

## Home cinema



A blizzard of decomposed images: Bill Morrison's *The Mesmerist* (2003), which uses damaged footage from a 1926 Boris Karloff film

## THE MOVIE ALCHEMIST

Bill Morrison's 'trance films' take decaying images from the nitrate vaults and turn them into hypnotic phantasmagoria

### BILL MORRISON SELECTED FILMS 1996-2014

Bill Morrison, USA 1996-2014 (one film is a co-production with Italy). BFI three-disc set/Region B Blu-ray, 17 films, totalling 460 minutes, exempt from certification: 4.3, 2.4.1 (and one extra in 16:9). Features: 'Bill Morrison: The Film Archaeologist' (Denmark, 2013, nine minutes); brochure containing essays by Lawrence Weschler, Alex Ross, Gareth Evans, Geoffrey Hines, Sukhdev Sandhu, Steve Dollar and Matt Levine

**Reviewed by Tony Rayns**

Like Criterion's two sets of films by Stan Brakhage, the BFI's anthology of Bill Morrison films is almost too much of a good thing. It's exhaustive, and exhausting. Thanks to *Decasia* (2002), Morrison is well known for (a) working

in equal creative partnerships with modernist and jazz musicians, and (b) retrieving and repurposing archive film, particularly footage which has suffered major or minor decay of its nitrate chemical base. Most films in this set play to those same strengths, and nobody is ever likely to watch all seven hours and 40 minutes of them straight through. It's a set to be sampled and savoured at leisure.

For all his work's focus on what has been and is being lost, Morrison (born in Chicago in 1965) often seems like a hippie out of his time – an impression broadly confirmed by the short interview included here as an extra on Disc 1, in which he looks and sounds vaguely academic but speaks about spiritual transcendence. Actually, the set suggests that there are two Morrises, peaceably coexisting. One is an idiosyncratic documentarist who uses archival newsreel footage to re-examine historical events (World War I, the Mississippi Delta floods of 1927, Oliver Sacks's successful

treatment in 1969-70 of patients who had been comatose for decades); this Morrison differs from orthodox archive-trawling documentary-makers principally in his unusual formal strategies and his willingness to use decayed or damaged images. The other is the hippie who brings a metaphysical eye to psychedelic visuals and is interested in heightened states of consciousness.

Spoiler alert: this paragraph risks nullifying the suspense built up in the 2010 short *Release*. The two sides of Morrison come closest to merging in *Release*, which is the most formalist short in the set. He takes one newsreel shot, a very slightly halting pan across a street in central Philadelphia, from the crowd of onlookers corralled on one side of the street to the state penitentiary opposite, and builds a 13-minute film from it. First, he takes the shot and flips it, presenting the original and its mirror-image side by side in a Scope ratio. Second, he repeats the shot many times, each time extending its beginning and end by a couple of seconds. Across the repetitions, we

gradually get used to the odd way the image is presented and start to focus on details – and, as always happens with looped repetitions, we learn to anticipate certain moments: a vehicle passes, a press photographer moves into position. The later repetitions of the shot are extended enough to show the opening of a door in the prison building; oddly, given the undramatic context, a kind of suspense is generated as we wait to see who will step through the opened door. Only in the final pass of the shot do we see Al Capone emerge and move off – and only in the closing credits do we discover that the figure was Al Capone and that this happened on 17 March 1930. Morrison has taken a neutral, inexpressive newsreel shot and turned it into a formalised visual event capable of triggering emotion. Vijay Iyer's accompanying soundscape helps, of course.

*Release* was made as an installation for an exhibition in Philadelphia, and end credits reveal that nearly all the 17 films on the discs were made on commission: some for exhibitions, some for live music/film events, and a couple were originally used in theatre performances. That doesn't imply that they don't stand up as films – far from it – but it does mean that the home-viewing experience sometimes feels a little incomplete. The 41-minute compilation of WWI newsreels, some of them with expressionistically decayed images, in *Beyond Zero: 1914-1918* (2014) is less resonant and impressive in its own right than, say, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's conceptually similar *Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's Music to Accompany a Cinematographic Scene* (1972). But seeing it with the Kronos Quartet (for whom it was commissioned) playing Aleksandra Vrebalov's original score live was very possibly something else again.

