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Eco-Ekphrasis in Richard Powers's *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*

Abstract: If in antiquity the term *ekphrasis* was used to denote a speech that stimulates mental visualization, then in contemporary discourse, ekphrasis refers to a wide array of intermedial phenomena, from descriptions of paintings and sculpture to the integration of film, photography, and digital media in literary works. Evolving in a time of environmental emergencies, contemporary ekphrastic writing often engages with various media products that address the environmental crisis, such as ecological artworks, television footage of environmental disasters as well as painterly, photographic, and digital images of the Anthropocene. As Gabriele Rippl observes, ekphrasis can invite the reader to engage with ecological issues and "conceive of the human-nature relationship in a new non-anthropocentric way" ("Sustainability" 221). Rippl then introduces the term "eco-ekphrasis," thereby bringing together considerations of intermediality and ecology in literature ("Sustainability" 225). My approach to eco-ekphrasis is informed by new materialist thought, which aims to challenge the anthropocentric idea of human mastery over the material world. Taking as case studies Richard Powers's novels *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021), this essay explores how eco-ekphrasis can draw attention to large-scale ecological processes and the effects of the Anthropocene, while simultaneously cultivating a sense of embodied, material embeddedness in the more-than-human world.

Keywords: ekphrasis, intermediality, new materialisms, arboreal time, Anthropocene, Richard Powers

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Introduction

The term *ekphrasis* was firstly mentioned in the first century CE, and ever since it has been through a long process of development and reconceptualization (Heffernan, "Ekphrasis: Theory" 35; Webb 1). In antiquity, ekphrasis was used as a rhetorical tool—"a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes" (Webb 1). The aim of the description was to make the audience "see" the described object (Karastathi 3; Webb 95; Brosch 234). Crucial to this persuasive effect is *enargeia*, or the capacity of vivid language to stimulate mental visualization, thereby "making absent things present" (Webb 87). In the twentieth century, the notion of ekphrasis was introduced into literary theory by Leo Spitzer. Spitzer defined the term as "the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art" (207). With the concept of ekphrasis becoming increasingly popular, James A. W. Heffernan proposed a broader definition: "*the verbal representation of visual representation*." (*Museum of Words* 3, emphasis in original). Heffernan's conceptualization is significant in that it places ekphrasis outside the dichotomy of (high) art and non-art. Thus, by the end of the twentieth century, ekphrastic theory has evolved to include the exploration of literature's engagement with all kinds of media, including descriptions of photographs, prints, drawings, and public monuments (Hollander). With the development of intermedial studies, many scholars adopted a medium-based approach to ekphrasis (Bruhn; Rajewsky; Sager Eidt; Grishakova; Pethő; Wolf; Elleström; Hartmann; Rippl; Vieira; Bruhn et al.).

Within the burgeoning field of intermediality, the concept of ekphrasis continues to evolve. Some of the recent changes in ekphrastic theory and practice may be explained by the development of technology, which has expanded the variety of media products. Photography, film, and digital media contribute to the diversity of media environments and practices. Contemporary literature not only engages with still pictures but also explores moving images and interactive digital artworks (Heffernan, "Ekphrasis: Theory"; Hartmann; Jansson; Louvel). As a reaction to the growing popularity of film culture, the notion of ekphrasis was expanded to include the representation of film medium in literature, or what Heffernan calls *cinematic* ekphrasis ("Ekphrasis: Theory" 45; "Notes" 5). Cinematic ekphrasis "narrates what is already a story told by a sequence of images" (Heffernan, "Notes" 4). As Behluli and Rippl observe, ekphrastic descriptions can also evoke cinematic effects and techniques, such as editing, dissolves, zoom shots, etc. ("Ekphrasis" 55).

