The Horror of Serenity:

The Romantic Sublime within *PSYCHO-PASS*

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Abstract: The sublime is a common subject in European literary studies, particularly in Victorian and Romantic period literary scholarship. The Greek writer Longinus proposed the concept in the 1st century in *On the Sublime* (first printed in 1554), and Edward Burke later popularized it in his work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). The sublime is less discussed in anime studies due to its European origins, but it has a robust history in Japanese literature and philosophy. Recently, scholars have begun discussing its presence in anime. This paper examines European and Japanese definitions of the sublime and then applies the European Romantic definition to *Psycho-Pass*. *Psycho-Pass*'s focus on horror, self-knowledge, and European philosophy makes it an ideal subject for examining the sublime in anime. Rikako Oryo is a schoolgirl who murders her classmates and is hunted by the protagonists in one of the show's side arcs. Her art emphasizes how the sublime's "horror" element can stimulate critical thought and concurs with the Kierkegaardian theory of the sublime. The primary antagonist, Shogo Makishima, represents the more transcendent aspects of the sublime and its role in self-knowledge and identity. After examining Rikako and Makishima, the paper takes a step back and apply the principles of the sublime to anime as a medium and *Psycho-Pass* as a whole. *Psycho-Pass* reminds viewers that violent media like horror anime and crime stories can use the sublime as a catalyst for critical thinking without endorsing violence.

Keywords: the sublime, Romanticism, horror, art, *Psycho-Pass*

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Introduction

This epidemic leads innocent and well-meaning people to their deaths. But it is a pathogen that will never be wiped out because we are the ones who create it. The disease is serenity, the slow death we've wished upon ourselves.

– Rikako Oryo, *Psycho-Pass*

Despite its Japanese setting and origins, *Psycho-Pass* constantly references European philosophers and has a strong connection to one European concept in particular: the sublime. The European concept of "sublime" features horrifying truths usually learned through nature or imagery. The essay will show that *Psycho-Pass* discusses the use of the sublime in artistic mediums like paintings and literature. The series proposes that horrific, sublime images wake us up from a state of passivity and cause us to reflect more on our choices and our society. To support this argument, the paper will first give a brief history of the sublime and discuss both European and Japanese concepts of the sublime. This essay then argues for a more European interpretation of the sublime in *Psycho-Pass* and centers on the Romantic concept of the sublime. After that, the essay examines *Psycho-Pass*, starting with Rikako Oryo and her art, showing how they emphasize the role of horror in the sublime. Next, the essay discusses Shogo Makishima's character and habit of setting up deadly plays to witness the struggle for survival. Following that, it takes a step back and shows how anime as an art form is uniquely suited to interrogating the use of the sublime and how *Psycho-Pass*'s specific animation style leans into the characteristics that make anime suited for it. Finally, the essay will connect my arguments to explain how *Psycho-Pass* both uses the sublime and interrogates the use of the sublime in horrific anime and other types of

violent media. *Psycho-Pass* argues that the sublime's ability to stimulate critical thinking and reveal transcendent truths is crucial to art. However, some ways of producing the sublime, such as literal violence, cross a moral line.

History of the Sublime

The European Sublime

Before *Psycho-Pass* can be examined in terms of the sublime, the term "the sublime" must be defined. To do this, a short history of the sublime in both European and Japanese culture is necessary to provide a solid foundation.

The Greek author Longinus proposed the concept that became the European sublime. At first, the sublime was a part of rhetoric, a feeling the rhetor introduced when he entranced an audience completely. The general feeling Longinus described was one of horror, awe, and an almost transcendent experience. According to Anime scholars Elif Elçi and Engin Yurt, the sublime in early Greek texts was defined as "a sense of alienation and exaltation."[1] As time went on, the human mind's inability to define the sublime became a core concept. In his 1790 work *The Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant added the human imagination to the concept. He theorized that the sublime represented the limit of human knowledge and rationality because of its amorphous existence. Other famous philosophers like Hegel and Nietzsche agreed with Kant about the sublime being irrational but thought the irrational should be embraced rather than suppressed.

