Anchors Aweigh:
The Aesthetic of Surface in the Films of Kon Satoshi

by

Alexander Kirst
Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the
county of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in East Asian Studies

Middletown, Connecticut
April, 2008
Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................ 2
Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 3
Chapter I, Persons in the Aesthetic of Surface ......................................................... 16
Chapter II, Cultivating the Aesthetic of Surface ................................................. 34
Chapter III, The Aesthetic of Non-Revealing....................................................... 59
Concluding Remarks ....................................................................................................... 78
Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 84
Acknowledgments

Maybe words cannot convey what I would like to say. Without the support of my friends, my family, and my professors, I know that I would not be the person I am today, that this project would not be what it is now. I am forever in your debt.
Introduction

“Paprika.” Thus reads the business card of the young woman who just walked through Detective Konakawa’s dreams and out his door. Infused by either her own power or the energy of Susumu Hirasawa’s lifting score, the business card transforms into an opening title before dissolving into a speeding highway, on which her motorcycle rides. With a mischievous glance to her right, she effectively changes lanes, drifting out of the camera frame to reappear astride a rocket on the side panel of a parallel truck. The rocket, her steed, rears back before blasting off into the night. Aloft, she briefly surveys her city before plunging into it. Like the motorcycle before it, the rocket heads off-screen while she remains, somehow manifesting on a billboard for Moonlight Seven cigarettes. As though bored, she waltzes into the nearby billboard for No. 1 Beer and then onto the glowing computer screen of a snoozing office worker. The pictures of scantily-clad models that surround his desk remain static, but she emerges from her surface to cover him with his coat before bounding away, through a dark corridor and into the city street. Halfway across, traffic remembers its place and resumes its breakneck pace. Unable to proceed against such speed, she stops traffic – and time – with a whistle, bounding across the street and out of the shot. The camera refocuses on her at a restaurant, eating a hamburger. Myriad mirrors reflect her bite.
Two young men, espying an attractive lady, head in her direction, and she smiles at them, though the mirrors’ reflections reveal unsyncopated disgust. She leads them out of the restaurant and jumps into a passerby’s tee-shirt, leaving her would-be suitors baffled. Rather than jumping out of the frame, the camera crops out the tee-shirt, focusing our attention again on her, on Paprika, who now stands alone on a lonely city street. Less mischievous, she looks to her right, and her eyes catch the first rays of the rising sun. After a cut back to the highway, we spot Paprika again astride her motorcycle, but she will not linger on it for long. As a car passes, she becomes its driver. As another speeds by, her face transforms into that of another person. After one more iteration, the metamorphosis into a prim and bespectacled black-haired businesswoman is complete. The director’s name, Kon Satoshi, appears. The music ends.

This sequence, two minutes long, begins six minutes into Paprika’s runtime, but it functions as an effective introduction to the confusing logic of the film. If an audience’s experience of it ended immediately after this segment, they might ask the following questions. “Who is Paprika and where did she come from?” “What connection does she have to Konakawa?” “How did she come into possession of the DC Mini?” “Why was she able to move so unscientifically through the Japanese cityscape?” “What is her relationship to the black-haired businesswoman she transformed into?” The film thus commences in media res, introducing a potentially overwhelming quantity of unexplained information without grounding its viewers in a conventionally stable status quo. The status quo of Paprika’s world is a literal contradiction, motion, visually represented by rockets, traffic, and transformations
and formally denoted by rapid editing and constant camera movement. Within this motion, real elements turn into nearly fantastic elements as Paprika moves through them, in them, and on them, becoming momentarily defined by them only to transcend them altogether. When she enters the Moonlight Seven billboard, she acquires the clothing and posture of the figure that preceded her, but her restlessness spurs her onward, into another billboard and another performed identity. With motion as the status quo, the film orients through disorientation, incarnating divine confusion. Origins unexplained, identity, not lost, is displaced, subject to formation and reformation.

The employment of this specific type of destabilizing confusion is typical of the films of Kon Satoshi. In the last ten years, Kon, a member of the prominent Madhouse Animation Studio, has emerged as one of Japan’s premiere directors, releasing four feature-length animated films (*Perfect Blue* in 1998, *Millennium Actress* in 2001, *Tokyo Godfathers* in 2003, and most recently *Paprika* in 2006), and one television series, 2004’s *Paranoia Agent*. Previously, he wrote the screenplay for *Magnetic Rose*, one of three short films that comprised Otomo Katsuhiro’s *Memories* (1995). Beginning with *Magnetic Rose*, Kon’s films have attracted attention from scholars, critics, industry insiders, and fans alike and earned widespread commercial success, appearing regularly at film festivals and on cable television. In his introduction to *The Illusion of Life II: More Essays on Animation*, Alan Cholodenko says, “Kon is increasingly emerging as one of contemporary Japan’s most significant animators” (12-13). Susan J. Napier, in her introduction to *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle*, adds, “Perhaps the most important new director whom I was
able to touch on [...] is Kon Satoshi” (XVII). The impetuses for Napier and Cholodenko’s comments lie in Kon’s virtuosic displays of technique, the controversial material around which his films often revolve, and the atmosphere of vertiginous confusion that I diagnosed earlier. His films have focused upon the hardships endured by the homeless population of Tokyo, the phenomenal and somewhat horrifying popularity of idols in contemporary Japanese popular culture, and the slow decay of the domestic film industry, among other issues.

Despite the great commercial and critical successes of his films, few scholars have yet begun to write about Kon or his works in the English language. Tom Mes, the co-founder of Midnight Eye, a compendium of reviews of Japanese movies and interviews of Japanese directors, interviewed the director in 2001, becoming the first Western critic to directly engage him. 2001 also marked the publication of Susan J. Napier’s Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke, the first full-length scholarly work to devote itself to an analysis of anime. While Napier did not explore any of Kon’s four feature-length films within either this book or her revised second edition, Anime: From Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle, both editions credited Kon in their analysis of Magnetic Rose. More recently, Kon has begun to receive more attention from English language critics. Melek Ortabasi has used Millennium Actress as a case study for both cultural translatability and educational pedagogy. Napier has very recently published a separate article within Steven T. Brown’s Cinema Anime in which she analyzes several of Kon’s films1 through the lenses of performance.

1 She focuses specifically on Magnetic Rose, Perfect Blue, and Millennium Actress. She included a one paragraph synopsis of Tokyo Godfathers and could not address Paprika due to her contribution’s release date.
Specifically, she is interested in the manners in which the personae of Mima, Chiyoko, and the female phantasm in *Magnetic Rose* are constructed under the effects of the male gaze. She ultimately concludes, “Looking at Kon’s oeuvre overall, it seems safe to suggest that Kon’s work, while initially seeming to revolve around the male gaze, actually undermines that gaze by showing its restrictiveness and negativity” (40).

While Napier explores the construction of characters from a literary background in her article, Meg Rickards, a film critic and screenwriter, investigates several of the formal techniques that Kon used in *Perfect Blue* in her essay, “Screening Interiority: Drawing on the Animated Dreams of Satoshi Kon’s Perfect Blue.” While many manuals on filmmaking have urged their readers to steer clear of dream sequences, viewed as often unavoidably trite, she believes that *Perfect Blue* challenges this maxim through an intentional ambiguity that challenges the audience’s perception of reality. She says, “There are no cross-fades, dissolves or establishing shots to link scenes with different locations or time settings, or to convey that we are entering dream territory. […] We are frequently cued in retrospect as to the dream status of a scene via shots of Mima awakening” (6). She believes that *Perfect Blue* can be used as a case study to “counter pedagogical warnings against the use of cinematic dreams” (18). In sum, Rickards’ article dissects the manner in which Kon cultivated this conflation of reality and unreality through a film studies perspective.

---

2 Kon himself has confirmed an interest in exploring their intersection, saying, “For an outsider, the dreams and the film within a film are easy to separate from the real world. But for the person who is experiencing them, everything is real. I wanted to describe that kind of situation, so I applied it in *Perfect Blue*” (Mes).
While I fully appreciate the labors of Mes and Ortabasi and respect the meticulous yet lucid arguments that both Napier and Rickards have proffered, I believe that their respective perspectives limit the scopes of their works. The first three view Kon’s works as cultural productions and analyze them with the theoretical tools that such an approach avails. Rickards, on the other hand, views Perfect Blue as a film, and she analyzes it accordingly. However, none of these critics have evaluated Kon’s works as either specifically animated texts or as products of a distinct Japanese anime industry. I will emphasize those distinctions because I believe that several key formal characteristics of anime outside the parameters of live action film inform the development of animated characters, the exposition of animated worlds, and the method of audience reception. In other words, anime has its own protocols, and I will endeavor here to interpret Kon’s works as a product of those protocols.

These protocols are a direct product of anime’s history as a medium. Anime refers to a style of animation that emerged in the 1960’s and has in the past twenty years experienced a worldwide boom in popularity, and it possesses several formal features that preclude it from synonymous analysis with either traditional films or Western, Walt Disney-style animation. Many Westerners, having grown up watching Walt Disney films, have come to expect fluidity of motion and logical narrative progression, characteristics synonymous with the studio in part because they reflect Disney’s personal aims. “Even though Disney dealt with what was a predominantly abstract, non-realist form, […] he wanted animated figures to move like real figures and be informed by plausible motivation” (Wells 23). Japanese animation, which
began with Tezuka’s *Astro Boy*, has largely defied this convention, sometimes
admittedly unintentionally, in the process ultimately creating a new aesthetic system.
Because of limited budgets in the early days of serial production on television,
animators could not afford to replicate the fluidity of *Snow White* or *Bambi*. They
instead drew far fewer frames and relied on elaborate camera tricks, producing works
somewhat resembling manga, Japanese comics, transposed onto the television
screen.\(^3\) For example, one practice that continues to dominate the industry even today
is the simulation of motion by pulling completed cels across the surface of a multi-
planar camera. To emphasize character reactions to pivotal events, many animators
will leave one still shot of a character’s face on the screen for periods of up to several
seconds, inconceivable to devotees of Disney movies or Warner Brothers cartoons.
As time passed, studios received greater funding for their projects, but such money
was usually allocated towards ever-increasing detail within individual cels. The
practices of the early days of limited animation remained in place.

The formal effects of this continuum were twofold. First, camera tricks,
however clever, inevitably create distortions within the shot. As a character onscreen
moves towards a structure, the structure increases in size, but one cannot
simultaneously increase the size of that structure and accordingly the size of
background objects (trees or other houses) while maintaining the size of the
foreground character without incurring logical problems.\(^4\) Secondly, with heavily
detailed images remaining onscreen for multiple seconds, objects other than the

---

\(^3\) See Thomas Lamarre’s “From animation to anime” for a succinct history of the
anime industry’s development.

\(^4\) Thomas Lamarre focuses on this line of inquiry in “The Multiplanar Image.”
performing characters vie for the viewer’s attention. Rather than merely watching Bambi frolic, one notes the representation of a frolicking deer as well as the trees and rocks surrounding him, among various other elements. The result of these two effects is a new methodology for creating and viewing, one in which “no element within the image is more important than any other element” (Lamarre "The Multiplanar Image" 136). In other words, the image itself, rather than the subject within it, achieves primacy in the eyes of the viewer.

Murakami Takeshi, a prominent Japanese art critic, has labeled this primacy of image, “Superflat.” For him, however, the term superflat does not merely express traits exclusive to anime, or even exclusive to art. Rather, he believes that society, customs, and culture, in sum the whole of contemporary Japanese life, “are extremely two-dimensional” (Superflat 5). In this statement, he implies that the primacy of image that dominates anime has extended its reign into the sphere of contemporary lifestyle. The subject is no longer evaluated as a solitary subject, and objects no longer stand for merely themselves. Rather, each subject and each object becomes a component within a larger system of images and obeys the logic of that system. Murakami does not offer any definitive evaluation of the possible outcomes of these changes, but he does proffer both hopes and fears. He says, “In it [superflat], however, one can see the budding saplings of a new future” (Superflat 25). Elsewhere, he adds that many anime series and films have attempted to develop an understanding of the effects of Japan’s defeat upon its citizens ("Impotence" 66). Murakami’s fear takes form in the shape of the otaku, a social group oft-maligned for their social ineptitude and reclusive tendencies. Unable to realize the importance that
Murakami locates in anime, the signified meaning within anime, “the *otaku* pour all of their energy into the *anime* and *otaku* worlds” ("Impotence" 62, his emphasis). They obsess over the image of anime, a practice that Murakami associates with impotence and passivity. For Murakami, impotence and passivity each carry several important connotations. Both categories imply a visible lack of agency, a lack of control over one’s own life, and a resignation to inferiority within the worldwide network of power. He ties Japan to impotence through its submission in the aftermath of World War II to American authority.

Murakami’s arguments, though at times farfetched, raise numerous important questions. Does the formal primacy of image characteristic of so many anime films and television series apply to Japanese life in general? Secondly, what formal connection, if any, does anime specifically have with passivity or impotence? Due to the scope of my own project, I will shy away from analyzing contemporary society as a whole, distill those questions, and finally redirect them towards Kon’s films. Does the formal primacy of image characteristic of so many anime films and television appear thematically within his four films? If so, does it manifest a formal or thematic link to either impotence or passivity? The discussion of impotence and passivity raises a question of outcomes that squarely challenges extant constructions of subjectivity. Simply, in a world where image has attained primacy, what options does a subject have?

