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## Station Eleven and Twenty-First-Century Writing

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## STATION ELEVEN AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY WRITING

# Critical Temporalities: *Station Eleven* and the Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel

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This article examines Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) in the context of the growing body of contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions and what I argue is their critique of the apocalyptic tradition. Traditional apocalyptic narratives reveal a utopian teleology to history, a conception of time that deeply informs western modernity and its metanarratives. The contemporary post-apocalyptic novel, instead, is not only predominantly dystopian but articulates temporalities critical of the apocalyptic model of history to make space for unwritten futures which are key to agency. I focus on three elements, which reflect central features of this body of writings – the critical appropriation of religious apocalyptic logic, the critique of utopian teleology, and non-linear narrative structures – and parallel Mandel's novel with three other key texts of the genre, Douglas Coupland's *Player One* (2010), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004).

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Published in 2014 to critical and popular success, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* is part of a widely-discussed, growing corpus of post-apocalyptic novels written by authors who do not typically write science fiction.<sup>1</sup> In what Andrew Hoberek (2011) identifies as the genre turn of contemporary fiction, the post-apocalyptic 'genre has moved from the margins (tacky science-fiction) into the mainstream (legitimate, widely-recognized and practiced speculative fiction)' (Buell 2013: 9), so much so that Frederick Buell frames it as a 'cultural dominant'.<sup>2</sup> As Andrew Tate puts it, 'contemporary narrative is haunted by dreams of a future that is a place of ruin' (2017: 2). It is in the context of what Heather J. Hicks, in her study of the twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic novel, discusses as an 'unprecedented outpouring of fully developed post-apocalyptic narratives by major, critically acclaimed anglophone [sic] writers' (2016: 5–6) that my article situates *Station Eleven*. Like Hicks, I argue that the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel 'addresses the nature of modernity' (2016: 4); unlike Hicks, I argue that these fictions do so to critique, rather than to salvage, modernity, and specifically, to critique the apocalyptic understanding of time underlying Western modernity through what I term critical temporalities. Indeed, as opposed to analyses of the contemporary apocalyptic imagination that interrogate its relationship with the current socio-historical conjuncture's traumas and risks,

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, in what follows 'contemporary post-apocalyptic novel' refers to the subject of this article, post-apocalyptic fictions written by non-SF authors. In addition to the texts discussed in my article, other examples of this growing body of twenty-first-century writings include: Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* (2017), Howard Jacobson's *J* (2014), Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007), Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005) and Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Despite the genre turn, Hoberek points out a 'persistent prejudice against genre fiction central to what Mark McGurl has dubbed the program era of post-World War II fiction' (2011: 484). In this sense, it is interesting to note that, just like another winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award for science fiction, Margaret Atwood (2004), who famously rejects the label of science fiction for novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) – the novel that won her the award – and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Mandel tends to consider *Station Eleven* as literary fiction and to disassociate the novel from the SF genre and speculative fiction more broadly. A *Washington Post* article reports that Mandel 'was surprised to discover that if you write literary fiction that's set partly in the future, you're apparently a sci-fi writer' (Charles, 2014: n.pag.). As she declares in an interview, 'I've started out trying to write a literary novel, ... a book where I'm trying to cast a certain spell through the rhythm of the prose' (McCarry, 2014: n.pag.). Similarly, some reviews of *Station Eleven* dismiss its generic elements as accidental, whilst praising its literariness. As the title of a *Globe and Mail* review puts it, '*Station Eleven* offers suspense and science fiction, but it is undoubtedly a literary work' (Cameron, 2014: n.pag.).

especially environmental risks (Berger, 1999; Mousoutzanis, 2014; Skrimshire, 2010), I contend that to understand the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel we need to consider the very core of the apocalyptic imagination: time.

After a discussion of traditional apocalyptic temporality as it informs modernity and a theorisation of the notion of critical temporality, my article turns to *Station Eleven*, drawing comparisons with other contemporary post-apocalyptic novels to illuminate key features of this body of writings and the critical temporalities they articulate. I focus on three elements: one, *Station Eleven's* critical appropriation of religious apocalyptic logic, which I discuss in parallel with Douglas Coupland's *Player One* (2010); two, the depiction of the aftermath of the Georgia Flu and *Station Eleven's* critique of utopian teleology, which I discuss in parallel with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006); and, three, *Station Eleven's* non-linear narrative structure, which I discuss in parallel with David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004).

### **The Apocalyptic Tradition and the Critical Temporalities of the Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel**

We tend to think about the apocalypse as a catastrophe of enormous proportions and overwhelming consequences, something which, then, brings about a dystopian post-apocalyptic scenario. But *apocalypse*, from the Greek *apocalyptein*, etymologically means to unveil or to reveal, and the revelations of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm are intertwined with time and utopia. Apocalyptic writings, ever since their religious origins, have flourished at times of crisis and '[I]t is to this disquieting sense of disorder that the apocalyptic myth speaks, reasserting teleological design and cosmic meaning' (Rosen, 2008: xviii). The goal of traditional apocalyptic logic is to order time and make it intelligible, by disclosing that the whole course of human history is tending towards a final resolution which will make sense of everything that happened before. The Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament and the central text of religious apocalypticism, is ultimately not about the catastrophic end of the material world, but rather the revelation of a utopian new world, the New Jerusalem, the divine kingdom which awaits the faithful at the end of history.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On the essentially temporal nature of traditional apocalyptic logic see also Kermode ([1966] 2000) and Zamora (1989).

This utopian teleology is central to the Western understanding of time, indeed, '[the apocalyptic] vision of history gives rise to "history" as a theoretical production' (Keller, 1996: 89) and the traditional apocalyptic paradigm lies at the very core of secular Western modernity.<sup>4</sup> The age of discovery and colonialism is informed by apocalyptic beliefs, as suggested by the trope of the new world (Keller, 1996). The great modern revolutions, from the American, to the French, to the Russian, rely on the apocalyptic faith in radical renewal after violent cleansing (Abrams, 1984). Modern metanarratives are apocalyptic, in that they are totalising explanations of history based on utopian teleology. In particular, progress, the modern metanarrative *par excellence*, 'represents the main example of the secularization of apocalypse' and of its utopian telos (Keller, 1996: 6).

