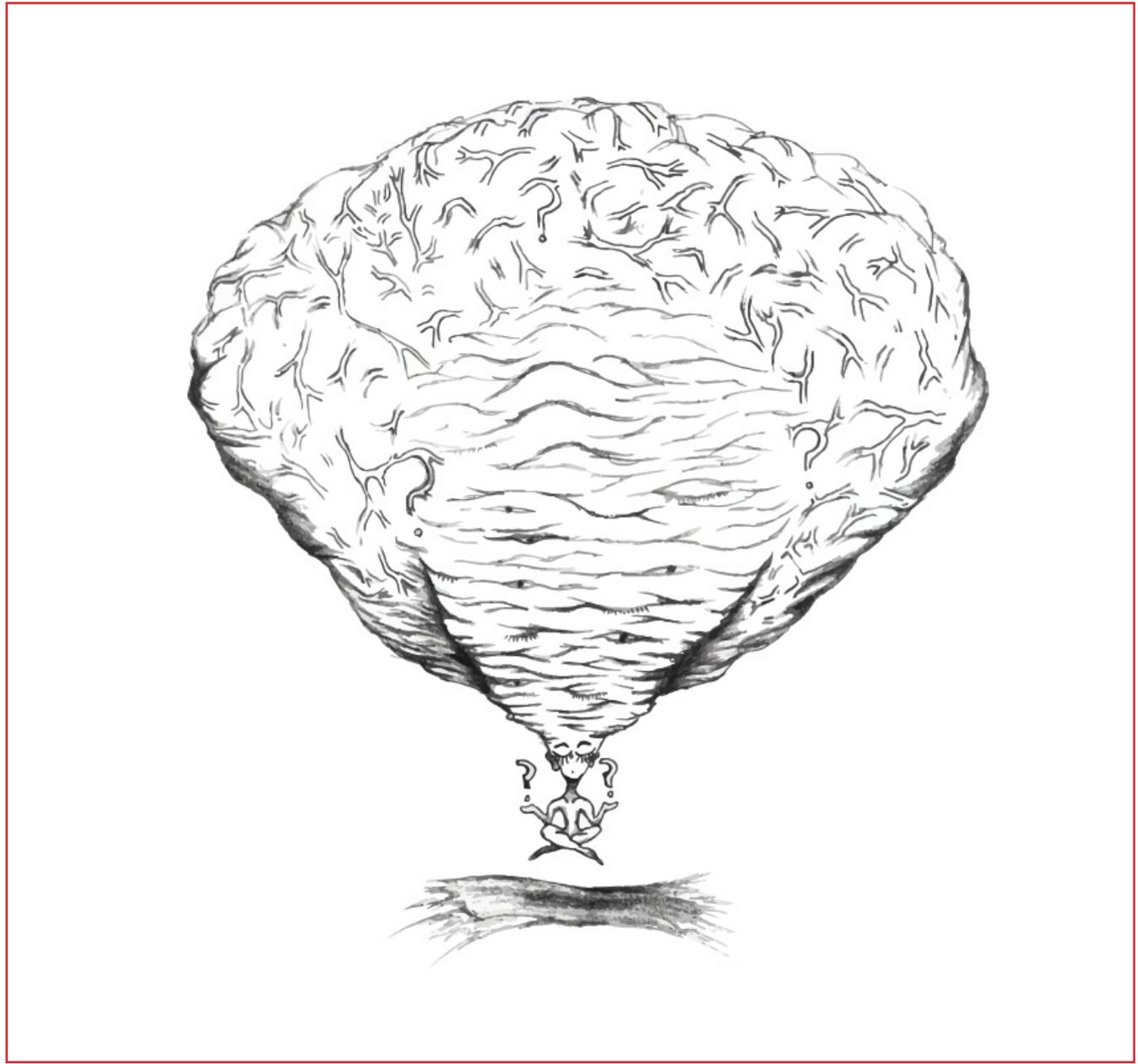


DIOCESAN HERALD

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THE ISSUE OF QUESTIONS





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WE ARE PROUD TO PRESENT to you the latest issue of the *Diocesan Herald*, a product of the hard work of all our writers, editors and designers over the past term. In this issue, questions will be asked and answered as our talented team of writers dive into topics ranging from the controversial blockbuster *Joker*, to a discussion on the practice of gift giving.

The coronavirus pandemic has completely changed our lives and created numerous challenges for the Diocesan community as well as society as a whole. Things as fundamental as physical interaction have been taken away and new concepts such as social distancing and virtual classes have risen in their place. This has inevitably been a tough time for all of us but despite these challenges, the Herald remains committed to offering our readers insights and discussions on a wide range of topics and issues. As you have already noticed, instead of reading from a paperback magazine, you're probably gazing into the screen of your computer or phone. We have decided to publish Issue 16 online so that despite physical barriers, we can still reach you through the Internet.

We would like to extend our greatest gratitude to everyone who has contributed to this issue: Our business manager Augustine Wong, who helped create our beautiful new Herald website at *diocesanherald.wixsite.com*. Our managing editors, who spent precious time and effort fine-tuning every single article. Our layout editors, who designed this amazing cover and layout. Our Teacher in Charge, Mr. Gregory Vanderheiden, for his limitless guidance as well as for inspiring us all. Our contributors, who have gathered their creative minds in writing quality articles for us. And of course, the school and the Diocesan community for their unwavering support.

Finally, we must thank you, dear readers, for your support is our greatest motivation. We would love to hear from you, so if you have any feedback for us, or would like to contribute a piece, feel free to send us an email at diocesanherald@gmail.com.

We hereby present to you The Issue of Questions.
Please enjoy.

Editors
Patrick Chu, Alvin Yung, Augustine Wong

An Economic Analysis of the Practice of Present-Giving: A Waste of Resources?

By **Jerry Wong**



LLSCanada

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN EXCITED to rip into an elegantly wrapped present, only to be disappointed by what was inside? If so, you're not alone. Almost everyone has experienced dissatisfaction towards a present. It is quite a struggle to keep a pleasant expression when staring up at you is a ballpoint pen or a hideous sweater you'd never want to be seen in. It is no wonder that many people, especially children, often wonder why the givers can't just give them cash. While the act of present-giving is simply a formality in our society, within this formality ultimately lies

an interesting question: "is present-giving simply a waste of resources?"

To be able to answer this question, we must first understand how and why we value different presents differently. In economics, there is a term called "utility", which refers to the usefulness or enjoyment a consumer can get from a service or good. For example, eating a piece of your favourite chocolate would give you utility, while falling down on the pavement and scraping your knees will take away your utility. Economic theories based on rational choice usually assume that consumers will strive to maximize their utility, and are willing to pay for as much of it as they can afford and, all other things being equal, at the lowest price possible.

In addition, different presents provide different individuals varying amounts of utility — a sweater and a hoodie may cost the same, but the utility they provide varies from individual to individual, and therein lies the problem: because you know what you like more than other people do (a phenomenon known as "asymmetric information"), it is likely that other people end up giving you something you don't value the most, or in economic terms, something that provides

you with less utility than would have been possible had you picked the present yourself. With this idea of a difference between possible utility and actual utility, it is not hard to see why some would consider present-giving a waste of resources.

