Aesthetic Experience beyond the Human: Literary Form, Perception and Posthuman Relationality

Fitrilya Anjarsari

DOI: 10.18355/XL.2026.19.03.04

Abstract
This article argues that posthuman fiction reconfigures aesthetic experience beyond the sovereign human perceiver. Drawing on Bence Nanay's account of aesthetic attention, it examines how literary form redistributes perception through atmosphere, sensory layering, and relational embodiment. The paper shows that posthuman aesthetics is not merely a thematic inclusion of the nonhuman but a formal reorganization of experience across more-than-human relations.
Key words: Aesthetic experience, Literary form, Perception, Posthuman aesthetic, Relationality

Introduction

Aesthetic theory has long been shaped by a human-centered image of experience. In its most familiar form, aesthetics presumes a perceiving subject who encounters an object, directs attention toward it, and forms a judgment concerning beauty, value, or form. Even when modern and contemporary aesthetics move beyond narrowly beauty-centered accounts, they often retain the assumption that aesthetic experience is anchored in a human perceiver who remains the organizing center of sensation and interpretation. For a posthuman inquiry, this assumption is no longer sufficient. Posthuman thought has repeatedly challenged the autonomy, coherence, and exceptionalism of the human subject, and that challenge must extend to aesthetics as well. If the human can no longer be understood as a sovereign center of being, then aesthetic experience can no longer be defined as the property of a self-contained observer. It must instead be reconsidered as relational, distributed, and mediated through forms that exceed the human alone (Braidotti, 2013). Wolfe (2010) similarly argues that posthumanism requires a critique of the conceptual structures that continue to privilege the human as the normative center of thought.

This article develops that problem through literature. Its starting point is that posthuman fiction does more than thematize nonhuman agency, ecological entanglement, or decentered subjectivity. It also reorganizes the conditions of aesthetic experience itself. That claim matters because posthuman literary criticism has often been more convincing in identifying what texts represent than in explaining how texts alter perception. Literary works are frequently described as posthuman because they contain animals, environments, technologies, distributed agencies, or unstable forms of subjectivity. Such descriptions are often accurate, but they can remain thematic in emphasis. They identify a text's conceptual content without fully accounting for the aesthetic mechanisms through which that content becomes experientially legible. The present study addresses that gap by shifting attention from posthumanism as theme to posthumanism as aesthetic reorganization. Its central argument is that posthuman fiction redistributes aesthetic experience beyond the sovereign human perceiver, and that this redistribution is achieved through literary form.

This intervention requires a more precise understanding of what is at stake in posthuman thought. Braidotti (2013) situates the posthuman in relation to the crisis of the liberal humanist subject, whose claims to autonomy and universality have become increasingly unstable under conditions of technological mediation, globalization, and biopolitical transformation. Wolfe (2010) likewise treats posthumanism not as an

abandonment of embodiment, but as a critique of the conceptual and institutional logics that sustain human exceptionalism. Ferrando (2019) extends this line of thought by framing philosophical posthumanism around relational ontology, ecological embeddedness, and mediation. Haraway (2016) redirects the question of subjectivity toward multispecies coexistence and practices of becoming-with, while Alaimo (2010) argues that bodies are materially inseparable from the environments through which they move. Across these formulations, the decisive point is that relation is constitutive rather than supplementary. Subjectivity does not precede relation; it emerges through it. Once that premise is accepted, aesthetic experience can no longer be understood as a detached act of contemplation performed by an independent human subject standing outside the world it perceives.

Yet the consequences of this shift for aesthetics have not always been fully elaborated in literary criticism. Posthuman studies has transformed how literature is read in relation to animals, ecologies, technologies, and material agencies, but it has less often clarified how literary texts formally produce experiences that unsettle anthropocentric modes of perception. This article argues that literary form is the key to that question. Theme tells us what a text is about, but form determines how a text structures attention, sensation, atmosphere, embodiment, and relation. A literary work becomes aesthetically posthuman not simply because it includes the nonhuman, but because it compels readers to experience perception as distributed, unstable, and more-than-human. Caracciolo (2021) is especially important here because he shows that narrative form can render environmental entanglement experientially available rather than merely conceptually stated. Building on that insight, the present article treats literary form not as a vessel for philosophical ideas, but as the medium through which posthuman relationality becomes aesthetically intelligible.

This is the point at which Bence Nanay becomes methodologically decisive. In Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception, Nanay (2016) argues that many central problems in aesthetics are best understood through philosophy of perception. Rather than treating aesthetics as a narrowly art-centered field, he approaches it as a domain concerned with the structure of experience itself. That move is particularly useful for the present study because it offers a vocabulary for explaining how aesthetic experience is organized. Nanay's concept of distributed attention is especially productive. He argues that attention may remain directed toward one object while being distributed across several of its properties at once (Nanay, 2016). Aesthetic experience, in this account, is not governed by a single, unified focal point. It is layered, mobile, and internally differentiated. Nanay (2016) identifies this distributed attention as central to many paradigmatic aesthetic experiences. That argument is highly compatible with a posthuman framework because it already weakens the model of a stable human gaze mastering a passive object.

Nanay's later account of aesthetic experience as interaction pushes this methodological usefulness even further. In his 2024 article, he argues that aesthetic experience is distinguished not only by perception or evaluation, but by action and interaction (Nanay, 2024). This shift matters because it challenges the notion that aesthetics is fundamentally a matter of detached contemplation. Instead, aesthetic experience becomes something enacted through situated engagement. Such a formulation resonates strongly with posthuman thought. Haraway (2016) insists that beings emerge through ongoing practices of relation rather than through self-enclosed identity. Alaimo (2010) similarly shows that embodiment is always materially enmeshed with the world. Read alongside these perspectives, Nanay's account makes it possible to think of aesthetic experience as arising through relational encounter rather than belonging in advance to a sovereign perceiver. This article does not claim that Nanay is a posthuman theorist. Its argument is more specific. Nanay provides a rigorous account of how aesthetic experience works, while posthumanism expands the ontological field within which that experience occurs.

