

# The Positive Impact of Pandemics in Two Selected Speculative Narratives

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**Abstract**—This article examines Stephen Soderbergh’s film *Contagion* (2011) and Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) as a critique of the uncivilized culture of our modern society, which depends on fragile connections and lack of solidarity. Although global pandemics annihilate the world and shatter families, this study demonstrates how they are depicted as a positive tool of change, serving as a force that exposes then undermines the deep-rooted cultural flaws in society and finally offers lessons that help in rebuilding a new civilized world based on human values. Such representation of pandemics in these selected narratives is allegorical, functioning as a mirror that reflects our COVID-19 reality, teaching moral lessons, and contributing to our understanding of the crisis and how we think and act in response.

**Index Terms**—global pandemic, speculative narratives, fragile connections, flaws, values of humanity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pandemics have attracted worldwide interest and have been largely studied by scientists, historians, and anthropologists. In literature and cinematography, some writers and film producers revisit the historical events of worldwide pandemics and compose them in fictional narratives. However, literature does not only remember the past but also speculates the future to add value to the present. Since the global occurrence of COVID-19, people’s interest in speculative films and novels about pandemics has increased because such works could make sense of the current pandemic real-life experience. At the same time, this reflects people’s desire for a deeper understanding of the crisis and a sense of comfort in the face of uncertainty. This article examines Stephen Soderbergh’s film *Contagion* (2011) and Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) as a critique of the uncivilized culture of our modern society, built on fragile connections and lack of solidarity. It shows the role of pandemics in revealing and questioning these social and cultural flaws, raising people’s awareness of the necessity of cooperation to rebuild a new post-pandemic world that cultivates humanitarian and selfless values.

Before examining pandemics in the selected narratives, it would be convenient to overview the genre of speculative fiction, which works as an umbrella of all fantasy narratives that are interchangeable with science fiction. Parrinder (1980) describes science fiction as a thinking machine that “has been widely regarded as a “literature of ideas”, especially political and scientific ones. Often these ideas are in advance of their time, and sometimes the speculative form of science fiction has enabled them to avoid the censorship they would otherwise attract” (p. 43). Further, Margaret Atwood (2011) in her book *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* states that the terms of “science fiction” and “speculative fiction” are fluid, yet science fiction is related to “the things that could not possibly happen” whereas speculative fiction concerns about the “things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (p. 14). That is why she classifies her books *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* under speculative fiction. In this regard, the ‘Outbreak Narrative’ is a sub-genre of speculative science fiction that suggests for readers a tale that firstly carries knowledge about the causes and effects of an overwhelming virus, and secondly observes human life from a distanced and alienated perspective, one that realistic fiction, with its everyday relations of existing events, does not allow.

Concerning its types over history, some speculative outbreak narratives are non-science fictional and set shortly in the real world. Such narratives have created a direction for both the past and future in treating the psychological and social consequences. They attract people because they draw inspiration from unusual events, offer an imaginative space to reality, and add a sense of meaning to human existence. Besides, they provide us with the questions people would have when confronted with real emerging infectious diseases. Both Frank G. Slaughter’s *Epidemic!* (1961) and Michael Crichton’s *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) are examples of such pandemic narratives that are mundane in speculation. However, the speed of spreading pandemics and the resulted coming of a predicted apocalypse have been discussed in the speculative apocalyptic narratives, which highlight issues of serious concern related to people’s obsession with the end of the world and their ongoing fear of the possibility that a tragic furious pandemic will strike the world and alter human life. The early origins of the apocalyptic speculative pandemic fiction begin with Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man* (1826), which speculates a global pandemic annihilating the European civilization in the late 21<sup>st</sup> century. Another

form of the speculative pandemic narrative is post-apocalyptic in scale since they are concerned about the life aftermath collapse and the best examples of such fiction are Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) and George Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949) which are interested in the post-pandemic fall of civilization and human survival.

Critically speaking, in *It Came From Outer Space: the Virus, Cultural Anxiety, and Speculative Fiction*, Thomas (2002) traces outbreak narratives of the 1990s and builds her study of viral invasions on poststructuralist standards by seeing the virus as "a touchstone for postmodern preoccupations with self and other" (p. 6). She argues that the virus, in most speculative fiction of the 1990s, acquires properties that are not possible according to the standards of realistic naturalistic fiction. Speculative fiction engages with the intricacy of the virus itself and how the infection has the potential to revitalize people rather than weaken them, leading to a kind of 'post-humanity'. She also argues how the virus is "a mirror of our own postmodern moment. Both as a metaphor and as a liminal agent, it can lead us to deconstruct the central binary of self and other in ways that other "speculative" postmodern metaphors ... cannot" (p. 19). Still, although such transformation to the posthuman world might have a utopian purpose, it creates a sense of fear that makes it difficult for people to accept their new status. In parallel, such debate applies to all contemporary post-pandemic narratives that give purpose to the past pandemics by offering a conclusion to the story and simultaneously serving as a starting point for the new world.

