

# Non-Human Perception of Aesthetics and the Phenomenon of Overview Effect in Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*

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Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* stages a representation of aesthetic perception under posthuman, post-terrestrial, and post-anthropocentric conditions of outer space. The experiences represented in *Orbital* are read alongside the cognitive and non-human sensorial phenomenon known as the overview effect. By placing these experiential shifts alongside their literary representation, this paper examines how spaceflight affects and dismantles the anthropocentric perception of aesthetics. Arguing that the overview effect, as represented in *Orbital* represents a posthuman perception of aesthetics and that the suggested concept of the postbody conceptualises these shifting forms of subjective aesthetic experience, emerging from the convergence of shifting perception in non-human spaces. | *Keywords:* Post-terrestrial, Post-anthropocentrism, Non-human Sensorial Perception, Overview Effect, Perception of Aesthetics, Postbody

When we're on that planet we look up and think heaven is elsewhere, but here is what the astronauts and cosmonauts sometimes think: maybe all of us born to it have already died and are in an afterlife. If we must go to an improbable, hard-to-believe-in-place when we die, that glassy, distant orb with its beautiful lonely light shows could well be it. (Harvey, 2023, p. 9)

## 1. Introduction

The perception of aesthetics, when subjected to the typical discourses, is seen through a perpetually shifting yet anthropocentric perception, whereby it grounds and centres itself in and around an anthropocentric and terrestrial unit, i.e. the Earth, and wherein the human appreciation of aesthetics, whether beauty or awe, is governed by the physical and the comprehensible nature.

Ascertaining a dislocation of the human subject from the Earth, that is through spaceflight, the human subject encounters a post-terrestrial space and perceives a post-anthropocentric shift in aesthetic perception rooted in awe and sublimity in observing the Earth from outer space. The aesthetic perception of deep space and the Earth from orbit becomes incomprehensible to the human subject and a subject of awe, or at least critical of their anthropocentric apprehensions. Such dislocation of identities is effected alongside diasporic encounters expressing a transnational realisation of the earthly, anthropocentric limits in an unlimited space, as against exilic nationalism on the Earth. These shifting aesthetic perceptions break the anthropocentric perception of aesthetics, influencing and extending it to post-terrestrial scenarios. *Orbital* provides a sensitive literary approach to these changes in identity and experiences shaping the posthuman perception of experience, bridging the psychological phenomenon of overview effect. Furthermore, dislocating the anthropocentric ideals of socio-cultural, political, and human superiority through a transcendent and natural observation of the Earth, rather than as an object of anthropocentric projection.

Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* presents a contemplative investigation of existence, disturbance, and metamorphosis, embedding its philosophical examination within the shifting contours of posthuman development. The narrative is delineated over a span of twenty-four hours, organised into sixteen ninety-minute cycles, reflecting the experiences of six astronauts and cosmonauts from Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States while aboard the International Space Station. Within these repetitive patterns of everyday tasks, Harvey incorporates instances of deeper contemplation regarding humanity, divinity, ontology, and the fragility of existence. These moments of introspection predominantly arise through a psychological phenomenon termed by Frank White as the overview effect, denoting a cognitive and emotional experience upon the observation of the Earth. As White explains, "the experience of seeing the Earth from space [...] results in a profound change in awareness," producing a perception of the "planet as a unified whole" challenging the more demarcated terrestrial understanding of the Earth (White, 1987, pp. 120–121). *Orbital*, therefore, operates this shifting awareness as both a disruption of anthropocentric aesthetics and ethics in favour of posthuman awareness.

