逃離獨眼巨人的凝視：談阿里·史密斯〈後生〉中的人類主體能動性

施恩惠*、陳建龍**

世新大學

摘要

媒體和傳播技術的普及縮短了人際間的距離，也使人們更容易獲取世界各地的最新消息。人們透過螢幕，如電視螢幕、電腦螢幕，甚至手機螢幕上的資訊來認識與感知世界。螢幕作為人類與技術之間的媒介，連結了人與世界，但也同時限制了人們的世界觀於狹隘有限之中。螢幕掌控人們感知和理解世界的方式，使他們逐漸屈服於螢幕背後未知力量所創造的虛構現實中。在這些情況下，喚醒人們重新評估人類在面對媒體技術時的主體能動性成為必要的課題。收錄於阿里·史密斯（Ali Smith）的小說集《公共圖書館和其他故事》(2015)中的短篇小說〈後生〉（"After Life"），描述了數位技術興起前後個人世界觀逐漸縮小和人際關係日益疏遠的過程。通過本篇短篇故事，史密斯描繪了技術與人類之間無法逃脫的共生關係，強調了生活在充滿技術的世界中，人們需要重新找回其主體能動性的迫切性。本文將從弗雷德里克·基特勒（Friedrich Kittler）所提出的「所謂人類」的觀點出發，分析史密斯的短篇小說〈後生〉中探討技術對人類的影響以及兩者之間的相互形成與共生的關係，以及故事中的主人翁（杰拉德）和她的女兒（克洛伊）如何在技術和人類相互形成的過程中重新找回他們的主體能動性。

關鍵詞：媒體（介）技術、弗雷德里克·基特勒、所謂人類、人類主體能動性、獨眼巨人

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* 世新大學英語暨傳播應用學系副教授

** 世新大學英語暨傳播應用學系副教授

Fleeing from the Cyclops's Eye: Exploring Human Agency in the Digital Epoch in Ali Smith's "After Life"

En-Hui Shih[*], Alvin Dahn[**]

Shih Hsin University

Abstract

The widespread use of media and communication technologies shortens the distance between people and gives people more access to the latest news worldwide. People perceive the world through screens, such as TV screens, computer screens, or even the screens of our smartphones. Screens, as a communication medium between humans and technology, allow people to connect with the world, but meanwhile, they also confine people to a limited worldview. Screens manipulate how people perceive and comprehend the world, entrapping them in the fabricated realities invented by the unknown power lurking behind the screens. People increasingly surrender their agency to technology, becoming subservient to its influence. Given these circumstances, the role of human agency in the face of media technologies should be reevaluated. Ali Smith's short story "After Life," collected in her book *Public Libraries and Other Stories* (2015), describes the gradual narrowing of the individual's worldview and the increasing estrangement of our interpersonal connections before and after the rise of digital technologies. Through the story, Smith envisions the inescapable symbiotic relationship between technologies and humans, emphasizing the pressing need to address questions concerning human agency in a technologically saturated world. This paper will analyze Smith's short story, "After Life," in terms of Friedrich Kittler's idea of the "so-called human" to explore the impact of technology on human beings and the reciprocal formation of the two parties, and how human beings, in the case of the story's protagonist (Gerard) and her daughter (Chloe), reclaim their

[*] Associate Professor of Department of English and Applied Communication, Shih Hsin University
[**] Associate Professor of Department of English and Applied Communication, Shih Hsin University

agency when technology and humans are evolved reciprocally.

1.Introduction

With a switch on the computer, a few clicks through the mouse, and a few scrolls, up and down, on some websites, we browse and sojourn in the boundless virtual world. This is what we do daily. The only interface between the world and us is a screen. Through the screen, we appear to know everything and rarely question it. Our world is profoundly influenced by information disseminated through digital platforms such as online news channels, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Line, among others. In today's digital age, the screen captivates us, influencing our way of seeing and understanding the world by conditioning us with curated information feeds. Just as the Cyclops ensnares its victims with its singular, all-seeing eye, our screens isolate us within tailored realities, arresting our attention and shaping our perceptions in a confined echo chamber. This brilliant metaphor of the Cyclops is used by Ali Smith in her short story "After Life" in her *Public Libraries and Other Stories* (2015) to highlight the influence of media technologies on our lives in the contemporary world.

The story unfolds with the newspaper heading "THE LOCAL MAN DIES," which is the first and the most outright statement in this short story "After Life." Twice is this statement made, and the protagonist, James Gerard, is accordingly announced dead at the end of the 1980s and the end of the 2000s, respectively. During the twenty years, the world and human life have radically changed with the emergence of media technologies and devices such as the Internet, iPod, iPhone, Facebook, and the like. Within a world saturated with media, our imperative pursuits are going after how one defines oneself, what one aspires to the future via the assistance of new technologies, and how interpersonal communications are facilitated as the world has evolved from the analog era to the digital one.

