Windows and Applications: A Reading of Etgar Keret’s “Windows”

A significant reference point for Keret’s literary trajectory is his short story “Windows,” published in *A Glitch at the Edge of the Galaxy* in 2018. The story first appeared two years earlier as the concluding text in *The Posthuman Age: Between the Fantasy of Eternal Life and Existential Panic*,[[1]](#footnote-2) a collection of mostly theoretical articles revolving around the posthuman theme.

“Windows” describes the next stage in human experience, achieved thanks to an application that offers its users a bot—a virtual machine that imitates human behavior but proves much more powerful than first assumed. The bot, a well-synched product with an immaculate human-machine interface that is constantly monitored and updated, is available to users who are interested in pursuing intimate virtual relationships. Assuming that technology and humans are increasingly integrated and that new technological developments make it possible to blur the boundaries between the human and the non-human, “Windows” elaborates a new epistemology in which technology plays a critical role in the constitution of the contemporary human.

The reading presented here sees “Windows” as a self-reflexive construct hinting at Keret’s move from postmodernism to post-postmodernism based on three main conjectures.

The first is that the story is underpinned by classic postmodernist themes and aesthetics. Under the watchful eye of a brown-suited caregiver, the protagonist and focalizer awakens in a one-room apartment with bare walls and no windows. Oblivious to his name and whereabouts, the protagonist is told that he has suffered memory loss and that, “when they found him on the side of the road, he didn’t have any papers on him.”[[2]](#footnote-3) The one-room apartment is referred to as “a great place to recover in,”[[3]](#footnote-4) since it contains no distractions that might delay the return to health of the protagonist, who agrees to be referred to as Mickey. Nonetheless, to provide Mickey with the sense of open space conducive to his recovery, by tapping a few keys on his laptop, the man in the brown suit has the image of two windows and an open door projected onto the walls of the room. Mickey is informed by the man in the brown suit that he has no need of “an on-site doctor’s visit,”[[4]](#footnote-5) since his patient care consists of a monitoring system center and a twenty-four hour telephone support line. Apart from what the man in the brown suit tells him, Mickey is completely ignorant: he does not know his name, where he is, with whom he is speaking, or for whom this caregiver actually works.

So far in the story, the reader finds themself confronted with the familiar topos of disorientation, which some postmodernist scholars contend is the essence of postmodernism.[[5]](#footnote-7) The idea that human notions and identities are essentially constructed like fiction, the loss of direction, the search for meaning, and the prevailing uncertainty serve as the foundation for the literary reduction of this situation *ad absurdum*.

At some point, a young woman appears in one of the wall projections. After inquiring, Mickey is told by the support center representative that the woman is part of an application upgrade (currently available free of charge) developed to provide users with “a touch of human presence”[[6]](#footnote-8) because “lately we’ve had more than a few complaints from users that the projected rooms are always empty, which makes them feel lonely.”[[7]](#footnote-9) As part of the upgrade, each system comes equipped with a different human figure. Mickey’s “companion” is called Natasha. Initially, Natasha is observable to Micky only through the projection of the half-opened door. However, her sudden passage through the wall into Micky’s room and subsequently emotional and physical relationship with him produces an ontological crisis in the story, since the two entities exist in two different ontologies.

The opening of a passage across the threshold of the projected door proves unidirectional. Only Natasha can transverse it: “The half-closed door that led to Natasha’s kitchen creaked open. Natasha was standing in the doorway, wearing a terry cloth robe, her hair soaking wet. She walked into Mickey’s room with a coffee mug in her hand.”[[8]](#footnote-11) When Mickey tries to pass through the door, he bumps into the wall. However, there is evidence that Natasha’s presence in the room was not a delusion: After Mickey spills the boiling coffee onto his hand and Natasha departs, the burn and the coffee mug remain. Questioning whether Natasha had ever actually visited him, Mickey searches from evidence that he has not experienced a delusion. Trying to determine whether Natasha had actually visited him in his room, Mickey soon discovers that the passage is only one-way, bumping into it as he tries to pass through.

