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Platonic Sex: Perversion and Shôjo Anime (Part One)

Thomas Lamarre

Abstract Anime abounds in images of 'nonhuman women', that is, goddesses, female robots, gynoids, alien women, animal girls, female cyborgs, and many others. This article provides an introduction to problems of gender and genre in relation to the nonhuman woman, followed by an extended discussion of the animated television series *Chobits*, based on a manga series by the four-woman team CLAMP. In a manner eerily consonant with psychoanalytic theory, *Chobits* reads problems of media and technology almost exclusively in terms of human desire, in terms of the weird substance of enjoyment. Yet, because the nonhuman woman remains nonhuman, structures of desire are subject to perverse material twists, and *Chobits* offers a very unusual logic of suture. The nonhuman woman becomes the catalyst for ways of looking that appear to bypass relations with Others altogether, promising the production of entirely new worlds at some elemental level of perception.

Keywords anime, gaze, manga, materiality, new media, new technologies, perversion, psychoanalysis, shôjo, suture

Anime abounds in images of 'nonhuman women', that is, goddesses, female robots or gynoids, alien women, and animal girls. There are also woman cyborgs, magical girls, psychic girls, cat-eared female cops, to mention a few other anime figures. Anime fans become familiar with a whole range of female figures that are either not really human

(robots, aliens, deities, animals), or that possess extra-human powers of some kind or another (from cyborg enhancements to magical or psychic abilities), which take them beyond the merely human woman. Of course, referring to these different images of the feminine as 'nonhuman women' amounts to taking a certain stance. One might initially read it as a trope, archetype, or motif in the context of myth or fairy tales. The nonhuman woman appears, for instance, as a motif in Kawai Hayao's (1988) study of folktales and the Japanese psyche under the heading of *irui no josei* or 'maidens of a different kind or genus', which was aptly rendered as 'nonhuman females' (1988). What strikes me as important about the nonhuman woman is that she/it implies a double relation: (a) between man and woman (or boy and girl), and (b) between human and nonhuman. It is typically the nonhuman dimension of the female figure that connects it with social, cosmological, and political concerns.

The trope of the nonhuman woman might seem to endorse a masculinist humanism wherein man = human, and woman = nonhuman. In most anime, however male-centered, things never work out as simply as all that. Of particular interest about the nonhuman woman in many anime is the doubling of heterosexual relations with something like material conditions. The nonhuman dimension implies some kind of relation to technologies or media, to material conditions of contemporary life. You don't have to be Marx or Freud to sense that something weird is happening when sexuality and new technologies are folded together.

Rather than attempt an exhaustive survey or overview of instances of the nonhuman woman in anime and manga, however, I will begin with a brief discussion of gender and genre in order to situate *Chobits*, an anime and manga series that serves here as a kind of case study in the nonhuman woman. The four-woman team CLAMP, consisting of Igarashi Satsuki, Ohkawa Nanase, Nekoi Mick, and Mokona Apapa, produced the exceedingly popular *Chobits* manga series in 2001. Like most CLAMP works, *Chobits* quickly spawned a television anime series (dir. Asaka Morio, 2002). *Chobits* presents a new twist on the female robot or gynoid, telling the tale of a young man who falls in love with a 'persocom', a personal computer with human form, a truly personal computer.

Chobits encourages viewers to look at new media and technologies in terms of structures of desire, and in a psychoanalytic way. In fact, much like psychoanalytic theory, *Chobits* puts an emphasis on the weird substance of enjoyment, reading problems of media and technology almost exclusively in terms of human desire and its inherent lack. Yet, insofar as the nonhuman woman remains nonhuman, structures of desire are subject to perverse twists.

Chobits also plays with a perverse structure of visibility, generating something very different from psychoanalytic logic of gaze and suture. The nonhuman woman becomes the catalyst for ways of looking that

propose to bypass relations with Others altogether, promising the production of entirely new worlds at some elemental level of perception. While the construction of such 'worlds without Others' is in some ways specific to *Chobits* and CLAMP, I also see it as a tendency of a specific world of animation, the world of television animation in which the link between manga and animation is especially pronounced. Even though the manga and anime versions of a tale tend to differ in terms of style and often in terms of narrative structure, the anime remains open to what might be called manga effects. The appearance of worlds without Others occurs where manga effects enable twists and turns within shôjo genres, promising to engineer new forms of sexuality, allowing such paradoxical forms of sexuality as the 'Platonic sex' that I see as a central feature of *Chobits*.