Evolving in a time of environmental emergencies, ekphrastic writing often engages with various media products that address the ecological crisis. Many twenty-first-century novels, e.g., Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009), Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015), include descriptions of ecological artworks, television footage of environmental disasters as well as painterly, photographic, and digital images of

the Anthropocene.[1] As Gabriele Rippl observes, ekphrasis can invite the reader to engage with ecological issues and "conceive of the human-nature relationship in a new non-anthropocentric way" ("Sustainability" 221). Rippl introduces the concept of "eco-ekphrasis" to designate "verbal evocations of (fictive or actual) works of art and other images or artifacts, which are dedicated to ecological topics" (Rippl, "Sustainability" 225; Behluli and Rippl, "Ekphrasis" 57; Behluli and Rippl, "Art–Life–Planet" 242). My approach to eco-ekphrasis is informed by new materialist thought, which aims to challenge the anthropocentric idea of human mastery over the material world (Coole; Bennett; Bolt; Neyrat). Taking as case studies Richard Powers's novels *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021), this essay explores how eco-ekphrasis can draw attention to large-scale ecological processes: first, I analyze how cinematic ekphrasis in *The Overstory* entwines human lives with the more-than-human temporality of tree growth; second, I examine how pictorial ekphrasis in *Bewilderment* foregrounds the effects of the Anthropocene, while simultaneously cultivating a sense of embodied, material enmeshment in the vast processes of ecological change.

Cinematic Eco-Ekphrasis and Arboreal Time in *The Overstory*

Richard Powers's novel *The Overstory* revolves around nine main characters, whose lives are—in one way or another—intertwined with trees. Powers himself described his book as "a novel about trees," arguing that the trees in *The Overstory* may be seen as characters in their own right ("We're completely alienated"). The focus on the arboreal world in the novel is motivated by Powers's concern with environmental destruction and human tendency to overlook the importance of plant species ("I've read more than 120 books"). *The Overstory* challenges plant blindness by foregrounding trees as participants in the story that interact with humans and ecosystems.

1 Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen coined the term the *Anthropocene* to describe a new geological epoch where human actions have become a significant force in shaping the ecology and geology of our planet; the beginning of the Anthropocene epoch is often dated back to the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century (Clark 1). Even though the concept of the Anthropocene foregrounds the results of human actions, several scholars in environmental humanities and ecocritical research point out that it does not pose humans as the central agent in the world; rather the concept serves to acknowledge a new degree of destructive human impact on the material world, where human and nonhuman agencies are entangled (Burger et al. 2; Oppermann 7–8; Schaberg 71–80). As Derek Woods puts it, both humans and nonhumans are part of "terraforming assemblages" in the Anthropocene (140). In this article, I rely on the non-anthropocentric understanding of the concept, which foregrounds human responsibility and simultaneously challenges human dominance over the world.

Trees are also central in several ekphrastic descriptions. In the first chapter of the novel, a farmer called John Hoel buys a Kodak camera and photographs a chestnut tree that is growing on his farm. He then decides to take a picture of the same tree every month until his death. With his son Frank and grandson Frank Jr. continuing the "photographic ritual" (Powers, *The Overstory* 17), the pictures of the chestnut turn into a "multigeneration photo project" (Powers, *The Overstory* 22). The pictures show the life and growth of the tree "through hundreds of revolving seasons," leaving "everything a human being might call the *story*" outside the frame (Powers, *The Overstory* 19, emphasis in original). The descriptions of the photographs in the novel decenter the human and may thus be viewed as an example of eco-ekphrasis.

