

D-PASSAGE

The Digital Way



TRINH T. MINH-HA

D-PASSAGE

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D-PASSAGE

THE DIGITAL WAY

Trinh T. Minh-ha

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Lotus Eye

(Reading Miyazawa Kenji and Making *Night Passage*)

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, Dissolve, Disappear: 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 film, 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*, the story revolves 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.² Their journey into the land of "awakened dream" and out 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 nonillusory, 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.

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 on 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 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)³ well before I read his stories and became acquainted with the man's personal tale. 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 twenty-five, while in her springtime.

Night Train to the Stars 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 ranges 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 skydivers, the first being an aviator by profession. That said, their novels differ markedly in the location of their voice. Of significance here is that Miyazawa, who also died at a young age, thirty-seven, having ruined his health with an ascetic food regimen, is a man of many selves and many talents — an aspect that accounts for the sheer expansive quality of his work.

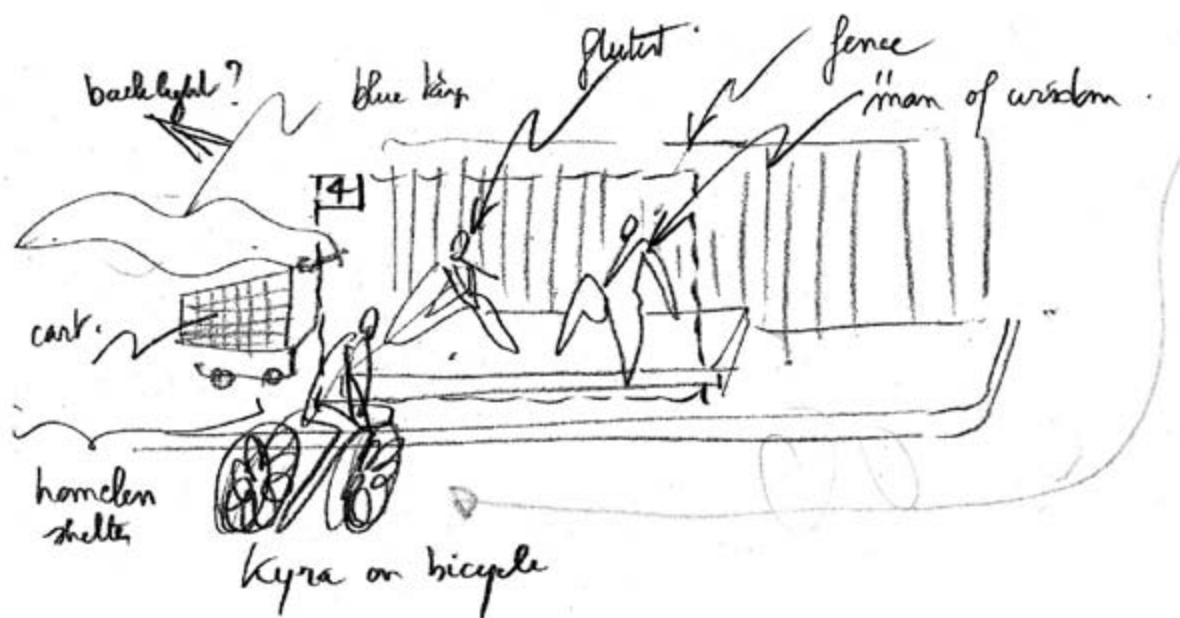
Poet, novelist, farmer agronomist, amateur astronomer, geologist, teacher, musician, and composer, he was a most misunderstood literary figure in Japan until the media decided to deify him sixty-three years after his death. A dilettante at heart, he loved Western classical music and had a strong fascination for foreign languages, including English, German, and Esperanto. Relevantly, aside from his 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-against 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.

In the first version I read of his novel *Milky Way Railroad*, 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."⁴ Since I usually prefer (at first) 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 terms with death, a story "typically Japanese," as my prejudices dictated. 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 do the main characters' names, Giovanni (Jovanni) and Campanella (Kanpanera), appear 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, coexisting with Japanese names, make all the difference. Here the politics of naming takes on an inventive role of its own.

FORCES AND FORMS: "WHERE THE ROAD IS ALIVE"

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 ("butterfly" in Korean), a name chosen by the actress herself, Denice Lee. Shin, the name of the little boy, was the one Japanese name I had decided to keep, despite the fact that the actor for that role is not Japanese. (This small detail did not fail to disturb some discerning viewers when the film was released.) On my night train, rather than focusing on the two boys, I set out to explore the journey of two young women accompanied by a little boy. 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, continually raised questions concerning their 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 revolved consciously or unconsciously around the boundaries they'd set up for cinema. As is known from analyses of the film world, there are two distinct Western avant-gardes: one based on the tradition of the visual arts and the other on the tradition of theater and literature. Working at hiding the stage, mainstream narratives are all theater, and it is with the power of money (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.) In contrast, 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 nonvisual 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 is it at odds with classifications such as documentary and fiction, but 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 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, 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 Sagar); 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, if diversity was important in the process of building cast and crew, as well as of visualizing the film, 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 touted 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 lie at the core of biopower and biopolitics. Since the film features a transition from one state to another, the focus is on the interaction of passages. Rather than treating difference as mere conflict, in *Night Passage* difference comes with the art of spacing and is creatively transcultural. Here trans- is not merely a movement across separate entities and rigid boundaries but one in which the traveling 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 says, “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,” as Nabi urges Kyra to follow her inner voice.⁵ The crossroads are where the dynamics of the film lie. They are empty centers thanks to which an indefinite number of paths can converge and part in a new direction. Inter-, multi-, post-, and trans-: these are the prefixes of our times. They define the before, after, during, and between of social and ethical consciousness. Each has a history and a seemingly precise moment of appearance, disappearance, and reappearance. 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 depths 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 on 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. The best one can do 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 says, "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 link-

ing it to the *bardo*, the “between-state” in the Tibetan art of dying. As it is well known among Tibetan Buddhist 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.

Night Passage begins with what may first appear to the viewer as a shot of a passing train, in which passengers appear, disappear, and reappear 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 viewers 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 reanimated 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 a 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 nonlinear 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-witness, 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