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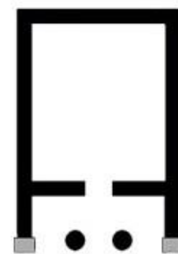

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The Anxieties of Cultural Influence: Cross-Cultural Contrasts and Conflicts in Steve Erickson and Ryu Murakami

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Shared Influences: National and Cultural Identities

Steve Erickson and Ryu Murakami have consistently chronicled the dark sides of their respective nations in their writing. Both novelists have a propensity for graphic description in order to convey themes such as implicit national contradictions or ideological struggle. Their novels are typically set in offbeat, conceptually-altered versions of real-life cities which act as analogues for such issues. The settings themselves, therefore, function primarily as vehicles for authorial preoccupation rather than as literal depictions. The effect of these odd, even morbidly exaggerated environments on the narrative is profound, influencing plot and characterisation in strange and unsettling terms. A sense of the loneliness associated with urban habitation is not only captured, here, but also reflects the displacement of national identity in a globalised age. The anxieties felt by Erickson and Murakami's characters are thus a manifestation of a series of national concerns, including historical and cultural disengagement and the dilution of a prevailing national identity.

A 1997 conversation between Erickson and Murakami for *Shincho* magazine explores how dreams and memory are shared points of influence. Erickson candidly claims: 'I think probably all of my work has been informed by my dreams. Even when I don't remember exactly what happens in the dreams, I remember the sense of the dreams. The echoes of the dreams stay in my head'.[1]

Indeed, Erickson's recollections of growing up in Los Angeles, and of the seamless change that occurred around him, are tinged with a surreal dream-like quality that has come to define his oeuvre. Childhood impressions of the landscape seamlessly changing around him—'an orchard of lemon trees lined by eucalyptus' into 'malls, theaters, McDonalds'—are frequently invoked to analogise the seismicity of change in grander spheres.[2] Los Angeles's uniqueness with regard to its formation and geography is intended to parallel America itself; Erickson has described the changes he witnessed first-hand as 'a metaphor for modern American suburbia'.[3] The suggestion here is that America is a rootless country uncomfortable with its own history.

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[1] Yoshiaki Koshikawa, 'Steve Erickson Meets Ryu Murakami: Self-Expanding into the World of the Unconsciousness', *Shincho* (22nd April, 1997), para. 11. <http://www.shinchosha.co.jp/shincho/9707/ryu_steve.html>. [Accessed 1 December 2020].

[2] Michael Ventura, 'Phantasmal America', *The L.A. Weekly* (29th August, 1986), para. 30. <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/phant.html>. [Accessed 1 December 2020].

[3] Steve Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*', *Science Fiction Eye* (Summer, 1993), para. 1. <http://www.steveerickson.org/articles/arceye.html>. [Accessed 1 December 2020].

The permanence of change and the inability to forget this past is a recurring theme of Erickson's writing. This in itself represents a source of conflict, particularly when what Erickson refers to as 'the ghost of America' invariably impinges upon his distorted or alternately-envisioned conceptions.[4] A reckoning between 'two Americas' is the usual outcome of this juxtaposition, in terms of how the country perceives itself compared to its true state, or through its selective relationship with its own history.[5]

Exposing the myth of American innocence has been a long-standing concern for Erickson. Facets of American history—slavery, most notably—have frequently been invoked throughout Erickson's oeuvre as a means of conveying this sentiment. This is where America's great contradiction as a nation lies, according to Erickson, especially as the falsehood of innocence was 'born out of the twin experiences of wiping out all the people who were originally here and bringing over people in chains in the hulls of boats'.[6] The incongruous co-existence of dichotomous contrasts is in fact a common feature of Erickson's fiction, intended to demonstrate such pervasive conflicts. Impressions of liberty or freedom are typically shown to be a fallacy through implicit reference to, for instance, burdensome obligation or external pressures. Even Erickson's repeated allusions to death and destructions are fundamental products of this contrast. The collective inability to consciously and coherently resolve issues of numerous American paradoxes invariably leads to violence and cataclysmic acts out of unconscious frustration.

