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“They are here. They are everywhere. They are us.” – Posthuman Encounters in Samanta Schweblin’s *Little Eyes* (2018)

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Abstract

In Samanta Schweblin’s novel Little Eyes (2018), the latest technological hype that stretches across the globe comes in the shape of cute, pet-like little robots with cameras for eyes. These so-called kentukis are remotely inhabited and controlled by their human users via an online connection which is established at random. As the novel’s blurb - “They are here. They are everywhere. They are us.” - suggests, a kentuki is at once a familiar and unfamiliar creature and users’ experiences range from comforting to unsettling. The novel revolves around the theme of stranger danger and reports several uncanny encounters between humans and not-quite-humans in places around the world, both from the perspective of the kentukis’ owners (so-called keepers) and the voyeurs (so-called dwellers). The representation of these posthuman interactions in the novel remains ambiguous: Even though the potential to challenge or even transgress the human/non-human binary is addressed, the novel follows a classic dystopian narrative, which posits that it is not the technology itself which is inherently good or bad, it is us humans.

Keywords: Human/non-human binary; Animal studies; Dystopia; Posthuman; Technology

In Samanta Schweblin’s novel *Little Eyes* (2018), the latest technological gadget is a combination of a toy, a surveillance tool, and a pet. These so-called kentukis, small, remote-controlled robots on wheels equipped with an internet connection, audio and video technology, come covered in fur, feathers or scales – depending on the model: a crow, a dragon, a mole, a bunny, a panda, or an owl. They cost 279 USD, run on 4G/LTE technology, and have a battery life of about a day or two. Kentukis sort the world’s population into two new categories: dwellers and keepers. Keepers are the people who buy a kentuki and allow it into their homes, and dwellers are the people who voyeuristically live ‘inside’ this device and steer it remotely, via their computers. The connection is established at random: Dwellers purchase a connection code (which costs the same as a kentuki), install the software, and are matched with a keeper once the latter switches on their kentuki. Both sides can end the connection: Dwellers can simply disconnect; Keepers can destroy the kentuki, or let its battery run out. The communication between dwellers and keepers is one-sided: Dwellers have audio-visual access to the keeper’s world, but the kentuki itself is mute, so they can see and hear the keeper, but cannot speak to them. Conversely, keepers can speak to their kentukis, but do not know who is listening to and watching them.

The premise of Schweblin’s novel is hardly futuristic. It merely builds on technologies that we are well familiar with: Surveillance tools, former tech fads such as electronic pets (e.g., Furby and Tamagotchi), user anonymity in internet forums and chats, randomised online encounters à la

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Chatroulette, video-call technology like Zoom, smart speakers like Siri or Alexa, etc. The only technical innovation that the novel invents is remote controlling via long distances – but even this is anything but unrealistic in the age of drone warfare. It is speculative fiction, rather than science fiction, and well within the limits of the readers’ imagination, as online communication is part of most people’s everyday lives. In an interview, Schweblin explained that this was partly the inspiration for the novel. Having left her home country Argentina to live in Berlin, her life is exemplary of the global interconnections she establishes in the novel. At the time of writing, she had “a lot of connection with other people through social networks and mobile devices” and “[travelled] a lot, practically jumping city to city, language to language and culture to culture.” (Schweblin in Alter, 2022). She noticed that:

I was reading contemporary literature, and I could feel how writers often avoided naming terms that by then absolutely belonged to our reality: “WhatsApp,” “Instagram,” even something as simple as the idea of a cellphone. [...] I wondered, and I still wonder, what happens to us with technology that we incorporate it so easily into our everyday, but then we reject it in the space of fiction? As a writer, another question arose from all this, the question that I think finally freed the idea of the kentukis: How can we talk about technology without getting tangled up in technical terms? How can we talk about the problems that we, as users, have with technology, without letting technology play a starring role? (in Alter, 2022)

