

## Last Days of Empire: DeLillo's America and Murakami's Japan David Palmer

During the decade following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, there was a revival of the concept of empire applied to contemporary politics.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, two major novels, one Japanese – *The Windup Bird Chronicle* (*Nejimaki-dori Kuroniku*), by Haruki Murakami – the other American – *Underworld*, by Don DeLillo – anticipated this vision of empire in their respective countries.<sup>2</sup> Even the cover of DeLillo's novel has a prophetic quality with its silhouette photo of a nineteenth century church in Manhattan's Wall Street district in the foreground and behind it reaching into a black sky the World Trade Center towers, which were standing when the novel was published but destroyed four years later.

The United States has been an empire since the opening of the twentieth century, but by the twenty-first century it faced decline, its symbolic 'last days' marked by the terrible recession that began in 2008 and indicated an economic power shift to East Asia. Did the decline actually begin during the Vietnam War, a war the U.S. had lost by 1975, followed by a decade of de-industrialization and urban decay prior to the financial debacle in the next century? Japan, the nation with the world's second largest economy, also became an empire in the twentieth century, but suffered total defeat in World War II by August 1945. Although its imperial empire, underpinned by military conquest, collapsed, Japan revived as a powerful economy. It rivaled the United States by the 1980s, only to sink into stagnation following its long recession throughout the 1990s. These empires can thus be viewed as geographic and military at certain times, but later as economic in character also.

DeLillo's *Underworld* and Murakami's *The Windup Bird Chronicle* can be interpreted as providing a literary vision of these two countries' 'last days of empire', even if this perspective may not have been the intent of either author. These novels are not political novels as such, but give scenarios of life and fantasies in the postmodern urban world – New York City, Tokyo – of these economic superpowers in the second half of the century, set against the historical memory of lost wars – World War II in China, the Vietnam War – and lost empires. There has been considerable literary criticism of these two novels, but a relative absence of discussion dealing with their historical implications socially, culturally, and politically.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A few of the many examples of such works include Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (London: Verso, 2004); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003); Emmanuel Todd (trans. C. Jon Delogu), *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order* (London: Constable, 2002); David Ray Griffin and Peter Dale Scott, eds., *9/11 and American Empire: Intellectuals Speak Out* (Olive Branch Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Murakami Haruki (trans. Jay Rubin), *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (London: The Harvill Press, 1997); Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Jay Rubin, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words* (London: Harvill Press, 2002); Rebecca Suter, *The Japanization of Modernity: Murakami Haruki between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008); Jesse Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000);

Historical memory in each work is layered through fragments of national culture and local superstition linked to religion (Catholicism, Zen Buddhism and Shinto) and spirits (urban ghosts and internet magic), and also through internal and external wars, such as urban violence and overseas military engagements and disasters. At times, war and violence in both novels are represented through the imagery of games such as baseball and mass entertainment such as television, with cultural forms specific to Japan or America, as well as those common to both nations.

### **War As Games, Politics As Mass Entertainment**

DeLillo opens *Underworld* with a Prologue entitled 'The Triumph of Death'. The scene is the October 3, 1951 pennant game between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Brooklyn Giants. It becomes a symbol for Cold War politics and culture in America, viewed not only from the perspective of ordinary people attending the game, but also through the power elite. In the box seats, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover learns from one of his agents that the Soviet Union has just detonated a hydrogen bomb.<sup>4</sup> Hoover was one of the most corrupt and powerful unelected figures in twentieth century American national politics. He controlled damaging personal files on every president from Roosevelt to Nixon, refused to recognize the existence of organized crime embodied in the Mafia, even though he enjoyed the leisure company of gangsters while having the FBI hound thousands of Americans accused of Communist Party membership or leftwing sympathies.<sup>5</sup> At the 1951 baseball game (in DeLillo's mythical account), Hoover shares box seats with entertainers Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason, both of whom had close friends in the Mafia. Images of a baseball game witnessed by thousands of fans in the ball park and by those around New York City listening to the radio, but also broadcast overseas on U.S. military bases by government radio merge with images of nuclear war and Pieter Bruegel's sixteenth century Flemish painting of war, from which the Prologue gets its name. Celebrating fans dump paper from upper tiers of the stadium, and a magazine reprint of Bruegel's painting falls onto Hoover: this is 'fallout' from the game. The scene thus merges sport, war, and art, with paintings of violence that are recognized as classic art objects, but which become, as reprints, little more than commercial waste.