Yet contemporary post-apocalyptic scenarios are predominantly dystopian. *Station Eleven* self-reflexively emphasises this difference between traditional and contemporary apocalyptic imagination. While the novel's prophet holds on to a religious understanding of apocalypse in which the end is followed by utopian rebirth, the Georgia Flu, the pandemic that kills 99% of the world's population, is termed *apocalypse* by the television newscasters in the sense of dystopian catastrophe rather than utopian revelation, and the apocalyptic narratives referred to in the text are disaster movies, 'with the dangerous stragglers fighting out for the last few scraps' (Mandel, 2014: 243, 256). The dystopias of contemporary post-apocalyptic scenarios become all the more significant if one considers that they are set when the traditional apocalyptic paradigm posits the utopian resolution which makes sense of everything that happened before.

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<sup>4</sup> See also 'the prototype of the Western concept that history has an intelligible and end-determined order, whether fideistic or naturalistic, is the scheme of the course of earthly affairs from genesis to apocalypse which is underwritten by a sacred text' (Abrams, 1984: 344) and:

The prominent and interconnected Enlightenment narratives that have given rise to certain versions of modernity – History, the Nation, and Man – continue to be secured by the spirit of the Christian apocalypse, a narrative that posits an origin and moves definitely, through a series of coherent and concordant events, towards an end that will make sense of all that has come before it' (Heffernan, 2008: 4).

Post-apocalyptic ravaged aftermaths implicitly subvert the central element of apocalyptic discourse, that is, a sense-making utopian historical teleology. But the recent surge of post-apocalyptic novels brings to the fore this critical tension between the contemporary and the traditional understanding of apocalypse by appropriating apocalyptic tropes to subvert them from within and, more fundamentally, by being essentially concerned with time and history, a concern that is often embodied within their structural narrative features. If traditional apocalyptic discourse is about time, contemporary post-apocalyptic discourse is also about time – more specifically, it is about critical temporalities, constructions of time that critique a hegemonic temporality. For the profound influence of apocalypticism on modernity can also be qualified as a 'chronic disease of the Western politics and poetics of temporality', a disease characterised by 'what Derrida called "the disorder or delirium of destination"' (Gomel, 2010: 121). Thus, the critical temporalities of contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions challenge the hegemonic temporality of modernity: time as a neutral, homogeneous and teleological continuum.

In accord with the postmodern narrative turn in historiography, the critical temporalities of these novels expose the modern and apocalyptic conception of history as a narrative construct deeply enmeshed with power structures. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (1992) emphasises, if modernity is about the belief in the epistemic neutrality and objectivity of our representations, postmodernity is ultimately about foregrounding the constructedness of our representations and of neutrality itself. The postmodern subversion of a realistic epistemology leads to the idea that 'there is no ultimate knowable historical truth, that our knowledge of the past is social and perspectival, and that written history exists within culturally determined power structures' (Munslow, 2006: 27). Drawing attention to the dystopian aspects of traditional apocalyptic discourse, contemporary post-apocalyptic novels suggest that its totalising historical teleology is a narrative construct which serves oppressive ideological agendas, for those who posit an end to history, no matter how utopian this end is, also conceive of themselves as the only rightful interpreters and agents of this telos. Furthermore, teleology entails determinism, which compromises the possibility of choices and ethics. As Lee Quinby sums up, the apocalyptic

metanarrative is a 'quintessential technology of power/knowledge', since its 'tenet of preordained history disavows questionings of received truth, discredits skepticism, and disarms challengers of the status quo' (1994: xiii). Through their content and narrative structure, contemporary post-apocalyptic novels take issue with the apocalyptic 'delirium of destination' of Western modernity (Derrida, 1992: 53), that is, with the closed and deterministic conception of time at the core of apocalyptic logic and its equally closed and normative utopian visions, which leave no space for agency and for alternative visions of the future.

### **The Critique of Religious Apocalyptic Tropes**

In her study of contemporary Canadian apocalyptic narratives, Marlene Goldman writes that:

Canadian authors introduce particular twists to the familiar myth of the end by challenging rather than embracing apocalypse's key features, specifically, the purgation of the non-elect and the violent destruction of the earthly world in preparation for the creation of a divine one (2005: 6).

While it is my argument that this challenge to traditional apocalyptic discourse and its model of history is key to contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction, in this section I focus on Mandel's novel in conjunction with another Canadian text, Coupland's *Player One*, which takes place in a Toronto cocktail lounge over five hours while the price of oil quickly escalates and a violent post-apocalyptic scenario ensues.<sup>5</sup> Both

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is my contention that, in its critique of the apocalyptic understanding of history, the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel addresses aspects of Western modernity that transcend national borders, which in any case become irrelevant after the catastrophes depicted by the texts. As children learn in *Station Eleven*, in the pre-apocalyptic world 'There had been countries and borders [but] it was hard to explain' these notions to them (Mandel, 2014: 262), as it is the case with many other objects and customs that characterised the pre-pandemic world, from planes to the Internet. Hardly by chance, *Station Eleven* is set across the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, in both (what used to be) Canada and the United States, *Player One* in an airport, one of the loci of our globalised world (*Station Eleven* also features as airport). McCarthy deliberately abstains from providing clues that identify the specific setting of his novel and, as the man explains to his son, 'there's not any more states' (McCarthy, [2006] 2007: 43), while Mitchell, a British author, sets the post-apocalyptic section of *Cloud Atlas* in Hawaii.



novels subvert the distinction between the elect and the non-elect, bringing to the fore the self-righteous violence of apocalyptic discourse and how this distinction, as well as the apocalyptic historical teleology it founds, are narrative constructs which serve the interests of those who articulate them.

