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**How to Cite:** Leggatt, M 2018 'Another World Just out of Sight': Remembering or Imagining Utopia in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2):8, pp.1–23, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.256>

**Published:** 10 August 2018

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## STATION ELEVEN AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY WRITING

# 'Another World Just out of Sight': Remembering or Imagining Utopia in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

Matthew Leggatt

University of Winchester, UK

[Matthew.Leggatt@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:Matthew.Leggatt@winchester.ac.uk)

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At the heart of *Station Eleven* lies a tension between remembering and imagining. Whereas most post-apocalyptic texts value their contemporary society by generating a sense of 'nostalgia' for the present, St. John Mandel's novel places its emphasis on the imaginary and utopian possibilities that could accompany disaster. In the novel, a host of now useless objects become aesthetic links to the past, reminders collected by Clark in the Museum of Civilization; the Travelling Symphony's productions of Shakespeare plays act as a way of remembering; and the patriarchal violence enacted by the Prophet offers an unpleasant *re*-enactment of the religious fanaticism that has punctuated history. But, whereas the objects and beliefs of the past provide a constant draw back into a nostalgic appreciation for a life that can never be recaptured, it is Miranda's self-published comic book, *Dr. Eleven*, that suggests the importance and primacy of imagination over remembrance in the wastelands of the future. Just as the comic offers Miranda an escape from the domination of the male figures in her life – first boyfriend Pablo, then actor-husband Arthur Leander – before the Georgia Flu pandemic, the comic's survival in the aftermath is what gives the novel its hopeful aspect. This article explores the way in which *Station Eleven* offers hope not through a rekindling of an exhausted past, but in a new *imagined* future in which the traditional lines and boundaries of relationships, ideals, identity, and community can be redrawn in 'another world just out of sight' (Mandel, 2015: 333).

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## Introduction

'There are people who, after fifteen years of perpetual twilight, long only to go home' writes Miranda in *Dr. Eleven*, a comic book that helps form the metafictional subtext of Emily St. John Mandel's meditative 2014 novel *Station Eleven* (Mandel, 2015: 83). This nostalgia, a quite literal longing for home – from the Greek *nostos* meaning 'return home' and *algos* meaning 'pain' – mirrors the characters in Miranda's fictionalized world with those in the novel's larger framework narrative. As readers, we are clearly meant to see the parallels here: much of *Station Eleven's* action also takes place some fifteen years after the moment of collapse, when a pandemic kills 99% of the population of North America. This is a moment that, understandably, leads the survivors to reminisce of a world now lost. Chapter six, 'an incomplete list', evokes a world of darkness where the loss of the electric grid means that there is '[n]o 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' (Mandel, 2015: 31): in short, like those who reside on Station Eleven, our protagonists too inhabit a world of perpetual twilight.

To this extent, *Station Eleven* seems to fit a general trend in post-apocalyptic fiction whereby contemporary society is revalued in light of its absence, generating a sense of 'nostalgia' for the present through the evocation of loss. Indeed, Dereck Daschke asserts that '[a]pocalypses are ... decidedly *nostalgic*' (2014: 465). 'Traumatic events', he argues, 'force the past to remain in the present; no future is possible until they are recognized, understood, and integrated into a new life' (2014: 464). Thus, letting go of the past becomes the most important stage in the establishment of any 'new life' after disaster, although also extremely difficult when one is constantly reminded of what has been lost. As one character notes, the whole world has become 'a place where artifacts from the old world are preserved' (Mandel, 2015: 146); newness itself is no longer produced, only reminders from the time before repurposed in the name of survival: planes become places to store food; the gas station a place to live.

On the surface, at least, it would appear that *Station Eleven* is shot through with such nostalgic reminiscence: the patriarchal violence enacted by the Prophet offers an unpleasant *re-enactment* of the religious fanaticism that has punctuated human

history; the Travelling Symphony's productions of Shakespeare plays, too, act as a way of remembering; and a host of now useless objects become aesthetic links to the past, reminders collected by Clark in the Museum of Civilization. Indeed, Emily Allen (in Allen et al., 2017) highlights a 'melancholic' tone in the novel, which she locates in the stylistic devices St. John Mandel uses and the 'beauty' of the language which evokes 'an incredible longing for the world that has passed'. But, while ordinarily these techniques might encourage nostalgia, Allen also notes the utopian dimension of the text since she suggests that, while the novel romanticizes the lost objects of our world, it imagines that, with them, economic inequality and racism have also been displaced. Whereas the objects and beliefs of the past consistently draw the various characters of the novel back into a nostalgic appreciation for a life that can never be recaptured, by placing an emphasis on the imaginary and utopian possibilities that might accompany a global catastrophe the author opens up a space for hope and, in so doing, offers the reader a way to reinvent themselves in the present.

