

Anomie and Isolation: *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle,* *Ghost in the Shell,* *Serial Experiments Lain,* and Japanese Consensus Society

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ABSTRACT

*The essay explores how the societal effects of Japan's economic recession during the 1990s are reflected in several cultural texts from that period: Haruki Murakami's novel *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, the animé film *Ghost in the Shell* and the animé series *Serial Experiments Lain*.*

Faced with sudden job uncertainty due to the recession, Japanese individuals accustomed to the ideology of progress of a society that values uniformity and conformity have fallen into listlessness and withdrawal. Accordingly, the protagonists of these texts all experience a crisis of embodied subjectivity, or shutaisei that is tied to a loss of community and history.

They work to reconstitute their shutaisei by first uncovering their personal and collective history in the form of a coherent awareness of their past. Transcending their isolation, they likewise strive to develop bonds with others through reciprocal communication.

Particularly because these texts are characterized by elements of the fantastic and narratives of metamorphosis, they can also be seen as allegories of subversion against Japanese consensus society and its ideology of progress.

Keywords: *subjectivity, Japan, Haruki Murakami, animé*

INTRODUCTION

A few years after the Heisei Emperor Akihito ascended to the Chrysanthemum throne in 1989, Japan's bubble-growth economy burst, prompting a decade-long recession. Long guaranteed stable jobs within their country's corporate system, the Japanese people were suddenly confronted with a bleak future. Many of them withdrew from the real world into the embrace of technology.

In this essay, I aim to explore how the societal effects of Japan's economic recession are reflected in several cultural texts from that period, Haruki Murakami's novel *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, the animé film *Ghost in the Shell*, and the animé series *Serial Experiments Lain*. These texts explore the erosion of self and its links to community, history, and technology.

POST-WORLD WAR II JAPAN

In its post-World War II drive toward reconstruction, Japan had attained its goal of gaining economic and technological advantage over Western countries by the 1980s. Such a momentous achievement had its downside, however, as the Japanese people were left without another cause to inspire the whole of the nation. Society began to splinter as people grew aimless (R. Murakami 49).

The effect has been most profound on Japan's youth born after 1970 and numbering 44 million, a third of the country's population. They were raised in affluence and little hardship with their future place within Japan's corporate machinery already set for them. This security has been paid for at a great price. Because parents would work long hours, they spent little time with their children and instead bought them toys and gadgets. Japan's current generation of young people grew up lonely and alienated, unable to relate to others. A specialist in youth culture observes, "Their groups are much less committed to each other. Getting along is much more important than getting involved" (Larimer, "Me" 19 and 20).

Such affluence has also translated into a lack of ambition, a sense of listlessness. A researcher on Japanese youth culture made a survey of young Japanese about the things they wanted the most. In the sixties, they desired television, refrigerator, and washing machine; in the seventies, they wished for a color TV and a car; and in the eighties, they pined for a baseball glove, Walkman, and gaming console. In the past few years, the answer was: nothing. Even when prodded, they could not name anything; they had no inkling as to what they truly wanted (Larimer, "Me" 19). Among these Japanese are the adolescents who can be witnessed in the center of town until two or three in the morning just standing around and doing nothing (McCarthy 28).

Many have chosen to adopt the lifestyle of a *freeter*, a term that combines the English word *free* with *arbeiter*, the German word for worker. Whereas Japanese salarymen would follow an exhausting work schedule for decades, *freeters* resist work as much as possible, only working when they need the money. Then they try to have fun for as long as they can until their funds are depleted. By doing so, they "celebrate their rejection of their parents' old workaholic lifestyle" (Wehrfritz and Hodgson 14 and 17). A 30-year-old design-school dropout explains, "Getting up early even in winter, crushing yourself into a commuter train, working late and drinking with your superiors to ingratiate yourself. Where's the freedom in that?" (qtd. in Wehrfritz and Hodgson 14). According to a study conducted by the Japanese Institute of Labor, however, their desire for freedom and flexibility results in the absence of any definite career goals (Wehrfritz and Hodgson 16).

The situation deteriorated in the early nineties when real estate prices plunged by 60-80 percent and the Nikkei stock index lost almost a third of its value from 39,000 to 14,000 (Larimer, "Sun" 20). Despite the election of a new, seemingly dynamic prime minister in Junichiro Koizumi in 2001, that year was its worst so far, with nearly 20,000 bankruptcies, the second highest annual total since World War II. The initial months of the following year did not offer any change in fortunes either. The Nikkei index fell below the Dow industrial average for the first time in decades and the largest Japanese banks were projected to lose an estimated \$17 billion for the fiscal year mostly due to bad loans (Larimer, "Sun" 18 and 22). Having

reached a postwar high of 5.6 percent, unemployment threatened to increase even further as more and more manufacturers, at the time 35 percent, were transferring their operations to cheaper countries like China (Larimer, "Sun" 18 and 21).

No longer assured of career jobs, young graduates are facing a "job seeker's ice age," or *shushoku hyogaki*. In the past, male students from the top Japanese universities would join traditional corporate giants, fresh high-school graduates would staff the factories and sales departments of major manufacturers, and women would assume "office lady" positions until their marriage. At the peak of the recession, however, there were years when barely 80 percent of college graduates would find any type of work after matriculation (Wehrfritz and Hodgson 14-15). Even employees supposedly secure in their jobs have been not spared from the effects of the recession. Due to corporate restructuring, or *risutora*, some Japanese have been forced to agree to lower salaries, job sharing or early retirement (Larimer, "Sun" 16 and 18).

The Japanese government has repeatedly tried to remedy the situation, but instead of adopting innovative solutions that would jumpstart the economy, it has relied on the same unsuccessful formula again and again. Whenever a potential crisis arises, the country's economic managers merely increase fiscal spending, weaken the yen, and make exports a little more affordable so as to buy more time (Larimer, "Sun" 16 and 21). Never having been known to reinvent themselves, an increasingly discouraged Japanese people have been left clueless as to how they could overcome the problem (McCarthy 25).

