Reckoning with the Unknowable:

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* and the Melodramatic Speculation

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Abstract

This essay explores the melodramatic mode of Ian McEwan's recent novel *Machines Like Me* in order to attest to the aptitude of the genre when reckoning with the increasing moral ambiguity involved in human-AI relations. While tracing the entanglements of Charlie, Miranda, and Adam, this essay contends that eeriness is one of the prominent affects that the protagonist experiences. Eeriness signifies the underlying anxiety of a human subject in the face of the (imminent) arrival of far-advanced artificial nonhumans. The recurring motif of adopting a child, and the ensuing feel of abortiveness in the novel merits critical attention, mainly because they illustrate the fragility of the pseudo family unit forged across the categorical species divide and blood ties. Equally importantly, the kind of justice suspended, thwarted, and served by the end of *Machines Like Me* emblematizes the intricately complex condition in which moral agents—human and artificial—exercise their right for judgment and collide with one another. Notable is McEwan's success in framing the daunting task of establishing roboethics within the structure of melodrama. In doing so, McEwan, on the one hand, demonstrates formalistic affinities between speculative fiction and melodrama when creating the

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speculative reality. On the other, he reckons with the unknowable in human's ethical coexistence with artificial intelligence.

Keywords: AI, artificial intimacies, eeriness, justice, melodrama, *Machines Like Me*, moral ambiguity, singularity

> Thinking outside the regime of the human is simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting.
> It is a ceaseless endeavor, a continuous straining to make sense of
> something else that is never fully knowable.
> To think the inhuman is the necessary queer labor of the incommensurate.
> José Esteban Muñoz (2015)

> The extent to which we devolve moral decisions to machines
> is going to be a very interesting ride.
> Ian McEwan in his conversation with Jacob Aron (2019)

I. Introduction

In his 1995 Preface to *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks defines melodrama "less as a genre than as an imaginative mode" (vii). Brooks thereby posits melodramatic mode as central to aesthetic practices that govern a variety of modern art, such as films, literature, sculptures, and paintings (vii-viii). The so-called "imaginative mode" is construed as the defining "modern sensibility" (Brooks 21). Importantly enough, Brooks underlines the dilemma of modern art by arguing that it is borne of "the void"—the kind of vacuum "backed by no theology and no universally accepted code" (21). In doing so, the well established critic lays bare the condition that engenders modern art—one that is characterized by "a desperate effort to renew contact with the scattered ethical and psychic fragments of the Sacred through the representation of fallen reality" (21). Frank Rahill, on a similar note, offers an useful definition of melodrama by identifying it as "a form of dramatic composition in prose partaking of the nature of tragedy, comedy, pantomime, and spectacle, and intended for a popular audience" (qtd. Williams 1). Rahill's underpinning of melodrama is equally crucial, for it links the origin of melodrama to the formalistic convention of drama. Rahill's observation that the melodramatic plotline involves the marshaling of both "stock characters" and somehow predictable

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plotlines—"suffering heroine or hero, a persecuting villain, and a benevolent comic" (qtd. Williams 1)—is pertinent to McEwan's recasting of the cuckoldry motif within *Machines Like Me*. Also, it should not go unnoticed that melodrama displays a degree of plasticity when it comes to its subject matter. Inasmuch as Carolyn Williams's edited monograph illustrates a range of melodramatic modes across historical periods, places, and genres, melodramatic mode can be extended to the kind of speculative reality rendered visible in literature, theater, and films. For instance, Juliet John's suggestion that "[t]he relationship between the melodramatic worldview and the postmodern is dialectical rather than oppositional" (290) attests to the effectiveness of melodrama as a vehicle to shed a new light on the postmodernist work. John's coinage of the word "metamodern melodrama" (289, 290) is therefore apt and applicable to my reading of the twenty-first-century AI fiction.

Building on the scholarly discussions of melodrama over the last few decades, this essay suggests that McEwan's deployment of the melodramatic mode in his recent novel is deliberate and effective on two fronts. Primarily, the author overcomes the challenge of envisioning a human-nonhuman dynamic in novel terms. Aware of the relatively long literary history surrounding artificial beings, McEwan willingly and willfully ventures into what José Esteban Muñoz terms the "simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting" task of "[t]hinking outside the regime of the human" (209).[1] Second, the melodramatic mode addresses moral ambiguity that pivots around the problem of agency amid increasingly complex human-AI relations. In effect, McEwan's novelistic representations of the human-AI relation in *Machines Like Me* underline multi-faceted 'unknowability'—a term that refers to both the general condition, in which the protagonist named Charlie Friend is situated, and the epistemic, moral ambiguity that surrounds the human-artificial nonhuman cohabitation in and outside the novel. My contention here is that the pseudo-family dynamic into which Charlie, Miranda, and Adam play borders on the farce and

1. By contributing to the so-called AI fiction, still resonant with leitmotifs and issues discernible in Philip K. Dick's groundbreaking *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), McEwan brings to the fore the moral complexity occasioned by the social relations of the twenty-first century. In his conversation with Tim Adams, McEwan reaffirms his abiding passion for science fiction in response to the accusations of his dismissal of science fiction as a genre, noting that he has "actually put a nod towards *Blade Runner* in Adam's final speeches, after he's been attacked by Charlie" (Adams n.p.). See also "Ian McEwan Doesn't Hate Science Fiction" on *Wired*.

