



Neuro-Reality of Immortality in Science Fiction: Envisions and Reality of *Altered Carbon*

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Abstract

Literature recreates and reflects life. The inseparable combination of Science Fiction is scientific verisimilitude, reality and future. Retro futurism, 'the future of the past' anticipates the empowering and devastating outcomes of technology. Science fiction novels, the mere offspring of the notion, reflect insightful plots on how people engage technology with cultural valuations in the contemporary social contexts and its future implications. The paper focuses on Neuro reality of immortality in science fiction with reference to Richard K Morgan's *Altered Carbon*. Employing Actantial model, the action that takes place in *Altered Carbon* could be mapped with the reality of immortality in neuro-science. Moreover, investigation of the predicted realities and the possible future with reference to earlier evidences evoke reality conditions become the subject matter of research.

Key words: Neuroscience, Immortality, Neuro-reality, Science fiction, Dystopia, Predictions.

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Introduction

Science fiction deals with stories about science and future technology. Science fiction has a relationship with the principles of science—these stories involve partially true partially fictitious laws or theories of science. Science fiction ventures into genre fantasy, yet it is not completely unbelievable. The plot portrays both present day and the obvious past conditions. New discoveries, happenings and scientific developments on human beings in the future are explained with a human element. The set for science fiction often revolves around future, in space, on a different world, in a different universe or dimensions

SF is a genre characterized by a thematic focus on science and technology and on their potential effects on contemporary society, whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment, and one that adopts a scientific ideology associated with the arrival of the industrial age. (Mather 1997, 134)

The magnitude of the Sci Fi deals with large consequences if a given scenario is played to its logical conclusion. The scope of this global dilemma often deals with catastrophic, civilization ending events. Such events include asteroids careening towards earth, strains of alien virus brought back on a returning spacecraft, decimating earth's



population and other forms of unimaginable science. The catastrophic consequences are a result of unwise choices made by humans. The most compelling and introspective one is "contact". Usual captivation of the imagination of humanity is the close encounters with the "Other". Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Jean-Paul Sartre have postulated that a person's cognition or definition of the 'Other' is paramount in defining one's sense of self. When the "Other" is from a different star system, ourself-consciousness re-focuses to humanity as a galactic species. We are part of a larger community rather alone in the vastness of universe. The moral provides new insight to perceive ourselves.

Consequently, Sci Fi can provide contemplation on how to live one's life. It ties in the ramifications by illuminating the moral and ethical considerations and practical outcomes. Sci Fi becomes a forecasting instrument and a predictor of the near-future. It acts as a moral compass which allows for soul searching and self-reflection. Herein lies science fiction's true value. Our humanity can be measured through science fiction. Science fiction conducts the power of universe and infuses us with the sense of wonder in experiencing our universe.

Philip K. Dick is the first prophet of Science Fiction and his works during his lifetime was almost exclusively written in the Sci Fi genre. Dick's themes in his works are spirituality, and philosophies, including Christianity, Taoism, Gnosticism and Jungianpsychology. Dick explored sociological, political and metaphysical themes in novels dominated by monopolistic

corporations, authoritarian governments, and altered states. In retrospect, Dick's work predicted contemporary concerns of the "Terrorism-Industrial-Complex" and the modern "Security State". Metaphysic and theology were his greater concern in his later writings like in his masterpiece *Vast Active Living Intelligence System VALIS trilogy*. Frank Herbert, another prophet, used science fiction to explore complex ideas involving philosophy, politics, religion, psychology and ecology. Herbert's masterpiece was the *Duneseries*. In his "*Neuromancer*" series, William Gibson, the "noir prophet" coined the term "cyberspace" in his short story "*BurningChrome*" and later popularized in his debut novel, *Neuromancer*-book one of the series.