Murakami waffles on the outcomes of a superflat society, but French theorist Guy Debord diagnoses a similar state of affairs in his conception of the spectacle. He argues that the proliferation of media created a phenomenon which, “all that once was
directly lived has become mere representation” (*Society of the Spectacle* 12).\(^5\)

Ultimately, he believed that a spectacular society would accomplish three ends. First, it would preserve the existing injustices of a system in which rich and greedy capitalists dominated the interests of the mythical proletariat. Secondly, image projected through the spectacle would achieve a level of primacy. Finally, that primacy would render all inhabitants of the spectacle passive subjects to the dominant power of the hierarchy, slaves both at work and at home. Despite this seemingly dire state of affairs, Debord, inspired by the then-vibrant French political scene, believed that a unified proletariat movement could successfully overthrow the existing power structure and at last introduce an ideal state of three-dimensional and active life (Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Turn* 92-94).

Though he recognized many of the same symptoms of the primacy of image, fellow Frenchman Jean Baudrillard rejected Debord’s idea and instead hypothesized the existence of the hyperreal, a state in which images and half-truths reproduce each other until the image or half-truth itself is accorded the status of the real, thereby eradicating any objective distinction of reality from illusion.\(^6\) Once the hyperreal is

---

\(^5\) Debord first published his *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 as a reaction against the growing influence of media upon the minds of his countrymen. Debord and his comrades, the Situationists, attempted to develop a reformulation of classical Marxism that accommodated the development of a prominent media industry. The Situationist agenda was part of a wider campaign against the establishment helmed by several groups of ambitious young French university students. The spectacle, to Debord, signified an attempt by the ruling powers to extend its reach beyond the realm of the workday and into the sphere of general social life (29). Use value and exchange value had both been superseded by representation or ideology made material.

\(^6\) Baudrillard was formerly a member of the Situationist movement, and many of his early works strongly endorse the Situationist agenda. Since the hyperreal was
realized, he states explicitly that no corrective action can be taken; the modern
opposition of reality and unreality cannot be restored. He says, “It is no longer a
question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that
the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (12-13). In other
words, only the illusion of reality can be preserved. The key quality that
differentiates the hyperreal from the spectacle lies in the former’s fatalism; the two in
fact provide far different options for their inhabitants. Once the hyperreal is realized,
every aspect of life becomes empty of signification, empty of meaning, devoid of
authenticity.

These two theorists’ insistence on the primacy of media and image in their
assessments of a contemporary culture echo the conclusions that Murakami reached
in Superflat. The three theories’ similar points, when viewed together, advance what I
will call an aesthetic of surface. This aesthetic of surface refers to the guiding logic
that I believe governs the animated films of Kon Satoshi. Questioning the
construction of the subject, it foregrounds the features of animation that compose
animated characters: their lack of origins, their lack of interiority, and their ability to
transgress the quotidian physics that overarch the mode of live action filmmaking. It
furthermore invokes a logic in which all information is received and absorbed in a
deepthless space devoid of interiority or layers. Characters and audience members
have the choices of acceptance and rejection, but they do not have a third choice to
probe deeper. Without the third option, ascertaining truth becomes nearly impossible.

devolved over a decade after the spectacle, one can view it as an update of the
former for a slightly different era, an era that had already witnessed the collapse of
the student movements that energized Debord’s theories.
An impenetrable climate of constant confusion emerges, only to coalesce under the principles of a new aesthetic, the aforementioned aesthetic of surface.

In chapter one, I will explore the formal characteristics of the animated figure and analyze how these formal characteristics manifest themselves in the aesthetic of surface of Kon’s films. After establishing this manifestation, it will begin two case studies of doubling within *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika*, questioning how doubling, which conventionally troubles and disturbs classically constructed subjects, interacts with animated characters. Chapter two is a bipartite whole that examines the methods that Kon uses to invoke his aesthetic of surface. The first section focuses on the narrative techniques that he employs while the second examines his formal techniques, focusing on editing and the development or destabilization of continuous causality. Chapter three fixates on the already hinted at confusing climaxes of *Perfect Blue* and *Tokyo Godfathers*. If Kon invokes an aesthetic of surface, then what options does he supply to the characters that live within it?

The answer to that final question, I believe, represents Kon’s greatest contribution to his medium. The scholars whose works I discuss are excellent diagnosticians of an aesthetic of surface, but they never tailored their theories to account for the specific features of animated characters. I believe that Kon’s films ultimately proffer a visionary attempt to theorize how to advance conceptions of the subject beyond their present through the ambiguous existences of animated characters.
Chapter I – *Persons in the Aesthetic of Surface*

In animation, the shape, size, color, costume, style, and voice of the animated figure can change. It can bend and twist in manners that defy conventional physics. It can change so often that it defies classification as any one thing or person, perpetually nebulous. It can fragment, multiply, or divide itself, appearing as several instances of itself or allowing one part of its body to stand in for the entirety. Whatever the animated character is, it is not static, and it is not fixed. I will begin this chapter by further developing the properties that govern the formation of the animated character. Afterwards, I will examine how Kon’s reinterprets the classic literary technique of doubling within *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika* through those properties.

*Properties of the animated figure*

Fundamental to audiences’ perception of any medium, animated, live, or otherwise, is an understanding of the figures that they view. They acquire certain information about what they are watching through those texts’ relations to their own experiences, but clever filmmaking can also disrupt or destabilize those processes of information reception. This section will analyze, beginning with the more familiar live action, the manners in which audiences receive information from and about the characters they view.

Viewers of Kurosawa’s epic *The Seven Samurai* might not remember the character of Kikuchiyo, but, assuming any familiarity with Japanese film, they will
definitely remember that one character, in fact Kikuchiyo, was played by Mifune Toshihiro, one of the most visible movie stars of Japanese cinema’s golden age and a prolific personality in Kurosawa’s films. While the other samurai exhibited the finesse and quiet reserve inseparable from contemporary stereotypes, Mifune’s character alone emanated brash intensity. In both word and deed unrestrained, his sheer ardor captured the audience’s attention, and audience and samurai alike mourned his death, both in spite of and because of his flaws, his atypical ferocity. The intensity that marked this performance, instead of singularly characterizing Mifune’s portrayal of Kikuchiyo, characterized instead the myriad roles that Mifune undertook during the 40’s, 50’s, and 60’s. As a samurai in Yojimbo or The Hidden Fortress, a warlord in Throne of Blood, a businessman in High and Low, or a detective in Stray Dog, Mifune developed a trademark onscreen personality defined by ferocity and moral incertitude. Viewers attending Mifune films thus entered with expectations that he would act a certain way, that he would say what he thought, do as he wanted, and perhaps fret over all of it later. The human body becomes an anchor that moors personalities to images, providing those otherwise abstract concepts concrete and relatively stable forms. The movie star persona of Mifune derives existence from its sometimes symbiotic, sometimes parasitic relationship with its host. Meaning is endowed from above, from outside the actor, and actors frequently experience difficulties when they attempt to change that meaning, the concordant side effect of typecasting. In other words, the term “anchor” in this context possesses a dual sense; it moors, but it also binds and limits.
Animation, due to its nature as a manmade or artificial medium, requires more time and labor to produce and cannot capture action as it occurs and reproduce it on a one-to-one basis. It cannot archive. This factor renders animation inutile for the purposes of recounting the days’ events or broadcasting the feats of sports teams, but this very limitation effectively liberates the medium to explore a host of other possibilities. Unable to record, animation must create, must make something new. It can only represent live action anchors through likeness and parody. The logic of each animated text is thus unbeholden to the unitary physics or icons that dominate live action. It is created and then encoded within the image, meaning that each animated text is not only free to establish its own logic but free thereafter to re-establish logic. Animators possess the capability to alter not only the overarching logic of the text but component parts within a shot. Animation could hypothetically represent two characters within the same shot experiencing different gravities, different air qualities, or even different locations. Every aspect of the world and characters of an animated text opens itself to play, to innovation. If the audience of anime, per Murakami, absorbs the totality of the shot, then that audience could theoretically absorb several different sets of physics, several different animation styles, or several different causalities simultaneously. Such potential lead Paul Wells to declare, “The animated body frequently becomes a fluid form which, even when it closely adheres to the codes of realism […] still exhibits an instability when scrutinized at the level of ideological coherence” (189). Simply, animation, by its very nature, lacks the stable anchors intrinsic to live action.
When this freedom is applied to the animated figure, conventional notions of subjectivity become moot. That is, no inner workings exist to supply characters with either a conscious or an unconscious. Without the body of a star like Mifune, they possess only the characteristics represented or else only the sum of the characteristics previously represented and maintained. Identity and function are established and re-established shot by shot, on the face of the image.

Walt Disney’s 1992 blockbuster *Aladdin* supplies one easily understood example of this image-based identity. The movie’s structure is frankly rather simple; it chronicles a turning point in the maturation of its protagonist and namesake, Aladdin. Like many other adventure movies, the plot drives Aladdin into yet more complicated social situations and yet more perilous predicaments, and the processes of overcoming these obstacles, often accomplished with or accompanied by catchy musical numbers, eventually yields him the privilege of betrothing the sultan’s daughter, Jasmine. The plot’s skeleton is rather generic and the costuming is quite staid. Aladdin sports the same garb, an undersized open-breasted purple vest matched with patched white pants and a tiny cylindrical purple hat, for most of its duration, and the other characters largely follow his example. Nonetheless, it is precisely the manipulation of these simple garments that facilitates Aladdin’s development and maturation. After befriending a genie, the genie, on request, turns Aladdin into a prince, transforming his meager rags into proper regal attire of a new color scheme that flashes much less skin. Functioning as mere camouflage or costume from a narrative perspective, the change in wardrobe is a formal change of Aladdin’s animated figure and corresponds to the creation of Aladdin’s new identity as the
charismatic Prince Ali. The new persona allows him to gain access to the palace and
befriend Jasmine, but the new identity ultimately proves untenable. Only after losing
his power over the genie and regressing to his original imaged status does he gain the
power and insight necessary to vanquish his sorcerer nemesis. Afterwards, the sultan
permits Jasmine to marry whomever she desires, Aladdin, and the film ends with a
shot of the couple on a magic carpet, sporting new clothes appropriate for a romantic
flight through the night sky. Aladdin’s clothes, now indisputably regal, retain the
approximate color scheme and style of his original ensemble. An open-breasted
purple vest now billows into a cape, and his formerly patched white pants are now
resplendent. His new hat is much bigger than before. Aladdin’s transformations can
thus be summarized: 1) establishment as an impoverished but slick and streetwise
delinquent clothed in tatters; 2) establishment as a prince completely different in
style, color scheme, and bearing from the earlier Aladdin; 3) reestablishment as a
resourceful delinquent, again in tatters; 4) establishment as a prince consort,
reconciled with his origins as demonstrated by his garb. Each of these changes to
Aladdin’s animated figure serves a narrative function, and each change reestablishes
Aladdin’s identity.

In the light of the affects of visual transformation on Aladdin, other
observations arise. Perhaps Fred Flintstone, Homer Simpson, and Elmer Fudd have
maintained such consistent wardrobes throughout the course of their runs on
television to assure viewers of their enduring and ineffaceable familiarity with these
iconic characters. Consistency itself becomes conspicuous. Conversely, Tetsuo’s
monstrous metamorphoses in Akira (1988) do not confirm merely the destabilization
of his thoughts and ideas; they hint at the total destabilization of his humanity. In
*Mind Game* (2004), God appears as a perpetually changing figure whose shape,
animation style, and color scheme is in perpetual flux. Naturally, because each
animated text does cohere according to its own logic, exceptions to these guiding
principles do exist, but the importance of visual change must not be underestimated.
Animated characters and their identities are not stable unless designed to be.
Otherwise, composed of only composed of images and sounds, they float, free to
signify anything.

*The animated figure and doubling*

Having discussed the principles that govern the construction of animated
figures, I will turn to Kon’s films and examine how his use of doubling relies on,
advances, and destabilizes the identities of animated characters within his aesthetic of
surface. Briefly, doubling, according to Sigmund Freud, are “characters who are to
be considered identical because they look alike” (210). Freud wrote more further on
the subject, and other notable scholars have since greatly elaborated on his ideas, but
this basic description itself supplies an adequate working definition. Doubling is
foremost concerned with characters and their appearances.

In *Perfect Blue*, Kirigoe Mima, an idol and a former member of a three-girl
trio dubbed Cham, in conjunction with her business managers, Tadakoro and Rumi,
decides to capitalize upon her recent individual fame by ending her singing career and
focusing on earning her fortune as a television actress. Mima lands a role on “Double
Bind,” an edgy detective drama, but the demands of the show and her own nostalgia
for her time in Cham lead her to doubt her decision and abilities. Accompanying this
decline in self-confidence is her discovery of a website known as “Mima’s Room,”
which publishes uncannily familiar accounts of her day-to-day actions.
Simultaneously, numerous threats and acts of violence begin to menace her directly
and directly or indirectly begin to affect everyone around her. The responsibility for
these negative stimuli appears to rest on the drooping shoulders of Me-mania, a
maladjusted male crazed with his idol, but his efforts comprise only one portion of
Mima’s problems. Threats, misinformation she receives from “Mima’s Room,” the
sheer pressures of stardom, and nostalgia for a renounced past produce in Mima
depression and, more importantly, an inability to discern her present circumstances
from her dreams and her role as a television character.

These feelings manifest themselves in Mima’s lived experience as a doubled
version of herself who still sports a Cham uniform. This alternate Mima first
materializes after her counterpart completes a simulated, though nonetheless
traumatic, rape scene on the set of “Double Bind.” As Mima attempts to shout her
unhappiness through her racking sobs on her bed, her double appears on the surface
of a computer and says, “See, didn’t I tell you? Is that the job that what [sic] you
wanted? That was the PITS!” (*Perfect Blue* 39:00).
Mima tosses a pillow at the screen, temporarily
banishing her reflected double, but she soon
reappears, less than three minutes later, again on the
surface of the computer screen. The dialogue
proceeds as follows:
Mima: "This... This isn't true! I'm not writing any of this!"
Doubled Mima: "Of course! The REAL Mima is writing this! I know that
deep down in your heart you want to be a pop idol again."
Mima: "No! I'm no longer..."
Doubled Mima: "No longer what? Oh yeah, you're no longer a pop idol.
You're a filthy woman now. Nobody likes idols with tarnished
reputations!"

