

The Multiplanar Image

When I take the Shinkansen, I love watching the countryside stream past the windows. I can't help but recall Paul Virilio's remark, that the landscape seen from the train window is art, just as much as the works of Pablo Picasso or Paul Klee. Virilio calls the effect of speed on the landscape an "art of the engine."¹ And he associates it with cinema. "What happens in the train window, in the car windshield, in the television screen, is the same kind of cinematism," he writes.² For Virilio, this art of the engine, these effects of speed, for all their beauty, are deadly. Cinematism entails an optical logistics that ultimately prepares us for the bomb's-eye view, consigning us to a life at one end or the other of a gun, or missile, or some other ballistic system. Maybe it's just me, but as I look at the landscape from the bullet train, I watch how the countryside seems to separate into the different layers of motion, and how structures transform into silhouettes. These effects make me wonder if there is not also an "animetism" generated through the effects of speed. This animetism does not turn its eyes from the window in order to align them with the speeding locomotive or bullet or robot. It remains intent on looking at the effects of speed laterally, sideways, or crossways. Consequently, animetism emphasizes how speed divides the landscape into different planes or

layers. In addition, it gives the impression that it is not simply the train that moves; the entire world is in motion.

In one of the early sequences in Ôtomo Katsuhiro's *Steamboy* (2004), as the young hero travels by train to London, the English countryside streams past the window, and the landscape—a series of rolling hills, clumps of trees, and small houses—looks like a diorama (Figure 1).³ But it is not one of those dioramas that use three-dimensional figures and scale models. It recalls the ones that children make in school with a shoebox and cardboard cutouts. Each house and hill and tree is decidedly flat, as if cut out and pasted in place. All sense of depth comes from the play between the cutout layers. As your viewing position moves, you distinctly feel the gap between these different layers or planes. The gap between layers is hard to catch by looking at a static series of screen grabs, so you'll have to imagine the effects of motions (or see the film on a large screen, which really accentuates the play between layers).

The depth of these open layers is a strange depth—strange, that is, in comparison with the hyper-three-dimensionality that is now familiar to us from digital animation in the style of Pixar; strange, too, in comparison to cinematic norms. The diorama style in *Steamboy* does not construct depth in accordance with the conventions of geometric perspective. This animetism focuses less on realism of depth than on realism of movement. It lingers on the effects of speed, but here the image's different layers seem to move independently of one another. The result is a multiplanar image.

Of course, in this “steampunk” tale, Ôtomo goes to great lengths to evoke and alter technologies of the Victorian era, and his use of diorama-like landscape is part of the historical conceit. The diorama recalls optical technologies of the period, and the sequence emphasizes the diorama effect by slowly



FIGURE 1. Sequence from *Steamboy*.

pulling away from the landscape to frame it in the train window—a perfect dioramic moment. The multiplanar image is not limited to *Steamboy* or to old-fashioned optics, however. In *Spriggan* (1998), for instance, in the sequence in which the young hero drives through Istanbul, the landscape appears as a collection of flat, superimposed layers of buildings (Figure 2). Again you feel the openness between the flattened planes of the image, which defies certain conventions of depth yet imparts a distinctive sense of movement. Rather than move into the landscape, you seem to move across it, soaring, speeding, spinning, wheeling.



FIGURE 2. Sequence from *Spriggan*.



Since Ôtomo also worked on *Spriggan* (as general supervisor), you might think that these multiplanar effects are part of his distinctive style, or of Studio 4°C, which is associated with experimental styles, not only on Ôtomo projects such as *Memories* (1995) and *Spriggan* but also on series like *Eternal Family* (*Eien no kazoku*, 1997–98) and films like *Mind Game* (2004). Multiplanar effects, however, appear all the time in animation, not only in Ôtomo films or experimental animation. These travel sequences from *Steamboy* and *Spriggan* touch on something fundamental to animation—at least to those forms of animation that grow out of cel animation.

THE MULTIPLANE CAMERA

A basic feature of cel animation is the layering of celluloid sheets, or cels, which produces odd effects of depth—odd, again, from the standpoint of certain conventions of rendering depth. Take a very simple scenario, for instance, in which you draw the lines of a character in dark ink on a transparent sheet of celluloid and carefully apply colors. You then place the character cel on top of a background (painted on celluloid, glass, or some other support). Two layers alone can produce effects of depth. If you draw and color the background somewhat lighter than the character, the more boldly drawn character will appear closer to the viewer—which is usually the desired effect. Now you draw various positions of movement for the character and take exposures. When projected, the character will appear to move in the foreground; if you slide the cel a bit, the character seems to move over or across the background. Still, as depth goes, this is not all that deep.

The difficulties begin when you want to create illusions of movement in depth, as Walt Disney did in the early 1930s.⁴ As you stack more and more cels, you can create some sense of depth, but you also begin to get silhouette effects, and a host of other problems arise. For instance, the colors of the lower cels tend to change, and lighting becomes difficult. Things truly take a turn for the worse, however, if you want to create the sensation of moving into or out of a background—for instance, if you adopt the viewing position of a character moving toward something in the background. Say that you want to create the sensation of walking toward a barn under a full moon. You can change the camera focus (zooming in or out) or move the camera closer or farther away from the picture. The problem is that, as the barn gets bigger, so does everything around it in the picture. The moon, for instance, also grows larger—rather than remain the same size, as it ought. Piling on

additional layers doesn't help with this problem. To ensure that everything in the image remains in scale while moving into the image, you would have to draw a series of backgrounds at different scales, each depicting the landscape a bit closer, with the sizes of barn and moon changing appropriately.