The central research problem follows from this dialogue. This study asks how posthuman fiction redistributes aesthetic experience beyond the human-centered perceiver and through what literary forms this redistribution is achieved. Those two questions define both the scope and the direction of the article. The study is not primarily concerned with demonstrating that posthumanism can be applied to literary texts. Nor does it seek to provide a comprehensive map of posthuman theory. Its objective is narrower and more precise: to theorize posthuman aesthetic experience as a formal reorganization of perception. In this argument, literary form is not an auxiliary stylistic layer added to philosophical content. It is the means through which perception becomes relational, decentered, and more-than-human. Atmosphere, dispersed voice, unstable embodiment, sensory layering, shifts in focalization, and formal fragmentation matter here because they reshape the reader's experience rather than merely illustrating a concept. Posthuman relationality, in this context, refers not simply to relation as a theme but to experience as an event emerging across bodies, materials, affects, environments, and textual structures (Alaimo, 2010). Braidotti (2013) is essential to this reorientation because she reconceives subjectivity in relational rather than individual terms. Nanay (2016, 2024) makes it possible to specify how that reorientation operates aesthetically.

This approach also allows the article to make a more precise contribution to literary criticism. Instead of treating posthuman fiction as a corpus unified by recurring motifs, it approaches such fiction as a site of formal experimentation in perception. What is at stake, then, is not only interpretation but perceptual organization. Narrative form can redistribute attention, loosen the dominance of character-bound consciousness, complicate sensory hierarchy, and generate atmospheres that exceed human mastery. Caracciolo (2021) demonstrates that narrative form can make entanglement perceptible. The present article extends that claim by arguing that literary form can do more than represent relation; it can reorganize the conditions under which relation is aesthetically experienced. This position resists a hierarchical model in which theory produces meaning and literature merely illustrates it. On the contrary, fiction becomes a mode of thinking that can expose the limits of anthropocentric perception precisely by altering how experience is formally composed.

The broader implication is that posthumanism should be understood not only as an ontological or ethical discourse, but also as an aesthetic problem. The decentering of the human has critical force only when it becomes perceptible as an experience rather than remaining an abstract proposition. Aesthetic experience is therefore one of the primary sites where posthuman relationality can be sensed, inhabited, and contested. By bringing Nanay's account of distributed attention and interaction into dialogue with posthuman theories of embodiment, mediation, and multispecies entanglement, this article develops a framework for understanding aesthetic experience beyond the human without losing sight of literary specificity. The next section turns to that framework more directly by clarifying how attention, perception, and interaction can be rethought within a posthuman aesthetics and why literary form is the crucial medium of that rethinking.

Decentering the Human

What requires decentering in posthuman aesthetics is not the human as an embodied participant in experience, but the privilege historically granted to the human perceiver as the stable source of aesthetic order. Much aesthetic thought has relied on a representational arrangement in which a subject stands before an object, gathers its features through attention, and organizes those features into value, meaning, or form. Even when this arrangement becomes more sophisticated through discussions of affect, ambiguity, or interpretation, it often preserves the assumption that a perceiver remains prior to the field it perceives. The perceiver may be historically situated or

psychologically unstable, yet it still functions as the tacit ground upon which aesthetic coherence depends. A posthuman account cannot remain satisfied with this structure because the issue is not simply whether the human can be criticized, but whether the human can continue to function as the unquestioned locus of perceptual authority. Decentering the human therefore involves a shift away from perceptual sovereignty and toward an account of experience in which no observer stands fully outside the conditions of what is encountered. Aesthetic experience, under such conditions, no longer appears as the accomplishment of a self-contained subject but as an event emerging within relations the subject does not fully control.

Karen Barad's agential realism is especially important for clarifying why such sovereignty becomes untenable. In Meeting the Universe Halfway, Barad (2007) rejects the assumption that discrete entities first exist in separation and only afterward enter into relation. Phenomena do not arise from already bounded subjects confronting already bounded objects; they emerge through entanglement. Read in aesthetic terms, this means that experience cannot be described as the act of a detached observer encountering a finished object from a position of exteriority. The perceiver is implicated in the very conditions through which what is perceived comes to matter. What appears is never simply there in advance, waiting to be gathered into meaning by a sovereign gaze. The scene of experience is constituted through relations among bodies, materials, discourses, affects, and environments, none of which can be assigned absolute priority. Such a view has strong consequences for literary criticism because it unsettles the idea that reading consists in a subject extracting meaning from a stable textual object. The reading event becomes instead a relational process in which form, sensation, expectation, material imagination, and embodied response participate together. Once that shift is made, the human perceiver can no longer be treated as the origin of coherence, because coherence itself is produced within a field of entanglement.

N. Katherine Hayles sharpens this displacement by exposing how abstraction often disguises dependence on material instantiation. In How We Became Posthuman, Hayles (1999) shows how informational thought privileged pattern over presence and code over embodiment, often imagining consciousness as though it could be detached from bodily and material conditions. Her critique is not only relevant to cybernetics or media theory. It also helps explain why the aesthetic perceiver has so often been imagined as a purified center of awareness, as though perception could be separated from the sensory, technological, and environmental infrastructures that make it possible. Hayles's intervention makes that separation difficult to maintain. Embodiment is not something added to a preexisting subject; it is a constitutive condition of experience. Perception is therefore never merely mental or neutral. It is mediated by bodily thresholds, technological prostheses, environmental exposures, and historical regimes of sensibility that shape what can be registered, sustained, and interpreted. The human is decentered here not because embodiment disappears, but because embodiment prevents consciousness from coinciding fully with itself. Aesthetic experience no longer belongs to a transparent perceiver who masters a scene from above. It belongs to a mediated body whose access to the world is always conditioned, partial, and susceptible to forces it cannot reduce to intention.

