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STATION ELEVEN AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY WRITING

The Rise of the Comics *Künstlerroman*, or, the Limits of Comics Acceptance: The Depiction of Comics Creators in the Work of Michael Chabon and Emily St. John Mandel

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The *künstlerroman* is a genre with a long and celebrated past. From Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park* (2005) to John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978) and Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), the genre has occupied a prominent place in bestseller lists and awards shortlists. The enduring popularity and continued critical celebration of the *künstlerroman* makes it all the more striking that, since the turn of the millennium a new kind of author-protagonist has emerged — the graphic-novelist-protagonist. This move not only inducts graphic novelists into this existing — and prestigious — literary genre, it also draws them into the same struggle for recognition in which other novelist-protagonists have long been involved. Drawing on the recent examples of Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), in this article I argue that there is a clear move toward the serious discussion of comics and comics creators in contemporary literature, an increasing willingness to talk about comics and their makers that is marked by a surprising faith in the fitness of comics as a mode of self-expression and a recognition of the clear kinship between prose authors and graphic novelists.

If we follow the critical orthodoxy on the subject, it is safe to say that comics have an image problem. David Pizzino, in his 2016 study of the reception of comics, argues that ‘while comics are less reviled now than they were in the worst years of censorship, the medium is still designated illegitimate by default’ (3). Paul Lopes, writing in 2006, goes further, arguing that comics are cursed with the double bind of being ‘low status and [...] stigmatized’, a combination that inevitably badges them as a “problematic” medium to be disregarded as ‘juvenile and disposable’ (388). It is certainly true that, despite recent steps in the right direction, the symbolic capitalisation of the form – by awards bodies, by nationally-syndicated book reviewers, by academic reading lists – does not match the enduring popularity of the medium suggests by its economic capitalisation.¹

What I mean to examine here, however, is the emergence of comics – and moreover their creators – as a legitimate subject for more readily symbolically-capitalised forms, namely prose novels. There has been a rise in a form of prose-novelistic interest in the stories of comics creators that I term the ‘comics *künstlerroman*’, a genre in which the comics creator’s journey to creative expression and fulfilment is treated as seriously as that of any other artist.² This is a turn that I argue has two origin points that each go some way to explaining its emergence. The first is that comics are, slowly, becoming more celebrated, carrying more symbolic capital.³ The second

¹ I draw these terms from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and those who have followed him. Of particular relevance here are Bourdieu’s comments on the ‘ascetic aristocratism of the teachers’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 286). Here, he clearly delineates a preference among those ‘who owe their place in the dominant class to the accumulation of educational capital’ for heavily symbolically but under-economically capitalised objects and pursuits, comments that have clear relevance for ongoing resistance to the highly economically but under-symbolically capitalised ‘field’ of comics.

² Here I use *künstlerroman* in its broadest sense, as Chris Baldick has it, ‘a novel in which the central character is an artist of any kind’ (2008, np). See also Carl D. Malmgren’s argument that ‘The *künstlerroman* by definition interrogates, describes, and enacts an aesthetic theory’ (1987: 24). In this case, the theory is that (some) comics can perform for their creators the same functions of self-expression and community-building as more ‘conventional’ art, and are therefore worthy of the same level of (symbolic) capitalisation.

³ To give just a few recent examples, Chris Ware won the Guardian First Book Award for *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* in 2001, Mary Talbot’s *Dotter of Her Father’s Eyes* won the Costa Biography Prize in 2012 and Nick Drnaso’s *Sabrina* has been longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2018. To qualify the idea that this is a purely postmillennial phenomenon, I do want to acknowledge a longer

is that comics, especially those that awards bodies and novelists seek to celebrate, are, increasingly, looking like novels. All of the examples cited above feature a single, identifiable author, and they – like conventional novels – are complete, finished texts.⁴ It is these ‘novelistic’ comics that both literary awards bodies and the novels I examine seek to celebrate. And, tellingly, it is also these comics that existing systems of symbolic capitalisation are set up to reward. The single author-artist who creates the comics gives awards bodies a creator to celebrate, and the ‘complete’ nature of each text gives them a unified body of work upon which to pass judgement. The central point I seek to make in this article is that the recognition of comics and their authors in the symbolically-capitalised novels I examine is revealing of the growing acceptance of some examples of the form by the value-distributing forces of the literary field.⁵ Just as significantly, however, I also make the claim here that the *kinds* of comics and comics creators that these prose novels celebrate reveal the limits of this acceptance, and the ongoing biases and preferences of such symbolic-capital-distributing forces.⁶

history of the cultural capitalisation of certain – similarly ‘novelistic’ – comics. The most obvious, and important, example is Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991) which ‘almost single-handedly changed the perception of comics among insiders and outsiders alike’ and ‘made a case for comics as a medium with serious cultural capital’ (Stein, Meyer and Edlich, 2011: 54). Other examples might include Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) or Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1987) and *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988). See Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels* for a thorough examination of the history of the medium.

