the sections of the novel set two decades after society’s collapse prominently feature the Travelling Symphony’s journey, engaging in cultural activities such as performing plays like *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in diverse settlements. Shakespeare emerges as a pervasive motif in the novel, particularly anchored in the pivotal event of Arthur Leander’s death during a production of *King Lear*, Shakespeare’s apocalyptic play. Twenty years later, the Travelling Symphony’s performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* symbolically signifies that the “world was softening” (St. John Mandel 2014, 133). As Smith presciently observes, if “*King Lear* heralds the apocalypse, then *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* heralds the possibility of rebirth” (Smith 2016, 294). Shakespeare’s timeless relevance and profound impact align with his own historical context marked by the plague, with which *Station Eleven* draws parallels. The novel accentuates the connection between its postapocalyptic world and Shakespeare’s era, noting that during Shakespeare’s lifetime, “plague closed the theatres again and again, death flickering over the landscape,” mirroring their own situation in “a twilight once more lit by candles, the age of electricity having come and gone” (St. John Mandel 2014, 57). The symbolic resonance between the Georgia Flu and the plague in Shakespeare’s time, as represented in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is emphasised in *Station Eleven*. Despite acknowledging the limits of these parallels, considering technological advancements, the Travelling Symphony performs Shakespeare because it resonates with audiences: “They’d performed more modern plays sometimes in the first few years, but what was startling, what no one would have anticipated, was that

audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare to their other theatrical offerings” (St. John Mandel 2014, 38).

The rationale behind the Travelling Symphony’s commitment to traversing the country, rather than settling down, is elucidated by the value they ascribe to their work, even if it is deemed a “difficult and dangerous way to survive and hardly worth it” (St. John Mandel 2014, 119). They possess the ability to “cast a spell” (St. John Mandel 2014, 151) on their audiences, momentarily diverting them from the toils of survival. In moments of transcendent beauty, despite having lost “almost everything, almost everyone,” they find solace in the enduring beauty of their performances, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the peculiar town of St. Deborah by the Water, with Lake Michigan glistening nearby (St. John Mandel 2014, 57). Beyond these elevated experiences, the Travelling Symphony functions as a surrogate home, providing a sanctuary where music and theatre render their post-apocalyptic existence tolerable. Culture, in this context, assumes a crucial role in imbuing lives that might otherwise be reduced to mere survival with meaning. Kirsten encapsulates this ethos by adopting the slogan “Survival is insufficient” from a *Star Trek: Voyager* episode, which is not only tattooed on her arm but also prominently displayed on the lead caravan.

The cultural landscape within the novel extends beyond Shakespeare and the Travelling Symphony’s musical repertoire to encompass various artefacts. Kirsten carries a snow globe and *Dr. Eleven* comic books, seemingly impractical items that, nevertheless, connect her to the past. These items forge links with Arthur, who gifted them to her, and his ex-wife Miranda, who created them. The comics, set in a future world on a space station named Station Eleven, serve as a *mise-en-abyme*, underlining their narrative importance. The comics convey a nostalgic sentiment towards the vanished world, articulated in the central sentence: “I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth” (St. John Mandel 2014, 42). Contrary to the expressed desire to forget, *Station Eleven* is fundamentally a novel about memory.

Memories hold significance, encompassing characters' recollections of their pre-apocalyptic lives, childhoods, and relationships. Kirsten frequently reminisces about her interactions with Arthur Leander and questions the accuracy of her memories: "Nothing in Kirsten's collection suggested the Arthur Leander she remembered, but what did she actually remember?" (St. John Mandel 2014, 41). Childhood memories, though recurring, are acknowledged as elusive, akin to dreams: "memories from before the collapse seem like dreams now" (St. John Mandel 2014, 195).

The paramount importance of memory is epitomised in the Museum of Civilization at the Severn City airport. This institution symbolises the collective desire to preserve the pre-Georgia Flu pandemic world. Clark initiates the museum, emphasising the importance of remembering when it becomes evident that a return to normalcy is improbable. Two decades later, the museum is replete with artefacts that serve as poignant reminders of the old world:

There seemed to be a limitless number of objects in the world that had no practical use but that people wanted to preserve: cell phones with their delicate buttons, iPads, and a selection of laptops. There were a number of impractical shoes, stilettos mostly, beautiful and strange. There were three car engines in a row, cleaned and polished, a motorcycle composed mostly of gleaming chrome [...] There were the passports or the driver's licenses or sometimes the credit cards of people who had lived at the airport and then died. Clark kept impeccable records. (St. John Mandel 2014, 258)

Demonstrating a wistful yearning for the world before its collapse, the museum not only reflects this nostalgia but also embodies the imperative to perpetuate memories. The act of preserving the recollections of the deceased emerges as a form of survival strategy, aligning with one of *Station Eleven's* recurrent themes: "physical survival and the record of existence are intertwined – that artefact, information, and, above all, texts serve as proof of the individual having existed" (Smith 2016, 296).

CONCLUSION

Culture and memory, as portrayed in the novel, function as instrumental tools for rendering the past applicable to the present. By the conclusion of the narrative, various indications suggest the potential for a partial return to the antecedent state. Initiatives such as attempts to “find” the internet using pedalled power or the establishment of newspapers and the upkeep of libraries underscore these efforts. The apex of these endeavours to reconstruct, albeit in a rudimentary manner, the past, occurs when Clark guides Kirsten to view distant lights from the airport’s tower at the novel’s denouement: “pinpricks of light arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity” (St. John Mandel 2014, 311). These lights evoke thoughts in Clark of a potential future amidst the ruins, a return to a world that might regain many pre-collapse amenities. Yet, due to the significantly reduced population, it could exist without some of the negative consequences associated with economic growth and technological progress. Clark contemplates the possibilities, questioning, “If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain?” (St. John Mandel 2014, 332). His contemplations epitomise the perspective of *Station Eleven*, which, unlike other post-apocalyptic narratives such as *The Road*, “appears to show more faith in the sparks of ingenuity that create civilisations” (Tate 2017, 133), finding beauty even in a postapocalyptic setting. As Emily St. John Mandel finds beauty to cherish even amidst ruin, desolation and despair:

A few of the roofs had collapsed up here, most under the weight of fallen trees. In the morning light, there was beauty in the decrepitude, sunlight catching in the flowers that had sprung up through the gravel of long-overgrown driveways, mossy front porches turned brilliant green, a white blossoming bush alive with butterflies. This dazzling world. (St. John Mandel 2014, 296)

Consequently, *Station Eleven* - despite depicting a pandemic causing

the demise of the majority of the global population and subjecting its surviving characters to post-apocalyptic tribulations - presents an optimistic narrative. The prospect of electric light two decades after the modern world's collapse symbolises a vision of rejuvenation and a new beginning in this post-apocalyptic imaginary.

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