

Alex Wilk

Breath, whisper, touch.

Gestures of contact in the ecotone for cinematic becoming-with

«I can cure you. From everything that makes you suffer. Your animal human is sick»¹. These are the words uttered by Clara, protagonist of *Clara Sola* (Nathalie Álvarez Mesén, 2021), just a moment before she leans into a whisper. With her hand cupped tightly around her mouth and her friend Santiago's ear, creating a sealed canal between the two bodies, the viewer will never know what is exhaled in that moment: a murmur, non-verbal sounds or breath alone.

Clara's urge to heal Santiago can be understood by the viewer at this point, 65 minutes into the film, as arising from her assigned role within the community in rural Costa Rica where she lives. As practising Catholics, locals believe her capable of channelling the Virgin Mary's divine healing grace and regularly flock to her house to attend religious ceremonies, crowding in to pray together, their arms stretched, hovering their hands above her body in an attempt to be touched by the saint. While the film leaves the viewer ambivalent as to the authenticity of her gifts, Clara – a neurodivergent, middle-aged woman with a spine scoliosis, characterised by a clumsy walk and a shy, child-like way of interacting with the world around her – has apparently embodied the suggestion. As exemplified by this scene with Santiago, on more than one occasion Clara manifests a desire to heal another outside of the usual ceremonial context, albeit as we shall see, in her own, particular ways.

The choice of words that she utters here – «your animal human is sick» – is a curious one and somehow encapsulates the thematic that underpins the entire cinematic work. By implying a dysfunctional double nature to a hybrid subject – an “animal human” – her words remind one of the Nietzschean sentiment that a great source of human suffering stems from the traumatic process of alienation from our inherent animality: a self-domestication upon which, according to the German philosopher, membership in political community is entirely conditional. Indeed, not by chance did he once declare that a dog – a tamed

¹ Nathalie Álvarez Mesén, *Clara Sola* [film], 2021, [1:05:00].

Title

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Abstract

In the cinematic work, *Clara Sola*, bodies meet, negotiate and co-constitute one another in ways that challenge the boundaries between nature and culture, animal and human. Drawing on concepts developed by Donna Haraway, this article interprets certain gestures of the protagonist as expressions of a particular ethical relationality within inter-species contact zones that the posthumanist scholar terms “becoming-with”.

KEYWORDS

POSTHUMANISM
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and domesticated animal – would represent his suffering². The gesture of Clara’s whisper, an act that conveys the presence of a hidden, unutterable truth, confirmed by the words that precede it, perhaps captures this series of seeping thresholds within the hybrid subject, indexing this fundamental mechanism of the western, Christian tradition: the longstanding attempt to excise or domesticate the animal within the human subject as well as the painful reality of their enduring entanglement.

This struggle with the boundary between animality/humanity, as well as the manifold related binaries – nature/culture, earthly/divine, said/silent, contact/separation – pervades the film, *Clara Sola*. And indeed, Clara’s whisper is not the only gesture that traces and challenges those usually highly patrolled borders. It is accompanied by various others that perform similarly: the exhale of her breath onto the body of another; her reaching out to touch another; the resting of her body upon another; the resting of her body on the ground. They are gestures that seem to challenge these binaries by complicating the apparently distinctly defined nature of each side, in particular, the traditional notion of human subjecthood as clearly delimited and entirely separate from animal others.

² «I have given a name to my pain and call it “a dog”». F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Vintage Books, New York 1974, p. 249.

For Clara carries her own complex and often conflicting relation to the catholic context she lives within, as well as an ambivalence to her own animality: to what precisely is sick within her double creature. The protagonist seems to desire the social inclusion that comes from those very processes of self-domestication at the root of the sickness that she also wishes to heal in Santiago. In her case, this manifests through attempts to escape the infantilisation she is subjected to through rendering herself more womanly. Nonetheless, Clara's hybrid nature is portrayed in the film as less suppressed than those around her. Her animal regularly emerges and makes frequent bids for freedom through various transgressive acts: abandoning her home to escape into the forest, bodily contact with earth and mud, sexual acts that clash with societal norms.

