Transhumanism, Ethics and Religion in "Altered Carbon" by Richard K. Morgan

Foršek, Nikola

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku
Filozofski fakultet Osijek
Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i književnosti i
hrvatskog jezika i književnosti

Nikola Foršek

Transhumanizam, etika i religija u romanu *Digitalni ugljik* Richarda K. Morgana

Završni rad

Mentor: dr.sc. Ljubica Matek

Osijek, 2019.

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku
Filozofski fakultet Osijek
Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost
Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i književnosti i hrvatskog jezika i književnosti

Nikola Foršek

Transhumanizam, etika i religija u romanu *Digitalni ugljik* Richarda K. Morgana

Završni rad

Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti
Znanstveno polje: filologija
Znanstvena grana: anglistika

Mentor: dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

Osijek, 2019.

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Study Programme: Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and Croatian Language and Literature

Nikola Foršek

Transhumanism, Ethics and Religion in *Altered Carbon* by Richard K. Morgan

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Ljubica Matek, PhD

Osijek, 2019

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of English
Study Programme: Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and Croatian Language and Literature

Nikola Foršek

Transhumanism, Ethics and Religion in *Altered Carbon* by Richard K. Morgan

Bachelor's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities
Scientific field: philology
Scientific branch: English studies

Supervisor: Ljubica Matek, PhD

Osijek, 2019

IZJAVA

Izjavljujem s punom materijalnom i moralnom odgovornošću da sam ovaj rad samostalno napravio te da u njemu nema kopiranih ili prepisanih dijelova teksta tuđih radova, a da nisu označeni kao citati s napisanim izvorom odakle su preneseni.
Svojim vlastoručnim potpisom potvrđujem da sam suglasan da Filozofski fakultet Osijek trajno pohrani i javno objavi ovaj moj rad u internetskoj bazi završnih i diplomskih radova knjižnice Filozofskog fakulteta Osijek, knjižnice Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku i Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu.

U Osijeku, datum
12.07.2019.

Nikola Fošek, 0160137427
ime i prezime studenta, JMBAG

Abstract

In line with the main concerns of the genre of science fiction, cyberpunk fiction, as its specific subgenre, highlights the whole array of problems caused by the development of technology, but most notably social inequity. Written in 2002, *Altered Carbon*, the debut novel of the British author Richard K. Morgan, is one of the prime examples of such fiction. The basis for the dystopian future in *Altered Carbon* is the so-called stack technology, that is, the ability to digitize human consciousness and store it inside a small stack to be stored just below the cortex. Thus, in theory, if one's body dies, but the stack remains unscathed, it can be retracted and put inside a different body, otherwise called sleeve. This thesis will attempt to explore the major ethical and sociological issues that such advanced technology implies in order to point out that the future, as imagined by this cyberpunk novel, seems both grim and uncanny.

Keywords: *Altered Carbon*, cyberpunk, (bio)ethics, transhumanism, religion

Contents

Introduction

Because it falls under the category of popular fiction, cyberpunk is still relatively unexplored as a genre, purely out of the fact that most deem it as "unworthy" of being studied. That is even truer for its own subgenres, which is why the first chapter of this thesis will use the definitions of genres of steampunk and dieselpunk to flesh out general defining features that constitute the building blocks of cyberpunk. These staples of the genre mostly fall under the realm of visual cues, which is why one can talk of cyberpunk as an "aesthetic" movement. Furthermore, under the same chapter, an attempt will be made to put *Altered Carbon* in the context of cyberpunk, through the issues of class in the novel.

To show that cyberpunk can indeed be read critically, from the next chapter onwards, the thesis will deal with other issues that belong to the text or subtext of the novel. The second chapter will therefore, firstly, define transhumanism as a movement which advocates for physical and mental improvement of the human condition through technical augmentation, the idea which is mostly represented in the novel by the so-called "stack technology". Its own subchapters will moreover attempt to discuss in which ways the novel fits inside the idea of transhumanism, and which ways it does not, considering the fact there are some major ethical issues which come into sight – most notably the ways in which the very augmentations which are supposed to help humans, are, in fact, used for warfare. Additionally, there are some issues concerning the transhuman body which push the topic towards existentialism, which is why one of the subchapters will be dedicated to exploring in which ways the transhuman body is presented in the novel, and whether it really can be considered a transhuman body as such.