Actually, this is not merely a problem of creating an illusion of depth, as is commonly supposed. Nor is it a problem of depicting movement toward or away from the camera. It is easy enough to depict movement away from

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the camera: draw the character smaller and smaller (or bigger and bigger); successive exposures make the character appear to move and vanish into the landscape. Miyazaki Hayao's *Castle in the Sky* (*Tenkû no shiro Rapyuta*, 1986) provides a good example: as Sheeta falls from the airship toward the ground, she gets smaller and smaller (Figure 3). Thus she appears to move away from us. Moreover, the images of Sheeta "falling" (that is, shrinking) alternate with images of the pirates look-

ing at her fall, who also become smaller and smaller. Thus you know that Sheeta and the pirates are moving rapidly apart. Nonetheless, such a scenario does not give you the sensation of falling, of dropping into the image, of plummeting through the night sky toward the city lights below. You don't have the sensation of movement into the depths of an image—the ballistic angle, as it were.

Apparently, conveying a sense of movement into the image became an obsession for Walt Disney. As the story goes, he felt that he could not make his feature-length animated film (*Snow White*) without the ability to produce the sensation of movement in depth—the sensation of a changing point of view and of accelerated camera movement. Prior work on animated shorts had introduced techniques of drawing, overlapping layers of cels, lighting, and camera movement to produce various kinds of movements as well as sensations of weight and dimensionality. But Disney aimed for something analogous to cinema's "motionless voyage" into the world on the screen.⁵ His solution was to introduce gaps between the layers of cels. Inspired by the creation of depth on the stage with its layers of scenery, Disney designed an apparatus, the multiplane camera, which allowed him to regulate the distances between layers, which he then calibrated in accordance with a shift in camera focus and position. In 1940 he received a patent on the multiplane camera, which he had already put to use in a *Silly Symphonies* segment called "The Old Mill" (1937). But it was in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) that the multiplane camera came into its own, remaining the dominant means of

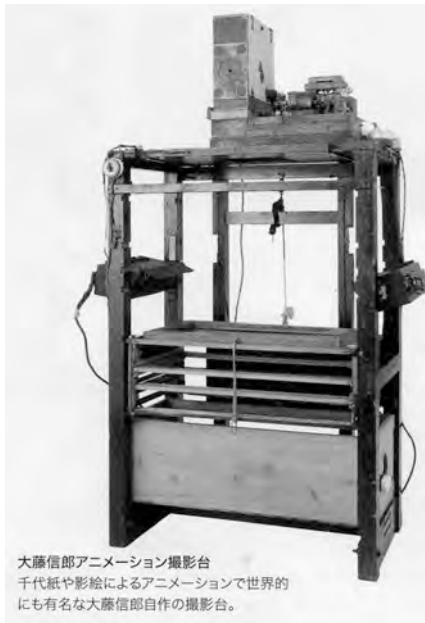
conveying a sensation of motion in depth well into the 1990s. Even today, digital animation software packages emphasize their abilities to produce multiplane camera effects.

While Disney surely deserves credit for the multiplane camera, it is also true that animators had been experimenting with this problem of layers since John Bray first introduced the use of transparent cels in 1914. In a 1933 photo, you see the Japanese animator Kimura Hakusan working with a rather sophisticated animation stand.⁶ While it is not clear from the photo whether he could use this stand to introduce significant gaps between layers, such a development is clearly not far off, given the arrangement of lights, camera, and glass panes. Because Japanese animators were already playing with the use of multiple layers of cels, the multiplane system did not present any technical obstacle. Already, by the late 1930s, animation stands were beginning to introduce separations between different layers of the image. A recent exhibit on Japanese film heritage, for instance, displayed the animation stand and camera used by Ôfuji Noburô, whose cut-paper animation met with international acclaim from the 1930s through the 1950s (Figure 4). The real obstacle was budget. It was only during the war when the Japanese government began to provide substantial budgets for animated films imbued with patriotic flavor that some studios could afford to put multiplane techniques to use.

The expense of the multiplane camera comes of the fact that you have to fuss with every shot, which makes it exceedingly time-consuming—and animation costs are above all labor costs. It demands so much attention because each time you wish to move a bit farther into the image, you have to readjust the vertical distances between layers. And if the camera moves inward at an angle, the various layers have to be adjusted horizontally as well. To ensure



FIGURE 3. Sequence from *Castle in the Sky*.



大藤信郎アニメーション撮影台
千代紙や影絵によるアニメーションで世界的
にも有名な大藤信郎自作の撮影台。

FIGURE 4. Stand for animation photography constructed by Ōfuji Noburō.

that things shift in accordance with scale, you must finesse the relations among layers shot by shot, vertically and horizontally. Otherwise, the viewer will feel the gaps between layers.

This problem persists in digital animation. In the supplementary disk with commentaries on *The Phantom Menace*, for example, techies talk about problems of movement within the digital image. After they had introduced layer upon layer of architectures into the image, they had to pay close attention when moving the (simulated) camera around because things did not remain in scale. You could see the slippage, or, if you could not exactly see it, you could feel it. Now you would think that computers could correct for the possible “deformation” of scalar relations automatically. But you would have to

introduce calculations for every one of the many layers and for their relations, which is not such an easy matter. And if you then decide to add another layer or alter one (as often happens during production or postproduction), everything changes. As a result, the camera doesn’t move around very much in many of these digitally composited sequences. Some sequences feel more like tableaux than worlds that you can move around in.

