

Playing the Kon Trick

Between Dates, Dimensions and Daring in the films of Satoshi Kon

Paul Wells

When Satoshi Kon tragically passed away in the Summer of 2010, anime lost one of its true auteurs, and animation, one of the most playful exponents of the way the animated form can re-define space, time and sensibility, both through its characters and environments, and its audiences. Kon's films, *Perfect Blue* (1998), *Millennium Actress* (2001), *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003) and *Paprika* (2006), as well as his screenplay for *Memories* (1995) all signal a preoccupation with how identity is bound up with the perception of temporal order, spatial laws and configurations, and how any one person might 'evidence' their presence and influence in the material world.

Kon is in some senses best known for this formal playfulness, and the satirical insights which emerge from his operational flux of perspectives, but often less acknowledged is what might be termed the 'emotional intelligence' of his films, and the ways in which his interests in the fundamental aspects of the human condition are revealed through his use of a 'magic realist' register. It is also the case that Kon is probably viewed as a quintessentially post-modern filmmaker, given the attention to visual surfaces and fragmented narratives in his work, but again, this neglects to take into account how Kon has privileged the use of the properties and specificities of animation in lending veracity to his understanding of an intrinsically Japanese sensibility. It is the preoccupation of this discussion, therefore, to evidence and evaluate Kon's emotional intelligence in the service of Japanese identity.

Edmund de Waal, in his quasi-biographical, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, discusses two phases of the impact of *Japonisme* on Western art, first at the end of the late nine-

teenth century, and second, at the end of the Second World War. The first represents the impact of art free from any determining connoisseurship or pre-judgement; a blank canvas upon which the West drew its conclusions. "Japanese things – lacquers, *netsuke*, prints – conjure a picture of a place where the sensations are always new," argues de Waal, "where art pours out of daily life, where everything exists in a dream of endless beautiful flow" (de Waal 53). There is much here to draw upon, not least the idea of a sensual, creative continuum in the dream-like expression of an inherently rich, everyday experience – life somehow imbued with feeling and aesthetics.

De Waal then engages with Japanese culture as it was mediated in the post-war period, when numerous books were written seemingly trying to 'explain' the otherness of the Japanese: "Japan – my, what an odd country! A country in transition. Vanishing traditions. Enduring traditions. Essential verities. Seasons in. Myopia of the Japanese. Love of detail of. Dexterity. Self-sufficiency of. Childishness of. Inscrutability of" (de Waal 321). This then, may be viewed as the moment of a 'final' authenticity of the Japanese sensibility before the impact and assimilation of the United States and Western culture. I wish to argue that Kon is constantly preoccupied with validating an idea of Japanese identity by representing a more authentic Japanese spirit, characterised by sensual apprehension of a past embodied in aesthetic evidence of experience. It is also an identity resistant to, while absorbing, the veneer of post-war Americanisation and post-modern pastiche. This essentially localises my view of Kon as someone dealing with the deep contradiction of a Japan sustaining the limits of past restraints in religious,

social, sexual and economic conduct, with the permissive excesses of the contemporary era.

From the outset then, it is worthwhile noting that I do not see the shifting parameters of Kon's narratives and images as evidence of post-modern fragmentation and cultural malaise, but as a different model of 'flow'. This is predicated more on what Scott McCloud has noted in Osama Tezuka's graphic story-telling, namely the more extensive presence of subject-to-subject transitions and non-sequitur juxtapositions in extended narratives (McCloud 76-83). The relationship between images in *manga* and animation, then, are not, therefore, based on classical editing, or ideologically charged agencies of montage or counterpoint, but the accumulation of aestheticised vignettes or 'micro-narratives' (see Wells, 89-105), which in turn, preserve some aspects of the specificity of the Japanese sensibility unadorned with Western traits and tropes. Hayao Miyazaki, of course, has been noted for the ways, for example, he reminds Japanese audiences in films like *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001) about a more spiritual engagement with the primary epiphanies of Shinto, before its tenets were mobilised ideologically in the support of militarist ends (see Callis, 93-103). Kon has a similar but more socially grounded vision in which he addresses the themes that have their conditions rooted in the past, but which emerge problematically in the contemporary world.