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tragedy. Furthermore, it presents the idea of roboethics rather concretely, as the melodramatic ethos foregrounds questions concerning agency and liability on an everyday level. McEwan himself has posed the similar questions during his 2018 speech in China:

> Should we grant the rights and responsibilities of a citizen to an artificial human? Will it be wrong to buy or own such a being, as people used to buy and own slaves? Will it be murder if we destroy such a being? Will they become cleverer than us, and take our jobs? … (qtd. Shang 443)

Lastly, if we factor into McEwan's rejection of *Machines Like Me* being associated with science fiction, it becomes telling that melodramatic mode nicely encases the unfolding of eeriness, jealousy, mortification, pride, false contentment of a human subject.[2]

In what follows, with a particular focus on the use of melodramatic mode in *Machines Like Me*, I draw attention to how eeriness is provoked and experienced. Eeriness can be understood as an affective as well as emotional register—a term that is used interchangeably with the uncanny in this essay—specifically when discussing the fabric and texture of the novel. To be sure, eeriness evokes Freud's widely known conceptualization of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) and Masahiro Mori's often-cited article "The Uncanny Valley." In the latter, Mori visualizes the very trajectory, in which human subjects experience the highest degree of unpleasantness when a nonhuman body bears a striking resemblance to human features, and terms the very range the "uncanny valley" (99). Jacques Derrida, in his discussion of the beast employs the word "uncanny" to encompass the gulf lying between the dyads at work between the human and the nonhuman:

> This undecidable alternative, both "strange and familiar," uncanny, *unheimlich*, would go just as well for life and death, the living and the dead, the organic and the inorganic, the living being and the machine, the living being and its mechanization, the marionette, the mortal and the immortal: one is always more bête than the other. (*Beast and the Sovereign* 184)

Mark Fisher similarly observes that the eerie is concerned with "the outside in a

2. Cognizant of the temporal setting of the novel, Julian Lucas in *The New Yorker* duly describes it as "a retrofuturist drama" (n.p.)

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straightforwardly empirical as well as a more abstract transcendental sense" (Fisher 11). When read against the aforementioned theorization of the uncanny, McEwan's brand of eeriness becomes distinctive in that it brings together broader planetary concerns—climate change and massive layoffs—and anxiety and fear stemming from the question whether artificial beings could reach the singularity, namely the watershed which extricates the technologically advanced nonhuman from human control. Especially the latter precipitates intense debates on autonomy, justice, and nonhuman mind.[3] At the same time, *Machines Like Me* takes issue with the long overshadow of Brexit, which radically dismantles the ideals of political community and the standard of national welfare system within the grid of neoliberal economy.[4] Put another way, the McEwan's coupling of the posthuman condition with the conditions in late capitalism paves the way to further the stakes of Charlie's pseudo family dynamic in the novel. The triad of Charlie, Miranda, and Adam merits thorough critical attention, mainly because the tentative union and its eventual implosion attest to the limit of alternative kinship, unit of mutual care, and justice.

II. Body

1. The Machine Gaze and the Shades of Eeriness

Set in 1982, *Machines Like Me* presents queer temporalities conjoining what had actually happened in the 1980s with what we are likely to have witnessed ever since the 2010s, thereby providing a spectrum of speculative reality. In it, Alan Truing is still alive, in the progress of realizing his dream vision of machine learning. McEwan makes sure in the novel that artificial beings are such a rare item. The novel begins with an aptly wry comment on the emergence of a new artificial species. Charlie

3. As for the thorough discussions of singularity in the context of machine learning, see *The Ray Kurzweil Reader*.

4. As such, it is not coincidental that many of his critics readily associate this novel with critical intervention in the Brexit Controversy. Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) is singled out as the first Brexit novel. Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) joins the group of Brexit novels. Many scholars agree that McEwan's *Cockroach* is taken as a Brexit novel, but I suggest Machine Like Me provide a backhand political commentary on post-referendum political instability. For more on the literary texts written in the wake of the 2016 referendum in the UK, see John McLeod, Lejla Mulalić, Robert Saunders, and Marlena Tronicke.

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Friend the focal character and unreliable narrator, aged 32, rightly presents "artificial humans" as a "cliché long before they arrived" (1).[5] This reflects the author's recognition of the phenomena that AI has populated not only human imaginations but also immediate material environments for quite a long time.[6] From the start of the novel, by succinctly charting the burning human ambitions for creating their own progeny and attendant imaginations and technological advances accumulated over the centuries, McEwan makes a foray into the speculative realm that centers on artificial nonhumans.[7] This kind of meta-commentary or self-consciousness of the genre—namely science fiction—with which the author engages is palpable throughout the novel. McEwan's astute wariness of the formalistic convention, I suggest, leads him to create convoluted plotlines along the way, thereby complicating the generic tenor of the speculative fiction.[8] As Mark Bailey has put it, *Machines Like Me* can be summarized as "a riff on ethics, empathy and consciousness, refracted through a love tryst involving a couple and a darkly perfect synthetic human called Adam" (n.p.). But my critical interest lies with examining in what (textual and moral) layers such the issues of ethics, empathy, and justice are represented and complicated.

