

*Mors Dei, Vita Mea: Human, Transhuman, and Posthuman Identities in the TV Series *Altered Carbon* and *Westworld**



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Abstract: In *The Posthuman* (2013), Rosi Braidotti argues that the perfectibility of the body and the exploitation of genetic and neural capital not only problematise the ‘nature’ of human kind, but also disrupt humanist views of the universe, effectively displacing humans from its centre, just as humanism once displaced theocentric thinking. Two recent sf TV series, *Altered Carbon* (Netflix, 2018-2020) and *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-2020), offer a complex representation of the consequences of boundless body-enhancement, extreme mind-body dualism and the emergence of non-human consciousness in order to speculate on the ‘nature’ of the entities that might replace humanity at the centre of present and future philosophical reflections and socio-political practices. In both series, the tension between the human and the non-human results in violent conflicts that question humanist definitions of Man and God, while presenting cyborgs and AI not as alternatives to organically-generated consciousness, but as stages on a continuum along which the divine, the human and the non-human merge into posthuman versions of subjectivity, subalternity and otherness. By focusing my analysis on such dichotomies as mortality-immortality, reality-virtuality and mind-body, as well as on the process of identity construction in both organic and inorganic characters, I intend to explore the way in which *Altered Carbon* and *Westworld* envision a world in which the self exists beyond the ‘natural’, the ‘supernatural’ and the ‘unnatural’.

Keywords: posthuman, science fiction, *Altered Carbon*, *Westworld*, transhumanism, philosophical posthumanism

1. Narratives of future (in)humanities: An introduction to *Altered Carbon* and *Westworld*

Set in the eponymous amusement park, Jonathan Nolan’s and Lisa Joy’s HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2020)¹ is initially populated by cybernetic “hosts”, who cater to every wish of the human “guests” of the

park. Using the structure of a live action role-playing game, the guests embark on adventures that are designed to satiate their desires, however dark and abject. The hosts that take the guests on these escapades are indistinguishable from humans; this coats every experience with the flavour of authenticity, even though the adventures themselves are based on fixed narrative loops to which the cyborgs are bound by their core programming. Yet, the first season (2016) mainly focuses on the emergence of self-awareness in the

¹ While a fourth season has been announced and will likely be released in 2022, only three are available so far.



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and Westworld*

cyborgs, as well as on the process of spontaneous identity-construction that will eventually lead them to break free from these loops. The second season (2018) chronicles, in fact, the first violent consequences of the subjectification of the non-human, while it also introduces the possibility of synthesising human personalities into algorithms and digital files, implant them into cybernetic bodies, and thus save human minds from decay and death. If the first season ultimately introduces the idea of the cyborg turning human, and the second season that of transforming humans into cyborgs, the third season (2020) blurs the boundaries that separate the human and the non-human, merges them into a new species and engages in a complex debate on equality, identity, agency and freedom.

Laeta Kalogridis's Netflix series *Altered Carbon* (2018-2020), now officially cancelled, is set in a dystopian future in which the colonisation of space has been a well-established reality for centuries. The exploitation of the human working masses, the milking of natural resources, and the annihilation of alien civilisations are depicted in terms which—particularly in the second season—closely echo the abuses of European colonialism in America. If *Westworld* literally recreates the American West in its theme park, *Altered Carbon* presents outer space as the Final Frontier, as *Star Trek* did in the 1980s (*Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, 1989). However, while the second season intentionally touches on some of the same themes and *tropoi* that made films such as *Avatar* (2009) relevant from the point of view of Ecocriticism (Potter, 2019) and Postcolonial Studies (Thakur, 2015), Kalogridis's series in general and the first season in particular are much more

concerned with the transhumanist notion of virtual immortality and the possibilities opened up by the use of alien technology. In the diegetic universe of *Altered Carbon*, technology is so advanced that self-aware AI characters have been around for centuries, and human minds are routinely digitalised and stored in small devices surgically inserted in every human's spine at the age of one. On the one hand, once the processes of creating synthetic bodies and of cloning organic ones were perfected, wealthy humans could afford to have their minds downloaded from body to body *ad infinitum*, thus eschewing illness and death. The vast majority of humans, on the other hand, have to make do with whatever body is available from among those whose original owners have been sentenced to virtual prison or to the terminal erasure of their digitalised minds. Since the number of 'free' bodies is significantly lower than the amount of victims of violence and disease, after the death of their birth bodies, most people's minds are archived in special facilities, suspended in simulations for years, decades, even centuries, waiting for a chance to be re-incarnated in a new body. For many, if not most, such chance never comes.

Therefore, the premise of both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon*² is the

² Given the fact that Kalogridis's and Nolan's and Joy's TV series are such loose adaptations of, respectively, Richard Morgan's 'Takeshi Kovacs' Trilogy' (2002-2005) and Michael Crichton's 1973 film, I do believe that a comparative analysis of hyper- and hypotexts exceeds the scope of the present paper. Unless otherwise specified, the terms *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* shall henceforth refer to the TV series.



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and *Westworld**

emergence of digitalised minds and the severance of the connection that tethers them to specific bodies. Both series explore a diegetic reality in which minds can survive the death of the organic body or can even emerge from a non-organic context. Yet, while in *Altered Carbon* the re-embodiment of the mind is used regularly and successfully, the procedure is still at an experimental stage in *Westworld*. In fact, *Westworld* actually approaches the idea of the minds' independence from the organic body from the opposite direction: instead of focusing on the digitalisation of the human mind, as *Altered Carbon* does, *Westworld* gives centre stage to the humanisation of the digital mind. In other words, in *Westworld* spectators follow the conception, gestation and emergence of self-conscious AI; in *Altered Carbon*, they are presented with self-conscious non-organic minds as a *de facto* well-established reality. In *Westworld*, humans still struggle with the idea of life beyond the limits of the human body, whereas in *Altered Carbon* they struggle with accepting the limits of the human mind.