Gerard's symbolic death prompts readers to question the truthfulness of information conveyed by media and to reflect on the fundamental aspects of human existence, i.e. where do we stand in the digital ear? "After Life" reveals Smith's worries about the crises people struggle with in the digital era. The story is driven by two mistaken newspaper reports on James Gerard's death and the unsuccessful interpersonal communication in the Gerard family due to their full engagement in media technologies. It is only Gerard's youngest daughter, Chloe, the key figure of the short story and the only character born in the digital age (as a digital native), who does

not entirely immerse herself in the digital world like her mother (Ellie) and siblings (Nathan and Emily). Instead, she is passionate about early-nineteenth-century documentaries ignored by most film buffs. Chloe creates an imaginary friend, "Mitchel," who demarcates the distinction between the past (analog) and the present (digital). Chloe's effective communication with Mitchel and her father symbolizes her keen curiosity about the implicit impact of the past on the future and her identity in the current world. Such a character calls for an analysis and related understanding in terms of the concept of the "So-called Man," proposed by Friedrich A. Kittler in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*.

Kittler's concept of the "so-called man" explains that the concept of "man" is constructed and mediated through technological and discursive practices, evolving alongside historical and technological developments. Kittler's insight, on the one hand, challenges the traditional humanist understanding of human subjectivity and the role of technology in shaping human experience; on the other hand, it implicitly highlights the importance of human involvement in the dynamic and reciprocal formation of humans and technology. The concept of the "so-called man "prompts us to explore our identity and possible autonomy in a world saturated with media technologies. Building on Kittler's concept, this paper examines how humans can attain possible agency in a technologically determined media environment, using Chloe as an example. Chloe's ability to navigate and utilize media technologies to help her father prove his existence and to shape her own view of the world underscores her potential agency amidst the deterministic power of media technologies, highlighting the dynamic relationship between humans and their mediated environments.

2. Recontextualizing the Concept of "Man," Invocation of the "So- Called Man": An Insight from Kittler

In our contemporary technology-driven society, the traditional humanist idea of the human subject as a pre-given and autonomous being faces renewed scrutiny. The interwoven relationship between technologies, media, communication, and "man" has become increasingly intricate. Such intricacy refutes the notion of technology as a set of neutral tools simply to be used by human beings. The intricate interplay highlights the reciprocity between human agency and our tech-ubiquitous environment. To pinpoint the coordinates of where the human subject stands in the realm of modern technologies, in his essay on Kittler's philosophy, Neils Werber provides a

fresh perspective on the concept of the human subject by delving into the original meaning of the term "subject." For Werber, a subject refers to "something 'subjected'" to description, discussion, or manipulation (48). Simply put, the subject's meaning and existence are affirmed and enriched through interactions within a linguistic system, that is, communication, which relies on the communicative exchanges with others.

Accordingly, the human subject is neither given nor self-contained; it requires the presence of "discourse networks," as Kittler argues, to construct and uphold its legitimacy in the eyes of others. Kittler states that "discourse networks" influence how we perceive the world and guide how we think. He explains that discourse networks are the complicated systems which "designate the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data" (*Discourse Networks 1800/1900* 369; emphasis added). Discourse networks encompass the operation of the verbal system (discourse) that shapes our world and the non-verbal system of all the intertwined and interactive objects that fashion the way the world looks.

Discourse networks consist of tech-based information, related communications, and their facilitating devices and institutions. While our networks have undergone a paradigm shift in the digital era, corresponding to the (r)evolution of media technologies in modern times, the human beings immersed in the discourse networks are accordingly subject to their shift, evolution, revolution, and all entailed influences. The changes in media technologies will transform human expression, reshaping the nature of literature, its creation process, and even the individual's relationship with society and their actions. Kittler's argument of "discourse networks" challenges the ingrained notion of the human subject as an autonomous pre-existing entity endowed with self- control and self-determination. He states instead that the human subject is shaped incessantly along with the transformation of technological and media conditions of discourse networks in different eras. He decentralizes and recontextualizes the human subject within the framework of media and communication technologies. Although Kittler's technological determinism asserts that human thoughts and actions are shaped by interactions with media and communication technologies, he does not entirely deny human agency. Rather, his perspective highlights the complex relationship between humans and machines in the creation of meaning and the world, prompting us to recognize the possible agency of the individual

in today's media-saturated environment.

The universal concept of "man" as a rational, autonomous individual has become less absolute in the mid-twentieth century. Jacques Derrida's notion of difference, decentering the stability of language and the fixation of human identity and Michel Foucault's proposition of man as the historical discursive construct and power struggles have shattered the fixation of identity and the definition of man. After the postmodern turn, a camp of scholars has turned to examining how the human subject or identity is formed under the influence of its interactions with objects, devices, and the environment. Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich A. Kittler, Bernard Stiegler, and Catherine Malabou, just to name a few, are leading scholars who analyze the significant role of technologies in constructing the human subject. Among these scholars, Kittler is the one who proposes a radical post-humanistic concept, "the so-called Man," to challenge the long-held idea of a unified and self-contained human subject and to highlight the pivotal influence of the evolution of technologies on humans.

