bernd herzogenrath (ed.)

the films of bill morrison

aesthetics of the archive

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BERND HERZOGENRATH (ED.)

THE FILMS OF BILL MORRISON

Aesthetics of the Archive

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And my heartfelt gratitude and admiration goes to Bill Morrison for all his support and, most of all, for his wonderful art!

All images reproduced courtesy of Bill Morrison and Hypnotic Pictures.

I dedicate this book to Janna and Claudia, and to the memory of Frank.

Part of the Introduction and part of Bernd Herzogenrath's essay already had a previous life in *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* 6 (2014) … republished with kind permission.

Aesthetics of the Archive

An Introduction

Bernd Herzogenrath

Dubbed by Robert Koehler as '[o]ne of the most adventurous American filmmakers' (*Variety* 12/11/11), director Bill Morrison was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1965 and he currently lives in New York. He attended Cooper Union, where he studied painting and animation. After college, he worked with New York's Ridge Theater, making short film backdrops for their avant-garde productions. This work has been recognized with two Bessie awards and an Obie Award.

Morrison's film and multimedia art has been screened at festivals, museums, and concert halls worldwide, including the Sundance Film Festival and the Tate Modern. The Museum of Modern Art has acquired eight of his titles for their permanent collection. The MoMa also hosted a mid-career retrospective of Morrison's work in October-November 2014.

His films are found in the collection of the Walker Art Center and the EYE Film Institute. Morrison has been commissioned to create films for numerous composers, including John Adams, Laurie Anderson, Gavin Bryars, Dave Douglas, Richard Einhorn, Bill Frisell, Michael Gordon, Henryk Gorecki, Vijay Iyer, Jóhann Jóhannsson, David Lang, Harry Partch, Steve Reich, and Julia Wolfe. Morrison has received the Alpert Award, as well as fellowships from Creative Capital, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and the NEA.

Decasia (2002), his feature-length collaboration with composer Michael Gordon, was described by *The Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman as 'the most widely praised American avant-garde film of the *fin-de-siècle*' (Hoberman 2007) and by Oscar-winning filmmaker Errol Morris as maybe 'the greatest movie ever made' (quoted in Weschler 2002). It was also was selected to the US Library of Congress' 2013 National Film Registry, becoming the most modern film named to the list that preserves works of great cultural, historic or aes-

thetic significance to the nation's cinematic heritage. Writing in *The New York Times Magazine*, Lawrence Weschler wrote that watching the film, 'I found myself completely absorbed, transfixed, a pillow of air lodged in my stilled, open mouth.'

In 2013, Morrison was honored with retrospective programs in four different countries: the Walker Art Museum, United States; the Vila Do Conde Short Film Festival, Portugal; the Adelaide Film Festival, Australia; and the Aarhus Film Festival, Denmark.

Morrison's particular 'hand-writing' and style of filmmaking is exhibited in his very idiosyncratic way of using the filmic material, the material carrier – the celluloid strip – as a prime factor in his art, the way that this material disintegrates, decays and, thus, renders a very special and affective quality of the scenes filmed.

*

1995 was an important year for Film and Media Studies in at least two respects. The year when 'the cinema' celebrated its 100th Anniversary, Sony, Philips, Toshiba, and Time Warner agreed on a standard for a data carrier formerly known as Digital *Video* Disk – the DVD [Digital Versatile Disk] that, on the one hand, declared war on 'the cinema as we know it', but, on the other hand, promised salvation: the medium film, having, since its early beginnings, sworn to 'capture' movement and the dynamics of life, had to struggle against its transience more than any other medium. In the year of its 100th Anniversary, the cinema was not only 'old', an 'old-fashioned-next-to-outdated' medium – the films themselves, the collected and archived reliquaries of film history, were in danger of rotting, decaying, and disappearing forever. Judging from the password of film conservationists – 'From the conservation of the medium to the preservation of the content' (Schüller 1994) – the DVD (or, in general: digital media) in fact seemed to be the redeemer for which 'film' had longed. This force field of the hope of 'making the moment stay forever' and the dread of decay, this oscillation of materiality and immateriality, of the animation of the static and the reanimation of *le temps perdu* reenacts – 100 years later – the relation of film, time, life, and death that already had marked the first steps of the medium film; history repeats.

