Queering Animation:
The Animated Aesthetics of Queerness in the Works of Satoshi Kon

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Thesis directed by Professor Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz

Animation has been regarded as a marginalized medium, one that can carry nonnormative messages. The queerness of animation can be found in its form, style, and narrative techniques. By analyzing the works of Japanese anime director, Satoshi Kon, specific queer strategies and aesthetics can be teased out and explored. In particular, Kon's use of reflexive cinematic devices to disorient, disrupt, and resist historical conventions create uniquely queer works. By examining how these techniques lend themselves to queering normative codes, we begin to understand how queer aesthetics are ones marked by resistance, creativity and transformation.

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The Queer Art of Animation:

In the field of animation theory, there are several texts that draw a parallel between the aesthetic of animation and queerness. Paul Wells, in his book *Understanding Animation* (1998), discusses this through the concept of a "malleable space" wherein gender and identity are made transformative and fluid due to the internal mechanism and laws of the animated medium (206). Queer theorist, Jack Halberstam, developed his theory on the "queer art of failure" by analyzing animated films, insisting that their marginalized status as "something not to be taken seriously" made them ideal works through which to hash out a queer theory (20). I will examine the correlations between queer theory and animation in order to further bridge the two together. The animated medium can be understood as a marginalized medium – one that is not taken seriously – and therefore has the capacity to be nonnormative in comparison to live-action cinema. The forms and figures in animation can be varied and non-permanent, bodies and identities can freely shift and morph. This thesis will be exploring the overlap between queer theory and animation through the animated films of the late Satoshi Kon (1963-2010). My use of queer theory is not only to showcase how a body of work is 'alternative' or nonnormative, but also to focus on the possibilities of an act or image being transformative.

The current discourse on anime has an abundance of publications focused on the works of mainstream anime artists that have been thoroughly offered to and known by Western audiences, such as the works of Hayao Miyazaki (*My Neighbor Totoro, Spirited Away*). I want to look at something different, something that has not been so easily accessible because its messages and formal qualities do not fit neatly into historical conventions. I want to legitimize the lesser known

anime director, Satoshi Kon, by identifying how the formal devices and narrative styles in his films make use of queer aesthetics. His films play, transform, and oscillate between collective identities and individualism; they can be read as 'queer' films on multiple levels: structural, cultural, formal, etc. By expanding the dialogue of animation in relation to transformation and queer theory, this close analysis will establish how queer theory functions within the animated image and how we understand identity as we arrive to it through the process of cinema, animation, and the many versions and reproductions of identity and image.

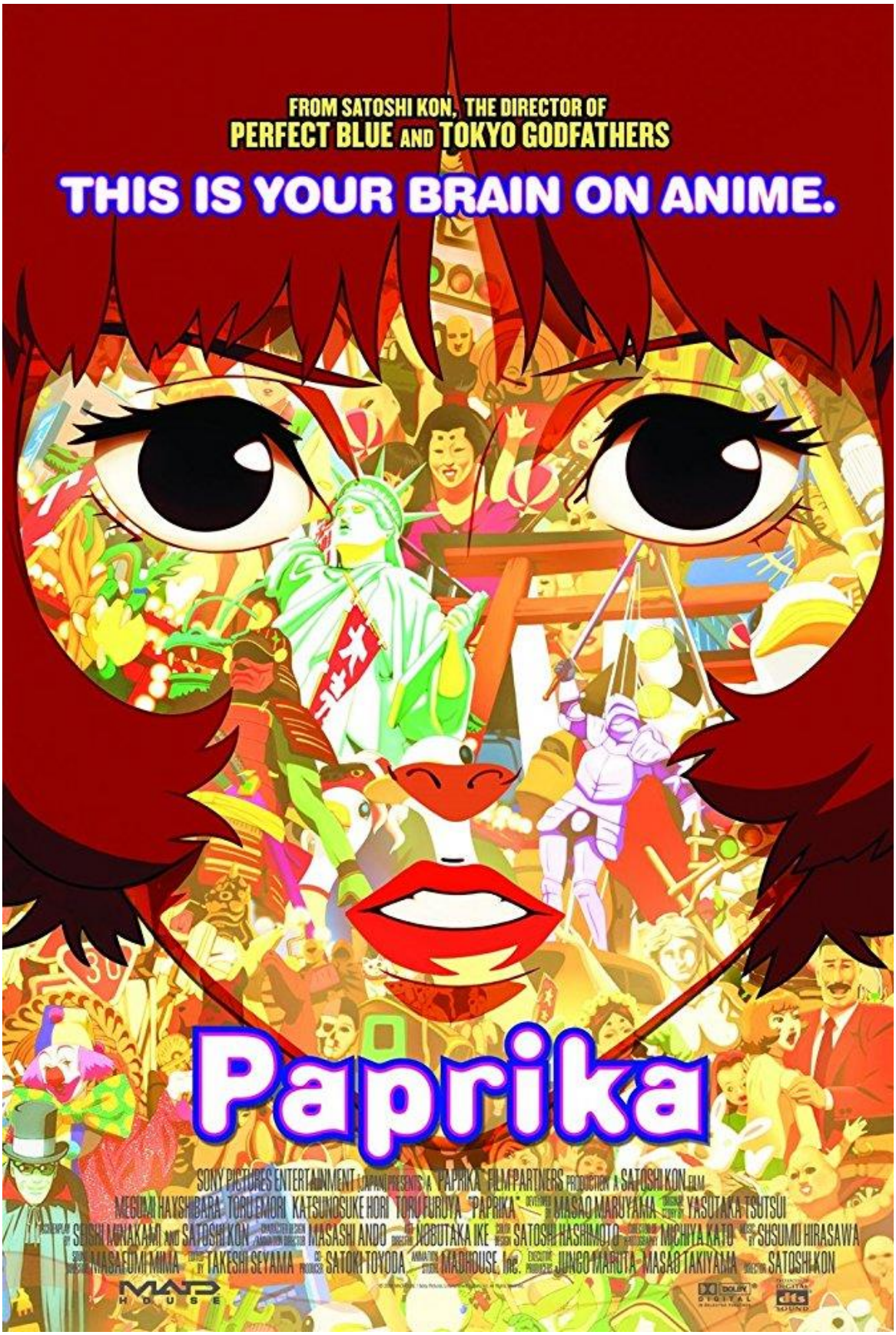
It is not easy to describe Satoshi Kon's oeuvre in one word: in fact, it has been labeled with many terms such as "surrealist," "magic realist," "bisexual," "art house," "avant-garde," "unconventional," to list a few (Napier, 24). The best way I can describe his body of work is "different." His films do not seem typical when compared to mainstream anime. There is something about his films that feels inherently fresh. Though the idea to explore reality through animation has been done before, Kon's work rehashes these concepts and steers them towards the question of identity. Kon's themes are contradictory and nuanced; they promote a suspicious devotion to the images that are a constant, meaningful presence in our daily lives. The exploration of these images as they shape the unreliability of reality and identity is what is at the heart of his films. In a nutshell, he is looking at how image and identity intersect through the cracks and uncertainty of reality. What Kon brings to the table is his skill as a director and editor and his unique style of storytelling, one that serves to deconstruct and transform the expectations of the viewers.

From Mangaka to Director:

Satoshi Kon (1963-2010) began his artistic path with a pursuit in writing and drawing manga, graduating from Musashino Art University with a focus in graphic design. His early career

was, at first, working on his own manga, publishing his first volume in 1990. He found his way into the world of animation through Katsuhiro Otomo – the creator of *Akira* – and eventually shifted into animation, starting out as an uncredited assistant animator or layout and background artist, working his way up to animation supervisor and even getting to direct an episode in a series. These formative years in the anime and manga industry allowed for Kon to perfect his skills for visual storytelling and detail-oriented style. Kon's career as an anime director owes a debt to Otomo, the man responsible for helping Kon's film career kick off by first having him write the story for the animated short *Magnetic Rose* (1995), part of an anthology, and then by recommending him to be the director of an orphaned film that would be *Perfect Blue* (1997). I will not be covering Kon's contributions to *Magnetic Rose* in detail, but it is of note that even with this story his themes of delusions and reality are very present, setting a theme that is in his entire body of work. Satoshi Kon directed four animated feature films: *Perfect Blue* (1997), *Millennium Actress* (2001), *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003), *Paprika* (2007). In addition, he produced a 13-episode TV-series *Paranoia Agent* (2004). At the time of his untimely death from cancer, Kon left behind an unfinished film, *The Dream Machine*.

Kon has a peculiar relationship to fantasy, in that he sees it as necessary but also dangerous if it becomes all we rely on to get through life. He incubates a space of possibility that is not set on monolithic definitions or strict boundaries, but one that requires openness. This theme is at the heart of most of his films, and we see the first instances of tackling and passing down this philosophy in how he handles *Perfect Blue*. The film cemented Kon as a promising and innovative filmmaker in anime with his self-reflexive approach to the narrative, pushing the envelope on the connection between art and identity. These aren't films that simply call attention to themselves through form and technique. They also take this vein and thread it into identity, how art and


FROM SATOSHI KON, THE DIRECTOR OF
PERFECT BLUE AND TOKYO GODFATHERS
THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON ANIME.
Paprika
SONY PICTURES ENTERTAINMENT (JAPAN) PRESENTS A "PAPRIKA" FILM PARTNERS PRODUCTION A SATOSHI KON FILM
MEGUMI HAYASHIBARA TORU EMORI KATSUNOSUKE HORI TORU FURUYA "PAPRIKA"
MASAO MARUYAMA YASUTAKA TSUTSUI
SEISHI MINAKAMI AND SATOSHI KON MASASHI ANDO NOBUTAKA IKE SATOSHI HASHIMOTO MICHIYA KATO SUSUMU HIRASAWA
MASAFUMI MIMA TAKESHI SEYAMA SATOKI TOYODA MADHOUSE, INC. JUNGO MARUTA MASAO TAKIYAMA SATOSHI KON
MAD HOUSE
DOLBY DIGITAL
dts SOUND

consciousness can reflect each other. His films take us into a space between thought and definition, a queered space of glimpses and uncertainty that fuels possibility. Kon's anime is one that seeks to traverse an intertextual map, leaving the comforting codes of the animated medium and looking for a new language that places animation within the context of live-action cinema, effectively blurring the lines between the two.

Satoshi Kon's films never quite hit it off with wide releases in the states but instead circulated around international film festivals; this contributed to his films being labeled as "art house" and niche for an anime director. Though the nature of why these films were given limited releases is indeed due to the barrier of his films being both foreign and an animation that is not for children. These qualities made for poor audience turnout and therefore a limited release. Still, it is surprising how with his second feature there were already whispers of his film being an Oscar contender, just as *Spirited Away* was. None of Kon's films were ever nominated for an Oscar, but it is still telling of his work that it was even considered a possibility. However, his relatively unknown status makes his work a good case study for how queerness can be found in animation.

Applying Queer Theories:

I will offer a selection of queer theorists and theories to frame how I am addressing Kon's films, their themes, and the animated medium. The definition of 'queer,' as I will be using it, does not always refer to sexuality, but is more of a term for something *nonnormative.* A quote from queer theorist Eve Sedgwick on her definition of 'queer' becomes valuable when applying queerness to an artistic medium: "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (12). Sedgwick uses these "gaps" to address the concern of heteronormative sexuality and the importance of pointing

out when individuals fail to fit into their gender and sexual identity, using what she defines as "queer" to challenge cultural institutions, literary canons, and the multiplicity of identity. This definition is found in her 1993 publication *Tendencies*; it is considered one of the earliest definitions of what the 'queer' in queer theory referred to, and it is one that I find most useful when discussing art that refuses a fixed identity.

To elaborate further on "queer" as being a nonnormative stance against dominant orders is a quote from David Halperin's seminal text, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995), which offers a broader definition of queer:

> As the very world implies, 'queer' does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence. (Halperin, 62)

By understanding the term "queer" as something beyond a sexual identity, we can begin to imagine the forms of queer resistance. Halperin's definition of "queer" is not an identity, but a *positionality* against normative structures that dominate social orders around sex, gender, identity, and knowledge. From this position of resistance to the dominant, the normative, the heterosexual, one can glimpse a horizon of possibilities beyond repressive orders, as Halperin states:

> It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviors, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-

> constitution, and practices of community – for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth, and desire. (Halperin, 62)

It is essential to open up what "queer" can mean, and how queer resistance includes an infinite variety of creative processes and performances. Kon's films become queer not in the sense that they are representing gay characters, but more so in the way they are deconstructing and challenging a multitude of historical conventions around social and artistic traditions.

One of the stylistic devices that I define as a "queer aesthetic" in Kon's work is his use of disorientation. If we understand conventional codes and normative structures as being "coherent" or "in line," then we can argue that Kon uses *incoherence* or disorientation as an artistic strategy to queer and critique the subjects of his films. Sara Ahmed's writing on "queer phenomenology" establishes orientation – spatial, temporal, sexual and racial – as a structure that holds things in place, keeps objects the "right way up," and turns us towards certain directions (2). Her book, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), expands on how individuals are 'brought into line' and directed toward a dominant orientation – cis-gendered heteronormativity – and how nonalignment will produce a queer effect. Ahmed characterizes these queer misalignments as "disorientating," as we suddenly move out of the world without falling into a new one (158). Ahmed refers to directions of orientations as creating (heterosexual) lines:

> Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition (Ahmed, 16).

Kon's films are "out of line" from traditional cinematic conventions, as well as the conventions of mainstream anime. He uses the lines of the animated image to draw new paths, put into motion through their repetition, and opens up a queer horizon of possibilities. Queerness in Kon's work is present in both the formal aesthetics and in narrative content; they aim to disrupt, to disorient, to destabilize hegemonic codes and identities.

Animated Aesthetics:

To further elaborate how the animated medium has inherent queer qualities to it, I will start with its very (complicated) definition. Animation has been theorized as a medium that can move between categories, that can blur and complicate motion and stillness, reality and fantasy, drawing and photography. Animation, as a medium, has been defined and redefined as the theoretical focus of the time shifts; there is a tendency to set animation against live-action cinema as a sort of measuring stick for what the moving-image *really* is about. Some critics claim animation is superior to live-action, others claim it has been marginalized, and some claim that animation is at the very definition of cinema itself, perhaps even superseding live-action as the most basic element of 'making an image move' in a sequence in time (Gunning, 37). While the aesthetics of an animated film mark it as different from live-action, it would be disingenuous to think of each medium as entirely distinct, specifically in the realm of identification. The cinematic signifier, as theorized by Christian Metz, is marked by the duality of presence/absence due to imaginary nature; animation operates with same presence/absence that allows a spectator to project onto and identify with the image (Metz, 45). While the two mediums are different, it is important to keep in mind that an animated film can "feel" as real as live-action. When discussing anime and animation throughout this thesis, I will avoid wandering into suggesting a superiority of the medium or a reductionist explanation of the form of animation; I am not here to argue that animation is more

expressive or imaginative than other art mediums. While there is plenty of scholarship that delves into these issues, my focus is more on the techniques and practice of hand-drawn animation, its reception in the West and its marginalized identity when compared to live-action. I am drawn by animation's amorphous, multiplicity of identity, exploring these concepts through queer theory and Kon's application of the medium.

Kon's work troubles the line between animation and live-action, his films do not sit easily within strict categories. While they *are* animated, Kon's films implement cinematic devices, styles and stories that would "fit" or "belong" in a live-action medium. Kon's films are *disorienting*, in a queer sense, as the medium itself shifts between something artificial and something with a deep realism that resonates throughout the work. This uncertainty of categorization – of not lining up with conventional standards – can be attributed to Kon's influences being live-action films, not other anime (Osmond, 17). Having a wide knowledge of cinema, Kon uses self-reflexive devices in his films to call attention to their resistance of norms. Robert Stam, in his book *Reflexivity in Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (1985), outlines reflexive devices in film as "other traditions" that resist, negotiate, deconstruct, or otherwise fall outside of filmic conventions (Stam, xi). These reflexive devices – narrative discontinuities, authorial intrusions, the frame-within-the-frame, the film-within-the-film – are constantly present in all of Kon's films, and further work to disrupt and resist normative expectations.

