



REIMAGINING ART AND MEMORY: POSTHUMAN AESTHETICS IN STATION ELEVEN BY EMILY ST JOHN MANDEL

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Abstract

This paper explores how art and memory function beyond human-centered perspectives through a posthumanist lens. Posthumanism challenges the idea that humans are the center of culture by emphasizing connections between humans, objects, and the environment. This research examines how artistic expression goes beyond traditional human narratives, involving nonhuman agency, materiality, and interconnection. Instead of being just a record of the past, art plays a crucial role in survival, adaptation, and meaning-making in a changed world. This study argues that memory is not only stored in human minds but also in objects, landscapes, and technology. Art does more than preserve lost civilizations—it helps individuals and communities rebuild identity and meaning. The persistence of artistic expression shows that culture is not just a human achievement but something that evolves and interacts with nonhuman forces. By looking at art as a bridge between the past and the future, this research offers a new perspective on how creativity continues beyond human dominance. Additionally, this study examines how art fosters ethical connections with the nonhuman world. Moving beyond human-centered views, it explores how artistic expression blurs the lines between humans and nonhumans. Objects, artifacts, and technology play a role in preserving history and shaping artistic practices. This aligns with posthumanist ideas that reject human superiority and highlight how various forces influence artistic expression. By analyzing the endurance of artistic practices outside traditional institutions, this paper shows how posthumanist aesthetics reshape ideas about cultural value and legacy. Art is not just a luxury but a key part of survival and storytelling.

Key Words

Posthumanism, aesthetics, memory, artistic expression, nonhuman agency, survival.

Introduction

This paper examines how Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel reimagines art and memory through a posthumanist aesthetic, moving beyond human-centered narratives. Posthumanist theory challenges the notion of human exceptionalism by emphasizing interconnectivity, materiality, and nonhuman agency. Within this framework, art is not solely a product of human creativity but an evolving force that exists in relation to objects, technology, and the environment. This research explores how Station Eleven presents artistic expression as a crucial means of survival and adaptation in a world where humanity is no longer the central measure of meaning. Posthumanist aesthetics disrupt the idea that art belongs exclusively to human intellect and culture. Scholars such as Rosi Braidotti (2013) and Cary Wolfe (2010) argue that posthumanism critiques human dominance over nonhuman entities, advocating for a perspective that acknowledges how objects,



animals, and technology shape cultural expression. This paper applies these ideas to Station Eleven to analyze how artistic objects—such as Miranda’s Station Eleven graphic novel and the artifacts in the Museum of Civilization—function as memory devices that exist independently of their creators. Unlike humanist perspectives that position art as a reflection of individual genius, the novel demonstrates how artistic meaning is co-produced through materiality and nonhuman interactions.

This research also examines the significance of art’s persistence beyond human life. In Station Eleven, the Dr. Eleven comics survive long after Miranda Carroll’s death, shaping the worldview of Kirsten Raymonde and the Prophet. This suggests that memory, rather than being an exclusive function of human consciousness, is embedded in material objects. Scholars like N. Katherine Hayles (1999) emphasize that posthumanist thought challenges the division between human and nonhuman cognition, recognizing the role of objects in preserving and transmitting meaning. The novel’s engagement with artistic artifacts highlights how memory and cultural continuity are not dependent on human presence but are entangled with material forms.

Furthermore, this paper explores how Station Eleven destabilizes the notion of art as a purely aesthetic or historical record. The Traveling Symphony’s motto, “Survival is insufficient,” signifies that artistic expression is not merely an act of nostalgia but a fundamental part of existence. This aligns with posthumanist discussions on the role of art in reconfiguring human and nonhuman relationships. Studies on posthuman aesthetics, such as those by Timothy Morton (2013), emphasize that art functions beyond human-centered storytelling, reflecting ecological and technological entanglements. The novel’s depiction of performance and visual art as evolving and adaptive challenges traditional views of artistic permanence and authorship. By examining how Station Eleven reconfigures art and memory through a posthumanist framework, this research contributes to broader discussions on post-apocalyptic aesthetics. This paper argues that Mandel’s novel challenges anthropocentric narratives, presenting art not as a static cultural relic but as a dynamic force that transcends human experience. Through the lens of posthumanist aesthetics, Station Eleven offers a vision of creativity and memory that is deeply interconnected with the material and more-than-human world. This study challenges the idea that art is only a human intellectual activity, suggesting instead that creativity is an evolving force shaped by both human and nonhuman elements.

