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Prologue - Adaptation as Plot

In the second edition of Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, the writer begins by noting the prevalence of adaptations across different media, explaining that one piece of evidence for our acceptance or awareness of such saturation in the decade preceding that edition of the book is the emergence of films *about* the process of adaptation (2013, 2). This is true of both fictional films, like Spike Jonze's *Adaptation*, and documentaries, such as Terry Gilliam's *Lost in La Mancha*, both of which she cites. Also released in the years preceding this edition of the text, though not mentioned in it, is Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York*, a film that involves aspects of adaptation studies and processes that neither of the named films do, even though the film is not overtly about adaptation in the way those films are.

Whereas *Adaptation* and *Lost in La Mancha* wrestle in an often darkly comic way with the difficulties of writers bringing existing narratives to the screen, *Synecdoche, New York* imagines adaptation as a process through which reality becomes confused with replication, as both reality and replication run parallel to each other--as the demands of a text become tyrannical and all-encompassing (in this film's case, the text is a kind of stage play or theatrical production). In her book,

Hutcheon examines replication and reality with reference to the novel *England, England*, by Julian Barnes, invoking related ideas of repetition and difference, and the power and pleasure afforded those who can rival reality by replicating and adapting it (2013, 114). For the doomed playwright of *Synecdoche, New York*, there is no pleasure in replicating every aspect of his life, and the lives of others, even though his MacArthur genius grant provides him with the budget and impetus to do so. Instead, he is cursed by the command the text exerts, to keep going, to walk towards death while playing out a preordained text rather than exiting the stage and freeing oneself from a replication, an adaptation of life. Perhaps he realizes in the end that replicating the substance of his life endlessly through art will not help him survive, though Kaufman's film is ambivalent about whether the death of the subject spells the absolute end of its adaptation.

The subject of this article is not *Synecdoche, New York* or *England, England*, though this introduction is intended to illustrate how the study of adaptation continues to evolve beyond its original position as a research subject for scholars and into a regular substance for the plots of popular texts. The domains also increasingly blend: the scholarly and the popular, the critical community and the fan community, and especially the different types of artistic expression that communicate such ideas. There is no confirmation that Kaufman was influenced by Barnes' novel about a theme park when he wrote his film screenplay about a theatrical production, though the resonances certainly exist. The two works and their similar plots concerning constructed replicas overtaking reality and transforming their human participants are related to the narratives on which the present article focuses: serialized television storytelling and literary fiction in which characters realize that their dystopian futures have been written in texts that overwhelm human attempts at replication and alteration. These characters guided by prophetic texts that have survived upheavals and tragedies realize that their own lives are threatened, and their devotion to these esoteric texts might facilitate their (and humankind's) survival.

Overviews - Two Key Texts about Survival and A Range of Adapting Agents

In Dennis Kelly's *Utopia* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* and its television adaptation of the same name by Patrick Somerville, the characters' awareness of being influenced by texts that they have some role in interpreting coincides with the demands of adapting to the grim existence of life during and following a pandemic. I will argue that these series and their sources explore the reputation of science fiction as a genre for adaptation and that the series dramatize an offshoot of what Patrick Cattrysse calls "Intermediate Adaptation" (2014, 259) while also bearing the appreciation of adaptation that is part of fan engagement. In my view, a significant distinction of these series is the way they position characters *within* the narratives as intermediate adapters of a different sort, existing between source texts they devote their lives to, and lost futures they fight to reclaim, however predetermined those lost futures seem to be. In both works, these adapting characters are the force that preserves threatened texts, and the texts facilitate their survival, a reciprocal process that sees each side constantly acting on and transforming the form or meaning of the other. I will also illustrate how these narratives take on predictive qualities in retrospect because of the centrality of pandemics within the fiction, which influences subsequent adaptations of and fan engagement with the works. This dimension additionally reflects the themes of determinism and contingency that are central to *Utopia* and *Station Eleven*.

In addition to the pertinent theories advanced by adaptation studies experts such as Hutcheon and Catryssee, another influence for this study is an aspect of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory. Consulting Actor-Network Theory allows one to loosen conceptions of beginning and ending points for adapted works and to consider how the knowledge creation and creative processes that are part of adapting might involve more participants than have been traditionally credited with that intellectual and creative work. Hutcheon's concept of "reception continuum" is one way of describing such expansion (2013, 171), with cultural and historical influences

affecting the relationship between a source and its adaptation and the degree to which adaptations might take precedence in certain contexts, relative to their sources. In *Utopia* and *Station Eleven*, the dire circumstances faced by characters living out the texts they hold dear heighten the sense that these human adapters' choices are constantly affecting and affirming the information in the original sources, but in neither is there a guarantee that fidelity to an interpretation of the source text will allow either the text or the adapter to survive into the future.

