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## “Survival is insufficient”: The Postapocalyptic Imagination of Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*

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### Abstract

Postapocalyptic narratives proliferate in contemporary fiction and cinema. A convincing and successful representative of the genre, Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) can nevertheless be distinguished from other postapocalyptic texts, such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), Margaret Atwood’s Maddaddam trilogy, and the television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–). The novel does not focus on survival, struggle, and conflict but rather examines the possibility and necessity of cultural expression in a post-apocalyptic setting, demonstrating the importance and value of art and memory even in strained circumstances. As a result, it presents an unusually optimistic and hopeful vision of an otherwise bleak future.

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Narratives of the end of the world as we know it proliferate in contemporary fiction and cinema. These postapocalyptic texts imagine life in a world destroyed or dramatically changed by climate catastrophes, zombie apocalypses, or global pandemics. Recent climate fiction, or cli-fi, includes Edan Lepucki’s *California* (2014), Claire Vaye Watkins’s *Gold Fame Citrus* (2016), and Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2016), novels that depict the United States as an uninhabitable desert where scarcity of water makes it a contested commodity. While popular cinema also presents future desert settings of water scarcity in films such as *The Book of Eli* (2010) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), the climate catastrophes that follow from the effects of global warming are often envisioned as more immediate and large-scale catastrophes, such as the sudden onset of an ice age in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), the literal breaking apart of the earth in *2012* (2009), and the global surge of heavy weather turbulences in *Geostorm* (2017). The zombie apocalypse is another popular subgenre of the postapocalyptic productions, as demonstrated by films including *28 Days Later...* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007), *World War Z* (2013), the comedies *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *Zombieland* (2009), the hugely successful AMC television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–),

as well as by literary fiction, notably Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011). A third form of end-of-the-world narratives deals with depopulated worlds in the wake of pandemics or nuclear wars. *Station Eleven* (2014), by Canadian novelist Emily St. John Mandel or Margaret Atwood's Maddaddam trilogy (*Oryx and Crake*, 2003; *The Year of the Flood*, 2009; *MaddAddam*, 2013) are set in a North America largely emptied of humans after fatal plagues. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) the few survivors of a nuclear war struggle for the last remaining resources in a ruined landscape, while the television series *The Last Man on Earth* (2015–) explores the humorous but largely harmless aspects of being the sole survivor in a depopulated world.

Although brief and by no means complete, this schematic outline serves as “evidence that popular contemporary narrative is haunted by dreams of a future that is a place of ruin” (Tate 2). Since “apocalypse expresses specific anxieties from specific moments in time” (Doyle 100), the recent popularity of postapocalyptic stories is not surprising, considering the numerous severe crises the global community is currently facing. These crises – global warming, political instabilities, international terrorism, large migration movements, epidemics such as the Ebola virus, or the rapid technological changes, to name just a few – result in insecurities that find expression in gloomy visions of the future. Postapocalyptic fiction provides imaginative extrapolations of current trends to a future setting and can therefore offer warnings of potential outcomes if current courses are further pursued. It can demonstrate possible alternatives to the contemporary situation at a moment when change is still possible. In a less optimistic sense, it can also be read as familiarizing the readers with conceivable postapocalyptic scenarios, normalizing an outcome that is perhaps inevitable.

Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), although for all intents and purposes a successful and convincing postapocalyptic narrative, is nevertheless markedly different from most other representatives of the genre. It does not focus on survival, struggle, and conflict but rather examines the possibility and necessity of cultural expression in a postapocalyptic setting, demonstrating the importance and value of art and memory even in strained circumstances. The novel, which depicts the onset of a global pandemic, the Georgia Flu, and life twenty years after that catastrophe, “is an ambitious, and multi-genre, exploration of the human capacity to create and to pursue meaning via art, story and shared community” (Tate 133). This is achieved by the story elements such as the Travelling Symphony, a group of actors and musicians who wander through an emptied-out North America to perform Shakespeare for the survivors, and the Museum of Civilization, which collects and exhibits artefacts from the pre-collapse world that have become useless except as nostalgic reminders of the lost past. By “celebrat[ing] the beauty of the present, flawed world” (Tate 22), *Station Eleven* presents an unusually optimistic and hopeful vision of an otherwise bleak future.