Furthermore, Clara is portrayed as relating with nonhuman creatures and the organic environment in ways that others cannot or will not. She seems to be able to communicate with a white horse called Yuka, able to convince the creature to comply through gestures that stand in contrast to the usual ones of mastery through training, taming or the violence of a whip. She also apparently possesses a heightened sensorium, narrated in the film by close-up visuals of insects and the amplified sounds of their movements as they crawl on the leaves and grass

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around her. This extends to an ability to sense earthquakes before her fellow humans are aware of them, much like the birds and other creatures around her.

Yet, while this apparently “supernatural” ability to conjoin with or sense the “natural” world seems to contribute to her apparent difference and thus also her perceived ability to connect with the divine, Clara is constantly being pulled in opposite directions, between the celestial and terrestrial, the holy and the mud. Her controlling mother, who organises the religious ceremonies, frequently disciplines Clara for her socially inappropriate behaviours, for her instincts and drives apparently *too* natural or animal-like. Yet this same figure also refuses Clara the opportunity for treatment to correct her spine, asserting that it would change the way God intended her, despite the fact she is also dressed in a straightening corset during the ceremonies. What is “natural” and therefore considered good for its closeness to the divine or unadulterated order of things, is thus revealed in the film’s narrative as constructed according to the culture’s societal norms and values, as it is so often too in the world outside of this film.

Clara’s life is thus marked by these social, physical and conceptual borders that she continuously traces and often traverses. Aside from her unconventional acts, Clara is also depicted as inhabiting the threshold between human and more-than-human zones in spatial and aesthetic terms: leaves, earth and insects often cling to her body – «leave them» she says, when Santiago attempts to remove the insects from her clothes – «they live there», indicating that for Clara, her boundary as an individual is not fully secured but rather open to being shared with others³.

³ Nathalie Álvarez Mesén, *Clara Sola* [film], 2021, [00:17:24].

In another scene she shares an apple with Yuka the horse, each taking turns to take bites of it, partaking in a companionship that, as Donna Haraway notes in *Where Species Meet*, comes from being «messmates at table together, breaking bread» (*cum panis*)⁴.

In stark contrast, her movement within the territory that surrounds her house is strictly secured and delimited by poles with purple ribbons attached that stake out an invisible boundary she is told not to cross (but does so in moments of daring or rebellion). Beyond the poles lie two gradients of the more-than-human world that she is forbidden from entering alone. On one side lies the field where Yuka the horse grazes – an intermediary zone of tamed nature – while beyond Yuka’s field lies the wild thicket of the forest. This dense, dark and insistent backdrop of the film is constructed as the locus of nature in its purest form, a domain from which humans, save Clara, are apparently alienated.

I propose that we can understand Clara’s spatial, social and emotional habitat that she moves within, as a liminal zone known as an “ecotone”: the intermediary area between ecosystems. In the ecological sense, these border areas, such as the vegetation between forest and grassland, are rich zones where biodiversity peaks, since the characteristics of each of the flanking ecosystems blend together⁵. The “tone” of ecotone comes from the Greek *tonos* meaning “tension” for it is precisely due to a productive struggle of different species living in close proximity that gives rise to new creative forms of adaptation and evolution⁶. With her house situated at the edge of the forest, Clara quite literally lives in a transitional area and the film seems to emphasise this by continuously moving between shots inside her home, to outside in the yard, to Yuka’s stable and the perime-

4 D. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis – London 2008, p. 208.

5 *Ecotone*, «Encyclopaedia Britannica», available at: <<https://www.britannica.com/science/ecotone>> (last accessed: 12/04/2025).

