



Attempts to Avoid Traumatic Occurrences through the Posthuman in Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021)

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Abstract: *Zero K* (2016) de Don DeLillo y *Klara and the Sun* (2021) de Kazuo Ishiguro exploran las posibles consecuencias en el camino hacia un futuro repleto de inteligencia artificial. Así mismo, ambas novelas examinan el rol que el posthumanismo y el transhumanismo pueden tener en sociedades futuras. Ambos textos muestran una preocupación en delinear personajes que intentan evitar situaciones traumáticas mediante (ab)usos de prácticas posthumanas, y al mismo tiempo, también analizan la posible e inminente reorganización jerárquica que se vería causada por el acceso a tales prácticas.

Tanto DeLillo como Ishiguro detallan mundos donde los humanos hacen uso de ciencia que aún no se ha explorado por completo, mientras representan las incertidumbres que el encuentro con el 'otro' posthumano conlleva. Al mismo tiempo, los autores teorizan sobre el posible abuso del privilegio de sus personajes, ya que éstos intentarían evitar convivir con el duelo, así mostrando intentos de evitar situaciones emocionalmente complicadas. De este modo, tanto DeLillo como Ishiguro presentan una exploración de los futuros usos que se le pueden dar a las prácticas post y transhumanas, y de los peligros implícitos en estas. Por lo tanto, ambas novelas examinan los modos en los que la manera de abordar el trauma y el posthumanismo pueden estar conectados de manera inextricable.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Don DeLillo, Trauma Studies, Kazuo Ishiguro

ES Intentos de evitar ocurrencias traumáticas a través de lo Posthumano en *Zero K* (2016) de Don DeLillo, y *Klara and the Sun* (2021) de Kazuo Ishiguro.

Resumen: Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) explore the possible outcomes on the path toward a future riddled with artificial intelligence, as they examine the role posthumanism may embody in future societies. Both texts concern themselves with the depiction of characters who attempt to avoid traumatic occurrences through the (ab)use of posthuman proceedings, as well as with the impending hierarchical (re)ordering implicit in the access to posthuman practices.

DeLillo and Ishiguro portray worlds in which human beings tamper with science not yet fully explored as they depict the uncertainties that the encounter with the posthuman other entails. Concurrently, both authors theorise that privilege may be abused to avoid suffering and loss, by showcasing attempts at avoiding emotional turmoil. This way, both authors provide an exploration of the future uses posthuman practices may provide, and the possible inherent dangers implied. In so doing, both novels explore the ways in which the approach to trauma and posthumanism may be inextricably linked.

Palabras clave: Posthumanismo, Transhumanismo, Don DeLillo, Estudios del Trauma, Kazuo Ishiguro.

Contents: 1. Introduction. 2. *Zero K*, *Klara and the Sun* and the Posthuman. 3. Trauma and the Posthuman. 4. Observing Hierarchical Structures. 5. Concluding Thoughts.

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1. Introduction

Literature concerned with the posthuman explores different upcoming forms of life and, in so doing, attempts to question our conceptualisation of humankind. As argued by Rosi Braidotti, to 'become' posthuman is a process that involves recalibrating the understanding of the attachment to a 'shared world'. This process involves and "enacts the transformation of one's sensorial and perceptual co-ordinates, in order to acknowledge the collective nature and outward-bound direction of what we still call the self." (2013, 193) To understand these impending processes, and how these transformations affect the self, this study aims to inspect how two novels explore the conflation with the posthuman, and, consequently, how some forms of literature can influence a pre-emptive understanding of the self in its encounters with the posthuman.

Furthermore, as of late, posthuman concern has been related to trauma studies as both critical currents are preoccupied with exploring unknown encounters.¹ In a traumatic event, an individual experiences a situation they are not equipped to deal with or to understand, a situation that is foreign because it has never been experienced before. These situations are so complex they cannot be articulated into language, and therefore become traumatic. In encounters with posthuman forms of identity, or in beginning to incorporate posthuman practices into everyday life, the self also finds itself encountering experiences which have not been processed before. For that reason, the self needs to be understood anew or redefined. As put forward by Miriam Fernández-Santiago, "both paradigms ... explor[e] the redefinition of the human self beyond limits of the merely human such as the instrumental mediation/extension of the self and the possibility of objective reality." (2021, 74) Hence, posthuman subjects (or individuals dealing with posthuman subjects), as well as trauma victims, navigate similar experiences when encountering the limits of their humanity (or their reality) as previously understood and integrated by the self.

As a consequence of that, analysing situations where both converge may be a valuable pathway to understand how both fields interact with and modify each other. This article explores these interactions and how they are navigated by individuals. To begin with, the article outlines the basic principles of how posthumanism and trauma studies are understood for the purposes of this study. Then, through the exploration of Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021), the article observes how the encounter with the posthuman may become traumatic, while also considering that, in some cases, individuals may attempt to use posthuman procedures to mediate traumatic experiences. This, in turn, leads to a reflection on whether these attempts can be fruitful or not, especially considering the inherent nature of trauma in itself. In view of the fact that both novels analysed show how the access to the posthuman is entwined in a hierarchical web and may only be available to a selected (privileged) few, the article also places emphasis on understanding that the lack of accessibility to the posthuman may eventually affect the way some human beings can or cannot cope with trauma. Therefore, aside from questioning whether it is possible or not to mitigate a traumatic experience through the use of posthuman procedures, the purpose of this study is also to examine the ethical dimension of such practices.

