

## Desiring Futures: Hope, Technoscience, and Utopian Dystopia in

*Puella Magi Madoka Magica***Leo Chu**

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I aim to analyze the animated television series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* through a combination of critical methods: neo-noir criticism, feminist studies of technoscience, and discussion of utopia/dystopia imagination. My focus is on how desire and hope—two interconnected but potentially conflicting concepts—create the central narrative tension in *Madoka Magica*. Besides, I will illustrate that the “genre subversion” of the series is connected to not only the fictional struggle of magical girls against their fates but also the real power structures and asymmetries in modern society. By scrutinizing how the series represents the difficulties to resist a future imposed from the standpoint of dominant social groups and how such impasse can be confronted, the paper argues that *Madoka Magica*, while not really committing itself to the imagination of radical alternatives to the existent social systems, is nonetheless able to affirm the desirability of having hope for futures that are yet to be imagined.

**Keywords:** magical girls, feminism, neo-noir, utopia, technoscience, hope

**Author Bio:** Leo Chu receives his MA in Science and Technology Studies from the University of British Columbia. His interests include history of ecology, environmental humanities, and science fiction studies. He currently works as a research assistant at the Department of Geography at the National Taiwan University.

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## Introduction: The Question concerning Hope and Desire

If to have hope is to desire better futures, desiring itself is nonetheless an act more complex than good or evil. The Latin word for “hope”, *spero*, from which “prosper” is derived, serves also as the root of “despair” (*despero*). To make a wish, to hope for the prosperity of someone or for oneself may as well become a harbinger of future betrayal. The purely benign *spero* may exist in the rare moments of firm faith or triumphant will, but the conflict between hope and desire might be more prevalent in our everyday life. From Kierkegaard to Nietzsche, from Heidegger to Sartre, Western philosophers have struggled to find the condition of hope amid their pessimistic reading of the Janus nature of desire. Technological advancement and the birth of a “mass” society were sometimes seen as the source of such pessimism: with the rise of technical and capitalist rationality that challenged traditional ethics and values, all desire appeared to be arbitrary, tailored not for the well-being of humans, but for the propagation of machines.<sup>1</sup>

But in the rebellious desire, there might still be hope. When radical imagination towards the future is needed more than ever, feminist theories focusing on women’s “life activity” that are able “to critique and to work against” capitalism and patriarchy may contribute to the discussion of hope in face of alienation and exploitation.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, feminist and science studies scholars such as Donna Haraway have paid particular attention to the role scientific knowledge and practices had in the subordination and marginalization of people from other gender, class, and race groups, while exploring new ontology and epistemology capable of “constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination”.<sup>3</sup> Science and technology, or “technoscience”

as a unit of analysis, thereby connects the questions about hope and future to the multiple contested practices, affects, and power relations embedded in the society.<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to study the question of hope and desire in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011, hereafter *Madoka Magica*), a twelve-episode anime series. I will use the following three sections to introduce the central stage of the story—a dystopian city that delineates the brutal world of magical girls. In section five and six, the critiques of modern technoscience and of the “male gaze” will be juxtaposed to the narrative of the series. Finally, I will conclude the paper by drawing attention to the ambivalent ending of *Madoka Magica* and discuss the condition of hope it implies.

### **A Magical Girl Noir**

As noticed by previous critiques, the entertainment value as well as shock *Madoka Magica* created were deeply shaped by its bold experiment on the “magical girl” (*mahō shōjo*) genre. Emerging in the 1960s and 70s, these animated works generally featured children-friendly stories about teenage girls’ everyday life, friendship, and adventures after they acquired magical power.<sup>5</sup> *Madoka Magica*, according to Sharon Tran, is thus exceptional for its investigation into the complexity of the genre by “foregrounding the various conditions that compel Japanese schoolgirls to become *mahō shōjo* in the first place”.<sup>6</sup> While Tran argued for the relevance of the series to young women in Japan by connecting its narrative to a sense of “powerlessness” induced by gender structures and economic neoliberalism, an audience reception study revealed that the series may resonate in diverse age, gender, and cultural groups

for its rich texts and subtexts that addressed a wide variety of messages.<sup>7</sup> The interaction between narrative and media technology in *Madoka Magica* has also been scrutinized.<sup>8</sup> How this paper can have a constructive dialogue with existing literature will be discussed in the later sections.

