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FROM ALTERITY TO (SELF-)EXILE AND SUBLIME IN OUTER SPACE. A
CASE STUDY: SAMANTHA HARVEY'S *ORBITAL*

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Abstract: *Samantha Harvey's Orbital presents a new perspective regarding space exploration, focusing on a day in the life of six astronauts, which brings forward a potential discussion regarding the human condition in outer space, the duality (human and cosmic) of astronauts, as well as the condition that they must face while being in outer space: being rather "outsiders" compared to people on Earth, but not feeling quite entirely at home in outer space either. Therefore, the following paper focuses on the lives of the six protagonists as depicted in Harvey's novel. Through a close reading and a narrative analysis, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the ways in which Orbital features the lives of six astronauts from a perspective that can be discussed from a theoretical standpoint that revolves around concepts such as alterity, exile (or rather self-exile), foreigner, and sublime (and cosmic sublime).*

Key words: alterity, cosmic sublime, foreigner, outer space, space exploration.

1. Introduction

1.1. Alterity and Outer Space: From "Being Singular-Plural" to Inner and Outer Environment

Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* focuses on a day in the lives of six astronauts traveling through space, orbiting Earth aboard the International Space Station. Their reflections on life, humanity, and existence can, therefore, be understood from two different perspectives: one that includes their human nature on one hand, and a reflection from an "isolated" point of view, from the other, as they are separated from our planet and the rest of humanity, in a theoretically different world. As a result, the ideas of isolation, alienation, and alterity can be used as theoretical frameworks to describe the double nature of Harvey's protagonists, especially while considering the clear dichotomy – they are neither completely at home, nor do they belong completely to the "outside" world of outer space. In other words, they only have themselves and the other astronauts – six isolated people against the world. However, human existence is rather relational, as Jean-Luc Nancy (2000:13) argues, in *Being Singular Plural*, that what we perceive to be "the outside", or the Other, is inside, rather as "the spacing of the dis-position of the world; it is our disposition and our co-appearance", while its "negativity", instead, "changes meaning; it is not converted into positivity, but instead corresponds to the mode of Being which is that of disposition/coappearance and which, strictly speaking, is neither negative nor positive, but instead the mode of being-together or being- with" (Nancy 2000:13). Therefore, the idea of "being singular-plural" (Nancy 2000:30) can be applied to the situation of Harvey's protagonists as well. The six astronauts find themselves in the paradox of being both in solitude and a collective as well – the situation that isolates them from the world is also the collectivity that brings them together, as each of them is singular (isolated and alienated from the world) and also plural (in a diverse group of astronauts that find themselves in the same situation):

Being singular plural means the essence of Being is only as coessence. In turn, coessence, or being-with (being-with-many), designates the essence of the co-, or even more so, the co- (the cum) itself in the position or guise of an essence. In fact, coessentiality cannot consist in an assemblage of essences, where the essence of this assemblage as such remains to be determined.

In relation to such an assemblage, the assembled essences would become [mere] accidents. Coessentiality signifies the essential sharing of essentiality, sharing in the guise of assembling, as it were. This could also be put in the following way: if Being is being-with, then it is, in its being-with, the “with” that constitutes Being; the with is not simply an addition. (Nancy 2000:30).

Therefore, the way Nancy (2000:185) understands the concept of “being singular-plural” is in a world that is brought together in spite of the differences – the “unity of a world” (Nancy 2000:185) is, according to the author, is “not one: it is made of a diversity, and even disparity and opposition”; furthermore, it is, in and of itself, “nothing other than its diversity, and this, in turn, is a diversity of worlds” (Nancy 2000:185). Therefore, a world (be it the one on Earth or in outer space) is “a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the mutual sharing and exposition of all its worlds—within this world” (Nancy 2000:185).

