

# **Dreams of Waking: Satoshi Kon's Anti- Escapist Animations**

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## **Abstract**

Satoshi Kon's short yet substantial career as a Japanese animation director is marked by his depiction of the relativity of 'reality' within the entertainment industry. Kon breaks the illusion of his films' worlds through the various narrative and editing devices, and, subsequently, critiques the sense of escapism, so-often found in the mainstream fictional entertainment. The critique of the escapism is combined with the celebration of the escapist storytelling. This dissertation examines, how Kon unites these two different stances and to what end. Satoshi Kon's films also possess didactic qualities, utilizing formalist detachment techniques to teach the audiences about both the dangers and the benefits of immersing oneself into the artificial. Through an auteur analysis of five of his films the conclusions are reached, that although universally-applicable, most of Kon's themes are rooted in the Japanese-specific socio-cultural contexts, particularly the long-reaching effects of the Second World War's aftermath.

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## Introduction

### 1) “Magnetic Rose”: The Names of the Roses

The year is 1995. One of the most celebrated Japanese animation directors of the time, Katsushiro Otomo (famous for his spectacular science-fiction extravaganza “Akira” (1988)), embarks on a passion project: adapting three of his lesser-known comic book shorts into a one feature-length animated anthology. It is called “Memories” – a decision, which could be interpreted as a conscious acknowledgement of the various changes made to Otomo’s original stories; in a fashion similar to that of the human mind selecting and re-arranging its recollections to suit the needs of the present, various directors and the screenwriters working on the project under Otomo’s (who had only actively participated in the creation of the last segment) supervision modified the comic-book plots so much that some of the results seemingly opposed the ideas of the originals altogether. It is extremely evident while examining “The Magnetic Rose” (directed by Koji Morimoto and written by Satoshi Kon), the longest and the most complex chapter of “Memories”: a science-fiction horror story that subtly shifts into a psychological drama. This short film has helped Satoshi Kon to get enough recognition to start his own directorial career as well as to lay the groundwork for the ideas used in all of his subsequent projects; the method of working within the mainstream (in 1995 Japan’s animation industry working alongside Otomo on a science-fiction project was as mainstream as one could get) while actively challenging its discourse at the same time being one of them. Morimoto makes this intention perfectly clear in one of his interviews: “The characters in the story had to escape the magnetic field, so Kon and I used to say we had to escape the magnetic field called Otomo!”<sup>1</sup>

Otomo’s original story in the comic book anthology “Memories of Her...” (1990)<sup>2</sup> is fairly simplistic and quite disturbingly misogynistic. It follows a crew of the almost-identical, facial hair-sporting space garbage-men, who, whilst travelling with their phallic-shaped spaceship arrive at the highly magnetic abandoned space station to investigate a mysterious S.O.S. call. The station’s shape resembles that of the rose – it rightfully invokes the flower’s symbolic meaning of femininity; the melodic S.O.S. plea combined with the astronauts’ macho characterisation creates a parallel to the classic plot of sailors lured by the siren voice to their doom. Sure enough: the crew and their ship get consumed by the ‘rose’, which is operated by the A.I. programmed to imitate the emotions of its long-dead master – a rejected

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in Osmond, Andrew *Satoshi Kon: the Illusionist* (2009), Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Otomo, Katsushiro *Memories of Her...* (1990), Kodansha, Tokyo.

woman. The story's ending creates an unsubtle metaphorical image of *vagina dentata*, which is only strengthened by the descriptions of the rose and the dialogue of the astronauts. The station is literally formed out of junk, as if to suggest the worthlessness of its content. After the revelation of the rose's nature, astronauts' first reaction is that of disgust: "A rejected woman! What a stupidity!"<sup>3</sup> Thus, the emotions in the story are portrayed as feminine, unwelcome and destructive; something that is dangerous and should be instantly rejected. Inability to do so leads one to their own demise.

Satoshi Kon turns the story on its own head. An originally nameless woman (an epitome of all the women) becomes a theatre actress and an opera singer; a person who consciously pretended to be something she was not during her whole life. Hence, the environments inside the rose are no longer based on her "true" memories, but rather on the memories *of her roles*. The storytelling itself takes a central stage in the "Magnetic Rose" – the digital ghost of the space station invites the astronauts to experience the *better*, the *improved* versions of its master's recollections, to suspend their disbelief in a similar way how the film's audience suspends theirs. The emotional background of the story is no longer that of the chauvinistic judgement regarding the "feminine" feelings, but rather the examination of nostalgia as the escapist longing to relive the idealized version of something long-gone, something that may have not even existed.

The theme of the skewed memories dominates the rest of the plot. The crew is yet again all-male, but this time without the slightest hint of machismo. They are lost souls, working deep in the outer space to escape from their emotional problems at home. Crew's international nature (it consists of German Heinz, a Spaniard Miguel, Russian Ivanov and Japanese Aoshima) reinforces the notion that these problems are universal, therefore, incredibly important (another stab at the outright rejection of the person's emotional side in the Otomo's original). The two main characters - Heinz and Miguel - are the opposite sides of the same coin.

Sleazy Miguel yearns to be a "brave sir Miguel"; his womanizing demeanour that starkly contrasts with the character's child-like desires imply his inability to handle serious relationships. The theatrical recreation of the dead actress on the 'rose' invites him to play along with its own fake memories; it provides Miguel the comfortable illusions of him as a ludicrous romantic hero in a theatre play – a prince charming of sorts - and the emotional

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<sup>3</sup> Otomo, Katsushiro *Memories of Her...* (1990), Kodansha, Tokyo, p. 31.

catharsis that comes with it. By accepting them an astronaut chooses to live a dream rather than face his personal problems.

The abandoned station's computer invites Heinz with a similar "siren song": it scans his memories and provides a constant stream of visual recreations of the man's happy recollections with his daughter; memories he had long-repressed due to her untimely death for which he himself was partially at fault. Those saccharine recollections (so idyllic one could reasonably doubt their genuine nature) provide the nostalgic feelings and an emotional closure, a way to absolve the character of his responsibilities. However, even though tempted to give in, Heinz refuses: the film makes it clear that the only way for him to deal with such an emotional problem is to face it head-on and accept his guilt, not run away from it; the catharsis computer provides leads to nothing more than stagnation and degradation.

One could reasonably draw parallels between these two characters and the types of audiences experiencing the film in real-life. A majority of them resembles Miguel: these are the viewers, who come to the movies to escape from their everyday problems. However, the changes Satoshi Kon has made to the original story makes it clear that he had no intention of providing a simple escape. Miguel gives in to the catharsis and is subsequently lost; yet Heinz denies it, accepts his responsibility. A rug is pulled from under the audiences: an escapist sci-fi horror flick turns into a one man's deeply personal drama; the expectations are intentionally subverted. By denying himself an emotional catharsis Heinz denies it to the audiences as well: after watching "Magnetic Rose" a filmgoer is invited to reflect on their own personal issues.

The last shot of the film reveals a 'rose' as beautiful and serene, no matter that it is composed of junk and illusions. The image could very well imply that the story is not merely a critique on the escapist nature of storytelling – it is a celebration of it as well. After all, Heinz could not have faced his own repressed feeling without witnessing their exaggerated reflections inside the ghostly station. The movie suggests, that the only way to clearly see the complicated matters is to look at them from afar: for example, through the lens of a highly fictional story flickering on the cinema screen. The elaborately fake theatre environment works in this argument's favour: as observed by Antonin Artaud, theatre is fake, its audience is painfully aware of that. Yet the emotions and issues represented on the stage are real.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Artaud, Antonin *The Theatre and its Double* (2010), Oneworld Classics, Richmond.