⁴ Standing in contrast to the ‘ongoing’ form of, for example, most (though not all) of the superheroic comic books produced by DC and Marvel. This form of comics does have a longer history, going back at least as far as Will Eisner’s *A Contract With God* (1978), which presented its readers with a closed and completed cycle of interlinked short comic book stories.

⁵ Again, here I borrow terms from Bourdieu, drawing especially on his sense of a cultural ‘field’ as a ‘classificatory system’ maintained by ‘an opposition homologous to the opposition constituting the field of the social classes’ (1984: 469).

⁶ And I should also point out at this juncture that not all critics of comics are as welcoming of their increasing cultural capitalisation as I am. Katherine Roeder, as one recent example, expresses her concern that ‘[a]s graphic novels become more popular [...] they run a greater risk of being co-opted by consumer culture and losing their autonomy’ (2008: 4). This is certainly a valid concern. The more that is invested in comics – both culturally and economically – the more likely it is that these vested interests will hold sway over a medium whose position on the margins has often been a source of strength and given them the space for innovation. In the examples I discuss in this article, however, it seems that rather than restrict their activities, the increasing capitalisation of the comic creators that

This article focuses on two of the most recent and most critically-lauded (symbolically capitalised) examples of the comics *künstlerroman*, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), though this is a trend that also includes films such as *American Splendor* (2004) and novels such as Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and Umberto Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004), all of which focussed (in a mostly positive way) on comics creators, and all of which garnered the kind of critical attention that their subject matter typically struggles to attract. In this examination, I mean to identify some of the workings of the contemporary prize-giving industry as a deliberate force of symbolic capitalisation (or refusal of that kind of capitalisation) and the kinds of texts that it is (and is not) organised to recognise and reward.

The comics *künstlerroman* I aim to explore here is part of a wider, but admittedly limited, post-millennial trend toward the critical acceptance — and symbolic capitalisation — of comics. Katherine Roeder cites two key (and once again 'novelistic') examples of this trend in 'Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* [2006], which was one of *Time* magazine's ten best books of 2006 and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and Marjane Satrapi's highly acclaimed memoir *Persepolis* [2000]' (2008: 2). In her work, Roeder argues that at least since the turn of the millennium, the serious work being done by these comics and their creators was beginning to be recognised by literary authorities and invested with greater symbolic capital than ever before. As Roeder states, '[c]omic art has always held popular appeal, but now it is *spilling over* increasingly into other forms of mass media and it is becoming intellectually and artistically respectable' (2008: 2, emphasis added). However, and most significantly for this article, Roeder argues that this 'spilling over' has begun to reach the world

Mandel and Chabon depict instead brings with it greater freedom. It is Joe's success with *The Escapist* that allows him to escape the watchful eye of Sheldon Anapol long enough to create his innovative *Luna Moth*. Equally, it is the importance — the cultural capitalisation — of Miranda's comics that allows them to fulfil the several roles that they play for Mandel's troupe. For these prose novelists at least, increasing capitalisation — both economic and cultural — brings with it not only increasing respectability, but also increasing freedom.

of prose literature where '[b]oth the making and collecting of comic books featured centrally in recent fiction by such popular authors as Michael Chabon, Umberto Eco, and Jonathan Lethem' (2008: 2). Jeremy Dauber picks up a similar line of argument and indeed goes some way to tying these two strands together when he points out that:

In recent years, we have witnessed a significant increase in writing by scholars and literary and cultural critics on the genre of the comic book, corresponding to an increased legitimacy given to the comic book industry *and its writers and artists* more generally. Part of this phenomenon no doubt stems from the attention lavished on the field by mainstream fiction and nonfiction writers who consider comic books a central part of their own and America's cultural heritage, such as Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem (2006: 277, emphasis added).

Dauber's is a point of view with which it is hard to disagree, as the symbolic capital of prestige, as the discussion to follow explores, tends to breed additional symbolic capital (and indeed economic capital, as publishers and readers both respond to this increasing respectability) for a particular medium or genre.

For Jason Dittmer, following Foucault and Jack Bratich, comics publishers' concerns for the reception and understanding of their texts is all about their audience, a group that is:

Reified through discourse and performance as a result of institutional anxiety and concern. The construction of 'audiences' is a necessary operationalisation for these institutions so that policies and practices can be implemented (2010: 224).

Producers (and especially publishers) need to know, argues Dittmer, who their audience is so that they can understand what they want, as part of ongoing efforts by publishers and authors to 'anxiously try to anticipate how their cultural products will be encountered by consumers in order to keep consumers coming back for more'

(2010: 224). Essentially, comics — like any other cultural product — seek to make themselves as visible and as appealing to their specific target audience as possible in order to maintain their sales and popularity. The difficulty emerges when a producer attempts to change or expand their audience.

At this point, the very public, but very polite, spat between Arthur Krystal and Lev Grossman that was conducted in the pages of *The New Yorker* and *Time* magazine becomes relevant. In 'Easy Writers', the piece that started the public argument, Krystal writes that:

The typical genre writer keeps rhetorical flourishes to a minimum, and the typical reader is content to let him. Readers who require more must look either to other kinds of novels or to those genre writers who care deeply about their sentences. [...] Since it's the formulaic nature of genre writing (variations serve to underscore such expectations) that keeps us coming back (2012: 1).

