

Why a “portrait painter”?: Haruki Murakami’s *Killing Commendatore* analyzed in terms of its connections to the animated movie *The King and the Mockingbird*

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1. *Translation* with reference to an early French animated movie:

Why is the main character of Haruki Murakami’s novel *Killing Commendatore* a portrait ?

Early French animated movies include a work called *The King and the Mockingbird* (released in 1980, started in 1947). Originally titled *The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep*, the circumstances surrounding the production of this movie are complex, but it is possible to view it as an extremely interesting work that provides many productive hints to the interpretation of Haruki Murakami’s novel *Killing Commendatore* (2017). This movie inspires me to ask the readers, what is the significance of the protagonist of the novel being a portrait artist, and what function does this play in the story? Furthermore, what are the effects of adopting this perspective?

In this paper, I examine Murakami’s depiction of the main character as a portrait painter in this novel, and whether a certain reference work was used to interpret *Killing Commendatore*. Here, the reason for using a reference work is that it may preserve some traces, fragments, or even interrelationships with the text that is the object of examination, or they may share common ground through either direct or indirect correlations, or as the source of the story. It is not based on the idea that they are products of shared or intersecting historical or cultural contexts. Regarding the theme of *translation* referred to here, it is not used in the narrow sense of the term to refer simply to a text that is originally written in one language and converted to another. Moreover, the term is not used to mean that a certain text is laterally deployed through a variety of cultures and media to achieve cultural adaptation. It also does not refer to an author transforming, borrowing, or naturalizing a past text, but rather, it means that readers or viewers must refer actively to another text when interpreting a specific text. It is, in every way, in the category of an “act of creative interpretation” by the reader. That is to say, it is used with the idea of concentrating on the action of the reader. Which is to say that the term *translation* here signifies the task of interpreting a text using a reference work that can provide insights into the target text.

In the present study, the animated movie *The King and the Mockingbird* and the novel *Killing Commendatore* are cross-referenced. Based on this cross-referencing, Murakami’s depiction of the protagonist as a portrait painter in *Killing Commendatore* will be explored. By analyzing the animated movie *The King and the Mockingbird*, which is referred to in a new cultural environment and in a new medium, new light will be shed on *Killing Commendatore*.

2. The animated movie *The King and the Mockingbird* and *Killing Commendatore: The King's Two Bodies*

I will first give an overview of the animated movie *The King and the Mockingbird*. Production of this early French full-length animated movie directed by Paul Grimault and based on a screenplay by Jacques Prévert began in 1947. However, after several years, it was released unfinished by the producer André Sarrut without the approval of Grimault and Prévert. Its original title was *The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep*. The movie was widely hailed, and deeply influenced members of the animation industry around the world. Later, however, Grimault and Prévert purchased rights to this work and completed a new version 34 years after they had the original idea for the movie. This is *The King and the Mockingbird*.

The major difference between the two works is the last scene; other than that, the plots are almost identical. The story is as follows. A tyrannical king lived in a multi-storied castle. The King, who possessed a fearful and suspicious soul, distrusted his retainers and punished them one after another. In the King's chamber on the topmost story of the castle, three paintings were hung on the walls. One was a painting of a beautiful young shepherdess, while a painting of a young chimney sweep hung beside it along with a portrait of the King. The only person the unsociable King loved was the young shepherdess in the painting. (Author's note: In contemporary terms, his feeling can probably be called *moe*, being strongly attracted to a two-dimensional character.) However, the shepherdess and the young chimney sweep were in love. In the face of the King's jealousy, the shepherdess and chimney sweep escaped from their paintings. This so enraged the King in the painting that he jumped out of it and pursued them. The real King who had noticed the tumult was, believe it or not, punished by the King in the portrait. Then, the King from the portrait, now transformed into the real King, ordered a search for the shepherdess and chimney sweep.

An interesting aspect of this movie is the characteristics of the tyrannical King. The King is "cross-eyed," which means he suffers from esotropia, a condition in which the eyes do not look in the same direction, but one eye looks in a different direction. The King orders his portrait painters to paint his portrait, but the portrait painters agonize over whether to paint a portrait of an "idealized King" or to paint him as a cross-eyed King, as he actually appeared. The audience watching the movie sees the King immediately execute a portrait painter who painted the King as he really appeared. A noteworthy point is that it is the "eyes" of the King that are the important symbol, and that the King in the painting has more authority than the real, flesh-and-blood King and eventually becomes the holder of power. Here, I wish to refer to *The King's Two Bodies*.

