



Variations of Death in Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon*. From Cybergothic to Candygothic

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The article presents an analysis of Richard K. Morgan's novel *Altered Carbon* with a focus on postmodern, neo-Gothic perspectives on death. More generally, it explores Gothic thanatology in the postmodern world. Attention is also drawn to the representations of death and technological survival in Morgan's novel.

Keywords: Gothic, cybergothic, postmodern culture, postmodern eschatology, *Altered Carbon*, Richard K. Morgan.

Let us start with the facts: in the past few decades Gothic has transgressed the strict limits of literature, massively penetrating the world of cinema, music, and fashion, which shows that people need and enjoy it. Understandably, Gothic plots and patterns are most eagerly adopted by the consumer industry of entertainment as a result of which they have been readily transformed into a mechanism of success. However, this type of success and the extension of Gothic onto a larger cultural field have also contributed to its decay, mainly explicable by the exhaustion of its literary relevance. For instance, a scholar like Fred Botting, who generally admits that the Gothic died with Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*, says that the Gothic in postmodern culture is the outcome of a "diffusion" of the genre (qtd. in Beville 7). At its extreme limits, the process of diffusion generates what Botting calls "candygothic" (134), namely, a popular, superficial kind of Gothic, flexibly adapted to the expectations of the public. This Gothic takes over the core imprints of the genre, builds on the public expectations of terror, and exploits the fear of dying within the so-called "culture of death." This is how Baudrillard has labelled the phenomenon where the true intensity of classical Gothic is highly diluted.

There are also scholars who try to redefine and nuance the engagement between Gothic and postmodern literature, going beyond the limits of its understanding as a culture of entertainment. One of them is Maria Beville, who is aware that the last few decades have contributed to the genre's dilution. Still, in her seminal *Gothic-postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*, Beville talks about a new genre, Gothic-postmodernism, that links the Gothic and the postmodern in literary and cultural terms. She maintains that the Gothic is "the clearest mode of expression in literature for voicing the terrors of postmodernity; a mode that is far from dead and in fact rejuvenated in the present context of increased global terrorism" (8). To put it differently, the core of the genre is *terror*, which has not been fully acknowledged yet. Beville adds that "Gothic-postmodernism is not the same, although it is related

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to classifications such as postmodern Gothic or Contemporary Gothic” (10). In her view, the characteristics of the new genre are:

the blurring of the borders that exist between the real and the fictional, which results in narrative self-consciousness and an interplay between the supernatural and the metafictional; a concern with the sublime effects of terror and the impossible to represent aspects of reality and subjectivity; specific Gothic thematic devices of haunting, the Doppelgänger, and a dualistic philosophy of good and evil; an atmosphere of mystery and suspense and a counter-narrative function. (15)

Relying on a quote from Angela Carter, Belville concludes that “the shadows and gloom, the turbulent landscapes and demonized, ghostly or monstrous characters are a central part of the generic substance of Gothic-postmodernism, and subsequently of its representation of otherness: the ‘subterranean areas behind everyday experience’” (15). Carter creates a hybrid, dialogic genre, in which the Gothic “functions to fulfil the expression of the darkness of postmodernity, while postmodernist aspects operate to establish ontological and epistemological standpoints that query accepted ethical and moral ‘realities’, which have long been the focus of Gothic subversion” (Beville 16). Such a perspective selectively extends the literary realm onto fictional works which explore the crises of identity, the fragmentation of the self, the darkness of the human psyche, and the philosophy of being and knowing, although many of these topics are not generally considered as being specifically Gothic.

Another scholar, Catherine Spooner, defines contemporary Gothic as “a diverse, loosely defined set of narrative conventions and literary tropes,” due to the fact that since its origins the Gothic has “spawned other genres, interacted with literary movements, social pressures and historical conditions” (*Contemporary* 26). According to her, postmodernism, along “with its embrace of genre fiction, pastiche, sensationalism and spectacle, provided a much more sympathetic climate for Gothic’s Revival” (“Gothic Media” 22).