Through reflexive techniques, Kon's films create a critique that challenges social orders of gender, sex, class, and repressive cultural traditions around the family. He does this by blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy, making for a disorienting narrative and an uncertain diegesis. The real becomes virtual. Life is fiction revealed through the artifice of animation that bares within itself a distinct realism; the truth that comes from fiction. There is formal and narrative

doubling in Kon's films, techniques that destabilize and demystify the notion of a static, secure reality and identity. With these reflexive techniques, the films focus on reality and subjectivity as enmeshed, the formal aspects of composition or framing become a doubling for the uncertainty of reality, the world that the character inhabits becomes unreliable. It is this specific approach to identity and reality as being something that must be negotiated, oriented, created, and transformed that leads me to apply the term 'queer' to these elements and techniques. The self-reflexive techniques are not necessarily queer on their own, it is important to clarify that it is *how* Satoshi Kon makes use of reflexive techniques to create a queer positionality against normative traditions and expectations. Wherein queer denotes possibilities, gaps and lapses, so too do these films encourage a nonnormative self-becoming, where identity is linked to creativity and *making* of identities beyond what is normal.

Kon will reveal a scene to be a film set to disrupt the narrative in Millennium Actress.

When it comes to looking at queerness in animation, a good start is Paul Wells' definition of the 'native potential' of the malleability of the animated figure in his book *Understanding*

Animation (1998): "[B]oth the physical and ideological boundaries of the anthropomorphized body as it exists in the cartoon are perpetually in a state of transition, refusing a consistent identity" (206). Wells explores a theoretical framework to approach realism in animation, narrative strategies, space, performance, gender, and sexuality. The text covers a broad spectrum on different elements, forms and aesthetics of animation as artistic and cinematic form, but it is his identification of animation being a space of possibility and fluidity wherein gender and identity refuses definition and is in constant flux. Wells identifies transformation as an essential quality of animation, one that allows for the characters and spaces to easily morph and remain in fluid.

Chapter One:

To define the reoccurring themes and queer aesthetic devices present in Kon's work, chapter one will examine his first feature film, *Perfect Blue*. I will outline how Kon's strategic use of disorientation in the film acts as a critique against heteronormative gender expectations and repressive gender roles in cinema and entertainment. The film uses the subject of Japan's Idol Culture to critique *otaku* and *kawaii* culture by examining how men look at women and how objectification negatively affects female stars. Kon makes use of the stalk-and-slash genre to further his critique on gender and to deconstruct the expectations of the genre itself. The film's plot is about a young pop-idol, Mima Kirigoe, and her identity crisis that arises with a career change. This is achieved by having the quintessential confrontation between the "final girl" and the killer not involve the death of the murderous "monster." Kon uses the gender-specific conventions of the slasher and steps out of them, making women the bearers of the knife. The film introduces Kon's formal structures and thematic connections to a crisis of identity that Japan was emerging in the 1990s.

Chapter Two:

Chapter two will focus on how temporality is queered in Kon's second feature, *Millennium Actress*. The narrative follows a similar vein to that of *Perfect Blue*, but with a hopeful approach to cinema and an actress's filmic selves. It is a love letter to Japanese cinema, and regards history as imbued with possibilities that will open up new futures. The plot of the film is about an amateur filmmaker who will be interviewing a once-famous actress; as she tells her story, the past becomes interactive. Eventually, the amateur filmmaker begins to don costumes and "act" as his own character within the actress's memories and films. To elaborate on the theory of queer futurity that is present in the film, I will refer to José Esteban Muñoz's seminal book *Cruising Utopia* (2009). *Millennium Actress*'s use of nonchronological editing can be compared to José Esteban Muñoz's theory on queer futurity, wherein queer temporalities are redefined as apart from heteronormative reproduction. Instead of relying on a heteronormative future of reproduction, queer futurity finds its horizon by looking to the past as a performative force on the present. Kon also invokes a gender critique of the *shōjo* genre in order to offer a nonnormative possibility outside of a heterosexual order.

Chapter Three:

Chapter Three will focus on *Paprika* and its use of dreams as they are linked to cinema. Paprika is a movie about a dream and a dream about a movie. Specifically, how we cannot escape our own images, our own films, as they play within the deep dark blue of our inner psyches. The form and narrative of the film reads like a dream still incubating in the unconscious state; it is disjointed, its narrative aspects mostly absent, replaced its own internal dream logic. Much like how the Surrealists aimed to represent raw, unconscious thought, *Paprika* approaches cinema with a similar goal. The plot is a mix of a therapy technique being used by our "dream-detective"

protagonist to help a detective solve a crime by entering his reoccurring dream of the event: a chase, the dead body, and the phrase that rings throughout the film "*and what about the rest of it!?*" The blending of cinema into the psychical spaces of dreams and the multiplicity of identity lends itself to this film as its strongest themes. The film is about unconscious spaces, where bodies can melt and mold into different, queer possibilities.

Chapter Four:

Chapter Four will be on Kon's third film, *Tokyo Godfathers*, which tells the story of three homeless people who discover an abandoned baby on Christmas Eve and try to return her to her family. The reason for leaving this film as the final chapter is due to its stylistic differences that set it apart from the rest of Kon's work. The narrative of the film is not as incoherent as his other features, and there is less of a focus on reflexive cinematic devices. What marks the film as queer, though, is the presence of a homeless transwoman as one of the protagonists. This film also features what can be described as a 'queer family' unit between the three main characters, one that is offered as possible and necessary for those in need of human connection. *Tokyo Godfathers* critiques heteronormative images of "the family" by exploring failed and broken families – contrasted against our three main characters. The subject of homelessness, and having homeless main characters, sets the film apart as nonnormative as an animated film.

Conclusion:

Through my examination of the various cinematic devices used by Kon – reflexive devices, film-within-a-film framing, nonlinear narrative, etc. – I will link their effect to relevant queer and animation theorists. Kon's nonnormative implementation of these techniques, in tandem with his critiques of historical conventions and normative codes, define his films as thoroughly queer. Art and being are linked, they can transform our lives and identities, reveal a hidden self, fragment and

multiply identity. In Kon's films, there is a need for a truth, not for reality. This rejection is not unlike that of queer theory, where one must look beyond what is seen as 'normal' in order to glimpse queer identities and spaces.

Chapter One:
Excuse Me, Who Are You? Queer Subversion and Identity Crisis

Perfect Blue Plot Synopsis: Mima Kirigoe is a pop idol who is going through an image change. She is leaving her idol group CHAM! and attempting to break into the acting industry, starting with a bit-role on the TV show *Double Bind*. After pulling some strings with the producers of the show, Mima's manager (Mr. Tadokoro) has gotten the writer to elevate her role in the show – however, it will require Mima to star in a rape scene. Mima reluctantly agrees to it in order to advance her acting career, despite the urgings of her agent and friend, Rumi. During the initial stages of shooting the show, Mima discovers an online blog called "Mima's Room," where someone is writing out disturbingly accurate diary entries of her day-to-day life, her experiences, her thoughts - claiming to be Mima writing entries to her fans. Soon after, one of her creepier-than-the-average fan (who goes by the online handle of Me-Mania) seems to be following her, filming her and stalking her every move. As Mima starts to go through the filming of the episodes – and trying to sell a new "sexy" version of her public image – Mima's reality start to unravel as bad events seem to follow her: namely, a trail of men being murdered, an obsessive fan turned stalker, and even the image of her own idol-persona. The division between reality and fantasy blur for Mima, who is going through a mental break as she struggles to maintain authority over her identity.

Introduction:

This chapter will examine the queer context and aesthetics present in *Perfect Blue* (1997), by focusing where Satoshi Kon is deliberately being non-normative. The cultural context is important to understand, as the film is directly addressing Japanese subcultures and consumer culture that was relevant at the time of its production and is still relevant in contemporary Japan. After outlining these cultural specificities (*otaku*, Idol Culture and *Kawaii* culture) I will then address the feminist critiques that the film takes on, discussing the male gaze and the impact objectification has on women. Finally, after setting up what is being subverted and challenged – the cultural critique and the feminist critique – I will pull this all into the queerness of the film overall.

The films of Satoshi Kon are *dis*orienting, in a queer way. Things don't seem the "right way up" in Kon's movies, there is a constant attempt at pulling the spectator into a disorienting, queer slant, thus presenting us with an entirely different perspective and the possibilities that come with it. By this I mean, as Sara Ahmed theorized in her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), wherein she combines Merleau-Ponty's theory on phenomenology and queer theory to examine different ways people or objects are "queered." Orientation is established by Ahmed as a structure that holds things in place, keeping objects the "right way" up; through disorientation this structure is challenged, slanted and undone. When we become disoriented, a new space opens up to us, one where different actions, identities and epistemologies become possible. Ahmed frames disorientation has a process or moment where a new (queer) future comes into one's grasp: "Risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer" (Ahmed, 21). What Kon does with his films is a disorientation of this manner, one that opens up possibility and stresses the

importance of self-transformation that does not adhere to a structural norm or cultural tradition. Here, the animated medium itself shifts between the artificial and the real, its boundaries porous and malleable. It is in a state of constant refusal, be it of clarity or convention. Queerness, in the subversive sense of the word, is one that also relies on play and transformation. To be queer is to live in the threshold spaces, hidden or unseen, part of multiple ways of being.

Kon's approach to his first feature film, *Perfect Blue*, combines the malleable quality of animation with the disorientation of queer theory. The film's narrative focuses on cultural and feminist critiques around women in the entertainment industry in order to destabilize and bring these norms into question. Mima's story is about her struggles to shed her Pop-Idol persona and the vulnerabilities that come with being a woman whose objectification is used to satisfy men. The protagonist's internal fight for identity is compounded by a stalker threat, which culminates in an ending that subverts the conventions of female victimization. By deconstructing expectations of gender and genre, *Perfect Blue* presents us with a discourse of resistance and subversion. Each element serves as its own step to the central message of the film: female empowerment and authority over one's identity. Kon makes use of these themes – Japan's cultural environment in the 1990s, the entertainment industry, otaku culture, gender difference and expectations, etc. – to tell a story that critiques its own subject. It is Kon's use of disorienting cinematic techniques that bring the nonnormative essence of his work to light.

Perfect Blue was originally meant to be a live-action adaptation of a novel, *Perfect Blue: Complete Metamorphosis* (1991), but the studio went with animating the film (the cheaper option) after an earthquake derailed production. By the time Kon was brought onto the project he was told he could rework the story under the condition that he kept three themes: idol, horror, stalker (Osmond, 26). Satoshi Kon saw opportunity in the script to examine the conflict between an

individual's public and private image, and the "tragedy caused by that gap getting too large" (Kon, 2007 – quoted in Osmond). The approach Kon takes to a story like *Perfect Blue* is telling, using a stalk-and-slash horror genre to tell a story of interiority and psychosis of the woman in peril. The horror is not in the act of murder or the physical danger the woman is in, it is instead in the idea of a woman's public persona becoming more real than her authentic self. This aligns itself with feminist film theories on the male gaze and the exploitation of women's bodies; Mima as a pop-Idol becomes a "sign of everything and anything but herself" when she is looked at by men (Cowie, 16). Her Idol-persona is not her true self, instead it is a representation of an idealization of innocence and femininity. The film becomes more of a psychodrama, wherein the focus of the story is on the representation of a woman's inner experience of objectification and sexuality. Here transformation and creative resistance become key to surviving systemic oppression. This opens up a queer understanding of radical, transformative ways of living in a state of constant becoming, to constantly be making and refashioning oneself (Halperin, 68).

The Pop-Idol group CHAM before their all-male audience.

Japan's "Image Change" Culture:

Kon blurs the line between animation and live-action by having the setting of *Perfect Blue* take place in "our world," so to speak: it is set in contemporary Tokyo in the mid-1990s. An unusual choice for an animated feature of its time, and definitely atypical for the anime genre, as the film treats both the setting and the events that unfold with a high degree of realism by drawing from true-life events. This choice of setting also serves to texture the cultural critiques of the film; it makes sense to have a Pop-Idol who is ogled by male fans, and to use the threat of both male fanaticism and female objectification to touch on real issues Japan had and still has. Namely, the film is critiquing the nature of *otaku* culture – a term that defines often male fans or geeks – and the industries that capitalize off it by creating images of women that meet a certain level of femininity and purity (*kawaii*). What is important to understand is how entwined these cultural elements are to one another – the nature of *otaku* culture is directly related to both a consumer culture and the objectification of femininity, which is linked to *kawaii* culture.

This is all evident in the opening sequence of the film, which revolves around Mima's final performance as a Pop-Idol. As the band CHAM is getting ready to perform, the viewer is given quick cuts to her awaiting fans, giving us a brief glimpse into *otaku* culture, with adult men talking amongst each other about who has a recording of "Mima-rin's" precious singing and handing out zines about CHAM. While the dynamic between who watches Mima, and who obsess over her is made clear, the film quickly re-establishes the focus of the film as being about Mima's own internal conflicts. This is seen in the editing of Mima's performance: as Mima sings, her performance is intercut with the banality of her everyday life as she rides the subway, picks up groceries and walks through the streets of Tokyo, each shot cutting on a matching action to link the two moments in time together. A head-whip becomes a glance down a store aisle, a twirl on the stage is now a hand

reaching for fish-food, crossing the street becomes dancing down to the front of the stage. All intricately cut as a single action, one moment that is part of Mima's life – the two lives she lives are not so separate to her. Kon's use of intercutting and editing brings together two points in time, two identities. Mima is someone plagued by the duality of her self – as public/private – and of her gender expectations as a Pop-Idol and as a female performer in general. We see only a brief glimpse of Mima's typical day before it all unravels with the events to come, the emphasis on dualities and dichotomies serving to set up what will be a "split" in Mima's own identity.

The cultural critiques in *Perfect Blue* reveal a deeper underlying issue that is both culturally specific to Japan and universal to consumer societies, particularly those which were manifesting in the 1990s. This is linked to Japan's history, which has been complicated by the shifting between isolation and connection, resulting in what would be identified as a "loss of national identity" resulting from the mixing of cultures (Iida, 426). Japan experienced an identity crisis in the 1990s, brought on by compounding problems on economic, social, and political levels. The film's theme around identity not being your own to control is one that resonates with Japan's own instability around identity and traditions in the 1990s, one that complicated the separation between image and reality.

Japan's consumer culture is complicated, as Donald Richie's book *The Image Factory: Fads and Fashions in Japan* (2003) discusses the trends of fads in Japanese society, defining them as the result of a conformist society seeking individualism in material goods and trends (13). To a Japanese fan, to consume and follow trends is a way of expressing one's individuality – it is this very notion that Satoshi Kon is opposing in *Perfect Blue*. Japan as an "image factory" is one where identity is commodified into consumable images, where individualism is sought in something outside the self. This results in an increased value in the virtual, one that was apparent in the 1990's

with the rise of the likes of *Tamagotchi*, a virtual pet in the form of a hand-held game. Yumiko Iida's publication on Japan's identity-crisis of the 1990s best explains the attraction to the virtual:

> In the most extreme cases, in the socio-discursive context where the boundary between the two is increasingly blurred, one is left with the disorienting sensation of ***an illusory world in which the virtual takes on an appearance more real than the real itself***. One might infer that this limitless expansion of virtual imagery assaults our familiar notions of the self, the body, and the world and inclines the subject to search for a point where the increasingly unbearable condition of being torn between an assumed identity and the lack of its real content can be transcended. (Iida, 456 – emphasis added)

This is still the case in present-day Japan with the rise of virtual dating and virtual pop idols. The fact that *Perfect Blue* features a woman trying to shed her pop idol persona immediately brings into focus the issue of image and identity in Japan's idol culture.

In the film, this lack of separation between reality and the virtual is represented by multiple outlets of media consumption – from a blog on a computer screen to the set of a television show. Throughout the film, Mima often visits a website that features daily diary entries written by someone claiming to be Mima the Pop Idol. The existence of this site is revealed shortly after the opening credits, where we see Mima leaving the concert and returning home to her apartment. As she is about to enter a car surrounded by loud fans, one voice yells out: "I'm always watching Mima's Room!" She turns to see who it was, but now she is standing at her apartment door, glancing over her shoulder, as if still trying to catch someone watching her. It turns out that "Mima's Room" is the title of a blog, the link of which was delivered to Mima in a blank pink envelope sealed with a small heart. The letter inside links the page and requests that Mima-rin

"sing for us forever." As the film unfolds, Mima becomes more and more obsessive over the blog, reading the impersonator's disturbingly accurate recounting of what "Mima's" day was like on a daily basis. The blog itself strongly suggests that Mima is being closely stalked by an obsessive fan who is trying to preserve Mima as being a *kawaii* Pop-Idol instead of a mature actress.