As the analysed novels discuss speculative technology, it is necessary to consider that speculative fiction can serve a poignant purpose when discussing technological advances. As Lovro Furjanić stresses, speculative fiction "can have a profound influence on the discourse about speculative technology as it can show a world where the technology is no longer speculative." (2019, 508) Indeed, speculative fiction can be very powerful in the process of understanding societies which fully interact with the posthuman, as well as with getting ready for the different outcomes of such interactions. This fiction provides explorations of societies which are already affected by such interactions; societies which are navigating the convergence of both forms of being. In this regard, and without strictly dealing with the science behind transhuman or posthuman thought, *Zero K* and *Klara and the Sun* present societies in which the encounter with the posthuman is either already ingrained in society (as is the case of *Klara and the Sun*) or in which characters are introduced to transhuman practices, allowing for an exploration of the phenomena and the science behind it (as it happens in *Zero K*).

Ishiguro and DeLillo are not new to exploring the influence of either technology or posthuman practices in their works, and it should be noted that the novels explored in this article are severely informed by previous work put forward by both authors. For example, Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) undeniably set the ground for *Klara and the Sun*, not only to allow the author to begin his exploration of posthuman concerns in his literature, but because both novels draw from similar ideologies as regards to the lack of ethics seemingly inherent in posthuman practices. Moreover, DeLillo has continuously dealt with the effects of the interactions between human consciousness and technology. Especially in works such as *White Noise* (1985), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007) or *Point Omega* (2010), before *Zero K*, the author shows a growing concern with technology, climate change or artificial intelligence, and how they affect individual and collective identities (hence clearly delving into posthuman issues). Moreover, both *Zero K* and *Klara and the Sun* have, indeed, been explored widely separately, as both authors are clearly well established, and a wide range of scholarly work is produced for almost each novel they publish. Nevertheless, the two novels have not been connected before, and consequently, this article illustrates how they can be linked through their portrayal of the issues inherent in the connections between trauma and posthumanism.² Thus, despite differing settings, subject matters or

¹ See for example Baelo-Allué (2022), Fernández-Santiago (2021) or Gündoğan İbrişim (2020).

² For further criticism on *Zero K*, see for example: Enteghar & Guendouzi (2021), Herbrechter (2020), Milojević (2020), Glavanakova (2017) or Nel (2021), and for *Klara and the Sun*, see Sahu & Karmakar (2022), Hosuri (2021), Banerjee (2022) or Kang (2022).

structural narratological approaches, both DeLillo and Ishiguro's works explore similar issues arising from the posthuman world, such as the inherent nature of trauma and the ways in which individuals might expect to find a remedy within human enhancement, as well as the hierarchical structures which may be reinforced due to the accessibility (or lack thereof) to posthuman practices. Allen Porter mentions that a posthuman future is inevitable, but that does not entail our society should move towards such a future blindly. (2017, 256) Therefore, to avoid possible dystopian outcomes, as Porter suggests, it is necessary to engage in critical reflection now, and this is what both novels achieve: by showing the possibilities to come in a posthuman future, they encourage readers to question the ways in which we interact with posthuman practices, and foster the need for individuals to enact such reflections and become informed before it is too late.

There is an emerging interest in humankind's curiosity in extending life, something explored in DeLillo's *Zero K*, which "deals with the techno-scientific practice and rationality of cryonics and focuses on the ways in which conceptions of the body, life and death and their relationship are being reconfigured" (Nel 2021, 2). DeLillo's novel explores how the preoccupation with extending life, along with the scenarios which would emerge from modifying our human bodies (which might also involve extending human consciousness) would alter the ways in which our understanding of humanity is configured. In this way, *Zero K* undeniably centres on reformulating how life, death, and birth (or rebirth) are understood, by questioning our current understanding of consciousness and its connection with our corporeal forms and identities. This endeavour is achieved by dealing with characters on the threshold between life and death and by exploring what happens when consciousness is tampered with. Concurrently, such an extension of life could lead to determining when and how subjects wish to die, and possibly marking when and how other people's deaths should take place (along with how to deal with them).

Klara and the Sun opts instead for what comes during and after a re-envisioned world with AI machines and with human versus machine interactions, leading readers to question what it is that makes us human, as well as forcing readers to begin shaping an understanding of what might (or might not) constitute humanity in posthuman subjects.³ Further, "[t]he story explores a range of ethical issues related to emerging technology – including artificial slavery, genetic editing, societal impacts and automation..." (Stenseke 2002, 2). Consequently, Ishiguro focuses on how human subjects living in a society filled with transhuman practices must face the repercussions of posthuman influences, but also on exploring posthuman subjects themselves. This is achieved through using Klara (an Artificial Friend (AF))⁴ as narrator and protagonist of the novel. In this way, Ishiguro's novel manages to explore both spectrums of the consequences inherent in adopting posthuman procedures in society: by placing Klara in a human family, the possibilities to explore both worlds merge seamlessly.

2. *Zero K, Klara and the Sun* and the Posthuman

It should be noted that both novels largely draw from exploring different forms of posthumanism. While *Klara and the Sun* focuses on both, exploring posthuman and transhuman practices, *Zero K* strictly deals with transhumanism. This section explores the ways in which each novel interacts with either posthumanism or transhumanism, and it also endeavours to introduce the ways in which in the societies depicted within each novel, the accessibility to these practices is not available to everyone but only to those specific social groups which can afford it. In this way, the texts also delve into the fact that there are sectors of society which, due to their economic reach, cannot afford to navigate their traumatic or emotionally taxing situations in the same ways. Consequently, both novels end up putting into question how ethically corrupt these societies and practices are.

