

A Metropolitan Utopia

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As one of the newest instalments to the vast canon of utopian/dystopian fiction, the 2012 Japanese cyberpunk animation, *Psycho-Pass* has inherited centuries of thoughts and ideas while setting itself up inevitably for comparison. An interesting (although not unique) aspect of *Psycho-Pass* is that it is exceedingly conscious of its position. The animation is littered with literary references used, in varying degrees of heavy-handedness, not only to discuss crucial issues like politics, ethics, society and human nature, but also as plot points and to give depth to characters and illustrate their relationships. It is also a form of organic communication in an overwhelmingly mechanised world, as they exchange books and thoughts pertaining to the literature of a bygone age. This essay considers the literary origins of the system that governs the futuristic Tokyo of *Psycho-Pass* as a culmination of utopian/dystopian ideas in an entirely different culture and medium.

Firstly, a short introduction to the series – *Psycho-Pass*, written by Gen Urobuchi (also screenwriter for *Madoka Magica* and *Fate/Zero*), presents itself as a utopia. In 2112, Tokyo is governed by what its citizens believe to be an infallible supercomputer called the Sibyl System. At the crux of the Sibyl System is an intricate network of psychometric scanners that actively measure the Crime Coefficient, the calculated likelihood of a person committing a crime, of all the city's inhabitants. Regardless of whether a crime has been committed or not, should an individual's Crime Coefficient exceed accepted levels, he or she will be apprehended or summarily executed by the police depending on the margin of deviation. In actuality, this system of predetermination extends into the private sphere as well, and the Crime Coefficient is but a component of an all-encompassing algorithm known as the 'psycho-pass'. Citizens are classified according to their aptitudes and traits, "choosing" from a set of occupations statistically proven to be suitable. We learn that Sibyl is also capable of arranging marriages to ensure maximum compatibility – in short, the formula for happiness is flexibly tailored to each person. In the first volume of the series' prequel manga, *Psycho-Pass*, the system is explained as such:

...one's mental state and personality can be measured into numbers. Every emotion, desire, social deviation, and mental inclination is put into record...This value that determines the standards of human mind, even an individual's soul itself...is known to the public as 'psycho-pass'.¹

Ironically, the story of this largely crime-free society is centred on Unit One of the Public Safety Bureau (PSB)'s Criminal Investigation Division² as they solve the crimes that plague a supposedly crime-free society armed with guns known as 'Dominators' that are programmed to only fire if the target's Crime Coefficient is at an unacceptable level. The reality is, however, that the 'Dominator', which continuously sends psychometric data to the user and promptly gives instructions to fire when necessary, are the "eyes of Sybil"³ and thus a direct expression of its will. In Episode 2, one of the protagonists, Shinya Kogami laments, "I'm a hunting dog, and I behave like one...I always obey that gun's orders." Accountability falls entirely on the Sybil System, not the user, as it is the system that serves as both judge and executioner. By this logic, shooting someone with a 'Dominator' is not classified a crime, but acting on one's own will with any other weapon is. As the story progresses, the existence of 'criminally asymptomatic' individuals come to light – the Crime Coefficients of these individuals never exceed the designated threshold. Eventually, the PSB has to face the growing realisation that regardless of whatever heinous crimes these displaced individuals commit, they lie beyond the system and beyond judgment. What is it exactly that makes Sybil unable to discern the colour of their souls? Is it an idiosyncratic failure of the system, a true play on the word "psychopath", or evidence of something unquantifiable, intangible and utterly human? This is but one of the many questions that the series raises, a probe into the frequently tackled issue of existentialism.