Idol Culture in Japan is still going strong, and its latest iteration is in the form a virtual idol named Hatsune Miku – a completely artificial, computer animated female Pop-Idol with a voice generated by a synthesizer – who performs as a projected hologram to a live audience. Japan's Idol Culture is one of strange obsessions and a degraded separation between reality and fantasy between the singer and their fans. In fact, the life of an Idol is strictly scripted, the performers "are subject to strict standards of behavior and presentation that are designed to maintain an idealized, hyper-feminine image of innocence" (Nelson, 141). Mima's Idol-persona, something that should be understood as being completely fabricated, gains a life of its own and threaten to become more real than Mima herself.

Patrick Galbraith and Jason Karlin describe Japan's Idol industry in their book *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture* (2012) as one that is organized around the fan as consumer of the constructed image and character of the idol. Feeding into this mode of consumption are the many industries in Japan: anime, manga, television, music, etc. The film focuses on two of these, Idol Culture and television, with the former having the greater influence on the narrative. This is a culture that is about female idols performing very specific characters, usually in line with what is considered *kawaii* or innocent. Idols are not chosen for their talent or ability, in fact if they are mediocre or even bad at singing it is considered "innocent" and "real" by the (usually male) fans. Galbraith introduces the notion that idols share the same conceptual space as a fictional character, in the case of the idol this is referred to as an "image character" (*imēji kyarakutā*) (186). The nature

of the idol industry is one of harsh control of the idol by their producer. Galbraith quotes one such producer, Tsunku, who wrote a book on how to choose a girl to make into an idol. The process is called an "image change," a phrase used in the idol industry to describe how to change an average girl into an "image character" of an idol:

> Because girls cannot see what they need to focus on, they need a producer. The ideal idol candidate must be "obedient" (*sunao*). She must lack a strong sense of self and give her agency over entirely. "In sum, take the value system of someone outside yourself into yourself." That is, allow Tsunku to decide your image, draw out your character, and produce an idol from your raw material (which both is and is not you). (192-193)

While this not the case for every Japanese idol, or even for every female idol, it is this aspect of the idol industry that is most applicable to *Perfect Blue*. The term "image change" is one brought up in Donald Richie's *Image Factory* (2003) as the phrase used by younger people to describe how they want to change their fashion or look to one of a new fad. "Image change," as Richie explains it, is what the young people would say when a new fad needs following in terms of fashion. In *Perfect Blue*, such a phrase becomes something else, it becomes representative of an oppressive industry which predetermines identity and expectations. Mima's producer mentions how he wants to do an "image change" for her, but Mima needs a real image change, one she has authority over.

The fans of female idols are majority male – in the case of *Perfect Blue* it seems to be exclusively men who attend Mima's concerts – this pulls in *otaku* culture into the mix. *Otaku* is a pejorative term used to describe a (usually male) fan of anime or manga, it translates to mean "obsessed" and is the Japanese equivalent of a 'geek' or 'nerd' subculture. At the time the film came out, there was a general idea of what an *otaku* was, which came to define '*otaku*' for the

public consciousness as: “those without basic human communication skills who often withdraw into their own world” (Azuma, 4). Kon absolutely makes use of this general perception of *otaku* with the character Me-Mania, who is absolutely the manifestation of cultural anxieties around anti-social and mentally unwell men who obsess over women in popular media. Making him a stalker only adds to the stereotype of *otaku*’s consumption of media as being dangerous – it is not hard to imagine such a character from a Western perspective, as America has had its share of obsessive fans taking their obsession too far, the likes of John Hinckley Jr. or Ricardo Lopez (the Björk Stalker) come to mind. It is by no means an exaggeration, as historical circumstances have proven that an obsessive fan’s lack of reality can lead to deadly consequences.

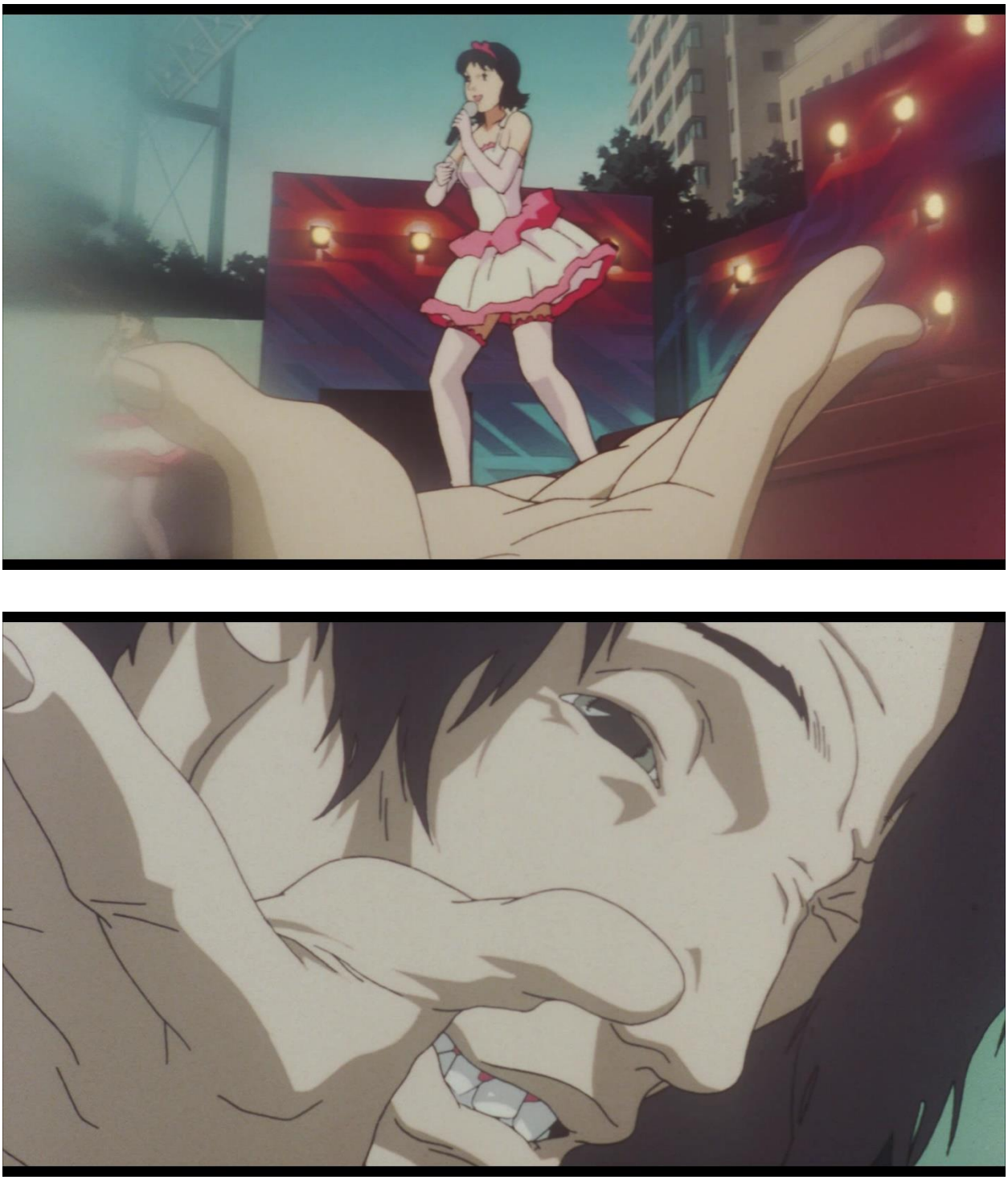
Me-Mania in his room, the phantom figure of “Virtual Mima” embracing him.

Perfect Blue is a rather explicit critique of Japan’s *otaku* culture and *kawaii* culture: Kon makes the stalker a creepy obsessed fan, and it should be noted that Mima’s idol persona is indeed steeped in *kawaii* culture, exposing a perverse side to it. Kinsella describes the rise of *kawaii* culture in her chapter “Cuties in Japan,” describing the movement as idealizing childhood as a

time of innocence and individual freedom, avoiding the responsibility and collective conformity of adulthood. The word itself, *kawaii*, translates as meaning both pitiful and cute – a *kawaii* character, like Hello Kitty, is one that cannot talk, cannot walk and needs to be taken care of (Kinsella, 236). This infantilization is not always specific to women, as men also participate in *kawaii* culture, but it is more likely female celebrities that take on this *kawaii* nature to appeal to male fans. What we have in *Perfect Blue*, then, is an ideal image of Mima in the form of her Idol-person, one that is based in being childish, sexless and "cute." Mima's struggle becomes about maturing beyond this mask she has been wearing in order to transform into herself.

Playing with Gender and Genre:

From the moment Mima takes to the stage in the opening scene, the power dynamic between men and women is apparent: women dance in childish outfits for an entirely male audience who are watching the performance through cameras, telephoto lenses and binoculars. The shots that follow of Mima performing on-stage are ones that suggest the "male gaze" of these fans on her form, the camera panning up and down her full body – emphasizing her legs and her ridiculously short tutu-like skirt. The camera focuses on one fan in particular, Me-Mania, crouched and holding his hand in front of his face. A subjective reverse shot reveals that he is using his hand to "hold" Mima's image in it, the forced perspective making Mima look like a little doll dancing in his palm. The image is one that speaks to the male spectator seeing the woman as 'his' object to hold and to visually enjoy. She becomes a literal "idol" for him to have and to hold. What is clear from the opening sequence is that women exist only to be looked at and that there is desire in seeing them perform an ideal femininity that is appealing to men. What is at stake is the threat that someone like Me-Mania has lost track of where a person ends and a character begins. It is the fear of someone perceiving us in a way we do not chose and cannot control.



Me-Mania holding Mima's image as she performs on stage.

Kon sets up a very specific male/female gender dynamic, wherein men exploit someone like Mima, her career as an actress/idol (as someone whose profession it is to be looked at) giving them permission to treat her as a sex object. Mima is exploited by all types of men, both consumers (her fans) and producers (the men who work on *Double Bind*). The story of *Perfect Blue* is one about what happens when a woman only knows herself as an image – specifically an image that men desire to look at. The film shows us how a female subject can claim agency over herself in a world where women are to be looked at. The world of *Perfect Blue* is one wherein John Berger's writing on gender and looking in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is a reality of life:

> A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself… She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (Berger, 46)

The power dynamic between men and women in *Perfect Blue* is exactly this, where women are praised for being attractive images men can consume. Laura Mulvey's seminal theory of the "male gaze" is invaluable to understanding the kind of world Mima lives in. We see the process of capturing Mima's image into an erotic display for her male fans to consume – through the filming of the rape scene and in a soft-core porn photo shoot – Mima is not so much an erotic object for *our* pleasure, though we see how she is this for the men who watch her. To look is to objectify and control that person, Kon is exploring this process and the effects it has on the objectified woman. Though not exactly a voyeuristic phantasy, *Perfect Blue* does reflexively question how we look at

women and in turn, how women come to understand themselves from these different types of looks.

From the opening sequence we discover that Mima's career change was not really up to her, but a decision made on the part of her producer, Mr.Tadokoro. This sets a precedent that will haunt Mima for the rest of the film: men will be the ones controlling her image and how it will be seen. In the set of the television show, all of the crew is male: the writer is male, the producer, the cameraman, the photographer, etc. This is an industry that is dominated by male-authorship and patriarchal power, which is used to exploit a woman's body for the pleasure of these men. There is a woman among these men, Rumi, who is Mima's manager and friend. In scenes where Mima's career prospects are discussed, she is the only one to try and speak for Mima. She asks the producer "But what about *Mima's* feelings?" when they are deciding on whether or not Mima should become an actress. When they discover that Mima will have to do a rape scene if she wants a bigger role in *Double Bind*, it is Rumi who assumes that Mima will not want to go through with it. Mima forces a smile and responds with: "It's not as if I'm *really* getting raped." While technically true – and even this assumption is questioned when we see the actual filming of the rape scene – there is something symbolic for Mima as she moves into producing more 'adult' material with her image.

On the subway ride home, Mima is staring off at Tokyo's nighttime cityscape, her blank expression hints at her true feelings around performing a rape scene. The train passes under a tunnel, obscuring the city, changing Mima's reflection into that of her Pop-Idol self, fully costumed. Her reflection turns to her and declares: "I absolutely *refuse* to do it!" Mima jumps back in shock, but as soon as it was there, the image is gone, her reflection now back to normal, leaving Mima stunned and shaken as she stares back at herself. The film often returns to the image of

Mima looking at her reflection and not always seeing herself in it; this becomes a central theme to her own destabilization over the course of the narrative. This is what she must overcome, when she looks at herself she gradually begins to see a false-self, one that has been crafted as a stage persona by someone else. Mima's arc as a character is to confront her reflection and finally see herself in it.

The filming of the rape scene begins with the eerie tune of a theremin, like that out of a science fiction film, as if Mima is about to be put into a very alien situation. The frame is cluttered with multiple monitors, each with an image of Mima on it from a different angle. She is on-set, getting some last-minute direction as the cameras and lights are being set up. The men behind the monitors look uncomfortable with what is about the transpire, Rumi and Mr. Tadokoro sit in the background. The director announces that they are ready to shoot, the shot cuts to a stuttered tilt up Mima's body, once again reminding us of the male gaze. We understand that we are watching a production, we can see the cameras and crew in the frame, yet Mima still looks scared. Kon's

filming of the rape scene itself is done in such a way so as to completely avoid any titillation or pleasure from the viewer watching it – this is done with literal interruptions by the director to move a camera and by focusing on Mima's expression as she acts her part of the scene. The result is an inability of the spectator to get into the film due to interruptions and a performance of Mima acting out getting raped that is genuinely disturbing and uncomfortable to watch. The rape scene represents the death of Mima's Pop-Idol self; she can never go back to being that now that her image has been used in a sexual situation. It also is the catalyst for Mima's break from reality, as her Pop-Idol persona, also known as Virtual Mima, begins to appear more frequently.

The reactions of Tadokoro and Rumi as they watch Mima perform the rape scene.

Half way through the shooting of the rape scene, Rumi stands up, tears streaking down her face, and wordlessly walks out of the room. Her reaction – the only one to cry over Mima's performance of being brutally raped in a bar – speaks to the experience of the female spectator faced with a similar scene when watching a film. Linda Williams described this best in "When the

Woman Looks" on why women hide their faces during horror films: "There are excellent reasons for this refusal of the woman to look, not the least of which is that she is often asked the bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation, and murder" (Williams, 17). Rumi's own status as a woman and her empathy for what Mima is being put through, is what moves her to tears. Because, even though what she is witnessing is all an act, it still represents a very real threat of sexual violence and is a reminder of a lack of power in a patriarchal order. Mima is exploited sexually on multiple levels: she is made to act in a rape scene, she is made to model for borderline-pornographic photographs, and then she is nearly raped by the stalker character. This is a film that has its share of sexual violence aimed at women, but presents that violence as horrific and uncomfortable to watch.

Queer Reflexivity:

A motif used throughout the film is a constant calling attention to the apparatus; seen with the inclusion of other frames within the frame, screens, cameras, photographs, etc. Though the film is not live-action itself, Kon recreates a live-action setting in order to interrupt the flow of his own film. Such use of reflexive devices serves to emphasize an essential aspect to cinema and looking, as Robert Stam points out in his book on *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*:

> More importantly than the pro-filmic display of the cinematic machinery is the fact that we are made aware of the *look* of the camera. Instead of identifying unconsciously, through a process analogous to primary identification in psychoanalysis, with the camera through which we see, here we are reminded that films are constituted by looks: the look of the camera, the spectator's recapitulation of that look, the looks between characters in fiction, the looks which carry us from shot to shot. (Stam, 59)

Kon decenters the diegesis of the film by constantly interrupting his own narrative to remind the audience that they are indeed watching a film which also entails seeing the sexual exploitation of Mima. One scene will open with Mima being followed by a man on the street, only for a cut to reveal that it was a shot for the television series she is playing a role in. With every new cut, scene and shot, we can never fully be sure if we are seeing something from 'reality' or from Mima's acting, or her hallucinations. This instability in the boundaries between what is real and what is fantasy in *Perfect Blue* serves to further destabilize formal and narrative conventions of live-action and animated cinema.