Schweblin has been called “a master of the unsettling” (Rosefield, 2020, 51). *Little Eyes* is not her first foray into posthumanism and its sister disciplines, such as ecocriticism and critical animal studies. Her previous work, e.g., her short-story collection *Mouthful of Birds* (Oneworld, 2019) features a story about a young girl who will only eat live birds, and her debut novel *Fever Dream* (Riverhead Books, 2017) has been classified as a work of eco-horror. *Little Eyes* – simply called *Kentukis* in the Spanish original – pivots on the undefinable status of technology, that is, the kentuki, in the users’ lives. Even as one character in the novel dismisses the kentuki as just “a cell phone with legs” (Schweblin, 2019, 112), it is clear that these little technological devices take on many more functions. One reviewer asks: “Is it a pet? A spy? A co-parent, a money spinner, an alter ego?” (Rosefield, 2020, 51) – but more importantly, one could ask whether it is an animal, a machine, or a human being.

The ontological category of the kentuki remains ambiguous throughout the novel, and this is the basis of the text’s posthuman potential. Schweblin creates liminal beings and liminal spaces: the dwellers are human and non-human at the same time, and they inhabit two worlds – their own as well as that of their kentuki, even if they only experience the keepers’ lived realities remotely on their screens and have limited means of interaction. Kentukis could be considered the embodiment of Haraway’s concepts of both, the cyborg, and the companion species in that they blur both the human-machine boundary as well as the human-animal boundary. This status as a posthuman other turns the kentuki into a powerful metaphor. It can stand in for exploited and oppressed groups – whether human or non-human. It could also be interpreted, as Benjamin Loy argues, as “a parable for the persistent and enormous social and economic inequalities in the globalised world,” as well as “a metaphor of the history of the internet between initial libertarian aspirations and its current



commodification and regularisation”² (Loy, 2023, 228-229, my translation). In this sense, the novel uses the kentuki to explore what Rosi Braidotti has called “the posthuman predicament”, namely

the convergence, across the spectrum of cognitive capitalism, of posthumanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other. The former focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of ‘Man’ as the allegedly universal measure of all things, while the latter criticizes species hierarchy and human exceptionalism. (Braidotti, 2018, 31-32)

While much of the novel’s narrative foregrounds human interactions and cyberpsychology, that is the human relationship to technology and specifically to new forms of communication and forming relationships with other beings on the internet, *Little Eyes* also offers a profound criticism of anthropocentrism, both through its representation of the human-animal relation, and its representation of human-machine interaction.

Blurring Borders, Overcoming Species Boundaries?

Like the kentuki, Schweblin’s text is a hybrid being. In terms of genre, it can be placed somewhere along the spectrum between the short story and the novella. Each chapter is a vignette built around one protagonist who is either a dweller or a keeper. Underscoring the theme of our interconnected lives and the porous borders of online and offline, virtual and real, the novel takes place in over a dozen locations across the globe, the majority of which are in the Global North.³ Some vignettes are stand-alone chapters and could be read as short stories, but there are some recurring locations with a longer story arc: In Lima, a lonely elderly woman connects with a young woman in Erfurt; in Oaxaca, the jaded girlfriend of an artist buys a kentuki out of boredom; in Antigua, a young boy who has recently lost his mother uses the kentuki to escape into a new world, in Croatia, a young man uses kentukis in a semi-legal business scheme and becomes embroiled in human trafficking, and in Umbertide, a recently divorced father is talked into buying a kentuki as a companion for his son but ends up needing it more for himself.

