

The Elephant Vanishes, TV People, and Identity in Modern Japan

Loren Landucci, Independent Scholar, Japan

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This essay examines how Haruki Murakami utilizes magical realism to critique the destabilization of individual identity within Japan's collectivist social framework. Focusing on two works of short fiction, *The Elephant Vanishes* and *TV People*, this essay explores theories of isolation and societal displacement. A literary analysis supported by sociological theory illustrates how Murakami's works, and more specifically his use of magical realism, embody the tension between the individual and the collective within modern Japanese society. Through this lens, notions of social conformity, institutional pressure, and the psychological weight of maintaining surface-level social harmony are deconstructed.

Keywords: magical realism, Haruki Murakami, identity, Japanese collectivism, alienation

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Modern Japan is characterized by a high degree of public order. Despite the colossal population density of megacities like Tokyo, Japan's urban centers are widely considered safe and quiet. Throughout Japan, social harmony is deeply valued, and a peculiar quirk of this harmony is the notable absence of public trash bins. Even without these bins, streets are often clean and well-maintained. This curious reality reflects an institutionalized collective sense of accountability. It is the expectation that people will carry their waste home with them, even if it is inconvenient. To an external observer, this may seem utopian. However, this policy decision is tied to a historical trauma that reveals a more complex reality within Japan. The widespread removal of public trash bins occurred directly after the March 20, 1995, Tokyo subway sarin gas attacks, when the *Aum Shinrikyo* cult weaponized trash bins to disperse a deadly nerve agent. In a sense, the clean and orderly streets of Japan are utopian in appearance alone, and the chaotic history signals a deeper fragility within Japanese society. Social harmony may be resilient, but it is also uniquely delicate. A persistent tension between individual consciousness and collective expectations contextualizes this dilemma.

This internal friction is a primary thematic focus for Murakami, whose short fiction requires readers to consider a central question: Is magical realism an effective conduit for exploring identity and alienation in modern Japanese society? Rather than presenting magical realism as a mere escape from reality, this essay asserts that Murakami's depictions of the surreal serve as a narrative device to capture the reality of ordinary individuals becoming detached from their collectivist structures. This detachment induces profound isolation, rendering the individual socially invisible, ultimately resulting in a destabilization of selfhood.

To understand the psychological displacement of Murakami's protagonists, one must first explore how identity is constructed and maintained within Japanese culture. Nakane (1970) explains that social organization in Japan is primarily dictated by vertical relationships. Within this framework, an individual's identity is defined less by personal attributes than by systemic placement within a designated group, such as a school, association, or corporation. The collective frame takes clear priority over the individual attribute, meaning that individual expression is often moderated in favor of maintaining group cohesion. This structural analysis is supported by Doi (1973) in his psychological framework of *amae*, defined as a form of emotional dependence that binds individuals to group expectations and institutional hierarchies. Constrained by mutual obligation and vertical alignment, displays of individuality are discouraged, as the self is understood primarily as a component of a larger whole.

Murakami constructs his protagonists as direct products of this social conditioning. Across his short fiction, his main characters are consistently ordinary, nameless men working routine corporate jobs. They are emotionally detached, quiet, and deeply embedded in repetitive daily routines. Their anonymity reflects a broader social condition where identity is secondary to group belonging. They operate smoothly within a highly organized system until they are confronted with a moment of surreal disruption.

Murakami's use of magical realism is the catalyst for this disruption. In his research, Strecher (1999) emphasizes that identity fragmentation is the essential foundation for Murakami's magical realism and Nakane's sociological framework further explains why this fragmentation invariably leads to social exclusion. By placing ordinary characters within unexplainable situations, Murakami cuts the strings that bind them to conventional, group logic. Surreal events force Murakami's protagonists to step outside their shared cognitive framework of the

collective, crossing the void into a reality that is far more complex. As sole witnesses to magical events, Murakami's protagonists are forever changed and unable to return to the illusion of harmony. Thus, we begin to understand the descent into identity destabilization.

Literature Review

The Elephant Vanishes

Murakami's short story *The Elephant Vanishes* (1993) introduces readers to a protagonist who is a prototypical corporate kitchen appliance salesman. The nameless protagonist's life is built around predictable social interactions. One evening, he witnesses an event that shatters his normal routine; while walking home, he notices the close bond between an elephant and its keeper who reside together in the local city park. Alone, he watches the pair carefully, contemplating their relationship when suddenly, the elephant and keeper shrink in size until they have vanished. In a state of shock, the protagonist cannot believe what has transpired. Yet, the events of the next day confirm the impossible.

