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Sublime Decay

By LAWRENCE WESCHLER

One day a few months back, a close-cropped, sweet-natured, looming hulk of a young man named Bill Morrison tentatively poked his head into my office and mentioned that a mutual friend had suggested that I just might find his predicament of passing interest. He was a filmmaker, he explained, and had recently completed several years of intensive work on a project that had gone on to find favor in Europe, at Sundance and even at the Museum of Modern Art. But suddenly it was beginning to seem as if the project had played itself out; it was proving impossible to secure distribution for his film, and he was stymied as to what to do next. Could that possibly be all there was going to be to it? Years of passionate, solitary work, a few well-received screenings and then nothing -- oblivion? He handed me a video and asked, if I ever had a spare moment, that I take a look at it; whereupon, passing me his card, he politely took his leave.

A few nights later I popped Morrison's video into my VCR and within a few further minutes I found myself completely absorbed, transfixed, a pillow of air lodged in my stilled, open mouth.

Now, I'm no particular authority on film, but I do know one -- Errol Morris, the director of such highly acclaimed documentary features as "The Thin Blue Line," "Fast, Cheap and Out of Control" and "Mr. Death." A short time later, when I happened to be visiting him, I popped the video into his VCR and proceeded to observe as Morrison's film once again began casting its spell. Errol sat drop-jawed: at one point, about halfway through, he stammered, "This may be the greatest movie ever made."

"Made," of course, being the operative word. And not exactly by Bill Morrison, either. For, as it turned out, Morrison hadn't shot a single frame in the whole thing. Rather, his film, "Decasia," was fashioned entirely out of snippets of severely distressed and heart-rendingly decomposed nitrate film stock: decades-old footage, taken from archives all around the country -- and at the last possible moment. The images in the film (which still has not found a distributor but will start airing on the Sundance Channel this week) are just the sort of thing you hear about all the time from crusading preservationists like Martin Scorsese. Their desperate struggle to rescue our nation's rapidly self-immolating film heritage is a worthy goal, to be sure -- but who knew the stuff was so beautiful? Who knew that decay itself -- artfully marshaled, braided, scored and sustained -- could provoke such transports of sublime reverie amid such pangs of wistful sorrow?

A DERVISH, WHIRLING. A massive bank of film projectors relentlessly unspooling their reels into

long canals of developing fluid. A volcanic crater, belching smoke -- a craggy shore, the waves breaking. An indecipherable welter of rotted, coursing shapes, and presently, through the pox-veil, a geisha gingerly approaching a screen. A butterfly pinioned against the coruscating surface. A mottled, pullulating mass: the frenzy of moths at twilight. Semen. Cells dividing.

And then later: a procession of camels making their slow way across a desert horizon. Nuns leading their young wards through a mission colonnade. A man rescued from drowning. A grown woman being dunked into a river for baptism. A crouching Central Asian man, spinning wool. A hand-driven Ferris wheel, somewhere in India. And a merry-go-round. A Luna Park rocket car exploding out of disintegrating chaos. A hag pointing a threatening finger at an appalled judge, and then turning back to us, metamorphosing into sheerest monstrosity. Lovers, melting into embraces that are themselves melting and coming undone. A baby emerging from a womb and then cradled in a tub of water (developing fluid?). A mine collapse; a shack gone up in flames. A young boxer, gamely jabbing at boiling nothingness. A lonely old man ambling through a mission plaza.

The empty sky, dappled with corrosive specks from which gradually emerge sputtering aircraft, droning on, circling and presently releasing further specks -- sperm? No, parachutists, who slowly float down to earth. The projectors unspooling. The dervish, whirling.

From the earliest days of cinema, Thomas Edison, George Eastman and their fellow trailblazers zeroed in on celluloid, the world's first synthetic plastic, which is produced by treating cellulose nitrate -- cotton combined with a mixture of nitric acid and sulfuric acid -- with camphor and alcohol. It was the ideal flexible, spoolable and transparent base upon which to slather their various arcane photographic emulsions. The nitric cellulose medium, however, suffered from two serious drawbacks. For starters, it was highly explosive -- a close cousin of nitroglycerine -- and even once its explosive potential had been tamed, the material remained extremely flammable. It burned far more fiercely (in fact, 20 times faster) than wood: 20 tons (the equivalent of 8,000 reels of 1,000 feet each) can easily burn itself to pure ash in just three minutes. And these sorts of disasters happen on a fairly regular basis. In 1937, for example, a massive nitrate explosion and fire in Little Ferry, N.J., consumed almost all of the silent films ever produced by the Fox Film Corporation. Similar calamities, in 1977 and 1978, at the National Archives film depository in Suitland, Md., took out the preponderance of the Universal newsreel legacy.

