



## Posthumanism and Biopunk in Cyberpunk Japanese Animation – *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy*

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### Abstract

Science and technology have always been used to propel humanity further towards an idealistic reality and perfection. Science fiction offers authors and creators the freedom to create and critique under the garb of superhuman fictional narratives. Cyberpunk, a subgenre of science fiction, deals with dystopian futuristic societies dominated by and dependent on computer technology that's disguised as utopian. Japan has been the epicentre of cyberpunk fiction since the earliest cyberpunk novel was published in 1984, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. *Ergo Proxy* (2006), directed by Shūkō Murase and written by Dai Satō, is set in a post-apocalyptic future. Similarly, *Psycho-Pass* (2012), co-directed by Naoyoshi Shiotani and Katsuyuki Motohiro and written by Gen Urobuchi, tells the story of the dystopian Sibyl System's governance of Japan, an artificial intelligence software granted control over its population to constantly monitor their mental state to root out latent criminals even before the crime takes place, resulting in the incrimination of innocents and undermining of organic human tendencies due to fear of persecution. The characters of the series are reminiscent of the posthuman cyborgs, “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”, mentioned in Donna Haraway's *The Cyborg Manifesto*. *Ergo Proxy* and *Psycho-Pass* provide a constructive critique of the authoritarian government, surveillance and transgressive biological technology established due to ambitions of achieving the utopian dream that ultimately undermines the organic human nature, so much so that the “human” becomes incapable of functioning without technological assistance. In this paper, I will explore the treatment of posthumanism and biopunk in cyberpunk Japanese animations - *Ergo Proxy* and *Psycho-Pass*.

**Keywords** - Cyberpunk, Biopunk, Cyborgs, Dystopia, Posthumanism, Man v/s Machin



‘I grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been. It had committed suicide. It had set itself steadfastly towards comfort and ease, a balanced society with security and permanency as its watchword, it had attained its hopes – to come to this at last.’ – H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*

The pursuit of a utopian society is a recurring motif in the genre of science fiction which can be traced back to its earliest representations. Whether it is through societal norms or the creation of superhuman beings, humanity’s desire to achieve an idyllic existence and transcendence has been manifested in science fiction narratives time and again. According to Istevan Csicsery-Ronay, the current world has become science fictional.<sup>1</sup> The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed a rapid growth of technology and its fast-spreading influence in all walks of life like never seen before where the jarring changes were not only hard to fathom for a normal person but it also felt like a sort of invasion: being compelled to adapt to technological developments, willingly or not, to keep up with the fast-evolving society. Teresa de Lauretis says:

Technology is now, not only a distant, science fictional future, an extension of our sensory capacities; it shapes our perceptions and cognitive processes, mediates our relationships with objects of the material and physical world, and our relationships with our own or other bodies.<sup>2</sup>

Cyberpunk as a subgenre emerged as a response to the posthuman reality of recent times, scrutinising the relationship between man and the machine. The narratives concern themselves with a dystopian future where society is taken over by scientific developments, technological advancements and artificial intelligence which undermine human agency and where organic human tendencies are seen as discardable, unnecessary and, at times, criminal. Glenn Grant in his discussion of *Neuromancer*, one of the first works of the cyberpunk genre, states how cyberpunk’s ‘preferred method of transcendence is through technology.’<sup>3</sup> Since the inception of the subgenre, Japan with its rapid growth of futuristic cities and advanced technology had always held a significant influence over it. William Gibson, the ‘father of Cyberpunk’ admitted how he was inspired by the East-Asian culture, especially the Japanese influence, although he confesses not to have visited the city of Chiba when including the name in *Neuromancer*.<sup>4</sup> However, years later he describes his visit to Japan as, ‘Modern Japan simply was cyberpunk. The Japanese



themselves knew it and delighted in it.’<sup>5</sup> The cybernetic impulse of transcendence from the human indicates the desire to escape the mundane and the mortal to achieve utopian perfection and to become eternal. This theme manifests repeatedly in Japanese animations, more popularly known as anime. The politics of body invasion and eugenics overlap cyberpunk with biopunk as the hybrid posthumanity of the two are inseparable. As Bruce Sterling mentions in his preface to the *Mirrorshades* anthology:

For the cyberpunks, by stark contrast, technology is visceral. Certain central themes spring up repeatedly in cyberpunk. The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. the even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry-techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self.<sup>6</sup>

In the anime series *Psycho-Pass* (2012), co-directed by Naoyoshi Shiotani and Katsuyuki Motohiro and written by Gen Urobuchi, we are presented with a high-tech Japanese society in the twenty-second century that has closed its borders to the rest of the world and is governed by an all-pervasive artificial intelligent network called the Sybil System (derived from the Greek prophetic) that has access to all its citizens’ mental states and functions using a ‘cynatic scan’ which gives it ultimate power over all the subjects and their fate. The authoritarian rule of the Sybil System was established to create an ideal society and persecute the latent criminals by judging their ‘Psycho-Pass’<sup>7</sup> even before the crime takes place: the name ‘Sybil’ taken from Greek mythology suggests its power and omnipotence. The System often uses the humanoid mask of Chief Kasei (Figure 1) to present itself in an approachable human manner: however, the figure cannot be killed and is replaced every time it is killed incapacitated, displaying its immortal and self-generative properties that are in contradiction with the mortality of biological humans. The antagonist Shogo Makishima, although he intends to resort to bioterrorism to break free from the sterile life within the system and ends up being persecuted, acts as a catalyst by planting the seed of rebellion in the minds of the two leading protagonists that sets the plot forth in motion.