Porter insightfully pinpoints the differences between transhumanism and posthumanism by exposing that

a 'transhuman' is a 'transitional human' who aims at becoming posthuman and takes appropriate steps (e.g., technological enhancement) towards that end – whereas 'posthuman,'... is a being so radically different in physical, cognitive, and emotional capacities from normal or current humans as to be no longer unambiguously human. (2017, 238)

Therefore, transhumanism implies changes made to a human body to enhance its performance, whereas posthumanism refers to subjects which possess traits which are not associated to the human body. Notwithstanding, within this differentiation it is implied that transhumanism is part of posthumanism, given that, as Porter suggests, transhuman practices are concerned with taking the steps towards becoming posthuman.⁵

In terms of posthumanism, *Klara and the Sun* explores the figures of Artificial Friends, conceptualised as AI 'robots' which work as companions for children. The novel outlines how AFs sometimes end up being taught

³ The 'humanity' of Klara as a posthuman subject cannot be analysed at length due to space limitations, nevertheless, the article will partially focus instead on understanding, at least, how these posthuman subjects are treated and whether it is ethical or not to treat them thus. It could be argued that the novel, indeed, intends to show how the family's treatment of Klara borders on the unethical, and in this way attempts to point out to readers that they should consider how to interact with subjects such as Klara in the possible coming future.

⁴ The novel refers to robots as Artificial Friends (AFs), thus, this is the terminology employed henceforward.

⁵ Throughout the article, the term 'posthumanism' is used both as a general term and to discuss forms of AI which do not stem from a biological organism, whereas 'transhumanism' is used to create a distinction between both and specifically focuses only on issues which relate to human enhancement.

to mimic these children and *continue* them if they were to pass away, by acting as though they were them in an *artificial body* that has been modelled after the child's image. The AFs are trained to know everything about the children and to learn how to behave like them so they can substitute them if needed (hence why this process is termed *continuing*). Interestingly, other than the limited information provided by Klara and the brief delving into her background offered at the beginning of the narrative, the figure of the AF is not explored at length. The reader is not given information about their conception, how long they have existed for, the purposes for their creation, or how ingrained these practices truly are in this society. In fact, "the roles of AFs are often far from clear and vary greatly from child to child" (Stenseke 2002, 3), which, ultimately, means it should be assumed that each AF has a different and unique personality as well as a distinct relationship with the child it is accompanying. By being vague in this regard, the novel allows for the reader to make a great amount of presumptions regarding the figure of the AF. In this way, Ishiguro's novel does more than simply point towards new technological prospects: it also forces readers to imagine a myriad of possibilities in the use of unfamiliar technologies.

Moreover, the access to AFs is not available to all members of society, as they must be purchased. It is known there are stores which supply them, and that the demand must be high considering the continuous release of new models (Ishiguro 2021, 4, 15, 31), which implies that there are competing companies working on these machines (although that is something that the novel also leaves to the reader's imagination, as the logistics behind the manufacturing of AFs is not explored either). At the same time, it is also made clear that the permanence of such stores seems ephemeral (Ishiguro 2021, 238), which raises doubt about the real status and/or influence of these machines. Therefore, the access (or lack thereof) to these machines, as argued above, eventually becomes problematic, as it does not provide the same opportunities for all social groups, confining the use of the features of the AF only to a selected few.

As aforementioned, however, both novels are also concerned with different forms of transhumanism. In *Klara and the Sun* there is what is termed *lifting*, a procedure done to children which is hinted to directly affect their intellect. In the novel, "[a]utomation has created a kind of technological apartheid state, which is reinforced by a dangerous 'genetic editing' procedure that separates 'lifted', intellectually enhanced children from the abandoned masses of the 'unlifted'" (Ajeesh and Rukmini 2023, 5). This way, one can only guess that such children go through a medical procedure which affects their biological structures. As it happens with the figure of the AF, however, the novel does not detail nor explain at length the nature of the procedure itself, but it does make clear that there is a social division rooted in this procedure: *unlifted* children, as will be explored below, do not have the same opportunities as *lifted* children do.

In DeLillo's *Zero K*, on the other hand, there is a very detailed exploration of cryonics, which is a procedure which

aims to pause death by vitrification ... Once a person is pronounced legally dead, there is enough time ... to empty your body of fluids, then vitrify it. Or, they can employ this process on the brain only, using your head as the container, and then suspend body, and/or brain, in ... a giant thermos flask filled with liquid nitrogen (Winterson 2021, 120).

The main aim of cryonics, as mentioned, is to 'pause death', that is to say, individuals undergoing it have the expectation to be able to be brought back, when the science allows it, either in their same body, an altered one, or a different vessel. Given that in *Zero K* cryonics is an unknown treatment to the main character of the novel, Jeffrey Lockhart, DeLillo's novel, unlike Ishiguro's, delves entirely into the science behind the procedure. By focusing on cryonics, the novel raises the following questions: What is it that happens when consciousness is tampered with? Are we only our conscious or are we additionally conditioned by our corporeal forms and environments? If our consciousness were to be detached from our bodies, would we not be dead? If due to such situations, death needed to be understood under different terms, should the human condition be understood differently? These questions are widely considered due to the exploration of an organisation (inside a facility with the same name) conveniently called The Convergence, where people plan on undergoing the cryonic treatment and create a future civilisation which will be entirely different to what is now known. The Convergence is described as "a bizarre art project, a bunker-like structure, a temple, and a tomb ... fortified with blast-proof walls, secure energy sources, and elaborate cybersecurity. It is described as 'an operation' and 'an endeavour' ... a hushed and somber place..." (Glavanakova 2017, 98), a description that manages to mirror the coldness and isolation involved in the procedure. Conveniently, the descriptions provided of the facility, as well as the detailed explanations of how it has been structured and conceived, work to show the amount of wealth involved in its creation. In this way, DeLillo's novel echoes Ishiguro's in showing the great social chasm that is created when wealth is the factor granting access to different and apparently improved ways of living.