Such a generous definition of Gothic introduces, under the umbrella of the genre, a great deal of fiction, from *The Da Vinci Code* to *Altered Carbon*. It does not necessarily mean that these works are programmatically Gothic. It only means that they also include several traces of Gothic decanted from the hard core of the domain. The traces of Gothic do not belong explicitly to literature, because – let us quote Catherine Spooner again –

Gothic has never been solely a literary phenomenon ... Gothic remains an incredibly fertile and diverse cultural form. Whether on My Space or at the multiplex, Gothic continually reinvents itself, and is reinvented, at both the level of the individual producer/consumer and of the multinational corporation. Gothic is both the stuff of big-budget blockbusters, and of underground bands and cult comics. Now more than ever it is impossible to summarize: it is branching out in new directions, spreading into new territories. (“Gothic Media” 195-196).

Bearing in mind the fact that Gothic proves to be a flexible and extendable matrix, we are going to analyse one of its hybrid forms, which borrows some of the familiar topoi of classic core Gothic, such as dark settings, sexual violence, or the dismembered town geography, but also appears to be a mixture of traditional Gothicism, science fiction, and cyberpunk. I am referring to the cybergothic analysed by C. Jodey Castricano in her essay “If a Building Is a Sentence, So Is a Body. Kathy Acker and the Post-colonial Gothic” (1998). Its main entity, the cyborg, challenges the limits of human identity, clears the distinction between people and machines, destroys any dream of a primordial unity, and envisions a world without gender divides.

A somewhat softer collision between Gothic and science fiction, which does not eradicate organic life, can be found in certain kinds of cyberpunk. As David Ketterer has said, this is a subgenre characterized by a futurist projection of the combination between *low life* and *high tech* (141). This means an incredible technological advancement, especially Artificial Intelligence, AI, combined with a social crisis or individual mess, or to put it differently, a dystopian, dark universe, placed on Terra in a not-so-distant future, which induces an invasive transformation of the human body. This subgenre is generally built on plots resembling detective investigations, with a lot of marginal protagonists who act from the

underground. The rest of this article will focus on Richard K. Morgan's novel *Altered Carbon*, and the series subsequently produced by Netflix in 2018.

The setting of Morgan's novel is a post-extropianist dystopian world which makes immortality possible due to the evolution of science and technology. Immortality is achieved by digitizing and storing human consciousness to download it into other bodies, called sleeves, easily recognizable due to their genetic ID. These might be natural bodies, they might belong to already stored criminals, or they might be synthetic, cheap and ephemeral, as well as clones or bodies improved through neurochemistry. Also, when aroused, as is the case of Miriam Bancroft, the bodies might secrete a drug called Merge Nine, which shifts the subject into a sensory overload. The storage happens in cortical stacks implanted in the cervical zone. Their destruction means real death because of the impossibility of transferring the personal data into another body. Obviously, within the scheme, there is also a mirror-image represented by a group of people who share the idea that reincarnation is nothing more than death, because all souls go up to the heavens after dying and do not fall into bodies. These people are the Neo-Catholics, who inherit the Catholic creed of today, and regard the Vatican as the centre of their religion.

Within a society which digitizes and stores memory, the judiciary system can easily solve criminal cases because it has, so to speak, unlimited access to information. Exceptions are the Neo-Catholics, usual targets of criminal attacks, because they cannot be re-sleeved for a future testimony. To stop the crimes against this group and, of course, in order to contain the criminal row, the United Nations Interstellar Protectorate promotes a bill, generally known as *Resolution 653*, which allows the authorities to re-sleeve real or suspected murder victims irrespective of their religious affiliation. This means that even Neo-Catholics can be re-sleeved so that they can testify as witnesses whenever it is deemed necessary.

