ACROSS
Journal of Interdisciplinary Cross-Border Studies
Vol. 10, No.6, 2026
The Sensitive Dimension of Canadian Time and Space

The Uncanny, Heterotopia, and Space in Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* (1993) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014)

Monika LEFERMAN

Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
monika.kosa@ubbcluj.ro

Abstract

Masterpieces of Canadian fiction, Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* (1993) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) are dystopian novels set in a pandemic-ravaged Canadian environment. These thematically rich works explore complex questions, such as what the aftermath of a deadly pandemic would look like for society and how to hold onto one's humanity amid difficult circumstances. This paper offers a comparative analysis of the two novels, focusing especially on the construction of Canadian space as both the setting for the unfolding action and the locus of revelations. This article will argue that, while differing in theme and narrative style, both novels offer complementary conceptualisations of space and valuable insight into the symbolic potential of the Canadian setting.

Keywords: heterotopia, uncanny, weird, Timothy Findley, Emily St. John Mandel

Introduction

A devastating pandemic has swept through Toronto, claiming countless lives and altering the city forever. This bleak setting provides a powerful backdrop for Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) and Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* (1993).[1] Both novels envision a pandemic-stricken Toronto, reimagined as a liminal and dystopian space. Toronto is a place where people from different backgrounds coexist; it is full of life and contradictions, making it the perfect setting to illustrate the devastating, life-altering effects of a global pandemic. Consequently, the remaining survivors become a microcosm of global civilisation. Thus, the city becomes a way to address and reflect broader narratological and cultural concerns, particularly those related to epidemics and societal crises.

One of the most important voices of twentieth-century Canadian literature, Timothy Findley was hailed as "one of the most singular and influential talents of his generation" (Duffy 2015) and praised for "the power of visual imagery, the filmic attention to gesture, the playwright's ear for dialogue, and the storyteller's love of narrative" (Brydon 1998, 1). Findley's fiction deals with a variety of complex themes, such as mental illness, the environment, the power of storytelling and myths, and animal welfare, but also touches upon themes as varied as "desire, madness, war, fire, fascism, the holocaust, and nuclear annihilation" (Brydon 1998, 1).

[1] Other Canadian novels that use epidemics as the backdrop include Kevin Chong's *The Plague* (2016), Saleema Nawaz' *Songs for the End of the World* (2020), and Eva Crocker's *Back in the Land of the Living* (2023).

Headhunter, one of Findley's dystopian classics, is an unusual novel that recounts the extraordinary tale of Lilah Kemp, a woman with schizophrenia, who frees Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and then sets out on a mission to return him to the original story. Published in 1993, *Headhunter* is set in a disease-stricken Toronto, where a deadly plague called sturnusemia wreaks havoc on the population. During the ongoing health crisis, Lilah Kemp, a psychic with schizophrenia, unwittingly releases Kurtz from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Findley's masterpiece was critically acclaimed for "its fusion of jeremiad with psychological thriller" (Marcus 2021) and for being "one of those novels that defies classification, using elements of the absurd, the supernatural and even a bit of science fiction to create a dark but real-seeming vision of our world" (Kleffel 1994). Against the backdrop of a disease-stricken Toronto, the narrative takes readers on a journey featuring a wide array of characters, both literary and intradiegetic, and several subplots that deepen the story's layered complexity.

Emily St. John Mandel is a renowned contemporary Canadian author who has published six novels to date, including the critically acclaimed *Station Eleven* (2014) and *Sea of Tranquillity* (2022). Her distinctive, non-linear narratives blend stories that traverse time and space, showcasing her interest in the human experience across different timelines and spatial settings. These spatial and temporal multiplicities play an instrumental role in her fiction, enabling her to explore complex notions of reality and human experience. One hallmark of her fiction is a keen eye for quiet, epiphanic moments in ordinary circumstances. For example, Miranda, a character in *Station Eleven*, reflects on how Toronto offers people anonymity: "The revelation of privacy: she can walk down the street and *absolutely no one knows who she is*. It's possible that no one who didn't grow up in a small place can understand how beautiful this is, how the anonymity of city life feels like freedom." (Mandel 2014, 77-78) In addition, Mandel shows special interest in "random human interconnections of characters" (Gadpaille 2023, 20), and her speculative fiction taps into the anxieties of contemporary times, such as simulated realities or the fear of epidemics, especially relevant in the post-Covid context.

