

# **Takeshi Kovacs: the Commodification of the Male Body in *Altered Carbon***

**(Netflix 2018-2020)**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter deals with the commodification of the male body as depicted in the popular TV series *Altered Carbon* (Netflix 2018-2020) and the implications that such representation has for contemporary debates on gender, the body, and the future of humanity. For such analysis, I will focus on the series' protagonist, Takeshi Kovacs (performed by different actors), to illustrate that oppressive patriarchal structures govern the universe of *Altered Carbon*, with the hypermasculine body ultimately functioning as a warning against certain biopolitical practices at work in our contemporary societies. Created by Laeta Kalogridis and based on the cyberpunk novel of the same name by Richard K. Morgan (2002), the series proposes that the mind can survive the death of the organic body and people can transfer human consciousness from body to body. This is done thanks to stacks, which are small objects that are implanted into the base of the neck that store and record the human consciousness in case of bodily destruction. This practice allows individuals to switch between different bodies, known as sleeves, from genetically engineered ones to less advanced models, depending on their needs but, especially, on their financial resources.

*Altered Carbon* is much about bodies. Precisely, the series starts with the image of the protagonist's naked body floating on water, followed by several close-ups of different parts of it. The body is regarded in the show as a unique marker of power and having—or rather acquiring—a “fine” sleeve is a guarantee of status. Yet, only rich and powerful people can have bodies and

clones to reach immortality. Other characters aim at having (at least temporarily) better bodies that would allow them to avoid being sold, bought, or manipulated. The poor and vulnerable people need to live in virtual reality scenarios, or in storage. The series shows, then, a discriminatory power hierarchy based on the characters' ability to have access to biotechnologies. As Fernández argues in relation to the show: "in *Altered Carbon*, the whole point of existing is existing in a body; being confined to one's stack is considered a punishment and has become the standard penalty for criminal behaviour" (90). In this context of body market, sleeves are regarded as commodities, disposable vessels at the benefit of wealthy humans that can be eventually replaced *ad infinitum*. The series' protagonist, Takeshi Kovacs, is gifted by multimillionaires Meths (people who can afford to live forever) with a perfected body that is, nevertheless, a property, a piece of spectacle, a vessel, a mere weapon, an artifact that can be manipulated, beaten, used and/or abused by the people in power at their will.

Kovacs, an Asian soldier-turned-rebel, awakens after 250 years in the body of an ex-cop, Elias Ryker, with the mission to resolve the mystery of the death of millionaire Laurens Bancroft (James Purefoy), who has paid for his liberation. In the first season, aired in 2018 and consisting of 10 episodes, Kovacs hosts a strong white body that is transferable and expendable. He is depicted as a tough hypermasculine character with extreme fighting skills and no apparent trace of vulnerability. In the second season of the show, aired in 2020 and consisting of eight episodes, Kovacs is hired by another Meth, Axley, who provides him with the body of a man of African descent with enhanced physical abilities.<sup>i</sup> The hard-boiled super soldier hosts, then, different sleeves and yet remains unable to effectively fight the system that reduces the body to a mere recipient, a marker of status and privilege that powerful businesspeople can manipulate and process to avoid death and reach immortality.

As it will be argued, the character of Kovacs ultimately works as a mirror of recent modes of commodifying life under biopolitical practices. His hypermasculine body is not powerful, and yet a commodification that serves the dictates of a patriarchal capitalist system that profits with life. *Altered Carbon* offers spectators a space for reflection and criticism of current practices that affect our embodied selves and that rely on an essentialist dualism that places hegemonic masculinity at the center of hierarchies.<sup>ii</sup> For the analysis of the male protagonist, this chapter will consider critical posthumanist arguments that demand the elimination of binarism for the construction of inclusive societies.

