

**THE JOY OF DEVOURING:**

**METABOLISM, DESIRE, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN SATOSHI KON'S *PAPRIKA***

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**INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

This article takes inspiration from Annemarie Mol's concept of the metabolic subject,<sup>2</sup> which rethinks embodiment not as a closed, autonomous system but as an ongoing exchange with the world. While phenomenology has traditionally centered on perception and movement, Mol argues that it has largely neglected metabolic processes—eating, digestion, and bodily permeability—which shape subjectivity just as much as vision and touch. This insight provides a starting point for reinterpreting the themes of *Paprika* (2006), Satoshi Kon's anime film where boundaries between bodies, minds, “real” world, dream world, and cinematic world are radically destabilized through dreams, technology, and consumption.

To develop this analysis, I begin with Mol's critique of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly her claim that his phenomenology remains too compact, failing to fully integrate metabolic exchanges with the world. I then turn to Merleau-Ponty's later work, which moves toward a more interwoven and porous conception of subjectivity through his take on dreams and the ideas of the invisible and chiasm. While this shift brings phenomenology closer to an open, absorptive model of selfhood, it still does not fully account for the material transformation of the body through consumption. Finally, through Emmanuel Levinas's thoughts on hunger and desire, love and consumption become vehicles for human relationships and inner transformation but in a radically “flattened” way. Together, these perspectives present *Paprika* as a philosophical project on identity and desire in an immanent world where boundaries are essential but constantly shifting.

## NARRATIVE AND CORE THEMES

*Paprika* was directed by Satoshi Kon in 2006, based on the book of the same name written by Yasutaka Tsutsui<sup>3</sup> in 1993. The film is widely recognized as a significant anime and it falls between darker techno-philosophical works, such as Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*<sup>4</sup> and Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion*<sup>5</sup> series, and the cheerful, techno-optimist fairytales of Hayao Miyazaki.<sup>6</sup>

The story follows Dr. Atsuko Chiba and her red-headed dream alter-ego, Paprika, who work together as a psychotherapeutic duo. Chiba is a psychologist who co-develops the DC Mini, a compact, futuristic device worn on the head. It resembles a slim headband with wires and small electrodes that wrap around the user's temples, enabling access to their dreams and enhancing psychotherapeutic practice. Paprika is Chiba's dream-world alter ego, interacting directly with patients inside their dreaming states. The two main characters—who can be seen as two halves of oneself—are starkly contrasted: Chiba is serious and reserved, while Paprika is optimistic, energetic, playful, and carefree. As Chiba-Paprika works with Detective Konakawa to help him understand and relieve his recurring nightmare, one of the DC Minis is stolen and weaponized, causing dreams to dangerously and chaotically merge with reality. The thief uses the device to invade people's minds, trapping them in a shared nightmare where both the dreaming and waking worlds begin to collapse. As a result, people—both awake and asleep—lose their sense of reality and objects from dreams start manifesting in the real world.

Chiba-Paprika, along with a few other characters, tries to navigate the confusion of dreams and reality while searching for the missing DC Mini to restore the boundary between the two worlds. After a series of dead ends, it becomes clear that the main culprit is Dr. Seijirō Inui, the chairman of the research institute. Initially opposed to the DC Mini, he now seeks to use it for his own agenda—to control the world and plunge it into chaos. Through an unlikely collaboration, Chiba-Paprika and her colleagues, Dr. Kōsaku Tokita and Dr. Torataro Shima, manage to stop Inui's plans. Though order is restored, the city remains scarred by the destruction left in his wake.

An important theme in the film is eating, but not in the usual sense of family or social gatherings, as is often depicted in Japanese cinema<sup>7</sup>. Instead, it focuses on eating as a bodily act of exchanging matter with the outside world. In the opening credits, Paprika eats a sandwich and feels a slight disgust caused not by the food itself but by two strangers apparently flirting with her<sup>8</sup> but most of the dining scenes are those of Tokita eating—often compulsively—huge amounts of food. He is portrayed as an obese genius inventor, with romantic feelings towards Chiba that he tries to suppress as he thinks that they are not reciprocated.

All the excessive eating sets the stage for the grand devouring finale. At the point when dreams have protruded into the city, the dream figure Paprika materializes in reality as well and Tokita changes into a giant destructive robot seeking food. Chiba doesn't seem happy to see Paprika outside of herself, acting independently, and they get into an argument. This clearly represents a struggle between the reserved external self and the suppressed internal emotions. Chiba tries to assert her control but Paprika suggests that it might as well be herself who should be in control. As the latter pretends that they should leave Tokita to his fate, the former finally becomes "true to herself" by combining her usual serious personality with her alter ego's courageousness and sets off to wake Tokita up from his dream. The giant robot grasps her and after she unsuccessfully tries to bring him to his senses by loving words in a King Kong-like scene, he gulps her in. Only after that can she approach him properly: by the force of opening herself completely to her feelings towards him, she returns as a ghost to save him. She is now a giant herself but a transparent immaterial one. The film switches between the robot-ghost interaction in the street and a scene in which Chiba struggles to pull Tokita out of the elevator where he got stuck because of his giant body—both of them in human forms. Paprika remarks that Chiba is dreaming but it's not quite clear which of the two scenes is reality and which is the dream. Chiba acknowledges Tokita's genius, and the key point is that, despite expressing some disapproval of his obesity and eating habits, she ultimately accepts him as a whole person.