To approach the subversiveness of *Madoka Magica*, the utopian-dystopian aspects of its story will be my focus, and criticism of neo-noir cinema will be my main point of reference. Neo-noir is a genre which distinguishes itself from the “classic” film noir of 1940s and 50s by a reflexivity towards its own conventions, and by its more complex approach towards the absurdity, alienation, and ambivalence of modern life. In *Madoka Magica*, a sense of absurdity is reflected by its depiction of characters’ struggle in the supernatural world they are bluntly thrown into. *Madoka Magica* also shares a set of motifs with the neo-noir genre: the “noir space” characterized by incessant conflicts and chaos, the “noir time” that intertwined “the distant future and the distant past”, and the moral ambiguity of a protagonist who tried to understand “his own identity and how he may have lost it”.<sup>9</sup> Although the narrative of *Madoka Magica* appears to be devoid of larger structures such as society, state, or history, I would like to suggest that, similar to the neo-noir genre, the series has embedded subtle reflection and critique of modern socio-political conditions within its seemingly “personal” tragedies.

In the beginning of the series, Madoka, the eponymous heroine, appeared to be an ordinary middle-school girl—until the day she met Homura, a student newly transferred to her class. Later, when shopping with her friend, Sayaka, she found a small, cat-like creature hunted relentlessly by Homura. Madoka and Sayaka were then ambushed by a horde of monsters before a senior

student, Mami, arrived and rescued them. Introducing herself as a “magical girl” who had signed a “contract” with the creature called Kyubey, Mami thus led the girls into a world they never knew. Initially, the plot consisted largely of the lighthearted adventure and fantastic combat typical of the magical-girl genre, but Mitakihara city—where the story took place—was not simply a generic background. It was, I would like to argue, depicted as a quasi-utopia. Mitakihara was a spectacular city with skyscrapers caricaturing real-world landmarks and neighborhoods composed of a mix of modernist and classical architectures. It was an eco-technocratic city where solar panels, wind turbines, canals, greenspaces, and classrooms equipped with electronic blackboards and automatic folding chairs co-existed in harmony. It was, interestingly, also a liberal city, with Madoka’s confident working mother, supportive homemaker father, and the abundant life they prepared for her and her toddler brother exemplifying the happiness of a middle-class family engaging in social production and reproduction.

The irony of *Madoka Magica* was that, after the brief showcasing of the everyday happiness taken for granted by Madoka and Sayaka in a quasi-utopia, their apprenticeship under Mami would guide them through the “other” Mitakihara where witches and their familiars—the monsters magical girls were supposed to eliminate—were hiding in their supernatural “labyrinth”, feeding on the vital energy of captured humans, and causing chaos and suicide. While the significance of witches in the series can be studied through the aesthetics of their design and abilities,<sup>10</sup> it may also be analyzed as a sign of a utopia irreversibly contaminated by the monstrous others it can neither understand nor erase. Such “contamination” became obvious when the tone of the story

radically changed by the end of episode three, in which Mami was grotesquely decapitated by a witch. The girls were thus forced to face the terrible reality. Since witches attract their victims to the space society deemed “marginal”, such as hospitals, deserted buildings, or vacant areas, the girls can avoid these places and find refuge in the apparent safety of middle-class girlhood. However, they found it difficult, if not condemnable, to simply forget the sufferings of magical girls.

Subsequently, episode four articulated this invasion of anti-utopian space into the everyday life. Following a possessed crowd into a rundown factory, Madoka saw them mixing bottles of detergent and realized that it was a mass suicide attempt orchestrated by a witch. Soon captured, Madoka was engulfed by the agonizing flashbacks about her adventure and tormented by her unfulfilled promise to support Mami. Unable to rejoin the utopia where people lived without even knowing the menace of witches or magical girls’ sacrifice, Madoka thus must remember all the pain and burden magical girls have endured, but even that was not enough. Apparently, the only way to reconcile the utopia with its dystopian failures was to remember them *as* a magical girl.

As it would later become evident, what made Mitakihara really a dystopia was not a Big Brother but little creatures like Kyubey. Constantly seeking girls to contract with, its offer appeared to be plain and simple: become a magical girl, and it will grant you a wish. Initially limiting itself to the role of an observer and guide, Kyubey nevertheless kept expressing its willingness to recruit the girls. Even though it promised to leave the girls alone as they were traumatized by Mami’s death, Kyubey—as if long waiting for the moment—showed up right after Sayaka decided to accept the contract in exchange for the miraculous

recovery of her friend, a young violinist whose career was ended by an accident. Using her newly acquired magical power, Sayaka was able to save Madoka by the end of episode four. However, the alienation, violence, and cruelty of the magical world would soon turn Sayaka's heroism into the ambivalence of noir absurdism.

