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Mechademia, Volume 4, 2009, pp. 3-18 (Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.0.0082>



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The Filmic Time of Coloniality: On Shinkai Makoto's *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*

In 2004, Shinkai Makoto's major film-length feature, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* (*Kumo no mukō, yakusoku no basho*) was released, solidifying the position of his work as that of a decidedly new generation, one stemming neither from the older big-budget cinematic style of Miyazaki nor the previous generation's anime studio system, symbolized by Gainax. Shinkai debuted as a quintessentially digital-age auteur with his entirely self-created 2001 short film *Voices of a Distant Star* (*Hoshi no koe*), perhaps the most concentrated expression of this new aesthetic regime, which came to be known as "sekai-kei" (literally, "world-style").

The Place Promised in Our Early Days (hereafter *PPED*) is in a doubled sense a *Zeitgeist* film: on the one hand, its success, its sensibility, its conditions of production, and its visual register make it a production representative of a distinctive shift in the archetypal anime feature; on the other hand its narrative structure places it in direct linkage to the recent boom of "alternative history" films and the politics of the field of significations implicit to this boom. But more specifically, I argue that *PPED* is itself a vehicle for something else, an expressive device for the question of coloniality, one in which we can read the problem not only of the historical memory and meaning of

the colonial system but also its field of epistemological effects in relation to the contemporary shifts occurring in the ostensibly “postcolonial” system of nation-states today. In its visual politics as much as its narrative arc, *PPED* is a lens through which the temporality of colonialism and the writing of history intertwine and overlap in a dense recoding of the present.

The backdrop to the narrative of the film proceeds from an alternative, but not unthinkable, history: in the decades following World War II, Japan is jointly occupied and, in 1973, divided into northern and southern portions: in the north by the “Union,” and in the south, by the United States.¹ Subsequently, the south shifts from an exclusively U.S.-occupied territory to an “Alliance” of the American and Japanese governments—conflict with the Union is impending, and at the climax of *PPED*, war breaks out between them. The Union controls Ezo, what would be contemporary Hokkaido, while the Alliance governs the rest of modern-day Japan, south of the Tsugaru Strait. From the film’s vantage point, Ezo is a site of mystery, and the Union is a closed and enigmatic society left largely undepicted. Dominating all is the immense Tower, which generates matter from parallel universes in the area surrounding it. Built by the Union on the southern edge of Ezo, it stretches far into the sky and is seemingly visible throughout southern Japan. It serves as a focal point both of the narrative and of the specular field of the film.

We are introduced to three middle-school students in modern-day Aomori: friends Fujisawa Hiroki and Shirakawa Takuya, as well as their classmate and mutual object of desire Sawatari Sayuri. The two boys, who are fascinated by the Tower in Ezo, are constructing an airplane in their spare time, with which they hope to fly across the Tsugaru Strait toward the Tower. Sayuri, who discovers this, becomes a third member of their group, and they promise each other that in the future they will achieve this dream. As the narrative shifts to years later, Hiroki is a depressed student in Tokyo, living alone and daydreaming of his love for Sayuri, while Takuya is a precocious military scientist at the Aomori Army College, studying the bizarre effects of the Tower in Ezo and the parallel universes it generates. Sayuri, meanwhile, has slipped into a coma—it turns out that her condition is directly related to the strange Tower. Eventually, Hiroki learns of Sayuri’s fate, and plans to fly her to the Tower, their “promised place” from childhood, believing that contact with the Tower will wake her up. Takuya, now also involved in the reunification guerrilla movement known as the Uilta Liberation Front, persuades Hiroki to fly their childhood plane, carrying Sayuri, to the Tower, now understood to be a Union weapon, and destroy it with a single missile. On the eve of war between North and South, Hiroki accomplishes his

mission, reviving Sayuri, and destroying the Tower in Ezo.

