

This Unbearable Imminence: Pre-apocalypticism in *The Last Policeman*, *Station Eleven*, and *Melancholia*

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>This thesis aims to study pre-apocalyptic narratives as a distinct form from other forms of apocalyptic literature, such as post-apocalyptic narratives. The goal is to examine what defines apocalyptic literature in terms of typical features and functions, and then consider how these factors change when the setting is pre-apocalyptic. Additionally, the study uses methods for analyzing human behavior when faced with an impending apocalypse.</p> <p>After creating an appropriate working model of the pre-apocalyptic, it was applied in the analysis of three primary texts that were characterized as pre-apocalyptic. The study examined how the apocalypse was realized in the texts, what role it served, and what relationship characters had to it. The primary texts were the novels <i>The Last Policeman</i> (2012) by Ben H. Winters and <i>Station Eleven</i> (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel, as well as the film <i>Melancholia</i> (2011) by Lars von Trier.</p> <p>Structurally, pre-apocalyptic narratives used the same methods as other apocalyptic texts but omitted certain narrative stages and functions such as a rebuilding of society and social critique. Apocalypse was best understood as a transformative event that recontextualizes events and worldviews. Knowledge of an upcoming apocalypse was also transformative in the same way as the event itself. Reader knowledge could also define the pre-apocalyptic context just as in-narrative knowledge could. Character behavior could be understood based on psychological models that describe reactions to disaster. Pre-apocalyptic narratives also drew a parallel between the apocalypse and human mortality, which emphasized self-reflection and recontextualization.</p> <p>The central findings of this thesis were that pre-apocalyptic narratives share themes with other apocalyptic literature but differ in tone and emphasis due to different structure and presentation. Further studies could compare pre-apocalyptic and post-</p>

apocalyptic narratives more directly or explore how sociopolitical contexts affect the creation and reception of pre-apocalyptic literature. Pre-apocalyptic narratives could also be studied more in-depth through the lens of specific philosophical or psychological frameworks.

Keywords: apocalypse, pre-apocalyptic literature, response to upcoming disaster, transformative experiences, mortality, Ben H. Winters, Emily St. John Mandel, Lars von Trier

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction and background

The apocalypse as a subject of literature has been popular throughout history, from the earliest days of written texts to the contemporary era. Especially in current literature and popular culture, it commonly takes the form of specifically post-apocalyptic narratives. That is, narratives that take place after an apocalyptic event has occurred. The converse idea, a “pre-apocalyptic” narrative that takes place before such an apocalyptic has even occurred, is decidedly less established as a concept and cultural phenomenon. Even so, the basic concept of a time before a disaster is not foreign in the least, and can be found in other forms of apocalyptic fiction. Post-apocalyptic literature for example can include a section set before the apocalypse, typically as contrast to the post-apocalyptic world, even if it is not emphasized in the narrative. Religious apocalyptic texts are also often by nature pre-apocalyptic, and disaster fiction that focuses on the prevention of some catastrophe relates to the idea as well (even if said catastrophe is ultimately successfully prevented). Additionally, social or political anxieties in the real world can include aspects of pre-apocalyptic rhetoric, such as in discussions about nuclear deterrence or global pandemics. In other words, the pre-apocalyptic is familiar to most people in some form, but as a formal genre or theme in fiction it is not commonly distinguished.

This thesis focuses on exactly that niche in the study of apocalyptic literature: distinctly pre-apocalyptic narratives in fiction. This refers to narratives that include the presence of an apocalypse (the exact definition of which is also studied) as something that will occur in the future. These narratives are set in a time before the apocalypse has occurred, and also include the assumption that by being specifically *pre*-apocalyptic, said apocalypse also definitely happens with certainty. In order to study these types of narratives, I will also first have to define the apocalyptic in general, and then examine and define how the pre-apocalyptic is distinct from other forms of apocalyptic narrative. This particular approach to distinctly pre-apocalyptic literature has not been extensively studied, and the comparison of three different modern primary texts in the analysis should produce novel results.

These introductory sections describe the rationale of the thesis, present the research questions formulated for the thesis, and then introduce the primary texts and theoretical literature used in understanding the apocalyptic and analyzing the texts. The

next chapter on the theory delves into finding a definition for concepts such as the “apocalypse” and “pre-apocalyptic”, explores the roots and typical features of apocalyptic literature, and finally attempts to identify and argue for a distinction between pre-apocalyptic narratives and other types of apocalyptic narratives. The next chapter contains the analysis of the three primary texts, using the understanding of the apocalyptic and analytical tools acquired via the theory. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the results of the thesis as well as identifies the limitations of the study and how it could further be expanded.

1.2 Research questions

What are the principal features of apocalyptic literature, is there a distinction to be made between pre-apocalyptic and other forms of apocalyptic literature, and what are the differences?

How is pre-apocalypticism present in the primary texts studied?

1.3 Methods and materials

This thesis analyzes three primary texts, two novels and one film. The first novel is *The Last Policeman*, written by Ben H. Winters and published in 2012; the second novel is *Station Eleven*, written by Emily St. John Mandel and published in 2014; and the film is *Melancholia*, written and directed by Lars von Trier and published in 2011. These texts are unrelated to each other and were chosen for study because they all can be understood as “pre-apocalyptic” in some way. In *The Last Policeman*, an asteroid is set to hit Earth with the expectation of major global disaster, causing major social and personal distress. *Station Eleven* features two narratives, one set before a globally devastating pandemic and the other depicting the post-apocalyptic world after the pandemic. *Melancholia*, somewhat similarly to *The Last Policeman*, features a large planet on a collision course with Earth. The common feature for the three texts is the presence of an upcoming apocalypse as well as knowledge of its approach, though in *Station Eleven* this knowledge is only present for the reader, and not the characters within the narrative. Notably, *The Last Policeman* is also the first novel in a trilogy. While this thesis could have focused on only this trilogy for its analysis, a study that features multiple authors and different depictions of the apocalypse is more interesting and gives a more general picture of pre-apocalypticism. Later events in the trilogy might change the perspective on certain events, characters, and themes of *The Last Policeman*, but this thesis does not consider the later

novels in any way. As a film, *Melancholia* also represents a different medium than the two novels, but as the analysis of this thesis is focused on narrative genre and character behavior, the technical and formal differences between a film and a novel should not be particularly relevant. Finally, the three authors also represent three different cultural contexts (Ben H. Winters is American, Emily St. John Mandel is Canadian, and Lars von Trier is Danish), but their background and the cultural dimension of their work is beyond the scope of this thesis. All primary texts are original English-language works.

The research questions were formulated to help understand both apocalyptic literature in a wider sense as well as give direction for analyzing the primary texts. The theoretical analysis will begin by studying the genre of apocalyptic literature and its historical and religious roots. A variety of commentators and literary critics have discussed the apocalypse and the literary genre that surrounds it, and a selection that is as broad as possible will be used to try to define what “apocalypse” means and what “apocalyptic literature” entails. Typical features and functions of apocalyptic literature, and reasons as to why such literature is written, will be identified. Additionally, the theoretical material will provide models and tools for analyzing the response humans and characters might have to an approaching apocalypse. After studying the apocalypse in this general manner, I will consider how the identified features and factors apply to a pre-apocalyptic setting and narrative. This should give an understanding of typical features and characteristics of pre-apocalyptic literature specifically. The primary texts will then be analyzed with these discoveries in mind, to examine how these pre-apocalyptic characteristics appear in or apply to the primary texts. The tools for understanding responses to approaching disaster will also be used to study the characters in the narratives. The result of the thesis should be an overview of what characterizes pre-apocalyptic literature, in which way the primary texts are “pre-apocalyptic”, and how the primary texts make use this pre-apocalyptic context to explore their characters and convey their themes.

2. Theory: apocalypse and pre-apocalypse

2.1 Understanding the apocalypse

Before we can consider the case of the pre-apocalyptic as a potential genre or mode of literature, and how it applies to the primary texts studied in the thesis, we need to understand the genre and wider literary and cultural tradition it is to be compared to and contrasted with. “Apocalypse” and “apocalyptic” are concepts that many are likely to have some intuitive understanding of through cultural exposure, but in scholarship the terminology appears to be used both as very specific and strict genre markers as well as referring to wider cultural and literary concepts. Studying the history and origins of the apocalyptic genre helps understand the function and role of the apocalypse in a narrative, and gives indications of how humans fundamentally engage with the idea of the end of the world. This knowledge gives further tools for constructing a working model of the pre-apocalyptic and analyzing how characters in the primary texts behave when faced with an approaching apocalypse.

Questions and narratives relating to the idea of the end of the world, what it exactly entails, and what happens afterwards are the core matters of what is generally considered “apocalyptic”. The apocalypse is one of, if not the, oldest motif and topic present in Western culture. The Fall of Man and the expulsion of humanity from Paradise found in the Old Testament is one of the first examples of apocalyptic literature (Lisboa 2011: xv-xvi). The narrative template found already in this ancient text is that of a mythical and religious struggle between fundamental forces of good and evil, in which the apocalypse itself represents the fear of evil ultimately triumphing (Lisboa 2011: xvi-xvii). The apparent primacy and fundamental appeal of the motif suggest that there is something universally interesting in the concept of the end of the world, and the enduring popularity of such depictions to this day support the idea.

The first types of apocalyptic literature, such as the biblical example mentioned, were notably religious in nature. In these texts, the end of the world ultimately heralded some form of salvation (even after the immediate suffering), dissolved the lines between known and unknown realities and existences, and suggested some kind of eventual religious paradise (Lisboa 2011: xviii-xix). Just like the story of expulsion from Heaven in the early biblical texts, later Judeo-Christian religious literature also produced iconic apocalyptic texts, and the Book of Revelations in the New Testament is considered an

originator for the specific term of the apocalypse (in the connotation of some form of revelation or uncovering) as well as the imagery of cataclysmic disaster that has come to be a hallmark of the genre especially in modern times (Himmelfarb 2009: 1). In the Judeo-Christian literary tradition, apocalyptic works told stories of divine revelations brought to humans by angels, but the works of the genre did not consist entirely of matters of the Last Judgment and such specifics of the end times. The texts also included descriptions of the afterlife, heavenly imagery, as well as topics such as astronomy and attempts at understanding the natural world, blending religion with natural philosophy and perhaps even science. These types of texts were popular all the way to the medieval period (Himmelfarb 2009: 1-2).

Aside from the Book of Revelations and the events depicted in Genesis, the ancient Book of Daniel, found in the Hebrew Bible, is considered by other scholars as the archetypical apocalyptic text that predates Revelations. It was a major influence on the emergence of the Western apocalyptic tradition by virtue of being one of the first such apocalyptic texts written (Himmelfarb 2009: 2, Hamerton-Kelly 2007: 5), though even it is not the absolute oldest known work to fall under the category (Himmelfarb 2009: 3). These older texts, however, were generally more concerned with astronomy, the mysteries of the known universe, and general matters of divinity and gods than specifically the end of the world and events such as the biblical Last Judgment (Himmelfarb 2009: 3). Thus, it seems clear that the apocalyptic tradition from its very first moments involved many other facets than merely depictions of calamity and catastrophic end times, and that it traces its roots firmly into the ancient Near East, and the Jewish cultural tradition in particular.

As for defining the concept of apocalypse and determining the form the texts have taken within the tradition, there are several contending views. The stricter and narrower definition, relating to the ancient religious Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition as described above, can be found in how, for example, the Society of Biblical Literature (in America) approaches the terminology. They define the term “apocalypse” as

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world

(Collins 1979, cited in Grabbe 2004: 115)

This definition describes the apocalyptic as specifically only a genre of religious literature, and one of a very specific traditional format as well. The thematic emphasis of this type would be on revelatory experiences, widening knowledge of existences beyond the human, and on ultimate salvation in line with common features in the Judeo-Christian religions. Similarly, the apocalypse can also be thought of in its most literal form, which harkens back to the original meaning of the term itself: experiences of unveiling or disclosure of greater understanding. The idea is that something relating to the fundamental structure of the world is revealed, whether it be through human means or by angelic and other supernatural powers, and that this new understanding bears some relation to a potential instability to this structure, be it by bringing a threat to the light or by causing such instability and chaos in itself (Hamerton-Kelly 2007: 2). The original religious understanding of the apocalypse explains a basic relationship humanity has to the idea of the world ending. Specifically religious explanations and relationships to the apocalypse are also featured in the primary texts to some degree, most notably in *Station Eleven* but also touched on in *The Last Policeman*. However, the primary texts studied in this thesis are neither ancient nor religious works, so a more modern literary understanding of the apocalypse is necessary.

In more modern times the notion of apocalypse has broadened, and while the term originally referred to the religious form (and is still used this way in such scholarly contexts), today it marks a broader idea of the end of the world. This idea includes any form of disaster or destruction or cataclysmic event in varying context, or even more widely referring to any greater danger that threatens human existence (Weaver 2014: 175). While the religious texts chiefly concern themselves the grand event of the end of the world, culture today sees a pervasive trend of post-apocalypticism (Berger 1999: xiii). This seems to indicate slightly differing interests in the modern apocalyptic tradition compared to the original one. It is worth noting that the idea of a post-apocalypse, that is, something “after the end”, only really becomes meaningful when it is contrasted with what came before (Berger 1999: xi), which touches on the relationship that this thesis is interested in.

In light of this broadened and shifted perception of the genre and terminology, alternate definitions have been developed. One oft-cited model is that of James Berger who classified the apocalyptic into three distinct “modes” or formats. The first of these he called the “eschaton”, which refers to an event that is the actual end of the world that

includes both the religious sense of a Last Judgment and a new paradise as well as the modern idea of a cataclysmic disaster or catastrophe that destroys the planet (which could take the form of, for example, nuclear annihilation, ecological collapse, astronomical dangers, and other such events). The second mode refers to events that closely resemble the eschaton as described, but represent the end of something more abstract rather than the actual world itself. For example, a drastic event that serves to end a way of life, or a way of thinking. It is a turning point in history or ideology or a paradigm shift that is instigated by some specific moment or event, that essentially changes the way one must think about and perceive what came before the event, and what remains afterwards. Berger's archetypical example is the Holocaust, which has had an immense impact on the politics, culture, and rhetoric of the world ever since, and has invited in-depth historical reassessments and analyses of what led to the event in the first place. The third mode incorporates the original meaning of the term *apocalypse* into the model, by suggesting the apocalypse ought to clarify and help understand what exactly it is that has come to an end, and what its nature was (Berger 1999: 5). The first mode, in the form of a massive worldwide disaster, is relevant in all primary texts as the primary way they are marked as "pre-apocalyptic" narratives, but the second mode is likely even more important for the texts. When the apocalypse is understood as a general transformative event, it becomes applicable in a large variety of narrative contexts. The analyses of the primary texts explore these applications in detail.

In addition to looking at definitions of the genre and the terminology, it is important to study the typical features and literary functions of apocalyptic texts. This can give a framework with which to understand the place of the pre-apocalyptic narrative as part of the greater apocalyptic tradition. As suggested above, even the ancient archetypical apocalyptic texts were concerned with more than mere religious doctrine and were in fact deeply political and moralistic in nature (Hamerton-Kelly 2007: 5). The apocalypse found in the Book of Daniel for example was concerned with moral judgment of the existing world, and with preserving order in society (Hamerton-Kelly 2007: 9-10). The biblical idea of the end of the world suggested that the exact time of the end of the world was not clear, or perhaps even impossible to know, and thus the texts sought to make people live a moral life as if the end could arrive at any moment (Hamerton-Kelly 2007: 12). A sort of moral guide for maintaining society, one might say. This idea of watchfulness and the inclusion of history and politics was found already in early

Christianity, where the imminent end of the world or return of Christ was expected to happen at any moment, and real events in their surroundings were used as signs and portents. This form of historical and political interpretation is a motivation found in religious groups throughout time to our days (Niewiadomski 2007: 52-53). As mentioned, the primary texts are not religious in nature and do not function as moral guides in this way. However, they all feature character reflecting on morality or values in life that in some way resemble this religious function.

To some scholars, the very purpose of apocalyptic literature is to infuse significant events in history and politics with religious meaning (Lawrence 2007: 99), and thus create a kind of fusion of real history and myth. The Book of Daniel, for example, can be interpreted as a description of the political upheaval and the struggle of the Jewish peoples of its time. The four beasts it describes that terrorize the people, represent the four foreign kingdoms that subjugated the Jewish peoples in history (Himmelfarb 2009: 35). The past historical events are given mythical significance, as the fall of the previous oppressors is seen to signify a predetermined history where the (at the time) current oppressor was also be destined to fall. And so, the mythical beasts are ultimately destroyed by God, and some form of Heaven on earth is established (Himmelfarb 2009: 36-38). These elements show that the apocalypse in literature can have a metaphorical and allegorical function as well. This is something the primary texts studied in this thesis, especially *Melancholia*, make great use of.

Through this example a commonly described feature of apocalyptic literature can be found. One of the core functions and appeals of the apocalyptic is that of social critique, with the idea of something old coming to an end, and being replaced by something new and better (Weaver 2014: 174-175). The apocalypse represents a transformation from “stasis to revolution”, or perhaps a desire for it, where stagnant and dysfunctional systems are dismantled or changed to something radically different (Lisboa 2011: xvii). The existing social order and its institutions are challenged, and through the use of apocalyptic disaster and depictions of a post-apocalyptic existence, the implication might even be that the current order cannot be mended or changed through conventional means, and only an extremely radical break can give the chance for reform. Though the suggestion can also be that the world should end, if it is perceived that in some sense the world already has, for example in a sense of moral degradation or complete failure of social order (Berger 1999: 7). In short, apocalyptic literature in this perspective would be defined by a distaste

for what currently exists, and a desire for what really should exist in its stead (Berger 1999: 34). This is also relevant for the analysis of characters in the primary texts, and particularly in *Station Eleven* that features both pre- and post-apocalyptic narratives.

