

Lotus Eye
Reading Miyazawa Kenji and Making *Night Passage*

¹ Quoted from the script of the film *Night Passage*.

² Also translated as *Milky Way Railroad*; *The Night of the Milky Way Train*; or *The Night when the Galaxy Train Leaves*. The version used here for all quotes is *Night Train to the Stars and Other Stories*, translated by John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1987). The original Japanese text, *Ginga Tetsudo no Yoru*, was published in 1927.

D-Story, D-Film

The name calls for mourning, sowing fear and panic in the hearts of mortals. It begins with a D in English and in its realm, time makes no sense. What is it that we call Death? Heavily lugged around, it is a name we need when the urge to draw a limit to the unknown arises. *Die, Disappear, Dissolve: the three D's*.¹ D changes its face, passing from metamorphosis to metamorphosis, almost never failing to surprise the one who dies. We tell stories in the dark to avert it, and we do everything else we can to forget, ignore, or deny it. Whether we hide it from sight or we provocatively display it for view, D remains elusively at once invisible and all-too-visible. No amount of corpses, spilled blood, or skulls and skeletons can represent the everyday death that accompanies a life from crib to grave. By trying to show it and solve this problem of the end, we end up arresting the infinitely Al-ready-, Al-ways-There – the immortal in the mortal.

Night Passage (98 minutes, color, 2004, directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha and Jean-Paul Bourdier) is a D-film on friendship and death. Made in homage to Miyazawa Kenji's classic novel, *Night Train to the Stars*², the story evolves around the spiritual journey of a young woman (Kyra), in the company of her best friend (Nabi) and a little boy (Shin), into a world of rich in-between realities. Their journey into and out of the land of 'awakened dream' is experienced as a passage of appearances, from a death to a return in life that occurs during a long ride on a night train. At each stop of the train, the travelers set out in the dark and come across an inner space of longing, in which their ears and eyes meet with people and events at once too familiar and oddly strange. Every encounter opens a door into the transcultural, and every intervention offers an experience of non-illusory, two-dimensional time-space spectacles. The film itself unfolds in the sequential rhythm of a train of window images. With magnetic intensity, each place features a gesture of the sensual world, or a means of reception and communication of our times.



Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Night Passage*. Courtesy of Trinh T. Minh-ha.

Miyazawa's spirit

"Off you go now, birds of passage! Now's the time to go," says a character in Miyazawa's *Night Train to the Stars*. During the railroad trip to the Milky Way, characters appear and disappear. They move in seemingly precise time: they want to get off the train but can't because "it's too late" and they leave the locations of their visits to get back on the train when "it's time". Some must part midway with their train companions, because "this is where you get off to go to heaven."

Hopping onto Miyazawa's night train is to step into a universe of sentient cyborgs in which the mineral, the vegetal, the animal and the human worlds happily mingle. As the journey into the fourth dimension expands in time and space, earthly and celestial beings, the living and the departed, the easterner and the westerner, the poet and the scientist, the child and the adult, are brought together in a quasi hallucinatory vision. Although driven at its core by the dark boundaries of life and death, such a vision offers neither somber picture nor mere drama. On the contrary, the glowing images strewn on the Milky Way are presented in light, subtle touches on the shimmering surface of the sky canvas. Although the sense of loss poignantly runs through the entire story like an underlining thread, tears and laughter are fluidly woven into the scenes of magical encounters, and only now and then does an alarming note of sadness erupt into the space of narration.

In conceiving *Night Passage*, there was no desire to imitate or to illustrate Miyazawa's tale. As with my previous films, I prefer to work with transformation in encounters, retaining what I see as the spirit of Miyazawa's narrative while riding a night train of my own. I stumbled onto his stark and intense poetry (*A Future of Ice* is an example) well before I read his stories and became



Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Night Passage*. Courtesy of Trinh T. Minh-ha.

acquainted with the man's personal tale.³ Death always seems near and can be felt lurking in every spring of joy or innocent youth that gives his writing its magical freshness. What strikes me the most, like a lingering fragrance, is the 'blue illumination' (a term he uses to define 'I') that his sister's death left as a gift on every page. The eye that weeps while laughing speaks through the haunting, absent presence of Toshiko, the young woman who died at the age of 25, while in her springtime.

³ Translated by Hiroaki Sato (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989).

