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To cite this article: Nicola Simonetti (2023): Mastering Otherness with a Look: On the Politics of the Gaze and Technological Possibility in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, DOI: [10.1080/00111619.2023.2186773](https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2023.2186773)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2023.2186773>



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Published online: 07 Mar 2023.



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Mastering Otherness with a Look: On the Politics of the Gaze and Technological Possibility in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformative effects of adding gaze theory to the critical approaches that have focused on Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021). Drawing on the issues of looking dynamics and surveillance in Michel Foucault's epistemology of the gaze, the argument is that a Foucauldian reading of Ishiguro's story uncovers the dependence of its power relations on gazing practices. By exploring the humanoid robot Klara's storyline, I highlight the dual role of the gaze and related visual dynamics in *Klara and the Sun* as both facilitators of humans' mastery of nonhumans and sites of nonhuman possibility. My analysis suggests that the novel articulates a complex disciplinary system in which the technological Other is constantly reified by both the human gaze and internalized practices of self-discipline. At the same time, against the reductive reading of Klara as a technological Other at the service of human selves, this article also proposes her figure as one of transgressive boundaries and gaze-engendered opposition, arguing that the novel's social system is ultimately undermined by the visual acts of overconformity that Klara adopts.

Introduction

Back in 1997, Patricia E. Johnson observed that “[r]ecent developments in the theory of the gaze have much to offer critics who are interested in narrative” (39). Drawing on Beth Newman's study of visual acts and metaphors in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Johnson was among the first to support a reassessment of the act of looking as signifying a psychosocial relationship to power, in which the gazer is empowered over the object of the gaze. This now twenty-year-old critical phenomenon – bolstered by Jacques Lacan's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, and, retrospectively, by Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism (*Discipline and Punish*) – has developed throughout cultural conversations across disciplinary boundaries to such an extent that something akin to “gaze theory” has been tentatively articulated in the humanities.

Over the past two decades, a number of literary scholars have focused on the relation between novelistic narrative and the gaze, contributing to its proliferation and diversification. In 2000, Kevin Goddard published an article examining the influence of the female gaze on the construction of masculinity. In 2009, Kelley Wezner drew on Newman to provide an anachronistic reading of gender and the imperial gaze in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*. Not long ago, James Bloom engaged with Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze in his *Reading the Male Gaze in Literature and Culture: Studies in Erotic Epistemology*. At the same time, the concept of the gaze has extended to literary genres – most prominently that of science fiction – which had yet to play a significant part in the ocular discourse. A remarkable case in point is that of John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, a colonial-gaze-informed reading of the relationship between colonial ideologies and science fiction's representation of imagined future scenarios. Particularly inspired by Rieder's observations about the

objectifying power of the colonial gaze in classical works of science fiction, this article shall extend the study of the politics of the gaze to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* as a text of speculative fiction that allows us to consider certain ways in which the gaze is integral to systems of power in a futuristic society heavily determined by technological and human collaboration.

As a novel deviating significantly from conventional speculative and science fiction – A. K. Ajeesh and S. Rukmini insist on Ishiguro's use of a humanoid narrator and her difference from ubiquitous sexualized depictions of female robots and cyborgs (paras. 27–28; Alesich and Rigby 55) –, *Klara and the Sun* has been at the center of much scholarly attention. Critical studies of Ishiguro's latest novel have explored the effects of artificial intelligence on the characters' morality (Stenseke), discussed issues of posthuman perfectibility (Sun), analyzed the work's transhuman implications (Mejia and Nikolaidis), and related the text's power operation system to Giorgio Agamben's biopolitics theory (Zhou and Yang). Adding to this array of critical approaches, I draw upon Foucault's politics of the gaze to consider the act of looking and the act of being looked at in *Klara and the Sun*, as well as their role in determining power relations that, despite their overwhelming narrative centrality, remain largely unexplored. By investigating subjective technological existence in a disciplinary society, the article discusses the organization of Ishiguro's fictional world around humans' mastery of other technological nonhumans via gazing practices. First, I add to the discourse around the novel's human control of robots (Sun; Zhou and Yang) by examining the story's use of visually based disciplinary dynamics. Later, I present a rereading of Ishiguro's text in terms of the liberatory possibilities of a posthuman existence. Against the belief that “Klara's programmed perfection has devastating results despite its ostensibly positive features” (Sun 7), this article proposes the figure of the humanoid robot Klara as one of “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions” (Haraway 154) and nonhuman possibility.

Understanding the Foucauldian Gaze

Engaging with the politics of the gaze in a text where the act of looking is as important as the possibility of being looked at, and the embodied gaze is as significant as the scrutiny of a diffuse and anonymous power, requires a model capable of accounting for all these variables. Interestingly, most scholars who have addressed the concept and social applications of the gaze have never developed an epistemology of embodied *and* disembodied vision, nor one that accounted for both the act of looking *and* the act of being seen. Lacan, for example, places the gaze within the act of being looked at rather than that of looking. By contrast, Edward Said mainly emphasizes the role of the eye that looks in his theorization of the postcolonial gaze. E. Ann Kaplan does something similar in her conceptualization of the imperial gaze. In parallel, discontinuous attention has been given to the embodied gaze as opposed to the disembodied gaze of an elusive power. While Lacan discusses the anxiety deriving from the *possibility* of being seen by an external entity, Said and Kaplan offer a more physiologically embedded notion of the gaze. In an attempt to consider all positions evenly, I have grounded my study in Foucault's discourse around the disciplinary power of the gaze.