An argument that holds, at least according to his opponent, that 'literary fiction is, by contrast, free from formulas and conventions', a conceit that Grossman is keen to point out in his rebuttal, 'is itself a convention [...] In other words — and here's the real nightmare, horror-movie reveal, wait for it — literary fiction is itself a genre, just like mysteries or westerns or fantasy', a point that is all the more convincing when we consider that some kind of classification of 'literary' fiction necessarily underpins Krystal's own argument (2012: n.p.).

In response, in the final article of the exchange, Krystal changes tack, arguing instead that:

It seems to me that Chabon, Egan, and Ishiguro don't so much work in genre as with genre. 'All the Pretty Horses' is no more a western than '1984' is science fiction. Nor can we in good conscience call John Le Carré's 'The Honorable Schoolboy' or Richard Price's 'Lush Life' genre novels (2012: 2).

And it is at this point that I seek to enter the discussion, by going back, via the work of Thomas A. Bredehoft, to my critical origin point, in order to explore the complex intersection of 'high' literature and 'low' subject matter that makes the comics *künstlerroman* such a fertile ground for Roeder's 'overspilling' of prestige. The point I want to take from Krystal's final article is that I am clearly not arguing that Mandel and Chabon are creating comics, but that the work they do with comics, and moreover the celebration of that work by literary tastemakers, is revealing in and of itself.

In his work on Harvey Pekar's comics, Bredehoft invokes Foucault's ideas of authorship to examine how we might better understand Pekar's approach to his work and, moreover, its reception. In the course of his argument, Bredehoft points out that:

[s]pecifically, Foucault invokes the notion of style in his four criteria of coherence, in which an author is conceptualized as a more-or-less coherent locus or guarantor of literary quality, doctrinal positioning, style, and historical positioning (2011: 100).

It is precisely this critical positioning, this new-found authorial coherence in a form that had previously resisted such neat conceptualising of its form, its origin and, as a result, its literary worth that, I argue, goes some way to explaining the popularity of books not just about comics, but specifically about their creators. In order to be recognised as 'literature', comics have not only had to match the subject matter of existing literary forms, but have also had to adopt their organisational and compositional practices, resulting in what we might term the 'novelistic comic book'. In other words, literary awards bodies are increasingly ready to recognise comics (and books about them) not only because their subject matter has changed, but because their authorial and organisational behaviours have.

This shift in comics practices and the resulting uptick in critical attention is, I argue, key to understanding the operation and preferences of the value-assigning

aspects of the publishing and reception industries. The reception industry, as Roger Luckhurst points out, is one that works:

First as an exercise of power that produced social classifications, then [second] as a set of like rituals or customs that signified status or rank symbolically, and textual forms that inscribed the existence of groups or communities (2010: 7).

That is to say that the reception industry — the collection of critics, awards committee members, blurb writers, copywriters and many others who shape our encounters with and understanding of texts through the deployment of what Gerard Genette terms paratexts — itself creates classifications with the more or less sole purpose of ranking them.⁷ As Luckhurst goes on to explain, through an invocation of Clifford Geertz:

The cultures at the core of [Geertz's] study were webs of meaning, 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life' (2010: 8).

For Luckhurst, and for the purposes of this article, the reception industry is one of Geertz's cultures, with its own rituals and symbolic methods of communicating its attitudes toward the communities that it itself creates.

Luckhurst describes his own argument as an attempt 'to explore how multiple contextual saturation might explode and then reconstitute [his] ostensible object of study: science fiction literature' (2010: 10). Having explored the current status of comics as being a form that, despite recent tentative moves toward acceptance of some of its manifestations, is still very much toward the bottom of the hierarchy of communities constructed and then judged by the reception industry, I will now

⁷ See Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, in particular his early statement that the object of the paratext is 'to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book' (2001: 1, emphasis in the original).

similarly, through close reading of my two examples of the comics *künstlerroman*, examine a form that is similarly multiply saturated.

**'It seems he's been writing a novel': Michael Chabon's
*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay***

The first, and in some ways most conspicuous, example of this post-millennial trend in prize-winning literature toward the depiction of comics creators appears in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2001. Chabon's text takes as its main concern the rise of the comic-book hero the Escapist. The Escapist is the crime- (and later Nazi-) fighting creation of the second-generation Czech-Jewish-American writer Sammy Klayman (professionally Sam Clay) and the Czech-Jewish émigré and artist Josef 'Joe' Kavalier. Chabon's novel follows the development and growing popularity of the Escapist from the late 1930s up to America's entry into the Second World War in 1941, at which point Joe joins the Air Force, breaking the partnership that created the character. During this time, the Escapist captures the imagination of wartime America and makes the two artists (and moreover their publisher, the cynical Sheldon Anapol) increasingly wealthy. More than just charting of the rise in the popularity (that is to say, economic capitalisation) of comics, however, Chabon is interested in the thematic and aesthetic development of comics during this period and in the personal and artistic development of Joe Kavalier, his comics-creating protagonist.