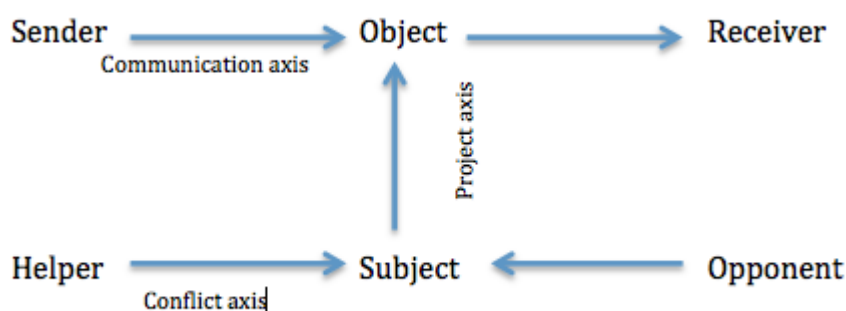
Most dystopian works present a world in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through various types of controls. Corporate control is one or more large corporations control society through products, advertising, and/or the media. Bureaucratic control happens when a society is controlled by a mindless bureaucracy through a tangle of red tape, relentless regulations, and incompetent government officials. Technological control takes place when a society is controlled by technological tools like through computers, robots, and/or scientific means. Philosophical/religious control is controlling a society by philosophical or religious ideology often enforced through a dictatorship or theocratic government. Hence the dystopian novels also project a transhuman and dehumanised people that terrifies the resultant society.

9686



Actantial Analysis of *The Altered Carbon*

Table 1.1 The Schema of Actantial Model



9687

The actantial analysis is a process in which “the axis of schema becomes an important element that connects the syntactical function of each narrative actants” (Greimas, 1966). The schema involves:

1. Sender, an actant who/ which is the reason for activating the story. Sender determined an object which is looked for. And then asks the subject to obtain an object that the sender wanted.
2. Receiver is an actant who/ which receives an object that is the result of the struggle by subject.
3. Object is something that is desired by the sender, such as freedom, justice, wealth, and so forth.
4. Subject or a hero is an actant who/which arranges an agreement with the sender's request. After the subject accepts an agreement, the subject gets a duty to obtain the object which is desired by the sender.
5. Opponent is an actant who/which blocks the subject's effort and struggle to get an object.
6. Helper is an actant who/ which helps the subject to get an object.
7. The axis from the sender that leads to an object implies that the sender has a desire to get an object. The last is the axis from object to receiver means that something which is searched by subject given to receiver. The axis from helper to subject means that helper gives

help to the subject who struggle getting an object. The axis from opponent to subject means that opponent obstructs the subject's effort to get an object. The axis from subject to object means that subject searches an object which is desired by the sender.

Analysis of Setting grounds any writing in the reality of place and depicts the theme of the story through powerful metaphor. Without setting, characters are simply placed in a vacuum, with no reason to act and most importantly, no reason to care. Without a place, there is no happening in the story. Setting helps with plot, determines and describes character and gives metaphoric links to theme. Hence the model helps in analyzing the purpose of the narrative in a significant manner. Richard K Morgan's debut novel, *Altered Carbon*, is set centuries in the future. It has a powerful noir atmosphere, and enough explosive action. It is an extremely well-crafted piece of fiction. The novel also has strong characterization and thoughtful treatment of alienation and loss.

Many stories use the same general settings, but in science fiction space is a big place with space battles, conflicts, and adventures. It may also spin around the near space earth orbit, where satellites and space shuttles circle the world and the space between the earth and the moon. Stories can



be set on space stations, spaceships, space colonies, and other artificial constructs in near space. Interplanetary space or anywhere within the solar system, the ring of planets that revolve about the sun can even be one of the settings. Distances between stars are staggering in the real world but not in science fiction. A single lightyear is trillions of miles. Beyond these unending reaches of emptiness is intergalactic space, unimaginable stretches of vacuum that bridge the distances between galaxies, distances that measure in millions and billions of lightyears. Alien Planets almost always have a star around which to orbit. If a writer dreams up a planet, and it isn't one that revolves about our sun, but a planet around another star. That star could be relatively nearby or it could orbit a star in another galaxy.

