

THE INFILTRATED SELF IN MURAKAMI HARUKI'S “TV PEOPLE”

Masaki Mori
University of Georgia

Murakami and Technology

“*TV pīpuru* TV ビーブル (TV People),” a short story originally published in 1989, presents an exceptional case among fiction by Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (1949–) in the sense that technology assumes central importance.¹ The technology in question, which is the analog TV system, has already been outdated and replaced by the digitized counterpart for a few decades, but the significance of this work still lies in problematizing the relationship between humans and technology, starting with the writer’s own case. Far from being a mere “bad dream, an optical illusion,”² the story critiques the fundamental ways televisual media, in general, affect people’s lives, the most important of which concerns the dismantlement of the self as a pivotal sociocultural construct of intellectual endeavor.

As a writer of contemporaneity, Murakami has publicly made use of the Internet system twice so far, accepting and answering many questions from his readers in Japan and abroad through a temporary website, publishing select collections of correspondence in the form of books and extended versions as CD-ROMs or electronic books.³ While this occasional practice calls for strenuous efforts at the expense of his other writing activities, he

¹ Haruki Murakami 村上春樹, “TV People,” in Alfred Birnbaum and Jay Rubin, trans., *The Elephant Vanishes* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 195–216.

² Livia Monnet, “Televisual Retrofutures and the Body of Insomnia: Visuality and Virtual Realities in the Short Fiction of Murakami Haruki,” *Proceedings of the Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies* 3 (1997), 357.

³ Four books came out respectively in 1998, 2000, 2001, and 2006 as a result of the first website correspondence between 1996 and 1999. The fifth book published in 2003, *Shōnen Kafuka* 少年カフカ (*Kafka the Boy*) was based on correspondence from 2002 to 2003. Another book was issued in 2006 from the third online interaction early the same year. The latest book was published in July of 2015 in response to far more readers’ input from January to May of that same year.

considers it an essential means to have direct contact with his readership rather than a relatively quick, lucrative form of publication. These undertakings prove his Internet literacy. Curiously, this online familiarity on a personal level does not translate well into the scarcity of references to information technology in his fiction, and they are far dispersed and not always of the latest kind. Examples include the cassette tape and its recorder that the narrator in “*Kangarū tsūshin* カンガルー通信 (*The Kangaroo Communiqué*)” (1981) uses and the online conversation with keyboard typing via the telephone line between protagonist and his brother-in-law as well as his missing wife in *Nejimakidori kuronikuru* ねじまき鳥クロニクル (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*).⁴

In creating his fictional world, at least, Murakami appears somewhat reluctant to incorporate the latest technology, as exemplified by *IQ84*.⁵ With the alphabet “Q” pronounced the same as the number 9 in Japanese, the very title indicates the story’s timeframe set in this particular year, just like George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) to which it pays titular homage. Like the British dystopian counterpart, Murakami’s story affiliates itself with science fiction when the term IQ84 refers to a parallel world that one of the main characters, Aomame, inadvertently slips into. Unlike Orwell’s novel that features the then imaginary technology of ubiquitous surveillance devices from the futuristic viewpoint of the forties, Murakami’s novel, however, published a quarter-century after the story’s dated setting, realistically refers to the technology that was available in the mid-1980s. The deliberately reversed lapse of time suggests at once his comfort of writing about his lifetime’s near past and his discomfort to negotiate the current Internet-based, informational society fully.

To a lesser degree, this temporal scheme suggestive of the writer’s hesitation to incorporate up-to-date technology also applies to *Kishidanchō goroshi* 騎士団長殺し (*Killing Commendatore*) (2017) that draws back about a decade earlier for its primary setting instead of addressing the present in its actual writing later in the mid-2010s. Accordingly, the characters customarily use cellular phones, but smartphones have not made their debut as yet even

⁴ Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, trans. Jay Rubin (New York: Vintage, 1998). Originally published in 1994–1995. All the translations to *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* are to this translation.

⁵ Haruki Murakami, *IQ84*, trans. Jay Rubin and Philip Gabriel (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2011). Originally published in 2009–2010.

in this latest novel. Meanwhile, the reclusive character Menshiki accesses the Internet with "a laptop" and "a state-of-the-art Apple desktop computer" at his isolated residence among hills.⁶ Generally speaking, Murakami's fiction centers on human affairs that have little to do with the advancing forefront of technology for communication; instead, it relies on established kinds, such as the radio, LP, CD, and TV, as staple elements of the social fabric from his younger days.

This preference of non-commitment to advanced technology contrasts with Kazuo Ishiguro's stance. Born five years apart shortly after World War II, Ishiguro (1954–) and Murakami respect each other as contemporary writers of international standing. Like the Japanese counterpart, the British writer is not known to avidly pursue new or emerging technology, with one major exception of *Never Let Me Go* (2005) that anticipated the nationalized system of human clone production to medically harvest organs in the foreseeable future. The novel was probably inspired in the wake of the world's first cloned animal, Dolly the Sheep, in July of 1996, and it was hardly a coincidence for the novel to come out of the United Kingdom where the sensationally innovative, biological experiment successfully took place. While uplifting national pride, the scientific breakthrough immediately stirred up the prospect of eventual human cloning with varying consequences, mostly of a genetically bleak future.

In this respect, Murakami's creative mind does not concern itself much with what the evolving technology signifies for humanity.⁷ Outside of information technology, *Sekai no owari to hādoboirudo wandarando* 世界の終わりとハードボイルド・ワンダーランド (*Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*) (1985) might seem to present an anomalous case, but its purely imaginary cerebral experiment creates an autonomous subconscious world that was not grounded on an existing or emerging technology of the eighties' reality. "TV People," therefore, stands out among his fictional pieces all the more for its focus on one of the most widespread, modern technological

⁶ Haruki Murakami, *Killing Commendatore*, trans. Philip Gabriel and Ted Goossen (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 2018), 262, 634. All the references to *Killing Commendatore* are to the translation in 2018.