Reports of an escaped elephant and elephant keeper appear on the front page of local newspapers, suggesting a temporary shared reality. However, as the official search extends for months without providing any logical explanations, public interest quickly wanes. The mystery remains unsolved and the story subsequently vanishes from public discourse. Despite the unfathomable disappearance of an elephant in the middle of a crowded Tokyo suburb, society resumes its normal routines. For the collective, institutional order remains a resilient base to lean upon in this moment of temporary uncertainty, but for the protagonist, a return to normalcy is unacceptable.

The protagonist becomes preoccupied with the vanishing elephant, and his internal world begins to unravel. He obsessively collects news clippings about the missing elephant in a hopeless attempt to hold onto some semblance of a shared reality. Instead, the fading public interest reflected in the news articles only serves to further destabilize the protagonist. When he attempts to articulate his experience or express his lingering doubts, the protagonist encounters indifference or quiet dismissal from his coworkers who cannot understand why he would break away from conventional norms to discuss a subject so absurd. He finds himself unable to maintain *tatemae*, the essential public facade used to preserve social harmony. His former identity slowly erodes as he can no longer engage with the routines and mannerisms typical of corporate vertical relationships. The elephant's disappearance shatters the logical order that once structured the protagonist's life, leaving him stranded outside the collective consciousness.

TV People

A similar manifestation of alienation occurs in Murakami's short story *TV People* (1993). While the unnamed protagonist is spending a quiet evening at home, an odd group of men referred to as "TV people" enter through the front door without warning to install a new television set. While sitting on the couch, silently watching the installation crew, the protagonist realizes that not a single word had been exchanged between him and the men who are now wandering through his home, and for a brief moment, he wonders if he is invisible. The TV people continue working without making eye contact, speaking, or acknowledging him in any way. They treat him as if he were entirely non-existent, and, as if suspended in a liminal space, the protagonist begins to question his own reality.

This surreal disruption becomes even more glaring when the protagonist notices the same TV people at his workspace the following day. As they are moving through his office, none of his coworkers acknowledge their presence. The protagonist cannot understand why everyone is unwilling to see what is right in front of them. Later that night, the boundaries between the real and the surreal become increasingly unstable. While sitting on his couch watching television, the protagonist notices that the TV people are now inside his television set. They are building something that they call an airplane, but it does not look like an airplane. The protagonist starts to wonder if his absent wife is having an affair, a reality that he has noticed before, but not consciously so. Suddenly, the protagonist is aware of everything all at once, and that nothing is as it seems. In this state of psychological disarray, the TV people begin emerging directly from the TV set, further warping the boundaries between real and surreal.

As Napier (1996) observes in her research, modern Japanese literature frequently explores themes of identity fragmentation in response to intense social pressures and rapid modernization. In *TV People*, the division separating the conscious from the subconscious, and the real from the imaginary, is eroded. By holding an awareness of an anomaly that his colleagues remain oblivious to, the protagonist experiences profound isolation. He remains physically present in his office and home, yet he has been rendered socially invisible, severed from the shared reality that previously anchored his identity.

Intertextual Analysis

When examined side by side, *The Elephant Vanishes* and *TV People* reveal a structured, narrative progression that illustrates how Murakami perceives social harmony and alienation. Murakami relies on these narrative steps to map out the systematic decoupling of the individual from their collective framework. We can analyze the following sequences across both narratives:

Disruption and Cognitive Divide

Murakami's narrative arcs rely upon an unexplainable event that shatters conceptions of shared reality. In *The Elephant Vanishes*, this occurs when an elephant and its keeper inexplicably shrink and vanish. In *TV People*, the disruption is marked by the unannounced arrival of reality-defying figures who install a television set in the protagonist's home. These incidents fracture the everyday logic that previously governed the protagonists' lives, thus planting the seeds of existential doubt. The rifts between the protagonists' perception and that of the community widen as their shared realities diverge. While the kitchen appliance salesman vividly remembers the elephant and continues to look for answers, the local public quickly loses interest and forgets the event. Similarly, the corporate worker in *TV People* observes the silent figures within his office workspace, while his colleagues remain entirely oblivious. At this stage, the individual develops a private awareness that separates them from their respective groups.