Published in 2014, *Station Eleven* is set in a world ravaged by the Georgia Flu, which killed 99% of the global population. The novel centres on a group of survivors in the Travelling Symphony who perform Shakespearean plays for the remaining communities. Combining snippets from pre-pandemic times with the desolate present, the novel "explores the consequences of a hypothetical pandemic and how the world and society might be altered as a result of it" (Paulus 2023, 2) and how art and community might help not only survive such difficult circumstances but also live a meaningful life.

Essentially, as Feldner observes, the novel "does not focus on survival, struggle, and conflict but rather examines the possibility and necessity of cultural expression in a post-apocalyptic setting, demonstrating the importance and value of art" (2018, 166). The short text written on the Travelling Symphony caravan, "Because survival is insufficient" (Mandel 2014, 58), emphasises art's vital role, even in a pandemic-ravaged environment. As Weiss aptly writes, "The novel's themes include the value of art and the unappreciated richness of modern life—things we too easily lose sight of in harsh conditions." (Weiss 2021, 187) This is also where Mandel's approach to dystopian fiction differs: rather than depicting a world of terror and despair, she focuses on hope and beauty. Leggat echoes this perspective, writing that "One of the most distinctive aspects of *Station Eleven* is its hopeful tone" (2018, 9). At the end of the novel, her "characters learn to accept present conditions and resolve to live as best as

they can, with art replacing religion as consolation for life's relentless suffering" (Baumlin 2020, 22), and the ultimate message seems to be "that amid the horror of collapse, humanity doesn't always have to revert to savagery." (Barnett 2016) One of the central questions of the novel, Gadpaille writes, encompasses this quest for meaning and hope in a post-apocalyptic setting: "Where does reality lie in a shattered world that cultivates dramatic illusion from the past and dreams of refuge (however schismatic) on a distant world?" (2023, 34)

Space plays a pivotal role in both novels. More specifically, Canadian urban spaces become canvases onto which national and personal fears are projected, such as anxieties surrounding disease and contamination, and issues of marginalisation based on mental health or race. At the same time, space becomes a symbol of hope for rebirth in Station Eleven, where the city's lights become a site where rebirth is possible. In *Headhunter*, for example, marginalised voices such as Lilah's assert their presence by literally manipulating and changing the physical space, creating an environment in which suppressed voices can emerge. In this way, the location transforms into a site of resistance.

Space and/as the Uncanny

In his excellent study on "spatial and architectural uncanny", Vidler argues that "the labyrinthine spaces of the modern city have been construed as the sources of modern anxiety, from revolution and epidemic to phobia and alienation" (1994, ix). As Vidler explains, "space as threat, as harbinger of the unseen, operates as medical and psychical metaphor for all the possible erosions of bourgeois bodily and social well-being" (1994, 167). So, space is not only defined by physical attributes; it also carries hidden meanings and can explore larger social breakdowns or health-related anxieties, becoming a visual projection of these concerns.

Essentially, Vidler captures how modern urban spaces are rendered distorted, with familiar and ordinary places also emerging as sources of fear and estrangement. Drawing on Freud's theories of the uncanny, Vidler suggests that the uncanny functions "as a metaphor for a fundamentally unliveable modern condition" (Vidler 1994, x). The resulting emotional distress is a consequence of this spatial repurposing.

Literature is an excellent medium for creating and experiencing the spatial uncanny. Vidler offers a useful analogy to help clarify the issue, using light and dark to explain how objects of fear haunt these texts: "In every case "light space" is invaded by the figure of "dark space," on the level of the body in the form of epidemic and uncontrollable disease, and on the level of the city in the person of the homeless" (1994, 168). In both *Headhunter* and *Station Eleven*, the pandemic is used to symbolise the contamination of urban spaces, which then become "the site for uncanny experiences" (Vidler 1994, 11). This analogy offers a useful starting point for exploring contaminated urban space in these novels.

But why are these uncanny sites of interest to readers? Westphal's theories may shed light on this matter by stressing the close link between literature and reality: "The border between fiction and reality is permeable, and fiction can contribute to the development of the real." (2007, 153) From this reasoning, literary texts can shape our perception of reality and even influence its evolution. In other words, texts help us understand the social and cultural crises that affected certain communities at specific points in history, and fiction can even offer ideas for how to move forward. Similarly, Marie Jakober claims that

> Just as realistic fiction can help us understand an aspect of human life in all the complexities of a particular context, speculative fiction can help us understand it in a different way, by lifting it *out* of its familiar contexts and searching for elements that might be universal (2007, 29).

