(CYBER) PUNK'S NOT DEAD – RICHARD MORGAN'S *ALTERED CARBON*

Ana Kečan
International Balkan University, Skopje, Republic of N. Macedonia, a.kechan@ibu.edu.mk

Abstract: The term cyberpunk refers to an offspring or subgenre of science fiction which rose to popularity in the 1980s. It was first coined by Bruce Bethke in his story of the same name, published in 1983. Even though there are critics today who claim that cyberpunk is long dead, numerous examples from the 21st century show that it is still very well and alive, and this revival is particularly aided by television, as cyberpunk has a massive visual potential. Hence, the 21st century saw the sequel to the cult *Blade Runner* (originally released in 1982), titled *Blade Runner 2049* (released in 2017), another (fourth) sequel of *The Matrix* (set to be released in 2020), TV adaptations of Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams* (2017) and, the main interest of this essay, Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* (season 1 in 2018 and season 2 set to be released in 2020). In this essay we are going to, first, outline the main narrative and stylistic conventions of cyberpunk, which include: a time and place in the future dominated by advanced achievements in information technology, science and computers (hence the term 'cyber') at the expense of a loss or breakdown of social order (hence the term 'punk') to the point of a dystopia (or post-utopia, as has been argued); virtual reality, data networks, illusion, bodily metamorphosis, media overload, intensity of visual components, bordering on what Norman Spinrad said was a fusion of the romantic impulse with science and technology. All of these encapsulate a core theme of the loss of distinction between real and artificial. In addition to this, the term cyberpunk requires clarification against several other terms which often appear alongside it and are related in one way or another, including science fiction, neo-noir, hard-boiled, post-cyberpunk, transhumanism, post-anthropocentrism, etc. Second, we are going to look at how those elements come together in the context of the first novel of Richard Morgan's trilogy about Takeshi Kovacs, titled *Altered Carbon*, published in 2002 (the sequels, *Broken Angels* - 2003 and *Woken Furies* – 2005, have not yet been adapted for television and will, therefore, not be included in our analysis). We are going to, then, compare those elements with the Netflix version of the novel, a 10-episode TV series, released in 2018. The comparison of the visual versus the verbal narrative will show the differences in the presentation of cyberpunk elements and how (or whether) these differences are dictated by the medium or not. It will also show whether what started out as a dystopia in the original text has grown into a post-utopia in the television series, simply reflecting the current trend of nostalgia and nostalgic recycling.
Keywords: cyberpunk, post-utopia, Altered Carbon, Richard Morgan, Netflix.

1. NARRATIVE AND STYLISTIC CONVENTIONS OF CYBERPUNK

One would be justified to assume that the term cyberpunk has something do with technology and resistance. However, as all genres, it, too, has been evolving in the past 4 decades and has, albeit mostly subtly, shifted both its focus and techniques – we are, after all, now living in the approximate future anticipated in the original cyberpunk stories of the 1980s.

Cyberpunk as a term was first used by Bruce Bethke in 1983 when he published a short story titled *Cyberpunk* which he had written three years earlier. In his own words, the invention of this term "was a conscious and deliberate act of creation on my part…I was actively trying to invent a new term that grokked the juxtaposition of punk attitudes and high technology."[1] Even though the two linguistic elements which make up the word are clear in their definitions – *cyber* relating to information technology, science and computers, and *punk* relating to the known subculture with anti-establishment views and the promotion of individual freedom, according to Martin de la Iglesia (in Arts, 2018:32) "there is no universally agreed-upon definition of cyberpunk", although he accepts the following description by Istvan Csicsiry-Ronay: "cyberpunk is about alienated subcultures that adopt the high-tech tools of the establishment they are alienated from" (ibid.). Csicsery-Ronay goes even further and calls cyberpunk "perfection" as a label, because it "suggests the apotheosis of postmodernism…on the one hand, pure negation: of manners, history, memory; on the other, pure attitude: all is power, and subculture…" (in McCaffery, 1991:182).

Cyberpunk is "frequently set in familiar near-futures and typically concerned with social, economic and ecological impacts of transnational capitalism and emergent information technologies" (Lavender, 2014:180). Furthermore, Bruce Sterling, who edited what is now considered the cyberpunk manifesto, *Mirrorshades* (1986), described cyberpunk as the "unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent" (in de la Iglesia, 2018)

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[1] Foreword to the *Cyberpunk* story @ http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/stories/cpunk.htm

only to further condense this definition and come up with what is now accepted as the core paradigm of cyberpunk: *low life and high tech*. Whereas in the beginning, the focus on high tech(nology) was more prominent, in recent decades, as the genre evolved, more focus has been put on information networks, virtual reality, the information explosion, artificial intelligence, global information exchanges, virtual cyberspaces, etc. because of the ever increasing role the Internet has had (ibid.).