Writing stories about galactic empires, the authors should realize just how big a galaxy is. It would be very hard to govern an empire that stretches for a hundred thousand lightyears. Take that fact and other basic astronomical realities into account when the setting is constructed. A mere interstellar federation can cover only a small star cluster but still be vaster than any empire in history. The underlying assumption of most epic fantasy stories is that the setting is a quasi-historical past with major alterations. The setting may look like the Middle Ages, or a barbaric prehistory, or some undefined past, but it might be one in which magic is real and plays a major role. Also, no actual historical figures or events need to occur. In fact, most epic fantasies can be considered alternate versions of historical periods. Some epic fantasy settings do not resemble any historical period at all, but are simply strange and wondrous.

Many science fiction stories are set in one future or another like earth's future, the future in space, or the future of some alien world that is part of an interstellar political entity. A story can be set in a future that need never happen. But SF/fantasy is not restricted

to the shape of things to come. SF/fantasy stories can be set in the past as well. They could be set in ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia, or in the remotest prehistory. Something then happens to change the world picture radically—an earth-killer asteroid approaches, a plague is loosed, aliens land, or some invention causes rapid and radical change. The characters are sometimes players inside a videogame or virtual world. The players keep the same avatars during all the story but must adapt to different environments and gameplay. The authors are like all powerful deities creating different characters. Instead of traveling through space SF protagonists travel in time. The stars died long ago, a dark empty sky is the only thing that our characters can see from their spaceships that run in transuranic metals since nuclear fusion was never discovered and is but a dream that only the craziest individuals seek.

Characterization is an important factor in SF than in mainstream fiction. The writers of science fiction don't just create characters they create aliens, humanoids and extra-terrestrial living beings unlike the writers of mainstream fiction. They try to experiment on a common living being by taking a terrestrial animal, stand it on its hind legs, make it intelligent, but derive the vast majority of its characteristics from the terrestrial animal's behaviour. Alien race is created by taking one of the many characteristics that defines a human being's psyche, push that into the forefront to the exclusion of everything else. The entire behaviour of the alien race was dictated by any one exaggerated characteristic of the human species. That's because in humans, characterization and personality come from the proportions of our various attributes, and the struggle between them. One-attribute beings can't have meaningful individuality and so the aliens are also created with hi-tech physical and psychological ability.

The physical description of the character involves lot of details more than the other



genres of fiction as SF characters are mostly out of the world creatures. Every minute detail should be described by the author to get the clear picture of not only the main characters but also the other minor creatures in the novel. Every trait should be given equal importance. Starting from the details of the face till the toe and the psychological traits of characters must be dealt with great concern. The characters reveal majority of the story and the action of the plot. Hence it is very important to create a strong visual image of the characters. The emotional state of the characters, whether it is a human or humanoid, has to be given due importance. Just as there can be no story without some sort of conflict or dilemma, without truly fascinating and realistic characters the novel becomes imperfect. The dialogue should be considered seriously as the dialogue deliverance could also reflect the nature of the character. Especially in science fiction, there are more chances for the characters to have their own language and a different culture which is all reflected only through the behaviour of the characters. The overuse of the terms would reflect a bad image of both the characters and the author. Placing the backstory in a fiction also needs a careful attention as it should not disturb the main story line. Science fiction has special traits like involving psychopathic characters, humanoids, alien race that go in par with technological advancements.

Amazing stories need great characters. Science fiction is mostly set in a futuristic or fantastical world, it's more important than ever for readers to be able to relate to your characters. It's also harder than ever, because the characters' lives and experiences will be totally different than the readers'. The author's responsibility is to make people identify with someone who lives in the future, or on another planet. The main characters stand out, against a bizarre and colourful backdrop.

The characters are not normal but scientists and alien creatures. Having scientists as your characters let the readers "explore the setting and the character at once." It also helps if the characters obsess about the mysteries and explanations in your story. They can also be obsessed with a planet, spaceship, new procedure or alien. The most realistic characters are often based closely on the above-mentioned traits. It is important to give the characters a thought-out world. The more carefully thought out the world the characters are placed into, the more readers will be able to perceive the character alive.

