



Japanese Aesthetic Expression and Social Environment Reflection in the Animated Films of Satoshi Kon

Limin Wang^a, Ning Wang^b

School of New Media Art and Design, BEIHANG University, Beijing, 100191, China

^ahi.limi@foxmail.com, ^bwangningmaya@126.com

Abstract. This paper investigates the Japanese aesthetic expression and social environment reflection in the animated films of Japanese animation director, Satoshi Kon. First, the Japanese aesthetic expression in Kon's works is explored from three perspectives: traditional Japanese cultural elements, Japanese aesthetics and connotations of colors, and the traditional Japanese aesthetic, mono no aware. Second, the characteristics of his works are analyzed in combination with his life background to shine a light on the fusion of fantasy and reality in his works and probe into the reasons for the formation of this style, the techniques of expression, and the Japanese social environment reflected in his works.

Keywords: Japanese animation; Japanese culture; Satoshi Kon; mono no aware; aesthetic expression

1 Introduction

Satoshi Kon is a distinguished Japanese animation director and cartoonist. He created four animated films in his lifetime. Despite the small number of works, he won numerous international awards and became famous at home and abroad with these marvelous films. All of his works have distinct personal characteristics, such as realistic style, cinematic-style composition, stylized montage techniques, and a narrative style that merges reality and fantasy. His unique artistic expression style grows out of his art learning experience and is also strongly influenced by traditional Japanese aesthetics and social environment. Moreover, his works, such as *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika*, always focus on the real problems of Japanese society by reflecting the social reality at that time. His works not only give the audience an artistic experience, but also portray a microcosm of Japanese society in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

2 Japanese Aesthetic Expression in Satoshi Kon's Animated Films

As a visual art, animated films give the audience visual aesthetic experience as the most direct impression. Moreover, the art style is closely related to the overall style and core

expression of animated films. As an animation director who focused on Japanese social phenomena and portrayed the sore points of the Japanese nation, Satoshi Kon incorporated Japanese aesthetics into his works.

2.1 Traditional Japanese cultural elements

The animated films of Kon have a strong Japanese style due to the inclusion of a large number of traditional Japanese cultural elements. He created metaphors in his works by incorporating the traditional cultural elements that the Japanese people are most familiar with, thereby deeply touching the audience.^[1]

In his work, *Paprika*, the classic scene of the dream parade is full of symbolic elements of traditional Japanese culture, including wandering Japanese shrines, ghosts in Japanese legends, and countless classic Japanese dolls in the parade team. Moreover, Kon also expressed his artistic ideas through the re-creation of traditional cultural elements, conveying his keen perception of the real dilemma hidden beneath the fascinating dreams in the rapidly growing economy of Japan. In the dream parade of *Paprika*, he portrayed politicians who were willing to become four-eyed Daruma dolls in order to ascend to the center of power. Daruma dolls are something special in Japan. It is called “縁起物” (えんぎもの) by the Japanese, which is an object for praying for good luck. The Japanese make wishes using the eyeless Daruma. They draw the left eye on the Daruma when making a wish and draw the other eye to celebrate when the wish comes true. This is called the “eye-opening” ceremony. The four-eyed Daruma drawn by Kon in the dream parade has profound meaning. The figure 1 shows that the four eyes satirize endless desires. There is no “eye-opening” ceremony after many wishes are made. The blank right eye of Daruma implies the empty promises made by some Japanese parties in the social election by unscrupulous means. Kon used traditional Japanese elements to satirize and criticize the stubborn social problems of Japan. The classic dream parade scene in *Paprika* vividly reflects Kon’s thoughts and observations about society.



Fig. 1. In the animated film *Paprika*, politicians in the dream parade turn into four-eyed Daruma dolls.

In Kon’s another animated film, *Millennium Actress*, metaphors of classic Japanese historical events and traditional stories are frequently seen, which reflects his perfect use of traditional Japanese cultural elements in his works from another dimension. The film presents the major periods in Japanese history, including the Sengoku, Shogunate,

and Showa periods. Kon made full use of the unique expression of animation and connected the cultural atmosphere of different periods in Japan over the past thousand years through the performance and running of the heroine, Chiyoko Fujiwara, by masterly storyboard design and editing. He incorporated the traditional Japanese culture over the past thousand years into Chiyoko's life of persistent pursuit of love. The film is full of Japanese aesthetics and creates stunning artistic effects.^[1]

2.2 Japanese aesthetics and connotations of colors

Color is an important visual code in animated films and an intuitive and powerful means of artistic expression. It has different meanings in different contexts. Japanese animation puts the emphasis on the use of color and exhibits a marked national character in color expression.