Another element that Kon disrupts is the slasher genre. *Perfect Blue* is a slasher film where all the murder victims are male and no women die. This alone makes it stand apart from the conventions of the genre, as outlined by Carol Clover in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, where the focus is more on the interrelation between men and women wherein men are the killer and women usually the victim. Kon is looking at the relationship between men and women, specifically women celebrities and male fans, and paralleling this with an individual's relationship between an interior/exterior self. This dichotomy – which does exist in the idol industry of Japan – sets up what could be a conventional horror or slasher film, where the woman is made vulnerable simply for being a woman and punished for becoming sexually active by a deranged fan who does not want to see her image change. However, while it would seem that the film will go in this direction, and indeed it does to an extent, it is crucial to acknowledge that Kon also uses these expectations to subvert gender roles within the slasher genre. This is done in the last fifteen minutes of the film, where the murderer is revealed to be Mima's friend and talent agent, Rumi. This not only plays into the film's theme of disorientation, but it also queers certain characters as they play into inverted roles within the narrative.

Mima's final confrontation is between herself and Virtual Mima (Rumi).

Throughout the film, Mima has been in her own double bind between trying to maintain a childlike, innocent image while also being sexually available. The pressure of being torn in two different directions – neither of which she has a choice over – compounds on Mima as the murders around her begin to escalate, making her question her own sanity. It all comes to a head when Mima discovers who the killer is, and has her final confrontation with them. Rumi enters the scene dressed in a red version of Mima's pop-idol outfit, claiming to be the *real* Mima who will go back to singing for her fans. The symbolic horror of the slasher is not shown as a male killer with gender issues, as outlined in Clover. Instead, what we have is a woman who disowns her ego in order to become another woman. After a brief chase through the back alleys of Tokyo, Rumi has finally caught Mima and is about to end her. Rumi taunts Mima about her identity, saying: "Mima is a pop idol! You're just a dirty impostor!" Mima yells back: "Like I care! *I AM WHO I AM!*" Mima claims authority over herself, outside of a normative order, and manages to fight Rumi off. It is

through becoming and claiming herself that Mima defeats Rumi, not through violence. Mima's final confrontation with her attacker does not follow the formula of the "final girl" as set up by Clover: it is not about Mima turning the tables on her attacker in order to kill her. Instead, Mima *saves* Rumi, pushing her out of the way of an oncoming truck. Mima's actions serve as a deconstruction of the slasher trope, as does having a female killer. The arc of Mima's character is one of broken traditions and revelation from the uncertainty: she goes from being part of a collective to becoming an individual. When we are granted authority over our identities, it opens up the path of possibilities where any desire can be followed and explored; where the threshold is left open for a queer becoming.

Conclusion:

The legacy of *Perfect Blue* is that of an animated film that had more of an impact on live-action than on other animated features, specifically in the works of Darren Aronofsky. The film sets up central themes that Kon revisits and expands upon in his other works: cinema and self-reflexivity, women being looked at, layered realities, reclaiming of one's identity/desires. All lead to the conclusion of better understanding of oneself through resistance of traditional norms. For a first feature, it tells a progressive story about a woman's struggle for identity and the cultural baggage around gender roles that contribute to these struggles. It is clear from his first film that Kon is about subverting expectations in order to explore and deconstruct dominant hegemonic structures around gender, identity and cinema.

Chapter Two:
Actress in Time Layers

Millennium Actress Plot Synopsis: Genya Tachibana is an aspiring filmmaker who is currently working on a documentary about the historical Genei Film Studio, which is currently being demolished. Genya has managed to land an interview with the studio's biggest star, Chiyoko Fujiwara, who vanished from the public eye at the peak of her acting career in the 1960's, her sudden disappearance shrouded her life story in mystery; a mystery which is cracked open when the amateur filmmaker returns a long-lost key to the actress, a key that unlocks her memories and desires. Genya, along with his cameraman Kiyoji Ida, are transported into Chiyoko's memories and films as she tells them her story. What follows is a journey into memory and cinema, or more precisely, memory *as* cinema or even cinema as memory. The film delves into Chiyoko's many lives and identities, real and fictional, all still chasing after what she wants.

Introduction:

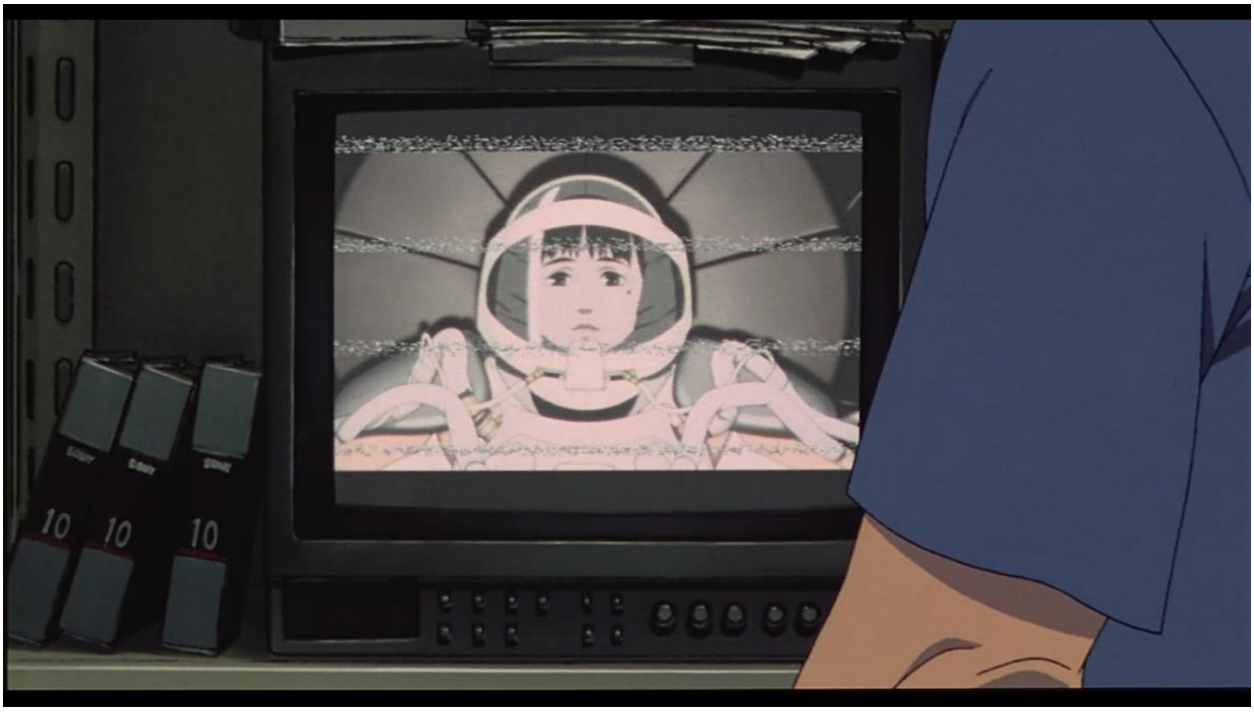
Moving on from the psychodrama of *Perfect Blue* (1997), Kon's second feature film *Millennium Actress* (2001) takes a woman's internal experience and narrative and superimposes it onto the history of Japan and Japanese cinema. Kon returns to the story of an actress and focuses on her identity within the media she produces, but this time he takes a positive approach to the concept of self-making through cinema. *Millennium Actress* and *Perfect Blue* have been compared to each other as sister films, exploring two sides of the same coin: how someone (in both cases, *women*) comes to understand themselves in and through media. Folded into the narrative of *Millennium Actress* is a personal imagining of the history of Japanese cinema and the post-WWII history of the nation itself, reimagined through the life-story of a woman and her retelling of that story.

The aim of this chapter is to break down how Kon's use of time – as both a formal and narrative element – invokes queer theories on temporality and futurity. Queer futurity is defined by José Esteban Muñoz as the future possibilities that exist outside of heteronormative reproduction (also known as "straight" time). To glimpse these queer horizons, "one can look to the past as a field of possibilities in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity" (Muñoz, 17). This queerness can be applied to the film's themes of cinema and memory, specifically in its depiction of the past as a performative force. In addition, Kon invokes another queer horizon by subverting heteronormative gender expectations. The film implements and then deconstructs elements of the *shōjo* (Japanese for 'girl') genre. This genre is usually aimed at young women and implements a melodramatic structure to its narratives that reinforce "feminine values" such as fashion, romance, marriage and motherhood (Saito, 146). The film makes use of reflexive devices to disorient the authority of time and tradition, to see a different way of being and having

been – in this case, the history of Japanese Cinema being centered around the drives/desires of a woman instead of the directorial gaze of a man. The result is a blurring of film, memory and time, where history itself can be directly engaged through the magic of cinema.

From the start, the division between cinema and real life seems uncertain in *Millennium Actress*; the opening scene begins with space, the camera itself seemingly adrift among the stars, until the image of our blue planet enters the frame – but it is not the focus, merely a measuring device to orient us to our actual location in space: the moon. The surface of the moon appears in the top of the frame, giving the impression that we are somehow under its mass. A metallic device blooms on the lunar surface, it is a launchpad, a futuristic rocket sits inside it ready for take-off. A woman is about to board the craft, but a man calls out to her, begging her not to go as she will never make it back. The woman simply responds, "I made a promise. I said I'd go to him." She turns and enters the ship, the man reaches out, about to confess his feelings: "I've always…" – but his line is doubled, interrupted, by the extreme closeup of the face of another man, Genya, in a dark room, his features lit by the glow of a monitor – we are reminded that we are watching a film, the very film Genya is re-watching in preparation for his interview with Chiyoko Fujiwara. The shot returns to the space-film, now framed in the monitor, the countdown finishes, and the thrusters ignite – suddenly, Genya's room begins to shake violently, as if the very force of the rocket taking off in the film is affecting his reality as well. We soon learn it was just a perfectly timed earthquake, one of many that occur in the film. The opening scene plays with the status of the film's diegesis, introducing an element of uncertainty and fluidity that colors the film's treatment of time, space and narrative. It provides a hint for what is to follow: a woman's story of her past, a recollection that transforms history into a stage where one can be both spectator and actor.

Genya's longing gaze and the rewinding footage on the monitor disrupt the film's diegesis.

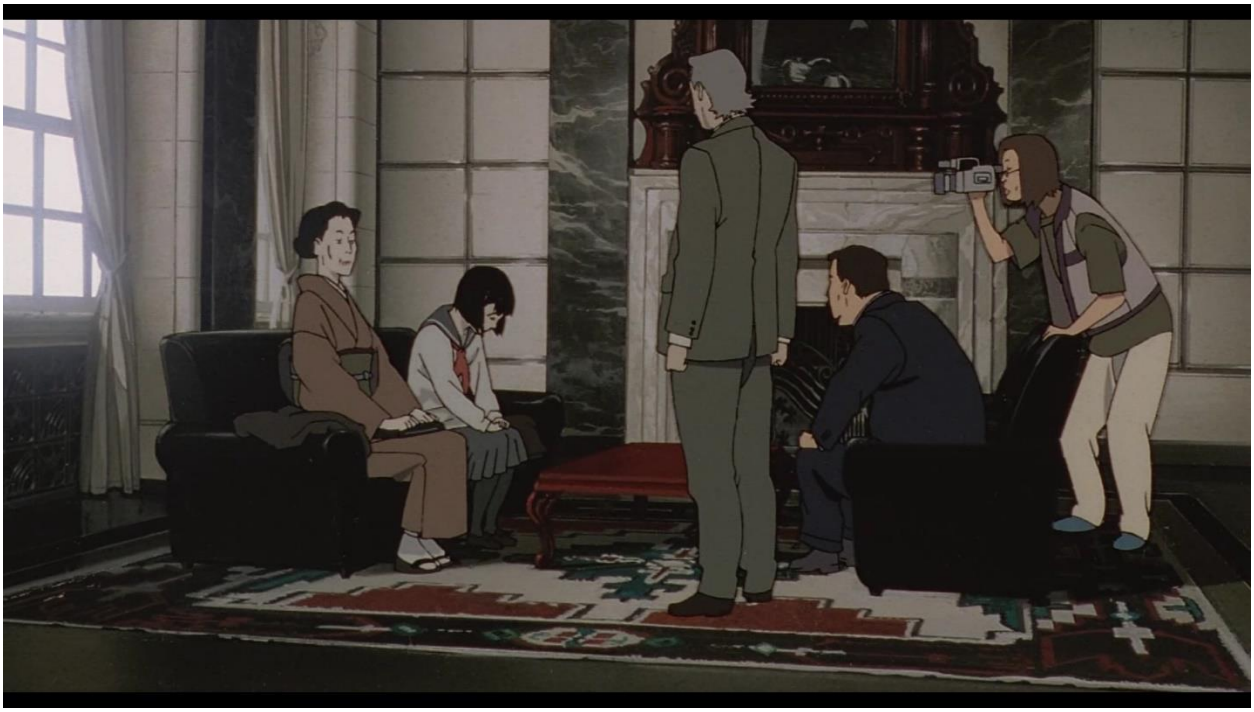


Running Through Queer Time:

It is fair to say there is no "straight" time in this film, in both senses of the word. Time in *Millennium Actress* does not follow chronological linearity, nor does it capitulate a heteronormative future. Instead, there are interruptions that draw attention to filmic production, demystifying the fiction of a monolithic historical time and creating new fictions. Much like Sarah Ahmed's concept of "disorientation," Kon proves to be an expert in straying from the standard path into a destabilizing space where tradition, art, and identity are questioned and entangled. In addition to this purposeful blurring of boundaries, Kon also used the film to explore and question the linearity of one's own sense of time (DreamWorks Interview, 2003). Instead of aligning with a hierarchy of history and temporality, *Millennium Actress* offers questioning, possibility, and rethinking around being, becoming and having been. In the fashion of "Queer Aesthetics" (Colebrook, 25), *Millennium Actress* employs a method of self-becoming and being that is inherently queer, achieved through performativity and a dismantling of "straight" time. This process of becoming merges into a queer understanding of time as the possibility of another world beyond the present, or 'straight' time: "Queerness is essentially about the rejections of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz, 1). Chiyoko looks for potential not in the future, but in the past.

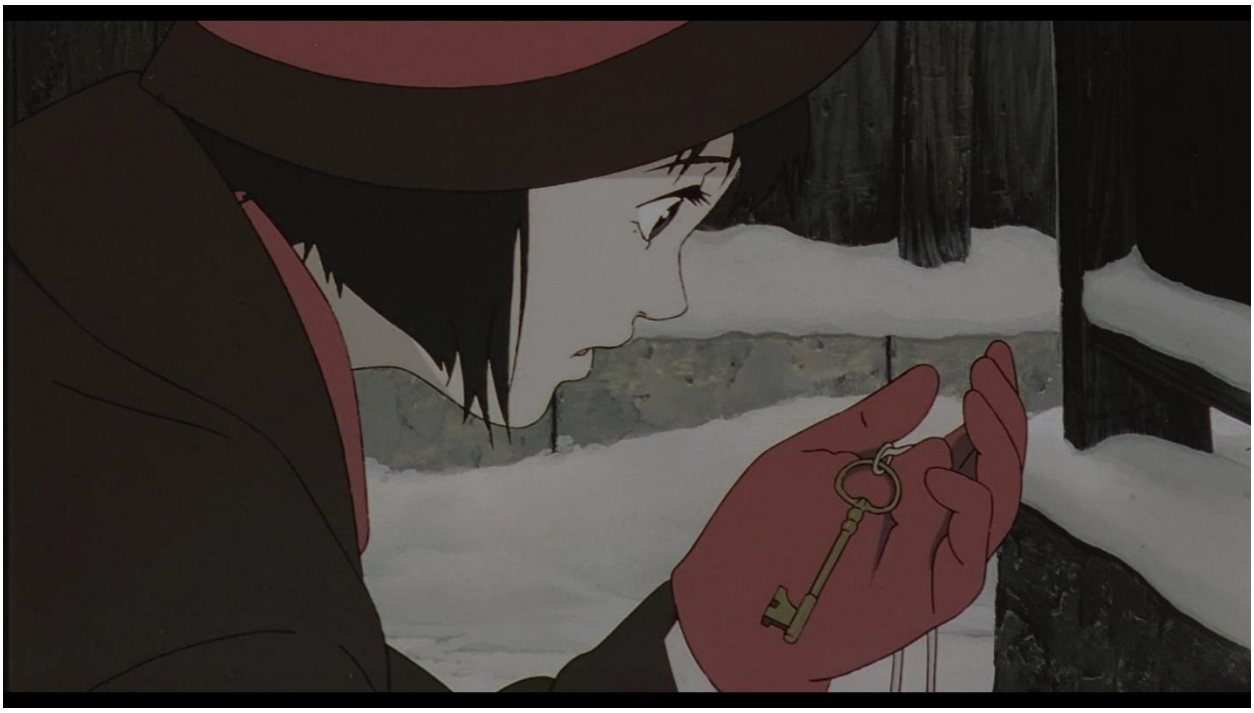
When Genya and Kyoji make it to Chiyoko's secluded home, setting up the camera for the interview in the living room, Genya reveals he has something that used to belong to the actress: a key. Chiyoko is surprised to see it, having almost forgotten about it, having convinced herself she would never see it again. She begins to tell her story, one that revolves around the mysterious key, the man who gave it to her and her past as an actress. As the images of Chiyoko's memories take over the frame, we become aware that the diegesis has become strange: Genya and his cameraman

Kyoji are able to directly interact with Chiyoko's memories. They stand in the background, run after younger versions of Chiyoko to keep up with her story, and eventually return to the present. The very device of the flashback is deconstructed and transformed into a queer version of temporality, where one can engage with history and the future. The reflexivity of the film also serves to disrupt and challenge what the spectator expects of a film about memories. The scenes from Chiyoko's memories can literally be interrupted. The filmmaker and his cameraman can enter the space of a memory, capture it, and become an active part of it.



