

Screening Interiority: Drawing on the Animated Dreams of Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue*

Meg Rickards

Abstract

This paper is two-faceted. The first section investigates the *anime* film *Perfect Blue* (1999), directed by Satoshi Kon,¹ to discover how he constructs dream and fantasy sequences that externalise the inner life of his protagonist. The aim is to counter a common tendency that sees filmmakers, particularly those in training, being advised to avoid portraying dreams because of the many pitfalls that they can present — especially in terms of hackneyed symbolism and style. Drawing on Cherry Potter's work on screen language and interiority, on Edward Branigan's theory of focalisation, and on Noël Carroll and Rosemary Jackson's writing about *doppelgängers*, this paper analyses Kon's treatment of dreams and fantasy, which rise above cliché to effectively externalise his protagonist's inner life. In the second section of the paper, I move on to consider the implications of the findings for the treatment of dream and fantasy in the film project *Zinzi and the Boondogle*.

Keywords: Satoshi Kon, *Perfect Blue*, film, *anime*, animation, screenwriting, filmmaking, dreams, fantasy, fantastic, interiority, focalisation, *doppelgänger*, double, mirror, reflection, fission, fusion, Cherry Potter, Edward Branigan, Noël Carroll, Rosemary Jackson.

Introduction

Having co-written a screenplay for a children's live-action and animated feature entitled *Zinzi and the Boondogle*, and being currently engaged in making a short animated film based on the story, I have been working out how best to treat the central dream sequence that appears in both versions. The film tells the story of a twelve-year-old girl whose mother dies and who has to bring up her two younger brothers and a baby sister. Her fear of this daunting task becomes manifest in the mutant, beaded Boondogle, whom Zinzi has to conquer in a quest across Cape Town and inside a magical world made entirely of beads. I am interested therefore in the intersection between dream and fantasy, given that my aim is to convey not only Zinzi's central dream, but also the imagined realm and fantastic creatures with whom she engages on her journey. So I approach this research as a filmmaker seeking means to build up the inner lives of characters as suggested on the page, in visual and aural terms on the screen.

In forging links between theory and praxis, I have found a guiding principle in Cherry Potter's proposal that the way dream — and memory and fantasy — is treated is always rooted in “the character's experience, in the dramatic question motivating the character, and, finally, in what the film-maker is trying to say”.² Of course, film characters do not

necessarily have only one motivating force: many film narratives are driven by a complex interplay of questions. It is not my aim to be reductive in identifying a single dramatic question, but to determine a film's key precept, which may well interact with several further subsidiary questions.

Despite the potential for oneiric sequences to communicate character interiority, it is common that filmmakers, particularly those in training, are advised to avoid portraying dreams. Screenwriter and teacher Blake Snyder states unequivocally, "I advise screenwriters to try to avoid the flashback and the dream sequence".³ Internet blogs such as MunkeyFilm reiterate this kind of advice: "There is no quicker way to make a film professor swallow his tongue than tossing in the dream sequence. Honestly, a student film with a dream sequence is about as predictable as rough sex in a Cronenberg film".⁴ And while screenwriting manuals usually urge writers to find ways to externalise internal conflict through action, most are reticent to endorse overt mental externalisations such as dream. Syd Field cites the writer Michael Blake, justifying his decision to omit dreams altogether in the screenplay for *Dances with Wolves*, even though they were crucial to his novel:

There were two important dream sequences that shed a lot of light on Lieutenant Dunbar and what makes him tick. But I felt, and Kevin [the director] felt, that those kinds of sequences never worked in movies. Dream sequences just tend to be flops. They were left out even though they were important.⁵

To be sure, dream sequences are often unsuccessful, precisely because the techniques used are so hackneyed and predictable. But in order to counter defeatist arguments, I have gone about identifying and dissecting dreams that work effectively.

To be fair, there are manuals that do not caution so much against dream *per se*, as they do against their clichéd treatment. By way of example, Richard Krevolin in *How to Adapt Anything into a Screenplay* discusses the flashbacks in the form of a dream employed in *X-Men* (2000: dir. Bryan Singer):

Do yourself a favour. When you use a dream sequence, please don't have your character 'jolt from sleep' or 'sit bolt upright'. Every screenplay I read seems to end its dream sequence in this way.⁶

Similarly Alex Epstein, in *Screenwriting: Writing Movies that Get Made*, claims that while flashbacks are one of the most powerful techniques of cinema, the problem is simply that they are used in a "cheesy way".⁷ I would wholeheartedly agree that the same often holds true for dream and fantasy, hence my search for techniques that are fresh and engaging.

While many films such as *Spellbound* (1945: dir. Alfred Hitchcock), *Wild Strawberries* (1957: dir. Ingmar Bergman), and *Open your Eyes* (1997: dir. Alejandro Amenábar) provide rich and diverse material for theorising dream sequences, this paper limits its

scope to focus on the oblique handling of dream and reality in Satoshi Kon's animated psycho thriller, *Perfect Blue* (1999). Because dream and fantasy are merged until indistinguishable in *Perfect Blue*, the paper draws also on discussions on the fantastic, and on the intersection between fantasy, psychoanalysis and dream.

