

KINO LORBER

DAWSON CITY: FROZEN TIME A FILM BY BILL MORRISON

"It is a story that is told, using these same films from the collection. It is both a cinema of mythology, and mythologizing of cinema. Gold and Silver, forever linked and following one another, drove the narrative in a unique chapter of human civilization."

- Bill Morrison

U.S., 2016, 120 minutes, b&w and color
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Hypnotic Pictures & Picture Palace Pictures

present

In association with ARTE – La Lucarne
In association with The Museum of Modern Art

A film by Bill Morrison

Directed/Written/Photographed and Edited by
Bill Morrison

Produced by Madeleine Molyneaux & Bill Morrison

Music by Alex Somers

Sound Design by John Somers

Associate Producer: Paul Gordon

Title Design: Galen Johnson

World Premiere:

Orizzonti Competition
73rd Mostra Internazionale D'Arte Cinematografica
la Biennale di Venezia 2016

North American Premiere:

Spotlight on Documentary
New York Film Festival 2016

U.K. Premiere:

Experimenta
BFI/London Film Festival 2016

South American Premiere: Retrospective
Valdivia International Film Festival 2016

2017 Intl Festival Screenings:

International Film Festival Rotterdam (NL); Goteborg International Film Festival. (SE);
!f Istanbul FF, Istanbul/Ankara, Turkey; FICUNAM. Mexico City (MX); Thessaloniki
Doc Fest (GR); It's All True, Sao Paolo, Brazil; BAFICI, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Synopsis

Dawson City: Frozen Time, a feature length film by Bill Morrison (U.S.), pieces together the bizarre true history of a collection of 533 reels of film (representing 372 titles) dating from the 1910s to 1920s, which were lost for over 50 years until being discovered buried in a sub-arctic swimming pool deep in the Yukon Territory.

Using these permafrost protected, rare silent films and newsreels, archival footage, interviews and historical photographs to tell the story, and accompanied by an enigmatic score by Sigur Rós collaborator and composer Alex Somers (*Captain Fantastic*), *Dawson City: Frozen Time* depicts a unique history of a Canadian gold rush town by chronicling the life cycle of a singular film collection through its exile, burial, rediscovery, and salvation – and through that collection, how a First Nation hunting camp was transformed and displaced.

Dawson City, located about 173 miles south of the Arctic Circle, is situated at the confluence of the Klondike and Yukon rivers and rests on a bed of permafrost. Historically, the area was an important hunting and fishing camp for a nomadic First Nation tribe known as Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. The town was settled in 1896 – the same year large-scale cinema projectors were invented – and it became the center of the Klondike Goldrush that brought 100,000 prospectors to the area. The Dawson Amateur Athletic Association (DAAA) opened in 1902 and began showing films and soon, the city became the final stop for a distribution chain that sent prints and newsreels to the Yukon. The films were seldom, if ever, returned.

By the late 1920s, 500,000 feet of film – 500 films – had accumulated in the basement of the local Library, under the care of the Canadian Bank of Commerce. In 1929, Clifford Thomson, bank employee and treasurer of the local hockey association, moved the films to the town's hockey rink, stacked and covered them with boards and a layer of earth. The now famous Dawson City Collection was uncovered in 1978 when a new recreation center was being built and a bulldozer working its way through a parking lot dug up a horde of film cans.

The films are now housed in the Canadian Archives in Ottawa and at the U.S. Library of Congress, which jointly restored all the titles to 35mm preservation masters.

Director's Statement

The story of the Dawson City film collection is a story that combines many contradictions specific to the 20th century. It is a story full of bitter ironies, where the promise of one thing often delivers just the opposite:

First nation people had used the encampment at Tr'ochëk for hunting and fishing for hundreds, if not thousands, of years before the Klondike Gold Rush of 1896. The Gold Rush brought change overnight. Tr'ochëk was renamed Dawson City in 1897, and boomed to a population of 40,000.

The discovery of Gold promised quick and easy riches, yet spurred a hugely expensive, and physically demanding migration by the hopeful. Most of them arrived after all the mines had been already claimed.

The prospectors then followed the gold strikes to Alaska, leaving Dawson City as a depleted and disillusioned town only a few years after gold was first discovered there.