A trait of utopian/dystopian literature is the strict censorship or a blatant disregard for art and literature. Consider Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), where the literature of a bygone era is deemed utterly irrelevant, the epitome of censorship in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), or Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), with its decaying museums and libraries. *Psycho-Pass* is unique in this respect, as there is no restriction on knowledge except that which pertains to the true identity of the Sybil system (Shakespeare is even taught at school), but these endeavours are attempted at personal risk. Many of the books

shown to be in the characters' possession are foreign, and often it is their translated counterparts that appear on screen, with the exception of the criminally asymptomatic antagonist, Shogo Makishima, who seems to be particular about reading first editions in their original language. The characters quote and have extensive discussions on books and films, which are not only limited to utopian/dystopian literature. To list but a few, *Psycho-Pass* brings before its audience references to Philip K. Dick, George Orwell, William Gibson, Jonathan Swift, the Bible, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Michel Foucault and Joseph Conrad. In certain episodes, a particular work serves as a plot point as well, for example Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* lies at the centre of a series of murders in which the bodies of female victims are disfigured and made into installation art⁴. In Episode 10, Richard Connell's *The Most Dangerous Game* is enacted in a deliberately anachronistic fashion where traditional firearms and dogs are used to hunt human prey.

In an unforgettable scene that avid readers of the science fiction genre would appreciate (Episode 15), Makishima, has a conversation with his favoured accomplice, Choe Gu-sung as such:

Makishima: "Yes, this abnormal town...how should I put it? The city is like a parody of the sort of novels I used to read when I was younger."

Choe: "Oh yeah? What kind? Like a William Gibson book?"

Makishima: "More like Philip K. Dick. Not as controlling as the societies George Orwell depicted in his work, and not quite as wild as those in Gibson's either."

Here Makishima establishes *Psycho-Pass* in the tradition of utopian/dystopian genre while simultaneously borrowing images from its predecessors – the chaotic, labyrinth megapolis and glittering neon of a Gibsonian world, the crumbling, dilapidated London of 1984 (published in post-war 1949) with the ubiquitous "Big Brother" image and the dusty, post-apocalyptic world of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*⁵ The sprawling cityscape of 22nd century Tokyo, and scenes of PSB detectives racing through the underbelly of the city – dark, gritty with endless pipes and smoke – is reminiscent of Gibson and the visuals of his progenitor, the film adaptation of *Blade Runner* directed by Ridley Scott. While drawing on these similarities, *Psycho-Pass* also makes clear distinctions about the uniqueness of its premise. While the city in *Psycho-Pass* may appear

dystopic to its audience, to its inhabitants who have been indoctrinated with a cataclysmic world history it is a utopia – for the most part it is inarguably orderly, comfortable to live in, and relatively crime-free. As Makishima commented, surveillance is much subtler than that of Orwell’s society – the “Big Brother” of *Psycho-Pass* is a faceless entity, addressing its citizens in a child’s voice, and the PSB via the ‘Dominator’ in a woman’s. Suffice to say that the majority live contentedly under the illusion of freedom. Save for a few restraints under the aforementioned system of predetermination, they are at leisure to pursue whatever they like in their free time – at their own risk, of course. There is an underlying implication about the deteriorating effects of art and literature – some artists in the series include the body tattoo artist, Koichi Ashikaga, who is more or less doomed to spend the rest of his life in a correctional facility, the noted artist Roichi Oryo, who passed away as a result of the drug therapy meant to lower his Crime Coefficient, and his daughter, Rikako Oryo, responsible for the *Titus Andronicus* murders, has the second-highest Crime Coefficient in the series. Yayoi Kunizuka, one of Unit One’s enforcers, tumbled down the social ladder after relations with a band member. The asymptomatic Makishima and latent Kogami and Masaoka are all avid readers of literature, while Tsunemori, who has one of the clearest ‘psycho-passes’ prefers texts on game theory, statistics and law because they are “useful”.