### **“You Won’t Hurt Me. You Are Only Pretending You Are One of The Monsters”: Kovacs as a Hard Guy**

Throughout the series, Kovacs is depicted as a hard-boiled combat man who does not fear death and who uses violence to solve most of his problems. Yet, he does not, at least effectively, fight the system that oppress people but, on the contrary, his embodied presence contributes to support the powerful ones. Partly because of his inability to fix the undesired situations the series poses, and reinforced by his conscious detachment from others and his apparent lack of vulnerability, charisma and empathy, spectators do not feel sympathy for this hypermasculine anti-hero whose perfected body supports exclusionist modes of understanding the future of humanity. It could be argued that it is Kovacs’s rage against the corrupted system in which he has involuntary been inserted, together with his inability to change it, what makes him “do angry”.

Kovacs is portrayed by different actors in the series. In the first season, he is mainly performed by Joel Kinnaman (in the body of Elias Ryker) and by Will Yun Lee and Byron Mann (in the original bodies), while in the second season the protagonist is mainly portrayed by Anthony

Mackie. At the start of the series, Kovacs is seen as a former member of the Protectorate turned rebel that is brutally killed, together with his girlfriend, in the intimacy of their house. His stack is, then, put into storage until he is resleeved after 250 years into a new body, that of Elias Ryker, an ex-cop who died years ago. This new sleeve is paid by millionaire Laurens Bancroft who intends to use him to solve the mystery of his own death. Throughout the series, there are many flashbacks of Kovacs in his previous sleeves, a soldier of Asian descent, whose actions intermingle with that of the Hungarian Japanese Kovacs of the present narration. In season two, sometime after Bancroft's case, another powerful man, Axley, offers Kovac a new body, this time of African descent, and a new mission. This sleeve has important upgrades: his hands are magnetized, and he can heal at high speed, which reinforces even more Kovac's toughness and combat skills. He is meant to be the same person mentally, since his cortical stack remains undamaged, but his sleeve changes due to destruction.

All in all, Kovacs is provided with a more than acceptable sleeve in most of his appearances: he is fit, middle aged, healthy, strong, military skilled and physically enhanced. Indeed, Kovacs's perfected body receives a lot of attention in the narrative throughout the two seasons. The series' emphasis on his muscled and impressive body is obvious from the beginning. In "Out of the Past" (S1, E1)<sup>iii</sup>, we get an early scene in which his naked body is explicitly exposed in the prison where he is being resleeved into a military grade neurachem with combat muscle memory. As Kovacs is told by the AI prison, he needs to adjust to his new sleeve and does so in a violent way, breaking the nose of one of the assistants and shouting aggressively at the rest of the team who are helping him out with the painful process of body swap. Images of his naked hyper muscled body occupy the center of the screen, and of the narration since concerns about his physical condition are commented by the prison assistants. Similarly, the resleeve scene in S2 E1

shows a hyper-muscled naked character with aggressive and threatening attitude. Kovacs's brand-new bodies in both seasons visually recall that of the male action hero found in popular action movies of the 80s and 90s with actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone performing these roles. As these male icons, Kovacs's manners are tough, as are his violent and aggressive behavior.

Hard men have always dominated the screen with different purposes, sometimes to foreshadow gender worries, sometimes to offer alternative ways to calm the anxiety or crises of masculinities. They are, ultimately, socio-cultural constructions that speak about gender and body politics.<sup>iv</sup> Also, mockery and humiliation of the male condition can be suggested by means of this visual exaggeration and, thus, "critics have seen stars like Stallone and Schwarzenegger as 'performing the masculine', drawing attention to masculinity and the male body by acting out an excessive caricature of cultural expectations" (Tasker 78). Through exaggeration, then, the armored hero in these action movies of the 80s and 90s became an icon of an ideal and unreachable masculinity. As Connell argued, the social definition of men as holders of power is not only translated into an ideal and mental body but also into muscle tensions, posture and the texture of the body (Connell 198). The cult of hardness, especially relevant in the 80s, stands for the need for some armour to feel protected in society since, and as Bordo argues, "[a] culture that idealizes, fetishizes, is addicted to the hard and impenetrable, is a cold and unforgiving place to be" (Bordo 59). Bordo insists on the fact that the way we experience our bodies is powerfully affected by the cultural metaphors that are available to us (38). This social need of armour became quite apparent during the 80s and muscularity implied notions of social power and sexual potency, as these hard heroes suggested. Yet, Kovacs's hyper muscled body, although also constantly in tension and exposed, works in another direction, since it is not a sign of social power and/or status but is