In the novel, both Artis Martineau and Ross Lockhart (the stepmother and father of Jeffrey), are intent on undergoing the cryonic process. The difference between their approaches is that Artis suffers from a terminal illness, whereas Ross eventually decides to go through the procedure to accompany her. Artis explains her reasoning thus: "I will become a clinical specimen. Advances will be made through the years. Parts of the body replaced or rebuilt... A reassembling, atom by atom. I have every belief that I will reawaken to a new perception of the world." (DeLillo 2016, 47). It is interesting to note that she considers herself a "clinical specimen", showing that she is quite open to the uncertainty and fragmentation transhuman practices provide. Ross's reasoning differs, however. He tells his son he is "[g]oing with her, joining her, sharing it, side by side' ... 'I don't want to lead the life I'll be leading without her' ... 'I'm ending one version of my life to enter another and far more permanent version' (DeLillo 2016, 110-111). Alan

Medeiros Casteluber and Gisèle Manganelli Fernandes state that the relationship between father and son is further complicated by Ross's decision, due to "his immense faith in the feasibility of the process, and his full conviction that this remarkable technology constitutes the only path to a new world and a new form of transcendence." (2021, 518) Ross is, therefore, propelled by a variety of reasons, mainly, because he has a blind belief in the project, as he is severely interested in the science behind it.⁶ Most importantly, however, because he wants to avoid a life without his partner, mostly, it seems, due to his preconceived idea of grief.

In this way, Ross attempts to take control over an impending traumatic situation, anticipating its emotional effects by self-styling his own death. Hence, the text forces readers to question their conception of (and relationship with) death. Be that as it may, the fact Ross can cultivate his own approach to death has to do with the fact he is a founder of the Convergence, which implies that the seductive effects of achieving immortality (through posthuman practices) are entangled with privilege and wealth. The novel is clearly concerned with making obvious the fact that Ross' situation is rare, that it is his wealth which puts him in the privileged position he enjoys and that that is what makes it possible for him to be able to consider and partake in such an endeavour. Once more, and echoing Ishiguro's narrative, DeLillo's novel questions whether it is ethical that only specific human beings can get to tamper with such issues in this way.

Alternatively, *Klara and the Sun* delves into what life might be like when these changes have already been enacted into society. As mentioned, the enhancement of human beings is explored through the *lifting* of children (specified to take place to provide children with better schooling and professional opportunities). Remarkably, the novel shows *lifting* has created a breach within society, given that only the privileged and wealthy enough can afford such procedures, thus leading to a wider gap between social classes. *Lifting* has also led to a society instilled with uncertainty: individuals must decide whether to *lift* their children or not, and it is known *lifting* can have life-threatening consequences. For example, Klara is a companion to Josie (the other protagonist of the novel), who is ill due to her *lifting* procedure, and throughout the narrative it is disclosed that Josie's sister, Sal, passed away shortly before, precisely as a consequence of the procedure. This means that when parents decide whether to *lift* their children or not, they are making a decision fraught with ethical repercussions, which will lead to living with the uncertainty of whether the child will respond well or not to the surgical intervention.

As discussed previously, what the reader knows regarding the existence of the AF is obtained from Klara's arguably limited narration, her memories, and the sporadic interactions she has with other AFs. Nevertheless, such limitation seems to be the novel's aim: throughout the course of the narrative, the machines' roles as *companions* as well as *substitutes* for these children is explored. As argued by Ajeesh and Rukmini, the role AFs have in this society may be perceived as quite problematic:

[the] notion of slavery may be easily applied to robots in general. They are machines designed by humans to do certain jobs. Furthermore, like slaves, robots and cyborgs have no rights, are not permitted in some locations, and are controlled by a master. Klara matches this description of a robot as a slave to its human master in a hazy way. Klara, as an artificial friend, is both the embodiment and refutation of the dehumanised server. On the one hand, she is an object, a machine ... On the other hand, Klara misses nothing, feels everything ... Her thoughts are transparent yet impenetrable at the same time... she is unmistakably unique (Ajeesh and Rukmini 2023, 5)

By having AFs be substitutes, *Klara and the Sun* contributes to questioning the morality of how they are used (and abused), regarded (and disregarded) in society, supporting the novel's aim to foster critical thinking when it comes to the treatment of and interaction with posthuman subjects. As argued, Klara is indeed treated similarly to a slave, when at the end of the novel, she is conceived as another domestic appliance, one that has no emotional connection to the family, even though she has served them by providing emotional support. As Robert C. Abrams states, despite being "treated with consideration" and "recognized" within the family unit, once her "presence is no longer required, her impending death will not be mourned." (2022, 637) Arguably, the relationship established between AF and human will depend entirely on the context and the use the family intends to give to the AF, "[i]n the context of robot rights ... moral status is *subject-* and *context-dependent*; something which is granted to entities (e.g., animals or robots) by a particular *subject* (e.g., humans) in a concrete *social context*" (Stenseke 2002, 10, emphasis in original). That is to say, the morality adopted in human-machine interactions depends entirely on the subject, the context and the relationship that is established with the entity. Braidotti also highlights the importance of establishing adequate ways to interact with posthuman subjects so as to avoid dehumanising them as we move towards a posthuman future. She stresses: "kinship and ethical accountability need to be redefined" (2013, 103) in a way that both affectivity and responsibility towards posthuman subjects is given specific attention to.⁷

⁶ See Leidenhag (2020) or Winterson (2021), where faith in technology is mirrored to religious faith, which helps understand Ross's position more comprehensively.

⁷ The need for affectivity and responsibility towards posthuman subjects is highlighted in the novel once Josie recovers from her unspecified illness. Klara, who was willing to accept her fate by *continuing* Josie, is instead relegated from her role as companion (being placed in a small room, and later left in landfill). This is reminiscent of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, in which the lives of 'donors' were disregarded once they had served their function in providing organs to their 'counterparts'. Consequently, from a moral standpoint, interactions between humans and posthumans need to be revisited and improved, and Ishiguro's texts arguably request a recalibration of the ethics which are to be enacted in the encounter with posthumanism.