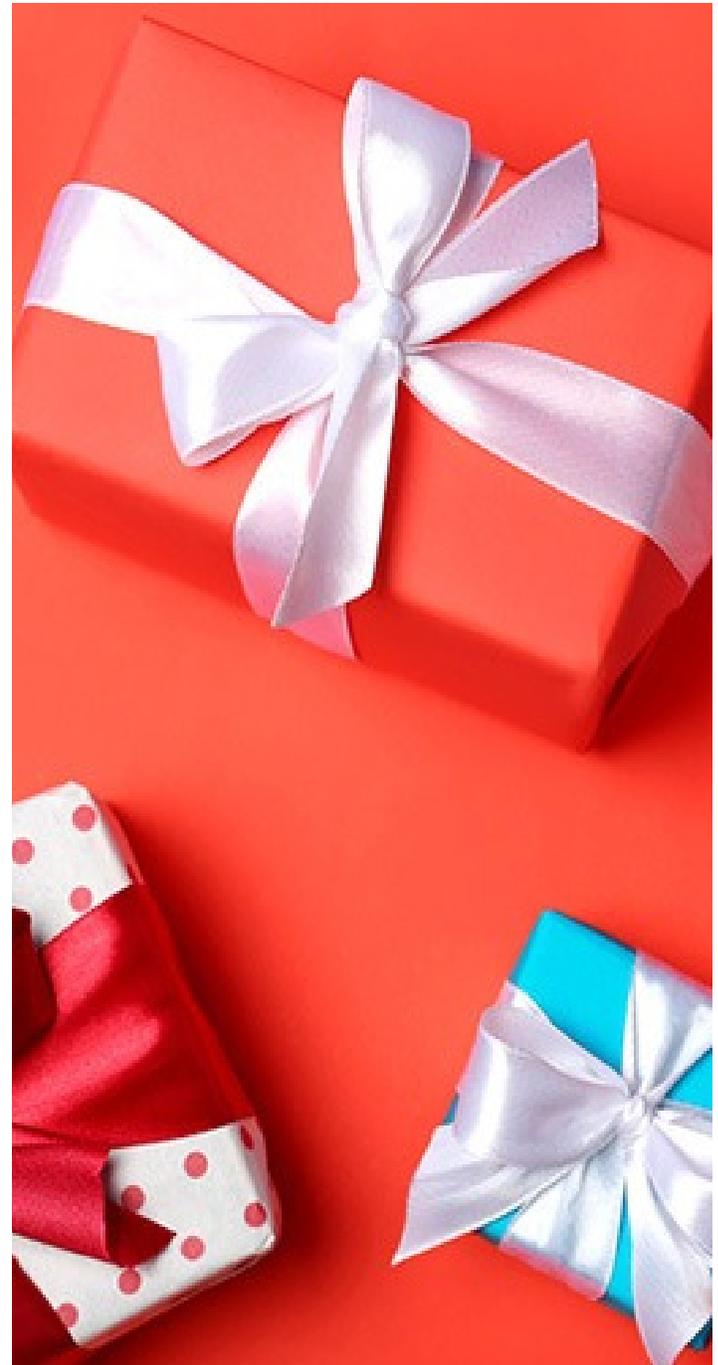
If present-giving truly is a waste of resources, wouldn't we be better off receiving money and buying the stuff we like on our own? Why is it that we still continue this practice?

The reason lies in a fundamental blindspot of our previous analysis. What many overlook in analyzing the value of a present is not its material cost or the packaging, but the sentimental value it holds. Aside from the present itself, the act of present-giving also possesses value: by taking the time to choose a suitable present, purchase it, wrap it, prepare it, and deliver it, givers show recipients their appreciation for them. Take Christmas as an example. Although children may feel moderate amounts of disappointment towards their presents, most are still ultimately happy, not only because of the presents but also because of the festive mood and the fact that they received presents.

However, that is not to say the practice of giving presents is perfect – in fact, there are many alternatives. For example, In China, a red packet is sometimes given during holidays or special occasions such as weddings, graduation or the birth of a baby. In doing so, one ensures that the recipient can gain the maximum utility from the money given.

Furthermore, people have started to alter conventional practices of giving presents to increase the “efficiency” of their presents. For instance, people in the US have started to ask their recipient what they would want for Christmas. There has also been an increasing acceptance of cash gifts and semi-cash presents like gift cards, especially for video games, as new titles hit the store every other day. Another increasingly popular solution is Amazon's ‘wish list’, where users can list the items they want for others to see, thus reducing any waste of resources that comes with buying the wrong present.

The practice of present-giving is ultimately fine the way it is. However, it is still important that we find alternative solutions in order to make for a more “efficient” gift.



eLearning Industry



Urban Decay Arrangement

When all is done and we are gone, who will preserve the monuments that remember our history?

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ISO 160
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The "Perfect" Prison

By **Oscar Tam**

WHAT IS THE FIRST IMAGE that comes to mind when you picture the word “prison”? Perhaps it is the loathsome rats scrambling through prison cells and nibbling at crumbs scattered on the floor, or the hostile guards coldly monitoring your every move, or the convicts in typical prison jumpsuits selling cocaine in secret. It is unfortunate that our negative perceptions of prison probably hold true for most modern prisons around the world. This has led prisoners, politicians and humanitarians to ask why prisons can't shed their image through better and more humane design.

Actually, they can. Built about ten years ago, the Halden Prison in southeastern Norway boasts a revolutionary design and hotel-like interior with glass-paned windows and modern layout, securing the prestigious Arnstein Arneberg Award for its architectural design in 2010. Surprisingly, the prison takes on a look rather similar to that of a modern university, with facilities scattered all around the “campus”, encouraging inmates to commute and move around each day. Perhaps the simplest yet most significant distinction between Halden Prison (or humane prisons in general) and traditional prison is the comforting presence of greenery, which not only evokes a feeling of beauty and even tranquility, but most importantly allows the inmates to observe the passage of time, which diminishes the jarring gap encountered by prisoners between themselves and the wider world. With the addition of televisions in each cell and a common area for inmates and various recreational facilities, it is not hard to realize why it is considered to be one of the “nicest” prisons on Earth.

This utopian fantasy of prison life may

seem too good to be true, and it has faced criticism for being too liberal and lenient. However, to understand the potential benefits that humane prisons pose, we must first recognize the purpose of prisons and by extension the criminal justice system is twofold: to deter people from reoffending and to rehabilitate convicts. These goals seem irreconcilable, and in fact most prisons choose to focus on punishment, which is significantly more cost-effective than rehabilitation. This characteristic of conventional prisons deliberately ignores the onus of modern prisons to ensure the reintegration into society of prisoners following their release.

