Towards Multisensory Aesthetics:

Mundane Materiality in Richard Powers'

Plowing the Dark and *The Overstory*

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Abstract   This paper explores the multisensory aesthetics and mundane materiality in Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark* and *The Overstory*, emphasizing their role in challenging anthropocentric and ocularcentric cultural narratives. It examines how Powers' novels employ synesthetic descriptions to critique Cartesian dualism and technoliberalism, presenting the body as inseparable from its material and nonhuman environment. By intertwining virtual realities with ecological consciousness, the analysis highlights Powers' critique of the transcendence of physicality and his focus on embodied vulnerability. The study further investigates how *Plowing the Dark* contrasts technological escapism with the corporeality of human experience, while *The Overstory* employs magical realism to emphasize ecological interconnectedness and humility toward the natural world. Through these multisensory strategies, Powers reframes literature's potential to foster embodied awareness and posthuman creativity, offering new perspectives on environmental and technological debates.

Beyond Vision: Introducing the "Corporeal Bounds of Our Flesh"

Our societies are obsessed with our bodies.

(Grace 9)

Contemporary Western society views the body as a source of data, constantly monitored and optimized. This perspective stems from an epistemology that privileges sight over other senses, perpetuating ocularcentrism. Such a focus not only marginalizes other sensory experiences but also reinforces cultural prejudices, including those against femininity (cf. Devorah 305) and the nonhuman. This paper explores how anthropocentrism, the data-driven body, and visual dominance in Western culture necessitate a multisensory aesthetics. Anglo-American aesthetics have only recently started paying attention to "everyday aesthetics," as seen in the late twentieth-century (Saito). Despite this recent interest, Western culture continues to prioritize visual aesthetics. Vision remains the "noblest of the senses" (Jay 21), especially in a society increasingly governed by digital culture.

Beneath this veneer lies a deeper narrative—one that perpetuates Cartesian dualism and reinforces the supremacy of human reason over embodied experience. This Cartesian worldview posits the human self as detached and superior, capable of observing and controlling the body from a position of transcendence. Yet, such a perspective overlooks the agency and autonomy inherent in corporeal existence, reducing bodies to mere objects of manipulation. The belief that bodies are transparent, readable, and customizable also sustains ageism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination by promoting an ideal of the body as perfectible: healthy, young, and beautiful. The Cartesian worldview upholds an anthropocentric view where human creativity and technology dominate and shape the body, rather than recognizing the inherent agency and unpredictability of embodied existence.

Technoliberalism perpetuates precisely this perspective through popular media, such as TED talks. A central assumption that underlies this discourse is the concept of "sensation without mediation" (Pfister 190), as Damien Pfister illustrates in his analysis of Sergey Brin's "Why Google Glass?" This vision relies on ideals of transparency, the primacy of sight, and a telepathic form of communication that neglects other senses. It dismisses the materiality and complexity of bodies, where mediation occurs on multiple levels. Literary synesthesia, as a technique that blends the senses, challenges this vision by highlighting how bodies are dynamic, networked entities intertwined with their environment—both technological and natural. Mediation, then, is inescapable.

Technoliberalism is marked by its "largely celebratory rhetoric attached to Big Data, algorithms, and artificial intelligence" (Pfister and Yang 251). Closely tied to the rise of digital technologies, it fosters utopian aspirations of transcending the "flesh" by enhancing the body. However, an analysis of Richard Powers' contemporary fiction reveals that literary discourse resists this narrative. It does not

advocate for cybernetic spaces or the transcendence of physicality by isolating "consciousness" as a separate entity. Instead, the act of reading shifts the focus to the lived experiences of embodiment, mortality, and vulnerability, grounding narratives in the materiality of (non-)human existence.

Even technologies such as virtual reality are deeply grounded in materiality. Richard *Powers' Plowing the Dark* (2000) provides a compelling lens for examining the development of immersive digital worlds and their implications. While the novel predates contemporary artificial intelligence, its exploration of virtual reality enriches our understanding of current technological debates. Discussions around AI, for example, often emphasize questions of consciousness—such as weak versus strong AI, the Turing Test, or Searle's Chinese Room—while neglecting the materiality of bodies and their interaction with technology. Revisiting *Plowing the Dark* allows us to draw connections between earlier visions of technological immersion and today's ongoing discussions, underscoring the need to foreground materiality in these debates.

Furthermore, Powers' fiction has evolved to adopt more ecological perspectives, emphasizing nature in his recent novels such as *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021). This development may not be incidental, as even his early work in *Plowing the Dark* explored and questioned the boundaries between technology and nature. His writing plays with these binaries, a quality that becomes especially evident in the multisensory descriptions and the focus on mundane materiality.