Contrary to McLuhan's famous notion of "media as an extension of man," Kittler does not view technologies simply as crafted and manipulated tools meant to empower humans. On the contrary, he claims that technologies change and shape human perceptions, cognitions, and behaviors: "Media determine our situation, which– despite or because of it–deserves a description," states Kittler in his landmark book, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (xxxix, emphasis added). Kittler's statement highlights that "humanness" is a "construction" or even an "effect of technology" instead of the given "agentic forces" (Parikka and Feigelfeld 349; Gane 38). The concept resonates with his statement of "discourse networks." Both concepts emphasize the significance of technologies, particularly media technologies, in shaping the human subject.

The "so-called man" is a mere surface effect generated by interactions between technologies and humans. And so is human agency. Kittler, for example, argues that our memory is not confined to our minds—our core source of self-awareness—but rather preserved externally in media technologies like writing, paper, computers, and software. These technologies enable us to preserve memories and maintain the illusion of a self-contained identity:

> What remains of people is what media can store and communicate. What counts are not the messages or the content with which they equip so-called souls for the duration of a technological era, but rather... their circuits1, the very schematism of perceptibility. (xl-xli)

Kittler's radical post-human thought is often criticized as "techno determinist" because of his "exorcising of the spirit of the human from the humanities" (Parikka and Feigelfeld 349, 350). However, his insight tells us that the evolution of technology is the main "driving force" that forms and controls human social and cultural development (Gane 38). We do not create technology; rather, we evolve alongside it. Kittler's idea focuses on the reciprocal interactions between human and nonhuman beings. His vision liberates technology from the total control of humans and its role as a mere tool. Even though Kittler dismisses the concept of humans and questions the autonomy of individuals and human agency as given in the framework of technologies, humans are not totally subservient to the operations of technologies. In fact, Kittler's notion of "the so-called man" highlights that human agency is mediated through technology and media. Human agency is present in human creativity, modes of communication, and memory that are mediated and constituted through human interactions with these technologies. Humans and machines (technologies) are mutually shaped by each other. "Discourse networks" require human participation to function and develop effectively, as it is humans who render these networks operable. The reciprocal human-machine relationship offers humans additional avenues to engage with a world shaped by the coevolution of human and nonhuman influences.

3. "The Local Man Dies": Gerard's Life and Death

"After Life" is a flashback story narrated by the protagonist, James Gerard, about his mistaken announcement of death in the news. The mistaken news of Gerard's death is an event that reflects how truth is constructed and represented differently in the analog and digital ages. In addition, it implies the dissolution of the idea of the human subject in the contemporary digital age. The story spans the 1900s, the 1990s, and the 2010s and explores the impact of the evolution of media technologies on human life. The three periods address the emergence of film, television, and the Internet, respectively, and the transition from the analog to the digital age. At the beginning of the story, the title of the Evening News report, "LOCAL MAN DIES," announced the death of Gerard for the first time when Gerard was on holiday in Spain. The erroneous report was quickly

rectified once Gerard's neighbors encountered him in his hometown. The proof of Gerard's survival (actually, he was not dead) was substantiated by the testimony of his neighbors. Their testimony forced the newspaper to declare an official "apology" for delivering this inaccurate news ("After Life" 135). The neighbors' heartfelt greetings to Gerard and his warm feedback to them show a strong connection and communication among people. As for his family, Gerard's wife and two kids, Emily and Nathan, welcomed him home with sincere kisses. They enjoyed watching the most popular television program, "Top of the Pops," together, and Ellie sang the song of the coming in of the Millennium on the sofa ("After Life"136). It was a sweet, happy family reunion scene during the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, before the emergence of the Internet and the widespread use of communication technologies and devices such as the iPhone, iPod, and Facebook. Gerard's nostalgia for the old days (the analog era) in his narrative implies his maladaptation to, and negligence of, the coming new age (the digital era). He described himself as "I am an old-fashioned kind of man at the end of the day" ("After Life" 135), which corresponds to the image of "LOCAL MAN DIES." He is a "local" living in the local area, watching local TV programs, and reading local newspapers. The statement suggests his resistance to change and failure to comprehend and fit into the new era. The coming of the digital age ironically makes him more "local" and secluded, and even sentences him to "death" for the second time.

A decade later, Gerard is disturbed by the same false news report on his death again: "LOCAL MAN DIES." Unlike the first time, Gerard has no evidence to prove his identity and survival, and his colleagues and family do not care about his awkward situation. In his office, Gerard's colleague, Claudine, shows no concern for Gerard, staring at the computer screen with "her face pale in the light off her screen" ("After Life" 139). At home, his wife, Ellie, "doesn't take her eye off the screen" and only cares about the "koalas" survival crisis in Australia. Her elder daughter is a TV addict, never turning her eyes away from the TV screen. His son, Nathan, always shuts himself in his room watching Euro porn. His younger daughter, Chloe, is the only kid willing to communicate with him but still shows no sincere care about his death. The people around Gerard live on media information, often neglecting the actual events occurring in their surroundings. Unlike his contemporaries, Gerard is relatively far from the control of the media and has no access to media technologies to deal with his situation. He has to borrow Chloe's MacBook to write an email to the newspaper editor to verify his survival or post a message on the news blog to respond to others'

