Journal of Language and Literature
Vol. 26 No. 1, April 2026, pp. 88-102
DOI: 10.24071/joll.v26i1.166
Available at https://ejournal.usd.ac.id/index.php/JOLL/index

The Contemporary Japanese Imagination in Makoto Shinkai's *Tenki No Ko*

Muslimah Nur Irfan
muslimah23001@mail.unpad.ac.id
Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, INDONESIA

Lina Meilinawati Rahayu
Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, INDONESIA

Amaliatun Saleha
Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, INDONESIA

Abstract

Makoto Shinkai's Tenki no Ko (2019) presents a narrative that moves across urban spaces shaped by modern technology, social pressure, and ecological instability, a movement that is closely experienced by its characters as they navigate everyday life in contemporary Japan. This study focuses on how Japan is imagined in Tenki no Ko and how that imagination presents utopia as a form of critique of contemporary Japanese society. The analysis uses a qualitative descriptive approach using the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure to reveal the relationship between signs in the text and the representation of modern Japan. The meaning of these signs is then connected to Ernst Bloch's theory of utopia to see how hope and future possibilities are shown in the narrative. By combining these two frameworks, this study examines Tenki no Ko not only as a critique of Japan's social and ecological conditions but also as presenting utopia as an ongoing process. The findings show that Tenki no Ko offers a critique of modernity while presenting utopia not as a perfect final world. Instead, utopia appears as a form of hope that grows from human relations with the city and with nature. From this analysis, the article argues that Tenki no Ko functions both as a critique of modernity and as an imaginative space where alternative ways of coexisting with nature in contemporary Japan can be continuously negotiated.

Article information

Received: December 12, 2025

Revised: February 12, 2026

Accepted: April 8, 2026

***Keywords**: imagination; utopia; Makoto Shinkai; signs*

Introduction

The advancement of technology in the modern era has provided enhanced facilities for accessing information and entertainment; concurrently, it has diminished the scope available for the exercise of human imagination. The incessant stream of instantaneous visual stimuli has resulted in individuals making increasingly limited use of

Journal of Language and Literature
ISSN: 1410-5691 (print); 2580-5878 (online)

imaginative and creative faculties in comprehending the surrounding world. According to Yoneyama (2020), contemporary society is confronted with a crisis of imagination, namely, a diminished capacity to conceive of new possibilities concerning the world we currently inhabit and the one we are to face in the future. The weakening of imaginative capacity limits individuals' ability to envision alternative possibilities beyond existing realities, thereby shaping how the future is understood, including in the imagination of utopia.

Bloch, in *The Principle of Hope* (1986), asserts that utopia should be understood as an open-ended process that continually moves toward the future. In this sense, utopia does not demand perfection or the absence of conflict; rather, it is grounded in humanity's capacity to persist in imagining and envisioning new possibilities amid the uncertainties of life. Accordingly, utopia does not signify the absence of conflict but resides in the attitude adopted by human beings in confronting life's inherent uncertainties (Yamanaka, 2014).

This understanding affirms that uncertainty and conflict constitute integral aspects of modern life. This view is accorded by Giddens (2013) in *The Consequences of Modernity*, it is emphasized that uncertainty and ambiguity are the logical and inevitable consequences of modernity. Accordingly, this study further examines the concepts of imagination and utopia to ascertain their relevance to ongoing developments of modernity.

The crisis of imagination outlined in the preceding section is not only pertinent to sociopolitical domains but may also be examined through literary works and popular cultural texts. One work that is highly relevant to this issue is *Tenki no Ko*. *Tenki no Ko* is a novel by Makoto Shinkai, published on August 18, 2019, by Kadokawa Corporation. The novel engages with the theme of natural disasters in relation to the phenomenon of climate change (Furuhata, 2022; Mulyadi, 2022; Yoneyama, 2020).

The novel tells the story of Hodaka Morishima, a teenager who leaves his rural hometown and travels to Tokyo, the center of Japanese urban life. Amidst his solitude in the metropolis, Hodaka encounters Hina Amano, an orphaned girl who secretly possesses an extraordinary ability. Their meeting unfolds against the backdrop of Japan undergoing climatic instability, as the summer season becomes marked by unceasing rainfall. This unpredictable weather condition not only serves as the setting that brings Hodaka and Hina together but also shapes the trajectory of their lives thereafter.

The novel *Tenki no Ko* not only depicts the contours of modern life but also foregrounds various transformations currently taking place in Japan, including erratic weather patterns, spatial dominance, consumption intensity, and pervasive feelings of alienation amid crowded cityscapes. These elements collectively illustrate conditions closely aligned with Yoneyama's crisis of imagination. Moreover, *Tenki no Ko* does more than narrate the life trajectories of its characters; it also portrays the ways in which contemporary Japan envisions itself through the intersection of technology and environmental concerns. This precisely renders *Tenki no Ko* a compelling text for examining the contours of contemporary Japanese imagination.

The relationship between the crisis of imagination, the concept of utopia, and the contemporary Japanese context in *Tenki no Ko* lies in the manner in which the work represents the modern human need to envision the world amid pervasive uncertainty. In this context, the spatial representations of Japan function as a medium of imagination that projects Japan not as a static ideal world but as a utopia in continual motion.

Several prior studies concerning *Tenki no Ko* indicate that the work may be construed from multiple analytical standpoints. Seruni (2022), for instance, highlights the representation of social class as manifested in the life dynamics of its characters. Other research places greater emphasis on the ecological dimension. Sutanto et al. (2023) determine that the most dominant ecological metaphor in the work is the notion that human life resembles the weather, thereby illustrating a profound interrelation between natural

conditions and human experience. Further, the study conducted by Amzah et al. (2023) demonstrates that *Tenki no Ko* has been widely received as a blockbuster film capable of eliciting heightened global awareness regarding environmental issues. Mulyadi (2022) examines the representation of various ecological problems arising from extreme climate change within the narrative, including declining air temperatures, erratic seasonal patterns, and adverse economic impacts.

