

**Aldona Kobus and Łukasz Muniowski, editors. *Sex, Death, and Resurrection in Altered Carbon: Essays on the Netflix Series*. McFarland, 2020, 198 pages.**

This short but skillfully edited collection of essays offers a close study of the recent Netflix science fiction production *Altered Carbon* (2018-), based on the 2002 cyberpunk novel by American writer Richard Morgan. It takes place in a dystopian future San Francisco (known as Bay City), a visually arresting neo-noir metropolis arguably more than reminiscent of the retro-futuristic vision of Los Angeles presented in Ridley Scott's seminal *Blade Runner* (1982). The first series, which is the subject of the collection, explores this world through the eyes of Takeshi Kovacs, an ex-mercenary and alleged war criminal brought back to life in order to solve a criminal mystery—the murder of the aristocrat Laurens Bancroft. In this far-future world, a person's life does not necessarily end with death. Thanks to the technoscientific revolution known as the “stack-and-sleeve technology,” a person's consciousness—thoughts, memories, experiences—is digitalized in the form of a “cortical stack,” located at the back of the skull. This small device can be removed from the “original” body and places in “sleeves,” human (or artificial) bodies that, when uploaded with the necessary hardware, act as a host body. When one's body dies the world of *Altered Carbon*, their “stack” can be “re-sleeved” into another body, rendering death only a temporary state—at least for those who are able to afford this procedure, and prolong their life, potentially reaching immortality.

*Sex, Death, and Resurrection in Altered Carbon*, co-edited by Aldona Kobus and Łukasz Muniowski, consists of thirteen essays divided into three sections. In the introduction to the volume, the reader is presented with the impressive methodological diversity of the book. The authors offer a concise summary of the series' mixed critical reception and most commonly addressed flaws—also examined in detail in the following chapters—and point to the many interesting theoretical perspective it nevertheless invites to pursue. Despite *Altered Carbon*'s problematic position in the contemporary landscape of science fiction, the thirteen collected essays prove that this seemingly derivative reenactment of the 1980s cyberpunk aesthetic carries in fact much intellectual weight, and offers its viewers a fascinating look at our very modern struggles with identity, gendered bodies, sex and sexuality, mortality and morality, and the neoliberal regimes of biopower.

The first section on “Sex” consists of three essays. Alexander N. Howe proposes to examine the series' engagement with embodiment and technology through a focus on the character of Kristin Ortega, a detective who becomes the protagonist's unlikely ally and romantic partner. Locating her within both the neo-noir and the hard-boiled traditions of female detectives, a far less popular figure than the tough-talking, street-smart male detective from hard-boiled fiction, Howe discusses Ortega's subversive role in *Altered Carbon* from the perspective of critical posthumanism and psychoanalysis. Focusing on her relationship with Kovacs, the ex-Envoy resleeved in the body of her former lover, the article fuses a discussion of the gender fantasies of neo-noir cyberpunk with a Lacanian reading of the uncanny love triangle. Despite the claims that the sleeve and stacks technology liberates humans from the constraints of embodiment, the author views it rather as a complication of the relationship between

identity, desire and technologized bodies, fulfilling a comment made by Kovacs, used as the title for the essay, that “technology advances but humans don’t.”

In his highly engaging, theoretically dazzling essay Kwasu David Tembo continues the exploration of the show’s interweaving of sexuality, biotechnology and biopower, particularly in relation to the neo-futuristic world’s monstrous ultra-elite’s obsession with sex, death, and power. Michel Foucault’s concept of the limit-experience, defined as “the point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or the extreme,” serves as the organizing theoretical foundation for Tembo’s multilayered analysis of “Meth-eroticism.” Named after the Methuselah of the Old Testament, the Meths are the top one-percent echelons of the futuristic society, a class of wealthy entrepreneurs-aristocrats possessing unlimited financial resources and political power. Contrary to the rest of society, the “grounders,” the (literally) sky-occupying Meth elite not only can afford endless resleeving—exchanging of sleeve bodies, including limitless access to their own clones—but they also can remotely store digitized back-up copies of their consciousness, practically becoming centuries-spanning, immortal beings almost completely detached from the rest of humanity. The author asks an intriguing question: in a world where technology allows the individual to escape subjectivity and function as multiple embodied, self-reproducing self, is it also possible to transgress the ethical and moral restrictions imposed on (post)human sexuality? *Altered Carbon* depicts Meth sexuality as excessive, sadistic, fueled by power fantasies of sexual violence and eroticized death, realized both in virtual reality and on the bodies of others. In the author’s eyes, the liberation from “normal” boundaries—namely, from the fear of death as the end of existence—pushes the limit-experience of Meths beyond mortality and morality, into the domain of an erotic power dynamic predicated upon the elite’s biopolitical control over the bodies of their victims. The stack and sleeve technology offers no escape from embodied and gendered violence for those people who are used for the fulfillment of sexual fantasies of the elites.