Powers's eco-ekphrasis is particularly remarkable in terms of temporality. When Nicholas Hoel (John's great-grandson) flips through the thousand photos of the chestnut, the pictures turn into somewhat of a five-second time-lapse film. This visual effect, as Garrett Stewart notes, recalls proto-cinematic optical toys (169). The ekphrastic description also evokes the technique of stop motion, which was used by early filmmakers such as Georges Méliès. What is important is that the pictures are set in motion: "Each picture on its own shows nothing but the tree he climbed so often he could do it blind. But flipped through, a Corinthian column of wood swells under his thumb, rousing itself and shaking free. Three-quarters of a century runs by in the time it takes to say grace" (Powers, *The Overstory* 21). Within a few seconds, the tree in the Hoels' "magic movie" grows from a seedling "into a sky-probing giant" (Powers, *The Overstory* 22). With its emphasis on the moving image and evocation of early cinematic techniques, the description of the Hoels' five-second film may be viewed as an example of *cinematic* ekphrasis, to use Heffernan's term ("Ekphrasis: Theory" 45). Drawing on cinematic effects, Powers's ekphrasis reveals the striking change of the tree through time. As Heffernan points out, cinematic ekphrasis "radically challenges the notion that ekphrasis deals only with pictures that are still in every sense, silent and motionless" (Heffernan, "Ekphrasis: Theory" 45). A film described in a novel, he explains, may be viewed as "a narrative embedded in the framing story" (Heffernan, "Notes" 6). In *The Overstory*, cinematic ekphrasis entwines the story of the Hoel family with an arboreal narrative and time. The ekphrastic passage combines an interest in "time recording" (Fargione 246)[2] with a concern for the nonhuman and the slow-paced development of the tree. The description of the tree images evokes the technique of repeat photography,

2 Powers's interest in the visual recording of time has been evident since his first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985), which was inspired by August Sander's photograph of the same title. In *Three Farmers*, Powers explores photographs as material records of the past, which invite the viewer to "peer into another time" (Powers 259). For discussions of photography in Powers's *Three Farmers*, see Dewey (19–28), Blatt (116–17), Piep (3–6), Kušnír (12–13), Fargione (246–48).

which creates the effect of compressed time. With the speeding up of arboreal time, the subjectivity of the tree becomes apparent.

Powers's ekphrasis also stresses the contrast between the "speedy" temporality of human actions (DeLuca 78) and the temporality of the tree living "at the speed of wood" (Powers, *The Overstory* 19). Trees operate at a slower timescale that extends far beyond human lifespans. To humans, trees might seem static and devoid of action. Khanh Nguyen analyzes arboreal time in *The Overstory* in terms of the concept of *deep time* (34), based on James Hutton's theorization.[3] Tree growth, Nguyen explains, is driven by natural forces on such a vast timescale that humans cannot observe the change in action (Nguyen 34–35). Indeed, Powers's novel suggests that tree "growth is invisible" to our plant-blind species (Powers, *The Overstory* 112).

The anthropocentric view of plants as passive entities has been repeatedly contested by new materialist scholars (Barad; Bennett). In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, vital materialist[4] Jane Bennett discusses trees as "active and powerful nonhumans," pointing out that they participate in more-than-human ecosystems (24). With their capacity "to grow, reproduce, bear fruit, spread, colonise," trees exceed the status of passive objects and may be seen as "actants" (Jones and Cloke 80). The embedded arboreal narrative in *The Overstory* emphasizes trees as actants operating at larger temporal scales that are unfamiliar to humans. The Hoels' movie reveals the growth of the chestnut tree as a purposive action: "A flip through the shots shows the subject stretching and patting about for something in the sky. A mate, perhaps. More light. Chestnut vindication" (Powers, *The Overstory* 15). As Powers explains in an interview, his novel invites the reader to recognize the "inexorable agency" of trees as well as witness "a history that is orders of magnitude bigger and millions of times older than us" ("The Death of Mimas"). By creating the effect of compressed time, cinematic eco-ekphrasis in *The Overstory* allows the reader to witness a story that unfolds at a more-than-human temporal scale. Thus, through the cinematic manipulation of time, ekphrasis foregrounds the often-overlooked nonhuman agency of trees.

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3 According to Scottish geologist Hutton, geological changes occur over immense timescales and are so slow that, to humans, no changes appear to take place; in other words, humans cannot observe such immense processes in action (20). Drawing upon Hutton's theorization of geological time, John McPhee coined the term *deep time* in his book *Basin and Range* (1981). McPhee argues that deep time is difficult to imagine and comprehend for humans: "On the geologic time scale, a human lifetime is reduced to a brevity that is too inhibiting to think about" (128).