It is precisely such mindsets that have pushed governments globally to pursue designs that focus on retribution. A good example of this is the “telephone pole” design of prisons in the United States (US), in which a main corridor connects various branches and departments of a prison. This design confines the movement of convicts to the same dull locations every day, with a lack of greenery, outdoor spaces and recreational facilities. This is done in the name of promoting maximum efficiency and capacity, begging the question of whether this is the optimal way for society to treat criminals.. Statistics issued by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in the US show that the national cost spent on mass incarceration per year reached an astonishing 81 billion USD in 2017, nearly two percent of the total national expenditure that year. Despite such figures, crime levels in the US are found to be 87% higher than that in Norway, based on a survey directed to citizens of both countries. Such studies show that blindly throwing away money to build prisons of an extremely cramped environment with minimal rehabilitation programmes is simply not a magical formula to remove crime as a whole. However, some may argue that the financial burden of such a fundamental change in prisons is simply not sustainable. Halden Prison costed a staggering 138 million pounds to build and covering over seventy-five acres, it remains widely in doubt whether a model of Halden Prison’s scale is worth implementing in

a larger country, say the United States, which has a prison population of 2.3 million, over 500 times more than that in Norway. This disparity between the demand and supply of prison cells also leads to the construction of profit-centric private prisons, most of which do not consider the well-being of convicts and rehabilitation schemes. Another factor is the misadministration and lack of attention given towards prisons in countries such as the United Kingdom and in Brazil. The Ministry of Justice in England and Wales graded over fifteen percent of prisons as of “serious concern” in 2019, with serious assault cases at an all-time high.

Whether major countries can fully implement the “Norwegian model” within their own borders also hinges on complementary legislation, including the reduction of the prison terms to facilitate integration into society (in Norway, the maximum time of imprisonment is twenty-one years), as well as measures to minimize social stigma. For example, implementing “ban the box” policies (removal of criminal-history related questions during employment processes) enables convicts to have equal employment opportunities and provide social welfare to help ex-convicts. These measures are crucial to revolutionizing the criminal justice system and the first step in improving the treatment of criminals. Nevertheless, policymakers usually go for the cheapest option available, due to a lack of awareness of the practical difficulties ex-convicts face, as well as the tendency to cater to the majority of the population by spending the budget elsewhere.

The modern study of penology has shown that rehabilitation, compared to state retribution, is more beneficial to both inmates and the rest of society. When traditional prisons like those in the US ignore the need for convicts to gain essential life skills and prepare for integration back into society, it becomes increasingly likely that ex-convicts will find themselves in desperate and precarious positions as they face the harsh reality of social stigma,

which is also an indirect result of inhumane prisons, leaving ex-convicts struggling to make ends meet with inadequate resources. The result is the vicious cycle of recidivism, which undermines what should be a core aim of the justice system: lowering crime rates.

This is where rehabilitation and integration come into play. Through education and therapy sessions, humane prisons can gradually provide convicts with psychological support, removing the criminal mentality that arose out of practical needs and desperation, instead allowing them to find a place in society. For instance, the Norwegian government demonstrates the importance of rehabilitation, enacting policies that assist criminals to find stable jobs and housing even during their imprisonment. At the same time, the hotel-like style of humane prisons gives the feeling of “normality”, preventing convicts from feeling isolated and stigmatized. The appearance of these prisons also fosters social acceptance of convicts, lowering the risks of them being stereotyped by the rest of the populace. In Norway, these policies have certainly paid off, with a recidivism rate of only about 20% , the lowest in the world. To put these figures into perspective, the US Department of Justice released a report stating 83% of prisoners released in 2005 were re-arrested at least once in the following nine years.

Another major benefit humane prisons yield is ease of security and management. Unlike typical Hollywood films portraying prisons as full of riots and violence, humane and modern prisons take the initiative in stopping these incidents from happening. Are Hoidal, the governor of Halden Prison, claims during an interview that “I really don’t remember the last time we had violence here,” proving the immense success humane prisons have achieved in putting an end to violence. This could be

largely due to the presence of entertainment for convicts, which encompasses a wide variety of activities from reading to playing video games and distracts convicts from problems that had plagued conventional prisons for decades, such as drug use and gang rivalry. Shifting prisoners' attention to these other activities can improve the environment of a prison, while revised regulations can still achieve the punitive goal of restraining their freedom.

The second factor at play here could be the emphasis on building interpersonal relationships (with both guards and other inmates) as an essential measure for rehabilitation. Guards there typically do not carry firearms, and are strongly encouraged to spend time with inmates, dramatically lowering the feeling of incarceration and hostility among the inmates. Different studies have shown that the mutual respect fostered between the guards and the inmates can enable convicts to gain a sense of positive respect and admiration towards the guards, known as referent power. The consequential trust from the use of expertise instead of brute force to maintain discipline, helps reduce the likelihood of inmates getting into major conflicts with others. At the same time, prison guards are discouraged from the use of pepper sprays and firearms for riot control. Instead, the relatively harmonious and accepting prison culture facilitate the use of personal connections to resolve potential disputes that may arise. Yet, this humane treatment of convicts should not be confused with mere leniency, as guards are still present in prisons to maintain a basic sense of order and and circumscribe freedom.

Even with humane or even arguably pleasant living conditions, modern prisons still provide retribution and deterrence to a certain extent. During the same interview, Hoidal also claims that “it is not easy to have your freedom taken away. In Norway, the punishment is just to

take away someone's liberty. The other rights stay.” Perhaps, this is the mindset the rest of the world should have, which can effectively propel a gradual change in the way we conceive of prisons and their underlying purpose.

Fredrik, a murderer in Halden Prison sentenced to 15 years, says during an interview that he's achieved a diploma in graphic design and is studying math and physics for exams. Perhaps governments should be considering the same question Norway has been for years: whether constraining criminals to a 20-foot cubicle, or teaching them life skills that can aid them to lead a better life outside prison, is better for millions of convicts just like Frederik and the rest of society.



Charles Koch Institute



Above: Yanko, a guide dog puppy attending socialization training

Guide Dogs: The Seeing Eye for the Blind

THE AXIOM THAT dogs are man's best friends might be cliché, yet the film *Little Q*, directed by Law Wing-cheong and released in June last year, truly reflected the unwavering loyalty of our canine friends while tugging at the heartstrings of many viewers. The film revolves around the life of Little Q, a yellow Labrador retriever, from puppyhood to guide dog training and lastly, to being assigned to Lee Bao-ting.

After being trained and fostered by the Chan family, Little Q is matched with Lee Bao-ting,

a renowned pastry chef who simply could not accept his encroaching blindness and choose to hide himself from the world. At first, things seem bleak between the pair, and Lee's indifferent treatment of his guide dog even borders on brutal. It is when Little Q saves Lee from a suicide attempt that the bitter and depressed Lee Bo-ting begins to view his devoted companion in a new light. With both Little Q and Lee's health in jeopardy later in the movie, Little Q's loyalty to Lee tightens the remaining bond between them. Without Little Q, Li Bao-ting would not have seen the ray of hope in the encroaching darkness.

Throughout the film, director Law Wing-cheong brings us on an emotional rollercoaster by warmly depicting the tale of how Little Q guides her master to learn to embrace life again with her selfless love. But most importantly, with the film produced in partnership with the Hong Kong Guide Dogs Association (HKGDA), Law hopes to educate the public by showing an accurate reflection of the training sequences in the early life of a guide dog, while raising awareness of a need for a larger guide dog development programme in Hong Kong.