A systematic consideration of Foucault's many references to the power of the gaze suggests that two approaches to visual dynamics can be found in Foucault's labyrinthine oeuvre. The first, best expressed in *The Birth of the Clinic*, underlines the disciplinary power of *le regard medical* (the medical look or gaze) and refers to the doctor's practice of alienating and objectifying the patient just by looking at them. The embodied medical gaze, which Foucault links to the rise of a new medical practice in the classical age (roughly 1650 to 1800), emphasizes “the sovereign power of the empirical gaze” (*Birth* xv), making the human eye “the depository and source of clarity” (*Birth* xiv). In a way somewhat reminiscent of the Sartrean look, although no explicit mention appears in Foucault's work (Jay 181), the medical gaze is conceived as that which establishes the scrutinized individual “in his irreducible quality” (*Birth* xv). The second approach, which marks Foucault's genealogical turn and was introduced in *The Order of Things*, focuses on the disembodied *possibility* of being seen rather than the physical act of looking. With the eclipse of the classical age, the new posthuman episteme no

longer requires the presence of an actual subject looking at an objectified Other. Rather, the power of the gaze now lies in the anxiety of constantly being looked at by an unknown and ubiquitous eye, which may be either visible or invisible. Foucault best illustrates the omnipresence of this surveillance in *Discipline and Punish*, through his analysis of Bentham's panopticon, a circular prison whose cells face inward toward a central watch tower. While the prisoners can see the tower at all times, the tower's blinds make it impossible for the prisoners to know whether they are being watched at any time. As Martin Jay explains, "[t]he object of power is everywhere penetrated by the benevolently sadistic gaze of a 1688 diffuse and anonymous power, whose actual existence soon becomes superfluous to the process of discipline" (191). The fear of constant surveillance, which is independent from the presence or absence of a real guard, acts as a prophylactic mechanism of self-regulation designed to prevent any unlawful behavior.

At first glance, these two conceptions of the gaze – both of which appear extensively in *Klara and the Sun* – may be perceived as sequential and antithetical. In fact, while the embodied medical gaze is prominent across what has become known as Foucault's archeological period, the disembodied panoptic gaze appears as one of the first major fruits of Foucault's so-called genealogical approach. Accordingly, Jay suggests that one may understand Foucault's comment that "the term 'regard medical' used in my *Naissance de la Clinique* was not a very happy one" (*Archeology* 60) as evidence of a certain weakening of the author's earlier interest in empirical visual dynamics (190). By contrast, I am inclined to treat the panoptic gaze as a development of Foucault's former conceptualization of the medical gaze that does not exclude, but rather exacerbates, its empirical premises. In fact, for the panoptic system to work, individuals must be conditioned to the idea that the panoptic gaze is complemented by the normalizing power of discipline, and that misbehaving equates punishment. But only people that have been previously conditioned to be looked at *and* disciplined through the gaze of an actual Other can experience the fear of being watched as anticipation of a future punishment. It follows that, for the panoptic gaze to work, some experience of the normalizing effects of the empirical gaze is required a priori. What appears is a complex picture in which the gaze acts as a site of tension between the act of looking and the act of being looked at, and in which the empirical gaze both precedes and informs the panoptic gaze. With attention to my reading of *Klara and the Sun*, Foucault's notions of the gaze – as both present and feared-but-maybe-absent – work together to shape the power dynamics of the novel's futuristic world and can help identify new ways in which the robot protagonist can oppose the text's human/nonhuman ruling system.

***Klara and the Sun*: Nonhuman Subjectivity in the Disciplinary Era**

The primacy of gazing practices in *Klara and the Sun* is established from the start, when Klara – an "artificial friend" (AF) programmed to support and take care of human children – discusses the advantages of sitting in the boutique shop window where she is regularly exposed: "[W]e all knew the gaze of a customer entering the store would fall first on the front alcove, and Rex was naturally pleased to get his turn there" (5). From then on, Klara – as the technological Other – is confronted with a specific form of otherness (human/nonhuman) that only grows when she is acquired by Josie, a sickly adolescent girl who has undergone "lifting," a genetic procedure designed to enhance a child's chances of success in life. As a nonhuman robot, Klara constantly experiences the repressive forms of power of an anthropocentric society whose common denominator is that of surveillance. By the last section of the novel, Klara is informed that she was chosen to replace Josie, who seems to be nearing her death. Klara does everything in her power to save Josie, asking the Sun – who is almighty and all-seeing – to help her heal. However, notwithstanding Josie's miraculous recovery, Klara is eventually abandoned in a yard for scrapped AFs and removed from everyone's sight, having dutifully completed her task.