Genre/gender

The CLAMP team is renowned for its agile transformations of familiar genres, as well as for combining shôjo and shônén genres, that is, 'boy genres' and 'girl genres', as in *Escaflowne* or *X*. Part of the genre genius of *Chobits* lies in CLAMP's blending of the technophilia implicit in the shônén cyborg genre with the magic or divine power of the mysterious shôjo, making palpable the analogy between technology and magic that runs across shôjo and shônén genres. CLAMP refers to *Chobits* as a variation on the genre of 'boy living with a mysterious girl' (CLAMP, 2003), and, because the mysterious girl is a computer, CLAMP is able to play between shônén and shôjo forms of address. The series proved popular with young men and women.

I deliberately speak of shôjo *genres* and shônén *genres*, that is, of genres in the plural. This is because there is a tendency in discussions of Japanese animation and manga to refer to shôjo and shônén in terms of a unitary shôjo genre and a unitary shônén genre. Put another way, there is a tendency to force an equation between genre and gender, and thus to reinforce normative conceptions of gender via genre. When construed in terms of a basic opposition, that is, the boy genre versus the girl genre, shôjo and shônén function as little more than normative gender categories: this is what boys like, this is what girls like.

There are, of course, specific kinds of address and expectations associated with shôjo and shônén in general. Yet shôjo and shônén each comprise a number of distinct genres, which effectively sets up a shifting field of expectations and a mobile form of address to readers or viewers. It is in this way that specific manga or anime series come to address multiple audiences, not only in the sense of addressing both girls and boys, but also in the sense of addressing different kinds of girls and different kinds of boys. After all, what passes for a boy or a girl does not only change over time but always varies within a

population. What is more, from at least the early 1990s, it has become evident to most fans that any sense of an absolute divide between shôjo and shônén has all but collapsed.

Bending genre and bending gender, however, goes back much further. This is not something that suddenly began in the late 1980s or early 1990s, even if a new consciousness about gender and genre emerged at that time in Japan. Bending gender and genre appears at the very origins of manga and anime (if one wishes to think in those terms). For instance, in one of the standard approaches to the history of manga and anime, these forms are said to take on a certain coherence and visibility through the work of Tezuka Osamu, the so-called 'god of manga' who also did a great deal to launch the television animation industry in Japan. If we take Tezuka as an origin, it is clear that gender bending was central, not marginal, to manga and anime from the outset. Tezuka explored and consolidated a variety of distinctive genre stories, and delighted in gender transformation as a mean of shifting basic story patterns. The robot or 'manmade human' (*jinzô ningen*) of *Metropolis* (1949) changes from boy to girl with the flick of a switch, and *Ribbon no kishi* (1953–6) follows the adventures of a girl garbed as a knight. Such devices in Tezuka not only recall the all-female musical comedies of Takarazuka Theatre but also harken back to the play with androgyny in the emergent mass culture of the Taishô era (1912–26), which in turn evokes aspects of the bawdy urban cultures of the Tokugawa period (1608–1868).

This is not to say that nothing new ever happens. Obviously, a gynoid is not the same as a Taishô androgen or, say, a female player in the pleasure quarters in 18th-century Japan. Rather I wish to point out that, if one looks at manga and anime only in terms of two basic genres (shôjo and shônén), one misses the complexity of anime and manga, in terms of reception and production, and in terms of the interaction of writers/producers with readers/viewers. If one treats shôjo and shônén as unitary genres, one will treat series that mix or combine shôjo and shônén elements as exceptions, when in fact they are the rule. Moreover, when one approaches manga and anime only in terms of a binary gender/genre system, one inevitably must posit an ideal past (or an oppressive past) in which shôjo and shônén (as girls and boys) did not mix as they do today.

