

Narrative Implosion and the Transformative Practice of Reality in Haruki Murakami's *1Q84*

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The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper examines how Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* engages with problems of representation in a modern society shaped by electronic media. It examines how *1Q84* allegorizes contemporary media structure and renders it perceptible through narrative devices such as symbolism, metaphor, and structure. It then argues that, as metafiction, *1Q84* functions as a critical lens through which reality can be examined. The originality of this study lies in its focus on the underexamined relationship between narrative form and media structure. The first half analyzes the female protagonist's growing awareness of deceptive appearances. The recurring warning, "Don't let appearances fool you," together with Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message," underscores the narrative's interrogation of media-constructed worldviews. This analysis resonates with Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, in which simulation displaces the real. The second half follows the male protagonist's transformative practice of resisting a culture dominated by media-generated appearances. This culminates in what the paper terms narrative implosion, exemplified by the rumbling thunder at the novel's climax. Along with the female protagonist's conception of a child, these moments symbolize the collapse of false appearances and the emergence of new possibilities. The paper concludes that *1Q84* demonstrates how the world transmitted through electronic media gradually distorts reality and rigidifies our worldviews. In response, the novel presents an ethical imperative: the acquisition of a meta-level perspective that enables one to see beyond fixed appearances. Through narrative implosion, Murakami's metafiction illustrates the transformative power of narrative and enables readers to perceive reality beyond appearances.

Keywords: Haruki Murakami, *1Q84*, allegory, media structure, metafiction

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Introduction

IQ84 is a work of metafiction that takes narrative itself as its central concern. The narrative alternates chapters centered on Aomame—who works as a sports instructor while secretly carrying out assassinations of perpetrators of domestic violence—with chapters focused on Tengo, a mathematics teacher who rewrites a novella by a teenage girl. While Aomame enters a pseudo-reality and gradually discovers discrepancies between that world and 1984, Tengo comes to recognize the power of creation through his rewriting of *Air Chrysalis* by Eriko Fukada and begins to write his own story. With Aomame eventually joining Tengo’s fictional world, the two characters ultimately return to 1984 together (Murakami, 2009–2010).

Some studies have examined the metafictional qualities of *IQ84*. Norihiro Katō interprets the novel’s “extension-like” structure—where Book 3 was added after Books 1 and 2—as a meta-level operation performed on the preceding text (Katō, 2020, pp. 315–316), while Mitsuyoshi Numano reads the work as an attempt to address social problems by replacing them with “another story” (Numano, 2010). However, these approaches do not sufficiently address how the narrative in *IQ84* engages with contemporary social reality.

The social problem addressed in *IQ84* lies in what may be called *media structure*. This perspective is suggested by the novel’s explicit citation of media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s dictum “the medium is the message,” which asserts that the form of a medium determines the content it conveys. In this paper, media structure refers not merely to media content but to the perceptual environment produced by the technological characteristics of electronic media and the frameworks of reception they generate. Such structures render subtle changes in reality invisible, thereby fixing recipients’ ways of seeing. The repeated warning at the opening of the novel—“Don’t let appearances fool you”—functions as a critical insight into this perceptual bias (Book 1, Ch. 1, p. 12, p. 16; Ch. 9, p. 135).¹

More specifically, the novel raises the issue of distorted representations of reality produced through electronic media. In 1980s Japan, where the novel is set, the influence of visual media—especially television—expanded rapidly. At the same time, religious cults such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Aum Shinrikyō emerged as serious social concerns, most notably in cases involving the refusal of life-saving medical treatment (Maruyama, n.d.) and acts of internal violence against dissenting members, which resulted in a number of deaths (Asahi Shinbun, 2025).² Yet such internal realities of these organizations remained largely invisible to the general public as of the 1980s. Just as television structures visually centered messages through the focalization of partial images, cult organizations likewise manipulated appearances by selectively presenting images of themselves through mass media.