considered instead as a mere tool for the powerful ones to use. In this regard, his appearance on screen does not work to calm anxieties but, as it will be debated later in this chapter, to make audiences realize of the damaging consequences of patriarchal capitalist systems that confer privileges to normative bodies. His depiction also departs from other films inspired in cyberpunk tradition that were released at the turn of the century. In them, according to Springer, “rampaging muscle-bound cyborgs were replaced by slim young men and women jacked into cyberspace, inspired by ‘console cowboys’ in cyberpunk fiction of the 1980s” (Springer 204).

As a member first of the Protectorate and later of the Envoys, Kovacs was trained to solve problems by using violence, and his well-built body precisely serves this purpose. His life has always been closely related to armed missions that imply excellent fighting skills and absolute dominance of the use of weapons and military tactics. Moreover, and as we learn from the continuous flash backs to his past, his family life was also surrounded by violence and machismo. S1 E3 begins with Kovacs and his sister reading a book about a violent man who kills kids, followed by a scene where the two kids are scared and hidden while their father beats their mother violently. Later, in S1 E7, we see his father killing his mother, which will lead 12-year-old Kovacs to end up with his father’s stack to protect his sister from death. After this, Kovacs is arrested and brother and sister are separated, taken to different armed regimes, and forced to live in cruel circumstances. Violence is and has been, then, integral part of Kovac’s life.

Examples of aggressive behavior and tough manners on the part of Kovacs are present in every single episode of the series. Indeed, the series’ assumption of a violent masculinity has been broadly commented by critics and audiences alike, who generally admit its problematic nature and contradictory messages. Morgan himself has claimed that the violent protagonists of his work help audiences avoid identification with them. Yet, as Edwards rightly recognizes: “while Morgan’s

protagonists may be addicted to violence, their successes often depend on it, which complicates Morgan's contradictory criticism of the process" (129). Kovacs's portrayal of violence in the novel, according to Frelik, may be also considered as a signal of hitting the system, even if he hardly ever articulates this attitude (179). As I see it, this exaggerated emphasis on the hypermasculine body of the protagonist, and on violence in general, results no less than shocking for 21<sup>st</sup> century spectators, who are familiarized with discourses that critically denounce the old belief that strength and aggression are naturally aligned with masculinity and power.<sup>v</sup> Indeed, and unlike these hard-boiled heroes of action films of the end of the century, Kovacs's intention, at least in the present narrations, is far from saving the world or defeating the "bad guys" but, rather, his hypermasculine body—and his very existence—inevitably contributes to support a classist and sexist capitalist world. The hyperbolic and violent representation of masculinity in the series does not provide with any convincing solution to one the series' main concerns: the commodification of life by profit-driven corporations. This masculinist conception of life is, then, neither effective nor desirable for contemporary audiences.

Kovacs is depicted as a rather individualistic character that uses violence to solve his personal problems and that does not want to get involved in the corrupted political systems that surround him. Yet, he inescapably does. As Frelik argues when referring to Morgan's Kovacs trilogy, "the protagonist is a solitary and cynical Chandlerian hero, he continually asserts his independence and readiness to do violence to maintain his territoriality, but the narratives repeatedly position Kovacs in situations in which he chooses to—as opposed to being coerced into having to—stand up for others" (Frelik 179). Still in these situations, his experience and emotions take priority, and he does not bond with those he helps (Edwards128). Kovacs is, then, rootless, isolated, and detached both from his environment and from his original body and this is what

“breeds cynicism” (128). In a similar vein, and referring to Morgan’s SF thrillers, Martín argues that “rugged individualism prevents hard-boiled men from joining others to demand justice against patriarchal abuse” and, therefore, Morgan “exposes how power-hungry patriarchal capitalism operates but his main male characters have no resistance to join, no higher cause to support” (91). In this regard, Martín refers to these male characters’ final passivity, even though they are aware of the dangers of patriarchal capitalism and rage against it: “their anti-patriarchal stance runs the risk of being a jaded, cynical rant instead of an effective tool for change” (91).

