

Speculative Sci-Fi and Trans-Human Body Politics in Altered Carbon (Kind Of)

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The Netflix “Altered Carbon” adaptation has come and went to minimal fanfare and surprisingly light web engagement for an established sci-fi source material backed by the Netflix marketing machine. I do not find the series’ rapid disappearance surprising; even as a huge fan of the novels I admittedly found it a chore to watch completely. What kept me returning to the series was thinking how AC fits into a dialogue with other “quality” speculative sci-fi, namely Westworld, Orphan Black, Black Mirror and the myriad of other shows fitting loosely into this speculative transhumanist body paranoia cycle. Reflecting, what I find most fascinating is the way in which these speculative series share common underlying discourse frameworks, and work to build an ideological system that stretches humanist traditionalism into a new technological space. There is very certainly an insistence and almost a desperation within the discursive processes of these texts, attempting to rapidly lay a cultural foundation as we approach these game-changing technological moments in the mid 21st century. Cribbing very much from Haraway’s notions that with new technological discourse comes new ideological and discursive alignments, I began thinking about how these frameworks are being outlined towards this posthuman moment, most importantly how does the hegemony extend traditional body normativity into spaces where they do not inherently belong or exist. For Haraway this process of cultural expansion begins by aligning traditional established positions with the newer non-established ones, and then by extending these alignments out into this new terrain, a type of normative discursive conquest to be very reductive and a bit glib. For me the stakes of this new transhuman body conversation revolve around the notion of anti-humanism as it relates to the monstrous body.

The Christian Humanist tradition as regenerated from Hellenism was fascinated with the presentation of the perfect human body and its closeness to divinity. This inherently becomes tied to the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy that defines our notions of self/identity more or less throughout Western metaphysics. (This again cribbed very much from very many theorists). Within our culture, we are allowed a cohesive subjective self and a cohesive humanoid body both of which are discretely culturally/politically regulated, and assigned carrots within society to regulate behavior identity etc. This binary setup becomes the de facto way of organizing thought according to many theorists (Derrida, Haraway, etc etc again) and is one that creates stable imbalanced hierarchies. Man/woman mind/body reason/feeling etc etc This type of humanism is directly challenged by the potentiality of trans/post human body politics that not only can distort these binaries but subvert biology itself, (the cybernetic vs biological position very often discussed). Consider: Why is a prosthetic enhancement for a war vet culturally validated, but for a “normal” functioning human to volunteer for metal prosthetics aberrant? Why are prosthetics limited to human functionality? Both in shape (I can’t have spider legs like Stellarc) or in function (a hydraulic arm that can

punch thru walls.) Adding to that, utopian humanism validates techno-genesis, but a specific techno-genesis interested in extending normativity and tradition. In turn, cultural "traditionalism" interprets and regulates notions of both aesthetically pleasurable and utilitarian future bodies. AC a text that ignores so much of the universe but is so insistent on stating the rules under which we can switch and/or modify our bodies (sleeves) is very clearly positing alignments and positional limitations as to where I belong when the transhuman moment comes, be that a conservative body luddite, a neoliberal bourgeois clone lover or a similar mash up ideological position of new and old. These discursive positions, although dealing with such an incredibly unique technology are almost shockingly reductive and banal; shrinking the potentiality of transhumanism to a fraction of itself before even outlining the stakes. Taking this back to a more classic sci-fi moment and this time cribbing a thought from a very bright student, the borg in star trek serve as pre emblematic positions to this argument, Roddenberries' humanist utopian vision is one in which non-humanoid bodies that chose alternative notions of self are clearly vilified and have no place in the Trek universe. The androids (data) must aspire to be human-like, or at least embrace the Federation's utopian humanist worldview. The borg, a monstrous hive-mind are a direct threat to this humanism in that they have no defined self and no individualism. The Cybermen and Daleks from Dr. Who pose a similar vilified anti-human position. In that sense both of these portrayals would be traditionally regressive, rather than thinking of these beings as hopeful monsters, (not my term) they are derided as anti-human, in a sense they are simply anti-traditional or anti-humanist. I would enthusiastically welcome a televisual imagination of a non-vilified anti-humanistic worldview, What would this look like? How would it challenge the very concepts that these "monsters" are outcasted for? There is a potential hopefulness in using these spaces as alternative speculations to humanistic body politics; ideally before the transhuman moment is already discursively colonized.