

# “The World of the Grotesque is the Darkness Within Us”: The Noir GEOAESTHETICS OF MURAKAMI’S NAKATA

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“Light displays both itself and darkness”  
Baruch de Spinoza, Ethics

The work of the immensely popular Japanese noir or “sushi noir,” as he calls himself (Mussari: 97) author Haruki Murakami is characterized by an odd sense of repetition. Mark Mussari is right when concluding, for instance, that “Hotels play a recurring role in Murakami’s writings, and they often function as portals to other planes of existence” (70). Yet the repetition here, contrary to how one might read this quotation, does not lie in the word “hotel,” or in the cats and crows or in any other word that often appears in Murakami’s stories. It would make up a strange linguisticism to assume that the “hotel” in *Kafka on the Shore* should relate (because of the word used) to the hotel in *1Q84*, or that the cat in *Norwegian Wood* is necessarily connected to the cat in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*.

The repetition, instead, happens in the way “other planes of existence” are introduced with the hotel. The repetition appears to us in feeling the movement of withdrawal from under the words as these other planes of existence suddenly realize themselves, removing us from the familiarity of presence over and over again. Only then “something beyond words appears to make itself felt” as Hobson reads a similar movement in Derrida (1998: 211). Only then do the words of Murakami become haunted.

Moving beyond the words themselves takes us to the breaths by means of which the words travel, by means of which they are being articulated. Being left to the tender mercies of these breaths, as they come from all possible directions, repetition takes place. Throughout his work, Murakami continuously breathes another space into a room, into a suburb of Tokyo, into a forest or into a highway. It clinches itself onto the objects, on the words being spoken, on the futures to come. Then, with a Lynchian slowness, this otherness takes over. It is always already out there, as it is always in here.

In his earlier short stories, space is still rather mechanistically approached as a means to release the breath of noir. In *The Elephant Vanishes*, for instance, we find ourselves in the suburb where the only attraction of a former zoo is an elephant that somehow disappears with its caretaker (which was impossible, considering the size of the elephant and the routes available). Similar to how H.P. Lovecraft, in his first short stories, experiments with an unknown and unknowable (for untraceable) secret that forms the center of his space (think of his *The Music of Erich Zann*), the early Murakami, too, circles around such a single crack in the world, a wormhole or vacuum solution that warns us for the existence of another spacetime.

Later in his oeuvre, however, the crack is not placed center space, but rather seem to be absolutized in the sense that, more and more, otherness is approaching us from every possible angle. In his latest work, *1Q84*, this otherness (established by the Little People) breathes into every possible space (from Tokyo to Chikura) as for instance the sky now always carries two moons: the moon we’ve always known is now accompanied by a small, green and hideous moon that haunts it just like the Mothers are haunted by the Daughters and the ‘pupa of air’ that is ready

to duplicate everyone everywhere.

This second moon affirms us that as of now (at least since 1q84), the black holes are everywhere; they shimmer in all the personae, all the buildings and the words that seem to create the particular space. Everywhere one sees a shadow that “is a manifest, though impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light” (1977: 154), as Heidegger had already put it. The shadows are not relative (to the sun for instance) but are present behind all illumination. China Mièville once very nicely verbalized the omnipresence of shadows, concluding that: “I saw others in similar shadows, similarly hard to make sense of, emerging, sort of, not approaching me, not even moving but holding themselves...” (2010: 198). In 1q84 the presence of another space turned absolute, but it was especially in Murakami’s most celebrated novel *Kafka on the Shore* that the felt presence of otherness was actively writing itself in every space. This epic work, Murakami’s most complex writing, provides our best scenario for learning about the immanent noirness of space.

The stories in *Kafka on the Shore* are brought to us by Kafka Tumura and Saturo Nakata, the two main characters that travel (from Tokyo to Takematsu), but not together. As always with Murakami, the characters are not developed in any detail, but much more function as media to the story in the Simondonian sense: they merely give a name to “the clinching into synergistic relation of a diversity of elements” (Massumi 2009: 43) as this makes up a situation. They cannot be considered the perspective from which the story unfolds. They are in no way relative to “other elements” that should be of our concern. As with the axonometric landscapes of ukiyo-e artist Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858) who famously painted the 53 stops of the Tokaido (the main road between Edo (Tokyo) and Kyoto), the travels reveal spaces that extend themselves along myriad of individualities, all equally important, equally illuminated, yet haunted by the dark. And only though Kafka and Nakata, the noir doubles of Ikku’s Yaji and Kita, are these synergistic relations situated.