1995 was also the year in which the *Journal of Material Culture* was conceptualized, in order to give a public and interdisciplinary face to a field of research that had already begun to take hold in various disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, geography, etc. During the previous thirteen years, material culture studies advanced to a new, exciting, and highly influential field of cultural studies (see e.g. Brown 2003). Material culture is based

on the premise that the *materiality* of objects is an integrative part and parcel of culture, that the material dimension is as fundamentally important in the understanding of a culture as language or social relations – material culture thus adds a welcomed counterweight and addition to the domination of cultural studies by sociolinguistic constructivism. Materiality's significance is independent of human action or intervention – it is as important to ask how things *do* things (and what kind of things things do), as it is how to do things with words. Objects have a life of their own, a temporality of their own, 'objects change over time, in both their physical composition and their cultural salience' (Eastop 2006).

Since material culture studies mainly focusses on the materiality of everyday objects and their *representation* in the media (literature, film, arts, etc.), a further and important step would be to redirect such an analysis to the materiality of the media *itself*, to put the probing finger not only at the thing *in* representation, but the thing *of* representation. The medium 'film' seems to me most fitting to test such an interface of material culture and media studies, since film has entertained a most complex relation to *time* from its early beginnings onward: film promised to (re)present temporal dynamics – and the temporality of things – *directly*, un*media*ted, a paradox that gives rise to the different 'strategies' of what Deleuze calls the *movement-image* and the *time-image* respectively. Such a representation, however, is not only an effect of a perceptive illusion, but also of the *repression* of the very materiality of film itself, the film stock, an immensely fragile medium that, in the course of its projection-life, is subjected to scratches, burns, etc. – to signs of the times. I will situate this crossbreed of material culture and media studies in the larger framework of Deleuze's *Cinema* books mixed with his 'intelligent materialism'[1] – a hybrid that stays in the family, so to speak, in order, as Régis Debray put it, '[t]o proceed as if mediology could become in relation to semiology what ecology is to the biosphere. Cannot a "mediasphere" be treated like an ecosystem, formed on the one hand by populations of signs and on the other by a network of vectors and material bases for the signs?' (Debray 1996).[2]

FILM: TIME | MOVEMENT

Film: Time | Movement – *Projection*

Since its birth, the cinema has entertained a complex relation with time. First of all, film was seen as a medium *representing* time. Marey's chronophotography can clearly be seen as one of the 'midwives' of film here. By creating ever smaller temporal equi-distances in the measuring, fragmentation, and

representation of time, Marey wanted to lift the veil of the mystery of 'living machines'. According to him, chronophotography proved once and for all that 'motion was only the relation of time to space' (Marey 1884). This puts Marey in direct opposition to Henri Bergson's philosophy of time – Bergson explicitly understood time *not* in its reduction to movement in space. It thus comes as no surprise that Bergson entertained a skeptical or at least ambivalent attitude towards the cinema. In *Creative Evolution* (Bergson 1944) he reveals what he calls the mechanistic 'contrivance of the cinematograph' (332) – it 'calculates' movement out of 'immobility set beside immobility, even endlessly' (331). If, as Marey claims, movement is only 'the relation of time to space', then, Bergson argues in *The Creative Mind* (1992), 'time is made up of distinct parts immediately adjacent to one another. No doubt we still say that they follow one another, but in that case succession is similar to that of the images on a cinematographic film' (18) and this completely misunderstands the fundamental difference between time as becoming, as continuous production of newness in the dynamics of an endless differentiation of life, and time as a 'mechanic' succession of moments 'cut out' of that very continuum. Bergson's *durée* has to be understood as a heterogeneous, qualitative duration that is completely at odds with Marey's quantitative, numeric, and linear conception of time as *temps* [t] – an opposition that finds its filmic equivalent in the tension between the single image and the projected film.

Film: Time | Movement – *Representation*

The classic narrative film *represents* time *in* film with well-known narrative strategies such as organic montage, rational cuts, continuity editing, flashbacks, hence, with the action-reaction model. Even in its connection with more complex *plots* (see *Back to the Future* or *Memento*), narrative film is ultimately based on the concept of an abstract and linear time – exactly what Marey had in mind.

