

## From Archives to Memory: Rebuilding Cultural Memory Through the Artifacts and Performance of Art in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

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### Abstract

Emily St. John Mandel in her award-winning novel, *Station Eleven*, presents a fictional, post-apocalyptic world after the Georgia Pandemic. She uses a profoundly differently approach that is rarely presented in other post-apocalyptic setting. Mandel, in her nuance, yet captivating style of narration, explores a world that is built up on the preservation and restoration of memory through the artifacts from the lost civilisations and transmission of cultural memory through performance of art. This paper investigates the conventional assumptions about the preservation of artifacts to preserve culture through the lens of Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. This paper further examines the tension between memory stored in traditional institutions and the performance of art through the lens of Mieke Bal's concept of "Memory Acts: Performing Subjectivity". The interaction between by artifacts from the pre-collapsed world and the symbolic meaning orchestrated by the performers of the "Travelling Symphony" create a collective cultural memory in the post-apocalyptic world.

**Keywords:** Memory, artifacts, les lieux de mémoire, post-apocalyptic, performance of art, Travelling Symphony

### Introduction:

Literature has always been considered the medium to express the artistic imagination of a writer. Writers of the contemporary time experiments with their creativity by imagining fictional worlds that vividly captures the beauty and perfection of Utopia and of the dystopian world, a utopian world that has gone awry. The hallucinatory experience of the devastated condition of the Holocaust, the catastrophe of war and the aftermath of a pandemic is also reflected in the writings of the contemporary literature.

As Speculative Fiction has been thriving in the contemporary literary scene, post-apocalyptic fiction also gains its momentum in the last few decades. Heather J Hicks, in the article, "Apocalyptic Fiction, 1950-2015" describes apocalyptic fiction as a genre that is made up of "both depictions of cataclysms that destroy the Earth and texts that portray the aftermath of a

disaster that annihilates a nation, civilization, or all but a few survivors of the human population.”

Emily St. John Mandel in her award-winning novel, *Station Eleven*, presents a fictional, post-apocalyptic world after the Georgia Pandemic. She uses a profoundly differently approach that is rarely presented in other post-apocalyptic settings. She captures a post-apocalyptic world that is rebuild from the ruins of destruction through the performance of art and preservation of artifacts. She also highlights the juxtaposition inherent in memory, the ways in which memory can hold conflicting emotions and perspectives simultaneously.

Mandel emphasis on the beauty of art and indeed its importance. In an online interview, she emphasis on how she wants to present her reader the life of an actor that has devoted its life to art, “I really wanted to write about the life of an actor. I’m interested in the idea of what it means to devote your life to art...” (BroadcastExchange) Modern men and women are fascinated by the advancement of technology and are drifted by it without realising the adverse effects of depending on technology.

Mandel, therefore, in her fourth novel, *Station Eleven*, presents a pan-view of a post-apocalyptic world that is built on the nature of human civilisation and the transmission of cultural memory through performance of art. The novel begins with actor Leander, performing the play, “King Lear” by Shakespeare, “The King stood in a pool of blue light, unmoored. This was act 4 of *King Lear*, a winter night at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto...His name was Arthur Leander” (Mandel 1). While performing, Leander suffered a sudden cardiac arrest and died on the stage, “The snow was falling fast around them, shimmering in blue-white light. Arthur wasn’t breathing” (Mandel 4). Mandel, in her nuance, yet captivating style of narration, explores a world that is build up on the preservation and restoration of memory through the artifacts from the lost civilisation and transmission of cultural memory through performance of art. This novel presents a post-apocalyptic society in which the institution that once preserved and recorded collective memory, such as museums, archives which stored public records, libraries and the digital archives that stored the data of the modern world collapsed in the wake of a pandemic. It aroused a question to its survivors on how civilisation can be continued and preserved the sense of cultural continuity within their community.

### Rebuilding Cultural Memory Through Artifacts

Pierre Nora argues that in the modern time, the memory of lived experience has become obsolete. It is not as vibrant and deep as it used to be in the older times. Older civilizations naturally lived within their cultures, whereas modern societies have lost this innate connection. As a result, people today seek to preserve cultural memory through artificial means like archives, museums, monuments and historical records.

Nora juxtaposed the ideas of *lieux de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire*. He opines that *milieux de mémoire* represent “real environments of memory” (Nora 7). They are the lived experienced of a community that are shared naturally through the embrace of cultural heritage, in the serenity of the custom that is rooted into tradition, and the performance of ancestral rites. Individuals within this collective space do not consciously preserve memory, rather it flows spontaneously into the daily life. Traditions are carried out through practice rather than through examination of monuments and historical records. The past continues to exist in relation to the present in a conventional manner. In contrast, *lieux de mémoire* are the sedimentary where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself” (Nora 7) arising from a rupture

with the past and inhibitors of the modern world tries to preserve memory through artificial repositories.