⁷ *Ibid.* Interestingly, the protagonist of *Killing Commendatore* expresses his personal aversion about the idea of having an operation remotely conducted by a surgeon via the Internet (119), and a friend ridicules him for his out-of-date mindset (446).

phenomena. This short story deserves close attention for that reason alone, inciting a fundamental question as to what underlies a nonsensical story about intruders from the other side of television.

Style and Negativity

Although Murakami's fiction has enjoyed high popularity in many parts of the world for three decades, certain established writers and critics have not tended to regard it favorably. While online bookmakers and news organizations have not failed to mention his name as one of the top candidates for a Nobel Prize for Literature in recent years, the selection committee has always proven to use different criteria. One major reason lies in the nature of his writings. Usually written in an easy style to read – filled with original humor, unrealistic occurrences, and references to consumer goods and items of popular culture – Murakami's works are often prone to criticism of frivolity and irrelevance by those who regard grave, sociopolitical conditions as a novelist's foremost duty. From another perspective, though, Murakami addresses specific contemporary issues in his own unique way. The unreal content is akin to works of Kafka and magical realism, alluding to a hardly articulable problem, which lurks in the psyche or society, through unconventional, and sometimes shocking representation. His fiction thus confounds the boundary between serious and popular kinds of literature, to which "TV People" testifies well.

The story does not abide by logic or reason in realistic terms, sounding almost as if the author enjoyed confusing the reader with the nonsensical content. Indeed, the text exhibits a strong sense of playfulness in several respects. The sudden, inexplicable intrusion of shrunk people with a TV set into the narrator-protagonist's daily routine, as well as one of them coming out of the TV in the end, indicates a major element of humor on the plot level. On the sensuous level, soon after the story's beginning, the reader encounters transcriptions of the noises that the narrator hears of a clock in the living room and a stranger's reverberating footsteps outside. Those supposedly onomatopoeic phrases attract the reader's attention audiovisually as they stand out on the pages for their jarring, consonant-rich formations that are hard to pronounce as well as for their dynamic presentations with bold letters in the original Japanese text and with capitalization in the English translation. With no semblance to any regular clock sounds or footsteps, the transcriptions are meant to be wordplays on the surface. Wordplay is also apparent when the narrator explains the strange yet barely noticeable size of the TV People's physique that is proportionally

less than that of humans by 20 to 30 percent. The text repeats the brief sentence "That's TV People" three times in ever-smaller font sizes to represent their reduced body size.⁸

Concerning consumer or popular items, apart from frequent mentions of TV, this story has a number of references to magazines targeted for young to middle-aged women with disposable incomes, such as *Elle* エル, *Marie Claire* マリ・クレール, *An・An* アンアン, *Croissant* クロワッサン, and *Katei gahō* 家庭画報 that is translated as *Home Ideas*. For her editorial research and personal interests, the narrator's wife subscribes to the periodicals, the latest issues of which she organizes in a pile on the sideboard of their living room. The husband does not care for them in the slightest, even wishing for the thorough elimination of all the world's magazines. Accepting their presence in his domestic surroundings as part of his marital condition, however, he confesses to the fear of disturbing the orderly pile of magazines lest that act of negligence provoke the displeasure of his meticulous wife. Magazines by nature are produced as consumables for a leisurely pastime and quick information, and their presence in the story bespeaks the consumption-oriented popular culture in which it is set.

The origin of "TV People" might also account, in part at least, for an ambiance of playful creativity through its close affinity with popular culture and consumer society. In the late 1980s when he stayed in inertia after having completed two long novels, including *Noruwē no mori* ノルウェーの森 (*Norwegian Wood*) (1987) and *Dansu dansu dansu* ダンス ダンス ダンス (*Dance Dance Dance*) (1988), Murakami was suddenly inspired to write the short story "almost automatically" after he watched on MTV "the video clip of Lou Reed's song" in which "two strangely dressed men were carrying a large box all over the town," and that helped him to break the writer's block.⁹

⁸ This is shown on page 198. Unless otherwise noted, all the references to Murakami's short story "TV People" are to its translation in *The Elephant Vanishes* (1993).

⁹ Haruki Murakami, *Murakami Haruki zensakuhin 1990–2000 1, Tanpenshū I* 村上春樹全作品 1990–2000 1, 短編集 I [The Complete Works by Murakami Haruki 1990–2000 1: The Collection of Short Stories I] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2002), 294. All the references to this short story in the original are to this edition. Unless otherwise noted, all the translations from Japanese texts are mine. See also Haruki Murakami and Kawakami Mieko, *Mimizuku wa tasogare ni tobitatsu: Kawakami Mieko kiku / Murakami Haruki kataru* みみ

With an uneasy, foreboding tone that is far from being light-hearted and merely amusing, however, the short story points to specific problems inherent in the very normal way we live our television-saturated lives. The intrusion of TV-carrying people into one's life, for instance, stands for the omnipresence of mass media in every corner of the society that seeks easy access to entertainment and information. The salience of their obtrusive visits aligns itself with the media's so pervasive and prevalent influence as to affect even those who, like the narrator, have opted out of televisual exposure. At the same time, with their uniformly plain appearance impersonally nondescript and their silent team maneuver not interfering with the general population, TV People integrate themselves into the social background so thoroughly that they do not attract attention or suspicion from anyone other than the narrator. Humans willingly embrace the media's availability for their convenience and take it for granted as an indispensable part of their lives.

"TV People" thus reveals how the television system affects people significantly through unhindered infiltration into society and stable placement in it as a presumed necessity. Certain kinds of exhibited humor might entertain the reader without offering much reason to laugh outright while supposedly facilitating the text to deliver its social commentary. The text badly qualifies as a conventional satirical piece of dark humor, because its oblique presentation heavily muffles and even distorts an assumed message to hamper and confuse understanding. The overall effect is attenuated negativity until the very end when the story offers not so much an open ending as an ambiguous resolution of alternative demises. For the sake of quick nomenclature, one might be tempted to ascribe such a composition to playful postmodern disillusionment with reality. The story investigates into an even more fundamental predicament that besets and undermines today's humanity beyond mere technophobia, which essentially accounts for the looming sense of negativity.