When everything works, however, the results are astonishing, precisely because the multiplane system gives the viewer the impression of being able to move around inside the image, as if the image had become a world. Moreover, the viewer can move around more rapidly and freely than in daily life. You can zip around. Cinema also aims for such effects, from its earliest attempts to produce a voyage into the world on the screen. As Nam June Paik says, “Cinema isn’t to see, it’s to fly.”⁷ I would add: cinema is to fly when it strives to produce a sense of movement in depth, giving you the sensation of speeding inside the image. Initially, the multiplane camera may seem nothing more than an attempt to imitate in animation the high-speed movement in depth that is characteristic of cinematism. But animation is not a simple repetition of cinematism. Multiplane techniques in animation can actually push beyond the limits of live-action camerawork. Animation has the potential to fly faster and farther. In this respect at least, animation does not merely replicate or simulate the ballistic-style optics of cinematism. It is a multiplication and even a “powering” of it—cinematism to the tenth power. Or at least, the

multiplane system has the potential to raise cinematism to another power. Needless to say, this is one of the prime uses of digital animation right now. Think of the chase scenes in *The Incredibles* (2004) in which Dash zips around. Of course, it costs a bundle, this digitally animated cinematism-to-the-tenth-power, this supercinematism.

But what happened to animetism, to those sliding layers that I opened with?

THE MANGA FILM

Multiplane camera techniques allow the transformation of animation into a supercinematism by pushing the limits of movement in depth. Animetism, however, begins to happen when you do not have the time, money, or, more important, the interest or inclination to fuss so much with the layers. Or, more precisely, animetism is what happens when you begin to prefer the sensation of openness between layers, or when you favor a flattening of layers. Animetism puts less emphasis on compositing the image tightly, on hiding the gaps between the different layers of the image as the camera (or viewing position) moves. Still, animetism is not the opposite of compositing. One kind of animetism favors an “open compositing” in which the image’s layers are allowed to move more independently of one another. While open compositing tends to work against sensations of movement in depth, it makes possible other sensations of movement. Open compositing does not have you look from the tip of a bullet speeding directly, in a straight line at its target—or the train rushing straight down the rails, or the camera moving into a world. It not only looks at speed sideways, it also gives a very different sensation of motion, and of relation to the world. Open compositing is not the opposite of speed, then: it is one kind of animetism that uses the multiplane concept to produce different effects of speed.

For animetic effects, you introduce separations between various layers of the image in a stand, as with the multiplane system. But you don’t adjust the distances between layers to keep things perfectly in scale when you move the camera. Thus, as the camera moves (or the focus changes), the elements in different layers will appear to pull apart or to draw closer together as they become smaller or larger. The effect is like

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FIGURE 5. Sequence from *Castle in the Sky*.

that of curtains opening and closing. Because the camera has moved (or its focus has changed), however, you have the sensation of sliding across the image more than moving into it.

Moreover, rather than hold the layers in place and move the camera, you can hold the camera in place and move the layers. In other words, you can move the drawings rather than draw the movement. In this respect, rather than strive to produce a sense of the camera moving into and around inside a world, animetism plays with the relative movement of different layers. This is one way to play with the multiplanar image. And the viewing position of the camera loses its privilege; it becomes another layer.

In Miyazaki Hayao's *Castle in the Sky*, after Sheeta and Pazu crash-land on the castle, they begin to explore their surroundings. As they walk to the edge of a cliff, a foreground layer and a background layer slide apart to reveal the depths below (Figure 5). Again, this is difficult to render with a series of screen grabs, but a close look at the images should demonstrate

that, rather than a movement into depth, this sequence involves a sliding of the image's planes. You don't have the sense of moving into the image. Likewise with the views of the castle: layers of clouds are slowly pulled across and between layers of architectures. Although there is no movement in depth, the effect is panoramic, and you definitely have the sensation of movement, even a slightly giddy sensation.

Miyazaki generally avoids the sort of compositing associated with the multiplane camera. Although he certainly has access to large budgets and computer technologies that would allow him to lessen the sensation of movement between layers, he prefers not to. For the most part, he restricts the use of digital technologies to coloring or painting. This resistance stems from reluctance to composite the image, which would enable certain ballistic effects of speed. Indeed, when he does resort to computer animation, the sequences

tend to stand out, as with the scenes in *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke-hime*, 1997) in which a wild boar charges after the hero (Figure 6). It stands out because, even though digital compositing would make it possible to produce effects of motion in depth, Miyazaki emphasizes lateral movement in ways that undercut the sensations of depth.

In a general way, Miyazaki dislikes the sort of cinematism that Virilio describes and denounces in so many of his books. Miyazaki appears as resolutely opposed to cinematism as Virilio. Yet Virilio does not think it will be easy—and it may no longer even be possible—to strip away the effects of modern technologies, to get back to a slow, nonballistic world fashioned on the scale of the human body and its senses. In his animated films, however, Miyazaki seems more optimistic than Virilio. He goes to great lengths to create a slow, human-scaled, nonballistic world. He labors to avoid cinematism rather than to denounce it.

Miyazaki thus prefers the lateral view of motion over motion in depth. He favors the sliding sensation of speed. Only rarely in his works do you see from the perspective of a speeding vehicle, and even then the vehicle is likely to be a bicycle or a glider or a flying broomstick. Usually, you glide alongside the glider, as if gliding yourself, rather than zeroing in on a destination or target. Compositionally as well, he often turns to the slippery



FIGURE 6. Sequence from *Princess Mononoke*.



staircase, the canted deck, the tilting plane, and then gives you a sideways impression of falling, slipping, careening. In his resistance to cinematism, he strives to invent “nice” effects of speed, ones that are closer to the human body or, rather, to the child’s body and imagination. The child looms large in Miyazaki’s animetism precisely because the child’s body is not yet completely habituated to ballistic effects of speed. In this respect, Miyazaki’s children or tweens are not so much about purity or innocence as about a sensory-motor openness, elasticity, and malleability. The child does not simply return you to the old pretechnological world but opens the possibility of a posttechnological world. At the level of narrative, too, Miyazaki avoids reaching a destination or conclusion or coming full circle.