Films based on the action-reaction schema are films that, in the Deleuzian taxonomy, belong to the *movement-image*. Deleuze argues that, when the reality of World War II and its aftermath exceeded our capacity for understanding, traditional forms of cinematic 'cause-and-effect' strategies became irritatingly inappropriate, resulting in the 'crisis of the action-image' (Deleuze 1986, 197) and the breakdown of its corresponding 'realist fundament', the 'sensory-motor schema' (155). Here, continuity was basically the effect of the filmic characters' movement through space – rational intervals ensure continuity and the actors function as differentials to translate dramatic action into movement, propelling a cohesive narrative forward.

As a result, the rational cuts and the continuity of the sensory-motor linkage loosen and collapse – the emerging interval marks the convergence of discontinuous durations and gives way to 'false continuity and irrational cuts' (Deleuze 1986, xi) that uncouple continuity, allowing 'time "in its pure state" [to rise] up to the surface of the screen' (xi). The resulting time-image emerges as something *beyond* movement (see 1-24), an image not defined as a succession of spatial segments, subverting the sensory-motor schema and not treating time as a simple derivative of space. No longer a measure of objects changing their positions *in space*, movement becomes a dynamics of relations *within time*.

Film: Time | Movement – *Preservation*

A further, no less important relation between film and time lies in film's attempt to *preserve* time, in its promise to not only *represent* time, but to *capture* and *freeze* it in its fleeting dynamics. After the first screening of Lumière's *actualités* at the Salon Indien in Paris, 28 December 1895, the daily newspapers celebrated the 'fact' that this new medium, with its possibility to record people 'in life', made death lose its sting. Death is also the central term in André Bazin's discussion of photography and film in his influential essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image'. Bazin here claims an anthropological cause for the arts in general, which he calls a 'mummy complex' (Bazin 2005, 9). Like the 'practice of embalming the dead' (9), which aimed at the 'continued existence of the corporeal body' (9), the image was to provide an almost magical *and* material 'defense against the passage of time' (9). Art as a means to immortalize man – Bazin is catching up with a traditional *topos* here. In contrast to traditional painting's 'obsession with likeness' (12), however, photography rather is a 'molding, the taking of an impression, by the manipulation of light' (12*n*†), an index of a human being or an object. While photography mummifies *the moment*, film is marked by the surplus advantage of conserving *and* simultaneously dynamizing the otherwise static recorded image. The mummy *of* film (like the mummies *in* film) lives – as every film-lover knows and which Bazin knew as well!! Or, as Bazin famously put it, 'the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified, as it were' (15). In the only illustration to Bazin's 'Ontology', we get an image of the Holy Shroud of Turin, which is defined by Bazin as a synthesis of 'relic and photograph' (14*n**). This allows us, I argue, to deduce that Bazin in analogy sees the filmic material, the actual celluloid carrier, as the mummy's shroud or bandage, and the balm or preserving natron as a kind of emulsion that makes possible a direct 'fingerprint' of the real, so that precisely photography's or film's

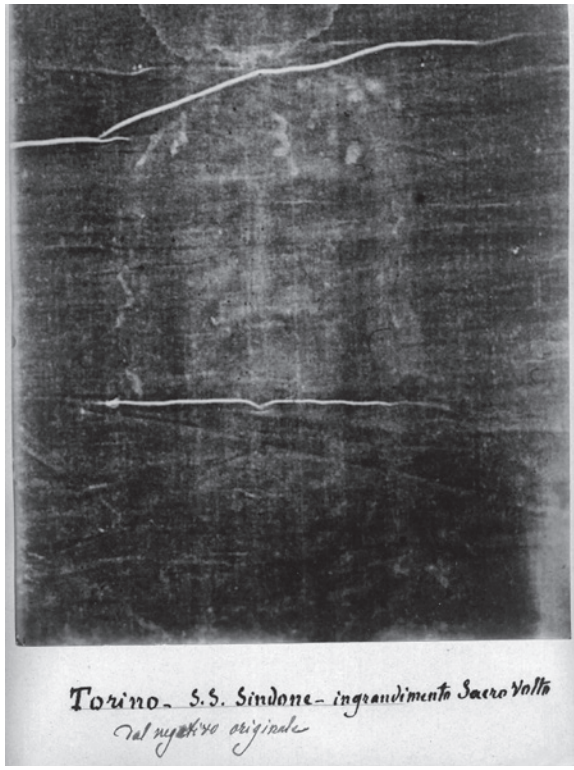

Fig. 1: The Holy Shroud of Turin – a synthesis of 'relic and photograph' (Wiki Commons).

