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'Out of interest': *Klara and the Sun* and the interests of fiction

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ABSTRACT

Kazuo Ishiguro's penchant for affectless, stilted or robotic narrators, along with his tendency to return across his oeuvre to the same concerns and motifs, has led to a growing critical tendency to identify his writing as (interestingly) uninteresting. His most recent novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021) (swiftly condemned as boring by many online opiners) seems to address this question head on, by thematising interestingness itself. This article reads *Klara and the Sun* in light of recent work (by Sianne Ngai and others) which theorises interestingness as one of our contemporary aesthetic categories. Exploring Ishiguro's iterated fictional concerns, in particular via a comparison with *Never Let Me Go*, it tests out a number of ways in which the uninterestingness of Ishiguro's narratives has been turned to critical account, but argues that *Klara and the Sun* withstands these critical manoeuvres. Instead, it demonstrates – via engaging with John Frow's formalist work on literary interest – that *Klara* offers a phenomenological investigation of *how* fictional interest is made. This account serves as a quiet manifesto for the interest of fiction *tout court*, and for the interest of Ishiguro's ongoing fictional project.

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'Alas, this narrative and perspective are incredibly boring and a tad twee and I am not interested whatsoever'; '[the] voice … does not help create an interesting narration'; '[the] narrative attention just slides off before anything becomes interesting'; '[the main characters] are not interesting enough to compensate for the vaguely futuristic dystopian sketch of the world around them'; 'Oh boy. I did not like this book very much. I tried, and really, by about halfway I just lost all interest in EVERYbody'; 'ugh [the author] needs to get some original material for his next book'.[1]

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These plaints are all culled from the Goodreads page devoted to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021).[2] If nothing else, they testify to the persistence of 'interesting' as one of what Sianne Ngai has called, in her important cultural-theoretical monograph of that name, 'our aesthetic categories'.[3] To this extent we might read our Goodreaders' reviews as symptomatic of demotic critical discourse in the twenty-first-century online salon. But they also speak a plain truth about *Klara and the Sun*. Ishiguro's novel – as I will go on to show – is *not* interesting, or at least not in any very obvious way. Underwhelming in its inhabitation of its chosen genre, uneventful in its plot, sketchy in its characterisation, simplistic in its moralising, robotically flat in its narration, and eerily similar – not least for all the foregoing reasons – to many of Ishiguro's other novels, it seems explicitly to defy James's stipulation of the minimal requirement of the novel as a form, namely 'that it be interesting'.[4] At the same time, however, this is a novel which quite overtly *thematises* interest. A digital search – and this AI-narrated novel seems to invite such an approach – discloses that 'interesting' is used 13 times, and 'interest/ed' a further 22, across its length. We might compare that with the 6 instances of 'interesting' and 12 of 'interest/ed' in *Never Let Me Go*, a novel whose own interestingness or otherwise has already received a degree of critical attention.[5] *Klara and the Sun*, uninteresting as it seems to be, is therefore a novel markedly interested in interestingness: in the dynamic discursive situation in which something is remarked as special or piquant with respect to a set of background expectations, and so worthy of further, more focused and more general, attention. With a recursivity which is itself a feature of the interesting, the obtrusiveness of *Klara*'s focus on interestingness in turn makes *it* interesting: it marks it out as in some way singular vis-à-vis a hinterland of novelistic interestingness, sets up a conversation with that broader tradition, and so solicits critical engagement.[6]

Interestingness and the novel

At first view, *Klara*'s arm's-length relation to interestingness sounds similar to those novelists with whom Ngai ends her brief account of fictional interestingness: novelists who 'seem to have deliberately increased the proportion of boredom in the ratio of boredom to interest, as if engaging in an experimental quest to discover what the absolute minimal condition of "interesting" might be' (p. 140). But Ngai here is talking about writers such Beckett, Perec and Robbe-Grillet, who engage in extreme experiments in lexical constraint, variation and permutation, and others like David Foster Wallace, whose works are fascinated by the exorbitantly-detailed machinery of bureaucratic modernity. In these twentieth-century, broadly-speaking avant-garde, writers it is the hyperbolic extremity of the boringness which

becomes interesting. *Klara and the Sun*, meanwhile, is neither bells-and-whistles experimental nor exorbitant. Indeed, one might say that it is low-key even in its tedium, and, ostensibly at least, it remains attached to the kinds of character transactions and plotting wherein fictional interest has long been understood to reside. Narrated in a tinny first person by Klara, the eponymous solar-powered robot, who becomes the 'artificial friend' (AF) to a young girl, Josie, *Klara and the Sun* begins with Klara in a shop, and moves from her purchase by Josie's mother, through her coming to know Josie, and attempting to help her, to Josie's recovery from an illness caused by genetic 'lifting' and departure for university, before concluding with Klara's 'slow fade', now immobile in a junk yard, whence she narrates her tale. Many aspects of this plot and governing scenario seem to echo a longer history of (mainly Anglophone) literary prose from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. *Klara* resembles a slave narrative or governness novel, a *Frankenstein* tale or a *Bildungsroman*, and has a narrator whose observant nature, cool rationality and watchfulness over her more volatile and changeful charge are reminiscent of Austen's sensible Elinor Dashwood, even while her cheerful recounting of her existence up to her planned obsolescence recalls Beckett's too-blithe Winnie from *Happy Days*. In these similarities, and in its more-or-less unproblematic deployment of a venerable narratological apparatus, *Klara* resembles many other works of contemporary fiction, often characterised *en bloc* in terms of a qualified return to realism nevertheless quietly marked by a knowledge of modernist and post-modern forebears.[7] And so we could simply take it up as offering a twenty-first-century coda to Ngai's account of novelistic interestingness, situating this work of contemporary fiction as the next stage in the serial unfolding of the history of this aesthetic category.