Relatively few studies have approached *IQ84* from the perspective of media critique. However, Endō Shinji’s analysis of Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood* (2004) offers a critical framework that is particularly useful for interpreting *IQ84*. Endō argues that the novel is “an allegory of

¹ To clarify the story’s narrative structure, and to help non-English readers locate quoted passages in translated works, the volume and chapter numbers are also included in in-text citations.

² In 1985, a 10-year-old boy died from excessive bleeding after his Jehovah’s Witness parents refused a blood transfusion. The document describes cases in which Jehovah’s Witness parents refused blood transfusions for their children, resulting in the children’s deaths, as well as cases in which adult believers themselves refused transfusions during medical treatment and pursued legal challenges up to the Supreme Court. See Maruyama’s report. Four years later, in 1989, Aum Shinrikyo, acting on the leader Asahara’s instructions, murdered a believer who wanted to leave the cult, and then the Sakamoto family, including the lawyer who had been supporting people leaving the cult.

ourselves, who lived through the 1970s and 1980s by advertising copy, mass media, and the information and narratives surrounding us daily—all made up of insubstantial words” (Endō, 1991, pp. 73–74).

This paper bridges metafiction and media theory by taking the novel’s presentation of media-formed appearances as its starting point. It examines how *IQ84* allegorizes contemporary media structures and renders them perceptible through narrative devices such as symbolism, metaphor, and narrative structure. To this end, the paper examines McLuhan’s thesis “the medium is the message” in relation to the novel’s opening warning that “things are not what they seem” (Book 1, Ch. 1, p. 12) and considers the significance of the two dates that frame the narrative: 1926 and 1984. It then discusses the roles of narrative and classical music by analyzing the impact of Tengo’s creative writing and the recurring presence of Leoš Janáček’s *Sinfonietta* in the world of *IQ84*.

What Problem Does *IQ84* Raise?—With Reference to Marshall McLuhan’s Media Theory

At the very beginning of *IQ84*, Aomame is riding in a solid, soundproof taxi while listening to Janáček’s *Sinfonietta* on the FM radio. For reasons she cannot fully explain, she knows that the piece was composed in 1926, and this knowledge leads her to recall that historical moment. The narrative thus evokes the oppressive atmosphere of the early Shōwa period: the sudden emergence of Hitler, the brief peace enjoyed by Czechoslovakia before its annexation by Germany, and the end of “the short interlude of modernism and democracy,” followed by the rise of fascism (Book 1, Ch. 1, p. 2).

Among the events of the early Shōwa period, one with particularly far-reaching consequences was NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation)’s launch of nationwide public radio broadcasting in 1926 (NHK, 1926). Given that radio appears symbolically at the opening of the novel and that Tengo’s father is depicted as a diligent NHK fee collector, it is natural to read *IQ84* as directing attention to the year in which radio broadcasting began. Just as radio was mobilized in Nazi Germany during the 1930s and 1940s as a means of stirring patriotic sentiment and inciting populations toward war (NHK, 2024), in Japan as well government and military propaganda advanced through newspapers, radio, and film, thereby legitimizing state policy and action (NHK, 1937).

While Aomame reflects on this historical moment, the mysterious taxi driver issues a warning about the world she is about to enter: “things are not what they seem... don’t let appearances fool you. There’s always only one reality” (Book 1, Ch. 1, p. 12). The problem of the year 1984, then, can be traced back to 1926, the year in which nationwide broadcasting began. Although 1984 is not identical to 1926, *IQ84* depicts a society in which the manipulation of appearances through electronic media had already begun, producing consequences that would later prove severe.

Book 1 portrays subtle discrepancies between Aomame’s world and the reality she has previously known, suggesting that the world she inhabits is one of appearances. Through careful observation, Aomame concludes that “it is not me but the world that’s deranged,” a realization that leads her to name this distorted reality “1Q84.” This world closely resembles Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, in which mediated representations replace reality (Baudrillard, 1976). Moreover, she reflects that these discrepancies “could cause me to commit errors that are... literally *fatal*” (Book 1, Ch. 9, pp. 152–153, p. 158, emphasis by me). Aomame

thus senses the danger of this condition, fearing that such discrepancies may undermine the logic of her actions.