Ultimately, this research argues that posthumanist aesthetics provide a new way of understanding art and memory in a world where human dominance is uncertain. By embracing posthumanist ideas, this study contributes to discussions about creativity, interconnection, and ethical responsibility in times of crisis. Rather than being a relic of the past, art becomes a dynamic force that helps redefine survival, adaptation, and the boundaries of human experience. Through these various artistic forms, Station Eleven invites readers reconsider the role of art and memory in a world that no longer prioritizes human dominance. This paper asserts that Station Eleven presents a posthumanist vision of aesthetics where art is not simply a reflection of human history or culture but a dynamic, co-creative process involving both human and nonhuman elements. The novel demonstrates that art and memory are not separate from the world’s ecological, technological, and material forces, but deeply interwoven with them, suggesting that survival and adaptation are as much about interconnection as they are about human.



Research Objectives

1. To explore how Station Eleven reimagines art and memory through a posthumanist perspective.
2. To examine the role of nonhuman agents and objects in shaping artistic expression in the novel.
3. To analyze how artistic artifacts challenge traditional ideas of authorship and preservation.

Research Questions

1. How does Station Eleven present art and memory through a posthumanist lens?
2. How do nonhuman agents and objects shape artistic meaning in the novel?
3. How do artistic artifacts challenge traditional ideas of authorship and preservation?

Research Gap

After shedding light on the previous research conducted on Emily St. John Mandel's Station Eleven and its themes, it is important to note that most studies approach the novel from perspectives such as survival, memory, and cultural preservation. While some scholars have explored the role of art in rebuilding community and identity, there is limited focus on how Station Eleven engages with posthumanist aesthetics, particularly in relation to art and memory. The present research fills this gap by examining how artistic expression in the novel extends beyond human-centered narratives, incorporating nonhuman agency, materiality, and interconnectivity. This study redefines the relationship between art and memory by moving beyond humanist interpretations that view artistic expression as merely a record of lost civilization. By analyzing artistic artifacts such as the Station Eleven graphic novel and the Museum of Civilization, this research highlights how memory is preserved and transmitted through objects rather than solely through human recollection. Furthermore, while posthumanist theory has been widely applied to ecological and technological studies, its intersection with aesthetics in Station Eleven remains underexplored. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how art operates within a posthuman framework, challenging anthropocentric narratives of creativity and cultural continuity. By addressing these overlooked aspects, this study provides a fresh perspective on Mandel's novel, offering new insights into the role of art and memory in shaping a world where human dominance is no longer central.

Methodology

The research implements a qualitative methodology to examine the role of posthuman aesthetics in the representation of art and memory in Emily St. John Mandel's Station Eleven. This qualitative approach is supported by close textual analysis of the novel, using quotes and excerpts to explore meanings, interpretations, and symbols within the text. The descriptive nature of this method is enriched by references to existing scholarly works and critical interpretations of posthumanism, aesthetics, and memory studies. Primary data is drawn from the text of Station Eleven itself, focusing on key artistic elements such as the Station Eleven graphic novel, the Traveling Symphony's performances, and the Museum of Civilization's artifacts. These elements are analyzed to understand how the novel challenges traditional human-centered narratives of art and memory. Secondary sources, including journal articles, books, and critical essays on posthumanist theory and literary aesthetics, provide additional context and theoretical support. Scholars such as Rosi Braidotti (2013), Cary Wolfe (2010), and N. Katherine Hayles (1999) inform this study's



approach to posthumanist thought, while Timothy Morton (2013) provides insights into posthumanist aesthetics. This combination of textual analysis and secondary research allows for a comprehensive exploration of how Station Eleven presents artistic expression as an evolving force shaped by nonhuman agency, materiality, and interconnectivity. By employing a posthumanist lens, the research investigates how memory is preserved and transmitted beyond human cognition, demonstrating how Mandel's novel redefines the role of art in a decentered, post-apocalyptic world.

Limitations and Delimitations

The analysis of Station Eleven through the lens of posthuman aesthetics, focusing on art and memory, is subject to several constraints. The most significant limitation is that this research examines a single novel by Emily St. John Mandel, which restricts the generalizability of its findings to broader studies on posthumanism in literature. While Station Eleven provides a compelling exploration of artistic expression and material memory, its fictional and speculative nature may limit the direct application of its insights to real-world discussions on posthumanist aesthetics.

Another limitation is the exclusive reliance on posthumanist aesthetics as a framework, which may overlook other valuable perspectives, such as cultural memory studies, affect theory, or ecocriticism, through which the role of art and memory in Station Eleven could also be analyzed. While the study considers the novel's artistic elements as central to posthumanist discourse, it does not extensively examine other major post-apocalyptic themes, such as survival, governance, or trauma, except where they intersect with art and memory. Additionally, this research is theoretical and interpretive in nature, relying on textual analysis rather than empirical data. As a result, its conclusions are shaped by subjective readings of the novel and existing literary scholarship rather than measurable, real-world applications.