From the outset of the film, division is the essential trope through which the narrative proceeds—the division of time into the time of the audience and initial narrative voice-over from the time of the storyline proper, the division of the country into north and south, the division of families as a result of this national division, the division between the three protagonists of the story from the holistic group of their childhood, the division between city and countryside, between “official” space and “private” space, between the time of the romantic encounter and the time of the world, and so forth. Through the recurrent theme of division, *PPED* shows us a series of interconnected problematics essential to grasping the question of coloniality and the position of the nation-state today. The film can be read as itself a “parallel universe,” in which the mutually reliant and reinforcing nature of imperial and ethnic nationalisms is incarnated in a disjunct *present*, rather than in a fantasy of return to the past or as a projection of the future. I would like to draw attention to the strong potentiality and prescience of Shinkai’s “postcolonial” scenario, which richly portrays the contours of the epistemic ordering mechanisms of coloniality and their provenance. Naoki Sakai has delivered an essential summation of the question of what we mean by the postcolonial:

THROUGH THE RECURRENT THEME OF DIVISION, *PPED* SHOWS US A SERIES OF INTERCONNECTED PROBLEMATICS ESSENTIAL TO GRASPING THE QUESTION OF COLONIALITY AND THE POSITION OF THE NATION-STATE TODAY.

It would be better to avoid the sense in which the term “postcolonial” is broadly used today to mean “after the colonial system” or “what follows the colonial system in chronological order.” This “post-” is “post factum,” that is, “post-” in the sense of a situation that is “too late,” irreparable (*torikaeshi ga tsukanai*), or irredeemable. Thought from the postcolonial viewpoint, the characteristic of being the colonizer is not an accidentally attributable supplemental situation to the identity of being Japanese, but rather its essential situation. The history of colonialism is sealed into the identity of being Japanese by means of this irreparability, and thus having been the colonizer is essentially included in being Japanese. It is the fact of this irreparable history that constructs the identity called “Japanese,” and thus in fact it is the *present existence* (*genzon*) of this history of colonialism that is precisely the postcolonial.²

In this sense, the colony itself is a fundamentally retrospective condition, which is possible only through postcoloniality as a projection back toward

the past. During the actual existence of the colonial system, coloniality itself is not established—it cannot be represented to itself as a colony but only as something else. The colony is consequently something like a testing ground or a research-and-development organ for its own aftermath, when its conditions have been established, for the technologies of government of the nation-state. Thus the nation-state, and the position of belonging to it as a national citizen, are conditions enabled not through the chronological overcoming of coloniality but rather through its establishment. It is in this sense that the postcolonial is a type of “continuity in discontinuity,” a circuit of regulation and control that only comes to function as the primary level of power relations after the colonial system has become a retrospective reality. Thus, coloniality is a machine whose parts are assembled in the colony, but which comes to function as a unitary circuit only, paradoxically, in the postcolonial present. We can identify this functioning as a kind of general “coloniality of power,” which “allows us to understand the diachronic density and the constant rearticulation of colonial difference even today, in a world governed by information and communication, and by a global colonialism not located in any particular nation-state.”³

In such a situation, it is necessary to hold ourselves immanent to the decisive meaning of what Sakai has called the “present existence of the history of colonialism.” Shinkai’s image of the split of Japan through a North–South “division system”⁴ is not only a clear allusion to the history of defeat and occupation in the Japanese context but also something that alerts us to a general split of the nation-state itself, or more broadly, a split of our “being national”: it reimages or retrospectively reveals how the colonial system was not an aberration or deviation but rather is *an essential and internal* element of the nation-state *at present*.

In the time of the film, in the fact that it is neither a fantasy of the future nor the retrospective projection of an imagined past but rather a parallel present, *PPED* explicates to us something crucial in this respect: it is necessary to examine the history of colonialism, the effects of coloniality today, and the role of “being national” in oneself, in the structure of the single person’s immediate existence. The objective system is grasped by the individual subjectively, producing an otherness not external to the sense of self but rather internal to it. It is this division of internal/external, private/official, or individual/world which recurrently expresses the aesthetic of the film, and in which, I argue, we can see the affective drive of the contemporary time of coloniality.

