



PROJECT MUSE®

---

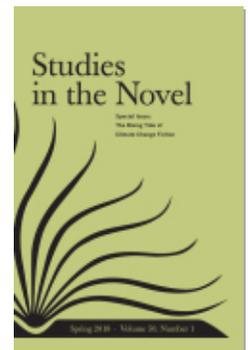
Beauty That Must Die: *Station Eleven*, Climate Change  
Fiction, and the Life of Form

Pieter Vermeulen

Studies in the Novel, Volume 50, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. 9-25 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2018.0001>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/687644>



## BEAUTY THAT MUST DIE: *STATION ELEVEN*, CLIMATE CHANGE FICTION, AND THE LIFE OF FORM

PIETER VERMEULEN

### 1. Object, Genre, Life

It is a commonplace that climate change constitutes a formal challenge to the customary rhythms, patterns, and scales of the novel. Still, literary criticism on climate change fiction has so far to a large extent evaded the question of form, and dissolved it into questions of genres and objects. Let's begin with the recourse to objects. Enlisting the support of object-oriented ontology or actor-network theory, such accounts resituate literature in assemblages of nonhuman, natural, and technological objects with which it colludes in unpredictable ways. In such constellations, literary works function as particular objects, not as formal constructs; they interact with audiences, corporations, sciences, and bureaucracies to make up the reality we know as climate change. As this reality is constructed "through a complex, unstable negotiation among texts, readers, and things," literary works circulate within "new networks of humans and nonhumans" that together give social currency to scientific insights into planetary change (Trexler 74, 57). Climate change, as a matter of concern rather than a mere matter of fact, is not shaped or reflected by literary form, but emerges through the interaction of literary and non-literary objects. Indeed, when climate change is understood, with Timothy Morton, as a hyperobject, it is defined as something that eschews representation, and that is intimated precisely in the *breakdown* of literary form. Planetary change remains fundamentally unrepresentable, and for critics like Morton, literature must first of all register the insufficiency of traditional modes of expression and representation. Form, in Timothy Clark's words, is merely "something to be interrupted, broken or questioned" (187). Literature can show how it has been disrupted and distorted by the temporally and spatially distributed process we call climate change, and it can display its failure to contain it, but it cannot subsume that affliction "as a matter of the intended form" (Ashton).

Literary criticism has so far been more attuned to “[r]epresentational obstacles” and “imaginative shortcomings” in the literary engagement with climate change than to literature’s achievements (Bond et al. 857). When it upholds these achievements, it tends to situate them in terms of genre; and if we understand genre as a “codification of discursive properties” (Todorov 162) or an “affectual contract” between text and reader (Berlant 847), it becomes clear that this approach also circumvents a focus on form. Adam Trexler’s *Anthropocene Fictions*, for example, shows how climate change has had an impact on such genres as the suspense novel, science fiction, or chiller fiction. For Mark McGurl, genre fictions (especially horror and science fiction) rather than literary fictions are “willing to risk artistic ludicrousness in their representation of the inhumanly large and long” (539). For Eugene Thacker, it is more specifically horror that is a privileged site for staging “the limits of the human as it confronts...the world-without-us” (*In the Dust* 8); figures such as the zombie, the vampire, or the demon are strategies for processing “a profound fissure at the heart of the concept of ‘life,’” as that concept not only refers to individual life, but also to “that which is common to each and every instance of the living” (115). The emphasis on horror and dread shows that these accounts are mainly interested in the affects that literary works generate and the way they recirculate elements from a cultural imaginary; they focus on the way genre fiction *conveys* a sense of dislocation, not on how it *shapes* that dislocation.

If object- and genre-oriented approaches evade literary form by situating the encounter with climate change in external afflictions or in readerly affects, this essay proposes a more rigorous focus on literary form. Reading for form, as I understand the term here, implies a commitment to reading the elements of a literary work as parts of a totality; and while it presumes the constructedness of that totality, it does not assume that the authorial intention behind the literary construction can be retrieved. It does not mean that the elements making up that totality are themselves authorial constructions—that is, forms; after all, many of the forces that distress a climate-changed world (and climate change literature) are not so easily thought of as forms—they are the unintended fall-out of complex distributed developments. Considering climate change writing as an engagement with form, then, presupposes an enlarged sense of the term.

In her book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Caroline Levine helpfully extends the meaning of the term to include social (rather than only artistic or literary) arrangements. For her, “form always indicates *an arrangement of elements—an ordering; patterning, or shaping*”; form, for Levine, means “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (3). Levine’s book is a masterful demonstration of the ways literature engages the social through the collisions, overlaps, and intersections of literary and social forms. Her revamped formalism falls short, however, in the face of a literature—like climate change literature—that

engages things that are *not* configurations, *not* ordered, but rather intractable, diffuse, or even intangible. Indeed, climate change and other Anthropocene phenomena entail a radically altered understanding of human life. Human life is now not only a social and biological but also a geological force (Chakrabarty 2); nor is human life any longer a discrete category, as “humans are now part of the natural history of the planet” (10). The Anthropocene drives home the point that life is, in Eugene Thacker’s words, “human-centered and yet unhuman-oriented” (*After Life* ix). Literary engagements with climate change are invested, then, in exploring novel configurations of life and form—in which life is precisely that which cannot simply be subsumed under formal patterns, orders, and rhythms, as a force that resists even as it encounters form. Arne De Boever has theorized life as something that is “plastic” rather than flexible and fungible. Rather than being infinitely malleable, life has a plastic dimension that allows it to “receive, give, and explode form” (24). If Levine’s formalism sees the interaction between forms as a matter not of causation but rather of promiscuous and overlapping collisions (16), De Boever’s account extends the unpredictability and contingency of such confrontations to the multifarious encounters between life and form; life’s power to “receive form and give form” means that it resists its subsumption by form.