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He avoids both linear progressive movement and cyclical regressive movement. Even his stories tend to move laterally, sideways, diagonally.

Miyazaki openly expresses his dislike of what he sees as the violence and ballistic optics of anime (that is, *terebi anime*, or television animation), insisting that his works are “manga films.”⁸

It often seems that he sees television

anime as an extension of cinematism. Indeed, he suggests that anime is not unlike Hollywood films and American TV in how it uses character and genre, and how it stresses violence. Put another way, for Miyazaki, anime appears to be a variation on the cinematism of the action film. And his resistance to cinematism entails a resistance to action films in general. But what of Miyazaki’s movies? Aren’t many of them like action genres?

Rather than rejecting action altogether, Miyazaki uses animetism to rethink and rework action. This is especially true of his earlier films. But even his more recent films rework action genres—what is *Princess Mononoke* but a reworking of the action and narrative patterns of the samurai film? This is also where difficult questions arise. Is it possible to make an action film without all the “bad” effects of action films? This is what open compositing is supposed to do in Miyazaki’s manga films. But Miyazaki himself has doubts. He worries that, even though his goal is to get kids away from the television and its ballistic optics that destroy their imaginations and relations to nature, his manga films might prove just as harmful as anime.⁹ What’s to prevent kids from watching *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*, 1988) over and over, rather than getting out in the garden (if they have one)? In other

words, even though the animetism of the manga film may produce different effects of speed than cinematism, those effects are nonetheless effects. As Miyazaki is well aware, the emphasis on sliding layers and gliding movements in his films could never be unquestionably, unambiguously, safe or natural or noninstrumental. Ultimately, his films are about radically limiting the optical logistics and ballistic instrumentality that come with cinematism. This is why so many of his films entail a quest for worlds based on clean, nonimpact sources of energy—usually the wind and human muscle. His is a quest for another, better kind of action, another, better kind of energy, another, better kind of animation.

This is why Miyazaki and his associates at Studio Ghibli tend to disparage anime (television animation), seeing it as not so different from the ballistic optics of cinematism (and its genre worlds). But is the action of so-called anime really just a capitulation to cinematism? Other commentators resolutely disagree. They see Japanese television animation as deliberately flat and two-dimensional. If flatness defines anime, then how could anime achieve the motion in depth characteristic of cinematism? How could it produce the same techno-political violence?

An insistence on the flatness, or two-dimensionality, of anime comes to the fore in the notion of the “superflat” lineage of Japanese art conceptualized and promulgated by the artist Murakami Takashi.

SUPERFLAT

The problem of cinematism—of motion in depth—can also be seen as a problem of geometric perspective. Geometric perspective (sometimes called linear perspective) makes the objects in a drawing look as if they recede into the distance, appearing smaller the farther they are away from you. To produce geometric perspective, you have to use perspective lines. That is, you need to draw straight lines at an angle that converge at a point, the vanishing point, on the horizon line (an imaginary line at eye level in the drawing). Such lines allow you to draw three-dimensional objects in scale in three-dimensional space. Clearly, cinematism depends on a sense of geometric perspective. The multiplane camera, for instance, is supposed to allow you to produce the sensation of cruising around in a 3-D world, by ensuring that the different layers of the image remain consistent with geometric perspective even as the camera angle shifts. Simply put, the multiplane system keeps the world of cels in scale even as the camera moves.

Television animation in Japan has rarely had the time, money, or inclination to produce multiplane camera effects. It may come as no great surprise, then, that Murakami sees, in Japanese television animation, a compositional timing that directs the “movement of the observer’s gaze along planes.” Like the art of early modern Japan (especially ukiyo-e woodblock prints), anime makes the viewer aware of the image’s “super-planarity.”¹⁰ In other words, Murakami sees in the anime image an extreme flattening of depth that makes everything seem to lie on the same plane. Murakami doesn’t seem interested in the gaps that can arise between layers of the image as your viewing position moves. Murakami pays no attention to multiplane effects at all. Everything conspires against any sense of depth whatsoever. You might think of this sort of image as “uniplanar” with a vengeance.

Murakami traces the flatness of the anime image back to the era of “limited animation” in the early 1960s—to the emergence of animated television series such as Tezuka Osamu’s *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu*, 1963–66). At that time, animators had neither the time nor the money to produce “full animation,” that is, animation that aspired to produce movement as fluid and detailed as cinematic movement. Consequently, they quickly developed techniques designed to present movement in other more economical and schematic ways. What is important in this context is that animators tended to limit the number of image layers—usually to two or three—to a foreground layer with a moving character and the background, sometimes with another layer sandwiched between them, with other characters or an additional layer of background. Significantly, even when there is a gap between these layers, you don’t feel it as much as in Miyazaki’s manga films. Sometimes there is no sense of gap at all, since it is easier to layer one image closely on another. In addition, animators avoided motion in depth with the camera, moving the camera across the image rather than into it; or they finessed motion in depth by having figures run directly toward or away from the camera, in which case it is enough to enlarge or reduce the character rather than use zooms or close-ups. A character on a background of speed lines also provided a sense of movement without any need to fuss with depth effects. Or you could produce movement by pulling the character cel across the background, without moving the camera at all. In sum, it is a combination of such effects that Murakami refers to when he calls attention to the extreme planarity of the anime image.

