

## Surveillance and American Television: Reflections of the Critical Dystopian Tendency in Jonathan Nolan's *Person of Interest*

المراقبة والتلفزيون الأمريكي: انعكاسات الديستوبيا النقدية في *Person of Interest* لجوناثان نولان

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### Abstract:

Recent trends in post-9/11 American television have led to a dramatic increase and a proliferation of dystopian science fiction. This article considers the surge of interest and the dystopian proclivity, precisely addressing the critical dystopian view in *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–2016) created by Jonathan Nolan. The shoot-now-ask-later post-9/11 politics normalizes and justifies the ubiquitous surveillance state through the discourse of fear. Therefore, *Person of Interest*, through a paradoxical and dichotomous two giant high-techs, perfectly places itself as a masterful TV show that best exemplifies what Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan term 'critical dystopia'. This latter refers to a dystopia that holds within itself a locus of hope and a possible change amid a nightmarish account. Hence, as its fundamental concern, this article focuses on the analysis of selected scripts gathered from different episodes under the critical dystopian lens. Much of the greater part of the literature on *Person of Interest* is extensive, and stresses particularly on surveillance state and culture of fear; however, it lacks clarity when it comes to the general premise in the show's final seasons. The potentiality of an alternative end to the traditional dystopia takes place in the last three seasons, thus breaking into a critical dystopia. The nature of the research calls for a multivalent approach that encompasses television studies as the product under investigation and script analysis. Moreover, it demands considerable insights and analysis of surveillance narratives within the series.

**Keywords:** post-9/11; surveillance; American television; critical dystopia; *Person of Interest*.

ملخص:

تبعاً لحوادث 11 سبتمبر إنتهج التلفزيون الأمريكي إتجاهاً حداثاً، مما أدى إلى إنتشار هائل لديستوبيا الخيال العلمي. هذا المقال يتناول بدقة الإهتمام الغير معهود بالديستوبيا، وبصفة خاصة علاقته بمسلسل "شخص ذو أهمية" (2011-2016) تحت إشراف جوناثان نولان. الولايات المتحدة كانت تحت الصدمة، حيث باشرت

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حكومتها تطبيع وتبرير المراقبة الأمنية خلال خطاب الخوف. "شخص ذو أهمية" يعتبر برنامجا تلفزيونيا مثاليا لدراسة حالة من هذه الشاكلة لشرح وتصوير ما يصفه طوم مويلان ورافاييلا باكوليني بمصطلح "الديستوبيا النقدية". هذا المقال يركز في تحليله على التحليل النصي للسيناريو من مجموعة حلقات مختارة تحت مجهر "الديستوبيا النقدية". جل الدراسات على هذا البرنامج التلفزيوني إرتكزت في معظمها على حالة المراقبة حصرا دون غيرها. هذا المقال يفسر الأمل الموجود والحدود البديلة في المواسم الثلاث الأخيرة. يعتمد هذا البحث على منهجية تشمل الدراسات التلفزيونية وتحليل السيناريو. إضافة إلى ذلك يركز أيضا على دراسات المراقبة، خاصة الأمنية منها.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** المراقبة، ما بعد 11 سبتمبر، التلفزيون الأمريكي، الديستوبيا النقدية، شخص ذو أهمية.

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***Introduction:***

It has been almost 21 years since the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, and the fields in Shanksville, witnessed the atrocious 9/11 events, leaving Americans shaking with trepidation (Hartig & Hoherty, 2021). Over 3.000 souls of different nationalities were lost during the attacks; thus, art in all its forms directed its canons to paint a new page in American culture. American television was fastidious and synoptic-panoptic before the events have taken place (Hartig & Hoherty, 2021); it grew even larger to encompass a variety of artistic forms (mainly cinema) thematically relevant to the attacks. Hollywood later became the public's center of interest. Not only producers have had an enormous space for creative portrayal, but it also developed into an onerous burden; the audience, after all, was outrageous with what had occurred, and it was time that Hollywood reacts.