### Survivors of Utopia

Although Kyubey probably couldn't care less if Mitakihara was a magical dystopia, Sayaka certainly set out to maintain its utopian façade. Inspired by Mami's commitment to hunt down witches and familiars, she regarded her decision to become a magical girl as fulfilling the responsibility to protect the people she cared and loved—including the young violinist who hardly noticed the girl's deep affection for him. Such moralization of the precarious life of magical girls can nonetheless be futile, or even self-destructive. As Frank Krutnik has argued, the classical noir, portraying its male characters as either struggling to meet up with the ideal aspects of hegemonic masculinity or indulging in a narcissistic fantasy that provided a "secluded and untested sense of perfection", has already captured the ethical predicaments faced by modern individuals.<sup>11</sup> On top of the portrayal of the difficulty, if not impossibility, to act ethically, neo-noir had a unique focus on how people struggled in the life *after* the dereliction of moral idealism.

For example, in *The Onion Field* (1979), the death of a police officer has induced no guilt in his murderers' mind, but caused endless regret for his partner. Being unjustly blamed for his colleague's death, the surviving officer resorted to alcoholism and petty crimes as if he attempted to turn himself into

a person deserving such punishment. The grim landscape of *The Onion Field* thus let the Kantian ethics survive only in the twisted form of “a shattered dream still worth having”.<sup>12</sup> Sayaka’s ethics, which drew a line between good and evil, were similarly fragile in the inhuman world she inhabited, but this moral idealism was also necessary for her to respond to a question raised by Mami in episode three: if Sayaka decided to sign the contract, was her intention based solely on the wish for the other’s well-being, or a desire to be *reciprocated* by the other whose wish was granted by her? Sayaka apparently interpreted this question as an opposition between altruism and egoism. Consequently, her wish for the violinist’s recovery, along with her decision to become a magical girl, can only be justified if they were conceived as purely altruistic acts. And yet by doing so, the “hope” she can have as a magical girl will be confined to a selfless, almost masochistic, desire for others’ happiness. A tension centering on this problem was thus presented in episode five and six.

Sayaka’s belief in duty and altruism was first and foremost dismissed by Homura, who argued that magical girls were not saviors but survivors themselves. Always trying to prevent Madoka from signing the contract, Homura claimed that the misery a magical girl would face originated in nothing but the “excessive” desire embodied in the wish she had made. Such a bleak future was suggested not without good reason: as a magical girl can only replenish her energy with the “grief seeds” produced by defeated witches, to use her power unwisely—such as fighting witches’ familiars which did not bare the “seeds”—may be tantamount to suicide. No wonder Sayaka’s principle was viewed by Kyoko, an experienced magical girl who arrived in Mitakihara upon Mami’s death, as merely an insulting joke. After preventing Sayaka from killing

a familiar and lecturing her on the “common sense” to let it escape and develop into a harvestable witch, Kyoko easily won a duel with the enraged girl. By maximizing the grief seeds she had, Kyoko’s powerful magic seemed to prove the superiority of her survivalist philosophy. However, the imminent threat to Sayaka’s idealism was neither witches’ menace nor the sabotage from other magical girls, but an enemy within: the concealed nature of her existence.

A plot twist occurred in episode six. Trying to stop another fight between Sayaka and Kyoko, Madoka threw away Sayaka’s “soul gem”—the oval-shaped container said to be the source of a magical girl’s power—causing Sayaka to lose all vital signs. As Homura rushed to retrieve the gem, Kyubey explained that a magical girl was in fact nothing but a chimeric combination of her soul—separated and preserved in the gem—and a biologically dead body, which can be controlled in a limited distance and repaired through magical power. Kyubey later claimed that it could not understand why humans were attached to their fragile bodies, and inflicted the pain previously suppressed by the gem on Sayaka to prove that its manipulation was necessary for magical girls to be combat effective. The Frankensteinian technology of soul gems therefore compromised Sayaka’s ethical principle from the start: how can her already dehumanized existence contain, rather than spread, the evil lodging in those inhumane corners of the city? And is protecting Mitakihara a cause worth losing her own humanity for? After all, is it still an ethical duty for a magical girl to “save” the ignorant others instead of trying to save herself?