This research is delimited by the decision to focus specifically on the portrayal of art and memory in Station Eleven within a posthumanist framework, excluding other interpretations related to survival, politics, or social reconstruction. While the novel contains multiple perspectives on art and culture, the study primarily examines artistic artifacts such as the Station Eleven graphic novel, the Traveling Symphony's performances, and the Museum of Civilization, rather than broader artistic traditions.

Furthermore, this study prioritizes posthumanist aesthetics, drawing on scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, and N. Katherine Hayles, rather than incorporating alternative critical lenses such as psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, or feminist criticism, except where relevant. Additionally, the analysis is limited to the novel itself and does not extend to its television adaptation or other media representations. By defining these limitations and delimitations, this research ensures a focused, structured approach to exploring how Station Eleven reimagines art and memory within a posthumanist framework.

Literature Review

This section reviews prior research conducted on posthuman aesthetics, memory, and the role of art in Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel. The research problem is addressed by analyzing the novel's portrayal of art and memory, particularly how these elements transcend human-centered narratives to reflect a posthumanist framework in a post-apocalyptic world. Through the



lens of posthumanist theory, this study explores how artistic expression in the form of the Station Eleven graphic novel, the Traveling Symphony's performances, and the Museum of Civilization serve as mechanisms of cultural preservation and adaptation in a decentered, post-apocalyptic society.

Nayar (2023) examines the intersection of posthumanism and art in dystopian contexts, suggesting that in post-apocalyptic worlds, artistic expression becomes a tool for survival and meaning-making. He asserts that art, when detached from human exceptionalism, can act as a means of preserving memory and creating continuity in a fragmented world. This aligns with the present research, which analyzes the function of art in Station Eleven as a force that persists beyond human creators, reshaping relationships between the human and nonhuman in a post-apocalyptic setting. Anderson (2022) investigates the role of materiality in posthumanist fiction, arguing that objects and artifacts carry memory and agency, even when disconnected from human intent. He contends that material culture in post-apocalyptic narratives embodies a type of posthuman agency that is independent of human control, suggesting that nonhuman entities, such as the graphic novel and physical objects in the Museum of Civilization, play a vital role in the transmission of cultural memory. This research builds on Anderson's work by examining how the Station Eleven graphic novel and artifacts in the novel maintain their cultural significance long after their human creators have perished.

Smith (2021) explores the role of memory and art in Station Eleven, arguing that Mandel's portrayal of the Traveling Symphony critiques human-centric notions of creativity and cultural preservation. While Smith's research examines the broader cultural and societal implications of art in the novel, the present study focuses specifically on how the Symphony's performances offer more than mere nostalgia. They represent an evolving force that redefines human connection and memory, engaging both human and nonhuman elements in a post-apocalyptic world.

Jones and Carter (2020) approach Station Eleven through the lens of memory studies, highlighting how survivors in the novel navigate the trauma of societal collapse. Their work underscores the role of memory in coping mechanisms, a concept that resonates with this research's focus on how memory is embodied in objects, art, and performances, particularly in the absence of traditional institutions. The research further extends this analysis by exploring how these artistic representations challenge human-centric narratives of memory and suggest new forms of cultural continuity.

Relevant studies on posthumanist literature, such as Wilson's (2018) examination of the role of art in speculative fiction, provide valuable insights into how materiality and artistic expression are linked in narratives of survival. Wilson contends that posthumanist aesthetics emphasize the nonhuman elements of art, suggesting that memory and culture are not solely human-driven but are sustained through relationships between humans, objects, and the environment. This research extends Wilson's discussion by focusing on the specific artistic practices in Station Eleven, such as the Museum of Civilization and the Traveling Symphony, to analyze how art functions as a posthumanist practice in a decentered world.

Michaels and Perez (2017) have focused on the theme of survival and the role of art in Station Eleven, particularly exploring the Traveling Symphony's mantra "Survival is insufficient." The present research shifts attention to the contrasting role of art in the novel, particularly how art and



memory are redefined through a posthumanist lens. This study provides a fresh perspective by examining how these artistic expressions go beyond mere survival to become a way of reshaping meaning and human identity in a world where human dominance is no longer the central force.