Figure 1: Chief Kasei<sup>8</sup>(PP)



Figure 2: Ergo Proxy<sup>9</sup> (EP)

*Ergo Proxy* (2005), directed by Shūkō Murase and written by Dai Satō, deals with a dystopian world set centuries ahead in the future where humans and AutoReiv androids coexist together in an enclosed environment of Romdeau city sustained entirely by technology under the authoritarian surveillance of the government after the natural climate of the earth became uninhabitable. Similarly to *Psycho Pass*, the governing head of Romdeau (inspired by the ancient philosophical city of Rome), the Regent, is implied to be reduced to a humanoid entity sustained by biotechnological assistance. The story begins with the androids gaining self-consciousness due to the spreading of the Cogito virus which results in a series of murders committed by the androids, destabilizing the carefully laid order of Romdeau city, whilst the government conducts secret projects on mysterious humanoid beings called ‘Proxy’ (Figure 2) which are said to hold the key to humanity’s survival. In the following, I will show how cyberpunk manifests itself through posthuman narratives of *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy*, questioning the ontological stability of biological categories, transgression of the ‘human’, free will, and the social implications that correspond to it.

The genre of cyberpunk is inherently anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian and rebellious; hence the term ‘punk’ is used to describe it. The term ‘punk’ itself expresses a political stance against the established power, the agencies being villainized and scrutinized. According to Lars Schmeink:

Cyberpunk picks up on the aggressive rejection of authority, as reflected in its outcast heroes, the lowlifes, drifters, drug users, and petty criminals that populate



the stories, as well as on the disillusionment with the established order of late capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

This sentiment is evident in both *Psycho Pass* and *Ergo Proxy*, as both of the stories deal with protagonists who have been rejected by acceptable society and recognized as criminals under the scrutiny of law, challenging the legitimacy of identity and citizenship. Whilst Shinya Kougami (*PP*), the protagonist, is branded as a latent criminal by the Sybil System, an anomaly for civil society, for him, experiencing extreme emotions after witnessing the violent death of his colleague, he is still expected to serve the system as enforcer due to Sybil's way of fighting 'fire with fire'. This suppression of human autonomy and freedom of expression makes him suspect the weakness of the system which eventually leads him into exile, leaving Japan and becoming a mercenary in the foreign countries while helping people gain autonomy. Whereas Akane Tsunemori (*PP*), another protagonist who is a detective, keeps her faith intact in the establishment as it was the core of her identity and making it question will result in her losing her identity and belief as a person. Akane represents the common citizens of a state who keep their faith intact in the system and at the same time hesitate to question the authority as they fear the eviction that will follow as a result of their transgression. Similarly, Re-l (also a detective like Akane) and Vincent (*EP*) had to leave the dome of Romdeau and venture into the toxic outside world to seek the truth. They had to physically remove themselves from the surveillance of the system to gain their autonomy. Whereas Vincent was already an immigrant, Re-l had to give up her privilege as a model citizen to find answers for her investigation. The protagonists are consistently shown to be distancing themselves from the reach of the authority to gain a broader perspective. Makishima (*PP*), whose character was inspired by the popular supervillain Joker, acts are a result of his feeling alienated from society as a whole since the Sibyl System cannot accept him for who he is and labels him a deviant. He was after all born into the system, and having his mental status not being acknowledged by it created an identity crisis within himself. Although he was accurate in deducing Sybil's intention of turning humans into non-thinking automatons, he becomes a tyrant in the process of rebelling against the system. The clash and contrast between exercising human free will and blind obedience to the system is repeatedly highlighted in cyberpunk narratives. It raises queries whether a scientifically artificial system created to imitate and embody the human attitude to absolute accuracy will ever be able to



understand the myriads of countless complexities of human nature. Is it possible to catalogue human impulses and responses like that of a machine?



Figure 3: Re-l Mayer<sup>11</sup> (EP) Figure 4: Vincent Law<sup>12</sup> (EP)

Cyberpunk narratives are often misinterpreted as advocating anti-technological and anti-biological developments given its dystopian setup. However, it is to be noted that the genre itself is based on these categories and acts as a precautionary clause: posing the question of where the boundary lies between development and exploitation and what can be considered as transgression in humanity's pursuit of the extraordinary. Cyberpunk offers us a possible vision of the future and warns us about the complications that could arise, never dwelling on the binaries of right and wrong. In the end, it does not provide us with an ultimate solution or formula that should be implemented. The reader/audience experiences the world through the eyes of the protagonists: Akane (PP) and Re-l (EP), and are made to come to their conclusions. *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy* do not encourage the classical model of attacking the system/authority head-on to dismantle its rule as it would cause a total breakdown of society leading to complete chaos: instead it shows how to manoeuvre within the existing system and gradually turn it over. It could be said that in a clinical dystopian world, cyberpunk presents us with a ray of hope and persistence of the human spirit: 'It is not society that determines people's futures. It is the people who determine society's future.'<sup>13</sup> (Akane Tsunemori, *Psycho-Pass 2*)