This positing of jarring contrasts is also an identifiable aspect of Murakami's fiction. A convergence between east and west most notably features heavily in Murakami's early recollections, citing his initial perceptions of this cultural clash as a point of inspiration. He recalls American sailors visiting a brothel near his home as inspiring early feelings of 'shame, disgust and fascination'.[7] Furthermore, he describes living near the Yokota American airbase (whilst a college student) as introducing him to an unsavoury lifestyle:

> I'd been living with an older woman, hanging out with GIs, doing every drug known to man, and getting myself arrested on suspicion of various crimes. It was a totally immoral lifestyle, but I can't say I ever derived much pleasure from it. Seems as if I was choosing, with unfailing fidelity, to make only the worst possible choices.[8]

Whilst Murakami clearly takes personal responsibility for his actions during this period, it is difficult not to be left with impressions of a corrupting external force; indeed, his fraternising with American GIs is suggested as being a factor in his 'immoral lifestyle'. The negative effect of such associations is made more explicit by Murakami, however, through his

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[4] Erickson, 'Formula for *Arc d'X*', para. 8.

[5] See Ventura, 'Phantasmal America'. The concept of 'two Americas' co-existing uneasily alongside each other is discussed here both as the subject of Erickson's second novel *Rubicon Beach* (1986) and with regard to the permanence of paradox in the American psyche.

[6] Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', *Contemporary Literature*, 38 (1997), 394-421 (p. 406).

[7] Madalina Bagacean, 'Ryu Murakami and the Influence of Western Culture', *Culture Trip* (19th March 2016), para. 5. <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/japan/articles/ryu-murakami-and-the-influence-of-western-culture/>. [Accessed 1 December 2020].

[8] Ralph McCarthy, 'Ryu and Me', *Kyoto Journal* (30th October 2011), para. 9. <https://kyotojournal.org/conversations/ryu-and-me-2/>. [Accessed 1 December 2020].

acknowledgement of consistently making poor choices. Though it should be stressed that this negative example of cross-cultural interaction is wholly empirical, similar contrasts—notably concerning American-Japanese relations—have nonetheless catalysed several of Murakami's narratives. The friction this can generate typically underpins graphic and violent description as the nature of the contrast itself is extrapolated.

The indelible effect of American culture on Japanese society constantly recurs throughout Murakami's literature. Its manifestation is ubiquitous, and emerges via fleeting references to American brands and musical artists to more considered analyses of the relations between the two cultures, such as through forensic dialogue. The prominence of America's cultural imports in Japanese society conversely makes this infiltration barely noticeable. It is simply depicted as an inextricable aspect of contemporary Japanese society.

Commentators have long since noted of this trend. Sameer Doshi, for one, has observed a process of adaptation that has enabled Western touchstones to take root and flourish in Japan during the latter portion of the twentieth century.[9] The ultimate effect of this cultural exchange is not a simple "Americanisation" of Japanese society, but rather a remodelling of imported tropes that have integrated into and subsequently distorted the milieu. Douglas McGray notes that, in this respect, what is important is 'the whiff of American cool' attached to pop culture experiences, rather than indistinguishable authenticity.[10] The result of this is a modified cultural framework that defies outside preconceptions whilst simultaneously alienating a significant demographic disengaged from this change.

The aim of this essay is thus to illustrate how both Erickson and Murakami channel their unique perceptions of their respective nations into cross-cultural presentations. The potent symbolism and thematic properties of these encounters will be examined to establish what exactly this reveals about American and Japanese attitudes towards culture, tradition, and their shared and individual histories at the twentieth century's conclusion. The various tensions that manifest will be considered, as well as whether a form of resolution or reconciliation is at all feasible.

