

“Not Properly Human”: Literary and Cinematic Narratives about Human Harvesting*

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Summary

In this essay the manner in which literary and cinematic narratives articulate the issues surrounding human harvesting and organ transplants is discussed. The focus is on recent works of four internationally known artists: the novels *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Excursion to Tindari* (2006) by Andrea Camilleri, *In stede van die liefde* [In Lieu of Love] (2005) by Etienne van Heerden and the film *Dirty Pretty Things* directed by Stephen Frears in 2002. A shadowy world is depicted where illegal trafficking tests the border between human and inhumane in terms of moral, physical and socio-political realities. At the same time these narratives are also love stories, revealing the many faces of love surfacing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The organisation of spatial patterns and the articulation of the conflict experienced in multicultural and immigrant societies are some of the meaningful literary devices and motifs developed in all four “texts”. Whilst the genre, cultural context and narrative tone differ considerably in each narrative, there appears to be a remarkable similarity of subject matter and theme and the local and current events compellingly become integrated with a global, almost timeless discourse.

Opsomming

Die wyse waarop die problematiek van die insameling en oorplanting van organe in fiksionele prosa en rolprente verwoord word, is die tema van hierdie opstel. My fokus is geplaas op onlangse werke van vier internasionaal bekende kunstenaars: die romans *Never Let Me Go* (2005) deur Kazuo Ishiguro, *Excursion to Tindari* (2006) van Andrea Camilleri, *In stede van die liefde* (2005) deur Etienne van Heerden en die rolprent *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) waarvan Stephen Frears die regisseur is. Elkeen van die verhale speel af binne 'n skaduwêreld waar onwettige orgaanhandel die grense tussen wat menslik en onmenslik is in morele, fisiese en sosiopolitieke terme beproef. Terselfdertyd is hierdie verhale ook liefdesverhale, en openbaar dit die veelkantige aard van die liefde soos dit aan die begin van die een-en-twintigste eeu vertoon. Die strukturering van ruimtelike patrone en die uitbeelding van die konflik wat in multikulturele en immigrantegemeenskappe woed, is net 'n paar van die betekenisvolle literêre tegnieke en motiewe wat in al vier “tekste” ontwikkel word. Terwyl 'n duidelike verskil ten opsigte van genre, kulturele konteks en narratiewe toon in die verhale aanwesig is, bestaan daar onderling opmerkbare ooreenkomste in die onderwerp en tema, en word die lokale en spesifieke gebeure op aangrypende wyse deel van 'n groter, byna tydlose diskoers.

[P]eople tried their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. While that remained the case, there would always be a barrier against seeing you as properly human.
(Ishiguru 2005: 240)

1 Context and Concern

Artists have, through their art, long been observing scientific investigation of the human body and its functions, its decline and its death. One could trace this enduring but mutable relationship back through many centuries. Perhaps the best-known of the early examples were Leonardo's drawings, the display cabinets of the Dutch pharmacist Ruysch,¹ and Rembrandt's iconic painting of a seventeenth-century anatomy lesson. Then came the poetry of Baudelaire, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The twentieth century lent cult status to the Mad Max movies, to the faceless enemy combatants in the film *Star Wars Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, and the gruesome “Body World” display of dissected corpses by Doctor Gunther von Hagens (who regards himself as carrying on the tradition of the Renaissance anatomist-artists).²

This century has seen spectacular scientific breakthroughs in biotechnology with the completion of the Human Genome Project and the focus on stem cell research and xenotransplantation. Several issues surrounding this brave new world have been imaginatively captured during the past two years in, for example, the highly praised novels of the French author Michel Houellebecq and the Flemish Stefan Brijs.³ On a different level of mass appeal, the blockbuster by Jodi Picoult (*My Sister's Keeper*, 2005), told the story of a teenager who was conceived solely to provide bone marrow transplants for her elder sister. One could regard in a similar light those hugely popular television shows such as “Nip/Tuck” that tells

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1. Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731) became known as the artist depicting death (“doodskunstenaar”) because of his collection (“kunstkamer”) of hundreds of glass jars and containers displaying human body parts and even whole corpses. This collection, bought by Tzar Peter from Ruysch in Amsterdam, was presented in St Petersburg in 1728, in Russia's first public museum, and then restored and reopened in September 2003. See Depondt (2006).
 2. See von Hagens's website: “Body Worlds”: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies at <http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/gunther_von_hagens/life.html>.
 3. Houellebecq, Michel (2005). *The Possibility of an Island*; Brijs, Stefan (2006). *De engelenmaker*.

