Summary of the dissertation

Title: **Totalitarian Algorithms and Algorithmic Totalitarianism in George Orwell's** *Nineteen Eighty-Four* **and Gen Urobuchi's Anime** *Psycho-Pass*

Candidate: Houssem Hamrouni

Theme:

The current research is comparative in focus and intergeneric in scope. By comparing the written novel to an anime, an audio-visual and narrative art product our aim will be to contribute to Orwell, anime and dystopia studies. The aim would be to make a case study of the value of *Psycho-Pass*, and anime in general, as an important medium worthy of academic attention. The anime *Psycho-Pass* draws a clear association with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, so the question is: can we say that Orwell provided us the canvas for a theory of totalitarianism as he sees it, on which we can paint afterwards? I would like to argue that the answer is a resounding yes. I would like to propose that Orwell and Urobuchi expand the concept of totalitarianism to include everything that comes from the state that oppresses and defies common sense. This model that Orwell describes can be used as a template to justify, for example, the oppression of men and women or the denigration of animals and nature.

The focus of the research will be to provide a modus operandi of totalitarianism as suggested primarily by the dystopias of Orwell and then Urobuchi. It is a modus operandi which serves not only as an instruction, but also aims at prevention. Polish poet and aphorist Stanisław Jerzy Lec eloquently wrote after his concentration camp experience that: "When I hit the bottom, I heard a knock from below" (qtd. in Kott 24). A main characteristic of totalitarianism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Psycho-Pass* is that there never is a limit, nor a bottom. There is always a trick in store, unexpected and ready to be deployed anytime by the totalitarian authority. We would like to argue that this model is based on three main stages: power, resistance, and repression. How are the features of totalitarianism defined? What can a rebel do and achieve in a totalitarian system? How can the latter retaliate? And why, even if there is no hope, we must rebel in the face of the totalitarian?

The aim will be to unpack the dystopian visions of totalitarian control, enabled by surveillance technology, pre-crime, and policing algorithms. One purpose of my analysis here is to examine how *Psycho-Pass* serves as a springboard for thinking through the implications

of algorithms and technology in totalitarian societies. *Psycho-Pass*, may be argued, prompts us to question a society of algorithmic totalitarianism - a society where most categorizations are dictated and set by algorithms. In such an environment of algorithmic dictatorship, citizens are defined primarily by what is called "measurable types" (Cheney-Lippold 48) data models that offer interpretations of the world, assign identities to individuals and frequently "determine the discursive parameters of what we can, and cannot, be" (48).

Another theme which belongs to the forground of this research is the redefinition of conceptions of totalitarian space and of modes and spaces of resistance. Spatiality within *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Psycho-Pass* offer multiple venues and opportunities for both domination and resistance. The production of controlled totalitarian spaces in these two worlds forges different modes and spaces of resistance within them.

Research hypotheses:

1) Although we cannot deny that a lot of other concerns are directly threatening our world (as highlighted by Gregory Clayes and Laurent Bazin in their works on dystopia), politics are still at the heart of literary dystopias. One possible reason is that even if we talk about feminist, or ecological problems, etc., we always come back to the need for political decisions, so it may be safely posited that politics remains inescapable. The totalitarian systems outlined by Orwell and Urobuchi retain most of the classical components of despotic regimes. The leaderships of such regimes employ scientific, technological and all possible domains to reinforce their functioning. At the same time, they also innovate new techniques of repressions, especially as far as surveillance and spatial settings are concerned.

2) Resistance and freedom are inherent qualities in human beings and natural responses to tyranny. Both male and female characters in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Psycho-Pass* are victims of their systems, yet they are equally apt for resistance and rebellion, each in their different, sometimes similar, method. One main motive which fuels them is to stand for one or more real-life values the characters believe in, like justice, or free will, etc. They strive to implement and see such values in society. Makishima is an intellectual, so this characterizes him well. Can the same be said of the other characters? The motives can vary:

revenge, contempt for the system, libido, etc. It is interesting to think about what triggers this behavior, but in most cases we do not know.