While *Psycho-Pass* touches on Longinus's and Kant's definition of the European sublime, the version most present in the anime is Edward Burke's Romantic European

sublime, foundational to both Romanticism and later versions of the sublime like Kant's and Hegel's. When Burke popularized the sublime in the 18th century in his landmark work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the emotions behind the concept remained the same. However, it became more rooted in horror and transcendence and less in persuasion. He proposes that the sublime is affected by individual perceptions and experiences in the mind and heart rather than externally. The concept of the sublime became more psychological and less philosophical due to Burke's writings. Burke also argued that the concept of beauty and that of the sublime were opposites because beauty could produce only positive emotions while the sublime usually produced negative ones. Burke wrote, "They [the sublime and beauty] are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure."[2] Despite setting the sublime and beauty as opposing concepts, Burke agreed they could simultaneously be present in the same objects. He did not appear to think they were any less opposite because they could exist in the same objects. The theory of the beautiful and the sublime as opposites is discussed among Romantic scholars, but Burke's fellow Romantic period authors seemed to disagree with the notion that beauty and the sublime were opposites. In the Romantic era, the sublime became intimately linked to nature. Descriptions of the awe-inspiring beauty of nature and the near-religious experiences it caused filled the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats, and Emerson. Gothic-style novels dramatized the entrancing and terrifying knowledge brought to humankind by the mysterious power of nature, but Gothic literature embellished nature's power and often utilized the supernatural. By contrast, Romanticism focused on portraying the unfathomable already present within nature. Through both genres, the natural world took on an eerie life of its own.

Of all the European viewpoints, the Romantic era view of the sublime is the most enduring. Anime scholars Brendan C. Walsh and Samragngi Roy[3] have previously utilized the Romantic sublime, so the essay will refer to this when discussing the European concept of the sublime.

The Japanese Sublime

While the sublime began in Europe, the idea also has a long history in Japan. In "A Modern-Day Romantic: The Romantic Sublime in Hayao Miyazaki's Creative Philosophy," Walsh notes that Japan experienced a Romantic literary movement following the end of the Bakumatsu period[4]. Alan Tansman further specifies that Mori Ôgai was instrumental in introducing the concept to Japan[5]. When the sublime first entered Japan in 1890, it was demonstrated in texts rather than discussed theoretically and kept most of its European aspects. The concept they used was so similar that Kevin Doak notes that Japanese writers complained that those who used the sublime were unpatriotic[6]. The criticism of the sublime eventually led to changes in its use in the 1900s. Natsume Sôseki was instrumental in reforming Romanticist concepts like the sublime to fit Japanese culture better. While the European Romantic period focused on the individual's emotional connection to nature, Sôseki advocated for showing the emotions of the individuals using the landscape or nature itself. According to Daniel Poch, he connected the sublime in prose writing to more traditional forms of Japanese poetry, such as the haiku, by doing so[7].

The indirect connection to Japanese culture remained insufficient for some writers, and the definition changed again, becoming more political. Tansman states that during this period, the word for sublime changed to "yûgen" and focused more on seeing

greater, transcendent power inside objects[8]. Individuals would merge their minds with that greater power to experience the sublime. A few recent articles, such as the one by Elçi and Yurt, return to the word "yûgen" as a synonym for the sublime and connect it to melding the mind with transcendent, powerful forces in nature[9]. Both definitions rely on a combination of Taoism and Shinto. In doing so, they connect with an earlier article by James Boyd which explained how kami, Shinto divine spirits, were thought to possess power over nature, even though they were not visible.[10] The kami remained a part of nature regardless of their invisibility. Elçi and Yurt further theorize that the immanent power of nature and yet transcendent existence is "the source of the natural awe, numinous feelings and ephemeral sacredness."[11]

The most relevant version of the Japanese sublime to *Psycho-Pass*, however, is the one that emerged following the bombing of Hiroshima. The horrific destruction left behind by the atomic bomb significantly altered the concept of the sublime. Tansman argues that the sublime was represented through the horrifying corpses of the victims in the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima. By doing so, the sublime politically served the "anti nuclear left."[12] The concept also became irrevocably linked to grotesque violence.

An overall look at the Japanese concept of the sublime reveals that it has a history distinct from the European concept as well as a different meaning. The Japanese sublime focuses more on transcendent, overwhelming awe. The European sublime is more focused on the individual experience and how horror leads to a confrontation with individual identity. Examining the histories and definitions of the sublime according to the culture has created a chance for a more narrow, culturally appropriate definition of

the sublime to apply to *Psycho-Pass*. Now, which version or versions of the sublime are present in *Psycho-Pass* better must be considered.