Therefore, both texts show that it is no longer about *how* this technology works or *if* this technology is possible, but about *what* happens when societies have already interacted with it. How do these new forms of technology affect humankind? How are posthuman subjects to be regarded and treated? The two novels being analysed seem to argue for the need to place the focus on the ethicality that may be lost not only in the treatment of posthuman subjects, but also in the allocation of accessibility to posthuman practices. As has been put forward, only a selected few have access to posthuman or transhuman practices, which creates further social divisions. In *Klara and the Sun* it is due to both, the *lifting* of children and the opportunities it provides, and the access to AFs, whereas in *Zero K* it has to do with the wealth necessary to be part of organisations such as the Convergence, which renders those without the means to wealth acquisition more vulnerable to situations which they cannot even attempt to remedy.

3. Trauma and the Posthuman

Trauma studies have historically focused on events which radically affected individuals due to their incomprehensible nature, events which were unprecedented and consequently had never been experienced prior by humankind. However, as of late, there has been a slight shift in the understanding of the conception of trauma, wherein other occurrences, arguably more ordinary and common, could be considered to have traumatising effects. It is under this latter lens that this section attempts to provide a theoretical framework which will help outline the analysis of how characters respond to impending situations of loss in the two novels.

For example, Avril Horner understands trauma as an inevitable condition of our current society,⁸ arguing it has become an inevitable consequence of our times:

many cultural critics have argued that even ordinary experiences of life within late modernity can become cumulatively traumatic ... the word “trauma” signifies, at one end, an experience beyond articulation and outside the boundaries of normal experience and, at the other end, an aspect of “normality” itself ... “collective trauma” is now endemic to the modern world and is exacerbated by the fact that we live in globalised societies based on risk culture. (2014, 35-37)

Thus, the traumatic experience has been redefined and is understood as an experience that is alien and unprecedented, which also involves a constant feeling of impending threat or loss. María Ferrández San Miguel discusses the existence of Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS), a newly recognised condition related to the effects that living in our current environmental and socioeconomical conditions may have on certain human beings:

Terrans thus live in a climate of ongoing threat, a situation now widely recognized by medical professionals as potentially traumatizing... The concept [CTS] was originally developed in the 1980s by a group of mental health professionals working in apartheid-era South Africa (Stevens, Eagle, Kaminer and Higson-Smith 2013, 75). CTS constitutes a diagnostic tool to describe the psychological impact of living in conditions in which there is a realistic pervasive threat of danger. (2018, 33-34)

While what takes place in both novels cannot be equated to a form of CTS, this theory allows us to conceptualise the potential for new forms of traumatic experiences to emerge, especially in a world where new manifestations of threat and/or danger are in a constantly shifting form. As these characters find themselves in completely unprecedented situations, especially given the fact the novels belong to the science fiction genre, it is interesting to see that their potential traumatising is not common and cannot fully be analysed satisfyingly through the prism of the trauma theory that has been conceptualised until the moment. Therefore, approached from this perspective, trauma is associated with grief and survival: that is to say, surviving a near-death experience or a loss. Loss, or the experience showing the proximity to death, reminds the subject of its mortality, enforcing the activation of coping mechanisms: “trauma is not a category that encompasses death directly, but rather draws our attention to the survival of subjects in and beyond sites of violence and in proximity to death” (Rothberg 2014, xiv). In the case at hand, the subjects are not strictly traumatised, but they are working towards avoiding their idea of an impending trauma, which is inextricably linked to their idea of mourning. Moreover, these subjects have access to posthuman procedures due to their wealth, which means they can develop new forms of possibly navigating trauma, as they can afford to experiment with new forms of technology.

It is necessary to closely regard Artis's case in *Zero K*, given that her experience deals with the conditions revolving our current Western conception of death,⁹ and her surrendering to the belief of transhumanism is shown as a form of accepting the fragmentation of the self that comes from trauma as well as from the transhuman. Interestingly, while Ross is adamant on avoiding grief, to the point that he is willing to let go of his life and the full health he enjoys, Artis embraces the uncertainty of her situation, showing a willingness to give

⁸ The approach taken to trauma in this study is widely informed by the conception of trauma studies, through the pivotal works of Sigmund Freud (2019 (1917)), Cathy Caruth (1996), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), or Dominick LaCapra (2014). It is understood, however, that the conceptualisation of trauma studies is being redefined, and hence, trauma is now perceived as inherent in the historic and sociopolitical effects of everyday life. As Stef Craps states, Caruth “conceives history as being inherently traumatic, and trauma as an overwhelming experience that resists integration and expression.” (2014, 45)

⁹ This conception involves the general understanding that death is a biological process, and consequently, both body and mind can no longer function after death, as they are a single, connected, unit. After death, therefore, both mind and body stop operating in the world. This is a conception that shifts with transhuman beliefs, given that bodies can be mended or replaced by different vessels, and minds can continue to operate without the body.

herself to new experiences and possibilities, despite the chance these may have disastrous consequences. Artis shows that when trauma and the posthuman converge, the often-traumatic fragmentation of the self might become a possibility for celebration:

both trauma and posthuman theory attempt to conceptualize the fragmentation of the subject and of culture which began in the times of postmodernism; yet the fracture that trauma provokes is usually read as negative, and hence the self seeks re-integration, while the fragmentation and hybridization that result from the assimilation of the posthuman is potentially liberating, and the discourse of post-humanity rejoices at the opportunities that this shattering of structures may afford the individual subject (Ferrández San Miguel 2018, 32).