This article does not offer an alternative view in historical and economic terms; however, it is centered on the new social construction and its consequences which are manifested in a dystopian climate, discourse of fear, and justification of the panopticon. Much ink has been spilled on the 9/11 events, and the body of literature has been increasing ever since. Surveillance studies took huge portion of interest, whether in sociology, politics, and cinema. The agency and the proliferation of surveillance apparatus in post-9/11 America is, till now, critical subject. With the advance of technology and the public's oblivion stance towards surveillance implementation on the expense of civil liberties, today, surveillance is justified under labels such as those of national security and public safety. Citizens of the United States were, and still are, thus, forced into choosing between their right to privacy and security.

The constitutional unclarity and extent of privacy have always been an issue which opened up hot debates. In the context of the United States, technology has prevailed, and surveillance has covered vaster parts of the country, especially after the passage of the U.S. Patriot Act in October 2001. Despite that it might yield safer environment for American citizens, excessive and imprudent exercise of social control and scrutiny can ultimately turn safety into danger. Consequently, what if technology gains too much power (or falls into the wrong hands) over people and develops into a monstrous machine that only serves certain groups of people with sensitive private data and knowledge? *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–2016), created by Jonathan Nolan, through a paradoxical and dichotomous two giant high-techs, perfectly places itself as a masterful TV show that best exemplifies the situation, while also perfectly portrays what Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan term as 'critical dystopia'.

***1. Surveillance Technology: Towards a Privacy Demise***

The issue of privacy dates way back in American history, as it created, throughout a long period, controversial views and heated debates about its status and legality. Even though Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, in 1890, were the very first to put the term to proper use (Myers, 2020), the case of *Griswold v. Connecticut* was in fact what marked the beginning of everlasting dissension and controversy over privacy as a matter of national concern (Alstyn, 1989). This latter paved the way for the Fourth Amendment, which is, as Stephen J. Schulhofer (2012, p. 4) points out, a "crucial shield against the staggering surveillance capabilities available to the government". Yet, before approaching surveillance and its repugnant and unpleasant ramifications on the state of

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privacy, it is key to bring to the fore a few historical landmarks that shape its contemporaneous reality. Despite that the Fourth Amendment came along to guarantee the citizens' rights to privacy, reality has always dictated different terms over the decades addressing privacy in different shapes and sizes.

Before diving into historical details that best explain the American's shift from a non-interventionist agenda toward political and military foreign commitments, it is vital to acknowledge the Federal Communications Act of 1934. It is the first law to approve wiretapping; however, "the information gathered was protected under a nondisclosure agreement" (Clement & Obar, 2015, p. 34). The law did not appear out of thin air but was a direct aftermath of technological advancement and the first World War. Before Pearl Harbor (1941), the U.S. had, for the most part, favored a neutral foreign policy, also known as 'isolationism', which "possessed left as well as right-wing strains" (Doenecke, 1977, p. 221).

Shortly after the tragic incident, the United States' position changed into a massive interventionist agenda. Imperial Japan's hostile aggression on a U.S. military base not only caused the States' involvement in an atrocious World War; but also largely contributed to the creation of various national agencies occupied with security matters, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Council in 1947 (Stuart, 2003). Stuart believes the nexus of these agencies was a step towards a "new system [that] was expected to *protect* [emphasis added] Americans against *another* [emphasis added] Pearl Harbor". Two years later, the United States' concerns regarding electronic communication have significantly grown. Consequently, the U.S. did not seem hesitant about enlarging its agencies' radar to protect its citizens. In 1952, U.S. President Harry Truman announced the formation of the National Security Agency (NSA) (Garcia & Miller, 2019), which played, plays, and will continue to play a vital role in communication, cyber, and surveillance apparatuses.