Lifestyles have changed as a consequence. Whereas men would live with their parents until they could save enough for a down payment on an apartment and marry, "high housing costs and relatively low wages" have prevented this from happening (Wehrfritz and Hodgson 17). Most students struggle to memorize thousands of facts, yet are unaware of the true purpose of their training (McCarthy 27). As much as they would want to change the order of things, young Japanese appear incapable of organizing a coherent plan of action. Instead, they channel their frustrations into their unorthodox behavior. As a form of rebellion against a society that values politeness, they deliberately act rudely and garishly. With

tanned skin and hair dyed brown, red, yellow, blue or purple, they gabble loudly on their mobile phones in public. So that they could keep up with the latest fashion trends and consumer products, some teenage girls from middle-class families even prostitute themselves for middle-aged men (Larimer, "Me" 18).

The angst borne by young Japanese has been expressed violently. Youth crime in Japan has risen, especially in the years 1996 to 1997 when the number of prosecuted juvenile offenders increased 14 percent (Larimer, "Me" 21). *Ijime*, or bullying has grown rampant in schools. A child who wears black socks while everyone else wears white socks can become a victim to more than just taunts. Because he is different, gangs surround him and beat him up (Larimer, "Me" 20). A more specific example is that of a quiet 13-year-old girl who had her school books ripped apart and pins taped inside her shoes. She can no longer straighten her ring finger because its tendon was severed by razor blades that had been imbedded inside the drawer of her desk (Larimer, "Me"). In a sense, *ijime* is a distortion of the uniformity and conformity that Japanese consensus society emphasizes. Primary public school education in Japan, for instance, reinforces these principles. During school plays, different students are granted the opportunity to say the lines of the main character. School competitions do not have individual events, only team events. Furthermore, grades do not reflect achievement since students can obtain high grades as long as they try hard enough (Tashiro 22). In sum, young people are trained to scorn individuality. Accordingly, sudden outbursts of irrational violence have become more common. *Kireru* literally means "snapping," such as when a Kobe teenager decapitated an 11-year-old boy and left his head on a post at his schoolyard gate (Larimer, "Me" 19 and 21). A more frequent example would be students who physically assault their teachers in schools once famous for their rigidity and discipline (Larimer, "Me" 18). According to an administrator, young Japanese who experience *kireru* are unable to articulate their negative emotions through language. "Frustrations are inevitably bounced back on themselves, internalized, stifled but unresolved" (McCarthy 27).

Others have isolated themselves within an imagined space more pleasant to them. This is *hikikomori*, which is loosely translated as "social withdrawal," another symptom of the dominance of

technology and lack of authentic human communication in Japanese society. An estimated one million of Japan's youth suffer from this condition. Friendless, such kids spend their days asleep and the nights watching television and playing video games. They "find it extremely painful to communicate with the outside world, and thus they turn to the tools that bring virtual reality into their closed rooms" (R. Murakami 49).

In fact, many Japanese nowadays spend more time with machines than with human beings. For example, Japanese high-school seniors, 41 percent of whom carry mobile phones against only 12 percent in the U.S., can ride a train run without human operators, ticket-takers, or conductors to school. On the way, she can check for voice messages, send e-mail responses to friends, and download her horoscope. She can stop by a vending machine on a consumerist whim since it sells assorted things like beer, ice, fried octopus balls, video games and porn magazines. At home, she can play with her pet Aibo, or mechanical dog. In local factories, an excess of 400,000 robots are used, which is more than half of the world's supply. These robots create cars, cellular phones, personal computers and \$4.3 billion worth of other robots. Moreover, machines act as mediators of human connection. The Japanese, being a culturally reserved people, have harnessed technology into a bridge that links them in different ways such as when video phones are used for both matchmaking and prostitution. The reality is that the Japanese have developed such a close relationship with machines that they even give them personal names (Larimer, "Rage" 19 and 20; "Man's" 23 and 24).

Commonplace are scenes in which several people gather together around a table at a Tokyo restaurant engrossed in their notebook computers, which are conspicuously attached to mobile phones. Instead of conversing, they e-mail one another as well as absent friends (Larimer, "Rage" 19). As staggering as it may appear, however, this is only part of a greater malaise affecting Japanese society. While people have established definite connections with the technology that surrounds them, they have become increasingly unable to communicate with their fellow human beings. According to author Ryu Murakami, "[m]iscommunication prevails throughout our society: in the family, in the community, between

management and employees, between the financial world and the Ministry of Finance, between the government and the people” (49).

THE WIND-UP BIRD CHRONICLE

Haruki Murakami’s work examines this crisis of subjectivity, or loss of *shutaisei* among contemporary Japanese. The Japanese notion of self is understood as *shutaisei*, a compound word made up of three characters: “*shu* (subject, subjective, sovereign, main), *tai* (body, substance, situation), and *sei* (quality, feature).” While dictionaries define it as “substance, subjecthood, independence, or identity,” Masao Miyoshi takes the word to mean “the agent of action, the subject of speculation or speech act, the identity of existence, and the rule of individualism” (qtd. in Iwamoto). In other words, *shutaisei* is embodied subjectivity, the coherence of concrete acts of agency.

Published in the midnineties, the three-volume *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* is said to encapsulate all the major ideas that Murakami had explored up to that point. In particular, the novel deals with the precariousness of *shutaisei* caused by the lack of human connection, social history, and personal identity, and in the process uncovers the link among the three. On one level, the Japanese individual is incapable of communicating and forming significant bonds with other people. On another, more allegorical level, the individual is alienated from himself and others by the strictures of Japanese consensus society. So that he may preserve his embodied subjectivity, he must recuperate his connections with others and his consciousness of his history.

Unemployed after having quit his job as a clerk at a law office, Toru Okada, the protagonist in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, spends his entire day at home doing nothing. Like Murakami’s other protagonists, Toru “avoids engagement and commitment” (Iwamoto), lapsing into a passivity that has deprived him of any true identity (Stretcher 281). Since his marriage, he has also failed to sustain meaningful relationships with other people, a fact he recognizes.

... my one-day absence was probably not affecting anybody. Not one human being would have noticed that I was gone. I could disappear from the face of the earth, and the world would go on moving without the slightest hiccup. Things were tremendously complicated, to be sure, but one thing was clear: no one needed me (H. Murakami 250).

For Murakami, the self defines itself in opposition to something else, for example, another person (Stretcher 271). Whereas an individual can easily assimilate inanimate objects within the realm of his reason by imposing value on them, he cannot do so as easily with another human being. Another person poses a problem for the self because, endowed with his own consciousness and identity, he resists simple assimilation (Iwamoto). The question Murakami attempts to resolve in his writing is how one can constitute his *shutaisei* “in the absence of meaningful interaction with an Other” (Stretcher 267 and 295).