In his analysis of the “explosion of law” in *Psycho-Pass*, Hourigan (2018) also highlights the techno-orientalism⁶ of *Psycho-Pass* by applying Napier (2000)’s argument of the statelessness of Japanese animation⁷ found in the choice of “cosmopolitan” rather “recognisably Japanese” visages of the characters, and a “not recognisably Japanese” architecture that is “urban and rural.”⁸ Napier argues that the deliberate lack of national identity and “de-Japanizing of the characters” frequently observed in Japanese animation is rooted in a “very problematic cultural identity at the start of the twenty-first century”, but accepts that it is not a universal argument, pointing out that there are animations like *Space Battleship Yamato* and a number of Studio Ghibli works that exude a distinct connection with Japanese culture and history. Character design in *Psycho-Pass* was undertaken by the manga artist, Akira Amano. When asked about her design process, she answered that she focused on “black hair and suits”, adding that she had to express each character’s individuality elsewhere⁹. With the exception of the white-haired, golden-eyed Makishima, who, as a marginalised individual of the system and the Kurtz to Kogami’s Marlow, is perhaps understandably different, none of the other characters, especially

those of the leading Unit One, look particularly foreign. In appearances and mannerisms, they resonate with a culturally Japanese identity. While traditional Japanese architecture does not appear in *Psycho-Pass*, the cluster of skyscrapers, rooftop gardens and luminous meandering highways, its retention of place names like the twenty-three wards, Hachioji, Takaido and Fuchu, etc. suggest a futuristic Tokyo grounded in the template of its original. Internal conditions share a fair number of things in common, too – modern-day Japan is also remarkably safe, boasting one of the lowest homicide rates in the world¹⁰. Its top-down, understaffed and overworked police is structurally similar to the PSB, and the conviction rate of more than 99%¹¹ that is almost impossible to overturn is much like an accusation of latent criminality. In lieu of terrorism and technological advancements, Japan is a thoroughly monitored society – for example, there are some 56 000 surveillance cameras in train stations alone¹². It is also a society that emphasises and is stratified by academic merit. In the film sequel, the Sibyl system is exported overseas for the first time to the Southeast Asian Union (SEAUn) as an experiment, and Japan is set in contrast with the rest of the world, shown to be severely unstable and wrought with violence. Thus, *Psycho-Pass* is not quite “stateless” – its city is both an extrapolation and a mirror of modern-day Tokyo.

In the beginning of the show, the protagonist, Akane Tsunemori, serves as a kind of audience surrogate. When she first appears on scene, she is as clueless about the PSB and how it functions as we are. It is through following her as she goes about her daily routine that one grasps the society she grew up and continues to live in. Tsunemori lives alone, and in the morning, after a shower, she usually watches television while eating breakfast. The projected monitor relays news, the weather forecast, and the Shinjuku ward’s “projected Group Stress”. Depending on this value, her virtual assistant, Candy, may or may not recommend “a supplement to prevent mental contamination”. At the PSB, citywide Area Stress Level (an aggregation of the Crime Coefficients of everyone in a particular area) readings are displayed as a map. A high Crime Coefficient caught on a scanner would cause this value to spike, setting off an alarm that alerts the PSB and, if necessary, citizens in the area, because exposure to such a clouded ‘psycho-pass’ can result in the poisoning of one’s own – a ‘psycho-hazard’. The idea of crime as a sickness first emerged in Edward Bellamy’s utopian novel of social reform, *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1888). Back in its day, it was tremendously popular, read and translated extensively. According to James, it was the most influential of all nineteenth-century

utopias, inspiring some fifty novels written either in support or criticism of Bellamy – the most famous of these being William Morris’ *News from Nowhere* (1890)¹³. Arguably one of the earliest works of science fiction and time travel that precedes *The Time Machine*, the protagonist Julian West is transported from 1887 to 2000 after falling into a deep sleep. He is woken by Dr. Leete, who gives him a tour of a middle-class utopia freed from capitalism. Dr. Leete’s lecturing style of narrative is met with much less enthusiasm these days, but James explains its initial popularity as such:

More than any other book, above all in the United States, it accustomed people to think about the future as something that could be rationally extrapolated, that could even be planned for, and, perhaps above all, that could serve as a setting for entertaining and instructive fiction.¹⁴

Thomas More’s coining of the term utopia in his novel, a play on the Greek words for “no-place” and “good place”, is generally accepted as the start of the utopian genre. The first volume of *Utopia* (1516) is a polemic, and in the second volume Hythloday recounts his travels to the fictional island. Ensuing utopian works like Campanella’s *The City of the Sun* (1602), Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627) and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) are also journeys to imagined places, but Bellamy affixed his utopia, set in Boston, to its present-day counterpart of a future not too far away. First broadcasted in 2012, Psycho-Pass similarly portrays Tokyo but a hundred years ahead in 2112 – though on a less positive note.

