

Tomorrow the war starts*

Dan Öberg**

I

‘Next stop Shinjuku, Shinjuku, doors on the right side will open.’ I open my eyes. The man in the window in front of me is staring. His face: a slightly bloated configuration of moles, pores and tiny scars between sweaty cheeks. Observing the uneven beard and hair, more gray than blond, as it moves with the rhythm of the train, I search for myself in the reflection. But all I see is tired pink flesh that stubbornly looks back.

It is a hot November day and I am returning to Shinjuku.¹ I get out of my seat along with hundreds of others as the train slows down and stops. The doors open. On the opposite platform, lines and lines of passengers are waiting to get in. Streams of darkly dressed, brown haired bodies float out of, and then into, the subway car. It is a swirl of clothes, bags, limbs, and mobile phones, creating a vortex without names and faces. My body, covered in a stained beige trench coat, moves unfamiliarly along with the peak hour mass. The shirt under my armpits is wet. From what I heard, every day nine million people pass through Shinjuku station. I recall how Murakami once wrote that the station transforms into a ‘sea of humanity’ that ‘foams up, rages and roars, during rush hour.’ And that ‘no prophet, no matter how righteous, could part that fierce, turbulent sea.’²

As I float along the deluge for the first time in years, the feeling of being alive comes back to me: this bustling nexus with clubs, entertainment, sex-industry and an urban pulse as addictive, and as cold, as any drug. We move up the escalators and I start making my way across one of the many crowded halls. Everything seems familiar yet different. My eyes search for sites that aren’t there anymore. I exit the gates at the southern entrance while staring at the space Aum Shinrikyō once made their own.³ It always amazed me how the cult stood there in public, chanting, even after the Sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway. It was

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¹ Shinjuku is a central ward that functions as the most important financial and social hub of the metropolitan Tokyo area. It is perhaps most famous for its enormous red-light district (Kabukichō), scenic high-rise sprawl (west of the station), and alternative bar area (*Golden Gai*).

² Haruki Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, (London: Harvill Secker, 2014).

³ Aum Shinrikyō was a Japanese cult that drew upon a mixture of Buddhism, Hinduism, and apocalyptic thought. It was headed by Shoko Asahara and carried out terrorist attacks in Tokyo during 1994-1995 in order to start a revolution. Asahara was sentenced to death with a dozen of other cultists and is currently awaiting execution. For years, members of the cult stood at the same spot outside the Southern entrance of the station trying to attract followers.

absurd, as if Al Qaeda would have had a spot outside Ground Zero reserved for Mullah Omar after 9/11. I love that about my Shinjuku: it does not look for apologies; it has no long-term memory.

People rush past me as I stop to inhale the sweet smell of the *macaron* chain-boutique that has appeared instead of the death cult. I have come here to search for things that have already disappeared. I see the overhead bridge from below and instantly recognize it from the YouTube clips. It is that bridge, no doubt. Ahead of me, wave after wave of men in suits walk up and down the stairs. I look up as I reenter the station. *Did he walk this way as well?* I can see him clearly with my inner eye, the man. He is older than I but looks younger. His hair is black and neat as is his suit. He wears glasses and holds a plastic bag in his left hand. There is no hesitation in his step. I wish I could go with him. He is going to war. I trace his footsteps and watch him stop at the overhead bridge. His face is clean. He is nothing like me.

II

I walk out on the bridge which spans southward over a road intensely trafficked by taxis. It looks like a metal skeleton and the sides are covered with Plexiglas halfway up. I can still see the man before my inner eye. He climbs up on the metal bars that resemble a ceiling with large holes. I stare at the grey sky. On the opposite side of the bridge, department stores and panorama windows face me. He climbs up; black suit; nice shoes; plastic bag swung over his shoulder. No one seems to care much. A man climbing up on the scaffolding of a bridge in Shinjuku is nothing. At the eastern entrance there used to live a naked homeless man. Or, at least, I think he was naked. He was so covered in black grime that it was hard to tell. No one really noticed him. Not even me after a while. A man climbing up on a bridge in broad daylight, shouting anti-war messages will not part that fierce, turbulent sea of which Murakami spoke.⁴

