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Out of Margins:
Exploring Post-humanity in *Klara and the Sun*

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Abstract

Seventeen years after *Never Let Me Go* Ishiguro deals with another dystopian story whose protagonist is an android. An artificial intelligence endowed with both sensitivity and extraordinary ability to observe the world around her. Klara is meant to be a 'friend' for only those who can afford her. Playing the role of a friend, she can observe many aspects of people's behavior in particular concerning personal relationships. Like in the previous novels, Ishiguro uses an I-first person narration to deeply investigate human love capacity. The novel seems to ask some crucial questions: how willing are you to compromise for love? What are the limits of the human heart? How much are we all dependent on technology and also in interacting with each other? My aim is to answer these questions through a close, hermeneutic reading of the text also considering the context in the view of the studies on post-humanism.

Robots in disguise

Man has always had the temptation to break the bank that divides the inanimate from the universe of the living. Our species has always struggled to bring an alternative parent vocation to the surface with its hands and intellect. There are plenty of examples of these attempts to shape otherness: a piece of clay to model, a slab of marble to sculpt, a genetic line to select, or a computer to program. Being able to create a life is such a strong *leitmotif* that it can be traced in the cultures of all times. Precisely, this lies in the persistent fascination for robotics, that is the challenge of man creating man. The engine of this atavistic human ambition is what the ancient Greeks called *hubris*, or the arrogance to place oneself on the

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same level as God by challenging the limits imposed on man and rebel against the established order. The motivations that guide this research are many: the desire to overcome death, the male dream to procreate without female inter-mediation, but also the fear of creating a double as a shadow or a reflected image of repressed fears and nightmares. The creative activity of man, therefore, presents itself in its double value of dream and nightmare. However, while the world of nature is perceived in a positive and legitimate way, even when it causes destruction and suffering to man, the fruit of human creation is always looked upon with distrust and fear. The creature, or the robot are totally delegitimized to an autonomous existence and almost all traditions revolve around the risk of rebellion and emancipation of the son of man who from obedient servant turns into an evil and dangerous entity. We find this narrative cliché, for example, in the myth of the minotaur, in the legend of the Golem, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and even in Collodi's *Pinocchio* (see Marchesini). The private and almost exclusive bond between the creator and the creature reveals the selfish need to maintain control over the creature and consequently the dark side of its creator. The creature is always represented in a problematic way, its entry into the human proscenium is accompanied by a series of questions about the risk of its contamination with human beings, a consequent rebellion against humanity, or the request for social recognition as a legal entity. Contemporary society feels a growing need to be assisted both in daily tasks and in adequate psychological support. All this in response to a condition of isolation that arises from the predominance of individualism. Hence androids can become perfect surrogate companions simulating social and affective behavior. In creating life-like robots, however, human beings paradoxically feel more comfortable to confide to them than to each other because a robot makes them feel less shy and insecure. As rightly observed by John Goff (2018, 8):

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> The value of an android would vary according to what it was required to do (or, at a further level of development, required itself to do). […] However, if the android was required not only to adapt to the humans it serves but also to do so reflexively through some form of self-understanding, then the better it was able to adapt to varying circumstances, and the more autonomy it developed, not only would it become more valuable to its humans but also to itself. It would have a value given the uniqueness of its adaptations. Such an android would not only have initial but increasing value – this is not dissimilar to a very good servant such as a butler. However, the range of services that an android might perform for its humans would be wider than that of a butler since an android fuses in its uses the roles of instrument and of agent.

One wonders how humanlike a robot should behave emotionally in order to be accepted by humans without becoming too realistic and, as a result, threatening. Designing a too natural robot could lead to ambiguous situations and unpredictable consequences, namely towards the 'uncanny valley' (Mori 2005), a no-place out of control where unexpected things may occur.

AI's environmental awareness.

