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Abstract

This paper offers an exploratory reading of two works by Kon Satoshi: his debut *Perfect Blue* (*Pāfekuto Burū*, 1998) the television series *Paranoia Agent* (*Mōsō Dairinin*, 2004). The goal of this paper is to work through the relationship between social ontology and ethics embedded in these two examples. To do this the paper develops a concept of ontological flatness, both as a description of the specific late modern phenomenon of the leveling of value distinctions between previously differentiated and privileged sources of social identity, and a method of representation Kon uses in order to both portray and critique this condition by pushing it to its logical conclusions. It is argued that rather than a gleeful celebration of this postmodern flat condition, there is a distinct modernist humanism in Kon's work: whereas the effect is ontological flatness, the goal is always to regain a sense of rooted perspective, or depth. This Archimedean point is anchored to a concept of the responsible human actor, who works through existential suffering as a matter of ethical obligations outside of historical and technological determination. Thus, while representing the postmodern experience of the self, in this aspect we can situate Kon's critique within a modernist tradition in Japanese political thought.

Key words:

Kon Satoshi, Anime, Ethics, Representation, Social Ontology

Introduction

This paper offers an exploratory reading of two works by Kon Satoshi: his debut *Perfect Blue* (*Pāfekuto Burū*, 1998) the television series *Paranoia Agent* (*Mōsō Dairinin*, 2004). I have chosen these two as they directly address what I take to be a key ethical theme addressed by Kon's work, namely the relationship between social ontology, individuals and agency in late modern Japan. A key component of this condition is the specific late modern phenomenon of the leveling of value distinctions between previously differentiated and privileged sources of social identity. This flatness is manifest in the worlds Kon conjures up, where perception, reality and dream collide to produce strange and unnerving social and psychological effects. Indeed anime, by virtue of the flexibility of the medium, can facilitate seamless transition between the virtual and the real (Napier 2003). However, this does not mean that Kon's is a gleeful celebration of this postmodern condition. Instead, there is a distinct modernist humanism in Kon's work: whereas the effect is ontological flatness, the goal is always to regain a sense of rooted perspective, or depth. This Archimedean point is anchored to a concept of the responsible human actor, who works through existential suffering as a matter of ethical obligations outside of historical and technological determination. Thus, while representing the postmodern experience of the self, in this aspect we can situate Kon's critique within a modernist tradition in Japanese political thought.

In exploring the relationship between flatness, depth and ethics in *Perfect Blue* and *Paranoia Agent* his paper moves through a number of stages. First I develop the idea of ontological flatness, both as a feature of late modern experience and as the method by which Kon presents the phenomenology of that experience. In this section I also discuss the problems for ethical action this flatness presents. The two subsequent sections move in to analyse *Perfect Blue* and *Paranoia Agent* in the context of the preceding conceptual and theoretical discussion, paying close attention to the

oscillation between flatness and depth in terms of the relationship between flat social ontology and the 'deep' interiorized modern self as prerequisite for ethical action. In the conclusion I relate my argument back to the literature Japan's identity crisis and capitalism, and consider some further avenues for research.

On Being Flat

Kon's films were all released in the context of a Japan in the social, economic and political doldrums: a discursive situation that provides a point of reference for his civic conscience (Napier 2006). With the implosion of the bubble economy at the end of the 1980s the economic metanarrative of the boom years, which produced both a set of well-defined identity roles within the economy and material evidence that these identities were producing social goods, gave way to discursive conditions characterized by lingering anxiety and unease (Iida 2000; Leheny 2006; Owada 2008; Yoda 2006). This is both due to the void left by the economic growth narrative, but also late modern epistemic conditions that deny the possibility of unifying narratives themselves. Uncertain of what the nation should represent in the context of the postmodern proliferation of the sign-economy, the perceived loss of sense of the body and the breakdown of the self and social hegemony (Iida 2000: 456), Japan has found itself:

> Locked in a double bind of late modernity, torn between two contradictory aesthetic solutions to its dilemma: the nihilistic and the ironic positioning of simulated identities and the attempted recovery of "true" identity and meaning by means of an existential leap into the realm of imagination (ibid: 458)

Arguments from Japan's neo-conservative right take the second route: appropriation of an essential Japanese-ness through recourse to a re-imagined history or the deployment of a mystified national essence as embodied by the rituality of flag and anthem. This is a theme we will return to later in the discussion. However, it is the first solution that brings Kon to mind. In many respects Japan is a place of simulated identities par excellence, what Donald Richie (2003) has called an 'image factory'.

