

*This is an original manuscript / preprint of an article published by SAGE in ANIMATION: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL on 23 Mar 2020, available online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/HVWZ4DXPK7GADMMREHRV/full>*

## **Making sense of complex narration in *Perfect Blue***

**Antonio Loriguillo-López**

Universitat Jaume I of Castellón, Spain

loriguil@uji.es

Postal address: Office HC1048DD, Departamento de Ciencias de la Comunicación, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales, Universitat Jaume I de Castellón. Campus del Riu Sec, Av. Sos Baynat, s/n, E-12071 Castellón de la Plana

**José Antonio Palao-Errando**

Universitat Jaume I of Castellón, Spain

**Javier Marzal-Felici**

Universitat Jaume I of Castellón, Spain

## **Abstract**

Although it has been identified as a feature of the film by both critics and researchers, the narrative complexity of *Perfect Blue* (dir. Satoshi Kon, Madhouse, 1997) has been ambiguously defined. In this article, we examine the complex narration in Kon's first feature film, equivocal and obscure in its more confusing points, through a narratological analysis of the film's most ambiguous scenes. Using the concepts of cognitive film theory introduced by David Bordwell and Edward Branigan, we link its approach in terms of the modulation of information flow throughout the film—high knowledgeability, high self-consciousness and (occasionally) low communicativeness—with the conventions of the slasher genre. Our analysis of the more perplexing scenes is reinforced by monitoring the veiled changes of focalisation between the film's three focalisers: Mima, Uchida (aka Me-Mania), and Rumi. On this point we explore how the narration—in the tradition of puzzle films—makes use of judgements, preconceptions and cognitive illusions in spectator activity to conceal Rumi's involvement in the persecution of Mima and in the murders committed. In the conclusion, we associate the film's complex narration with its critical commentary on the representation of Japanese pop idols (and former idols) and the state of audiovisual entertainment in Japan.

## **Keywords**

Anime, puzzle films, Japanese idol, psycho-thriller, media representation, film

narratology, complex narration, cognitivism

## Introduction

Satoshi Kon is considered one of the most significant figures in Japanese commercial animation, a status due in part to the narrative complexity of his feature films and animated television series, which are thematically very different from the clichés of most commercial anime. His status as an auteur, a label attributed to him by both cinephiles and critics, is reinforced by his constant identification as one of the most popular filmmakers in anime studies, where academic research covering his whole filmography<sup>1</sup> has continued even since his death in 2010.

*Perfect Blue* was the directorial début for Kon, who until then had been known as a *mangaka*, animator and screenwriter for anime productions<sup>2</sup> under the protection of Katsuhiro Ōtomo. The film has been the subject of publications with methodologies ranging from feminist theory (Napier, 2006) and fan studies (Ogg, 2006; Norris, 2012) to the identity crisis in the Japanese horror film genre (Iles, 2008), ethics (Perkins, 2012), and representations of psychology in the animated medium (Rickards, 2006; Choo, 2014). Most of these studies identify narrative complexity as one of the defining features of the film:

— “a complex and stylish psycho-thriller [...] *Perfect Blue* is far more complex than a conventional horror film” (Napier, 2006: 23-32);

- “layered narration” (Rickards, 2006: 6);
- “Kon’s seemingly post-modern, divorced from linear narratives and well-defined boundaries of real and imagined” (Perkins, 2012: 131);
- “its narrative style that blurs the real and fictional” (Norris, 2012: 73).

However, these essays all prioritise the application of theory to a textual analysis, a characteristic feature of the predominantly culturalist approaches in anime studies, which has the effect of simplifying the complex storytelling of the films in order to focus on the sociocultural reality to which the story refers. In opposition to such culturalist approaches is the heuristic of narratology, whose inductive methodology is based more on a detailed examination of the surface of the text than on its paratextual implications. In the case of *Perfect Blue*, the omission of a crucial point of the story’s conclusion in the academic studies mentioned above highlights a need for a critical revision of the film. For example, in what is possibly the most oft-quoted analysis of the picture, Susan Napier identifies both the complex storytelling and Kon’s “metacritical consciousness” of Japanese society (2006: 24), and, despite the absence in her study of narratological terminology, she stresses the importance of the focalisation on Rumi in the final scenes: “it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is Rumi’s twisted gaze that is the most important one in the movie” (2006: 33). However, Napier’s essay still fails to highlight the close relationship of Rumi’s “psychotic overidentification” (2006: 29) with her

experiences as a former pop idol now working for a *jimusho*,<sup>3</sup> or with the precarious working conditions of Japanese idols in general, a question of increasing interest to scholars specialising in the Japanese entertainment industry.

## **Theoretical framework and methodology**

The case of a puzzle film like *Perfect Blue*, whose most prominent feature is its complex storytelling, requires an inductive analysis focusing on the narration's textual surface to interpret its tangled *syuzhet*. To do this, we take as our reference the methodology used by Warren Buckland (2009) in his analysis of one of the most paradigmatic puzzle films of all, *Lost Highway* (dir. David Lynch, 1997). In his analysis, Buckland makes use of both the categories for studying narration developed by David Bordwell (1985: 54-62) and the classification of focalisation and types of shots proposed by Edward Branigan (1992: 86-114).