Chiyoko's story begins in 1930's Japan, during the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. A teenaged Chiyoko has been spotted by a film producer who wants her to act in his films. Her mother is very much against this path for her daughter, proclaiming that she will serve her country as most women do: by bearing children for it. Immediately, Chiyoko's past is overwhelmed with political strife and cultural traditions that repress women. Chiyoko, frustrated at her lack of power over her future, leaves her home to blow off steam. She encounters a mysterious man – his face obscured in shadow – running from authorities, carrying with him a canvas wrapped in cloth and

his leg injured. She decides to help him, hiding him in a storeroom back home where she learns he is a painter in addition to being a "human rights activist," and he wishes to join his friends in Manchuria to rebel against the invasion. He talks about the possibility and hope that the future carries with it, of the need for a time that is not yet here but yet exists in the horizon of future possibility. The painter carries a key around his neck. When asked what the key is for, he replies: "This? It's the key to the most important thing there is." Chiyoko doesn't press to know what it is really for, instead telling him to give her until tomorrow to guess. The following day, Chiyoko comes across the painter's key in the snow, like a Cinderella slipper, prompting her to go after the painter to return the key and realize her desires of being with him. She does this by accepting the offer of becoming an actress for a film set in Manchuria, setting the start of her acting career. While this is what the viewer learns from Chiyoko's retelling of her life, it certainly is not shown in such a "straight" fashion.



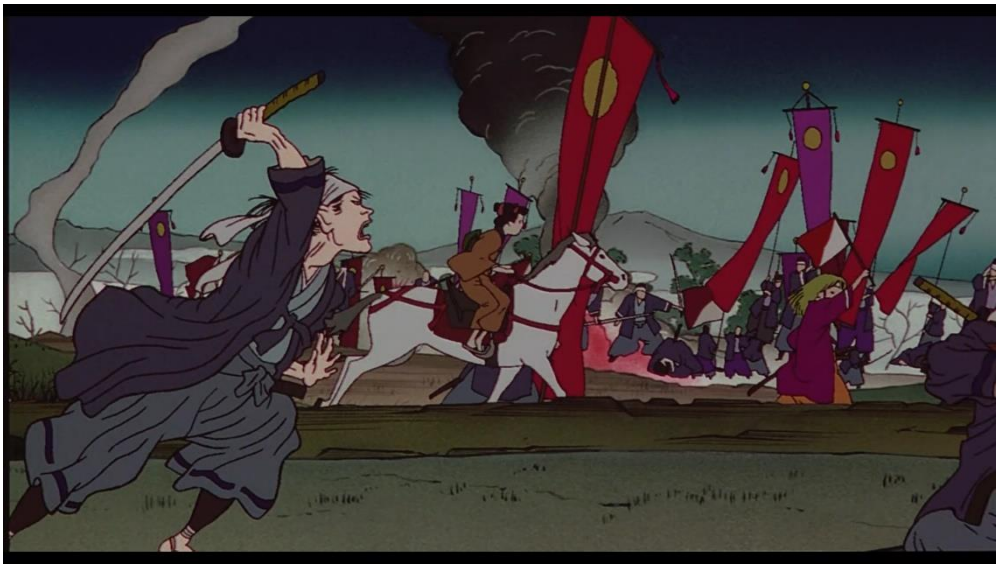
Chiyoko discovers the painter's key in the snow.

The key unlocks the door to Chiyoko's past, as if the object itself contains tissues of memory, represented through cinema as revealing the psychical process of remembrance. Chiyoko's life in recollection becomes a series of links that give resonance to the chaos of life, not aligned with temporal linearity – there is no beginning, middle, or end to her story. *Millennium Actress* presents a complicated act-structure, one that is constantly flowing between memories. Specifically, it is difficult to identify when one act ends and another begins. The film reads more as a memoir, a recollection of events that are, in turn, reflected on from the vantage point of the teller, one that allows them to understand their story in a larger, historical context and pulls certain elements and themes of their lives into their personal story as a form of structure. The beginning and end are interlinked (bookended by the spaceship). Birth and death are the same, there is transcendence into a queer horizon. Her private search for the painter has colored her life, it is how she comes to understand her past and herself within the turbulent past of the nation. It is her solace, her goal, her desire. She gets through it by pushing on, by eternally chasing after what she wants.

Queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman wrote on "chrononormativity" in her book *Time Binds* (2010), where she identifies time as a system of privilege that organizes a society around a structure that requires synchronicity (Freeman, 4). For Freeman, this established sense of time and history can be examined and undone in order to reveal the constructed nature of these systems, how entire populations are managed by the narrative of these rituals – marriage, work, childrearing, death. Lives are instructed to fit within a specific heteronormative narrative (Freeman, 4). The nature of this system is based in cause-and-effect, sequence, cycles, stability; the things that have been established as being "timeless" are actually a form of suppression. But there are pauses, breaks, and interruptions to these timeless cycles – here is where a "queer" time changes how we have come to understand history and being in time. These gaps suggest other historical moments or

ways of living; history is transformed into a different form of time (Freeman, 6). Our very sense of time can be queered. You find yourself looking back to look ahead, discovering unrealized identities and futures that reside in the past, a discovering of alternative potentials.

Jose Esteban-Muñoz's seminal book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), links queer temporalities with utopian feelings as "indispensable to the act of imagining transformation" (9). For Muñoz, queer temporality is about the rejection of a "here and now" for the potentiality of another (queer) world/future that remains on the horizon (1). One accesses this horizon through traces in the past: "I see the past and the potentiality imbued within an object, the ways it might represent a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening" (Muñoz, 9). For these queer potential futures to be glimpsed, one must "step out of the linearity of straight time" in order to pull from the past and push beyond the stranglehold of the present (25). Muñoz insists on having hope in his theory of queer utopia, instead of concluding that queers have no future due to not being part of heterosexual reproduction. *Millennium Actress* applies the same approach to time and history, touching on both melancholy and hope in its conclusion. The painter's speech to Chiyoko carries many similarities to Jose Esteban-Muñoz's writing on queer futurity being a horizon of potential, for example. Despite being a film about history, *Millennium Actress* offers the spectator the promise of a queer futurity – one that finds a new future in the past. Chiyoko is out of synch with normal time. When she tells her story, she appears to inhabit the actual space and time of her memories, mixed with her films, converging across time in a single instant. These are shown as two climactic montages where the different moments of the past are intercut, repeated and made into one continuous instant where Chiyoko is running, chasing her painter but never being able to reach him.



The figure of the painter is one that depends on recollection. He remains mostly *unseen* because Chiyoko can no longer remember what he looks like. Her desire to go to him, to be with him, is never fulfilled or achieved – this resonates with queer identities that are left out of dominant heteronormative regimes of narrative time, or left behind altogether. The technology of photography and film has a tumultuous relationship with temporality, which is why Chiyoko's relationship to film and time is a fitting one. Chiyoko is *literally* performing her story, her past is understood as a collection of roles, identities and pluralities that are all categorized within her overall identity: do they make up all of her or does she make up all of them? Chiyoko's physical and temporal identities are never fixed, and all are driven by her resolve to reach what she desires: the painter who gave her hope. The film aims to highlight how the interaction between history and memory expands the possibilities of historical imagination specifically into a queer futurity – one that refuses a "normal love that keeps a repressive social order in place" (Muñoz, 134). One's subjective knowledge and historical imagination is just as valid and authentic as the dominant understanding of history; we can find the gaps through discontinuity and expose the artifice of the temporal institutions that keep queer identities and desires hidden and marginalized. These different ways of living as glimpsed through queer temporalities have the potential to challenge dominant/normative knowledges and identities.

Cinema Memory:

The conflation between cinema and memory also complicates personal histories and identities – both in the film and out of it. Annette Kuhn explains this "cinema memory" as "our understanding of a *lived* time, the time of inner life: a time lived collectively as much as individually, a time somewhat incongruent with the linear temporality of historical time" (Kuhn, 106). Time in cinema can be made complicated and difficult when using the film to recreate the

equally complex psychical process of memory. *Millennium Actress* seeks to open that gap further, to disorient us from time and narrative that one would normally arrive to in traditional cinema. Instead of history being set and objective, Kon is trying to show a history of subjectivities that have always been essential to the history of cinema.

Kon's refusal and resistance to normative conventions serves to highlight an alternative or 'queer' way of understanding narrative forms and the making of alternative identities that resist a fixed definition or understanding. By putting the audience through this disorientation, Kon is expanding on how we come to understand ourselves and become ourselves through a process of self-creation. The transformative qualities of cinema and animation for Kon are where self and cinema are entwined into the same psychical process of memory and consciousness. In *Millennium Actress,* the power of memory and cinema is elevated to a transformative stage, centered around a woman's retelling of her story. Memory can disrupt the linear movement from past to present to future, as Bill Schwarz explains in *Regimes of Memory*: "in memory, past and present are compressed, such that the past itself remains peculiarly resistant to transcendence in the present" (Schwarz, 141-142). The scenes move between these moments effortlessly, crossing a threshold into a different time, a different place. Kon uses cinema as a tool for discontinuity against normative time and space, driving collisions between different orders of temporality, much like the difficult process of memory.

Millennium Actress also seeks to deconstruct narrative film language, the separation between time and scenes becomes nonexistent. The traditional rules of the cinematic diegesis are bent and broken. Kon perfects the ellipsis of space in the film through associative editing techniques, mostly achieved through match cuts, action, and sound as the bass of the rhythm that pulses ecstatically in each montage. Time and one's movement through it are represented as spatial

metaphors – moving around a corner, a room, a doorway – these images invoke that "difficult moment in thought when time and space converge" (Schwarz, 142). The editing of the film itself frees the boundaries of space and time, refusing a linear, normative representation of bodies situated in a time and place. It is about shifting one's sense of time, to turn our gaze and replicate consciousness seeing itself in time. Kon's attention to rhythm is what makes the editing work, it pulses to its own internal, intuitive logic, more of a stream-of-consciousness – a visual thinking in moving pictures. Time is compressed into delightful montages of color and motion. We watch Chiyoko run across centuries, images, and art styles that are iconic to Japanese art history. Kon is not giving us just live-action cinema in animation, but also other forms of art that have become essential images in the nation's historical imagination. As Kon stated in an interview with DreamWorks:

> What we included was our *image* of history… Historical verification doesn't really matter in this case. We created this film with *our own vision* of Japanese history. (Kon, 2003)

Kon is blending a personal history of Japanese cinema with the identity and drives of the main character. She is linked to the past but can also change and transcend it with her hopes and desires.

What is shown is not necessarily an 'accurate' portrayal of Japan's film history, but a personal one, where the images of these films hold a different representational worth to the filmmaker; images of Japanese cinema collected from his childhood and repurposed to make up a symbolic imagining of the nation. Throughout the film, we see Chiyoko framed in the collective memories of Japanese cinema. Kon puts Chiyoko in films such as: Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), and *Rashomon* (1950), Honda's *Godzilla* (1954), and Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953), to name a few. Chiyoko's story blends her personal history with film and the history of Japan itself.

Millennium Actress focuses on a woman, her influence on cinema – the film has been noted for its love-letter to Japanese cinema, but more importantly is the fact that we are seeing that history with a woman at the center of it, driving it with her own goals and desires.

Kon creates a pastiche of iconic images from Japanese cinema.

Millennium Actress's connection to concrete history is also present in the protagonist's acting career. Chiyoko Fujiwara's character is based, in part, on the life of Setsuko Hara, a famous figure in the history of Japanese cinema. Chiyoko's sudden departure from her career in film and decades of solitude away from the public eye takes almost direct inspiration from Hara's actual life (DreamWorks interview, 2003). Even the initial premise of the film's story is intriguing in what it sparks as potential in the historical imagination, that despite those decades of silence and solitude, the actress would agree to one interview, one final address to her fans. What would have been discovered of Setsuko Hara if she had done the same before her death? To wonder such a possibility is more important than what the actual answer might have been, as explored in *Millennium Actress* it is what we might find and where we might go that makes these stories

essential to expanding personal, imagined histories. Invoking Muñoz's theory of the past as a "field of possibility" here reveals how the film is creating new potentials from the past, critiquing the present in the process (17).

Setsuko Hara, in addition to being an iconic actor from the post-war era of Japanese cinema, has her own ambiguous queer implications. Setsuko Hara's acting career "defined Japanese women in their various social roles," having played them all – mother, daughter and wife (Harper, 2002). Yet, her later life suggests a rejection to these traditional roles. In 1963, Hara announced that she would stop acting, and "was never seen again" in cinema or the public eye (Harper, 2002). Hara never married, hence the "eternal virgin," and remained withdrawn from the glare of the public for over fifty years until her death in 2015. Her secluded life and the abrupt end of her acting career has always had an air of mystery to it, as she never once gave an interview to explain her choice. Her choice to remain unmarried and childless has been theorized as Hara making a conscious decision to protest the cultural traditions around gender her acting roles represented (Harper, 2002). This protest, and Hara's refusal to submit to heteronormative expectations, can paint her as queer. She chose to be lost from the public, to not marry and instead isolate herself. This resonates with Muñoz's writing on loss and queerness as:

> To accept loss is to accept the way in which one's queerness will always render one lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws. To accept loss is to accept queerness – or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement. To be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality's path. (Munoz, 72-73).

Setsuko Hara can be read as queer in a number of ways, but most fitting is her ultimate refusal to follow a heteronormative path. She became "lost" from heteronormative spaces, and so does Chiyoko, who's life of seclusion, childlessness and lack of marriage closely follows in Hara's steps.

Subverting Shōjo:

Like in all of Kon's work, there is a critique of traditional gender roles embodied through the main character. This time Kon is going even further back in history, from the 1920's to the 1960's, challenging the filial traditions that were thrust on the women of that time. This focus on gender and alternative ways of living as a woman continues the progressive feminist critique that *Perfect Blue* began. It also implicates Kon's own subversiveness of crossing gender boundaries while growing up by enjoying manga genres aimed at adolescent girls (*shōjo*). For *Millennium Actress,* Kon is critiquing those genres, offering feminist and queer possibilities of refusal and subversive being (Osmond, 12). Kon is highlighting a potential future from the past that could and *should* be: women gaining independence from patriarchal institutions. In popular Japanese visual culture, there is a striking gap between the representation of "real" women – as reported in statistics – in contrast to visual representations of empowered female heroes, "magical girls." Kumiko Saito notes that there is a disjunction in the (mis)representation of female characters in Japanese media from real-life women in Japan (Saito, 143). Kon's films focus on women that could actually exist in reality, and gives them struggles and arcs that elevate them beyond the typical anime female character. The type of transformation that occurs in his films surround identity in a fundamental fashion, examining interior and exterior forces that change us and make us who we are.