In brief, to rest content with a binary divide between shôjo and shônén is to adopt the perspective of normative categories of gender and sexuality, when in fact the bulk of anime and manga production plays with and bends normative categories of sexuality, inventing and reinventing genre paradigms in order to outpace the imposition of static categories. Because many commentators love to puzzle over shôjo genres of sex change (such as *Ranma 1/2*), of putative cross-dressing (*Rose of Versailles* or *Utena*), or of 'love between beautiful boys' (*bishônen'ai* or *yaoi*), there has been a tendency in anime and manga research to reify genre play as resistance to hetero-normative

sexuality (Buckley, 1991). Yet it is characteristic of genre (especially when associated with gender categories) to mix things up. Genre is inherently hybridizing (Neale, 1995). This is not to say that genre play, with its drive to mix and remix icons and motifs, is inherently libidinal.

It is important to acknowledge that genre is a matter of *regulated difference* rather than of imposed norms. Insofar as genre involves regulation, the twists and turns of genre (its play with difference) may do no more than expand the reach of regulation. After all, generic regulation feeds on difference to survive in the marketplace. Of course, because genre must continually entertain difference, it frequently affords a better indicator of the operations of power than normative categories (such as boy versus girl). Genre tends to play with difference precisely where the imposition of social norms runs the risk of failure, to the distress and delight of viewers. Generic difference must always promise to dismantle the very conventions of genre, to undermine the regulation of difference. But can genre, as regulated difference, produce something truly different, something that would afford a shock of enlightenment, however fleeting, that might open critical thinking within genre?

This is a crucial question in the relation to *Chobits*, because the anime series, like the manga series, plays off genre conventions associated with the nonhuman woman. *Chobits* opens the genre sometimes referred to as 'living together' (Tokusatsu Takarajima Henshūbu, 1996) to various generic complications by having the boy live with a 'mysterious girl'. The mystery of the girl in *Chobits* lies in her status as a computer, and not any ordinary computer but one of the legendary 'chobits' series reputed to feel emotion. The choice of a gynoid computer is an interesting one insofar as generic conventions appear to open to contemporary material and social conditions associated with new technologies and new media. In effect, *Chobits* promises to show how boy-girl relations have changed (and not changed) with the advent of PCs, internet, and new articulations of domestic, urban, and public spaces. CLAMP shrewdly plays off viewers' fascination with new technologies and media, holding forth the possibility that computer technologies will utterly transform sexual relations and thus break with all the generic conventions of romance. In brief, *Chobits* turns to 'new media technologies' to open difference within genre (of boy living with mysterious girl).

Insofar as genre is about regulated difference, one might expect that *Chobits* will do no more than regulate, domesticate, or otherwise soften the impact of new media technologies, ultimately flattening the very material difference that it evokes. Or, to put it rather baldly, can one expect romance genres to impart profound insights into contemporary material conditions? While *Chobits* can indeed be accused of offering nothing more than spurious innovation and regulated difference, its exploration of sexual relations between man and gynoid nonetheless produces a great deal of gender and genre trouble.

The excessive trouble with sexuality in *Chobits* merits closer attention, for it provides insight into how perversion emerges and operates in relation to new media technologies. What is more (to anticipate subsequent discussion), by entertaining a troubled relation to new media technologies, *Chobits* ends up confronting its own materiality. Especially in the second part of this article, I will show how manga effects provide a way of thinking through media problems – in both the television anime series and the manga. This affords some insight into the visual operations of anime, particularly of anime that remains relatively close to its manga sources, and probably of television anime more generally (which cannot, after all, be treated in isolation from manga). Especially interesting about *Chobits* is that it appears at once very savvy about cinematic structuring of the visual field (the gaze and suture) and about how to redirect or pervert their operations. This perversion of visual operations begins with the problem of (sexual) difference inherent in genre/gender play.

Sex or something like it

The crucial scene of *Chobits* occurs right at the outset, in the first chapter of manga (CLAMP, 2003) and in the first episode of the animated series (dir. Asaka Morio, 2002). It occurs just after the male protagonist, Motosuwa Hideki, has discovered a female ‘persocom’ in a pile of garbage.