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction embedded fears of nuclear war and rapid industrialisation, and more recently, works of fiction "can be read as a reflection of the creeping awareness of fundamental *ecological* and *geological* crises" (Greve and Zappe 2019, 3). In *Headhunter*, Findley explores the collective fears that plagued late-twentieth-century society, such as the panic surrounding AIDS, which led to the stigmatisation of those with the disease. The novel also addresses themes of mental illness and power abuse. In this way, Findley helps his readers to better understand the realities of the late twentieth century, while also using these issues as a starting point for metafictional reflections. At the same time, the city reveals the hidden violence lurking in urban sites such as institutions and domestic spaces. For instance, the park is described as "a strolling ground for the mad" (1993, 47). Through Lilah's perception, the familiar environment of the park — an important urban recreational site — transforms into a place of disorder. This distorted view of the park is shaped by her personal experience of mental establishments, creating a deeply uncanny experience of space.

Toronto is constructed as a space where stories and history intersect. The city is also shaped and filtered through subjective perception, adding intimacy to both novels, which depict a post-apocalyptic world devastated by a pandemic and widespread death. This issue is highlighted in *Station Eleven*, when one of the characters ponders on how subjective perception can shape this city:

> And as always, the sense of Toronto existing in layers: the city that had shocked her with its vastness when she'd arrived here from Delano Island at seventeen still existed, but it occupied the same geographical space as a city that now seemed much smaller to her, a place diluted by the years she'd spent moving between London, New York, the harbor cities of Asia (2014, 205).

They reflect concerns about disease and the fragility of our environment. Moreover, both novels touch upon the temporal relevance of space, suggesting that the projected literary world can serve as a cautionary tale. This implies that landscapes may change irrevocably if those in positions of power are not cautious enough.

Headhunter is set in Toronto, one of the most emblematic Canadian cities. The first part of the novel centres on Lilah, a woman with schizophrenia who appears to have supernatural powers. She releases Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* at the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library. The novel's premise hinges on Lilah's ability to summon literary characters. The story never reveals whether the plot is merely a hallucination or if Lilah is actually a conjurer. Lilah's protest that "They don't allow people out of books in here" (1993, 5) deepens the contrast between setting and intertextual invasion, while also grounding the novel in a realistic framework. The novel specifies that the act of summoning took place in a particular library, which serves a dual purpose. Firstly, this anchors the novel in the real world.

Secondly, the library setting is relevant because it foreshadows the significance of intertextual references in the novel.

The opening sentence is also instrumental in setting a gloomy atmosphere: "On a winter's day, while a blizzard raged through the streets of Toronto, Lilah Kemp inadvertently set Kurtz free from page 92 of *Heart of Darkness*" (1993, 3). This is another example of foreshadowing and is indicative of Findley's blending of realistic descriptions with supernatural incidents. The blizzard also serves as a visual symbol for Kurtz, who epitomises evil in the novel. As the tale unfolds, Toronto morphs into an uncanny setting teeming with deranged literary characters, evoking a sense of impending doom. The more Kurtz becomes involved with the city, the more its familiar spaces turn into what Vidler calls dark spaces (see 1994, 168). The dark space is visually conveyed through sturnusemia, the deadly outbreak that devastates the city. The pandemic is framed as a biological manifestation of corruption and evil, while Kurtz is seen as a personification of moral degradation and social depravity. At the same time, sturnusemia reveals how fragile modern society is, and how quickly a deadly virus can alter life as we know it.

Henighan considers that "*Headhunter* begins and ends as a Torontonian retelling of the tale of Kurtz and Marlow" (2002, 45). While Findley does indeed draw on *Heart of Darkness*, his novel is much more than just a retelling of Conrad's masterpiece. Findley breathes new life into the story, constructing a complex tale that employs literary motifs and archetypes as universal sources that can be adapted across different historical periods and cultures, highlighting their universality.

Headhunter is written as a postmodern, playful "carnivalesque hide-and-seek game" (Darias Beautel 1996, 319), in which the readers "are detectives tracing clues" (Hutcheon 1988, 176). Overall, the novel tackles serious themes, such as the AIDS crisis, racism or power abuse in various forms, so the stakes are high, mirroring how the mental institution, "the empire of healing" can turn into "an empire of destruction just as the empire of Western civilization enabled racism, economic exploitation, and cultural devastation" (Brydon 1998, 93) in the wrong hands. Thus, Findley demonstrates to his readers how systems can easily become corrupt, and the fact that the story is set in a real Canadian city only reinforces this connection to real life.