Toru’s disjunction from others is exemplified in his relationship with his wife of six years, Kumiko, the fulcrum of all action in the narrative. Kumiko works long hours editing a health food magazine and belongs to a traditional Japanese family that values social position and financial success, a situation which is a source of conflict for Toru. The protagonist has the mistaken belief that their marriage is happy and unproblematic; in fact, his self-absorption has carried over into their relationship. Whereas Kumiko knows that Toru is not too fond of manicured nails, telephone covers, thermos bottles with flower decorations, and bellbottom jeans with rivets, he is unaware that she dislikes blue tissues, flower-patterned toilet paper, beef and green pepper. Wondering if these details are actually important for him to know, Toru recalls moments when she will unexpectedly become quiet in the middle of a conversation for no clear reason and starts to doubt that he fully understands his wife.

Could it be true that the Kumiko I had thought I understood, the Kumiko I had held close to me and joined my body with over the years – that Kumiko was nothing but the most superficial layer of the person Kumiko herself... If so, what about those six years we had spent together? What had they been? What had they meant? (H. Murakami 278)

... inside lay a world that belonged to Kumiko alone, a vast world that I had never known. I saw it as a big, dark room. I was standing there holding a cigarette lighter, its tiny flame showing me only the smallest part of the room.

Would I ever see the rest? Or would I grow old and die without ever really knowing her? If that was all that lay in store for me, then what was the point of this married life I was leading? What was the point of my life at all if I was spending it in bed with an unknown companion?

(H. Murakami 30-31)

Toru then receives a series of phone calls from a mysterious woman, who in the end, turns out to be his unconscious representation of Kumiko. The woman, whom he describes as being “in a place far removed from the limits of my consciousness” (H. Murakami 20), asks to talk to him for ten minutes so that they can understand each other better. Toru’s inability to recognize Kumiko’s voice on the phone reflects his inability to connect with her. Likewise, his unwillingness to answer the phone each time it rings reflects his unwillingness to confront this problem.

Murakami’s characters are always confronted by two worlds, those of the conscious and the unconscious (Stretcher 268), which are associated with images of light and dark. For the author, the latter is the impregnable part of a person’s inner mind that contains the memories he has gathered throughout his life. It is often dark, cold, and lifeless (Stretcher 270) as Kumiko observes on her first date with Toru.

What we see before us is just one tiny part of the world. We get into the habit of thinking. This is the world, but that’s not true at all. The real world is in a much darker and deeper place than this... We just happen to forget all that... Two-thirds of the earth’s surface is ocean, and all we can see of it with the naked eye is the surface: the skin. We hardly know anything about what’s underneath the skin (H. Murakami 225-226).

While in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, this irretrievable identity is termed the “black box,” in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* it is repeatedly referred to as *something*. The use of the word *something* appropriately connotes incomprehensibility

since the contents of the unconscious, being impregnable and irrational, cannot be accessed through reason. Even if they were to surface on the level of consciousness, they would assume entirely different and unrecognizable forms.

When Kumiko is abducted at the start of the second volume by her brother Noboru Wataya, Toru realizes that to be able to rescue her is a way to constitute his *shutaisei*. “All I knew for certain was that as long as I failed to solve the secret of that something, Kumiko would never come back to me” (H. Murakami 332). In other words, in order for him to establish a connection with his wife, he must first reestablish his own identity. Recognizing that the unconscious is the foundation of selfhood, Toru attempts to break open “that ‘impregnable’ box of memories and experiences” and examine it (Stretcher 271 and 281). He descends into a deep, pitch-black well beside an abandoned house, where he eventually penetrates his inner mind by contemplating memories of his life with Kumiko. Inside his unconscious, which is depicted as room 208 of a labyrinthine hotel, Toru meets a woman, actually Kumiko, who demands that he remember her name. This interweaving of the real and the fantastic, such that the two are no longer distinguishable, is characteristic of Murakami’s fiction. In almost every work, “a realistic narrative setting is created, then disrupted, sometimes mildly, sometimes violently, by the bizarre or magical” (Stretcher 267). The fantastic becomes an instrument by which Murakami’s protagonists can fashion their own individualized, personal sense of embodied subjectivity (Stretcher 269).

The worlds of the conscious and the unconscious typically allow a seamless crossover for characters drawn from the latter (Stretcher 268). These characters become “gateways” that enable the protagonist to reach “a deeper understanding” of himself (Napier 126). In *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, however, it is often difficult to determine whether the characters Toru encounters are real or not. Nevertheless, when elements of the unconscious manifest themselves in Toru’s conscious world, this world appears hallucinatory or irrational. Reality is seemingly transformed, for instance, after Toru receives the blue-black mark on his right cheek that enables him to help others recover their core identities.

Without a step-by-step investigation of the event, I would not be able to distinguish the point at which the real ended and the unreal took over. The wall separating the two regions had begun to melt. In my memory, at least, the real and the unreal seemed to be residing together with equal weight and vividness (H. Murakami 293).

Moreover, when he starts working for Nutmeg Akasaka, he observes that the logic of his world suddenly resembles the absurdity of an art film's narrative.

Two of the characters in this narrative are Malta and Creta Kano, sisters who help people find the lost *something* inside their heads. The younger Creta, who dresses as if it were still the sixties, was "defiled" by Kumiko's brother, Noboru Wataya, when he stole her core identity. Toru learns from Creta that, throughout her early life, she had lived in excruciating pain. Having failed a suicide at 20 - she had crashed her brother's uninsured car into a crumbling building - she lost not only the pain but all feeling in her body. As a way of paying for the damage and seeing the true extent of her physical numbness, she was forced to turn to prostitution.

