

Technological Entanglement in an Age of Somatic Transformation



Fig. 1. Still from Doctor Who. "The Tenth Planet." *Doctor Who*, season 4, episode 1, Loyd entertainment,
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INTRODUCTION

Where is the voice that would say that altered carbon would free us from the calls of our flesh? The visions that said we would be angels. Instead, we became hungry for things that reality could no longer offer. The lines blurred. [...] The only currency that truly counts: the appetites of the immortal. ("The Wrong Man" 45:00)

This speech was taken from the 2018 series *Altered Carbon*, produced by Netflix. The show follows protagonist Takeshi Kovacs, a former Envoy (member of a rebellious organization) as he is taken off *stack* and projected into a future version of Earth. Future for both Kovacs and the viewer because Kovacs has just been awoken and *resleeved* from being a hundred and fifty years on *stack*. On this version of Earth, people ended up discovering ancient alien technology that enabled them to create stacks that are implanted into your spine as a baby that will hold your mind in coded form. This means that the mind becomes downloadable and the body can be swapped so easily (when you have the money) that it has come to be referred to as a sleeve.

Kovacs has been hired by one of the people from the highest social class on Earth to solve what the police ruled to be a suicide, his suicide. The person in question cannot accept this verdict and has gone to great lengths to procure Kovacs. The rest of the season follows Kovacs as he tries to make sense of this murder/suicide plot and of his place in it.

Originally Kovacs was part of a group of terrorists/freedom fighters that fought against the creation of this stack technology. They believed that people were not meant to live this long, and if they did, they would develop the attitudes and appetites that the opening speech warned

against ("The Wrong Man"). Their rebellion failed and Kovacs is now forced to accept how society has continued to develop in the face of it.

In this thesis, I will answer the question: How can *Altered Carbon* be read as an expression of some of the changes Cyberpunk has undergone over the years with an emphasis on how the platform of Netflix impacts the way Cyberpunk functions in a larger cultural economic framework? Because *Altered Carbon* is noted on Netflix as belonging to the genre of Cyberpunk, I will start the first chapter with looking into the genre of Cyberpunk. In order to do that, I will first look at Science Fiction, because Cyberpunk is commonly thought of as a subgenre of Science Fiction. Sabine Heuser wrote extensively on how Cyberpunk and Science Fiction relate to each other and will play a large role in my explanations of these genres. I will use her ideas on how Cyberpunk relates to Science Fiction in terms of how Cyberpunk deconstructs the more optimistic tendencies of Science Fiction and its own genre.

Because the things Cyberpunk tends to be critical of are often socio economic—related to technological development—in nature, I will also use theories from Postmodernism in relation to capitalism to further illustrate what Cyberpunk was originally criticising and how this has changed over the years. I will also relate this to theories from Comstock and Manovich about how people's relations with technology are changing in ways that are hard to oversee the consequences of.

In the second chapter, I will discuss a children's story from the world Kovacs grew up on. In it, he describes the Patchwork man. A creature created from murdered children, made to work for their father. I use this story to compare and contrast some of the characters from *Altered Carbon* that are framed as being bad guys because their motivations are purely economic and

how Kovacs is framed as a good guy because he keeps claiming that he cannot be bought. The Patchwork man will be compared specifically to the character that made the speech I quoted at the beginning, Dimi. He is a gun for hire that has split his mind in two in order to double sleeve, a crime punishable with read death (deletion of your stack). I use Jameson's theories on fragmentation of the self in the face of capitalist society that always demands more in order to make sense of Dimi and his role in the story. I will compare Dimi's mode of existing to Giles Deleuze's concept of the dividual and Jamesonian schizophrenia because of the way he has fragmented his mind in multiple ways in order to function in the underworld of *Altered Carbon*.

I will also use Hardt and Negri's theory on the shift in what is being valued in the production process in capitalism. They identify a shift from tangible things towards a more intangible form of production in which cognitive production becomes increasingly important. I will use this as a setup for explaining why it is important to pay attention to how Netflix as a content producer functions in the feedback between producer and consumer of these cultural objects.

Furthermore, I will use Mark Fisher's theory on hauntology to further illustrate the differences between how some characters are framed as good guys and others as bad guys. The good characters are portrayed as being more able to deal with the things that haunt them from their past, but the bad characters are seen being consumed by their ghosts. These temporal structures of simultaneity, as I will show, also contribute to an idea of deconstruction inherent to Cyberpunk. But as I will explain, it has been overused and has contributed to the demise of the critical potential of Cyberpunk.

In the third chapter, I will explain that a hyperreal is being perpetuated in *Altered Carbon* by the women that promote the most exclusive brothel, Head in the Clouds. These women both promote and participate in the myth surrounding this establishment. Therefore, I will explain how this Baudrillardian hyperreal functions within *Altered Carbon* and how this relates to Cyberpunk and its ability to be critical. I will relate this to the economic changes that took place in the 80s that fostered the prosumer, the consumer that produces at the same time in accordance with Barillo's theory on it.

I will also discuss the difference between Walter Benjamin's thoughts on how cultural objects can still potentially be critical and how Horkheimer and Adorno looked at this problem. I will pay special attention to the role of Netflix as the producer of *Altered Carbon* and the parallels between the themes within the show and how Netflix markets itself in terms of consumer freedom and personalized choice.

In the end, I will link these ideas of changing relations to the body and consumption and production back to the show and question the narrative of victory that the viewer is presented with through Kovacs. I will use this to draw larger conclusions on the developments within the genre of Cyberpunk and how companies like Netflix have impacted these changes in relation to the market system that they function in. I will have answered the question: How can *Altered Carbon* be read as an expression of some of the changes Cyberpunk has undergone over the years with an emphasis on how the platform of Netflix impacts the way Cyberpunk functions in a larger cultural economic framework?

CHAPTER 1: GENRE

SCIENCE FICTION

When Takeshi Kovacs resleeved a hundred and fifty years after he last experienced a sleeve death, he was injected into a world that felt unfamiliar in terms of the expanse of time that had passed and the planet that he was forced to familiarize himself with. Originally from Harlan's world, Earth felt as alien to him as his home planet would feel to us. As we, the audience, see this ambiguously dystopian world through Kovacs' eyes, it seems to carry with it the run down bleakness of a society without hope, yet it functions in a semi orderly way. For many of us it might strike us that this version of Earth seems more familiar than one might expect from a world shaped by inhabitants able to exchange bodies so easily that they have come to be referred to as sleeves. Kovacs feels so out of sync with this rendition of Earth, it pushes him to submerge himself into the chemically enhanced nightlife that offers drugs like Reaper that will allow the user a near death experience, something that in this society has become so fetishized that people start chasing it in chemical form. As Kovacs dives into the streets of Bay City, the viewer might be reminded of Cyberpunk classic *Blade Runner* because of the dimly lit streets, mainly illuminated by the neon signs everywhere, blending Asian, American and Middle Eastern cultures and languages together.¹ Kovacs quickly runs into something unexpected—for both him and the viewer that has just been triggered into a frame of remembrance connected to older forms of Cyberpunk—where the obnoxious advertisement techniques in *Blade Runner* remained mostly external to the characters, in *Altered Carbon* they invade your *ONI* (a lens you put in one eye everyday that functions as a communications device) and floods you with calls to visit brothels

¹ For a comparison between the aesthetics of the city scapes in *Altered Carbon* and *Blade Runner* see figures 2 and 3.

and gambling halls of every variety. As Kovacs is overwhelmed (and floored) by a deluge of drugs and lewd entertainment, Ortega, the cop whose boyfriends skin he is riding, slaps on a jammer and welcomes him into Bay City again.

Altered Carbon carries with it unmistakable elements of Cyberpunk and Science Fiction, from the time it is set in, the technologies that play a role, and the underdog misfit trying to solve the murder mystery. In order to set up the framework for further analysis of the themes of the Patchwork man and the Ouroboros, I will first look at the genres of Science Fiction and Cyberpunk. This will allow me a relevant point of departure from the show into theory and back again.

Genre Questions and Definitions. Because Cyberpunk is seen as a subgenre of Science Fiction, I will look at Science Fiction first (Heuser, Suvin, Jameson). I will pay attention to where Science Fiction and Cyberpunk overlap, and where they break away from each other. As Sabine Heuser puts it in her book *Virtual Geographies*: "Cyberpunk's significance can best be understood when it is placed in the context of science fiction as a genre" (Heuser 4). The significance of Cyberpunk is dependent on its resonance with Science Fiction where it breaks away from the genre, but more importantly, how it takes the conventions of Science Fiction and uses them in new contexts that inevitably change their meanings.

Genre is always something that is forming as it is being defined. Because of this flux, genre is "found in the middle of things, never at the beginning of them" (Rieder 20). I propose to add that this also holds true for the end of things. Genres are notoriously hard, not only to define, but also to put limits on. As Rick Altman points out in his article "A semantic/syntactic approach

to film genre,” the traditional way of seeing genre as a neat package does not account for the historicity of genre and the changes it might undergo (18). Cyberpunk, for instance, has been declared dead and revived more often than I am comfortable estimating (McHale, Heuser, Tandt, McQueen, Jones) and with every revival it has changed. Science Fiction (interchangeably referred to as Science Fiction or SF in this text) has had similar struggles.

In his book *Science Fiction and the Mass Culture Genre System* John Rieder argues for a mode of looking at Science Fiction as a genre that takes problems of defining genres in general into account. "Historians of SF are all too fond of proclaiming its moment of birth, whether it be in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), the first issue of Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* (1926), or elsewhere according to one's geographical and historical emphasis" (Rieder 20). As Rieder shows here, some of the potential starting points of Science Fiction span over a century. Not to mention that these works deal with vastly different themes, time periods, and protagonists. How can we then still speak of a thing called Science Fiction and have an inkling about what we are referring to?

Defining Science Fiction. Heuser proposes that the *problems* surrounding a definition of Science Fiction might actually contribute to a way to define it. "The fact that science fiction is written across many genres has led to considerable confusion regarding its definition, which has culminated in its being considered as a mode or its being defined by content" (Heuser xxvii). Trying to encompass Science Fiction in one genre definition works to constrict it rather than clarifying it. Differently from other genres such as Modernism, that are characterized through not only specific themes but also because of their narrative styles, Science Fiction can be found in

Modernism and other genres as such, because it is grouped on the basis of content rather than its storytelling strategies.

Perhaps Darko Suvin has tried to conceptualize one of the most coherent theories on Science Fiction in their book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. There, Suvin looks at how Science Fiction developed and changed over the centuries. "The natural sciences caught up and surpassed the literary imagination in the nineteenth century; the sciences dealing with human relationships might be argued to have caught up with their highest theoretical achievements but have certainly not done so in their alienated social practice" (Suvin 12). Suvin sees a clear connection between Science Fiction and a developing estrangement people are experiencing with contemporary science. "In the twentieth century SF has moved into the sphere of anthropological and cosmological thought, becoming a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives (Suvin 12). As Suvin sees it, in the twentieth century Science Fiction took on a different societal role. Instead of recovering from being taken over by science in the nineteenth century by coming up with even more innovative and futuristic forms of science, Science Fiction started to develop a role in which it cautioned and criticized the developments of science. What Science Fiction and especially Cyberpunk are doing in the twenty first century in terms of how they relate to culture and society will be expanded upon in chapter 2 and 3.

This criticism of Science Fiction on the consequences of the developments of science, manifested into what Brian McHale saw as two different tendencies within Science Fiction. Firstly: "extrapolative SF begins with the current state of the empirical world, in particular the current state of scientific knowledge, and proceeds, in a logical and linear fashion, to construct a

world which might be a future extension or consequence of the current state of affairs” (4). In other words, extrapolative Science Fiction adheres more to what Suvin would have called Science Fiction of the nineteenth century. It takes the current way science seems to be developing and takes that as far as it will stretch without becoming completely fantastic in its speculations. Secondly: “speculative world-building, by contrast, involves an imaginative leap, positing one or more disjunctions with the empirical world which cannot be linearly extrapolated from the current state of affairs” (McHale 4). Speculative world building also conforms to Suvin’s ideas on nineteenth century Science Fiction, because it lacks a critical element that would take it from the fantastical to the critical. I would like to add here, in light of how *Altered Carbon* activates a specific cultural reference (specifically how the urban environment looks), that extrapolative Science Fiction can take not only the empirical world as point of departure, but that it can also take earlier cultural expressions and build on those. In terms of aesthetic representation of urban life and society, *Altered Carbon* plays with a set of references that are familiar with a lot of people that are fans of this genre. But *Altered Carbon* combines extrapolative and speculative Science Fiction elements when it introduces topics that push it beyond these original genre confines. By introducing the concept of a downloadable human mind, the show combines elements of different forms of Science Fiction that through their combination transform the original frameworks of the construction of meaning. It engages with people's sense of nostalgia by invoking *Blade Runner* while also transforming and adding meanings through the introduction of elements that do not fit into this framework like the internalisation of commercial advertisements. This combining of old and new in various forms (technologies and narratives techniques) is what pushes *Altered Carbon* beyond Science Fiction

and into the realm of Cyberpunk. The next section shall deal directly with the show in relation to Cyberpunk and explore how the elements taken from Science Fiction become transformed in a Cyberpunk context.

CYBERPUNK

When Takeshi Kovacs is first 'decanted' into his new sleeve, his first questions are when, where and why he is. After the first two have been answered, the third question looms over him until he is escorted to the luxurious home of Laurence Bancroft in the Aerium, a separate part of the city above the clouds that seemingly floats far above the worries of everyday people. Laurence, as Ortega explains, is what is commonly referred to as a Meth—a reference to the Biblical Methuselah, known for being the longest living Bible character—this title/derogatory term is reserved for only the wealthiest that can afford to live obscenely long lives. As Bancroft explains to Kovacs, he is being hired by Bancroft to solve Bancroft's murder. Bancroft, whose alleged murder was ruled a suicide by the Bay City Police (namely by Ortega), does not buy that explanation and tasks Kovacs with finding his true killer. When Kovacs probes further it becomes clear that he has been chosen because he is the last Envoy, a group of elite 'terrorists' that were fighting against the idea of immortality that the stacks grant people and the societal inequalities this would entail. This group was eradicated in the battle of Stronghold some hundred and fifty years ago. Kovacs was the only survivor until he got taken out by the Protectorate's (the collected name for all the colonized worlds) forces. Kovacs seems relieved now that he has an idea what his release seems to be about. He tells Bancroft that he refuses to be bought like this, and that he prefers to go back on stack (a form of punishment where your

consciousness gets taken out of a sleeve and is stored digitally). Bancroft tries to bribe him in various ways but Kovacs ensures him that his loyalty is not something that can be bought. After trying and failing to celebrate his one night granted to him on Earth, after which he will voluntarily go to serve the rest of his punishment, Kovacs is almost killed by a small group of mercenaries that are specifically looking for him. This piques his interest, because according to him, there really aren't any people that a hundred and fifty years later, on a different planet, should be looking for him. This incentivises him to take on Bancroft's offer in order to understand what his connections to the murder plot are.²

As I demonstrated in the previous section on Science Fiction, Cyberpunk takes elements from Science Fiction and through combining them, transforms them in ways that impact the ways meaning is being constructed. This way of combining motifs in Cyberpunk is often related to a juxtaposition of themes like old/new, dystopia/utopia, dirt/shine in the way it gets compared to punk (Heuser, Hollinger, Berardi). When Kovacs is brought into Bancroft's home, he might have been wearing the clothes that were provided for him, making him fit in a bit better with the Meth's, but his entire frame of reference is out of joint with everyone around him. When Ortega calls Bancroft a Meth, she has to explain it to him because he is neither from this place in terms of time or space. Because Bancroft is three hundred and sixty years old, him and Kovacs can talk about topics like the revolution and connect easily because they have both lived it. But their differences become starkly clear again when Bancroft nonchalantly pulls out the diary of the founder of the rebellion (Quellcris Falconer), something he purchased at an auction, whereas Kovacs held the journal when he and Quell were preparing the last stance of the rebellion. The

² Summary based on the episode "Out of the Past."

way they relate differently to this diary, and the casual way Bancroft treats this priceless object (there are exhibitions in museums about the battle of Stronghold) solidifies their differences and spurs Kovacs on to turn Bancroft down originally.