*Station Eleven's* critique of traditional apocalyptic logic is most evident in the figure of the prophet – Tyler – through whom Mandel self-reflexively appropriates religious apocalyptic tropes to subvert them from within.<sup>6</sup> Tyler, the son of Arthur Leander, the character who links the text's pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative strands, is only a child when the pandemic hits the world, but grows up to be the charismatic leader of a violent doomsday cult. The prophet believes that 'everything that has ever happened on this earth has happened for a reason' (Mandel, 2014: 59), including the Georgia Flu, which he sees as a 'perfect agent of death [that] could only be divine' (Mandel, 2014: 60). The survivors are the elect who, as he puts it, were saved 'not only to bring the light, to spread the light, but to *be* the light. We were saved because we *are* the light. We are the pure', working towards the advent of a new world, the 'divine plans' for which were 'revealed to him in dreams' (Mandel, 2014: 60; emphases in original). Similarly, Bertis, a fanatic sniper in *Player One's* peak oil post-apocalyptic scenario, believes that the pre-apocalyptic world is 'dying and corrupt' and about to be renewed through divine intervention (Coupland, [2010] 2011: 129). Just like Tyler, Bertis sees himself as the prophet of the new world to come, which is, however, not for everyone. '[L]ife on earth is just a bus stop on the

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<sup>6</sup> The critical appropriation of apocalyptic tropes to foreground their complicity with oppressive power dynamics is typical of contemporary post-apocalyptic novels. See, for instance, the state propaganda in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), where the apocalyptic imagery of renewal is at the core of the operation 'American Phoenix' and of the post-apocalyptic rebirth it promises. This operation, however, serves to conceal a much more sinister and hopeless scenario. Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) deploys a similar device: the end is coming for the environmentally depleted planet Orbus but the government apocalyptically presents the discovery of Planet Blue as the chance to begin again in a utopian world. As in *Zone One*, however, this is just propaganda, for Planet Blue will be home only to the rich and powerful, while the rest of the population will be left to die on Orbus. Both Will Self's *The Book of Dave* (2006) and Sam Taylor's *The Island at the End of the World* (2009) deconstruct the apocalyptic paradigm from within by parodically appropriating biblical apocalyptic tropes – from Revelation and the Genesis story of the Flood – and exposing the apocalyptic metanarrative as a narrative particularly congenial for deranged minds.

way to greater glory or greater suffering' (Coupland, [2010] 2011: 152) and Bertis understands his murders as partaking in a divinely-sanctioned separation between the elect and the non-elect. Both Tyler and Bertis exhibit traits of what Catherine Keller identifies as the 'apocalypse pattern' (1996: 11): the faith in historical determinism, the inclination to think in terms of clear-cut polarities of good versus evil and the identification with the good that purges the evil from the old world and is worthy of the imminent utopian renewal of the new world.

*Station Eleven* features explicit intertextual references to biblical apocalyptic narratives, from the Flood, in Genesis, to Revelation. The Georgia Flu, the prophet claims, 'was our flood. The light we carry within us is the ark that carried Noah and his people over the face of the terrible waters' (Mandel, 2014: 60). The prophet's image of the pandemic as an 'avenging angel' (Mandel, 2014: 60, 286) echoes Revelation 15–16, where the seven bowls of god's wrath are unleashed on the Earth by seven angels. A scene depicts Tyler as a child reading Revelation 18 to the victims of the Flu sealed forever in a quarantined plane (Mandel, 2014: 259). This biblical passage contains a prophecy about the city of Babylon, symbol of the sinful Roman empire, being destroyed by plagues 'for mighty is the Lord God who judges her' (Mandel, 2014: 259) – an obvious parallel with the Georgia Flu and with the prophet's argument that the pandemic targeted those who were found lacking by god. One of the prophet's followers, who dies revelling in Revelation's promise of a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Rev. 21:1), frames the apocalyptic origin of the distinction between the elect and the non-elect at the core of the cult's credo when fervently claiming that the survivors' 'names are recorded in the book of life' (Mandel, 2014: 286). This is a reference to Revelation 20:11–15: during the Last Judgment, people are judged according to their deeds, which are written in books, and only those whose name is in the book of life will be allowed to dwell with god in the new heaven and earth of the New Jerusalem. Finally, when the prophet is killed towards the end of the novel, people find in his bag 'A copy of the New Testament, held together with tape ... nearly illegible, a thicket of margin notes and exclamation points and underlining' (Mandel, 2014: 303), which further confirms the profound influence of biblical apocalypses, and of Revelation in particular, on the prophet's worldview.

*Station Eleven's* appropriation of biblical apocalyptic serves to foreground the violence inherent in apocalyptic logic.<sup>7</sup> As Kirsten, a child actor with Arthur in the pre-apocalypse and a member of the Travelling Symphony in the post-apocalypse, muses, '[I]f you are the light, if your enemies are darkness, then there's nothing that you cannot justify. There's nothing you can't survive, because there's nothing that you will not do' (Mandel, 2014: 139). The apocalyptic distinction between the elect and the non-elect fuels the ruthless actions of the prophet and his followers – from killing to raping and enslaving – which they commit '[A]ll the time smiling, so peaceful, like they've done nothing wrong' (Mandel, 2014: 273), because they see themselves as the only rightful interpreters and agents of the apocalyptic goal of history, the utopian renewal of the new world. In *Player One*, Bertis justifies his murders through a similar self-righteous moral dualism and teleology. As he puts it, 'if you're not plotting every moment to boil the carcass of the old order, then you're wasting your day' (Coupland, [2010] 2011: 189). And, as a sniper, he believes he is clearing the way for god's new utopian order, for '[T]he people [he] shot bothered God. They angered Him' (Coupland, [2010] 2011: 134) – although, it turns out, he is also motivated by a much more mundane reason: he wants to kill his father, who ran off with his wife.