Lastly, the thesis will explore in which ways the (trans)humanist ideas of the novel clash with how religion is presented in it and the final chapter will conclude the thesis underlining its main ideas and arguments.

1. Cyberpunk

Before delving into the issues of the novel, it would be appropriate to first put it into the context of its genre. As stated already, *Altered Carbon* is a cyberpunk novel. What that actually means would probably best be explained through cyberpunk's main motifs and its general aesthetics.

Generally speaking, science fiction not only deals with science, but also with time, that is future, and so do all of the subgenres of science fiction literature. One of the key features that distinguish the human race as a species is the fact that we measure time, and we do so linearly. What sets us apart even further from other species on planet Earth is the fact that we hold the cognitive abilities to think and speculate about time, which resulted, among other things, in a body of science fiction literary works. At the brink of the nineteenth century, with the rapid technological advancements that came with the invention of the steam engine, the ability to speculate about what the future holds has prompted many fiction authors to do exactly so – in fact, the first novel to be written by one of the founding fathers of science fiction, H. G. Wells, is titled *The Time Machine*. Since then, exploring the far future and the technologies that might develop by then has become one of the most popular tropes of the genre. Most of the fiction produced in the early twentieth century was utopian and saw our future brightly – the humans thrived, spread out towards the stars, met other species, colonized new worlds, and lived in a general state of peace and prosperity. In the eighties, however, as a way to challenge the previous tropes of science fiction, a new genre emerged. A complete antithesis of utopian fiction was thus birthed, a subgenre named cyberpunk, which was inherently dystopian in its views.

In his preface to the cyberpunk anthology *Mirrorshades* (1986), Bruce Sterling gives a rather broad and simple definition of the Cyberpunk movement. He defines it as "an integration of technology and the Eighties counterculture" (Sterling xii). But to see what that means exactly, and to extract some general motifs of the genre, it will do good here to compare it with some general motifs of its own subgenres that have emerged later on, most notably steampunk and dieselpunk. It is the prefixes steam- and diesel- that should here give an inkling of what the world-building and the atmosphere of the subgenres are: in steampunk, the technologies and the ambience of the Victorian era are taken and "blended with", or "thrown into" a futuristic time setting, while in dieselpunk, the future is encapsulated in the atmosphere of the World War II era. Correspondingly, the prefix cyber- implies that the genre of cyberpunk will be exploring and making use of the themes and motifs of the progressive

computer technology that had just begun emerging in the eighties. The shared root "punk" implies that it will be coupled the "punkesque" culture of it. Some of the defining features of the aesthetics of cyperpunk would, therefore, be things associated with a rapidly growing information industry, such as the computerization of pretty much any aspect of human life (including the bodies), hacking, virtual reality, large, bright, neon cities, flying cars, skyscrapers, and interstellar traveling. It also has certain elements usually associated with a space opera. But the genre also puts certain social problems and inequities in the forefront, depicting the various fights against those illnesses of corrupt future societies.

Consequently, texts that belong to the genre will usually turn out to be far from a light or trivial read. In addition to highly technical and technological metalanguage, the genre also posits certain philosophical (ethical) and sociological questions that can easily unsettle the readers. According to Erich Schneider, the world in cyberpunk texts is oppressive in its own specific way:

> Cyberpunk literature, in general, deals with marginalized people in technologically-enhanced cultural "systems". In cyberpunk stories' settings, there is usually a "system" which dominates the lives of most "ordinary" people, be it an oppressive government, a group of large, paternalistic corporations, or a fundamentalist religion. These systems are enhanced by certain technologies (today advancing at a rate that is bewildering to most people), particularly "information technology" (computers, the mass media), making the system better at keeping those within it inside it. (qtd. in "Cyberpunk as a Science Fiction Genre")

The rapid development of technology that Schneider refers to has brought about a movement that is concerned with the possibility of enhancing people via the use of available technology – transhumanism, to which the next chapter is dedicated.