Night Train to the Star reminds me in many ways of Antoine Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* – although, for reasons likely to reflect the power imbalance between East and West, the latter is far more universally known than the former. The two so-called 'children's tales' offer a luminous tapestry of poetic, scientific and spiritual imagery capable of speaking to an unusual readership that spans from the very young to the very old, not excluding the majority of impatient 'grown-ups'. Saint-Exupéry and Miyazawa are both consummate stargazers and adventurous sky-divers, the first being literally an aviator by profession. That said, their novels differ markedly in the location of their voice. Of significance here is to recall that Miyazawa, who also died at the untimely age of 37, having ruined his health with an ascetic food regime, is a man of many selves and many talents – an aspect that accounts for the sheer expansive quality of his work.

Poet, novelist, farmer-agronomist, amateur astronomer, geologist, teacher, musician and composer, he was a most misunderstood literary figure in Japan until the media decided to deify him 63 years after his death. A dilettante at heart, he loved Western classical music and had a strong fascination for foreign languages such as English, German, Esperanto. Relevantly, aside from the gift of speaking from an experience of death and dying, what appeals to me as unique to Miyazawa are the quirky elements of transculturalism that traverse his novel and the social consciousness that grounds his spiritual practice. While freely crossing borders and pushing boundaries, Miyazawa's voice is firmly rooted in local realities and the Buddhist sutras. The vividly depicted backdrop of his creative work is generally that of his own town and region, Iwate – known for its exceedingly harsh climate and soil, and regarded as the 'Tibet of Japan'. His hardship in volunteer work, his personal commitment to the discriminated minorities, and his self-sacrificing struggle for the welfare of the regional peasants who survive on the fringes of subsistence have all been well documented and repeatedly praised as a model to emulate in Japanese media and literary circles.

⁴ Translated and adapted by J. Sigrist and D.M. Stroud (Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1996).

In the first version I read of his novel, *Milky Way Railroad*,⁴ the translators had taken the liberty of changing the characters' names into Japanese names, under the pretext that it would "eliminate any confusion caused by Japanese characters in a Japanese setting having European names." Since I usually prefer to enter a text directly and to follow the writer's thought process afresh, without the mediation of an "Introduction," at the end of the book, I was deceptively left with a feeling of wonder for what I considered to be a harmlessly charming story of coming to term with death; a story 'typically Japanese', as my prejudices dictate. It was only a year later, when a Japanese friend offered me another translated version of the novel, *Night Train to the Stars*, that I realized with awe and utter

excitement the scope of Miyazawa's experimental and cosmopolitan mind. In this translation, not only the main characters' names, Giovanni (Jovanni) and Campanella (Kanpanera), are kept as originally intended, but a whole complex tapestry of foreign-sounding names of people and places emerges from the story, as if by magic. Suppressed in the first adapted version I read, these Italian, French, English and American names, in co-existence with Japanese names, make all the difference. Here, the politics of naming takes on an inventive role of its own.

Politics of Form

The Transcultural

Toshiko was the name I first gave to the young woman who dies in *Night Passage*. But as the script I wrote evolved with the actors and artists who participated in the film, Toshiko disappeared to leave room for Nabi (or "butterfly" in Korean), a name chosen by the actress herself, Denice Lee. Shin was, however, the one Japanese name I had decided to keep for the little boy, despite the fact that the actor for that role is not Japanese. (This small detail had not failed to disturb some discerning viewers when the film was released). On my night train, rather than focusing on the two boys, it is the journey of two young women accompanied by a little boy that I set out to explore. With this shift of gender, everything changes. Miyazawa's original story recedes, leaving here and there a few pertinent traces in its inspirational role. For me, in order to remain loyal to his spirit, only the glow and the bare minimum of the narrative are kept: the beginning, the ending, and a couple of small core incidences on the train.

As with Miyazawa's stories which, to his credit, had continually raised questions concerning its true nature (Is it a novel? A children's story? A poem in prose? A Dharma lesson?), *Night Passage* offers a journey that cuts across cinema, painting and theater. Spectators coming into the film with expectations of what a narrative on screen should be have been disquieted by what they have seen. The comments they made evolved consciously or unconsciously around the boundaries they'd set up for cinema. As it is known from analyses of the film world, there are



Trinh T. Minh-ha, Denice Lee in *Night Passage*. Courtesy of Trinh T. Minh-ha.

two distinct Western avant-gardes: one based on the tradition of the visual arts, and the other, on the tradition of theatre and literature. Working at hiding the stage, mainstream narratives are all theatre; and it is with money power (in buying locations and expertise) that they naturalize their artifices. (It suffices to listen to these narratives without looking at the pictures to realize how much they remain entrenched in ‘acting’ and theatrical delivery). Whereas experimental films borrow so heavily from painting and plastic arts that they’re often conceived in negative reaction, against anything considered to be impure to their vision – such as the verbal dimension and other non-visual concerns. As with my previous films, *Night Passage* continues to raise questions about the politics of form (which includes, but is not reduced to the politics of representation). Not only it is at odds with classifications such as documentary and fiction, it also explicitly plays with both traditions of the avant-garde.