By analyzing how Powers' fiction incorporates synesthetic descriptions, this paper aims to demonstrate the necessity of multisensory aesthetics. Such an approach enriches our engagement with literature and offers an alternative venue to critique anthropocentrism by returning attention to the nonhuman. Synesthesia "is a figure of speech in which linguistic expressions referring to different sensory modalities are combined" (Strik-Lievers). In Anglo-American context, it is usually associated with the 'art for art's sake movement' of mid-to-late Victorian Britain (Poueymirou 1).

However, the synesthetic aesthetic is not just some 'apolitical' literary gesture, as it extends beyond the privileged sense of sight. In this way, it challenges dominant cultural narratives that often privilege human exceptionalism and mastery over the natural world. This can also have implications for how we approach both environmental and technological issues, as it shifts the focus from an exclusively anthropocentric perspective to one that recognizes the significance and inseparability of (non)human life.

Literary Synesthesia in *Plowing the Dark*

Contemporary novels by authors like Richard Powers challenge the metaphor of the transparent body propagated by technoliberalism and reveal spaces of agency

within the monitored landscape. They employ the literary device of synesthesia as a narrative experiment that decenters the human by placing it in a rich environment. Despite appearing counterintuitive, they use synesthesia to provide access to the nonhuman, rather than to celebrate human genius.[1] Synesthesia acts as a form of relationality that displays contiguity between the human and the external world of objects, animals, and plants. Rather than focusing on the inner workings of the human mind, synesthetic descriptions are replete with sensory observations that shift the focus from a psychological view of the world to the body and its vulnerability.

The synesthetic aesthetic is an overlooked element in literary studies but holds great critical potential. Synesthesia is not just a trait of subjectivity, but also works as a method of connection, including the human and nonhuman realms. While Ian Bogost's notion of "alien phenomenology" emphasizes how human perception is shaped by encounters with the nonhuman, this paper extends that idea to argue that synesthesia reveals the ways in which human experience is fundamentally intertwined with the nonhuman. Rather than suggesting a hierarchical division of the senses, synesthetic blending demonstrates sensitivities and experiences that connect us to the nonhuman world. This perspective moves us beyond attempts to "comprehend" or "capture" the nonhuman in human terms, redirecting attention toward feeling with it—an embodied and relational awareness. Ursula Heise's concept of "multispecies justice" aligns with this shift, advocating for ethical frameworks that do not depend solely on human empathy but instead recognize our inherent entanglements with the nonhuman. In this sense, synesthesia offers an alternative to the ventriloquist impulse of representing nonhuman perspectives and instead fosters a shared, multisensory engagement with the world.

In *Plowing the Dark*, Richard Powers offers a compelling critique of the technoliberal rhetoric. The thematic investigation of Cartesian dualism resonates throughout the narrative, particularly in its portrayal of the division between hardware and software. This dichotomy, present both philosophically and materially, is ingeniously structured within the narrative framework, resembling a double helix. The narrative unfolds through "twin narratives" that complement each other (Harris 120). These storylines are further connected by eleven short chapters, forming what some critics describe as "weak bonds" (Kley 424).

One narrative thread follows virtual reality researchers striving to create demonstration rooms aimed at "defeat[ing] matter" (Powers 125). Meanwhile, the other introduces a half-Iranian English teacher who becomes a hostage of Islamic militants. These intertwined storylines, often described as "contrapuntal" (Ickstadt 13; Dewey 11), share not only a quest for a "great escape" (Powers 122) but also a focus on "world-making" (Löffler 92). While typically associated with the boundless creativity of the mind envisioning "infinite possibilities" (Ickstadt

32), this notion of "world-making" perpetuates an anthropocentric worldview the novel simultaneously interrogates.[2]

Cartesian dualism traditionally delineates between the immaterial mind (software) and the physical body (hardware), a schism that manifests in the novel's portrayal of the RL (*Realization Lab*) and the Cavern. Here, the RL appears to symbolize the tangible, corporeal realm, characterized by its industrial infrastructure and sensory richness, akin to the body in Cartesian philosophy. Conversely, the Cavern seems to embody the ethereal, virtual space of software, where consciousness seemingly transcends physical limitations, mirroring the realm of the mind. Yet, Powers also challenges "the absolute hierarchy of information/materiality" (Szadziewicz 101). A closer analysis of the novel reveals a complex interplay between the physical and the digital, inviting readers to contemplate the ways in which they are not separate.

While most critical readings focus on the Cavern (Dewey; Harris; Kley; Meier; Szadziewicz) and the "magic" of virtual technologies, scant attention is paid to the computer laboratory of the *Realization Lab*. This is understandable, considering the space the novel itself offers for exploration of the Cavern, while the lab receives relatively less attention. Whether deliberate or not, this narrative choice echoes the contemporary societal focus on visual aesthetics. The novel creates a visual matrix incorporating art from Vincent van Gogh, the architecture of Hagia Sophia, and virtual technologies. The machines in the RL are named after famous painters like Da Vinci, Claude, Hsie Ho, Rembrandt, or Picasso, evoking associations with human creativity and innovation. Art and technology are married in this visual matrix, emphasizing the interplay between human imagination and technological development.