Psycho-Pass's Sublime: European Romantic

The conversation on whether *Psycho-Pass* uses the European or Japanese sublime is ongoing. Scholars who prefer the Japanese interpretation, like Mark A. Wood, argue that while European philosophy is evident in the show's numerous references to European philosophers and scholars, the show was still created by a Japanese author and produced in Japan, so the Japanese influence supersedes the European influence. Wood states, "Whilst *Psycho-Pass* draws heavy inspiration from Western writers and theorists, interpreting *Psycho-Pass* through Western theory risks ignoring some of the show's cultural specificities."[13] Anna Felicia C. Sanchez disagrees, protesting that the show's reliance on European philosophy is too significant to ignore; the show should be examined according to European philosophy. She writes, "Despite its familiar crime-show format, *Psycho-Pass*'s heavy usage of mostly European philosophical texts tackling governance and ethics allows the narrative to be examined in this light."[14] Walsh gives respect to the Japanese tradition when examining the sublime in the works of Hayao Miyazaki, but he ultimately sides with Sanchez by using the Kantian concept of the sublime.[15] In short, there is no overall consensus on how to approach philosophical concepts in anime, particularly when the concepts have European roots as the sublime does.

The essay mostly uses the European concept of the sublime because of its origins; the references to Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and other European philosophers; and what we see in the anime. Elçi and Yurt[16] and Walsh[17] agree that the sublime was

imported into Japan when globalization began. Beyond a doubt, Japanese writers and artists re-shaped the sublime according to Japanese culture, but the root of the idea remains European. As Sanchez noted, *Psycho-Pass* quotes and relies on European philosophers and writers[18]. *Psycho-Pass*'s focus on horror and its use of religious motifs strongly implies it aligns better with the European sublime.

Nevertheless, Wood's arguments about a culture affecting a work are worth consideration, and a few pieces that belong strictly to the Japanese sublime, like a focus on the horror of what is, are visible. So the current examination of "the sublime" will mainly be using the Romantic European concept but will also keep in mind the influence of Japanese culture. The elements of the sublime focused on the most will be the horror, transcendent truth, and self-knowledge aspects.

Rikako Oryo and the Art of Horror

Psycho-Pass addresses the connection between art and the sublime during the Oso Academy arc in the character of Rikako Oryo and the art she created using the bodies of her victims. The horrific nature of Rikako's art appears to represent crime stories—such as brutal murders—and other forms of art that rely on horror. Rikako's goal of sparking critical thought about society and the world further shows the potential of the sublime within art as a catalyst for critical thinking. Due to Rikako's experiences with the world she lived in, she became disgusted with the peaceful, sanitized existence created by The Sybil System (the automated system that judges people's mental states and the likelihood of them committing a crime). She wanted her art to shock people out of their complacency and start contemplating harsh realities like death. With the help of

the show's main antagonist, Shogo Makishima, Rikako set out to accomplish her goals in an unforgettable and nightmarish way that the show ultimately does not condone.

Rikako's Inspiration

Rikako's message springs from her father Roichi Oryo's artistic career and how the current society, created by the Sibyl system, caused his decline. Roichi worked as an artist before The Sybil System was created. His paintings focused on broken female bodies and were considered both beautiful and disturbing. As Makishima notes, some might have assumed that someone had to be cruel and twisted to create such art, but Roichi's goals were to help humankind control their cruelty by making them aware of how it lay in their natures. Makishima states, "[Roichi] believed his artistic duty was to enlighten humanity and challenge us to grow."[19] When The Sybil System began to manage everyone's psychological health for them, and self-examination became unnecessary, Roichi embraced the change and stopped creating his art. However, part of him became unsettled by the lack of personal responsibility in The Sybil System's solution to human evil. He started using stress care methods to quiet his anxieties, leading him to overuse them and become ill. The disease he developed is known as Eustress Deficiency in the anime, but it is similar to what one could expect from the overuse of opioids. In the end, Roichi's attempt to become a peaceful man in the new peaceful society led to his brain deteriorating from lack of stimulation and the stopping of his heart.

Rikako knew about her father's career and intentions and then observed what The Sybil System—with its enforced happiness—had done to him. As a result, she began to view a lack of self-examination and critical thought as a type of living death. To honor

her father's legacy, Rikako became an artist with the same goal of enlightening humanity her father once had; however, her medium differed considerably from her father's.

