

**NULLIFYING TOPOGRAPHICAL,
ARTISTIC AND TEXTUAL BORDERS
IN EMILY ST JOHN MANDEL'S *STATION ELEVEN***

by

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From zombie fiction to alien invasions and sci-fi doom-laden scenarios, apocalyptic narratives have proliferated in the twenty-first century. As a result, the portrayal of a world that survives a catastrophe has been rendered a familiar—if not trite—plot. *Station Eleven*, Emily St John Mandel's award-winning novel, restores the possibility of authenticity in a popular literary trend by creatively tangling various media in its narrative. Following the trajectory of a peripatetic group of artists, the novel delineates the world in the aftermath of a flu pandemic. In this world, humanity is virtually eradicated. Due to the post-apocalyptic setting, the reader can ponder over perdurable anxieties of existence and survival.

Yet, this piece of contemporary literature—published in 2015—addresses current anxieties as well. The book's connotations are geared towards the refugee crisis as well as the place of art and literature in a technologically charged world. It is also inevitable to draw connections with the recent U.S. elections—policies predicated upon the division of humanity generate anxieties similar to an apocalypse. What chiefly binds the novel's variable thematic planes however, is the dissolution of various forms of borders. The novel fuses and explores the collapse of geographical, artistic and textual borders. This intricate fictional mosaic casts a bright light on the issue of borderlessness and focuses on its potential for a positive reimagination of the world.

The novel begins with the death of a famous actor amidst the performance of *King Lear*. Within a few hours, the lethal flu has already struck and its rampant spread wipes out 99% of human beings. Against the backdrop of the catastrophe, the novel brings into the fore the lives of the few survivors. There are two main storylines threaded in the narrative. The one refers to the world prior to the havoc and focuses on the life of the famous actor, Arthur. The other describes the world after the apocalypse and has as its focal point a troupe of actors and musicians, namely The Travelling Symphony. As *Station Eleven* unravels, correlations are established between the two narrative plots through continual flashback narrations. Despite the novel's initial setting in Toronto, the action is gradually transferred in nameless places since nations no longer exist. Characters scarcely ever explicitly mention the locations according to their current names such as New York or New Jersey. In case they do, the only purpose is to facilitate the reader. For instance, they refer to the former Virginia state so as to give quasi-precise coordinates of their journey. The nameless venues gesture towards a transnational message. This globalized ambience is primarily generated when the geographical borders are eradicated.

Through the nullification of topographical borders, the author elucidates its repercussions in the society and reveals the aspect of glocalization (the merging of both the local and the global). *Station Eleven* outlines very convincingly the condition of a world that crumbles. At the outset, the non-existence of borders dissolves the boundaries of law and structured society. One of the protagonists, Jeevan, describes the threatening ambience in Toronto where anarchy reigns. The liberty that citizens suddenly acquire is quite treacherous and

creates an atmosphere of precarity since anyone can rob, inflict pain or even kill his fellow man. Therefore, borderless society equates lawless society. The threat that other infected people create becomes a perpetual anxiety. This state of contingency is not limited to Toronto though. Kirsten, a member of the wandering troupe concedes that she was forced to kill in order to survive in the States.

In a parallel plane, the novel describes the living conditions of some survivors that were passengers in an airplane. The survivors are coerced to land to a secluded airport and this temporal lodging eventually becomes their permanent dwelling. At first, the passengers refuse to live in this new reality and merely lament over the lack of technology: “God, why won’t our phones work? I so wish I could tweet this” (398). As technology grinds to a halt, they realize that they cannot return to the previous world, thus they are forced to adapt. In order to cope with their universalized sentiment of displacement, the passengers decide to come closer to each other and a powerful sense of community emerges as a prerequisite for survival. Their living conditions harken back to the primitive communities since absence of technological advancements (eg. electricity, means of transportation and Internet) brings the human being back to the local. At the same time though, this local is inseparable from the global. Due to the paucity of humans, their very existence acquires significance and attains a cosmopolitan dimension. Therefore, there is a constant transition from globalization to localization and vice versa. Along with the collapse of structures in terms of space, the time frame is also altered. Catastrophe marks the new calendar, thus time is reorganized from the vantage point of the flu epidemic. For instance, Year Twenty is the twentieth year after the event. Time can no longer be institutionalized and be in clear-cut boundaries, thus humans acquire a freer appropriation of time.

The idea of geographical borders alludes to the refugee crisis as well. In *Station Eleven*, the idea of a distinct nation has been discarded. In the new camps or towns that are created, solidarity is the crux of existence. Propinquity with other people is a necessary premise in order to counterbalance the distances. Especially after a cataclysmic event, alienation equals death, thus all survivors welcome each other and seek unity. The lack of borders denotes an endless freedom to be accepted anywhere. The notion of border and the symbolic dimension of the frontier in their prototypical sense underscore a lack of this freedom in the novel. The author renders the only camp that preserves borders in *Station Eleven* a totalitarian place. A religious leader has established strict regulations and specific modes of conduct within his territory. In the face of the leader, the reader recognizes the Machiavellian trope of imposing self-interested practices. The border implies a refusal to accept newcomers in the areas it encompasses. This is where the connection with the refugee situation is established. Syrian refugees are pushed into the margins nowadays by being denied access to any country. Thus, borders essentially function as barricades. In the novel however, everyone is a refugee. The absence of legislature leads to a reevaluation and even annihilation of the concept of the citizen. Since laws are made by humans, they can be reversed. The novel manifests how petty the arbitrary demarcation of the border is when survival is at stake. In the extreme edge of the spectrum, citizenship is granted by default if you are a survivor in a post-apocalyptic world.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the novel pertains to borders with reference to art and culture. In *Station Eleven*, art and its corollary artistic production transcend spatial and temporal constraints. Their presence is mainly established in the novel through the Travelling Orchestra which performs both Shakespeare and concerts of classical music. The idea of the travelling troupe alludes to wandering troupes in France around sixteenth century and is revived in this future setting. There is also a historical attestation of a plague in the time of Shakespeare, analogous to the cataclysm in *Station Eleven*. However, neither the plague nor

