

# Post-apocalyptic mobilities in *Station Eleven*

## [semester paper]

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*This paper aims to explore mobility as a trope in the post-apocalyptic dystopian visual narrative Station Eleven (2021), a TV adaptation of the eponymous novel by Emily St. John Mandel. Perspectives from the new mobility paradigm and writings on indigenous mobilities are used to approach the topic.*

The series locates its story geographically around the North American Great Lakes, as it temporally toggles between different points in time – a present, which hosts the story’s destabilizing event (a world-ending flu, which kills 99% of world’s population), and several points in the future, for which the time before the outbreak becomes simply the “pre-pan[demic]” or “before.”

### The Plot

The series follows characters connected by actor Arthur Leander. Kirsten, a 10-year-old Shakespearean actor, and Jeevan, an audience member meet in a Chicago theatre on the day the pandemic hits. Theirs is one of the two main stories of the narrative.

After 80 days of isolation, they leave the city, bound for a lake cabin. A year later Jeevan is attacked by wolves and separated from Kirsten, who leaves the cabin, and spends a year alone, only to meet Sarah in “Year Two”. Sarah is the composer in a group of traveling artists self-titled **The Traveling Symphony**, where Kirsten spends the next 20 years of the “post-pan.” The Symphony travels every year on the same route (“the wheel”), around Lake Michigan.

A second story follows Clark and Elizabeth, Arthur’s best friend and wife, who accidentally end up isolated in Severn City Airport, on the day of the outbreak. The **Airport Community** remains bound in this space for the 20 post-pan years, where Clark is a leader and collects artifacts of the old world, for what he calls “The Museum of Civilization.”

### Mobility and the post-apocalyptic imagination

As a “speculative narrative” (Hsu&Yazell 2019), *Station Eleven* is a telling example of “postapocalyptic imagination” (sic) at work (Doyle 2015). As theorized by B. Doyle, the postapocalyptic imagination is “the process of thinking beyond revelation in the apocalypse;” it “contains the desire for apocalypse, while stretching...into an altogether different narrative space” (ibid:101). The series proposes a “contemporary modification of the apocalypse (post-biblical, secular), which withholds revelation in favor of playing out scenarios of human survival in the ruins of the old world” (ibid). However, the two communities are seemingly contrasted for their value systems, and one of them could be construed as a

“revelation” for the other: the Symphony embracing other people without fear, on the open road, while the Airport community is closed, and upholds quarantine as a protective measure 20 years after the pandemic.

Through gimmicks of cinematography (lighting, color hues), the Symphony appears as a sun-loving Utopia; the Airport—a dreary Dystopia (Appendix Fig 1). Thus, the series comes close to what Carlos Lopez-Galviz calls “utopian thinking,” which “could assist us in envisioning futures (including those of mobility) differently” (2019:1). If we read this into its teleology, *Station Eleven* successfully envisions two speculative utopian models, yet fails to do so from the amoral, neutral ground required by post-apocalyptic thinking.

The series engages its characters in a type of post-pandemic survival which has more to do with social structures and modes of communal living, rather than conventional typologies of disaster and its aftermath: the landscape is not derelict, the environment is not inhospitable. The narrative remains true to the genre, in that the focus is on small groups of people, aiming to recover social structure at local levels, after either nuclear, environmental, or biological apocalypse (Ireland 2009:503).

Another convention of the dystopian genre that the series embraces is the road narrative. This positions *Station Eleven* in the panoply of cultural products, most often of (North)American origin, which blend errant stories and characters with end-of-the-world plots. As Brian Ireland mentions, “movement has been the dominant fact of American history and national character” (2009:498). Additionally, an apocalyptic event “denudes the landscape of people and creates a landscape similar to that facing America’s original Europeans settlers. This wilderness is part of the American national consciousness” (ibid).

In these narratives, the post-apocalypse becomes a site to (re)stage mobilities. The disaster is often a spatial disruption, a displacement, such as in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, in which mobility equals salvation (Doyle 2015). Elsewhere, disaster speaks to identity-related anxieties, ideological rifts, or structural and administrative fractures, where mobility is upended and containment is exacerbated, such as in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* or Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029-2047*.

### ***Station Eleven* - a study in mobility**

This mix of post-apocalyptic plots and the all-American, frontier-pushing model of employing mobility as a trope makes *Station Eleven* relevant to a study of mobility. Here, I focus on the two sites created by the series – the Traveling Symphony and the Severn City Airport, as embodying versions of (non)mobility. At first, the former appears as a quintessential story of nomadism, whereas the latter depicts sedentarism (Adey 2017). This dichotomy needs a critical perspective, which would emphasize the “stabilization” through repetition of movement – eg. in the cyclical nomadism of the Symphony.

