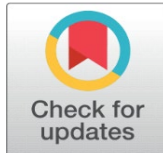
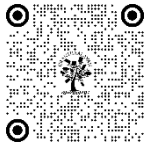


ALTERED DISTINCTION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE MIND AND THE BODY IN THE CASE OF ALTERED CARBON

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.4369](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.4369)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Altered Carbon is a Netflix original series in two parts. The First part is created by Laeta Kalogridis, and adapted from the novel, by the same title, written by Richard K. Morgan in 2001. In this Cyberpunk genre series, a new human subjectivity is represented in the series, in which a Transhuman state is imagined. In the series, human mind can be stored in 'Cortical Stacks' and can be transferred into changeable bodies indefinitely thereby making humans immortal. It can also be spun up in the virtual for any purpose such as interrogation, torture or a virtual meeting. Bodies can be manufactured, real or synthetic and commodified. But these capabilities also result in unfair handling and exploitation of both mind and body. Hence, this detailed content analysis will study these conflicts and issues of 'altered carbon' with the perspectives of the mind/body as actually distinct substances as suggested by Rene Descartes. He argues that mind and the body differ in their natures, which makes it possible for one to exist without the other. These characteristics seem to adhere to the mind/body distinction as demonstrated in the series, which will help the paper explore the problems of a Transhuman state. In conclusion, with this paper, I would be critically analyzing the altered human subjectivity and its consequences in the series.

Keywords: Science Fiction, Cyberpunk, Mind-Body Dualism, Mind-Body Problem, Post humanism, Transhumanism

1. INTRODUCTION

Taking into consideration the rapid advancements in the fields of technology, biology and medicine, imagining something impossible is potentially possible as new technological discoveries may soon change our fantasies to our realities. But Posthuman fantasies do not necessarily come with positive connotations alone. Technological advancements that go unchecked, can also lead to deterioration instead. Natasha Vita More is of the view that "Often when our passions are the driving force of change, they are discounted or misconceived. To sum up this sentiment, I refer to a misconception about a Brave New World." (80) Though we humans are designed to explore and progress, we need to know our limits to what we need and what we want.

As Neil Badmington argues, we humans are too eager to step into the Posthuman terrain, ignoring a proper working through of Humanism. One such terrain can be called Transhumanism which Francesca Ferrando, a philosopher of posthumanism, divides into three categories of Liberal Transhumanism, Democratic Transhumanism, Extropianism and Singulitarianism, all sharing the common goal of human enhancement through science and technology. Ferrando says that for some Transhumanists, humans may undergo such a radical change as to no longer being able to call themselves

humans. Max More declares: "By thoughtfully, carefully, and yet boldly applying technology to ourselves, we can become something no longer accurately described as human—we can become posthuman" (More). Such a radical transformation is seen in the Netflix series *Altered Carbon* where humans can exist in virtual simulation or in a natural or synthetic body. This imagined world of *Altered Carbon* allows the mind to exist with and without a physical body. Thereby making it a distinct substance different from a body. This possibility of distinction is what was proposed by Renè Descartes as the Mind-Body problem in 1641. In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), he attempts to explain the relation between the existence of God and the 'real distinction' between the mind and the body in such a way that they could exist all by themselves without any other substance, including each other, but made possible only by the will of God. He gives two versions of the 'real distinction' arguments. Descartes states that the mind is a non-extending, thinking thing, whereas the body is the extended, non-thinking thing. And therefore the mind is distinct from the body and can exist without it. Similarly Descartes claims that since the mind seems indivisible by its very nature, whereas the body which has parts and can be divided by its very nature. Hence the mind is completely different from the body. Descartes was doubtful if life was only a dream and the 'reality' we live in is just an illusion and not actually happening. But he could be sure of one thing, he could trust that he was actually thinking. This thinking is a proof of his being, 'I think, therefore I am'.

These arguments by Descartes can be seen fit to explain the imagined world of *Altered Carbon* where mind and body seem to be able to exist separately. Specifically the Mind that exists in the form of 'Cortical Stack', a digitisation of mind, which can be put into a new sleeve (body), real or synthetic, as many times as one can afford, as long as the stack remains intact. These Stacks hold the consciousness and memories of a person. As the mind is digitized, it can be spun up in virtual reality for meetings, pleasure, interrogations, torture etc. The bodies can be fabricated, replicated and cloned thereby making the body a commodity as well.

2. AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The overall aim of this research is to explore the Transhumanist scenario of the mind existing in such a state that makes it possible to exist within and without a physical body. The research shall primarily aim on the problematics of this transhumanist state- the exploitations that arise out of the mind-body split, the commodification of mind and body and how everything changes the whole human subjectivity, all in adherence to Descartes' idea of Mind-Body Dualism.

3. ARGUMENTS PRESENTED

Throughout the story we see people changing sleeves and living in virtual reality, which supports Descartes' argument straight away that the mind and the body are two distinct elements that are capable of existing irrespective of each other. The first episode of *Altered Carbon* starts with a monologue saying :

"First thing you will learn is that nothing is what it seems. Your body is not who you are. You shed it like a snake sheds its skin. Leave it forgotten, behind you."

In the fifth episode, Takeshi Kovacs, the protagonist of the series, says :

"How do I know you are who you are? Before stacks, yeah, a face is a face. But now, anyone could be in there."

These instances show how in the world of *Altered Carbon*, the sleeve has no necessary relation to a single body or any body for that matter. No one knows if the other person is in his birth sleeve or not. Or if that person is actually the person they are. Descartes thinks that the mind does not constitute the brain but only interacts through it. So is the case with cortical Stacks which sit beneath the brain. Every time the Stack is shifted it interacts with the new brain and body. Killing of the brain doesn't mean killing of the Stack. Kovacs is brought back up from ice (prison) where he existed for two hundred and fifty years without a body. He wakes up in the new sleeve in a state of panic which the prison employee explains to be due to the violent death of the last sleeve Kovacs was in before he went on ice. This is indicative that the mind could exist without the body but is not completely unaffected by it. Further when Kovacs realises that his new sleeve is hardcore nicotine addict, it explains that the modes of the body interact with the mind. And since Kovacs is a trained envoy, his skills of combat and instincts are intact as the modes of his mind which existed for a long time without a body. Similarly the enhancements of military-grade neurachem and combat muscle memory of Ryker's sleeve (present Kovacs sleeve) were intact as the modes of the body which were stored without a mind.

Like Descartes, who seems to put mind over body, the story too gives precedence to the mind being the essential characteristic of a human and not the body, which has been commodified as merely a product that can be purchased and exploited as much as one can afford. The body's commodification is most evident in episode 2. The Psychasec facility which is the top of the market in augmented and designer-enhanced sleeves. The holograms of sleeves lure the customers

by saying “you deserve to look on the outside the way you feel on the inside. You deserve this”, “Best sleeves money can buy”, “What does your sleeve say about you” and a young naked sleeve says, “Put your wife in me”(AC ep.2). All these instances seem to draw a picture of the body as an individual substance trying to entice the mind as another individual substance. Also in the first episode when Kovacs is brought out of the prison in Ryker’s sleeve, two parents receive their seven years old daughter in a middle aged woman’s body who is even older than them. When they complain about it, the employee rudely asks them to pay for an upgrade or put her back in storage. Receivers look into the eyes of strangers, searching for a glimpse of the person they’ve lost. So the protectorate keeps the best sleeves for higher causes, treating the body in matters of a good or bad quality commodity. Infact, people themselves care little about their bodies and treat them as something external. In episode three, Bancroft holds a grand party where his main event is sleeve killing, in which a married couple brutally fights for an upgraded sleeve. When asked by Ortega how they go home to their kids as strangers, they answer that their children are used to it. Similarly sleeve death fights are demanded and are a major sport in places like ‘fightdrome’ where the host Carnage, excites the crowd by offering ‘real blood, real pain, real death’ to which the adrenaline fueled crowd shouts, repeats and desperately demands ‘real death’. Also the personality of the person lies solely in his mind and not in the body. Kovacs pretends to be Ryker to interrogate Carnage, so he asks Ortega how he can act like Ryker.