This emphasis on art also serves to subvert the prevailing notion of transparency in technoliberal rhetoric, which often promotes concepts like visibility, clarity, and transcendence. The chiaroscuro technique not only underscores the importance of darkness but also makes light more tangible, acting like a fabric. While the dome symbolizes celestial or divine realms and evokes a sense of vastness and illumination, the cavern represents a stark contrast as a dark, enclosed space. However, by simulating Hagia Sophia in the Cavern, the novel appears to collide these two images, emphasizing the materiality of vision itself. This connects to the notion that vision does not ensure transparency and is inseparable from the other senses, underscoring the need for a multisensory approach.

The Cavern's simulation process underscores this complexity. As Jackdaw explains to Adie: "We do it all with liquid crystal back projection. One Electrolamp Luminox projector throwing alternating double-buffered images onto each of the five walls. We cast the floor onto a refracting mirror, through a hole in the ceiling" (Powers 26). This detailed description not only highlights the technological intricacy involved but also blurs the line between light as an ethereal

phenomenon and its tangible, structured manifestation. The juxtaposition of Hagia Sophia's divine illumination with the Cavern's darkness embodies this tension, underscoring the material complexities of digital simulations and challenging the idealized notions of transparency and transcendence.

Architecture helps reinforce this materiality: "buildings were art's skin" and a temple's "texture and light changed with the season, the hour, the thousand-and-one viewing angle. *Frozen music*, yes. But also thawed paint" (Powers 138). In this synesthetic description, it becomes obvious that vision is not separate from other senses. The notion that even transparency has its own materiality becomes evident in another scene, where a bird slams into the picture window, "a feathered fist bouncing off the plate glass with a smack. At the sickening pop, Adie's body ruptured" (143). The bird eventually awakens and flies away as if nothing happened, unsettling Adie's colleagues. Here, nonhuman life is acknowledged not just visually but audibly, suggesting that the "acknowledgment" of other species typically occurs on a multisensory level. Furthermore, the scene challenges the notion of transparency, as even what appears to be transparent material (a glass window) is revealed to be solid and unyielding. It also ruptures the human from within, serving as a reminder of their own mortality and vulnerability.

Characters in the novel appear to "look for something better than this body" (Powers 321), only to find themselves gravitating back towards it. As scholars have noted, "In der Suche nach der ultimativen Kopie zeigt sich ein uraltes Verlangen nach Transzendenz, nach einer Befreiung von den körperlichen Begrenzungen der Welt und der Wille zur Macht" ("In the search for the ultimate copy, an ancient desire for transcendence reveals itself–a yearning for liberation from the physical limitations of the world and the will to power," Kley 431). The Cavern presumably represents "humanity's final victory over the tyranny of matter," until it does not (Powers 267). This becomes obvious in Adie's observation that "All she lacked was dirt under her fingernails" (Powers 56). This yearning to transcend materiality goes hand in hand with a fascination for the power of the mind: the Joint Chiefs of the lab seek what art promises, "to break the bonds of matter and make the mind real" (Powers 396).

However, this pursuit initiates a paradoxical return to the very thing one seeks to escape. As articulated in the text, the problem with the virtual room is that "nothing bleeds. Nothing rots. Nothing breaks" (Powers 144), as it seems to lack the physicality it aims to evade. Additionally, there is a need for "color, texture, and motion laid on top of the traditional height, width, and depth" (Powers 79-80). The fantasy of escaping the constraints of the body ironically leads to a desire to materialize ideas, encapsulated in the notion of "the word made flesh" (Powers 215). The more the researchers work towards "the final escape from brute matter" (Powers 62), the more they begin to acknowledge the materiality of information.

According to scholars such as Philipp Löffler, Taimur presumably "exceeds the confines of the body and the empirical world that he is so hopelessly caught up in" (98). Yet, the novel also resists this interpretation; Taimur's plotline also suggests that one needs "to break the terror of existence by depicting it" (Powers 228), so those confines cannot be exceeded. Taimur is not allowed to look, and "the crib where they've dumped you is too dark to see. Inch by inch, your fingertips cover its surface [...] It stinks of soot and vegetables" (69). When he manages to crack the seam of his gag, a "gush of fresh air knifes into you. You shove your nose into the stream. It tastes like God in your nostrils" (72). Later on, his body gives in to an infection and a "steel chill spreads" from his extremities (151), recalling the steel of the cavern. He also keeps hearing the background hum of traffic (98), which creates another connection to the perpetual hum of the lab. His routine includes scooping "cold water" over his head, armpits, and groin (100), so all of these visceral descriptions stand in contrast to the "color washes" (168) of the VR. As Benny Pock also suggests, Taimur actually "discovers the quintessential role of his body in defining his existence" (125) which also becomes more obvious in his effort to "summon the sensual and material basis of reading" (127).