In addition to the challenges against her moral idealism, gender norms also played an important role in the dilemma Sayaka faced. In a noir film like *Bladerunner* (1982), for example, the struggle of cyborg-slaves was presented

as a source of salvation for the male protagonist who, after witnessing the agency of cyborgs, eventually came to understand the meaning of being a human.<sup>13</sup> When the female protagonists of *Madoka Magica* were turned into part-flesh, part-technology, and part-magic cyborgs, their bodies became a mark of disgrace. A sense of “self-contamination” was evident in Sayaka’s confession to Madoka that she, with her body degraded into a “zombie”, can no longer ask the violinist to reciprocate her feelings. What was identified by feminist scholars as the rebellious potential in cyborg—a “subtle understanding of emerging pleasures, experiences, and power”—was thereby repressed as unnatural and undesirable through Sayaka.<sup>14</sup> To demonstrate how feminist theory may help to elaborate issues of social structures in *Madoka Magica*, I will now turn to an analysis of episode seven and eight, where the struggle for moral principles was connected to a power asymmetry that made any hope for better futures unbearably difficult.

### **Survivalists’ Dystopia**

After the appalling revelation about magical girls’ true nature, Kyoko tried to seek reconciliation by telling Sayaka her own story. A daughter of an excommunicated pastor, she made a wish to have people listen to her father’s preaching. By becoming a magical girl, Kyoko both contributed to the safety of her hometown and lifted her family out of poverty. Nevertheless, after discovering her identity, her father denounced Kyoko as—ironically—a “witch”, subsequently burned down the church and murdered her family. Surviving such monstrous violence had shaped Kyoko’s survivalism. Seen in this light, her philosophy was probably formulated not devoid of the influence of moral

idealism. For magical girls to survive, Kyoko suggested, they must discard the naïve altruism by the name of “hope”, act egotistically, and accept their past and future suffering as if they really *deserve* it.

Sadly, this rigid opposition between altruism and egoism, between benign hope and selfish desire, forced Sayaka to either abandon her principle or to protect it till the bitter end. The confrontation between the girls—in a ruined church, under stained glass with Christian figures, and centering on an apple Kyoko offered Sayaka as a token of friendship—was imbued with religious symbols. And yet to accept the apple, when the innocence mystified by religion had been long lost, was not to betray the Eden but to recognize the rules of dystopia. As Sayaka decided to cling on her ethics, interrogating Kyoko how the money used to buy the apples was obtained, she compelled herself to follow an “altruism” that moralized even the forbidden fruit as normative *good* in the myth of market economy. Uncannily, this separation of self-interested egoism from order-keeping altruism echoed the capitalist structure that separated use value from exchange value. From the workers’ standpoint, the two kinds of value were artificial and falsely created. Living in a capitalist society asked the workers to internalize such division at the service of a market logic which deemed “exchange as the only important side of the dichotomy” and thus benefited the capitalists far more than the workers.<sup>15</sup> In order to see herself as ethical, Sayaka likewise had to fight for a society devaluing “egoistic” behavior, even though her sacrifice was ignored by the very people who benefited from her protection. Like the workers, Sayaka was exploited for the benefits of others.

Eventually, the cause of Sayaka’s despair was both the unjust foundation of her “magical” power and the structural violence against her as a “girl”. This

was shown in the shock Sayaka experienced in episode seven, when she was informed that one of her friends, a classmate whom Sayaka previously rescued from a witch, planned to confess to the violinist Sayaka used her wish on. Sayaka was struck by a bitter thought—she should not have saved her friend—and became overwhelmed by the subsequent shame. As the friend asked Sayaka to “face her true feelings” for the violinist, she found herself, with her body turned into a “zombie” and mind full of resentment, unworthy of being loved. If Kyubey’s technology forced magical girls to view their bodies and minds as separate “hardware” and “software”, the patriarchal social norms limited female subjectivity to the value of “purity” and “self-sacrifice”. Sayaka’s refusal of survivalism forced her to live with the unreasonable demands of both Kyubey’s technology and patriarchy, and thereby denied herself the agency to seek love, meaning, or hope. The demands of being a magical girl and being a woman in a patriarchal society are thus juxtaposed.

The last day of Sayaka’s life depicted the disintegration of her moral principle. After a self-destructive fight in which she deliberately “switched off” her sense of pain, a quarrel with Madoka, and witnessing her friend and the violinist become a couple, came a black-and-white sequence containing the most explicit depiction of the brutality of social structure in the series. On a train, two men were disparagingly talking about how a woman could be physically and emotionally abused, exploited for money, and ultimately discarded “for her own good”. The scene was then abruptly cut as Sayaka angrily approached the panicked men, whose fate was unknown. Later, found by Kyoko at an empty station, Sayaka admitted that she had been wrong. A world that permitted neither the right to desire nor the possibility of hope was not worth

protecting. Finding her faith in moral action become utterly absurd, Sayaka transformed into a witch.