After Mima shouts her objections, the shot briefly fades away from Mima’s
confrontation with her double to present the audience with a crowd of faceless
silhouettes, their arms raised, chanting Mima’s name
in unison. That scene too fades, replaced by a
washed-out shot of a giddily smiling Mima, replete in
her full Cham uniform, bounding towards the camera.
As the dialogue recommences, the Cham uniform-
clad Mima continues bounding, growing larger until it transcends the borders of the
shot and steps into the real world. One shot holds both Mimas, presently face to face.

  Doubled Mima: “You can't step back into that spotlight now... But that's
  alright [sic]. I'm here. From now on, I'll be the in the light, and you'll be
  in the shadows.”
  Mima: “What are you saying!? Who in the world are you!?"
  Doubled Mima: “Nobody likes you anymore. You're tarnished!
  FILTHY!”
  Mima: “Stop! Stop it! I am not tarnished!” (*Perfect Blue* 39:50-40:13)

As Mima shouts this last line of dialogue, her doubled counterpart steps towards the
window and leaps through it. Mima shouts at her to wait and runs after her, colliding
with a glass sliding door that reflects her startled countenance back at her. After
briefly hesitating, she heaves it open and chases her double onto the porch, only to
watch her bound from streetlight to streetlight, until she finally fades out of sight.
I believe that Kon’s usage of doubling, as represented in scenes like this one, illustrates a drastic departure from the standard conception of doubles. For Fruekd, the double is one instance of the uncanny, which he describes as “something which is familiar and old – established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (217). The construction of the double dates back to the infantile period of development, and it reappears to adults under duress, during conflicts between the subjecting forces of society and the impulses of the id. In a purely Freudian interpretation, the double thus becomes a binary phenomenon. In her book on twins, Julia de Nooy rejects this strict reading, saying, “The meaning of twins (or doubles, or mirrors, or shadows [...]), like all meaning, is situation specific” (3). In other words, she seeks to liberate the meanings that doubles can offer from a purely psychoanalytic context. Still, I believe that that even de Nooy’s more flexible ideas fail in one crucial area: the origins of those doubles. While Freud identifies doubling as an instance of the uncanny, a psychological phenomenon, de Nooy focuses her book primarily on tropes of twins. Her ideas necessarily presuppose separate origins and separate identities for each of the subjects she analyzes. However confused, two persons exist.

Presuppositions of origins line any text that discusses doubling or copying. Walter Benjamin envisions in mechanical reproduction the ability to “destroy the unique phenomenon of an instance” (216) by substituting “a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (215), but his very vocabulary betrays his reliance upon the original. For a copy or reproduction to exist, an original with definite origins must precede it. His theory liberates only through distribution. Hillel Schwartz’s Culture
of the Copy perpetuates many of the preconceptions of its predecessors. He employs a combination of this psychological framework and Benjamin’s notions of authenticity and reproduction to examine other phenomena of doubling and likeness as diverse as plagiarism, animal mimicry of human speech and conduct, and doppelgangers. His book is well researched and logically captivating, but its reliance upon biological processes and the vocabulary of reproduction ultimately renders even this commendable volume unfortunately unfit for the purposes of my project.

The problem that I thus wish to pose is a problem of origins. Where exactly does Mima’s double come from? Is the she a delusion or else a symptom of a wholly interior psychological disorder, as per Freud? Is she a copy of Mima? Is she an impostor?

At first glance, one might be tempted to answer the first question with a vehement affirmative. After all, the doubled Mima does first materialize after Mima undergoes a traumatic rape experience, the simulated rape. Moreover, she does not at first exhibit any of the physicality of a material person. After taunting Mima, she bounds through a closed glass door and afterwards from lamppost to lamppost before finally disappearing into thin air. In a separate scene, Mima chases her double through the halls of a radio station and out into a street (Perfect Blue 50:48-52:15). Throughout the chase, she remains acutely aware of her double’s loping bounds, but those around her heed only her frenzied progress. Because no mechanism of copying

---

7 Schwartz begins by illustrating the effects of the death of a physical twin on the psyche of the developed birthed individual. He believes that the double, the “vanished twin” is something natural that humans seek, represented by, among other things, various cases of doubling. This idea leads him to assert, for example, that, “impostors persevere because any fear they may have of being discovered is overshadowed by their dread of being alone” (84).
or reproduction appears anywhere in the film, the second option can immediately be discounted. Imposture, although perhaps accounting for aspects of Rumi’s impersonation of Mima at the movie’s finale, fails to account for the double’s ability to circumvent conventional physics. Analyzing only this data, one could thus easily assert that the double was a production of Mima’s mind, but such conclusions ignore numerous inconsistencies. Although the double first *materializes* after the rape scene, she first *appears* to Mima immediately before it, on the face of the glass of a train door (30:16). Additionally, the double does appear elsewhere, away from Mima. In a rare peek at Me-mania’s actions, he promises via e-mail to eliminate the actress who he believes has tarnished his idol’s image. As he finishes typing, the double materializes behind him while the images surrounding him voice their appreciation of his promise (48:40). A pair of possible conclusions avails. The materialization could imply collective delusion, but the protagonist shares no relationship with her stalker save as the object of his desires. Else, it could imply that anyone possesses the ability to create a new Mima, but the methodology of creation then becomes suspect. Why could only Mima, Me-mania, and perhaps Rumi manufacture new versions of her? Theoretically, the principle of creation should then extend indefinitely.

To answer this problem, I would like to briefly address the scene of simulated rape in “Double Bind.” Both Kon’s viewers and the film’s characters understand explicitly that the rape is not real. No penetration occurs. The performer and the
rowdy audience are all paid actors, and the performer himself apologizes for the
closeness of his face in between takes. Additionally, the scene actually has to be
reshot because the initial take’s speed fails to satisfy the drama’s director. Without a
doubt, rape in the most literal sense does not occur. Nonetheless, in performing a
rape scene, Mima does subject her body to a literal male body and again to the more
abstractly male gaze of the camera. The trauma of that subjection reverberates within
her afterwards with the impact of a real rape. A new line of logic is revealed. It is
neither the nature nor the origin of something that produces effects; the point of
consequence is the point of interpretation. Arguably, the rape scene only becomes
significant to Mima and her managers because of the context they viewed it in.
Before deciding to become an actress, Mima was an idol with a pure image.

I believe that Mima’s double must be treated in a similar manner as the
simulated rape scene. When the Cham uniform-clad double enters into Mima’s room
from inside a medium and through a washed-out shot, she immediately insists upon
not merely her authenticity as a real Mima but on her authenticity as the real Mima;
she verbally and visually claims Mima’s history as her own and severs her counterpart’s link to it by
insisting upon her status as a “filthy woman” unfit to be an idol. This latter visual element recalls my
previous discussion of the animated figure. Perfect Blue commences with Mima’s final performance as a member of Cham, and this
sequence is the only section in the entire film in which Mima herself dons her
uniform. Throughout the rest of its duration, she wears civilian clothes and attempts
to distance herself visually from her former profession, removing even the Cham poster from the wall atop her bed. No mere artifact, her uniform materially established her as a member of Cham, and her separation from the image of her formerly uniformed self effectively looses her bond to that past. Mima is an actress, and she wears clothes that negatively distinguish her non-membership in the group. By donning Mima’s Cham uniform and her guise, the wearer becomes the subject of both Mima’s former identity and her forsaken history. Regardless of her origin, her menace is real.

On the theoretical level, *Perfect Blue* pushes doubling away from an emphasis on copying, production, or reproduction. It heralds not the destruction of the original, but instead assaults the very idea of the privileged precedent of the original. It threatens not a Benjamin-esque destruction of aura but instead the nullification of a privileged history founded in experience.

*Paprika* employs a peculiar type of mismatched doubling that toys with both the conventions of the technique and its previous usage in *Perfect Blue*. Briefly, *Paprika* is an unabashed effort to challenge the boundaries of conventional perceptions of reality, dreams, and technology. At an elite biotechnology firm in Tokyo, Chiba (the black-haired businesswoman into whom Paprika transforms), Tokita (a rotund genius), and Shima (an aged doctor who heads the team) have been developing the DC Mini, a medical device whose technology would enable doctors to view the dreams of their patients, despite the protests of their firm’s wheelchair-bound chairman, who believes in a strict separation of dream from reality. At the beginning of the film, someone steals from the firm’s laboratory a prototype of the
DC Mini and begins to use it as a weapon of terror, inserting delusional dreams into the minds of still awake humans, creating a type of insanity that often ends in violent self-inflicted injuries. The three scientists, together with Paprika, attempt to discover the identity of the terrorist while Konakawa attempts to discover the meaning of his own dreams. The objects of these two searches begin to coincide at the film’s finale, a moment when the boundaries between dream and reality disintegrate altogether under the terrorist’s ill-guided hand.

As Paprika’s opening credits illustrate so effectively, the two female protagonists of the film possess a mysterious relationship; they perhaps share the same body, or else they might be different personalities existing within one person. The opening sequence renders it impossible for the audience to discern any set truth. Regardless, by the film’s finale, the audience can make several resolute conclusions. Chiba and Paprika do not directly correspond to the framework of consciousness and unconsciousness or the opposition of superego and id. Although Paprika does appear more playful, the characters both obey certain rules of interaction, and they furthermore both share several of the same goals. Moreover, both remain explicitly cognizant of the other’s doings. Conversely, Paprika and Chiba are not two sides of the same character. Aside from their physical differences in appearance, Konakawa and the scientists at Chiba’s firm have different relationships and different modes of interaction with each woman. Neither woman is the interior or real version or otherwise the shell of her counterpart. Because of Chiba’s prim demeanor, her job as a scientist, and her
realistic manner of interacting with her colleagues, some viewers might consider Paprika as Chiba’s inner personality loosed at night, but events later in the movie complicate matters immensely. In his dream stronghold, Osanai, the chairman’s lackey, uses his arm to slice through Paprika’s body. Paprika, rather than dying or bleeding, becomes a dermis, a covering. Chiba is revealed (Paprika 63:22).

The audience receives only one tantalizing item of information about Paprika or Chiba’s background during the course of the entire film. Doctor Shima Toratarou, the lead scientist of the DC Mini project at Chiba’s firm, briefly comments to Chiba from his hospital bed that Paprika had saved him before, helping him through depression over two years ago, but neither party proffers further explanations (Paprika 22:56). By partially answering the immediate question, however, this revelation raises other lines of inquiry. How long has the DC Mini’s prototype existed? What role did Chiba or Paprika have in its initial development? If the device has existed for less than two years but Paprika has existed for more than two years, then Paprika must have been able to move in and through dreams without the aid of the device. If so, then why does Chiba use the DC Mini to connect herself to the dream world? Moreover, why does Paprika use it?8

Viewers will not be able to arrive at satisfactorily rational answers to any of these questions without subjecting the text to speculation, but this case alone does not render the text entirely incoherent; the film’s second set of doubles, Konakawa and his partner, provides a critical lens through which the previous set gains more coherence. Paprika first visits Konakawa because he is suffering from anxiety and

8 Remember that Paprika uses a DC Mini in the opening minutes of the film at Konakawa’s hotel.
recurring dreams. Within his dream, Konakawa, a detective, chases a faceless shadow through several scenes that parody movie genres, including Tarzan adventure films and spy thrillers. The chase at last ends in a hallway, the crime scene of an especially confusing open case, when the faceless man escapes through a door at the end of the hallway. At last, a disembodied voice shouts, “But what about the rest of it?” The DC Mini records the dream, and Paprika thereafter subjects the detective to a brief round of psychoanalysis, attempting to deduce the impetus of his anxiety from an interpretation of his dream (Paprika 0:00-3:25). Unable to identify the faceless man, the film’s progression thereafter follows two narrative threads. First, Chiba, Paprika, and their associates attempt to find the thief of the DC Mini prototype. At the same time, Konakawa seeks the identity of the faceless man in his dream.

This second storyline comes to its head as Konakawa idles in an online bar. As the bartenders prod him for information, Konakawa reveals that he was once an amateur filmmaker. A high school student, he worked with a friend who possessed characteristics that he lacked. Unable to commit to film school himself, his friend enrolled but died of an undisclosed sickness before classes started. Recalling that friend, Konakawa says, “He was the other me” (Paprika 62:09). The English translation of the dialogue is adequate to convey a superficial meaning, but the original Japanese (“Mou hitori no ore datta.”) offers another perspective. The grammatical pattern, “Mou hitori,” can be understood as “the other,” but it also functions as implying “one more.” This latter interpretation hints at a multiplicity that echoes not only Paprika’s peculiar relationship with Chiba but also the literal contents of Konakawa’s recurring dream. In the first segment of it, Konakawa, in a
cage in the center of a circus tent, faces an onrush of instances of different people all wearing his face. Up until this revelation, viewers most likely did not even recognize the presence of a second set of doubles, but multiplicity nonetheless manifests.

Konakawa’s double achieves importance retroactively. Unlike the case of Chiba and Paprika, the film does briefly probe Konakawa’s history, but it does so only to push the viewers further forward. After both his initial dream and the revelation of his double, a disembodied voice identifiable as that of the double shouts, as mentioned earlier, “But what about the rest?” The Japanese “Tsuzuki wa dou surun da yo” could also be more directly translated as “what comes next?” In either case, both translations, unwilling to dwell upon the past, immediately refocus the characters and the audience on the events of the future. Further elaboration of Konakawa’s relationship with his friend never occurs. No exact meaning of “mou hitori” is ever revealed.