In the novel, both reading and virtuality share this desire to "make worlds" and escape the present one. "Reading serves as the process by which both the Cavern's inventors and Taimur negotiate the differences between their physical circumstances and their alternative realities" (Szadziewicz 95). In this context, reading becomes a hideout from the real world, a place of comfort where the self withdraws: "simulated spaces of aesthetic refuge, traditionally books and museums but lately movie theaters, computers and other virtual geographies, theme parks, and television" (Dewey 11). In this anthropocentric world, books become perfect for getting lost in, but can also be easily replaced with virtual worlds and other forms of withdrawal. This also recalls Rosi Braidotti's concept of "becoming-imperceptible": "What we humans truly yearn for is to disappear by merging into this generative flow of becoming, the precondition for which is the loss, disappearance, and disruption of the atomised, individual self" (Braidotti 136).

Yet, Powers challenges precisely this form of virtual disembodiment and escapism associated with reading practices, suggesting that the power of literature resides precisely in the opposite: to make the body more present. Even more, it suggests that "becoming-imperceptible" requires the body, rather than escaping it. As Szadziewicz notes, in this process, "the body takes on an unusual role of being both absent and present" (95). In this context, she quotes the passage in which "a floating finger moved upon this list, a disembodied digit that tracked the waves of Spider's wand" (Powers 14). She adds: "The 'floating' and 'disembodied' representation created by the programmer's 'wand' suggests at once a kind of *magic* as it simultaneously emphasizes the transformation and dissolution of the body. Signifi-

cantly, however, the body stays present: The 'floating finger' remains, as does the human operator" (Szadziewicz 95).

At the same time, there is another "magic room" depicted by the novel, which is not the Cavern, but the graphic engine room, the "*Cavern's cavern*" (Powers 31).

> She made her way back up the mountain, to the Realization Lab and its
> magic room in question. [...]
>
> Inside the RL, the redwood and river rock gave way to long olive corridors
> and linen-lined cubicle partitions that teemed with the same jittery bee-
> loud buzz that had seduced her out here in the first place. (Powers 25)

The phrase "jittery bee-loud buzz" blends auditory, kinetic, and visual sensations. The description not only conveys the sound of the buzzing but also evokes a visual image of bees and their restless movement, effectively merging sound and sight into a single, vivid sensory experience. This synesthetic description immerses the reader in the environment of the RL, while also blurring the lines between nature and technology, bees and machines, humans and nonhumans. This is further reinforced later on in the novel when "thoughts flit about you like bees" (389).

The Cavern becomes the epitome of anthropocentrism, embodying the Platonist dream to "make our interior visions more real than *mundane materiality* ever lets them be" (Blume). Yet, Powers' synesthetic descriptions redirect attention precisely to that "mundane materiality." This mundane materiality even veers into the monstrous, precisely because it is either ignored, repelled, or mocked. The novel reveals how the silicon bodies of technology are not only ignored, but they become monstrous entities that need to be manipulated. This occurs when Jackdaw takes Adie to take a look at the "monsters" for the first time:

> These *shaggy dungeon creatures* had managed to turn their airy park ranger's
> roost into a *subterranean wonderland*. [...] Even the copious indoor plantings
> could not entirely *soften the feel of chrome*, steel circuit-card cages, and CRT
> screens. Here and there, *squares of acoustical ceiling tile* fell jimmied open,
> spilling out *the snakes' nest of cabling* they hid. Hardest of all on her, the place
> *whirred*. A *perpetual low-grade hum hung in the air*, the spin of disk drives, the
> clack of keys, the *high-pitched metal ping of blocks* of data being manipulated.
> (Powers 25; emphasis added)

These excerpts offer a vivid portrayal of the physical environment within the RL, highlighting its industrial and mechanical character. Descriptions like "shaggy dungeon creature" and "subterranean wonderland" conjure images of a tangible,

tactile landscape much like a Cavern, though here it is one dominated by hardware infrastructure. These evocative phrases immerse readers in the sensory richness of the RL, emphasizing its materiality and corporeal presence. It adds a new layer of meaning to the "other," virtual Cavern, too.

Technological bodies are portrayed as both invisible and monstrous, reflecting societal trends that prioritize abstract, software-driven conceptions of virtual reality and artificial intelligence. While earlier representations of AI emphasized its physicality—consider Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the nineteenth century or Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* in the twentieth century—modern depictions often reimagine AI as abstract entities residing in servers and virtual spaces. This shift is exemplified in the cyberpunk genre and works like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992). Such transformations parallel broader societal trends, wherein the tangibility of AI gives way to a more digital, software-centric culture.