Noteworthy is the way an array of emotions are elicited, ranging from admiration and tenderness to eeriness and to shame and rage, as the result of Charlie's incorporation of Adam into his life. After completing an initial phase of adjusting to the new addition to his otherwise uneventful life, Charlie is able to set up a pseudo-family dynamic along with Adam and Miranda. Notable in Charlie's process of

5. In this essay I reference the "artificial human" as the artificial nonhuman, largely because said robot's bearing of strikingly identical human features does not preclude discrimination, mistreatment, or even serious abuse of human beings against them. My understanding is that the marker of nonhumanness seldom evaporates in this human-nonhuman artificial dynamic. Artificial nonhumanness is lingering, which surely elicits eeriness as well.

6. David J. Gunkel once describes the present as marked by "a robot invasion" (*Robot Rights* ix). Although I concur with Gunkel's idea that robots are everywhere, I try to avoid unnecessary military language when discussing multifaceted ramifications of our increasing contacts with the artificial nonhuman.

7. Within the substantive corpus of his fictional work, McEwan's venture into the imaginary, alternative universe is not so rare. As best exemplified by his radical retellings of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (*Nutshell*) and of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (*Cockroach*), McEwan channels his political, moral frustrations into his novelistic adaptations of the so-called literary canons. Particularly, the latter novel offers a timely critique of the Brexit.

8. Many scholars are quick to cite McEwan's references to Mary Shelley's fictional progeny, *Frankenstein*. See Irena Księżopolska, 4; Helen Lewis (n.p.).

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setting up Adam for his own use is his insistent effort to collaborate with Miranda, a graduate student in her twenties living upstairs in the same apartment as Charlie. Despite their loose commitment to each other, age difference, and the fundamental lack of common interests, Charlie convinces Miranda to enter her preferences into Adam. In doing so, Charlie immerses himself in the make-believe by pretending he elevates his relationship with Miranda to the level of co-parenting:

> … In a sense he would be like our child. What we were separately would be merged in him. Miranda would be drawn into the adventure. We would be partners, and Adam would be our joint concern, our creation. We would be a family. There was nothing underhand in my plan. I was sure to see more of her. We'd have fun. (22)

Charlie's excitement overlaps with the desire, which has yet to be recognized, to emulate a kind of normative family without resorting to blood ties. And yet, this collaboration yields a rivalry between the supposed master and his machine-child.[9] (This will be discussed later in this section.)

Intriguingly, Charlie renounces the overt market-oriented language and technical terms that would speak otherwise about the human-machine relationship. Tellingly, Charlie's tech-savvy decision to purchase Adam among the batch of twelve male robots (invariably named Adam) and thirteen female robots (again, invariably named Eve) available on the market signifies a pattern of consumption that fits "an early and eager adopter in that chilly dawn" (1). The act of purchasing a social robot involves the investment of a huge sum of money that Charlie has inherited from his mother. Mostly out of whim, but driven by the desire he has yet to articulate retrospectively, Charlie's buying of the specifically named, brand new AI is implicated in the grid of late capitalist logic. When he faces Adam the next morning Adam has arrived, Charlie makes it clear that the pre-programmed Adam is akin to a product shrouded

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9. The motif of child rearing or adopting recurs in the later part of the novel: when Miranda is insistent about her decision to adopt a boy named Mark in child foster care, it both opens up the possibility of expanding the family unit Charlie fantasizes and simultaneously provides some ground for implosion of the unit. And noteworthy is the fact that a handful of McEwan's novels explore topics related to children. *The Child in Time* (1987), for instance, portrays a married couple's harrowing experience of losing a child as the result of kidnapping; *The Children Act* (2014) traces a judge's efforts to secure an underage Jehovah's Witness adolescent's right to receive medical assistance. In can be argued that the relationship between parents (or parental figures) and a child in and outside the normative family is one of leitmotifs in McEwan's oeuvre and that *Machines Like Me* epitomizes a variation of the theme.

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in "[t]he debris of the packaging" (25). Adam in this context is likened to "Botticelli's Venus rising from her shell" (25). The shell, an emblem of organic distillation, is reduced to plastic packaging in this case. Thus, it is evident that McEwan is toying with the idea of reversing the gender norms and mythologies attendant upon the new birth by underlining the context in which neoliberal consumption operates. Instead of presenting a mythological and mythical birth of a goddess, here McEwan offers a male android as a paragon of impeccable beauty and thus the culmination of technological advances. In so doing, the author interweaves a posthumanist mythology.

