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THE TIMESCAPE OF AN ARTIFICIAL FRIEND:  
POSTHUMOUS LIFE IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S  
*KLARA AND THE SUN*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout much of his writing career, Kazuo Ishiguro has been known for his portrayals of characters who furnish autobiographical witness accounts. From *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) through *The Remains of the Day* (1989) to *Never Let Me Go* (2005), the reader encounters immigrants, artists, servants, orphans, and clones. Finding themselves on the margins of society, these characters exercise their narrative skills to give their lives at least some, albeit delusional, coherence. Critical opinion holds that Ishiguro's novels deploy strikingly consistent narrative arrangements:

Featuring first-person narrators reflecting on the remains of their day, these protagonists struggle to come to terms with their participation in structures of harm, and do so with a formal complexity and tonal distance that suggests unreliability or a vexed relationship to their own place in the order of things. (Holmes and Rich 1)

*Klara and the Sun* (2021), Ishiguro's eighth novel, takes said consistencies to a new and, perhaps, highly problematical level. The novel appoints a solar-powered android as its homodiegetic narrator. Klara narrates back from her current situation in a scrap yard to the time when she was "new" in the store (Ishiguro, *Klara* 3). In her predominantly sequential and frequently id-

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iosyncratic narrative, she revisits her career and destiny as an AF, or Artificial Friend, in a society preoccupied with competitive self-transcendence.

Critics have read *Klara and the Sun* as a strong testimony to a series of current crises: environmental, social, economic, humanistic, and representational. The crisis of the environment finds its potent personification in the sick body of Josie, a teenage girl who suffers from loneliness and isolation, and for whom Klara has been purchased to serve as a companion (Groes 1030). The social crisis manifests itself in the growing gap between those who can afford to have their children genetically edited, or “lifted”, and those who cannot. Chrissie, Josie’s mother, allows her daughter to undergo lifting despite the risk of sacrificing her remaining child’s life and health to the pressures of an ostensibly fulfilling future (Charlwood 1054). The crisis of capitalism renders Klara into yet another object of exploitation, making her history resemble the treatment of black slaves as replaceable and upgradable commodities (Banerjee 3). The crisis of humanism takes centre stage in Klara’s algorithmic limitations, which reveal her human qualities and highlight the humanity of her fellow characters. Unlike humans, though, Klara lacks the agency to forgive. By contrast, Josie grants her mother forgiveness for the lifting she has been put through (Eaglestone 12). The crisis of representation becomes evident in how Klara sustains a very close affinity with Ishiguro’s earlier characters. She offers the reader a re-enactment of familiar roles and routines, positing thus a metafictional question about the novel’s own obsolescence in an age of digital technology (Parkes 25). Taken together, these critical readings comprise an emerging strand of scholarship, which situates *Klara and the Sun* at the intersections of a wide variety of culturally mediated concerns.

This article contributes to the dynamic discussion of Ishiguro’s novel by exploring Klara’s multifaceted relationship to time through the notion of timescape. Conceptually, timescape owes itself to Barbara Adam’s sociological interventions into the phenomenon of time. In *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (1998), she defines timescape in a dual sense. On the one hand, timescape provides a record of the environmental damage done by what we know nowadays as the Anthropocene. On the other, it enfolds “the multiple intersections” between “diverse temporalities”. Adam treats time as space’s “invisible ‘other’, that which works outside and beyond the reach of our senses” (Adam 9–10). Crucially, timescape distinguishes itself from other scapes. Whereas landscape, seascape, blind-scape, and soundscape focus on the perceptibility of space from a certain

vantage point, timescape seeks to heighten the imperceptible interactions between life and matter. Timescape diffuses the anthropocentric ways of knowing and being in time. In application to Ishiguro's novel, Adam's timescape perspective avails itself of Klara's nonhuman status, allowing me to perform three analytical moves. First, through timescape, I contextualize Klara alongside the geological registers of the Anthropocene and theorize her ontological and chronological position as regards the human and the posthuman. Second, timescape brings out Klara's self-aware preoccupations with the linear order of her narrative, on the one hand, and its temporal disjunctures of that narrative, on the other. And third, Klara's timescape supplies insight into both her examined prosthetic life and an afterlife of unexamined possibilities.