1.1. Issues of Class: Meths and the Social Hierarchy

The novel deals with the murder of the wealthy Laurens Bancroft and takes the form of a detective story, which is quite typical for cyberpunk literature. The murder is investigated by Takeshi Kovacs, an ex-U.N. Envoy soldier, who is the novel's protagonist. In the futuristic Bay City, where the novel's plot is set, the social stratum can, more broadly, be divided

between “ordinary” people and Meths – the Meths being an extremely rich class of people, with immense political influence, neatly expressed by the lawyer in charge of the Bancroft’s legal proceedings, Oumou Prescott’s, laconic statement: “Mr. Bancroft has an undeclared influence in the UN Court, which is more or less common knowledge” (81). It goes without saying that they have best the money can buy – enough money, in fact, to ensure immortality. Their name, Meths, is a reference to and represents an abbreviation of the name of “Methuselah” – a character from the Bible known for his longevity. Moreover, the gross inequality between the ordinary people and the Meths can foremostly be seen in their residence – the Suntouch house, far above the corruption of Bay City, which is described by the novel’s protagonist Takeshi Kovacs thusly:

> The ebb and flow of human commerce beyond the limo’s windows had a quality like choppy water in the space between boats. People pushed and shoved their way along, backing up abruptly to get round tighter knots in the crowd that they apparently hadn’t noticed until it was too late to maneuver. Obvious tensions broke out, necks craned, muscled bodies drew themselves up. Twice I saw the makings of a fight take stumbling shape, only to be swept away on the chop. It was as if the whole place had been sprayed with some pheromonal irritant. (53)

They live far above, far enough not to be associated with the ruins of the lower levels of Bay City. The life of the ordinary people of the city is of no concern to them. It also shows that, as much as a cyberpunk city is advanced, it also can be, on its lowest levels, ruinous. Drugs, illegal arms trafficking, murders, prostitution, and similar illegal activities are brought to the extreme on the lower levels of Bay City – or any cyberpunk city, for that matter. In fact, according to Schneider, cyberpunk literature frequently focuses on “those who live on its [the system's] margins, on ‘the Edge’: criminals, outcasts, visionaries, or those who simply want freedom for its own sake” (qtd. in “Cyberpunk as a Science Fiction Genre”) which is why the depictions of cyberpunk cities contain various representations of crimes, criminals and other marginalized people.

2. Transhumanism

According to one of its founding fathers, Nick Bostrom, transhumanism is defined as "the intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities" (Bostrom 4). When applied to the novel, it becomes most evident through the concept of stack technology, which also roughly corresponds with Bostrom's idea of "uploading" – the process of transferring an intellect from a biological brain to a computer (Bostrom 17).

Ivana Greguric states that the meaning of the idea of "improvement" is twofold. Firstly, she says that the faith in improving the human race speaks volumes of the power of scientific and technological discoveries and procedures that would provide a possibility of complete control of any future developments. Secondly, its meaning has an ethical character – it speaks of the right of man to provide for himself, through scientific and technological instruments and by improving and reshaping his body and mind, an eternal life, that is, those kinds of social relations that will make for an image of a "heaven on earth" (Greguric 51).

Transhumanists base their beliefs for, and attempts at, improving and reshaping the human kind on these principles: there should exist complete freedoms and rights for an individual to pick out the treatments through which they would improve their body and mind, as well as certain ethical obligations of the same individuals for the way they optimize their living conditions and working capabilities. Greguric refers to John Harris, who, while aware that such technologies would bring certain risks along with themselves and could potentially jeopardize health, still states that through scientific and technical evolution, a better society could be created, and that an individual should therefore take on certain responsibilities for their own actions (qtd. in Greguric 76-77).

Significantly, one of the founding texts of the genre of cyberpunk, William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984), depicts the character of Molly, a professional assassin, whose body has been enhanced by technology in order to make her a more efficient and more robust killer. In fact, her character appears throughout his opus signifying her "durability" and hardiness which surpasses that of ordinary (un-enhanced) people. Specifically, she had surgically inset glasses that sealed her sockets as well as retractable scalpel blades beneath her nails (Gibson 24-25). Thus, the idea of transhumanism is inextricably tied with the genre since its very inception. In addition to the idea that body can be improved and made more

durable, transhumanism speculates about the possibilities of preserving the consciousness and transferring it into a new body, once the body one is born with becomes old, ill and weak. This is called the stack technology and it features as the central thematic issue of Morgan's novel *Altered Carbon*.

2.1. Stack technology

The idea behind stack technology is that the whole of human consciousness can, in the future of *Altered Carbon*, be easily digitized, encased, and then just as easily be transferred from one body to another, virtually enabling one to live on forever (provided there *is* another body to be transferred into, in the first place).