Cyberpunk as a Genre of Juxtapositions. Hueser argues that the juxtaposition between old and new is one of the determining features of Cyberpunk in terms of which elements it incorporated from Science Fiction.

Science fiction as represented in cyberpunk narratives presents its own logic of invention, founded in the 'shock of the old.' It combines different moments from its own history as a genre, moments which are rarely self-consciously foregrounded to the degree characteristic of mainstream postmodern writers, particularly those of the early phase of postmodernism. However, these references are implicit, and the skilled reader of science fiction will notice the changing value attached to the use of such figures as the robot, the android, and the cyborg. (Heuser xxiv)

When cyberpunk takes some of the characteristic values of Science Fiction such as technological innovation expressed in the figures of the robot, android, and cyborg, the way they use it changes the meaning through contrasting it with other, potentially, older elements, that foreground this disjunction. This "shock of the old" is not only expressed through juxtaposing old and new objects such as when Kovacs moves in a hyper digitized world where his eye lens picks up virtual street commercials but uses matches to light his cigarette, but through citing the genres of Cyberpunk and Science Fiction itself in the way they have chosen to give shape to the world in *Altered Carbon*. The way that that is very reminiscent of the world of the original *Blade Runner*

film emphasizes the inner relations between not just genre's but also the general cultural history of them.

Let's take a step back first, and look at Cyberpunk as a genre before I will explain the ways in which it relates to Science Fiction that are relevant for my argument. In the *Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction* Cyberpunk is described as follows: “The group [...] came to be known as the 'cyberpunks' because of their fascination with computer-based manipulation of consciousness (hence the *cyber*) and their edgy, ironic attitude towards the optimistic tone of mainstream SF (hence the *punk*)” (Evans 547). The Wesleyan definition looks at the words that make up the name Cyberpunk. It takes 'cyber' to be analogous with computer technologies, and connects 'punk' with the subculture bearing the same name (Evans 547). By pushing these two terms together, both are transformed while simultaneously retaining part of their original meaning. It denotes a subgenre of Science Fiction that struggles with its origins. The punk in its name hinting at break with some of the features of Science Fiction, while keeping some of its futuristic feeling.

Science Fiction has often been called a genre of Utopian sensibilities (Jameson, Tandt, Heuser).³ Cyberpunk struggles with this legacy of optimism. In the 80's, when Cyberpunk first came about as a genre, the optimism of earlier years was no longer sustainable due to the economic and socio political struggles like the rampant drug problems (Codelippi 57). This climate enabled a shift in tone that would soon be called Cyberpunk.

Cyberpunk juggles with contradictory epistemological and political evaluations of its electronic world. Two axes of uncertainty structure this unstable mapping game: the texts

³ Science Fictions has not been exclusively utopian, but I am choosing to focus on this trend within Science Fiction and the way it relates to Cyberpunk.

explore whether the cybercommunity is a closed or open field; simultaneously, they investigate whether it offers a utopian or dystopian environment. (Tandt 101)

I want to focus on Tandt's distinction between Cyberpunk as having Utopian or Dystopian elements. Because even though Cyberpunk's general subversive nature, it is often unclear whether a Cyberpunk text is fully Dystopian or not. Often, it will be clear that this is not a Utopian text—*Altered Carbon* makes it clear in the way society is represented, that even the possibility of immortality did not solve humanity's problems but only served to further polarize the differences between rich and poor, yet society seems to be largely functioning without great scarcities or famines—so it never quite tips over into a fully Dystopian text. The way *Altered Carbon* plays with these concepts touches on the concept of heterotopia as Foucault described it where a heterotopia is a place that holds within it “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 3). *Altered Carbon* can then be seen as the mirror needed to access this collective of cultural references (while also warping them, like mirrors often do), allowing its viewers to connect the dots between elements of Science Fiction, Cyberpunk, Utopia, Dystopia and the like. In the heterotopia, these concepts can be represented and inverted, and as I will argue in the second and third chapters, perverted.

Cyber Optimism. Even in the 60s—when computers were large, hulking machines that were mostly used for computations and had to be operated with an interface resembling a typewriter—there were computer scientists that saw the potential of human computer symbiosis as something that could lead to great developments for humankind. Joseph Licklider was one of these

scientists that was closely involved in developing the internet as we know it today. He was employed with ARPANET and focussed on using computers to connect people, condensing both time and space. "The hope is that, in not too many years, human brains and computing machines will be coupled together very tightly, and that the resulting partnership will think as no human brain has ever thought and process data in a way not approached by the information-handling machines we know today" (Licklider 4). Licklider saw this future coupling of human and machine mainly as a way to free up something he thought was humanity's most precious commodity: time (Licklider 3). In these early examples of writing, there is mostly a sense of unrestricted optimism on how these technologies will develop in order to make people's lives easier. There is less awareness on how these technologies will not only change our lives in terms of time management, but the structure of our social relations and even our brains as well. In *Altered Carbon*, Quellcrist Falconer gives a speech in a flashback before the battle of Stronghold discussing these dangers.

We cannot win a conventional war against this enemy, because it is not the Protectorate we're fighting. It's immortality itself. The creation of stacks was a miracle and the beginning of the destruction of our species. A hundred years from now, a thousand, I can see what we will become. And it is not human. A new class of people so wealthy and powerful, they answer to no one and cannot die. Death was the ultimate safeguard against the darkest angels of our nature. Now the monsters among us will own everything, consume everything, control everything. They will make themselves gods and us slaves in all but name. ("Nora Inu" 31:58)

I have included this speech by Falconer because it exemplifies the changing role of Cyberpunk as a subgenre of Science Fiction. Where Suvin saw the role of Science Fiction in the twentieth century as something to caution people for the unrestrained progression of science, in the twenty first century Science Fiction in the form of Cyberpunk is playing with themes of subversion and revolution in order to paint a complex picture, neither completely Utopian nor Dystopian.

Falconer's passionate dismissal of the structure of society under the strain of immortality seems to try and safeguard a form of humanity that she perceives to be doomed if the course is not changed. Science Fiction and Cyberpunk have complex relations with Postmodernism and the capitalist structures they function in that complicate these notions of subversion and revolution.

Cyber Dependency. *Altered Carbon* illustrates a society that has become dependent on a form of technology, inaccessible to us, that has changed the very fabric of the human mind. The human mind has been captured in code, enabling people to change their concept of space and time drastically. When Kovacs was decanted in the beginning of the season, he had to come to terms with, not just being out of place on a different planet, but out of time as well. Time has unfolded into the very thing that Falconer warned against, a few select people controlling and consuming everything. The potential of eternity, though obtained by a few, is nevertheless experienced by society as a whole. Grzegorz Trębicki describes what this entails for the people in the world of *Altered Carbon*. Trębicki sees a notable difference with one of the earliest examples of Cyberpunk, in the form of William Gibson's trilogy, where Gibson choose to make his hero (Chase) the exception to the rule (with how far he goes in order to complete his hack, in the world of *Altered Carbon* on the other hand: "all the revolutionary advancements have been

broadly implemented and analyzed from various angles; the extreme has become the ordinary, the statistical; the digitalization of the mind is no longer a personal epiphany—but rather routine procedure, a social convention, with all the consequences resulting from this fact. (Trębicki 122).

The extreme has become reduced to the ordinary in so far as that it has become chopped up through analysis into consumable little chunks. The extreme has lost its inherent nature of being extraordinary because it has become the order of the day, making people chase new and more brutal forms of it. What Trębicki describes is the consumability of revolution, or at least a taste of it. When Kovacs declines Bancroft's offer of both the job and diary he does this because Bancroft seems to value him about as much as the diary that he carelessly tosses around. This is another instance where contemporary Cyberpunk takes parts from Science Fiction and even from older forms of Cyberpunk and changes their meaning by reconfiguring them in a different way. Where older forms of Science Fiction and even Cyberpunk focussed on the special, the chosen one, the outlier to right the wrongs, *Altered Carbon*, instead, emphasizes the powerlessness of the protagonist on the larger narrative more often than not, as will become clear in my later examples from the show. One of the underlying themes in *Altered Carbon* is the way the technology of stacks has influenced the way people view humans and humanity. Carnage, people fighting each other to death become entertainment. Even these forms of entertainment are no longer enough to stimulate the mind that has been stimulated for centuries, it needs the added dimension of the people fighting each other until the other perishes to be wife and husband, locked into a cycle of murdering each other in order to fulfill the hunger of people for entertainment that will make them feel something they haven't felt before. The brutal has become

the everyday and needs to be chased into the extreme, and this has consequences for not just social relations, but for the way the brain is structured.

Edward Comstock, in his book about neuroscience, discusses the impact of different technologies that allow people to externalize their memory on the mind. He sees these developments as a progression where people and technology become dependent in a way that changes the very structures of memory and the brain. He sees the “tertiary retention systems” people use as things that do more than just allow people to externalize part of their memory, it also shapes the way the brain is constructed because it no longer needs to function in the ways it used to (Comstock 134). Comstock furthermore sees these changes as culturally specific: “each cultural movement or milieu is characterized by the textured and neurobiological relations the culture has to its specific tertiary retention systems, as different technologies give rise to different human and cultural 'protentions' (that is, latent human potentialities)” (Comstock 134). Many of *Altered Carbon's* more Utopian or Dystopian characteristics can be traced back to this flux between mind altering technologies and a society that both abhors and thrives on the consequences this has for the way humanity is viewed. Comstock argues that it is unavoidable for people to be changed on the level of the somatic when the means they use to retain information that would otherwise be stored in the brain change. These changes on both the level of technology and the of the body do not stay contained in this binary back and forth of progress and change. These changes leak out of this flux and spill over into society, where they start influencing the way the body—and even the mind—is monetized and framed into the capitalist system.

Earlier in this chapter, I have focussed on how new technologies change how the mind relates to a concept of humanity that asks it to be treated with a certain level of inherent value. Now I want to look further into how the way the body is shaped by these changes in technology beyond just the brain. In *Altered Carbon*, it is not just the relation between the mind and the body that is impacted by the technology that allows people to change bodies so frequently that they have start referring to bodies—once an integral part of what was considered the root of human nature—as sleeves, but the body itself is also chopped up with its parts thought of as disposable. When Ortega loses an arm, Kovacs feels like the best way to make up for it (and mitigate the guilt he is experiencing) is to buy her the most expensive cybernetic prosthetic money can buy. She is quickly taken by its new and improved capabilities, the loss of her human arm is mourned within seconds of screen time. The suggestion seems to be that she cannot mourn the loss of her arm because it has effectively been upgraded. Her flesh and blood arm has been separated from her and in its place she now has “the best money can buy,” leaving her with no other option than to happily accept it (“Man with my Face”). She is forced to become dependant on this new piece of technology but in the next section the ways people have voluntarily and unknowingly been becoming dependant on the technologies they are incorporating into their lives are discussed further.

Imprisonment of the Body. Lev Manovich argues that people have slowly been getting trapped by the technology they voluntarily incorporate into their everyday lives, thereby becoming dependent on them.

The imprisonment of the body takes place on both the conceptual and literal levels; both kinds of imprisonment already appear with the first screen apparatus, Alberti's perspectival window. According to many interpreters of linear perspective, it presents the world as seen by a singular eye, static, unblinking and fixated. (Manovich 131)

Manovich is expressing a worry here on how we are letting these screens—in their different iterations—dictate how we view the world and how we ourselves move through that world. We start accommodating the very technology that was supposed to support us in our lives as they were. Instead of merely improving our habits and routines, they start actively shaping them. "In fact, the body was reduced to nothing else—and nothing more—than a giant mouse, or more precisely, a giant joystick" (Manovich 135). When the body becomes reduced to 'a giant joystick', this is not something that happened to us, but it is something that we sought out and enabled in order to enter into a new relationship with technology. There is a line being walked in *Altered Carbon* where on the one hand, by placing the lens of the ONI over your eye, you invite commercials into your brain in a way that makes it seem like you are hallucinating three dimensional representations of them in your surroundings. But on the other hand, the ONI is still an external thing, not an implant. The technologies are both being internalized, the commercials and the stacks themselves, and externalized, by not integrating the ONI into your physique as an implant.

A lot of these technologies, like the VR games that Manovich is describing here are focussed on helping us find ways to spend our leisure time. Games, movies, and TV shows are increasingly becoming models in which people are both consuming a product and at the same time, producing an output in terms of preferences, likes, and data that are in turn being eagerly

being consumed by the market that promised leisure instead of work. I am arguing that there are parallels between some of the trends in Cyberpunk and this larger trend of leisure time being used as a model of production where people are largely unaware of how they function in it. More about this way of tricking people into producing whilst they think they are just consuming will be in chapters 2 and 3 where I'll use the figures of the Ouroboros and the Patchworkman as I mentioned in the introduction.