After climbing up, did he pause and think? Did he see his life flash before him? What would I think of if I had five seconds left to live? Would I even think? I have no idea. I have been out of ideas for a long time. The only near death experience I had didn't teach me much. Nothing flashed before my eyes that time and I was left with a mixture of excitement and disappointment. But this was different. The man stood there for a while. Then he opened his bag and took out a bottle filled with something that looked like water and poured it over himself. He must have had a good view from up there. Shinjuku *is* beautiful, particularly from above. I wonder if he really believed in what he shouted. Did he care that no one cared? I could never have done what he did. He took out a lighter and set himself on fire, just like that. Now, all of a sudden, people did notice. At least they noticed enough to point their mobile phones at him.

A man was engulfed in flames standing on top of the overhead pass outside Lumine department store at the southern entrance of Shinjuku station. He fell to his knees and burned fiercely like a torch. In no time guards were there with fire extinguishers. They covered him with foam. Smoke rose like a pillar from burning flesh. The man stood firm, waging war on war. At least until one of the guards climbed up on the metal skeleton that covered the overpass and dragged him down. His burning body slammed to the ground. The man waged war on war and fell. I walk across the overhead bridge. There are no traces left. Everything

⁴ The man's actions can be seen as part of what during 2015 became a national wave of protests against the way the liberal democratic government changed the Japanese constitution to let Japan send military troops abroad. During September that year, over 100,000 people took to the streets of Tokyo, protesting the reinterpretation of article 9 (which outlaws war as a way for Japan to settle international disputes).

has been erased. Streams of people pass next to me. If I climb up what would they do? Would they not see me like they never saw the man before he lit himself on fire?

III

I spend my days immersed in war. I, a visiting professor at a university in Tokyo, have been teaching war for years. My lectures present uncompromising thinkers arguing that when faced with a hegemonic neoliberal order, the political subject has two options: either to be complicit in the system or to contest it. I walked my students, my wonderful, intelligent students, through the course in much the same way as I walked through the station in Shinjuku that day, nostalgic for a radical era. Usually they listened curiously to what I had to say ('let's find out why this old guy is so worked up about war and society'), politely ('he seems to feel strongly about it, let's not disappoint him'). Granted, they didn't have much choice. They had to listen to pass the exams so to be rid of me. And indeed, why would they be concerned? Complicity pays the bills, gives you a job, a social status. The very reason they are at university getting an education *is* complicity and it is ordered by people like me. After all, I am the 'visiting professor'.

So my students go through the motions. But frankly, when I teach, I often get tired of hearing my own voice constantly critiquing the system. And I go through the motions as well. It was heartwarming the way my students listened to me as if I really had something important to say. On their way to becoming diplomats, lawyers, housewives, or unemployed, they simulated concern, I simulated radical, and we all imploded into long talks about the way war is part of the fabric of the everyday and about the need to challenge techniques of control. But as the semester neared its end I had gradually noticed that war didn't upset me much. I sought refuge in it and promoted it, more than anything.

I cough as I walk out of the station. The stuffy air from the AC feels like it is stuck in my throat. I cross the road and enter a Starbucks. The girl at the counter is young enough to be my student. She goes through the motions as well. She takes my order: 'tall ice-coffee', 'for here.' As I pay she finishes off with a dead smile filled with white teeth: 'thank you very much.' It strikes me that this resembles my life. Does it make me a customer or part of the serving staff? I picture myself teaching, wearing a green apron and sporting a dejected smile full of yellow teeth. 'Good morning, everybody. Are you doing your critical thinking here or are you taking it outside the classroom?' 'For here, good choice'; 'One antiwar lecture with extra radicalism, coming up, enjoy the rest of your life.' I sit down outside Starbucks trying to remember what I used to be before I turned into the visiting professor with solutions to problems that I hadn't known as problems until I found their solutions. Back in the 90's, when I more or less lived on these streets, Shinjuku usually answered that question for me.