3) Dystopian anime can be considered as permanent and generic contribution to political awareness and education. Anime is not only a Japanese product, but responds to global and common concerns. Through its visual narration techniques, anime stages real-life scenarios, foregrounding the urgency to be conscious about the imminent threats surrounding us and offering a helpful perspective on our contemporary condition. It shows us aspects of our own society, but here we have as well the problem of our own perception. This is fiction, so we tend to separate ourselves from it, thinking that it is only fictitious and does not impact us. This demonstrates a very limited vision, because if it is a dystopia for a Western woman, it could be reality for another woman on the other side of the globe. Through examining *Psycho-Pass* my aim is also to analyze anime as a cultural and academic phenomenon that has yet to receive significant attention from academia as a site of self-criticism. It prompts us to question ourselves, individually and collectively, in the private, political, and technological sphere. Anime is also capable of making us engage in global introspection, encouraging us to question ourselves in relation to others, human and non-human beings, and to nature in general.

Method:

This dissertation is theories informed. In the analysis, I try to highlight the peculiarities first of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, moving to those of *Psycho-Pass,* stressing when relevant their differences as well. Throughout the analysis, I try to draw from different critical and theoretical concepts pertaining mainly to theories of power and theories of space. The first critical direction is theories of power: Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Max Weber. The second main direction is to situate the analysis in the theory of space. Drawing from the spatial criticism of Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault and Edward Soja I try to show how, just like history and other sciences, spatial theories contribute not only to propaganda, manipulation, and domination, but also to resistance movements and action. Interest in space can be linked to the rise and development of both totalitarianism and resistance.

The first part of the dissertation, "Algorithmic Power and the Power of Algorithms: Down and Out in Oceania and Tokyo," is an attempt at analyzing how totalitarian power in

NEF and *Psycho-Pass* manifests itself through three main channels. First, the manifestation of control over the spirit, over the concept of objective truth and over language will be discussed. This is considered to be a main element of totalitarianism touched upon by Hannah Arendt in her three-volume book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). For her, this constitutes the element of "terror as a major weapon of government" (6) through which totalitarianism works. Second, an analysis of another component of totalitarian power, the self-elected one-party ruling elite, is attempted considering Weber's "law of small number" and De Tocqueville's "Tyranny of the majority." Third, omnipresent control and the destruction of freedom will be addressed. In his book *Théorie de la dictature* 2019, Michel Onfray recognizes the absence of freedom as the first pillar of dictatorship. While in dictatorships a margin of freedom can be allocated as long as people steer away from politics, in the totalitarian regimes of Big Brother and Sibyl both physical and mental freedom are controlled, in politics and in every other aspect of human life. In *NEF*, totalitarian power is defined through different axioms and rigid instructions to be followed. In *Psycho-Pass* however, power is defined through algorithms. Data speaks for everyone, classifies, and defines them.

Part two, "Resistance: Coming Up for Justice," is an attempt to analyze how resistance, the second pillar of this modus operandi, works. We will try to show first of all how the notion of crime is ambiguous in the totalitarian systems of Big Brother and Sibyl. Philosopher Karl Jaspers, who was Hannah Arendt's mentor, postulates that "a criminal state is one which in principle neither establishes nor acknowledges the rule of law. What it calls justice, and what it produces in a flood of laws, is for it a means to the pacification and subjugation of masses of men, and not something that the state itself honors and observes" (35). For Orwell, as well as for Urobuchi, punishment is a spectacle, an act of farce which serves not to rehabilitate the subject, but only to assert the control of the totalitarian regime who has its own valid law and jurisdiction. Another objective which belongs to the foreground of this chapter is to show how both individual, and organized, peaceful and violent resistance are condemned to failure in totalitarian regimes. While Orwell paints a rebel on the pacifist-anarchist model, who does not propose ideas and plans for change, but who still rebels although he knows that it is in vain, Urobuchi constructs a rebel on the model of Dostoevsky, a criminal for the good of society. But the terrorist for someone is a freedom fighter for others, especially if the crime is the answer to social injustice. Female resistance is also analyzed in both works through the figures of Julia and Oryo. Their resistance is largely different, non-violent versus violent, and depends on the sexual context

and the attitude towards the system. We will try to reflect on the different motives which drive characters, protagonists and antagonists, to resist the system.