In fact, *Klara* would seem to have a really quite singular relationship to the trajectory sketched by Ngai. Ngai traces a literary-historical genealogy according to which 'interesting' shifts from its Romantic origins, where it refers to a colourful 'aesthetic of difference in the form of individual idiosyncrasy or variation', through a more muted nineteenth-century focus on the lower-stakes piquancy of everyday life, to its coolly monochrome twentieth-century instantiation as 'an aesthetic of difference as information' (p. 143). This last, while it might be represented in certain modernist and post-modern novels, finds its formal apotheosis in the serial works of twentieth-century visual artists. Here art is produced iteratively, and quasi-mechanically: as Sol Le Witt puts it, 'the serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise'.[8] *Klara* seems uniquely placed to reflect on this history. This is a novel, after all, which concerns an anthropoid, information-cataloguing, artificially-intelligent narrator who is charged with reflecting on the question as to whether there is a 'human heart […]

something that makes each of us special and individual' (p. 218). On the one hand, it thus uses the computational aspect of interest as narratorial lens through which to examine the individualist model, while on the other hand doing so by deploying all the inherited conventions and resources of the very genre itself tethered *to* the anthropocentric notion of vibrant individualist originality. It is as though (in a motif we will later see the novel itself deploy as a figure *for* interestingness) the history of aesthetic interest has been 'folded over onto itself' (p. 179).

To what end this interest *in* interest? A number of issues are implicated in the folds of Ishiguro's reflections. For a start, his forensic exploration of the workings of interest redounds on his own oeuvre, and the question as to how we might appraise it as a whole. His practice as a novelist is notoriously iterative and recursive – the 'dirty secret' that he 'tend[s] to write the same book over and over' is by now an open one.[9] And *Klara and the Sun* takes this iterative tendency to an extreme, in particular in its relation to *Never Let Me Go*. *Klara*'s marked formal and thematic repetitions of this earlier novel, seem polemically to engage the question of the interest *of* Ishiguro's work at large, and its own dogged unfolding as an iterative series.[10] For this reason, a comparison with *Never Let Me Go* runs through this article. Next, and picking up that question of the 'interest of Ishiguro', Ishiguro's explorations of interest set up an implicit dialogue with a number of ways in critics have hitherto found his novels to be interesting, and so also, by synecdochic implication, with the 'interests' of contemporary fiction studies at large. One of the governing questions occupying critical conversations about the contemporary novel is that of its aesthetic – formal, stylistic – *specificity*, in particular in its relationship to what, in the wake of Zadie Smith's polemical 'Two Directions for the Novel', gets dubbed 'lyrical realism'.[11] This venerable literary mode situates interest in the individual, and in the felicitous individuality of high-spots of literary style. As Sianne Ngai's literary-historical tracing of the mutations of aesthetic interestingess vis-à-vis the advance guards of literary innovation implies, such a mode today cannot but appear revanchist. And for Smith and others it is so because it remains shackled, in its mesmerised focus on moments of subjective fulfilment and authenticity, to a liberal individualist politics operating in more-or-less violent denial of the globalised, posthuman and ecologically-endangered world it inhabits. Ishiguro is frequently read as being in critical dialogue *with* the conventions of lyrical realism, and with the ideological and aesthetic presuppositions which attend it. Indeed this dialogue becomes one way of turning the apparent uninterestingness of his prose and plotting to critical account. Thus, for example, the 'flat' and affectless tone of his stilted and stolid narrators becomes interesting if conceived as offering an ideological *critique* of liberal individualism; or as playing games with the interpersonal sympathy realism is supposed to engender; or as being relieved

by spots of lyricism which engage the reader's own complicated attachments to the consolations this mode offers. What is markedly *un*interesting at the level of style and characterisation, titivates critical interest when historicised, and conceived against the backdrop of lyrical realism, in relation to which its flatness becomes obtrusive, and so piquant. But here is the rub. As we shall see, *Klara and the Sun*, in its quite flagrant flouting of certain forms of interest, deliberately repudiates each of these critical ways of turning a profit from the monotony of previous Ishiguro-iterations, and so stymies the methods by which Ishiguro's earlier novels have been found critically interesting. Where then *is* the interest in *Klara*, if interest there be? *Klara*, I suggest, and for all its flagrant uninterest in lyrical realism, nevertheless remains deeply interested in some of the most basic elements of its inheritance of the novel form. The clarity of *Klara* ultimately offers a phenomenological exploration of the interest(s) of fiction *tout court*, and of the fundamental formal mechanisms through which fictional interest is made.

It is perhaps in this concern for the interests of fiction that *Klara and the Sun* most bespeaks its own contemporaneity. While Ngai traces a history for interestingness which goes back to the eighteenth century, her claiming of it as one of *our* aesthetic categories marks too its contemporaneity. As a judgement which registers difference against the hinterland of an expected norm, and simultaneously promises a future critical accounting for the specificities of that difference, the speech act deeming something 'interesting' resembles the workings of information technology, registering the raw data of difference in relation to fixed points, to produce legible (and commodifiable) patterns. Meanwhile as a (mildly approving) registration of (mild) novelty, it shares an ethos with late capitalism's ostensible valorisation of variety and choice, signalled, even while the markets are dominated by a small number of oligopolistic corporations, by the stylistic singularities of branding. In the so-called 'attention economy', of course, 'interest' itself becomes the commodity. And lastly, insofar as literally *anything* can be interesting, the term has a promiscuity of reference which seems to fit it for what has been called the 'aestheticisation of everyday life'. In these dispersed and distracted contexts, claims for the specificity and consequent interest of literary fiction as such are both hard to make, and compromised *a priori*. The very terms of any 'defence' risk, after all, recourse to the very clickbate ruses from which literary interest might want to differentiate itself. Ishiguro's sedulous engagement with the techniques of interest avoids this trap, offering a low-key and (mildly) novel contribution to a debate more often characterised by rather grander rhetorical claims.