In this section, DeLillo takes us inside the mind of J. Edgar Hoover. We learn that the FBI director is obsessed with death, fear of contamination (physical and ideological), and his own mortality. The paradoxical connection between mass spectator sports ('people on the field') and mass nuclear destruction ('light[ing] the city') becomes explicit in Hoover's mind as he looks at the reprint of Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* and then back to the game, now over.

And what is the connection between Us and Them, how many bundled links do we find in the neural labyrinth? It's not enough to hate your enemy ... The old dead fucking the new. The dead raising coffins from the earth ... He looks up for a moment. He takes the pages from his face ... and looks at the people

---

David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Athens, GA.: University of Georgia Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> For background on the American and Soviet race to build the hydrogen bomb, see Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). The date in *Underworld* actually corresponds with the Soviets' second hydrogen bomb test explosion.

<sup>5</sup> See Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and His Secrets* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

on the field. Those who are happy and dazed. Those who run around the bases calling out the score ... The fans pressed together at the clubhouse steps chanting the players' names. The fans having fistfights on the subway going home ... Those who will light the city with their bliss.<sup>6</sup>

The winning home run, hit by Giants player Bobby Thomson, leads to a fight in the stands over who will get the prized baseball. The scene where the final combatants grab for the ball – Cotter Martin, a black teenager who has illegally gotten into the park by jumping over the entrance gates with his friends, and Bill Waterson, a stereotypical white adult male, ‘good neighbor Bill’ – draws on the most basic American conflict: black versus white. It is also about class and the change about to occur in America's inner cities of the 1950s.

The homerun baseball becomes the symbol of the game and the absurdity of American consumerism. It is a revered object that exists in a country where waste and disposable consumer goods are everywhere. The baseball also becomes a symbol of destruction, but it is also a memory object. In the late 1980s, one owner of the ball, Marvin Lundy of Cliffside Park, New Jersey, comments, ‘the whole thing is interesting because when they make an atomic bomb, listen to this, they make the radioactive core the exact same size as a baseball’.<sup>7</sup>

Games and war in *Underworld* connect back to childhood as well. In Part 6 (‘Arrangement in Gray and Black, Fall 1951 - Summer 1952’), the novel moves back in time to Italian-American working class Brooklyn of the early 1950s where brothers Nick and Matt Shay, the novel's main characters, grew up. The street games of children mirror the war / game interface of Bruegel's two paintings, *The Triumph of Death* and *Kinderspielen / Children's Play*, that DeLillo uses as imagery. Nick Shay's high school science teacher, Albert Bronzini, is walking through the streets watching children play. His wife is Klara Sax, who becomes Nick Shay's lover around this time. By the 1970s, Klara has established herself independently as a Manhattan-based artist. The complex links of all these themes – war, games, art, sex – are brought out when Bronzini, the adult, observes the children and their street games.

Girls playing jacks and jumping double dutch. Boys at boxball, marbles and rinolievio. Five boys each with a foot in a segmented circle that had names of countries marked in the wedges. China, Russia, Africa, France and Mexico. The kid who is *it* stands at the center of the circle with a ball in his hand and slowly chants the warning words: *I de-clare a-war u-pon*.<sup>8</sup>

While DeLillo focuses on Cold War America from the initial hydrogen bomb competition with the Soviets through the immediate post-Soviet era, Murakami in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* links Japan of the ‘bubble economy’ years, the mid-1980s, with the tragic and brutal Japan of World War II, specifically the years 1939 and 1945. Murakami's war scenario happens outside Japan, in Mongolia and Manchukuo (the Japanese puppet regime in occupied Manchuria). The material, or object, that is the link to this sordid past is a dry well and a baseball bat. Although *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* does not revolve around sporting games, its focus on extended periods

---

<sup>6</sup> DeLillo 51.

<sup>7</sup> DeLillo 172.

<sup>8</sup> DeLillo 662.

of silent waiting, followed by sudden moments of action, is reminiscent of the batter anticipating a pitch in baseball. Coincidentally, baseball (or *yakyu* in Japanese) has been considered the national game of Japan in the post-World War II era. Murakami, like DeLillo, makes uncanny use of baseball as a symbol of social violence.

The main character of Murakami's novel is Toru Okada, who has quit his meaningless white collar job and is enjoying solitude at home, reading and cooking, while his wife, Kumiko, pursues her career and earns the money for the household. Murakami reverses the usual stereotype of Japanese gender relations, of the 'salaryman' working long hours and socializing at night in contrast to the homebound 'housewife'. For several weeks, Kumiko comes home late from work (or so she says), with the return hours getting later each evening. One night she does not return at all. The next day, Toru Okada calls her place of employment and discovers that she has disappeared. He subsequently is told that she has left him for another man with whom she was having an affair. Okada vows to find her and learn what she is really thinking, so that he can get her to come back to him. As the novel progresses, he becomes convinced that she is being held against her will, and it turns out, in psychological terms, that he is correct.