Jane Bennett extends the argument by challenging the idea that matter is merely passive until human attention animates it. In Vibrant Matter, Bennett (2010) argues that materiality possesses force, efficacy, and vitality. This matters for aesthetics because it redistributes participation across human and nonhuman actors rather than reserving animation for the perceiver alone. If matter is lively, then aesthetic scenes cannot be organized simply as relations between active subjects and inert objects. Textures, surfaces, infrastructures, organic processes, weather, waste, and ordinary things help shape the conditions of feeling and attention. Their significance does not arise solely because a subject projects symbolic value onto them. They participate in the composition of experience by exerting pressure on affective tone, perceptual emphasis,

and sensory organization. In literary terms, this is especially important for forms that dwell on atmosphere, material density, or object-worlds that refuse reduction to metaphor. Such writing does not merely describe a world full of things. It allows material presences to organize the terms under which experience unfolds. Bennett therefore helps clarify that decentering the human is not simply a matter of adding nonhuman entities to interpretation. It is a matter of acknowledging that aesthetic experience itself may be structured by agencies that are not derived from human consciousness. The perceiver remains involved, but the scene no longer belongs to perception alone.

Timothy Morton's account of hyperobjects intensifies the problem by showing that human-centered perception is also limited by scale. In Hyperobjects, Morton (2013) describes entities such as climate change and radioactive waste as massively distributed in time and space, resistant to direct apprehension, and impossible to localize within ordinary coordinates of sensory mastery. Their relevance to aesthetics lies in the pressure they place on the fantasy that human apprehension can provide the measure of what a thing is. A hyperobject cannot be contained within the scale of contemplative possession. It can be encountered only partially, indirectly, and often through effects rather than through presence as such. This changes the structure of aesthetic experience. The object of concern is no longer proportionate to the capacities of the perceiver, and the perceiver can no longer imagine itself as the frame within which the object becomes fully intelligible. Exposure replaces mastery, and disorientation replaces composure. This scalar crisis is crucial for posthuman literary criticism because it explains why environmental excess, atmospheric pressure, temporal diffusion, and formal dislocation matter so much in contemporary fiction. Such features do not merely represent a damaged world. They register a breakdown in the aesthetic regime that once assumed the human could stand in proper proportion to what it encountered. Decentering the human thus becomes inseparable from recognizing that many objects of contemporary experience exceed the scale on which human-centered aesthetics was built.

Bence Nanay provides the perceptual vocabulary needed to describe this breakdown with greater precision. In Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception, Nanay (2016) argues that aesthetics is centrally concerned with experience and that perception is therefore indispensable to aesthetic theory. His account of distributed attention is especially important because it shows that aesthetic experience is not structured by a single, unified focal point. Attention can remain directed toward one object while being dispersed across several of its properties at once (Nanay, 2016). Experience is therefore internally layered rather than governed by one stable line of sight. This argument is useful for posthuman aesthetics because it weakens the notion that perception belongs to a coherent observer who gathers the object into unity through a sovereign gaze. Distributed attention suggests instead that experience is composed through simultaneous emphases, partial investments, and shifting orientations. The perceiver is still present, but its relation to the object is no longer one of simple possession. Nanay's later account of aesthetic experience as interaction pushes this further by arguing that experience is distinguished not only by perception or evaluation, but by engagement and interaction (Nanay, 2024). Aesthetic experience no longer appears as detached contemplation, but as something enacted through situated contact. When this is read alongside Barad, Hayles, Bennett, and Morton, its implications become sharper. Interaction is never the free exercise of an independent subject. It is conditioned by entanglement, mediation, material participation, and scalar asymmetry. The human is decentered, then, not by rhetorical declaration, but because attention and interaction themselves do not sustain the fiction of perceptual sovereignty once their structure is described carefully.

Such a decentering should not be confused with the erasure of the human, nor with a simplistic inversion in which the nonhuman simply replaces the human as the new

center of value. The point is neither to deny embodiment nor to dismiss interpretation, but to refuse the assumption that either can be grounded in a self-sufficient perceiver who guarantees coherence from above. The methodological consequences for literary criticism are substantial. Anthropocentrism often survives not in explicit statements, but in reading habits that continue to gather all significance back into humanly secured meaning. A text may thematize ecology, animality, infrastructure, or distributed agency, while criticism still treats those elements as finally meaningful only insofar as they are absorbed into human consciousness. A posthuman aesthetics requires another discipline of reading. It asks criticism to attend to atmospheres that shape experience without being reducible to mood, to objects that organize attention without becoming mere symbols, and to formal instabilities that do not resolve into the mastery of any single viewpoint. Under these conditions, literary form becomes philosophically decisive because it is through form that perception is redistributed beyond the human-centered frame. Decentering the human is therefore not an ornamental preface to posthuman literary analysis. It is the conceptual precondition for understanding how fiction can compose experience as mediated, entangled, materially animated, and scale-disrupted. Only after that displacement can one adequately explain how literary form reorganizes perception rather than merely representing more-than-human content.

Literary Form and the Redistribution of Perception

Literary form becomes indispensable to posthuman aesthetics at the point where representation alone no longer explains how a text alters the conditions of experience. A novel may include animals, ecologies, infrastructures, material agencies, or dispersed forms of subjectivity and still leave intact the deeper assumption that perception belongs to a stable human center. The presence of more-than-human content does not automatically transform the structure of aesthetic experience. The decisive question is not only what literature depicts, but how it composes the field in which perception takes place. Caroline Levine's account of form is especially useful because she treats forms as organizing principles with distinct affordances rather than as passive containers of meaning (Levine, 2015). Derek Attridge, from a different direction, argues that literature is encountered as an event whose force depends on the reader's responsiveness to formal singularity rather than on the extraction of paraphrasable ideas alone (Attridge, 2004). Read together, these perspectives clarify that literary form is not secondary to philosophical argument. It is one of the primary means through which perceptual order is rearranged, salience is redistributed, and reading is displaced from the security of a human-centered frame.