The focus for this reinvention (on a number of occasions in the novel a quite literal 're-invention' given that old technologies are being newly discovered) becomes Miranda's self-published comic book, *Dr. Eleven*, from which St. John Mandel also draws the title for her novel. Through the fantastical world Miranda imagines and creates, *Station Eleven* infers the importance and primacy of imagination over remembrance in the wastelands of the future. In this article I explore the ways in which *Station Eleven* offers hope to the survivors of its apocalypse not through a rekindling of an exhausted past but in a new *imagined* future. I argue that St. John Mandel's novel privileges imagination over remembrance and facilitates the emergence of a utopian sensibility, encouraging the *redrawing* of traditional lines and boundaries of relationships, ideals, identity, and community in, as Clark envisages in the final lines of the novel, 'another world just out of sight' (Mandel, 2015: 333).

## Remembering

As highlighted by both Svetlana Boym (2001) and Helmut Illbruck (2012), nostalgia was considered a disease when the term was first coined by a Swiss medical student, Johannes Hofer, in the late seventeenth-century. "Nostalgia" in 1688', writes Illbruck, 'is a new name for displacement, denoting not a sentimental longing but a deadly

disease caught by and consuming those cut off from their homeland' (2012: 3). How appropriate, then, that in *Station Eleven* St. John Mandel imagines nostalgia as the disease that lingers *after* the virus – the Georgia-flu – has been eradicated. Nostalgia, of course, is also a form of imaginary intervention. The act of remembering is not always quite so neatly separated from the act of imagining. One might *recall* a fact, but when it comes to nostalgia we *remember* only partially, inventing the rest as we go. This is why, so often, nostalgia is apolitical. We remember, somewhat impressionistically, a time and location through our senses: in the depths of winter we might imagine fondly the smell of rain on the hot tarmac of a summer's evening, for example, but we generally fail to associate such nostalgic memories with the more difficult political history that so often undergirds such moments. Throughout *Station Eleven* characters remember in this fashion. The references in chapter six, already mentioned in the opening of this article, are exactly of this nature: the lit swimming pool; the football game; the moths under the porchlight. Yet, in its very construction, St. John Mandel's novel resists the overwhelming force of such nostalgia and critiques those who would surrender to its comforting embrace. The structure of the novel is key to this: we do not just get characters remembering the past – like the hazy flashback that has become such an important and prominent trope of the post-apocalyptic movie – we get the *actual* past, with all its flaws. Through this narrative technique the novel serves continually to remind the reader of the constructed nature of such nostalgia; its lack of 'honesty', if you will. Thus, for St. John Mandel, the key binary is drawn not simply between those who remember and those who imagine, but between those who imagine – through memory – and wish to return to the past, and those who use imagination in order to forge new pathways, evoking the spirit of discovery chiefly associated with earlier forms of utopian fiction.

In the twenty-first century, many post-apocalyptic works of fiction have displayed a fascination with the now-worthless objects which will litter a future destroyed Earth. This is, perhaps, understandable considering the role that apocalypse frequently plays in the contemporary imagination – namely as one of the only tangible ways left by which one might imagine a world without consumerism. Fredric Jameson once wrote, in a line that seems always to return to me, that 'it is easier to imagine

the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (2005: 199). Thus, the ubiquity of objects and their fetishization in apocalyptic texts serves to remind characters, and readers, of the loss of the very fabric of a reality beyond which imagination falls short. A particularly strong example of this can be found in Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* in which the survivors of an unspecified global disaster come across a can of Coca-Cola. Of the moment, which stands out in the novel at least in part because of the general lack of reference to brands elsewhere in the text, Brian Donnelly writes that: 'the find results in a dramatic collision between the worlds of the pre- and post-apocalypse, precipitating a gesture of nostalgic reminiscence while it invites the reader to envisage the post-apocalyptic scenario of a world without the ubiquitous soft drink' (2010: 70). Furthermore – not only does the moment provoke nostalgia for a product which still, in the reader's world at least, dominates the market place – it also signifies the collapse of a system of governance and domination and with it opens up a space for the imagination of something beyond capitalism: 'as the iconic residue of the pre-apocalyptic society, the extinction of Coke marks the text's endeavor to demonstrate in the severest sense the discrepancy between reality and "the Real Thing", the last representative of a consumer fantasy that is no longer tenable' (Donnelly, 2010: 73). Whereas before the apocalypse it was a world without consumer-driven capitalism that was wholly intangible, here, in the aftermath of destruction, consumerism itself has become the fantasy.