The question of gazing dynamics and power can be approached through three key aspects of the novel: its articulation of otherness, its use of disciplinary dynamics, and the position of the Sun as the narrative's absolute observer.

Making the Other(s)

As I previously indicated, the notion of otherness is inherently tied to Foucault's model of the gaze and works to determine those gazing as superior to the object of their look. The gaze is for the author what the doctor uses to diagnose his or her patient as unable to comply with the standards for physical and moral relations of the society in which he or she lives (*Birth* 40). A Foucauldian reading of Ishiguro's novel reveals how the text's many forms of otherness are themselves dependent on gazing practices. Starting from the second chapter, gaze-engendered otherness proves to be one of the novel's driving motifs. During Klara's first encounter with Josie and her Mother,¹ she tells the reader: "And for just one second, her [the Mother's] piercing stare was no longer on Josie's back, but on me, and I immediately looked away" (16). Klara's discomfort at the Mother's gaze only worsens when she is chosen as Josie's new AF: "[H]er [the Mother's] eyes narrowed like people on the sidewalk when they're trying to see if a taxi is free or already taken. And when I saw her and the way she was looking at me, the fear . . . came back into my mind" (48). The Mother's gaze creates in Klara a palpable anxiety, which climaxes when the Mother asks Klara to reproduce Josie's defective walk, effectively transferring Josie's disability upon Klara in a way that exacerbates her inferior status as nonhuman and makes her ashamed about who she is and what she is doing: "I realised that, as well as the Mother – and of course Josie – the whole store was now watching" (50).²

From this moment on, the theme of otherness-via-gaze takes center stage in the narrative plot. Forgoing verbal interaction altogether, Josie's father objectifies Klara through visual surveillance alone. The first time they meet, the Father refuses to acknowledge Klara's presence, yet he cannot stop looking at her: "At one point the Father turned towards me, but continued speaking to Josie even as his eyes examined me" (211). References to vision abound in this chapter. The Father's gaze is said to wander around the room before it falls on Klara (208) and is described as repeatedly glancing toward her (209, 211). The reifying power of the Father's gaze is emphasized by his lack of interaction with the AF, a choice that arguably strives both to deprive Klara of subjectivity and to nullify her role in the reciprocal, intersubjective glancing exchange. In line with Foucault's early understanding of the empirical gaze as the best and sole mode of ascertaining any truth about the external world – it originated, in fact, from a breakdown in the trustworthiness of the word-image unity (*Order* 43) – the Father's silent observation of Klara is presented as the only way in which he can successfully assess Klara's suitability to take Josie's place. Direct observation replaces language as the Father's mark of truth, while simultaneously constituting Klara as a non-entity.

The Father's silent treatment of Klara is complemented by Rick's refusal to make eye contact with her. When introduced to Klara as Josie's best friend, Rick refuses to look at her: "Rick went on concentrating on his remote and didn't look my way. 'You said you'd never get an AF,' he said" (69). As an unlifted child, Rick is regarded as socially inferior to his lifted counterpart Josie. Nonetheless, by way of his actions he strives to establish his imposed inferiority as superior to that of Klara as a "servant golem" (Graham 95). Whilst in her study of perfectibility in Ishiguro's novel *Yuqing Sun* speaks of 'the "unlifted" Rick who shares Klara's "inferior" status' (3), my suggestion is that, by refusing to directly look at Klara, Rick reaffirms his higher status as a human, however imperfect. Like Josie's father, but by also refusing Klara any visual interaction, Rick denies her as a thinking subject and reiterates the asymmetry implied by the human/nonhuman binary. For Rick, Klara is less than any unlifted human: she is "the dehumanised server" (Shulevitz para. 12).

With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that Klara is unable to take advantage of the act of looking to shape and establish her identity as superior to that of the object of her gaze. As a result of her constant othering at the hands of the humans around her, Klara's gaze fails to exercise the same objectifying function over those in her life as the human gaze does to her.³ The scrutiny that Klara directs outwardly unmistakably turns back upon herself and self-reflexively determines her as an Other in relation to both humans and the othered group of nonhumans to which she already belongs. Discussing Rosa, Klara's robot friend at the AF shop, Klara confesses the former's inability to grasp much of what is unfolding around her: "She [Rosa] would often exclaim delightedly at a pair going by, and I would look and realise that even though a girl was smiling at her AF, she was in fact angry with

him . . . I noticed such things all the time” (19). By virtue of her sense of observation, Klara repeatedly witnesses how AFs – including herself – are at all times under the control of humans, showing a self-awareness of her lower status that other AFs do not share. In another instance, when B3 robots, more advanced models of AFs than Klara, arrive at the boutique shop, Klara alone notices their attempts at distancing themselves from the older models:

[T]here could be no more doubt: the three new B3s were deliberately moving themselves away from the older AFs so that when customers came in, the B3s would look like a separate group on their own. . . . I felt sorry for the older boy AFs, but then realised they hadn’t noticed anything. (41)

Klara’s unique perspective on the B3s’ attempt at creating their own group makes her not only an Other but makes her feel an *inferior* Other in light of her outdated nature as a B2. While it may be argued that Klara’s awareness of the B3s’ actions – as opposed to the older boy AFs’ lack of self-awareness – gives her an advantage over the B2 older boys, I believe instead that it goes to add to her feeling of alienation as an older humanoid robot, effectively relegating her to the bottom of the social ladder.