Murakami’s examples of anime are highly selective. His lineage is rather narrow, because he draws heavily on the ideas of Okada Toshio, one of the founders of Gainax Studios and celebrated king of *otaku*, or “otakingu.” Like

Okada, Murakami tends to see Gainax series as the heirs of a tradition that begins with the limited animation of the 1960s and extends through the epic series popular with boys in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Space Cruiser Yamato* (*Uchû senkan Yamato*, 1974–75), *Mobile Suit Gundam* (*Kidô senshi Gundam*, 1979–80), and *Super Dimensional*

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Fortress Macross (*Chôjîkû yôsai Makurosu*, 1982–83). For Okada and thus for Murakami, it is Gainax Studios above all that builds on this legacy, bringing it to new heights. Still, partial as his lineage of anime is, Murakami's emphasis on Gainax makes sense. After all, Anno Hideaki's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*Shin seiki Evangelion*, 1995–96) truly defined a new sense of what anime was and could be. *Evangelion* was (and remains) one of the most successful anime series, and, like many other Gainax series, it consciously references other animated television series. Moreover, the Gainax director Anno deliberately sticks to an extremely limited style of animation. All in all, it is really not surprising that Murakami would adopt Okada's Gainax-centered slant on the history of anime.

In any event, if you're looking for how limited animation turns flatness into superflatness or into "superplanarity," Murakami's examples are good ones, despite *and* because of the Gainax bias. Surprising, however, are the recurring images of explosions, space battles, planetary destruction. Famously, in his superflat exhibit, Murakami highlighted the work of the animator Kanada Yoshinori, including images from the climactic battle scenes in *Galaxy Express 999* (*Ginga tetsudô 999*, 1978–81) (Figure 7). He writes admiringly of "the beauty of that climactic battle scene and the disintegration of the Planet Meteru scene!"¹¹ In other words, superflat anime is not in opposition to action, or to genres of space war and futuristic military action. This is surprising because, after reading about the multiplane camera, you wouldn't expect flatness to be particularly well suited to conveying action. At least, you wouldn't expect to see ballistic effects of speed that depend on creating a sense of motion in depth.

Rather than dwell on the images in Murakami's exhibit, I would like to present a sequence from a more recent *Galaxy Express 999* movie—*Ginga tetsudô 999: Eternal Fantasy*, 1998—to give a sense of the ubiquity of these superflat explosions (Figure 8). In this sequence you see the train spiraling outward as bits of flaming wreckage from an explosion. This sequence has

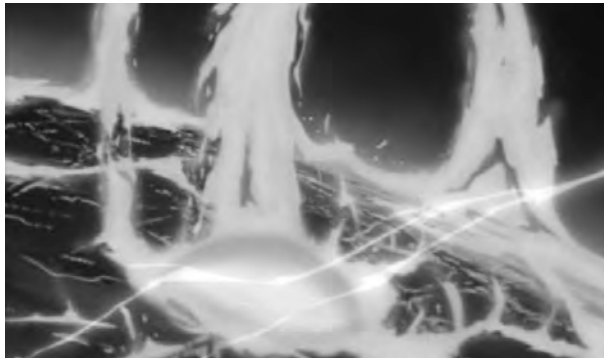
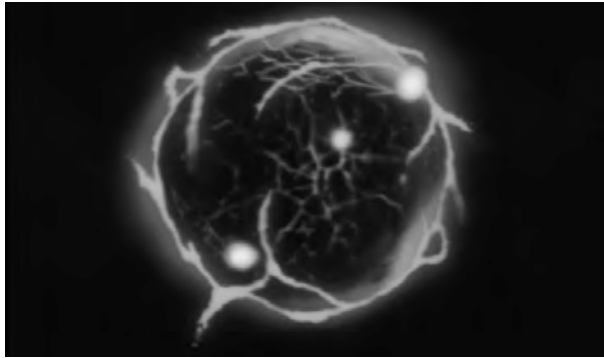
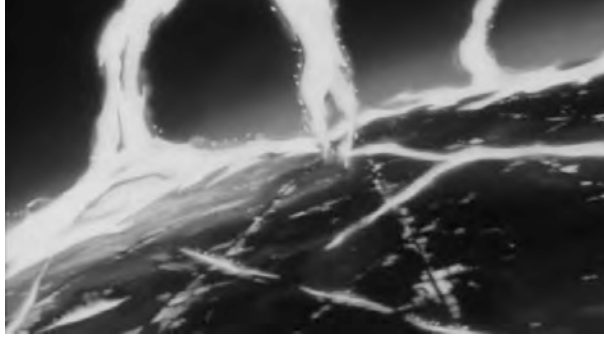


FIGURE 7. Sequence from *Galaxy Express 999*.

neither the ballistic movement in depth characteristic of cinematism nor the open compositing favored in Miyazaki. As Murakami notes, everything calls attention to the image's planarity. But what is the relation between the superplanar image and genres of future war action and mass destruction?

Murakami finesses the relation of superplanarity to action by stressing the beauty of Kanada's sequences, as if their beauty allowed them somehow to transcend the story's depiction of violence, chaos, and death. But what kind of action is this superplanarity? Should we see superflatness only in those moments when the composition and timing of limited animation calls our attention to the planes of the images, to their flatness, thus taking us to an experience beyond that of war (yet in the midst of war)? Does the superflatness of limited animation take us into an aesthetic realm beyond action? Or is it a new or different kind of action from cinematism?