The whole process of re-sleeving is rather uncomfortable, as described by Takeshi Kovacs, at the very beginning of the novel:

> I came thrashing up out of the tank, one hand plastered across my chest searching for the wounds, the other clutching at a non-existent weapon. The weight hit me like a hammer and I collapsed back into the floatation gel. I flailed with my arms, caught one elbow painfully on the side of the tank and gasped. Gobbets of gel poured into my mouth and down my throat. I snapped my mouth shut and got a hold on the hatch coaming, but the stuff was everywhere. In my eyes, burning my nose and throat, and slippery under my fingers. The weight was forcing my grip on the hatch loose, sitting on my chest like a high-g manoeuvre, pressing me down into the gel. My body heaved violently in the confines of the tank. (15)

Bodies are kept in storage units, much like products, and that is why the process itself entails two ethical problems: that of the treatment of the human body and that of an economic nature (that is, class). But before looking into the ethics, the paper will present the ways in which technology is used in the novel.

2.2. Envoy conditioning

In the novel, the concept of an Envoy solider is the closest as one gets to the concept of a Universal solider, a perfect solider. Experimented on and pumped up with all sorts of steroids, chemicals, technical enhancements, an Envoy is the perfect killing machine, devoid of all emotion, equipped with everything needed to make a perfect all-kill; the concept fits into the main idea behind transhumanism, although on the negative spectrum of it. As mentioned before, the character of a perfect soldier or rather a highly efficient killer has been introduced early on by Gibson in the character of Molly. The (il)legality of such augmentation is put forth by Kovacs:

> Neurachem conditioning, cyborg interfaces, augmentation—all this stuff is physical. Most of it doesn't even touch the pure mind, and it's the pure mind that gets freighted. That's where the Corps started. They took psychospiritual techniques that oriental cultures on Earth had known about for millennia and distilled them into a training system so complete that on most worlds graduates of it were instantly forbidden by law to hold any political or military office.
>
> Not soldiers, no. Not exactly. (36)

The mentality of an Envoy – the complete lack of emotion coupled with the purest kind of killing instinct, almost animalistic in its nature, is elaborated on further by Kovacs in this exchange:

> "Then let me tell you something instead. When they make an Envoy, do you want to know what they do? They burn out every evolved violence limitation instinct in the human psyche. Submission signal recognition, pecking order dynamics, pack loyalties. It all goes, tuned out a neuron at a time; and they replace it with a conscious will to harm."
>
> He stared back at me in silence.
>
> "Do you understand me? It would have been easier to kill you just then. It would have been easier. I had to stop myself. That's what an Envoy is Curtis. A reassembled human. An artifice." (217-218)

When discussing the different streams in philosophical thought which eventually lead to bioethical musings, Ante Čović takes special notice of a particular group of British philosophers, the so called Scottish School, who formed their own ideas on where one's so called "moral sense" comes from. This type of ethics is accordingly named "moral sense ethics" and is just a part of a broader term of the so called "ethics of feelings" (or *Gefühlsethik*). As the name suggests, the basis which makes up a person's sense of what is wrong and what is right comes, almost exclusively (according to D. Hume and his student A. Smith) from how a person interacts with other people on an emotional level. This means that, in order for an individual's sense of morality to crystalize, one must primarily *sympathize* with others (Čović 96-97).

Envoys are elite soldiers, augmented for a single purpose – to improvise in, and adapt to any given situation. Those abilities come at a price, however, and that price is a dubious moral compass; that is, the inability to sympathize with and care for others – which makes Envoys such efficient killers. Many aspects of modern warfare in *Altered Carbon* are also dubious, such as the use of biological and digital warfare, which will be discussed next.

2.3. Biological/Digital warfare

As already shown, in Morgan's futuristic imagining, the human race has already achieved a status of a transhuman race. The current biological threats would not present much of a threat to the human race which has been so technologically and biologically altered. Therefore, a special kind of a digitized virus is needed to contaminate a digitized mind, a virus largely used during war time. Such a virus is found in Rawling 4851, the effects of which Takeshi himself has witnessed: "'Rawling variant 4851 takes about a hundred minutes to go fully active, by which time it's too late to do anything.' I forced images of Jimmy de Soto from my mind. 'The target's contaminated beyond redemption.'" (297)

Of course, the possession and usage of such a devastating biological weapon is highly unethical, but, the society of the twenty-fifth century is not exactly too concerned about morals:

> UN law governing transfer and ownership of war viruses was clear to the point of bluntness. Inert viral forms could be owned as subjects for study, or even, as one bizarre test case had proved, private trophies. Ownership or sale of an