The Ending of Forking Impasses

Rather than suggesting imaginable possibilities to evolve after the textual closure, the ending in question presents an interpretive impasse with mutually entangled and multiple combinations of dead ends. First, finding himself somewhat getting dry and shrunk in the penultimate paragraph, the

ずくは黄昏に飛びたつ：川上未映子 訊く／村上春樹 語る [The Horned Owl Flies Off at Dusk: Kawakami Mieko Asks / Murakami Haruki Tells] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2017), 251–252.

narrator fears impending death through petrification like what his office colleagues have undergone in his short dream immediately before one of the TV People emerges out of the TV. On the one hand, it represents an awareness of physical death. In the overall context of repeated emphasis on the reduced size of TV People, on the other hand, the perceived physical shrinkage might indicate the narrator's mutation into a nonhuman form of TV People.¹⁰ Their persistent interest in him as a target of their invasion might bespeak their unspoken intention to enlarge their cohort. The ending, without a definite outcome, does not make it clear whether he is becoming another one of them or turning into mere stone at the end. More importantly, in either case, he is at a loss of what to say because he is losing the capability not only to vocalize but also to formulate his own thoughts, which amounts to the loss of his mental faculty and signifies the demise of his inner being.

Second, the one who steps out of the screen and has apparent leadership over the other two TV People makes two assertions concerning the narrator's wife, who has mysteriously failed to come home that evening: she will no longer return to him, and the telephone will ring in about five minutes with a call from her. The narrator is inclined to believe the TV representative in the end, thinking that his marital relationship with the wife has irreparably been damaged. Nevertheless, there is no objective basis for the validity of those statements. His wife might arrive after all or might not, as the representative tells him. The predicted telephone call involves at least three pairs of unresolved binaries concerning its actualization, timing, and the caller's identity. Notwithstanding, he is convinced in the end that his wife has abandoned him, albeit the notion is unfounded and forced on him.

A phone call, possibly from a protagonist's absent wife who stays away at an unknown, unreachable location, recalls an analogous situation with which *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* begins. Unlike the novel in which the protagonist has the textual scope of three volumes to strive for a reunion with his wife, psychical or otherwise, the short story's curtailed circumstances likely indicate the termination of the relationship if the suffered damage is so considerable as the narrator is induced to believe, or now that the narrator's life is in jeopardy. He holds no reason for hope to restore the tie with his missing wife in either of these cases.

In these two respects, there are a number of combined possibilities to follow after the ending, but none of them can claim certain legitimacy. The

¹⁰ See Monnet, "Televisual Retrofutures," 341, 343, 357.

irresolution of such entangled plotlines renders the ending into a kind of labyrinth where the reader hermeneutically gets lost. In effect, “TV People” finds itself congenial to magical realist works of South American writers such as Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) who penned short stories like “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941) and “The Aleph” (1945) as well as Gabriel Garcia Márquez (1927–2014), whose recently translated yet unspecified long novel the narrator is reading. Murakami’s text as a whole is similarly written somewhat like a maze, which one might enter lightheartedly as an uncomplicated reading game. The text hardly makes rational sense, however, and the reader can thus get metaphorically entrapped in this maze since the game turns out to be much more serious and complex than it initially appears. Towards the end, Murakami inserts the phrase, *osoroshii kaisen meiro* おそろしい回線迷路 (dreadful circuit maze),¹¹ translated as “mega circuit” of the telephone line system, to hint at the impassability of almost infinite routes that disconnects the narrator from his wife and also to finalize the text’s labyrinthine quality and its implied literary affinity.¹² This specific reference to a system too complicated to exit at the narrative’s termination verifies not an open-ended development but the plot’s ultimate breakdown.

The Narrator’s Vulnerability

Given the ending’s nature discussed above, a few questions arise as to what brings about the narrator’s multifaceted demise: What attracts TV People as an instrument of the demise to this individual? and what does the entire situation signify beyond this particular case? With the first two questions, some elements suggest what might be amiss with the way he lives. In a way, he is no more than an ordinary resident of the city. Beneath his appearance as a successfully married, regular office employee, however, lie some personal issues and idiosyncratic dissonances.

First, by principle, he refuses to own or use certain mechanical amenities, such as the television and elevators, to the extent that his colleagues ridicule him as a modern-day Luddite. His obdurate avoidance of the machinery, especially the television, largely accounts for TV People’s keen interest in him. They do not have to approach the others, including his wife and colleagues, because the television has already appropriated them

¹¹ Murakami, *Complete Works*, 43.

¹² There is a similar situation involving the protagonist and his missing wife in Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, 485.

into its system. In other words, the humans, with a few exceptions, have thoroughly and willingly forfeited their position as critically thinking beings without resistance or questioning as far as their interaction with technology is concerned.¹³ As such, they unreflectively behave as if a TV set or TV People did not exist even when they are physically aware of the new device or intruding strangers nearby. What TV People want is the conversion of a few resistant standouts. In this respect, the narrator is a social outcast, and the others treat him accordingly by refusing to discuss or acknowledge his conundrum over technology.

Second, apart from his aversion to technological assimilation, the narrator stays quite aloof of human connection and commitment in both public and private spheres, although he does not regard his detachedness as unusual. In his public role as an office employee for a major electronics company that rivals Sony, he works competently enough to be well regarded by his department head. He self-admittedly does not feel much enthusiasm or satisfaction with his job, which mostly consists of long, smoke-filled meetings for marketing new products. For instance, the day after TV People's first intrusion into his life, he speaks up only once in one of those meetings to ease his sense of duty for receiving a salary. To worsen the unfulfilling environment of drudgery, he has not developed a close relationship with his colleagues. He innately detests the department head for his lightly physical and habitual touch of intended cordiality. Exceptionally, the narrator goes out for a drink after work with a man of his age once in a while, but this supposedly friendly colleague tensely ignores and silently interrupts his confiding as soon as he timidly ventures to mention TV People. In short, as a member of the paid team organized to ensure and enhance corporate profitability, the narrator is not isolated in his workplace, but he does not meaningfully connect to anyone beyond his expected duties.