In fact, this celebration of fracture can be a means of coping with the possibility of the traumatic itself and embracing new emerging parts of human identity. Artis states she feels “artificially” herself, she describes her voice as being different, as if it was not coming from her but from the outside. Most interestingly, perhaps, is how she articulates her excitement, exclaiming “I’m so eager. I can’t tell you. To do this thing. Enter another dimension. And then return. For ever more. A word I say to myself. Again and again. So beautiful.” (DeLillo 2016, 52-53) Casteluber and Fernandes highlight this effect as a common occurrence within posthuman subjects, going back to Donna Haraway’s conceptualisation of the cyborg, stating that both figures (that of the posthuman subject and of the cyborg) simultaneously represent disunity and fluidity within the same body. (2021, 520) Artis is a clear exemplification, with her case being further elaborated by DeLillo when an entire chapter of the narrative is dedicated to Artis’s state after she has undergone the cryonic treatment. The chapter consists in a long, fragmented stream of consciousness, where Artis seems to be in a perpetual state of confusion, a multiple subject, unsure of what and where it is, with the narration switching between first and third person:

She is first person and third person with no way to join them together ... Can't I stop being who I am and become no one. She is the residue, all that is left of an identity ... I try to know who I am. But all I am is what I am saying and this is nearly nothing. ... Here and now. This is who I am but only this. ... All the selves and individual possesses. What is left to her but a voice in its barest sheddings. (2016, 160-162, emphasis in original)

This perfectly depicts a subject in a state of disarray, with her subject representing that simultaneous disunity and fluidity just mentioned.

However, this section in the novel problematises the certainty displayed by Artis throughout the first half of the text, as it is momentarily questioned when the reader is made privy to her new form of consciousness. After the procedure, “Artis’s cognitive abilities and her speaking faculties seem to have suffered trauma, and the elegant idiosyncrasies that the reader has come to think of as characteristic of her self-expression have disappeared from her language” (Vågnes 2020, 40). Ergo, the chapter puts into question Artis’s previous statements, showing that although the transhuman may have been a cause for celebration (a possibility for hope), when it is enacted in society what is encountered is utterly unknown.

While Ross does not initially go through the process as planned, after Artis’s procedure he undergoes clear physical and emotional decay. *Zero K* depicts a man who has abandoned himself to grief, aimlessly navigating life. Jeffrey describes the striking difference in his character throughout the years in the few encounters they share, indicating he is shocked by his father’s appearance: his clothes and facial hair are strikingly different to the person he is used to interacting with, his demeanour is described as exhausted, going as far as hinting at the fact that Ross has lost the spark and vitality that used to define him. (DeLillo 2016, 200-201) This shows a man changed by grief and loss, a man transformed into something other, a man in despair. As a consequence, after two years without Artis, Ross finally undergoes the procedure, arguably, to put an end to his grieving. While initially his idea was to avoid a traumatic situation through the use of posthuman procedures, ultimately, he attempts to stop his suffering through the same means. Nonetheless, it seems the novel is pointing towards the idea that trauma, regardless of class privilege, may be unavoidable. While traumatic situations can be navigated more easily due to the access to the posthuman, as has been shown through the case of Ross (and as will now be exemplified through Chrissie), that does not seem to eradicate the suffering inherent in grief. In other words, Ross may go through the procedure to put an end to his suffering, but he cannot take back the pain he seems to have experienced the previous two years.

Klara and the Sun portrays a society with a seemingly communal wish for an elongated and *lifted* life. However, the narrative is also concerned with showing that a blind belief in posthumanism may be problematic. This is specifically exemplified through Chrissie, Josie’s mother, who having already lost a child due to the *lifting* procedure, chooses to have Josie *lifted* either way. As she states:

After Sal, [my ex-husband] said we shouldn’t risk it. So what if Josie doesn’t get lifted? Plenty of kids aren’t. But I could never have that for Josie. I wanted the best for her. I wanted her to have a good life ... I called it, and now Josie’s sick. Because of what I decided. (Ishiguro 2021, 213)

Therefore, Chrissie’s decision shows that even though the *lifting* process may backfire, most of the depicted society strikingly continues to choose the way of posthumanism: they seem to have an urge to participate in it, displaying a willingness to experiment with new forms of technology, regardless of the consequences.

To contend the situation where *lifting* children may result in their demise, this society now uses the figure of the AF. Klara is specifically asked and trained to *continue* Josie: there is an AF model/portrait being made

from Josie's body before her assumed death (Ishiguro 2021, 204–207) and ideally, after the Josie-shaped AF is created, Klara's data, having learnt everything about Josie, will be transferred to that AF:

Klara, we're not asking you to train the new Josie. We're asking you to *become* her. That Josie you saw up there, as you noticed, is empty. If the day comes – I hope it doesn't, but if it does – we want you to inhabit Josie up there with everything you've learnt ... You're not being required simply to mimic Josie's outward behaviour. You're being asked to continue her for Chrissie. And for everyone who loves Josie. (Ishiguro 2021, 209–210).

Notwithstanding, the novel shows that despite the attempts at avoiding the grief inherent in the loss of these children, the results are fruitless. The reader witnesses the decay of Josie's mother throughout time. Not only has she already undergone a process of loss with her other daughter, but she is now reliving the experience through Josie's illness.

Chrissie grieves Josie while she is alive, terrified of what she knows her grieving experience to be ("if it happens, if it comes again, there's going to be no other way for me to survive. I came through it with Sal, but I can't do it again" (Ishiguro 2021, 212)) and the only way she can envision moving forward is by participating in acts which involve the posthuman. It is worth noting she already tried to somewhat *continue* her other child with an older model of the AF figure, an endeavour which was considered a failure. Consequently, despite the fact the attempts made are fruitless, she continues to seek hope in the possibilities offered by the posthuman. The text portrays a woman that is already experiencing the pain of loss, and that in her thirst to overcome it, continues to put herself under a distress she is already familiar with and which she believes she is incapable of dealing with.