The term *shōjo* is generally translated as "girl," but the term specifically indicates "a young woman who is not allowed to express her sexuality" (Takahashi, 115). The genre began in girl's

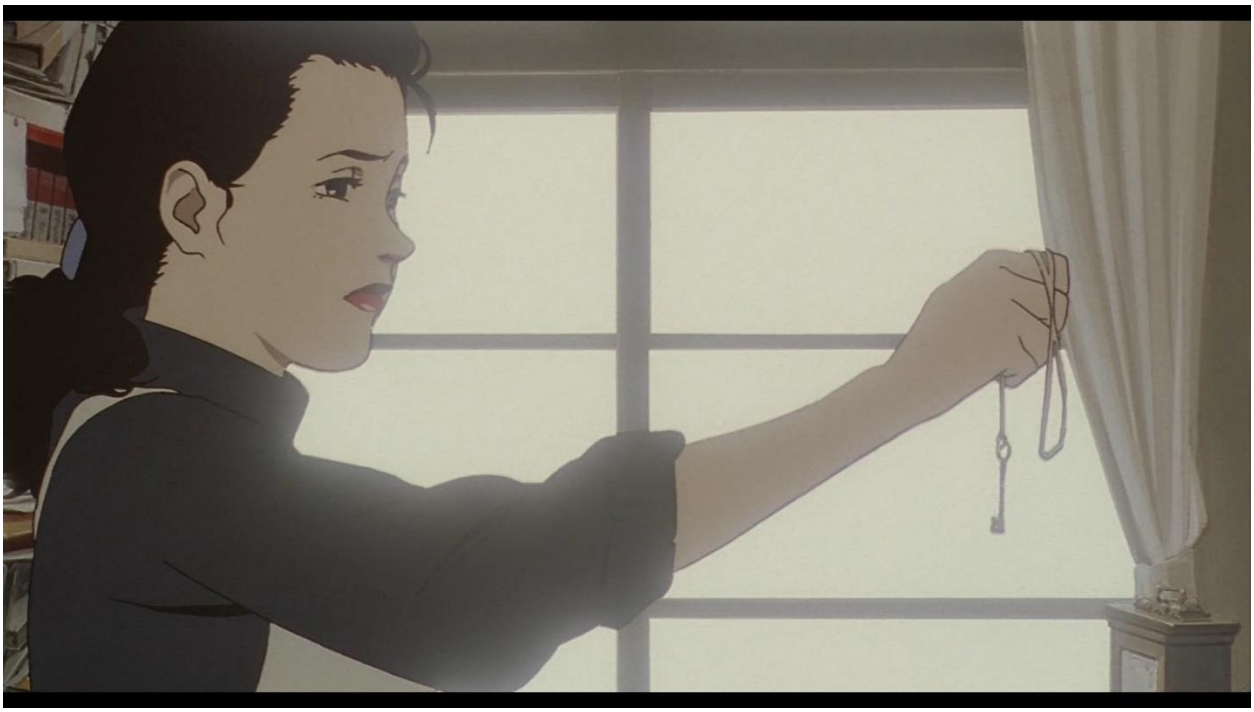
magazines in pre-war Japan, where socially conservative gender roles dictated "feminine values" as striving for a domestic life as a happy future bride (Takahashi, 116). To better understand the contemporary *shōjo* genre that Kon is subverting through Chiyoko, it would be best to examine its past representations and narratives around femininity and gender ideals:

> [T]he female protagonist in the "magical girl" genre reconfirms the values of femininity, which teaches girls to envision marriage and domestic life as a desirable goal once they have passed the adolescent stage. Compared to female heroes who are cute juvenile girls, [the] women in the enemy force, whether in magical girl programs or the *Power Rangers* series, are adult women wearing heavy makeup and obsessed with careerism: they are, simply put, the women who failed to be a wife or a mother. (Saito, 146)

In the past, anime representation of gender like those in the quote above suggested that female adolescence was a time of magical freedom prior to the gendered stage of marriage and motherhood, "suggesting the difficulty of imagining elements of power and defiance beyond the point of marriage" (Saito, 148).

Instead of falling in line with these heteronormative expectations, Chiyoko chases after a male artist and shows only an interest in him; other men's attempts at courtship are usually ignored or rejected. But her rejections are not always respected, as the director she worked with found a way to get Chiyoko give in and finally marry him. He had the key stolen away by an older actress, Eiko, who had always been jealous of Chiyoko's success. When explaining how the loss of the key led to her marriage Chiyoko reveals, "It was as if I'd lost part of my heart with that key. And I was too old to be dreaming anymore." The key was an object imbued with the past and the potentials of the future. It was what allowed Chiyoko to see a horizon that was not in line with

heteronormative institutions. By losing it, she lost her hope, and gave in to the traditional gender role of a wife. In the scene following her wedding, Chiyoko is cleaning her home, the domestic work is framed as dull and isolating. The color of the scene is a muted sienna, as her marriage has zapped the very color out of her world.



Chiyoko rediscovers the key, hidden by her husband in his study. She confronts him, realizing how he has no regrets hurting her and tricking her into marriage. Eiko comes forwards, admitting to her involvement in stealing the key away. Eiko confesses her jealousy of Chiyoko's youth, which impacted her own acting career: "And I got stuck playing the older woman you'd run up against." The scene reveals that Eiko's resentment is misplaced; her anger should have been aimed at the director, the one responsible for her limited acting roles. Having the key back allows Chiyoko to take control of herself again. She leaves her loveless marriage and once again searches for her painter. Chiyoko follows her own desires, refusing to fall into a dominant, "normal" love that perpetuates a repressive social order. Kon employs *shōjo* conventions only to

step out of them and question their use within a larger critique of a system; in this case, of a woman's agency in her own story.

After watching Chiyoko run through cinema and time, her own personal history, desperately chasing after the man she desires, the entire convention of the love story narrative is disrupted with the final line of the film. The strain of unpacking her past proves to be too much for Chiyoko's body; she collapses due to exhaustion and is rushed to a hospital. As Genya and Kyoji follow the ambulance, we are given the final piece to the puzzle, the heartbreaking truth from Genya's recollection of his own story – one that crosses paths with Chiyoko's – the painter was killed in Manchuria. All this time, Chiyoko has been chasing a shadow, a ghost. The stretch of road ahead of them becomes the hallway of the hospital with Genya in silhouette wordlessly receiving the bleak prognosis for the dying woman, the weight of the news causing him to fall to his knees. The visuals alone tell us all we need to know without any dialogue: Chiyoko is dying.

As Chiyoko lies in the hospital bed, Genya visits her for the last time; she smiles at him from behind her oxygen mask and tells the amateur filmmaker not to be sad, because "after all, I'm going after that man again. See?" She reveals the painter's key in her hand: "I have the key, thanks to you. It's opened the door to my memories of him. It's as if while I was talking to you, the girl I was came back to life." Genya, devastated and moved by her, responds, "This time you'll find him! I'm sure of it!" The scene begins to fade to white as she slips out of her being in time, a final thought unravelling in her mind: "I wonder… But maybe it doesn't matter. After all…" Her eyes close, the image changes around her, and she is transformed, young again, back in the rocket that opened the film. Genya and the camera man are there seeing her off as she blasts into space, the shots lingering on the ship in the dark void of space. Cut to a medium close-up of Chiyoko's face, smiling as she completes her final thought: "After all, it's the chasing after him I *really* love."

With a ghostly sound, a white void opens up in the distance, ribbons of light swirling out from it into space, the rocket enters the light, blasting off into the bright unknown, the abyss that we all return to.

Millennium Actress ultimately destabilizes its established love story plot with the very last line of the film: "After all, it's the chasing after him that I really love." This places Chiyoko's desires out of heteronormative ideals; it's not getting the man that matters most in the end. It's that she chased after him, spurred by her own desires. In an interview from Osmond's book *Satoshi Kon: The Illusionist*, Kon revealed how essential Chiyoko's final words were to him:

> It was because of *Millennium Actress*'s last line, in order to say it, that I made the film. That was how important the line was for me. I anticipated that some people [in the audience] might be shocked, and might consider it to be very egoistic of Chiyoko, due to the nature of the film as a love story. However, this wasn't my intention. I didn't consider the phrase to be egoistic; this was her attitude toward something she's going after. Even if she might not be able to catch it, still her attitude is to chase after it. It isn't Chiyoko's ego that's on display, it's her attitude, her style of life, that's shown here. (Kon – quoted in Osmond, 54)

There is a fairytale quality to the roles Chiyoko is cast in and her recurring cast of characters that appear alongside her: the man with the scar, the jealous older woman, the mysterious painter. The use of gender roles and dichotomies in *Millennium Actress* serves to subvert them, to look into history and see it from a new perspective.

Conclusion:

In a way, Chiyoko already understands how a combination of events, circumstances, people and past encounters determined where she ended up. This approach resonates with Ahmed's understanding of queer phenomenology: "it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds" (Ahmed, 3). It matters how we arrive at the places we do; the film elevates Chiyoko from myth into legend, a mythic representation of women who have impacted the past through cinema. The emphasis on the personal truth within our life stories suggests that we have to create our own history by telling our queer stories in cinema. History can be changed, it is fluid and its fluidity is dependent on life stories and memories. History is not set, monolithic, or permanent. And neither is the future. Through the work of the past, as seen in cinema and memories, we are propelled onward by the longing for a queer horizon. It is essential that we can imagine transformation in these utopian feelings, ones that open us to new potential futures outside of a natural order.

Chapter Three:
The Dream of a Movie

Paprika Plot Synopsis: A revolutionary scientific development, the DC-Mini, allows psychotherapists to have direct access to their patient's subconscious by way of entering into their dreams. Dr. Atsuko Chiba lives a double life: awake she is a scientist working in the field of dream therapy; dreaming she becomes her alter-ego, Paprika, a "dream detective." Paprika is starting treatment with a new patient, Detective Konakawa, who is haunted by a recurring dream surrounding the events of an unsolved murder case he is currently working on. The unfinished DC-Mini technology is stolen by dream terrorists, who use the device to take over people's dreams, posing a serious threat to the dreamer's very consciousness. Atsuko, along with her colleagues, Dr. Tokita – inventor of the DC-Mini – and Osanai, follow clues found in the dreams of those affected by the terrorists and begin their own detective work to find the stolen device and prevent further harm. What follows is a merging of dreams, reality and cinema.

Introduction:

Satoshi Kon is incapable of telling stories "straight" – both in the sense of normative identities and in telling them linearly and sequentially (Stam, 152). In his final feature film, *Paprika* (2006), Kon returns to the realm of the psyche, to dreams, in order to tell a story about cinema and identity. The elements of reflexivity in Kon's films become their own form of resistance, queering the nature of the film's form and the social constructs that make up the self. This is done by "slanting" how we understand the boundaries between dream and reality, movie and spectator. When those boundaries shift it creates a schism wherein there is possibility in what one can be – identity is not held in place by societal standards when one exists in the space of a film or dream. This is further played with by utilizing the animated medium to transform the human body, as Paul Wells notes about animation: "Animation, almost by definition, transforms the codes and conditions by which traditional or dominant modes of representation are considered" (Wells, 188). *Paprika* takes full advantage of this, subverting physical orthodoxies and normative forms of identity and sexuality; ultimately questioning how we come to create our own truths out of fictive means in order to resist dominant forms of knowledge. The film opens up queer possibilities by questioning the very notion of boundaries between reality and imagination, the ways we can exist in the world and how we can subvert dominant power structures.

The story of *Paprika* is based on an avant-garde novel by Yasutaka Tsutsui, a well-acclaimed science fiction novelist, published over several issues of the Japanese editions of the woman's magazine *Marie Claire* between 1991-1993 (Osmond, 101). The novel *Paprika* was praised as a masterpiece for its vivid depictions of dream worlds, the breaking down of reality and dreams, and the influence of psychoanalysis. What had captured readers where the rich descriptions and details. Tsutsui, having knowledge of psychoanalysis, used images and scenarios

from his own dreams as the source of the images in the novel. Kon had great respect for Tsutsui and his novel, confessing that he was considering *Paprika* as possible material for his first feature, which ended up instead being *Perfect Blue* (Osmond, 101). Kon stated that his goal was not to make a faithful adaptation of the novel – such an approach is not his style – instead he aimed to capture the essence and spirit of the work. The movie is an adaptation, it is Kon's version of Tsutsui's novel wherein he plays with the idea of performances, that our lives are made up of different performances, identities and schisms – real and imagined – emphasizing that these boundaries are not always essential or impenetrable.

Kon uses the natural *dis*order of dreams to queer identity and critique dominant forms of knowledge. Kon is using dreams – specifically a film-within-a-dream style of framing – to subvert notions of identity and bodily autonomy. Dreams are presented as a form of collective resistance and a queer space for personal revelations about the self. Where unconventional desires can be seen and transfigured into a public space; where the power structure of gender can be dismantled by an empowered woman. It all comes back to Kon's use of reflexive devices and techniques – from filling the frame with images of other monitors, screens, cameras, etc. – to his very use of cutting and intercutting, how he plays with the very syntax between shots and the diegesis of the film. The film is queer in its resistance against being live-action and animation – it is a hybrid, it is both and neither. Kon makes use of a pastiche of Hollywood cinema to complicate the separation of live-action from his animated feature. The uncertainty of the border between reality and dreams – a waking imagination – further complicates identity.

Paprika is a film that runs on its own inner logic, replacing narrative with excessive images of chaos and fluidity. The film deliberately avoids clarity by skipping narrative specifics so to disorient the spectator; as if we ourselves have been thrust into a dreaming mind, the logic between

scenes and cuts replicating the movement of images and thoughts in a dream. Kon's filmic representation of a dream is not unlike Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), where disjointed chronology and lack of plot aim to tease out the repressed emotions hidden in the psyche. In *Paprika*, the psychical space of the dream becomes a space of resistance, and the film offers us the possibility of creative resistance through dreams, cinema and images. Kon highlights the inherent instability in the terms of film language and hierarchies of gender and sexuality. The central narrative strategy becomes one of excess and discontinuity, much like Stam's "anti-illusionistic art" which "calls attention to the gaps and holes and seams in the narrative tissue" (Stam, 7).

The story is flourished with a detective story and fantastic images, but in the end, *Paprika* is the dream of a movie. Kon relies on queer "disorientation" to create queer spaces wherein identities are expanded, duplicated, destroyed and recreated. Identity is linked to a psychical process, one that relies on fantasy to work through personal difficulties. Art and being are connected, they can transform our lives and identities, reveal a hidden self, fragment and multiply identity. In Kon's films, there is a greater need for truth than for reality. This rejection is not unlike that of queer theory, where one's "queered" positionality in relation to the "straight-and-narrow" allows for glimpses of queer identities and possibilities of subverting hegemonic norms. By acknowledging the constructedness of meaning and identity we can begin to imagine alternative ways to thinking and being (Sullivan, 51). By opening up the possibility of a different kind of thought, then you also open up different ways of being, becoming and identities. Making new connections and meanings between objects and images in the world can disrupt conventional understandings of gender, the body and identity. Kon relies on ambiguity and polysemy in his films to avoid a clear definition or understanding of his film. *Paprika* uses dreams and cinema to

(re)frame gender, power structures, the body and sexuality into something malleable, brimming with (queer) possibilities for fundamental change.

Dreaming Cinema:

The connection between cinema and the nature of dreams has been well documented and debated – I will not go in-depth on the history of dream theory and the nature of dream interpretation. What is more vital here is the connection between dreams and cinema. Film critics such as Jean Epstein and Christian Metz have written on cinema's dream-like qualities. Kon goes further here, using poetic logic to depict dreams and fantasies as a phenomenon of life. Dreams, and the people who dream, become polymorphic – there is more to a dream than the Freudian latent/manifest contents. Dreams become more than a Freudian road to the unconscious, they can hold profound truths and fictions about our identities, our guilt, our desires. Through dreams one can heal, destroy, change one's identity with little effort, like an actor playing different roles in film. *Paprika* begins with this very question, and answers it: dreams are their own form of cinema. One's internal world is represented as theatrical, with a stage and actors (Resnik, 11).

While previous Kon films have played with the film-within-a-film framing device (film-within-a-memory/memory-within-a-film in *Millennium Actress*) here he offers a new approach: film-within-a-dream. Kon is linking the fantastical and creative powers of dreams to the images and stories of Hollywood cinema. The opening scene of the film is a fast paced six-minute dream-sequence, wherein references to Hollywood films are not only made, but recreated in the composition and action of the shot. The film's allusions to Hollywood cinema are its claims to being a continuation of that tradition, taking it into a new direction of subversion and queer self-transformation.