Toru likewise becomes involved with Nutmeg and Cinnamon Akasaka, a mother and son who do work similar to that of the Kanos. He assumes Nutmeg's job when the blue-black mark he receives in the well endows him with the power to restore the "inner balance" within rich and powerful middle-aged women. Nutmeg tells him that she was once a successful fashion designer who lost her passion for the craft after her husband was brutally murdered. Toru frequently listens to her memories of the end of World War II when she was a child living with her family in the Japanese puppet-state of Manchuoko. The boat that carried her family back to Japan would have been destroyed by an American submarine had their country not surrendered. Left behind in the mainland, her father, the chief veterinary surgeon at a zoo, helplessly witnessed Japanese soldiers execute Chinese rebels and eliminate all the animals in the zoo. On the other hand, her son, the dashing but withdrawn Cinnamon Akasaka, has not spoken since he was a child. Despite his silence, he communicates to Toru by letting him read his stories, which are about his grandfather's fate in

Manchuoko during World War II. Because no one knows what really happened to his grandfather, Cinnamon makes his grandfather's story his own by recovering these lost experiences through the use of his imagination.

He was engaged in a search for the meaning of his own existence. And he was hoping to find it by looking into the events that had preceded him.

To do that, Cinnamon had to fill in those blank spots in the past that he could not reach with his own hands. By using those hands to make a story, he was trying to supply the missing links. (H. Murakami 525)

Toru also regularly corresponds through mail with Lieutenant Mamiya, a veteran of Japan's war with China and World War II. Mamiya narrates to Toru a part of Japan's history that is normally left unspoken and even forgotten. As a member of the Kwantung Army during Japan's installation of Manchuoko, Mamiya was sent on a secret mission into Outer Mongolia to retrieve a secret document. When they were captured, their team leader was skinned alive by a Russian officer named Boris the Skinner. Although he was left to die in a well, Mamiya survived. He lost his *shutaisei* while in that well. He confesses:

I feel as if, in the intense light that shone for a mere ten or fifteen seconds a day in the bottom of the well, I burned up the very core of my life, until there was nothing left... no matter what I have experienced since then, I ceased to feel anything in the bottom of my heart (H. Murakami 170).

Mamiya eventually encountered Boris the Skinner again in a Siberian labor camp after World War II. Boris the Skinner terrorized the Japanese prisoners there, but when Mamiya found the opportunity to kill him, he was unable to do so. One function of the conflict between Mamiya and Boris the Skinner is its parallel with the antagonism between Toru and the character of Noboru Wataya. When he confronts Wataya at the end of the novel, Toru must see if he can defeat his nemesis whereas Mamiya has failed (Stretcher 287).

The most significant bond Toru forms is with his wise teenage neighbor May Kasahara, who walks with a limp and has a small scar under one of her eyes. Basically a loner, May invites Toru to join her as she surveys bald heads for a wig factory. In the afternoons, they hang out on May's lawn and talk about life. May shares with him her peculiar obsession with death but almost kills him when she locks him in the well for over a day. Nonetheless, they are able to establish a definite connection with each other such that when Toru becomes trapped in a well that is slowly filling with water May can hear his cries for help.

In his attempt to constitute his *shutaisei* to rescue Kumiko, Toru manages to connect with these characters by learning to listen to them tell stories about themselves. One reason why people may have grown lonely and alienated in the world is that no one is willing to listen to them. May Kasahara tells him:

Everybody's born with some different thing at the core of their existence. And that thing, whatever it is, becomes like a heat source that runs each person from the inside. I have one too, of course. Like everybody else... What I'd really like to do is find a way to communicate that feeling to another person. But I can't seem to do it. They just don't get it. Of course, the problem could be that I'm not explaining it very well, but I think it's because they're not listening very well. They pretend to be listening, but they're not really (H. Murakami 322).

The characters in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* succeed in breaking through their isolation and forming bonds with one another by uncovering the other's history. This history is significant. Because an individual's core identity is comprised of memories, in order to create a sense of embodied subjectivity, he must recall these memories by expressing them through language. He must similarly find meaningful interactions with others since these interactions help define his identity. The two activities are interrelated. By telling one another stories, people realize that, because these stories are interconnected through history, they are interconnected, as well. In its constitution, therefore, *shutaisei* is both personal and social.

By the conclusion of the novel, Toru has overcome his listlessness. Instead of fleeing from the threat of danger, he chooses

to confront Noboru Wataya, the person who abducted his wife and stole her core identity. In the end, he acknowledges that indeed, without another person, there is no self: “I could not – and should not – run away, not to Crete, not to anywhere. I had to get Kumiko back. With my own hands, I had to pull her back into this world. Because if I didn’t, that would be the end of me. This person, this self that I thought of as ‘me,’ would be lost” (H. Murakami 338). The sum of connections he has formed with others has enabled him to constitute his *shutaisei*.

Alternatively, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* can also be read as an allegory of subversion against the staid conformity of Japanese consensus society. In Japan, people are defined according to their role within this tightly organized system (Stretcher 281). Unthinking acquiescence to the “highly conscious ideology of progress” that permeates through every level — “the government, private citizenry, business, and educational institutions” — is promoted (Napier 144 and 159). Those who deviate from the system “become isolated, forbidden to participate in the affluent society that surrounds it” (Stretcher 281). Murakami explores what in the core identity of a person will lead him to assimilate willingly into the system or pursue instead the marginal alternative (Stretcher 271). One of the constant ideas throughout his work is that an individualized *shutaisei* can become a form of rebellion against Japanese consensus society’s attempt to impose “a dictatorship over the mind” (Stretcher 279 and 280).

For no clear reason in his mind, Toru Okada abruptly ends his pursuit of a law career. According to him, he simply does not want to become a lawyer. He had been “a nameless one” among the “vaguely defined people” who went about their daily routines unquestioningly (H. Murakami 391-392). May Kasahara sees such a society as rigidly rational: “Anyway, it seems to me that the way most people go on living (I suppose there are a few exceptions), they think that the world or life (or whatever) is this place where everything is (or is supposed to be) basically logical and consistent” (H. Murakami 460). In Toru’s old company, difference was discouraged. The dress code was strict as everyone, even clerks were required to wear a suit to work. A person who used a tie that drew attention had less a chance of promotion. In contrast, Toru finds

unemployment liberating: “I found this kind of life refreshing. No more commuting to work on jam-packed subways, no more meetings with people I didn’t want to meet. And best of all, I could read any book I wanted, anytime I wanted” (H. Murakami 25). His desire for freedom and flexibility is not so far removed from that of the *freeters*.

In the novel, the image of the wind-up bird seems to represent the mindless compulsion to work which directs the members of Japanese consensus society.