It is worth mentioning that the idea of space exploration as equal fascination and alterity is not necessarily new; Alexandra Ganser (2019:36) argues that from their “earliest cultural expressions”, humans have manifested “cosmological interest, including space travel, especially with regard to their place in the universe” (2019:36). As a result, from existential to scientific, approaches regarding our place and purpose in the universe have been discussed from a variety of perspectives. Olson and Messeri (2015:29) bring into consideration the discussion of an “inner environment”, one that “stretches from the Earth’s surface to the exosphere, Earth’s outermost atmospheric stratum” (2015:29), while the contrasting “outer environment” (29) represents “a discontinuous spatiality” one that “includes the ultra-deep Earthly subsurface and core but also the zone we are primarily concerned with here: the unbracketable space beyond the Earth’s atmosphere” (2015:29). Concepts such as the Anthropocene have been discussed in relation with outer space as well; in this case, the authors mention that, in the case of this distinction, the outer environment is an area where “certain things and processes, such as solar radiation and material bodies in motion, may obtain contingent inner environment significance via cultural interpretations of their terrestrial boundary-crossing significance” (2015:29), while the concept of the Anthropocene “is overdetermined by anthropic relations with inner environment and underdetermined by anthropic relations with outer environment” (2015:29). Furthermore, as the two argue, in terms of space explorations, “the idea of a human future untied to the Earth is now (...) presented no longer as a scenario, fantasy, fiction, or thought experiment, but rather as an inevitable necessity and a ‘natural’ result of enormous technological advancements in space sciences and technologies since World War II” (2015:36).

For a brief understanding of the paradigm shift in perception of outer space and space exploration that has occurred over the years, it is also necessary to understand how the world as we knew it suddenly became a completely different system after we saw it from outer space. Peter Redfield (2000:112) argues that the challenge was “to respect the present and the past simultaneously, and to cease insisting on the absolute gravity of categories”, with the main question of the modern world being “what is our sense of ‘outer space,’ and how did it come to be?” (2000:112). According to Redfield, “what has been a geometry of two dimensions becomes three, as connections are no longer restricted to the surface sphere of the planet” (2000:123), as having a platform in outer space “offers both an imperial vantage point across continents and a potential beacon between them, circumventing geographical markers on the ground or altering their meaning.” (2000:123). As a result, the world becomes “more actively whole, open to inspection and connection from above, allowing a degree of uniformity never before possible” (2000:123). While the airplane “opened the sky and moved through it at dramatic elevations” (2000:123), space technology “closed the sky again, bounded it from above and sealed it whole” (2000:123) and, eventually, “the world was one” (2000:123).

2. Astrofuturism and Models of Being

When it comes to artistic expressions related to outer space, the term “astrofuturism” has become increasingly prominent in recent decades. Douglas Kilgore (2003:2) argues that the term has been initially meant to represent “a narrative sub-genre of hard SF that intends to both entertain and educate in terms of technology and science”, which now “posits the space frontier as a site of renewal, a place where we can resolve the domestic and global battles that have paralyzed our progress on earth” (2). The way Harvey’s novel presents astrofuturism is not necessarily as a way to “embrace” or adhere to the term, but rather to question and challenge its limitations related to how humans (and, in a more specific way, astronauts) understand and relate to astrofuturism and the “feasibility” of the endeavor.

Related to the matter, specifically to our needs and capabilities of functioning within or beyond certain anthropological models of attachment and/or detachment to and from our limits, Debora Battaglia (2005:5) brings into consideration the idea of an “anthropological model of visits”, a model that, according to the author, “challenges us to reevaluate our attachments to and detachments from place, as a cultural ethics of visitation” (2005:5). This model, Battaglia argues, “acknowledges the problematic of departures, enjoining us to honor the disconnect, even as our focus shifts to the work we more commonly undertake as anthropologists of interrogating contact and the problematic of connecting across differences”(2005:5).