These arguments may also apply to Kalogridis’s creation, although in the show, unlike the novel, the Envoys are indeed rebel figures fighting against an oppressive new world order. In S1 E7 we see how, even if Kovacs joined the resistance led by Quellcrisp Falconer (Renée Elise Goldsberry) against immortality, he did so mainly moved by personal circumstances. After eventually finding her sister Reileen (Dichen Lachman) after such a long time apart, and aiming to escape from their respective oppressive circumstances, they go to the forest, where they meet the leader of the uprising, Quellcrisp, who offers them to join and “make a difference” (S1 E7). Anxious for revenge and in need for an immediate plan for him and his sister (and, as we will soon learn, captivated by Quellcrisp), he decides to join. Yet, contrary to his early expectations, the resistance becomes Kovacs’s new family, and he develops an intimate relationship with Quellcrisp that will determine most (if not all) of his future actions. He also bonds with other members, who support and help each other in their common mission to liberate the world from control and tyranny. Kovacs, unlike his sister, feels he belongs to this group and, as he tells her: “We are Envoys, and we have a job to do” (S1 E7). When Kovacs discovers her sister was the one who consciously killed all the member of the resistance but him, he feels emotionally devastated, and demands answers: “Why? They gave me life”; “You killed everyone I loved, our family” (S1 E7).

Unlike the solitary character of cyberpunk literature of the 80s, Kovacs's past as an Envoy commits him somehow to a socio-political cause, albeit this ultimately involves violence and war, problematizing hence its legitimate cause. At the end of this same episode, we learn that he was unable to fight the virus that took the life of everybody else in the resistance and could not reach the shuttle that blew up and killed Quellcrist and his sister. He was not able, then, to support the resistance in an effective way, which would determine his passivity, disillusionment, and conscious detachment from any political or personal cause in his future sleeves.

Hence, in the present moment of the narration in both seasons, Kovacs is mainly uninterested in changing the system and avoids personal relations with other characters. While fully aware of the dangers of the regimes depicted, he shows indifference, failing to offer any compelling solution to the problematic issues the series exposes. As he himself recognizes, his actions are guided by selfish reasons, and he always avoids personal relations of any kind, playing the role of the hard guy. Kovacs's portrayal of an angry masculinity is manifested from the very beginning of the series, when his girlfriend asks him: "Have you ever been such an asshole?" to what he answers: "Every sleeve, every time" (S1 E1). Throughout the whole series, Kovacs uses disrespectful language, insults people and does not show many signs of vulnerability or empathy towards others, at least openly. In season one, his investigation involves dealing with Lizzie (Hayley Law), that is trapped in virtual because her body was killed but not her stack. His father, Vernon Elliot (Ato Essandoh), accuses him of not caring about her, to what he responds: "Don't take it personally, but I don't care about anyone" (S1 E3). Later, Kovacs will tell Elliot: "I've told you before, we are not friends. I am just doing this to fulfil my needs: my freedom" (S1 E4). In the second season, which takes place 30 years after the events of season one, Kovacs, now in a new sleeve, does not demand social justice but he is mainly focused on his personal search for his

lost love and Envoy leader Quellcris, with the virtual character of Poe (Chris Conner) as his always loyal supporter. As he affirms on various occasions, he works alone, although the lack of resources and contacts in Harlan's World would inevitably make him join a few others to get to Quell. Kovacs seems proud of his anger and lack of friends. For instance, when he is imprisoned by Colonel Carrera, he does not show any sign of weakness but, on the contrary, he adopts a threatening and intimidating attitude and tells him: "I hate a lot of people (...) you have no idea who you are dealing with" (S2 E3).