Ultimately, otherness is granted from multiple perspectives within the novel, and it is assigned from the gazer’s position in both an active and a self-reflexive way. While the Mother, the Father and Rick other Klara by looking at her (or by denying her any attention altogether), she becomes self-aware of her alterity and difference from other AFs by gazing and interacting with them. In Foucault’s conception, the gaze imposed on another is as important for his or her objectification as the self-awareness that the subject gains by constantly looking at his or her own surroundings. In line with other postcolonial conceptions of the gaze (e.g., Kaplan), the Foucauldian subject imposes otherness onto the observed individual by using a value system that is foreign to the latter, such as the conviction of human superiority over nonhumans. This is what happens when the Mother, the Father and Rick look at Klara. However, in addition to postcolonial conceptions of the gaze, Henry Krips explains that the Foucauldian subject is also “determined as a direct reflection . . . of the image that is implicit in the social relations of power in which it participates and through which it is ‘subjected’” (“Politics of the Gaze” 95). Foucault is at pains to emphasize that the observing gaze is typically accompanied by a process of internalization that mediates “any collective image of how to be in terms of highly personalised preconceptions” (Krips, “Politics of the Gaze” 96). The scrutiny that Klara directs at the B3s turns back upon her as a feeling of discomfort occasioned by the awareness of her disadvantaged position in relation to the new AF models. This acquired self-centered anxiety exacerbates Klara’s role as a submissive servant and technological Other.

Disciplinary Power (The Observer is Present)

As gazing strategies are fundamental in determining otherness in the novel, these same strategies also see that Klara’s status as a subordinate Other is maintained by establishing important disciplinary practices that populate the narrative. The analysis of gaze-based disciplinary dynamics is at the center of Foucault’s early archeological and genealogical writings, as the idea that both the doctor’s empirical gaze and the panopticon’s elusive eye share a controlling and normalizing function. In particular, the perspective on the present and/or potentially absent observer that Foucault offers – according to my reading of the medical and panoptic gazes as complementary and continuous – lends itself to study the co-existence of present and elusive observers in *Klara and the Sun*, and the role of their embodied or disembodied gaze(s) to preserve the superiority of the novel’s – lifted – human race. The novel’s opening chapter already establishes Klara as the object of other humans’ surveillance, which translates in her repeated reification. Klara’s turn in the shop window submits her to the customers’ objectifying gaze and designates the shop window as an environment of constant surveillance. During one of her times here, Klara explains that visual relations underlie the interaction and selection process between human customers and AFs. The passage is worth quoting in full:

It was very tempting to look more closely at a passer-by who came up, but Manager had explained that it was highly vulgar to make eye contact at such a moment. Only when a passer-by specifically signalled to us, or spoke to us through the glass, were we to respond, but never before. (10)

Looking relations are never innocent. The customers' freedom to look at the AFs establishes them as superior to the object of their gaze. Furthermore, it creates a situation comparable to the one described by Foucault's panopticon. As the prisoners in the panopticon can never know whether they are being observed (although they are free to look at the watch tower at any time), Klara and the other AFs cannot know whether someone is looking at them until they are addressed first. What they are able to know is that a physical someone is, in fact, standing by the window: "Rosa only looked elsewhere for any length of time when a passer-by paused in front of the window . . . we put on 'neutral' smiles and fixed our gazes across the street" (10). The AFs' capacity to ascertain the presence of an actual subject but their inability to establish whether he or she is looking at them both adds to Foucault's panoptic model and can be explained through it, in a way that foregrounds the text's disciplinary mechanisms.

In the second part of the novel, the link between the gaze and surveillance becomes at its most evident at the interaction meeting thrown for Josie, a party designed to encourage socialization among lifted kids. As Josie's new AF, Klara is the focus of everyone's attention, and the object of surveillance of the group's collective gaze: "She [Josie] was signalling me to come closer, and as I did so all the eyes turned my way . . . No one seemed to pay him [Rick] further attention because they were now looking at me" (84). Forced by the lifted children to perform and mocked as an older model, Klara reacts to their gaze by enacting the visually based, objectifying practices of self-regulation that she was taught at the AF shop, thus avoiding eye contact and communication with the people around her: "I'd by now fixed a pleasant expression on my face and was gazing past her . . . I continued to stare beyond the long-armed girl at the bricks on the wall . . . Though it might look impolite, I didn't turn" (88–89). As a reaction to the look of those around her, Klara shuts down and refuses to stare back at her detractors.⁴ Under the scrutiny of the lifted children, she becomes the "perfect" servant, regulating her behavior according to an interiorized code of conduct that other humans have taught her. With a view to her objectification, Klara's statement that, had she turned, she would have had to face Josie, "and then we would have to exchange looks with each other" (89) is far from insignificant, because it indicates Klara's awareness that Josie is not any different from her party guests and plays a part in Klara's reification. Notably, when asked why she did not buy a B3, Josie acknowledges that she probably should have (88).