In the meantime, another giant is terrorizing the city and causing destruction: Chairman Inu turned into a huge monster of unspecified power, spreading darkness. “Light and dark, reality and dreams, life and death, man and ... woman. And a little bit of spice,” Paprika exclaims and cheerfully jumps into Tokita’s robotic body, which turns her into a giant ghost baby, that starts nurturing herself by sucking all the darkness, including Inu. She quickly grows into an adult woman and lifts up the nightmarish spell. Then she disappears. Interestingly, the ghost woman is not Paprika because she doesn’t have red hair so it’s possible to think of her as a re-integration of Paprika and Chiba.

#### DREAMS, REALITY, AND THE MERGING OF WORLDS

The film depicts a network of inside–outside dichotomies that interact in complex ways. Dreams, which originate within an individual, are externalized through the DC Mini, allowing them to be projected and shared like recorded media. As the film progresses, these dreams escape containment and parade through the city, appearing as intrusions from outside reality. Yet they are composed of objects and memories from within—familiar, everyday items drawn from the privacy of people’s homes: kitchen tools and appliances, TVs, cars, furniture. Beyond dreams, the film extends the inside–outside dynamic to other mediating spaces: films, an abandoned theme park, and the Internet—all spaces where reality is filtered, replayed, or reconstructed. Paprika herself, while an internal part of Chiba, has also an autonomous presence. This tension is made most explicit in one of the film’s darkest moments: Dr. Morio Osanai, a pawn in Inu’s plan, pins down a winged version of Paprika, only for her body to split open and reveal Chiba physically contained inside her. The film’s inside/outside tensions also manifest in the character of Tokita—a genius encased in a childlike, oversized body that resists conventional distinctions between intellect and physicality. Chiba’s concern with his ungoverned appetite and excessive form suggests an anxiety over uncontrolled permeability, a hesitation that may explain her reluctance to acknowledge her feelings. Tokita, for his part, seems to eat compulsively, as if hunger functions as a substitute for unmet emotional

connection. The huge ghostly figures that appear toward the end are semi-material outward manifestations of the immaterial versions or inner selves of the protagonists.

Anime frequently explores themes of monstrosity, permeability, and the fusion of biological and mechanical forms—often as a response to post-war trauma and anxieties about technological intervention. On one hand, this reflects Japan’s ambivalent relationship with technology after the atomic bomb; on the other hand, it can be seen as an attempt to surpass the violence of Hollywood films.<sup>9</sup> *Paprika* participates in this tradition, though its approach to permeability is not framed through violence, but through appetite and bodily transformation. Technology is still important, but the film moves beyond the mechanized cyborg body toward a metabolic model, where the boundaries between self and world are redrawn through dream introspection, consumption, digestion, and assimilation. While *Paprika* contains moments of darkness—such as Osanai’s attack—the film’s overall tone remains playful, even during moments of devouring. In contrast to Western narratives, where consumption is often tied to horror, greed, or punishment, *Paprika* presents eating as a productive, transformative force. Tokita’s voracious appetite—both in his human and robotic forms—ultimately facilitates the resolution, not destruction. *Paprika* presents a body that does not resist external influence but metabolizes it into new possibilities.

In comparison, most Western films that depict gluttony or exaggerated devouring tend to be either very dark, lacking the cheerfulness and playfulness of *Paprika*—as seen in *Alien*<sup>10</sup> or the more recent *Swallow*<sup>11</sup>—or they are associated with greed, as in *The Meaning of Life*<sup>12</sup> or the *Harry Potter* films.<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, gluttony is linked to laziness, as seen in comical characters like Garfield<sup>14</sup> or Homer Simpson.<sup>15</sup> As anthropological, psychological, and sociological studies suggest,<sup>16</sup> these differences may correspond to deeper currents within Japanese society and culture. However, the film also raises a deeper philosophical challenge: How can we conceptualize a subjectivity that is neither impermeable nor entirely dissolved, but metabolically engaged with the world? In the following pages, I explore how *Paprika* complicates traditional models of embodiment:

I begin by examining Mol's critique of impermeable subjectivity in her text *Eating in Theory*,<sup>17</sup> arguing that her metabolic model of embodiment offers a framework for understanding *Paprika*'s depiction of permeability, consumption, and transformation. From there, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's later work, particularly his essay "The Intertwining—The Chiasm,"<sup>18</sup> to explore how the film's dream-reality dynamic aligns with his concepts of invisibility, reversibility, and flesh as a site of relational becoming. Finally, I incorporate Levinas's philosophy of hunger and desire, which shifts the discussion from bodily permeability to the ethical and relational aspects of consumption.