An American in Tokyo: Erickson's Nuclear Memory

Erickson's *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (1999) and Murakami's *In the Miso Soup* (1997) are two novels published around the time of their conversation with *Shincho* magazine, quoted earlier, which convey their specific concerns relating to their respective home nations. Anxieties surrounding the beginning of a new year are a shared feature of both texts. The graphic, disastrous imagery both writers employ takes on a new complexion affixed against the notion of a temporal ending. Impressions of an impending apocalypse or cataclysmic reckoning of sorts are difficult to ignore in this regard.

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[9] See Sameer Doshi, 'Reversing Flows: Pop Culture, East to West', *Harvard International Review*, 21 (1999), 11-13 (p. 13).

[10] Douglas McGray, 'Japan's Gross National Cool', *Foreign Policy*, 130 (2002), 44-54 (p. 45).

Erickson's novel begins in the early stages of the new millennium before flitting back several months prior. The new millennium is immediately established as a fixed demarcation point dividing the narrative. Murakami's employment of this premise functions in a slightly different way whilst still channelling a sense of an impending fate. Specific years are never referenced, despite the coming year being central to characteristic concerns; indeed, the new-year celebrations featured in *Miso Soup* symbolise a sense of finiteness. The generally more violent tone and content of *Miso Soup* in contrast to *The Sea* enables this interpretation, posing the notion that such incidents are directing the plot towards an inexorable conclusion.

The structure of both texts only enhances these separate readings. Erickson's books, for instance, are renowned for their diverged plots and intersecting storylines. Linearity is often rejected in favour of a mode of storytelling that skips between seemingly disparate time periods to perpetuate notions of narrative fluidity. This is reflected in the fact that *The Sea* opens at the furthest point temporally and then proceeds to journey back in time to depict a series of interconnected plot strands. *Miso Soup*, however—like the majority of Murakami's novels—unfolds in a conventionally linear fashion. The arrival of a new year at the text's denouement represents the logical end point of its structural premise. Indeed, this is strongly implied at the outset of the text when the first-person narrator begins his story on 29th December and significant emphasis is placed upon new-year celebrations amid a spate of killings in Tokyo.

Erickson's *The Sea* also opens in the Japanese capital in 2000. The reader is introduced to Kristin, a seventeen-year-old American now living in Tokyo after fleeing a mass suicide attempt. Considering the stark narrative and tonal shifts synonymous with Erickson's fiction, and for purposes of relevancy, textual focus will solely be attuned to her plot strand. The dreamy, other-worldly atmosphere that envelops much of Erickson's writing becomes evident through the description of Kristin's surroundings. The city is presented similarly to Erickson's depictions of Los Angeles as a mutable urban entity, and a pointed contrast is offered here between the Tokyo cityscape during the day and at night:

> In the gray day, the gray city disappears. It's possible an empirical investigation would reveal that, during the day, there in fact is no Tokyo, only people wandering an empty plain overgrown with tufts of fog that take the shape of shops, homes, hotels, and temples. But at night the city blazes like an aquatic arcade surfacing up through black water […].[11]

The juxtaposing concepts of various forms solidifying out of a foggy haze, of fire and water evocatively intermingling, create a sense of the city's intangibility. This same intangibility underpins Erickson's offbeat description of the city's 'sonic spine of Tokyo consciousness' and it contradictorily existing as 'a vibrating lull—a maelstrom of frantic motion in complete silence' (*TSM*, 4). Each of these conflicting facets combines to give a sense of the city's unphysical nature, of it being constantly shaped by perception as opposed to existing in fixed terms.

[11] Steve Erickson, *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (London: Quartet, 1999), p. 4. Henceforth cited in-text and footnotes as (*TSM*, page number).