This metaphor is rich, as it not only points to the mechanistic production of images, but also the marketing and selling of these images as commodities. 'Japan as image factory' is a place where identities are produced, circulated, consumed and performed.[i] And this is a vision of Japan that pervades Kon's work.

Kon's characters are caught within the image factory, and as Napier points out in reference to *Perfect Blue*: 'it goes beyond critiquing Japanese society to become a subtle study of the attempt to find oneself in a postmodern realm where illusion and reality commingle in ways that threaten the autonomy of the individual' (Napier 2006: 35). But while the commingling metaphor suggests that two distinct realms penetrate each other while retaining at least the potential for extraction, Kon takes this a step further by rejecting the distinction wholesale and then working through the implications of this move. What is of particular interest here then is a lack of crossing from the real to the virtual and back again in Kon's films. Instead there is only what is present, with things, images and people all on the same ontological footing, all as real as each other and all producing effects. His is therefore a form of flattening that is also, on face value, a rejection of a series of Cartesian juxtapositions: mind/body, real/virtual, depth/surface. To foreshadow this point, in an interview about *Paranoia Agent* (2008) Kon made his view explicit:

> Overall, I think the premise that you can separate the 'virtual' and the 'real' is strange. It might have been the case that to begin with the 'virtual' functioned to express the 'real', but now they have become one: it is impossible to separate out which one is representing the other. The real is the virtual.

It is here that we can start to develop the idea of ontological flatness in Kon's work. Ontological flatness is a representational principle of equality between all elements of the world, the flatness referring to leveling of layers that have traditionally held different ontological statuses in relation to a Cartesian knowing subject. A consideration of the Superflat artistic movement developed by Murakami Takashi brings out this point well. Superflat is both a rationale for a certain type of artistic product and a statement about the relationship between representation and authenticity. At its core is the notion that with the digitization and distribution of the

image as primary mode of mediated knowledge, images loose their referent. For, whereas analog technology stands in a mimetic relation with the object it reproduces:

> Digital technologies, on the other hand, operate via a fragmentation of an image or sound into a code, which then must be recombined. There is therefore no technological relation of mimesis—there is no morphological constraint of resemblance between the different levels. Furthermore, if one looks, for example, at the way self-reproducing robots work, a limited code of ones and zeros will in fact produce an open variety of different robots out of that one, limited code. So the only place one can locate the so-called true identity of that originary code is at the level of each actual manifestation of the code. Real complexity, and identity, lies at the level of the surface, not some prior interiorized point of origin. Identity, in other words, *is emergent*. Reality itself, authenticity, and real complexity thus lie at the surface, and in this sense can be thought of as "flat." This contrasts with the depth model of the modern, interiorized subject (Looser 2006: 96 – 97, my italics).

However, with this flatness comes an ethical difficulty in that again it denies the potential for exteriority from the system of flat relations: 'with the insistence that there is no hierarchy at all between media or between layers of worlds, it would be hard to see how there could *be* an outside, of any sort at all' (106 – 107, original italics). If there is no possible method of establishing some sort of firm ground from which to act, it is equally impossible to know if those actions have any ethical content at all: all that is left is a relativistic, disembedded simulation of ethical action emptied of any meaning.

As will be demonstrated through the following discussion, it is precisely this point that Kon addresses. While Kon takes the rejection of the interiorized subject to its logical conclusion via the representational tool of ontological flatness, the ultimate effect is a demonstration of the continued salience of the knowing, morally responsible actor. Thus, Kon's approach to the dilemma of identity set out at the beginning of this section is to reclaim the modern, interiorized subject by demonstrating its *a priori* necessity. In this way his rejection of the real/virtual

distinction, and demonstration of the consequences, is a method of reclamation. The next two sections will explore this relationship between flatness and depth further through two examples: the case of reclaiming the self in *Perfect Blue* and obligation to others as a foundation for moral action in *Paranoia Agent.*