The first shot is of a clown emerging from a miniature car. She addresses the camera: "It's the greatest showtime!" The first line of dialogue immediately calls attention to the artifice and theatricality of both the film the spectator is watching and to the nature of cinema and dreams as spectacles bordering a threshold of the subconscious. A montage of images, performances, and audience reactions, assault the spectator with the spectacle of the circus acts, the scene bringing to mind Max Ophüls' *Lola Montès* (1955) in its framing. We soon learn we are in the dream of Detective Konakawa – one of Paprika's patients – not through exposition but through the dismantling of physical (or in this case, psychical) space. The detective is transported into a cage; the audience (all bearing his face) rush at him, the floor gives way and we fall into another dream.

Moving quickly from one dream to the next, all interconnect by cutting on movement to create one action that spans across multiple places and temporalities. Each new setting are all in direct reference to Hollywood: first swinging through a jungle as "Tarzan*"*, next a dramatic fight on a train recreating that in *From Russia with Love* (1963), then to Paprika as Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday* (1953) posing for a photograph as she hits someone with a guitar. The image becomes that of the photograph, frozen in time, until a dark figure in the background leaves the frame, alerting Konakawa who gives chase to the unknown man. It ends with the essential image that the film will revisit over and over, the images that haunt Konakawa's dream: a gunshot, a body falling but not ever hitting the ground, a bright red hallway, a dark figure escaping through a doorway beyond. Konakawa starts to pursue the figure, but he never seems to be able to reach him, the ground beneath him begins to come undone, folding on itself like an unraveling ribbon. He reaches the door, only to fall into a white void, yelling out in terror. The shot fades to white as a voice – belonging to the man Konakawa was chasing – yells out: "*What about the rest of it!?*" The white space is flooded by hypnagogic flashes of colors lasting only a few frames, as if vision is

Iconic scenes from Roman Holiday *and* From Russia with Love *create a pastiche of Hollywood.*

being returned to our eyes as we awaken from the dream. The next image is a point-of-view shot of a dimly lit ceiling: the dream is over.

This opening dream-sequence begins with emphasizing our position as a spectator of cinema, of this very film, but ends with a subjective shot, putting the spectator into a position for identification with one of the characters. The way we see films and who we connect with is constantly at play in *Paprika*. The next shot after Konakawa awakens from his dream is of him and Paprika reviewing the *very footage from the previous sequence* on a laptop in order to analyze the content of the dream. In her analysis of the dream, Paprika notes how Konakawa's dreams resemble cinematic genres and explains the relationship between film and dreams: "REM sleep that occurs later during the sleep cycle is longer and easier to analyze. If earlier cycles are, say, artsy film shorts, later cycles are like feature-length blockbuster movies." Konakawa sheepishly responds: "Then that makes you a dream movie star." Paprika is like the movie star who lives many lives, like the fragmented and forgotten stories we slip into every night, the many personas and character we become in the dark. You aren't just entering a fantastical world in this film, you are watching the characters do the same. The very nature of entering a dream, acting in a film, memory and identification, are all brought to the forefront of the screen. It is reflected upon, played with, and transformed. The very diegesis of the film, what images only we as the spectators of the film get to see and those which are *also* seen by the characters, is deliberately made uncertain and queer.

The biggest rebuttal to the nature of film being like those of dreams is the insistence that the spectator knows they are watching a film whereas the dreamer does not know they are dreaming (Rascaroli, 2002). This is not what Kon is asking, as Konakawa's dreams feature theaters, seats, projections onto screens, etc. He is not asking if the spectator knows what they see is real or not,

he is exploring if we are sure of the boundary between film and reality; between reality and fantasy. Kon has stated in an interview his view on the nature of reality:

> Besides, the attitude of completely separating reality from fiction isn't a healthy way of living. In our reality, there are many layers, and while to others it may seem like a dream or fantasy, to someone else it might be nothing less than the truth. My wish is to continue interpreting the world in this way and capture the multifaceted circumstances that affect people and their relationship to one another. (Kon, 2004)

The boundary between what we know as real, as natural, is put into question through the (de)construction of cinematic devices and dream space. The result is an examination of the structure of knowledge, of how we understand what we know, as one of the final lines of the film reveals: "it's the truth that came from fiction."

The overall aesthetic of the film is one of near-constant motion, there are very few pauses that would allow the viewer to process where we are now or what is happening. It is not entirely chaotic by any means, but it is resisting typical narrative form by intermixing more than one story, a convergence of the stories, etc. While not as non-linear as his previous work, *Paprika* still offers a liminal space of possibility and imagination, where identity should change, where you can control who or what you are.

In *Paprika*, the titular character states that the DC Mini is the "scientific key that allows us to open the door to our dreams." In a way, it removes latent content of a dream by recording the dream itself – in any case, the film is using psychoanalysis only as it needs it, not structuring its representation and the meaning of dreams around it. Dreams don't reveal a hidden erotic desire or wish fulfillment as Freud would insist; it instead opens doors to secrets, memories and new forms of being. There is a hidden message in Konakawa's dream, a hidden self, a forgotten memory of

films and truth. The DC Mini ultimately breaks down the boundaries between dream and reality, resulting in the carnivalesque scenario with the parade and the world going insane – in a way, the film offering the possibilities of identity in a world where boundaries are lifted, where queerness is everywhere. The boundaries that keep physical bodies intact seem to melt as the 'real' world is invaded by a collective id – represented as a parade of inanimate objects – which people slowly begin to join, their forms shifting into dancing instruments and religious statues.

Queer Animated Bodies:

In his book *Saint Foucault*, David Halperin describes the term "queer" as a subversive positionality from which the queer subject may "envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relationship among sexual behaviors, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-constitution, and practices of community – for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth, and desire" (Halperin, 62). Queerness is a positionality – not an identity – it is against the normative and the

dominant. To be queer is to resist and subvert the norms, which Kon is definitely doing here. He emphasizes thresholds, lapses of boundaries, perception, imagination and reality. He tells a story, then steps out of it and critiques it. He is not out to deconstruct or destroy what he is subverting, but to play with it, to offer different possibilities for how we can understand an animated film that borrows from Hollywood.

Animation theorists have noted the interrelation between the qualities of the animated body and queer theory. Namely, as Paul Wells wrote on in *Understanding Animation*: "animation can reduce the status of 'the body' and, in doing so, extend its vocabulary of representation, thus using it as an infinitely malleable property less fixed by biological or social constraints" (50). The animated body can destabilize gender, sexuality, and identity through its metamorphosis; there is no physical continuity of the body, the lines are blurred. What is animated in this film is ways to arrive to a creative resistance and how to reconsider dominant forms of knowing. Wells notes that the "instability of form, an intrinsic credential of the animation medium itself, has led to an instability of representational norms, particularly in the creation of comic effects" (Wells, 208). But Kon avoids the traditional "cartoon-ish" comedic effect when transforming bodies, he lets the instability of form be strange, *feel* strange and have a queering effect in the film. The animated body is used to subvert and undermine physical orthodoxies, the very status of the body is reduced to a constant state of flux and a refusal of identification (Wells, 74). The fluidity of gender, bodies and form are shown as the slippery movements of thoughts and images that flash behind our eyes in a dream, projected on a screen.

This reflects Eve Sedgwick's definition of queer as an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances" (12). Resistance to norms, as portrayed in *Paprika*, become a creative act that aligns with Foucault's writings on "ethical self-fashioning" – queerness is not

simply the deconstruction of the system it is subverting, but it is a (re)creation of how we come to understand forms of dominance and identity. Foucault offers a genealogical critique of truth to illuminate transformative possibilities and creative forms of resistance against dominant power relations. Creative resistance, for Foucault, involves the demystification of these power relations by revealing their constructed and contingent nature: "A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence – even, and perhaps above all, in those aspect of it that are most familiar, most solid and most intimately related to our bodies and to our everyday behavior" (Foucault – quoted in Simpson, 247). In the case of Kon's *Paprika,* there is an altering of the relation between film and spectator, and even in how we examine sources of truth. This pulls from the Nietzschian concept of "untruth," as it deconstructs how we understand forms of knowledge and how to create new, queer ones that resist normative ways of knowing; how we can create valid truths from fictions. *Paprika* ends with Konakawa having a revelation about himself – his love of films and his guilt over abandoning an unfinished film he made with a close friend. The man that has been haunting the detective's dreams appears to tell him: "You lived out our movie in real life. It's the truth that came from fiction." Links between dreams and narrative (story-telling) become their own source of a personal truth – subverting dominant forms of knowledge by looking to stories and dreams for a truth that shapes our experience of the world. Through dreams, imagination/fantasy and cinema, we can find ways to challenge dominant forms of knowledge and truth by discovering our own truths (untruths?) from unconventional, ephemeral places.

The film carries a feminist message in its queering of identity, as it is revealed that the dream terrorists are in fact the Chairman and Osanai. The character of the wheelchair-bound Chairman can be read as a sick patriarchy. He seeks control over dreams, he tries to control others

for his own personal gain, like with Osanai. He is ill, old, an archaic patriarch clinging to life, but despite his physical weakness he can still hold tremendous power over others, due to the societal roles of the past that have shaped how men in power are perceived. In the film, he is shown to always be surrounded by plants. These eventually turn into gnarled roots, like the rotten roots of patriarchal authority that try to cling to life. There is the telling scene where Paprika is flayed – Osanai has her pinned to a table, like the dead butterflies that hang on display on the walls. Osanai, in a demented expression of "love" for Atsuko, molests and flays Paprika to see her "true self" – her skin splitting apart to reveal the unconscious Atsuko beneath it. Before he can go any further, Osanai's body is suddenly overtaken by the Chairman. His hand, now roots, strangle the unconscious woman. The Chairman's head grows next to Osanai's, like a tumor ballooning out of his neck, and there is a battle of control over the body. Toxic patriarchal entitlement becomes a literal disease, one that will influence one's actions with misogynistic intentions.

In a critique of the Oedipus myth, Paprika takes on the form of the Sphinx, and Osanai that of Oedipus; it is later revealed that the character who takes on the form of Oedipus is not in bed with his mother, but in bed (literally) with the patriarchal figure of the Chairman. The very notion of heterosexuality in a patriarchal order is itself made queer; myths that supported the dichotomy between male/female are presented with a queer slant. This offers new possibilities for women, gender roles and how to understand power relations. Sexuality is ambiguous and open in the film, many characters are hinted at being homosexual, and the nature of desire is left as not a drive determined by sex or gender, but by whatever object the individual desires.

The patriarchal unconscious is portrayed as something oppressive and destructive to all forms of identity and gender, but it is also a force that can be overcome. Sexuality is complicated in *Paprika*, men perform certain masculinities while having their own questionable homosocial

relationships. It is the characters that side with the villainous Chairman who are objectified themselves, used, killed and nearly destroy the world. It takes a woman, empowered by her unconventional desire becoming seen and known, to destroy the patriarchy. In the climax of the film, where dreams and reality have merged, and the Chairman has obtained a god-like status of domination over the world, Atsuko and Paprika unify into one, re-emerging as a giant infant who begins to "eat up" the Chairman's dream, and his source of power. She becomes a boundless self, transcending into a giant goddess, sucking away the power of the Chairman, growing stronger with each gulp, eventually devouring the Chairman himself.

Dreams can transform how we interact with and understand the everyday of our waking lives; it offers the possibility of what can be. A being without restrictions. What we can understand as queer from this film is that profound knowledge can be found in the ephemeral, the imaginary, in things that seize you and slant the world. The incoherence of things is the crystallization of a new way of knowing the world. The fact that such disorienting images can exist in us, and can be shared with others, speaks to a poetic potential for transformation of the self. The ability to resist, to revolt, is in us.

Visually, Kon is taking full advantage of the malleability of form in animation. Characters are constantly changing form, becoming objects, other people, animals, characters from films and novels, figures from mythology. This film is exhibiting what Paul Wells referred to as "the malleable space of possibility" – wherein, due to the unique logic and qualities that an animated film has, a character can change their gender, identity and have an ambiguous sexuality without it being seen as strange or unnatural. Identity, form and sexuality are not monolithic in the world of animation, instead they can be transformative, it becomes a part of a creative process of making yourself.

It is clear that at this point in his career, Kon has truly perfected his editing technique, the film constantly keeps us guessing and uncertain as to what we are looking at: are the characters also watching it with us? What began in *Perfect Blue* is brought into a new physicality as the very bodies and forms of characters can stretch, expand, shrink, etc. One moves through a door, a threshold to someone else's dream, now she is someone else, playing a new role. Sara Ahmed's concept of "queer disorientation" is recreated in *Paprika* as the uncertainty of location (is it reality or still a dream? Who else is watching?) and the embracing of incoherence of space and time that is achieved by quick edits. This reflexive strategy resonates with Stam's writing on "anti-illusionistic" art: "Anti-illusionists hybridize genres in such a way that the signification of the work partially arises from the creative tensions generated by their interactions, tensions which force us to reflect on the nature of genre itself as one of the ways 'reality' is mediated through art" (Stam, 132). *Paprika* is breaking an assumed relationship between interior and exterior, diegetic and non-diegetic, forcing us to contemplate the film as a queer collage of cinematic pastiches. We are never

certain of what exactly we are seeing while watching the film, any image that is on the screen could very well be something the characters are also seeing.

Conclusion:

Identity is linked to an artistic process, a poetic self-making and self-knowing, reflected and understood through images. Art is restorative to the self, a tapping into a well-spring of imagination that fuels our self-creation. Art becomes a transformative encounter, a poetic making of the self, perhaps only a fragment or maybe a full shattering… we are left changed, open to possibility. Kon's films have the power to provide different ways of imagining, of tilting us from the "straight-and-narrow" into a queer space of possibility. His films follow the logic of poetry – working off of poetic links, metaphors, hints, secrets – they follow an organic rhythm of a stream of consciousness-like pattern, one that has a purpose and a drive in its disorder. They unapologetically cut into the meat of life's complexities, there is no black or white answer – they examine life beneath the surface. Indeed, these films lay open the logic of a person's thought and desires. In this sense, Kon leaves it open – how we understand ourselves through art cannot be made into a monolithic experience or definition.

Chapter Four:

Chosen Families, Liminal Lives

Tokyo Godfathers Plot Synopsis: Three homeless individuals live together as a queer family of sorts, surviving on the streets of Tokyo. Gin (a middle-aged cynical alcoholic), Hana (a maternal transwoman), and Miyuki (a teenaged runaway). Miyuki is constantly insisting she isn't really homeless as she can return home anytime she wants – though, this does not turn out to be the case, as the reason Miyuki ran away from home was because she stabbed her father during an argument. Gin at first weaves a tragic tale of how he could not afford to care for his sick daughter, and her death resulted in his homelessness. It is revealed later that this story is a false one, fabricated by Gin to gain sympathy and validate his choice to abandon his family due to self-pity over gambling debts. Hana never reveals much about her past directly, but her current situation came about when her lover died, leaving her without a home. On Christmas Eve, the trio discover an abandoned infant in the trash while dumpster diving and decide to try and find her parents. Hana names the child Kiyoko, and fulfills her dream of being a mother. As they traverse the snow-covered city, the characters confront aspects of their pasts that they ran away from, all having to do with dysfunctional families. After a series of comical coincidences – saving a mob-boss, bonding with South American immigrants, preventing a suicide – the trio are able to return the baby to her birthparents, and gain validation in their redemption.

Introduction:

Tokyo Godfathers (2003) with its shift away from disorienting storytelling aesthetics, is the odd one out of Kon's overall filmography. It is for this reason that I have left this film for the final chapter, as it will require a slightly different approach than Kon's other work. The film does not focus heavily on layered realities, nor on exploring how cinema links to psychical processes. It instead tells a story of three homeless individuals who find an abandoned newborn on Christmas Eve, and their quest to return her to her birth parents. The film does not implement covert queer aesthetics; instead, it uses an *overt* approach to queerness, setting the film in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo and having a transwoman as the film's protagonist. *Tokyo Godfathers* is a queer film in its defiance against heteronormativity and its representation of liminal identities that fall outside of the normative institutions it criticizes. It has Kon's auteurial mark, as the film is about subverting expectations and challenging repressive systems of normalcy. This chapter will examine how Kon critiques the traditional family while offering a queer kinship as substitute. In addition, the representation of both homeless and trans characters in an animated film is a unique contribution that is worth examining in detail.