However, even these cyberpunk texts reveal a paradoxical tension between the transcendence of the flesh and a continued reliance on visceral imagery. AI bodies, though frequently presented as abstract, are briefly rendered perceptible through multisensory cues. For instance, in *Neuromancer*, Gibson describes the digital landscape as a pulsating, immersive experience, with Case perceiving the AI's presence through the hum of data streams. Similarly, in *Snow Crash*, auditory imagery conveys the dissonance of the virtual world, with the virus manifesting as a relentless, discordant hum. These moments of sensory engagement challenge the dominant narrative of AI as purely algorithmic. However, the critique in cyberpunk remains largely tied to its dystopian tone, warning against the alienation and dehumanization that accompany efforts to escape the material world.

By contrast, Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark* critiques transcendence by shifting the focus toward mundane materiality, as well as the inseparability of technology and nature. The depiction of the RL's machinery as "ugly and septic" (30) roots virtual environments in their physical and ecological contexts, emphasizing the labor and material resources required to sustain digital experiences. Powers reframes technology not as a space for disembodied escape but as a tangible extension of human and natural systems.

The "feel of chrome," the "squares of acoustical ceiling tile," and the "perpetual low-grade hum" paint a synesthetic experience of the Realization Lab. This does not merely deepen the immersion into its physicality, imbuing the lab with a palpable presence, but it also blurs the boundaries between the physical and the digital. The juxtaposition of these sensory elements serves to engage readers with the RL as a multisensory space where the materiality of the digital realm is keenly felt, rather than hidden or transcended. This is further reinforced by the image of the "snakes' nest of cabling," which once again couples nature and technology, this time through the mention of snakes rather than bees. The image also evokes his-

torical and moral associations; in the biblical story, the snake symbolizes evil. However, by situating this image in the mundane setting of an engine room, the novel gestures toward a renewed understanding of bodies, challenging their demonization by recontextualizing them in an everyday environment.

Similarly, transcendence and paradise are usually envisioned as flight, the soul's elevation towards the skies. The novel's mystical encounter between Adie and Taimur can be interpreted in light of this tradition. Towards the end of the novel, Adie enters the Cavern and experiences a sensory overload and a heightened sense of awareness, feeling as though her body is both grounded and lifted at once. She encounters Taimur, whose presence seems also ethereal, and they share a connection that seems to challenge the boundaries of the physical world. One of the most controversial scenes of the novel, this episode has been read as a "vague utopia of compassion and communion between people by means of the imagination, which is completely independent of physical media and conditions" (Meier 166). Harris views this encounter as an inevitable intrusion: a "supernatural event" that has "intruded into the rationality and materiality of an otherwise realistic text" (121). Löffler interprets it as a moment of "structural closure" (103), while Johanna Heil reads it as an "intrusion of the Real [that] discloses a deconstruction of both the Symbolic and the Imaginary [...and] reveals ruptures and paradoxes that consciousness usually smooths out" (170).

However, this controversial scene also illuminates the novel's deeper interrogation of escapism and world-making. The juxtaposition of the researchers' efforts to achieve a "matter transporter" (Powers 308) with Taimur's captivity reveals a nuanced perspective on the concept of freedom. The researchers' quest to transcend physical limitations through virtual reality mirrors Taimur's literal imprisonment, suggesting that their pursuit of erasing time, space, and bodily constraints is not actual freedom, but rather another form of imprisonment. In both plotlines, there is a paradoxical relationship between the desire for flight and the feeling of captivity. This desire is fueled by a shared restlessness that underscores a profound existential burden, wherein mere existence becomes intolerable, prompting a desperate search for an escape.

Yet, what these characters have to confront is precisely that deeper entanglement in their existential constraints. So, the yearning for transcendence becomes a double-edged sword. The novel complicates the notion of flight, suggesting that in their pursuit of freedom, the characters inadvertently construct their own prisons. This is additionally captured in the line, "In captivity, every inference is the freest flight" (Powers 185). The researchers' and Taimur's experiences highlight how attempts to escape existence lead them back to its undeniable, mundane materiality, indicating that they cannot merely "transform the ordinary" (165). This convergence of the ordinary and extraordinary challenges the notion of par-

adise as an escape, suggesting instead that freedom lies in recognizing the burden of existence itself.

As such, freedom comes when these characters recognize their inseparability from the nonhuman realm, including their own bodies and nonhuman life, whether nature or technology. This connects the novel to other environmental works by Powers, such as *The Overstory* or *Bewilderment*. Adie's epiphany that "her body was the sound and light" (168) and Taimur's interaction with the plant in his cell, realizing "the world goes simple, finally. Air, water, light, heat" (385), underscore this interconnectedness. Their moments of liberation are tied to acknowledging the agency of the nonhuman and their integration with it. In the mundane acts of life, such as patting bedcovers or tending to plants, humans can find a deeper sense of existence. As the novel illustrates, "Water wanted to pour. Shirts wanted wearing; picture frames, straightening" (225), highlighting the agency of the nonhuman in these interactions.