But for all their momentary drama, such catastrophes pale in comparison to the slower-motion conflagration afflicting virtually all nitrate film stock (and nitrate film stock was the medium for most filmmaking until the 1950's). Because it is chemically unstable, cellulose nitrate film stock begins decomposing the moment it is manufactured, a process that accelerates with the passage of time. (Vast expanses of our nation's film stock has been wrested from nature, and nature wants that film stock back.) The silver image -- the singularly rich and deep and luminous image that is the glory of nitrate projection -- undergoes a brownish discoloration; the emulsion becomes sticky, exuding a brown frothing foam (known to conservators, quaintly, as honey) and provoking a pungent odor ("the smell of dirty laundry," as one conservator delicately parsed the matter for me). Soon the plastic depolymerizes and the entire film reel begins to congeal (moving from a "doughnut" into its final "hockey puck" phase), after which the brittle mass disintegrates further into an acrid, reddish

powder, which is extremely combustible (and has been known to spontaneously ignite at ambient temperatures as low as 105 degrees).

All of this is inevitable -- it cannot be avoided (although as conservators now realize, the processes of decomposition can be significantly forestalled if the archives are maintained at low temperatures and low humidity). Sooner or later -- and generally speaking, far sooner than we would like -- all nitrate films crumble into dust.

It's not a pretty picture -- and one that in fact has already been estimated to have cost the nation's archives more than half of the 21,000 feature films produced before 1950. The great and marvelously sexy 20's film icon Colleen Moore, for example, was fated to outlive most of her films -- and such seminal performances as Greta Garbo's in "Divine Woman" and Theda Bara's in "Cleopatra" have been relegated to powder, smoke and rumor. They are presumed to exist no more.

And yet -- and this was to be Bill Morrison's key discovery -- for all the sorry ugliness of the situation, the actual pictures that this relentless disintegration was producing could be more than just pretty. Sometimes, indeed, they were ravishingly, achingly beautiful.

Bill Morrison was born in 1965 into a middle-class household -- his father a lawyer, his mother a schoolteacher -- in the Hyde Park-Kenwood area, the integrated neighborhood girdling the University of Chicago and itself surrounded by severely impoverished, deeply segregated ghettos. The youngest of four and the only boy, he was doted upon, though he was somewhat isolated and self-contained. He was particularly fond of his grandfather, who rode the rails and explored the West as a youth, occasionally boxing for money. "I had an entirely blessed upbringing," Morrison says, "such that the seemingly dour nature of much of the art it subsequently engendered is all but inexplicable to me. People who've seen my work usually expect to meet someone in his 60's, all nostalgic for the 19th century and obsessed with death and decay; when they do meet me, they're surprised to find me quite a bit younger, of fairly good humor and not overly concerned with death at all."

With death, maybe not -- but certainly with decay. From his earliest days, Morrison reports, he reveled in the splendors of the urban detritus all about him, enchanted by vistas others found ugly or mundane. He loped about, lollygagging, lost in thought.

Fast-forward through college at Cooper Union, where he majored in both painting and film animation, and after that a productive collaboration with New York's avant-garde Ridge Theater, where he became the resident short-film backdrop creator, in which capacity he began haunting musty film archives all around the country in search of raw footage. Then, about three years ago, Morrison attended the first annual Orphan Film Symposium in Columbia, S.C., a gathering of similarly obsessed aficionados of antiquarian film. Columbia, as it turned out, is home to a veritable trove of decomposing Fox Movietone newsreels, and it was here that Morrison first began thinking about film decay itself as a possible subject and, more than that, as the raw material for a future project.