After many months have gone by without Kumiko, Okada goes to Shinjuku, one of Tokyo's huge commercial centres, where he sits all day waiting for something to happen. He notices a man who he thinks he has seen before who he saw one night playing guitar in a Sapporo bar while Kumiko, back in Tokyo had an abortion without Okada knowing. Away from home in distant Hokkaido, Okada and the few patrons present heard this strange folk-singing guitar player talk about pain and the notion of empathy for those with pain. The guitar player then held a candle to his palm until he burned it, but miraculously there were no burn marks when he held up his hand to the audience. No one at the bar had seen him before this performance nor did they know who he was.

Now in Shinjuku, Okada follows the man, who is carrying a guitar case (which later turns out to be empty), into a part of the city just south of the commercial hub to a location that looks like a neighborhood from the 1950s with two-story wood frame buildings crammed together and streets too narrow for cars. There are no people anywhere, only cats that peer out at him. Half the buildings are boarded up and appear abandoned in this 'forgotten section of the city' where even the sound of cars has disappeared.<sup>9</sup>

Has Okada entered an actual place or is he stepping back in time into another city, a shadow world or underworld not usually visible? When he follows the man into a rundown wooden building, the man surprises Okada and attacks him with a baseball bat. Okada grabs the bat and beats the man repeatedly with it, then hurries from the scene and boards a bus for home, with bat in hand and blood covering his shirt. Okada keeps the bat and takes it down into an empty well in a yard connected to an unoccupied house in his neighborhood. He has been down to the bottom of the well before, staying for some time where he sits silently, but now he has a weapon – the bat – that he takes with him. He has no idea how to contact his wife, but somehow he thinks that if he descends to the bottom of the empty well and sits and waits that something will happen. He believes that at least he can get a sense of things, as if meditating Zen-style, in the total darkness beneath Tokyo. He comes to feel that if he can pass through the wall of the empty well he will be able to enter a shadow world

---

<sup>9</sup> Murakami 335.

(or underworld) where Kumiko is being held against her will. Only by entering this shadow world can he contact her and try to bring her back.

Murakami portrays an economic environment engulfed by global capitalism and a political setting dominated by the opportunist, conservative party politics of the 1980s. This world, however, is an echo of 1930s Japan, when economic conservatism became entwined with political repression at home and military conquest abroad.<sup>10</sup> Okada's wife, Kumiko, has an older brother, Noboru Wataya, who started his career as an academic economist and turns out to be her psychological captor. By the end of the novel, Noboru works his way into a potentially powerful political position, becoming a media star whose television image is everywhere Okada turns. The 'evil' of Manchuria and Mongolia that infested the leaders of both the Japanese and Soviet armies during the World War II era (Murakami's portrayal) seems to be resurfacing for Okada in the prosperous Japan of the 1980s 'economic miracle,' with Noboru personifying this depraved 'success.'

About two years after I married Kumiko, Noboru Wataya published a big, thick book. It was an economics study full of technical jargon, and I couldn't understand a thing he was trying to say in it ... People in the field thought it was great, though ... Soon the mass media began to introduce him as a 'hero for a new age.' ...

It made him famous ... He appeared on television to comment on political and economic questions ... He had obviously been worked on by a professional ... Who was this man? I wondered, when I first saw him. *Where was the real Noboru Wataya?*<sup>11</sup>

Noboru Wataya appears to be a combination of several actual Japanese political leaders prominent in the 1980s. Noboru was also the given name of Noboru Takeshita, who was prime minister of Japan from 1988 to 1989. During the 1980s, Takeshita was also the leader of the largest faction of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Japan's sole governing political party from 1955 through the 1980s. Takeshita was a 'pupil' of Kakuei Tanaka, who was prime minister from 1972 to 1974, and who was the leader of the largest LDP faction during the 1960s and 1970s. Tanaka was highly popular during his ascendancy, viewed by many Japanese as a 'man of the people' who opposed the elitist politicians with law degrees from Tokyo University. He had been a private in Manchukuo (Manchuria) at the beginning of World War II. He became ill, however, and returned to Japan where he made a living in the construction business in Tokyo through his father-in-law, and subsequently made a substantial fortune in Japanese-occupied Korea by relocating a major Japanese piston ring factory there. After the war he used his skills in business and political deal-making to successfully rise in party politics. The fictitious Yoshitaka Wataya was also sent to Manchukuo, with the 'mission ... to calculate the time that would be needed before ... stable supplies of wool could be secured in Manchukuo. Yoshitaka Wataya

---

<sup>10</sup> Since the 1950s, no substantial scholarly books in English have been published that cover the history of the relationship of the Japanese political economy to the rise of military autocracy during the 1930s. This contrasts with a number of recent publications on the political economy of the Third Reich. See, for example, Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Murakami 27-76 (italics added).

seized upon this problem of cold-weather clothing as a model case for modern logistics and carried out an exhaustive numerical analysis'.<sup>12</sup> He too entered politics after the war.