The rose is a symbol that has many meanings. Otomo has chosen the most obvious one while writing his original story. Yet Kon has subverted even that. The last line of a famous historical detective novel by Umberto Eco “The Name of the Rose” reads: “Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus” (yesterday's rose endures in its name; we hold empty names).<sup>5</sup> With this citation of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Benedictine poem, Eco suggests that his book itself is a symbol of something long lost that may have not even existed in the first place. The similar nostalgia, its values and vices are examined in the “Magnetic Rose”, but not only that. The film as an art form can be called ‘a name of rose’ as well – a composite of beautiful illusions that has a great power of reflecting reality. The four feature films and a TV miniseries that Kon directed through his short directorial career are the prime examples of this notion. Starting with the script for “Magnetic Rose”, Satoshi Kon has constantly critiqued escapism yet celebrated the escapist storytelling. The rest of this dissertation shall focus on the narrative and the cinematic techniques the director has used to combine these two, seemingly, contradictory ideas; it will also try to pinpoint the purpose of such an endeavour in the Japanese-specific socio-political context as well as to examine how the subversion (the defamiliarization) of the audiences’ expectations and working both *within* and *against* the mainstream Japanese animation has helped Kon to represent these ideas.

## 2) Methodology and Literature Review

The analyses of this dissertation will be conducted via the close formal readings of the four animated feature films by Satoshi Kon (“Perfect Blue”, “Millennium Actress”, “Tokyo Godfathers” and “Paprika”), with the strong emphasis on the first two films, as most of the ideas regarding Kon’s sentiment towards the escapism are fully-developed there. The narratives and the narrative structures of the movies shall be discussed as well: their popular genres and the mainstream appeal are important to illustrate, how Kon utilizes the escapist media to criticize it. Furthermore, the analysis of the narrative structure of “Millennium Actress” should provide an apt example of how the director celebrates the fictional storytelling.

Two works from the Russian formalist school will be used to help analyze the aforementioned films’ narrative structures: Viktor Shklovsky’s essay “Art as the technique”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Eco, Umberto *The Name of the Rose* (2004), Vintage Classics, Penguin, London, p. 529.

<sup>6</sup> Shklovsky, *Victor Art as Technique* (1917) [Online] Available from: [http://web.fmk.edu.rs/files/blogs/2010-11/MI/Misliti\\_film/Viktor\\_Sklovski\\_Art\\_as\\_Technique.pdf](http://web.fmk.edu.rs/files/blogs/2010-11/MI/Misliti_film/Viktor_Sklovski_Art_as_Technique.pdf) [Accessed on: 18 November 2014].

and Vladimir Propp's article "Morphology of the Folk Tale."<sup>7</sup> Whilst Shklovsky's notion of "defamiliarization" (making the familiar unfamiliar; encouraging the readership/spectatorship to witness the plot elements or the visual details as they would for the first time) is useful to illustrate Kon's discouragement of losing oneself in the immersive illusion of the fictional, "Morphology of the Folk Tale" will be applied to show the director's perceived merits of it. Bertolt Brecht, his theoretical work (sufficiently explained in Erika Hughes's article<sup>8</sup>) and the "learning" plays such as "Decision"<sup>9</sup> will be utilized in the following chapters to highlight the didactic messages of Kon's films, usually achieved through the denial of emotional catharsis.

There are not many scholarly books written about Satoshi Kon's works yet; thus, Andrew Osmond's wonderful volume "Satoshi Kon: The Illusionist" will serve as a starting point of many of my arguments. The book contains various excerpts from Kon's interviews, the factual information about his movies' production histories and the insightful analyses of the films themselves. The analyses are centered around the relativity of reality within the director's animated films and the exposure of it as such – hence the book's title. This dissertation, however, tries to pinpoint the *reasons* for the "illusions as illusions" approach in Kon's movies that are deeply rooted in Japanese socio-historical background.

To make the sufficient arguments regarding Japanese historical and contemporary issues, various books and articles regarding the factual information were researched: ranging from Professor Kenichi Ohno's analysis of Japan's economic changes experienced through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>10</sup> to the article discussing the status of the homeless in today's Japan<sup>11</sup> and various online sources outlining the trends of the contemporary Japanese popular culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Propp, Vladimir *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1958) [Online] Available from: <https://archive.org/details/MorphologyOfTheFolkTale>, [Accessed on: 23 November 2014].

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, Erika Brecht's *Lehrstücke and Drama Education* in Schonmann, Shifra (ed.) *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education* (2011) Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 197 – 201.

<sup>9</sup> Brecht, Bertolt *Collected Plays: Three* (1997), Methuen Drama, London.

<sup>10</sup> Ohno, Kenichi *The Economic Development of Japan: The Path Travelled by Japan as Developing Country* (2006), GRIPS Development Forum, Japan, pp. 199-216.

<sup>11</sup> Okamoto, Yoshihiro *A Comparative Study of Homelessness in United Kingdom and Japan* in *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2007, pp 537-538.

## Chapter One

### “Perfect Blue”: Reality behind the Artificial

After the success of the „Memories“ anthology, Satoshi Kon finally got a chance to make his own directorial debut with the animated psychological thriller „Perfect Blue“ (1997) – a very loose adaptation of a pulpy novel „Perfect Blue – a Complete Pervert“ (written by Yoshikazu Takeuchi) Considering the straight-to-the-point title of the original, an easily-bankable cute girl on the poster and former Kon mentor Katsushiro Otomo’s attached credit as a „creative advisor“<sup>12</sup>, the audiences were lured to see the movie with the completely justifiable expectations of cheap thrills and simple-minded entertainment. The actual film, however, betrayed these expectations completely. Instead, it used the trappings of the mainstream to perform what Victor Shlovsky termed “defamiliarization”. “The technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, -...- because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself -...-”<sup>13</sup> – contemplates Shklovsky argues in his essay “Art as a technique”. The technique of defamiliarization is widely used in “Perfect Blue” with the purpose of unmasking the simple-minded, non-reflexive modes of escapism the film itself was presented as for the hindrance of the personal and social growth Kon believes them to be. Such a stance, while universally applicable, is rooted in Japanese-specific cultural issues. This chapter examines how Kon’s attempt at defamiliarizing mainstream Japanese animation responded to Japan’s socio-political context during the 1990s.

*Fabula* of the “Perfect Blue” revolves around a relatively famous Tokyo pop-idol Mima and her attempts to move on with her career and life by accepting a role in a dark and grimy TV drama “Double Bind” – a role that contradicts Mima’s already established public image of a forever virginal and pure pop-idol. Yet moving away from that image is not as easy as it seems: while being harassed by her former fans, having all aspects of her privacy invaded and even confronted by her ghostly other self – a doppelganger who *did* remain a virginal idol – the novice actress starts to lose her grip on reality to the point of not knowing which of her personas is a real one. „Excuse me – who are you?“ is a line from the “Double Bind” script repeated over and over again throughout the film. This simple and

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<sup>12</sup> A false advertising at its finest – according to Andrew Osmond, Otomo’s involvement in the film’s creation ended with him recommending Kon to be its director (Osmond, p. 26.)

<sup>13</sup> Shklovsky.

straightforward question, which initially seems to indicate the main character's conflicted sense of identity starts to gain a much more complex meaning: as the relatively simple murder mystery film switches its gears into a psychological horror genre and becomes as fragmented and conflicted as Mima's psyche, the audiences realize, that in a meta-narrative sense the line is wholly applicable both to them and to the movie itself. Kon establishes this reflexive relationship between the film and its audience in the film's very first scene.