4 Vital materialism is a strand of new materialist thought that is rooted in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza; Spinoza views force as being "immanent to matter, because matter is nothing other than an expression of *force itself*" (Gamble et al. 119, emphasis in original). Drawing on Spinoza's philosophy, Bennett aims "to give voice to a *vitality* intrinsic to materiality," thereby challenging the association of matter with automatism and passivity (3, emphasis added).

Pictorial Eco-Ekphrasis and the Panorama of the Anthropocene in *Bewilderment*

While novelistic narratives often focus on "events unfolding at the human scale" and stories "attuned to the patterning of human mental and social life" (Caracciolo 7), ekphrasis has the capacity to disrupt human-centered narration and reveal its limits. As in *The Overstory*, eco-ekphrasis in Powers's next novel *Bewilderment* invites thinking beyond the familiar scale of human experience. Both novels are preoccupied with ecological issues and the constraints of anthropocentric thinking. Because of the recurring environmental themes,[5] *Bewilderment* has been discussed as "a coda" to Powers's *The Overstory* (Alter).

In *Bewilderment*, the narrator is Theo Byrne, a widower and a single parent of nine-year-old Robin. The boy is diagnosed with Asperger syndrome and has a deep attachment to the nonhuman world: Robin is seriously worried about the extinction of birds and other species. The narrative mainly focuses on events in the everyday lives of Theo and Robin—that is, events unfolding at the human scale. The novel invites the reader into the intimate world of the father and the son, who often struggle to cope with Robin's emotional meltdowns and his extreme grief for biodiversity loss. The character's concern for the environment is also expressed in his drawings of endangered species. Ekphrastic descriptions of Robin's artworks recur throughout the whole novel. Aiming "*to paint every endangered species in America*," he begins with a simple drawing of the dusky gopher frog (*Lithobates sevosus*) and goes on to create several striking paintings of birds, mammals, insects, reptiles, and plants (Powers, *Bewilderment* 76, emphasis in original). Particularly remarkable is the description of a banner that Robin makes for a demonstration at the U.S. Capitol. The banner—which is richly decorated with colorful drawings of endangered creatures—is supposed to draw public attention to environmental emergencies. The impressive large-scale composition of Robin's ecological artwork reminds Theo of the boy's mother Alyssa (Aly), a researcher and environmentalist:

> The banner was longer than the two of us stretched end to end. And it was covered in paints, markers, and inks of all colors. Down the length of it ran the words:
>
> LET'S HEAL WHAT WE HURT
>
> He had filled the scroll with bright, bold design. It seemed another thing he'd learned directly from Aly, who worked on *a canvas too large for me to see*. Creatures

5 In an interview with Alexandra Alter, Powers says that *Bewilderment* led him "to re-engage the questions that were left hanging at the end of *The Overstory*" ("Richard Powers Speaks"). The questions that preoccupy Powers focus on our relationship with the environment: "how did we lose our sense of living here on Earth? How did we become so alienated and estranged from everything else alive? How did we get convinced that we're the only interesting game in town, and the only species worthy of extending a sense of the sacred to?" ("Richard Powers Speaks").

> ringed the letters, as though drawn by a hand more mature than his. Stands of staghorn coral were bleaching white. Birds and mammals fled a burning forest. Ten-inch-long honeybees lay on their backs along the bottom of the banner, legs up and little X's in their eyes. [emphasis added] (Powers, *Bewilderment* 211–12)

When looking at the elaborate drawings of animals and plants, Theo comes to realize that Robin shares with his late mother an ability to think of the world beyond the human scale. Importantly, the ekphrastic image encompasses a larger view of the world than the human-centered father-and-son narrative.