However, and although Kovacs insists on denying any personal feelings, he does eventually bond with three characters: Lieutenant Ortega (Martha Higareda), Vernon Elliot and Poe. It is not until E5 in S1 when Kovacs discovers who his sleeve is, Ryker's, and finds out about the close bond Ortega-Ryker in the past. From this moment, they develop a kind of intimacy, which is both confusing and troublesome. He helps and cares for her when she is badly injured in hospital and Elliot likewise supports them at this critical moment. At the end of the first season, Kovacs understands he is not the person Ortega wants and decides to buy Ryker's sleeve back just to make her feel happy. This action, however, ultimately contributes to support a perverse system that profits with lives. Kovacs, Ortega, Elliot and Poe work together and are finally loyal to each other. Indeed, when Reileen threatens Kovacs to torture his "friends", or as she also states, "these people you are coming so attached" (referring to Elliot and Ortega), he stands up for them and risks his own life for them. He values their lives over his own's and does "the right thing", even though it implies killing his once beloved sister and losing the opportunity of having his lover back. His role as a hard man seems somehow weakened when, in the last episode, he is seen deeply affected by this action, embracing her sister and crying. In season two we see a Kovacs whose love for Quellcris determines all his actions, including his final sacrifice in E8. This deed would,

significantly, avoid the end of the world. So, despite his initial indifference, he gradually becomes more social and feels somehow responsible for others. His personal and selfish actions turn out to be, unexpectedly, social, or political. In relation to Morgan's work, Frelik notes that the lack of any meaningful attitude towards politics and the issue of (dis)embodiment, two major facets of Movement-era cyberpunk, are revised and challenged in the novels in several aspects (176). The show also includes meaningful variations to the portrayal of the cyberpunk anti-hero, as suggested above. On the one hand, Kovacs cannot really escape the neoliberal system he is trapped and, on the other, his hard-boiled masculinity does not correspond to the one found in cyberpunk narratives of the 80s.

As it has been argued so far, Kovacs does not offer meaningful solutions for the problems the series exposes. Quite opposite, his very existence further contributes to the functioning of tyrannical systems that control the body and privilege normative visions of it. In both seasons, his actions are conditioned to the obedience to two powerful men, Bancroft and Axley, who hire him to solve their personal problems, for what they need a hard guy. Kovacs's angry masculinity and conscious detachment from others can be read, then, as the result of this rage against the system, which decides on his body and his life. Hence, as we get to know, his embodied existence as a hard man is pure artifact, mere appearance, a role he consciously plays to survive in a capitalist patriarchal society where nothing is what it seems, and where the body is but an expendable vessel for the rich. As Quellcrist tells him when they first meet: "You won't hurt me. You are only pretending you are one of the monsters (S1 E10). Ultimately, Kovacs's portrayal of an angry masculinity encourages spectators to reject this masculinist conception of life, to reconsider the status quo and to wish for healthier and nonviolent ways of living and existing in our current and future worlds.

### **“Your Body is not Who You Are”: Kovacs as Commodity**

Apart from suggesting that a violent masculinity is not desirable, the show offers a space for spectators to reflect on the negative effects of some current biopolitical practices that consider life as capital. In *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First Century Speculative Fiction* (2021), Vint deals with new biopolitical figurations present in contemporary speculative fiction that describe recent modes of commodifying life. As Vint, argues, biotechnology intervenes in the very processes of biological function, reshaping life itself to serve economic ends. These biopolitical figurations, she argues, “are both diagnosis and map, a way to chart how the concept of life is shifting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and an impetus to steer a different course” (20). In this line of thought, it can be argued that *Altered Carbon* mirrors how neoliberal biopolitics reinvents both the concept of life and the meaning of living. Kovacs occupies a variety of sleeves that are subjected to control and violence by a capitalist patriarchal society that trades with bodies. Consequently, his hypermasculine body becomes the target of cruelty, distress and pain, an object to be manipulated and commercialized by the rich people.

