

*Consumerism and Possibility of an Authentic Self in Murakami Haruki's Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*

Burcu Genc, University of Tokyo, Japan

The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2015  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

With a reference to Jean Baudrillard's theory of consumerism embedded in his scrutiny of power, this paper investigates the possibilities of an authentic self in Haruki Murakami's *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* within the context of Japanese consumerism in 1970s and early 1980s. By alluding to the Baudrillardian discourse, I argue that the protagonist's choice to abandon his shadow at the very end of the novel is closely linked with his attempt to find an authentic self: in other words, an attempt to liberate himself from the power consumerism exerts on him.

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

'Consumerism' is a relatively recent term coined at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest definition provided in OED is "interests of consumers". However, this study avails itself of the contemporary definition formulated in the second half of the century:

"(excessive) preoccupation with the acquisition of consumer goods", as OED defines. Despite its contemporariness, the desire to attain consumer goods, particularly luxury goods, pre-exists the term itself. For instance, the fourth chapter of *Theory of Leisure Class* written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Thorstein Veblen (1992) describes consumption as the acquisition of luxury goods to gain prestige:

"the utility of consumption as an evidence of wealth is to be classed as a derivative growth. It is an adaption to a new end, by a selective process, of a distinction previously existing and well established in men's habits of thought"(p. 1). Evidently, Veblen's definition of 'consumption' primarily pursues a conscious purchase process in order for individuals to fashion themselves in a certain way in their societies. Since consumption is as a result of consumer's careful choice regarding his/her appearances and social relations, it is also simultaneously grounded on the determinate conditions regulating the individual's position in the social hierarchy:

in other words, the antagonism of the elite, middle and working classes. Yet, contemporary 'consumerism' or acquisition of consumer goods entails broader connotations as in Jean Baudrillard's exhaustive work, *The Consumer Society*:

*Myths and Structures*. In its introduction, George Ritzer (1998) highlights two crucial differences:

first is Baudrillard's rejection of Veblen's concern with imitation and prestige as a conscious social process. "Instead, Baudrillard argues for the study of the signs, structural relations, the code and, more generally, unconscious social logic" (Ritzer, 1998, p. 6). Second, "Baudrillard seeks to extend consumption from goods not only to services, but to virtually everything else" (Ritzer, 1998, p. 15), including technology, arts and aesthetics, leisure, and history etc. In this larger scene, he explores how consumer objects and their signification processes form our daily life, and in the long run the self.

Baudrillard (1998), who defines consumption not as "... individual function of interest across a corpus of objects ... but the immediately social function of exchange, of communication, of distribution of values across a corpus of signs" (p. 78) in *The Consumer Society*:

*Myths and Structures*, thus separates himself from the 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse of consumption. Rather, he seems to derive his definition of consumption from his examination of Foucault's description of power as a non-representational entity:

"... power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength that we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault, 1990, p. 93).

Although Baudrillard's non-representational definition of consumption seems to be closely associated with Foucault's interpretation of power, two distinctively crucial aspects nourish his examination of consumerism implanted in his understanding of power. First, Foucauldian discourse does not dismiss the determinate conditions or antagonistic forces such as production and consumption, terrorist and hostage, or the wealthy and the poor and so on. Foucault considers such determinate conditions existing on the level of the real. Under these determinate conditions, resistance, he explains, is equally achievable with a meticulous scheme:

"... as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power

we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy" (Foucault, 1988, p. 123). Baudrillard (2012), quite the contrary, claims that antagonistic forces or determinate conditions are nullified within a vicious cycle of signification in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*

there is still an illusion in thinking that the capitalist system, at a certain threshold of increased reproduction, passes irreversibly from a strategy of shortage to a strategy of abundance. The current crisis proves that this strategy is reversible. The illusion still comes from a naïve faith in a *reality* of shortage or a *reality* of abundance, and therefore from the illusion of a real opposition between these two terms. (p. 33)

Second, highly pertinent to reversibility of the antagonistic forces, Baudrillard (2012) observes a discontinuity concerning the political economy and referential reason between the period before and after the Second World War. For instance, he assesses the 1929 crisis, "... resolved by regulating demand in an endless exchange of finalities between production and consumption" (p. 33) as a real one resulting from social limitations of consumption. Conversely, the preventative action against a possible shortage, he asserts, precedes the real one today. More precisely, reversible shortage and abundance, under an illusionary antagonism, duplicates society in a Marxist model "... in order the better to mask the system's real law and the possibility of its symbolic destruction" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 31). Therefore, in a society circumscribed by such a mask, "... social function and social organization far surpass individuals and impose themselves upon them by way of an unconscious social constraint ..." (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 78).