nonsensical comments on his death. In these cases, he even feels regretful to "sen[d] anything to anyone. It is somehow a defeat to have engaged at all" ("After Life" 142). Gerard's unwillingness to engage himself in the use of the media and people's indifferent attitude towards his death make Gerard an outsider. He resembles an isolated island within the society in which he resides. Therefore, the report on Gerard's death is a symbolic gesture to suggest his social death in the digital era. Having little connection with media technologies makes him too "local" to connect with the world and cyberspace, which is at odds with the ethos of the digital age— "to connect, to innovate, and to program, without asking permission" (Lupfer).

People's apathy to Gerard's death and Gerard's unfamiliarity with media technologies hinder Gerard from proving his survival. However, the main reason for Gerard's death stems from the media's fabrication of Gerard's death, which renders Gerard an empty name and deprives him of his autonomy in cyberspace. In reality, he is silenced and accordingly unable to justify who he is. Compared with the first false report of Gerard's death a decade ago, the current news provides a more intricate account of his death. Gerard is taken aback by these fabricated details: "The report says I was hit in my Mazda by a truck at a road junction…and that its [truck's] driver suffered minor injuries" ("After Life" 136). Annoyed by the disinformation, Gerard is eager to point out to the police the fake information that contradicts his survival, but the police cannot help him even though "they've no record of me [Gerard] being dead anyway" ("After Life" 136).

The lack of authority for state power, including the police, to control the information published by the press represents the freedom of speech inherent in the media, commonly known as the "fourth estate." The mediascape becomes the locus of power, for "[p]ower is there, where information is generated, in a globally diffused jigsaw puzzle…" (Flusser 115). Regardless of the accuracy of the information provided, people have more freedom to express themselves and comment on any issue in the digital realm. They tend to assume less responsibility for their words on the Internet than on traditional press products like hard-copy newspapers. For example, people discuss and share their personal sentiments about Gerard's death and evaluate the authenticity of it on various social media platforms ("After Life" 141). These opinions provide little substantial help to prove Gerard's survival. Gerard's death is nothing more than idle gossip

at people's leisure. Disappointedly, he calls the newspaper office to rectify the news but is prohibited from meeting any editorial staff in person. He is instructed to communicate with them solely "online" ("After Life" 136). Unfortunately, his request received no response; the online news was still uncorrected the following day. The failure to contact the newspaper staff online urges Gerard to go to the newspaper office in person. However, he can only speak to the unknown editorial staff via a "security speaker system" under the surveillance of "A CCTV black bubble in the ceiling of their foyer" ("After Life" 138). What frustrates Gerard most is that the newspaper office requires him to find his "self's lawyers present" as a condition to start a "verification meeting" with their "newsgroup's lawyers" ("After Life" 139).

The invalid communication between Gerard and the newspaper office exposes the illusion of people's autonomy in cyberspace. Actually, individual power is relatively feeble when confronted by the media industry or technologies, for the idea of "local" is of space. When Werner Klippert speaks about the VHF radio system and the relationship between media technologies and human interactions, he maintains, "the mise-en-scene, invisible yet localizable, cannot be dismantled and replaced by a new one in front of the listener as easily as in the case of a monophonic play (qtd. in Kittler, *Gramophone* 40).[18] This takes us back to the opening scene of the story where Gerard is the audience of media and readership of the newspaper "invisible yet localizable" ("Local Man Died"). Gerard's subsequent attempts on SNS to prove that he is alive only end up being a testament that his announcement of death by the media "cannot be dismantled and replaced by a new one" in front of the media-recipient public. Kittler points out that digital media have transformed how we communicate, think, understand, and perceive the world. He assumes that the emergence of digital technologies results in the end of discrete media, for all information is converted into binary data, 0 and 1, that is, the digital form. Digitalization is the process of "remediation" (Gane 32). It transforms every information and channel into "a number," which is "quantity without image, sound, or voice;" "any medium can be translated into any other" (*Gramophone* 1-2). This blurring of boundaries between different types of media leads to the standardization of diverse forms of communication and information into a digital format, often in the form of data or programming, creating a universal singular medium. To facilitate the storage,

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[18] The English translation here is taken intact from Kittler (1999 118), translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wuts.

transmission, and communication of information, digital media operate unilaterally, leading to an insurmountable and dictatorial "monophonic play." Information transmitted or communicated in digital format tends to be more enclosed than that of analog media. Like Gerard, his voice goes unheard in cyberspace despite his attempts to communicate directly with others online. The truth of his survival cannot be verified. His presence is actually absent. He becomes an empty name devoid of agency in the media-dominated society. Symbolically, he is dead within the space of the digital age.

