

# Dreaming Murakami

*Bridging language and imagination*

**Nitesh Anjaan &  
Juliane Wammen**

When Danish translator Mette Holm begins translating Haruki Murakami's debut novel *Hear the Wind Sing*, a two metre tall frog shows up at an underground station in Tokyo. The Frog follows her, determined to engage the translator in its fight against the gigantic Worm, which is slowly waking from a deep sleep, ready to destroy the world with hatred.

Thus, the 2017 documentary, *Dreaming Murakami*, by director Nitesh Anjaan, is presented. And from this point, the movie unfolds as a dreamy, poetic and engaging portrait, not only of Murakami's world renowned literary works, but also, and most especially, of Mette Holm and the processes at work when a literary translator dives into her author's literary universe and goes on a quest to find the (near) perfect translation.

## **Making literary translation visible**

But how is it even possible to capture this very internal and private process in moving images and narrative form? How do you go about making literary translation visible and

interesting as a movie – an art form so apparently distant from the art of translating literature?

This was the task the young Danish director set himself – to make the seemingly difficult move from literature to film without compromising either art form. Furthermore, Anjaan wished to provide an insight into Murakami's fantastical universe and the world of his Danish translator – both of which has been an inspiration for Anjaan since his first encounter with Mette Holm seven years ago.

*“The process of making such a movie is of course influenced by both artistic and practical considerations, and I've been working on it, via both straight paths and many detours, for a couple of years. At first I was really worried that I wouldn't be able to show just how fascinating I find Mette's work. For how to make the act of translation interesting, right?”*

## **A giant Japanese-speaking frog**

Then the idea arose of a two metre tall, Japanese-speaking frog following the translator around. And with the frog in

mind, Anjaan began writing the compass for a movie to be spun around Mette Holm's work on translating Murakami's debut novel, while also moving into that special world existing somewhere between one's own immediate reality and the imagined reality one enters into when translating a spellbinding tale. When listening to Holm talking about books she has translated, Anjaan felt they sounded less like books and more like worlds she had visited. That was the idea he wanted to translate into a movie.

*"The compass was continuously adjusted as me and the rest of the crew got a clearer idea of where the story was heading. In fact, we didn't actually know where it would end until the very last week of editing – which, of course, was a little anxiety-triggering. But I'm getting used to a working method where we alternate between first improvising material and afterwards developing and structuring the material into different shapes."*

## ***"A dreamy, poetic and engaging portrait"***

### **With the help of a cat**

In this way, Anjaan feels that Mette Holm and the rest of the cast – other Murakami-translators, friends, publishers and, not least, Mette's cat – in many ways have helped shape the movie, that they are the movie. But of course, as film artists, the director and crew made the final choices.

*"Fortunately, Mette was very positively surprised when she saw the end result. She felt we had seen something in her life and work that opened up new questions and perceptions on the process of translating great literature. Overall, we've had many reactions from translators – including other Murakami translators – who feel recognized and inspired by the movie. This means a lot to me, because I really wanted the film to shed light on the translator; a figure that is often overshadowed by the writer he or she is translating."*

Likewise, it means an irrationally great deal to me when the film resonates well with a Japanese audience. I don't speak or understand Japanese, so it has been a daunting task to achieve a Japanese language for the movie that is correct, but also a Japanese that is alive and narrative in the right way for the story. I wished Dreaming Murakami to be Danish when looked at through Danish eyes, and Japanese seen through Japanese eyes. So that the movie would somehow be suspended in exactly that (invisible, intangible) place between geographical and linguistic realities where well-translated world literature is also placed. This fall, the movie will premiere in Japan, and I'm very excited to see how the audience will react to it."

### **Passionate perfectionists**

For Anjaan, there are many parallels between his work as a director and Mette Holm's:

*"As I see it, she's a passionate perfectionist who for the sake of the reader, and of course her own professional satisfaction, goes to great lengths to ensure that content and form ends up as*



**Nitesh Anjaan** is a Danish film director and writer living in Copenhagen. His debut as director, “Far from Home”, premiered at the film festival CPH:DOX ‘14 and won Best Debut Documentary at Mumbai International Film Festival. In 2016, his first novel, Kind of Blue, was published in Denmark. He is currently studying at The National Film School of Denmark. Dreaming Murakami is produced by Final Cut for Real and was officially selected for IDFA in 2017.

**Nitesh Anjaan**

**Photo: Michella Bredahl**

*harmonious as humanly possible. This is something I can really identify with.”*

He – and most of his crew – also strongly identify with the working conditions of the translator, the great number of more or less lonely days, months, years, going into the individual work, something none of the readers or viewers get a feel of.

*“But it’s not a negative loneliness. I would prefer to use the English word ‘solitude’ for this feeling, but we don’t have that word in Danish. A protected kind of loneliness.”*

To Anjaan, Mette is very much like a medium; one who is able to look at things he doesn’t understand – in this case Japanese characters – and recreate them, turn them into sentences that make sense. These sentences create universes and give the reader a chance to meet all kinds of characters and follow them into stories that move and inspire, entertain and enlighten. Reading Murakami’s works, and other great books in translation, Anjaan says, we as readers

get to travel the world and go places we wouldn’t be able to know without literature – and we also get to travel into ourselves and reflect on our own lives.

### **The power of imagination**

The fantastical elements are quite prominent in *Dreaming Murakami*. And as such, the film doesn’t resemble a classic documentary. But for the director, this is actually an important point when dealing with this specific material.

*“I have a strong belief in the power of storytelling. I believe that what we come to believe when reading literature or watching a movie have enormous potential with regard to our ability to dream up our own world and remind ourselves that we actually exist. We exist right here, in this world, as sentimental and reflecting creatures. Born with an amazing gift: the power of imagination. My wish was to create a bridge between language and the imagination. Internally, I used the concept ‘a documentary of the imagination’ in my work on Dreaming*





**Still from Dreaming Murakami**  
**Final Cut for Real/Agapi Triantafyllidis**

*Murakami. It's a way of insisting that the things we imagine when we read are just as real as that which we otherwise call reality; the physical, social world. Because that's how I feel myself: The things I experience and feel when I read well-written literature often feel more true and more real than the strange and absurd world passing by outside my window or online."*

On a more humble level of ambition, it makes Anjaan very happy when people tell him that the film has made them think about literary translation for the first time.

*"The idea that people have lived their whole lives reading literature from foreign languages, but never have been conscious of the actual person writing and retelling all those words. That they suddenly become aware of something which has had such a significant, yet invisible presence in their lives, ever since they had stories read to them as*

*children and the literature of a whole world began shaping their imagination."*

He is grateful and feels inspired when Murakami readers and translators experience a further understanding of Murakami's works through watching the movie, or even feel that *Dreaming Murakami* is like actually being inside one of the author's books.

*"And it's fantastic when people without any relation to either Murakami or literary translation seem to get something out of the movie. Because this was the very first question I posed myself: How do I make translation relevant and interesting? That is, as relevant and interesting as I actually felt the work of the literary translator was when we started – a sentiment that only grew in strength while working on Dreaming Murakami."*