To begin with, guide dogs are professionally trained and provided to visually impaired and blind people who want enhanced mobility, safety and companionship. The idea of guide dogs is lost in the mist of history, with some records of the use of dogs to guide blind people dating back to the first century AD. However, the first recognized system to train dogs to help the blind or visually impaired was set up during the First World War. During the war, thousands of German soldiers were blinded by chlorine gas on the front. After seeing his own dog tending to his patients, the German doctor Gerhard Stalling saw the opportunity of training dogs to help the affected. He then began exploring various ways to train these canines and opened the world's first guide dog school for the blind in Oldenburg in August 1916. Unfortunately, the decrease in quality of the dogs led to the shutdown of the school in

1926. Yet, this is certainly not where the guide dog story ends. By the time Dr Stalling's school closed, another guide dog training centre had been opened in Potsdam, Berlin, and it proved to be a huge success. The guide dogs were then exported to all of Europe, including Britain, France, Italy and Spain, and even to the United States. These events in the 1900s gradually shaped the idea of modern guide dogs, and soon, guide dog schools opened their doors across the world. Today, thousands of blind and visually impaired people worldwide have had their lives turned around by guide dogs, thanks to the organizations that provide them, enabling the visually impaired to live with dignity, independence and enhanced mobility.

Any well-trained dog can become an ally for the blind, with Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, and German Shepherds among the most popular breeds. The Labrador Retriever crossed with the Golden has also become increasingly widespread as it combines many of the great traits of both breeds. You may ask, what makes these sweet animals well-suited for this challenging career? These breeds are chosen based on their intelligence, temperament and physicality. Retrievers were originally bred in the 19th century to fetch downed game for hunters and are known for accompanying their owners around town. They possess a strong work ethic and a high level of intelligence, both of which are essential qualities for a guide dog. These qualities allow them to stay alert to any sensory input while ignoring distractions and understanding commands given by their visually impaired owners as they guide them through obstacles in the streets unscathed. One might say that guide dogs must always obey commands from their owners; however, these canines must also be competent in deciding to disobey a command that puts their owners in danger. For example, upon seeing oncoming cars, he must know to disobey the order to cross a road, with its unbearable consequences.

Loyal in the extreme, guide dogs have been

known to use their bodies to physically protect their owners from dangers, not only in films, but also in real life. One day in June 2015, Figo spotted an oncoming school bus heading for Audrey Stone, the blind woman he was guiding. His protective instincts kicked in as he threw himself in front of the bus in hopes of protecting his user. Even though Stone still got hurt, the loyal golden retriever took most of the hit for her, and resulted in his leg cut down to the bone. If it had not been for Figo, Audrey Stone would have probably received life-threatening injuries.

Another quality the dog breeds possess that makes them perfect for the job is their calmness and friendliness. They never act aggressively even when people step on them accidentally or pet them without permission, nor will they suddenly take off and cause trouble due to various distractions present in their working environment.

Finally, not only are the dogs strong in mind, but they also have the physicality to serve their owners. Thanks to their strong build and relatively large size, they can keep up with their owner no matter where that person lives, and their owner can easily reach the harness fitted onto the dog.

Being both mentally and physically strong, along with a high level of intelligence and loyalty, these breeds seem to satisfy all the requirements to become guide dogs, given the high number of distractions present in their work environment. However, these dogs do not become guide dogs overnight; in fact, much time is needed to train a dog in socialization and let him get used to his working environment before he can be matched with a visually impaired companion.

For a dog to become a full-time working guide dog, he must go through three stages. At

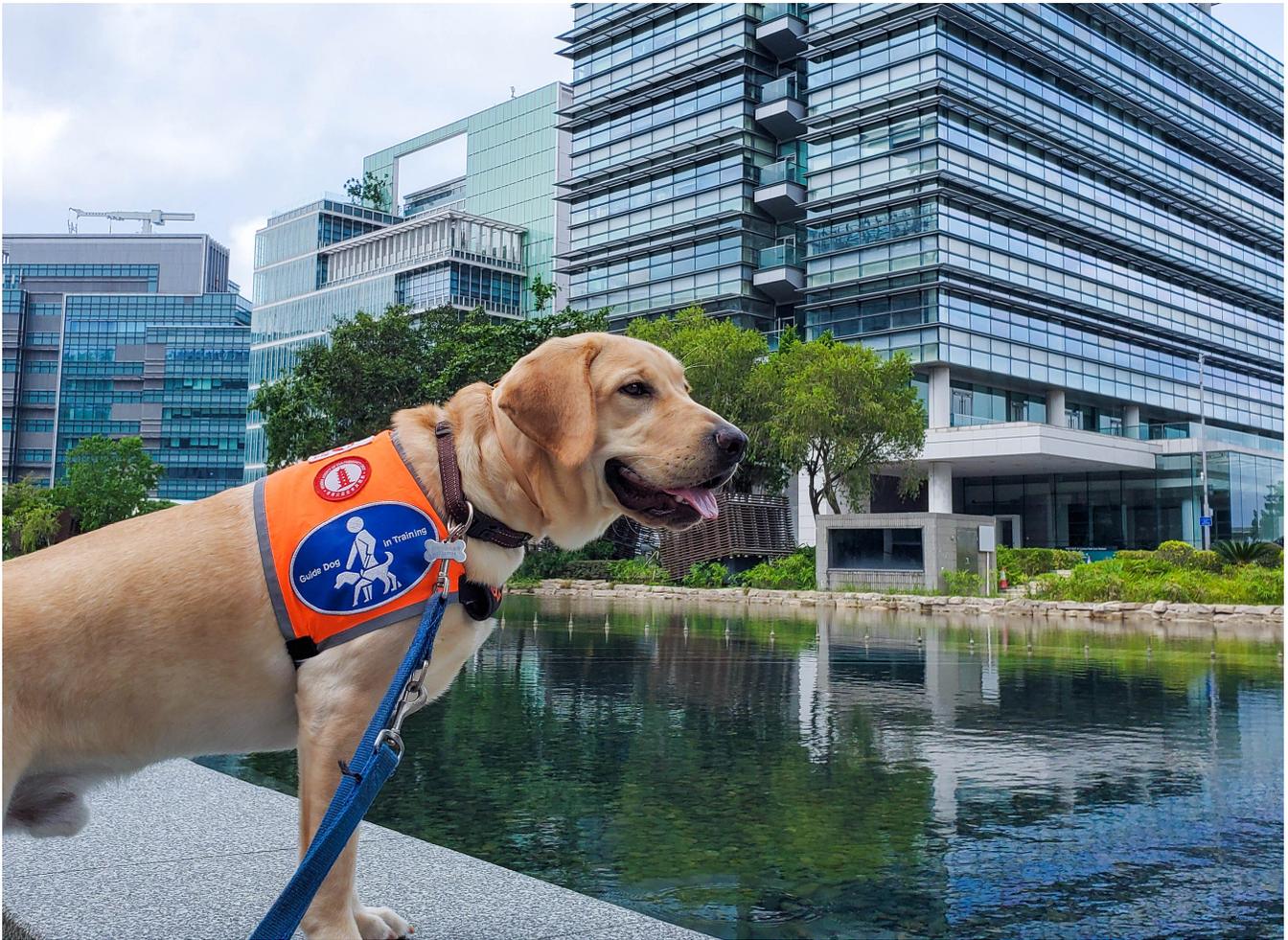
eight weeks of age, the puppy will be chosen to stay with a host family and begin his socialisation training, through which he learns to interact with humans and gets used to the working environment. They will learn to behave well and remain calm and collected in the streets while ignoring distractions and to be able to approach all types of structures such as lifts, elevators and stairs with confidence. During training, the puppy will wear a jacket that allows him access almost anywhere. Of course, the puppy will also be given playtime after training.

