

The Indomitable Gaze of Art in the Pandemic Abyss: Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

Smriti Thakur

Abstract

The Canadian novel *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel emerges as an influential work in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature of the twenty-first century. Drawing an intersection between art and technology, the novel commemorates and documents the inestimable endurance of art in the stripping days of civilisation and emphasises the necessity of art in fostering unity and strengthening humanity in times of crisis. As *Station Eleven* revolves around the fictional disaster that makes survival alone inadequate for the characters in the novel, it necessitates the understanding of art that contributes meaning and a sense of purpose in the constant possibility of death. So, the study investigate the factors that make art's survival possible in times of pandemic, keeping in view the depicted experiences of decadence.

Keywords: Art; Humanity; Pandemic; Survival; Technology.

Art sustains us when survival is uncertain

-Sarah Fine

Introduction

History bears witness that both art and humanity can transcend any disaster. The inextricable link between art and humanity not only emphasises their interconnectedness but also a testament to the human capacity for introspection, expression, and creativity, even in the face of adversity. Sarah Fine's assertion in her essay "Humanity at night" that art is a soul-preserving tool that provides humans a moral basis for their approach to life, culture, and society, serve as a foundation for the exploration of this theme. And we all know that as long as human civilisation continues to be fascinated by the works of art they surround, there is no wonder art would never cease to exist. It is human's inherent creative instincts that work as gliding strings on the veins of crisis and preserve humanity from extinc-

tion. Philosopher of art, Denis Dutton says “Art isn’t a byproduct of evolution, but rather an evolutionary adaptation – an instinctual trait – that helps us survive because it is crucial to our well-being” (Dutton, as cited in Alcorn, 2013: 37). Reflecting on the destabilising effect of COVID-19 on the present time, Sarah Fine reinforces the idea that art fulfills human need for reason to live. “Of course, we need food and shelter in order to survive but we also need reasons to live. Laughter, stories, play, dance, music: we learn that these, too, are basic needs and fundamental components of decent human lives” (Fine 2020: 5).

Allocating the same thought in a different tone, Emily St. John Mandel in *Station Eleven* further advances this discourse by portraying parallels between art and technology (such as airplanes, television, internet, radio), and shows how, in the face of a devastating epidemic, art sustains and gives hope to survivors, contrasting with the breakdown of technological infrastructure. It is quite apparent in the novel that how one blow of flu (Swine/Georgia flu) not only shakes the very foundation of technology like electricity and communication but completely swipes its operational mode in the dystopian world. While the products of art continually depicted transcending the bleak cords of people in their fight for self-preservation by giving them hope and purpose to come out from the darkest times.

This struggle of surviving human connections at the face of a cataclysmic event in Mandel’s *Station Eleven* exquisitely correspond with Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution i.e., “Survival of the Fittest” which emphasises the idea that organisms with enhanced adaptability to their surrounding are more likely to survive and procreate. The prevalent themes in *Station Eleven* such as adaptation, resilience, perseverance, and the survival of artistic and cultural elements such as language, arts, food, clothing, religion and belief system, technology and innovation, family structure, entertainment, and so on, collectively shows that it is not only physical strength but also the adaptation of new and challenging reality, preserving cultural and artistic expressions that helps one to thrive. Although technology seemed miraculous to those who survived the global collapse in the novel, when the desired things were just a press away “Incredible in retrospect, all of it, but especially the part having to do with travel and communication” (Mandel 2014: 214), imagining life without art has been depicted entirely out of the question.

The fragility of the modern structure and its failed persistence in the face of crisis is visible throughout the novel which requires large networks of

people to operate it. In contrast, art is free from any technical and vast circle dependency; it is so inextricably linked to human activity that it is enough to stave off any pandemic and get humanity back on its feet. The availability of historical narratives such as Viktor E Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1958), Sarah Kofman's memoir *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* (1994), and Otto Dov Kulka's *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death* (2013), further solidifies this argument that landscapes of arts whether it is literature, music, artistic performances, visual arts, and plastic art, fills people's craves for normalcy at times of crisis and bring stability in their precarious existence.