Institutional Continuation and Social Alienation

Despite the profound rupture experienced by each protagonist, the surrounding social apparatus remains rigid. The local government and community in *The Elephant Vanishes* simply accepts that an elephant has disappeared, preferring to simply forget rather than explore the profound implications of such an event. The corporate office in *TV People* continues its daily routine without pause and the protagonist's coworkers are unable to see or perhaps unwilling to notice

disruptions to their established norms. By acting as though nothing out of the ordinary has occurred, the collective actively enforces conformity, prioritizing institutional stability over the disruptive truth witnessed by individuals. As the protagonists find themselves unable to reconcile their private experiences with the collective denial, or group inability to perceive difference, their capacity to function within vertical relationships is frayed. The appliance salesman struggles to maintain a public façade, *tatema*, and begins to drift away from his orderly and simple life. Similarly, the corporate worker in *TV People* withdraws into a state of silent observation, becoming completely cut off from the professional and personal circles that previously defined him. The result is an inescapable isolation.

Destabilization of Self

The final stage of Murakami's pattern offers no resolution or social reintegration. Instead, the narrative concludes at the point of existential collapse. The salesman in *The Elephant Vanishes* is left feeling completely aimless and adrift in a world that has lost its objective meaning, while the corporate worker in *TV People* is physically frozen as the uncanny figures step directly out of the television screen. Both protagonists' sense of self becomes fully destabilized as they are severed from the shared reality of the group, and they are rendered socially invisible.

Murakami and the *Zenkyōtō* Movement

Murakami's structural pattern highlights a fundamental tension within Japanese society. When an individual experiences a disruption that cannot be integrated into the group's shared reality, the system does not adapt to accommodate them. Instead, the collective continues unchanged, leaving the non-conforming individual isolated and conceptually erased. This sense of alienation and identity fragmentation reflects cultural and philosophical tensions within modern Japan that have had significant historical implications. Strecher's (1999) research links Murakami's exploration of social identity to a key political event, which he asserts had a meaningful impact on Murakami's literature: Japan's 1968 and 1969 student-led protests, known as the *Zenkyōtō* movement. The *Zenkyōtō* movement was a massive, anti-establishment mobilization driven by an existentialist desire for authentic self-expression. Students actively questioned whether they were truly free, or if they were simply being taught to conform with others and fulfill the desires of a highly bureaucratic corporate state. When the movement collapsed in the early 1970s, it left behind a profound sense of cultural defeatism. Many participants eventually integrated into the very consumerist, corporate structures they had protested against.

Murakami's literature captures the lingering effects of this transition. He has reflected that modern Japanese society faces an ongoing existential crisis, suggesting that individuals are losing their capacity to understand themselves (Strecher, 1999). Within his narratives, an uncompromising corporate culture that devalues individuality acts as a primary source of his protagonists' existential suffering. As Loughman (1997) articulates in her research, within Japan's corporate landscape, group identification with an institution is of primary importance, while the attributes of the individual are treated as secondary. To maintain standing within the corporate group, individuals are often expected to adjust their appearance, behavior, and personal time to match established company norms, and Murakami's narratives clearly define the costs of non-conformity. Any disruption of the status quo can leave an individual completely isolated and unable to reintegrate.

Conclusion

Murakami offers no explicit solutions in his writing. His protagonists never successfully overcome their corporate structures, nor do they achieve a triumphant sense of individuality. Instead, they end their journeys suspended in a permanent state of uncertainty, isolated from a modern society they no longer belong to. Murakami's fiction ultimately invites readers to reconsider how modern social institutions shape individual identity and belonging. His depictions of alienation suggest that this condition may emerge whenever collective stability is maintained at the expense of individual subjectivity. Murakami's narratives reveal that a profound threat to contemporary identity is not overt exclusion from society, but rather active participation in a system that quietly and systematically renders the individual invisible.

References

- Doi, T. (1973). *The anatomy of dependence*. Kodansha International.
- Loughman, C. (1997). *No place I was meant to be: Contemporary Japan in the short fiction of Haruki Murakami*. *World Literature Today*, 71(1), 87–94.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/40152821>
- Murakami, H. (1993). *The elephant vanishes*. Vintage Books.
- Nakane, C. (1970). *Japanese society*. University of California Press.
- Napier, S. J. (1996). *The fantastic in modern Japanese literature: The subversion of modernity*. Routledge.
- Strecher, M. C. (1999). *Magical realism and the search for identity in the fiction of Haruki Murakami*. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 25(2), 263–298.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/265903>