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## Reconstructing the Grand Narrative

### The Pure Land of *Madoka Magica*

Since its premiere, the 2011 anime series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* has been widely regarded by both critics and consumers as a groundbreaking work. While contemporary *otaku* culture typically eschews the notion of a grand narrative, this does not mean that *otaku* lack a longing for the transcendent, which is often projected onto a young girl whose limitless potential triggers an intense reaction with *otaku* who have an affinity for the fictional over the mundane. However, *Madoka Magica* harkens back to an even older model of the transcendent. Within the series, through powers gained from multiple, self-sacrificial incarnations, the lead character Madoka is able to break free from her reality and into a paradise in which her fellow magical girls can attain absolute peace. This article explores the ways in which the discourse of Pure Land Buddhism have been integrated into *Madoka Magica* and, thereby, offers *otaku* a postmodern Pure Land.

KEYWORDS: Pure Land—*otaku*—*Puella Magi Madoka Magica*—transcendent—*nijjigen*—postmodernism

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SINCE ITS premiere in 2011, the anime series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, along with its 2013 film sequel *Rebellion*, has been widely regarded by critics and consumers alike as a groundbreaking deconstruction of the perennially popular *mahō shōjo* 魔法少女 genre. The *mahō shōjo* genre, in which young girls with magical powers fight sundry enemies, began in 1966 with the TV series *Sally the Witch*, and eventually became part of the Beautiful Fighting Girl *otaku* オタク consumption pattern (SAITŌ 2011a). As Hiroki Azuma notes, *otaku* culture is a form of postmodern identity that coalesces around media consumption via what he describes as the “database model” in which aspects of narrative and visual media are broken down into their sundry components, providing the individual with satisfaction and garnering their interest (AZUMA 2009, 31–35).<sup>1</sup> While contemporary *otaku* culture typically eschews the notion of a grand narrative, this does not mean that *otaku* do not possess a longing for the transcendent. Rather, this longing is often projected onto a young girl whose limitless potential triggers an intense reaction with *otaku* who already have an affinity for the fictional over the mundane (GALBRAITH 2009; SAITŌ 2011a). However, *Madoka Magica* hearkens back to an older model of the transcendent, which as a replication of Pure Land Buddhism, is altered to fit contemporary audience expectations of the *mahō shōjo* genre.

This replication is not altogether unexpected. Because of the database culture underlying *otaku* consumption, all forms of ideology and discourse have been separated and divided into their constituent parts, just as they are in any given anime or manga franchise (AZUMA 2009). What is unclear, however, is why the production committee behind the creation of *Madoka Magica* elected to use Pure Land discourse as the basis for its narrative. This article argues that as a deconstruction, *Madoka Magica* attempts to reveal a deeper truth that lies behind the set expectations of genre. Unable to create a sense of a transcendent

1. *Otaku*, a subculture in Japan that is focused on the heavy consumption of and identification with mass media and related goods, often derived from anime or manga, have been a major focus in the study of Japanese fan culture and postmodern identity since the term was coined in the 1980s (GALBRAITH 2019).

A “database model” is a particular model of postmodern narrative consumption that Azuma argues is critical in the understanding of *otaku* culture. Rather than approach narrative and media holistically, *otaku* instead reduce these into their component parts or micro-narratives. It is these component parts, be these the design of a character or a specific narrative device, that attract and interest the *otaku* rather than the narrative itself. Azuma notes that this is part of a larger disinterest in grand, uniting narratives and ideologies in a postmodern world.

truth out of a simple narrative, the production committee elected to co-opt the discourse of the transcendent that already existed within the broader cultural milieu of Japan—that of readily accessible Pure Land Buddhism. By adapting this existing discourse as a form of emotional and philosophical shorthand, *Madoka Magica* is able to create a multi-layered commentary on the use of *kyara moe* キャラ萌え in *otaku* consumption to both fill their psychological needs and towards a new form of the transcendent that is derived from the *otaku*'s post-modern consumption patterns.<sup>2</sup> *Otaku* consumption of *kyara moe* is based on a preference for the *nijigen* 二次元 (“the two-dimensional”; the world of fiction and narrative) over the *sanjigen* 三次元 (“the three-dimensional”; society and the “real” world). While *otaku* are well aware that the *nijigen* is not a physical reality, the *nijigen* possesses an emotional reality that resonates more deeply than any aspect of the *sanjigen* (GALBRAITH 2019, 7). Thereby, *otaku* consumption of *kyara moe* already possesses a vague aspect of the transcendent as it provides an escape from the *sanjigen* that has proven for the *otaku* to be disappointing.

Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) claimed that all buddhas behaved as benevolent mentors, with each possessing their own Pure Land where the hurdles on the path to enlightenment were much lower and where true followers could be reborn through the recitation of the Buddha's name (BLUM 2011, 236–237). Within *Madoka Magica*, through powers gained by multiple, self-sacrificial incarnations, the lead character, Madoka, is able to break free from her reality, transform herself into a creature of total enlightenment, and bring into being a paradise in which her fellow magical girls can attain absolute peace. Through Madoka, magical girls who were reborn as witches in an illusory and declining world are instead reborn within a perfect meta-universe created by the now-transcendent Madoka. This narrative is also grounded in *otaku* consumption patterns. As reluctant insiders, *otaku* do not perceive their values and identity as truly reflecting what society dictates as normal and are thereby drawn to *kyara moe* as a means of transverting social boundaries that they view as oppressive (GALBRAITH 2019, 10). Like a Pure Land devotee who feels the world around them has entered the age of *mappō* 末法, *otaku* find society in general to be unsatisfying and disjointed and use narrative to construct a better reality and personal social order, even if the *otaku* is the only individual to belong to this order, that counters their disappointment with reality (AZUMA 2009, 26–27). As a “marginal form,” anime—*mahō shōjo* and *kyara moe* in particular—are capable of generating new worlds, infinite transformation, and itineration and, thereby, create the

2. *Kyara* refers to flat images of a character that are otherwise devoid of context and meaning, such as the character of Hello Kitty. However, this has recently expanded to also include characters from narratives whose aspects are used in an archetypal or repetitive manner. *Moe* is a term used to denote a particular response to a *kyara*, an intense emotional reaction that creates a link between the viewer and the image (GALBRAITH 2009).

space needed for *otaku* to construct their personal worlds (GALBRAITH 2019, 13). However, this can also be a source of trauma that draws *otaku* to compulsively reenact, an issue that leads the sequel film of the series, *Rebellion*, to condemn *otaku* consumption (SAITŌ 2011a, 87–88).

