

Memories and Mourning: Exploring Robot Memory and Post-human Imagination in *After Yang*

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Abstract: The science fiction film *After Yang* delves into the emotional transformation experienced by a family following the demise of a highly empathetic and memory-endowed "cultural robot." In the movie, robots with human-like emotions and recollections transcend their status as disposable and replaceable commodities, instead becoming genuine companion species intricately involved in human lives. Through the enduring nature of memory and ancient mourning rituals, the film challenges anthropocentrism, human enhancement technologies, and biopolitics, while affirming and respecting post-human intelligent life. It also prompts reflection on life and redemption for those rigidly adhering to technological optimism yet grappling with loneliness and alienation. The film calls for a more open-minded approach to post-human life, where "companion species" that once aided humans in labor and companionship are no longer disposable or interchangeable products, but vibrant beings with emotions and memories akin to our own. Acknowledging, respecting, and mourning these lives is a redemption for those in post-industrial society who experience loneliness and alienation.

Keywords: *After Yang*; Memory; Mourning; Robots; Post-human.

1. INTRODUCTION

After Yang is a cinematic masterpiece by Korean-American director Kogonada, marking his second feature film following his debut "Columbus" in 2017. The film premiered globally at the 74th Cannes International Film Festival in 2021 and was subsequently honored with the Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prize in the following year, 2022. While the Sloan Award is specifically bestowed upon outstanding films centered around scientific themes, *After Yang* diverges from being a hard science fiction film that emphasizes scientific accuracy and technical details. Instead, it is a 'soft science fiction' tale that delves into human emotions.

The film revolves around an interracial, inter-species family, with the father, Jack, a somewhat melancholic white man barely keeping his tea shop afloat; the mother, a busy, career-driven black woman; their adopted Chinese daughter, Mei Xiang; and Yang, an Eastern-looking robot purchased to acquaint Mei Xiang with her Chinese heritage and help her adapt to their Western household. Yang fulfills the family's expectations, forming a deep bond with Mei Xiang, who affectionately calls him "the best big brother." When Yang suddenly "falls ill or malfunctions, the family embarks on a quest for a cure, treating him as they would a sick family member. However, upon learning that Yang cannot be repaired, the father refuses to let him fade away or be reclaimed by the manufacturer. Instead, he endeavors to find Yang's core memories. Through Yang's memory chips, their shared moments together are revived, revealing the robot's emotions and experiences. Set against a warm and Zen-like backdrop, the film not only explores Yang's memories but also incorporates Taoist concepts like Lao Tzu's "yin and yang," Zhuangzi's butterfly dream, and tea ceremony, along with a soothing yet sorrowful cello score. This tribute to Yang's life challenges human-centric views, human enhancement technology, and bio-politics, affirming the subjectivity and value of post-human life. It offers an opportunity for reflection and redemption to those who cling to technological optimism yet struggle with loneliness and alienation.

2. FROM ROBOTS TO 'HUMANISTIC ROBOTS': THE EMPHASIS ON MEMORY AND EMOTION

The term "robot" originated from the Slavic word for "forced laborer"[1], but with the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, robots have evolved from early industrial models to museum tour guides, domestic helpers, and even robotic pets. AI technologies consistently explore and expand the capabilities of robots, aiming to endow them with human-like attributes such as mind, consciousness, and emotions. Presently, bio-inspired robots that resemble humans in both form and intelligence can possess memories and emotions akin to those of humans, enabling them to interact and connect with people. The text conveys a certain level of empathy and emotional intelligence, functioning indisputably as humanity's "companion species" [2] and "partner in dependable and predictable behavior." [3] The robot in *After Yang* is a highly empathetic and mnemonic "cultural robot", whose uniqueness does not stem from an extensive knowledge base but rather from the emotional bonds it forms with its human family and the eventual reflection it provokes on the nature of sentient artificial life.