The ending of the careers of Tanaka and the fictitious Yoshitaka Wataya also coincide. Yoshitaka Wataya, who represents the conservative Niigata district in the novel, suffers a heart attack in early October, 1985, which makes it possible for his nephew Noboru to run for his Lower House position. The real Tanaka represented the same district and by 1985 was the most powerful 'shadow shogun' in Japan, as a leader of the main faction within the Lower House. He had already been convicted of bribery in the Lockheed scandal, but survived behind the scenes to maintain his power over the LDP. On February 27, 1985, however, he suffered a stroke, and according to Masumi Junnosuke 'the LDP was at last liberated from Tanaka's spell'.<sup>13</sup> In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Noboru Wataya casts a similar spell over Japanese politics and the public, a spell that Okada eventually seeks to destroy. We witness the 'game' of politics, like the 'game' of war, through these apparent parallels of history and fiction.

### **Religion, Spirits, War, And Historical Memory**

In a broader, cultural-religious framework, Murakami has a perspective that draws on Zen Buddhism. At one point Malta Kano, who is a medium assisting in relocating Okada's lost cat that led him to the house with the dry well, but later a go-between for Kumiko on behalf of Noboru Wataya, makes a reference to Zen when talking to Okada about a strange gift he has received: an empty Cutty Sark box (a symbolic fusion of Western consumer culture and Japanese traditional cultural). This 'empty' gift comes from Oishi Honda, who had been a corporal in the Kwantung Army (Japan's Manchurian-based occupation force from the 1930s to 1945), and later in life a practitioner of spirit possession. Honda had recently died, and an old comrade of his from the 1939 Nomonhan campaign in Manchuria, Lieutenant Tokutaro Mamiya, personally delivered the keepsake to Okada, in accordance with Honda's request. Toru Okada and Kumiko had visited Honda a number of times before getting married, at Kumiko's father's request. Her father, a top bureaucrat in the Ministry of Finance who saw Okada as only a lowly white collar worker, believed totally in Honda's ability to see the future and agreed to the marriage only when Honda indicated that preventing it would have dire consequences.

In 1939, Honda and Mamiya served together in a Japanese Army intelligence unit in Manchukuo. When they secretly entered Soviet-occupied Mongolia during the brief 'Nomonhan War' between Japan and the Soviet Union, they were captured and only Mamiya survived. Honda, however, had slipped away before the unit's capture, knowing in advance what would happen. The Soviet-led Mongolian unit took Mamiya away and finally threw him down a dry well, leaving him to die. Alone on the vast Mongolian plain, Honda discovered Mamiya's location without any physical clues

---

<sup>12</sup> Murakami 449.

<sup>13</sup> Junnosuke Masumi (trans. Lonny E. Carlile), *Contemporary Politics in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 421. Background on Tanaka and Takeshita comes from Chalmers Johnson, *Japan: Who Governs? The Rise of the Developmental State* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) 183-211; Robert Harvey, *The Undeclared: The Rise, Fall and Rise of Greater Japan* (London: Macmillan, 1994) 358-366; and Karel van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 126-154.

and pulled him out of the well. Honda knew where Mamiya was through his clairvoyant powers.

Although not explicitly stated, folk Shinto and traditional Japanese spirit beliefs, not just Zen, seem to pervade Honda's outlook. Honda informed Okada during one of the visits made by the young couple before they were married to 'be careful of water ... be very, very careful of water'.<sup>14</sup> Water is at the heart of Shinto ritual. Cleansing with water is required before entering a shrine, and the continuous flow of this water signifies purity and life. Okada's discovery that the neighboring well, in the middle of modern Tokyo, is dry indicates that the flow of water under the houses in his neighborhood has stopped, just as the water had stopped in the Mongolian well 45 years earlier. Malta Kano, too, has been strongly affected by water, but for her it was a quest for mystically powerful water in a mountain spring on the Mediterranean island of Malta (the reason she has taken this name), which 'has a wonderful influence on the body's elements'. When Okada tells her about the dry well, she warns him that a 'flow' is blocked in the neighborhood, and that he may be in great danger. These beliefs go beyond just naturalism, because water, like other natural things in Japanese tradition, is thought to be a living spirit rather than an inanimate object.<sup>15</sup>