The emergence of different new outbreaks in the past two decades, like the SARS pandemic of 2002–2003, the swine flu of 2009, and the Zika epidemic of 2015, has inspired more contemporary speculative pandemic fiction in literature and film. In *Coughing and sneezing to the end of the world*, Schut (2013) argues how "the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought the fear of disease back into prominence and moved it from baseless paranoia to practical fear as technology and the global economy began to accelerate and enable the natural mutation and spread of new pandemics" (p. 12). In contemporary novels like Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* (2012), Amber Kizer's *A Matter of Days* (2013), Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), and Meg Elison's *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* (2016), the post-apocalyptic, post-pandemic vision relies on imaginative breakthroughs to create a new world different in a large scale from our own but anticipate the same cultural and social concerns of reality.

Similarly, in the cinematic realm, film directors have given significant attention to pandemics and their challenges to the world. They speculate about the existence of invisible creatures (germs or viruses) that invade the body's immunity (physically and psychologically) and cause the collapse of society. Curtis and Han (2020) in their article "Social Responses to Epidemics Depicted by Cinema," classify films that are related to pandemics into three broad categories connected to science fiction or horror: "Apocalyptic destruction or near-destruction of the whole of humanity, rising concerns over bioterrorism, and the rise of an undead or form of zombie existence" (p. 389). For example, *28 Days Later* (2002) is a post-apocalyptic horror film in which humanity has been destroyed, and only four people survive. *Blindness* (2008) is an apocalyptic dystopian film, which "considers the human capacity for prejudice, indifference, selfishness, and an easy resort to aggression and violence" (p. 392). And *Contagion* (2011) is a speculative narrative of a highly contagious mysterious virus that kills people within two days. The film examines social movements from below and criticizes current trends toward materialism and self-interest.

The following argument in the article examines Stephen Soderbergh's film *Contagion* (2011) in the first section and Emily St. John Mandel's post-apocalyptic novel *Station Eleven* (2014) in the second. Structurally, the first phase of each section discusses the role of the pandemic in exposing the uncivilized cultural behaviors represented in the deep-rooted social stereotypical misconceptions, the dissemination of misinformation, and the socioeconomic inequities of the contemporary world in *Contagion* and the pursuit for celebrity and the blind dependence on technology in *Station Eleven*, while the second phase examines the post-collapse society and the positive impact of pandemics in offering solutions for building a new civilized society appreciating humanity over anything else.

## II. STEPHEN SODERBERGH'S *CONTAGION* (2011)

*Contagion* is a speculative pandemic film released in 2011. It is a horror disaster film that deals with the social destruction caused by a worldwide spread of a fatal mysterious virus. The film is admired for its inspiration from real-life events and for its accuracy in portraying the transmission of the virus from one person to another. It spreads through coughing, sneezing, or touching contaminated objects, killing people who are not necessarily suffering from health issues. As a result, it appears frightening and dangerous, to the extent that 26 million people died in the first month. The film is "a faux pandemic history which situates itself in an imagined future, drawing on the powers of vivid prognostication which come with narrativity and cinematic imaginary" (Davis, 2014, p. 6). It is also seen as public health propaganda that is designed "to make people fear and better prepare for pandemics [and] allows us to rethink the film as a cultural placeholder marking a shift from post-9/11 security politics to the pandemic moment" (Moore, 2020, p. 1). Yet, the disasters caused by this fictional pandemic are viewed differently in academic articles.

Most critics investigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the individual's body, society, and economy. For example, Sundaram (2012) studies the representation of the biological disaster caused by pandemics in contemporary film narratives, including Soderbergh's *Contagion*. She studies the viral invasion of the individual's body, which is "seen as a permeable system, one that is unable to withstand viral invasion and also unable to contain it" (p. 147). The film visualizes the body's vulnerability to a virus and emphasizes the risks associated with man's ability to manufacture viral material in a laboratory setting. In the end, such biological disasters, as Sundaram argues, will inevitably lead to a

social, cultural, and economic breakdown. Similarly, Cebalo (2019) views the infected social body as a metaphor for illness from a biopolitical perspective. He argues that “the intensifying social strife caused by the pandemic is analogous to its biological spread in the body. Disruption at one sector of the social organism necessitates crises in others, resulting in looting and violence” (Cembalo). Although the virus is not able to kill the head of the body, it has affected the whole organism, like when the pandemic fails in reaching the head of the social state but has left it paralyzed for generations.