Indeed, both *Station Eleven* and *Player One* emphasise how the teleological determinism and moral dualism of apocalyptic logic are self-referential narrative constructs which legitimise the oppressions and violence of those who articulate these narratives. Confronted with Bertis' preaching, the other characters of Coupland's novel notice that the way Bertis talks is 'weird' (Coupland, [2010] 2011: 187). As Rachel explains, the sniper is deploying poetic devices, such as 'rhythm and regularity of speech', in order to 'have a stronger impact' and to 'quickly and effectively indoctrinate' (Coupland, [2010] 2011: 187–8). By the same token, *Station*

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<sup>7</sup> In his analysis of *Station Eleven*, Tate writes that Tyler's followers are 'believers in the secondary sense of apocalypse: a violent end that glories in death' (2017: 136), that is, the contemporary sense of apocalypse as catastrophe. I argue, instead, that, through Tyler's cult and its reliance on religious apocalyptic texts, *Station Eleven* draws attention to the violence already intrinsic in the traditional apocalyptic paradigm.

*Eleven's* prophet terrorises the population of the region, assembles a cult, and gains power thanks to a 'combination of charisma, violence, and cherry-picked verses from the Book of Revelation' (Mandel, 2014: 280), where 'cherry-picked' underlines the constructedness of Tyler's prophecy. Just like Bertis, Tyler uses contrived rhythms and repetition in his speeches, so much so that Kirsten notes 'a suggestion of a trapdoor waiting under every word [of his]' (Mandel, 2014: 59). Both texts expose how apocalyptic discourse is fabricated to push ideological agendas. Yet Tyler's apocalyptic narrative indicates not only the complicity of apocalyptic logic with violence and power structures but also how the appeal of this kind of narrative depends on its promise of a sense-making temporal order.

Traditional apocalyptic narratives are 'fictions of historical order' (Zamora, 1989: 4) that flourish in times of crisis and, through his apocalyptic narrative, the prophet seeks to restore order in the chaotic post-pandemic world. As he claims, 'when we speak of the light, we speak of order. This [the cult's community at St. Deborah by the Water] is a place of order. People with chaos in their hearts cannot abide here' (Mandel, 2014: 61). The chaos of historical contingency – chaos which is even more evident and dreadful at times of crisis, such as that of the devastating Georgia Flu – is tamed through the recourse to apocalyptic determinism, namely, to the belief that 'everything happens for a reason', as the prophet's mother repeats throughout the novel. But both in terms of content and, as we shall see in this article's fourth section, narrative structure, *Station Eleven's* critical temporality questions the idea of a historical pre-determined pattern, emphasising its constructedness. As one of the survivors puts it, 'Elizabeth's [the prophet's mother] a fucking lunatic' (Mandel, 2014: 253). Or more nuancedly, as Clark, a good friend of Arthur's, comments to Tyler: 'it's not a question of having been bad or ... the people [who died] were just in the wrong place at the wrong time' (Mandel, 2014: 260; ellipsis in original). This staunch rebuttal of apocalyptic determinism through the emphasis on the role that chance plays during the pandemic is echoed when Clark describes the period of contagion as a 'choreography of luck', 'the hours of near misses', of 'coincidence[s]' (Mandel, 2014: 223, 224). Importantly, these 'hours of miracles [are] visible as such only in hindsight' (Mandel, 2014: 223), that is, the deterministic teleological pattern of

apocalyptic logic, with its distinction between the elect and the non-elect, is always constructed retrospectively, after the end, be this a future projection or a past event that is perceived as an end of something, as is the case of the Flu with the survivors. This dynamic is what Frank Kermode terms the 'sense of an ending': 'We project ourselves – a small, humble elect perhaps – past the end, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle' ([1966] 2000: 8). Mandel's novel thus exposes apocalyptic temporality as an artificial teleological order that one imposes on contingency, often with oppressive agendas in mind, as is the case of the prophet. Ultimately, *Station Eleven's* critique of apocalyptic temporality as a self-referential narrative construct is particularly effective because the prophet's fanatic apocalyptic fabrication is an attempt at making sense of history in the wake of an apocalypse that, as typical of the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel, failed to bring about the expected utopian renewal.

### **The Critique of Utopian Teleology**

According to Elana Gomel, 'plague narratives are structured by the logic of iterative mortality that undermines the teleological progression of the apocalypse'. Therefore, the plot of pestilence is 'not so much a "fiction of an end" as a fiction of an end indefinitely postponed. It may become antiapocalyptic in its refusal of the transition from the tribulation to the millennium' (2000: 410, 412). The refusal of this transition, I argue, is at the core of contemporary post-apocalyptic novels – be they about pandemics or not – for in these texts the aftermaths of the cataclysmic destruction of the world as we know it are preponderantly dystopian.<sup>8</sup> In this section, I compare *Station Eleven's* more nuanced and hopeful version of the aftermath

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<sup>8</sup> There are varying degrees of dystopian post-apocalyptic scenarios: from *Zone One* and *The Road*, where human survival appears to be highly unlikely, to *Station Eleven* and Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* (2007), where the tone is far more optimistic. Yet even in the latter cases, readers do not find the utopian renewal which is so central to the traditional apocalyptic paradigm. In *The Pesthouse*, for instance, the apocalypse has made civilisation revert to a more primitive state, and the result is not a pastoral utopia, so much so that people wish to emigrate from post-apocalyptic America (for a more in-depth analysis of *The Pesthouse* see De Cristofaro, 2013). Indeed, the dystopian post-apocalyptic reversal of civilisation to a more primitive state is a trope of contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions, from *The Book of Dave's* neo-medieval society to *Cloud Atlas's* hunter-gatherer one.

with *The Road's* univocally ravaged and hopeless post-apocalyptic world to discuss how, notwithstanding varying degrees of dystopian scenarios, contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions consistently articulate critical temporalities that reject the traditional apocalyptic notion of a utopian teleology active in history.