These and many other questions seem to underlie the eighth novel by Kazuo Ishiguro whose protagonist is a robot named Klara. However, Klara is not just as any robot but a perfectly anthropomorphic robot, highly performing, as the store manager says in a sales pitch, she has an: "appetite for observing and learning ... [and] has the most sophisticated understanding of any AF in this store" (Ishiguro 2021, 42). The story unfolds in a dystopian US town where robots like Klara are designed to serve humans in an absolutely unusual way. After *Never Let Me Go* Ishiguro returns to science fiction as a pretext to talk even more to man about man. Ishiguro has accustomed his reading public to deal with various literary genres and transform them into something always new and unpredictable. If in the *Never Let Me Go* dystopia clones are designed to donate their organs to sick humans, in *Klara and the Sun* the robots have a no less disturbing function: they are creatures programmed to become the best friends of lonely children. Klara is an AF, that is to say an artificial friend. Through Klara's eyes, the narrative explores themes of machine intelligence, human frailty,

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and the ethical implications of creating sentient beings. Through the lens of Rosi Braidotti's *Metamorphoses* we can better understand how Ishiguro's novel grapples with the boundaries of the human and the posthuman. Braidotti's posthumanist framework moves beyond the humanist fixation on the autonomous subject and instead emphasizes the fluidity of identities, bodies, and subjectivities. This conceptual lens is particularly relevant when examining *Klara and the Sun*, as Klara occupies an ambiguous position between the human and the machine. Subjects are no longer seen as fixed, rational entities, but rather as fluid and interconnected with the nonhuman, animal, and technological worlds: "The model of the body proposed by the brand of philosophical nomadism I am defending is symbiotic interdependence. This points to the co-presence of different elements, from different stages of evolution: like inhabiting different time-zones simultaneously. The human organism is neither wholly human, nor just an organism. It is an abstract machine, which captures, transforms and produces interconnections (2002: 226)". Klara, an AI with a humanoid form, embodies this posthuman subjectivity. She blurs the line between human and machine, possessing not only intelligence but also a capacity for empathy and moral reasoning. Ishiguro deliberately leaves ambiguous the extent to which Klara can truly feel or understand human emotions, but her actions often suggest a deep engagement with the world of humans. Klara's keen observational skills and willingness to sacrifice herself for Josie's well-being challenge traditional notions of what it means to be human, as her behavior echoes Braidotti's notion of fluid identities that move beyond the purely human. Braidotti's idea of 'becoming' is also central to Klara's narrative arc. That is meant as the potential for individuals and societies to undergo transformative processes. Klara, throughout the novel, constantly becomes something else. She begins as an observer in the store window, gradually becoming Josie's companion, and ultimately tries to become a surrogate for Josie in her mother's desperate plan to transfer Josie's essence into Klara.

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Klara's transformation, however, remains within the boundaries of her artificial nature. Even though Josie's mother entertains the idea of using Klara as a vessel for Josie's identity, the novel explores the limits of this becoming. Klara's sense of self remains distinct and separate from the human experiences around her. Furthermore, Klara's relationship to the Sun introduces an interesting angle to Braidotti's notion of materialism and the vitality of nonhuman entities. Klara attributes great significance to the Sun, seeing it as a source of life and power, even praying to it in her own way to heal Josie. This connection between Klara and the Sun could be seen as part of a broader posthuman perspective, where technological life forms are still interconnected with natural forces and ecologies. In this view, Klara is not just an isolated machine but part of a larger network that includes the natural world.

Stephen Cave has also dealt with the AI in his work. Cave, in particular, identifies recurring tropes in AI stories, such as the idea of AI as a threat to humanity or AI as a tool for human salvation. Cave highlights the long-standing cultural fear that AI will surpass human intelligence and potentially harm humanity. This fear is notably absent from *Klara and the Sun*. Unlike many AI narratives where AI is depicted as a dangerous force that threatens human supremacy (such as in the case of HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Skynet in *The Terminator*), Klara is portrayed as a deeply benign and caring entity. Her motivations are entirely centered on helping Josie, even to the point of personal sacrifice. In this sense, Klara is a deliberate departure from the traditional narrative of AI as a potential antagonist. Ishiguro invites readers to consider a different narrative, one where AI is not necessarily a threat but a companion and helper, though still bound by its limitations. Another key narrative analyzed is the idea of AI as the 'perfect servant' — machines designed to fulfill human needs and desires: "The close association between artificial intelligence, power, and control is one such area of continuity, as are the desires for perfectly loyal, unerring servants, and for reliable information about the future (2020: 66)". Klara fits into this

