

# Loneliness as the New Human Condition in Murakami Ryū's *In za miso sūpu*: Otaku-ness, space, violence and sexuality

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## Abstract

*This article analyses how loneliness is depicted as a diagnosis of the time in Murakami Ryū's (born 1952) hard-boiled novel In za miso sūpu (In the miso soup). Three conceptualisations of loneliness are hermeneutically analysed to show how loneliness is narrated and contextualised. As the analysis reveals, loneliness functions as an utterance of crisis experiences and of perceived insecurities and highlights socio-psychological phenomena considered characteristic of 1990s Japan.*

**Keywords:** Japanese literature; Heisei literature; loneliness; Murakami Ryū; Kabuki-chō; Tokyo; otaku

## **On Loneliness in Early Heisei Japan**

Until the 1990s, contemporary Japan was considered to be characterised by continuous economic growth. For a large number of people in Japan, economic strength enabled improvements in their living conditions, mass consumption and upward mobility. Accordingly, for many decades a narrative of progress through growth and a general middle-class consciousness (*sōchūryū ishiki*) were dominant. However, the assumption of a large middle class in Japan—behind which social and gender inequalities always already existed—was considered a guarantor of political and social stability (**Schad-Seifert, 2007: 105–106**).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the self-image of Japan as a middle-class society has been shaken and a sense of crisis began to sediment into the collective consciousness. The bursting of the Japanese bubble economy and the long-lasting economic recession that followed contributed significantly to it. Due to the dissolution of certainties long considered guaranteed the Japanese contemporary period is perceived as a (ongoing) state of uncertainty. The—at times—overburdening uncertainty and an increasing desideratum for adjustment culminate in stagnation.

With regard to growing socio-economic differences in contemporary Japan, in the late 1990s the term ‘*kakusa shakai*’ emerged in the Japanese economics and sociology and was also widely adopted in non-Japanese research on Japan. It refers to the social decline of large parts of the population, the individual perception of crisis, and thus increasing social inequality (see **Allison, 2013; Baldwin & Allison, 2015, Chiavacci & Hommerich, 2016; Goodman et al., 2012; Oguma, 1995; Schad-Seifert, 2007; Zielenziger, 2007**). A sense of uncertainty and differences was further reinforced by (1) an increasing pressure of globalisation; (2) multiple traumatic shocks, such as the poison gas attack by Aum Shinrikyō in the Tokyo underground (1995), the Kōbe earthquake (1995) and the triple disaster in Tōhoku (2011); and (3) demographic change that is the direct consequence of Japan being considered the world's first super aged society since 2005 (according to the United Nations definition) and at the same time facing a significant decline in births. Socio-economic differences intertwined with various further differences—such as gender, sexuality, and urban-rural disparities—and display an enormous impact on the socio-cultural climate.

The literature of Heisei Japan (1989–2019) is considered to reflect on these differences, on uncertainties and on multiple experiences of crisis. The highly heterogeneous Heisei literature is characterised, inter alia, by variously expressed feelings of unease, boredom and loneliness, the emergence of a new literature of the precarious, an increased emphasis on transgressions (ekkyōsei) and global orientation (Gebhardt, 2010; Gebhardt et al., 2019; Iwata-Weickgenannt & Rosenbaum, 2014; Kawamura, 2009; Tan, 2019; Urata, 2015). Countless works tell of characters who are drawn as deviating from the norm. These deviations range from anti-social behaviour, via postponed adulthood, to self-injurious practices, avoidance of interpersonal interactions, and to highly peculiar patterns of behaviour and thought. The radicalness with which these characters are depicted is notable, as it can be read as an expression of unease and coincides with a refusal to conform. In this they point directly to the world into which they are placed, as well as to its nature and structures. The literary critic Urata thus notes that not only has literature and the interest in literature changed thoroughly, but that the world in which literature is created has also undergone a fundamental transformation:

*Since the beginning of the Heisei era, the interest in literature seems to have changed drastically: Creole culture, which reflects a multitude of racial and ethnic groups, has come into the limelight, and cross-border literature, which reflects the borderlessness of exile, refuge and migration, has attracted attention. As symbolised by the fall of the Berlin wall, the Cold War has imploded and the world map has changed drastically. At the same time, the phenomenon of economic globalisation has accelerated the movement of people across borders. There has also been an increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees as a result of regional conflicts and the spread of terrorism. In addition, people from all over the world are increasingly enjoying cross-border travel. (Urata, 2015: 338)*

Further, literary depictions of contemporary Japan published during the 1990s are overshadowed by the economic crisis and the traumatic experiences of 1995. They reflect on that decade's disillusionment and promote loneliness as their leitmotif. In Japan, too, loneliness evolved into being a key issue in literature and culture—at least since the modern era (i.e. since the second half of the 19th century)—, and likewise is crucial to scholarly and general discourse (Fleischer-Heininger & Schulz, 2020: 337–42). As modernity is closely linked to several manifestations of social disintegration—such as urbanization, domestic migration, and the erosion of families and communities—that are most visible in times perceived as caesuras and characterised by various transformations and crises, it is not at all surprising that in Heisei Japan a new boom in loneliness is on the

horizon. Allison, thus, even describes various forms of loneliness as the 'new human condition for Japan/ese in the 21st century' (Allison, 2012: 349). Loneliness now increasingly appears as an overall social phenomenon that leaves no area of life and no field of interpersonal interaction untouched. It is no longer limited to certain processes (such as modernisation from the second half of the 19th century onwards) or social groups (such as the elderly, since the post-war period), but appears to be universalised. Loneliness is revealed as part of a reality of life to which not only everyone can relate, but also as a cross-linking of various developments and manifestations of late modernity.

