

Klara and the Vagaries of Human Hearts. What Kazuo Ishiguro's AI tells us about the Uncanny Valley

Diane Leblond. University of Lorraine, IDEA.

The challenge that technological advances pose to the boundaries between humans and their creations has inspired stories throughout the history of Western fiction. In a recent development of this process, contemporary British novels have mapped out the ambivalent place conceptualised by Masahiro Mori (1970) and designated in English as 'the uncanny valley,' where the once attractive almost-but-not-quite-human suddenly repulses us.

The protagonist of Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) seems like a perfect candidate to take us through the uncanny valley. Klara is a lifelike doll whose AI capabilities make her the best 'Artificial Friend' to Josie, a teenager afflicted with a potentially fatal condition. She is also a first-person narrator and internal focaliser whose perspective we embrace—until the suggestion that she might 'continue' her little charge after her demise suddenly presents her in an entirely different, ominous light.

Told as it is from the android's viewpoint, the fable informs our experience of the uncanny valley. While Mori's original model focused on appearance, our discomfort in the face of Klara's uncanny proximity seems to be elicited by her inner discourse. This brings up the hypothesis of an 'uncanny valley of mind' (Gray & Wegner, 2012). Yet through most of the story, as we inhabit the AI's consciousness, we perceive her similitude and difference as exhilarating rather than offputting. Ultimately, our encounter with this peculiar narrator reminds us of the role that storytelling plays in allowing us to theorise about, imagine and rejoice in the inner lives of others, human and not.