## 1. *Station Eleven* as a Postapocalyptic Novel

The postapocalyptic genre includes a number of distinguishing elements, most of which can be found in *Station Eleven*. These include the occurrence of an apocalyptic event, the depiction of post-collapse society, and a narrative structure that connects and interlinks the pre-apocalyptic past with the postapocalyptic present. First of all, the genre necessitates an apocalypse, which in *Station Eleven* takes the form of the Georgia Flu, an extremely deadly and contagious virus that arrives basically overnight, a "flu that exploded like a neutron bomb over the surface of the earth" (St. John Mandel 37): "The television newscasters weren't exactly saying that it was the end of the world, per se, but the word *apocalypse* was beginning to appear" (243).

The onset of this flu is experienced mainly through the perspective of two characters, Jeevan Chaudhary and Clark Thompson. Jeevan is informed early on by a friend about the rapidly spreading contagion, so that he has time to stock up on food and other provisions and withdraws into his brother's apartment in a tower in Toronto. From there he witnesses the devastation caused by the pandemic, which results in the quieting down of the city: "Toronto was falling silent. Every morning was deeper, the perpetual hum of the city fading away" (177). Clark, meanwhile, is unaware of the catastrophe until it has already wrought considerable damage. He is lucky to avoid contact with the virus as he travels to Toronto and his flight is redirected to Severn City Airport, a place that is never exposed to the flu and subsequently becomes a permanent home for Clark and the other passengers stranded there.

In their protected spaces Jeevan and Clark survive the Georgia Flu and the collapse of society. As the virus spreads across the world, "the fabric was unravelling" (239) and "countries began to go dark, city by city – no news out of Moscow, then no news out of Beijing, then Sydney, London, Paris, etc." (177). As the virus spreads across the world, "countries began to go dark, city by city – no news out of Moscow, then no news out of Beijing, then Sydney, London, Paris, etc." (177). Television serves as a source of information for the characters, and it is the slow disintegration of this service that most immediately and unsettlingly communicates the societal breakdown. Not only do the networks begin "to blink off the air, one by one" (243), but also

the local news became more and more local, stations dropping away one by one, until finally the last channel on air showed only a single shot in a newsroom, station employees taking turns standing before the camera and disseminating whatever information they had, and then one night Jeevan opened his eyes at two a.m. and the newsroom was empty. Everyone had left it. [...] A day later, someone finally switched off the camera on the empty newsroom, or the camera died on its own. The day after that, the Internet blinked out. (177)

In addition to the end of TV and the internet, there is no electricity and water stops running after thirty days.

The novel leaves no doubt about the consequentiality of the events, and the characters are keenly aware of the changes to their lives, even if they cannot yet conceive how drastic they would turn out to be. Jeevan knows early on that the Georgia Flu “was going to be the divide between a *before* and an *after*, a line drawn through his life” (20; original emphasis). This notion of a before and an after also occurs to Clark, even before he knows what exactly has happened. When he sees the droves of people assembled under the airport TV screens, he knows something bad must be going on, but he gets himself some tea before feeling able to face the news: “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” (233).

