

“YOU CAN HOLLER, YOU CAN WAIL”

Review by Thomas Tyrrell

Kalogridis, Laeta, creator. *Altered Carbon*. Performances by Joel Kinneman, James Purefoy, Martha Higareda, Chris Connor. Netflix, 2018. Television.

After a bloody firefight on a distant planet, ex-Special Forces soldier Takeshi Kovacs wakes up on Earth, in a new body, and finds out he has been hired to investigate the murder of the oligarch Laurens Bancroft. Unconventionally, his client is the victim himself. *Altered Carbon*, the Netflix adaptation of Richard Morgan’s 2002 hardboiled body-swapping whodunit, takes place in a world where a cortical chip at the base of the brain stem stores all human consciousness, allowing minds to be transferred into different bodies, or sleeves, and permitting a kind of immortality for those in possession of sufficient capital. Despite having his chip blown out, Bancroft is inconvenienced with no more than the loss of the twenty-four hours since his last backup.

Released in the wake of two prominent Cyberpunk films – *Blade Runner: 2049* (2017) and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) – the series both benefits and suffers from this proximity. On the one hand, Hollywood’s renewed attention to Cyberpunk gives the audience all the tools and aesthetic cues to recognise and appreciate the extraordinary design and camera artistry of *Altered Carbon*’s world, which rivals the blockbusters in its stunning visuals. By comparison with *Blade Runner: 2049*, however, its in-your-face portrayal of a sexist dystopia sometimes feels crass. Take Joi (Ana de Armas) from *Blade Runner: 2049*, a holographic computer program designed as the perfect companion for Ryan Gosling’s K. Not only did she show us the commodification of femininity in the *Blade Runner* universe, but she was an effective satire on film plots driven by manic pixie dream girls who foreground the hero’s needs at the expense of their own. Compare the scene in a sleeve shop early in *Altered Carbon*, where one of the naked female bodies on sale turns to the camera and says: “Put your wife in me.” It provokes a wince but provides little in the way of food for thought.

Ghost in the Shell had already roused an online furore at the substitution of white actress Scarlett Johansson for the Asian android at the centre of the franchise. *Altered Carbon* manages the perversely impressive feat of provoking a similar whitewashing backlash, despite being much more visibly multicultural than its source novel. Much of this criticism was focused on the show’s opening, where we are introduced to the Japano-Slavic Takeshi Kovacs, played by the Asian actor Will Yun Lee. Ten minutes later and this sleeve is already dead, with Kovacs’ consciousness being transferred into the body of a Caucasian male, played by Joel Kinneman. He is given a mirror, and as his face contorts in agony, we see his old reflection warp and give way to the new. Whitewashing is where a character’s ethnicity is changed in the process of adaptation, but this sequence is exactly as it appears in the novel. Flexibility of race, gender, and other forms of corporeal identity are defining features of Morgan’s universe. Intentionally or otherwise, however, the opening scenes are a vivid

enactment of the pain and disappointments of racial identity being erased and overwritten, and this proves to be an issue which is never addressed during the rest of the series. Kovacs behaves and is treated exactly as a white male protagonist would. No-one even calls him by his Japanese honorific of Takeshi-san, as they do in the novel.

Of course, it would be futile to portray a sexist dystopia without portraying actual sexism, or to show a body-swapping future without engaging with what this means for concepts of racial identity. There remains such a thing as subtlety, however, and at its brash worst, *Altered Carbon* tends to forget that shock value is not the same as satire – expressing an idea in the most hyperbolic way possible is not the same as critiquing it. On the other hand, things are not always this extreme. Showrunner Laeta Kalogridis unshackles the narrative from Kovacs' first-person perspective and explores the lives of many minor characters of colour. One of the most enjoyable new side-plots is when Kristin Ortega (Martha Higareda), a Latina cop, transfers her grandmother's consciousness into the sleeve of a male criminal and brings them home to celebrate Dia de Los Muertos with the family. This is world-building done properly, showing us familiar rituals in an unfamiliar future and emphasising that a post-racial world is by no means a post-cultural one. It does not hurt that Matt Buela is clearly having a ball playing an elderly Spanish grandmother in the sleeve of a hulking street thug.