I believe that this emphasis on futures can be used to explain the unclear generation of the double in *Paprika*. In the limited text of the film, origins need not necessarily be revealed because the film’s narrative logic always pushes forward and onward. Chiba and her colleagues push forward to perfect the DC Mini. With Paprika, they together endeavor to discover the identity of the thief. Only because of their forward motion do they conflict with the motivations of the firm’s chairman. On the other hand, Konakawa must look forward to find the criminal. Even
regression ultimately pushes him forward again. Further exploration of origins, except by happenstance, would only hinder the film’s drive.

In sum, doubling in *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika* defies the technique’s conventions, shifting its emphasis away from the rationally constructed self of Western philosophy and away from the processes of production and reproduction described by Benjamin and Schwartz. Like the properties of animated figures, mere existence, however insecure or tenuous, is enough to yield results. Proof of existence, so often defined in theory as a definite history, as definite origins, becomes entirely moot. Liberated formally and thematically, these characters are free to cohere under their own logic, a logic of perpetual establishment and reestablishment without explanation, an aesthetic of surface.
Chapter II – Cultivating the Aesthetic of Surface

In the preceding chapter, I examined the destabilization of the animated character within Kon Satoshi’s films, but the qualities enumerated there can be understood retroactively as one component of a greater program. This chapter explores several of the narrative and formal techniques that Kon employs in his development of an aesthetic of surface. To attain an understanding of how exactly he deploys his techniques and why they achieve such great success, I will first broach a very basic discussion of classical continuity editing, a style of filmmaking that has emerged as the international norm. The ensuing sections, utilizing all of Kon’s films in turn, will continue the previous chapter’s discussion of animated identity and focus upon first the narrative means and secondly the formal means through which Kon subverts the established norms of filmmaking to develop the environments of his films’ worlds.

Before commencing that discussion, however, I first define several of the conventions that serve as Kon’s points of departure. David Bordwell, one of America’s eminent film scholars, has spent his lengthy career elucidating the structures that govern films. Specifically, he examines the manners in which narrative interests intersect with formal elements (camera angles, editing, lighting, and so forth) to produce an internal logic, to produce causality or lack thereof. His study commences with an exploration of the Hollywood conventions of the first half of the twentieth century. As motion pictures became a lucrative business, major studios defined certain narrative and stylistic rules for directors to follow so that the
audience could easily understand the final product and that the movie could thereafter turn a relatively risk-free profit. These rules, when obeyed, combined to produce transparency and definite causality wherein actors – anchors – acted according to their demonstrated motivations and events proceeded without confusing elisions of time or incoherent camera angles. Over the subsequent decades, special effects technologies improved dramatically, directors began to edit films faster (meaning that each shot lasted for less time), and shots themselves became tighter (showing less of actors’ bodies and environments), but Bordwell dismisses the notion that such stylistic changes indicated a departure from the classical Hollywood style. “Far from rejecting traditional continuity in the name of fragmentation and incoherence, the new style amounts to an intensification of established techniques” (Hollywood 120). Because each shot lasts for less time and included less of the actor and the set, shots must be arranged with ever increasing care. With fewer reference points, viewers would otherwise become confused. Intensified continuity simultaneously demonstrates a nearly infantile dependence on motivational logic to produce closure. The characters must act according to their wills and desires, and they must achieve a new status quo by the end of the film. The goal of major motion picture studios and conventional cinema is thus the production of an ultimately easily digestible reality, dominated, regardless of genre, by a definite causality.

Intensified continuity relies on a style of moviemaking known as continuity editing that emerged during America’s studio era. Continuity editing prescribes special methods of filmmaking that allows filmmakers to carry continuity across
shots, to unite through technical division. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson helpfully supplies a definition of this style’s spatial component:

“In the continuity style, the space of a scene is constructed along what is called variously ‘the axis of action,’ ‘the center line,’ or the ‘180° line.’ The scene’s action [...] is assumed to project along a straight line. [...] The camera work and mise-en-scene in each shot will be manipulated to establish and reiterate the 180° space” (164).

The benefits of this practice are immediately tangible:

“The viewer always knows where the characters are in relation to one another and to the setting. More important, the viewer always knows where he or she is with respect to the story action. The space of the scene, cleanly and unambiguously unfolded, does not jar or disorient” (Bordwell and Thompson 165-166, their emphasis).

This spatial component of continuity editing is paired with a temporal component that maintains an easily understandable narrative progression. Bordwell and Thompson note:

“If an action carries across the cut, the space and time are assumed to be continuous from shot to shot. [...] The viewer must recognize that time has passed. For this task the continuity style has built up a varied repertory of devices. Most often, dissolves, fades, or wipes are used to indicate an ellipsis between shots” (172-173).

To produce continuity without creating confusion through disunity, viewers must first understand their spatial positions relative to the items on the set. Secondly, they must understand the temporal relation of one event to the next.

Bordwell’s intensified continuity generates causality that audience members are expected to misidentify as reality. It compounds within itself, reaching ever more concentrated forms, urging ever faster cutting, ever tighter shots, and ever more unified storylines. It is manipulative, creating the illusion of unbroken causality and logical coherence that defies the “real world” it seeks to capture. In the last pages of
his book, Bordwell remarks, “the style asks us to become connoisseurs of pictorial contrivance” (188). It dissolves difference. “Even Third World airlines program Hollywood comedies, so that a Thai Air jet en route to India, packed with Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, screen *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* as the airlines’ idea of ‘universal’ fare” (Shohat and Stam 148). Most importantly, in the midst of intensified continuity, viewers seldom experience the confusion or vertigo that the style creates except in hindsight. They identify represented reality. In the eye of a proverbial tornado, the effects of intensified continuity appear benign.

These rules produce a transparent and rational causality in line with governance by Debord and Baudrillard’s media theories. However, if intensified continuity demonstrates characteristics of the hyperreal, then Kon’s films are an invocation of the hyperreal’s wake, confusing and vertiginous. Through unorthodox use of orthodox filmmaking techniques, Kon destabilizes the construction of reality and causality on both narrative and formal levels, evoking an extremely fragile aesthetic of surface.

**Narrative Techniques**

Three key narrative techniques of destabilization that line Kon’s films are what I shall call misinformation, disinformation, and misperception. Misinforming, for the purposes of my project, is the act of providing false information. It is not necessarily characterized by intention or design, although deliberate lies are included within its scope. It can occur incidentally, and it can occur extra-morally, lodged in the expressions and exaggerations that compose everyday conversation. In contrast to
this rather broad definition, disinformation is much more limited. Debord proffered this definition in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*:

“Disinformation would not be simple negation of a fact which suits the authorities, or the simple negation of a fact which does not suit them: that is called psychosis. Unlike the straightforward lie, disinformation must inevitably contain a degree of truth but one deliberately manipulated by an artful enemy. [...] In essence, disinformation would be a travesty of the truth” (45).

Disinformation’s specificity thus lies in its intent and in its insistence upon the partial revelation of truth. This latter aspect proves especially useful in the cultivation of an aesthetic of the spectacle or hyperreal. Upon receiving information, one faces the choices of acceptance or rejection, but acceptance becomes a much more acceptable option if some portion of it is known to be true. Disinformation conflates truth and lie, yielding a state of affairs in which deducing truth, much less Truth, becomes nearly impossible. Both of these techniques combine to generate misperceptions as a matter of course, but misperception exists, too, as an independent technique of active narration. In other words, misperception can either be a result of misinformation and disinformation, a rational conclusion based on false data, or it can be the beginning of another chain of misinformation, a false conclusion based on empirically true data. In either case, misperceptions are produced when characters do not make entirely rational choices in line with personal motivations and present emotions based on verifiable data.

The regularity of the manifestation of these techniques gives rise to a question of outcomes. In anime, exaggerated reactions such as falling over in response to an especially bad joke produce no immediately apparent detrimental effects. Viewers will assuredly understand the significance of the exaggeration; the meaning is
guaranteed by an implicit pact. Two problems arise. The first is the advent of an excess of signification, a state of affairs in which signs have run rampant. Assigning the proper meaning to the proper sign becomes increasingly difficult. Misperceptions can occur. Because so many falsehoods are extra-moral and because so much information is not entirely accurate, unreliable information is often accepted as truth, and that misperception, a result of misinformation, disinformation, or misperception itself, serves as the foundation of something larger. Even seemingly incidental events can produce far-reaching outcomes. In short, every detail must be analyzed. Every instance of misinformation, disinformation, or misperception contributes to the composition of a greater aesthetic.

Less dependent on clever editing, special effects, or science fiction than Kon’s other films, *Tokyo Godfathers* is replete with instances of these three techniques. The film centers on three homeless people living together in an imagined familial relation in Tokyo’s largest city. Despite their disparate ages, experiences, and attitudes, each of the godfathers shared two common traits: a tendency towards outbursts of explosive vulgarity and an inability to reconcile their present selves with the events of the past. Gin, a middle-aged male with a weakness for alcohol, had left his family years before and established a reputation for toughness among the Tokyo homeless community. Hana is a transvestite with an appreciation for Western literature, Christianity, and show tunes. Miyuki, the youngest, is a former high school student who ran away from her family after seriously injuring her father and presently straddles the line between contempt for her natural family and desire for reunification with them. On Christmas Eve, this mismatched trio finds a baby abandoned in a trash
heap whom they dub “Kiyoko” and thereafter sets out on a mission to return this baby to her natural parents, sure that some kind of horrible mistake had been made. Over the course of the film’s duration, coincidence builds on coincidence, and the trio stumbles through several often-humorous misadventures. *Tokyo Godfathers* uses a more realistic mode of character and environmental representation than either of Kon’s previous two films, but it too climaxes in a crisis that pits the godfathers against an abductor they had unwittingly identified as Kiyoko’s mother.

When the homeless trio first stumbles upon the baby girl, Kiyoko, they bring her back to their ramshackle tent and procure her formula. As Hana struggles to feed her, Gin deftly takes her in his arms and swiftly accomplishes the task, an action contrary to his gruff appearance. At that time, he relays to Hana the first version of his history, in which he identifies himself as a former bike racer, forced away from his family due to a fixed race gone awry, an instance of blatant misinformation. The audience briefly glimpses a static shot of a triumphant Gin astride a bicycle, an image that authenticates this impression of him and endears both Hana and the audience to his plight (13:10). However, subsequent revelations soon subvert both these altered impressions of him and the image-authenticated history Gin had earlier manufactured. Gin devolves from a racer into a bike shop owner and from the victim of a scheme gone bad whose family had all died unfortunate deaths into a victim of his own vices and finally into an unsympathetic sod who abandoned his family, unwilling to pay the price for his failures. Unlike this brief summary, the revelations of Gin’s past
conduct do not occur in one fell swoop. Rather, each individual alteration corresponds to an encounter that effectively forces that alteration out of him. Tending to Kyoko’s needs requires an explanation. Meeting the yakuza to whom he still owed money generates another. Unexpectedly reuniting with his grown-up daughter at the hospital where Hana received treatment later in the movie forces the revelation of the last points. In between each of these haphazard meetings, both the audience and the characters of *Tokyo Godfathers* re-ground their assumptions about Gin as layers of misinformation and disinformation crumble.

As the plot careens from one misadventure to the next, the characters likewise discover more information about Kiyoko’s parents. At the bottom of the bag in which Kiyoko was found lies a key, a key that corresponds to a locker at a train station. Inside that locker is another bag, in which the trio finds both a business card and a photo of an apparently happy couple standing in front of a house (18:50). Assuming that the two people in the photo were Kiyoko’s parents, the godfathers cannot guess why Kiyoko was abandoned, but they now have a less abstract goal and a more concrete sense of whom they were searching for. After preventing a businessman from being crushed by his own car, they attend his son’s wedding, there meeting the yakuza who caused Gin such grief. The yakuza had actually employed Kiyoko’s mother as a club dancer, and, after a string of lengthy misadventures, the trio eventually passes a night in the burnout interior of Kiyoko’s parents’ pictured home. Not until the next day do they identify their location. After this instance, audience
and character perceptions of the couple change numerous times as more information becomes available. The trio’s misadventures are frankly too lengthy to count, but the ultimate irony of their search is that Kiyoko was not the pictured couple’s child. The woman in the photograph, Nichizawa Sachiko, had stolen the baby from the maternity ward after her own pregnancy failed in a desperate attempt to restore her marriage to respectability. Their quest has ultimately been driven by compounded misperceptions.

The eventual revelation of Gin’s misdeeds and Sachiko’s even more reprehensible abduction threaten to eviscerate the “feel good” atmosphere that the film otherwise cultivates in spite of the social status of its main characters. The city of Tokyo is revealed to be a den of hellions, miscreants, and victims of circumstance, an all too often unhappy place where vice dons a biker’s helmet and selfishness a mother’s smile. In this light, a world dominated by misinformation, devoid of the evils and hardships that accompany truth, might even be preferable. It might even be wondrous. At the start of the film, Gin and Hana attend a Christmas Eve service at a Christian soup kitchen. In line for food, Hana asks for a second portion from her server, saying, “Better give me a little more. After all, I’m eating for two“ (Tokyo Godfathers 1:47). Several scenes later, the server, on an escalator in a train station, sees Hana walking with Kiyoko in her hands and gasps in open-mouthed awe, “A miracle” (Tokyo Godfathers 17:32)! No mere comedic afterthought, this scene illustrates the potential susceptibility of the beholden to the effects of Kon’s narrative techniques. Though the audience may laugh at her misperception, the misperception itself is an honest one, a not entirely illogical reaction to the available information.
Suspending laughter long enough to think unveils a new methodology for evaluating misperceptions. The godfathers, too, commit honest errors of misperception, errors that stem from their well-intentioned zeal. Rather than labeling their conduct “misadventures” or “exploits,” “needlessly dangerous risks” is more apt. The trio never successfully locates the baby’s natural parents. Instead, the baby spends an egregious amount of time exposed to the bitter temperatures of Tokyo’s winter. A South American assassin briefly takes her hostage, and the trio ultimately dumps her back into the arms of her abductor, now suicidal. Their efforts are entirely futile, and that futility acquires a potentially lethal character thanks to the misperceptions of her guardians, her “godfathers.”