3.1. From Death to Life: Life Regained of Gerard

The failure to justify his survival and the fact of people's indifference to the fake news of his death lead Gerard to reexamine the difference between the past and the present and the influence of the media on this world. Gerard is ill-fitted to a world where media technologies are fast developing. His wife Ellie is so cheerful toward such a world and says, "Over the last ten years, new communication technology has brought people so much closer together" ("After Life" 147). Although his two children, Emily and Nathan, do not offer a comment or conclusion like this, their behavior of, if not addiction to, internalizing media as part of their lives speaks for their mother's viewpoints and values. In contrast, Gerard is nothing like his family. He does not belong in the tech world or the family.

The breach between Gerard and his family (except Chloe) is his fixation upon the "difference between then and now" ("After Life" 147). Gerard is constantly puzzled by this. While Gerard's family's fixation with media is space-based (his two children are glued to media and in their rooms; his wife feels the distance brought closer by technology), Gerard's fixation is time-based. This brings Gerard closer to Kittler's key contribution to the notion of "time-axis manipulation." He is the pre-eminent thinker of time-based media and what it means to edit the flow of time with technical means (Peters 6). In other words, Gerard is trapped in a very Kittlerian question: What is the difference between then and now? If the Kittlerian view of media is that media is manipulative by nature, Gerard is a victim of such manipulation. Gerard is a victim because, through such manipulation, he becomes ill-fit for his mini-society. People around Gerard, including his family (except Chloe), are also manipulated but not victimized. They are being manipulated as a group, and taught to accept media messages without question. Gerard is a victim because he lost two decades of manipulation and two decades of media feeds. In a space where

information and media define life, missing out on media means missing one's life.

Gerard seems to lapse into an awakening, waking everyone up, preparing food, and gathering his family in the dining space. Gerard and his wife Ellie, the optimistic follower of media technology, are present; Emily and Nathan, his two media-indulged children, are present; Chole, the time traveler in the media world, is supposed to be present. With real objects (food and drink) and face-to-face contact in a physical room, Gerard stands firm on all the spatiality available to him, asking his recurrent temporal question: "The difference between then and now" ("After Life" 146). What seems to bother Gerard is his loss and ignorance of time. Gerard's disruptive sense of time is connected with Chloe's help. Which means what? You should articulate it conceptually here, so that the elaboration makes more sense below.

Gerard's children, Emily and Nathan, were born before the emergence of the Internet (the digital age) in the late 1990s, while Chloe was born and grew up in the world of the Internet. They are digital natives. Emily and Nathan experience migrating from the analog world to the digital one. Compared with Chloe, who spends more time with her computer, Emily and Nathan are more addicted to TV screens and have alienated relationships with their families. Their strong attachment to machines weakens their interpersonal relationships with others. They are machine-like. According to Gerard's description, a sense of alienation looms in every interaction scene involving Nathan and Emily. Their doors are permanently shut to their father; their spaces are always shut to the outside world. While one never seems to stop her intake of TV visual feeds (Emily), the other appears invested in vicarious sex through porn viewing (Nathan). Media feeds the former; the latter is invested in media. For Emily, TV alone claims her attention; for Nathan, porn alone claims his affection.

Emily's attention to the TV is accompanied by her negligence of her family. She is an excellent listener to her TV, mean to her brother, indifferent to her father, and nonchalant to everything around her. The impact of media on Emily reminds us of Kittler's notion of "[t]he decomposition and filtering of love" (*Gramophone* 182). Her mind merges with media at the cost that her affect deviates from her family or even the entire physical world. The filter here is the media, particularly her TV. Her contact with her family, the physical world outside the TV, and all sources of human affection

are decomposed around her. On the other hand, Nathan does not have his affections filtered but redirected into a loop. Nathan is shut in his room by himself. His enclosure secures his engagement in and with porn as if the need, desire, and expression of sexuality are only possible as a claustrophobic experience that is enabled by media and hidden away from people's knowledge. If Nathan is not a character but a projection of anybody and sex is only a metaphor for basic needs, such experience looms bleak and hints at our relationships with the world around us in times of digital technology. In Kittler's words, Nathan stays trapped in and addicted to "a sexually closed feedback loop" (*Gramophone* 184). It is bleak because the feedback here is not bilateral. There is no honest feedback. There is only an organic human being and a cold machine.

Although Emily and Nathan are absorbed in media, there is a distinct difference between them. Emily, who stays engaged in the unconditional reception of the media, suffers no shame. Nathan, who maintains human desire while interacting with media, is often made to feel ashamed: "He's watching Euro porn, Emily shouts through her own shut bedroom door" ("After Life" 140). After Nathan says he has been watching bike gear systems instead of porn, his sister Emily responds:

> That's crap, Emily says. I saw. You were watching a porn movie with a gang bang in a prison.
> I was not, he says. That's a YouTube clip of a film star in a foreign film where she goes to prison by mistake and in the cell these men crowd round her and sing a song. ("After Life" 146)

Funnily enough, the more human one (Nathan) is shamed for being human, having human needs, and showing human desire. The more non-human or indifferent one (Emily) is the one who claims the right to criticize others and to speak up louder with conviction and authority. Such scenes may reflect our surroundings where AI, the Internet, AR, VR, and other cyber technologies dominate our views, values, and a new sense of ethics that grace indifference and shame humanity.