In *Station Eleven* the reader repeatedly finds objects treated in a similar fashion. The novel is scattered with instances of now useless objects – passports, mobile phones, credit cards, computers, even a paperweight – that have become aesthetic links to the past. The commonplace nature of these objects, which in the terrifying landscape of the post-apocalypse cease to have function or purpose, helps to signify not only their superfluity but also the decadence of a time in which such objects were valued. Like McCarthy's can of Coke, which, although a 'cheap' consumable, is treated as the height of luxury, these objects offer little more than a reminder of what has been lost. For example, Kirsten describes the paperweight, kept only because 'she found it beautiful', as 'nothing but dead weight' in her bag (Mandel, 2015: 66). Perhaps the paperweight is an acceptable object of beauty, also considered

primarily for its aesthetic value in prelapsarian society, but what of the objects of technology that have become revered as Museum exhibits? Isavella Vouza writes that, in the novel 'technological advancements such as cell-phones are reduced to their material condition and become cultural artifacts. In this way', she argues, 'technology is repurposed and becomes art' (n. dat.: 3). This is a world recolored by nostalgia, only in its warm orange glow could the 'limitless number of objects in the world that had no practical use but that people wanted to preserve' be transformed into sentimentalized works of art (Mandel, 2015: 258).

St. John Mandel's writing on the question of remembering is at its most insightful and interesting, however, when in its most abstracted form. References to memory are found strewn throughout the excerpts from Miranda's *Dr. Eleven* comic books, which act as a mirror for the action taking place in the rest of the novel. Miranda's comic may be set on the titular and fantastical Station Eleven, but it often reads as a substitute for the desolate landscape of post-apocalypse America. More than that, the divide between those who live on the islands above and those who live in the Undersea reflects the debate taking place in the larger narrative between those who cope with disaster by remembering the old world and those who wish to forge ahead and build something new:

On Station Eleven's surface it is always sunset or twilight or night ... and the only land remaining is a series of islands that were once mountaintops. There has been a schism. There are people who, after fifteen years of perpetual twilight, long only to go home, to return to Earth and beg for amnesty, to take their chances under alien rule. They live in the Undersea, an interlinked network of vast fallout shelters under Station Eleven's oceans. ... "All they want is to see sunlight again. Can you blame them?" (Mandel, 2015: 83)

It is no coincidence that Kirsten's interview with Diallo also takes place fifteen years after disaster. Nor is it a coincidence that the people of the Undersea, like those living by candle-light after the Georgia Flu disaster, 'live out their lives under flickering lights' (Mandel, 2015: 86). It is understandable, according to the comic, then, that

after fifteen years of struggle – of permanent darkness – some should 'long only to go home'. 'We were not meant for this world. Let us go home' reads a note left by an Undersea assassin (Mandel, 2015: 105).

Indeed, by highlighting the powerful and retrograde sway of nostalgia that people experience in the aftermath of disaster, St. John Mandel taps into one of the most pressing issues of our age: as Boym puts it, no longer is nostalgia merely a 'passing ailment', rather, it is now 'the incurable modern condition' (qtd. in Bauman, 2017: 2). Writing in the same year as *Station Eleven's* release, Mark Fisher observes in *Ghosts of my Life* that:

While twentieth-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the twenty-first century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn't feel as if the twenty-first century has started yet. (Fisher, 2014: 8)

Thus, the current focus on nostalgia – from the academic, to the cultural, to the political – seems a mark of our time; a time 'exhausted' and bereft of imagination. Indeed, it is the power of this nostalgia to narrow our horizons that appears to disturb St. John Mandel most. 'They are always waiting, the people of the Undersea. They spend all their lives waiting for their lives to begin', writes Miranda in *Dr. Eleven* (Mandel, 2015: 86). And she delineates these people with a certain air of pity: 'For years Dr. Eleven had been the hero of the narrative, but lately he'd begun to annoy her and she'd become more interested in the Undersea. These people living out their lives in underwater fallout shelters, clinging to the hope that the world they remembered could be restored. The Undersea was limbo' (Mandel, 2015: 213).

Like the people of the Undersea, trapped in limbo between a world that has passed and a world they are yet to come to terms with, Clark and the others who make their residence at the Severn City Airport are also left 'stranded' in what Marc Augé described as one of 'the real non-places of supermodernity' (1995: 96). 'The entire history of being stranded in airports up to that point was also a history of



eventually becoming unstranded' muses Clark in an effort to describe the sensation of living the rest of one's life in such a transitory space (Mandel, 2015: 231). What St. John Mandel emphasizes is that such people miss the true beauty in the new world. By dwelling solely in the past they 'sleepwalk' through this new existence, just as they once did the old one.

Indeed, Clark's own realization that he is 'sleepwalking' through life, as 'minimally present' as those he interviews, is emblematic of the novel's more persistent critique of a society which is stuck facing inward (Mandel, 2015: 164). While the loss of some aspects of contemporary life is clearly lamented in *Station Eleven*, St. John Mandel often highlights the misery and stresses of the present in the passages which temporally precede the Georgia Flu outbreak: the failed marriages and relationships, the stress of work, the lack of fulfilment, the lawyers, and the downright fakery. In Kirsten's sections of the novel, however, the character frequently expresses the surprising magic of a world emptied of people: 'what was lost in the collapse: almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty', writes St. John Mandel as Kirsten prepares for her performance in a twilight rendition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Mandel, 2015: 57). Indeed, what Kirsten sees is a 'dazzling world': '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' (Mandel, 2015: 296). The real challenge the novel suggests, then, is not in remembering the old world, but in trying to forget it: as Miranda writes in *Dr. Eleven*, in a line repeated in the wider narrative, '*I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth*' (Mandel, 2015: 42, 105, emphasis in original).