Alternatively, post-apocalyptic narratives could serve as representations of historical traumas or traumatic events (Berger 1999: 19), similar to how historical events could be given religious significance. The idea of trauma here connotes a type of apocalypse that forces a reassessment of what led up to it and what (or who) has been left to process it and live the consequences (Berger 1999: 21). This is in line with Berger's second mode of the apocalyptic, particularly in the ideological sense, where the ways of thought that enabled the trauma have to be reevaluated and challenged so as to prevent a repeat. This perspective on the apocalyptic as traumatic representation especially highlights the cautionary aspect of the texts. A typical feature of post-apocalyptic literature is the question of whether we (as humanity) have learned something that will prevent the apocalyptic event from repeating, or whether it might be in our nature to be destructive (Lisboa 2011: 48). The apocalypse thus becomes a form of morality tale, where a new ethic or system can amend previous mistakes such as amorality, wastefulness, greed, godlessness, hubris, recklessness, or any other perceived vice or failing the author seeks to discuss (Lisboa 2011: 53). Especially the third primary text, *Melancholia*, engages with this type of idea to a significant extent, and connects past trauma with a fear of the future in an apocalyptic context.

It is typical of apocalyptic narratives that the end of the world is either completely averted, or that something survives and lives through to rebuild a new world, even though it may still carry over the same fundamental issues (Lisboa 2011: 53-54). The idea of complete global destruction and the end of everything is quite rare in literature until the nuclear age (Lisboa 2011: 8-9). A core theme is the idea of apocalypse not just as an end of something, but as the anticipation of something new beginning afterwards, even if enough of the old survives for the new to resemble the old (Lisboa 2011: 8). Change is the driving force in the apocalyptic imagination. One aspect that could drive the fascination of the genre is a fear of losing order and civilization and returning to chaos, while simultaneously harboring a desire to return to something more fundamental and primal (Lisboa 2011: 2-3, 5-7). The fear of death is also a fundamental aspect of this, with the apocalypse representing this universal and primal terror that might be impossible for humans to ever truly understand, with apocalyptic literature embodying this fear that

something terrible might be happening at any time (Lisboa 2011: 11, 51). Mortality and the fear of death are particularly important themes in all the primary texts, and the analyses indicate they are the central themes of pre-apocalyptic literature in general.

As a genre of endings and beginnings, a set of typical stages in an apocalyptic narrative can be identified. These stages are the dystopia (the originating state of the world whose social order and values are being critiqued and put under scrutiny), a disaster or the threat of it (the instigating incident, can be thought of as any of Berger's three modes of apocalypse), the post-disaster, and finally the new world. The first two represent the destruction of the old and the latter two the beginning of something new. The new world exists to contrast with the original dystopia, and this comparison invites the revelations and cultural or ideological challenges that the text sets out to express (Ketterer 1974, cited in Weaver 2014: 181). Generally, the historical religious apocalyptic tradition has emphasized the latter stages, salvation and the new world, whereas secular and more modern science fiction interpretations often de-emphasize it or lack it completely (Weaver 2014: 183). Nevertheless, some literary critics point out that depicting the end and the rebirth together is what effectively suggests a possibility of change and constructive visions of what change might offer, and that modern apocalyptic literature lacks something if it does not include these depictions (Kumar 1995, cited in Weaver 2014: 184). On the other hand, the idea of end and rebirth can also be used (and has been used) in hostile ideology and rhetoric, with examples evident in Nazism and other political new world order movements (Weaver 2014: 185-186). As the latter section of this chapter and the analyses of the primary texts will show, these four stages are important for defining and analyzing pre-apocalyptic narratives.

Apocalyptic literature can thus be considered a form of protest literature, where the apocalypse is depicted as a direct result of the status quo, which highlights the issues in question (Weaver 2014: 188-189). Apocalyptic calamity is the transformative event that reveals the failings of the situation, but also potentially shows the path to change, and presents an opportunity for rebuilding a culture or morality that is better than the last. In other words, this transformative process can create a "new language to speak of the calamity, which destroys the old language that caused it" and can help shed superfluous, irrelevant, or damaging aspects of discourse, ideology, or culture (Cohen 1981, cited in Lisboa 2011: 57-58). In this context, the apocalypse (especially when considered as a transformative or revelatory event rather than a concrete disaster) is essentially never the

actual complete end (of narrative, or of existence), but rather merely a vehicle for discussing the real concerns of the narrative (Berger 1999: 5-6). The eschaton (that is, the disastrous end of the world) is only a means to an end; the apocalypse only exists so as to create the post-apocalypse. Furthermore, the existence of the post-apocalypse in a narrative in turn makes everything before the apocalypse “post-apocalyptic” as well, both in theme and through the understanding that the apocalypse and post-apocalypse will transpire in the narrative. While reading, the “mind is already there, after the end” (Berger 1999: 6). And so, the study of post-apocalypse is really a study of what was before, or rather which parts of it have disappeared, which have remained, and in what state (Berger 1999: 7). The tension between what was before and what comes after is where the substance is expressed. This dynamic is, of course, extremely important when it comes to distinctly pre-apocalyptic narratives, even as they omit depicting what comes after.

As a revelatory event, the apocalypse can be seen as something that can and should reveal and make clear something about the world or matters such as morality, by, for instance, clearly separating good from evil, or truth from falsehood. The apocalypse is meant to bring clarity through new information and revelation (Berger 1999: 8). Apocalyptic science fiction narratives, for example, claim to reveal some fundamental aspects of human existence or human nature (Berger 1999: 10). The Christian apocalyptic view in literature is not about exactly predicting future events, but rather emphasizing the revelatory aspect. These revelations would make clear and allow people to understand the current world as a moral battle between good and evil. This Christian narrative already presupposes an ultimate victory for good (God) and serves as an assurance that evil will not prevail, so as to highlight understanding the now over the coming (De Gruchy 2017: 10). At the same time, it can be argued that the Christian view positions people in a state of constant awareness of the end (De Gruchy 2017: 162). Hence, the temporality of the apocalypse is complex and clearly dynamic in many views. As the pre-apocalyptic is primarily distinguished by its temporal relationship to the apocalypse, understanding this is crucial in studying pre-apocalyptic literature.

Another set of features and functions identified as common in apocalyptic literature is given by Lester L. Grabbe. These focus on the traditional religious form of the genre, yet remain partially applicable to secular and modern depictions as well. The first feature is that the text is presented as delivering some divine message to humanity. Secondly, the text is “addressing the contemporary audiences” in that it refers to current

and immediately relevant events, or gives advice or new perspective to such matters at hand. Thirdly, the text operates under the idea that the divine and mythical can and do influence the human world and humanity. Fourthly, the text includes the hope for some ultimate end state of peace and order, such as a new paradise on earth. And finally, the text incorporates “significant paraenetic material”, that is, moral instructions, or warnings and features of a cautionary tale (Grabbe 2004: 117). Many of these features, if stripped of their immediate religious associations and significance, can be seen as motivations and features for apocalyptic literature in general, and not just the religious tradition specifically. The functions that deal with paraenetic factors and address current situations in particular are prevalent in the secularized apocalyptic tradition, and science fiction apocalypses in literature emerged as a response to quickly advancing technology in society (Vox 2017: 20-21). The nuclear bomb in particular dominated as the symbol after World War II (Vox 2017: 53). Many of these features have different implications and importance depending on the type of apocalypse depicted, and when the text is distinctly pre-apocalyptic. The primary texts studied in this thesis generally downplay the causal nature of their apocalypses, and are thus less paraenetic in nature than a classic religious apocalyptic text for example. Nevertheless, these are features that are worth studying in the analyses of the primary texts.

There are several other arguments for the appeal and function of apocalyptic literature as well. One suggestion is that apocalyptic literature allows readers and writers to assess and imagine “significance for themselves” and their existence, and helps them understand or structure meaning in their life. The enduring popularity of the genre and the constant production of more works in relation to it suggest that the idea of the end of the world in general culture and the human psyche is considered “immanent”, or fundamental in nature (Kermode 1967, cited in Weaver 2014: 176). The end of the world, in some form or another, would be seen as inevitable or otherwise always present as a concept in culture, which is supported by the fact that the genre has existed since ancient times and has continued to be prevalent throughout history. Another view is that apocalyptic literature appeals to the idea of evil getting its dues, as the end of the world would entail the end of evil as well along with everything else (O’Leary 1998, cited in Weaver 2014: 177), perhaps with the suggestion that there will not be a new beginning and that the ultimate end was for the best. A Christian perspective could also be offered, in considering the apocalypse as an expression of a loss of faith in the culture and

institutions of the Western world (Wagar 1982, cited in Weaver 2014: 177), leaning into the idea of the apocalyptic as countercultural or critiquing the currently established social order. Additionally, apocalyptic narratives might serve a therapeutic function, embodying and engaging with fears of destruction and endings (such as large-scale war), and allowing for safe engagement with such fears and how to potentially avoid causing such issues (Sontag 1965, Jackson 1981, cited in Weaver 2014: 178). As explored in the next section of this chapter and in the analyses of the primary texts, these features have varying significance in pre-apocalyptic narratives. The first point in particular, describing apocalyptic literature as a way to analyze and reflect on one's own life, is a central feature in every primary text analyzed in this thesis.

Finally, Slavoj Žižek provides a political and ideological perspective on disaster, its causes and consequences, and how people and cultures engage with the apocalyptic in discourse and ideologically. His argument is based on the premise that the capitalist system is heading towards an apocalypse due to several issues (ecological collapse, the "biogenetic revolution" and dissolution of the human, systemic imbalances such as resource scarcity, as well as increasingly extreme "social divisions and exclusions") (Žižek 2010: x). He argues that societal responses to ideas of disaster and apocalypse can be understood via Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's model of the psychological stages of grief that people go through during times of loss or other similar distressing situations (Kübler-Ross 1969, cited in Žižek 2010: x). The process is presented as follows: first, ideological denial, where the fundamental issue threatening disaster is outright denied to exist. Then, anger at the injustices that have led to the situation or those that do not act to prevent it; bargaining in the sense of arguing that there is potential to change things and fix the issue so as to be able to continue as before; depression and withdrawal as the bargaining fails to produce results; and finally acceptance: where the threatening situation stops being considered a threat, but instead is seen as a chance for change or to a new beginning (Žižek 2010: xi-xii). Similar arguments have been made elsewhere, where engaging with the end of things (be it the death of self or the world) is seen to involve similar aspects as dealing with bereavement, such as "overwhelming incomprehension, guilt, anger, blame, remembrance, preservation, rebuilding" (Lisboa 2011: xviii), roughly corresponding to the stages presented by Žižek.

Žižek also argues that in situations where societies are threatened with processes that work to collapse them or bring qualitative change, they tend to double down on

ignorance and self-deception (Žižek 2010: 327), effectively stalling on the first stage of Žižek's model. Furthermore, when a (potentially preventable) impending catastrophe that originally had been thought of as impossible becomes certain and inevitable, it is normalized and considered always having been inevitable and expected instead, or perceived as the natural order of things. There is thus a conflict and potentially a cognitive dissonance between knowing a catastrophe is possible, but still firmly believing it will not come to pass (Žižek 2010: 328). This type of process applies to explicit human activity as well, such as war, genocide, or other ideological matters, rather than merely to catastrophes perceived as external threats (Žižek 2010: 329). As Žižek's model describes reactions to an upcoming disaster, it is very useful as a tool for analyzing pre-apocalyptic narratives and characters, and will be used throughout the analyses of the primary texts and their characters. The section following immediately below will discuss how the various features and functions of apocalyptic literature change in pre-apocalyptic contexts. The resulting model of pre-apocalyptic narratives will then guide the analysis of the primary texts.

2.2 The case of the pre-apocalyptic

In summary, the previous section explored and expanded on various core features associated with apocalyptic literature, which we can use to try to understand how a pre-apocalyptic narrative might differ from other forms of apocalyptic literature. Typical features in apocalyptic literature as discovered include: a distaste for existing social orders and ethics, and a hope for creating something better after the old is gone; historical and societal critique and recontextualization; cautionary tales and warnings of impending dangers, that can engage with past traumas to clarify causes and effects (to avoid repeating mistakes, or to serve a therapeutic function); a test or a cleansing of perceived evil, with the remaining good rewarded with a new paradise that is better than what was before (chiefly religious in nature but the sentiment exists in general as well); the fear of death and the primitive or the lack of order as central themes; and the stages of grief being a useful tool through which one can analyze reactions to impending disaster. Structurally, an apocalyptic narrative has four stages: dystopia, disaster, post-disaster, and the new world. The apocalypse itself can be understood in two key ways: as a transformative event (in Berger's sense) and as a revelation that brings new understanding or clarification. Additionally, apocalyptic literature helps contextualize and understand the meaning and the structure of one's own present existence and life.

With these definitions and features laid out, the question becomes how they interact or are present when the narrative is decidedly pre-apocalyptic. In this case, “pre-apocalyptic” refers to a narrative or thought that takes place in, or is concerned with, the time before an apocalyptic event (disaster, transformative event, revelation) has occurred. The knowledge that the apocalypse will eventually occur may or may not be included. However, as Berger suggested regarding its relationship with the time after and the time before; the pre-apocalyptic also usually presupposes that the apocalypse will happen (or already has, in the sense that the author has already created the event). As a transformative event that forces recontextualization and reassessment, and the study of cause and effect, it is therefore clear that, if there is knowledge that a disaster is impending, the apocalypse should reasonably exert influence even on the time before. Žižek’s argument and model is based on the idea that the knowledge of potential future events influences behavior and ideology in the present, and he even considers the change that happens as potential becomes certainty. If we know something will happen that will drastically alter the societal order, we can imagine the consequences and what the implications are for ideologies or systems. And if it is an event that is directly related to human activity, we can potentially alter the causes and change the effects. In a sense, knowing that the order will break due to some event can cause the order to break before that, as a response to the knowledge: the threat of change itself instigates change, in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The revelatory mode operates similarly, and especially in religious apocalyptic texts (which some already argue to be decidedly pre-apocalyptic in nature) it is chiefly concerned with the now rather than the future world after the end. Cautionary and therapeutic roles also remain intact in a pre-apocalyptic narrative, although the delivery can be perceived as somewhat different. In a post-apocalyptic narrative, the consequences of mistakes are made explicit or embedded into the setting (i.e. the apocalypse and its aftermath were a direct consequence of something that was done), whereas in a pre-apocalyptic setting they are merely implied: the emphasis is on the processes that will eventually lead to disaster, and how they ought to be observed and rectified before it is too late.

The dynamic between the old that was and the new that will be, and the disdain for the corrupt and the promise of rebuilding something good, are affected by the change in setting and presentation to a greater extent. The first part, a critique of the existing, is hardly affected despite a pre-apocalyptic narrative lacking a depiction of what the result

will be. After all, a text can criticize a system or identify flaws in a society without explicitly showing the final consequences that those issues have on a society. The second part, corresponding to the post-disaster stage and the new world, is more impacted, however. The time after is removed from the explicit narrative text, which creates arguably the biggest ostensible break between pre-apocalyptic literature and other forms. However, as already mentioned, the threat of change can be the cause of change as well, which offers pre-apocalyptic narratives a way to engage with similar themes. If the religious or Judeo-Christian view is considered pre-apocalyptic as well, as a prophetic type of text, the new world is also already included in the guaranteed promise of something better afterwards, even when it is not explicitly depicted in the narrative. Pre-apocalyptic literature in some cases appears to be based on understanding this tradition. The reactions to an impending end always carry the question of whether the end can be lived through, and what will come afterwards. In a pre-apocalyptic narrative, these questions of “will something remain?” and “can something better be rebuilt?” are made into explicit in-narrative issues. That is, the characters in the narrative are themselves faced with considering these questions, in addition to the reader. Žižek argued that societies react certain ways to these questions, and characters in a narrative can and have to be considered the same way.

Finally, the idea of the apocalypse as an invitation to contemplate aspects of one’s life and its meaning is likewise present in pre-apocalyptic narratives as it is in other forms of apocalyptic literature. There is even potentially a stronger impetus for this in pre-apocalyptic narratives, as the settings and conditions presented are most likely closer to our own lived reality than mid-disaster or post-apocalyptic settings that we have to imagine. In the Christian view where the end is not predictable a similar effect is also present, where the suggestion is to reevaluate morals and life choices in the present rather than after something has already changed. In this we can sense a core feature of pre-apocalypticism: the suggestion that the transformative or revelatory experience caused by the apocalypse can exist in the present, and that one can examine and revalue fundamental aspects of one’s life even before the apocalypse has happened. As the analyses of the primary texts will show, this is a particularly important feature of pre-apocalyptic literature. Self-reflection and re-evaluation of one’s life, instigated by some form of apocalypse, is something every major character in every primary text experiences.

By exploring the origins and various forms of apocalyptic literature, as well as definitions of the terminology and concepts, we have come to understand the central thematic aspects and typical features of the genre. Pre-apocalypticism appears to fundamentally touch on and achieve similar goals as other forms of apocalyptic literature, while carrying some clear differences, particularly in presentation and in terms of the aspects of the genre which are emphasized. By studying the primary texts, falling under various forms of “pre-apocalyptic” in their narrative forms, we can examine how they utilize certain narrative modes or represent certain themes, and how being pre-apocalyptic plays a role in their delivery. Most, if not all, features and considerations explored in this chapter are identifiable in the primary texts, or help understand how the apocalypse is depicted and how it impacts the characters.