At the beginning of the story, Takuya and Hiroki wait at their local train station after school, chatting about their upcoming summer vacation, and

their part-time job at a munitions factory supplying the U.S. military. As they prepare to board the train, the frame pans upward, exposing the incredible size of the Tower in Ezo, visually bifurcating the backdrop of the sky, (Figure 1) colored red by the setting sun. In this shot, we see the Tower as an integral part of the natural expanse, an ordering focal point of the film's specular logic. In marked contrast, the figure of Hiroki and the lines of the train share our camera-gaze: small, rooted to the ground, and gazing upward to emphasize the differentiation of scale. As our view pans toward the top of the Tower, Hiroki's disembodied voice-over tells us, "We admired two things—one was our classmate Sawatari Sayuri, and the other was the Tower."

In the sense that Sayuri represents everything close, nearby, and intimate, the Tower symbolizes precisely the inverse: distance, the foreign, the artificial and mysterious. In this early moment of *PPED*, the aesthetic sensibility of what has come to be called the *sekai-kei* style is visibly rendered.

"*Sekai-kei*" emerged in the early part of the 2000s as a vague catchall phrase for a certain shared aesthetic surfacing in the subcultural arts of anime, manga, and games. Although a universally agreed-on definition of what precisely constitutes *sekai-kei* does not exist, it tends to be used to denote a particular type of aesthetic register reliant on the structure of the romance story as the foreground for a type of world-historical, interplanetary, or international conflict. Within this style, the overwhelming emphasis is on a bittersweet nostalgia, often mobilized through the disjunction of the linear temporality of a romantic



FIGURE 1. The Tower in Ezo visually bifurcates the backdrop of the sky. From Shinkai Makoto's major film-length feature *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* (2004, *Kumo no mukō, yakusoku no basho*).

relationship—flashback, flash-forward, and multiple timelines coexisting in one filmic situation are the primary narrative devices.

The romance is invariably cast in a kind of parallelism to war, the earth, the nation, and so on, and this parallelism is the usual lever for the operation of nostalgia: through the juxtaposition of imagined or daydreamed past possibilities or lost hopes within the relationship, the positions in conflict are thrown into relief. Filmically, this style tends toward macro-aestheticization at all times: extradiegetic music and a visual aesthetics of contrasting scale are formalized features. Through the juxtaposition of hallmarks of intimacy and closeness—smallness, slowness, lightness, taciturnity, the silhouette, the sweet memory, touch, the vanishing moment—with the hallmarks of “the world” and distance—bigness, speed, heaviness, multivocality, endless differentiation, immensity, monumentality, world-time (in contrast to the time of sociality), and so forth—the tendency toward aestheticism, contemplation, and the parallelism of individual and world is constantly rearticulated. Landscape, and its relation to the individual, is a recurrent image employed in Shinkai’s films, a visual configuration in which this parallelism of contrasting scale is constantly put forward.

But equally important to the *sekai-kei* style is the affective level at which this relation of individual and world operates. “World” here is not only “the” world but also “my” world. Thus, there is a constant emphasis in *PPED* on the enclosed, small, internal, psychic spaces of the individual life as one “world.” The tendency toward this mentality, that is, toward flirtation with a certain solipsism, can be considered a quintessentially post-Fordist phenomenon, into which most of the younger generation in the “advanced” industrialized countries are thoroughly inculcated. On one hand, the boundaries of the world are both more diffuse in terms of the latticed networks of information, communication, commonality of the image, synchronization of everyday time, and so forth. Simultaneously, the scale of the world itself is infinitesimally smaller, mirroring the shrinking nature of the commodity unit and its increasing concentration. Hence, the world is both enormous and immediately at hand, and the position of the self is increasingly “global” in its cross-fertilized contamination.

At the same time, the means of access to “the” world are increasingly mediated by a new, dense array of technologies—most importantly, the sociality on which we had come to rely for our earlier notions of individual and world are largely being replaced. For example, I might relate to an increasingly vast number of people, from a series of distant locations, with a bewildering amount of information, opinion, and affect, but I relate to them through the

mobile phone, through the two-dimensional screen of the computer, and so forth. Consequently, an essential element of the *sekai-kei* aesthetic could be considered a new discovery of “world”—in other words, the world and all of its vast scale, its overwhelming openness, is also contained in this “cramped space” implied by the miniaturization of the object today. The perfect example of this can be seen at the beginning of Shinkai’s debut film, *Voices of a Distant Star*, when the protagonist’s voice is overlaid on the opening of the film: she dials a number on her mobile phone while her voice tells us, “There is a word—‘world.’ Until I was in middle-school, I thought that ‘world’ just meant somewhere that my cell-phone signal reached.”

