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ENGL 228

24 April 2017

*Psycho Pass* and Psychopaths

*Psycho Pass*, directed by Naoyoshi Shiotani and Katsuyuki Motohiro, is an anime series set in a future dystopia in which the government has been replaced by a technology called the Sibyl System. Sibyl constantly observes and analyzes citizens with neural scanners that measure psycho pass, a measure of one’s current stress level and their likelihood to commit a crime. If one’s psycho pass passes a certain threshold, the Ministry of Welfare’s Public Safety Bureau (MWPSB) are dispatched to either take the target into therapy or eliminate them. During the first season of *Psycho Pass*, viewers follow Inspector Akane Tsunemori and her team’s attempts to apprehend a criminal psychopath, Shogo Makishima, while also exploring different approaches to the Sibyl System. The anime compares and contrasts the significant characters in order to highlight different interpretations of this dystopian society. It is not until the season finale that one character triumphs and the anime makes its concluding argument about society: the only way to destroy corruption is not to try to change it from within, but simply to choose one’s own path -- with reasonable moral limits.

Until the final few episodes, Sibyl is a disembodied voice that emanates from various electronics, including the MWPSB’s guns and peace-keeping robots. In the pilot episode, Sibyl encourages Enforcer Shinya Kogami to kill the victim of a kidnapping and rape because her psycho pass was deemed beyond the point of recovery. On her first day on the job, Inspector Tsunemori shoots and stuns Kogami to prevent him from doing so, presenting an early, bold act of defiance towards Sibyl. The anime presents many more forms of resistance towards a system that is deeply flawed in all its key functions. First, the stressed citizens to whom Sibyl recommends therapy usually return to therapy multiple times because their treatment is not a permanent solution. This represents a critique on society’s judicial system, which often oversees inadequate punishments and repeated incarcerations. Second, Sibyl’s evaluations of skills and resulting mandatory career paths limit people to tasks at which they are efficient, but not necessarily work that they enjoy. With this flaw, the anime criticizes our current domineering school system and job market which force young people down paths decided for them. Finally, the Sibyl System’s simplistic analyses of people is inherently wrong because they attempt to quantify human emotions and capabilities. This is Sibyl’s largest and most central flaw, which is meant to point out society’s discouragement and swallowing of creativity, emotional expression, and skepticism.

Shogo Makishima reveals the system’s fatal flaw in that his psycho pass is consistently low, despite his atrocious crimes. This is because Makishima is a psychopath who feels neither remorse nor stress towards his actions. The fact that Sibyl is unable to judge Makishima for his crimes presents one of the anime’s main arguments: corruption cannot destroy corruption. The concluding episodes of the first season display the Sibyl System’s corrupt inner nature when Sibyl reveals to Inspector Tsunemori that it is operated by a collection of brains harvested from psychopaths. This shocking revelation is meant to highlight the idea that Sibyl and Makishima have striking similarities with an overall theme of corruption. The psychopathic murderer may resist the system with all his might, but in truth, the only important difference between Sibyl and Makishima is that the latter is not in a position of power. Makishima is frequently portrayed in positions of disadvantage and turmoil. In the final episodes, Makishima walks through a field of grain, reading the “Parable of the Sower” from the Christian Bible. Just as the farmer in the story was able to plant some seeds in good soil, Makishima believes that his ideals will prevail in the end, but many people must die first. Makishima’s comparison to Christ is completed after he is wounded in battle and limps through the field of grain and up a hill. The criminal then spreads his arms in the shape of a crucifix and willingly accepts death. In this powerful mise-en-scene, the directors were not attempting to represent Christ with Makishima, but to cast Makishima as a false prophet who is wholeheartedly trying to oppose corruption, but cannot because of his own corruption.

Tsunemori, on the other hand, is placed in a unique position of power when she becomes the only character to know of the Sibyl System’s true form. Tsunemori decides to keep the secret of the system and allow its further existence, which remains consistent with her character thus far. The inspector’s strong morals and sense of justice motivate her to prevent killing anywhere she can - even in defiance to Sibyl. Due to the high value she places on human lives and potential, Tsunemori differs from Makishima in that the inspector hates the system because it fails to protect people, while Makishima hates Sibyl because it inhibits people. Tsunemori’s ultimate decision to permit the existence of the Sibyl System casts her as an accomplice to the oppressive system and she is thereby guilty of corruption, just like Makishima. The overarching similarity between the two is highlighted in the fact that, like Makishima, Inspector Tsunemori has a consistently low psycho pass, despite being frequently subjected to traumatizing situations. The season finale makes a final, visual comparison between Makishima and Tsunemori: after Makishima reaches the top of the hill and runs out of breath, he falls to his knees from exhaustion. In a similar manner, Tsunemori falls to her knees after a loud gunshot signals the end of the chase. These comparisons are meant to further tie Inspector Tsunemori to symbols of corruption in order to argue that allowing corruption is just as bad as perpetuating it. Additionally, the idea that corruption is incapable of eradicating corruption is further explored in the finale when Makishima attempts to murder Tsunemori with a gun that is out of ammunition. This scene is meant to show the other side of this theme, because just as Sibyl and Tsunemori are unable to kill Makishima, Makishima is unable to kill Tsunemori or Sibyl.

The revolver which failed Makishima is a symbol of freedom and defiance towards the system, as it operates outside of Sibyl’s control. Tsunemori first forcibly takes the revolver from Kogami and then fails to halt Makishima’s escape. Makishima then acquires the pistol and fails to kill Tsunemori, and both of these events signify that corruption cannot destroy corruption. Finally, Kogami reacquires the gun and becomes the only character able to walk away with complete victory and closure, as he accomplishes his long-time goal of revenge upon the man who murdered his police partner years ago: Makishima. Leading up to this conclusion, Kogami defects from the MWPSB and obtains the revolver in order to hunt Makishima without the limits of the Sibyl System. At this point, Kogami is being tugged by two sides: Tsunemori and the MWPSB try to coax him back onto the side of the law, while Makishima attempts to unhinge him from the system entirely. In the end, however, Kogami chooses his own path as he joins neither side and succeeds in his personal objectives. This powerful conclusion reveals the anime’s main argument: the only way to defeat corruption is to choose one’s own path. However, this path must be aligned with morals, or it leads only to corruption, as in Makishima’s case.

Strangely enough, Makishima often seems to be the most humanized character through his love for art, brash defiance, and deep flaws. In fact, Makishima can only be viewed as inhuman in a system that dehumanizes. After Tsunemori’s confrontation with Sibyl in the season finale, Tsunemori states that Sibyl should not underestimate humans and that people will eventually outgrow the current system. Sibyl replies, overlaid with an uncharacteristic, disturbing laughter: “Akane Tsunemori. Fight. Struggle. So that it will help us to evolve.” The system’s choice to say “evolve,” which is a biological concept, in conjunction with the bizarre laugh are meant to mock Tsunemori and her lack of truly understanding that Sibyl is, in fact, human. She also fails to see that the Sibyl System would only meet its demise if people began to make choices in their lives. The anime argues that this powerful concept of choice is the key to destroying corruption and repairing our own, modern society.