Fantasy shares significant kinship with dream in that it also wells up in the imagination and the unconscious. Although we exert less control over dream than we do over fantasy, I would argue that filmmakers employ dream to serve a similar function as they might use fantasy: to bespeak a character's psychological and emotional state, and to underline the dramatic question motivating a character. Notably, in portraying Mima's dream world, Kon makes extensive use of two classic fantasy devices, the mirror and the *doppelgänger*, in sequences that could be read as oneiric or fantastic.

Communicating Interiority

In *Until the End of the World*, made in 1991 but set in 1999, Wim Wenders depicts a team of researchers in the Australian outback working on a technique for making visual recordings of dream images that can be played back and observed. Noël Black views the attempt to portray dreams and the unconscious "as being more interesting than the result".⁸ Certainly, the grainy images evoke fragments of home videos more than they do fleeting sojourns into the unconscious. Norbert Grob argues that because Wenders has been so involved in digital technology, he has lost touch with his own cinematic precepts:

He fails to distinguish between what should be made visible and open to scrutiny, and what should be left up to the subjective imagination of his audience.⁹

To the contrary, I would maintain that filmmakers should be free to scrutinise every aspect of human experience. Yet Grob's critique does point to the dangers inherent in screening dreams. For one, being a material medium, it is impossible for film to achieve the same ineffability of dreams. However, nor can film achieve the same degree of "reality" of everyday experience — and that is not to say that filmmakers do not try to do so.

Another obstacle in creating filmic dreams is that they are usually more transparent than their "real" counterparts, for filmmakers inevitably battle to create the same degree of illogic as is produced by the unconscious. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that filmmakers necessarily use dreams to build a character's dramatic motivations, and to convey particular messages to the audience. However, the difficulty of reproducing oneiric illogic notwithstanding, it is worth remembering that neither does cinema commonly present the randomness of prosaic existence. Instead, in constructing narrative, films make pattern and story out of daily experience. There seems nothing then to prevent filmmakers from creating narrative of fragmentary dreams, yet endowing them with a degree of illogic that distinguishes them from the depiction of reality.

Potter holds that dreams, memories and fantasies manifest themselves in a language that is close to that of film, and that film — like dream — compresses time:

An experience that in reality may have lasted for years, weeks or hours is communicated in minutes or seconds of screen time because only the essential ingredients are selected for communication.¹⁰

It seems that dream's ability to "telegraph" a character's state of mind is the most basic reason that dreams are employed within film narratives. Moreover, the fact that dream, like film, is primarily an illusory visual and aural medium, makes the inclusion of dreams in films relatively seamless. That dreams and films both employ symbolic language further supports the accommodation of dream sequences in cinema. The elliptical nature of dreams can be poignantly conveyed via editing — as I will discuss in relation to jump cuts. Indeed, Sarah Boxer suggests that film as a visual and illusory medium is arguably "is as close to dream as you can get".¹¹ The cinematic medium can, despite its limitations, offer effective means of screening dreams.

Perhaps animation has an advantage over live action film in that it can "film the unfilmable", and so represent imaginative realms and inner states such as fantasy, dream and imagination. Paul Wells sees animation as being concerned with metaphysical reality — an alternative reality by means of which alternative perspectives are possible.¹² Consequently, the juxtaposition of live action and animation often articulates the transition into an imaginative realm or an altered state of mind, such as in *Cool World* (1992: dir. Ralph Bakshi) and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998: dir. Terry Gilliam). Kon creates this kind of fluctuation within a wholly animated film, using stylistically innovative dream sequences to externalise the inner life and imagination of his protagonist.

Anime Dreams

To give an idea of the ways in which dream and reality intertwine in *Perfect Blue*: Kirigoe Mima, a 21-year-old pop idol, abandons her music career to become an actress on a television psychodrama, only to start being haunted by a malign shadow version of her former pop-star persona. She also finds her every move posted on an Internet homepage, in disturbingly accurate detail, as a crazed fan called Me-Mania stalks her and reports her every move. Regardless, she forges ahead with her new career. She is coerced into taking part in a chilling rape scene and into posing for nude photographs, whereupon the plots of real life and the TV series begin to merge. The show's producer and screenwriter are both gruesomely murdered, in scenes that reflect the TV drama in which Mima plays a schizophrenic character who performs similar murders. Soon Mima loses all track of dream and reality — even consulting the Internet homepage to find out where she has been and what she has done. At the film's climax, Mima's agent Rumi turns upon her in a terrifying attack. It is revealed that it was Rumi who staged the killings and hired Me-Mania to kill Mima. In a final showdown, Mima defeats Rumi, who ends up in a psychiatric hospital, while Mima goes on to become a successful actress.

Tasha Robinson sees *Perfect Blue*'s success as lying in “the twisted, self-referential storyline that inter-cuts reality with fantasy so fluidly that viewers inevitably take on Mima's shattered point of view, unable to distinguish the truth until the stunning conclusion”.¹³ What is more, Kon’s use of *anime* renders fantasy and reality on the same flat plane, as equal parts of Mima’s experience. Joel Black accordingly raises the question as to whether dreams are different from reality in the fantasy world of animation:

Are dreams (or nightmares) just dreams or are they as real as anything else in the film? Is it possible to dream in animation, and if not, how is possible to ever wake up?¹⁴

There is a case for saying that the animation endows the entire film with a dream-like quality that undermines the dream/reality dualism. For Kon’s “limited animation” style, which as pointed out by Thomas Lamarre is characteristic of much Japanese *anime*,¹⁵ has the effect of showing characters floating though space in a dream-like manner. Less attention is given to animating every single step when characters walk, and more attention is given to lyricism and atmosphere.