But what Shinkai’s films, and *PPED* in particular, demonstrate is not that “world” is discovered as an autonomous, distant field outside consciousness but rather that the world is understood as a ubiquitous connective tissue related to the formation of an “I.” It is possible to discover in *sekai-kei* productions a merely solipsistic, isolated, fearful sociality in which “world” comes to signify everything from which one must escape. But it is also possible, and, I would argue, more suggestive, to see in *PPED* and its aesthetic counterparts an identification of a kind of “general intellect,” an increasingly socialized knowledge involved in the constant figuration of the world and its history (Figure 2).

In *PPED*, as Hiroki, Takuya, and Sayuri walk back to their local train station, Hiroki narrates their transition from childhood. As the train pulls away



FIGURE 2. “... but in those days, I felt that the smells of the night wafting into the train, the trust I had in my friend, and the hint of Sayuri that lingered in the air were everything in the world” (*sekai no subete*). From Shinkai Makoto, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*.

from the station, Hiroki stares out of the window of the train and says, “Just close by, the world and history were changing, but in those days, I felt that the smells of the night wafting into the train, the trust I had in my friend, and the hint of Sayuri that lingered in the air, were everything in the world (*sekai no subete*).” This parallel of monumentality (“the” world and “history”) and miniaturization (the relation of I and you as another world) again shows us the degree to which “world” here is a bundle of significations, a vehicle both of everything absolutely external as well as a series of internal affective judgments through which there is a common logic connecting them along a chain of meaning or identification, also called “world.”

We have, throughout *PPED*, a mobilization of “world” as a contested, unstable object which is more than anything identifiable solely through its creation as a unifying aesthetic—in a sense, the film demonstrates and relies on a notion of the thickness of world as a material-semiotic field.⁵ Thus, *sekai-kei*, rather than necessarily being a reactionary retreat from the responsibility and burden of historical memory, could be read as having precisely the opposite set of potentialities at work. Because it breaks down the density of “world” as a concept toward “world” as a name for a series of malleable affective registers, *sekai-kei* admits and images the world and history as figuration; that is, it shows that *the making* of a world and its history *is* that world and its history. Thus it comes as no surprise that in *PPED* the question of writing, rewriting, and overwriting, or “coding,” is key. But as we will see, while *PPED* raises a series of decisive questions about our contemporary moment, not only in its narrative and associated “world” but also in its visual logic, the film itself is resolved in the final analysis through an evasion of the problems it itself articulates.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, *PPED* is not a futural projection nor a reimagined past—rather it is, in keeping with its diegetic narrative, itself a type of parallel present, a “remix” of contemporaneity. It is itself a “world,” and it is this that distinguishes it as representative of a new type of creation within the anime sphere—as a work, the traditional contours of *PPED* as a “story” or “plot” are significantly less important than its “world.” To a certain extent this is what Azuma Hiroki, among others, has referred to as “manga-anime realism” (*manga-animeteki rearizumu*)—*PPED* is a work that rests on a world that is found only as a figuration on Shinkai Makoto’s hard drive, a new type of realism whose “reality” is itself a feedback loop for its own “world.”⁶ But this problematic is not merely worth considering in terms of the formal conditions of production of *PPED* but also as a part of its internal logic and as something that we could say is “theorized” by the film’s narrative itself.