My focus on life and form may seem to resemble Thacker’s emphasis on horror as an encounter with “the dread of life” (*In the Dust* 98). Still, I want to make allowances for a broader range of tonalities than Thacker’s horror—or indeed McGurl’s ludicrousness and weirdness. While Thacker focuses on the encounter between a notion of life as “generative and germinal” and one as “scarcity and finitude” (121), Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, the novel I will discuss in this essay, explores many different modalities of life in light of the near-extinction of the species. The tone of *Station Eleven* is composed, tender, and melancholy, and it studiously avoids shock and dread. My double argument is that this tone emerges through differing constellations of life and form, and that it is by reading the novel as a self-reflexive formal construct—rather than as a particular object or a generic product—that we can confront its singular constellation of life and form with other such articulations beyond the literary domain. More specifically, this approach makes it possible to situate the novel’s contribution in the context of philosophical and theoretical interventions on the stakes and affordances of human life in the Anthropocene.

Like Roy Scranton’s *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* and Samuel Scheffler’s *Death and the Afterlife*, the two philosophical works I discuss in the next section, *Station Eleven* taps into what James Berger has called the “pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility in recent American culture” (xiii). Combining genre elements and high literary style, it won an Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction in 2015 and was shortlisted for, among other accolades, the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award. The novel is organized around an epidemic that wipes out 99.6 percent of

the world population, and while it does not engage directly with changes in climate, it does engage with crucial elements of the Anthropocene imagination—extinction, epidemics, energy depletion, survival—in ways that are also relevant for our understanding of cli-fi. The novel’s central concern with biological extinction does not mean that it simply upscales human life to the level of the species (as Scranton and Scheffler tend to do); as Derek Woods has shown, human life in the age of climate change “is not ‘our species’ but the sum of terraforming assemblages composed of humans, nonhuman species, and technics” (134). This means that the human does not simply need to be upscaled, but “needs to be divided among scale domains, the tributaries of which fail to converge at ‘species’” (138). *Station Eleven* responds to this need to “think...disjunctively about the human” (Chakrabarty 2) by articulating the threat of biological extinction with accounts of different communities situated before, during, and after the epidemic. The novel’s frequent temporal shifts (its most remarkable formal feature) entangle its accounts of individual and shared lives with the organizing conceit of planetary catastrophe, just as it juxtaposes its sense of inevitable doom with a resolute hope in the persistence of human culture—embodied, in the novel, by a traveling troupe of Shakespearean actors. *Station Eleven* is as unconcerned with the unrepresentability of the Anthropocene world as it is with conveying affect—it is, instead, occupied with different modalities of the Anthropocene encounter between life and form in a way that enriches existing philosophical accounts of human life in the Anthropocene.

## 2. Form of Life, Afterlife, Life Form

*Station Eleven* is concerned with both the biological fate of the human species and the trajectories of different human constituencies. One way to capture the differences and overlaps between these domains is through the distinction between *life forms* and *forms of life*. If the former term pertains to biological entities, the latter, in anthropologist Stefan Helmreich’s words, typically captures “those cultural, social, symbolic, and pragmatic ways of thinking and acting that organize human communities” (6). Helmreich emphasizes that forms of life are always plural as well as “uneven, contested, and overlapping” (6); they never fully immunize human life against other life forms, but merely modulate and mediate their entanglement (as such, they offer a more differentiated account of ecological interdependence than, for instance, Timothy Morton’s notion of the “mesh”). Yet in a time of biotechnology, genomics, and even species revivalism, biological life forms can no longer be considered a stable background for human forms of life; life forms, far from being anchored in a living substance, rather point to a mode of “organization, morphology, and pattern” that has at times become strangely disconnected from material substrates (Helmreich and Roosth 39). Nor, as Thom van Dooren has remarked, do forms of life only apply to humans: there are also other-

than-human forms of life, as he considers “birds (and other organisms) as life forms *with* a form or way of life” (8-9). Life forms loosened from biological substance, forms of life extending beyond the human: “the relation between life forms and forms of life,” Helmreich writes, “has become liquid, turbulent” (8). This instability makes these notions helpful for capturing the dynamic literary encounter between life and form; like the notion of plasticity, they capture the irreducibility of life to form even as they express their inseparability.