From an economic perspective, Beaumont (2014) responds to the capitalist crisis caused by the pandemic and applies some of Fredric Jameson’s Marxist theories to the film. Since Jameson and Slavoj Žižek provocatively claim that the end of the world is easier to imagine than the end of capitalism, Beaumont interprets the virus in the film as an “unstoppable natural cataclysm that smashes a metropolitan city and its population to pieces... as a coded attempt to contemplate the implosion of capitalism” (p. 83). The scenes of rubbish everywhere, shoplifters destroying stores, corpses stacking up on the streets, and soldiers unsuccessfully enforcing curfews reflect the chaos and social disorder that resemble the aftermaths of an economic catastrophe. Furthermore, Abdul Rub (2020) shows how the movie “reasserts the plight of human nature where a microscopic organism plays its game” (p. 1584). The article describes the public health crisis caused by the pandemic and emphasizes more on the virus as a societal nightmare that leads society to fall apart with panic. He describes how “a sub microscopic virus can be more devastating than an entire army ... it is something that simply kills anyone without any consideration” (p. 1587). From the same angle, Arifa (2021) uses a descriptive qualitative research method to examine the impact of pandemics on social issues in the film and the society to find out that misleading information and rumors play a major role in spreading fear and panic added to the pandemic itself.

As perceived from the literature review above, most critics describe the negative impact of the pandemic on the individual, social, and economic body. This article displays how the virus depicted in the film is a source of a global pandemic but is worsened further along with cultural and social flaws. The fictional pandemic in the film is portrayed as a tool of positive change, working as a force that comes to expose then undermine the deep-rooted cultural shortcomings in society to rebuild a new civilized one based on human values. Beginning from the title, ‘contagion’ as a term is a foundational concept, which has a long history of cultural and social connotations explaining how beliefs circulate in social interactions. Wald (2008) in her book, *Contagious*, explains how the term refers “to the circulation of ideas and attitudes. It frequently connoted danger or corruption. Revolutionary ideas were contagious, as were heretical beliefs and practices. Folly and immorality were more often labeled contagious than were wisdom or virtue” (p. 12). For Wald, the circulation of both disease and ideas displays the danger and strength of bodies in contact, but it also indicates the fragility of social relationships. In the film, Soderbergh focuses on the circulation of contagious contaminated ideas that are just as contagious as the deadly virus. The pandemic of cultural ideologies can easily affect individuals connected by different means of communication, and the virus comes to question their social interactions.

Soderbergh’s film critiques the social stereotypical misconceptions, the dissemination of misinformation, and the socioeconomic inequities that are already deep-rooted in the pre-pandemic world. From the beginning, the film illustrates a decline of morality represented in the American marketing administrative, Beth Emhoff, the ill-advisedly patient zero or the carrier figure who contracts the virus on a business trip to China and whose extramarital affair spreads the virus further. It seems that what happens to her is a direct consequence of immorality and wrongdoing. However, from a larger sense, the immoral scenario is to see epidemics as a result of foreign invasions only because the virus takes the direction from the east to the west. The final episode of the film depicts how the virus originates in China. It spreads when Emhoff shakes hands with a careless chef who has just finished cleaning a pig bitten by an infected bat. According to Wald’s argument, epidemics are usually attached to immoral aspects like stigmatization, scapegoating, and blame, and in outbreak narratives, “it is not unusual for a virus to be described as a foreigner or even an immigrant” (Wald, 2008, p. 42). During crises, attempts of identifying strangers as enemies and scapegoats are familiar because it is easier to assign blame than to accept disasters. Therefore, China in the film, as a host country of disease, is stigmatized and identified as an enemy.

The pandemic does not create such tension between America and China, the force and the counterforce, but it comes to expose the pre-existing supremacy of the Anglo-American civilization over the other ethnicities and cultures. This might be reflected in a crucial scene in the film when the Chinese official, Sun Feng, kidnaps the WHO epidemiologist, Dr. Leonora Orantes, who is sent to Hong Kong to search for the origins of the pathogen. He shows her his village and says: “While they cure each other, we are here at the end of the line” (00:51:50). He believes that America and France will find the vaccine and obtain it for themselves, leaving the other inferior world to the last, so by kidnapping her, they can press these industrial countries to distribute the vaccine to their country. Such an attitude indicates how the rest of the world, “the other,” views America and Europe as industrialized nations and birthplaces of civilization. However, by sending the Chinese village a fake vaccine, America proves to be uncivilized and inhuman. Back to Wald’s theories: “communicable diseases are a part of life; they will continue to emerge and circulate, and people will suffer and die. Yet suffering and death should not be accepted as inevitable in one place and unthinkable in another” (p. 270). America’s immoral attitude also reflects how unwise it is because the impoverished conditions in the world will fuel the spread of disease which will easily reach America via different means of transportation.