Old Art in a New Medium

Rikako's artwork can be viewed as unoriginal. Rather than find her own way to shock people with her art, she uses her father's motif of dismembered female corpses combined with natural imagery. The first of her artworks matches one of her father's paintings seen in her dorm room. The second art installation Rikako creates, a girl holding her severed head in both hands with a rose underneath the head and both legs framing the picture, mimics almost the same pose made by a skeletal female body in one of her father's paintings. The most significant change between the father's artwork and the daughter's is in the choice of medium. From what the anime depicts, Roichi's work consisted solely of paintings. Rikako ups the violence and horror level by using real dismembered female bodies and creating installations that more closely resembled sculptures. Apart from the dismemberment and lack of clothing, Rikako does not appear to alter the bodies, which suggests she wants them to remain recognizable as real human beings. Roichi was willing to create fictional nightmares to terrify his viewers into self-reflection. Rikako consciously amplified the sublime characteristics in the art by making the nightmares real.

A major component of Rikako's medium was where she acquired the bodies, her components. Much like an artist's choice of subject impacts the meaning of the work, Rikako's decision to use her classmates at Oso Academy implies something. *Psycho-Pass* emphasizes that Rikako was particular about her choice of victims. They had to be

students attending Oso Academy. Choosing to only take victims from among her schoolmates has consequences: the inspectors and enforcers close in on her much more quickly because she kills within her social sphere. Makishima notes that as an issue and asks Rikako why she insists on murdering her classmates. Her reply is revealing.

First, Rikako points out that Oso Academy is an all-girls boarding school and then asks Makishima's thoughts on the curriculum. Makishima says it is traditional and the only place to get a conservative education. Rikako then states that Oso Academy focuses on "chastity and gracefulness, classic virtues that are nearly extinct, except for Oso Academy where they are still taught and celebrated."[20] She argues that the values are meaningless for boys but that they could still be used on girls to turn them into "antiques" for wealthy older men to "purchase" and marry. Rikako corrects herself after using the term "antiques" and instead uses the word "components," which compares them to her art installations. The switch to "components" implies Rikako believes Oso Academy's goal is not to create a critically thinking woman who can go out into the world on her own and succeed. Instead, she believes the school aims to create a movable doll: a serene and empty shell that can be manipulated in whichever way their husbands wish. With such a goal, Oso Academy symbolizes everything Rikako hated about a serene and unthinking world. By taking the classmates in the process of being shaped into those dolls and transforming them into horrifying, sublime artwork, Rikako makes a mockery of everything Oso Academy is trying to do. She creates a comparison between her murdering and using girls' bodies in her artwork and what Oso Academy wants its students to become.

Her love of *Titus Andronicus* hints at her focus on the concept of girls as pure dolls because *Titus Andronicus* features a girl, Lavinia, who is killed after being raped because she is no longer chaste and her presence shames her father. Similarly, both Oso Academy and The Sybil System valued purity in girls and punished the impure, even when a loss of purity was not the girl's fault. One of Rikako Oryo's final victims, Yoshika Okubo, faces a similar situation due to sexual harassment from her stepfather. While Yoshika tried to bear it, her purity of mind—in the form of her hue—was slowly tainted by the situation. If her hue, the marker of her psychological state, grew too dark, she would be treated as a criminal and locked away. Rikako knew about Yoshika's situation and discussed *Titus Andronicus* multiple times with her, even quoting it shortly before murdering her. Rikako may have seen Yoshika as another Lavinia whom society would destroy for being a helpless victim. Murdering Yoshika saved her from such a fate. Another aspect of *Titus Andronicus* that might have interested Rikako is that Lavinia's tongue is cut out so she cannot reveal the crimes against her. The cutting out of the tongue and its symbolic removal of the feminine voice may have been meaningful for Rikako, who saw society and Oso Academy as guilty of the same act. Perhaps she also hoped that seeing their friends physically placed in a doll-like state would wake the girls at Oso Academy up. There is have no confirmation of that last idea, so it remains mere speculation. What is known that Rikako wanted her artwork to be composed of her fellow students and would not compromise on that point, even to keep herself safe.

The choice of medium and victim reflects Rikako's desire to expose both The Sybil System's forced serenity and Oso Academy's true goals. The bodies are turned into sculptures through a particular type of resin that turns living tissue into plastic. As a

result, the body parts Rikako used were clean, bloodless, and perfect when she placed them in her artwork. Her installations should be dripping blood; instead, they are eerily sanitized like the body parts do not belong to living beings. Taking away the gore dehumanizes the girls, turning them into dolls to be taken apart instead of people with lives of their own. By taking away the blood and the stench, some of the most distressing elements of death, Rikako recreates how The Sybil System takes the stress out of profound events in life that should cause it. Doing so removes the messy parts that make a human being and leaves a soulless human doll behind. The strange contrast between the brutal reality of the human corpse and the flawless perfection of the plastic sends the message that death still exists in the world. It has simply been cleaned up and made to look like something else.