Murakami isn't really interested in such questions. But, when pressed to deal with them, he tends to associate the superplanar effects of anime with inaction and impotence. This is already apparent in his superflat exhibit in his treatment of the art of Nakahashi Katsushige, who takes photographs of small models of Japanese Zero fighter planes and tapes them together to make a full-scale paper model, which is then burned. Nakahashi links the production of these paper planes to sites of Japanese violence during World War II, pulling members of the local community into the project, encouraging them to help carry the model to the site and burn it. Where Nakahashi stresses the politics of remembering the war and Japanese imperialism and aggression, Murakami sees a demonstration and reminder of "the impotence of the Japanese themselves."¹² Indeed, impotence runs like a refrain through Murakami's conceptualization of superflatness. More recently, Murakami has made a third entry in his superflat trilogy, a 2005 exhibit at the Japan Society Gallery in New York titled *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, which stresses the feeling of impotence experienced by a generation of Japanese boys in response to Japan's defeat, as manifested in their responses to the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—code-named "Little Boy" and "Fat Man." For Murakami, images of nuclear destruction that abound in anime (or in a lineage of anime), together with monsters born of atomic radiation (Godzilla), express the experience of a generation of Japanese men of being little boys in relation to American power, of being unable to become men, while eternally full of nostalgia for their boyhoods.

This insistence on the impotence of the Japanese (male) in relation to the potency of the United States has a long and complicated history.¹³ But it is clearly part of a cultural nationalism that would erase the history of Japanese militarism, reconstructing national values by lingering on Japan's subordination to the United States. Not surprisingly, Murakami turns out to be rather

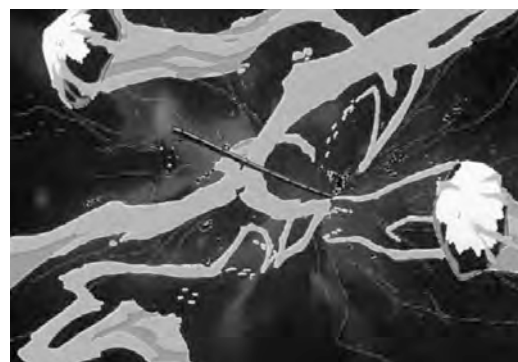


FIGURE 8. Sequence from *Galaxy Express 999: Eternal Fantasy*.

ambivalent about Japan's support for the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. After all, in his world, little boys just want to become men, and becoming a man means driving military vehicles.

If it is possible to set aside, at least temporarily, Murakami's transformation of superflat into Japanese nationalism and militarism, there may be another way to think about the superplanarity of the anime image in relation to action. This other way of looking at superflatness calls attention to an information-rich Japan. It does not find a Japan obsessively trying to catch up with America but a Japan that is struggling to situate itself in transnational networks—and succeeding, for the most part.

First, we need to ask how something apparently uniplanar (flat) becomes superplanar (superflat). Superflat implies that something is not simply flat but very, very flat—complexly flat. To make something look superflat, you have to begin with layers that introduce the possibility of depth and then crush it. As I've already discussed, such layers can be tightly composited as in the multiplane camera system, allowing motion in depth. Or they can be openly compositing, allowing more animetic possibilities—sliding and gliding and wheeling effects—a sort of motion over or across depth. You achieve superflatness, however, only by having complex layers and making them all appear equally on the surface, and equally important visually. In other words, backgrounds or intermediate layers don't fade away, allowing themselves to be overlooked. On the contrary, they push to the fore. Oddly enough, very flat backgrounds—say, a background of a single color or one composed of speed lines—often appear as important as the figure that they highlight. Depth comes right to the surface even as it serves to direct attention to the character. Foreground and background become equally striking.

This is the basic idea of superflat: no element within the image is more important than any other element. The result is a visual field without any hierarchy among elements. You could also call this a distributive visual field, since elements are distributed rather than hierarchized. Of course, you might argue that this is bound to fail because viewers automatically select certain elements of an image as more important than others. But this is precisely the effect that superflat strives for. When everything comes equally to the surface, you still make connections, you will still orientate yourself, but those connections and orientations will not be guided by depth cues. There is greater potential for disorientation, since elements are not only distributed but also densely packed. (Murakami's art, for instance, is nothing if not busy, as are his anime examples.) But now you are orientating yourself in a very different kind of space (different from spaces designed for motion in depth,

that is). Now you are orientating yourself in a densely packed distributive field—a sort of information field. Rather than simple flatness, you have complex superflatness. Here you might think of “super” literally as “over” and “above.” For, as you connect elements, there emerges a pattern that is not given directly in the image, which hovers above it, as it were—a set of shifting connections.

A couple examples may explain better how this works in different registers. First, with respect to anime characters, Murakami reminds us of how Kanada allowed animators to assert their individual styles. Usually, animators are supposed to follow the designs of chief animators closely, to ensure that a character always looks the same. Murakami credits Kanada with changing this system, permitting animators to make their own styles visible as they “copied” a character. In some ways, such freedom had already arisen on an ad hoc basis in television animation, for schedules and budgets were tight, and animators often didn’t have the time to produce seamlessly identical drawings. In any case, Okada Toshio gives a good example in his book on *otaku*, *Introduction to Otakuology (Otakugaku nyūmon, 1996)*: he shows renditions of the character Ryō from *Getter Robot (Gettaa Robo, 1974–75)* drawn by three different animators, Komatsubara Kazuo, Nakamura Kazuo, and Noda Takuo.¹⁴ Each design is slightly different. Okada remarks that, with the advent of the VCR, anime fans of such series began to pay greater attention to the work of different animators and designers. In effect, fans began to flatten hierarchies between anime producers, watching for patterns of distributed information rather than attributing the series entirely to the director, or writer, or chief animator.

