

Paradoxical Faithfulness

Review of *Murakami Haruki on Film* by Marc Yamada, Association for Asian Studies, 2024

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For over forty years, Murakami Haruki's writing provides a consistent industry of publication, translation, and international distribution. Parallel to the voracious appetite for Murakami's writing is a desire by filmmakers to adapt his works for the screen. Murakami notoriously held back from authorizing adaptations of his work after initially being dissatisfied with *Hear the Song of the Wind* (1981) by director Ōmori Kazuki. Thirty years later, critical acclaim for films like *Burning* (2018) and a Best International Feature Academy Award for *Drive My Car* (2021) have sparked new interest in screen adaptations of Murakami's work. This recent increase in adaptations serves as a basis for Marc Yamada's concise and probing study, *Murakami Haruki on Film*.

The book is published through the Asia Shorts series of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS), a series that encourages contemporary academic discussion on topics pertaining to studies of Asia. Since the winter of 2018, Asia Shorts has published twenty-two monographs on a range of topics. Some are quite topical, such as the impact of the pandemic, while others focus on issues meant to inspire discussion or serve as a basis for a university course. *Murakami Haruki on Film* functions as a clear example of the latter, exploring debates in literature, media, and adaptation studies and making the argument for substantive analysis of Murakami's influence on global cinema.

In five chapters, Yamada analyzes screen adaptations of Murakami's work organized by theme. Yamada opens with the argument that Murakami's

literary works lend themselves to filmic adaptation. This leads to focused analysis of multiple *Bakery Attack* series adaptations, then “unfaithful” adaptations in *Drive My Car*, followed by issues of memory and time in *Norwegian Wood*, *Burning*, and *Tony Takitani*, before finishing with a deep dive in the unique synthesis between animation and Murakami’s literary style.

The transmutable capacity of Murakami’s writing is a core element of Yamada’s thesis, stating that “Murakami’s fiction deals with issues that are central to the workings of filmic expression could be part of the reason why so many adaptations of his work have emerged over the last thirty years.”¹ Yamada asserts that Murakami’s works invite a cyclical conversation between the source material and filmic adaptation, where meaning is made through engagement with both works, which then reframe the meaning of each. Yamada suggests this process is faithful to the author, as it replicates Murakami’s approach to “transform our view of characters, narrative perspective, settings, and even ontological experiences into something new.”² In this way, whether one reads or watches a Murakami work, such as *Norwegian Wood*, each medium informs, shifts, and reinterprets the other. The cyclical meaning-making proposed by Yamada appears almost like a nod to the famed Kadokawa Haruki marketing campaign in the late 1970s of “Read it first or watch it, watch it first or read it?” that points to a mixed-media quality inherent to Murakami’s style.³ In Yamada’s estimation both are crucial for a full engagement with the works.

Yamada’s thesis expands from his research efforts of comparative studies and informs each chapter while each chapter also functions as an independent analysis of a particular theme and grouping of works. This provides the monograph a unified cohesion while allowing for the flexibility of assigning single chapter readings in a classroom or discussion group.

1. Marc Yamada, *Murakami Haruki on Film* (Association for Asian Studies, 2024), 13.

2. Yamada, *Murakami Haruki on Film*, 17.

3. Zahlten, Alexander, *The End of Japanese Cinema : Industrial Genres, National Times, and Media Ecologies* (Duke University Press, 2017), 106.

In chapter 1, Yamada thinks through the literary background and elements that make Murakami's work available for moving image adaptation. Yamada notes Murakami's training in the Theater Department at Waseda University, which historically helped launch numerous directors, screenwriters, and other members of Japan's film industry. Yamada devotes considerable attention to works like *Hear the Wind Sing*, *Sputnik Sweetheart*, and the more recent *1Q84* to identify the storytelling devices that make Murakami's works desirable for adaptation.

Chapter 2 focuses on both *Bakery Attack* and *The Second Bakery Attack*, the basis for multiple film adaptations. This chapter offers a nuanced discussion of the political landscape of 1960s Japan and Korea along with the international erasure of the sociopolitical specificity of Murakami's work when transposed to the United States or Poland. Rather than offering more authenticity to the films made in closer geographic proximity to the source, Yamada suggests that "more than other Murakami stories" *The Bakery Attack* "lends itself to adaptation in a variety of culture contexts" because it serves as a platform for discussing global engagement with "Marxist values, martial relationships, and neoliberal economies."⁴ More recent adaptations made outside Asian countries, Yamada notes, provide a clearer means to "tease out" new interpretations of the work than those made closer to the source's country of origin.

Chapter 3 addresses the notion of an "unfaithful adaptation" in relation to the most high-profile Murakami adaptation in recent years, *Drive My Car* (2021), directed by Hamaguchi Ryusuke. As the central chapter and cover image for the book, this chapter offers the closest reading of a case study for Yamada to illuminate his thesis. Hamaguchi's adaptation is an amalgam of multiple Murakami short stories, in which the director breaks down, combines, and reforms Murakami's source material. Yamada calls the adaptation "unfaithful" as a form of praise, as the film realizes the palimpsestic quality of Murakami's writing.

4. Yamada, *Murakami Haruki on Film*, 35

Chapter 4 is the most theoretically grounded portion of the text, analyzing three Murakami adaptations through the prism of Deleuze's concepts of memory and time in relation to three prominent feature adaptations of Murakami works. On the surface, this analysis may prove challenging for an undergraduate course, but Yamada synthesizes his summary of Deleuze's work with clear language and analysis of *Burning*, *Norwegian Wood*, and Ichikawa Jun's *Tony Takitani* adaptation.

Chapter 5 centers film and industry studies in an analysis of animated adaptations of Murakami's work. Yamada asserts that the medium of animation has the greatest capacity for adaptation of Murakami's writing, particularly the ability to incorporate techniques that would seem experimental in a live-action feature but can be more naturally accepted within animation. Greater attention is paid to the animation studios and production process in films like *Blind Willow*, *Sleeping Woman*. The increase of Murakami adaptations over the past decade also offers greater access to officially licensed versions on streaming and video-on-demand services with captioning in multiple languages, which helps those who wish to compare the source works with these screen adaptations.

Murakami Haruki on Film provides deft analysis but equally invites further debate about Murakami, adaptation, and the nature of meaning-making in film. Small adjustments might have strengthened the synthesis between word and image. The analysis of the *Bakery Attack* series, for instance, includes several title card screenshots, but Japanese language text is left untranslated even while Yamada highlights the critical importance of the card's meaning.⁵ Alternatively, images from *Tony Takitani* enhance Yamada's analysis of shot composition, character blocking, and narrative meaning-making.⁶ These notes are quite minor when considering the benefits Yamada's work offers to researchers, undergraduate courses, and a broader readership of those interested in Murakami's film adaptations. Academic

5. Yamada, 14.

6. Yamada, 64–65.

courses in Asian studies, media, or comparative literature will benefit a great deal by assigning this text or specific chapters. The language is clear, with multiple case studies and clear sourcing to support and provide guidance to readers. It is a welcome starting point for conversations on storytelling and the impact of Murakami Haruki globally.