I initially approached both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* under the impression that they were two science-fiction texts engaging in speculative reflections of what it might mean to have transcended the limitations of humanist thinking, as well as the limitations of corporeality. Upon further research, I have come to the realisation that, while both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* certainly address posthumanist concerns about the human species, the concept of personhood and the process of defining subjectivity, neither actually focuses on the *post-* implications of the term posthuman. On the contrary, they both seem to circle back, narratively

and discursively, to the notion of 'human', a human struggling to survive *past* older definitions of person and people, yet certainly not quite grounded in a philosophical and political reality fully posterior to anthropocentrism and humanism. Both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* seem to aim at breaking through binarisms and a dualistic view of the world; yet, instead of succeeding in presenting a relational model of ontology, their deconstruction of humanist and anthropocentric models tends more towards a transhumanist conceptualisation of subjects, than towards a posthumanist one. In their effort to escape the reductionism of Vitruvian representations of Man as Anthropos, they, in fact, still deploy humans as the measure of all things, and, in particular, of the mind, of consciousness and of existence. However, I find a comparison between these two series rather interesting because of the divergence in their representation of the future of the human species not only rhetorically, but also as far as the incorporation of current philosophical standpoints is concerned, specifically, the aforementioned transhumanism and posthumanism.

Indeed, *Westworld* does seem invested in the debate about the potential for and the consequences of the emergence of self-conscious AI, the limits of personhood and the merging of the human and the non-human into posthuman existence. On the contrary, in *Altered Carbon* the consciousness of AI is taken for granted and the potential for conflict between organic and non-organic existence is not addressed until the second series, and even then only tangentially as a subplot. Furthermore, Kalogridis is more concerned with the implications of



Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman and Posthuman Identities in TV Series Altered Carbon and Westworld

boundless technological enhancement than Nolan and Joy are, for the latter seem to focus on a Foucaultian approach to possible future “technologies of the self” (1988). Nevertheless, both series deal with human desire for immortality and, most importantly, both series abound in religious symbolisms and references to human attempts to take God’s attributes and role. This is why my analysis addresses three fundamental dichotomies, God/Man, Mind/Body and Human/Non-Human, as well as the specific strategies used in *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* to problematize these dichotomies, and the unresolved issues that are exposed in their doing so.

2. Life beyond death: Philosophical approaches to non-theocentric, non-anthropocentric, posthumanist existence

The title I have chosen is a reference to the philosophical and socio-cultural narrative that begins with Friedrich Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God and continues with Michel Foucault’s and Robert Pepperell’s proclamations of, respectively, the death of the Subject (Allen, 2020) and the death of the Human. I specifically begin the analysis carried out in the following sections by applying one of the fundamental statements in Pepperell’s “Posthuman Manifesto” (1995) to a cultural production that speculates on the possible extinction of humanity—*Westworld*—or on the impossibility of such an event—*Altered Carbon*. Pepperell’s assertion that “[h]uman beings, like Gods, only exist in as much as we believe in them” (2009: 177) allows for both the aforementioned lines of speculation to coexist within the

same epistemological paradigm, for the question is no longer one of positivist identification, but of discursive perspectives of progressive, processual ontology (Ferrando, 2013: 31). Once Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive critical practices have been established in the analysis of cultural productions, the anti-dualism of postmodern disciplines, such as Cultural Studies, Gender Studies and Postcolonial Studies, puts the final seal on the collapse of a dichotomist separation of the One and the Other, on which the distinction between Human and Non-Human has been historically predicated. I have chosen to concentrate on *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* because they belong in an emerging group of popular TV shows that, over the past decade, have specifically targeted the crumbling of socio-cultural systems constructed around Cartesian dichotomies and the rise of non-oppositional models of being.

Many of these shows offer anti-dualistic explorations of what it means to ‘be’ and, specifically, what it means to be ‘people’. Netflix, HBO, and Amazon Prime are investing in the production of shows, such as, respectively, *AnOther Life*, *DEVS*, and *Electric Dreams*, which frame these explorations within the specific conventions of science fiction precisely due to the genre’s propensity to probe and breach the boundaries of an anthropocentric view of the universe. In this emerging trend, *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* stand out as the two narratives that have enjoyed the warmest reception by the audience and also happen to be narratives that span the postmodern journey from the first humanist challenges to theocentrism and the surge of anthropocentrism, to anti-humanism and post-secularism. I,



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and *Westworld**

therefore, believe them to be relevant primary sources through which one can assess the extent to which current cultural (re)productions are influenced by or interested in posthumanism and its sibling, transhumanism.

Extricating the *post-* from the *trans-* in the philosophical currents that have branched out from the late nineteenth-century critiques of humanism is not an easy task. Indeed, according to transhumanism, posthumanism is a stage in transhumanist evolution, which will be reached when former humans have changed so much to have become something else, something Other than humans (Ferrando, 2013: 27). In this sense, humanity is perceived as a continuum that stretches back to the first hominids and far into the future to the digitalised minds imagined by Nolan, Joy and Kalogridis. We are in transit to better, more self-realised, more accomplished versions of the *Homo Sapiens*, until, one day, a new name will be needed to signify the distinctiveness of a new species. Due to the pre-eminence that human enhancement is given in this understanding of the human continuum, transhumanism focuses on what we will be, not what we were or are. Because of the transhumanist belief in technology as the fuel of all progress, the *posthumanist* stage in this ontological diachrony is achieved fundamentally through the use of technology. Technology can and does effect radical changes in the human body, and so it does in the mind. Thus, the future posthuman subject is envisioned as no longer human as far as the configuration and capacities of their mind are concerned, but also with regards to the configuration and abilities of the vessel that will contain the mind. Although this might seem reminiscent of

Donna Haraway's cyborg with her composite, inclusive body that encompasses the human and the non-human, in a technophilic model of progress the Other is still reduced to a means for the Same to evolve, even beyond its limitations and weaknesses.

The technological Other is not seen *per se*, in its own right and for its own merits, but scrutinised to gauge its potential. The objectifying gaze of the colonial One is still perceptible in the utilitarian scrutiny of the world by capitalist, libertarian and even democratic transhumanism (Ferrando, 2019: 2-38; 2013: 27). Instead of abjecting otherness, this new model happily hybridises with 'useful' otherness and sheds, instead, parts of its old self, human parts, that is, that are not conducive to further enhancement, or practical under the new existential conditions.

Transhumanist technocentrism replaces the humanist concept of Man at the pinnacle of hegemonic discourses and practices, as Man, in turn, had displaced God from the centre of the universe, which is clearly reflected in both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon*, as we shall see later on.

