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The Multiplanar Image

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Multiplanar Image

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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 **[End Page 120]** 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 Katsuhiko'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.



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Figure 1.
Sequence from *Steamboy*.

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 **[End Page 121]** 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...

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