The analysis of the novel's disciplinary dynamics is further deepened by consideration of Klara's everyday surveillance of Josie. As a robot designed to care for her sick human counterpart, Klara always strives to keep an eye on Josie. Since her purchase, Klara is very attentive to any of Josie's movements and the environment where her charge lives. The Mother and Melania Housekeeper often remind Klara of her monitoring role: "You'll need to look out, both for yourself and for Josie" (101), and again, "No, AF! You stay in there. Make sure no hanky-panky" (132). Based on these and the above examples, Klara's surveillance of Josie may lead the reader to presume that Klara's gaze exercises a similar disciplinary power over Josie to the one exercised by the shop customers and Josie's guests over herself. Nevertheless, not only does Klara's gaze lack the same disciplinary power as the human gaze – "Had Josie also made such go away signals, I wouldn't have remained" (132) – but Klara's policing role is completely undermined when she finds out that she has been the secret object of the Mother's gaze all along. The monitoring perspective is irrevocably turned on its head when Klara sneaks into a closed room at the studio of Mr Capaldi – a man hired by the Mother to make a portrait of Josie – and finds a replica doll of Josie. Here Klara is made privy to the plan of Josie's parents to eventually replace their dying daughter with Klara: "I now understand" she says, "why you've asked me, at every step, to observe and learn Josie" (231). To borrow what Sarah Hatchuel wrote about *Lost*, a television series that shares many gazing practices with Ishiguro's novel, in *Klara and the Sun* "the characters are under surveillance, spied upon, manipulated . . . ; others carry out the surveillance, are the spies, do the manipulating" (Willis 9). Confusion as to who observes whom and to what end arises at multiple narrative moments. Yet Klara's persistent objectification via human gazing strategies inevitably reinforces her position as a social outcast.

From God's Eye (The Observer May Be Absent)

If the novel's power relations depend on a binary configuration in which the gazer's position is regarded as superior to that of the object of their gaze and the human gaze is established as superior to the technological look, we could argue that the presence of the Sun, as a nonhuman entity that seemingly incarnates the narrative's ultimate disciplinary authority, appears to challenge both the idea that lifted humans are the novel's master race and the Foucauldian belief that in the panoptic system "[t]here is no absolute certainty, no God's eye point of view from which a trustworthy picture is revealed" (Krips, "Politics of the Gaze" 97). Indeed, Klara introduces the Sun as the novel's ultimate observer and absolute principle for judging the truth. In the first chapter of the book, she describes the Sun in quasi-religious terms: "When I was lucky enough to see him like that, I'd lean my face forward to take in as much of his nourishment as I could" (3). When Klara becomes troubled by Josie's illness, she bargains with the Sun to save her, in exchange for destroying the polluting machines that Klara views as the Sun's enemy:

But the Sun was watching at the yard that day, so he will know how hard I tried, and how I made my sacrifice, which I was only too pleased to do, even if now my abilities aren't perhaps what they were. And you must have seen how the Father too helped and did his utmost, even though he knew nothing about the Sun's kind agreement, because he saw my hope and placed his faith in it. (301)

The Sun is not only described as all-powerful, but his gaze is characterized as dominating and overseeing. Klara explains that the Sun sees everyone's actions even when he may be temporarily obscured by clouds of pollution (34). In this sense, the Sun appears to embody the most paranoid fantasies about the existence of an absolute look, emanating from the Sun and able to penetrate everywhere. His gaze does not simply coincide with the gaze originating from the panoptic watch tower but appears to coincide with "God's eye point of view" (Krips, "Politics of the Gaze" 97) that Foucault repeatedly denies.