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed numerous events that led to a further proliferation of surveillance activity and privacy concerns among citizens. The Cold War era and the Watergate scandal (1978) were few among various incidents that shaped the condensed atmosphere of fear from the 'other'; while also questioning the government's authoritative expansion. Coddington (2018) argues that "the effects of Watergate are being felt in America even Today" (p. 23). The government's enigmatically secretive plans remained a recondite subject for the public. The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) "authorized the creation of secret FISA courts to request warrants for electronic surveillance or domestic surveillance related to national security" (Hernandez, 2020, p. 7). Even though it became widely known to the public that the government might be operating in the shadows, it did not really seem to impose any menace on privacy, at least up until then.

The first footstep of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was rough enough to shock all of the international community. The 9/11 attacks caused a poignant tragedy to the world and U.S. citizens for the most part. The aftermath of the attack and the media's garrulous discourse of fear led the U.S. government to speed up the process of passing The U.S. Patriot Act, which facilitated data collection in and off-shores (Alperen, 2017). Baldwin (2003) enumerates the legislative significance through many objectives such as: "computer privacy, electronic surveillance, warrant to trap and trace, no knock searches, extra-territorial search warrants, matters involving immigration... as well

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as new predicate crimes complementing the crime of money laundering, and agency sharing” (p. 105). The Act was the beginning of a series of secret programs that the government used to spy on national and international individuals. The Act legitimized the conduct of massive electronic surveillance and data collection and storage of private information on the government’s servers (Hearing Before the Committee on the Judiciary, 2005).

Despite that anti-surveillance advocates were remarkably present to resist social monitoring through data collection using sophisticated technologies (Dencik, Hintz , & Cable, 2016), section 215 of the Patriot Act was, in fact, reintroduced through the USA Freedom Reauthorization Act (Mckinney, 2020). The abusive nature and overarching omniscience of surveillance raged a storm of controversy at both public and authority levels. Advocates for pro-surveillance, such as former Secretary of State John Kerry and former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates justify their views with the war against terrorism. ( Bossie, 2004; Hernandez, 2020). On the other hand of the equation, the opposition viewed surveillance and its modern laws as a threat to democracy, a violation of citizens’ rights, and an abuse of central powers. (Kevin & Samatas, 2010).

## ***2. Post-9/11 American TV, and Foucault's Panopticon***

The U.S. media did not stand idly by; the country’s newscasters fulminated with rage against the attacks (Abdulla, 2007). The media went through a catharsis after the dramatic and traumatic events, which almost looked and sounded surreal. A sense of “estrangement from ordinary life” broke through the doors of Americans, and daily scheduled television routines were utterly altered (Spigel, 2005, p. 121). Spigel argues that television programs transformed into an anamnesis of historical events, such as U.S. immigration, Pearl Harbor, the Vietnam and Gulf wars, etc. (2005). Surprisingly, and unlike its ‘freedom of speech’ tendency in its casual cinematic production, Hollywood canceled movies that seemed, at that time at least, sensitive, such as Warner’s *Collateral Damage* and *The Siege* (Spigel, 2005). Spigel (2005) further lists a plethora of movies replaced with less violent ones. TBS, for instance replaced *Lethal Weapon* with *Look Who's Talking*.

In today’s post-network era, the public view towards entertainment, news, and cinematic productions, in general, has radically changed. The influence of the 9/11 attacks on American TV captivated tremendous critical attention from all around the globe. Themes such as surveillance, political-thriller, intel, and war-on-terror movies and series took the lion’s share (Castrillo, 2019). Moreover, the viewer plays a critical role in cinematic production. As mentioned above, the post-network era is in line with what is known as ‘narrowcasting’ and opposite to ‘broadcasting’; that is, the existing state of affairs, especially regarding social and political issues, determines and narrows down the audience’s choice from popular to particular, and from general to specific (Rives-East, 2019). Hollywood has put forward some films which overly deal with the aforementioned themes, such as *The Interpreter* (2005), *Michael Clayton* (2007), *Shooter* (2007), *State of Play* (2009), *The International* (2009), and *Kill the Messenger* (2014). Furthermore, Castrillo (2019, p. 112) asserts that “the surge in political thrillers— and simultaneously, in spy narratives— has not been exclusive of the movies”. Series of that nature have been growingly expanding since the attacks, such as *Alias* (ABS, 2001-2008), *24* (FOX, 2001-2014), *Spooks* (BBC, 2002-2011), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–2016), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012–), *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020), *The Blacklist* (NBC, 2013-), *The Spy* (Netflix, 2019-), *The Americans* (FX, 2013-2018).