### *The Use of Pure Land Imagery in Madoka Magica*

In the sequel to the original series, Madoka's Pure Land is briefly made visible as it descends from the heavens in the form of a Superflat mandala.<sup>3</sup> *Madoka Magica*'s heavy use of bricolage and Superflat art styles are hints to canny viewers that there is an additional layer of meaning behind the glossy, superficial images that play across the screen. This is not a trait that is particular to *Madoka Magica*, however. As Christopher Bolton notes, *otaku* use a dual-layer approach when they view anime: as entertainment as a fan but also as a detached critic/connoisseur who interprets and deconstructs it as a text (BOLTON 2018, 13–26). Similar to Shinran's claim that total understanding of the *nenbutsu* 念仏 was not possible no matter how thoroughly one had explored the darkest reaches of their hearts (BLUM 2011, 239), anime is designed to cover a plurality of possible meanings and to initiate unending interpretation as a form of audience engagement. As a deconstruction, *Madoka Magica* had to not only touch on key aspects of the *mahō shōjo* genre, but for *otaku* there is a perception that deconstruction also contains a deeper level or narrative in which ethical or philosophical questions are explored.

In anime, genre deconstruction has been tied to philosophical discourse since the premiere of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* over fifteen years prior to the launch of *Madoka Magica*. Deconstructions since this landmark project are designed to point at deeper truths that lie outside the grasp of a typical genre entry, which is often couched in religious imagery. As Azuma notes, “[T]he *otaku* consumers, who are extremely sensitive to the double-layer structure of post-modernity, clearly distinguish between *the surface outer layer within which dwell simulacra*, i.e. the works, and *the deeper layer within which dwells the database*” (AZUMA 2009, 32–33). As religion for *otaku* is merely another aspect of the larger database, the use of religious iconography is merely a break in narrative immersion that allows them to transition between the outer and inner layer of the texts they consume (BOLTON 2018, 14). While the *Evangelion* franchise relied on the heavy use of Christian or Kabbala iconography as a means of signaling the sublayer of possible meaning within the series, *Madoka Magica* has instead usurped the

3. The Superflat Art Movement was started by the artist Murakami Takashi 村上隆 and uses the imagery and production patterns of contemporary Japanese popular visual culture to create a style of art with no meaning, hence the name “Superflat.”

discourse of Pure Land Buddhism to signal that *Madoka* serves as a gateway into the transcendent.

Due to the privileged position of *mahō shōjo* and *kyara moe* within *otaku* culture, however, the character of Madoka implies perhaps a greater need within the fan community for a new belief system to replace older ideologies that have weakened with the growth of postmodern thinking, a trait for which the *otaku* community in particular is noted (AZUMA 2009, 31). Contemporary manga and anime have begun to utilize mythological female entities, from deities and saints to monsters and villains, as a device for creating an additional layer of meaning and emotional resonance in an otherwise average series (AKGUN 2019). Along with the rise of the *isekai* 異世界 genre in which average individuals are transported to another world or trapped within virtual reality, it appears that the most recent generation of *otaku* who were raised with deconstruction as an integral aspect of anime are seeking a new form of the transcendent via the consumption of narrative and media, and that Madoka may be a new icon: a sublime figure through which this transcendence might be reached.

### *Religion as a Database*

But why would a contemporary anime series rely on the use of Pure Land discourse in its narrative when adherence to religion within the *otaku* community is not particularly high? This phenomenon is a result of the postmodern nature of the *otaku* community and their consumption patterns (AZUMA 2009). In the “idealistic age” of the mid-twentieth century, the grand narrative (the ideologies that gave meaning to everyday life and action) was still a fundamental aspect of society. From the 1970s, society moved into the “fictional age,” where the grand narrative is cast into increasing suspicion (AZUMA 2009, 73). However, *otaku* are drawn towards the occult, mysticism, and religious iconography due to their predilection for the fictional, not because they are incapable of distinguishing between the mundane and transcendental other (AZUMA 2009, 27–28). The first generation of *otaku*, in particular, were drawn to such imagery, as the same factors within society that led to the growth of New Age spirituality also caused the growth in *otaku* subculture (AZUMA 2009, 35). For the second generation of *otaku*, this interest was brought under suspicion as both Asahara Shōkō 麻原彰晃 (1955–2018) and his followers were noted fans of anime and manga prior to their acts of terrorism, something that critics at the time blamed on *otaku* culture and its preference for the fictional (THOMAS 2012a, 128).<sup>4</sup> However, this interest never fully evaporated within the *otaku* community due to their intense

4. Asahara was the leader of Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教, responsible for the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. This religion advertised in magazines geared to *otaku* and used motifs and images derived from popular anime and manga series in their religious materials.

desire to consume narrative and, through this, touch something beyond the everyday, an innate desire in this subculture.

This desire is visible within anime and manga, as religious concepts and iconography are frequently used in a variety of ways depending on how they are designed to be used in the narrative; some are purely aesthetic, others are for didactic purposes, and others still convey a particular message (THOMAS 2012b, 57–59). Jolyon Thomas notes that sci-fi and fantasy, such as *mahō shōjo*, are where religious imagery is most frequently used (THOMAS 2012b, 69–70). Despite the seemingly superficial ways that spiritual iconography is used in these productions, however, those exposed to such narratives alter their behavior—for example, the use of anime and manga characters in religious prayer messages called *ema* 絵馬 and contents tourism to shrines and temples featured in popular series (THOMAS 2012b, 76–77). Contents tourism, the practice of ritualistically visiting sites connected to anime or manga, typically incorporates traditional pilgrimage practices that are derived from established routes tied to Japanese Buddhism (GREENE 2016). Even visiting Akihabara has been described by *otaku* as a form of *matsuri*, a Shinto festival in which normative behavior is suspended (GALBRAITH 2019, 142). While religiosity in Japan is said to be low, Thomas found in a survey that over 50 percent of anime viewers claim to have had a transcendent experience while viewing anime, and the majority agreed that religious imagery in fiction is a positive addition (THOMAS 2012b, 60–61). *Otaku*, as heavy consumers of anime, are therefore likely to experience the sensation of transcendence while watching anime and, via the database consumption pattern, are likely to decouple religious iconography from its original discourse.