I argue that in the hard-boiled novel *In za miso sūpu* (1997, trans. *In the miso soup*, 2003) by Murakami Ryū (born 1952) loneliness functions as a diagnosis of the time. By analysing motifs and content I aim to investigate how loneliness that is omnipresent in contemporary Japan and its literature in *In za miso sūpu* serves to negotiate recent tendencies and deficits of early Heisei Japan. I analyse three conceptualisations of loneliness that might be considered both representative of Heisei period literature and central to the novel and its analysis. I look at how the clichéd image of an otaku—a Japanese-style nerd—is created to gain entry into the subculture of Tokyo's nightlife, to—as a character who does not conform to social normativity and has to be considered a figure of the social-cultural margins—discuss the 'other' in the 'own' and to display deficiencies in contemporary Japan. I examine places as major constituents of identities (as a sense of belonging) and as symbols of a nostalgic longing to the past which in itself states insecurity and loneliness of contemporary Japan. Finally, I analyse how drastic and at times exaggerated depictions of violence and sexuality are operationalised as expressions of alienation, existential threatening and a loneliness contingent on underlying social structures.

### **Murakami Ryū's *In za miso sūpu* and Early Heisei Japan**

Murakami Ryū is one of the most provocative and polarizing writers of contemporary Japan. His fiction constantly oscillates between the conventions of the 'bundan' (i.e. the literary world that as an informal network of writers, literary critics and publishers, etc. exerts a decisive influence on the success of works and (up-and-coming) authors, especially of 'high literature') and the escapism of popular literature. Right from the beginning of his literary career, Murakami's books were bestsellers and won him numerous awards. His first novel *Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū* (1976, trans. *Almost Transparent Blue*, 1977)—a harsh critique 'on the overdetermined power relations between Japan and the United States' (Inoue, 2016: 155)—was awarded the most prestigious prize for 'high literature', the Akutagawa Prize. Then again, as editor of his own email

magazine Japan Mail Media (JMM), as (co)host of several television shows and as producer of music and ebooks (Murakami Ryū denshibon seisakusho, since 2013) he bypassed the rules of Japan's literary mainstream. In this sense, Murakami is to be seen as a pioneer of a literature that does not conform to attributions and that appears as prototypical for the eclecticism and the border-crossings of Heisei literature. He is nevertheless a controversial author who has repeatedly been criticised for conservative or even right-wing tendencies—for example, with regard to the novels *Koinrokkā beibīzu* (1980, trans. Coin Locker Babies) and *Gofungo no sekai* (1994, trans. The World in Five Minutes From Now). In *za miso sūpu*'s harsh criticism of Japan is also to be seen in this respect.

In *za miso sūpu*, like most of Murakami's novels, is based both on highly performative depictions of violence and sexuality, and on frequent references to the practices of global popular culture. The novel's plot is set in the metropolitan area of Tokyo. Mainly it takes place in the nightlife district Kabuki-chō, located in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward. Temporally, the novel is set in the immediate present (at the time of its release). With the exception of minor analepses, the narrative is organised chronologically. The language is simple and straightforward. The text critically (and often polemically) discusses what it means to be human in late modern Japan.

In *za miso sūpu* is told by the 20-year-old first-person narrator Kenji who works as an unlicensed guide to the red-light districts of Tokyo and as such encounters a notorious and psychopathic killer. On the morning of December 29, the US-American traveller Frank calls Kenji for the first time and books his services until New Year's Eve. Frank's appearance coincides with several brutal murders: Violence begins to sneak into Kenji's life when during Frank's first telephone call, he reads that a high-school prostitute is found murdered in Kabuki-chō (**Murakami, 2005: 10**). Later, a homeless man is killed and burned at a batting centre in Kabuki-chō, a place Kenji had visited with Frank. The story peaks when Kenji is forced to witness Frank's brutal killing of all guests and staff at a nightclub. The sole reason why Frank does not kill Kenji as well is that he sees him as a man who has become a loyal friend, but has simultaneously retained a stable autonomous self and is—in contrast to most other characters—capable of love. In Frank's eyes, Kenji thus stands for the possibility of interpersonal connectedness and counters loneliness.

Kenji spends his life as a freeter (*furitā*, i.e. a person who, at the age of 15 to 34 years, is either underemployed or unemployed (excluding housewives and students)). He considers his English to be 'far from perfect', but works as a 'nightlife guide' for tourists (**Murakami, 2005: 9**):

*Since AIDS, the sex industry hasn't exactly welcomed foreigners with open arms—in fact, most of the clubs are pretty blatant about refusing service to gaijin—but lots of visitors from overseas are still determined to play, and they're the ones who pay me to guide them to relatively safe cabarets and massage parlors and S&M bars and 'soaplands' and what have you. I'm not employed by a company and don't even have an office, but by running a simple ad in an English-language tourist magazine I make enough to rent a nice studio apartment in Meguro, take my girl out for Korean barbecue once in a while, and listen to the music I like and read the things I want to read. (Murakami, 2005: 9)*

Living in Meguro (approximately 3.6 miles from Shinjuku) distances Kenji from the world of his professional life in Kabuki-chō. A further disruption in Kenji's lived-in world can be identified in his family's home in Shizuoka Prefecture. There, some 180 kilometres away from Tokyo, his mother 'runs a little clothes shop', assuming that her son is 'enrolled in a college preparation course' (Murakami, 2005: 9–10). Kenji rejects his mother's aspirations, which rely on a hope of social advancement via education and him domestically migrating to the metropolitan area of Tokyo. He matches a type of outsider that is widespread in Japanese literature of the 1990s: the 'moratorium person' (moratoriumu ningen). He prolongs his adolescence. Relying on psychological procrastination, he tries to avoid social responsibility. (cf. Gebhardt, 2010: 272; Straub, 2002: 60–61).