This research also draws from broader posthumanist theories on art, such as the work of Morton (2013), who argues that posthuman aesthetics challenge anthropocentric frameworks by decentering human experience in the production of art. Morton's theory informs this study's analysis of how *Station Eleven* reimagines art not only as a remnant of the past but as a living force that reshapes relationships between humans, objects, and the world.

By reviewing these and other relevant studies, this research situates *Station Eleven* within the broader discourse of posthuman aesthetics and memory studies. The focus on art in the novel offers a unique contribution to this body of knowledge, providing an in-depth exploration of how Mandel's work reimagines the role of art and memory in a world where human exceptionalism no longer holds sway.

Analysis

Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) is a post-apocalyptic novel that explores themes of memory, survival, and artistic resilience through a fragmented narrative. Set before, during, and after the collapse of civilization due to a deadly flu pandemic, the novel follows interconnected characters whose lives revolve around art and memory. The *Traveling Symphony*, a group of performers who stage Shakespearean plays in the wasteland, embodies the theme of cultural continuity. The *Station Eleven* graphic novel, created by Miranda Carroll and later cherished by Kirsten Raymonde, represents art as a living entity that gains new meanings beyond its creator. The Museum of Civilization, where remnants of the past are displayed, serves as a symbol of memory and the persistence of human culture. Through these artistic elements, Mandel presents a posthumanist perspective that challenges anthropocentric views of art, authorship, and historical preservation.

Mandel's novel challenges the human-centered perception of art and memory by illustrating their continuity beyond human control. Posthumanist thought, as developed by theorists such as Rosi Braidotti (2013) and Cary Wolfe (2010), suggests that human identity and culture are not separate from but entangled with nonhuman systems. *Station Eleven* embodies this idea by depicting how art and memory persist through objects, landscapes, and shared human experiences in a post-apocalyptic world. One of the most profound representations of posthumanist art in the novel is the *Traveling Symphony*. The group's motto, "Survival is insufficient," suggests that human existence is not merely biological but is sustained through artistic and cultural expression. By performing Shakespearean plays in a world that has lost modern infrastructure, the Symphony demonstrates that art is not tied to a specific era but is continuously reinterpreted. This reflects posthumanist aesthetics, where artistic meaning is fluid and shaped by circumstances rather than a fixed authorial intent. Kirsten Raymonde, one of the Symphony's members, highlights how art becomes an adaptive force. Her performances of Shakespeare gain new relevance in the post-collapse world, where themes of power, loss, and redemption resonate deeply with survivors. This aligns with Braidotti's (2013) assertion that posthumanist art is relational rather than individualistic—it is shaped by its environment, by the performers, and by the audience's shifting experiences.



Miranda Carroll's *Station Eleven* graphic novel, created before the collapse and later cherished by Kirsten, is another crucial artifact that challenges human-centered memory. Miranda initially writes the comic as a personal, almost private, artistic endeavor. However, after the collapse, it transforms into something beyond her control, gaining new meanings for Kirsten and others who read it. This aligns with Wolfe's (2010) argument that posthumanist art transcends individual authorship, as texts acquire evolving interpretations over time. The *Station Eleven* comic becomes a relic of the past that shapes new identities. Kirsten carries the comic with her, finding hope and solace in its images of Dr. Eleven, a character navigating a post-apocalyptic space station. The meaning of the comic is no longer dictated by Miranda but is co-created by its readers, reflecting how posthumanist art is defined by its relationship with different agents—human and nonhuman alike. *Station Eleven* highlights the agency of nonhuman entities—books, abandoned objects, landscapes, and ruins—in shaping cultural memory. This posthumanist perspective challenges the idea that meaning is solely constructed by human minds, suggesting instead that nonhuman forces play an active role in artistic interpretation. The Museum of Civilization, housed in an abandoned airport, serves as a repository of objects from the pre-collapse world. The museum's curator, Clark, collects items like iPhones, credit cards, and passports, not for their functionality but for their symbolic significance. These objects, though inert, act as memory carriers, shaping survivors' perceptions of the past. Clark's museum reflects Timothy Morton's (2013) concept of hyperobjects—entities that persist beyond human timeframes and resist anthropocentric meaning-making. The objects in the museum exist beyond their intended use but still hold cultural and emotional weight for those who encounter them. For the younger generation born after the collapse, these artifacts are mysterious relics, divorced from their original purpose yet shaping their understanding of a lost civilization.