But as the prospectors left, motion pictures arrived. Not only did films find their way to Dawson, Cinema took the North Woods as its subject matter, portraying this new landscape and its wilderness stories as one of its favorite, if most wildly romanticized, genres.

The films that arrived were not returned to their distributors. Instead they were stored in a library, before being disposed of in a defunct swimming pool, ultimately returning the gold, and the silver that followed it, back to the same earth that yielded it.

Despite this, subsequent shipments of nitrate films caused the fire that destroyed the theater decades later. Just as gold was the town's making and undoing, film fueled both the theater's creation and destruction.

Ironically the only films that survived were those early ones that were buried in a subarctic swimming pool and then discovered 50 years later.

Those films revealed the stories of an invasive culture that was woefully misplaced in its new environment, and even more woefully unaware of its trespasses.

It is a story that is told, using these same films from the collection. It is both a cinema of mythology, and mythologizing of cinema. Gold and Silver, forever

linked and following one another, drove the narrative in a unique chapter of human civilization.

The Dawson City Film Find happened in 1978, and I first heard of it as an art student in the late 1980s. It seems that film archivists who were my age and older (50+) are familiar with the story, while most of those who are younger than me have never heard of it. Despite numerous newspaper accounts, there was only one published essay about the find, by Sam Kula, director of audiovisual archives in the National Archives of Canada, entitled "Up From The Permafrost: The Dawson City Collection", which was included in the collection of essays entitled "This Film is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film" (2002).

It is an amazing story in and of itself, the rediscovery of 533 film reels that were preserved in permafrost while all other known copies perished from fire or neglect. But that discovery was only part of a larger and perhaps even more compelling story - the story of the gold rush town of Dawson City and how it went from a sleepy fishing camp of First Nation Han-speaking natives, to a town of 40,000 gold-crazed stampeders within two years, and then how it then reverted back to a town of 1000 where it weathered out the century.

And then it contains many more stories, those specific to this town and its unique relationship to cinema, and those stories told in the newsreels and features that were recovered in 1978. It is literal time capsule of histories converging on each other, layered and self-referential, silver film having been returned to the same earth that gold was removed from. The role cinema played was central and essential to the telling of these stories. For me, you only come across a film story like this once in a lifetime. It is my Titanic. It is a perfect distillation of the 20th century.

I believe the film may be seen as a metaphor. But like any good metaphor, it also may be taken at its face value as a true, and compelling, story.

Firstly the people who buried the films were not trying to preserve them - in fact they were trying to get rid of them. They posed a threat to the town as they were (and are) highly flammable. They inadvertently stumbled across one of the most sure-fire ways to store nitrate film: to freeze it and bury it so that there is no air circulation around it. And they only buried a small percentage of the films that came through that town. The vast majority were thrown in the Yukon River or went up in enormous fires, either intentionally or accidentally. This small batch was preserved because these were what were available in storage at the moment that they were filling in the swimming pool, and looking for more landfill. They also sensed that it was not environmentally friendly to be throwing films in

the river. So it is really dumb luck that these films were saved, and that they exist at all today. A miracle, really.

The stories contained on the films fascinating, none more so than the newsreels, which, in their infancy, reported on both the struggle of the worker, as well as the their conquest by corporations. Ultimately this supports the story of the town and the film find itself:

This is how the story is still relevant, beyond the amazing details specific of Dawson City. It is a tragedy what happened to the natives and the land at the hands of the miners. It is a tragedy what happened to the miners and the town at the hands of corporate greed. It is a tragedy what happened to film everywhere: that it was made from an explosive material to begin with, and that even though a safety film was developed in 1910, that we continued to use nitrate film nitrate because it was cheaper to make, despite the incredible loss of life, property, art and historical records, that we suffered as a result.

That these films survived is an actual miracle. If such things can be said to exist, this is one. And so of course there is humor here as well - dark humor - because we are always so predicable and unchanging, and we remain unchanged in our consumption and greed and unwitting grace.

In my past work, especially in the short *The Film of Her* (1996), and later, with the feature length film *Decasia* (2002), archival film became central to both the form and content of the film. The former used archival film to tell the story of an ancient film collection. The latter used decaying archival film as a metaphor for mortality.