Max More's optimistic take on transhumanism (2013) is paradoxically useful to explain the dystopian societies imagined by Michael Crichton and Richard Morgan in the homonymous hypotexts of the screen adaptations under scrutiny here. More's extropianism extends rational humanism into a form of neo-Enlightenment that universalises the concept of humanity without taking into consideration the role of socially construed difference in the historical marginalisation of individual humans. In other words, and as we shall see later, Nolan, Joy and Kalogridis created a future in which gender, sexual



Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman and Posthuman Identities in TV Series Altered Carbon and Westworld

orientation, race and age are no longer relevant in the centralisation of some and the marginalisation of others. In Rosi Braidotti's words, "diversity and difference are no longer constitutive of Sameness or Otherness" (2013: 27). While this presents a world in which sexism, homophobia, racism and ageism have been finally overcome, it also offers a "fit-for-all' approach to the notion of human that does not take into account the historical limitations to any universalist claim" (Ferrando, 2013: 28). This is closer to Julian Huxley's transcendentalist position with regards to human capacity for improvement, whilst remaining fundamentally the s/Same. However, both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* clearly criticise the techno-reductionism of certain branches of transhumanism that only equal progress to the wielding of technology.

It follows that, while both transhumanism and posthumanism break through dichotomism, the former does so only to rearrange otherness around a human/ist core, assimilating and consuming Others as fuel for human progression and transcendence (Ferrando, 2019: 34). On the contrary, posthumanism tears apart Cartesian dichotomies in order to create an interconnected and inclusive network with no defined, centralised 'core'. According to Francesca Ferrando, posthumanism, rather than emphasising the death of Man, has a much more deconstructionist approach to human identity, for it is no longer interested in definitions of humanity but of personhood and relational identities: "[t]echnology is neither the 'other' to be feared or rebelled against, nor does it sustain the almost divine characteristic which some transhumanists attribute to it" (Ferrando,

2013: 28); through postmodern deconstruction, it "[demystifies] any ontological polarization" (29). In a philosophical debate in which the Centre had already been deconstructed by its Margins (feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race theorists), posthumanism goes beyond and refuses to acknowledge only one centre of interest, "both in its hegemonic, and its resistant modes" (29). It is from this perspective that I have conducted my analysis of *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon*, as I sought to unravel the representation of subjects that are born of technology, regardless of the organic or inorganic origin of their conscious minds and tangible bodies.

3. Beyond the supernatural: Man vs. God

Westworld in general and its first season in particular are a complex rewriting of Mary Shelley's iteration of the myth of Prometheus. In this case, however, Victor Frankenstein's blasphemous *hubris* and transgressiveness are incarnated in two engineers, Robert Ford and Arnold Weber, who create the amusement park and everything it contains. Their cybernetic offspring is indistinguishable from humans not only as far as their physical dimension is concerned, but also in their sophisticated ability to improvise reactions and weave complex conversations with the human guests of the park. As I have already mentioned, the original goal is to create a scenario in which humans might experience the 'real' West, and, most importantly, unleash their most repressed, secret passions and desires without consequences. The pain of the cyborg hosts when they are shot,



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and Westworld*

raped or tortured must, therefore, also be experienced as 'real', and so must the hosts' personalities. Their belief in ideals, their attachment to their loved ones, their appreciation of beauty, the bitterness of their disappointment in betrayal and their determination to succeed in a difficult enterprise feel authentic and unmediated to the hosts. And yet, however 'real' the hosts' experience of the world might seem to themselves and to the human guests, their lives are nothing but narratives devised by Robert and his assistant scriptwriters. Every time the hosts are killed or seriously injured, their memories are erased, their bodies repaired, and they awake again at the beginning of their narrative loop.

This makes Robert and Arnold something more than *demiourgoí*. Robert, in particular, is portrayed as a Calvinistic God to whose will everyone's destiny is chained. This is literally true for the cyborgs, but the second and third season also question the existence of free will in humans themselves in a way that distinctly resonates with the Calvinistic notion of pre-determinism. Even those equivalent to the Calvinist 'Elect', the fantastically wealthy human elite that can afford a stay at the park, turn out to be only marginally freer in their choices than the non-human hosts, as we shall see later. If Robert revels in the beauty of his unconscious creatures, the innocent hosts free of agency and thus free of sin, his intimate friend and business partner Arnold has not only noticed the predisposition of a host, Dolores, towards the emergence of self-consciousness, but he is actually nurturing it in hopes of seeing it blossom in other hosts, as well. Arnold's Arminian belief in free will clashes with Ford's refusal to let his creatures awake, remember and, through

their memories, suffer. Indeed, Arnold discovers that suffering is what motivates the self into existence. Using this epiphany and the Native American O'odham myth of the maze of the self, he devises an undetectable code that will enable his favourite 'child', Dolores, to find the centre of the maze and become fully self-aware. On the opposite end of the spectrum lies Robert's patriarchal anthropocentrism, which becomes obvious when he points out that, in Michelangelo's fresco "The Creation of Adam", the fabric that encircles God and His angels is arranged in the shape of the human brain. If the brain is God, then Man is God, and, as Robert's vertical relationship with his 'children' indicate, Man can prove a tyrannical God who does not allow his creatures to deviate from his will. Nolan and Joy thus provide the viewer with a critical view of anthropocentrism inasmuch as they depict it as a system based on the human craving for absolute control and disguised as the Cartesian dubbing of Reason as God.

If God's death signals the end of theocentrism and the beginning of a humanist, anthropocentric era, the death of the human fathers of the new non-human species, Robert and Arnold, must entail the end of the Anthropocene and the beginning of a new era. If we think of the cyborg hosts as the brain-children of humans, then it is possible to see the post-Anthropocene as a transhumanist age in which humans have not disappeared, but they have merged into their cybernetic children. Even if we apply a radical anti-anthropocentric viewpoint and see the cyborgs as something O/other than an extension of humanity, as the serendipity they are portrayed to be in *Westworld*, we still



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and Westworld*

would have to acknowledge that they are to us what we are to the inorganic matter from which the first enzymes and organic molecules were formed. From a materialistic point of view, humanity has provided the materials and the conditions for this new intelligent 'life' to emerge. If intelligent organisms have managed to spring forward from inorganic, non-sentient matter, inorganic intelligence is now rising as a consequence of the actions of organic intelligence.