While *Tokyo Godfathers* sanitizes to preserve its atmosphere, events in *Perfect Blue* fully articulate the potentially deadly or debilitating effects of misinformation, disinformation, and misperception. Disinformation manifests itself in the latter film in Rumi’s publication of the website known as “Mima’s Room.” This online journal buoys its authenticity by providing vivid descriptions of Mima’s routine as well as photos too candid to appear on anything but a personal website. With truths of a sort established, the journal’s subsequent claims of unhappiness and disenchantment gain credence among its audience. Of its principle readers, Me-mania (the stalker) takes the journal’s contents to be gospel, and his assumption of these plaints to be true stokes his already unhealthy fantasies into an inferno of obsessive zealotry. He murders because he obeys, obeys because he misperceives, misperceives because he misidentifies, and misidentifies because has been misinformed.
Mima, on the other hand, at first loudly protests many of its contents to be incorrect. As disillusionment with her role and depression over leaving Cham settle in, her unvoiced sentiments begin to mirror those of the diarist, and she too commits an error of misperception of the highest degree. Lacan’s theory articulates one of the most infamous examples of the potential dangers of misperception. According to his argument, when infants of six to eighteen months, still unable to properly control their limbs, approach mirrors and recognize themselves, they identify themselves as the figures in the mirrors. “The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation […] and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour [sic] of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development” (Lacan 4). An incidental moment of everyday mundanity, occurring at an age few can remember, directly dictates the direction of development of the adult human. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Lacan’s argument, the sheer potential of even the most apparently innocuous event to produce long-term effects is terrifying. Echoing Lacan’s mirror stage, she identifies herself with the other, with Rumi in the persona of the diarist, thereby alienating herself from herself. At last, Mima muses, “But maybe she is more like me than myself” (Perfect Blue 53:16), and self-alienation through misidentification is complete. In sum, disinformation threatens Mima both physically, through the violence of Me-mania, and mentally, through self-alienation triggered by a tragic misidentification. Ironically, misinformation and misperception compel one victim to harm another.

In neither film are these narrative techniques confined solely within the narrative. Character misperceptions are effects of limited information, and the
viewing audience never receives the privilege of an omniscient perspective. Frankly, they receive little more information than the protagonists themselves. They never learn, for instance, the true identities of Kiyoko’s parents until the godfathers themselves do. Moreover, some scenes in the film actually function as disinformation targeted at the audience members themselves. Kon grants the audience limited access to several scenes that demonstrate Me-mania’s obsession for Mima. For example, after nude photos of her appear in a popular magazine, Me-mania scours Tokyo for copies, buying or taking all that he can find (*Perfect Blue* 47:39). Access to these scenes, however, does not augment the audience’s powers of discernment. Conversely, the audience focuses on Me-mania as Mima’s most dangerous threat, and they accordingly perceive many of their early actions as an intricate game of cat and mouse. Of course, Me-mania is in fact dangerous. He does attempt to rape and kill her, but such a black and white judgment ignores circumstances that mitigate the intent of Me-mania’s actions; he has been baited by disinformation as much as Mima. Both of them had been manipulated since the start of the film by Rumi, one of the protagonist’s closest friends and the sole vocal defender of her integrity. The unexpected betrayal by such a trusted ally momentarily cripples Mima and the viewing audience, not so much because of its source but because another character had appeared so dangerous. *Perfect Blue* demonstrates that having more data on which to base a judgment is no guarantee of accuracy or truth. Unreliable information is real, it is omnipresent, and, however unreal its contents, it can produce definitively hazardous consequences.
These examples detail only a meager portion of the instances of misinformation, disinformation, and misperception present in Tokyo Godfathers and Perfect Blue, and numerous other instances dot Millennium Actress and Paprika. Time and space limitations necessarily limit this project from covering all of them. However, even this pittance of scenes articulates several features of Kon’s aesthetic of surface. First, the utilization of these techniques founds realities entirely empty of reality. Viewers must question whether empirically true information can even exist. Secondly, within Kon’s films, “truth” appears to be steeped in lived experience, a necessarily subjective category. Unverifiable due to the effects of misinformation and disinformation, seeking “truth” becomes a process of perceiving, or more often misperceiving. If these three techniques invoke the hyperreal or spectacle by producing an aesthetic of surface, then they achieve their effects through their problematization of even the simplest actions of daily life.

**Formal Techniques**

Kon’s films successfully cultivate an aesthetic of surface by matching the aforementioned narrative techniques to similarly destabilizing formal techniques. Since Kon’s films are anime and not conventional live action cinema, they do not follow many conventions of representation, but they do still adhere to many rules of form. Editing remains a necessity. Kon understands these principles of continuity construction that I identified earlier, and his films consciously disobey them. They destabilize, intentionally exposing the artifice of plot construction and forcing the viewers to question the veracity of the events they view. As previously discussed,
Meg Rickards’ “Screening Interiority: Drawing on the Animated Dreams of Satoshi Kon’s Perfect Blue” focuses on the formal manner in which Kon deploys dream sequences to blur the line between dreams and reality. Rickards identifies two characteristics in particular that facilitate this conflation. First, “there are no cross-fades, dissolves, or establishing shots to link scenes with different locations or time settings, or to convey that we are entering dream territory” (6). Secondly, “We are frequently cued in retrospect as to the dream status of a scene via shots of Mima awakening” (6). These two characteristics indisputably serve Rickards’ argument well, but I wish to add several more features to complement her two points.

As mentioned before, the parties responsible for these activities are an obsessive stalker, Me- mania, and Mima’s own business partner, Rumi. The combined effects of Mima’s own depression, their threats, and the misinformation she receives from “Mima’s Room” result in Mima’s depression and, more importantly, an inability to discern her reality from her dreams and her role as a television character. The impetus for Mima’s first awakening is the buzz of a doorbell. Rumi arrives, bringing cake, and she attempts to make small conversation with her friend. Recognizing Mima’s poor mood, she begins to speak about “Mima’s Room” and advises her not to visit the site again. Mima responds by wondering
aloud if perhaps the Mima represented by the website might be more real than she herself. As she speaks these lines, Kon manipulates the multi-planar camera to slide a close-cropped shot of Mima’s talking face across the screen to the right while sliding Rumi’s head through the background outside the edge of the frame to the left (Perfect Blue 53:29-53:45). As Mima finishes her line, a hand lands on her shoulder, and she asks, “Rumi?” Rather than continuing the conversation, Kon cuts on that action directly into a new locale, one of the on-location sets of “Double Bind.”

By cutting on and through action, this one transition raises several important issues. First, it forces the viewer to question how many events actually took place. For example, Mima could have used one of her stage lines in her private conversation with Rumi, only to be reminded of the conversation a la déjà vu later. In that case, the cut would signify an elision of some unknown period of time, but if only one event took place, which of those events was real? After watching Mima wake up for the first time, we might consider Mima’s meeting with Rumi real, but after watching the interruption of Mima’s reverie on the set of “Double Bind,” we might suspect the entirety of the previous segment, from before she even woke up, to be unreal, a mere daydream. More problematic, the interrupted “Double Bind” scene concludes with a dissolve to Mima waking up again, in the exactly the same clothes and the same position as before. Naturally, Kon recycled the animation frame for frame. Shelving the question of Kon’s literal reproduction of the animation, the audience again faces questions of causality and time elision. Rickards has already performed an excellent job in analyzing the problematic aspects of these dream sequences, but I would like to add that, in addition to problematizing the dream-real boundary, Kon’s editing can
create problems on the boundary between two “real” events. Cutting from Mima’s room to the set of “Double Bind” produces as much confusion as dissolving from “Double Bind” into a sudden arousal. In this manner, reality itself becomes as malleable as dreams.

The manner in which Kon uses editing to distort reality in Perfect Blue becomes even more complicated when he incorporates other dimensions, other media, into that equation. After a photographer who took scandalous photos of Mima winds up dead, Kon cuts from Mima’s reaction to the news to the studio set of “Double Bind” (Perfect Blue 58:58). This cut is “merely” an indefinite elision of time, and the following scenes’ causality proceeds more or less
independently from that of the former. On set, Mima’s next scripted scene
commences with the aftermath of her character’s murder of another character with a
screwdriver, likewise the weapon of choice of Me-mania and Rumi. As she mounts
the stage, the cadaver suddenly rights himself and its bloody eye sockets gaze back
through the shot at the viewing audience. The scene dissolves into white, and Mima
wakes up again in her room, but as the camera pans around her, Ochiai Eri, the
leading actress of “Double Bind,” appears and begins to ask Mima questions about
her identity. Mima confirms her identity as herself, Mima, an actress, and the camera
cuts away from the duo. On the other side of a police glass mirror, the camera settles
onto two male actors playing detectives. They say that “Mima” is a fake identity, an
idea that Eri confirms when she walks out of the interview room. She says that
“Mima” is a persona that another girl created to convince herself that she had not
been raped in the past. After these exchanges, a director’s shout cuts the taping, and
the camera zooms out to show a segment of “Double Bind” rewinding on a small
television screen. After rewinding, the segment plays back diagnostically, with Mima
and Eri this time using the names of the television show’s characters.

Critical viewers must question which of the above actions actually occurred
and what, if any, elisions occurred. If the cadaver’s animation occurred in “reality,”
as opposed to “dream,” what did Mima do afterwards? Else, if the cadaver never
moved, merely the product of a dream to be understood after the fact, was that scene
ever taped? Moreover, was Mima ever in Mima’s room? Was that mere imagination,
or did the transition to the first possibly taped segment signify elision? Since the
scene that I analyzed earlier in which Kon slid Rumi’s face off screen problematized

50
the preceding shot’s mere existence, the audience cannot be sure of this cut either. Did the first taped segment in which Mima and Eri spoke of Mima as a “Double Bind” character ever occur, in any continuity, or does that shot sequence instead reveal metaphorically Mima’s state of mind? On the other hand, since they did see a tape diagnostically rewound, what diastic impetus spurred that action? Most radically, could Mima’s out-of-character dialogue with Eri be interpreted as the only coherent segment of the entire film? In other words, can Eri’s explanation of “Mima” as a persona created by a sexually abused girl unable to cope with her circumstances lead us to a vastly disparate truth that underlies the whole film? *Perfect Blue* makes no effort to provide answers to any of these causal questions. The dearth of causality that the editing engenders prevents the audience from discerning one “true” path of continuity. Real elements, dream elements, media (in the form of a television program), and elements generally considered obviously unreal (the cadaver rising to life) combine to conflate, and the result is confusion, a chaotic breakdown of the reality principle essential to continuity editing. This scene likely contains the most radical breakdown of reality in the entire film, and it fittingly precedes the climax of the film by a period of only two minutes. Had such a sequence occurred earlier in the film, *Perfect Blue*’s structure would not have supported it, and the audience would have considered this breakdown mere nonsense. However, after having reality slowly broken down over the course of an hour on both narrative and structural levels, the effacement of virtually all semblance of causality and coherence achieves a level of abstract clarity wherein the audience recognizes the nearly shattered fragility of Mima’s mind and their own fragile grasp of “reality” in its most general sense.
Clever cutting in *Millennium Actress* challenges the assumption of continuous time progression, crisscrossing narratives with meta-narratives to produce nearly indescribable confusion. During the heyday of the Japanese film industry, the fictional character of Fujiwara Chiyoko had dominated the silver screen, embodying both during World War II and well through the end of Japan’s occupation the ideal young Japanese woman, modern and independent but accessible and virile. After roughly two decades of regular work, she abruptly ended her career, secluding herself in a remote hideaway and shunning the press. The film commences three decades later. A film executive of mediocre success, Tachibana Genya, uses a relic from Chiyoko’s past, an old key that formerly belonged to her, to secure an interview with her as part of his commemorative documentary shoot. At Chiyoko’s home, he and his cameraman, Ida, film her reminiscences, but the reminiscences soon gain material form. Genya and Ida are plunged into the midst of Chiyoko’s memories, but the memories have combined with the characters that Chiyoko played to render actress indistinguishable from her role and figures of her memories inseparable from recurring co-stars. Throughout its duration, *Millennium Actress*’s narrative never pauses to explain; it only pushes onwards, towards an ultimate crisis of memory.

For example, lost in a film/memory wherein Chiyoko and Eiko battle as ninjas, Eiko’s chain trips Chiyoko, sends her hurtling towards the forest floor, but Chiyoko never reaches it. Kon cuts before she lands, cutting through the impact to a much different scene in which a now kimono-clad Chiyoko protests her lover’s fate to

---

9 Chiyoko’s background bears several similarities to that of real-life Japanese actress Hara Setsuko. After experiencing twenty years of commercial success, Hara, too, abandoned the film industry and secluded herself. Unlike Chiyoko, she never emerged to explain the reasons for her abrupt exit.
Eiko, now the handler of several geisha (*Millennium Actress* 38:00). Through this cut, Kon elides narrative time, historical time, and location. It operates on the background level of Chiyoko’s memories, rushing the audience and the characters from one film to the next, and on the represented historical level, flashing forward hundreds of years. Lastly, he suddenly shifts the location of action from a forest to a city. The disorientation caused by this scene’s lone cut is staggering. Yet again, Genya’s cameraman voices the audience’s confusion: “Now we’re in Kyoto… faster than a speeding bullet train. Another age, too” (*Millennium Actress* 37:26).