In his explorations of the stylistic and narrative features of the different modes of narration proposed in his historical poetics of cinema, Bordwell employs three categories to characterise the strategies of information transmission to the spectator used by the narration, for the purpose of conducting an effective analysis of the way in which the film's style and plot construction manipulate time, space and narrative logic to enable the spectator to construct a particular unfolding of the story:

1. The first of these is *knowledgeability*, which in turn depends on:

- 1.1. The range of *restriction*. Is our knowledge of the story limited to what a particular character knows, as in the case of Jeff in *Rear Window* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)? This would be a highly restricted narration. Or conversely, does the narration offer more information than any single character in the diegesis could possibly possess? In this case, we would be dealing with a more unrestricted narration, common among films with multiple protagonists.
- 1.2. The degree of *depth* of the information, which bears a direct relation to the subjectivity of the knowledge: the greater the depth, the greater the subjectivity. Thus, low levels of depth are limited to what a character sees and/or hears (the ocularisation on Jeff looking through his binoculars in *Rear Window*), while a high level of depth would allow us to see subjective mental processes such as daydreams and delusions.
2. The second category is *self-consciousness*, the extent to which the narration displays a recognition that it is addressing an audience. Enunciative markers, like the voyeuristic view of the courtyard through the windows in *Rear Window*, with a clearly expository function, are obvious signs of self-consciousness. The degree of self-consciousness of these kinds of markers—which also include repetitions, breaking down the fourth wall, and voice-overs—depends largely on how the revelation of the existence of the narration to the audience conditions the plot within the conventions of the genre (e.g. the high self-consciousness of a character addressing the camera is

relative in musicals due to its status as a genre convention) and the modes of production (e.g. despite their self-consciousness, close-ups of stars are a convention of classical Hollywood cinema).

3. Thirdly, Bordwell refers to *communicativeness*,<sup>4</sup> the degree of effective communication of information to the spectator permitted by the narration in relation to an estimate of the maximum amount possible. This maximum is determined to a large extent by the range of the previous two categories. The restrictive narration of *Rear Window* is nevertheless notably communicative, given that throughout most of the movie it gives us access to what Jeff knows (greater depth), except at moments where, breaking with the norms established by the film for the other categories, it makes the gaps in Jeff's knowledge explicit, which in turn is associated with the film's adherence to the routines of the detective genre: "the narration could tell more, but it doesn't" (Bordwell, 1985: 59), a mark of moderate self-consciousness. This is an especially useful category for making such gaps in the narration explicit, resulting from a deviation from a film's internal norm of communicativeness, and to give weight to transtextual motivations, such as genre (suspense in the mystery film, surprise in the horror genre), with respect to intrinsic structural demands.

Although, as Bordwell himself notes, "[i]n general, narrative films are constantly modulating the range and depth of the narration's knowledge" (1985: 58), turning our attention to the development of such modulations, especially in the more complex stages

of the film, can help shed light on the ambiguity of the “narrative complexity” label.

### **Proposed narrative sequencing of *Perfect Blue***

For the segmentation of the film we have used the scene as the unit of analysis, privileging the application of a methodology favourable to narratology. Using this procedure, we have identified three basic structural blocks:

1. From idol to actress: introduction to Mima’s changing life.
2. The peak of the internal and external persecution.
3. Blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction.

As most previous studies of *Perfect Blue* have done, we identify Mima’s transition from pop idol to actress as the narrative catalyst. This transition is represented by the filming of the rape scene in *Double Bind*, whose acceptance by Mima also marks the beginning of her psychological torment in the form of the apparitions of “Idol Mima”. We locate the transition between the second and the third block in the series of repetitions of Mima waking up in her room preceded by fades to white. Based on this, the narrative sequencing of the film can be mapped as follows:

1. From idol to actress: introduction to Mima’s changing life.
  - 1.1. CHAM! concert and first threat.
    - 1.1.1. Before the concert and main title shot (scene 1).
    - 1.1.2. Introduction to Mima (scenes 2, 4-8).
    - 1.1.3. Concert (scene 3).
    - 1.1.4. Leaving the concert (scene 9).



- 1.1.5. Letter about *Mima's Room* and threats via fax (scene 10).
- 1.2. Début on *Double Bind*
  - 1.2.1. Filming on TV set (scene 11).
  - 1.2.2. Rumi sets up Internet for Mima (scene 12).
  - 1.2.3. Broadcast of *Double Bind* (scene 13).
  - 1.2.4. Reaction of the *jimusho* to Mima's début (scene 14).
  - 1.2.5. Reaction of the *otaku* to Mima's debut (scene 15).
- 1.3. Mima's day-to-day life as a new actress.
  - 1.3.1. Panic attack on the train (scene 16).
  - 1.3.2. At the *jimusho* office (scene 17).
  - 1.3.3. Flashback to début of CHAM! (scene 18).
  - 1.3.4. Episode of *Double Bind* (scene 19).
  - 1.3.5. *Double Bind* outdoor shoot (scene 20).
- 1.4. Rape scene
  - 1.4.1. Discussion of the proposal at the *jimusho* (scene 21).
  - 1.4.2. Apparition of "Idol Mima" (scene 22).
  - 1.4.3. Filming, delusion, changing room and car (scenes 23-26).
  - 1.4.4. Depressed in her apartment (scene 27).
  - 1.4.5. Uchida's criticism on *Mima's Room* (scene 28).
- 2. Peak of internal and external persecution
  - 2.1. Rise to fame
    - 2.1.1. Mima's new public image and response of the *otaku* (scenes 29-32).
    - 2.1.2. Mima reads *Mima's Room* (scene 33).
  - 2.2. Shibuya's murder (scene 34).
  - 2.3. CHAM! concert and photo shoot.
    - 2.3.1. Before CHAM! concert in a shopping mall (scene 35).
    - 2.3.2. Mima tries to pursue "Idol Mima" (scene 36).
    - 2.3.3. Rumi calls CHAM! to order (scene 37).
    - 2.3.4. Mima's photo shoot (scene 38).
    - 2.3.5. CHAM! concert (scene 39).
    - 2.3.6. Mima's confrontation with "Idol Mima" (scene 40).
    - 2.3.7. "Idol Mima U" appears at the CHAM! concert (scene 41).
    - 2.3.8. Post-concert (scenes 42 and 43).
  - 2.4. Uchida troubled about publication of photos (scene 44).
  - 2.5. Uchida receives an email in his room (scene 45).
- 3. Blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction
  - 3.1. First fade to white.
    - 3.1.1. *Double Bind* outdoor shoot (scene 46).
    - 3.1.2. Tadakoro and Mima visit CHAM! (scene 47).