The aesthetics and use of color in Japanese artistic creation are considerably influenced by Western art and culture. During the Meiji Restoration, Japan implemented reforms in the fields of politics, military, economy, and culture, etc. and began to wholly accept Western civilization. Western architecture, culture, painting, sculpture, etc. were introduced to Japan on a large scale. The Japanese studied Western painting with unprecedented enthusiasm.^[2] In this context, Western painting, which uses color as the main form of expression, has greatly influenced Japanese painting. As a result, Japanese painting has developed into a unique national art by combining Eastern line expression with Western color perception. Kon's animated films highlight the characteristics of traditional Japanese paintings and embody Japanese aesthetics in the use of colors.

In the three works known as Kon's Memories Trilogy, *Perfect Blue*, *Paprika*, and *Millennium Actress*, Kon presented a unique aesthetic feast of colors full of traditional Japanese aesthetic features. Let's take red as an example. Japanese culture has complex emotions towards red. Red and the similar colors, yellow and purple, have multiple characters in Japanese culture. On the one hand, there is a folk concept that "red is not clean" in Japan, which means it brings up associations with blood and death. On the other hand, red symbolizes the sun and even appears on the Japanese flag. Kon's Memories Trilogy uses a lot of red. In *Perfect Blue*, red appears a lot in Mima's room and on Mima's dress in the later part of the film. In *Millennium Actress*, red first appears on the scarf of the painter that Chiyoko chases, and red elements of different brightness also appear on Chiyoko at different times, ages, and moods. In *Paprika*, red appears on the body of the youthful and energetic Paprika, in the environment of the mysterious dream dominated by Paprika, and in the disordered and crazy dream. In these films, Kon not only creates a unique Japanese aesthetic through the extensive use of red, but also addresses the subtle changes in red and the subtle differences in its symbolic meaning in Japanese culture, thereby maximizing emotionality in colors based on reality.

2.3 Traditional Japanese aesthetic - mono no aware

Mono no aware (もののあはれ) is a key component of the Japanese aesthetic system. In brief, it is about all living things and the true expression of human emotions.^[3] To this day, mono no aware has always been the fundamental aesthetic tone of Japanese

animation, reflecting the distinctive Japanese aesthetic style.^[4] In Kon's films, *mono no aware* can be seen in the visual language, plots, and even the soundtracks.

2.3.1 Visual language.

The influence of the *mono no aware* aesthetic can be seen in character design, scene design, and the use of many elements in Kon's films.

In terms of character design, Kon was influenced by Otomo Katsuhiro and others. He had a realistic painting style, as shown in Figure 2, and pursued meticulousness and exquisiteness. Chiyoko, Paprika, and other characters, especially female characters, have beautiful shapes based on realism, demonstrating his keen pursuit of beauty.^[2]



Fig. 2. In the anime *Millennium Actress*, the character design, costume design, and even the key freeze frames of the heroine are all delicate and sadly beautiful.

In terms of scene portrayal, Kon, like his contemporary Japanese animators, strove to portray the scenes to perfection and pursued realism and beauty. For example, many scenes in *Millennium Actress* use the colors and style of Ukiyo-e and depict elements, such as falling cherry blossoms, layers of trees, and falling snow, giving the film a tinge of sadness.

2.3.2 Plot design.

The plot is driven forward by depicting emotions, such as family, friendship, and love, while exploring human nature, thereby creating the aesthetic of *mono no aware*.^[5] In terms of plot design, Kon was good at capturing the subtle emotions of people and leaving the audience with a slightly regrettable ending. Although some of his works, such as *Tokyo Godfathers*, which depicts the adventures and redemption of homeless people on Christmas Eve, and *Millennium Actress*, in which Chiyoko pursues love throughout her life but fails, are shrouded in a faint sadness in the overall narrative, the plots are reasonable and realistic.^[6] This accords with the “true expression of human emotions” advocated by the aesthetic of *mono no aware*.

2.3.3 Soundtrack design.

When talking about the soundtracks in Kon's animes, we must mention a brilliant Japanese musician, Susumu Hirasawa. Hirasawa has a distinctive composing style and participated in the production of many works directed by Kon, including *Millennium Actress* in 2002, *Paranoia Agent* in 2004, and *Paprika* in 2006. Among the many works jointly created by the two masters, the most outstanding masterpiece is undoubtedly the

soundtrack of the animated film, *Paprika*, in which the dream parade is perfectly matched with the music. Hirasawa's music lends a magical touch to the illusory dream-land. The music created by combining electronic music, hymns, and Japanese folk songs in *Paprika* is majestic yet modern, creating a carnival-like scene. In particular, this chaos and craziness is perfectly expressed by the electronic music.^[7] This work embodies the aesthetic of *mono no aware* in a grand, sacred, and soul-touching way.