In a broader interpretive framework, Furuhata (2022) argued that *Tenki no Ko* is a medium of local reflection upon the climate crisis and the geological conditions of the Anthropocene, wherein local myths are critically brought into dialogue with the longue durée of Earth's history and cosmological narratives. Meanwhile, Yoneyama (2020) situates Makoto Shinkai's work in relation to that of Hayao Miyazaki in order to examine the human–nature relationship through the lens of postmodern animism.

In other words, the foregoing prior studies constitute secondary sources that serve to reinforce the analytical foundation of present research. Drawing upon such scholarship, this study seeks to broaden interpretive engagement with *Tenki no Ko* by employing Bloch's conception of utopia as an open and continually unfolding process. This perspective facilitates an understanding of how the future is dynamically imagined within the framework of contemporary Japanese culture, while also demonstrating that the utopian imagination articulated in *Tenki no Ko* is not static but rather evolves in accordance with ongoing social and cultural transformations. The notion of contemporary Japanese imagination referenced herein pertains to the manner in which the novel envisions Japan through the semiotic markers of modern life that reflect present-day social and cultural conditions, as well as the relationship between humans and the natural environment.

Based on the existing body of prior research and employing Ernst Bloch's theory of utopia in conjunction with Saussure's semiotic methodology, it may be observed that discussions of utopia in *Tenki no Ko* remain infrequently positioned as the primary focus of analysis. Accordingly, this study is significant insofar as it regards *Tenki no Ko* not merely as a work of fiction, but as a cultural text that imaginatively constructs Japan through the signs embedded within its narrative. Through this approach, the study seeks to examine how the imagination of contemporary Japan is represented in *Tenki no Ko*, as well as how utopia operates as a critique of modernity in the Japanese context.

Methodology

This study began with a close re-reading of *Tenki no Ko*, focusing on narrative moments that articulate Japanese contemporary imagination, particularly in relation to human life, nature, and urban space. Relevant passages are elements functioning as significant signs within the text. The analysis then examined the operation of these signs through a semiotic approach grounded in the theory of Ferdinand de Saussure (1986). Based on Saussure's concept of the sign, consisting of the signifier and signified, this research endeavors to expose how the narrative of the novel constructs particular representations through the relationship between these two components.

After identifying the sign system, rather than treating signs as isolated units, the study approached them as interconnected elements embedded within broader narrative and sociocultural contexts. Concepts from postmodernism and contemporary Japanese studies were therefore employed to situate these signs within the conditions of modern Japan. Subsequently, the sign through Saussure's semiotics was connected to broader theoretical frameworks to elucidate their imaginative implications. Ernst Bloch's (1986) theory of utopia was used to examine hope and possibility amid ecological anxiety, while Henri Lefebvre's (2012) concept of space illuminated the role of urban settings as socially produced mediators of human–nature relations. In addition, Lawrence Buell's (2009) ecocritical perspective was applied to analyze the narrative's engagement with ecological consciousness.

Through this methodological framework, this study traces the movement from textual

Journal of Language and Literature
ISSN: 1410-5691 (print); 2580-5878 (online)

signs to cultural imagination, revealing the utopian potential embedded in the novel's representation of contemporary Japanese ecological and spatial concerns.

Results and Discussion

This research found that *Tenki no Ko* articulated a contemporary Japanese imagination through three principal forms of representation: (1) the estranged space of the modern city, (2) the human–nature tension characteristic, and (3) a critique of the social conditions of postmodern Japan. These three forms of imagination emerged through the signs embedded in the narrative, the experiences of the characters, and the spatial structures depicted within the text.

1. Contemporary Japanese Imagination

The process of imagining Japan cannot be separated from the influence of the West upon Japanese society (Fukutake, 1988; Konovalova, 2019). These transformations began when Japan abolished the *Sakoku* policy, an isolationist system enforced by the Tokugawa shogunate for more than two centuries (Kapasi, 2019: 32). In the course of this transition, Japan underwent a process of Westernization and developed into a technologically advanced nation (López-Aranguren, 2023: 225). The Japanese exhibit a pronounced interest in all that is new and technologically advanced in the wider world. Elements deemed most compelling and relevant to their cultural sphere are subsequently adopted becoming integrated into Japanese culture, often without an explicit awareness of the transformative process involved (Konovalova, 2019: 1). In Makoto Shinkai's *Tenki no Ko*, the imaginative construction of contemporary Japan emerges through narrative depictions of space, nature, and daily life. The various signs embedded within the narrative collectively constitute an imaginative representation of Japan in the present era, one of which is shown through the main character's experiences in navigating urban spaces.

Contemporary Japan is concretely realized through the experiences of the main character, Hodaka, who fled to Tokyo from his home island. Hodaka, who fled to Tokyo from his home island, experienced the urban space as unfamiliar, notwithstanding the fact that he remained within the territorial boundaries of Japan. This was evident in the following excerpt: Hodaka's experience represented the estrangement between individuals and the spaces they inhabited. This was evident in the following excerpt:

> *"街はひたすらに、巨大で複雑で難解で冷酷だった。駅で迷い、電車を間違え、どこを歩いても人にぶつかり、道を尋ねても答えてもらえず、話しかけてもいないのに謎の勧誘をされまくり、コンビニ以外の店には怖くて入れず、... バイトを探すためにようやく辿りついた新宿では(なんとなく東京の中心は新宿のような気がしていたのだ)、いきなりのゲリラ豪雨でびしょ濡れになった。*
>
> *" Machi wa hitasura ni, kyodai de fukuzatsu de nankai de reikoku datta. Eki de mayoi, densha o machigae, doko o aruite mo hito ni butsukari, Michi o tazunetemo kotaete moraezu, Hanashikakete mo inai noni nazo no kan'yū o saremaku ri, Konbini igai no mise ni wa kowakute hairezu,.... Baito o sagasu tame ni yōyaku tadoritsuita Shinjuku de wa (nantonaku Tōkyō no chūshin wa Shinjuku no yōna ki ga shite ita no da), Ikinari no gerira gōu de bishonure ni natta."*
>
> *"This city was truly vast, complex, difficult, and emotionless. I got lost in the station, boarded the wrong train, bumped into people everywhere I walked, was ignored when I asked for directions, was suspiciously approached even though I wasn't talking to anyone, and was afraid to enter any shop other than a minimarket. ... After struggling so much, I finally reached Shinjuku (because I felt Shinjuku was the center of Tokyo) to look for a part-time job, yet I immediately ended up soaked because of the cat and dog rain, high-intensity local rain." (Makoto, 2019: 24).*