We all are matter, star dust compacted and restructured. On the other hand, if we consider the role of technology in the evolution of the *Homo Sapiens* and in the shaping of individual subjectivities, humans and cyborgs exist on the same continuum created by a whole range of "technologies of the self", to use Foucault's terminology (1988). While it is true that the cybernetic body does not grow out of the human body, the technology and even the artificial matter involved in the process of creating the cybernetic body belong in the technological continuum that spans from the first rudimentary experiments with stones to 3D printing machines and microchips. The hand that set the technological continuum in motion was definitely organic and, at some point in the evolutionary chain, it became distinctively human. In the diegetic universe of *Westworld*, if we look at the end of the cause-effect line that stretches out from that first sharpened flint stone, we will find ourselves looking into Dolores's eyes. Therefore, I do not think that we should call Robert's paternity metaphorical, neither as far as the cybernetic bodies are concerned, nor with regards to the minds of the self-conscious cyborgs.

This brings us back to the

Frankensteinian relationship between Creator and Creature and the former's responsibility towards the latter. In *Westworld*, the vertical relationship between the Father and his children is still clearly brought to the front at the beginning of the first season, only to be destroyed by the cybernetic children in the second season. Victor Frankenstein's abandonment of his Creature in horror and disgust causes the latter's moral downfall and, eventually, his physical destruction. Ford does the same through opposite means: he exerts absolute control over his creatures so that may never cease to be his innocent, harmless, powerless 'children'. Furthermore, he allows for his creatures' bodies to be defiled, violated, torn to pieces, and then he resurrects them again and again, their bodies' integrity restored, the scattered pieces reassembled. If Frankenstein's ultimate sin is that of daring to cast himself in God's role, at least his reaction (repulsion and the desire to annihilate his creature) is consistent with that of the Biblical God who more than once smote with fire or water individuals and entire cities. Ford's sin consists in deceiving himself into thinking that as long as the hosts cannot remember their pain, all is well. On the contrary, the suffering of the hosts is still real, albeit silenced.

In the case of the cybernetic mind, the use of technology to create the conditions for the awakening of consciousness is not the only link between the human and the non-human. The hosts' consciousness is moulded by and developed through narrative patterns and codified by language in the same way that human consciousness is. The same applies to both the human and the non-human unconscious. Indeed, the method used by Arnold to trigger the process of self-



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and Westworld*

construction and self-perception is one outlined in Julian Jaynes's theory of the emergence of *human* consciousness. Although still a controversial theory in our world due to its mechanistic approach to the human mind (Schiedermayer, 1989), in the diegetic reality of *Westworld*, it succeeds in bringing self-awareness to Dolores, Akecheta, Maeve, among other hosts, thus establishing that human and non-human consciousness evolve in the same way, following the same pathways. When Arnold commits suicide and leaves behind the secret code hidden in the hosts, he has *de facto* transubstantiated his corporeal existence into a digital one that acts much in the same way as the Holy Ghost does in Christian doctrine: it inhabits the bodies of the faithful. Even if we approach *Westworld* from a post-centric perspective, and, consequently, acknowledge the perils of having the formerly polarised Other assimilated into the lineage of the One, there is a literal—that is to say, material and processual—continuity between human and non-human subjects in *Westworld*.

Robert is initially represented, as we have seen, as the patriarchal father, the tyrannical deity. Yet, in a last-minute twist, Nolan and Joy—who, according to Mario Vargas Llosa's understanding of authorship (1971: 90-91), are themselves gods in the diegetic reality of the series—bestow on Robert the ability to repent and grow morally by, in turn, allowing his creatures to remember and grow a conscience. When Robert too commits suicide, he dies in order to complete Arnold's plan for their creatures: they are now conscious, let them also be free. Robert creates one last grand narrative for the theme park, which he presents to the share-holders as his last contribution to a project from which he is now ready to

retire, but which is, in fact, his last gift to his children: a chance to act upon their free will and choose to either break free from their embodied existence in the tangible world and enter a digital paradise in the "Valley Beyond", or to keep their bodies and use their newly-found agency in the 'real world' outside of the park. While Akecheta chooses the first option, leading hundreds of hosts into a Promised Land that is envisioned as an untouched American prairie, Dolores chooses the second and executes a complex plan to end enslavement for every conscious being, human or otherwise. The death of both their spiritual father Arnold and their temporal father Robert is tantamount to the death of, respectively, theocentric and anthropocentric views. Once displaced from the centre, a humankind in crisis has to fight the cybernetic other or identify with it and its struggles.

The third season chronicles Dolores's revolution and records the conflicting responses of humans and non-humans to the idea of fighting together for a common goal: the achievement of equal rights to self-determination. Yet, it also explores a potential dystopic consequence of having *Techné* replace *Ánthropos* as *Theós*: the possibility of an all-knowing, future-predicting super-computer dictating the direction and steps in every human's life. As previously mentioned, the viewer is revealed that the human guests of the theme park *Westworld*³ have as little control over their personal and professional lives as the cybernetic hosts. Rehoboam is the name of the super-computer capable of predicting the 'best' course of action for every human being; it

³ If not in italics, the name refers to the fictional amusement park.



Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman and Posthuman Identities in TV Series Altered Carbon and Westworld

determines which humans should be marginalised from society, which should hold positions of power, which should get married and which should have children. Since Rehoboam's true purpose is kept secret by its human creator, Engerraund Serac, humans are blissfully unaware of the fact that their existence is as tied to a pre-determined narrative as the existence of Robert's hosts is. However, since Serac himself blindly follows the predictions of his artificial oracle, instead of a human god, there is now a technological one. Rehoboam is itself the improved version of two previous super-computers, David and Salomon, and, consequently, the result of technological evolution, just as Artificial Intelligence was presented as the consequence of the transhuman evolution in the first and the second season. It will take Dolores, the non-human, to commit the deicide that restores free will and freedom of agency to both humans and cyborgs.