Addressing the theoretical framework for the conceptual foundation of this paper, which aims to establish that posthuman conditions lead to posthuman perceptions and beyond the anthropocentric models of understanding and attributing meaning within humanist binaries, how aesthetics operate in a world/space which is increasingly away from human-mediated surroundings and are aided by technology. Braidotti's posthuman subject operates within an "eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 49). The posthuman subjects in *Orbital*, i.e., the astronauts and the cosmonauts are relational subjects, related to both their perception of the Earth from the ground and from orbit. This relationality shifts or rather is constituted

by multiplicity, as it moves beyond a fixed perception of aesthetics of the Earth from the ground towards that observed from outer space. From outer space, this perception becomes unrepresentable and puts them in awe and addresses a profound change in awareness due to the realisation of the Earth's size, the Earth's unitary view as compared to the version with international boundaries taken for granted through a terrestrial perception. Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1979, p. 78), in the context of modern art, says that the unrepresentable exists, "to make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible" addressing a reaction to the sublimity of a subject, which in this case is the Earth itself. The Earth can be hypothesised as 'presentable', when observed terrestrially, and within the bounds of human imagination and curiosity, whereas the Earth, when observed from the perception of the astronauts and cosmonauts in *Orbital*, the demarcated version of the planet breaks for a more unitary version of the planet, often questioning the socio-political divide. Frank White states in accordance with the influence of this 'unrepresentable' in relation to the overview effect that "personal identity is the foundation of an individual's psychology and that the realisation that your identity is with the whole planet is significant" (White, 1987, p. 121).

The concept of the postbody arises from the difference in aesthetic perception in different spaces. A postbody is theorised not as a posthuman subject in itself but as an embodied condition that carries the aesthetic perception of an anthropocentric Earth as a memory or as a nostalgia to a post-terrestrial and post-anthropocentric setting, and actively goes through changes due to differing aesthetic observations. Braidotti's posthuman subject articulates a subjectivity beyond humanist frameworks, where the postbody is a situational and perceptual state produced by the non-terrestrial environment and the realisation of the Earth as a unit, embodying the overview effect. A postbody thus relates to posthuman experience and is the embodiment of such experiences, which clash with anthropocentric ideals and actively change them during the realisation of the overview effect.

## 2. Decentering Perspectives

Overview effect, therefore, becomes a portal for posthuman aesthetics, shifting the apprehension of beauty, scale, and the sublime, contributing not only in aesthetic shifts but conscious shifts also, which question the psychology of the individual and rather addresses the planet as a whole. White asserts that "returning space travelers will begin to exert transformational influences on Earth's society, and that space-based civilisations will operate out of fundamentally different paradigms" (White, 1987, p. 121). This assertion grounds itself in posthuman aesthetics, as aesthetics in an anthropocentric Earth could be observed as rather ignorant to the situation of the Earth as a unified whole, ignoring the consequences of each other's actions whereas posthuman aesthetics and the postbody, which embodies this realisation visualises the Earth in a decentred and different perspective.

In *Orbital*, such vastness is rendered through sequences that dissolve geography into abstraction: “The rich purplish-green of the vast Nile Delta. Brown becomes peach becomes plum; Africa beneath them in its abstract batik. The Nile is a spillage of royal-blue ink” (Harvey, 2023, p. 83). What was once topography becomes chromatic flow: Earth is no longer a map but a moving palette. From this vantage, the astronauts do not experience the conventional sublime of mastery or conquest; rather, they confront dispossession. The scale of the planet and its fragility evoke Jean-François Lyotard’s articulation of the ‘unpresentable’, where the anthropocentric conception of bordered nations and divided people vanish or are rendered illogical due to the vast and continued observation of the Earth. Harvey’s prose translates this into aesthetic form: “Blue becomes mauve, indigo becomes black, and night-time downs southern Africa in one” (Harvey, 2023, p. 91). The human gaze, once fixed and territorial, dissolves into gradients of colour, motion, and becoming. Estranged from gravity and intermediated by technology, Harvey’s astronauts inhabit a posthuman condition where the body is deterritorialised, no longer confined to Earth’s stability. Microgravity renders embodiment fluid; movement, thought, and even rest adapt to new phenomenologies. As Chie’s (Harvey, 2023, p. 91) list reminds: “Forgetfulness, Questions, Church bells that ring every quarter-hour, Non-opening windows, Lying awake, Blocked noses [...]”, the minutiae of life in orbit manifest as fragments of displacement, sensory confusion, and reconfigured corporeality. These details demonstrate how the postbody negotiates between mechanical mediation and organic adaptation. The overview effect complements this estrangement: perception expands beyond the human sensorium into a distributed network of awareness, a planetary consciousness where seeing becomes relational – between human, technology, and cosmos alike.