In *Altered Carbon*, Catholicism provides the conservative perspective on immortality, the main argument of its adherents being that only "God can resurrect" (Morgan 17) and therefore dead bodies must not be interfered with. However, Karmic Buddhism provides a different view of the matter, namely, that you remain connected to your previous lives and pay for sins you committed in them. Asked by the author and journalist Saxon Bullock about the initial idea of the novel, Richard K. Morgan remembered:

It started out from an argument I was having with a Buddhist. The point of conflict was the karma system. He was arguing any suffering you undergo in this life is a direct result of something bad you did in a previous life, which sounds fair until you realize that you can't actually remember any of your previous lives. Then, it suddenly starts to sound existentially pretty fucking unfair. After all, if you can't remember a previous life then to all intents and purposes that life was lived by another person. And why should you be paying for someone else's crimes? Once I got hold of the idea, it fascinated me and I couldn't let it go. I decided that I wanted to tell a crime story based around this injustice. And since I'm not in any way a religious man, the only way I could make it work was to go shopping for the hardware in the SF Mall of Fame. There are precedents for the kind of technology *Altered Carbon* describes all the way back to writers like Robert Sheckley and there's even an episode of the original *Star Trek* that has the same basic premise. So I just ransacked the genre and made off with the goods. Later on, of course, I had to sit down and figure out how to make all this stuff work in a social and political context, and that was where the fun really started. (Bullock)

In the novel, even prisons function digitally, the inmates being extracted from their bodies and stored for the purpose of introducing them later into the marketing system that regulates the commercial circuit of the reincarnations. In other words, the emptied body of a prisoner is hired or sold for new reincarnations.

Takeshi Kovacs, a former member of a military, interplanetary elite squad named the Envoy Corps, is the "beneficiary" of such a consciousness transfer. Kovacs is taken out from the prison storage and downloaded into the unfamiliar body of an ex-cop called Elias Ryker, hired/blackmailed by the wealthy and near-immortal Laurens Bancroft into investigating his recent (temporary) death, classified by the police as a suicide. Takeshi Kovacs returns to life several year lights after his last mission which ended with his incarceration into Bay City (San Francisco).

UN Resolution 653 is the edge of discord within the economy of the plot which also comprises elements of crime fiction. The Neo-Catholics act against it: “No to Resolution 653! Only God can resurrect!! D.H.F = D.E.A.T.H” (Morgan 17). The resolution is also targeted by a conspiracy led by Reileen Kawahara who wants to conceal several crimes committed within her brothel, the Head in the Clouds, and whose services stretch out to include sadism and necrophilia. Barring the Resolution means getting rid of the witnesses, even if these potential witnesses, or victims, are coded illegally as Neo-Catholics. Moreover, the suspension of UN Resolution 653 will guarantee the discretionary power, over life and death, of the richest caste, the Meths.

The discretionary power evolves within a perimeter in which money and political influence criss-cross the underground criminality, which favours “cannibalistic” relationships between social classes. There is a dark and clandestine geography here where bodies are marketed, and different drugs are put on sale. The underground space unleashes the primary, violent, even monstrous energies of the humans. It is inhabited by Reileen Kawahara, who sets the dark rules of the game, by the very rich and influential magnate Laurens Bancroft, who is manipulated to commit a crime, being afterwards blackmailed in order to block the UN resolution, but also by Takeshi Kovacs, famous for his Sherlock Homes-type composure. The comparison is justified both by Takeshi’s outstanding ability to detect any hidden detail and by his impeccable training as an Envoy.

The investigation of the alleged crime whose victim Bancroft is gets rapidly out of control: Kovacs is caught between the police network, the criminal underworld, and the persuasion of Reileen Kawahara, an old acquaintance. Reileen has recommended him for the job, but now she asks him to falsify the outcome of the investigation. Convinced that human life has no value at all because “real human flesh is cheaper than a machine” (Morgan 351), Reileen is an epitome of occult power. In the TV version, Reileen is transformed into Takeshi Kovacs’s lost sister. Her treacherous past is gradually exposed, which increases the dramatic overturns and the interpersonal tensions within the story. In both versions, print and film, Takeshi Kovacs moves between elitist pleasure dwellings suspended above the clouds and the darkness of dubious, terrestrial hotels, biocabins used for sex, fighting grounds, and the criminal sub-worlds whose origins could be traced back to cyberpunk and the Gothic.