As far as we can surmise from the text, he does not have much social activity in his private life, either. Unlike his wife, who goes out to see her friends from high school over dinner on some weekends, he prefers to stay home by himself, thus indicating few friends, if any, with whom he can socialize away from work. His unsociability extends to the family circle. As

¹³ See Kuritsubo Yoshiki 栗坪良樹, "Chinnyūsha TV pīpuru 闖入者 TV ピーブル [TV People the Intruders]," Kuritsubo Yoshiki and Tsuge Mitsuhiro 柘植光彦, eds., *Murakami Haruki sutadīzu 3* 村上春樹スタディーズ 3 [Murakami Haruki Studies 3] (Tokyo: Wakakusa shobō 若草書房, 1999), 281.

is typically the case with Murakami's writings, fictional or otherwise, parents are simply disregarded and are irrelevant to the story. Unmentioned likewise, siblings probably do not exist or matter for the narrator. He does have some other relatives but mentions that for ten years, he has not met his cousin to whom he does not feel very close, and he intends to send her a letter to decline her wedding invitation. It is easily inferable that, with a mutual feeling, she has sent him the invitation merely out of the formality of familial obligation.

The situation is even more problematic with his marriage of four years to his wife, who should undoubtedly be the single, most crucial companion in wedlock. She works for a minor publisher of a niche journal with a small yet devoted readership. Both still at an early stage of their careers, they work hard to gain enough income to afford a middle-class urban lifestyle equipped with an apartment in a so-called "mansion" building and a car. When they are busy with their respective jobs, they hardly talk to each other for three days. It is partly because of their tight, ill-matched schedules that the narrator is inclined to decline his cousin's wedding invitation in preference of a long-planned vacation with his wife in Okinawa. Insufficient communication and deficient partnership constitute a large part of their marriage life.

Fairly typical of many of today's marriages in which both spouses have full-time office employment, however, their case does not deviate from the norm much. What makes this marriage striking is the balance of power that plays out between the two involved. Neither of them dominates over the other, but the wife has imposed her will on the husband in certain respects from the beginning, including having made him quit smoking upon getting married. She does not compromise herself, either, with regard to the precise arrangement of interior home decorations. The small apartment is cramped with her research materials as well as with his books, and she does not allow him to disturb in any way. Lest he displease her with his carelessness, he accepts her meticulous ways with patience as a necessary condition for keeping their marriage untroubled and does not shift the position of any items in their residence, except for his own possessions like books and records.

Generally speaking, a spouse often caters to the partner's whim or demand in order to keep their relationship intact. The narrator's wife might as well have conceded to accommodate her husband's idiosyncrasy for life without a TV, although her editorial interest for a magazine about organic food and farming has possibly contributed to their mutual agreement on a less artificial way of living. Still, her uncompromising volition to place everything under her control is oppressive. As the narrator guesses, her

minute attention to the domestic space must exhaust her mind with stress, probably reflecting an unsurfaced yet persistent fear and insecurity verging on the neurosis of dealing with unmalleable external reality. With the aforementioned deficiency of communication and companionship into consideration, there emerges a possibility of her underlying dissatisfaction with her married life, from which she might wish to escape before the husband understands the cause.

At the same time, through his submission to her will, he might keep peace at home, but not necessarily peace of mind. In his home, his life is mentally compartmentalized, consisting of a larger area that he shares with his wife and a much smaller one, reserved exclusively for his own use. Constant caution about casually touching and altering the configuration of nearby objects outside his own small domain renders him psychologically strained and claustrophobic, and as a result, even somewhat paranoid, which might partially account for his fixation on the heterogeneous intruders of a reduced size into his personal space. The spouses' complex inner crises, combined yet mutually unacknowledged, likely have significantly been undermining their marital relationship for some time until it reaches a point of no return or reparation, which the TV representative declares at the end as part of the intruders' scheme.

Of the two spouses, TV People have already taken the wife into their machination because on her return home one day, despite her strong penchant for order, she completely ignored the disorderly aftermath of what the technicians have done in the living room, including the newly installed and unrequested television, her disarrayed magazines, and the large clock displaced on the floor. Given no TV exposure at home, it is only inferable that her induction into their fold had taken place at her work or in the past before marriage when she probably used to watch it. The narrator, on the other hand, remains an unfinished business for TV People, for he has adamantly lived his adult years without a TV. His case must intrigue them all the more for his deep occupational engagement in the proliferation of new TV sets.

The story begins with their covert yet daring onset on him because the time has finally ripened for their maneuver against this exceptional individual. The exact timing cannot be haphazard and unplanned, for the opening pages show him in a very vulnerable state. Physically, he stays alone at home. Socially, as explained above, he is isolated. He also reveals his detachment from the traditional Japanese culture through his total disregard for the sensitivity to nature and seasonal changes in his urban habitat.

Spatially, he feels strained and ill at ease in his private surroundings; and temporally, he habitually finds himself vaguely anxious and disoriented at twilight on early Sunday evenings. The oxymoronic headache of a dull, yet piercing sensation is the first sign, accompanied by the hallucinatory perception of jarring noises, including the large clock's mechanical movement and a stranger's footsteps reverberating in the hall outside the apartment.

These two sensory phenomena undoubtedly strike him on a regular basis, as he anticipates them at a specific time, almost like an obsession. Rather than presented merely as playfully distorted, onomatopoeic transcriptions, the two kinds of noises refer to the relentless progression of time and tacit ostracism that he cannot alter. One comes literally from a solid device for indicating time within the domestic walls where he feels constrained, while the other metaphorically stands for the society that alienates him externally. The narrator is so familiar with the noises that he internalizes them, promptly answering to the wife's question with a similarly dissonant, almost unpronounceable phrase, “サリュッツツブクルウウツ” transcribed as “SLUPPPKRRRZ,” before realizing its nonsensicality and taking it back.¹⁴ The noises, as well as the headache, result from the persistent unease over lost time and opportunities in the form of a mounting list of the Sunday plans that he has failed to carry out. Coupled with the dreary prospect of a weekday labor cycle to begin just overnight, the noises and the headache beset the narrator with such intensity of discomfort that he lies stupefied, both mentally and physically, in the gathering dusk of his living room, subjecting himself as a ready target before TV People's arrival.