Comics scholar Hilary Chute places *Kavalier & Clay* alongside E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* in a continuum of texts which are 'about the birth of popular culture in America' on the basis that one 'charts the rise of film in the first decades of the twentieth century' and the other 'the invention of comic books in the 1930s and 1940s' (2008: 272). Chute goes on to argue that:

Kavalier & Clay, as with *Ragtime*, theorizes a democratic popular culture that is yet aesthetically innovative. It is no surprise, then, that the immigrant Harry Houdini is a major figure in both novels. In both *Ragtime* and *Kavalier & Clay*, Houdini, like the novels themselves, raises the question: What are popular art forms?' (2008: 281).

Or, to expand upon Chute's question, how are popular forms and their creators received and understood? Ultimately, Chute argues, '*Kavalier & Clay* is about comics moving out from a degraded mass form (the pulps) to what Joe insists on: comics as a serious art form', and, as I would argue that it necessarily follows, the emergence of their creators as serious artists (2008: 281).

Joe's insistence on comics-as-art, however, stands in direct contrast to the disdainful attitudes of other characters in the text, ideas that are set early on and rarely change. 'This is a comic book we're talking about, okay?' Joe is told by Jack Ashkenazy in their first meeting to discuss the launch of a comic book line, 'Half bad is maybe better than beautiful' (Chabon, 2008: 89). This is a position that is reinforced at the second such meeting, where again Joe and Sammy are told, 'You know, don't you, that this is pure trash. Superman is pure trash, too, of course. Batman, the Blue Beetle. The whole menagerie' at which point Sammy is obliged to counter with "'You're right," [...] through his teeth. "Trash sells."' (Chabon, 2008: 157). Even as the text progresses, and ironically just after Joe begins work on the highly innovative and experimental *Luna Moth* series, the pair are again told, this time by their thoroughly jaded editor George Deasey that '[t]here is only one sure means in life [...] of ensuring that you are not ground into paste by disappointment, futility, and disillusion. And that is always ensure, to the utmost of your ability, that you are doing it solely for the money' (Chabon, 2008: 285). For their publishers at least, economic capital is all, symbolic capital is for other, more sophisticated (and less profitable) ventures into the field of literary production – and comics are an ideal form for this profit-driven approach.

However, Joe's experimentation comes to the fore in his first solo project to be published by Ashkenazy and Anapol's (Amazing Midget) Radio Comics, *Luna Moth*. In this series (scripted and drawn entirely by Joe) 'the urban dreamscapes, the dizzying perspectives, the playful tone, and the bizarre metamorphoses and juxtapositions of *Little Nemo in Slumberland* all quickly found their way into Joe's pages' (Chabon, 2008: 319). These references invoke in a classically literary way the intertextual links between the vertiginous perspectives and dream-logic of real-life cartoonist Winsor

McCay's wildly experimental comic strip of the early 1900s and Joe's second project. Joe's willingness to experiment and to make intertextual links to other, equally experimental, works extends even to the form that he uses, as Chabon tells us that:

Suddenly the standard three tiers of quadrangular panels became a prison from which he had to escape. [...] He sliced up his panels, stretched and distorted them, cut them into wedges and strips. He experimented with benday dots, cross-hatching, woodcut effects, and even crude collage (2008: 319).

This is where Joe's development as an author-figure begins, and with it the development of his comics-as-art. The more Joe behaves like a recognisable author-figure, the more developed (and enduring) his work becomes. As one of Chabon's playful footnotes tells us, these comics, unlike those Joe produces with Sammy Klay, endured and remained difficult and unusual even into the 1970s when '*The Weird Worlds of Luna Moth* (Nostalgia Press, 1970; second edition, Pure Imagination, 1996) quickly became a head-shop bestseller' (Chabon, 2008: 319).

The vital creativity of comics and their creators is contrasted throughout Chabon's text by the frustrations experienced by those characters who are trying to write prose novels, the more conventional heroes of the *künstlerroman*. *Kavalier & Clay* is full of characters who are trying – and failing – to write (prose) fiction. Most prominently, there is Sammy Clay's oft-started but never completed *American Disillusionment* which takes the form 'at various times, of a bitter comedy, a stoical Hemingwayesque tragedy, a hard-nosed lesson in social anatomy like something by John O'Hara, a bare-knuckles urban *Huckleberry Finn*' (Chabon, 2008: 542). Even Joe seems to be aware of the novel's existence, despite the fact that Sammy claims never to show it to other people, telling his longtime love interest Rosa early on that Sammy is 'writing a novel [...] A *real* one' (Chabon, 2008: 284, emphasis in original). Sammy works on the novel throughout the text, each time forced to do something similar to the action that brings to an end our first encounter with the manuscript: 'He put *American Disillusionment* back in the drawer and began to work on the script

for *Kid Vixen*, the crime-fighting female boxer' (Chabon, 2008: 296). Sammy finally abandons work on *American Disillusionment* altogether toward the end of *Kavalier & Clay*, compelled by 'bills and debts and a family' to return to the world of writing comics, so that 'When the Gold Star job [as managing editor] came along, he had at last thrown in the towel on his old caterpillar dreams' (Chabon, 2008: 481).