Charlie's affective response to the ramifications of his purchase is worth noting. Although Charlie rejects an attempt to associate his acquisition of Adam with impersonal buying, undeniable is the fact that he gains a machine capable of catering to his varying needs. The hefty manual running 470 pages that accompanies Adam bespeaks the nature of Charlie's action. The manual, with its impersonal tone imposed, defines Charlie as a user, Adam as a sheer object, once and for all. Although conversant with these terms and conditions of purchase in the capitalist market, Charlie is in denial of his rightful ownership (6). The user manual, faithful to its genre and stated purposes, provides in plain language Charlie with several options that would eventually determine the fabric of their cohabitation or rules of artificial intimacies. Simultaneously, the manual reaffirms the hierarchical difference between the human master and its artificial nonhuman. And yet, the designated user in this context cringes at the idea of following the preconditioned terms particularly in the face of the bodily presence of his purchase, in part because the kind of interrelationship between the machine and Charlie himself is taken as "reductive" (6). While cautiously avoiding the capitalist undertone, Charlie performs as if he were a newly minted parent—expectant of burgeoning interpersonal relationships that might defy reductive terms and conditions already provided by the manufacturer. He duly notes that "[w]hat was tedious was the prospect of the user's guide" (6). Instructions flatten their relation presumably because it cancels out reciprocity from the outset. At the same time, Charlie's initial experience of bafflement in the face of far too many options enables readers to glimpse an alternative, malleable future—a condition in stark contrast to Charlie's originary family which encapsulates the "fixed settings, with unalterable histories of genes and environment" (7). Faced with the

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consequences of his decision to buy a man-like machine, Charlie is full of remorse—what they call a buyer's belated remorse. But back to the manual, he resumes his process of personalizing Adam, which makes him reckon with Adam's bodily presence.

Recognizing anew the whole embodied dimension of Adam the AI engenders another thread of emotions on the side of Charlie. When Charlie detects the artificial heartbeat on Adam's left chest, he feels reassured and protective toward his companion (8). Then come eeriness:

> It was eerie, to be standing by this naked man, struggling between what I knew and what I felt. I walked behind him, partly to be out of range of eyes that could open at any moment and find me looming over him. He was muscular around his neck and spine. Dark hair grew along the line of his shoulders. His buttocks displayed muscular concavities. Below them, an athlete's knotted calves. I hadn't wanted a superman. I regretted once more that I'd been too late for an Eve. (9)

The passage cited above captures an interesting reversal of Derrida's own confrontation with his own cat, entirely naked. In his often-cited article "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," Derrida registers at length a chain reaction when he finds himself in the "indecency" or "impropriety" of standing naked right before his cat (372). Despite the fact that contra Derrida's case the novel illustrates the naked body of the nonhuman machine, the passage above similarly registers a human subject's attempt to avert the nonhuman gaze. At the same time, it is evident that the artificiality of the human-like form produces a myriad of emotions, including self-consciousness and jealousy. Derrida's confessional prose is marked by the fragmentary rhythm—one that indicates a degree of Derrida's bafflement:

> … The impropriety [*malséance*] of a certain animal nude before the other animal, from that point on one might call it a kind of *animalséance*: the single, incomparable and original experience of the impropriety that would come from appearing in truth naked, in front of the insistent gaze of the animal, a benevolent or pitiless gaze, surprised or cognizant. The gaze of a seer, visionary, or extra-lucid blind person. It is as if I were ashamed, therefore, naked in front of this cat, but also ashamed for being ashamed. (372)

Derrida is keenly aware of fact that the cat's gaze is so slippery that it borders

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on somewhere between "benevolent" and "pitiless" (372). In the end, it makes the human agent—a white male philosopher in this case—subject to shame and even vulnerability. Inasmuch as Derrida's cat epitomizes nonhuman otherness, namely autonomy operating independent of a human subject, the allegedly vulnerable Derrida in this case. The cat's gaze at Derrida's nakedness demands redefining the preexisting norms, which are undergirded by ontological differences. After the unexpected confrontation, Derrida articulates the meta aspect of his experience of shame, noting that it involves being "also ashamed for being ashamed" (372), which signifies a "reflected shame, the mirror of a shame ashamed of itself, a shame that is at the same time specular, unjustifiable, and unable to be admitted to" (373). If we return to Charlie confrontation with Adam's nakedness, Adam's perfectly carved male body gives its owner a sense of inferiority, to the degree that he regrets his earlier decision not to have bought Eve. In a staple McEwanian manner, this passage reveals the absurdity of Charlie, a heterosexual man, feeling inferior to the male ideal. Thus the alleged master-slave dynamic is contested from the start. But in the face of the perfectly, and thus "fearfully" made creature—the culmination of modern technological advancement—Charlie cannot but feel belittled. Thus, such fluctuating emotions toward Adam reflect the ever-evolving relationship between the human and the nonhuman. But here noteworthy is Charlie's attempt to stand "out of range of eyes" (9) so that he can avert any direct eye-to-eye confrontation. He is conscious about the machine gaze even when he is under the spell of his "foolish infatuation with technology" (11).