### **From the Standpoint of Perverted Reason: Science, Economy, and Gender**

As the final secret about magical girl's existence—that she would become a witch once she exhausted her magical energy—was unveiled, one may likely ask what can be the benefit Kyubey derived from deceiving the girls into having hope, recruiting them into the pointless bloodshed, and awaiting their second transformation in despair? What may be the use of such an inhumane system which reduced a magical girl's future to nothing but the replication of her *history*—the individual struggle between hope and despair as well as the collective suffering of magical girls and their witch sisters? In this section, I will argue that Kyubey's scheme can be better understood through the interconnected problems of science, economy, and gender in the real world.

Disclosing its true identity in episode nine, Kyubey turned out to be an alien from a civilization which harvested energy from changes of emotional state. Since emotions and individuality were only “rare diseases” in Kyubey's society, it was on the Earth that Kyubey, acting as one of the “incubators”, found the ideal energy source: the ebb and flow of human desire, especially the transition from hope to despair experienced by adolescent females. Magical girls' second transformation into witches was claimed to be a process so miraculous that it defied the law of thermodynamics. By reversing the unidirectional increase of entropy, the girls were seen by Kyubey as the best candidates to save the universe from its future heat death—or at least to save it

for the aliens who deemed the sacrifice of individuals from some “lower” civilization a rational choice. A closer look at Kyubey’s argument reveals that its use of technological rationality to justify a normative claim (“sacrificing yourself for the universe”) resonates well with the conundrum of moral idealism in previous sections. Nevertheless, Madoka was far from convinced by Kyubey’s rationale—not because she rejected the idealism Sayaka had failed to fulfill, but because Kyubey’s logic brazenly exposed the absurdity of moral idealism as an ideology *imposed from outside*.

In addition to the appropriation of science as justification of its exploitation of magical girls, Kyubey’s discriminatory and essentialist reading about girls’ “emotional” nature was arguably built upon an asymmetrical gender dichotomy that simultaneously took women’s labor for granted while rejecting their claims to knowledge as being too “emotional”. Apparently, Kyubey’s standpoint was made dominant not only through its alien technoscientific expertise but also through its entanglement with the economic and gendered structure on the Earth. Western science has been criticized by feminist scholars as “a conquering gaze from nowhere” which effaced the partiality of scientists who were predominantly white and male.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the visual design of Kyubey may reflect certain aspects of this “gaze from nowhere”. With a harmless, doll-like appearance, Kyubey can easily disguise itself as a typical sidekick in the magical-girl genre. However, its generic “cuteness” was surrounded by uncanniness even before its true intention was disclosed. In early episodes, a close-up of its face, which reduced the character to two large round eyes and an “ω” shape mouth, was frequently inserted and created an impression of surveillance and voyeurism. This intrusive gaze,

coupled with the fact that Kyubey referred to itself by a male pronoun (*boku*), hinted how scientific claims could be entangled with the gendered violence magical girls have suffered.

The economic root of Kyubey's perverted reason demands another line of inquiry. Here, I will make a brief digression into the formation as well as the representation of modern girlhood in Japan. The construction of a childhood scaffolded by a standardized school system is crucial. As a place to educate children about an "open-ended time" in which humans control their own destiny, school, according to Rappleye and Komatsu, is in fact an extension of the factory regime which imposes "clock time" to advance the efficiency of alienated labor.<sup>17</sup> Modern school therefore begot an ambivalent selfhood trapped in the capitalist society. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, being a girl (*shōjo*) at school—a place where affective bonds among women can emerge while patriarchy was kept at bay—may nevertheless symbolize certain forms of resistance. It can be argued that the fictional representation of modern *shōjo* was "created only to be admired and gazed at by girls".<sup>18</sup> However, while literature—including manga—created by women and for women remained popular in postwar Japan, since the late 1970s the depiction of *shōjo* also started to change.<sup>19</sup> Media related to *shōjo*, such as the magical-girl genre, was at least partially incorporated into the male-dominant market. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the representation of *shōjo* was deeply enmeshed in a consumerist culture focusing on *kawaii* (cute) objects. As Kumiko Saito has pointed out, under such market conditions, "magical girl's mission is now solely to be cute and lovable so as to provide viewers in and outside the text visual enjoyment."<sup>20</sup>

In the end, neither school nor society, in the real or fictional world, was

unscathed by a system that reduced “future” to mere numerical calculation. Technoscience can as well be complicit in the system by providing it a quasi-rational foundation. To question Kyubey’s abuse of rationality is thus also to problematize the meaning of “progress” in history. After all, in the world of *Madoka Magica*, it is upon this very contract between incubators and magical girls that human civilization is founded.