Sammy seems able to write only when he produces formulaic stories for comics, when he can divorce his self from his fiction and work with other, secondary, authors to produce comics 'for the money' (Chabon, 2008: 285). We are told that at the height of his comic book writing powers Sammy is 'capable of ninety words a minute when under a deadline or pleased with the direction his story was taking' (Chabon, 2008: 486). But this is not the creative, fulfilling work he craves, as Chabon describes this process as something almost like automatic writing:

Over the years his brain had become an instrument so finely tuned to the generation of highly conventional, severely formalistic eight-to-twelve-page miniature epics that he could, without great effort, write, talk, smoke, listen to a ball game, and keep an eye on the clock all at the same time (2008: 486).

Sammy, it seems, has been too long doing this for the money, and the creative avenues apparently open to Joe have been closed off to him, possibly forever, because of his inability – or unwillingness – to see the comics he can produce as a genuine and genuinely fulfilling avenue of artistic expression and to behave in a properly (and conventionally) authorial manner during their production.

Sammy is not the only frustrated novelist we find in Chabon's text. George Deasey has at least one manuscript not written for the money hidden away among the pulp plots in his office, and even Sheldon Anapol, the spectacularly hard-nosed owner of Radio Comics, is 'in fact eternally at work on a treatise-cum-autobiography he referred to sometimes as *The Science of Opportunity* and other times, more ruefully, as *Sorrow in my Sample Case*' another of *Kavalier & Clay*'s never-finished prose-novel-cum-memoirs (Chabon, 2008: 80). This frustration is a striking contrast to Chabon's depiction of the creativity and potential for personal expression with which he

invests the comics that Joe produces. Joe's comics, even under the watchful eyes of Anapol and Deasey, are creative, ever-changing entities which, even outside the overt experimentation of *Luna Moth*, begin to approach something thoroughly novelistic in their scope and ambition, with super-powered characters like the Escapist fading into the background, to be replaced by, as Chabon reflects:

The ordinary people around them, whose own exploits, [...] advanced so far into the foreground of each story that such emphasis itself, on the everyday heroics of the 'powerless,' may be seen, at least in hindsight, a kind of secret, and hence probably ineffectual, propaganda (2008: 368).

The dramatic conclusion of Chabon's comics *künstlerroman* comes suddenly, in the discovery of Joe's huge, and hugely ambitious, manuscript of *The Golem*. Found by Empire State Building security in Joe's secret office, we are introduced to this enormous comic book by one character's exclamation that whatever else Joe had been up to, '[a]pparently he was writing a novel' (Chabon, 2008: 368). Even Sammy, jaded veteran of comics though he is, is stunned by the discovery: 'At first Sammy was too overwhelmed by the sheer number of pages – there must have been four or five thousand' hugely longer than anything Sammy or Radio Comics would have put out in their conventional comics lines (Chabon, 2008: 542).

Yet this comic has other unique aspects. Sammy first notices that the pages are 'uninked. [...] Joe had been working in a variety of gauges of lead, letting his pencils do the tricks of light and mass and shadow that were usually pulled off with ink' (Chabon, 2008: 542). But even more remarkable are the people of this comic:

The characters, for the most part, appeared to be Jews, old-fashioned, black-garbed, drawn with all of Joe's usual fluidity and detail. The faces, Sammy noticed, were more specific, quirker, uglier, than the lexicon of generic comic book mugs that Joe had learned and then exploited in his old work. They were human faces, pinched, hungry, the eyes anticipating horror but hoping for something more (Chabon, 2008: 542).

The only exception to this new-found individuality is '[o]ne character, repeated over and over in the sketches on the walls, [who] had barely any face at all, the conventional V's and hyphens of a comic physiognomy simplified to almost blank abstraction', the Golem itself, as Sammy intuits (Chabon, 2008: 542). That there are no word balloons or any dialogue of any kind is another, seemingly secondary, consideration, soon cleared up by Joe's assertion that 'There is a script. In German' (Chabon, 2008: 578). This is, Joe insists, not a problem even in just-post-war America, because 'This is not to sell' (Chabon, 2008: 578). This may seem like a defeat, another work in a long line of never-to-be seen vanity projects, but the point here is that it *is* finished. Joe, in his research into Jewish history and mysticism and the completion of the project, has got what satisfaction he required out of the project. He has finished the story. He has, finally and totally, disavowed economic capital. Joe's insistence is all that stops Sammy from publishing the first graphic novel, or 'comic book novel' as Sammy calls it, in 1946, a full three decades before Eisner's *A Contract with God* (Baronet Books, 1978) (Chabon, 2008: 578).