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In an equally important parallel, I need to further point out to the notion of narrowcasting in cinema. It is the basic premise of targeting an audience and delivering a particular designed cinematic product that best fits their expectations. Hence, audiences in the post-network era are sensitive and meticulous when choosing their shows and films. Traditionally, viewers are used to watching TV programs solely on television screens. However, today with the immense availability of multiple platforms and devices which competitively offer distinct and convenient sources of entertainment, it is difficult, if not entirely impossible, to satisfy the consumer's needs. Seemingly, the television status quo as a streaming screen no longer fulfills the current generation's needs. Simply, a streaming service such as Netflix is flexible in terms of both time and choice; however, television (as a streaming service) offers a limited, and scheduled set of programs. This is not to say that cable television has lost its importance; Rives-East (2019) contends that even though television today is converging with the internet, in platforms such as Netflix and devices such as iPhone, "episodic programming is still produced by companies that are associated with television networks—either public or cable" (p. 7).

### ***2.1 Narrowcasting vs. Broadcasting and Foucault's Panopticon***

To make sense of the previous analysis; and its indirect relationship with surveillance and privacy, it is essential to point to the leading role that social media has in regard to narrowcasting. The audience may be oblivious to the social media data collection on a massive scale; however, with the advent of technologies and network algorithms, viewers provide "producers and network executives [with] an additional understanding" (Rives-East, 2019, p. 9). Hence, viewers in this respect are unconsciously participating in the process of providing producers with an easy marketing strategy and a clear view of what the viewer expects and wants to watch. For instance, lately, there has been a widespread of internet Fandoms (as independent websites), Facebook groups, or Instagram pages of fans' favorite shows. A practical example of this may be the *Doctor Who* pub quiz in the United Kingdom, through which *Doctor Who* fans manifested superior knowledge of the show than the actual producers themselves (Doran 2015, as cited in Rives-East, 2019).

Following from this, we understand that audiences are being watched, and, most importantly, constantly studied and analyzed. Hence, this brings forth the concept of the Panopticon prison introduced by Jeremy Bentham and later developed by Michel Foucault. The idea behind the Panoptic model is to paint an illusion of surveillance of the observer over the observed; subsequently, power becomes automatic. The prisoner must believe that he is under a heavy state of surveillance. Similarly, we, as a public, are being surveilled under a panoptic vision through sophisticated technologies of visibility by a few isolated individuals (Foucault, 2008). In this respect, Foucault (2008) maintains that

power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. (p. 6)

Thus, the panoptic viewer gaze would possess an ability to follow, analyze, and detect abnormal or dangerous behaviour of and from large crowds without being noticed.

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While in the ancient Panopticon model, prisoners, as already noted, are well aware that they are being watched at some point; however, due to the watchtower's complex architecture, they do not recognize that specific moment. Slightly different in our modern days, people are typically oblivious to the fact that they are constantly being watched. The core difference lies in (a) the normalization of surveillance: it became automatic, and crowds are gradually disciplined into accepting it (b) technology, for the most part, in terms of new systems of data collection, is invisible, unlike the watchtower, which is a concrete constant reminder to prisoners (Ethics Explainer: The Panopticon, 2017). Thomas Mathiesen's perspective of the panopticon slightly differs; he argues that despite that Foucault provides a fair amount of analysis of surveillance, he does, however, fail to observe certain features. In his understanding, Mathiesen's (1997, as cited in David, 2006) neologism of the 'synopticon', opposite to the panopticon, can manifest alternative views regarding surveillance. According to him, the many can indeed watch the few. Mathiesen's synopticon is highly relative to today's mass media—TV, among multiple other platforms, especially the internet.