To Kenji, too, the life he lives seems neither satisfying nor viable in the long run. He hopes to 'save up a fair amount of money to go to America' (Murakami, 2002: 10). While this hope is just another way for him to remain passive, he is very aware that in his own interest he should change his lifestyle: 'Most of the guys I know who've done this job a long-time sort of worn thin—not physically run down, but like something's eroded away inside. Even when you're talking to them face to face you have this feeling of not connecting, as if the words just pass right through them' (Ibid: 19).

In In za miso sūpu Frank is the only character who considers himself as belonging to the (upper) middle class. He claims to be a tourist from the USA, but occasionally falls into a 'strange British accent' (Ibid: 84). He tells Kenji that he imports Toyota radiators from Southeast Asia and that he 'came to finalize the licensing agreement' (Ibid: 13). This is not plausible to Kenji: Frank's hotel as well as his clothing are much too cheap (Ibid: 13). From their first meeting on, Kenji feels that he can neither trust Frank's words nor his facial expressions and feature.

*It was a very average sort of face, but you couldn't have judged his age from it. Depending on the angle of the light, one moment he looked like he could be in his twenties, and the next in his forties or even fifties. (...) The skin. It looked almost artificial, as if he'd been horribly burned and*

*the doctors had resurfaced his face with this fairly realistic man-made material. (Murakami, 2002: 12)*

Frank's face appears to Kenji like an empty but versatile projection surface. On the one hand, he is isolated from people and their natural interactions; on the other hand, he is almost arbitrarily adjustable and thus able to connect with anyone at any time.

Beyond the character level In za miso sūpu is based on a dichotomy of the 'other' (US-America)—using the terms American and foreigner ('gai(koku)jin') almost synonymously—and the 'own' (Japan). The dichotomy of Japan and America is already implied in the novel's English-language title, which is written in the syllabic katakana-alphabet; it pervades the novel as a leitmotif and in culturalistic boldness.

The novel is a harsh critique of early Heisei Japan that is depicted as saturated, disillusioned and desolated. The 'middle-class' Japanese are drawn as being driven without serious reason. Their concerns are presented as what might be called 'first-world problems'. They live in a state of relative prosperity and security, but feel insecure and threatened by fears of decline and diffuse dangers. They appear both resigned and ossified. They are less and less capable to relate to others and the world around them.

In his thoughts, Kenji recapitulates questions that his foreign clients continually ask him and that enable him to see Japan as seen from an outside perspective:

*Kenji, why are there so many vending machines? Who needs them, with convenience stores everywhere you turn? And why do you need so many different types of canned coffee and juice and sports drinks? (...) Japan is one of the richest countries in the world, why do you have this karoshi problem, people literally working themselves to death? Or: Girls from poor Asian countries I can understand, but why do high-school girls in a country as wealthy as Japan prostitute themselves? Or: Wherever you go in the world, people work in order to make their families happy, so why doesn't anybody in Japan complain about the tanshin-funin system that sends businessmen off to live on their own in other cities or countries? (Murakami, 2005: 43)*

Unacceptable living and working conditions appear to counterbalanced by amenities that seem alienating and dispensable. Against the backdrop of post-growth Japanese society, the novel's characters are depicted as dealing with both a longing for a fortune and stability once guaranteed during the decades of economically (high) growth, during which the same conditions have been shaped not insignificantly, and a struggle to find their way in times of crisis.



Throughout the novel, Kenji repeatedly digests Frank's critique of Japan and approves to it. However, he neither engages in an actual controversial discussion about it, nor does he defend, relativise or contextualise any aspect criticized by the US-American. It is only in the closing sequence where Frank declares the life of homeless people unworthy living that Kenji begins to dissent to Frank (**Murakami, 2005: 178**). Kenji shares most of Frank's sentiments and cites examples that support his claims. Nevertheless, he keeps red lines. Frank's criticism to him thus appears to be valid in essence, even though it is clearly exaggerated.

### **Not Exactly in an Otaku's Shoes: Ostensible otaku-ness as a gate-opener and a measure of deficiencies in early Heisei Japan**

From the start, *In za miso sūpu* reads as a negotiation of identities. In the very first sentences, Kenji contemplates on how to say 'My name is ...' in Japanese and thus directs the readers' focus on the impact of language on the formation of one's individual identity.