If the relation between forms of life and life forms is less than stable in a climate changed world, the distinction is yet vital when we consider the currency of imaginings of a post-catastrophe world and of the extinction of human life (Vermeulen, “Future Readers”). After all, it matters whether the life that ends is a life form or a form of life. Take, for example, Roy Scranton’s short 2015 book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*—a title that derives much of its appeal from the specter of a “disanthropic” world (Garrard), a world without humans. Particular elements in Scranton’s argument seem to confirm that he is, indeed, talking about biological extinction, as when he positions his work in a philosophical lineage hailing back to Montaigne (who wrote that “to philosophize is to learn how to die”), to Cicero (who saw philosophy as a preparation for death), and ultimately to Socrates (identifying philosophy as “the practice of learning how to separate the soul from the body” [90-91]). Yet Scranton’s argument is essentially about the unsustainability of current forms of life and the need for forging new such forms. The book’s subtitle already mentions “the end of civilization,” and the “death” in the book’s title is in fact “the suicidal burnout of our carbon-fueled global capitalist civilization” (26, also 43, 84). Its central argument is that “this civilization is already dead,” and that we need to get down “to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality” (23).

The point is not that Scranton is simply making a category mistake, but that the categories of life form and form of life allow us to get a purchase on the rhetorical work that notions of life and death are doing in Scranton’s argument. The threat of biological extinction (of the demise of the human life form) allows Scranton to present cultural, economic, and social change (in our forms of life) as a matter of life and death. The challenge “[f]or humanity to survive in the Anthropocene” is “to learn to live with and through the end of our current civilization” (22). The specter of biological death inspires a “daily cultivation of detachment” (92) that “interrupts” (another of the book’s key terms) our mindless participation in “circuits of fear, crisis, and reaction” (86) and makes us apprehend our petrocapiatlist forms of life as things open to change and, in fact, in need of change.

The rhetorical transfer between life forms and forms of life is often fairly bewildering, as when Scranton compares human life to an animal form of life that is in its turn being imagined as an animal version of human forms of life—the workplace and the colony: “How do we stop ourselves from fulfilling

our fates as suicidally productive drones in a carbon-addicted hive, destroying ourselves in some kind of psychopathic colony collapse disorder?” (85-86). For Scranton, who is also an accomplished novelist, the deliberate interference between (the end of) the human life form and (the end of) human forms of life does much of the work that literary form normally does—that, for the Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, even defines “literariness” as such: it *defamiliarizes* a reality we have come to take for granted. In contemporary literature, it is often a shift to a post-catastrophe future that makes the present tangible as a contingent construction (Vermeulen, “Disappearing the Future”)—as if in perverse fidelity to a famous phrase (incorrectly) attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek: “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2). For Scranton, as for the post-catastrophic imagination he exemplifies, conjuring the end of the life form makes the finitude of our forms of life imaginable.

If *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* showcases the complexity of the relation between life and form in the Anthropocene, philosopher Samuel Scheffler’s 2012 Berkeley Tanner Lectures, published as *Death and the Afterlife*, simply sidestep that complexity; it is the distinction between forms of life and life forms, I argue, that makes it possible to diagnose that omission. For Scheffler, the afterlife is not life after death, but “the continuation of human life on earth after our own deaths” (26). Scheffler’s argument is that, unlike the knowledge of our personal death, the knowledge that there will be no humans after us would mean that many of the things that matter to us will stop doing so (15). Human value, in other words, depends on a belief in the persistence of the species in a way it does not on individual immortality. Scheffler draws uplifting conclusions from this insight, in that it points to a limit to individualism, as “the existence of the afterlife”—that is, other, often distant, people’s lives—“matters more to us than our own continued existence” (26). This sounds like good news: it predicts that people faced with the prospect of human species extinction will do what they can to minimize the chances of planetary cataclysms, as everything they hold dear depends on the persistence of human life.

Like Scranton, Scheffler mobilizes literary strategies to align the specter of species death with the construction of value—or, in our terms, to link the human life form with sociocultural forms of life. His argument relies on two thought experiments that convey “the prospect of the disappearance of the human race” (74). One, the doomsday scenario, invites readers to imagine that the “earth would be completely destroyed thirty days after [their] death in a collision with a giant asteroid” (8), while the other draws on the imagining of sudden collective infertility (a scenario dramatized in the novel and film *Children of Men*). The examples are decidedly cosmic and biological, not merely cultural; they pertain to the demise of the human life form as a whole. The burden of Scheffler’s argument is that these thought experiments

reveal our concern for the whole species, not just for people we share a social lifeworld with. Scheffler sees that concern as an upscaling of in-group solidarity to the level of the species, as if the human life form were just an extension of human forms of life and as if there were no “disjunctures and incommensurable differences among scales” (Woods 135). He grants that people are also invested in a group-based afterlife, in “the survival of the community or the clan or the people or the nation” (34) in order to “create a future in which the values we have historically shared with other members of the group will continue to endure” (35), yet he still maintains that “our concern for the existence of an afterlife is not solely a concern for the survival of particular people or groups” (38). It is not just the death of our social group, but “the prospect that everyone else will soon die” (26) that robs our projects and commitments of their value.