IV

I leave Starbucks and start walking. The sun is setting. At first, I mostly notice what is not there anymore. My eyes search for the tanned boys with dyed blonde hair who are no longer standing next to the southern entrance recruiting young girls for pornography and soap lands.⁵ I notice the absence of the homeless and the railway track that has taken their place. Walking further east to the outskirts of Kabukichō, I breathe in a Shinjuku that seems less like a red-light district and more like Disneyland on steroids. I absorb the seductive indifference of

⁵ Soap lands are a type of sexual entertainment parlors that involve erotic massage with water and soap.

street after street of empty love hotels, the frantic expansion of sterile consumption spaces, and the omnipresence of neon.

There are no *flaneurs* in Shinjuku, only passers-by. The surrounding space is regulated perfectly so as to maximize circulation. It creates a cityscape which lacks interstices. Streets that vibrate to the pulse of the commuters. I can sense their rhythm: going to work, going home, going back and forth, going nowhere, always being there already, always already gone, never *really* going for good. I recall a poem that circulated on Twitter after the man had fallen on the bridge, waging war on war:

After riding on a packed train day after day, I began to care nothing for anybody else / After reading messages on Internet forums, I came to care nothing for how others feel. / After hearing so many reports of deaths from abuse and suicide, I came to care nothing for life. / Preparations are complete. / I am numb to war. / Tomorrow, the war starts.⁶

Who could part this human sea of numb commuters? I look around. There are attempts to address people everywhere: advertisements, right wing radicals with megaphones, left wing radicals with megaphones, even a Buddhist priest with his face covered by a straw hat, begging for change. Mostly, it goes unnoticed, and attracts faint waves, quicker steps, and eyes glued to the ground. The passers-by move to the frenzied pace of circulation and only look up to stare at their iPhones. But in the absent interstices of the city, something else also constantly vibrates. I recall an interview I once read with a woman in Kabukichō, who, when asked ‘what is the worst suggestion you ever got?’ responded:

‘The men who come and want to buy my spit.’
 ‘They ask me to drool in a plastic bag.’
 ‘They pay well.’ ‘It is difficult to spit that much.’
 ‘They don’t look well.’ ‘I wonder what they do with it.’

I notice the disappearance of the big blow-up picture of a squinting girl in a high-school uniform next to GAP, whose face was covered in diarrhea. It was not the forced smile that had gotten to me. Her face didn’t stand out among the other pornographic teenage faces that framed my way home, but the fact that you could see how little pieces of shit were stuck between her teeth. The pictures of madness might be gone but insanity still circulates in their absence.

V

The five floor game-center is still there: the incredibly noisy and smoky parlor full of arcade games. I recall the last time I was here. I stepped out on to the sidewalk while speaking on the phone and lit a cigarette (even though I did not smoke, Shinjuku always smoked a little, through me). As I did, I noticed a man standing in the shade of a road bridge, holding a camera, cowering, while posing as a photographer. He took a step towards me and looked

⁶ The poem is called ‘Asu sensō ga hajimaru,’ and is translated into English as ‘Tomorrow the war begins.’ I have changed the translation of the last sentence to ‘tomorrow the war starts.’ Maiko Itagaki, ‘Anti war poem written 7 years ago goes viral with timeless message,’ *The Asahi Shimbun*, 10 July 2014. http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/social_affairs/AJ201407100007

focused. The man appeared to be in his thirties, an average salary man dressed in a grey suit. He started to take my picture feverishly.

The man's camera looked expensive. I kept talking on the phone and blew smoke his way, to counter what I thought of as his inappropriateness. He shot picture after picture: *ra-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta*. Finally I shouted at him to 'stop it,' 'leave me be.' The man looked up, surprised, and instantly threw himself on the ground, screaming. I stared at him in disbelief. He rolled around sobbing in a puddle of water, still holding his camera with both hands. I looked at him unsure of what to do or say. He was lying there wailing in the dirt with people passing around him. My first instinct was to help him up. But instead I stepped away and started walking. I threw the cigarette in the puddle of water next to him.