- 3.1.3. Mima pursues “Idol Mima” (scenes 48 -49).
- 3.2. Second fade to white.
  - 3.2.1. Mima wakes up in her bed and Rumi arrives (scene 50).
  - 3.2.2. *Double Bind* outdoor shoot (scene 51).
- 3.3. Third fade to white.
  - 3.3.1. Mima wakes up in her bed and Rumi arrives (scene 52).
  - 3.3.2. Mima reads *Mima’s Room* (scene 53).
  - 3.3.3. Diagnosis of psychiatrist on *Double Bind* (scene 54).
  - 3.3.4. Murano’s murder (scene 55).
- 3.4. Fourth fade to white.
  - 3.4.1. Mima wakes up in her bed (scene 56).
  - 3.4.2. Filming of stabbing scene on *Double Bind* (scene 57).
- 3.5. Fifth fade to white.
  - 3.5.1. Mima wakes up in her bed (scene 58).
  - 3.5.2. Filming of final scene on *Double Bind* (scene 59).
- 3.6. Sixth fade to white.
  - 3.6.1. Uchida attacks Mima (scene 60).
  - 3.6.2. Tadakoro and Rumi talk about Mima’s future (scene 61).
  - 3.6.3. Mima kills Uchida in self-defence (scene 62-63).
  - 3.6.4. Rumi picks up Mima in her car (scene 64).
- 3.7. Rumi’s psychotic break.
  - 3.7.1. Rumi attacks Mima (scene 65).
  - 3.7.2. Bodies of Tadakoro and Uchida (scene 66)
  - 3.7.3. Chase scene (scene 67).
  - 3.7.4. Final struggle and daybreak (scene 68).
- 4. Epilogue (scenes 69-70).

## **Overview of narration in *Perfect Blue***

The narration in *Perfect Blue* exhibits two of the features described by Eleftheria Thanouli in her theory of the mode of narration of post-classical cinema (2009: 173-203) based on the categories defined by Bordwell:

- The degree of *self-consciousness* is explicitly high. Far from the stylistic discretion of classical cinema, the narration is made conspicuous in the film from beginning to end—for example, through the intensified fragmentation of time and space in the concatenation of scenes introducing Mima (although this series of scenes is intelligible and fulfils its purpose as an introduction to the diegetic world)—as is the presence of parody—the television series *Double Bind*, from its affected soundtrack to its turbulent production. These are the two key elements that illustrate the meta-reflection of the text in which they appear.
- High degree of *knowledgeability*. The narration makes use of a considerable degree of *depth*, whereby the spectator has access to the mental activity of a small group of characters through a variable and complex game of profound internal focalisations (highly *restricted* narration) on the Mima-Uchida-Rumi trio.

It is the degree of *communicativeness* that is worthy of a more detailed discussion because, in contrast with the narrative pattern of post-classical cinema, it is low. If, as Thanouli argues, self-consciousness in post-classicism does not come into conflict with communicative clarity (2009: 181), in this film we have a narration that aims to conceal the causal relations that could reveal the identity of Mima's stalker. The dominant narration is explicitly self-conscious, but also obscure in communicative terms, partly due to the adherence of *Perfect Blue* to the conventions of the slasher genre<sup>5</sup> (Coëgnarts and Kiss, 2017). However, the existence of knowledge gaps after the resolution is also a

quality of puzzle films, half-way between post-classical storytelling and the mode of narration of art cinema with its campaign against the hegemonic pleasure of the movie experience. From the low level of communicativeness and the creation of knowledge gaps related to Rumi's culpability, in the next section we turn our attention to the modulation of focalisation and the processes of judgement formulation on the part of the spectators.

**Table 1.** Summary of our assessments of the categories of narrative strategies proposed by Bordwell (1985: 54-62) in *Perfect Blue*. Source: compiled by authors.

Knowledgeability		Self-consciousness	Communicativeness
<i>Restriction</i>	<i>Depth</i>		
High	High	Constantly high	Low

## Complexity in focalisation

“Should a spectator’s interpretation end with the end, or begin at the end?” Edward Branigan (2014: 249)

The conclusion to *Perfect Blue* is shocking for the spectator. Rumi, Mima’s most loyal confidante, is revealed to be the murderous mastermind behind the persecution of the protagonist. But the final twist is not limited to the *fabula*. The revelation of Rumi as a psychotic who thinks she is Mima (her reflection in the mirrors is that of the idol) compels spectators to retroactively reformulate all their hypotheses about the more ambiguous moments of the film, and, ultimately, about the film’s discourse as well, as what seemed to be a harsh portrait of the obsessive *otaku*<sup>6</sup> subculture in the early days of the Internet turns into an exploration of an ugly underbelly of the Japanese entertainment

industry: the harrowing working conditions of the female pop idol.<sup>7</sup>

The narrative complexity of *Perfect Blue* is primarily the product of a narration whose different narrative levels are manifestly entangled, and which makes use of the (highly improbable) similarities between the delusions and real experiences of Rumi, Mima and Uchida and their selective modalisation over the course the story. The similarities between delusions are supported graphically by match cuts, a strategy that seems to reflect the narrative axis on the expressive level. Until the last few minutes of the film, the spectator attributes the murders committed in the diegesis to Uchida and Mima, mainly due to witnessing the psychological disorders of both characters, represented by their visions of an idealised likeness of Mima (for clarity, we will distinguish here between “Idol Mima”, seen by Mima herself, and “Idol Mima U”, seen by Uchida). How can the spectator end up crediting these impossible visions when Rumi’s involvement is not only more than feasible, but conveniently established at different points in the narration? Many of these little moments that point to Rumi appear to be of no consequence, beyond their role as triggers for rash conclusions based on preconceptions (e.g. the maternalistic or *kohai-senpai* relationship between idols as the source of Rumi’s opposition to Mima’s change of image) and are identified as irrelevant until they are recalled later in the story. It is in this subsequent recollection that spectators recognise that their understanding of the story has been founded on small but crucial errors of judgement triggered by the narration.