6 *Ecotone Explained*, «Ecological Society of America», available at: <<https://esa.org/esablog/about/ecotone-explained/>> (last accessed: 12/04/2025).

ter of the horse's grazing field, to the depth of the forest itself. The production of these zones with their diverse moods and qualities can be understood as to what Adrian J. Ivakhiv calls the "geomorphic" dimension of the film – that is to say, the film's production of «territoriality, of hereness and thereeness, homeness and awayness, public and private spaces»⁷. To this we could add, the production of human, more-than-human worlds that at certain points cease to become distinct domains but rather blur into ecotones where diverse species (and people) co-habit and come into contact. Yet I would like to go a step further to suggest that *Clara Sola* develops not only spatial ecotones but also philosophical ones through Clara's particular nature as a «boundary-crossing individual» and her relational gestures with the more-than-human world and its inhabitants⁸.

In their editorial text on the concept *Ecotones as Contact Zones*, Drew Hubbell and John Ryan extend the ecological term to encompass Donna Haraway's notion the "contact zone", itself an extension of Mary Louise Pratt's homonymous concept developed through the analysis of colonial encounters: «where subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other [...] often within radically asymmetrical relations of power»⁹. Hubbell and Ryan propose the term "ecotone" as a means to rethink longstanding assumptions about nature as «the organic sublime, where humans either belong or are alienated from»¹⁰. Rather, they state that «the ecotone is a place of sustained conflict, of unequal power dynamics and co-shaping through intimate, uncomfortable touch, and other unsettling registers of the proximate senses»¹¹. These continuous meetings and en-

7 J. I. Adrian, *Ecologies of the Moving Image Cinema, Affect, Nature*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario 2013, pp. 7-8.

8 *Ivi*, p. 27.

9 M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London 1992, p. 7.

10 D. Hubbell – J. Ryan, *Scholarly Ecotones in the Information Landscape*, «Landscapes: The Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language», vol. 7, issue 1, 2016, p. 2.

11 *Ibidem*.

tanglements of beings in ecotones give rise to, in Haraway's words, «assemblages of biological species [that] form outside their comfort zone» and which «change the subject – all subjects – in surprising ways»¹².

A close reading of Clara's gestures and movements might bring us into this philosophical dimension of the film, as she reveals and traces these moments of contact within the ecotone, between herself and other species, herself and other humans, and even, we might go as far as to say, humans and symbolic realm during her mediating of the religious ceremonies, quite literally experienced as “uncomfortable touch” by the protagonist. In doing so, I propose that we might uncover the hints of a particular kind of posthuman ethics unfolding, the kind that Haraway calls a “becoming with” in order to practice a “becoming worldly”¹³. That is to say, an ethics that arises first and foremost from the acknowledgement of the contingencies of life and the vulnerability to ask, «who will “we” become when species meet»¹⁴.

As I began collecting images of these moments of contact between human and nonhuman worlds, I wondered whether it is by chance, or rather propelled by some subtextual force, that a recurring motif of the film seems to echo the iconic gesture present in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (c. 1508–1512), where the index fingers of two radically diverse beings, a deity and a human, are depicted just moments before contact. In *Clara Sola* this touch, or near touch, of a single index finger also unfolds in scenes where she manifests a desire to utilise her apparent supernatural gift to heal another, be they human or nonhuman. In some cases, Clara's position seems to imitate that of the deity, most obviously in the scene where she is asked