As it happened, just around that time, a composer named Michael Gordon (a founding member of the Bang on a Can collective, with which Morrison had already had occasion to work on several

Ridge Theater productions) was preparing to work on a major orchestral piece for the Basel Sinfonietta to be premiered as part of European Music Month in the fall of 2001. Gordon was in some ways Morrison's acoustic twin, entranced by traces of decay and decomposition in music itself. He was fascinated by the slightly-out-of-tune and yet more so by the more-out-of-tune-yet, and likewise by rhythmic distortions and distress. "I am attracted by something really pretty that's at the same time really ugly," he recently said to me, "so that you hear the pretty and you hear the ugly. In my own work I aim for an effect of sweet and sour -- to be able to evoke the sweetness through the sour. I like things a little dirty, I like to take something really beautiful and to mess it up a bit."

Gordon approached the Ridge Theater, and soon after, he and Morrison embarked on a cinematic-symphonic collaboration, invoking the model of "Fantasia," only this time, keying to themes of decay and dilapidation. Morrison already had many images to work with from his time in the Fox archive in Columbia. "I managed to dig up the nuns with their wards at their Arizona mission that very first day, along with that footage of a boxer" (shades of his beloved grandfather). "The boxer footage in particular was unbelievably evocative: the guy -- according to the reel's label, his name was Ritchie - - had clearly been jabbing at a punching bag, only for some reason the chemical content of the bag imagery had deteriorated far in advance of the rest of the frame, so that it looked for all the world as if Ritchie were engaged in a desperate struggle with the roiling abyss itself."

He kept returning to Columbia, and after digging through the archives for more than 100 hours, he managed to excavate footage (including the camel caravan, the Indian Ferris wheel, the Central Asian wool-spinner, the planes and the parachutists and an uncanny sequence of a high diver hoisting herself up a silhouetted ladder that itself looks like a strip of film) that would come to comprise 36 minutes, a good half of the eventual completed film.

He also ventured out to the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base outside Dayton, Ohio, where the Library of Congress houses its phenomenal (and phenomenally volatile) nitrate-film collections. Here Morrison tracked down the silent melodrama footage of the judge and the harridan, the waves breaking on the shore and the solitary man traipsing across the mission plaza (further shades of his grandfather). "It was a bit of a challenge," Morrison concedes. "After all, I was looking for the stuff most archivists tend to hide." But he gradually got the archivists to warm to his daffy quest. "Many visitors are amazed at the sorts of decay you come upon around here," Kenneth Weissman, the head of the Library of Congress's Dayton operation, subsequently told me with a sardonic drawl. "But few seem to enjoy it as much as Bill."

In addition, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, an avid collector of much of Morrison's work at the Ridge Theater, granted him unprecedented access to their film vaults.

"I wasn't just looking for instances of decayed film," Morrison recalls of his two-year excavation. "Rather, I was seeking out instances of decay set against a narrative backdrop, for example, of valiant struggle, or thwarted love, or birth, or submersion, or rescue, or one of the other themes I was trying to interweave. And never complete decay: I was always seeking out instances where the image was still putting up a struggle, fighting off the inexorability of its demise but not yet having succumbed. And things could get very frustrating. Sometimes I'd come upon instances of spectacular decay but

the underlying image was of no particular interest. Worse was when there was a great evocative image but no decay."

And now fast-forward again, past further years of dusty, musty labor to the revelatory intertwining of Morrison's images to synthesized approximations of Gordon's score; and then onto a triumphant premiere of their combined piece in Basel in 2001; and further weeks in the editing room as Morrison honed his procession of images to Gordon's now, at long last, orchestrally recorded score; and past Sundance and onto the New York premiere of the completed film on the very last day of screenings at the Modern's vaunted Titus 1 auditorium last spring before it was closed for renovation, where it was shown along with an exquisitely well preserved silver print of "Casablanca."

After one of those screenings, an audience member contacted Morrison by e-mail (at www.decasia.com): "Congratulations! You have created the first post-postmodern film." Morrison rolled his eyes as he told me the story.

And yet, in a strange way, the guy was onto something. Because for all its antique sources and resonances, "Decasia" is a film absolutely of the moment. In fact, it couldn't have been made a minute sooner: it took precisely this long for time to exert its magnificently inspired ravages upon the source material. This is what this stuff looks like today -- and now here it is, preserved for all eternity.

"Oh, yeah?" Morrison shot back, smiling, when I tried this notion out on him. "Just wait a few years."

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