In *Station Eleven* the desire to return home that we associate with nostalgia and which, of course, can never be fulfilled, is complicated by pain. Kirsten tells Diallo 'the people who struggle the most with [this current era] are the people who remember the old world clearly ... the more you remember, the more you've lost' (Mandel, 2015: 195). Indeed, St. John Mandel draws attention to the problem of nostalgia not just figuring it as a natural response to a post-collapse society, but by

critiquing its effect on the present through the shared history between Arthur and Miranda. Their separate moves from the idyllic island of Delano, on which they were both born, to the bright lights of Toronto and later Los Angeles, echo the movement from a past pastoral utopia to the metropolitan modernity that consumes everything in its path. Arthur goes to Miranda in the nights before his death because she knows where he is from:

Once we lived on an island in the ocean. Once we took the ferry to go to high-school, and at night the sky was brilliant in the absence of all these city lights. Once we paddled canoes to the lighthouse to look at petroglyphs and fished for salmon and walked through deep forests, but all of this was completely unremarkable because everyone else we knew did these things too, and here in these lives we've built for ourselves, here in these hard and glittering cities, none of this would seem real if it wasn't for you. (Mandel, 2015: 207)

But, rather than simply reminisce about this *imagined* past in nostalgic revelry, Arthur is able to look beyond since, for him, it is these 'glittering cities' that have enabled his success. As Arthur tells a journalist of Delano: 'It was the most beautiful place I've ever seen. It was gorgeous and claustrophobic. I loved it and I always wanted to escape' (Mandel, 2015: 74). So it is this escape from the past that becomes important for Arthur, just as Miranda escapes too through the imagined world of Station Eleven, and it is these two characters, both of whom are dead before they can experience the new world post-Georgia Flu, that also inspire Kirsten in the future to re-imagine *her* own world as a more optimistic place and enable her to leave the past behind.

## **Imagining**

One of the most distinctive aspects of *Station Eleven* is its hopeful tone. Indeed, Philip Smith writes that, 'the destruction of the apocalypse, in certain incarnations of the genre, offers the promise of reconfiguration, of resetting and rebuilding a society unencumbered by the problems of the world that was destroyed' (2016: 291), and this is a strong theme in *Station Eleven*. More than this, the apocalypse, at least from

a Christian standpoint, has historically been depicted as preceding a period of rebirth and renewal; a nuance often missed in twentieth and twenty-first century popular cultural imaginings that have tended to place the focus, instead, on the moment of destruction. In *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* John Gray highlights that '[i]n common speech "apocalyptic" denotes a catastrophic event, but in biblical terms it derives from the Greek word for unveiling – an apocalypse is a revelation in which mysteries that are written in heaven are revealed at the end of time, and for the Elect this means not catastrophe but salvation' (2008: 5). Likewise, in *Station Eleven*, Emily St. John Mandel chooses to explore the ways in which the Georgia Flu pandemic might offer a form of salvation from what can be read as 'the modern condition'.

Kirsten, in particular, is a child saved by the apocalypse. When the novel flashes back to the moment Miranda meets Kirsten in Arthur's dressing room a short time before the Georgia Flu outbreak, she describes the child as 'like a China doll': 'she looked like someone who'd been well-cared for and coddled all her life. She was probably someone who would grow up to be like Miranda's assistant Laetitia, like Leon's assistant Thea, unadventurous and well-groomed' (Mandel, 2015: 212–3). In this short but important passage, Miranda imagines the life Kirsten might have led had disaster not struck: a life as empty as the corporate cronies that Clark interviews for a living. But what saves Kirsten from this empty existence is not just the tabula rasa of apocalypse but also the cultivation of her imagination. Not only is Kirsten gifted the *Dr. Eleven* comics that will fuel her escapist dreams for the next two decades by Arthur, both Miranda and Arthur also give Kirsten the confidence to let her imagination run wild: when Kirsten relates that another child has told her that she can't color the princess' dress with stripes, Arthur tells her that he thinks stripes are perfect and, once finished, both adults tell her how beautiful the image looks (Mandel, 2015: 214–5). 'A creator who isn't grabbed around the throat by a set of impossibilities is no creator'. Rather, 'a creator is someone who creates their own impossibilities, and thereby creates possibilities' wrote Giles Deleuze (1995: 133). Thus, where *Station Eleven* retains that crucial element of hope is in its insistence that we *create*. It is the imagination of impossibilities that allows the creator to, eventually, turn them into possibilities, turning survival into revival.