*My name is Kenji.*

*As I pronounced these words in English I wondered why we have so many ways of saying the same thing in Japanese. Hard-boiled: Ore no namae wa Kenji da. Polite: Watashi wa Kenji to moshimasu. Casual: Boku wa Kenji. Gay: Atashi Kenji 'te iu no yo! (Murakami, 2005: 9)*

Ralph McCarthy, who translated the novel into English, decided to keep original phrases in transliterated Japanese. Therefore, he had to add further information such as 'hard-boiled' or 'polite'. These are not necessary in Murakami's original text. Due to the novel's highly performative quality and by means of semantics the text shows rather than discusses forms of constructing socio-cultural identity in Japanese (**Murakami, 1998: 6**).

Identity here is first constructed through the self-addressing personal pronoun. 'Watashi', 'boku', 'ore', 'atashi': they all literally mean 'I'. But each of these terms indicates its own specific degree of (im)politeness and gender conventions. By letting Kenji consider these aspects, Murakami allows to glimpse at various identity markers and their semantic and linguistic transmission.

Further, these few lines of text illustrate that identity is thus shaped in interplay with the 'other'. Each way of saying 'My name is ...' described here refers to a distinct social context and group. These references in the novel's opening sequence already suggests that the self-association with and the admission to certain (subcultural) groups is significantly controlled by language.



Ostensible otaku-ness in *In za miso sūpu* is a pivotal device for the construction and communication of identity on an individual level. It also serves to access Tokyo's nightlife subculture and to reflect on the condition of contemporary Japan. Although the word otaku does not appear once in the entire novel, due to Frank's self-fashioning the otaku is constantly represented as a cliché.

The otaku is a distinct form of the nerd inherent to Japanese literature and culture. In its current usage, the term otaku can be traced back to the early 1980s (**Morikawa, 2012**). This is well before on an international scale nerds entered the mainstream media through popular formats such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019). Its history reaches back far less than that of the nerd, which was already in use in 1950, and first representations of the nerd on TV (cf. **Lane, 2018**).

The evolution of the Japanese term otaku is as complex as that of the English term nerd. It has undergone various changes and reinterpretations. The otaku subculture is highly heterogeneous. Basically, an otaku is regarded as a person with an enormous interest in one special field—such as public transport, music, anime/manga or programming. An otaku is often considered an outsider, a person with a barely developed social life and difficulties in dealing with people (**Morikawa, 2012; Galbraith, 2015b: 205**).

For the general public otaku appear to have predominantly negative connotations. This still widespread, stereotypical assessment results from the assumption that otaku are fundamentally different, engage in deviant sexualities and are attracted to images of prepubescent girls. With regard to sexuality, the perspective on otaku not only derives from—as Galbraith puts it—a 'prehistory of "otaku" sexuality' (**Galbraith 2015b: 205**), but also from criminals who, for instance because of their media consumption, are considered otaku. Probably one of the best-known perpetrators of this nature is the serial killer Miyazaki Tsutomu (1962–2018), who brutally murdered, posthumously abused and dismembered four girls of pre-/primary-school age. On the contrary, those who, e.g. associate themselves as otaku or share an understanding that links otaku with a globally circulating popular culture made in Japan, consider otaku as positive. Otaku culture, thus, also serves as a means of feeling affiliation with a group and of constituting a sense of belonging (cf. **Galbraith, 2015b; Galbraith et al., 2015; Morikawa, 2012**).

The otaku has also made its way into contemporary Japanese literature. Yet, both the respective works per se and the otaku characters portrayed are extremely heterogeneous. They range from stories of normalisation to those of emancipation. Other works retell or recontextualise the nerd (cf.

Cervelli's article on Summer Wars in this issue). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that there is such a thing as the otaku in Japanese literature.

Densha otoko (2004, *Train Man*, 2004), a prominent and widely cited work of realistic fiction, tells the rather shallow boy-meets-girl love story of a young, unconfident male otaku with no dating experience and a young woman whom he saved from a drunkard on a Tokyo subway train. Due to the advice from the internet, the otaku gradually transforms into a person who is capable of having a relationship and conforms to social norms and thus becomes 'normal'. The text is based on edited (and at times presumably 'faked') posts from the internet forum 2channel (cf. Nakano, 2007; Fisch, 2009; Freedman, 2009; Galbraith, 2015a). The novel is read as a story from the immediate present: In terms of content, it tells about an age where—as with Ryang—people seem to be connected to the internet and are yet alone and lacking 'real' human connection (Ryang, 2006: 97); in terms of form, it intersects Japanese literature and new media (Galbraith, 2015: 56) and thereby illustrates another specific feature of Heisei literature not mentioned here so far.

Unlike in *Densha otoko*, Murakami's Frank cannot exactly be understood as an otaku at all. He is rather creating a selective and stereotypical otakuness in order to achieve certain purposes. Besides being an unreliable character in everything he reveals about himself, his statements and obvious facts also contradict one another. Therefore, Frank as a character remains altogether elusive. He claims to have been in psychiatric treatment since his early childhood and even mentions that he had undergone a neurosurgery. His life, the way he narrates it, is a life of a psychopathic killer who is not capable of empathy and felt 'lost' for his entire life (Murakami, 2005: 155–67).

Frank declares himself a sex maniac. He pretends to be eagerly interested in Japanese nightlife as if he was an otaku with a special interest into this very specific and stereotypical field. However, his fascination with nightlife soon turns out to be merely pretended. As little as he is interested in the consummation of sexuality, he is sexually attracted by media images. This is actually what distinguishes him most from (stereo)typically depictions of an otaku. The otaku Frank pretends to be is a foreign, self-confessed one who is only superficially acquainted with Japanese otaku subculture. He embodies an otaku in the context of media worlds based on the simple equation otaku=sex. As such, this is similarly under-complex as his psychological drawing as a character. He is less the cliché of an otaku than the cliché of a somewhat simple-minded western man with interest in the otaku subculture of Japan. At the same time, as a notorious murdering psychopath, he is also linked to the stereotype of the otaku associated with violent crimes.