From the foregoing excerpt, several signifiers are observable and function as

representational markers of life in Tokyo, Japan. The expression *'this city is truly vast, complex, difficult, and devoid of feeling'* shall be deemed to constitute a signifier delineating the manner in which the character Hodaka apprehends the urban reality of Tokyo. At the level of the signifier, the phrase *'a large city'* refers to an expansive, dense, and modern spatial configuration. However, at the level of the signified, the clause *'devoid of feeling'* signifies a sense of estrangement and emotional frigidity within human life amidst such advancement. This depiction is consistent with Hodaka's lived experience in Tokyo, given that he is a fourteen-year-old adolescent undergoing the transitional phase toward adulthood. Such a process of maturation is, by its nature, an ordeal characterized by difficulty, anxiety, and psychological turbulence. In this context, Hodaka's experience of alienation reflects a form of irony that frequently emerges in both utopian and dystopian narratives. As Muallim (2017: 41) argues, such narratives often portray individuals or groups as being estranged from the social order. Accordingly, Hodaka's experience is not merely personal but also reflects a broader condition of alienation within society.

The relationship between the signifier and signified is inherently arbitrary, insofar as the meaning of the expression *'large city'* does not arise from any natural or self-evident correspondence. The designation of a *'large city'* shall therefore be understood as a spatial construct produced by human agency. As Lefebvre (1991), argues, human beings, as social entities, do not merely inhabit space but simultaneously create and constitute such space through their practices of everyday life. Human subjects participate in the production of the world in which they are situated by virtue of their consciousness and actions. The forces of modernity, comprising engendered what Lefebvre terms *'abstract space'*, industrial capitalism as well as socialism have namely a spatial order constituted through the logics of control, standardization, and efficiency, which in turn operate to displace and dismantle traditional spatial forms previously held by indigenous communities (Buell, 2009: 63-64; Lefebvre, 2012: 48-53). The traditional space referenced herein shall be construed as denoting a spatial formation in which 'place and community are integrated as a singular unity' (Buell, 2009: 63–64).

Hodaka perceives Tokyo as an alienating spatial formation, owing to its operation under logics of accelerated movement, rationality, and efficiency, which frequently disregard the affective dimensions of human life. Such a sense of estrangement is further intensified by the fact that he remains in a formative stage of self-identification, having only recently entered a mode of existence that differs substantially from his place of origin. Accordingly, Hodaka's encounter with Tokyo constitutes not merely an entry into an urban metropolis, but a concurrent process of self-comprehension undertaken amid a spatial environment that both constrains and configures the trajectory of his life.

The signifiers 'I got lost in the station, boarded the wrong train, bumped into people, and was ignored when asking for directions' constitute semiotic indicators of the social disorientation experienced by Hodaka in Tokyo. These signifiers generate a corresponding signified relating to the absence of empathy and the emergence of alienation within metropolitan life. Within the Saussurean framework, such meaning is arbitrary, in that it does not inherently derive from the act of 'being lost' itself, but is instead produced through a modern social structure that prioritizes efficiency, speed, and rationality to the extent that interpersonal relations are increasingly marginalized. These values have shaped the identity of contemporary Japanese society and reflect broader social realities in which Tokyo, as the nation's capital, functions as a large-scale and increasingly individualistic urban environment (Seruni, 2022: 856).

The development of modern urban centers in Japan cannot be separated from the processes of modernization initiated during the late nineteenth century, particularly following Japan's opening to the West after the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853. This encounter marked the collapse of the Tokugawa isolationist system and the beginning of the Meiji Restoration, during which Japan underwent rapid industrialization

and transformation of its social structure (Kapasi, 2019: 32). In the postwar period, capitalism expanded at an accelerated rate and transformed Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka into consumer-oriented cities. Urban growth thereby ceased to be predicated primarily upon political function and instead shifted toward the expansion of industrial and economic activity (Fukutake, 1988: 82-83). Rapid urbanization has led Japan to face various challenges commonly experienced by economically developed countries. One prominent phenomenon is the increasing migration of populations from rural to urban areas, which, in the Japanese context, occurs with considerable intensity (Kapasi, 2019: 35). The rapid economic expansion further reconfigured prevailing consumption patterns and positioned self-image and social prestige as integral components of everyday life (Fukutake, 1988: 130). This capitalist configuration gives rise to an urban spatial order characterized by rapidity, pressure, and a structural orientation toward productivity. Within this context, Hodaka's experience being disregarded, becoming lost, and feeling estranged operated as signifiers that denote the manner in which capitalism and Japan's history of modernization have produced a densely populated, competitive, and emotionally attenuated lived environment.

Thus, Hodaka's experience does not merely depict the anxieties of an adolescent entering the threshold of adulthood but further constitutes a representation of the conditions of contemporary Japan, characterized by heightened mobility, social isolation, and pervasive uncertainty in modern life. Following Giddens (2013), technological advancement and its spectacular sophistication obscure the harsher and more pressurized realities of urban life. Within this context of uncertainty, Japanese society does not entirely abandon traditional belief systems as a means of interpreting complex realities. This tendency is reflected in the figure of the "Sunshine Girl," which the novel represents as a mythological presence embodied in a human figure that mediates between the modern world and Japan's traditional belief systems.

In *Tenki no Ko*, the "Weather Girl" functions as a symbolic figure that connects technological modernity with enduring cultural traditions. Although Japan is widely recognized as a technologically advanced nation, traditional narratives and beliefs continue to persist within its collective memory (Fairuz et al., 2022; Shirani, 2012 in Fairuz & Efraim, 2023). The presence of the "Weather Girl" thus demonstrates that modernity does not eliminate older belief systems; rather, the two coexist and together shape contemporary Japanese cultural imagination. Moreover, (Ramadhan & Ummah, 2023: 398-399) identifies the continued representation of on, a Japanese social concept that regulates behavior and social obligation. In modern society, however, individuals interpret this concept more flexibly, no longer adhering to it in a rigid manner, although it still carries social consequences. This flexibility, in turn, introduces ambiguity and may obscure the realities of social relations in contemporary Japan. Accordingly, the "Weather Girl" operates as a sign that not only represents traditional belief but also serves as a medium through which uncertainty in modern Japanese life is interpreted.