The objective of this section is to explore the misleading illusions and perceptual and cognitive problems that arise as we interpret the film's more ambiguous scenes. As Edward Branigan (2014) does in his analysis of *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), we will focus on the narration in these scenes to consider how spectators make meaning and formulate hypotheses based on a position that will be tested with the aid of their memory and of common psychological problem-solving strategies, giving special attention to how the narration forces spectators to take shortcuts in terms of heuristic judgements and preconceptions due to the strict limitation of their short-term memory. Drawing on psychological studies, Branigan establishes five types of *judgement heuristics* (2014: 257-258):

1. *Representativeness*: judgements based largely on the degree to which the object of judgement in question is illustrative, and how a particular example may serve to represent a larger collective or category. In our case, many of the suspicions formulated about Uchida in *Perfect Blue* are due to his *representativeness* as an *otaku*.
2. *Availability*: judgements are based on the ease of finding examples that fit the case under scrutiny, through explanations that are equally simple to create. These examples, occurrences that occur only once in isolation, become events with the potential to be considered "common". If Uchida, in his overprotective zeal, killed the troublemaker at the concert, might he have been able to take the life of Shibuya the screenwriter as well?

3. *Anchoring and adjustment*: when solving a problem, an outlandish and irrelevant starting point can have a big impact on our judgement. Is the fact that they are the authors of the change of image of a secondary actress in a series (among so many stars on television) sufficient motive for that actress to kill them, however stressful her recent popularity might be? In general, people adjust their judgements too little from an initial “anchor”.
4. *Framing*: setting a threshold for perceiving a problem has an effect on its resolution (“people are inclined to think more positively about something that has a 50 percent success rate than about the same thing if it is said that it has a 50 percent failure rate”). Branigan points out how specific filmic aspects can affect the spectator’s judgement in this respect: “[c]onsider also the impact on our judgement of such devices in film as establishing shots, initiating events, reaction shots, and suspense.”
5. *Proximity*: it is common to judge two elements that appear together as belonging together. A major principle of causal reasoning is that events prior to a resolution, merely by virtue of their spatio-temporal proximity, will be interpreted as causing that resolution. This is an especially interesting point for films due to the relationships that can be created merely by juxtaposing shots in the editing process.

Branigan also presents six types of cognitive biases and illusions (2014: 259-260):



1. *The fundamental attribution error*: we often underestimate the influence of circumstances and changing environments on behaviour, privileging static personality traits (attitude, goals, values) associated with a character over such factors.
2. *Perseverance of refuted initial beliefs*: what we believe initially often continues to have an effect on us even if it is quickly refuted. This preconception is related to the primacy effect and with *heuristic availability*.
3. *Disconfirmation*: we tend to ignore or underuse evidence that refutes our beliefs and hypotheses.
4. *Vividness*: we tend to weigh information favourably when it can be formulated vividly, i.e., “appearing in concrete, immediate, sensual, unusual, or intense form, as with imagery.” Because abstract categories or entities cannot be visualised, it is hard for us to formulate them vividly.
5. *Dilution effect*: irrelevant information tends to dilute the impact of key diagnostic information for formulating a judgement.
6. *Failure to use statistical heuristics*: failure to use reasoning processes based on randomness, correlation, sampling, covariation, etc.

But what incriminating evidence has the narration contributed in relation to Mima’s and Uchida’s involvement in the murders? And conversely, what evidence does the narration contribute to incriminate Rumi, who is ultimately revealed to be the culprit?

### *Rumi as responsible for Mima's Room*

Scenes 11 and 12 are crucial for linking Rumi to the main source of Mima's persecution: *Mima's Room*. The spectator identifies Uchida as the secret webmaster behind *Mima's Room* due to all the information presented by the narration and by his *representativeness* as an obsessive *otaku*, an element on which spectators *anchor* their judgements for much of the film. However, this information should not incriminate him given the scarcity of real evidence and because the clearer signs, identified as *biased*, point to Rumi: she was at Mima's side when she flattered Ochiai (scene 11). Although it is not a *vivid* explanation, Rumi was at the most appropriate distance to get a clear recording of the sound clip with Mima's voice that becomes available on the website, and she also demonstrates a knowledge of the Internet (scene 12). Despite the fact that these two clues should make us suspect Rumi of having something to do with *Mima's Room* and with the violent opposition to Mima's career change, her almost maternal relationship with Mima has a dilution effect on this logical association, especially if we consider how the narration stresses Rumi's apparently benevolent zeal in many of the subsequent scenes in which she appears.

In scenes 14 and 21, Rumi verbally expresses her objection to Mima's change from idol to adult actress in two different meetings at the *jimusho*. In her emphatic reaction in scene 21, her position appears to leave no doubt as to her protective attitude

towards Mima, characteristic of a mother figure and with *available* examples appearing repeatedly in the narration, e.g. her tears during the rape scene (scene 23):

- [Rumi] You're crazy! A rape scene!?
- [Tadakoro] She's the key figure in the second half of the series! It's an important role!
- [R] But Mima's a pop idol! Don't worry, Mima. We'll ask the producer and get it changed.
- [T] Hey, hey. Wait a minute! The scripts are already behind schedule as is, and the art staff is getting antsy! How will it look if we made it worse by arguing? I even told Shibuya that she was changing out from a pop idol!
- [R] It's our job to protect the celebrities in our agency! There's no way Mima can do such a thing!