The persocom is a new twist on the personal computer, a PC that is also a person, or at least, that takes human form. In *Chobits*, persocom are primarily female, that is, gyneoid personal computers. Occasionally, the series offers a glimpse of a male persocom in the crowd, or refers to women who own male persocoms. Yet the emphasis falls almost exclusively on the relation between men and their female companion computers.

Motosuwa Hideki is newly arrived in Tokyo from the rural north of Japan, and one of the marvels of the metropolis is the omnipresence of persocoms – and especially of sexy female models. Of course Motosuwa yearns for a female computer of his own. But he cannot afford one. In the manner of a fairy tale, *Chobits* instantly grants him his wish.

On his way home from his part-time job, Motosuwa finds a female persocom in the trash, its sexy young body alluringly wrapped in tape. Overjoyed at his find, he lugs ‘her’ home, and alone in his small room, tries to find the switch to turn her on. Four hours later, after exploring every square centimeter of her, he still cannot find the switch. There is only one place he hasn’t checked. And as he slides his fingers between her legs, he tries to reassure himself, ‘Nothing dirty about turning on a machine.’

Apparently, there is a switch (or something) between her legs,

because the persocom instantly comes alive, and the wrappings fly from her body, leaving her exquisitely exposed. Yet the reader-viewer never sees or knows exactly what Motosuwa finds between her legs. Moreover, Motosuwa himself does not see. His eyes are tightly shut as he turns on his newly found persocom. It may look to us as if he inserts a finger into 'her' vagina, but there is no image of female genitals or of a switch. We see only his hand between her legs, fingers crooked (Figure 1).

This is the critical scene and the crucial image for the entire series. For it establishes the question that activates the series: Is this a sexual relationship? And other questions quickly follow. If it is not a sexual relationship, what is this relationship between Motosuwa and the female personal computer? If it's not a sexual relationship, will it turn into one? Crucially, however, right from the outset, it looks like a sexual relationship. Yet the reader or viewer has constant reminders that it only looks like sex. In fact, Motosuwa is just turning on a computer - nothing but a switch between those legs, folks, just a button to turn her on. There's nothing dirty about it at all. Yet the



Figure 1 In the anime series, Motosuwa finally works up the nerve to turn her on.
© CLAMP • KODANSHA/"CHOBITS" PARTNERSHIP.

scene is deliberately disquieting, dirty and perverse, since it looks like a sexual relationship, and the idea that Motosuwa is activating the female computer, that is, turning it on, serves to reinforce this sense that something sexual is happening. In this respect, the stance of CLAMP, the team of four women responsible for the original manga, recalls Lacan's quixotic formula about sexuality: despite all appearances, there is no sexual relationship (Lacan, 1975: 65, 1982: 141).

Of course, the 'absence of the sexual relationship' means something very different in CLAMP than in Lacan. As Žižek (1991) points out, for Lacan, existence is synonymous with symbolization, and the absence or non-existence of the sexual relationship means that it resists symbolization (p. 136). As for CLAMP, when Ohkawa Nanase, a member of the team, speaks of the anime adaptation of their manga, she indicates that the idea was to make an anime that wouldn't embarrass girls (CLAMP, 2003). CLAMP's attention to girls' responses is important, for it reminds us that, even though the initial appearance of *Chobits* in a shōnen publication suggests a young male audience, *Chobits* combines shōnen and shōjo forms of address, which is not unusual in the 'living together' genre. It also signals that, for CLAMP, the absence of sexual relations is a pragmatic problem of representation, while for Lacan the absence of the sexual relationship is part of a theory of human existence and symbolization. Nonetheless, CLAMP and Lacan cross paths, intersecting at the figure of the nonhuman woman, where the problem of representation turns into one of symbolization.