Furthermore, within the cited passage, the signifier *'Shinjuku… the center of Tokyo'* in the novel *Tenki no Ko* operated as a representational marker of contemporary Japan. The term *'Shinjuku'* functions as a signifier referring merely to the lexical expression itself, whereas the signified corresponds to the conceptualization of an urban territory characterized by density, modernity, and its status as a locus of societal activity in Japan, particularly within the nation's capital, Tokyo.

> *"…だから派手な電飾の歌舞伎町のこのゲートをくぐるのももう四度目だ。*
>
> *" ...Dakara hade na denshoku no Kabukichō no kono gēto o kuguru no mo mō yondo me da."*
>
> *"...For that reason, I had already passed through the Kabuki-chō gate—adorned with conspicuous ornamental lighting—on four separate occasions." (Makoto, 2019: 25).*

"窓の外では巨大な街頭テレビが雨に滲んで光っている。歌舞伎町の喧騒が、イヤフォンの音漏れのように窓の向こうからかすかに届く。"

"Mado no soto de wa kyodai na gaitō terebi ga ame ni nijinde hikatte iru. Kabukichō no kensō ga, iyafon no otomore no yō ni mado no mukō kara kasuka ni todoku.

"Outside, the giant street-side television screen emitted a blurred glow, its surface rendered indistinct by rainfall. The bustle of Kabuki-chō, situated beyond the window, reached my ears only faintly, resembling the residual leakage of sound from an earphone." (Makoto, 2019: 31)."

The foregoing excerpts collectively affirm that Shinjuku is depicted as a space saturated with illumination, technology, and human traffic—constituting characteristic signifiers of a modern city operating under the logic of capitalism and commodification. As Chowdhury and McFarlane (2022: 4) argues, Shinjuku functions not merely as a railway station, but as a central space that integrates diverse cultures, urban forms of life, and ongoing social and political transformations. From such representations, it may be ascertained that the novel situates Shinjuku not merely as a narrative setting, but as a sign that renders visible the operative dynamics of contemporary urban space.

Shinjuku is understood as a sector of Tokyo that serves as a focal point for societal activity. This area constitutes a representation of modernity and capitalism, evidenced by the presence of videotron screens on building façades and rows of high-rise structures that reflect the busyness of contemporary society. Such depictions illustrate the condition of Japanese society living within the currents of postmodernity— characterized by technological advancement, commercialization, and an accelerated pace of life. The transformation of modern Japanese urban space may be apprehended through a shift in orientation from public to consumptive space. Fukutake (1988: 19) observed that, as cities develop into metropolises, traditional shopping alleys are replaced by modern commercial centers that constitute principal attractions for urban populations. Within this transformation, consumption emerges as a defining feature of urban experience, whereby shopping ceases to be perceived merely as a routine task and instead becomes a mode of life. According to Japan Quarterly (1974, as cited in Romit, 4), Shinjuku continues to undergo urbanization, marked by the proliferation of high-rise office buildings in the western area and the expansion of recreational and commercial spaces in the eastern area, both of which contribute to increasing commuter traffic. In this context, Shinjuku can be understood as a consumptive space that organizes human experience through commodities.

The vast physical transformations of the city and the concomitant modes of societal life constitute a salient sign of contemporary Japan. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, in that there exists no inherent connection between the sound *'Shinjuku'* and the conceptual notion of a metropolitan city. Nevertheless, Hodaka apprehends this relationship through established social and cultural conventions. Collectively, Shinjuku functions as a symbol of progress and modern life in Japan.

Conversely, within the cited passage, the signifier *'…I immediately became soaked due to the guerrilla rain…'* whereas the corresponding signified constitutes a depiction of a natural condition that is unstable and difficult to control. Hodaka's experience of rainfall constitutes a form of mimesis, namely, an effort to render environmental experience into language. Buell emphasizes that every representation of nature within a text is constrained by sensory limitations, insofar as 'all attempts to bring the world into the book encounter a limit, namely the point at which the environment cannot be fully conveyed to the reader's consciousness' (Buell, 2009: 33). Such limitations render the full presentation of nature impossible; accordingly, the novel employs signs, such as rain, to underscore the tension between the natural world and the modern milieu. These signs operate within a broader social context. As Yoneyama (2020: 4) affirms, 'it is beyond doubt that the Anthropocene—including climate change and

Journal of Language and Literature
ISSN: 1410-5691 (print); 2580-5878 (online)

anomalous weather—constituted the social and ecological condition within which this narrative unfolds'. This passage substantiates that the issue of extreme rainfall in *Tenki no Ko* cannot be disentangled from the development of densely populated and pollution-laden modern Japanese cities. As Iswahyudi and Anwar (2025: 41) argues, the novel portrays rain as a symbol of unavoidable moral and ecological consequences. Accordingly, Fukutake (1988: 89), observed that as cities expand and increase in density, environmental degradation concomitantly escalates: the larger the city, the greater the pollution; the denser the population, the greater the destruction. Lefebvre (2012) similarly contends that collective space constitutes the 'real' space, produced through social relations. The arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified indicates that rain in *Tenki no Ko* functions not merely as a narrative backdrop, but also as a symbol of the environmental and social disequilibria characterizing contemporary Japan.

Thus, the persistent rainfall depicted in the narrative may be construed as an arbitrary representation of the ecological and humanitarian crises experienced in contemporary Japan, in which the boundary between natural phenomena and social conditions mutually influences one another, thereby producing a new reality reflective of modern human life that is no longer in equilibrium with the environment. The term 'guerrilla' conveys a potent meaning, denoting a natural force that is autonomous and unpredictable. From this semiotic excerpt, Japan is imagined as a representation of modern spatiality, yet with nature rendered in a form that is discordant with advanced human life.

In other words, the signs associated with the foregoing excerpt constitute a system of meaning that presents Contemporary Japanese Imagination as a society situated between two realms: rational modernity and autonomous nature. Thus, in *Tenki no Ko*, Japan is depicted not only as technologically advanced, but also as vulnerable in the face of natural forces that remain unpredictable.