Returning to Shakespeare, the novel's insistence that literary history – through the continued performance of Shakespeare – is preserved might seem to imply the primacy of historical forms of white male patriarchy. However, *Station Eleven* can also be read as conforming to a pattern Susan Watkins notes in women's apocalyptic fiction from Atwood and Winterson to Lessing, namely that 'rather than regretting the loss of the world's literature and aiming for complete recovery of "logos"', these works of fiction appeal to 'the idea of palimpsestic accretion, or a gradual process of rewriting and reinvention' (2012: 131), hence while Shakespeare has been chosen because, as we are told by Dieter, 'people want what was best about the world' (Mandel, 2015: 38), we are, nevertheless, also told that the clarinet 'hated Shakespeare'. 'Survival might be insufficient, ... but so was Shakespeare' she argues (Mandel, 2015: 288). While Dieter insists on the parallels between North America post-Georgia Flu and plague-affected England in Shakespeare's day, the clarinet wants to write something more 'modern' to reflect the specifics of their time. She desires, importantly, not just to remember or relive the past, but to instead interpret the new world around her.

The choice to stage *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is also instructive because it is an upbeat play when compared with the more obvious choices of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or even *King Lear*. As Smith suggests, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 'is not a play about the end, ... but about revival and ... new beginnings' (2016: 294). Smith reads the decision to perform Shakespeare as a sign that the group is moving forward, rather than being stuck in the past:

In *Station Eleven* characters have not only been flung backward to a pre-civilized state, but have since progressed and rediscovered fragments of early modern culture. Modernity has been wiped out; air travel is gone, gasoline has gone stale, and the only means to create light is burning candles. Shakespeare, however, has survived. Indeed, Shakespeare is in high demand ... The Travelling Symphony do not simply go back, they also go forward – they have progressed from primitivism to a lifestyle on the cusp of modernity. (Smith, 2016: 292)

There is certainly a suggestion throughout the novel that society has progressed from those first days after the collapse. References are frequently made to the dark

early years where survival was tough and the world a very dangerous place. Now, we are led to believe, while cities still present a real danger – ‘Did you hear that story about snipers in the Sears Tower?’ (Mandel, 2015: 66) – the world is settling into a new rhythm. Ultimately, however, the act of remembering is a clear point of contention in this new world. During her interview with François Diallo, Kirsten tells him that in some towns the Symphony has visited ‘they want to talk about what happened, about the past’, but there are other places where ‘discussion of the past is discouraged’ (Mandel, 2015: 115). When Diallo confidently asserts that ‘the more we know about the former world, the better we’ll understand what happened when it fell’, Kirsten responds dismissively: ‘but everyone knows what happened’: in essence, what good does such knowledge really do (Mandel, 2015: 114)? Later in the novel Jeevan sits debating the issue of remembering with a character named Michael who laments ‘maybe it’s time we stopped telling [our children] these crazy stories. Maybe it’s time we let go’ (Mandel, 2015: 270).

More generally, *Station Eleven* implicitly criticizes those who would choose to live in the past. In its most vivid incarnation this criticism is embodied in the prophet, Tyler Leander, whose brand of patriarchal and religious fanaticism sees him and his followers indulge in a violent restoration of the female subjugation and polygamy of past eras. His repetition of his mother’s mantra, herself a *history* major, that ‘everything happens for a reason’ belies the evidence before his eyes. Tyler insists that he and his worshippers bring the ‘light’ in a gross inversion of twenty-first century morality. His attachment to the Book of Revelations, taken dutifully out of context by a boy-become-man who has grown up bereft of strong parental figures, shows the danger of clinging to past attachments.

It is particularly interesting that *Station Eleven* should find its creative release not through traditional literature but through the descriptions of scenes in a comic book. Hilary Chute asserts that ‘through its spatial syntax, comics offer opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality – as well as on the idea that “history” can ever be a closed discourse, or a simply progressive one’ (2014: 4). Unlike the novel, the history of which is tied to the seeming immutability of the canon, the comic offers Miranda an escape from historicity itself.

Chute's assertion that the comic book form resists the pull of the grand narrative, its open spaces signifying the malleability and the artifice of historical accounting, makes it ideal as a means for St. John Mandel to push aside nostalgic reminiscence in favor of boundless creativity. It is the potential to exploit the spaces in-between both dialogue and the image, the gutter-space if-you-like, which allows those who read and write comic books the imaginative freedom to engage in an active utopianism. Just as the comic offers Miranda an escape from the domination of the male figures in her life – first boyfriend Pablo then, later, actor-husband Arthur Leander – before the Georgia Flu pandemic, the comic's survival in the aftermath of destruction helps to give the novel its hopeful aspect.

As Chute determines, the comic book medium is also particularly effective for the articulation of trauma since '[t]he spatial features of comics, such as its activation of the space between word and image and its erection of literal drawn frames alongside its breaking and violation of them, presents a grammar that can inscribe trauma not just thematically ... but also powerfully at the level of textualization in words and images' (2016: 35). Not only can the comic form allow a release from traumatic memory, then, it can also instill hope that in the spaces *between* images the impossible can be both imagined and realized. These texts also allow for the transformation, by incorporation, of the surrounding world into a new fictionalized world-space. Indeed, this is exactly what happens in *Dr. Eleven* since Miranda redraws scenes and people from her everyday life into the imagined landscape of Station Eleven.

