
The Importance of Art to Society in "Station Eleven"

In Emily St John Mandel's 2014 science fiction, dystopian novel *Station Eleven*, a majority of the world is deceased due to the Georgia-flu pandemic spread unknowingly by a passenger on a flight from Russia to The United States causing an apocalyptic world. All technology and modern inventions during have collapsed but, the Arts remain as an important part of society even after the fall of civilization. While the preserved, broken technologies remain only in abandoned houses and the Severn airport museum of civilization unable to be used, the arts were one of only a few pre-pandemic aspects actively preserved in the aftermath of the Georgia flu. In this novel the arts function as a measure of how stable society is. When the arts begin to diminish, society begins to fall and when the arts slowly begin to strengthen again, as does society.

This idea stated above is further supported in a research paper published by Princeton University entitled "How the Arts Impact Communities: An introduction to the literature on arts impact studies" written by Joshua Guetzkow, it is argued that the arts have a positive impact on the development of communities and society. This article acts as a lens to understand why members of the travelling symphony were able to collect themselves in the aftermath of the apocalypse and live thriving, productive lives. To explain why the arts help communities and society, Guetzkow uses three main pillars that can be found throughout *Station Eleven*. The first pillar in Guetzkow's article argues that a direct involvement in the arts fosters the health of those involved in the arts by "Build[ing] interpersonal ties and [...] increase[ing] opportunities for self-expression and enjoyment" (Guetzkow 3). The second pillar of Guetzkow's article argues that a direct involvement in the arts allows for positive cognitive and psychological impacts through an "Increase[d] sense of individual efficacy and self-esteem [and an] Improve[d] [...] sense of belonging or attachment to a community." The third and final pillar in the article argues that amongst the aforementioned benefit's, direct involvement in the arts improves one's interpersonal skills by giving an "Enhanced ability to work with others and communicate ideas." Each of these skills acquired from the incorporation of the arts in a person's life are a key part to explaining why the amount and quality of the arts found in a society is a measure of societies competence. Simply put, the more art in society the more interpersonal ties, self-expression, sense of belonging, and communication there will be. Each of these things, provided by the arts, create a competent society especially in *Station Eleven*.

Initially in the first chapter of Mandel's novel, the arts, specifically a rendition of Shakespeare's play King Lear, are spoken of as an important aspect to the plot of the novel. Before the other character and the audience of the play realize Arthur is having a heart attack "there was a change in his face, he stumbled, he reached for a column but misjudged the distance and struck

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it hard with the side of his hand.” From one perspective this could be judged as Arthur ruining the play and in turn the arts being diminished as a whole. Following Arthurs death, and a decline in the arts because of his death and the ruined play, a mass death began. This is the first case of the amount and quality of art corresponding to the condition of society. This situation also relates to the first pillar of Guetzkow’s paper because when Arthur died the play ended and the other actors lost their way of self-expression then society went into a downward spiral into the apocalypse.

Chronologically, the next example happens towards the end of the novel but it is in a flashback that takes place at the beginning of the apocalypse. While sitting in the Severn-City airport the first winter after the epidemic, everything began to stop working. by the third day in the airport “all the vending machines in the airport were empty of snacks, and the battery on Tyler’s Nintendo console was dead.” Although video games are an unconventional form of art, time magazine argues that video games should be considered art because “They include many forms of traditional artistic expression—sculpture in the form of 3D modeling, illustration, narrative arcs, and dynamic music—that combine to create something that transcends any one type.” With the idea that video games are art in mind, Tyler’s Nintendo console dying is considered another type of art crashing as society crashes after the epidemic. When he found out his gaming console had died and wouldn’t be functional again “Tyler wept, inconsolable” as if he knew that society was worsening as the arts, his video game console, fell. Tyler’s loss of his video game console relates to the second pillar of Guetzkow’s paper because the loss of his video makes Tyler feel like he is losing his sense of belonging to his former life.

Another important case of the arts relating to how society is functioning happens when the novel fast forwards twenty years to the post plague world where once again people are beginning to live together in small groups or towns. The travelling Shakespearean company stops in a town named St. Deborah by the water to put on a performance. After their performance, once the traveling symphony left St. Deborah’s by the water they found a stow away twelve-year-old girl by the name of Eleanor. According to Eleanor she “was going to be [the prophets] next wife” (123) because “he had a dream where god told him he was to repopulate the earth” (123). Everyone in the symphony was disgusted by the prophet and kept asking “why would he marry a twelve-year-old” (123) By stowing away in the travelling symphonies caravan to get out of St. Deborah by the water, Eleanor escaped a life of being betrothed to someone she didn’t love. Therefore, the rekindling of the arts through the travelling symphony gave Eleanor her freedom and bettered society by setting the precedence that it is wrong for a twelve-year-old to marry a grown man.

Finally, at the end of the travelling symphony stays in the Severn City Airport for five weeks. During this time, life for the traveling symphony slowly begins to return back to the way it was pre-pandemic as members of the symphony began incorporating music into their daily activities

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as they had done before the Georgia flu changed their lives. One afternoon while still in the Airport “Garrett hummed a Brandenburg concerto while he worked in the gardens.” First, this quote is important because it shows the people in the symphony doing relaxing everyday chores that they couldn’t do post plague due to the condition of the world. Secondly, this quote shows the reemergence of music during these everyday chores meaning the world is beginning to heal. After Garrett was singing, Dolores was found “whisper[ing] fragments of Shakespeare to herself while she swept the concourse floor” (331) prior to living in the airport, while the symphony was moving around and camping in different places each night, they would never have swept. It is the “fragments of Shakespeare” Dolores was whispering that pulled her through the apocalypse into this time where she could be whispering them while sweeping like in her time before the flu hit. All of the people from the symphony coming together and doing different household chores while they were living in the airport is a blatant example of the third pillar of Guetzkow’s paper; as the arts were reintroduced into everyday activities the symphony began to work together more efficiently to take care of one another.

Overall, it is the amount of music, plays, paintings, and all other forms of art in *Station Eleven* that measures how competent society is. In the beginning of the Georgia flu outbreak art began to fall as society did. However, when the symphony began travelling and spreading the arts, society began to revive itself by reverting back to its old ways while also adopting new customs.

Works cited

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