#### 1. KLARA'S STATUS IN TIME: HUMAN—POSTHUMAN—POSTHUMOUS

Being the embodiment of carbon-based artificial intelligence, Klara stands in a complex ontological and chronological relationship to the human. If read through the lens of Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1991), Klara's ontology presents a textual construction. In that sense, she postdates humanism as a matter of scripting, coding, and fabrication. This posthumanism makes her akin to humans, whose existence is also cyborgian, since it straddles the boundaries between "machine and organism", "science fiction and social reality" (Haraway 149). However, Klara's capacity to act independently on any such textual determinations raises questions as to her posthuman status. In *Posthumous Life: Theorizing beyond the Posthuman* (2017), Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook reorient this question from cybernetics to anthropology. They contend that the human has always been posthuman, because it has always sought to overcome the limitations of its own mortal body. Technologies have permitted the human to define itself as such, but they have also extended the human into the environment. Weinstein and Colebrook view the Anthropocene as the outcome of a humanism which glosses over the human as a biological event, privileging instead the idea of the human "as a rational, sentimental, technical, spiritual, cultural, or historical means of surpassing life" (Weinstein and Colebrook, "Preface" xix). By this logic, the Klara of Ishiguro's novel is transhuman, rather than posthuman in an ontological sense. She provides a prosthetic technology for

her foster family, rather than transforming life and matter into her own prostheses.

Klara's posthuman condition becomes more meaningful as a matter of geological chronology. Geologists project the archive of the Anthropocene into a remote, deep future of our planet, long after the human species has become extinct and nonhuman intelligences have come to discover the posthuman trace there. Most famously, Jan Zalasiewicz opens his bestseller, *The Earth after Us: What Legacy Will Humans Leave in the Rocks?* (2008), with a science-fictional hypothesis: "The Earth, in a post-human future, many millions of years hence, being re-explored.... What would such explorers, of whatever ancestry, find of our own, long-vanished, human empire?" (1). Zalasiewicz speculates that the would-be palaeontologists may find stratigraphic evidence of polymerized hydrocarbons, or plastics, in geological strata. Discoloured and opaque, the traceable remnants of human activity will manifest themselves in "the graphitized carbon ghosts of their original form" (Zalasiewicz 187). Invoked from across the unimaginable gulfs of geological time, such ghostly presences haunt the Anthropocene as it is occurring now, be it in the form of climate disruption, genetic editing, or artificial intelligence. At a similarly speculative remove, Klara belongs to that distant posthuman temporality, where she will have survived the human as a potentially detectable impact.

This vestigial survival inflects Klara's ontological status. In addition to being chronologically posthuman, she becomes, in Weinstein and Colebrook's terms, a version of posthumous life. They posit:

Whereas the posthuman is imbricated only in the event of the "death of Man" (or human) and remains a human question, the concept of posthumous goes a level deeper by indicating that the remnants of humanism present in our conventional notions of life, too, must be transcended—signaling the "death of life" and the problem of the posthumous. (Weinstein and Colebrook, "Introduction" 6)

This imaginary, almost impossible enterprise—to think of life after the death of life—conduces to a transformation of the worldview associated with the carbon ghosts of the Anthropocene that haunt the present. Posthumous life invites one to endow those traces with an afterlife, which, in turn, generates its own "knowing and not knowing" (Weinstein and Colebrook, "Introduction" 7). In Ishiguro's novel, Klara entertains both potentialities. She knows how to assimilate time into a narrative that makes meaning, but she does not seem to know how to deal with the time that demands unscripted

response. Klara's timescape testifies to how her narrative confidences run up against the prospect of the posthumous life she has not been programmed to live algorithmically.

## 2. KLARA'S TEMPORAL ORDER

In the spirit of Frank Kermode's "sense of an ending" (see Kermode 17, 23–24), the final scene of Ishiguro's novel brings together the distinctive features of Klara's timescape. The reader becomes aware of Klara's temporal relation to the novel's events, her concern about narrative sequences, and her experience with the unnarratable. When Klara admits that "I am, in reality, sitting here in the Yard, on this hard ground" (*Klara* 333), she reveals that the time from which she narrates is subsequent to the time of her story. In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972), Gérard Genette construes this "classical position of the past-tense narrative" as a source of one of the most powerful literary illusions (217). He observes that subsequent narrating comes across as being instantaneous, as towering above time. In Genette's words, "it possesses at the same time a temporal situation (with respect to the past story) and an atemporal essence (since it has no duration proper)" (Genette 223). However, Klara's narrative act grounds this illusion of atemporality in the physical reality of her actual being. She finds herself in the midst of a disposal area among other disused machineries, including AFs. Holding remnants of nonbiodegradable plastic: cable, wire, and panelling (*Klara* 334), the site renders the time of Klara's narrating less atemporal and more posthumous.

