Bronfen, Elisabeth , and Christina Wald , ed. Shakespeare and Seriality: Page, Stage, Screen. London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2025. Shakespeare and Adaptation. Shakespeare and Adaptation. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 19 Feb. 2025. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350437296>.

10

Serial Shakespeare after the end of the world

From repetition compulsions to the romance of recycling in *Station Eleven*

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What would happen to Shakespeare if a pandemic killed 99 per cent of the human population in a few weeks, all infrastructure collapsed and all established governments fell apart?[1] Would Shakespeare's plays survive such an end of the world? If they survived, what could they offer for this post-apocalyptic situation? Would they serve as relicts, as reminders of what has been lost or as blueprints to recreate the past? Or could Shakespeare's plays be retooled to develop a different future in the twenty-first century? Such questions are raised in the miniseries *Station Eleven*, first released in the winter of 2021/2022 on HBO in the midst of an actual pandemic. Creator Patrick Somerville based *Station Eleven* on Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 novel of the same title, but the series departs from the novel in some respects.[2] Entangling several plotlines happening before,

during and twenty years after the pandemic, the most prominent action centres on a theatre group called the Travelling Symphony dedicated to performing Shakespeare plays with a new musical score. Soon after the global collapse of civilization, they begin to travel around Lake Michigan in conditions that resemble the wandering troupes of Shakespeare's time. As I will argue, the series shows how Shakespeare is reactivated to work through traumatic losses in a serial manner on both a personal and a collective level.

It is noteworthy that the TV series increases the relevance of the novel's Shakespearean intertexts, chiefly *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, and adds new ones, most prominently *Hamlet*. *Station Eleven* shows scenes from three different performances of *Hamlet* by the troupe, each with a different cast and different implications for how Shakespeare can be serially reactivated in the post-apocalypse. Some actors play different parts across the three performances, with each constellation offering new affordances to come to terms with their traumatic losses. What is more, the series embeds its own action in Shakespeare's plotlines, focusing in particular on the question of inheritance taken from *Lear*, of loss, grief and revenge taken from *Hamlet*, and of surviving severe damage taken from *The Tempest*. *Station Eleven* thus focuses on three Shakespeare plays, which themselves are intertextually linked and can be fruitfully read in a serial manner, with *The Tempest* being a romance version of the previous tragedies. As Paul Kottman has recently reminded us, 'all the internal strife of "Shakespearean plots" in which brother betrays brother, in which kingdoms are at risk, daughters grow apart from fathers, [are] all once again gathered up and recycled in *The Tempest* as if to "test" the old formulae' (2019: 121).

Station Eleven continues this testing via recycling. Though we might habitually distinguish between 'timeless' tragedies and 'disposable' pop culture (Lanier 2002: 3), the series' first shots make clear that Shakespeare could belong to the abandoned cultural waste in a post-apocalyptic world: a dirty, decomposing programme for a *King Lear* production is shown in a derelict theatre overgrown by plants and inhabited by animals (see Figures 10.1 and 10.2).

Watching these darkly lit shots without a narrative introduction explaining the setting in the post-pandemic future and without an establishing shot to provide spatial orientation, TV viewers may understand only in retrospect that what they are seeing is an abandoned theatre building: suddenly, after 70 seconds, the scene

FIGURES 10.1 AND 10.2 Screenshots of the opening minutes of Station Eleven © Paramount Television Studios for HBO 2021.

switches to the Chicago Theatre in its full splendour, shot from the same perspective (see Figures 10.3 and 10.4), where TV viewers as well as the diegetic theatre audience witness the unexpected end of the *King Lear* performance.

The main actor, Arthur Leander, dies onstage from a heart attack just before Gloucester can say 'O ruined piece of nature, this great world / Shall so wear out to naught' (*KL* 4.6.130–1). This disruption of Shakespeare's most apocalyptic tragedy functions as the dramaturgical starting point for the global spread of the influenza virus which hits Chicago on that night and kills almost all inhabitants.[3]

FIGURES 10.3 AND 10.4 Screenshots of the opening minutes of *Station Eleven* © Paramount Television Studios for HBO 2021.

The premature interruption of the tragedy also leads to the survival of several characters related to Arthur: Kirsten, the child actor who plays young Goneril, is taken care of by Jeevan, a spectator who had rushed to the stage to help Arthur. Arthur's second wife Elizabeth, their son Tyler and Arthur's friend Clark survive the pandemic on a flight to Arthur's funeral that is intercepted at a provincial airport. The ensuing plot oscillates between events before the flu outbreak, the first two years after the collapse and the action

twenty years later, when Kirsten has become the star performer of the Travelling Symphony. Eventually, the company visits the airport community, where all surviving protagonists meet. *Station Eleven*'s non-chronological form emphasizes effects of serialization and at the same time undercuts an ordered, teleological understanding of seriality; it thus creates a traumatized aesthetic that makes the painful and disorientating seriality of psychological acting out and working through palpable for audiences.