Though Actor-Network Theory is not a principal text for adaptations studies, it contributes to a useful foundation for examining this article's two texts--*Utopia* and *Station Eleven*--because Actor-Network Theory recognizes that the relationship networks that exist in the world include human and non-human agents or actors, especially in plots that involve developments or advancements in science and technology. In *Utopia* and *Station Eleven*, the foremost non-human agents are deadly flus and science-related graphic novels or comics that exist in the story worlds. These non-human agents become equally or more influential than some human actors in the networks of characters that populate the narratives. A lengthy quotation from Latour explains how slippery social formations are and accounts for how something like a graphic novel or comic could possess such power, especially in a world where the status quo is suddenly transformed by pandemics and the accompanying threat of extinction. Inviting his reader to consider what we mean when we talk about the adjective *social*, Latour writes:

> The adjective 'social' designates two entirely different phenomena: it's at once a substance, a kind of stuff, and also a movement between non-social elements. In both cases, the social vanishes. When it is taken as a solid, it loses its ability to associate; when it's taken as a fluid, the social again disappears because it flashes only briefly, just at the fleeting moment when new associations are sticking the collective together. (2005, 159)

One understanding of his distinctions is that the formation or unit one imagines when one hears the adjective social might seem unified and less penetrable (and therefore

closed off to new associations), but once opened to form new associations, is susceptible to new influences and threats against its cohesion.

There is a clear parallel between this process and how an adapted text is both fixed and malleable. Latour also offers a supplementary list of uncertainties provides a structure for considering the presence of contingency versus certainty in *Utopia* and *Station Eleven*. That these uncertainties exist seems to be one of the only certainties, and what they ensure is a kind of flux in anything we might refer to as social or the way we conceive of any network. Change as the only constant is an idea at least as old as Heraclitus, though Latour contributes categories or gradations as an outgrowth of what he calls "the major intuitions of the social sciences" (2005, 21-22). His "five major uncertainties" are "the nature of groups…the nature of actions…the nature of objects… the nature of facts…and, finally, about the type of studies done under the label of a science of the social as it is never clear in which precise sense social sciences can be said to be empirical" (22). The first four of these are all relevant to *Utopia* and *Station Eleven*, and I will weave these uncertainties into the following examination of the series. But first it is necessary to establish some particulars about these programs, as serialized narratives, and to consider their commonalities.

Authors, Narrative Intentions, and the Persistence of Genre

Utopia's Dennis Kelly was a playwright before he wrote scripts for television. *Osama the Hero*, an early play of Kelly's, first staged two decades ago, introduces some themes and approaches to dramatizing world-changing events that will become relevant to the series *Utopia*, particularly unspectacular urban characters whose becoming enmeshed in such events distinguishes them and determines their fate. In *Osama the Hero*, this distinction occurs through the text of a school project written by a teenager who must deliver a presentation on a living hero. He selects Osama bin Laden. The subsequent accusations and torture that the boy is subjected to mirrors the cyclical aggression of the War on Terror in miniature. Had the boy not written the school project, would he ever be considered a suspect in a bombing? Had he not grown up in a poor and violent estate, would he have chosen bin Laden for his

presentation? The questions, the uncertainties, multiply. *Osama the Hero* adapted then-current events, which was particularly stinging for some as the real bin Laden was still being sought and in a media environment in which even the most reverent treatments of 9/11 narratives were sometimes rejected with the objection *too soon*. That *Osama the Hero* continues to be produced to this day, well after the titular character was killed in the real world and beyond the real war on terror, affects the social experience of staging and watching the play: the representation lives on even as the terroristic referent is gone. Any contemporary adaptation exists under those conditions.

Utopia came to Kelly after being initially proposed for television by Kudos, a British film and television production company. In a Channel 4 news release timed to the premiere of the series, Kelly explained his initial attachment to the show and some of the ways he refined and adapted the original idea:

> Kudos came to me with an idea, and it was about a conspiracy hidden inside a graphic novel. It was very embryonic, and a bit more comic-book. I think the conspiracy was quite 'illuminati'. What I really liked was the idea of this thing that just randomly happened to get hidden in a graphic novel. I liked some of the idea, and some of it I wanted to change. I wanted to ground it in quite a real world, and not make it superheroic or sci-fi. (Channel 4, 2012)

This statement makes clear that Kelly was aware of the actions available to him as an adapter of a story in its germinal stage. One of these was the selection of a narrative element he found the most interesting, which was a feature of the story-within-a-story, the graphic novel within the television show script. The other was a choice of tone, style, or genre that could serve as the form communicating or uniting both the inner story and the outer one.