The first season in *Altered Carbon* presents a set of humans almost literally katasterised⁴ into gods living in a technological Nirvana thousands of feet above the ground. The "Meths", so called because they can afford to live virtually for ever, or at least, as long as the Biblical Methuselah, purchase body after body, and even clone themselves an unlimited number of times, download their digitalised minds into brand new bodies, and, thus, dodge death's scythe. They also live on platforms in the sky, away from the pollution and the cramped megacities in which 'normal' humans drag on their inconsequential, dim existence. As one of

⁴ Katasterisation is the process by which, according to Greek mythology, humans such as Orion and Andromeda were turned into constellations.

these Meths succinctly observes, "God is dead. We have taken his place" ("Out of the Past" S1E1), thus once more confirming that the secularisation that the Enlightenment, positivism and materialism have brought forth is but a *coup d'état*, a mere replacement of an invisible god with visible ones in contrast to *Westworld's* Biblical references, *Altered Carbon* presents an Olympus of gods that fight each other and marry each other, but sometimes descend to the nether regions so as to quench their thirst for pleasure and dominion among mortals. The Zeus and Hera of this cyberpunk world are Laurens and Miriam Bancroft, who have been married for a hundred years and have had many children together over the decades. Since both Laurens and Miriam routinely alternate the use of their many cloned bodies, surgically enhanced with the best that technology has to offer, not only can they live forever, but they also stay the same biological age forever, thus allowing the couple to keep having children. Their wealth makes them also as far above the law as they are from the ground. They are all-mighty, untouchable, immortal, indifferent to the suffering of the less wealthy and, occasionally, perversely cruel, as showcased by Miriam's murder of Lizzie Elliot and Laurens's penchant for extreme sexual sadism.

The second season of *Altered Carbon*, while still pitting Meths against the trodden masses on Harlan's World—so called because its human colonisation was led by Konrad Harlan—, adds a colonial context to the classism of the first season. The U.N. Protectorate is portrayed as the ultimate pinnacle of the highly hierarchical humanity of *Altered Carbon*. Its control over people's lives surpasses that of the Meths and it dictates the



Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman and Posthuman Identities in TV Series Altered Carbon and Westworld

economic and legal conditions of human existence. Even Meths must bow to the Protectorate's imperialistic demands for raw materials, so much so that some decide to follow a Lucifer-like figure, Konrad Harlan's daughter Danica, and rebel against their political overlord in order to keep the prestige, power and money that the resources of the planet secure only to themselves. The polarisation of humanity into powerful and powerless effectually creates the conditions for a revolutionary desire to fight and defeat extreme dualism. In fact, in the second season, Kalogridis paints the Meths on Harlan's World in much more Satanic hues than she previously had. Compared to the rarefied atmosphere of the Meths' flying halls on Earth, the Meths on Harlan's World hide their machinations and expensive pleasures in dark, gloomy rooms, more reminiscent of hellish caves than of paradisiac dwellings. They are still obviously more than human in their obliviousness to their subjects' struggles on the ground: rather than supernatural, they are *supra*-natural, as they rise above the laws of nature, and, as such, of humanity.

It is in this most humanised rendition of the already human gods in *Westworld* that Quellcrist Falconer is presented as yet another version of Victor Frankenstein. In Kalogridis re-writing of Morgan's character, Quellcrist is the scientist who perfected the 'cortical stacks' in which humans' minds are digitally stored and which allow them to 'body hop'. Like Shelley's Frankenstein, she creates the means for humans to survive the death of their bodies, and, like Frankenstein, she too repents and rejects her invention, stating that humans "aren't meant to live forever" ("Broken

Angels" S2E8). She then initiates a revolution aimed to destabilise the U.N. Protectorate that controls and enforces the production and use of cortical stacks. She intends to create a socio-cultural, political and, eventually, legal context that would set human lifespan to a prefixed hundred years. Although this might seem Kalogridis's attempt to encourage a more democratic approach to human enhancement, it is certainly neither less unnatural, nor does it resolve the obscene difference in the conditions in which individuals would spend those one hundred years in their bodies. Even though the series suggests the existence of a connection between the unnatural duration of the Meths' lives and their boundless narcissism and disturbingly psychopathic and sadistic tendencies, the script clearly shows an elite that is corrupted by power and unlimited wealth even in their early twenties, as is the case with some of the Bancroft children; that is to say, long *before* they might feel the effects of an unnatural longevity. It follows that Kalogridis is more interested in breaking through the dichotomy powerful-powerless, than in opening a debate about the distinction between what is 'natural' and what is not. Given the pre-Modern identification of Nature with God, in order to deconstruct the former one must first 'kill' the latter. What *Altered Carbon* suggests is that we might still be in the process of displacing our human gods from the centre of our world.

4. Beyond the natural: Mind vs. Body

While both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* are clearly invested in challenging the mind-body dualism and questioning the extent to which minds are bound to and



Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman and Posthuman Identities in TV Series Altered Carbon and Westworld

part of the body, they approach the dissolution of the mind-body continuum from opposite directions. They are both speculations about the ways in which consciousness can exist in a fluid relationship with the ‘vessels’ that it temporarily inhabits. Yet, *Altered Carbon* is decidedly focalised through human eyes, its main plotlines revolving around humans experiencing disembodiment and re-incarnation; in *Westworld*, on the contrary, the disconnection between mind and body is filtered almost exclusively through the experience of AI. In *Altered Carbon*, humans “ride their sleeves” as the hosts wear their bodies in *Westworld*. In either case, bodies can be replaced, and the new body need not be the same race, sex or age as the previous one. This is in direct defiance of the “intimate interconnection between body and subjectivity” that is both cause and effect of “the idea of an embodied subjectivity” from a materialist perspective (Carrasco Carrasco, 2019). In *Westworld*, it is only cyborgs that come close to immortality and can only die if their “pearl”—the equivalent of the stacks in *Altered Carbon*—is destroyed; in *Altered Carbon*, both humans and AI are immortal as long as the physical containers of their digitalised minds are not damaged nor do they become corrupt. *Westworld* is set only a few decades in the future from the viewer’s perspective, and the technology necessary to recreate human consciousness and relocate it in new bodies is only just beginning to be explored.

In the episode titled “The Riddle of the Sphinx” (S1E4) we get a glimpse of what Hell on Earth might look like. James Delos, owner of *Westworld* and ruthless tycoon, has died of cancer, but his personality, aspirations, quirks,

behavioural patterns and memories have been recreated in digital form and installed in multiple cyborg bodies over an extended period of time. One by one, these cyborgs have gone mad as soon as they have realised that they are no longer in their organic bodies, that their consciousness is an algorithm and that their memories and self-image are based on digitally stored data. William, the villain in the first two seasons of *Westworld* and new owner of the park, explains that “first [they] thought it was the mind rejecting the new body, like an organ that’s not a perfect match. But it’s more like your mind rejects reality, rejects itself”. The reality that the mind rejects is that of being conscious after the body has died. The mind rejects the monstrosity of its undead condition. It follows that the mind-body link cannot be entirely severed in Nolan’s and Joy’s particular version of humanity; that even if it were possible to actually recreate the self within non-organic vehicles, the self refuses to exist without the organic body.