The cyberpunk’s conscious response to the neoliberal ideology by portraying a solitary hero out of the system jacked into cyberspace has changed since, as Vint and Alexander note in *Programming the Future* when analyzing contemporary SF television, this neoliberal ideology has migrated since the 1980s from the margins to the center of Western democratic political rhetoric (1). The authors suggest, then, that neoliberalism replaces democratic values and concepts of citizenship with market logics (6). Indeed, an exaggerated depiction of this ideology can be seen to impregnate the whole of the *Altered Carbon* universe, so Kovacs cannot really escape it. He becomes an inevitable part of it, and nor his pretended isolation from political causes, nor his angry

masculinity, nor his constant use of violence, can really avoid its devastating effects. He is, literally, a product of this oppressive ideology that speculates with lives. In relation to this issue, Kucukalic affirms that the show “extrapolates concepts inherent in the Age of Biology: productizing (human and other) living organisms and applying profit-driven biotechnology to them, resulting in the loss of agency, a systemic loss of power and rights” (5). Kucukalic argues that the series points out to a new order of classes based on the ability to utilize biotechnology, that is, a “biotech elitism” that suggests a society that has not transcended the economic and political inequities thriving in human history (Kucukalic 5). *Altered Carbon* extrapolates, then, on the dangers of biopolitical practices that consider human lives as expendable and profitable.

As mentioned above, Kovacs inevitably becomes part of the capitalist oppressive system himself, since his very body—and existence—can but support discriminatory practices that commodify human lives. In S1, Kovacs is hired, and his stack pulled out of prison by Meth Bancroft, one of the wealthiest men in the settled worlds, who offers him the chance to get a new life, in exchange for his fighting skills and loyalty. From this moment onwards, Kovacs is regarded as a commodity, and his body as something that can be used/misused by him and/or his family at will. From the very beginning of his existence in the body of Elias Ryker, Kovacs is considered as a property with no rights at all, a weapon, or as attorney Prescott affirms in S1 E2, “a hired gun”. Throughout the series, he is also referred to as “new pet terrorist”, “hired muscled”, “an expensive toy”, “the purchased”, “a minion” and the like. In S 2, set 30 years after, he is likewise hired by multimillionaire Axley, who buys him a new sleeve, which is augmented to better accomplish his mission.

Precisely because he is conscious of his commodified existence, he does not fear death: “The danger of living too many times is that you forget to fear death; but fearing death is good for

you” (S1 E7). An immediate consequence of this consideration of the body as a mere artifact is that physical damage is a commonplace, under the premise that it can be repaired, enhanced, or even replaced. In S1 E4, we get one of the most explicit manifestations of violence on the body. Kovacs suffers a brutal torture when he is caught by criminal Dimitri and taken to a virtual interrogation program at the Wei Clinic. Kovacs does not really understand why he is being tortured but manages to survive because he follows Quell’s advice: “The sleeve is a tool, it doesn’t control me, I control it”. In this specific scene, Kovacs is burnt, drowned, suffocated, and tortured to death repeatedly. In a similar vein, in S2 E3, Kovacs is brutally punished, while his past memory images are extracted from his mind. These scenes showing extreme body damage are regarded, nevertheless, as pure spectacle, and Kovacs becomes a piece of entertainment to be enjoyed by privileged others. In S1 E6, Kovacs and Ortega are both part of the deadly spectacle at the Flightdrone Arena, where they are involuntarily brought to fight against violent and grotesque monster bodies for the enjoyment and fun of others. This scene, as Carnage, the presenter of the show, proudly announces, is “real blood, real pain, real death”. In S2 E3 Kovacs’s violent and deadly fights with his own digital memories are streamed live in Harlan’s World to the joy of its population. In relation to this clear depiction of body violence in the series, Kucukalic argues: “In *Altered Carbon*’s high-tech world of interchangeable bodies, cloning devices, and VR implants, the vulnerability of identity and the body, the affective self, is exposed to exploitation and harm, slavery, violence, grief, and disorientation” (Kucukalic 4). Kovacs’s body becomes vulnerable, and as these scenes clearly suggest, his life is regarded as useless and meaningless, his only reason for existence being that he accomplishes the mission he was sent for.