From within this (problematic) binary, we can explore processes of meaning-making, with mobility playing a central role. If, according to Cresswell, the “fact of movement becomes mobility” through meaning (2006:7), there are several questions we can ask: how does *Station Eleven* encode mobility/stagnation with (what) meanings, in a dystopian context? What “mobile practices” are being created in the series?

## The Post-Apocalypse – on the road again

If both road stories and post-apocalypse stories offer insight into the context, anxieties, and tensions of the contemporary moment of their production (Ireland 2009; Doyle 2015), we can ask: what role do “constellations of mobilities” (Cresswell 2010) play in rendering a “post-apocalyptic” imagination, and how may these inform knowledges on mobility in our moment of contemporaneity?

The specific anxieties (Doyle 2015:100) of the current moment can be linked to mobility. Impending calamities are ubiquitous in contemporary mindsets; as Ole B. Jensen writes, “disruptive [global] events prompt re-thinking the taken for granted ... touch local perception, and lead to mobility breakdowns” (Jensen 2021). Globalization, late-capitalist narratives of progress, the fragile promise of perpetual growth – they are referenced (and inverted) in the series. The sudden halt of the world is visualized by stagnant (sites, nodes) of mobilities (Fig 2-4). The end of movement is the end of the world, with the Airport community its most clear metaphor.

As Doyle cites F. Jameson’s famous “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (101), we observe that *Station Eleven* enacts the simultaneous end of both, allowing us the dilemma of asking which one generated the other (playing into current discourse warning against constant growth).

The defamiliarization and restructuring of our experience of the present are functions of the genre (Doyle 2015) present in *Station Eleven*, with mobility as conduit: the Traveling Symphony moves slowly, using hybrid travel forms – horse-drawn trucks (Fig 5).

It’s useful here to apply Cresswell’s aspects of mobility (2010), particularly to observe their interconnection: the motive force blends post-disaster displacement with a desire to keep culture alive (performing Shakespeare plays on their stops); the rhythm is likewise impacted by these temporary destinations. Velocity is important – as high-speed travel is no longer possible, a slowing down of the journey is necessary. The route the Symphony travels on is always the same (“We never leave the wheel” Fig 6), by virtue of their mission. Finally, the Symphony stops along the way to perform, only to always start again. The experience of travel is closely connected with meaning: “We’re the traveling Symphony. We travel for a reason – you burn the house down, then you go. Try to make sense of the world for a minute.” These aspects constitute the constellations of mobility in *Station Eleven*, where mobile practices, movement, and the socially shared representation of mobility are interlinked (ibid).

These aspects of the Symphony, however, risk essentializing it as a site (or act) of nomadism. In fact, a perspective based on fluidity would make it possible to emphasize the stability and sense of place created by mobility (Adey 2017): the “the wheel” is a place constituted by the journey (Fig 7), one with cartographic existence as well as attached meanings. To loosely reference Glissant, the Symphony puts down *roots* while on a constant *route* – they simultaneously *move and stay* on the wheel.

An important critical take, stemming from indigenous culture thinkers and critics: in its depiction of slowness as adaptability, its preference for nomadism as a mode of surviving the apocalypse, the series produces a fetishizing depiction of mobility. By presenting (slow, circular) mobility as exceptional, this

type of *speculative* narrative erases the *existing* modes of mobile life, often present in indigenous ontologies (Whyte et.al 2019). If adaptability, resettlement, and “seasonal round strategies” of movement through landscape are often features of indigenous lifeworlds (ibid:323), their use in speculative plots about (White Americans’) futures obfuscates *actual* indigenous presents. Hsu & Yazell (2019) coined the term “structural appropriation” to describe how dystopian narratives recasting end-of-the-world violent (yet fictitious) plots have the effect of obscuring histories of racism and colonialism which already inflicted the end-of-the-world for indigenous populations: “The apocalypse, for Native Americans, is not a future scenario but a historical experience” (ibid: 348).

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The new mobilities paradigm offers a nuanced way of examining the forms of mobility in the Symphony. Reading this with Sheller & Urry (2005), we can note how “place is dynamic,” and how the Symphony challenges the idea that places, people, and mobile practices are distinct. Similarly, the mobility turn offers a framework to question what meaning does both to movement and to people (Ayan Yasin 2022 RUC Lecture). Indeed, the “context of mobility” (Adey) leads to new subjectivities– “new mobilities [produce] new subject positions (Cresswell 2006:27).