The idea of place – or, rather, belonging to a certain place – has been heavily discussed in relation to how we relate to outer space, when comparing and contrasting to how we relate to life on Earth. Lisa Messeri’s book, *Placing Outer Space: An Earthly Ethnography of Other Worlds*, addresses some of the aforementioned conundrums, while also focusing not on a place itself, but also being – and, as a result, belonging – to a certain extent, to a specific place:

“But, importantly, one can *be* (or can imagine *being*) in a place. Place suggests an intimacy that can scale down the cosmos to the level of human experience. To claim that the infinite field of stars is not an invitation to loneliness but a prompt for feeling the pull of cosmic companionship requires a powerful and pervasive understanding of these planets as *worlds* and *places* that relate to our own—that invite being (Messeri 2016:2).

Messeri’s argument can also be applied to the ways in which astronauts can relate (or not) to their voyage on the International Space Station as a place where they feel that they belong to. As a result, being on Earth itself becomes a question of belonging; in her own words, being on Earth “is both to dwell in a locality and to be connected to a planetary system. But how is Earth, in all of its vast geography, understood?” (2016:9). In this regard, Messeri follows with the concept of “the planetary”, which tries to answer the previous question with a follow-up based on what she calls “*intangible modes of being*” (2016:11), described as “ways of being that at first blush seem disconnected from *place*” (2016:11) which results in two things; one, “place itself is undergoing a change” and, as a result, “Earth itself becomes a singular locality” (2016:11). Therefore, the idea of place, as Messeri argues, should be understood and discussed as “an epistemological heuristic; a way of understanding that is actively pursued and cultivated by, in this case, planetary scientists that allows for a meaningful mode of interacting with objects that physically lie outside human experience (2016:15-16).

Place, in this case, represents “not an afterthought or something produced alongside science but is intimately tied to daily practice” (2016:16). The relevancy of this method delves into a matter that allows the development of “social studies of outer space” (2016:16), a field focused on “what the cosmos can tell us about ourselves” (2016:16). Narrating represents one of the fundamental ways of doing so; according to Messeri, narrating “builds a rich story that connects Earth with another world” (2016:19), which determines the idea of place to be centered around the act of “placing outer space” (2016:22), one that establishes what the author

calls the “cosmosview”. (2016:22). This needs to include, however, both perspectives; one, of the life they have on Earth and the second, within the logic of space exploration as a way to try and, perhaps, “conquer” the alterity that outer space still represents for our species. Frank White (2014:78) argues that, in order to fully comprehend the meaning of the experiences that astronauts encounter, “one must understand them as part of the story of systems on Earth”, based on the fact that “it supports the development of human social systems, so that they can function as elements in a wholly new type of system” (2014:78). A remarkable example could be represented by the ways in which concepts such as “self” or “nationalism” become significantly “altered” once one gets to see the world from outer space. White also argues that, for astronauts, “their nationalism diminished while they were in orbit or on the moon, and they became aware of humanity as a whole system” (2014:81) and, simultaneously, “the vastness of the universe reminded them that humanity is also distinct from everything else in space” (2014:81). Therefore, the paradigm shift in terms of identity and self-consciousness also became “a shift in what they considered ‘self’ and ‘other.’” (2014:81). A similar idea has been shared by William Cronon (1996:25) from an environmental perspective, related to the space of the “wildness”, which brings into consideration that if said wildness “can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world – not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both” (1996:25).

Last, but not least, David Nye (2022) discusses, in *Seven Sublimes*, a type of sublime that is intrinsically related to the ways in which we perceive outer space: the “environmental sublime”, as Nye argues that the outer space is not something that can be discussed in terms of ownership, but rather something that belongs to all of us: “Intangible atomic particles or revelations of outer space are not the exclusive property of one nation. (...) And as for the environmental sublime, it reveals symbiotic communities and complex dependencies” (Nye 2022). The environmental sublime is, arguably, noticeable in the ways we, as humanity, relate to the symbiotic relationship between nature and technology in order to try to understand the world we live in, as well as the world beyond our planet. Our power to transform the world around us, as well as the sublime that manifests itself in each technological advance that takes the evolution of our species further, are the things that determine us to reach for new heights and new limits; it is the “awe” that pushes us to reach for what seems to be unreachable, or rather, beyond reach:

“A natural object is an expression of external powers, while a technological object is a human product. When nature is the powerful source of experience, humankind is reduced to insignificance. But when awe is induced by human constructions, the experience may be identified with the conquest of nature, for example by conquering gravity in flight or containing a powerful river behind a dam. Humanity, often personified by the architect or the engineer, is exalted. The observer is not made aware of inner powers that reach beyond the visible world, but rather focuses on the human power to transform the visible world” (Nye 2022).