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archetype as she is created specifically to provide emotional and social support to children. However, Ishiguro complicates this narrative by questioning the ethical implications of creating sentient beings for the purpose of serving humans. Klara is undeniably intelligent, and while her emotional experiences may not be as rich or complex as those of humans, she nonetheless demonstrates a form of consciousness. This raises uncomfortable questions about her agency and the morality of using her as a tool to fill emotional gaps in human lives. Klara becomes a mirror for the human characters' anxieties about death, illness, and loneliness. Josie's mother, in particular, sees Klara as a possible solution to her fear of losing her daughter. The potential of transferring Josie's consciousness into Klara speaks to a deep-seated human desire for immortality, a theme that Cave traces through various AI narratives. However, Ishiguro complicates this desire by showing the limitations of such a solution. Klara, despite her intelligence, cannot fully replicate Josie's essence, suggesting that there are aspects of humanity — the soul, perhaps, or individual consciousness — that remain beyond the reach of AI. Ishiguro's novel also engages with another narrative discussed by Cave: the Promethean myth, which frames the creation of intelligent machines as a form of overreaching hubris. In *Klara and the Sun*, the act of creating AI, while not explicitly framed as hubristic, does raise ethical concerns. The idea that Klara might be used as a replacement for Josie hints at a discomfort with the notion of humans playing god, creating machines in their own image, and attempting to defy the natural order of life and death. Yet, unlike traditional Promethean narratives, where human hubris leads to disaster, *Klara and the Sun* offers a more nuanced exploration of the consequences of AI, suggesting that while AI can be helpful, it cannot fully replace the complexity of human relationships. As in previous novels, also in *Klara and the Sun* there is a first person narration (see Lodge). Yet, unlike the previous narrators, Klara does not start her story 'in the midst of things', but from the beginning, namely from the time she arrives at the shop. She feels the urge to

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recollect her memories in order to take stock of her life which has come to a moment of dead end. Klara, however, recounts the events that she witnesses in a casual way, while they occur, slowly plunging us into a deeper perception and awareness of the reality around her. Klara embodies the topos of the different camouflaged as a human. As an android Klara does not have to comply with laws conferred on her by nature, but must only respond to the orders of her manufacturer. Yet, there is an emancipation of the robot that from a slave meant for industrial activity becomes a friendly partner who is able to create an attractive interface with its user. Klara is precisely the example of this emancipation. She is the one capable of surpassing man's performance, proving to be more reliable and precise. As a robot, Klara initially moves only in confined spaces, in the store where she is alternately placed in the window when she gets: " 'the special honor' of representing the store to the outside" (5), or in the back room and then at Josie's place, the little girl who has chosen her to be her personal AF, though: "[U]nlike most AFs, unlike Rosa, I'd always longed to see more of the outside - and see it in all detail" (6). Differently from human beings, Klara experiences the store and the house as 'striated spaces' while the town outside as 'the smooth space'. According to Deleuze and Guattari's spatial theory, indeed, there are basically two types of space, the smooth and the striated, the latter is characterized by "hierarchical ranking, identity, resemblance, truth, justice and negation, the rational founder of order, the power of logos, entrenched in a closed space, power which builds walls" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 363). This space is therefore called striated because "lines or trajectories tend to be subordinated to points: one goes from one point to another" (ibid. 478). On the other hand, the smooth space is generally associated with force "which arrives from outside to break constraints and open new vistas". Unlike "demodystopias" based on overpopulation (Domingo 2008, 725), the novel represents the main characters' house as isolated among endless prairies. Klara lives as a recluse in two very delimited spaces