*The Road* is a recurrent point of comparison for *Station Eleven* in academic analyses and reviews alike (Tate, 2017: 132–33; Alter, 2014; Huntley, 2014). After all, McCarthy's text – which depicts a father and son's journey in a post-apocalyptic US where, after an unspecified catastrophe, 'everything [is] dead to the root' (McCarthy, [2006] 2007: 21) – is one of the most famous examples of the contemporary body of post-apocalyptic novels as it won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. As Mandel muses, 'It's almost as if *The Road* gave more literary writers permission to approach the subject [of the post-apocalypse]' (Alter, 2014: n.pag.). Yet, she explains, 'it was important to me to not write that book [*The Road*]. I was very deliberate in the timing of the narrative: it's set mostly fifteen and twenty years after the collapse, not during or in the immediate aftermath' (Mandel, 2015: n.pag.). This deliberate timing allows Mandel not to dwell on the horror and mayhem brought about by the Georgia Flu, horror and mayhem which are instead at the core of *The Road's* 'borrowed world' (McCarthy, [2006] 2007: 130). As she puts it, 'I assume that there would be a period of utter chaos immediately after an apocalyptic event, but ... I don't find it credible that that period would last forever' (Griffith, 2015: n.pag.). Indeed, Mandel glosses over the 'blood-drenched years just after the collapse', the 'first unspeakable years' which were, tellingly, spent on the road, travelling (Mandel, 2014: 48, 37). The narrative moves literally and metaphorically away from the road – the actual road of the first post-pandemic years as well as McCarthy's *The Road*.

The only descriptions of the immediate aftermath Mandel gives her readers are through Jeevan, a paramedic who tries to help Arthur when he has a stroke on stage the night the pandemic begins. The things Jeevan sees vividly recall *The Road*. Just like McCarthy's father and son, Jeevan and '[A]lmost everyone was moving south' in a 'silent landscape. Snow and stopped cars with terrible things in them. Stepping over corpses' (Mandel, 2014: 193) – a description that echoes the snowy wasteland of *The Road*, 'barren, silent, godless', strewn with cars in which people were burnt alive

(McCarthy, [2006] 2007: 4, 273). Yet, significantly, '[T]he road seemed dangerous. Jeevan avoided it, stayed mostly in the woods. The road was all travellers walking with shell-shocked expressions, children wearing blankets over their coats, people getting killed for the contents of their backpacks, hungry dogs' (Mandel, 2014: 193–4). This passage is a clear intertextual reference to McCarthy's *The Road*, whose world is complete with travellers with shell-shocked expressions, children walking covered in blankets, people being killed for their backpacks' contents, and a hungry dog. However, *Station Eleven's* post-apocalyptic scenario is very different from McCarthy's and, signifying the shift away from *The Road*, not only does Jeevan keep out of the road, but Kirsten cannot, and does not want to, remember anything about the traumatic year she spent on the road immediately following the catastrophe (Mandel, 2014: 195, 295).

Twenty years after the pandemic, when *Station Eleven's* post-apocalyptic narrative strand is mostly set, society has stabilised into an 'archipelago of small towns', and although 'almost everything, almost everyone [is lost,] there is still such beauty' (Mandel, 2014: 48, 57). The word 'beauty' recurs in the descriptions of the post-flu world: 'the beauty of this world where almost everyone was gone', 'there was beauty in the decrepitude ... this dazzling world', 'It was very difficult, but there were moments of beauty' (Mandel, 2014: 148, 297, 302). Even the Georgia Flu, Jeevan notes, has a 'disarmingly pretty' name (Mandel, 2014: 17). *Station Eleven's* post-apocalyptic beauty is a far cry from *The Road's* 'ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence' (McCarthy, [2006] 2007: 274), an irrecoverable ecosystem that indicates the lack of a utopian renewal after the end – indeed, the lack of post-apocalyptic futurity tout court – and the collapsing of the sense-making order the traditional apocalyptic paradigm projects onto history through teleology. Yet, just like *The Road*, *Station Eleven* articulates a critical temporality that subverts the utopian teleology of apocalyptic logic.

What the readers find in Mandel's novel is not the destruction of the corrupt old world and subsequent ushering in of a utopian new world but, rather, a lament about the lost 'wonders of technology' and 'the splendours of the former world' (Mandel, 2014: 288, 231) which undermines apocalyptic sense-making. Beauty

features far more prominently in descriptions and memories of the pre-apocalypse. 'Why in his life of frequent travel, had he never recognized the beauty of flight? The improbability of it', muses Clark, who is echoed by Kirsten reminiscing about the urban landscape seen from a plane at night: 'clusters and pinpoints of light in the darkness, scattered constellations linked by roads or alone. The beauty of it' (Mandel, 2014: 247, 135). The same interplay of artificial lights and darkness can be found in the description of a shipping fleet permanently anchored off the coast of Malaysia due to the 2008 economic crisis. Miranda, Arthur's ex-wife, 'was unprepared for [the fleet's] beauty. The ships were lit up to prevent collisions in the dark, and when she looked out at them she felt stranded, the blaze of light on the horizon both filled with mystery and impossibly distant, a fairy-tale kingdom' (Mandel, 2014: 28). The 'dazzling power' of electricity – 'floodlights', 'porch lights', 'candy-coloured halogens', 'screens shining', the 'points of glimmering light' that are 'towns glimpsed from the sky through airplane windows' – populates Mandel's 'incomplete list' of what is lost in the catastrophe (Mandel, 2014: 31–2). Even the moments of 'transcendent beauty and joy' created by the Travelling Symphony's performances consist in conjuring, through Shakespeare, 'what was best about the [pre-apocalyptic] world' (Mandel, 2014: 47, 38). For 'the thing with the new world ... is it's just horrifically short on elegance' (Mandel, 2014: 151). Aptly described as an 'elegy for the hyper-globalised present' by Andrew M. Butler of the Arthur C. Clarke Award committee (ACCA, 2015: n.pag.), *Station Eleven* celebrates the beauty of the pre-apocalyptic world and mourns its loss. Herein lies its critical distance from the utopian teleology of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm.