Dawson City: Frozen Time shares some of the same approaches and aesthetics of these two earlier works. The new film has the additional context of being about globalization – firstly through the discovery of Gold, and by extension, Film, which always followed the money.

The films that arrived in Dawson were not returned to their distributors. Nor were they watched again. Instead they were stored in a library, before being disposed of in a defunct swimming pool, ultimately returning the gold, and the silver that followed it, back to the same earth that yielded it.

Subsequent shipments of nitrate films fueled the fire that destroyed the theater – and most of the film collection that had accumulated there – decades later. The only films that survived were those early ones that were buried in the pool, and then discovered 50 years later.

The films are now housed in the Canadian Archives in Ottawa and at the US Library of Congress, which jointly restored all the titles to 35mm preservation masters. The titles almost certainly fared better than any of the other prints of their time. As nitrate filmstock is given to self-destruction, these prints became some of the last surviving records of titles from studios such as Essanay, Rex, Thanhouser, and Selig. I worked closely with Paul Gordon and his team at the Canadian Archives in Ottawa to digitize this footage at the highest resolution possible (4K); this has been combined with the use of period photographs, chronicling the region and Yukon residents, from special library collections.

Early on in my research of this collection, I started looking at which baseball stories were included among the 238 newsreels. And being a Chicago White Sox fan, I was pleased to discover that both the 1917 World Series (which the Sox won) and the 1919 World Series (which they lost) were included as stories on two of the reels. I also sensed that no one else was aware that this 1919 World Series footage existed, as it is a legendary story in American sports. Eight White Sox players were eventually banned from baseball for life for conspiring to lose the Series on purpose, in exchange for a payoff from New York gamblers. In my film, the "Black Sox" scandal also ties in with the larger story about Labor in America in the early 20th century. Baseball players were not recognized as workers, and in fact resembled slave laborers as they were owned by their teams and were unable to negotiate with another. It was fertile ground for corruption to take place. My use of the story in this film is to show how the incident was used as an excuse by baseball owners to introduce an anti-labor baseball commissioner, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis. But it also speaks to the nature of coincidence and the long odds that this footage would be found.

The footage in Dawson Collection, unlike any other, contained one of the key play that was referred to in testimony about whether or not the players cheated. The chance of this play- a single play out of the eight games that were played being filmed by a 35mm news camera in 1919 was already slim. That it made the edit into a five minute story about the series that was made before anyone realized it depicted a crime, is even more unlikely. That it was shipped to Dawson City, 500km south of the Arctic Circle, probably several years after it was shot, and long after the scandal was know, is another layer of improbability. That it was buried instead of being drowned or burned, and then that it was unearthed 49 years later is truly bizarre. And the coup de grace is that it sat hiding in plain sight for another 38 years until I saw it. The one play, the failed double play of the fourth inning of Game One becomes a metaphor for the highly unstable passage of history down through future generations. It is well a documented story in American sports, and in America, baseball fans are among our most ardent historians.

So when we released the video of this footage that had never been seen before in the Spring of 2014, it became a news story among baseball historians everywhere, garnering 350,000 hits overnight, and for a week I was doing interviews everyday with sportswriters across the US and Canada. The interview with Chris Russo on his MLB show *High Heat* begins the film. After this I soon realized that - as was the case with Black Sox footage - while all the material I was viewing was well catalogued and documented, little of it had actually been seen by a larger audience since being restored in 1978, and we had an opportunity to introduce an enormous number of historic images to the world that had not been seen by people living on the planet today.

– *Bill Morrison, 2016*

Producer's Note

The films of Bill Morrison combine a documentarian's thirst for uncovering hidden histories with an archivist's obsession for recovering hidden cinematic treasures. These twin passions, combined with an acute and abiding connection with some of the most innovative and progressive music of the time – from Phillip Glass to Jóhann Jóhannsson, have yielded a body of work that is singular and essential.