One need only immediately address the issues of sex, sexuality and sexual representation to evaluate this in Kon's breakthrough film, *Perfect Blue*. Japan had imposed a ban on sexual imagery in graphic form up to 1985, rendering sex education texts useless in regard to their illustration, but somewhat ironically, Japan had sustained a rich tradition of erotic art since the early nineteenth century, the first 'tentacle' porn, arguably Hokusai's *Diver and Two Octopi* in 1814. Changes in the law in the mid-1980s allowed for the exponential growth of graphic and animated pornography; contemporary *hentai*, a cornucopia of often extremely brutal, misogynistic, fetishistic, male fantasies. On the one hand, this might be viewed as the inevitability of responding to long-held socially determined repression; the cathartic liberation of perverse masculine desire; or an engagement with the aesthetic and conceptual 'graphic' freedom the animated form allows. On the other, it could be understood as a moment in the implicit creation and cultivation of a modern Japan in which the repressed, marginalised, domestic identity of women, is taken to its logical extreme, privileging patriarchal power at the expense of female identity, or indeed, any individual identity which seeks to move beyond what are arguably new conformities and oppres-

sions. It is this theme that is at the heart of *Perfect Blue*, and indeed, much of Kon's oeuvre.

Kon's breakthrough success with *Perfect Blue*, and its marketing to the West as a Hitchcock style thriller, to some extent misrepresents his work and its specific achievements both in animation and as a Japanese film. Although Kon uses genre carefully, the preoccupation here is not with the Hitchcockian idea of being directed or misdirected to see in a certain way, but to explore the ways of seeing that both lead to seemingly challenging conclusions about how and why humans think or act, or signify psychological chaos and confusion. This is not then mere playfulness with film form, or only the mixing of different registers of reality, but the use of narrative vignettes pointing to the contradictions and tensions in the cultural thematics Kon has identified. In *Perfect Blue*, ingenue Mimie Kirigoe, seeks to develop her career by leaving the teen pop group CHAM, and becoming an actress. What this entails is essentially the shift from the platonic sexuality of a 'girl group' to the adult realm of mainstream eroticism and exploitation; a shift which prompts psychological and emotional uncertainty in Mimie herself, but also those around her, who act upon their *assumed* knowledge about her, and the ways in which they wish to manipulate her for their own ends. It also moves Mimie through different registers of social and theatrical performance, as well as through her own engagement with changing aspects of her personality. Kon effectively documents these processes – through a mode of 'magic realism' – thereby revealing the underpinning emotional terrain of Japanese culture.

Fredric Jameson, intrigued by the illusiveness in defining 'magic realism' in film, traced it back to its Latinate roots, but ultimately found it most notably in Eastern European cinema, concluding that:

In spite of...stylistic differences, however, I retain a sense of shared features, of which I will here isolate three: these are all *historical* films; the very different *color* of each constitutes a unique supplement, and the source of a particular pleasure, or fascination, or *jouissance* in its own right; in each finally, the dynamic of *narrative* has somehow been reduced, concentrated and simplified, by the attention to violence (and to a lesser extent sexuality)...All of them in different ways, enjoin a visual spell, an enthrallment to the image in its present of time, which is quite distinct...(Jameson 130)

Jameson's refinement of the 'magic realist' principle could arguably be recognised in a great deal of cinema, and certainly much animation, but it is clear that the historical preoccupation, conceptual colour use, and concentrated



narrative vignettes in the service of heightening the ‘present of time,’ is a clear feature of Kon’s work, especially in the ways in which he heightens both physical and emotional ‘violence.’ In *Perfect Blue*’s now notorious ‘rape’ scene in which Mimie endures a simulated, though seemingly ‘real’ rape, when playing a night-club stripper in an episodic drama, “Double Bind,” Kon localises a moment of transition in which violation, manipulation and performance are entwined, and the restraint and repression of the past is replaced by an acceptance of a seemingly lax, immoral, corrupt, code of existence. Kon, having already over-extended the rape scene with interruptions that signal the indifference about what is happening, and to heighten unease, uses Mimie’s resistant yet resigned confusion amidst a swirl of ever darkening violet and blue lights and faces to create an emotionally charged moment when the celebratory cheers of the crowd of men watching her rape remind her of the crowds who once adored her as a pop idol in CHAM. Her innocence is lost, beginning a psychological fragmentation in which Mimie is constantly confronted by her former identity in the girl group; the voice of Me-Mania, her psychotic stalker, who mimics, indeed, replaces her in ‘Mimie’s Room’, her on-line blog; and ultimately, a mentally unstable ‘double’, Rumi, her erstwhile agency manager, but former pop idol, now jealous of her charge’s success.