about ordinary men and women who will go to extraordinary lengths in trying to surgically improve what they perceive to be bodily flaws. During June 2007 this convergence of science in the form of advanced technology and art seen as everyday entertainment for a mass audience reached a new climax. The Dutch media company Endemol, creators of the now international money-spinning show “Big Brother”, advertised a new production. A terminally ill cancer patient would decide on stage and before a worldwide audience which one of three desperate candidates could present the most heart-rending story and thus “win” her healthy kidney. That the show turned out to be a “hoax” aimed at raising awareness of donor shortage and recruiting potential donors, changed much of the initial outrage professed by other, less successful, television stations into disappointed complaints.

The hype and almost global interest surrounding this latter event indicate in an exaggerated manner how intricately the issues of technological advances, individual need, cultural attitudes, moral outrage and eventual dehumanisation are tied when one considers one of the most topical aspects of contemporary medical science, namely human organ transplants. Whilst advances in science have made organ transplants almost routine medical procedure, the real problem is the (un)availability of organs. In order for some to live, some must die, and where natural deaths do not provide sufficient donations, moneyed patients specifically can acquire the coveted organs through paid or forced donation. The matter of organ harvesting as a way of curtailing or jumping the waiting list for healthy organs available to critically ill patients is a very real problem today.⁴ News reports indicate that this is a global phenomenon. In the United States, the number of renal transplants from live donors exceeded those from deceased donors for the first time in 2001, and by far the majority of organs come from unrelated, paid donors. While Brazil, India and Moldavia have recently banned the trade in organs, Iran is now the only country where it is lawful for one

4. See, for example, the essay on the conflict between science and religion on the ethics of the alternatives to organ donation (Ilbury 2006). “The Question of Life”. *Pretoria News*. Monday June 19, p. 9).

On Tuesday 17 July 2007, the British television station Sky News reported that the Chief Medical Officer of the UK had proposed that after death everybody should be considered an organ donor, a law that already exists in Spain and Belgium. This would hopefully limit “organ tourism”. According to the same report there are at present a minimum of 6,500 patients waiting for kidney transplants in the UK alone. In 2005 there were about 60,000 people in the United States on the waiting list for other organs. (<www.thelancet.com> Vol. 365, p. 1299). On 17 January 2008, Sky News put the spotlight on a new controversy about the development of hybrid animal/human embryos for medical transplant purposes.

citizen to sell an organ to another. In Pakistan trading in organs is allowed.⁵ Accounts of enforced donations, though, are ever increasing. Not only does China admit using kidneys from executed prisoners, but also ordinary imprisoned criminals are said to be at risk. Recent court cases in South Africa involved doctors attached to a respected medical school, who formed an international syndicate trading in human kidneys; a new Mafia in Egypt is turning that country into the regional hub for the human organ trade ... the charges seem endless.⁶ Stem cell research may be an admirable scientific project for the twenty-first century in order to achieve organ renewal and so prolong life; the ancient acts of trading, robbing or killing to obtain the desired object seem more successful for the present.

2 Texts and Theme

In a number of recent narratives, written in different languages and representing different genres, the issue of organ harvesting is addressed within a fictional world. The authors of these “texts” are not only well known in their respective spheres but also enjoy international praise and recognition. Amongst the works of fiction are the novels *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro – a previous winner of the Booker Prize; *Excursion to Tindari* (2006, first published as *La gita a Tindari* in 2000) by the Italian Andrea Camilleri who is famous for his crime writing; and the Afrikaans author Etienne van Heerden’s *In Lieu of Love* (first published in Afrikaans in 2005 as *In stede van die liefde*). Van Heerden is one of the best-known and most esteemed figures in contemporary Afrikaans fiction; his novels have already been translated into several languages. Also in this group is the film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), directed by Stephen Frears whose movie *The Queen* (2006) was the winner of multiple prizes, including the Oscar, for the best film of that year.

