

The Depth of Time

With Alison Rowley

SOMEWHERE FROM THE MIDDLE

ALISON ROWLEY: *I have been reading Milky Way Railroad by Kenji Miyazawa, which was written in 1927, because I was curious about why you chose this novel as a starting point for your digital film Night Passage. In the introduction to the English translation of the book I read that Miyazawa was Japan's best-loved children's writer, as well as one of its three great modern poets. He was a chemist and government agricultural agent and also worked as a schoolteacher. Although he was well known in Tokyo's literary circles, he lived hundreds of miles away from the capital, in the isolated province of Iwate in the North of the country, and while he was knowledgeable about most branches of modern science he also searched for a belief system that would accommodate the religious teachings of both Buddhism and Christianity. Miyazawa was born in 1896 and died in 1933, so his life and work coincide with the high point of Western modernity. They also, it seems to me, correspond with the observations you made about contemporary Japan in The Fourth Dimension. The film attends to the encounter between the rituals of traditional culture as they persist today in the everyday life of the country and sophisticated new technologies of communication and representation, which are structured by their own ritual forms. In The Fourth Dimension and in Night Passage the train is, quite literally, the narrative vehicle of the films. In The Fourth Dimension it travels between past and present; in Night Passage the journey takes place between life and death. There is a moment in The Fourth Dimension when we see a young woman asleep on a modern Japanese train. Does she dream the story of Night Passage? This is a way of asking, Are the two films companion pieces? How do you understand the relationship between them?*

TRINH T. MINH-HA: Great questions that need no answer after all. You have somehow situated this entire film within an image sequence of another film and linked it to the sleep state of a woman in the train. What a wonderful way

to connect *Night Passage* with a previous film of mine and to see them in relation as a dream within another dream. As viewers, one often forgets that each film, each image has its own history and trajectory.

We have to begin somewhere, so it's normal that you start with Miyazawa. The information you gave could be helpful to the reader unfamiliar with the name, which is often the case when the writer is from the non-Western world. But although I am not indifferent to biographical details of his life, they are of limited use here. I would rather begin somewhere in the middle: with the spirit of his work, which was how I met him on the page, and with what I retained from the book *Milky Way Railroad* or *Night Train to the Stars*. The relation that *Night Passage* maintains toward this book is that of inspiration — and not of illustration, imitation, description, or realist rendition.

In other words, viewers need not read Miyazawa to enter the film. The question of “source” or “influence” is of little relevance, for what compels me to make the film after having read his book is not its mere content — the story, the message, or the information — although these have a role and are quite wonderful in his case. It is rather the sparks generated by our encounter, the freedom, and the insight for new possibilities that the book opens up to. As one of the vehicles of the life-and-death passage — the others being, for example, the bicycle, the boat, and the ship — the train runs at the core of his voyage, not as one that begins and ends the story but as one that gives access to the Milky Way and allows its passengers to rediscover, at each stop, the queerness of human desire and yearning.

Life is not explicable when it is lived intensely, with magical freshness. What I kept of Miyazawa in *Night Passage* were spirit, structural forces, and field of action. His story has no development, so to speak. Broadly speaking, it is composed of an opening and a closure and, in between the two, a space of free-flow happenings and encounters. It was the freedom provided by such a framework that appealed to me initially. In coming up with a night train of my own, the only traces of his that I retain in the film can be found in its beginning and ending and in some incidences on the train. The rest, the middle, is where the ride to an elsewhere happens and where everything comes alive in the journey. The train appears in the middle of Miyazawa's story, and it is from this middle that possibilities abound.

As in ancient Asian praxes, practicing the Middle Way does not mean being

halfway. No compromise, indecision, or noncommitment is implied here. On the contrary, the middle is where there's no duality, no leaning on one side or the other, hence no foreclosures due to barriers. The form that emerges is like the moon of realization: empty in its fullness, with neither beginning nor end. Deleuze and Guattari picked up a grain of Zen and became very attuned to this particle of the East when they recalled how Eastern arts always grew from the middle and urged us to start again from the middle — so as to work with new relations of speed and slowness, thereby enabling new possibilities of assemblages.

Inter, between, midway: what comes to our senses is always on the go, already in motion. Each scene, each sequence could be an autonomous gesture with a center of its own. Story and plot are minimally retained only to set free the field of affects. We may use them as a way to “humanize” a larger-than-life event, reducing it to the size of our mouth so that we can digest and regurgitate in putting it into words.

For me, the term *dream* in its normative sense is not quite adequate when applied to the different passages at work in *Night Passage*. Night travelers and film face infinity with the multiplicity of comings and goings offered in the middle. Rather than leading from one point to another, passages are middles, intervals within intervals, since life itself is an interval between birth and death, and each life is an interval within numerous other lives.

This is all in response to your situating *Night Passage* somewhere in the middle of my film body's trajectory — already in motion in *The Fourth Dimension*. We can even travel further in time, in and out of the digital realm, if we return, let's say, to the sonic plane of the train in yet another fiction film of mine, *A Tale of Love*.

CINEMATIC, INDUSTRIAL, DIGITAL

ROWLEY: *Trains and the idea of the magical journey figure at the very beginning of cinema's existence. The famous sequence of a train pulling into a station made by the Lumière brothers, shown in 1895, and George Méliès's fantasy Le voyage à travers l'Impossible (1902), initiate the two dominant strands in cinema history: the documentary and the fiction film. For me a sense of the nineteenth-century industrial technological revolution pervades Night Passage. To take just one instance of many: at*