3 Reflection Of Social Reality in Satoshi Kon's Animes

Kon was born in 1963. His teenage and young adult years coincided with the period of extensive revitalization and golden age of the Japanese animation industry.^[8] He also witnessed the development of Japanese society in the Showa and Heisei eras, the development of the postwar economy, and the economic crisis in the 1990s.^[9] In this context, he had unique thoughts on society and life. Only in this way could Kon's works be created against the background of religion, World War II, and mega-economy and expose the real problems of modern society in an open way. However, he did not use this as a gimmick to promote his works. His original intention was simply to create a world where people can cry, laugh, and show their true selves.

A prominent feature of Kon's works is the fusion of fantasy and reality by reflecting real social issues while depicting dreams. The author analyzes this feature and investigates the reasons for the formation of this style, the techniques of expression, and the Japanese social environment reflected in Kon's works.

3.1 Fusion of fantasy and reality

Kon was good at interweaving and merging fantasy and reality in various dimensions including the themes, narrative style, and techniques of expression.

3.1.1 Selection of themes.

The themes of Kon's works focus on social reality and are closely related to the current social environment. He focused on the long-suppressed mental status and dilemma of modern Japanese, exploring how to find a balance again amidst the physical and mental exhaustion and disorders, and how to find an approach to reality in illusion.

In *Perfect Blue*, the story revolves around Japanese idols and the mental dilemma of modern Japanese.^[10] Kon magnified Mima's anxiety and mental pressure in the artistic expression of anime. However, this is indeed the mental dilemma facing the Japanese people in reality. Kon's works depict the sad fact that people, as the subject living in a highly developed modern civilization, are inevitably losing their subjectivity and gradually becoming alienated.

In *Tokyo Godfathers*, the plot in which Miyuki stabbed her father because he hurt her cat points to the social issues related to adolescent violence. The younger age of violent perpetrators is a sore point that Japanese society cannot escape. From November 1988 to January 1989, a shocking murder case, known as "concrete-encased high school girl murder case", was committed by teenagers in Japan with brutal means. It was the

first murder case in Japanese history where the corpse was encased in cement. The Japanese government even amended the *Juvenile Law* because of it.^[11-12] Kon focused on the theme of adolescent violence to explore the dark side of human nature hidden in Japanese society.

3.1.2 Narrative style.

Kon has a unique way of structuring and narrating stories. As a major feature of his works, his narrative structure and camera language always make the audience wander between the absurdity in reality and the reality in absurdity.^[8] This feature is particularly evident in Kon's *Memories Trilogy*: reality intertwine with dreams in *Paprika*, the two selves of Mima clash in *Perfect Blue*,^[13] and the reality of life blends with the plot of film in *Millennium Actress*. The boundaries of reality are blurred in his works, but thoughts and expressions based on reality always exist in the fantasy worlds created by Kon.

His other work, *Tokyo Godfathers*, has a more realistic style, but is still full of interweaving of fantasy and reality in terms of narrative style. Kon set up a lot of coincidences in the film to pave the way for an "impossible miracle" to happen, thus driving forward the plot. The three protagonists met because of the "miracle" and started the stories, which is exactly the so-called "reality" constructed by Kon through fantasy.

3.2 Development and expression of social insight

3.2.1 Development of keen insight.

The unique style of Kon's works is the result of his own experience as well as the development of Japanese society.

From a personal perspective, Kon's style is derived from the art he was exposed to when he was young. Kon studied graphic design at the Department of Visual Communication Design at Musashino Art University in Tokyo. When Kon was a teenager, Japan was experiencing an extensive revitalization of animation, during which numerous excellent animation works were produced. During this period, Kon feasted on classic animes, such as *Space Battleship Yamato*. When studying at Musashino Art University, Kon turned his interest from animes to live-action films. In particular, the works of two directors, Terry Gilliam and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, both of whom are experts at depicting fantasy themes and capturing the state of people at intersection between reality and fantasy, had a significant influence on Kon's future creations. Kon learned a lot from their works about the handling of fantasy and reality and developed his own unique style by further developing the techniques learned and incorporating stream-of-consciousness narration.^[14]

As Hippolyte Taine said, "The artist themselves, together with all their works, is not isolated." An artist belongs to a larger whole, that is, the artistic school or family to which they belong. And the artistic school or family itself is also included in a larger whole, that is, the social environment in which it exists and whose tastes are consistent with its own. Artistic creation cannot be separated from social reality. Kon's creations

were derived from his meticulous observation and reflection on life, his concern for the lower classes of Japanese society, and his insight into the plight of society.