DeLillo's framework, in contrast, is that of Catholicism, but a Catholicism that is urban, American, working class, and influenced by Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican, and other immigrant ethnic cultures. Zen and Shinto, as well as Catholicism, have been religions connected to war. For the Japanese, Zen has historically been the credo of the samurai and war, although Zen as a broader philosophy should not be subsumed under this category. Shinto has taken many forms, including folk religion, but its most famous branch is connected to Japanese nationalism and emperor worship, especially from the Meiji Restoration (1868) to World War II. Catholicism, in turn, was the religion of the Crusades and autocratic Papal authority in pre-modern Europe; of the Spanish, French, and Portuguese colonial conquests; and of the Spanish Inquisition. For the American urban working class (especially Italian, Irish, Polish, Latino) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, Catholicism has been the foundation for an ethnic and cultural credo quite different from this institutional history. Surface loyalty to Vatican church hierarchy has often disguised the undercurrent of popular religious superstitions and practices in the United States. This American version of working class Catholicism, persisting through the Cold War era, is the folk variant that parallels folk Shinto and popularly accepted (as opposed to ideologically statist) Zen in Japan.<sup>16</sup> In portrayals by DeLillo and Murakami, these modernized folk variants of their nations' religions assume a populist form of resistance to authority and political-economic elites. Behind the Cold War and the global capitalism of multinationals is an 'underworld' of alternative and seemingly irrational popular

---

<sup>14</sup> Murakami 51.

<sup>15</sup> For Shinto, including folk and state forms of Shinto, see Joseph M. Kitagawa, *On Understanding Japanese Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) 139-173. For Zen Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism generally, Hajime Nakamura (trans. and ed. by Philip P. Wiener), *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964 / 1985) 345-587.

<sup>16</sup> For a brief but comprehensive history of Catholicism in New York City, which includes a lengthy bibliography that includes material on European immigrants and Hispanics, see Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New York: Yale University Press, 1995) 190-194.

belief systems that challenge the commercially, politically, and culturally homogenized status quo and which ultimately undermines 'empire'.

These cultural-religious frameworks for each nation are one way of understanding the social 'rules of the game' and the philosophical underpinnings for national attitudes toward war. Murakami's perspective highlights nothingness, the empty well, the vast empty space of the Mongolian plateau; a city (Tokyo) of shadows, lost places, labyrinths going nowhere; and a nation deluded by vacuous politicians and their sleazy gangster enforcers who appear at night. DeLillo's portrayal is apocalyptic, full of prophecies and revelations that cut from the nuclear test wastelands of the America's Southwestern deserts to a city (New York) on the verge of social and economic chaos, with its own mafia gangsters and urban labyrinths.

In the world of religion and spirits, where is the link back to war? War is an historical event, or events, that are taken as real. Armies fought, people died – these things actually happened. But how do we actually know these events occurred, and why are particular situations and the people engulfed in them so easily forgotten? Both Murakami and DeLillo address this question of historical memory in their novels when they introduce disappearance as a theme. Individuals vanish, but so do these events. History, in effect, vanishes. Were these people simply spirits, figments of the imagination or were they actual, material human beings? Or were/are they somehow both?

Murakami's World War II characters are always searching for someone who will listen to their story and will somehow understand it, and thus validate a historical reality for them. Okada invariably is the link between Japan's grim World War II past and its overblown present, but individuals – Kumiko, the Kano sisters, Lieutenant Mimiya, Nutmeg and Cinnamon – who reach out to him vanish just as history has vanished.<sup>17</sup>

For DeLillo, the uncertainty of history takes on a different form. History becomes fragments of information. It is memory, but broken into particles, disconnected but somehow all interrelated. The highly fragmented narrative structure of *Underworld* reflects this mindset. It is machine memory as much as human memory, for the human side of things is virtually swallowed up in the underworld of the technological.

Among the memory objects in *Underworld* is 'Long Tall Sally,' a B-52 bomber from the Vietnam War, which becomes, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of Klara Sax's art installations in the Nevada desert, amidst dozens of other mothballed Air Force planes. Drawing the art/war link again, DeLillo later takes the story back to December 1, 1969, when 'Long Tall Sally' was flown for bombing runs over Vietnam. Louis T. Blakey and Charles 'Chuckman' Wainwright (who bought the famous homerun baseball back in 1951) argue over their bomber's name. Blakey (who is black) says it is a song written by a black woman so the song is black, and later Wainwright (who is white) thinks that Blakey's count down for dropping the bombs is 'like a Negro spiritual that makes your whole face tingle with reverence and

---

<sup>17</sup> On the intriguing theme of vanishing people and modern ghosts in present day Japan, which corresponds in a general sense with Murakami's fictional portrayals, see Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

awe'.<sup>18</sup> A perverse mixture of heaven and hell, death and light, pervades their bombing mission.