3. Analysis of the primary texts

3.1 *The Last Policeman*

Synopsis

Approximately ten months before the events of the novel begin, an asteroid, eventually nicknamed Maia, is discovered in outer space, with a miniscule possibility of crossing trajectories with planet Earth. As the months go by, the calculated probability of impact increases, and roughly two months before the novel begins astronomers announce that Maia is guaranteed to hit Earth with consequences implied and expected to be cataclysmic and a threat to all life on the planet. The asteroid's impact location remains unknown, but the impact is dated to happen in October.

The events of the novel begin at the end of March of that year, some six months before the asteroid hits. Point-of-view character Henry Palace, a police detective in the city of Concord, New Hampshire, is involved in the routine investigation of the death of Peter Zell, who appears to have committed suicide by hanging. As suicides have become increasingly common in the past year due to the asteroid's impact probability increasing, the police do not consider the event anything unusual, but details on the scene cause Henry to suspect Peter was actually murdered and he begins investigating further despite his coworkers' disbelief and mockery. His investigation leads to uncovering details of Peter's life, as well as Peter's relationships with his coworkers, relatives, and lone friend. Despite evidence repeatedly suggesting Peter did indeed commit suicide, Henry continues and pursues various leads he believes are suspicious. As the investigation proceeds, Henry discovers a drug dealing business might be involved, and as the investigation escalates Henry's car is sabotaged in an attempt to stop him, a key witness is accidentally killed by police, and another witness is murdered by an unknown, strengthening Henry's resolve to solve the case. Ultimately, Peter is confirmed to have been murdered, and the perpetrator (who also killed the second witness) is revealed to be his brother-in-law Erik Littlejohn who has a family with Peter's sister and was running the drug business in order to secure a safe material future for his son in case they survived the asteroid's impact.

Parallel to these events is also a narrative thread about Henry's sister, who together with her recently-wed husband Derek are involved in an anti-authority community of conspiracy theorists, with Derek being arrested by the National Guard and

Nico going missing. The novel ends in April, with the impact location of the asteroid having recently been confirmed to be in Indonesia, across the globe from Concord.

Analysis

Before delving into studying the characters and the society depicted in *The Last Policeman* (TLP in citations), it is worthwhile to take a look at the type of apocalyptic narrative the novel actually is. At a glance, it is very distinctly and clearly a “pre-apocalyptic” setting in the most obvious meaning of the term. The explicit disastrous apocalyptic event is described and recognized as a catastrophe, but it has yet to happen. But at the same time, the world depicted in the novel is well aware that the disaster is coming, to the extent of being able to pinpoint the impact of the devastating asteroid to an exact date on the calendar. Both the global community in the novel as well as the reader of the novel operate under the assumption that the asteroid will hit, and that the apocalypse will happen. This clearly marks the novel as pre-apocalyptic.

As an apocalyptic narrative, the novel’s setting can be considered in the context of the four stages of apocalyptic literature as described in the previous chapter. These are dystopia, disaster (or, crucially, the threat of disaster), post-apocalypse, and the new world. Given the novel is set in what is essentially our world, as evident by its depictions of real-life American locations and various pop-cultural and geopolitical references, the existence of the dystopian stage can be questioned. Typically, dystopia, particularly in science fiction, exists as an exaggerated or extrapolated depiction of a society and serves as a vehicle for social critique or an exploration of consequences leading up to the apocalypse. The asteroid in the novel is an external power not affected by the state or actions of society, so the novel’s world cannot reasonably be seen as a dystopia leading to an apocalypse. Nothing outright stops a view of the depicted world as a platform for critiquing social order or policy, but as described later in this chapter, the novel’s main analytical interests are elsewhere, as it is more concerned with human nature and emotional introspection over societal depictions. Likewise, a religious interpretation might consider the depicted world, as it replicates the real world, as a way to explore society and its relation to a higher power, for instance by considering the apocalyptic asteroid impact some sort of divine punishment. While this religious angle is acknowledged by the narrative and informs the behavior of certain groups or characters, it is largely tangential and not a major feature of it, just like the previous view.

The second stage of the apocalyptic narrative, the disaster itself, is perhaps more obviously present. As an asteroid that is about to hit the planet, it takes on the aspect of a threat, rather than the concrete event itself, which is exactly what defines the narrative as pre-apocalyptic as opposed to other forms of apocalyptic text. It seems clear, and certainly will be after this thesis, that the presence of the apocalypse is the single defining key factor in apocalyptic literature, which may seem like a tautological or obvious statement, but given the flexibility and potential omission of the other stages of apocalyptic narratives it feels worth pointing out. The framing of the novel's narrative as counting down to a specific date and the presentation of the premise serve to make the apocalyptic impact feel truly inevitable, despite the novel only taking place during a few weeks' period of time and ending with the impact still looming ahead in the (relatively) distant future. The assumption nevertheless is always that the asteroid will ultimately hit, even if the unknown location of the impact affects character behavior. While the impact is expected to be world-ending in its destructive power and is thought to likely kill off even those who are not directly affected by the explosive impact (*TLP*: 115-116), the weight the characters give to the location of the impact is a suggestion that a post-apocalyptic reality may be possible. As the novel ends before the disaster itself, this post-apocalyptic stage as well as the succeeding new world and rebuilding are completely omitted from the narrative. What remains, however, is the characters' awareness of said stages. Some (including the murderer, Erik) are quite aware of the possibility of a life after the asteroid's impact, and it informs their actions and motivations, serving as one of the core conflicts in the novel.

As mentioned, as an apocalyptic event, the disaster in the novel is beyond the control of the characters and humanity at large. It is also not something that has been caused by humanity's actions, behavior, or beliefs (dismissing the religious interpretation for now). As the analysis in this chapter will show, the apocalyptic disaster can quite comfortably be considered a transformative event or major historical turning point as Berger described it, that extends its transformative effects into the preceding time period by virtue of simply existing. But the specific case of the asteroid being detected and its probability of impact calculated raises the question of what exactly is the entity that projects this transformative power: is it the impact itself, or is it the knowledge of the impact.

While the asteroid existing and striking the planet is beyond human actions, gathering knowledge about it and the spread of said knowledge are purely human actions. The theory of apocalyptic narratives as described suggests the threat of disaster has the same transformative properties as the disaster (meaning, pre- and post-apocalyptic narratives share the same core predicament), and so the knowledge about the disaster proves to be an additional dimension to the analysis. In the case of *The Last Policeman*, but also more widely applicable to pre-apocalyptic narratives, the case can be made that it is not the disaster itself that instigates the transformative changes, but the knowledge of the disaster. One could easily imagine a pre-apocalyptic narrative wherein the disaster is still impending, the asteroid is still going to hit, but the characters are completely unaware of it, and no transformative effect or societal changes would occur. Ignorance might be bliss, and might shelter from the transformative effects of the apocalypse. This might even raise the ethical questions of whether one has the right to share this knowledge should one possess it while others remain ignorant, or if it even might be unethical not to share it. If the apocalypse is thought of more in the revelatory sense, of uncovering some greater truth or understanding, is it right to deny this experience by not sharing the knowledge?

Exploring this further, one could go as far as to say that a pre-apocalyptic narrative in fact contains two apocalypses (in the transformative sense). The actual disaster itself (which happens regardless of any knowledge of it), as well as the one caused by knowledge about it. Interestingly, within a narrative, the former also effectively destroys the effects of the latter. Even if characters or society have transformative and revelatory experiences and successfully recontextualize their lives, they will still be lost in the disaster, and those who survive (assuming a post-apocalyptic reality) might go through a second transformative experience. By depicting this, *The Last Policeman* then seems to be asking questions regarding the value of such transformative experiences. What worth is there in introspection or reevaluation if it will all be wiped out anyway? This situation, however, can easily be transposed onto a more general view of human life and death. Humans are destined to mortality, and the knowledge of death's inevitability informs life to a large degree, as can be seen throughout history in art and action. The novel's thesis is, then, that the apocalyptic impact of the asteroid is no different from a peaceful passing of old age. If the impending apocalypse can force a transformative introspection and a reevaluation and recontextualization of one's life and values, so can the very fact that all humans are mortal. Death is the core fear of humanity, as suggested in the previous

chapter, and as such humans avoid thinking of it, and all pre-apocalyptic literature does is force the discussion.

Additionally, in the context of “two apocalypses” and the role of knowledge as a factor in pre-apocalyptic narratives, it is worth noting the separation between the reader and the in-text reality the characters inhabit. Even when the apocalyptic event is unknown to characters in the narrative, the reader might be aware of it, which would thus make it a pre-apocalyptic narrative through context (this is a core aspect of the second primary text studied in this thesis, *Station Eleven*). Presumably a narrative in which the impending apocalypse is unknown even to the reader (until it is revealed later, for instance) would also similarly be a pre-apocalyptic narrative though its nature was hidden. In either case, the reader’s position allows any transformative or revelatory experiences of the characters to survive even their own demise in the “second” apocalypse, and again highlights the appeal and function of pre-apocalyptic literature: the invitation to introspection and recontextualizing.

When it comes to religious approaches to the apocalypse in *The Last Policeman*, the novel is quite sparing in its content. The impending disaster is treated quite matter-of-factly, chiefly in a secular analytical manner, though this is likely influenced by the novel’s prose being strictly from Henry’s point of view. Even so, the title pages for the various parts of the novel include details and scientific data on the location of the asteroid and its movement through space, and the asteroid is never described as anything but an astronomical phenomenon and object about to collide with our planet. The religious interpretation of the disaster is relegated to only being expressed by certain specific characters and briefly alluded to as a societal phenomenon. Religious apocalypses also typically feature the dystopian stage of narrative, where e.g. human actions or moral weakness are the cause of disaster to some extent. *The Last Policeman* however is very clear in not depicting or commenting on life before the asteroid was known to exist (in a sense, there lies yet another pre-apocalyptic world beyond the one depicted in the novel), de-emphasizing ideas of cause and effect or that human activity might have had anything to do with the asteroid emerging from space. The emphasis in the novel is on moral questions during the lead-up to the disaster, not what led to it happening. The post-apocalypse and rebirth are of course also prominent features of religious apocalypses, and likewise are not depicted in the novel.

Moving on to the specifics of the world depicted in the novel, there are numerous effects the impending apocalyptic event has on society. Henry himself expresses his observations on what the general atmosphere of the pre-apocalyptic world is like:

I would characterize the mood, here in town, as that of a child who isn't in trouble yet, but knows he's going to be. He's up in his room, waiting. 'Just wait till your father gets home.' He's sullen and snappish, he's on edge. Confused, sad, trembling against the knowledge of what's coming next, and right on the edge of violence, not angry but anxious in a way that can easily shade into anger.

(*TLP*: 62)

In this description he identifies the idea of knowledge pressing on the human psyche, reinforcing the idea that information about upcoming disaster itself weighs as much as the disastrous event itself. He also characterizes the tumultuous and conflicting emotions felt by people in reaction to this knowledge. Depression, sadness, agitation, confusion, fear, and anger. Many of these bring to mind the stages of grief that Žižek was applying when describing reactions to catastrophe. The state described by Henry most accurately maps onto the idea of depression, where the catastrophe is known to be happening, but no solution can be imagined, and the mind sinks into a resigned state. Hints of anger as well, potentially lashing out against anyone thought responsible, and perhaps a sense of bargaining can be implicitly understood in the description, if one were to imagine the child having thoughts of running away from the trouble, suggesting they have options for salvation. Overall, the description captures the fear of death that defines the apocalyptic imagination and the visceral emotional reactions to disaster.

Henry comments on how the impending asteroid impact has led to various extreme social and political movements and events across the world, including cannibalism, decadent orgies, especially active charity work, attempts at political and religious revolutions, multiple religious movements that preached the second coming of religious figures, belief in the arrival of aliens, attempts and building spaceships to escape the planet with, and overall general unrest and disregard of law (*TLP*: 116-117). In this list of events and trends one can identify multiple different motivating factors that are affecting society. Religious movements predicated on the idea of salvation and of being rescued from the disaster; the hope of being saved likewise leading all manner of plans for escape, no matter how unrealistic they may seem, suggesting even non-religious people of the world feel like miraculous events are their only remaining option. Some indicate that there is belief in survival or a continuity of civilization, as a political

revolution with the presumed goal of installing new institutions and social order or extensive charity work suggest longer-term planning, or at the very least that something worthwhile can be achieved in the last few months before the asteroid hits. Notable also is a sense of indifference or acceptance in some of the events described. With the end of the world looming, the fear of lasting consequences disappears along with many social inhibitions, leading to the mentioned increased sexual activity and even extreme taboo or violent activities. In a similar vein, a common trend described is that of acting out one's "bucket list" (*TLP*: 50), which refers to leaving one's responsibilities behind and doing what one has always wanted to do before dying. This activity hinges to a certain extent on the same idea of not caring about the consequences or long-term future plans, but also interestingly implicitly carries the notion that those people have thus far lived their lives without doing what they have wanted to do. A clear call to introspection and reevaluation in the manner already identified as being present in pre-apocalyptic narratives.

Religious reactions and movements in society are depicted in the novel chiefly through the presence of various activist figures in the background. Henry briefly runs into people preaching in the streets on a few occasions (*TLP*: 96, 168), and is told to repent and pray, and that "wickedness shall be punished" (*TLP*: 169-170). While the exact contents of their beliefs are not expanded upon, as Henry appears very uninterested in their gospel, from these short interactions it is possible to assume they follow typical religious views of the apocalypse. The disaster is understood as being a divine punishment for some undefined transgression, and praying is presumed to bring salvation. Whether it is thought to prevent the disaster itself or merely guarantee a new and better life is not clear, but the effect of the ideology is the same either way. While religion does not play a large part in Henry's life, and consequently the novel's core narrative, it is implied to be a significant feature of the world at large. Henry notes that while many restaurant chains and food-related companies have gone under, one in particular has survived and its owners have had some form of religious awakening, to the point of only staffing fellow believers (*TLP*: 21). This is suggesting a dominant presence of religion in people's lives and likely a great popularity as well.

Somewhat similarly, the novel also describes certain widespread conspiracy theories that suggest the United States government has secretly devised plans to survive or escape the disaster through hidden bunkers or living habitats built on the moon (*TLP*: 201-202), that Henry's sister Nico and her husband Derek also believe in. These sorts of

beliefs are in the pre-apocalyptic context not fundamentally different from religious beliefs, and they both ultimately preach about potential salvation and a hope for survival. The key difference is the anti-authority slant of the conspiracy theorist communities, that can be seen as representing the social critique side of apocalyptic literature, that otherwise appears fairly scarce in the novel. The implication of the conspiracy and its secret bases is that some chosen elite will be the one to survive, and the ignorant commoners are left to perish in the disaster. Not only is it an anti-authority idea of a tyrannical or callous government neglecting the people it is supposed to represent, but brings to mind issues of class divide as well.

Matters of class and money are also relevant in the novel's context as they are also things that enable the realization of bucket list items and a life in luxury for the last months of human life. This social divide is also evident in the way law enforcement operates and what it represents. As the world is expected to end in six months, even short prison sentences can effectively be life imprisonment, which many are acutely aware of (*TLP*: 53-54, 156). Due to this, the police who make the calls to pursue or persecute certain criminals are in a sense acting as executioners as well, having the power to doom someone to certain death in prison. The police are aware of their power as well, and Henry uses it to pressure a criminal into helping him in exchange for not charging for a crime (*TLP*: 53), and later expresses his desire to ignore certain offenses because the criminal in question helped his investigation (*TLP*: 182). This power and its implications on society and the power dynamics of law enforcement are not fully questioned, as Henry himself takes advantage of it to his own benefit, and he remains the sole point-of-view character of the narrative. The use of gasoline in America has also been restricted to the police force and the army (*TLP*: 44), further increasing the power and class disparity and limiting the opportunity of life for the common citizens. Such measures are likely reasons the anti-authority conspiracy theories have emerged and gained such a foothold in the public consciousness.

One impact the impending asteroid impact has on society that is immediately relevant to the novel's plot and Henry's own activities is the large increase in suicide rates (*TLP*: 13, 17), to the point where a suicide to many is not considered shocking or surprising anymore. The novel does not explicitly analyze reasons for committing suicide, but leaves the implicit question of why one would end their life when certain death is expected mere six months later. In the novel's specific context, perhaps people seek to

control their own fate rather than leaving it to the mercy of a potentially violent end in a cataclysm, or the anxiety caused by the impending disaster is too overwhelming. The novel generally is careful about discussing the subject and of implicating certain causes. Nevertheless, despite suicides being a common tragedy and mostly reacted to with apathy, Henry notes that the police actively avoid drawing attention to them for the sake of societal stability (*TLP*: 20), suggesting they want to avoid needlessly highlighting the gravity of the present worldly condition. It also serves as a micro example of the burden of knowledge discussed earlier, where the frequency and seriousness of suicide is seemingly willfully ignored or downplayed so as to not cause further depression or chaos in society. Despite the inescapability of the apocalypse, that is, death, everyone wants to avoid thinking about it.