Figure 5 (from left to right): Nobuchika Ginoza, Akane Tsunemori and Shinya Kougami<sup>14</sup> (*PP*)

The subgenre of biopunk is inseparably intertwined with the dystopian posthuman discourse of cyberpunk. The opposition of technological versus biological augmentation constructs key driving forces of the plot. Both *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy* deal with the nature of existence in a hyper-real and socio-culturally fluid modern society where ‘the mechanical’ becomes synonymous with organic humans. The characters in both the anime are reminiscent of what Donna Haraway identifies as ‘cyborg’ in *A Cyborg Manifesto*: ‘A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.’<sup>15</sup> Dr. Haraway exists as a character in the cyberpunk anime *Ghost in the Shell II* (2004). Chief Kasei (*PP*) and Regent (*EP*) are cyborgs that display elements of immortality, or at least properties that defy the natural law of dying once: alluding to the most primitive human desire of living forever and being God on their own. Kasei and Regent are deified in their worlds, biotechnology and artificial intelligence elevating their status in the eyes of the common folk. However, mechanical intervention and artificiality do not always have to be threatening for humans: for example, after Nobuchika Ginoza (*PP*) loses his arm to a dynamite explosion it is replaced by a prosthetic arm which serves him better in terms of utility, even as a weapon at times as we especially witness in *Psycho-Pass: Case. 1 Crime and Punishment*. His artificially fitted arm sets him apart from others; while in present times the loss of a limb may be perceived as a potential downfall in physical performance, it is accepted as an enhancement in this cyber-biopunk narrative. Nonetheless, in this dystopian reality, Ginoza is not offered the privilege of mourning the tragedy that killed his father and he is downgraded to the rank of an Enforcer



abdicating his freedom, similar to Kougami. The Sybil System forces its subjects to suppress their so-called ‘negative’ emotions like anger, sadness, frustration, and anxiety and compels them to feel only the ‘positive’ ones like calmness and happiness eventually resulting in the people giving up their critical thinking skills and judgments and only follow the rules of the system to remain model citizens and avoid persecution. Sybil’s fascist regime only allows the illusion of free will and liberty: not the actual execution of it. Ironically, it is the cyborg Toyohisa Senguji who highlights the hypocrisy of it all by stating, ‘When you entrust so much of your everyday life to those electronic devices, the argument that you aren’t a cyborg isn’t very convincing’ (*PP*).<sup>16</sup>

The post-humanity of cyberpunk is that it erases the demarcation of where the human ends and the machine starts. It presents us with the inevitable interconnectedness between man and machine that will take place in humanity’s future and foreshadows the eventual *pro et contra*. The cyberpunk aims at creating a globalised society that is the epitome of social equality and justice but is nonetheless rampant with class and social discrimination. In *Psycho-Pass*, we are shown how non-human cyborg entities like Toyohisa Senguji and Chief Kasei (Sybil System) exist amongst the humans *as* humans but wield an upper hand over the population which is only possible due to their privileged position in the hierarchy of citizenship. Normal (human) citizens of the system are not allowed the opportunity of immortality through artificial intelligence and nor are they granted emancipation to question their reality. The genre questions the bias which entails that technology/machine is superior to organic humanity. The biological impulses are downgraded simply because of their non-mechanical nature; it is this thought that considers technology to be superior due to its speed and precision compared to natural human tendencies of trial and error, personal value, emotional reasoning and ‘slowness’. *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy* continuously fight against the notion that humanity is inherently broken or flawed and that technology is the *only* option that can be used to save or ‘fix’ it. Although technological advancements are necessary for human civilization’s development enhancing the quality of life and extending the lifespan of humanity, it remains controversial whether machines should be used as a substitute for biological humans. If it so happens, can it still be considered as entirely a human civilization or should it be called a posthuman civilization? Most important of all, where is the line that separates man from the machine?





The nature of humanness is further explored in *Ergo Proxy* where the so-called humans have become more machine-like whereas the AutoReiv androids get infected with the Cogito virus and develop self-consciousness becoming more human-like. It compels one to ask questions like whether humans operating like robots can still be considered humans or whether robots acting like humans can still be considered robots entirely. *Ergo Proxy* probes the age-old questions of ‘what is humanness?’ Is it the biological body or the actions or the mind? Similar to *Psycho-Pass*, human self-consciousness and emotions are seen as ‘viruses’ in *Ergo Proxy*. The androids designed to accompany humans and support them were not expected to be human-like. Pino, the childlike android, becomes almost human-like by the end after being infected with the Cogito virus at the beginning of the story, confessing that she ‘loves’ to play. It makes the audience wonder if Pino may be considered a human now. The humans living in the dome of Romdeau lack knowledge about their bodily autonomy: romantic relations are non-existent, and displays of emotions are at a minimum. The people did not even possess knowledge of biological procreation and only believed it was possible with the help of an artificial womb controlled by the authorities of the dome. Something similar is shown in *Psycho Pass* where people are expected to depend on the Sybil System to choose a partner for themselves and not trust their judgment regarding a life partner. Hence, it is a recurring pattern in cyberpunk fiction where even intimate interpersonal relationships amongst humans are under the direct scrutiny of the higher authority where emotional engagements, if not directly discouraged, are not encouraged either.