All of that sounds very grand itself. Over-promising is one of the risks of academic writing, as it makes a bid for readerly interest. But to situate *Klara and the Sun* in these contexts is simply to provide a number of frames within which its singularities may appear interesting. What follows proceeds

modestly – in accordance with the unobtrusive mildness attending our 'merely interesting' term. In the first part of the article, I stage a series of readings which, shadowing some of the dominant moves in the critical literature on Ishiguro's interestingness, try and fail to find *Klara and the Sun* interesting. And in the final section, I elaborate the novel's own thinking of interest. This structure itself bespeaks the properties and dynamics of our guiding concept. The serial evidencing of the claim that *Klara* is uninteresting underlines that this judgement is an *aesthetic* one – a 'feeling-based evaluation', as Ngai puts it, that simultaneously generates the impetus towards discursive elaboration and conceptual justification (p. 132). At the same time, it points up that interestingness (and its opposite) is also a question of *style*, which might become the object of critical consensus, and is amenable to demonstration through close reading. Meanwhile, all this evidentiary labour cannot but – in spite of its own constative claims – perform an almost obsessive interest in its object. Here we see at work the shifty relationship between interestingness (as a property) and interest (as an orientation), as well as the reflexively interested nature of any writing (including my own) *on* interestingness. Interest, as Jan Mieskowski has it, is 'by nature double; it always spawns an interest in interest, and one relates to interest (or the lack thereof) only with and through still another interest'.[12] Interest's iterative nature, at once recursive and yet generative, offers one way of accounting for the continuing fascination Ishiguro's own iterations hold for literary scholars, while also providing a clue for why, in *Klara*, Ishiguro might be so pre-occupied with interest *tout court*.

Interest in *Klara*

Klara and the Sun participates in a long writerly tradition of prose narratives which draw formal and thematic energy from riffing on the different senses of the word 'interest'.[13] These include its meanings as: a concern or stake in some matter, a repayment for an investment or loan, concern for self, solicitude for others, a disposition to attend to alterity, and as piquant variety or novelty. The word's etymology is pertinent too. Klara is inter-esse, in between other beings, from the start. 'When we were new, Rosa and I were mid-store' she begins, opening with a hypotactic construction which inscribes these box-fresh, solar-powered robots within established orders from the first (p. 1). We soon learn that they are also jockeying for their place in the sun, a literalising of Pascal's metaphor for the origins of property which encapsulates the political and economic situation of the world Ishiguro sketches, where humans are replaced at work by machines, and compete amongst themselves for resources, in a situation in which these are unequally and hierarchically distributed, and self-interest is the ruling principle.[14] In this environment the AFs themselves (at once fetishised

commodities and chattel slaves) have to compete against each other, not only for sunlight, but for the 'special interest' (p. 3) of customers. They risk being put in the shade by newer models, but each has some characterising feature which marks them out, and so makes them interesting. And Klara's singularising trait is, handily for a narrator, and in a reflexive twist, precisely her capacity for interest. 'What makes this one unique' is 'her appetite for observing and learning' (p. 42), her Manager tells Josie's mother, and she is 'always so interested in the outside' (p. 36). In keeping with this individuating quality, 'interesting' is, alongside 'special', one of Klara's favoured adjectives, repeated with a slightly tedious frequency. She reads 'interesting magazines' (pp. 8, 9, 14), is critical of her friend Rosa's failure to 'see what was special or interesting' about something (p. 13), and finds going outside 'interesting' (especially 'the wind, the acoustics' (p. 62)). Negative affects (whether others' or her own) are also blandly registered as interesting – she is 'interested to see that instead of anger, the Mother showed anxiety' (p. 206), and, bullied at a social event, reports having found it 'uncomfortable' but also 'interesting'. Quizzed on this choice of adjective she clarifies: 'it was very interesting, for instance, to observe the different shapes the children made as they went from group to group' (p. 87).

As her focus on 'acoustics' and 'different shapes' suggests, Klara's interest is explicitly comparative and cumulative. She makes no essentialist or humanist claim for the intrinsic interest of a singular phenomenon, but avowedly attends to similarities, differences and patterns. Here we find Ngai's interestingness as 'an aesthetic of difference as information'. Each new bit of data operates as a supplement, adding to but slightly reframing Klara's view of things. Of Josie's friend Rick, for example, she says 'I should observe him carefully to understand how he belonged within the pattern of Josie's life' (p. 60). But with this assertion we begin to discern the ideological underpinnings of what appears initially as a disinterestedly neutral form of interest, and so a certain, suspicious, readerly interest – we might think – is here piqued. What Klara's remark discloses is that her interest is itself *interested*, algorithmically determined by a prior, contractually-programmed, investment in a particular individual, whose own interests Klara is obliged to put first and adopt as her own. Thus, even while she understands that 'favoritism isn't desirable' (p. 276) she nevertheless petitions the sun (for hers is a heliocentric metaphysics) for 'special help' and 'special kindness' towards Josie. And while she suggests that such kindness would be unmerited grace, Klara having 'no right' to ask for it (pp. 272–3), she also conceives it as a return on her earlier capital investment: the sacrificial donation of some of the vital P-E-G Nine fluid located 'inside [her] head' (p. 226). So: Klara's individuating characteristic – her capacity for interest – is what makes her commercially interesting. And her charmingly formalist interest in the world around her turns out to be algorithmically skewed by the

capitalist *status quo*, operating in the interests of an already-privileged individual, and – against her own enlightenment reason – bolstering an individualist ideology. Beneath the ostensible neutrality (the disinterestedness) of *aesthetic* interest, lurk pre-programmed ideological interests. Voilà! Here, critique has its day.