The last article in this section, written by Michał Klata, offers a provocative, but insightful defense of the series’ critical reception. At the time of the premiere, the first season of *Altered Carbon* was accused by many critics of relying too much on unnecessary sex scenes, verging toward gratuity particularly in its emphasis on presenting female nudity. Klata’s essay proposes a formal analysis of several sex scenes from show, read closely not only in their relation to the overall plot—such as foreshadowing future narrative twists—but also focusing on sequencing, sound editing, the use of close-ups. His sex-positive reading employs Sergei Einstein’s theory of montage, coupled with Laura Mulvey’s influential concept of the male gaze. According to the author, when analyzed more thoroughly and without bias, the sex scenes in *Altered Carbon* can be seen as serving many different functions in the narrative. Klata’s argument, as well as his careful analysis, certainly demonstrates the value of applying theoretical frameworks to film criticism—something that is sadly missing in many mainstream reviews of popular genre productions.

The second section titled “Sleeves” turns attention to the corporeality of bodies and identities. It consist of six essays which, even though their authors pursue diverse theoretical directions, engage in an intertextual discussion with each other. The first article, co-written by Esra Köksal and Burcu Baykan, critically interrogates

the series' vision of a posthuman disembodied futurity attained through revolutionary technological advancements. At first glance, it is a world that seems to privilege the mind (stacks) over the body (sleeves), since what they call "a floating consciousness" can exist without corporeality in the separated dimension of virtual reality, and humans are essentially techno-organic hybrids, malleable mixtures of information and the flesh, human and non human agents. While Köksal and Baykan agree that the characters depicted in the show are a quite literal representation of what Donna Haraway calls "cyborg subjectivities," they are in fact still strongly and affectively attached to their material bodies. As their essay convincingly argues, despite promising a liberation from embodiment, in the world of *Altered Carbon* the body "cannot be regarded as a piece of clothing that can be easily switched, replaced or discarded, as each resleeving has its own consequences, creating a sense of doubt or confusion about one's sense of self." This attachment to the materiality of posthuman identity aligns the series with N. Katherine Hayes' conceptualization of posthumanism: a postulated future in which the technological, digitized and hybridized reconfigurations of our identities will not eradicate our material embodiment—the body will still matter.

Lars Schmeink's article also explores the theme of the mind/body relationship, noting the primacy of the biological as opposed to the virtual, but focuses on the commodification of bodies. His chapter mixes an analysis of the show's aesthetical choices, namely its obsessive reproducing of violent images of bodily harm (including its problematic gender politics), with a reading of the two contradictory approaches to the body. Whereas members of lower classes such as Kovacs and Ortega are shown as caring for theirs and others' sleeves, the aristocratic Meths represent a radical reimagining of what Schmeink calls "the capital, neoliberal notion of human ownership and mastery of the body." This vision of cybernetic posthumanism is one certainly not liberated from embodied differences of race, gender, class—especially the latter, as the economic and political hegemony of the Meths allows them to enact violence on other bodies, and then pay off their transgressions as property damage fees.

Approaching the subject of the commodification of the body from yet another angle, Łukasz Muniowski proposes to read the Meths' consumer practices—their unending quest for obtaining the healthiest, most physically attractive sleeves—in parallel with the recent phenomenon of the wellness movement. Wellness culture dictates that health is a personal choice, and caring for oneself is an individual task governed by the regimes of healthy eating, dieting, training. The perfect body becomes a testament to one's success in life, a statement of control and, as Muniowski aptly states, a reflection of present-day narcissism, permeating Western culture. For Meths, this ideal of wellness can be obtained through their access to clone copies of themselves. It is a luxury commodity not available to "grounders," who, if their original body is destroyed, can continue embodied existence only through resleeving in either organic or synthetic sleeves. Access to health is another aspect of the stack and sleeves technology that on closer inspection seems less futuristic, but grounded in the realities of late capitalism.

Aline Ferreira's essay examines the biopolitics of the series from a philosophical perspective centered around the fantasy of escaping death. In some way it reads as a companion piece to the previous three entries, as the author brings into focus the idea

of a posthuman future promised as a way of prolonging life *ad infinitum*, but still grounded in the corporeality of the body. The idea of radical life extension through sleeve and clone technology is examined from multiple angles, including a discussion of the role of gender in the futuristic society—arguably a theme that is either ignored by the creators of the series, or sadly downplayed in the narrative and world-building—and the question of distributive justice in access of life-prolonging technologies. Ferreria's reading of the series' portrayal of the dream of immortality, deeply embedded in the fixed class structuring of the futuristic society, perfectly encapsulates why the world *Altered Carbon*, despite following a seemingly utopian impulse of eradicating death, is in fact a technologically-dependent dystopian nightmare.