Like many first books, *Altered Carbon* is a gloriously messy, druggy, hyperbolic novel that explodes in all kinds of directions. When it was optioned as a TV series, it was a natural temptation on the part of Kalogridis to trim or smooth out some of its wilder plot excrescences, and get it running according to tropes the audience is more familiar with. Often this works: I am usually no fan of the Darth Vader reveal of the family-member-as-villain, but reimagining Reileen (Dichen Lachman) as Kovacs' hyper-possessive sister makes her a much more compelling adversary than she was in the novel, where she is an enemy from Kovacs' hazy war days. The most substantial change and the one that I think the series struggles to pull off, is the revision of Kovacs' back story. In the books, he was once part of an elite UN Protectorate force called the Envoys, sent in to deal with planets that got out of line. Short of a major natural disaster, Envoy deployment is about the worst fate that can befall a planetary civilisation. He is also a sometime-follower of the anarchist philosophy of Quellcris Falconer (Renée Elise Goldberry), who led a rebellion against the Protectorate before Kovacs birth, on his home planet of Harlan's World.

Quell does not appear until the third book in the series (*Woken Furies*, 2005), but apparently Kalogridis was so impressed by the character that she determined to get her into the first season. Hence the Envoys are now an anti-governmental rebellion, led by Quell, who enlists Kovacs after he leaves Protectorate Special Forces and later takes him as a lover. This opens a whole lot of questions that the series struggles to close. It made sense that Laurens Bancroft (James Purefoy) would hire an ex-Special Forces soldier to investigate his murder. Hiring a revolutionary who hates him and everything he stands for is less explicable. Where the Kovacs in the novel was motivated by Quell's ideologies, he is influenced in the series by her ghost popping up and explaining what he needs to do, slowing the relevant scenes to a crawl. The most damaging change from the book is the

reveal that Quell was the scientist who originally invented the chip that permits this immortal body-swapping civilisation. Now she has had second thoughts and wants to undo her work, limiting people to a fixed lifespan. This makes her not a revolutionary at all; she is Pandora, trying to persuade all the evils of the world to crawl back into the box. She is trying to resurrect a long-vanished status quo, harkening back to a simpler, more moralistic age. She is a reactionary in a revolutionary disguise.

Ideology is a difficult thing to show dramatically, but by turning Kovacs' intellectual engagement into a romantic entanglement and Quell's political philosophy into *Matrix*-style warrior mysticism, Kalogridis follows an unfortunate trend in Hollywood Cyberpunk that favours the aesthetics of Dystopia over the radical alternatives that remain submerged in the source texts. The final transformation of Quell into a passive Sleeping Beauty, awaiting the stubbly kiss of the anti-hero to wake her into life, strips her of a vast part of what made the original vital, distinctive, and radical.

That said, this is still a show worth watching. While I may not agree that all the changes were made for the best, it is a privilege to watch a series that obviously cares so much for the book, and has put so much energy and creativity into visualising its world. When "Future Starts So Slow" (2011) by The Kills thumps across the soundtrack of the final episode, I found that the lyrics I once applied to my PhD thesis worked equally well for the series as a whole:

You can holler, you can wail,
You can blow what's left of my right mind,
But I'll never give you up,
If I ever give you up,
My heart will surely fail.

BIONOTE

Thomas Tyrrell has a PhD in English Literature from Cardiff University, UK. He also reviews for *Wales Arts Review*, and his poetry has appeared in *Allegro*, *Amaryllis*, *Cheval*, *Picaron*, *Spectral Realms*, *Three Drops From A Cauldron*, and *Words for the Wild*.