The Peril of Flat Identities in *Perfect Blue*

Perfect Blue is the story of Mima, an idol in a niche pop group called Cham, who breaks with the relative ease of this job to embark on a new career as an actress. The story follows her attempt to break into the industry, the choices she has to make and the reactions of her agency and her fans, and in particular one fan, who calls himself 'Mi-Mania'. Ostensibly the film is a psychological thriller, and was marketed as such by Manga Video in the West. A thumbnail sketch of the plot also reads this way: after giving up her place in Cham and taking up a part in a television drama called *Double Bind,* Mima is first threatened and then sent a letter bomb; later on characters instrumental in Mima's transition from the idol scene to the world of acting – a script writer, a photographer and eventually her agent – are murdered. The film culminates in a showdown with Mi-Mania, where it is revealed that he was the unwitting puppet of a member of Mima's talent agency, Rumi, who is pathologically obsessed with Mima. A second showdown ensues, with Rumi eventually ending in an insane asylum.

However, as one of the preconditions for taking on *Perfect Blue*, Kon made it plain that he wanted to do something different with the medium. First he wanted to break with what he saw as the traditional approach to character in animation:

> ...[the difference between *Perfect Blue* and other animations is] that I wanted to get rid of the main selling point of anime: characters that are easy to empathize with. This is not a visual thing to do with character design, but it has to do with the fact that it is a film where it is difficult to understand the personality of the main character.

The reason for this, Kon argues, is because when he looked around him he did not see the sorts of simple characters that consumers of anime expected on the screen: hence

there was a lack of realism in anime. The second difference Kon identifies is closely linked to this concern with reality. Visually, Kon was interested in depicting his characters and the worlds they inhabit with as little embellishment as possible: he described himself as a director and writer that 'is bad at producing stereotypical work.' While *Perfect Blue* is more or less consciously realistic in its style, the content – images and narrative – steadily becomes more fractured and more divorced from linear narratives and well defined boundaries of real and imagined. This would seem to be exactly the sort of 'embellishment of everyday life' that Kon vowed to avoid and is, on first impressions, anything but realistic. But the 'real' for Kon is not just a concern with realistic characters drawn in an atypical anime style, or ones that are complicated and conflicted, but it is also about capturing the ontology of late modern experience. As he put it in an interview on *Paranoia Agent*, but which sheds retrospective light on *Perfect Blue*:

> The reality that we live in is multilayered [*tasōteki*]. Even if, when viewed from another person's perspective, it [the lived reality] might look like a dream or an illusion, for the [experiencing] person it is the one and only truth. I want to grasp this. I want to paint a picture of the multilayered circumstances and environment people are embedded in (2004).

The multi-perspectival nature of subjective experience – the phenomenology of that experience – produces effects that act on and across the flat, two-dimensional screen. Therefore while the lived world is multilayered, Kon portrays the net effect of these layers on one flat canvas, at the same time drawing attention to the screen-like nature of the modern experience. In doing so Kon draws attention to circumstances and environments where the separate narratives that we come to know ourselves by can easily become conflated, diffused and distorted as previously privileged sources of knowing, for example descriptions of the self emanating from the Cartesian knowing, thinking subject, are all forced to exist on the same ontological footing as descriptions emanating from elsewhere. The film's narrative is reflective of the cognitive buffeting effect that follows, as both Mima and the viewers find ourselves situated within different narratives – *Double Bind*, Mi-Mania, other fans, and Mima's own

attempts at making sense of her self and actions.

The nature of human experience of the self in an increasingly flattened environment is therefore a core theme. In an interview Kon stated that when coming up with a rational for adapting the novel *Perfect Blue* for the screen he needed to be able to add something to what was on the face of it a simple horror stalk and slash narrative:

> In the process of writing a rough draft I hit upon the idea of a story about a character whose idea of 'me' is superseded by a 'me-like-existence' [watashirashii sonzai] for the people around her, which is born and propagates through the Internet (1998b).

