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The Interconnectedness of Urban Life: Representations of Capitalism in *After Dark*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the representations of urban life in After Dark by Murakami Haruki. Modern cities in 21st century have been theorized as having opened up new space for a different type of economy. It is the argument of this paper that the novel showcases a sympathetic yet ambivalent attitude towards Tokyo's nighttime service economy. Shamelessly materialistic and sometimes violent, it is a place for work for some and refuge for others, but in the end, the depiction of capitalistic society facilitated through this particular service economy is quite sinister. As the inertia of capitalism marches on, the novel sketches a picture of not just Tokyo, but of the larger world order in our time, where everything is happening all at once, round the clock, in service of profit.

1. Introduction: Cities at Night

Contemporary cities are remarkably fascinating places to be awake at night. Virtually anything that is available during the day can also be had at night—and then some. But it is true that after dark, the city looks different, like a different flavor of the same thing. It is somewhat exciting, somewhat mysterious, and slightly dangerous. This difference in atmosphere owes much to the fact that night economy feeds, and is fed by, a different profile of people.

In *After Dark*, Murakami Haruki presents us with such night-time Tokyo, where it is still Tokyo, but slightly off character. It takes place during a seven-hour window that begins just before midnight, when the subway stops running, and ends the morning after when it starts running again. Like any city under the order of capitalism, the urban environment consists of a complex network of buying and selling, but the “amusement district,” (4) in which the story takes place features a service-driven economy that tends to feature a different cast of characters from those found during the day. Although the main characters of the story are students—that specialized breed of younger generation largely exempt from economic burden—the novel makes it clear that everyone, without exception, is implicated in the makeup of the current urban environment.

This paper will examine the characterization of the occupants of the night in *After Dark*, with an eye towards how relate to the serving of contemporary urban economy. Through the analysis, it will also attempt to analyze how the city is functioning as a metaphor as the very tool of capitalism.

2. Human Labor in Contemporary Urban Society

Tokyo at night, as depicted by Murakami, is a service economy that is both convenient and exciting, but it can also be mercilessly brutal or devastating on a personal level. One can pick and choose among the variety of options at a 24-hour convenience store at nearly 3 am (104), but there is also an atmosphere that is “pregnant with foreboding,”(4) presumably of something dangerous. There appears to be more personal freedom on the street in the amusement district, due to the carefree attitude towards the late hour, but such freedom does not apply to everyone. In fact, stretched hours for some inhabitants of the city simply mean odd working hours for others.

The “opening up of night-time hours,” is a commonly noted phenomenon of contemporary times. A new, previously nonexistent arena for consumption had been activated when cities were “made available” during the night. Night-time simply caters to different needs and customers. In *The 24 Hour Society*, Leon Kreitzman discusses the temporal and spatial expansion of the modern city, describing how globalization and technological advances, has made it both exciting and challenging for people to occupy their time. And while such possibilities are exciting to the party-goers of amusement district, it is challenging for others who must fight internal clocks. More often than not, they happen to be underprivileged people. On reality level, such “new” possibilities do discriminate.

The “love ho” keepers of *After Dark* are such underprivileged people. Ironically, in the story, these are the people who make Tokyo's nightscape a little safer. Kaoru, Komugi, and Korogi look after the beat-up prostitute, and offer a room for Mari to sleep. Likewise, despite the “foreboding” alluded to early in the novel, there is no sense of serious danger in the night. Despite Kaoru's warning to Mari that “the place changes [at night]: it's not the same as in daytime” (70), and hints of gang-led violence, there is no sign of apparent danger, evidenced by the fullness of bars and family restaurants after midnight. Even gang-led prostitution is described as

something that is normal and essentially harmless, “delivering women to hotels on motorcycles—hot ’n’ fresh, like pizza” (53). The single incident of violence in the novel, ironically, is perpetrated by an office worker, an “occasional” night occupant by choice.