In *Perfect Blue*, Kon uses *anime* in tailored ways in order to express Mima’s mental state; for instance, there are a number of jump cuts, the purpose of which Kon has described in an interview:

We’d cut fast from one thing to another as if it were a fight scene, even if there wasn’t any action involved — it helped emphasise Mima’s sense of confusion.¹⁶

Kon explains that as he and the animation team progressed with the film, especially in its latter half, they decided to cut faster and faster from scene to scene.¹⁷ The resulting ellipses contribute to the increasingly crazed confusion present both in Mima and in the viewer. Kon further claims that he used imaging techniques to connect different scenes by “piling action scenes or images one on top of the other”.¹⁸



[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE *Murder montage* \(wmv format – size 6 MB\)](#)

Mima's real and nightmare worlds are connected by this kind of "image conglomeration" in a montage sequence that cuts rapidly between a man being stabbed, and naked images of Mima posing for a photo shoot. The murder scene appears to be Mima's nightmare, which is based, in turn, on a murder she enacted in the drama series. The inter-cutting between Mima's stripping and the violent murder underlines the level of degradation that Mima undergoes in the photo shoot, and the traumatic effect that it has on her psyche. The montage accelerates to a dizzy crescendo, whereupon the film cuts to Mima jolting awake in her bed — only to find bloody clothes in her cupboard that seem to point to herself as murderer. Due to the rapid piling up of images, Mima's inner and outer worlds are barely distinguishable at this point — underlining her dramatic question, *Will Mima discover who she really is?*

Kon's quest to create a style that underlines Mima's state of mind, and which reflects her dramatic question, sees his deliberate rejection of many well-worn techniques. He believes that with animation, there are many cases where the style is fixed, and that depictions of dreams follow set patterns.¹⁹ Kon refers to such hackneyed techniques as wavy lines on the screen, the switch to sepia tones, the cream flowing to the top of coffee to create a whirlpool, and a close-up of someone's eyes.²⁰ This kind of editing he sees as "totally boring", and believes that there are many more ways of introducing dreams and flashbacks:

Even if the shot or the scene changes, they must be linked within the flow of the story and I thought that it would be interesting if the viewers did not immediately grasp they were watching a flashback or a dream.²¹

The dreams are thus not treated as separate entities, but carry the narrative forward to the same degree as do the waking scenes. Kon claims that viewers are "too used to being treated kindly" and that he has deliberately broken the pattern of "sleepy continuity".²² Consequently 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. For instance, there is a scene in which Mima the actress is delivering lines on the set for the drama, and is suddenly waking in her bed, only to be seen a moment later back on the set. Interestingly, although we as viewers are not given the usual cues as to when we are entering a dream, we are frequently cued in retrospect as to the dream status of a scene via shots of Mima awakening. The audience's quest to determine what is dream and what is reality is in this way constantly undermined.

Layered Narration

Cutting without warning from scene to scene and from location to location, Kon interweaves layers of reality with Mima's dreams. But there is a third layer of narration: scenes from the appropriately named show *Double Bind* in which she is cutting her teeth as an actress. This third layer in a sense reflects both Mima's dreams and reality.

The multiple levels of narration reveal themselves in their most extreme complexity in a scene from *Double Bind*, in which Mima's character Yoko is diagnosed as suffering from multiple personality disorder. She is convinced that she is really Mima: in other words,

the character that Mima plays in the television drama confuses herself with Mima the actress and former pop idol playing her character. In a *Sight and Sound* review, Jonathan Romney describes this as a “baffling moment soon revealed as only a provisional representation of Mima's predicament”.²³



CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE *Multiple personality disorder* (wmv format – size 10.5 MB)

This baffling moment warrants careful unpacking. It starts with Mima waking from a nightmare that is ostensibly also a scene from the drama, in which her character Yoko enacts a murder. Mima awakes in a wide top shot that is used in exact replica at several other points of the film. We cut to a medium close up, with Mima’s reflection in the mirror behind her, in a space that could still be her bedroom, yet in its neutrality could also be part of another location. Mima proceeds to rotate from this neutral position in a leftward motion through space. The camera simultaneously pans left with her, to reframe on a two-shot that shows Mima — now in actress mode – facing the psychologist character of the drama. The psychologist asks her name, and Mima’s television character Yoko replies that she is a pop star, then corrects herself quickly — “No, an actress”. The psychologist leaves the glass booth, and tells two men outside that Yoko has dissociative identity disorder, or multiple personality syndrome. Yoko sees herself as a new actress, Kirigoe Mima, and sees her original persona as nothing more than a character in a drama. As the psychologist explains all this to the observers, Mima’s character is seen speaking noiselessly through the glass, as if trapped in a cage.