This functionality is hinted at during a discussion between Miranda and Arthur about the origins of her decision to choose the comic form, Miranda admitting that she had been inspired by the 1980s comic *Calvin and Hobbes* and in particular the character Spaceman Spiff (Mandel, 2015: 88). Like Calvin, who day-dreams of Spaceman Spiff, an interplanetary explorer, often as a means to escape the mundanity of life by transplanting the figures and landscapes around him into the fictionalized and more exciting imaginary world of the space-exploring Spiff, Miranda too dreams of escape through the transformation of her surroundings into those of the more fantastical Station Eleven. But this is a function that also makes the comic form a

particularly personal one, and which, in the cases described in *Station Eleven*, allows the subjugated female in particular to break free from the restraints of a dominant patriarchy through the possession of an alternative world of one's own creation. When the controlling Pablo accuses Miranda of always being half on Station Eleven, exclaiming 'I don't even understand your project', Miranda rebuffs by saying 'You don't have to understand it ... it's mine' (Mandel, 2015: 87). This sense of ownership is also evident in Arthur's choice to give the comic books away because, as he admits to Tanya, he 'never really understood the point of it' either (Mandel, 2015: 320). Similarly, when first countenancing the idea of ending her relationship with Pablo, Miranda experiences 'a peculiar giddiness' with 'thoughts of freedom and imminent escape'. The source of these feelings, however, are not her potential escape into a life with Arthur, but rather an escape into Station Eleven as she continues: 'I could throw away almost everything ... and begin all over again. Station Eleven will be my constant' (Mandel, 2015: 89).

The world of Station Eleven, Miranda's ability to imaginatively allow the space to reconfigure her actual surroundings, and the sense of ownership the project brings, liberates her. Unlike Arthur who, as an actor, performs at the expense of today in order to generate legacy, echoing the sentiment expressed by the celebrity philanthropist for which Frank writes – 'first we only want to be seen, but once we're seen, that's not enough anymore. After that, we want to be remembered' (Mandel, 2015: 187) – the purpose of the comics for Miranda is simply personal. At the dinner party Tesch asks Miranda, 'what's the point in doing all that work ... if no one sees it?' To which Miranda responds: 'It makes me happy. It's peaceful, spending hours working on it. It doesn't really matter to me if anyone sees it' (Mandel, 2015: 95). It is this, I would argue, that undermines Smith's assertions about the comic book when he claims that:

The slogan of The Travelling Symphony is "survival is insufficient" ... from which we might expound that survival means more than just continuing to live – to survive one must maintain a past. ... In one profound moment of the text, Clark encounters a comic book depiction of a dinner party he attended. Recognizing the author's hand, he wonders, "What became of

Miranda?" ([Mandel, 2014:] 332). In this sense, Miranda, the author of the comic, survives through the capacity of the written text to attest to its author and its subject's existence. (Smith, 2016: 297)

Contrary to this, however, I would suggest that the slogan 'survival is insufficient' implies that the survival of the comic is only important in that it allows Kirsten to begin to redraw her own world in a more optimistic manner. The slogan suggests that survival is in fact *not* enough. For these texts and objects to survive, to become collections, does not help people to live in the new world. The comic book does hold the key, but not because it enables Miranda to survive – after all she is very much dead, and Kirsten and Tyler, both of whom worship her text, do not even know the identity of its author. *Dr. Eleven* is not a way for Miranda to be *remembered* but, rather, a way for her and future readers to *forget* the past; to move on with no regrets – as indicated by her mantra 'I repent nothing' repeated no less than four times in the novel (Mandel, 2015: 89, 107, 206, 307).

The empowerment creation brings enables Miranda to begin to shape her own destiny. Thus, in one passage we are told, with a sense of finality, that 'in the next version of her life, she decides, she will be entirely independent' (Mandel, 2015: 103). In a similar fashion, the idea that drawing might be used to alter the path of one's existence also appears early in the novel when Jeevan imagines that the Georgia Flu pandemic will be 'the divide between a *before* and an *after*, a line drawn through his life' (Mandel, 2015: 20, emphasis in original). Repeatedly *Station Eleven* positions characters as stuck in the past, haunted by the ghosts of a life that can never be recaptured and destined simply to *survive* in this next life just as they merely *survived* before the Georgia Flu: a survival that is, as the text tells us, 'insufficient'. But, there are also important characters like Kirsten, Jeevan, and Miranda, who seem to demonstrate the existence of an alternative possibility: that one can escape an unproductive nostalgia through the power of one's imagination. As the novel comes to a close, one last extract from *Dr. Eleven* attests to this power. As Miranda lies dying on a Malaysian beach she thinks back to an image of Dr. Eleven as he is visited by the ghost of his friend, Captain Lonagan. Eleven asks the Captain the obvious question: 'what was it like for you, at the end?' Lonagan's reply – 'It was exactly like waking



up from a dream' – is a clever reversal of the answer one might expect that also showcases the utopian outlook of the novel (Mandel, 2015: 330). In her last moments Miranda imagines a way out of death. If life is like a dream, then to die is to wake up: to live again. Miranda's imaginative escape from death is to wake up and start afresh, leaving the old world behind like a dream that slowly fades from memory – lost to the ether – as one's eyes adjust to the light of a new dawn.