“The Beginning of the Perfect Blue is a fake! That is to say, it's completely unrepresentative of the film we're about to see”<sup>14</sup>, Osmond announces while providing his short analysis of the film's opening. It is quite easy to see his point – as typical with Kon's films<sup>15</sup>, “Perfect Blue” opens up not with the establishing shot, but a medium close up; furthermore, it is a close up from a seemingly altogether different movie. Three colourfully-dressed space heroes (based on Japan's long-running *Super Sentai* characters) are apparently fighting their villainous cosmic foe. After his dramatic escape, space heroes, depicted in the medium shot, turn directly to the camera (this way breaking the fourth wall) and vow to protect peace no matter what. The three-shot sequence suggests a cheesy and clichéd space adventure movie, rather than a psychological thriller. The audience could definitely be confused – have they bought tickets to the wrong film? However, the fourth shot in the sequence (an establishing one – the scene is edited in the reverse order of the classical continuity) makes things clear: the camera *Super Sentai*-wannabes were looking at was a diegetic one, filming a space hero performance on a stage in front of the live audience. The opening scene, although having nothing to do with the rest of the film plot-wise, establishes one of the main themes through its form: a purely artificial nature of the entertainment industry. As both the space hero show and the psychological drama that follows are animated in a same fashion, without the establishing shot there would be no method to distinguish which of the two is more “real”. Thus, Satoshi Kon's use of animation rather than live-action is paramount. Combined with the fourth-wall breaking shot of *Sentai* looking directly at the camera, the film suggest that the answer to the cryptic “who are you?” regarding the movie in its entirety is actually an obvious one – the film's story is as artificial as the ridiculous space hero action scene that precedes it. Thanks to the defamiliarizing opening scene the audiences are forced to detach themselves from the images on screen and comprehend them for what they are – just the images. However, for what purpose?

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<sup>14</sup> Osmond, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Zhou, Tony Satoshi Kon – Editing Space & Time (n.d.) [Online] Available from: <http://filmmakermagazine.com/86886-watch-satoshi-kon-editing-space-time/#.VG2nPL3t8Z> [Accessed on: 17 November 2014].

This reflexive approach characterizes much of Kon's work. He encourages his audiences to be reflective and accept their everyday responsibilities rather than find a comfortable escape in the artificial. In "Perfect Blue" director represents the full dangers of such escapism. The scene following the *Sentai* introductory sequence is a rapid juxtaposition of Mima's everyday life actions (buying milk, riding a train) intercut with her last concert as a pop-idol. Later on in the movie Mima (now an actress) discovers an online blog, describing all of these seemingly private mundane activities. For her fans, Mima's everyday and public lives are indistinguishable just as how we cannot distinguish between the *Sentai* show and the rest of the film. However, while the editing of the film makes both of those segments equally artificial, the fans perceive private and public sides of the main character's life as equally *real*. The author of the blog is Rumi, Mima's mentor, who, while being a former pop-idol herself, wishes to relive long-past glories via following Mima's life to the level of obsession. By perceiving Mima's public image directly, without detachment, she finds an excuse for not moving on with her own life: while watching Mima, Rumi can imagine herself to *be* her and thus, free herself from the problematic life of the washed-away former idol. What she does not want to understand is that behind Mima's on-stage persona there is an actual girl with her own problems – hence, Rumi accommodates her protégé's real-life issues into the artificial public image. In a lot of ways, Rumi is a character parallel to Miguel in "Magnetic Rose". Miguel's demise depended on him not understanding the artificiality of the wish-fulfilling theatrical performances inside the ghostly "rose"; his sincere role-playing. Thus, one way to explain the conscious breaking of the illusion of the film's "reality" of the "Perfect Blue" is a didactic warning for viewers – by immersing themselves in the artificial without proper detachment, one might be in danger of going down the same self-destructive path as Rumi.

However, another, a more interesting interpretation of the film is possible. As the "Perfect Blue's" *syuzhet* distorts the relatively comprehensible *fabula* (using various jump cuts and matching scenes), the film's ending in which Rumi is revealed to be a culprit behind most of the horrific episodes throughout the movie (with monstrous stalker Me-Mania as her disciple) becomes highly debatable. It is entirely possible that both Rumi and Me-Mania exist solely inside Mima's head as the defensive mechanisms helping her cope with the unreasonable expectations from the public and her own inability to move away from the chaste idol persona into a more adult and responsible life as a TV actress. The scene depicting main character's short nervous breakdown after being filmed in an extremely graphic (albeit completely fake) rape scene for the "Double Bind" illustrates this idea.

After finishing the scene Mima returns to her flat. The first shot of the scene is an establishing one – the interior is depicted in wide shot. The flat is made to look dark and menacing – there is a sense of some malignant force waiting there for Mima. The only colour clearly visible in the foreboding darkness is the blood red of the poster depicting some fish. The striking mise-en-scene foreshadows the thematic development that will happen later. Mima turns on the light – the flat instantly loses its menace, everything seems to be back to normal. Her demeanour is cheerful; almost exaggeratedly so. She tries to act, as if the infamous scene in the TV drama had no impact on her at all. Mima then begins to do her evening routine, starting with feeding her fish in the tank. The fish tank was already established as an important, ever-present object in the previous scenes; the audience gets the feeling, that Mima’s routine pet-feeding is a symbol of normalcy, stability in her life. The next shot is presented in an extreme close up from Mima’s point of view – all of her fish are inexplicably dead. The girl cannot find solace in her own home – the scene in “Double Bind” has changed her life drastically, for better or for worse. After seeing the symbol of her stable, unchanging way of life perished, Mima drops her act. She starts crying and making a mess out of her room. Most of her tantrum is focused on throwing away her collection of plush toys and cute knick-knacks – the sign of the loss of innocence and growing up. After loudly shouting the truth – that she did not want to take a part of the scene, but had to, because that’s what responsible grown-ups do – Mima is confronted by her former public image incarnate. The ghostly “other Mima” is dressed in her cute, pink idol outfit – more fitting for a child than a grown woman. The real Mima throws a pillow at the doppelganger’s face and realizes that there is actually nothing there; she is looking at her own reflection. The last shot of the sequence is another extreme close up on the fish tank – the fish are alive again, normalcy restored. The next time we see Mima, she is (seemingly) happy and without a care in the world; the character jokingly denies a possibility that acting in the more mature TV show has affected her in any way. From this sequence alone it is possible to reach a conclusion, that for Mima her public image is the same form of reckless escapism as for her audiences – confronted with her own personal growth, being afraid of her own changes, she imagines herself as a more radiant, eternally childish idol – a reassurance, that Mima’s old self will always be there, that the changes she experience will reverse like the dead fish coming back to life in her childishly-decorated flat.

The choice to depict Mima as a pop idol unable to move away from her public persona is significant. The idol culture in Japan is very specifically rooted in the country’s

history during the middle and the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. After losing the World War II, the Japanese were occupied by the Allied Forces and (during the implementation of Marshall Plan) subsequently introduced to western business practices.<sup>16</sup> However, the necessary rebuilding of the country demanded the Japanese middle class to dedicate vastly more time to their jobs than the perceived norm in the Western world.<sup>17</sup> The socially-accepted workaholicism and the highly demanding group mentality at the workplaces (which are the ongoing issues in Japan even to this day) has led Japanese teenagers and adults in the 1970s to embrace the “*kawaii*” (cute) social conduct: acting childishly, wearing childish accessories to at least temporarily escape from their hardships of adulthood. Because reaching it meant the end of joy and independence – the only way of escaping was eternal, artificial childhood.<sup>18</sup>

The “*kawaii*” culture has led to idol culture. For the Japanese pop-idols singing is a secondary skill; the main attractions of the idol (which are also depicted in the “Perfect Blue”) are “(being young), saccharine, chaste, demure, and sincere, so to not shatter the fantasyland in which all idol pop fans dwell.”<sup>19</sup> The good Japanese pop-idol therefore is an incarnation of escapism – forever young and innocent, a fairy tale onto which her (or his) spectators can project themselves to forget the hardships of their adult lives. Therefore, the interpretation of the doppelgänger being Mima’s defence mechanism against growing up seems entirely valid – after all, the “other” she is forever stuck with the profession that embodies the very specifically Japanese symbol of the eternal childhood. Even the lyrics of Mima’s former pop-idol band’s songs seem to support this notion: “I’d rather wear jeans than tight business suits -...- I want to stay the way I am forever.” Ironically, one of the reasons why “Perfect Blue” itself was granted a cinematic release (instead of becoming a straight to video animated feature, as originally intended)<sup>20</sup> was the initial impression of a somewhat familiar story, the main character of which is a “*kawaii*” girl, an innocent pop-idol – two aspects that are mercilessly deconstructed in the movie. The mainstream appeal of the “cute”

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<sup>16</sup> Clombo, Jesse *Japan’s Bubble Economy of the 1980s* (2012) [Online] Available from: <http://www.thebubblebubble.com/japan-bubble/> [Accessed on: 19 November 2014].