POSTMODERNISM

Where is the voice that would say that altered carbon would free us from the calls of our flesh? The visions that said we would be angels. Instead, we became hungry for things that reality could no longer offer. The lines blurred. [...] The only currency that truly counts: the appetites of the immortal. ("The Wrong Man" 45:00)

When Kovacs is almost murdered in the first episode, it is by people looking specifically for him. One of the people is known by the police as Dimi the Twin. Dimi once illegally copied his mind into another stack, a process referred to as double sleeving and is punishable with Real Death. When Kovacs kills Dimi I's sleeve, he escapes police custody and tries to take Kovacs down again. This time, he is RD'd (Real Deathed) by Kovacs and Ortega. His 'brother' Dimi II comes looking for answers and spirits Kovacs away to the Wei clinic. There Kovacs undergoes hours of torture in VR at the hands (or mind) of Dimi II. In VR Dimi has trouble sticking to one face, VR represents you like you see yourself. Kovacs has had training that allows him to inhabit sleeves like they are his own skin. Dimi is suffering from what Kovacs calls, personality frag. When you

sleeve and resleeve too many times—to not even mention what happens when you double sleeve—you start losing this sense of self, and VR shows this through inconsistencies in representation. After Kovacs escapes and Dimi is arrested, he gives the speech that I quoted at the beginning of this section. In it, Dimi talks about the promises of altered carbon—a different name for the technology that made the creation of stacks possible—and how reality faced with immortality became something people had not foreseen. A hunger awakened in the people living with the potentialities of eternity, and in the end, only the desires of the people at the top—above the clouds—mattered. (“Force of Evil”)

When Dimi talks about the consequences of altered carbon, he describes a society in which time has ceased to matter in the same way it used it, and so has flesh. This means that both of these things, time and flesh, can also become commodified in ways hereto thought beyond what was considered to be humane. In this section I will look at the points where Science Fiction and Cyberpunk are thought to have an overlap with Postmodernism. This will later be used to make the jump to multiple forms of capitalism and how these can be traced in *Altered Carbon* through the ways the appetites of the immortal are made the prime driving force of society.

Defamiliarization and Society. Fredric Jameson argues in his book *Archeologies of the Future* that Science Fiction has a special way to tell stories that depends on a specific temporality. "SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique 'method' for apprehending the present as history, and this is so irrespective of the 'pessimism' or 'optimism' of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization" (*Archeologies* 288). Because Science Fiction almost always deals with the future or futurism in some way, Jameson sees in this a unique temporal

structure in which the part of time that for us is still the future, in Science Fiction has already been lived and has become the past. This structure does not inherently hold within it a value judgement on if this lived future has been good or bad, it simply has been. Jameson takes this structure as the basis for the defamiliarization he sees at work in Science Fiction. Didi-Hubert warns for a different type of temporality related defamiliarization. He sees the way people have been forced to come to terms with the potentiality of immortality as something that estranged people from themselves and their fellow humans. This resulted in what he calls; a change in appetite, people need more and more in order to feel stimulated, leading to, as I will discuss in chapter 3, a need to consume other people in ways hereto unthought of.

Jameson sees this defamiliarization as one of the core aspects of why Cyberpunk strikes a chord with people, or at least how it tries to. "Cyberpunk, for all its energies and qualities can historically be interpreted as SF's doomed attempt at a counteroffensive, and a final effort to reconquer a readership alienated by the difficulties of contemporary science" (*Archaeologies* 68). Jameson, similarly to Suvin, sees this alienation of people from science as what partly inspired Cyberpunk. They see Cyberpunk as an expression of an estrangement people experience with modern science. This feeling of estrangement gets vocalized in works of Science Fiction and Cyberpunk because these take current themes and place them in a temporal structure where what we would consider to be the future, has already become the past. Therefore it allows these genres to go beyond mere prediction of an imminent future and tries to imagine how these developments could impact humanity in a longer time frame. Another level of interaction between society and these genres is how Cyberpunk and Science Fiction interact with the market on a larger level. The next part will set up the framework of how this defamiliarization relates to

subject fragmentation and why connecting Science Fiction and Cyberpunk to Postmodernism is important in order to understand *Altered Carbon* in the light of recent market developments connected to Netflix as the platform that both produced and offered *Altered Carbon*, which will be used to illustrate my ideas on the Patchwork man and the Ouroboros.

Jameson wrote extensively on Science Fiction and Cyberpunk alike. He wrote about the genres not just in terms of their themes or subject matter, but about how they functioned within society as a whole.

Cyberpunk, which opens with a bang with William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984): a general period break which is also consistent, not only with the neo-conservative revolution and globalization, but also with the rise of commercial fantasy as a generic competitor and ultimate victor in the field of mass culture. (*Archaeologies* 93)

Jameson saw Cyberpunk as a genre that did not just claim to be subversive, but it also marketed itself in this way. As a genre that was considered to be part of the larger fantasy category, it had found a place within the capitalist system, selling people revolution while keeping them consuming. Sean McQueen sees this as part of the reason why Cyberpunk was quickly declared dead in his book *Deleuze and Beausdrillard: From Cyberpunk to Biopunk*: "Cyberpunk's subversive strategies were quickly adopted by, and became indistinguishable from, the corporate structures they initially opposed" (McQueen 5). Because of Cyberpunk's commercial success, their strategies of countering mainstream culture and mass media were quickly adopted by the very things they were trying to subvert. McQueen, in his book, describes how this resulted in Cyberpunk having to adapt, find a new niche, and that this ended up resulting in what he calls Biopunk, a genre that leans on biological transformations of humans through gene editing and

splicing (McQueen). However, I argue that with the overt similarities between *Altered Carbon* and Cyberpunk original *Blade Runner*, Cyberpunk is not just lurking in the shadows of mainstream media, but it is fully being employed by a big mainstream content producer such as Netflix in order to attract an audience that can recognize its self referentiality, but does not have to in order to enjoy it.

Jameson argued that Cyberpunk and Postmodernism are irrevocably linked together: "[On Cyberpunk] The supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (Jameson *Cultural Logic* 417). Despite Jameson's bold claim, defining both Cyberpunk and Postmodernism remains a challenge. Postmodernism has always been a tendency (not even a genre or period) that is hard to define. Veronica Hollinger wrote about Cyberpunk in relation to Postmodernism in her article about Cyberpunk and its deconstructing tendencies. "Cyberpunk—like the punk ethic with which it was identified—was a response to postmodern reality that could go only so far before self-destructing under the weight of its own deconstructive activities (not to mention its appropriation by more conventional and more commercial writers)" (Hollinger 217). Postmodern reality in itself seems to be a contradiction as Postmodernism seemed to often deny things such as objective truth and reality. The deconstructive drive in Cyberpunk, as Hollinger argues, as incentivised by Postmodernism, seems to have turned on itself. Hollinger, in line with McQueen and Jameson, sees this deconstructivist tendency within Cyberpunk as part of the reason why Cyberpunk was declared to be done and over with shortly after it first arrived on the scene. I do not agree that Cyberpunk is not around anymore as my case clearly demonstrates. I am interested in tracing how it has

partly survived its own deconstruction and how it has morphed as genres are prone to.

Furthermore, how this deconstruction enabled Netflix to adapt it for their goals.

Postmodernism in Relation to Modernism. An important part of Postmodernism is the way it defines itself in opposition to Modernism. This doesn't lead to a coherent definition, but it is what characterizes a lot of its theoretical starting points. As Bruno Latour explained in his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, we have never been modern because this label is the result of a historical analysis that happened after the fact (46). Latour uses this to explain why definitions of both Modernism and Postmodernism can never fully make sense, if Modernism never started, the era coming after that (Postmodernism) can never really make sense (47). Featherstone and Burrows clarify this retrospective relation of Postmodernism and Modernism when they argue that this leads to Postmodernism turning away from the optimism they see in the "modernist metanarratives of progress and 'the new'" (Featherstone and Burrows 1). This turning away manifests itself in the same temporal structure Jameson discussed where "we are confronted by a future which 'has already happened'" (Featherstone and Burrows 1) where Postmodernism confronts people with an alternative to this optimism. In order to do this, Cyberpunk engages in a deconstructive practice with its own genre—by citing from it in transformative ways—and by creating a new temporal structure that allows it to comment on far reaching potential consequences of the new ways of thinking these technologies might engender in people.

Postmodernism in Science Fiction (or vice versa), according to Heuser, is not a substitution of one set of themes and narratives structures for the other. It is not an exchange of modernist strategies for postmodernist ones that give Science Fiction its particular flavor of

Postmodernism. Instead, it is a mixing of styles, allowing Science Fiction to be written across many different genres, taking elements from each and combining them into many different sub flavors, like Cyberpunk. Heuser sees this coupling between Science Fiction and Cyberpunk as something that has a specific basis in temporality based on anachronism which results in Postmodernism and Modernism being able to be present in the same work (204).

This anachronism has led to the misunderstanding that the postmodern is ahistorical (see Jameson). [...] By retaining disparate elements which can be 'blocked together,' Lyotard finds a major source for the creation of dissent, which he perceives as the driving force that ensures the continuation of discourse generally and art in particular. (Heusser 204)

Because of this simultaneous presence of Modern and Postmodern aspects in works of Science Fiction and Cyberpunk, this allows these genres to be anachronistic without being ahistorical, as Jameson claims they are. Heuser sees the anachronistic aspects of these genres as the way they transform meaning, through quoting things from their own and other genres, they create a new structure in which familiar things are functioning in an estranging way because of the way they are interacting with unfamiliar or seemingly impossible things. Just the fact that Kovacs is pulled from his imprisonment and put into an unfamiliar time and place forces the narrative to account for him. His juxtaposition as the last Envoy—a relic—and the bright and fresh—yet ancient—world of the Meths, is a both a clash and a recognition between them. Kovacs is someone that was technically born 150 years ago, but has not been living for these 150 years, therefore he can both level with the Meths because they have both been alive for major historical events, but he also functions in a completely different way because he has not been confronted with the actuality of eternity in the same way the Mets that have been alive for hundreds of years

have been. And as Dimi pointed out at the beginning of this section, their appetites have changed because of it.

As the genres of Science Fiction and Cyberpunk have been absorbing trends and themes from each other, they have also been spreading out—fragmenting—over multiple genres and time periods themselves. Jameson saw a fragmentation of the idea of the self as an important part of Postmodernism. "This shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology [schizophrenia vs anxiety] can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation" (*Cultural Logic* 14). He saw a difference between Modernism as a period in which the subject was characterized as being more anxious and Postmodernism as a period in which the loss of identity through fragmentation was so great that it led to a schizophrenic attitude. Jameson saw the Postmodern subject as someone that was forced to adopt a certain mode of being that he saw as having a lot of schizophrenic symptoms. "[S]chizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence" (*Consumer Society* 7). This mode of being allowed people to keep up with the new nature of culture, a nature that changed more rapidly than ever, forcing them to adapt this style of interacting with it in order to keep up. Kovacs calls Dimi II the Patchwork man when he is torturing him in VR. He calls him that because Dimi has trouble keeping his virtual representation coherent, making him flicker between different faces, a sign that you have sleeved and resleeved into different sleeves too many times. Kovacs tells Ortega that they have a name for that where he comes from: personality frag. Your personality fragments when you resleeve too many times because you have to work to inhabit the sleeve every time, make it your own. When you do this too often, you start carrying with you little

fragments of all these sleeves, resulting in personality frag and causing you to go out of your mind according to Kovacs. The tale of the Patchwork man and its relations to Cyberpunk and Postmodernism will be further discussed in chapter 2.

Postmodernism and Capitalism. Another large part to Postmodernism is the way capitalism is viewed through its lens and how cultural objects like *Altered Carbon* function in this mode. No matter how the names may change, capitalism, postcapitalism, post-postcapitalism, neoliberalism, Fordism, liberalism, capitalism in its many shapes and forms is still functioning in some way in a lot of places. Jeffrey Nealon, in his book *Post-postmodernism: Or, the cultural logic of just-in-time capitalism*, sees the capitalist market system as one of the most postmodern trends active in contemporary, western society.

For all its slippery descriptions and heterogeneous definitions, there is perhaps nothing more universally recognized as 'postmodern' or 'posthuman' than the triumph of consumption capitalism—the obliteration of humanist use-value and the concomitant domination of mechanistic exchange in this, the age of money as the ultimate general equivalent. (Nealon 90)

He acknowledges Postmodernism is hard to define, yet he sees within consumption capitalism, with its inclination towards the division of labour and people's estrangement from the products they produce with money as the only currency, one core Postmodern aspects. As I mentioned in the introduction, I want to not just look at how the stories of the Patchwork man and the Ouroboros work within *Altered Carbon*, but I want to compare this to how *Altered Carbon* can be taken to be exemplary for how cultural objects in general, but specifically within Cyberpunk,

function in a market system that is being more and more determined by a relatively new phenomenon such as streaming websites with Netflix as an example here. As I mentioned before, capitalism seems to still be functioning in some way in a lot of parts of the world. Kind of similar to Cyberpunk, it has been declared over, or transitioned into a different phase, under a different name many times. But as Nealon argues in his attempt to "periodize the present, a collective molecular project that we might call *post-postmodernism* is to construct a vocabulary to try and talk about the 'new economies' (post-Fordism, globalization, the centrality of market economies, the new surveillance techniques of the war on terrorism, etc.) and their complex relations to cultural production in the present moment" (Nealon 15). Nealon contends that it is important to look at how Postmodernism isn't completely adequate anymore to understand the global system of the market economy and how cultural production relates to this. This leads him to instead call his theory "post-postmodernism" in an attempt to emphasize the changing nature of how the different parts of this system relate to each other.

In the second and third chapter I will build on the ideas on Postmodernism and capitalism I have laid down here in order to place *Altered Carbon* into the larger cultural production framework it came from while keeping its genre specificity in mind.

CHAPTER 2: THE PATCHWORK MAN

PERSONALITY FRAG

When Kovacs calls Dimi II the Patchwork man as he is being tortured by him in VR, he is referring to a children's story from his home world. There, the Patchwork man is a story to incentivise children to stay inside at night. In it, Mad Mykola murdered his own children when

they fainted from working in his mill. Mad Mykola came up with a plan to generate a new slave that would work for him without complaint. He went into the village and took the children and chopped them all up to sew them together into the Patchwork man. But the slave turned on him and ripped Mad Mykola to pieces instead. From then onwards, the Patchwork man roamed the streets, looking for more children to add to his patchworked flesh, "stealing the innocent to live forever" ("In a Lonely Place" 25:41). Kovacs calls Dimi the Patchwork man because he suffers from what Kovacs calls personality frag. This means that someone is losing their identity between all the sleeves they have inhabited. Kovacs sees symptoms of this in Dimi because he cannot maintain one face in VR, a sign that his identity is no longer stable.