Lilah acts as a filter through which space is constructed throughout the narrative. She relocates intertextual characters within the diegetic universe, thus altering familiar everyday objects through what McHale calls "transworld migration", which means that "Entities can change their ontological status in the course of history, in effect migrating from one ontological realm or level to another (McHale 1987, 36). One suggestive scene involves Lilah glimpsing Kurtz in a grocery store: "She thought of Kurtz as being so utterly a creature of fiction—a paper man without human needs—that it was a shock to see him enter a grocery store. He was going to buy food, as she just had" (1993, 109). Kurtz's disruptive presence distorts the familiar, turning even a place as mundane as a supermarket into an eerie setting.

The city of Toronto has an uncanny, Gothic quality that is evident even from an architectural perspective. The buildings also reflect the morally corrupt society that inhabits them, morphing into a symbolic landscape of depravity. One suggestive passage shows how monstrous the old and new buildings are, and how their qualities emphasise their uncanny nature:

> *The buildings are so damned ugly*, he said, *you miss them for the charm of their deformation*. This was not true of the newer buildings: the Library and the Parkin Institute. These were monstrosities of another kind altogether—flat- slabbed paste-ups of glass and concrete that had passed for architecture in the deadly years when the whole world sucked its thumb, eyes closed in self-satisfaction" (1993, 148).

This glimpse of the architectural uncanny, presented from Marlow's perspective, is a significant spatial indicator of decay.

Station Eleven, on a different note, presents a distinct perspective on the urban landscape. Although both novels share similarities, such as depicting a society ravaged by a pandemic, *Station Eleven* incorporates the uncanny in a different manner. The novel is more grounded in reality as it echoes real-life pandemics[2] and explores, in a speculative vein, the prospect of a global crisis. The novel alternates between two timelines: the present-day journey of survivors through a post-apocalyptic, pandemic-ravaged landscape, and a past that contains easily recognisable elements for the readers. This temporal layering creates a spatial vision that encompasses the world as we know it, the world as it was before the Georgia Flu, and the post-pandemic dystopian landscape. In this way, Mandel juxtaposes two versions of the urban environment, enabling readers to see how a global disaster can alter the ordinary.

The story of *Station Eleven* begins at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto. Arthur Leander is on stage, performing Act 4 of *King Lear*, when he suddenly suffers a fatal heart attack in front of a bewildered audience. His collapse can anticipate the collapse of civilization and the old order. Here, Elgin Theatre clearly grounds the narrative in the Canadian urban environment, acting as an anchoring reference point. At the same time, the theatre hints at the underlying interest in ontological matters as the stage that suspends norms and brings together different ontological realms. As a liminal threshold where the ontological levels of actors and audience converge, the stage is the perfect metaphor for the intersection of different levels of reality.

The stage is also a transitory space, which is another example of foreshadowing. Such spaces will come to replace cities and other modern built environments in the aftermath of the pandemic. An episode that draws attention to the uncanny nature of the stage reveals how similar it is to airport terminals and other transitory spaces: "It was too transitory, all those doorways and dark spaces between wings, the missing ceiling. It was more like a terminal, he thought, a train station or an airport, everyone passing quickly through" (2014, 5).

Gadpaille suggests that a deserted airport terminal becomes a "symbolic hub for survivors" (2023, 23) in the aftermath of the pandemic. Therefore, comparing the stage to an airport terminal demonstrates the cultural significance of such venues for a local community. Throughout the novel, key urban spaces such as theatres, parks, bars and airports are given new meaning within the post-apocalyptic framework. More specifically, twenty years after the pandemic, the focus is on the Travelling Symphony, a group of survivors who wander the Earth performing songs and Shakespearean theatre:

[2] See Michelle Gadpaille's excellent study on *Pandemic, Prophecy, and Politics in Mary Shelley and Emily St. John Mandel* (2023), in which the author shows how Mandel's narrative builds on previous pandemics, such as Spanish influenza and more recently, Covid (Gadpaille 2023, 20).

> The Traveling Symphony moved between the settlements of the changed world and had been doing so since five years after the collapse, when the conductor had gathered a few of her friends from their military orchestra, left the air base where they'd been living, and set out into the unknown landscape (2014, 37).

The perspective of these survivors is crucial in showing readers the devastation caused by a pandemic and how it can transform the urban landscape into an eerie sight.