The remaining two essays in this section move beyond the issue of embodiment or the promises of posthumanism, offering two very different perspectives. Damla Pehlivan is the author of the most surprising and original reading of the series' political conflict between the Meths and the Quellists—the latter side composing of rebels who oppose the idea that humans should have access to multiple life spans (and thus to immortality). She proposes to examine the conflict between materiality and spirituality from a Gnostic perspective, switching the philosophical inquiry to the question of transcendence and search of knowledge. The essay presents a very intriguing approach to deciphering the many layers of the show's politics. Dariusz Brzozek in turn analyzes the soundscape of the series, and asks who is speaking in and/or through the body of the other. His reading methodologically unites psychoanalysis with hauntology in examining the voices that speak and haunt the protagonists of *Altered Carbon*. To whom belongs the voice speaking in a rented sleeve—to the personality (stack) or the material body (sleeve)? Is it a voice of the living, or a haunting sonic memory of the dead? Brzozek's article deals with the ontological and metaphysical anxieties induced by radical (but inherently rationalized) technologies allowing these (dis)embodied voices to be heard, and provides an thought-provoking coda to the second part of the book.

The third section consists of four essays which interrogate *Altered Carbon*'s cyberpunk legacy. The initial lukewarm reception of the series among film critics troubles some of the authors in the collection, most certainly Adam Edwards, who opens the section with a discussion of the parodic elements of the series which he sees as crucial for understanding its complicated, critical engagement with the cyberpunk heritage. While acknowledging the Netflix series' existing aesthetical ties to *Blade Runner* (present both on screen and in marketing materials), Edwards contends that what this criticism fails to capture is how the creators of *Altered Carbon* are consciously entering in a dialogue with cyberpunk texts from the past, in order to recontextualize and update them, or, on the other hand, subvert the metatextual expectations of viewers. The scholar argues that instead of being an unoriginal revamping of an 1980s aesthetic, the series should be viewed as a parody of the cyberpunk genre. Important for his argument is Fredric Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche, the latter defined as a postmodern "imitation of dead styles," and the former as a style of producing imitations that remain respectful of the tropes and styles it wants to make fun of. According to Edwards, *Altered Carbon* is a self-conscious, ironic and, perhaps most significantly, critical repetition of seemingly used-up motifs and tropes of the cyberpunk. His analysis of selected scenes from the show supplies his argument

with valid examples of the parodic quality of the series' engagement with worn-out generic tropes and clichés (e.g. the hard-boiled tough detective, the grim neon-lit city, etc.). It also contextualizes them within not only the history of science fiction, but also in reference to the creators' intertextual plays with their (intended?) audience's expectations.

Kenneth Matthews' article deals with the idea of manufacturing history and ties the show's politics with the current political climate in the US. It discusses the relationship between the past and the present, focusing specifically on the questions of truth, and on who is able to control the historical narrative—both in our present so-called post-truth era, and in the cyberpunk future of *Altered Carbon*. Matthews analyzes the series through the lens of New Historicism, recognizing the impact of literacy and linearity on the concept of time and history. His theoretical discussion of the historical specificity of cultural texts and their interpretation centers around the question of how the past is negotiated through a "selective tradition," which is ultimately a successful method of fabrication, pursued in the show by the all-powerful Meth elite.

The theme of how the past is constantly interfering with/in the present is continued in the next essay, written by Aldona Kobus, the co-editor of the volume. It examines the show from the perspective of Derridean hauntology, offering a multi-layered, insightful analysis of several cases of haunting: the ghosts of dead lovers, the ghost-like specters of artificial intelligences, or the frightening presence of those who return from the dead—and speak. Kobus argues convincingly that the future world of *Altered Carbon* is haunted by the past, as is the genre of cyberpunk itself. Once a fresh and original new wave of science fiction, today it is often berated for the staleness of its ideas and its over-use of worn-out aesthetical and political tropes. These different meta-textual specters of cyberpunk haunt the narrative of the show, either giving voice to counter-hegemonic narratives, or are silenced by those in power. Kobus's essay carefully constructs a very thoughtful critique of the genre's compulsive returning to the past to envision a future—perhaps even a retro-future, a future that had already taken place in the past—while also demonstrating the subversive elements present in the narrative which "is making us aware of the necessity of living with ghosts."

The last article, co-written by Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Emiliano Aguilar, examines the Netflix series' original interweaving of cyberpunk and the Gothic. Although the authors focus on the character of Edgar Allan Poe—an artificial intelligence running the Raven hotel—their essay also covers other emanations of the Gothic/Poesque in the narrative. It is the show's obsessive dance between life and death that is read through Poe's own dual fascination with the fear of death on the one hand, and the eroticism of death on the other. This contradictory perspective, the authors argue, is elevated in the show, as it challenges the neoliberal fantasy at its heart—the techno-scientific idea of prolonging life (at a certain price). Their essay brilliantly encapsulates both the show's and the reviewed book's investment in complicating, deconstructing and reevaluating the philosophical and political constraints put on the meaning and value of life and death.

The volume as a whole offers an intellectually captivating examination of a very recent American cultural text that succeeds in capturing present-day fears,

dreams and obsessions. Contributors to the collection employ an impressive array of theoretical frameworks that engage with the first season's multiple transgressive and subversive contexts, ranging from the issue of embodiment and sexuality, the past haunting the present, thanatophobia, up to the critique of late capitalist biopolitics and neoliberal fantasies of endless self-realization. Kobus's and Muniowski's edited collection is valuable not only for its immediacy and freshness, but most importantly for its skillful demonstration of the complexity that the science-fictional imagination brings to the discussion of the past, present, and future of Western technoculture.

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