In psychoanalytic terms, the Sun resembles the Lacanian big Other, understood as an omniscient entity that attests and guarantees the existence of all individual subjects. For Lacan, "if the subject exists, it is because the big Other wants something from them" (Willis 11). Lacan explains the subject's position in relation to the big Other through the Italian question "Che vuoi?," meaning "What do you want?," and the big Other's inability to provide a satisfactory answer. As a result, "[t]he subject structures their desire around this mystery, convinced that the big Other expects something of them" (Willis 11). Throughout the narrative, Klara, who believes that she knows the Sun's dislike for pollution, interprets her life role as that of destroying the polluting machines that hinder the Sun's charitable work. As a robot expected to put her charge's interests before her own, Klara is not concerned with what the Sun wants from her for her own sake, but with what the Sun wants from her for Josie's sake. During their first encounter, Klara asks the Sun: "Supposing I were able somehow to find this machine and destroy it . . . Would you then consider, in return, giving your special help to Josie?" (186). Yet the central notion of Lacan's theory is that the big Other, like Foucault's ultimate observer (God's eye), does not exist. The absence of a clear response from the Sun to Klara's question is the first piece of evidence that the Sun may lack the potency which Klara bestows upon him and does not act as the novel's definitive arbiter. While an argument could be made that the Sun seems to hide behind Josie's miraculous recovery, a counterargument could also be advanced that Klara's first-person narration affects the story's objectivity. In fact, the novel lacks any hard evidence of the Sun's healing role. As Hang Zhou and Yanling Yang observe, none of the other characters present at the site of Josie's recovery link her healing to the Sun's intervention (335). While Klara introduces the Sun as the novel's ultimate authority, the incarnation of "God's eye point of view" (Krips, "Politics of the Gaze" 97), we become progressively more aware that his description is tainted by Klara's biases.

A reconsideration of the Sun's role may account for the robot's solar-powered operativity, which impacts the way a B2 sees the Sun. From the start, Klara is presented as a solar-absorption-based AF. As she explains in the novel's opening page, "we [Klara and Rosa] used to worry that because we often couldn't see the Sun from mid-store, we'd grow weaker and weaker" (3). Klara, like all other B2s, draws

energy from standing in the Sun's presence and turning her gaze to him. Soon after, she continues: "That's the Sun's pattern right there. If you're worried, you can just touch it and get strong again" (3). The Sun is the source of B2s' life. At the same time, as any other robot Klara works according to a human-designed "program [that] tells the machine what to do and the machine can be relied upon to do it" (Boden 7). With this in mind, it may be suggested that Klara's faith in the Sun could be linked back to her human-designed programming in such terms as a necessary measure to guarantee her survival. Most significantly, this reading would submit that the same humans whose empirical gaze both determines and controls Klara's social standing have programmed her to believe in the Sun's omnipresent and beneficial gaze to ensure her frequent exposure to sunlight and avoid any operating problems (7).⁵ According to this interpretation, the Sun would not only escape the label of absolute observer but could be reinscribed into the novel's disciplinary binary (human/nonhuman) as a proxy for the human race, and his gaze could be understood as an extension of the human gaze. Rather than the ultimate authority that Klara believes him to be, The Sun would represent the authority that humans want her to believe him to be. His gaze could be reconsidered as exercising upon Klara the same normalizing power that the human gaze does and participating in the human belief that technological Others are less-than-human and therefore in need of control.

Practices of Freedom and Acts of Overconformity

A Foucauldian reading of *Klara and the Sun* exposes the strictly anthropocentric premises on which the narrative relies. Within the novel, I have shown how gazing practices work as a disciplinary tool that supports the status quo and alienates the nonhuman Other. The story's ending has also been read as validating this reading (Zhou and Yang 335). Mentions of Klara's gaze are many, but do not correspond to an improvement in the power of her gaze. After Josie recovers from her illness, Klara moves into the Utility Room. Here Josie helps her build a seat tall enough to look outside the window, apparently granting her observational power over the outside world: "You should have told me before," Josie said. "I know how much you love looking out" (326). This is mirrored by Klara's final days in the recycling yard (333). From her special place, Klara can easily see everything around her (335). The novel ends with Klara and Manager briefly meeting again in the yard, and Klara observing Manager walk away (339–40). In both situations, Klara stops being the object of other people's gaze and becomes herself an active observer. Nevertheless, her gaze is depleted of power as it lacks two key traits of the Foucauldian gaze: the presence of another to look at and the other's – more or less conscious – awareness that they are being observed. In the first case, the novel indicates that the only thing that Klara can see from the window of the Utility Room is 'the grey sky stretching over the cut fields' (326). In the second case, Klara's observation of Manager is exercised without the latter's awareness of it: 'When she was mid-distance, she stopped and turned, and I thought she might look back one last time at me. But she was gazing at the far distance' (339–40). Unlike Rick, whose refusal to make eye contact with Klara was linked to his wish to deny her as a thinking subject, Manager seems to simply forget about her. Manager's unawareness of being observed prevents Klara's gaze from effectively asserting that 'psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze' (Schroeder 208). As such, the novel's ending also reinforces the idea that humanoid robots are to be regarded as inferior to their human counterparts.

On the one hand, the novel provides a rather pessimistic portrayal of a speculative future, in which the idea of human and nonhuman authority in equal terms is rejected. On the other hand, a gaze-theory-informed reading of the text opens up previously inaccessible ways of thinking about nonhuman possibility. Besides the most immediate interpretation of the novel as a conservative text celebrating human superiority, my conclusion is that a Foucauldian reading of *Klara and the Sun* shows how the novel's disciplinary dynamics can also be challenged.

