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

A symptomatic reference-point for the literary trajectory Keret has made throughout his career probably is his short 2018 short story “Windows,” published in **A Glitch at the Edge of the Galaxy**, but first appeared two years earlier in the anthology, **The Posthuman** **Age: Between the Fantasy of Eternal Life and Existential Panic.**[[1]](#footnote-1) Mostly a theoretical compilation of articles revolving around the posthuman theme, the story appeared at the conclusion of this combined theoretical and descriptive compilation.

“Windows” describes the next stage in human experience achieved through an application that offers its users a bot, a virtual machine that imitates human behavior but proves much more powerful. The bot, a well-synched product, with immaculate human-machine interface consistently monitored and relentlessly updated, is available to users who order intimate virtual relationships. Taken as a given that new technological developments make possible the blurring of boundaries between the human and the non-human and that technology and humans are increasingly integrated, “Windows” deliberates a new epistemology in which technology plays a critical role in the constitution of contemporary human.

With a threefold conjecture I will read “Windows” as a self-reflexive construct hinting at Keret’s move from postmodernism to post-postmodernism.

The first conjecture is that the underpinning of the story is classic postmodernist themes and aesthetics.

Under the supervision and watchful eye of a caregiver in a brown suit, 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-2). The one-room apartment is referred to as “a great place to recover,”[[3]](#footnote-3) and it appears that it has been selected to avoid distractions that will delay the return of the protagonist, who agrees to be referred to as Micky, to health. Nonetheless, to provide Micky a sense of open space conducive to his recovery by tapping a few keys on his laptop, the man in the brown suit provides that two windows and an open door are projected onto the walls of his room to serve in lieu of actual windows.

Instead of a human touch and the “on-site doctor’s visit”,[[4]](#footnote-4) this form of treatment entails that patient care involves a tracking center and twenty-four hour telephonic support service. Nonetheless, Micky is completely ignorant: he does not know his name, where he is, with whom he is speaking, or who this caregiver actually works for.

Up until this point in the story, the reader stands on the familiar ground of the postmodern topos of disorientation that postmodernist scholars contend is the essence of postmodernism:[[5]](#footnote-5) attacking the idea of a notional center and human identity as essentially constructed like fiction, the loss of direction, the search for meaning, and 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. Upon inquiry, Mickey is told by the representative in the support center that she is part of an application upgrade currently available free of charge that was developed to provide users with “a touch of human presence”[[6]](#footnote-6) and personalized so that each system is equipped with a different human character; this is 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-7) She is Natasha. Initially, Natasha exists across the threshold of the projected door and is observable to Micky through the half-opened

door. Yet, when suddenly she passes through the wall, enters into Micky’s room, and subsequently enters into an emotional and physical relationship with him it produces an ontological crisis in the story; since each one of them exists in a different ontology:

“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-8)

The opening of a passage across the threshold of the projected door proves unidirectional. Only the woman can transverse it. When Micky tries to pass through it, he bumps into the wall. Mickey searches for answers to signify his reality he looks for evidence that he is not being deluded; he questions whether Natasha actually visits him in his room but the passage is one way only, as he soon realizes.

Here too we are found in the familiar territory of postmodern fiction of ontological skepticism, of the presence of a “world next door”. This postmodernist style-marker is defined by Brian McHale 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-9) When unable to signify reality, the literary text creates ontological instability in place of epistemological stability. Moreover, Micky’s room constitutes what McHale refers to as “the zone,”.[[10]](#footnote-10) The zone’s fluidity enables “a large number of *fragmentary possible worlds* [to] *coexist* in an impossible space,” and produces ongoing clashes between worlds characterized by different ontological conditions. [[11]](#footnote-11)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 dominat is replaced by multiple possible worlds

By now, principal terms that form the basis of the storyline’s realistic plentitude such as the accident, the memory loss, rehabilitation, patients, medical tracking and recovery through phsychological support via “our support center open twenty-four hours” FN are rendered less significant in the overall thematics. Simultaneously, the polysemic nature of certain terms gradually intensifies; for instance, the windows projected onto the wall, initially viewed solely in connection with the emotional support provided for the patient during his recovery now are perceived as a symptom of the algorithmic age that enables the technology. And, abruptly, the context frame of digital communication and cyberspace terms becomes audible and moves to the forefront: the laptop computer, Windows (as an operating system), Applications, system app, Updates, Users, Upgrades, free service, tracking (collection of user data and feedback), Features, expansion of existing service, user experience, access code, running time, feedback, additional options, service interruption, and disconnection.

The cyber-related terminology materializes to its full extent in the fifth of the story’s six sections; the only section of which Micky is not the focalizer, in which the point of view shifts to Natasha This change inverts the initial classification of user and virtual neighbor, and the reader’s initial perception of what constitutes actual reality and what constitutes virtual reality. Turns out that Natasha is the user, whereas Micky is the virtual neighbor, existing in cyberspace; indeed, the only onee who can move between the two ontologies in the man in the brown suit, who programmed the room behind the door in the first place.