### *Magical Girls and Karmic Returns*

The problematization of karma and action in regard to salvation is an aspect of Pure Land Buddhism that is used regularly throughout *Madoka Magica*. As Hōnen states, “*Nenbutsu* is for all... it does not discriminate between the wise and the ignorant, between good people and bad, between those who uphold the precepts and those who do not...” (as quoted in BLUM 2011, 248). Furthermore, the recitation of the *nenbutsu* itself was viewed as being “neither a religious practice nor a good act,” but rather as something that transcended both (BLUM 2011, 253). Through this emphasis on the importance and unique aspects of the *nenbutsu*, Pure Land Buddhism called into question the concept of karmic reward and punishment to the point of positing that salvation through meditation and action was impossible, and that only through the invocation of an outside power could one escape the cycle of death and rebirth (BLUM 2011, 257–258). Several *ōjōden* 往生伝 (biographies of buddhas and bodhisattvas) in the early Pure Land tradition state that only those who were already destined for rebirth in the Pure

Land would be drawn towards the recitation of the *nenbutsu*, demonstrating that members of the group were, through this prior selection, already destined for rebirth in the Pure Land (BATHGATE 2007, 282). In *Madoka Magica*, potential *mahō shōjo* are automatically targeted by Kyūbē キュウベエ (a small, cute, emotionless alien trickster) and thereby achieve at the end of the series a predestined and automatic rebirth in Madoka's Pure Land.

Within *Madoka Magica*, actions and motivations are divorced from a character's destined rebirth (or lack thereof) within Madoka's Pure Land as, by the end of the first season, all of the magical girls are destined to end their troubled existences in Madoka's paradise and to never again experience the horrors of the mundane world from which they were plucked. Prior to the creation of Madoka's Pure Land, all magical girls were also doomed—no matter the injustice or righteousness of their acts—in a cycle of transformation that darkly mirrors the Buddhist concepts of death and rebirth. The character Kyūbē notes that selfish magical girls who sabotaged others and fought for territory were common, as they were thereby able to delay ever so temporarily their own transformation into witches, and several magical girls advised that potential magical girls should never make a wish that was selfless as this would lead to bitterness and a quick transformation into being a witch. This is further highlighted through the character Sayaka, who becomes a witch within days of becoming a magical girl due to the grief caused by the repercussions of a selfless wish that she has made for the well-being of another.

In another parallel with Pure Land discourse, karmic action is made tangible within *Madoka Magica* in the form of “soul gems” and “grief seeds.” Both are explained by Kyūbē as physical manifestations of the magical girls' souls: the former being their untarnished souls, which are purified whenever a magical girl risks her life to protect others from witches, and the latter being an inevitability that occurs when a magical girl's soul is so degraded that she transforms into a witch. However, the taint would eventually overwhelm even the best and most selfless magical girl and transformation is therefore inevitable. As magical girls, both selfless and selfish, are doomed to become witches, karmic salvation under their own power is an impossibility. Even if they were to avoid the pressures inflicted upon them by Kyūbē and his ilk to transform into magical girls, the world around them will transform them into cynical adults like Madoka's parents and teachers who ignore the suffering of others while myopically hunting after their own impossible-to-find self-fulfillment. The world is that of *mappō*, the Pure Land belief that in the present world salvation through one's own karmic merit is now impossible and exists in an increasingly harsh state of defilement (MARRA 1988). Only through Madoka can these girls be saved from this cycle. Like the girls' actions, Madoka's existence is only perceived by those

magical girls who are already at the cusp of salvation; much like the *nenbutsu*, only the saved are drawn towards it.

### *Madoka Magica as a Postmodern Hagiography*

*Madoka Magica* also closely replicates the *ōjōden* tradition of Pure Land biography, a type of discourse within the Pure Land tradition including biographical accounts of those who were reborn in the Pure Land (KIKUCHI 2014, 70–71). While proto-*ōjōden* began in Tang-dynasty China (BLUM 2007, 331), the form coalesced through the *setsuwa* 説話 tradition in Heian-period Japan (KIKUCHI 2014, 67–70). These works, too, had to balance the need to convey a larger religious message with the life of a singular individual and primarily did so by grounding the particular experience of a saint in a larger community of characters, demonstrating the saint's impact on the lives of others as well as interpersonal conflict that could serve as a teaching device and thereby creating a universalized message within the biography (BATHGATE 2007, 272–273). An interesting aspect of *Madoka Magica* is the relative passivity of Madoka herself, who only becomes a magical girl in the primary narrative timeline in the last episode and then experiences an immediate apotheosis. Throughout the series, it is the characters around Madoka who drive the action rather than Madoka herself. Through her cycle of death and rebirth (caused by Homura ほむら, a powerful magical girl who has reversed time an uncountable number of times to save the life of her one-time friend Madoka), Madoka is destined for the transcendent, and, instead, it is the lives of those around her that transmit an ideological message.

Furthermore, *ōjōden* tend to expound on how the saint in question is a transcendent ideal as well as a specific individual, implying that all could be as divine if they were to mirror the example set in front of them (BATHGATE 2007, 275). Madoka herself is described by those around her as unfailingly kind and compassionate, while seemingly being no more exceptional than any other typical teenage girl. It is only through events that are out of her control that she gains the potential to become such a powerful figure, and even then, she is merely an example of how to exist rather than someone truly capable as an individual through her own internal abilities of exceptional feats. Her apotheosis is achieved through the works of those around her who guide her towards her destiny.

Additionally, within *ōjōden* discourse, the action of a single individual may result in the salvation of many (BATHGATE 2007, 281). Thus, through her own act of self-sacrifice, Madoka is able to create a new “Law of the Cycle” that saves all magical girls—both living and dead, present and future—from their inevitable doom. Through this act, Madoka becomes the savior of all magical girls in all



timelines and all universes while simultaneously losing her identity as an individual and becoming a being that has transcended personal identity. Instead, she becomes a personification of hope that offers the girls a form of paradise. This is very similar to the transcendent form of saints and bodhisattvas in *ōjōden*. In the Pure Land tradition, salvation is not something that is attainable through devotion and self-discipline. Only the intercession of a transcendent being can bring a renewed existence in a purer realm (BOWRING 1998, 226). Furthermore, beings such as Kannon 観音 or Amida 阿弥陀 exist within all self-aware creatures (SANFORD 2003, 127), just as Madoka exists within all magical girls.