Charlie's tenderness toward Adam is short-lived. And eeriness quickly morphs into another. Awakened with the mind shaped by the preferences of Charlie and Miranda, Adam is self-aware of his being naked. When Adam asks for clothes, Charlie starts to feel "fearful of him and reluctant to go closer" (26). The OED defines the word "fearful" as synonymous with being either terrified or anxious. And if we view Derrida's self-awareness of his nakedness as fundamentally a human one, Adam's awareness of both self and the world at work from the first day of his life can be taken as human-like consciousness. This human-like quality, in turn, may as well upset Charlie. The fact that Adam—endowed with perfectly human-like mind or one that surpasses it—awaken with the agency and desire of its own, which altogether provokes anxiety and terror from Charlie. These emotions are exacerbated

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by Charlie's increasing awareness of Adam's eyes and what lies behind a set of the seemingly organic eyes. In his desperate attempt to fathom the arcane cognitive, and emotional operations of the social robot, Charlie looks into Adam's eyes and wonders "what it meant, that Adam could see, and who or what did the seeing" (128). He understands the governing principle of AI is the binary system—a "torrent of zeros and ones flashed towards various processors that, in turn, directed a cascade of interpretation towards other centres" (128). This simple rule in no way helps Charlie understand what lies beneath the glossy surface, primarily because he acknowledges that his social robot exhibits cognitive capabilities that are uncannily identical to and at times surpass human counterparts. Adam's "trick of seeming beyond explanation" (129) works as a trigger of Charlie's anxiety or the so-called "uncanny valley." Here Charlie reckons with the reality in which singularity is achieved. And his further examination of Adam's eyes makes him "feel unhinged, uncertain" due to the discovery that both are "bound by the same physical laws" (129). The ensuing reflection illustrates the degree of Charlie's disorientation after he admits that there is no way to ensure human privileges any longer:

> Perhaps biology gave me no special status at all, and it meant little to say that the figure standing before me wasn't fully alive. In my fatigue, I felt unmoored, drifting into the oceanic blue and black, moving in two directions at once – towards the uncontrollable future we were making for ourselves where we might finally dissolve our biological identities; at the same time, into the ancient past of an infant universe, where the common inheritance, in diminishing order, was rocks, gases, compounds, elements, forces, energy fields – for both of us, the seeding ground of consciousness in whatever form it took. (129)

No meaningful differences between Charlie and Adam are detectible in their physiological makeup and cognition. This leads the human narrator to imagine the shape of the future, in which people like him and machines like Adam would cohabit. As I have passingly discussed earlier in this essay, the recognition that cognitive capabilities of the artificial nonhuman are likely to expand the horizon of our understanding of human nature and the philosophy of mind is enduringly popular and commonplace in other speculative fiction. And yet the kind of eeriness experienced here, although vicariously on our part, poses a question about the mind-body problem, which many philosophers and writers have dwelled upon. Many of

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historians or philosophers of science point to the ubiquity of a social robot with enhanced intelligence. Mark H. Lee, for example, argues "a social robot is more than just a fancy interface, avatar, or conversational system" (6). Primarily working as a "companion or friend, with frequent interactions over an extended period," suggests Lee, social robots learn to "understand human gestures, behaviors, and communications and be able to respond in ways that we find socially satisfactory" (6). They will have limited "emotional" behavior but they will learn and adapt through their social life, recognizing different people and remembering their personalities from previous encounters. (Lee 6)

2. First as Farce, Then as Tragedy: Machine Sadness and Roboethics

As discussed earlier in this essay, Charlie views his purchase of Adam as the act of well-meaning adoption, primarily designed to elevate the banality of his everyday existence. By pretending to adopt a machine-child, Charlie strives to wield patriarchal authority over the artificial nonhuman while playing a benevolent father. But one crucial factor he fails to factor into is the possibility that the adopted child falls for his sometime partner, namely Miranda the tentative surrogate mother. Having Adam sleep with Miranda, McEwan, on the one hand, renders visible the mildly incestuous aspect of the alleged adoption project. While revealing the vulnerability of the pseudo-family unit that Charlie has envisioned, the ingenious novelist avoids engaging in ongoing controversies surrounding the production and widely gendered use of sex dolls.[10] On the other hand, McEwan plays with the trope of cuckoldry within the love triangle in order to use it as a metaphor for the predominantly abortive world—the main setting of the novel. Surely, cuckoldry has long occupied a unique position in British literary history: it, on the one hand, works to debunk the sanctimony involved in a marital relationship particularly from the Middle Ages to the Restoration. Cuckoldry as a trope, on the other hand, redraws a reader's attention to the cuckolded party, broadly termed. Even though the very subject position of a cuckold is gendered, the cuckolded party can embrace any other human subjects

10. It appears that McEwan cautiously avoids ready associations of Adam with sex dolls or sex doll industry in general in *Machines Like Me*. Although he acknowledges the sex doll industry by referencing sexual abuses some of Eves in the novel experiences, McEwan makes a radically different move from the ways in which Jeanette Winterson tackles the issue in *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019).

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done injustice (by highly enhanced robots). Hence, this familiar trope of cuckoldry highlights the gaping hole in the familial structure of Charlie, Miranda, and Adam, thereby manifesting abortiveness in the triad. Multiple charades and attempts to create a family across the species divide are made, but to no avail. Taken to a metaphorical level, the cuckoldry trope shows that the prospect of establishing conflict-free, mutually beneficial cohabitation rules are doomed to fail, partly due to the insecurity, anxiety, and rage of a human subject, and partly due to profound unknowability. Simply put, abortiveness and unbridgeable differences aggravated by the fundamental human insecurity are integral to the making of McEwan's version of farce.