As Takuya goes on to work as a scientist in the Alliance's top-secret research division dedicated to reconnaissance and investigation of the Tower in Ezo, we are given an increasing amount of information about its powers. The Tower, it turns out, is a device intimately related to dreams. When Takuya and his coworker (and new romantic interest) Maki visit the munitions factory where Takuya and Hiroki once worked, she explains: "our world hides all these different possibilities, things that could have been, inside our dreams—we call these 'parallel worlds' (*heikō sekai*) or 'branch universes' (*bunkyūchū*)." Just prior to this, we have learned that a certain Ekusun Tsukinoe, a famous Union scientist who proved the existence of "parallel worlds," was responsible for the design and supervised the construction of the Tower. In the area surrounding the Tower, there is a space of "completely different matter," itself composed of "different universes," and between the world in which *PPED* takes place and the areas around the Tower, there is a constant ebb and flow of "spatial displacements with these parallel worlds." That is, the Tower is to a certain extent a spatial concretization of the dream-spaces of all the people around it. It is not simply that the Tower produces these "parallel worlds"; rather, these worlds are internal features of all organisms' brain patterns—hence the research unit to which Takuya belongs is known as the "Brain Science Unit." The importance of this research is visually confirmed by the presence of the U.S. National Security Agency at their laboratory—the potential power of this technology stems from its use to predict future historical outcomes. However, these future outcomes are not grasped by examining a field of possibilities across linear, chronological time and computing their likelihood. Instead, *PPED* tells us that the "future" is predicted, or more accurately, identified, by seeing in these "parallel worlds" the *results of an actual future*. In other words, the ability to grasp the past, or indeed the ability to understand the future, occurs through the conceptual overlapping of another disjunct temporality on the present—to a certain extent in *PPED*, there is no time other than the present, a type of "eternal now" that is stretched, elongated, and retracted through its imbrication with other parallel presents, an endless oscillation from one present to another and back.

*PPED IS A WORK THAT RESTS
ON A WORLD THAT IS FOUND
ONLY AS A FIGURATION ON
SHINKAI MAKOTO'S HARD DRIVE.*

Hiroki and Sayuri, who has been in a coma for three years since their "promise" to go to the Tower, dream of each other. Their parallel interior worlds overlap—and when Hiroki encounters Sayuri in his dreams, that is, when he encounters "her" within "himself," he remarks that the experience was "more

real than reality” or “more present than the present” (“*genjitsu yori mo genjitsu rashii*”). As Sayuri’s dreams shift in the wake of seeing Hiroki in her ostensibly “private” internal space, the Tower begins to inscribe its parallel realities over the existing material world surrounding it. The “Brain Science Team” are frantically scrambling to prevent the “real” material world from being swallowed up by this widening “parallel world,” and, as the circle of “overwritten” matter widens (Figure 3), the chief scientist Tomizawa asks himself, “Do they mean to rewrite the world?” (“*Sekai o kakikaeru tsumori na no ka?*”).

The Tower is “rewriting” the world, “rewriting” history, and destabilizing the facticity of *this* present, by recoding it with the endless possibilities of the parallel presents occurring in conjunction with that of *PPED*’s narrative. Thus, we can see the equivalent occurring on the internal level of the narrative as is occurring for the audience watching, with respect to the temporality of *PPED*. In this sense, the film can also be read as itself depicting the development of an animated cinematic logic essential to the affective structures implied by computerization, digitalization, immaterialization, and so forth. That is, particularly in its expressive functions, *PPED* is exemplary of the transition between what Paul Virilio called extensive and intensive time.

What is increasingly being replaced through digitalization, the instaneity of computerization and automation, is the logic of extensive time, which “worked at deepening the wholeness of infinitely great time,” articulated in the chronological order of “past, present, and future.” In its place is increasingly a kind of “intensive time,” no longer marshaled across the tenses, but



FIGURE 3. The Tower begins to inscribe its parallel realities over the existing material world surrounding it. From Shinkai Makoto, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*.

in the “real time” and “delayed time” of the image.⁷ This is explicated in *PPED* precisely through the Tower as the point of mediation of “real time” and its displacement. The displacement occurring around the Tower is not a shift of the past into the future,

or vice versa, so much as it is an intensification and compression of the “real time” of the narrative with other presents, including that of the audience.