Scheffler’s argument goes wrong in at least two ways, and both have to do with the alignment of life forms and forms of life. First, by upscaling our care for particular others to concern for the species, he also upgrades the investment in the preservation and continuation of a shared tradition that defines communities to the level of a universal imperative. The implicit conservatism of this position is clear when he writes that “[h]umanity itself as an ongoing, historical project provides the implicit frame of reference for most of our judgments about what matters” (60). Humanity as a project is a particularly Western and modern notion, and it fails to ponder the possibility that there might be something wrong with this particular frame of reference. Like Scranton, Scheffler uses the specter of species death as a defamiliarization device; but unlike Scranton, he does not use it to detach us from our forms of life, but rather to strengthen our attachment to particular—and, Scranton would argue, particularly destructive and toxic—forms of life that he erroneously takes to be universal. And this leads us to consider a second problem with Scheffler’s position: by intensifying people’s attachment to existing forms of life, and by failing to acknowledge the plurality of such forms, it overlooks the detrimental effect that the intimation of the vulnerability and contingency of forms of life—rather than the biological life form—has in human constituencies. Think of the affirmation of toxic masculinity in the face of feminist challenges, xenophobic resistance to non-Western alternatives to Western ways of life, or Donald Trump’s contention in a speech in Warsaw in July 2017 that “the fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive”: in each case, the perception that a particular form of life may go extinct leads more readily to defensiveness and intercultural aggression than to a scalable template for solidarity. Once we bring in the difference between life form and forms of life, Scheffler’s upbeat conclusion becomes hard to sustain. As I will argue, reading the choreography of life and form in *Station Eleven* reveals an account of life and value in the Anthropocene that can complement (if not correct) Scheffler’s and Scranton’s philosophical positions.

### 3. *Station Eleven*, or, Beauty That Must Die

*Station Eleven*'s opening chapter immediately foregrounds the unpredictable interactions of forms of life and life forms. Arthur Leander, an aging actor, is playing King Lear on a Toronto stage when he misses a few lines and then dies of a heart attack. Yet these events are initially seen as part of the performance—the first paragraph of the novel, after all, had already underlined that this is an experimental interpretation of the play that crosses borders between stage and audience, featuring “three little girls [playing] a clapping game onstage as the audience entered” (3). So when Arthur gets his lines wrong, “[i]t was still possible at that moment that Arthur was acting” (3); only later is it “obvious that he wasn’t Lear anymore” (4)—but then, of course, he has never strictly been Lear to begin with. Nor does the intervention by a paramedic and a cardiologist (while the stage snow keeps falling) end the performance: as another team of medics takes over, Jeevan, the paramedic, notes that “his role in this performance was done” (6). Even when Arthur is clearly dead, the show continues and an oxygen mask is applied, so the family “wouldn’t be notified of his death via the evening news” (7). Biological death, then, does not just signal the end of a form of life, but also the proliferation of new ones.

Still, the collision of nature and culture resonates beyond the theater. It begins snowing in the city, as if in “an echo of the plastic translucencies” on stage (9), and the muted cataclysm in the theater coincides with a global epidemic that will kill most of the world population in only a few days. Yet *Station Eleven* does not indulge in the blood and gore such an epidemic typically invites, nor does it dwell on the devastations of its immediate aftermath: the novel skips “the first ten or twelve years after the collapse” and shifts to the “calmer age” that follows it (145). The horror is only ever contemplated from a distance—and again, the snow exemplifies this more tender and muted perspective: watching what they do not yet know is a terminal civilization, the actors note that “[f]rom the bar the snow was almost abstract, a film about bad weather on a deserted street” (15; the next chapter starts in the “interior paradise” of a greenhouse, while another character witnesses the disintegration of her marriage and the unfaithfulness of her husband “like a diorama, white walls and golden light and glamorous people” [98]). The snow is also contemplated in a paperweight that connects different strands of the story—“a lump of glass with a storm cloud trapped inside” (15). Through the motif of snow, the novel registers its awareness of its detachment from disturbing events; in that way, it qualifies that reserve as a formal decision rather than a statement on the purported unrepresentability of the collapse of civilization (a decision that arguably also opens new avenues for cli-fi—avenues that are less spectacular and apocalyptic than usual). As in Scranton’s and Scheffler’s accounts, species extinction (or near-extinction) serves as a catalyst for a reconsideration of the relation between life and form; but while Scranton invokes extinction as a trigger to change our forms of life and Scheffler as a reminder of the need

for these forms' perpetuation, *Station Eleven*, as I will demonstrate, uses the affordances of the novel form—time shifts, multiple narration, free indirect speech, lyricism—to sketch a more multifaceted dynamic: it shows how the prospect of finitude enriches human life, and how forms of life are as persistent as they are discontinuous.

The novel codes the relation between finitude and value through the notion of beauty (a term that also captures the novel's own tender and precious tone; it studiously avoids the customary scales and disorientations of the sublime or the traumatic). The words "beauty" and "beautiful" recur throughout the novel, and they mostly name valuations powered by an insight into the finitude of things. When Kirsten, one of the child actors in the play that opens the novel, receives the paperweight on the eve of destruction (although she will survive and play a prominent role in the post-post-apocalyptic strand of the novel), it is described as "the most beautiful, the most wonderful, the strangest thing" (15); after the collapse, she still finds it "nothing but dead weight" yet "beautiful" (66). When realizing her marriage is over, the character Miranda finds the family home more beautiful than ever: "She's always found the house beautiful, but it's even more so now that she knows she's leaving" (102). After the collapse, the world is rendered more lovely by the prospect that "[p]erhaps soon humanity would simply flicker out," which releases "[t]he beauty of this world where almost everyone was gone" (148). Even an abandoned Toronto strikes one survivor with "[a] stark and unexpected beauty, silent metropolis, no movement" (182). It is only when cars have stopped driving and planes have stopped flying that people "recognize the beauty of flight" (247).