The symbolic role of the city becomes even more significant after the onset of the Georgia Flu. The silent and deserted city becomes a powerful visual symbol for the post-pandemic reality: "Toronto was falling silent. Every morning the quiet was deeper, the perpetual hum of the city fading away" (2014, 177). In this context, silence marks both the absence of humans and the desolation left behind by the epidemic. Toronto, a bustling Canadian metropolis, becomes an eerie ghost town. As the most iconic Canadian city, it is the epitome of emptiness:

> There was a clear morning some days later when he looked up and saw Toronto on the far side of the lake, ghostly with distance. A thin blue spire piercing the sky, glass city. From this distance it looked like something from a fairy tale (2014, 193).

Overall, the novel contains many descriptive passages that build the atmosphere and convey the impact of the pandemic. The extensive descriptive passages about the city emphasise the importance of the urban setting, and the detailed descriptions of physical spaces provide a solid foundation for the novels. These passages anticipate the looming doom and have a foretelling function. For example, the park appears transformed by the darkness: "It had been rendered foreign by the storm, all snow and shadows, black silhouettes of trees, the underwater shine of a glass greenhouse dome" (2014, 11). Another significant episode reflects on how the absence of electric lights can lead to uncanny perceptions of the city:

> There was no movement on the plaza or on the street, or on the distant expressway. A smell of smoke in the air, with a chemical tinge that spoke of burning offices and house fires. But most striking was the absolute absence of electric light. Once, in his early twenties, he'd been walking up Yonge Street around eleven p.m. and every light on the street had blinked out. For an instant the city had vanished around him, and then the lights were back so quickly that it was like a hallucination, everyone on the street asking their companions if they'd seen it too—"Was it just me?"—and at the time he'd been chilled by the suggestion of a dark city. It was as frightening as he would have imagined (2014, 190).

At the same time, streetlights and other urban amenities can serve as lasting beacons of hope: "If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain?" (2014, 332) In this case, the persistence of these seemingly ordinary objects, integral to cities, has immense power because they embody humanity's essence.

The pandemic also reshaped borders, turning the local community into a universal group of survivors and vice versa, explicitly voiced by one of the characters: "The world's become so local, hasn't it?" (2014, 108) and "Towns change" (2014, 55). As Gadpaille argues, the pandemic destroys "the notion of home or national belonging" (25) and collapses national boundaries. The post-apocalyptic reality is, in fact, an uncanny site that exposes the fragility of constructed social systems. At the same time, the world turned into smaller communities that carry on the hope of humanity's literal and spiritual survival:

> Civilization in Year Twenty was an archipelago of small towns. These towns had fought off ferals, buried their neighbors, lived and died and suffered together in the blood-drenched years just after the collapse, survived against unspeakable odds and then only by holding together into the calm (2014, 48).

Station Eleven also emphasises the crucial role of community in shaping a city. People are at the heart of the urban setting, and the silent city serves as an eerie reminder of post-pandemic conditions:

> On silent afternoons in his brother's apartment, Jeevan found himself thinking about how human the city is, how human everything is. We bemoaned the impersonality of the modern world, but that was a lie, it seemed to him; it had never been impersonal at all. There had always been a massive, delicate infrastructure of people, all of them working unnoticed around us, and when people stop going to work, the entire operation grinds to a halt. No one delivers fuel to the gas stations or the airports. Cars are stranded. Airplanes cannot fly. Trucks remain at their points of origin. Food never reaches the cities; grocery stores close. Businesses are locked and then looted. No one comes to work at the power plants or the substations, no one removes fallen trees from electrical lines" (2014, 178).

Mandel sheds light on the aftermath of the pandemic, reminding readers that modern cities, though seemingly impersonal, are full of life and personality, thanks to the people who populate them, in beautifully written, highly poetic prose.

Overall, *Headhunter* and *Station Eleven* are groundbreaking in their inclusion of political realities, such as the mental health stigma and pandemics, in their plots. They also use the urban setting not merely as a backdrop, but as a powerful visual representation of the uncanny. A useful phrase for understanding the complex relationship between imagined and real places was coined by Westphal, who refers to "*heterotopic interference*" (2007, 104) when talking about impossible places in fiction. When such interference happens within a narrative, "the connection between reality and fiction becomes precarious. The referent becomes a springboard from which the fiction launches itself. One might see the referent and its representation entering into an impossible relationship" (2007, 104).

Including familiar issues alongside the uncanny Canadian environment is key to connecting with readers and prompting them to reconsider the familiar. As Atwood writes in her groundbreaking *Survival*, "it's at points like these—when literature names situations we can recognize—that writer and reader connect in an area we call real life: it's *our* situation that's being talked about" (1972, 241). This idea is echoed by Robert T. Tally Jr, who writes that

fantastic literature is valuable "for thinking about the real spaces of the world" (2013, 147). He also mentions that by including these extraordinary elements, these authors create a mirror of our own "world that is strangely familiar and utterly novel" (Tally 2013, 150). So, these texts can be read as fictional explorations of anxieties and real-world issues. This helps us to better grasp our own reality and consider the potential ramifications of our actions.