'Survival is insufficient': *Station Eleven*'s adaptational network

The Travelling Symphony's motto 'Survival is insufficient', which Mandel called 'almost the thesis statement' of her novel (2015) and which has been used in this manner on posters marketing the series, expresses their dedication to art as an important meaning in life, but it also raises the question of how Shakespeare ought to be re-performed in radically altered circumstances. *Station Eleven* tests varying forms of recovering Shakespeare that range from verbatim performances and rewritings by the Travelling Symphony to more oblique references to the plays, which provide character constellations and plot elements for the offstage action. The series also makes clear that Shakespeare's survival has depended on previous adaptations. Accordingly, the company's slogan 'Survival is insufficient' is taken from a post-apocalyptic science fiction graphic novel that is also titled 'Station Eleven', which was written by Miranda, Arthur's first wife, and gifted by Arthur to Kirsten, who cherishes the novel. The graphic novel can be categorized as a loose adaptation of *The Tempest*, which has been called 'the mother of all sci-fi' (White 1999: 5) and discussed as 'scientific romance' (Maisano 2014). Not only the author's name, Miranda, but also parts of the action link the sci-fi novel to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: Set in a flooded space station where some humans have survived the apocalypse, the graphic novel reimagines a 'brave new world' after a wreck (*Tem* 5.1.183).

It is part of the recycling circuits of the series that the line 'Survival is insufficient' is neither Miranda's invention nor the invention of the actual author Mandel, but, as many other lines in the graphic novel,

a repurposed quote. It is taken from the *Star Trek Voyager* episode 'Survival Instinct', which belongs to the *Star Trek* canon that itself quotes from Shakespeare. *Station Eleven* directly refers to one of these Shakespeare links when young Kirsten watches the 1966 *Star Trek* episode called 'The Conscience of the King' about a Shakespeare theatre group travelling through space who perform a *Hamlet* production. In the episode 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Aren't Dead', whose title refers to Tom Stoppard's rewriting of *Hamlet* that came out in the same year as the *Star Trek* episode, the series thus indicates that young Kirsten might have first encountered *Hamlet* via *Star Trek* and other adaptations, and that the actor who has become a star therefore performs a networked script with multiple origins that opens up multidirectional ways of interpretation, as Douglas Lanier has amply theorized in his rhizomatic understanding of Shakespeare (Lanier 2014). Sometimes, *Station Eleven* derives irony from this oblique serial recycling. For instance, when a potential new member of the Symphony auditions, he needs special permission to perform a non-Shakespearean scene. He presents a speech from the movie *Independence Day*, but some members of the diegetic rehearsal audience and the extra-diegetic TV audience might be aware that this speech was itself modelled on the St. Crispin's Day speech in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (see Tichenor 2021).

Shakespearean repetition compulsions: Post-apocalyptic *Hamlets*

In *Station Eleven*, the Shakespearean reconnections have traces of a repetition compulsion, which has been amply theorized in psychoanalytic and cultural theory as a phenomenon of seriality. I will in the following explore how the series uses Shakespeare's plays to act out and work through past trauma and to develop models for future action, both on the individual and on the collective level. The Travelling Symphony reinterprets *Hamlet* as the drama of being a bereft survivor in a post-apocalyptic world. In lieu of proper funerals and graves, which could not be provided in the emergency situation of a global pandemic, the traditional form of tragedy offers a template to come to terms with pervasive loss. As Tobias Döring has argued,

> acts of mourning, to become effective, need monuments and mementoes. . . . Individual responses to loss and bereavement, let alone communal efforts to come to terms with death, must resort to familiar forms in linguistic or poetic or some other conventionalized shape as focal points and agents of affective mediation. Whenever these are not available or not accessible in any given situation, mourning fails. As a personal and social performance, it can instead become pathological or turn into retributive action. (2006: 72–3)

While Arthur's son Tyler represses his grief and instead seeks retribution for his grievances, for Kirsten in the title role, the performances of *Hamlet* become a forum to act out and work through experiences of loss and violence. Given that Kirsten means 'the anointed' 'who walks with God' and Raymonde means 'well-advised protector', she and Tyler are presented as two contrastive reactions to the apocalyptic losses they suffered. The notions of acting out and working through derive from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic work on repetition compulsions and were made prominent in the trauma theory of the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries by the work of Dominick LaCapra. When a trauma is too overwhelming to emotionally come to terms with at the time of its occurrence, the traumatized person repeats it later in order to experience it more fully. When they act out (*ausagieren*) the trauma, they are not fully aware of this painful repetition because they cannot fully recollect the initial trauma. Working through (*durcharbeiten*), however, is a form of serial reactivation that allows for a certain degree of control and awareness and enables a gradual coming to terms with the trauma (Freud 1962; see Ganteau 2020 for an overview of the concept's uses).