This becomes clear when narrative perspective is approached as a formal problem rather than a merely psychological one. Gérard Genette's account of focalization remains crucial because it separates the question of who speaks from the question of who sees, thereby making perspective visible as an effect of formal arrangement rather than an immediate expression of character consciousness (Genette, 1980). Once perspective is treated in these terms, the apparent naturalness of perceptual authority begins to dissolve. Monika Fludernik's emphasis on experientiality deepens this point by showing that narrative form creates conditions under which experience becomes available to readers, and that these conditions do not have to coincide with the coherent interiority of a single human subject (Fludernik, 1996). A text can distribute experiential force through unstable focalization, variable narrative distance, impersonal descriptive zones, or shifting scales of access that do not culminate in the centered mastery of one observer. Under such conditions, the reader is not simply granted privileged entry into a subject's consciousness. The reader is required to inhabit changing positions of proximity, uncertainty, and partial access, often moving between perspectives that cannot be fully reconciled into a single perceptual order. Literary form redistributes perception here by weakening the bond between experience and stable interiority. The world of the text no longer appears as something gathered neatly by a human

consciousness; it becomes a field through which perception travels unevenly, taking shape across relations that are atmospheric, material, and discontinuous.

Such redistribution is even more pronounced when atmosphere is understood as a formal force rather than as an ornamental background. Gernot Böhme's aesthetics of atmosphere is valuable precisely because it refuses the familiar split between objective setting and subjective emotion. Atmosphere, in his account, is neither purely inside the subject nor simply located in things themselves; it emerges as a quasi-objective tonal field that shapes how bodies are disposed within a space (Böhme, 1993). For literary criticism, this concept is especially productive because it allows one to describe how a text organizes feeling and perception before these are stabilized as the property of a character or narrator. A literary atmosphere does not merely set a mood. It distributes affective and perceptual pressure across weather, surfaces, sounds, spaces, textures, and rhythms of description, making the reader inhabit a tonal arrangement that precedes reflective mastery. This matters for posthuman aesthetics because atmosphere dislodges the assumption that feeling originates in an autonomous consciousness and is then projected outward. Instead, feeling becomes something that takes shape in the interval between body and world, between textual construction and readerly exposure. A novel whose atmosphere is thick with environmental pressure, material density, or quasi-impersonal unease is not merely decorating its thematic concerns. It is reorganizing the reader's sensory relation to the world it composes. Perception becomes less a matter of observing an environment than of entering a field whose tonal force precedes and exceeds human interpretive control.

The redistribution of perception can also be traced in the way literary language directs the reader's sensorium. Elaine Scarry's *Dreaming by the Book* is especially important here because it demonstrates that literary writing does not only communicate semantic content; it instructs acts of imaginative seeing, shaping how readers construct movement, contour, brightness, texture, and spatial relation from verbal cues (Scarry, 2001). This argument matters because it shifts attention away from the assumption that language simply refers to a world already constituted in perception. Literary form, on the contrary, helps produce the conditions under which the world becomes sensorially available in the first place. The reader is not merely receiving information but performing perceptual labor, constructing scenes that are often unstable, layered, and revisable. Nanay's account of distributed attention remains essential at this point because it explains how aesthetic experience can involve attention directed toward one scene or object while being spread across several of its properties at once (Nanay, 2016). Scarry's emphasis on the reader's imaginative activity extends this insight by showing that verbal form can compel attention to oscillate among multiple perceptual cues without resolving them into a unified visual mastery. In posthuman terms, such writing matters because it prevents experience from gathering itself around a single, centered observer. The reader is drawn into perceptual arrangements in which no one point of view can fully exhaust what the text is making available.

Rhythm further complicates the structure of perception by shaping how experience unfolds in time. Levine's account of rhythm as one of the major forms that organize social and aesthetic life is especially helpful because it directs attention to patterned repetition, interruption, recurrence, and temporal sequencing as forces that govern relation (Levine, 2015). In literary works, rhythm is not confined to verse or to stylistic cadence in a narrow sense. It includes the pacing of scenes, the spacing of descriptive intensities, the recurrence of motifs, and the management of delay or interruption across the narrative whole. Such temporal arrangement matters to posthuman aesthetics because it can dislodge the reader from a regime of immediate recognition. Repetition can pull perception away from instrumental forward movement and back toward texture, resonance, and recurrence. Delay can prevent consciousness from securing itself too quickly in interpretation, while interruption can redistribute salience away

from what initially appears central. Attridge's account of literature as singular event is especially valuable here because it foregrounds the reader's encounter with formal otherness rather than with already available thematic content (Attridge, 2004). Rhythm, under these conditions, becomes more than a feature of style. It is one of the ways literature loosens the habitual temporality of centered consciousness and compels the reader to undergo a different organization of attention. The human perceiver no longer occupies the unquestioned center of experiential time, since form itself can produce intervals, returns, and suspensions that resist appropriation by a stable interpretive subject.

A related transformation occurs in the hierarchy of what a text renders salient. Anthropocentric reading often assumes that significance naturally accumulates around human action, intention, and psychological depth, while objects, infrastructures, environments, and material presences remain secondary or merely contextual. Formal organization can radically disturb that hierarchy. Levine's argument that forms have affordances is useful because it suggests that every formal arrangement opens certain pathways of attention while closing others (Levine, 2015). A hierarchy, a network, a bounded whole, or a rhythm does not merely contain material; it organizes relations according to specific logics of prominence and subordination. In narrative terms, this means that descriptive duration, spatial arrangement, object recurrence, and scene composition can systematically relocate salience away from human interiority. Genette's distinctions remain important here because they remind us that narrative discourse controls not only access to consciousness but also the distribution of temporal and descriptive emphasis (Genette, 1980). When a text lingers on objects, surfaces, architectures, systems, or environments with unusual persistence, it is not merely adding detail. It is reorganizing the perceptual hierarchy through which readers learn what deserves sustained investment. This reorganization is central to posthuman aesthetics because it detaches significance from the assumption that human feeling is always the obvious center of literary meaning. Perception begins to move across distributed arrangements without requiring those arrangements to become symbolic extensions of character consciousness.