Dividuals and the Mind as Software. Dimi II explains later when he is in custody that what he does is in order to function in this new society where "The only currency that truly counts: the appetites of the immortal" ("The Wrong Man" 45:00). Dimi's response to this was to resleeve as many times as he saw fit and even go so far as to double sleeve. Dimi is highly aware that he exists by the grace of the Meths employing him. As he makes a break for it when he is in detention, he strikes a deal with another Meth and tells them that he'll do whatever they want, as long as they can provide an immediate extraction. This means that his consciousness will be downloaded and cast into any environment that this Meth sees fit. Dimi is aware that he can make demands all day but that in that moment he is fundamentally dependent on the Meth on the other end of the line to stick to their bargain and not just stick him in an animal equipped with a stack just for fun.⁴ What is being illustrated here is a shift in what commodity is. Where before it

⁴ This is something that happens in episode 3 "In a Lonely Place" where Kovacs is invited to a Meth party at Bancroft's house where all the guests have to bring something unique. An art dealer has brought a snake with the

was money, now it becomes the human mind in encoded form and what people are willing to do with it. This is reminiscent of what Alexander Galloway describes in his article “The Poverty of Philosophy” where “the economy today is not only driven by software (symbolic machines); in many cases the economy is software, in that it consists of the extraction of value based on the encoding and processing of mathematical information” (Galloway 357). The human mind has become the currency that software represents in the economy Galloway describes. And just like software, the human mind can become fragmented and corrupted by the processes that are being done to and with it. Dimi has adapted to this mode of being by actually fragmenting his mind through resleeving as often as he sees fit. Even going as far as to split his mind in half just to create the perfect partner that will never betray him, himself. This echoes what Deleuze called "dividuals" in his text, "Postscript on the Societies of Control." According to him: "Individuals have become 'dividual,' and masses, samples, data, markets, or 'banks' and people have come to be divided over all these different modes of being (Deleuze 5). He identifies a difference between societies of discipline where he follows Foucault's writings in saying that these had their subjects obey because of an external, after the fact, fear of punishment, and societies of control that make people internalize these fears in order for them to want to stay out of trouble before the fact. Because the expectations placed on people seem never ending, and no longer contained to one field that follows the next (from school to the workforce), people have become divided among many of these fields in order to accommodate the demands of modern life. Dimi has found that the best way to spread himself thin enough to meet the demands placed on him by society is to make enough of himself to go around. This mode of being that Dimi has embraced,

mind of a convicted rapist in it. According to her, they once decanted him back into a human sleeve but apparently he only laid there and withered.

that has forced him to fragment himself in order to survive in this world and his disregard for the safety of not only his body, but also his mind, will be the focus of this chapter.

One of the striking things about Dimi's actions is his willingness to leave his body behind and place his consciousness in the hands of unknown people. I see here a similarity to the Cyberpunk tendency Heuser discusses where the body is something that is often a tool to be discarded when it can be traded for a better functioning tool to do the job at hand, like a computer.

Junk and rubble often clutter the urban environment found in the typical cyberpunk framing universe, and the cyber heroes' bodies are frequently regarded as extensions of the same. The body is the outer shell, which the protagonist discards and leaves behind upon entry into the immaterial realm of cyberspace. (Heuser 33)

The body as a shell that can be discarded is an idea that is taken even further in *Altered Carbon*, which allows the show to explore what happens to a society where the body truly becomes just a shell. Not just a tool to be extended and plugged into a computer that will give you access to cyberspace, but something that can be seen as a throwaway product, something as easily replaceable as a coat, or an arm. In the next sections, I want to look at how these changing ideas about the body are being informed by changing notions within capitalism about production and estrangement.⁵

⁵There remains an attachment to materiality that takes the shape of a body, like with the synthetic sleeves that are used by people, but the human in *Altered Carbon* has ceased to be dependent on the flesh in the ways that are often thought to be an essential part of humanity. The body and its contingent ideas on humanity are never completely abandoned, but the flux they are put in within the world of *Altered Carbon*, is what I am focusing on.

The Body Unified and Disjoined. Katherine Hayles in her book *How we Became Posthuman*, discusses how the body is continuously being negotiated with as a concept in order for people to make sense of their relation to it in different cultural contexts. “[A] coherent, continuous, essential self is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain embodied experience. The closer one comes to the flux of embodiment, Varela and his coauthors believe, the more one is aware that the coherent self is a fiction invented out of panic and fear” (Varela qtd. in Hayles 201). Hayles discusses how ideas about a coherent body fall short in explaining embodied experience, yet they are clung to in order to make sense of the tensions between “the body as a cultural construct and the experiences of embodiment that individual people within a culture feel and articulate” (Hayles 193). Hayles, in other words, sees these ideas about unified embodiment as continuously in flux with the body as shaped by culture and actual lived embodied experience.

Jameson also sees ideas revolving around the body as a unified entity as potentially contributing to false ideas about it. This, in turn, leads to people using this concept of the body to fulfill new ideas of how to utilize it in ways to make it productive. Both Jameson and Hayles see a disjunction between the concept of a unified body as the basis for subjectivity and actual embodied experience, but Jameson focuses more on the economic consequences of this disjunction. The problem with this is, according to Jameson, that it is an imaginary idea of the body that is being used here. "For Jameson the body serves a series of ideological functions, formed in the very process of its mediated encounters" (McQueen 243). By disregarding the construction of this idea of the body, through mediated encounters with, for instance, culture, the construct starts functioning as if real, leading to a disconnect between people and their bodies. Jameson further sees this disconnect between the body and ideas about it as contributing to a

state of being in which people have to adopt a form of schizophrenia in order to keep functioning. "When that relationship breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" (*Cultural Logic* 34). What Jameson is describing here, the loss of coherence between signifiers leads to a schizophrenic attitude because it forces people to try and construct meaning through forced coherency. By looking for a stable identity, people disregard the mediatedness of the construction of this identity. This leads Jameson to conclude that people no longer understand the ways in which they allow capitalism to swallow them up and convert them into the things that they are producing. He clarifies further: "Yet technology may well serve as adequate shorthand to designate that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labour stored up in our machinery" (*Cultural Logic* 35). People have lost the connection to the things they are producing because the production process has been broken up into pieces no longer traceable to the larger product. This leads people to invest themselves into capitalism, their bodies, their time, in ways that they are no longer aware of because of this new fragmented idea of existence.

Hayles points to the form of subjectivity that is needed to allow people to function in the way Jameson describes, and how it is dependent on the idea of disembodiment. "I believe they [statements that the body has disappeared in the age of virtuality] should be taken as evidence not that the body has disappeared but that a certain kind of subjectivity has emerged" (Hayles 193). This new form of subjectivity does not depend on the body having disappeared, but on the idea that the body is disappearing. This sentiment allows people to function in the way Jameson explains that enforces a fragmented sense of self that is able to meet the ever increasing and

changing demands of society. Dimi, as the Patchwork man, has found ways to play the system, work it in a way that makes him effective in the trade he has chosen, but it has also fragmented his mind in ways that is made visible by the technologies in *Altered Carbon* like the stacks and VR. Dimi walks the line between playing and being played by the system. He is able to function in ways that many others are not—by double sleeving himself—but the price is a fragmented sense of self and an over-reliance on the people that are in a way consuming him, enabling and forcing him to sleeve and resleeve again. Keeping him like their guard dog, much like the Patchwork man.⁶

Intertwining with Technology and Commodity. In the previous sections, I have been hinting at a shift in capitalism that accounts for the changes in culture and technology from the past decades. These changes affect the relationships people have with their bodies and capitalism further. Hardt and Negri's ideas about change within capitalism from physical labour to intangible forms of labour, are discussed by McQueen in terms of the impact they had on McQueen's ideas on biopower that he translates to Biopunk.

[I]n Hardt and Negri's Deleuzian political ontology, the central role previously occupied by the labour power of mass factory workers in the production of surplus value is today increasingly filled by intellectual, immaterial, and communicative labour power. Here, biopolitical production is not the production of commodities, but of 'ideas, information,

⁶ Even though Dimi uses bodies, he has discarded the idea of having an attachment to any of the bodies he occupies. Therefore he can be seen navigating the different senses of self that I have touched upon in this chapter. He discards his sense of self by fragmenting his mind in order to meet the demands of his employers, whose appetites are the only thing that really matters in this world, according to him.

images, knowledges, codes, languages, social relationships [and] affects. (Hardt and Negri qtd. in McQueen 9)

What McQueen calls biopolitical production encompasses a change from the traditional mode of factory production to newer forms of production that are made possible by new technologies. These technologies enable new forms of production that lean more on the cognitive powers of people and how they can be translated into commodity. Combining this with Jameson's ideas on fragmentation and Comstock's ideas on the impact on the somatic when the tertiary retention systems are changed, I argue that we can observe changes in the way people are actively working to accommodate new technologies and use them in order to become more capable of dealing with the fickle nature of modern life that demands a level of adaptability that our smartphones, for instance, prepare us for. Hayles and Jameson warn that people are unaware that their conceptualizations of the body as either coherent or disembodied are partly (or largely) mediated by culture and enable people to function within the current capitalist system in ways that impacts their sense of (fragmented) self negatively. In *Altered Carbon*, the accommodating of these technologies has been taken to the level where it actively and immediately impacts the way people treat their bodies. Because of the temporal structure of *Altered Carbon* the viewer is allowed to be confronted with a level of estrangement similar to what Suvin described when he said that Science Fiction is an expression of people's estrangement from modern science, and Heuser's assessment that Cyberpunk works with transformative meanings by combining older and newer themes. This allows *Altered Carbon* to play with both the familiar (a murder plot, people, cigarettes) and the unfamiliar (stacks, sleeves, real death), through bridging the temporal gap that would otherwise be in place when we try to imagine these things. Therefore, the way

people in *Altered Carbon* treat their bodies comes as a shock because the viewer is being confronted with familiarity reframed into an unfamiliar future.

When the body gets reframed in terms of changing economic forms of production, that requires different things from how value is attached to the body, fragmentation happens. With this fragmentation comes a loss of boundary distinctions.

This means [the subject, bodies, outside/inside world boundaries being reconfigured] that the key analytical categories we have long used to structure our world—which derive from the fundamental division between technological and nature, are in danger of dissolving; the categories of the biological, technological, the natural, the artificial *and* the human—are now beginning to blur. [Emphasis in original] (Featherstone and Burrows 3)

As Featherstone and Burrows argue here, new technology impacts the way people are defining themselves against other things. As people become more entwined with technology, more categories than just human and technology start to become unstable. The breaking down of these categories are one of the other effects of a changing capitalist system in which people are constantly being reconfigured in order to produce in new and different ways. As Olga Goriunova states in her article "The digital subject: People as data as persons": "Digital hybridity is the de facto mode of contemporary existence" (2). This digital hybridity is what is being asked of people in order to become producers of more different types of consumable goods. The cognitive ends up being consumable, but in order for it to become consumable it has to first be fragmented, broken up into bite sized chunks. When Dimi I has been eaten up by the system, Dimi II takes his place.

Mark Poster in his article "Postmodern virtualities." discusses how these new forms of temporality that I have discussed as being a part of Science Fiction, Cyberpunk and Postmodernism are impacting our sense of lived time as well. "The terms 'virtual reality' and 'real time' attest to the force of the second media age in constituting a simulated culture.⁷ The mediation has become so intense that the things mediated can no longer even pretend to be unaffected [...] In the second media age 'reality' becomes multiple" (Poster 85). He argues that because these forms of culture introduce these different concepts of time, people start thinking in these terms as well. This, in turn, impacts how people conceive of themselves in relation to time. When time starts being divisible in different categories that imply different levels of real-ness, this implies that people are also able to stretch themselves out over these multiple categories. According to Poster, this also means that reality becomes multiple. In *Altered Carbon*, reality could be thought of as categorical in multiple ways. One could argue that every sleeve constitutes as a different reality. There is also the difference between the ground level and the Aerial where the Meths live. Earth or one of the colonies. The difference between inhabiting a sleeve (synthetic or not) and being either in VR or "on ice" (when your stack just gets stored when you are either waiting for a new sleeve or are serving a sentence). But as Annemarie Mol argues in her book *The Body Multiple*, even though the body might be multiple, it also hangs together (55). These many different levels of reality are in theory still all traversable by one consciousness but doing so will impact someone's sense of time that has passed (by being on ice) and the way that time is currently passing. In the section on consumable time and the third chapter, I want to look more at what purpose a show like *Altered Carbon* serves in making

⁷ The notion of simulated culture will be addressed further in the third chapter.

viewers more familiar with these ways of experiencing time. For now it suffices to say that a show like *Altered Carbon* is not a neutral external when it represents time and reality as being multiple and malleable. Instead, I argue that it is an integral part of understanding cultural objects' role in society and the market to look at the way they introduce audiences to these different temporally and ontologically flexible worlds.

THE CANCELLATION OF THE FUTURE

Dimi I and II are two characters that exemplify what can happen when a person in the world of *Altered Carbon* tries to play the game of resleeving and double sleeving. Their once identical personalities, at the point of resleeving, became unstable, leading them to make reckless decisions. Dimi II goes to extraordinary lengths to be able to avenge Dimi I (referring to him as his brother). He makes a deal with a powerful Meth and is unwilling to back down, even when he is almost murdered. Dimi is not the only example of double sleeving in the show. Kovacs is able, through his Envoy training, to inhabit many different sleeves without problems. In the final episodes of the show, Kovacs ends up carbon printing a clone of himself and double sleeves into two bodies. He does this in order to unravel the final parts of Bancroft's murder/suicide plot and to bring down his sister—a titan of industry⁸—in a final attempt to right something in the world he was unable to do at the battle of Stronghold. As a symbolic reference to the battle that was meant to put an end to stacks and immortality, Kovacs uses the same virus that infected the stacks of his allies then, Rawling. This virus enters a person's stack and will eat up the mind

⁸ Reileen Kawahara is in the business of not just selling the services of prostitutes, but their minds and bodies as well by unknowingly exposing them to patrons who will Real Death them without resleeving them in a new body. Instead, religious coding is faked that prohibits resleeving them or "spinning them up" to ask them who murdered them. Their bodies are discarded and new girls are brought in. Cheaper than keeping them alive, they are discarded as disposable. The third chapter will revolve around these themes the body and mind as disposable and consumable.

translated into code and drive you insane within minutes. Kovacs double sleeves into two bodies, looking identical, and they start discussing who is going to be the decoy—that will take Miriam Bancroft (Bancroft's wife) up on her offer to spend time at her private island with her—and who will go to confront Reileen. From the get go it is unclear who has the status of original, although the Kovacs from who the copy was taken quips that the other Kovacs is technically a virgin ("Rage in Heaven" 32:49). Questions of authenticity become more complicated after both versions of Kovacs have to decide which one of them gets to stay alive and which one will be deleted. After the altercation with Reileen, the version of Kovacs who faced her destroyed his body but not his stack when he fell into the bay from a high altitude. He and the decoy Kovacs meet up in VR to decide which one gets to live, a courtesy extended to them because of their role in bringing a criminal organization down (otherwise both would have been deleted). They end up opting to play rock, paper, scissors, to settle the matter but it is implied that decoy Kovacs finds it important that the version of them with memories of killing Reileen remains alive. When Ortega and Kovacs meet up again he tells her that he is the version of him that she said goodbye to at Reileen's ship, making it very clear that it is him, and not the decoy ("The Killers" 48:54).