TV People Examined

Unrealistic and surreal as they are, TV People's properties can be understood in terms of Sigmund Freud's speculation on the uncanny,¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulations,¹⁶ and J. Hillis Miller's definition of the

¹⁴ Murakami, *Complete Works*, 18.

¹⁵ See Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in Alix Strachey, trans., *On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958). Originally published in 1919.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in Mark Poster, ed., Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman, trans., *Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). Originally published in 1981.

paranormal.¹⁷ These three theories interrelatedly work together effectively to explain Murakami's nonhuman beings. First, Freud's idea of the uncanny is relevant here more for what does not apply to Murakami's short story than for what it does. The psychoanalyst classifies the uncanny phenomena into two kinds, one that we feel "when repressed infantile complexes have been revived," and the other "when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed."¹⁸ The "castration-complex," including the fear of such dismemberment as damage to eyes, typically exemplifies the first kind.¹⁹

This does not apply to Murakami's narrator-protagonist because he is not concerned at all about a specified physical damage of that kind, repressed or not, to his body, and there is no single reference to the past of his childhood in which repression must originate. A repressed trauma from the past does not lie within the scope of this story. The second group consists of the superstitious fear that the rational mind rejects, such as the revival of the deceased and human lookalikes coming to life. This is not the case with *TV People*, because they are neither revived dead beings nor animated dolls. Infused with life, they act like humans.

In contrast to the Freudian uncanny that fills the subject with "dread and creeping horror" or "feelings of unpleasantness and repulsion," *TV People* do not terrify or discomfort the narrator with a sense of repugnance at all. Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, therefore, has little place here.²⁰ Nevertheless, the narrator intrinsically senses an unusual sort of awkwardness that disquiets the mind in the face of *TV People*, which he tentatively calls "何かしら奇妙な印象 (an inexplicable strange impression)" or "居心地の悪さ (uncomfortableness)," initially ascribing it to the proportional reduction of their physical size.²¹ This kind of unexplained discomfort might account for the reason why Matsuoka Kazuko 松岡和子 considers "*TV People*," along with the other short stories included in the book *TV People*

¹⁷ Miller, J. Hillis. "The Critic as Host," *Critical Inquiry* 3/3 (1977), 439–447.

¹⁸ Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 157.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 122–123.

²¹ Murakami, *Complete Works*, 11.

(1990), a new kind of ghost story by Murakami.²² We have no other way but calling this peculiar feeling uncanny.

At the same time, Freud's etymological investigation into the term has specific bearings on the current case. Citing Schelling, he states that *unheimlich*, "literally 'unhomely'" in German and translated into English as "uncanny," came to assume the same meaning with its presumed opposite, *heimlich*, as "something long known to us, once very familiar...that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light."²³ The Freudian uncanny recurs through "the process of repression."²⁴ As discussed above, however, repression does not have a role in the narrator's psychology. Instead, the uncanny arises extrinsically in the form of TV People. They take advantage of his underlying susceptibilities to impose themselves upon the narrator, because the medium they represent has been "long known" and "very familiar" to him despite his flat refusal to have it at home.

His affinity with TV partly comes from his office work in which he contributes to the further propagation of its influence. More importantly, like everyone else around him, he lives in the society that presupposes the TV's presence as an integral part of its system, and he is exposed to its dominance, whether he accepts it or not. He has become so familiarized with it as to internalize it. For instance, after coming back home from work and waiting for his wife's return, he fails to kill time effectively by deliberately reading the tedious newspaper more than once, and he cannot bring himself to write a letter, due now, declining attendance to his cousin's wedding. The indeterminate suspense of little motivation is typical of what the social norm prescribes as a kind of time to be spent on watching TV aimlessly for the sheer sake of letting time pass. Old-fashioned means, such as reading a novel or a newspaper, which he tries, fail him. Without consciously realizing what he needs but lacks, he misses a regular, functional device to watch. There is no wonder, then, that he has felt a strong fascination with the set from the beginning once TV People install it in his living room even though the machine does not show any recognizable content. The following evening,

²² See Matsuoka Kazuko 松岡和子, "Kyōfu no naka ni tenzai suru azayakana iro: Murakami Haruki cho 'TV pīpuru' 恐怖の中に点在する鮮やかな色: 村上春樹著「TV ピーブル」[The Bright Colors Interspersed in Fear: 'TV People' by Murakami Haruki]," *Murakami Haruki sutadōzu* 3 (1990), 285.

²³ Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 123–124, 124n, 130.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

however, he cannot even manage to activate the TV, although he tries multiple times with a remote control before it turns on by itself to show the TV representative on the screen.

Although unidentified as such, the representative first appears on the Sony color TV set that a team of three TV People carried around in the narrator's bleak dream of an office meeting. When he wakes up, he finds the same image gazing at him from the living room TV. The correspondence between dream and reality suggests TV People's successful infiltration, like "夢の尻尾 (the tail of a dream),"²⁵ not only into his private physical space but also into his subconscious. They are neither inhabitants of the dream sphere nor a projection of disturbed or repressed psychology upon reality. Instead, they "ought to have remained hidden and secret" behind the TV screen "and yet come to light" in daily life while getting discreetly internalized without resistance as "something...very familiar" and "long known" in the psychic space that they find congenial. This familiarity partly accounts for their unassertive kind of uncanniness.