The entire population residing in the dome of Romdeau is artificially created by the real humans with the help of scientific advancements and genetic engineering which are seen as pinnacles of human intelligence and excellence. By the end of the series, it is evident that even the protagonists Vincent Law and Re-l Mayer, who we thought of as biological humans, are revealed to be just clones of the Proxies – the namesake of the series. The Proxies in *Ergo Proxy* can be compared to the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* created as a result of the overemphasis on human intellectual pride and intelligence as well as greed to serve the creators only to be abandoned later. Keith N. Hull says,



Mary Shelley's monster suffers bitterly because despite enviable human intelligence and handsome looks, his biology is nonhuman. No matter how human he looks and acts, he is physically alien, and his origins betray him. But then perhaps a reader's sadness at the monster's decay is an indication that, like Wells's Time Traveller and his friend, we attribute humanity to whatever has human feelings.<sup>17</sup>

In *Ergo Proxy*, the Proxies were created by the real humans as a backup plan and bestowed with God-like omnipotence over the domes' population to sustain the habitat until it was safe for the actual humans to come back to earth. The impulses of Frankenstein's Creature get reflected in the Proxies – whereas Ergo Proxy aka Proxy of Death wants to live a human life and fit in: hence taking the form of Vincent Law, Proxy One wants to take revenge against the humans for his doomed existence. *Ergo Proxy* highlights the extent of human greed and ambition in each step of the story – the destruction of earth's natural habitat and ecosystem, endangering biological life on the planet, creating pseudo humans –to maintain the ecological balance in their absence so that they could return to a perfectly sustained environment.



Figure 6: Pino getting into the position of praying after being infected<sup>18</sup> (*EP*)

Humans have always aimed to lead an easier life full of leisure and less work; hence, the eventual creation of robots and artificial intelligence. However, is it moral to bestow enough powers upon creation so that it is useful to us but not enough powers for it to be able to take over us? On one hand, *Ergo Proxy* shows the robotic nature of human life under the control of artificial intelligence, but on the other, it shows how the current predicament is a consequence of prior human acts of selfishness. Inspired by the philosophy of Gnosticism, the majority of the



series explores what it means to be human which is based on the idea of "Cogito, Ergo Sum" (I think, therefore I am) of Rene Descartes. The reason the Cogito virus got its name is that it makes the robots self-aware and capable of displaying all the vices and virtues of human emotions. This explains the various acts and responses that occur as machines assume human characteristics, making them just like people in every way. Whilst Pino immediately takes on the posture of praying after being infected (refer to Figure 6) alluding to mankind's never-ending search for a higher power, a God or religion, the AutoReivs after being infected by the virus gain knowledge of their slavery to the humans, particularly of how they were expected to serve the humans in a selfless charitable manner which results in them committing a series of murders to seek revenge. Similarly, in *Psycho-Pass* it is the people who created the Sybil System to come up with a standard judgment system that would lessen their responsibilities of making conscious choices every time in society-building as well as simultaneously help them to create an ideal society but they ultimately ended up enslaved by their very own creation. *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy* raise these controversial concerns – (1.) Is the creation of a new humanoid species the next step in human evolution?, and (2.) How inevitable is the merging of biological humans with technological apparatus? Nonetheless, it is common knowledge that we are heading towards a radical posthuman future if not already living in it. It is perhaps appropriate to remember the words of Hayles N. Katherine in this context:

But the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice.<sup>19</sup>

A defining quality of cyberpunk seems to be the dissolving of the separation between the mind and the physical body. Human cybernetic transcendence is frequently portrayed as liberation from the constraints of the physical body and mortality where we experience endless access to information and discover new and previously unimagined and uncharted vistas of physical and mental capability in our new bodies; or, more accurately, in our new body-lessness. Themes of separation of mind and body can also be found in other anime like *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998) and *Ghost in the Shell* (2002) which deal with the uploading of the consciousness to a virtual network and the naturalization of cyborgs, much similar to Kasei and Senguji in *Psycho-Pass* and the set of characters in *Ergo Proxy*. Unlike the traditional cyberpunk narrative



models which are a predominantly male-dominated field, *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy* feature head-strong female characters as protagonists: Akane Tsunemori and Re-l Mayer, figures that the audience is supposed to identify with. However, the plot does not offer a narrative exclusive to the female experience; in fact, in terms of gender and sex, the characters tend to be more neutral. In the liquid modern reality of cyberpunk, one's biological body does not play a significant role in their characterization or identification, in certain ways the narrative can be interpreted from a feminist perspective where the individuals have broken free of the constraints imposed on them based on how or who they were born, and are judged by their actions and choices, promoting a sense of gender fluidity. However, it is to be noted in the *Psycho-Pass* universe that overt expression of personal desires and opinions does not bode well with the system; hence, the biological reductionist temperament has more to do with the suppression of individualism rather than liberal humanism. Only two romantic relationships were portrayed in *Psycho-Pass* which are between ShionKaranomori and Yayoi Kunizuka, and, between Kei Mikhail Ignatov and Maiko Maya Stronskaya in the third season; both of these couples can be considered as 'different' or 'outcasts' in their ways: whilst Shion-Yayoi are in a lesbian relationship that sets them apart from the traditional heterosexual dynamics, Kei-Maiko are Russian immigrants in Sybil-ruled Japan trying their best to fit into a so-called foreign culture. Hence, both couples in their own way represent a rebellious streak against the uniformity demanded by their governing body. Similarly, in *Ergo Proxy*, Vincent and Re-l display romantic feelings towards each other but it does not come to fruition as both of them were derivatives of Proxies and were in some capacity or the other working against the system. Hence, romantic feelings again emerge as a site for protest against the clinical regime of Romdeau's governance. Ironically, punk sensibilities get realized by love and affection, highlighting essential human desires and qualities that have the potential for weaponization against the cybernetic system/s which strictly demotes and demonizes sensitivity and passion.