In *Perfect Blue* the me-like existence is a digital product; uploaded, transmitted and distributed via the web. It is also an image that is digitally consumed and modified through the process of consumption and as such is not autonomous and has no concrete centre or essence, as in the discussion of computer code in the previous section. In this sense the me-like-existence is the detachment of the sign *watashi* from the complex of self-descriptions that make up the ontologically secure self. In the terms laid out above, this is possible because of the transition from the depth model of the interiorized subject to the surface identity of ontological flatness. In this case the flatness is also temporal: the me-like-existence is a past version of Mima which nevertheless can remain coeval with her, constituted and maintained by the will of her fans and Mima's own doubts about her career choices. In realizing this vision, the creation of a me-like-existence takes place in two ways, via the Internet, and in particular via a website called 'Mima's Room' (*Mima no heya)*, and via the narrative structure itself, which constantly cuts between 'reality' and Mima's performances in *Double Bind.*

A particularly obsessive fan that operates under the handle of 'Mi-Mania' maintains Mima's Room. At first Mima is delighted to see herself represented in the new and exciting world of the Internet and the descriptions on Mima's room reflect the reality of Mima's life, detailing her everyday activities with uncanny accuracy. However, as the plot progresses the posts written in her name start to diverge from the sorts of

opinions she has of herself and decisions made in order to move forward in the *geinōkai* (world of entertainment), such as appearing naked for a photo shoot and agreeing to play a rape scene in *Double Bind.* The posts reflect a Mima who wants to hold onto her previous identity as untarnished idol. This notion of tarnishing relates to Mima moving from one set of descriptions to another, in this case from the niche idol world dominated by all things *kawaii* (cute), to the harder, more overtly sexualized world of television. The structuring descriptions of *kawaii* identity include 'sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearance' (Kinsella 1995: 220). The rape scene and photo shoot disqualify Mima from this logic of identity. However, instead of Mima's authenticity being located with her physical self and her actions in the present, for Mi-Mania, the authenticity is the image consistent with the list of idol attributes. The *kawaii* style self manifests on the screen: floating, skipping and smiling, it purports to be the 'true' Mima, who has not turned her back on her fans and her image. This 'idol' torments Mima throughout and later congeals into a personification of fetishistic fandom itself.

This alienation of Mima from herself has become possible because Mima the material, physical person is operating on the same level as Mima the image-commodity. The question of authenticity has become moot as there are now multiple copies of Mima – the idol, the actress, the Internet presence, the everyday – circulating, being consumed and being reproduced on the surface of a flat plane. This transformation renders authenticity a function of subjective value measured in instrumental terms. Mima the commodity has a socially determined value and is consumed by others – nominally the fans – who see a use-value in her, but the distinction between Mima as person and Mima as use-value is here mystified and conflated. This is not only the case for the fans in their consumption but also for Mima herself. In keeping with Kon's approach to the real and virtual, the images of Mima are just as real as she is. They push back at her and proscribe action; they pull at others and facilitate action. And as she is also reliant on social resources to make sense of her own biographical situation and the exterior perspective granted by a privileging of the knowing self has been removed, she too begins to question her

sense of self. The result of this reliance on external narrative resources is that throughout she becomes increasingly unable to tell the difference between herself and her image.

Through this conflation, self worth becomes detached from something intrinsic to Mima as human being (a concrete, non-relative value or essence) to float in value relative to the use-values of those who are consuming it. Mi-Mania's own ability to integrate into this world of images (and thus gain value within it) is to peg his own value to their consumption of an object that has high value within this system – i.e. the Idol (see Iida 2000). The Idol holds 'virtual potential for the fan' (Galbraith 2009) and individual value is secured through the virtual conduits opened by proxy. Therefore Mima's decision to change from *kawaii* idol to actress is akin to the destruction of the sense of self of the fan who consumes Mima as idol. This becomes all the more violent for those who have pegged their identity value to Mima only, rather than hedging their bets on a wide range of mass cultural products. Mi-Mania and later Rumi are examples of this extreme form of value-dependency. It is also significant that Rumi, whose own Idol career has ended, is herself overweight, with short hair and flat features. This is not an image that can easy find value in the mediatized world of *kawaii* culture. But also, her consumption of Mima the image reaches the point where she, like Mima, cannot distinguish between the real physical person and Mima the commodity. Or true to Kon's position, at this point there is no difference between the real, physical person and the virtual Mima concept propagated through media industry. If the image is detached from its referent, if there is no such thing as the authentic Mima, then a claim to be Mima has its own internally consistent logic. It is this that allows Rumi to *become* Mima.