Strictly speaking, in the relationship between Motosuwa and the gynoid computer, there is no woman. This is why Motosuwa can insert a finger between the computer's legs and turn it on, without it truly being a sexual relationship. Yet the situation remains perverse, precisely because the computer looks like a woman, or rather, a girl. (One learns that her physique is that of a 15- or 16-year-old.) And so, just as Motosuwa cannot immediately bring himself to feel between 'her' legs, so the viewer cannot quite believe that these images of a 19-year-old youth with a 16-year-old girl in his arms, with his hands exploring what appear to be the most private parts of her body, are not images of a sexual relation. In an almost classic psychoanalytic fashion, *Chobits* sets up the truth as unbelievable, which produces a desire to see the truth from a believable angle, to set it straight and get it right. This is what sets the story in motion. Is this a computer or a woman? Since *Chobits* presents 'woman' as an effect of socially structured relations (ultimately the persocom is a woman insofar as Motosuwa treats her/it as such), the question 'computer or woman?' goes hand in hand with a second one about sociality: will Motosuwa treat it/her as a computer or as woman?

Here *Chobits* also presents its readers or viewers with an opposition between instrumental use and love, in order to invert its workings. On the one hand, the series tells us, while humans may use computers as instruments, men should not use women that way; and they will

not, if they are truly in love. On the other hand, real women unnerve Motosuwa, and it is only because his computer is not a woman that he can treat her/it as he should treat a woman, with love, respect, and affection. He can't treat women like women but he can treat a gynoid computer like one. What then is a woman?

This is why the crucial scene for the series is the one in which Motosuwa turns her/it on. *Chobits* toys with the reader-viewer's inability to see what lies between the persocom's legs. What do persocoms have down there? Is the female persocom really (that is, anatomically) like a woman? We cannot see what the persocom 'really' is. Is 'she' a computer or a woman? Apparently Motosuwa knows, but even if he told us what he found there, we could not believe him, for the story insists on his complete lack of experience with women. *Chobits* presents him as an anomaly: a 19-year-old virgin who is continually embarrassed by his lack of experience. What's more, he closes his eyes as he reaches for her switch. Would he really know the difference between an on-switch and, say, a woman's genitals? Does he know what a woman is? *Chobits* thus uses Motosuwa's lack of experience to pose a very basic question. How does anyone know what a woman is? Who can say for sure? Is it just a way of looking at things? From what angle can you see what a woman is?

By not allowing the reader-viewer to see, *Chobits* implies that there is a deeper structure, a secret to be revealed. The first sequences of *Chobits* thus establish the female persocom - soon to be called Chi, for 'chi' is the only sound she can initially utter - as a site of secrets. And, in the course of the series, more and more attention focuses on resolving the mystery of how that thing between her legs functions. Ultimately, *Chobits* (especially the manga) has very concrete answers to the mystery, but what is important is the suspense, the displacement of the traumatic moment when Motosuwa first explores her secret.

The series gradually deepens and widens the mystery around Chi. In the second episode, for instance, we learn that Chi does not have an OS, an operating system. In effect, the story displaces the problem of the initial 'mysterious something' between her legs to a different, possibly deeper level, that of her OS. In the third episode, we learn that Chi should not be able to perform any kind of activity without an OS, yet she walks, responds to commands, and utters 'chi' incessantly. The mystery deepens. By the third episode, there is already speculation that Chi might be a 'chobits', that is, one of a legendary series of persocoms designed to feel emotion and evolve. Because the origins of the chobits series are cloaked in mystery, Chi's secret continues to grow. Circles of mystery expand like ripples around the nothing between Chi's legs. In one episode, Chi goes out in search of a job to help support her life with Motosuwa, and a pornographer who stages peep shows (live and in real time online) tricks her into working for him. When the scurrilous pornographer slips a hand between her legs

to show her how to masturbate for the audience, Chi begins to float, and lapsing into a dreamlike state, skips and flies over the rooftops, aglow with a weird radiance. As she lingers in her amnesiac state over the city, all the other persocoms in the city go dead. In other words, to touch her between the legs has an effect on every persocom in the city and thus urban existence itself.

The circles of mystery thus continue to expand. A master hacker pursues and kidnaps her, and there are mysterious agents who track her, intent on preventing her from realizing her destiny. At the same time, someone is writing illustrated children's stories that speak directly to Chi, in an attempt to teach her who she is, to awaken her awareness. In sum, the entire world comes to revolve around Chi's secret. If only we knew what she really was (that is, what is that nothing between her legs), we would come to understand the conspiracies and other weird events.