Even the immediate sequel of the first series replicates in Pure Land a subsidiary of *ōjōden* that includes visitations of both the Pure Lands and Buddhism's myriad hells (BATHGATE 2007, 271). In this film, Homura is trapped in yet another illusory world created by the Incubators (the race of alien beings to which Kyūbē belongs) that is meant to draw out the transcended Madoka, who becomes increasingly confounding and miserable. Through these two entries in the series, the *Madoka Magica* franchise explores several realms, each of which is ultimately illusionary and imperfect. In the mundane world, the actions of the magical girls and witches are invisible to most, despite the work of both classes having tangible effects on the physical world. Individuals are killed by unseen powers and inexplicably drawn toward acts of self-destruction, and young girls vanish without remark. These miseries are rendered invisible, as the world itself is a haven of inexplicable and unpredictable misery and cruelty where random events destroy lives. Even human relations are made difficult by personal ambition, from Madoka's mother, who plans to sideline others at her workplace in order to further her career to their detriment, to Sayaka さやか, betrayed by a close friend who is attracted to the same boy. Madoka is advised by multiple people that letting misfortune occur is the wisest course, but she is unable to follow this advice and is repeatedly horrified by the arbitrary suffering of those around her. In this way, the mundane world is not dissimilar from Homura's hell: a realm of illusion, false attachment, and suffering, the cyclical agony of which can only be broken by the intercession of a transcendent being. Naturally, this, too, is a replication of Pure Land discourse of *mappō*: it is only through the intercession of an outside power that magical girls can escape a world of inordinate suffering. However, this is blocked for Homura for reasons that will be explored in greater depth below.

Another aspect of the *Madoka Magica* narrative that has been derived from Pure Land discourse is the series' focus on the death of magical girls. As a genre deconstruction, the series would naturally show the unseen but likely consequences of such a world, similar to the way that *Neon Genesis Evangelion* explored the psychological consequences of the *mecha* メカ genre (a genre of anime/manga focused on large fighting robots that are often piloted by adolescent

males). *Ōjōden*, by their nature as biographies of saints on their progression towards enlightenment, must focus on the cycle of death and rebirth and typically end with a sequence that relates a dream or vision imparted by a still living individual of this mundane realm who has witnessed the saint's final rebirth in the Pure Land (BATHGATE 2007, 276). Within *Madoka Magica*, the action of the series is entirely predicated on the many deaths of Madoka as witnessed by Homura. Through this cycle, Madoka becomes the nexus of innumerable timelines and thereby gains the power to ensure her own apotheosis and her own realm in which she can provide salvation to other magical girls through this cycle of rebirth and death. Furthermore, this salvation is witnessed by Homura who, despite having her memories of Madoka erased, still remembers Madoka's name and maintains an awareness of her existence on some level in order to demonstrate to the viewer the truth of Madoka's apotheosis as expected in many *ōjōden*.

An additional trait of *Madoka Magica* that is derived from *ōjōden* is the manipulation of time. Naturally, Pure Land discourse focuses on the cycle of death and rebirth, condensing the many lives of an individual into a single narrative. However, cause and effect can also be altered, as individuals who did not live a particularly holy life could be reborn in the Pure Land due to acts that were undertaken in distant incarnations. Similarly, a pure and holy individual may suffer, despite their many good deeds, due to ancient crimes or, notably, the will of another that holds them back from the Pure Land (BATHGATE 2007, 277–278). Not only are good and bad deeds within *Madoka Magica* divorced from any system of reward, but in the sequel to the original series, Homura is able to break a part of the transcendent Madoka away and entrap her within a hellish replication of Madoka's Pure Land out of her own selfish desire to possess a girl who has nearly no memory of their friendship and lives a life out of her own dreams. Thereby, the life of a saint is, like in several *ōjōden*, derailed by the act of another.

This creation of an antagonist within the developing *Madoka Magica* storyline is also a replication of *ōjōden* discourse, which over time also developed an interest in the existence and ultimate fate of those who had opposed saints (BATHGATE 2007, 284–285). Furthermore, the narrative's focus on the characters peripheral to Madoka is typical for *ōjōden* as well, as they typically include a multitude of figures who act as either support for or antagonists against the life of the saint (BATHGATE 2007, 289–290). Within the series, the primary actor of the narrative is not Madoka, but rather, those around her. It is the actions and behaviors of Homura, Sayaka, Mami マミ, and Kyōko 杏子 who pull Madoka ever closer to her apotheosis.<sup>5</sup>

5. Sayaka, Mami, and Koyoko are powerful magical girls who either are killed by witches while fighting with Madoka or who transform into witches and then must be killed by Madoka or other magical girls.

### *The Need for a New Transcendent*

Why would *Madoka Magica* use Pure Land discourse as the foundation of its narrative at all? This decision aligns with trends within the *otaku* community and consumption patterns that are inherently both postmodern and also deeply desirous of returning to older narratives and forms (AZUMA 2009). With the collapse of the grand narrative in the 1970s, a belief in a meta-discourse that legitimized societal and ideological systems and the transition into a postmodern society took hold. With this transition, the belief that life could have an overarching meaning evaporated along with the transcendental grand narrative on which it relied (AZUMA 2009, 71–72). Furthermore, without a grand narrative that provided a sense of meaning behind one’s actions, even the attempt to work for a particular cause or towards a larger goal can be a source of frustration, disappointment, and fatigue, as the individual cannot perceive the value of their act beyond the immediate (LYOTARD 1984, 37–38). However, the necessity of the transcendent for one’s life to have some level of meaning or significance remains. Thus, the discourse of the transcendental has become sublimated into what Azuma described as the “database” (AZUMA 2009, 32–35). As deconstructions are supposed to unearth deeper truths within a stagnated form, these are naturally the realm in which the transcendental receives a new life.

This need to search for deeper meaning within a narrative is natural for *otaku*, who, as connoisseurs, view media with a double-layered perspective as both viewers consuming media for entertainment, and as critics who analyze the work for deeper meaning and signification (BOLTON 2018, 159–161). Additionally, *otaku* experience their personal relationships as things that are mediated by media, and as a result, can easily form social ties and connections with other *otaku* (AZUMA 2009, 90–92). *Otaku*, according to some scholars, are discomfited by their encounters with a world that cannot be in some way narrativized. Rather, *otaku* prefer to mediate their reality with narrative and storytelling, in what is described as a “multi-layered reality,” that is, a double-layered orientation that views reality through the mediation of fiction (SAITŌ 2011a, 24–25). Azuma also describes *otaku* as snobbish cynics, as they detach themselves from the wider society just as they detach meaning from text and view both with a jaundiced eye without acknowledging their connection to either (AZUMA 2009, 68–71). This is likely the reason why Madoka is beset by individuals who experience and commit acts of cruelty; her incomprehension mirrors the dissatisfaction with society that *otaku* experience and offers a means of narrativizing the world around them and subsuming it within the database. Furthermore, *otaku* desire a “well-constructed narrative” ever more as the grand narrative dissolves (AZUMA 2009, 74). *Madoka Magica*, by relying on an existing discourse, can more readily construct a solid story that could draw in viewers while creating a

multi-layered text that could be consumed by the double-layered perspective of *otaku* (BOLTON 2018, 159–161).