Louis does his phony countdown and waits for the flash. A strong and immortal young man on a noble mission.

'Three, two, one.'

Then the world lights up. A glow enters the body that's like the touch of God ... There's whole skeletons dancing in the flash. The navigator, the instructor-navigator, the electronic gunner. We are dead men flying.<sup>19</sup>

In the same way that the forgotten events in the 'exterior' Nomonhan War in Manchuria and Mongolia of *Windup Bird* have their counterparts in Tokyo's 'internal' urban political war, the Vietnam War is echoed in the South Bronx. Although the physically violent 'inner' war taking place in the South Bronx in the mid- to late-1980s is the opposite of the psychologically violent 'inner' war taking place in Tokyo of the 'bubble economy,' the sources of alienation and inequality are similar. In the midst of this urban wasteland of polarized wealth and poverty, people seek some kind of spiritual revelation, that is, both a revelation of the human spirit, but also of the underworld's spirits that surround them. The scenes portrayed by DeLillo are American in every sense, but also appear strangely like many parts of the 'less developed' world. Two nuns, Grace Fahey and Sister Alma Edgar (J. Edgar Hoover's Catholic working class counterpart in the novel), are helping the poor in the South Bronx by distributing food, and they find themselves in the middle of a war zone whose objects reveal a historical archaeology of social waste.

The two women looked across a landscape of vacant lots filled with years of stratified deposits – the age of house garbage, the age of construction debris and vandalized car bodies, the age of moldering mobster parts. Weeds and trees grew amid the dumped objects. There were dog packs, sightings of hawks and owls. City workers came periodically to excavate the site ... like infantrymen huddled near advancing tanks ... Gunfire sang at sunset off the low walls of demolished buildings. The nuns sat in the van and looked. At the far end was a lone standing structure, a derelict tenement with an exposed wall ... This was where Ismael Munoz and his crew of graffiti writers spray-painted a memorial angel every time a child died in the neighborhood....

Edgar laughed inside her skull. It was the drama of the angels that made her feel she belonged here. It was the terrible death these angels represented.<sup>20</sup>

This particular tenement 'wall' is also like a ship in the dark sea of the South Bronx, Melville's ship perhaps, but this time under the command of a Puerto Rican named Ismael, rather than the despotic Captain Ahab ('Call me Ishmael. . .' which is the opening line of *Moby Dick*). The third world has come to the very heart of the American empire, an urban underworld of 'the drama of angels' in which children's

---

<sup>18</sup> DeLillo 612.

<sup>19</sup> DeLillo 613.

<sup>20</sup> DeLillo 238, 239.

lives are nothing, except to those who themselves are forgotten and visually memorialize these children.

In the early 1970s, Ismael was known as Moonman 157. He was the best of the secret graffiti artists who were hated by city authorities for 'bombing' their spray can art onto buildings and subway trains, but art sought after by those wanting to buy and sell this art form in the fashionable galleries of Soho, lower Manhattan, including friends of Klara Sax (the artist painting the abandoned bombers, including 'Long Tall Sally' used in the Vietnam War). Sister Edgar fears Ismael, believing he is a potential AIDS carrier because of his bisexuality and drug use. She is obsessed with contamination just as her FBI counterpart J. Edgar Hoover was, and she believes that the AIDS epidemic is a demonic conspiracy that may consume her, not just those around her.<sup>21</sup> Without Ismael, however, the sisters cannot carry out their humanitarian assistance in the South Bronx. Ismael is their link into this underworld, which he somehow has humanized by taking care of his orphaned 'crew' of teenagers inside the protection of 'the wall.'

Sister Edgar becomes preoccupied with a teenage girl known as Esmaralda, who frequents the area around the wall. Esmaralda lives off of garbage, is completely solitary, and runs away if anyone approaches her. At the end of *Underworld*, Esmaralda is brutally raped and thrown off a building, becoming a martyr in the eyes of Sister Edgar and many in the South Bronx. Sister Edgar wears a traditional nun's habit, with its peaked hood, resembling a large black raven, which is an allusion to the bird of Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem, 'The Raven'.<sup>22</sup> In this poem a young woman disappears and the sound of the raven is heard throughout ('Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore"'). Esmaralda's image, many believe, appears on a billboard next to the South Bronx Expressway, drawing hundreds of devout believers who see in her the image of the Virgin Mary. The religious-literary connection drawn by DeLillo illustrates the popular and irrational way that ordinary people deal with the chaos of this urban underworld. Just as Murakami's 'religion' of subversion draws on spirits of the shadow world common to Japanese popular culture and folk Shinto, DeLillo draws on the deities and angels that inhabit American popular culture in its inner cities, especially the spirit world of Italian and Caribbean popular Catholicism.