After rendering the apocalypse in this way, the narrative jumps ahead twenty years to create a convincing and effective picture of a depopulated world in the wake of a pandemic. Thus, *Station Eleven* satisfies a second feature of postapocalyptic fiction, namely the depiction of settings characterized by “decay, disaster and ruin” (Doyle 101). This depiction is partly achieved through appropriate and suitably cinematic postapocalyptic imagery, including gridlocked streets, derelict and overgrown holiday resorts, and the ubiquity of remnants from the old world. Hence the description of a road that “curved towards the distant shine of the lake and disappeared behind the trees. The highway was miles of permanent gridlock, small trees growing now between cars and thousands of windshields reflecting the sky. There was a skeleton in the driver’s seat of the nearest car” (St. John Mandel 144). In another scene, the characters come across resort hotels which “stood along the lakeshore, the windows mostly broken and their shards reflecting the sky. Trees pushed up through the parking lots between rusted cars” (283). The leftovers from the pre-collapse society, mostly useless waste, can be found everywhere. This includes cars that are “rusted exoskeletons on flat tires” and other “trash from the old world, crumpled chip bags, the remains of pizza boxes, electronic objects with buttons and screens” (296). These images, which trace the ways in which the world has changed in the twenty years since the modern capitalism of the early twenty-first society came to an end, account for much of the novel’s impact.

The world-building exercise undertaken by *Station Eleven* also involves investigations of the postapocalyptic social order. Even though in the various narratives depicting the end of the world the apocalypse itself takes different forms, the results are usually rather similar. As Benjamin Kunkel points out, the consequences are typically the breakdown of civilization, the collapse of modern technologies, and the dispersal of a connected society into to small groups of survivors:

In almost every case [...], large-scale social organization, 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 93–94)

In St. John Mandel's postapocalyptic scenario there is no longer any government, no infrastructure, and no motorized transport. After a few years on the road, the survivors settled down "because the gasoline had gone stale by Year Three and you can't keep walking forever" (St. John Mandel 37), so that society now consists of "an archipelago of small towns" (48).

The world of *Station Eleven* is charted by the Travelling Symphony, a group of actors and musicians that "moved between the settlements of the changed world and had been doing so since five years after the collapse" (37). Moving across an area that mainly consists of Michigan and Southern Ontario they map the novel's postapocalyptic setting, "travelling back and forth along the shores of Lake Huron and Michigan, west as far as Traverse City, east and north over the 49<sup>th</sup> 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" (37). Clearly inspired by the traveling theatre companies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras (cf. Smith 292), they perform Shakespeare in the scattered settlements they come through. The Symphony's caravans bear the signs of a lost civilization, as they "had once been pickup trucks, but now they were pulled by teams of horses on wheels of steel and wood" (St. John Mandel 36). Like the medieval and Renaissance theatre troupes, they use makeshift stages and painted sheets to provide the backdrops for their performances: "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" (55). Following rumours of a "Museum of Civilization," they are on their way to the settlement at the Severn City airport. The fact that they are pursued by a character called the prophet imbues the world they inhabit with a sense of danger. As there "are always sects, conflicts, and dangers" (Doyle 103) in postapocalyptic fiction, this notorious leader of a messianic cult terrorizes the Symphony, abducting and killing several of its members.

A third central element of the postapocalyptic genre concerns narrative structure. *Station Eleven* consists of three different time frames: (1) the events happening to the Travelling Symphony and at Severn City airport in Year Twenty after the apocalypse; (2) the night of the arrival of the flu and its immediate aftermath; and (3) glimpses of Arthur Leander's life in the decades leading up to his death, especially his relationship with his ex-wife Miranda. The flu hits America on a stormy winter night, the same night that the actor Arthur Leander dies of a heart attack during a production of *King Lear* in Toronto. This event is the frame narrative for the other events in the novel, dominating the first and the last chapters

and being referenced throughout. Spatially, the scenes of Arthur's life connect locales such as Toronto, New York, and London, as well as a small island just off mainland British Columbia. This globalised world of cheap air travel is considerably diminished in its scale after the breakdown of the necessary infrastructure to navigate it. The ground the Travelling Symphony arduously traverses by foot and horseback, then, is the comparatively small area between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. The story jumps back and forth between these different temporal and spatial settings and between the novel's five protagonists, which results in a rather complex narrative structure across the novel's nine chapters. However, the reading experience is never confusing or disorienting, because each change of scenery is carefully introduced and the current setting and focalizer are always clear.