The narrative time of *Klara and the Sun* correlates with the order of memories which the novel's protagonist narrator purports to ensure. To that end, Klara resembles her predecessor from Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. Narrating back to her time at Hailsham, Kathy H. attests to the "urge to order all these old memories", "to get straight all the things that happened" (Ishiguro, *Never* 37). The avowed ordering and straightening of memories becomes Klara's major fixation, which results in a largely linear, albeit sub-plotted, account of her career. However, she complains at the beginning of the novel's final episode: "Over the last few days, some of my memories have started to overlap in curious ways" (*Klara* 333). This development particularly concerns Klara's "composite memories": "the dark sky morning when the Sun saved Josie, the trip to Morgan's Falls and the illuminated diner Mr

Vance chose” merge “into a single setting” (333). Despite Klara’s belated acknowledgement of said anomalies, the novel betrays several earlier instances of both conflation and splitting of her memories.

Every such occasion leads back to a temporal disjuncture in Klara’s narrative, involving the two visits she pays the sun and her collusion with Paul, Josie’s father, to stop pollution. Klara discloses the first conflation when she comes to plead with the sun for Josie’s health and recalls Chrissie’s eyes and the angry bull she had seen before (184). On Klara’s second trip to the sun, the conflation of memories increases. She again remembers “the terrible bull on the way up to Morgan’s Falls”, but complements that recollection with the mother’s voice and the lonely woman she had spotted in the diner (302). As Klara’s narrative pauses, it reconstructs a seemingly disparate mosaic of her timescape. These variable conflations piece together the desperation and separateness that humans suffer in a world whose hostility Klara identifies with the bull in the field. For her, the bull signifies “some great error having been made to allow a creature so filled with anger to stand unconstrained up on the sunny grass” (302). Without realizing the human-induced cause of the beef industry behind the bull’s presence in the landscape, Klara sees it as an offence to the sun. She exhibits a remarkable skill to discern the evidence of pollution, but she always exonerates the human from the cause.

The orderly presentation of Klara’s memories becomes interrupted by an ellipsis, which bespeaks her traumatic experience. Following her second pleading with the sun for Josie’s sake, Klara vows to terminate the so-called Cootings Machine, which “has three funnels and each of them emits terrible Pollution” (244). Prompted by Paul, she makes a sacrifice of a small amount of her vital solution, which she allows to be extracted through an incision on her neck. Even though Klara knows that the operation is going to affect her “cognitive abilities” (252), she enters into a strange Luddist complicity with Paul, which involves damaging one machine for the purpose of destroying another. This whole episode falls silently between the novel’s pages, as Klara excises it completely from her narrative. Instead of pausing to untangle the formation of her composite memories, she reinstalls the double act of machine vandalism analeptically in three successive flashbacks (275, 283–284, 290). Klara’s trauma returns in uncannily familiar ways, as though it had been repressed: “I thought then about the Father, closing the door of this very car, looking beyond me towards the yard and the Cootings Machine, saying, ‘Don’t worry, I heard it. The little fizzing sound. That’s the telltale signal. That monster won’t rise again’” (290). Determined to keep her mem-

ories “in the right order” (339), Klara may be seen to espouse Paul Ricoeur’s famous injunction. At the opening of *Time and Narrative* (1983), he argues: “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative...” (Ricoeur 3). Klara’s temporal disjunctures demonstrate her knowing that narratives make meaning through associative, rather than chronological connections. Her own narrative humanizes time by positing an association with the human standing up against the machine. Klara partakes of the human plot to redeem humanity as both a narrative and a technological prosthesis.