Baudrillardian consumerism, as such expounded above, can be regarded as relevant to analyse Murakami's works. This relevance has already been pointed out by a prominent Murakami critic, Matthew Strecher in *Dances with the Sheep*:

*The Quest for Identity in the Works of Murakami Haruki* (2002) and *The Forbidden Worlds of Murakami Haruki* (2014). Yet, it is Michael Seats (2006), who elucidates on the pertinence between Murakami and Baudrillard in greater detail in *Murakami Haruki*:

*The Simulacrum in Contemporary Japanese Society*. In addition, as much as it is possible to detect evidence among the Western critics of Murakami, independent Japanese scholar Chiyoko Kawakami (2002) frequently refers to Baudrillard in her article titled, "The Unfinished Cartography:

Murakami Haruki and the Postmodern Cognitive Map”. These three critics seem to be of the same opinion regarding how the protagonist is usually gripped by a series of events and finds himself in the middle of a journey. More crucially, they ultimately interpret this journey as a self-odyssey in association with their particular analysis of Baudrillardian discourse. As a matter of fact, quintessentially Harukist protagonists not so infrequently find themselves involved in a quest such as a search for a sheep or Toru Okuda’s struggle to get his wife back as in *A Wild Sheep Chase* (2000) and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1999) respectively. And such long yet eventful expeditions, ushered in as a result of a solid and concrete objective, equally manifest themselves to be a self-odyssey, in which the protagonist is embroiled in a struggle regarding the self as against the social norms shaped by consumerist policies and ideologies of the political economy.

Similarly, *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, one of Murakami’s early works, can be interpreted as a self-odyssey. As the title suggests, it has two distinct storylines:

one is the hard-boiled land set in a futuristic urban Tokyo converted into a centre of high information technology. In this high-tech urban setting there are workers called ‘calcutecs’ serving a quasi-governmental institution named ‘the System’ by processing and encrypting data through their subconscious. The narrator is a certain nameless ‘calcutec’ only known by his profession and consumption habits. The narrator, as a result of an experiment carried out on him, finds himself in a convoluted state of affairs, which pave the way for his self-odyssey. The second narrative is the end of the world or the Town as frequently referred by its inhabitants. Impenetrable walls surround the Town and inhabitants have to leave their shadows behind upon entering. The life is contrarily idyllic and its inhabitants perform jobs that do not really require any high technology. In this storyline, the narrator’s self-odyssey continues and as a dream-reader, he tries to make sense of the Town in order to understand significance of his existence in this place.

The nameless narrator of the hard-boiled, in line with the above-mentioned Baudrillardian discourse and the consumer habits of 1970s and early 1980s in Japan, can be regarded as a typical consumer, only known through his profession and consumption habits. He serves to the system both through his labour and seemingly non-labour activities. Any system such as political economy or arts, Baudrillard underlines, is deprived of antagonistic forces cancelling one another. Likewise, non-labour time also does not manifest itself as an opposition to the labour time. Rather, it establishes itself as the allotted span bought through one’s wage and the individual is

“... given a wage, not in exchange for labour, but so that you spend it, which is itself another kind of labour” (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 41). Thus, so long as “

...the system is charged with neutralising the symbolic retaliation *by buying it back through wages*” (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 41), its domination over the individual never ceases to be. By resembling his each ordinary day out to that of “a squirrel in November, with mounds of little things” (Murakami, 2003, p. 71), the narrator of the hard-boiled land reveals himself as a good exemplary of such domination:

At eleven o’clock, I left the apartment, headed for the supermarket near the station,

stopping next at the liquor store for some red wine, soda water, and orange juice . . . Then to the bookshop for two magazines, the electrical goods store for light bulbs and cassette tapes, the photo store for a pack of Polaroid film. Last, it was the record shop, where I picked out few disks. By now, the whole back seat of my tiny coupé was taken up with shopping bags. (Murakami, 2003, p. 71)