Therefore, TV and streaming services generally can be "panoptic-synoptic" (David, 2006, p. 43). While an audience that might accede millions of fans around the globe would claim the synoptic gaze of watching, for instance, a TV show with 'few' characters; the show producers, inversely, could easily use Fandoms and data collection and algorithms on the internet and cable TV respectively to claim the panoptic gaze: they would, thus, have a better understanding of the 'many'.

The synoptic-panoptic model, thus, provides an ideal paradigm for today's surveillance spectrum. This latter is a big part of current technological innovations; however, it may impose a genuine threat—not only to privacy per se but also to citizens. The fanatic use of technology imposes particular regulations and political lanes to control the current social fabric through these apparatuses. The United States, since 2001, has made substantial efforts to come up with laws that serve the government's new agendas. The authorities had a carte blanche to pursue any possible jurisdiction in order to protect America from further attacks. It meant that whoever opposed the new policies would be a direct threat to the country's safety. President George W. Bush, a pro-surveillance advocate, chose a discourse of fear addressing any part of any debate: "you are with us or you are with the terrorists". (Baofu, 2002, p. 100). The statement unfolds a discourse of fear and a clear justification for probable authoritarian misconduct of central powers.

### ***3. Dark Horizon: Surveillance State in Nolan's Person of Interest***

It surely might be appealing to many that the idea of surveillance serves as means to protect the U.S. from external and internal threats. Security at the expense of civil liberties seems to be a minor issue compared to the amount of distress and anguish that comes along with safety deficiencies. However, imagine a world where multidimensional and ubiquitous machines monitor every single move you make, where life becomes automatic and artificial, and where the concept of privacy is lost in the dusty pages of history, and where the personal is no longer hidden. Imagine a world where the agencies that possess all private data lose control to an underground intelligence firm that might use it to spread terror all around the world. Imagine an AI (artificial intelligence) that is futuristically complex to the extent of omniscient control and state of artificial consciousness. Such a fictional world summons fears in a magnum opus TV show that evokes a Utopian atmosphere in Jonathan Nolan's *Person of Interest*.

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Jonathan Nolan's *Person of Interest* is a five seasons (2011-2016) crime thriller, broadcasted on CBS. It follows the event of a billionaire named Harold Finch (played by Michael Emerson) who creates The Machine: a computer system meticulously designed to detect and predict possible terrorist threats. It provides several government agencies, such as the NSA, with sensitive information called the 'relevant list' of possible terrorist attacks. It also provides Finch with an 'irrelevant list': it contains ordinary people who are involved in violent crimes. The Machine possesses unlimited feed access from local agencies over people's phone calls, logs, all kinds of online records, social media, and surveillance apparatuses. Finch, and because of his physical disability, finds himself obliged to recruit a former CIA special forces agent John Reese (played by Jim Caviezel). The Machine provides them with random Security Numbers of the POI (Person of Interest). This latter can be either a victim or a perpetrator, the team, therefore, must investigate the person in the quest and determine a course of action.

The Machine was primarily created to defend the U.S. from further attacks since 9/11. The American law, as explained in the previous paragraphs, has hampered the NSA's ability to keep track of terrorist plots. Alicia Corwin (played by Elizabeth Marvel), the Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (APNSA), and one of the few to know of the Machine's existence, told Nathan Ingram (Harold's trustee): "If Congress knew about the machine, you're building... about the unfettered access we've given you to all the data we're compiling on U.S. citizens ... you would go to jail" (1.8).<sup>1</sup> Thus, putting the National Security Agency in a tough position between violating civil rights and the constitution or conceiving a second Pearl Harbor. As the show carries on, Nolan puts forth several analogies of real programs developed by governmental agencies. In the Pilot Finch asks Reese to turn off his phone, and informs him that

after the attacks, the government gave itself the power to read every e-mail, listen to every cell phone, but they needed something that could sort through it all, something that could pick the terrorist out of the general population before they could act ... they tried Able Danger, SpiNNaker, TIA but they were all failures. (1.1)

Here Nolan refers to an outlined agenda that came into existence after the 9/11 attacks, manifested in the Trailblaze Project and ThinThread alongside many other classified ones (Stanger, 2019).