Born in a colony named Harlan’s World, the ex-envoy Takeshi Kovacs is accustomed to reincarnations. His earlier missions presuppose the downloading of his consciousness into different bodies from different worlds, these operations being made possible through the so-called download-centres, by means of subspace transmissions called needlecasting. While being transferred into a different body might be traumatic for an ordinary person and might require a certain period of adaptation, an envoy’s accommodation time is faster, due to his special mental training, which is highly efficient. The training of the elite squads combines neurachem conditioning and cyborg interfaces with old, Oriental psycho-spiritualistic techniques, which form an entity capable to ingest rapidly any data provided by a new experience.

“Coming back from the dead can be rough” (Morgan 9), we are told at the beginning of the first part of the novel. However, “[i]n the Envoy Corps they teach you to let go before storage. Stick it in neutral and float. It’s the first lesson and the trainers drill it into you from day one” (Morgan 9). Disengaging becomes possible due to the bleak faith in the efficiency of the penal system. There is also the social mantra “Don’t worry, they’ll store it” (Morgan 9).

In technical terms, somebody’s return to life is similar to re-experiencing the pains of a natural birth, and it starts with the immersion of the new body into a tank full of flotation jelly, an amniotic liquid substitute. When somebody is reincarnated into the body of a person alien to them, a potentially dangerous moment can be the so-called mirroring stage, when the person sees their new face for the first time, experiencing a moment of split personality:

For the first couple of moments all you can see is someone else looking at you through a window frame. Then, like a shift in focus, you feel yourself float rapidly up behind the mask and adhere to its inside with a shock that’s almost tactile. It’s as if someone’s cut the umbilical cord, only instead of separating the two of you, it’s the otherness that has been severed and now you’re just looking at your reflection in a mirror. (Morgan 12)

A reaction called psycho-entirety rejection can happen within these seconds, due to the belief that your body is inhabited by someone else, as the mirror shows a person different from yourself.

The reincarnation trauma can be quite frightening for children, who must reincarnate into aged, adult, or cross-gender bodies on account of financial problems in their families or the precarious terms of the insurance policy that their parents have taken out; this process is labelled cross-sleeving. Such odd reincarnations make self-recognition extremely difficult both for those who come back to life from the altered carbon exile and for the families that they belong to. On the other hand, the digital version of Gothic vampire immortality manifests a specific Achilles tendon vulnerability, identified by the digital status of the consciousness because the cortical chips, called stacks, can be infected and even annihilated by various cybernetic viruses. Such a virus is Rawling 4851, which has contaminated the Envoy Corps inducing in them self-destructive insanity.

Immortality becomes possible, but it is not guaranteed within the deeply polarized, money-centred society depicted in the novel. Morgan himself formulated this in the following way:

Society is, always has been and always will be a structure for the exploitation and oppression of the majority through systems of political force dictated by an élite, enforced by thugs, unformed or not, and upheld by a wilful ignorance and stupidity on the part of the majority whom the system oppresses. (Bullock)

Significantly, the Marxist critic, philosopher, and political theorist Fredric Jameson famously pronounced cyberpunk to be “the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself” (419).

In a review of *Altered Carbon* for *The Guardian*, Jon Courtenay Grimwood remarks that Morgan’s novel “reads like a hypermodern vampire novel as its hero faces down an unholy alliance of the un(willing-to-be)dead” (theguardian.com). The vampire figure, in this case, is a member of the elitist social group called the Meths, whose name comes from the Biblical figure of Methuselah. In Genesis, 5, 21-27, Methuselah, the son of Enoch, is said to have lived for nine hundred and sixty-nine years, and thus he has become the iconic image of human longevity. Transformed by Richard K. Morgan into a social class category, the Meths incorporate the idea of Biblical longevity, but they do not share the divine assistance enjoyed by the paradigm. Such a Meth is the extremely rich Laurens Bancroft. He is the beneficiary of a guaranteed immortality, due to his endless stock of clones and a programmed remote storage mechanism administered by Psychasec, a laboratory specialized in keeping the Meths alive forever.