<sup>17</sup> Wolfren, Karel van *Japan’s Repressed Middle Class* (n.d.) [Online] Available from: <http://www.nancho.net/anthcult/kwrepres.html> [Accessed on: 19 November 2014].

<sup>18</sup> *Japan, Why so Kawaii?* (n.d.) [Online] Available from: <http://www.tofugu.com/2012/08/09/japan-why-so-kawaii/> [Accessed on: 18 November 2014].

<sup>19</sup> Covington, Abigail *Unravelling a fantasy: A beginner’s Guide to Japanese Idol Pop* (2014) [Online] Available from: <http://www.avclub.com/article/unraveling-fantasy-beginners-guide-japanese-idol-p-206896> [Accessed on: 17 November 2014].

<sup>20</sup> Osmond, p. 25.

culture has helped Kon both to attract audiences seeking escapism, and to snap them out of the fantasyland to which many of them are willing to escape.

The film's message of accepting one's responsibilities and leaving the past in the past could be applied not only on the individual, but on the social level as well. Mima's leaving her idol career behind and struggling to accept the new, harsher and more demanding way of life, is somewhat allegorical to the changes Japan as a country experienced from 1980s to 1990s. The origins of the change could yet again be traced back to the aftermath of the Second World War – the same socio-political developments that created the workaholic „salarymen“ culture and the „kawaii“ counter-culture, did bring the country the financial prosperity it has yearned for – however, at a cost. Japanese skewed, monopolising capitalism in 1970s and the 1980s was driven by the extensive and reckless expansions of the country's *keiretsu* (companies, combining business and banking) conglomerations: an ever-inflating „bubble“, that popped in the 1990s, dramatically ending the dream of utopian prosperity and plunging the nation into a two-decades long financial stagnation.<sup>21</sup> Incidentally, the expensive pop-idol industry that prospered during the 80s had lost most of its popularity after the burst of the „bubble“– the illusions of the responsibility-free youth were not that appealing anymore.<sup>22</sup> Similarly to Mima, the young and reformed post-World War II Japan had to stop dreaming, grow up, and accept its responsibilities.

All in all, no matter how one would choose to interpret „Perfect Blue“: as a coming-of-age story, a meta-narrative involving the film's audiences themselves or the social allegory, one thing is clear: the movie contains a very strong anti-escapist message. The message is universal, yet expressed through and influenced by the Japanese-specific cultural issues. The effective conveying of the said message depended on the film's mainstream appeal combined with the Satoshi Kon's position as an outlier who challenges the mainstream. The “Perfect Blue's” ending, in which Rumi is revealed to be a culprit, is ambiguous: there are too many inconsistencies in this version of the depicted events (as, indeed, with any other interpretation of the film). Perhaps the confusing *syuzhet* is as paramount as the use of animation? There is no way to know the “real” person from the outside perspective, especially through the constructed images of pop-idols, TV-stars or animated heroines. Mima's “true” identity is an uncrackable mystery – only she can know for

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<sup>21</sup> Ohno, Kenichi, pp. 199-216.

<sup>22</sup> Martin, Ian *AKB48: The Return of Idol Music and the Rise of the Superfan* (2014) [Online] Available from: <http://www.nippon.com/en/column/g00207/> [Accessed on: 19 November 2014].

sure. The same goes for the film's audiences. The only thing a film-goer should hope to gain in the cinema theatre is not a temporary escape into the lives of others (all of that is artificial), but to glimpse a reflection of their own life, their own problems; and an encouragement to act on them.

## Chapter Two

### “Millennium Actress”: of History and Fairytales

Satoshi Kon’s unorthodox approach of depicting the relativity of ‘reality’ within the entertainment industry did not remain unnoticed – not long after the international success of the “Perfect Blue”, Kon’s producer approached him with the proposal of making another film using similar narrative devices.<sup>23</sup> The result was the “Millennium Actress” (2001) – an animated faux-biographical/romantic period drama with a multi-layered narrative. Contrary to Kon’s previous movie, the themes of escapism and detachment were not just subtly hidden inside the seemingly straightforward story, far from it: the juxtaposition between the real and fictitious was the crux of the film from the get-go. As the director himself has put it: “So for Perfect Blue, in the beginning there was a story and to tell that story we applied this method. Whereas with Millennium Actress, the method itself is the aim of the film.”<sup>24</sup> However, the new film did not just rehash the ideas, already established in the “Perfect Blue”; in a way, it actually challenged them. If the former was directed as a sharp critique of the escapist culture, the latter *celebrated* escapist storytelling as the tool invaluable on both the personal and the societal levels. Furthermore, the usage of the detachment technique in the “Millennium Actress” was intense enough to remind its viewers of Bertolt Brecht’s concept of the “*Lehrstücke*” (learning) theatre.”<sup>25</sup> As the Brechtian plays were written to deny their audiences even the slightest possibility of losing themselves in the artificial reality on the stage, so did the narrative of the “Millennium Actress” inform its spectators from the very beginning (much more overtly than it was done in the “Perfect Blue”) about the completely fictional nature of the events unfolding on screen. The World War II’s legacy in Japan, merely implied and touched upon in Kon’s previous film, has expanded into one of the main themes in the “Millennium Actress” as well. Lastly, the influence of the most ancient and basic forms of escapism in human history – the fairy tales – marks the structure of the entire film; its various characters and the plot developments thoroughly adhering to the all-common fairy-tale functions, mapped out by Vladimir Propp<sup>26</sup>, another scholar of the Russian formalist school. Andrew Osmond notices this influence in his own analysis of the

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<sup>23</sup> Mes, Tom *Satoshi Kon Interview* (2002) [Online] Available from: <http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/satoshi-kon/>, [Accessed on: 26 November 2014].

<sup>24</sup> Mes.

<sup>25</sup> Hughes, Erika, pp. 197 – 201.

<sup>26</sup> Propp.

“Millennium Actress”, yet dismisses its importance and does not dwell on the issue: “Admittedly, Kon probably wasn’t thinking of fairy tales, which “Millennium Actress turns out to be -...-.”<sup>27</sup> However, it is possible to argue, that the “Millennium Actress’s” nature as a self-reflective fairy-tale is crucial for understanding the film’s curious pro-escapist stance. How such a stance can work together with the seemingly contradictory criticism on escapism in “Perfect Blue”? How and why the Brechtian detachment technique is employed to celebrate the immersion of the fictional stories, if its usual purpose is to break it? How do the Japanese history and their cultural issues tie with all of it? This chapter of the dissertation will be dedicated to answering these questions via the close reading of the film.