Moreover, Taimur's literal act of slamming his forehead into the wall before his mystical encounter underscores the necessity of escaping the tyranny of anthropocentrism, rather than matter. Thus, the novel suggests that freedom and a sense of belonging arise not from escaping the material world but from embracing and interacting with it, including the bugs and spiders in one's room. This shift from seeking transcendence to acknowledging the interconnectedness of all life forms and the inherent agency within the nonhuman realm throws a new light on the final encounter between Adie and Taimur. Their individual selves became "imperceptible," so they can become light and air.

In the end, Adie's winged feet above the trees recall an observation she made at the beginning of the novel. Before she became part of the team, Adie imagined the RL as populated by people wearing "open-toe sandals made out of silicon" (9). This imagery symbolically connects humans to the nonhuman silicon bodies prevalent within the lab's environment. Adie's vision of the lab juxtaposes everyday human elements like sandals with the artificial materiality of silicon, suggesting a blurring of boundaries between organic and synthetic, human and nonhuman. This is another example of mundane materiality that shifts the attention back to a "kinship of posthumanity" (Filip 270) that underscores the contiguity between the human and nonhuman realms.

Plowing the Dark seems to replicate, but ultimately challenges the Western emphasis on visual aesthetics through its portrayal of digital reality, screens, vision, images, and virtual reality. The novel's focus on art, architecture, and digital landscapes aligns with traditional notions of beauty and aesthetic pleasure associated with visual representations. However, Powers simultaneously challenges this focus by shifting the narrative towards themes of monstrosity and vulnerability, particularly evident in his depiction of the hardware. The hardware, here portrayed

as "shaggy dungeon creatures" and "subterranean wonders," disrupts conventional notions of beauty, emphasizing the raw, industrial nature of technology.

Moreover, Powers explores the multifaceted nature of light, presenting it not only as a visual phenomenon but also as something tangible, with materiality and structure. The title itself, *Plowing the Dark*, suggests a material quality to darkness, further blurring the boundaries between the visual and the tactile. Additionally, the novel gradually shifts its focus towards mundane materiality, highlighting the everyday aspects of technology and the human experience. This juxtaposition of visual aesthetics with themes of the monstrous, vulnerability, and mundane materiality challenges traditional perceptions of beauty and invites readers to reconsider their relationship with technology and the world around them. To further illustrate Powers' exploration of the nonhuman environment, I will now briefly focus on *The Overstory*.

Literary Synesthesia in *The Overstory*

The Overstory explores the theme of mundane materiality through a multisensory aesthetic that immerses readers in what I call "tree experiences." The novel positions trees and nature as vital, living entities with agency, rather than mere background elements in human lives. From the novel's opening pages, sensory details bring the nonhuman world to life: "[The pine's] needles *scent* the air, and a force *hums* in the heart of the wood. Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies. The tree is saying things, in words before words" (Powers, *The Overstory* 3; emphasis added). Here, smell and sound evoke an intimate interaction with trees, and this sensory richness recurs throughout the novel, reinforcing the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. The recurring hum amplifies this multisensory immersion.

Patricia Westerford, a dendrologist, marvels at the process of photosynthesis, describing it to her students as:

> A miracle, she tells her students, photosynthesis: a feat of chemical engineering underpinning creation's entire cathedral. All the razzmatazz of life on Earth is a free-rider on that mind-boggling magic act. The secret of life: *plants eat light and air and water*, and the stored energy goes on to make and do all things. She leads her charges into the inner sanctum of the mystery: Hundreds of chlorophyll molecules assemble into antennae complexes. Countless such antennae arrays form up into thylakoid discs. Stacks of these discs align in a single chloroplast. Up to a hundred such solar power factories power a single plant cell. Millions of cells may shape a single leaf. A million leaves rustle in a single glorious ginkgo. (Powers, *The Overstory* 124)

This passage not only captures a sense of wonder at the mathematical sublime and the intricate design and order of life, but also reaffirms the novel's commitment to emphasizing the often-overlooked materiality of plants.

Neelay Mehta, another central character, bridges the realms of technology and ecological awareness through his work as a game developer. At one point, he reflects on the interplay of the organic and the technological, marveling at the microprocessor: "That's a microprocessor? It's like a bug with square legs" (92). His ambition to create immersive digital worlds is fueled by his profound connection to nature. Neelay's fascination with computers begins in a life-altering moment when he climbs an oak tree and falls, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. He wonders whether "the branches jerked" (102), and as he lies on the ground, time seems to stop. Gazing upward, he has a vision:

> Bark disintegrates; wood clarifies. The trunk turns into stacks of spreading metropolis, networks of conjoined cells *pulsing* with energy and *liquid sun*, water rising through long thin reeds, rings of them banded together into pipes that draw dissolved minerals up through the narrowing tunnels of transparent twig and out through their waving tips while sun-made sustenance drops down in tubes just inside them. A colossal, rising, reaching, stretching space elevator of a billion independent parts, shuttling the air into the sky and storing the sky deep underground, sorting possibility from out of nothing: the most perfect piece of self-writing code that his eyes could hope to see. Then his eyes close in shock and Neelay shuts down. (102)

The passage echoes Patricia Westerford's description of photosynthesis while expanding it with vivid multisensory imagery and a depiction of capillary action, where a liquid defies gravity to ascend. The phrase "liquid sun" introduces an oxymoronic quality, as it contrasts with the more familiar image of water, which is typically cool and blue, whereas sunlight is hot and intangible. Here, sunlight acquires a tactile dimension, suggesting both the flow of liquid gold and an embodied experience of light. This juxtaposition imbues the ordinary processes of nature with a magical quality, reminiscent of the enchantment found in magical realism.

The paragraph concludes with Neelay "shutting down" like a computer, a moment that emphasizes his profound integration of human and technological experiences. Later, Neelay has another vision while visiting Stanford's campus, rolling through its tree-lined inner court. He moves "from planter to planter, touching the beings, smelling them, listening to their rustles. [...] He touches their bark and feels, just beneath their skin, the teeming assemblies of cells, like whole-planetary civilizations, pulse and hum" (110). This scene recalls not only the hum introduced at the beginning of the novel but also the hum of the virtual reality lab in *Plowing*

the Dark, linking sensory immersion with both natural and technological environments.

Through the imagery of pulsing energy and liquid sun, *The Overstory* gives sunlight a tactile quality and blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman experience (in this case, a tree). It suggests that what might seem "alien phenomenology" is already present within human perception, even if not consciously recognized. Neelay's body itself becomes increasingly intertwined with nonhuman imagery: his cheeks "shift like continental plates," "black wires" sprout from his privates, and his hair "flows in thick vines that fall all around his elongated face" (105). This transformation resists anthropomorphism, where human traits are imposed on nonhuman entities.[3] Instead, the novel suggests that the human is already partly nonhuman, a reality rooted in deep ecological interconnectedness. As Patricia quotes Thoreau, "Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (129).

The magic of mundane materiality is further exemplified in Dorothy's description of trees making "sugar and wood from nothing, from air, and sun, and rain" (168), which echoes Taimur and Adie's realization that they, too, are composed of light and air. This approach cultivates a sense of humility distinct from the awe inspired by extraordinary nature and sublime landscapes in Romantic literature. Instead, the novel criticizes the exploitation of Earth's resources and the utopian idealism that can drive destructive radicalism, both rooted in an anthropocentrism marked by exceptionalism. The novel suggests that the path forward requires humility and an acknowledgment that humans are not the center of the universe.[4] As such, one does not need grand landscapes to appreciate nature; it is already present and "hovering above our heads": "something in the air's *scent* commands the woman: *Close your eyes* and think of willow … What floats over your head right now?" (3).

The novel deepens this concept with the line, "That's the problem with people, their root problem. Life runs alongside them, unseen. Right here, right next. Creating the soil. Cycling water. Trading in nutrients. Making weather. Building atmosphere. Feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count" (4). By drawing attention to overlooked elements like soil, water, and atmosphere, Powers highlights the unnoticed processes that sustain life. These hidden dynamics challenge anthropocentrism and underscore the mundane materiality of existence, where profound ecological processes unfold constantly, unseen but indispensable.

Powers juxtaposes the enchantment of magical realism with precise scientific detail to inspire humility toward nature. For example, he describes the process of transpiration with meticulous care:

> In summer, water rises through the xylem and disperses out of the million
> tiny mouths on the underside of leaves, a hundred gallons a day evaporating

> from the tree's airy crown into the humid Iowa air […] In winter, bare branches
> *click* and *hum* above the drifts, their blunt resting buds almost sinister with
> waiting. (15)

By blending scientific precision with a sense of wonder, Powers encourages readers to find magic in the mundane, recognizing the extraordinary in everyday natural phenomena. Even more, these vital clicks keep recurring. Branches "*click* in the breeze as if this moment, too, so insignificant, so transitory, will be written into its rings," and they also "wave their semaphores against the bluest of midwestern winter skies" (23). The sound of these clicks connects this imagery to the technological realm and the clicks of the keyboard, where touch and sound merge. Once more, the acknowledgment of the nonhuman emerges in subtle sounds and vibrations, inseparable from other senses.