This kind of triumphant, or knowing, disclosure of political interests beneath formalist aesthetic ones is, of course, the signature move of the so-called 'hermeneutics of suspicion', and is what motivates the turn from formalism to ideology critique in literary studies. Indeed, as Bersani has pointed out, the interestingness of a phenomenon is what incites such a reading in the first place – 'to inspire interest is to guarantee a paranoid reading'.[15] But this is where we must pause. For *Klara and the Sun – as a novel* – inspires no such reading. Klara's programmed partiality is avowed, and needs no unveiling, and the novel wears its ideology critique on its sleeve. It represents a world recognisably similar to the contemporary Global North, in which inherited privileges of class (some characters are identified as wearing 'high rank' clothes (pp. 3, 12, 22)), and race (Klara takes whiteness as an unmarked term, registering only the skin tone of 'black-skinned' characters (pp. 68, 190, 245)) can then be compounded by culture ('lifting', and the future educational advantages it goes on to guarantee) to ensure a consolidation of hierarchies, and exacerbation of injustices over time. And all the while, unremarked by anyone but Klara, Pollution continues unchecked. All this is already known within the world of the novel, and legible from its opening pages. No plot reversal comes to check the status quo, no character comes to a revelation concerning it, no humour or excess marks its treatment as satire, and no defamiliarising trick presents it to us afresh.

This refusal of the ruses of unveiling seems deliberate. What is signalled as the main *narrative* disclosure – that Klara has been acquired not only to supply Josie with a friend, but, in the event of Josie's death, to take her place – is rendered with a stage hamminess which cannot but appear ironic. Like the protagonist of Bluebeard, Mr Fox, and similar tale types (up to, indeed, the AI film *Ex Machina*) Klara steals away from the room she has been assigned by the heavily-bearded Capaldi, the artist tasked with making a 'portrait' of Josie. '[T]aking care not to cause the metal mesh to ring … or to cross spotlight beams in any way' she arrives at the locked room, 'key[s] in the code [she] has observed' (p. 203), and finds there 'Josie … suspended in the air', just like the dead wives in Perrault's *Barbe Bleue*. But the next sentence begins prosaically 'she wasn't very high', aerial, narrative and tonal 'suspense' all brought bathetically low by Klara's characteristic interest in the measurable and the quantitative. And even the ostensible disclosure here – that this is a *model* of Josie (and Capaldi therefore a Coppelius figure, as his name half-suggests) – is not

itself a surprise, and so forbids any uncanny frisson. Our robo-heroine has 'suspected for some time' (p. 207) the existence of the doll, and moreover finds 'obvious' (p. 202) the purpose of the test designed to ascertain that she knows her charge well enough to permit posthumous substitution. Having deployed the formal codes of narrative suspense, the novel loses interest in them.[16] It is as though, in its refusal to pander to the kind of readerly interest which would find itself titillated by the ruse of unveiling, narratological or ideological, *Klara* 'suspends' those ruses, holding *them* up for our attention.

Sympathy

Perhaps we might derive greater interest from a turn to the more affective aspects of *Klara*. Such a turn is one made by a number of critics of Ishiguro's earlier foray into speculative fiction, *Never Let Me Go* – a novel which many agree 'takes up the challenge of the uninteresting – or apparently uninteresting – to an extraordinary degree'.[17] This novel explicitly invites investigation of its inheritances from the tradition of novelistic realism, via its references to *Daniel Deronda*. Moreover the emotional appeal expressed or quoted in its title, and the fact that its narrator is by profession a 'carer', suggest that this inheritance might be understood in terms of the question of the novel's solicitation or repulsion of *sympathy*, and to the afterlife of nineteenth-century realism's ethical project of 'amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'.[18] Adam Parkes and Shameem Black, who both address the question of *Never Let Me Go*'s 'narrative tedium', therefore do so by suggesting that complicated games are here afoot with the fellow-feeling or imaginative identification novels are traditionally engineered to solicit.[19] Parkes suggests that 'at what seems to be the highest point of emotional sympathy' the bogus quality of the novel's ostensible lyrical realism produces in the reader an 'urge to separate', undermining the 'sense of unity' it seems also to solicit.[20] Meanwhile Black argues that the novel denounces the individualist ideology of humanist realism, and along with it 'liberal empathy', even while its generic-sounding voice illuminates 'the aspects of our own lives that are less than fully human' and so 'generates a new aesthetics of empathy for a posthumanist age'.[21]

These are compelling readings, and they suggest how the reader might be bound into – inter-ested in – the workings of the novel. But they are hard to carry over to *Klara*, even while this similarly 'posthuman' text seems to cry out for comparison with its forerunner. Both novels, after all, meld a political preoccupation with structural inequalities, with existential questions about mortality and finitude, and ontological concerns about the nature of the human. Both centre on the prosthetic supplementation of the human by

the technical. The novels' titles are prosodically identical, employing a – perhaps slightly robotic-sounding – catalectic trochaic trimeter.[22] And both have a non-human narrator whose name begins with a Kafka-esque K, and whose voice has an artificial quality which many readers have registered as boring. What is more, both novels turn on the (in principle agonising) question as to whether a higher authority might remit one's otherwise pre-determined fate; and in both individualist exceptionalism is thus put on the stage. But here is where they diverge – precisely at the moment where readerly sympathy is most at issue. In the case of *Never Let Me Go*, the inquiry to the guardians about the possibility of a 'deferral' of the clones' mortal fate is made by our narrator Kathy and her lover on their own behalves, in a long, involving, scene of dialogue, exchange, reminiscence and explanation, followed by an account of its angry and disappointed aftermath.[23] Klara, on the other hand, petitions the sun in silent monologic prayer, not on her own account but on behalf of an (already-privileged) other, after which the sun shines, and, as she recounts in a quick retrospective summary, its 'special nourishment prove[s] … effective for Josie' (p. 289). In Kathy's case, impassioned sympathetic identification with the outrage of existential finitude is solicited first-hand, by obvious underdogs, and through the dynamic play of the writing, whereas in Klara's it is represented at one remove, followed by a briskly-narrated happy ending, which itself suggests that fortune favours the already-favoured. Klara's own junkyard demise, meanwhile, is the object of no protest or reflection on her part. One might, of course, still feel pathos at her fate, and indeed find oneself more generally cathecting her dispassionate, nerdish, but 'cute' and doll-like person (pp. 11, 70). As I go on to discuss in the final section of this article, such emotional investments can be produced by any person-like entity (be that a toy, a humanoid vacuum cleaner, or a set of textual marks) and the fact that they *can* is a possibility in which *Klara*, as a novel, is deeply interested. But this makes the comparison with *Never Let Me Go* the more stark. *Klara* explicitly echoes the involving scenario through which the earlier novel solicited readerly sympathy, but this time renders it statically, and with an abstract remoteness. In *Never Let Me Go*, it is the dynamic *sporting* with readerly identification which is what makes a claim also on literary-critical interest, making legible the novel's engagements with a longer literary tradition. In *Klara*, Ishiguro's iteration of the affective workings of sympathy keeps it at a more dispassionate arms' length throughout.