Yet Harvey resists romantic transcendence. The aesthetic being of *Orbital* lies not in an escape from the human but in its reorganisation within technological and cosmological matrices. The overview effect becomes a hinge between awe and mourning – a condition where wonder is tempered by awareness of fragility. The sight of the planet as ‘a spillage of royal-blue ink’ or ‘a paint-splattered’ surface evokes beauty inseparable from its ephemerality. Temporality itself becomes altered, Earthly rhythms of day and night dissolve into orbital cycles, and human time yields to cosmic scale. The overview effect, therefore, is not merely a vision of Earth but a revelation of temporality’s contingency; it produces an aesthetic experience that destabilises both scale and duration, replacing mastery with relational finitude. Harvey’s reflections on environmental decay and existential finitude align with the ecological consciousness often reported by astronauts who return to Earth with a renewed awareness of the Earth as a system without borders and that the difference is created with a physical experience of this reality (White, 1987, p. 121). Early astronaut reflections already reveal how orbital vision alters aesthetic perception by reframing Earth as both beautiful and vulnerable. Following his historic spaceflight, Yuri Gagarin remarked, “Circling the Earth in my orbital spaceship, I marvelled at the beauty of our

planet,” urging humanity to “safeguard and enhance this beauty, and not destroy it” (Gagarin, 2016). Such statements frame the overview effect as an ethical and aesthetic awakening grounded in visual encounter rather than abstract reflection. Subsequent astronaut testimonies reinforce this emphasis on fragility and affective perception. Michael Collins, reflecting on his experience during the Apollo 11 mission, described Earth as projecting “an air of fragility,” characterising it as “tiny, shiny, beautiful, home, and fragile” (Collins, 2019). Here, aesthetic appreciation is inseparable from vulnerability, as perception shifts from territorial recognition to relational awareness. More recent accounts continue to stress the sensorial and emotional intensity of orbital vision. Describing his experience of viewing Earth from space, William Shatner emphasised the contrast between the planet’s protective atmosphere and the surrounding void, likening the passage through the blue atmospheric layer to a sudden exposure to “ugly blackness” and existential uncertainty. For Shatner, Earth appeared simultaneously as “mother,” “comfort,” and a fragile refuge suspended against cosmic darkness, rendering the experience “unbelievable” in its emotional force (Shatner, 2021). The overview effect operates as both phenomenological and aesthetic rupture: perception surpasses comprehension, and the visible gives way to affective understanding.

The overview effect thus yields as an aesthetic of immanence rather than transcendence: a somatic understanding of coexistence, interdependence, and fragility that forms the basis of posthuman aesthetics. The aesthetic of immanence, that is of being present and inherent, emerges from the perceptive observation of the Earth from outer space as a unified whole without demarcations. The Overview effect does not elevate the postbody beyond bodily embodiment or worldly entanglement but rather provides an alternate sense of aesthetic experience situated within vulnerability, dependence, and proximity to other people. Where the postbody, or in the case of *Orbital*, the astronauts and cosmonauts experience themselves as being much closer to the inhabitants of the Earth as fellow humans and not rather as citizens of specific nations or those belonging to varying ideologies. One such instance in *Orbital* is the lists created by Chie, the Japanese astronaut who lists insignificant items of non-scientific purposes, as “forgetfulness, questions, church bells that ring every quarter-hour, non-opening windows, lying awake, blocked noses, hair in ducts and filters, fire alarm tests, powerlessness, a fly in the eye” (Harvey, 2023, p. 91). Such lists are relatable to most (if not every) human being, regardless of their nationality or other categorisations.

Seen thus, *Orbital* becomes a literary exploration of the aesthetic implications of the overview effect. Through *Orbital*’s observation of shifting geographies and altered temporalities, Harvey dramatises how space travel reconstitutes the senses, inaugurating a posthuman aesthetic regime that supplants anthropocentric hierarchies. The astronauts’ gradual transformation from spectators to participants in the planetary continuum embodies an aesthetic consciousness released into the unrepresentable scope of the cosmos.