Experientiality itself changes when literary form refuses to anchor experience in a singular consciousness. Fludernik's work remains particularly valuable because she shows that narrative form is deeply bound up with the conditions under which experience is rendered intelligible to readers (Fludernik, 1996). Yet experientiality, in this context, need not be secured by an individualized human subject. It can be diffuse, mediated, impersonal, or environmentally distributed. A text may produce experience not through deep interior access alone, but through the accumulation of material impressions, tonal fields, bodily orientations, and spatial pressures that no single character entirely possesses. Böhme's account of atmosphere helps clarify how such experience can be affectively organized before it is cognitively stabilized as someone's emotion (Böhme, 1993). Scarry's analysis of verbal imaging shows how language can lead readers to enact these conditions rather than merely observe them from outside (Scarry, 2001). What results is a stronger conception of literary form as perceptual composition. Form does not simply convey an already constituted experience. It composes experience by distributing orientational, sensory, and affective cues across heterogeneous elements. This matters profoundly for posthuman aesthetics because it allows more-than-human relation to register at the level of lived reading, not just at the level of conceptual recognition. The reader still undergoes experience, but the architecture of that experience no longer guarantees the sovereignty of a single human center.

These formal dynamics also require a methodological recalibration in criticism. Once perception is recognized as something form composes rather than something theme merely carries, criticism can no longer remain satisfied with models that treat literary works as repositories of hidden meanings awaiting extraction. Attridge's insistence on

responsiveness to formal singularity is useful because it emphasizes the eventfulness of literature and the demand it places on readers to attend to how a work happens rather than only to what it states (Attridge, 2004). Rita Felski's challenge to the dominance of suspicious reading is equally relevant, since it resists the tendency to reduce literary works to symptoms whose significance lies elsewhere (Felski, 2015). A posthuman account of literary form does not abandon interpretation, but it does require interpretation to answer to the perceptual and affective work performed by formal arrangement. If atmosphere tunes the reader, if focalization destabilizes narrative authority, if rhythm interrupts mastery, and if objects or environments acquire salience independently of human intention, then these operations are not merely secondary effects. They are constitutive of what the text means and of how that meaning becomes experience. Reading posthumanly therefore requires more than identifying nonhuman motifs or philosophical themes. It requires attention to the ways literary form redistributes perceptual labor, unsettles habitual hierarchies of significance, and places the reader in relation to worlds that cannot be secured by the old model of the sovereign observer.

The force of literary form in posthuman aesthetics lies precisely in its ability to alter not only what is perceived but the terms on which perception becomes possible. Focalization can detach experiential authority from stable interiority and expose the contingency of perspective. Atmosphere can relocate feeling into tonal fields that implicate bodies, materials, and spaces together. Verbal form can compel acts of imaginative perception that are layered, unstable, and resistant to any final mastery. Rhythm can reorganize time so that attention no longer follows the secure path of human-centered recognition. Hierarchies of salience can be reworked so that objects, environments, and systems acquire prominence without becoming derivative of human psychology. Under these conditions, literary form does not illustrate posthuman relation from the outside. It composes a mode of experience in which relation is lived as perceptual redistribution rather than merely declared as an idea. What matters is not simply that literature can represent a more-than-human world, but that form can train readers to inhabit worlds where perception no longer gathers itself securely around a sovereign human subject. The problem that then emerges is not whether relation exists, but how such formally mediated redistribution comes to register as a specifically posthuman mode of relationality.

Posthuman Relationality as Aesthetic Experience

Posthuman relationality acquires aesthetic force only when relation ceases to function as a purely conceptual proposition and begins to shape the texture of experience itself. In literary criticism, relation is often named at the level of ontology or ethics: bodies are entangled, agency is distributed, environments are active, and the human is no longer sovereign. Yet such statements remain abstract unless they can account for how relation is sensed, inhabited, and undergone in reading. What matters, then, is not simply that posthuman thought displaces the human from the center of being, but that literature can compose an experience in which this displacement becomes perceptible. Aesthetic experience is decisive because it is the domain in which relation is no longer merely argued for; it is lived as an arrangement of proximity, exposure, responsiveness, and altered salience. The force of posthuman relationality lies precisely here. It names neither a fusion of all differences nor a sentimental celebration of interconnectedness, but a reorganization of experience in which self, object, environment, and otherness are no longer encountered as neatly separable terms. Under these conditions, literary form does more than redistribute perception. It renders relation itself experiential by loosening the distinction between what perceives and what is perceived, between what belongs to the subject and what presses upon it from beyond. Arnold Berleant's aesthetics of engagement is especially useful at this point because it offers an account

of aesthetic experience that begins not from distance but from participation (Berleant, 1991). Sara Ahmed's phenomenology of orientation is equally important because it shows that relation is always spatially and directionally organized, governed by what comes within reach and what remains at the edge of perception (Ahmed, 2006). Read together, they help clarify why posthuman relationality must be understood aesthetically: not as an abstract network of connections, but as a lived field of involvement in which the perceiver is shaped by what it encounters.

Berleant's challenge to disinterestedness is especially valuable because it identifies the point at which traditional aesthetics most clearly secures the autonomy of the perceiver. In *Art and Engagement*, he develops aesthetic engagement as an alternative to the detached model of appreciation that had long dominated the field, arguing that aesthetic experience is participatory, embodied, and immersed rather than distanced and contemplative (Berleant, 1991). The significance of this move for posthuman aesthetics is substantial. Once engagement replaces distance, the perceiver can no longer be imagined as an unaffected observer standing outside the scene of experience. Aesthetic experience is not something performed upon a world held at arm's length; it is something undergone within a field of relations that includes bodily movement, spatial disposition, sensory openness, and environmental implication. This is not a minor correction within aesthetics. It alters the architecture of experience itself. In literary terms, engagement means that reading cannot be described as the extraction of meaning from a safely bounded object. The reader is not exterior to the text's world in the way the old model presumes. Tone, rhythm, material description, spacing, and narrative pressure draw the reader into a participatory field in which interpretation is inseparable from affective and perceptual involvement. Posthuman relationality becomes legible here because the reader does not stand above relation in order to identify it; the reader is implicated in it. What literature can make available, under these conditions, is an experience in which relation precedes judgment and participation interrupts mastery. The value of Berleant's intervention lies in the way it transforms aesthetic relation from a secondary effect of contemplation into the very condition under which experience takes place.