Beauty, it seems, is premised on scarcity; it only emerges when we acknowledge the finitude of things. Only things that can be lost, the novel seems to suggest, can be beautiful, which means that a strong reminder of finitude, such as the catastrophe at the heart of the novel, has the power to make things beautiful. In his book *Dying for Time*, Martin Hägglund has theorized the relation between desire and loss. According to Hägglund, human life does not desire to escape time and find repose in some timeless paradise; in such an imagined state in which nothing can disappear, nothing can be valued either. For Hägglund, only things that can be lost can become objects of desire, as "[t]he sense of something being valuable or significant is inseparable from the sense that it *can* be lost" ("Beauty" 103). Desire is tied to temporal existence, not to an illusory immortality, and it is "the attachment to temporal life that is the source of all care" (*Dying* 9). In Hägglund's view, the sense that "[t]he passing away of the moment...is an inseparable part of what animates the passion for the moment" ("Beauty" 104) also pertains to beauty: beauty is, in words he borrows from John Keats, always a "[b]eauty that must die" (qtd. in Hägglund, "Beauty" 106).

Clark, one of the survivors of the collapse, starts a "Museum of Civilization" in an abandoned airport terminal. Hägglund's logic helps explain why this

museum, which merely assembles random things whose associated forms of life have become obsolete—iPhones, Nintendo consoles, stiletto heels, a snow globe (255, 258)—functions as a repository of beauty: “Clark had always been fond of beautiful objects, and in his present state of mind, all objects were beautiful” (255). Beauty, in other words, emerges when things are weaned from the forms of life that used to organize their production, circulation, and consumption, and enter novel entanglements of life forms and forms of life (which, incidentally, goes to show that a focus on form is indispensable for capturing the dynamics of objects in climate change fiction). In that sense, it is appropriate that the museum is housed in an abandoned airport terminal, the ultimate supermodern non-place where people “are surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary, and the ephemeral” (Augé 78). Indeed, this weaning (which is also a form of defamiliarization) makes these elements visible in the first place: when Clark looks at the snow globe, he imagines its whole life-cycle, from “the mind that invented those miniature storms” over “the assembly-line worker who watched the globe glide past” to “the UPS man carrying boxes of snow globes” to the airport (255). Again, a comparison to Scranton and Scheffler is instructive: if, in *Learning to Die*, the prospect of catastrophe makes petrocapiatist forms of life visible so they can be exchanged for new forms, and in *Death and the Afterlife* it serves to reaffirm our attachment to extant forms, in *Station Eleven* it serves to make objects beautiful by temporarily detaching them from form. In the same way that the aesthetic operation of the museum renders things beautiful, the novel itself, which like the museum is organized around a situation of massive loss, constellates the human life form and sociocultural forms of life in a way that makes things beautiful.

That the museum serves as a figure for the novel’s own aesthetic program is most apparent in occasional litanies of “[w]hat was lost in the collapse: almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty” (57; the logic of the sentence would be more accurate if “but” was replaced with “and therefore”). The cultivation of beauty chimes in with the novel’s refrain: “*Because survival is insufficient*” (58, 119)—which goes together with the unstated premise that, if survival is not sufficient, then near-extinction is yet necessary for the production of beauty. The novel repeatedly insists that those who remember everything suffer most (267), and it is implied that such remembrance also provides the experience of loss—of a “divide between a *before* and an *after*, a line drawn through...life” (20)—on which beauty depends. This enabling knowledge is, of course, also that of the reader, who has access to both the world before (the world the reader actually inhabits) and the one after the collapse. The museum and the novel also share an archival function: the museum “kept impeccable records” (258), and consulting them is “something like prayer” (262). The novel’s omniscient perspective also keeps records, as it transcends the memorial limitations of the different contexts it records. One

strand of the book consists in instalments from an interview between a local journalist—after the end of telecommunication and “the end of gasoline” (36), there is only local reporting left—in the post-catastrophe world and Kirsten, the child actor who survived. When the interviewee forgets one of the names of the people she talks about, the novel itself is the one instance that has stored that name (181); it is also the one instance that can access the parts of the interview that are off the record (265-68).

If the novel as a whole choreographs the losses that occur between different forms of life and life forms, its status as a perfect recording device to which nothing is lost is a problem: by the novel’s own logic, this seems to make it immune to beauty. The novel circumvents this complication through its reliance on ekphrasis—the linguistic description of a visual work of art. This work is the graphic novel also entitled *Station Eleven*, which tells the story of one Dr. Eleven, who, in some far-away future, leads an escape mission from the Earth when it is taken over by a hostile civilization and hides out in a space station “in the uncharted reaches of deep space” (83). The comic book is the work of Miranda, whose imagining of a cataclysm and a band of survivors will turn out to be eerily prophetic. Yet as if to underscore the unpredictable entanglement of life forms and forms of life, of species extinction and more local losses, the novel underlines that the comic book mainly serves as a projection of Miranda’s personal ambitions and disappointments (87); when she sees her marriage to Arthur disintegrate, the world of Dr. Eleven provides an emotional template: “She is marooned on a strange planet” (92). It is significant that the novel adopts the title of the comic it cannot represent, only evoke, as that formal decision inserts a moment of medial insufficiency, and therefore of loss, and therefore of beauty, in the novel’s very form. This sense of medial loss is even intensified by the inclusion in the first edition of the novel of a number of illustrations based on the novel’s description of the comic and rendered in a retro style by the artist Nathan Burton. *Station Eleven*’s ekphrastic mode—the evocation of a beauty that is lost—then comes to characterize the novel’s whole depiction of the pre-catastrophe world, which is also the reader’s world.