The creator of *Ergo Proxy*, Dai Satō had previously worked on popular and critically acclaimed series like *Cowboy Bebop* (1998) and *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* (2002) (based on Masamune Shirow's manga): both of them from the science fiction genre similar to *Ergo Proxy*. Whilst *Cowboy Bebop* is neo-noir space western anime set in the year 2071 in a post-apocalyptic future which heavily relies on the themes of existential crises, loneliness, boredom and the failure of escaping one's past, *Ghost in the Shell* deals with a similar



dystopic future in the year of 2030 where many people have become cyborgs possessing prosthetic limbs and cyber brains. Interestingly, *Psycho-Pass* was born as a result of Production's I.G.'s seeking of a successor to Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) (Masamune Shirow's manga) and *Patlabor* (1988)<sup>20</sup>. The cyberpunk spy thriller *Ghost in the Shell* acts as a connecting factor between the two series (*EP* and *PP*). *Psycho-Pass*'s writer Gen Urobuchi had previously worked on a series called *Puella Magi MadokaMagica* (2011) which is a dark fantasy psychological thriller anime series where a group of middle school girls form supernatural contracts and become magical girls. Compared to *Psycho-Pass*, *Puella Magi* is much more fantastical and less serious even though both of them deal with similar dark themes.

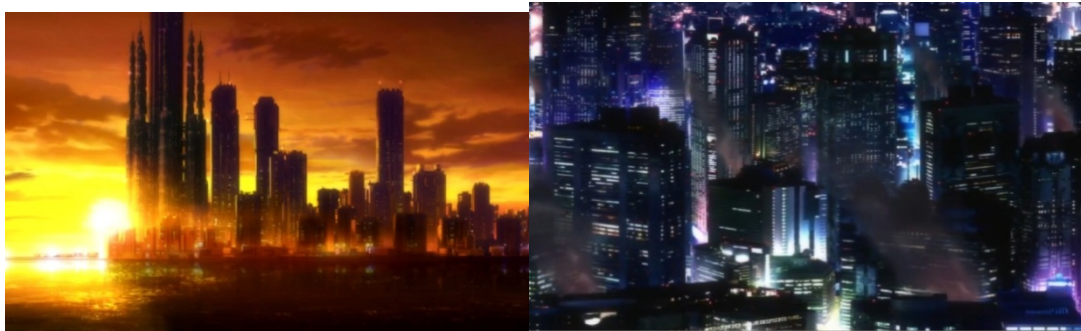


Figure 7: City of Tokyo during sunset<sup>21</sup> (*PP*) Figure 8: City of Tokyo during nighttime<sup>22</sup> (*PP*)

Despite the similarities between the two anime, the execution and impact of the feelings on the audience vastly differ. *Psycho-Pass*'s co-director Shiotani admits to having been influenced by several Western science-fiction films, two of which are *Minority Report* (2002) and *Blade Runner* (1982)<sup>23</sup>. Before making the series, Shiotani was informed by his co-director Motohiro that nothing should be animated that could not be made into a live-action film<sup>24</sup>. The animation of *Psycho-Pass* is futuristic and the epitome of a cyberpunk cityscape. The series features character design (refer to Figures 1 and 5) by Akira Amano, the *mangaka* known for her work in the shōnen series *Reborn!* The city of Tokyo in *Psycho-Pass* is presented exactly as what

someone would expect a technologically advanced cyberpunk city a century into the future to look like (refer to Figures 7 and 8). The colour palette of the series is rather dynamic laying emphasis on neon shades of blue, green and orange that are usually associated with a futuristic cityscape/space. Even though the series features some explicitly gory and graphically violent scenes, the real absurdity of the story is manifested through the progression of the plot. Hence, the element of horror is implicit and runs deeper.

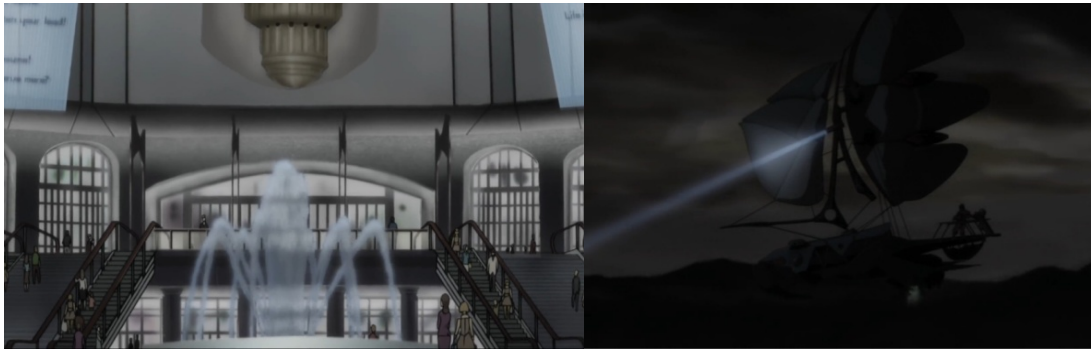


Figure 9: Central Mall inside Romdeau dome<sup>25</sup> (EP)      Figure 10: Outside world of the Romdeau dome<sup>26</sup> (EP)