In *Station Eleven*, Georgia Flu emerges like sudden gust of wind and wipes out about ninety-nine percent of the civilisation, leaving technological advancements as little more than remnants. In the modern world, technologies have become an integral aspect of daily life, are deeply rooted as an essential component in contemporary lifestyles. At times, it is mistakenly regarded as synonymous with culture. However, in the novel, the convenience and the application of these technologies are depicted as mere artifacts and raising questions about what truly matters, “At first the people in the seven city airport counted time as though they were only temporarily stranded...the entire history of being stranded in airports up to that point was also a history of eventually becoming unstranded, of boarding a plane and flying away.” (Mandel 231)

History of technological advancement has significantly been destroyed or forgotten, “...the space shuttles and the electrical grid and the amplified guitars, the computers that could be held in the palm of a hand and the high speed trains between cities, but to have lived among wonders for so long” (Mandel 232). These technologies that have been associated with the history of modern civilisation are Nora’s *milieux de mémoire*, the “real environments of memory”. In the novel, these sites have become obsolete, disrupting cultural continuity and causing cultural amnesia which creates a need to construct artificial repositories like museums to preserve the remnants of technology. Therefore, Clark Thompson curates “The Museum of Civilisation”, preserving artifacts, such as iPhone, boarding passes, laptops and other objects that had been used by people as everyday essentials. “...he took his role as curator seriously and he’d decide years ago that ‘It’s hard to explain’ isn’t good enough, so he always tried to explain in all anyway...” (Mandel 232). These objects, in the conventional sense, may appear like an absurd act but in the novel, the objects are not random and mere entities, they are imbued with significance serving as Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*. These objects were once deliberately associates with the daily life of people, connecting individuals across time and space; data has been stored in the digital archive extending memory beyond the rigid dimension of physical space. Clark believes that these objects contain symbolic representations of contemporary life and he is confident that future generations will be able to unravel the cultural significance embedded within them. Katie Paulus argues that preserving these items is essential, despite claims of their unimportance, “The unnecessary items become as important as the arts when it comes to humanity because caring about, enjoying and collecting arts and various other items is what makes the characters of *Station Eleven* human. Again, the collection of ‘unnecessary’ items is essential for the survivability of culture and humanity.” Clark’s commitment to preserving these objects underscores the profound necessity for human civilization to safeguard its legacy beyond mere historical accounts contained within the archive. His conscious desire to preserve these artifacts becomes meaningful as it is an act of resistance against cultural amnesia.

Kirsten Raymonde performed as a child actor in the play “King Lear” appearing alongside Arthur Leander. When Leander collapsed on stage, Kirsten witnessed the event, which became a significant memory she revisits when reflecting on her life before the pandemic. She notes an inability to recall much of her previous life and actively searches for “tabloids” and additional copies of “Dr. Eleven” comic, a work given to her by Leander. The “tabloids” and the comic book series “Dr Eleven” are initially considered as unnecessary items by others. However, for Kirsten, these objects are a powerful tool to recall her memory of the

past world and maintain their presence in the current times. These objects, though seemingly trivial, play a crucial role in preserving cultural memory and history of the past. In times of crises, these mere artifacts become repositories that holds tangible meaning. They become the memory that has been preserve consciously in “certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (Nora 7). With the disruption of civilisation, people begin to reflect on the concept of memory.

### Rebuilding Cultural Memory through Performance of Art

The “Travelling Symphony”, is a troupe of musicians and actors in *Station Eleven*. The troupe wanders around Great Lakes, performing musical acts and play. In a world devastated by pandemic, the troupe gives hope to the people through music and performance of play. Their motto, “survival is insufficient,” suggests that merely staying alive isn’t enough; in times of devastation, art and music become essential parts of what it means to be human. During the hardest moments, most people find comfort in artistic expression. In *Station Eleven*, the “Travelling Symphony” actively reconstructs cultural memory in ways that the Museum of Civilisation alone cannot achieve. Cultural memory requires not only preserved artifacts but also lived experiences and individuals who can convey the true significance of these archived objects. Clark says he struggles to explain the museum’s artifacts, as they seem irrelevant to young people from the post-apocalyptic society, “It’s hard to explain...” (Mandel 232).