He was successful in committing to that direction, as the series regularly juxtaposes the expressionistic drawings of a graphic novel manuscript with the imagery of the reality outside of that manuscript: a grim and ultra-violent adventure that is nonetheless replete with three or four recurring color motifs, spectacular

oversaturation and color grading, and conspicuous lens flares that link the real world of the characters to the spectacle of the graphic novel or comic book form with which they are obsessed. And it isn't just any graphic novel or comic book. Within the fictional world of *Utopia*, *The Utopia Experiments* is a graphic novel series that has a small and devoted following--a group whose members meet in virtual spaces like websites, message boards, and online chats. From the first episode of the series, *The Utopia Experiments* is presented as a text with strong determinative power. Kelly illustrates this determinative power as a quasi-circular process within the narrative. The information in the text is so important that the characters feel they must possess it as if their lives depend on it, and their drive to possess it marks them as targets and threatens their lives, which substantiates their belief that the information is important. In other words, they believe the information is important enough to risk their lives because they are risking their lives for it.

Furthermore, *The Utopia Experiments* attests to its own significance by not requiring fan involvement for its prophetic material to come true. Though, as this small fan network connects the dots (sometimes literally, as seen in Season 1, Episode 6), each of their interventions into the events confessed and foretold in the text threatens the much more powerful network of global decision-makers whose transgressions are chronicled in *The Utopia Experiments*. In comics language, this is not spy versus spy, it is network versus network. The arrangement of conflicting forces within the narrative is explicitly depicted as such, with the protagonists utilizing networked communication to strategize and the antagonists known simply as The Network, capital N.

An early sequence from the first episode of the series establishes the distinct visual style, acquaints the viewer with the function of *The Utopia Experiments* graphic novel within the narrative, and highlights the stakes and deadly effects of the text itself (both the manuscript and the information therein). In this two-scene sequence, two killers sent by the Network are using their particular methods to track the manuscript and kill everyone with whom they inquire about it. Then, in the second

scene, one of the fans of *The Utopia Experiments* (Becky, played by Alexandra Roach) attempts to persuade a university committee to fund her study of the graphic novel, unaware that she is putting herself in danger by publicly aligning herself with the search for the unpublished volume that the Network's killers are seeking.

In this sequence, the production and set design focused on red and yellow colors become a code for the persuasive and pervasive surveillance techniques and effects of the Network. Additionally, there is a foregrounding of locations related to comic books and graphic novels. As Becky entreats the committee to approve her research topic, one of their rebuttals about conspiracy theories being no longer fashionable might have been true in 2013 but is ironically out of step for the post-*Utopia*, post-COVID-19 world. Finally, this sequence introduces a debate over whether a graphic novel is a serious enough form or medium for PhD study. Becky's position that funded studies on sci-fi movies and television shows are hardly serious subjects seems to align with Kelly's resistance to lean too much into sci-fi with the series as a whole.

Before disclosing more about the contents of *The Utopia Experiments* and their relationship to adaptation theories and processes shortly, it is necessary to similarly introduce the other key text of the article. Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* is a book that, like the television series *Utopia*, reflects its author's priorities about genres and texts, as well as depicts as part of its drama the relationship between a graphic novel text and a deeply emotionally invested fan community, albeit a smaller one. The following analysis alternates between the source and its adaptation.

The book *Station Eleven* was published in 2014, just a couple of weeks after *Utopia*'s final episode aired. In *Station Eleven*, a comic book series called *Dr. Eleven* exists in an even more limited run than *The Utopia Experiments*. Only ten copies of the two issues were ever printed, shortly before a flu pandemic that radically alters the world, and the protagonist, a young woman named Kirsten Raymonde, has memorized these issues, using them as a kind of guidestone for her hardscrabble itinerant way of life. Kirsten's network of characters is a small troupe of musicians and

actors, known as the Traveling Symphony. They have committed to performing year-round in a circuit of locations where survivors of the flu pandemic (and those born since the catastrophe) live in a radically altered North America--one without electricity, the Internet, and only the occasional presence of the performing arts to maintain continuity with various narratives of the past. Their record of pre-pandemic life includes scraps of a range of material from Shakespeare's plays to tabloid magazines, both forms that Kirsten is deeply attached to and treats as similarly sacred in a world where not much new seems to be created and the luxuries of the past are conspicuously unavailable.