Morrison has named his own company Hypnotic Pictures, and it's pretty clear that his commitment to what we might call 'trance film' trumps his enthusiasm for multimedia performances. He dramatised his own surrender to the joy of exploring archives in his early short *The Film of Her* (1996), which rhymes his personal journey into the nitrate vaults with a celebration of the pre-war heroes who realised the value of the paper print collection in the Library of Congress and at the same time introduces the kind of imagery that will reappear in his later work, including microphotography of cells and amoebae and astronomical shots of heavenly bodies. Six years later *Decasia* represented an epiphany of sorts: an epic scale assemblage of disparate material unified both by Michael Gordon's quasi-symphonic score and by the foregrounding of nitrate damage. You couldn't isolate or define an overall meaning, but the beautiful/terrible decay somehow meshes with the innate poignancy of old film images – the sense that the people represented are long dead, and that these near lost images may be all that's left of them – to create a powerful awareness of the transience of all things.

Right after *Decasia*, Morrison went on to explore such spiritual implications in two remarkable shorts using damaged footage from the 1926 feature *The Bells*, directed by James Young. (We're left wondering if the film also



*Just Ancient Loops* (2012)

survives undamaged, but Morrison never tells.) *The Mesmerist* (2003) uses an episode with Boris Karloff as a fairground hypnotist who brings a man in the audience under his control and makes him confess to his recent murder of a Polish Jew; the framing footage is shown 'straight' but the flashback to the murder is a mesmeric blizzard of decomposed images, an extraordinary, material-based phantasmagoria. Then *Light Is Calling* (2004) reworks an episode in which an innkeeper's daughter is accidentally thrown from her carriage and rescued by a passing horseman; the drama of the original scene is barely discernible through the swirling decay, but Morrison replaces it with his own 'drama' of the images' struggle to survive the damage.

Morrison was interested in trances even before he surrendered to movie archaeology.

*The beautiful/terrible decay somehow meshes with the innate poignancy of old film images to create an awareness of transience*



*The Great Flood* (2013)

His earlyish short *Ghost Trip* (2000), apparently inspired by the ornate cemeteries of New Orleans, is a spectral psychodrama in the vein of Maya Deren which uses no found footage at all. His blends of original and reworked footage peak in the single most masterly film in this set, *Just Ancient Loops* (2012), which places trance-effect material (such as apocalyptically damaged footage of a solar eclipse) in a conceptual framework that's pure poetry.

Around the film's mid-point Morrison switches from found footage to an original computer-animated sequence showing Jupiter's four moons and their looping orbits, and then provides a range of visual analogies for their motion, from revolving machinery to strips of film stock wound through baths of chemicals. The ending nudges the motif of loops into metaphor, with exquisite clips from old biblical films summarising the cycle of life from the Garden of Eden to Christ's resurrection and ascension.

Overall, the set definitively establishes Morrison as the heir to the spirit of the 'New American Cinema' of the 1960s; if he'd been born a generation earlier, he'd no doubt have been a leading light of the New York Filmmakers' Co-op or the Canyon Cinematheque. His slowed-down explorations of decayed nitrate films have a direct precedent in Ken Jacobs's elaborate reworking of a DW. Griffith short in *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969), and his collaging of seemingly disparate imagery parallels the work of Bruce Conner, Robert Breer and Craig Baldwin. The final chapter of his feature *The Great Flood* (2013), which features silent footage of such legendary bluesmen as Big Bill Broonzy, Son House and Sonny Boy Williamson – incidentally giving composer Bill Fissell one of his biggest challenges – even suggests a distant kinship with the musicalistic films of Les Blank. Right now, though, Morrison is out there on his own. **B**