The cry of this bird was audible only to certain special people, who were guided by it towards inevitable ruin. The will of human beings meant nothing, then... People were no more than dolls set on tabletops, the springs in their backs wound up tight, dolls set to move in ways they could not choose, moving in directions they could not choose. Nearly all within range of the wind-up bird’s cry were ruined, lost. Most of them died, plunging over the edge of the table (H. Murakami 525-526).

Those who hear its cry are the individuals who submit their lives to the logic of Japanese consensus society. In exchange for financial security, they surrender their individuality, and yet they only succeed in losing any definite sense of self. The relentless progression of time marked by the unwinding of the wind-up bird’s spring is nothing but a slow countdown toward the destruction of their individuality. On the other hand, when the spring runs down, everything in the world stops moving. This void in time gives individuals such as Toru the critical space to reflect and to reconstitute their *shutaisei*. “Never until then – never in the whole course of my life – had I grappled with questions like this. And why not? Perhaps because my hands had been full just living. I had simply been too busy to think about myself” (H. Murakami 24). Like Toru, the Japanese have forgotten about themselves because they have been too busy working.

As Toru has rejected the values of Japanese consensus society, he has difficulty getting along with Kumiko’s traditional family. Her father is arrogant and self-righteous, especially when it comes to the ideals of the world to which he belongs. He believes that because people are not born equal, those who are superior to others

ought to exercise their advantage through ruthless domination. Kumiko's mother is her father's shadow. Her only meaning in life is her husband's high position in government and her son's high grades. These values were not passed down to Kumiko, who grew distant from her family since she had spent the significant years of her childhood with her grandmother. Her family sent her there because she was taciturn and withdrawn. When Toru proposed marriage to Kumiko, her family disapproved at first due to Toru's average social standing. They eventually agreed after the family psychic, Mr. Honda, said it was the right thing to do.

Toru's nemesis is Noboru Wataya, who seems to embody what Japan has become. Pressured to succeed from childhood, Noboru Wataya becomes an academic who writes a thick economics book that nobody understands but everyone praises. A celebrity, he regularly appears on television and print, which he is using as his launching pad into politics. However, Toru notes that during debates, Noboru frequently changes his arguments to match those of his opponents. In other words, the Noboru Wataya who appears in media is manufactured and hollow.

His was a world that he had fabricated by combining several one-dimensional systems of thought. He could rearrange the combination in an instant, as needed. These were ingenious – even artistic – intellectual permutations and combinations. But to me they amounted to nothing more than a game. If there was any consistency to his opinions, it was the consistent lack of consistency, and if he had a worldview, it was a view that proclaimed his lack of a worldview. But these very absences were what constituted his intellectual assets (H. Murakami 75-76).

Beneath his well-groomed appearance lies a lack of originality and conviction that is typical of members of the Japanese establishment.

After meeting Noboru Wataya for the first time, Toru Okada instantly develops feelings of unease and paranoia. For Toru, Wataya wears a mask behind which lurks something sinister. What Toru usually does when faced with an insurmountable problem is to transfer all his unpleasant thoughts and feelings to an unconscious corner of his mind so that he can deal with them at a time when he is better prepared. This is something he is unable to do with Wataya.

Toru's strong dislike for Wataya seems to reflect his aversion to Japanese consensus society. Wataya steals the core identities of women from their bodies, causing them to lose the ability to act out of their own volition. While Wataya himself seems to represent what Japan has become, what Wataya does to others echoes what Japanese consensus society has done to its people. In order to sustain its narrative of progress, Japan has forced the Japanese people into sacrificing their individuality and their history: in other words, the things that make them who they are. The sheen of economic success is only a façade that hides the actual social malaise afflicting Japanese society. That women are particularly targeted by Wataya is indicative of a society that renders women subservient to their husbands. “[S]ubdued and delicate” (Napier 81), Kumiko’s mother lives this stereotype of Japanese femininity. In spite of her marriage, Kumiko, on the other hand, continues to work and, in fact, is the one who financially supports her husband. Because of her lifestyle choice, Wataya must put his sister in her place. He disrupts her “inner balance” which causes her to lose sight of her true self and surrender herself to different men.

The Wind-up Bird Chronicle’s use of elements of the fantastic could be viewed as subversive. Japanese fantastic literature has traditionally served as a “mirror image of Japanese history” by revealing literally and figuratively a “reverse side of the myths of constant progress, economic miracle, and social harmony” (Napier 12). As mentioned earlier, characters drawn from the unconscious surface in conscious reality. Mysterious forces steal the *something* deep inside people. While trapped in a well that is his gateway to his unconscious, Toru receives a blue-black mark on his right cheek that grants him the power to restore the “inner balance” of people. His own core identity is Room 208 in a labyrinthine hotel. Furthermore, Murakami disrupts conventional narration by incorporating other narrative forms into the third volume. Toru’s privileged position as the protagonist is challenged when news items, letters from May Kasahara, and even a fable about a boy usurp his narrative duties. These devices are used to signal a “conscious departure from consensus reality” (Napier 9).

History is given great significance in the novel. The various characters in the novel communicate with one another through

letters, stories, and conversation. By listening to them, Toru enables others to articulate the traumatic aspects of their own personal history and Japan's history as a nation which normally remain unspoken and suppressed in Japanese consensus society. While Kumiko speaks of her abortion, Creta Kano discloses her suicide attempt and turn to prostitution. Both Lieutenant Mamiya and Nutmeg Akasaka struggle to recollect their involvement in World War II and Japan's occupation of China. Cinnamon Akasaka also speaks about the latter. In short, Toru embraces their history and makes it his own. In this way, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* highlights the urgency that Japan awaken to its lost history. Because identity is the collection of memories of past events, history is a significant part of what constitutes people as individuals. When Japan effaced that portion of its history it would rather forget, it not only forgot itself, but, more importantly, its responsibility for its actions. Moreover, this attempt to whitewash history has resulted in the erosion of *shutaisei*, since history makes the Japanese into who they are as a people (Stretcher 293). Only by rediscovering history and connecting with others is Toru finally able to overcome his listlessness and confront Noboru Wataya, or Japanese consensus society, in other words. For May Kasahara, Toru's struggle is a fight for the sake of other people. By helping others regain their core identities, Toru empowers people to resist complete assimilation by Japanese consensus society. Unlike Mamiya, who loses his *shutaisei* at the bottom of well, Toru regains his.