The awareness that nature possesses its own autonomy can be discerned in the symbolic statement of a priest:

> *"「そもそも天気とは天の気分」と、ようやく咳がおさまった神主が語り出す。「天の気分は人の都合などには構わず、正常も異常も計れるものではない。"*
>
> *"Somo-somo tenki to wa ten no kibun" to, yōyaku seki ga osamatta kannushi ga kataridasu. "Ten no kibun wa hito no tsugō nado ni wa kamawazu, seijō mo ijō mo hakareru mono de wa nai".*
>
> *"Essentially, weather constitutes the mood of the sky," stated the priest, who finally ceased coughing. "The mood of the sky is indifferent to human interests and cannot be measured as either normal or abnormal" (Makoto, 2019:124).*

The cited excerpt indicated that weather, as a representation of natural forces, does not operate in accordance with human logic and shall not be deemed measurable by any standard unilaterally established by human subjects. Human beings, as acting subjects, are required to acknowledge that nature possesses its own autonomous agency. Upon the cessation of efforts by humans to assert dominion over nature, and upon the recognition of nature's independent position, the relationship between humans and nature may consequently be deemed capable of progressing toward a state of equilibrium.

In this context, a novel awareness emerges: namely, that human life should not be constructed on the basis of domination over nature, but rather through harmonious coexistence. This perspective aligns with Ernst Bloch's assertion in *The Principle of Hope* (1986: 75), wherein he observes that 'Hope moves not only from the possible toward the actual, but also from the known toward that which is not yet fully realized.' It reflects the consciousness that the world is replete with phenomena beyond human control, yet life must be conducted as optimally as possible within existing conditions (Yamanaka, 2014). Accordingly, hope is not to be construed as a

mere repetition of the past or the preservation of outdated systems, but rather as a movement toward the recognition of the unfinished—a possibility that remains open for actualization.

The presence of contemporary Japanese imaginaries illustrates Japan's present situation within a modern framework. The shift from efforts of control toward a posture of stewardship shall be understood as implying a capacity to reject the logic of efficiency and exploitation embedded within the modern system. As Muallim (2017: 39) argues, technological development functions as a double-edged sword. Similarly, Uche et al. (2025: 1) highlights a paradox in Japan between technological advancement and ecological vulnerability. On the one hand, Japan has achieved significant progress in technologies such as artificial intelligence and low-carbon energy, which contribute to improving environmental quality. On the other hand, ecological pressures—evidenced by the exceeding of natural biocapacity—indicate that sustainability remains an unresolved issue. Accordingly, technological advancement in contemporary Japanese society does not eliminate crisis; rather, it reveals the complex relationship between humans, nature, and modern systems.

Rather than prescribing technological solutions to address the climate crisis, *Tenki no Ko* shall be construed as presenting a form of hope arising from the willingness of human subjects to acknowledge their own limitations and to accept that nature possesses powers not subject to complete human control. The novel shall not be interpreted as depicting a finalized utopian world, but rather a world in the process of moving toward potentiality—an orientation consistent with Bloch's assertion (1986: 137) that every genuine hope necessarily contains vigilance and resistance to a posture of resignation. Yoneyama (2020: 6) further affirms that the matters articulated by Shinkai in his work do not merely concern the issue of global warming, but pertain to survival and the pursuit of life as expressed through the actions and effects of adolescents in their relation to nature and the environment.

Thus, the utopian construct in *Tenki no Ko* shall not be interpreted as an ideal world devoid of crisis, but rather as an invitation to reconstruct human–nature relations through a transformation of perspective and mode of living. Consistent with Buell's view, the history of nature writing may be construed as an effort to preserve and re-stabilize remnants of the wild amid modernization through the 'condensation' or consolidation of natural objects (Buell, 2009: 41). However, Buell's framework further stipulates that representations of nature are not confined to the preservation of a stable image of the wild; they encompass symbolic and imaginative forms that expand ecological experience. Within this context, *Tenki no Ko* shall be deemed to advance a representational utopia—not a concrete ecological remedy, but an expansion of ecological imagination that compels human subjects to renegotiate their relationship with the natural world.

This construction of meaning is reinforced by ecocritical scholarship, which posits that literary works frequently articulate critiques of modern modes of thought that prioritize economic and technological growth. According to Amzah et al. (2023), the notion that humans may influence weather patterns in *Tenki no Ko* reflects the social practices of post-industrial societies that continue to rely upon technological rationality and the presumption of unlimited growth. Within the framework of literary ecology, such a posture signifies the persistence of a dominant paradigm resistant to transformation.

2. Imagining Japan's Future in *Tenki no Ko*

As the novel moves toward its end, Tokyo becomes a space that keeps changing as a result of human choices. Shall be understood as rendering an increasingly evident shift in human modes of perception. The manner in which nature responds to human actions through irreversible ecological transformations is reflected in the following description.

"東京都の面積の 1/3 が、今では水の下だった。しかしそれでもなお、この街

Journal of Language and Literature
ISSN: 1410-5691 (print); 2580-5878 (online)

は日本の首都であり続けていた。元々海抜〇メートル以下だった広大な東部低地は、降り止まない雨に従来の排水機能が間に合わず、二年以上をかけてゆっくりと海に沈んでいった。

"Tōkyō-to no menseki no san-bun no ichi ga, ima de wa mizu no shita datta. Shikashi sore demo nao, kono machi wa Nihon no shuto de ari tsudzukete ita. Motomoto kaibatsu ○ mētoru ika datta kōdai na tōbu teichi wa, furiyamanai ame ni jūrai no haisui kinō ga ma ni awazu, ni-nen ijō o kakete yukkuri to umi ni shizunde itta."