No mere isolated instance, Kon consistently utilizes jarring editing of this sort to transition from film/memory to film/memory without often returning to the site of the storytelling, Chiyoko’s secluded home. As a result, the audience and the cameraman intended to voice their confusion lose track of one scene’s relation to the next, on temporal, spatial, and biographical levels. As discussed before, Chiyoko’s memories of filming merge with film and individual memory to produce a nearly incomprehensible pastiche whose logic I cannot begin to adequately explain. However, this state of confusion produces one especially important byproduct. Fades, wipes, and dissolves, though conventionally used to indicate elided time, because of the infrequency of their usage, instead gain the function of opening extraspacial pockets of alternate causality. After a scene of film/memory of Chiyoko in postwar Tokyo, ravaged by firebombs, Chiyoko collapses. As Genya and the cameraman rush towards her, the scene dissolves into black. Against a black background, a number of translucent looms appear. So too does the spectral old woman who first appeared in the samurai segment of Chiyoko’s film/memory.
(Millennium Actress 52:55). Earlier, the old woman appeared to possess a role as a character within a film, but her subsequent appearance matches no narrative function. The space and time that she inhabits exist outside even the questionable causality that the narrative otherwise cultivates. Is this scene a dream? Does only the audience view it, or does Chiyoko join the viewership from another perspective? Because of the appearance of her animated figure, her previous establishment as an evil witch of some sort, and her unorthodox situation outside the causality of the plot, this old woman becomes a menace composed of pure signification. Under Kon’s hand, techniques of conventional continuity editing designed to assure coherence instead yield abstract confusion.
In *Paprika*, too, sophisticated computer animation allows Kon to turn even multi-layered backgrounds into malleable single-layer surfaces that buck and bulge under the pressures of characters’ actions, providing him an additional weapon to seamlessly assault continuity. One such scene occurs during Chiba and her coworkers’ unauthorized search of another coworker’s apartment. Because one of their valuable DC Mini dream viewing devices has been stolen, the researchers and technicians who support its development attempt to connect clues to discern the identity of the thief. One of their coworkers, Himuro, had not appeared at work for several days, so they inferred that he might be responsible for its absence. During the course of the search, Chiba becomes separated from Tokita and Osanai, her two male colleagues. She proceeds down a ladder in the floor of Himuro’s closet into a tunnel into another world. Through that tunnel, she walks into a fairground and there espies a doll that uncannily resembles her coworker. As she moves towards it, she jumps a railing, and the railing suddenly buckles under her. The railing, formerly moored to solid earth, instead reveals its
mooring to Himuro’s balcony, and Chiba begins to hurtle down towards the street. Only at the last instant does Osanai’s hand extend to save her (*Paprika* 17:50-18:05).

The buckling of background in this scene is incredibly provocative because it wholly disturbs continuity and causality while refraining from cutting. While continuity editing unites through division and Kon’s editing elsewhere jars through the unity of divided segments, this scene divides and disturbs in the midst of unity, in spite of unity, and, most importantly, because of unity. It underscores the fragility of reality and reemphasizes the potential dangers of perceived reality. Moreover, it also rearticulates a problem originally posed by Mima’s sudden awakenings in *Perfect Blue*. The jolt of destabilization occurs upon reentry into reality, not upon entry into fantasy, dream, or delusion. In other words, phenomena of the hyperreal, the spectacle, or even misperception can only be recognized in retrospect. After all, the homeless trio of *Tokyo Godfathers* never begins to recognize the error fundamental to their search until completing it, until after they deposit their ward in the arms of a suicidal abductor.

Kon’s employment of establishing shots embodies the combination of the narrative techniques of misinformation, disinformation, and misperception with the formal techniques described above, thereby completing his aesthetic of surface. Conventionally, establishing shots are used to orient the audience to the space in which subsequent actions will unfold. Accordingly, establishing shots are often the widest shots in a scene, providing the spatial cues that set up the 180° line and facilitating tighter camera angles and the shot/reverse-shot sequences that dominate dialogue in so many films. As expected, Kon often thwarts these conventions.
First, he often commences with exceptionally narrow shots and then expands the view by either cutting to a wider shot or zooming out to expose more of the frame. Early in the film, Mima returns to her apartment by train. The establishing shot is a shot of the glass of a train door. Pausing for a moment, the camera thereafter widens its gaze to first take in Mima’s reflection and thereafter Mima herself (*Perfect Blue* 2:59). So early in the film, this brief scene exhibits none of the overt intensity of later events, but it does exert its own effects. By establishing and then expanding, the shot demonstrates the existence of bodies and objects exterior to knowledge and perception. It forms an apt combination with cutting; while cutting elides, widening precludes. Both techniques problematicize perception’s reliability.

Secondly, Kon often establishes on and through media and memory. In lieu of orienting the audience with material bodies, locations, or objects, he establishes abstractly on the very surfaces of objects responsible for misinformation, disinformation, and misperception. Two examples will suffice. In *Millennium Actress*, Chiyoko’s convoluted recollections of her life are often established through shots of magazine covers, memorabilia, and media. Early in the interview, after returning briefly to Genya’s present, the camera refocuses on a magazine cover of Chiyoko as a young actress before plunging in media res into the ninja film I utilized in a previous example (*Millennium Actress* 33:02). This establishing shot does not
necessarily mislead the audience, but it does not establish much either. The audience understands little of the motivations of the characters within that remembered film and none of the circumstances of its production. Without that information, they cannot discern whether the scene they view reflects the events of the film, Chiyoko’s own history, or a lived present. This seemingly benign establishing shot is a model example of disinformation. However, establishing shots can produce far more damaging or destabilizing effects. When Gin of *Tokyo Godfathers* first describes his past as a bicycle racer, his past is receives additional support from a static shot of Gin in uniform astride a bicycle. Memory and history are founded on the face of an image, creating the misperception that I described earlier. This misperception is driven by misinformation, and this misinformation’s claims to veracity stem from an image, from an establishing shot.

The state of affairs produced by the confluence of these narrative and formal techniques recommends suspicion by default. It echoes the pessimism of Baudrillard when he says, “Everywhere, in no matter what domain … one enters into simulation, and thus into absolute manipulation” (31). “The real dies only to be reborn, artificially resurrected within a system of signs” (Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Turn* 102). It threatens to manifest a perfectly closed aesthetic of surface.
Chapter III – *The Aesthetic of Non-Revealing*

In chapters one and two, I focused on the development of the characters of Kon’s films and the environments in which they reside. In these confused worlds, characters float freely, unmoored to stable identities and unable to often discern even simple truths. Their only vector is acceleration, ever forward. Origins undefined, the films focus instead on outcomes. This acceleration aptly peaks at the respective films’ climaxes, yielding intricate scenes of frenetic action and incredibly complicated visual movement. In each film, the climax carries it to the limits of its logic, threatening the effacement of the protagonists while conversely promising the revelation of – for once – unclouded and undiluted truth. These moments of revelation deserve special attention because they challenge the aesthetic of surface that I have until this juncture described. Accordingly, in this chapter, I will analyze the outcomes of the climaxes and denouements of *Perfect Blue* and *Tokyo Godfathers*, situating them both within and beyond the general scholarship of Debord and Baudrillard that has informed this project’s vocabulary.

My analysis of *Perfect Blue* will commence from the point at which my analysis in chapter III ended, directly after an incredibly confusing sequence wherein Eri diagnosed first Mima and then Mima’s character from “Double Bind” as suffering from multiple personality disorder. Immediately after the diagnosis, a director diegetically cuts the shot, and the cast and crew of the television drama begin to celebrate the conclusion of the series. The camera spins around Mima, sitting in the midst of her coworkers and then cuts to a later shot in which Mima and her managers
exchange pleasantries with the producer. All of them leave, and the protagonist begins to make her way to her dressing room to change. On the way there, she briefly greets Eri, as Eri passes down the hallway, Me-mania approaches her from the opposite direction. As he moves to grab her, the film cuts to a shot of Mima’s managers standing in an exterior parking lot. They briefly discuss the series’ finale, and Tadakoro prepares to leave. The camera cuts back to Mima’s plight. Me-mania has apprehended her and taken her to the set of “Double Bind.” He forces her to the ground beneath him, rips open her blouse, and begins to explain to her that he is committing these actions to protect his conception of the real Mima. In a moment of carelessness, Mima kicks her assailant off of her and runs around the room. A scuffle ensues, and Mima is finally knocked against a piece of the set, which buckles under her weight. Me-mania positions himself above her again, eagerly preparing to subject Mima to an unsimulated rape, but before he can penetrate, Mima grabs a nearby hammer and crushes it against his skull. He stands and then wobbles around the set briefly before collapsing in its center.

The camera cuts to Rumi, searching for her starlet. She finds Mima leaning against the wall of a nearby corridor, her clothes a shambles. After changing her clothes, Mima hurriedly takes her manager to the scene of her near death, but Me-mania’s body is missing. Rumi offers to drive her home. Inside Rumi’s car, Mima dozes off. She awakens in her room. Rumi is in the kitchen. As she dials Tadakoro’s number, the camera cuts to an exterior location, following the sound of
his cell phone’s ringer. The camera finally locates Tadakoro. Slumped against a wall, his eyes have been gouged out in a manner similar to the film’s other victims. His body slides to the ground, thumping against that of Me-mania, similarly defiled. When the camera cuts back to Mima’s room, she stares idly into her fish tank but then realizes that all the fish are dead. Looking across the room, she notices that the CHAM poster she rolled up during the film’s opening minutes has been reaffixed to her wall. Standing up, she brushes the window’s curtains aside and looks out; trains roll past her line of vision. She is not standing in her own room. She says, “No… This isn’t my room” (70:35).

A door opens behind Mima. She turns around to see her double standing in the open doorway in a new red dress. A nearby mirror catches the double’s reflection and reveals the double’s identity: Rumi. The double maintains Mima’s form, but the mirror, in this case, reveals the truth. Rumi, in her identity of the moment, reveals that she has been controlling Me-mania’s actions and shortly thereafter lunges at Mima with a screwdriver. She pushes Mima to the ground and plunges the tool into her shoulder, drawing blood. Mima frantically grabs at her attacker’s neck, briefly causing a choking fit and a dissemblance of Rumi’s resemblance to Mima. In pain, she briefly resumes her fleshy form. Mima runs outside onto the porch, and the two begin a dangerous chase, leaping from rooftop to rooftop. In a moment of panic, Mima flails, knocking the screwdriver away, but Rumi picks up a sharply tipped umbrella and resumes the chase. The two soon tumble off a rooftop into an alley below, landing in garbage.
The chase recommences on flat ground, through the deserted alleyways of a sleeping city. In the windows of passing shops, the double’s reflection reveals Rumi’s heaving exertions. Her bulbous body cannot match the grace with which her manifest form bounds. Turning the corner onto a wider avenue, Rumi catches up with her ward and drives the umbrella’s tip into her back, again drawing blood. Mima stumbles into an alley and comes face to face with her reflection in the glass of a shop’s window. Rumi swipes at her quarry with the umbrella, erring but breaking the window’s glass, and then uses the umbrella to press Mima up against a wall, echoing the words of Mima’s previous double, “impostor” (75:00). As Rumi exerts pressure on Mima’s throat, the starlet grabs frantically at her manager’s head and pulls off a wig. The loss of the wig perturbs her immensely. She stumbles around for a few seconds before tripping, impaling herself on the broken glass of the window. Blood gushes out, but she somehow regains her footing and stumbles out of the alley and into the street, into the path of an oncoming tractor trailer. At the last instant, Mima pushes her manager out of harm’s way, saving both of them. As the protagonist stares into the rising sun, the camera cuts away to a view of the city.

The camera cuts again to a view of the same city with a much bluer sky. Time has passed. It cuts into a clinic and the camera briefly follows a pajama-clad Rumi as she scuffles across the room, holding a
bouquet of roses in her arms. While Mima, observing through glass, briefly discusses Rumi’s condition with a supervising doctor, the camera returns to Rumi. Standing in front of a mirror, her mirror image takes the form of Mima, dressed in her Cham costume. Eliding time again through a cut, the camera goes outside. As Mima passes, two nurses whisper, questioning whether the woman passing is actually the star actress. Lingering on them for a second, the camera returns to Mima, now entering her car. After turning the key of her car’s ignition, the camera’s position flips 180°, repositioning itself just over Mima’s left shoulder; only her reflection in the rearview mirror is visible. She whips off her sunglasses, focuses her eyes on the mirror, and says, “No, I’m real” (78:15). The credits roll.

The final scenes of *Perfect Blue* demonstrate several characteristics found throughout his films’ climaxes. Formally, they feature the fastest instances of cutting in the film, mismatching angles and perspectives to formally enhance jarring action. Even when Kon cannot or does not cut, he often shakes the camera during even basic movements or else slides the layers of background and foreground against each other to further simulate movement. On a narrative level, he pushes his characters and their inhabited worlds to their breaking points, threatening both physical and non-physical injury. In these last instances, he places his characters on the brink of eradication, and this position lays bare many qualities until then hidden in the film. It at last exposes his characters’ adversaries as adversaries and unveils information that his characters had sought.
In the climax of *Perfect Blue*, for example, all of Mima’s enemies finally face her, substantiating her long-held fears. Rumi’s isolation in a clinic and the nurses’ hints at Mima’s subsequent success as an actress apparently confirm Mima’s existence as a whole and complete self, liberated from the pressures, lies, and half truths that previously caused her so much anguish. When viewed in this manner, her subsequent success and apparent satisfaction with her self could be reasonably interpreted as an escape from the clutches of the diagnosed aesthetic of surface. Formerly unaware of the manipulation around her, Mima confronted the source of her manipulation and ultimately committed an incredibly daring reversal. While Rumi had sought to kill her protégé to assume her identity, Mima appears to have confirmed her own by saving the life of her ex-manager.