An additional layer to unpack is the selection of the *mahō shōjo* genre, both as one for deconstruction, but also for its use of Pure Land discourse. Itou Gou argues that the third generation of *otaku* were raised alongside the development of the concept of *kyara*: images that are divorced from narrative and whose flat signification allows for individuals to project any number of meaning onto them (Itou cited in GALBRAITH 2009, 7). Within *Madoka Magica*, Madoka's initial interest in becoming a magical girl lies in her desire to assume the identity of a *kyara*. She doodles variations of herself in costume within her notebook, in the manner of a staple *mahō shōjo* genre character. Nor is Madoka alone in being drawn to flat characters. *Otaku* are drawn to *kyara moe* as figures of “pure fantasy” on which their libidinal desires can be projected (GALBRAITH 2009, 2; SAITŌ 2011a, 27–29). Additionally, these characters are largely female, an unsurprising choice as young girls in Japan, as well as in many other societies, are expected to perform emotional labor for others (GOERISCH and SWANSON 2015, 451–452). Like *kyara*, *moe* is a phenomenon that is common among third-generation *otaku*, and the consumption of these images is a key aspect of their identity, as these characters are largely divorced from the wider world that *otaku* feel such discomfort within (GALBRAITH 2009, 6).<sup>6</sup> Additionally, a single character or figure can have aspects of both *moe* and *kyara*; Madoka in her magical girl form is both *kyara* and *moe*. As society provides the *otaku* little in the way of personal fulfillment, *kyara moe* provide both a means of accessing the wider world via fantasy and also, the satisfaction of a relationship that an *otaku* finds more rewarding than a complicated negotiation with another living individual (GALBRAITH 2009, 4). *Otaku*, unable to identify with others and the world around them, instead connect with *kyara moe* in which any meaning can be projected and with whom interaction can be controlled.

As the third generation of *otaku* matured, *kyara moe* have become increasingly proactive as characters within anime and manga and have been used to deconstruct and comment on patriarchal discourse and hegemonic powers within society (AKGUN 2019). This shift in the portrayal of *kyara moe*, who are otherwise flat, ties in with changes in the *otaku* community at large. Morikawa Kaichiro, a professor of Japanese popular culture at Meiji University, noted that the interests of the *otaku* community have shifted between the generations, beginning with an interest in science fiction and fantasy, then erotic works, and then, as the economic malaise of the 1990s continued to cast a shadow over the prospects of the next generation, the media favored by *otaku* shifted to an equally

6. “Third-generation *otaku*” refers to *otaku* who were born after 1980. This generation of *otaku* tend to rely more heavily on the database model (AZUMA 2009, 7).

grim tone (cited in MURAKAMI 2005, 168). Madoka spends much of the series ill at ease with the world around her, believing that her surroundings should match her expectations of kindness and consideration, only to be disappointed with it, just like *otaku*.

*Madoka Magica* acts as a deconstruction and a criticism of the *mahō shōjo* genre in particular, but appears to be most closely tied to the series *PreCure* or *Purikyua*. Like *Madoka Magica*, *Purikyua* was created via a production committee, a legal entity that consists of multiple companies that produce multi-platform work (BENSON 2019, 63). This production model was developed by the publisher Kadokawa from the 1980s, when the third generation of *otaku* were born (STEINBERG 2012, 172). This series uses *kawaii* and *kyara moe* and is designed for a particularly young, female audience who use what the anthropologist Christine Yano described as “pink flow”: a process by which young girls find escapism via the consumption of what they perceive as an ideal girl (Yano cited in BENSON 2019, 64–65). One of the draws for a franchise like *Purikyua* is the total immersion that it offers its fans, as they can consume tie-in products and mirror the actions of those within the series in their lives (BENSON 2019, 68). Because of this aspect of its larger cultural existence, the fictional world of the series is made attainable and can be incorporated into any facet of daily life through a product range that includes toys, clothing, stationary, and other goods (BENSON 2019, 70–71). However, as Lamarre notes, genre divisions and targeted demographics have become blurred; even seemingly gender-based meta-genres like *shōjo* 少女 (narratives directed at young girls) and *shōnen* 少年 (narratives directed at young boys) are freely consumed by members of either gender. Furthermore, genre itself is now a space for play and deconstruction (LAMARRE 2006, 47–49). This blurring of genre also gives young men the space needed to use *mahō shōjo* as a form of escapism like their younger, female counterparts, without censure or dismay.

Through the consumption of these products, the consumer feels a transcendental connection with the narrative, as if they were a part of the story themselves. However, Madoka undermines the hopeful atmosphere of the series, taking aspects of the narrative and imagery from *Purikyua* and rendering them dark and oppressive. The girls are no longer made heroic through becoming magical girls. Rather, they are exploited and disposed of for a universe that cares not for their suffering. This exploitation and disposal provides a dual-layered signification to the series, in which magical girls provide not only a door into the transcendent and a form of satisfaction to *otaku* viewers by offering a *kyara moe* who refuses to compromise with a cynical social system, but also through the characters Homura and the Incubators who condemn *otaku* consumption of magical girls as they force Madoka to reenact her own demise innumerable times for their own profit. This dual signification creates a commentary on the

exploitation that is inherent in the highly commercialized *mahō shōjo* genre (in the same way that *Neon Genesis Evangelion* did for the equally commercial *mecha* genre), while still offering *otaku* a form of the transcendent in the form of Madoka who not only rescues her counterparts but also offers a more perfect existence that could be tapped into with the myriad of *Madoka Magica* tie-in products.

However, if *Purikyua* is geared for young girls, why would *otaku*—whose membership largely self-identifies as male and are either in their late-teens or adults—be drawn to *kyara moe* and the *mahō shōjo* genre? The Japanese philosopher Honda Touru argues that *kyara moe* allows male consumers to abdicate a masculine identity that they find stifling and instead, find a form of liberation in femininity (Honda cited in GALBRAITH 2009, 4). Further, in forming parasocial relationships with *kyara moe*, individuals perceive these figures as more compassionate and caring than those they encounter in daily life (GALBRAITH 2009, 9). *Kyara moe* also, according to Saitō, possess a simulacrum of the phallus without true potency, as they lack the trauma that the Phallic Mother would traditionally possess and are therefore more appealing to young men (SAITŌ 2011a, 159–160). Furthermore, *kyara moe* and fighting girls lack sexuality and can thereby have the sexual desire of the *otaku* more readily projected upon them (SAITŌ 2011a, 162–164). Therefore, *kyara moe* are not only an entry point for the transcendent, offering a means of accessing a world of narrative that *otaku* find more appealing, a more satisfying simulacra of an interpersonal relationship, and a means of alleviating social expectations and burdens, but they are also a form of comfort when the *otaku* believes that their surroundings are dismal and their futures dreary. Thereby Madoka, as a deconstruction of a *kyara moe* and thereby a signification of a greater truth and a replication of a *kyara moe*, fulfills a number of psychological needs for the *otaku* viewer.