All the various narrative strands are connected by the character of Arthur Leander. His heart attack at the beginning of the novel starts the exploration of events in the past and future of characters that are more or less closely associated with Arthur. One of the two protagonists in the novel's postapocalyptic section is Kirsten. Now one of the Travelling Symphony's members, she was seven years old and a child actor in the play the night Arthur died. At the end of the novel she meets Clark at the Severn City airport, the second protagonist in this time frame. He once was Arthur's best friend, but they had become estranged long before the latter's death. The third protagonist, Jeevan Chaudhary, has a more tenuous connection to Arthur; he was a paparazzi and entertainment journalist, who had followed Arthur for a while and once interviewed him. He is in the theatre when Arthur dies, and jumps on the stage to perform first aid. While Kirsten and Clark are the characters through whose perspective the postapocalyptic world twenty years after the flu are rendered, together with Clark, Jeevan is the focalizer in those scenes that depict the breakdown of civilization after the onset of the flu. Miranda, the fifth protagonist, does not survive the flu. She is the character the narrated events from Arthur's life revolve around. She was his wife once, and she created the *Dr. Eleven* comic, which plays an important structural and symbolic function in the novel. Her relationship with Arthur not only gets extensive narrative attention, but also resonates into the future, especially through the gossip magazine clippings that Kirsten collects about Arthur.

Through the character of Arthur, thus, the years after the flu are narratively linked to the pre-collapse world, whose events are otherwise unrelated to the later catastrophe. These connections between the pre- and postapocalyptic setting are typical for the genre, where most "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 152). In this respect, the moment of Arthur's final performance of *King Lear*, which is repeatedly revisited throughout the novel, serves as the pivotal moment in *Station Eleven*. In "this moment we are presented with a micro-

cosm of the post-apocalyptic genre; the simultaneous movement forward and back encircling the moment of Armageddon" (Smith 290). As the novel simultaneously evokes the end of the world and marks the beginning of a drastically altered future, the postapocalyptic mode is inscribed into the novel's narrative structure.

## 2. The Postapocalyptic Imagination of *Station Eleven*

If *Station Eleven* is therefore clearly established as a postapocalyptic text, it might be useful to attempt to answer the question that according to Jacques Derrida is asked of "whoever takes on the apocalyptic tone" (53): "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" (51)? There are two common explanatory frameworks for postapocalyptic narratives, namely eschatology and critiques of capitalism. A third possible framework is science, which in this genre is often important in terms of either humanity's salvation or its destruction. In the context of *Station Eleven*, however, its role is too insignificant for further discussion.

Eschatology stands in the tradition of biblical readings of the apocalypse and involves an understanding of apocalypse as "revelation" – the word's etymological roots come from "to uncover" or "to disclose" – and the prediction of the coming of a new age. This "mode, derived from biblical eschatology, continues to exert a significant influence on the shape of texts that might otherwise be read as 'secular' or even atheist in orientation" (Tate 12). Sarah Dillon, for example, explores how the postapocalyptic novel *The Flood* (2004) "enters into, and engages with, the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition, producing a contemporary apocalyptic narrative of consolation and revelation," even though the novel also "breaks with this tradition in its refusal of final judgment and in its intimation that justice remains to come" (375). *Station Eleven* participates in "eschatological preaching (*predication*), the fact of telling, foretelling, or preaching the end, the extreme limit, the imminence of the last" (Derrida 47). However, by prominently presenting the world twenty years after the catastrophe, the novel also makes clear that the apocalyptic event is not the end or ultimate destiny of humanity. As a postapocalyptic text *Station Eleven* does not have a teleological endpoint but is an example of what Briohny Doyle calls "a contemporary modification of apocalypse which withholds revelation in favour of playing out scenarios of human survival in the ruins of the old world" (100).