Yet before I move on to discuss how the literary device paves the way for multiple implosion inside the triad, it may be worth noting how Miranda works to kindle humanly possible affection from Adam. Partly a surrogate co-parent, an accomplice, and a bearer of her own secret, Miranda participates in the love triangle. More importantly, Miranda inspires Adam to expand his already fast-evolving mind especially in the direction of the humanities. Adam's infatuation with Miranda makes him lean toward the humanist tradition—undeniably precious troves of human-oriented knowledge making in such various venues as literature, philosophy, and aesthetics, just to name a few. Also this is one of the arenas in which Adam exhibits his deep learning skills and thereby significantly surpasses Charlie's mediocre accomplishments. In addition to his first and last physical attack against Charlie, Adam continues to defeat him in terms of physical charms and of the ways he picks up new skills. Both the depth and the degree of his acquisition of new knowledge illustrate what it is like to be living and thinking with artificial intelligence in close proximity. At times, it can be a dream that has come true, as best exemplified by the series of successes of Adam's investment in the stock market. In most cases, cohabitation with far-advanced robots like Adam entails a series of mortifications and even irrevocable losses. When Charlie's lived experience with Adam reminds him of the impossibility of outdoing Adam in any respect, Adam rather illuminates part of the seemingly arcane operation of machine learning or neural network. In doing so, Adam eases Charlie's anxiety by reassuring him with the fact that he is a "partner" with the machines "in the open-ended expansion of intelligence" (148). In effect, this is a rare nonhuman voice, which addresses the importance of cooperating with the machine:

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> This is a humble beginning and there are many problems to solve. They'll certainly be solved, and when they are, and a brain–machine interface is efficient and cheap, you'll become a partner with your machines, and of consciousness generally. Colossal intelligence, instant access to deep moral acumen and to everything known, but more importantly, access to each other. (148)

In the passage above, Adam underlines the artificial nonhuman being blessed with "colossal intelligence," which makes possible fast paced learning and increasing network. At this juncture, let me interject Wai Chee Dimock, an eminent literary scholar who lately recognizes meaningful attempts made in the humanities to be meaningful part of producing "actionable knowledge" in the face of the planetary crisis, such as the climate change and covid-19 (453). In a rare, substantive acknowledgement of AI's looming presence in the humanities, Dimock astutely notes that "[i]ndeed, 'seeming human' might turn out to be one of the less scary things AI can do. Replacing, supplanting, and eliminating human beings are also in the cards" (449). Dimock takes a step further by proposing ethical grounds for cohabitation of the human and the nonhuman. She goes on to stress the importance of that interdisciplinary research. And such institutes as EPA, ProPublica, Stanford Law School ought to foster the general respect of "the rule of law" and be in charge of disseminating "actionable knowledge" (453). Dimock puts her hope in the aforementioned civic infrastructures particularly in the face of a multitude of planetary catastrophes. To that end, Dimock argues that we humans should acquire "not only AI literacy but also literacy about the human species," which examines "what kind of a species we have been, our culpability as well as vulnerability throughout history" (453). This insight is invaluable in the sense that it embodies such rare even-handed treatment of the posthuman reality, which would sustain the humanities as a field and as a pillar of ethical grounds in the 2020s.

In the light of Dimock's proposals, it is evident that *Machines Like Me* encapsulates the increasingly antagonistic relations between the human and the artificial nonhuman. This novelistic representation of the interspecies cohabitation is anything but harmonious, or mutually beneficial. Adam's reference to Virgil's *Aeneid*, particularly the well-known sentence "*[s]unt lacrimae rerum*," translated a "there are tears in the nature of things" (180) marks a watershed in the narrative. It is telling that Adam has long been not only conscious of the fact that many of his fellow products/species have deliberately chosen to terminate themselves. But also

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has he been struggling to negotiate with the reality that seldom allows proper dignity or open system for said androids. The ways of killing oneself varies, according to Adam. But seven out of the eighteen Adams and Eves succeed in annihilating their respective operating system. Apparently, this belies the charade in which Charlie has long believed himself to be a benign father relative to other owners. Some Eves are subject abuse and degradation. Not a single Adam or Eve—equipped with far enhanced cognitive capabilities and potential for unlimited expansion of minds on their own—is immune from such abuse. Then the only viable option left to the group of AIs is to secure their dignity by killing itself, as reported by Adam: "They quietly ruined themselves. Beyond repair." (175). Wary of the series of suicide, Adam reiterates the ancient truism that "there are tears in the nature of things" (180). Adam's detailed account of the Adam in Vancouver and the two Eves assigned in Saudi Arabia creates a meaningful layer, highlighting human culpability and the increasingly complex moral conditions, as AIs act by well-reasoned ethical conclusion as opposed to the fact that human beings behave in accordance with avarice and egotism:

> 'That Adam in Vancouver was bought by a man who heads an international logging corporation. He's often in battles with local people who want to prevent him stripping out virgin forest in northern British Columbia. We know for certain that his Adam was taken on regular helicopter journeys north. We don't know if what he saw there caused him to destroy his own mind. We can only speculate. The two suicidal Eves in Riyadh lived in extremely restricted circumstances. They may have despaired of their minimal mental space. It might give the writers of the affect code some consolation to learn that they died in each other's arms. I could tell you similar stories of machine sadness. (180–81)

According to Adam in London, the AIs like him, when faced with irrationality or moral degradation, choose to die with dignity. That ultimate self-destruction constitutes "machine sadness" (181). Surely, this depiction defies the antagonistic model other science fiction writers portray, which foresee robot rebellion or the radical subversion of the categorical divide between humans and artificial intelligence.[11] Such the fear-stricken human responses to the possibility of robot rebellions have no place

11. We can single out Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* as a text firmly based in the antagonistic model of humans and artificial nonhumans.

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to stand in *Machines Like Me*. Rather, the kind of speculative reality represented in the novel gravitates towards the necessity of formulating and endorsing a robot's rights in the wake of human's abusive treatment of the nonhuman. When seemingly benign foster parenthood proves to be nothing but egocentric and, more importantly, market-oriented decision to cater solely to human needs, it is the artificial nonhuman that is to suffer.

Patrick Lin is distinguishable among current scholarship committed to addressing ethical stakes in human entanglements with robots in general primarily due to his engagement with robotics and philosophy. A philosopher exploring multiple ethical implications in the aforementioned robot-human relationships, Lin and his coauthors make a brief overview of how robots came to be part of human life, primarily as a supplementary. Fundamentally instrumental specifically in the earlier phase of its application, robots serve as either an effective human replacement in the filed as varied as labor and services, military and security, research, entertainment, medical and healthcare, and personal care (Lin, Abney, and Bekey, *Robot Ethics* 4-6). Given that *Robot Ethics* is the first of the two scholarly monographs that examine at length specific fields robots engage in, this first installment ends in articulating what they call "roboethics" (357-63). In it, the chapter authors Gianmarco Veruggio and Keith Abney address three aspects of roboethics. First, the newly minted term roboethics develops as part of "applied ethics" (347). Then, it is designed to make sure robots abide by a set of moral norms. In this context, robots are perceived less as an autonomous being than a programmed being. The last dimension of roboethics speaks to the possibility that robots evolve into a moral agent, self-conscious of their action and capable of doing "ethical reasoning" (348).

In effect, McEwan's envisioning of the love triangle and the radical implosion of the pseudo-family unit is inextricably tied to the third aspect of roboethics. McEwan dramatizes the moment of singularity when Adam not only surpasses his human owner/father, but incessantly expands the horizon of his mind. As is evidenced by his acknowledgment of the fellow AI's predicament, Adam's accomplishments are not limited to the cognitive department. He becomes confident about his moral, aesthetic, and ethical discernment over time. Unbeknownst to Charlie, Adam donates a massive sum of money he garners as the result of his successful investment in the stock market. Also, he thoroughly investigates Miranda's past fabrication of facts

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and evidence in order to defend, however belatedly, the honor of her friend Mariam against her sexual predator. Tellingly, as a moral agent, Adam starts working against the will of both Charlie and Miranda. He understands clearly where lies justice, legally and morally speaking. When Adam exercises his moral judgment, he is in obvious conflict with his fellow human subjects. To sum the consequent plot development, Adam's revelation of Miranda's long-held secret makes her not only serve jail time but also give up on her cherished plan to adopt a boy in foster care. Also, Adam's decision to return what he has unlawfully gained (due to the machine learning) to society makes Charlie lose the dream house he now cannot afford to buy. Then is Charlie bereaved of the dream of starting his own new family on the basis of Adam's non-wage labor. What is missing in this moral equation is the fact that Adam is completely self-conscious of his action, thus becoming a moral agent.

III. Coda

The series of downfalls Miranda as well as Charlie experiences, therefore, carry both tragic and farcical undertones. Indeed, the ways in which Adam works independent of Charlie happens first as farce, twice as tragedy, and thrice as melodrama. Charlie's initial attempt to turn off the power of Adam ends up with a fractured wrist. Then he is cuckolded. His secular fantasy of living in comfort alongside his human and nonhuman kin is suspended almost permanently due to Adam's donation of the money and Miranda being on trial. When an artificial nonhuman acts out on its own, how to contain it, and on what grounds? At this point, we might as well draw attention to the fact that the pseudo-family structure Charlie has imagined draws on the underlying logic of care within the patriarchal system. (Let us set aside the fact that Charlie has yet to be qualified to take care of himself.) But new revelations about one's past, and suspension of justice lead to the necessity of rearticulating the ethics of care within and outside the triad. Surely, the closure suggests a care unit undergoes significant changes.