### *The New Transcendent*

With the cathartic value of the *kyara moe* established, let us now explore the reasons why the transcendental discourse of Pure Land Buddhism would be subsumed into a *mahō shōjo* series. Under the umbrella of “magical realism,” *mahō shōjo* is capable of tapping into trauma by transfiguring it into something that is sublime and untouchable (TAKOLANDER and LANGDON 2017, 46–47). Furthermore, BLUM (2007, 330) notes that *setsuwa* and *ōjōden* are also precursors to magical realism, meaning that the transformation of trauma and discontentment is doubled within *Madoka Magica*. As trauma is transformed in magical realism, it also creates a multitude of meanings (TAKOLANDER and LANGDON 2017, 44). As magical realism and related genres, from *setsuwa* to *mahō shōjo*, are centered on those on the margins of society they attract alienated *otaku* (TAKOLANDER

and LANGDON 2017, 41–42). *Otaku* view themselves as a subculture on the margins of society, and consequently, are inexorably drawn in by genres related to or conscribed within magical realism.

The *mahō shōjo* genre is no different. However, due to its reliance on *kyara moe* in recent years, it had flattened it into pure culture industry, a monopoly of cultural production akin to other forms of mass consumer production such as cars or phones, by the advent of *Purikyua* (HORKHEIMER and ADORNO 2002, 95–97). Through the deconstruction of traditional *mahō shōjo* entries like *Purikyua*, *Madoka Magica* promises the *otaku* viewer a means of transgressing their trauma and touching something that is sublime by showing the cruelty that is inherent in *otaku*, who claim to have an affiliation with *kyara moe*, yet unendingly consume media in which the characters are placed in harms way for the sake of *otaku* catharsis. This is why Komatsu Riho argues that *Madoka Magica* is less *mahō shōjo* than horror akin to *The Ring* franchise, where hope is invariably replaced with despair. In the same way, the *otaku*'s hopes for the future, which draw them towards science fiction, have been replaced with the despair caused by their inability to exist in a more perfect world (KOMATSU 2014, 71).

As a deconstruction within the *mahō shōjo* genre, *Madoka Magica* also acts as a critique for society as a whole. Anime also provides a world that stimulates emotional reaction (SAITŌ 2011a, 146–147). However, the primary antagonists within *Madoka Magica* are the Incubators in general and Kyūbē in particular, who approach the world with cool, rational detachment. Like a production committee, the Incubators create innumerable *mahō shōjo* designed to be consumed to sustain a universe that would otherwise fall into entropy in the same manner that deconstructions, franchises, and reboots keep alive stale genres for *otaku* consumers. Only Madoka and her friends, who still view the world via an emotionality that their adult counterparts have lost, retain a sense of purity. However, there is one exception, which is Homura. In the show's true "original" timeline, Homura is an awkward, socially isolated transfer student who is drawn to Madoka as she is a *kyara moe* who also happens to be a *mahō shōjo*. Homura even becomes a *mahō shōjo* herself in order to more fully identify with Madoka and to keep her alive the way *otaku* identify with their favored *kyara moe* and revisit a franchise endlessly within the database. That Homura is more *otaku* than *mahō shōjo* is the reason why she is unable to enter Madoka's Pure Land later as she is readily captured by the Incubators as easily as production committees are able to hold the attention of *otaku*. Nor is Homura able to accept a transcended Madoka who has achieved nirvana and nonexistence, and instead tries to possess a simulacra of Madoka in a world of illusion that is more hellish than the world she just escaped. This becomes a dual-layered criticism of *otaku*, whose database approach prevents them from fully approaching a text, no matter how cool, without the dispassionate eye of the connoisseur (AZUMA

2009, 68–71), and whose enjoyment of media is predicated on the exploitation of the images of young girls and the society that creates them through anomie. It offers instead a return to unironic hope, a *kyara moe* that can return them to a pre-postmodern perspective if they are willing to abandon the database-style consumption pattern.

The key aspect of this discourse lies in the character of Kyūbē, who belongs to a race of intergalactic beings who are behaving as if magical girls exist within the typical *mahō shōjo* universe, while knowing that this system is an arbitrary creation of their own design to manipulate teenage girls into performing self-sacrificial behavior in order to sustain the continuity of an increasingly failing space-time. This discourse parallels both *mahō shōjo* and *kyara moe*, trapped eternally in a recursive loop to perpetuate the fictional world that keep alive the database universe in which *otaku* thrive. This recursion underlines the larger disappointments and tragedies in which Madoka and her classmates live, where Madoka's mother's work is viewed as important and worth betraying others for despite it being merely a means of suppressing her own dissatisfaction of not reaching her own dreams and where adults tell children to abandon hope and even fail to note the disappearance of a teenage orphan left to fend for herself.

### *Salvation from a Broken World*

The cynical and cyclical narrative of the series replicates the adherence to the Great Other that is perpetrated by those who do not believe in its existence and validity but yet continue to behave as they do in order to achieve their own goals (ZIZEK 2001, 41).<sup>7</sup> This is something that *otaku* are not truly capable of doing due to their disillusionment with society and preference for the fictional, and is a node of trauma that dissociates them from wider society. As Takahashi Yūko notes, in *Madoka Magica* the battles of the magical girls and the realms of the witches are invisible and signal a wider blindness on the part of the wider society (TAKAHASHI 2014, 47). Magical girls like Madoka are thereby a form of *objet petit a* that those who can perceive the falsity of the social order around them see in the void created by this unbelief (ZIZEK 2008, 68–70). Through this *objet petit a*, *otaku* are able to approach the sublime through the gap between the present, *Darstellen*, the *sanjigen* in the case of *otaku* consumption, and the representation, *Vorstellung*, the *nijigen* (ZIZEK 2008, 229–230).

