

## **Curtis Runstedler, “Artificial Friends, Attentional Anxieties, and Intelligent Systems in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*”**

**Abstract:** Contemporary depictions of robots and inattention anxieties abound in the 21st-century English novel, reflecting concerns about technological progress and advancement. Such literary representations of robots simultaneously embody technological advancement and achievement while also elucidating the critical lapses in attention as shown in the behaviour of their human counterparts, which often prove destructive or damaging for not only the humans in question, but also the robot or artificial human’s well-being. These 21<sup>st</sup>-century literary robots are also commodified and exploited due to their attentional capabilities, distinguishing them from earlier representations of literary robots. Alternatively, they are marketed as commodities to attention-deficient consumers who quickly lose interest in them and treat them as disposable objects.

In this presentation, I argue that Klara, the “Artificial Friend” protagonist in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* (2021) embodies contemporary concerns about technology and attentional shifts. Klara possesses hyperattentive qualities that reflect her excellence as not only a sentient being, but also as a potential surrogate daughter for a family with a chronically ill daughter. Unfortunately, her sense of trust and compliance, as well as her attentional capabilities, are exploited by both her family and neighbours as well as her manufacturer. Klara's hyper attentional qualities are juxtaposed with the attentional deficiencies of her human owners, who experience such deficiencies due to their overdependence on and superficial understanding of technology in their lives. This results in the exploitation of her economic (and social) value as an AI figure and autonomous being. The humans' behaviour in this novel also reflects a cultural anxiety of technological progress (a robot taking their daughter's place in the family and their anxieties and eventual rejection of it).

This paper aims to illuminate the interconnectedness of intelligent systems, particularly intelligent robots, and the crisis of attention in the contemporary English novel. Such hypothetical models of technology are helpful for exploring concerns about attentional deficiencies as well as the ethical treatment of advanced robotic beings or “artificial friends” in society. In this case, Klara is often more human-like than her host family. Rather than leading a robot revolution, however, Klara becomes a victim of this “advanced” society due to her extreme subservience and complacency .

**Curtis Runstedler** is a postdoctoral fellow in the English Literature department at the University of Stuttgart. His current research investigates literary representations of medieval robots and automata, and he is also interested in medieval werewolves, medievalism in popular culture, and the intersections between contemporary depictions of robots and attention in English literature.