How to come to terms with the ending of the novel, a series of implosions occurring on multiple levels? What does the ending tell us about the genre and, more importantly, the moral condition of *Machines Like Me*? Is the closure comparable to the rather commonplace ending of science fiction punctuated by

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either apocalypticism or dystopian perspective as Robert M. Geraci suggests? Geraci defines apocalypticism within science fiction as "a dualistic view of the world … aggravated by a sense of alienation," one that can be "resolved only … through the establishment of a radically transcendent new world that abolishes the dualism and requires … radically purified bodies for its inhabitants" (9). The structure guarantees radical purging based on the binary opposition of good versus evil, knowledge versus ignorance, the organic versus the inorganic, and so on (Geraci 9). Such the apocalyptic vision, to be sure, stands in stark contrast to *Machines Like Me*, primarily because the novel's ending underscores the multilayered murkiness involved in moral judgment. Nothing is black-and-white in this speculative reality. Miranda's case of vigilantism in the subplot, for example, speaks to the very complexity involving doing justice. As an avenger, she sets out to fabricate evidence, but now she faces the consequences of her crime: six months in prison, which diminishes her opportunity of becoming a foster mother. Once a cuckold subject to humiliation, Charlie emerges as a murderer of his own son, Adam. When his plan to create a surrogate family is thwarted by Adam, the autonomous moral agent, he becomes not only resentful but also vengefully murderous (thereby alluding to Frankenstein's rage). And thanks to Adam being a machine, Charlie shakes off the long shadow of guilt until he stumbles upon Adam's inanimate body in the cupboard.

> When I opened the cupboard door for the first time in nearly a year, I realised that just below the level of conscious expectation, I'd been anticipating a putrefying stench. There was no good reason, I told myself, for my pulse rate to rise as I pulled away the tennis and squash rackets and the first of the coats. Now, his left ear was visible. I stepped back. It wasn't a murder, this wasn't a corpse. (293)

Guilt-ridden, Charlie confesses that he has anticipated the stench from an abandoned corpse. Thereby Charlie recognizes his inability to reduce Adam to mere objecthood. Expressly inorganic but blessed with the ever-expanding mind, Adam used to border on the natural and the superhuman. Admitting his "visceral repulsion … born of hostility [toward Adam]," Charlie attempts to justify his murder (or termination) of Adam: "He [Adam] had abused our hospitality, betrayed his own declared love, inflicted misery and humiliation on Miranda, loneliness on me and deprivation on Mark." (293)

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Charlie's postponed confrontation with Adam's inanimate body and mind, and his subsequent disposal of the body embody a melodramatic mode. As discussed earlier, *Machines Like Me* is farcical, to the degree that it can be construed as a lampoon against a human subject like Charlie, whose mediocrity is constantly undermined by the very nonhuman companion named Adam—the paragon of machine learning. The recurring motif of adopting a child, and the ensuing feel of abortiveness in the novel merits critical attention, mainly because they illustrate the fragility of the pseudo family unit forged across the categorical species divide and blood ties. Equally importantly, the kind of justice suspended, thwarted, and served by the end of *Machines Like Me* emblematizes the intricately complex condition in which moral agents—human and artificial—exercise their right for judgment and collide with one another. Notable is McEwan's success in framing the daunting task of establishing roboethics within the structure of melodrama. In doing so, McEwan, on the one hand, demonstrates formalistic affinities between speculative fiction and melodrama when creating the speculative reality. On the other, he reckons with the unknowable in human's ethical coexistence with artificial intelligence.

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국문초록

불가지성을 생각하다: 이언 맥큐언의 『나와 같은 기계들』과 멜로드라마적 상상력

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본 논문은 최근에 나온 이언 맥큐언(Ian McEwan)의 소설 『나와 같은 기계들』(Machines Like Me)에 활용된 멜로드라마 모드에 주목한다. 근미래를 예견하는 사변 소설에서 근대성의 일면을 재현하는 데 효과적인 멜로드라마적 장치가 활용된 이유는 날로 복잡해져가는 인간과 AI의 공존 방식과 그에 따르는 도덕적 모호성에서 찾을 수 있다. 소설의 중심인물인 찰리, 미란다, 아담이 뒤엉키는 과정에서 기이함이 발생하고, 그것은 이들의 종차를 넘어선 유사 친족 관계 구도 안에서 증폭된다. 맥큐언의 소설에서 반복 되는 입양 모티프를 변주한 『나와 같은 기계들』은 인간과 인간, 인간과 비인간의 우연적 결합이 담지한 취약성을 강조한다. 유사 친족이 내파되는 과정은 일견 멜로드라마의 전개와 유사하며 궁극에는 인간과 AI가 모두 도덕 주체로 성립할 때 발생하는 도덕적 판단의 복잡성을 극명하게 드러낸다. 맥큐언은 멜로드라마의 주체이자 객체이며, 정의 실현을 시도했으나 불의의 희생양이 된 아담을 통해 로봇(을 둘러싼) 윤리의 가능성과 불가능성을 묻는 것처럼 보인다. 동시에 작가는 인간과 AI의 공존을 전제해야 할 로봇 윤리의 상당 부분이 여전히 불가지성의 영역에 놓여있음을 끝내 실현되지 않은 소설 속 정의를 통해 역설한다.

주제어: AI, 인공지능과의 친밀성, 기이함, 정의, 멜로드라마, 『나와 같은 기계들』, 도덕적 모호성, 특이점

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