The sheer ordinary-ness of nighttime activity—love ho’s, prostitution, bars that open late into the night—and their implied safety does not mean, however, that beneath the carefree facade and the nonchalant narrative, there is another reality, which is the life of those who serve the night economy. As service providers, the characters have different reasons to undertake difficult work hours. Kaoru, the motel manager, has wasted her youth and ended up as a bodyguard at a lowly hotel, often sleeping at the back room preferring not to go back to her apartment due to her tough working hours. Korogi is running from something, and needs the anonymity provided by the motel despite the killing working hours of ten to ten. It is assumed the Chinese prostitute has crossed border illegally, which forces her to work as a prostitute.

Then, there are others whose job does not exactly require them to be active at night, but semi-forces them to, due to the structure of contemporary society. Shirakawa is a different character from the servers and prostitute at the motel. To an extent, he is also a “service worker” like the motel workers, in the sense that he provides service—to an *intangible* economy (as opposed to manufacturing or trade of tangible commodities)—but he is a white-collar worker with normal working hours during the day.

Traditionally, and especially in an Asian society where jobs which require formal educational training are regarded in higher status than manual work, white-collar jobs are envied for their lack of manual work and hard-and-fast work hours. Yet, this is no longer the case in contemporary society. He works at night because his line of work, which is in service of a “virtual” commodity, has opened up a new time, space, and urgency for him to work at night. In this regard, despite having a wife and children, his life is no different from that of blue-collar service workers such as the motel workers in that he has little personal time. “I’d like to have a meal together once in a while, and maybe go to sleep at the same time,” pleads his wife on the phone (102).

This mingling of service economy is highlighted when he enters into conversation with a taxi driver. Even though Shirakawa has a relatively cushier job as perceived by the driver, in Shirakawa’s eyes, they are not much different, as the time-space expansion and the speed at which they must work have rendered their lives similar.

[Taxi driver] “The less I take in, the longer I have to work to make up the difference. But still, sir, I think you’ve got it better. At least the company pays your cab fare when you work overtime.”

[Shirakawa] “Yeah, but if they’re going to make me work this late, they’re going to have to pay for my cabs. Otherwise, I couldn’t get home.” (168)

This conversation between Shirakawa and the cab driver not only reveals the preexisting prejudice for hierarchic order among the workers of the night, but also comments on the inhuman conditions contemporary urban dwellers are exposed to. Neither the driver nor Shirakawa absolutely must work at night, but given the circumstances they do, as if they did not have a choice in the first place. But also, this work became only possible thanks to the infrastructure and remote technologies that simultaneously enables and requires him to work at night. Likewise, if there were no one in the streets at night, the taxi driver could not possibly work at night.

Out of that possibility results their nocturnal work, which has then turned almost obligatory. And because of the interconnectedness of the current economic situation, no one is able to escape the chain. Just as it became acceptable to call on people at late hours since personal phones became common, which then turned into an extension of working hours (and thereby providing even more service to the economy), the expansion of night hours brings on a domino effect on others: when one stays awake, others follow.

It is no surprise, then, that the novel depicts students as the grey area where they are free from any obligations at night. They are almost purely consumers. Takahashi pulls all-nighters because it is more convenient—suits him better—to practice at night. Kaoru comments, “students have it easy,” (44) half-sarcastically pointing out that he is awake by choice. On the other hand, Mari is only a visitor to this night world; she has personal reasons that make her *want* to stay awake at night. The key difference between these students and others in this story is whether they have a choice in occupying the night or not. The students can end their night occupancy at any time, but the rest cannot, even though theoretically they can. Significantly, Mari feels a strong, unexplainable connection to the Chinese prostitute after discovering they are the same age, saying that they could have been friends “if [they] had met in a different place at a different time (157).” Simply put, their wide gap as a consumer and server in the night economy is too great to accommodate that naïve wish.

While the depiction of such night dwellers is not necessarily unfriendly or unrealistic, Shirakawa is an exception. The bipolar office worker puts in an exaggerated, conscious effort to “control” himself against nature, exercising with his shirt off in the empty office after midnight. While he is perhaps the night worker with most choice, he physically refuses to even acknowledge the challenges of working at night, instead turning it into an “exercise,” himself into a “workhorse” and a consumer of a peculiar red light economy.