### 3. THE POSTHUMAN TRACE AND KLARA’S UNNARRATABLE AFTERLIFE

Further to manifesting itself in the novel’s narrative aspects, Klara’s timescape carries an unscripted scenario of posthumous life. This prospect revolves around the future perfect of the following question: what legible trace will Klara have left as the posthuman narrator of both herself and of the human she has been devised to serve? The novel’s final episode provides an important clue. Unable to move around the scrap yard, Klara recognizes her former sales manager in one of the visitors. Their conversation indicates that each of them has made peculiar efforts to seek solace in their memories. The manager comes to the yard “to collect little souvenirs” (*Klara* 337), which means both the loose items she picks up from the ground and the reaffirmations she hears from the AFs she used to sell. The latter reportedly tell her that they “have no regrets” (338). Klara, in turn, ponders on the unrealized afterlife of becoming Josie and presents it as her own decision not to do so: “There *was* something very special, but it wasn’t inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her.... So I’m glad I decided as I did” (338). For Klara, the human exists in the hearts of other human beholders, and she doubts her capacity to replicate such an existence. Stated close to the novel’s end, Klara’s admission constitutes a trace of a self-reflexive AF who has putatively outgrown her inherent algorithm, so much that she understands the intricacies of human nature and her android autonomy. At the same time, Klara registers the manager’s trace gradually disappearing in the distance. Burdened with a pouch-like bag full of rubbish, faltering, leaning to one side, and looking towards the construction crane for orientation, “she continued to walk away” (340).

Human elusiveness troubles Klara throughout much of the novel. She leads the reader to believe that her observational skills are exceptional, which permits her to pass quite perceptive remarks about the implications of human behaviours. In an early scene, Klara watches an old couple having a reunion in the street outside her store window. Their emotions make her wonder: “they seem so happy.... But it’s strange because they also seem upset” (25). Klara struggles with this perceptible incongruity, which she learns to explain later during her stay in Josie’s house. At the interaction meeting she attends, the lifted teenagers taunt her. As Josie takes no action to protect her AF, Klara generalizes this attitude as at once consistent and situational: “people often felt the need to prepare a side of themselves to display to passers-by—as they might in a store window—and ... such a display needn’t be taken so seriously once the moment had passed” (96). Superficially, Klara’s explanation reflects her android-centred logic of a sentient commodity. Yet the Kantian distinctions between thing-for-us and thing-in-itself loom large behind her reflections. Unlike Kant, though, Klara shrugs off human elusiveness as a momentary contingency, assuming thus that humans are emotionally mutable, yet essentially consistent. When Josie recovers and parts ways with her erstwhile friend Rick, Klara’s scruples intensify. Having pleaded with the sun in the name of their love, she can only resign to a self-conciliatory thought that the sun does not “feel cheated or misled” and that “Josie and Rick might once again meet” (323–24). Most likely, Klara derives her notion of human consistency from her own algorithmic determinations.

The possibility of Klara’s afterlife comes to the fore when she realizes that her function might translate into a “*continuation* of Josie” (230). This realization occurs when Klara witnesses Josie’s “portrait”, a hollow envelope of her artificially produced body, on which Mr Capaldi has been working in his studio, in case Josie fails to survive her lifting. In line with Chrissie’s earlier requests to imitate Josie’s gait, voice, and manners, Klara misconstrues her role: “I’ll use everything I’ve learned to train the new Josie up there to be as much like the former one as possible” (231). However, Capaldi supplies a sobering corrective: “we’re not asking you to train the new Josie. We’re asking you to *become* her. That Josie you saw up there, as you noticed, is empty” (232). Klara’s anxiety about such an afterlife transpires in the next scene, when she points to her own body, wondering: “what would happen to . . . all this?”, which Chrissie dismisses: “What does it matter? That’s just fabric” (237). In her ensuing conversation with Paul, Klara explores the less material implications of becoming Josie. Opposed to Josie’s



genetic editing, Paul worries about Klara's ability to learn his daughter's heart. Comparing Josie's heart to a house with many rooms, Klara assures Paul of her eventual success. In her programmed understanding, "a human heart is bound to be complex. But it must be limited" (243).

Remarkably, these exchanges heighten Klara's disproportionate concern: her physical afterlife as a representation of the human bothers her more than the metaphysical afterlife of that representation. In *The Prosthetic Imagination: A History of the Novel as Artificial Life* (2020), Peter Boxall re-channels the idea of representation from mimesis to prosthesis. He holds that representation "does not merely *stand in* for an absent reality, is not simply a replica of a missing thing, but, like the prosthetic, it is that thing itself" (Boxall 9). However, Ishiguro's novel proposes a somewhat different configuration. For Klara, imitating Josie, that is standing in for her, is a more palatable prospect than becoming the missing Josie, filling in and animating the void in her portrait. When Klara sacrifices her vital solution for Josie's alleged wellbeing, she acts in the name of her own self-preservation, which she construes, perhaps mistakenly, as part of her autonomy. Ishiguro employs Klara in the role of a narrative and technological prosthesis, yet he refuses to appoint her as the continuation of the human form. Such an afterlife remains unnarratable in the novel.