As in *Utopia*, the comic book series that exists within the story world (fiction nested within fiction) is also at the center of the drama. When Mandel introduces the comics to the reader of the book *Station Eleven*, she creates a resonance between the post-pandemic survival of Kirsten and the dramatic situation of the fictional character Dr. Eleven: "*I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth*" (2014, 42). For a character like Kirsten, who was old enough to remember life before the pandemic, but whose adolescence and adulthood have occurred entirely after the pandemic devastated the globe, forgetting the former sweetness of life on Earth might be preferable to continuing on as a figure who spans the before and after, aware of what has been lost. The television adaptation of *Station Eleven* elevates this before/after dichotomy to one of the main concepts of the narrative.

While there is no evidence that Kelly and Mandel shared any of the same particular inspirations or intentions for their works, there are significant plot parallels that I will detail a bit later. As I used Kelly's words about his selection process in adapting the original premise for his series, it is also useful to quote Mandel about her attitude toward the type of fiction she aimed to write with *Station Eleven*. In an interview with Ron Charles of the *Washington Post*, on the occasion of the book being named a finalist for the National Book Award, Mandel discussed her objection to or surprise at the book being received by critics and readers as a work of science fiction. This followed a similar development earlier in her career when her works were

categorized quite outside of her intentions as crime fiction: "…with 'Station Eleven,' I set out to write something completely different, because I didn't want to be pigeonholed as a crime writer…I was surprised to discover that if you write literary fiction that's set partly in the future, you're apparently a sci-fi writer" (Charles 2014). Mandel notes in the same interview that overemphasizing these categories of fiction is that readers will either avoid the book because of their negative perceptions of sci-fi works or that those enthusiastic about sci-fi books will "be disappointed because the book isn't sci-fi enough" (Charles 2014).

Mandel's comments vary a familiar theme within literary criticism, the debate involving literary fiction versus genre fiction, which continues to this day. However, more pertinent to this article is the echo of Kelly's desire not to position his scripts for *Utopia* as a sci-fi series. If being character-driven is a hallmark of literary fiction, then *Utopia* and *Station Eleven* could be called literary, because the networks of human characters in the plots do not take a back seat to the spectacle or conceptual thrust of the narratives.

However, there is no one way to conceive of or express science fiction, and recent cinematic sci-fi adaptations such as the feature films *Arrival* and *Annihilation* arguably preserve the interiority of their literary source texts' human characters even as they pique the speculative imagination with other kinds of non-human agents within the plots, such as extraterrestrial aliens, hybrid creatures, and replicas that complicate the division between referents and representations. In summary, whatever Kelly and Mandel were reacting negatively to when wrestling with the sci-fi label might not be as relevant a decade later, as character-driven sci-fi adaptations are regularly produced and widely celebrated.

Somerville's television adaptation of *Station Eleven* moves fluidly between modes. For example, a montage set to Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright," begins in the realism of the frozen conditions in the months after the pandemic began. As the view of the frozen earth expands into a wider shot, the narrative moves into the fictional world of the text-within-the-text, ostensibly occurring in outer

space but really only existing in the reader's imagination. A character who appears to be an astronaut (Dr. Eleven) is alone in this sci-fi environment. Then, a cut back to earth, years after the pandemic, confirms how absorbed Kirsten is within the sci-fi comic book that is one of the only material links to her past, to the pre-pandemic world. She reads the book while lying on the ground, which is no longer covered with snow.

To some degree, Kelly and Mandel's characters are extensions of their writers' awareness that sci-fi and genre works are inescapable as popular culture forms. In *Utopia*, Becky's reference to *Star Wars* and *Dr. Who* positions her within a story world where these are dominant narratives. This reality extends to the casting of the second season of the program, as *Star Wars*' own Emperor Palpatine, Ian McDiarmid, appears in a principal role as a key player behind the Network's scheme to sterilize the world or kill millions with a weaponized flu and vaccine. The characters of *Station Eleven* are conversant about the genre narratives they have consumed and now appear to be living within. About two-thirds of the way through the novel *Station Eleven*, there is a scene that takes place at the very beginning of the pandemic, in which a character named Jeevan explains to his brother Frank, with whom he is hiding out in an apartment with a large stock of food and water, "'It's like those disaster movies'" (Mandel 2014, 193). Mandel narrates their experience:

> Those were the days before the end of television. They were stunned with horror but it hadn't entirely sunk in yet, any of it…All evidence suggested that the center wasn't holding--Was this actually happening? they asked one another--but personally they had food and water, they were at least momentarily secure and not sick. "You know," Jeevan had said, "in the movie version of this there's the apocalypse, and then afterward--" [Frank responds] "What makes you think we'll make it to afterward?" (193)

Beyond these references to sci-fi titles and genre fiction formulas, going a layer deeper into the texts, Kelly and Mandel introduce the same sort of anxiety their characters exhibit and experience: a vacillation between wanting to hold on to life as-

is, and the thrill of taking some small part in navigating and interpreting horrible futures that become a challenge to be survived. This is a process that plays out through networks of characters who adapt the sources by which they live, even if the arrangement of those sources and human and non-human agents includes a number of uncertainties.

This scenario, full of contingencies and constantly reorienting the characters and readers/viewers back to source texts in search of stability and clarity, revolves around texts that have survived and through which characters hope to survive. As these characters within the narratives adjust to the unexpected developments caused by other actors whose relationship to the source material differs, they embody Patrick Cattrysse's system of "intermediate adaptation," which involves, in his words, "the choice to select an adaptation instead of an 'original' text for adaptation," which he says, "must be considered in a study of preliminary norms" (2014, 259). Cattrysse notes that "The question concerns the (in)directness of the translation or adaptation process. Subsequent issues include: What types of intermediary elements can be found between so-called 'original' elements and their adaptations?" (2014, 259).

Textual Survival at the End of the World

As I've established, both *Utopia* and *Station Eleven* involve flus that cause drastic reductions of the human population, among other societal changes. *The Utopia Experiments* graphic novel series and the *Dr. Eleven* comic book series, which are the stories within the stories, directly and metaphorically portend the conditions of the flus and their aftermaths, meaning that the surviving characters with an awareness of the stories within the stories are able to compare their experiences with the words and images that constitute the original source of their present condition.

In *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture*, Rachel Carroll notes that "All adaptations express or address a desire to return to an 'original' textual encounter… every 'return' is inevitably transformative of its object -- whether that object be the original text or the memory of its first encounter" (2009, 1). The dystopian narratives of *Utopia* and *Station Eleven* force an intermediate approach to adaptation precisely

because the threats and stakes of the plots make a return to original circumstances an impossibility. In the story world of *Utopia*, the original conditions of *The Utopia Experiment*'s creation are inaccessible because the author is believed to be dead and the central conspiracy is carried out in such a clandestine manner that the more revelations one discovers, the more likely they are to die. Thus, degrees of distance from the original conditions and their revelations are sometimes the only safeguards for the graphic novel fans in *Utopia*. In *Station Eleven*, the flu has claimed the author of *Dr. Eleven*, and the intervening years since the onset of the pandemic have erased most traces of the capitalistic culture that was inspiration for her speculative fiction. The precious few characters who carry a memory of *Dr. Eleven* remember their original encounter with the text, but that memory is retroactively recontextualized through the reality of an apocalypse.

Carroll also notes in her discussion of fidelity and infidelity, which some call outmoded measures for the success or failure of an adaptation, that the "the figure of the 'fan' [is] emerging as a significant cultural agent" with respect to fan fiction, etc. (2009, 2). Indeed, in *Utopia* and *Station Eleven*, it is the fans within the texts, these obsessed and devoted characters, that become highly significant nodes in the networks that collide in the stories of attempted human survival. Therefore, the survival of the texts, which develop in meaning as life goes on, appears to be of utmost importance to the human characters whose actions adapt the predictive narratives.

In *Utopia*, the texts survive in three ways: First, one of the engineers of a population control program appears to go mad and confess his transgressions in the form of a graphic novel that becomes *The Utopia Experiments*. Second, the sinister capital-N Network writes the dissident group of graphic novel fans *into* the global conspiracy by accusing them of horrible crimes in order to discredit the discovery and exposure of a planned human cull. Third, the same sinister Network causes or persuades such characters to bear the textual information inside of them or on their bodies.

The original information exists in the experiments and weaponized science of characters such as Philip Carvel (Tom Burke), also known as Mark Dane, author of the graphic novel, and Milner (Geraldine James), also known as Letan, also known as Mr. Rabbit. She has many names within the series, which is part of her shifting and notoriously unreliable identity. Together, Carvel and Milner have plotted to reduce the population of the Earth by sterilizing ninety to ninety-five percent of the global population using a serum called Janus. In their view, retaining a global population of only five hundred million humans would be the ideal number and a plateau point that would allow the world to heal of environmental damage and the suffering caused by what these scientists see as the scourge of overpopulation.

