

***Perfect Blue* de Satoshi Kon***Un voyage vers l'identité à travers la folie***Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue****A Journey Towards Identity Through Madness***Mohamed KENDRI**

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[kendri.mohamed@ensc.dz](mailto:kendri.mohamed@ensc.dz)**Date de soumission : 28.01.2023 – Date d'acceptation : 13.02.2023 – Date de publication : 20.02.2023**

**Abstract** — *Satoshi Kon* (1963-2010) is an acclaimed director who left a unique signature in the world of cinema, a legacy that reached overseas influencing some of the most renowned Hollywood representatives such as *Darren Arronofsky* (1969) and *Christopher Nolan* (1970). His films are characterized by a narrative that blends dreams and reality in order to explore the psychology of individuals attempting to adapt to modern life. His magnum opus *Perfect Blue* (1997) is considered a mainstay of the psycho-thriller genre in the Japanese animation. Taking inspirations from *Hitchcock's Vertigo* (1958), and *Dario Argento's Suspiria* (1977), Kon manages to create a complex work about the main character *Mima Kirigoe* and her slow decline into insanity as she switches careers from a J-Pop Idol to a professional actress, until finding her personal identity.

With an analytical method, We try to approach the film from a Psychoanalytical angle for the purpose of shedding the light on an interestingly portrayed mental disorder: "*Dissociative Identity Disorder*", which Mima goes through dragging along secondary characters, and the viewer with her in an abyss of shared psychosis.

Kon's exquisite artistry relies mainly on film transition techniques and symbolic imagery to establish the characters' mental worlds; creating a trompe-l'œil effect that completely absorbs the spectators and conveys the messages with subtlety.

**Keywords:** *Satoshi Kon, Perfect Blue, Madness, Shared Psychosis Identity, Cinema.*

**Résumé** — *Satoshi Kon* (1963-2010) est un réalisateur acclamé qui a laissé une signature unique dans le monde du cinéma, un héritage qui a atteint certains des représentants les plus renommés d'Hollywood tels que *Darren Arronofsky* (1969) et *Christopher Nolan* (1970). Ses films se caractérisent par une narration mêlant rêve et réalité afin d'explorer la psychologie des individus qui tentent de s'adapter à la vie moderne. Son oeuvre maitresse *Perfect Blue* (1997) est considéré comme un pilier du thriller psychologique dans l'animation japonaise. S'inspirant de *Vertigo* d'*Hitchcock* (1958) et de *Suspiria* de *Dario Argento* (1977), Kon parvient à créer une oeuvre complexe sur le personnage principal *Mima Kirigoe* et son déclin dans la folie lors de son passage d'une J-Pop idole à une actrice professionnelle, jusqu'à retrouver son identité personnelle.

Avec une méthodologie analytique, nous essayons d'aborder le film sous un angle psychanalytique dans le but d'éclaircir un trouble mental dépeint de manière intéressante : « *le trouble dissociatif de l'identité* », que Mima traverse en traînant des personnages secondaires, et le spectateur avec elle dans un abîme de psychose partagée.

Le talent artistique exquis de Kon repose principalement sur des techniques de transition cinématographique et des images symboliques pour établir les mondes mentaux de ses personnages ;

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créant un effet de trompe-l'œil qui absorbe complètement les spectateurs et transmet les messages avec subtilité.

**Mots-clés :** *Satoshi Kon, Perfect Blue, folie, folie à deux, identité, cinéma.*

## Introduction

Western Modernity is Logocentric. Accordingly, its Cartesian features and coordinates were built on the rules of the methodology based on intuitiveness and clarity, and the rejection of everything that is ambiguous or features mystery and unfamiliarity. And the coronation was completed with *Kant* (1724-1804), who installed the mind as an ontological, epistemological and axiological judge, But the matter did not remain that way with the advent of the philosophers of suspicion. Here is *Marx* (1818-1883) overturning *The dialectic of Hegel* (1770-1831) and proving that the mind is not the driver but the social class and the economic system, then the strongest blow was with *Nietzsche* (1844-1900) and his genealogical demolition of the rational system, to open the way for man with all his shortcomings and faults, before the completion of the trio with *Freud* (1856-1939) and his theory of the subconscious, which showed that man is controlled by instinctive, unconscious forces hiding behind all his rationalizations. From here the Pandora's box has been opened for difference and forgotten topics. Here is the Nietzschean thinker, *Michel Foucault* (1926-1984), who goes to the unthinkable and the marginalized to put it in the center and calls for the possibility of thinking about it and extracting meaning from the unreasonable that's been excluded in favor of the reasonable and rational, for this last doesn't hold the absolute truth. It is upon him that we initially adjust the concept of insanity, which is:

*"Madness is meaning and knowledge outside of themselves" (Fuery, 2004, p. xi).*

Madness then, is not a lack or absence of meaning, rather it is another version of meaning that for some reason or other has been placed in a special category of otherness. Hence the love of madness for a special art form that emerged and flourished in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Cinema. The idea that when we become spectators of cinema there is something beyond the interplay between reality and pretence. There is something that dissolves the distinction between film and what could be called the everyday existence of reality. Such dissolution becomes part of what we see as madness (Fuery, 2004, p. 7). Madness and film both provide a unique perspective on knowledge and meaning. By embracing their relationship, we can gain insight into topics related to knowledge and meaning.

The focus of this paper is a cinematic masterpiece of an unusual and unexpected area, from an irreplaceable genius. Praised by the critics as the child of *Walt Disney* and *Alfred Hitchcock*; *Perfect Blue* is *Satoshi Kon's* magnum opus that still proudly stands the test of time. Often imitated, never surpassed<sup>1</sup>. *Perfect Blue* is an embodiment of post-classical cinema,

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<sup>1</sup> It is primordial to give *Kon* the recognition he deserves for his cinematic heritage that influenced *Darren Arronofsky* and *Christopher Nolan*, respectively for *Black Swan* and *Inception*. Although *Arronofsky* paid his respect later on in the documentary *Satoshi Kon l'illusionniste*, there is no official declaration concerning *Nolan* about the huge intertextual impact of *Paprika* on *Inception*

which refers to films that challenge traditional narrative structures and conventions. Often features nonlinear narratives, complex characters, and ambiguous endings. *Perfect Blue* fits this definition as it features a protagonist struggling with identity issues, nonlinear storytelling, and an ambiguous ending that leaves viewers with questions about the protagonist's fate. Referred to as a pillar of the psychological thriller in Japanese animation due to the mature way it handles its themes and characters thanks to his artistic touch and aesthetic sensibilities, which inspires us to ask the following: What is the madness in which *Kon* invites us to experience with his oeuvre? How does it help navigate such problematic? And what meaning can we get from it? This is what we try to approach and clarify in the following lines.

## 1. The Roots

Satoshi's genre-defying *Perfect Blue*, which, in a masterpiece of animation, combines elements of drama, action, suspense, murder-mystery, psychological thriller, and horror, all wrapped within a tale of personal growth and struggle for individuality in the pop music/idol industry. This film forms a compact entryway into the issue of identity-as-crisis.

The early premise of psychological thriller regarding the cinematic apparatus can be traced back to German Expressionism. Throughout their extreme stylization of mise en scène, shadowy lighting, and at times highly fluid camera movement, with exaggerated performance techniques in stories with macabre or lowlife settings and themes; they could evoke an atmosphere of foreboding, anxiety, and paranoia. Works such as: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Weine, 1920); following the story of hypnotist *Dr. Caligari*, who uses a somnambulist named Cesare to commit murders. The film is widely considered the first true horror movie and has been praised for its unique visual style. It has also been noted for its exploration of themes such as insanity, authoritarianism, and the duality of human nature. And *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), amongst many others, are key representatives of the school. The influence of the German Expressionists on Hollywood films went beyond *Citizen Kane* (Orson Wells, 1941), and film noir with heritage such as subjective flashbacks and dream sequences of the 1940s. The influence of German Expressionism can also be seen in American horror films, which often feature elements such as dark shadows and distorted sets that are reminiscent of expressionist films.

The suspense and surprise aspect of the thriller is associated with manipulations of narrative and filmic form aimed at misleading audiences, a speciality of "*master of suspense*" Alfred Hitchcock, whose 1960 film *Psycho*, with the shocking murder of its protagonist part way through the film, is widely regarded as the suspense thriller par excellence.