An article titled *The Neuroscience of Immortality* in *The New York Times* (2015) envisaged that brain function after death could be made possible in the near future. According to neuroscience, the pattern of connections between the neurons transmit the electrical and chemical signals through the brain. Individual synapses collectively form the connectome in a cubic centimeter of the human brain. Keeping the transition alive had been impossible till the scientists recently found ways for the brains of smaller mammals to recover the memories after the death of the animal. Scanning the entire mouse connectome has been made possible, similarly it could be done to the human brains. Even though the process seems slow in the beginning it will eventually result in retrieving the entire memory of a human brain. Neuroscientists argue on the identity crisis and the number of copies that could be made with or without consent. However, the concept is reachable and the same had been experimented in ***Altered Carbon* by Richard Morgan**.

In the novel, definition of life and death has changed due to technology. Mankind has spread out among a number of worlds like earth. Humans have the ability to digitally transfer their consciousness between inhabited worlds. In the novel, Takeshi Kovacs has been transferred in such a way to earth

9689



from Harlan's World. Kovacs's mind is beamed across space at high speed to Earth through a needle cast transmission and downloaded into a new sleeve. He was one of the most elite soldiers and a ruthless killing machine. The cortical stacks are implanted in the nervous system of humans which could be retrieved even after death. Only the poor dies now as the majority of people have their personality backed up, recorded in micro stacks and embedded in the flesh at the back of the neck.

The primary element in the novel is 'Needle Cast Download.' The human race has colonized certain planets other than earth. The protagonist of the novel; Takeshi Kovacs is from Harlan's world. He is brought to Earth through Needle Cast Download. In the future world, every human being is attached with a Cortical Stack which stores their data at regular intervals of time. If any person commits a mistake, then their stacks are removed and put into storage. When the stored persons are needed, their cortical stacks are brought through Needle Cast Download. The downloaded stacks from a different world are inserted into a 'Sleeve' (human body). The sleeve is selected depending upon the purpose for which the person is brought back. Hence a Carbon (human) can have many altered sleeves if it is affordable for them.

People who cannot afford sell their sleeves to sleeve marts. If a person wishes to keep their relative's sleeve with him, he has to pay the sleeve rental and the mortgage properly. Kristin Ortega withholds her lover, Ryker's sleeve in such a way, but very soon it is bought by a Meth, Laurens Bancroft in which Kovacs was resleeved. Meth is a term used to refer to the human beings who have been living for centuries without real death. It is possible when the individual is rich enough to be resleeved. They may also have the facility of making their own clones to resleeve again at regular intervals. Meths are the powerful people in the society. Bancroft and

his wife Miriam Bancroft are such powerful Meths of *Altered Carbon*. Bancroft is 357 years old who has changed eleven sleeves. They both have got remote storage of their stacks that is updated every 48 hours. Bancroft and Miriam have got guaranteed Immortality.

The attitude of Meths was one of superiority as they have been witnessing centuries after centuries pass by. People like Bancroft think that they are God and they want others to obey them. The younger generation is looked down upon by them. Kristin Ortega expresses her hatred of the attitudes of Bancroft and other meths as, 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 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 74)

People are not afraid of Death. They are able to resleeve into another human body even after death. These meths have been living for more than 250 years. Hence, Death has lost its power in such a society. In the novel, the reader can find the protagonist Kovacs himself uttering the words, "Death where is thy string?" (Morgan162)

The novel consists of many instances where an Artificial Intelligence replaces humans work. There are solitary cleaning robots which are programmed to make the floor clean. These kinds of innovations really relieve human beings from tedious physical jobs. The cleaning robots are available throughout the city. Moreover, the cabs are automatic that speak and respond to humans. The cab drives by itself carefully and makes the passengers comfortable. If a person is intended to visit a risky place, it also warns and suggests that the passenger should

9690



change his idea of going to that place. Kovacs is staying in a hotel where he finds that a machine knows every detail of a person than the other individual. A machine is fixed in the hotel's elevator tells Kovacs that he had a visitor. It has also taken the decision of making the visitor wait inside his room as it knows the importance of the visitor. Kovacs refers to such a decision an intrusion of one's privacy. Shopping physically has been reduced and virtual markets were overflowing. Humans are mostly replaced by the Mandroids wherever possible.