The show continues to solve crimes, protect victims, and puts end to perpetrators in dramatic-full-of-action episodes. The ethicality of gathering private data without citizens' permission is frequently mentioned throughout the series. In a scene where Finch makes his arguments. He believes that "the public wanted to be protected, they didn't want to know how they were being protected" (1.1). Nathan also claims that if every process is autonomously done by the machine. Then, technically, the government is not violating the 4th amendment. The ethical dilemma seems not to be confined to warrantless surveillance but also to panic and fear of leaving a backdoor to such power in the wrong hands. In several scenes, Finch appears very concerned and anxious about what the future beholds for the Machine. In the meanwhile, the Machine seems to be adopting a human-like attitude, "an instinct for self-preservation" (1.11), as if it is coming alive. Certainly, such a machine with a piece of software that cannot be inspected, modified, and at times not even controlled should cause concern to all humanity.



#### ***4. Dystopia-in-the Making: an AI Becoming a God?***

Sadly, Finch's past constant fears came true. In season two, the Machine was infected with a deadly virus. John Greer, a former MI6 agent working for Decima Technologies, was the brains behind the attack. His objective was to destroy the Machine. In Nolan's alternative present, the Machine did not seem to be the only project the U.S. government has rooted for. Samaritan was Arthur Claypool's long-abandoned machine: a similar AI to the Machine. Decima Technologies, through their vigilance, launched a mission to obtain Samaritan's drives and put them in motion. Greer's teams succeeded in running Samaritan, and his ultimate goal was to take over the world. Subsequently, the two AIs and their ground operatives entered a brutal war to gain control over the world. In the beginning of the series, characters such as Carter and Nathan excused Finch of playing the role of God. During the last two seasons the series presented us with a "dystopia-in-the-making universe from the perspective of two competing ASIs, which could not have been more different in their approaches to humankind" (Łaskarzewska, 2019, p. 74). The antagonism between the two AIs has reached its peak. The Machine was portrayed through a virtue of rightness and good actions to help those irrelevant numbers. On the other hand, Samaritan was portrayed as pure evil with the intent of controlling the world and establishing an ethical logic that is not necessarily good. The Machine's threat-red-box was activated and launched God-Mode to combat Samaritan.

***Figure N° 1. The Machine's Threat Classifications***



***Source: Jonathan Nolan, (2011-2016)***

The dramatic thriller series turned into a technophobic nightmare. The two godlike destructive machines are panoramic, omniscient, and omnipotent: possessing all it takes to turn the world into a hellish place. It is, therefore, when fallen in the wrong hands, very likely that an incredibly developed AI would be a tool for oppression, and as much it is capable of saving lives, it is equally dangerous and deadly. Following from this, we find that the alternative present created by Nolan had put its character in a dystopian-like account. Hence, the bona fide series may as well serve as a prophetic vehicle ... for warning us of terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside" ( Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, p. 2). Łaskarzewska (2019, p. 84) asserts that "the ASI becomes far more than a tool of oppression. It assumes the role of a permanent archive of knowledge/information; it subsumes every 'noise in the system' ... forever immortalizing the dead and offering a modicum of hope to the living".