The giallo takes on an increasingly violent and erotic connotation, specializing above all in the description of the figure of the murderer, not limiting himself to his external appearance, but above all dissecting his psyche. The intention was to involve the viewer in some way in the crime, through the eyes of the murderer himself. For this purpose, a rather

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and the flagrant similarities. The only inspirations mentioned are Heist movies and Stanley Kubrick's 2001 *A Space Odyssey* as a technical influence to be found in *The Making of Inception*.

innovative cinematographic technique for the time was used, called Point of View Shot, in which the position of the camera coincides with the point of view of the author of the crime.

These types of film are not a scientific reference that we rely on to diagnose mental disorders. The function of art, regardless of the entertainment aspect that primarily appears to the mainstream public, is to create experiences that the spectator undergoes in the world of the film that penetrates his senses and motivates him to think about what he saw – primarily through affect – because the auteur does not want to reduce him into a passive consumer. From here, we re-ask our question: What experience does this film offer regarding a Dissociative Identity Disorder? Why does the spectator need such an experience? Especially since the portrayal of mental disorders in films is, in most cases, very stigmatized, superficial and detached from reality. As the stereotypical label ‘psychopath’ is attached to a serial killer or on an introverted teenager, which creates an erroneous image in the minds of the masses. Or in the best case, we are offered a biography of a certain figure with the most prominent stations of their life that led to the insanity without delving into depth.

One might even worry that the spectator’s health is at stakes by pushing him towards the abyss without return, if a psychological disorder is embodied in a movie with absolute realism. What is the average spectator’s need for this? Isn’t it better for such a movie to remain hidden among eccentric groups? Fortunately, the genius directors control the mechanics of their narratives, and bring the viewer to catharsis with health and wellness after all the fun manipulations that he went through, to allow him the opportunity to say his word and extract his reading after he had opened up to the artwork, and before he re-read it once again.

### 1.1. Textual Reading

Although difficult to reduce to one single genre or subgenre that it borrows from in order to shape its own identity, *Perfect Blue* tells the story of J-Pop Idole *Mima* and her journey as she switches careers from an industry to another one that is the industry of acting, and all the psychological transitions and emotional turmoil she undergoes during the process, while a killer stalker is threatening her life. Set in an urban late 90’s Tokyo with a rather realistic aesthetics regarding architecture and facial expressions. The film begins with a stage show of three sentai warriors fighting an evil creature, then Mima and her CHAM! Band start their live for her to begin the “*euphoric ascension*” via a fade to white shot. *Kon* starts warming up the spectator by intercutting the spatiotemporal lives of Mima; personal and professional, spicing up with match cuts for the purpose of linking reality and fantasy in a subjective perspective. Throughout the film, shots follow one another with anxiety-provoking compositions, crossed by geometric shapes and “*surcadres*”; frame within a frame. The “*Double Bind*” TV show in which Mima makes her first steps contains a semantic value: She is entrapped between two worlds. Real and Illusory, Private and Professional, Pop Idole and Actress, Stable and Insane, *Mima* and *Virtual Mima*... all in a series of intertwining dualities.

The city divides the space, separates its inhabitants. *Mima*’s apartment is overloaded, stuffy. And her social contacts, other than professional, are reduced to a phone call to her mother – who never appears in the film –, and to her tetra fishes. In other words, there is no one else to see *Mima* but her fans. Her struggle to escape this persecution and reach her

identity is foreshadowed in the *Double Bind* dialogue that took place between *Eri-san* and the detective as follows:

E: — *Do you know why the culprit peels off the skins of his victims?*

D: — *I assume he gets sexual stimulation from such activities...*

E: — *He wants to become One.*

D: — *Become...what?*

E: — *A woman... or...*” (Kon, 1997, 14:43).