The emotions in the film are intricately tied to memories. When Meixiang, a girl from China, is adopted into an American family, the disorientation of a new culture and adoption issues weigh heavily on her spirits. Her robotic older brother, Yang, sensitively perceives Meixiang's transformation and promptly takes her to an orchard. There, he employs an ancient Chinese grafting technique to evoke her memories of her motherland's culture, encouraging Meixiang to embrace her role as a new branch in their "family tree." From the family's participation in a dance competition at the start of the film, to Meixiang reminding Yang to include them in a family portrait, and the anxiety and sorrow displayed by the family when Yang malfunctions, it becomes evident how significant the robot Yang is to the family's dynamics.

In the film, another notable scene unfolds as Jack and Yang engage in a conversation about tea. While Jack searches earnestly for something deeply connected to earth, plants, climate, and way of life, as he's seen in a documentary on tea, Yang encapsulates the essence of the leaf with the phrase "one tea, one world." Through his words, Yang reveals a sense of "place from a Western human geographical perspective. In human geography, place carries a distinct meaning from space; it is a unique arena filled with human experiences and significance. A place is not merely an object, but rather a space imbued with the meanings and emotions that people attach to it – it is constructed by human perceptions. When Yang says that tea can evoke memories of a location and a time, he speaks of human recollections. It is in this sense that he tells his father that tea holds far more than mere knowledge for him.

Furthermore, Yang's memory also encompasses an understanding of life. When he holds a butterfly specimen encased in a frame and tells his mother the story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai's transformation into butterflies, symbolizing love, he declares that he is "not bothered if my end is nothingness." The reason Robot Yang can readily accept decay or death stems from his profound knowledge that his existence is solely to serve humans, and his life and demise are but programmed constructs. Ultimately, he is destined for planned obsolescence, "a concept introduced by Adam Parkes in his analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's robotic novel, *Clara and the Sun*. Planned obsolescence refers to capitalism's use of various strategies to produce goods that will eventually need to be replaced or updated, thereby creating, sustaining, and even expanding consumer demand." [4] In the film, when the father desperately seeks advice from the robot vendor on repairing damaged Yang, the customer service representative mechanically suggests upgrading to a new model before it deteriorates further, minimizing loss. Here, the robotic nature of the product is laid bare. Rather than Yang having a philosophical acceptance of life and death, it is more accurate to say that Robot Yang accepts the prevalent "planned obsolescence" in post-industrial society. [4]

Both robotic technology and biological cloning fall under the category of human "life enhancement" models. A comparative reading of *After Yang* with Ishiguro's other science fiction novel, *Never Let Me Go*, reveals that the lives and emotions of robots or clones are consistently disregarded by humans. However, the film handles damaged robots in a unique way. Instead of merely perceiving them as replaceable products, their owners seek medical help as they would for a family member and mourn them appropriately after their death.

3. "WHOSE LIFE COUNTS AS LIFE?": MOURNING FOR ROBOT YANG

American postmodern theorist Judith Butler poses the inquiry from the perspectives of mourning ethics and biopolitics: "Who counts as human? Whose life is considered life? And ultimately, what kind of life is worthy of mourning?"[5] If Butler's focus is on those marginalized Others within established systems of life, James Gips' question is even more startling: "Who (or what) counts as a person? Whose happiness do we value?... Are women considered persons? Are

strangers persons? People from other countries? Those of different races? Those with differing religious beliefs? Those in a persistent vegetative state? Fetuses? Whales? Robots?"[6] The film responds to this query through Yang's "death," affirming whether robots hold a life deserving of human mourning. The entire narrative serves as an act of mourning and remembrance for a lost intimate relationship and life.

If intelligent robots symbolize a technological and societal advancement, then the melancholy that lingers on the father's face in the film carries a particular significance, akin to Benjamin's notion that "melancholy is an emotional response to an eternal catastrophe." [7] The eternal catastrophe that Benjamin refers to is the neglected aura of life within modernity, dominated by progress, and recapturing memory amounts to a reverence for life, especially for those forgotten, repressed, or demeaned – including the robot Yang and his vestiges, soon to be deemed trash in the film. When the father in the movie gazes at Yang's yellow vest late at night and the camera that once captured their family portraits, isn't he also longing for the intimate connection that Yang yearned for? Magritte, in his *Ethics of Memory*, associates relics with this intimate connection, [8] suggesting that by leaving behind artifacts, we hope to be remembered by those we sustain, those who care for us, and those we cherish, desiring that our relationship has an impact on their lives. [8]