Ontological Liminality and Heterotopia

An enduring concept in literary theory, the term *heterotopia* was coined by Foucault to describe spaces that "are outside of all spaces, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (1967, 1-2). More specifically, the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia encompasses sites that simultaneously represent and contest other spaces (Foucault 1967, 1).

Foucault provides the example of the cemetery, which is a space that exists within society, but whose function has changed over time. More specifically, the cemetery is no longer just a sacred space located at the heart of urban dwellings; it has become "the other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place" (1967, 6). This cultural shift in how communities relate to cemeteries lies at the heart of the approach to cemeteries as heterotopias. Foucault also establishes six principles of heterotopias, of which number three is of special interest for this paper. More specifically, Foucault writes, "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (1967, 6). As such, literary space becomes the ground for superimposing radically different spatial layers, which problematizes the construction of space, and reveals new ways of seeing and understanding space, and by extension, ontological matters.

The Canadian environment teems with the potential for layering seemingly incompatible worlds, and Toronto appears as the archetypal heterotopia in both novels. Both novels depict the transformation of an ordinary city into a dystopian, pandemic-stricken landscape. This tendency towards heterotopic transformation is particularly evident in *Headhunter*, where Findley juxtaposes literary spaces with elements from other texts, resulting in ontological hybridity. Findley's text is "Radically discontinuous and inconsistent, it juxtaposes worlds of incompatible structure" (McHale 2004, 44). The Toronto from the novel is the locus of spatial tension as it juxtaposes the fictional reality of the characters while also being invaded by intertextual references, becoming a metafictional and ontological oddity. In other words, the Canadian city appears heterotopic because the novel reorganizes Toronto into a metafictional instrument. Worth mentioning in connection with *Headhunter* especially the strategy of interpolation, which "involves introducing an alien space *within* a familiar space" (McHale 2004, 46). More specifically, Findley integrates intertextual characters into the narrative which also contains real world places that can be found on a map: Toronto. Toronto becomes an ontologically pluralised setting through the juxtaposition of incompatible ontological layers: the fictional world and the many intertextual intrusions. This can be linked to McHale's ideas on transworld identities. He suggests that "the presence in a fictional world of a character who is transworld-identical with a real-world figure sends shock-waves throughout that world's ontological structure" (McHale 2004, 85).

Mandel also shows a preoccupation with heterotopic spaces, but her approach differs from Findley's. Mandel focuses on juxtaposing temporal layers within the same spatial setting and is interested in counter-sites that defy both geographical and temporal boundaries. At

the same time, the novel shows how the pandemic leads to a radically different future, where the past gains different meaning for different characters:

> Some towns, as I was saying, some towns are like this one, where they want to talk about what happened, about the past. Other towns, discussion of the past is discouraged. We went to a place once where the children didn't know the world had ever been different, although you'd think all the rusted-out automobiles and telephones wires would give them a clue. Some towns are easier to visit than others (2014, 115).

Other heterotopic sites in *Station Eleven* include the stage, the airport, the Museum of Civilization, all alternate versions of the actual world where identities are negotiated, realities overlap and timelines intermingle. The transitional sites appear as responses to the crisis brought on by the Georgia Flu and they disrupt the structures that governed societies, reshaping entire communities and spatial formations. Here, Walter Benjamin's angel of history is a useful metaphor for exploring how artefacts and objects can take on new meanings when they are stripped of their original significance. Put simply, the metaphor depicts an angel confronting the ruins of the past while being propelled into the future by progress **(**Benjamin 1968, 257-258). *Station Eleven* is full of ruins and remnants of the past, which it references frequently. For example, the narrator lists items that are no longer available, such as everyday devices that twenty-first-century readers take for granted:

> No more cities. No more films, except rarely, except with a generator drowning out half the dialogue, and only then for the first little while until the fuel for the generators ran out, because automobile gas goes stale after two or three years. Aviation gas lasts longer, but it was difficult to come by. No more screens shining in the half-light as people raise their phones above the crowd to take photographs of concert stages. No more concert stages lit by candy-colored halogens, no more electronica, punk, electric guitars (2014, 31).