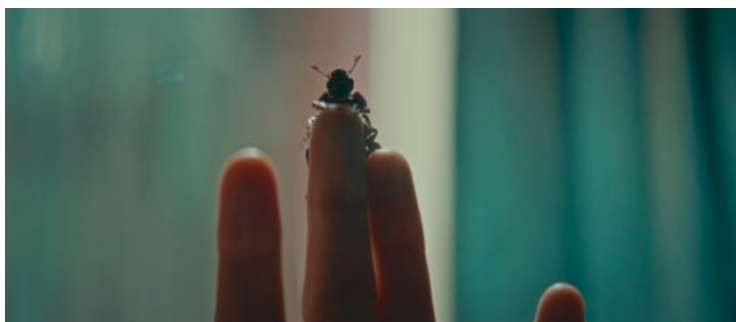
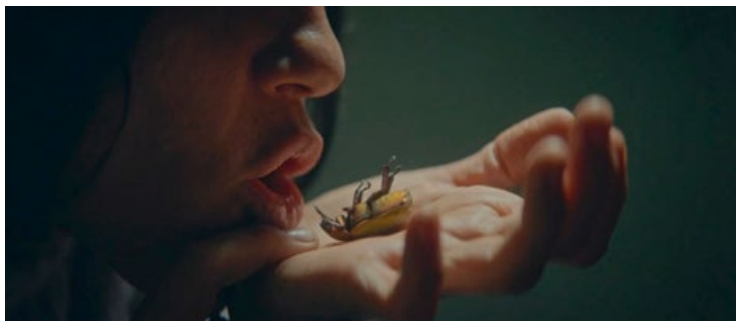
12 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, cit., pp. 217-219.

13 *Ivi*, p. 35. Note that in *When Species Meet* “becoming with” is not hyphenated. Whereas in Haraway's more recent *Staying With the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) the term becomes “becoming-with”. When not directly citing the term from *When Species Meet*, I have opted to use the more recent hyphenated version.

14 *Ivi*, p. 5.

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to channel the Virgin Mary's grace by touching the head of a man. Yet in moments where similar gestures of touch occur with other species, the flow of affectivity is not unidirectional, but rather seems to encapsulate a visual unfolding of an ethical vulnerability or what Haraway terms "response-ability" where

«touch ramifies and shapes accountability»¹⁵. Here, diverse bodies co-shape one another through the capacity to respond (as opposed to mere reaction, the traditional ability assumed of nonhuman animals) and be affected by the other in a dynamic revealed as flowing both ways.

These two-way currents of affect and response can be traced in the very first scenes of the film. The opening shot shows Clara stretching her arm out to touch Yuka, at first alternating between the horse's and the human's perspectives, the scene then moves to a side view where we see that Clara is blocked from moving forward by an invisible border, which we later understand to be traced by the purple ribbons that delimit Clara's movement within the territory. Yuka stands just out of reach, seemingly exercising her free will and power over the human, stubbornly refusing to move despite Clara's verbal requests for her to come closer. Eventually, Clara gives up but, before walking away, she utters, «Come or I'll leave you alone», a childish threat that nonetheless signals their interdependence¹⁶. As she moves out of sight, Yuka, despite her previous immobility, moves off to follow her, suggesting that the fear of abandonment is shared by both human and horse. Yet, unlike Clara, who has been told to remain in her strictly delimited, human zone, Yuka as a domesticated animal – trained enough to be accepted within human spaces while never quite abandoning her ability to return to “nature” – is another border-crossing creature of the film. In this instance the fact is subtextually communicated through her freedom to traverse the border that marks the frontier between her grazing zone and the path towards Clara's house¹⁷.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 36.

¹⁶ Nathalie Álvarez Mesén, *Clara Sola* [film], 2021, [00:01:20].

¹⁷ This feature of Yuka also appears in a later scene where she is able to cross a similar threshold, at least partially, by protruding her head through Clara's kitchen window. Here Yuka becomes witness to yet another disciplinary act to secure the border between animal/human within Clara's subjecthood: the protagonist is being told to soak her fingers in freshly chopped chili – in itself a domesticated plant – by her mother, as a means to punish and prevent her



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After moving through the thicket together, still obeying the permitted route demarcated by the ribbons now attached to trees, they enter Clara’s yard where they are greeted by a man who we understand rents Yuka for tourist trips. He ties ropes around the horse’s head but attempts to pull Yuka to follow him do not work. «Clara, help me, I have tourists who are waiting for me by the waterfall», is his urgent imperative¹⁸. Clara places her hand and then rests her head on the body of Yuka, lying there for a moment letting the horse’s back support her weight. Then, as she lifts her head with one hand remaining on the creature’s back, without needing to utter anything, Yuka seems to understand and once again moves off.