Depicting this process of acting out and working through, the Symphony's first *Hamlet* performance of about thirty lines from Act 1, Scene 2 is cross-cut with Kirsten's traumatic experiences as a child. Thus, when Gertrude recites the lines 'Do not for ever with thy vailed lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust. / Thou knowst 'tis common all that lives must die' (*Station Eleven* S01E02, 00:28; *Ham* 1.2.70–2), the performance is cut against fragments of a scene when eight-year-old Kirsten, having fled to the apartment of Jeevan's brother Frank, realizes that her parents have died of the flu. Past and present are closely interlaced not only visually, but also

by making the sound carry over, so that the childhood scenes have a *Hamlet* voice-over and the play is underlain with dialogue from Kirsten's past. By this intermingling of the past and the present, Hamlet's lines 'I know not seems' and 'I have that within which passeth show' (*Station Eleven* S01E02, 00:29; 00:31; *Ham* 1.2.76; 85) are filled with memories and insights into Kirsten's tormented inner life, making clear that she is, just like Hamlet, 'possessed by the unspeakable' (Neill 1997: 225) and that her experience of time is haunted by intrusions of the traumatic past into the present. The fact that she cries onstage despite having performed *Hamlet* multiple times before emphasizes that the tragedy provides her with a forum for a serialized acting out of her multiple traumatic experiences of loss.

Her parents remain a mediated presence in her memories, as Kirsten calls them, but only reaches their mailboxes, listening to their recorded voices again and again. Eventually, she receives text messages from their phones stating that the owners of the phones have died at the hospital and cannot be visited. When young Kirsten finally hands her phone to Jeevan with the words, 'I got weird texts' (S01E02, 00:30), her comment can also be read in relation to Shakespeare's lines from the future, spoken by her adult self still suffering from the losses, thus further blurring the distinction between the present and the past. In his article, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through', Freud argued, 'we may say that the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it' (1962: 150). Kirsten will later quote a line from 'Station Eleven' that catches the paradox temporality of repetition compulsions induced by traumatic loss, an unacknowledged seriality: 'I feel this again for the first time' (S01E06, 00:20). *Station Eleven*'s aesthetics lets audiences share Kirsten's traumatized experience of time, as scenes from different times switch, clash and overlap constantly: like the traumatized survivor who is haunted by intrusive memories, audiences live in several times simultaneously. The series will gradually reveal that Kirsten has not only lost her biological parents and her father figure Arthur, but also her post-pandemic caretakers Frank and Jeevan. Thus, the ghostly parental plea 'Remember Me' (*Ham* 1.5.91) is even more ambiguous for Kirsten than for Hamlet, and the series carefully constructs not only

the order in which these losses are revealed but also the degree to which Kirsten comes to terms with them.[4]

Simultaneous to this process of acting out, the serial re-enactment has aspects of the working through of trauma, the gradual coming to terms with it and the increasing acknowledgement of seriality. The scripted, rehearsed *Hamlet* scene is a highly controlled situation, which gives Kirsten a degree of mastery over her emotions and memories. In this vein, some reviewers have even suggested that Kirsten, like a method-acting-trained performer, here might deliberately use her childhood experience to reinforce the emotional power of her roleplay (Whiting 2021; Nestruck 2022). Her performance oscillates between control and compulsion, just as Hamlet shifts between the strategic playing of his 'antic disposition' (*Ham* 1.5.170) and genuine mental distress that lets him lose control over his actions. Thus, after the applause and praise for the star performer, one audience member remarks, '[y]ou're charged with that Day Zero pain. It's like you never left' (S01E02, 00:40–41) and the Symphony's conductor observes, '[s]omething had you. Just for a second. What happened? Tell me' (S01E04, 00:08). Kirsten refuses to or is unable to talk about her trauma, however, and instead uses Shakespeare's words as the medium for serially acting it out and working it through.