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organized according to very rigid rules. In the store she has to follow the directions of her manager, at Josie's those of the child's mother and of the strict Melania Housekeeper. The latter sees Klara with the evil eye, perhaps jealous of her presence or perhaps worried about Josie's illness, she is often gruff and unfriendly towards Klara. Klara scans the spaces, learns to move skillfully especially in the kitchen and to sit on the stool without losing balance. She also becomes keen on a soft cream couch beside the bedroom renamed 'the Button Couch' (53) from which she enjoys the last part of the Sun's journey. The sun plays a predominant part in the story as Klara is an eco-friendly robot, she is indeed solar powered and she looks at the sun as a sort of deity which is able to sort all things out. Though the sun is essential for her survival, Klara has to catch its rays staying in, but imaging the world outside. Her limited view allows her to visualize two opposite dimensions: the urban one (the striated) when she stands in the store window and the wilderness (the smooth one) outside Josie's house. The latter becomes particularly meaningful when Klara has got finally the chance to explore the world outside. What she sees is far from being comforting.

Her trip to the Morgan Falls turns to be strongly uncanny as it brings back sorrowful memories of Josie's dead sister, Sal. This place in which astonishment and terror mingles together metaphorically mirrors Josie's mother's state of mind. Nevertheless, Klara appears to perfectly integrate in the new environment and in her role of Josie's perfect companion until she decides to take an initiative out of the way. As a matter of fact: "In modernity, the android is the ideal of the worker made real. However, in use and practice, the android begins to develop a kind of particularity and a shift from a universal *gestalt*" (Goff 2018, 19, my emphasis), literally 'a shape'. According to the Gestalt foundations, indeed, the whole is greater than the sum of all parts meaning that our own behavior is the result of a complex organization that also guides our thought processes. In human standpoint:

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> an android is a perfect human form and one that also functions perfectly (without fault). As an instrumentalization, an android is perfectly obedient. Ideally, androids are without fault, error or accident. However, this conception will meet its fate in the actuality of ongoing human-android interactions […]. Relations in which androids are most likely to be very far from perfect" (Goff 2018, 19).

Not having taken this latter aspect into account is what compromises Klara's relationship with humans and even with herself. As said above, Klara is very good at observing and also imitating people, Josie's mother asks her to imitate her daughter's pace twice. Yet, despite her skills, her knowledge of the world is limited and characterized by physical margins over which she cannot imagine or visualize anything else. Klara's horizon stops at a farmer's barn, Mr McBain's, where she believes the sun sets. Since she wants to do something to recover Josie's health, and as she sees the sun as a God, she plans to go across the grasslands surrounding Josie's house to make a plea for help, but surprisingly: "[…] the Sun was about to descend not into the place I was making such an effort to reach, but somewhere further away still" (161). Klara becomes aware the Sun must be angry with mankind:

> it was clear the Sun was unwilling to make any promise about Josie, because for all his kindness, he wasn't yet able to see Josie separately from the other humans, some of whom had angered him very much on account of their Pollution and inconsideration, and I suddenly felt foolish to have come to this place to make such a request" (165).

Klara, therefore, understands to have to give something in return if she wants to have her wish accomplished:

> 'I know how much the Sun dislikes Pollution. How much it saddens and angers you. Well, I've seen and identified the machine that creates it. Supposing I were able somehow to find this machine and destroy it. To put an end to its Pollution. Would you then consider, in return, giving your special help to Josie?' (inverted commas in the text, 166).