In addition to the socioeconomic inequities, the American failure to manage the crisis globally will result in another failure on the local level. The United States government deals dishonestly with its citizens, beginning with those who sacrifice their lives to fulfill their duties. For example, Dr. Erin Mears, who works with the Department of National Security, is sent to Minnesota to coordinate the containment of the virus. After she contracts the virus, a plane is supposed to bring her back but is redirected to pick up prominent politicians instead. Moreover, the government fails in vaccinating citizens fairly. Most doses are sent for the elite and officials, and the other amounts are distributed according to people's birthdates which suggests how ordinary people are ultimately labeled as second-class citizens. Such discrimination already exists but it becomes more obvious when the pandemic puts the country in crisis. In brief, when the above authorities hold corrupted ideologies, fear spreads everywhere. The restrictions that governments impose upon people, like limiting mobility and restricting food distribution, lead people to stand in the streets and struggle for survival. The government encourages self-centered individualism instead of motivating values of altruism and cooperation that enhance social bonds. Some of the film's scenes depict the social collapse in images of people showing all modes of violence by robbing houses, burning pharmacies down, and killing each other for food or drugs. The American response to the catastrophe determines a lack of democratic principles, leaving the chance for people to be Darwinist in thinking with no deterrent to eliminate their greed and violence.

Besides the government's poor crisis management and lack of authenticity, Soderbergh demonstrates how the dissemination of misinformation causes greater public panic than the pandemic itself. During the crisis, unscrupulous people with extreme Darwinist beliefs seek to manipulate circumstances to further their own goals. For instance, Alan Krumwiede has circulated a rumor via the internet pretending that he contracted the virus and cured himself with the remedy of "forsythia". He also claims that American laboratories have manipulated the virus for their benefit. He uses online media to distribute lies and let millions of people follow him. "Forsythia is a lie, it is a lie, and you made four and a half millions of dollars for telling it" (1:30:40) as told by a police officer. Although media and journalism are supposed to protect people by offering them true information, they aggravate societal unrest and get people to their extreme behaviors. The lack of information and the appearance of untrusted social media trigger social disorder and mass hysteria and allow conspiracy theorists to propagate disinformation among the general public.

So far, the film depicts the contagious pandemic as a tool for revealing the negative cultural structures of the American society until it reaches a moment when it becomes crucial to make sense of chaos by constructing new meanings in a new post-pandemic world. "While catastrophic infections can result in the annihilation of an existing community, the devastation will, in turn, precipitate new communal affiliations" (Wald, 2008, p. 49). The bright side of the pandemic is revealed when humanitarian and selfless values ultimately emerge because survival requires a new society based on morality and sacrifice in such a post-disaster context. In short, people need to revise their relationships, work together, stick to morality, and think of matters selflessly to regulate the state of disintegration. Such moral behaviors support Wald's argument, which depicts pandemics as fundamentally transformative. In treating the matter locally, Soderbergh draws attention to the necessity of obliterating all kinds of discrimination against unprivileged people by showing them solidarity and empathy. Such moral principles are embodied in Dr. Ellis Cheever, who decides to give his dose of vaccine to the janitor's son, although vaccination is limited to those privileged people. Such an attitude indicates the necessity of surrounding the ones on the margins with the socioeconomic safety of any collapse.

Moreover, regarding the xenophobic and underestimated view of the Chinese people as strangers and carriers of disease, Soderbergh suggests the necessity of accepting them and rescuing them for a global revival. As Wald points out: "in the outbreak narrative the stranger/carrier materializes, and amplifies, the disequilibrium that strangers characteristically represent. The process through which the stranger is incorporated into the community converts the threatening disequilibrium into a principle of renewal" (Wald p. 57). Such belief is embraced in the film by the character Leonora Orantes, who by the end refuses the American schemes of giving placebos to the Chinese, so she voluntarily returns to help them, sacrificing her freedom in exchange for a genuine vaccine. As noticed, the virus, which is depicted as a demolishing force, allows people to form a sense of solidarity and collaboration, and it inspires in most of them a sense of self-sacrifice. Dr. Ally Hextall is the best example of the scientists and microbiologists who act selflessly to save humanity by racing to find a cure. She tracks down the source of the virus to develop a potion, and when she succeeds, she disobeys the rules and risks her life by self-testing the vaccination. The vaccine in the film signifies immunity, which is required to create societal balance and a sense of utopian reassurance. This optimism that the film ends with in the form of a successful vaccine indicates the importance of morality and the communion work to get the final redemption.