The films have been critically acclaimed and widely disseminated – *Decasia* (2002) has been heralded as one of the best films of the decade, with Errol Morris asserting it as “the best film ever made”; *The Miners' Hymns*, a document of the Coal Mines in Durham, UK throughout the early 20th century from 2011, features nameless real life personages that become characters, saved from historical obscurity as it were through Morrison's recovering of archival footage originally produced by the National Coal Board's Film Unit. It was called “quite simply one of the best and most beautiful films of the year” by the *Huffington Post*. Manohla Dargis points out in her *New York Times* review that he is “a miner himself of a type.” His collaboration with Bill Frisell in *The Great Flood*, represents perhaps his most overtly political film to date, as it recovers footage in and of a world of the American South in 1927.

Dawson City: Frozen Time expands the history of cinema (the material recovered) and simultaneously inhabits the lateral history of cinema exploitation, an investigation of how early cinema was diffused, colonized and buried. The impact of this recovered footage is vast and universal.

--*Madeleine Molyneaux, Producer, Picture Palace Pictures*

Filmmaker Bill Morrison: Biography

“One of the most adventurous American filmmakers.” - Variety, 12/11/11

Bill Morrison (born Chicago, November 17, 1965) is a New York-based filmmaker and artist. His films often combine rare archival material set to contemporary music, and have been screened in theaters, cinemas, museums, galleries, and concert halls around the world. He attended Reed College 1983-85, and graduated from Cooper Union School of Art in 1989. Trained as a painter, his work reflects a deep and abiding attention to the celluloid image.

He has collaborated with some of the most influential composers of our time, including John Adams, Maya Beiser, Gavin Bryars, Dave Douglas, Richard Einhorn, Erik Friedlander, Bill Frisell, Philip Glass, Michael Gordon, Michael Harrison, Ted Hearne, Vijay Iyer, Jóhann Jóhannsson, Kronos Quartet, David Lang, David T. Little, Michael Montes, Steve Reich, Todd Reynolds, Aleksandra Vrebalov, and Julia Wolfe among many others.

Decasia (67 min, 2002), a collaboration with the composer Michael Gordon, was selected to the U.S. Library of Congress' 2013 National Film Registry, becoming the most modern film named to the list that preserves works of “great cultural, historic or aesthetic significance to the nation’s cinematic heritage.” Morrison's films are also in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Walker Art Center, and the EYE Film Institute.

Morrison is a Guggenheim fellow and has received the Alpert Award for the Arts, an NEA Creativity Grant, Creative Capital, and a fellowship from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts. His theatrical projection design has been recognized with two Bessie awards and an Obie Award.

His previous work has been distributed by Icarus Films in North America, and by the British Film Institute in the UK.

A mid-career retrospective was held at the Museum of Modern Art (NY) in 2014; Morrison has also had retrospectives at the Walker Art Museum, Minneapolis; the Vila Do Conde Short Film Festival, Portugal; the Adelaide Film Festival, Australia; and the Aarhus Film Festival, Denmark. 2016 retrospectives include Valdivia (Chile) and Jihlava (CZ).

Bill Morrison: Selected Filmography

FEATURES

Dawson City: Frozen Time
(2016, 120 min, B/W & color, HD)

The Great Flood
(2013, 78 min, B/W, HD)

Tributes - Pulse
(2011, 65 min, B/W & color, HD)

The Miners' Hymns
(2011, 52 min, B/W & color, HD)

Spark of Being
(2010, 68 min, B/W & color)

Decasia
(2002, 67 min, B/W, 35mm)

SHORT FORM WORKS

Back to the Soil
(2014, 18 min, B/W, HD)

Beyond Zero: 1914-1918
(2014, 40 min, B/W & color, HD)

All Vows
(2013, 10 min, B/W & color, HD)

Re:Awakenings
(2013, 18 min, B/W & color, HD)

Just Ancient Loops
(2012, 26 min, B/W & color, HD)

Release
(2010, 13 min, B/W, HD)

Every Stop On The F Train
(2008, 5 min, color)

Dystopia
(2008, 30 min, B/W & color)

Fuel

(2007, 25 min, color)

Who By Water

(2007, 18 min, B/W)

Porch

(2006, 9 min, color)

The Highwater Trilogy

(2006, 31 min, B/W, 35mm)

Outerborough

(2005, 8 min, B/W, 35mm)

Gotham

(2004, 25 min, B/W & color)

Light Is Calling

(2004, 8 min, color, 35mm)

The Mesmerist

(2003, 16 min, color, 35mm)