The question to ask, of course, is what to make of this lengthy depiction of the development of Joe's comics and comics artistry, and in particular what to make of the Pulitzer Prize committee's decision to reward *Kavalier & Clay* instead of the other finalists, Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde* and Joy Williams' *The Quick and the Dead*. The citation for *Kavalier & Clay* calls it 'a stunning novel in which the tragicomic adventures of a couple of boy geniuses reveal much about what happened to America in the middle of the twentieth century' (Anon, 2001: n.p.). There is a lot more than 'just' comics in Chabon's text, taking in as it does action in Nazi-occupied Europe, pre- and post-war New York, wartime Antarctica, themes of Jewish-American relations, survivor guilt and, in Sammy's relationships with Tracy Bacon and later Rosa Saks, the repression and concealment of homosexual identities in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Yet, what occupies most of Chabon's interest, Joe's lengthy wartime sojourn to Antarctica aside, is comics and comics creation, and their development and (mis-)understanding by the public – complete with references to Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*. Comics were definitely 'what happened in America in the middle of the twentieth century', as the Pulitzer committee had it (Anon, 2001: n.p.).

For a prize committee to reward a novel which demonstrates such a clear faith in the potential of comics (or at least those comics that most closely resemble novels) to provide greater personal freedom and potential for their creator's expression than conventional prose narratives suggests that, perhaps, they might be as open to such a view as Chabon himself seems to be in his comics *künstlerroman*.

Comics as Post-apocalyptic Cultural Relic: Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

Canadian author Emily St. John Mandel's post-apocalyptic fourth novel *Station Eleven* may seem like an odd bedfellow for Chabon's alternative-history text, but, as I will demonstrate here, it retains the same faith in the importance of novelistic comics, both as cultural transmitters and as avenues for the creative expression of its comics-creating protagonist, Miranda. Mandel's novel flips back and forth between the years prior to and twenty years after the outbreak of a devastating flu pandemic which wipes out roughly 90% of the world's population, leaving only small encampments of survivors which Kirsten, another of the novel's protagonists, wanders between as part of a travelling Shakespearean acting company and orchestra. Where Chabon's novel is historical – or at least rooted in the past – Mandel's is speculative (to borrow Margaret Atwood's preferred term for future-set science-fiction); where Chabon was a novelist of international repute before *Kavalier & Clay*, Mandel's previous three novels had fared poorly outside Canada.⁸ In terms of genre, of prior reputation, of nationality, and even of gender (the comics landscape being a traditionally male-dominated one), Mandel's text occupies a very different position from Chabon's. All of which makes it all the more remarkable that this text, which displays remarkable faith not just in the enduring power of (single-authored) comics-as-art, but also as a means of forging community, of bridging divides, and as means of true and productive self-expression, became such a critical and popular success. *Station Eleven* won the Arthur C. Clarke award and was nominated for a host of other awards including the

⁸ See, for example, Atwood's interview with *The Guardian's* Robert McCrum from 2010 for more on this term.

National Book Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction.

Yet more remarkable, given its critical success, is that Mandel's novel adopts the tropes of several identifiable genres. The first Mandel herself addressed in an interview with the *New York Times*, saying of post-apocalyptic fiction that 'It's almost as if "The Road" gave more literary writers permission to approach the subject' (Alter, 2014: n.p.). Alexander Alter, Mandel's interviewer, seems convinced, arguing that works like Mandel's and McCarthy's 'blur the line between literary and genre fiction and seem positioned to capture both science-fiction readers and fans of more experimental fare' in comments that recall the Krystal/Grossman debate mentioned above (2014: n.p.). Mandel, at least by her own account, started out with an altogether more 'conventional' text before it changed during its writing into something else. As Alter tells us, Mandel:

Set out to write a quiet novel about a traveling Canadian stage actor. But the novel quickly morphed into something darker, [...] following a small band of actors who travel across the Great Lakes region after a pandemic, performing Shakespeare's plays for scattered camps of survivors (2014: n.p.).

Even American publishing houses, despite Mandel's relatively low profile outside of her native Canada, were convinced by the pitch, as in the same interview we are told that a 'three-day bidding war broke out among a half-dozen publishers' for the rights to *Station Eleven*, after which "[t]he novel sold to Alfred A. Knopf, which paid a mid-six-figure advance, far more than Ms. Mandel had made on her previous three novels combined." (Alter, 2014: n.p.)

In many ways, Knopf, the publishers of McCarthy's *The Road*, could not have been a more apt place for Mandel's 'literary dystopian novel' to land. But what Alter's article and the many other interviews with Mandel and reviews of the text that have appeared since *Station Eleven's* publication have ignored is the central role that the comic *Dr Eleven* plays in the narrative. Justine Jordan, reviewing *Station Eleven* for *The Guardian*, comes closest when she writes that '*Station Eleven* is not so much about apocalypse as about memory and loss, nostalgia and yearning; the effort of art to

deepen our fleeting impressions of the world and bolster our solitude' (2014: n.p.). To make this claim about 'art' is nothing new, but to make this claim about comics – or to include comics under the heading of 'art' – is something altogether different.