### **The Japanese And American 'External' Wars: From Manchuria To Vietnam**

The focus of both authors on 'external' war scenes of actual physical and human destruction, not just political rhetoric and policy posturing, is where these two novels converge. The scenes Murakami and DeLillo portray are not epic or heroic, but instead are devastatingly individual and terrifying. There appears to be absolutely nothing rational about the context of this external war. Furthermore, the 'enemy,' in both cases connected to the Soviet Union, has figures in control who have much in common with elites and political bureaucrats who hold power in the United States and Japan.

---

<sup>21</sup> Although J. Edgar Hoover lived in the years before the discovery of AIDS, he was fanatical about contamination by germs, having everything around him regularly cleaned. Part of this fear was fueled by his belief that Communists might try to infect him through germ warfare. Ironically, this very tactic was used by the CIA against Cuba's Fidel Castro in the early 1960s.

<sup>22</sup> Here the names 'Edgar' appear linked, as is 'Allan' (Allan for Poe, Alma for Sister Edgar, with 'alms' as a possible transition between the two).

For Murakami, contact with ‘the enemy’ is conveyed directly, through the words of the soldiers themselves. They are reluctant participants in a strange drama: the Nomonhan War of 1939 between Japan and Russia, on the border of Manchukuo and Mongolia, and later the collapse of Japan’s Manchukuo empire at the end of World War II in 1945. In both situations, Japan lost, but in 1945 we witness the last days of the Japanese military empire in the Pacific, as told by Nutmeg. She was a child aboard a freighter full of refugees returning to Japan from Manchukuo, which had been under siege by the advancing Soviet Army. An American submarine suddenly surfaced, threatening to kill them all, but just as suddenly left because the submarine’s captain learned of Japan’s surrender. The ship, with Nutmeg aboard, continued on until reaching the Japanese port of Sasebo. She recalls her feelings at that moment and of her father’s disappearance:

The whole world seemed caught in a deep paralysis, and some on board felt as if they had stumbled by accident into the land of the dead. After years spent abroad, they could only stare in silence at the country of their ancestors. At noon on August 15, the radio had broadcast the Emperor’s announcement of the war’s end. Six days before that, the nearby city of Nagasaki had been incinerated by a single atomic bomb. The phantom empire of Manchukuo was disappearing into history. And caught unawares in the wrong section of the revolving door, the veterinarian with the mark on his cheek [Nutmeg’s father] would share the fate of Manchukuo.<sup>23</sup>

In *Underworld*, actual war (in contrast to symbolic Cold War) appears in scenes of the Vietnam War, but these scenes are removed from actual physical confrontation and battle. They are technological and remote, involving bombing runs and not even focused on the war itself, but on the people (Americans, not Vietnamese) who are in the bombers. The Vietnam War also appears through numerous U.S.-based protests: in New York City at the Black and White Ball, where a masked J. Edgar Hoover, who is secretly attending, fears his disguise will be torn away, and in Madison, Wisconsin at the state university, where massive antiwar riots and police and national guard attacks on students become a ‘war at home’.

War also surfaces in scenes depicting nuclear testing and weapons design deep in the American Southwest deserts. This is the ‘external’ war that reverberates internally, with nuclear weapons aimed at the Soviet Union, but based and tested in the United States. Matt Shay, Nick’s brother, is a weapons systems designer in the 1970s who works within the nuclear weapons complex in New Mexico, the site of Trinity, the first atomic bomb test in 1945. In the late 1960s he served in Vietnam at Phu Bai, reviewing air reconnaissance films for military intelligence, and he has continued his connection with the military in this post-Vietnam War position back in the United States. Eric Deming, one of Matt’s ‘bombhead’ colleagues, tells him stories, kept secret by the government, of how local people living downwind from the Nevada aboveground tests (‘downwinders’, mainly in southern Utah) have suffered severe disfigurements as a result of radiation exposure.