Style

Beyond political content, or emotional engagement, however, lie the possible interests of *style*. And one of the most compelling recent accounts of

contemporary fiction, David James' *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation*, here pitches its stall.[24] Taking on a dominant suspicion towards aesthetic consolation, especially where it might be felt to prettify and detract from the representation of trauma or atrocity, James engages in a series of close readings of contemporary novels which, through their form, syntax, rhetoric and so on he shows to negotiate the tensions between 'one's aesthetic experience of a text and the emotive tensions' it produces (p. 11). *Never Let Me Go*, with the cloned plainess of its narratological style, and the 'sense of linguistic deprivation' (p. 187) this produces, is one test case. And James demonstrates convincingly, via an attention to 'stylistic features of a granular kind' (p. 186), that the narrative moves towards a moment which offers the affecting high-spots, and syntactical flex and invention, we have come to expect from so-called lyrical realism.[25]

This is not the case with *Klara*: here the tonal monotony is more thorough-going. Operating in part in the service of character verisimilitude, the narrative voice gives us an impression of tinny robo-speak and the effects of natural language processing. The voice's deadened, robotic, effect is created by the deployment of a set of simple, oft-repeated key words ('happy', 'sad', 'excited', 'interesting', 'special', 'surpris-ed/-ing', etc.), as well as a number of inflexibly linked collocations ('interesting magazines', 'to give privacy', 'the sun's nourishment') which make it sound at once mechanical and bland.[26] Klara is pedantically zealous about locating events in their correct temporal sequence – 'when we were new', 'three weeks after the interaction meeting' (p. 84), 'two days later' (p. 176), 'over the last few days' (p.301) – and is free with subordinating conjunctions of all kinds, placing things in their established hypotactic order with programmed fluency. Formally her voice is unrelieved by the kind of fillers and vaguenesses which give an impression of flex and ersatz liveliness to the speech of earlier Ishiguro narrators, however anaemic, gauche and stilted they also appeared to be.[27] And in characterological terms this latest robotic iteration of the Ishiguro narrator removes for the reader any possibility of psychologising these traits as signifiers of repression or disavowal.[28] No inter-esting gap can be posited between surface and depth. It is almost as though Ishiguro is aiming for a hyperbolic literalising of an adjective often applied to the tone of his earlier novels, namely 'flat', a flatness which must now be received in all its platitude. In keeping with this, many of Klara's descriptions focus on surfaces, or on the spatial disposition or measurable aspects of objects, calling to mind a long-established network of associations between novelistic description, superficiality in its negative sense, and boringness.[29] Klara 'estimates' ages with a particular pedantry – thus Josie is 'fourteen and a half' (p. 9) another girl 'twelve and a half' (p. 30) and so on – giving us the kind of numerical information without pertinence or substance which Ngai escries in the 'merely interesting' aesthetic of conceptual art (p. 154).

All this might sound similar to the 'linguistic deprivation' of *Never Let Me Go*. But here there are no spots of stylistic solace to be found, and – once again – their absence seems explicitly marked. In what is by far the most markedly figurative passage in the book, Klara records that the sky, capable of 'surprising variations', was 'sometimes […] the color of the lemons in the fruit bowl then could turn to the gray of the slate chopping boards'. Meanwhile 'when Josie wasn't well it could turn the color of her vomit or her pale feces' (p. 52). While we might want to espy here the kind of defamiliarising devices long held to be the special property of the literary, the dogged cataloguing has the effect of a set of colour-chart comparisons, and it is hard to ignore the irony that the figurative vehicles are derived from the confined and familiar field of empirical knowledge available to our narrator. Banally removed from their empyrean tenor, they seem overtly to foreclose lyrical sublimation. Compounding the down-beatness is the syntax, which remains resolutely hypotactic – 'sometimes', 'when' – avoiding what David James has called 'swelling parataxis' (p. 190), while its repetitions ('could turn', 'the color of') are not such as to create intensification. This proffering of tropes which have little capacity to turn us towards an elsewhere is even more evident in Klara's other rhetorical tendency: a pseudo-playful proclivity for the use of epithets and sobriquets. These are either spelled out for us with a literal-mindedness which washes them of rhetorical colour – the 'food blending woman' encountered in the kitchen at a party acquires her moniker because her 'shape resembled the food blending machine' (p. 67) – or else function as near tautologies, as with the 'Cootings machine' (p. 27), so dubbed because of the name branded on its side, or 'the Open Plan' (p. 57), a superlatively literal-minded sobriquet for the open plan living room. It is as though we are being shown the shape or workings of figuration, rather than figuration itself. We get not the thing, but the outline – the 'open plan' – of the thing.