Micky is not a user who has a “neighbor” projected onto the wall of his room thanks to an application. Nor is he a patient injured in an accident. He is a bot, a machine, existing only in cyberspace capable of performing man and portraying him perfectly in accordance with the user’s particular needs. Hence, he is in effect under the purview and the watchful eye of the application’s developers. Micky’s bewilderment and incomprehension about how a woman suddenly appears, passes through a wall to enter his room, and eventually disappears, explained to him as part of an update to a computer application, are suddenly understood in inversion. It is Micky who is available for Natasha’s selection, at her beck and call. Every time he experiences a change in habits with Natasha, it is a sign that she either added or removed features, or, in the end, chose to discontinue the service altogether.

As the novum in the story,[[12]](#footnote-12) serving to elicit cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization, by making a difference in the text the bot illuminates the user, the human for whom the bot was developed. It is Natasha, as the contemporary subject living in the multiverse that enables her to exist simultaneously in everyday reality and in virtual or augmented reality, constitutes the center of scrutiny. One of the many contemporary subjects who exist equally in cyberspace on computers and smartphones, in applications, and through smart systems that navigate their lives—in fact, all of us, living in the real world and simultaneously in the worlds on the screens in the palms of our hands, across from us on our knees, or on the table in front of us. Natasha desires to forge a lifelike relationship with a computer simulation for herself because for her virtual experience is preferable in every way to experience in tangible reality. She is of this age and time, which proves that “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-13); for Natasha, virtual reality and artificial intelligence in the form of a bot might be more human that the machine that is man.

Moving on to the next stage of my conjecture, in literary terms the meeting between the virtual neighbor and the user occurs in the zone, in “an ‘impossible typology,’”[[14]](#footnote-14) Yet, in practice, the zone offers a typology for the multimodal world made possible by contemporary communications technology. The the digital space constitutes a zone by definition, because it creates an interface between the real world and the virtual world in both of which the user lives. 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-15)

Thus, more than an inquiry into possible worlds ,“Windows” expresses the depth of cyberspace’s presence in people’s lives, and glimpses the new *terminal identity*, with the recognition and understanding that cyberspace’s existence 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 suggest 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-16)

Moreover, from a *terminal identity*’s perspective the foreground and background shift their placement with regards to the characters in the story; the marginal characters move to the center. Specifically, these are the man in the brown suit and the representatives at the call center, with whom the protagonists either meet in person or speak over the phone. They are a sign and testimony to the entrepreneurial digital world that advances, enhances, updates, and develops up until the point where machine-interaction experience is far more tangible and fulfilling than human interaction. The type of relations the representatives form with Mickey and Natasha embodies the relations between man and the anonymous computerized systems. Accordingly, these representatives are never ascribed a proper name: they remain remote and detached: the man in the brown suit, the tired guy, the woman with the runny nose. With a purported semblance of ‘care for the customer’, ‘support and assistance’ FN which the company is “always updating and improving the application”[[17]](#footnote-17) and comfortably connects to the user, obviously it is a deployment of oversight of the technology/bot and the users. The conversations between the representatives and Mickey and Natasha are in fact informational exchanges, with the aim of gathering as much information as possible:

“The man in the suit asked Natasha almost everything: how much did it bother her that the ‘neighbour’ 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-18)

Information gleaning is necessary in order to enhance the content Natasha consumes, its timing and its duration, and to match it to her behavioral patterns. The developers 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. It is not a conversation but an interrogation; the many interrogations are designed to better program the bot. This conversation accentuates that the bot fundamentally is 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 information that is constantly collected, the customer’s needs, and the user’s experience, everything in service of the goal of intensifying the actual *effet du réel* [[19]](#footnote-19) inside of the virtual one. Admittedly, the bot represents the achievement of the simulacra - the copy replaces the original and even surpasses it.

Interaction with the bot surpasses experiences in external reality; it seems natural in the 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.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

The technology is permanently temporary, and it reserves the right for itself to change the rules at any moment; “for now the service is free, but the company reserves the right to demand addional payment for human presence in the future” [[21]](#footnote-21)hence Mickey knows not who he is; the bot a-priori has no memory, he is only a sequence of programmed information. If memory is the basis and prerequisite for a coherent identity, for stability and for uniform meaning, it is something Micky will never have even if he performs perfectly as a human. Identity, history and space are meaningless, if not a disturbance, if the app is designed to provide an experience of a real social interaction in a disembodied human-machine interface designed to be a perfect fit for a specific user. This logic of identity as performance, as iterations, as creation and re-creation of the self spills out in principle from the bot to the user. In “Windows”, it is suggested that the user, imbued in technology and the digital sphere, might also be reduced to a performance of selfhood; as if technoculture buoys the nature of the self as constructed and constituted.FN FOUCAULT Without energy for true intimacy, Natasha deems unnecessary her full-fledged subjectivity when she orders non-human relationship services like one would order take-out food, outsourcing fundamental aspects of what is defined as human: interpersonal connections, intimacy and sex. As Eva Ilouz contends, technology catapults romantic capitalism, making romantic relationships available for consumption like any other merchandise,[[22]](#footnote-22) eliminating the arduous task and hazards of emotional vulnerability that may come with a price to pay in real-world human intersubjectivity.