## Utopia

Historically speaking, utopia has often been located in the past. Indeed, as Gregory Claeys highlights in his book *Searching for Utopia: the History of an Idea*, 'many societies have creation myths that go hand-in-hand with the idea of a past golden age of purity, harmony and virtue' (2011: 17). This is most evident in the Christian Creation narrative – the Garden of Eden and the idea of Original Sin – but is also present in Roman and Greek mythology. In fact, locating utopia in the future has been something of a more recent phenomenon partly birthed by the increasing dominance and popularity of science fiction writing in the twentieth century. What I find problematic, however, with searching for the answers in our past, is precisely our past's tendency to mislead. Nostalgia tricks us into seeing only the virtues of history – we miss the painful process of *getting there*. And it is worth noting that exploration has always been a key feature of classic utopian texts from Sir Thomas More's text which coined the term in (2016), through Jonathan Swift's masterful satire *Gulliver's Travels* published in (2001), to twentieth century incarnations like Aldous Huxley's *Island* in (2005) and even science-fiction television series *Star Trek* which first aired just a short time after in 1966 and from which Kirsten draws the line 'survival is insufficient'.

It is telling, then, that in *Station Eleven* those characters who choose to live in the Severn City Airport reside in the Departures lounge rather than Arrivals. They are forever waiting for a way out, for their connecting flight, or for the resumption of the old world now long departed. But, actually, the novel is all about arriving somewhere. Perhaps, the Arrivals lounge would have given the characters a feeling of being somewhere, of being home – a cure for their nostalgia. Asked in an interview, given shortly after the publication of *Station Eleven*, about the popularity

of post-apocalyptic fiction, St. John Mandel dismissed popular suggestions for what such texts might respond to in order to emphasize the idea of exploration:

A suggestion that I hear quite often is that our interest in post-apocalyptic fiction is a natural expression of the anxiety we feel. We always seem to think the world's ending. ... Someone suggested to me that it has to do with economic inequality. That we secretly desire a situation in which this entire apparatus is blown up and we all start over again on perfect equal footing. The theory that I found the most interesting was suggested to me by a bookseller in England last year: she thought perhaps our interest in these futuristic narratives had to do with the fact that there are no more frontiers. You know, it's no longer possible to set out as a pioneer and stake a claim and start a new life. Now that that's all mapped and charted out and there are no more frontiers – that's left us with a certain restlessness, that I suppose gets channelled into our interest in this futuristic, speculative fiction. (Mandel qtd. in National Public Radio, 2015: n. pag.)

The idea that *Station Eleven* is about exploration – the mapping of not only new places, physical locations, but of new ways to exist – is strongly echoed in the novel's ending. There is no doubt that this exploration, fueled by imagination, is a search for a better way to live as much as it is any particular place.

The final paragraph of *Station Eleven* offers the reader perhaps the clearest crystallization of the way in which these concerns help form the backdrop to the text's dealings with utopia. As Clark sits contemplating the pages of a *Dr. Eleven* comic, gifted to him by Kirsten, he muses about the future and the rekindling of a spirit of exploration and adventure. With 'his candle flickering in the glass', the aging Clark is poised gazing wistfully out at the edge of the *known* world. 'Is it possible that somewhere there are ships setting out?' he wonders, continuing: 'If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain?' (Mandel, 2015: 332). Clark imagines 'vessels ... , steered by sailors armed with maps and knowledge of the stars' embarking on intrepid journeys 'towards another world just out of sight' (Mandel, 2015: 332–3).

In this moment the metaphor seems to shift. The departure that Clark hints at in the final lines of the novel isn't a form of longing for the past, for home, but rather an imaginative departure into the future and with it the promise of rebuilding 'civilization'.

For all the romance of this ending, it is difficult to look beyond the colonial overtones that crackle on the surface of Clark's vision. Indeed, in his article, 'Shakespeare, Survival, and the Seeds of Civilization in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*', Smith convincingly ties this ending, and more broadly the actions of the Travelling Symphony and their attempts to bring Shakespeare to the newly forming communities of North America's post-apocalyptic landscape, to British colonialism and its highly problematic efforts to *civilize* previously uncharted territories and peoples. His view is, in large part, supported by Christopher Thurman's reading of the novel which highlights the established place of Shakespeare in 'debates about cultural superiority and inferiority' as well as 'a combined Anglo-American "cultural imperialism"' (2015: 58). But, it seems to me, at least, that the novel's critique of nostalgia as highlighted in this piece, suggests a desire to move away from old narratives of conquest. Instead it seems more useful to see exploration here as embodied not in figures like Columbus and Vespucci, but rather in Kirk, Pickard, and Janeway. And while *Star Trek* has also been read as a colonial enterprise by some critics – Claeys notes that *Star Trek* is 'often seen as [a vehicle] for extending the American way of life onwards into a grateful universe' (2011: 194) – there is no question that in its, at times absurd, attempts to imagine a post-capitalist, egalitarian future, the show nevertheless made space for the imagination of fans around the world.

