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## Haruki Murakami: everyday transculturality

Haruki Murakami (born 1949) is a bestselling author not only in Japan, but throughout the world. He has developed his own style of writing. Not only English, but also music has played a significant role in this. When Murakami began writing in 1978,<sup>1</sup> he made use of two aids. He first formulated his thoughts in English, and only then put them down on paper in his native Japanese. This was one factor that gave his writing a transcultural grounding from the outset. The other was music, especially jazz.<sup>2</sup> Murakami had the idea that writing a book should be like playing good music. Music requires good rhythm, good harmony, and good melodic line. That's what writing is about, too. By his own admission, having this analogy in mind helped Murakami in his writing beginnings, and he kept this perspective and method later.<sup>3</sup> – Transculturality, then, is

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<sup>1</sup> The impetus for this came (in a way inexplicable to himself) from a baseball game he attended in 1978. Murakami himself speaks of a “revelation” or an “epiphany” (cf. <https://lithub.com/haruki-murakami-the-moment-i-became-a-novelist/>).

<sup>2</sup> Murakami ran a jazz bar in Tokyo from 1974 to 1982.

<sup>3</sup> “At one point, I thought I should write the book as if I was playing good music. What good music requires is good rhythm, good harmony, good melody line. Three things. Writing is the same – rhythm, harmony, and melody. Once I realized that, it got easier for me to write. I wrote that book, *Hear the Wind Sing*, just like I was playing an instrument” (Murakami, quoted in Jonathan Ellis and Mitoko Hirabayashi, “In dreams begins responsibility: An interview with Haruki Murakami”, *The Georgia Review* 59/3, 2005, 548-567, here 567).

twofold right from the start: a linguistic leap (from English to Japanese) as well as a transfer between art genres (from music to literature).

Murakami repeatedly quotes American and European literature and music as well as films. Some of his stories bear the titles of popular songs. For example, *Norwegian Wood* was titled after a Beatles song; *Dance Dance Dance* is named after the rhythm-and-blues number with the same title by the band The Dells; and *South of the Border, West of the Sun* is so named after Nat King Cole's song "South of the Border." Murakami lived and taught in the United States for an extended period of time, and this, in addition to his initial acquaintance with the American language and the American way of life<sup>4</sup>, has obviously influenced his language. (The English that resonates in his writings is American English). Also, this familiarity with the American way of life has helped him to give adequate expression to the Japanese way of life, which is now heavily influenced by the West, especially among the younger generation. The consumer products and life orientations of the West are to be found everywhere in Japanese everyday life. This is why Murakami can counter accusations that he is pandering to the American model: "American culture was strong. I didn't choose it. It was there."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he can explain, "I write my books in Japanese of course. And mostly I write about Japanese people living in Japan. So naturally I think I am a Japanese author who is writing Japanese novels. That's very natural to me"<sup>6</sup>. The Japanese life world is just de facto widely permeated by Western elements, has absorbed them, appropriated them. This becomes clear in Murakami's stories and novels in a very unspectacular way. Transculturality is nothing special in them, but everyday normality.

Transculturalization occurs in both directions. Murakami not only refers to the elements of American and Western culture, but he 'japanizes' them at the same time, thus bringing them in 'asiatized' form to readers in other Asian countries such as China or Korea (where Murakami's books also enjoy great popularity); likewise, he gives references to European and American culture a peculiarly 'Japanese' twist by embedding them in surreal, magical, or mythical contexts that have become all too alien to Europe and the West (cause, perhaps, for readers there to reflect on shortcomings and corrections).

<sup>4</sup> Murakami grew up in the Japanese port city of Kobe, where exposure to the American way of life came naturally.

<sup>5</sup> Murakami, "In dreams begins responsibility," *op. cit.*, 555.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 566.

A special point for European and American recipients is that Murakami refers equally to consumer culture and high culture. In addition to a large number of pop icons and greats of the music industry, there are also references to Russian literary heroes such as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, to internationally known writers such as Proust, Kafka, Hemingway, Orwell, and Márquez, to philosophers such as Kant and Nietzsche, or to composers such as Wagner, but also to fairy tale characters such as Sheherazade or Cinderella. In Murakami's view, the supposedly highbrow and the supposedly trivial are of equal importance – an impetus for readers to cast aside their traditional cultural arrogance and to consider new, transcultural weightings.

Finally, the transcultural elements in Murakami's work also have an emancipatory effect. By getting to know and trying out other ways of life, his characters are able to break out of the traditional norms of Japanese society. This is especially true for female protagonists, who get to know and use alternatives to their traditional roles as wives, housewives, and mothers.

Murakami is not only a person of transcultural character himself, but he makes it clear to his readers that they are in a similar position. He shows how transculturality is a matter of course today: contemporary societies are transculturally constituted, and so are today's individuals. And this is not only a fact, it is actually a good thing.