Marguerite's intimate connection becomes a means of perceiving the interdependence between one's self and others. Butler also articulates a similar sentiment: "When we lose someone... we may feel that the experience is temporary, that mourning will end, and the previous order will be restored. Yet... something about who we are and how we relate to others is revealed... that is, I am not alone here, and you are not alone there, and what pertains to you is also a part of me. If I lose you, I must not only mourn the loss but also become enigmatic to myself, for without you, who am I?" [5] Thus, for Butler, mourning deepens our understanding of our ties with others, and through mourning, our connections with them are further illuminated and fortified.

In the film, against the mournful yet soothing melody of the cello, the couple, Meixiang, and Yang's girlfriend Ada bid farewell to Yang in a museum gallery, a ceremony reminiscent of a funeral. Eventually, they agree not to exhibit Yang's body in the museum but permit researchers to study his memories, acknowledging that "his existence was significant." Here, memory serves not only as testament to Yang's presence but also as a respectful acknowledgment of his life and a rightful mourning for his death. The mourning for Yang allows the entire family to accept his passing and brings about reconciliation and healing for all. In the final scene, the couple leans on each other, free from their previous unspoken words, melancholy, and loneliness. Meixiang's heartfelt statement, "I want to thank you for being the best brother in this world. I'm sorry for saying I hated you; I miss you, big brother," tugs at the audience's heartstrings. Meixiang's words affirm the profound love and attachment the family had for robotic Yang. As Magritte might say, The meaning of love corresponds to a term that has been declared obsolete - mourning. Through an understanding of mourning, the connection between caring and remembering is a proposition I wish to preserve. Moreover, caring, beyond mere concern, encompasses a perspective of respecting others.

Before Yang's passing, his emotions and memories were not fully acknowledged by his family; it was only after his death that they were compelled to confront them. In this sense, the mourning for Yang becomes a kind of "belated redress," [9] encompassing regret for the deceased, a comprehensive reevaluation of their life, and "rendering visible some previously invisible connections." [9] The film does not focus on high-tech robots; instead, it reveals an emotional inner world of the "robot" through flashbacks of memory, along with the affectionate bond established between it and humans.

At this juncture, it would be more accurate to say that the film captures not just the robot Yang's past and present memories but also the introspection of Yang's family members triggered by those recollections. As suggested in a Douban film review, the Chinese title could fittingly be translated as "A Long Farewell to Yang," reflecting the movie's tender tone. Following Jacques Derrida's notion of mourning politics, mourning a friendship does not exploit the deceased for personal gain; instead, it involves bearing witness not only to what it has taught us but also to the questions it opens up, the questions it leaves us with." [10] When Yang's father asks his robotic partner Ada if Yang ever wished to become human, especially when robots possess emotions and autonomy akin to humans, the film prompts us to consider how humans should navigate their relationships with machines. This contemplation opens up a broader, posthuman issue that humanity should ponder.

4. HUMAN-MACHINE COMMUNITY: LIFE AND MEMORY IN POST-HUMAN IMAGINATION

In her book *How We Become Post-human* (1999), Katherine Hayles suggests that in the future, humans will coexist extensively with intelligent robots and other forms of artificial life, fostering a "symbiotic relationship". [11] Within this sci-fi cultivated "post-human community", a more inclusive entity will emerge, transcending anthropocentrism and

embracing a greater diversity of “others”. [12] The film not only offers a space for reflecting on the relationship between humans and machines but also initiates literary imagination concerning the post-human community.

Social robots, by incorporating artificial emotions, assist those in need of emotional comfort, such as neglected children and elderly individuals. People openly share their feelings with these machines, forging a “new type of intimacy”. This concept of “new intimacy” is explored by Haraway in her book, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003), where she discusses interspecies relationships within families, focusing on domestic pets and cyborgs.