Oscar Wilde famously wrote that, 'a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias' (1891). And, thus, even in the darkest of times humanity has sought utopia as a means to provide hope. That Kirsten and, to a lesser extent, the other members of the Travelling Symphony continue to move around, hoping each time they land somewhere new that they will find an improving world, demonstrates the progressive possibilities of

a utopian imagination even when such an idea might seem impossible. This is why the novel can also help the reader to reconsider their own environment. Ruth Levitas writes that, 'for those who still think that utopia is about the impossible, what really is impossible is to carry on as we are .... Our very survival depends on finding another way of living' (2013: xii). But more than just survive, *Station Eleven* insists that we *live*.

It is important to acknowledge that imagining *future* utopias is often much more difficult than retreating into a comforting nostalgia, and that this difficulty might also have something to do with recent events. Both climate change and financial collapse have meant that, for Levitas, 'the reconstitution of society in imagination and in reality is a pressing need', but that the difficulty of the global situation has also meant greater difficulty in conceiving of 'the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society' in the twenty-first century (2013: xi). To some extent, that the Georgia Flu in *Station Eleven* is a wholly unpreventable disaster in contemporary terms, means that characters more easily slip into nostalgia and lamentation. Despite Tyler Leander's claims that the Georgia Flu is a divine apocalypse, the text suggests that there is no one to blame for the destruction. It is interesting, however, that in the mirror world of Miranda's *Dr. Eleven* comics we see a far more identifiable apocalypse: a climate change disaster scenario in which rising sea levels leave the people of Station Eleven stranded either on small islands which were once mountain tops or living in undersea bunkers. Thus, the comic book world serves to remind the reader of their own responsibility to stop dwelling in the past and to confront the conditions that might create disaster.

Referring to the discovery, toward the end of the novel, of a town on the horizon that has restored electricity, Isabella Vouza writes that:

I have my reservations that *Station Eleven* will construct a better world by restoring technology. However, when the existent world crumbles into pieces, the human potential to experiment in creating something anew cultivates a spirit of hope and establishes an interdependent future with fellow humans. (Vouza, n. dat.: 4)

Indeed, I would argue that the novel is actually fairly ambiguous toward technology, locating the magic in its rediscovery rather than its restoration. For example, one moment that emphasizes the difference between remembering and imagining comes when members of the Travelling Symphony meet an inventor who has managed to use an electrical system to power a laptop in search of the Internet. Looking at the screen, we are told that while Alexandra, the youngest member of the group, 'had been enraptured, the screen a magical thing with no memories attached', in contrast August, who could remember clearly a time in which such technology was ubiquitous, 'had stared at the screen with a lost expression' (Mandel, 2015: 39). Thus, what *Station Eleven* searches for is not a return to the past, a simple restoration of technology, a nostalgic vision of the present eulogized in a post-apocalyptic nightmare, rather it is a dream of an imagined utopian future in which society might harness the magic of technology in a progressive manner. It is this excitement that fills the characters as they gaze 'in the distance' at the 'pinpricks of light arranged into a grid' (Mandel, 2015: 311). No one said that discovering utopia would be easy, it is certainly more difficult than remembering some half-forgotten nostalgic past: it takes imagination. But luckily, for us and for St. John Mandel, this imagination is something that humanity has in abundance; a will not just to survive but to imagine something better.

Throughout this article I have argued that *Station Eleven* establishes a division between those who, in the face of adversity, retreat into memory and the past, and those who instead choose to imagine radical alternatives and generate new perspectives or ways of seeing the world. Beyond this, I have proposed that the novel privileges the latter by suggesting that the former leads to a lack of fulfilment where imagination leads to new possibilities. 'Utopia', writes Claeys, 'is not the domain of the impossible', rather, 'utopia explores the space between the possible and the impossible' (2011: 15). Indeed, while *Station Eleven* may not offer us a blueprint for a utopian society – although one could argue that it extolls the value of friendship and community, particularly in its depiction of the Travelling Symphony – I would suggest that it offers us the *feeling* that it's there, somewhere in the distance: that if we keep exploring, not just in a physical sense but in a personal one too, then we might just be the ones boarding the ship sailing towards 'another world just out of sight'.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Leggatt, M 2018 'Another World Just out of Sight': Remembering or Imagining Utopia in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 8, pp.1–23, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.256>

**Published:** 10 August 2018

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