the flu is a necessary condition to impede the continuation of art since centuries later, artists still perform classical masterpieces. Art becomes a universal constant and subsists through the Travelling Symphony. The element of timelessness is also established through the audience's preference for classical Shakespearian plays. "[W]hat was startling, what no one had anticipated, was that audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare to their other theatrical offerings" since people wanted "what was best about the world" (68), as a member of the troupe attests. Philip Smith claims that "Shakespeare is seen as a means to facilitate a cultural shift from savagery to civility, or from primitivism to modernity" (300). He continues that the Bard is perceived to be the person who is able to "effortlessly bridge historical and cultural gaps... [and thus] unite past and future" primarily "because he speaks directly to the essence of that which is human" (298).

As people grapple with survival in dire conditions, they wish to preserve aestheticism in art. Albeit not vital for (physical) survival, it has a reassuring presence in the people's lives. Besides, art is connected with a social goal as well. It acts as a reminder that the old world has not entirely perished. By moving from place to place, the Symphony ensures that the message of art reaches all the remaining humanity. Although the artistic past is prevalent, this does not necessarily imply that there is not an artistic future, too. The edifice of civilization might have collapsed but relics of it are preserved in the Museum of Civilization. The latter is an initiative of Arthur's friend Clark, one of the passengers in the airplane. This constitutes an attempt to preserve the memory of a bygone past and simultaneously create the culture of the new world. Technological advancements such as cell-phones are reduced to their material condition and become cultural artifacts. In this way, technology is repurposed and becomes art. Therefore, the concept of art is wholly reevaluated.

Station Eleven also gestures towards borderlessness in terms of literary form. Firstly, it resists a stern categorization in a specific genre. Is it post-apocalyptic? Is it speculative? Is it science fiction? No one—not even the author herself—can verify the genre of this oeuvre. Furthermore, it is an exploration of the novel's boundaries in terms of the infusion of multiple media. The title of *Station Eleven* is "borrowed" from a comic book series that Arthur's wife, Miranda created. The comic book is an integral part of the narrative since it anchors the entire action and conduces to the formation of networks among the protagonists. Concrete parts of it are also integrated in the novel. Aside from the comic, there is an assemblage of various media and artifacts that partake in the realm of culture. *Station Eleven* incorporates Kirsten's interviews printed in a newspaper of the post-apocalyptic world. There are also excerpts from books and gossip magazines. The Shakespearean texts and the performances both of *King Lear* and *The Midsummer Night's Dream* are interpolated as well. Rather than being a chaotic whirlwind of fragments however, the author's exquisite prose unites them into an organic whole. Mandel makes this formal choice to underscore the positive aspects of literary borderlessness. As a borderless novel, *Station Eleven* expounds the genre of the novel per se, expands the audience's reading practices, and allows for more opportunities in the writing process.

Firstly, the reader is led to interrogate and reconceptualize quintessential ideas about the notion of genre. Mandel artfully infuses this multimedia element into the high brow art of the novel. In this way, she challenges the boundaries of its formal element and opens up new possibilities. Thus, the incorporation of diverse media does not grant a diminutive status to the novel. Quite the contrary, it continues to be a profound reading that has a legitimate status and can be classified as literature. Furthermore, this creative pastiche enhances our contemporary reading practices. Our reading has already become intermedial due to the pervasive presence of social media in our lives. Mandel takes into consideration the reader's

(especially the younger generation's) need for an alternation of media in the story. She offers this intermediality of experience but not at the expense of the novel's quality. Also, Mandel's decision is beneficial for the writer himself. By moving beyond the borders, the artist attains a greater freedom to experiment. By choosing from a bigger terrain in terms of form, the author is able to explore more and his/her potential is not circumscribed. This pastiche is primarily where the power of *Station Eleven* as a contemporary artistic work lies.

The prospect that most human beings are lost in the ether is not the most heartening thing to consider, I admit. Nonetheless, the destruction of the world does not imply that it cannot be reconstructed on more solid foundations. The novel's optimistic message is encapsulated in this sentence: "[i]n the distance, pin pricks of light arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity." 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.

The transitions from a microscopic (the character's lives) to a macroscopic level (the apocalyptic global havoc and the extermination of humanity) render *Station Eleven* a riveting book. The conclusions that can be drawn offer food for thought for our current lives, too. The absence of borders in countries might entail proximity with people despite the initial chaos. Through the novel, the reader can revisit the concepts of immigration and/or refugees, but most importantly think critically about any policies that lack fundamental respect towards humans. When a world leader who endorses such practices rises in ascendancy, naturally fears about a doomed -even apocalyptic- present arise. The novel, however, outlines the blueprint for a ray of hope even in an apocalypse. In addition, the prevalent presence of art evinces that art belongs in an eternal present and moves beyond spatiotemporal borders. Furthermore, the form of the novel implies that borders should not be imposed when it comes to artistic production; there are endless potentialities that the writer can leverage in order to expand textual boundaries. The novel provides a refreshing outlook in all aspects of humanity, art and the creative potential in writing. By allegorizing an optimistic vision, Mandel eventually wins her wager on borderlessness.

Works Cited

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