In *Looking Backward*, when West notes the absence of “the old state prison”, Dr. Leete answers, “We have no jails nowadays. All cases of atavism are treated in the hospitals.” He also affirms that crime is considered “the recurrence of an ancestral trait”¹⁵. He explains the logic of this new society as such:

[Crime] resulted from the inequality in the possessions of individuals; want tempted the poor, lust of greater gains, or the desire to preserve former gains, tempted the well-to-do...in these days, when education and good manners are not the monopoly of a few, but universal, such atrocities are scarcely ever heard of...nearly all forms of crime known to you are motiveless now, and when they appear can only be explained as the outcropping of ancestral traits.¹⁶

In Bellamy's utopia, crime arises not from a fault of the system or society, but the individual. It is congenital, a mental sickness to be treated in a hospital, much like in *Psycho-Pass* where latent criminals are shipped off to correctional facilities¹⁷. The idea is expanded on with an epidemic quality. Essentially crime is as much a foreign concept in *Looking Backward* as it is in *Psycho-Pass*, far removed from daily life – reduced to a number, a statistic. While detectives of the PSB and the Sybil system via the 'Dominator' use the term, "Crime Coefficient", regular citizens hardly do, substituting it with "hue" (while the Crime Coefficient is a number, the 'psycho-pass' is expressed in colour – clear colours like powder blue or pink indicate a "healthy" 'psycho-pass', while darker colours like steel blue indicate deteriorating mental health) or occasionally, "psycho-pass", a more integral measurement of the overall state of mind. This extreme lack of exposure to negativity in general is the cause of the public's pronounced susceptibility to "contamination", and also produces a disturbing apathy, as shown in Episode 14, where a man wearing a helmet that blocks psychometric scanning beats a woman to death on the streets with a hammer before a crowd that simply spectates in stupor, with some filming the transgression on their phones. Widespread violence soon engulfs the city, with ordinary citizens committing extreme acts of aggression and murder in retaliation – in the wake of the Sybil system's temporary but unprecedented collapse, they are unable to judge for themselves right and wrong.

Plot-wise, *Psycho-Pass* draws the most inspiration from Dick's short story, "The Minority Report" (1956), which coined the term *precrime*. This futuristic society functions on a predictive policing system that apprehends people before they commit a crime by harnessing the precognitive ability of three mutants, known as "precogs", that are able to see up to two weeks into the future. Vegetable-like, with "enlarged heads and wasted bodies", they are strapped into machines that translate their "babbling" into predictions that serve society. Each precog generates its own prediction, or "report". A computer analyses these three separate reports and identifies two that are the most similar to produce a "majority report". Police Commissioner John Anderton is horrified to find himself destined to kill Leopold Kaplan (a man he has never met) and seeks to obtain the "minority report" that may prove his innocence. Initially he flees out of self-preservation, and upon confirming a future where he does not murder his victim in the minority report, desires to make it public to clear his name. However, he soon realises that his refutation

of the majority report will abolish the system – which is what ex-Army Kaplan wants in order to reinstate martial law. He ultimately shoots Kaplan to maintain the precrime society and divulges the content of the three reports – produced consecutively, they each presented a different future for Anderton, who as Commissioner, was in a privileged position to make a choice. He is exiled for his crime.