### III. EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL'S *STATION ELEVEN* (2014)

By moving to Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, we move to a world full of "What if?" possibilities, a world where a furious virus can annihilate the globe leaving scientists no chance to develop vaccines or even to understand what is happening. "It's a fast incubation period. If you're exposed, you're sick in three or four hours and dead in a day or two" (Mandel, 2014, p. 235). The novel is a contemporary speculative post-apocalyptic novel that vividly moves in time back and forth between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic years to reflect people's different responses toward the civilized old world and the primitive new one. It begins with the present moment when a famous actor, Arthur Leander, dies on stage while performing *King Lear* just before a deadly virus wipes out humanity. Then it moves

forwards to the future after twenty years of the collapse of civilization to return to the past to learn more about the old world. It seems that the virus comes to offer a conclusion to the modern world with its industry and technology to let people search for beauty in the new world.

In terms of the novel's literary criticism and literature review, critics vary in inspecting the worlds before and after the collapse. Through remembering, one can see how the characters in the post-apocalyptic era are still connected to past events. However, the novel also emphasizes the future through the act of imagining. This tension between remembering and imagining is examined in Leggatt's article, "Another World Just out of Sight" (2018), in which he argues that remembering is obvious through Clark's creation of the museum of civilization and the Travelling Symphony's performance of Shakespeare on stage after twenty years of the collapse. While imagining is embodied in Miranda's comic book, *Dr. Eleven*, which she published before the collapse but is still read by Kirstin and Tylor after twenty years of it. Leggatt bases his argument for the novel's optimistic tone on the survival of Miranda's comics which represents a break from the past's dominance. Moreover, the importance of imagination in Mandel's novel is also discussed in Feldner's article "'Survival is insufficient': The Postapocalyptic Imagination of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*" (2018), in which he refers to Briohny Doyle's argument on the post-apocalyptic imagination to explore the elements that make the novel typical to the genre. Feldner concludes that the "possibility and necessity of cultural expression in a post-apocalyptic setting, demonstrating the importance and value of art and memory even in strained circumstances" (p. 166). Therefore, he sees that survival without culture and memory is insufficient.

On the other hand, away from the thematic analysis of the novel, Cristofaro (2018), in "Critical Temporalities: *Station Eleven* and the Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel" studies the novel as part of the contemporary dystopian literature contrary to what traditional apocalyptic logic claims by considering 'time' as the fundamental of its imagination. She argues that the novel is a dystopian beginning from the moment the catastrophe happens, exactly when television newscasters call the pandemic 'apocalypse' in the sense of dystopian tragedy. Moreover, by comparing *Station Eleven* to McCarthy's dystopian novel, *The Road*, Cristofaro refers to the chapters of the immediate aftermath of the collapse through the eyes of Jeevan, who witnesses people stepping over corpses and killing to survive. Later, after twenty years, the dystopia is embodied by Tylor, who calls himself the prophet, and his followers who commit all kinds of killing, enslaving, and violating as if they do nothing wrong only "because they see themselves as the only rightful interpreters and agents of the apocalyptic goal of history, the utopian renewal of the new world" (p. 9). Further, from the novel's non-linear narrative sense of an ending, Cristofaro finds out that "rather than stressing the end, the emphasis is on the present and its ethical value" (p. 23), and this indicates how the novel celebrates the beauty of the old world and mourns its loss.

Moreover, Punkari (2019), in her Master thesis, *We Long Only to Go Home*, analyzes the novel from a nostalgic perspective by looking at the pre-apocalyptic world as a lost utopia. *Station Eleven* scrutinizes the American society as an entity for the nostalgic yearning, motivates readers to respond nostalgically to its representation, and works brilliantly in resolving social issues. Punkari finds out that "the lost pre-apocalyptic world is reminisced through the nostalgic lens of post-apocalyptic retrospect... This temporal feature of post-apocalyptic fiction allows for the reader to examine their contemporary world as a lost utopia, which creates an immediate nostalgic window into their present moment." (p. 73). So, for Punkari, the lost utopia is related to the present modern life, and such an aspect of longing has functional purposes and idealizing impact that encourages readers to appreciate their contemporary world.