> active military virus, or the codes whereby a dormant virus could be activated, was a UN indictable offence, punishable with anything between a hundred and two hundred years' storage. In the event of the virus actually being deployed, the sentence could be upped to erasure. Naturally these penalties were only applicable to private citizens, not military commanders or government executives. The powerful are jealous of their toys. (305)

So unethical and devastating it is, in fact, that even the long-lasting, out-living Meths are afraid to come into any contact with it: "Virus! Even Meths were afraid of the invisible corroder, because even they, with their remote storage and their clones on ice, were not immune. Viral Strike! Stack down! Bancroft was off balance" (326).

Despite his Envoy conditioning, it is heavily implied throughout the novel that by having to, at times, "force images of Jimmy de Soto out of his mind", Kovacs suffers from some form of shell shock. Of course, the reader will never have Kovacs admit this straightforwardly, but through very descriptive images, such as "[Jimmy de Soto's] own left socket [being] a glutted well of gore, all that was left at Innenin when he dug the eyeball out with his fingers" (71), one can get a rather clear picture of what sort of nightmares plague Kovacs' mind at night.

Another kind of unethical conduct in the novel is the use of torture – a theme a tad too morbid to be explained here in too great of a detail. In one instance, Takeshi is taken in for questioning and re-sleeved into a female body which is, in various ways, then mutilated.[1] However morbid it is, it can nonetheless work as an introduction to the discussion on how the human body is perceived and handled in *Altered Carbon*.

2.4. The essence of a (trans)human – the views on the (trans)human body

When no longer faced with the prospect of a human's physical constraints and limitations, the human body is ultimately seen as nothing more than an object, an expendable object at that. Human bodies are kept in storages, like merchandise, to be bought and sold at will, and for a certain price. For a hefty price, at that, if one wants to provide for himself or herself a "good enough" body. For the rich, of course, it is not a problem to clone their own

[1] In the TV series (2018–) he is transferred into virtual reality, another major part of the cyberpunk aesthetic.

body, to be kept in mint, peak condition. The poor are consequently left with literal "leftovers".

Enhancement strikes at the very core, the very essence of who the human race is as a species. It strikes at human identity itself and requires for a redefinition or an adaptation of our own understanding of what "human" means. Will a human stay a human when altered? Similar questions and stipulations are raised by Ronald Cole-Turner:

> When we use technology for enhancement, we change more than just our bodies or our biochemistry or our performance. (…) We are embodied creatures, and any use of technology that affects any part affects the whole being, including the very core of identity and personality, our mental powers of memory, understanding, and will, what traditionally has been called the soul. (…) When these technologies of human enhancement get inside us, they become part of us, turning us into our own products and blurring the lines we once drew between subject and object, agent and effect. (Cole-Turner 7-8)

Bioethics, too, is concerned with the problem of human identity, and how various biotechnologies would affect it. Rade Kalanj, using Paul Ladriere's and Paul Ricoeur's terms, concludes that such biotechnologies have their "ethical meaning a beneficial effect only if they do not put into question the basic structure of personality, that is the reason, freedom and autonomy of a human being, its self-determination" (Kalanj 63). Thusly, the problem of transhumanism becomes an existentialist problem, too.

According to Sartre's ideas on existentialism, the essence of man is in what the does, that is, it is epitomized completely throughout his actions; a man is nothing more or less than a summary of all of his endeavors – therefore, *to do is to be*, or rather, a man is only *what he makes of himself*. Existence comes before essence, in that, to truly find his own essence, a man must first go through the process of self-defining, and all of life's truths come out of man's knowledge of himself. Herein lie all of man's potentials. A man is therefore an object as much as he is a subject, in that; a man is a project, in a way; a project on which constant work needs to be done. One is, of course, thusly utterly free to do whatever one wants, and for that, one must take *full responsibility* (22-54). If a man is what he makes of himself, does he also, consequently, have the potential to make himself into something entirely non-human? Here the opposition between a transhuman and a posthuman comes into play.