One possible interpretive path could be through cannibalism, as famously conceptualized by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro<sup>19</sup> in the context of Amerindian nature-cultures. Although cannibalism has been used as a hermeneutic tool in the Japanese context,<sup>20</sup> and Tokita literally swallows Chiba-Paprika in both of her forms, the scene lacks the darkness required for such an interpretation. Instead, *Paprika* embraces eating as a process of becoming, where blending, permeability, and bodily transformation are not acts of destruction, but of expansion and reintegration.

#### EATING AS A MODEL FOR SUBJECTIVITY: THE LIMITS OF MERLEAU-PONTY'S EMBODIMENT

What if we take eating not just as a biological necessity, but as a model for understanding subjectivity? How does human dependence on nutrition shape our relationship to the world? And what alternatives does this model offer for thinking about the body's boundaries and its constant exchanges with its surroundings?<sup>21</sup> This perspective is largely missing from most Western philosophical writings of the past, and even when food was discussed, it was usually relegated to the "lower" level of human nature, as seen in works by Hannah Arendt,<sup>22</sup> Hans Jonas,<sup>23</sup> and Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>24</sup> Mol's critique of embodiment extends to Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenology, she argues, remains too compact and enclosed, failing to account for the body's continuous exchanges with the world. She highlights his focus on the

neuromuscular system—the body as a coordinated whole that navigates space efficiently: “Merleau-Ponty’s subject is able to walk around his apartment as long as his neuromuscular body works as an integrated whole. Its integration allows it to remain distinct from its surroundings, to avoid bumping into tables and chairs.”<sup>25</sup> The subjectivity built around metabolic processes presents a paradox: to maintain a stable, autonomous self, to be “a whole,” the body must remain open to external exchange—eating, breathing, and excretion are all acts that blur the boundary between inside and outside. Mol’s book is filled with everyday examples of what happens when this semi-permeability is compromised, which I don’t need to detail, as everyone is familiar with this from personal experience.

Mol does not argue that Merleau-Ponty is entirely mistaken, but rather that his model of embodiment is limited—applying only to certain contexts, bodies, and conditions. This critique aligns with feminist phenomenology,<sup>26</sup> challenges the assumption of a supposedly universal subject that is, in reality, typically male, white, and able-bodied. A similar critique is found in Jean-Luc Nancy’s work, where he questions the self-contained structure of phenomenological embodiment.<sup>27</sup> While Merleau-Ponty moves beyond static Cartesian embodiment, he still privileges movement over metabolism—attending to the neuromuscular system but taking for granted the body’s digestive, absorptive, and excretory processes.<sup>28</sup> As Renaud Barbaras remarks:

Franck Tinland says very well, [that] with Merleau-Ponty, ‘this incarnation of the *cogito*, however interesting it may be, goes hand in hand with a kind of disembodiment of the body’; if the *cogito* is incarnated, it is for the benefit of a body which is a pre-objective *view* of the world, which knows the world in its own way, and whose movement is rather a knowledge instead of knowledge being a movement.<sup>29</sup>

This critique highlights a key tension in Merleau-Ponty’s early phenomenology but in his later work he moves toward a more interwoven and porous conception of embodiment and subjectivity as experienced in dreaming and altered states of perception. Dreams, unlike movement, do not rely on a neuromuscular body acting within an external world, but instead reveal a mode of existence where perception, imagination, and embodiment intertwine in ways that challenge conventional distinctions between self

and world. It is in this later work that Merleau-Ponty focuses more on the oneiric dimension of experience, which *Paprika* takes to its radical extreme.

## SEEING THE INVISIBLE: MERLEAU-PONTY'S LENS ON DREAMS

In “The Intertwining” essay, everything is composed of *flesh* that is instituted by *écarts*,<sup>30</sup> which create hierarchies and ensure that relations exist at all—so that there is anything to relate to or discuss. Without the deflection (*écart*), “the experience of the thing or of the past would fall to zero.”<sup>31</sup> However, this *écart* is not merely a cut; it is also “an openness upon the thing itself.”<sup>32</sup> My connection to the world arises from the inner force between the two poles of the flesh (their “intertwining”): my flesh and the flesh of the world. There is the “visible” sensible matter, but the power that links subject and object—the “call” radiating from the world, especially from non-human nature—is the “invisible”: “realization of an invisible that is exactly the reverse of the visible, the power of the visible.”<sup>33</sup> The invisible is “the invisible *of* this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being (*l’Être de cet étant*).”<sup>34</sup> It is not a negation, it is the “margin of the visible.”<sup>35</sup> In Renaud Barbaras’ words: The invisible is not the other of a visible conceived as positive in itself, but rather it is what makes itself visible in order to preserve its distance, its signifying power; the visible, in turn, is not then the negation of the invisible, but the element of its manifestation and, in being so, a primitive mode of ideality.<sup>36</sup>

I will argue that in *Paprika*, dreams function as the “invisible” of *The Visible and the Invisible*;<sup>37</sup> however, this is not how Merleau-Ponty himself viewed dreams.