One of the widely remarked-on techniques employed in *PPED* is Shinkai’s use of the photograph as a reference point. Scenes in the film would be essentially drawn “on top” of photographic images of Aomori in a new type of digital overwriting or refiguration. That is, the processes of imagination at work in this type of visuality stem not from the imagining of “new” worlds (as in the older “extensive” form of science fiction) but rather from a new type of sensibility in its *sekai-kei* inflection, that is, science fiction as remix or paralleling of the present. In just the same way as the Tower rewrites or recodes the space of the “world,” so Shinkai rewrites the space of “Japan” by recoding the visual register of Aomori and Tokyo. Azuma for instance remarks, “When I first saw [Shinkai’s] *Hoshi no koe*, I thought, this is something completely different from anime thus far. This isn’t a moving image, it’s something more like a collection of still images that happen to be moving.”⁸ That is, there is a strange doubled system of visual referentiality operating in *PPED* (as well as in *Hoshi no koe*)—the still image overlaps with the audience’s “real time,” and is imbricated with the audience’s sense of spatiality, but when the image begins to move, it does not move in this “real” time but in a displaced, parallel trajectory, thus visually “theorizing” for the audience the immanent possibility of multiple directions in the present.

Through the graphic superimposition, tracing, and doubling of the audience’s “real time” and space with the “parallel world” of the animated image, *PPED* itself is constituted as a perfect symbolization of the supersession of extensive time/extensive space with intensive time and, by extension, a direct emphasis on history and memory as continual creation. The rewriting or redrawing of the contours of history is an articulatory act of re-outlining, redrawing the boundaries of the space of the world itself, an endless, improvised figuration in an unstable, partially determined present that is increasingly evident and visible in contemporary cognitive capitalism.

PPED articulates the “present” nature of coloniality, the temporality of the constant creation of the “here,” and the new direct productive capacity of

IN JUST THE SAME WAY AS THE TOWER REWRITES OR RECODES THE SPACE OF THE “WORLD,” SO SHINKAI REWRITES THE SPACE OF “JAPAN” BY RECODING THE VISUAL REGISTER OF AOMORI AND TOKYO.

affect, gesture, and so forth. By displacing and dislocating the conceptual architecture of “our” present into another present in which the same materials are divergently organized, the film itself becomes an image of “the geopolitical postcolonial situation” that serves “as something like a paradigm for the thought of history itself as figuration, figuring something out with ‘chunks of the real.’”⁹ That is, its strength as a creation lies not in its prescriptive capacity for reflection but in the way it performatively puts into question our inherited organization of history.

Hiroki boards a train for his home of Aomori, in preparation for his mission to fly to the Tower with Sayuri, and as we see him on the train, reading Miyazawa Kenji’s *Spring and Asura* (*Haru to shura*), we hear in a voiceover Okabe stating to his comrades in the Uilta Liberation Front: “It’s now clear that the Tower is a weapon—over the past twenty-five years, it has become a symbol of every aspect of daily life: the nation-state, war, ethnicity, despair, and longing. But the one constant is that everyone sees it as something unreachable, something that can’t be changed. As long as they do, this world won’t change either.” The Tower is reflected in the glass of the train, and in our screens we see again the doubling effect of the present in *PPED*—the superimposition of the young man reading a classic of “our” modernity in a vehicle that is a recognizable technological innovation of “our” history, on top of which is overlaid the Tower, the symbolic ordering mechanism of “his” present (Figure 4). In this sense, Shinkai’s film can be read as a replication and dislocation device for us, a way to see a series of still images, snapshots, and movements of the operation of contingency in our present, the presents within the self that are endlessly vanishing and emerging.