As part of this working through, *Hamlet* provides Kirsten with scripts that grant her the ability to react to situations of danger differently than in her childhood and thus to increase the variation involved in serial repetition. For instance, directly after the *Hamlet* performance, she interrogates a mysterious audience member whom she finds highly suspicious. When he threatens to kill or kidnap members of the Symphony, she stabs him in a surprise attack. She here proves to be both less hesitant than Hamlet and less impulsive because she first makes sure that he is in fact suspicious and not an innocent bystander like Polonius. It will later turn out that this audience member is a self-proclaimed prophet for the younger generation – and even later that he is Arthur Leander's son Tyler. That her interaction with him is cross-cut with scenes in which young Kirsten cries in panic for Frank, which are later revealed to have happened while Frank was stabbed by an intruder, shows that she repeats aspects of her past with different coordinates: while as a child she helplessly witnessed the murder of her surrogate family member, she now proactively protects her artistic family.

Several episodes later, Kirsten completes this process of working through Frank's loss: in a poison-induced hallucination, she imagines her return to the time when she lived with Jeevan and Frank. Invisible to the brothers, she can communicate and interact with her own younger self, trying to alter the events that led to the murder of Frank. She has to realize, however, that she cannot change what happened in the past, which is presented before her eyes as a scripted performance largely sealed off from her intervention as spectator. What she can change, however, is her attitude towards the past that she keeps reliving as if it happened to her in the present. As LaCapra has put it, '[i]n acting-out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed. Mourning involves a different inflection of performativity: a relation to the past that involves recognizing its difference from the present' (1999: 716). As part of Kirsten's working through via mourning, in her hallucination she remains in the apartment with Frank's body after Jeevan and her younger self have left, taking her leave in a prolonged death watch at the end of which Frank's body has turned into a skeleton and the apartment has transformed into the derelict state it is in twenty years later.

In the final episode of the series, the collective, political aspect of the Shakespearean serial reactivation is made particularly prominent through the third and final *Hamlet* performance, which takes place at the airport community. The arrival of the Travelling Symphony at the former airport is modelled on the arrival of the travelling players at Elsinore, and Kirsten now becomes Hamlet-the-director, who casts Arthur's son Tyler as Hamlet-the-character. Similar to Hamlet's dumb show in Shakespeare's play, the Symphony's *Hamlet* as play-within-the-series re-enacts the past as it re-assembles Tyler as Hamlet, his mother Elizabeth as Gertrude and his former replacement father Clark as Claudius. They can thus act out and work through the problematic family constellation in which they came to live in the airport community before Tyler, an angry child, disappeared under circumstances that made his mother believe that he died. To hide his identity, Tyler calls himself Lonergan after a ghostly character in the graphic novel 'Station Eleven'. Even before the rehearsals start, it becomes clear that Clark in his life offstage has transformed into a Claudius

character who fears the rebellious potential of the younger generation. He confides in Elizabeth that he re-read *Hamlet* and realized how dangerous Hamlet's defiance of the authorities is: 'Imagine if our teenagers felt that anger that clearly' (S01E08, 00:25). Clark therefore plans to prohibit the performance and to prolong the troupe's quarantine, effectively turning them into prisoners: instead of fearing a renewed outbreak of the flu, it is the contagious quality of Shakespeare's script that Clark seeks to control.[5] Elizabeth agrees to play Gertrude because she senses that the mysterious young actor who will play Hamlet is her son, who is alive after all but refuses to talk to her. It is only by rehearsing and performing the play that they begin to communicate. For their first encounter, Kirsten suggests the confrontation between Gertrude and Hamlet in Act 3, Scene 4, and Tyler can eloquently, via Shakespeare, not only acknowledge their re-encounter as mother and son, but also express his disgust with the older generation. Meeting his mother and 'uncle' again after two decades, Tyler's anger is undiminished; just as Hamlet returns from England as an active avenger, Tyler's return to the airport community is marked by his destruction of Clark's Museum of Civilization and hints that he might plan to assassinate members of the airport community. Viewers already know that his rebellion is not only personal, but also a political move. Tyler is the mysterious leader of a cult for young people born after the flu outbreak and determined to fight the older generation. Calling themselves 'the Undersea children' and following the mantra 'There's no before', both taken from Miranda's graphic novel 'Station Eleven', Tyler and his followers embody Hamlet's 'messianic urge, his casting himself as scourge and minister, together with his prophetic premonitions' (Samolsky 2003: 83).