The centrality afforded to a character's perceptions is an integral feature of Erickson's fiction. It is a fundamental component in the construction of a fluid ambience typified by the distortion of boundaries between the external and the internal. Details of Kristin's profession in Tokyo affirm this notion, whilst perpetuating Erickson's conceptualising of the city itself. Her status as a 'memory girl' is alluded to being a quasi-sexual trade, given that the 'memory hotel' where she works is surrounded by 'bars and brothels and strip joints and massage parlors and porn shops' (*TSM*, 3). The text, though, stresses that her clients 'trade in memory rather than sex, and by nature, memory is more monogamous than desire' (*TSM*, 6). Nonetheless, there is established a correlation between sex and memory underpinned by a deep longing. The concept of memories resonating with the client for longer than any flicker of physical desire is arresting in itself. It also suggests a yearning to relocate something that has been forgotten or denied to the client for so long. Abstinence correlates with the collective amnesia among her Japanese clientele, and more about this prevailing amnesia is divulged when it is revealed that Kristin's nationality is the primary reason for her popularity:

> As an American she's considered by Japanese men a natural conduit of modern memory. As a daughter of America, Kristin represents the Western annihilation of ancient Japanese memory, and therefore its master and possessor, a red bomb in one hand, a red bottle of soda pop in the other (*TSM*, 6).

The above excerpt examines all that Kristin's nationality symbolises in the minds of her clientele. An inextricable association with destruction and commercialism is inscribed in the Japanese consciousness. The August 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are presented as a 'year zero' of kinds in the Japanese psyche, where the 'new' Japan subsequently formed in the aftermath is suggested as having commercial enterprise central to its post-war identity. The evocative image of the 'red bomb' counterbalanced by the 'red bottle of soda' crystallizes this sentiment perfectly, with the allusion to Coca-Cola here being shown as fixed alongside the reference to cataclysmic destruction.

The cultural relationship between America and Japan in a relatively modern context is, of course, predicated by cataclysmic destruction. Even those with a rudimentary knowledge of the twentieth century are aware of the role played by the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 in bringing the Second World War to a close. The American post-war occupation of their defeated rival signalled irrevocable change in Japan's cultural fabric. 'Japan was disarmed, its empire dissolved, its form of government changed to a democracy, and its economy and education system reorganized and rebuilt', as Alan Taylor contextualises prior to his photo-essay 'Japan in the 1950's', capturing how the country's economic rehabilitation corresponded with an embrace of American culture.[12]

This, of course, is posited as having wider ramifications for Japanese national identity. The historic and cultural amnesia that Erickson implies is prevalent in Japanese society and embodied by Kristin's clientele. The nature of this relationship is in effect a mirroring of the post-war dynamics between the two countries. The 'Western annihilation of ancient Japanese

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[12] Alan Taylor, 'Japan in the 1950's', *The Atlantic* (12th March, 2014), para. 1. <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/03/japan-in-the-1950s/100697/> [Accessed 1 December 2020].

memory' indicates of a conscious post-war remodelling of Japanese society—a clearly defined relationship based upon hierarchical notions of mastery and ownership. In effect, Japan's ancient traditions have essentially been purged in favour of the forced adoption of an American cultural model. The 'modern memory' that has triumphed over 'ancient Japanese memory' thus refers to the inherent conflict between both cultures' prominence in the national consciousness.

Aspects of Freud's theoretical work on 'screen memories' can be discerned from Erickson's depiction of this relationship. The notion of a traumatic incident concealed by memories of another incident or event from a similar period can be ascertained in the twin imagery of the 'red bomb' and the 'red bottle of soda'. Memories of the war and of a post-war commercial boom are presented as intertwined; furthermore, the fact that Freud's theory dictates that the trauma is subsequently reattached to the memory, concealing the feeling's true origins, is similarly alluded to through this connection. The 'red bottle of soda' is an equal impediment to the location of Japanese memory as the image of the 'red bomb'. The trauma's origins have therefore been obfuscated by a prior cultural change, albeit one that is tethered to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This 'screen memory', as elaborated by Freud, is one in which 'value consists in the fact that it represents thoughts and impressions from a later period and that its content is connected with these by links of a symbolic of similar nature'.[13] This clearly illustrates Erickson's intention here in correlating a representation of commerce with destruction. The former unquestionably arose from the latter to insidiously distort Japanese culture, but the original point of trauma remains the bombings. The trauma associated with a lost culture has only been identifiable from the vantage point that history offers; that is, the early months of 2000 as in the text. It is, in effect, a retrospective sentiment.