To achieve this goal, the Network endeavors to ensure that a Russian flu and a corresponding vaccine reach the public according to a plan and timeline that the small network of graphic novel fans attempt to thwart through their intervention. The recurring conflicts between these two networks illustrate Latour's uncertainty of "the nature of groups [and the] many contradictory ways for actors to be given an identity." Carvel's graphic novels establish, for those willing to pay attention, the direct plot of the population cull and associated events. However, despite the verification of such information by several individuals spanning a variety of positions in society, from senior civil servants to children, the power of the villainous Network frustrates this sustained engagement with the text. In other words, with each disclosure or discovery of information and corresponding devotion to the text, the characters meet a countervailing force that stops their momentum. Ian (Nathan Stewart-Jarrett), whose IT expertise is no match for the Network's surveillance tactics, finds himself accused of sex crimes. Young Grant (Oliver Woollford), whose pitiful home life explains his misbehavior, is framed for a school shooting. The media attention to these charges for which the graphic novel fans are wholly innocent writes them into the ongoing story the Network creates.

The other category of characters absorbs the original text in a bodily manner. Jessica Hyde (Fiona O'Shaughnessy), the enigmatic lone wolf of the first season of

Utopia, discovers that the more consequential original information relating to the serum Janus is not provided in any graphic novel manuscript but exists exclusively inside her blood. Her father was Philip Carvel, the mad scientist author of *The Utopia Experiments*, who injected his young daughter with his creation and doomed her to a life of violence and isolation. This revelation radically alters the goals and tactics of most of the characters. The final episode of *Utopia*'s first season ends with Milner declaring that the sought-after *Utopia Experiments* manuscript consisted of nothing more than a bunch of old drawings by a "crazy" man, and that the true function of the manuscript was to lure Jessica, experiment on her brain and body, and secure the final piece of the information needed to implement the flu and vaccine plan.

This turning point in the series illustrates Latour's uncertainty regarding "the nature of actions: [as] in each course of action a great variety of agents seem to barge in and displace the original goals" (2005, 22). More significantly, though, as the development relates to the process of adaptation within the series, Milner's revelation reveals how memory is susceptible to distortion. John Ellis has claimed:

> Adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural memory. The adaptation consumes this memory, aiming to efface it with the presence of its own images. The successful adaptation is one that is able to replace the memory of the novel with the process of a filmic or televisual representation. (1982, 3)

Though characters like Jessica Hyde are not attempting to turn *The Utopia Experiments* into a film or television show, their interaction with the text of the graphic novel does qualify as the third of the three modes of engagement Hutcheon examines in her book--beyond telling, beyond showing, and into the mode of the participatory or interactive (2013, 22-23). That Jessica Hyde is simultaneously a character in *The Utopia Experiments*, being the daughter of its author, and the bearer of the information its author implanted into her blood, causes her to be a unique nexus of information and memory to be consumed and exploited by the Network. Her

character arc is one that takes her from pursuing an assumed original source to being a pursued container for scientific information unavailable anywhere else.

An additional character, Wilson Wilson (Adeel Akhtar), transforms from a zealous skeptic into a brutalized fan of the graphic novel before becoming a corporate villain and true believer in the Network. In contrast to the unwilling Jessica, Wilson demonstrates a bodily commitment to the cause of the Network's purposes, doing violence against himself to bear the information that will allow the Network to write its own version of events and sustain its threatened narrative. Next, I will move on to how *Station Eleven* also involves the survival of original sources even as the characters continue to interpret and adapt them. Their methods differ considerably from the survival techniques in *Utopia*.

At this point it is more fruitful to mostly discuss the television adaptation of *Station Eleven* rather than *its* original literary source, as doing so reveals the additional layers of adaptation theories and practices and help to show the differences between telling and showing a story. In a moment, I will include one more passage from the book, but then I will discuss the television series adaptation. Regardless of which version one examines--the book or the television show--one major difference between *Station Eleven* and *Utopia* is in the sheer number and historical and stylistic ranges of texts that the writers and characters adapt and attempt to preserve. Whereas *Utopia* focuses almost exclusively on an indirect succession of information from weaponized science, to graphic novel series, to the playing out of events foretold, *Station Eleven* is a survival narrative in which newspapers, magazines, films, books, plays, and other forms join the comic book story-within-a-story to occupy the characters' attention and provide a purpose for their lives. Patrick Somerville's television series adaptation focuses the viewer's attention on characters' work as adapters of comics.