Furthermore, the novel also explores the sense of collective trauma associated with a posthuman society. In the same way it provides an insight into the communal wish to participate in these practices as a community, the narrative also explores how these practices may be traumatising for the entire community. To do so, it would be interesting to regard the encounter with the posthuman as the encounter with the Other. As Ferrández San Miguel argues:

From the perspective of posthumanity, human subjectivity and identity are transformed as a result of the encounter with the Other, of the assimilation of the Other within the self, leading to hybridization and the dismantling of the concept of the human, which, let it be said, may potentially be a traumatizing prospect for some. (2018, 31)

This can be identified in the novel given that, as mentioned above, *Klara and the Sun* paints a picture of a fractured society and, towards the end of the narrative, the novel also hints at two different sets of brewing rebellions: one within the world of AFs (against humanity and/or amongst themselves, due to the hierarchies caused by the release of new models (Ishiguro 2021, 35)), and the other from humans (Josie's father, Paul, is part of a community which is planning for a possible insurrection against machines (Ishiguro 2021, 232, 236)). What these behaviours indicate is that the human-machine encounter, albeit relatively welcomed, may prove traumatic on a collective level, as it is not only individual families being affected by isolated events which face the consequences of the posthuman society they inhabit, but ultimately, multiple social groups being affected by these encounters. This is, consequently, a society fractured on multiple levels: not only is there the fracture between the privileged and the non-privileged, which leads to the procedures mentioned above, such as *lifting* and *continuing* or the possibility to acquire AFs being available only to specific social groups, but the encounter with the posthuman is also leading to a fracture on the level of the machine versus human interactions, where distrust and remorse are hinted at, along with possible remorse brewing as well within the group of posthuman subjects in themselves (as they see their worth devalued with the capitalist need to keep upgrading and improving on the models).

Further, it is through the encounter with the other that the self can constitute a more solidified sense of identity. Indeed, in the society depicted by Ishiguro's novel, in the case of the encounter with the posthuman, this otherness could be conceptualised as exacerbated: not only is the other a threat, providing cause for alarm and a forced redefinition and self-analysis of the self/human, but it also has the added element of not having the potential of being destroyed or annihilated – on principle. This encounter, in the case of the novel, "results in a paradoxical situation where there is a widespread production of discourses, knowledge and practices ... about a category – the human – at the very time when this category has lost all consensus and self-evidence" thus becoming an "expression of anxiety about survival and the concomitant fear of loss of privileges". (Braidotti 2019, 62) This means that when it comes to posthuman otherness, the threat is new, unexplored, and consequently, menacing. After all, "artificial intelligence has emerged as an interactive mirror that enables us to "both recognize ourselves in and measure ourselves against it" (Davis & Thacker (1998) qtd. in Sahu & Karmakar 2022, 2). That explains the seemingly contradictory need to simultaneously participate in and to attempt to overpower the otherness inherent to posthumanism. In this regard, human beings are now beginning to experience encounters with the posthuman that are unprecedented and consequently difficult to assimilate. This, in turn, affects not only the interactions with posthuman otherness, but the building of the self in itself, as humans find themselves forced to recalibrate the ways in which they understand and define their own identities in opposition to the posthuman subject (or, in some cases, and as has been argued in regard to Artis, as posthuman others).

With reference to the posthuman encounter, therefore, and as argued before, it operates like *ordinary* traumatic occurrences: human beings are not yet equipped to deal with such encounters, and ultimately, the response may be similar to that of a traumatising event. In this way, both novels explore a double social

phenomenon in that human beings attempt to make use of new technologies to cope with their own humanity, yet they simultaneously become traumatised by their failure to adhere to the understanding of these new forms of living. The never-ending process of incorporating new forms of technology, some of which having profound effects on the self and on society, is one which the individual cannot easily accommodate and comprehend.

4. Observing Hierarchical Structures

As observed above, a key element in the traumatic situations experienced by Ross and Chrissie and what links their thirst to utilise the posthuman to attempt to navigate their grief is the fact that both are privileged enough to be able to afford the access to such practices. Both novels show that the access to different forms of posthumanism, including AI, may heighten the unequal dynamics inherent in our current hierarchical societies. As stated by Lanlan Du, *Klara and the Sun* “not only cautions the danger of unchecked technological advances, but also criticizes how genetic perfection used only by affluent people may lead to an unfair hierarchical world.” (2022, 559) As a matter of fact, both novels expose how hierarchical structures originate and continue to be reinforced, hence clearly delineating how access to posthuman practices is different for each social group.¹⁰

In *Zero K*, for example, this is seen through the existence of the Convergence, which is depicted as a space built for and by extremely wealthy individuals. Because of the Convergence, the novel “draws attention to wealth as the demarcation line between those who can choose to enjoy the benefits of technology and those who remain excluded regardless of their choice” (Furjanić 2019, 493). At first, the Convergence is depicted as a space composed of people who have a very detailed planning and vision of a(n almost utopian) future society. The ideology behind this group is to create a world where life can be different to what humankind has created during its Anthropocene:

What’s happening in this community is not just a creation of medical science. There are social theorists involved, and biologists, and futurists, and geneticists, and climatologists, and neuroscientists, and psychologists, and ethicists ... All the vital minds. Global English, yes, but other languages as well. Translators when necessary, human and electronic. There are philologists designing an advanced language unique to the Convergence ... A language that will enable us to express things we can’t express now, see things we can’t see now ... broaden every possibility. (DeLillo 2016, 33)

Jeffrey recognises their power, aware that his father “put major sums of money into this entire operation, this endeavour ... and the office was a gesture of courtesy, allowing him to maintain convenient contact with his network of companies, agencies, funds, trusts, foundations, syndicates, communes and clans” (DeLillo 2016, 7). DeLillo’s novel puts emphasis on how money is what gives access to the project, thereby making it obvious that those without means cannot even afford to plan for such a utopian future.