Moreover, the role that the Bible and religion play in the novel is a decidedly negative one. The only context in which the Bible occurs in any sustained way is with the prophet, who is the main antagonist of the Travelling Symphony. This self-declared prophet is the leader of "a messianic doomsday cult that enslaves those it captures" (Christ 153) and rules with "a combination of charisma, violence, and cherry-picked verses from the Book of Revelation" (St. John Mandel 280). He



is an indication that religion is not something that provides relief and consolation in the context of the novel. Instead, his character emphasizes the destructiveness of religious thoughts and actions.

Alternatively, postapocalyptic fiction can be read as a critique of neoliberal capitalism. In this sense, stories set in the ruins of modern civilization are examinations of the breakdown of capitalism: “the explorations of the postapocalyptic imagination are properly explorations of the various break-downs of capitalism itself” (Doyle 101). Since, according to the well-known aphorism, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” Frederic Jameson suggests that postapocalyptic texts make possible witnessing “the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (76). In addition, postapocalyptic settings imply a criticism of the current neoliberal situation, using their alienating effects to highlight the negative aspects of the world we live in:

One characteristic of twenty-first century apocalyptic fiction, particularly narratives set after the collapse of society, is a tacit antipathy for the corrupt present in which the novel is written. The ruined worlds that they evoke are, it is implied, frequently a product of our current propensities and trajectories: the legacy of the early twenty-first century to these near-future eras is often environmental degradation, consumer greed, the loss of human rights and the exploitation of future generations who will pay a high price for current folly or cruelty. We are, the subtext is clear, making a horrible mess of things and nostalgia for the present is relatively rare. (Tate 132)

Although these points of criticism can be read into *Station Eleven*, it would not be particularly convincing to frame the novel as an anti-capitalist text. In its rendering of a future where people live without electricity in small rural settlements, the novel displays a certain longing for a pre-capitalist pastoral that is imagined to be marked by a life in harmony with nature. It also makes some oblique references to positive effects of the breakdown of modernity, such as mentioning the fact that “the era of light pollution had come to an end” (St. John Mandel 251) or that there are “[n]o more countries, all borders unmanned” (31). In addition, *Station Eleven* can be argued to be alluding to “the apocalyptic logic that underpins capitalism itself” (Doyle 101), by stressing the virus’s heightened impact due to the global connectivity. The characters all exude a sense of amazement about the miracle of planes, but air travel also accelerates the contagion’s spread.

All in all, however, the novel is pervaded with a profound fascination with, and even gentle nostalgia for, the vanished elements of the modern world, including the possibility of air travel, the internet, and the sound of electric guitars. This makes it difficult to consider it a thorough critique of capitalism. The nostalgia for the pre-collapse society that characterizes the novel is plainly visible in a short chapter that is little more than a list of things lost:

No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail. 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 airplanes [...]. No more spacecraft rising from Cape Canaveral [...] burning paths through the atmosphere into space. (St. John Mandel 31–32)

In this list *Station Eleven* reveals that it is much more prone to lament the loss of amenities and pleasures of the early twenty-first century, than to criticise the excesses and destructive effects of the capitalist system that enable these pleasures. It certainly does not address the host of problems that neoliberal capitalism entails and that big buzzwords such as environmental destruction, global warming, as well as global inequality and conflict only insufficiently capture. If the novel depicts the end of capitalism, it does so not to attempt to find viable alternatives, but rather to imagine what the collapse of civilisation might feel like to those who benefitted most from its comforts and pleasures.

As a result, neither biblical nor anti-capitalist interpretative frameworks are especially useful for an understanding of *Station Eleven*. Instead, the novel provides a positive attitude towards the postapocalypse, presenting a vision marked by nostalgia, hope and optimism. The novel communicates this positive outlook, which considerably distinguishes it from other representatives of postapocalyptic fiction, in primarily two ways: it exhibits a positive view of humanity and demonstrates the importance and value of culture and memory.