Even further, as a heartless criminal, he considers himself a savvy customer of modern day materialism, accepting prostitution and even his acts of violence as a simply exchanges in currency, calling the prostitute a “Chinese snack” (101). He displays no remorse in his acts, and as the transaction has not been completed, he feels that he is justified in taking her clothes and money back. If the motel workers stand for a certain humanism in the midst of capitalistic world—they even let Mari sleep without payment—Shirakawa showcases the sheer recklessness of the capitalistic franchise, which is amplified in the night due to its lawlessness (prostitution is unregulated, and even the motel workers refuse to call the police).

The city, as a machine for capitalism, is restless and unstoppable; it is also merciless and tyrannical—it does not discriminate. It is also an inescapable domino, as everyone, consumers and servers alike are implicated in the service of the night industry. Even innocent students are implicated somewhere in the process, as long as one occupies the night space. This interconnection will be examined further in the next section.

3. The City as “Organic” Machinery: Network-Like Connections of Human Activity

As observed, the urban environment in *After Dark* is inescapable and merciless, which is amplified by the setting. Murakami describes the environment of Tokyo as a web: a buzzing network of human activity that hums on day and night like a restless machine. This network of the city alive is described in a physical, tangible, almost organic way, almost like a living organism. The novel opens with a description of the city seen from “midair” (3) as a point of view:

It looks like a “single gigantic creature—or more like a single collective entity created by many intertwining organisms. Countless arteries stretch to the ends of its elusive body, circulating a continuous supply of fresh blood cells, sending out new contradictions and collecting the old. To the rhythm of its pulsing, all parts of the body flicker and flare up and squirm.”

Metaphorically, “arteries,” “contradictions,” and “the old,” could stand for the human and nonhuman elements of the city, collectively constituting it as a whole. It encompasses and breathes humans, activities, nature, built environment, etc. like a living creature. It even slows down at night like a sleeping body—its “basal metabolism that maintains life continues undiminished” (3)—like a heart that continues beating even when the brain and body is asleep. And because they are “intertwined,” they cannot exist separate from each other.

This interconnectedness is an undeniable force; and because of its sheer inclusive quality, it is somewhat scary, as it means one cannot help but implicate himself in the larger sense of things. But in our materialistic society, it is a cruel, heartless kind of belonging, which extends firstly to its direct participants (motel keepers, Shirakawa, prostitute, Chinese gang), but in the space of the novel, also indirectly involves the seemingly harmless students. Describing his eye-opening epiphany at the criminal court, Takahashi describes his perception of elements of society as a “weird creature,” like a “giant octopus with tremendously powerful life force ... heading somewhere, moving through the darkness of the ocean.” It is both inescapable and inexplicable—“You can try cutting off its legs, it will just keep growing back. Nobody can kill it, it’s too strong.” (118)

Even though Takahashi, as a student, does not have a very hard life at the moment, he realizes there is little to distinguish between the lesser fortunate people and himself. In addition, watching the criminal receive a death penalty, he realizes that they are all implicated in the way life is ultimately interconnected in life. He says that despite having no link at all, he felt a “deep emotional upset,” which leads him to conclude that “any single human being, no matter what kind of a person he or she may be, is all caught up in the tentacles of this animal like a giant octopus, and is getting sucked into the darkness (120).” And, because of their life being implicated in everything else, he suspects that the criminal world and their own student world may be more similar after all, that “maybe the other side has already managed to sneak its way inside of us, and we just haven’t noticed” (118).

As he very long-windedly muses, the two students do implicate themselves in the cruelty of night economy. Mari translates for the beat-up Chinese prostitute, while Takahashi introduces her to Kaoru; he also picks up the phone left by Shirakawa, which previously belonged to the Chinese girl, which is then picked up again by another unknowing CVS attendant. The TV program, *Creatures of the Deep*, is showing on both Shirakawa’s home TV and at the motel. On the way home in a cab, Shirakawa is passed by the gangster on a motorcycle. All of these small involvements, commonalities, and encounters in the night are done without their own knowledge, yet become parts of the nightscape and its economy. By the night’s end, Mari has become familiarized with the night and its people, and feels like a part of it: “the gaudy purple neon lights [of Alphaville] now fondly familiar” (181).