## CONCLUSION

Conceptualized at the intersections between the sociology of time, critical posthumanism, narrative theory, and Anthropocene discourse, timescape offers a multifaceted cross-section of both human and nonhuman temporalities, their overlappings, and divergences. In *Klara and the Sun*, the protagonist narrator supplies a nonhuman perspective on the disappearing trace of the human. Within her relatively short timespan as an AF, Klara registers not only the fickleness of the humans she meets, but also their efforts to transcend their biology, no matter how life-threatening the latter enterprise can be. Similarly to Ishiguro's other narrators, Klara constitutes a timescape where blindness and vision intersect to produce invaluable, albeit problematic insight into the posthumous life of artificial intelligence. Klara re-enchants the dependence of all life on solar energy, while at the same time erasing her own carbon-based origins, which she shares with any other machinery. She defamiliarizes the ways in which narrative and technology

make and unmake the human, yet she remains oblivious to her own artificiality and status as nonbiodegradable pollution. Sensitive to the lifting and subsequent disappearance of the human, Klara's timescape envisages her algorithmically inflected afterlife in stark separation from her human forebears.

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## Summary

This article examines Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) through the notion of timescape, which builds on Barbara Adam's interventions into the sociology of time. Timescape receives its further conceptualization at the intersections between critical posthumanism, narrative theory, and Anthropocene discourse. In application to Ishiguro's novel, it opens up the protagonist narrator's multifaceted relationship to time. Klara is a solar-powered android who at once embodies and attempts to rectify the human impacts on the planet. Timescape allows me to explore Klara's nonhuman temporalities in three analytical moves. First, through timescape, I contextualize Klara alongside the geological registers of the Anthropocene and theorize her ontological and chronological position as regards the human and the posthuman. Second, timescape brings out Klara's self-aware preoccupations with the linear order of her narrative, on the one hand, and the temporal disjunctures of that narrative, on the other. And third, Klara's timescape supplies insight into both her examined prosthetic life and an afterlife of unexamined possibilities. I argue that Klara envisages her algorithmically inflected posthumous life in stark separation from her human forebears.

**Keywords:** timescape; narrative; android; human; posthuman; Anthropocene; Kazuo Ishiguro

PEJZAŻ CZASOWY SZTUCZNEGO PRZYJACIELA:  
ŻYCIE POŚMIERTNE W POWIEŚCI *KLARA AND THE SUN* KAZUO ISHIGURY

## Streszczenie

W artykule przeanalizowano powieść *Klara and the Sun* (2021) Kazuo Ishigury poprzez odwołanie się do pojęcia pejzażu czasowego (*timescape*), które wywodzi się z teorii Barbary Adam dotyczących socjologii czasu. Pejzaż czasowy znajduje się na styku posthumanizmu krytycznego, teorii narracji oraz dyskursu antropocenu. W odniesieniu do powieści Ishigury pejzaż czasowy umożliwia spojrzenie na wieloaspektową relację pomiędzy narratorem, będącym głównym bohaterem, a czasem. Klara to android zasilany energią słoneczną, który jednocześnie ucieleśnia i próbuje zniwelować skutki wpływu człowieka na planetę. Poprzez wykorzystanie pojęcia pejzażu czasowego autor analizuje androidową czasowość Klary w trzech krokach. Po pierwsze, odwołując się do pejzażu czasowego, kontekstualizuje Klarę wraz z geologicznymi rejestrami antropocenu i przedstawiam rozważania teoretyczne na temat jej ontologicznego i chronologicznego statusu względem tego, co ludzkie i postludzkie. Po drugie, pejzaż czasowy uwypukla samoświadome zaabsorbowanie Klary linearnym porządkiem jej narracji z jednej strony i czasowe niezgodności tej narracji z drugiej. Po trzecie, pejzaż czasowy Klary pozwala na wgląd zarówno w jej pozorne życie, jak i życie pośmiertne o niezbadanych możliwościach. Wysuwam tezę, że Klara wyobraża sobie swoje algorytmiczne życie pośmiertne w wyraźnym oddzieleniu od swoich ludzkich przodków.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pejzaż czasowy; narracja; android; człowiek; postczłowiek; antropocen; Kazuo Ishiguro