Dreams, like hallucinations, children’s worlds, and myths, are anthropological<sup>38</sup> spaces rooted in lived space<sup>39</sup> and can only be distinguished from it by contrast<sup>40</sup>: “The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence.”<sup>41</sup> He writes, “I am always rooted to a natural and non-human space,” and that “the fantasies of dreams reveal even more clearly the general spatiality in which clear space and observable objects are embedded.”<sup>42</sup> Dreams thus in a way “illuminate this primary spatiality.”<sup>43</sup> At the same time, these spaces are “primordial”<sup>44</sup> in that they establish lived experience—such as when a child learns distinct subjectivity through interaction with the world,<sup>45</sup> during moments of disorientation when I am unsure if what I perceive is even an object at all.<sup>46</sup> The natural world and all possible anthropological worlds which include the dream world hence mutually establish each other.



In his 1954–55 lectures, Merleau-Ponty<sup>47</sup> revisits sleep and dreams in the course on *The Problem of Passivity*. Here, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes even more strongly the intertwining of the sleeping and dreaming subject, the natural and dream worlds, and waking and dreaming consciousness: “The two modalities impinge upon one another.”<sup>48</sup> The common hinge is embodied subjectivity: “the body, as perceptual focusing in general, as relation to dramatic situations, is the subject of dreams,” even though I lose the “I can,” the fundamental openness to the world.<sup>49</sup> Sleep and dreaming are phenomena that happen to the subject privately—“the oneiric content is [...] a *private object*”<sup>50</sup>—but at the same time, I cannot fully control it. In order to fall asleep, I have to (actively) become passive and reject the world: “When I lie down I do something, I not only await sleep, *I lend myself to sleep* [...] I call upon sleep, but it is sleep which comes. [...] Sleep [is] an activity of distancing the world.”<sup>51</sup>

A few lectures later, Merleau-Ponty offers his understanding of the dreams as products of *oneiric consciousness* that operates through *condensation*.<sup>52</sup> In dreams, there is no true acting, only perceiving, because the distinction between subject and object disappears. There is neither anything that can act nor anything that can be acted *upon*.<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty draws on the Freudian concept of the unconscious but instead of interpreting it as an individual force that operates independently, he sees it more as a sub-layer of the waking consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty continued being interested in dreams and possible distinctions between the real and imaginary (hallucinations, dreams, etc.) towards the end of his life, as evident from the posthumously published collection *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>54</sup> Asking whether we truly see the world (the quasi-Cartesian doubt of whether my whole life is a dream) is impossible, because the entire dichotomy of true and false relies on the very distinction being questioned.<sup>55</sup>

*Paprika* begins with disorientation: we are in the middle of a dream, a surreal circus show, and the dreamer, Detective Konakawa, appears confused. “Dreams are not temporally circumscribed acts,” says Merleau-Ponty<sup>56</sup> a fact that every dreamer knows from experience. Subjects and objects blend as

Konakawa's face is multiplied onto other characters. Following a rapid succession of movie scenes, Konakawa awakens beside Paprika. They both take their DC Minis off and proceed to analyze the just experienced dream projected on a screen. At this point, the viewer is still unaware that this, too, is a dream, as Paprika is a dream character who only breaks into the real world toward the film's end. False awakenings are not unusual,<sup>57</sup> but dream analysis is typically an activity of wakefulness, as dreams themselves occur within the "dedifferentiated body"<sup>58</sup> where subjects and objects blend.

Through technology, dreams cease to be "private objects" and instead become accessible entities, open to external analysis by anyone with access to the files. The dreams in *Paprika* incorporate film scenes, functioning both as an ingenious self-reference to cinema and as a testament to how dreams draw inspiration from shared cultural memory.<sup>59</sup>

This blurring of boundaries is not limited to the film's narrative content but is embedded in Kon's and his team's audio-visual style, which actively dissolves distinctions between dream and reality (within the fictional world of the film, to be clear). As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult for both characters and viewers to determine where one ends and the other begins. *Paprika* employs rapid match cuts, seamless transitions, and layered visual framing to blur these distinctions. For instance, in the opening sequence, Paprika effortlessly moves between different dream environments—appearing on a circus stage, inside a detective film, and within a Tarzan-like jungle—all without conventional transitions. She simply jumps from one setting into another through match cuts. In the opening credits that follow, she fluidly moves between three-dimensional space, posters, and even a T-shirt print, emphasizing images as portals between worlds. The dream world is not marked by specific visual distortions but instead infiltrates reality in a way that mimics the way memories, films, and media shape perception. Unlike conventional depictions of dreams as ephemeral or subjective, Kon makes them physically intrusive, reinforcing the film's themes of permeability, immanence, and the dissolution of stable subjectivity.<sup>60</sup>