The novel's elegiac tone is encapsulated by the Museum of Civilization, where 'civilization' refers to the bygone hyper-globalised world. The Museum, set up by Clark in the Severn City Airport, hosts everyday objects of the pre-apocalyptic society, such as a laptop, an iPhone, a credit card and a snow globe. These are elevated by the catastrophe to the status of artworks, 'beautiful objects' which move Clark because of the 'human enterprise each object had required' (Mandel, 2014: 255). The Museum soon becomes a sanctuary where people go to pray, for *Station Eleven's* post-apocalyptic characters 'clin[g] to the hope that the world they remembered



could be restored' (Mandel, 2014: 213), just like the people of the Undersea in the comic 'Station Eleven', penned by Miranda, the title of which signals its status as a *mise-en-abyme* text.<sup>9</sup> Thus, children at school are taught about 'the way things were', although these are just 'abstractions' and essentially 'science fiction to them' (Mandel, 2014: 269, 262, 270).

This refusal to paint the old world as worthy of a destruction that paves the way for a utopian renewal articulates the novel's critical temporality but is not devoid of issues, as *Station Eleven* ends up unquestioningly celebrating the current system. Notice the singular 'civilization' of the Museum's name: it encapsulates the neoliberal dream of a unified globalised world in which all difference is erased under the global free market. Hardly by chance, schooling in the post-apocalypse insists on transports and communications that create a hyper-connected world in which borders are meaningless:

Satellites beamed information down to Earth. Goods travelled in ships and airplanes across the world. There was no place on Earth that was too far away to get to. [Children] were told about the Internet, how it was everywhere and connected everything, how it was us. They were shown maps and globes, the lines of the borders that the Internet had transcended' (Mandel, 2014: 262).

This utopian narrative about the pre-apocalyptic past obscures the material labour that props up the hyper-connected globalised world and the inequalities between the global North and South that lie beneath its seemingly seamless unity. Notice, in this sense, Clark's musings on the snow globe housed in the Museum. Albeit more attentive to the materiality of labour, his tracing of the production process of this object conceals, and indeed, aestheticises, workers' exploitation and alienation, as well as the inequalities of the global free market:

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<sup>9</sup> The world of the comic has suffered an apocalypse of its own: the space station's artificial sky was damaged during a war with the aliens that have taken control of the Earth so that Station Eleven has been in a state of perpetual twilight for fifteen years (Mandel, 2014: 83) – a state which parallels the lack of electricity in *Station Eleven's* post-apocalyptic world. For a more in-depth analysis of the comic as a *mise-en-abyme* text, see Matthew Leggatt's article in this special issue (2018).

Consider the mind that invented those miniature storms of snow, the factory worker who turned sheets of plastic into white flakes of snow, the hand that drew the plan for the miniature Severn City with its church steeple and city hall, the assembly-line worker who watched the globe glide past on a conveyor belt somewhere in China. Consider the white gloves on the hands of the woman who inserted the snow globes into boxes, to be packed into larger boxes, crates, shipping containers. Consider the card games played belowdecks in the evenings on the ship carrying the containers across the ocean, a hand stubbing out a cigarette in an overflowing ashtray, a haze of blue smoke in dim light, the cadences of a half dozen languages united by common profanities, the sailors' dreams of land and women, these men for whom the ocean was a grey-line horizon to be traversed in ships the size of overturned skyscrapers (Mandel, 2014: 255).

As Mark West points out in another article in this special issue, Clark's reflection 'addresses but rather miscasts the globalized trade networks' in that it 'fetishizes the "beautiful objects" at the expense of the workers who make them, workers who are dehumanized into assemblies of working parts (note the emphasis on their hands)' (2018: 19, 20). Indeed, the passage's beautiful writing and imagery sublimates and glosses over a production process that relies on the exploitation of cheap labour from the global South, something Mandel merely hints at through the mention of workers 'somewhere in China' and 'the cadences of a half dozen languages'.

The spectre of the 2008 economic crisis and ensuing recession does haunt the novel, in which '12 percent of the world's shipping fleet lay at anchor off the coast of Malaysia, container ships laid dormant by an economic collapse' (Mandel, 2014: 28). The acknowledgment section explains Mandel took this statistic from Simon Parry's 2009 *Daily Mail* article 'Revealed: The Ghost Fleet of the Recession Anchored Just East of Singapore'. Thus, 'one might suggest that Mandel's book describes an apocalypse that already happened in 2008–2009: it is a novel not about a post-apocalyptic future but a post-apocalyptic present', for 'the ships embody the breakdown of capitalism's fundamental premise of eternal growth' (Hoberek, 2015: n.pag.). Yet beyond this cursory reference to the economic crisis, the novel remains curiously

silent on the issues of the neoliberal order, including anthropogenic climate change, which represents the flip side of, and a significant threat to, 'capitalism's fundamental premise'. As West writes, *Station Eleven* 'excuses a mindset in which problematic, even apocalyptic, systemic structures are minimized, rather than critiqued' (2018: 20). Mandel's list (2014: 31–2) of what is lost in the disaster is 'incomplete' first and foremost because, in its elegiac harkening back, *Station Eleven* ignores present systemic problems, offering merely a few jabs at celebrity culture through Arthur's storyline, the dependence on technology – see the 'iPhone zombies' – the joylessness of corporate work and the meaninglessness of corporate jargon (Mandel, 2014: 160, 162–4, 276–8). While *Station Eleven* does not fall into the traps of the utopian teleology of traditional apocalyptic logic, which risks, in its determinism, legitimising oppressive power dynamics, the novel is too complicit with the current system and its exploitations.