“Millennium Actress” starts with a film director Tachibana and his assistant Ida visiting an aging legendary Japanese actress Chiyoko to get an interview about her life story for the documentary they are making. Tachibana presents her an item she thought was long-lost – a key to the “most important thing there is.” The film then switches to the titular actress’s memories, concerning the importance of the key and a man Chiyoko loved and had been chasing throughout most of her life. The visual style of the first memory sequence is used to legitimize its historic accuracy: the sequence begins with the series of still, black and white images, similar to the photographs of Japan’s real-life historical period (which serves as the background for Chiyoko’s childhood) – the occupation of Manchuria. During the actress’s and Tachibana’s dialogue, the unmoving frames transition into a fluid, yet still almost monochrome-coloured animation – both to indicate, that the accurate depiction of Chiyoko’s past continues, and to create the sense of nostalgia, as the muted colours of a sequence invoke a bittersweet feeling of the days gone by. However, the notion of accuracy is quickly undermined: the audience’s full immersion within the re-telling of Chiyoko’s memories is impossible due to the Tachibana’s and Ida’s inexplicable presence within them. The director and his assistant can be seen bumbling around each scene, “filming” actress’s story with their movie camera and constantly breaking the fourth wall with the comments that directly link their presence to that of the film-viewers inside the real-world cinemas: “I feel like a stalker!”, expresses Ida while watching young version of Chiyoko from afar. The idea, which was subtly implied through the editing of the Perfect Blue – that the film’s reality is a pure artifice, there is nothing “more” or “less” real within it – is put to a forefront and vocalized as a part of the narrative itself in the “Millennium Actress.” The immersion-breaking avatars of the audience, embodied by Tachibana and Ida, are similar to the chorus,

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<sup>27</sup> Osmond, p. 43.

which talks directly with the spectators in the Brecht's play "Decision."<sup>28</sup> However, the element that truly differentiates "Millennium Actress" from the "Perfect Blue" is the establishment and the almost-instant destruction of the film's "accurate" historical past. After all, if one would take film for what it is – a series of on-screen images – for the movie's audiences these images will not be set in the past (no matter what historical period they depict), but in their present. The viewers see the events unfolding directly before their eyes during the "now"; it is not that different to the manner in which the fictional director and the assistant are shown to perceive Chiyoko's memories. The film itself is set not in the historical, linear time, but in the cyclic, based on the repetition of its different screenings, all of which bring images of the past directly into the present like the reminiscence skewed by nostalgia (hence the importance of the nostalgic feeling created by the muted colour palette). The idea of non-linear time is further reinforced by the fairytale-like characters and events.

During her childhood and teenage years, Chiyoko constantly dreams about meeting her "one true love." It does not take long – very early in the film its heroine is encountered by the mysterious artist, on the run from the Japan's imperial military police. From this moment onwards "Millennium Actress's" similarities to the basic fairy-tale structure becomes evident. After the initial encounter artist hides in a shack; meanwhile the police agent inquires Chiyoko about his whereabouts. Policeman's menacing demeanour corresponds to Proppian function of "interdiction": teenager Chiyoko is subtly warned not to help the artist, yet does that anyway (advising the police agents to pursue the false trail), while adhering to another function – "violation of interdiction" – which in the majority of the fairytales begins the ongoing confrontation between the hero and the villain. Sure enough, the same happens in the "Millennium Actress": Chiyoko's initial disobedience forever puts her on the villainous policeman's radar. Moreover, the police agent himself is the perfect embodiment of the fairy-tale "villain" character function – his only role in the story right until its very end is to oppose the "hero" (Chiyoko) in her journey of attaining "the princess" (another function, in this instance represented as the character of the artist, as he (apparently) is the sole goal of Chiyoko's upcoming quest). The only characteristic this villain seems to possess besides his chilling behaviour is a deep facial scar – the most cliché and superficial indicator of his villainy, befitting the walking-talking Proppian function. Considering the basic depiction of the villain, it is not surprising that the enigmatic artist possess even lesser amount of distinguishable features. Chiyoko's love interest does not seem to develop any personality

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<sup>28</sup> Brecht.

defining characteristics; furthermore, even his face is forever shaded, creating an impression of an *idea* of the character, which serves only as the “hero’s” goal. Thus, it seems that Andrew Osmond’s comment about “Millennium Actress” being a cinematic fairy-tale is an apt one. Yet during the film’s progression it also becomes evident, that Osmond may have been wrong while dismissing the movie’s fairy-tale nature as the mere afterthought.

After the policeman’s intervention Chiyoko visits the artist in his hideout. The painter shows young girl a key and describes it as something that unlocks the most important thing in the world (in the couple of the following scenes the key falls into Chiyoko’s hands, hence, making the painter represent the Proppian “donor of a magical item” function as well). The intimate bond is felt between the two characters; Chiyoko quickly falls in love with the artist. At this moment it is already possible to notice the importance of the fairy-tale structure: in the beginning of the film it was established, that the young Chiyoko has spend her childhood dreaming about the fairytale-like “one true love.” That information, combined with the utter facelessness of the artist suggests that the reason for his function as the “princess” character throughout the film’s story is rooted in the Chiyoko’s escapist tendencies: the girl’s obsession with the romantic fairytales leads to her projecting their basic functions onto the dangerous-yet-mundane real world of Imperial Japan. In other words, while believing the unlucky Japanese dissident to be her “prince charming” Chiyoko can imagine herself being a romantic heroine, more capable than the young girl actually is. Not unlike Rumi in “Perfect Blue”, she does not appear to see the reality behind the image she has created for the painter – hence his faceless features. However, Chiyoko’s escapism does not absolve her from the everyday responsibilities; contrary so, it makes it easier for her to accept them. Soon after their conversation inside a shack, the artist is forced to flee the country; rumour has it – to the recently occupied Manchuria. Continuing to live out her fantasy of being a “hero” of a romantic story Chiyoko signs up with the filmmaking agency to become an actress in Manchuria – even though this decision is propelled by the girl’s delusional goal of finding her “beloved”, it also starts Chiyoko’s life-long acting career, helps her mature and act decisively (up until this point she had a hard time deciding anything). Via such plot development Satoshi Kon suggests, that the escapism on the personal level may not necessarily be destructive – the storytelling could also serve as a positive, inspirational force.

The first memory sequence ends with the chase scene – young Chiyoko futilely tries to catch the departing train with the artist onboard, while Tachibana and Ida frantically follow her movements quite similarly to how the film’s audience try to keep up with the action on

screen. However, the drama of the lovers-apart is completely undermined with the comically sobbing Tachibana explaining, that he “cried 53 times at this scene!” The film zooms out of the story-within-story to reveal, that the events depicted thus far are not merely old Chiyoko’s memories, but her reminiscences *combined* with the plot of one of the first film’s she had played in. The revelation’s thematic purpose is twofold. On one hand, it further detaches the “Millennium Actress’s” viewers by presenting another diegetic proof of the movie’s artificial nature. On the other, it reminds of the Robert A. Rosenstone’s paradigms regarding the relationship between film and the history; more specifically, of the fourth one, “film as historical document.”<sup>29</sup> Even though the paradigm was conceived to examine specifically historical films as the documents, encoding the desires and other emotions of the time they were produced in, due to the marriage between the memories and the fictional in could be applied to the “Millennium Actress” as well. Chiyoko’s remembrances are infused with the artificial because the artificial was the immensely important part of her life: the various roles she had played, starting with the ‘unofficial’ one of the fairy-tale heroine, has shaped her as a person, and therefore, it is impossible to talk about her past endeavours without dwelling on them as much as on the factual events. Furthermore, it is not only Chiyoko who plays her roles – it is the nation of Japan itself. By analyzing the “outer layers” of the actresses’ memories (the elements of the movie plots mixed within them), one could also map out the changes of anxieties and desires of Japan as the whole during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By putting Chiyoko’s life story one step further away from his audiences, Satoshi Kon seems to celebrate storytelling’s revelatory nature – after all, the stories we choose to tell or play in tell a lot about *us*.