A second example comes from *Evangelion*, with its multiple story lines or, rather, referential and iconic networks. Viewers who watched the series closely (and really, there wasn’t much choice but to watch it closely) found that there were patterns of iconic references that led in different directions. Ultimately, Anno would foil all efforts to gather these various information patterns into a single narrative. *Evangelion* leaves viewers with the protagonist Ikari Shinji grappling with his sense of insecurity and his inability to commit to life. In other words, viewers select and follow diverse patterns of information throughout the series, but there is no attempt to hierarchize these different patterns, to draw them all together into an overarching pattern or to select one pattern among the many. In the final episode of the television series, Shinji turns into a modulating set of lines (Figure 9), as if unable to hold himself together, and yet modulation itself steps in to ensure the emergence of something coherent. The series ends (if it can be said to



FIGURE 9. Sequence from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

end) with all the characters applauding Shinji (Figure 10). And, while Anno has not pulled anything like his end of *Evangelion* in subsequent works, his series *His and Her Circumstances* (*Kareshi kanojo no jijô*) or *He She* (“*Kare Kano*,” 1998–99) and his movie version of *Cutie Honey* (2004) certainly crowd the images with flattened layers of nonhierarchized information, which asks viewers to make superplanar connections and patterns.

In a sequence from the end of the first episode of *Kare Kano* (Figure 11), “she” (Miyazawa Yukino) rushes to the door with an umbrella, thinking that it is her sister, who has forgotten her umbrella and has rung at the door for it. “She” leaps out the door, only to plant her foot squarely in the belly of “him” (Arima Sôichirô). Rather than motion in depth, the sequence is composed of a series of manga-like stills, and at moments of heightened emotion or affect, the image transforms into another color scheme or graphic style. You have affective layers of the “same” scene. Moreover, as the sequences careen through radically different image types to create an effect of emotions running wild, Anno introduces layers of words, icons, and symbols that operate at another level. The overall effect is one of flatness, both within and between images, yet this flatness generates new effects (superflatness) with its affective stacks. It is not surprising that another anime theorist, Azuma Hiroki, sees in anime a “database structure.”¹⁵

If Murakami tends to associate superflatness with inaction and impotence, maybe it is because he sees anime fans as submitting passively, masochistically, to the superplanar image. This is speculation on my part,

since he never addresses this problem. Clearly, however, the superplanar image (at least as I have extrapolated it from Murakami with an example from *Kare Kano*) would imply a certain kind of viewer, one more comfortable with scanning for information and stacked windows of data. This viewer would be extremely attentive to fluctuations and modulations of the image. Such a viewer would not necessarily be an impotent adolescent but one attuned to

focusing attention at various levels amid a buzz of informatic connections. This is a very different world of viewing from that of Miyazaki's posttechnological children who wheel across panoramic landscapes. Still, the superplanar image is not the opposite of the multiplanar image. In fact, you might think of superplanarity as a special case of multiplanarity, one that goes to extremes.



FIGURE 10. From *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

Where Miyazaki leaves gaps open between layers, the superplanar image flattens them. Flattening the openly composited depths of the multiplanar image does not get rid of layers, however. Rather, the image's different layers all demand equal attention. And the depths of the image come right to the surface. You see multiple planes at the image's surface. In contrast to the open compositing characteristic of Miyazaki, you have a "flat compositing." As a result, you tend not to have panoramic effects so much as architectures, schemas, and flow charts. The image still has multiple planes, but, because they are not hierarchized, you scan over them rapidly, with details of layers swarming and flashing in new patterns. In brief, the image's multiple planes push toward strobing effects that produce patterns. In this respect, superflat is closer to the spirit of manga reading than the so-called manga film. Or maybe these are very different interpretations of what manga is.

In any event, the superplanar image accelerates the effects of limited animation, pushing multiplanarity to an extreme—toward pure animetism. It flattens the image's multiple planes in order to force multiplicity to emerge at another level, that of information. At the other extreme, you have the pure cinematism that Virilio describes in such lavish detail. Some examples of cinematism in animation come to mind, especially in films that hover between live action and digital action. As more interesting recent examples, I would tentatively suggest *The Matrix* or *The Incredibles* or *Kung Fu Hustle*, but only tentatively. I remain cautious here because neither animetism nor cinematism occurs in pure form. Moreover, a film like *Kung Fu Hustle* pushes cinematism to the point where its speed folds characters back into flatness. Similarly, while there are hypercinematic moments in *The Incredibles*, Pixar has learned that such films work better with rather flattened characters, that is, characters that retain much of the iconic qualities of flat cel animation characters (rather than the hyperreal characters of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* [2001]). Similarly, while Anno pushes toward a hyperanimetism akin



FIGURE 11. Sequence from *His and Her Circumstances*.

to the superplanarity touted by Murakami, superplanarity never arrives in pure form. Many sequences in Anno's *Nadia, Secret of Blue Water* (*Fushigi no umi no Nadia*, 1990–91) come close, though. For instance, in episode 13, in which the little girl Marie wanders off on the island alone and discovers railroad tracks: as she walks down the tracks with the lion named King, their walking is a repeated loop without forward movement (Figure 12). The clouds stay in place, and so do the lion and girl; but, as their limbs move in circles, the grass slides by, and it is the sliding grass that gives the impression of forward movement.