"One-third of Tokyo Prefecture is currently submerged. Nevertheless, the city continues to function as the capital of Japan. The extensive lowlands in eastern Tokyo were initially situated at elevations below zero meters above sea level. Conventional drainage systems have been unable to accommodate the incessant volume of rainfall, and over the past two and a half years, the area has gradually succumbed to submersion" (Makoto, 2019:242)

The foregoing excerpts indicate that environmental conditions in Tokyo are in a state of significant distress; accordingly, the reference to *'one-third of Tokyo being underwater'* exists the signifier, indicating drastic environmental change and a projected future in which the city is threatened by the climate crisis. The meaning of such a signifier does not arise naturally from the text but is constituted through Japan's social experience of disaster. Japan is located within a geographical condition that is highly susceptible to earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and extreme weather events because of its location within the Pacific Ring of Fire, a convergence zone of the Eurasian, Pacific, American, and Philippine tectonic plates (Farhanrika et al., 2023; Sekimov, 2012). Therefore, the representation of a submerged Tokyo should not be deemed a mere work of fantastical imagination, but rather one that resonates with the historical experience and ecological vulnerability recognized within Japanese society.

Furthermore, the depiction of a submerged Tokyo in *Tenki no Ko* bears a direct relation to contemporary realities. In October 2019, Typhoon Hagibis—designated as the Reiwa 1 East Japan Typhoon—produced the highest recorded rainfall in the history of northeastern Japan, resulting in 104 fatalities and 3 missing persons. A comparable event occurred in Kyushu in July 2020 through the Reiwa 2 Heavy Rain phenomenon, which caused 78 fatalities and 7 missing persons as of the end of July (Yoneyama, 2020: 5). These events serve to reinforce the social value attached to the signifier *'a submerged Tokyo,'* thereby rendering such a depiction that Japanese society considers entirely plausible.

Thus, the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified in the passage can be deemed to be constituted by Japan's contemporary socio-ecological context. The sign *'a submerged Tokyo'* generates a broader cultural meaning, namely, the portrayal of contemporary Japan as a society coexisting with disaster and ecological threats. Modernity, long associated with progress and stability, can no longer be regarded as guaranteeing security; thus, the modern city emerges as a vulnerable space, whereas nature appears as a force not subject to complete technological control.

The contemporary Japanese imaginary in *Tenki no Ko* should therefore not be construed merely as depicting a dystopian future fantasy, but as disclosing an awareness of the climate crisis and of the impacts of modernization upon ecological balance. The novel demonstrates that ecological threats are not foreign to Japanese society but constitute a component of everyday life that continually shapes its modes of imagining both the present and the future. The representation of a submerged Tokyo operates as a sign reflecting such contemporary anxieties and affirms that imaginative constructs within fictional works are invariably conditioned by the social circumstances in which they arise.

Subsequently, the signifier *'the conventional drainage system could not keep pace with the volume of rain that showed no sign of stopping'* shall be construed as a complete signified derived from the preceding

sign. This excerpt operates as a signified indicating the incapacity of modern infrastructure to withstand the accelerating pace of climate change and the intensification of natural forces. Such meaning does not arise directly from the technical description of the drainage system but is constituted through the social conventions of contemporary Japan, which exists under the persistent shadow of natural disasters. Japan is recognized as possessing one of the most advanced flood-control infrastructures globally, namely the *Metropolitan Area Outer Underground Discharge Channel* (MAOUDC), designed to mitigate flooding originating from the Nakagawa and Ayase river systems. The MAOUDC employs two primary discharge channels to prevent the overflow of small and medium-sized rivers and subsequently pumps the excess water into the larger Edo River (Nakamura & Oosawa, 2021: 2). Within this context, the drainage system functions as a symbol of Japan's modern achievements. However, *Tenki no Ko* demonstrates that such technology is no longer capable of managing persistent rainfall. The resulting signified thus extends beyond a depiction of technical failure, encompassing a broader representation of the fragility of Japan's modernist project in confronting climate change.

Thus, the sign articulated in the cited excerpt illustrates the paradox of postmodern life that lies at the core of *Tenki no Ko*. Tokyo is depicted as the center of Japanese social activity, a city representing progress, advanced technology, and order. The drainage system constructed therein serves as evidence of the modern human endeavor to regulate and control nature, as though technical capability could operate as a barrier against uncertainty. However, the circumstances indicate otherwise. The unceasing rainfall renders the system inoperative, and the grand and orderly city gradually becomes submerged, thereby demonstrating that modernity has never fully succeeded in subordinating the forces of nature. Weather not only serves as a narrative backdrop but also reflects the imbalance between humans and nature. Accordingly, the continuous rainfall in Tokyo symbolizes inner turmoil and uncertainty while functioning as a metaphor for a human-induced environmental crisis (Iswahyudi & Anwar, 2025: 39).

Thus, *Tenki no Ko* offered a depiction of the inherent ambiguity within Tokyo as a space that is simultaneously modern and fragile. This depiction aligns with Anthony Giddens's (2013) argument concerning the risks of late modernity: technologies originally designed to protect human life paradoxically generate new and uncontrollable forms of risk. In this regard, modern technology proves insufficient when confronted with a transforming environment. In the case of *Tenki no Ko*, modernity's pride in sophisticated infrastructure ultimately clashes with the reality that nature cannot be wholly governed. Consequently, the excerpt underscored that modernity not only produces advancements but also engenders a structural ambiguity, between the order and the inevitability of ecological disruption.

While Tokyo is depicted as a magnificent, dense, and luminous city at the beginning of the novel, this quote depicts Tokyo in its post-disaster state: partially submerged but still a hub of life. This shift demonstrates that the imagination of contemporary Japan in *Tenki no Ko* is no longer solely about modernity, but rather about resilience and adaptation to natural disasters. A semiotic analysis of the above quote represents the imagination of contemporary Japan as a space where modernity, disaster, and sustainability intertwine. The novel asserts that amidst ecological destruction, Japan still imagines itself as a nation that survives, not through control over nature, but through acceptance of its inevitable forces.