The present article begins its argument with the real dystopia in *Station Eleven*. Is it the postapocalyptic world as Cristofaro argues, or the old world, "the lost utopia" as Punkari terms it? Since this study tends to examine the representation of pandemics in the novel, it is preferred to call the preapocalyptic a pre-pandemic and the postapocalyptic a post-pandemic to show how the virus comes to expose the flaws of the old world by questioning the real meaning of civilization and technology and in what sense they can help in rescuing people from redemption. In the third section, chapter 13 of the novel, the timeline leaps back fourteen years before the pandemic describing Arthur Leander's early struggle in Toronto seeking celebrity and fame. He is originally from Delano Island. "It's the kind of place that practically no one Arthur encounters in New York, Toronto, or Los Angeles can fathom, and he gets a lot of uncomprehending stares when he talks about it" (Mandel, 2014, p. 74). It is a place far away from being civilized like those big cities, and this makes Arthur live "in a permanent state of disorientation like a low-grade fever, the question hanging over everything being How did I get from there to here?" (p. 77). The idea of being from an idyllic, isolated island that nobody from the civilized world recognizes makes Arthur feel ashamed of his past and struggle to adapt to his new world. Through Arthur Leander, the novel critiques modern society's obsession with celebrity and critiques the mundane civilization which misleads people and ruins their lives socially and psychologically. The glittering life and the celebrity culture that Arthur has obtained spoil his social connections and make him unable to get any family stability, as noticed by his three-time marriages and divorces.

Moreover, Arthur's infidelity and neglect cause instability in his relationship with his first wife, Miranda Carroll, although they have grown up on the same island and share the same past. However, Miranda has inner troubles related to her choice of the right partner. Before meeting Arthur, she has been in a relationship with an abusive boyfriend, Pablo, who hates her success although she enters the corporate world to support him financially. He always disdains her job and her art out of jealousy, unlike Arthur, who admires her talent and offers her hope to find freedom. However, deep inside, she is aware of the coming traps everywhere. "She's too soft for this world or perhaps just for this city, she

feels so small here. There are tears in her eyes now. Miranda is a person with very few certainties, but one of them is that only the dishonorable leave when things get difficult” (Mandel, 2014, p. 89). She feels out of place in Arthur’s world. She once expressed that what makes her stand the life in the city is that “the anonymity of city life feels like freedom,” but now by being the wife of a famous Hollywood actor, her privacy and freedom cost her dearly. “She knows she’ll never belong here no matter how hard she tries. These are not her people. She is marooned on a strange planet. The best she can do is pretend to be unflappable when she isn’t” (p. 92). Mandel indicates here that feeling out of place indicates how civilization disconnects people from each other. In such a world, Miranda cannot find herself and cannot find the right person who can understand her, so she always pretends to be unflappable to living among them.

The urban civilized world does not only detach people from each other but also separates humanity from nature. By leaving Delano Island, both Arthur and Miranda disconnect themselves from the serenity of nature. Lewis (1993) in his article “On Human Connectedness with Nature,” reveals how being “cut off from nature’s own healing powers, city-dwellers are subject to a host of specifically urban maladies, both physical and psychological. As a result, they become profoundly alienated from both their fellow human and their fellow nonhuman beings (p. 805). In the final weeks of his life, Arthur grows to regret his misdeeds and loses interest in his fame in the city. When he learns about his father’s death, he phones Miranda expressing his longing for his homeland.

Once we lived on an island in the ocean. Once we took the ferry to go to high school, and at night the sky was brilliant in the absence of all these city lights. Once we paddled canoes to the lighthouse to look at petroglyphs and fished for salmon and walked through deep forests, but all of this was completely unremarkable because everyone else we knew did these things too, and here in these lives we’ve built for ourselves, here in these hard and glittering cities, none of this would seem real if it wasn’t for you. (Mandel, 2014, p. 207)

Arthur’s desire to return home stems from his dissatisfaction with the metropolitan modernity, which deceives him by consuming everything in its path. The description of the city indicates how Mandel criticizes the superficiality and shaky moral standards of modern society, especially when it comes to the laws that shape one’s social status. On the other hand, Miranda regrets nothing because she finds refuge in her art, in the realm of imagination that she creates to feel entirely at home.

Moreover, Mandel criticizes people’s misuse of technology in the modern civilized world and how it becomes a means of social disconnection from each other and their environment. For example, while walking in the street, Clark “kept getting trapped behind iPhone zombies, people half his age who wandered in a dream with their eyes fixed on their screens” (Mandel, 2014, p. 160). The word “zombies” appears for the first time in this post-apocalyptic novel. Using it to describe the cellphone users in the old pre-collapse world emphasizes how lost those people are as they walk around entirely unaware of their surroundings. Ironically, although iPhones are designed to be communication devices, they lead people to live virtually as sleepwalkers. Antonucci et al. (2017) consider the positive and negative aspects of the new technologies and “caution that these new technologies can have the dehumanizing effect of distance thus creating the potential for insensitivity and increased negativity” (p. 1). The dehumanizing effect of technology happens when it expands to replace the traditional forms of social interaction through face-to-face contact. Therefore, people’s dependence on technology weakens their connectedness and dehumanizes them.