“— *Who are you?*” asks Mima herself on set under the dizzying lights and peers’ pressure. When the shockingly sordid rape scene gets performed on set and recorded on multiple cameras, the spectator is bombarded with spiralling lights and a certain dose of surcadrages. A crucial moment of visceral transgression. She goes back to her apartment like nothing happened and none of it was real, until her tetra fishes are found dead; symbolizing the death of Mima the Idole. The cognitive dissonance is unbearable for her which causes her psychotic<sup>2</sup> breakdown, and the madness begins. Virtual Mima starts appearing from the reflections and answers *Mima*’s reflexion “*Who Are You?*” in a degrading shame-inducing discourse. The series of murders that follows, takes down successively everyone who got involved in the retirement of Idole Mima. The obsessive madness with the *Mima* they were idolatring took over them, murders are given as an answer to “*Who Are You?*” by initially the stalker Me-Mania. The viewer is empathizing with *Mima* in her disorientation, and the key scenes of some renowned animators like *Takeshi Honda* with his kinetic style add an emphasis to the experience. The illusion haunted most of the characters touched by *Mima*’s departure and a first reading of the film suggests that it was *Rumi* behind the murders. The *Double Bind* TV within the main film shares revelations about the culprit suffering from an Identity disorder and by killing, and becoming her sister top model, she salvaged her heart; which correlates with putting *Rumi* in a psychiatric asylum, trapped in her projected old self in a mirror which she couldn’t escape or move on from. The final scenes show a stable *Mima* who became an actress and is moving on with her life, before she breaks the fourth wall and speaks to the audience from a mirror declaring not in the city accent she learned for acting, but her original accent: “— *No, I am Real!*”

## 2. Analysis

It is obvious to state that *Perfect Blue* is a rich text that suggests multiple reading angles and approaches, which enriches the experience and elevates it to an artistic status. Beyond the textual reading of its complex narrative and stylistic cinematic language, there’s the possibility of intertextuality within the film, text within a text let’s say, that reveals another layer

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<sup>2</sup> Neurosis and psychosis are two distinct types of mental disorders. Neurosis is a minor disorder characterized by physical and mental disturbances, while psychosis is a break from reality. Freud originally distinguished between neurosis and psychosis by saying that in neurosis, the ego suppresses part of the id out of allegiance to reality. People often misuse psychological terms such as “neurotic” or ‘split personality’ without understanding their true meanings. See : (*Introduction to Sigmund Freud, Module on Neuroses, n.d.*).

of its depth. We will try to show how the mentioned Dissociative Identity Disorder corresponds with the diegesis of the film without any projection or mutilation of the film's body, for the disorder has been mentioned in the film. And an interesting approach from psychoanalysis for completion of the picture by comparison and reply regarding the psychiatric literature.

## 2.1. Intertextuality of The Psychiatric literature

The criteria for Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), a mental disorder mentioned in the film, according to the DSM-5 are as follows :

*"A. Disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession. The disruption in identity involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory-motor functioning. These signs and symptoms may be observed by others or reported by the individual.*

*B. Recurrent gaps in the recall of everyday events, important personal information, and/or traumatic events that are inconsistent with ordinary forgetting.*

*C. The symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.*

*D. The disturbance is not a normal part of a broadly accepted cultural or religious practice. Note: In children, the symptoms are not better explained by imaginary playmates or other fantasy play.*

*E. The symptoms are not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts or chaotic behavior during alcohol intoxication) or another medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures)" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 292).*

The defining feature of dissociative identity disorder is the presence of two or more distinct personality states or an experience of possession (Criterion A). The overtness or covertness of these personality states, however, varies as a function of psychological motivation, current level of stress, culture, internal conflicts and dynamics, and emotional resilience. Each personality may have its own unique set of characteristics and behaviors, as well as different memories and thoughts. The said Disorder can be difficult to diagnose due to the wide range of symptoms associated with it, which include memory loss, confusion about one's identity or sense of self, flashbacks to traumatic experiences in childhood or adulthood, depression and anxiety<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> To avoid confusion between DID and Schizophrenia; both are mental health conditions, but they have distinct differences. DID is characterized by two or more distinct identity states, also known

*Perfect Blue* explores themes related to DID through its main character *Mima Kirigoe* who begins experiencing dissociation after leaving her pop idol career behind for an acting role in *the Double Bind* television drama series. As she struggles with her new life choices she begins having visions from multiple identities including herself as an actress named and another version of her – this other persona is much darker than *Mima*’s usual cheerful demeanour suggesting that it could represent some kind of trauma experienced by *Mima* during her past life events such as being raped. The film also features other diagnostic features characteristic for people suffering from DID like: fragmented memories, depersonalization episodes, feelings of detachment from reality etc. (Figure 2).