Frank's performed fascination with nightlife serves him as a gate-opener to the local nightlife subculture and thus allows him a deeper look into early Heisei Japan. While he chats with girls at a nightlife location in Kabuki-chō, Frank reads from his Tokyo pink guide. This promises to male Western nightlife tourist '(e)verything (they) need to know about Tokyo's sexy pleasure spots' on its cover. The guide provides Western sex tourist with general information on the Japanese sex industry, details of various establishments, maps and directions, a list of phrases considered relevant as well as a Japanese-English and an English-Japanese glossary (Langhorne, 1997). Though intertextual references to and quotations from this guidebook seem to implicate that the very special milieu is depicted in an authentic and trustworthy manner and that they are meant to serve Frank to self-fashion as a potent and a little exotic sex tourist, they prove to be superficial and are mere caricatures. He quotes phrases from the booklet that amuse but not enable a serious understanding. These also reproduce stereotypes. Using the guidebook Frank underlines his obvious incapability to translate, and thus marks a gap that exists between him and the girls at the nightclub.

Frank pretends to have an immense interest in all things sexual, but neither comes close to nor seriously strives for intimacy—be it romantic or commercial. He resembles the cliché of an extremely sexualised western otaku only in performing one. His ostensible affirmation is merely strategic. Where an otaku integrates the 'foreign' into the 'own', Frank's use of being otaku-ish in turn serves to trivialise the external 'foreign' into a then familiar 'own foreign' that appears understandable and controllable. He thus acquires access to nightlife that acts as burning glass of Japanese society. It is only because Frank adopts the supposedly norm-deviating behaviour of an odd sex-obsessed and lonely otaku that he is finally in a position to reveal the loneliness, alienation and insecurities that appear to be deeply anchored in the consciousness of the Japanese majority society and thus stimulate corrections. Frank personifies a sentiment of crisis that sediments into the reality of people's lives in late 20th century Japan. He can be read as a kind of *deus ex machina* who, coming from the outside, reveals a certain imbalance in Japan's post-growth society and indicates a sense of alienation and disintegration in the own.

### **A Place to Belong: Locating loneliness in Heisei Japan and Murakami Ryū's *In za miso supu***

Urban places and spaces are of outstanding significance for understanding late modern, post-industrial societies and its literary representations, since any form of private and public life, production, trade, politics, art etc. interconnect there. Urban centres are home to the narratives of progress-

generated prosperity, irreversible globalization and intensified acceleration, all of which are hegemonic in late modernity. In urban spaces, individual memory merges with collective memory and forms a collective identity. Urban planning practices—as Ferrar points out—further ‘help to cultivate or diminish our understanding of the past and our place in it’ and the way ‘we choose to build history into or eradicate history from our cities and towns shapes our understanding of identity, community, and responsibility’ (Ferrar, 2011: 723). The interweaving of places and memory carries a particular meaning in *In za miso sūpu*, as places symbolize a nostalgic longing to the past. This period, however, is shaped by narratives of prosperity through growth and internal homogeneity, which in itself show to be a gauge of insecurity and loneliness of contemporary Japan.

Kabuki-chō is the largest nightlife district in Asia. Roughly 36,000 square meters are densely packed with bars, shops, restaurants, love hotels and theatres. At the same time the district is a centre of administration hosting the city hall of Shinjuku. As the district is located next to Shinjuku Station, one of the world’s busiest transportation hubs, it is directly linked with Japan and Tokyo which, more than any other city in Japan, for many writers and intellectuals symbolizes the experience of a modernity embedded in global contexts and promising prosperity. Kabuki-chō is the home of choice for members of various marginalised groups—such as ethnic, cultural and sexual minorities, migrants, precariously employed and (minor) criminals. Though innumerable literary works, films and non-fictional literature perpetuate its reputation as a place of crime, drugs and yakuza (Azuma, 1998; Mizoguchi, 2009), ordinary passers-by are unlikely to get into any kind of trouble there. Most buildings in the area were (re)built after World War II, but today a marked lack of investments into their maintenance can be seen. As a small number of old buildings in this area become unattractive for residents and businesses alike, they turn into facilities seen through nostalgic eyes. They therefore are eventually regarded as implying a nostalgic longing that first of all is ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement’ (Boym, 2001: xiii–xiv) for the post-war period that again highlights criticism on a Contemporary Japan that is perceived as uncertain and exceedingly demanding.

The novel displays an abandoned clinic as a modern ruin. It is a symbol of the steadily accelerating rate of change, not only in its material and structural makeup and past purpose, but also as a symbol of society as a whole (Harrison & Schofield, 2010: 67–70).