Mikel Dufrenne's phenomenology of aesthetic experience introduces a different but equally important complication into the scene of relation. In *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Dufrenne does not reduce the artwork to a neutral object awaiting activation by a subject. Instead, he treats the aesthetic object as an expressive presence encountered in and through perception, a presence that discloses a world rather than merely submitting to the viewer's organizing gaze (Dufrenne, 1973). That shift matters for posthuman relationality because it interrupts the assumption that the subject alone provides initiative in the aesthetic encounter. The object is not inert material that receives meaning from consciousness. It confronts the perceiver with a sensible density, a style of appearing, and a world-bearing force that cannot be collapsed into subjective projection. This phenomenological insight has strong consequences for literary thought. A novel is not merely a storehouse of themes waiting to be arranged by a critical intelligence. It presents itself as a structured world whose rhythms, tonalities, and sensible organizations press upon the reader, soliciting forms of attention and response that are not freely invented from outside. Posthuman relationality gains depth here because relation becomes reciprocal without becoming symmetrical. The text addresses the reader, but not as a human other in any simple sense. It addresses the reader through a material-semiotic form whose agency is aesthetic rather than personal. Dufrenne therefore helps explain why posthuman relation cannot be reduced to interpersonal ethics. Relation may emerge through contact with a world-bearing object that has no interiority of its own and yet is not passive. Such a model is especially important for literary aesthetics because it allows form itself to participate in the event of relation. The reader is decentered not only by what the text says, but by the text's expressive pressure as an aesthetic object.

The spatial and directional dimensions of relation become more explicit in Sara Ahmed's account of orientation. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed argues that orientation shapes what is near, what is reachable, what recedes, and what comes to matter within a lived field of space (Ahmed, 2006). Orientation is not merely a matter of where a subject happens to stand. It is the condition through which worlds acquire lines, objects become available, and bodies take shape in relation to what they approach or avoid. This is especially important for posthuman aesthetics because it shows that relationality is never abstract. It is directional, selective, and materially organized. Aesthetic experience is always a matter of orientation: how attention turns, what comes within reach, what remains at the margins, and how bodies inhabit pathways laid out by form. In literary works, such orientation is continuously modulated. A narrative can draw perception toward objects that anthropocentric reading would ordinarily treat as background. It can rearrange proximity so that environments, infrastructures, weather, animal presences, or material textures become newly forceful. It can also disorient, putting readers out of line with inherited habits of perception and thereby exposing the conventions through which human-centered worlds are ordinarily secured. Posthuman relationality becomes aesthetic in precisely this sense. It is experienced not as a generalized awareness of interconnectedness, but as a reorientation of what is reachable, what is central, and what can no longer be kept at a distance. Ahmed's account makes it possible to describe the reader not as a detached consciousness surveying relation from above, but as a body reoriented by form into other pathways of attention and responsiveness. Relation is thus felt as a changed geometry of experience.
Tim Ingold's dwelling perspective deepens this account by shifting the terms of perception from representation to inhabitation. In *The Perception of the Environment*, Ingold argues against models that treat perception as the internal processing of an external world. Perception, for him, emerges through skilled engagement in an environment; it is grown through practice, movement, and habitation rather than assembled inside the mind as a detached representation of what lies outside (Ingold, 2000). Such a claim is profoundly useful for posthuman aesthetics because it relocates relation from the level of conceptual recognition to the level of lived co-presence. A perceiver does not first become a self-contained subject and then encounter an environment. Self and environment take shape together through movement, skill, and dwelling. Literary experience can be understood in similar terms. Reading does not simply involve looking at a textual world from outside and naming its themes. It involves a process of inhabitation in which one learns the tonal, temporal, and material conditions of a world, often before those conditions can be fully conceptualized. The posthuman force of Ingold's perspective lies in the way it denies the perceiver a position of transcendence. To perceive is already to be in, to be along, to be amidst. Relation is therefore not added to aesthetic experience as an ethical supplement; it is constitutive of how experience becomes possible. In literary terms, this means that posthuman relationality appears whenever a text compels the reader to dwell within environments, rhythms, and material lines that cannot be subordinated to a sovereign consciousness. The world of the text is not there simply to be surveyed. It must be inhabited, navigated, and learned. That change in the status of reading makes aesthetic experience less contemplative and more ecological in the strongest sense: it becomes a matter of being with rather than looking at.
Erin Manning's philosophy of movement adds another layer to this account by locating relation in the interval rather than in already formed entities. In *Relationscapes*, Manning resists the idea that movement is merely displacement from one point to another and instead emphasizes the intensity of movement, the relational in-between through which bodies and sensations take form (Manning, 2009). Her intervention matters because it prevents relation from hardening into a static structure. Posthuman relationality is not a network of fixed nodes simply linked together; it is a process of

becoming in which relation itself moves, alters, and produces the terms of the encounter. Aesthetic experience becomes especially significant under this description because art and literature often register precisely such intervals, suspensions, and emergent intensities. A literary text can hold the reader within states that are not yet resolved into subject and object, action and reaction, self and world. Rhythm, pacing, tonal suspension, and descriptive drift all contribute to this. The force of Manning's thought lies in the way it allows relation to be felt as incipience. Something is happening in the interval, but it has not yet consolidated into stable identity. This is crucial for posthuman aesthetics because it makes room for a mode of experience in which human-centered categorization arrives too late. The reader is carried by a movement of relation before securing what that relation means. Such an experience does not abolish form; it radicalizes it. Form becomes the means by which relation is kept mobile, by which the aesthetic event remains a process of emergence rather than a completed arrangement. Reading, then, becomes less the appropriation of a text than a participation in the text's relational motion.