Erickson's posed concept of Japanese clientele seeking to rediscover their heritage through the conduit of a young American woman captures the dynamics of the relationship between the two countries and their respective cultures. America is essentially presented as a gatekeeper here, bridging the cultural disparity between post-war and pre-war Japan. Erickson's motif highlights the extent to which this 'new' culture has infiltrated the Japanese psyche, whereby the country's ancient traditions are portrayed as a wartime casualty. Kristin's role as a 'memory girl' suggests a semblance of American guilt in this respect, linked intrinsically to a futile willingness on the part of the Japanese to rediscover a lost, markedly different culture.

An American in Tokyo: Cultural Displacement in *Miso Soup*

Murakami makes the conflicting relationship between America and Japan the narrative fulcrum of *Miso Soup*. The novel follows a twenty year old Tokyoite named Kenji, who secretly earns a living by chaperoning sex tourists around the city's red light district. His latest client is an American salesman named Frank, who is in Tokyo on business in the lead-up to the city's new-year celebrations. Their meeting occurs in conjunction with a number of grisly murders that

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[13] Sigmund Freud, 'Screen Memories', in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 541-560 (p. 553).

have been committed in the city. Kenji becomes suspicious that Frank may be the serial killer on account of his erratic behaviour and questionable backstory.

The first meeting between Kenji and Frank in a hotel cafeteria immediately fosters a sense of unease. Murakami's employment of the first-person narrative form is particularly effective in this regard as the reader gains a direct insight into Kenji's consternation. Frank is presented in vague terms through Kenji's speculation as to his client's age: 'one moment he looked like he could be in his twenties, and the next in his forties or even fifties.'[14] This same vagueness extends even to description of the character's physical appearance. A disconcerting impression of artificialness is created through reference to Frank's unnatural-looking skin, who looked 'as if he'd been horribly burned and the doctors had resurfaced his face with this fairly realistic man-made material' (*MS*, 12).

The first connection between Frank and the murders is made here. 'For some reason these thoughts stirred up the unpleasant memory of that newspaper article, the murdered schoolgirl', Kenji thinks, highlighting the centrality of these killings in the thoughts of Tokyoites (*MS*, 12). An inherent distrust of outsiders is insinuated here, following Kenji's assertion that, '[s]ince AIDS, the sex industry hasn't exactly welcomed foreign tourists with open arms' when explaining the necessity for an accompanying Japanese tour guide (*MS*, 9). Death's prevalence in the Japanese consciousness is evident here, implying an association with foreign visitors and influences, and Frank embodies these feelings as a sex tourist in Japan. The character's nationality cannot be viewed as mere coincidence additionally. It is wholly representative of America's central presence in this particular complex.

Such a notion is expanded upon through Kenji and Frank's interactions. A conversation about baseball reveals an inconsistency in Frank's family history. After previously declaring that he has two older sisters, he reveals to Kenji that he spent his childhood playing baseball with his brothers. The digression follows an expression of ignorance as to the identity of the Los Angeles Dodgers' Japanese player Hideo Nomo. 'There's no such thing as an American who comes to Japan on business and doesn't know who Nomo is. Not even one in a thousand. Among Americans he's surely the most famous Japanese alive', Kenji muses (*MS*, 35-36)'.

The exchange performs a key narrative function of casting further suspicion on Frank. It additionally indicates Murakami's central textual concern. The conversation is predicated on Frank's surprise at baseball's popularity in Japan: '"So baseball's pretty big in Japan too, I guess?"' (*MS,* 35). Similar seemingly ignorant observations concerning the prominence of American culture in Japanese encapsulate the novel's primary theme. The relationship between both cultures in the globalised age is presented as uncomfortable at best and completely incompatible at worst.