In part three, "Heterotopias of Repression: Redefining Space," I expound on the idea of repression, how totalitarian tyranny strikes back to reaffirm its grasp over everyone. I argue how this is done in the case of Orwell and Urobuchi by redefining the role of dystopian space. In her "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," Hannah Arendt postulates that the totalitarian government is very rigid in its ideologies, but flexible in its institution and methods (16-17). By focusing on the Foucauldian conception of space as heterotopic, we will try to show how the totalitarian regimes in *NEF* and *Psycho-Pass*, manage even the opposition and the resistance to the point of controlling their space, by creating ostensibly safe blind spots. Heterotopic spaces in totalitarian societies are deliberately allowed to exist as baits and traps for deviant and refractory individuals. It can be further suggested that their role is to nudge individuals into deviance, much like agents provocateurs, to purge the system of potential offenders and at the same time scare other people into renewed obedience.

Results:

1) As far as dystopian space is concerned, it may be said that mental as well as physical spaces are dominated by the totalitarian regime. The cities in both dystopias are transformed into carceral archipelagos and code/spaces. Space is carefully constructed and managed in a way as to privilege certain types of activities on the one hand and inhibit other possible types on the other hand. The dominated space encourages the disciplining, control, and subjugation of citizens while at the same time inhibits resistance, discontent, and revolt. The dominated space supports and serves the project of the master and deters the goals of any entities which try to go against it.

In order to revolt, one must reappropriate space, but in totalitarian regimes the so-called "blind spots," or gaps only exist if the system wants them to. This compensatory heterotopic space allows Winston and Julia to rebel, Makishima and Oryo to plan their actions against Sibyl. These "safe" places are still created, invigilated, and controlled by the system. They allow it to find and eliminate its opponents more efficiently by making them have the illusion that they are in a sanctuary. The totalitarian regime manages the opposition and resistance to the extent of managing their space by creating seemingly safe blind spots, as

we have seen not only in *NEF* and *Psycho-Pass*, but also in Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* and Sansal's *2084*. These *angles morts* reinforce the dystopian setting.

2) Individual resistance is risky and condemned, as shown by Winston Smith and Julia. Still, it is necessary to try and stand up in the face of injustices, like the Orwellian plant which, although in darkness, pushes its way up towards the light. Both characters know that their pacifist rebellion is doomed to failure, but they continue. Optimistically Winston sees hope in the proles, in reference to Kropotkin and his pacifist resistance which comes with natural cooperation and mutual aid among people.

Urobuchi proposes the other type of rebellion, violent rebellion, and the other type of rebel: a criminal within the parameters of Dostoyevsky's logic, but the terrorist for someone is a freedom fighter for others, especially if the crime is the answer to social injustice. Like the extraordinary man that Dostoevsky's Raskolnikoff theorized about and embodied, Makishima allows himself to go to extreme lengths for the sake of his mission of ridding society of Sibyl's dictatorship. To realize his ideal, he and his accomplice Oryo do not hesitate in the face of crime, of high-level and extreme crime if necessary.

Orwell and Urobuchi present us with two fundamentally distinct types of resistance, but with the same result – failure. Even if at a certain point in *Psycho-Pass* the attempted resistance is no longer individual, the unprepared crowd is condemned to failure just the same. Orwell leaves us with some hope in the proles, maybe in a slightly optimistic way.

3) One of the central ideas that *Psycho-Pass* conveys is that technology (surveillance technology, martial technology, and technology in general) is never impartial. Technology often reflects the values and presuppositions of its respective designers and creators. This is one of the subjects of debate, when it comes, for example, to human rights and AI. The problem here is that AI itself has no sense of morality or ethics, as it executes what its algorithms ask it to, regardless of whether the command is ethically correct or not. It reflects the views of its creators, because behind every algorithm is a database on which it relies and with which it works. The AI Sybil system is programmed according to the political vision of those who own the technology, the constituent members who are criminally asymptomatic. The logic of this technology in *Psycho-Pass* is as follows: you can choose any color you want as long as it is black, to borrow from Henry Ford. It may be posited that the official language of politics in *Psycho-Pass* and *NEF* is doublethink, but it looks like the ultimate goal is to make everyone believe in this doublethink and to eventually turn everyone into "doublethinkers."