In hindsight, his pathetic gesture reminds me of the man on the bridge. Not only did they look the same in their salary man uniforms. Both men were also trying to halt the blind tide in their respective ways, without succeeding. But the most striking similarity was the way in which they both fell to the ground – like collateral damage in an invisible war – as people hurried past them. They fell, crumbled, and decayed and as they did, they came together in my head, into one. I shunned their insanity without perhaps understanding that in doing so it got hold of me as well.

I walk past Marui, the department store on Yasukuni Road. What is a 17th century Shinto shrine doing here, squeezed in between office buildings? Many philosophers criticizing the meaninglessness of modern life end up in the sacred. A shrine should be reassuring then. But is there holiness in this place? Surely the gods and goddesses have left long ago. Only the specters remain. I stop and read the signs. It occurs to me that I have passed this place hundreds of times without really seeing it. Perhaps it blends in by virtue of its dedication, a shrine dedicated to the gods of sexual fertility and financial success.

VI

Midnight. A sturdy man hurries towards me. He is in his 40's all dressed in pink: bunny ears, platform shoes, short skirt, camisole, a handbag on his hairy arm and an energy-drink against his bearded mouth. It is like all the beauty of the gay clubs in Shinjuku ni-chōme pass right through me.⁷ Is he going to work, or simply to have fun? He is cloaked by the apathy that comes out of all the passers-by who never for one second stop to actually see. He walks past a muscular police officer with a bullet proof vest, whose presence reminds us that Kabukichō is not Ginza.⁸ They do not notice each other; they look right through each other, it would never occur to them that I, as by a stroke of providence, see them both.

I walk past the streets filled with yakuza, with their weird baggy suits and booming voices, deciding I need a drink. I head for the mummified heart of Shinjuku. It is ironic that in a city of amnesia the most obvious challenge to change comes from nostalgia. *Golden Gai*: a remnant of the past. I stumble around in narrow alleys in a labyrinth of tiny bars. All the doors are open to the outside world, a panopticon of leisure, veiled in cigarette smoke. The electric cables, small Chinese signs and 1950's style buildings create the illusion of the 'spirit' of an époque. *Golden Gai* is a matrix of nostalgia in a place which exterminates its trace.

⁷ In Japanese, a city block or district is called 'chōme' (while *ni* simply means *two*). Shinjuku ni-chōme therefore translates as the second district in Shinjuku (out of 23). It is famous for having the highest concentration of gay bars in the world.

⁸ Ginza is one of the most expensive luxury shopping districts in the world. The policemen stationed there do not wear bullet proof vests.

I enter a small bar devoted to flamenco music. The place is tiny and dark, with room for no more than a table and 4-5 chairs. The owner has a long moustache and wears a flat cap over his bald head. A ponytail sticks out in the back. His smile exposes a mouth full of teeth that speaks of a life of tobacco and drinking. Two girls sit at the counter talking. I order a Nikka whiskey. The man pours it and adds one ice-cube with his dirty fingers and hands it over to me. He immediately starts talking about music, about *Golden Gai*, and about the past. He tells me how this bar has been around for over 60 years and that every famous flamenco artist has paid it a visit. 'It is holy ground for flamenco lovers,' he states proudly.

'Another shrine,' I think while sighing.

While he speaks, my mind drifts off to the two girls who sit and enjoy their drinks. One of the girls is wearing a tight white dress. She looks back at me with a smile that says 'hello.' She seems slightly drunk and points at my bright red nails as if she wants to ask why a man my age in a beige trench-coat wears nail-polish. I flaunt my fingers and ask her, 'do you like it?' She smiles and nods, 'yes, but why?' she asks. Her friend looks a bit uneasy. I could tell her about how my little daughter loves painting my nails, and how we bond that way, or about teaching radical gender courses at the university, and the need to challenge established conceptions of masculinity. I could also tell the story about a man who loves talking about how it creates a bond with his daughter as if terrified that the bond might not be as strong as he hopes. Or even the story of a middle-aged man, greying, ageing, who is running out of ways of getting attention. But instead I surprise myself by asking: 'Do you remember the guy who set himself on fire on the bridge outside Lumine?' They both look at me like I'm insane. The drunk girl responds tentatively, 'yes I remember, it was scary,' 'in fact one of my friends saw it,' she adds. 'No way,' the uneasy girl fills in with less enthusiasm than the phrase suggests. 'Where was your friend?' I ask. 'She sat at the café on the opposite side of Lumine, she saw everything.' I nod and tell them that I am a visiting professor and that I'm writing an article about it. They seem to relax a bit. Academia has that effect on people. 'Do you remember why he did it?' I ask. They both look at me bewildered. 'Maybe he got dumped by his wife?' 'No he probably lost his job,' the girl in white responds. 'Either way it was inconsiderate, really rude.'