Platonic sex

Ultimately, these layers of mystery with their broad hints of vast conspiracies depend on a very simple proposition: there is no woman here. With its gynoid persocom, *Chobits* offers a concrete instance of Lacan's proposition, *il n'y a pas La femme*, that is, 'woman does not exist' or 'there is no such thing as The woman' (Lacan, 1975: 68, 1982: 144). It is because Chi is not a woman but a computer that so much confusion arises, producing a demand for endless layers of elaboration to determine what it/she is. Or rather, insofar as Chi continues to function symbolically as a woman, she is, quite literally, what Luce Irigaray (1985) calls the 'sex which is not one'. Simply put, *Chobits* makes 'woman' (or 'girl') into a metaphysical problem. The woman-ness of Chi is an effect or symptom of something else, something beyond Chi as a physical being (a computer). At some levels, Chi works much like the femme fatale in *film noir*, whom Žižek (1991) sees as a perfect example of the Lacanian proposition that 'Woman does not exist': 'she is nothing but the symptom of man, her power of fascination masks the void of her nonexistence' (p. 65). And, in fact, with its layers of conspiracy and its hints of dark urban secrets, *Chobits* folds elements of *film noir* around its mystery girl.

Chobits offers a very different resolution than Žižek's *noir* to the metaphysical problem of sexuality, however. Žižek (1992), faithful to Lacan in this respect, centres his discussion on woman as a symptom of man: '*man himself exists only through woman qua his symptom*: all his ontological consistency hangs on, is suspended from his symptom, is "externalized" in his symptom' (p. 155, emphases in original). In the context of *Chobits*, this interpretation fits nicely with Motosuwa's gradual construction of Chi as a girl and then a girlfriend. Motosuwa cannot bring himself to think of her as merely a computer.

Chi's womanness is, in this sense, Motosuwa's symptom. What of Chi, however? The story establishes her destiny as a quest to find the one who will love her for herself. In other words, her destiny is to serve as man's symptom, at least in appearance. Yet *Chobits* departs from the destiny of the femme fatale in *film noir* as Žižek (1991) depicts it,

The destiny of the femme fatale in *film noir*, her final hysterical breakdown, exemplifies perfectly the Lacanian proposition that Woman does not exist: she is nothing but the symptom of man, her powerful fascination masks the void of her nonexistence, so that when she is finally rejected, her whole ontological consistency is dissolved. (p. 65)

While *Chobits* promises something like a final hysterical breakdown, the series does not end in rejection and ontological dissolution. Of course, as it folds and unfolds layers of mystery and conspiracy around Chi's button, *Chobits* often promises a final hysterical breakdown, not only of Chi or of the romance, but also of the world itself. The mysterious agents who track Chi suggest that, if Chi does fulfill her destiny, the world as we know it will end. Of interest here is the idea that the final hysterical breakdown is not only of the woman but also of the world. This is because Chi's breakdown is not only that of woman but also of contemporary communication networks.

Mary Anne Doane's (1999) remarks about the cyborg in SF genres come to mind here. She suggests that, as biological reproduction and mechanical reproduction become indistinguishable in the figure of the cyborg, it is as if the functions of the maternal body were spread throughout the social, creating deep anxieties about origins. If there are no fixed biological origins (mothers), if anything and everything is giving birth, identities become unmoored, impossible to ascribe. Stories of cyborg women in particular try to work through these anxieties. Chi is, of course, a cyborg-like entity whose origins are a source of mystery and anxiety. Yet, for all its evocation of an apocalyptic scenario, *Chobits* is a homey genre. It has family drama. One learns about Chi's family, about Chi and her sister, who were gynoid computers designed by a childless couple as daughters. Unfortunately, the daughters felt a bit too much affection for the father, and one had to be destroyed. But the parents could not bear to destroy Chi, and abandoned her to her destiny, with the mother standing watch over her, close at hand yet in the shadows. In this respect, *Chobits* also folds in elements of melodrama with its loving mother who hides her true identity and inhabits secret rooms, trying to steer her daughter's destiny (success in love, marriage). Yet, for all the melodrama, this does not end in tears. Nor does *Chobits* deploy a temporality of the 'too late', to evoke Linda Williams's (1999) characterization of melodrama. Ultimately, to use Williams's overarching terms, it is more like the 'right on time' of pornography.