This final *Hamlet* performance is enmeshed with and transformed by its rewriting in *The Tempest*. Clark's physical transformation in the year 2040 brings him close to how Prospero has often been theatrically presented, with long grey hair and beard and a cape that looks like a magician's robe (Figure 10.5). The series expands on this parallel between *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, which gives Tyler the double role of rebellious sons Hamlet and Caliban, who both plan to kill their replacement fathers. Kirsten is not only Hamlet-the-director but also becomes a Prospero figure who directs the play and finally gives up the book that helped to magically enchant

FIGURE 10.5 Screenshot of Clark as Claudius-Prospero in episode 8 of *Station Eleven* © Paramount Television Studios for HBO 2021.

her life, the graphic novel 'Station Eleven', when she lets one of Tyler's followers run away with it. She also learns to let go of her 'daughter' figure, Alex, who eventually leaves with Tyler, Elizabeth and the Undersea children. The performance is again cross-cut with the memories of Tyler, the Hamlet actor. Haunted by his miserable childhood days at the airport, Tyler as Hamlet unexpectedly threatens to kill Clark as Claudius on stage with the very knife that Frank's murderer used. Kirsten, the director who watches the action from the wings, is confronted with the possibility that her trauma of watching both Arthur and Frank die onstage will be repeated. In a peripety that transforms the tragic action to romance, however, Tyler abandons his plan when he realizes that he is united with Clark in their mourning for Arthur (and when, resolving the lingering Oedipal conflict, he understands belatedly that Clark is gay, was in love with his father and never replaced his father as his mother's new sexual partner). In this way, the performers of this third *Hamlet* production achieve reconciliation through *anagnorisis*, through insight into their own mistakes and misunderstandings, and avert, at least for their offstage lives, the catastrophic ending of the tragedy. For its family drama, the series employs Shakespeare's tragic script to work through and resolve violent impulses that stem, at least in part, from painful memories shaped by a child's misinterpretation.

The series thus begins with a *King Lear* performance that serves as a foreboding prologue to the apocalypse and it culminates in a *Hamlet* production in which revenge is forestalled in favour of reconciliation, effectively the action of *The Tempest*. *Station Eleven* serially re-enacts, condenses and reinterprets Shakespeare's development from writing tragedy to writing tragicomic romance, with *King Lear*, as Joseph Wittreich has argued, likewise functioning as the starting point for this shift as the 'stark prologue' to the romances (1984: 196, see also Kottman 2019). *Station Eleven*'s ending in its romance spirit also has an unexpected reunion in store for Kirsten when she meets Jeevan, who after all had survived what she thought was a lethal wolf attack. They promise to meet annually henceforth, because Kirsten will add the airport to the Symphony's route. The title of the final episode, 'Unbroken Circle', hence means a spiral rather than a repetition loop, as the symphony's circular route is modified and as the traumatic repetition compulsions of the central characters are transformed by and into therapeutic art. This individual healing in spiral loops of working through has political and ecological implications that I will discuss in the following section.

The romance of recycling: Working through ecological trauma

The series' portrayal of serial acting out and working through works on different scales: In addition to zooming in on psychic processes of the individual mind, the series also reflects on the collective, political and ecological task of coming to terms with traumatic loss in order to break free from harmful repetitions of the past. From episode 1 onwards, the camera work literally provides the bigger picture: it intermittently offers a planetary view of the no longer globalized Earth, as scenes are presented in overhead shots with varying degrees of distance. These overhead shots are also used to demonstrate the lush reforestation and to show how nature has taken back former urban and industrial settings. Visually, the series here responds, I would argue, to the threat of global warming and the sixth mass extinction, that is, to our fear of the catastrophe to come, even if it does not directly tackle the question in its dialogue. It is striking that, just as in the novel, the characters never explicitly

comment on the ecological problems that had been caused by the lost, unsustainable civilization for which some characters mourn. Both the novel and the series can therefore be regarded as part of what Mark Bould has analysed as 'the Anthropocene unconscious' of current literature and culture, in which other catastrophes stand in for the repressed knowledge of the climate catastrophe, the apocalypse to come, the apocalypse that has already begun (Bould 2021: 4, 17; see also Vermeulen 2018 and Eve 2018 for ecocritical readings of Mandel's novel). As Bould puts it, these literary texts, films and artworks are not characterized by silence about the climate catastrophe, but by 'expressive aphasia' (2021: 4). In the case of *Station Eleven*, this replacement phenomenon is a story about personal, cultural and technological losses after a flu outbreak. However, the series not only uses more ecologically evocative visual imagery than the novel, but parts of its production and its release happened in a phase of increased awareness about the close ecological interconnection of human and non-human life forms and the unintended damaging consequences of our actions: as we have learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, virus outbreaks are a result of human intrusion into wildlife areas, so there is not only a symbolic but also a causal connection between a pandemic catastrophe and the climate catastrophe.