The most eloquent evidence of the fragility of modern life and technology lies in its failure to stop the flu from spreading. The Georgia flu has struck the world and exploded “like a neutron bomb over the surface of the earth” (Mandel, 2014, p. 37), killing 99% of humanity, damaging, and changing everything. Mandel intends to let such an invisible virus defeat human bodies without finding any force to stop it. Only those who kept themselves in homes having enough provisions may physically survive, but not for long. When Jeevan hears the news of the coming pandemic, he goes to the market and fills seven carts with supplies enough for months. After the pandemic, Jeevan and his brother know that it is the end of the world, realizing how human the modern world is and how “when people stop going to work, the entire operation grinds to a halt. No one delivers fuel to the gas stations or the airports. Cars are stranded. Airplanes cannot fly... Food never reaches the cities; grocery stores close... No one comes to work at the power plants or the substations, no one removes fallen trees from electrical lines” (p. 177). Such description shows how all the technological advances can never build a real civilization since all technological devices of laptops, iPhones, credit cards, and passports, later on, have become antiques in Clark’s museum of civilization. Accordingly, because there is no industry or technology without humanity, the flu comes to examine the fragility of such a modern world by making people’s bodies its target for destruction. However, one may ask where the hope is in all of this gloom.

To answer the question, one can refer to Leonhard’s book *Technology vs. Humanity* (2016), in which he explains that technology can never become us since it “knows no ethics, norms, or beliefs, the effective functioning of every human and every society is entirely predicated upon them” (p. 17). Besides, people live according to their values and mindsets, while machines might simulate them through algorithms and data that cannot work without people. Therefore, when machinery stops working, people still have their ethics and moral principles to build another righteous society. Similarly, Mandel asserts the importance of these morals as fundamental human essences required for the survival of humanity in the post-pandemic world. The novel’s optimism stems from the fact that a few people survive, reviving the possibility of building a harmonious, stable, and peaceful society. It seems that creating a new world based on morality and cooperation is impossible without annihilating the old one. Mandel believes that humanity without principles is not enough for survival, so she applies her attitude to the Traveling Symphony who borrows from Shakespeare’s *Star Trek*:

*Voyager* the line that says, “survival is insufficient” (Mandel, 2014, p. 137) and makes it their slogan along with their trips.

The nature of people’s values and ethics are examined by Leonhard as “a human signifier and differentiator, transcending differences of religion and culture” (2016, p. III). He encourages people to seek happiness that cannot be acquired through machines since technological progress is meaningless “if we as a species do not flourish if we do not achieve something that genuinely lifts all of us onto another plane of happiness” (2016, p. 122). In *Station Eleven*, it seems that the absence of technology in the post-pandemic world is a blessing because it urges people to search for true happiness that transcends the structures of culture and religion. In literary terms, she lets the survivors build their new utopian society on morality, which exists in art where beauty and happiness stand. Such morality that Mandel calls for transcends the standards of religion. In the novel, Tylor calls himself ‘the prophet,’ believing that God sends the virus as a divine agent of death to cleanse the old world, so their survival has a purpose. In his sermon, he says that the plague was “only an initial culling of the impure, that last year’s pestilence was but further preview and there will be more cullings, far more cullings to come” (Mandel, 2014, p. 61). Mandel depicts the misrepresentation of the bible when it appears only in the context of an extremist person like Tylor, who makes the matter more destructive and violent. By killing Tyler, Mandel displays her rejection of any radical religious interference in building the new world because it moves society in the wrong direction.

To survive through art means to pursue the brighter side of life. “What was lost in the collapse, almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty” (Mandel, 2014, p. 57). The beauty of art will always survive in Shakespeare’s plays, Miranda’s comic book, the musical symphony, and the museum exhibition that all, in turn, help survivors maintain their humanity within society. Yet, Mandel reveals how survivors can be sustained and nurtured back to their best selves by combining the power of art with strong social relationships and cooperation. For example, the traveling symphony depicts a united small community seeking beauty and happiness through art by staging Shakespeare and playing music. When Kirsten and August get accidentally apart from the traveling symphony, they are at grave risk of being killed by the prophet at any moment, but when they reunite with others, they replenish their strength and search for a larger safe community to embrace them. In the Severn City Airport, Clark brings people together in his museum because he realizes the importance of rebuilding larger communities for the survival of humankind. Those survivors are lucky to “not just the mere fact of survival, which was, of course, remarkable in and of itself, but to have seen one world end and another begin” (p. 231). Therefore, art and communal work provide vital hope for peace and prosperity in the new world.