As in the book, the character Miranda (Danielle Deadwyler) is the creator of the comic series, which exists as an escape from the disappointments in her life. And, in keeping with the conception of adaptation as a network rather than a direct line,

Mandel's novel describes how the inspiration for *Dr. Eleven* the comic series was not birthed ex nihilo, but was instead adapted from a particular form and text:

> "She started thumbing through an old *Calvin and Hobbes*, and she thought, *this*. These red-desert landscapes, these skies with two moons. She began thinking about the possibilities of the form, about spaceships and stars, alien planets, but a year passed before she invented the beautiful wreckage of Station Eleven" (2014, 88).

Moments later, Mandel describes Miranda's emotional attachment to the text she will create: "There are thoughts of freedom and imminent escape. I could throw away almost everything, she thinks, and begin all over again. *Station Eleven* will be my constant" (2014, 89). This last phrase from that section of the book, disclosing an author's interior life, also describes the dramatic situation for two characters in the television series narrative, whose relationship to each other is much more extensive than it is in the book.

One of this pair of characters is Kirsten (Mackenzie Davis), a leading member of the Travelling Symphony, whose day-to-day life in a post-pandemic world involves bringing Shakespeare to the remnant of humanity that is bereft of opportunities for art and culture. Somerville's series adaptation grounds this arc of participation in the survival of the arts to Kirsten's childhood attachment to Miranda's comic. The seventh episode of the limited series includes a scene depicting adaptation not included in the book but greatly contributing to the narrative's attention to Kirsten as an adaptor. In this scene, young Kirsten (Matilda Lawler) directs Jeevan (Himesh Patel) and Frank (Nabhaan Rizwan) in a theatrical version of her beloved graphic novel that takes place in Frank's locked-off apartment.

Having only met Miranda briefly as a child, Kirsten has no direct connection to the author of the comic books, but when the pandemic begins, Kirsten spends her days in the safety of Frank's apartment preparing to adapt the book into a play. In this location, several understandings of survival converge: Survival from the conditions outside, both the flu and the brutal winter, becoming the survivors of their dying

families, and the survival of texts, which Kirsten ensures through her dedication to the comic book. Neither Jeevan nor Frank has any attachment to the book, so it is up to Kirsten to write and direct the play, which her new guardians admirably commit to performing, even as they don't understand the text. Their performance of the child's theatrical adaptation of a comic illustrates the many layers of adaptation Somerville builds into his series adaptation. For example, this episode, set around Christmas time, also adapts a key part of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to insert adult Kirsten into the proceedings. Her impossible presence at the past event, motivated within the narrative by being poisoned and hovering near death and fantasizing herself into the past, provides an audience for the performance. Though young Kirsten's adaptation succeeds in bringing a scene from the comic book into another form--the stage play--her co-actors remain unaware of the particulars and only Kirsten will carry the significance of this adaptation into the future.

Though Mandel's book and Somerville's series do not involve a conventional central human villain, the human threat in both comes from a character known as The Prophet. This character began his life as Tyler, like Kirsten a child at the start of the pandemic, and he is one of the only other people on Earth who possesses a copy of Miranda's comic book. He, too, has grown up obsessing over its contents. Unlike Kirsten, though, Tyler sees the fantastic story of Dr. Eleven in outer space as cohering with his worldview that the survivors of the pandemic are a problem. In Tyler's view, their attachment to the "before" is what presently plagues humanity, and his self-appointing as a prophet includes being a violent threat to anyone he sees as an impediment to the future he wants to build.

As this description makes clear, there is a sharp contrast between Kirsten, who clings to the comic series as a way of proving that healing and restoration are possible and Tyler, whose devotion to the same text motivates him to destroy. That each character has been adapting the same text to their own individual ends in the years since the pandemic sets up a collision course of their respective philosophies, rendering both of their journeys with the texts as intermediate adaptations toward a

conclusive end. The book settles this tidily, as the prophet Tyler is killed by one of his child followers before he can do too much harm to Kirsten's network of musicians and actors. However, in the television series, Kirsten and Tyler (Daniel Zovatto) synthesize their worldviews through a new act of adaptation that they create together.

In the eighth episode, Kirsten and Tyler arrive at a heavily controlled airport and are forced by its leader to perform a scene from a play to prove they are part of the troupe. Kirsten is skeptical of this airport, seeing it as a kind of prison that offers the illusion of safety. Tyler is hellbent on destroying the airport's literal museum of objects held up as a fascination of what life had to offer before the pandemic. Together, they improvise a play using the text of the comic book, the text that seems to have predicted their once disparate, now conjoined futures. Their shared knowledge of this relic from the past, so familiar to them they can adapt the text on the spot but foreign to everyone else around them, is what helps them survive the moment and extend the memory of the text into the uncertain future.