This charges the series' reactivation of Shakespeare, one of the cultural icons of modernity, with ecological meaning. As Heather J. Hicks puts it in her study of post-apocalyptic fiction, post-apocalyptic survivors face two options: they can either 'move beyond salvaging mere scraps of modernity and rebuild dimensions of it in earnest or they should concede that modernity is beyond salvage and attempt to devise something that transcends its historical forms' (2016: 3). These two options are taken up in *Station Eleven* and played out as conflict between the characters, in particular between Clark, the Claudius-Prospero character, who dreams of rebuilding civilization in its previous form, and Tyler, the Hamlet-Caliban, who violently rebels against the older generation. The conception of Tyler is one of the most significant revisions that the series undertakes: in the novel, the Prophet is a paedophile and authoritarian cult leader who mainly serves as antagonist to Kirsten and the Travelling Symphony. In the series, he is a more ambivalent and enigmatic character whose rebellion against the older generation and their nostalgia for the lost civilization of late capitalism might have to do

with differing ecological awareness. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the flu outbreak, when Tyler is an eight-year-old child, he is disappointed by the adults' lack of imagination regarding the planet's post-apocalyptic future: to the surprise of his parent's generation, Tyler suggests that humankind should not aim to repopulate the planet. When they have to decide which information about current civilization ought to be saved for the future before the internet breaks down, he does not reject Clark's demand that all of Shakespeare's plays need to be saved but wonders whether they should delete rather than save the Wikipedia entry on capitalism. Amused by his naïve approach, his mother responds, '[w]e'd just invent it again' (S01E05, 00:34), because for her, capitalism is an inevitable stage of human evolution or a repetition compulsion of its own kind. In the plot strand set twenty years later, no economic transactions in the post-pandemic world are ever shown; the series remains vague regarding the economic structures of the new-found communities.

Station Eleven thus leaves room for speculation about what our future might look like: after the collapse of civilization and carbon-based capitalism, the survivors might not only have suffered traumatic losses but also gained the chance to create a more just and more sustainable future. Some changes should perhaps more accurately be described as an absence or even a liberation rather than as a loss. As LaCapra has argued in his reflections on collective responses to trauma, 'the very ability to make the distinction between absence and loss . . . is one aspect of a complex process of working-through' (1999: 699). Accordingly, in *Station Eleven*, the tragic script of repetition – to kill the king who killed the king, or to reinvent capitalism, ecological exploitation and mass extinction – gradually gives way to a different form of seriality that I suggest calling the romance of recycling: a transformative re-assemblage of leftovers.

The political and aesthetic dimensions of this romance of recycling condition each other. The culminating *Hamlet* performance demonstrates that the Symphony's re-assemblage of the remaining 'scraps of modernity' is much more captivating for the young generation than the inventory of unused objects in Clark's Museum of Civilization. While the museum chronicles loss because its founder hopes to recreate the past, the Symphony creatively works with both remnants and absences. As usual, they

employ their aesthetics of leftovers for their *Hamlet* performance. They use torchlight and minimal scenery built from relicts on three small stages placed next to each other, some of them converted from their pickup trucks (now drawn by horses when they are travelling). The actors wear flamboyant costumes designed from remnant materials, for instance, from a large number of spools, sponges, cans and gloves, thus reflecting on the conspicuous consumption of the past.[6] Using leftovers found at the respective places of performance, the company grounds Shakespeare firmly in their environment, also by performing outdoors and sometimes on the bare ground. This site-specific recycling of Shakespeare in an aesthetics of repurposed old world-remainders makes their productions artistically more inventive than the fairly conventional, indoor and static pre-pandemic *Lear* production shown at the beginning.

This pre-pandemic *Lear* takes place on a wintery set (see Figure 10.4), whose artificiality is emphasized when one of the stones falls onto the stage floor during Arthur's collapse, the noise betraying that it is made of cardboard. Later, when a doctor tries to reanimate Arthur onstage, someone shouts for the artificial snowfall to be stopped. This contrast highlights the ecological approach of the post-apocalyptic performance: it acknowledges nature as an agent in its own right, whose weather cannot be switched on and off at human command, while the *Lear* performance was still implicated in what has been described as an ontology of the scenery by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. In this 'Kulissen-Ontologie', 'humans act as dramatic animals in front of the massif of a nature that can never be anything other than the dormant background for human operations', even though after the Industrial Revolution, nature is increasingly used as a 'resource storehouse' and a 'universal dumping ground' (2015: 36). The opening shots of the series drastically make clear that a new ecological ontology has gained momentum after the flu outbreak, as the derelict theatre is now inhabited by plants and animals, which have taken centre stage: the dormant background has become the active foreground, and the human actors are reduced to an object, present only as a photograph of Arthur Leander on the decaying theatre programme (see Figures. 10.1, 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4). In a phrase that fits this transformation of *King Lear*'s staging in *Station Eleven*, Bruno Latour has suggested that climate change