The novel's choice of 1984, therefore, carries significant implications. It was the year in which the predecessor organization of Aum Shinrikyō was founded—a religious group that would later perpetrate lethal violence through the manipulation of appearances, including its presentation as a yoga ashram and the concealment of its internal practices (Asahi Shinbun, 2015; 2025). This organization closely resembles the cult “Sakigake” in *IQ84*, which likewise conceals its reality behind a carefully constructed image. As Aomame's friend Ayumi reports, “Everything on the surface is there for show... The packaging is beautiful, but I get the feeling that suspicious plans are hatching behind the scenes...” (Book 1, Ch. 23, p. 415).

Ayumi then links this observation to Marshall McLuhan's thesis that “the medium is the message,” emphasizing that content is shaped by the characteristics of the medium itself. McLuhan argues that “the personal and social consequences of any medium ... result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves or by any new technology,” and warns that “the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium” (McLuhan, 1994, pp. 7–9). In other words, media technologies create conditions under which recipients may unconsciously and uncritically absorb transmitted information. That said, the electronic medium itself is not inherently evil; rather, the problem lies in a lack of awareness of its nature. In this sense, McLuhan's thesis resonates closely with the novel's opening admonition. The subtle discrepancies Aomame perceives thus allegorically express how a media-constructed apparent reality overwrites the world itself—and how such distortions can lead to *fatal* consequences.

The Role of Narrative and Classical Music Within Media Structure—From the Recollection of 1926 to the Implosion of the Fictional World

Trigger of Janáček's *Sinfonietta*

The two protagonists' determination to “move on” at the end of the novel is initiated by a single musical experience: Janáček's *Sinfonietta*. The scene in which Aomame hears *Sinfonietta* while riding in a taxi on the Metropolitan Expressway marks the point of origin for the motif of implosion. Composed in 1926, the piece coincides historically with the beginning of radio broadcasting.

At the same time, Janáček's composition symbolizes a counterforce to the radio waves of that era. The novel recounts that Janáček once encountered an outdoor performance and suddenly felt “a surge of joy” throughout his body, at which moment the motif for *Sinfonietta* came to him. Recalling this experience later, he described a sensation as though “something... snap[ped] in his head,” followed by a feeling of being “enveloped in ecstasy” (Book 1, Ch. 9, p. 157).

The music also functions as a catalyst for introspection. As Su-Hyun Lim argues, Murakami increasingly foregrounds classical music in his later works because, unlike trend-driven popular music, it resists unilateral broadcasting and allows listeners to form their own interpretations. Classical music, therefore, appears at moments when protagonists enter silent contemplation (Lim, 2018, p. 419).

Janáček's experience of ecstasy and reflection is transmitted through *Sinfonietta* to Aomame. The piece functions as a counter-medium to the radio waves that accelerated fascism in the 1930s. Aomame recalls experiencing "an intensely physical—and intensely personal—jolt" when she listened to the music (Book 1, Ch. 9, p. 155). This jolt enables her to notice the anomalies of "1Q84" and to shift toward critical observation. Through this process, she gradually comes to grasp the structure of appearances—particularly those behind "Sakigake," which has degenerated into a religious cult.

Janáček's explosive creative will is, in turn, passed on to Tengo. A chain of coincidences in high school leads him to play the timpani—an instrument central to the opening of *Sinfonietta*—and this experience becomes the catalyst for the later flowering of his creative impulse. "Listening to *Sinfonietta* early in the morning" becomes his daily routine, giving him "a sense of personal encouragement and protection" (Book 2, Ch. 2, p. 465).