*Station Eleven's* ending is key to the text's deconstruction of utopian teleology. The concluding chapter seemingly adheres to the apocalyptic pattern of end and rebirth, for the depiction of Arthur's and Miranda's last hours is followed by Clark's musings on 'another world just out of sight' (Mandel, 2014: 333). However, on the one hand, the novel is far from adhering to the radical utopian renewal of traditional apocalyptic discourse. *Station Eleven* replicates what Gomel (2000: 408) identifies as the plague pattern, where there is 'no place for millenarian rebirth. This pattern comprises panic, dissolution of socioeconomic structures, and despair, succeeded by a makeshift return to normality once the disease has run its course'. The concluding discovery of a town with a functioning electrical grid (Mandel, 2014: 311) suggests not the advent of a radical new world and the revelation of a sense-making pattern to history, but, rather, that civilisation might slowly revert to its pre-apocalyptic state – and given the positive and optimistic tone of the conclusion, reinforced by the way in which electricity and lights are repeatedly described as beautiful, this, too, indicates the novel's problematic celebration of the current system.

On the other hand, the key element of the novel's final passage is the sense of possibility (see my emphasis below), rather than the totalising teleological determinism of apocalyptic logic:

*is it possible* that somewhere there are ships setting out? *If* there are again towns with streetlights, *if* there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else *might* this awakening world contain? *Perhaps* vessels are setting out even now, travelling towards or away from him, steered by sailors armed with maps and knowledge of the stars, driven by need or *perhaps* simply by curiosity: whatever became of the countries on the other side? If nothing else, *it's pleasant to consider the possibility*. He likes the thought of ships moving over the water, towards another world just out of sight (Mandel, 2014: 332–33; emphasis mine).

This passage is another intertextual reference to *The Road*. Clark's optimistic musings on the possibility of ships and life in the countries on the other side of the ocean stand in stark contrast to the father's answers to his son: 'Do you think there could be ships out there? I dont [sic] think so. ... What's on the other side? Nothing' (McCarthy, [2006] 2007: 216). Even when the man contemplates the possibility of ships 'out there', these are 'deathships', and the hypothetical father and son on the other side are similarly hopeless, living 'among the bitter ashes of the world ... st[anding] in their rags lost to the same indifferent sun' (McCarthy, [2006] 2007: 219). While *The Road's* passages signify the critique of utopian teleology through a hopeless dystopian scenario in which we find an entropic dissolution, *Station Eleven's* ending subverts utopian teleology through speculations. The novel's final paragraph consists mostly of questions, while the hypothetical ships move towards 'another world *just out of sight*' (Mandel, 2014: 333; emphasis mine), that is, towards a future that, contrary to the normative and prescriptive utopian visions of apocalyptic logic, remains undefined. This critique of teleology is reflected in *Station Eleven's* narrative structure.

### **The Critique of the Narrative Sense of an Ending**

Time, Paul Ricoeur contends, 'becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative' (1984: 3). As I have argued, the critical temporalities of the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel debunk the apocalyptic conception of history at the core of western modernity as a narrative construct. These fictions also

target the nexus between narrativity and apocalyptic logic captured by Kermode through the notion of the sense of an ending. In both traditional fictional plots and apocalyptic history, Kermode writes, the end 'confer[s] organization and form on the temporal structure' ([1966] 2000: 45), transforming the mere succession of events into a meaningful sequence. Addressing this nexus, and through it the power dynamics and determinism embedded in teleology, the narrative structures of the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel articulate critical temporalities that invite us to conceive of narrative, and therefore of history, beyond the sense of an ending. In this section, I compare *Station Eleven's* narrative structure with that of Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*.<sup>10</sup> Both texts complicate the teleological linearity of apocalyptic narratives to make space for unwritten futures which are key to agency.

*Cloud Atlas* consists of six narratives set between the nineteenth century and a distant post-apocalyptic future. The peculiarity of the novel is that all the stories – with the exception of the sixth, the post-apocalyptic one, situated in the middle – are interrupted in order to give way to the following one in a chronological order, and are then resumed in reverse order in the second half of the book. This structure articulates a critical temporality that undermines the apocalyptic sense of an ending and, more specifically, foreshadowing, which, with its view of the present 'as the harbinger of an already determined future', is at the core of the temporality of traditional plots and apocalyptic history alike (Bernstein, 1994: 1–2). Firstly, 'Time's Arrow bec[o]me[s] Time's Boomerang' (Mitchell, 2004: 149), that is, the linear and teleological development of traditional plots and apocalyptic history – the 'arrow' of the novel's first half – is complicated by the 'boomerang' of the second half. Secondly, the interruption of each story defers closure, and even the stories' conclusions contain hints to the following narrative. Thirdly, while in the first half of *Cloud Atlas* the chronological order of the narratives encourages readers to look for clues foreshadowing an ending which will integrate, and make sense of, the various strands, there are gaps in the history traced by the novel and the shifts from one era to the other remain unexplained. The apocalypse is such a gap: we do not know

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<sup>10</sup> For an extensive analysis of *Cloud Atlas's* critique of apocalyptic logic see De Cristofaro, 2018.

what happened, just as in *The Road*, and this in itself challenges the sense-making function of the end in both apocalyptic history and traditional narratives. These gaps keep spaces of possibility open in the novel's structure, indicating Mitchell's intention to debunk apocalyptic determinism and narrative foreshadowing. Rather than reading for the end, Mitchell invites us to read *Cloud Atlas* looking for parallels and connections, from the comet-shaped birthmark that links the protagonists of the various stories to their acts of defiance against the predatory logic that brings humanity to the apocalyptic demise.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the chronological ending of the novel – the post-apocalyptic future – is effaced through the actual ending of *Cloud Atlas* – the nineteenth-century narrative – which suggest that the future is not already written. Just like the parallels between the stories, the conclusion emphasises the individual's agency to shape the future and the openness of actual time, as opposed to the closure of time in traditional plots. Questioning the passivity of apocalyptic determinism, Adam, the protagonist of the nineteenth-century narrative, reminds us that 'history admits no rules; only outcomes' and encourages us to 'believe' in the possibility of a better world than one culminating in an apocalyptic dystopian future (Mitchell, 2004: 528).