By the romantic conventions of the genre 'boy lives with mysterious girl', the viewer knows from the outset that this will not end in

tears. Yet the story must end just short of marriage. Chi and Motosuwa must remain in limbo, trying to work out how to live together, not as man and wife but as quasi-man and quasi-wife, as an off-kilter unmarried couple, one whose relationship is subject to potentially endless serialization (even if the series itself does not continue). Indeed, at the end of the series, Motosuwa has failed his exams and will remain a student for another year, living with Chi. At least another year of 'boy lives with nonhuman girl' is on the horizon. Yet the terms for their living together are exceedingly bizarre. In fact, they are so bizarre that the anime version glosses over what the manga makes perfectly clear: the button between Chi's legs is a reset button, and so if Motosuwa were to have sex with her, he would reset her, and she would lose all her memory and identity. Faced with the reset button, Motosuwa decides that he loves her for herself, not for her body. He will live with her without having sex with her. In other words, the mystery of what lies between her legs is resolved, and yet the resolution serves only to make concrete the original conceit of the series: there is no sexual relationship here. Yet, nonetheless, there is a woman, or something like a woman, that emerges as a symptom of man. Chi becomes herself insofar as Motosuwa loves her for herself.

Chobits might, in this respect, be thought of as an inversion of what Žižek sees as the hysterical breakdown of the femme fatale in *noir*. The series continually flirts with, but ultimately runs counter to, the rejection and dissolution of the mysterious femme fatale. It remains true to the conventions of romance in this respect. It does not, however, offer a clear-cut resolution (marriage or even sex). Rather it offers fairly rote symbolic equivalents of marriage and sex, an endless living together. In effect, *Chobits* toys with the hysterical breakdown of the femme fatale in *noir*, presenting an interminable series of minor breakdowns. But these minor breakdowns are always repaired, and the resistance to symbolization associated with sexual relations and the woman becomes more like engineering than ontological dissolution. Things can always be patched up; even faced with the absence of the woman, the guy can pull things together, and the woman, confronted with her own void, does not break down, ontologically. Rather there appears a material rift that demands constant attention.

In other words, in *Chobits*, elements of *noir* (and of apocalypse and other genres) serve the ends of serialization – a sort of hysterical serialization – rather than of ontological reckoning with lack. Insofar as the woman is computer, however, love is more like an upgrading of systems to address design flaws, implying a perfectibility that runs counter to Lacanian notions of lack and hysteria. This is *film blanc* – an animated film style that retains a sense of the manga page, of its whiteness and blankness, of the page as a surface on which perfectible geometries can emerge and dissolve and emerge again, not only the geometries of panels and their dissolution, but also the geometries that make for idealized figures, for idealized traits. If the geometries or ideal forms of drawing may not be entirely

perfect, such imperfection does not signal an underlying lack. It is as if the blankness of the page implies an underlying plenitude and thus an infinite perfectibility.

This manga effect extends into the anime series, despite their various differences. While it is beyond the scope of this article to take up this topic in detail, I would argue that the manga effect extends into the anime version not simply because the manga is the source for the anime. Rather it is because manga and animation share an emphasis on the modulation of figures (however these are sketched or rendered), a 'cartooning' (so to speak) that stresses figure over background, bending, fracturing, or even breaking with effects of framing. *Chobits* pushes this tendency toward an infinitely perfectible blankness.

In *Chobits*, perfectibility lies with Chi, and it falls more to women than to men. However cute and idealized Motosuwa's appearance, it is not subject to the same kind of graphic attention as is Chi's form. From episode to episode, Chi models a series of different looks, each cuter and sexier than the last. At this level, the series hovers between a girl's fashion magazine and pornography for young men. Part of the success of the series, then, is that Chi appeals to young men and women, while imparting an aura of innocence to the desire for celebrity (attributed to girls) and to voyeuristic impulses (attributed to young men). Significantly, the perfectibility of appearance does not appear disabling but empowering for girls. This is because the underlying logic of *Chobits* is not lack but plenitude. The challenge of *Chobits* lies in its play with scenarios of lack that impart a sense of metaphysical depth to the problems of sexuality and woman. It thus encourages a psychoanalytic reading, a plunge into the perverse depths of sexuality. Yet ultimately it turns the constitutive failure of human sexuality into a boon. And it is not just a matter of enjoying the symptom, of tarrying with the negative. On the contrary, *Chobits* turns lack into 'blanc' or 'blank', and blank promises to discover a wellspring of creativity and perfectibility at the heart of lack.