### **Redeeming History**

According to Kyubey, the incubators have been intervening in the affairs of humans long before recorded history. Historical events such as the formation of states, wars, and the fall of empires were revealed to be the ramifications of magical girls’ hope and despair. The world of *Madoka Magica* had therefore “progressed” only via an endless cycle of female sufferings. This historical “fact” made Kyubey’s argument of utilitarian calculation more difficult to refute: our current society was made possible by nothing other than the sacrifice of a sub-population. Kyubey then compared its relationship with humanity to humans’ relationship with domestic animals, and asserted that, by profiting from the historical breakthroughs enabled by the contract, humanity on the whole had gained far more than they had lost. Finally, it provoked Madoka by asking whether she had ever thought of the animals raised, propagated, and consumed in modern society. If humans seldom care about the suffering of creatures with which they build unequal relationships, why should the incubators care about humans?

Indeed, even if magical girls appeared to never free themselves from the shackles of their contract, Kyubey could not dictate the action of individual

magical girls either. The advantage it really enjoyed was a *privileged access* to knowledge and information. Its inaction upon knowing Kyoko's desperate bid to bring Sayaka back from her witch form, which resulted in the death of both girls, exemplified how knowledge and rational calculation helped Kyubey realize its scheme. Since it had long predicted the arrival of the "Walpurgis Night", a gigantic, almost undefeatable witch, in Mitakihara, Kyubey attempted to "retire" as many magical girls as possible. This would be the best strategy to nudge Madoka, whom Kyubey believed to possess the power to defeat the Walpurgis Night singlehandedly, into signing the contract. Consequently, it seemed impossible for the magical girls to gain the upper hand over the incubators without first attaining the same level of knowledge they possessed. And yet even such efforts cannot guarantee success in this unfair game. Homura's backstory, unveiled in the tenth episode, would testify to this.

In her original timeline, Homura was rescued by Madoka from a witch's labyrinth. The two girls then become close friends, but Madoka was soon killed in her encounter with the Walpurgis Night. To save her friend, Homura made the wish to travel *back* in time as a magical girl. Her initially shy, unconfident demeanor was quickly hardened across numerous timelines in which she repeatedly failed to defeat the Walpurgis Night, while gradually realizing the lies Kyubey had told. She nevertheless refused to give up, hoping to accumulate more and more experiences in each trial. Forrest Greenwood has noted the similarity between Homura's strategy and the save/load mechanism of video games, arguing that Homura's difficulties in "winning" the game was a reflection of the unique branching-time system in recent transmedia works in Japan. Such a system would allow new universes to be born via official spin-offs

or “the alternate, fungible futures posited by derivative fan works”.<sup>21</sup> In both fan fictions and the canon, Homura can never fully control how the story unfolds. There will always be unforeseen events and unintended consequences, and her desire to save Madoka is eventually proved to be self-defeating. As hypothesized by Kyubey, it is precisely Homura’s Sisyphean time travels that made Madoka, with her unprecedented energy potential, into a “lucrative” target for the incubators.

The futility of Homura’s resistance notwithstanding, I believe there is significance in her persistent attempt to utilize her own *knowledge* about the system in the struggle against Kyubey’s plot and the catastrophe of the Walpurgis Night. Scholars have called attention to the ways of knowing held by the “insider-outsiders”, who are included as the functional necessity of a society but are excluded or marginalized by the dominant group which holds the power to make the self-serving rules.<sup>22</sup> Insider-outsiders might, however, obtain certain insights into the techniques of oppression, since their daily survival depends on it, that even the dominant group does not have. While Homura may not gain access to the “science” behind magical girls’ transformation into witches, she can plan ahead for the fight with the Walpurgis Night while discouraging Madoka from becoming a magical girl—acts that even Kyubey could not comprehend initially. It was also remarkable to see how Homura, lacking an aggressive magical power of her own, utilized technoscience in her struggle: triangulating the location of witches based on statistics, using and *crafting* a variety of modern firearms, and calculating ballistic trajectories during combats were all skills she cannot afford to do without. If Kyubey’s scheme was simply to wait for a magical girl’s transformation into a witch,

Homura's project enjoyed no such luxury. Gaining knowledge about the magical world in a trial-and-error fashion, she must constantly learn from her experiences, actively survey the innumerable timelines from a standpoint both inside and outside the history, and hope to discover the "correct path" leading to Madoka's salvation.