According to psychoanalysis, enjoyment exists due to prohibition. The social order creates a space between discipline and prohibition for pleasure via the imagination (MCGOWAN 2003, 15–16, 19–22). However, contemporary capitalism is predicated not on prohibition but rather on pleasure, thereby increasing the

7. The “Great Other” is an aspect of the symbolic order, such as ideology or religion, that provide a sense of order and meaning to society (ZIZEK 2001, 41).



level of narcissism present in society as the super-ego—not the ideal-ego—holds sway (MCGOWAN 2003, 30–34). This form of enjoyment creates a society that is antisocial and destructive, traits that are often attributed to *otaku* (MCGOWAN 2003, 13–14). However, *otaku* culture is based on constant consumption and the indulgence of one's own particular interests. Without prohibition and discipline, however, this pursuit of pleasure will eventually become unsatisfying. With the addition of the decline in the grand narrative, this situation may leave *otaku* adrift and searching for a new form of fulfillment. *Otaku* see society and the limits of its ideology and through this, sense its lack, which in Lacanian psychoanalysis, creates a sense of kinship between the subject and the other as the subject realizes that they both share the same limitations (ZIZEK 2008, 137). But, for *otaku*, this lack merely serves as another means of alienation from the broader society they feel should have a level of completeness that they find in a well-told story.

Furthermore, in a society based on enjoyment, subjects are inextricably drawn to new figures of authority (MCGOWAN 2003, 40–46). Thereby, *otaku* seek within narrative a new authority, one that does not threaten them with prohibition. In a society predicated on enjoyment, individuals are forced to live in a form of narcissistic self-isolation. This isolation causes the individual to lose faith that the Great Other can address the lack within oneself and thereby loses the ability to find meaning in their own existence (MCGOWAN 2003, 66–67). As *otaku* live via narration and online, they find a perfect partner in virtual worlds that they believe cannot disappoint, but, as this is a simulacrum of an enjoyable relationship, the virtual cannot truly satisfy (MCGOWAN 2003, 70–71). This drives the *otaku* to try to find ever greater depths within narrative; it is what drives their dive into the database and deconstruction, where they hope they can find a more actual truth. Like the pervert who seeks to transgress to find the law (FEHER-GUREWHICH 2010, 192), *otaku* break the well-constructed narratives they love so well to find a truth that is only a phantasm.

This lack within the Great Other is what draws the *otaku* to the fictional and the database, where they can obscure the lack in their new social order with recursive narration and deconstruction. This is an outgrowth of fantasy, as fantasy can be used to resist the lack in the other and the potential that the desire of the other will become so overwhelming that it transforms into the death drive (ZIZEK 2008, 132–133). In order to fill the gaps in their new, transcendental and fictionalized world, the *otaku* resorts to the fantasy that their order is complete. In *Madoka Magica*, Madoka can sense the flaws in the world around her, the everyday horrors that she encounters with greater frequency as she moves out of childhood. As she is able to escape to a realm of her own design, filled with creatures of her imagining and with other, disillusioned little girls, she escapes this

mundane world's lack. Through their affiliation and identification with *kyara moe*, so do her *otaku* viewers.

This psychological dysfunction is further highlighted in the adult characters within *Madoka Magica*, whose cynicism confounds Madoka during the series. Žizek writes of the impossibility of the “beautiful soul,” a perfect and uncorrupted being that exists somehow outside of the social order. Because no one lies outside of the bounds of the social order, any so-called “beautiful soul,” no matter how victimized and uncorrupted they may appear, is fully integrated into the social order, and the only “hero” is the one who fully accepts the consequences of their actions and does not seek to hide them via performative victimization (ŽIZEK 2001, 12–14). The “beautiful soul” is therefore not much different than the cynic who acknowledges the incompleteness of ideology and that the ideals of the social order fail to match reality and yet still act as if these were unreplicable out of self-interest (ŽIZEK 2008, 24–26). All must adhere to fetishistic illusions and ideological fantasies, from the concept of currency to the notions of law and justice, that are misrecognized as or pretend to be universal truths (ŽIZEK 2008, 28–39). *Madoka Magica* rebounds with such characters. “Beautiful souls” like Sayaka and Koyoko merely affect their victimization but resent that their good acts were never rewarded with what they desired. Kyūbē and the adults in Madoka’s life all behave with a level of self-serving cynicism that acknowledges the failure of the system in which they live, and yet they insist that the order is perfect. While the character of Kyūbē is just one of many unemotional aliens in fiction (TAKAHASHI 2014, 47), he is merely the adult world taken to its rational endpoint. The only one to truly recognize the imperfection is Madoka, and she accepts her extinction from this world in order to grasp her liberation.

Saitō argues that *Madoka Magica* is a warning against desire, noting that the entirety of the narrative is driven by emotion and desire and therefore, in his opinion, the work is a meta-discourse on *otaku* culture and their consumption of beautiful fighting girls, a character type that now frequently overlaps with *kyara moe* (SAITŌ 2011b, 39–40). Like any fantasy, this consumption merely upholds the social order despite dissatisfaction, and only desire can transcend it (MCGOWAN 2007, 79–80). Only Madoka has desire and not fantasy. Koyoko had the fantasy of her father’s success, Sayaka, the fantasy of a perfect relationship, and Madoka’s mother, the fantasy of overcoming her own thwarted hopes with a high-powered career, and all of them eventually lose something. However, Madoka cannot even conceive of something to wish for that would allow her to become a *mahō shōjo* no matter how much Kyūbē prods her for an answer. Madoka is an individual that has no desires of her own. *Otaku*, with their hunt for an ever-more-perfect narrative, create the misery of the *mahō shōjo* through their consumption of the genre. By acknowledging this exploitation, *Madoka*

*Magica* promises a means of moving beyond this exploitation into something purer, something that is less terrible for the *kyara moe* with whom *otaku* identify.

### *Cycles of Reincarnation*

Nishigai notes that *Madoka Magica* is one of several recent anime productions that have played with the concept of cyclical time, most notably, *Higurashi no Naku Koro ni*, a horror anime that also subverts the expectations of *kyara moe* in a slice of life anime (NISHIGAI 2012, 27). While time in manga and anime is typically atemporal as part of its visual language and coding structure (SAITŌ 2011a, 136–137), the use of cyclical time is relatively novel in either medium. In narratives that use looped time travel, the shared aspect is the focus on the hope that rectifying the past will eventually lead to a better present and a happier future (NISHIGAI 2012, 23–24). This is akin to Žižek’s description of revolution as an act that exists in *jetztzeit*, a nexus that combines both history and the present into a single state (ŽIZEK 2008, 155–157). However, this alternation of time is similar to the concept of reincarnation as used in *ōjōden* discourse, in which an individual moves inextricably towards their rebirth in the Pure Land and enlightenment, transcending time and existing in a perpetual revolutionary *jetztzeit*. Madoka, too, as both saint and revolutionary, exists in the same single time frame over innumerable timelines simultaneously, thus giving her the power to effect change.