In analysing this sequence it is useful to turn to Edward Branigan’s work on focalisation, which he defines as follows:

Focalisation (reflection) involves a character neither speaking (narrating, reporting, communicating) nor acting (focussing, focussed by), but rather actually experiencing something through seeing or hearing it. Focalisation also extends to more complex experiencing of objects: thinking, remembering, interpreting, wondering, fearing, believing, desiring, understanding, feeling guilt.²⁴

He posits that focalisation through a character depends on levels of narration that “define and ground the character who is to have an experience”.²⁵ In an analysis of the famous

mirror shot in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, Branigan provides a useful breakdown of the conflicting kinds of focalisation at work – proposing that the mirror shot is the result of at least six different levels of narration operating simultaneously.²⁶ I have summarised his analysis thus:

- 1) Bergman presents a story in which the character Isak Borg becomes the diegetic narrator.
- 2) We see Borg narrating the story about himself.
- 3) Borg, an externally focalised character, falls asleep.
- 4) He dreams of himself at his present age of 78 in a new locale.
- 5) In his dream he witnesses his 20-year-old sweetheart confront his 78-year-old self. She holds up a mirror.
- 6) The mirror reflects Borg's 78-year-old face.²⁷



Ingrid Thulin and Victor Sjöström in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*

After Branigan, the self-reflexive construction of the scene where Mima is both herself, an actress, and a character, can be unravelled to show these conflicting narrative layers:

- 1) **The mirror shot at the scene's opening is a physical reflection of**
- 2) the "real" Mima who has abandoned her pop career for acting, and in her self-turmoil is being pursued by
- 3) a ghost or double of her former pop idol self, who is finally transformed into
- 4) Mima's agent Rumi, a former pop idol, who ends up in a psychiatric institution, thinking she is Mima the pop idol.
- 5) The "real" Mima (2) in this mirror shot is playing a schizophrenic young woman, who thinks that
- 6) her real self, Yoko Takukura, was just a character in a drama, and that she is really
- 7) Kirigoe Mima, a new pop star and actress...
- 8) as observed by the viewer, who identifies with Mima.

Branigan's description of the mirror shot in *Wild Strawberries* as deriving its power from its "sudden knotting together of distinct narrations to create contradiction and paradox"²⁸ also holds true of this scene in *Perfect Blue*. In fact, the contradiction and paradox that the viewer experiences arguably reflect Mima's own confusion as the bounds between dream and reality are blurred. Thus I have proposed the eighth level of narration, given that as much as there are doubles within the text, the film spectator is another kind of double. Of course this opens up the vast arena of spectatorship theory, which I shall not go into here. I simply raise the fact that, given the identity search that runs throughout *Perfect Blue*, we as viewers perhaps do not remain entirely ourselves, but take on something of Mima's confused screen persona.

There is a similar transgression between levels of narration in a scene where Rumi visits Mima in her apartment. Mima expresses concern that her other personality — "my other self that I buried deep in my heart" — could start acting on its own. As she says this, she slides rightwards across the screen, the busy detail of the apartment being replaced by a flat background. A hand enters frame-right to touch her shoulder comfortingly, as someone says, "It's all right. There is no way illusions can come to life". Mima responds "Rumi?" before we cut wide to see her no longer in her apartment with her agent, but on set with the psychologist character and the television crew. The sliding motion across the screen has replaced a cut between one spatial and temporal location and another. Startling in its unexpected transition, the sliding seems to reflect the frightening slippage between reality, the show, and the dream that is taking place within Mima's mind.



[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE *Slippage and sliding* \(wmv format – size 16.5 MB\)](#)

Mima's confusion is embedded in the very structure of the film's narrative so that it takes on the same sort of irrational fluidity she herself is shown as experiencing. The replaying of events creates a nightmarish loop, which evokes what Freud describes as "involuntary repetition" and as "fateful and inescapable".²⁹ Freud further describes repetition as arousing an uncanny feeling, and as recalling "the sense of helplessness experienced in some dream states".³⁰ The exact replication of images at different points in the film, for instance that of Mima waking up time and again in the identical position, is certainly uncanny in its effect both on Mima and on the audience.

The uncanny repetition of events and images contributes to the blurring of the line between objective and subjective perspectives in *Perfect Blue*. Kon speaks about the way in which he transgresses the usual boundaries between these standpoints: “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”.³¹ In this sense, the merging of reality and dream in *Perfect Blue* evokes that aspect of the uncanny that, according to Freud, is concerned with where “the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced”.³²

Kon further effaces any divide between reality and dream in that he introduces no graphic distinction whatsoever between conscious and unconscious states. The only graphic difference employed to distinguish between the multiple narrative levels, is the *manga* imagery used to describe pop culture. Romney points to an instance: “an excessively baroque flash of *manga* art — a generic big-eyed space girl — invades the screen, looking much more three-dimensional than the film's real world”.³³



CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE *Manga girl* (wmv format – size 2.5 MB)

To be sure, the “real world” of the film is plain and flat in its execution. Romney holds that the very execution of the animation in *Perfect Blue* becomes “a complex metaphor for Mima's reality, in which the everyday becomes a colour-drained place of exile from the pop universe”.³⁴ The quotation of pop and *manga* images stands in contrast to the often bleak images of a faceless Tokyo, and in this way, the iconic pop language serves as a layer of dream-like existence running in parallel to the bland urban environment. By creating another level of visual complexity, the *manga* and pop images not only contribute to the theme about fame and celebrity that runs through the film, but also undermine the reality/dream divide — which enjoys no such visual demarcation.