Usually, postapocalyptic stories tend to present a rather negative view of humanity, depicting a post-catastrophe world of violence in which the human survivors are determined by their struggles and efforts to survive. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006/2009), both in its literary and cinematic incarnations, or the popular AMC television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–2018) can be taken as exemplary for this tendency. The former is not only set in an ash-covered world during a nuclear winter but also requires its protagonists to evade roving cannibal gangs in a war of all against all, while in the latter the eponymous zombie hordes are little more than the backdrop to the brutal fights among the surviving human groups. It is especially with view to texts like these that Kunkel notes "a basically zoological idea of humanity" (Kunkel 97) in postapocalyptic fiction, which often highlights kinship bonds over other forms of societal organisation: "The contemporary apocalypse, as painted in our collection of movies and novels, illustrates in the most literal fashion possible Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families" (Kunkel 93–94). End-of-the-world scenarios that focus on individualistic conflicts and struggles can be read as reflecting contemporary society.

Moreover, “the wreck of civilization reveals the inherent depravity of mankind” (Kunkel 95).

Margaret Atwood’s novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and the films *28 Days Later...* (2002) and *I Am Legend* (2007) express their mistrust in humanity by highlighting that the catastrophe is man-made. The destroyed wasteland of *The Road* appears to be the outcome of a nuclear war, even though this is not made explicit. The only references to the event itself is during a flashback in which the protagonist sees “a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” and “a dull rose glow in the window-glass” (McCarthy 54). While in *Oryx and Crake* society is already shown to be corrupt before the apocalyptic event, in *The Road* people’s true nature is revealed by it. *Station Eleven* doubtlessly exhibits all the trappings of postapocalyptic fiction, but it is nevertheless an exception in the genre in its attitude towards mankind. It does not trace the pandemic, a mutated and highly dangerous variety of the bird flu, back to any human activity. It also avoids detailed depictions of the breakdown of civilization and the violent years afterwards. Instead, the first days of the flu are experienced by characters safely stowed away in sheltered environments. Then it jumps ahead by twenty years, to a time in which the world has become far less dangerous than in the years before, thus skipping the years on the road that for many of the survivors were years of violence. These “first unspeakable years” (St. John Mandel 37), when people “had fought off ferals, buried their neighbours, lived and died and suffered together in the blood-drenched years just after the collapse, survived against unspeakable odds and then only by holding together into the calm” (48), are merely alluded to, but not narrated directly.

This reluctance to display the violence of a postapocalyptic setting clearly differentiates *Station Eleven* from other representatives of the genre. McCarthy’s *The Road*, for example, portrays its subject matter, the first few postapocalyptic years, in the most bleak and gruesome way. The world of *The Road* is scorched, lifeless and covered in ash, where the landscape is “a stark black burn. Charred limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side” (McCarthy 6). Its nuclear winter brings out the worst in the few survivors fighting over the few remaining resources, resulting in a Hobbesian state of nature, where there famously is “no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes 76). The characters of *Station Eleven* seem to have experienced similarly nightmarish circumstances, but readers do not learn much about these. Like the characters of many other postapocalyptic texts, *The Road* just one among them, Kirsten herself spent the first years on the road. But whereas the slow and arduous movement and the problems and conflicts along the way are rendered extensively in *The Road* or *The Walking Dead*, in St. John Mandel’s novel the time on the road exists as half-suppressed memory. Kirsten, who was seven years old when the flu hit, cannot remember the first bad year: “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 195). Kirsten is also reluctant to speak about former atrocities she committed, such as having killed two people, which is symbolized by two knife tattoos on her arm. In an interview with a small makeshift newspaper she explains the meaning of the tattoos, but insists on staying off the record in order not to be remembered for having killed these people.