The bot, Mickey, is an innovation on the edge; Susan Liautaud explains that innovations on the edge are those “that blur humanity’s boundaries. […] where machines and animals cross over into purely human realms – physical attributes, functions, and societal and personal interactions”.[[23]](#footnote-23) The bot defies binary thinking of human vs. machine, collapsing clear distinctions between the human and the non-human and altering 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. It came from the users. Many of them said that the presence of the ‘neighbors’ aroused an intense need in them for human interaction” (66).[[24]](#footnote-24) The depictions of cybersex in the story further accentuate the deep penetration of technology into human experience since cybersex, as a faculty of technoculture, belongs in proximity to the posthuman idea, because it takes place in a realm where the biological and the technological meet and it demands that humans become more than their human shapes in order to take part, because it is impossible to enter into cyberspace as flesh and blood.[[25]](#footnote-25) Are human beings distinguished absolutely from inhuman entities machines, to what extent do human-machine interactions and exchanges shape our ideas about human exceptionalism and unique essence. For Natasha, the binary is already blurred:

“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.” 70

Mickey is built for her needs and suited to her attributes. The bot satisfies a need for belonging and connection, but it testifies to the difficulties contemporary humans have maintaining connections in the physical world. The digital world influences the quality of interpersonal connections; Natasha’s reaction here the potential consequences and entanglements that arise when we connect with machines: while Natasha clearly has created a bond with the bot and while she allowed human non-human boundaries to crumble and even allocates herself ethical responsibility for her decisions, Natasha maintains the ’s relationship with the bot is akin to the relationship one has to mere merchandise that one can cut oneself off from—in every sense of the term. She cuts herself off from the service both physically and emotionally.

She also expresses doubt as to what she connected with “his mind was real”, she says.

The man in the suit comforts Natasha after her misgivings about ending the service: “you have nothing to worry about […] you can’t kill something that was never alive.[[26]](#footnote-26)

But if the bot, having been programmed to be human, is no less than one, then Natasha has mishandled him, as the bot is left disappointed and stupefied, the victim of unrequited love; at 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.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Hence, it is my third conjecture that “Windows” is to be perceived as the text that delineates/sketches out a paradigm shift in Keret’s writing; the 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, deriving from how technology fundamentally altered human life, acknowledging information technology’s tremendous powers that penetrate Man’s consciousness and body. The focus on the new modes of subjectivity technology provides, along with novel ethical questions and dilemmas is posthumanism’s mission. And, the resulting ontological consequences are a rewriting and recasting of what being human entails.

Thus, “Windows” offers a reflection on the human and a reflection of Man in the new technological environment, when intimate relationships involving humans and machines is an existing and viable possibility.

The adoption of new technologies has always had a powerful physical and mental influence on humankind, as well as on literature. In “Windows,” 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.

Postmodernist poetics blurs ontological boundaries and crosses over into the world[s] next door, posthumanism blurs ethical boundaries and introduces a decentralized spatiality parallel to the topography of aphysical reality is acknowledged. today, reality has caught up with fiction. Virtual reality, alternative worlds, avatars and simulations are all worlds next door that are available to everybody and coexist. The crossing of ontological boundaries is not just an imagined, literary or theoretical trope. It is already here.[[28]](#footnote-28) I propose that “Windows”s fictional world structure,” where “the user” finds “the neighbor” next door is a clear allusion to McHale’s metaphor and its realization. It equally signifies that we are no longer engaging with postmodernism fiction, That postmodernist fiction as theoretical “possible worlds’ is a thing of the past, we are no longer in postmodernism when ‘The world next door ‘ has come to life before our eyes: 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.” [[29]](#footnote-29)

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

1. Ataria et al.,2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Keret 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Keret 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Keret, 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McHale, 1986; Hutcheon, 1988; Jameson, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Keret 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Keret, 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. McHale, 1986, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. McHale, 1986, 49-53 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. (McHale 1986, xxx; emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Suvin (1979) contends that the novum is an element in the narrative that makes a difference in the text, enticing us to think about our world differently, estranging us from our usual assumptions and raising a critical understanding of the structures underlying the familiar world of daily experience. The estranging effect must be the result of the depiction of a world estranged from our familiar one. ust hence 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-12)
13. Bruce Sterling in Scott Bukatman, 2005, 69. Bukatman’s concept of terminal identity is the is an aspired disembodied subjectitivy for whom the experience of cyberspace is as a real space. It is the fuel that runs the digital world. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gomel, 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Gomel, 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Bukatman, p. 118. Bukatman’ concept of *terminal identity* is that the fuel that runs the techno-culutral society is an aspired disembodied subjectivity for whom the experience of cyberspace is of a “real”space. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Keret 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Keret, 70-71 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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-19)
20. Bruce Sterling in Bukatman 2005, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Keret, 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Eva Ilouz 1997, 2002, 2008, 2013 ELUCIDATE [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. (Liautaud 125) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Keret, 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. (Wheaton 2015, p. 163). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Keret 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Keret, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Keret was Brian McHale’s student at Tel Aviv university between the years -----. He took McHale’s courses on pm ---- [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Braidotti 2013, 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)