Figure 11: Regent's throne room<sup>27</sup> (EP)      Figure 12: Lacan, one of the four stone statues<sup>28</sup> (EP)

*Ergo Proxy* features a combination of “2D digital cell animation, 3D computer modelling, and digital special effects”<sup>29</sup>, which exudes a rather dark and gloomy aura. Its designs are almost gothic in nature and darker tones seem to dominate the colour palette, especially with the scenes



outside of the Romdeau domes (refer to Figure 10); lighter and/or less darker scenes come as a rare occurrence. The Regent's throne room seems to be blatantly inspired by the gothic/sacral architecture and the four statues through which the Regent speaks are named after philosophers – Derrida, Lacan, Husserl and Berkeley, further reinforcing the deep philosophical contemplation of the series (refer to Figure 11 and 12). The horror and dystopic elements of the series manifest themselves in an overtly brutal manner through the darkness of the scenes. The landscape and buildings inside Romdeau's dome emit a clinical absurdity in their lack of colours, making the audience feel the cold absence of human feelings and empathy (refer to Figure 9). *Ergo Proxy's* animation perfectly manifests its base themes of philosophy, especially of Gnosticism tinged with existential dread. The religious undertones are also present in the opening and ending soundtrack of the series. Both the songs 'Kiri' by Monoral and 'Paranoid Android' by Radiohead ('Paranoid Android' being the only song not specifically composed to be used in the series) are of sombre mood and evoke a feeling of sadness and loss in its listeners. The lyrics "Believe in me/ And/ Drink the wine/ And/ Take my hand/ And/ Fill me up" in 'Kiri'<sup>30</sup> and "God loves his children" in 'Paranoid Android'<sup>31</sup> are reminiscent of Christian sentiments and Jesus Christ alluding to mankind's hope for a saviour from higher powers bringing us back to Pino falling into the praying position after being infected. Meanwhile, *Psycho-Pass's* soundtrack also embodies the theme of technological futuristic absurdity that the series tries to exhibit. The series has its opening theme - 'Abnormalize' - made by the famous post-hardcore, progressive Japanese rock band Ling Tosite Sigure, who had also made one of the most popular anime soundtracks of all time – 'Unravel' for *Tokyo Ghoul* (2014). Opposite of *Ergo Proxy's* music, 'Abnormalize' is loud, electrical, frenzied and exudes the ethos of cyberpunk fiction. The lines, "Telecastic Tac Tic/ Everything seems to be normal by now, right?/ The abnormal plastic normal world/Is an infinite reflection of the world that's all too emotionless"<sup>32</sup> summarizes the entire plot of *Psycho-Pass* seamlessly by revealing the entire series' posthuman-biopunk themes in a few short lines.

The scenario surrounding *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy* is not foreign to contemporary times and the concerns surrounding the two fictional narratives can be juxtaposed into current context/s. The outbreak of pandemic in the recent years resulted in an upsurge of engagement and entanglement with technology and new media in all walks of life. People were compelled to adapt to a new reality – a posthuman reality – where all their interpersonal exchanges and



expressions had to go through a virtual medium. The internet has become an extension of bodily autonomy and the vast storage of information – both true and false – have become an immediate and integral part of people's consciousness. According to the Global Risk Report 2024 published on 10th January 2024, India is facing the highest risk of misinformation which will most likely contribute to social unrest in the immediate future<sup>34</sup>. Late-stage capitalism has organizations constantly releasing new information and upgrades to stay relevant in the market disregarding whether the additions are true or at all necessary at the given moment in time. According to UNESCO's official website regarding the ethics of artificial intelligence,

[...]these rapid changes also raise profound ethical concerns. These arise from the potential AI systems have to embed biases, contribute to climate degradation, threaten human rights and more. Such risks associated with AI have already begun to compound on top of existing inequalities, resulting in further harm to already marginalised groups.<sup>35</sup>

AI-powered algorithms only present consumers with the content of their liking thereby creating a greater polarity of opinions. Features like 'Deepfakes'<sup>36</sup> are also frequently incorporated for malicious intent by multiple organizations and individuals in order to gain personal benefits or stir unrest which in turn causes distress to the victims involved as well as distorting the nature of truth. The role of ethics and privacy policies come into the limelight during these media-saturated times where multinational corporations depend on users' personal information to provide a better personalised interface and browsing experience. Ferm, Thaicon and Quach say,

AI relies on data to perform tasks and understand customer needs. This data can come from intentional sources, like when customers provide their personal information, or unintentional sources, where AI collects data without individuals realizing it, such as through facial recognition. Since AI can unintentionally gather our personal data without us knowing or wanting it - this data might end up being used in ways not always expected, which goes against our feelings of control and privacy.<sup>37</sup>