As Mark A. Wood rightly points out then, what the algorithmic society and the Sibyl system in *Psycho-Pass* illustrate is that the technological unconscious is a "political unconscious of values inscribed into technology" (332). As we are now surrounded by and equipped with technology and as it has become almost unavoidable, we must remain vigilant and cautious.

The first hypothesis which we formulated is confirmed. Politics remains a central part of literary dystopia. Drawing on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Psycho-Pass* complicates and updates Orwell's involvement in the political dystopian tradition. The modus operandi of totalitarianism in both works is based on classical elements: the domination of logic and language, the destruction of freedom, terror, repression, etc. It is also reinforced by emerging technology to perfect surveillance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and to transform space and individuals into data in the case of the algorithmic environment of *Psycho-Pass*. Technology also facilitates the domination of space, by the novum of the telescreen and the Dominator, which surpass the panoptic capability, and by the creation of seemingly safe blind spots to better manage any possible resistance and reestablish total control.

This also takes us to the third hypothesis, which can be argued that it is confirmed as well. Through the case study of *Psycho-Pass*, it can be safely suggested that anime is a global, cultural, and academic phenomenon which is able to efficiently contribute to contemporary political awareness and education. One main aspect of political education is the process of resistance to and subversion of the power to govern (Frazer 13). It involves educating citizens on how to be reflexive about the power relations surrounding them, how to witness the use of power and those in power and how to challenge and resist this power if needed. Through its audio-visual narration and animation techniques, the anime medium is able to swing viewers between immersion in the fictive universe and distance from it to reflect on our own reality. Anime pushes us to question ourselves, in the social, political, and technological spheres, individually and as a collective society. As we have seen, one of the main conceits of *Psycho-Pass* is to warn us of AI and algorithms, and what may happen if we become seen as data objects, not objects of scientific, ethical, and academic knowledge. The anime also warns us against the partiality of technology. Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning and algorithms are often laden with the values and ideologies their creators program in them. In the case of *Psycho-Pass*, it is the ideology of the 247 asymptomatic criminal members.

As for the second hypothesis, we cannot support it. Resistance is not always a natural response to tyranny but is often absent, as in the case of the crowd, or triggered by another

motive as is the case with the main characters. Makishima and Winston are motivated by their contempt for the unfair and unjust system, but they are the closest to confirming this theory. All their effort is geared toward recovering lost freedom and restoring free will. The peculiarity of female resistance is that both characters use their sexuality as an act of rebellion. Oryo is motivated by a desire for revenge on a system which kills not only freedom but also family relations, family members, and art. Through her homosexual acts and subsequent murder of her victims, she seeks revenge not only on the system, but on submissive and obedient girls who blindly follow the directives of the oppressive system. Julia for her part can be seen as an Orwellian fighter for common decency, which is her main motivation. Through her acts, she demonstrates that her rebellion started well before her encounter with Winston and that she managed to hide it from the system. She also shows that she stands up for common decency and the totalitarian mission of Big Brother to dehumanize people.

Neither *NEF* nor *Psycho-Pass* show signs of decline of the system. Worse still, *Psycho-Pass* shows the possibility of the system expanding and evolving. Does this simply mean that the two authors chose the episodes of "height" of the system before decline, or according to them it can last indefinitely before someone overthrows it? The answer is hard to guess, but maybe what both authors want to convey through their characters is that resistance is needed and should be continuous, regardless of the result. It is dangerous to replace freedom and free will with alleged happiness, security, and prosperity and entrust decisions, choices, and justice to algorithms instead of human critical capacities. Everyone will lose something: choices will be controlled and restricted, and there will be no artistic or any other form of freedom, etc. The task of being aware and of resisting is getting harder and harder every day, and now we need to resist first these gadgets and this datafication before resisting the systems behind them.

