

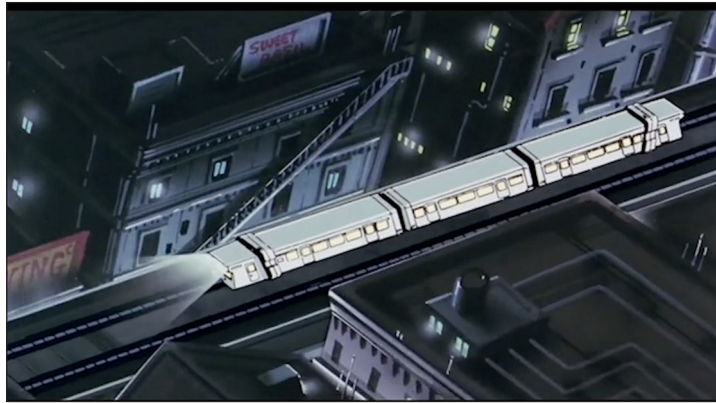


Phantom Rides: Trains in the Work of Hideaki Anno

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This video essay explores recurring imagery of trains in the work of Hideaki Anno. By linking together disparate audio and sound effects from Anno's TV and cinema, it attempts to explore Anno's coiled, labyrinthine train space, and chart its phantom contours. It begins by analysing train carriages as a site of mental unrest in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1996). It then contextualizes Anno's train fixation within film and Japanese history more broadly. In its conclusion, it looks at Anno's live-action works, before ending on a scene from episode four of *Evangelion* which uses a train station for a moment of stasis and reconciliation.





Creator's Statement

Neon Genesis Evangelion (1996), directed by Hideaki Anno, remains one of the most studied and discussed anime texts. The series is noted for its metaphysical style in which “the narration frequently breaks down, revealing that both the background/world and figure/story depend on a volatile set of narrative and imaginary choices, vague references, and simulations” (Ballús & Torrents 2014). Studies of *Evangelion* have discussed its psychoanalytic themes (Ortega 2007), its gendered depictions (Lunning 2007), and its significance within Japanese fan culture (Azuma 2009). Anno has also worked in live-action cinema, though these works have been less discussed in film scholarship. His first live-action features were *Love and Pop* (1998) and *Ritual* (2000), both introspective art films that continued several visual motifs from *Evangelion*. In 2016 he directed *Shin Godzilla*, which was noted for its allusions to the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and won Best Picture and Best Director at the Japan Academy Film Prize.

Anno has several visual fixations, but one of the motifs he returns to most often is that of train carriages, tracks, and stations. In *Evangelion*, train carriages act as spaces of mental turmoil. As the series enters its psychoanalytic material, characters are often depicted in the environment of a train carriage at sunset, which becomes a setting of cloistering introspection. *Love and Pop* similarly utilise this imagery recurrently. I have previously written on this motif in a blog post for *Animation Studies 2.0* (Seager 2023), but this video essay seeks to illustrate more thoroughly the aesthetic nature of this motif.

Trains register as a particularly important image throughout cinema history. The well-worn story of the screening Lumière brothers' film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895) goes that on witnessing the movement of a train arriving at a station, early cinemagoers ran in terror for the exit. The appeal of this (likely apocryphal) anecdote is that it proclaims the power of cinema—cinema as a transformative

depiction of reality that would rapidly shift culture and experience in the 20th century. Trains are emblematic of modernity—of abbreviating the distances between towns and cities in the creation of a faster, more connected national body. A popular genre of early cinema was the “Phantom Ride” films, footage of train journeys created by strapping a camera to the front of a locomotive. Gerda Cammaer notes that “the primary quality of phantom rides is movement and the ability to draw the viewer into the world on screen,” and here they are both energetic and ghostly, capturing a disembodied perspective that glides through a filmstrip-like procession of towns, countryside, and cities (Cammaer 2018, 150).