The narrator's depiction of his daily shopping experience might at first seem as indiscriminate choices. However, when his justification of buying a car is taken into account together with his postulate about the sofa in the old man's room, it also becomes palpable to what extent his consumption habits are in line with two significant concepts shaping the advertisements and shopping habits of consumers in the post-war miracle years:

rationalisation and status of life style. Regarding the topic, “. . . in the post-war and miracle years the purchase of new goods – a large proportion of them electrical consumer durables – could be based on their functionality and ‘rationality’, [and] by the 1980s Western-style furnishings had become more a matter of status and lifestyle choice”, Penelope Francks (2009) writes in “New Tribes and Nostalgia:

Consumption in the Late Twentieth Century and Beyond” (p. 201).

The narrator, as a typical consumer of his day as portrayed by Francks, seems to be balancing these two concepts, rationalisation of goods and goods as a sign of status and life style. This born shopper chooses his car on its functionality:

“I only wanted a car for shopping” (Murakami, 2003, p. 72). Although the functionality is ironically grounded on a justification for his excessive shopping – a sort of rationalisation open to discussion, a car certainly makes shopping easier. As much as he rationalises his consumption habits, the narrator equally finds evidence of life style philosophy essential:

“Procuring a good sofa . . . requires style and experience and philosophy. It takes money, yes, but you also need a vision of the superior sofa. That sofa among sofas” (Murakami, 2003, p. 45). Therefore, when Junior and the Big Boy smash everything in his ‘cosy and tasteful’ house, the scene yields to the example of the Kwakiutl's potlatch, “competitive destruction of precious goods which sets the seal on social organization” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 43). This is because, as Baudrillard claims, the value of objects in consumer societies lies in their destruction as much as it does in their accumulation. The destruction and accumulation of objects are of an indistinguishable effect, prompting the very same consequence – that is to say, “tell me what you throw away and I'll tell you who you are” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 42). Correspondingly, the calcutec revels in how his apartment, a symbol of his life style and status, is being destructed:

“Big Boy was bringing *a new meaning* to the word destruction in *my cosy, tasteful apartment* (my emphasis). I pulled another can of beer out of the refrigerator and sat back to watch the fireworks” (Murakami, 2003, p. 142).

As much as the narrator is under the sway of the system as a typical consumer, he is equally controlled by the same system as a labour force. This is because, as

Baudrillard (2012) puts it, “a man must die to become labour power. He converts this death into a wage. But the economic violence capital inflicted on him in the equivalence of the wage and labour power is nothing next to the symbolic violence inflicted on him by his definition as a productive force” (p. 39). In other words, the system robs the individual of any other value and reduces him/her only to productive force while the difference between his labour and non-labour activities are concurrently being negated. In similar fashion, the narrator as a *calcutec*, although he can gain access to wide range of information, is only permitted to receive and decode it in line with the System’s needs and purposes.

Moreover, depending on the type of data encryption, he can even be driven into the position of a mere container as in the case of ‘shuffling’. He describes it as “... nothing I can pride myself on. I am merely a vessel to be used. My consciousness is borrowed and something is processed while I’m unaware. I hardly feel I can be called a *Calcutec* when it comes to shuffling” (Murakami, 2003, p. 115). Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the narrator can claim his labour, whose productive results are denied to him, only through his wage and consumption habits. Moreover, the fact that he “can only follow the prescribed order of business” and “despite the meddling and raised eyebrows at the System”, the narrator knows “no line of work that allows the individual as much freedom to exercise his abilities as being a *Calcutec*” (Murakami, 2003, p. 115). While this further demonstrates the impossibility of an authentic self in the hard-boiled land, the narrator’s physical death, as a result of an experiment carried out on him, ironically highlights him more as a dead labour, from which he is alienated.