#### 4. Shakespeare and the Form-of-Life

If *Station Eleven* is organized around a discontinuity between forms of life, it invests in objects and works of art to restore a tenuous sense of continuity. There is not only the paperweight that makes it from Miranda’s story over the *Lear* performance to the post-catastrophe world, there is also a physical copy of the comic book that travels across civilizational collapse. The most remarkable survivor, however, is the work of Shakespeare. If the novel starts with a performance of *Lear*—a play that has a particular affinity with the Anthropocene (Dionne)—his work keeps being performed by “The Travelling Symphony,” a group of actors who travel around the devastated world. Remarkably, the survival of Shakespeare not only bespeaks the

resilience of a humanist heritage, but it also testifies to a deeper affinity between Shakespeare's time and the post-catastrophe world (McCarry). The novel notes that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first performed "the year London's theatres reopened after two seasons of plague," and "a year before the death of Shakespeare's only son" (57). It was written by a writer who was the first of his siblings to survive infancy, in a time marked by "death flickering over the landscape" (57). This situation resonates with what Mandel in an interview calls *Station Eleven's* "post-pandemic world" (qtd. in McCarry). The Symphony's audience, "the lives they brushed up against," "were work-worn and difficult, people who spent all their time engaged in the tasks of survival" (151). *Station Eleven* is not about the unperturbed continuity of a humanist tradition—indeed, that the persistence of culture depends on artifacts (paperweights, comics, scripts) underscores its contingency. Rather, *Station Eleven* shapes a half-buried affinity between historical periods in which the fit between life and the forms that normally contain it becomes less stable—when time-honored constellations of life forms and forms of life are destabilized.

*Station Eleven's* channeling of Shakespeare highlights a peculiar consonance between historical periods in which forms of life—understood not only as modes of organization, but also as inevitably imperfect modes of protection—become particularly vulnerable and precarious. Eric Santner has influentially theorized such moments as revealing the "creaturely" dimension of human life—as moments when human life is exposed to nonhuman life forms without being able to coincide with them (indeed, human life is defined by the impossibility of such coincidence). The creaturely, Santner writes, "signifies a mode of *exposure* that distinguishes human beings from other kinds of life: not exposure simply to the elements or the fragility and precariousness of our mortal, finite lives, but rather to an ultimate lack of foundation for the historical forms of life that distinguish human community" (5). It is this paradoxical condition of exposure without coincidence, brought on by forms of life that can never immunize human life against threats, of an entanglement without intimacy, that characterizes human life in the Anthropocene—and, as *Station Eleven* suggests, also the transition into early modernity recorded in Shakespeare's plays.

For Santner, creatureliness is "a dimension not so much of biological as of *ontological* vulnerability, a vulnerability that permeates human being as that being whose essence it is to exist in forms of life that are, in turn, contingent, fragile, susceptible to breakdown" (6). What *Station Eleven's* emphasis on a pandemic adds to Santner's account is that "the radical contingency of the forms of life that constitute the space of meaning within which human life unfolds" (5-6) is not opposed to geological or biological contingency, but is, if anything, amplified and compounded by the more radical reorganization of life forms and forms of life that marks a climate changed world. Creatureliness in the Anthropocene, then, needs to factor in geological and biological

unsettlements that Santner's problematic humanism underestimates. The updated version of creatureliness that *Station Eleven*'s inflection of Shakespeare intimates is situated at the intersections of biological, geological, social, and psychological pressures that characterize the relation between life and form in the Anthropocene.

Connecting Shakespeare's early modernity and the Anthropocene as historical moments when forms of life and life forms enter novel constellations delivers a different account of modernity. That such an account is articulated through Shakespeare is significant. While few go as far as Harold Bloom's hyperbolic claim that Shakespeare "invented the human as we continue to know it" (xviii), it is yet customary to credit his plays with cementing the displacement of a medieval and theocentric world with a humanist modern one. Mandel herself hints at such an elevation of Shakespeare when, in an interview, she nominates Shakespeare as the epitome of what she calls "our world": "It seems to me that in a post-apocalyptic scenario, people would want what was best about the lost world, and in my entirely subjective opinion, what was best about our world would include the plays of William Shakespeare" (qtd. in McCarry). Like the refrain "*Because survival is insufficient*," this suggests Mandel's humanist intent. But as with the refrain, that intent gets entangled in a recalibration of life forms and forms of life in which, as we have seen, the encounter with contingency, and thus with the borders of the human, is a crucial condition for the generation of value. If for Scheffler value asserts itself as an imperative to preserve threadbare forms of life, and for Scranton as an urge to abandon them, *Station Eleven* resituates contemporary forms of life in a subterranean history through which particularly charged moments of semantic and somatic stress are connected. I have shown elsewhere that, in the turbulent reorganization of the relations between life forms and forms of life that marked the German twentieth century, thinkers like Erich Auerbach, Walter Benjamin, and Carl Schmitt all turned to Shakespeare to test transhistorical affinities between the periods in which they wrote and Shakespeare's early modernity (Vermeulen, "Creaturely Memory"). By joining that effort, *Station Eleven* recovers the half-hidden history of creatureliness and helps us gain purchase on the dislocations and imbrications of human and nonhuman agencies that mark the climate changed present.