The multiple layers of Kon’s universe – dreams and nightmares; memories; fantasies; solipsistic scenarios; theatrical performances; social role-playing; mediated constructions, references to other visual sources, etc – are readily facilitated by the ontological equivalence of the animated image. All animated imagery, however imitative, mimetic or quasi-realist, foregrounds its constructed-ness

and illusionism. Kon takes this to its next level in creating ‘magic realist’ epiphanies like Mimie’s state of consciousness at the height of her rape, where aesthetics work in the service of a transcendence that points at one level to the emotional/ emotive outcomes of the scene, but also bigger concerns, ones here related to a ‘slippage’ in the Japanese sensibility from a sense of balance and order, to an emotional and sensual capitulation, resulting in a chaotic and sometimes contradictory *existentialism*. This is also historically specific, in that it represents the emergence of a modern Japanese identity, no longer bound by its religious or insular culture, or the post-war impact of American occupation and Western intervention. Kon is the fundamental chronicler of this emergence, dealing with these topics and themes much more playfully in *Millennium Actress*.

Millennium Actress takes the ‘magic realist’ principle further still as Kon bases the narrative on the making of a documentary film, in which a former studio runner, Genya Tachibana, now in his late career, seeks to make a film about a reclusive actress, Chiyoko Fujiwara, a woman who he has loved and admired from afar throughout her glittering film career. Kon recognises that in essence it is the act of image-making in itself, which is at stake in prompting what defines and interrogates reality/identity/history, and how far this reveals the sensibilities of those who make the images and those who are depicted in them. Consequently, Chiyoko’s reported memories of her life actually see Tachibana and his sceptical cameraman, Kyoji, feature in the imagery she is describing; imagery which moves seamlessly between her recollections of the life she led, and scenes from her films – most notably a samurai movie referencing Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957) and a science-fiction film recalling the work of Karel Zeman.

As is usual in Kon’s work, one register is as ‘real’ as the other, and here, the conventions of the romance genre seem to inform Chiyoko’s everyday life as she constantly pursues the ideal of once again meeting, and being with, a dissident artist, who she briefly met in her youth, and from whom she attained a key. As Andrew Osmond has pointed out, the film’s premise emerged from the conceptual idea of a *trompe l’oeil*, a painted illusion that seems so real, it effectively temporarily ‘replaces’ reality to those perceiving it, until the illusion itself becomes apparent under closer observation. Consequently, this points to the notion

codes that explicitly signify their status as interpretive acts, within a historical context.

In *Tokyo Godfathers*, Kon chooses to refine this ‘existential coding’ in a more conventional approach to storytelling, but one in which he deploys what Susan Napier has called his ‘bi-sexual gaze’; one which she argues “offers the audience a world of fluidity and ambiguity in which the male and female gaze are both powerful and capable of uniting with other gazes, such as the nostalgic or the romantic, to offer alternatives to a hard-edged worldview” (Napier 41). Three homeless vagrants, Hana, a gay cross-dresser,

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that all images, illusions and issues, are only matters related to how we perceive them, so as Osmond notes, “the artist’s key (to ‘the most important thing there is’) *seems* [sic] to be a bit of junk once owned by a man who is finally revealed to have been dead for most of the film. But it *might* [sic] just be the key that unlocks Chiyoko’s door to eternity” (Osmond 58). In the film’s possibly surprising ending, in which Chiyoko admits that it is actually the thrill of the chase that she enjoys rather than the possibility of the attainment of her dream, Kon reveals his own imperative, and implicitly, that of documentarian Tachibana, in wanting to know and retain the emotional flux of experience, rather than the ‘finality’ of fulfilment. In Kon’s worlds, it is better to believe in something that heightens and elevates experience than to merely accept its fundamental mundaneness, and it is this that both underpins his interest in depicting shifting registers of reality/perception, and his desire to create moments of ‘magic realist’ transcendence. This serves to show not merely the fluidities of existence but reveals complex personal, social and cultural perspectives. Chiyoko’s ‘magic realist’ life is thus effectively based on the motif of running, and moving through, the contours of Japanese social history since the 1930s. This engaging aesthetic flux can thus also be understood as a range of competing ideological and ethical perspectives, that once more show the re-invention of Japan in vignettes of ‘presentness’ – at once ‘magical’ and ‘real’. I wish to finally term this, *existential coding*, since it seeks to record modes of perceived reality and experience in