But is such hope merely a mirage? After all, despite the efforts she made in creating an arsenal by handcrafting and stealing from military bases, modern weaponry—guns, cannons, explosives, and even missiles—appeared to be toys when facing the almighty Walpurgis Night. By the end of the eleventh episode, Homura was lying in the ruins of Mitakihara, pondering whether to give up altogether. The injured, fractured, already too contaminated history of magical girls and human civilization seemed irredeemable. But it was actually Kyubey who unknowingly provided the condition for the undoing of this dilemma. What the incubators failed to understand was that, while they controlled the technology to transform a girl into a magical girl, they cannot *replace* the girls' emotional labor—the "miraculous" power of wishing. Witnessing the cycle of suffering Kyubey showed her, Madoka had realized that history was the locus of resistance. Thus, in the final episode, Madoka decided to eliminate witches from the universe. Madoka then appeared in various historical and futuristic settings: before every magical girl on the verge of despair, she purified her soul gem and promised that the belief in hope and miracle was neither wrong nor futile. Simultaneously, she even destroyed the witch she would become in the timelines Homura had traveled. What was the "scientific law" in the eyes of Kyubey was eventually transcended.

Nonetheless, in the end, Madoka was forced to become a "higher" existence

which would uphold the new physical laws in a reconstructed universe. In a highly emotional sequence, she bid farewell to Homura as her body slowly dissolved into the light. While history appeared to be redeemed, Madoka was nowhere to be found. Neither inside nor outside the history, she had become the very condition for new stories to be told.

### **Desiring Futures**

The ending of *Madoka Magica* was subject to various criticism. Some have argued that Madoka's self-sacrifice failed to challenge either the socio-economic system or the gender stereotype of female caregivers.<sup>23</sup> It is evident that the life of magical girls has barely improved in the new world—they still have to fight a supernatural enemy called “wrath”, which replaced witches as the bringer of despair. Only the form of their *death* was changed: after exhausting their power, they mysteriously disappeared. Referred as the “law of cycles”, this phenomenon was apparently known by magical girls as some sort of divine intervention. As for Kyubey, it remained an alien agent contracting girls for energy exploitation—only this time energy was extracted not from the girls but the enemy they fought against. Consequently, Madoka's wish seemed to merely reform, not revolutionize, the system. Sharon Tran's remark is more positive. Madoka's new mode of existence, by defying the “notions of agency grounded in an ideology of autonomous individualism”, may actually challenge the neoliberal society.<sup>24</sup> This analysis can also be valid to some extent: Madoka could not wish for the redemption of history without her knowledge of the collective struggle of magical girls, or without the efforts she and her friend, particularly Homura, had made together in desiring different futures.

Consequently, to read Madoka's hope as imagining something radically new may shed light on what Elizabeth Grosz called "the movement of actualization" that entailed "the opening up of the virtual to what befalls it".<sup>25</sup> If Madoka's wish really created a new world, that was because she did not predetermine how this "utopian" world should look like in order to solve the ill of the day, but instead concentrated on the reality she must *negotiate with* so that a different world can be actualized, even though she had never known or thought of that world before. It was through an openness to flexibility, hybridity, and futures which remained to be made and remade that something new could emerge. The hope for alternative modes to organize space and time, along with ways to inhabit the world, may also come from the "cyborg writing" that tell stories "about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other".<sup>26</sup> While the tension between desire and hope is likely to remain, if we stay with the conflicting feelings and realities, if we can desire futures despite and *because of* such uncertainties, it may still be possible to transform the dystopian undertones in our utopian dreams into new sources of hope—into future worlds we will love to know and become part of.

Indeed, the genre subversion of *Madoka Magica* might be seen as "part of the self-revolutionizing nature of capitalist production" that operates totally within, not outside, the dominant ideologies of society.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, to investigate how the questions of hope, desire, and future are approached by mainstream media can potentially enrich our understanding of the socio-political contexts they aim to reflect. This paper examines these questions through the paradox of technoscience in *Madoka Magica*. As I have argued, the

series reflects the possibility and desirability to confront an imposed future by seeking alternatives that are yet to be thought. Although the questions raised by *Madoka Magica* are very different from the classical utopian vision about ideal political and economic structures, I believe it is only after our desire to think about time, history, and futures is initiated that a critique of such desire becomes meaningful. We might then engage in sincere discussions about the ways in which our desire can be mobilized and materialized for causes that are truly transformative for contemporary society.