TV People are instinctively familiar to the narrator because they, as simulacra, embody the sort of life that he and the other members of society live. By calling them by the *katakana* transcription of the English word, "ビープル (people)," which is highly unusual, if not impossible, in actual Japanese usage, he distinguishes them from humans from the very beginning. He thus considers these human lookalikes from the televisual sphere of artificial illusion alien, even somehow false in contrast to actual humans' existence. But the real as genuine can no longer be validly discriminated from the imaginary as false because simulation compromises the distinction between those binaries and brings forth amalgamated truth or reality as a result. As Baudrillard puts it regarding cartography, "[i]t is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: hyperreal," and TV, along with Disneyland, is the critic's favorite example of such "a hyperspace" in today's world. In other words, our epistemology faces "a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself," which constitutes "an operation to deter every real process by its operational double."²⁶ Emerging as human-like emissaries from the TV hyperspace to affect the external world, TV People function as a metaphor incarnate of "operational doubles."

²⁵ Murakami, *Complete Works*, 38.

²⁶ Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 169–170.

Though TV People appear like humans, their “効率よく (efficiently)” acted-out purposefulness along with the representative’s precisely regulated way of stepping down the stairs and his paper-thin voice devoid of intonation are more aligned with mechanical qualities.²⁷ This mechanical nature also accounts for the second source of TV People’s uncanny impression, not just for being affiliated with a machine but because, as agents of simulation, they operate to transmute the world into an extension of the televisual space. According to Baudrillard, simulation, by way of “any technical apparatus, which is always an apparatus of reproduction,” constitutes “the place of a gigantic enterprise of manipulation, of control and of death,” and he associates a resulting “anguish, a disquieting foreignness” and “uneasiness” with Walter Benjamin’s theory of the mirror-image.²⁸

Without transforming social reality, TV People manipulatively yet unnoticeably approximate it to the TV hyperspace through simulative reduction, thereby achieving the effect of reproduction that begins with their shrunk physique. To the extent that it hardly brings about any caution or attention on humans, their size is reduced, for “genetic miniaturization is the dimension of simulation,” and, theoretically, they “can be reproduced an indefinite number of times.”²⁹ Their reduced physical size not only defines their proper domain behind the small screen through which they emerge but also corresponds to the reductive way of thinking with which electronic media affects the viewer into accepting their information with little questioning. The process is well demonstrated toward the end of the story when the narrator challenges the TV representative about the shape of an object in the making. The large, black, strange machine on which the other two TV People are assiduously working looks like a “giant orange juicer” to him at first. As the unflustered representative stands next to him and talks as if coaxing a recalcitrant child, he soon accepts the representative’s absurd proposition of the object in question as an “airplane.” In this mindset, the

²⁷ Murakami, *Complete Works*, 22.

²⁸ Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” 185. See also Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, trans., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 32–33. Originally published in 1935.

²⁹ Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” 170.

narrator also comes to accept the subsequent comments made by the representative about his damaged marriage life and the wife's desertion without offering any voiced refutation.

The external reduction of the body turns out to be symptomatic of what undergoes inside mentally. As his intellectual capacity is reduced to merely "repeat" what the representative tells him, the narrator finds his palm smaller than usual. Other symptoms of reduction include the awareness of his very existence as "とてもすっぺら (very thin)" and his voice that gradually loses depth and human expressiveness like the representative's as he converses with the nonhuman counterpart that watches over his transformation.³⁰

In this way, TV People influence society in order to make it a copy of their own proper sphere without altering its distinct structure and detail. As a token of the simulatively copied world, the phonetically challenging, dissonant noises that the narrator hears in his living room the evening before, especially those of the large clock, prove not to be merely strange, isolated phenomena. Instead, these sounds reveal to be of the same nature as the mechanical noises coming from the huge machinery that the two factory workers are making on television. As these two noises alternate one after another as if mutually echoing from each side of the TV, the narrator begins losing humanity or facing imminent death. Those distorted noises he hears on early Sunday evenings, then, turn out to announce the opening of a passage into the other world of televisual simulacra, thus presaging an arrival of intruders, at once familiar and yet unknown, accompanied by a painless sensation of deep penetration into the brain.

The two sides acoustically correspond to each other, because the TV screen no longer imperviously demarcates the seemingly authentic, yet now compromised, reality from televisual simulation. Not hermetically delimited any more, the TV sphere exudes through the osmotic screen to produce an unpronounced, fundamental change outside in the form of TV People. In this sense, rather than supernatural, their presence proves to be that of the paranormal in Miller's terminology:

A thing in "para" is...not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary...[but] also the boundary itself, the screen which is...a permeable membrane connecting

³⁰ Murakami, *Complete Works*, 43.

inside and outside...dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other.³¹

TV People traverse the TV screen from the electronic realm to the tangible world of materials and vice versa without much difficulty. At the same time, the televisual space that appears three-dimensional in the apparatus behind the screen, in fact, presents itself nowhere else than on the screen's exposed surface two-dimensionally only when the device is in operation. In this sense, the very screen constitutes their presence, which explains why they never maneuver far away from a TV set, as first demonstrated in the narrator's living room. As for his office, including the reproduced one in his dream, the entire corporate space is solely aimed at designing and marketing such consumer electronic devices as the television for maximal profits, enabling TV People to move around at ease like proverbial fish in the water.

This paranormal nature thus prescribes their spatiotemporal presence. As the protagonist specifies at the beginning of his narration, it is the brief intermediary span of time, a temporal "permeable membrane connecting" day and night, when they first encroach on his living space; hence, he is fully aware that, for their infiltration, they deliberately choose "時刻の薄闇 (the twilight of time)" on a Sunday evening when he habitually lies paralyzed and vulnerable.³² On the way to his office on the ninth floor the following Monday morning, he encounters the TV representative walking down the "四階と五階の間の階段 (stairs between the fourth and fifth floors)."³³ As people rely on the elevator, the unused stairs functioning as a spatially "ambiguous transition" between two populated floors is one variation of Murakami's loci that often take the form of a hole to descend to a fabulous or extraordinary place, as illustrated by "*Doko de are sore ga mitsukarisōna basho de* どこであれそれが見つかりそうな場所で (Wherever I'm Likely to Find It)" (2005). In that short story, a Merrill Lynch trader, who also avoids using the elevator, has seemingly disappeared without a trace on the stairs between the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth floors of his high-rise "mansion" building. Another good example is the abandoned stairway that Aomame goes down from a congested highway to find her unintentional passage into a world with two moons, which she later terms 1Q84.