Not only is the body/sleeve commodified, the mind too, in a way is handled as a product or an object throughout the story. Cyber-crime is very prevalent and hackers or Dippers steal the snippets of meths’ memory during the uplink (needlecasting) and sell them to the black market which has a huge demand for it. People are seen handling, hiding, trading someone else’s stacks (minds) for their benefits. In episode two, Kovacs visits a museum where the old Envoy Stacks from the Battle of the Stronghold, are put on display as a marvelous sight. Though the stacks are dead and no longer hold the minds of the Envoys, they can be seen as a metaphor for the same. At Bancroft’s part, a Meth Woman flaunts a snake which has the consciousness of a rapist. This is illegal in the law but she claims that “laws don’t apply to people like us(meths)”(AC ep.3), to which all Meths cheer and celebrate. Bancroft also flaunts the ‘Last Envoy’ that he ‘owns’ which sends a heavy buzz around the room. Technically the last envoy here resides in the mind of Kovacs and not in his sleeve, that belongs to Ryker. Besides, Bancroft hired Kovacs’ mind because of his ability to solve the case and gave him an optimum body afterwards.

Another major instance and an important subplot of Lizzie Eliot, can be used as a support of Descartes’ famous claim ‘i think, therefore i am’. Just because he is thinking, it is the only evidence required to qualify as existing. This falls in line with Lizzie’s condition. She is beaten brutally by Mirriam Bancroft and later tortured by her in the VR in the Wei Clinic, a virtual interrogation facility. She loses her body and remains in the virtual. Her mind is traumatized to the extent that Poe, an AI (digibrain) performs ‘psychosurgery’ on her. Slowly she feels empowered through violent training which requires her to vent out her anger and fear. And at last she gets to go out in the real (a synth sleeve) to take revenge on those who tortured her. So Lizzie is the only character in the story who stays in the virtual up until the last episode. She breaks and heals solely in the virtual environment without a physical body. Thereby falling into Descartes’ theory that the mind is capable of its existence as a single substance without the help of the physical body. Two major themes, except Lizzie, involve VR: Prostitution and Torture. Bancroft, being the rich guy he is, practices both Virtual and Real sex. The prostitution centres first entice the customers through a VR experience where they can make their wildest fantasies come true, and then they offer the same in the real. This can be indicative of the fact that the mind is capable of experiencing something like sex, which is otherwise understood as more of a physical contact activity. Torture sees its best use in terms of virtual reality. As Quellcris Falconer says, “to the mind, pain is pain”(AC 4). In episode four, Kovacs is tortured by Dimitri Kadmin (Dimi the twin), a wanted criminal. Kovacs is incapable of his physical abilities of neurachem and has to work through his mind alone. Dimi kills Kovacs and restarts the construct several times. As Kovacs’ mind is a trained envoy, he controls the construct and snaps out of it and kills Dimi. In the last episode, Reileen Kawahara kidnaps and tortures Ortega in the virtual and threatens Kovacs that ‘If DHF is the human soul’, then she has Ortega’s. All these instances where the mind and the body are manipulated and exploited, represent how the subjectivities of ‘the human’ are altered in this Transhuman imagination of *Altered Carbon*.

4. CONCLUSION

Though the web-series is full of potential elements to study, for the purpose of this research paper, I had to adhere to what was most relevant to Descartes. Essentially this paper brings out the elements of the mind and the body and their interaction with technological advancements and how it changes the whole human subjectivity and meaning. The instances not only attend to the theory of dualism but also successfully bring out the potential consequences to it. The

consequences of the never dying nature of the mind and the body and how the characters struggle to cope with their altered existence. The Mind-Body Dualism and their separate existence also sheds a dark light on human greed and exploitation. The human desire for immortality, no matter how optimistically aimed it may be, can potentially lead to a dystopia of extreme class divide and uneven power distribution. The whole dystopian idea of this mind-body divide as shown in *Altered Carbon* also rethinks the idea of Transhumanism and its advancements. It questions if we really need what we are aiming for? Is Transhumanism a leap towards the betterment of humans or rather away from it. One can infer from the analysis that humans, in order to bring more value to themselves by attaining immortality, ironically only end up ruining the original idea of 'being a human'.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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