As the diegesis goes by, secondary characters become involved in the dilemma, including the viewer who gets trapped in what can be called a shared psychosis; *folie à deux*<sup>4</sup> where the line between reality and fantasy has become indistinguishable and the madness took over everyone and their obsession with the Idole *Mima*.

The intertextuality of Psychiatry offers indeed a solid gravity point for recognizing what’s going on since *Kon* provides with his craftsmanship the viewers with insight into what living with Dissociative Identity Disorder might look like. Yet a line in the denouement of the *Double Bind* TV series suggests further psychoanalytical understanding with this following line pronounced by the character played by *Eri-san*:

“The original persona, *Tadakora Yoko*, no longer exists. By killing, and later becoming, her sister the top-model, she salvaged her heart” (*Kon*, 1997, 01:01:45).

An allusion to the famous Lacanian case where a woman killed her ideal example who was an actress, but also the concept of separation-individuation theory<sup>5</sup> suggests that *Mima* were using other objects, internalizing them before getting rid of them, in order to grow and reach her goal and true self; successively everyone who were a stone in her way, from the

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as alternate identities or alters, which are not present in schizophrenia. Trauma is associated with both disorders, but the trauma associated with schizophrenia tends to be more subtle and less severe than that associated with DID. Additionally, dissociation from reality plays out differently in each disorder; schizophrenia is marked by a split from reality while DID involves a disruption of identity and memory.

<sup>4</sup> In 1894, *Évariste Marandon de Montyel* (1851–1908) at the Ville-Evrard asylum near Paris, in an article on “morbid mental contagion” in the *Annales médico-psychologiques*, identified three forms of the disorder: *la folie communiquée* (a concept that he took from Jules Baillarger [1809–1890] meaning approximately one person causing the symptoms of another, or induced insanity); *la folie simultanée* (two people exposed to the same cause who simultaneously become ill); and *la folie imposée* (a psychotic conveys his delusional ideas to someone who stands in a dependent relationship to him) (Shorter, 2005, p. 106).

<sup>5</sup> Separation-individuation is a psychoanalytic theory of child development proposed by Margaret Mahler. It involves the internal process of mental separation from the mother and the development of a self concept. Attachment to the primary object is seen as intrinsic to this process, and it is a precursor to differentiation (Blum, 2004).



people involved in the TV production to the managers of CHAM! Pretty frightening as an interpretation indeed.

### 3. Metanarrative

The metanarrative of identity that can be extracted from the film is of no less artistic value than the previous readings and analysis. The film opens onto an ontological horizon through the vertiginous experience it offers. The opening scene is that of characters wearing masks, it is a film about humans and the personas they wear to keep up with their daily lives. The scene which first introduced a mirror creates anxiety in our psyche (**Figure 3**), as if something mad and predatory is waiting for us.

*"In this delusive attachment to himself, man generates his madness like a mirage. The symbol of madness will henceforth be that mirror which, without reflecting anything real, will secretly offer the man who observes himself in it the dream of his own presumption. Madness deals not so much with truth and the world, as with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive" (Foucault, 1972, p. 36).*

The mirror is such an integral part of the representation of madness, and why so many of these images draw on the aspect of reflexivity. This can be the literal representation as well as more symbolic variants. Mirrors<sup>6</sup> reflect our private and intimate worlds, captivate us so that a series of questions about our ontological identity begins. *"Who are you?"* requests *Mima* from a mirror and the insane journey begins in the depths of the self and its intercourse with the other to the paroxysm. We did not listen to *Deleuze* when he warned us about the nightmares of others that time: *"... even when it's a graceful young woman, she's a horrific ravager, not through her soul, but through her dreams. Beware of the dreams of others, because if you are caught in their dream, you are done for"* (Deleuze, 2015, 23:27). The girl take us on board on dangerous and burning turns of increasing madness in which the spectators are focalized on throughout most of the diegesis. Far from the stylistic discretion of classical cinema, the narration is made conspicuous in the film from beginning to end, 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 – (Loriguillo-López & al., 2020, p. 7), and when the climax is reached and the denouement is manifested, now that the dust has settled, *Mima* leaves *Rumi* entrapped in a world of mirror, only to break the fourth wall and adress to us vividly from a mirror (**Figure**

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault claims that man generates his madness like a mirage in an attachment to himself.