The setting of the novel is also far advanced. The plants from different planets are decorating the earth. Songspire, a narrow tree like structure made of red stones from Mars decorates and also spreads perfume. It is imported from Mars to Bancroft's home. Virtual reality has become so common in the society of *Altered Carbon*. Kovacs has been seeing it from the time he stepped onto the earth. There are warehouses of various types. The famous are Jerry's Biocabin and Head in the Clouds. The women are considered physically weak even after lots of scientific innovations. Resleeving policy resembles our present insurance policy. Fraudulent practices enter the Resleeving Policy as well. The Innenin Virus is very popular as it has taken the lives of many people. It spreads throughout the body in 100 minutes and destroys the whole body. Kovacs has known about it and uses it to make the people believe that Bancroft died due to this virus. It is popularly known as Military virus or Rawling 4851. Technology is able to make Multiple Copy Sex which is to have a copy of oneself in another sleeve with all the experience and mental abilities. It is more like taking a photo copy. Kovacs copies himself towards the end of the novel to solve the case.

People were sleeved from one body to another to regain their lives. But, the toughest part of resleeving is acceptance. Every individual would be really excited to

look at him/her self after resleeving. Similarly, Kovacs has the first look of himself at the mirror. He feels as someone else is looking at him, "For the first couple of moments all you can see is someone else looking at you through a window frame." (Morgan 16)

Kovacs had to overcome the feeling of otherness from the sleeve he is wearing. The nature of the sleeve also affects the Kovacs. The sleeve should have been a chain smoker as there was tightness in the lungs. Every sleeve has a history. But the individual should not be carried away by it. The responsibility of the individual is to accept the sleeve with its history. Even though Kovacs was not a smoker, he had to smoke as the sleeve has got accustomed to it. Flexible Kovacs started smoking at first. Later he controlled and made the sleeve kick the habit of smoking. Once accepted, the concept of resleeving is the birth of a new you in a strange new body to lead a happy life.

"I took the pen and wrote my name in someone else's hand writing ..." (Morgan 73). Family reunion is a ceremony where the dead poor people are given a sleeve to visit their family. Certain people just escape from their family with a new sleeve. Kovacs's father himself just walked past his waiting family on their family reunion. Kovacs feels that family reunion is a waste of time. He also includes that it makes the family feel weird to see the person in a stranger's body that is not even close to the same person. But as a young boy he always awaits for the reunion of his beloved grandfather.

Conclusion

The struggle is real. The virtual world is ruling the current scenario also could make switching between worlds with different bodies and minds be possible. Various predictions of SF writers have become reality in the present world, few of the instances depicted in earlier SF novels are the credit cards was conceived in *Looking Backward* by

9691



Edward Bellamy (1888), automatic doors were visualised it in H.G. Wells' *The Sleeper Awakes*(1899), artificial wombs were only possible in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), but in reality now. Television surveillance was foreseen by George Orwell in his famous work, *1984*, written in 1949 and laptops in *Inherit the Stars* by James P Hogan.

Analysis of *Altered Carbon* clearly states a peculiar and a diplomatic future. It portrays the dystopian world of the forthcoming generations. The very nature of human being is questioned through the predictions of the author in the novel. If the visions in the novel happen in reality, like other earlier SF predictions, a harmful weird artificiality will prevail in the society. This paper is the study on *Altered Carbon* that highlights the awareness towards dystopian society and its after effects on the carbons (Human Beings). The neuro – reality of immortality is real and the generations to come would experience it with no big deal. Philosophical debates continue to wreck and prevent human beings, yet the possible advancements of neuro science with its autonomous neurodevices record, and combine learning algorithms based on

neurological signals and feedback to act and alter human behavior on the fly. Immortality thus to be redefined or accepted as possible in the future realm.

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9692