The *vividness* of her objection in these two scenes has a *diluting effect* on the earlier tense exchange between Rumi and Tadakoro (scene 14), which is significant because it reveals Rumi's past as a pop idol:

- [R] Just three shots. Is this work really worth leaving CHAM! for?
- [T] Rumi, do you know how hard it is to get a character that appears in a drama series? Even a role like this?
- [R] Yes, I do. But...
- [T] This is where Mima proves if she can be seen as a real actress or not.
- [R] But we should sell Mima as a pop idol!
- [T] Really. Times are different from when Hidaka Rumi was a working pop idol.
- [R] I know that.
- [T] Nowadays, there are no places for pop idols to appeal to the masses. This is the branch point that will decide if Mima lasts or not.
- [R] Well, excuse me for not surviving.
- [T] Please, Rumi! There's nothing better than having Mima be able to change into an actress!
- [R] She came to Tokyo to sing...

- [T] Think! On record sales we make practically nothing! But I do wish that they'd use her a little bit more...

All this information is identified by the spectator as *biased*. Rumi's role as the webmaster of *Mima's Room* is only finally confirmed at the end of the film, when we can link her psychotic break to her past as the pop idol Rumi Hidaka in the 1980s and to her current status as a talent agent in a *jimusho*.

#### *Rumi drugs Mima*

In our proposed film structure, the third block is defined by Mima's successive blackouts, paradoxically represented by fades to white. Through *objective shots*, and especially through *internal focalisation (depth)* on Mima, the narration has displayed her increasing psychological instability in *vivid* episodes: the apparitions of "Idol Mima" (scenes 22, 27, 33, 36 and 40). The spectator assumes these blackouts of Mima's are correlative (*framing* based on *proximity*) with the disorder that results in her visions of "Idol Mima". But are these lapses of Mima's entirely the product of her mental breakdown?<sup>8</sup> After the first fade to white (scene 50), Mima is drinking tea with Rumi. After the second (scene 52), Mima is in a visible stupor: she responds sluggishly to Rumi, wears a vacant stare, and breaks the teacup in her hands. This is followed by four highly revealing shots, the last three *objective shots* of the scene and the first of the next scene:

- a) A detail shot of a drop of blood, presumably from Mima's wounded hand, dissolves

into the tea in an *objective shot*.

- b) A close-up of Mima's face, which shows her in a stupor that will cloud her gaze until the ending of the film.
- c) A wide shot from behind Mima's back while she is browsing the Internet in the darkness of her bedroom.
- d) The close-up in the following scene corresponds to the diegesis of *Double Bind*: a detail shot of an aspirin dissolving in a glass of water. This dissolving image rhymes narratively and metonymically with shot a).

The subtlety of this relationship between two detail shots so close in scale (without comparison anywhere else in the film's *découpage*) and the strength of the Mima-Rumi relationship detailed above, results in this information being interpreted as *biased*, as neither the cut on Mima's hand nor the aspirin in *Double Bind* is followed up on elsewhere in the diegesis.

#### *Rumi as Murano's killer*

Finally, Murano's murder (scene 55) is the most complex moment in terms of the ambiguity of the switches between focalisations. After the conclusion, the spectator assumes that the murder was committed by Rumi,<sup>9</sup> who becomes the *focaliser* of the scene as we see her in externally focalised shots as "Idol Mima R"—the idealisation of Mima that Rumi sees—dressed as a pizza delivery boy. But how does this explain the

flashbacks to Murano's directions during the photo shoot, which would only be known to Mima (and of course unknown to Rumi, who is shown in a parallel scene accompanying CHAM! at their concert)?

Our hypothesis is that the narration positions Murano's murder by Rumi/"Idol Mima R" together with a dream of Mima's in which she kills Murano. In the middle of the attack, although it is harmonised with the continuity of stabbing movements, there is a break in the 180-degree rule that marks the beginning of (and justifies) the inserts of Mima's photo shoot and the flashback to Murano's directions. When Mima wakes up, she looks at her trembling hands. The juxtaposition of the murder scene with her waking up shaken (*proximity*), the discovery of the blood-stained pizza boy's uniform inside the blue bag—*vivid* incriminating evidence against Mima—and, on top of this proof, the implausible nature of this coincidence (*failure to use statistical heuristics*, albeit induced by the almost complete absence of *availability*) are what lead the spectator to ignore any possibility other than Mima's guilt.

## **Results**

What our detailed analysis of the film's focalisation reveals is not that Mima has split off into a shared or "virtual" Idol Mima that Mima, Rumi and Uchida can all see, as other studies have argued (Osmond, 2008: 42; López Rodríguez and García Pacheco, 2012: 101), but that each of them has their own idealised vision of Mima as a member of

CHAM!. Nor is it Uchida (Iles, 2008: 112) who kills Murano: it is “Idol Mima R”, the likeness of Mima that (one of the personalities of) Rumi believes she embodies. It is the *internal focalisation (depth)* on Rumi from scene 65 that narratively (and discursively, as will be discussed in the next section) defines the film’s denouement.

On the other hand, our analysis of the spectator’s cognitive activity in the more ambiguous scenes of *Perfect Blue* reveals that the narration does not violate the norms of internal coherence of the diegesis (which is marked by a decidedly realist approach) to deceive the spectator, but makes use of cognitively problematic scenes that challenge heuristic shortcuts taken to reach judgements in a short space of time in response to intense stimulation. In this way, the evidence that should have led the spectator to link Rumi to “Mima’s Room”, Mima’s stupor, and Murano’s murder are dismissed as *biased* in favour of a *fundamental attribution error*: Rumi’s apparently unwavering loyalty towards Mima. These erroneous judgements are quickly established as the foundations on which the spectator posits hypotheses (*anchoring and adjustment; perseverance of refuted initial beliefs*) in an effort to fill the gaps resulting from the low *communicativeness* of the narration.