Orwell still matters because the guide he provided serves as a model for artists and writers after him. It is safe to assume that Gen Urobuchi also matters because his work improves critical discourse on dystopia and on totalitarianism by revisiting and complicating Orwell. I try to show that the anime *Psycho-Pass* reconfigures totalitarian space for both the regime and resistance. It allows for the system the creation of new spaces, invigilated, dominated, and enabled by technology, and for resistance the creation of thirdspaces, reappropriated spaces within this dominated space, and to forge different modes of rebellion within.

It can also be said that the anime shows the potential pitfalls and deviations of legislation and warns us of the use of AI in legal proceedings and in other fields in general. The dystopian world fiction of *Psycho-Pass* demonstrates that not everything which is legal is necessarily a good thing. Everything which happens may be perfectly legal, but is it ethical? That is another question.

I also find both the authors (Orwell and Urobuchi) and the theories of space mentioned (Lefebvre, Foucault and Soja) lacking engagement with environmental issues, the negative impact of speciesism and the destructive aspect of the artificial environment. One could argue that it is not their task to address such issues, but I think that without this, the academic engagement may risk remaining just post-modernist abstract thinking, and being labeled as theories that are far removed from reality and the 21st century challenges we face. This also offers some directions to stretch the research further. Investigating the impact of artificial intelligence and environments, totalitarian warfare, and environmental issues not only on humans within such dystopias but especially on animals may bring rewarding results

List of related publications:

Hamrouni, Houssem. "Review of Jadwiga Węgrodzka. *Popular Genres and Their Uses in Fiction*." Trans. Klaudia Jancsovics. *Helikon* 65.4 (2019): 550-552.

—. "The Strange 'Fox' Hunts in Connell's The Most Dangerous Game and Urobuchi's Psycho-Pass." *The Strange(r) in Literature, Art, and Culture*. Szeged: SZTE BTK Magyar Nyelvi és Irodalmi Intézet, Összehasonlító Irodalomtudományi Tanszék, 2021. 116-122.

—. "The Figure of the Anarchist in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the Anime *Psycho-Pass:* From Traditional Anarchism to Modern-day Terrorism." *Futhark. Revista de Investigación y Cultura* 16 (2022): 71-77.

—. "Az ökológiai disztópia mint társadalomkritika: Margaret Atwood és Paolo Bacigalupi néhány regényéről." Trans. Viktória Taskovics. *Et al. - Kritikai Elmélet Online* 2021: 106-118.

—. "La Réappropriation de L'espace dans une sélection d'Atwood, Orwell et Urobuchi : Angles morts, Angles mortels." *Futhark. Revista de Investigación y Cultura* (2023): Forthcoming.

Unrelated publication:

Hamrouni, Houssem. "Identity Crisis and Identity Negotiation in a Group of Post-revolution Tunisian Muslim Women." Legitimacy and Power in the Muslim World: 3rd Annual Conference. Ed. Juline Beaujouan. Durham: University of Durham: Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (IMEIS) , 2018. 27-38.

Bibliography

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego: Harcourst Brace & Company, 1976.

—. "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution." The Journal of Politics 20.1 (1958): 5-43.

Cheney-Lippold, John. *We are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*. New York: New York University Press, 2017.

Frazer, Elizabeth. "The Idea of Political Education." *Oxford Review of Education* 25.1 (1999): 5-22.

Jaspers, Karl. "The Criminal State and German Responsibility: A Dialogue." *Commentary.* Rudolf Augstein. Trans. Werner J. DannHauser. 1966. 33-39.

Kott, Jan and E. J. Cserwinski. "The Icon and the Absurd." *The Drama Review* 14.1 (1969): 17-24.

Onfray, Michel. *Théorie de la dictature*. Paris: Groupe Robert Laffont, 2019.

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Ed. John Bowen. Oxford: Oxford University press: Oxford World's Classics, 2021.

Psycho-Pass. By Urobuchi Gen. Dir. Naoyoshi Shiotani. 2012. Blu-Ray.

Wood, Mark A. "Algorithmic Tyranny: *Psycho-Pass*, Science Fiction and the Criminological Imagination." *Crime Media Culture* 15.2 (2019): 323–339.