Furthermore, Kelly and Kesse (2007:ix) outline the following characteristics as the prime elements of cyberpunk:
- Presenting a global perspective on the future.
- Engaging with developments in infotech and biotech, especially those invasive technologies that will transform the human body and psyche.
- Striking a gleefully subversive attitude that challenges traditional values and received wisdom.
- Cultivating a crammed prose style that takes an often playful stance toward traditional science fiction tropes.

It is generally widely accepted that William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, published in 1984, is the first cyberpunk novel, thus making Gibson the father of cyberpunk. There have, by all means, been stories that fit the cyberpunk bill well before 1984 and we can go as far back as Marry Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and find it has quite a lot in common with what we now know as cyberpunk. One of the aspects of the novel and a recurring theme of cyberpunk is the body - bodily modifications/transformations and recycling of body parts.

Cyberpunk has always been concerned with the theme of the body and it is intriguing to follow how that theme has evolved: if the cyberpunk of the 1980s and 1990s "was centrally concerned with themes of body and mind invasions…the movement's 'impatience with borders' […] creating a veritable cyborgian laboratory of transgressive bodily possibilities" (in Latham, 2014:412), the main interest of this essay, Morgan's *Altered Carbon* completely separates body and mind – there is no longer need for bodily modifications as the body is just a replaceable and dispensable sleeve, nothing more; even identity is only marginally affected by or dependent on which sleeve one uses. However, before we go into detail with the novel and the Netflix series, let us delve deeper into some other terms commonly found alongside cyberpunk.

2. CYBERPUNK VS. SOME OTHER RELATED TERMS

In this section we are going to present the basic delineation of terms which can often be found alongside cyberpunk, and some of which may not be readily understood. Cyberpunk is seen as a subgenre of *science fiction* which has, "since [its] onset, relied on science and technology for [its] core concepts" (Bloom, 2016:1), although a major part of its beauty and attraction for decades has been its bravery of going where no man has gone before and exploring "not only imaginary and extraterrestrial places, but contested sociopolitical spaces as well" (Lavender, 2014:180). However, cyberpunk leaves behind the "old linear futures of space adventure" to "pursue the lateral futures of today's information technology" (Slusser & Shippey, 1992:3).

According to Dani Cavallaro (2000:8-9), a major influence on cyberpunk and the genre from which it draws its main inspiration for characters and setting is the *hard-boiled* detective fiction that developed in America in the late 1920s and 1930s, which questions notions of rationality, community and stability, having a loner main character and hard-boiled endings which affirm their heroes' ability to survive against the odds. The tough guy in the main role, the detective, is faced with a world of corruption and violence, and "is responsible for solving puzzles in a surreal setting of urban brutality, deprived of any real sense of belonging and forced to do the sorting out single-handedly" (ibid.). The Hollywood screen adaptations of these stories came to be considered early examples of *film noir*.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* defines *post-cyberpunk* as "referring to science fiction that employs many of the themes associated with cyberpunk, especially the effects of highly advanced computer technologies on societies, but generally lacking the alienation and dystopianism characteristic of cyberpunk" (2007:152). As a term, it was first used by Lawrence Person, who wrote an essay "Notes Toward a Postcyberpunk Manifesto". According to him, the post-cyberpunk era began as early as 1988 with Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net*, but according to Kelly and Kesse, today's post-cyberpunk deals with post-human future (2007:xii) and this leads us to the next term – *transhumanism* which, as defined by Max More, who coined the term, is

"a class of philosophies that seek to guide us towards a posthuman condition. Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life. […] Transhumanism differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in the nature and possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies. (in Livingstone, 2015:316)

The term transhumanism is therefore generally synonymous with the terms posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism, as the quality developing after humans or after/beyond the human race. Cyberpunk has, therefore,

evolved over the past several decades from a relatively confined offspring of science fiction, to a genre that encompasses trends beyond it.