Economics and geopolitics have also been affected by the incoming asteroid. Henry notes that the world economy collapsed around the time the chance of impact was around 50% (*TLP*: 48), and more specifically points out that many restaurant chains also disappeared (*TLP*: 21). He also observes that non-essential jobs such as cleaning of storefronts are neglected (*TLP*: 13-14). All of these indicate a general hopelessness and lack of vision of a future life that permeates society, not just in America but worldwide. Without an expectation of life continuing past the apocalyptic event, people see no reason with engaging in materialism or the wider forms of capitalism. A notable exception pointed out are certain broadcasting companies that fought over the exclusive right to broadcast the final impact probability announcement, seeking to maximize their profits in the case civilization might survive the impact (*TLP*: 76). While the fate of these companies in the months since is not discussed in the novel, their actions suggest some still believe in the potential continuity of society and the continued possibility of exploiting it for profit.

Geopolitical tensions also flare up in the background of the narrative, with Pakistan wanting to destroy the asteroid with nuclear weapons and the United States threatening them not to attempt it (*TLP*: 140), in fear of the splintered asteroid causing even greater destruction than a single large impact would. This dynamic shows the impending disaster has not eliminated nationalist divides, and indicates certain countries still believe in situations where the impact does not destroy everything and are looking out for themselves even at the expense of others. As the impact location is eventually confirmed to be near Indonesia, notably on the other side of the globe from North America,

Americans are celebrating while the US also sees a large spree in lootings (*TLP*: 308). The news has given Americans hope of survival now, and the reactions suggest a renewed interest in gathering supplies and preparing for the post-apocalyptic, a clear shift in attitudes towards the impending disaster. This sort of preparatory activity and culture is also hinted at with Henry noting the existence of a black market for stolen weapons (*TLP*: 112). It suggests the populace is expecting violence, presumably not only in the time before but also after the disaster, particularly after the news about the impact location which would have to a degree vindicated or reinforced the ideology of the communities preparing for survival. The people thus show clear awareness and understanding of the apocalypse, the post-apocalypse, and what they might entail.

Other miscellaneous observations of society's reactions to the incoming asteroid include Henry's note that when the asteroid was newly discovered and the probability of impact still low, astronomy as a hobby soared in popularity (*TLP*: 187). This depicts a kind of innocence that in hindsight is likely to appear bittersweet to someone in the later months, but also suggests that the threat of the impact was not taken seriously at first, and the asteroid merely considered a curiosity. Perhaps people even did not want to believe it might hit, which would describe Žižek's model on denial of threat. Another interesting point is Henry commenting on a group of teens being dressed in "weird pre-apocalyptic fashion" (*TLP*: 192) which indicates in both Henry and in the wider community a high self-awareness of the situation as distinctly pre-apocalyptic, to the point of using the exact term to describe the phenomenon. This line is the most direct reference to the apocalyptic tradition and imagination in the novel. It also has implications for the culture during these times, indicating social judging and caring about appearances has lessened in the pre-apocalyptic age, especially among the youth who have not had the chance for long lives yet. Finally, Henry mentions that a science fiction TV series called *Distant Pale Glimmers* has been produced for the past few months, depicting a future of peaceful space exploration (*TLP*: 137). It indicates a desire for escapism and a likely hopeless dream of a future where such activities would be possible, appealing to the kinds of people who still believe in survival or perhaps the secret moon base conspiracies. It also shows that artists are still choosing to create despite the circumstances, whatever their motivations for it might be. Whether they believe their works will remain after the disaster can only be guessed upon.

Žižek's model can also be used to consider certain activities and phenomena. Religious ideas of salvation and hope of rescue represent bargaining and a possibility of preventing or surviving the disaster, while the anti-authority aspects of the conspiracy theories hint at anger as a reaction. The idea of going through one's bucket list suggests a degree of acceptance, not in the sense that the disaster is no longer a threat as Žižek described it, but rather that nothing can be done about it and thus it is no longer of concern in the same way. The wave of suicides on the other hand are a symptom of deep societal and personal depression. Outright denial proves to be the rarest, perhaps owing to the novel's events beginning after the news of the asteroid's impact has already settled in the public consciousness and largely been accepted already. The only true example of denial is a briefly mentioned conspiracy theory that suggests the asteroid's trajectory has been calculated wrong, and that it actually will pass Earth without impact (*TLP*: 124-125), a belief which Henry dismisses as delusional and outright false. How widespread such a belief is, is not made clear.

In the case of specific characters and their reactions to the approaching apocalypse, the most important one is Henry himself, as he serves as the narrator throughout the novel, and his experiences and thoughts are depicted the most intimately of any character. The promotional blurb on the back cover of the novel asks the question: "What's the point of solving murders if we're all going to die soon, anyway?". This problem encapsulates the core arc that Henry goes through in the novel. In picking up and pursuing the investigation of what seems to everyone else to be a routine suicide, his motivations to remain actively working as a policeman and what drives him to continue to live where many others choose not to are challenged. Throughout his investigation he consistently finds it difficult to rationalize or express what truly motivates him, and his mood shifts dramatically on several occasions, but his conduct and a comparison with other characters reveals the conflict he undergoes.

Henry himself notes that he had always wanted to be a police officer (*TLP*: 38). While he never articulates why exactly this is, he tells that his mother used to work at the city's police station as a clerk, and when he was a child, she was killed in a seemingly random crime for no apparent reason despite the city's low crime rates, which later caused his father to commit suicide (*TLP*: 220, 274-275). Various reasons can be interpreted out of this, such as a desire to prevent a similar fate from befalling anyone and a general desire to protect order and punish criminals, or perhaps a sense of wanting to uphold the

legacy of his mother by working in the same field and even at the same police station. Whichever is the case, he presents himself as diligent and idealistic about police work even in the present circumstances where the purpose and value of many activities are called into question with the asteroid set to hit. He even shows irritation at his coworkers neglecting their own responsibilities (*TLP*: 127), despite the police generally not having much serious work to take care of. His attitude to his work is also exemplified in how he claims to have loved his job as a petty patrol officer, even after the news of the asteroid became dominant, though at the time of the novel's beginning, he has been promoted to detective and expresses a certain vague sense of dissatisfaction (*TLP*: 38). This dissatisfaction suggests he is starting to sense the lack of purpose to the job and the mission to uphold order which he appears to have been particularly resistant to before, similarly to how the apocalypse has affected other demographics and aspects of society. The lack of "real" work as a detective is also likely a factor, not letting him live his dream before the world ends.

When he is finally faced with the potential for a case to investigate, he notes of having an "awful but inspiring feeling" (*TLP*: 13). As a policeman, his purpose is to uphold law and order, yet on a personal level he appears to be wishing for a crime to investigate. The personal desire for motivation and satisfaction, which are caused by his search for a meaning in a world set to end, are gravely clashing with the wellbeing of society and his role in it. The situation also highlights his insecurity and lack of trust in his own abilities as a detective, further reinforcing the conflict between wanting and not wanting the case to be real. The reader is initially made to question whether Henry's suspicion of the cause of death is valid or merely his own fabrication, as many other police characters repeatedly dismiss his claims as ridiculous or pointless, and Henry himself also doubts this throughout the novel. The stress of an impending catastrophe that forces one to reevaluate one's motivations in this case seems to cause cognitive dissonance and possible delusions.

The case emerges as a sort of lifeline for Henry, and his reliance on it is expressed in how excited he is when it appears to be progressing and new evidence seems to be appearing (*TLP*: 44-45, 206). He also acts quite desperate when pursuing certain leads in order to make his case, such as when he steals a vial of blood from Peter's autopsy session (*TLP*: 89) and violates protocol to get it independently tested to prove a certain suspicion (*TLP*: 167-168). He also directly expresses that he feels he has to solve the case (*TLP*:

95-96), though not further expanding or explicitly rationalizing why this need has arisen. In the context of a pre-apocalyptic narrative, it seems clear the case has started to become his sole reason for living and not succumbing to the pressures of the impending disaster. This is further reinforced in the way he starts to feel depressed and panicked when evidence seems to invalidate his case, such as when Peter Zell's sister and brother-in-law convince him Peter very likely committed suicide due to drug withdrawal (*TLP*: 190-191). Another attempt at rationalizing his behavior occurs later, after he has already realized the truth about the case and is arranging for a confession and arrest, when he is asked why he tried so hard to solve what had by then been confirmed to be a murder, and he simply answers with "because it's unsolved" (*TLP*: 272). He appears entirely unaware or unwilling to admit the personal motivational stake he had in pursuing the investigation, that he might have pursued it merely to distract himself from the depression and morbid reality awaiting him should he stop and consider the situation. But there is also potential for interpreting his behavior as simply upholding the same ideals that drove him to become a police officer in the first place, before the asteroid even existed in mankind's consciousness. He might find value in just upholding the order the police are meant to protect, which would indicate a stronger introspective awareness and appreciation of morals even when death was inevitable, a position that was identified as being a crucial aspect of pre-apocalyptic literature. He might even believe in a possible upholding of these values even through the disaster and as a legacy of his own.

Henry, however, also seemingly recognizes that despite his passion and emotional investment in the case, solving it won't have any bearing on the asteroid and whether it hits Earth (*TLP*: 205). He does struggle with this attitude too, though, as his investigation continues to escalate. His car is sabotaged in an effort to hurt him (*TLP*: 139). When additionally a key witness, Naomi, who he became intimately involved with, is murdered and a revised autopsy confirms Peter Zell was indeed murdered as well (*TLP*: 246-257) he appears to start wonder whether his case might be connected to something much bigger and more important after all. Despite dismissing the conspiracy theories of government secrets, his sister's beliefs in them and the arrest and later death of her husband at the hands of the National Guard (*TLP*: 132, 258) would have influenced Henry's worldview as well, and the escalation of his case might convince him that something was being covered up. In this case, Henry's attitude towards the apocalypse is shifting from merely

accepting it towards actually having hope for survival and the world post-disaster, which would further serve to stave off depression.

Ultimately, however, Henry solves the case but finds no joy in it (*TLP*: 270) as the truth turned out to be completely mundane, crashing any budding hopes for survival he might have started to develop through the process. The meaninglessness of his occupation and his pursuit in the face of the impending end of the world, and how he failed to protect the witness he came to care for during the investigation, start to dawn on him. He comments how there is “something galling” about the arrival of spring (*TLP*: 277), which highlights his depressed state at the end of his experiences. The expression indicates a distaste for the passage of time, a cruel reminder of how the asteroid continues to advance every day, and twists a traditional symbol of rebirth and new life into a reminder of death and inevitability. At the end, Henry hesitates to turn the perpetrator in for his sentence, which would be guaranteed life in prison, but ultimately decides to uphold justice (*TLP*: 302). The hesitation is because in the murderer, Erik, Peter Zell’s brother-in-law who wished to protect his son, he recognizes the same anxiety and fear of the apocalypse that he has struggled with himself, and the desperate extents one goes to find and justify a meaning for oneself. Henry never resorted to murder, but the thought process is the same between the men. Handing over the murderer for sentencing is the final moral test Henry has to overcome, and his decisions shows that he still has some belief in the values of the police and the order of society. It might even indicate that he believes in survival as well, that he still has hope, as proposed earlier, and that he seeks to uphold the notion of justice and order in the hopes of it surviving the disaster.

At the very end of the novel, his sister Nico returns after having disappeared during activities by the conspiracy theorist communities, and she is preaching about hope and something big that might save them all. Henry, however, appears very apathetic and dismissive towards this promise and closes the door on her (*TLP*: 315-316, 318), though his reaction is somewhat ambiguous. He could be expressing sadness that his sister still believes in a conspiracy that he himself was on the verge of falling for but has lost faith in, or perhaps he has lost hope himself and feels no desire to seek it. The latter seems less believable given his actions previously in the case of handing over Erik and his belief in order and truth. Instead it seems he feels he has lost his sister to the false hope of the conspiracy theory, while he himself has achieved some more tangible sense of hope for

survival and continuation of civilization and order, especially with the asteroid's impact now known not to directly threaten North America.

Henry's thoughts on the disaster itself are slightly less complicated. As already suggested before, as the point-of-view character, his attitudes towards disaster are the chief attitudes presented in the novel, and for instance his disinterest in the religious approach means it is largely not featured. He retorts that the asteroid is "not falling on our heads" at his sister using that expression to describe the disaster and instead gives a fatalistic, matter-of-fact view of two objects in space merely happening to intersect (*TLP*: 136-137), seemingly outright the religious or ideological view of the disaster happening for a reason or as a result of some human activity. At another point he expresses anger at the asteroid (*TLP*: 97) as if it is impeding the progress of his case despite the obvious disconnect, expressing his hatred for how the looming end of the world makes him feel solving the case is meaningless. He comments on a recurring dream he has about his childhood love, and expresses self-awareness about the dream representing a desire for normalcy rather than simply love (*TLP*: 104). He thus shows he understands the effects the asteroid has even now, merely existing as a threat. This is further shown in how he explicitly notes the mere threat of disaster is having a great effect on both people and society at large, in observations such as "the terror of the coming devastation a devastation of its own" (*TLP*: 270) and him cursing that "Maia, from 280 million miles" was "having her way with us all" (*TLP*: 316). Despite his personal struggles with motivation and searching for meaning in the pre-apocalyptic situation, and how deeply the impending disaster affects his life and behavior, he still shows acute understanding of the psychological effects of the apocalypse.

As for other characters, the murderer, Erik Littlejohn, is worth taking a look at. He at first appears to be religious, suggesting he trusts in God's plan for humanity (*TLP*: 72), not in the context of the asteroid but the implication remains nevertheless. He also insists on having his son Kyle attend school, despite schools generally being very empty throughout the country (*TLP*: 73). These points suggest he has a belief in a future and life continuing in some form after the disaster strikes. This is proven when the motivation for his crimes is revealed. He stole and sold medical drugs to fund hoarding supplies and weapons, in an effort to make sure Kyle can have a safe future even after the asteroid hits, and he resorted to murder to silence people who witnessed his dealings and were likely to expose him (*TLP*: 293-294). He also insists he had no choice but to kill, and when

confronted by Henry who argues nobody is forced to kill, he insists that “soon, they will” (*TLP*: 297). These facts reveal his true attitude, as he believes a violent post-apocalyptic reality is inevitable and implies human nature is to be violent. Just as described in the previous chapter, he fears the primitive in humanity and the lack of order. His desire for Kyle to get an education signals not just his trust or hope that Kyle will get to live and make use that education in some way, but also serves as a way to stave off vulgarity and uncivilized reality. Erik, just like Henry, shows he understands the dynamic between the pre- and post-apocalyptic eras, and how things are bound to change due to the presence of an apocalyptic event. His own behavior, of course, is also fiercely affected by the disaster to come, ultimately driving him to murder. His ostensible religiousness seems to have been facetious or a matter of cognitive dissonance, as his belief that the times will become tough and hoarding of guns suggests he believes the fate of a human ultimately lies in their own hands, and what they themselves can achieve. He could not trust God’s plan when it came to his own son, but realized he had to take care of matters himself.

Another interesting character is Henry’s coworker, fellow police officer Andreas, who throughout the novel goes through several different stages of reacting to the impending apocalypse, in many cases corresponding to Žižek’s model. Early on he shows signs of depression, commenting on the date the impact location is to be announced as feeling very soon (*TLP*: 25), showing his awareness of the fact his time is slowly running out. At the same time, he also lashes out in anger when another officer reads news about the asteroid aloud (*TLP*: 26) indicating he does not want to be reminded, potentially also embodying denial. Later, he falls deeper into depression and tells Henry “I don’t know how you do it” (*TLP*: 67), expressing a sort of jealousy of Henry’s motivation and eagerness to solve the case, likely entirely unaware of the very similar conflict Henry himself is going through at that point. Unlike Henry, though, Andreas cannot find even a superficial sense of meaning or purpose to keep him occupied. He neglects his work which further drives a wedge between him and Henry (*TLP*: 126), as he sees no reason to continue handling crime. The strongest moment of denial in the entire novel is his fixation on the rumor that the asteroid’s trajectory calculations are wrong (*TLP*: 124), which feels like desperate attempts at clinging on to a hope of survival. The belief also relies on blatant denial and disregard of factual reality, as Henry comments that Andreas was outright seeing things that were not there in a piece of animation showing the projected trajectory of the asteroid hitting Earth (*TLP*: 127). Later still, Andreas latches onto a

religious pamphlet that promises salvation through prayer (*TLP*: 175), which serves as the absolute last hope for Andreas. At this point he is looking for any possible solution to the apocalyptic predicament, but unlike the conspiracy of the incorrect math, religion seems to offer a method that requires less outright denial of reality. His thoughts are not expanded upon in the novel, and why he ultimately falls through with every option he considers is unclear, but after considering the religious approach he appears to have finally lost his last hope, and throws himself under a bus in front of Henry (*TLP*: 194). The contrast with Henry in particular is a crucial element, and shows the importance of values and goals one can believe in even in times of great distress, and the death strongly reinforces Henry's attitude of clinging to his values and continuing his life.

The other police officers are ostensibly far less impacted by the impending disaster or the state of society. They are decidedly apathetic towards the suicides, make jokes about the asteroid and the lack of their own future (*TLP*: 27-28, 120), and some show little serious grief or concern over the deaths of Peter Zell or Andreas (*TLP*: 65, 195). They might have already reached a stage of acceptance, or they might be hiding their depression under a cover of humor and apathy, which indicates almost a sense of self-deception and refusal to seriously engage with the fact that the world is ending. They do show excitement, however, when Henry's case gives an opportunity for them to act as responsible and active police officers, as they go to interrogate a key witness with potential drug dealing charges (*TLP*: 172-173, 175). This attitude suggests a "bucket list" mentality, letting the police officers a chance to act a certain way or do certain occupational things they never had the chance to otherwise. However, one of them in particular acts too eager and careless, leading to the witness panicking and getting shot in the chaos (*TLP*: 183). Their lack of professionalism is contrasted with Henry, and highlights how idealistic his morals and values are given his surroundings and the apocalyptic situation.