Surprisingly, perhaps, for an inherently visual artifact, *Dr Eleven* is not introduced by what it looks like or what it contains, but by how it connects people to other people, the post-apocalyptic world to the pre-apocalyptic: "I *knew* him," Kirsten says of Arthur Leander after finding an old gossip magazine with the long-dead actor on the cover, "He gave me the comics I showed you!" (St. John Mandel, 2014: 40, emphasis in original). Her companion August's only response to this revelation is to nod and to ask 'to see the comics again' (St. John Mandel, 2014: 40). This is significant. The comics are a relic of the pre-apocalyptic world, but the reason that they resonate with Kirsten and especially with August is not, like the long list of things that no longer exist that Mandel presents elsewhere in the novel, including 'no more diving into chlorinated pools', because of a general connection to memories of the old world, but a personal one and, moreover, one forged in the fragile communities of the new world (St. John Mandel, 2014: 31). The comics are imbued with meaning not because of their material value, or because they, like the old copies of *TV Guide* that Kirsten and other scavengers collect, remind the travellers of the old world, but because of the way in which they connect the people of the troupe in the new world.

The materiality of these comics is just as important as their symbolic function. These are comics, we are informed, that 'had been produced at great expense, all those bright images, that archival paper, so actually not comics at all in the traditionally mass-produced sense, possibly someone's vanity project' (St. John Mandel, 2014: 42). They are more like folio novels or fine editions of important texts, recalling once again the way in which Joe's comics achieve novelistic recognition much more readily once they start looking and behaving like novels. This respect for the comics links back to the role they play for their pre-apocalyptic author, Miranda. Miranda, the artist of Mandel's comics *künstlerroman*, uses the process of making the comics to escape the tedium of her office job, where '[t]here's rarely enough work to keep her occupied for more than an hour or two at a time, which means she can often spend entire afternoons sketching' (St. John Mandel, 2014: 42). Miranda even

uses this creative outlet to escape or process her personal problems. Mandel shows her closing an angry email from her abusive boyfriend (and thwarted artist, another trope Mandel shares with Chabon) Pablo and imagining 'the water rising until it covers the streets, gondolas moving between the towers of the financial district, Dr. Eleven on a high arched bridge' (St. John Mandel, 2014: 86). *Dr Eleven* is a project of genuine personal expression and creativity that gives Miranda the means to express herself. This freedom is something that becomes even more important to her when she marries the successful but jaded actor Arthur Leander and finds herself living a life of comfortable idleness.

This freeing up of creative expression in otherwise difficult circumstances is precisely the role that the comics play in the post-apocalyptic future which much of the rest of the text presents to readers. The travelling company, especially the younger members, find comfort in the repeated retelling of the familiar story of the comics. These are stories which, we are told by Kirsten, the members of the troupe have 'memorised', bringing her closer than ever to the oral storytellers of an earlier time. However, due to their inherent visual component the troupe can never fully do away with the comics themselves. The comics, for the travelling company, take on a function similar to but distinct from the works of Shakespeare that they continually stage and re-stage, forming a social core that allows the group a critical cohesion as they travel around the remains of North America, crossing and re-crossing what was the old border between Canada and the United States.

The connective function of the comics extends back in time into the pre-apocalyptic section of the novel as well. The pre-pandemic telephone exchange between Arthur Leander and his estranged son (and future Prophet of St Deborah-by-the-Water) Tyler starts awkwardly until Arthur can guide the conversation onto the subject of the comics. At this point Tyler explains, "It's like a planet, but a little planet, [...] Actually it's sort of broken. It went through a wormhole, so it's hiding in deep space, but its systems were damaged, so on its surface? It's almost all water." He was warming to his subject' (St. John Mandel, 2014: 324). This exchange gives Arthur one of his few moments of true connection with his son, demonstrating Jordan's

point about *Station Eleven's* faith in the ability of 'art [moreover comic-book art] to deepen our fleeting impressions of the world and bolster our solitude' (Jordan, 2014: n.p.). The power of comic book art (or at least, those examples of comic book art that look like novels) to connect people, and to provide a genuine creative outlet and a means of bridging otherwise insurmountable gaps in understanding, is never in doubt in Mandel's work, significant in such a critically well-received text.