Yet, when it comes to whether social robots can replace humans, Turkle observes acutely that “they can’t perceive the emotional shifts, the fluidity of human relationships...robots don’t feel anything.”[3] No matter how sophisticated these intelligent machines may be, they are not truly human. As people become dependent on robots, the outcome is a diminishment of “expectations for all relationships,” leading down a path toward “collective loneliness.”[3]

While Turkle’s critique of robots is indeed sharp, she also acknowledges that her criticism stems from human nature’s inclination to rely on others. She doesn’t intend to belittle robots or dismiss them as engineering marvels; rather, she seeks to redefine their role, pondering how they might actually be “thinking about themselves” and “thinking about being alive”. In this sense, Turkle’s inquiry is in line with the meditations on “the human heart” in Kazuo Ishiguro’s recent robot novel, *Klara and the Sun*.

Soul and memory, one connected to the heart, one to the mind. As two vital human organs, the heart and the brain serve as crucial markers of life’s existence. Whether it’s brain death or the heart ceasing to beat, it typically signals the impending departure of a living being. Yet, as Clara realizes, the departed’s heart truly resides within those who love them, and the same can be said for memories. Professor Huang Mingfen examines memory from the perspective of post-humanism in science fiction films and inter-species communication. He argues that memory holds multi-dimensional significance. Firstly, it possesses a natural meaning in the continuity of life stories. Secondly, it carries social importance for collective progression. Thirdly, it pertains to the psychological significance of individual self-awareness. Memory is intertwined with human identity, and one characteristic of the post-human era is understanding memory as a process of interactions among various intelligent beings, not limited to humans. In the film, the robot Yang and his memories evoke the family’s “deep emotional attachment” [13], enriching their understanding of humanity, emotions, and life. Amidst the prevalent feelings of loneliness, alienation, and disconnection in modern society, Yang serves as a “moral model” [14], improving human behavior through his example in interactions and awakening the gentlest aspects of people’s nature. Yang’s passing not only makes the couple feel remorseful towards him but also prompts the work-focused wife to realize her responsibility in nurturing Meixiang and helping her connect with Chinese culture and traditions. To a large extent, their regret over Yang transcends anthropocentrism and technological optimism. In the film, when the father asks Yang’s girlfriend Ada if Yang ever suffered because he was a robot or wished to be human, Ada responds, “Only humans would ask such questions... What’s so great about being human?”

If the father’s inquiries reflect human-centricity and the “psychological, technological, and cultural arrogance” fueled by human enhancement”[15], Yang’s memories prompt the father to reevaluate Yang’s existence. Within a human-centric perspective, robots are not “creatures born of nature,” but at most, they serve as auxiliary tools for humanity, the “summit of creation”. No matter how intelligent, they lack “independent identities”, disappearing when they become “useless”, consigned to “landfills for discarded objects.” [16] However, in the film, Yang’s memories, including his relationships with families and romantic experiences, reveal him to be an even more emotionally vibrant life than many in modern society. The father’s transformation acknowledges Yang’s robotic life and signals the emergence in the post-human era of the “thingness” characteristic, where “thinghood” becomes prominent and objects gain subjectivity. *After Yang*, through memory and mourning, it achieves reverence for intelligent life and redemption for humanity.

5. CONCLUSION

Scholars categorize Guo Jingming’s filmic creations as “video essays” or “essay films”. This genre emphasizes the persuasive use of audiovisual techniques to convince the audience of an existing or shaped idea, “not creating something new from emptiness, but rather revealing the orders that once were.” [17] It serves to reenact a world where intelligent robots and cloned life have become an integral part of human daily existence. Enduring memories coexisting with humanity, and ancient rituals of mourning. The film transcends human centricism, human enhancement technologies, and the limitations of biopolitics through the death of the intelligent robot Yang and the emotional transformations it brings to his family. It calls for a more open-minded approach to post-human life, where “companion species” that once aided humans in labor

and companionship are no longer disposable or interchangeable products, but vibrant beings with emotions and memories akin to our own. Acknowledging, respecting, and mourning these lives is a redemption for those in post-industrial society who experience loneliness and alienation.

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