The Town, where power of consumerism is also superimposed on the narrator, can equally be accounted an aspect of 1970s and early 1980s consumer culture, particularly in connection with the Japan railways ‘Discover Japan’ project. In her thorough article, “Formations of Mass Culture”, Marilyn Ivy (1993) expounds on ‘Discover Japan’, an outcome of concentration on nature and self-reflection after Nixon and oil shock exposing the fragility of Japanese economy, as the most extensive project in Japanese history. The most significant result, according to Ivy, was that such a large-scale project “reorganized the entire cultural topography of Japan according to a continuum of “tradition” and “modernity”” (p. 252). The outcomes of the project are very crucial because its launch coincides with the Nixon and oil shock, a period that indicated a possible shortage after the affluence of post-war miracle years. From the Baudrillardian point of view, such simultaneity is closely linked with a need of shortages as a result of mythic accumulation of production and labour:

“Capital, to avoid the risk of bursting from these liquefied values, thus becomes nostalgic” (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 32) In other words, it seems that a turn towards nature as a result of excessive accumulation of wealth and production became necessary to reverse the possible negative effects of this excess after the Nixon shock. “Hence ecology, where the danger of absolute scarcity reinstates an ethic of energy conservation” (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 32) becomes the solution in the form of the ‘Town’ after the attack of inklings. In this sense, seemingly hostile inklings, a destructive force causing shortage through data erasure, indeed work towards the benefits of the System:

“it’s a strategic move... the government doesn’t mind INKlings and INKlings doesn’t mind the government” (Murakami, 2003, p. 138). Therefore, the attack of inklings, interpreted as cooperation with the System, together with narrator’s death evokes a yearning for nature and past by marking the end of hard-boiled land.

Contrary to the very high-tech and urban depiction of hard-boiled land, the narration of the Town – following both Ivy’s and Baudrillard’s arguments – begins with a referral to a sphere strictly outside the urban:

“this is the time when instinct compels the males to clash—after they have shed their winter coats, a week before the females bear young. They become so fierce, wounding each other viciously ...” (Murakami, 2003, p. 17). Yet, allusion to nature is not the sole aspect categorising the Town as a domain outside the modern. Time can be treated as another major element disassociating it from the modern or hard-boiled land. The depiction of fight among golden beasts for the female – being repeated at a certain season each year – is a reminder of the cyclical time, a notion of time analogous with the past and nature. In addition, the clock tower, a product of industrialisation and symbol of modernity, fails to function in the Town:

“the clock has long forfeited its original role as a timepiece” (Murakami, 2003, p. 38). The narrator of the Town, as revealed towards the end of the novel, is the calcutec of the hard-boiled land and thus he can be taken for the domestic urban traveller in the Town portrayed as against the hard-boiled land.

On account of having a living shadow, the narrator distinguishes himself from the inhabitants and fulfils the role of newcomer/non-member in a group. The narrator’s existence in the Town as a newcomer/non-member conforms to the primary principle of tourism/travel warranting a destination outside home. Following this primary principle, all journeys, despite the destination and length of the stay, presuppose going eventually back home. Thus, the shadow not so surprisingly encourages the narrator to escape the Town as it simultaneously resorts to the discourse of “us” and “them”:

“We’re the ones who are right. They are the ones who are wrong absolutely” (p. 248). In addition, John Clammer discusses in “Sites and Sights:

The Consuming Eye and the Arts of the Imagination in Japanese Tourism” that it was not so infrequent among Japanese domestic tourists to visit a rural town as they experienced the natural life at once. In such trips “one can visit the countryside, stay in a traditional inn, eat wholly natural foods ...” (Clammer, 1997, p. 150). Similarly, the narrator like the domestic tourist Clammer mentions stays in the Town and experiences the life as its inhabitants live. He consumes the food different than what he is used to:

“The food here is different than elsewhere. We only use a few basic ingredients. What resembles meat is not. What resembles egg is not ... Everything is made in the image of something” (Murakami 224).