When looking at this seemingly motley group of narratives, striking similarities can be noticed. Whilst the choice of genre, the cultural context

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5. Tan Ee Lyn (2007). “Bizarre World of the Kidney Bazaar”. *The Star*, Wednesday 8 August, p. 37.
 6. “Trade in Illegal Organs Booming in Egypt”. *Pretoria News*, Wednesday April 5 2006, p. 8. Van Beek, Lizel (2005) “Orgaanroof in Sjina”. Litnet Expat-ekskursie. Online: <http://www.litnet.co.za/expatnet/vanbeek_organ-roof.asp>. Accessed on 10 May 2005. “China vat glo organe in tronke”. *Beeld*, 11 July, p. 8. Broughton, Tania (2006) “Kidney Trade: Medics off the Hook for Now”. *Pretoria News*, 21 July, p. 12. Otto, Hanti (2007) “SA Top Destination in Human Trafficking” *Pretoria News*, 12 July, p. 5. Power, Megan (2007). “Transplant Doctors Face Fresh Charges”. *Sunday Times*, 19 August, p. 10

and narrative tone differ considerably amongst the narratives, there appears to be a remarkable correspondence in subject matter and theme, as well as a similarity in the treatment of several broader questions related to the subject of organ harvesting. In this essay I want to discuss the appearance and meaning of these similarities and offer an interpretation of the relationship between social and fictional realities and how this is articulated in the various texts.

3 Narrative Patterns

3.1 The Tradition of the Crime Novel

Every one of the narratives can, to a different degree, be read as a variation of the mystery or crime novel. In *Excursion to Tindari* this traditional pattern is most closely followed: the text is part of a well-known series of detective stories in which Inspector Montalbano takes central position. In this, the fifth of the series that has also been adapted for television, a puzzling triple murder must be investigated. All the confusing leads eventually converge in the exposé of the Italian branch of a “globalized organization” (Camilleri 2006: 295) that forcibly obtains organs from people imprisoned in jails and in refugee camps the world over. The twists and turns and misleading information, such an essential part of the crime novel’s plot, are particularly confounding. Montalbano only discovers the gruesome truth right at the end when he stumbles upon the unbosoming by one of the murdered criminals. This document is masked as a novel hidden in another novel, *I, the Robot*, by the famous science fiction writer Asimov. The degree of evil in trading and transplanting organs is unexpected and sounds almost preposterous; to the Inspector – and probably most of the readers – it is also physically repulsive and morally incomprehensible.

In Frears’s film, the opening frame sets the scene. In a middle-class hotel, also frequented by refugees and prostitutes, the toilet in one of the rooms becomes blocked. When the night porter Okwe – the refugee from Nigeria who drives a taxi cab by day though he was a doctor in his home country – investigates, he finds a newly removed, still beating human heart stuck in the plumbing. This breathtakingly shocking image already hints at what is to come. The narrative develops by letting Okwe discover what exactly is happening at the hotel, whilst his and others’ personal secrets are also cleverly parcelled out. He eventually prevents one of the Turkish maids from selling her own kidney in order to receive a forged passport, and wreaks revenge on the slimy manager by removing this man’s kidney to keep the feared organ traders satisfied.

In *In Lieu of Love* the organ trade seemingly plays a very small part in the actual plot and occurs almost at the end of the novel. However, it is a very

meaningful part of the entire narrative structure. This novel tells about the lives of a dysfunctional but well to do family, an art trader Christian Lemmer, his wife Christine and their teenage son. But the concerns of a poor rural community living around an isolated railway station from where a talented young girl disappears without trace, are juxtaposed with their lives in various ways. When Christian embarks on a search for this girl, motivated by his desire to help his wife deal with her own childhood demons, his underworld informants point him to Harare. There he enters a house in which a number of small children are being held captive for organ harvesting, but where the Cape girl cannot be found. The narrative is crammed with hints of past tragedies, sadness and impending doom. The nature of the eventual revelation, though, is once again an unexpected shock, the more so as Christian leaves Harare without attempting to save the victims.

Never Let Me Go is a story about clones, created as biological vessels for organ donation, and told by one of them, Kathy H. She grew up and completed her education at Hailsham, an unusual and totally isolated private school in the English countryside. Kathy and two special friends, though enjoying their very enriching school years, entertain numerous questions and keep on trying to discover more about their unknown backgrounds, their mysterious guardians, and their rigidly structured though not fully understood futures as either “donors” or “carers”. A pivotal part of Kathy’s narrative describes the efforts to find the mysterious “Madame”, probably a powerful patron of Hailsham, and someone who the students hope could, in some exceptional cases, change their future. Kathy’s failed investigation ends outside a small rural hospital where she has finished taking care of her lifelong friend Tommy who is on the verge of his last donation before “completion”. She herself, at the age of thirty, will now start the process of “donating” her organs until death.