However, it is the next memory sequence in which the importance of the film’s fairytale structure fully takes shape. Chiyoko is in Manchuria now, searching for the artist whom she has heard was captured once again; yet the sequence is dressed up as a samurai film (set in a distant past) the heroine has played in at the time. The choice of a historical action film is significant, especially considering the soundtrack Kon uses through these scenes – it is very modern electronic music, completely unfitting the ancient setting. The usage of electro-pop brings the past to the present – not as the mere remembrance, but as something that is happening *here* and *now*. Moreover, another important change happens during the sequence: Tachibana and Ida stop being just the avatars for the movie’s audience

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<sup>29</sup> As summarized in Ashkenazi, Ofer *Rethinking History* (2013): *The Future of History as Film: Apropos the Publication of a Companion to Historical Film*, *Rethinking History: the Journal of Theory and Practice*, DOI: 10. 1080/13642529.2013.814289, p.8.

and start participating in and influencing Chiyoko's memories themselves. When the film once again zooms out of the memory segment into old Chiyoko's apartment, we can see the diegetic explanation for this new layer of narrative: Chiyoko and Tachibana are humorously acting out the scenes from the movie which has served as the backdrop for this particular segment. It is a re-enactment – a process that may definitely appear comical, as the past brought into the present in such a way is inaccurate, skewed by nostalgia and inevitably anachronistic (exemplified by the usage of the modern music during the scenes set in the ancient Japan). Yet it is also an almost ritualistic action of reviving the past: the history no longer resides in the memory, it is being lived out again, and therefore, the connection to the emotional, abstract aspects of the past is reconstructed much more effectively than through the more accurate-yet-lifeless straight re-telling of the events. During the conclusion of the interview, Chiyoko gratefully tells Tachibana that “As if when I was talking to you, the girl I was came back to life.” It is almost literally true – Tachibana, by bringing actress an item from her past and helping her re-enact parts of it, has “unlocked” Chiyoko's former self from the memories and (at least temporarily) brought her into the *now*. This usage of the non-linear time is very similar to the workings of the fairy tales – folklore is not stuck in some particular historic reality; each generation re-enacts the fairytales to their children, this way preserving the long-gone ideas, parables (the *felt* history) within the present. Thus, the Brechtian detachment technique used in the film works to reveal the value of the fictional: by “acting out” rather than just talking (the “acting” can be considered as the fictional side of fairytales, theatre, literature or the film itself), one may bring the long-forgotten truths back to life..

The value of the fictional storytelling rooted in the more specifically Japanese historical context can be seen while analyzing a couple of particular scenes, depicting Chiyoko's life during the end of the Second World War. The scene starts within one of Chiyoko's memory sequences – via the combination of three different film settings actress has played in, the viewers are showed that she has managed to locate the artist – yet it is too late, the pursuing scarred policeman has already captured him for good. Chiyoko enters the prison her beloved is kept in, but emerges into a completely different world. The medium shot of confused Chiyoko wearing a different, much shabbier outfit is followed by the establishing one, which depicts the fiery red skies, completely destroyed cityscape, and the endless barrage of bomber planes above. The only sound that is heard is the ominous air raid siren. The equally bewildered assistant Ida, wielding a movie camera, vocalizes the inevitable thoughts of the audiences regarding the scene change: “What is this, science-fiction?” The

initial thought, that the plot now has entered one of the more fictional of Chiyoko's films' settings is understandable – the desolation looks so total, the contrast with the previous scenes - so jarring, that the science-fiction movie may be the only reasonable explanation. And yet, this is one of the few scenes in “Millennium Actress” which shows an almost-unaltered historical reality: Japan has lost the World War II, these are its last days and the Allied forces are bombing the Japanese territories. The unstoppable destruction puts every aspect of anyone's lives - including the Chiyoko's heroic quest - to a total halt. The artist is still locked in prison; nothing can save him from the air raid, not even the heroine of the story.

At the end of the scene a matching shot is used to connect it to the next one – a dark cloud of dirt, dust and explosion powder transforms into a serene, snow-white cloud in a peaceful, deep blue sky. The serenity is reinforced by the sound of the cicadas' song, symbolizing a returning life (in contrast with the air raid siren, a sign of death). The war has ended, the slate washed clean. Chiyoko is depicted in a wide angle shot as standing among the ruins of what has recently been her whole life. In the background one can see other survivors – all of them appear as confused as the main character. The desolation of the real is too total to comprehend as it is – no-one knows what to do next. The prison, in which the artist was kept, is destroyed: Chiyoko's fairytale seemingly ended. She does not even appear sad, just discombobulated – the inspirational force, which kept driving her through life, is no more. Yet within the destroyed building she finds something: a single red woman's shoe, shown in an extreme close up. It seems that the context of the shot would create a sense of tragedy regarding this lost item, suggesting that its owner has perished during the raid. Yet for the “Millennium Actress's” heroine the shoe is a symbol of hope (a notion supported by a happy, enchanting melody that immediately starts playing in the background): the item looks beautiful, out of place in the layers of dirt and concrete; like a sign that something magical, something greater than the shambles of reality still exists. Furthermore, the shoe is indirectly linked to the actual fairytales: its shape and the cheerful red remind the viewers of classic Cinderella and the Red Riding Hood stories. Sure enough, the sign proves to be true. A few moments later a hopeful Chiyoko finds one of the few still intact walls of the building, on which, like a fairytale miracle, there is a final message from the painter: “Until we meet again”, written alongside the beautifully-drawn graffiti of film's heroine, the artist has managed to create during his captivity. Chiyoko smiles: the painter must still be out there. The destruction caused by the American army is just a hindrance in her story; a setback

which she, as the “hero” must overcome to reach her “princess.” The little piece of fiction has restored actress’s compass in life.

During the few following scenes old Chiyoko explains to her interviewers that after the war fiction served as a salvation not only for her, but for the Chiyoko’s entire filmmaking studio as well: “We had no food, no clothes; wanting to make good films was all that kept us going.” Similarly to Ida’s confusing the historic reality with the science-fiction, creating and experiencing the various forms of fiction has helped both Chiyoko and the studio to comprehend the devastations brought by the real and move forward with their lives. The escapist nature of storytelling provided a comfort that was necessary at the time. Parallels could be drawn with the emergence of Japanese post-war escapist culture, which was discussed in the previous chapter and harshly criticized by Kon in the “Perfect Blue.” “Millennium Actress” may not have provided an excuse for the Japanese tendencies towards escapism, yet it certainly showed a justification: when encountered with the total destruction and the changes in the way of life, one can only comprehend this totality by putting it into the re-assuring structures of the artificial. However, it also begs a question: if Kon thoroughly endorses the escapist storytelling in “Millennium Actress”, how does such a stance work together with his anti-escapist sentiment in “Perfect Blue”? The scene towards the end of the movie, in which the scarred policeman finally becomes a character larger than his initial “villain” function, should provide an answer.

In this memory segment Chiyoko is entering her middle age years; the war is long over. The scarred villain arrives at the actress’s studio to make his amends. The scene begins with a cut-in rather than establishing shot or a close up – we are initially not sure about the person’s identity. The policeman is depicted sitting on a bench, his arms and the lower body shown in focus. The low quality of the man’s clothes (compared to the suits or the dashing imperial uniforms he was wearing before) is immediately noticeable, as well as the signs of the poor health: a cup of warm tea, clutched tightly in policeman’s hands and a crutch, resting besides him on a bench. All of the details indicate misery in one form or the other. When the camera pans upwards, for the first time the audiences are allowed to see the policeman not just a Proppian function in a fairytale, but as an actual human being. A scarred man is mutilated by war: he is blind in one eye, has a missing leg; a deep scar on his face this time symbolizes not the policeman’s role of a perpetrator, but that of the victim. Yet what is he a victim of?