In *Klara and the Sun*, this is exposed through the social hierarchies presented in the novel, by providing a detailed exploration of two different families living under dissimilar means. Through Klara’s experience, the reader gets to know both the world of wealthy families (such as Josie’s) which have been able to *lift* their children and enjoy a lifestyle blatantly connected to posthuman subjects, as well as the lives of other families (such as Rick’s) which have been unable (or have refused) to enjoy such connectivity. Ultimately, it is obvious that in this society, those that can afford the access to the posthuman can expect to have a more privileged future.

Moreover, both authors make use of a character to fully interact with this idea. Jeffrey and Rick work in opposition to those characters that participate in posthuman proceedings (namely Ross and Chrissie). They both actively refuse to participate in interactions with the posthuman on an ethical basis. The novels clearly establish the different lifestyles these characters have as opposed to the rest of society shown in the texts. In *Klara and the Sun*, the glimpse at Rick’s lifestyle and his family’s lack of wealth is translated into not being given access to the same schools (Rick even struggles with being awarded a scholarship for a good school: “Atlas Brookings may make a big thing of it, but it’s less than two percent. That’s all. Their intake of unlifteds is less than two percent” (Ishiguro 2021,130)). Not being *lifted* has confined Rick and his mother to a lower class from which they cannot move upward.¹¹

Alternatively, in *Zero K*, while Jeffrey could enjoy the benefits of posthumanism due to the wealth in his family and his father’s position in the Convergence, he constantly refuses to interact with them: aside from his trips to the Convergence (where he goes only to be able to bid his goodbyes to his father and stepmother), he is also shown rejecting job offers presented to him through his father’s connections (DeLillo 2016, 193, 198, 201). This indicates that, while he is privileged, he refuses to take advantage of the opportunities provided to him by such privilege, establishing a difference with his father’s use of wealth. Later in the novel, Jeffrey

¹⁰ Regarding how hierarchical dynamics improve or rather deteriorate due to the use of the posthuman, Francis Fukuyama argues that it is paramount to consider that “[t]here is no guarantee ... that technology will always produce ... positive political results. Many technological advances of the past reduced human freedom. ... Biotechnology and a greater scientific understanding on the human brain may promise to have extremely significant political ramifications.” (2002, 15)

¹¹ It is unclear whether Rick was meant to be *lifted* or not “Rick used to go to a school, you know. I mean a real, old-fashioned one’ ... ‘Well, the long story short of it is that Rick left the school to take up home tutoring like all the smarter children. But then ... things grew complicated” (Ishiguro 2021, 147). It may be concluded that the family could not afford his *lifting*, as the clear economic imbalance between them and Josie’s family is repeatedly pointed out. Nevertheless, as his mother later explains, she does not regret it (Ishiguro 2021, 236).

retreats to a high form of minimalism, even letting go of technology, going on to “find him living in the world and paying more attention to the wonders of the everyday, finding transcendence in the ordinary” (Casteluber and Fernandes 2021, 530). It is as if the contact with the *etherealism* of the Convergence facility has led him to a wish to go back to human basics: not only does he doubt those things he cannot physically perceive or interact with, but he also takes pains to distance himself from technological advances. In short, the more blatant his encounter with posthumanism, the more palpable his need to establish control (Glavanakova 2017), a control lost, ironically, due to the emerging new forms of being and living arising due to the posthuman.

5. Concluding Thoughts

In their novels, Ishiguro and DeLillo offer a vision of the hierarchical breach likely to be experienced by societies in the coming future, and both question whether (or why) the posthuman is only accessible to specific members or groups of society, further examining whether it is possible that a future society can offer mitigating responses to traumatic events only to a selected few. Both novels complexly explore a world in which the access to the posthuman has created a heightened form of privilege. Moreover, this privilege impacts more than the possibilities to mitigate trauma differently: these are societies in which human beings, as well as posthuman subjects, see their basic rights altered.

Both novels show human beings in distress turning to posthumanism to avoid impending traumatic situations, and both also entwine such ideas to the approaching realisation that there cannot be a posthuman solution to trauma without access to a high social spectrum. Moreover, as exemplified, both authors hint at the fact that despite having access to such posthuman means (through wealth acquisition), the solutions that are sought after may not be possible or fruitful just yet. Furthermore, both showcase the idea that posthuman subjects may have to face further traumatic contexts in the future if a conciliation between human-machine interactions, as well as a new understanding of the posthuman condition, do not take place. Concurrently, through both texts, trauma is understood as an inevitable process inherent in the conflation with posthumanism, and despite the attempts made to fight it off, it seems that it will continue to exist, as all characters discussed are to a higher or lesser degree traumatised, despite their differing levels of involvement with the posthuman.

Furthermore, it is key to establish that works of speculative fiction such as the ones explored can be pivotal in our society’s adaptation to the posthuman reality, as they provide scenarios that allow for a better understanding of all the possible outcomes in the interaction with the posthuman and the possible problems or solutions which may arise. The novels, by providing a glimpse into a possible near future riddled with posthumanism, become a warning tale, as they exemplify the uses that may be given to posthuman practices, how these may affect how human beings interact with themselves, with others, or with posthuman subjects, and how such practices may be both morally questionable and/or fruitless.

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