As dreams blend increasingly with reality, they gradually escape the private sphere, transforming into a kind of collective unconsciousness that reshapes the world itself. As Andrew Lapworth notes, borrowing from Félix Guattari, the film hence stands in the opposition to “a psychoanalytical conception of the unconscious as an individualised entity bound to personological representations and meaning,”<sup>61</sup> “everything seems to be a mass shared dream.”<sup>62</sup> The merging of reality and dreams does not diverge from Merleau-Ponty’s view: “If life is a dream, the dream is a life,” he quotes Eugenio d’Ors (commenting on Pedro Calderón de la Barca).<sup>63</sup> However, *Paprika* pushes this idea further, suggesting that subjectivity itself is built through shared images, media, and dreams that blur the line between individual and collective experience. In doing so, the film performs a radical “flattening” of ontological categories, where private, public, real, and virtual no longer hold clear distinctions.<sup>64</sup>

In Merleau-Ponty, the personal depth of dreams contrasts with the collective depth of the invisible, which is, simply put, the inner force of the natural world—a force that “has a meaning, without this meaning being-positated by thought, [...] the autoproduction of a meaning.”<sup>65</sup> Marie-Eve Morin writes, “we should not think of this invisible or this shadow as something hidden in some inaccessible other realm, but rather as that which gives the outside—the visible—its relief and consistency—its reality—and upon which the visible opens so that there is always more to see.”<sup>66</sup>

By making dreams collective, they come to function as the Merleau-Pontian invisible. The dream world and the “real” world exist in a delicate balance, where the reflection of the invisible is revealed through human-made technological devices (DC Mini, Internet, cinema) that serve as aids to human life. It is only when dreams become truly “visible”—as material entities, fully integrated into this world—that the balance is broken and must be restored through the voracious tendencies of certain main characters.

Paprika’s fluid movements—her ability to leap effortlessly between dreams and images—align with Merleau-Ponty’s model of a healthily moving subject in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Likewise, Chiba-Paprika’s dual existence reflects the semi-permeable dualities of late Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic

model. While Merleau-Ponty's later work on dreams and intersubjectivity does push beyond the bounded subject of *Phenomenology of Perception*, it remains largely focused on perception, visibility, relationality, and the spiritual side of subjectivity. His model of the dream state as a site of interpenetration aligns with *Paprika*'s depiction of a shared dreamworld, where distinctions between self and other become fluid. However, *Paprika* does not simply depict intersubjectivity—it makes subjectivity radically material and permeable. The film collapses the boundary between bodily and mental exchange, where eating, swallowing, and metabolizing function as modes of transformation on the same level as dreaming and merging with others. At this point, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology—even in its later stages—reveals its limitations: it accounts for the blending of subjects through perception, but does not fully theorize how subjectivity is transformed through metabolic processes—how consuming the external world literally changes the body, rather than simply opening it to relationality. This is where Mol's interventions become necessary: She expands the phenomenological body into a metabolic process. However, her work remains largely descriptive, offering numerous examples without fully theorizing how metabolic subjectivity operates philosophically. In the final section, I expand on *Paprika*'s vision of metabolic subjectivity by turning to Emmanuel Levinas, who reframes hunger as an existential desire rather than mere biological needs. Whereas Mol critiques Merleau-Ponty's impermeable subject, Levinas shifts the discussion from bodily materiality to the relational and ethical implications of consumption. This allows for a more expansive reading of *Paprika*, in which acts of eating, swallowing, and absorbing are not only metabolic but also relational, forming connections between self, other, and world.

#### HUNGER AND THE IMMANENT DESIRE

As one of the few phenomenologists to discuss eating,<sup>67</sup> Levinas compares hunger and eating with other forms of desire. While the craving for food can be fully satisfied at the expense of annihilating the object,

sexual and romantic desire does not literally consume its object.<sup>68</sup> Levinas's distinction between hunger and desire is precisely the tension embodied in Tokita's character. Hunger is both a basic need and an existential relation to the Other—it can sustain or consume, nourish or obliterate. Tokita, whose appetite is excessive yet unsatisfied, confuses the physical act of devouring with the emotional need for connection. Levinas speaks of “the ridiculous and tragic simulation of devouring in kissing and love-bites. It is as though one had made a mistake about the nature of one's desire and had confused it with hunger which aims at something [...] The *other* is precisely this objectless dimension.”<sup>69</sup> Much can be said about Chiba-Paprika's objectification through the male gaze<sup>70</sup> by at least three characters in the film and perhaps the film's audience since both Chiba and Paprika's appearances largely conform to anime standards of female beauty. However, the moment when Tokita devours Chiba—confusing hunger with romantic or erotic desire according to Levinas—is precisely when everything begins to improve.<sup>71</sup> It is as if Chiba's acceptance of Tokita's concerning physical traits finally allows her to yield to her own romantic feelings. But it is not only erotic desire that imitates hunger; the reverse is also true, as Tokita's hunger, unlike that of Levinas's ideal subject, is never fully satisfied.