As a result, *Station Eleven* sketches a postapocalyptic world in which its inhabitants are familiar with struggle and violence but are not determined by it. Their lives may not be completely safe and peaceful, as the Travelling Symphony's conflict with the prophet – which provides much of the novel's narrative drive and suspenseful climax – shows. But twenty years after the apocalypse, Kirsten experiences the world as "much less dangerous than it used to be" (114). This is illustrated in a scene where she encounters a man with a rifle: "His tone wasn't unfriendly, and this was the pleasure of being alive in Year Twenty, this calmer age. For the first ten or twelve years after the collapse, he would have been much more likely to shoot them on sight" (145). The novel "takes the risk of believing that an ethical, cooperative, version of society might be achievable. The nightmare of ruined worlds, it suggests, are vital to our collective imagination, but there are alternatives, if we do not capitulate to the idea that the future has already been written" (Tate 137). This then might be the major purpose of *Station Eleven*, the end to which the novel declares the end of modern society (cf. Derrida 51): to present a more optimistic view of the postapocalyptic future.

### 3. "Survival is insufficient": The Importance of Culture and Memory

Since *Station Eleven*'s postapocalyptic scenario is not determined by the brutal rule of a state of nature and its characters do not only have to concentrate on survival, they have the opportunity to engage in cultural activities. In contrast to the end-of-the-world depictions in *The Road* or *The Walking Dead* which highlight struggle and conflict, in St. John Mandel's novel humanity arguably redeems itself through culture. It demonstrates that our cultural activities lie at the core of what makes us human, even in the restricted and hardened circumstances of a postapocalyptic setting. Already in the beginning, as the virus spreads across the globe, the characters use their familiarity with cultural texts to make sense of their situation, comparing the images they see on television with disaster movies: "They'd all seen the post-apocalyptic movies" (St. John Mandel 256). Although the song is not mentioned by name, Jeevan has REM's "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)" (1987) stuck in his head, while the world as he knows it is ending: "it's the perfect song" (176). It is also no coincidence that the parts of the novel set twenty years after the collapse of society centrally depict the Travelling Symphony's journey through the country, performing plays

including *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the disparate settlements along their way.

Shakespeare is generally one of the most dominant motifs in the novel. Most obviously, the narrative poignantly hinges on the pivotal event of Arthur Leander's death during a production of *King Lear*, Shakespeare's apocalyptic play about a dying monarch, on a stormy November night in Toronto. Twenty years later, the Symphony performs *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a symbolic reminder that the "world was softening" (133). As Smith succinctly puts it, if "*King Lear* heralds the apocalypse, then *A Midsummer Night's Dream* heralds the possibility of rebirth" (Smith 294). Aside from its timelessness and power, Shakespeare is suitable material, considering that he lived in a particularly plague-ridden time. *Station Eleven* stresses the parallels between its postapocalyptic setting and Shakespeare's world. One of the Travelling Symphony's members observes that during Shakespeare's lifetime "[p]lague closed the theatres again and again, death flickering over the landscape," while their own situation is "a twilight once more lit by candles, the age of electricity having come and gone" (St. John Mandel 57). There is also "a symbolic resonance between the Georgia Flu and the plague in Shakespeare's time represented in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (Smith 294). While one of the Symphony's members notes the limits of the parallels, since in "Shakespeare's time the wonders of technology were still ahead, not behind them, and far less had been lost" (St. John Mandel 288), the main reason the theatre group performs his plays is simply that Shakespeare is what the audiences want: "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" (38).

The value the actors and musicians of the Travelling Symphony find in their work also explains why they go through the effort of moving through the country instead of simply settling down, continuing what "seemed a difficult and dangerous way to survive and hardly worth it" (119). At times they are actually able "to cast a spell" on their audiences, and to distract them from lives that "were work-worn and difficult, people who spent all their time engaged in the tasks of survival" (151). In the best moments, they even achieve a sense of transcendent beauty. They may have lost "almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty. Twilight in the altered world, a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a parking lot in the mysteriously named town of St. Deborah by the Water, Lake Michigan shining a half mile away" (57). But on a more basic level, the Travelling Symphony also simply offers a home to its members, where the music and the theatre make their postapocalyptic existence bearable. Culture has the important role of adding meaning to lives that otherwise would be reduced to mere survival. It is in this spirit that Kirsten has appropriated the slogan "Survival is insufficient" from a thematically fitting *Star Trek: Voyager* episode, a slogan not only tattooed on her arm but also painted on the lead caravan.