In the world depicted in *Altered Carbon* immortality proves to be a problem of options and resources. Even if the great majority of the population can afford to get resleeved when death is approaching, poor people are unable to update their bodies or to acquire a clone. Therefore, they keep growing old, again and again, which makes their new incarnations very problematic in the long run. Death, or the voluntary storage, interrupted only by rare family gatherings, becomes an existential, rather than a religious, option. On the other hand, rich people, such as the Meths, can buy not only updated bodies, clones cultivated in laboratories, chemically enhanced and stored in special safe boxes, but also a digital backup of their consciousness and memory, which guarantees them a survival even when their stack is destroyed. While for an ordinary person the destruction of his/her cortical stack means real death, as opposed to the virtual one, in the case of the Meths existential and digital privilege delays real death for ever. They thus approach the classical paradigm of the “undead” vampire.

Obviously, for the Meths immortality is not provided by drinking blood, but by spending money, which enables them to pay for a whole range of resources guaranteeing that state: bodies, technical assistance, research, chemical incentives, and so on. The new type of capitalist order favours the exhaustion of human energy resources existing on Earth, following the intergalactic colonization which started earlier. Resorting to knowledge of previous colonial projects, Laurens Bancroft, who has built his empire by absorbing the remnants of human energy on the planet, explains that the decay of human civilization has happened because young people were included in the intergalactic colonizing strategies, leaving behind on Earth an inert, obedient, and fossilized society, dominated by a sterile morality. The UN did nothing to stop the crisis but in fact exacerbated it through protectionist decrees and rulings.

A powerful image of the social division and inequality depicted in *Altered Carbon* is social geography: unlike the lower classes, the Meths live in sumptuous aerial residences such as Suntouch House. In the Netflix series, Aerium, a luxurious, beyond-the-clouds, sunny perimeter, inhabited by the Meths, is contrasted to the gloomy terrestrial Licktown, engulfed in violence and crime. The dichotomy clearly exposes the vampire-like relationship between a voracious, privileged minority and their potential victims recruited from the common people who constitute a majority.

What happens actually when dying is no longer inevitable due to the resleeving technology? A possible answer is supplied by Kristin Ortega, a lieutenant working for the Organic Damage Division (the police):

You live that long, things start happening to you. You get impressed with yourself. End up, you think you're God. Suddenly the little people, thirty, maybe forty years old, well, they don't really matter anymore. 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. (Morgan 53)

Within the dichotomies imagined by Richard K. Morgan, the Meths come close to Artificial Intelligence (AI), both of them sharing a similar, discretionary distancing from "normal" humanity. Upon reflection on the conduct and the destiny of the elite, Quell Falconer, the wise authority whose reflections dominate the novel, says:

They are what we once dreamed of as gods, mythical agents of destiny, as inescapable as Death, that poor old peasant labourer, bent over his scythe, no longer is. Poor Death, no match for the mighty altered-carbon technologies of data storage and retrieval arrayed against him. Once we lived in terror of his arrival. (Morgan 251)

The clearest proclamation of the divine status enjoyed by the Meths is formulated by Laurens Bancroft in the cinematic version aired by Netflix in 2018: "God is dead! We have taken his place." "The Meths have surmounted Death, the Great Equalizer, the darkest of the angels of our nature."

The entities called AI (Artificial Intelligence) control everything in *Altered Carbon*, including the hotel industry. The Hendrix, the hotel at which Takeshi Kovacs registers, proves to be such a place. It scans the personal data of the clients and acts accordingly to provide pleasure for the guests. In the TV show this aspect of the hotel is altered as part of an attempt to meet the expectations of the Gothic genre. Thus, it is called *The Raven*, having as a logo a hologram representing a raven croaking luridly, while its humanoid concierge is called Edgar Allan Poe. The advertisement promises to provide a "sanctuary to the weary traveller," as well as "Bay City's most deliciously macabre experience." ("Let us unfold you in the dark and delicate world of luxury," says Edgar Allan Poe's inviting hologram.)