Given the relative brevity of many chapters – somewhere between half a page and ten pages, the readers only catch glimpses of the protagonists’ lives and so while reading, in a way become kentukified: We become the voyeurs in the stories, watching the relationship between keepers and dwellers unfold from a third person limited perspective, for as long as Schweblin allows us to. Similar to the dwellers inside the kentukis, the reader is kept at a distance by the absence of an authorial narrator who might give more insight into the characters’ lives (Loy, 2023, 230). Being forced into this voyeuristic position might also invite readers to consider their own relationship to internet technologies and perhaps even their internet personalities, be it in the context of gaming or social media, as dwellers and keepers represent the two extremes of online personas: Internet users might, like dwellers, choose to passively watch the interactions of others, or like keepers, actively produce content for others to consume. The narrative set-up of the novel not only invites readers to consider whether they are more of a dweller or keeper, it also mirrors the spectrum of real-life users’ online activities and hence underlines the notion that the separation of fictional – or virtual - and real worlds becomes ever more untenable.

² “También sería perfectamente viable una interpretación del fenómeno de los kentukis como una parábola de las enormes desigualdades sociales y económicas persistentes en el mundo globalizado o como metáfora de la historia del internet entre las esperanzas libertarias iniciales y su comodificación y regularización actual.” (Loy 2023, 228-229)

³ The locations are: South Bend, US; Lima, Peru and Erfurt, Germany; Oaxaca, Mexico; Antigua, Guatemala and Honningsvåg, Norway; Umbertide, Italy; Barcelona, Spain; Zagreb, Croatia and Cartagena, Colombia as well as Surumu, Brazil; Beijing and Lyon; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Vancouver, Canada; Sierra Leone and Hong Kong.

As mentioned above, blurring borders and challenging binaries that are usually considered as fixed and natural are the novel's primary posthuman strategies to challenge anthropocentrism. The kentuki is a mix between human, animal, and machine: It looks like an animal, is made of robotic parts, but is controlled by a human. The combination of two non-human others immediately evokes Donna Haraway's 1985 concept of the cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, 2016, 5) which transgresses common categories of difference and dissolves binaries such as man/woman, nature/culture, or human/animal: "Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal a disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling" (Haraway, 2016, 11), and which Haraway explicitly thought up as a utopian ideal: "[M]y cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work." (Haraway, 2016, 14) Even though she already mentioned the human-animal boundary in "A Cyborg Manifesto", Haraway actually moved away from the cyborg as a symbol of ultimate relationality and dedicated much of her later work to animals – dogs, to be precise - and the concept of the companion species as "the most fundamental unit of existence" as Matthew Calarco describes it (Calarco, 2020, 49). Cyborgs and companion species are, as Haraway admits herself, "hardly polar opposites" (Haraway, 2003, 4) and cyborgs can be seen "as junior siblings in the much bigger, queer family of companion species [...]" (Haraway, 2003, 11):

Cyborgs and companion species each bring together the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways. (Haraway, 2003, 4)

Given that the kentuki takes the shape of an animal and is frequently treated like a pet – or more specifically, like a dog (even if it is a bunny or a mole kentuki), Haraway's companion species may be even more apt a description of the ontological complexities that the kentuki represents. The kentuki – at least at first glance - seems to weaken or erase the power of the usual categories of difference, such as race, class, and gender, and instead focusses on species as the determining factor in the relation between the dwellers and the keepers. Kentukis are, at the same time, zoomorphised humans, and anthropomorphised animals or machines. The fact that a human dwells inside a kentuki is reminiscent of the idea of a soul – but also that of a strange transmogrification: there is a person that lives in two bodies, one human, one human-animal/machine. The novel plays with the human-animal difference; the issues that arise in the text between keepers and dwellers are those usually (falsely) cited as examples of why we differ from animals: Animals allegedly have no language (rather: no human language) and neither do kentukis – they can only make animal noises. Animals allegedly have no awareness of their own death, and no freedom or agency because they are driven by instincts rather than ethical considerations or rational thought. Similarly, kentukis and their dwellers often do not see their own death coming because of the limited function of the camera – or because bags or buckets are placed over them before they die; they may be remote-controlled but can easily be trapped, imprisoned, and killed, so their agency is severely limited, and they do indeed have a survival instinct in that they must return to their chargers if they do not want to die an untimely death. Granted, in this scenario the survival instinct might only be the dweller's selfish interest in keeping his latest toy alive, because after all, they are expensive. Nevertheless, the comparison of a kentuki to a pet is convincingly constructed in the novel. The technical elements of the device are hardly mentioned, except when the battery life of the kentuki is used as a tool for the narrative pace in some stories. Instead, there are numerous references to kentukis being treated