I’ve often been asked whether my making feature narratives is a shift in my itinerary as a filmmaker, but the one luxury that independent filmmaking offers is precisely the ability to shuttle – not necessarily from one category to another, but *between categories*. Created with a mood, rhythm, structure and poetry that are at once light and intensive, *Night Passage* stays away from heavy drama and from the action-driven scenario. It invites the viewers to experience the magic of film and video anew, to enter and exit the screen by the door of their own mediation, sensually or spiritually, or both, according to their own realities and background. At the first screening of *Night Passage* in Berkeley (California), a viewer (the poet and painter Etel Adnan) described the film to me as a “journey across appearances” and “a story of humanity with all five races”. She went on to specify that yes, she agrees, “the world today is not occidental”. Other viewers noted that the film is “vast in its subject, but very local in the coloring”; and made remarks on how distinctly Californian the film’s backdrop is in its landscape and art activities. As one of them put it, “I have been there and I know the place, and yet.... I don’t quite recognize it. It looks gorgeous, but it’s as if I’ve never seen it before”.

Certainly, it is not by mere accident that the cast is highly diverse. The actors selected to play the roles of the main characters are: Chinese American for Kyra (Yuan Li-chi); Korean American for Nabi (Denice Lee); Jewish American for Shin (Joshua Miller); Irish for one of the storytellers on the train (Howard Dillon); African American for the other storyteller on the train (Vernon Bush), as well as for the drummers and Black scientists (Sherman Kennedy and Yesufu Shangoshola); Chicano for the man of wisdom in the street (Luis Saguar); French for his companion, the flutist (Viviane Lemaigre Dubreuil); Japanese for Nabi’s father (Atsushi Kanbayashi, who is actually the art director Brent Kanbayashi’s father); and the list goes on. However, in the process of building cast and crew, as well as of

visualizing the film, if diversity was an important part of the criteria for selection, it was obviously not upheld for its own sake. Although gender, sexual and racial diversities are easily recognizable by the eye and ear, their visibility is often used to tame all disturbing differences, to give these a fixed, familiar face, and hence to turn them into consumable commodities.

What I find infinitely more challenging is to work on and from multiplicity. The term, as used here, should be neither equated with liberal pluralism nor confused with multiculturalism as taunted by the mainstream media. In normalizing diversity, multiculturalism remains deceptively color-blind and utterly divisive. Its bland melting-pot logic denies the racism and sexism that lies at the core of biopower and biopolitics. Since the film



Trinh T. Minh-ha, Denice Lee in *Night Passage*. Courtesy of Trinh T. Minh-ha.

features a transition from one state to another, the focus is on the interaction of passages. Rather than having difference treated as mere conflict, in *Night Passage*, difference comes with the art of spacing and is creatively trans-cultural. Here trans- is not merely a movement across separate entities and rigid boundaries, but one in which the travelling is the very place of dwelling (and vice versa), and leaving is a way of returning home – to one's most intimate self. Cultural difference is not a matter of accumulating or juxtaposing several cultures whose boundaries remain intact. The crossing required in the transcultural undermines fixed notions of identity and border, and questions 'culture' in its specificity and its very formation.

As a character in the film said: *"Life's a net, made up of so many roads. Dirt roads, asphalt roads, virtual roads. Sometimes you go in a straight line; sometimes you just go round and around in circles... Drives us crazy but there's nothing to do about it. And, sometimes you find yourself at the crossroads. Then what?"* Well,... you get stuck; or else, take the risk and *"go with the wind—where the road is alive,"*⁵ as Nabi urged Kyra in following her inner voice. The crossroads are where the dynamics of the film lies. They are empty centres thanks to which an indefinite number of paths can converge and part in a new direction. Inter-, multi-, post- and trans-: these are the pre-fixes of our times. They define the before, after,

⁵ From the script of *Night Passage*.

during and between of social and ethical consciousness. Each has a history and a seemingly precise moment of appearance, dis-appearance and re-appearance. Although bound to specifics, they are, in fact, all related as trans-events.