But how do we square the novel's engagement with unsettling discontinuities with its investment in beauty? How, that is, are the historical and spatial dislocations it chronicles organized in its decidedly subdued and neatly controlled narrative? Even if it is organized around shifts in the relation between life forms and forms of life, I suggest, the novel is energized by a desire to neutralize these tensions. "Beauty" is one name for such moments when tensions are suspended. In the novel's different plotlines, characters escape by simply withdrawing from toxic life forms: Miranda finds rest in Malaysia, where "12 percent of the world's shipping fleet lay at anchor off the coast"

(28), while Jeevan uses the collapse to just walk away from a relationship he has outgrown. These quiet disappearing acts are contrasted with the storyline that tells the story of the Prophet, a charismatic cult-leader in the post-catastrophe world who terrorizes the territories in which the novel is situated. The cult is marked by its inability to sustain the complex entanglements of biological death and the fragility of life forms; when people run away from the group, the cult erects “grave markers” located next to real graves, yet “driven into perfectly flat and undisturbed earth” (52-54). Rather than embracing the complexities of Anthropocene life, the cult denies them through simplification, as the contingency of a form of life is erroneously coded as biological death. “To us,” the Prophet notes about the renegades, “they are dead” (62).

In critical theory, such figures that can be killed with impunity because they are already symbolically dead have a name: they are the *homines sacri* that Giorgio Agamben famously recovered from the archive of Western political thought. As the avatar of bare life (or what Santner calls “creaturely life”), the *homo sacer* is exposed to sovereign power, especially when customary forms of life no longer protect it. It is this exposure that *Station Eleven*’s form couches in beauty. Interestingly, Agamben’s work has begun to develop a notion that counters the abandonment besetting bare life. Agamben calls this notion “form-of-life.” If life normally is “the naked life that...separates the forms of life from their cohering into a form-of-life” (*Means without Ends* 6), a “form-of-life” is precisely “a life that cannot be separated from its form” (4). A life that temporarily coincides with its form is “a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself” (4)—a life, in the terms of the novel, for which survival and that which is more than (insufficient) survival are the same, and therefore enough.

What are these forms of life that are also forms of survival? Already before the catastrophe, *Station Eleven* refers to the *Lear* actors by their stage names, even when they are off stage—hence a bar conversation between “Gloucester” and “Goneril” (13-15). Actors coincide with their role, and life, it seems, temporarily coincides with its form. There is also Jeevan’s brother Frank, who works as a ghostwriter for “some overprivileged philanthropist” and whose words and ideas seem to merge fully with Frank’s own mental life to the extent that their authorship becomes undecidable (186-87). And there is Miranda, whose personal problems temporarily disappear when she begins “living her job, breathing her job, until she isn’t sure where she stops and her job begins” (107). Yet the clearest instances of form-of-life are intimated by the names of the members of the Travelling Symphony—who are called Viola, Tuba, Clarinet, etc. The novel notes that they used to have different names “but had taken on the name of [their] instrument after the collapse” (128). Some members are also referred to as “the first oboe,” “the third cello,” “the second horn,” or “the seventh guitar” (46). Crucially, “seventh” here is not an ordinal number but part of a rigid designator: “the guitarists had a tradition of

not changing their numbers when another guitarist died or left, so that currently the Symphony roster included guitars four, seven, and eight” (46). The seventh guitar, in other words, designates “a life that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it” (Agamben, *Highest Poverty* xi); it names a “form-of-life.” It is as a “form-of-life” that life becomes more than a bare life struggling for mere survival, and it is through “form-of-life” that *Station Eleven* confronts the entanglements of life and form in the Anthropocene.

### 5. Coda: Climate Change and the Time of Beauty

An annoying little detail: one of the things that bring Miranda and Arthur together in one of the storylines of *Station Eleven* is that they both hail from a “gorgeous and claustrophobic” small place in British Columbia named Delano Island (74). In an interview, Mandel notes that Delano Island is “an ever-so-slightly fictionalized version of the small island where [she] mostly grew up” (qtd. in Martinez). But why call this slightly displaced island, of all things, Delano Island (which is, in reality, the name of a little island in Ontario that has no relevance for the novel)? It is hard to avoid reading this name as an encrypted reference to Captain Delano from Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno*. In Melville’s 1855 novella, Amasa Delano is a Massachusetts captain who boards a Spanish slave ship that is lying off the coast of Chile and where, unbeknownst to him, a mutiny has taken place. Delano’s stay on the ship and his elaborate dialogue with its captain, Benito Cereno, are sustained exercises in denial (supported by the narrative’s infamously destabilizing narrative perspective [Kavanagh]), and in willfully misinterpreting the abundant clues that, in fact, the former slaves are now in control of the ship and Benito is forced by them to act as if everything is in order. When the facts finally become impossible to distort, Delano unleashes a mission of revenge in which the mutinous slaves are mercilessly slaughtered.