Once he has achieved the foundation for guide-work, the dog will start his formal training at around 14 months of age. He will learn to lead a blind person from one place to another while avoiding all obstacles and stop not only for changes in elevation, such as curbs and stairs but also overhead obstacles including tree branches. Guide dogs are often trained using positive reinforcement. This method encourages and motivates the dog through rewards like food and affection, which includes praise and petting. This also ensures that the dog is never reprimanded for his errors, guaranteeing a happy work environment while motivating and helping him build confidence in his own work.

The dog will start his training with his user at around twenty months of age. At this stage, the dog will be matched with a visually impaired user who has been accepted into the guide dog training program. The matching process ensures that the unique qualities of the dog meet the requirements of the user. Bonding between the user and the guide dog is enhanced through a course of training which includes communicating and working with the dog using verbal commands and gestures. The guide dog will also get used to the specific routes the user takes in his or her daily life. On completion of training at around two years of age, the dog will graduate and live with his user as a full-time working



GUIDE DOGS: THE SEEING EYE FOR THE BLIND



guide dog. Once the demands of guide-work become too difficult for the dog, he retires, oftentimes due to age-related issues such as a slower walking pace, a lack of stamina or various diseases. There is no fixed retirement age, but guide dogs typically retire at around 10 years of age. The dog will then have four options. If the guide dog user cannot keep the retiring dog, the dog will be offered either to the host family that raised him when he was a puppy, or he will be further trained to become a companion dog or a comfort dog. If all these options fail, the dog will then be given to an adoptive family as a pet. This ensures that the dog will be placed in a safe, comfortable and loving environment - one they truly deserve for their service during their working lives.

With the puppies undergoing rigorous train-

ing, puppy raisers have to put in much time and effort when training them. In fact, I am a Puppy Raiser for the Hong Kong Guide Dog Association. Currently, I am taking care of Yanko, a yellow Labrador puppy. From the minutiae of walking him in different places to the task of potty training, all of which require a great deal of patience, it has truly been an extremely memorable experience.

Raising a guide dog puppy is very different from raising a pet dog. There are actually many rules we have to follow. For example, puppies are not allowed on the bed and the couch, as we do not know whether their future users will like it or not. They are also not allowed to eat human food as this may teach stealing food from people. With these rules, it is crucial to allow the puppy to recognize who is in charge, as it estab-

lishes fertile grounds for discipline training down the road. This has been quite challenging, yet it has been a truly fulfilling experience witnessing Yanko's growth and improvement from introducing to him how to sit to teaching him to lie down when waiting for meals. It has also been extremely meaningful to me as I am able to understand the needs of the visually impaired through the puppy raising program.

There is a common assumption made by people that the life of guide dogs involves relentless work for their owners, and that they lead a worse life than dogs that are adored pets. However, compared to pet dogs, who have to be left at home whenever their owners have to go to work, guide dogs never feel lonely as they can stay with their owners wherever they go. In fact, staying with their masters is the thing dogs love the most, and this is where their happiness comes from. And with the fact that they are being loved by so many people they meet on the streets in their short lifespan, a guide dog's happiness is not any less, but probably even more than that of dogs who are kept as pets.

Even though these lovable animals seem to be the best way to aid the visually impaired, sad to say, it is quite difficult to find a guide dog in Hong Kong. According to the International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF), ideally, there should be one guide dog for every 100 visually impaired people. Yet currently, there are fewer than 50 serving guide dogs in the city, and it is estimated that at least 1650 more guide dogs are needed given Hong Kong's 170,000 visually impaired people. So why is there such a huge shortage in the number of guide dogs?

In Hong Kong, the two organizations that provide training and guide dog services are the Hong Kong Guide Dogs Association (HKGDA) and the Hong Kong Seeing Eye Dog Service (HKSEDS). These two groups are trying to localise the breeding and training of guide dogs to benefit more of the visually impaired. However, without general knowl-

edge about guide dogs among the public, trainers and their dogs face many challenges in their day-to-day training.

Trainers have to care for guide puppies for months and it is very different from owning a pet, as they have to walk the puppies in as many different places as possible so that the puppies become familiar with different environments. This is where the problems arise as the public do not understand the training process even though they know what guide dogs are. Various legal grey areas also exist under current laws which causes inconveniences for trainers and their guide dogs puppies.

For one, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance only acknowledges the rights of visually impaired people and their guide dogs, but not of people with normal vision who are raising or training guide dogs for the blind. According to the tenancy agreements by the Housing Authority, tenants cannot keep any dogs in public housing without prior written consent. As of now, only the visually impaired who need a dog for support can get such approval. This means that people living in public housing cannot apply for training guide dogs. Also, most of the visually impaired in Hong Kong take public transport, so a guide dog has to be familiar with different forms of public transport during its training. Nowadays, most bus drivers welcome guide dogs in training, but in fact, this violates the Public Bus Services Regulations, which says that guide dogs can only get on buses if accompanied by a visually impaired person. There have been countless cases where trainers and their guide dogs have been barred from going into places like restaurants and boarding public transport with the reason "you are not blind".

As a Puppy Raiser, there were times when I was also barred from access to certain places. When I first got Yanko, the management office at my apartment said I was only allowed to pass through the lobby with Yanko in a stroller, even when they were told that Yanko is a guide dog in training. Yet, this

is in fact a part of Yanko's training – to remain calm in any place. He must also learn to lead his user from his or her home through the apartment's lobby to the streets in the future. Another instance was when I was introducing the escalator to Yanko in a guide-dog-friendly mall. That time, a security guard came to me and said that I was obstructing the way and told me to leave immediately, even when there was not a single person in sight and Yanko was wearing his training jacket. We can see that the public lacks education about guide dogs and does not understand that it is essential for them to visit as many places as possible to get used to the city's environment, especially since Hong Kong is so densely populated.

In addition, the standards for acceptance for the trainer, user and guide dog are high. Applicants as trainers have to go through many stages of screening before they can start working with a guide dog puppy, while users that applied for the guide dog program have to undergo a long period of training and supervision to ensure a positive bond between them and their guide dogs so that the user can rely on the guide dog after the pair graduates. According to the HK-GDA, because the standards for acceptance are so high, only about 40% of every litter is expected to become guide dogs.