3. Exile and Foreigners

The quest for the unreachable can also manifest itself as a double-edged sword; the stronger we push and the more we try to conquer, the higher the risk for reaching alienation, alterity or – in the case of astronauts – even something that can be described as a state of being “exiled”; feeling that one belongs, for a (shorter or longer) while, neither fully part of Earth, nor fully part of outer space. Edward Said (2002:173) describes exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted”. In relation to the 20th century – and, arguably, the

21st century as well – exile, as Said describes it, is “neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible: at most the literature about exile objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience first hand; but to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as ‘good for us.’” (2002:174). Even though it may be temporary for astronauts - varying from months to years, depending on the mission – the feeling of being “exiled” from Earth can still be significantly acute for most astronauts. Said also argues that their well-being does not always make a difference, as the exiles are “always eccentrics who feel their difference (even as they frequently exploit it) as a kind of orphanhood” (2002:182), as the exiled individual “insists on his or her right to refuse to belong” (2002:182), which, in turn, leads to accepting and adhering to “methods for compelling the world to accept your vision-which you make more unacceptable because you are in fact unwilling to have it accepted. It is yours, after all” (2002:182).

However, the idea of exile, as Said sees it, is different, in some areas, compared to the experience of an astronaut; while Said argues that exile is not something a person deliberately chooses, as “you are born into it, or it happens to you” (2002:184), astronauts are willingly taking part in space missions and have the option to choose whether this is the road they want to follow in their careers. However, the feeling of being “left out”, of belonging to “the other” (or rather outer) space and last, but not least, the alterity that the astronauts are facing are, still, as real as they can get. Sometimes, in the case of exile – and this could be applied to the astronauts as well – we may identify what Said calls “a particular sense of achievement in acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be” (2002:186); however, ultimately, exile “is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure” (2002:186). Ultimately, it is arguable that, in outer space, astronauts might feel as exiled, as the exile represents “life led outside habitual order” (2002:186), one that is “nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew” (2002:186), which, as we are about to see in Harvey’s novel, can be applied to the lives of astronauts in outer space as well.

Another concept that can be applied to the alterity that astronauts encounter other space is being “the foreigner”. Julia Kristeva (2024:1), in *Strangers to Ourselves*, describes the figure of the foreigner as “the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder”. In facing the difficulties, the foreigner “becomes smooth and hard as a pebble, always ready to resume his infinite journey, farther, elsewhere” (5-6); furthermore, the foreigner must deal with the distance that “detaches him from the others as it does from himself and gives him the lofty sense not so much of holding the truth but of making it and himself relative while others fall victim to the ruts of monovalency”. When it comes to the idea of belonging to a certain place, Kristeva (2024:7) describes the foreigner in terms of alterity; the foreigner does not belong to “any place, any time, any love” (2024:7), facing “the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the present in abeyance” (2024:7). Often described as without a clear home – in a way, same as astronauts, as their “home” becomes the International Space Station –, they face a paradox similar to the one that Kristeva describes to the foreigner, of being “never completely true nor completely false” (2024:8). In terms of self and identity, “settled within himself, the foreigner has no self” (2024:8), but rather only “an empty confidence, valueless, which focuses his possibilities of being constantly other, according to others’ wishes and to circumstances” (2024:8). Last, but not least, the foreigner remains “never simply torn between here and elsewhere, now and before” (2024:10).