The King's Two Bodies,¹ published in 1957 as the culmination of more than 30 years of research by Ernst H. Kantorowicz is a work that presents the historical process that establishes the belief that a King has two distinctive bodies, based on his study of source documents, paintings, coins and paper currency,

¹ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, Isao Kobayashi (1992). *The King's Two Bodies*, Tokyo: Heibonsha.

and the architecture of mausoleums. Kantorowicz considered the structural change of the image of regal authority, but his book portrays a process that culminated in the sixteenth century English theory of the king's two bodies. The two bodies of a king are the "body natural," which is mortal, and the "body politic," which is immortal. The body natural signifies that the body of a king eventually must die and that it is a fragile living thing. This shows that the throne, the crown, and for that matter, the state might be, in the end, merely fictitious products of people's imaginations. The body politic, on the other hand, signifies a body that can be neither seen nor touched. It is the body created from political policies and government, which guides people and advances public welfare. The body politic escapes the weaknesses of the natural body. It appears that an image or metaphor for regal authority created by humans will guide human actions. In other words, when various metaphorical terms are used to describe regal authority, the body politic of the king will be created. Kantorowicz argued that in the kings of Europe, the body natural and the body politic are unified and inseparable. The two bodies are incorporated in one person.

Regarding the portrait seen in the animated movie *The King and the Mockingbird*, the scholar of modern Japanese literature Yōichi Komori made an interesting observation referencing Kantorowicz. It concerns the role played by the portraits of kings in the history of painting in Europe. In European society, portraits of kings were retained as symbols of their authority. A king leaves his own body as a symbol in the form of a portrait. The actual body of a king dies, but the king's gaze—that is, his eyes in his portrait—function as a lasting symbol of his authority.²

When considering the novel *Killing Commendatore*, while referring to the concepts in the movie *The King and the Mockingbird* and in the *King's Two Bodies*, I noted three common points: an interrelationship between portraits and authority, a portrait and the memory of an actual person, and a concern with eyes. These three factors hold important significance in Murakami's *Killing Commendatore*.

The main character in *Killing Commendatore* is a portrait painter. The account of how he came to paint portraits shows that he does it to earn a living. Although at art school he painted abstracts, after graduation he became a specialist in portrait painting.

(Quote)

"In a word, the president of a company, leading member of an academic association, member of the Diet, local big-shot, and other such people who are considered worthy to be called "pillars of society" (although the dimensions of the pillar differ somewhat) are always portrayed realistically. A drawing style which is realistic, grave, and calm is required. These were portraits that were practical in every respect and intended to be hung on the walls of drawing rooms or company presidents' offices."(1)³

He said that many of the people who modeled for his portraits were members of the financial or

² Isao Takahata, Yōichi Komori (2006) special interview: War and the verticality of the social structure that the poet Prévert considered a constant problem, *Cine Front*, 347, pp.34-45.

³ Translations of the text of *Killing Commendatore* are by Yomemura.

political world. In other words, the portraits that the main character painted were linked to strengthening authority in some way. Besides, what the main character required for his portraits were “memories.”

(Quote)

“What I needed were vivid memories more than the actual person in front of me. (The presence of the subject was even an obstacle to my painting). It was memory as a three-dimensional *shape*.” (1)

The element that could arouse the interest of the main character was nothing other than the “eyes.” He had a girlfriend at that time, but he happened to be introduced to another girl who he instantly fell in love with. He married that girl and she became his wife. The main character was entranced by her eyes. He said that her eyes were the same as the eyes of his younger sister who died of congenital heart disease at the age of 12.

(Quotes)

“She reminded me of my younger sister not because of the similarity of her physical features, but because of the impression given by the movement of her expression, particularly the movement and brightness of her eyes, was astonishingly similar. It is just as if a magic spell had somehow reawakened the past before my eyes.” (2).

“Towards the end [his younger sister] had become extremely thin, but despite this, her eyes were as fresh and filled with vitality as ever.”