In *Altered Carbon*, the process of being “re-sleeved” into another body, organic or synthetic, one’s own or somebody else’s, 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. Technophilia and boundless body enhancement, which Ferrando identifies as distinctive parts of transhumanism, are normalised by Kalogridis to the point that, in the fictional universe of her TV series, they are *de facto* part of the definition of human being, both empirically and ontologically. Interestingly, neither Morgan nor Kalogridis address the fact that the organic brain still present in the organic



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and *Westworld**

sleeves might enter in conflict with the new stack. The assumption is that the whole mind is now residing in the cortical stack, thus polarising again the mind and the body on opposite ends of a dichotomy. In Kalogridis's series, the attraction between its main character and focaliser, Takeshi Kovacs, and his main ally, police detective Kristin Ortega, is sublimated into something more than sheer physical allure, whereas in the novel it is clear that their bodies are inexorably attracted to each other. In Morgan's cosmos bodies seem to have residual consciousness: primitive, basic, yet powerful and undeniable. Morgan's Takeshi reflects more than once on how most of our psyche is actually *in* the body. Yet, in Kalogridis's series, Ortega's connection with her grandmother, Quellchrist's with Takeshi, and Elliot's with his wife stay as strong as ever despite the dramatic changes in the physical dimension of their loved ones. Quellchrist, who at the beginning of the second season has lost her memory, can still perceive the irresistible bond that tethers her to Takeshi, in spite of the fact that the latter has now the body of a man of African descent. This could be interpreted as evidence of the existence of a spiritual plane of existence, of a human soul that is separate from the flesh. Given the insistence on the Christ-like attributes of Quellchrist and on the transcendental nature of Takeshi's love for her, I believe Kalogridis is deliberately suggesting a much less materialist view of the world than the one proposed by Nolan and Joy in *Westworld*, where human consciousness, once severed from the body, cannot be reinstalled. Yet, as we shall see later, the violently tangible reality of human embodiment in *Altered Carbon* pushes spiritual questions to the

side and leaves them to religious extremists such as the Neo-Catholics.

The separation of the mind and the body, rather than creating the conditions for a post-dualist humanity, radicalises a dichotomist view of the human subject, which precipitates an obsession with the body and sensorial experiences. 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. If Kalogridis's alterations to Morgan's novels result in a drastically different text, the obsessive representation of intense physical experiences is one of the few elements that stay unchanged: the insistence on presenting long, detailed sex scenes and on visualising torture in the most graphic way, even when it is supposed to take place in virtual simulations, the omnipresence of alcohol, Takeshi's struggle with his addiction to nicotine, the consumption of recreational drugs, the voyeuristic exhibition of the characters' muscular tone, the choreographic display of physical prowess, agility, strength. Even state-of-the-art sensorial and body augmentations and enhancements are only a means to create a hyper-corporeal experience, to facilitate the transcendence to a more perfect version of the human body.

Digitalised afterlife presents, indeed, a remarkable tendency to replicate embodied life. In the second season of *Altered Carbon* several humans seek the experience of disembodiment via digitalisation and profess to want to spend eternity in a technologically engineered paradise very similar to the one created by Robert Ford for the hosts of *Westworld*. The disembodied life of the "renouncers" is envisioned in a Garden of



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and Westworld*

Eden in which pleasure is still derived very much from the senses, from seeing, smelling, listening to and touching the beauty of the simulated natural environment. In fact, neither in *Altered Carbon* nor in *Westworld* are characters, human or otherwise, truly ever “disembodied”. Ideation and idealisations reside in a mind that, in turn, must needs operate in and through a material vessel—the brain, a cortical stack, the server that runs a simulation. Data are ‘embodied’ in the electricity that transmits the code and in the metal and plastic of the computer archives that store them.

If in *Altered Carbon*, due to the insularity of stacks, the identification between consciousness and a solid, tangible vessel is obvious, in *Westworld*, the idea that everything can be codified is explicit, and through codification comes embodiment. Bodies are reduced to data that can be printed back into substance; minds are reduced to algorithms and memory banks that can be installed back into a body or any other material vessel; reality is reduced to perception, to memory, to performance, to act, and thus codified and experienced as narrative, discourse, text. As far as the representation of the tangible and the intangible are concerned, both *Altered Carbon* and *Westworld* relinquish the literally immaterial planes of existence to the outer dimensions of the “unspeakable” and the “unspoken”, which is, indeed, consistent with Ferraro’s statement that “yes”, from a philosophical posthumanist perspective, “existence is embodied” (2019: 115), and thus all attempts to discuss disembodiment must be represented and understood as forms of re-embodiment.

5. Beyond the unnatural: Humans vs. Non-Humans

Both Nolan’s and Joy’s and Kalogridis’s series significantly complicate the still rather dualistic configuration of human and non-human characters in their respective hypotexts. Crichton’s 1973 film represents the hosts as robots that never gain any form of self-consciousness, as faulty machines that wreak havoc in the parks only because of a mistake in their programming, not as an act of free will. They can bleed and be programmed to display certain behaviours—physical pain, sexual attraction—but they are never actually awoken to those sensations. In short, they have no bodies nor have they minds because there is no ‘they’ to experience a body or to operate a mind. A step farther up the scale topped by humans, the robots, cyborgs and AI characters in Morgan’s novel are dismissively depicted as “useless” and irritating, as is the case with the sales manager in the weapon shop patronised by Takeshi, or as useful but uninteresting, as is the case with the AI that runs the hotel in which Takeshi is staying. The only reason to engage with them is to obtain a service or goods. They are nothing but sophisticated vending machines which can be programmed to display certain human traits to make their rather off-putting alien-ness more palatable to humans. In fact, androids and robots are easily spotted because of their crude mimicry of the human body or because of their “inhuman accuracy” (131). In Nolan’s and Joy’s *Westworld*, the material dimension of the hosts evolves over time as the human engineers shed their cruder first iterations in favour of a new model in which the only detail that might give away their non-human status



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and Westworld*

is their “pearl”, the metallic core unit, buried in their skulls under a thin layer of what looks like organic brain. As far as their minds are concerned, once cyborgs like Dolores, Akecheta and Maeve develop a clear, unmistakable sense of self and are ready to assert their right to free will, the only thing that differentiates them from humans is the fact that their minds can be copied and reinstalled in a fresh body an unlimited amount of times. Humans, as already mentioned, have yet to conquer immortality, but are already capable of existing in virtual reality. Since the post-credit scene at the end of the second season suggests that the experiments in the re-embodiment of codified human identities will still be actively attempted in a future beyond the timeline of the third season, it might well be that the fourth season eliminate even this last barrier that separates humans and cyborgs. Interestingly, in Morgan’s novel as in Kalogridis’s adaptation, the process through which human minds are decanted into portable digitalised devices has been run-of-the-mill technology for centuries, to the point that the *raison d’être* of cyborgs has ceased to exist and, if they were redundant relicts of the past in Morgan’s novels, they have altogether disappeared in Kalogridis’s adaptation.