Frank grows increasingly annoyed at the extent of American culture's permeation of Japan. The effect of this can be glimpsed in the fact that baseball is widely considered Japan's national

[14] Ryu Murakami, *In the Miso Soup*, trans. by Ralph McCarthy (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 12. Henceforth cited in-text and footnotes as (*MS*, page number).

sport. A conversation on the Japanese aping of American cultural practices occurs after Frank notices a department store with the name 'Times Square' situated by Shinjuku Station:

> '"But Times Square is Times Square because the old Times Tower was there. The *New York Times* doesn't have a building in Shinjuku, does it?"
>
> "Japanese think using names like that is cool."
>
> "Well, it's not cool, it's embarrassing. Japan may have lost the war, but that was a long time ago now. Why keep imitating America?"' (*MS*, 29).

A correlation between Japan's losing war effort and its cultural usurpation is strongly implied in the above. As mentioned in relation to Erickson's *The Sea*, there appears a common consensus regarding such an assertion. Murakami, however, also conveys the influence of this cultural hegemony on a more personal basis. Such emphasis enables a lens to be applied to Japan's materialist obsession. Frank is appalled to find one prostitute's dream solely consists of shopping at the Niketown store in New York: '"One big building, many Nike shops! And we can enjoy Nike commercials in giant video screen!" (*MS*, 23). Frank's second night with Kenji in Tokyo's red light spots features a similarly terse encounter with another prostitute who longs to stay at the Disneyland Hilton. This earns her a scathing rebuke from Frank:

> '"The Hilton's not such a high-class hotel […] You don't know much about anything, do you? […]. It's said that four hundred rooms is the maximum number you can have if you want to maintain the very best service, but the New York Hilton has over a thousand. That's why the truly rick never stay there. They prefer the European-style hotels, like the Plaza Athenee or Ritz-Carlton or Westbury. The only people who choose the Hilton are hicks from the country and Japanese"' (*MS*, 106).

An obvious point raised here concerns the relationship between cultural influence and its subsequent association among society. The Japanese idealisation of the Hilton is essentially the same as the American fetishizing of the grand European-style hotels referenced by Frank. What Murakami suggests here is that connotative value and associative expectations are prioritised by the consumer over authenticity. The Hilton as a representation of high status triumphs over the true picture that Frank offers. *Miso Soup* highlights the perverse nature of these cultural relationships in how facets and tropes seemingly associated with a fetishized milieu are reconfigured by a willing host for the purpose of showcasing desirable traits. The glamour and sophistication associated with the Hilton in the minds of the Japanese exemplifies this effect. Murakami demonstrates here how the authenticity of what is being sold is of a secondary concern. Perceptions of what the brand in question signifies, or the image it promotes, is the overriding concern. Accuracy and authenticity are therefore irrelevant when considering the version of America impressed upon the Japanese.

The presentation brings to mind aspects of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*. What Baudrillard refers to as 'the divine irreference of images'—their ultimate representation of empty signifiers of a particular emotion or experience—is at the core of Murakami's conception here. The essence of this very assertion is traceable in the longing for an idealised version of America cynically pushed towards the Japanese consumer. The following quotation

from Baudrillard's text not only distils such a notion, but also demonstrates how these myths and reality eventually become interchangeable as entities:

> There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared.[15]

Murakami's allusion to Disneyland via reference to the Hilton again brings to mind the example used by Baudrillard to best illustrate the concept. The marketing of Disneyland as 'the Happiest Place on Earth'—a simulacrum devoted towards an idyll—bears comparison with the Japanese fetishizing of America in *Miso Soup*. What Disneyland represents in this respect is elaborated upon further by Baudrillard:

> Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland [...]. Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.[16]

The preconceived America posed throughout *Miso Soup* is in effect a Disney-esque commodified construct comprised of fanciful myths and half-truths. Frank's discontent stems from the recognition of this; that a perceived noble and ancient culture has eroded at the expense of a hollow, ill-informed imitation of an American milieu. The revelation that Frank is indeed the serial killer plaguing Tokyo brutally expresses this notion.