Ontological skepticism, or the presence of a “world next door,” is another touchstone of postmodern fiction. Brian McHale defines this postmodernist style-marker as “a dual ontology, on one side our world of the normal and every day, on the other side the next-door world of the paranormal or supernatural, and running between them the contested boundary separating the world next door.”[[9]](#footnote-12) When unable to signify reality, the literary text creates ontological instability in place of epistemological stability. In this instance, Mickey’s room constitutes what McHale refers to as “the zone,”[[10]](#footnote-13) a liminal space whose fluidity enables “a large number of *fragmentary possible worlds* [to] *coexist* in an impossible space,” producing ongoing clashes between worlds characterized by different ontological conditions.[[11]](#footnote-14)According to McHale, such clashes prove central to postmodern poetics because, when authors no longer feel capable of supplying their readers with meaning about the world, the epistemological dominant is replaced by multiple possible worlds.

By now, the principal elements that form the basis of the story’s realistic plentitude, such as the accident, the memory loss, rehabilitation, patient care, medical tracking, and recovery through psychological support are rendered less significant in the overall thematics. Simultaneously, the polysemic nature of certain terms gradually becomes more pronounced. For example, the windows projected onto the wall, initially viewed solely as a means of emotional support provided for the patient during his recovery, are now perceived as a symptom of the algorithmic age. This foregrounds the contextual frame of digital communication and cyberspace terms: the laptop computer, Windows (as an operating system), applications, systems, updates, users, upgrades, free services, tracking (collection of user data and feedback), features, the expansion of existing service, user experience, access codes, running times, feedback, additional options, service interruption, and disconnection.

The cyber-related terminology is especially prominent in the fifth of the story’s six sections, the only one in which Mickey is not the focalizer, and where the point of view shifts to Natasha instead. This change inverts the initial classification of user and virtual neighbor as well as the reader’s initial perception of what constitutes actual and virtual realities. Suddenly, we find out that Natasha is the user, whereas Mickey is the virtual neighbor, existing in cyberspace.

In fact, Mickey is not a user who has a “neighbor” projected onto the wall of his room. Nor is he a patient injured in an accident. He is a bot, a machine that exists only in cyberspace, capable of performing as would a man and portraying him perfectly in accordance with the user’s particular needs. Hence, he is in effect under the purview and supervision of the application’s developers. Indeed, the only one who can move between the two ontologies is the man in the brown suit who programmed the room behind the door in the first place. The inversion explains Mickey’s bewilderment and incomprehension about how a woman presented to him as the product of a computer application can suddenly pass through a wall to enter his room, and then exit it through a door that seems open only to her. It is, in fact, Mickey who has been summoned for Natasha and is at her beck and call. Every time he experiences a shift in his relationship with Natasha, it is a sign that she has either added or removed features from the service, or, eventually, chosen to discontinue it altogether.

As the novum in the story,[[12]](#footnote-15) the element that produces cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization, the bot serves to illuminate the user, the human for whom they were developed. As the contemporary subject living in a multiverse that enables her to exist simultaneously in everyday reality and in virtual or augmented reality, Natasha is the one who constitutes the center of scrutiny in the story. She is one of many contemporary subjects who exist equally in cyberspace, on computers and smartphones, in applications and in the smart systems that navigate their lives—which is to say, she is one of us, living simultaneously in the real world and in the worlds of the screens in the palms of our hands or on the table in front of us. Natasha desires to forge a lifelike relationship with a computer simulation because she finds virtual experience preferable in every way to experience in tangible reality. She is of this age and time, an age in which “technology is instinctual […] it penetrates into every location, in a totally intimate form. It is found besides us rather than outside us. It is underneath our skin; frequently, it is inside our brains.”[[13]](#footnote-16) For Natasha, artificial intelligence in the form of a bot might be more human than the machine that is man.