³¹ Miller, "The Critic as Host," 441.

³² Murakami, *Complete Works*, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

Central to Murakami's fiction is an intermediary space of paranormal nature, as the main character often seamlessly transitions through it from a world of normalcy to a new dimension with varying degrees of unfamiliarity. Other examples abound, such as *watashi's* entry through a ladder into Tokyo's subterranean world where insidious creatures, called Yamikuro, are lurking in *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. In *Killing Commendatore*, the narrating painter descends into the other world of "metaphors" via a hole that suddenly opens up on the floor of an older painter's sickroom where he is visiting.

This traversing is not one-directional, and not all the human figures, if fortunate, manage to come back after all. Many kinds of nonhumans also make the transition. For instance, an unidentified, slimy creature of malign nature "squirm[s] out of [dead] Nakata's mouth" before Hoshino succeeds in closing the opened path it seeks by turning a large, heavy stone in chapter 48 of *Umibe no Kafuka* 海辺のカフカ (*Kafka on the Shore*).³⁴ Similarly, the "ominous"-sounding "Little People" come out of the open mouth of a sleeping ten-year-old girl who has been severely abused sexually to the detriment of her mental and reproductive faculties in chapter 19 of *1Q84*.³⁵ In chapter 21 of *Killing Commendatore*, the eponymous character comes alive as a self-proclaimed "Idea" in the form of a reduced copy of one of the figures on a recently discovered painting, while another character from the same painting, who identifies himself as "a Metaphor, nothing more," pops out of the hole in the room of that dying old man who painted it in chapters 51 and 52.³⁶ Both these embodied "Idea" and "Metaphor" as well as the TV representative respectively belong to the compressed, intermediary plane field of a canvas or a TV screen, out of which they emerge.

The transitional space facilitates the traversing and lessens the expected impact of violation, which relates to the East-West difference that Murakami posits. The Western imagination sharply and inviolably separates

³⁴ Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. Philip Gabriel (New York: Vintage, 2005), 451–454. Originally published in 2002. See also Koyama Tetsuro and Yukawa Yutaka, "Murakami Haruki rongu intabyū: *Umibe no Kafuka wo kataru* 村上春樹ロング・インタビュー: 『海辺のカフカ』を語る [A Long Interview with Murakami Haruki on *Kafka on the Shore*]," *Bungakukai* 文学界 57/4 (2003), 10–42.

³⁵ Murakami, *1Q84*, 240, 249–250.

³⁶ Murakami, *Killing Commendatore*, 236, 550.

this familiar world of the living from the other, unknown counterpart, and the crossing, if any, entails inevitable friction and a great sense of infringement. In contrast, Japan and East Asia show a “unique kind of pre-modernity” in which reality and unreality coexist side by side and “traversing the border this way or that is natural and smooth, depending on the situation.”³⁷ He ascribes the unreal elements of his fiction in general to this traditional East Asian sensitivity to traversable duality. A device that makes the passage hardly laborious and remarkable, if not quite “natural and smooth,” therefore functions in his literature as an intermediary space between two worlds.

Accordingly, even when one of the alien TV People comes out of the TV set, the action only requires on the representative’s part the same amount of physical exertion as going through just a regular, somewhat narrow opening like a window rather than forcibly trespassing upon another dimension. On his part, as if hypnotized, the narrator does not make any reaction or express any horror. It follows that Murakami here is interested in TV not necessarily as a piece of technology per se but as a pathway from another world, and TV People prove to be paranormal rather than supernatural by nature, and more “[t]elevisual virtual images” than “cyborgs, computer simulations or AI...creations.”³⁸ Assimilated into the reality that television as a dominant medium of information, saturated and simulated, their presence is already considered familiar even if no one has seen them materialize before. That sense of uncalled-for, unacknowledged familiarity causes the narrator an unaccountable uneasiness that verges on the uncanny.

What fundamentally renders them uncanny, however, is their ability to transfuse themselves into the human psyche, take over the mind, and dismantle the self in the process. At the end of the story, the self disintegrates as a result of the substantial influence from media. The Western philosophical speculation in the last four centuries has placed primal emphasis on the solidified consciousness of one’s own interiority as irreplaceably unique, independently contained, and sharply contrasted to social exteriority as an individual entity. The construction of the self was posited as a project of increasing importance since Descartes and the Enlightenment, culminating in the apparent actualization with modernity. Now, as Fredric Jameson notes

³⁷ Koyama and Yukawa, *A Long Interview*, 13–14, 16, 38–39.

³⁸ Monnet, “Televisual Retrofutures,” 346.

as "one of the fashionable themes in contemporary theory," the "formerly centered subject or psyche" is considered "*decentering*" in postmodernity.³⁹

This "disappearance of the individual subject,"⁴⁰ therefore, was happening as the sense of the self almost established the status of a given while its basis was eroded through modernization, or more specifically, technological advance for reproducibility, the side effects of which concern Benjamin's main tenet. His interest pertains to the greatly enhanced technology of reproduction in the early twentieth century and its profound implications on artistic practice and sociopolitical reality. He discusses the "authenticity" or the "aura" of an artifact as its "core," arguing that "the destruction" thereof "is the signature of a perception" that "by means of reproduction...extracts sameness even from what is unique."⁴¹ Abundant copies that the technology of reproducibility made readily available began to cripple the artistic "authenticity" when most urban inhabitants already "relinquish[ed] their humanity in the face of an apparatus."⁴² If we treat the self as an intellectual construct with "authenticity," the underlying analogy is obvious.