*Station Eleven's* structure similarly articulates a critical temporality that complicates the sense of an ending. The novel begins with the apocalyptic end, Arthur's death on 'Night One' (Mandel 2014: 180) of the pandemic. As Jeevan describes it, this night, 'was going to be the divide between a *before* and an *after*, a line drawn through his life' (Mandel, 2014: 20; emphasis in original). This is, of course, how apocalyptic logic works, with the end ushering in a perfect new world which makes sense of everything that happened before. But *Station Eleven's* apocalypse does not bring any sense-making order. Rather, during the first traumatic months spent walking on the road after the catastrophe, Jeevan's 'litany of biographical facts' unravels and is replaced by 'strange fragments' (Mandel, 2014: 194). By the

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<sup>11</sup> *The Stone Gods* operates on a similar premise, with four narrative strands set in three different eras connected by parallels – from characters' names to the environmental issues that bring humanity to the apocalypse planet after planet – rather than by a teleological narrative development.

same token, Kirsten 'collect[s] fragments' of Arthur's life as told in gossip magazines because they are signifiers of her past, of which she has few and disconnected memories (Mandel, 2014: 40). *Station Eleven's* plot itself consists of fragments from before and after the apocalypse, which challenges the teleological linearity of apocalyptic temporality. The narrative continuously moves between the pre- and the post-apocalypse without any regular pattern, and, what is more, even in these two distinct periods, the narrative keeps shifting between different times, from the night Arthur dies and the pandemic begins, to various moments in his life and that of people that are connected to him, from the catastrophe's immediate aftermath, to fifteen and twenty years after it.<sup>12</sup> Just as in *Cloud Atlas*, *Station Eleven's* structure encourages us to read for connections between pre- and post- apocalyptic fragments, rather than for an end that integrates the various moments. After all, this end – the death of Arthur, who ties together the various characters, and the apocalypse, which is the catalyst of the story – has already been given at the beginning of the narrative.

Mandel self-reflexively plays with the determinism of the sense of an ending by deploying apocalyptic foreshadowing as a narrative device that connects the various sections. Similarly to *Player One*, which features sections foreshadowing what happens in the next hour of the story narrated by the post-human Player One (the implication being that, when it comes to history, the apocalyptic perspective from after the end of time is manifestly impossible in human terms), sentences like 'The Georgia Flu would arrive in a year', 'Civilization won't collapse for another fourteen years', 'A year before the Georgia Flu', 'Two weeks till the apocalypse', 'just before the old world ended', 'the Georgia Flu so close now' (Mandel, 2014: 40, 71, 110, 201, 217, 328) punctuate Mandel's narrative. By opening with the apocalyptic end that is foreshadowed by these sentences, *Station Eleven* highlights not only how the temporal order of the sense of an ending can be imposed on the randomness of time solely retrospectively, but also how this order ultimately implies a future that

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<sup>12</sup> A similar alternation between pre- and post-apocalypse, which troubles the teleological linearity of apocalyptic history, can be found in Self's *The Book of Dave* and Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* (2005).

is already written. The sense of an ending and the deterministic foreshadowing it allows should pertain to the closure of time in traditional plots, not to the openness of time as lived, where the future is unwritten.

*Station Eleven* repeatedly emphasises that there is no deterministic pattern to time, contrary to what apocalyptic logic affirms. Miranda curtly rebukes Elizabeth's apocalyptic belief that everything happens 'because it was supposed to happen' by saying 'I'd prefer not to think that I'm following a script' (Mandel, 2014: 106). Stressing the role of contingency and chance in life, reflections of Arthur's include 'how did I get from there to here?' and 'How have I landed in this life? Because it seems like an improbable outcome, when I look back at the sequence of events' (Mandel, 2014: 77, 157). And, looking back to his past towards the end of his life, a retrospection that by definition should allow the sense of an ending to emerge, Clark does not see any meaningful order but only 'a series of photographs and disconnected short films' (Mandel, 2014: 279). A life, and therefore actual, rather than fictional time, is made up of a 'number of loose ends' (Mandel, 2014: 27) that resist the retrospective patterning of the sense of an ending. Thus, while the traditional apocalyptic narrative 'makes the conjunction of meaning and ending its theme, both in its expressed understanding of history and in its own narrative procedures' (Zamora, 1989: 14), *Station Eleven*, as discussed, leaves readers with the sense of possibility, an open and unwritten future that challenges the closure and determinism of the sense of an ending and that, like the gaps in the fictional history of *Cloud Atlas*, allows space for human agency.<sup>13</sup>

This critique of the sense of an ending is particularly important because, while it may be innocuous in narratives, if we construct history according to a teleological narrative model, we subscribe to determinism and a totalising explanation of the flow of time that risks justifying oppressions as part of a necessary pattern tending

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<sup>13</sup> In this sense, it is interesting to note Hillary Chute's reflections on the form of comics in terms of their spatial gaps that subvert linearity: 'through its spatial syntax [of gutters, grids, and panels], 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' (2016: 4). This observation is key to Mandel's novel given the presence of the Station Eleven comic – a presence that, at least for the hardback edition which features the comic as an insert, is physical.



towards betterment. The critical temporalities of the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel not only expose the apocalyptic conception of history as a narrative construct enmeshed within power structures through their critical appropriation of religious apocalyptic tropes and the subversion of utopian teleology, but, through their structures, these fictions challenge what is an essentially apocalyptic model of narrative dominated by the end and invite us to conceive of history beyond the determinism of the sense of an ending. Rather than stressing the end, the emphasis is on the present and its ethical value, as the moment in which individuals take choices that inform the future. Thus, after a paragraph foreshadowing Miranda's divorce from Arthur and ensuing life – a future that in *Station Eleven* is, literally, already written at the start of the novel, when we are informed of Arthur's many ex-wives (Mandel, 2014: 13–4) – Mandel pauses to remind the readers that 'first there's this moment' (Mandel, 2014: 107), a moment in which, in life unlike narratives, we take decisions that shape an unwritten future.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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