With the realization that Rumi is the murderer comes the realization that the collective intentionality of Mima's fans has up until this point produced the social resources through which Mima has been able to make sense of herself and her relationships with others. With this the battle scene at the end of *Perfect Blue* takes on a symbolic character – it is not just Mima vanquishing a deranged serial killer, but also her reclaiming authority over herself – a return to value routed intrinsically in her and her

intentions, descriptions and accounts of her actions. It is thus a battle to reclaim depth. The last line – *Watashi ha watashi yo*! (I am me) – is the assertion that Mima is the ultimate arbiter of her narratives. However, if Rumi is the embodiment of a fan world gone crazy, which is itself an extension of the logic of the mediatized world of signs, the fact that Rumi ends up in an insane asylum takes on extra significance. Rumi, like Mima, is an example of the dangers of the proliferation of sources of the self without some sort of external check that enables evaluation. However, unlike Mima, who has managed to reclaim a foundational point of reference in her self, Rumi is left insane. Therefore, the effect is not necessarily a rebuke of the society, but more of what it takes to live through it: *Perfect Blue* is a coming of age story, with coming of age referring to the development of an interiorized self as the base point of authoritative identity construction.

Breaking free from the soporific spectacle

Paranoia Agent is Kon's most obvious attempt to put Japanese society on the psychologist's couch. It is important from the outset, however, to correct the standard translation of the title (*mōsō dairnin*). Although 'Paranoia' is one translation of *mōsō*, it is clear from an interview with Kon that the correct translation is not "paranoia" but "delusion". This may seem like semantic quibbling, but the correct translation enables a firmer grasp of the overall theme of the television series, which is at times opaque. Here, seven years later, themes found in *Perfect Blue* take on a bigger scale. The virtual / real distinction is fully dispensed with and elements of gaming culture and fantasy are introduced. The television series is made up of twelve stories linked together by a mysterious baseball bat wielding teenager known in translation as 'Lil Slugger' but in the original Japanese as Shōnen Batto (I will use this name in the following discussion). In each episode a character or group of characters, who are in some way experiencing anxiety or fear, are attacked by Shōnen Batto and knocked into unconsciousness, where they appear peaceful and calm. Apart from Shōnen Batto himself, three other characters play important roles: a timid toy designer called Sagi Tsukiko and her sometimes animate creation Maromi, Ikari Keiichi, an experienced police detective, and his young partner Maniwa Mitsuhiro. Ikari's sickly

wife also becomes significant later in the series.

The series starts with Sagi struggling to create a new character to capitalize on the success of Maromi. After a day of pressure from the boss and bullying from her colleagues, Shōnen Batto attacks her on her walk home at night. Ikari and Maniwa are called in to investigate the incident and soon other people, all suffering from anxieties, are attacked by the mysterious bat-wielding boy. However, after a suspect dies in custody, Ikari and Maniwa are struck off the police force. Ikari goes on to work as a security guard on a construction site, while Maniwa, now obsessed by the case, starts broadcasting warnings about Shōnen Batto over shortwave radio. The attacks continue with greater and greater frequency, causing hysteria in the public and at the same time public anticipation of the new Maromi television series reaches fever pitch. The two phenomenon seem intimately related. As Shōnen Batto becomes more powerful, Ikari and Maniwa confront Sagi, who reveals that Maromi was based on a puppy she had as a child. However, Sagi had let go of the puppy's leash and it had run into traffic and died. Scared of what her father would say, Sagi invented Shōnen Batto to account for the puppy's death. At this point it becomes clear that Shōnen Batto had returned to save Sagi from the pressures of creating a new character at work. But once the concept of Shōnen Batto had got out other people began to drawn on him as an escape route from the pressures they were experiencing. When Sagi admits the truth Shōnen Batto is defeated. The television series ends with Ikari still working as a guard on a construction site, and a new cute character being advertised. It seems that the cycle is ready to start over again.

Although Kon denied basing any character or scene on any one particular case he did state that all the characters were 'projections of the contemporary Japanese Zeitgeist'. Each of the stories deals with a particular national point of concern: youth violence, bullying, child molestation, online suicide groups and issues of gender roles. However, both the opening and closing credits point to the underlying theme. In the opening credits present a particularly unsettling set of juxtapositions, both through the visuals and the audio accompaniment. Visually the main characters of the series stand laughing robotically in front of images of a crumbling, hyperkinetic Japan; they