Harvey's vivid geography, where continents become hues, cities become constellations, and human time becomes a cosmic instant, renders visible the origin of posthuman aesthetics: an observation and perception freed from gravity and as experienced by the postbody.

### 3. Rupture of Aesthetics

As a direct outcome of the dislocation of human subjectivity in the boundless, alien landscapes of post-terrestrial space, the Overview effect comes to serve as the primary mechanism whereby the astronaut's matrices of perception and cognition are greatly transformed and restructured. In her work, Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* convincingly argues that the aesthetic experience that is being encountered in the realm of space does not consist in a dilation or extension of earthly sensibilities and vantage points but consists in a wholly new mode of perception. It disrupts older anthropocentric assumptions and maintains a posthuman sensibility, redefining our experience of being. White speaks of the overview effect as a profound experience of the Earth's aesthetic gazing or 'earthgazing' as implying a "oneness in relationship to a vast universe" (White, 1987, p. 123). In *Orbital*, that sublime effect emerging from 'earthgazing' serves not merely as a primary cognitive shift but as a momentous aesthetic occurrence, radically rethinking the astronaut's experience of scale, relationality, and vulnerability in the cosmos, as White addresses how astronauts speak of the Earth through the term 'spaceship Earth' (White, 1987, p. 124).

This perceptual and temporal reconfiguration is sustained throughout *Orbital* through Harvey's vivid spatial imagery. The astronauts' gaze upon Earth becomes a practice of relational witnessing: "Here is Cuba pink with morning. The sun bounces everywhere off the ocean's surface. The turquoise shallows of the Caribbean and the horizon conjuring the Sargasso Sea" (Harvey, 2023, p. 71). Such vision extends beyond territorial boundaries; geography dissolves into chromatic fluidity, where nations and continents blur into aesthetic continuums. When Harvey writes, "It's the black hole of the Pacific becoming a field of gold or French Polynesia dotted below, the islands like cell samples, the atolls opal lozenges" (Harvey, 2023, p. 72), she captures a posthuman reimagining of perception – one that turns the human gaze into a hybrid of scientific observation and poetic awe. The astronauts' perception becomes non-possessive, attuned to flux, fragility, and the relational play of light and matter. In this relational mode of seeing, Earth is no longer an object of dominion but an affective field – "the rich purplish-green of the vast Nile Delta [...] Africa beneath them in its abstract batik. The Nile is a spillage of royal-blue ink" (Harvey, 2023, p. 83). Through this aesthetic abstraction, *Orbital* transforms geography into relational perception, where beauty is inseparable from fragility. As day turns into night – "Blue becomes mauve becomes indigo becomes black, and night-time down southern Africa in one" (Harvey, 2023, p. 91) – Harvey's prose foregrounds the transience of human understanding in the face of cosmic immensity. The overview effect here functions as both perceptual revelation and ontological destabilisation. Harvey further deepens this sense of dislocation through Chie's list (Harvey,

2023, p. 91) – “Forgetfulness, Questions, Church bells that ring every quarter-hour, Non-opening windows, Lying awake, Blocked noses, Hair in ducts and filters, Fire alarm tests, Powerlessness, A fly in the eye.” These fragmented notations embody the residual traces of human experience in an environment that suspends normal rhythms. They are catalogues of partial memory – small terrestrial ghosts haunting the body in orbit. The list functions as both mnemonic and melancholic, reflecting a nostalgia that ties the posthuman body to its lost gravity.

This relational understanding of perception, mediated by time and memory, closely aligns with Braidotti’s conception of the posthuman subject, which emphasises “an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 48). In Harvey’s novel, microgravity facilitates the becoming of this subject – the ‘postbody’ – a being whose gestures, sleep, thought, and affect are inseparable from the orbital environment. Temporality becomes embodied: the circadian cycles of the body merge with the rhythm of Earth’s rotation and the spacecraft’s path. Each movement, each gaze becomes a negotiation between human limitation and technological mediation. Consequently, the aesthetic rupture brought about by the overview effect is deeply intertwined with transformations of both time and body. In this condition, beauty, vulnerability, and ethical awareness emerge together, as astronauts perceive Earth’s fragility not through distance but through relational immersion.

