



KENJI MIYAZAWA'S NIGHT ON THE GALACTIC RAILROAD is a March, 2016 dvd upgrade, now available to borrow from the Hugh Stouppe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of it.

16 of a possible 20 points

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Japan 1985 color 107 minutes English-dubbed version of a feature animation fantasy Asahi Shimbun / Asahi National Broadcasting Co. Ltd. / Nippon Herald Films Producers: Masato Hara, Atsumi Tashiro

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
Points:

- Direction: Gisaburô Sugii**
- English-Language Direction: Arlen Tarlofsky**
- 1 Editing**
- 2 Cinematography: Yasuo Maeda***
- 1 Lighting**
- 2 Writing: Minoru Betsuyaku from an idea by Hiroshi Masumara, based on a novel by Kenji Miyazawa**
- 2 Animation Direction: Marisuke Eguchi**
- Animators: Marisuke Eguchi, Nobuko Abe, Makiko Futaki, Kazuyuki Kobayashi, Yasunari Maeda, Sayuri Matsumoto, Kaoru Nakajima, Yasuhiro Nakura, Hidekazu Ohara, Yutaka Oka, Takaya Ono, Michiyo Sakurai, Yukiya Senda, Tamotsu Tanaka, Tsukasa Tannai, Takamitsu Yukawa, Kazushige Yusa**
- 2 Music: Haruomi Hosono (Yellow Magic Orchestra member)**

2 Art Direction: Mihoko Magoori*
Character Design: Takao Kodama
Stage Design: Minoru Aoki*
2 Sound
0 English Voices Cast Acting
2 Creativity
16 total points

English-Language Voices Cast: Amy Birnbaum (Tadashi), Scott Cargle (Conductor), Crispin Freeman (Campanella), Tatsuyuki Jinnai (Campanella's Father), Rachael Lillis (Marceau / Dairy Woman), Eric Moo (Wireless Operator), Lisa Ortiz (Kaoru), Scott Rayow (Dairy Man), Sam Riegel (Young Man), Ryuji Saikachi (Store Owner), Eric Schussler (Father), Eric Stuart (Lighthouse Keeper), Veronica Taylor (Giovanni), Greg Wolfe (Teacher / Scientist), Oliver Wyman (Zanelli, heron catcher)

NIGHT ON THE GALACTIC RAILROAD concerns that most fearsome of phantoms, death. Kenji Miyazawa, author of the original book, had lost his adult sister Toshi to tuberculosis in 1922. Sometime shortly after a rail trip to Sakhalin, her brother began writing a fantasy which would ultimately take shape as the story of an express train speeding through the Milky Way galaxy. This allowed him to combine two obsessions: science and philosophy. Attempting unification of Buddhist philosophy with symbols and theology borrowed from Christianity, Miyazawa crafted an allegorical tale of sickness, alienation, life, death, and afterlife. In its literary setting, human characters are featured. Due to its emotional intensity, filmmakers elected to instead employ cats in the main roles, believing those to be more comforting to children watching the screen. Designed for broadcast first on Japanese television, this production eventually reached videocassette. More recently, it was restored and released with an English-language voices cast. This offers both advantages and disadvantages.

But before detailing those, here is an outline of the plot.

A Japanese boy with the unusual name of Giovanni is being tormented by classmates due to the prolonged absence of his father and a souvenir otterskin coat he wears. Only one of his peers, compassionate Campanella, defends and befriends the pariah.

Giovanni is a dreamer, too busy after school running errands and working as a printer's apprentice to engage in the games enjoyed by other villagers his age. He has no time to participate in the Festival of the Stars. While

occupied in trying to obtain milk for a sick mother, he meets Zanelli, a fellow student, who is on his way to the neighborhood celebration. Zanelli mocks Giovanni's poverty. With Campanella not present to defend him, undernourished Giovanni abjectly carries on, disappointed in not being able to enjoy the night's festivities. Distracted by thoughts of what he is missing, the boy muffs a typesetting task, earning himself criticism from his boss. Woes mount — the dairywoman from whom he seeks refreshment for his mother says she is out of stock. He should have come earlier. Nothing seems to work out for Giovanni. Not this particular day, anyway.

Weary and discouraged, he drags along through a meadow, gazing up at the stars, a favorite pastime. His father has taught him their names and locations. At least they remain loyal, in customary places at their usual times.

Out of the darkness a train appears, coming to a noisy, steaming halt just in front of the stargazer. Its conductor takes shape, asking Giovanni if he has a ticket for a ride on it. To his amazement, a search through his pockets unearths one, the mysterious consolation item given him by the dairy products seller earlier that evening.

Giovanni, still puzzling over his unusual ticket, climbs aboard the train and is soon whisked upwards into the sky. Before daybreak he will see close by the Southern Cross, the Coalsack, and the Northern Cross. Campanella will join him and so also three children from a shipwreck, a catcher of herons, a private tutor, and a lighthouse keeper. These mentors introduce the visitor to notions of death and what lies beyond earthly life, drawing upon concepts familiar to Christians or Buddhists, but seldom presented jointly.

Sugii's exquisitely designed feature has the pacing of a sleepy snail. This adds to the mysterious profundity permeating each scene, but could deter restless youngsters, especially those accustomed to flashy computer generated adventure epics.

Rather murky lighting further obscures details, hardly what the director desired for night scenes. A decision to deliver Campanella's lines as if the character were asthmatic is counterproductive, retarding plot progress even more.

An open-ended script permitting auditors to reach their own conclusions about what follows life is a notable asset. It never belittles or condescends to listeners and is blessedly free of smart-alecky one-line quips. From time to time, signs and articles in Esperanto show up, a reminder of Miyazawa's advocacy of that unifying artificial language.

One of the highlights meriting special mention is the first depiction of the Galactic Express itself, a clamorous, steam-enshrouded bulk looming out of

misty nebulousness. Another is the bird's-eye view of Giovanni's school and village early in the film, reducing characters and dwellings to miniatures in an immensity of encircling space.

Sound recording picks up even the softest fragments of speech and noise, reproducing all with stunning clarity.

Plunging into infinity where time loses all meaning, the sparsely populated titular ghost train serves the same function as spectral visitors in Dickens' *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*, assuring hope always remains, conqueror even over mortality. An unlimited future awaits everyone, ready or not. Self-sacrifice has due reward, though payback may not come immediately or in the form anticipated. Nothing and no one is ever completely lost. Just transformed.

A masterpiece of animation with unique metaphysical conjectures, NIGHT ON THE GALACTIC RAILROAD is a singular audiovisual trip unlikely to be forgotten. The film is suitable for children ten and older, as well as adults. This Discotek Media dvd release includes audio commentary by Anime News Network's Justin Sevakis and Mike Toole, unfortunately requiring specialist knowledge of television anime to properly appreciate. English and Japanese trailers for the film are included as well. Any adult who enjoys Japanese animation must see this one.