As Tengo's passion for judo fades, the editor Komatsu asks him to rewrite *Air Chrysalis*, a novella written by the teenage girl Fukada Eriko. Having accidentally witnessed the inner workings of "Sakigake," Eriko becomes repelled by its distorted reality and flees. Tengo reshapes her manuscript into a coherent work of fiction; although he initially hesitates, upon completion, he finds that something like "good change" has begun to take root within him (Book 1, Ch. 16, p. 284). At this point, his creative energy begins to build momentum, which he expresses through the metaphor of "the great karmic wheel of Indian mythology" (Book 1, Ch. 16, p. 301). The moment when the protagonists proceed with *Sinfonietta* thus marks the point at which the hyperreal world of "1Q84" begins to collapse and be rewritten.

Allegorizing Media Structure and the Role of Creation

The rewriting of Eriko's *Air Chrysalis* begins to unravel the fictional order shaped by the Little People. As the narrative reaches a critical point, *1Q84* depicts narrative itself as the catalyst for the implosion of the "1Q84" world. This implosion, a central motif of the novel, is closely linked to the recurring image of metamorphosis, symbolized by the butterfly emerging from its chrysalis.

What, then, do the Little People represent? I propose that they function as a central allegorical device for media structure. *Air Chrysalis* evokes broadcast imagery, while the Little People can be read as metaphorical representations of electronic media such as airwaves. Eriko's observation that "they...can enter people's dreams whenever they like" (Book 2, Ch. 19, p. 768) allegorizes the process by which electronic media inscribe information into recipients' unconscious. In this sense, the Little People reconfigure McLuhan's thesis that media are extensions of ourselves.

This allegorical structure is reinforced by the depiction of Tamotsu Fukada's body as "on the road to destruction" (Book 2, Ch. 9, p. 600), an image that suggests sensory numbness induced by electronic transmission. Fukada degenerates from the leader of an idealistically founded agricultural commune into the head of a religious cult. When Aomame uncovers that what he believed to be the "voice of God" was in fact the voice of the Little People, the novel underscores the replacement of divine messages with fabricated narratives transmitted through electronic media.

The same allegory appears in Ushikawa's caterpillar metaphor. When he first sees the two moons, he imagines the following:

Maybe I looked at those two moons for too long, he thought, absorbed too much of their light. Their vague afterimage remained in his eyes. Their dark silhouettes numbed the soft part of his brain, like a bee stinging and numbing a caterpillar, then laying eggs on the surface of its body. The bee larvae use the paralyzed caterpillar as a convenient source of food and devour it as soon as they're born. (Book 3, Ch. 22, p. 1207)

Here, the caterpillar symbolizes media content; the bee, the broadcasting medium that carries such content (that is, the Little People); and the bee larvae, viewers who unconsciously consume those images. This imagery vividly embodies the process by which electronic media numb consciousness and strip away critical judgment.

As Tengo turns toward creation, the media-constructed world of "1Q84" begins to be overturned from within. He not only writes a story but also intervenes in the narrative space he has created, driven by his resolve to find Aomame. A series of explosive images — "the flame of an oil refinery, the gigantic gas tanks" (Book 2, Ch. 8, p. 574) — symbolize the internal dismantling of preconceived ways of seeing, leading toward the reconstruction of reality.

On the night when Tengo unites with Eriko, who mediates his connection to Aomame, and when Aomame quietly kills Tamotsu Fukada after a meaningful dialogue, the novel inserts "a great thunderclap that cracks the heavens in two" (Book 2, Ch. 12, p. 654). Aomame and Fukada are described as being "in an ancient cave—a dark, damp, low-ceilinged cave," and what strikes is "thunder-without-lightning"; the cave figures the rigid worldview constructed through media structure, now collapsing from within (Book 2, Ch. 13, p. 672). The loss of the Little People's power is later confirmed when Eriko states, "The Little People are not stirring anymore" (Book 2, Ch. 14, p. 686). Book 2 then closes with the image of "scattered shards of glass," likened to "the ocean's tiny ripples" shining in the light of the two moons (Book 2, Ch. 24, p. 841).