Only one other police officer, McConnell, does her job diligently, and shows great enthusiasm at being of use in solving Henry's case (*TLP*: 151-152). Henry praises her effort by telling her she'll "make a great detective one day", to which she replies "Oh, I know" (*TLP*: 153). This exchange displays how completely they share values with regards to the job of a police officer and how they think about the impending apocalypse. Henry's phrase implicitly suggests a belief in the continuation of the police force and orderly civilization, and McConnell's response is perfectly in tune with it. Neither of them points

out or is depicted as expressing amusement or bemusement at the seeming absurdity of the statement, so one must believe they are to some degree sincere about it.

In conclusion, it seems clear from the analysis that the apocalypse exerts its influence even on the time before, with both the treat of disaster and the very knowledge of that threat having huge and varied impacts on the society and characters of the novel. Early in the story, the witness in Henry's case, Naomi, tells Henry in response to a question about depression "Aren't we all depressed, Detective? Under the weight of all this unbearable imminence?" (*TLP*: 41). This expression succinctly encapsulates the central conceit of the novel, and in truth the core facet of pre-apocalyptic narratives in general. The unbearable imminence of the end of the world, or even the mere knowledge of it, pressing on the consciousness and forcing onto us the thoughts of death. The apocalypse takes on the aspect of a truly transformative event that has far-reaching effects in all temporal directions, and changes societies and psychologies fundamentally. Characters are forced to recontextualize and reevaluate their goals and motivations, and wonder what is truly valuable and meaning-giving in their life. In Henry and Andreas there is a pair of these characters where one succeeds and the other fails. The social critique and cautionary aspects of apocalyptic narratives are very much deemphasized in this novel, as the disaster's causes are entirely beyond human control, and the only real solution proposed (striking the asteroid with nuclear weapons) is likely to only make the situation worse. Many forms of hope offered by religion or conspiracy theories are disregarded as false hopes, and survival is only hinted at as a distant possibility. The ultimate fate of the world in the novel remains unknown, as the novel ends still several months before the asteroid is set to hit, but in a sense the results of its apocalyptic descent have already happened long before the events of the novel began, when the possibility of the world ending was first conceived.

3.2 *Station Eleven*

Synopsis

The novel begins in Toronto, where aging film star Arthur Leander has a heart attack and collapses on stage during a theater production of *King Lear*, in which he stars in the titular role. Despite attempts at resuscitation, Arthur ultimately passes away at the spot he fell moments later. At the same time, elsewhere in the city, an extremely contagious and lethal influenza-type virus known as the Georgia Flu first makes landfall on the North American continent and begins rapidly spreading. The initial hours and days following these events are briefly depicted, but following this, the novel alternates between two sets of narratives.

The first tells the story of Arthur Leander, from his youth on a rural western Canadian island, through the developments of his acting career, his tumultuous emotional life and multiple failed marriages and estrangement from his son Tyler, and his own reflections on the life he has lived, ultimately leading up to his last moments which opened the novel. Other characters close to Arthur are afforded points-of-view in this narrative as well, and have their ultimate fates depicted. Chief among them Miranda, an artist born on the same island as Arthur, who ends up being the first to marry him and eventually passes away in the pandemic; and Clark, an old friend that Arthur first met after he had first moved from the island to the city of Toronto. Miranda is also the sole author of a set of limited-edition post-apocalyptic science-fiction comic books that lend the novel its name, *Station Eleven*.

The second narrative is post-apocalyptic, set twenty years after the onset of the globally devastating pandemic. Over 99% of the world's population is estimated to have perished, and modern civilization has all but collapsed. In the region near the Great Lakes and the former US-Canadian border, a group known as the Travelling Symphony travels between surviving settlements, performing stage productions of Shakespeare. Among the group is Kirsten, who was a child actor cast in the *King Lear* production and witnessed the death of Arthur, and carries copies of the *Station Eleven* comics. In their travels, the Symphony comes in conflict with an oppressive religious cult led by a man known only as the Prophet, who is preaching an apocalyptic ideology. The reader ultimately learns after the Prophet's death that he was Tyler, the son of Arthur's second marriage, who as a child together with his mother Elizabeth and Arthur's friend Clark survived the pandemic on the airport their plane was redirected to during the initial outbreak. The novel

ends with the characters of the Symphony encountering the aged Clark at the airport-turned-settlement, uniting the two narratives. Additionally, a distant settlement is revealed to have successfully re-introduced electricity, suggesting civilization is rebuilding.

Analysis

Station Eleven (cited as *SE*) is an interesting novel to study in the context of this thesis, as it is not as easily understood as a straightforward pre-apocalyptic narrative the way *The Last Policeman* is. One of the two alternating narratives is set before an apocalypse that is dramatically destined to happen, but no character is aware of this fact, and none of these events have any bearing on how or why the apocalyptic disaster event occurs. Some moments are even set decades before. The second narrative, on the other hand, is decidedly *post*-apocalyptic, very explicitly set in a period after the apocalyptic pandemic has already come and gone. What makes the novel a pre-apocalyptic text, and thus worth examining in this thesis, is the way the context of the narrative creates a sense of the pre-apocalyptic for the reader, rather than the characters. In knowing the deadly virus will nearly wipe out humanity in the future, Arthur's wholly mundane life story and experiences are transformed into a pre-apocalyptic tale. *The Last Policeman* displayed how knowledge of apocalypse is a powerful component in actually realizing the apocalyptic (within a narrative), and *Station Eleven* extends this effect to a higher textual level by involving the story's context as a novel.

As this chapter will demonstrate, this effect is used especially to highlight the recontextualizing and transformative facets of apocalyptic literature. Not so much for the characters themselves, but in reader perception of the characters and their narratives. The life and decisions of the characters serve as a vehicle for analyzing and recontextualizing life and values in a broader sense, though there are a few occasions of characters themselves self-reflecting in this manner. Because the analysis is not dealing with characters' reactions and reflections on an upcoming apocalypse, models such as Žižek's are not very applicable. They could, in theory, be applied to analysis of readers and their responses to the narrative and its context, but that is beyond the scope and aims of this thesis.

As an apocalyptic text, *Station Eleven* displays the different stages of apocalyptic narratives as previously described. Like *The Last Policeman*, the dystopian stage is

largely nonexistent, as the apocalyptic event is a sudden disaster, both out of human control and not a consequence of human actions. Any social critique as part of the setting is thus also limited. The apocalypse or its threat are also denied depiction to a large extent, with only a few short chapters devoted to describing the pandemic's onset and its development. As the virus' spread is so sudden and rapid, there is no space for knowledge of its apocalyptic nature to truly make a difference either. In other words, the "true" pre-apocalyptic portion of the narrative is extremely brief, and mostly de-emphasized. The last two stages of the apocalyptic narrative, the post-apocalyptic world and the new world, do exist, however. And it is precisely their presence that creates the pre-apocalyptic context of the rest of the novel. A post-apocalypse pre-supposes an apocalypse and a world before the apocalypse, after all. As a quite traditional post-apocalyptic narrative, the novel features many typical motifs and themes of its kind, such as musings on culture, morals, human nature, challenges presented by living and upholding society, and death. However, as this thesis is predominantly focused on pre-apocalypticism specifically, what becomes relevant are not necessarily these features nor the post-apocalyptic narrative itself, but their relation to the pre-apocalyptic half of the novel. Matters such as the continuity and parallel nature of themes, how the apocalyptic is present in both pre- and post-apocalyptic contexts, and the universality of the human experience between different time periods and situations. The novel shows an awareness of various apocalyptic forms not just in its own structure, but also through inclusions of the eponymous post-apocalyptic comic books, and the ideology of the Prophet which is explicitly pre-apocalyptic (and religious) in nature. More on both of these later.

Finally, the novel also draws a clear parallel between the apocalypse as a monumental disastrous event, and the mundane death of a human being. The analysis of *The Last Policeman* raised the question of whether the end of the world is truly fundamentally different as a concept from simple human mortality, and *Station Eleven* leans into this line of thought as well. It is important to realize that despite Arthur's death on stage coinciding with the spread of the apocalyptic pandemic, they are not related events. He, in fact, passed away before the apocalypse truly began. However, the fact that these two events happen at the same time creates a strong parallel and juxtaposition, where the death of a person in fact does compare to a global apocalypse in philosophical magnitude. This is why the half of the narrative concerned with Arthur's life and career

becomes a pre-apocalyptic narrative: because all of human existence is in a sense pre-apocalyptic by virtue of being finite.

What are the ways through which St. John Mandel creates the pre-apocalyptic context in the novel, then? The primary method is not the actual events in the novel itself, but rather the expository narration and framing language that has a certain metatextual quality to it. For example, in wake of Arthur's collapse and passing in the earliest pages of the novel, before the novel has even introduced the pandemic and its deadly quality, a group of theater staff are gathered at a bar discussing Arthur. This three-page chapter ends simply with "Of all of them there at the bar that night, the bartender was the one who survived the longest. He died three weeks later on the road out of the city" (*SE*: 15). By informing and later reminding the reader that the apocalypse is in fact on its way while all of this is happening, the novel becomes an undeniably pre-apocalyptic text. This method is repeatedly deployed to reinforce the effect and emphasize certain facets of the pre-apocalyptic condition. These range from simple temporal references such as "a year before the Georgia Flu" (*SE*: 110) and "this is well before the Georgia Flu. Civilization won't collapse for another fourteen years" (*SE*: 71) to more elaborate descriptions of how the world ultimately changed, such as an entire page dedicated to "an incomplete list" of things that were no longer possible in the post-apocalyptic world (*SE*: 31-32) and a conversation described as taking place "during the final month of the era when it was possible to press a series of buttons on a telephone and speak with someone on the far side of the earth" (*SE*: 30). This goes the other way as well, with the post-apocalyptic half of the narrative initially introduced as taking place "twenty years after the end of air travel" (*SE*: 35). In effect, everything that happens in the novel is framed through its temporal relationship to the apocalypse, despite the knowledge of the apocalypse not being an in-narrative concern for the pre-apocalyptic part of the narrative at all. As a transformative event, the novel's apocalypse is thus shaping the form of the narrative itself, despite its effects on the events of the narrative being quite limited.

Interestingly, there are a few instances of a kind of reversal of this expository technique as well. A conversation set during the post-apocalyptic narrative is described as occurring "twenty-six years after Miranda and Arthur's last dinner party in Los Angeles" in addition to the usual time since the pandemic (*SE*: 108), referencing an event that ultimately led to the divorce of those two characters. Here, the apocalyptic is framed by the personal, rather than the other way around. The human lived reality becomes the

core concern, the key event in history, rather than the danger that nearly eradicated humanity. The divorce that was the result of that dinner party becomes a sort of apocalypse itself, as a transformative event. The details of the situation are relevant later when studying the characters more closely, but in this context as an apocalyptic referent it is already showing the novel's interests. It suggests that apocalypses as transformative events exist on many scales, and gives the sense that life exists as simply a series of such transformative events. Similarly, the penultimate pages of the book, which depict the last hours and minutes of Arthur's life before he climbs the stage, begin with "on his last morning on earth" (*SE*: 317), omitting a reference to the virus entirely. The narration has shifted entirely to the matter of the personal as opposed to the global and the conventional apocalyptic disaster. As mentioned before, Arthur's death is in fact an entirely separate apocalypse from the virus, and so the distinction seems warranted. Arthur's world ends there, after all.

While the narrative is not traditionally pre-apocalyptic for the most part, there are a few brief moments of reactions to the unfolding pandemic depicted in the first chapters of the novel. Jeevan, the man who had attempted to revive the collapsed Arthur at the theater, has heard of the spreading pandemic from a doctor friend of his and is reflecting on its impact:

If Hua said there was an epidemic, then *epidemic* wasn't a strong enough word. Jeevan was crushed by a sudden certainty that this was it, that this illness Hua was describing was going to be the divide between a *before* and an *after*, a line drawn through his life

(*SE*: 20)

Jeevan is acutely aware of what an "apocalypse" entails, and both understands and articulates the dichotomy of pre- and post-apocalyptic, and where he is currently situated in this flux of states. He ends up using this understanding to prepare for survival with food supplies (*SE*: 21) which ultimately ensures he lives to see the post-apocalyptic reality as well. Notably, his description of the situation quoted above is still entirely framed through his own personal perspective as a matter that affects his life, rather than a disaster that changes the entire world. As with Arthur or Miranda, the apocalypse is characterized more as a personal and emotional turning point than a cataclysmic end of the world.

Another moment that shows awareness of apocalyptic realities occurs during the post-apocalyptic part of the narrative, where Kirsten, who lived through the pandemic, meets children who were born after the apocalypse happened. She briefly wonders

whether it is better for children such as these to learn about the pre-apocalyptic world and what was lost, or to remain ignorant and simply accept reality as it is now (*SE*: 147). This is reminiscent of the problem of knowledge that was central to *The Last Policeman*, here made an explicit problem pondered by a character, albeit only as a minor comment in one scene. Kirsten shows awareness of the fact that the apocalypse is created in part due to knowledge about it. The pre-apocalyptic becomes pre-apocalyptic through the knowledge of an upcoming apocalypse, and similarly the post-apocalypse only exists as a post-apocalypse if there is knowledge about a past apocalypse and what preceded it. This draws further parallels between the nature of pre- and post-apocalyptic realities and narratives. Fundamentally, they appear to be the same or containing the same universal features. This universality will continue to be a recurring theme throughout the novel.

As mentioned earlier, the characters of the novel serve as vehicles for the recontextualizing facet of the apocalypse, and Arthur himself as the central figure of the novel is a chief example of this. The central themes to his story are the pursuits of one's passions, the search for something meaningful and genuine in life, and ultimately the weight of regrets in the later years and final moments before his death. The pre-apocalyptic context his story is told in of course leaves a familiar question hanging overhead throughout: what is the value of these pursuits when we know the apocalyptic outcome?

These themes are embodied in the dichotomy of the rural and the city that Arthur struggles with, and how these relate to feelings of fakeness and fame, as well as genuineness and understanding. The young Arthur feels he needed to leave the rural island he was born on as it appears stifling to him with the city of Toronto serving as a tool for freedom and escape (*SE*: 74) in quite a typical expression of modern urban life. However, later in life he speaks fondly of his home island, and comments that his urban-born new friends and associated do not understand the island, life on it, nor its significance (*SE*: 72-74). In letters dating to his youth in Toronto he also feels conflicted about homesickness and whether the city truly accommodates him or not (*SE*: 153-154). The city is clearly representing the freedom to pursue what he seems to truly want, acting, but at the same time the city is given an air of hollow fakeness that lacks some quality that Arthur feels was present at his original home. The distinction is not necessarily drawn as a generalized conflict between rural and urban, but rather seems to be a matter of Arthur's personal psychology and experiences that happen to correspond to these locations. Just

as the personal apocalypse takes precedence over the global apocalypse in the novel, so too does the personal experiences trump the general conflict in significance. Nevertheless, in experiencing this dichotomy, Arthur ends up developing a need to search for something that feels fulfilling and meaningful emotionally, and it is ultimately what drives many of the complications in his life.

Indeed, the aspect of the city transforms through Arthur's life experiences, further shifting the dichotomy of locations. As his fame as an actor grows, the city takes on the stifling and constricting nature that he originally ascribed his home island, and he comes to view the anonymity as the true enabler of freedom (*SE*: 77-78). By associating with and eventually marrying Miranda, also born on the same rural island (*SE*: 76-77, 79), he seems to want to come in contact with this sense of freedom and with someone that can truly understand him as a person. He still yearns for freedom and expression, but instead of the city, that yearning is now represented by his origins and the absence of the city, which previously were symbols of the exact opposite. What has happened here is that a transformative event (in Arthur's case, the accumulation of fame) has forced a change of perspective and challenged his outlook on life and how he relates to events both before and after. In other words, the events of his career form a microcosm of the transformative apocalyptic narrative. As alluded to before, the novel is painting a picture of mundane human life as a series of transformative events. That is, in a sense, apocalypses. His relationship with the rural and the city, and the social implications those ways of life imply, are also contrasted with the post-apocalyptic narrative. In the context of the Travelling Symphony moving between small post-apocalyptic settlements, members comment that such rural and insular life is claustrophobic and stifling (*SE*: 48), echoing Arthur's feelings from decades earlier. The cyclicity and constants of human emotions survive through the apocalypse, but this contrasting also show how outlooks and attitudes are affected by transformative events.

Arthur's quest for something meaningful and fulfilling continues throughout his life, and after three years of marriage with Miranda he ends up cheating on her with a woman called Elizabeth, the eventual mother of his son Tyler. This relation is what comes to light during that last dinner party that was devastating enough to serve as a temporal marker (*SE*: 98-99). He later marries and divorces Elizabeth as well (*SE*: 172), leading to estrangement from his son. These episodes show his perspective and sense of what is genuine or meaningful continues to change and suggest a fear or stagnation. This fear

leads him to effectively force the transformative events, realizing the series of apocalypses that also create more and more pre-apocalyptic existences when observing his life in retrospect (as readers do of his entire life story). These events also take on different aspects between the various people involved, as the first divorce appears particularly heavy in its impact on Miranda, and losing contact with his son Tyler becomes a key point for Arthur himself in his later years, as well as for Tyler himself as the later Prophet. In other words, an apocalypse is a personal event that may not even take the appearance of an apocalypse for another.

