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Immortality and Digital Rebirth in Science Fiction

The challenge of coming to terms with mortality has been a universal aspect of human culture and a driving force of artistic creation. Since its beginnings, literature has been a creative way to make sense of or even challenge death, and the dream of immortality is already prominent in the epic of Gilgamesh and Greco-Roman myths. While immortality and great longevity were long considered divine gifts of the immortals or, at least, supernatural phenomena, they repeatedly appear within the reach of human power in science fiction stories. Beginning with Shelley's foundational novel *Frankenstein*, the ambition to defeat death is closely connected to the motif of the artificial human as a form of scientific creation. Whereas Victor Frankenstein reanimates a composite corpse to create life outside natural reproduction, many new technologies and related transhumanist ideas have inspired the literary imagination since the 19th century. This paper introduces more recent ideas of challenging death in science fiction that are directly related to the digital revolution of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Along with genetic engineering and the replacement of human body parts (based on cloning or cyborgization), the concept of mind uploading appears as a science-fictional tool for human life extension or even as a digital rebirth that promises immortality. This talk aims at a critical discussion of mind uploading as an attempt to defeat death in Anglophone science fiction from William Gibson's *Neuromancer* to Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* and its sequels, including texts by Greg Egan and other writers. The comparative analysis can reveal common premises and different strains in such posthuman visions, for example, the notions of data-based immortality as a curse, artificial longevity as a commodity, and digital existence as an alternative to biological mortality. On the one hand, mind uploading could allow for a virtual rebirth as a digital subject by turning the biological, human 'wetware' into software that runs on technical hardware. On the other hand, narratives such as *Altered Carbon* imagine digitalisation as a backup of the human mind and a related reincarnation in cloned biological bodies. Along with an interrogation of body-mind dualisms, the discussed texts address fundamental questions of human identity, responsibility and possible transcendence by challenging human mortality through digital technologies.

Stefan Lampadius teaches English literature at Leipzig University and has studied English, German, Communication and Media Science, and Teaching German as a Foreign Language. His research centres on the intersection of science and literature, for instance in his study *The Human Future? – Artificial Humans and Evolution in Anglophone Science Fiction of the 20th Century* (Winter, 2020). He has also published on literary transformations of religious narratives, utopia/dystopia, and travel literature, and has co-edited a book on East and West in travel writing of the 20th century.