3. RICHARD MORGAN'S *ALTERED CARBON*
"It's a detective story set in a gritty cyberpunk world where no one ever dies, every deviancy is available for a price, and staying young is as simple as buying a new body."[2]
All of the terms described in the previous section can be applied to Richard Morgan's trilogy about Takeshi Kovacs, in varying degrees. For the purposes of this essay, we are going to look at the first novel, *Altered Carbon* (2002). Morgan described his vision of a distant future in this novel, which is an example[3] of cyberpunk, as the quote in the beginning of this section states. The cyber element is reflected by a dystopian image of a future in which technology has taken over the lives of people to the point where even death can be real or not. The particular technology in question is of alien origin and it is called altered carbon. Altered carbon was supposed to free people of their flesh, of their bodies or, as Morgan calls them, sleeves, and allow them to live unencumbered, as digital entities that can re-sleeve into different bodies or, if they can afford it, clones of their own original sleeves, in which case, the re-sleeving and, hence, life, can be endless. Their pure mind is digitized in what Morgan calls cortical stacks, implanted into each individual when they turn one year old. Takeshi says of the stack "it didn't look like much, impact-resistant casing…barely the size of a cigarette butt with…twisted filaments of the microjacks protruding stiffly from one end" (63).

The punk element of cyberpunk comes in the form of, first of all, the Neo-Catholics, who oppose the very idea of prolonged life and who see life and death as God intended – you only have one of each. They "don't believe you can digitize a human being without losing the soul" (Morgan, 2008:20). However, the main resistance, coming specifically through the characters of Kristin Ortega and Vernon Elliot, is more directed towards the effects the new technology has had on human nature. Namely, they oppose the eternally living and filthy rich Meths[4], and this is the social chasm altered carbon has brought, making it one aspect of the dystopian feature of the novel.

In Morgan's future, even a murder is not a classical murder as we know it, or as Laurens Bancroft, 357 years old, says "you can't kill me just by wiping out my cortical stack" (37) because he has remote storage where his entire personality is being updated, every 48 hours. While it may sound like the ultimate achievement, Ortega says:

> "you live that long, things start happening to you. You get too impressed with yourself. Ends up, you think you're God. Suddenly, the little people, thirty, maybe forty years old, well they don't really matter any more. You've seen whole societies rise and fall, and you start to feel you're standing outside it all, and none of it really matters to you. And maybe you'll start snuffing those little people, just like picking daisies, if they get under your feet." (68)

She even goes so far as to compare the Meths to the AI[5]'s in a sense that "they are not human, they deal with humanity the way you and I deal with insect life" (69). So, Morgan presents a new stage in the conception of the cyberhuman – beyond the cyborgs and bodily modifications or technological enhancements; and this is possible precisely due to the fact that he separated body and mind. But, for those who could not afford having their original sleeves cloned multiple times to live out eternity, the altered carbon technology is not that remarkable and this potentiates even further the chasm that it has brought. Takeshi says:

> "…most people could afford to be re-sleeved at least once, but the point was that unless you were very rich you had to live out your full span each time and old age…was a wearying business. Second time around was worse because you knew what to expect. Not many had the stamina to do it more than twice. Most people went into voluntary storage after that, with occasional temporary re-sleevings for family matters, and of course even those re-sleevings thinned out as time passed and new generations bustled in without the old ties." (69)

In his re-sleeving as we witness it in *Altered Carbon,* Takeshi, or Tak, is an epitome of the tough detectives of the hard-boiled genre. With his military training in the special forces known as the Envoy Corps, he is much more than

[2] https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/a34dxe/altered-carbon-netflix-review
[3] Some would beg to differ with this statement, for ex. https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/12/17004210/altered-carbon-netflix-blade-runner-aesthetic-cyberpunk-retro-futurism; https://medium.com/@damiengwalter/altered-carbon-was-always-doomed-5511e14b8c52
[4] A short for Methuselah, the oldest person in the Bible, who is said to have lived 969 years. In the book and the series, Meths are multicentenarians.
[5] Artificial Intelligence. In Morgan's world, the AI are sentient beings who are disgusted by humans and see them as weak and in need of being conquered.

just a private detective because the Corps "took psychospiritual techniques that oriental cultures on Earth had known about for millennia and distilled them into a training system so complete that on most worlds graduates of it were instantly forbidden by law to hold any political or military office." (34). Tak himself says "I work by absorption…whatever I come into contact with, I soak up, and I use that to get by" (ibid.).

Yet another cyberpunk characteristic evident in the novel is its neo-noir quality, particularly "to the extent that…neo-noir…marked a shift from concentration on story to the psychology of character, interpretation of motive and meaning has become more important" (Monaco, 2010:43) – all of these three elements are of crucial importance in the story.