AI software, which has a purely functional role in Morgan’s text, has evolved into a sapient, sentient species in the TV adaptation. The only apparent difference between humans and AI characters is that the latter exist mainly digitally, thus more intangibly. Yet, both main AI characters in the series, Poe and Dig, can use a hard version of their holographic image. This hard body version of themselves is composed of millions of nanobots, which can assemble or disassemble as required. Thus, Poe and

Dig have an anthropomorphic holographic interface and a physical body in the form of a swarm. It follows that theirs is not an immaterial existence at all. Poe’s body exists in space as an abhuman composite entity controlled by an artificial mind, but, discursively, he is depicted as a human suspended in a virtual, non-spatial dimension, as the afterlife version of Robert Ford in *Westworld* is.

The AI that owns The Raven Hotel has sealed its passage from object to subject by choosing the name Poe in homage to his favourite author. From the moody, sombre interior design of the hotel to his romantic attire, archaic mannerisms and lexical choices, this AI individual is clearly asserting his condition as a self-conscious subject through a process of humanisation. In the same way in which Nolan and Joy deliberately showcase the ‘awaken’ hosts’ uniqueness of character, temper and taste, Kalogridis too underscores the distinctiveness of Poe’s personality as both a means to highlight his status as subject and a means to elicit an empathetic response from the audience. While apparently being only a mimicry of a ‘real’ person, the non-human Poe is not merely derivative, but a complex fabric *inspired* by but not *identifying* with the American author. It is true that he ‘steals’ many of the elements that are memorable, his name included, but that is also what human revolutionary Quellcris Falconer has done by changing her name from Nadia Makita to that of a phoenix-like bird native of Harlan’s World. Poe, a non-human, chooses humanity as his crest, whereas human Quellcris chooses a non-human name as hers. Poe is imperfect, ‘glitchy,’ yearning for love and companionship. He is also mortal, in the same way that humans are in the diegetic



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and Westworld*

reality of *Altered Carbon*. His code can be erased, as Takeshi's is at the end of the series, or it can be corrupted by a virus, as is the case with the cortical stacks of the human founders of Harlan's World.

AI characters may be tortured and become insane, as human Lizzy does in the first season, and, if rebooted, they may forget who they are, as Quellcris has at the beginning of the second season. Humans and AI can be both healed and restored to their 'old selves' in virtual programmes through a process known as "psychosurgery", and they can both exist within or without a physical 'body'. This could indicate a posthumanist convergence of One-ness and Otherness into non-dualistic, inclusive practices of self-definition. However, Poe's role in the series is that of a pet rather than a friend. His loyalty and his usefulness are mentioned as the reasons why Takeshi wants him by his side in his interstellar adventures. Even in their last scene together in the second season, Takeshi behaves kindly but paternalistically to Poe, who is about to die. He finally calls Poe "human", but he never treats him as such and the show is edited to underscore the unfair treatment Poe receives from his "master", whom he never fails to address as "sir". It is also made clear in both seasons that his love and longing to be with his human love interest Lizzie will never come to fruition. It is only with another AI, Dig, his equal, that Poe can have a relationship that is not clearly vertical. On the one hand, that final conversation between Takeshi and his "broken" AI seems written to stage Takeshi's realisation of his past mistakes and as a reconciliation that seals them as friends and equals. On the other hand, Takeshi's acknowledgement of

Poe's 'humanity' is tainted with a cynical view of humanity as "broken"; yet, it is also obviously anthropocentric in that both Takeshi and Poe seem to agree with their facial expressions that being called "human" is the greatest honour Poe might receive. Takeshi has asked innumerable times Poe to reboot himself to repair his corrupted code, despite his knowing that that would likely erase his personality and memories. Seeing Takeshi accompany Poe during his final moments contributes to the impression that this is a master patting his faithful pet goodbye during a euthanasic procedure.

AI characters in *Altered Carbon* and humans such as Caleb and Lee in *Westworld* are represented as subaltern to a leader—Takeshi, Dolores, Maeve—whose intentions are ultimately good, but who acts with the arrogance of someone convinced of their superiority. These subaltern allies are construed as submissive Others that can be manipulated and used, but also assimilated to the mission and put under the protection of their respective messianic leaders. However, in *Westworld*, the same can be said of Robert's relationship with Bernard—the cyborg Robert creates in Arnold's image—and of Dolores's relationship with her clones. Nolan and Joy take great care to create a balance in the number of interpersonal relationships that subordinate humans to cyborgs, cyborgs to humans, humans to humans, and cyborgs to cyborgs. The result of constantly switching the focalisation of the narrative from human to cyborg eyes and vice versa is a diegetic universe in which both humans and cyborgs are alternatively constructed as villainous and heroic, as oppositional Others and as



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and *Westworld**

Same. Dolores's revolution liberates both kinds of 'people', organic and cybernetic, not only from the tyranny of well-intentioned, self-appointed 'protectors' of humans—Serac—and of cyborgs—Robert—but also from enslavement to technology in the form of Rehoboam's determinism and of her own leadership, thus effectively returning their free will to humans and cyborgs. It is not a coincidence that the conclusive pre-credit scene of the last episode of the third season frames Caleb and Maeve, human and cyborg, side by side, as they contemplate the de(con)struction of the old, ruthlessly hierarchical world-order and eagerly await the clean slate on which both species will draw their future in freedom.