The analogy—or even interchangeability—of hunger and love reflects the larger process of flattening in *Paprika*. Just as food, desire, and identity collapse into one another, so too do reality, dreams, and technology. This metabolic model of subjectivity does not distinguish between material and immaterial exchanges—it treats bodily consumption, emotional attachment, and ontological transformation as part of the same continuum. Chiba-Paprika's appetite, with which she ‘sucks in’ the nightmare, shows that harmful or excessive boundary crossings can only be undone by further transgression and permeation. While Tokita swallows Chiba in a robotic—i.e. “object”—form, the gigantic baby Chiba-Paprika, feeding on and growing through the city's nightmare, resembles a ghost, another reminder that all kinds of entities exist on the same level.

The subject that crystalizes in the film is an amoebic, desiring body that changes shape—a body without organs,<sup>72</sup> in a sense. Rather than the Merleau-Pontian verticalities and depths,<sup>73</sup> the invisible in

*Paprika* is radically immanent.<sup>74</sup> The act of devouring in *Paprika* is not a form of annihilation, but of transformation—an opening up of the self to new possibilities. In the final moments of the film, the boundaries between dream and reality are restored, yet the characters themselves are changed. Chiba, reconciled with Paprika, embraces both love and her own permeability, at last allowing herself to dream again. Tokita, previously consumed by his desires, is now able to express them without reducing the Other to an object. And in the final scene, Konakawa, once paralyzed by his past, overcomes his anxiety about cinema, buys a ticket to *Dreaming Kids*, and accepts his own unfinished dreams as part of his evolving self.

Consumption in the film is not merely a biological function but a process that alters identity itself—those who consume, or are consumed, emerge as something new. Chiba-Paprika's final act of swallowing the nightmare does not eliminate it but transforms it into something metabolized, something that has already become part of the world. This reflects a metabolic ontology of the self, where subjectivity is not given, but constantly reconstituted based on what it ingests—be it food, media, technology, or dreams. In this sense, *Paprika* enacts a model of (inter)subjectivity that is radically absorptive, where selfhood is not a fixed essence but an ongoing negotiation between internal and external forces and between protection and permeation of the boundaries of the self, the world(s), and all entities. Andrew Lapworth's<sup>75</sup> analysis of dreams can be extended to the film's portrayal of eating: Just as Guattari's desiring-machines do not belong to individuals but to networks of flows, *Paprika* presents eating as a transindividual process, where consumption alters not only the eater but also the surrounding world.

## CONCLUSION

*Paprika* offers a vision of subjectivity that challenges traditional boundaries between self and other, reality and dreams, the material and immaterial, and human and machine. The self that emerges from the non-hierarchical space—spread across dreams, reality, cinema, and technology—is fluid and radically

immanent, transforming through its interactions with others and its surroundings. Rather than simply emphasizing connection, the film illuminates the tensions that arise from a self that must both protect and permeate its boundaries, a dynamic that plays out not only in dream-sharing and identity shifts but also in the bodily act of consuming, absorbing, and being absorbed.

These mechanisms culminate in a transformative journey for Chiba, who ultimately reconciles with Paprika, opening herself to her own feelings. Tokita's uninhibited appetite also plays a crucial role in breaking down physical and psychological barriers, while Detective Konakawa's renewed passion for cinema reveals the power of accepting one's past. Unlike early Merleau-Ponty, *Paprika* envisions a subject that does not merely perceive and interact with the world but metabolizes it—dissolving and reconstructing itself through continuous exchanges with its surroundings. And unlike late Merleau-Ponty, the film presents not just a vision of permeability and intersubjectivity but a metabolic ontology of selfhood, where incorporation—whether through eating, dreaming, or love—becomes the fundamental process of transformation. By bringing dreams, technology, eating, and cultural artifacts onto the same plane of existence, the film flattens ontological categories into a continuum of exchange, where all forms of incorporation—whether physical, symbolic, or virtual—are treated as equally constitutive of being and/as becoming.

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<sup>2</sup> Annemarie Mol, *Eating in Theory*, Experimental Futures (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021)

3 Yasutaka Tsutsui, *Paprika*, trans. Andrew Driver, Reprinted (Richmond: Alma Books, 2009).

4 *Ghost in the Shell*, directed by Mamoru Oshii (Kôdansha, Bandai Visual Company, Manga Entertainment, 1996).

5 *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, directed by Hideaki Anno (Gainax, Nihon Ad Systems (NAS), TV Tokyo, 1997).

6 E.g. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (Nibariki, Tokuma Shoten, Hakuhodo, 1987); *Castle in the Sky*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (Tokuma Shoten, Studio Ghibli, 1991); *Princess Mononoke*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (DENTSU Music And Entertainment, Nibariki, Nippon Television Network (NTV), 1997).

7 Eugenio De Angelis, "Shokutaku Jigoku. Visions of Family Meals in Japanese Cinema," *Ca' Foscari Japanese Studies* 17 (2021): 107–15, <https://iris.unive.it/handle/10278/3749629>.