This narrative style, exploiting the conventions of the detective novel, may be interpreted in various ways. It supports the likelihood that a crime has been committed or is waiting to happen. The reader is therefore drawn into an atmosphere of dread and potential evil long before the details become known. But writing according to the conventions of the detective novel also implies that there is some narrative instance that knows more than either the main character or the reader. That the narration in each of the “texts” is confined to either a first-person narrator (*Never Let Me Go*), or with the main focus firmly settled on one central intelligence – even in the movie – supports this notion of limited knowledge. In these tales of illegal (and fatal) organ “donations”, the slow but in several instances shockingly brutal revelation of facts exposes crimes which evidently exist right under our eyes, but which we cannot, or choose not to, see. The fact that no final solution is reached in any instance can be read as an ironic twist to the traditional pattern. Although Inspector Montalbano did solve the mystery of

the organ trading, the murderers escaped and he feared that his bosses would “hush the whole thing up. Ingrò has some very important friends. Too important” (Camilleri 2006: 303). In *Dirty Pretty Things* the criminals are not arrested; Senay can only escape by using the false passport; Okwe even turns criminal himself by operating on the hotel manager in a hotel bedroom and delivering the kidney to the waiting traders.

3.2 Historical Time and Place

Despite the development of a strong plot that captivates the reader’s curiosity and is such a traditional characteristic of fictional prose, the narratives refer in detail to the historical placement of the narrated events. The background to Camilleri’s detective novel is explicitly indicated as December 1999 on the island of Sicily. Several reviews quoted on the cover of the book stress the vivid images of the small-town life, the idiosyncratic Sicilian dialect in which the original text is written and the convincing portrayal of the unique culture and landscape. In the Frears film a multi-ethnic London of the late 1990s is recognised as the setting; the depiction of an immigrant culture in constant fear of British laws, customs and political expedience is grimly realistic. The relevance of the socio-political history of South Africa and several references to the year 2003 are pertinently articulated in *In Lieu of Love*. In fact, the specifics of the drug-and-crime-infested face of South Africa, in contrast to the good life and natural beauty on the other hand, underlie a core part of the narrative. The reader is thus left with no uncertainty about the countries, the regions and towns and even the streets and houses where the events occur. This accent on historical places and times creates a compelling impression that what is being narrated is credible and “real”.

The phrase “England in the late 1990’s” appears as an introduction on the first page of *Never Let Me Go*. Though Kathy’s memories are vague about specific cities and towns, she recalls with great detail interior and exterior spaces, atmosphere and local colour. When driving around to care for her patients she is always on the lookout for the Hailsham she remembers, and seems to recognise some of its distinctive features in many of the large houses she passes. The overall picture she paints is one of an idealised England: genteel in nature and in spirit, in a strong ironic contrast to the context of her life. In an interview about his book, Ishiguro said that he considered it to be set against an alternative but still plausible history of current political and scientific trends (Butcher 2005).

Read individually, each narrative also conveys by these detailed descriptions the message that what is happening is an undeniable part of the social fabric of that specific society; deeds occur that cannot be explained away as some unthinkable evil perpetrated by inhuman criminals in far-off places.

And thus not only the fictional characters but also the readers are drawn into the equation. We read about our own world, about our own concerns.

This emphasis on historical reality also introduces one of the major issues that are questioned by all these narratives, namely the rigid categorising of people into opposing and unequal groups. The resentment of the presence of despised immigrants and refugees, the articulation of alienation and xenophobia and the stark division between “them” and “us” which currently are common experiences all over the world, form recurring images. In the crime novel by Camilleri the separation at first seems a self-evident one: the gourmet detective is pitted against the dour criminals, the judicial system against the Mafia, the fun-loving Italians against the soulless organ traders. But the stereotyping goes further: jovial Italians also refer with contempt to Albanian refugees (2006: 276) and at first the police summarily ascribe the organ trade to Eastern European criminals.