Time Passage

At twelve, I found myself in sinister water: I drowned. Not in the sea, but in the chlorine depth of a fire station's swimming pool. My brother pulled me out in time. Since then, I have had to live with the ordeal of the liquid descent. Every now and then, the experience of drowning arises again from nowhere, and the encounter with death in water returns with ever-changing faces. Never twice the same, and yet always *It*. From one nightmare to another, I slowly learn to pull myself out in time, to wake up just as I am being swallowed in a wall of water – usually, a tidal wave. Now, as if by magic, sometimes I die not, and emerge laughing in the fall, letting the drowning settle. Like vapor on seawater, the fear vanishes. I awake, feeling light in radiant darkness. The nightmare has turned into a dream.

A passage involves both time and timing. For me, the advent of digital cinema or D-cinema, as the tech-community calls it, is a timely event. Its technology seems most compatible with Miyazawa's inventive spirit, and is very apt to capture his poetic world of beings and events – at once eccentric and oh, so boringly ordinary. In view of the potentials and unparalleled impact of this new technology on the film culture, the elusive story of Death can also take on a new lease of life. The unknown, like the fantastic, is never merely out there; it is always already in here, there (in the ordinary, legible image) where one neglects to look with *eyes wide shut*.

Already, in our previous feature, *A Tale of Love* (35mm, 108 mins, 1996, directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha and Jean-Paul Bourdier), a character notes that in the realm of photography and representation, the two impossibles are: Love and Death. Love stories are often stories made without love, and showing an image of death is primarily showing time passing. No matter how imaginative one is, capturing these two on screen is literally impossible. All that one can do best is to circle around them without falling into the clichés abundantly supplied by the media and its repertoire of ready-made images. To question our consumption of these images is to touch the core of a whole system of narrative cinema that determines the way we sell and buy love-and-death stories.

As in Miyazawa's novel, the voyage portrayed in *Night Passage* happens in a framework that is at once timed and timeless. When the call is made, the "birds of passage" that we are would have to go because "it's time to go". Time prevails as a crucial element in filmmaking and film exhibiting.

But if a film always ends at a definite time, its unfolding can stretch our sense of time indefinitely. Its closure, rather than merely closing off, can lead to a new opening. Thus, in *Night Passage*, the passing of time is made tangible in the viewer's experience of film; comings and goings go hand in hand; death happens with a return in life; and stillness can be found in every movement. There's no opposition between time and timelessness. For me, the night train ride, the last trip taken together by the two friends raises the following question: what happens in this moment between life and death? How would one spend this time-span with one's best friend – that two-hour flash just before she disappears from one's life?

Ship and Train of Death

The Last Act is here a creative act for, as a character in the film said: *"Everyone is Nabi. Everyone you meet, they're all people you've danced with or ridden on trains with so many times before. Where the path ends, the novel begins".*⁶ Struck by the spiritual process and by the extensive work of colors and light in the film, some perceptive viewers have given a name to this Passage, by linking it to the *bardo* or the 'between-state' in the Tibetan art of dying. As it is well known among Tibetans practitioners, the time of the between, the transition from death to new rebirth is the best time to affect the karmic evolution for the better. In its inevitability, death makes everything in our tightest grasp dissolve – especially what we hold on to as solid matter in the waking world of the five senses. What remains and can live on is what we can't put our hand on. So it goes also for cinema and the work of composing with light in creating images. Screen life, like body life, has no solid reference, no enduring substance, no binding essence, and it can be exposed as such in the very course of the film.

⁶ From the script of *Night Passage*.

Night Passage begins with what may first appear to the viewer as a shot of a passing train, in which passengers appear, disappear and re-appear with no apparent continuity, except for the continuity of the movement of the images themselves. As the camera slowly zooms in, what may become more apparent to the viewer is the fact that what they see are not 'natural' images of a passing train, but the collage of a repeated series of window images taken from outside a train and re-animated so as to reproduce the movement of a train passing across the screen. Right from the outset, the film displays its aesthetic and structural constitution. The opening sequence not only encapsulates the spirit and rhythm of the digital journey, it also plays on the movement *both* of the train outside and inside, and *between* train rider and video viewer. Thereby, a reflexive and performative relation is maintained between the images of the train within the story space and the train of images that moves linearly in finite sequences across the

screen. What is set forth is the zone of infinite shades onto which the double train opens.

In this D-passage unwinding at the speed of light, death is not only part of life, it is the constant zero ground from which life emerges. The mortal and the immortal meet on the light canvas as realities contain one another ad infinitum. “You appeared from nowhere.... Who are you?” “Where are we now?” “Where have you come from?” “Where are we going?” “Do you know where this leads us?” These are some of the recurring questions that persistently punctuate the story space in *Night Passage*. And these are also the questions that may be expected, as the film unfolds, from viewers for whom “just going” makes no sense. Being attuned to the normative concept of cinema in which all actions serve a central story, some of us easily get stuck unless we know ahead of time where to go, and what that means....