The force of atmosphere shows even more clearly how posthuman relationality exceeds private consciousness. Tonino Griffero's work on atmospheres as quasi-things is especially productive here because it treats affective tonality neither as a purely internal state nor as a simple property of external objects. Atmospheres, in his account, are powers diffused through lived space that act upon bodies without being fully localizable as stable substances or events (Griffero, 2017). Dylan Trigg's account of atmosphere and shared emotion develops a related argument by showing that atmospheres can ground forms of affective experience that are bodily, spatial, and collective rather than purely private or reflective (Trigg, 2020). These interventions matter enormously for literary aesthetics. Once atmosphere is understood as a spatially diffused and semi-autonomous force, relation can no longer be confined to interpersonal exchange or individual feeling. Aesthetic experience becomes relational because bodies are toned, pressed upon, and disposed by fields that are not simply inside anyone. The posthuman significance of this is difficult to overstate. Atmosphere is one of the clearest modes in which the world itself seems to participate in feeling. Literary works often create precisely such atmospheric fields: not merely by naming moods, but by letting syntax, imagery, tempo, material detail, and environmental pressure gather into a tonality that grips the reader. The reader does not first identify a relation and then feel it. The reader is entered by a tonal field through which relation is already operative. Such an experience is posthuman because it decentralizes the subject as the sole origin of affect. Feeling is distributed across bodies, spaces, and material conditions. The aesthetic event is therefore not reducible to what a human perceiver chooses to recognize. It is something that comes on, surrounds, and reorganizes perception from within a shared or quasi-shared field.

This atmospheric dimension also clarifies why posthuman relationality should not be confused with conceptual holism. Relationality is not valuable merely because it tells us that everything is connected. Such a statement risks becoming trivial unless one can specify how connection is felt, resisted, distributed, and unevenly borne. Trigg's work is especially useful because it shows that shared emotion is not reducible to harmony or consensus. Atmosphere can bind bodies together, but it can also weigh on them, estrange them, or expose them to forces that are difficult to name or master (Trigg, 2020). Griffero's quasi-things likewise underscore that atmospheres can assault, resist, and impress themselves upon us without being fully grasped as intentional objects (Griffero, 2017). This matters for literature because posthuman relationality often appears less as celebratory connectedness than as vulnerability to fields of pressure that are affective, material, and more-than-human. Aesthetic experience is where that vulnerability becomes legible. One may be drawn into a text's atmosphere without controlling it, just as one may be oriented by a world that never fully yields itself to conceptual command. What emerges from this is a less sentimental account of relation.

Relation is not the soft erasure of boundaries. It is the condition under which boundaries become porous, unstable, and responsive to forces beyond the subject's control. The aesthetic scene therefore acquires a posthuman character not because it abolishes difference, but because it makes difference itself relational, lived, and affectively charged. Literary form can sustain precisely such experiences by preventing the reader from retreating into reflective distance. Tone, pressure, opacity, and immersion become ways of making relational vulnerability sensible.

Yuriko Saito's work on everyday aesthetics introduces a further consequence that is especially important for literary criticism. In *Everyday Aesthetics*, Saito argues that aesthetic experience is not confined to art objects but extends across ordinary environments, objects, practices, and decisions, shaping quality of life and carrying practical consequences for how worlds are organized (Saito, 2007). This claim matters because it prevents posthuman aesthetics from becoming a purely rarefied theory of special encounters. If everyday life is already aesthetically charged, then the reorganization of perception effected by literary form need not end with the page. Reading can alter habits of attention that bear directly on how environments, objects, creatures, and spaces are encountered beyond literature. The posthuman significance of Saito's argument lies in its insistence that aesthetic judgments are implicated in world-making. What seems merely perceptual or sensory has consequences for how one treats materials, values environments, responds to forms of disorder or care, and orients oneself within everyday surroundings. Under this light, posthuman relationality as aesthetic experience cannot remain a purely contemplative matter. It names a training of sensibility. Literary works become important not only because they represent more-than-human worlds, but because they cultivate modes of attention in which relation is perceived as constitutive rather than incidental. A reader habituated by such formal experiences may become less likely to approach the world as a collection of objects arranged for human use and more likely to register the aesthetic and ethical claims of shared environments. Saito's everyday aesthetics thus opens posthuman relationality toward practice without reducing it to moralism. The point is not that literature teaches lessons. It is that literature can alter aesthetic comportment, and that altered comportment matters for how the world is inhabited.

What takes shape across these positions is a conception of aesthetic experience that no longer begins from the detached subject and moves outward toward relation, but begins from relation and allows the subject to emerge as one participant within it. Berleant replaces disinterested distance with engagement, making participation the condition of aesthetic experience (Berleant, 1991). Dufrenne grants the aesthetic object an expressive force that interrupts the fantasy of passive material awaiting interpretation (Dufrenne, 1973). Ahmed shows that relation is oriented and spatial, organized by lines of reachability and distance rather than by abstract communion (Ahmed, 2006). Ingold reconceives perception as dwelling and skilled inhabitation, displacing the image of a mind facing an external world (Ingold, 2000). Manning locates relation in movement and interval, refusing to let it solidify into a static system (Manning, 2009). Griffero and Trigg reveal that affective tonality can be spatially diffused and shared without becoming simply subjective or objective (Griffero, 2017; Trigg, 2020). Saito finally reminds us that aesthetic relation extends into the ordinary textures of lived environments and everyday decisions (Saito, 2007). Taken together, these approaches allow posthuman relationality to be understood as a mode of aesthetic experience in which bodies, objects, spaces, atmospheres, and textual forms co-compose perception. The human is not removed from this scene, but it no longer occupies a position of foundational privilege. It is affected, oriented, immersed, addressed, and trained within a field whose terms it does not fully command. Relation becomes aesthetic when it is lived as participation, pressure, atmosphere, movement, and altered proximity rather than merely asserted as worldview.