In making such a promise Klara shows not to fear the freedom to make a choice. Despite being programmed to be subaltern and non-subject, Klara wants to play an active role in her and other's lives symbolically moving herself from a marginalized to the central

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position. Unlike human beings, who often seek to escape from freedom (see Fromm 1941–2013) because it can feel intoxicating and dizzying, freedom also entails the responsibility of making choices, which brings anxiety and anguish due to the inherent risks involved Klara does not feel the urgency of doing something as a threat, on the contrary, as the chance to play her part in the world. What she acts is 'freedom to' (positive freedom) characterized by authenticity and spontaneity both belonging to the process of child development so that: "positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality" (Fromm 2003, 257). Klara experiences her own emancipation from the authoritarian system which has created her through love. Similarly to the clones of *Never Let Me Go*, Klara is a selfless creature who can love immensely and even to sacrifice herself. This is her way to become an individual which perfectly epitomized in Fromm's famous statement "there is only one meaning of life: the act of living itself" (261). Klara finally accomplishes her purpose by destroying the Cootings Machine, but the day after a new machine replaces the old one and Klara's good intentions fail. In doing so, she even loses an amount of her P.E.G-Nine solution, namely a part of her metal ability. Despite her sacrifice, pollution increases, but Josie eventually heals and her life continues happily.

Lifted *vs* unLifted

In the imaginary future hypothesized in the story, there is not only a margin which splits beings in two categories: humans and non-humans, but also another one creating an opposition between those human beings who have been 'lifted' and those who have not. Josie belongs to the first group of children who are genetically engineered for academic research. In the second group there is Rick who is Josie's neighbor and best friend. In such a programmed society those who are not lifted do not enjoy the same opportunities as others. The future looks even more predetermined and unjust than our present. The whole

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society is rigidly controlled through scientific practices, via eugenics, of the human race. Those, like Rick, who have not received this treatment, are considered second-class citizens. The marginalization of non-lifted children becomes apparent when Josie has to host an "interaction meeting". Like the other 'lifted', Josie spends a very solitary life, mostly at home studying, she has not much time left to socialize, so the interaction meetings aim at making friends and sharing opinions among equals, as her mother Chrissie explains:

> 'This crowd happen to be your peer group. And when you get to college, you'll have to deal with all kinds. By the time *I* got to college, I'd had years of being alongside other kids each and every day. For you and your generation it's going to be pretty tough unless you put in some work now. The kids who don't do well in college are always the ones who didn't attend enough meetings' (italics and inverted commas in the text. 63).

Josie is however reluctant to host such a meeting unless her friend Rick also joins it. The meeting is attentively reported by Klara whose brain visualizes the party geometrically through a series of boxes. She deconstructs her view in many parts in order to understand each and to eventually gather them and obtain a single overall image. Her personal space perception and representation metaphorically makes the separation existing among these individuals more evident, Rick is the outsider:

> The Sun, noticing there were so many children in the one place, was pouring in his nourishment through the wide windows of the Open Plan. Its network of sofas, soft rectangles, low tables, plant pots, photograph books, had taken me a long time to master, yet now it had been so transformed it might have been a new room. There were young people everywhere and their bags, jackets, oblongs were all over the floor and surfaces. What was more, the room's space had become divided into twenty-four boxes - arranges in two towers - all the way to the rear wall. Because of this partitioning, it was hard to gain an overall view of what was before me, but I gradually made sense of things. Josie was near the middle of the room talking with three guest girls. Their heads were almost touching, and because of how they were standing, the upper parts of their faces, including all their eyes, had been placed in a box on the higher tier, while all their mouths and chins had been squeezed into a lower box. The majority of the children were on their feet, come moving between boxes. Over at the rear wall, three boys were seated on the modular sofa, and even though they were sitting apart, their heads had been placed together inside a single box, while the outstretched leg of the boy nearest the window extended not only across the neighboring box, but right into the one beyond. There was an unpleasant tint on the three

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> boxes containing the boys on the sofa - a sickly yellow - and an anxiety passed through my mind. Then other people moved across my view of them, and I began to attend instead to the voices around me. […] (Rick), he now was by himself, not conversing with anyone (70-71).