In *Station Eleven*, the post-apocalyptic default subject is the “drifter/nomad.” According to Doyle, this figure gains from more complex approaches, such as views from feminist theory. Doyle cites Rosi Braidotti, for whom, “the nomad is a deterritorialized figure who traverses national boundaries and categories of subjectivity”(106).

## Borders and Arrivals

In the new paradigm, “travel is not just a question of getting to the destination” (Sheller&Urry 2005:113): movement redesigns a new *telos* for itself, and mobility is inseparable from this emerging ontology that is “the wheel.”

Deterritorialization is key within the new mobilities paradigm; Sheller & Urry see the paradigm as “going beyond the imagery of terrains as spatially fixed geographical containers for social processes” (209), and also note the “complex interrelations between travel and dwelling, home and not-home” (211). *Station Eleven* imagines a post-pandemic future which decenters social and community experience from state structures (Fig 8). Both the Symphony and the Airport community exist at an “end of state as container for social processes” (Sheller&Urry 2005:210).

If the state is not present to “be the enemy of people who move around,” as James Scott would put it (Cresswell 2006), echoes of the value clash between nomadism and sedentarism are still present. The Airport, for instance, enacts boundaries akin to pre-pandemic order. Interestingly, the airport itself, a “node of mobility” (ibid:213), is recast in the series as a stagnant entity.

The connectivity typical of the airport is replaced fully by its function as a border. J. Bechmann notes that the airport is a “particularly suitable site for the study of mobility and ambivalence” (2004:28). The paradox, he argues is that increased mobility produces increased ambivalence; too, an increased sense of

modernity relies on increased mobility. Modernity, however, cannot accommodate ambivalence (ibid: 30-31). This adversity for ambivalence is present in the Airport community, which retains a hierarchical and social order inspired by the pre-disaster ‘modern’ world. As the Symphony arrives at the Airport, the shell of pre-pandemic social order cracks and culminates with one of the “nomad” visitors setting fire to the control tower housing The Museum of Civilization (Fig 9). A micro-apocalypse is metaphorically featured here.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it could be argued that within conventional post-apocalyptic narrative, *Station Eleven* proposes a speculative view of the world “as both a human world and a non-human world” (Eugene Thacker) – a world past the end of “civilization.” That the world ends when “modernity” ends is, of course, a script of Western hegemonic origins. The series employs new mobility practices to activate humanity past its point of demise; in effect, it creates sites of exceptional (white, Western) mobility, while erasing *other* mobile experiences. Meanings attached to (non)mobility can be traced to a desire of opposing Utopia to Dystopia, with a faulty value system used to differentiate between the two.

“How do we give meaning to the world, in the aftermath of a disaster?” asks E. Thacker. We can challenge the question by acknowledging that *some* worlds have already ended, but “the end of their worlds did not make these populations vanish so much as it pushed them to invent new methods of ecological and cultural reproduction,” and, we may add, new modes of being mobile (Hsu&Yazell 2019:352).

If a post-apocalyptic (rather than Utopian) thinking were to guide us in an approach of mobility today, we’d “think beyond revelation...engage with the past in a necessarily flawed and incomplete way to imagine different kinds of presents and futures that have no jurisdiction over humanity as a whole and remain incomplete as visions, treatises, critiques, (dis)organizations, and what-if” (Doyle 2015:111). This approach can aid a decolonizing of the single-story of modernity, where the end of capitalism is the end of the world.

If nomadic subjects “require and produce nonunitary, complex politics,” it is an *actual*, not only a *speculative*, engagement with this type of subjectivity that can lead to a heightened awareness of a plurality of contemporary journeys. Teresa Heffernan asks: “What does a world that has abandoned a sense of ending look like? Is it about ruins and ghosts? Is it about possibility and plurality?” Possibility and plurality are takeaways from *Station Eleven*—either inspired by the execution of the story, or by its shortcomings. Regardless, the use of mobility as a trope is telling.

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## Appendix

*Paper title: Post-apocalyptic mobilities in Station Eleven*



Fig 1: Traveling Symphony (down) – Airport Community (up)



Fig 2 Cars stopped in traffic. Day 80 after the outbreak.





Fig. 3: L-Train tracks reclaimed by nature.



Fig 4: A sick man crashes his car. Epitome of losing control of (auto)mobility.



Fig 5



Fig. 6





Fig. 7 Map of the wheel



Fig 8 New dwelling forms; old waterfront industry foregrounded by new dwelling forms. The new world is young enough for traces of the old world to still be standing, yet inactive.



Fig 9 The Museum of Civilization is set on fire.