In his later years, Arthur comments that he has “always been interested in people. [...] What drives them, what moves them” (*SE*: 169), which reflects his own desire for understanding that same aspect of himself. As the novel progresses, his death he is narratively destined to experience approaches, and the weight of the question mentioned earlier increases: have his pursuits had any real value when the end is predetermined? On his final morning, Arthur seems to have found some manner of answer. He decides to start shedding and spending his material wealth for the happiness in others, and has decided to once and for all reconnect with his son Tyler he has struggled to be in contact with over the years (*SE*: 317). Taking on the role as King Lear, he finds himself “a man who repented almost everything, regrets crowding in around him like moths to a light” (*SE*: 327), vowing to right the wrongs, moments before his death. The pre-apocalyptic context that has increasingly intensified throughout his story is at its most pressing in this exact moment, and lends his realization its true impact. Of course, the trick of the narrative is that his death has nothing to do with the world-ending apocalypse, and that his life is like that of any other human being in our mundane existence. The world might have ended hours later, but his fate reminds the reader that *everyone’s* world ends sooner or later. His realization is not worthless because the world ended, it is precisely worthwhile because the end is already known, and always will be. Arthur’s revelation is the type of recontextualization and revelation everyone ought to have, as per the core functions of apocalyptic literature. His reflections on passions, meaning, and regrets are an invitation. Of course, it is also worth noting that Arthur’s tale as it is presented can function completely independently from the cataclysmic apocalypse that coincides with it. This global apocalypse, however, serves to force the apocalyptic mindset on the reader, heightening the sense for the recontextualizing aspect of the narrative.

Contrasting with Arthur's quest for his passions is the story of Jeevan, who initially worked as a journalist and paparazzi, effectively making his livelihood by observing Arthur (SE: 5), but who harbors a desire for doing work he considers meaningful (SE: 10, 102). This leads him to train as a paramedic (SE: 3, 10) which in turn causes him to be present at Arthur's death. Failing to save Arthur reinforces his passion for the new job he chose (SE: 11), and he ends up surviving the deadly pandemic and living his life as a medic in the post-apocalyptic reality (SE: 270-271). In its simplicity, this story places Jeevan as a sort of reader surrogate within the story. Through his interactions and experiences with Arthur, he ends up reevaluating his life choices and gaining new perspective of his own. Arthur's death becomes the important transformative event for him, not necessarily the pandemic he described as drawing a boundary through his life. The fact he survives to see and live in the post-apocalyptic world also reflects the reader's continued existence past Arthur's death, and how the self-reflection can be carried onward. Jeevan transcends the division of pre- and post-apocalyptic, just as the novel's narrative and the reader's understanding of it does. In this sense the post-apocalyptic becomes a mere extension of the pre-apocalyptic as well, in that it merely facilitates the expression of what was learned in the before.

The story of Miranda, the second most prominent point-of-view character in the novel, parallels Arthur's. She shows great passion for expressing herself through art and comic books, and is fascinated by the wonders of space (SE: 88). Her hapless artist boyfriend Pablo represents the same kind of stagnation that Arthur feared, and her relationship with Arthur in turn the freedom and expressive possibilities that he also desires (SE: 81-82, 86). Her vast ambitions contrast with what we know eventually happens with her relationship and Arthur himself, as well as the pandemic, but as with Arthur's tale, the value of the journey in itself justifies the lack of a happy ending. Unlike Arthur, however, she shows awareness of this herself. Her passion project and magnum opus is the *Station Eleven* graphic novels, which she believes do not have to be published for the world to see to have any value. Simply creating them is enough for her (SE: 94-95). Indeed, the comics never end up being published, and only take the form of ten copies she presents to various people close to her, including Arthur, and her attitude serves as a clear answer to the question that Arthur's story asks elsewhere in the novel.

But as with everyone else, her apocalypse also inevitably arrives. Arthur's celebrity life feels alienating to her (SE: 91-93), and the divorce it results in hits her

particularly hard, with her appearing hardened and lonely in her post-marriage life, her motivational mantra “I repent nothing” turning bitter (*SE*: 106-107). The mantra also serves as a harsh contrast to Arthur’s final moments spent contemplating the magnitude of his regrets. Importantly, this experience that became her own personal apocalypse serves as a perspective from which to understand the *Station Eleven* comic she created and her own understanding of the apocalyptic. The comic depicts a space station that has escaped from a post-apocalyptic alien-infested Earth, cast in perpetual twilight due to broken mechanisms, that houses a bitter conflict between the protagonist’s faction who wish to struggle and survive on the damaged station, and a group who desire to return to Earth and struggle against the aliens (*SE*: 83). Through the comic, the post-apocalyptic reality in fact already exists in the pre-apocalypse. As the theorist Berger noted, the mind is already there, in the post-apocalypse. “You’re always half on Station Eleven”, as Miranda’s boyfriend Pablo expresses it (*SE*: 87). The present is always pre-apocalyptic, and the pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic are one and the same, as the novel constantly reminds us. The sadness and loneliness of the comic’s hero, Dr. Eleven, and his lament over his “damaged home” also directly reflects Miranda’s feelings towards Arthur and the home she lost in their divorce (*SE*: 105). The apocalyptic and the personal intertwine as before. And to complicate the matter further, the copies of the comic she handed to Arthur are passed on by him to the child actor Kirsten (as well as his son Tyler) (*SE*: 322, 324), who reads them and relates to the post-apocalyptic reality depicted in them twenty years later, after the world has ended (*SE*: 42). The meaning of the comic has been transformed through its continued existence on either side of the apocalyptic disaster, while its emotional resonance and depiction of the human condition remains constant and universal in both periods. Similarly, Kirsten’s Travelling Symphony also ends up performing Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which she notes may have been written in a time immediately following a deadly plague in England (*SE*: 57). The parallel exists not merely between the play and the Symphony, but between the play and the *Station Eleven* comic as well, which cements the timelessness of human experience and the role literature has to play in it. Undoubtedly, *Station Eleven* the novel likewise represents a thread in this web.

The final major character to be examined is of course Tyler, or the Prophet as he later becomes known as in the post-apocalyptic world. Despite being primarily featured in the post-apocalyptic half of the narrative, the religious ideology he and his followers

preach among the survivors is one of pre-apocalypticism, which makes it worth studying in this thesis. As the son of Arthur and his second wife Elizabeth, his background was defined by the failed marriage and aborted attempt to reconnect of his parents, culminating in the death of Arthur and the pandemic sweeping the world. As the disaster strikes, he and his mother become stranded in an airport alongside others who eventually form it into a new post-apocalyptic settlement (*SE*: 236). Elizabeth, struggling with both the death of Arthur as well as the unfolding end of the world, copes through denial as well as by reassuring herself that “everything happens for a reason” and that “everything passes” (*SE*: 249), while the 7-year-old Tyler occupies himself with reading the only literature available to him: the New Testament, and *Station Eleven* (*SE*: 252, 304). Through losing his father, his mother to grief, and the world he knew to the pandemic, as well as being influenced by two pieces of apocalyptic literature, Tyler is the embodiment of the unprepared human mind being forced to face the apocalyptic reality. Unlike Jeevan, Tyler does not manage to turn his experience with the apocalyptic into a positive recontextualization, but instead the influences around him twist his conclusions. His mother’s denialist hope becomes a delusion of the apocalypse’s true nature combined with the Bible’s religious understanding of the end times, while Miranda’s bitter sorrow expressed in *Station Eleven* resonates with his emotional experience. While the emotions of the pre- and post-apocalyptic are universal, as the novel has clearly expressed, the ultimate form they take are intensely personal, just as the apocalyptic experience itself.

The Prophet Tyler’s pre-apocalyptic ideology argues that everything indeed happens for a reason, that the pandemic was part of God’s plan to cleanse the Earth of the unjust, and that the survivors are being prepared to face an upcoming end of the world (*SE*: 59-61). In the post-apocalypse the pre-apocalyptic reemerges, in the form of religion: the primal form of apocalyptic thought that appears universal and transcends time. As argued in the theory chapter, religious pre-apocalypticism is one of the oldest literary traditions in the history of mankind, and *Station Eleven* as a novel seems to argue for a reason for that. As the apocalypse is equal to the death of oneself, and life is fundamentally pre-apocalyptic in nature, so is the human mind also drawn to the apocalypse at its most primal. The Prophet highlights how he represents order against the danger of chaos, and warns of a spiritual death when one lacks order and meaning (*SE*: 61). The fear of the primal is presented in conjunction with the primal fear of death. The pre-apocalyptic as a concept embodies this fear of death that is fundamental to humanity,

while the religious understanding of the pre-apocalyptic represents the creation of order and the staving off of the primal chaos. In the post-apocalypse, mankind has returned to the very fundamentals that govern our understanding of reality. The pre- and the post- are one and the same, and it is the human life. The apocalypse is merely a transformation along the way.

The novel's final word, though, should be given to a nameless character who appears in the novel for but a brief page or three. Clark, Arthur's close friend who ultimately survived the pandemic and narrates much of Tyler's later experiences in the novel, worked as a coach for business managers before the end of the world. An office employee he interviewed for a project offered sharp observations that embody the heart of the novel. She doubted whether people can truly change if they are fundamentally unhappy with their life choices without realizing it (*SE*: 162), and observed that "adulthood's full of ghosts", drifting people who do not follow their passions, disappointed but passive, "high-functioning sleepwalkers" (*SE*: 163). In this, she identifies the crux of the conflict that defines the principal characters of the novel and permeates the pre-apocalyptic realities and contexts of both Arthur and Tyler, and of pre-apocalypticism in general. The end comes inevitably, but one can choose not to sleepwalk toward it.

3.3 *Melancholia*

Synopsis

The film opens with a prophetic vision. A large celestial object moves through the solar system, passing planets by. Imagery of dying animals and strange electrical phenomena on Earth are shown. Characters move around in slow motion, and a woman in a wedding dress is tied down and hindered by large threads of yarn. The planet moving through space approaches and collides with Earth, completely obliterating it.

Part one of the film, subtitled “Justine”, begins. Newlyweds Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) and Michael (Alexander Skarsgård) arrive late to their own wedding reception, held at a large country estate owned by Justine’s sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsborough) and her husband John (Kiefer Sutherland). Justine displays interest in the night sky upon arrival, and throughout the rest of the night. The party proceeds joyously at first, but various incidents begin wearing the mood down. Justine’s divorced parents have a vitriolic argument in front of the guests when holding their speeches to the wedding couple. Justine’s mother (Charlotte Rampling) appears bitter and loathes marriage as a ceremony and institution, while her father (John Hurt) acts spitefully and fools around with his two women companions. Justine’s employer at an advertising firm (Stellan Skarsgård) also announces Justine’s promotion in his speech, while also asks her to work during the party.

While initially happy, Justine herself has trouble enjoying the party for unclear reasons. She repeatedly withdraws to be alone and shows signs of distress or sadness, frustrating her family and husband. She tries avoiding Michael, and when he is presenting her the plot of land he has secured for their upcoming house, she signals her disinterest and leaves him. Later she rejects his intimate romantic advances and ends up cheating on him by having sex with a coworker (Brady Corbet) who was pestering her about work. She also lashes out at her boss and resigns. She tries discussing her troubles with her parents at separate occasions, but neither reciprocates. She also suggests to Claire that the vision depicted at the start of the film was a dream of hers, and that it is what is troubling her. Ultimately, the party ends with the marriage broken, and the various family members disappointed, bitter, or sad.

Part two, “Claire”, is set some time after the wedding. Justine’s depression has worsened, and she comes to live at the estate with her sister’s family. She is debilitated

to the point of not being able to move, eat, or socialize. Claire tries to care for her, while John is frustrated at her helplessness. At this point, Claire and John discuss the existence of a planet, known as Melancholia, that is approaching Earth through space. Claire, influenced by Justine's condition, is worried that it will collide with Earth while John, hobby astronomer, reassures her that it will merely be a flyby and an exciting once-in-a-lifetime event, just as predicted by professional astronomers. Secretly, however, he harbors doubts and prepares for long-time survival. Justine gradually becomes more active again but appears apathetic and resigned rather than depressed. On the expected date, Melancholia approaches and passes by Earth, greatly relieving both Claire and John. However, the next day John observes the planet has changed course and is heading back towards Earth. The realization that the collision will happen leads him to commit suicide. Claire, after realizing the same thing and discovering his death, panics and tries to escape the estate with their son Leo (Cameron Spurr), but vehicles fail to function. Justine remains calm through these events. Justine, Claire, and Leo sit together at the estate as Melancholia collides with Earth, destroying it completely.

Analysis

Structurally, *Melancholia* as a pre-apocalyptic text is quite similar to *The Last Policeman*. They both feature a disastrous end of the world that is dramatically pre-determined to happen, but that is also recognized to some extent by the characters in the narrative as well, unlike in *Station Eleven*. In some sense, the end is even more certain in *Melancholia*, as the destruction of Earth is plainly shown in the first minutes of the film, whereas *The Last Policeman* relies merely on the knowledge of the disaster's certainty. In this way, the audience of the film is more certain about the end result than the readers of the novel. While both *The Last Policeman* and *Melancholia* at times create doubt as to whether the end result truly is inevitable, the film's choice to show the collision at the very beginning pre-emptively casts these doubts into question, and reinforces the pre-apocalyptic context of the story. The characters of *Melancholia*, however, are more varied in their expectations compared to the cast of *The Last Policeman*, where the asteroid hitting Earth is already treated as an unchangeable fact.

In terms of the stages of apocalyptic narrative, *Melancholia* likewise follows the structure of *The Last Policeman*, and the same observations made in the earlier chapter apply here as well. The later stages, the post-apocalyptic world and the rebuilt new world, are completely absent, and the knowledge of an upcoming apocalypse serves as the main

transformative presence in the story. The first stage, the pre-apocalyptic dystopia, is also absent in the traditional sense of a world that causes the apocalypse or is used for social critique. The apocalyptic disaster, the planet Melancholia colliding with Earth, is not something caused by human actions and is entirely out of human control. It is treated as inevitable and unfixable. The absence of this dystopia appears to be a pattern with the three primary texts studied in this thesis, which might suggest a trend or tendency in pre-apocalyptic fiction. In typical apocalyptic stories that feature the full range of narrative stages, the dystopia functions as a cautionary depiction of society that either caused or deserved the apocalyptic disaster. The refusal of pre-apocalyptic narratives to depict the dystopia and the apocalyptic disaster in such a way instead highlights the metaphorical parallel between the apocalypse and mundane mortality, as discussed extensively in the previous chapters. The apocalypse's inevitability is what makes this metaphor function. Post-apocalyptic narratives serve as a chance to reflect on what went wrong and what came before, in circumstances where often the worst has already passed. In pre-apocalyptic narratives the catastrophe has yet to come and requires one to come to terms with it. Omitting the dystopia serves this goal. If there is one major difference to be identified between pre- and post-apocalyptic narratives, this structural omission appears to be it, at least in the case of the three primary texts studied in this thesis. A pre-apocalyptic narrative does not necessarily require the omission of the dystopian premise, but it is certainly a notable common feature of the primary texts. The religious pre-apocalyptic narrative, with its idea of divine punishment and sin, is the exception to this, but every primary text studied in the thesis rejects a religious interpretation of their pre-apocalyptic realities. *Station Eleven* considered the nature of the religious version, but only in a post-apocalyptic context.

Station Eleven explored in particular the idea of the apocalypse as a personal experience rather than a global catastrophe, and *Melancholia* heavily leans into this interpretation as well. Whereas Arthur's story in the novel emphasized reevaluation and retrospectives, *Melancholia's* story explores the nature of these personal apocalyptic events and how they influence the lives of the people involved, similar to Miranda's side of the novel and the *Station Eleven* comic book. As this chapter will demonstrate, in *Melancholia*, the personal apocalypse is not only a transformative experience for an individual; it leads to a transmission of feelings and behavior between individuals as well. The personal apocalypse expands and spreads, becoming a larger event through its

influence. In the context of the film's events, this means the planet colliding with Earth gains causal characteristics after all. While Justine's anxiety in part one of the film is ostensibly explained by the fear of the approaching planet, interpersonal issues appear just as relevant in causing her trouble. As the film withholds concrete information regarding the planet and its approach for some time, the causality of the events appears to have flipped. The film suggests that the personal apocalypse is what ultimately wills the apocalyptic disaster into being. The film also accommodates this interpretation, as the existence and approach of *Melancholia* is generally depicted in a fantastical and unrealistic manner, as if to refuse straightforwardly rational explanations or a pretense of science fiction. Instead, this approach highlights the metaphorical nature of the film's apocalyptic disaster.

As *Melancholia* is a pre-apocalyptic narrative that is to a large extent concerned with human reaction to apocalypse and impending apocalypse, Žižek's model becomes quite applicable for studying it. The narrative features an upcoming disaster to which characters to varying extents have knowledge and these characters' reactions to this disaster (and knowledge about it) are explored in multiple stages, often corresponding to the ones Žižek described: the denial of the threat, anger expressed towards its causes or inaction of others, bargaining as a hope of preventing the disaster, depression, and finally acceptance and resignation. All of these stages are represented in *Melancholia* and its characters, although the anger stage less straightforwardly so. As anger in this context is aimed at the causes of the disaster or the lack of action taken against it, it does not at face value apply to an apocalyptic narrative without the dystopic component and where the disaster is ostensibly out of human control. But in an interpretation where a personal apocalypse leads to other personal apocalypses, or greater global apocalypses, anger can acquire a target.