As for Takahashi, after taking the phone call from a Chinese gangster, he feels strangely ominous about it: “the more he thinks about their meaning, the more it seems to him that the words were intended not for someone else but for him—directly, personally.” (221). As a new day dawns, he is “unable to tell for sure which side—which world [old and new day]—contains his center of gravity” (222), suggesting his unsure footing in the world.

4. Refusal of the Machinery of Capitalism: the Case of Eri Asai

After Dark features an interesting character (or absence of character) who sleeps through the entire novel: Eri Asai, Mari’s sister. Eri, who is described as exceedingly beautiful, has been an object of admiration since young, working as a model. One day, she simply announces she is going to sleep for a while (195), and sleeps for two months. She does not intend to die, however, as she is active just enough to keep her alive. She also somehow washes herself and eats, meaning she intends to take care of herself as a being, but otherwise refuses all engagement with the outside world, including any human interaction.

Her sleeping around the clock stands for her refusal to participate in the economy buzzing on outside her door, to put an end to her existence of being in service of, and being served by, the environment outside. Due to the complete shutdown, its complete ignorance of the world, her sleep is unpolluted by it, which makes it “too pure, too perfect... a total surrender of consciousness” (31). It is also noted by her sister that she is “more beautiful [when she sleeps] than when she is awake (200).” It appears that her ceasing to be objectified and consumed has elevated her to an aesthetic level previously unachieved.

Yet, because of the sheer unrealistic level of perfection, Eri’s sleep is something that is unnatural. Hence, “something about her sleep is “incompatible with nature” (32). Her refusal to participate in the natural course of activities in contemporary society is unrealistic; she is essentially trying to stop the unstoppable, deny the undeniable forces of human footprint in world. You must allow some contamination to happen in order to live.

The brutal extraction of Eri from her “too pure” state seems to also point to the idea that the state is untenable. When Eri momentarily wakes up, she does not welcome it:

Her consciousness seems to resist awakening. What it wants to do is exclude the encroaching world of reality and go on sleeping without end in a soft, enigmatic darkness. By contrast, her bodily functions seek positive awakening. They long for fresh natural light. These two opposing forces clash within her, but the final victory belongs to the power source that indicates awakening.

As she has pushed away reality for too long, she finds herself in a place void of scenery, locked up in a room. While there may be many ways to interpret her sleep or awakening, the complete void she finds herself in symbolizes the destruction she brings on herself by spurning the world and its attendant realities. There really is no escape from the world of capitalism. Thus, while the comatose character of Eri suggests Murakami's version of a reactionary, rebelling towards this machine-like vessel of capitalism is simply impossible to maintain.

5. Conclusion

After Dark shows a sympathetic but ambivalent attitude towards Tokyo's night economy. The urban nightlife of this city is brutally materialistic, sucking up its occupants and spitting them out in occasionally violent ways. Some come out physically injured, while others may seek refuge from a previously inflicted injury by hiding in the dark. For some others with more resource, the unnatural character and brutality of the nightscape is almost too facile, the anonymity and dangerous nature of nighttime service industry too convenient, which makes their participation in the capitalistic society even more sinister.

Furthermore, this physical and emotional violence is not only limited to the obvious servers of economy, as everyone is implicitly implicated in the march of capitalism. Purity in the midst of such chaos, as in the case of Eri Asai's experiment, is too idealistic, simply unachievable. In *After Dark*, Tokyo's night scene is both frightening and exciting, where prostitutes are beaten and students rediscover themselves or fall in love. And once set in motion, inertia makes it march on—incessantly moving, the system throws it into a loop. In the end, it is a picture of not only Tokyo, but of the world order in our time, where everything is happening all at once, round the clock, in service of profit.

6. References

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