So, *Klara* seems to detach itself from three key mechanisms through which fiction tends to solicit interest – the dialectic of suspense and disclosure, the dynamic engendering of readerly sympathy, and the furnishing of the consolations of lyricism, or stylistic invention. The comparison with *Never Let Me Go*, and critical attempts to wring interest from its apparent tedium, suggests that the earlier novel negotiates with these mechanisms in complicated ways. But here, suspense is ironised, sympathy represented at arm's length, and figuration rendered in outline. It is as though Ishiguro's marked iteration of the traits of the earlier novel reduces them *to* traits – abstract lines or marks, the mere *form* of fictional interestingness. This iterative recession to pure form is figured in *Klara* itself. While *Never Let Me Go* mentions a number of canonical texts and authors by name – notably *Daniel Deronda*, on which Kathy is writing an essay, but also Joyce, Kafka and Proust – *Klara* references not a single work of literary fiction. The only

book to feature at all is an unnamed one in which Josie pretends to be interested to conceal her emotion ('she appeared still to be engrossed in her paperback' (p. 186)). The paperback is later reduced to pure shape – its corner a 'small triangular object left on the floor' (p. 275) – in Klara's glitching memory. This abstract form 'protruding out of the shadows' is what *Klara* retains of the novelistic tradition it inherits.

The most interesting thing in the world[30]

Klara and the Sun, then, rather frustratingly refuses most of the ways in which we might hope for a novel to interest us, rendering these only in abstract. In this regard, it might be read as a certain kind of 'late' novel. There is none of the dissonance here that Adorno hears in Beethoven's deployment of the codes he inherits: *Klara*'s clarity is more like the suffusion of light we find in late Turner, where the attention to the very condition of visibility blurs figurative specificity. But still, with its alienated but nevertheless-legible relationship to the contracts pre-supposed in its inherited form, this is a novel speaking to us from the junkyard. And from there, out of interest, it offers its own, quietly austere, defence of interest itself. 'Late style is what happens if art does not abdicate its rights in favour of reality', writes Said.[31] *Klara and the Sun,* I want to suggest, defends interest as an art which we owe to the novel itself. And it does so precisely through its abstract and formalist relationship to two fundamental aspects of fictional narratives: their construction of person-like entities, and their fabrication of a world for these entities to inhabit.

Across the course of *Klara and the Sun*, our narrator's comparative and formalist interest is pressed into the service of an inquiry into human personhood: the question as to whether there is a 'human heart', 'something that makes each of us special and individual' (p. 218). In the final pages of the novel, she delivers her verdict:

> Mr Capaldi believed there was nothing special inside Josie that couldn't be continued. He told the Mother he'd searched and searched and found nothing like that. But I believe now he was searching in the wrong place. There *was* something special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her. That's why I think now Mr Capaldi was wrong […]. (p. 306)

This childlike moral relies heavily on the iteration of a set of simple words ('believed / believe', 'searched and searched / searching', 'special', 'inside').[32] But if patterned iteration is the mode, then it is also the message, and in this Klara's words are more radical than they appear. Josie is special not because of any singular quality she possesses, but because of her position within a dynamic network of relationships. In a parallel which underscores the meta-fictional implications of these words, Klara's conclusions are very

similar to the remarks Ishiguro himself makes when, a little defensively, he offers an account of the interestingness of *Klara*. 'You can create individual characters that are very eccentric and colorful and interesting, but they don't touch the reader unless they're related to another character in some sort of interesting way', he is reported as saying. 'I find that if the relationship is fascinating, the characters on either end of it kind of take care of themselves'.[33] Emphasising that literary interest and affective connection lie in relationship and pattern, rather than in an individualism that generates sympathetic one-to-one identification, Ishiguro's words at once recall the etymological origins of 'interest' as inter-esse, between beings, and participate in an age-old debate about literary character, which, as John Frow writes in his *Character and Person*, tends to haver 'between thinking of characters as pieces of writing or imagining and thinking of them as person-like entities' (p. 2).[34]

John Frow is useful here, because he offers a rare attempt to address literary interest in formalist terms. He points out that one version of the debate between character-as-writing and character-as-person is a stand-off between 'structuralist reduction and humanist plenitude' (p. 17). But structuralism is 'no longer a theoretically viable or, indeed, interesting project' – and this is so precisely because it can't account for readerly interest, for 'the affective force of the imaginary unities of character' (p. 15). Just as a phenomenon is interesting insofar as it stands out in relation to a normative hinterland, so characters are figures 'that stand[] out from a narrative ground' (p. 8) in such a way that 'the reader […] endows them with a specular personhood, and on that basis finds them of interest' (p. 37). This emergence of figure from ground is what a structuralist analysis can't explain. The question is how something 'flat' – a black mark on a white page, a mere shape, such as a 'small triangular object' – takes on the appearance of three-dimensionality, such that one can cathect it. Frow suggests that in any positing of character there is an at-least dual movement, in which we identify at once a voice, and the positioning of that voice – 'a prior instance', 'which guides our reading of textual patterns' (p. 39). It is this movement – a textual fold whereby something is at once marked and re-marked – which erects a character as an identifiable figure, and gives flatness the appearance of dimensional personhood. Thus, for example, we infer the patterns of Klara's robotic narration to have been instigated by an implied author. This inference makes their motivic repetitions ('special', 'interesting') resonate, so that we read them as at once individuating (of the character) and significant (in terms of the project of the novel).

We might describe the play of marking and re-marking Frow identifies as a sort of inter-esse effect: one taking place not between characters, but within the voice of a single character, making it sound *as* a voice in the first place. And what *is* interesting, I want to suggest, is that this figurative frisson is *itself* figured within Ishiguro's novel. As Josie gets agitated about her illness Klara

remarks that 'it was as if it had been folded over onto itself, so that two versions of her voice were being sounded together, pitched fractionally apart' (p. 179). The affecting pathos of a voice, Klara shows, derives from the effect of a fold, the piquant thrill provided by the glitching micro-difference of a pitch. In this context, Klara's curiously tautological way with sobriquets, turning a woman who looks like a foodblender into 'the foodblending woman', starts to make a different, meta-fictional, kind of sense. It renders in abstract the iterative, inter-esse, stutter by which, in fiction, a pattern becomes a person.