In my previous work, I proposed to call this type of ekphrasis an *embedded world-picture*; it involves a literary evocation of a broad panoramic picture of the world (it can be an existing or fictional artwork, e.g., a landscape painting) (Kurr 45). What is especially significant is that the ekphrastic image encompasses a larger picture of the world than the primary (often human-centered) narrative does. The description of Achilles's Shield in Homer's *Iliad* may be viewed as the oldest example of this type of ekphrasis. The Shield is engraved with an image of the whole universe, including the earth, the moon, the sun, and the sky with stars and constellations. On the one hand, the artwork is a thing among other material things in the world of the *Iliad*. On the other hand, it encompasses a bigger world outside the primary narrative. Therefore, the relation between the inside and the outside is reversed. W. J. T. Mitchell was the first scholar to discuss the effect of external inclusion in the *Iliad*. The Shield, he notes, "represents much more of Homer's world than the *Iliad* does ... Achilles' shield shows us the whole world that is 'other' to the epic action of the *Iliad*, the world of everyday life outside history that Achilles will never know. The relation of epic to ekphrasis is thus turned inside out: the entire action of the *Iliad* becomes a fragment in the totalizing vision provided by Achilles' shield" (Mitchell 180). By evoking the large-scale image in the human-centered narrative, ekphrasis provokes the reader to switch between the human scale of everyday events and the unfamiliar, gigantic scale of the more-than-human universe.

Like the Shield of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, Robin's banner in *Bewilderment* reveals and transgresses the boundaries of anthropocentric perspectives. Powers's ekphrasis brings before the mind's eye a broad panoramic picture that shows two different versions of the world. One side of the banner depicts the suffering of all kinds of creatures—or "hell"—as Theo calls it (Powers, *Bewilderment* 212). The other side portrays "the peaceful kingdom" inhabited by thriving nonhuman beings: "feathered and fur-covered, spiny, star-shaped, lobed and finned, bulky or sleek and stream-lined, bilateral, branching, radial, rhizomatic creatures, known and unknown, creatures in the wildest array of colors and forms, all deployed between the deep green forest and the ocean blue" (Powers, *Bewilderment* 212). Interestingly, the two sides of Robin's banner—the hellish and the heavenly—recall the composition of Hieronymus Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1510). The side panels of Bosch's famous triptych depict heaven and hell, while the whole artwork

shows a broad panoramic view of the world crowded with people (Figure 1). Similarly, the ekphrastic description in *Bewilderment* conveys an image of the world at large. However, if Bosch's painting is populated with humans, then Robin's banner foregrounds nonhuman creatures, revealing the impacts of the Anthropocene on coral reefs, forests, birds, mammals, and pollinators. Considering the large-scale effects of the Anthropocene, Timothy Clark observes that the environmental destruction that is happening at broader scales often remains "invisible" in everyday life due to the limits of human perception (22). With the change of the spatial scale, Power's eco-ekphrasis simultaneously reveals and transgresses the limits of normal human perception, which fails to recognize the large-scale phenomena of ecological degradation.