The story of the film is an original one, though it pays homage to John Ford's 1948 Western, *3 Godfathers,* utilizing the Christian themes of the film, as well as some plot points, to make a queer retelling that focuses on the struggles of economically marginalized individuals (Osmond, 64). The film's focus on humanity, redemption and the human connection between those alienated from 'normalcy' can be attributed to the co-writer, Keiko Nobumoto (*Cowboy Bebop, Wolf's Rain*) which might explain the difference of this film compared to Kon's other work. Nobumoto's major contribution, as noted by Kon, was in the development of the trans character, Hana: "Nobumoto's input was an essential part, especially in the case of Hana. I was only possible

to create such a deep, rich character, who had both masculine and feminine characteristics, by having both of us as writers" (Osmond, 60 – 2007 interview with Kon). This theme of being neither and both at once resonates as a queer strategy to complicate codes and conventions by blurring the boundaries of gender identity and erotic desires. Hana embodies this blending of opposites, offering her own complex gender identity that does not line up with heteronormative standards – both by being trans, and in her appearance as failing to pass. Another element of the film that represents a blurring or troubling of boundaries is in the film's genre; this is Kon's funniest film, yet the subject is a bleak examination of those living in destitute conditions, broken families, and suicide.

Kon's representation of homelessness contains a multiplicity; it speaks to the varying complexities that result in homelessness – personal failures, economic injustice, sexual and racial marginalization, mental illness. The different circumstances that resulted in each character's current situation serves to highlight how people fall out of a normative structure, and who can go

back. Stephen Pimpare's 2017 book, *Ghettos, Tramps, and Welfare Queens: Down and Out on the Silver Screen*, establishes four categories that the representation of the homeless (man) characters fall under: "a Vaudevillian (to be laughed at), a Villain (to be feared), a Victor (to be celebrated and held up as a hero), or a Victim (to be pitied)" (139). There is no simplification in how we are to receive the homeless characters in *Tokyo Godfathers*: we don't fear them, pity them, or blame them for their situation. Kon offers these characters respect by giving them depth and humanity; we come to understand their circumstances and pasts as the result of repressive institutions and human failures.

When conceiving the film, Kon said that he specifically wanted to make a film starring homeless protagonists in Tokyo. His reasoning was to take inspiration from the world around him and to utilize discarded ideas: "These homeless people picked up a baby from the trash. I picked up ideas that had been thrown away, that nobody was using" (Kon quoted in Osmond, 59). Kon's quote invokes a strategy from Discard Theory, where what is considered "trash" or unworthy by a dominant system (i.e. queer communities, communities of color, homeless individuals) do indeed have value. In the film, the characters are literally marginalized, to the point of being likened to trash within the narrative. This is the kernel of the queer critique of the film: using material that would fall "outside" of normative standards to bring queer identities and possibilities into view. Kon makes use of the protagonists' alienation from general society to examine their position as homeless and as trans in comparison to normative institutions. It is important to emphasize how the film does not romanticize homelessness as people going their own way against society. The homeless status of the protagonists serves to establish how the boundaries of traditional institutions include or exclude individuals who do not fit into the dominant models of heteronormativity. Sara Ahmed identified a "disorientation" that extends into dwelling places, feelings of home, and those

who do not line up with traditional family expectations (27). The protagonists of *Tokyo Godfathers* do no align themselves with familial or social orders, they have fallen out of being oriented towards "the family" at the cost of becoming unseated from their dwelling place (Ahmed, 154). Though, maybe they never felt at home in the first place.

Eve Sedgwick's writing on the "Christmas Effect," connects with the film's use of religion, Christmas and repressive institutions as forces that leave queer people out. Sedgwick claims that during Christmastime there is an "alignment" of various institutions (the State, the Church, the Market) and the family: "… the pairing 'families/Christmas' becomes increasingly tautological, as families more and more constitute themselves according to the schedule, and in the endlessly iterated image, of the holiday itself constituted in the image of 'the' family" (Sedgwick, 5-6). It is at Christmas time that those who do not "line up" with these institutions and "the family" are reminded of their alienation from dominant ideologies of 'normalcy.' Tokyo Godfather's uses the setting of Christmas to show how the protagonists do not line up with the image of "the family." Throughout the film, images of ideal (heterosexual) families appear in the form of advertisements, billboards, books, photographs, etc. Each image is of a happy couple, either with a child on the way or already parents, gleaming out to the viewer with a desperate semblance of happiness and normalcy. The images communicate the heterosexual hierarchy that our protagonists live in, one that privileges reproductive, monogamous heterosexual relationships. It is clear that Kon's version of Japan insists on a particular idea of the 'normal' family, but it is just as fake as the ads and photos.

Trans Representation:

The open scene begins with children performing a Nativity Scene play for the homeless. As preacher takes the stage to address the audience with a comically spirited rant about how

"nothing is harder than having no place." In the audience, listening the sermon, is Hana. She is the first character of the group that the spectator sees, her somber frown revealing how Hana's sense of placelessness deeply affects her. The first thing that sticks out about Hana is her appearance: Kon designed the character to have very masculine features (a pronounced, square jaw, a hint of facial hair) coupled with the voice talent of (Yoshiaki Umegaki), who plays with Hana's voice by going from falsetto to deep baritone depending on her mood. In addition, Hana's body language and facial expressions are animated with a sense of excess; her face will stretch into comically wide or extreme expressions. Hana visually fails at passing as a woman, her appearance is made to convey a transgendered individual who is destitute, and cannot afford to keep up surface appearance. Hana cannot conform to normative standards of gender appearance – and it is the lack of continuity with her appearance that sets her apart as being queer.

Hana is referred to by Kon and the cast of the film as a "drag queen," though her statements about her gender seem to indicate otherwise. Following the opening scene, Hana and Gin are in line at a soup kitchen, having just watched the Nativity Play. In response to being insulted with a homophobic slur from Gin, Hana declares herself to be "a mistake made by God!" She continues, "In my heart, I am a woman." It is made very clear that Hana identifies herself as being female, presenting as female through her clothing, hairstyle and makeup (most of which she maintains despite being homeless). The character's passion for motherhood establishes her relationship to Gin and Miyuki – acting as a partner to Gin (she eventually admits to being in love with him) and a motherly gender role model to Miyuki (constantly correcting her manners and insisting she be more ladylike). Hana takes on a maternal role towards the found infant, constantly cradling her and keeping her close. Most important, Hana is an active agent in the narrative of the film, moving the story forward with her desire to care for Kiyoko, Gin and Miyuki.

By focusing on three homeless characters, Kon is taking the opportunity to offer queer alternatives to the traditional, heterosexual nuclear family. Kon is portraying a form of trans parenting through the character of Hana – her desire to be a mother, to provide a child with love (speaks loudly to her denial of love from her biological family, as she claims she "never knew her mother"). Hana believes that Kiyoko is a miracle sent to them by God. When they first discover the infant, Hana excitedly swaddles her and exclaims, "This is a Christmas present from God! She's our baby!" Despite the complaints and groans of the other two, Hana insists that the infant is God's gift to them, and that she is "doing God's will" by taking care of it. Gin reminds Hana that they are homeless and have no way to care for a newborn, she would be better off if given to the police. Hana glares at Gin, yelling "This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance! *Let me feel like a mother!*" The other two concede to keeping the baby overnight, and giving her to authorities in the morning. The infant represents something that Hana does not possess: the ability to have children. She has become a surrogate wife and mother to Gin and Miyuki, a relationship that the film insists is just as valid despite their lack of conforming to a traditional family structure.

The film's critique on heteronormative families and motherhood comes from Hana herself. The following morning after the infant was found, Gin and Miyuki awaken to find that Hana has taken Kiyoko and left the tent. After a brief search, Gin and Miyuki find Hana sitting quietly in the snow, holding Kiyoko close. Gin tries to convince her to let the authorities deal with the infant, so she can return to her birth parents: "A baby's always better off with its real mother." Hana retorts, "Not necessarily. Sometimes a foster mother is better." When the other two members of the group press her on why she does not want to simply drop the baby off at a police station, she tells them about how she does not want the infant to live in foster care, "never having one memory of ever having been loved." Gin insists the parents must have had a reason to dump the infant, to

which Hana passionately criticizes: “Nothing should make you abandon a child! That means you’ve taken love and tossed it away, like trash.” Hana sees herself in Kiyoko, the infant being abandoned by her parents mirroring Hana’s own history with her mother. Hana resolves to find Kiyoko’s mother and ask her why she abandoned her baby, hoping to understand and learn to forgive her own mother in the process.

The many reviews of the film – and their approaches to describing/gendering Hana – are a good measure for how radical it was to have a trans character in an animated film. The representation of transgendered characters has been a mixed bag at best, with them more likely to be cast as dangerous, mentally ill villains - *Sleepaway Camp*, *The Silence of the Lambs* – or a comical joke (Rigney, 4). Publications discussing Hana’s gender seem to be uncertain about what exactly it is. She is called a transsexual, a cross-dresser, a drag queen – some publications have even used male pronouns when referring to her. J. Hoberman from *The Village Voice* referred to her as a “turbaned trannie” (2004). For its time, and its medium, *Tokyo Godfathers* was

revolutionary in its goal to portray a realistic transwoman, and to give her depth and humanity beyond her gender identity. For anime, such a representation was extremely rare – as was having a protagonist older than 21. You did not typically see middle-aged characters as protagonists, as the main audiences were younger men and women. Kon's insistence on a mature representation of a trans character that remains as close as it can to reality bends the expectations of the medium itself.

Families Lost, Families Made:

The queer family unit that is our three main characters do not line up with traditional expectations of the family, and their homeless position furthers this unalignment. The relationship dynamics between the three challenge the traditional ordering of familial norms; there are no shared genetics, no official papers, no sexual dyad. Queer theorist Elizabeth Povinelli, notes how society values people by their connection to a family tree (355). The homeless protagonists do not follow the family lines established by heteronormative patriarchal structures, they remain "out of line." The main cast has no family tree, they are alienated, invisible, unwanted. Gin and Miyuki have families they could return to, but both have their reasons not to go back, mostly out of shame and guilt. Hana, on the other hand, is estranged from her biological family, and only seems to have a chosen family in the form of other drag queens that run a gay bar.

By chance, Gin managed to run into his estranged adult daughter, also named Kiyoko, prompting an awkward conversation where he lies to her about where he has been. Hana, irritated with Gin's constant lying, loudly tells him off in front of his daughter, exposing who and what he is. Hana leaves in a huff with Miyuki in tow, who demands to know why Hana did such a thing. Hana's back is to the camera, her form darkened against the blue twilight sky of the city, she knows that Gin has been wanting to rebuild a relationship with his daughter, but doing such a thing would

mean he would leave her. Hana responds to Miyuki with a sad acceptance that it would be better if everyone was with their families. Miyuki gets upset and asks "And then what? You don't have a real family!" Hana does not respond, she just looks off into the distance. Her status as queer sets her apart from being able to achieve anything like a 'real' family. As Sara Ahmed states, to be queer is to "disturb the order of things," which can be done with a refusal to submit to normativity (161).

One of the many images of the heteronormative ideal family that the film criticizes.

Tokyo Godfathers has been accused of upholding traditional family roles by having a heterosexual family structure of father, mother, child (Napier, 45). Susan Napier claims that the film seems to be critiquing couples who postpone having children, as motherhood and children are a major theme of the film. However, I would argue that the film is not critiquing those who do not propagate immediately (or ever), but is instead critiquing the fakeness of these normative expectations. Every image of a happy husband and wife is just that: a reminder of what heteronormative families are not. Every family portrayed in the film is dysfunctional in one way

or another: Gin gambled himself into debt and left his family, Miyuki stabbed her father during a fight, Kiyoko was abandoned in the trash. There is hardly a positive representation of a heterosexual nuclear family, and therein lies the critique: no one's family is like the images promotes on billboards, books, or photos. We come to understand this when we fail to line up with our family lines, when we do not feel at home.

The climax of the film highlights these failures, touching on dark themes of post-partum depression and suicide. The clues about the infant's parents lead the group to a dysfunctional family – not the infant's true parents, as we learn, but a failing marriage that has been exasperated by a recent miscarriage. The wife, Sachiko, has become suicidal after the loss of her child, leading her to kidnap another newborn from the hospital and keep it as her own. In a panic, she dumped Kiyoko so to avoid her being taken away by authorities. By sheer chance, Hana and Miyuki prevent her from jumping off a bridge, leading Sachiko to recognize the baby and claim she is Kiyoko's mother. By the time Hana and Miyuki learn that Sachiko is not the infant's mother, but a very unstable woman, they (along with Gin) leap into action to save Kiyoko. After a harrowing chase, the climax of the film takes place on a snowy rooftop, with Sachiko (clinging to Kiyoko) standing on the ledge, about to attempt suicide a second time. Miyuki attempts to talk down Sachiko from jumping off the building or to at least spare Kiyoko and return her to her real parents. Sachiko breaks down into tears and reveals that she thought having a child, and being a "real family," would fix her husband and save their marriage. "I thought as long as I had her, everything would be fine. My husband would mend his ways, and we'd be a real family." Miyuki yells back: "That's *bullshit!*" The film's critique of the failures of heteronormative expectations of couples, marriage and parenting are quite searing, portraying broken, dysfunctional 'normal' families in contrast to our main characters, who make up their own queer family.

Conclusion:

Queer Obscurity and Kon's Impact

I have argued that the films of Satoshi Kon exemplify queer aesthetics that link the animated medium to queer theories. Through the stylistic strategy of disorientation, Kon's films challenge artistic and social conventions by deconstructing them. By implementing Sara Ahmed's theory of "disorientation," I highlighted how this stylistic strategy can operate on formal and narrative levels in the films. The formal cinematic techniques fall under "self-reflexive" devices – film-within-a-film, narrative discontinuities, interruptions, frame-within-the-frame – which aim to disrupt and resist normative systems. Kon uses "other traditions" of cinema to open up what cinema is, how animation can complicate live-action, and how art can transform the self. From subverting gender and genre expectations to complicating the diegesis of the film, Kon's work is queer in its refusal of any confining set of boundaries or categories.

Kon's Legacy:

Kon's films had more of an influence on live-action directors in the West, than on other anime directors. In particular, Kon's work had a direct impact on two Western directors – Darren Aronofsky and Christopher Nolan – who feature Kon-like imagery in their films. Aronofsky famously bought the remake rights of *Perfect Blue* so to legally recreate the bathtub scene from the animated film in his *Requiem for a Dream* (1999). The scene features the camera positioned directly overhead, framing the bare back of the character in the cramped space of water and ceramic, cut to close-up of her face under the water and her muffled yelling. There have also been rumors that Kon's *Perfect Blue* was an influence for another one of Aronofsky's films, *Black Swan* (2010), though he denies any such influence despite similar plots. Nolan's *Inception* (2010) owes a lot to *Paprika* in terms of visual and story, which he has cited as a key influence. For someone who had only just begun to carve out his place among the many names and styles of anime makers,

Kon was already drawing attention to his style of story-telling and use of the medium to address live-action cinema and animation. Though he remains an obscure anime director, his images and themes have taken on other lives beyond animation.

I have argued that Kon's films are all 'queer' in the sense that they are nonnormative, resisting codes and traditions by critiquing 'normal' aspects of everyday life in Japan. On the day of his death Kon requested that one final blog entry be uploaded to his website, one that directly addressed his fans, titled "Goodbye." In this final address, Kon reflexed on his directorial and artistic career, expressing his own nonnormative stance: "The fact that I rejected what was "expected (normal)" seemed to me to be very much like me… I've never really felt that I belonged with the majority" (Kon, 2010). Kon saw this rejection to normative expectations as his core principle, one that allowed for queer possibilities to manifest in his films. David Halperin expressed that queer resistance to the dominant is not "simply a negation but a creative process" (60). This is exemplified in Kon's work, where the formation of one's (queer) identity parallels art making; Kon's work advocates for a queer resistance that involves creativity, bringing something into the world or transforming something that is already here. Transformation is a process: it is essential to how we can be in the world; without it, there is no possibility. To experience a change in the self through art is a topic that branches into imagination, creativity, subjectivity, and the poetic experience of the work of art. Kon is exploring the relationship between identity, reality, and the moving image. He advocates for people to see the world clearly, and shows that one can see clearly through fantasy, art, and imagination. There is truth in fiction for Kon, and the moving image, cinema, seems to be the vehicle for this experience of seeing truth outside of reality or what is simply before you: things as they are.

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