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, trains were similarly emblematic of modernity in a Japanese context. Tristan R. Grunow notes that in the Meiji period, “Locomotives and western-style buildings [...] advanced ideological unification by means of modernity, ‘civilization and enlightenment’ and the emperor system” (Grunow 2012, 236). Grunow argues that the central image of this process was the Tokyo Station, built in 1914, positioned as the “epitome of ideological unification through modernity” (*ibid.*). Japanese cinema and literature have a long history of engaging in this imagery of railways and train stations as indicative of societal change. Yasujirō Ozu memorably bookended his film *Tokyo Story* (1953) with an image of a train, emblematic of the film’s themes of ageing and the passage of time. In 1933, modernist author Kenji Miyazawa wrote *Night of the Milky Way Railroad*, which used the image of a cosmic locomotive to tell a story of a journey through the worlds of life and death. Miyazawa’s novel was extremely influential on Japanese pop culture, inspiring, for instance, the *Galaxy Express 999* (1977) franchise. Miyazawa’s novel expresses tension in its use of the modernist image of the locomotive to explore primordial themes of death and grief. As Takao Hagiwara notes, “while deeply rooted in modernity, Miyazawa dedicated his life and literature to overcoming [...] modern problems and, by extension, his own modernism itself” (Hagiwara 2011, 312).

Trains would similarly appear as an important motif in the works of Osamu Dezaki, a director of the 1960s “Mushi Pro” generation who was a particularly strong influence on Anno’s style. Dezaki’s *Oniisama e...* (1992) was likely the most influential work on Anno’s train fixation. *Oniisama e...* uses trains as a symbolic shibboleth. They come to represent the spectre of suicidal ideation, the fear of change, as well the rhythms of life, and how the protagonist Nanako journeys to school every day. Anno’s use of locomotives, however, becomes less about movement than it is about space. The rumbling, shaking train carriages of Anno’s work are an expansive, snake-like location, a coiled theatrical backdrop for the psychodrama of his many characters. In constructing this labyrinthine, internal train space, Anno not only looks back on his influences, but also explores the phantom spaces that lie between.

Underlying the footage used in this video essay is a soundtrack of train carriages taken from moments in *Evangelion*. The effect is intended to illustrate the phantom, ghostly sensibility of the soundscape in Anno's work. In the section on *Love and Pop*, I use the soundtrack of the opening scene, which utilizes Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1*. Cutting between a few different scenes from the film, I emphasize its focus on movement and recursion. At the centre of the essay, I contextualise Anno's train fixation within the wider history of trains in film, and Japanese history generally. In this segment I overlay the soundtracks of several films: *Galaxy Express 999* (1979), *Sans Soleil* (1983) and *Night on the Galactic Railroad* (1985). It is hoped the overlapping monologues create a harmonious, subdued, dreamlike sensibility. In the final sequence, I allow a scene from *Evangelion* to play uninterrupted, a long static shot of a train station that I argue functions as a moment of forgiveness and grace.

Sources

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Biography

Dr River Seager is a film theorist and practitioner who earned a PhD in 2023 for their thesis on gender archetypes in the work of Scottish filmmaker Alan Sharp. They have recently directed the documentary "I Am a Cyborg: Conversations About Queerness and Anime Fandom," shown at Scottish Queer International Film Festival (SQIFF) 2023. They primarily research gender archetypes in cinema.

Review by Selen Çalık Bedir, Beykoz University

Trains are quite visible in Japan, not only as the people's choice in public transportation, but also as objects of disproportionate affection. Both Japanese residents and tourists are expected to visit train stations, in order to commute but also to photograph the venue as well as the vehicles, to collect stamps, and to buy all sorts of merchandise. This practice is rather similar to a pilgrimage, in the sense that one visit is not enough to complete the practice, as the sights (with changing decorations) along with the goods (by introducing limited rarities) are seasonally renewed.

In this context (further explored in River Seager's video essay), it is not a surprise to see trains making appearance in the movies and animations directed by Hideaki Anno. In fact, this interest goes beyond geographic and medial limitations, as trains have arguably changed the ways passengers see the world all around the globe. In his influential work *The Anime Machine*, Thomas Lamarre develops his theory on anime in dialogue with trains' existence in cinema. While traveling via this particular vehicle of previously unimaginable speed, looking outside yields a head-turning spectacle that both resembles cinematic vision and gets capitalized on by it. However, the position that the camera will take, in the passenger seat or directly in front of the speeding train, creates strikingly different visual organizations guided by either an "animetic" movement of quickly sliding sideways, or a cinematic movement that takes the onlookers into depth. Lamarre illustrates that Anno combines the extreme use of animetic movement with flat compositing, in which the layers (cels) that comprise the totality of an image are stacked on top of each other with no gap in-between. This particular combination of animetism and flat compositing undermines the sensation of depth (that is, the anchor for the gaze and for everything within the frame) and exposes the field of vision to sudden intrusions of new layers of image, resulting in a spectacular dizziness. Even when there are extended periods of stillness, which is another signature of Anno's animations and the *Evangelion* series specifically, the screen remains an expectant, charged surface that keeps the eye busy, anxiously seeking change.