PPED, in this sense, *structurally* articulates the coloniality of the present and its irreversible location in “me” but, on the level of its narrative, in the end reveals itself as an evasion of history, predicated on a denial and unwillingness to confront situatedness or positionality. It is impossible to reverse, repair, or redeem “oneself” from the fact of the history of colonialism—in this sense, it must be said that *PPED* recognizes that “I,” as the audience, implicitly acknowledge this in the identification of my present as the time of coloniality. Thus, in the film, the entire question of the linear flow of time, and in particular the traditional linear narrative of the beginning, establishment, and end of the colonial system, is displaced through the fragmenting of the present. Because the form of the film itself is predicated on the understanding that it is *our time* and *us* in which coloniality exists, *PPED* cannot be accused of being an erasure of the history of colonialism. But it does not draw this interrelated network of problems out to its natural conclusion; rather,



FIGURE 4. The doubling effect of the present in *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*: the superimpositions of a man reading “our” modernity, in an innovation of “our” history, overlaid by the Tower, the symbolic ordering mechanism of “his” present.

it can be said that *PPED*, while a mechanism for examining the coloniality of the immediate moment, is nevertheless *devoted to effacing the present, to escaping from confronting it within oneself*. It is never the retrospective linear gaze back toward the moment of colonial violence that is disquieting, instead it is “our” actual present existence that gives us pause. My “self” is precisely the site of the postcolonial in the sense of its irreversibility, an existence itself always already implicated.

When Hiroki describes Ezo and the Tower early in the film, he suggests that its specular power to generate fantasy stems precisely from the fact that, while it is constantly seen, it is fundamentally unreachable. The Tower is that “place that looks so close, it’s like you could reach out and grab it, but you can never actually get to it—we wanted to see it with our own eyes.” They thus aim for something impossible, the encounter and conquest of “the Real.” Okabe duplicates this with his argument that as long as the Tower remains unreachable as a symbol of war, the nation-state, ethnicity, and so forth, none of these things can be changed themselves. But in *PPED* precisely the opposite happens: the Tower *is* reached by Hiroki and Sayuri, she *is* awakened, and they *do* destroy the Tower with a single missile. Thus, at the climax of the film, it is not that “war,” “ethnicity,” the “nation-state,” and so on are confronted and re-figured—they are blown away entirely as constraints precisely by the destruction of the Tower. In this sense, the Tower is not just the externalized concretization of desires, dreams, and so forth, it is within the film something inside “me,” the colonizer, in which the signifying chain

of “responsibilities,” “guilt,” and so forth exceed me and come to, in a sense, control me, and that one wants desperately to be rid of. Thus, as the Tower explodes in a massive conflagration (Figure 5), Hiroki and Sayuri float in the blue sky in the airplane of their childhood dreams and Hiroki says, in a voiceover and thus not to Sayuri *but to the audience*, “We’ve lost our promised place in this world, but now our lives can begin.”

Here is the real dream of *PPED*—that there is within me a detectable kernel that symbolizes the position of being the colonizer or the oppressor that can be externalized and destroyed, so that one might begin again, free of guilt and shame. Thus the destruction of the Tower is not so much a utopian act for a new world as it is a concentration of the desire to be free of one’s own irredeemable positionality, free of the need to ask “on what is the ‘fact’ of my immediate existence predicated?” *PPED* confronts directly the most essential problem of “responsibility,” it confronts the fact that “my” identity already contains the irreversible time of being the colonizer. In the face of this fact, *PPED* essentially narrates in its form its own “dream of the universe”—the fantasy of being able to start over, to find a new moment of departure wherein there is neither “place” nor “position” as such, but rather an endless and untethered subjectivity predicated on nothing more than the individual’s self-positing. This incredible fear of positionality in *PPED* thus can show us a great deal about the function of the “coloniality of power” today, not to mention the operations of contemporary capitalism that rely on it.



FIGURE 5. The Tower explodes in a massive conflagration, and Hiroki and Sayuri float in the airplane of their childhood: “We’ve lost our promised place in this world, but now our lives can begin.” From Shinkai Makoto, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*.

It could be argued that at the climax of the film the nation has achieved reunification through the destruction of the Tower, the foremost constraint and symbolic placeholder for the border and division, in direct parallel with the reunification of Sayuri and Hiroki. But, problematically, Sayuri realizes upon reunification that she has lost her memory, her psychic life reduced to immediate experience without the intervening grid of historical memory, and thus her love for Hiroki will vanish in tandem with the Tower. This decisive concluding gesture within the *sekai-kei* aesthetic—this parallel reunification, or indeed the reunification of the nation on the basis of the reunification of separated young lovers albeit at the expense of the past—should seem to strike a bittersweet note, but in fact it is precisely the opposite. This loss of memory is the ultimate triumph, the fantasy of integration into a new holism in which historical memory and the experience of trauma are eliminated, the fantasy of reversibility and escape.