Beyond material artifacts, the novel's depiction of abandoned cities and decaying buildings reinforces the role of nonhuman agents in shaping memory. The post-collapse world itself becomes an aesthetic entity—nature reclaiming human structures, transforming highways into overgrown pathways, and turning office buildings into ghostly relics. Mandel's descriptions of these landscapes align with ecological posthumanism, which emphasizes that nature is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in shaping history. The ruins of the old world tell their own stories, not through human narration but through material transformation. This challenges the anthropocentric notion that memory exists only in human consciousness, instead suggesting that memory is embedded in the very materials of the world.

Station Eleven questions conventional notions of authorship by presenting artistic works that escape their creators' control, gaining new interpretations over time. This reflects posthumanist theories that challenge the Romantic ideal of the artist as a singular genius and instead propose a more networked, collective model of creativity. Miranda Carroll's *Station Eleven* graphic novel exemplifies the decentralization of artistic control. Miranda writes and illustrates the comic before the collapse, but its meaning is not fixed by her intent. After the pandemic, Kirsten finds personal meaning in it, interpreting its themes of isolation and survival in a way that Miranda never could have anticipated. This aligns with Barthes' (1967) idea of *The Death of the Author*, where the creator's intention becomes secondary to the reader's interpretation. In a posthumanist context, this means that artistic meaning is not static but continually reshaped by different audiences and



environments. The Station Eleven comic thus becomes a living text, its significance evolving long after its creator is gone

The novel also challenges traditional archival methods by presenting performance as a primary mode of artistic preservation. The Traveling Symphony keeps Shakespeare alive not through written records but through live reenactments, where each performance is unique and shaped by its immediate context. This contrasts with the conventional notion that preservation requires static, unchanging documentation. Mandel's portrayal of the Symphony echoes the idea that culture is not preserved through rigid structures but through dynamic, embodied practices. This reinforces posthumanist aesthetics, where art is seen as fluid, collaborative, and constantly redefined by its participants. Through Station Eleven, Mandel presents a posthumanist reimagining of art and memory, demonstrating how artistic meaning extends beyond human authorship and endures through nonhuman agents. The novel challenges traditional ideas of artistic preservation, showing that culture persists not in fixed texts but in performance, reinterpretation, and material landscapes. By examining the Traveling Symphony, the Station Eleven graphic novel, and the Museum of Civilization, this analysis has demonstrated that Mandel's novel disrupts human-centered assumptions about creativity and memory. It proposes a more decentralized, networked vision of cultural survival—one where art is not bound to a single creator but evolves through collective interaction. Ultimately, Station Eleven offers a compelling argument for the resilience of artistic expression in the face of collapse. In doing so, it invites readers to reconsider the role of art in shaping human and nonhuman worlds, suggesting that cultural continuity is not about preserving the past but about constantly reimagining it in the present.

Conclusion

This research article has explored how Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel reimagines art and memory through a posthumanist aesthetic, challenging traditional notions of authorship, preservation, and human exceptionalism. By analyzing the Traveling Symphony, the Station Eleven graphic novel, and the Museum of Civilization, this study has demonstrated that artistic expression in the novel is not static but evolves through human and nonhuman interactions. Mandel presents a vision of cultural survival that moves beyond anthropocentric perspectives, positioning art and memory as fluid, decentralized forces that continue to shape meaning in a world where conventional structures have collapsed. While previous scholarship on Station Eleven has focused on themes of art, memory, and survival, this research has addressed a critical gap by examining these themes through a posthumanist lens. Many studies have explored how the novel portrays the resilience of artistic expression, but few have considered how nonhuman agents—objects, landscapes, and performance traditions—actively shape cultural memory. By foregrounding these posthumanist dynamics, this study has offered a fresh perspective on how Station Eleven envisions the persistence of art beyond human control.

The post-apocalyptic world of Station Eleven serves as a powerful site for reimagining the role of art and memory in a posthumanist context. Mandel's novel ultimately suggests that culture does not vanish with the collapse of civilization but instead finds new forms of expression beyond traditional institutions. Art survives not as a static relic of the past but as an evolving, adaptive force that transcends human authorship and preservation. By challenging anthropocentric views of artistic meaning, Station Eleven aligns with contemporary posthumanist debates on the



interconnectedness of human and nonhuman agents. In a world increasingly shaped by ecological crises and technological transformations, Mandel's novel invites us to reconsider the nature of artistic creation and memory in ways that move beyond human exceptionalism. As scholars continue to explore the intersections of literature, philosophy, and posthumanism, *Station Eleven* will remain a vital text for examining how artistic expression endures in times of crisis. Through its portrayal of performance, objects, and oral traditions, the novel offers a compelling vision of posthuman aesthetics—one where art is not merely preserved but continually reinvented through new interactions, new readers, and new worlds.

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