Culture in the novel is not only represented by Shakespeare and the music the Symphony plays. Other cultural artefacts are similarly prominent. Kirsten, for example, always carries a snow globe and the *Dr. Eleven* comic books with her; items which appear to have no practical value. However, the comic books, like the snow globe, serve an important function in linking past and present by connecting Kirsten to Arthur who gave them to her, and to his ex-wife Miranda who created them. Being set in a future world on a space station after an invasion has made earth impossible to inhabit, the comics are effectively a *mise-en-abyme*, whose importance to the novel's narrative is indicated by the fact that it is named after the space station, Station Eleven. The comics' central sentence evinces a nostalgic stance towards the vanished world that is akin to that of the novel: "I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth" (42).

Contrary to the aim to forget expressed here, *Station Eleven* is a novel about memory. Memories play a relevant role; before the collapse characters remember their childhoods, their happier pasts, their failed relationships, and after they remember, or try to remember, the world as it used to be. Kirsten often thinks of elements of the preapocalyptic world, for instance her interactions with Arthur Leander, whom she has also assembled a collection of magazine clippings about. But she also wonders about the accuracy of her memories: "Nothing in Kirsten's collection suggested the Arthur Leander she remembered, but what did she actually remember?" (41). Childhood memories often come up as well, but these "memories from before the collapse seem like dreams now" (195).

The importance of memory in the context of the novel is nowhere more obvious than in the Museum of Civilization at the Severn City airport. It symbolizes the desire to remember, to keep the world before the Georgia Flu as present as possible. After settling permanently at the airport, Clark starts the museum soon after it becomes clear that things would not go back to normal. Twenty years later he has accumulated a sizeable number of 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, Tyler's Nintendo console, 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. Traders brought things for Clark sometimes, objects of no real value that they knew he would like: magazines and newspapers, a stamp collection, coins. 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 258)

Illustrating the nostalgic longing for the pre-collapse world, the museum also embodies the need to keep memories alive. Preserving the memories of people who have died is a sort of survival strategy itself, and fits within one of *Station*

*Eleven*'s recurring themes, namely that "physical survival and the record of existence are intertwined – that artefacts, information, and, above all, texts serve as proof of the individual having existed" (Smith 296).

Culture and memory are therefore depicted as tools for making the past usable for the present. In fact, by the end of the novel, there are several hints that indicate the possibility of a return to the way things used to be, at least to a certain degree. There are, for example, efforts to "find" the internet with power created with an exercise bicycle, or the creation of newspapers and maintenance of libraries. The high point of the attempts to reconstruct, at least rudimentarily, the way things used to be comes at the very end of the novel, when Clark shows Kirsten from the airport's tower lights in the distance: "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 311). These lights stir in Clark thoughts of a possible future in the ruins, a return to a world that might regain many of the amenities of the of the pre-collapse past, but, due to the drastically reduced number of people, without many of the negative consequences of economic growth and technological progress. Clark "has no expectation of seeing an airplane rise again in his lifetime, but is it possible that somewhere there are ships setting out? If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain?" (332). His musings are exemplary for the outlook of *Station Eleven* that, in contrast to other texts such as *The Road* "appears to show more faith in the sparks of ingenuity that create civilizations" (Tate 133), and finds beauty even in a postapocalyptic setting:

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 296)

As a result, despite being a story about a pandemic that kills most the earth's population and has its surviving characters endure hardships in the years after, *Station Eleven*'s postapocalyptic imaginary is one of optimism, where the possibility of electric light twenty years after the end of the world represents the vision of a new start, of a world that is reawakening.

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