Madoka, despite the absence of an inherently heroic or self-sacrificing character in this particular timeline, becomes so, as she elects to behave as if she were. As Žižek notes, when one assumes a “mask” and behaves accordingly, then the internal truth of the “mask” is irrelevant, as the individual becomes what they presume to be via action (ŽIZEK 2001, 34). Žižek also notes that this is a frequent motif in fiction, as it represents the subject paying a debt to themselves via a seemingly self-sacrificial act that prevents them from feeling guilt or misgivings later (ŽIZEK 2001, 16–19). Madoka, despite numerous warnings to not behave in a self-sacrificing manner in order to free Homura from her uncountable recursions to the past, does so anyway, as she is unable to live with the guilt caused by letting someone else die in her place and the risk that the powerful witch Walpurgisnacht places on those around it. If Homura truly wished for Madoka to be saved from her innumerable deaths, then Homura should have left her completely alone in this timeline as it is only through Homura’s actions, her strange behavior, and her attempt to kill Kyūbē that draws Madoka into the world of magical girls. In all other versions of the universe, Madoka is either already a magical girl or becomes so very quickly after meeting Homura. But repression only exists after its appearance, and, like *otaku* who are drawn back to their traumatic first encounter with the *nijigen*, Homura is drawn to Madoka the more she

attempts to repress her desire to be close to her (SAITŌ 2011b, 87–88; ZIZEK 2001, 14). Without approaching Madoka and exposing her to the existence of magical girls, Homura is unable to repress her desire to be a magical girl with Madoka, a desire that eventually casts Homura from Madoka's Pure Land into her own hell. This is an example of the misrecognition of ideology in which one believes that one is the "addressee" of this Great Other and, therefore, what happens is fated when it is instead random chance (ZIZEK 2001, 10–12). It is this repression and repetition that gives Madoka the misrecognition of fate that is the source of her power.

Furthermore, it is this misrecognition, repression, and repetition on the part of Homura that requires the ultimate death of Madoka. For Jacques Lacan, there exists two bodies, one sublime and one that is physical, which opens the individual to the possibility of two deaths: the social one, in addition to that of the physical body, which creates a *ding* (a psychoanalytical term that is the unfillable void within the human psyche) that is a node of trauma within the symbolic order (Lacan cited in ZIZEK 2008, 148–150). It is a doubled image in order to obscure the truth that when the subject encounters itself unvarnished, it encounters its own annihilation (ZIZEK 2001, 21). As death is a master signifier, this *ding* can become a point of paramount importance (MCGOWAN 2003, 26–27). However, "the very notion of life is alien to the Symbolic Order" (ZIZEK 2001, 22). Within *Madoka Magica*, the very universe is attempting to snuff out its own existence through entropy. The prevention of this fate is what brings Kyūbē's race to Earth, as this alien race is too cynical and unemotive to create the emotional energy needed to feed the universe. Only through the emotional frustration of thwarted teenage girls and the energy released with their deaths can Kyūbē keep the Symbolic Order that is the universe as it exists in their understanding. Lacan argued that any true act is predicated on a form of self-destruction, a distillation of suicide, if not suicide itself, as a form of symbolic self-annihilation that can lead to a form of rebirth for the subject (ZIZEK 2001, 42–44). Kyūbē and the adults, too cynical to hope for rebirth in any form, are not capable of the act needed to create a symbolic order that is not predicated on the self-sacrifice of teenage girls. Madoka, being a repressed subject, is given great power, and is therefore able to transcend this order and create an external paradise.

### *Conclusion*

Zizek argues that truth is only approachable through misrecognition. This is also true for historical necessity, when what initially appears random is later perceived to be something that needed to occur when it begins to repeat (ZIZEK 2008, 63–64, 66–67, 163–165). Like a saint destined for the Pure Land, Madoka initially appears to be a random event. Only through the recognition of her reoccurring

nature is she recognized as a historical necessity. Madoka also becomes a leader, who claims the power of her “people,” the other magical girls, and draws a line between herself and her opponents, Kyūbē and his fellow Incubators.

Due to this misrecognition, it is unsurprising that the concept of undermining karma is a key aspect of *Madoka Magica*. Kyūbē uses the concept of justice and a fair universe that the teenage girls still possess to manipulate them into acts that, while generally positive and self-sacrificing, result in nothing but ultimately pointless misery (TAKAHASHI 2014, 48). Kyūbē has replaced karma with image, choosing to be silent on key aspects of the magical girl experience in exchange for the flat *kyara moe* that draws the girls’ interests. In late-capitalist societies, the image has begun to replace speech due to the ubiquity of screens. Even novels are becoming increasingly visual in their description of the worlds contained within (MCGOWAN 2003, 59–60). This reliance on images allows for a greater ease in ideological manipulation and coercion. As Todd McGowan notes, “in valuing the image over the word, we fall victim to the image’s appearance of full revelation” (MCGOWAN 2003, 65). *Otaku* too, despite their love of narrative, favor the image over the word, hence their love for *kyara moe*. However, the *otaku* is aware that this leads to their manipulation: to buy goods, to break apart narrative, to be drawn to aspects of a story that are derived through the canny use of the database. Through Madoka’s rejection of the image in favor of self-sacrifice, she offers a break that seems to lead to the sublime.

This is also why the transcendence offered by Madoka is truly only offered to *mahō shōjo*. As creatures of pure image, they too can follow Madoka in the rejection of the image in favor of self-sacrifice; in fact performative self-sacrifice is the purpose of a *mahō shōjo kyara moe*. As the series progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that Homura is not truly a *mahō shōjo* but rather something that is external to them, possessing a critical distance that all others lack. She is more *otaku* than *mahō shōjo*, despite affiliating herself with them rather than the world around her. Even in her last interaction with Kyūbē before the end of the first series, it is clear that she has insight and a critical distance the Incubators also lack but wish to tap into, the way the production committees tap into *otaku* consumption to propel a franchise. The series thus becomes a dual-layered deconstruction, not just of the *mahō shōjo* genre but also *otaku* consumption of *mahō shōjo kyara moe*. *Madoka Magica* offers a form of a postmodern Pure Land where *mahō shōjo* can escape the unending recursion of genre while simultaneously condemning *otaku* for creating their own idiosyncratic worlds that are as toxic as that which is created by Homura and the world that *otaku* wish to transcend but, as *sanjigen* themselves, can never escape.

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