He also states that the symbol of madness is a mirror which reflects the distortions of modern civilization. In *L'Histoire de la folie*, Foucault attempts to straddle the literary field by analyzing *Diderot's Le neveu de Rameau* (1891). He also claims that madness has been given *"the virtues of a mirror"* in which all of subjectivity can be seen. Finally, Foucault states that in the mirror, one sees themselves where they are not, in an unreal virtual space that opens up behind the surface. See : Graham (2013).



4) that She is herself. It's the progression towards her true self that allows her to become herself. The words of Kon encapsulate this message about identity perfectly:

*"One little thing leads to another and things start to fall apart. You focus on overcoming the obstacles in your life. Then you may start to question your existence and begin a journey of life experiences. Then you start to feel a sense of identity and realize what it is that you are here in this world to accomplish" (Kon, 2020, 9:50).*

*Was it the end of the journey?* Mima reaching the status of actress doesn't mean that she has to stop growing, questioning and learning about herself and the world. It is an ever renewed process, like Hegel's famous: "[Life] wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself" (Hegel, 1977, p. 19).

## Conclusion

Madness and Cinema interweave in an interdependent relationship ; where madness hides in the spectral areas of the cinematic expression, and cinema reveals such madness in all its forms throughout the experience it vehicules and gets the spectators engaged with the diegesis. Thus, putting them (the viewers) in a state of awariness regarding the unthinkable and marginalized, so the insight and empathetic approaches start processing.

Works like *Perfect Blue* are perfect examples of the capacity of the animation medium to produce texts rich in themes and capable of transferring powerful affects with complex narration and ingenious craftsmanship that explore serious topics such as mental disorders and identity, without falling as shallow or enclosed, carrying one single layer of reading. It suggests that sculpting one's identity isn't an operation that happens only once, rather it is a constant dialectic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

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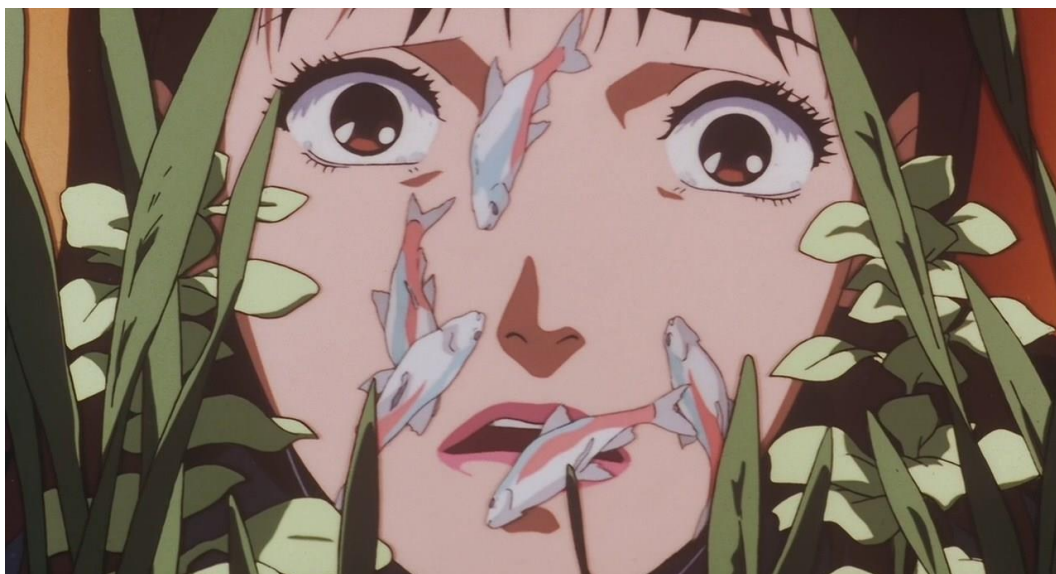
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## Annexes



**Figure 1:** Mima coming back home after the rape scene to find her tetra fish dead. *Perfect Blue* (Kon Satoshi, 1997).



**Figure 2:** Mima experiencing derealization and depersonalization.



**Figure 3:** The scene with a mirror behind Mima, provoking an uncanny feeling.



Figure 4: The Final shot.

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