3.2.2 Expression of artistic propositions - montage.

Film is a narrative art. Montage is the main technique of narration and expression of films. The artful combination of metaphorical and mental montage is a distinctive feature of Kon's animes. This technique plays a crucial role in conveying his creative ideas, creating an atmosphere of blurred boundaries between reality and fantasy, and portraying the psychology of characters. Kon was particularly good at using montage to exploit the hidden meanings between shots. He used actions, sounds, plots, and matching of similar frames to transition scenes, thereby omitting redundant narration and making the intricate storyline more organized. In *Millennium Actress*, for example, the protagonist Chiyoko's pursuit of love is integrated into her film and television works. Her performance is moving and full of emotion. The roles played by Chiyoko in the play-within-a-play span a huge range, from a princess in a castle, a noble lady in the Taisho era, to a girl in war and even a female astronaut. Kon created a special montage for this part of the anime, which simplifies the large-scale narrative of the play-within-a-play and enhances the sense of substitution through the nesting of time and space and the straightforward leap of time,^[15] while intensifying the emotional progression of the protagonist Chiyoko.

The dazzling visual experience created by the montage technique intensifies the sense of fantasy and conceals the reality, allowing Kon to create the dream while properly integrating all his expressions and observations into the film. All his montages and dreams have a basis in reality, reflecting the true dynamics of modern Japanese society.

4 Conclusion

Despite his short life, Japanese animation director Satoshi Kon left the world with marvelous works through his artistic feelings and life observations. The dreams woven in his works allow the audience to see the plight of modern Japanese society in an ideal and accurate way. His works are authentic, bold, and full of his objective and sharp reflections on Japanese society. They opened the door to the creation of adult animations and left a strong mark on the animation art of this era. It is a pity that this "niche" master has not been known by the wider public. In view of this, the author wrote this article to present Kon's works which incorporate an intense Japanese flavor and strong sense of social responsibility and insight into animation art.

Studying the national aesthetic expression in Kon's animation works can also inspire the development of Chinese animation art. On the one hand, Kon created a national style by using a lot of Japanese elements and classic colors, which is a technique that has been frequently used in current Chinese animations. On the other hand, as a part of film and television works, animation also requires adequate humanistic care. Animation creators have to observe and think about society to create works rooted in national cul-

ture, which is something Chinese animation creators can learn from. In the future, Chinese animation can draw on the national aesthetic expression and artistic techniques of Kon's works to apply techniques such as stream of consciousness, focus on the expression of themes, and integrate depth, aesthetics, interest, and emotion.

References

1. Zanwei Chen. Innovative interpretation of traditional culture in Japanese animation[J]. Television Caption Effects Animation, 2008, (08): 22-26.
2. Xiaoyu He. Satoshi Kon's animation works and Japanese national culture[D]. Shandong Normal University, 2016.
3. Zihua Qiu, Wenge Wang. Cultural interpretation of Japanese aesthetic categories[J]. Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences), 2001, (01): 58-68, 76.
4. Li Yang. On the Japanese culture of mono no aware from the perspective of film works[J]. Shuangqing Academic Publishing House Limited, 2022: 31-34.
5. Guangfeng Zheng. Construction of mono no aware aesthetics in Miyazaki Hayao's animated films[J]. Masterpieces Review, 2023, (29): 130-132.
6. Villa-gracia Daniel, Martínez Víctor-Cerdán. La popularidad de las heroínas anime de Hayao Miyazaki y Satoshi Kon (2004-2021): un análisis estético y narrativo[J]. Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM), 2022, 13(1): 461-474.
7. Hyewon Shin. Springer Nature Singapore[M]. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2024: 415-438.
8. Donghan Weng. Artistic characteristics of Japanese commercial animation[D]. Fujian Normal University, 2008.
9. Jinan Wu. Reality and illusion of the 'great power dream' of Japan: Experience and lessons regarding the political transformation of Japan since the 1980s[J]. Japanese Studies, 2021, (S1): 149.
10. Ríos Alberto. Sueños, ficciones y visiones: las posibilidades de otros universos en la obra de Satoshi Kon[J]. Universidad de Lima, 2024, (031): 34-41.
11. Mengzhu Xiao. Hand-painted fantasy: Aesthetic interpretation of Satoshi Kon's animes[D]. Southwest University, 2015.
12. Xuede Chen. Restorative justice vs. juvenile justice[J]. Angle Publishing Co., Ltd., 2022, 2(2): 24-33.
13. Suryani Putu-Buda. Representasi Halusinasi Tokoh Mima Kirigoe dalam Film Animasi PERFECT BLUE Karya Satoshi Kon[J]. Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, 2024, 10(1): 53-58.
14. Chen Chen. Fantasy and reality[D]. East China Normal University, 2011.
15. Chen Chen. Transcending media and time and space: Analysis of Satoshi Kon's works[J]. JinGu Creative Literature, 2023, (37): 91-93.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