Another revealing image that can be attributed to the efforts of the astronauts may also be related to the imminence of our planet’s destruction that threatens, in a way, our entire species. Robert D. Romanyshyn (2005:24), in *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, argues that “the possibility of departure from earth is a way of lessening the emotional effects of the fear

of its destruction”, which leads to the idea that due to the threat of destruction, “as imaged in the nuclear cloud, there is the need to escape, imaged as space flight” (2005:24). As a result, “it becomes necessary to devalue the earth we would leave behind, to lessen the impact of the loss” (2005:24). Nevertheless, the image of home remains “perhaps the oldest, deepest, and most powerful image of the human soul” (2005:24), as we try to limit the emotional burden that this may cause: “In stripping the earth of this image, we sever its hold upon us and thereby deaden for ourselves the impact of its loss. Initially devalued, the emotional disaster of its loss is somewhat tamed” (2005:24). When we notice the rocket on the launching pad, we “get some rough measure of how far we have come along the long road of evolution toward separating ourselves from the earth and the rest of creation” (2005:31), as we identify as “the new masters of creation, and it is an *awe-ful* vision” (2005:31). At the same time, there is a certain “linear perspective” (2005:34) which, in turn, achieves “a kind of geometrization of the space of the world, and within that space we become observers of a world which has become an object of observation” (2005:34) – which allows the “transformation of the eye into a technology and a redefinition of the world to suit the eye, a world of maps and charts, blueprints and diagrams, the world in which we are, among other things, silent readers of the printed word and users of the camera, the world, finally, in which we have all become astronauts” (2005:34). Furthermore, the “self of infinite vision” (2005:96) is now “a psychological reality. We are all, psychologically, astronauts” (2005:96).

4. Alterity, (Self-)Exile and the Cosmic Sublime in *Orbital*

The portrayal of life on the International Space Station, depicted by Samantha Harvey in *Orbital*, is a reflection not just on the lives of the protagonists – from small daily habits to perspectives on existence and our place in the (known) universe – but also on the past, present and future of our planet, as well as our species. The question of “where” (and even how) we belong in the infinite vastness of the universe is a matter that can be identified in the daily struggles, reflections and interactions of the protagonists – either with themselves or with strangers that capture the same frequencies at a certain moment during the day. According to Claire Cazajous-Augé (2025:98), Harvey’s novel can be analyzed through a perspective of what the author calls the “cosmic sublime”. Relatively similar to the other types of sublime that we have previously mentioned so far, this type of sublime (which is quite specific and applies to Harvey’s novel as well) provides, according to the author, “a more subjective perspective on humanity’s place in the universe and inspires existential wonder, particularly through the firsthand experiences of astronauts” (2025:98), in the sense that it “stirs a profound sense of awe at the immensity of space while also highlighting the ethical dilemmas posed by humanity’s environmental footprint on Earth and beyond” (2025:98). Its limitations, as described by Cazajous-Augé, include the fact that the cosmic sublime remains, at least for now, “an exclusive experience that is accessible only to a privileged few, such as astronauts or wealthy space tourists, thus limiting its transformative environmental potential” (2025:98); therefore, the author brings into consideration the “Anthropocene cosmic sublime” (2025:98), a framework that “intensifies the ethical and environmental awareness associated with the cosmic sublime while democratizing its impact” (2025:98).

In that sense, literary works “serve as powerful vehicles for the Anthropocene cosmic sublime because they make this experience accessible to broader audiences and thus dissolve the exclusivity tied to firsthand space exploration, which could confine environmental awareness to those with the privilege of experiencing space traveling” (Cazajous-Augé 2025: 98). Furthermore, Harvey’s novel “combines a sense of awe when contemplating the vastness of space with a stark reflection on the pressing environmental crises currently facing our planet” (2025:100), while capturing “how an existential awareness of humanity’s place in the vast

universe can emerge through the quiet rhythms and seemingly ordinary routines of daily life in space. (2025:101)

The daily life of astronauts, as featured in Harvey's novel, revolves around both the mundane and the extraordinary. While the six astronauts are trying to go on with their tasks, the feeling of being exiled, somewhere far away from home, becomes a lot more difficult to manage. In this particular day that the action of the novel takes place in, one of the first things that we found out about Chie, one of the protagonists, is the fact that her mother had passed away. A traumatic incident for anyone; however, for an astronaut, being the furthest away from home, it becomes unbearable – both for her and for the other astronauts, who cannot find the right way to console her. There is a new dimension of grieving; even a concept such as heaven is captured in a different light. The "(self-)exile" gives a new perspective to life and death altogether:

"None of them knows what to say to Chie, what consolation you can offer to someone who suffers the shock of bereavement while in orbit. You must want surely to get home, and say some sort of goodbye. No need to speak; you only have to look out through the window at a radiance doubling and redoubling. The earth, from here, is like heaven. It flows with colour. A burst of hopeful colour. When we're on that planet we look up and think heaven is elsewhere, but here is what the astronauts and cosmonauts sometimes think: maybe all of us born to it have already died and are in an afterlife. If we must go to an improbable, hard-to-believe-in place when we die, that glassy, distant orb with its beautiful lonely light shows could well be it". (Harvey 2024:9).

The "(self-)exile", however, may turn out to have perhaps unexpected results every now and then. For example, while describing the lives of astronauts in orbit, Harvey describes a particular time where they experience "a powerful desire that sets in — a desire never to leave. A sudden ambushing by happiness" (2024:12). What can be described as a short moment of sublime, given by the authenticity of this unique experience, happens to each astronaut not through the form of overwhelming happiness, but rather through what most people would consider the mundane, usual routine in the day of an astronaut; happiness, therefore, can be found "from within the sachets of risotto and chicken cassoulet, from the panels of screens, switches and vents, from the brutally cramped titanium, Kevlar and steel tubes in which they're trapped, from the very floors which are walls and the walls which are ceilings and the ceilings which are floors" (2024:12), just to name a few. The space of exile becomes a second home; the space of alterity, even for a short while, can become a more than bearable place. For them, "it isn't so much that they don't want to go home but that home is an idea that has imploded — grown so big, so distended and full, that it's caved in on itself" (2024:12).

Exile, therefore, can also turn out to be a space of (re)discovering themselves for the protagonists of Harvey's novel. The remarkable aspect, in this case, is noticing the ways in which they adapt to their journey. At first, the narrator mentions, "they each miss their families, sometimes so much that it seems to scrape out their insides" (2024:12); later, as a result of both necessity and adapting to the new reality, "they've come to see that their family is this one here, these others who know the things they know and see the things they see, with whom they need no words of explanation" (2024:12). However, one of the most difficult things upon returning home would be the fact that very few people in the entire history of humanity would be able to relate to their stories and understand the things they have experienced and gone through. The novel questions this from the first pages of the novel: "When they get back how will they even begin to say what happened to them, who and what they were? They want no view except this view from the window of the solar arrays as they taper into emptiness. (2024:12-13). Also, being far away from their families affects the rest of the astronauts as well; Nell, another

protagonist of the novel, finds herself “trapped” with her “family” from outer space. In an email exchange with her brother, he said that “it must be nice to be with five others all the time, your *floating family*, he called it”. Nell’s perception, however, portrays a narrative of alterity, isolation and exile: “Up here, *nice* feels such an alien word. It’s brutal, inhuman, overwhelming, lonely, extraordinary and magnificent. There isn’t one single thing that is nice” (2024:17).

However, this feeling is not singular: they all seem to share something similar to being “singular-plural”, as they are all together in their loneliness: “They have talked before about a feeling they often have, a feeling of merging. That they are not quite distinct from one another, nor from the spaceship” (2024:19). Still, the world that they will be going back to starts to feel less and less like home, either; strangers in outer space, they get the sense that they will feel estranged once they get back on Earth as well. The narrative describes them as feeling “they are encapsulated, a submarine moving alone through the vacuum depths, and when they leave it they will feel less safe” (2024:20), and when they return, they will have to endure feeling “strangers of a kind. Aliens learning a mad new world” (2024:20).