are all in peril but seem happily oblivious to it, even when a mushroom cloud appears over Tokyo tower and we see a full blown apocalypse from the vantage point of the moon. Further adding to the sense of unease is the accompanying soundtrack, written by the electronic music producer Hirasawa Susumu, which is energetic to the point of euphoria. The closing credits, however, are the exact opposite. Here we see each character lying on a field of grass, sleeping gently and seemingly at peace. The music is now calm, soft and playful. And as the perspective zooms out we see that the characters are lying around a giant Maromi doll, which sits upright like a totem. Maromi acts as a soporific, but the totem pole metaphor indicates Maromi is more than this: there is a religious quality to Maromi's presence. As representing part of the spectacle of Japanese society, Maromi functions, to borrow situationalist thinker Guy Debord's terms, 'as the material reconstruction of the religious illusion,' and with it 'the illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself' (Debord, 2009: Section 20).

The first (and last) scene of the series also talks to the nature of the diagnosis Kon makes of Japanese social ills, or in particular approaches to those ills located in popular discursive frameworks such as those presented at the beginning of this paper. We see a procession of images of people trapped – trapped in traffic jams, jammed into trains, bumping into each other on the street. We also come to see a procession of people isolated and alienated from each other. On the trains people are plugged into their MP3 players, tapping messages on their mobile phones to apologise that they will not be able to meet in person: they are 'too tired' or 'too busy'. There is a very real sense of tension and loss in these scenes – of an emptiness between people unable to take the time for personal, immediate exchange. It is an image strikingly reminiscent of the characterisation of 'communication' that undergirds Baudrillard's critique of contemporary consumer societies. Baudrillard questions the relationship between communication technologies and relationships. Unlike McLuhan, who saw potential in media technologies to bring mankind together in a form of mediated spiritual collectivity, Baudrillard argues that they do the opposite: replacing the unscripted encounter with sanitized *communication*, a word that itself denotes a

rationalized form of mediating technology rather than a spontaneous act (see Merrin 2005). For example, in a recent posthumously published essay, which holds onto the 'commuter' metaphor, Baudrillard writes (2009: 16):

> Nothing is more beautiful than two roads crossing each other, but it is dangerous as an accident risk – so is crossing of glances or the exchange of words, human words, as a seduction risk. So we invented traffic infrastructures where cars can move without passing each other, without touching each other, without looking at each other. We are all commuters, and the condition for the fluidity of information, for the fluidity of transit, will be the abduction of all sense, of looking, of touching, of smelling, of all the potential violence of exchanges.

Baudrillard is speaking to the modern tendency of avoiding the dangers of exchange by rationalizing modes of being and codifying strictures that keep human anxieties, fears and dangers (as well as the lusts and ecstasies) of real face-to-face interaction at bay. And while Baudrillard argues in the same essay that this is the final destruction of the subject of anthropology – the human subject itself – Kon actualizes this picture, using the tool of ontological flatness to give the deception form and agency on the screen. This is again consistent with his take on the relationship between the virtual and the real and it is also a move facilitated by the representational potential of the form of animation itself. The physical shape the delusion (*mōsō*), takes is two fold, and this becomes clear in the concluding episodes of the series where it is revealed that Shōnen Batto and Maromi are both products of the same imagination, and as such they both have the same function of distracting from engagement with the ethical difficulties of real human exchange. Maromi's is a quiet urging: whenever Sagi Tsukiko starts to recall anything upsetting or uncomfortable Maromi dismisses it saying, 'you're thinking too much!' (*Kangaesugi dayo*!). At the other end of the spectrum, Shōnen Batto's is a violent emancipation from thought itself – unconsciousness as escape.

Maromi and Shōnen Batto draw attention to and illustrate the ways in which society has created methods to simplify and sanitize human emotional reactions to events, and

thus avoid dealing with those events head on. But rather than place the blame on the external – the monster Shōnen Batto or capitalism or late-modernity – *Paranoia Agent*, like *Perfect Blue*, makes the case for individual responsibility. The laughing characters in the introduction are oblivious to the carnage in the background. The same characters, sleeping soundly around the Maromi Totem, have also escaped the everyday. Much in the same the way Baudrillard locates an overwhelming urge in late modern society to rationalise out the feelings and 'potential violence of exchanges', Kon's narratives suggest that people have become estranged from their own deeds and emotions as complex, feeling human beings. These feelings are themselves strange and threatening, but instead of acknowledging them as part of being and confronting them head on, they are seen as a threat to normalcy, the easiness of the everyday, and as such reach out for something external to them that will take them away. Both Maromi and Shōnen Batto provide this escape through the mechanisms discussed above. In an interview included on the English DVD box set release (2004), Kon uses the metaphor of a child who does not want to go to school to illustrate this point:

> When a child doesn't want to go to school he might say: I have a stomachache. And adults use the same excuse without much thought... When a child says I have a stomach ache so I don't want to go to school, I don't think that is a lie; it really does hurt -- while he is saying, 'it hurts, it hurts' it actually starts to hurt... This is a sort of self defense mechanism. But as a 40-year old animation creator named Satoshi Kon I want to say: 'well that might be the case but you also have responsibility [*sekinin*].'