“The Travelling Symphony” can be analysed through the lens of Mike Bal’s concept of “Memory Acts” by Mieke Bal. In the essay, Bal asserts that “performance is unthinkable...without memory,”(8) since every rhythm of performance depends on the internalisation of gestures, roles and textual structures that must be recalled in the present. The symphony delivers musical performances that serve as living memories through embodied practice without reliance on technological infrastructure. Staging Shakespeare does not require technological tools such as electricity, audio tapes, recorders, digital archives or physical repositories for its preservation. Everything relies on shared memory, voices, bodies and collective participation. When the symphony performs “Midnight Summer’s Dream” in St. Deborah Town, the transmission of culture happens between people. Amid the devastation of the world that has been reduced to ruins, hope blooms through the cracks and the barren soil as Kirsten finds beauty in performing the play:

What was lost in the collapse: almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty. Twilight in the altered world, a performance of A Midnight Summer’s Dream in a parking lot in the mysteriously named town of St. Deborah by the Water, Lake Michigan shining a half mile away. Kirsten as Titania, a crown of flowers on her closed-cropped hair, the jagged scar on her cheek-bone half-erased by candlelight. The audience is silent. Sayid, circling her in a tuxedo that Kirsten found in a dead man’s closet near the town of East Jordan... (Mandel 57)

The troupe demonstrated what Bal asserts, performance is always a “skilled and thoughtful production” (8). After the performance of “Midnight Summer’s Dream”, the Symphony stood tall, basking in a standing ovation from the audience. The audience has commended them for making the performance feel vibrant and alive. One person from the crowd expressed gratitude: “We are blessed most of all in being alive today” (Mandel 59). In a post-apocalyptic world where conventional archival institutions have disintegrated, the symphony

serves as an active repository that carefully preserves and interprets cultural memory thoughtfully and skilfully.

Bal further asserts that “memory as stage director” orchestrates how meaning is signified in the present since viewers bring their own cultural associations and perceptions. In the context of the “Travelling Symphony”, both the performers and the spectators interpret the meaning of Shakesporean plays through layers of memory that are embedded unevenly with variables. A fraction from the crowd might associate the meaning through the fragments of the “old world” while others might create meaning through the performance of the Symphony, relying on their direct engagement with the performers’ conceptual expressions. This signifies that meaning does not emerge from the text alone but from the interaction between performance and memory which aligns with Bal’s assertion that the viewers are not the passive participants in meaning-making. In this context, the audience becomes a co-performer whose interpretation is orchestrated by the intersection of present experience and present knowledge that are not stable.

Moreover, Bal draws a line between performance and performativity. According to Bal, these differences are instrumental in interpreting and demonstrating how the meanings of each performance by the Symphony are conveyed distinctly to various audiences. As Bal asserts that performance is the memory aroused through repetition of scripts, acts and gestures; performers memorised these components and induced it through performance. While performativity is what evokes in the present moment, a continuous flow of unrepeatable occurrence of acts that unfolded itself before the audience. The “Travelling Symphony” sit at the intersection of this tension. The actors indeed memorised the acts and scripts and their performance is a result of repeated conventional components but each performance evokes a difference that is unique to each other. A staging of Shakespeare’s “King Lear” in a specific place will always be different from the next spot not simply because the spectators are different but because, as Bal annotates, the present moment itself reinterprets whatever is being repeated. So rather than juxtaposing each other, “performance” and “performativity” enhances each other at the intersection of memory.

Bal’s assertion on cultural memory, further explains why the symphony is significant in the meaning making between the past and the present. As she explains that cultural memory sits at the line of intersection between shared cultural memories of a community and the ruptured memory of each individuals that are interpreted subjectively from their own experiences. This is how the members of the Symphony acts while building cultural memory through their performance of Shakesporean plays. They trace memory through the collective memory that they have witnessed before the collapsed world and also the ruptured memory that is subjective to each individual. There is a tension in the interpretation of meaning between Dieter and Kirsten. They do not treat Shakespeare as a classic piece that cannot be touched but a segment of fragments of the lived memory that is channelised through performance. Therefore, the “Travelling Symphony” motto, “Survival is Insufficient” can be understood in relation to Bal’s concept that memory must be actively performed in order to remain relevant and meaningful among the community. The Symphony does not simply preserve “remnants” of the pre-collapsed world, gauged in the walls of archives like in “The Museum of Civilisation”, they make the cultural alive through performance, beyond the traditional way of archiving objects.

## Conclusion

To conclude, *Station Eleven* posed a question on what survives when the world collapsed. How culture survives when the traditional institutions that archive memory of a society suddenly collapsed. Mandel explores a new style to the post-apocalyptic genre by examining the tension between memory stored in traditional institutions and living performance orchestrated through performance of art. The novel specifically navigates how the communities not only build a collective memory but also a sense of identity through culture. This paper through the lens of Pierre Nora and Mieke Bal analysed this tension and brings to the conclusion that the novel is not asserting that traditional custodians of records, archives and historical objects are useless but the meaning embedded into these cultural artifacts needs to be orchestrated through repetition and practice within the community. Art remains not because it is perfectly archived but communities continue to recreate it together.

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