‘Nobody’s supposed to know this ... Secret. Untalked about. Hushed up ...  
Multiple myelomas. Kidney failures. Or you wake up one morning and you’re

---

<sup>23</sup> Murakami 418.

three inches shorter ... Little farm communities ... Nearly all the kids wear wigs.' Eric, however, does not believe the stories. He only spreads them '[f]or the tone ... The existential burn.'<sup>24</sup>

### **The Last Days Of Empire: 'Links In A Circle'**

The epilogue to *Underworld*, entitled 'Das Kapital,' may appear puzzling. From an historical perspective, however, this concluding section, with its title taken from Marx's famous three-volume analysis of capitalism, can have a double meaning: the old Soviet doctrine enshrined but supposedly dead by 1992; but also the new globalisation of capitalism that was eerily predicted by Marx. Nick Shay, the waste disposal new age executive, encounters this transformed world in the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan where he is contracted to dump American nuclear waste. His business colleague Brian Glassic 'finds this place frightening ... It's the sense of displacement and redefinition.' Their host, Viktor Maltseva, 'a trading company executive,' obviously once connected to the now-dead Soviet regime, explains:

Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that's electronic and sex that's cyberspaced, untouched money and computer-safe sex, the convergence of consumer desire ... But even as desire tends to specialize, going silky and intimate, the force of converging markets produces an instantaneous capital that shoots across horizons at the speed of light, making for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream.<sup>25</sup>

In fiction at least, conditions develop that lead to the possibility of the 'empire's last days.' They can be viewed as 'days' rather than years or eras because they are particular, individualized, and locally specific. In DeLillo's portrayal, these conditions are produced, in macro terms, by global capitalism (with the United States now just another player); the cyberworld of the internet and its explosion of destabilizing information; and America's burned inner cities and underclass that can ignite social upheaval. It is a realm that is no longer the American empire of the 1950s following the U.S. triumph in World War II. At the end of *Underworld*, Sister Edgar dies, but 'she is in cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems'. Everything is fused together. Nuclear test explosions, whether U.S. or Soviet, can be found on 'the H-bomb home page'. Sister Edgar fuses too. She becomes 'her biological opposite, her male half, dead these many years ... The bulldog fed, J. Edgar Hoover, the Law's debased saint, hyperlinked at last to Sister Edgar – a single fluctuating impulse now, a piece of coded information. Everything is connected in the end'.<sup>26</sup>

This same pattern of interconnectedness is at the heart of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, except that instead of everything merging into one (into 'white noise'), the individual somehow survives but discovers he / she is a link in a previously unseen circle. Okada, at one point, has been reading intently on the history of Japanese

---

<sup>24</sup> DeLillo 405, 406.

<sup>25</sup> DeLillo 785, 786.

<sup>26</sup> DeLillo 825, 826.

Manchukuo, and finds unexpected connections between himself and people he has been relating to recently.

I ... stared out the window in the vague direction of the front gate. Soon the gate would open inward and the Mercedes-Benz would appear, with Cinnamon at the wheel. He would be bringing another 'client.' These 'clients' and I were joined by the mark on my cheek. Cinnamon's grandfather (Nutmeg's father) and I were also joined by the mark on my cheek [Nutmeg had stopped to talk with Okada in Shinjuku because she noticed his mark, which was identical to her father's]. Cinnamon's grandfather and Lieutenant Mamiya were joined by the city of Hsin-ching ... Lieutenant Mamiya and I were joined by our experience in our respective wells - his in Mongolia, mine on the property where I was sitting now ... All of these were linked as in a circle, at the center of which stood prewar Manchuria, continental East Asia, and the short war of 1939 in Nomonhan. But why Kumiko and I should have been drawn into this historical chain of cause and effect I could not comprehend.<sup>27</sup>

DeLillo's 'everything is connected' and Murakami's 'link in a circle' can be interpreted as a way of viewing history at an individual level that has many connections at other levels, within America's 'underworld' (DeLillo) and Japan's 'shadow world' (Murakami), experienced during the empire's symbolic 'last days' in the megacities of New York and Tokyo, and beyond. Empire, war, and decaying capitalism, however, are not the final words of either author. Murakami's novel concludes with the line: 'In a place far away from anyone or anywhere, I drifted off for a moment'.<sup>28</sup> DeLillo's novel concludes with the line:

And you can glance out the window for a moment ... and you try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world ... a word that spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards to the solitary hills.

Peace.<sup>29</sup>

We find this strange coincidence of both novels concluding in a similar direction, even if the final pages are quite distinct in the complex stories they are relating. Each ending implies another world is possible, perhaps beyond wars and empires.

---

<sup>27</sup> Murakami 501, 502.

<sup>28</sup> Murakami 611.

<sup>29</sup> DeLillo 827. The last sentence in *Underworld* is over half a page long.