What Seager's essay further asks is, what exactly Anno does with his trains? Beyond an inspiration for how things should move, what does he make of them? By comparing the animations to the movie *Love and Pop* by the same director, the essayist reveals a constant feature in Anno's works that transcends the choice of medium. Anno seems to consider trains as emotionally as well as physically vibrant spaces, where people meet and cross multiple intersections together. As the essay shows through its montage, what may set trains apart from other vehicles and make them still a common sight on the screens is that they allow passengers to build dynamic spatial relationships with each other as if they are on a mobile stage. The train

compartment is a secluded yet spacious platform that allows the characters to stand in close proximity to one another or far apart, looking at each other or at opposite directions. The way the characters position themselves in relation to others, or move constantly perhaps, gives the audience plenty of hints concerning their mental states and relationships. As the vehicle gains speed, neither these fictional passengers' gaze nor ours can constantly keep up with the pace of change in scenery. It may be difficult to make sense of the train's position in relation to the outside, but the gaze may then turn inward, inside the room and inside the mind.

Despite the flattening of the animetic image then, in Anno's movie and animations alike, trains are presented as potent and voluminous spaces where surprise connections and coincidental meet-ups happen. Where decisions are made by people and by luck as to where they should go and where to part ways. Where temporary unities are formed and common dissatisfactions can also be voiced. And where isolation rather than camaraderie, or a lack instead of presence can also take the stage. However, Seager's comparison between Anno's selected works reveals one more interesting similarity between his movie and animations. As mentioned above, while time may slow down and movement may come to an end in Anno's animations, he can always stack up fresh layers to move stories upwards instead of forwards and introduce a new gliding agent to the scene. Despite the affordances of the emancipated camera that introduces depth into the image, Anno's cinema too features the superimposition of separate layers of image or recordings. This choice of the director turns narrative development into a cumulation of narrative crossing points, and physical progress into psychological turmoil. (And as Seager's editing masterfully echoes, it is most often the crackling sounds of the impartial, aloof environment, which spill over the shots and nonchalantly hold the visual pieces of Anno's works together.)

In a pleasantly surprising manner, Seager overlays a personal statement on top of such a narrative crossing point from *Love and Pop* while musing over it. Through the comment that reads, "which is pretty much how I remember being a teenager feeling," the essayist unexpectedly reveals their appreciation of the young protagonist's personal journey that Anno interweaves with trains, train tracks, and stations via superimposition. But this message also unquestionably betrays the essayist's own presence outside the narrative. The uniqueness of this particular attempt (to bring in whatever is necessarily left out of the work) captures the eye and this very segment yields the essence of the whole essay: Anno's works may indeed be more about connections than conclusions.

Review by Gabriel F. Y. Tsang, Hong Kong Baptist University

Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is highly canonised in East Asia (especially Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan), generating a cultural impact hardly imagined by the West. One of the reasons is that it resonates with the loneliness and emptiness of many youngsters in the (post-)modern, existentialistic, and dystopic era. Aptly capturing the angst of the characters genealogically reproduced in Hideaki Anno's works, this video essay explores the symbolic function of transportation that contains individuals' invisible ambivalence. When Sartre ponders 'existential angst', he considers mainly the 'fundamental absurdity' from which one can hardly escape. However, the potential of the space to be escaped is overlooked. Therefore, it is significant to reflect on what is external to absurdity and what can serve as a self-therapeutic tool. By tracing from Anno's earlier animation movies to his later live-action films, such as *Love and Pop* (1998) and *Ritual* (2000), with moody theorisation, Dr River Seager not only reveals how the director consistently utilises the same theme to deliver mental unrest (both personal and political), but also implies the correspondence of existential conditions between him and his characters. They, together with the audience, are all trapped in the same train, recurrently escaping in a universally shared and unescapable plight/home.

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