Compared with Emily and Nathan, Chloe alone is more human-like and communicable to Gerard. Chloe is connectable. From a dialectical (and neurologist) point of view, this is understandable in terms of Gerard's death: "In the days of the founding age of modern media, the neurologist Benedict described how the dying visualizes their past as time-lapse

photography" (Kittler, *Gramophone* 130). To Gerard, Chloe is part of his existence. She is always available to him, if not affectionately close: "She's the only person in this house who opens a door fully these days" ("After Life"136). Nevertheless, when he claims access to his Chloe, he almost always uses the Internet. Chloe seems to be his means of reaching out to the world and retrieving data and memories.

　　Chloe was born between the "two deaths'' of the narrator. During the ten lost years, Chloe's birth and existence facilitate her father by filling him in with all the technologies that entail his life adaptation. The 10-year-old Chloe is not only her father's little computer, but also his memory chip, compensating him for his ten years' loss of experience in the media-booming world. While Kittler maintains that "media determines our situation" (Gramophone xxxix), this "our situation" already integrates our existence with what? As we exist both in the physical world and the virtual world where we work, recreate, and socialize, Gerard also lives in his small town and the worldwide web (with the help and access of Chole). He tries to fight the comments online and proves that he is alive. He attempts to challenge the situation dictated by the media, yet he overlooks the fact that human identities are shaped by our mutual interactions with technologies. Gerard's eagerness to use technology, such as social media, as a means to justify his survival overlooks the profound impact technology has had on shaping the human subject and our understanding of reality. In an interview in 2006, Kittler explained to his interviewer that "the development of the Internet has much more to do with human beings becoming a reflection of their technologies, reacting or responding to the demands of the machine. After all, it is we who adapt to the machine. The machine does not adapt to us" (Armitage 35-36, emphasis added). Kittler's elimination of the human agency overturns the supposed dominance of humans over machines, emphasizing the crucial role that machines play in shaping the human subject.[19] In this remark, Kittler seems to reserve a kind of human agency before one decides to what extent one is going to "adapt" oneself to the machine. Thus, Gerard's desire to use Chloe's computer to affirm his existence to the public through social media networks symbolizes his adaptation to digital technology, transforming

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[19] Kittler's use of "adapt to" signifies humans' orientation to align with the demands of machines. This expression does not entirely negate human agency or decision- making but rather emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between humans and machines.

him into a new form of life—a new subject.

His voice is devoid of media technologies, Gerard's voice can only reach the media- saturated world through Chloe. Chloe serves as her father's gateway to the digital world, his reflection, and the conduit through which he adapts to a technology-driven world. As a daughter, she may be the closest to her father; as a hub of media, she may be the most potent proof of her father's existence. The seemingly careless mention of the email heading "You Only Live Thrice" ("After Life" 139), though it appears brusque, may as well refer to the situation that the already twice-dead father is now alive (and adapting himself), enjoying his third life by reacting or responding to the demands of the machine of the Internet. Every time the father interacts with Chloe, he borrows her computer. Every time he borrows her computer, he adapts himself to the world of media, which determines his existence. Every time he uses Chloe's computer, he comes back to life. Chloe is thereby the conduit to Gerard's third life.

Chloe, the welcoming daughter, bridges Gerard to the present. Gerard is "the dying," while Chloe is the visualizable time-lapse. This is how Chloe, unlike other family members, becomes close and indispensable to Gerard: "She's the only person in this house who opens a door fully these days" ("After Life" 136). In fact, she is the medium accessible to Gerard. From a narrative like "Mitch has been a figment of Chloe's imagination" ("After Life" 137),[20] we learn that Chloe, integrated with her documentaries, becomes a combination of the past and the present, which ushers Gerard back and forth between the past and the future and the worlds of the dead and the living. In the dialogues between Chloe and Gerard, there are two apparent misnomers intended:

> "How can I be of subsistence?" ("After Life" 136)
> "I think I can be of persistence" ("After Life" 141).

They are obviously deviations from the common saying, "How can I be of

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[20] "Mitch" is Chloe's imaginary companion whose full name is "Mitchell Kenyon." ("After Life" 137). The name derives from Mitchell and Kenyon, documentary filmmakers a hundred years ago. Chloe is a documentary lover who interrogates the interconnection between the past and the present (the gap between the analogue and the digital ages) through her imaginary conversation with Mitch. Accordingly, Chloe serves as a bridge between two distinct eras. She is the only character capable of scrutinizing the digital era beyond her contemporaries.

assistance." While "subsistence" refers to the living present, "persistence" can mean the ongoing process of the past up until now. The former is the now; the latter is the past that does not die and contributes to the now. These two misnomers speak for Chloe's identity as the bridging between the past and the present and indicate that Chloe is the string that attaches Gerard to the present world. Chloe serves as a medium, allowing the dying to last until now; by Chloe, the dying can visualize the present beyond the past. As we see in the short story— "Rip Van Mitchell" ("After Life" 142)— Chloe is the medium that wakes the dead to life. Gerard wakes up from his two deaths, as Rip Van Winkle wakes up from his 20 years of sleep/death.