My second conjecture is that, in literary terms, the zone in which the meeting between the virtual neighbor and the user occurs presents what Ilana Gomel terms an “impossible typology.”[[14]](#footnote-17) Yet, in practice, the story offers a typology for the multimodal world made possible by contemporary communications technology. The digital space constitutes a zone by definition, because it creates an interface between the real world and the virtual world, both of which are inhabited by the user.

Cyberspace is reality, not fiction; it is a reality in which “daily experiences are defined by simultaneity, semantic proximity, and immediate access to cyberspace rather than by the body’s field of action for a growing number of people.”[[15]](#footnote-18) Thus, rather than being an inquiry into possible worlds, “Windows” expresses the depth of cyberspace’s presence in people’s lives, and shows us glimpses of the new “terminal identity,” with the recognition and understanding that the existence of cyberspace underpins humanity’s contemporary condition and even becomes life itself. As Scott Bukatman contends:

Whether “cyberspace” is real or not, our experience of electronic space is a “real” experience. By distinguishing the constitution of being as an activity of interface, phenomenology suggests that the status of being is not an absolute condition, but one that changes relative to changes in the experience of the real [enabling] a reconceptualization of the human and the ability to interface with the new terminal experience […] and thus a uniquely terminal space becomes a fundamental part of human (or posthuman) redefinition.[[16]](#footnote-20)

One of the markers of the onset of “terminal identity” in the story is that there is a shift between the foreground and background regarding the characters in the story; that is, the characters we view as marginal—the man in the brown suit and the support representatives with whom the protagonists either meet in person or speak over the phone—move to the center. They are the markers of an entrepreneurial, digital world that advances, enhances, updates, and develops up to the point where the machine-interaction experience becomes far more tangible and fulfilling than human interaction. The relationships that the representatives form with Mickey and Natasha embody the relations between man and the anonymous computerized system. Accordingly, these representatives are never ascribed a proper name. They are only ever referred to as “the man in the brown suit,” “the tired guy,” or “the woman with the runny nose,” thus remaining remote and detached. While the company purports to “care for the customer,” offer “support and assistance,” and constantly upgrade the user experience by “always updating and improving the application,”[[17]](#footnote-21) it is obvious that this a deployment of oversight over both the technology/bot and their users. The conversations between the representatives and Mickey and Natasha are in fact informational exchanges, the aim of which is to gather as much information as possible:

The man in the suit asked Natasha almost everything: how much did it bother her that the “neighbor,” was restricted to only one room; what did she think about the name “Mickey,” and in retrospect, would she have preferred to choose a name for him herself; to what extent did the fact that the “neighbor” didn’t know that he wasn’t real contribute to her excitements; and was his lack of memory and independent relationships crucial in her decision to end the service.[[18]](#footnote-22)

Data collection is necessary in order to enhance the content Natasha consumes, adjust its timing and its duration, and match it to her behavioral patterns. The developers need to optimize the digital mechanism designed to monitor and improve the efficiency of the bot’s performances in accordance with the user’s taste and needs. The interactions with the users are therefore not conversations but interrogations designed to better program the bot. This accentuates that the bot is fundamentally a product of mathematical and statistical analysis of patterns of behavior through use of algorithms and studies based on mathematical and engineering methodologies. The story lingers on the constant collection of information regarding the customer’s needs and the user’s experience in order to intensify the “*effet du reel*”[[19]](#footnote-23) inside the virtual world. And indeed, the bot represents the successful achievement of simulacra—the copy replaces the original and even surpasses it. It seems natural that in a state of affairs in which “technology is instinctual […] it penetrates every location, in a totally intimate form. It is found besides us rather than outside us. It is underneath our skin; frequently, it is inside our brains,” interaction with a virtual bot should surpass experiences in external reality.[[20]](#footnote-25)

Virtual technology is permanently ephemeral and is subject to drastic changes at any given moment, such as, “for now the service is free, but the company reserves the right to demand additional payment for human presence in the future.” [[21]](#footnote-26) Mickey is thus a temporary construct: he does not know who he is, he has no memory; he is merely a sequence of programmed information. If memory is the basis and prerequisite for a coherent identity, stability, and a uniformity of meaning, Mickey will never have these attributes, even if he performs perfectly as a human. Identity, history, and space are superfluous, if not obstructive, for an app designed to provide the experience of a real social interaction in a disembodied human-machine interface custom-tailored for a specific user.