The feeling of loneliness is further emphasized by the narrative in the moments when the astronauts are scanning for radio waves during their orbit – mirroring our fascination for extraterrestrial life. The feeling of potentially being alone in the universe feels different for the astronauts who are facing the vast emptiness of the solar system. Within a narrative dominated by the daily lives of astronauts, *Orbital* finds several moments to address the anxiety and isolation that we, as humanity, feel in the face of the great questions that we have no clear answer to – particularly whether we are alone in the universe or not: “Meanwhile we begin to listen. We scan the reaches for radio waves. Nothing answers. We keep on scanning for decades and decades. Nothing answers. We make wishful and fearful projections through books, films and the like about how it might look, this alien life, when it finally makes contact. But it doesn’t make contact, and we suspect in truth that it never will. It’s not even out there, we think. Why bother waiting when there’s nothing there?” (29). However, it might be argued that the anxiety and isolation that the astronauts feel in their orbit is also a result of the physical toll that the astronauts’ lives are taking on the protagonists. The physically demanding task of orbiting the planet becomes, in time, quite unbearable. Not only does time move a lot differently, but so is the task of simply moving on with your day; before too long, prolonged exposure to outer space becomes too much – both literally and figuratively. The self-exile of outer space becomes, in a way, a matter of survival:

“Too bad for you, it consoles, that you’ve drifted too long, you’ve floated too long, that the clocks in your cells have gone off their pace. Too bad for you that when you wake up in the morning you don’t know where your arm is until you look, that without the feedback of weight your limbs are mislaid. (Where did I put it, that arm? says the panicked brain. Where did I leave it?) Too bad for you that your limbs are lost in space and that those lost in space are lost too in time. That you’re losing your grip. That when you snatch lightning-fast at a pair of pliers sailing by, your split second is a lumbering two or three, that time around you is growing idle and plump. That you are no longer the sharp tool you used to be.” (Harvey 2024:65).

The feeling of isolation and “exile” remains, however, one of the most prominent themes of the novel. According to (Cazajous-Augé 2025: 110), *Orbital* “moves beyond ideological critiques, foregrounding the astronauts’ very physical disconnection from Earth as a stark reminder of human limitations in space”. The alterity manifests itself in multiple ways; from the standpoint of spaceflight, astronauts experience “significant alterations in their sensory perception: their muscles atrophy, their sinuses are congested, and microgravity alters the functioning of the nervous system” (2025:11), which as a result, leads to the protagonists experiencing “feelings of Earthsickness and a longing for terrestrial sensations and

experiences” (2025:110). Furthermore, the protagonists of the novel “perceive both grandeur and minutiae, which allows them to grasp the invisible yet essential interconnections between all living forms” (2025:111).

One of the most remarkable images, however, offers a kind of social commentary on life on Earth. From outer space, the destruction of our planet, especially through conflicts, seems almost absurd and, yet, imminent, as the astronauts seem to be helpless; they simply cannot do anything to stop the conflicts and, furthermore, all the issues regarding conflicts seem to be pointless from the perspective that the astronauts have. They rhetorically ask, seemingly already knowing the answer: “Can humans not find peace with one another? With the earth? It’s not a fond wish but a fretful demand. Can we not stop tyrannising and destroying and ransacking and squandering this one thing on which our lives depend?” (Harvey 2024:73). As Cazajous-Augé (2025:112) notices, the novel “does not only illustrate how space traveling has an impact on our understanding of our place on Earth and in the universe; the novel also actively shapes our relationship with the world and urges us to reconsider our perception of and attitudes toward the Earth and its orbital environment”. The social commentary of *Orbital* extends to everyone, from world leaders to all humans: “They come to see the politics of want. The politics of growing and getting, a billion extrapolations of the urge for more, that’s what they begin to see when they look down.” (Harvey 2024:75). Furthermore, the social commentary captures nuances of ecocriticism; as seen from space, humans are dominated by the seemingly unstoppable force of consumerism: “the sheer amazing force of human want, which has changed everything, the forests, the poles, the reservoirs, the glaciers, the rivers, the seas, the mountains, the coastlines, the skies, a planet contoured and landscaped by want” (2024:75).