What I want to focus on for this part of Kovacs' story, is both the concept of him double sleeving in order to be at two places at once, creating a multiplicity of himself, and how his actions are partially motivated by dissatisfaction with how the future he was propelled into turned out. This dissatisfaction that Kovacs is struggling with is similar to Bancroft's feelings on his potential murder/suicide. Bancroft is driven by his inability to accept that he would commit suicide, and if he did, that he messed it up. Even though Bancroft has a vault full of clones of himself, the destruction of one does not mean anything to him monetarily speaking, but the

thought that his mind could have turned on itself like this is what is inconceivable to him. He feels no attachment to his bodies, but suicide is not something a Meth would do. This culturally motivated idea on his concept of self is what partially propels him to investigate further, something Kawahara was banking on for her plan to succeed.

Hauntology and Failed Futures. Mark Fisher discusses his take on the concept of hauntology and failed mourning in his book *Ghosts of my Life*. In it, he discusses how "haunting, then, can be constructed as failed mourning. It is about refusing to give up the ghost or—and this can sometimes amount to the same thing—the refusal of the ghost to give up on us" (Fisher 22). Mourning, when it fails, can lead to ghosts that the person failing to complete the process of mourning properly is either clinging to or the ghost is clinging to them. By not accepting that he could have killed himself, Bancroft is creating a ghost that will not only haunt him but that will bring about his demise. The police originally, in the form of Ortega, ruled his death a suicide. If Bancroft would have left it at that and accepted that he could have indeed committed suicide, he would have encountered no further problems from this beside the mental consequences of having to accept these fictitious actions. But "the spectre will not allow us to settle into/for the mediocre satisfactions one can glean in a world governed by capitalist realism" (Fisher 22). Because Bancroft cannot find it within himself to be satisfied with the explanation of the police, he takes the advice of his art dealer and procures Kovacs to carry out a new investigation. What Kovacs uncovers is that Bancroft's murder/suicide⁹ was part of a ploy to force his hand in making sure a

⁹ I call this a murder/suicide because he put the gun to his own head but it was part of a larger plot that orchestrated him coming to that point.

certain bill would not pass.¹⁰ Capitalist realism does not only create the world in which Bancroft cannot be satisfied with his suicide, it also created the situation that led him to pulling the trigger. The motivations for this situation were mostly economical from Kawahara's point of view—even though she claims that she had been waiting for a hundred and fifty years for the right chance to bring Kovacs back, it does not seem to be her main objective.

Fisher furthermore argues "the slow cancellation of the future has been accompanied by a deflation of expectations" (Fisher 8). Ideas about the future are always informed by current cultural ideas for "the future is not an obvious concept, but a cultural construction and projection" (Berardi 17). Because the future as a concept is informed by current socio economic climates, it is important to look at what the projections for the future look like for any given time. This combination of perspectives (cultural, temporal, economic) is partly what ties Cyberpunk together as a genre that often operates within Postmodern modes, heavily influenced by current capitalist tendencies. The convergence of these perspectives—or their simultaneity—becomes clear in *Altered Carbon* in story arcs like Bancroft's infirmity in the face of his potential suicide, this is Bancroft not accepting his past where he was motivated by the strains of the capitalist desires of a third party.

Cyberpunk has often been referred to as a genre with a specific temporal structure (Heuser, Jones, Jameson, McQueen, McHale). Cyberpunk operates in a way where it can show a potential future as already having past, but it also, through doing this, is giving a commentary on the present in which it was created. "In essence, even though the cyberpunks may write about the future, they are doing so to understand the present, and perhaps that is why the work is so

¹⁰ The passing of this bill would hurt Reileen Kawahara's business because it would allow even people with religious coding to be 'spun back up' for being questioned about their murder. More about this in chapter 3.

strikingly current rather than futuristic" (Jones 82). As Jones argues here, Cyberpunk often has less of a futuristic flavour, but rather, it seems more current than anything else. It also carries within itself certain futuristic themes, such as the advancement of science which can lead to estrangement through the way it gets combined in works of Science Fiction or Cyberpunk (Heuser, Suvin). But this temporal structure also folds back on itself and allows these authors to not just comment on the present but the "impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity" (Fisher 9). This simultaneity is made concrete in *Altered Carbon* by allowing multiple characters to exist as multiple versions of themselves. When Dimi does this, it is clearly motivated by capitalist principles, he is trying to meet the demands of the appetites of the immortal but he ends up being consumed by them himself. When Kovacs does this, the motivation seems more temporal in nature. He is trying to use himself as a decoy to right a wrong from the past that he feels partially responsible for. He feels guilty towards the victims of Kawahara because he has saved her multiple times in the past, him taking her down feels like atonement for his inability to prevent this future—the future that Quellequest Falconer and him fought to keep from happening. Because of this guilt, he is able to spread his consciousness over two bodies and after he faces Kawahara, returns back to one without a seemingly major loss of identity or fragmentation. Kovacs, as a character that seems less driven by capitalist goals than Dimi, seems better equipped to handle a simultaneity of his personality without it chipping away at his mind in the process.

As I argued earlier, when quoting Trębicki, in *Altered Carbon* the extraordinary has become ordinary through its temporal structure. When Kovacs is resleeved, all revolutions have already been fought. They have been fought, lost, analyzed, written about, and have had lavish

museum displays painting the Envoys as cruel terrorists. What was still a relatively new form of technology when Kovacs was fighting against it, has become the absolute standard in the time he was serving his sentence. This structure, of the special becoming regular through time passing, allowing the special to be produced to the extent that it can no longer hold the position of being special, can be seen as well in what Fisher calls the dyschronia in the futuristic culture of the 1980s: "This dyschronia, this temporal disjuncture, ought to feel uncanny, yet the predominance of what [Simon] Reynolds calls 'retro-mania' means that it has lost any *unheimlich* charge: anachronism is now taken for granted" (Fisher 14). Fisher, here, claims that anachronism has lost its *unheimlich* status because it was being used so excessively in the 80s. Jameson claimed that this anachronism also led to a form of ahistoricity, but Heusser contradicted this by contending that anachronism in Cyberpunk was a key aspect of how it combined elements from its own and other genres and times and through combining them, transformed the meanings. Has anachronism become the standard of the Cyberpunk genre? It is an integral aspect of it, but even though it has been repeated a lot, because of this, when *Altered Carbon* uses anachronism to trigger associations of *Blade Runner* it is invoking a specific cultural framework that masks some of the mechanisms at work in it—as I will explain further in chapter three. For now, it is important to understand that ahistoricity in *Altered Carbon* works to underline a sense of synchronism. Events can be happening simultaneously, with the same people, and past events can heavily influence current actions.

The Myth of the Future. "For cyberpunk's persecuted mavericks and desperadoes, the future promised by a generation of writers forecasting progress and prosperity never materialized"

(Heuser 42). If Cyberpunk was incentivised by a sense of disappointment resulting from a promised future that failed to come to pass, where did this idea of a future better than the present originate? Franco Berardi, in his book *After the Future*, outlines the disjunction between ideas about the future from the past, and contemporary ideas about the future. "The rise of the myth of the future is rooted in modern capitalism [as opposed to the middle ages where perfection was located in the past on the basis of theological perspectives], in the experience of expansion of the economy and knowledge" (Berardi 18). Because Enlightenment ideas loosened the hold of theology on society, an idea of progression in relation to the future was able to take hold (Poster 91). Capitalism depends on an idea of progressive expansion but "underground cultural currents started to signal the new horizon of exhaustion" (Berardi 45). Cyberpunk is part of the "underground currents" that were dealing with, yet again, changing ideas of the possibility to continuous progress. Berardi specifically points towards punk as the cultural movement that dealt with a loss of faith in the future (18). "The idea that the future will be better than the past is not a natural idea, but the imaginary effect of the peculiarity of the bourgeois production model" (Berardi 18). Here, the culturally constructed nature of the future is again emphasized. This constructed nature of the future in general, but specifically as being better than the past, is important because it is the mode of looking at the future that capitalism demands.

Capitalism demands in this sense a different experience of temporality from what was appropriate to a feudal or tribal system, to the *polis* or to the forbidden city of the sacred despot: it demands a *memory* of qualitative social change, a concrete vision of the past which we may expect to find completed by that far more abstract and empty conception

of some future terminus which we sometimes call 'progress'. (Jameson *Archaeologies* 284)

According to Jameson, there is a concrete idea of the past necessary that includes an idea of change from a social perspective. From this idea of the past, people construct an even more abstract idea of the future that will be used to project notions of progress. Jameson argues that one of the main functions of Science Fiction is to show us our inability to predict the future and these representations "prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished" (*Archaeologies* 288-9). Cyberpunk, in the form of *Altered Carbon*, uses these structures of temporality in order to project the viewer—and Kovacs—into a future that depends on the notion that it has emerged from a process of improvement, but simultaneously, it could have been so much better. Kovacs (and Falconer) has very clear ideas about how the future, that he is now dropped into, should not have come to pass. Through the colonisation of other planets and because of the invention of stacks, there is a sense of progress, but this progress has resulted in forms of economic production and a division of rich and poor beyond what Jameson could have predicted. Dimi's failure to play the game of capitalism dominant in the world of *Altered Carbon* is played off as justice because he is a bad guy. He does not play by the rules, neither does our hero Kovacs, but Dimi's goals are purely selfish and therefore the audience is not incentivised to feel for him when he fails. Kovacs feels more closely aligned with the viewer because both are dropped into a world that is temporally and technologically unfamiliar. Both are potentially shocked by how standard extremely exploitative and brutal forms of entertainment have become. By killing off Dimi without allowing sympathy for his position as someone who is consciously trying to feed the appetites of the immortal, the Patchwork man is kept at bay by

expelling him from society in the guise of Dimi and the Meths are allowed to remain unmasked as the real Patchwork men. There no longer is a future, nor a past, because the Meths have consumed everything.

CHAPTER 3: THE OUROBOROS

THE CONSUMED SUBJECT

When Reileen Kawahara (Kovacs' sister) mentions that she has become a titan of industry, she is referring to her business called "Head in the Clouds." This brothel floats at some distance from the Aerium, where the Meth's live, and caters only to the wealthiest. And as Dimi pointed out, the appetites of the wealthiest have developed into things that cannot be grasped by the mind that has not been confronted with the true consequences of immortality. Head in the Clouds is so popular with the Meths because it has found ways to enable even the darkest fantasies. In a world where human bodies are replaceable, killing someone just does not have the same flavor anymore. Head in Clouds promises its girls that if they play along with their customers wishes to torture and kill them, they will pay them handsomely and buy them new and better sleeves. These promises turn out to be false. Instead, Head in the Clouds takes advantage of the religious coding that some people have put on their stack to signal that they believe that if their consciousness is spun up even once, their soul will be lost forever. Kawahara has found a way to fake this type of coding on the girls working for her. So instead of Kawahara having to pay the girls and buy them new sleeves, she allows the patrons to kill the girls and disposes of their bodies. Because of the coding, even if the stack is not damaged, the police will not be able to question the girls. And their families are left confused on why they decided to convert without

saying anything. Kawahara furthermore used the knowledge she gained on her clients through her business to put Bancroft in a position where he would kill one of her girls. Bancroft always told himself that he had a line he would never cross. That line was to never Real Death one of the prostitutes he hired. He had no problem with killing their sleeve and buying the girl a new one. But actually damaging someone's stack beyond repair and effectively killing them for good, was something he told himself he was not capable of. When Kawahara manages to put Bancroft in the position where he did end up RD'ing one of the girls—by dosing him with an aggression inducing drug (Stallion) with the help of his wife (who owed Kawahara a favor)—her plan was to get Kovacs involved in order for him to partially solve the mystery for Bancroft. The idea was that Kovacs would tell Bancroft he Real Deathed one of the girls and that this drove him to suicide, the part that Kawahara and his wife played in the plot would remain concealed. He would then have no choice but to help Kawahara in preventing law 653 from passing. This law would enable the police to spin up murder victims, regardless of religious coding. This would prove to be a serious blow for Kawahara's business model, hence her going to great lengths to prevent this from happening.

In previous chapters, I have discussed how the relationship between people and technology are influencing people more than we seem to often realize. Licklider argued as early as the 1960s that humankind would greatly benefit from entering into a close relationship with computers. This relationship would allow people to free up time that they could use on other pursuits. Similar optimism can be found several decades later in the writing of Scott Bukatman. In his book *Terminal Identity* he describes what he sees as human power being able to spread out across the web by being hardwired into it (Bukatman 210). He sees consciousness as being able

to separate from the body through this connection to the internet, and in turn, become a body of itself (Bukatman 210). As I have argued before, by mentioning Comstock's ideas on how people can be changed on a somatic level by the way they chose to externalize parts of their memories, entering into this type of relationship does not leave us unaffected. Comstock, following Stiegler, further argues that "the dialectical relation between human and technological evolution has been replaced by a permanent technical innovation that evolves on its own terms and at its own pace (133). He sees technological development as being less dependent for its continuous development on us than it used to be. Technology has started to develop at a pace that is no longer connected to our needs in the same way it was before. This change also means that "humans no longer master tools through use—tools also use us" (Comstock 133). Tools might be using people in a way, if I follow Comstock's line of thought here, but tools do not use us in an autonomous fashion, with intent and purpose beyond what people can fathom. There is still an economic system in place around these tools that are mobilizing them. In this chapter, I will look at how technology, in relation to Cyberpunk and its cultural products, is being used to create the subject that will consume and want them eagerly. Much like Kawahara used her brothel to mold Bancroft into the person what would help her stop law 653, and the girls into people desperate enough to let themselves be tortured to death as long as they were compensated for it.

Punk Transformed. One of the reasons Cyberpunk has been declared dead and over (Jameson, Heuser, McQueen, McHale, Jones) is that it suffered a fate similar to that of punk. "In many ways, cyberpunk followed in the trail blazed by punk. It may have begun as 'fake culture' or a byproduct of 'fashion sense,' but it became 'real culture' in the end, exactly as punk did" (Heuser

41). Cyberpunk might have started partly on the premise of it being part of counterculture but it still functions within a larger web of culture and cultural connections. When mainstream culture started assimilating it, some of these founding principles got changed. Their meanings got transformed. What role can something like *Altered Carbon* fulfill if it carries the label Cyberpunk openly even though it is part of mainstream media in the form of it being a Netflix production? The second section of this chapter shall deal more in depth with this question but for now I will look at the fluctuation between *Altered Carbon* selling an idea of revolution in the form of Kovacs trying to bring down Head in the Clouds, but also look at how this fits with the mold of the creation of the neoliberalist subject.¹¹

Henry Jenkins and John Tulloch argued in their book *Science Fiction Audiences* that there are two ways to look at cultural products under capitalism:

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the social meaning of the cultural product under capitalism was entirely determined by its commodity status, which functioned to produce a homogenous, uncritical consciousness. For Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, the technology of the mass media (mechanical reproduction on a vast scale) produced a collective meaning, opening up the possibility of cultural struggle over this meaning, even within the framework of the capitalist cultural industries. (Tulloch and Jenkins 26)

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the way cultural products interacted with the social environment was entirely dependent on how they functioned in the capitalist system.¹² Being reduced to their

¹¹ I take neoliberalism to mean a version of liberalism with more of a focus on a free market economy. This free market economy enables companies like Netflix to operate in the ways I will be criticizing in this chapter. I follow Nealon in these definitions.