Narratives like George Orwell's *1984* and Philip K. Dick's "Minority Report" as well as anime like *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy*, depict scenarios where individuals lose control over their lives due to pervasive surveillance and a lack of privacy thus leading to systems of oppression. This grim vision is reflected in academic studies that link data collection to the growth of a capitalist economy in which personal information serves as the primary form of wealth. However, the development of artificial intelligence has also served humanity to a great extent through its





contribution to the medical field, improving the quality of life as a whole and bringing even the most remote corners of the world together. Hence, not all AI and technological advancements should be regarded negatively and criticized. Nonetheless, indeed, humanoid robots like Pino (*EP*) and Chief Kasei (*PP*) are not a distant vision of the future and social humanoid robots like Sophia<sup>38</sup> exist in real time although she is nowhere as alive as the androids in the anime (refer to Figure 13). Similarly to the AutoReiv androids in *Ergo Proxy*, Sophia's creator Hanson admitted that he designed her to be a "suitable companion" to the elderly and assist people in several activities<sup>39</sup>. Sophia's existence is proof of the scientific advancements we have achieved in the twenty-first century, yet it still makes a large part of the population feel uneasy when they perceive feeling threatened by being taken over by AI robots soon it has been portrayed in several sci-fi works. It is sufficient to say that humanity as of now is far from becoming a literal cyberpunk dystopia; nonetheless, it should not be concluded that it cannot become so in some distant future. Dystopic science fictions like *Ergo Proxy* and *Psycho-Pass* serve the purpose of presenting us with an alternate reality that could happen if we fail to take necessary actions in the present moment. Technological and scientific advancements should not stop but it should not compromise organic human tendencies either.



Figure 13: Sophia, the Robot<sup>40</sup>

In conclusion, the Japanese animation *Psycho-Pass* and *Ergo Proxy* manifest existential psychosis caused by rapid developments in science, genetics and mechanical technologies combined with human greed and ambitions that aim at setting aside natural biological impulses



only to upgrade/replace them with artificial intelligence and biotechnology. The repercussions of these transformations are only now becoming apparent to us because the literal extent of probability has long since transcended our human identities and embraced post-humanity. The literary tradition of cyberpunk science fiction serves as the foundation for the cultural formation of biopunk which extends beyond it and connects divergent discourses on liquid modernity, posthumanism, and technological advancement that navigates the vast territory of the critical dystopian imagination mixed with our anxieties and fears as well as our hopes and desires to be posthuman.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. "The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 23, no. 3 (1996): 385–88.
- <sup>2</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. "Signs of Wo/ander." *The Technological Imagination*. Ed. Teresa de Lauretis, Andreas Huyssen, and Kathleen Woodward. Madison, WI: Coda (1980): 159-74.
- <sup>3</sup> Glenn Grant. "Transcendence through Detournement in William Gibson's 'Neuromancer' (La Transcendance Par Le Détournement Dans 'Neuromancer' de William Gibson)." *Science Fiction Studies* 17, no. 1 (1990): 41–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239970>.
- <sup>4</sup> Jane Chi Hyun Park. "Stylistic Crossings: Cyberpunk Impulses in Anime." *World Literature Today* 79, no. 3/4 (2005): 60–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40158943>.
- <sup>5</sup> William Gibson. "The Future Perfect: How Did Japan Become the Favored Default Setting for So Many Cyberpunk Writers?" *Time International* (2001): 48.
- <sup>6</sup> Bruce Sterling. "Preface" *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. Arbor House, New York. (1986): ix-xvi.
- <sup>7</sup> The Sybil System's endless monitoring of the Japanese citizen's mental state which includes a numeric Crime Coefficient index, revealing the citizen's criminality potential, and a color-coded Hue, alerting law enforcement to other data, as well as the improvement (clearing) or decline (clouding) of said Psycho-Pass. When a targeted individual's Crime Coefficient index exceeds the accepted threshold (100), they are pursued, apprehended, and either arrested or killed by the field officers of the Crime Investigation Department of the Ministry of Welfare's Public Safety Bureau.
- <sup>8</sup> Yasuo Ejima, director. "Episode 13: Invitation from the Abyss" *Psycho-Pass*. Aired January 17, 2013, Fuji TV, Production I.G, 2013: 08:13 minutes.
- <sup>9</sup> Kei Tsunematsu, director. "Episode 1: Pulse of Awakening" *Ergo Proxy*. Aired on February 25, 2006, Wowow, Manglobe, 2006: 23:11 minutes.
- <sup>10</sup> Lars Schmeink. "Dystopia, Science Fiction, Posthumanism, and Liquid Modernity." In *Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society and Science Fiction*, 18–70. Liverpool University Press (2016): 22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ps33cv.5>.
- <sup>11</sup> Tsunematsu, director. "Episode 1: Pulse of Awakening/ awakening" *Ergo Proxy*. Aired on February 25, 2006, Wowow, Manglobe, 2006: 10:43 minutes.
- <sup>12</sup> Shūkō Murase, director. "Episode 23: Proxy/ dues ex machina" *Ergo Proxy*. Aired on August 12, 2006, Wowow, Manglobe, 2006: 27:17 minutes.



<sup>13</sup> Gen Ubukata, writer. “Episode 11: What Color?” *Psycho-Pass 2*. Co-directed by [NaoyoshiShiotani](#) and [Kiyotaka Suzuki](#). Aired December 19, 2014, Fuji TV, Tatsunoko Production. 2014.