Still, *Chobits* hovers between lack and blank, or, at another level, between the mysterious hysterics of the femme fatale of *film noir* and the divinely innocent attractions of the Lolita entity of *film blanc*. The result is an interminable state of 'Platonic sex', figured perfectly in the resolution of *Chobits* whereby Motosuwa will live with Chi but without ever turning her on again.

I call this state Platonic sex because it recalls what is loosely referred to as 'Platonic love', that is, a love that is not sexually consummated. (Although I use the term very differently from former porn video actress Iijima Ai in her book *Puratonikku sekusu*, which subsequently appeared as a film and television series in 2001, I think that the presentation of sexuality in *Chobits* can be read as an ambivalent response to exploitation of women in the sex industry.) Platonic love here implies a love of ideal forms over and above the crass material intercourse of bodies, even while soft-porn images of bodies remain

desirable and even necessary. For *Chobits* is not simply about love over lust, or about ideal forms over matter. *Chobits* also includes a great deal of sex, or something like it. Throughout the series, for instance, Motosuwa shows a keen interest in pornography, and there are lots of jokes about his getting off on porn pictures. Significantly, when his female acquaintances (Chi, his landlady, his teacher) catch sight of porn in his apartment, Motosuwa shows great embarrassment, and yet the women treat pornography (and masturbation) as perfectly normal for him. Also to Motosuwa's embarrassment, Chi at one point adopts the dress and postures of the women in his skin magazines, knowing how much he likes them.

At this level, Chi appears to be all about service, in the sense given to it in the manga and anime world. 'Service' (*sabbisu*), or sometimes in English 'fan service', refers to images calculated for sexual excitement or titillation that are unnecessary to the story. For instance, a shōjo story about a girl who finds herself in ancient China might include sexy images of her designed to appeal to the more prurient interests of male fans. Such 'fan service' is thought to draw male readers or viewers to shōjo genres. Insofar as all genre production is about servicing fans, this sort of fan service might be thought of more specifically in terms of a shift in mode of address that combines shōjo and shōnen modes. The advertisements for *Chobits*-related figurines in American fan journals give a good sense of this fan service associated with Chi. For example, they feature 'a beautiful assortment of 4" PVC figures' above a headline 'locate their "on" buttons', thus addressing boys and girls at once.

In any event, what is important in the context of *Chobits* is that it not only presents pornography for young men as acceptable but also endorses pornography as a solution to the problem of human sexuality. It is as if the image can satisfy desire, thus localizing and managing it. The image of a sexy woman does not evoke in the man a desire that must be satisfied with a real woman. Rather Chi and Motosuwa's relation suggests that men and women can bypass sexual relations with one another, as long as soft porn images are allowed to manage things. The solution to the constituent lack of human sexuality is Platonic sex, that is, what one might think of as sex with images, a kind of safe sex in which people don't touch, in which there is no penetration, but only a play with surfaces. If Platonism describes a movement of the soul from the chaotic formless world of the senses toward the realm of ideal forms that express geometric perfection of reason, Platonic sex describes a movement of desire in which ideal forms are precisely those perfect images of the feminine that tremble between soft-core pornography for men and girl's fashion. Therein the soul puts an end to the restless movement of lack, finding conceptual bliss in the engineering of perfectible forms of desire, moving not over the void of existence but through the full whitening of life - not as a woman but as something like it. It is a movement that Platonism may not survive except in the most minimal form, as

the slight thickening or narrowing of a line that can reveal something of the true nature of a character sketched on the page, on the celluloid sheet, or even the line as extended through a Bézier curve in digital animation.

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