In this sense, Kovacs’s body can be regarded as “wasted lives” according to Bauman’s theorizations developed in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2004). As Bauman contends,

processes of modernization have become globalized, and, consequently, many human lives have been commodified and/or commercialized. In the show, Kovac's body can be read as "superfluous beings" or "redundant population" (to use Bauman's terms) at the service of an alleged economic progress, which will be disposed or put back "on ice" once it does not serve the purposes of a capitalist world. This commodification of certain bodies by advanced capitalist societies is also denounced by critical posthumanist thinker Braidotti, who contends that: "these are the sexualized, racialized and naturalized others, who are reduced to less than human status of disposable bodies. We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others" (2013,15).

Braidotti's theory of the disposable body further works in the series as a warning of certain transhumanist practices and how the pursuit of longevity and power can lead to social injustice and severe inequalities. Supported by Bostrom or More, among others, transhumanism is a philosophy that "seeks the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its current form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values" (More 15). Hence, transhumanism opts for the feasibility and desirability to the use of technology and science to enhance and extend human capabilities beyond natural limitations, with the hope to become posthuman in the future. Accordingly, by enhancing our bodies, humans would hopefully become posthumans, "beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have" (Bostrom 1). The show is full of scenes that hint at the problematics of enhancement and the expendability of the body, which is but an invitation to audiences to think about the fatal outcomes that transhumanist practices of life extension may have for the future of our species and our planet.

Lastly, the series' premise that the body does not supposedly affect the mind and the characters' personality, which is not totally true since inevitable inferences are constantly

suggested, further contributes to this idea of commodification. In relation to this issue, Fernández affirms, “the process of being re-sleeved (...) has become part of daily life, a routine for those in the more dangerous professions, a choice for those with the wherewithal to extend their existence in the universe beyond the boundaries of one single body” (12). Although some conflicts are highlighted derived from this idea of body switch, the series does not elaborate them and focuses instead on an apparent independence between the organic body and the stack, which inevitably ends up in suffering and chaos. From the very beginning of the series, spectators learn by the voice-off of Quellcrist that “your body is not who you are” (S1 E1), which defies the interconnection between body and subjectivity or the idea of an embodied subjectivity proposed by critical posthumanism, a philosophy advocated by Braidotti or Ferrando, among others, that believes in a positive *continuum* body-mind and advocates for non-hierarchical relations with other beings on Earth. Ferrando is against any hierarchical construction of our future realities and affirms that “evolution does not imply any type of hierarchy or progression from inferior to superior organisms, nor does it support any essentialism or strict dualism; rather, it complies with a hybrid, processual perception of existence” (Ferrando 125). Binarism, so evident in *Altered Carbon*, is not, accordingly, a productive motor for the search of inclusivity and diversity.

No space is provided, then, for the characters’ exploration of their embodied subjectivities. Indeed, despite the possibilities that might be offered by these artificial bodies to transcend oppressive systems of thought, gender roles and stereotypes are however reinforced, particularly noticeable in the series’ reliance on a hypermasculine protagonist and the explicit portrayal of gendered violence. Hence, even though we see women holding positions of power, they are often victimized, and their bodies become the objects of brutal and sexualized violence, which reflects real-world issues that need urgent attention. Moreover, although the series highlights some of the

concerns of transgender individuals, with characters navigating the complexities of gender dysphoria, audiences are not provided with a proper exploration of these issues and characters still need to fight against binary systems that control them. The series ultimately suggests, then, that we need to find new ways of configuration, since, as Braidotti argues in *Nomadic Theory* (2011), we are still mortal, enfleshed, made of language and hence alterity (122). Vint likewise recognizes the need to find new ways of thinking to grasp the affective and political contours of our times and considers speculative fiction as places of popular reflection that show the “real subsumption of life by capital” (7).

In short, by focusing on the idea of the commodification of the body, the show urges spectators to denounce discriminatory practices and work toward a new concept of the body which is in tune with notions of fluidity, flexibility, and interdependency. The series suggests the need to have an intimate and healthy interconnection body-mind, an embodied subjectivity. This critique is done, mainly, through the character of Takeshi Kovacs, whose commodified body and his angry hard-boiled masculinity makes spectators aware of the need to eliminating sex and gender discrimination in our contemporary and future societies.