Rikako's Sublime

Beyond the bodies, Rikako's choice of medium also involves natural features, which are influenced by her view of the sublime. Rikako's artwork fits within the Romantic concept of the sublime because it uses natural places like parks and natural elements like roses, vines, and trees. More specifically, it fits with Kierkegaard's view of the sublime and art itself. In one episode, Rikako references Kierkegaard's philosophy that humankind despairs because they must relate the finite to the infinite. She says, "If you can't know despair, you can't know hope."[21] The concept of needing despair to understand hope fits well with Kierkegaard's philosophy that natural disasters like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are needed to bring people back to Christianity. He claimed that if these horrifying events created by natural forces did not bring people to the Church, no amount of theology could change their minds.[22] Kierkegaard also

advocated that children have the crucifixion of Jesus Christ described to them in as much detail as possible so that the terrifying images of Christ's suffering and pain could give them a sublime understanding of all Christ had sacrificed. Rikako lacks the Christian focus of Kierkegaard; however, she agrees that spectacular horrifying events are necessary to bring people back to the higher truths in life.

Another area where Rikako agrees with Kierkegaard is in his overall view of art. Joakim Garff stated that Kierkegaard thought of art as an empty shell, though curiously enough, Kierkegaard was an avid enjoyer of art.[23] Kierkegaard believed that art, especially modern art, could be redeemed if it used the sublime and brought its viewers to a state of transcendence. Rikako echoes this idea because she admires works like *Titus Andronicus* and her father's that utilize violence to invoke the sublime but dislikes Shakespeare's comedies and other works that do not contain the sublime. She also relies on the medium of her work to relay most of her message, which fits with Kierkegaard's theory that works of art could reflect on their own forms rather than serve only as an interpretation.

Rikako Oryo and her art create a dialogue about the role of horror in the sublime. The focus is on the bloodless yet nightmarish nature in which she displays the bodies of her schoolmates and on her calm, philosophical reflections amid her violence and personal trauma. Adding her father, Roichi, into the mix adds an element of contrast. Because while he remained pure as an artist and committed no crimes, Rikako committed physical violence. The difference in the ultimate fates of Roichi and her father implies that Rikako should be condemned for that violence. While Rikako accomplishes her mission of making viewers think about death and the nature of

society, she ultimately is defeated by her own methods. One of the protagonists, Shinya Kogami, recognizes the similarity between Rikako's art and her father's work. Since she only killed girls from Oso Academy, finding her at the school all but guaranteed she would be a suspect. Soon, Kogami shows up and points a Dominator at her. Dominators are the firearms carried by Inspection and Enforcement officers of the Ministry of Welfare's Public Safety Bureau (MWPSB), which require permission from The Sybil System to fire. The gun immediately transforms into Lethal Eliminator mode, revealing Rikako as the killer and forcing her to flee. In her flight, she is betrayed by Makishima and killed. Ironically, her own body is later turned into artwork: her bones are made into carved tobacco pipes for a rich man, bringing the horror of Rikako Oryo full circle.

Makishima and Transcendent Truths

Rikako Oryo's mentor, Shogo Makishima, also demonstrates the use of the sublime in *Psycho-Pass*. As the show's main antagonist, he drives the action forward by sponsoring killers like Rikako and manipulating events behind the scenes.

Makishima did not create physical works of art like Rikako, but he did sculpt stories meant to connect with the sublime. In his appearance and philosophy, Makishima invokes the more transcendent aspects of the sublime. By creating life-and-death situations, Makishima stripped people down to their essential natures and learned more about what people were. He also attempted to teach society that life was about a struggle to survive and maintain one's identity. Instead of an artist, Makishima is closer to an author or playwright, using real people to act out his stories.

Makishima, the One Above it All

The pure white of Makishima's clothes and skin and his golden eyes invoke the concept of angels. The uneven feathery white hair reminds the viewer of a pair of wings. When examining a memory that Akane Tsunemori experiences during the memory dive she takes to uncover Makishima's face, Sanchez comments that "in this constructed memory, Makishima is a magnificent picture of contradiction: white as a seraph, the heavens blue and bright behind him, he descends the stairs to the singing of an angelic choir, preaching the gospel of free will, making the same declarations as he did while murdering Yuki."[24] The mentions of a "seraph" and "an angelic choir" reflect Makishima's connection to the angels. His expression is usually serene and distant. He often reflects on high, philosophical matters and expresses his desire to see the soul. The soul is closely linked to religion, and through it, to transcendence. Makishima can be inferred to represent a deity or transcendence.