These material losses are not just reminders of the past and what was lost; they are also a source of nostalgia and power that will motivate survivors to move on and build flawed yet hopeful communities. At the same time, as Gadpaille writes, these are all "a tour of Canada's first-world comforts, of the idealized image of success in urban Toronto" (2023, 22), objects that consumerist societies appreciate, but in the novel they gain a deeper meaning. Objects and even the city itself form part of the collective memory, meaning that the novel is also an attempt to rebuild the past world and preserve a moment in time that has been destroyed. Reading the novel is therefore an exercise in memory. Readers explore the ruins of a civilisation whose spatial and cultural logic is familiar to them and to some of the characters. Consequently, the survivors, and implicitly the reader, are granted a unique spatial authority.

Fisher connects the uncanny with ontological estrangement through the term of weirdness, which he describes as a feeling of "fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience" (2016, 8). The weird emerges as a useful concept for reading narratives using the lens of affect theory. Fisher argues that Freud's unheimlich or the uncanny "is about the strange *within* the familiar, the strangely familiar,

the familiar as strange — about the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself" (2016, 10), while the weird "allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside" (2016, 10). The weird is associated with the montage, "the conjoining of *two or more things which do not belong together"* (Fisher 2016, 11). Fisher further argues that "weird is a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of *wrongness:* a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here" (2016, 15). This ontological wrongness is particularly evident in *Headhunter,* where the intertextual figures seem out of place. But this is also applicable to *Station Eleven*, especially in connection to the objects of the past, which seem wrong in the post-apocalyptic setting.

Using McHale's theories on postmodernism, Fisher also employs the term weird to refer to "confusions of ontological level" (2016, 45). This "estrangement of realism" (Fisher 2016, 48) and ontological instability is the consequence of the violation of ontological borders. One means to achieve this ontological estrangement is what McHale calls "transworld identity" (2004, 16-17), which occurs when characters from different ontological levels intermingle. To further complicate the matter, in *Headhunter*, Findley resorts to "a case of intertextual boundary-violation" (McHale 2004, 17) in which "fragments of a number of possible orders have been gathered together" (McHale 2004, 18). In this context, "entities can pass back and forth across the semipermeable membrane between two texts, as well as between the real world and the world of fiction." (McHale 2004, 36). This is especially relevant for *Headhunter*, where characters from other fictional works invade the literary space and push the limits of narrative play.

These ontological violations lead to defamiliarization, which is a prominent aspect in both novels. As Whitcombe suggests, one way to achieve spatial defamiliarization is through narrative unreliability (2020, 30). In *Headhunter*, this is evident right from the beginning. Is Toronto's infiltration by Kurtz just a hallucination? Did the delusional Lilah invent the entire plot? Nothing that the reader discovers can rule out the possibility that the entire narrative takes place in Lilah's schizophrenic mind. The world constructed in *Headhunter* is problematic, to say the least. The overlapping of several ontological layers raises a multitude of epistemological questions, such as what is real, and issues related to reliability. It also delves into the realm of metafiction, exploring the boundaries of writing. Findley masterfully maintains narrative ambiguity, leaving readers to guess whether the story really happened or if Lilah simply hallucinated the entire plot. Furthermore, unreliability contributes to engagement by allowing the reader to interpret the story in various ways and the whole novel becomes "a heterotopian intertextual zone" (McHale 2004, 57).

Station Eleven resorts to a different type of unreliability, one that is constructed on temporal disjunctions and embeds different perspectives in the novel, showing how the same event—in this case, the pandemic—is experienced differently by different characters, urging the readers to reflect whether coherent account of events is achievable. Furthermore, memory becomes central in constructing the narrative, even though memory can be easily altered and it can appear incomplete. For example, Arthur Leander's life is reconstructed through the stories that the characters share about him. This means that he becomes a figment of other people's memories and stories.

Toronto becomes a liminal space, which is symbolic of Canada as a marginal zone that sits on the limit of the continent, which has been explored at length by Hutcheon in her seminal

Canadian Postmodernism, in which she writes on the peripheral in postmodern writing, where she suggests that "the centre and the periphery do not simply change place. Nor is the margin conceived of only a place of transgression. The periphery is also the frontier, the place of possibility" (Hutcheon, 1988, 3). Spatial defamiliarization is not merely an ontological issue but becomes a means to contest this condition while also interrogating it. The urban space becomes in both novels a borderland, where the real and the fantastic coexist so the space "belongs neither here nor there" (Darias-Beautell 1996, 316).