4. Fleeing from the Cyclops' Eye: From the So-called Man to the Human Agent

In terms of Kittler's idea of the so-called man, the media-conditioned Emily, Nathan, and their mother, Ellie, are among the best defined: "[T]echnical media are models of the so-called human precisely because they were developed strategically to override the senses" (Kittler, *Optical Media* 36). Emily's attachment to her TV and Nathan's indulgence in his bicycle-gear documentaries or European porn serve as convincing proof that technology overrides their senses. According to Kittler,

> There are no longer any differences between individual media or sensory fields: if digital computers send out sounds or images, whether to a so-called human-machine interface or not, they internally work only with endless strings of bits, which are represented by electrical voltage. Every individual sound or pixel must then actually be constructed out of countless elements, but when these bits are processed quickly enough, as the mathematician John von Neumann recognized in the face of his first atomic bomb, everything that is switchable also becomes feasible. (Kittler, *Optical Media* 225-226).

This is why and how human senses are overridden by technology. Reality is "switched on," and the so-called man receives whatever is switched on through his engagement with technology. As the so-called man is thus conditioned, he loses his agency in a reality dominated by technology.

In the cases of Emily and Nathan, the senses being overridden are more about how they lose their human agency, while their mother's is more

about a false sense of space. Ellie believes that technology brings people closer than ever instead of noticing that human senses of distance are manipulated by technology. While speaking of how human senses are overridden by technology, Kittler goes into detail to make known the fact that technology manipulates our sense of space and it can fail on certain occasions: "Eyes that fall short of this distance are no longer able to see shapes and figures, but rather only countless points of light that constitute their electronic existence and above all their non-existence—in the form of moiré patterns or blur" (Kittler, *Optical Media* 36). The keyword here is "non-existence," which human senses may or may not experience, entirely depending on how technology presents it. In either case (Emily and Nathan's or Ellie's), the so-called man stands whether the human being is conditioned or falsely impressed. And yet, such a standing claims the victory of technology, the loss of human agency, and the failure of human perception of reality.

Contrary to her mother and siblings, Chloe is the only person able to shuttle between the past and the present. She is the singular individual certain of her existence amidst the current era of media saturation. Chloe is relatively free from the overall control of media technologies. Born as a digital native, Chloe knows well how to take advantage of cutting-edge media technologies to address challenges without becoming overly dependent on them and is highly aware of the risks that media technologies may bring to human beings. She employs the metaphor of "Cyclops" to illustrate how people are ensnared by their reliance on mobile devices. She explains to Gerard about people's addiction to mobile devices:

> It's like when the one eyed giant shut the sailor in the cave and started eating his shipmates, she says, and the sailor has to think how to get them all out of there, and what they do is they sharpen the phone mast and they stick it right in its eye. ("After Life" 143; emphasis added)

Chloe's remark reminds us of the danger of being trapped and manipulated by the information circulated by media technologies. By so doing, we will be able to react to the control of the media. Chloe's symbolic gesture to "sharpen the phone mast" and blind the one-eyed giant suggests her keen understanding of technology and skillful use of other technological devices to break down the information barriers imposed by singular media technologies. "Self-awareness first, reaction second" is Chloe's strategy to

escape the control of media technologies.

Chloe unveils the erosion of individual freedom and autonomy through the widespread use of mobile devices. She also foresees the possible decline of human thinking and the loss of freedom resulting from people's revealing personal information on social networks. This trend not only diminishes interpersonal communication and limits people's exploration of the world, but also exacerbates the surveillance of individuals by the media. Chloe tells Gerard about Mitch's future vision: "Mitch thinks that humans will evolve like in Charles Darwin to have a square screen in our foreheads instead of having eyes. We will look at their screen to see everything we need to know. We do not need to cogitate anymore" ("After Life" 143). Mitch-Chloe's vision of cyborg-like humans points out the inevitable future crisis: the erosion of profound human thinking due to the complete integration of humans and technologies. In the face of the crisis, Chloe proposes that one should be a "nobody" in the cybernetic world in order to "survive" in the real world ("After Life" 143). Chloe's vision reminds us that it is necessary to have greater self-awareness when one takes in information from the media or shares one's thoughts on social media platforms so as to safeguard against becoming more machine-like and preserve the autonomy and cognitive ability one should have.

