Dreams and Reality in Paprika (Reginald Pierce)

How real are dreams? This is the question posed by Satoshi Kon's animated film Paprika. Paprika explores the relationship between technology and our perceptions of dreams and reality. By exploring the theme of technology in Paprika and other Satoshi Kon films a clear message can be seen. Reality and dreams have similar natures, and our perceptions of them can be changed by technology. Paprika is optimistic about technology, but cautions us to use it responsibly so as not to damage our lives.

The focal object in the film is a device called the DC Mini, designed by psychiatric researchers to peer into dreams of patients. The device is very promising and the film illustrates its uses and dangers. The DC Mini is a creation of the enormously fat Dr. Tokita, a researcher at a psychiatric research center. Also involved in the development is the stern young female scientist Dr. Chiba and the dwarfish Dr. Chima, known as "Chief." The device has not yet won public approval, so the doctors are not supposed to use it for treatment. Neither are they supposed to use the capability to become part of the dream, an untested new feature. However, Dr. Chiba has begun to secretly begin to treat some close acquaintances (including Dr. Tokita) through the persona of "Paprika" a more vibrant, carefree alter-ego of her cold and reserved self.

Unfortunately, because of the incompleteness of the device, terrorists steal it and use it to implant malicious dreams into the subconscious of waking people. What we don’t find out until nearly the end is that the Chairman of the research facility is the terrorist. His motive was to “safeguard the dream world” by sullying the reputation of the DC Mini. Instead of doing so, he is swept up by the power granted by the device and creates a shared dream between all of the movies characters that spills over into real life so that he, who is unable to walk in real life, can be "perfect". Many people would find it hard to accept that dreams and reality could merge, so Paprika provides some concrete examples.

The word dream can mean goal or aspiration and this wordplay is exploited by Paprika to help illustrate the message of the film. As dreams begin to merge in the movie, Dr. Tokita speaks of the DC Mini itself being a collective dream because it was the dream of both himself and his assistant and the “entire development team dream of its completion.” The conclusion drawn in the movie is that “The crossing of two dreams creates many more dreams.” We find it easy to accept this message because it is couched in terms of experiences that we all have. Few of us would call our dreams false or illusory, but our goals are not physical objects and no one else knows of any of these goals unless we describe a goal to them. This is consistent with nighttime dreams.

Paprika also compares the Internet with dreams. Though we usually consider the Internet to be “real” and our dreams to be “illusions,” both are products of our imagination that exist outside of our corporeal selves. When Detective Konakawa, a patient suffering from recurring nightmares, seems surprised to see Paprika in the site radioclub.jp, Paprika asks him “Don’t you think the Internet and dreams are very similar?” Her argument rings true. On the Internet, as in our dreams, we experience anonymity and we have a chance to create our own reality. As in dreams, we have the chance to be free of the restrictions of time, space, and our corporeal selves. To put it as Paprika does, “The Internet and dreams are the means of expressing the inhibitions of mankind.”

In the previous two examples it is easy to see the connection between reality, dreams, and the Internet. Both aspirations and the Internet are certainly part of reality; things we experience all the time. Though nighttime dreams do not occur every day 1, they are still part of reality. Conversely, reality is part of dreams and the Internet. Our goals are based on our real experiences and so is the Internet. Additionally, psychologists have found that nighttime dreams can be a way for our brains to organize and make sense of our recent real-life experiences 2, further showing the link between reality and dreams. What then, is the difference?

To find a satisfactory answer, we need to explore other works by Satoshi Kon and how he uses “the gaze”. According to the theory of “the gaze”, media is generally created with female performances for male audiences who collectively form “the gaze.” Perfect Blue provides an optimal window through which to illustrate gaze theory as used by Satoshi Kon. In this film about a young woman going through a transition from pop singer to actress, “the gaze” is used for exploring character identity. Mima, our main character, is tormented by the negative reaction of her fans and by what appear to be apparitions of her former identity. This persistent, piercing gaze of society combined with the stress of seeing what appears to be an alternate version of herself makes start to lose her sanity. Susan Napier, in her analysis of Perfect Blue, addresses this issue. In a scene from near the beginning of the film the main character is seen staring at her reflection in a train window. According to Napier, this signifies that “even this ‘true’ identity is vulnerable to the gaze of others, including herself.” This fact that we don’t really know our own identity is interesting, and connects well with Paprika.

As previously mentioned, Dr. Chiba always treats patients in the character of “Paprika.” This is true up to the point where dreams and reality begin merging, at which point she is seen as herself in dreams. Since our minds create the dreams, the only rational explanation is that she now perceives herself differently in dreams. The solution is simple: Our perceptions are affected by the gaze of others. As we move from dreams to reality we see a continuum of changing gazes. In dreams we own a universe all to ourselves, seen only in our minds’ eye. Aspirations are likewise self-created, but they are liable to be changed by those we share those dreams with. On the Internet, we are still semi-anonymous which one of the reasons why we behave differently there 4. In real life we can be seen by all those around us. Paprika crosses those boundaries by merging the dreams of everyone. Since all dreams then become public, it is impossible to tell where reality ends and dreams take hold.

Though this explains the merging of dreams in Paprika, it doesn’t fully explore the theme of technology. In both Paprika and Perfect Blue television plays a role as a perception changing technology. In Perfect Blue the main character is an actress who finds herself confusing her TV personality with her real life. In Paprika, characters literally escape by diving into a TV and out the camera lens. These symbols are complementary. Satoshi Kon, in an interview with The New York Times, was quoted as saying that “In Japan not just children but adults in their 20s and 30s will chose anime and manga as a means of escape from their real lives.” This is symbolized by the escape through the television. Kon then went on to caution against letting our real lives deteriorate as a result of too much technology. The interview was for the release of Paprika, but we see that this message was embedded in both Paprika and Perfect Blue. It isn’t a warning against use, but against misuse. Technology, anime, and manga all have their place in the world, but can create detrimental effects if misused.

This message is a common Japanese perspective 5. Paprika is optimistic about the possibilities of the DC Mini, which is always portrayed as a delicate, elegantly designed instrument, folding nicely at the push of a button. At the conclusion of the movie it appears that it will be approved for use, albeit with restrictions to curb unauthorized use. This is also the attitude that Paprika takes toward TV, and it can be applied to everything in the movie. We need to be responsible in our lives, in our dreams, and with our creations. It is oft quoted in the film that dreams are sacred, and the same applies to our lives.
2 ibid.