When asked in an interview, included on the *Perfect Blue* DVD, whether there was a message he wanted to deliver through the film, Kon initially laughs wryly and claims that he is not sure that there is anything in particular. But soon he starts to muse as to what it is that he wants to say:

Perhaps it would be ‘losing reality’ ... the real life images and the virtual images come and go quickly in the film. When you are watching the film,

you sometimes feel like losing yourself in whichever world you are watching, real or virtual. But after going back and forth between the real world and the virtual world, you eventually find your own identity through your own powers.³⁵

Kon's message is clearly about "finding oneself". It seems that the blurring of dream and reality, and their ultimate re-separation at the film's conclusion, are crucial in communicating this search for self-integration.

Seeing Double

Mima's shifts between reality and dream are characterised by the repeated appearance of her phantom or *doppelgänger* self, who renders Mima's crisis of identity physically manifest and creates an uncanny unease in the viewer. Indeed, according to Freud, the uncanny is connected with the phenomenon of the double that "appears in every shape and in every degree of development".³⁶

Richard Scheib suggests that the actress is really a split personality created by Mima to deal with the stress of being a pop star, and that the *doppelgänger* is in fact her real self coming through.³⁷ He sees the TV show as a projection of the repressed memories of an "abusive childhood".³⁸ I disagree wholeheartedly with Scheib's analysis, as there is little to suggest Mima's stress in being a pop star. Instead, her angst is about shedding her safe image as a squeaky-clean pop idol and embarking on the unpredictable career of an actress — a move that solicits disapproval from her mother, for one. It seems clear that Mima's *doppelgänger* is a direct result of her trauma around becoming an actress, and after all, what is acting, but displacing one's own identity?

Furthermore, Mima is clearly an actress by the film's end, when we are ostensibly very much in "real" territory. Scheib points out that at the film's "puzzling conclusion" the *doppelgänger* and the various assassinations "are mundanely revealed to be the mere machinations of one of the heroine's friends".³⁹ I agree with Scheib that the *denouement* is puzzling, but contest his position that the *doppelgänger* can be explained away as Rumi's "machination". While Rumi could conceivably have been behind the stalker Me-Mania in creating the hoax homepage, and in assassinating the producer and writer of the TV show, a haunting shadow self has been present in Mima's mind regardless of Rumi's actions. The way in which the *doppelgänger* bounces along streetlamps and appears in mirrors defies logical explanation, and is patently not something that Rumi could have orchestrated. Although Mima's double is displaced by Rumi's real presence in the final scenes, the *doppelgänger* that appears in private to Mima before this point is nonetheless an imagined shadow self, defying logical explanation.

Possibly Mima's *doppelgänger* is, in fact, "transferred" onto Rumi at the film's climax. This "transference" takes place as a series of dissolves between the *doppelgänger* and Rumi, who is dressed up in a wig and Mima's former pop star outfit. Rosemary Jackson points out that "figures who attempt [a] return to undifferentiation, in fantastic tales, are

doomed to failure”.⁴⁰ She writes that most versions of the double “terminate with the madness, suicide or death of the divided subject: self cannot be united with ‘other’ without ceasing to be”.⁴¹ It seems that for Mima to achieve reintegration, it is required that her agent sacrifice her own sanity. Mima’s words in the film’s final scene “I wouldn’t be where I am today without her” then take on a particular pertinence: by Rumi “becoming” Mima’s double, Mima is able to achieve reintegration.

In discussing the splitting of characters, Jackson argues that “the idea of multiplicity is no longer a metaphor, but is literally realised — self transforms in selves”.⁴² Noël Carroll identifies this multiplication process as “spatial fission”, which “distributes the conflict over space through the creation of doubles”.⁴³ According to Carroll, spatial fission involves a character or set of characters being multiplied into one or more new facets, each standing for another aspect of the self: “generally one that is either hidden, ignored, repressed or denied by the original character”.⁴⁴ Mima quite clearly articulates this denial of her former self: “Maybe she is more like me than myself, the self that I hid deep in my heart”.⁴⁵

Perfect Blue brims over with images that bespeak the multiplicity of Mima’s character: there are images of her on the TV screens as she passes a shop window; the multiple shots of her face on the screens of the *Double Bind* editing suite; and the media images of her pop idol persona pasted all over Me-Mania’s room. Mima’s numerous reflections in mirrors throughout *Perfect Blue* both serve to underline her dislocation, and on a practical level to introduce the ghost of her former self. In fact, Carroll writes that films that employ spatial fission commonly employ some mechanism of reflection – a portrait, a mirror or shadows — as the pretext for doubling.⁴⁶ The first such reflective device is a train window. Mima is on her way home after a tough day of acting when her double, dressed in her former pop star outfit, suddenly appears leering at her in the place of her own reflection. A passing train wipes out the haunting image, so that Mima sees her own reflection once more.