In both the Afrikaans novel and the British film the gap between haves and have-nots, between the powerful and the powerless – which in both narratives are also linked to gender, age and race – originates in socio-political realities of displacement, poverty and war. In South Africa the Cape heartland with its beaches and mountains and vineyards, traditionally the dream destination for tourists, is inundated with waves of black immigrants streaming over porous borders to flee the war-torn countries to the North. And in a xenophobic culture they are seen to be the providers of drugs and prostitutes, they kidnap children and they are responsible for the collapse of the indigenous communities. In the UK refugees and asylum seekers are desperately in search of employment or an identity document; when neither is legally forthcoming it may be bought with an organ as currency. And these victims are always the most vulnerable ones – often a woman or a child; “the people you do not see” (Okwe in *Dirty Pretty Things*).

In Ishiguro’s novel, the division between donors and recipients touches upon the very essence of life. The former are regarded by the outside world as “shadowy objects in test tubes”, created to “complete” after at the utmost four donations. Those who receive the donations regard this acceptable, because, as one of the “normal” ones explained: “[P]eople tried their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren’t really like us. While that remained the case, there would always be a barrier against seeing you as properly human” (Ishiguro 2005: 240).

But even amongst the donors there exist important differences. The students from Hailsham are infinitely more privileged than those cloned in the appalling “vast government homes” (2005: 242), and even amongst the Hailsham students themselves there were those who asked questions and those who did not. Despite Kathy’s matter-of-fact narration, her story is unique: she had once at least explored the possibility of delaying or even

escaping the inevitable completion whilst the greater majority of the students stoically accepted their fate.

The spatial patterns that emerge and many of the visual images of place reinforce the *motif* of opposites, of insiders and outsiders and of isolation and alienation. In the movie the pulsing, almost frantic pace of a world city accompanies the action, but it is remarkable how few of the traditional cityscapes of London appear, and white Londoners seem to be totally absent from the screen. The scenes play out in a shabby city where desperate immigrants inhabit the temporary and cramped shelters: anonymous hotel rooms, backstreet alleys, taxi and airport interiors, hospital corridors. The only time when there is face-to-face contact with the powerful “others”, it also takes place in an underground parking area where a kidney is delivered. “They” and “us” visibly live apart.

The Mafia Don who is one of the murderous organ seekers in Camilleri’s novel, lives totally detached from the rest of the community – those “ordinary people” frequenting the noisy police station, the inviting restaurants, the busy harbour – in a fortified castle on a bare and lonely hill. At the serene Hailsham, the outside world is shut out not only by a thick forest-like hedge but also by the absence of any direct contact with that world. In class the students learn about the English counties and cities and rivers through colourful but incomplete and dated cardboard maps. Years later, when driving through the countryside on the lonely roads that link the numerous “recovery centres”, Kathy thinks: “[I]t seemed to me these dark byways of the country existed just for the likes of us, while the big glittering motorways with their huge signs and super cafés were for everyone else” (Ishiguro 2005: 249).

In the Afrikaans novel the Lemmer family in their gracious home pretend that the gangsters are confined to their shacks and in the slums; that drugs and prostitution exist in a separate space which cannot intrude the leafy suburbs. The failure to keep these spaces apart is a major theme in van Heerden’s narrative. And this contrast between the visible spatial arrangements and the development of the storyline also occurs in the other narratives. As the good gets drawn into the evil, the rich cannot ignore the poor and the human cannot exist without the clone, all four narratives indicate that the seemingly stark divisions are illusory. Opposites intermingle, influence and ultimately accommodate one another.

The spotlight that falls on the difference between generations is another interesting feature. Whilst in most instances it refers to a general and age-old conflict, it also concerns issues specific to the central theme. The Don has his grandson murdered because he fears interference with his need for an organ transplant (Camilleri 2006); the teachers at Hailsham isolate themselves from the young students because intimacy could foster an exchange of information and thus endanger the scientific project (Ishiguro 2005). The technological alienation between older people and a younger

generation who is wholly at ease with the IT age is another manifestation of this conflict. In *In Lieu of Love* these differing degrees of proficiency in the cyberworld mark the generational boundaries between Christian and not only his hard-boiled young employees but also his rebellious son Siebert. It does afford him the opportunity to gain his son’s affection by publicly defending Siebert’s hacking activities. In the context of the crimes that were committed, the accent on the different generations also implies that a new millennium regards these specific deeds as more ordinary, if not more acceptable. When Inspector Montalbano realises that his young colleague does not react with equal horror to the disclosure of the organ trafficking, he concludes:

Mimì had turned pale, yes, but didn’t seem too upset. Self-control? Lack of sensitivity? No, the reason was clearly much simpler: the difference in age. He was fifty and Mimì was thirty. Already prepared for the year 2000, whereas he would never be. Mimì knew he was entering an age of pitiless crime committed by anonymous people. Who had Internet addresses or sites or whatever they’re called, but never a face, a pair of eyes, an expression. No, he himself was too old by now.