Why Does *1Q84* Adopt the Method of Metafiction? Presenting a Meta-Level Vantage Point From Which to See a Fixed World Image

In *1Q84*, the two moons floating in the night sky—"the moon that had always been there" and "a far smaller greenish moon"—function as a symbolic motif that unsettles the narrative world. As the text explicitly states, this green moon is the part Tengo "had worked the hardest," which he described "as concretely and detailed as possible" (Book 2, Ch. 2, pp. 779–780).

Tengo's rewriting of the world is motivated, first, by a desire to recuperate a childhood time lost through isolation and separation. While the past itself is irretrievable, narrative serves as a means of rearticulating a broken temporal continuity.

Second, the historical context of 1984 itself is crucial. At a time when television had become central to everyday life and the seeds of cultic movements were becoming visible, people's perceptions were increasingly shaped by fixed ways of seeing formed through older media. Tengo recognizes the need to rewrite that rigid image of the world from his own perspective and in his own language. Here, Wittgenstein's idea of the tendency to see the world by fitting it into an existing mold provides an important theoretical framework. Throughout the narrative of *1Q84*, preconceptions that rigidify the world repeatedly appear, including Aomame's belief that "once a gun appears in a story, it has to be fired at some point" (Book 2, Ch. 23, p. 819). At the same time, the novel depicts moments that mark attempts to step outside such fixed ways of seeing. Standing before his father in a coma—who nonetheless continues to be seen

as an NHK fee collector—Tengo murmurs, “But isn’t this just a sham?” and “I have a feeling your consciousness isn’t lost at all” (Book 3, Ch. 12, p. 1026).

Wittgenstein argues that prejudice arises when “we confuse prototypes with objects” and “dogmatically confer on an object properties which only the prototype necessarily possesses,” leading to the uncritical assertion that “It must always be...” (Wittgenstein, 1931, p. 14e). To escape such fixation, he insists on maintaining “a clear view in our reflections of ... an object of comparison—a yardstick, as it were” (Wittgenstein, 1937, p. 26e).

In *IQ84*, the exposure of a distorted world and its eventual overwriting by Tengo can be read as precisely this process: a coagulated world image returning to a state of fluidity. This contrast is symbolized by the expressways depicted at the novel’s beginning and end. Early on, the Metropolitan Expressway is congested and barely moving, representing a rigidified world. By contrast, when Aomame and Tengo return to 1984 at the end of the story, traffic flows “unusually smoothly” (Book 3, Ch. 30, p. 1296). Through Tengo’s writing and Aomame’s attentive actions, the world regains movement. Tengo’s observation—“Lots of things around us are already starting to fall into strange patterns. Some things have already transformed, and it may not be easy for them to go back the way they were” (Book 3, Ch. 18, p. 1138)—suggests that his narrative is rewriting the world from within. Along with the female protagonist’s conception of a child, these moments symbolize the collapse of false appearances and the emergence of new possibilities.

Given that the green moon is described in a color evocative of the Earth, metaphors such as “that lonely, taciturn satellite” (Book 2, Ch. 18, p. 742) and Ushikawa’s sober recognition—“This isn’t the world I came from” (Book 3, Ch. 19, p. 1158)—can be interpreted as signs of a meta-level vantage point from which the world can be observed from the outside. The second moon thus marks the acquisition of an elevated perspective.

Conclusion

As metafiction, Murakami’s *IQ84* demonstrates how a world transmitted through electronic media gradually distorts reality and rigidifies our worldviews. In response, the novel presents an ethical imperative: the acquisition of a meta-level perspective that enables one to see beyond fixed appearances. Through narrative implosion, Murakami’s metafiction illustrates the transformative role of narrative and invites readers to perceive reality beyond the surface.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author directed and controlled all aspects of the research and writing process, with AI tools providing limited assistance. ChatGPT was used selectively to rephrase statements for accuracy, clarity, and readability. Grammarly was used solely for spelling and grammar checks. The ideas, findings, analyses, and discussions are originally written. All sources and references were manually identified and verified.

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