This fleeting scene lasts just a few moments, yet it is nonetheless steeped in the complexity of Yuka and Clara’s interspecies relation: a friendship and a shared affinity while simultaneously and unescapably a relation of use. For, like most horses in human care, Yuka has been bred, trained, held captive and is made to work for an income, here to benefit Clara’s family. Ethical accountability is thus clearly a matter at stake in their interactions and, as in all contact zones, there is an asymmetrical flow of power. Yet, perhaps precisely due to Clara’s very own ambivalent position within the human world – simultaneously infantilised, controlled and also put to work, in her case as a spiritual medium to support her family – her interactions with

habit of touching herself during the romantic scenes of a telenovela. “Chili finger, be careful”, Clara utters to Yuka as she hovers her hand above the horse’s muzzle, almost daring to share this pain of self-domestication with her, a pain that Yuka, surely, already knows. Nathalie Álvarez Mesén, *Clara Sola* [film], 2021, 00:01:20.

¹⁸ *Clara Sola* [00:02:15].



Yuka reveal a different dynamic to what we are used to seeing portrayed between humans and horses.

Rather than the «unidirectional relations of use, ruled by practices of calculation and self-sure hierarchies, as Haraway describes the violent history of human exploitation of animal others, here Yuka’s compliance as a fundamentally unfree worker is instead negotiated through Clara’s nonverbal gesture¹⁹. In allowing herself to be supported in this vulnerable position, resting her head on the horse’s body, the protagonist seems to be practising what Haraway conceives as an ethical response to inevitable relations of use: the active experience of “shared suffering” through participating in the same conditions of work and, in doing so, engaging with the act of «*respecere* – looking back, holding in regard, understanding that meeting the look of the other is a condition of having a face oneself»²⁰. Even if this is not a face-to-face moment, this gesture of contact nonetheless clearly recognises in the same way, the presence of another that holds consequence to both parties. Far from a simple imperative to move, Clara’s nonverbal utterance could rather be heard as: «I need you to support me, to bear the weight of my body and the weight of my requests of you. I and my family depend on you and so we are accountable to you». It is a gesture that seems to contain within it the shared pain of their entangled histories that keeps Clara simultaneously “at risk and in solidarity” in an interspecies instrumental relationship that she cannot disavow²¹. As Yuka moves off, seemingly once again of her own accord, one could imagine that it is precisely as a consequence

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¹⁹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, cit., p. 71.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 88.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 70.

of the communication of accountability, signalled by Clara's touch, that Yuka accepts her part within their entangled companionship, as a being that both responds and is responded to, within what Haraway calls, the «dance of "becoming with"»²².

Within the ecotones of the cinematic work *Clara Sola* – upon the thresholds between those highly patrolled boundaries between inside and outside, nature and culture, animal and human – bodies meet, negotiate and co-constitute one another in intricate knots of relation. In this text, I have proposed that we can interpret some of the protagonist's gestures as visual expressions of this complexity. Furthermore, if we observe closely, we might find a posthuman ethics rooted in the reciprocal affect and mutual transformation that Haraway terms "response-ability". The film's border-crossing protagonist not only reveals the disciplinary forces that serve to perpetuate the traditional definition of the human subject as distinctly separate from the natural world, but simultaneously challenges these forces through her will to be permeable, vulnerable and accountable to human and nonhuman others. Clara inhabits the contact zone of the ecotone fully and accepts the contingency of her selfhood that it implies, to embrace a becoming-with, in Clara's words, "animal human".

²² *Ivi*, p. 25.