> has not only become a piece of news, not only a story, not only a drama, but also the plot of a tragedy. And a tragedy that is so much more tragic than all the earlier plays, since it seems now very plausible that human actors may arrive *too late* on the stage to have any remedial role. . . . Through a complete reversal of Western philosophy's most cherished trope, human societies have resigned themselves to playing the role of the dumb object, while nature has unexpectedly taken on that of the active subject! (2014: 12–13)

Similarly, Timothy Morton has observed that '[r]ight now, ecological awareness presents itself as tragedy' (2021: 27). Their invocation of the patterns of tragedy to describe the climate crisis has been corroborated by commentators who describe our current pandemic as a revenge tragedy, in which non-human life forms, viruses, now take revenge on humans for the human destruction of the plant and animal worlds (e.g. Narine 2015: 9). What is remarkable about the series *Station Eleven*, however, is that it goes beyond the tragic patterns of catastrophe usually employed in post-apocalyptic fiction, film and TV series. It contributed to the series' outstanding success that its post-pandemic tale of pervasive loss has offered strange comfort to spectators during the pandemic. This comfort partly derives, I argue, from its hopeful outlook on a post-apocalyptic future where human beings, despite their suffering, also manage to creatively respond to loss and grief in the spirit of romance.

Ecological theory is trying to grasp our current moment with new terminology such as 'pre-traumatic stress disorder' in the face of the ecological catastrophe to come, 'anticipated grief' over the losses that we and future generations will experience, 'ecological grief' over the losses we already experience and 'solastalgia' for the lost physical and mental wellbeing that we used to derive from a healthy environment.[7] Yet *Station Eleven* shows us a world in which the process of ecological destruction has been drastically slowed down, nature has reclaimed spaces of civilization and humans have managed to cope with, and even take pleasure in, their new frugal lives. As an 'exercise in "secondhand nonexperience"' (Heise 2008: 206), this speculative outlook helps us imagine a world beyond source depletion. Forensic spectators of *Station Eleven* will notice that the first episodes obliquely comment on the uneasiness of late capitalist consumers: to the sound of the screeching streetcar and

Jeevan's hyperventilating breathing during a panic attack, a shot shows an electrically lit train station that features posters for trips to the countryside with headlines such as 'Get out' (S01E01, 00:18); the series then inserts an eight-second shot of the same place shot from the same angle abandoned and overgrown by nature, with a soundtrack of chirping birds (S01E01, 00:18) before cutting back to the year 2020. *Station Eleven* repeats this technique of cross-cutting, which has an ambiguous effect on both worlds: on the one hand, the shots of renaturalized urban spaces devoid of humans indicate imminent mass death and the collapse of civilization, but on the other hand, the sun-lit, overgrown, abandoned city of the future has a peaceful, pastoral quality that offers a soothing alternative to the urban, increasingly chaotic and apocalyptic city life shown mainly at night, at winter, in blue colours and with stressfully loud noise.

In *Station Eleven*'s re-assemblage of leftover Shakespeare material, the shift from tragedy to the comedic happy ending typical of Shakespeare's romances, including family reunions and the return of those supposed dead, therefore also bears ecological significance. As ecological theory has pointed out, comedy patterns fit the ecological demands of our present and future much better than tragedy:

> The comic mode of human behavior represented in literature is the closest art has come to describing man as an adaptive animal. Comedy illustrates that survival depends upon man's ability to change himself rather than his environment, and upon his ability to accept limitations rather than to curse fate for limiting him. It is a strategy for living which agrees well with the demands of ecological wisdom. (Meeker 1996: 168–9)

Whereas tragedy culminates in (ecological) catastrophe, comedy allows for renewal, rethinking and rebirth (see also Dürbeck 2012: 4), and Shakespearean romance grants both the characters and spectators unexpected and undeserved rewards, reconciliations and reunions. *Station Eleven* has this utopian dimension of wish-fulfilment with 'the feel of a hypnotic fairy tale', as one reviewer put it (Metz 2021), which includes the complete dissolution of racism, sexism, classism and ableism. In the Travelling Symphony, which defines itself as a large family, non-binary and physically disabled characters as well as actors of different ethnicities live in

various queer relationships. In this regard, *Station Eleven* differs from many post-apocalyptic novels and films that 'fail to imagine new experiences of race, gender, and sexuality' and instead 'all too often reproduce conservative ideologies', as Barbara Gurr has shown (2015: 2).[8] While this imagination of a socially more inclusive and just future is explicit, the ecological significance of the series depends on the viewers' interest and skills in excavating the Anthropocene unconscious of its action, dialogues and visual imagery. As typical of complex TV, *Station Eleven* thus caters to audiences with different sensitivities and ideologies: it can be watched on the whole spectrum between a denial of, or at last a diversion from, our knowledge of climate change and relief from intense eco-anxiety. My ecocritical reading argues that the series invites us, in a meta-adaptational and meta-serial move, to reflect on techniques of adaptation as ecological survival skills that may help to imagine and build a future beyond the repetition compulsions of resource depletion and accelerating global warming.[9]