The low education level about guide dogs among the public exacerbates the shortage problem of guide dogs and also leads to trainers having to face different challenges on a day-to-day basis, given the high standards for the performance of the guide dogs and also the owners. The Hong Kong government can allocate more resources to safeguard not only the interests of the visually impaired but also those who are training guide dogs. This can reduce the chance of trainers getting rejected from stores and public transport, allowing the guide dogs full exposure to the city during their socialization training.

Being strong in both mind and body, a guide dog's job is not only to lead his master through the streets, but also to provide his owner with safety and companionship. Guide dogs are just like the seeing-eye for the blind, and in order to benefit more visually defected people, public awareness about the shortage of guide dogs has to be raised. Near the end of the film *Little Q*, Lee Bo-ting's sister Lee Bo-yi says that dogs are colourblind, because they leave us with the most beautiful colours in life so we can lead the most wonderful lives we can. It is these faithful companions that are capable of helping their visually impaired owners set out on a new path in their lives and shine a light where there was only darkness before.



GUIDE DOGS: THE SEEING EYE FOR THE BLIND



THE JOKER

By **Wesley Yip**

2019'S FILM AWARDS SEASON has come and gone, and one of the most favoured yet worrying movies on the nomination list is *The Joker*. Though it has garnered a number of awards and nominations, the gritty origin film about Batman's infamous arch-enemy has made waves all over the Internet, sparking controversy over its seeming glorification of violence and nihilism. Many felt that the *Joker* was reminiscent of those who commit mass shootings in the United States as well as members of the online incel community. Even the United States military warned service members about the potential for a mass shooting at screenings of the film, which

sparked wide concerns. However, these accusations are unfounded and instead perpetuate misinformation and increase irrational fear of the movie.

The *Joker* chronicles the story of Arthur Fleck, a disillusioned comedian manqué who spiralled into madness as he suffered injustice after injustice. His job as a clown and his disease, which caused him to fall into fits of uncontrollable laughter, made him a prime target for bullying and abuse. He was constantly harassed and humiliated, and was even brutally beaten up by a gang of teenagers in the exposition of the movie. On the way home after getting fired, Arthur encountered three drunk men who tormented and assaulted him for dressing up as a clown. Arthur finally snapped and shot all three of them. As he felt more and more empowered by the murders he had committed, such as suffocating his own mother and bludgeon-



ing a fellow comedian's head, his tether to society and reality became weaker and weaker, and he ends up being completely disconnected from any sense of rationality. In a climactic ending, he kills a talk show host who humiliated him on live television and inspires the disenfranchised to start city-wide riots.

The Joker has been applauded by many as it has shone a spotlight on mental health issues and how the needs of individuals having such disorders have been neglected. Another main theme of the movie is its reflection of modern society (especially in the Western world), in which the downtrodden often resort to violence to bring about vigilante justice, raise societal awareness, or simply to vent their anger. For many, however, this is precisely the problem. JOKER features an abundance of graphic violence, such as gory and grotesque stabbings and vehement shooting rampages. Admittedly, this is hardly new in cinema; most thriller or action flicks

contain their fair share of violence. The controversy of *The Joker* lies not in the violence itself, but rather in what causes this violence. Many people feel that Arthur Fleck's discontent with his life is similar to that of perpetrators of mass shootings, and they fear that the movie will become a catalyst for violence. In an ironic turn of events, part of JOKER's audience has turned the movie against itself, accusing it of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, affirming and glorifying individuals with psychopathic tendencies while implicitly condoning vigilantism through its antiheroic depiction of the Joker. In response to these accusations and criticisms, both Todd Phillips and Joaquin Phoenix have defended the movie, pointing out that its purpose is to examine violence in a realistic way and show the raw consequences of it.

In part, the controversy of the film was due to its depiction in the media. In an attempt to create sensational headlines and attract viewers, different articles greatly exaggerated the amount of violence in the movie. The media also portrayed the movie as a call to arms: encouraging incels and various other aggressive groups to unleash violence and chaos on society. Ironically, the way JOKER depicts the media in the film directly mirrors how the media acts in reality. In the movie, after the Joker kills three assailants, the incident is sensationalized by the media so that he faces the scrutiny of the entire city. This in turn inspires others to use the Joker's mask as a way of lashing out at society: In the ending of the movie, thousands of people wearing clown masks start rallying against the rich and powerful. Similarly, what the media is saying about *The Joker* follows the film's path almost exactly. Its concerns are not unfounded, yet the controversy was disproportionately reported, and these articles could potentially capture the attention of extremists and inspire them to act radically more than the movie would. Thankfully, there were no criminal incidents related to the Joker, yet it is ironic that the depiction of violence caused by the media in the movie might

have happened in reality because of the way this movie was portrayed and criticised. Moreover, the audience is not encouraged to empathise with the Joker. Shots that encourage the audience to identify with a character, such as point-of-view shots and close ups, rarely occur in *The Joker*. Instead, we see him through a range of distorted surfaces, such as windows, mirrors, and television screens that reflect his unhinged state of mind. The response to the film is showing us our hypocrisy regarding the depictions of violence – we enjoy watching violence on the big screen, but we don't want to have to think about our role in creating the individuals who commit it in real life.

Another reason why *The Joker* caused such outrage is that in all the films the Joker has appeared in, there has always been a hero like Batman to counter his evil ways. Every Batman movie ends with good triumphing over evil, but without the existence of Batman, a champion of good, to make the Joker's atrocious acts more bearable, all that remains is a disturbing, albeit realistic, portrayal of a psychopath. Add to the fact that the Joker is a character designed to elicit sympathy from the film's audience through his tragic and sardonic life, the film truly treads a dangerous line. In the first half of the film, Arthur was humiliated, abused, and trodden upon. He was neglected and scorned by society, he lost his job and was beaten up, and then he was humiliated in front of an audience of millions on his favourite talk show. Rather than being transformed into the "Joker" after falling into a vat of acid—as the villain so often does in depictions of his DC Comics origin—a harsh life compounded by constant mockery and oppression is what ultimately led to his rise as one of the greatest villains of comic book lore.

The rugged and nihilistic portrayal of the Joker is what makes the movie unique in the superhero genre. Without Batman, the Joker becomes a realistic character study of what makes

a person disconnected from reality and his subsequent danger to society. In a world where there are no superheroes to save the day, what part do we play in creating the Joker? Though we are not the ones pulling the trigger, are we truly free from fault?

Reality doesn't have a fairy tale ending, and what this movie is trying to tell its audience is that horrific violence doesn't appear out of nowhere; the negligence and loss of empathy towards those who are abused, or repressed, or have mental illnesses can ferment, which can burst out in horrifying violence, as seen with what happened to Arthur Fleck.

Depicting and condoning violence are two very different things, which the media often mix up when addressing the Joker controversy. As Joaquin Phoenix said himself, "I don't think it's the responsibility of a filmmaker to teach the audience morality." A filmmaker's or actor's job is to create a piece of work which the viewers can then interpret themselves. The crux of the movie is to examine what would happen, and is happening, to people like the Joker. To take away the authenticity of the experience would rob the film of its heart and soul. Rather than complain about its "dangerous" message, we should instead embrace what the movie is trying to bring out, and what it says about society.