Despite their miscommunication and isolation, everyone is interconnected through history. This underlying interconnection becomes evident to Toru Okada toward the end of the novel.

There 'clients' and I were linked by the mark on my cheek. Cinnamon's grandfather (Nutmeg's father) and I were also linked by the mark on my cheek. Cinnamon's grandfather and Lieutenant Mamiya were linked in the city of Hsing-ching. Lieutenant Mamiya and the clairvoyant Mr. Honda were linked by their special duties on the Manchurian-Mongolian border, and Kumiko and I had been introduced to Mr. Honda by Noboru Wataya's family. Lieutenant Mamiya and I were linked by our experiences in our respective wells – his in Mongolia, mine on the property where I was now sitting. Also on this property had once

lived an army officer who had commanded troops in China. All of these were linked as in a circle, at the centre of which stood prewar Manchuria, continental East Asia, and the short war of 1939 in Nomonhan (H. Murakami 497-498).

It is necessary for people to uncover this interconnection by articulating their history, thereby discovering who they truly are amid the dehumanizing anonymity of Japanese consensus society. This interweaving of different individuals and circumstances, shows an interweaving of human communication, social history and personal identity.

The novel concludes on a note of uncertainty, however. The struggle against assimilation will be a difficult one.

The protagonists of the films *Ghost in the Shell* and *Serial Experiments Lain* similarly experience a crisis of *shutaisei*. What makes both works different is the way they raise important questions about the role of technology in contemporary Japan.

Technology has long occupied a central place in the consciousness of the Japanese. Despite the trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the postwar Japanese realized they could only embrace technology, not dread it. According to a cultural anthropologist, “People entrusted their hopes and dreams to the machines of the fictional world” (qtd. in Larimer, “Rage” 18). Through extensive cultural and spiritual indoctrination from writers, teachers and the government, technology for the Japanese became less an alien appendage than an extension of man. This was facilitated by the Shinto belief that, everything — alive or dead, active or inert — has a soul (Larimer, “Man’s” 23). Likewise, Japanese culture produced works that reflected technology’s increasing presence. Introduced in 1951 by Osamu Tezuka, the robot child Astro Boy instantly became a cultural icon as “a figure that embraced both scientific know-how... and human frailty” (Larimer, “Rage” 18 and 19). The landmark animé series, *Gundam*, also portrays technology as an instrument of salvation. In contrast, technology assumes a nightmarish quality in Natsume Soseki’s turn-of-the-century *Ten Nights of Dream*, Kobo Abe’s novels *Inter Ice Age 4* and *The Face of Another* and Katsuhiro Otomo’s popular manga and animé feature *Akira*.

In *Ghost in the Shell* and *Serial Experiments Lain*, technology becomes a means by which the protagonists are able to undergo a profound evolution. In Japanese consensus society, where social mobility is largely restricted, the mobility connoted by such a metamorphosis is subversive (Napier 110).

GHOST IN THE SHELL

Major Motoko Kusanagi, the cyborg protagonist of *Ghost in the Shell*, works for the security police of Section 9 in the Hong Kong of the future. Her closest friend among her fellow agents is another cyborg, Bateau, whose attraction to Kusanagi is only implied. Both of them have had their bodies and capabilities augmented by mechanical implants. Unlike Bateau, however, Kusanagi has more than just an enhanced brain and a cybernetic body; she has been given increased strength and agility. At the start of the film *Ghost in the Shell*, the operatives of Section 9 are in pursuit of a computer hacker named the Puppet Master who has infiltrated government mainframes and controlled individuals by manipulating their memories.

As the plot unfolds, it becomes apparent that, in the world of the film, there are two distinct realities that at times overlap. One is the domain of conscious reality, where people conduct their daily lives; and the other is the invisible network of cyberspace, where information proliferates. Cyberspace, however, is depicted less as a venue for human interconnection than as a site for espionage and crime. The narrative style of the film reflects this precarious duality. The movements of objects and characters are deliberate and abrupt. Dialogue scenes are static, as if all action has been paused to allow the characters the time to grasp the implications of their thoughts. Certain significant events, like the sequence where the abductors of the Puppet Master are being chased, are presented as sound montages with slow, meandering music.

In rapt contemplation of the nature of her existence, Kusanagi is, like Toru Okada — *jiheiteki*, or self-absorbed (Stretcher 285). Being partly machine, she lacks buoyancy, and yet she is fond of diving into the dark depths of the ocean, which, for Haruki

Murakami represents the recesses of the unconscious, where the core identity is located. Because she doubts her humanity, such an image could signify her desire to unearth her true nature. In other, long static shots, Kusanagi does nothing else but stare at her own reflection in the mirror or on the surface of water. She argues that there is no way of knowing if parts of her brain are really human; her core identity could have merely been plugged into a purely synthetic body. According to her, she only feels human because she is treated like one, which highlights the role of others in constituting the self. Moreover, she asks Bateau: "What if a cyber brain could possibly generate its own ghost — create a soul all by itself? And if it did, just what would be the importance of being human then?" (*Ghost*) Like in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, identity in *Ghost in the Shell* is formed by an accumulation of memories. Here, people's identities change as their original memories are replaced by simulated experiences. Since memories can be taken to mean information about experiences, not only humans but machines are, therefore, capable of having an identity. As Kusanagi suggests, the only thing that makes a person human is his ability to constitute his own *shutaisei*. Should a machine or computer program be able to do likewise, the nature of humanity would become problematic.

Kusanagi frequently reflects on the role of identity in determining individuality.

There are countless ingredients that make up the human body and mind, like all the components that make me up as an individual with my own personality. Sure, I have a face and voice to distinguish myself from others but my thoughts and memories are unique only to me and I carry a sense of my own destiny. Each of those things are [sic] just a small part of it. I collect information to use in my own way. All of that blends to create a mixture that forms me and gives rise to my conscience (*Ghost*).

Distinct thoughts and memories are what constitute people as unique individuals. Accordingly, *Ghost in the Shell* emphasizes the idea that unique individuality is an essential element of a thriving society. Kusanagi informs Togusa, a recent transferee to her special team, that she recruited him for this very reason. Diversity within

a group makes that group more effective. Because he comes from a different background and lacks technological enhancements, he would provide a point of view different from those of the rest of the team in approaching a problem. This idea is echoed by the Puppet Master when he declares that diversity has enabled particular species throughout the history of the world to survive extinction and to evolve. The significance given to uniqueness subverts Japanese consensus society and its privileging of uniformity and conformity.