As part one of the film is titled after Justine, it is natural to begin the analysis with her. The context of the first half of the film is her wedding, which immediately creates the association of the film's conflict as a truly personal matter rather than the global catastrophe depicted in the short intro vision. This wedding becomes the central conflict and metaphorical payload of the film, perhaps even more so than the actual planet *Melancholia* that threatens the world and gives the film its name. In the prophetic vision Justine had that opens the film, she was depicted as trying to flee, wearing her wedding dress, while the yarn threads tie her down (*Melancholia*: 05:00). While this represents her

inability to escape from the planet that is about to destroy everything, the presence of the wedding dress suggests it also represents a more personal struggle she has with the marriage itself. The yarns tying her down trap her on Earth, but also trap her within a marriage. Her fear of death becomes mirrored in her fear of getting married. This sense of being trapped is reinforced by the film's general presentation as well. The entire film takes place and is shot exclusively on the country estate and its grounds where the wedding reception is held, with the only exceptions being the shots of space and the approaching planet in the initial prophetic vision. The estate itself becomes the embodiment of this entrapment, a symbol of the despair that ultimately becomes apocalyptic in nature. Moving in and out of the place is depicted as deeply troubling or impossible for Justine. In the first scene after the introductory vision, Justine and Michael's hired limousine has trouble navigating the narrow road at the estate, leading to them arriving late (*Melancholia*: 08:25). Upon finally arriving, Justine also insists on going to see her favorite horse at the stables before joining the party (*Melancholia*: 12:40). Both of these incidents indicate the difficulty Justine has with entering her new life as a married person. She fears getting trapped in the marriage or in a destructive and depressed mental state, and the physical location of the estate responds to and accommodates her reluctance. Crossing the boundary into the estate ultimately does trap her. Later, the day after the disastrous wedding reception, she is out riding horses with Claire. As they attempt to cross a bridge leading away from the estate, Justine's horse stops and refuses to move past that point (*Melancholia*: 1:05:00). This also happens again later in the same way, increasing her frustration (*Melancholia*: 1:18:50). Just like the limousine, the horses respond to Justine's state of mind, and at this point she is well and truly trapped by her mental state and the knowledge of the apocalypse. But while her woes are reframed as apocalyptic in the latter half of the film, the wedding is what initiates the situation and the true cause of her imprisonment.

A major factor poisoning Justine's wedding and state of mind is the relationship of her parents, and their attitude towards her. Their former marriage is suggested to have been less than pleasant, and they begin arguing in front of the wedding crowd during the dinner, harshly insulting and criticizing each other's characters (*Melancholia*: 19:30). They in effect hijack Justine's celebration to air their own past grievances and bitter feuds, and importantly make their personal matters a public affair that involves everyone at the reception. Just like the unhappy marriage of Arthur and Miranda in *Station Eleven*,

Justine's parents' marriage serves as a sort of past personal apocalyptic event, that now continues to exert influence over behavior. By having this argument in public, their personal apocalypse expands and engulfs more people, mirroring what becomes the larger arc of the film: Justine's depression and personal apocalypse influencing her sister and ultimately the entire world in the form of Melancholia the planet.

Justine's mother states that she does not "believe in marriage" (*Melancholia*: 19:48) and tells Justine to "enjoy it while it lasts. I myself hate marriages" (*Melancholia*: 20:09). What issues she and Justine's father experienced are left unclear, but it is clear their failed marriage influences Justine's attitude towards her own marriage. In her parents Justine sees a cautionary example of how bitter and destructive marriage and love can be, and it no doubt affects the apprehension she feels towards committing to it herself. If the failed marriage and broken relationships are thought of as a personal apocalypse, they introduce an interesting situation regarding knowledge. Justine's own view is affected because she has knowledge of a past apocalypse (her parents' marriage). One apocalypse influences the attitudes and behaviors of others, which leads to further apocalypses. If the metaphor is stretched a bit, one might even say Justine's parents live in a post-apocalyptic state that then becomes a pre-apocalyptic existence for Justine. Their transformative event becomes one for her. She sees how unhappy her parents are and consequently sees no hope in her own life that appears to follow theirs, she has trapped herself in certain doom. The planet Melancholia and its inevitable destructive existence is this feeling manifest, the dead end and bitter death she was so afraid of. The planet is the result of Justine's anxiety, not the cause of it. This is reinforced by Justine's behavior towards the end of the film. She becomes apathetic and calm regarding the descent of the planet and the end of the world because her world has already ended with the wedding.

The nature of the apocalypse as a personal matter is also evident in how others have trouble understanding or sympathizing with Justine's anxiety during the wedding reception. Most guests are enjoying the party throughout its duration, while Justine alone broods. Others concentrate on practical matters and appearances, such as Claire and John commenting how troublesome and expensive the wedding was to arrange when Justine and Michael arrive late (*Melancholia*: 11:45), or when they later get angry and embarrassed when Justine and her mother fail to participate in party events such as cutting the wedding cake (*Melancholia*: 31:40). This shows their preoccupation with the social functions of the event, and their lack of understanding of what Justine is experiencing or

thinking. Michael, likewise, is dejected when Justine lacks enthusiasm for the plot of land he bought for them (*Melancholia*: 37:20) and when she rejects his sexual advances in their bedroom (*Melancholia*: 52:50). He cannot understand what Justine is going through, and Justine refuses to engage with him honestly. She seems to be alienated from her family and friends, unable to connect. The toxic influence of her parents is something that affects her alone and separates her from everyone else, Michael in particular, who as the other half of the marriage still obviously lacks close experience with Justine's parents. But Justine's alienation affects her behavior and ends up hurting Michael anyway, the same way Justine's parents' troubles transferred to her. Once again, personal apocalypses expand into the public sphere. The same issues are perpetuated and continue to create new transformative experiences.

Justine's isolation is apparent elsewhere as well. She is confronted and asked whether she truly wants the wedding when she acts callous (*Melancholia*: 11:55), and Claire tells her they "agreed that you weren't going to make any scenes tonight" (*Melancholia*: 21:05). When Justine mentions her prophetic dream, Claire also warns her not to "say a word to Michael" (*Melancholia*: 29:30) and accuses her later of "lying to all of us" about being happy (*Melancholia*: 42:30). Justine's employer at the party also takes the opportunity to talk about work and asks her to brainstorm during her own wedding reception (*Melancholia*: 39:45). He is demanding and pushes a role onto her without regard for how she feels. Justine's feelings and condition are repeatedly made secondary to the social importance of the event and the maintenance of relationships. Whether they truly do not understand the extent of Justine's state or simply deny her right to express it publicly is not clear, but the end result is the same: her alienation and dissociation from the others intensifies, further reinforcing the sense of being trapped and doomed as well.

Justine's parents do not offer substantial sympathies either. "Mom. I'm a bit scared" Justine confesses to her mother when they have a chance to talk alone during the party, which her mother interprets as a fear of being married (*Melancholia*: 44:05). While the film's metaphorical context is here talking about exactly that, Justine is also talking about her dream of the planet, and in a sense her mother is missing the point by projecting her own distaste for marriage onto the conversation. The line between the personal and global apocalypses is particularly blurred here. In the same conversation, Justine repeats that she is afraid, and her mother responds with "We all are, sweetie. Just forget it. Get the hell out of here" (*Melancholia*: 44:40). What exactly she is referring to here depends

exactly on which side of the blurred line the conversation is moving on. The call to simply “get out” of the situation, whether it is the marriage and estate that traps Justine or the despair that an incoming planet is causing, appears quite tone-deaf on the mother’s part, and shows a lack of understanding of the gravity of the situation and the weight it is on Justine. Justine’s mother refuses to truly take responsibility for corrupting Justine’s idea of marriage in the first place and is reduced to offering shallow advice when it is already too late. Justine is not reassured by this discussion either, as evident by her inability to leave the estate later. Justine’s father does not offer even this level of courtesy. While he appears jovial and loving during the party, Justine never has the chance to discuss matters with him. She tries to get him to stay at the estate overnight so they might have an opportunity to converse, pleading “Please, Dad. I really need to talk to you” (*Melancholia*: 54:50). He, however, sneaks away with his lovers as the party winds down, leaving only an apology note for Justine (*Melancholia*: 1:02:40). Much like others at the event, he appears indifferent and ignorant of Justine’s troubles, too busy with his own interests to take his daughter’s troubles seriously. Together with his ex-wife, he ostensibly shares responsibility for causing Justine’s damaged mental state, yet he too refuses to take responsibility. His reluctance to stay at the estate might even be him avoiding Justine’s mother, highlighting the continued destructive influence of their past apocalyptic event. His only real comment as to Justine’s state is early on when he tells her he has “never seen you look so happy” (*Melancholia*: 19:00), a shockingly inobservant comment in the context of the film’s narrative.

After the wedding, Justine’s depression develops into a severely debilitating state. Claire attempts to cheer her up with her favorite food, but Justine comments that “it tastes like ashes” (*Melancholia*: 1:13:25). This changed outlook, even over a seemingly trivial matter, signals that the transformative event has transpired. Her apocalypse has come, leaving her unable to think about past things in the same way as before, and forcing a reevaluation of her values. The wedding reception has become an apocalyptic event in itself, and Justine’s doom is sealed. The effects of this apocalypse continue to develop as she lives at the estate with Claire’s family, and Justine becomes more active but increasingly apathetic. When the horse refuses to cross the bridge and let her escape the estate for the second time, she becomes angry and beats it violently (*Melancholia*: 1:18:50), before looking at the approaching *Melancholia* in the sky and spitefully commenting to Claire “There it is. There’s your flyby” (*Melancholia*: 1:19:50). This burst

of anger is her last defiance against the impending final destruction that she has doomed herself to, and her comment a resignation to the fact that their fates are now inevitable. This heralds her final transformation, which occurs on a night later on, when she goes out naked to bathe in the light of the planet, now sizeable in the night sky (*Melancholia*: 1:23:10). This is her ultimate resignation and acceptance of the impending apocalypse and is a result of the apocalypse she has just experienced. Her nakedness exposes her to the planet, she gives herself to it and invites it to her. The intimacy and sexual energy of the scene serves to truly mark the film's apocalyptic narrative as specifically personal and metaphorical rather than global. The sexuality of the encounter also gives her resignation a sense of pleasure and liberation. After accepting the apocalyptic reality, she is no longer afraid, and she remains calm for the rest of the film, including at the very end when everything is engulfed in flames (*Melancholia*: 1:50:00). After this acceptance, she also offers thoughts on the value of the impending apocalypse: "The earth is evil. We don't need to grieve for it. Nobody will miss it" (*Melancholia*: 1:31:10). She is now trying to rationalize the incoming end of the world and her acceptance of it, her parents' toxic attitudes manifesting as misanthropy. In addition to physically beckoning the planet before, she is now inviting and justifying the collision as well. Her behavior destroys the world around her, just as her world was destroyed. The destruction of the planet is merely a dramatic formality after this point. The true apocalypse of this apocalyptic narrative was the disastrous wedding reception rather than the planet colliding with Earth.

The second part of the film increases the focus on Claire, and it is here that the influence of Justine's despair can most strongly be seen. Just as their parents corrupt Justine's state of mind, so Justine corrupts Claire and drags her with her to destruction. Claire's husband John is unique in the story for recognizing this pattern of apocalyptic influence, commenting that Justine is "a bad influence on you [Claire] and Leo" (*Melancholia*: 1:07:50) when she arrives at the estate to live with them in her depressed state. Like characters in *The Last Policeman* and *Station Eleven*, he shows an awareness of the pre-apocalyptic condition and the psychological distress it exerts on people, but also acknowledges the problem of knowledge: that knowledge of the apocalypse is as powerful as a transformative force as the apocalypse itself. However, Claire is already expressing fears about Melancholia, telling him "I'm afraid of that stupid planet" while he reassures her the astronomers are correct and that the planet will merely pass Earth (*Melancholia*: 1:08:10). While here the knowledge of Melancholia's approach is

presented as being common knowledge, and thus the origin of Justine's worries, the structure of the film implies otherwise. After all, Justine's story and the development of her own personal apocalypse is shown first, and the knowledge gained by Claire and the audience at this later stage is framed by Justine's preceding personal issues. The relationship of cause and effect is effectively obscured, lending credence to the planet Melancholia's metaphorical existence.

John and Leo act enthusiastic about Melancholia's flyby as a spectacular astronomical event, but Claire feels alienated from their joy (*Melancholia*: 1:20:20), much like Justine felt during the wedding reception. The possibility of the planet colliding with Earth, as Justine implied, creates a rift in Claire's marriage and her personal relationships. Just as the problem of knowledge predicts, the knowledge of the apocalypse, or even just the possibility of it, creates an early apocalypse. Justine's depression and pre-apocalyptic mindset transmits to her sister and dooms her the same way. Claire's distress and panic when the planet is closing in and is certain to hit Earth (*Melancholia*: 1:50:00) mirrors Justine's behavior in part one of the film. The fear of death has fully transferred from individual to individual. Apocalypse creates further apocalypses. The film also deploys the same mechanisms of entrapment for Claire when her state of mind approaches Justine's. Previously Claire's horse had no trouble crossing the bridge that Justine could not get past, but when Melancholia is about to hit and she tries to escape with Leo by driving a golf cart away from the estate, the vehicle stops and then ceases to function on the exact same bridge (*Melancholia*: 1:52:15). The reuse of imagery highlights the parallel between the sisters and conveys that Claire's feelings are now truly the same as Justine's were. The seeming absurdity of attempting to escape a planet colliding with Earth by leaving the estate also highlights the metaphorical role the physical location has. The country estate that trapped the entire film continues to exert its barriers over the characters. It represented the toxic idea of marriage that Justine had developed, but ultimately it became a manifestation of the destructive depressive and apocalyptic mindset that both sisters fell victim to. A mental prison that prevented either woman from seeing hope or overcoming their fear of death. In the end when Melancholia strikes, Justine is calm while Claire panics (*Melancholia*: 2:02:40). Their final responses contrast, as the paths they took to reach that situation differ, but ultimately their experiences with the apocalyptic and their inability to cope with the fear were the same.

Claire's husband John in contrast to her is presented as a confident rationalist. He consoles the scared Claire by arguing that astronomers and their calculations of Melancholia's trajectory can be trusted, and that online theories about it actually hitting Earth are untrustworthy conspiracies (*Melancholia*: 1:08:40). This particular attitude creates an interesting contrast with *The Last Policeman*, in which the idea of the celestial object *not* hitting Earth was considered a conspiracy theory. In *Melancholia*, the audience is certain that the planet will strike Earth, while the characters struggle with what to believe (save for Justine). In *The Last Policeman* it was a matter of clinging to hope when all hope was lost, whereas at this point in *Melancholia* it is about fear intruding onto a situation where fear should rationally not have any place. While the situations may seem similar, the distinction highlights the difference in approach the film has to the other primary texts, and *The Last Policeman* in particular, which it ostensibly shares a lot in common with. However, even John's attitude appears hollow. He prepares supplies under the pretext of the flyby potentially causing atmospheric or electric interference, seemingly expecting something terrible to happen, while also tells Justine to keep it a secret from Claire so as to not alarm her (*Melancholia*: 1:17:15). He wants to avoid panic, as he understands that to acknowledge the possibility of apocalyptic disaster is to invite apocalyptic disaster. He is conflicted between his fear of what might potentially happen if the calculations are not entirely accurate, and his trust in those same calculations. This trust borders on a deliberate denial of the possibility of something bad happening. Ultimately, this internal conflict comes to a head as he observes Melancholia returning towards earth on a collision course after the initial flyby. His denial is shattered, and he chooses to end his life on his own terms, unable to handle the fear and distress the knowledge of the apocalypse causes. In this sense, he is very similar to officer Andreas in *The Last Policeman*, who let himself be captivated by the conspiracy theories promising salvation from the apocalypse, and who similarly committed suicide after the world's fate seemed truly inevitable. *Melancholia* offers no more exploration of this extreme reaction than *The Last Policeman* did, but given the recurring theme of escape in Justine and Claire's stories, suicide in this context appears to take on a similar position: as a last desperate attempt at escaping the controlling inevitability of death by, contradictorily, ending one's own life.

The conflicts at play in John and Claire's cases are highlighted by a particular image at the very end of the film. While stumbling back towards the estate after failing

to escape, Claire and Leo wander across the estate's golf course and briefly pass a flag indicating the 19th hole of the course (*Melancholia*: 1:54:00). The 19th hole, a violation of common sense and directly contradicting previous statements in the film that mention the presence of a typical 18-hole golf course on the estate grounds, acquires a strong symbolic meaning through its absurd existence and its placement at a climactic scene. Its unnatural presence highlights the metaphorical and unreal nature of the film's apocalypse and the planet Melancholia. It emphasizes that the cause and effect at play that led to apocalyptic extents was emotional, not physical nor societal. Justine's despair willed the planet to collide, her personal apocalypse expanded to become the global catastrophe. The 19th hole also serves to reject John's rationalism, by defying the rules and reality as understood by his conventions. This also reinforces that John severely misunderstood the nature of events transpiring around him. He was disinterested in and frustrated at Justine and dismissive of his wife's fears, neglecting their emotional states in favor of enforcing his own view of the world. The 19th hole of an 18-hole golf course defies reason just as the planet Melancholia defies his reason, because it was a product of an emotional malaise that he was blind to. The apocalypse was not a science fiction disaster, it was a personal apocalypse unfolding in plain sight, potentially preventable but ultimately destructive and infectious.