Kon's vehicle for this ethical injunction is the older detective Ikari Keiichi. Throughout the series Ikari comes across as gruff and callous: his interview technique is unforgiving when compared to his younger partner and his take on life appears anachronistic. He is a man of another era and thus prone to retreat into the past and he expresses dismay and incomprehension at the spate of attacks. Due to the death in custody of a suspect in the Shōnen Batto attacks, Ikari and his partner are struck off of the police force. While his partner cannot let go of the case and withdraws into his

own narrative world for making sense of the events unfolding around him, Ikari starts work as a security guard at a construction site. But later, as he finds it more and more difficult to understand the world he has found himself in, he too withdraws. His destination is an idealized Japan. Seemingly post-war, this is a Japan where tradition and local bonds are the dominant forms of identification and life appears simpler to understand. The colours are sepia and brown. Significantly the people that populate this fantasy world are themselves flattened into two dimensions – they appear to be cut outs from a diorama or fairground ride. And like a fairground ride they play their roles in a predictable way, never deviating nor displaying irrationality, unlike the world that Ikari has withdrawn from. The community respects Ikari, people are bright and cheerful and he seems completely at home. His anxiety cannot be sated by Maromi (as consumption) nor Shōnen Batto, and so Ikari's delusion is nostalgia for a past that never existed in a world populated by people playing readily understood predetermined roles. Ikari retreats into a myth of Japanese-ness, or the second of the two aesthetic solutions presented by Iida at the beginning of this paper.

Sagi joins in him in this world, bringing Maromi along with her. Maromi tells her that this is 'Ikari's world', but it is also Sagi's world, a world without Shōnen Batto. But although Ikari seems at home in his cutout surroundings, he cannot seem to cut away from his wife: she appears as a waitress in an *Izakaya* and later stands next to him as he watches fireworks at a festival. At this point Sagi has transformed into a little girl, Maromi into a puppy. This arrangement seems to benefit Ikari: he remarks that he always wanted a girl and he seems to be slipping further into delusion. We then see a montage from Ikari's past. First his wife pregnant and then her losing the baby. Ikari says to her: 'lets accept reality. The only person I really need by me is you.' Then a shot of Ikari looking up at his wife as she waves good-bye for the day. Then we see her talking to Ikari as he is readying to leave for the construction site. Kneeling, head bent she says: 'If only I wasn't with you, you wouldn't have to have this hard life.' To which Ikari replies:

> Don't ever say such a thing again. You're just trying to escape. A makeshift salvation is nothing but deception. No matter how hard it is, don't run away,

and we'll overcome it together.

Ikari has up to this point always stayed with her but now, with Ikari in his perfect world, his wife is dying. She says that she is about to die, but wants to say good-bye own last time. On saying: 'I was very happy with you', she disappears. This is enough to pull him out of his own 'delusion'. Sagi calls out to Ikari, calling him 'father', Ikari replies: 'Who are you calling 'father?' and starts destroying the 2D world around him with a baseball bat. Maromi tries to stop him as he does this, pleading that if he continues he will destroy his world and as such his place of belonging. Also, as Ikari continues to destroy the world around him little Maromi dolls are revealed, signifying that Ikari's old-fashioned world is principally of the same type as that provided by the mass media spectacle represented by Maromi.