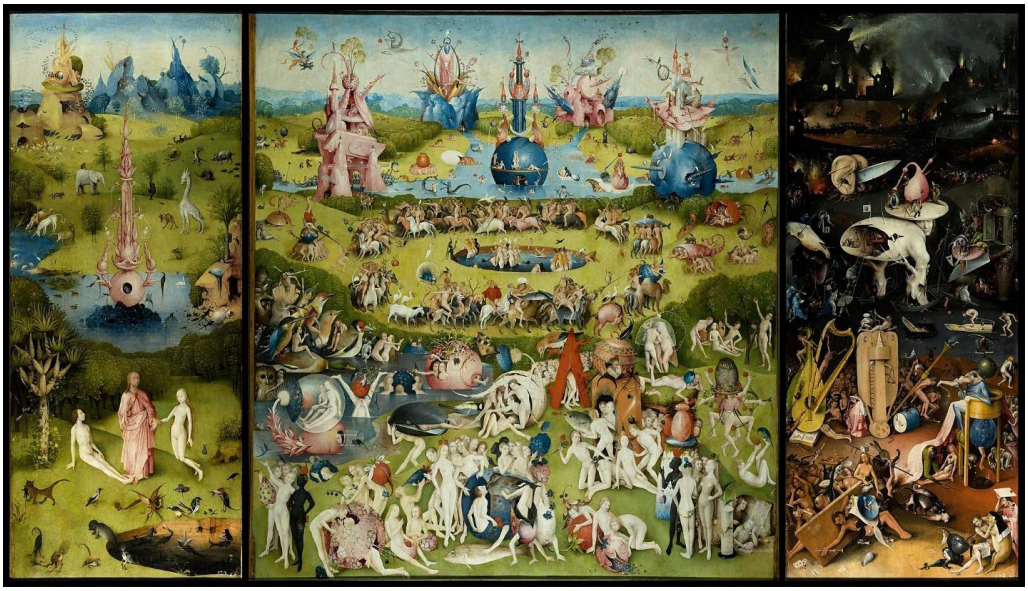

Figure 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, ca. 1490–1510, Prado Museum, Madrid.

While eco-ekphrasis brings to the fore more-than-human ecological processes, the primary narrative focuses on the lived human experience of the environment. Theo's account of everyday events conveys a sense of embodied engagement with the material world: animals, forests, rivers, and the air. It is worth noting that the ekphrastic description of Robin's ecological artwork mirrors some signs of environmental emergencies that are described in the main narrative. In a sense, then, some events discussed by Theo become a fragment in the large-scale image of ecological disasters that is evoked through ekphrasis. For example, the "burning forest" in Robin's banner (Powers, *Bewilderment* 211) recalls Theo's discussion of California wildfires and his experience of abnormal heat: "It was only June, but I couldn't breathe" (Powers, *Bewilderment* 138). Thus, the state of ecological emergency is

not only addressed in Robin's panoramic picture of the Anthropocene, but it is also felt by the characters, who are enmeshed in the material world.

Stacy Alaimo argues that we need to "shift from the sense of humans as an abstract force that acts but is not acted on, to a trans-corporeal conception of the human as that which is always generated through and *entangled in differing scales*" (155, emphasis added). For Alaimo, "the anthropocene subject" is not abstract but always "immersed and enmeshed" in the environment (157). In *Bewilderment*, eco-ekphrasis creates a link between the large-scale view of ecological degradation and the characters' material enmeshment in the world. Powers's novel does not merely evoke an abstract, disembodied view of the Anthropocene but invites the reader to switch between the concrete, embodied experience of the characters and the large-scale image of environmental emergencies. The switching between the differing scales—human and more-than-human—fosters a sense of embodied, material enmeshment in ecological processes that extend beyond the human scale.

Conclusion

Eco-ekphrases in Powers's novels *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment* entwine human stories with temporalities and images that challenge anthropocentric perspectives. In *The Overstory*, the ekphrastic description draws on cinematic techniques to foreground the story of the chestnut tree, which unfolds at an unfamiliar more-than-human temporal scale. The development of the tree occurs at the pace of arboreal time, the pace so slow that humans cannot observe this biological process in action. By compressing arboreal time, cinematic eco-ekphrasis reveals the often-overlooked agency of trees. Similarly, the ekphrastic passage in *Bewilderment* focuses on the nonhuman: the vivid description of the pictorial artwork addresses the impacts of the Anthropocene and environmental emergencies on animals and plants. It is remarkable that eco-ekphrasis creates the effect of external inclusion, whereby the embedded picture encompasses a larger view of the world than the primary narrative does. The ekphrastic image disrupts the human-centered narrative, encouraging the reader to switch between the everyday embodied experience of the human characters and the more-than-human processes of environmental degradation. In both novels, the verbal evocations of the visual create a sense of entanglement in differing scales, including unfamiliar nonhuman scales. Thus, eco-ekphrasis serves as a powerful evocative tool that invites the reader to encounter the world beyond the human and relate to wider ecological processes.

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