4. NETFLIX'S *ALTERED CARBON*

Some of the original narrative elements of *Altered Carbon* the novel differ in the television series of Netflix's adaptation: some are more successful – examples go from the change of the (Jimmy) *Hendrix* to the (Edgar Allan Poe's) *Raven* AI hotel to the sublimation of Envoy trainer Virginia Vidaura and anti-Protectorate rebel leader Quellcrist Falconer into a single character; to the less favorable ones, such as the rewriting of Reileen as Tak's sister. However, the one, perhaps more subtle change we are interested in for the purposes of this essay is the barely perceptible movement away from the dystopian cyberpunk to a post-utopian post-cyberpunk.

Elana Gomel in her essay titled "Recycled Dystopias: Cyberpunk and the End of History" (in Arts, 2018), differentiates the terms utopia, dystopia and post-utopia. She says:

> "utopia and dystopia share a dynamic future-oriented modality involving a meaningful change, whether this change is seen positively or negatively…in other words, both utopia and dystopia presuppose a teleological narrative of history which culminates in either millennium or apocalypse. In either case, the future is transformed." (47)

She then poses a key question, asking whether the future of cyberpunk is "sufficiently different from our present to be regarded as dystopian"? (ibid.) to then state that cyberpunk is not dystopian, but rather post-utopian. While, in the context of *Altered Carbon,* we are without a doubt looking at a future much different from ours and therefore can freely call it a dystopia, the notion of post-utopia, as mentioned earlier, is of significance for the screen adaptation. Francis Fukuyama introduced the term in an essay in 1989 in which he wrote of the end of History, with a capital H, i.e. "the notion that this process has an inbuilt salvational or destructive directionality" (ibid.).

Post-utopia is characterized not by a look to the future, be it positive or negative, but rather by a nostalgic look to the past, making it not spatially but temporally nostalgic and this new nostalgia, according to Gomel "is engaged in historical denialism through a complex system of pastiches, intertextuality, remaking and recycling" (49). It is precisely this type of temporal nostalgia that more than just permeates the Netflix adaptation and this is evident in several aspects:

- Even though the change from Hendrix to Poe was an unplanned alteration, due to the fact that the Jimi Hendrix estate refused to give the producers the rights to the guitarist's name and image, the *Raven* and its AI host Poe color the series with a profound touch of nostalgia for a past gone and a language gone, as Poe uses not the vernacular, but his lyrical and poetic language. Not only the language, but his entire persona reflects a time gone by, which is at odds with the current present.
- The novel contains narrative flashbacks, but they do not detract the futuristic sense the readers gets and do not really pull the reader back into Tak's past as they do not have the nostalgic element. This element prevails in the series, as Tak is quite overwhelmed emotionally each time he has a vision/hallucination of Quellcrist or Rei. In his most difficult times, times of despair, he does not look to the future, but idealizes his past. This, coupled with a longing to go back to that past, gives the series its post-utopian feel.

Furthermore, in Csicsery-Ronay's citation in the first section, he claims cyberpunk contains pure negation of manners, history and memory and nothing could be less true of the screen adaptation, as it is more than just permeated by history and memory – rather, it is saturated with them.

Finally, the *Altered Carbon* of the TV series is less dystopian than the novel and it moves away from the original postulates of cyberpunk and more towards post-cyberpunk. When it comes to post-cyberpunk, Wheeler (2016) says whereas "cyberpunk is often cold and nihilistic, post-cyberpunk is often warm and humanist…[as it] often attempts to explore what happens when we move beyond the threshold of being human, into the post-singularity period". Altered Carbon may not be warm and humanist to a great extent, but it is arguably warm*er* and *more* humanist than other examples from the genre, mainly through its portrayal of family life and family ties – primarily those of Tak and Rei, Ortega and her family and Elliot and his daughter. Finally, whether or not, not just *Altered Carbon*, but today's cyberpunk has simply faded into retrofuturism, is a question for another essay.

5. CONCLUSION

In 1993 in an article titled *Cyberpunk R.I.P.*, Paul Saffo said "the cyberpunk movement is disappearing as quickly as it arrived just a few years ago". Well, he was quite wrong about that, although he predicted post-cyberpunk's coming with more success saying that "this new movement will be cyberpunk imbued with human warmth, substituting a deep sense of interdependence in place of lone-wolf isolationism". As the title of this essay says, cyberpunk is not dead, but alive and flourishing in the 21st century, although it may not contain all the original elements it did in the 1980s, as it has grown and evolved in the past decades because, as Tobeck and Jellerson state (in Arts, 2018:83) "cyberpunk generic conventions now militate against the creation of a symbolic system that can effectively respond to its evolving social moment".

It might be said that we are now in the age of post-cyberpunk, transcending the human form and the human limitations, going beyond the grim vision of the future the early works had. From a dystopian vision, we are now moving towards a post-utopian and a post-teleological vision.

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