## **Conclusions**

As it has been argued, *Altered Carbon* offers spectators a space for criticizing contemporary sexist and unethical practices on our bodies and lives by portraying a hard-boiled protagonist that does not offer solutions to the dangerous situation the series proposes but, on the contrary, remains at the service of oppressive power structures that decide on the future of humanity. Hence, despite his enhanced and strong body, Kovacs is not powerful; he is skilled for the fight, and yet he does not overtly win any (political, social or personal) battle; he behaves violently, but his body is

commodified and brutally manipulated; he tries to be indifferent and detached from the system that controls lives, yet he becomes a key part of it. His (sometimes pretended and exaggerated) portrayal of a hard guy in the series suggests, then, that violence and a hypermasculine body are not the answers and that we need to find other paths for understanding our embedded embodied selves in our present and future societies. Kovacs ultimately warns audiences against biopolitical practices that consider human life as profit and materializes the negative consequences of a drastic mind-body dissolution, ignoring the fact that, as critical posthumanism defends, the body should be affected and affect the mind and other bodies in non-hierarchical ways.

The show delves, then, on contemporary issues that need urgent solutions, such as patriarchal capitalist economies, social injustice, oppressive ways of governing, the commodification of human life, violence against women, etc. Vint and Alexander analyze contemporary TV series and affirm that they “negotiate, interrogate and work through the contradictions of living in this neoliberal order, making visible what might be hard to see as one lives through it, at times naturalizing the status quo and at times offering visions of alternative possibilities” (Vint and Alexander 3). The hypermasculine and angry protagonist of *Altered Carbon* brings to the fore social and gender injustices, while opening a space for projecting cultural anxieties and preoccupations, which ultimately activates critical mechanisms on viewers that desire other futures for us and for our planet. Kovacs does not offer audiences with any hope for the problematic concerns suggested in the series. In this sense, I agree with Vint and Alexander when they argue that science fiction television is a productive space for public pedagogy concerning governance (4). Kovacs’s commodified body opens, therefore, a path to think in terms of what we do not want or desire for our future by analyzing critically what we see. *Altered Carbon*

stands, then, as a valid space for reflecting on our present social and political structures by imagining more equalitarian ways of structuring the world.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The fact that Kovacs's original Asian body becomes in the first season a white character has been the object of criticism. Creator Kalogridis has defended her casting choices arguing that the two Kovacs played by Asian actors are just as important to the storyline as Kinnaman's version in the present time, and that she wanted to follow Morgan's novel. See <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/altered-carbon-cast-creator-respond-whitewashing-criticisms-at-la-premiere-1081352/>)

<sup>2</sup> The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" was integrated into sociological studies of gender in the 1980s, and Connell's *Gender and Power* (1987) became the most quoted source for the term. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as a gender strategy that assures the dominance of men and the subordination of women. This scheme generates dominance not only over women but also over other—subordinated or marginal—masculinities. While it is commonly agreed among scholars that this concept of "hegemonic masculinity" entails an ideal form of masculinity connected with the institutions of male dominance, it has been the origin of many debates and objections. Much of this literature considers hegemonic masculinity as negative, violent and dominating, something Connell himself has denied in his response to these critiques. Moreover, many scholars use the term to indicate a type that is easily reproduced in mass media, literature and advertisement through the figure of the hero. Yet, Connell's intention was, I believe, to define a strategy that changes along with dominant institutions. As Messerschmidt rightly argues, the concept is still key and contemporary research on hegemonic masculinities confirms the continued significance of Connell's (1987, 1995) original emphasis on hegemonic masculinity as the legitimization of unequal gender relations.

<sup>3</sup> Season 1, episode 1. From now onwards, I will refer to season as S and episodes as E.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Jeffords' influential work *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994) and Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies. Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993) become key references for any analysis of the muscular hero during Reagan times.

<sup>5</sup> This idea is closely linked to the idea of role-playing that Steinem suggests when affirming "men are made to feel they must earn their manhood by suppressing emotion, perpetuating their superiority over women [...] and imposing their will on others whether by violence or by economic means" (153).

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