Consequently, this constructs a posthuman aesthetic perception, which increasingly is anti-anthropocentric, moving away from terrestrial demarcations and constructed categorisations and instead focuses on a more unified observation of the Earth, both aesthetically and socio-politically. The posthuman aesthetic perception is further aided by a post-anthropocentric conception of time, which doesn’t concern itself with the organisation of time in a terrestrially grounded understanding but rather through a situational observation of time. This observation of time, aided by the aesthetic experience of the overview effect, creates a posthuman consciousness emerging through it.

#### 4. Overview Effect and Posthuman Aesthetics

Approaching the overview effect primarily as an aesthetic phenomenon rather than solely as a cognitive or psychological experience, we can understand that the observation of the Earth from outer space signals a sense of community, unity, and universal preservation. As mentioned earlier, astronauts and cosmonauts have continuously referred to the Earth as ‘spaceship Earth’, ‘fragile’, ‘refuge suspended across cosmic darkness’, ascertaining the posthuman observation of the physical and aesthetic unity of the planet in contrast to the anthropocentric constructed territorial demarcations. Furthermore, in *Orbital*, the planet has been aesthetically described through geographical terms and descriptions as changing colours with respect to sunlight from ‘brown’ to ‘peach’ to ‘plum’ and then ‘blue’ to ‘mauve’, ‘indigo’

to 'black' (Harvey, 2023, p. 83; White, 1987, p. 124; Gagarin, 2016; Shatner, 2021). The geographical indicators are also equated to a plethora of colours, as the Nile is described as being 'rich purplish green', and Africa as an 'abstract batik'. These observations of geographical locations are posthuman, as to observe this one needs the aid of spaceflight and the act of going to space, living, working, and observing, shifts the human relationship with technology. The aesthetic observation of the Earth and the experience of the overview effect are highly psychological, as they contest the rooted terrestrial anthropocentrism and influence the conscious understanding of the relationship between the planet, the human species as a community, and the individual. The overview effect emerges as an aesthetic condition produced by non-terrestrial vision, apart from being a psychological phenomenon, foregrounding planetary unity, vulnerability, and awareness of oneness.

For Harvey, this continuum is both represented through wonder and loss in the narrative of *Orbital*. The sight of the Earth is not just an aesthetic experience of the descriptive scenery, but also the disintegration of the aesthetic paradigm of anthropocentrism and Earth-bound humanism. The Earth is presented at one level as a focus of beauty and as a signifier of finitude. Lyotard's unrepresentable which speaks of "something that can be conceived but can neither be seen nor made visible" (Lyotard, 1979, p. 78) represents the postbody perception of the Earth with respect to outer space. The Earth has always been accepted to have been a suspended celestial body, yet the observation of the planet suspended brings about the emergence of the overview effect, which in turn has been represented literally in *Orbital*. Further, this encounter with the unrepresentability of the Earth brings a sublime experience, as defined by Lyotard to have been when the "imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept" (Lyotard, 1979, p. 78), where the concept of an Earth with terrestrial boundaries have been taken for granted, which is challenged by an aesthetic observation of the Earth from outer space, which is devoid of any such demarcations and have been instead aesthetically observed by the characters and represented in *Orbital* through the use of geographical markers as that of the continents, islands, rivers, deserts, etc. and the universal experiences of the human race (Lyotard, 1979, p. 78; Harvey, 2023, p. 83-91).

Therefore, Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* converts the overview effect from a simple cognitive and psychological phenomenon to a posthuman aesthetic experience, influencing the perception of observation of spacefaring humans. Through altered temporal experiences, non-terrestrial observation of the Earth, and embodied disorientation, the characters of *Orbital* experience a reconfigured perception that actively dismantles the demarcated anthropocentric aesthetic perception of the Earth in favour of a more relational, existentially aware, and posthuman aesthetic perception. The postbody registers this transformation in aesthetic perception somatically, grounding aesthetic experience in immanence of the Earth's unified observation rather than in bodily transcendence. Posthuman aesthetics thus

emerges as a mode of perception actively shaped by postbody experiences, dismantling the anthropocentric perception of aesthetic beauty or the sublime.

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