Makishima is also immune from the judgments of The Sybil System as an asymptomatic criminal., a person whose psychological data does not match their malicious intentions. To demonstrate this to Tsunemori, he murders her best friend, Yuki Funehara, while she stands before him with a Dominator pointed at him. The Sybil System can render three judgments when a Dominator is aimed at someone. If The Sybil System deems a person a threat but capable of reformation, the gun will only stun. Criminals marked as incapable of repentance turn the gun into a lethal blaster. If the person is deemed innocent, the gun will not fire. When Tsunemori points it at Makishima right before he murders Yuki, the gun refuses to fire—The Sybil System does not consider Makishima a criminal. Tsunemori knows at that moment that her faith in The Sybil System is wrong because it has rendered an obviously immoral judgment.

Most of the characters in the series are tied down by The Sybil System. Many, like Nobuchika Ginoza, struggle daily to achieve the system's requirements. Makishima, however, is as immune to that struggle as he is to the danger faced by the killers he sponsors. Makishima transcends all other human beings in the story, like an angel or a god. The Sybil System confirms this with its final judgment of Makishima. Because of his asymptomatic status, Makishima is offered the chance to join The Sybil System's network of brains and become one of the "gods" judging humanity. Makishima refuses the offer and kills one of The Sybil System's brains in his escape, but the point remains that The Sybil System recognized Makishima as an equal even though it considers itself a god.

Exposing the Soul, Revealing the Identity

The bloody scenarios Makishima sets up, pitting killers like Rikako against Inspectors and Enforcers, also represent his connection to the transcendent. In each case, Makishima provides aid and sometimes counsel. He interacts intellectually with the killers he thinks have more potential. When the time comes for the killers to commit a crime, though, Makishima does not personally help them. He will send subordinates or advice but remains above the dirt and the blood, watching what transpires. Some killers—like Toyohisa Senguji, the cyborg billionaire with a taste for hunting people—invite him to participate, but Makishima refuses. At times, as he does in the case of Senguji, Makishima sets the killers up so that they are in real deadly peril themselves. For Senguji, Makishima left parts for a radio for the trapped human prey, Kogami, to call his fellow Enforcers for help. Doing so allowed Kogami to obtain a Dominator, fire back, and eventually kill Senguji. Before his death, Senguji notices that Makishima has

altered the plans to make it possible for Kogami to kill Senguji, his hunter. When Senguji asked Makishima about this betrayal, Makishima's response shows the philosophy behind his habit of sponsoring serial killers.

Makishima says:

> "When a man is confronted with fear, his very soul is tested. Everything that he was born to seek, everything he was born to achieve, his true nature will be revealed quite clearly…an unforeseen situation, an unexpected turn of events; in the wake of such moments, you too will be forced to face your true self."[25]

By encouraging the serial killers he saw as promising, Makishima could learn the sublime truth about what humankind was at its core and what they could do with that knowledge.

Makishima's concept of the sublime fits best with that of Edward Burke. According to Simon Morley, the horror Burke discussed when writing about the sublime was existential. He stated that Burke thought "the sublime experience, on the other hand, had the power to transform the self, and Burke, like Longinus, saw something ennobling in this terror-tinged thrill, as if the challenge posed by some threat served to strengthen the self."[26] Since Burke's concept of the sublime focused on the psychological, it can be assumed he likely did not mean physical threats but those that have the power to break or destabilize the image we have of our identity. Makishima creates physical threats to survival via the Enforcers or himself but continues to follow Burke's concepts. The violent situations are means for his killers to gain knowledge about themselves and for Makishima to learn more about the human soul. Before most of the killers he sponsors are killed by the Enforcers, Makishima contacts them and says that he wanted to learn something from them. He wanted to learn how the killers would

react to the sublime truth of humanity and their own identity. This argument is supported by the end of two different killers he interacted with, Matasake Midou and Toyohisa Senguji.

In the cases where Makishima expresses disappointment, the killers failed to cope with their revealed identities. Matasake Midou, the killer who murdered popular holo-net personalities and stole their avatars, had put his entire identity into copying others, so his own identity was blank. Makishima admitted that he was only interested in Midou because he wanted to see what would happen when Midou learned this sublime truth. Midou's horrified cries and sobs disgust Makishima, who mocks Midou before leaving him to be killed by the newly arrived enforcers.