According to N. Katherine Hayles, "[i]n the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (3). Additionally, Greguric states that artificial intelligence and technical advancements create a premise for completely artificial, non-human forms of life that will have no origin in anything biologically organic. The human striving for immortality carries with itself characteristics of the super- and non-human *because* it transcends the limits and possibilities of humanity (Greguric 81). In simpler terms, what the future may hold for the human race are, in theory, completely digitized bodies. This is why, in most (but not all) cases, the idea of a posthuman roughly corresponds with the idea of a cyborg[2]. If a transhuman is the next techno-evolutionary step in human development, a posthuman would be the one after that. Our consciousness, our essence, could potentially be completely disjointed from our organic bodies and put inside an inorganic "vessel". But when does the augmentation stop? Where do the boundaries between a machine and human completely blur? The inability to answer these questions with certainty is why the prospect of a cyborg is, for many people, frightening. A more important question which arises is this – are the humans of *Altered Carbon* really transhuman, or posthuman?

Arguably, points to back up both such stipulations can be made. First of all, when talking about stack technology, it becomes painfully obvious that the humans of *Altered Carbon* did, in fact, manage to separate their consciousness from their biological bodies. This would bring them to the brink of being defined as postumans. However, as it has also been previously discussed, there exists one key factor one must take into account – the fact that, no matter how advanced they are; they still, for most part, *choose to inhabit their biological bodies*, even when re-sleeving. Somewhere in that collective separated consciousness, there still exists the perception that they are *self-defined as human*, which, for them, means that they need to have a body. From the very name – sleeve – it can be discerned that the human body has been reduced to nothing more than a literal vessel, a mere piece of clothing. Yet, the fact remains that they still choose to inhabit a human body, with all of its biological functions intact. Therefore, as close as the humans of *Altered Carbon* get to the definition of a posthuman, they, arguably, still fall under the category of a transhuman.

[2] Because the term is complex and understood in different ways by different authors (see: Olson), for the purpose of this paper, a distinction will be made between an android and a cyborg: if an android is a machine made to look like a human, with a cyborg, it is vice versa, the process is reversed – a cyborg is, therefore, a human slowly turning themselves into a machine.

The female body, too, is objectified – if not even more so. This becomes evident from the very onset of the novel, when Takeshi seemingly cannot help himself but to make side-comments about his employer's wife's "Slavic boned cheekbones", her "décolletage", and "the tilt of her hips" (49). Everything about the female body is overly sexualized. But there is a tragic element within the story, far more horrendous than Takeshi's apparent arousal at the sight of Miriam Bancroft. It is the story of Louise and Elizabeth Elliot.

Both were prostitutes, working in the lowest levels of Bay City, and both were murdered senselessly, for no other apparent reason than to serve other people's own selfish reasons. Before Takeshi's own torture, Louise had been captured and also, for the purpose of extracting information, battered until the point of death. If the transhumanist body is seen as expendable, the female transhumanist body is doubly so – it is an item that exists to be used and thrown away. This, of course, can (and should) be construed as sexist; however, after everything discussed so far, and considering the general aspirations of cyberpunk to be dystopian, it should really come as no surprise.

Through this, the transhumanist ideas meet with cyberpunk, or rather, clash with it. Even though the people of the future managed to obtain the technology necessary to greatly improve the human condition, and did so with the best possible intentions, through the very process, they have started to dehumanize themselves. The closer they edge to being posthumans, the more they become desensitized to the idea of violence and using their own bodies as mere items.

3. Religion

The technologically advanced American society of *Altered Carbon* has evolved past the need for superstition. They have come a long way from the time when you had to live from day to day, never knowing whether or not you would die at any given moment. Diseases have been eradicated; the only viruses which circle around are man-made and digital. The human race has practically achieved a god-like status, because a trait has been obtained that is usually associated with all sorts of gods – immortality. Christians reverted back into a sect – a crazed sect at that. They are looked down and frowned upon, and the novel even challenges all of the previous systematic beliefs installed in, and forced onto the society:

> "Kovacs, I hate these goddamn freaks. They've been grinding us down for the best part of two and a half thousand years. They've been responsible for more misery than any other organization in history. You know they won't even let their adherents practice birth control, for Christ's sake, and they've stood against every significant medical advance of the last five centuries. Practically the only thing you can say in their favor is that this D.H.F. thing has stopped them from spreading with the rest of humanity." (25-26)