East River

(2003, 5 min, color)

Trinity

(2000, 12 min, B/W, 35mm)

Ghost Trip

(2000, 23 min, B/W, 35mm)

City Walk

(1999, 6 min, B/W, 16mm)

The Film of Her

(1996, 12 min, B/W, 35mm)

Nemo

(1995, 6 min, B/W, 16mm)

The Death Train

(1993, 17 min, B/W, 16mm)

Footprints

(1992, 6 min, B/W & color, 16mm)

Producer Madeleine Molyneaux: Picture Palace Pictures

Madeleine Molyneaux is an independent creative producer based in New York and Los Angeles. Through Picture Palace Pictures, founded in 2004, she works closely with emerging and established artists, both in North America and abroad, to develop, produce, and represent films, video projects, installations/exhibitions and curatorial initiatives. She is engaged in the realization of genre narrative, experimental cinema and creative documentary/hybrid projects that often defy easy categorization and co-exist within experimental film and contemporary art contexts. Many of the projects are dedicated to the diffusion of film in a contemporary art context/continuum (and vice versa).

Her long association with the fiercely prolific artist/filmmaker Kevin Jerome Everson (U.S.) recipient of the 2012 Alpert Award in Film/Video, has included the production of seven feature films, numerous award winning shorts and the organization of retrospectives and solo exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou, Visions du Reel, Nyon, Viennale and the Whitney Museum of American Art. In addition to Everson's work, she has produced recent films for the visual artists **K8 Hardy** (*Outfitumentary*, an Official Selection of *Rotterdam*, *Outfest* and *Era New Horizons* 2016); **Pierre Bismuth** (*Where is Rocky 2?*, a French/Belgian/Italian/German co production, Art Basel, Locarno and Hot Docs 2016) and **Phillip Warnell** (*Ming of Harlem: 21 Stories in the Air*, winner of the Georges Beaugard Prize at FID Marseille 2014 and distributed in the UK by Soda Pictures).

Her collaboration with filmmaker **David Jacobson** includes, as producer, the independent American feature *Tomorrow You're Gone* (2012) a neo-noir starring Stephen Dorff, Michelle Monaghan and Willem Dafoe, and as creative consultant on the 2005 feature *Down in the Valley*, starring Edward Norton, Evan Rachel Wood, Bruce Dern and Rory Culkin, which premiered at Cannes *Un Certain Regard* in 2005. They recently produced two episodes for *National Geographic's* critically acclaimed TV series *Breakthrough*, directed by David Lowery (*Pete's Dragon*, *Ain't Them Body Saints*) and Ana Lily Amirpour (*The Bad Batch; A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*).

Composer: Alex Somers

Alex Somers, born 1984 in Baltimore, Maryland (U.S.), is a composer, musician, producer, and artist who splits his time between Reykjavík, Iceland and Los Angeles. He first rose to prominence in 2009 via his ambient album. Alex had previously toured America in support of Jónsi's band Sigur Rós with his own outfit Parachutes, having previously attended Berklee College of Music in Boston to study composition.

Following the highly-acclaimed *Riceboy Sleeps* project, he went on to play keyboards and guitar in Jónsi's touring band, having already co-produced tracks on his 2010 debut solo album, *Go*. Somers then started expanding his production work at his studio space in Reykjavík, co-producing Sigur Rós's 2013 album, *Valtari*, and producing albums for Subpop's *Death Vessel*, vocal experimentalist Julianna Barwick, Briana Marela and Icelandic bands *Pascal Pinon* and *Sin Fang*. In 2014 he mixed Damien Rice's *My Favorite Faded Fantasy*.

In 2015 he and Jónsi scored the first season of WGN's atomic bomb drama *Manhattan*.

Somers is also a visual artist, exhibiting his work with Jónsi around the world, as well as co-creating the sleeves for Sigur Rós's *Takk* and *Riceboy Sleeps*. Recently Somers scored the critically acclaimed *Captain Fantastic* starring Viggo Mortensen (Un Certain Regard, Cannes 2016). His score for Bill Morrison's *Dawson City: Frozen Time* was recorded in Iceland. He plays a variety of instruments on all tracks. His brother John Somers is the film's sound designer.