[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE *Train double* \(wmv format – size 2.5 MB\)](#)

There are several further instances in which the virtual Mima arrives on the scene via reflective surfaces: a bathroom mirror, the shiny side of the staircase, a car window, and the glass divide in a recording studio. Leo Bersani holds that mirrors offer

a spatial representation of an intuition that our being can never be adequately enclosed within any present formulation — any formulation here and now — of our present being. It is as if the experience of perceiving ourselves elsewhere suggested the possibility of our becoming something else. Mirrors represent as a phenomenon of distance our capacity for unpredictable metamorphoses.⁴⁷

Endorsing this notion of mirror as distancing tool, Jackson suggests that “by presenting images of the self in another space ... the mirror provides versions of self transformed into another”.⁴⁸ She believes that the mirror uses distance and difference to suggest the instability of the “real” on this side of the looking-glass.⁴⁹ Mima’s multiple mirror reflections certainly facilitate the splitting of her self into her double, and suggest the instability of the real.

Conceivably, Mima’s computer screen also serves as a kind of mirror when her *doppelgänger* appears leering and taunting her from her hoax homepage. This is apt, given that the notion of a double seems to have first taken hold of Mima’s mind via the selfsame website that “mirrors” her life in its minute reports on her thoughts and actions. The homepage is significantly called “Mima’s Room”, which connotes a kind of space, albeit a virtual one. The use of the homepage tellingly recalls Kon’s statement about virtual spaces, and how the film is perhaps about “losing reality”.⁵⁰ Seemingly the Internet in *Perfect Blue* serves as a precarious mirror realm, where one can lose any coherent sense of identity and reality. To cite Kon’s words once more: “But after going back and forth between the real world and the virtual world, you eventually find your own identity through your own powers”.⁵¹ The process of regaining stability involves, then, a systematic separation out from a fracturing virtual space.



CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE *Mima’s room* (wmv format – size 9 MB)

Indeed, it is Jackson’s view that classical unities of space, time and character are “threatened with dissolution” in fantastic texts.⁵² She holds that “the limited nature of

space has inserted into it an additional dimension, and that this additional space is frequently narrowed down to an “enclosure” where the fantastic has become the norm.⁵³ She points out that a number of modern fantasies, including Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, rely upon the Gothic enclosure as “a space of maximum transformation and horror”.⁵⁴ There is a sense in which the “Mima’s Room” homepage is a site of transformation in that it provides a portal for Mima’s *doppelgänger*. The homepage is also a site of horror in introducing into Mima’s thoughts the notion of a stalker and in haunting her with its accounts of her “double life”, so much so that Mima asks herself, “Did I really go shopping in Harajuku today?”

It is telling that Mima’s apartment is likewise referred to as “Mima’s Room”, and too becomes a “virtual space” in serving as a site of slippage into the fantasy or dream realm. Mima’s apartment is also a kind of Gothic enclosure: time after time, Mima awakes from a nightmare, sprawled in the exact same position — only to find herself within yet another nightmare. Moreover, the apartment also reflects Mima’s state of mind through the film. Her cute belongings that are neatly arranged to begin with are later strewn about — even bloodied — and her pet fish die from neglect. On a number of occasions we zoom or cut from a wide shot of the street into the singularly lit up space of Mima’s apartment, as if honing into her imagination: Mima’s increasingly chaotic living space becomes a metaphor for her entropic state of mind.

Implications for Zinzi and the Boondogle

On the surface, *Perfect Blue* is not an obvious place to look for inspiration for the making of *Zinzi and the Boondogle*. For one, *Perfect Blue* is a patently adult film. And notably, Zinzi is markedly distinct from Mima in *Perfect Blue*, in being in charge of her own destiny, and is not merely reactive to her circumstances as is Mima. In this way, Zinzi is more similar to Hayao Miyazaki’s resourceful girl-children, such as Kiki in *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1989) and Chihiro in *Spirited Away* (2002), whose rites of passage I do investigate elsewhere. Nonetheless, in that Kon articulates dreams and the unconscious as coexisting within the mundane realm, *Perfect Blue* suggests filmic possibilities for treating the Boondogle as a manifestation of Zinzi’s own fearful imagination, within the quotidian space of contemporary Cape Town.

Zinzi’s journey is not, in fact, dissimilar to that of Mima, in that Zinzi too has to find her place in the world — and fast. She is only twelve when her mother dies of an AIDS-related illness, leaving her to raise her two younger brothers and sister. She is terrified about how she will cope. Her mother’s dying words are “Listen to your heart”. But Zinzi’s first worry is how to pay the rent for their tiny home. Having no money, she strikes a deal with her landlady to bead badges in lieu of rent — an impossible one hundred badges by morning.

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD PDF](#) *Zinzi – Extract 1*

Zinzi beads late into the night and, in her exhaustion, experiences a half-waking dream, during which she continues to bead in auto-pilot and to muddle the designs for the baboon, dolphin and eagle icons that appear on the badges. In a weird metamorphosis, the

badge turns into a live mutant “Boondogle” who offers, in a scene reminiscent of *Rumpelstiltskin*, to conjure up the remaining badges. Terrified of eviction, Zinzi agrees. And so she is trapped. For as her need for more badges increases so do the Boondogle’s demands, and on his third visit, he takes Zinzi’s baby sister as his slave. The Boondogle offers Zinzi one last chance: if she can rescue her sister by sunset that night she gets to keep her; if not, Zinzi and her brothers will be his slaves forever. This sets the stage for the quest across Cape Town and into a magical bead world, during which Zinzi at last saves her sister and triumphs over her fear.