It is worth drawing attention to the occasionally blatant similarities between the situation of Miranda's Dr Eleven – who finds himself stranded on a damaged and shrunken world, unable to return home – and that of the survivors who find their world similarly irreparably shrunken by the dearth of transportation and damaged by the ravages of time and the Georgia flu pandemic. Mandel is prepared to draw a reader's attention to the obviousness of Dr Eleven as an author-insert for Miranda. Mandel has one of her characters who was present at a disastrous dinner party held during Miranda's marriage to Arthur reflect on Miranda's recreation of the awkwardness of that scene from her life, 'all at once he recognises the dinner party, he was *there* [...] On the page, only Miranda is missing, her chair taken by Dr. Eleven' (Mandel, 2008: 332, emphasis original). But even this, perhaps limited, creativity stands in dramatic contrast to the thwarted, yet more conventional, creative ambitions of Miranda's first boyfriend Pablo, who cannot sell a painting and as a result stops creating them. It is also a contrast to the aspirations of her husband Arthur, who finds his own profession unfulfilling and alienating in spite of its considerable economic rewards. Much the same could be said of the troupe of post-apocalyptic actors, who find themselves endlessly repeating the same repertoire. But this is part of the point that Mandel seems to be making here. Comics in the pre-apocalyptic world provide one of the most vibrant and certainly most active sources of personal expression for their creators, far outstripping the more established and prestigious painting and acting in their potential, while in the post-apocalyptic world, creativity seems almost impossible. The only spark of creativity we see in the 'new' world of Mandel's novel is an ill-fated attempt by one musician to write a new play 'based on German avant-garde theatre' which never gets past the first page (St. John Mandel, 2014: 288). Just

as Cormac McCarthy's nameless man in *The Road* laments that 'there is no other tale to tell', the real dread that the post-apocalyptic world seems to hold for Mandel's characters is this death of creativity and cultural stagnation (McCarthy, 2006: 32). Yet the comics provide a window back to one of the most recent – and undoubtedly most relevant – examples of this kind of creativity, perhaps hinting at a way out of this death of culture.

Mandel's text, like Chabon's before it, shows a faith in the ability of single-author, book-like comics to bind people together and to make understandable things that would otherwise be incomprehensible, to 'bolster the solitude' of her characters (Jordan, 2014: n.p.). That *Dr Eleven* occupies the same cultural space for Mandel's characters as Shakespeare and the Bible (that one of few remaining copies of the comic falls out of the Prophet's copy of the New Testament is no coincidence) demonstrates this faith in comics-as-art, an art that is productive, creative and a critical part of the glue that holds people together, pre- or post-apocalypse.

Conclusion: The *Künstlerroman* and (the limits of) comics overspill

Throughout this article I have sought to argue firstly that since the turn of the century there has been a marked move in conventional prose literature toward the depiction and discussion of some comics as serious art and of their creators as serious artists. Secondly, I have argued that this move has been rewarded by assorted major prize committees, suggesting an increasing acceptance among tastemakers and awarders of symbolic capital of these comics and of their creators as a proper subject for literature. Furthermore, not only have comics emerged over the first two decades of the new century as a fitting subject for serious literature, they have been depicted in these texts in a way that imbues some comics with the same powers of community-forging and personal expression that have conventionally been assigned to more traditional forms of art. Indeed, in many cases in the texts I have discussed, novelistic comics have gone beyond the expressive powers of traditional forms, as they are shown connecting people, as in Arthur Leander's connection with his son or August's with the symphony, times in Joe's depiction of pre-war Warsaw or the sense-

making power of the comics in Mandel's post-flu world, and dealing with themes in Joe's survivor's guilt and Miranda's comfortable alienation that seem inaccessible to conventional novels, providing valuable and productive creative outlets in times that seem to throttle conventional prose authors.

This willingness to talk about and have faith in the power of novelistic comics and the concomitant respectability of their makers can be seen in Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay*. Joe Kavalier is able firstly to express his rage and frustration and secondly to deal with his survivor's guilt as the only member of his immediate family to have escaped the Holocaust through his symbolic battles with the Nazis he depicts in the pages of *The Escapist*. He then goes on to develop a more experimental and conventionally literary form in the *Luna Moth* series, before finally finding true and unfettered personal expression in his long, silent 'comic book novel' *The Golem*, his most celebrated (and most novelistic) work. Equally, the power that the *Dr Eleven* comics in Mandel's *Station Eleven* hold to unite people across space and time, regardless of what catastrophes may occur, demonstrates a similar faith in the community-making and self-expressive power of novelistic comics. It is through the comics that Kirsten and other members of the troupe find hope and comfort, and the reading of the long-memorised comics becomes a bonding ritual for the group, bringing and keeping them together. In this way, Mandel's text becomes not just about Miranda's development as a comic book storyteller, but also Kirsten's. More than this, though, in both novels we see the excitement and creativity that the comic-book form allows for its creators (especially its solo creators) contrasted with the frustration and stagnation of more established forms of cultural expression. In contrast to the frustration of the novelists of *Kavalier & Clay* and the despair of Mandel's actor Arthur Leander and painter Pablo, novelistic comics provide the spark of creativity that the characters of Joe and Miranda need to express themselves and find their place in the world.

But what is most striking about the examples I discuss here is their warm, even rapturous, reception by highly regarded (and thus well-endowed with symbolic capital) prize committees. Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

among many other honours while *Station Eleven* was nominated for a host of awards, winning one of the most established science fiction prizes. Little by little, prize win by prize win, there seems to be a willingness among the keepers of symbolic capital to recognise the importance and artistic merit of at least the most conventionally novelistic of comics, and I argue that the award-winning comics *künstlerroman* is a critical, and developing, part of this process.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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