Finally, the various behavior of characters present throughout the film can also be analyzed using Žižek's model. This gives some additional perspective to certain characters and how the film constructs its apocalyptic reality. Denial appears in multiple places, most obviously in John's rejection of the conspiracy theories and Justine's depressive attitude. The exact truth of his internal conflict, whether he truly believed Melancholia would just pass by or not, is not entirely clear, but the intensity of his reaction after the truth is confirmed suggests he genuinely believed (or made himself believe) nothing bad would happen. His development past this denial is not shown, as he presumably falls into a depression off-screen and ends his life. His conflict also represents the bargaining phase, where he battles with rationality and fear in the hopes of there being a solution. Interestingly, with Melancholia's approach considered common knowledge later in the film, one has to consider the behavior of the wedding guests who would likewise have known of it, if one entertains the notion of the film's apocalypse as a straightforward astronomical disaster. The guests' choice to enjoy the party without showing signs of despair or fear indicates either a strong sense of denial or that they have

already reached the final stage of acceptance and have stopped worrying about the end of the world. Only Justine's parents can reasonably be read to have more complex reactions. The discussion with her mother as analyzed previously possibly hinting at her naïve understanding of the apocalyptic reality, and her father's insistence of indulging in life with his lovers instead of caring for his daughter suggesting he has stopped caring and wishes to spend his remaining time selfishly. Most importantly for the film's narrative, however, is the way the guests deny Justine's depression so as to maintain the mood and form of the party, as described earlier in how her alienation is constructed. As her depression maps onto the apocalyptic in the film, this denial of her feelings becomes an example of denial in Žižek's sense, where it is used to avoid facing a problem and its consequences.

Anger is really only present in Justine's outburst against her horse as it refuses to cross the bridge off the estate grounds. As suggested earlier, this display of anger is somewhat complicated, as the target of it is somewhat unclear. Ostensibly, she is beating the horse for not following her orders, but in truth she is blaming herself in that moment. Justine is the victim and cause of the apocalypse, and being trapped at the estate is what enables it. She is frustrated at her own inability to escape the trap, the destructive mindset that drags both her and her family down. Ultimately, she finds it impossible to escape, but the question the film leaves is whether it might have been possible? Justine could not do it on her own, and neither could Claire in her time of need, but could someone have helped them out? Anger is the way Justine expresses her inability to answer that question.

Depression and acceptance on the other hand are the driving forces of the film. Depression in particular strikes every main character at some point, beginning with the deep-rooted fear that Justine harbors, and even further into her mother's resentful and disillusioned relationship with marriage. Justine passes through her phase of depression and eventually reaches some sense of acceptance, whereas Claire and John, influenced by Justine, have their own experiences with depression before the end arrives. Justine's acceptance does not take exactly the form that Žižek's initial model described, where the apocalypse is not seen as a danger anymore, but rather as merely inevitable. Žižek's additional comment is accurate, however, where he suggests that after a disaster passes the point of inevitability, it becomes normalized and retroactively rationalized as always having been inevitable. In accordance with this, Justine argues the destruction of the world is justified and always ordained, after having invited it herself. The question raised

here is, once again, could she have been saved? Was her apocalypse always inevitable, or did it only become inevitable because she believed it was inevitable?

Melancholia explores many pre-apocalyptic themes familiar from *The Last Policeman* and *Station Eleven*. The problem of knowledge once again rears its head as a defining feature of the pre-apocalyptic narrative, but the film combines it with a strong argument for treating apocalypse as a personal experience above all else. Marriage is the film's single strongest embodiment of the apocalyptic, both in the case of Justine and her parents (who ultimately are a cause of Justine's twisted perception). Apocalypses as transformative events trap you into certain mindsets that further perpetuate apocalypses. The self-fulfilling prophecy of the pre-apocalyptic "double apocalypses" becomes reality again. What is particularly unique to *Melancholia*, however, in contrast to the other primary texts, is its exploration of how this depressed apocalyptic mindset infects those around the victim and brings everyone down together. *Station Eleven* acknowledged the transmission of emotions across apocalypses, but *Melancholia* crafts its entire narrative around the idea. The apocalyptic trap that caught Justine widens until it swallows the entire Earth. More so than either of the other primary texts, *Melancholia* is a cautionary tale that expresses the horror of untreated depression by giving it a body of apocalyptic scale. The planet is named Melancholia, because only a colossal celestial object with the power to destroy the world can represent the enormity of such a condition.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to study apocalyptic literature and identify whether “pre-apocalyptic” narratives can be construed as distinct from other forms of apocalyptic narratives. This was done by first defining “apocalypse” and identifying characteristic features and functions of literature related to it, and then considering how these factors change when the narrative is set before an apocalypse (as opposed to during or after one). The aim was also to consider the human response to an impending apocalypse and how it might affect behavior. This understanding of the apocalypse and apocalyptic literature was then applied in analyzing the three primary texts, which are all pre-apocalyptic in some way. The aim in the analysis was to understand in which way they are pre-apocalyptic as texts, what form or role the apocalypse takes in the texts, and how characters or societies react and behave in relation to an upcoming apocalypse.

The study produced several conclusions. The pre-apocalyptic form of apocalyptic fiction was identified as being present in even the earliest historical apocalyptic texts, which means that the pre-apocalyptic narrative is as old as the wider genre and thus not fundamentally separate from other forms of apocalyptic narratives. The four stages of apocalyptic narratives were used to highlight the formal and structural differences between pre-apocalyptic and other forms of apocalyptic stories, as pre-apocalyptic literature typically omits the last two (which depict the post-apocalypse and the rebuilt new world). Apocalypse in literature is used as a vehicle for social critique, as moral evaluation, or for reevaluation and recontextualization of life choices and values. All three primary texts de-emphasized the social critique aspect of the apocalypse by removing the causal link between the pre-apocalyptic society and the apocalypse itself. Instead, the texts focused on exploring emotional and social reactions to an inevitable apocalyptic event.

The most prominent and useful definition of the apocalypse in the thesis was the idea of an apocalypse as a transformative event that forces one to change how to think about the world preceding and following the apocalypse. This concept of an apocalypse can be applied to more than simply massive global calamities that are perhaps the most common way to understand the apocalypse. As a transformative event, the apocalypse can also exert its influence on the time preceding itself, and all primary texts displayed the effects of this through the behavior of their characters or the reader’s understanding of the narrative. Knowledge of an upcoming apocalypse was also found to be a

transformative event in itself of comparable magnitude to the apocalypse proper, which was particularly evident in *The Last Policeman* and *Melancholia*. This knowledge had effects such as people looking for hope for survival (both religious and through denial of danger), both successful and unsuccessful attempts at coping with a mortal fear, and various reactions that could be described using Žižek's model for understanding reactions to disaster. The main characters in all primary texts were also particularly reflective with their own lives and values, and at some point each struggled with their own respective search for meaning in a pre-apocalyptic world. In the case of *Station Eleven*, though, this "pre-apocalyptic world" was only realized through the reader's knowledge of the narrative's context, rather than the character having this knowledge, but the thematic effect was the same.

A common feature in all primary texts, and seemingly a defining feature of pre-apocalyptic narratives, was the parallel drawn between the apocalypse and mundane human mortality. This means pre-apocalyptic narratives emphasize already existing life, values, relationships, and social structures and a reflective attitude towards them, whereas post-apocalyptic narratives are more inclined to emphasize that which remains after the apocalypse. Both forms of apocalyptic literature ultimately attempt to explore what one considers valuable or moral, what is important in life, and how people cope with death, but the narrative contexts and tone are different. Notably, as pre-apocalyptic narratives almost by definition omit the last stage of apocalyptic narratives, the birth of a new world, they may come off as ostensibly less hopeful, while also forcing attention on what already exists (and is under threat). *Melancholia* especially metaphorized its apocalypse to serve as a representation of emotional distress and depression as an expression of this realization of mortality and finiteness. In particular, it emphasized the apocalypse as a personal transformative event that also affects others via the individual's relationships.

Based on the study conducted in this thesis, pre-apocalyptic literature fundamentally contemplates and engages with the same themes of society and human existence as other forms of apocalyptic literature. Pre-apocalyptic narratives also use the same types of tools and functions to present their apocalyptic contexts, but by omitting certain elements or highlighting others they shift the thematic emphasis and approach to a certain degree. A pre-apocalyptic setting also allows the use of analytical tools such as Žižek's model for responding to impending disaster, which is not applicable as-is to post-apocalyptic narratives. All three primary texts were distinctly pre-apocalyptic in their

narrative, and their apocalypses could all be understood as transformative events. Through their parallel between the apocalypse and mortality they all also emphasized introspection and reflection of life and values, identifying a distinctive pre-apocalyptic feature.

While this thesis compared and studied several different pre-apocalyptic works, it notably did not directly compare pre-apocalyptic literature with post-apocalyptic literature other than on a general level. Any commentary on the nature of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives was mostly general and did not delve into detailed examples. There is thus room for further study on that front. This thesis was also not a historical or cultural study. The development or evolution of the apocalyptic genre was not considered extensively, and whether the pre-apocalyptic form was particularly prevalent in certain time periods or cultures was not studied. All the primary texts were published in the 2010s, and thus represent very modern contexts. Similarly, the real-world context of the primary texts was not a relevant factor in the study, and the political and cultural climate that produced the texts or in which they were read was not considered in the analyses. There is also the possibility for deeper or different psychological or philosophical approaches for analyzing pre-apocalyptic texts. For example, Žižek's model utilized the theory of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross to construct a tool for understanding human behavior, showing that other psychological models could also be helpful for understanding the pre-apocalyptic condition. Specific branches of philosophy such as existentialism or various religious ideologies could also be used to read pre-apocalyptic texts for more focused approaches, which this thesis did not do. The thesis was also limited to only three primary texts, and while a case was successfully made for these being pre-apocalyptic and sharing certain distinctive features, a more extensive study would still be required to make truly significant statements about the pre-apocalyptic as a genre. Nevertheless, this thesis still argues that the pre-apocalyptic as a narrative form and potential distinct genre is uniquely interesting as an object of study, and the multitude of approaches available reflect the richness of the subject.

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Summary in Swedish – Svensk sammanfattning

Denna outhärdliga väntan: Preapokalyptiska teman i *The Last Policeman*, *Station Eleven* och *Melancholia*

I denna avhandling i engelska språket och litteraturen behandlar jag tre verk, två romaner och en film. De är romanen *The Last Policeman*, skriven av Ben H. Winters och publicerad år 2012, romanen *Station Eleven*, skriven av Emily St. John Mandel och publicerad år 2014 samt filmen *Melancholia*, som regisserades av Lars von Trier och hade premiär år 2011. Alla dessa tre verk är preapokalyptiska på något sätt. Avhandlingen behandlar preapokalyptisk litteratur som en särskild genre från postapokalyptisk litteratur. Preapokalyptisk litteratur kan definieras som berättelser som utspelar sig före världens undergång eller någon extrem katastrof. Eftersom litteraturen ändå är apokalyptisk, innehåller genren antagandet att världens undergång faktiskt kommer att äga rum i berättelsen. De tre verken som behandlas i avhandlingen är preapokalyptiska på olika sätt. I *The Last Policeman* är en stor meteorit på väg att träffa jorden, och världens befolkning vet med säkerhet när det kommer att ske. *Station Eleven* är uppdelad i två delar, varav den första utspelar sig före ett farligt virus sprider sig och dödar en stor majoritet av världens befolkning. I *Melancholia* hotar en stor planet att krocka med jorden, men endast vissa karaktärer är medvetna om eller rädda för katastrofen.

Avhandlingens mål är att utreda centrala kännetecken på och teman i apokalyptisk litteratur och sedan beskriva hur dessa kännetecken och teman behandlas annorlunda då en berättelse är preapokalyptisk. Med hjälp av denna beskrivning kan jag skapa en slags allmän modell eller definition på vad preapokalyptisk litteratur egentligen innebär. Med hjälp av modellen kan jag sedan analysera de tre verken och utreda på vilket sätt apokalypsen används eller framträder i berättelserna. I analysen använder jag också en modell som presenterats av Slavoj Žižek, som beskriver hur människor beter sig när de hotas av en extrem katastrof.

Jag hittade flera sätt att definiera apokalyptisk litteratur och på apokalyps. Det finns fyra typiska stadier i en apokalyptisk berättelse. Det första stadiet kallas dystopi, och beskriver världen som den är före apokalypsen. Det andra stadiet är själva apokalypsen, vanligen en extrem katastrof som förstör samhället. Det tredje stadiet är världen efter apokalypsen. Det sista stadiet är en återfödelse eller återbyggnad av en ny värld. Preapokalyptiska berättelser utelämnar de två sista stadierna, vilket utgör en

karakteristisk skillnad i strukturen av preapokalyptiska verk i jämförelse med till exempel postapokalyptiska verk.

Apokalyps som händelse kan beskrivas som en upplevelse eller händelse som radikalt ändrar på tankesätt eller människors förståelse av något. Exempel på sådana händelser är bland annat viktiga historiska vändpunkter eller en personlig traumatisk upplevelse. En sådan händelse leder till en omtolkning av händelseförlopp eller introspektion. Denna definition på apokalyps är flexibel och kan beskriva flera olika sorters händelser, inte endast extrema katastrofer och världens undergång. Denna definition är därför mycket användbar för analysen av litteratur. Apokalyptisk litteratur och apokalyptiska teman grundar sig på en rädsla för döden, vilket är en grundläggande mänsklig känsla. Världens undergång är alltså en metafor för människans dödlighet och livets ändlighet. I och med att preapokalyptiska berättelser också låter bli att skildra vad som händer efter världens undergång, sätts fokus på det som finns till i nuet och hotas av apokalypsen (det vill säga, döden). Postapokalyptiska berättelser däremot betonar ofta det som blir kvar efter apokalypsen.

I *The Last Policeman* vet romanens karaktärer att meteoriten kommer att träffa jorden. Denna kunskap leder till att världens befolkning reagerar starkt på den kommande katastrofen, och samhället faller samman. Vanliga reaktioner bland karaktärerna är bland annat stark ångest, apati eller vrede. Detta visar att kunskap om den kommande katastrofen har en lika stor påverkan på människors beteende som själva katastrofen. Romanens huvudperson som är polis undrar om det är meningslöst att försöka utreda brott då jorden ändå kommer att gå under i framtiden. Han bestämmer sig slutligen ändå för att upprätthålla den samhälleliga ordningen och ett moraliskt beteende. Detta visar hur apokalypsen får en människa att ändra sitt synsätt och reflektera över sitt beteende.

Station Eleven är en preapokalyptisk berättelse endast eftersom läsaren vet att det farliga viruset kommer att sprida sig. Karaktärerna i romanen är inte medvetna om den apokalyptiska faran. Den del av romanen som utspelar sig före världens undergång beskriver livet för en man som omkommer just innan det dödliga viruset börjar sprida sig. Romanen drar en parallell mellan mannens dödlighet och världens undergång, och likt *The Last Policeman* menar romanen att mannens liv och handlingar inte var meningslösa även om han dog. Mannens liv innehöll ännu flera händelser som ändrade hans tankesätt eller ledde till introspektion (till exempel en skilsmässa), vilka kan tolkas som

apokalypser. Romanen visar alltså hur apokalyps kan vara något personligt. I och med att apokalypsen liknas vid dödligheten kan allt liv tolkas som preapokalyptiskt.

I *Melancholia* är apokalypsen en metafor för ångest. Huvudpersonens föräldrar har haft ett olyckligt äktenskap, vilket leder till att huvudpersonen är rädd för att själv gifta sig. Hennes bröllop slutar därför olyckligt, och hon börjar lida av en svår depression. Denna depression relateras också till rädslan att en stor planet kommer att krocka med jorden. Huvudpersonens rädsla och depression sprider sig till hennes familj, och slutligen förstörs jorden i krocken. Föräldrarnas olyckliga äktenskap som påverkar familjens sinnestillstånd kan tolkas som en apokalyps, som sedan leder till en liknande händelse som påverkar huvudpersonen. Apokalyps karakteriseras alltså som en personlig upplevelse som dessutom också kan påverka andra personer. Huvudpersonens ångest materialiserar sig som en verklig katastrof som förstör världen, vilket visar hur en personlig apokalyps kan påverka andra.

I alla verk kan dessutom Slavoj Žižeks modell användas för att beskriva karaktärernas beteende i verken. Till exempel förnekar vissa att den kommande katastrofen är farlig, vissa blir extremt rädda eller ångestfyllda, och vissa godkänner att katastrofen kommer att äga rum samt att de inte kan påverka händelseförloppet. En annan av avhandlingens slutsatser är att preapokalyptisk litteratur i stort sett behandlar liknande teman som postapokalyptisk och andra sorters apokalyptisk litteratur, men på grund av skillnader i berättelsernas struktur betonas olika detaljer. Preapokalyptisk litteratur betonar framför allt en jämförelse mellan världens undergång och människans dödlighet. Detta uppmuntrar karaktärerna och läsarna att analysera sina synsätt och reflektera över sina liv och värderingar. Vidare utforskning av ämnet skulle kunna jämföra preapokalyptiska verk med postapokalyptiska verk, eller undersöka hur sociopolitiska faktorer påverkar skapandet av preapokalyptiska verk. Preapokalyptisk litteratur kan också analyseras med hjälp av specifika filosofiska eller psykologiska teoretiska modeller, vilket denna avhandling inte gjorde.