It is worthwhile to consider the futures of *Utopia* and *Station Eleven* as texts about fan engagement that are also subject to interpretation, fan engagement, and critical commentary. Both texts seem prescient concerning the plots, values, and aesthetics of life during and after a pandemic. The present post-pandemic awareness of such a scenario retroactively shapes the more than decade-old series *Utopia* and novel *Station Eleven* as speculations that are less far-fetched than they might have seemed at the time of their original release. This awareness also has the effect of further blurring the line between real life and science fiction, an aspect of reception that is probably welcome for writers not wanting their work to be received as exclusively belonging to the sci-fi genre.

Contagion Beyond Fiction

More interesting than this position of the texts relative to the development of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath is how the aspects of the narratives like deadly flus, vaccines, and population control could be read as predictive programming by those who see such a process at work in entertainment media. Such scrutiny of

both original texts--the original Channel 4 series and Mandel's book--was eclipsed to some degree by the fact that both were adapted in recent years: *Utopia* became a 2020 Amazon series starring John Cusack and produced by Gillian Flynn, and *Station Eleven* became the HBO Max series created by Patrick Somerville, discussed in this article. Both adaptations received commentary and criticism because of their timing, being produced and/or released during a pandemic. Filming for the *Utopia* remake ended in October 2019, whereas *Station Eleven* began shooting in January 2020 and concluded a year and a half later, having been interrupted by the pandemic. Critical reception of the interestingly timed adaptations also often focuses on the uncertainty of the nature of facts, to use Latour's language about natural science. Both *Time* magazine and *Slate*, among other publications, published articles arguing the *Utopia* remake should not have been released. Matthew Dessem's article for *Slate* outlines how the conspiracy within the text of *Utopia* is far too close to the real-life events and related conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

> 1. Convince the general public that there is an outbreak of a deadly new virus. To sell the story, poison or otherwise kill people, then attribute their deaths to the phony virus.
> 2. Once the fake pandemic is up and running and the public is terrified, announce that there is a vaccine that can defeat the virus.
> 3. With the help of global elites, NGOs, and world governments, inject everyone on the planet with this "vaccine" as quickly as possible.
> 4. Surprise! The vaccine is designed to permanently sterilize all or all but a certain percentage of the people who take it. Sit back and relax as the global population drops from 7.8 billion to about 500 million in a single generation, ushering in a new era of plenty. (Dessem 2020)

Additionally, one search of "John Cusack Utopia" on X reveals many viewers of the remake framing his lines of dialogue from the show as a confession about depopulation. There are other strands connecting real-life events to the fictional

plots, each one resembling the sort of rabbit hole the characters of *Utopia* are susceptible to fall into.

Even the authors of these speculative fictions are not immune to the potential for the proliferation of conspiracy thinking to overwhelm or frustrate their creative aims. In an NME article marking ten years since the cancellation of *Utopia*, Kelly is quoted as saying, "it's worth pointing out that since I wrote it conspiracy theories have gone unbelievably… I honestly wouldn't write it today because they're so mainstream" (Seddon 2024). There are at least two ways of reading his comments. One is that his interest in the secretive, dangerous world of *Utopia* diminished because conspiracies are so popular that they have lost their edge as a subject. Another interpretation is that Kelly is cautious about feeding that conspiracy frenzy with screen stories that such an audience thinks substantiates their suspicions about plots to destroy humanity. Either way, this admission serves as another example of how cultural currents and actors beyond the author's intentions can threaten a text, in this hypothetical case, stopping it at the idea stage and preventing its flourishing.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show how the awareness of adaptation and the practices of fan engagement have continued to become more widespread to the point that compelling television series and novels can involve central plots about obsessed fans interpreting and adapting their chosen texts as guides for survival. No matter how deterministic the world seems to be, even if events are spelled out in advance, outside forces, including non-human ones can produce unexpected contingencies that alter what might have seemed like a certain course. *Utopia* and *Station Eleven* are story worlds in which a graphic novel and a comic book provide some sort of stability for characters clinging to them for survival and aiming to preserve the texts that mean so much to them. As they adapt to existence-threatening forces, the characters take on the responsibility of living out what has been written, even as their interventions transform the meaning of the texts, showing that every act of adaptation has

intermediate and indeterminate dimensions as the texts and their readers attempt to survive.

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