When Senguji is forced to confront his nature, a man who lives by facing the thrill of death repeatedly, through his fight with Kogami, his reaction meets with Makishima's approval. Unlike the comparatively weak Midou, Senguji embraces the new revelations about his identity and thanks Makishima for setting up the opportunity. Makishima's promise to Senguji as the enforcers close in is: "I will witness the splendor of your life, all the way until you draw your last breath."[27] The description of Senguji's life as "splendor" and the tone of the promise show the respect Makishima has for Senguji. By coming in person to watch Senguji's hunt and staying until the enforcers have finished closing in, Makishima also takes a risk that he never did with any of the killers. His promise and actions suggest Makishima found what he was looking for in Senguji; a man who could know the sublime truth of his own nature and accept it.

Makishima, the Author

The sublime is at work in Makishima's character in the "art" he produces and the manipulations made to create it. By helping the killers commit their crimes and putting them in life-or-death situations, Makishima makes living stories reflecting life's nature as a constant struggle between ourselves, other people, and the world. He is not too different from the writer who places the characters in the scenarios or the audience who watches the gory happenings with horrified fascination. His quest to show life as a struggle even The Sybil System cannot end comes to a climax as he stands in front of Tsunemori with a razor to her friend's throat. He tosses Tsunemori the shotgun and challenges her to shoot him with it rather than trying to use the useless Dominator. The action leaves Tsunemori with a choice: believe in The Sybil System even when it seems wrong, or discard it and take matters into her own hands. This is the one moment where Makishima puts himself on the line, where he loses some of his transcendence to make himself vulnerable. Tsunemori is paralyzed, unable to decide to throw her Dominator and her faith away, as Makishima slits Yuki's throat in front of her. The horror of the experience brings Tsunemori the knowledge of transcendent truth, that life is about struggles choices. Makishima goes on to attack the MWPSB directly and later dies at Kogami's hands. Yet, the moment with Tsunemori still stands out as the climactic moment where Makishima revealed the terrifying truth of The Sybil System.

Before the discussion of Makishima can be considered complete, however, there is a component of the European Romantic sublime which has yet to be mentioned and seems to be missing from Makishima's actions at first: nature. Unlike Rikako, who puts her art in natural settings and uses natural imagery, Makishima's scenarios do not

appear to include nature. In his manipulations, though, nature is the return of humans to a natural state rather than using natural wonders. He reduces people to their cores by creating primal struggles, the struggle to fight off others and to survive. Senguji particularly invokes this idea because he is a hunter, though he is more akin to an English nobleman hunting than an ancient primeval man.

Makishima and his actions are grotesque and violent. However, imbuing Makishima with angelic characteristics and the distance of a deity emphasizes the transcendent, religious aspects of the sublime. He shows viewers the value of life while dramatically taking several lives. Much like Rikako, however, his ending is painful and ignominious. Makishima is a fascinating character, but his death implies that he should not be seen as admirable due to the violence he created and committed.

Psycho-Pass, Anime, and the Sublime

By examining specific characters like Rikako Oryo and Shogo Makishima and the different ways they represent the sublime, examples of two specific ways the sublime is portrayed within *Psycho-Pass* emerge. Before making an overall statement about how the series' use of the sublime can be interpreted, a step back is necessary so that the sublime in *Psycho-Pass* as a whole can be examined. As an anime, *Psycho-Pass* possesses several characteristics commonly shared by TV shows of that medium, such as deliberate exaggeration and beautiful, horrific portrayals of violence. The animation style *Psycho-Pass* uses is also more conducive to depicting the sublime.

Beautiful, Gory Violence

Anime as a medium portrays the sublime well because it often exaggerates expressions, especially in moments of horror. One reason for this, as Satoshi Cho and Hisashi Sato note, is that animating features is easier when they are exaggerated.[28] Jaqueline Berndt also noted that exaggerated forms in anime, like chibi, can be used during moments where characters feel deep emotion to provide comic relief or create an extra layer or meaning. Berndt argues, "midget versions of one and the same character visualize affective states – uncontrollable temper, immense exertion, or physical pain."[29] Chibi-fication is less grounded in horror than other types of exaggeration in anime, but it displays the potential to manipulate features to change the impact of a scene. This is especially felt in moments of horror. The moment a person realizes they will die is often portrayed with wide eyes and shocked expressions. Zeqing Liu states, "Because of the unique artistic tension of anime, the consequences of such technological distortions are often expressed in horrific and exaggerated painting forms, adding to its horror and sense of shock."[30] Since animation lends itself to exaggeration, as Cho and Sato suggest, and exaggerated facial expressions can make the characters' emotions more impactful, as Berndt and Liu note, animation proves itself to be is a suitable vehicle for the sublime. The sublime involves using graphic images to communicate transcendent truths and provoke critical thought, and the exaggeration in anime makes it uniquely qualified to portray the sublime.

