

Paprika and The Importance of Dreams - Nikko Schaff (Final)

There can be a lot said for the power of dreams. On one hand, they have been the sources of inspiration and new thought for all who retain and interpret the limitless imaginative power of the bare subconscious. On the other, they have helped provide philosophers and psychologists an abundance of theoretical and analytical instances with which to derive theories on the human mind. Yet, in our advancing age of technology much of what is now considered bygone and decrepit, dreams seem to be wrongly losing their importance in our society. For anime director Satoshi Kon, keeping dreams preserved as integral parts of existence is paramount.

Satoshi Kon has always been a deep advocate for the importance of dreams. In an interview regarding his dream-oriented movie, "Paprika", he states, when referring to a central plot element of a parade of crazy, living, dream-like objects, that they contain "very old characters like objects that are discarded by people today," and then goes on to say that "even nowadays, people have forgotten the importance of dreams."¹ But why are dreams so important? Satoshi Kon delivers the powerful argument with his movie, "Paprika."

"Paprika", on the surface, is a movie about how a device that allows conscious traversal through people's dreams. However, much deeper down, the movie explains the real problem with treating dreams carelessly, less as a vital component of life, and more of a meaningless, fleeting event between sleeping and waking up. Much of this fear is represented in the cryptic, and later, corrupted, character of the Chairman, who runs a company that builds the "DC-Mini," the offending device.

Although the Chairman's personal history is never explicitly shown, it is at least clear that his personal philosophies are focused around the belief that observation changes results. Like quantum physics, where measuring an electron's position loses the ability to detect momentum and vice versa, dreams are untouchable instances of existence that cannot be tampered with. As was shown in the movie, once dreams were being invaded, they began to overlap and take on a destructive nature.

The manifestation of the overlapped dreams was a large, frenetic parade of anything a mind, or subconscious in dream, could envision. Using a parade was preferable as a metaphor was in the typical action of a parade: one of excited and unstoppable celebration. While from the outside, the characters of the movie saw the dream parade as a blind rush towards "a place of no return," in a sense, the end of all things. Yet they simultaneously celebrated the advent of the creation of the DC-Mini. While the human creation of a device that allows people of reality to traverse dreams looked like a wonderful revolutionary creation, the concept of dreams spilling into reality was a horrifying possibility. Who are we then, to decide what we may do to affect dreams directly, if thinking dreams could do the same to our reality is verboten?

Just about everything the Chairman says seems to be long prepared in advance so that the philosophy is rock-solid, reasonable, seeing as his only appearances seem to be when he is within some form of sanctuary of plants and organic life, indicative of his devotion to preserving nature. He often growls about the device, and how the ability to go into the dreams of others is "destroying dreams."

Although the Chairman is the greatest villain in the story, he, not the lovable and spunky Paprika, is the character Satoshi Kon seems to be imparting most of his philosophy onto. He (Kon) has a long history of regarding the nature of dreams to be sacred. As he said once in an interview, "we don't always experience things rationally."² Just as similar experiences overlap given current ones, subjective experiences can overlap and influence the objective.

It is also the overlap that is crucial to understanding the meaning of the film. Balance, as the argument seems to go, is necessary in order for things to be understood. At the end of the film, when all is but doomed, it's the insertion of balance into the system that sets everything back to normal. As was written in the OtakuUS Magazine review of the movie, "[the main characters] have to learn to release their psychic pressure valves in order to do battle with nightmares in the world of dreams"³ The movie is also reminiscent of this opinion, when the carelessness of the free use of the DC-Mini causes dreams and reality to merge, which, when imbalanced with the now-corrupted Chairman, ends up nearly destroying both. From this aspect, "Paprika" posits that dreams are what they are, and they should not be changed or altered from their present state. Satoshi Kon doesn't believe dreams are to be avoided, but rather that "In the morning daze after a dream you go over it wondering what it meant."² This is far from the director's first foray in experimenting with understanding perception.

In his most-recognized debut, "Perfect Blue," he also carries similar themes of understanding reality when the picture is skewed. As was written in a segment of a book on anime and cinema about "Perfect Blue," "Perceptions cannot be trusted. Again and again throughout the narrative, Kon sets the viewer up... only to pull back to show that it is happening on television or on stage."⁴ The alteration of perspective causing a change in how the audience views things is a hallmark of Satoshi Kon. When asked about why he chose to deviate on the script of "Perfect Blue" from that of the original novel, he said, "The storytelling aspects interest me much more. Looking at things objectively or subjectively gives two very different images."⁵

Much of the same can be said for "Paprika". There is a strong undercurrent in the movie of filmmaking, and at one point there is a scene where a character explains how certain cinematographic techniques can make or break a segment of the movie. The theme of perspective then loops back to the central meaning of the film, when the crossing of dreams, the sacred, personal experiences, causes an exponential expansion of dreams that take on their own identity and begin to devour reality.

Like in "Perfect Blue," Satoshi Kon strongly portrays the danger of a society that is increasingly developed, connected, and full of information. In such a society, personal, "unsharable" experiences, like the full extent of one's dreams, are in many ways, the last refuge of nature. While almost every physical aspect of the universe is constantly being discovered, categorized, and at some point or other, alterable, dreams are the one place where humanity can remain subjective and within themselves. As with "Perfect Blue," the director shows the example of the subjective being stripped from the self, and the absolute havoc that results.

Satoshi Kon is a traditional auteur in a multitude of ways. He often thinks of ideas in the context of how they could work in films, rather than just good stories. He prefers to work with people he has done work with before, so his portrayal is that much more manageable. Yet he also sticks to his guns when dealing with his personal philosophies. As "Paprika" is meant to show, the world is too interconnected to ignore, but using the same strategy for the objective on the subjective is like comparing apples and oranges. Mostly by smashing them against each other. And they're filled with acetylene and nitroglycerin.

- 1 "Paprika: Interview with Satoshi Kon." Interview by Romain Le Vern. DVDrama. Excessif.com. Web. 02 Oct. 2010. Interview discussing Paprika, Satoshi Kon mentions that dreams are in danger of being viewed as obsolete.
- 2 Aguiar, Bill. "Robofish : Tp Article - TOKYOPOP." HOME - TOKYOPOP. 25 Apr. 2007. Web. 02 Oct. 2010. <http://www.tokyopop.com/Robofish/tp_article/688419.html>. Satoshi Kon describes subjective and objective reality, and their significance.
- 3 Davis, Julie. "Paprika." Otaku USA 30 Nov. 2007. Web. The reviewer points out that it is the power of the unconscious minds that are necessary in order to overcome the conflict.
- 4 Brown, Steven T. Cinema Anime: Critical Engagements with Japanese Animation. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print. The author of this section discusses how Satoshi Kon uses perception as a method for guiding the narrative.
- 5 Miles, Tom. "Midnight Eye Interview: Satoshi Kon." Midnight Eye - The Latest and Best in Japanese Cinema - Interviews, Features, Film Reviews, Book Reviews, Calendar of Events and DVD Releases, Links and More... 11 Feb. 2001. Web. 02 Oct. 2010. <http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/satoshi_kon.shtml>. Satoshi Kon talks about why he likes using subjective and objective perspectives as a technique for his films.