If Klara thus offers an investigation into not only human but *literary* character, her dorkish fascination with questions of temporal and spatial organisation, numerical and scalar measure, and the horizon, home of the rising Sun, is at the same time an investigation into the instantiation of three-dimensional fictional worlds. Take, for example, this exemplary moment of novelistic description, which occurs when Klara is first moved from 'mid-store' to the front of the shop window, so that she can see 'close up and whole' things she'd hitherto only apprehended as 'corners and edges':

> I could see for the first time that the RPO Building was in fact made of separate bricks, and that it wasn't white, as I'd always thought, but a pale yellow. I could now see too that it was even taller than I'd imagined – twenty-two stories – and that each repeating window was underlined by its own special ledge. I saw how the Sun had drawn a diagonal line right across the face of the RPO Building, so that on one side of it there was a triangle that looked almost white, while on the other was one that looked very dark, even though I now knew it was all the pale yellow color. And not only could I see every window right up to the rooftop, I could sometimes see the people inside, standing sitting moving around. Then down on the street, I could see the passers-by, their different kinds of shoes, paper cups, shoulder bags, little dogs, and if I wanted, I could follow with my eyes any one of them all the way past the pedestrian crossing and beyond the second Tow-Away Zone sign, to where two overhaul men were standing beside a drain and pointing. (pp. 6–7)

The building is here registered in terms of its materials, its colours, the number of its floors, the arrangement of its windows, and the way it catches the sun. The new knowledge permitted by Klara's change of position, registered in the repeated 'I could see for the first time', 'I could now see', allows for the correction of previous apprehensions (white not yellow), and for the adding of further details (the number of floors, the special ledges). The movement of the gaze ('I could follow with my eyes') through space and over time enables the identification of recurrent features ('each repeating window') and of relationships ('one the one side … on the other'), while also creating an impression of depth. In all these ways, the passage advertises itself at once as an act of description, and as one employing the codified rules of perspectival realism, which in visual art attempts to approximate on a flat surface an image as seen by the eye. In this mode, as

Elizabeth Ermarth helpfully summarises, 'form and position are relative', 'the identity of anything … can only be discovered in relationship', over time, and as it appears from 'one vantage point', a vantage point which is perforce 'incomplete'.[35] If these qualities are underlined for us in Klara's description through the little reflexive frisson of its robotic iterations, the whole scene is itself framed for us by a (shop) window, calling up the 'open window' of Alberti's *De Pictura* (On Painting, p. 1435), usually cited as the first codification of the theory and practice of linear perspective.[36] 'Each repeating window was underlined by its own special ledge', underlines Klara. Indeed, the idea that Klara has been programmed to understand linear perspective is foregrounded repeatedly throughout the novel: 'Rick's house was smaller, and not just because it was further away' (p. 61), she reports earnestly, displaying her understanding of the workings of spatial recession as they have been conceived from Brunellschi to Father Ted.

We might escry here the kinds of meta-fictional disclosure of the naturalised codes of perspectival realism to which much post-modern fiction devotes itself, with a view to questioning the interested humanist centreing of an individual vantage point implicit in their organising schemas. In *Klara* the defamiliarising happens at moments when – overloaded by an influx of novel data – our narrator's vision goes on the fritz, and divides into boxes, organised by type, rather than spatial relation. For example, when being taken out for a drive, Klara records that 'at one stage a box becames filled with the other cars, while the boxes immediately beside it filled with segments of road and surrounding field' (p. 97). Through such cubist moments, and their subsequent recomposition into a realist whole, we see that whole *as* a composition, a kind of visual hypotaxis, a particular way of ordering data, which might, therefore, be ordered otherwise. But, as with the other political orderings figured within this novel, the perspectival conventions deployed are on the one hand made legible from the first, and yet remain intact to the very end. Klara, in the novel's final paragraph, watches the Manager walk to the 'mid-distance', and then gaze 'at the far distance, in the direction of the construction crane on the horizon' (p. 307). Here the effects of spatial recession are again explicitly underlined, even while, on the vanishing point of a literal and metaphorical horizon, the undermining of the very grounds of this comforting anthropocentric world-view continues apace. So, the novel 'knows' that the conventions of perspectival realism which it stages for us are 'interested' in a political sense, but its affective energies seem not to be directed towards disclosing this already long-established fact. Instead, and as with the treatment of character, what we seem to have is a cool abstraction of this narrative mode, as though the novel were interested *in* it. And, returning to our window scene, what we see in Klara's description is *a rendition of interest at work*. The serial and iterative movement essential to the organising co-ordination

of scale, relation and depth operative in the instantiation of a three-dimensional, realist, world, is *also* the movement of interest itself, as we have come to understand it. Interest – just like Klara's rather plodding description – operates comparatively and relationally; it registers differences as it moves. What we see, in the movement of the narration which renders for us Klara's own clear-sighted gaze, is the *making* of interest.

Characters, then, are interesting because they stand out from a narrative ground. And this effect is created by an inter-esse operation, which produces the impression of a being, through the inter-weaving of a tonal relation. Now we can see that fictional world-building itself works through a similar folding. Appearing to take an interest in what it itself posits ('I could see', 'I could now see') it works through a miming of the recursive seriality by which interest as 'an aesthetic of difference as information' operates. At the same time, it functions like the discursive aesthetic judgement that something is interesting: its ruses of remarking worldly phenomena echo the processes by which such phenomena, in the world, are found to be remarkable, which is to say interesting, and so worthy of future, and more general, attention. If what we see foregrounded here is the making of interest, then we might also see that interest is always a kind of fiction, or – perhaps better – an art, a kind of worldly making, which in turn has a world-making force. As Henry James tells H. G. Wells in 1915, 'It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance'.[37] Interestingness, we have suggested, is a compromised aesthetic category. And it is not one with which Ishiguro, in his robotic iterations, and obsession with robotic iteration, seems to have had much truck. And yet, right to the end of this latest, lateish, novel, and until the solar-powered batteries run down, the patient making of interest continues, with a view – perhaps – to 'life' beyond the vanishing point at its own 'horizon'.