Yet this story folds back and forth through alternating chapters in which either Kafka (the uneven chapters) or Nakata (the even chapters) is at center stage. They cannot meet one another, rather they function as “othernesses” to one another in that they are present in each other’s story and real in all their consequences. At the same time, however, also because they seem to be pursuing their journey so differently, their stories have nothing to do with one another. In short: the doubled chapters per/form a different mode of being, and yet they are one. They are each other’s unforeseen.

It is important to note that the doubled story, as it evolves, develops matter as a “form-taking activity immanent to the event of taking-form” (Massumi 2009: 43). In the string of events, in the new and unexplored spaces offered nothings exists. All comes into existence through Kafka (and Nakata)/Nakata (and Kafka). Kafka Tumura, also known as ‘The Boy Named Crow,’ (Kafka means ‘crow’ in Czech) flies through the air, quickly moving from one place to the other in straight lines, always in a rush to get inside and to stay inside: from the inside of the library to the inside of the house in the forest and back again, always in search for a place to shelter. Throughout the book, he always desires to create a ‘new home’, to create a safe environment in which “the function of the real and the function of the unreal are made to co-operate” (1969: xxxi), as Gaston Bachelard phrased it. For it is this non-cooperation that actually frightens (him) to death. It is acceptable, then, that the home allows for the living spirits, the *ikiryō* as the Japanese call them, to come about. In fact it is especially for that reason that Kafka searches for the new home, as, again, Bachelard concludes: “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (1969: 60).

Kafka’s journey makes up the major plot; his urge to shelter makes up for the dominant ‘progress narrative’ of the whole book, both in terms of how his fears originate and in how he solves his paranoia. As could be expected, the abusive father and the loved mother play a key role in this trip (*mazakon* is actually a famous Japanese concept for Oedipus complex, coming from the English the “mother com(plex)”). Written between these two poles (in other words, it is only halfway through the book that the poles are fold out) this Oedipal history and this idealist future sediment themselves in the plot (the critical taking-form of the present) as Kafka (the medium) creates both the (historical) problem (the dark father) and its future solution (the enlightened mother) at the same time.

Kafka’s way to deal with these problems is that he starts to discuss matters with what is then still his omniscient superego, ‘The Boy Named Crow’. Starting from the first page of the book in which he packs his bags to leave the house that he considered always already dead, his insecurity is expressed through these internal conflicts which he overcomes more and more in his traveling, when moving further away from this dark past and finding the ultimate shelter in the womb of Miss Saeki, who is herself both a 15 year old living spirit and a woman in her fifties whom Kafka believes to be his mother. It is in this schizoid peaceful interior dark space –the womb of Miss Saeki- that

Kafka finally finds his peace. His little death –petite mort in Freudian terms- gives him this place which is “stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deeprooted” (Perc 1999: 91)

The second main character, Saturo Nakata, known for his ability to talk to cats, crawls his way through the city. With Nakata, Murakami makes reference to Natsume Soseki’s 1905 fantasy *I Am a Cat*, and whereas Kafka is in many ways a crow, the medium Nakata time and again proves himself to be a cat. Thus, when Kafka flies away from home, from the city of Takamatsu because he needs to take shelter from the unimaginable dark, Nakata on the other hand, drawn by instinct and movement, crawls further and further away from the city of Nakano not because he flees but because he is always already hunting for “an important thing on the right place” which he actually finds near the end of the book. This important thing turns out to be “the entrance stone,” with which he learns to talk. We find out that the entrapment of Kafka (on this side) and of Nakata (on the other side) thus coincides with the entrance stone. After Nakata turned it, free movement between “this side” and the “other side” presumably liberates them both.

The capture of Nakata (on the other side) is explained in top secret files of the US Department of Defense, in the beginning of the book. They tell us that Nakata as a child has experienced the “unimaginable light.” In 1944, a group of 16 schoolchildren inexplicably “lost consciousness” during an outing (picking mushrooms) in a rural mountain area and only Nakata never really got over it, never returned to the city where he came from and presumably got his government sub-city, as he calls it himself, as a consequence of this “accident”. Later in the book the teacher tells different stories which seem to hint at a Freudian explanation again (saying that domestic violence caused Nakata to act differently from her other pupils).

It is tempting to conclude that the way in which spaces appear within one another, happens in a Freudian way. Murakami has read Freud and definitely has great sympathy for psychoanalysis, but since his “pairs” (Kafka and Nakata, the real and the unreal) rather happen within one another, are a-causal yet extremely meaningful cross-connections, his world comes closer to what C.G. Jung (1960) has called “synchronicity” as Murakami himself has also noted (see Murakami 2011: 382). Also Jung’s emphasis on archetypical demons and spirits that we have inherited from our ancestors and that keep haunting us, seems to have inspired Murakami. Yet the crucial difference with Murakami is that whereas psychoanalysis, and Jung’s ideas in particular, work with historicisms, Murakami’s philosophy seems much more speculative, much more in search of what is yet to come.