According to Liu, *Psycho-Pass*'s style is typical of dystopian anime and focuses more on the characters' expressions. The detailed expressions allow us to see the pain and terror the characters experience, creating sympathy for them and a corresponding

sense of horror in the viewer. The ability to understand emotions better also communicates other concepts to the viewer. Rikako's serene expressions make the viewer feel revolted because she commits murder without any sign of being bothered by the act. Makishima's distant expressions connect his role as a symbol of transcendence. Creating detailed, exaggerated expressions allows for a more sublime viewing experience.

Psycho-Pass also relies on anime's exaggerated portrayal of violence. Christopher Bolton compared anime's portrayal of violence to how puppet theaters portray violence[31]. He stated that, in both cases, the medium allows for special effects which exaggerate violence in a way that makes it deeply moving. Despite the gratuitous gore, the violence in *Psycho-Pass* can sometimes seem graceful, even beautiful. Hand-to-hand fights, like those between Kogami and Makishima, become intimate dances, with each fighter playing their part. The Dominators in *Psycho-Pass* are a more significant example of exaggeration. Instead of a small burst of blood and a hole, Dominators in Lethal Eliminator mode make people bubble and explode into showers of gore. People near the target of a Dominator become covered in the target's blood. The iconic Dominators are also examples of violence turned into beauty. Liu states that the Dominators look beautiful when they transform into Lethal Eliminator mode. Sanchez agrees, writing that "The gorgeous animation of the Dominator's modes as it transitions from Non-lethal Paralyzer to Lethal Eliminator to its highest setting intended for inorganic targets, Destroy Decomposer, are in deliberate contrast to the gross violence to which anyone who falls outside the norm is subjected."[32] The significance of the weapon being beautiful while the victims become horrifying is telling. It makes the

weapons seem less monstrous, yet the horror provides pity for the victims. Liu argues that "directors deliberately use violent and gory scenes or scenarios to create an exciting and unpleasant effect."[33] He refers to this portrayal of violence as the "aesthetics of violence" and states that it is common in anime such as *Psycho-Pass*. This essay argues that the aesthetics of violence in *Psycho-Pass* are meant to remind the viewer of what they are witnessing and provide them with a sublime experience of their own. The visceral and unpleasant gore may also be to discourage real violence.

Conclusion

By applying the European Romantic concept of the sublime, viewers can see how *Psycho-Pass* both comments on and utilizes the sublime. Rikako Oryo and Shogo Makishima deliberately utilize the sublime in their art. While Rikako shares her father's belief that humankind can awaken critical self-thought through experiencing the sublime, Makishima believes the sublime can clarify a person's identity. The contrast between Rikako's end and her father Roichi's end suggests the show asks what price artists are willing to pay to portray the sublime. While Rikako, who went too far by committing to portray the sublime in her art, died violently and was regarded as a heinous serial killer, Roichi, who used violent symbols but committed no physical violence, was admired as an artist and died a somewhat peaceful death through Eustress Deficiency. Like Rikako, Makishima is known only as a criminal mastermind. His end was painful as he had to endure bullet wounds and a prolonged chase before finally being shot in the head. Examining each character's ultimate fate and how far they went to portray the sublime supports the theory that while *Psycho-Pass* advocates for the value of using the sublime in art and fiction, it condemns actual violence as a method for

the sublime. The distinction is important because some scholars, such as Bolton, believe violent media like anime can encourage violence by glorifying it. *Psycho-Pass*'s argument against real violence suggests that it utilizes violence without making it seem admirable.

The view of fictional violence versus actual violence appears to match the usage of the sublime in *Psycho-Pass*. Several horrific images, like the dismembered bodies of high school girls and the gory explosion of criminals hit by Dominators, are used; a few even appear beautiful. Nevertheless, the exaggerated expressions and violence enhance the feeling of unreality, reminding the readers that what they see is ultimately fictional even as they take in the horror of it all.

Psycho-Pass demonstrates that fiction can utilize the sublime without endorsing violent or immoral acts. If this view is accurate, the argument that violent TV shows are harmful can be called into question. *Psycho-Pass* shows that a little terror and gore might be healthy for the minds of critical thinkers.

Notes

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