A literary text becomes posthuman in a particularly strong sense when it does not merely represent such relation, but composes it as the reader's mode of access to the work. Under those conditions, relation is neither thematic supplement nor ethical afterthought. It is what the reader undergoes. The text does not simply say that humans are embedded in wider fields of material and environmental interdependence. It makes those fields felt through forms of engagement that exceed contemplative distance, through expressive objects that resist reduction to symbols, through orientations that shift the geometry of attention, through rhythms of movement and delay, and through atmospheres that distribute affect across a more-than-human scene. The critical value of posthuman relationality as aesthetic experience lies precisely here. It allows literary criticism to move beyond identifying motifs of entanglement and toward a richer account of how relation is formalized, sensed, and inhabited. Reading under such conditions is not the mastery of a world but exposure to one. It is not the securing of distance but the experience of implication. It does not dissolve the perceiver into an undifferentiated whole, but it does deny the perceiver the fantasy of standing apart from what it encounters. That altered condition of reading is where posthuman aesthetics reaches its strongest form. Relation is no longer simply what literature is about. It becomes the very mode in which literature is experienced.

Conclusion

Posthuman aesthetics invites a fundamental revision of how literary experience is conceived. The issue is not exhausted by the thematic presence of animals, objects, environments, or more-than-human agencies within the text. What is at stake is the status of the perceiver for whom the literary work becomes available as experience. Once aesthetic experience is no longer grounded in a sovereign human subject who organizes and secures the world before it, literature can no longer be understood primarily in representational terms. Its force lies instead in its capacity to reconfigure perception itself. Literary form matters here because it does not simply contain meaning but conditions the ways in which meaning can be sensed, inhabited, and sustained. Atmosphere, rhythm, sensory dispersion, and embodied orientation reorganize the relation between subject and world, displacing the human from its inherited role as the stable center of intelligibility. What emerges from this displacement is not the negation of the human, but a more exacting account of experience in which human perception is always already mediated by relations that are material, affective, and more-than-human. This shift requires an equally serious reconsideration of literary criticism. A reading practice that merely identifies nonhuman figures or distributed agencies may still preserve the old epistemic arrangement in which the critic remains the final authority over textual coherence. Posthuman aesthetics demands something more difficult: an account of reading attentive to the ways literature acts upon perception and exposes thought to forms of relation it cannot fully master. Interpretation remains necessary, but it can no longer proceed as though meaning were separable from the sensory and formal conditions through which it comes to matter. Aesthetics becomes decisive at precisely this point, not as an embellishment of ontology or ethics, but as the domain in which the decentering of the human becomes experientially intelligible. Literature does not simply describe relational existence; it composes it as an event of attention, implication, and altered orientation. Aesthetic experience beyond the human names this event. It marks a mode of encounter in which the subject is neither abolished nor enthroned, but re-situated within a world whose relations exceed possession, control, and anthropocentric measure. Under those conditions, posthuman relationality appears not as a supplementary philosophical claim, but as the condition through which literature can be felt, thought, and critically understood.

Acknowledgement
The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Aprinus Salam, S.S., M.Hum., as dissertation supervisor, and Dr. Nur Saktiningrum, S.S., M.Hum as co-supervisor, for their generous guidance, intellectual support, and continued encouragement throughout the development of this study. Their insights were invaluable in deepening the author's understanding of posthumanist philosophy and in clarifying its relation to aesthetics and literary criticism. The author also gratefully acknowledges the financial support provided by Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (LPDP), which made this research possible.

AI Use Declaration
Grammarly was used in the preparation of this article solely for checking grammar, improving sentence clarity, and reviewing diction. It was not used to generate arguments, research data, or substantive analysis. All ideas, interpretations, and final decisions regarding the content of the article remain the sole responsibility of the author.

Bibliographic references
Alaimo, S. (2010). Bodily natures: Science, environment, and the material self. Indiana University Press.
Ahmed, S. (2006). Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others. Duke University Press.
Attridge, D. (2004). The singularity of literature. Routledge.
Barad, K. (2007). Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning. Duke University Press.
Bennett, J. (2010). Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things. Duke University Press.
Berleant, A. (1991). Art and engagement. Temple University Press.
Bohme, G. (1993). Atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics. Thesis Eleven, 36(1), 113–126.
Braidotti, R. (2013). The posthuman. Polity Press.
Caracciolo, M. (2021). Narrating the mesh: Form and story in the Anthropocene. University of Virginia Press.
Dufrenne, M. (1973). The phenomenology of aesthetic experience. Northwestern University Press.
Ferrando, F. (2019). Philosophical posthumanism. Bloomsbury Academic.
Felski, R. (2015). The limits of critique. University of Chicago Press.
Fludernik, M. (1996). Towards a "natural" narratology. Routledge.
Genette, G. (1980). Narrative discourse: An essay in method (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Cornell University Press.
Griffero, T. (2017). Quasi-things: The paradigm of atmospheres. State University of New York Press.
Haraway, D. J. (2016). Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene. Duke University Press.
Hayles, N. K. (1999). How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics. University of Chicago Press.
Ingold, T. (2000). The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill. Routledge.
Levine, C. (2015). Forms: Whole, rhythm, hierarchy, network. Princeton University Press.
Manning, E. (2009). Relationscapes: Movement, art, philosophy. MIT Press.
Morton, T. (2013). Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world. University of Minnesota Press.
Nanay, B. (2016). Aesthetics as philosophy of perception. Oxford University Press.

Nanay, B. (2024). Aesthetic experience as interaction. Journal of the American Philosophical Association, 10(4), 715–727.
Saito, Y. (2007). Everyday aesthetics. Oxford University Press.
Scarry, E. (2001). Dreaming by the book. Princeton University Press.
Trigg, D. (2020). The role of atmosphere in shared emotion. Emotion, Space and Society, 35, 100658.
Wolfe, C. (2010). What is posthumanism? University of Minnesota Press. hat is posthumanism? University of Minnesota Press.

Words: 9197
Characters: 64 074 (36 standard pages)

Fitrilya Anjarsari
Fakultas Ilmu Budaya
Universitas Gadjah Mada
Jalan Nusantara 1, Bulaksumur, Yogyakarta 55281
Indonesia
fitrilya.anjarsari@mail.ugm.ac.id
ORCID: 0009-0006-6885-0273