A film poster behind the man's back suggests a possible interpretation. It is a poster of the pre-war Japan's propaganda movie: the brave and heroic imperial soldiers are shown marching to victory; a fairy-tale version of war, once fed to the entire country, the harrowing results of which is situated in front of it. This scene serves as a distinction between the inspirational and damaging escapism. The storytelling that works in favour of personal or social development is *reflective*; one applies it to their lives to better comprehend them, to find enough inspiration for moving forwards (similarly to how Chiyoko's romantic fantasy has helped her to deal with her life problems, or how the artificial inside the space station has encouraged Heinz to confront his demons in "Magnetic Rose"), but never loses distinction between fictitious and the real, hence, never misses the real life details that do not fit within the structures of the artificial. If the storytelling is truly and genuinely believed in, on the other hand, one is in danger of going down the same path of self-destruction as Rumi in "Perfect Blue" or Miguel in "Magnetic Rose." A policeman as a "villain" function was used throughout most of the "Millennium Actress" to mirror his own fairytale-like outlook on the world: for him, both the artist and Chiyoko appeared merely as a dissident and a collaborator; "villains" in their own right. All the details that did not fit into the fictional, i.e., their real life problems and personalities, were ignored. The scene's pro-reflective message is universal, yet also very specifically applicable to Japan. The post-war Japanese in a way seem stuck in finding solace by fictionalizing reality<sup>30</sup>: the 2014's commemoration of the World War II war criminals as the national heroes, led by none other than the contemporary Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, is the most recent example.<sup>31</sup> Such acts force the brutalities and complexities of the real back into the pretty, escapist fairytales; emphasize the heroic poster in the background while ignoring the mutilated policeman and his victims that were created by it. Thus, "Millennium Actress" could also be understood as a warning message against the whitewashing of history for the Japanese society as a whole.

The film's climactic last segment further reinforces the distinction between two different modes of escapism while at the same time providing another reason for a Brechtian detachment technique used throughout the movie. Interview is concluded, old Chiyoko is dying. She had never managed to meet the artist again: the fairytale structure of the film is seemingly broken, as the "hero" did not get a "princess" she deserved. Yet Chiyoko dies in

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<sup>30</sup> Nozaki, Yoshiko and Selden, Mark, *Japanese Textbook Controversies, Nationalism, and Historical Memory: Intra- and Inter-national Conflicts*, the Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 24-5-09, June 15, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> BBC news *Japan PM Shinzo Abe marks war criminal ceremony* (2014) [Online] Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-28948501>, [Accessed on: 30 November 2014].

peace; her last words are: “After all, it’s the chasing after him is what I really love.” Thus, although subverted, the fairytale narrative remains intact – the prize Chiyoko deserved (and got) was the self-applied romantic fairytale, which provided her life a structure and motivation to go through it. Moreover, just before the ending scene Tachibana reveals to Ida that Chiyoko’s painter was dead throughout most of the film’s *fabula*: he was tortured and killed by the scarred policeman just before the end of the Second World War. Chiyoko herself was not aware of this fact; yet judging from her last line, it did not matter if a man of her dreams was alive or dead anyway. All that mattered was the dream itself.

This type of ending denies the film’s audiences the emotional catharsis one can expect from a romantic drama. After all, the popular genre of the romance films largely adhere to its own set of narrative rules – or “functions” – that are rarely challenged. Instead “Millennium Actress” poses a question: why does one go to the romantic dramas at all? Perhaps to escape from one’s life problems, to get the emotional resolution at the end, to seek inspiration – at the same time being fully aware that the experience is completely fictional and illusionary. In other words, a filmgoer’s experience is similar to Chiyoko’s reliance on her own reflective fairytale. Denying audiences the expected catharsis to teach them something they would reflect on after leaving a theatre was one of the purposes of Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* plays.<sup>32</sup> Satoshi Kon’s thematic messages in the “Millennium Actress” work in a similarly didactic fashion: they teach viewers the value of escapist storytelling while warning about the possible dangers of escapism at the same time.

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<sup>32</sup> Hughes, Erika Brecht’s *Lehrstücke and Drama Education* in Schonmann, Shifra (ed.) *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education* (2011) Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 197 – 201.

## Chapter Three

### “Tokyo Godfathers” and “Paprika”: the Value of Mainstream

The last two animation films directed by Satoshi Kon could not appear more different. “Tokyo Godfathers” (2003) is a feel-good Christmas comedy, the *fabula* of which revolves around the three homeless people in Tokyo, desperately trying to return a displaced baby to its parents. “Paprika” (2006): a fast-paced science-fiction action flick, featuring a heroine able to enter and alter people’s dreams. Yet the emphasis on the difference between the reckless and the reflective escapism that is felt throughout them thematically unites these seemingly incomparable movies. Even more, Kon’s usage of the popular genres serves to reinforce the films’ similar themes rather than diminish them; the importance of director’s working within the mainstream to challenge the reckless escapism it so often provides is especially evident in “Tokyo Godfathers.” Lastly, both movies via their form and narrative play with an idea of film as an art form being especially suitable for tackling the problem of escapism. The following chapter of the dissertation will be dedicated to provide examples for these interpretations through a short comparison between the two side stories of “Tokyo Godfathers” and “Paprika.”

Similarly to “Perfect Blue”, “Tokyo Godfathers” subverts its audience’s expectations through a thoroughly mainstream appeal: both its posters and an initial half an hour of narrative suggest a relatively simple, light-hearted Christmas comedy. However, even though the film’s main plotline (a search for a displaced baby’s parents filled with audaciously inexplicable lucky coincidences) certainly delivers in that regard, the side stories delve into the material dark and topical enough to fit a psychological drama or even a documentary on the Japanese-specific social issues. The main characters of “Tokyo Godfathers” are a trio of the homeless, each dealing with their personal issues they are trying to run away from specifically and the their outlier status in Japan in general. It is noticeable, that the characters refer to one another as “homeless” in English rather than Japanese – they are the members of a social group the neglect of which is deeply rooted in Japan’s past to the level of Japanese not having a proper word to describe it.<sup>33</sup> The very first scene of the film shows the trio attending a Christian charity nativity play, in which they hope to get some food: the scene is

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<sup>33</sup> Okamoto, p. 526.

charming and funny, yet instantly reminds the Japanese viewers of the lack of their government's support for the homeless. The Homeless Law was only introduced in Japan in 2002, just a year before the movie's release date (furthermore, even the new legislation did not improve the homeless situation much, as the government of Japan expects the social group to provide themselves their own housing and offers almost no state benefits), thus making the issue represented in the "light-hearted" family film highly topical.<sup>34</sup> Shklovsky's method of defamiliarization comes to mind: using slapstick comedy and a mainstream, "time of miracles" Christmas movie plot (which invites viewers for an escape from the real life issues), "Tokyo Godfathers" makes its argument about the serious social problems of the Japanese homeless stand out (to be seen as for the first time) and make a more lasting impact than it would have been possible using the less mainstream genre, such as a social issue film or documentary.

A comedic scene portraying a disturbing social problem that particularly stands out depicts Gin, one of the three main characters, being beaten almost to death by a group of teenagers. Discrimination and violence against the homeless is prominent in Japan, yet rarely discussed – as the unwanted elements in society, homeless tend to be almost invisible in the eyes of the public. Andrew Osmond keenly notices the videogame-like manner in which the lights in the nearby building are turned off each time Gin is hit. Combined with the cheerful soundtrack, it certainly creates an absurd, darkly comedic effect.<sup>35</sup> Yet the turning off the lights also reminds of a Kitty Genovese case and the psychological bystander effect<sup>36</sup>: the beating ensues in the populated neighbourhood, the residents of which are aware of it. They do not act, however – the film implies, that each neighbour relinquishes their responsibility to help a dying man, opting to "close their eyes" (symbolized by the darkening windows) instead. After the beating is over, the lights are being turned on again, reinforcing the idea of the residents' awareness and negligence. By creating such a scene in a comedy film Satoshi Kon makes sure, that its audience would not be able to close their eyes this time: the problem is put on screen unexpectedly with a focal character belonging to the social group most would like to ignore just how the neighbours did in the film.

The cliché plot in "Tokyo Godfathers" does have another purpose – to show the value of formulaic stories both within and without the fictional. The film's trio of main characters

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<sup>34</sup> Okamoto, pp. 537-538.