As Krips argues apropos the Foucauldian gaze, a correct reading of Foucault's gazing epistemology suggests that "the Foucauldian gaze may have *either* disruptive, Dionysian effects *or* conservative, Apollonian effects" ("Politics of the Gaze" 98). Foucault strives to emphasize that the gaze, however

central to one's subjectivity, cannot in and of itself determine it. He draws a distinction between power relations and relations of domination to explain that subjects are not forced to conform "to the same predetermined and limited range of blueprints for how to be and what to do" (Krips, "Politics of the Gaze" 96). Foucault explains that "[t]he idea that power is a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom cannot be attributed to me" (*Foucault Live* 441). By removing the presence of an absolute principle – God's eye – in relation to which any truth is determined, the truth-content of any message becomes indeterminate (Krips, "Politics of the Gaze" 97). This indeterminacy engenders a space for acts of resistance, what Foucault terms practices of freedom, through which subjects can challenge the truth-content of all impositions "from the Other that assail them from all sides" (Krips, "Politics of the Gaze" 97). In his *History of Sexuality. Vol. 1* (1976), Foucault develops such practices of freedom at an abstract and ahistorical level (159). Moving from these premises but adding to them, *Klara and the Sun* constitutes a practical – albeit still speculative – example of how, by thinking of power relations as "mobile, reversible and unstable" (*Foucault Live* 442), new possibilities arise for opposing existing disciplinary regimes.

Like the Foucauldian subject, Klara struggles between fitting within the system of power relations of her society and exercising a "care for the self" that goes against wider societal interests (*Foucault Live* 437). As a robot designed to behave as her programme tells her to, Klara is never clear, and perhaps even unaware, about the information that has been uploaded onto her brain. She merely states that AFs are expected to be "kind and helpful" to their humans (20). At the same time, Klara's actions throughout the novel – in particular when she violates "her inbuilt codes in order to rescue Josie" (Sun 6) – suggest that her designers likely gave her the ability to "choose actions based on an adaptive set of criteria rather than too rigidly designed a program" (Fellous and Arbib 371). Accordingly, Klara seems to develop, through gaze-based algorithmic learning processes, a significant degree of moral intelligence and awareness of humans' unethical behaviors that give her reason to doubt the actions she normally takes. As she clarifies, "The more I observe, the more feelings become available to me" (111). To go back to her relationship with the Sun, for example, Klara's repeated glitching when she prays to him – "[I] was surprised to find that everything had instead become partitioned" (183) – can be interpreted as a manifestation of her difficulty to reconcile her programming with the common sense that she has developed. In a way, this not only suggests that Klara's faith in the Sun is not as adamant as it seems, but it also shows the effect that Klara's maturing consciousness has on it. Whilst never fully free from her programmed role, Klara's actions indicate how her deep learning process has contributed to her growth in ways that do not always comply with the standing social order.

Most interestingly, in Ishiguro's novel Klara's practices of freedom take the form of visual acts of overconformity, that is, acts through which individual subjects do not break the law, but insist on it to the letter. Slavoj Žižek, who first introduced the notion of ideological overconformity, explains that:

[S]ometimes, at least – the truly subversive thing is not to disregard the explicit letter of Law on behalf of the underlying fantasies, but to *stick to this letter against the fantasy which sustains it* Is not an exemplary case of such subversion-through-identification provided by Jaroslav Hášek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*, the novel whose hero wreaks total havoc by simply executing the orders of his superiors in an overzealous and all-too-literal way? (29, 22)

Opposition through overconformity abounds in *Klara and the Sun* and suggests how the truly subversive power of Klara's gaze does not lie in her ability to look, but in her capacity to resist others' gaze. Overconformity becomes for Klara the best way to balance her tendency to follow her pre-programmed information with the dawning consciousness she has been developing. To illustrate, after her first meeting with Josie through the shop window, Klara is approached by a spiky-haired girl interested in her purchase. Yet Klara, determined to wait for Josie's return, resists the transaction by acting out the interactional rules that she knows. Since the girl does not specifically signal to Klara nor speak to her, Klara refuses to ever look her in the eye. Consider the following passage:

Eventually, after a lot of whispering, the girl . . . was directly facing me. She touched each of my elbows in turn, then took my left hand within her right one, and held me like that, her eyes looking into my face. Her expression

was quite stern, but the hand holding mine squeezed gently, and I understood this was intended as another little secret between us. But I didn't smile at her. I kept my expression blank, throwing my gaze over the girl's spiky head to the Red Shelves on the wall opposite, and in particular, at the row of ceramic coffee cups displayed upside down along the third tier. The girl squeezed my hand twice more, the second time less gently, but I didn't lower my gaze to her or smile. (36)

Klara's actions trouble the status quo. The spiky-haired girl eventually buys a B3 model and Klara is scolded for her behavior. Manager cautions her: "I supported you this time. But I won't do it again. It's for the customer to choose the AF, never the other way round" (38).