*Figure N° 2. Samaritan Tracking the Machine Team*



*Source: Jonathan Nolan, (2011-2016)*

#### ***4.1 Postapocalyptic Hope: Towards a Critical Dystopia***

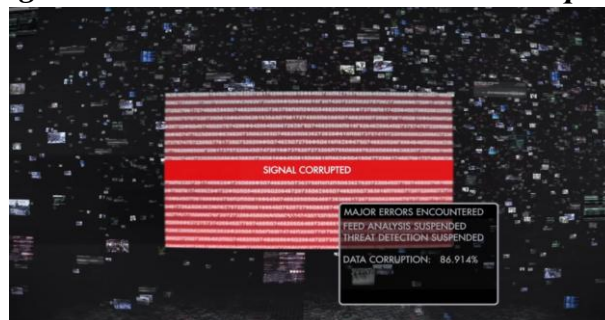
The apocalypse was not far from happening when the government decided to shut down the Machine and replace it with Samaritan. The exact situation I noted would be deadly. Here, we understand that AIS or any overdeveloped technology is always dependent on humans' touch. And this latter does not seem to be serving justice very well throughout human history. Therefore, a human factor is not always to be trusted nor is a 'humanized' machine. In my view of the superpanopticon technology which turns into a dystopian nightmare only possesses a relative truth based on a flawed human judgment, and is clouded by personal understanding of the world.

*Figure N° 3. The Machine Threatened*



*Source: Jonathan Nolan, (2011-2016)*

*Figure N° 4. The Machine's Data Corrupted*



*Source: Jonathan Nolan, (2011-2016)*

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In its last three seasons, *Person of Interest* seemed to be developing into a dystopian-like alternative reality. It is, therefore, vital to understand the dystopian thought in Nolan's speculative approach. Lyon contends that the dystopian vision toward surveillance is mostly negative and exclusively oriented toward its "unjust aspects" (Lyon, 1994, p. 204). He further maintains that the dystopian view toward surveillance proliferates pessimism (p. 204); however, the term dystopia can somewhat be problematic. In order to define *Person of Interest* as a dystopian work it must resemble an undesirable world; which is relatively but not precisely correct. The distinction between dystopias and eutopias is not as plain as it seems to be. The term dystopia is usually confused with anti-utopia. On the one hand, the latter "should be reserved for that large class of works, both fictional and expository, which are directed against Utopia and utopian thought" (Sargent T. L., 1975, p. 137). On the other hand, the former offers a state of 'social dreaming', "the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (Sargent L. T., 1994, p. 3). In this line of thought, the terms eutopia and dystopia share the social dreaming as they both fall under the umbrella term 'Utopia' (Marks, 2005). This latter can be divided into two polars: Eutopia (or positive Utopia) tends to be a *more* perfect society compared to that one of the author's, whereas dystopia (or negative Utopia) is a rather *less* perfect society.

It can be argued that *Person of Interest* is indeed a dystopian work. However, even though Nolan's account has put his characters in constant sense of danger and fear in the midst of a post-apocalyptic atmosphere, a glance of hope appears on the surface each time. Unarguably, the Machine's ethical logic most certainly is infected by human touch. Thus, the notion of 'good' vs. 'bad', and 'them' vs. 'us' are manifested in the Machine vs. Samaritan. While Finch and his team sought out a noble goal, Greer and Decima Technologies team thought of world control, though it meant blood. Hence, team Machine acted according to their virtuous morality to save the world from an oppressive regime seen on the horizon. The 1<sup>st</sup> season's 3<sup>rd</sup> episode, *Mission Creep*, was aesthetically significant. According to Merriam Webster mission creep means "the gradual broadening of the original objectives of a mission or organization" (mission creep, n.d.). In this sense, both AIS had an incredible development. Łaskarzewska (2019, p. 83) notes that they were "growingly sentient, humanlike" beyond the original intentions. Further, the continuous warnings throughout the series are manifested in Harold's scene when he was reading *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis: a fictional 1935 dystopian book speculating a fascist dictatorship in America, in the wake of Hitler and Mussolini (1.5) (Sinclair, 2014).

***Figure N° 5. Harold Finch Holding the Novel "It Can't Happen Here"***



*Source: Jonathan Nolan, (2011-2016)*

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Moreover, Nolan again makes Communist and Nazi references when a librarian addresses Harold regarding surveillance: “before the country reunified East Germany was the greatest surveillance state the world has seen” (1.8).