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In sum, rather than the ballistic effects associated with cinematism and its motion in depth, the superplanar image tends to produce motion on the surface, as the different layers of the image vie for attention, transforming the image into an informatic space, a distributive visual field. You might see this superplanarity as just another example of the information bomb, a notion that Virilio borrows from Einstein to refer to a complete collapse of distances resulting from the global spread of telecommunication technologies.¹⁶ Through this look at the multiplanar image in Japanese animation, however, we begin to see some things that do not occur to Virilio, with his emphasis on almost mythic oppositions—the old, slow, human-scaled world versus the new, accelerated, posthuman world.

First, as Miyazaki's push toward a slower, greener world of human proportions indicates, that world is not really prior to or outside the allegedly posthuman world. Rather, his more livable world comes from opening gaps *within* the ballistic operations of the posthuman world. You need only introduce spaces of play into cinematism, which allow you to limit its effects and its purchase on the imagination, radically. Miyazaki's open compositing transforms cinematism by imposing extreme limits on its tendency toward motion in depth.

Second, as Murakami's notion of superflat and Anno's extremely limited animation suggest, the tendency toward a superplanar field, a distributive visual field, has a direct relation to information. And, although I began this exploration of the multiplanar image with Virilio's ideas in order to highlight some of the techno-politics of manga films



FIGURE 12. Sequence from *Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water*.

and television anime, I would still insist that these animations are more interesting than the ballistic cinematism that comes to the fore in most of today's big-budget 3-D digital animation—precisely because their animetic relations to the information bomb are more complex and decidedly less nostalgic. Nevertheless, the complexity of Japanese animations is not attributable to a Japanese sense of impotence or inferiority vis-à-vis American global hegemony and military power (as Murakami would have it). Nor is it merely a bid for an alternative (Japanese) vision of the globalized world. Rather, we come face to face with complicity between different realms of media production in the contemporary world. We glimpse the tendency toward a unilateral world in which nations operate on the surface only to extend the reach of total war via information. Yet that experience, too, is full of complex dislocations and confabulations, full of worlds. This is an experience that the animetism of Japanese animation offers, in very diverse ways. One variation on that experience would be rather like riding the Galaxy Express from *Galaxy Express 999*, which Murakami cited as an example of extreme planarity.

Rather than looking out the window of the bullet train, we're now in an old-fashioned train somehow retooled for flight into outer space (Figure 13). Clearly, the animetic effects of this Galaxy Express are not only due to acceleration, to looking out from an ever-faster train approaching rocket speed. Animetism is not only an experience of speed that gives you the sensation of transcending older bodies, technologies, and limitations. Animetism is also an effect of reworking and rethinking what was expressed in those older modalities. In its awkward and mawkish way, this is what *Steamboy* attempts

to do: to think animetically about the history of technology. While *Steamboy* may not be considered a great success, it does serve as a reminder that animetism entails more than putting the same old multiplane camera effects in new software packages. Animetism is an experimentation that challenges the multiplane system and opens it in new directions, whose technopolitics have yet to be explored. I would hazard to say, however, that the future worlds of animation lie in those animetic directions.



FIGURE 13. From *Galaxy Express 999: Eternal Fantasy*.

Notes

1. Paul Virilio, "Cyberwar, God, and Television: Interview with Louise Wilson," in *Digital Delirium*, ed. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1997).
2. Paul Virilio, *Pure War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 85.
3. Special thanks to Heather Mills for her assistance in locating images.
4. This account derives in part from the discussion titled "The Multiplane Camera" at the Golden Gate Disneyana Club's 100 Years of Magic, <http://www.ggdc.org/mp-100multiplane.htm>.
5. Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, trans. Ben Brewster (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 59. On the problem of motion in cinema in relation to panoramas and trains, see also Jacques Aumont, "The Variable Eye, or the Mobilization of the Gaze," in *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).
6. Yamaguchi Katsunori and Watanabe Yasushi, *Nihon animeeshon eiga shi (A History of Japanese Animation Films)* (Osaka: Yubunsha, 1977), 33.
7. Cited in Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989).
8. See Miyazaki Hayao, "Animation to manga eiga" (1982) in *Shuppatsuten 1979–1996* (Tokyo: Studio Ghibli, 1996), 151–52. In 1984 Miyazaki specifically refers to *Castle in the Sky* as a manga film in "'Tenkû no shiro Rapyuta' kikaku gen'an" ("Original Plans for 'Castle in the Sky Raputa'"), also in *Shuppatsuten*, 395.
9. See Margaret Talbot, "The Auteur of Anime," *New Yorker*, January 17, 2005, 70.
10. Murakami Takashi, "*Sûpaafuratto Nihon bijutsu ron*—a Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art," in *Superflat* (Tokyo: Madra, 2000), 12–13. Translation modified.
11. Murakami, "Visual of Superflat Manual," 114–15.
12. *Ibid.*, 120–21.
13. Among the many discussions of this problem, see Michael S. Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa* (London: Routledge, 1999); and John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Norton, 1999) for cogent overviews of the sexual and racial politics arising in the wake of the American Occupation of Japan.
14. Okada Toshio, *Otakugaku nyûmon* Shinchô OH! Bunko 019 (Tokyo: Shinchôsha, 1996), 16–17.
15. Azuma Hiroki, *Dôbutsuka suru posutomodan: Otaku kara mita Nihon shakai Kôdansha gendai shinsho 1575* (Tokyo: Kôdansha, 2001).
16. Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Crepuscular Dawn*, trans. Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2002), 135–36.