This logic of identity as performance, as iterations, as creation and re-creation of the self, crosses over from the bot to the user. In “Windows,” it is suggested that the users, submerged as they are in technology and the digital sphere, might also be reduced to a performance of selfhood, as if techno-culture were foregrounding the nature of the self as constructed and constituted. Unwilling to make the effort to achieve true intimacy, Natasha deems her full-fledged subjectivity unnecessary when she orders non-human relationship services just as one would order take-out food, outsourcing fundamental aspects of what we define as human contact: interpersonal connections, intimacy, and sex. As Eva Ilouz contends, technology is a springboard for romantic capitalism, making romantic relationships available for consumption like any other merchandise and eliminating the arduous work and hazards of emotional vulnerability that are the cost of real-world human intersubjectivity.[[22]](#footnote-28)

The bot, Mickey, is a cutting-edge technology, the kind that, according to Susan Liautaud “blur humanity’s boundaries […] where machines and animals cross over into purely human realms—physical attributes, functions, and societal and personal interactions.”[[23]](#footnote-29) The bot defies the binary thinking of human vs. machine, collapsing clear distinctions between the human and the non-human and blurring the categorical divide separating the two. The application enables bots and humans to have cybersex, an option the tired representative explains is “completely free of charge.” He elaborates that the availability of this option is yet another response to the needs of users, many of whom “said that the presence of the ‘neighbors’ aroused an intense need in them for human interaction.”[[24]](#footnote-30) The depictions of cybersex in the story further accentuate the deep penetration of technology into human experience, since cybersex, as a faculty of techno-culture, exists in proximity to the posthuman idea, because it takes place in a realm where the biological and the technological meet. Furthermore, it demands that humans become more than their human shapes, since it is impossible to enter cyberspace as flesh and blood.[[25]](#footnote-31)

The story asks questions about whether human beings are absolutely distinguishable from inhuman entities such as machines, and to what extent human-machine interactions and exchanges shape our ideas about human exceptionalism and unique essence. For Natasha, the human / non-human binary is already a thing of the past:

When he asked her if what had developed between her and Mickey could be called “genuine intimacy,” Natasha found herself tearing up. “He was just like a real person,” she said, “not only in how his body felt. His mind was real. And now that I’ve broken it off, I just don’t know what you did to him. I hope you didn’t kill him or something.”[[26]](#footnote-32)

hints at has bonded takes some degree ofher relationship to Mickey is still akina consumer productfrom which ,even though Mickey is designed to be perfectly compatible with her needs and attributes. It is a testament to the difficulties contemporary humans have in maintaining connections in the physical world.

The man in the brown suit comforts Natasha after her misgivings about ending the service, saying “[Y]ou have nothing to worry about […] you can’t kill something that was never alive.”[[27]](#footnote-33) Yet the bot, having been programmed to be human, is left disappointed and stupefied, the victim of unrequited love. In the end, “he pressed the receiver to his ear and dialed zero. The only thing he could hear on the other end was a long, endless beep.”[[28]](#footnote-34) It seems that, although he was “never alive,” Mickey has been mistreated by his user, Natasha.

Hence, it is my third conjecture that “Windows” can be seen as a paradigm shift in Keret’s writing, a text that overtly signals the author’s move from postmodernism to post-postmodernism and posthumanism. The story explores a new set of themes typical of critical posthumanism, derived from how technology has fundamentally altered human life and acknowledging information technology’s tremendous powers that penetrate our consciousness and bodies. Posthumanism focuses on the new modes of subjectivity offered up by technology, along with the novel ethical questions and dilemmas they entail. The resulting ontological consequences are a rewriting and recasting of what it means to be human. Thus, “Windows” offers a reflection on humanity faced with a new technological environment, where intimate relationships between humans and machines are a distinct and viable possibility.