Contrary then to the dominant reading of his work (see for instance Kawai 2004: 90), Murakami’s (later) plots never historicize themselves, which one would expect, if they truly engaged with psychoanalysis. The travels of Kafka and Nakata do not proceed through the psychoanalytic (re)discovery of the traumatic past. A history is sometimes reassembled again, but never in order to trace the cause of what happens. Rather, history is a consequence of yet another unknown space. History is a means to explain space being formed. History is what Keiji Nishitani would refer to as “recovery”(1982: 65): it restores what was already there (it actively assembles what made the space in the first place) while it once again covers up the world (necessarily creating a new narrative that thickens the body of the earth).

The therapy that Kafka and Nakata follow (towards their liberation, their capture on either side of the Entrance Stone as we find out later) is always aimed at what is to come, which equals the completely unreal, “because all the activities of man become manifest as themselves only in unison with absolute nothingness. And yet precisely at this point they are seen to be the most real of realities because they are nothing other than the manifestation of absolute selfhood” (Nishitani 1982: 73). For that reason they recover cities, forests, but most of all outskirts and backstreets of cities like Takamatsu where the damned seem to rule. Here they are bound to meet strange, dreamlike and vicious characters such as Colonel Sanders and Johnny Walker, who seem to step out so naturally from their environment that they can pop up anywhere. And they will. As the (pimp) Colonel Sanders ensures us: “I am not a person, okay? How many times do I have to tell you that?.. Pimping’s just a means of getting you here... I don’t have any form... I don’t have substance. I’m an abstract concept” (Murakami 2005: 285: italics in original).

The alternating chapters, then, do not take “different routes” towards this Health materialized in the form of a stone. The doubled chapters practice a doubled recovery which is a recovery of perversions that, as always, have an equal amount of “real” and “unreal” in them, as Murakami himself put it (in Gabriel: 122). Similarly, both chapters travel both conscious and unconscious paths. As it works with the entrance stone, upon which the spaces of both “this side” and the “other side” are at work, all spaces open up from an intensive topological surface upon which inside and outside, city and countryside, Kafka and Nakata, make up one morphogenesis in which what happens always bypasses the possible, as it was already inscribed within the laws of nature, opening them, instead, onto a spectrality where there is no respect whatsoever for any binary, dualist, parallel, or representationalist organization

of the real. This is the noir of (im)possibility, a kind of a absolute Jungian collectivity at work which does not only include the possible whole of mankind, but all that is in the process of being formed. In Murakami's *Genesis* there is no intrinsic difference between the light and the dark; in chiaroscuro the diagrammatical relations between the clear and the obscure come into being.

As already mentioned, Kafka's desire/fear to get in equals Nakata's desire /curiosity to break out. Their synchronicity reveals us two modes of the same breath (to come). Or in Milan Kundera's terms (1985): Kafka is the one (the bird) has to become the one who perpetually falls inside (heaviness, the darkness) whereas Nakata (the cat) has to become the one who has to climb out, towards the light, never afraid of falling (lightness). This is expressed by Kafka's fear to be united with his own shadow, which is what happens when you eventually "fall". At the same moment, Nakata is pushed to stop searching for lost cats (with which he, at the start of the novel, makes some extra money) and start a search for the other half of his shadow.

But, of course, there are many more personae, masks through which landscapes are recovered and vitalized, that are haunted by mere shadows, and by characters that have lost theirs. Perhaps, in a Spinozist, Deleuzo-Guattarian way (also echoing Colonel Sanders) the media (as we labeled Kafka and Nakata before) have by now turned into "conceptual personae" that "serve to crystallize and orient the creation of concepts" (Hallward 2006: 183), that make up the various directions of movement in which the fear, the violence, and the real horrorshow are all materialized. These conceptual personae, these conceptual spirits, have no qualities, no essence, but rather combine particular ways to accelerate, and thus to reveal and vitalize all possible worlds.