Another remarkable dynamic is determined by Nell’s marriage; with her orbiting the planet, far in outer space, and her husband at home, on Earth. However, they both seem to feel distanced (and distant) from one another. Training to become an astronaut is taking its toll on the protagonists’ personal lives as well, with an almost impossible work-life balance for some of them. As a result, it is arguable that alterity occurs even within the personal relationships of the astronauts; not only do they feel like foreigners in the vastness of the universe, but they also experience feeling like the “foreigners” of their own relationships. The lives that they have chosen to pursue are equally contributing to the “distance” between the two. Both Nell and her husband have chosen their own “(self-)exile”: one in Ireland, the other in outer space – regardless, the emptiness between them speaks volumes regarding the sacrifices that not only astronauts, but their families have to confront:

“She is, it must be said, trapped. It’s his whereabouts that are less known; he could be anywhere. Of the six years of their relationship they’ve been married for five; of those five years she’s been in astronaut training for four; of those four years they’ve spent only a handful of months together, and not even a third of those have been spent in his family home in Ireland which he inherited and moved into last year with a suitcase of things, because if he was going to be largely alone then better there than their flat in London where he had no garden or space or sense of himself. (...)

So she asked him, Who is the more unknown? And his reply to that: Both differently but equally unknown. Your mind full of acronyms and mine full of sheep ailments. Both of us equally unknown.” (Harvey 2024:85).

Last, but not least, what seems to be the ultimate sublime dimension of human experience often oscillates between the extraordinary and nihilism. As Pietro, one of the protagonists of the story, argues when questioning the purpose of their journey in outer space, their lives often seem to be “inexpressibly trivial and momentous at once” (2024:121), as they, as astronauts, “matter greatly and not at all”. The main issue that he identifies is that, regardless of the nature of their extraordinary achievements, they seem to have no real substance, meaning

or even happiness behind them at all; Pietro's conclusion speaks volumes in terms of the sacrifices that the astronauts have to make "only to discover that your achievements are next to nothing and that to understand this is the greatest achievement of any life, which itself is nothing, and also much more than everything" (2024:121). Eventually, the sublime of the experience is reduced to its core elements; it is both survival and endurance, both unbearable and unique – the closer they find themselves facing the great void of the unknown, the more they get to enjoy life: "Some metal separates us from the void; death is so close. Life is everywhere, everywhere" (2024:121).

5. Conclusion

Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* brings a unique perspective to the genre of space exploration, yet it does not shy away from focusing on the mundanity behind the sublime, the alterity, and the exile that astronauts experience while "facing" the overwhelming world of outer space. It is, arguably, a different type of exile: one that includes a perspective which very few people have had the chance to experience so far. Despite its grandeur, the world of cosmic exploration still represents a "rupture" from the world we were born into, from the place we have lived our entire lives, and, for now, the only "home" we know as a species. The foreigners of outer space – and, also, a type of foreigners for those of us who are, currently, not in outer space –, astronauts find themselves in multiple conundrums at once. From outer space, they seem to, at least temporarily, not belong to either Earth or outer space, which, in turn, makes up for a separate, unique type of exile, that provides a kind of alterity which is to be understood within the context of the fascination of our species for space exploration, on one hand and from a personal perspective (of who we are as humans, what we feel, what we feel and what we need) on the other.

Consequently, *Orbital* can also be understood as a novel that presents a "behind the scenes" look at our quest, as a species, for both knowledge and order in the vast, unknown "chaos" of the universe. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2014:236) argues, it is about "those endless cosmogonic efforts to derive all *this* from *that*, efforts whose very multiplicity signal a persistence of chaos amid anything that looks like order", which can be understood, in a way, also as "the real promise of the multiverse" (236). Before the multiverse, however, our quest for exploring and finding meaning in the universe will, most likely, continue. In the meantime, Harvey's novel sheds light on a most important lesson to remember: no matter how much we strive to reach beyond the world we live in and "conquer the outer space", we are all, astronauts or not, still – inescapably, but fortunately – human.

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