The guests' attitude towards Rick is only apparently kind, they actually ask him intrusive questions and make impolite comments implying that he is not one of them. The same treatment is reserved to Klara. Like Rick she feels uncomfortable and disappointed by Josie who behaves differently towards them when she is together with her peers. Unlike Rick, the lifted children are upper class kids who can afford AFs and they take delight in showing off the latest models. Yet Klara refuses to show her skills in front of those troublesome kids revealing again her 'freedom to', her independent mind collides with the homologation of the children. Despite being an android, Klara is not an automaton. Although the 'lifted children' are meant to be superior, they are far from flawless. Josie's sister has already died, revealing their fragility, and they often fall ill more frequently than the 'unlifted' children.The experimentation has not worked as expected. Later on we learn that, according to the logic of the social hierarchy of this futuristic utopia, Klara is not only meant to be Josie's AF, but also to replace Josie in case of her death. This is the disturbing plan of the notorious Mr Capaldi, the creator of these genetic manipulations.

Conclusion

Time goes by, Josie recovers her strength and goes to college, suddenly Klara becomes obsolete and she is even perceived as a threat for the society. Mr Capaldi warns Klara of the atmosphere of suspicion that has arisen around the androids. At this point, the story focuses on a common fear. When faced with artificial intelligence, people feel a mixture of fascination and repulsion; the above mentioned 'uncanny valley' describes the anxiety that man feels in front of robots that are all too similar to humans. Basically, according to this theory, the more a robot looks and behaves like a human being, the more we are inclined to

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empathize with him; until we reach a certain threshold beyond which the robot seems mysteriously too human and therefore disturbing. It is not entirely clear why this happens. It could be an evolutionary reaction, where our senses pick out characteristics in someone (or something) that raise the alarm (see Patel 2015). It could also be a knee-jerk response from our brains, trying to resolve the cognitive dissonance caused by seeing something that looks like a man but we know it isn't. The greatest fear is that robots, instead of remaining subservient to humans, might rebel and take control, causing humans to lose all power over them. Being faced with a robot that understands what we say, who responds to us naturally, smiles, takes offense and seems to feel emotions, it is, in short, a bit too much. At this point, a question inevitably arises: can robots feel emotions? The book suggests that, rather than fearing a possible robot revolt, we should be more concerned about a society so fragmented and isolated that we might one day rely on robots to keep our elderly relatives company or even take on the role of lovers. And that they could even become children's best friends or replace dogs or cats as pets. This can be scary, but in this case, man is the only culprit. This is a point of no return and Mr Capaldi is aware of that when he asks Klara:

> Do you believe in the human heart? I don't mean simply the organ, obviously. I'm speaking in the poetic sense. The human heart. Do you think there is such a thing? Something the makes each of us special and individual? And if we just suppose that there is. Then don't you think, in order to truly learn Josie, you'd have to learn not just her mannerisms but what's deeply inside her? Wouldn't you have to learn her heart? […] I considered this for a moment, then said: 'Of course, a human heart is bound to be complex. But it must be limited. Even if Mr Paul is talking in the poetic sense, *there'll be an end* to what there is to learn. Josie's heart may well resemble a strange house with rooms inside rooms. But if there were the best way to save Josie, then I'd do my utmost. And I believe there's a good chance I'd be able to succeed' (my italics, 218-219).

However, once Klara is moved to the area where old machines are stored where she can peacefully slow fade. Klara retires to a kind of open-air yard or junkyard for old robots. This place is described as a recovery yard where obsolete robots are discarded, no longer of use. Here, Klara reflects on her life and the role she played in Josie's life, accepting her fate with

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a quiet dignity that aligns with her selfless and robotic nature. She also realizes that she couldn't have 'continued Josie': "to continue" – an echo of "to complete", one of the sugar-coated verbs which *Never Let Me Go* is peppered with (Whitehead 2011, 60) implying that any being is unique and irreplaceable, even an android. Klara might have invested too much in the humans, but she is not disappointed, she regrets nothing and she cares to say that: "The Sun was very kind to me. He was always kind to me from the start. But when I was with Josie, once, he was particularly kind" (307).

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Bio-bibliographical note

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