Miyuki, a teenage runaway, and Gin, a deluded alcoholic, find a newborn baby girl in the midst of discarded rubbish, and begin a bizarre journey across a snowbound Tokyo to try and find the infant’s mother. Crucially, Kon turns his ‘magic realist’ gaze on the tension between the ‘magic’ suggested in the Christian conception of Christmas, when the film is set, and the ‘realism’ of homelessness in contemporary Japan. Hana, in particular, mediates the idea that contemporary Japan has lost some of the moral and social sense bound up in past practices, and that those consigned to the margins might offer a reminder of the kind of compassion and dignity now forgotten in the wake of self-serving, indifferent and indulgent cultures.

The trio encounter criminals, drug addicts, and violent street thugs; broken marriages and attempted suicide; each addressing their own reasons for their homeless condition – Miyuki’s stabbing of her father in a petty argument, Gin’s addictions to gambling and alcohol, which resulted in the loss of his family, and Hana, reconciling the contradictions he perceives in himself as ‘a mistake made by God’. Importantly, though, if *Perfect Blue* and *Millennium Actress* are concerned with imagined or desired relationships, *Tokyo Godfathers* is grounded in the relationship between the trio, who arbitrate a new morality amidst the degradation which they confront, in a spirit of reconciliation and acceptance. The ‘existential code’ here is the recovery of an emotional reality beneath the circumstances that create the kinds of alienation and emotional dissatisfaction experienced by Mimie in *Perfect Blue* and Chiyoko in *Millennium Actress*.



On this occasion, though, Kon is not concerned with the irrationality or obsession of the individual psyche, but rather the everyday irrationality and arbitrariness of the social world. It is this very arbitrariness, however, which allows Kon to deploy the kind of ‘magic realism’ in which divine intervention, in the shape of a gust of wind, saves Hana as she plunges from a roof, clinging to a street banner, holding the abandoned baby. The fall occurs at the night’s last moment of darkness, and the day’s first moment of sunshine as the banner slowly descends to earth; a miracle witnessed by the dumbfounded onlookers. The film enjoys these magic realist moments, consolidating the Christian themes of forgiveness, redemption and salvation in two further incidents of good fortune and coincidence: when Gin picks up a winning lottery ticket and also the hint that Miyuki may be reconciled with her father. Kon uses his animation to authenticate his shifts of register and ‘magic realist’ transcendence, not in this instance to reveal the conflicted mind or the social body, but instead to privilege an essential soul and a defining spirit in humanity in response to hopelessness and disillusion at the heart of the more apocalyptic agendas of the Japanese post-war sensibility.

These apocalyptic scenarios present in much (sci-fi) anime, at one level, demonstrate a deep ambivalence about the advances in post-war technology, and Japan’s place at the forefront of such innovation. Typically, Kon embraces this in what will sadly be his last film, *Paprika*. Drawing together themes from his previous films, and the work of author Yasutaka Tsutsui, Kon sets a scene in which the heroine, Dr Atsuko Chiba is equipped with a device – the DC mini – by which she can enter others’ dream-states as her alter-ego, Paprika. As in all scenarios dealing with advanced technologies, there is always the underpinning idea that the positive or negative outcomes of their use is fundamentally related to the hands in which they are held. When some DC minis are stolen, this sets in train a thriller plot by which Chiba seeks their return, but this is but secondary to the opportunity such a narrative conceit affords in enabling the free play of visual invention in the representation of dreams (and other kinds of visual narratives), and more

significantly, in the use of animation as a form of creative expression.