The novel illustrates that technology is consistently shaping and stimulating our perception of the world but we need to understand that art possesses its own distinct language, the language of desire, which contributes to the resilience of the human spirit – even seen in the nature spread around us. The survival of artistic pursuit in the form of The Traveling Symphony in *Station Eleven* is symbolic of the resilience of art and its role in coping with devastation. Through the proclamation “survival is insufficient,” by the members of the Traveling Symphony, Mandel prompts readers to seek out the beauty embedded in different forms of art and in the world to live a meaningful life. “The lead caravan carries an additional line of text: *Because survival is insufficient*” (Mandel 2014: 61). The inclusion of this statement in the novel is a poignant cue of the inadequacy of mere existence and the need to go beyond it. Mandel believes that art has the potential to make human realise, it is people – not technology, who shape and advance civilisation. This perspective urges reader not to take the luxurious benefits of modernity such as electricity and communication, for granted and instead explore the beauty inherent in human activity itself.

Unlike technology which is presently eradicating and affecting human touch and bonding in the name of advancement, privacy, security, and luxury, the novel *Station Eleven* depicted art as a powerful tool to bring people together despite their concealed, varied, and contrasting opinions. This social and communal dimension of art has been underpinned in the works of influential art thinkers and philosophers such as John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, Walter Benjamin's “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” and Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* which collectively showcase art's coping mechanism with technological and cultural changes and its potential to lace and be laced by social fabrics. Similar to this is depicted in *Station Eleven*, where landscapes of art are not only seen tying people in one thread having different knots of beliefs as apparent in the case of Symphony members but are also seen uniting peo-

ple like Miranda and Elizabeth in the novel who have every reason to hate each other. "She falls silent, and after a moment Miranda succumbs to curiosity and sits on the floor beside Elizabeth to see the room from her vantage point. Paintings and sketches are pinned to the walls" (Mandel 2014: 102). Despite having repulsive feelings towards Elizabeth who has a love affair with her husband, Miranda feels at ease finding a connection with Elizabeth when she enters Miranda's room and starts commenting on her works of art hanging on the wall. By representing this interaction between Miranda and Elizabeth, and employing a contrasting line between art and technology, Mandel not only throws light on the unifying force of art but is seen to convey a message in *Station Eleven* that one can imagine life or civilisation without technology or modernisation but living life without art would be like roaming around the world devoid of soul.

In addition to connecting people, artworks in *Station Eleven* are seen to bring comfort to the life of survivors.

If your soul left this earth I would follow and find you

Silent, my starship suspended in night. (Mandel 2014: 133)

This piece of August's poetry which he recites to soothe the soul of Kristen at the face of horror, stirred by the disappearance of Symphony members such as Sayid, Dieter, and the clarinet, in the novel, not only moved Kristen profoundly but rest her assure that she is not alone in her grief. On the other hand, Miranda retreats into her gift of writing to escape the failed relationship with her boyfriend Pablo and to overcome the feeling of being out of place at her workplace Neptune Logistic where Miranda works as an administrative assistant, depicts the therapeutic nature of art which makes her realise that she always has her art as a constant support to move from one stage to next stage of life. Here, art not only helps Miranda to turn from an uncertain to a decisive person but brings stability to her upside-down life. Thus, the potentiality of art in coping with knock off life by providing a different way to access and externalise emotions suppressed in the hours of chaos find enough space in *Station Eleven*. In this novel, an artistic process is not only seen to reconcile the emotional conflicts and elevate the personal growth of characters but also seen to make a statement through the Museum of Civilization that imagining civilisation without art seems like a banal existence that has no history to stand on.

From the onset of the novel, art is not only depicted as a means to connect with oneself and the time one lives on but also with the time gone

by. "These images from the shadow world, the time before the Georgia Flu, . . . she'd memorized the details of everyone" (Mandel 2014: 69). Or "The book had belonged to her mother, purchased just before the end of everything. *Dear V.: An Unauthorized Portrait of Arthur Leander*" (Mandel 2014: 142). Kristen's unexpected encounter with the book *Dear V* in one of the abandoned houses not only conjures up images from the past but also gives her a way to feel connected with her dead mother. Here, this piece of art allows Kristen to look back and have a conversation with the past. Thus, there are several instances represented in *Station Eleven* such as Tanya's gift of a paperweight to Kristen, Kristen's act of playing King Lear's daughter: from childhood version to adulthood version, August's collection of TV Guides/ gossip tabloids, Kristen's obsession over the comic books, and so on, that have not only depicted the different and necessary contributing parts of art objects to over-all well-being of human race but also shows the conscious effort of survivors to preserve what is significant to them and saved them to lose their sanity. At the same time, it illuminates the significance of artifacts to connect and make the post-collapse generation understand what civilisation was once like.