The possibilities afforded by new technologies have always had a powerful physical and psychological influence on humankind, as well as on literature. In “Windows,” the classical Keretian questions about a directionless, purposeless subject morph into questions about the implications of technology’s penetration into all aspects of life, human-machine relations, the boundaries of the human, and the machine as human. While postmodernist poetics blur ontological boundaries to cross over into the world[s] next door, posthumanism blurs ethical boundaries and introduces a decentralized spatiality parallel to the topography of a physical reality.

In the world we live in today, reality has caught up with fiction. Virtual reality, alternative worlds, avatars, and simulations are all adjacent worlds that are available to everybody in an instant. The crossing of ontological boundaries is not just an imagined, literary, or theoretical trope; it is an act in which we engage on a daily basis.[[29]](#footnote-35) It therefore appears to me that the fictional world structure of “Windows,” where “the neighbor” next door crosses over into the room of the “user” is a clear allusion to McHale’s metaphor and its realization. It equally signifies that we are no longer engaging with postmodernist fiction, that the postmodernist concept of theoretical “possible worlds” is a thing of the past, that the “world next door” has come to life before our eye. As Braidotti formulates, “the posthumanist perspective rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further in exploring alternatives. Without sinking into the rhetoric the crisis of man. It works instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject.”[[30]](#footnote-36)

If Keret’s earlier postmodernist stories delivered an attack on the very core of essentialist subjectivity, his later post-postmodernist stories acknowledge that we are already posthuman, existing in (at least) two simultaneous realities, one physical and the other virtual, in and outside cyberspace, and question the Humanist construction of the exceptional, autonomous human being.

1. Ataria et al.,2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Keret 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Keret 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Keret, 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. McHale, 1986; Hutcheon, 1988; Jameson, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
6. Keret, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
8. Keret, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
9. McHale, 1986, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
10. McHale, 1986, 49–53 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
11. (McHale 1986, xxx; emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
12. Suvin (1979) defines the novum as an element in the narrative that makes the reality depicted in the text different than ours, enticing us to think about our world differently, estranging us from our usual assumptions, and inviting a critical understanding of the structures underlying the familiar world of daily experience. According to Suvin, the novum is “so central and significant that it determines the whole narrative logic—or at least the overriding narrative logic—regardless of any impurities that might be present” (1979, 70). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
13. Bruce Sterling in Scott Bukatman, 2005, 69. Bukatman sees the concept of terminal identity as an aspired disembodied subjectivity for whom the experience of cyberspace is as a real space. It is the fuel that runs the digital world. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
14. Gomel, 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
15. Gomel, 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
16. Bukatman, p. 118. Bukatman’s concept of “terminal identity” dictates that a techno-cultural society aspires toward a disembodied subjectivity for whom the experience of cyberspace is of a “real” space. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
17. Keret 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
18. Keret, 70–71 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
19. Barthes, 1968. I am borrowing Barthes’ term, which originally refers to literary texts. The term signifies textual devices which aim at producing *effects of reality* that emphasize and anchor the narration as a realistic text. Textual details with no direct functional objective make up a realistic plenitude and maintain an impression of reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
20. Bruce Sterling in Bukatman 2005, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
21. Keret, 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
22. See Eva Ilouz 1997, 2002, 2008, 2013 ELUCIDATE [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
23. (Liautaud 125) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
24. Keret, 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
25. (Wheaton 2015, p. 163). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
26. Keret, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
27. Keret 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
28. Keret, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
29. Keret was Brian McHale’s student at Tel Aviv university between the years -----. He took McHale’s courses on pm ---- [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
30. Braidotti 2013, 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)