## **Conclusions: a critique of the figure of the idol in the Japanese media industry through narrative complexity**

The insight offered by different academic studies in recent years into the structure

of the Japanese media industry is critical to distancing the contextual aspect of our analysis from the a priori presuppositions of the original reviews of *Perfect Blue* by US and British critics at the time of its limited distribution in those countries in 1999. Although reviews published in forums like *Variety* (Harvey, 1999), *The New York Times* (Gates, 1999) and the *San Francisco Gate* (Morris 1999, Graham 1999) and in fan compilations (Patten, 2004) suffer from the typical prejudices against anime prior to its acceptance in the Western world (for example, incorrectly interpreting the status of the idol band CHAM! as an equivalent of the Spice Girls, when in the diegesis it is not a successful girl band but a group that has achieved only limited recognition even for a specific niche of the market), critiques in specialist media offered a more respectful commentary, highlighting the level of metafictional reflection in the context of contemporary entertainment industries (in *Sight and Sound* by Romney, 1999; in *Midnight Eye* by Sharp, 2001). The main failing of these early reviews is, in our view, that they reflect a superficial understanding of the production routines and commercial structures of the Japanese media industry of the time, an understanding that has broadened considerably among Western critics and academics in the last few decades thanks to the higher profile of Japanese media production. In this section, we incorporate the most recent academic references to the “idol” (*aidoru genshō*) phenomenon into our analysis of *Perfect Blue* in an effort to contextualise Rumi’s professional background and thus establish a clearer understanding of the discourse of the film.



Japan's "idols" are female artists aged between 14 and 24 who are expected to become more than just singers, paradoxically, without having particularly good voices: their songs and eye-catching dance routines are composed and designed by professional artists in the shadows. Although firmly established as just another species in the animal kingdom of entertainers that have formed part of the Japanese media industry since the 1980s, it was not until the first decade of the new millennium that research in the field of idol studies (*gūzōgaku*) began exposing the working conditions of idols and the synergies between the local audiovisual entertainment world and the *jimusho*. The *jimusho* are crucial to the industry, as they provide television programmers and advertisers with artists conveniently adapted to public exposure to facilitate their conversion into ubiquitous stars, capable of appearing simultaneously in multiple commercial contexts. The *jimusho* who manage idols "are most responsible for the content of the entertainment world" (Marx, 2012: 37-38), and their modus operandi involves the creation of artists from the ground up and the construction of a medium-term career through the production of a unique artistic identity in Japan's saturated music market (Galbraith, 2016). Although this media ubiquity is what maintains their popularity, the limited life cycle of these idols—whose careers last around two to three years (Galbraith and Karlin, 2012: 16-17)—means they are characterised as dispensable, always replaceable with younger versions. Their working conditions are also precarious because, in contrast with other entertainment industries like that of the US, Japanese idols are generally hired as *jimusho* employees,

with a monthly salary of around 200,000 yen (Marx, 2012: 46-47), subject to increases only at the end of the contract if they have enjoyed some degree of success. In exchange for the support they offer, the *jimusho* demand total control over the artists' careers, ownership of the rights to their material and, to a large extent, of their personal lives. For example, the agents for idol supergroups like AKB48 forbid them from having boyfriends or practically any private lives outside the band, while pressuring their employees to maintain a squeaky-clean lifestyle with hyperactive exposure on social networks. Behaviours considered inappropriate are repressed and penalised by the *jimusho*, with punishments made many times worse by the public apologies required of the idols.<sup>10</sup> The careful construction of the public personae of idols to a large extent reflects the qualities demanded by their producers and fans: innocence, vulnerability and obedience above talent or personalities of their own (Galbraith, 2012: 192). The absence of qualities that could be threatening to male fans goes hand in hand with the impression of dependence cultivated for these artists, a variable aimed primarily at satisfying the fantasies of the *otaku*. As a result, the ideal idol, as presaged by the virtual idols so common to anime plots for decades (Masataka, 2016), need not have a physical presence because, quite simply, she doesn't require a tangible body (Black, 2012: 219). The boom of Hatsune Miku (Leavitt, Knight and Yoshida, 2016) and the fetishism over 2D characters reflect the fact that human biology may have even become an obstacle for fans who, through digitalisation, not only enjoy the docility of the virtual idol's image, but can also

manipulate and customise that image to suit their tastes.

The narration in *Perfect Blue* makes use of the transtextual parameters of the idol subculture to construct the increasing madness of Mima, on whom the spectators are focalised deeply throughout most of the diegesis. The tension between Mima's manufactured persona as an idol and her personal identity—a recurring problem for characters in Kon's filmography—is evident in three sources identified in most analyses of the film:

- Mima's doubts about her transformation into an actress (a change in which her "idol" features must be radically modified);
- her status as a suspect of the murders of people responsible for this change (the screenwriter Shibuya and the photographer Murano); and
- her character in *Double Bind*, Rika Takakura, who suffers from a dissociative identity disorder that enables her to deal with the serial killings investigated in the plot of the TV series.

The conclusion to the film, however, requires us to focus the interpretative analysis on Rumi, an erstwhile failed idol who ended up working for the *jimusho* as an agent. The point of view that is truly crucial to make sense of the film's critical underlying discourse is thus Rumi's, rather than the specular split identities of Mima (López Rodríguez and García Pacheco, 2012) or her supposed *doppelgängers* (Rickards, 2006:

11). In this sense, the murder of Tadakoro, the director of the *jimusho*, could also be interpreted not only as revenge for changing Mima's public image, but revenge for the rejection Rumi herself once suffered for failing in her career as an idol. In the epilogue, Rumi still sees "Idol Mima R" in her reflection in the mirror. The narration therefore remains deeply focalised on Rumi to the end, in a peculiar narrative choice that adds a subtle nuance overlooked in previous reviews and essays on the film: the future of the idols, broken toys in the Japanese entertainment industry, can be even crueller than their present.