Perhaps it is little coincidence that there are three main characters of varied backgrounds in *Psycho-Pass* who perceive the world around them and ensuing events very differently, and present different responses to society at hand. Makishima is the anomaly, the revolutionary that seeks to destroy the system and return humans to a pre-Sybil age, to what he believes is their natural state: “In order to measure a person’s worth, you must do more than push them. The real way to test their worth is to give them power. When they gain the freedom to act outside the boundaries of law and ethics, you can sometimes see their souls.” On the other hand, Tsunemori, like Anderton, is a beneficiary of the system and chooses the status quo as the best available solution. Yet she is anything but a passive subordinate, and to her, society is still far from utopian – over the course of the series, she constantly overrides Sybil’s commands whenever she believes that justice is compromised. Kogami is the most conflicted – while he possesses a strong sense of justice and purpose, he has lost faith in a system that cannot judge Makishima for his crimes and provide the much-needed catharsis. In his rejection of Sybil, he knowingly becomes an embodiment of Makishima’s ideals.

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- 1 Gotou, Midori and Sai, Natsuo. *Psycho-Pass: Inspector Kogami Volume 1*. Dark Horse Manga, 2016, pp. 6-7.
- 2 It should also be mentioned that officers of the Criminal Investigation Department are further classified into two categories – inspectors and enforcers. Inspectors are the elite of society recruited by the PSB, but it is usually the enforcers, who are all latent criminals, that do the heavy-lifting. The gory ‘lethal eliminator mode’ of the ‘Dominator’, for example, can only be wielded by enforcers.
- 3 In the guide to the series, *PSYCHO-PASS OFFICIAL PROFILING* (published in 2013 by Kadokawa Shoten), the name “Sybil” is attributed to the oracles of Greek mythology and Philip K. Dick’s short story, “The Eye of the Sybil” (1987).
- 4 The deformed human figure, particularly that of the female, is a noted preoccupation of Japanese

- cyberpunk. Consider the protagonist of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), Major Motoko Kusanagi, whose only organic body parts – her brain and spinal cord, inhabit a prosthetic body, *Battle Angel Alita* (1990), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996), and *Mardock Scramble* (2010-2012). Also see *AKIRA* (1988) and Project Itoh's works, namely *Genocidal Organ* (2007) and *The Empire of Corpses* (2015).
- 5 Makishima makes a clear distinction between the novel and the film adaptation in the ensuing conversation by inviting Choe to compare them when he has time.
 - 6 Defined by Toshiya Ueno as an othering of Japan by the West that sees it as a technological dystopia or utopia.
 - 7 Napier, Susan J. *ANIME from Akira to Princess Mononoke*. Palgrave, 2000, pp. 24-27.
 - 8 Hourigan, Daniel. "The symptoms of the just: *Psycho-Pass*, judg(e)ment, and the asymptomatic commons." *Law and Justice in Japanese Popular Culture*, Routledge, 2018, p. 27.
 - 9 マイナビニュース 「『PSYCHO-PASS サイコパス』 キャラ原案を天野明、主人公の声を関智一が担当」 <https://news.mynavi.jp/article/20120827-a008/> Retrieved 30 October 2018.
 - 10 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "UNODC Statistics Online." <https://dataunodc.un.org/crime/intentional-homicide-victims> Retrieved 1 November 2018.
 - 11 Ministry of Justice (Japan). "Number of persons finally judged by type of judgment." <http://hakusyo1.moj.go.jp/en/61/image/image/h002003001001h.jpg> Retrieved 1 November 2018.
 - 12 Kitabayashi, K. & Saito, H. "High-tech cameras fight crime but at what cost to privacy?" *The Asahi Shimbun*. June 23, 2012. http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/social_affairs/AJ201206230037 Retrieved 1 November 2018.
 - 13 James, Edward. *Science Fiction in the 20th Century*. Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 20-21.
 - 14 Ibid, p. 21.
 - 15 Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward 1887-2000*. Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 71.
 - 16 Ibid, p. 72.
 - 17 Exceptions would be the enforcers, and individuals whose Crime Coefficients exceed 300, at which point the system deems that the chances of rehabilitation are extremely low. As such, they are executed supposedly to conserve resources.