As Henighan explains in regard to *Headhunter*, "The Toronto of the near future in which the story unfolds is both strange and familiar" (2002, 45). This idea captures the city's quintessential ontological ambiguity and sheds light on the construction of the urban setting as a dual space in terms of ontological representation. Although Toronto is firmly grounded in Canadian geography in both novels and is easily recognizable to the readers, it turns alien and altered as the plot advances. This prompts reflection on the symbolic potential of space. In other words, the fictional worlds depicted are governed by norms that defy real-world logic, prompting us to reconsider how space is represented. Heterotopia and ontological estrangement are important frameworks for better understanding the novels and the creation of these hybrid literary geographies are relevant for taking the Canadian city into new conceptual territories. At the same time, these authors create post-pandemic spaces that facilitate metafictional experimentation and narrative play, while also addressing profoundly human issues.

Conclusions

Reading *Headhunter* and *Station Eleven* as narrative experiments in spatial construction reveals their similarities in terms of literary geography, while also highlighting their contrasting approaches. In terms of thematic interest and narrative experimentation, *Headhunter* and *Station Eleven* offer new and interesting takes on traditional storytelling techniques while dealing with serious themes. Essentially, both novels shed light on the enduring interest in conceptualising notions of urban environments within the Canadian literary tradition. In other words, both texts are preoccupied with urban spaces and their symbolic potential. In both novels, the city of Toronto is a heterotopic and uncanny space where past and present coexist, and is also a place haunted by literary ghosts, where time and intertextual elements converge.

Both novels, at their core, depict a ravaged society in the aftermath of a pandemic; however, their approach is different. While Findley's novel delves into the darker aspects of the human experience, *Station Eleven* takes a more optimistic approach, celebrating the power of art and community. More specifically, *Headhunter* shows the readers a Toronto ravaged by disease and invaded by an intertextual villain bent on violence and destruction. In contrast, *Station Eleven* is more focused on the healing potential of art and community, even in a dystopian context. Although the pandemic has taken away the comforts of a modern urban lifestyle, the group of survivors carve out their own space within the dystopian environment, showing that there is still hope if the community works together and art is preserved. Mandel transform ordinary spaces, such as the airport or a bar, into stations that give their characters' lives' meaning, so these places become genuine beacons of hope and communal gathering. Although the lost home can never be regained, the novel demonstrates that the concept of home can have multiple meanings and that hope is never irretrievably lost. This idea is

reinforced by sentences such as, "Outside, the world was ending and the snow continued to fall" (2014, 174), which imply that there is continuity.

At the same time, the narratives reveal alternative ways of experiencing and understanding space, challenging and expanding spatial notions in the process. Essentially, these authors reposition Canadian spaces — more specifically, the city of Toronto — to explore cultural anxieties and personal crises. Thus, engagement with these spaces becomes a literary medium through which diverse issues such as mental illness and pandemics can be explored, proving that literary geographies can have universal relevance. The authors use spatial defamiliarisation, juxtaposition, and interpolation as key narrative strategies to show how easily spatial relations can shift, while also targeting underlying Canadian sociopolitical issues and modern anxieties.

Both novels seem to suggest that space is never neutral. In Findley's work, space is constructed as a complex site of contrasting elements, where the past and present, the intertextual and the textual coexist. Canadian spaces are imbued with intertextual and historical ghosts, creating a complex narrative of corruption and evil. Space becomes a means of problematising deeply human issues and serves a metafictional function. Toronto intertwines real-life elements and historical references with characters from other texts to create a transgressive mishmash. These ontological displacements are crucial for creating a text that warns readers about the disastrous consequences of abusing power and marginalising difference. Space also expands our understanding of reality and projects social evil through a dystopian framework.

Mandel's approach to exploring Canadian space is also uncanny and heterotopic at its core. She extrapolates from past and present realities throughout the novel. The Georgia Flu has altered these spaces, and Mandel demonstrates how seemingly ordinary urban establishments, such as airport terminals or bars, can facilitate navigation of the new, post-pandemic reality. The novel's spatial dimension is where past and present meet, and this appears to be the main temporal contradiction. While her heterotopic spaces result from the pandemic, for Mandel, these liminal zones are spaces of opportunity where new meanings are created, identities renewed, and hope found.

Overall, the Canadian space has multiple functions: it is a place where the boundaries between reason and madness, reality and fantasy are renegotiated, and where personal and cultural fears are projected. In a more general sense, these texts explore the concept of space, time, human connection, reality and, ultimately, writing. Thus, the Canadian environment enables a variety of topics of interest to contemporary sensibilities to be examined, ranging from madness to abuse of power. The novels invite readers into the narrative space and to confront their own fears, becoming a powerful lens for personal reflection.

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