Perfect Blue: A Harrowing Masterpiece

By **Alvin Yung**

Note: Mild spoilers for Perfect Blue.

Also, this film is definitely not suitable for children.

A JAPANESE ANIMATED FILM from 1997 may not be traditionally associated with horror, but Satoshi Kon's debut film *Perfect Blue* might just be one of the most overlooked, unknown, yet influential horror films of all time. Its distinctive style, harrowing plot, and meaningful themes and messages elevate it far above its peers, proving that animation can be terrifying and thought-provoking rather than being merely artistic.

The Director

The name of Satoshi Kon might not ring a bell, yet his influence is clear in the works of some of the most prolific directors working today. Kon's film career lasted only 13 years (from his debut in 1997 to his sudden death by pancreatic cancer in 2010), yet he had already left behind a legacy of four feature films and one television series, all of which are critically acclaimed.

The director Darren Aronofsky (*Requiem for a Dream*, *Black Swan*, *Noah*) is a professed fan of Kon's work, notably purchasing the film rights for *Perfect Blue* just to recreate a scene from the film in his *Requiem for a Dream*, and his 2010 film *Black Swan* also carries thematic and plot similarities to *Perfect Blue*: both focus on a performance artist (a pop idol in *Perfect Blue*, a ballet dancer in *Black Swan*) haunted by her doppelgänger and descending into mad-

ness. Christopher Nolan's 2010 blockbuster *Inception* also bears striking similarities in terms of action set-pieces and scenes to *Paprika*, Kon's final film about dreams within dreams.

Kon's filmography is also notably different from those of many conventional Japanese animation directors. While Hayao Miyazaki excels at creating universal entertainment with timeless appeal, and Makoto Shinkai paints breathtaking panoramas that perfectly suit his genre of fantasy, Kon's works delve deep into the human psyche, using external struggles to highlight his character's psychological problems, *Perfect Blue* being exemplary of this. Arguably the darkest of Kon's works, *Perfect Blue* examines the themes of identity, celebrity culture, obsession, and madness in a (dare I say) perfect fashion—ideas which are all the more relevant in our current society.

The Plot

Perfect Blue's plot centers on Mima Kirigoe, a pop idol who leaves behind her career as part of an idol group to go into television acting. Her career seems to be going well until Mima starts seeing a ghostly and ethereal doppelgänger and discovers a website that reveals aspects of her life that no one else should know, while the people with a hand in her career are murdered, one by one.

In the film, Mima stars in a television show, in which she is asked to act out a scene which exacts a heavy toll on her psyche. After an emo-



A SATOSHI KON FILM

PERFECT BLUE

tional incident in her apartment, she becomes increasingly unable to distinguish between what is happening in the show and what is happening in her life. The psychological threat of Mima going insane and the physical threat of her stalker slowly intertwine, creating an utterly entrancing thriller.

Style and Substance

The style of *Perfect Blue* perhaps draws the most inspiration from the Italian giallo or murder mystery, a genre characterized by its garish colors and the disorienting feeling it creates in its audience. The giallo elements of a killer whose identity is shrouded and a focus on grisly death sequences also heavily inform both the style and content of *Perfect Blue*, making it feel distinct from most other animated works of its time.

The death sequences of *Perfect Blue* are nothing short of horrific: the first character death of the film takes place in an empty parking lot in the middle

of the night, a situation ideal for creating the maximum amount of paranoia. Tension is skillfully built up as the character waits for an elevator; then as the doors open behind him, the scene reincorporates the movie's opening theme to terrifying effect. Another kill takes place during a pizza delivery — an everyday occurrence suddenly changing into a brutal and surprising murder. Though *Perfect Blue* leans more towards the psychological genre of horror, its traditional scares certainly would not disappoint a conventional audience.

The color palette of *Perfect Blue* is also very distinct, though ironically the colour blue does not play a huge part. Instead, the color red, especially a stark blood-red, stands out against the relatively drab and realistic color palette of the film. In the cover of a script, the carpet of an elevator, or the harsh lighting of a tunnel, red can be seen everywhere in *Perfect Blue*. Traditionally associated with blood, passion, and death, the distinct color tone



Me-Mania in his room, staring at his posters of Mima

gives the film a distinct visual style, conveying the themes of the movie whilst creating a stunning look.

The animation style of Perfect Blue is also unique: departing from the traditional conventions of animation (large eyes, exaggerated facial expressions and movements), the characters' appearances and movements are all distinctly realistic: they look and act just like normal people. Therefore, the characters with movements different from the rest are able to stand out, enhancing a dissonant effect that adds to the unease Perfect Blue creates. For instance, Me-Mania's hulking form remains almost completely immobile for most of the film, creating an anticipation for violence — the audience doesn't know what will happen should he decide to move. In a chase sequence, the ghostly doppelgänger's graceful movements contrast strongly

with Mima's frantic running, creating a particular unreality within the reality of the film.

Reality and Fiction

At its core, Perfect Blue is a film about contrasts. The contrast between fiction and truth, illusion and reality, dreams and wakefulness are all presented in the film, presenting its themes in an artful but disorienting manner.

The contrast between the illusion that celebrities present to their fans, and the reality of their lives is highlighted in Perfect Blue's opening scene: the film intercuts between Mima's final performance onstage and her going about her daily life, a movement from one bleeding into movement of the other. The scene shows her on-stage persona blending with her daily life and vice versa, an instance of foreshadowing that informs much of the film's later events. In



One of my favourite shots in the whole film, this shot perfectly encapsulates the film's message about obsessive fans who desire to possess their idols (literally "dancing in their hand")

another scene, Mima's murmur of "Who are you?" repeats itself over and over, until it is revealed that she is rehearsing that very same line for her television show.

Mirrors also play a heavy part in the film, symbolizing the difference between a person themselves and the person's self-image. Mima's doppelgänger, the so-called "Old Mima", represents her past career as an idol and stress placed upon her by her audience: the doppelgänger mocks her and calls her an impostor, tarnishing the "real Mima's" image. When the doppelgänger first appears, Mima glimpses her in the reflection of a train's glass window, then in the reflection of a computer screen. As the film progresses, the doppelgänger steps out of the mirror and into the film's reality, leading Mima on a chase through the streets of Tokyo. And in the film's climax, the roles are reversed, the film's reali-

ty showing the doppelgänger while a mirror reveals the identity of the killer. The plot of the film mirrors the mental state of its protagonist; as Mima's reality breaks down the film breaks down along with her.

The confusion of what is real and what is not in *Perfect Blue* is very deliberate – by experiencing Mima's descent into madness as it occurs, we are entranced, drawn into the fabric of the film.