<sup>35</sup> Osmond, p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). *Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 377-383.

would do anything to escape from their personal problems; however, it is not possible due to the narrative's nature as an all-familiar "time of miracles" Christmas movie. Throughout the "Tokyo Godfathers" every imaginable coincidence happens – after all, it is a comedy, during which the viewers' disbelief can be suspended very easily – and all of them confront the main characters with the people, places and issues they desperately want to avoid; the cliché "tie-up-all-loose-ends" comedy genre ending trope demands otherwise, though. Thus, through its *fabula* "Tokyo Godfathers" makes an argument about various social and personal issues, typical to the homeless in Japan; but it is the formulaic *siyuzhet* that forces both the film's characters and its audiences to look for the solutions. The cliché plot works as the inspirational force: the solutions *are* reachable; within the unreal world ruled by the family comedy tropes it is possible to depict them all. If the viewer would take action, some of them would definitely be achievable in the real world as well.

"Tokyo Godfathers" represents the possibility of seemingly escapist storytelling in films working as the anti-escapist, inspirational force through its form, whereas in "Paprika" a very similar argument is made through the movie's content. The story of "Paprika" involves a young doctor, using advance technology to cure people through their dreams. Usage of the fictional (dreams) to help fix characters' problems in their real lives does immediately remind of the similarly-purposed fairytale-like narrative structure in "Millennium Actress." The idea is sidelined when the film's main plotline is introduced (which, in a fashion befitting a genre action blockbuster, features a megalomaniacal villain, yearning for the domination of people's dreams and the main heroine's strife to save the world), and is more fully explored only through one of the movie's side-stories, revolving around one of the doctor's patients – a middle-aged detective Konakawa. The very first scene of the film, which introduces both detective and the doctor (as her colourful dream-world alter-ego, called Paprika), relishes in its artificial nature: Konakawa's dream sequence switches from the setting of an extravagant circus to that of the Tarzan movie, followed by a shot inspired by a James Bond flick and finished with a extracts from a romantic comedy and a detective action thriller. The different settings are connected by matching shots to sustain a sense of continuity, while detective Konakawa chaises a mysterious figure – a "traitor" through the scenery of film genres. A last segment, however, is incomplete: the cop movie ends with the traitor killing his victim and escaping the detective for good, which prompts the dream to fracture in a manner similar to the slowed-down movie reel (even the film reel's sound effect is used in the shot). Konakawa is depicted as being trapped inside this reel – his reoccurring dream, a piece of fiction directly

linked to film as the art form is a defence mechanism, a form of escape, preventing the detective to face his real-life problem hidden beneath it. Later during the film it is revealed, that both the victim and traitor have a face of Konakawa himself: the murder symbolizes his guilt regarding the past mistake. By constantly experiencing the same dream, detective projects this real, personal problem onto it. He imagines himself as a hero of the story sincerely, which helps detective to temporarily get rid of his guilt, embodying it as a blockbuster villain. There is a reason within “Paprika’s” narrative for Konakawa’s dreams being a mishmash of different film genres, yet such a presentation also works allegorically: similarly to Rumi and Miguel, the initial state of detective’s character symbolizes a recklessly escapist moviegoer, finding a temporary solace in the artificial.

The change of representation of film’s escapism occurs in the second half of the “Paprika.” After realizing the truth regarding his repressed guilt, Konakawa embraces the same heroic cop role reflectively: by consciously playing out every action movie cliché in his technologically-enhanced dream-state, detective literally guns down the embodiment of his guilt (the “traitor” figure), this way both acknowledging a past mistake and deciding to leave it where it belongs – in the past. The structure provided by the popular genre of the fictional helps Konakawa to make sense out of detective’s internal struggle and move on with his life; not unlike how Chiyoko used her romantic fairytale for the same purpose in “Millennium Actress.” In this movie, however, it is openly suggested, that the art of the film itself (employing all its formulaic genres) can function as such an inspirational force for its spectator.

Thus, though “Tokyo Godfathers” and “Paprika” possess many differences, both films have a similarity that unites them: the differentiation between the reckless and the reflective modes of escapism (an idea, already established in the three films previously discussed in this dissertation), and the importance of the usage of the popular genres while establishing it. “Tokyo Godfathers” presents the argument on both personal and the societal levels, while “Paprika” (as befitting a movie concerning dreams) takes a more psychoanalytical (a notion of repressed guilt or desire dates back to Sigmund Freud’s work<sup>37</sup>) approach.

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<sup>37</sup> Freud, Sigmund Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (1990), W. W. Norton & Company, New York.

## Conclusion

### Satoshi Kon: the Storyteller

The year is 2010. Satoshi Kon tragically passes away from pancreatic cancer,<sup>38</sup> leaving a short, yet substantial filmography as his legacy. All of his four feature films, albeit adhering to the different genres, are unified by the same underlying themes: a critique on the escapism and the celebration of the escapist storytelling. The (seemingly) contradictory messages are beautifully married via the various meta-narratives, reflecting on the relationship between the film and its audience. Like a true auteur he was, Kon has even managed to leave his signature stamp on the project that was supposed to be driven by another man's creative vision – a short film “Magnetic Rose” in Otomo's anthology “Memories.”

As it is the case with all the great directors, this short dissertation has merely scratched the surface of his works: Kon's anti-escapist sentiment is perhaps most vividly felt in his sole project for the small screen, a 13 episodes-long mini-series “Paranoia Agent” (2004), the main villain of which literally is the escapism incarnate. However, a thorough analysis of the said TV show would require a separate dissertation, as almost-every episode is designed like a short film, with its own main character and narrative structure. Furthermore, other major themes of Satoshi Kon's work, such as feminism (the evolution director's female heroines, ranging from the submissive Mima in “Perfect Blue” to dominant and in-control titular character of “Paprika” offer an appropriate level of material regarding feminist thought) or the increasing role of technology in our everyday lives, deserve their dedicated articles as well.

Andrew Osmond titles Satoshi Kon “the illusionist”,<sup>39</sup> touching on the theme of the reality's relativity, which is so prominent in all of the Kon's films. Although the theme and the implementation of it (through editing, usage of animation and the technique of defamiliarization) is immensely important for the director's ever-present analyses of escapism (its dangers and merits), the representation of illusions is only one half of the coin. As evident from the close readings of Kon's films, dazzling his audiences with the spectacle

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<sup>38</sup> Scott, A. O. *Satoshi Kon, Anime Filmmaker, Dies at 46* (2010) [Online] Available from: [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/arts/design/26kon.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/arts/design/26kon.html?_r=0), [Accessed on: 05 December 2014].

<sup>39</sup> Osmond, p. 8.

of illusions (and subsequently breaking its immersion) was never enough for the director; the real cruxes of his films were the *teachings* of the truths underneath. As stated in the introduction, a film could be understood as a “name of the rose” - a composite of beautiful illusions that has a great power of reflecting reality. Satoshi Kon’s films reflect the real-world issues, that are universally applicable, yet have the very Japanese-specific socio-historical roots (World War II legacy, prominent escapist cultures, history white-washing, ill-treatment of the homeless, etc.). They do so while employing the formulaic structures of the mainstream storytelling, the genesis of which can be traced back to the fairytales. While viewing Kon’s films through the folklore lens, these vices of the real could be called “dragons” of our personal and societal lives.

Yet like all good fairytales, director’s movies are not satisfied by merely talking about the existence of the dragons. The messages of his films are didactic: like those in Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* plays they teach the audiences of the difference between the modes of escapism and the possible methods of overcoming the social problems. Whilst creating a sense of detachment at the same time, Kon’s filmography invites its viewers to apply this learned knowledge onto their own lives, to reflect on it long after exiting the cinema theatres. Thus, Satoshi Kon is not just an illusionist; he is a storyteller, weaving the modern didactic folklore through the flickering animated images on screen. To quote a British fantasy author Neil Gaiman (another notable storyteller of our times): “Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Gaiman, Neil *Coraline* (2003), Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, London.

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