The screenplay’s dream sequence conveys the moment at which Zinzi brings into existence the Boondogle, and he can in this sense be viewed as a dream or nightmare creature. It is useful to apply to the dream sequence the three questions posed in investigating *Perfect Blue*. Firstly, how does the dream convey Zinzi’s state of mind? Secondly, how does it underline Zinzi’s dramatic question? Thirdly, how would the dream convey what the filmmaker intended to say?

Firstly, the dream is intended to convey Zinzi’s acute distress. It centres on her fear of not coping with the task of taking care of her family. Her envisioning her siblings sitting on the pavement, hungry and cold, is a projection of her fear of failure. The fact that her baby sister is swept away by the eagle represents Zinzi’s very worst fear — that of losing her siblings, and it also serves as a premonition for what is to come when the Boondogle actually kidnaps her sister.

Secondly, the dream underlines the film’s central dramatic question: *Will Zinzi overcome her debilitating fear?* Zinzi’s dream articulates her terror, and through the dream she brings to animated life the Boondogle. The answer to Zinzi’s dramatic question is finally answered during the film’s climax, when she destroys the badge she created during this nightmare, symbolically conquering her fear. Yet the Boondogle not only represents Zinzi’s fear but also her desire — in that she no doubt wishes for a powerful, magical fairy-godmother figure to wave a magic wand and provide much needed help in the seemingly insurmountable tasks she faces. Freud maintains that every dream is the articulation of a wish, in disguise.⁵⁵ After Freud, one could view Zinzi as unconsciously wishing to be rid of her baby sister due to the pains of responsibility, and this would be entirely consistent with the pact with the Boondogle, which leads to her sister’s kidnapping — albeit unwittingly so for Zinzi. It is this proximity of dreams and desire that makes the Boondogle a kind of double for Zinzi herself, and confronting him is a way of confronting and coming to terms with *her own* power, and with *her own* dark side.

Thirdly, the dream needs to convey a message pivotal to the film as a whole: that we are, to some extent, in charge of our destinies. It is crucial to the film’s meaning that the Boondogle does not appear arbitrarily out of the ether, like a genie, but that he is seen to be the product of Zinzi’s powerful imagination. For this reason, there needs to be precise inter-cutting between Zinzi’s dream images and her hands working in autopilot: for the dream thoughts are made quite literally manifest.

Zinzi's awakening from her dream is shown by her sudden jolt, and her drowsing off again needs to be as clearly communicated to the audience by the closing of her eyelids, and the drooping of her head. Potter points out that new filmmakers often feel that simple solutions like showing a character wake up are too obvious or clichéd.⁵⁶ She asserts that while it is important to be subtle when the material demands it, it is also important to know when to be direct.⁵⁷ In this case, the confusion inherent in the structuring of *Perfect Blue* works by way of counterpoint example: for it seems that for its target audience, the dream scene in *Zinzi and the Boondogle* is quite complex enough, and that clarity in its direction will be critical.

Zinzi's dream, in containing an allegory of sorts, keeps with the cinematic tradition whereby oneiric sequences are suffused with figurative meanings. In its unabashed symbolic language, it is my hope that Zinzi's dream will reflect the Freudian notion of condensation, whereby multiple meanings are contained within one image.⁵⁸ Whereas such devices are unlikely to be apparent to children on a conscious level, they should create a sense of depth and mystery. In particular, the element of rain in the dream sequence should serve as an image of condensation. In her dream, countless beads pour down on Zinzi and her siblings. On a literal level, this recalls the miserable rain of the funeral, and echoes the actual rain pounding down on the tin roof as Zinzi dreams. The landlady has earlier commented on it with an incredulous "Rain in summer! Something odd in the air, I can feel it." The unseasonable rain suggests that something odd is afoot – so prefiguring the Boondogle's arrival. The nightmare rain echoes this real rain, and underlines Zinzi's terror as to what would happen if they were to be evicted from their home and exposed to the elements. The fact that the rain is made of beads should furthermore stress the task Zinzi has to complete to avoid the eviction: a task that – like the bead river – threatens to drown her. It is in keeping with Zinzi's terror of failure that the beads are also the substance from which the Boondogle materialises. Thus the bead rain is intended to condense a number of interrelated meanings in a way characteristic of dream motifs.

Crucially, the bead river that flows down the street foreshadows the fantastical bead world, where everything from buildings to people will be made of beads. In fact, the bead rain trope will be used to animate the transportation of the children from the real – to the bead world at the start of Act Three. Just as Kon tailors *anime* techniques to express Mima's mental state, it is my intention to exploit animation's potential to convey interiority. Thus Zinzi's inner trance-like state, as she moves through a liminal zone between realms, is visually portrayed by the morphing patterns in her mind's eye.