> *"「東京のあの辺はさ、もともとは海だったんだよ。ほんのすこし前——江戸時代くらいまではね」…「江戸そのものがさ、海の入り江だったそうだよ。地名が表してるだろう？入り江への戸口が東京だったのさ。その土地を、人間と天気がすこしずつ変えてきたんだ」…「だからさ——結局元に戻っただけだわ、なんて思ったりもするね」窓の外の堤防を眺めながら、冨美さんはなんだか懐かしむような表情でそう言った。*

Journal of Language and Literature
ISSN: 1410-5691 (print); 2580-5878 (online)

> *" 'Tōkyō no ano hen wa sa, motomoto wa umi dattan da yo. Hon no sukoshi mae — Edo jidai kurai made wa ne.' 'Edo sono mono ga sa, umi no irie datta sō da yo. Chimei ga arawashiteru darō? Irie e no toguchi ga Tōkyō dattan no sa. Sono tochi o, ningen to tenki ga sukoshizutsu kaete kitan da.' ... 'Dakara sa — kekkyoku moto ni modotta dake da wa, nante omottari mo suru ne.' Mado no soto no teibō o nagamenagara, Fumi-san wa nandaka natsukashimu yō na hyōjō de sō itta".*
>
> *"The area of Tokyo in that region was, in its origin, part of the sea, and not in the distant past—approximately until the Edo period. … Edo itself is said to have once been a small bay. Its place-names reflect this, do they not? Irie—a bay; toguchi—Tokyo as the gateway to that bay. That land was gradually altered by human intervention and by climatic forces. … For that reason, I sometimes feel that, ultimately, everything merely returns to its prior state. While gazing at the embankment outside the window, Fumi-san expressed this with an air suggestive of recalling the past." (Makoto, 2019: 247).*

This passage articulated a form of historical awareness that situates human existence within a temporal span extending beyond that of modern civilization. Fumi-san's statement serves to remind us that what is presently regarded as terrestrial space and as a center of human activity was formerly part of the sea, an original natural domain subsequently transformed through human intervention and climatic forces. The assertion that *'everything returns to its prior state'* shall not be construed merely as fatalistic, but as a reflective statement concerning the notion of progress predicated upon the subjugation of nature. In this context, *Tenki no Ko* advances the view that destruction arises not solely from natural disasters but also from human disruption of ecological rhythms and boundaries.

Through this awareness, the narrative re-examines the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. In *Tenki no Ko*, the gradual reversion of Tokyo to its original natural form is not portrayed solely as an ecological tragedy, but may be construed as a form of natural correction in response to human ambitions that have exceeded reasonable limits. This framing generates an imaginative projection concerning Japan's future—namely, that the ecological transformations depicted in the novel shall not be interpreted merely as an endpoint, but as the logical consequence of a developmental orientation excessively centered upon modernity and technology while disregarding ecological balance. Simultaneously, the narrative also provides a domain of possibility: prior to such outcomes materializing, attitudinal change toward nature remains attainable. In this context, utopia no longer signifies a purely idealized place; rather, it functions as an aspirational process arising from collective efforts to imagine and shape a better future (Selvaraj, 2024), a perspective that aligns with Ernst Bloch's conception of utopia.

According to Bloch et al. (1986: 113), hope always resides within an unfinished and unrealized realm. A path marked by hope is not materially richer than one marked by fear, yet it appears more vibrant to communities moving from darkness toward illumination. In this light, Tokyo's reversion to its natural form may be understood as a *noch-nicht* landscape—a space in which alternative ecological futures remain imaginable. Such a perspective enables a reading in which the ecological transformations in the novel do not solely signify devastation, but simultaneously open the potential for new directions in the future.

> *"この二年半、脳が擦りきれるほど考え続け、大学は農学部に決めた。気候が変わってしまった今の時代に必要なことを学びたかった。漠然とでも目標が出来たことで、ほんのわずかに、僕は息が吸いやすくなったように思う。"*
>
> *"Kono ninenhan, nō ga surikireru hodo kangaetsuzuke, daigaku wa nōgakubu ni kimeta. Kikō ga kawatte shimatta ima no jidai ni hitsuyō na koto o manabitakatta. Bakuzento demo mokuhyō ga dekita koto de, honno wazuka ni, boku wa iki ga suiyasuku natta yō ni omou."*

> *"For the past two and a half years, I have strained my mind in constant deliberation, and I have finally decided to pursue studies in the Faculty of Agriculture. I want to learn what this era—shaped by a changing climate—now requires. Although the path ahead remains indistinct, having a purpose, however tentative, makes it feel just a little easier to breathe." (Makoto, 2019: 244).*

This excerpt illustrated that the form of utopia proposed in *Tenki no Ko* does not consist in a restoration of the world to its prior condition, but rather in the willingness of human beings to conduct their lives in a manner that is more accountable to the natural environment. Hodaka's recognition of the transformations within his life corresponds to what Bloch (1986: 113) identifies as the human orientation toward the future, which manifests in two distinct forms of intentionality: (i) expectant emotions, constituting emotional intentions directed toward what is anticipated, and (ii) expectant ideas, constituting intellectual intentions directed toward what is anticipated. Both forms of intentionality give rise to a state of not-yet-conclusion, namely a mode of consciousness that is not yet fully constituted but nonetheless contains latent transformative potential.

Hope for the future does not arise from escapism or the exertion of dominion over the environment, but rather from awareness and concrete actions undertaken by human beings from the outset. In this context, the changes occurring within Hodaka do not constitute a mere response to destruction; instead, they reflect the possibility that human beings could, in fact, avert an ecological crisis if they had, from the beginning, apprehended their relationship with the natural world in a more ethical manner.

Regarding Bloch, the moment of crisis (*dark moment*) and the state of openness to possibility (*adequate openness*) constitute two poles that structure utopian consciousness. In *Tenki no Ko*, the conditions of extreme weather operate as the dark moment that signifies the failure of the human–nature relationship, whereas the characters' choices create a space of possibility for an alternative future. The transformed state of Tokyo at the conclusion of the narrative may be construed as an outflow, namely a form of the future that has begun to manifest yet remains fundamentally indeterminate. Accordingly, the narrative does not construe destruction as a terminus but rather as an invitation to reimagine the future of Japan in a more balanced relationship with its environment.

Finally, Hodaka's actions signify a shift in orientation from a desire to control nature to a desire to comprehend and adjust to climate change. Hodaka does not seek an immediate remedy or the restoration of conditions preceding the disaster, but instead initiates incremental steps motivated by awareness and responsibility. Accordingly, utopia does not appear as a distant ideal, but as a concrete potential for transformation—one that emerges from reflection rather than denial and from understanding rather than domination.