Miso Soup as Metaphor

The incongruous Japanese fetishizing of American superficialities in *Miso Soup* represents the most prominent manifestation of lingering post-war trauma. As previously mentioned, Frank explicitly references this point in the text as a notable source of frustration. The tone of the novel abruptly changes following the revelation that Frank is responsible for the gruesome murders plaguing Tokyo. Dialogue between Kenji and Frank predominantly focus on common themes of Murakami's literature, such as alienation and the fallacy of preconceptions.

The extent to which Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel's assessment of these discussions leads to Frank's 'eventual success in establishing "connection and communion" with himself and society' is open to dispute, however.[17] More of these exchanges between Kenji and Frank convey the meek acceptance of the implicitness of neuroses within a collective national consciousness. Resolution is simply not possible because such issues are ingrained in the national condition and have indelibly shaped one's identity. The ultimate realisation of the presence of such flaws is all that can be offered in response. The textual motif of the new-year countdown suggesting of a seismic reckoning is therefore exposed as an ironic plot. Life is

[15] Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulation', in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 166-184 (p. 170).
[16] ibid.
[17] Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel, 'Ryu Murakami. *In the Miso Soup*', *World Literature Today*, 78 (2004), 88.

simply left to continue, in essence, and this is demonstrated by Kenji and Frank merely going their separate ways at midnight with no suggestion of repercussions.

The two part as the New Year's bells ring out across Tokyo. Their final exchange sees Frank recall first ordering miso soup at a sushi restaurant in Colorado: 'It had that funny brown color and smelled kind of like human sweat, but it also looked delicate and refined somehow. I came to this country hoping to find out what the people who eat that soup on a daily basis might be like' (*MS*, 179). Kenji's response that they could eat some together at that very moment as the dish is sold in convenience stores elicits a rueful smile from Frank. Kenji's obliviousness to the implications of what he has said captures the novel's major theme of insidious, unconscious commercialism. The dish's modification is, in this respect, indicative of America's post-war influence in the reshaping of Japanese culture. The ancient traditions that Frank long wished to partake in have simply been adapted to reflect a new cultural normality.

The reference to having eaten the dish in Colorado is of additional significance. A comparison can be made with how the novel frequently depicts Japanese expectations of American culture as having been shaped by simulacra. The dish itself is evidently shown to have been commodified, from its availability in convenience stores to its serving in themed restaurants abroad. Presumably such restaurants adapt to local tastes and customs, which consequently influences consumer preconceptions of a particular milieu. This is an inarguable symptom of globalisation. The misguided expectations that this cultural decontextualizing generates resonates with William Scheuerman's assertion of 'distinct conflicts and dislocations' being an irrefutable outcome of the theory.[18] This is a result of the simultaneous manufacturing of a single commodity in 'distant corners of the globe'.[19] An outcome of this process is the fragmenting and subsequent reconceiving of cultural facets far away from their original form. A sense of this necessitates the text's portrayals of alienation and dissatisfaction within a milieu that is perceived to have been corrupted.

Franks' final words to Kenji see him invoke the experience of eating miso soup as a metaphor for his current condition in Japan. He claims he feels like the 'little slices of vegetables' as he himself is 'floating around in this giant bowl' of miso soup (*MS*, 179). The character essentially views himself as being immersed within a culture he had previously fetishized, but one which has not fulfilled expectations. The ultimate effect of this process enabled by globalisation is the same meek acceptance of an acute detachment from one's surrounding as felt here by Frank. One exists within such confines, but at the same time feels dislocated. His murderous sprees emblematise both the anger at this global reality and the apparent indiscriminate manner in which cultural supersession occurs. The absence of a resolution in this reflect merely highlights perpetuation of this process and the collective acquiescence of its happening.