By reversing the countering and then reversing the aims of the system, embodied in Rumi, Mima invokes Debord’s theory of détournement, a technique of creative resistance wherein subjects within the dominant system would challenge the system through reversals of its logic. Essentially non-violent in character, this technique could be employed in a wide variety of situations, a characteristic necessary for the success of his agenda. He did not want to merely reform the oppressive structures that governed his society. Rather, he wanted to transform the quality of power over he and his comrades. Thus, language itself became a principle target of détournement. He says,

“As a proponent of the replacement of subject by predicate, following Feuerbach’s systematic practice of it, the young Marx achieved the most cogent use of this *insurrectional* style: thus the philosophy of poverty became the poverty of philosophy. The device of *détournement* restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed
into respectable truths – or, in other words, that have been transformed into lies” (Society of the Spectacle 144-145, his italics).

Détournement relies on two essential principles. It occurs within the existing power structures of the spectacle; change cannot arise from the actions of a party occupying an exterior position. Similarly, the technique utilizes the structures of the extant system in the hopes of subversion. The creativity this technique requires is not a creativity defined by creation of new possibilities but a creativity of expansion and alternation. Solidarity in subversion would generate power, eventually becoming strong enough to overthrow the existing structures and yield the possibilities of renewed agency and self-determination that Debord and his cohorts sought.

Using Debord’s theory to analyze Kon’s endings provides very persuasive interpretations of Kon’s films, but one recurring aspect of Perfect Blue rears itself to complicate Debord’s argument: reflection. Throughout the film and throughout this climax, reflections have served as a mechanism of establishment, reestablishment, and destabilization. Mima’s Cham uniform-clad double emerges from the surfaces of mirrors, but in the climactic chase, reflections reveal that double as false. At the clinic, a mirror conversely confirms the depth of Rumi’s personality disorder, reflecting a Mima-like figure decidedly different from the figure gazing into it. Finally, Mima professes her authenticity through a reflection in a car’s rearview mirror. Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage argues that identification with reflection is a process of self-alienation through misidentification with an other, but reflections in this film obey no such concrete logic. In Perfect Blue, the effects of reflection vary not just from one character to the next but within characters as well. Based on this evidence – or conspicuous lack thereof – the final shot in which Mima insists upon
her authenticity and her status as a whole subject cannot be used as proof that Mima has either transcended or escaped the limitations of the spectacle.

With Mima’s own statement about her authenticity in question, only Mima’s acting career could attest to personal success, but this argument, when framed within Debord’s theory of the spectacle, runs into internal contradictions. Film is one of the principle media of both the spectacle and the hyperreal, and Debord advances the following conception of media stars in *Society of the Spectacle*:

“The individual who in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom’s spotlight is in face the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others. In entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomy in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the course of things” (39).

In other words, becoming a media star inherently cannot liberate individuals from the spectacle; it plunges them into its depths and makes them into its agents. To become a star, she offers up the personality of Kirigoe Mima to the public, denying that persona through camouflage to create a semblance of privacy. In other words, the very fact of her success simultaneously forces her to further deny and hide. Rather than freeing Mima from the spectacle, the evidence of her success as an actress in fact plunges her further into it, evincing a further fractured identity that she can only dare to confirm within the lonely solitude of her car’s cabin.

This outcome moreover recolors Mima’s decision to save Rumi from the oncoming truck, previously interpreted as an act of détournement. As a result of that decision, Rumi has been confined to a clinic. Her existence is permanently fractured, unable to claim subjecthood because she cannot identify herself as herself or her origins as her own and unable to subsume another’s identity. She dwells under
perpetual surveillance, subject to the medical examinations of attending physician and psychologists. Mima saved her former manager’s life only to deprive her of any semblance of power, turning into a slave of the existing hierarchy.

The last shred of evidence still supporting the transgression of the spectacle is the revelation of truth. Before, during, and after the final assaults, several confusing components of the film finally become clear; the audience learns the identities of Mima’s tormentors. Because *Perfect Blue* meticulously shrouds the identities of these individuals throughout its duration, this new information does illuminate several causal problems. However, innumerable other questions remain unexplained. What generated the appearance of Mima’s first double? Exactly who killed the screenwriter of “Double Bind” and the photographer who specialized in scandalous pictures? When Mima charged Me-mania with those crimes, he refrained from answering. Revisiting a causal problem previously discussed in chapter III, in what line of causality did Eri’s diagnosis of Mima herself suffering from multiple personality disorder occur? The audience does understand more quantitatively, and they may therefore consider this marginally heightened clarity to be indicative of truth, but this new information cannot address profoundly troubling causal problems. These revelations answer only a few select questions, but they nonetheless engender acceptance. This quality remarkably resembles a technique of destabilization that I discussed earlier: disinformation, the act of feeding half-truths to yield a desired response. Instead of freeing its characters from a logic of surface, the détournement that manifests at the finale of *Perfect Blue* plunges viewers and characters alike headfirst back into that logic, preventing them from ever ascertaining its dangers.
Perfect Blue’s theme of non-liberating reversal is repeated in Tokyo Godfathers, where Kon, in this instance, problematizes the sanctity of the natural family as a refuge of agency. The climax of this film begins shortly after Hana and Miyuki “return” Kiyoko to Sachiko, the woman who had in fact abducted the baby from her natural parents. Moments after bidding her farewell, the duo meets up with Gin, who had earlier spoken with Sachiko’s husband and learned the nature of Kiyoko’s abandonment. Finally understanding that the woman whose path they had followed is not actually the baby’s mother, Gin, Hana, and Miyuki begin a frenetic search for her. They soon find her in a nearby playground and chase her out of the playground through a maze of neighborhood alleys. When the alleys at last reach a street, Sachiko hops into an idled delivery truck and sets off down the street, and Gin responds by commandeering a police officer’s bicycle. Meanwhile, Hana and Miyuki stumble upon the taxi of a character they met earlier, and the two prod the driver into hot pursuit. As the godfathers and their ward’s abductor continue the chase, all three vehicles barrel through intersections and accelerate to ever increasing speeds. When Gin at last reaches the side door of Sachiko’s truck, she rams the side of the truck against the wall of a tunnel, destroying Gin’s borrowed bicycle but somehow failing to dislodge the determined godfather. As the truck exits the tunnel, Gin rips the door open, and Sachiko frantically spins the steering wheel to her left, sending it careening through the front of building. In the last instant before the crash, Gin grabs Kiyoko and jumps away from the impact, rolling until he collapses. Kiyoko is safe.

Sachiko, miraculously unharmed, limps away from the crashed truck towards Kyoko. As Hana, Miyuki, and the taxi driver approach the scene, Sachiko scoops up
the infant and enters an elevator. Miyuki enters the stairwell and begins to scale it rapidly, discarding her heavy winter clothing in the process. Hana and Gin enter an elevator after Sachiko, but Miyuki continues the chase most directly, casting off more articles of clothing on her way towards the building’s top. When Sachiko finally stumbles out onto the roof, the shot acquires an overhead perspective; a news helicopter has arrived at the scene and is broadcasting footage of the chase to television sets around the city. As Sachiko’s delinquent husband watches the footage, the shot drops to focus on his hands. Underneath them are photographs of happier times. Tears drop. Back on the roof, Sachiko scrambles onto its precipice as Miyuki confronts her, forcing her to accept responsibility for her conduct, but Sachiko responds by recounting her own miseries. Ignored by her husband, the baby that she carried in her womb represented her last hope, but that baby sadly died before it could take a single breath. Still cradling Kiyoko in her arms, she stands, turns, and states, “I want to be reborn,” as she prepares to leap to her death (83:20). A shout from below stops her. Her husband appears below, imploring her to return to him. In spite of those words, Sachiko leaps.

Miyuki catches her by her shoulders, holding on desperately while continuing her demands that Sachiko return the baby to her natural parents. As Sachiko gazes at the baby, it hushes and speaks, “I want to go home” (84:05). Sachiko continues to stare at it for a moment longer and then begins to cry. She agrees to return the baby to her parents, but as she does so, Miyuki’s grip fails, and the two begin to plummet
towards the ground. At the last instant, Gin catches hold of Miyuki’s ankles, but the baby continues to descend. Hana leaps down onto an eave and cushions the baby in her lap, but her momentum pulls her forward off of the eave and down towards the street. She grabs hold of a banner pinned against the building’s front, but the banner rips off the wall, and her descent continues unabated. Halfway to the ground, a gust of wind whips up beneath her feet, catching the banner and slowing ward and guardian’s descent to an illogically slow glide. As the baby yawns, the scene dissolves around her. Hana’s worn clothing transforms into the soft folds of her mother’s sweater.

Now in a hotel room, Kiyoko’s unnamed parents thank a detective for his diligence and then ask if they could see the three godfathers, to thank them for assisting in the return of their baby. The shot cuts to the protagonists’ hotel room. Hana and Gin, both in hospital beds, chat with a nearby Miyuki. A moment later, the door opens. The detective walks in, but stops in his tracks. The camera cuts to a close shot of Miyuki’s face, cuts back to the detective, and cuts back a final time to an even closer shot of Miyuki. She whispers, “Father…” (86:30). The camera cuts to a few quick shots of Gin, Hana, and the baby before refocusing outside the building and then zooming out. As the ending credits start to scroll, the buildings of Tokyo sway back and forth in time to the closing music.

The climax of *Tokyo Godfathers* demonstrates many of the same formal and narrative features found in *Perfect Blue*. Although not identical, the speed of Kon’s
editing increases dramatically, the main characters and their adversaries’ aims are revealed to the audience, and the finale literally arranges itself around the event of the chase. The question that the film’s conclusion ultimately poses is not a question of a successful chase but a question of the result of the chase. Because of the chase, grievances are aired, identities are bared, and three natural families are afforded the possibility of reconciliation. Kiyoko is at last reunited with her natural parents. Sachiko, her abductor, realizes through this instant of desperation that Kiyoko really does belong with someone else, destroying the imagined bond, but now faces the prospect of reunion with her previously estranged husband, who now appears to recognize some small portion of the unhappiness that he caused her. The film ends, finally, with the face-to-face meeting of Miyuki and her father, the detective. The prospect of the reunited family in this film functions as a restoration of origins, the literal sites of biological and psychical developmental, but it also promises the corresponding dissolution of imaginary familial bonds. Returned to her natural parents, the godfathers understand that they will not in the future be able to take an active part in Kiyoko’s maturation. Their baby’s name is not even Kiyoko anymore. Sachiko’s imagined maternal bond to the baby is likewise extinguished, and, with the impending reconciliation of Miyuki and her father, the imaginary family of the three godfathers itself faces the likelihood of disintegration.

The restoration of the natural family does imply a restoration of origins, but I wish to problematize that relationship by examining the manner in which the natural family as a concept is developed in the film. Miyuki’s case provides the most evidence because her persona is developed directly through her see-saw relationship
with her natural family. While *Tokyo Godfathers* does not depict any ensuing actions resulting from her final meeting with her father, this meeting is the culmination of a lengthy series of events. At the beginning of the film, Miyuki stresses in a quibble with Hana that she is not an urchin without a home, merely an urchin who does not wish to return home (4:15). The voluntarism that appears to line her decision reveals a profound discontent with her experiences in a natural family. However, her subsequent reactions reveal instead a fixation with the natural family. During her return from buying water for Kiyoko at a convenience store, she stumbles into two homeless people who were collecting books, likely to burn them as fuel. Several books tumble to the pavement. One of those books’ covers is a picture of a smiling immediate family – a father, a mother, and their child. The camera cuts away briefly to focus on Gin and Hana as the former relays to the latter his faulty history as a bicyclist, but it then returns to Miyuki, now reading the contents of the book. Inside its pages, the happy and healthy family is bathing together. On seeing these images, Miyuki bluntly spits out, “Bullshit” (12:00). However, instead of returning the book to its collectors, she places it securely in her satchel, exchanging it for two onigiri. Despite her contempt for the image of the happy family disseminated in the book, it nonetheless holds value for her, value so strong that she becomes willing to exchange food for it. This transaction reveals a startling discontinuity between speech and action.
The discontinuities in Miyuki’s character reflect her reasons for leaving her family’s home. Months earlier, she stabbed her father, infuriated by a combination of the relentless pressures the detective exerted on his daughter and the loss of the family’s pet cat, Angel, who had disappeared (40:05). Resentment of her father’s treatment of her mixes with guilt over having injured her father swirl inside the youngest godfather, preventing her from squaring to face her situation. When she sees her father on a subway train, she runs away from him as fast as she can (19:00). Later, she calls her family’s home, desperate to hear her parents’ voices but unable to speak to them, unable to say anything more than “I’m sorry” (57:15). Miyuki clearly longs for reconciliation with her family, and her narrative arc emphasizes these yearnings, gradually revealing more details about her relationship with her father, her complicated attitude towards him, and her somewhat jaded, but more often hopeful outlook towards family life in general.