This idea is reinforced in Adam's experience of climbing his maple tree, where he feels "how much better life is above ground level" and observes the palmate leaves waving "in the gentle breeze, a crowd of five-fingered hands," accompanied by "a *sound* like *light rain*, the shower of thousands of tiny bud scales" (52). The scene's magical realism arises from its multisensory aesthetic, intertwining touch, sound, and vision. Light has weight and tactility; and language itself acts like a sensory fabric. The very act of writing demands pressure, whether that of a pen on paper or that of a finger on a keyboard. These physical gestures of creation suggest the interconnection of human expression and the material world, where even the act of writing embodies a tactile engagement with matter. Literature, then, becomes a means through which this mundane materiality is both practiced and recognized.

Powers employs a multisensory aesthetic to reveal the deep, often unnoticed connections between humans and the nonhuman world, encompassing both nature and technology. In *Plowing the Dark*, this aesthetic aligns with the monstrous to represent marginalized technological bodies while evoking human mortality and vulnerability. In *The Overstory*, it merges with magical realism to cultivate sensory attunement with the natural world, fostering a sense of humility and aliveness. These dimensions complement each other, forming two facets of the same idea that humans are inseparable from their environment.

Conclusion: The Relevance of Literature

Literature has long been celebrated for its visionary capacity to imagine new worlds. Yet, this vision often remains tethered to anthropocentric and humanist perspectives that overlook literature's ability to cultivate embodied awareness. Richard Powers seeks to "close the gap between people and other living things" (Hamner), illustrating how the power of literature lies in its capacity to challenge the dream of transparency and human exceptionalism. Instead of striving to control

bodies, literature invites us to feel with them, embracing vulnerability and granting access to the ineffable world of the senses. Through the act of reading, literature fosters connections—not through telepathic streams of data between brains, as envisioned by technoliberalism, but by creating a space where the human and non-human interact on a multisensory level.

While storytelling is often associated with individualism, Powers offers a different approach. Storytelling need not center exclusively on human subjectivity; instead, it can reimagine creativity beyond anthropocentric terms. Creativity, rather than being a product of the isolated mind "hovering above," emerges from a reciprocal engagement with the world. This reorientation of creativity intervenes in contemporary debates on artificial intelligence, particularly the fear of AI replacing human creativity. Such concerns appear misplaced when viewed through this lens, as each entity—human, nonhuman, or technological—engages with the world in unique ways.

By rethinking creativity and storytelling as interconnected processes, literature can help us reevaluate our relationship with the environment, often perceived as external and separate from ourselves. Through the use of synesthesia, writers blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman experiences, crafting more inclusive and ecologically conscious narratives. Synesthesia allows for the emergence of an immersive and embodied aesthetic experience, inviting readers to engage with texts on a multisensory level. This kind of writing fosters a deeper connection to the environment, emphasizing the interdependence of all living and nonliving entities and encouraging a more profound awareness of the world's intricate materiality.

Notes

[1] For a more in-depth analysis of literary synesthesia and its manifestations in other contemporary literary works, see also my monograph *Self-Help in the Digital Age* (2024), which has an entire chapter dedicated to literary synesthesia, while also exploring other works like Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, and Richard Powers' *Generosity: An Enhancement.* See also my article on Margaret Atwood's *Old Babes in the Wood* (MAS, 2024) or my paper on contemporary postcolonial fiction (2024) for further examples.

[2] Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) similarly explores humanity's desire to transcend the limitations of mortality through technology. Besides their thematic affinities, the tone and style of the novels differ: Powers' work is more descriptive, while DeLillo's is more minimalist. The impact of these stylistic choices on their message and reception warrants further exploration.

[3] Powers brings the nonhuman to the forefront by using magical realist elements rather than ventriloquism. In an interview with Everett Hamner, Powers admits, "If I could have managed it, I would have tried to write a novel where all the main char-

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acters were trees! But such an act of identification was beyond my power as a novelist, and it probably would have been beyond the imaginative power of identification of most readers". Instead, he emphasizes the importance of attuning ourselves to the frequencies where we can hear and listen to the trees—an act of acknowledgment and "response-ability" (Jennings 29). As Dunja Mohr notes, "not (directly) representing but acknowledging other lifeforms' views, avoiding the ventriloquist's pitfall, is in fact an honest and post-anthropocentric narratological stance" (58).

[4] See also my upcoming article on "Ecological Affects," which further explores ecological feelings such as humility and aliveness.

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Biography

Loredana Filip earned her PhD in American literature and cultural studies from Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, where she was a fellow at the Collaborative Research Centre "Cultures of Vigilance." She holds an MA in North American Studies from Friedrich–Alexander University of Erlangen–Nürnberg, where she also taught and supported international students. Her research blends literary studies, environmental humanities, and affect theory, exploring how everyday reading shapes ecological aesthetics, multisensory engagement, and human–nonhuman relations. She is the author of *Self-Help in the Digital Age: TED Talks, Speculative Fiction, and the Role of Reading* (De Gruyter, 2024), and her work has appeared in *COPAS, Medical Humanities*, and several edited collections. In addition to her academic writing, she publishes creative nonfiction, literary fiction, and children's books under the pen name Laurel Dunn.