*Person of Interest* is an alarmingly unpleasant imaginary set in an alternative present. It is, however, difficult and maybe even unjust to place the series as purely dystopian or anti-utopian. Despite that Samaritan imposes grave danger on human life, its rival, the Machine, attempts to save the world. The anti-utopia “is designed to refute a currently proposed eutopia”, and the “[dystopia]... usually begins directly in the terrible new world” (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, p. 5). Therefore, *Person of Interest* is best placed in what Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini term as critical dystopia, “the critical dystopia is the dark side of hope, and hopes for a way out; anti-utopia attributes the darkness to Utopia itself, and tells us the exits are ambushed” (Levitas & Sargisson, 2013, p. 26). Nolan’s series has always maintained an impulse of hope during the bleak and depressing world. This allowed the protagonists (team Machine) to resist the status quo. Unlike several dystopian novels and movies which foretell, speculate and warn the audience from a probable disastrous event, the critical dystopias “suggest causes rather than merely reveal symptoms”, while also encourages *acting* rather than *witnessing*. The series represents a postapocalyptic hope; that is, in the dystopian world characters “do not get any control over history and the past”; however, in the critical dystopia they are provided with a “protentional instrument of resistance” (Baccolini, 2003, p. 115), which is the Machine.

What further identifies *Person of Interest* as a critical dystopian work is the attitude of its protagonists. Finch, Reese, Shaw, Root, Carter, and Fusco (alongside others) sacrificed: either their lives or things they considered more precious. In this respect, Baccolini (2003) contends that “in the critical dystopia, even in the presence of utopian hope there is not much room for happiness” (p. 130). Finch, for instance, has felt an enormous amount of responsibility towards humanity, accompanied by fear of the government’s intentions, accompanied by nostalgia towards his beloved woman; Reese was found drunk and living a miserable life as a single man without friends; Carter dies after being mortally wounded; Fusco lives in uncertainty because his child was constantly being threatened by the mob and HR; Root (Samantha Groves) sacrificed her life to save Harold, Shaw, and the machine. Thus, characters in the critical dystopian world, rather than feeling happy, get a “sense of regret and of missed opportunity accompanies the awareness and knowledge that the protagonists have attained”. (Baccolini, 2003, p. 130). The burden on Harold’s shoulders continues to nip his guilty consciousness; he questions his choices in life and responsibilities towards human life. Baccolini (2003, p. 130) asserts that “instead of an easily compensatory and comforting happy ending, the critical dystopia’s open ending leaves its protagonist dealing with his or her choices and responsibilities”. Therefore, *Person of Interest* is best placed and identified as a critical-dystopian television series, for, though it represents a society heading towards an oppressive future, it provides its characters and viewers with hope to overcome the rather gloomy and speculated aftermath.



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**Conclusion:**

The United States has gone through many critical events in history. World War II, the Cold War, and the 9/11 attacks caused U.S. governments, throughout the decades, to revise their domestic security policies and alter their overseas commitments, which eventually led to a fanatic proliferation of surveillance and privacy abuses. Even though surveillance politics violated basic civil liberties, Congress and consecutive governments maintained a tight grip over the newly adopted agendas. Moreover, American television took over the scene and took it upon itself to mirror and paint an aesthetic picture that revolves around terror, crime, and thriller, among many genres, in many series. *Person of Interest* (2011-2016) is the product of the terrorist attacks and depictions of some of the government's secretive programs. The series perfectly exemplifies Foucault's Panopticon, portraying the politics of social control, mass surveillance, and data collection. It is also a perfect example, as far as tv shows are concerned, of what Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan term the 'critical dystopia', as it holds a locus of hope within its rather disturbing technophobic atmosphere.

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***6. Notes:***

<sup>1</sup> All in-text references to the show are made using the season-episode system, where for example "1.8" stands for season 1, episode 8.