#### IV. COVID-19 RESPONSE

Studying *Contagion* (2011) and *Station Eleven* (2014) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic helps audiences to evaluate the parallels between fiction and reality and consider the applicable moral lessons they provide. Although fiction deals with the unreal, it is not the same as lying. A lie intentionally denies the truth, whereas fiction aims to depict reality through implied meanings. Released a decade ago, Soderbergh’s *Contagion* comes up with striking similarities to the Covid-19 outbreak. In her CNN report, “‘Contagion’ vs. coronavirus,” Kristen Rogers (2020) studies the film’s connections to the real-life coronavirus pandemic to find how both have a great similarity in transmission, symptoms, mortality rate, and how both share the same place origin.

Most importantly, the film addresses the same negative fragilities of our modern world. For example, it warns about the danger of spreading misinformation that arouses panic and causes disorder more than the disease itself, and it draws attention to themes of discrimination and economic inequities that result in global and local chaos. Such critique in fiction is reflected in reality when the UN (2020) documents that “state authorities are having to deploy maximum resources to combat the spread of the disease and protect lives... [they have to] reconstruct relations between people and leaders; and to achieve the global stability, solidarity, pluralism, and inclusion on which we all depend” (p. 3). In parallel, as based on scientific reality and preserves cultural relevance, the film calls for these human values and appreciates them.

On the other hand, post-apocalyptic pandemic narratives can also make sense of the present real-life experience of the pandemic. Although Mandel’s *Station Eleven* is dystopian because it is a pandemic story, it makes sense of chaos, weaves beautiful stories of human relationships amid the devastation, and inspires us to search for beauty in our modern world. The work raises the question of whether the true civilization belongs to the pre-collapsed fascinating world or the post-collapsed one, which is primitive but based on human values. Readers of the novel during the crisis of COVID-19 may apply the same question to our modern world. “There are various damages COVID-19 has brought with all over the world, but the most important ones are bio-ecological damages in the light of modern means of communication and transportation along with socio-economic collapse due to the rapid spread of the pandemic all over the world” (Farooq et al., 2021, p. 118). Such global connectivity makes it easy for the coronavirus to spread worldwide. In such a case, to survive, as the novel suggests, people should not depend on modernity but search for beauty in their human relationships and solidarity.

From a speculative perspective, studying *Contagion* (2011) and *Station Eleven* (2014) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lets one consider the future possibilities in light of the current challenges and speculate whether our modern world will result in a dystopia or utopia. When the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, who is best known for

writing dystopian fiction, was asked in an interview about whether our contemporary world under the circumstances of COVID-19 is dystopian, she answered: "A dystopia, technically, is an arranged unpleasant society that you don't want to be living in. This one was not arranged. So, people may be making arrangements that aren't too pleasant, but it's not a deliberate totalitarianism" (Flood, 2020). Atwood believes that what we are living in today is "an emergency crisis" but not a dystopia.

In response to Atwood's comments, an open letter by Privacy International skeptically questions the actions followed by governments that rapidly reshape societies. The letter says that "a government may not set out to design a dystopia, but that doesn't mean it won't happen by accident." When misinformation spreads and the official narrative is misplaced, people face a collective threat. "Covid-19 has brutally exposed the fault-lines that have existed in our societies for so long" in addition to the faults that have appeared during the crisis like "punitive benefits systems, inadequate healthcare, ravaged economies, and bleak futures with opportunities atrophying" (Privacy International 1). Further, the letter includes a critique of the government's misuse of technology, the surveillance technology, in particular, that is used for profit and power. In the end, the letter calls for people to be aware enough to reject the status quo and protect their freedom to be human.

## V. CONCLUSION

Although the narrative structures and plots of *Contagion* (2011) and *Station Eleven* (2014) are set up differently, both describe the dystopian social constructions of the pre-pandemic world and how a contagious disease disturbs these constructions to offer lessons about how society ought to be in the future. In both speculative narratives, the two pandemics are imaginary and allegorical as they stand for ideologies that put the world in an ongoing cultural crisis. Both represent a means for exposing and criticizing the pre-pandemic uncivilized cultural behaviors represented in the deep-rooted social stereotypical misconceptions, the socioeconomic inequities, and the personal manipulative behaviors in *Contagion* and the pursuit for celebrity, self-interested tendencies, and blind dependence on technology in *Station Eleven*. In both fictional narratives, the post-pandemic society seems better with the positive impact of pandemics that allow survivors to reconstruct a new utopian world based on the values of humanity.

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