The constructed self was even more precarious in Japan's modernity that was hastily imported and implemented in a matter of half a century. Self was an ill-fit covering imposed on the Japanese psyche whose orientation was traditionally communal. The resulting conflict is evident, for instance, in *Kokoro* こゝろ (1914) by Natsume Soseki 夏目漱石 (1867–1916) with the nation hovering on the threshold into full modernity at the end of the Meiji Period. Of particular interest in this context is *Tomodachi* 友達 (*Friends*) (1967) by Abe Kobo 安部公房 (1924–1993) that came out more than two decades after World War II when individualism supposedly took root on the adoptive soil. A nine-membered, three-generational family without kinship to the protagonist suddenly impose themselves on him and takes over his private living space, claiming that the solitary figure needs their surrogate companionship. Incarcerated in his apartment, he eventually dies thanks to the "comfort" they provide against his will. The play offers an ironic social commentary on the majority principle of the constitutionally implemented,

³⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴¹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 22–24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 31.

post-war democratic regime.⁴³ More importantly, Abe exposes the fragile basis of individuality in mid-twentieth-century Japan, where the crafted selfhood remained fragile and vulnerable to the binding force of a communal entity of the family.

Conclusion

In the next few decades, the unstable status of the self did not change, while the communal cohesion that once suppressed individualistic assertion diminished mainly through structural disintegration of the family system from multigenerational to nucleus, and often to even smaller social units. The comparison with Abe's *Friends* reveals that, by the time "TV People" was written, the individual has lost meaningful contact with the rest of the society, including its own immediate relatives, through the social restructuring. Without the familial bond that used to define and sustain a person's social identity, the self is left on its own. In place of a socioculturally hereditary system, what approaches and appropriates the now exposed, isolated, and not fully developed self is electronic media, more specifically TV in this case, to fill the widening relational gap among humans with a pervasively overflowing amount of information.

It follows that Murakami's short story illustrates the process of the dismantlement of the self as a construct of modernity. By definition, the self is supposed to have its solid agency, yet its foundation does not stand very certain as it remains unguardedly susceptible to influences from new inventions of telecommunication for reproducibility and simulation. In this story, the ambiguous ending with external signs of two alternative outcomes to the protagonist, physical petrification or metamorphosis into a nonhuman form, alludes to what is happening internally. The self is not only dismantled to the death of humanness but also reintegrated as one of the simulated "depthless...postmodern subjectivities" of the television system.⁴⁴ Hence, the psychic shell becomes an internal "permeable membrane" to allow and identify with the televisual infusion. That is the ultimate source of the uncanny that the narrator feels upon encountering TV People as they

⁴³ Kuritsubo, "TV People the Intruders," 274–275, 284, discusses the same situation in Abe Kobo's short story, "*Chinnyūsha* 闖入者 [Intruders]" (1951), which is a prototypical text for the play, in terms of the majority principle and an individual's alienation.

⁴⁴ Monnet, "Televisual Retrofutures," 351.

paranormally interpenetrate first through the TV screen, then further into the self, which they find readily transmutable to their simulative image manipulation.

As their identically copied appearance indicates, their human-like form is a temporary result of the necessity to insert themselves into the physical world. Coming from the electronic realm, these beings originate in the TV screen's "白い光、ノイズ (white light, noise)" out of which the representative emerges.⁴⁵ In essence, the televisual system seeks to place isolated individuals collectively under its control. If it achieves the aim, the content of broadcast information does not matter. Therefore, the white noise, stands for the ultimate form of enthrallment of human viewers, as this happens to the narrator as well.⁴⁶ His initial interest in the new TV's blank screen lasts less than half a minute. Later in the middle of that night, he finds himself gazing at the white light with static noise for a longer time. Finally, the following evening, he gets frustrated with the TV that fails to turn on despite his many attempts to the extent that he misses the white noise, signaling his readiness for incorporation into the system just before the representative's embodied emergence.

Murakami leaves certain aspects of the story untold or unexplained. First, while TV People function as manifested agents of the TV system that encroaches on the human psyche, it is not mentioned who or what organization operates them at the center of the system. Second, it is also not clear at what point of time, in what situation, and for what reason the narrator tells his story to the reader. The first question pertains to many of his stories. Indicative of the insidious nature of the postmodern society in which the center of power stays obscure and unidentifiable, those stories do not ascribe the source of manipulation to a single individual, organization, or a cluster of them. Even when those entities are named, such as the star-marked sheep in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the Calcutecs in *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, and Wataya Noboru in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, among others, they are not presented as "the" villain(s) whose immediate removal alone would solve the problem. Instead, these elusive figures are always suggestive of the larger machination that stays behind and unspecifiable

⁴⁵ Murakami, *Complete Works*, 25.

⁴⁶ This reference recalls the postmodern novel by Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1984).

while infusing them with an unmitigated, malevolent will to power,⁴⁷ and its effect goes far beyond mere surveillance as “TV People” illustrates.⁴⁸

As for the second question, the protagonist’s narration in past tenses places the story’s formation after its ending. On the one hand, this makes it awkward for him to be telling his personal account after he has lost his existence as a human being. On the other hand, he offers a narrative of what has transpired to him without critiquing at all how adroitly TV People infringed on his life, which is compatible with his post-human phase. These considerations altogether make it clear again that, while somewhat concerned about a broader aspect of postmodernity, this short story primarily focuses on the fundamental effect of electronic media on humanity in the reductive form of terminal functionaries. They are pervious not only to the TV screen but also to the human psyche, effectually altering and appropriating people’s critical thinking, free will, and emotions that should render them human. Without being didactic, Murakami wrote a cautionary story about too much dependence on the television system. Three decades after the publication, however, the text increasingly seems to have foreshadowed humanity’s current predicament in which far more advanced, pervasive media has profoundly affected our society.

⁴⁷ What Ebisuno in *IQ84* states about Little People is suggestive in this context because Little People approximate TV People in several respects. According to him, in place of George Orwell’s Big Brother who as an easily detectable figure has “no longer any place...in this real world of ours” (Murakami, *IQ84*, 236), the unidentifiable Little People have appeared.

⁴⁸ In this sense, rather than such phrases as “colonized...reality,” “imperialistic...visuality,” and “[d]ictatorship” that suggest a source of power, Monnet’s mention of “a totalitarian and oppressive, if diffused vision” seems more appropriate to “TV People” (Monnet, “Televisual Retrofutures,” 346, 348, 351, 353).