By bringing Christianity into the novel, Morgan provides a successful ideological counterbalance to the idea of transhumanism – its exact opposite in its own conservative views. Ted Peters admits this, saying that, "[t]hrough the eyes of today's transhumanists, religion looks like a roadblock, an obstruction" (Peters 72). Nowhere is the clash between the old Christian dogmas and the (trans)humanist aspirations seen better than in the stances on the so called "Resolution 653". The point of the resolution is simple – once installed, it would enable murder victims be re-sleeved again for the purposes of testifying against and bringing their murderers to justice. The only problem is – Christians despise the idea of being brought back from the dead. To them, a man once dead, must remain in such a condition – resurrecting him would spoil the Christian sense of the essence of man, in other words, a soul. To refer back to Peters, he asks himself pretty much the same questions discussed previously: "If we in the human race have been responsible for selfishness, economic injustice, and environmental degradation, how can we then become capable of benevolence, economic justice, and ecological health? How can a leopard change its spots?" (Peters 82). Herein, another purpose of bringing religion into the novel can be extracted – which is to question the

very same nature of the human condition as already discussed, but with a theological twist to it. The twist is rather ironic too, considering the fact that, by completely detaching themselves from Christian morality, the society of *Altered Carbon* is left without anything to "keep them in check", that is, their moral compass is left to spiral down toward moral decrepitude. This can be clearly seen in connection to a drug called Reaper, just one of many drugs used amongst the people in *Altered Carbon,* which was developed while researching near-death experiences. It is said that, when "[r]iding the Reaper, a Godwin's Dream renouncer monk could torch a village full of women and children and feel nothing but fascination for the way the flames melted flesh from bone" (Morgan 123). The fact that just about anyone can gain access to a drug which has such a destructive effect on a person's mind shows that the society's sense of morality is spiraling downwards.

Conclusion

Even though *Altered Carbon* may seem like a trivial read at a first glance, most of the problems it discusses are anything but trivial. The novel is a typical representative of the cyberpunk genre as it deals with the influence of digital technology on human life and portrays this influence as largely negative. All things considered, it can be concluded that the transhumanist projections which serve as a basis for the future events in *Altered Carbon* take on negative connotations when put in a cyberpunk context.

Although the overall human condition has, in the novel, reached its maximum potential, such development seems to have had the detrimental implications in the future of *Altered Carbon*. Death has become nothing more than a mere inconvenience which can be dealt with, but at a great cost. The gap between the rich and the poor is as large as ever, laying the groundwork for all sorts of corrupt behaviors to emerge. The human body is treated as a "sleeve" – a dispensable piece of clothing and the notion of its sanctity is gone. With the morality at an all-time low, the society is treading on a dangerous path towards completely squeezing the humanity out of humans, if steps are not taken to ensure a responsible usage of technology. All in all, the future of *Altered Carbon* looks to be a grim one, and the novel is a one which prompts the readers to ask for themselves – *what if*?

Works Cited

Bostrom, Nick. “The Transhumanist FAQ”. *World Transhumanist Association*, 2003, https://nickbostrom.com/views/transhumanist.pdf. Accessed 7 July 2019.

Cole-Turner, Ronald. “Introduction: The Transhumanist Challenge.” *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, edited by Ronald Cole-Turner, Georgetown UP, 2011, pp. 1-18.

“Cyberpunk as a Science Fiction Genre.” *The Cyberpunk Project*, 10 Feb. 2017, http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/scifi.html. Accessed 11 June 2019.

Čović, Ante. *Etika i bioetika: razmišljanja na pragu bioetičke epohe*. Pergamena, 2004.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. Ace Books, 1984.

Greguric, Ivana. *Kibernetička bića u doba znanstvenog humanizma*. Pergamena, 2018.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. The U of Chicago P, 1999.

Kalanj, Rade. “Bioetička paradigma.” *Bioetika: etički izazovi znanosti i društva*, edited by Ivan Cifrić, Croatian Sociological Society and The Sociological Institute of the Zagreb Philosophical Faculty, 1998, pp. 53-72.

Morgan, Richard K. *Altered Carbon*. OceanoPDF, 2002.

Olson, Nikki. "Do You Want to be a Cyborg, or a Transhuman?" Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, 5 Jan. 2013, https://ieet.org/index.php/IEET2/more/olson20130105. Accessed 10 Jul. 2019.

Peters, Ted. “Progress and Provolution: Will Transhumanism Leave Sin Behind?” *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, edited by Ronald Cole-Turner, Georgetown UP, 2011, pp. 63-86.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale UP, 2007.

Sterling, Bruce. “Preface.” *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, edited by Bruce Sterling, The Berkley Publishing Group, 1988, pp. ix-xvi.