¹² This status of cultural products is also part of the capital shift that tries to profit from people's leisure time as well as their working time. More about this and how ideas about productive consumption play a part in this in the following sections.

status as commodities, cultural products lost the ability to be critical because they had to be marketable first and foremost. Walter Benjamin still saw potential for cultural products in this capitalist system for the larger collective meaning to be challenged. The problem with this perspective is that it can easily be used to fool people into thinking that they are participating in a form of larger meaning deconstruction or counterculture, while actually participating in it in ways that will not challenge the larger system and will therefore remain uncritical. Looking at how these techniques are used to make people fit into the molds where they think they are being critical whilst operating exactly how the systems wants you to is what the next sections will be devoted to.

A Spectacle of Control. Because of the economic shift that happened in America in the 70-80s, a shift was needed not only in how things were produced, but more importantly, how consumers were viewed. "It now became clear that to produce goods which would then almost automatically find the corresponding demand for them was no longer sufficient" (Codeluppi 57). The shift went from trying to fulfill a demand in the old model, to creating the demand in the first place in the new model. "It was necessary to produce not only goods but also consumers; in other words, individuals had to be educated by nurturing their awareness of the pleasure they would be able to gain from consuming" (Codeluppi 57). People could no longer be trusted to understand why they would want to consume the things that were being produced. Instead, they needed to be stimulated, groomed, to cultivate the desire they had to consume.

This resulted in a system that tried to appeal to a false sense of personalisation. If people felt like they were being spoken to more directly, like their personal tastes were being met, this

would incentivise them to consume. "The growing personalization of consumer choices is not then so much the result of the consumer's independence but above all of the need imposed by the economic system" (Codeluppi 57-8). A false sense of independence is fostered within people in order to make them feel like they have choices that they in fact do not really have. Clayton Rosate in his article "Spectacle and the Singularity" discusses how one of the aims of this system is to make people conform to the ideal form of consuming (and producing as I will argue in the second part of this chapter) while making them feel like they have a freedom through the ample choices they seem to have. "The central struggle of digital capitalism is not (yet) between machines and humans but between social life and its forms of mediation, which *already*—and have for so long—subjugate humans as they provide for their liberation" (Rosati 97). What Rosati describes here could be a bleak potential outcome of Benjamin's way of thinking discussed earlier. Where Benjamin saw the potential for subversion when being confronted with the larger narrative of mass media, Rosati points to an illusion of freedom of choice in this model. If people are thought to have an abundance of choices—amongst which will be choices of the rejection of mainstream and rebellion—they will notice their actual overall compliance with the system less. As long as people are still consuming within the neoliberal economic framework, even though the messages of the products they consume might be rebellious, this will accomplish little beyond giving people a feeling that they are subverting the system.

The idea that a certain level of revolution is needed to maintain a system like capitalism, as exemplified and supported by the culture industry, is described by McQueen as follows: "While 'systems try to make control as tight as possible [...] if they succeed completely, there would be nothing left' [...]. When there is no more opposition, control becomes a meaningless

proposition" (Deleuze qtd. in McQueen 4). What McQueen describes here are the dynamics that go into keeping a system of control functional. In order for this system to function, there needs to be room left for opposition, or the entire idea of control becomes superfluous. This remaining opposition or subversion needs to remain at a level where it allows people to believe that it exists in an impactful or productive fashion without ever actually threatening the larger system. This allows people to keep functioning within the system while believing that the system is not as all regulating as it actually is.

Mediation and the Hyperreal. The desire to consume must be both created and fulfilled within the same system of consumption and production. Jean Baudrillard sees what he calls the 'hyperreal' as the domain in which these desires are both created and met.

In consumer society, natural needs or desires have been buried under, if not totally eliminated by, desires stimulated by cultural discourses (advertising, media, and the rest), which tell us what we want. We are so precoded, so filled from the very start with the images of what we desire, that we process our relation to the world completely through those images. Furthermore, capitalist production in our time proceeds by first creating a demand through marketing and then producing the product to meet that demand. There are no longer natural needs that human work strives to satisfy. Rather, there are culturally produced 'hyperreal' needs that are generated to provide work and profits. The world is remade in the image of our desires. The signs (the images of what we want) exist before we create the thing to which the sign refers. (Baudrillard 1730)

Baudrillard sees the capitalist production system as the thing that wipes out people's "natural needs" through filling them with images of the things they should be desiring. People have lost the ability to conceptualize what they want a priori to the images that are conditioning them to live in the hyperreal where everything is mediated through (made up out of) these images. The image, and therefore the desire for the thing represented on the image, pre dates the creation of the thing on the image. As Codeluppi argued, the economic shift demanded that the desire for the product was created before the product instead of the other way around. In order to be susceptible for the structure in which false promises of revolution can be used to fulfill the need for an idea of subversion, people need to be conditioned to live in this hyperreal.

Because the hyperreal substitutes the world that is not mediated by these images, this unmediated world no longer exists. Tandt describes this as follows: "Baudrillard illustrates this notion by comparing the postmodern signifying economy to a map that has erased the territory it was meant to represent: the technologically generated signs of consumerism have phagocytized real world objects and subjects" (Tandt 102). In the hyperreal, the "real world" of objects and subjects has been consumed by the images of consumerism constantly projected for people to consume. This also means that "if nothing subsists beyond these simulacra, individuals are left without any means to put their consumerist lifeworld to the test of reality and thereby to resist it" (Tandt 102). Because people are constantly confronted with the images through which the world, and people themselves, are mediated, they lose the ability to test their convictions. There is no longer an unmediated reality left to which to cling, no objective measure. This results in a loss of ability to guard against the hyperreal and leaves people susceptible to the idea that they can

subvert the system through certain consumer choices while actually still participating within the constraints of the system.

Gerald Sim, in his article "Individual Disruptors and Economic Gamechangers: Netflix, New Media, and Neoliberalism," points out that the neoliberal subject needs this idea of individualism in order to keep functioning in the system without causing trouble. "[T]he individualism implicitly defined bears the contours of a neoliberal subject, which as David Harvey points out, neither possesses nor seeks the sort of ideals and freedoms capable of threatening corporate power" (Harvey qtd. in Sim 190). In order to create a good neoliberal subject, the market needs to keep up the illusion of consumer freedom of choice, playing into people's desire to be spoken to as individuals. This molds them into subjects that will still want the idea of freedom, but this idea can be satisfied through these consumer choices that never actually threaten the way the system operates. "What people want, therefore, is both quantified and commodified [through tracking user behavior] (Sim 192). People are being observed as well when they consume, and this information is constantly being used to optimize the selection of choices that is being presented to them. "The freedom of choice exercised by what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer [...] term 'pseudo individuals' resembles Harvey's depiction of the neoliberal subject, who prizes 'the liberty of consumer choice,' not only with respect to particular products but also with respect to lifestyles, modes of expression, and a wide range of cultural processes" (Sim 192). The trend that Sim is identifying here, is that of the neoliberal subject that experiences a sense of liberty through the consumer choices they make. These choices do not only impact their personal lives, but they also feed back into the culture that is producing these

choices. These cultural processes are working in a feedback loop between producing, consuming and anticipating these things and creating a demand for them.

There is a high incentive to use these techniques of personalization from the perspective of businesses and advertisers that want to market products to people. Mathew Hindman in his book *The Internet trap: How the digital economy builds monopolies and undermines democracy* describes the results this garners for businesses: "Personalization systems can provide dramatically better results for advertisers, generating more sales per dollar of ad spending while increasing the overall value of a site's ad inventory" (Hindman 60). As Hindman describes, using personalization techniques is directly influencing the results of ad campaigns. By using the data many websites collect, they construct a digital subject that is used to target personalized advertisements towards people. This digital subject results in us becoming "our data, granulating our subjectivities in the data worlds we inhabit" (Goriunova 11). These granules are gathered up again by the companies whose media is being consumed and used to create or recommend the next set of things ready for your personal consumption. Companies like Netflix explain their reasons for doing this by saying that they try to make things as easy for the consumer as possible because "decision making is costly for users [in terms of cognitive power]" (Hindman 72). And when people have to use too much of their cognitive power to navigate to the next thing, they might as well click off the website and try and find entertainment somewhere else.

Marketing the Market. In *Altered Carbon* Kawahara is part of the multi layered industry of prostitution. She sells the women working for her multiple false dreams. There is the obvious one where she lies to them when she promises to compensate them for consenting to be tortured

to death and promises them a new sleeve and money for their troubles. But she also feeds into and uses another more culturally embedded lie. If the prostitution industry is layered, Head in the Clouds is both literally and figuratively speaking at the top of the pecking order. Their location floats high above the world these women have grown up in, their world is one on the ground and of harsh poverty. The options for women wanting to do sexwork are limited to establishments like Jerry's Biocabins or Jack-it-off. In these places, the clientele is not regulated in any way and they make little money while still running the risk of being beaten up or even killed without any of the compensation Kawahara promises. Head in the Clouds is seen by these women as a luxurious escape from this type of life. One time working at Head in the Clouds, where the clients are all part of the revered and scorned Meth class, could potentially make them enough money to improve their and their families' living situations. Kawahara feeds into this idea of exclusivity and promise by seemingly only accept a few girls, keeping them separate as to not arouse suspicion, and spreading stories about the monetary successes of these girls. By working to keep up this air of promise and exclusivity, she is actively contributing in the creation of the desires in both the patrons and the women aspiring to work there. The ground level establishments that offer sexual services even use Head in the Clouds to favorably compare themselves to, contributing to the air of status and privacy the brothel has ("Out of the Past"). This forces the women working in those establishments to see Head in the Clouds as the ultimate goal. If they can not work there, they should at least be almost good enough to work there. The hyperreal that is being created in *Altered Carbon* is one where the women in the sexindustry are constantly being confronted with images of ideals that they should strive for, be lucky enough to participate in. The desire to work for Head in the Clouds is actively being fostered by the cultural

status that it has garnered, going so far as to force them to market themselves as being at least as good as the girls there. Kawahara is working towards creating the type of woman that is eager to work for her, because she has been blinded by the images that are circulating about Head in the Clouds.

The hyperreal in *Altered Carbon* can be thought to create the type of culture that allows false ideas about Head in the Clouds to incentivise women to aspire to work there and see it as one of the most highly attainable things for them.¹³ "What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (Jameson *Cultural Logic* 4-5). In the world of the show, a feedback loop has been created between Kawahara's goals; having people that work for her, and the cultural production that works to foster this desire in people.

So, in postmodern culture, 'culture' has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process. (Jameson *Cultural Logic* x)

When the women are praising themselves as being just as good as the girls at Head in the Clouds, they are both consuming and producing this idea of exclusivity that Head in the Clouds thrives on. They are part of a market that works to create the desire that it thrives on for people willing to participate in it while consuming these very people in the process. At the end of the season, Kawahara's business model ends up being unsustainable. The Ouroboros, as will be

¹³ The importance of personalization will be discussed further in the next part of this chapter.

discussed in the next section, will end up biting its own tail and the market, in the form of Kawahara and Bancroft, ends up consuming themselves.

THE CONSUMED MARKET

Kovacs has a tattoo of the ouroboros on most of the sleeves he has worn for longer periods of time. It is one of the first things he does to the sleeve he wears for most of the series as soon as he makes up his mind to stay. It serves as a reminder to both his mother and sister, two figures he was not able to save. Their mother wore a necklace with an ouroboros on it and later it is the only thing Kawahara has from her. She later admits that the reason she wears it is not to fondly remember their mother, but as a reminder to never be weak like her ("Rage in Heaven"). Kovacs ends up discovering what Kawahara has done to try and manipulate Bancroft into doing her bidding when it comes to law 653 and her general attitude towards unsavory business practices. Because of the guilt he experiences for both the failing of the battle of Stronghold and not having seen earlier what she is capable of, he decides to use the same type of virus that was used in the battle to bring Kawahara down, Rawling. By using this specific virus, lifted from the stacks of his former friends that were on display in a museum, Kovacs links his past and his future together. By killing Kawahara, Kovacs is able to discover what actually happened with Bancroft. Before, Kawahara only told Kovacs what she thought he needed to know in order to help her carry out her plan. When he seemed unwilling to help her, she kidnapped Ortega and threatened

her and his other friends with slow and maddening deaths. Under pressure, Kovacs told Bancroft what he needed to hear in order to push him in Kawahara's corner. After she is dead, Kovacs is free to use the information he learned about the Bancrofts as he pleases. He ends up confronting them with their crimes in front of a gathering of their friends and family. There ends up being a big showdown after which both Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft are arrested. The overall feeling is that of victory. The problems in society, the ones that were not playing by the rules, had been given faces in the forms of the Bancrofts and Kawahara—and let's not forget about Dimi—and are dealt with accordingly.

Altered Carbon follows a clear narrative where Kovacs gets dropped into an unfamiliar world where he is somehow part of a bigger plot that revolves around some of the most powerful people on the planet. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that even though his sister claims that she did it all for him, her economic motivations must have been at least as big if not bigger than her familial motivations. In the end, she does not side with him and it becomes clear where her priorities lay. This also means that the story was less about Kovacs than it seemed in the beginning. The narrative turns out to have been driven more by the monetary concerns of Kawahara than anything else. Kovacs murders her in an attempt to restore balance to this world and manages to bring down the morally corrupt Bancrofts as well. He spins the story back on himself by making a large impact on it. These victories are presented to the viewer as such, victories. This section will look at how this narrative resolution in *Altered Carbon* corresponds to how Netflix (its producer) functions in the market, and how this links up with formerly discussed ideas on capitalism and changing forms of producing and consuming.