Section 9 discovers that the Puppet Master, the computer hacker they are pursuing, was originally a computer program called Project 2501. This program evolved into a sentient being when it became aware of its existence, while navigating the different networks of cyberspace, as he himself explains.

Life has become more complex in the overwhelming sea of information... Man is an individual only because of his intangible memory, and memory cannot be defined but it defines man. The advent of computers and the subsequent accumulation of incalculable data has given rise to a new system of memory and thought parallel to your own (*Ghost*).

Kusanagi is drawn toward him due primarily to a sense of incompleteness in her which he can, perhaps, resolve. Even if she has barely formed connections with others, she finds a certain meaningful bond with the Puppet Master. When the Puppet Master attempts to defect to Section 9, the synthetic body in which he has become trapped is stolen by the agents of Section 6. So she can “dive” into it and communicate with the Puppet Master, Kusanagi tries so desperately to recover that body by herself, such that her own cybernetic body is badly damaged in the effort. Accordingly, the Puppet Master seeks her throughout the regions of cyberspace because he needs her to fulfill his goal. In order for life to evolve further, they must merge their individual consciousness into one. He tells her that he still lacks the basic processes inherent in all living organisms; namely, reproduction and death. Merging would endow their new form of life with these qualities. At the film’s conclusion, their newly born being, now appropriately housed in the synthetic body of a child (their original physical bodies were destroyed by Section 6), prepares to spread their offspring throughout cyberspace.

At the climax of *Ghost in the Shell*, the camera tilts across a tree of human evolution, revealing the history of the world to be the constant evolution of species from one level of existence to a higher one. Life would not have evolved further had Kusanagi refused to merge with the Puppet Master, which is how he convinces her in the end despite her reluctance: “Your effort to remain what you are is what limits you” (*Ghost*). As mentioned earlier, this idea has a subversive purpose. It implies that, if Japanese society — which has kept itself from adapting to new situations — refuses to change, this stagnancy can lead to catastrophe.

SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN

Serial Experiments Lain, on the other hand, explores the precarious border between the real world and cyberspace, referred to as the Wired. Its protagonist is a naïve, withdrawn, and soft-spoken eighth-grade girl named Lain Iwakura. In school, she is isolated from her schoolmates and, at home, the members of her family are distant toward one another, as shown by their silence over dinner. When she attempts to communicate with her mother, her mother does not reply. Her father does but fails to make eye contact or even look at her, as he is too preoccupied with his computers. The people in the city go about their everyday lives, without much passion or urgency. Lain herself frequently daydreams, staring at her shadow for long periods. Although Lain has never touched her Navi, a device that will enable her to connect to the Wired, her father encourages her to use it since it can help her make friends. Lain is so unused to interaction that, when her Navi greets her good night, she is visibly affected.

Lain’s seemingly mundane world is disrupted when several eighth-graders in her school, including her, receive an e-mail from Jisa, a taciturn classmate who committed suicide. In her message, Jisa explains that death allowed her to leave her corporeal body behind and exist entirely in the Wired. The real world had merely held her back: “In the real world it no longer mattered whether I was there or not” (*Lain*). Indeed, for someone suffering from *hikikomori*, such a place as the cyberspace can provide a reprieve from a dreary reality, albeit in this case a permanent one, since it

represents wider possibilities of existence. There, a socially withdrawn individual could avoid the dilemma of physically interacting with others. He could easily exchange his unsatisfying identity for a more acceptable one and access more pleasant realities at the click of a button.

In *Serial Experiments Lain*, like in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, the realistic setting is suddenly ruptured by the introduction of a bizarre event. This particular rupture reveals the premise that drives the narrative forward: that the Wired is slowly encroaching on the real world. For one, reality in the series seems hallucinatory. The animation is dreamlike. Strange, disjointed images abruptly appear onscreen and disappear. The intense sunlight during the day and the brilliant neon lights at night blur the definitions of things. In the first episode of the series, “Layer 01: Weird,” Lain sees bleeding telephone wires and notices amorphous phantoms watching her. Certain motifs are used throughout the entire 13 episodes. Shots of intersecting telephone wires are always inserted into the narrative. A low buzzing drone hounds Lain wherever she goes. The words “Everyone is Connected,” emblazoned in Japanese on a bright plain background, are briefly flashed from time to time. Each episode starts with a white noise from a television screen quickly followed by a voice that announces with a sinister laugh, “Present day, present time.” Subsequently, there are shots of a busy intersection with crossing figures, a pedestrian stoplight turning red, and intersecting telephone wires. A disembodied voice tells the viewer not to be afraid, the real world is no longer desirable, and invites him over to the Wired. In fact, there are frequent invitations by disembodied voices and words to leave the real world since it prevents people from connecting with one other, such as the line, “Why did you die? Here, there is a god” (*Lain*).

In the world of *Serial Experiments Lain*, there are two dominant philosophies regarding the connection between the real world and the Wired. On the one hand, the Wired is merely an appendage of the real world, a means of communication between people. On the other hand, the Wired may constitute another world since it is formed by an intricate web of computers, electricity, and information which covers all areas of the globe. More

importantly, the border between this world of the Wired and the real world is crumbling.

The Wired might actually be thought of as a highly advanced upper layer of the real world. In other words, physical reality is nothing but an illusion, a hologram of the information that flows to us through the Wired. This is because the body, physical motion, the activity of the human brain is merely a physical phenomenon simply caused by synapses delivering the electrical impulses. The physical body exists at a less evolved plane only to verify one's existence in the universe (*Lain*).

The appeal of the Wired is the absence of limits within its realm.