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- <sup>1</sup> See Feenberg, Andrew. *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
  - <sup>2</sup> Hartsock, Nancy CM. "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism." in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Berlin: Springer, 1983), 305.
  - <sup>3</sup> Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 585. While this paper adopts Western feminist ideas to study how science and economy in *Madoka Magica* are represented, such approach is not without limitation. I would like to thank the reviewer for pointing out the problems of using Western theories in analyzing Japanese anime.
  - <sup>4</sup> Adams, Vincanne, Michelle Murphy, and Adele Clarke. "Anticipation: Technoscience, Life, Affect, Temporality." *Subjectivity* 28, no. 1 (2009): 246-265.
  - <sup>5</sup> Saito, Kumiko. "Magic, Shōjo, and Metamorphosis: Magical Girl Anime and the Challenges of Changing Gender Identities in Japanese Society," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1 (2014): 143-164.
  - <sup>6</sup> Tran, Sharon. "Kawaii Asian Girls Save the Day! Animating a Minor Politics of Care." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 43, no. 3 (2018): 20.
  - <sup>7</sup> Butler, Catherine. "Shoujo Versus Seinen? Address and Reception in Puella Magi Madoka Magica (2011)." *Children's Literature in Education* 50, no. 4 (2019): 400-416.
  - <sup>8</sup> Greenwood, Forrest. "The Girl at the End of Time: Temporality, (P)remediation, and Narrative Freedom in Puella Magi Madoka Magica." *Mechademia* 10 (2015): 195-207.
  - <sup>9</sup> Abrams, Jerold J. "Space, Time, and Subjectivity in Neo-Noir Cinema." in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 7.
  - <sup>10</sup> See Cleto, Sara, and Erin Kathleen Bahl. "Becoming the Labyrinth: Negotiating Magical Space and Identity in Puella Magi Madoka Magica." *Humanities* 5, no. 20 (2016): 1-13. Accessed January 5, 2020. doi:10.3390/h5020020.
  - <sup>11</sup> Krutnik, Frank. *In A Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 90
  - <sup>12</sup> Berger, Douglas. "The Murder of Moral Idealism: Kant and the Death of Ian Campbell in The Onion Field," in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 80.
  - <sup>13</sup> Barad, Judith. "Blade Runner and Sartre: the Boundaries of Humanity," in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 21-34 .
  - <sup>14</sup> Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics*, ed. Elizabeth Weed (New York, Routledge, 1989), 196.
  - <sup>15</sup> Hartsock, Nancy CM. "The Feminist Standpoint," 287
  - <sup>16</sup> Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges," 581.

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- <sup>17</sup> Rappleye, Jeremy, and Hikaru Komatsu. "Living on Borrowed Time: Rethinking Temporality, Self, Nihilism, and Schooling," *Comparative Education* 52, no. 2 (2016): 177-201.
- <sup>18</sup> Dollase, Hiromi Tsuchiya. "Early Twentieth Century Japanese Girls' Magazine Stories: Examining Shōjo Voice in *Hanamonogatari* (Flower Tales)," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 36, no. 4 (2003): 733.
- <sup>19</sup> See Galbraith, Patrick W. "Seeking an Alternative: 'Male' Shōjo Fans Since the 1970s." In *Shōjo Across Media: Exploring "Girl" Practices in Contemporary Japan*, ed. Jaqueline Berndt, Kazumi Nagaike, and Fusami Ōgi (Berlin: Springer, 2019), 355-390.
- <sup>20</sup> Saito, Kumiko. "Magic, Shōjo, and Metamorphosis," 152.
- <sup>21</sup> Greenwood, Forrest. "The Girl at the End of Time," 195.
- <sup>22</sup> Wylie, Alison. "Why Standpoint Matters," in *Science and Other Cultures*, ed. Robert Figueroa and Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2013), 34-56.
- <sup>23</sup> For the former criticism, see Howard, Christopher. "The Ethics of Sekai-kei: Reading Hiroki Azuma with Slavoj Žižek," *Science Fiction Film & Television* 7, no. 3 (2014): 365-386; for the latter, see Sugawa-Shimada, Akiko. "Shōjo in Anime: Beyond the Object of Men's Desire," in *Shōjo Across Media: Exploring "Girl" Practices in Contemporary Japan*, ed. Jaqueline Berndt, Kazumi Nagaike, and Fusami Ōgi (Berlin: Springer, 2019), 181-206..
- <sup>24</sup> Tran, Sharon. "Kawaii Asian Girls Save the Day!," 28.
- <sup>25</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. "Thinking the New: Of futures yet Unthought," *symplokē* 6, no. 1/2 (2002): 52
- <sup>26</sup> Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 198.
- <sup>27</sup> Howard, Christopher. "The Ethics of Sekai-kei," 385.

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