or acting like dogs, circling their owners' legs, following them to the bathroom, being walked on a leash, being buried in the backyard next to actual pets, or simply staring uncomfortably at their owners: "Please stop looking at me like that," said Enzo. "If you don't mind, stop chasing me around the house like a dog." (Schweblin, 2019, 30). Some owners buy dog beds and dog toys for their kentukis – even if the kentuki is a rabbit (Schweblin, 2019, 39; 41). Schweblin herself has highlighted the parallel between kentukis and pets: "Pets watch how we live, they know we're real, and we like to be looked at and adored. But it also soothes us to know that an animal looks but doesn't talk, adores but doesn't offer an opinion" (Alter, 2020).

The kentuki is also symbolic of another posthuman predicament, namely the fact that capitalism is notoriously anti-speciesist in that it allows for animals and technology to be commodified indiscriminately. Anyone with 279 USD to spare can purchase a kentuki. Post-anthropocentric exploitation, as Rosi Braidotti highlights, is a marker of advanced capitalism (2013, 71): "[T]he opportunistic political economy of bio-genetic capitalism induces, if not the actual erasure, at least the blurring of the distinction between the human and other species when it comes to profiting from them." (Braidotti, 2018, 63). Even though the name of the kentuki can be interpreted as a reference to the American fast-food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken, with restaurants across the globe and so, implicitly, as an allusion to the issues of global capitalism and consumerism, the novel makes no mention of the tech company that produces the kentukis, their ethics of production, or their marketing. In an interview, Schweblin explained that her main interest lay elsewhere:

For decades, we have been concerned with the idea of technological control in the hands of large companies or states themselves. It was already there, even in *1984* by George Orwell, and any apocalyptic idea regarding the control that can be inflicted at a massive level on citizens seems very genuine to me. But I think we sometimes neglect the power and harm that we, ourselves, as naive and poorly-educated users of technology, inflict on others. It is naive and clumsy harm, yet massive. (in Ramakrishnan).

Hence, the novel establishes an analogy between people who unthinkingly and – perhaps – irresponsibly purchase a pet and those who, equally naively, acquire the latest technology without having considered the consequences of allowing this new 'being' into their lives.

But the most convincing, if also the most uncomfortable parallel between the kentuki and domesticated animals – the ones we keep and the ones with eat – is that we can kill them or, in some cases, will kill them. In fact, in the majority of the over one dozen stories in the novel, the kentuki dies a violent death – whether by its own volition or at the hands of its owner. The novel features many chilling scenes of entrapment, of torture, and of murder, and some descriptions of the kentuki's death are just too uncannily close to how animals might react if confronted with imminent death to be coincidental. The very first story ends with a panda bear kentuki being trapped by its keeper, a teenage girl, so that it is unable to return to its charger:

The bear squealed and she cried out – she didn't know it could make noise. [...] Someone had told her that if you couldn't break the thing, the only way to turn it off was to wait for its battery to run out. So she hugged her pillow and sat on her bed to wait. Trapped under the bucket, the bear went on squealing for hours, banging against the plastic like an overgrown hornet, until, near dawn, the room was left in complete silence. (Schweblin, 2019, 8)

In another story, a bunny kentuki is being pushed under water by its owner until it drowns (227), similar to how unwanted kittens might be killed. And in the most obvious instance where the kentuki's death bears similarities to how animals are killed, a crow kentuki is put on a truck that delivers chicks to the slaughterhouse:

He was floating among a mass of chicks that were stretching their necks and gasping for air. They stepped on and pecked at each other, screeched from asphyxiation and fear, pecked at him as well. [...] The chicks shrieked, some of their beaks had been torn off and the wounds were open and oozing. (Schweblin, 2019, 104)

Here, the novel's criticism of how humans treat animals becomes particularly apparent. After witnessing the above scene from the safety of his home, the dweller cannot bear it any longer and cuts the connection. This dweller, Grigor, is a young Croatian man who deals with kentukis on the black market. He tailors kentuki experiences to his customers' wishes, establishing selected rather than random connections between dwellers and keepers. Although he is shaken by the experience, he resumes business as usual shortly after: "After that, Grigor took down the classified ad for that kentuki and reinstalled the tablet's operating system. He could use it for a different connection." (Schweblin, 2019, 104)

The graphic descriptions of the deaths of kentukis obviously pose the most fundamental moral questions about the not-quite-human other, such as whether they have rights, and if so, whether they should be given what is commonly called human rights, e.g., the right to be free from harm, or, quite simply, the right to be free.⁴ The novel's representations of these violent encounters between humans and their kentukis at times seem to negate this question and to reinforce human-non-human boundaries, rather than challenging them. One kentuki owner, Alina, muses on the functions of her kentuki and decides that she is not interested in a human – let alone a posthuman – connection:

She understood now: it was a trap. Connecting with that other user, finding out who this other person was, also meant saying a lot about oneself. In the long run, the kentuki would always end up knowing more about her than she knew about it, that was true: but she was its keeper, and she wouldn't allow the crow to be anything more than a pet. At the end of the day, a pet was all she needed. (Schweblin, 2019, 24)

This quote already hints at the fact that the idea of the kentuki as a hybrid of human and non-human other is more fruitful in theory than in practice in the novel. As the examples cited so far show, many keepers have little to no ethical consideration for their kentukis, nor do they philosophise about their ontological category, or whether or not the kentuki has rights, or even feelings. Kentukis simply serve as compensation for whatever pedestrian needs, desires, or fears the keeper or dweller has: jealousy, greed, dealing with grief or loneliness, longing for love or recognition. In each of the recurring characters' stories, the characters' relationship to their kentukis mirror their relationships – or rather, the lack of relationships - to other humans. The elderly dweller in Lima, Emilia, misses her son, who works in Hong-Kong, and forges a new mother-daughter relationship with her keeper, Eva. Marvin, the motherless young boy in Antigua, uses his second life as a dragon kentuki in Norway to look for the validation that he does not get from his authoritarian father in real life. Enzo, the Italian divorcee who buys the kentuki at the behest of his ex-wife and her son's

⁴ While the issue of kentuki rights is addressed in one story arc, that of the young Antiguan boy whose kentuki is freed from its indoor prison in Norway by a group of young hackers and is then able to roam around freely, the hackers do not offer their services purely out of the goodness of their hearts but because they can charge the dwellers for their services.



psychologist, comes to consider the mole as a co-parent that makes up for the lack of actual human connection he has in his life. Grigor, the Croatian kentuki trafficker, realises right at the beginning that the idea of living vicariously through someone else is what drives most dwellers:

There were people willing to shell out a fortune so they could spend a few hours a day living in poverty, and there were people who paid to be tourists without leaving their houses: to travel through India without a single day of diarrhoea, or to witness the arctic winter barefoot and in pajamas. (Schweblin, 2019, 60)⁵

In an insidious twist at the end of Grigor's story arc, he finds out that his own trafficking activities are mirrored in the real world, when he discovers a father's plot to sell his own daughter through the camera of one of his kentukis. And in the story with which the novel closes, Alina, the alienated girlfriend of the artist in Oaxaca, projects her mistrust of her partner onto her kentuki: She suspects an old lecherous man to be the dweller and begins to torture her crow kentuki in various ways: she forces it to watch porn, burns a swastika into its forehead, and slices off its wing – only to find out in the end that the dweller is a young boy of seven, who is severely disturbed by her actions. Alina's suspicions about her partner, however, become true: He hacks into her kentuki, tapes both her mistreatment of it and the boy's reactions, and displays the videos as art in an exhibition, hence confirming Alina's pessimistic view of human nature. The tirade about the meaning of the kentukis she delivers towards the end of the novel encapsulates the idea that kentukis are only human after all:

What was the whole stupid idea of the kentuki about? What were all those people doing rolling around on other people's floors, watching how the other half of humanity brushed their teeth? Why didn't anyone collude with kentukis to hatch truly brutal plots? [...] Why were the stories about kentukis so small, so minutely intimate, stingy, and predictable? So desperately human and quotidian. (Schweblin, 2019, 204)

The Posthuman Fallacy

In the end, *Little Eyes* offers a devastating yet intriguing commentary on human (ab)uses of technology at an interpersonal level, rather than a posthuman vision of a world in which technology is used to challenge anthropocentrism. Even though kentukis show how easily ontological categories become blurred and that the boundaries between the virtual and real world are increasingly non-existent, they are not used to decentre the human. Instead, the range of kentuki behaviour simply reflects that of humans. There is kentuki porn, there are kentuki paedophiles, but there are also kentukis who help save lives. At its heart, the novel is a cautionary tale: Using the themes of power, stranger danger, and anonymity, the novel replicates everyday decisions about the use of (internet) technology and the possible consequences of those decisions in the liminal space created by the kentuki experience. While being a keeper suggest an element of control, one review of the novel contests this idea by pointing out the panopticon-esque, “obverse power of their [the dwellers'] impenetrability – to see without being seen, to know without being known” (Allan, 2016). Alina also wonders at one point: “If being anonymous online was the maximum freedom for any user [...] how would it feel then, to be an anonymous actor in someone else's life?” (Schweblin, 2019, 114). Grigor, the character who has made the kentukis his (semi-legal) profession, even predicts that while “weighing the pros and cons of being a keeper or a dweller never left either side a clear winner”, in

⁵ Grigor's customers are somewhat reminiscent of the people who, in HBO's *Westworld* (2016-2022), pay a fortune to live out their fantasies in a Western-themed amusement park inhabited by androids.

his business, “sooner or later, the balance would tip toward the connection codes” (100), meaning more people will want to be dwellers. The question that drives the novel and provides its suspense is who this stranger might be, and how they might (ab)use the powers given to them through the means of technology. In this sense, the novel’s posthuman criticism also lies in its mockery of the idea of human exceptionalism: Human behaviour, *Little Eyes* seems to suggest, is entirely predictable, or, as Jenny Holzer’s famous artwork would have it: “Abuse of power comes as no surprise”. Another reviewer put it this way: “Kentukis offer humans new ways of mistreating and being mistreated” but it “doesn’t suggest that these ways are necessarily worse than the old ones.” (Rosefield, 2020, 51). Schweblin echoes this view: “Technology is neutral. It is neither good nor bad, nor interesting in itself. The interesting thing is how it is used, the interesting thing is the people behind it, and the limits to which they can reach or let go” (in Ramakrishnan, 2020). In this sense, *Little Eyes*’ criticism of the relationships between humans and animals as well as between humans and technology is ultimately an explanation of why posthumanism’s project of moving beyond anthropocentrism cannot be implemented. Nevertheless, as Rosi Braidotti has pointed out, it is also a fallacy to think that the posthuman automatically resolves all binaries of identity and conflicts of power:

The ‘posthuman’ is normatively neutral and it does not automatically point to the end of the species, let alone to post-power/gender/class/race/species relations between members of the species. As a figuration, the posthuman is both situated and partial – it does not define the new human condition, but offers a spectrum through which we can capture the complexity of ongoing processes of subject-formation. (Braidotti, 2018, 36)

Schweblin’s novel offers us a glimpse of what these processes might look like in an increasingly interrelated and technologized world.

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