8 C.f. Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape – De l'évasion*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16, 66ff.; see also David Goldstein, "Emmanuel Levinas and the Ontology of Eating," *Gastronomica* 10, no. 3 (2010): 34–44, <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2010.10.3.34>, where he

- points out that even though nausea might as well be always explicable by a medical cause, its feeling is existential.
- 9 Arghyadip Dewan, "Superflat and Post-Gender: A Case Study of Female Bodies in *Ghost in the Shell* and *Paprika*," *Journal of Women's Studies: University of North Bengal* 11 (2022): 28–45, <https://ir.nbu.ac.in/handle/123456789/5187>.
  - 10 *Alien*, directed by Ridley Scott (Twentieth Century Fox, Brandywine Productions, Scott Free Productions, 1979).
  - 11 *Swallow*, directed by Carlo Mirabella-Davis (Charades, Logical Pictures, Stand Alone Productions, 2019).
  - 12 *The Meaning of Life*, directed by Terry Jones (Celandine Films, The Monty Python Partnership, Universal Pictures, 1983).
  - 13 E.g. Uncle Vernon in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, directed by Chris Columbus (Warner Bros., Heyday Films, 1492 Pictures, 2001).
  - 14 *Garfield and Friends* (Film Roman Productions, United Media Productions, Lee Mendelson Productions, 1988).
  - 15 *The Simpsons* (Gracie Films, 20th Television Animation, Fox Television Animation, 1989).
  - 16 E.g. Romin W. Tafari, Tara C. Marshall, and Haruko Katsura, "Standing Out in Canada and Japan," *Journal of Personality* 72, no. 4 (August 2004): 785–814, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00280.x>; Erin McCarthy, *Ethics Embodied: Rethinking Selfhood through Continental, Japanese, and Feminist Philosophies* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); Debra J. Occhi, "Sloppy Selfhood: Metaphor, Embodiment, Animism, and Anthropomorphization in Japanese Language and Culture," in *Approaches to Language, Culture, and Cognition: The Intersection of Cognitive Linguistics and Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Masataka Yamaguchi, Dennis Tay, and Benjamin Blount (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 124–44, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137274823\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137274823_6); cf. Mara Miller, "Views of Japanese Selfhood: Japanese and Western Perspectives," in *Culture And Self* (Routledge, 1997); Mara Miller, "Art and the Construction of Self and Subject in Japan," in *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice*, ed. Roger T. Ames, Thomas P. Kasulis, and Wimal Dissanayake (SUNY Press, 1998), 421–60.
  - 17 Mol, *Eating in Theory*.
  - 18 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 170–201; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130–55.
  - 19 E.g. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014).
  - 20 E.g. Jonathan Friedman, "Consuming Desires: Strategies of Selfhood and Appropriation," *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (1991): 154–63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/656412>; Erik Lofgren, "Ideological Transformation: Reading Cannibalism in Fires on the Plain," *Japan Forum* 16, no. 3 (October 2004): 401–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0955580042000257891>.
  - 21 Mol, *Eating in Theory*, 39.
  - 22 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2. ed., [Nachdr.] (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).
  - 23 Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2001).
  - 24 E.g. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Softcover reprint of the hardcover 4th edition (Dordrecht Boston London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).
  - 25 Mol, *Eating in Theory*, 36; cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 235; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon – New York: Routledge, 2012), 209.
  - 26 E.g. Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," in *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing like a Girl" and Other Essays*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 27–45.
  - 27 E.g. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, Edition revue et complétée, Sciences humaines 4 (Paris: Métailié, 2000), 117.
  - 28 Mol, *Eating in Theory*, 32.
  - 29 Renaud Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, Problèmes et controverses (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 2008), 68; my translation.
  - 30 I.e., separations, spreads, or, arguably, folds; see Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 156; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 118.
  - 31 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 163; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 124.
  - 32 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 163; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 124.
  - 33 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 188n; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 145n5.