Chloe's sensitivity and adeptness in using media technologies without succumbing to their influence gives her a deeper self-awareness than other family members in our media-saturated world. This is why she could flee from the overall control of the media while still maintaining her human agency to some extent. As Gerard asks his family about "the difference between then and now," it is Chloe who clearly answers the questions: "The difference between then and now... is I wasn't here then, and now I am" ("After Life" 148). This straightforward answer manifests Chloe's assurance of her identity and position in this world. By contrast, Ellie, Emily, and Nathan answer the question from perspectives unrelated to their true selves. This implies their self-effacement due to their immersion into the virtual world created by the media. For example, their answers include the facilitation of "new communication technology" (Ellie), "the bike gear system" (Nathan), and the separation of the self and the other in terms of clothes and political orientation (Emily) ("After Life" 146-147). Hence, Chloe's clear understanding of her presence in the world allows her to understand the differences between the past and the present. To trace the

connection between the present and the past, she collects the documentaries filmed in the early decade of the twentieth century. By watching these early documentaries, she envisions the future. She is the bridge linking the past and the present, straddling two temporalities. Her friendship with the imaginary Mitch (the embodiment of the past) helps her to contact the past, to question the present, and to envision the future in the context of the rise of media technologies. It is through Chloe that Gerard can connect with the past, the present, and the future. Only through his interpersonal relationship to his daughter can he regain his life.

5. After Life: The Converging Gaze of the Small Boy and Gerard

The final scene of the converging gaze of a small boy and Gerard on the computer screen suggests the intersection of the past and the present. The contingent encounter of their gazes awakens Gerard's sense of being in the present and his anticipation of the unknown future. After Chloe clearly answers his question about the difference between the past and the present, Gerard happens to notice Chloe's "beloved DVD on the computer desk" ("After Life" 148). The DVD consists of documentaries of ordinary British villagers' lives in 1901 ("After Life" 149). This period was marked by the emergence of a new media technology: film. The new technology captured people's curiosity and attention at that time. When the camera was set in the village, people there were crowded and waved their hats at the camera. They were actually waving "at themselves" ("After Life" 149). It was not these people catching Gerard's attention; Gerard is impressed mostly by a small boy in and out of the camera frame occasionally. The small boy gets near and looks at the camera with doubt. His gaze meets Gerard's through the "eye": the camera (to the boy) and the computer screen (to Gerard) ("After Life" 149). The computer screen becomes an interface bridging the present and the past. Gerard is the gazer, and the boy is the gazed. The convergence of the two gazes reveals the shared desire of the two persons: their desire to see the future and their question of the present. At this epiphanic moment, Gerard glimpses the similarity between the boy and his daughter, Chloe, too. They all question the effect of their contemporary new technologies and pursue the meaning of their self in the new era, which is similar to the small boy's behavior in front of the computer screen: "He isn't delighted. He's questioning, grave. He means business. He wants to know" ("After Life" 149). The screen becomes an interface through which Gerard connects with the past, which inspires him to examine the present and anticipate the future. Like the boy who "looks

the future in the eye" and "walks towards it, holding its eye steady in both of his," Gerard regains a sense of life through media technologies because "[h]e [the boy] is completely alive. The life in him pierces me" ("After Life" 149; emphasis added).

6. Conclusion

Smith's "After Life" explicitly demonstrates her worries about the gradual dissolution of the human agency in the digital age. She uses the two misreports of Gerard's death within a decade as events to show the decline of human agency, the change of the world, and the hegemony of the media industry entailed by the rise of new media technologies. Such a media-dominated world reflects Kittler's concept of the "so-called man," which emphasizes how the human subject is shaped along with the transformation of media technologies. Kittler's idea points out the dilemma and crisis we are facing—humans are gradually losing their agency in the media-saturated world. Even though the influence brought by media technologies is inescapable, Smith, in this short story, intends to show her optimistic view to humans in the future: Humans still preserve agency to some degree in front of the overwhelming impact of media technologies. Like Chloe and Gerard, the father and the daughter keep reclaiming their agency when confronted with media technologies. The father-and-daughter interactions not only bridge the disruption of the past and the present caused by the advancement of media technologies but also allow them to rediscover a potential agency within the human subject. For example, Chloe is the only sober character with a strong awareness of her identity and the possible risks of media technologies. Her perception and understanding of the world are affected by media technologies, just as Kittler's perception and knowledge of the "so-called man" are. However, she still struggles to sense, question, and react to the force deployed by media technologies. She cannot avoid becoming the "so-called man," as "determined" by the media, yet her inquiring attitude toward media technologies maintains her human agency. She is fleeing from the all-seeing Cyclops's eye. In addition, the converging gaze of Gerard and the small boy on the computer screen disrupts Gerard's sense of self, which awakens Gerard's self-awareness and provokes his doubt about the world he is living in now. Smith's "After Life" leads us to see what is happening in the current media-dominated world, just as Kittler's insight has shown us, while also reminding us of the agency we still have in the digital age.

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Address for correspondence

En-Hui Shih
Department of English and Applied Communication,
Shih Hsin University
116 No. 1, Ln. 17, Sec. 1, Muzha Rd.,
Wenshan Dist., Taipei City
Taiwan

ehshih@mail.shu.edu.tw

Alvin Dahn
Department of English and Applied Communication,
Shih Hsin University
116 No. 1, Ln. 17, Sec. 1, Muzha Rd.,
Wenshan Dist., Taipei City
Taiwan

alvin@mail.shu.edu.tw