The carnival of objects, figures, machines, statues and phenomena that marches throughout the film is essentially a symbol for the freedoms of consciousness, and the language of animation that apprehends and records them. Kon’s ‘magic realism’ on this occasion rests with the idea that consciousness is imbued with the possibility of creative invention and psychological wholeness. While this is not without threat or anxiety, nor sexual and aggressive nuances, it once more suggests a transcendent model of moving beyond the limits of reality and into the realms of the magical. In consequence, Kon plays with dates and times to shift dimensions and space in acts of creative daring that re-invent anime *and* animation. Crucially, though, Kon’s films freely interrogate the contradictory yet progressive sensibility of modern Japan, reconciling past and present, and recover the place ‘where art pours out of daily life, where everything exists in a dream of endless beautiful flow.’

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The Sound of an Android’s Soul

Music, Muzak and MIDI in *Time of Eve*

Philip Brophy

At a crucial reveal halfway through Yasuhiro Yoshiura’s *Time of Eve* (*Evu no jikan*, 6-part OVA, 2008-9, compiled into a feature film in 2010), teen Rikuo remembers a past conversation with his best friend, Masaki. Unbeknownst to them at the time, they innocently stand at crossroads. Masaki will continue his studies in law; Rikuo is uncertain, having given up his aspirations to be a concert pianist. Masaki ridicules his decision, for Rikuo has rejected his aspirations after seeing a robot perfectly perform a piece of music on the piano. Rikuo doesn’t mention to Masaki what was most disturbing about the performance: only at this point in *Eve*’s back-story do we realise that Rikuo was truly ‘moved’ by the robot’s performance. This is not your usual existential dilemma – a field in which teen-oriented anime excels, more than most Western photo-cine attempts at the same. Here in this near future (sardonically tagged as “probably Japan” in a pre-title card), the teen Rikuo has his world inverted because a robot achieved not a technically perfect actualisation of a piece of classical pianoforte music, but because to Rikuo’s advanced listening sensibilities (dedicated to encountering and hopefully generating such moments of actualised perfection) this robot’s performance emotionally ‘moved’ him. Japanese cinema and anime has consistently told stories in manifold genres that evidence this inversion, wherein everyday life is accepted to be ‘existential’ until one day a ‘humanist’ moment occurs and transforms things. Anime’s preponderance of ‘androids with souls’ is thus less likely to be formally motivated by generic machinations of science fiction, and more likely to be culturally determined by philosophical enquiries of dramatic fiction.

In *Eve*, we never get to hear that robot’s performance, yet it weighs heavily in Rikuo’s head, softly ringing with

emotional gravitas. With acumen and sensitivity, sound and music in *Eve* – an acute meld of sound effects design, spatial environment mixing, musical arrangement, phonographic reproduction and compositional performance – function like a ‘meta-score’ moulded by concave and convex undulations of the inner surface of Rikuo’s head. Belying an aptly Japanese sense of how dramaturgy and psychology are represented in and expressed by narrative moments, arcs and formations, *Eve*’s conduction of sound and music precisely maps the story’s key themes of consciousness (a boy realising androids have feelings, while a ‘girl’ android realises her feelings to her ‘master’ boy) and in the process gives rise to a bounty for musicological signification.

While sound and music are easily foregrounded in *Eve* due to Rikuo’s character, the aural issues it raises are particularly well presented by the anime world, wherein considerations of the minutiae of post-human behaviour (as both social interaction and internal motivation) have been a staple meme ever since Osamu Tezuka’s ground-breaking manga, *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Astroy Boy*, serialised between 1947 and 1963, then made as an animated TV series in 1963, 1980 and 2007). Atomu is the definitive ‘android with a soul’, questioning not only his own existence, but also interrogating Isaac Asimov’s famous “Three Laws of Robotics” from a robot’s point-of-view. (Not by coincidence is Asimov’s logic similarly interrogated throughout *Eve*). More so, just as the anime form gives rise to considering how appearance and simulation constitute a self-reflexive given (i.e., a realm where graphically rendered images of humans include identically rendered androids who within the fictional world are perceived as being indistinguishable from actual humans – but which to us watching anime appear equally ‘unreal’ due to their shared status as drawings), so too does its sound-