Netflix and the Freedom to Choose. In the first chapter, I argued that Cyberpunk is distinct from Science Fiction because of its deconstructionist tendencies and its temporal structure. Cyberpunk deconstructs itself by quoting from its own genre and that of Science fiction, but through the way this is done—by combining elements that arouse both feelings of familiarity and estrangement—it manages to transform the original meanings into something new. But because these are structures that are repeated throughout the genres of Cyberpunk and partly Science Fiction, the effect of estrangement undergoes a deconstruction as well. "[S]cience fiction not only produces an effect of estrangement: it also renders the strange more familiar. Science fiction entails a creative and cognitive process that requires the reader's participation" (Heuser xliv). One can assume that when someone is watching *Altered Carbon*, they will not be as surprised with the concept of stacks by the third episode as they were when they first encountered it. But what are the consequences when Cyberpunk's general narratives of subversion and revolution become commonplace? In other words, are newer iterations of Cyberpunk, like *Altered Carbon*, contributing to the personalized sense of freedom in choice and subversion through consuming that are being used to keep people hooked to the idea of revolution while keeping them in line with the very system they think they are pushing away from? In order to examine that further, I want to look at the general structure and promises of Netflix as a streaming website.

Netflix was one of the first companies that made the move from a Blockbuster like model, where they shipped movies to you to rent them, to move this business model to the internet and start streaming movies on a subscription basis (Johnson). You pay a set amount every month, and for that money, you are allowed access to all the movies they have licenced at that moment. Some of the big differences with traditional broadcast television are that Netflix

does not force you to watch any commercials and you are not restricted to any time schedule but your own. These differences constitute what "[Henry] Jenkins charts as a progression where online video services alter modes of consumption, change textural forms, and move media culture into a new era" (Sim 187). Jenkins sees a development where streaming services do not just impact the cultural products that are being produced, but the ways in which they are being consumed as well. I want to add to this that the ways in which the consumer is—often unknowingly—being used as a producer, by tracking their online behavior, is also impacting the general structure of the economic system and the role media play in it.

Derek Johnson, in his book *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, describes the developments of the introduction of streaming services in a generally positive light. He claims that: "services like Netflix have 'freed' content from time" (Johnson 6). Because broadcast television was rigorously structured in terms of timed schedules, it impacted people's time management in ways that Netflix claims to free people from. People no longer have to plan around these times schedules, instead, they make the schedule and Netflix will adapt to whatever you want. Johnson further argues that this new mode of consuming as streaming is networked in the way "in which the more open and participatory affordances of the Internet enable audiences to make programming choices while independent modes of production and distribution thrive outside the control of traditional channel gatekeepers" (4). He sees these streaming services as a way for the internet to showcase its potential for more participatory modes of production, circumventing the traditional broadcast television channels that according to him "gatekeep" independent modes of production. He therefore sees the development of media into this networked era as a potentially good thing on the basis of the affordances it grants people to

participate in new ways in which culture being produced. On the one hand he claims that: "non-linear viewers can be their own guides" (Johnson 4). But he also sees the ways in which companies like Netflix use the data they gather on their customers to tailor them into echo chambers of prefixed preferences. He claims that "the strategies of audience targeting—or channel branding—that have been characteristic of cable channels seems consistent here and applicable to the portal environment, especially as subscription services like Netflix target a multiplicity of specific taste cultures" (Lotz qtd. in Johnson 9). Johnson describes here that Netflix has not walked away from all the aspects of traditional broadcast television. It has retained certain aspects of how audiences are being targeted and used the affordances of this new online system to improve on these strategies.

Sticky Attention. The form of cognitive commodity that I have hereto been discussing is functioning in a system that has been called attention economy. Claudio Bueno, in his article "An Immanent Critique of the Attention Economy," explains that "with the spread of mass media and digital technologies, attention itself becomes a source of information that is fed directly back into the productive process, easing the communication link between the spheres of consumption and production, and hence accelerating the extraction and realisation of surplus value" (Bueno 119). Consumer's attention has become one of the most highly sought after forms of commodity, not just because people are consuming businesses' content when their attention is grabbed, but because they are producing data when they are doing so. If going to an old bookstore on a street with no cameras, and paying for your purchase with cash, is one of the most anonymous ways of consuming culture, Netflix is about as far away from this idea as you can imagine. Netflix wants

to know everything, and has access to most of it. They want to know what you are watching, how—on what device, how many times you pause, how long will one session lasts—where, what, when your friends and family are watching, the list goes on and on. When you consume media using a provider like Netflix, you are giving them data that is a form of capital: "the attention economy subsumes this unleashed social productivity under the logic of surplus value, expanding the exploitation of human activity beyond the factory and hence reproducing the dominant power relations at an even larger scale" (Bueno 107). Bueno sees a transformation in the way people's leisure time can be used to mobilize people to not just consume, but produce as well. He sees this as the exploitation of human production power far beyond what the old model held that was focussed on what people could physically produce in factories. Hindman also argues that: "the digital attention economy increasingly shapes public life, including what content is produced, where audiences go, and ultimately which news and democratic information citizens see" (Hindman 5). Attention economy, therefore, does not limit itself to one part of human life, it tries to go as far as it can go, shaping public life and people's views. Attention economy can be seen as a way in which companies are purposefully trying to create something like Baudrillard's hyperreal, where people are constantly being enticed to keep watching, keep consuming, keep producing. This is needed because in the online environment "sites live or die based upon their stickiness—their ability to attract readers, to make those readers stay longer when they visit, and to convince them to return again once they leave" (Hindman 48). If sites cannot compete with the stickiness of other sites, they cannot hope to play a part in the attention economy.

One of the ways sites work to improve their stickiness is through tactics of personalization and according to Netflix's chief content officer, Netflix's brand is personalization. (Ted Sarandos qtd. in Havens 322). Stickiness through personalization can partly be seen in *Altered Carbon* by how Kovacs moves within the story. When he is first brought on by Bancroft, he is unimpressed to be a hired tool and turns the offer down. When there are people out looking for him specifically, this piques his interest in the narrative now that he seems to have a more prominent role in it than just a hired gun. The importance of Kovacs to the proceedings of the story fluctuate throughout the season, but this initial inflated sense of self importance enhances the stickiness of Earth and the murder mystery for him enough to incentive him to stay despite his initial decision.

When Netflix uses these techniques of personalization they also work to get the most personalized data back from their customers. "Digital subjects are new forms of subject construction that arise out of computational procedures and are employed by various forms of power" (Goriunova 3). The emphasis on Netflix being able to cater that what you want as an individual and thereby producing you as that individual simultaneously is important here. Because, not only do people get produced to produce in specific ways here by the technology that enable Netflix to operate, reminiscent to what Comstock said about humans being used by the tools that they use, but these techniques are being used by various forms of power. In other words, people might be being used by the tools they use in return in ways that can sometimes be hard to spot, but this mechanism is actively being used as well by companies like Netflix to incentivise you to not just keep consuming, but more importantly, to keep producing.

Freedom to Volunteer for Prison. Netflix actively markets itself as a "disruptive brand." Timothy Havens, in his article "Netflix: streaming channel brands as global meaning systems," describes how Netflix sees its role in the market: "the immediacy of delivery—the erasure between desire for media content and the satisfaction of that desire—takes center stage in Netflix's articulation of a 'disruptive' brand" (Havens 326). Netflix sees the way they circumvented television broadcasting channels and their traditional ways of producing content with a heavy reliance on commercials and time restraints as the reason for their disruptive nature. I argue that Netflix is promoting a deceptively disruptive nature in order to enable the types of feelings as discussed in the previous section of this chapter (of freedom and subversion through consumer choice). Netflix enables feelings of freedom through consumer choice while exploiting a new production model that allows them to not only have people consume the content they provide, but to use people to completely model this production/consumption system on the output of their customers in the form of data. Comstock describes this process when he talks about "the work of grammatization based in writing and individual experience becomes replaced with a technological attention capture that instead grammatizes *individual input as metadata for economic gain*" [emphasis in original] (Comstock 144).¹⁴ The attention economy has become such a dominant force in the online—intangible—consumption of people, that companies base their business model not just on producing their content, but to produce just the right content/consumer. Nello Barile calls this "the emergence of a new digital economy based on the centrality of UGC (User Generated Content)" in his article "Branding, Selfbranding, Making: The Neototalitarian Relation Between Spectacle and Prosumers in the Age of Cognitive

¹⁴ Grammatization as the critical articulation of a system through metalanguage (Comstock 143).

Capitalism" (150). He sees the emergence of a new type of consumer that also is producing while consuming called the prosumer. This new output of the prosumer is what has become central in the new digital economy. The women aspiring to work for Kawahara can be thought of as an over exaggerated example of the prosumer. They are trapped in this position where they aspire for the thing they are promoting. This means they are both partaking in fueling the hyperreal's barrage of images and ideals on *Head in the Clouds*, but they also want to consume the ideal of it by actually participating in it. Which in turn, would mean that they are actually consumed by it. Manovich talks about this willingness to participate in this system but he externalizes it to technology that we, in turn, willingly internalize.

Eventually VR apparatuses will be reduced to a chip implanted in a retina and connected by cellular transmission to the Net. From that moment on, we will carry our prisons with us—not in order to blissfully confuse representations and perceptions (as in cinema), but to always 'be in touch,' always connected, always 'plugged-in.' The retina and the screen will merge. (Manovich 29).

Manovich describes a process similar to Comstock's ideas on the relation between using and being used by technology. They both argue that the technologies we are using, are having a bigger impact on us, and we accommodate them more, than we tend to think. Comstock believes that this results in changes on the somatic level. We will be changed on a mental and physical level in order to keep up with the way technology is evolving around us. Manovich sees this relation more as an actual symbiosis between people and technology. In order to harmonize with the technology we eagerly become increasingly dependent on, we are willing to take pieces of it into our physical body. According to Manovich, this means that we will forever be "plugged in,"

but this implies that we are not already plugged in. I argue that these technologies and the increasing dependencies people have on them are not the effect of these technologies but of the companies producing and mobilizing them to function in this way (of wanting us to be plugged in). These technologies and dependencies work towards one common goal: promoting consumption. In order to do this, both the product and the demand are being created. As Jameson said: "in the postmodern, indeed it is the very idea of the market that is being consumed with the most prodigious gratification; as it were, a bonus or surplus of the commodification process" (*Cultural Logic* 269). Consumption, and its promotion, has become so all encompassing that it can do nothing else but to start consuming its own notion of the market.

An Eye for an Eye. In *Altered Carbon*, Kovacs ends up killing Kawahara and brings down the Bancrofts. In doing this, he seemingly restores balance to a somewhat functioning system. Kawahara's greed has caused two titans of industry to be taken down. It is assumed that this will have some form of positive impact on Earth because the people that have become the face of this evil have been taken out of the equation. The struggle that Kovacs was confronted with in the beginning is resolved. Not only has he fulfilled his bargain, buying his freedom, but he has also managed to bring down Bancroft, the one that put him in this position in the first place. Kovacs' personal narrative of trying to gain freedom has bled over into the rest of society, liberating them of various evils as well in the process. The prosumers in the form of the women hoping to work for Kawahara have been shown the disillusion that was the simulacra that was being repeated by them. But they have been shown this by the biggest prosumer of them all, Kovacs. Because the narrative inflated his sense of self importance, enhancing the stickiness for him, Kovacs ends up

having a big impact on the narrative not because he was important from the beginning, but because he made himself important. Producing his own sense of self importance, enhancing his enthrallment with the narrative, enables him to produce large changes for society on Earth by taking out Bancroft and Kawahara. The viewer has been invited to identify with Kovacs from the beginning (through the shared temporal displacement and estrangement experienced when first confronted with the world of *Altered Carbon*) and now they get to share in his sense of rebellious victory as well.

The market, in a way, might have consumed itself, just like the ouroboros biting its own tail. But the market, just like the shape of the ouroboros, is circular. In the end, only the people that have become exemplary for this moral decrepity of the world of *Altered Carbon* have been taken down, but no true structural changes have been made like the ones that were promised in Falconer's speech. The stacks still remain, as do the Meths that benefit the most from them. As viewers, we are left with a hollow sense of victory. Kovacs, and Netflix through him, offers the viewer a false sense of rebellion. Netflix uses the genre of Cyberpunk to cite ideas of progression, technological innovation, subversion, and the lone hero, but it functions differently than Cyberpunk originally did. The parts of Cyberpunk that were punk have been changed, subverted themselves to the whims of consumer society that needs the idea of rebellion to keep the idea of control alive. *Altered Carbon* has been one of Netflix's largest productions thus far, selling its viewers ideas of rebellion. But in the end, by having it on a platform that depends so highly on people's data as a mode of production, the dissent it promises with its Cyberpunk flavor is about as hollow as Kovacs' revenge on the society that tried to puppeteer him for their gains.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have answered the question: How can *Altered Carbon* be read as an expression of some of the changes Cyberpunk has undergone over the years with an emphasis on how the platform of Netflix impacts the way Cyberpunk functions in a larger cultural economic framework? I will briefly go over my main arguments again.

Chapter 1, In the first chapter, I discussed Kovacs' displacement in time and space and how this forges a bond with the audience that is similarly unfamiliar with this version of Earth. The specific way Earth—and especially Bay—has been portrayed will enable audiences familiar with Science Fiction to connect it to *Blade Runner*. This association connects *Altered Carbon* to the tradition of Cyberpunk quoting its own genre and enforces the sense of familiar yet strange that multiple of the theorists discussed in this thesis have pointed at as being essential parts of both Science Fiction and Cyberpunk (Heuser, Suvin, Jameson).

Because Cyberpunk has a close relation to the genre of Science Fiction, as it is commonly seen as a subgenre of it (Heuser, Suvin, Hale), I have looked at how these genres relate to each other. From this comparison, I drew the conclusion that Science Fiction laid a framework that Cyberpunk was able to push against. Where Science Fiction often functioned in a way to help people make sense of the fast changing sciences of the modern world, according to Suvin, Cyberpunk seemed to have a more critical and speculative take on this narrative of progression. The way Cyberpunk combines elements of speculative and extrapolative worldbuilding, *and* how it combines the old and the new, work to distinguish Cyberpunk from Science Fiction. These

combinations serve as deconstruction of Cyberpunk's own past and history in general. And through combining these elements, they are transformed in turn. This transformation through deconstruction is what gives Cyberpunk the ability to be critical towards larger societal tendencies, through the combination and transformation of elements not regularly seen together and creating the "shock of the old" effect (Heuser).

Furthermore, in chapter one, I discussed how Kovacs only became interested in the murder plot he was being hired into when he discovered people in Bay City are specifically looking for him. I focussed on how Kovacs is able to connect with Bancroft because they have lived through the same things most other people have not. But they also clash because of their radically different experiences of these times. The meaning of the history of the world of *Altered Carbon* is changed depending on which character's perspective you assume. This juxtaposition can also be read as Cyberpunk struggling with the optimism of Science Fiction when Kovacs and Bancroft are played against each other like this. *Altered Carbon* never really fully develops into either a utopia or a dystopia, it always remains hovering in the middle. The idea of no longer being limited by when your flesh expires seems to carry with it utopian ideas of longevity and the potential to colonize the galaxy, as seen in *Altered Carbon*. But on the other hand, society is grim and not much seems to have changed from the type of backstreets seen in *Blade Runner* with how they are portrayed in *Altered Carbon*. And furthermore, in *Altered Carbon*, the negative effects from people being able to live so long are being framed in terms of wanting more and more violent and brutal forms of entertainment.