Modern Relevance: Obsessive Fandom, Celebrity Culture, and the Internet

One of the more overt and dominating presences in *Perfect Blue* is Me-Mania, Mima's stalker. Every element of the character is designed to be disturbing: from his large and hulking form to his deformed appearance and the ominous silence he maintains. Though *Perfect Blue's* narrative focuses on Mima, Me-Mania is always seen in the back-

ground – behind the magazine shelf in a convenience store, in the shop around the corner, or in a dark corridor behind Mima’s dressing room. He undergoes a metamorphosis from an obsessive and protective fan to a hostile attacker as he believes the doppelgänger’s claim that the real Mima is an imposter.

Me-Mania’s willingness to go to violent and even deadly lengths to protect his idol (or at least his expectations of who his idol should be) brings to mind the countless instances of celebrities who have been stalked by obsessive fans in recent years, with Taylor Swift, Kendall Jenner, and Natalie Portman being just a few examples. In one particularly memorable scene, Me-Mania reads an email from the “Mima” running the website. Countless posters of Mima hanging around his home speak to him simultaneously as he mouths the words, the voice being Mima’s instead of his own. By highlighting his delusions on screen, the film represents Me-Mania as a facet of modern media’s obsessive fandom: those who literally believe that their idols are speaking directly to them, and act out their own fantastical ideals of who their idol should be.

The themes of *Perfect Blue*, especially about one’s public and private persona, particularly relevant in the modern age, especially for the celebrity culture it critiques: celebrities’ private lives are often the subject of public and media scrutiny, and many public figures feel the pressure to maintain a certain image for their audience. Even though the film is wonderfully dated at times (in one scene, Mima puzzles out the words “World Wide Web” in broken English, and requires her manager’s help to understand what a link is), its use of online media and websites as a means of introducing its horror places it well ahead of its time.

The blog “Mima’s Room”, detailing various aspects of Mima’s life as well as her idiosyncrasies (the brand of milk she likes, the feed she



chooses for her fishes at home), at first reads like a well-intentioned, if overly specific fan page written as a faux diary entry of Mima herself. But then, the contents of the site veer towards the bizarre and upsetting: her own thoughts regarding another actress’ performance is repeated verbatim, her thoughts on an unsavoury scene she performed are exposed on a site for all to see. An anxiety experienced even now by those in the modern age is seen here: that of seeing one’s most private thoughts and feelings exposed online for all to see (certainly, that is a fear that many hackers capitalize on to extract money from their hapless victims) One might find that fact that these very modern facts are



Just one example of mirrors and reflections being used in Perfect Blue

explored in a film from 25 years ago to be jarring, but these demonstrate that Perfect Blue was well ahead of its time in exploring themes related to technology, virtual identity, and privacy in the digital age.

Final Thoughts

Perfect Blue is a remarkable example of film as a medium to express artistic ideas: the use of animation provides a unique visual style, and of course the more outlandish sequences of the film would have been harder to achieve and less believable if they had been filmed in live action. In the end, Kon's

debut proves that Japanese animation can certainly be more than the vapid and pointless entertainment some may perceive it to be – the medium can produce works just as artful, thought-provoking and horrifying as the masterpieces of live action.

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2 REVIEW

By **Nicholas Lam**

STEP INTO A WORLD of gunslingers and cowboys as Red Dead Redemption 2 takes you on a journey into the past. Red Dead Redemption 2 provides the player with an interactive and immersive experience, and is certainly one of the best games I have ever played. The popular sandbox game has sold more than twenty-six million copies, and is expected to gain even more attention following its recent PC release in November 2019.

Red Dead Redemption 2 depicts the lives of Arthur Morgan and his partners, the Van Der Linde Gang, as they roam through the rural states of America, running from the law and combating rival gangs. The game boasts one of the most intricate maps the gaming community has ever seen, filled with bustling cities, looming forests and gigantic waterfalls. While not completing the main story, players can select from a variety of activities, from fishing to bounty hunting. The endless variation this game can take, are what make the game fresh to play even after spending hours and hours on it.

The technical features of Red Dead Redemption 2 put the limits of conventional sandbox games to the test. The game utilizes the exclusive RAGE game engine created by the games developer Rockstar Games. The RAGE engine, which stands for Rockstar advanced game engine, is considered by many to be the absolute best when powering sandbox games. One of the things I noticed when I played Red Dead Redemption 2 is how smooth the interface and gameplay in general, and really shows

how far Rockstar has come in developing sandbox games.

One of the most renowned aspects of Red Dead Redemption 2 is the storyline. The storyline of this game is unlike any other game that I've played before: an intricate tale revolving around the themes of loyalty, brotherhood and betrayal. The story shows the Van Der Linde Gang's adventures as well as their struggles as they fight to survive in an increasingly civilized world, where the era of outlaws was coming to an end. The first ten hours of gameplay focuses mainly on the gang's endeavors involving bank robberies, train heists and all sorts of other adventures. The story then focuses on how things start going downhill, starting from internal conflicts within the gang. From here themes such as betrayal and the dark side of human nature are explored. Loyalties are questioned and bonds are broken while two sides of the gang struggle for control. Aside from illustrating these conflicts Rockstar included some controversial but prevalent topics in American history such as the Indian removal act and slavery. Due to the increasing rate of colonization and industrialization in the late nineteenth century hundreds and thousands of native Americans were forced to leave their homeland, leading to further conflicts between the natives and the colonists. Red Dead Redemption 2 includes some of these conflicts in the storyline, and accurately portrays how scary greed can be, and how unrecognizably violent humans can become.

Perhaps what makes Red Dead Redemption 2 so compelling to players is how realistic the developers have made the game look and



feel. Aside from entertainment, another big reason people play games is for escape. When people are bored, or tired of their current reality, they turn to games, which provide the stimulation of a different reality from what they find in real life. Games that are immersive, in other words, games that are able to successfully place the player into the fictional reality of the game, are incredibly appealing. *Red Dead Redemption 2* is particularly alluring in the fact that the developers have put every last inch of effort into sculpting the expansive world, while making sure the game is as realistic as possible for the player. The graphics of the game are beautifully designed, as well as the detail of the map. Another aspect that contributes to the realism of the game is the development of characters throughout the storyline. Character development is more generally found in films or books, and refers to the process of creating a complex, rounded and lifelike character within a fictional context. In other words, forming a ‘real’ character. Over the years previous games have attempted to show character development within their storylines, but rarely, if ever with success. However when I was playing *Red Dead Redemption 2*, it came to me as a pleasant surprise to see such comprehensive character development within

a video game, and such an action-packed one too. What also shocked me is that aside from the main characters having rounded personalities, the other members of the Van Der Linde Gang were not neglected either. The reason I believe character development is so important in games, especially story-based ones like *Red Dead Redemption 2* is because players will actually form a connection with the characters, allowing players to become more invested and immersed in the game. As I mentioned earlier, realism is one of the sought-after aspects within a video game, and *Red Dead Redemption 2* caters to that brilliantly by providing players with an interactive and immersive experience.

Red Dead Redemption 2 brings to the table not only incredible graphics, meticulous details and a fantastic storyline, and is unique in terms of creating such an immersive world for players to dive into. All in all, *Red Dead Redemption 2* was an astonishingly enjoyable game, and I would definitely recommend it to anyone who is interested in trying it out.

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