Something similar happens at Josie's interaction meeting. As noted above, Klara refuses eye contact with the lifted children and does not reply to their sharp comments. Nonetheless, by acting so Klara does not openly refute the human/nonhuman social order – which would expect her to comply with human requests – but simply follows her duties *to the letter*, past the point where common sense would suggest otherwise. As Josie's AF, Klara's primary role is to befriend and take care of Josie. Klara has the right to dismiss any other unnecessary interactions: "I'd by now fixed a pleasant expression on my face and was gazing past her [one of Klara's detractors], much as Manager had trained us to do in the store in such situations" (88). Significantly, while remaining the object of the lifted children's controlling and reifying gaze, Klara is also able to challenge the novel's social order by refusing to acknowledge Josie's guests. The resulting situation uncovers the hidden precariousness of existing power relations. Rick, the only unlifted child in the room, steps forward in Klara's defense and strikes an argument with one of Klara's bullies, Danny. Cornered by Rick's accusations, Danny's lifted status is threatened. Order is restored only by the intervention of the children's parents. "That's enough!" Danny's mother says, "You leave Danny be!" (91).

By avoiding eye contact with both customer and lifted children, Klara refuses to distance herself from the rules of conduct that she knows even when the situation at hand would require that they be broken. The smooth working of the novel's power system depends upon "an officially disapproved but unofficially tolerated obscene underside of practices that everyone takes for granted" (Krips, "Politics of Overconformity" 309): that is, AFs disobeying the teaching they have been given by participating in visual and verbal exchanges even when they do not comply with the code of conduct that they know. In this context, then, true opposition would be for AFs to refuse these acts of disobedience and choose to scrupulously stick to the instructions that they have been trained to observe. Like the good soldier Schweik, Klara undermines the novel's social order by overconforming: "To be specific, it is a matter of not merely saying but also acting out publicly what everyone knows in private but dares not say: not merely announcing in public that the Emperor is naked, but arresting him for indecent exposure" (Krips, "Politics of the Gaze" 99).

Conclusion

A gaze-theory-informed reading of *Klara and the Sun* both illustrates the centrality of visual dynamics in determining power relations in Ishiguro's futuristic society, and how an apparently conservative text – with respect to the human/nonhuman hierarchy – can be repositioned as part of a more transgressive project of the liberatory possibilities of a posthuman existence. A Foucauldian analysis of the text suggests that the character of the humanoid robot Klara is one of both passive compliance and active defiance. Whilst she is the object of other humans' disciplinary and controlling gaze, Klara is also a character of "transgressed boundaries" (Haraway 154) and visual subversion. If not openly advocating for an optimistic future history of co-existence between human and nonhuman entities, *Klara and the Sun* seems to at least reject the idea of a future in which human beings rule as the undisputed master race.

My focus on Ishiguro's novel is intended to be taken as a case study of the widespread benefits of applying a comprehensive gaze model to the study of power dynamics in works of science fiction. This, I argue, ultimately calls for a critical reassessment of the nonhuman as a category signifier for all other-than-human entities. To borrow from Bruce Clarke's study of the nonhuman, by portraying a society in

which humans' mastery of nonhumans endures but its precariousness is foregrounded, *Klara and the Sun* consolidates "the emergent consensus that the human, ontologically speaking, can no longer proceed under the mistaken presumption that, rising above the nonhuman, it goes it alone" (Clarke 150). Rather, Clarke quotes Peter-Paul Verbeek to argue that "technological 'things' not only mediate our existence, but also are places where these mediations are made explicit . . . The posthuman I defend here . . . simply gives a central place to the idea that the human can only exist in its relations to the nonhuman" (Verbeek 261).

Notes

1. Capitalization of familial roles and job titles is present in the original text.
2. What is interesting in this context is that the Mother – a female character – is the first to objectify Klara. Against the idea that Klara's gender may contribute to her reification (Ajeesh and Rukmini para. 28; Mulvey), Ishiguro's inclusion of female gazers playing a mastering role seems to invalidate a gender-informed reading of this novel's power relations.
3. Another reading may suggest that Klara's inability to exercise an objectifying gaze over humans is related to her human-designed programming. As such, Klara's programming would prevent her from ever self-determining in terms that would play down the importance of humans. According to this interpretation, Klara could hardly be considered an agential individual. Jakob Stenseke investigates the matter of Klara's agency in his article on Ishiguro's novel (5) but fails to reach a definite conclusion. Unlike Stenseke, and as I will discuss below, in my reading I follow Sun in believing that, "even if the ethical standards surrounding her [Klara's] creation are not openly declared . . . in so far as she violates her inbuilt codes in order to rescue Josie", Klara remains "a vehicle of moral as well as technological choice" (6).
4. A link can be made between Klara's refusal to look at Josie's party guests and Rick's refusal to look at Klara (69). Even though their choices are likely dictated by different motives – it is highly implausible that Rick was ever taught how to interact properly with a nonhuman robot – it may be worth exploring why both a *human* and a *nonhuman* social outsider are made to enact the same visual strategies.
5. Far from suggesting that Klara's designers meant to undermine her agency, Klara's human-devised attachment to the Sun would tie back to a more structural necessity, that is, her designers' wish to guarantee her operational efficiency at all times.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).1996 1976

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