*We'd reached the end of a cul-de-sac, and I followed Frank into a narrow gap between two buildings. No light from the houses or streetlamps made it into this space, and it was so narrow we had to*

*shuffle along sideways. The path ended at a ruined building that looked as if it had been in the process of being torn down by the land sharks when the real-estate bubble burst. Mortar had fallen from its outer walls, which were draped with canvas dropcloths and sheets of vinyl. (...) The building must have been a clinic: in one corner was a pile of discarded medical equipment and broken chairs. A bare mattress lay on the hardwood floor (...). (Murakami, 2005: 145–46)*

As depicted in *In za miso sūpu*, in the metropolitan areas (and not just in the depopulated rural areas) there are several small backstreets and numerous wooden houses much older—some of them abandoned (*akiya*). These signify a Japan that is perceived as unspoiled and long gone. Such tiny old houses in/around *Kabuki-chō* could easily be overlooked, as they hide in the shadow of *Shinjuku*'s skyscrapers (Murakami, 2005: 143). They do not function for the purpose of value creation, welfare or administration etc. But they do contribute to stabilize people's sense of belonging:

*Who would have guessed you'd find a neighborhood like this, full of old wooden apartment buildings, pretty much smack dab in the middle of Tokyo and only about a fifteen-minute walk from Kabuki-cho? Not me. Amid the tenements were a few ancient, one-story wooden houses, like the kind you see in samurai dramas, so small I almost wondered if they weren't scale models. (Murakami, 2005: 144)*

The houses mentioned here seem to be relicts from pre-modern and/or early modern Japan. Encapsulated in the urban sprawl, they are witnesses of times long gone. As such, they represent a more distant layer of nostalgia that is directed towards pre-modern Japan. It offers a kind of virtual anti-modern rootedness by linking people with places (e.g. a shrine or temple), and thus strengthens local memory, which serves to construct identities.

*Kabuki-chō* as depicted in *In za miso sūpu* is populated with characters working and living in economically and emotionally precarious conditions. Against the backdrop of perceived instability, the novel draws attention to precarious working conditions and to loneliness. Both serve as major manifestations of the background social dynamics. Stephen Snyder reads the characters of the novel as symbols of the social ailment of contemporary Japan and argues that 'for (them ...), the mundane represents a kind of threat from which they must flee, an anxiety for which they seek therapy in violent conditions and degraded situations' (Snyder, 1999: 201). Carl Cassegård adds that '(u)nlike in the 1970s and 1980s, when the vision of society as a stable and peaceful naturalized modernity was most pronounced, during the 1990s the "prison" against which Murakami Ryū had been revolting seemed to have cracked open'

(Cassegård, 2007: 206). Thus, the criticism on early Heisei Japan articulated in *In za miso sūpu* is not least aroused by the fact that the freedoms and opportunities that open up are not utilised. Instead, the focus remains on the numerous uncertainties and insecurities, resulting in numbness, alienation and grotesque substitutionary actions. The loneliness of the characters thus appears to be endogenously created and can be overcome through new forms of interpersonal connectedness, the shaping of life, solidarity, etc.

While upper-class elites and middle-class people do not appear directly, the narration clearly focuses on the bottom end of Japan's gap society: all characters can be classified as lower-class or marginalized people, and the novel shows empathy for them. The marginalized people at the low end of society, e.g. migrant women forced into prostitution, are portrayed as living in perpetual danger and as struggling with their precarious living circumstances. But they are still given respect rather than being criticized, as long as they are interpersonally connected and try to master their life with all they have and can give.

If marginalized people are (no longer) fighting and seem to spend their life in resignation and inactivity, empathy is not certain. When Frank and Kenji see a homeless man spending his time at the batting centre, neither of them shows any willingness to help. While Kenji does not articulate much empathy in general, Frank shows extraordinary disgust and hatred (**ibid: 46**).

After visiting a peep show Kenji guides Frank to 'a batting center at the outskirts of the love hotel district' (**Murakami, 2005: 43**) that is likely modelled after the Shinjuku Batting Centre. This place is embedded in bleakness: the characters are surrounded by a fence as if they were in a cage, with nothing but 'the neon lights of the love hotels and their sad, dimly lit windows' in sight, and the only sound 'the syncopated clank of metal bats'. It is a symbol for the whole of Japanese society which barely seems to give a chance to opt out and to find one's way into a self-determined life, to an own pace, and proportions that fit an individual scale.

Further on, a woman urges a man hitting the ball not to lose: 'Don't let 'em beat you!' she screams (**ibid: 43–52**). This episode refers to the terms 'kachigumi' (winning team) and 'makegumi' (losing team), which have been widespread in Japan's general and media discourse since the 1990s. They connote an increasing (perceived) social inequality (cf. **Schad-Seifert, 2007: 115–16**). The literary-fictional outline of a competitive situation set in the time of leisure that it is all about 'winning' and 'losing', points to a deeply internalised dichotomic view on contemporary society as well as to ubiquitous pressure to perform and the fear of failure—a mindset rooted

in (high) growth Japan. These ultimately disembody in desolidarisation and thus inevitably reinforces forms of loneliness.