Conclusion

Based on this analysis, *Tenki no Ko's* imagination depicts contemporary Japanese imagination as a space situated at the intersection of modernity and human relationships with nature. The novel presents Japan as a technologically advanced society that remains exposed to climatic unpredictability, revealing that modernity does not eliminate vulnerability but intensifies the need to renegotiate human–nature relations.

Within this framework, utopia is not portrayed as a final or ideal state but as an ongoing process shaped by narrative movement and spatial negotiation. The repeated return to moments of environmental crisis and human choice emphasizes that hope emerges from an awareness of limitations rather than mastery. Harmony with nature is therefore imagined not through control but through acceptance, adjustment, and ethical relationality.

Furthermore, the narrative suggests that the future remains open and contingent upon present actions. Instead of restoring a stable pre-crisis world, *Tenki no Ko* envisions utopia as a transformation of perception and behavior in response to uncertainty. Thus, the

novel reflects contemporary Japanese ecological anxiety while simultaneously opening a space to imagine alternative forms of coexistence grounded in hope amid instability.

Acknowledgments

We are thankful to the research grant given by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology.

References

Amzah, N., Ismail, H., & Shi, N. L. (2023). Climate Change in the Movie Weathering with You-Critical Discourse Analysis of Environmental Issues. *3L, Language, Linguistics, Literature*, *29*(3), 285-307. https://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2023-2903-20

Bloch, E., Plaice, N., Plaice, S., & Knight, P. (1986). *The Principle of Hope* (Vol. 3). MIT Press.

Buell, L. (2009). *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. John Wiley & Sons.

Chowdhury, R., & McFarlane, C. (2022). The Crowd and Citylife: Materiality, Negotiation and Inclusivity at Tokyo's Train Stations. *Urban Studies*, *59*(7), 1353-1371. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980211007841

de Saussure, F., Bally, C., Sechehaye, A., & Riedlinger, A. (1986). *Course in General Linguistics*. Open Court.

Farhanrika, N., Sarpono, S., Kusuma, K., & Widodo, P. (2023). Advancing Resilience and Fostering Sustainable Development through Strategic Investments in Cutting-Edge Technology and Innovative Methodologies for Disaster Risk Reduction: Japan Experiences. *International Journal of Humanities Education and Social Sciences (IJHESS)*, *3* (1). https://doi.org/10.55227/ijhess.v3i1.589

Fukutake, T. (1988). *Masyarakat Jepang Dewasa Ini*. PT Gramedia.

Furuhata, Y. (2022). Weathering with You: Mythical Time and the Paradox of the Anthropocene. *Representations*, *157*(1), 68-89. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.157.4.68

Giddens, A. (2013). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Polity Press.

Iswahyudi, A., & Anwar, F. (2025). Analisis Resepsi Pembaca terhadap Tema Novel *Tenki No Ko* Karya Makoto Shinkai [Reception Theory; Horizon of Expectations; *Tenki no Ko*; Online reader reviews; teori resepsi;]. *2025*, *32*(1), 14. https://doi.org/10.14710/humanika.v32i1.72676

Kapasi, T. A. (2019). A Glimpse in to Japan's History Through Makoto Shinkai's *Kimi no Nawa* (*Your Name*). *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, *24*(10), 32-37.

Konovalova, N. (2019). The Architecture of Postmodernism in Japan: The Main Features. *2019 International Conference on Architecture: Heritage, Traditions and Innovations* (AHTI 2019). https://doi.org/10.2991/ahti-19.2019.1

Lefebvre, H. (2012). From the Production of Space. In *Theatre and performance design* (pp. 81-84). Routledge.

López-Aranguren, J.-L. (2023). Japan's Science and Technology Diplomacy: Society 5.0 and its International Projection. *Communication & Society*, 225-239. https://10.15581/003.36.2.225-239

Makoto, S. (2019). *Shōsetsu Tenki no Ko*. Kadokawa Bunko.

Muallim, M. (2017). Isu-Isu Krisis Dalam Novel-Novel Dystopian Science Fiction Amerika. *Poetika: Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*, *5*(1), 36-50. https://doi.org/10.22146/poetika.25810

Mulyadi, B. (2022). The Environmental Problem in Anime Weathering With You Directed By Makoto Shinkai. In (Vol. 359). Les Ulis: EDP Sciences.

Nakamura, H., & Oosawa, M. (2021). Effects of the Underground Discharge Channel/Reservoir for Small Urban Rivers in the Tokyo Area. IOP

Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science, https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/703/1/012029

Ramadhan, F. H., & Ummah, N. W. (2023). *Konsep On Masyarakat Jepang dalam Film Tenki no Ko (2019) Karya Makoto Shinkai*. Prosiding Seminar Nasional Kolaborasi Akademik Dosen-Mahasiswa,

Sekimov, A. (2012). Comparative Study of Disaster Management of Japan and Kyrgyz Republic. *Tokyo: Asian Disaster Reduction Center*.

Selvaraj, R. G. A. (2024). "Earthseed" – Utopia within Dystopia in Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower. *Nanotechnology Perceptions*, *20*, 2430-2435.

Seruni, A. P. (2022). Social Reflection in Novel *Tenki No Ko* by Makoto Shinkai: The Study of Marxist Literary Sociology. *Ethical Lingua 9*(2), 853-860.

Sutanto, M. R., Indrabhaswara, K. Y., & Sutandio, A. (2023). Ecological Metaphor in Shinkai Makoto's Animated Film *Tenki No Ko*. *Humanus: Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu-ilmu Humaniora*, *22*(1), 1-11.

Uche, E., Caglar, A. E., & Radulescu, M. (2025). Assessing the Environmental Sustainability Corridor in Japan: The Role of Artificial Intelligence and Low-Carbon Energy. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *12*(1), 1918. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06169-w

Yamanaka, H. (2014). The Utopian "Power to Live": The Significance of the Miyazaki Phenomenon. In *Japanese Visual Culture* (pp. 237-255). Routledge.

Yoneyama, S. (2020). Rethinking Human-Nature Relationships in the Time of Coronavirus: Postmodern Animism in Films by Miyazaki Hayao & Shinkai Makoto. *Asia-Pacific Journal*, *18*(16), e6, Article e6. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466020030235