The world Ikari returns too has been ravaged by the two complimentary methods of escape presented by Shōnen Batto and Maromi: the ease of blaming monsters and the distraction of consumption. This world is put back together through the realisation that Maromi and Shōnen Batto were created by Sagi. What is particularly noteworthy here is that the destruction of Tokyo can be traced back to the actions of a child avoiding being told off, and also avoiding the complex of feelings – responsibility, shame, guilt – that surrounds the death of her pet dog. Like the example of the child and the stomach ache, Kon uses this vehicle to make the claim that Japanese society is in some way infantile. In this he is showing affinities with the critique of Japanese society found in, for example, the work of Asada Akira and in particular his notion of infantile capitalism. Asada observes that modernist post-war philosophers, the towering figure of Maruyama Masao being most prominent, argued that the development of a modern individuated subject was the only bulwark against the sort of totalising organic Japan seen in the pre-war years (see also Koschmann 1996). The development of this form of subjectivity (*shutaisei*) was an imperative for moral action, and part of Japan's successful modernization process. But furthermore, the development of capitalism in Japan would necessarily bring about this subjectivity as it proceeded to tear away at traditional structures, produce individuals and set them into competition with one another (this was the early hope of philosopher Karatani

Kojin, see Cassegard 2008).

However, this 'individual that bears responsibility for himself', according to Asada, never fully materialised. Instead, after the social and political turmoil of the 1960s and early 1970s, Japanese society embarked on a process of infantilisation, the development of a 'playful utopia' typified by a society carried away by wordplay, parody and 'other childlike games of differentiation' (1989: 275). But this utopia is 'at the same time a terrible "dystopia"' (276), stemming from the underlying ideology of Japanese-ness that acts as the 'protection' to enable the 'children to "play freely"' (ibid). The danger of this ideological foundation, argues Asada, is in its similarity in function to the postmodernism / transnationalism of the 1930s, as exemplified by Nishida Kitaro's philosophy of nothingness (*mu no basho*). Ikari's flight into an idealised past – an ideology of Japanese-ness – is itself a method of self-preservation, whereby he does not have to be the 'individual that bears responsibility for himself', but can instead fall back on a mythologised history that enables him to belong: his identity is ascribed, he does not have to question.

Kon is here making a salient point about calls from that right that argue for a return to a more authentic mode of Japanese identity, either grounded in the ritual of flag and anthem in schools, or a reimagining of Japanese wartime past, or a reclamation of Bushido values (see for example Fujiwara 2007). Whatever the 'external' foundation, with *Paranoia Agent* Kon is arguing this is a form of delusion – a 2D world of our own making. Instead of grasping for societal foundations, Kon posits that resources for an ethical life are already present: embodied in everyday social interaction and obligation to others. This obligation presupposes a knowing self. However, in contrast to *Perfect Blue*, which saw the interiorized subject come about through a violent process of coming of age, *Paranoia Agent* suggests a relational ethic rooted in basic obligations to others. Just as Ikari's obligation to his wife pulls him out of his own flat world, our relationships and obligations to others act as a check on the delusions that feed the spectacle – either as consumption, the production of monsters or retreat into a mythologized past. There is thus divergence here: Mima's 'I am me' is not relational – it relies on the depth of the interiorized self. But Ikari's solution is

to reclaim depth via his relatedness and obligation to others, in this case his wife.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the relationship between social ontology, flatness, depth and Kon Satoshi's ethics. It has argued that Kon's seemingly post-modern, flat approach to story telling can also be seen as a method of reclaiming the importance of the modern interiorized subject. I have argued that this theme can be found in both *Perfect Blue* and *Paranoia Agent*, although there are important differences between the two. In *Perfect Blue* the protagonists comes of age through a process of violence, whereby she reclaims herself as final arbiter over the complex of self descriptions that make up her extended, mediated and consumed sense of self. In contrast, Ikari in *Paranoia Agent* is only able to escape his nostalgic delusion, and as such reclaim authentic foundations for ethical action, through his relationship with his wife. It is this relationship and the obligations inherent to it that presupposes Ikari as knowing modern subject. For considerations of space and exposition the discussion was purposefully limited to *Perfect Blue* and *Paranoia Agent*, however there is scope to further explore these issues in his other films, in particular *Millennium Actress* (2001) and *Paprika* (2007), which also use this tool of ontological flatness to show us much about social ontology, depth and ethics.

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[i] See Asada (2000) for a discussion of the commercial embrace of post-modernism and notions of the simulacrum in Japan, including the ironic runaway success of his own book, *Kōzō to Chikara: Kigoron wo Koete* (Structure and Power: Beyond Semiotics, 1983). See also Stevens (2010) for a discussion of Japan's post-modern consumer culture.