Read from its end, i.e. from the concluding sequence, the novel reports not only on the capacity for friendship and love that Frank identifies in Kenji, but it also pleads for a reconsideration and reconstitution of communality as an antithesis to the loneliness of people in early Heisei Japan. This relies on the notion of a pre-modernity that is static and stationary and characterised by the local and mutual interconnectedness of people: On the afternoon of December 31, Kenji and Frank leave for Tsukiji hongan-ji, a Jōdo-Shinshū Buddhist Temple in the Tsukiji district of Tokyo's Chūō ward. Frank is desperate to listen to the traditional ringing of the bells on New Year's Eve, the so-called Joya no kane. Each year, the bells can be heard 108 times (107 times on New Year's Eve and one last time on New Year's Day). Frank had heard about the bells and that it is commonly believed that they are a means for healing:

*(...) there's a certain gentleness here you can't find in other countries, and that they've come up with these incredible methods of healing. Like the bells. Ringing them at temples on New Year's Eve is a custom that goes back more than a thousand years, right? How many times was it they ring the salvation bells? (Murakami, 2005: 144)*

While In za miso sūpu pays only very little attention to noises that form the soundscape (Belgiojoso 2014: 34) of a urban city (e.g. trains, trucks, construction sites), this sound of a bell plays a prominent role. The bell, which is the bell of a temple, represents the sonic geography of the city and it doubles the city's sacral geography (Assmann, 2010 [1999]: 303). It stresses the static state of the temple set within a dynamic urban space. In its timelessness and fixedness, the bell do not only properly signify a basic need for holy places that are associated with miracles, atonement and healing, the Joya no kane also traditionally serve a need for local belonging growing the midst of intensifying complexity and accelerating global interconnectedness (cf. Boym, 2001: xiv). The ringing of the bells is rooted and rooting at the same time. They signify temples (and shrines) that appear as a supratemporal, static place facilitating a sense of belonging and stand for the fundamental need for connectedness.

### **Quite a Horror Show: On violence and sexuality as benchmarks for alienation**

Like Kenji, the characters who populate the nightlife of Kabuki-chō are lacking a regular job and/or a promising education. Thus they earn their living outside the primary labour market. Cassegård argues that in Murakami's oeuvre these characters 'share the aversion to living in a



normal, indistinct world which makes them irritated and bored', so that even 'violence is preferable' to them (**200 Cassegård, 7: 198**).

I would add here that frequent and extremely explicit depictions of violence (as well as boredom) are to be understood as an expression of a mentally overloaded subject and as a reaction to existential threats and an environment that is perceived as hostile. A fear of loneliness and isolation, which drives to radical brutality. The excessively depicted violence formulates an unease about the condition of contemporary Japan:

*It looked as though Maki had another mouth below her jaw. Oozing from this second, smiling mouth was a thick, dark liquid, like coal tar. Her throat had been slit literally from ear to ear and more than halfway through, so that it looked as if her head might fall right off. And yet, incredibly, Maki was still on her feet and still alive, her eyeballs swiveling wildly and her lips quivering as she wheezed foam-flecked blood from the wound in her throat. She seemed to be trying to say something. The man beside her was the manager. He and Maki were leaning against each other, as if they'd been positioned to hold each other up. His neck was twisted in an unnatural way, his head turned as though to look over his shoulder, but drooping limply, chin resting on his shoulder blade. Just beyond Maki's high heels, Yuko and the waiter lay in a heap on the floor. A thin blade, like a sashimi knife, was buried deep in Yuko's lower back, and the waiter's neck was twisted like the manager's. (Murakami, 2005: 112)*

Contemporary Japanese literature is rich in authors who incorporate the most explicit depictions of violence into their texts (**Kanehara, 2003; Kirino, 1997; Kirino 2004; Kuroda, 2001**). The usage of violence, however, as provocation often serves the purpose of promoting the author and his or her work.

In *In za miso sūpu* disturbing and even dangerous sexual practices serve to criticise recent negative tendencies of late modern Japan. They 'confront a complacent Japanese collectivity with unsettling images of itself or what it can become' (**Snyder, 1999: 103**). The novel depicts sexuality and sexual violence time and again. Nonetheless, it is not at all presented as related to love—yet the reader may assume that at least the loving relationship between Kenji and his girlfriend is also sexual in nature. Sexuality instead is shown in terms of sexual service such as prostitution. The first woman who appears in the story is a murdered schoolgirl prostitute Kenji reads about while talking to Frank on the telephone for the very first time. The simultaneity of her murder and Frank's first appearance suggest that they could be connected (**Murakami, 2005: 10**). The reader learns about this girl only after she is already dead. Kenji is rigorous in his judgement of girls like her:

*(...) although generally speaking these girls are just spoiled, selfish children, physically they're adults, and I warn you that there's no telling how bad things could get if we don't clamp down and punish them accordingly, and of course I'm referring to the men who patronize these girls as well, they too are responsible for this state of affairs. (Murakami, 2005: 66)*

In 1990s Japan, a phenomenon euphemistically named enjo kōsai—compensated dating—entered the common consciousness. These concerns (often underage) high school girls who in exchange for favours let themselves be financed by wealthy, often much older men. The crossover to prostitution is fluid (cf. **Ryang, 2008: 96**). In 1996 Murakami also published a novel entitled *Rabu & poppu* (Love & pop), that tells the story of two high school girls who engage in compensated dating. Two years on, a film adaption under the same title was released by the celebrated animator and filmmaker Anno Hideaki (born 1960).