I also compared *Altered Carbon* to Foucault's idea of a heterotopia, where all the possible sites of cultural expressions are held together with their inversions. *Altered Carbon* can be seen

in a similar vein where many different cultural references are present at the same time, creating a sense of simultaneity. And because their juxtaposition, they have not only become inverted, as was suggested with the idea of heterotopia, but perverted even.

I discussed how the cyber optimism of earlier years as exemplified in Licklider's theories is approached in Cyberpunk from a more cautious direction, similar to how Cyberpunk is critical of the more optimistic tendencies of Science Fiction. Licklider saw computers as the solution to free people's time up more. Time, he saw as humankind's most valuable commodity. This newfound leisure time and the pressure on people to function in a society that always demands more enables a certain kind of capitalist system to not only lay a claim on the time people spend working, but also on this relatively new leisure time. These capitalist notions on leisure time and consumerism (during leisure time) complicate some of the subversive notions inherent to Cyberpunk. Just as Kovacs needs to make sure the plot becomes dependant on him, so do people need to believe that the choices they make through their consumption carries with it a certain—potentially rebellious—impact.

According to Comstock, when people start using different technologies to externalize part of their memory, this changes people on a physical level. These changes enable the body—and even the mind—to be monetized in new ways, and therefore relate to capitalism and ideas about production in new ways too. I argued that in *Altered Carbon* Ortega losing her arm can be read as an example of such changing relations. When her arm is replaced, it is emphasized that it was the best—and most expensive—thing on the market. Clearly an upgrade, this seems to invalidate her original discomfort with the arm and force her to accept it as the better substitute for her own arm. I further brought up Manovich's ideas on how people seem to fail to realize the level to

which they accommodate technology, internalizing it even, because it contributes to the attitude towards the body Ortega displays. The body is thought of more and more in terms of how productive it is, and technology as how this can increase this productiveness. This enables the way technology prompts people for an output as they are consuming things like media, to go largely undetected.

I related the ways capitalism (according to Jameson) demands that people spread themselves so thin that their idea of self becomes fragmented to Dimi the twin and how he suffers from personality frag because the double sleeved and resleeved too many times. Dimi has found this re-and-double sleeving the best way to meet these extensive demands of the Meths that employ him.

I pointed towards Heuser's argument that the anachronism in Cyberpunk does not lead to the ahistoricity that Jameson warned against, but that it is actually part of what allows Cyberpunk to enter into this critical dialogue with its own (and other) past(s).

Chapter 2. In the second chapter I discussed the children's story of the Patchwork man. How Mad Mykola murdered children and stitched their bodies together into one monstrous worker that he could command. The Patchwork man ended up turning on Mykola and murdered him instead. Kovacs compared the Patchwork man to Dimi the twin because the repeated sleeving Dimi has done to himself has resulted in him suffering from personality frag. This means that your identity becomes a patchwork blanket from all the sleeves you have inhabited. I compared this fragmented identity of Dimi to Deleuze's idea of the dividual and Jameson's schizophrenic personality, because both are ways to cope with the extensive demands capitalism places on

people. I also brought up Galloway's notion of software as a currency because I see the way the mind has become software in *Altered Carbon* as an example of how production under contemporary capitalism has been changing towards more intangible and cognitive forms of production (as Hardt and Negri point out) and how this allows the mind to be converted into money. This way of monetizing cognition depends on an unawareness of how the idea is self becomes fragmented and even leisure time is being taken up by this model of consumption and production.

I brought up that Hayles sees this way of functioning as dependent on an idea of disembodiment, I argue that this idea of disembodiment combined with the fragmented self allows people to disregard the way they spreading themselves too thin in order to meet the demands, not only of the larger capitalist system, but the extensions of this system in the form of new technologies like streaming platforms as well. I have argued that people are working hard to accommodate these technologies in order to become a new type of consumer. Barille calls this the prosumer, the consumer that during their leisure time becomes a producer of content as well. Feeding into a feedback loop between producer and consumer, uniting the two in one without the consumer being aware of this.

I have taken the difference in how things end for Kovacs and Dimi as an example of how *Altered Carbon* tricks its viewers into believing there is a right and wrong that is being played out here. Kovacs has been established from the beginning as the character to identify with because he is as temporally and spatially confused by the world he is dropped into as the viewer is. Kovacs was a former rebellion fighter in the battle against the evils that this society has blossomed into. Dimi, on the other hand, is portrayed as merely a thug with only economic

motivations and no moral compass. He works for the highest bidder and seems to take pleasure in the pain he inflicts on Kovacs. The viewer is invited to believe that it is righteous when Dimi dies and Kovacs is victorious. The viewer is not invited to reflect on the societal structures that enabled Dimi to become what he was.

I discussed that Kovacs' use of the virus Rawling can be read as him actively connecting his past and his present in order to right some of the wrongs he considers to have led to this future. By using the virus that was used against the Envoy's during the battle of Stronghold, he tries to go against the society he fought from happening. Rawling represents the ways Kovacs feels haunted (Fisher) by his shortcomings and the ways he feels responsible for the evils his sister has committed. Again, Kovacs is seen as being better at dealing (or at least more successfully) with his ghosts than other characters do. Bancroft is haunted by his failing to accept the possibility of him committing suicide, actively contributing to the situation that will lead to his downfall. The society that he functions in as a Meth has left him unable to accept these types of shortcomings within himself. The capitalist (culturally informed) idea of the future as always being part of some kind of progression cannot accept that all the years that Bancroft has been alive would lead to him taking his own life. The shortcomings of these capitalist motivations are emphasized again with both of these character's failings (Bancroft and Dimi) juxtaposed with Kovacs' success in navigating his ghosts.

According to Fisher, the haunting of the past in the present has become commonplace in Cyberpunk. Anachronism underlines synchronism but this idea of simultaneity loses its unheimlich flavor because it has been used too many times. Therefore it has become a part of the capitalist system (through these types of cultural objects) that asks of people that they fragment

their sense of self in order to fulfill multiple demands simultaneously. The idea that the future is always part of some progressive process is part of what tricks people into being willing to function in this way. Kovacs falls into this trap of trying to better the present by righting what he considers to be his past wrongdoings that contributed to this future coming to pass.

Chapter 3. In chapter three, I discussed how the women wanting to work at Head in the Clouds are the ones perpetuating the myth that keeps women wanting to work for Head in the Clouds. By doing this they set the very trap that they fall into.

I linked back to Licklider's optimism regarding computer and human symbiosis and I connected this to what Bukatman thinks are some of the potential virtues of becoming connected through computers with the internet. I contrasted this with what Comstock warned against with regards how tools are starting to use people more and more instead of the other way around. I argue that these tools are not acting of their own accord and with intent, but that it is important to see the ways in which they are being employed by companies and how this leads to new forms of production such as the cognitive capital Hardt and Negri mentioned.

I discussed two visions on the function of cultural objects with regards to their potential revolutionary potential. Horkheimer and Adorno thought that these objects are being reduced to their commodity status and have lost any critical power they might have had to question the system in which they function. Benjamin argues that collective meaning can be challenged by consumer choice. In order to make clear why I argue that this potential criticism through consumerism does not work in contemporary culture the way Benjamin hoped it would I described the economic shift that took place after the 80s. In this shift the market no longer

sought to meet the desires of what people wanted to consume, but a system took shape where these desires would actively be fostered in people. And according to Codeluppi, this was largely successful because it focused on a false sense of personalization that tricks people into believing they are making choices directly related to their sense of self.

I discussed Baudrillard's hyperreal because it illustrates why people are no longer able to test the desires they think they have against any "real". There is no longer a real because everything has become endlessly mediated by a barrage of images, no longer relating to anything. The women wanting to work for Head in the Clouds participate in perpetuating this hyperreal because they both are the producers of these images in the way they advertise themselves, and they are the subject that is susceptible to the desires that make them want to work there. They have locked themselves into a feedback loop of producing and participating in the desires that their way of selling themselves (as good as the girls at Head in the Clouds) promotes.

Kovacs sells the viewer something else than the women wanting to work at Head in the Clouds. Kovacs sells an idea of rebellion, of the little guy coming out on top in the end. Where he started the story being completely dependent on Bancroft and Kawahara for his continued existence in a sleeve on Earth, he ends it with Kawahara dead (and him being lauded a hero for having killed her) and Bancroft in handcuffs. The way the story developed as being more and more centered on him has the side effect of selling the viewers of the show a sense of victory over something. Victory over the ways society on Earth has been corrupted in this future narrative, the bad guys have been defeated by the good guys and all is well again. I argue that this false sense of victory—false, because no actual underlying structures that led society to this

point are questioned or dealt with by Kovacs—is symptomatic of the developments Cyberpunk as a genre has undergone. Because the subversive tendencies of Cyberpunk as a genre that pushed off from Science Fiction's more optimistic tendencies have been repeated, their unique flavor has become stale from overexposure. The rebellion has been hollowed out and made consumable, much like Kovacs seemed to have been made in the beginning of the show, when he was being paraded around at a Meth party like a curiosity to gawk at. Kovacs managed to come out on top in the end, but Cyberpunk has lost the ability to do what Benjamin hoped it would, be a subversive choice that can question the larger system it functions in.

I argued that especially with Netflix as its producer, *Altered Carbon* cannot escape a role in the capitalist system that has cultural objects work in a way (through the use of newer technologies) that allows Netflix to force people to become prosumers. This becomes especially apparent when you see that Netflix markets itself much like it does *Altered Carbon*, as a disruptive choice in the face of cable networks (Johnson). Netflix claims to give viewers a new sense of personalized freedom while largely profiting from newfound ways of extracting data. Even Manovich could not have foreseen the ways new technologies to help you spend leisure time would transform people into not just consuming entities, but how they would be kept as perpetually producing as well. Because of these techniques being employed in the context of leisure related consuming, the very idea of the market and consuming is being consumed much like how Kawahara's greed ends up consumer her and Bancroft.

This consumption of the market, I argue, forces the attention back to another feature of the ouroboros. It does not just consume itself, but by doing this, it also created a circular shape. No structure has changed, there are always ways to keep the system afloat. Society in *Altered*

Carbon and the culture industry at large will keep churning and turning, undisturbed by our subversive choices.

In this thesis, I have answered the question: How can *Altered Carbon* be read as an expression of some of the changes Cyberpunk has undergone over the years with an emphasis on how the platform of Netflix impacts the way Cyberpunk functions in a larger cultural economic framework? Cyberpunk has been changed throughout history, the elements about it that were punk (and extraordinary in its original context), have been changed through their repeated use. Because of hollowing out, these elements have been consumed by mass media. Cyberpunk, in the form of *Altered Carbon*, has come to function as a rebelliously flavored choice while neither criticizing the underlying systems of how the society in *Altered Carbon* functions, nor how Netflix fosters prosumers. Enabling systems in which people voluntarily become entwined with technologies that mainly focus on extracting commodifiable data from their consumers. The contributive function to this system of shows like *Altered Carbon* is something I suggest that should be looked at more closely in order to keep a grasp on the ways people work to accommodate technologies that are used by companies to foster prosumers.

List of Illustrations



Fig. 1. Still from Doctor Who. "The Tenth Planet." *Doctor Who*, season 4, episode 1, Loyd entertainment, 8 October 1966.

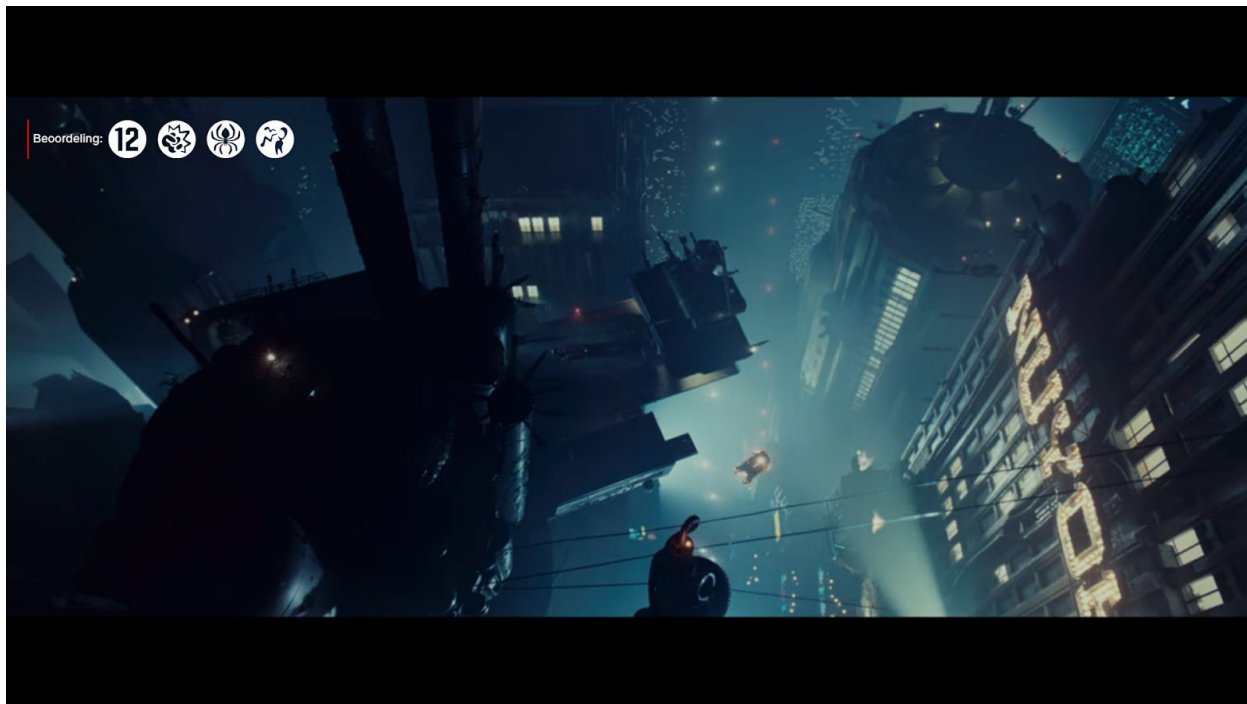


Fig. 2. 00.10.15 Deckard being driven to the police station. *Blade Runner*. Directed by Ridley Scott. The Ladd Company and Shaw Brothers, 1982.



Fig. 3. 00.55.20 Kovacs looking out over Bay City. "Out of the Past" *Altered Carbon*. Episode 1, Netflix, 2 February 2018.

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