On the other hand, Clark's act of setting up the 'Museum of Civilization' in Severn City's airport, where he preserved the remaining artifacts of the past civilisation such as laptop, mobile, Amex card, motorcycle, iPad, and so on, appreciates and justifies the attempt of all those creative thinkers and makers of the society who not only provide a platform to their communities to interact but also encourage them to engage in a deliberative process which is a much-needed move towards social progress. Thus, this documentation of human history expressed not only their collective experiences of the pandemic but also their desire to seek "what was best about the world" (Mandel 2014: 42). In the novel, the effort to collect relics of the past not only symbolises their longing for the old world but also points to their age-old hope in human civilisation that is capable of rising out of any challenge and restoring its elegance. In this way, the depiction of the Museum in the novel itself explores what one can endure with the habit of collecting.

It also represents how the collection of art objects represents the essence of the owners and becomes part of their identity by continually connecting them with gone civilisation. "As identity can derive from lineage, owning artworks is therefore also a way for an owner to communicate with the past. In art collecting, the past is usually about the collector's perceived affiliations with notable people" (Thompson 2016: 2). Similarly, preserved landscapes of art in *Station Eleven* are depicted connecting the shattered

identities of the survivors. It is evident in the novel that the members of the travelling symphony referred to each other by the names of their respective instruments after the collapse. Hence, it can be said that these surviving landscapes of art not only give them a sense of belonging and become part of their identity but also serve as a means for the post-collapse generation to understand what things are necessary for self-preservation.

Characters such as Kristen, August, Clark, and older Symphony members' habit of collecting and carrying the remnants of the past civilisation and using them as a platform to express themselves and connect in *Station Eleven transcends art's artifact role and turns it into a source of pleasure, purpose, and beauty that kindles rays of hope in people's lives and stimulates their will to survive by developing a common ground between them. It shows that high art alone does not exclusively add value in a person's life, everyday art objects play a significant role in a person's well-being and their psychological comfort.*

Travelling Symphony's deliberate choice to perform predominantly Shakespeare's play and their attempts to draw a parallel between their own lives and the plague-ridden society in which Shakespeare lived represent their desperation to flicker out the trying time. "Shakespeare had lived in a plague-ridden society with no electricity and so did the Travelling Symphony" (Mandel 2014: 266). At the same time, the portrayal of art objects in the novel such as paperweight, comic books, and musical instruments is symbolic of a 'reason' the survivors need to have for living their lives. The basic components of human lives, art objects, help survivors to lift the fatigue of their daunting lives in the post collapsed world. It not only helps them to become active participants in the artistic expressions that reflect their resilience, humanity and their persistent pursuance of beauty in the face of crisis but also assist them to capture the essence of life in everyday objects of life.

Similar to this is evident in the act of gift, Kristen, the young artist, received from the renowned actor Arthur Leander in *Station Eleven*. Kristen says "Arthur Leander gave them to me. That actor I told you about" (Mandel 2014: 105). Here, the gift of the comic book series, *Dr. Eleven* exceeds the realm of mere exchange; it becomes an emblem of connection that helps her to understand and stay connected with her artistic skills in the post-collapse world and gives her strength to cope up with the world heaviness brought up by the pandemic. Instead of just being a mere collection of images, comics provide Kristen emotion and psychological sustenance. They become a medium through which Kristen relieve her

stress and upholds the goodness in her. Thus, the inclusion of this narrative transcends the mere materiality of art objects and turn them into vessels of self-discovery and empowerment that might not have a direct utilitarian purpose in survival but threads an intricate web in deepening the understanding of life.