Let me give an example of how these conceptual personae enact what we might call an "event" central to the book: the death of Johnny Walker. Johnny Walker performs vivisection on cats. After quite a journey in which Nakata is lured into the darkest and most obscure backstreets of the city, Walker confronts Nakata (the cat) with his gruesome slicing open of cats and the eating of their hearts. Walker then demands Nakata to kill him, as this is the only way he can be stopped. Nakata knives him two times, after saying "I don't feel like myself" (2005: 136). Covered in blood, Nakata falls asleep, but when he wakes up the blood is gone. The blood seems, however, to have continued its journey for at the same time, Kafka, in the city of Takamatsu, awakens for no apparent reason drenched in blood (2005: 64-5). Later in the book, the blood shows similar powers when Kafka states: "I spread my fingers apart and stare at the palms of both hands, looking for bloodstains. There aren't any. No scent of blood, no stiffness. The blood must have already, in its own silent way, seeped inside" (2005: 210).

Taking the travels of the blood as only one example, we can see that this story does not start with two contrasting individuations that take similar routes, but actually of a whole series of dimensionalities through which, for instance, the blood take place. There are not two, but many levels of reality/unreality/irreality/surreality that continuously resonate within one another. The intensive quanta that thus stretch themselves all over these planes (the blood, the flying, the crawling, the inside, the outside) cause the individuals, as Simondon would call them, to be formed and reformed in most remarkable ways. This is what Henri Michaux summarizes when he states in his reading of schizophrenia: "The lines follow each other almost without stopping. Faces slide over them, outlines of faces (usually in profile) are caught in the moving line, are stretched and contorted like the heads of aviators subjected to too much pressure that kneads their cheeks and foreheads like rubber" (2002: 122-3). It is in this first moment of being in which the principles of individuation are always already at work, molding the individuals named by the book, that Murakami frightens us the most.

It is not the unconscious of the existing person, but the fear of not becoming individualized as a (stretched and contorted) person that haunts the dark spaces to be recovered, that moves the life of Kafka/Nakata. It is the fear that this internal resonance as it takes place before the moment of individuation, as Simondon would put it, is being disturbed. The pre-individual fear makes them one. It is the fear for a mentality not to emerge and the knowledge that this mentality, this individuation, is always already too late, that it cannot anticipate this fear, which causes Kafka to hide himself. This, then, is a human all too human fear. It is the fear that Nishitani (inspired by Buddhism and Heidegger) warns us against the most; this self-centered or logos-centered dogma of a modernism that fears the unforeseen, that is blind to the mechanology. Only when moving towards what he calls an "absolute nothingness": "Everything is now truly empty, and this means that all things make themselves present here and now, just as they are, in their original reality. They present themselves in their suchness, their tathatā. This is non-attachment" (Nishitani 1982: 34).

Then, whereas the metaphysical spaces in which Kafka happens, reveal to us the plot of the book, the pragmatic spaces of Nakata, in which there is such a strong focus upon the senses, sensitivity, sensuality, reveal how the future

starts acting upon the present. Nakata, the cat, has no idea what is about to happen, but he does not fear it. He prehends it, as Whitehead would say, in such a way that his emergence has already turned several discontinuous energetic fields into an emergent continuity. That is why Nakata never feels ‘like himself’. He feels space, the city, the environment. He feels the multifunctionalities that are not yet here, but here to come.

Nakata is the leap into operative self-solidarity, as Massumi (after Simondon) calls it. Nakata is the unforeseen. This constantly takes place in his own chapters where, for instance, the truck driver Hoshina, normally confined by his usual routes and orders from above, through Nakata enters into new spaces, new environments and –never fearful- becomes inspired by the new spaces to come.

It is not, however, only in his own chapters that Nakata puts the multidimensionality of noir to work in its most unforeseen ways, for Kafka also, and mysteriously through Nakata’s turning of the stone, finds his home in Miss Saeki and thereby comes to his end. By turning the stone the specters meet the spirit as Nakata immanently produces the magic formula that “what is interior is also exterior” (Simondon in Deleuze: 89). By travelling, by feeling his way through the shadows, Nakata recovers the noir that displays both itself and the light; that, in its resonances with Kafka, unfolds the danger of both the dark and the bright, thereby opening up life and death as one and feeling the futures yet to come.

Nakata’s noir geoaesthetics holds great promises for thought. Spinoza (the monist) claimed that “Light displays both itself and darkness” (EII, P43, Schol). Heidegger recovered the dark under the spell of the light claiming that everywhere one sees a shadow that “is a manifest, though impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light” (1977: 154). Murakami himself, in 1984, already went further defining the dark and the light as equals concluding that “Where there is light, there has to be shadow, and where there is shadow, there has to be light. There is no shadow without light, nor light without shadow.” But it is with Nakata that the true liberation of the dark takes place. For Nakata, the cat that crawls, that touches the earth with its stomach, that desires to feel the power of the dark matter, feels the ethics it includes. Nakata feels that it is not light that creates life (organic and an-organic and non-organic), but that it is in the earth that powers come to being. All forms evolve only from the dark.

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