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD PDF](#) *Zinzi – Extract 2*

The Boondogle who rises up out of the beads can also be viewed as a condensation in himself — a fusion monster. He is a creature born of Zinzi's nightmare, and as such, it is useful to draw on Noël Carroll's discussion about the composition of fantastic beings in "Nightmare and the Horror Film". As I discussed in looking at the creation of Mima's double in *Perfect Blue*, Carroll identifies two means of creating nightmare creatures: fusion and fission.⁵⁹ Whereas Mima's *doppelgänger* fits into the latter category of fission, the Boondogle clearly represents a fusion, entailing the "construction of creatures that

transgress categorical distinctions”.⁶⁰ The Boondogle crosses the distinctions between baboon, dolphin and eagle, and in so doing, combines the qualities traditionally associated with these creatures: guile for the baboon, playfulness for the dolphin and strength for the eagle — associations both positive and negative. According to Carroll, “The fusion of conflicting tendencies in the figure of the monster in horror films has the dream process of condensation as its approximate psychic prototype”.⁶¹ The Boondogle fuses and condenses together conflicting tendencies, for instead of being merely repulsive, he should carry a certain appeal to make him a more engaging antagonist. Certainly, Zinzi’s relationship to him is curiously ambivalent — as should be that of the viewer. Zinzi patently needs the Boondogle’s help and so has to court him; but fears his mischief, which inevitably turns to outright malevolence. Indubitably, though, the Boondogle’s presence in her life ultimately benefits Zinzi: in order to stand up to his strength, she has to become stronger in herself. The antagonist is necessary for her growth. As Bruno Bettelheim puts it in relation to fairy tales, “internal processes are externalised and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events”.⁶²

Similarly, *Zinzi and the Boondogle* aims to communicate Zinzi’s inner journey through an outer one. To overcome her debilitating fear, she has to struggle with the fantasy monster that she “dreams up”. The Boondogle is not confined to Zinzi’s dreams, but — like Mima’s doppelgänger — invades her waking life. Yet, his presence remains ambivalent, for instance in a mirror sequence following the Boondogle’s second visit. With a creeping awareness of the Boondogle’s capacity for harm, Zinzi is at an emotional low-ebb.

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD PDF *Zinzi – Extract 3*](#)

Zinzi brushes her teeth, staring in dismay at her dishevelled, exhausted self, in the tarnished bathroom mirror, when suddenly alongside her reflection appears that of the Boondogle. Zinzi turns quickly to face him, but he is not there; when she looks back into the mirror, his reflection again leers at her. She swings away from the mirror once more — furious at his games. But the Boondogle is nowhere to be seen. She is quite alone. The mirror is used to portray the Boondogle as a projection of Zinzi’s fear, at a moment when she is deeply afraid. This brings to mind the first arrival of Mima’s *doppelgänger* in *Perfect Blue* — as a reflection in the train window after a fraught first day on set. Mima is beset by self-doubt, panicking that she is seeing things. We, like Zinzi, are unsure whether or not she is imagining the Boondogle’s presence — just as we are unsure whether or not Mima’s double is real.

It is my hope that the Boondogle himself will escape easy labelling as real or unreal. It ought to be possible for a viewer to read him as a psychological projection, or alternatively as an independent creature that really exists. For in a sense he straddles these two categories: he is created within Zinzi’s dream, yet he is nonetheless visible to the other characters. The Boondogle is eerily present, fleshy and real on the one hand, yet frustratingly elusive on the other — much like our dreams, perhaps?

Conclusion

This paper has focussed on Satoshi Kon's highly effective dream sequences in order to counter pedagogical warnings against the use of cinematic dreams. The paper has attempted to show how dream is employed in *Perfect Blue* to reflect Mima's psychology, to illuminate her central dramatic question, and to communicate what Kon is trying to say. I have then gone on to interrogate the text of *Zinzi and the Boondogle* along the same lines.

Firstly, in terms of reflecting Mima's state of mind, the use of nightmare imagery is in keeping with Mima's disarrayed psyche — the unpredictable transitions between dream and reality underlining her confusion. Zinzi does not suffer the same confusion, but the nightmare imagery contained in the Boondogle is very much a projection of her innermost fear.

Secondly, the dream sequences, together with the use of the *doppelgänger*, bespeak the theme of identity in *Perfect Blue*, and constantly reiterate Mima's dramatic question: *Will she find her true self?* Mima at last provides an answer in the film's final line, with a chirpy "Yes, I'm real". She voices her assertion over the film's concluding shot, which shows Mima's reflection in her car's rear-view mirror, looking back composed, *sans* any shadow self. Similarly, Zinzi's pivotal dream in bringing the Boondogle — her fear incarnate — to life underscores her central dramatic question: *Will she overcome her debilitating fear?* Zinzi finally answers the abiding question in the film's climax, in destroying her nightmare projection, and so conquering her fear.

Finally, the treatment of dream is crucial to both films' messages, as it were. The use of dream that invades and subsumes Mima's existence — veritably tearing her apart before she can piece herself together once more — conveys *Perfect Blue's* central point about the necessity of finding oneself, and one's place in the world, through struggle and exploration, and through a process of "self-reflection". Along the same lines, the appearance of the Boondogle within the context of Zinzi's dream suggests that we are, to some extent, in charge of our destinies. It is crucial to the film's meaning that the Boondogle does not appear arbitrarily out of the ether, like a genie, but that he is seen to be the projection of Zinzi's fear-ridden unconscious — a figure then that she can ultimately confront and destroy.

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