<sup>14</sup>Toshiyuki Kono, director. “Episode 3: Rearing Conventions” *Psycho-Pass*. Aired on October 26, 2012, Fuji TV, Production I.G, 2012: 04:42 minutes.

<sup>15</sup>Donna J. Haraway. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, New York (1991): 149-181.

<sup>16</sup> Gen Urobuchi, writer. “Episode 9: Paradise Fruit” *Psycho-Pass*. Directed by Kyōhei Ishiguro, Aired December 7, 2012, Fuji TV, Production I.G, 2012-2013.

<sup>17</sup> Keith N. Hull. “What is Human? Ursula Leguin and Science Fiction’s Great Theme.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 32, no. 1 (1986): 67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26281850>.

<sup>18</sup>Akira Toba, director. “Episode 2: Confession of a Fellow Citizen/confession” *Ergo Proxy*. Aired on March 4, 2006, Wowow, Manglobe, 2006: 18:38 minutes.

<sup>19</sup>Hayles N. Katherine. “Conclusion: What Does It Mean To Be Posthuman?” *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London (1999): 286.

<sup>20</sup>Jacob Chapman. “Psycho-Pass Season One Blu-Ray - Complete Collection” *Anime News Network*. Review. April 29, 2014. <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/sponsor/click.php/17979/7301/1718519642/133261/9/28254428>

<sup>21</sup>Takayuki Hamana, director. “Episode 2: Those Capable” *Psycho-Pass*. Aired on October 19, 2012, Fuji TV, Production I.G, 2012: 15: 10 minutes.

<sup>22</sup>Yutaka Hirata, director. “Episode 16: The Gate to Judgment” *Psycho-Pass*. Aired on February 7, 2013, Fuji TV, Production I.G, 2013: 11:31 minutes.

<sup>23</sup>Lynzee Loveridge. “Directors's Panel with Katsuyuki Motohiro, Naoyoshi Shiotani, and Atsuko Ishizuka” *Anime News Network*. Sakura-Con 2013. March 31, 2013. <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/convention/2013/sakura-con/5>



<sup>24</sup>Dennis A. Smith and Michelle Tymon. “Media Q&A with Executive Director Katsuyuki Motohiro, Director NaoyoshiShiotani and Producer Joji Wada (of “PSYCHO-PASS”)” *J!-ENT Interviews and Articles*. J!-ENT. May 7, 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130627135814/http://j-entonline.com/interviews-and-articles/media-qa-psycho-pass/>

<sup>25</sup>Akira Toba, director. “Episode 2: Confession of a Fellow Citizen/confession” *Ergo Proxy*. Aired on March 4, 2006, Wowow, Manglobe, 2006: 03: 40 minutes.

<sup>26</sup>Akira Toba, director. “Episode 7: re-1124c41+” *Ergo Proxy*. Aired on April 15, 2006, Wowow, Manglobe, 2006: 23: 17 minutes.

<sup>27</sup>Kei Tsunematsu, director. “Episode 1: Pulse of Awakening/Awakening” *Ergo Proxy*. Aired on February 25, 2006, Wowow, Manglobe, 2006: 17: 25 minutes.

<sup>28</sup>Kei Tsunematsu, director. “Episode 1: Pulse of Awakening/Awakening” *Ergo Proxy*. Aired on February 25, 2006, Wowow, Manglobe, 2006: 16: 34 minutes.

<sup>29</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ergo\\_Proxy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ergo_Proxy)

<sup>30</sup>Monoral. “Kiri” *Ergo Proxy Original Soundtrack opus 1*. Vamprose. May 25, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Radiohead. “Paranoid Android” *OK Computer*. Parlophone. May 26, 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Ling TositeSigure. “Abnormalize” *I’mperfect*. Sony Music Associated Records. November 14, 2012.

<sup>33</sup><https://www.statista.com/statistics/792074/india-internet-penetration-rate/>

<sup>34</sup> World Economic Forum. “TABLE C.2: Top five risks identified by the Executive Opinion Survey (EOS)” *Global Risks Report 2024*. 19<sup>th</sup> Edition. Insight Report. January 10, 2024: 106.

<sup>35</sup><https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics>



<sup>36</sup>The combination of "deep learning" and "fake" gave rise to the term "deepfakes," referring to manipulated synthetic media replacing one person's likeness with another in a convincing manner. Coined in 2017 by a Reddit user, the term now encompasses any fake videos, pictures, or audio created using artificial intelligence to seem authentic, such as lifelike images of non-existent individuals.

<sup>37</sup>Lars-Erik Casper Ferm, Park Thaichon and Sara Quach. "AI and Its Implications for Data Privacy" Routledge and CRC Press. August 30, 2023. <https://www.routledge.com/blog/article/ai-and-its-implications-for-data-privacy>

<sup>38</sup>The Hong Kong-based company Hanson Robotics developed Sophia, a social humanoid robot. Sophia became active on February 14, 2016, and she made her initial public appearance in mid-March 2016 at the South by Southwest (SXSW) event in Austin, Texas, United States. Marketed as a "social robot," Sophia is designed to imitate social behaviour and evoke feelings of love in humans.

<sup>39</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophia\\_\(robot\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophia_(robot))

<sup>40</sup><https://www.flickr.com/photos/itupictures/27254369347/>



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