## **Funding**

This work was supported by the Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades del Gobierno de España for the research project *Participación ciudadana y medios de comunicación públicos. Análisis de experiencias de co-creación audiovisual en España y en Europa* under Grant code RTI2018-093649-B-I00; by the Universitat Jaume I for the research project *Análisis de identidades en la era de la posverdad. Generación de contenidos audiovisuales para una Educomunicación crítica* under Grant code 18I390.01/1; and the Valencian Community and the European Social Fund through the post-doctoral scholarship program, under grant number APOSTD/2019/067.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> His full filmography is covered by a range of academic articles: *Millennium Actress* (dir. Satoshi Kon, Madhouse, 2001), Ortabasi, 2006; Chang, 2013; *Tokyo Godfathers* (dir. Satoshi Kon, Madhouse, 2003), Montero Plata, 2007; *Paranoia Agent* (dir. Satoshi Kon, Madhouse, 2004), Gardner, 2009; *Paprika* (dir. Satoshi Kon, Madhouse, 2006), Mishra and Mishra, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Of his previous work, which includes major incursions into metafiction (a *mangaka* being pulled into his own work is the premise for his manga series *OPUS*, for example), it is worth highlighting, given its adherence to the conventions of the puzzle film, the short *Magnetic Rose* directed by Kōji Morimoto for the anthology film *Memories* (dir. K. Morimoto, Tensai Okamura and K. Ōtomo, Madhouse, 1995), which tells the story of a psychological nightmare suffered by the crew of a rescue spaceship when they explore the drifting mausoleum of an opera diva.

<sup>3</sup> The talent agencies that represent pop idols in Japan (Stevens, 2008: 70-71).

<sup>4</sup> Due to the problematically polysemic nature of the term, it is worth noting the considerations offered by Emilio Garroni regarding the concept of *communicativeness* applied to art in his ambitious semiotic project (1973: 27-32). For Garroni, the *communicativeness* of an artistic phenomenon is a necessary formal condition, however evasive and obscure its communicative strategy may be (e.g. in avant-garde works): “Either there is a communication phenomenon or there is not: if there is, even if it is

extremely limited, it is of course communicable.” This leads him to the conclusion that “communicativeness (in different degrees) is not nor should be a rudimentary criterion for assessing the artistic products in question”, but rather “in analytical and historiographic terms, it is simply an objective and historically conditioning piece of data that the scholar should take into account for a better understanding.” Thus, Garroni distinguishes between two levels of *communicativeness*. The first is the aforementioned *formal communicativeness* (or general communicativeness, inherent to any communicative act). And the second is *material communicativeness*, which refers to the fact that optimal comprehension of the message of a communicative act requires a specificity of particular knowledge, often shared by only a very small group isolated from the larger masses of communicators. In our case, the analysis of *communicativeness* proposed by Bordwell focuses on the *material communicativeness* of the successive poetics of the different modes of narration. Specifically, Bordwell proposes a non-evaluative scale of *communicativeness* in film narration to effectively identify the textual parameters of ways of filmmaking that are established as deviations from the classical model; in other words, Bordwell attempts to define through the films of Godard or Antonioni what Garroni identifies in these same landmark works as “a poetics of disturbed communication”.

<sup>5</sup> As noted previously, the low level of *communicativeness* is due to the unknown source of Mima’s increasing persecution; however, this should also be identified as the basis for

a psychological thriller, the genre that would become the main transtextual standard for the formulation of hypotheses by spectators (and, as discussed in previous chapters, one of the predilections of the puzzle film movement). The narrative development typical of such films is recreated here through the presentation of Mima as the slasher film victim, increasingly paranoid (becoming frightened in the hallway of her apartment, her hesitation in answering the phone, the fluttering of the curtains) about the anonymous threats. As will be shown, it will be the ongoing nature of these threats, which, together with Mima's increasing psychological vulnerability, turn her into another type of victim in the second block of the film: the victim in a "psychotraumatic thriller" (Neale, 2000: 76).

<sup>6</sup> CHAM!'s audience is made up mostly of male youths tending towards the stereotypes which, in the late 1980s and beyond, gave fans of the subculture a bad reputation in the Japanese media, particularly since the arrest in 1989 of the serial killer Tsutomu Miyazaki, labelled by the press the "Otaku Murderer" due to the fact that anime productions were found in his video tape collection. The sensationalist press and the suspicions of the public identified the figure of the *otaku* as an example of what antisocial attitudes and passive consumption of products of the subculture (Iida, 2000) could do to youth (Norris, 2012: 75-76), a stereotype deconstructed by academics in recent years through the presentation of the *otaku* subculture as an active promoter of many of the synergies between producers and consumers of commercial culture (Azuma, 2009: 4).

<sup>7</sup> Although our analysis is limited to female pop idols, it is worth noting that many of the conditioning factors and defining features of their activity are shared by their male counterparts, dominant during the 1990s in the music market thanks to the “boyband” standard established by the *jimusho* Johnny & Associates (Stevens, 2008: 53).

<sup>8</sup> We realise that the narrative complexity of *Perfect Blue* could lead us on this point to develop abductive hypotheses bordering on the exegetic. Although we attempt to back up our suggestions with observations about the film’s *découpage*, we are aware of the risk of missing the mark in the formulation of such hypotheses.

<sup>9</sup> Rumi would therefore also be responsible for Shibuya’s murder (the same *modus operandi* of stabbing and eye mutilation) and of the mutilation of Uchida’s and Tadakoro’s eyes (presumably also murdered by Rumi).

<sup>10</sup> The most famous case is that of Minami Minegishi of AKB48, who shaved her head as a gesture of apology for having been caught in the company of a man in February 2013.

## References

- Azuma H (2009) *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Black D (2012) The Virtual Idol: Producing and Consuming Digital Femininity. In: Galbraith PW and Karlin JG (eds.) *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave, 209–228.