Despite the hopeful romance ending, the series leaves some mysteries and traumas unresolved, both on the individual and on the collective level. For instance, Kirsten works her way back to the traumatic losses of Jeevan, Frank and Arthur, but she never remembers her biological parents in flashbacks or ever talks about them. *Station Eleven*'s serialized working through thus leaves its protagonist in the finale 'that within which passeth show' – and thus, room for audiences to speculate about her past as well as about a potential continuation of the series. Given the open political interpretation of *Station Eleven*, the mise-en-scene of the final shot is noteworthy, which shows Kirsten and Jeevan's leave-taking at a fork in the woods after they had been miraculously reunited at the airport. Read as a symptom of either the Anthropocene unconscious or of climate trauma, this image signals that the rebuilt post-apocalyptic human communities are at a crossroads regarding their reactivation of modernity's leftovers: they have to decide whether they will tread the same path of developing once more a full-blown, ecologically exploitative civilization or whether they will choose a different way. Shakespeare's serial reactivations may help them to decide and may help us to reflect on how we feel about this decision.

Notes

1 Thank you to all participants of the workshop 'Shakespeare's Seriality' held in Konstanz in summer 2022 – Aleida Assmann, Carla Baricz, Elisabeth Bronfen, Ewan Fernie, Diana Henderson, Sarah Hatchuel, Claudia Olk, Isabel Karremann, Paul Kottman and Stephen O'Neill – and the 'Retooling *Hamlet* for the 21st Century' panel at the ESRA conference in Budapest in summer 2023 for their inspiring responses to an earlier version of this paper as well as to Jonas Kellermann, Susanne Köller and Juliane Vogel. My thanks also go to Sofia Meyers for her careful proofreading.

2 See Brown's discussion of the novel and previous post-apocalyptic fiction that engages with Shakespeare (Brown 2019).

3 See Wittreich 1984 and Poole 2019 for discussion of *King Lear*'s apocalyptic imagery.

4 Presenting a young woman with multiple parents as survivor of a humanitarian catastrophe and modelling her situation on Hamlet's, *Station Eleven* ties in with other recent serial *Hamlet* adaptations, for instance, *Black Earth Rising* (BBC and Netflix 2018), which explores the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide (see Wald 2020: 137–86).

5 As Bernard has pointed out, this contagious quality of Shakespeare's plays is part of *Hamlet*'s metatheatrical commentary on early modern antitheatrical anxieties (2019: 225).

6 In this respect as well, the troupe takes up early modern theatre practice. As Rose has pointed out in her ecocritical reading of *The Tempest*, the 'ecology of salvage extends from the fiction of *The Tempest* to the stage materials, garments, hand properties and set pieces, which were recycled from prior early modern contexts into theatre storehouses and then onto the stage' (2017: 272).

7 See Craps' excellent overview over these concepts (Craps 2020).

8 In Mandel's novel, as far as readers can tell, the maintenance of the Shakespeare heritage is predominantly a white preoccupation as well, which has led Thurman to conclude, '[i]f Shakespeare survives the apocalypse, so too does whiteness' (2015: 59). The series' multi-ethnic cast differs from the novel and is particularly relevant since the travelling company may also invoke for audiences the touring troupes that brought Shakespeare's plays to the British colonies as a means of imposing British art and values (Thurman 2015: 59; Smith 2016: 298–300). The colonial legacy and racism that characterized the world in 2020 seem, however, to be dissolved in the post-apocalyptic world of 2040.

9 My reading thus seeks to contribute to the nascent field of ecocritical adaptation studies as recently sketched by Meikle and Geal. While Meikle states that 'the study of adaptation needs to be joined with the study of political ecology in the age of climate change' (2021: 265), Geal points out that ecocritical adaptation studies, opposed to intermedial ecocriticism with a synchronic perspective, can take into account historical and transcultural comparison to discuss 'how human attitudes to various aspects of the non-human world around us change and adapt through time and space' (2023: 6). Studying post-apocalyptic adaptations as nodes of the Shakespeare rhizome that spans centuries and cultures across the globe is one way of contributing to this research.

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