If we read *Station Eleven* as a novel also concerned with climate change (among other Anthropocene phenomena), this sly reference to Melville’s novella hints at its critique of the temporality of climate change denial: an ever more desperately and aggressively enforced blindness to an atrocity that has already happened and that, when the truth finally hits, will unleash butchery of the kind that ends *Benito Cereno* (Bates). The novel contains a few further references to that temporality: when she sees her marriage fall apart, Miranda notes that “[i]t’s too late, and it’s been too late for a while” (98); civilization before the collapse is called a world of “[h]igh-functioning sleepwalkers” (163). *Benito Cereno*’s atrocious carnage is precisely the kind of cataclysmic gore of “the first unspeakable years” (37) that *Station Eleven* declines to indulge; Mandel’s main characters *leave* Delano Island, just as the novel carefully undoes a stance of desperate denial.

Yet Delano Island refuses to leave the characters alone: later in life, one of Arthur’s childhood friends releases a book about him based on the letters he

kept sending her, even if, as he admits, she never wrote back. Arthur notes that he “treated [her] like a diary” and “used her as a repository for my thoughts,” to the extent that he “stopped thinking of her as a human being” (211). *Benito Cereno* is a case study in the savagery that a denial of (the) humanity (of slaves) entails; in the context of climate change, *Station Eleven*’s encrypted reference underlines the cost of denial. Mandel, Scheffler, and Scranton share an awareness of the need to undo denial to minimize that cost. *Station Eleven* shows that part of the cost is the cancelation of a beauty that paradoxically depends on the acknowledgment of loss. The novel is deeply invested in intervals that, unlike that in *Benito Cereno*, are powered by loss rather than by its denial: in the graphic novel, there is the Undersea where people “liv[e] out their lives in underwater fallout shelters” (213); there is the decorum that kicks in between Arthur’s death and the communication with his family; there is the airport terminal where people initially count time “as though they were only temporarily stranded” because “the entire history of being stranded in airports up to that point was also a history of eventually becoming unstranded” (231). A number of the survivors work hard to keep the runway snow-free, in case an airplane will come to the rescue. Gradually, they abandon that cargo-cult mindset and accept that they will never again become unstranded—that the interval between the demise of customary forms of life and the extinction of the human life form is all the life that remains. It is the point of *Station Eleven* that this remainder is neither an object nor a generic occasion for horror and dread; it is, instead, a novel encounter between life and form whose beauty remains to be achieved.

UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN, BELGIUM

## WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rule and Form-of-Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013.
- . *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000.
- Ashton, Jennifer. “Totaling the Damage: Revolutionary Ambition in Recent American Poetry.” *Nonsite.org* 18 (2015): n. pag. Web.
- Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995.
- Bates, Robin. “Melville and Climate Change Denial.” *Better Living through Beowulf*. 12 May 2014. Web.
- Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Berlant, Lauren. “Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event.” *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008): 845-60.
- Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Fourth Estate, 1998.
- Bond, Lucy, Ben De Bruyn, and Jessica Rapson. “Planetary Memory in Contemporary American Fiction.” *Textual Practice* 31.5 (2017): 853-66.
- Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

- De Boever, Arne. *Plastic Sovereignities: Agamben and the Politics of Aesthetics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016.
- Dionne, Craig. *Posthuman Lear: Reading Shakespeare in the Anthropocene*. New York: Punctum Books, 2016.
- Garrard, Greg. "World without Us: Some Types of Disanthropy." *Substance* 41.1 (2007): 40-60.
- Häggglund, Martin. "Beauty That Must Die: A Response to Michael Clune." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15.3 (2015): 101-07.
- . *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012.
- Helmreich, Stefan. *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2009.
- Helmreich, Stefan, and Sophia Roosth. "Life Forms: A Keyword Entry." *Representations* 112 (2010): 27-53.
- Kavanagh, James. "'That Hive of Subtlety': *Benito Cereno* as Ideological Critique." *Bucknell Review* 28.1 (1984): 127-57.
- Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Providence: Princeton UP, 2015.
- Mandel, Emily St. John. *Station Eleven*. London: Picador, 2014.
- Martinez, Robin. "No One Stays Forever: An Interview with Emily St. John Mandel." *Robinlmartinez.com*. 18 Aug. 2014. Web.
- McCarry, Sarah. "I Want It All": A Conversation with Emily St. John Mandel." *Tor.com*. 12 Sept. 2014. Web.
- McGurl, Mark. "The Posthuman Comedy." *Critical Inquiry* 38.3 (2012): 533-53.
- Santner, Eric. *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011.
- Scheffler, Samuel. *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016.
- Scranton, Roy. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2015.
- Thacker, Eugene. *After Life*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010.
- . *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2011.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Origin of Genres." *New Literary History* 8.1 (1976): 159-70.
- Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2015.
- Vermeulen, Pieter. "Creaturely Memory: Shakespeare, the Anthropocene and the New *Nomos* of the Earth." *Parallax* 23.4 (2017): 384-97.
- . "Disappearing the Future: Dystopia and Memory Culture in Elliott Hall's *The Rapture*." *Poetics Today* 37.3 (2016): 473-94.
- . "Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene." *Textual Practice* 31.5 (2017): 867-85.
- Van Dooren, Thom. *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. New York: Columbia UP, 2016.
- Woods, Derek. "Scale Critique for the Anthropocene." *Minnesota Review* 83 (2014): 133-42.