- Bordwell D (1985) *Narration in the fiction film*. London: Routledge.
- Branigan E (1992) *Narrative comprehension and film*. London: Routledge.
- Branigan E (2014) Butterfly effects upon a spectator. In Buckland W (ed.) *Hollywood Puzzle Films*. New York: Routledge, 233–264.
- Buckland W (2009) Making Sense of Lost Highway. In Buckland W (ed.) *Puzzle films: complex storytelling in contemporary cinema*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 40–61.
- Chang Y-J (2013) Satoshi Kon's Millennium Actress: A Feminine Journey with Dream-Like Qualities. *Animation* 8 (1): 85–97.
- Choo H-J (2014) A Study on Persona of Double-sided Characters Shown in Satoshi Kon's Works. *Cartoon and Animation Studies* 35: 181–208.
- Coëgnarts M and Kiss M (2017) "Look Out Behind You!" Grounding suspense in the slasher film. *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 15(3): 348–374.
- Galbraith PW (2012) Idols: The Image of Desire in Japanese Consumer Capitalism. In: Galbraith PW and Karlin JG (eds.) *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave, 185–208.
- Galbraith PW (2016) The Labor of Love: On the Convergence of Fan and Corporate Interests in Contemporary Idol Culture in Japan. In: Galbraith PW and Karlin JG (eds.) *Media Convergence in Japan*. Tokyo: Kinema Club, 232–264.
- Galbraith PW and Karlin JG (2012) *Idols and celebrity in Japanese media culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave.

- Gardner W (2009) The Cyber Sublime and the Virtual Mirror: Information and Media in the Works of Oshii Mamoru and Kon Satoshi. *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 18(1): 44-70.
- Gates A (1999) 'Perfect Blue': This Cartoon Didn't Come from Disney. *The New York Times*, 20 August. Available at: <https://partners.nytimes.com/library/film/082099blue-film-review.html> (accessed 28 January 2018).
- Graham B (1999) Animated 'Blue' Has a Surreal Twist / Japanese film scrutinizes pop culture, *San Francisco Gate*, 15 October. Available at: <http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Animated-Blue-Has-a-Surreal-Twist-Japanese-2903346.php> (accessed 28 January 2018).
- Harvey D (1999) Review: 'Perfect Blue', *Variety*, 31 October. Available at: <http://variety.com/1999/film/reviews/perfect-blue-1200459946/> (accessed 28 January 2018).
- Iida Y (2000) Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero: Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990s. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 8(2): 423–464.
- Iles T (2008) *The crisis of identity in contemporary Japanese film: personal, cultural, national*. Leiden: Brill.
- Leavitt A, Knight T, and Yoshida A (2016) Producing Hatsune Miku: Concerts,

- Commercialization, and the Politics of Peer Production. In Galbraith PW and Karlin JG (eds.) *Media Convergence in Japan*. Tokyo: Kinema Club, 200–229.
- López Rodríguez FJ and García Pacheco JA (2012) Perfect Blue: la quiebra de la identidad como síntoma de la sociedad posmoderna. In López Rodríguez FJ (ed.) *Satoshi Kon: Superando los límites de la realidad*. Palma de Mallorca: Asociación Cultural del Cómic (Japonés), 85–115.
- Marx D. W. (2012) The Jimusho System: Understanding the Production Logic of the Japanese Entertainment Industry. In: Galbraith PW and Karlin JG (eds.) *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave, 35–55.
- Masataka Y (2016) On Two-Dimensional Cute Girls: Virtual Idols. In Galbraith PW and Karlin JG (eds.) *Media Convergence in Japan*. Tokyo: Kinema Club, 144–168.
- Mishra M and Mishra M (2014) Animated Worlds of Magical Realism: An Exploration of Satoshi Kon's Millennium Actress and Paprika. *Animation* 9(3): 299–316.
- Montero Plata L (2007) La disolución de las fronteras de la realidad: el cine de Satoshi Kon. *Secuencias: Revista de historia del cine* 25: 46–62.
- Morris W (1999) Animated thriller hints at De Palma, *San Francisco Gate*. Available at: <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Animated-thriller-hints-at-De-Palma-3062858.php> (accessed 28 January 2018).
- Napier S. J. (2006) “Excuse Me, Who Are You?”: Performance, the Gaze, and the Female in the Works of Kon Satoshi. In Brown ST (ed.) *Cinema Anime*. New York:

Palgrave Macmillan, 23–42.

Neale S (2000) *Genre and Hollywood*. New York: Routledge.

Norris C (2012) Perfect Blue and the negative representation of fans. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 4(1): 69–86.

Ogg K (2006) Lucid Dreams, False Awakenings: Figures of the Fan in Kon Satoshi. *Mechademia* 5: 157–174.

Ortabasi M (2006) Indexing the past: Visual language and translatability in Kon Satoshi's *Millennium Actress*. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 14(4): 278–291.

Osmond A (2008) *Satoshi Kon, The Illusionist*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press.

Patten F (2004) *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press.

Perkins C (2012) Flatness, depth and Kon Satoshi's ethics. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 4(2): 119–133.

Rickards M (2006) Screening Interiority: Drawing on the Animated Dreams of Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue*. *Cinephile* 7(1): 1–21.

Romney J (1999) Perfect Blue. *Sight and Sound*. Available at: <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/176> (accessed 28 January 2018).

Sharp J (2001) Perfect Blue. *Midnight Eye*, 20 March. Available at: <http://www.midnighteye.com/reviews/perfect-blue/> (accessed 28 January 2018).

Stevens CS (2008) *Japanese popular music culture, authenticity, and power*. Abingdon:

Routledge.

Thanouli E (2009) *Post-classical cinema: an international poetics of film narration*. New York: Wallflower Press.