Her comment surprises me. 'Why rude?' She looks at me like she has swallowed bile. 'My friend said it was gross, he could have just killed himself without anyone noticing. Instead he had to light himself on fire in front of everyone.' I pause for a second thinking of how to respond. Meanwhile, they both pick up their mobile phones and start to flicker at the screens. The man's war against war was clearly not theirs. The conversation seems to be over. I finish my drink, pay, and complement the patron as I get out of my chair. He gives me a distorted smile, asks me to hand him the glass since he can't reach it from inside his little bar, before his face turns into a frown.

'Flamenco lovers will have to find a different place in the future, though. They are going to demolish *Golden Gai* before 2020, did you know?' I shake my head in surprise, pretending to care. It occurs to me that I don't even know what flamenco is. He continues, 'the official reason is that Tokyo needs to focus on disaster prevention prior to hosting the Olympics. But everyone knows it's absolute crap. They have been trying one hostile takeover after another for as long as I can remember.' He looks down into the bar desk with a hollow stare, his cheeks turning red from pent up anger. I nod goodbye as I step outside and inhale the brisk night air. So this place is dead as well? It seems almost appropriate. It seems as if death is the only thing that might upset the way we spend most of our time pretending, going through the motions: at work, at bars, on the trains, in bed. If nothing else, the girl's contempt for the man on the bridge taught me as much. Shinjuku does not need relics.

VII

5 am. I am slightly drunk and walking towards the station. A ‘new-half,’ smiling with dirty blonde hair is beckoning me in broken English, pointing to one of the love hotels.⁹ Next to us, young girls, probably on their way home from work at a soap land, with wet hair, slippers, and yukata. I follow them for a bit. They debate which area of Tokyo attracts the richest men. The answer seems to depend on the season. I wonder why. An old blind man in a suit is standing next to the road, back straight, with his cane, staring at the sky. We walk past him. He speaks with a loud clear voice about Fukushima, claiming that the government moved the homeless there to work in the radiation sites, and how they would die and come back to haunt us. He reminds me of an urban prophet from some movie. What kind of tomorrow does he see with his blind eyes? I see a woman in a short skirt, high-heels, and a top, on all fours in an alley vomiting red fluids. The man standing next to her looks bored and winks at me as I walk by. I see a group of African men leaning against a fence, relaxed as if they are still at the kraal, talking, smiling, laughing. The eastern exit is where it always is. All is surprisingly still, the calm before the rest of our lives.

I stand in line at the platform. The doors open and we enter the half-full subway car. ‘Perhaps this is my Shinjuku,’ I think in a haze, ‘the Shinjuku that I can visit for a day and a night, to pick up fragments of “radical” and bring them back into the everyday: the Shinjuku that holds the many signs of challenge, the contraband signs.’ I sit down in the train and watch the face that reflects in the opposite window. The dead configuration of bloated, pink flesh is gone. But the visiting professor is still in there somewhere, staring. His face startles me. It is my face; but it is also the face of the burning man, staring at death; it is the face of the transvestite, dressed in pink camisole and a bullet proof vest; it is the face of a girl, vomiting fluids in a plastic bag with small pieces of shit stuck between her facialized teeth; it is the contorted face of the insane man with the camera, begging people to help him up. They all come together, demanding my attention, like the blind prophet, desperately trying to part that turbulent sea. I smile back at them and see myself clearly for the first time in a long while.

The doors close. It is time for me to go to work. As the train leaves the station I realize that I look forward to seeing my students. I look forward to teaching class.

Tomorrow the war starts.

⁹ ‘New-half’ is an anglicized Japanese word for transvestite.