In the course of the further plot, Frank and Kenji meet five women involved in sexual services at a Kabuki-chō omiai ('matchmaking') bar. A conversation between Maki and Yuki, two of the women, with Kenji and Frank soon evolves into a miniature model of early Heisei Japan and its shortcomings. Contrasted with sex workers from poor Asian or Central/Southern American countries who prostitute themselves out of need and for their families back home, these female characters are equated with Japan. The text is unabashedly contemptuous of these women. Like contemporary Japanese society, whose product and expression they are, they are criticised as 'perverse'. They are said to be 'lonely', which is not contextualised or questioned further. Nor is their 'loneliness' discussed as a form of psychological need or a fundamental insecurity. Only this blank space allows the dichotomous drawing of the Japanese (semi-professional) and the immigrant prostitutes on the one hand, and the association of prostituting Japanese women with weakness on the other. This weakness is the basis for the indulgent view of them and could be read in the sense of a conservative-reactionary lament about an insufficiently self-confident Japan that became virulent again in the Japan of the first Heisei decade. In this sense, these characters serve to bear witness to and critique trends that are diagnostic of the times, without, however, reflecting them in their conditionality:

*A woman like her turns to prostitution because she has no other means of making money. Which isn't the case with high-school girls involved in compensated dating, for example, or the ladies in the omiai pub. Most Japanese girls sell it, not because they need money, but as a way of escaping loneliness. That seems particularly unnatural and perverse to me, compared to the situation of all the women I know who made it*

*here from mainland China only by having relatives pool their resources to come up with the price of an airplane ticket. (Murakami, 2015: 128–129)*

While the women signify what are perceived as maldevelopments of Japan, Frank, the psychopathic killer, acts as a sceptic and critic who distances himself from them and seeks for corrections in his own way. Watching the five girls singing and touting in the shabby bar, Kenji starts to wonder, 'if there's still such a thing as a perfectly respectable woman in this country' (Murakami, 2005: 91).

Maki wears a 'white mini dress and a lot of makeup', and thus does not look 'like an amateur' to Frank (*ibid*: 90). She says 'she'd dropped in here just on a whim, because she had the night off from her job at a 'super exclusive members' club' in Roppongi where simply sitting down already 'costs you sixty or seventy thousand Yen' (*ibid*: 95). She uses what she perceives as luxury goods to live a lifestyle she actually cannot afford. Consumption is her last resort to attain some kind of social prestige and to maintain her self-consciousness.

Neither Maki nor Yuko are honestly interested in communicating and connecting with other people. Lost in alienation and desolation, they are not even interested in whether they are understood at all. Yuko admits that she does not speak English and Kenji adds that Maki is 'chattering away in Japanese as if it were the only language in the world' (*ibid*).

However, their inability to communicate with Frank is not limited to their poor knowledge of foreign languages. Rather, what hinders them is their exaggerated focus on their very self. Longing for love, but not being able to love another person, they live sexuality without love. The division of sexuality and love, of body and mind, distances humans from others. It leads to a rise of isolation and may on a societal level culminate in a decline of solidarity.

Increased domestic consumption is a political strategy that was perceived as essential for the Japanese economy. It was established in the post-war period and re-energised during the 1970s global oil crisis. Moreover, it was fundamental to the middle-class consciousness established in (high) growth Japan (cf. Leheny, 2003: 79; Schad-Seifert, 2007: 111).

Unable to love others or themselves, people come together not for love, but for sexual intercourse or luxury consumer goods. Consumer goods like designer clothing, technical devices or toys evolve into being 'transitional objects' (Winnicott, 2006: 1–20). As Ryang argues, the 'disconnection of body and soul enables people to sell their bodies as sexual goods and to buy luxury goods with the money they earn. Consequently, such a constellation allows loving a Prada bag, but makes it impossible to love a

man or woman' (Ryang, 2008: 95–125). The novel also negotiates the preference for luxury goods to emphasise an unwillingness to make an effort and to engage in a serious debate (Murakami, 2005: 97).

The explicit depictions of sexuality expose characters in an almost hopeless uncertainty. They exploit themselves and others without reservation to numb their feelings of vulnerability and emptiness. Additionally, they point to structural conditions of that lie behind the increased expression of a perceived loneliness.

### **Conclusion**

The loneliness narrated in Murakami's *In za miso sūpu* reads like a loneliness within the whole of Japan. It's depiction centre on Frank's otaku-like, norm-violating behaviour serving as a gate-opener to Kabukichō as well as to Japan in toto, on secluded and marginal places functionalised as catalyst for reflections on loneliness and acting as insulae that, in contrast to the (self)image of a highly developed, hypermodern Japan It draws attention to misguided developments and on highly explicit depictions of violence and sexuality representing an omnipresent loneliness of people alienated from themselves and from others. In doing so, it enables some corrective imagination of a Japan that better suits humans needs.

Drawing on three conceptualisations of loneliness that function in particular through divergent, alienating and contrasting elements, *In za miso sūpu* locates loneliness in early Heisei Japan. Thus the novel sensitises the reader to loneliness as well as to its social, economic and psychological implications as a highly debated issue at the end of the twentieth century. By its drastic, polemical and radically pointed approach, the novel from the margins of contemporary Japan encourages the imagining of alternative, liveable realities that better meet human needs. It thus contributes to discussions were highly topical in early Heisei Japan and continue to be virulent and most urgent.

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Carolyn Fleischer-Heininger studied Theatre Studies, Modern German Literature and Japanese Studies and recently defended her doctoral thesis in Japanese Studies at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) Munich. Using cultural and literary theories on globalisation, her dissertation analyses world references, (counter)world constructions and identity conceptions in the life and work of Terayama Shūji (1935–1983). She is a research associate at the Japan Centre at LMU. Her research interests include literature, theatre and film in Japan since the post-war period; theories of modernisation and globalisation in Japan; dis/ability and diversity in contemporary Japanese literature.

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