In the process of going, one is constantly in a state of transition. Similarly, the digital video image is an image constantly in formation. Emerging and vanishing via a scanning mechanism, it continually morphs into another image. In the editing of my previous films, the *cut* is always a straight cut; one that assumes unashamedly its nature as a cut and may sometimes even jar the viewer in its radical rupture (as with the many jump-cuts in the films *Reassemblage* and *Naked Spaces*). In *Night Passage*, however, the choices and constraints in the creative process differ markedly. As digital technology made it possible, the image is worked on accordingly so as to assume a double look: the film look for the scenes and the video look for the transitions. Since the journey is visualized primarily as passage, great attention is given to “the time of the between” and the “crossroads”—that is, to transformation and transition as time-spaces of their own. Thus, rather than the cut, it was the *dissolve* (and the *cross dissolve*) that I chose as an aesthetic principle for the transitions. It is here, in the very intervals that link the scenes, the places and the encounters that the magic of video technology prevails.

The time implied in the experience of the film is at once explicitly linear in the frontal sequencing of two-dimensional images; and non-linear in the multiplicity of ordering of events and performance spaces. If in Miyazawa’s novel, the train trip leads to Heaven and its Silver River (the Japanese term for the Milky Way), in *Night Passage*, rather than ascending to the sky, the two young women enter the night to meet their own earthly dreams. The focus is primarily on the river below and on the witnessing of one’s own voyage in the dying process – here Nabi’s death in drowning. When the two young women get off the train to walk out into darkness, the other vehicles of the between they embark on are the ship and the boat. Again it is inside the ship, in the folds of water, or else, outside, by the side of the river that the young women enter the world of the eccentric, and the departed.

There, they watch as observer-observed, spectator-witnesses, the mysterious dances of water and fire – the dance of Nabi's death.

In their conception and choreography, the dances form another instance of the transcultural. The singular image that emerges from the passage between Eastern and Western traditions is a trajectory of fire that turns into light calligraphy. With the light writing on the night sky, I see, near and far and in between, Miyazawa's blue illumination. For him, death is a passing from one state to another. To come to terms with his sister's death, he followed her in her passage. He crossed land/water borders and took a ship to Sakhalin a year after she had left. Viewers paddle up the river of *Night Passage*, not knowing where exactly it may lead, and find the lit energy of bodies in performance. The fire, the light. The song of the flame tells us that when extinguished, the flame does not die out; instead, it enters another state and goes on burning. Among the story-sources that fire Miyazawa's imagination are stories set in India, in the very birthplace of Shakyamuni, the Buddha. For example, a story titled "A Stem of Lilies" opens with lines best read while in the vast, with eyes *wide* shut: "At seven tomorrow morning, they say, the Lord Buddha will cross the Himukya River and enter the town.' What would the Buddha's countenance be like, they wondered, and what color were his eyes? Would he have the dark blue eyes like lotus petals, as it was rumored?"⁷

"The world today is not occidental" (E. Adnan). The painter-poet's statement still rings on with acuity. For as the birds of passage that we are, it is still difficult to accept when it's time to go and when it's not. We can't seem to be able to resolve the problem of the end, or what we see as Death's un-timeliness, with our eyes wide open. We yearn for immortality and resurrection with no spiritual investment. With new technology's assistance, we want both a timely ending and an immediate attainment of immortality. The question that remains, however, is whether for our bodies to resuscitate with our old defective eye, though it leads us, makers, to fear to create anything that no one can see, just as it limits what we create to everything that everyone can see.

In film, this means abiding by the normative system of "predatory cinema" (Raoul Ruiz), in which not only all stories are action-and-conflict-driven, but all conflicts are also reduced to one enslaving central conflict. Such a practice of cinema sees the world as a grand war zone. The relationships between people are no more than a sum of constant hostilities that require all participants to take sides ("You're either for us or against us"). Differing views of the world are filtered through the eye of central conflict and all conflicts are subsumed under the one spectacular conflict that matters to the most powerful nation of the West. The globalization of this system, both in its economical and political connotations, makes it all the more necessary for us to continue to ask the question: Which eye?

⁷ In Kenji Miyazawa, *Once and Forever*, trans. J. Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993, rpt. 1997), 109.

What gives life to the image dies in the image. If death is untimely, then it seems that one can't help but be untimely. It may be said thereby that in living the present, one is always slightly ahead or slightly behind. In today's world of terror against terror in which globalization fights globalization, it may be particularly relevant that D-cinema be a way of intimately addressing our mortality, with filmmaking as a way of assuming our in-secure path of freedom.