Notes

1. These quotations are taken from the Goodreads page for Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/54120408-klara-and-the-sun?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=rhdXGBNK2J&rank=1 [Date accessed: 5 September 2022]. They are from the following users respectively: Tatiana (6 March 2021), Emily May (12 August 2021), Nataliya (3 June 2021), Nataliya (3 June 2021), Lata (5 July 2021), Lisa of Troy (15 July 2022).
2. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021). References henceforth in the text.
3. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012). References henceforth in the text.
4. Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism* (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 191.

5. See Adam Parkes, 'Ishiguro's "Rubbish": Style and Sympathy in Never Let Me Go', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 67 (2021), pp. 171–204 which cites reviews by Frank Kermode, Jacqueline Rose and James Wood, each of whom mentions the 'uninteresting' qualities of this novel.
6. On the recursive nature of interest see Jan Mieskowski, *Labours of Imagination: Aesthetics and Political Economy from Kant to Althusser* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 38f.
7. Doug Battersby offers a helpful survey and summary of this 'common contention' in his 'Contemporary Realism, Postmodernism, and Bodily Feeling: Ian McGuire's *The North Water*', *English: Journal of the English Association*, 67 (2018), pp. 1–22, p. 2.
8. Sam Hunter and John Jacobus, *Modern Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1986), p. 326.
9. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/01/klara-and-the-sun-by-kazuo-ishiguro-review-another-masterpiece [Date accessed: 5 September].
10. On the subject of Ishiguro's iterations see Chris Holmes and Kelly Mee Rich, 'On Rereading Ishiguro', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 67 (2021), pp. 1–19.
11. Zadie Smith, 'Two Directions for the Novel', *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), pp. 71–96.
12. Mieskowski, *Labours of Imagination*, p. 38.
13. See Jacob Sider Jost, *Interest and Connection in the Eighteenth Century: Herve, Johnson, Smith, Equiano* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020).
14. Blaise Pascal, *The Thoughts of Blaise Pascal*, trans. C. Kegan Paul (Toledo, OH: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), p. 103.
15. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 188.
16. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1983), pp. 125–6, identifies three types of interest – intellectual, qualitative and practical – each of which is linked to the drive to narrative closure.
17. Ibid, p. 175.
18. George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review*, LXVI (July 1856), pp. 51–79, p. 54. http://georgeeliotarchive.org [Date accessed: 5 September].
19. Ibid, p. 799.
20. Ibid, p. 198.
21. Shameem Black, 'Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 55 (2009), pp. 786–807, pp. 798 and 803.
22. John Lennard points out that this falling rhythm – unlike iambic and anapestic metres – 'doesn't sound natural' and indeed can appear 'strange' in *The Poetry Handbook* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 6.
23. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), pp. 243–67.
24. David James, *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). References henceforth in the text.
25. James argues that the moment he reads steers the reader 'into a partial lee' (p. 190), and offers a moment of solace even while 'consolation's foreshortening' (p. 191) is simultaneously signalled. Parkes is tentatively sceptical even of the attenuated consolations James explores, wondering whether Ishiguro 'turns to

lyrical realism in order to trade on its belatedness and secondhandedness': Parkes, 'Ishiguro's "Rubbish"', p. 194.

26. A digital search suggests that 'happy' crops up 38 times, 'sad' 31 and 'angry' 34.
27. Parkes, 'Ishiguro's "Rubbish"', analyses the compositional processes by which Kathy's voice is made 'livelier' across successive drafts, but points out that 'livelier … doesn't necessarily mean more interesting or alluring' the 'idiomatic' qualities accorded the voice sharing a depressingly generic quality', p. 179.
28. To say that is not to decide on one of the question whether a robot can have emotion, but to suggest that any answer to that question would redound on how one theorised the psyche.
29. For an account of some commonplace prejudices against description, including that it is the part of the text that is 'skippable with impunity', see Stephen Benson, '"What Shall be Our New Ornaments?" Description's Orientations', *Textual Practice,* 34 (2020), pp. 605–25, p. 608. See also Ivan Stacy, 'Mirrors and Windows: Synthesis of Surface and Depth in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (2022). doi: 10.1080/00111619.2022.2146479, which appeared while this article was in the final stages of preparation.
30. I take this subtitle from Jacques Derrida, '"This Strange Institution Called Literature:" An interview with Jacques Derrida', Derek Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–75, p. 47. Derrida's thinking of interest hovers behind by reading of *Klara* here.
31. Edward Said, 'Thoughts on Late Style', *London Review of Books*, 26.15 (August 2004). https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v26/n15/edward-said/thoughts-on-late-style [Date accessed: 5 September 2022].
32. For a reading of (what appears to be) the banality of Ishiguro's moralising in earlier works, see Bruce Robbins, 'Cruelty is Bad: Banality and Proximity in *Never Let Me Go*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 40 (2007), pp. 289–302.
33. https://www.dailycal.org/2021/05/06/nobel-prize-winner-kazuo-ishiguro-unpacks-his-writing-process-at-7th-bay-area-book-festival/ [Date accessed: 5 September 2022].
34. John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 2. References henceforth in the text.
35. Elizabeth Ermarth, 'Realism, Perspective and the Novel', *Critical Inquiry*, 7.3 (Spring 1981), pp. 499–520, 506–7.
36. Ibid., p. 508.
37. Henry James, *A Life in Letters* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 555.

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