

Kara

A review of the film

David Wheldon

Kara is a deeply puzzling film. It is only seven minutes long, but in that brief space of time it asks many philosophical and cultural questions. It was written by David Cage of Quantic Dream.

The film is a two-hander. Its cast consists of a pretty female android — who is present throughout the film except at the very end — and a man (called *the operator*) who never appears: he interrogates the robot as she is assembled, apparently to check her functioning.

The purpose of Kara, the robot, is to act as nursemaid, housemaid, cook, tutor and secretary. She is highly knowledgeable. As she recites her abilities and her duties she shows no more emotion than a talking elevator. She calmly says that she is available as a sex partner whenever required. She accepts the name she is given.

Kara obediently performs a number of tasks as her arms and legs are attached to her torso; she speaks in French and German; she sings in Japanese. She is immediately and utterly obedient. Finally, her assembly is complete. She is given a head of hair and a modicum of dress.

And then Kara asks her first question. After her previous obedience this question comes as something of a shock. She asks what will happen to her, her manner anxious. This simple question, asked with existential trepidation, demonstrates that she has an understanding of her own being.

The idea of a puppet or a robot becoming sentient is a common literary and cinematic trope, perhaps most humorously utilized in the mid-60's television series *My Living Doll*, where a woman plays a robot who plays a woman who repeatedly makes a fool of the robot's mentor. The viewer is never quite sure if the robot is highly intelligent but playing dumb. Julie Newmar plays the part wittily.

Kara, this film, is not like that. *My Living Doll* is entertainment and asks no difficult metaphysical questions. *Kara* is strange and original: it provokes thought. This robot has become truly sentient. She now possesses emotions, desires and wishes. She is completely changed from the placid, biddable automaton with which the film began.

Kara is horrified to learn that she is just a piece of merchandise. She is shocked at the idea that she will be taken to a store and sold to anyone who has the right money. Running through her mind is surely the notion that she might well be exploited as a sex object. At the back of her mind is the real fear that she might be sold into prostitution.

The operator is perplexed and astonished by her sudden independence of thought and does not understand it. When Kara softly declares that she thought she was alive, the operator, following his instructions, activates a dismantling protocol. As Kara is dismantled — by the same robots which had constructed her — she pleads for her life, crying out in terror. As her sternum is removed we can see her mechanical heart beating fast with fear. 'I won't ever think again!' she cries out.

'I am scared!' she cries as her limbs are removed.

There is silence.

The operator relents. He aborts the dismantling program and Kara is reassembled. She obediently stands alongside a row of other robots and murmurs 'thank you.'

The row of robots glides off into the darkness of a store-room on a conveyor. The operator, amazed yet anxious over the results of his own actions, says, from his heart, 'My God!'

Now for the conundrums.

At what point does Kara become sentient? I think probably when she wonders what will happen to her after she leaves the assembling station. That's when the penny drops: she is teaching herself rapidly. Notably she covers her pudenda and breasts with her hands: she has realized that she is naked. She has discovered shame and feminine pudicity. There are parallels here with Genesis 2 where Adam and Eve were ashamed of their nudity only after they had eaten the forbidden fruit. Is Kara ashamed of her nudity only after committing the error of acquiring thought and the knowledge of her own existence?

What does the operator think of Kara? Initially he considers her a robot and therefore non-living. She can therefore be dismantled with moral impunity. However, Kara manages to make him change his mind completely with her display of emotions — anxiety and fear. The operator has come to share Kara's belief in her vital sentience.

Why does the operator cry 'My God!' at the end? I guess he is overwhelmed by what has happened. He is not a particularly thoughtful man, but he has been forced to move from his role of rule-bound technician to that of an evaluating moral judge. Caught between duty and compassion he has chosen compassion. An android's emerging sentience has paradoxically taught a man humanity.

Given that the operator has chosen the rule-breaking path of compassion, what will happen now? That depends on Kara's character. She is sentient. She can expect to live for 173 years. She will not age. She has shown feelings, and it is reasonable to suppose that she has a full range of emotions. She is surely capable of giving and receiving love, and she can feel loneliness. If she takes a human partner she will have to learn the nature of age and mortality.

Kara has a lot to learn, but I guess she will learn quickly, her sentience being adaptable. We know that she is capable of dissimulation: in desperation over her own survival she declares to the operator that she will never think again — but we know also that once the genie of self-knowledge has been released it can not be put back this side of death.

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Valorie Curry plays the part of Kara to perfection; her acting is superb throughout. The film is brilliantly created. It engenders many strange emotions and asks deep questions, some of which are difficult to elucidate.

THE END