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[18] William Scheuerman, 'Globalization', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (5th November, 2018), para. 11. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/globalization/>. [Accessed 1 December 2020].
[19] ibid.

Cultural Conflicts: Conclusions, or Lack Of

The implicitness of contrast and the permanence of paradox in the national condition are noted concerns shared by both Erickson and Murakami. Interestingly, the two develop their premises and themes attached to such subject matter towards similar ends. The most striking aspect of this, however, is that the plot's denouement does not always lead towards the resolution of the various conflicts posed. The conclusion itself is typically one of muted acceptance concerning a situation's reality. A definitive resolution is suggested as being implausible on account of how entrenched these conflicts are within the respective national psyches, and are presented as concepts which ultimately are inextricable from the very conventions that foster a sense of nationhood. As such, their unacknowledged presence within the collective (un)consciousness is shown to be a catalyst facilitating the seamless distortion of a country's cultural fabric.

Erickson's *The Sea* demonstrates how intertwined the emblem of destruction is with the Japanese cultural identity of the late twentieth century. Kristin personifies this notion via both her nationality and her occupation as a 'memory girl'. Her historic association with chaos and indiscriminate carnage only strengthens the assertion of the August 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as representing a cultural reset for Japan. The counterbalancing of destructive and commercialist imagery expresses this particularly evocatively. The collective amnesia which has since permeated Japan illustrates the extent of the country's estrangement from its past, and Kristin's presence in the country highlights the centrality of America's role in this cultural and historical divorce. The inescapable truth of a country's culture having been reshaped by commercialism is revealed through attempts at reconnecting a people with their ancient customs. Erickson poses the 1945 bombings as the unquestioned starting point of this process.

Murakami's *Miso Soup* toys with similar themes, albeit primarily from the Japanese perspective. The cultural usurpation that Murakami conveys in the text is largely normalised. Imported brands and sports are commonplace, as is a typical feature of globalisation. Where this usurpation occurs most intriguingly is via the fetishizing of a simulacrum of American culture. The character of Frank performs a crucial function in this regard, exposing the vapidity of such sentiments. Indeed, his characterisation as a frustrated serial killer symbolises the mechanics of the same cultural infiltration that he is shown to abhor. Rather than simply use the novel as a vehicle for a diatribe against modern Japanese culture, however, Murakami instead shows how this cultural homogenisation is prevalent across the developed world. Frank's recollections of consuming miso soup at a Japanese restaurant are testament to this. It simply reflects how certain cultural facets are adapted to suit the tastes of a specific market. Frank's perceptions of Japan are in turn shaped by the experience. Though not as obviously garish as fetishizing a Nike superstore or a stay at a Hilton hotel, for example, the point stands that the simulacra is presented as a legitimate substitute for experience in the text. Frank's despair stems from this realisation: that significant cultural facets of a particular country are essentially interchangeable. The muted acceptance of this at the novel's conclusion demonstrates this as a basic and inarguable reality of contemporary society. Again, that this is largely unacknowledged or even audibly considered makes the prospect of resolution an uncertain one.

Erickson and Murakami's portrayals of cross-cultural interactions share a commonality in highlighting how national cultures and conceptions are essentially malleable constructs. The influence of post-war commercialism is therefore shown to be obvious. Its intrinsic connection with destructive acts is additionally referenced in both implicit and explicit terms in order to convey the sordidness inherent to contemporary society. The feelings of detachment or alienation that this perpetuates are prominent themes of both texts. Both writers expertly demonstrate a globalised society's capacity to isolate, alongside subsequent attempts at establishing a personalised structure from this chaos. The inescapable outcome of these cross-cultural presentations is shown to be a profound loneliness. Ultimately, the emotion itself is depicted as having been instilled by facets of a culturally-homogenised society interpreting history in wholly unreliable terms.

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