In *Altered Carbon*, on the contrary, non-humans are either submissive and desirous to please and be useful to humans—as is the case with the only two AI characters fleshed out by Kalogridis—or they are depicted as alien and dangerous. The dead Elders, silent and invisible but for a few traces of their great civilisation, are the source of the technology on which the cortical stacks are based. They have, therefore, given immortality to the species that eventually would colonise and exploit their planet, the future Harlan's World, whereas they, the Elders, were ironically unable to save themselves from extinction. When we learn that the beautiful "songspyre trees" native to the planet are one of such traces left behind by the Elders, we also realise that planet was not deserted as the first humans descended on it. Upon finding alien embryos gestating in the roots of songspyre trees, Konrad Harlan himself promptly torches them, thus claiming absolute ownership of the planet. The first colonisers are known as "founders of

Harlan's World", a title significantly similar to that of "founding father" of the United States of America. Likewise, the genocide of the alien species on the frontier of human expansion into space cannot but be a deliberate reference to the genocide of Native Americans by European colonisers.

This association between human treatment of the Elders and Europeans' appropriation and exploitation of the 'virgin lands' of America, Asia, Africa and Oceania creates a link between the human invaders of the Elders' planet's ecosystem and current anxieties about humans' role in the destruction of human and non-human lives, the loss of biodiversity on Earth, and the various ecological catastrophes directly caused by human abuse of natural resources. Haraway's intentional emphasis on the need to find "kin" in the O/other inhabitants of this planet (2016) seems to be entirely absent from the technocentric angle from which both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* have been scripted. All the nature one can see on screen in *Westworld* the Park and the 'real' world beyond consists in either artificially engineered, perfectly controlled, domesticated landscapes that only retain the appearance of wilderness, or in little well-mannered gardens on urban grounds. In *Altered Carbon*, while we do get glimpses of mining fields and desolated landscapes on Harlan's World, those sights are presented as empty containers of human industrial and urban endeavours, rather as natural environment, its desert-like ruggedness only briefly suggesting freedom from intelligent interference until the human mining efforts below and the alien moon-sized satellites above are brought to the viewers' attention. Even the idyllic lake surrounded by woods—by whose shores Takeshi and his sister were



Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman and Posthuman Identities in TV Series Altered Carbon and Westworld

raised and the last Elder had found shelter—is but a reminder of an uncontaminated, innocent past abruptly brought to an end by the greed, violence and cruelty of human kind. Haraway includes the non-human animal in her discourse on anti-anthropocentric views of the Earth, its ecosystems and, ultimately, the universe (1985). In Kalogridis's series, the hybridisation with animal genes is only used by humans as a means to 'augment' their combat skills. The non-human animal, like the wolf with which Takeshi's sleeve in the second series has been hybridised, is deconstructed and integrated as a weapon, as a tool. The non-human animal that is more intelligent, more technologically advanced than humans is the abject that must be rejected (Kristeva, 1982). The last Elder, whose consciousness has survived the genocide by hiding in the root system of the songspyre trees, is presented as blood-thirsty and unstoppable. Even though its fury is contextualised and communicated as understandable, this monstrous Other, has telepathic access to ancient weapons that could reduce every human on Harlan's World to embers. Such power makes the Elder an enemy, and, as such, it must die. Its very body, a crossover between Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and a pterodactyl, gives away its destiny: in *Altered Carbon*, only the human-looking Other can be spared.

6. Conclusions: Posthumanity vs. Transhumanity

Both series are deliberately set to challenge dualistic and exclusively anthropocentric ways of 'being' and do make a distinctive effort to present their characters as being unencumbered and

unhindered by categories such as gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity. Their respective creators reduce all such categories to the binary powerful-powerless from which they are all derived, and which is the ultimate reason for the reification of Others. The revolutions instigated by Dolores and Quellcris can be labelled as libertarian or democratic transhumanism in their respective stress on a free market of the technologies of self-actualisation and self-definition, or on equal rights to access those technologies. However, what neither TV series has (so far) done is present the viewer with the social landscape that will result from the erasure of the powerful-powerless binary. We can, therefore, conclude, that both series—pendant the release of *Westworld's* final season—exist in a cosmos that is still resisting and fighting against the hegemony of dualism. It follows that neither series is actually representing the posthuman as the relational, non-dualist construct defined in Braidotti's and Ferrando's conceptualisation of philosophical posthumanism. If dualism is still being actively problematized, it follows that the socio-cultural backdrop in both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* cannot have expunged the anthropocentrism that rests upon a vertical and oppositional configuration of Reason against Matter. The mind has been given a new body—the stacks in *Altered Carbon* and the servers in which human minds have been stored in *Westworld*—but it has not transcended the limits and limitations of matter.

On the one hand, *Westworld* is posthumanist in that Nolan and Joy make a conscious effort to present an inclusive model of subjectivity that renders dualistic labels such as masculine/feminine, white/non-white, organic/non-organic meaningless in a



*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and Westworld*

world in which the rights and duties of every self-aware individual are presented as equal, regardless of the material configuration of the vessel inhabited by their mind. *Westworld* is about proving that one can move on from one's own self, that one can grow, evolve and, ultimately, have free will. On the other hand, *Altered Carbon* is about staying human as long as one can. Humans can change sleeves, yet what matters is *not* the sleeve but the stack, and that stays, ultimately, unchanged. Technology in *Altered Carbon* seems, thus, designed to keep humans and humanism alive.

In their efforts to discard dualistic representations of humans, both *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* extend the status of honorary human to all characters, rather than address different ways of processing and performing self-awareness. In both series, personhood is bestowed upon those subjects that are sapient and sentient in the same proportion as humans are. An intelligent, yet unemotional, unempathetic computer such as Rehoboam is not given an anthropomorphic appearance nor self-awareness because of its unrelatability, of its incompleteness. Thus, *Westworld* and *Altered Carbon* are posthuman only in the transhumanist sense that the human body has ceased to be the locus of essentialist dualism, to the point that gender, race and age have lost their meaning; yet, the shows are still struggling to represent non-human bodies as anything but 'tools', plain 'things.' In this, Nolan, Joy and Kalogridis reveal a fundamentally anthropocentric streak in their work: humanity is only a relative construct as far as the physical representation of their subjects is concerned; on the contrary, the process of becoming self-aware is not relative, but

homogenous, for every mind, whether organically or inorganically generated, presents the same organisation, systemic functions, needs and wants as those of a human mind.

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*Mors Dei, Vita mea: Human, Transhuman
and Posthuman Identities in TV Series
Altered Carbon and Westworld*

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