The Place Promised in Our Early Days retreats from its own possibilities, in that it acknowledges the only partially determined nature of the national community, the space for figuration that its need for constant reproduction establishes. Instead of confronting this irredeemable position of “I” and “we,” the film resolves itself in discovering a means of being entirely free from *the present*, that is to say, of being entirely free from oneself. But it is not possible to simply encounter the sorrow of the history of oppression by countering it, or “overcoming” it—it is not possible to “demarcate” oneself from racism, from the history of colonialism, and so forth, such that I can discover a new, untainted position from which I can relieve myself of the burden of *being myself*: “the only choice is the choice between the terrifying contaminations it assigns. Even if all forms of complicity are not equivalent, they are *irreducible*.”¹⁰ The unreachable place of *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* is not the diegetic split of north and south but rather the split within the place where the “I” can come to be, from which escape is impossible—a new politics and new sociality able to grasp and respond to the contemporary “coloniality of power” can emerge only to the extent that we hold ourselves immanent to the complicity and irreversibility contained in the formation of this “I.”

Notes

In revising this essay for publication, I would like to mention my gratitude for Thomas Lamarre’s advice, suggestions, and incisive critical reading of the essay. I also benefited from discussions with Naoki Sakai, Christopher Ahn, and Noriaki Hoshino and would like

to thank the reviewers for *Mechademia*. All translations from languages other than English are my own unless otherwise indicated.

1. It bears pointing out that in the defeat and occupation of Japan, this split division between the Soviet Union and United States was a concrete possibility, which resulted in the annexation of Sakhalin by the Soviet Union. The “actuality” of this process, however, can be continuously seen in the existence of the divided Korean peninsula.

2. Naoki Sakai, *Nihon/eizō/Beikoku: Kyōkan no kyōdōtai to teikokuteki kokuminshugi* (Japan/image/America: The community of sympathy and imperial nationalism) (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2007), 294–95; my italics. It goes without saying that this formulation is not limited to the case of the putative unity “Japan” but is a general condition of the form of belonging to the nation-state.

3. Walter Mignolo, “Capitalismo y geopolítica del conocimiento,” in *Modernidades coloniales: otros pasados, historias presentes*, ed. Saurabh Dube, Ishita Banerjee Dube, and Walter Mignolo (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2004), 248. The term “coloniality of power” is associated with the work of Anibal Quijano.

4. The concept of “division system” was put forward by Paek Nakchōng in the 1970s to describe the system of mutual reliance between the governments of North Korea, South Korea, and the United States on the field of effects generated by the division of the Korean peninsula; that is, he points not merely to the violence of “division” itself but to its solidification into a continuously self-reproducing “system.” Among his many publications on this subject, see, in English, “Habermas on National Unification in Germany and Korea,” *New Left Review* 219 (September/October 1996): 14–22; “Coloniality in Korea and a South Korean Project for Overcoming Modernity,” *Interventions* 2, no. 1 (2000): 73–86.

5. This phrase is taken from Donna Haraway: see *How Like a Leaf* (London: Routledge, 2000), 107. Also see on this point her well-known “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991), 183–201.

6. See the discussion between Shinkai Makoto, the critic Azuma Hiroki, and the manga creator Nishijima Daisuke, “Sekai kara, motto tōku e” (Far from the world) originally published in *Hajō genron* (Speech waves), September 2004. Reprinted in Azuma Hiroki et al., *Kontentsu no shisō* (Thinking content) (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2007): 34–35. See also Azuma’s extended discussion of this question in *Gēmuteki rearizumu no tanjō: Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan 2* (A birth of gamelike realism: animalizing postmodernity 2) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2007).

7. Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose (London: The British Film Institute and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 66–72.

8. Shinkai, Azuma, and Nishijima, “Sekai kara, motto tōku e,” 23.

9. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 62–63.

10. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 40.