Miyuki’s arc parallels and intersects with other family-based problems that recur throughout Tokyo Godfathers. Images of happy and complete families inundate and suffuse the world that the characters inhabit. The book that Miyuki picked up is merely one instance. Billboards of happy and virile families line streets (see 19:50 or 56:25 for examples). A photograph of a happy family serves as one of the trio’s only clues in locating Kiyoko’s natural family. The film moreover begins with a snippet from a Christian Christmas service, recounting the birth of Jesus of Nazareth into his natural family. While photographs and media...
invoke the image of the happy family, they also hail their viewers to both recognize and fulfill their roles in creating the happy family. The relationship between media and its viewers becomes a spectacular one in which the media reinforces and redefines the principles that its beholden value. At the same time, as discussed before, the grim realities of Tokyo subvert these images of the happy family. Gin abandoned his family, fleeing from a mountain of gambling debts and the certain vengeance of a loan shark. Sachiko and her husband, so apparently happy in their photograph, had experienced a long series of marital problems, problems that finally culminates in the abduction and abandonment that drives this film’s narrative.

Two crucial problems of logic underlie the restoration of the natural family as a means of restoring origins and surmounting the spectacle. The media surrounding these characters interpellates them as members of a whole and natural family, meaning that the restoration of the natural family is in fact also a fulfillment of the role demanded by the spectacle. More importantly, the film’s narrative has, through the unraveling of several layers of misinformation, disinformation, and misperception revealed the all too cruel realities that swirl beneath the surfaces of apparently healthy relationships. The happy family cannot establish itself as certainly happy because another line of contradictory logic precedes it. Interpreting the restoration of the natural family as a challenge to the spectacle requires viewers to ignore the logic that the film otherwise develops.

Juxtaposing *Tokyo Godfathers* against *Perfect Blue*, the semblance of a cruel formula begins to emerge. Kon incarnates an aesthetic of surface in the bodies of his films, destabilizing identity construction and causality through formal and narrative
means. When the excesses of that aesthetic reach a point of saturation, he unleashes
them in chaotic climaxes that teeter on the brink of truth, on the brink of destruction.
A semblance of truth momentarily established, the chaos ends. Brief epilogues
provide the audience closure and simulate character development, but they conversely
plunge both audience and characters alike back into that aesthetic, perhaps even more
mired in it than before because no new problem emerges to challenge the mundanity
of daily life. Without excess, the aesthetic of surface encompasses even more. The
flexibility of this aesthetic appears to manifest several of the characteristics that
Baudrillard diagnosed. Moments of truth restore the principle of reality without
eradicating the myriad layers of deceit and simulation that compose daily life. The
aesthetic bends without breaking, thereafter reincorporating the characters that
appeared to have nearly transcended it.

Writing nearly half a century after Debord, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner
sought to update their predecessor’s notions of spectacle and resistance for the
contemporary era. They argue,

“Like the industrial commodity markets that preceded it, the spectacle has
gone global with the proliferation of satellite dishes beaming Western
consumer goods, and images to all corners of the globe, subverting the
cultural traditions of many countries and producing a globalized mass
culture. […] Hence, through spectacles, the culture industry produces ever
more desire for its goods and way of life and proliferates into new arenas
and realms” (“Cybersituations” 136).

These “new arenas and realms” include, among other structures, sports and religion,
both of which presently utilize sophisticated technologies and relentless advertising to
amplify the effectiveness of their respective products and maximize potential profits.
They believe that the power of the contemporary spectacle often accumulates in such
large quantities that it produces “Megaspectacles” which “range from superhyped films like *Star Wars* […] to theme parks […] to media-generated passion plays like the OJ Simpson trial or the Clinton sex scandals” (“Cybersituations” 135). Despite the power that the spectacle has gained, Best and Kellner believe that the network of the spectacle has grown so wide that it in fact facilitates the development of solidarity, auguring promising levels of cooperation. Specifically, they argue that those in opposition to the spectacle should use recently developed technologies to create “cybersituations.”

“Producing cybersituations involves individuals engaging in activities that fulfill their own potential, further their interests, and promote oppositional activity aiming at progressive change and alternative cultural forms. This could consist of using cyberspace to advance struggles in the real world, such as a political demonstration, action, or organization. It might include the construction of a website, computer-mediated space such as chat rooms, or discussion groups that provide alternative information and culture” (“Cybersituations” 149).

They maintain Debord’s belief that the spectacle can be infiltrated from within, but their proposal modifies one crucial component. Rather than insisting upon the reversal of spectacular logic, they instead seek to harness the structures that compose the spectacle and use the power of those structures directly against it, the solution practiced by the protagonists of Kon’s films. Their strategy, which identifies weaknesses within the very excess of the spectacle, is more direct than that of their predecessor and articulates an even wider window of opportunity to achieve a positive end.

After analyzing the outcomes of these movies, I must reject the possibility of empowerment championed by Debord’s early work and subsequently reinterpreted by Best and Kellner, In my previous discussion of Baudrillard’s theories, I noted that his
hyperreal state, when achieved, allows no possibility of escape, no loopholes, and no contingencies. His world is a world of perpetual present tense, of endless inundation compounded through reproduction. Efforts to subvert such a state of affairs and find objective or verifiable truth will inevitably fail because of the sheer scope of the hyperreal’s penetration. Within the hyperreal, a “reality principle” (Baudrillard 13) does persist, but its persistence perhaps engenders more futility than good. It exists to placate its captives into believing that some logic must underlie their actions. Resistance seeks truth, but its very definition of truth is steeped in a sedative. An aesthetic of surface that demonstrates many characteristics of his hyperreal pervades and defines the films of Kon Satoshi, but I cannot accept his propositions either. Each of these theorists closes off their systems using logical provisions that guarantee the inevitability of their respectively diagnosed outcomes. Kon’s films demonstrate a semblance of logic, but they do not and cannot cohere under a single unifying logic. Some characters cannot be defined. Some events cannot be accounted for. The final chapter of this project will explore some of the alternative possibilities that Kon’s aesthetic of surface enables.
Concluding Remarks

Thus far, I have examined the characters featured in Kon’s films and their distinct lack of origins, the worlds permeated with surface phenomena in which they reside, and the conclusions of two of his films, climaxes that ultimately deny the possibility of overthrowing what I have called Kon’s aesthetic of surface. The following questions arise: if the characters of those films truly remain mired in worlds of inescapable surface, what agency, if any they, do they possess? Can these situations offer viewers any positive alternatives for existence in such worlds? To respond to those questions, I will pose two more. Must the advent of such worlds – defined as spectacular, hyperreal, superflat, or otherwise – be a necessarily negative or undesirable outcome? Must they necessarily deprive their inhabitants of agency? This final chapter details the possibilities that I believe Kon’s worlds afford.

To articulate their theories, Baudrillard, Debord, Murakami, and the other scholars that I have discussed have all relied upon a few essential assumptions. They all, regardless of their stances on the outcomes of these worlds, diagnose a fragility of truth located squarely in the present. Simply, something is rotten, and it must be exposed; it must be recognized. To write about the spectacle, the hyperreal, or the superflat is to demonstrate a definite cynicism. The present state, in its currently form, has not always existed. Culpability for its onset is located within a complex network of power relations more or less ambiguously associated with the dissemination of ideology and information facilitated by the proliferation of the mass media. It requires the media to act as both its herald and its agent, to form and reform
as it informs – or rather misinforms and disinforms. The question of outcomes can become one of debonair resistance, embodied by Debord’s détournement, but it more often manifests as escape. “How does one escape the spectacle?” “Can one escape the hyperreal?” “What must one do to avoid the superflat?”

The inherent problem of escape is its vector. To where or to what does one escape? Since the diffuse characters of the respective theorists’ ideas curtail escape to any existing place, both escape and resistance instead locate their refuge in the form of a pre-condition, the state that preceded the present aesthetic of surface. Escape becomes synonymous with restoration, and the goals of escape quickly congeal into the form of recovery. Debord, Best, and Kellner seek the recovery of truth and affective power while Murakami wants to recover virility, the antithesis of the metaphorical impotence he so abhors. Baudrillard alone seeks nothing, closing off his system and denying all possibility, insisting upon the certainty of waywardness. To him, the time for discussion or contention has long since passed. The inhabitants of his system remain trapped in it forever.

Though Kon’s films invoke surface and formally embody the confusion and destabilization about which scholars have written, the characters within Kon’s films should not be blindly plugged into any existing position of subjectivity. As I have already discussed, many of Kon’s characters do fill that position. Mima (chapters two and four), Konakawa (chapter four), and the homeless trio of Tokyo Godfathers (chapter four) all demonstrate characteristics indicative of this formulaic confusion. Simulations of human thoughts and emotions, these characters cannot interact with their environments without referring back to some sort of reality. They base their
identities on established or re-established narratives, not lived experience, and they suffer physically and psychologically precisely because of the unveiling of the artifice of those foundations.

Despite the inertia of these characters, I believe that two of Kon’s characters proffer alternative possibilities for existence within worlds of surface. Paprika and Chiyoko have been assembled to conflict with established constructions of subjectivity. As discussed in chapter two, Paprika possesses no clear relationship with Chiba, and she furthermore displays no indication of having been herself biologically birthed. These two characteristics highlight her ambiguous biological presence. Chiyoko’s difficulty, on the other hand, is not a Lacanian form of self-alienation through misidentification. It is instead a problem of multiple and simultaneous identifications wherein she exists in different places at different times and in different forms. Through this state, she gains the liberty of multiple origins, but they all become dubious. The inevitable tradeoff is an inability to cohere as a unified subject under the conventional umbrella of subjectivity.

To visually demonstrate their respective constructions, both characters undergo numerous profound visible transformations, interacting on, in, and through media, memory, and dreams. Throughout these sequences, their identities are reformed, reestablished, and redefined, but the process of transformation itself never produces any duress. Neither of these characters ever questions the veracity of the events they experience. Discontinuity, elision, and transformation, however jarring to the audience, are expected permutations within their broader status quos. During the title credits of Paprika, its namesake waltzes through billboards and tee shirts.
Subsequent scenes include changes in form ranging from the acquisition of fairy-like wings (49:42) to nearly complete metamorphoses into classically mythological creatures (54:43, 55:12). In *Millennium Actress*, Chiyoko alternately dons the identities of a ninja, a princess, a scientist, a World War II survivor, and a young geisha. Her roles mold her as she molds them, and she proceeds seamlessly from one to the next. Genya attempts to match her pace, but he simply cannot maintain it (37:42). Meanwhile, cameraman and reader alike struggle throughout, often unable to identify either the setting or the character.

Because they do not suffer the duress that conventionally crafted characters experience in Kon’s worlds, Paprika and Chiyoko lastly function as storytellers. While the narrative forms of *Perfect Blue* and *Tokyo Godfathers* necessarily limit the perspectives of both the audience and the characters, these two female characters provide the key data that serves as references throughout the remainder of the films. Before any discussion of terrorism or conflation of reality and dream begins, Paprika introduces the audience to the ideals that govern Chiba’s team’s development of the DC Mini. This early introduction of idealism proffers an interpretation of how the device should be used and facilitates identification with Paprika’s like-minded comrades. Thereafter, she pushes, prods, and inspires her co-stars, to realize their own wills and to follow her, two goals that often intersect. Chiyoko, less pushy, provides *Millennium Actress* its drive. The film’s plot follows her progress back to and forward through her younger years. The audience’s perspective is a component of her perspective. Without her occasional narration, only guesswork, assisted intermittently by the cameraman’s snide commentary, would provide clues. To be
clear, neither protagonist functions as a guide to her respective world; if either the audience or the other characters had a guide, then they would not find themselves lost within these worlds.

Becoming conduits for their medium, the aesthetic of surface, Paprika and Chiyoko exist and thrive within it, unbehelden to it. The stories that they tell enraputure, but the act of enrapuring is not an act of volition or one of complicity; their internal positions within imply that the medium flows through them. The stories would be told without them and would still enrapture, would still trap those at the receiving end. Paprika and Chiyoko shift their positions from subjects or nodes at the ends of a stream of information to free-floating abstract signifiers floating in its midst. Free from conventional constructs, Kon’s aesthetic of surface does not destabilize them. Their nature as animated characters combines with the formal and narrative features of the films to produce identities of pure performativity, wherein re-formation and re-establishment supplant formation and establishment. The division between consciousness and unconsciousness is effaced with the corresponding primacy of the instant. Origins become anachronisms and universal certainties – truth, gravity, biology, and so on – are exposed as mere myths. Acceleration becomes the modus operandi.

The identities of Paprika and Chiyoko developed by Kon in Paprika and Millennium Actress can be interpreted as model strategies for solving the problems posed by the theories of Debord, Baudrillard, and Murakami. Each of these theories assumes a ceiling to human development delimited by a pre-existing human subjectivity steeped in intellectual traditions and pseudo-science. The subject must be
founded and moreover must be founded upon something. However, as I discussed earlier, animated characters lack any origins for such subjectivity to be constructed atop of. The aesthetic of surface that they articulate inhibits agency only because the subjects expected to inhabit it have not adapted themselves to their surrounding conditions. Bound to such a model, these theorists can only propose a solution of regression cruelly masquerading as restoration, extinction the alternative. The subject becomes helpless, awash in a sea of half-truths, overwhelmed figuratively and often literally as well. Every citizen becomes a client of Las Vegas’ Westin Bonaparte, unable to locate themselves within the system and unable to find an exit, to find their way back (Jameson 39).

The model of performative identity embodied in the characters Paprika and Chiyoko must not be viewed as a closed system. Audiences glimpse in Kon’s films characters in the midst of evolution, persons still advancing forward whose outcomes have not already been decided for them. Unmoored to anything, they are buffeted by whirling forces of confusion and destabilization, but they survive and they somehow thrive.
Bibliography


———. “Millennium Actress,” (2001)