In the end, extinction occurs under the same projection of the poet's profile. It is completed heroically while several lines from Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" are heard: "And neither the angels in Heaven above/ Nor the demons down under the sea/ Can ever dissever my soul from the soul/ Of the beautiful ..." Not sharing the complete neutrality of the canonical Artificial Intelligences, Edgar Allan Poe (called Eddie sometimes) is mesmerized by everything human, the origins of his fascination lying within a bond between the creation and its creator. As a result, Eddie takes up unexpected human characteristics. He even becomes an assistant in the police investigation conducted by Takeshi Kovacs, and also protects a female character called Lizzie Eliot.

An essential ingredient in *Altered Carbon*, shared both by cyberpunk and Gothic, is violence. It is usually extreme, not softened in any way, but stretched out to include sadism. Whenever it is about the maniac description of the effects induced by drugs and weapons, the pleasure to go into minute details when describing the destruction of something organic or a bloodshed, as well as the snuff houses and their practices, violence is intended to shock, horrify, and to some extent make the reader externalize their own ambiguous attitude. If the large number of the weapons in the text shows that the author is really obsessed with contemporary weaponry, the drugs included in the novel introduce a world of their own. For instance, Betathanine, or the Reaper, proves to be an extremely intriguing drug. Engineered for the near-death research projects, it induces a clinical alteration of the intellect, suppresses emotions,

neutralizes the instinct of pain or joy and assures a detached, strictly rational functioning of the human being. By taking it an ordinary soldier is transformed into a cold-blooded, ruthless killing machine.

Violence also includes the possibility of the so-called doublesleeping. The procedure is illegal and is for this reason punished with a final death. This means that the culprit's stack is destroyed. On the other hand, the simultaneously plural embodiment of a digitized consciousness gives way to the criminal avoidance of the restrictions imposed by the system. On its shadowy half we can find the ruthless assassins like Dimitri Kadmin, while its sunny counterpart allows Takeshi Kovacs to find the truth in the final section of the novel.

Ever since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* the terror caused by scientific progress has been a recurrent feature of quite a lot of Gothic fiction. Significantly, we find a mythological creature in *Altered Carbon* that is strongly reminiscent of Victor Frankenstein's "Monster." The creature in question is some sort of a Bogeyman called the Patchwork Man. Let us not forget that the Creature in Shelley's novel represents a volatile, non-identity case, because Victor painstakingly combines bits and pieces of dead human and animal bodies hoping to get a harmoniously unified being. The problem is that his Creature becomes the embodiment of heterogeneous atrocity whose disparate body parts are in horrid contrast to one another. He is a grotesque corpse capable of articulating speech and complex thinking, a hybrid being that blurs the boundary between life and death.

Curiously enough, a similar anxiety returns within the hybrid realms of the postmodern world, accompanied by some fascination exercised by technological and media explosion, an increased alienation of the self, and growing secularism. In *Altered Carbon*, the most powerful criticism of such tendencies comes from Neo-Catholicism whose proponents claim that digitizing human beings produces soulless humanity because mechanized salvation is virtually impossible. Even if you surpass the religious interdictions and accept a mechanized version of eternal life provided by machines, terror appears to balance with hope in a prolonged tension:

The human race has dreamed of heaven and hell for millennia. Pleasure or pain unending, undiminished, and uncurtailed by the strictures of life and death. Thanks to virtual formatting, these fantasies can now exist. All that is needed is an industrial-capacity power generator. We have indeed made hell – and heaven – on earth. (Morgan 231-232)

But the heaven within the novel is not exactly the heaven of mystics and visionaries. Significantly, Morgan himself has warned readers against approaching *Altered Carbon* in the spirit of optimism. Asked about the message of his text, his answer was sardonic: "Don't visit Earth, perhaps?" (Bullock).

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