On the other hand, the Travelling Symphony's (post-collapse art groups of musicians and actors) choice of performing Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* instead of *King Lear* in the awful and depressing atmosphere of the town of St. Debora by the Water not only become symbolic of the transformative potential of art, providing healing and insight into the human capacity to find meaning amid chaos but also its closeness to reality. The fascination sparked by the theatrical performance of the symphony's members in the heart of town people makes a statement in the novel that being alive is not enough for humanity. One also needs food to feed the soul which can keep humanity alive in times of crisis. "The audience rose for a standing ovation. ... A man in the front row had tears in his eyes" (Mandel 2014: 63). The very response of applause from the audience's side is a metaphorical representation of their initiation of rebellion against the prophet who is forcing the people of St. Debora to share his faith. It is a proof of the profound impact an artistic representation can left on the mind of an observer.

The portrayal of 'tears in eyes' verify the belief that art resonates and triggers the deep-rooted chords of human beings. So, by staging the act of art, music, and theatre, Symphony members not only sow the seeds of hope in St. Debora's people but also attempt to maintain their connection with humanity simultaneously giving them the sense of ages gone by. And when it comes to the proximity of art to reality, the role of Titania and Oberon, assigned to Kristen and Sayid in the play *Midsummer Night's Dream* seems to mirror the relationship status shared between them. As well as, the blurring of the line between performance and life is quite evident in Arthur Leander's way of interacting in his later artistic career which leaves his peers in confusion to differentiate his behavior as acting or reality. "'Arthur looks up. Beat.'" Was he acting? She couldn't tell" (Mandel 2014: 197).

Here, art not only portrays conversation with reality but also covers and provides the spaces that exist between them. On the flip side, the unintentional cloning of Luli, Arthur Leander's, Miranda's x-husband's dog, and two staples on the desk in Miranda's graphic novel *Dr. Eleven* not only throws light on the mirroring role of art which gives us a quick look

into the life of an artist which s/he put in the piece in his/her works of art but also highlight the therapeutic function of art where one can find more than escape. “[a] translucent silhouette in the dim light of Dr. Eleven’s office, which is identical to the administrative area in Leon Prevant’s Toronto office suite, down to the two staplers on the desk. . . . The Pomeranian, Luli, is curled asleep in a corner of the frame” (Mandel 2014: 303). Here, art allows Miranda to live in a world apart from her and build the life she always desired.

Examining the discussion, Symphony members have regarding the importance of various forms of art in life, and their choice to stage mostly Shakespeare’s plays for the remaining survivors in the post-collapse world, reveals that Mandel in *Station Eleven* not only stirs up the debate between high and low brow art by equating Shakespeare’s play with comics and gossip magazines but also proves the weightage of mass art that can make its existence possible in times of crisis. She makes the point that art is valuable because people find value in it. Kristen, despite being the finest actress of the Shakespearean play in the novel, finds meaning of life in the line ‘survival is insufficient’ of the TV show *Star Trek*. “The best Shakespearean actress in the territory and her favorite line of text is from *Star Trek*” (Mandel 2014: 114). The novel illustrates that it doesn’t matter whether art belongs to cultivated taste or is colored by taste of the masses, every work of art adds meaning, value, entertainment, and mystifies human life in its own unique ways. By conjuring the devastating experiences of the pandemic in *Station Eleven*, Mandel not only showcase the necessity of art in human life, but also bring to the surface art’s inextricable link with humanity. Throughout the novel, Mandel assures that it is human connection only that can heal and rise humanity from any crisis. And as human inherent instincts are creative there is always hope for a better future where humanity not only rise on its feet again but will exclaim its historicity which is not only rich in nature but a part of their identity as well because humans need always a sense of belonging to survive and sustain its sanity.

Works Cited:

- Alcorn, Marshall W, and M. Alcorn. *Resistance to Learning*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- Fine, Sarah. “Humanity at Night.” *Aeon* (2020): 1-7. Web. 27 Dec. 2023.
- Mandel, Emily St. John. *Station Eleven*. New York: Pan Macmillan, 2014. Print.
- Thompson, Erin. “Why people collect art.” *Aeon* (2016): 1-10. Web. 17 Jan. 2024.