“It was definitely my wife’s eyes that attracted me to her. It was *something* that could be seen in her eyes. My heart was violently shaken from the moment I first saw those two pupils.” (2)

“I took out the small sketch book I always carried around from my backpack and quickly sketched her face with a B2 pencil. [...] The important part was, of course, her eyes. I was most eager to sketch her eyes. A deep world transcending time spread in the depths of those eyes.” (2)

Considering the selection of portrait artist as the profession of the main character of *Killing Commendatore*, it seems that the important points are portraits and authority, memory, and eyes. I will now continue my analysis of this point below.

3. What is the significance of the main character being a portrait painter?

At the end (32) of Part 1 of *Killing Commendatore*, there is a quote from *Revolt in Treblinka* by Samuel Willenberg under the section heading, “His specialized skills were greatly prized.” Here, an artist who painted portraits for the German soldiers at this German Nazi concentration camp appeared. Why is there a reference to this German Nazi concentration camp? *Killing Commendatore*, which became the title of this novel, of course refers to the scene with a painting that has been concealed by the artist Tomohiko Amada who has been hospitalized with dementia, but this scene is reproduced with the help of the main character at the end of the novel in the ward where Amada has been hospitalized. He

described what Tomohiko Amada saw, as follows:

(Quote)

“My opponent who was about to die at my hand was, for him, not Commendatore. Who in the world was it that he saw? Was he a high-ranked Nazi officer whom he planned to assassinate in Vienna? Or was he the young second lieutenant who handed a katana to his younger brother and ordered him to behead three Chinese prisoners in Nanjing Castle?” (51)

In addition, considering the fact that when the painting “Killing Commendatore” suggests “assassination” aimed at “authority,” which Tomohiko Amada and his younger brother were not allowed to exercise, the main character acts to kill Commendatore on behalf of Amada, the fact that the main character is a portrait painter begins to appear in a new light.

Noi Sawaragi found out Hitler in the man who was assassinated in the painting *Killing Commendatore*, and Tomohiko Amada himself in the man who committed the assassination in the painting “Killing Commendatore”.⁴ In fact, as one continues to read this novel, scenes involving the painting “Killing Commendatore” suggest that the failed 1938 assassination attempt that Tomohiko Amada became caught up in while a student in Vienna was portrayed symbolically. Amada had an Austrian lover who was involved in an underground resistance organization, but the members who planned to assassinate the high-ranking Nazi officer were all arrested and executed by the Gestapo. However, only Amada narrowly escaped death by being forcefully repatriated to Japan. This novel included not only the annexation of Austria by the Nazis (*Anschluss*), but other historical events: the Nanjing massacre in which Amada’s younger brother played a part (and because of which he later committed suicide), the Great East Japan Earthquake, and others. Tomohiko Amada said nothing about the failed assassination plot after his return to Japan.

Tetsuro Koyama focused on the fact that when Murakami attended the trial of the Aum Shinrikyo believers who carried out the subway sarin gas attack ordered by Shoko Asahara, the leader of their cult, he stated, “It really made me think about the problem of war.” Koyama links this specific scene in the painting “Killing Commendatore” that portrays Amada to Tomohiko Amada’s younger brother who murdered prisoners under orders from his superior officer—and who later suffered and took his own life.⁵ This scene of the painting “Killing Commendatore” can be understood by readers as the embodiment of actions that, for the younger brother, could not be performed, and as a requiem for those who lost their lives.

However, how did the main character who acted on his behalf in the painting “Killing Commendatore” conduct himself later as a portrait painter?

⁴ Noi Sawaragi (2017) *Assassination and the forest*, *Shincho*, 114 (5), pp.134-145.

⁵ Tetsuro Koyama (2017) “I” in *Opposition to Ideas*, *Bungakukai*, 71 (5), pp.70-90.

In this sense, interestingly enough, in the beginning of the novel *Killing Commendatore*, a “faceless” man appeared and orders the portrait painter who is the main character to paint his likeness. Moreover, the main character had already talked about the following: “I might someday be able to paint a “portrait of nothingness” just as a certain artist could sketch the painting “Killing Commendatore”.” (prologue)

* In the quoted text, the italicization of words for emphasis is based on the original text. Words are underlined for emphasis by the author.

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