(Camilleri 2006: 298)

3.3 Looking for Love

“At its core *Never Let Me Go* is a love story” (Vorhaus 2007: 99); what is remarkable is that, for each in its own way, this is true about the other narratives too. Drawing on the conventions of the romance, an even older genre than the mystery novel, these stories tell about love in many forms, about its possibilities and its limits. The title of the Afrikaans novel gives the most direct indication of this theme. Christian Lemmer loves his wife, and she probably also loves him. But too many mysteries and secrets, past and present, prevent them from expressing this love, and one of the victims of their secrets is the girl who has disappeared. Snaartjie, this girl with an obsessive love for classical music and the violin, sees her departure in the company of the foreign druglords as an opportunity to realise her exceptional talents while at the same time releasing her embittered father and his family from grinding poverty. Christian, who is caught up in drug addiction and flees the vengeful gangsters, weaves his frenetic way through different cities and disconnected lifestyles evading all intimacy. It is only at the very end of the narrative, when he starts to disclose these secrets to Christine that, though damaged, a renewed love becomes possible.

In *Dirty Pretty Things* the acts of sexual love, like body organs, are treated as commodities. The hotel manager is simultaneously organ trader and sexual predator, the doorkeeper gets his commission from the prostitutes in kind, Okwe earns extra money by treating the illegal workers for STD. But the deep affection between Okwe and Senay, the Turkish hotel

maid who wants to sell her kidney, is also an exceptional expression of love. There is no kissing or cuddling or sleeping together, though they share the same poky flat at different times of the day. Love means that they protect each other from the feared immigration agents; he saves her from a butchered operation even though it means revealing his carefully hidden past, and they enable each other to leave the London purgatory behind. In a much more frivolous manner the Sicilian crime novel also contains a love interest. This is a community of strong, almost obsessive family ties, of ancient vendettas and enduring Don Juans. But in addition to all the scenes of adultery and betrayal, the Inspector intends to change his habits and commit himself anew to Livia, his estranged lover.

To return to *Never Let Me Go*. The story of Kathy and Tommy and their lifelong attachment is so intriguing not so much because of the manner in which it develops but rather in the particular detail of between whom it develops. Kathy and Tommy are clones; they should be nameless, faceless and soulless – there should be no speaking of love. The narrative is strewn with almost casual references to sexual encounters, and starting at a remarkably young age, between the Hailsham pupils. It is also emphasised how thorough, yet clinical, their sex education had been. What renders Ishiguro's novel unique is that he, in this very matter-of-fact style, convinces the reader that what is inhuman is not the clone, but society's selfishness, intolerance and fear. What Hailsham as an institution tried to achieve was to prove that the clones could not be ignored as if they were not properly human, and it is because of that uncomfortable truth that the school was destroyed. When Kathy and Tommy try to delay their completion by seeking permission to love each other for a few more years, the denial shows that not they, but the powerful members of society, are the soulless ones. The caring love that Kathy bestows on the donors takes the possibilities of love even further; this is love despite oneself, against all odds.

Once again, however, the reader realises that the conventions of the genre are tested and rearranged. It seems that the three main male characters – Christian, Okwe and Inspector Montalbano – represent not only the narrative core but also the moral backbone of the “texts”. Though flawed, they can be seen as heroes – as in the romances of old; the ones who struggle against evil, who try to save the needy, who eventually prevail. But it is also evident that these love stories have no happy endings. Love is imperfect and limited. Not only is the outcome of Christian's relationship with Christine unclear (*In Lieu of Love*), but in Snaartjie's case her physical disappearance is accompanied by the disappearance of her narrative voice and thus any indication of her eventual fate. And although Kathy wishes to remain with him, in the last days before his “completion” Tommy sends her away:

"I keep thinking about this river somewhere, with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it's just too much. The current's too strong. They've got to let go, drift apart. That's how I think it is with us. It's a shame, Kath, because we've loved each other all our lives. But in the end, we can't stay together."

(Ishiguro 2005: 259)

This pattern establishes an ironic parallel with the romances of old and also reveals the different nature of the battles that are fought nowadays.