People are fundamentally interconnected in that they share memories at the level of the collective unconscious. The world's collective unconscious is formed by an electromagnetic field surrounding the Earth, called the Shuman Resonance, which is generated by the brain waves of people. Eiri Masami, who created the Wired, uploads his memories and thought patterns into the Wired as part of a program called the Seventh Gen Protocol that taps into the Shuman Resonance, transforming himself into a powerful sentient being who is omnipresent in the Wired. A group of computer specialists, the Knights of the Eastern Calculus, worship his godly presence with the belief that man is merely an executable computer program who, designed to break down the barrier between the two worlds, must discard his physical body in order to evolve onto a higher plane of existence. They engage in activities that will fulfill this prophecy by eliminating the boundaries that separate the Wired from the real world in order to allow their god, or *deus* of the Wired to cross over into the real world. By harnessing the psychic energy of children who play an online game, the Knights intend to raise the collective unconscious to the level of the real world. As the border gradually dissolves, elements of the two worlds start to interpenetrate. Individuals who are killed in the online game die in real life. Lain's sister, Mika, is replaced by her doppelganger in the Wired. Through their connection to the Wired, individuals have the ability to transport themselves to any place in the world.

After Lain activates her Navi to receive Jisa's mysterious e-mail, she gradually grows more engrossed in the Wired, until it

dominates her life. Her room is soon filled with computers and other devices that will augment her access to the Wired. Instead of listening to the teacher during lectures, she surfs the Wired with her pocket computer. Instead of hanging out with her friends after class, she spends time tinkering with machines and attaching the latest computer chip to her system. As her interaction with the Wired becomes more complex, her personality changes. She becomes more outgoing, meeting the countless other individuals who frequently inhabit the Wired. She discovers that she has a doppelganger in the Wired that appears occasionally at the nightclub Cyberia. Unlike her, Lain's rude and abrasive double swears often and conducts mischievous activities aimed at effacing the barrier between the real world and Wired. This doppelganger spreads nasty rumors that Alice, Lain's one true friend who untiringly invites Lain to hang out with her, is having an affair with one of the teachers at their school. Lain's desire for interconnection reaches a point where she must hook up various parts of her anatomy to the Navi with electrodes in order to maximize her access to the Wired. Soon she is able to interface with the Wired without the use of peripheral devices.

Her connection to the Wired causes Lain to experience both a heightened sense of *shutaisei* and a loss of it. Through her regular access to the Wired, Lain manages to develop a sense of her embodied subjectivity. Breaking out of her shell of passive isolation, she learns how to construct her own Navi from different computers and devices. She becomes more outgoing when she starts joining Alice and her friends after class. By the end of the series, she seizes hold of her fate when she succeeds in subduing the forces that have been manipulating her. Unleashing her own power, she assumes control over the Wired's limitless flows of information and physical reality itself, whose perception is actually an effect of electric synapses and flows of information. Alternatively, interaction with the Wired also results in the erosion of Lain's *shutaisei*. When she discovers her mischievous doppelganger, she begins to doubt her identity. She wonders if she is the only Lain in existence. These reflections by Lain allow the series to explore the nature of *shutaisei*. Like *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* and *Ghost in the Shell*, it presupposes that identity is constituted by an individual's collection of memories. If that is indeed the case, some of the characters conclude, then people could exist entirely in the Wired without

need of their physical bodies. In *Serial Experiments Lain*, the self also relies on other people for its definition. According to Lain, people have substance in the minds of other people. The thoughts and memories of others can determine an individual's *shutaisei*, since that individual's identity becomes partly a construct of these thoughts and memories. For example, a person perceived to be withdrawn becomes withdrawn because people relate to her as though she were withdrawn. Accordingly, since the characters in the series sees Lain's doppelganger, whom they mistake for the real Lain to be mischievous, they believe Lain herself is mischievous.

Like Toru, Lain realizes the necessity of establishing definite connections with others. Although she interacts with different people through the Wired, these interactions merely form temporary bonds that are built, broken and rebuilt upon each encounter. The idea that everyone is connected at a fundamental level, however, pervades throughout the narrative. People are connected unconsciously since they share memories through the collective unconscious, which the Knights try to raise to the level of the conscious real world. Lain's only true friend is Alice, who, unlike their other schoolmates, makes an effort to maintain a meaningful relationship with Lain. Even if everyone agrees that Lain has spread the rumors about Alice, Alice continues to trust Lain unfailingly.

Serial Experiments Lain differs from *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, since the characters of the former are finally able to create significant connections among themselves only when their memories are altered. By accessing the collective unconscious, Lain develops the power to erase unpleasant memories, as if she were deleting corrupted files from a computer database. At first, her intention is to change people's negative perception of her by erasing their memories of her doppelganger. Lain explains, "What is remembered never happened. Memory is merely a record. You just need to rewrite that record" (*Lain*). In short, bad memories can be rewritten, since reality is altered when people's perception of reality is altered. When she learns to value her friendship with Alice, however, she starts using her powers to fashion a better reality for Alice. First, she causes people to forget the rumors her doppelganger has spread about Alice. In the end, she changes reality to one in which Alice is old enough to become the girlfriend of the teacher

she has a crush on. Lain finally overcomes her isolation by managing to create a bond with this new Alice, who, despite her different identity, still retains her caring nature. Lain chooses this reality over a reality where she exists entirely in the Wired, even if living in the real world is accompanied by the lack of communication and connection. By the conclusion of the series, Lain, like Toru, is able to connect with other people, thereby constituting her own *shutaisei*.

In sum, *Serial Experiments Lain* seems to explore how cyberspace has provided a refuge for socially withdrawn Japanese who have lost their sense of *shutaisei*. Isolated from others and trapped in his/her neatly defined role within Japan's consensus society, the Japanese individual has seemingly become "an absurd creature" who does not know "what it is that drives [his] or even keeps [him] alive" (Lain). In a sense, the series is a repudiation of such a society, since the characters would rather go elsewhere than remain in that dystopia. That Lain must even alter reality likewise suggests that there are many things that need to be changed in the world.

CONCLUSION

Because *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Serial Experiments Lain* were all produced during the Heisei Recession, the period in which Japan's once vibrant economy fell into recession, the erosion of their protagonists' *shutaisei* could be read as symptomatic of the uncertainty and anomie which had confronted contemporary Japanese. Such problems afflict not only those who wish to become part of Japan's corporate machinery yet are unable to do so due to the recession, but also those who consciously resist assimilation because they reject Japan's ideology of progress. The texts succeed in illustrating the miscommunication and isolation which permeate recent Japanese society. They are therefore subversive in the sense that they articulate an awareness of the malaise that Japanese consensus society would rather keep quiet about, since it will want to project the image that all is well in Japan.

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