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- 34 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 196; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 151.
  - 35 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'invisible : Inédites de La Bibliothèque Nationale (Transcrites Par Renaud Barbaras)" (n.d.), 37.
  - 36 Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology, Studies in Continental Thought* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 235.
  - 37 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.
  - 38 Merleau-Ponty calls them anthropological because they are not immediately codependent with non-human space.
  - 39 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 339–40; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 306–7.
  - 40 However, as long as I am fully within the dream or illusion, I cannot see it as such because then it would cease to be one. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 308; see also e.g. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Samuel J. Todes, "The Three Worlds of Merleau-Ponty," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 22, no. 4 (1962): 560, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2105261>.
  - 41 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie, 6. print (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 13.
  - 42 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 307, 297; Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 340, 330.
  - 43 James Morley, "The Sleeping Subject: Merleau-Ponty on Dreaming," *Theory & Psychology* 9, no. 1 (February 1999): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354399091005>.
  - 44 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 339; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 307.
  - 45 Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 117.
  - 46 Dreyfus and Todes, "The Three Worlds of Merleau-Ponty": 560, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2105261>.
  - 47 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité : Notes de cours au Collège de France* (Paris: Belin, 2015); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2010); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960*, trans. John O'Neil, First English language edition (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
  - 48 Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France*, 48.
  - 49 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 148.
  - 50 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 148.
  - 51 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 142, 148.
  - 52 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 156.
  - 53 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 158.
  - 54 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.
  - 55 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 19–20; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 5–6.
  - 56 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 157.
  - 57 E.g. Giorgio Buzzi, "False Awakenings in Light of the Dream Protoconsciousness Theory: A Study in Lucid Dreamers," *International Journal of Dream Research* 4, no. 2 (2011): 110–16; Michael Raduga, Oleg Kuyava, and Natalia Sevchenko, "Is There a Relation among REM Sleep Dissociated Phenomena, like Lucid Dreaming, Sleep Paralysis, out-of-Body Experiences, and False Awakening?," *Medical Hypotheses* 144 (November 1, 2020): 110169, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mehy.2020.110169>; Greta Mainieri et al., "Are Sleep Paralysis and False Awakenings Different from REM Sleep and from Lucid REM Sleep? A Spectral EEG Analysis," *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine* 17, no. 4 (2021): 719–27.
  - 58 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 148.
  - 59 Timothy Perper and Martha Cornog, "Psychoanalytic Cyberpunk Midsummer-Night's Dreamtime: Kon Satoshi's 'Paprika,'" ed. Kon Satoshi, *Mechademia* 4 (2009): 326–29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41510949>; Kerin Ogg, "Lucid Dreams, False Awakenings: Figures of the Fan in Kon Satoshi," *Mechademia* 5 (2010): 157–74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41510962>.
  - 60 As Brett Hack (*The Anime Philosophy Lab*, NOVA University Lisbon, February 27, 2025) noted during the Q&A after my conference talk, the film, along with its soundtrack, is highly rhythmic, which could also be linked to the metabolic process. However, due to space constraints, I will not pursue this line of inquiry further this time.

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- 61 Andrew Lapworth, “Guattari and the Micropolitics of Cinema: The Desiring Machines of Satoshi Kon,” in *Why Guattari? A Liberation of Cartographies, Ecologies and Politics*, ed. Thomas Jellis, Joe Gerlach, and John-David Dewsbury, Routledge Studies in Human Geography 7 (Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 194.
- 62 Arghyadip Dewan, “Meta-Internal Scapes: Politics of Visualized Minds in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Paprika*,” *The Apollonian: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 2024): 92, <https://theapollonian.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-Apollonian.pdf>.
- 63 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 157.
- 64 Dewan, “Superflat and Post-Gender: A Case Study of Female Bodies in *Ghost in the Shell* and *Paprika*,” 41. Of course, one could take a further step and analyze the relationship between the film and everyday reality. Considering art not as a finite object lying before a subject to be consumed, but as a force that acts back upon the subject, would deepen the notion of flattening even further. However, this lies beyond the scope of my text, see e.g. Milan Kroulík, “The Mimetic Faculty and the Art of Everyday Life,” *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (June 1, 2019): 144–60, <https://doi.org/10.25138/13.1.a7>;
- 65 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature : Notes, Cours Du Collège de France*, ed. Dominique Ségler, Traces Écrites (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 3; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Robert Vallier, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 19; see also Renaud Barbaras, “Merleau-Ponty and Nature,” trans. Paul Milan, *Research in Phenomenology* 31, no. 1 (2001): 22–38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24659206>.
- 66 Marie-Eve Morin, *Merleau-Ponty and Nancy on Sense and Being: At the Limits of Phenomenology*, New Perspectives in Ontology (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2022), 79.
- 67 While Merleau-Ponty doesn’t focus on eating, he too mentions that human food is a fully human phenomenon, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Structure du comportement: Précédé de Une philosophie de l’ambiguïté* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1967), 188; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 174.
- 68 Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), 43.
- 69 Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 43.
- 70 E.g. William O. Gardner, “The Cyber Sublime and the Virtual Mirror: Information and Media in the Works of Oshii Mamoru and Kon Satoshi,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjfs.18.1.44>; L. Angélica Cabrera Torrecilla, “Allegories of Japanese Women in *Paprika* by Tsutsui Yasutaka and Kon Satoshi,” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019): n.a.
- 71 Perper and Cornog, “Psychoanalytic Cyberpunk Midsummer-Night’s Dreamtime,” 327.
- 72 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of the “body without organs” in *Paprika*, or anime in general, is a vast topic in itself. The concept of the body without organs evolved over time in Deleuze and Guattari’s writings, but my reference here focuses on its quality of undifferentiatedness—“[t]o the bound, connected, and intersecting flows, it [the body without organs] sets its undifferentiated amorphous fluid against” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie : L’Anti-Oedipe*, Critique (Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 1980), 15; my translation)—and on the field of immanence—“[t]he BwO is the *field of immanence* of desire, the *plane of consistency* specific to desire (with desire defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it)” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 154).
- 73 Morin, *Merleau-Ponty and Nancy on Sense and Being*, 181.
- 74 See also Gardner, “The Cyber Sublime and the Virtual Mirror,” 66.
- 75 Lapworth, “Guattari and the Micropolitics of Cinema.”