4 Surpassing the Boundaries

Though in each case the narratives are imbedded in their specific regions, the circumstances and contexts relate to the larger world and to contemporary questions on social responsibility and civic rights, on medical ethics and life itself. As has been done in earlier centuries, art continues to observe and comment upon the prevalent scientific paradigm. In an age where genetic technology surpasses the traditional boundaries between what is accepted as human and inhuman, these narratives reflect on the supposedly post-human nature of life and society at the beginning of the third millennium.

Today as men and women from different ethnic backgrounds populate every big city across the world, the dilemma of how to deal with "Aliens" or "Immigrants" or "Minorities" has become a global issue. In most cases these invaders are desperate refugees who flee social, economic or political oppression and are willing to do (cheaply) the work no one else wants to do. But, also in an attempt to obtain the proper papers and political rights, very often they revert to crime. This is an extreme simplification of a problem that is profoundly complex and which, moreover, turns especially ugly when people who are already regulated by a hostile bureaucracy and exploited by corrupt employers, feed that fear of foreigners which is present in all humankind. Whether it concerns Muslims in Britain, Christians in Iraq, Nigerians in South Africa or Albanians in Greece, increasingly the tendency is to blame all the ills of the country on "them", on those who look and speak differently, and therefore are inferior to "us". What these narratives all do is to rephrase these matters in dramatic and troubling ways. We are shown that "they" and "we" cannot be kept apart, neither in mental nor in actual space; that regarding someone else as not properly human, dehumanises us all.

In his essays on the effect that a global capitalist and electronic "developmental" culture may have upon humankind, Lyotard (1991) articulates his "double" suspicion that "human beings, in humanism's sense, are in the process of constrained into, becoming inhuman; and that what is 'proper' to

humankind is to be inhabited by the inhuman” (1991: 2). Although not explicitly foregrounded, the global functioning of a demand-and-supply culture which involves capitalist tenets dependent upon techno-scientific advances, is implicitly present in all of the narratives. Organ trafficking presents the triumph of a very specific form of capitalism. Therefore these texts also address a broader philosophical question. That is, whether the local and the singular experience can resist the destructive effects of generalisation and stereotyping – that which Lyotard (1991: 61-65) regards as the “inhuman” countenance of globalisation.

In January 2006 the US Congress passed five bills that would prohibit cloning in its various forms, on the grounds that it would affect not only the direct participants but also the entire society that allows or supports this activity. The President’s Council on Bioethics had earlier concluded that reproductive cloning was morally unacceptable.⁷ *Never Let Me Go* reopens the debate and asks disturbing questions about cloning. Not only whether it is technologically feasible or safe but also what society’s responsibility should be toward these “products”, people who are feeling, loving and dying like all of us. It may even prepare the reader for a new age of humanity in which cloned children will be welcomed as “properly human”.

Finally, I perceive these narratives as contributing to our common metaphysical search, be it a rather bleak conclusion that is reached. They can be read as metaphors for the *condition humaine*. They disclose and comment on human hypocrisy and selfishness; they empathise with our suffering, they stress our mortality. In all cases the titles of the books hint at a broken world: the pilgrimage to the holy shrine at Tindari is commercialised and misused by criminals, Christian’s love is imperfect, the pretty things are dirty. And as is implied by Ishiguro’s plaintive title, we cannot hold on forever. All of humankind lives a limited life. We are all potential donors, we can contribute to the continued existence of new generations, and we are fortunate if a loving carer supports us during our span of life. Scientific advances may prolong the physical life but do not cure or invalidate human frailty and sorrow. We keep trying, as Kathy and Tommy did, to evade this truth, be it through love or religion or art or drugs. In the final instance, however, our fate is to “complete”.

* Revised and extended version of a paper read at the XVIIIth Triannual Congress of the ICLA held from 27 July to 5 August 2007 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The conference theme was “Beyond Binarisms: Discontinuities and

7. President’s Council on Bioethics (2002). *Human Cloning and Human Dignity: An Ethical Enquiry*. Washington DC: President’s Council on Bioethics. Towards the end of 2007 a UN report titled *Is Human Cloning Inevitable? Future Options for UN Governance* urged the world community to revisit the issue before “science overtakes policy” (Keeton, Claire (2007). Full Human Clones “a Matter of Time” (*Sunday Times*, 11 November, p. 28).

Displacements in Comparative Literature”. In Section 4 the questions surrounding the post-human era of genetic technology as they surface in literature, cinema, and the visual arts were addressed.

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