According to Clammer (1997), domestic trips to rural areas not only promoted the economic growth but also led to “... a dual activity of construction:

identity construction on the part of tourists and of the construction of the countryside on the part of urbanites with the complicity of the ruralities” (p.150). Through his dream reading job and experience of Town life, the narrator tries to understand not only the peculiarities of the Town but also the meaning of his own existence. Although the narrator acknowledges that it makes more sense to go back to his former world as a travel necessitates an end by going home, he feels that the Town is a key to his existence and decides to stay:

“I have discovered something that involves me here more than I could have thought” (Murakami, 2003, p. 398). The narrator’s wish to stay implies a deviation from the standards ‘Discover Japan’ project aimed at. The project “... targeted Japanese desires for a simpler rural past, yet its recuperation of that past indicated all the more clearly the difficulty of escaping the managed society of the 1970s” (Ivy, 1993, p. 252). In other words, ‘Discover Japan’ was a project intended to evoke a sense of past and nostalgia not as a result of the traveller’s independent experience, but rather as “... a system which secures the ordering of signs and the integration of the group ...” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 78). As a natural consequence of a pre-decided experience, “the whole recent ecological turn ... [is] no longer a crisis of overproduction as in 1929 – of the involution of the system, recycling its identity” (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 32), as in the case of ‘Discover Japan’ project. Therefore, the narrator’s decision to abandon his shadow and stay in the Town, in order to find an authentic self through his own unique and independent experience, can be regarded as an attempt to set himself free from the limits consumer society exerts on him.

The narrator, who tries to learn about the Town as much as possible in order to reunite with his shadow and plan an escape together, contrarily decides to stay in the Town at the very end. As opposed to his life in hard-boiled land, where he renders up everything and emerges only as productive force aligning with the system and its needs, the narrator finds unexpectedly something fundamental to his existence in the Town. Yet, he does not try to persuade his shadow to stay together with him. The shadow, who makes a clear distinction between the narrator and the inhabitants of the Town, seems to belong to the hard-boiled land rather than the Town. With an adoption of an invidious approach to the inhabitants of the Town and its attempt to urge the narrator to leave the Town, the shadow seems to be a part of the System like the inklings are. Therefore, as much as narrator’s experience and self are shaped by the pre-decided consumption patterns in the hard-boiled, so long as his shadow remains attached to him, there is no actual freedom as a domestic traveller in the Town, either. Under such circumstances, detachment from the shadow becomes a means of escaping the managed society Baudrillard talks of, as well as an emancipation of the self. In this way, the narrator hopes to recover an authentic self although he is not certain himself whether such a deed is within the reach of possibility.

## References

- Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. C. Turner (Trans.). London: Sage Publications.
- Baudrillard, J. (2012). *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. I. H. Grant (Trans.). London: Sage Publications.
- Clammer, J. (1997). Sites and sights: the consuming eye and the arts of the imagination in Japanese tourism. *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption* (pp. ). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*. L. Kritzman (Ed.). A. Sheridan (Trans.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of Sexuality* (Vol. 1). R. Hurley (Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Francks, P. (2009). New tribes and nostalgia: consumption in the late twentieth Century and beyond. *The Japanese Consumer: An Alternative Economic History of Modern Japan* (pp. ). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ivy, M. (1993). Formations of mass culture". *Postwar Japan as History* (pp. ). A. Gordon (Ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Kawakami, C. (2002). The unfinished cartography: Murakami Haruki and the postmodern cognitive map. *Monumenta Nipponica*. 37(3), 309-337. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3096769>
- Murakami, H. (1999). *The wind-up bird chronicle*. J. Rubin (Trans.). London: Harvill Press.
- Murakami, H. (2000). *A wild sheep chase*. A. Birnbaum (Trans.). London: Harvill Press.
- Murakami, H. (2003). *Hard boiled wonderland and the end of the world*. A. Birnbaum (Trans.). London: Vintage.
- Ritzer, G. (1998). Introduction. In J. Baudrillard. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (pp. ). C. Turner (Trans.). London: Sage Publications.
- Seats, M. (2006). *Murakami Haruki: the simulacrum in the contemporary Japanese society*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Strecher, C. M. (2002). *Dances with the sheep: the quest for identity in Murakami Haruki*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan.
- Strecher, C. M. (2014). *The forbidden worlds of Murakami Haruki*. Location: University of Minnesota Press.

Veblen, T. (1992). *The Theory of Leisure Class*. London: Transaction Publishers.  
Consumerism. (n.d.). In Oxford English dictionary online. Retrieved from  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39979?redirectedFrom=consumerism&>