'automatism', devoid of an intervening subject (this coincides with Bazin's idea of realism), makes 'the logical distinction between what is imaginary and what is real [...] disappear' (15). As already mentioned, film 'embalms' time, 'rescuing it simply from its proper corruption' (14), but what if the corruption and entropy proper to time also eat at the mummy's bandages? What if these die and decay, which also means – what if these have *a proper life of their own*?

Film: Time | Movement – *Manifestation*

'This Film is Dangerous!'[3] I am not referring to the contents of movies that supposedly are corrupting our youths, films containing 'scenes of nudity and extreme violence' – I want to focus on the *material* level of film, neither on the level of narration, nor of technology and techniques, but on the fundamental level of the film's *thingness* – the film strip, a.k.a. 'celluloid'. Until approximately 1950, all movies were shot on nitrate film, on nitro-cellulose (commonly referred to as 'celluloid'), a highly flammable material – just remember the

scene in Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* (or Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds*, with its 'Operation Kino'), in which the cinema goes up in flames. Developed in 1899 by George Eastman, the immense advantage of nitrate film was its high quality – no other material provided such brilliance and high amount of shades of gray. But nitro-cellulose consists of cotton, camphor, and acid and is based on the same formula as the so-called 'gun cotton' – nitrate film carries loads of oxygen in its own pockets to fend the flames, so that it even burns under water.

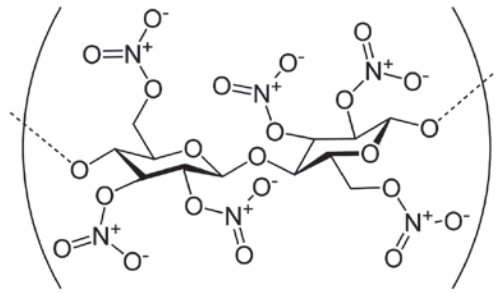

Fig. 2: Nitro-cellulose formula (Wiki Commons).

In addition, once processed, this material is highly sensitive to 'environmental factors': it tends to decompose and deteriorate in dependence of time and environment; it returns to its components – nitro-cellulose, gelatin, and silver emulsion. This process enfolds in various states; it begins with a sepia/amber 'coloration' of the film strip and the fading of filmed images; then the celluloid loses its 'shape', softens, and becomes gooey; next, bubbles and blisters emerge on the surface of the film, the emulsion separating from the nitro-cellulose carrier. In the end, the nitro-cellulose base completely depolymerizes and hardens into the notorious 'hockey pucks' and 'donuts' so dreaded by film archivists, until what is left is just a highly inflammable reddish powder.

Bazin saw the medium of film as a bandage, as a protective skin – in French, the material film strip is referred to as *pellicule* (skin). Since the film – and the skin of film – is also a *thing*, a material object, it is *itself* subjected to time – and to decay – as well. When actors reach an age at which they lose attraction with the audience, they either have a 'skin job' or quit acting. Likewise, films, if time has left too many marks on their surface, are either restored ('embalmed') or taken out of distribution. The entropic process can be slowed down, but it cannot be stopped – and it is exactly these decaying film skins that Bill Morrison uses as basic material for most of his films. Christa Blümlinger, in an important and early appreciation of Morrison's work, evokes the notion

of the 'Poetics of the Ruin' (2009, 37). But Morrison's work does not exhaust itself in that notion – far from it, which is why we rather like to evoke the idea of the 'Aesthetics of the Archive', which, while not shying away from the notion of the passing away of the archive, also focusses on the materiality of the filmic medium. Morrison's work takes film's materiality seriously and lends itself to a 'materialist approach' to media and film studies – representation of time and things *in* film are complemented by a perspective that takes into consideration the temporality of the medium *itself*.

*

The following essays – by film historians, curators, film scholars, and filmmakers – deal with the majority of Morrison's expansive work in a chronological manner, centred by a Photo Essay by Agnès Villette and preluded by André Habib's essay on Morrison's aesthetics of the archive.

ANDRÉ HABIB
DRAFTS AND FRAGMENTS: REFLECTIONS AROUND BILL MORRISON AND THE PAPER PRINT COLLECTION

Between 1992 and 1996, Bill Morrison has sourced material from the Paper Print Collection at the Library of Congress, in the context of the Ridge Theater stage productions or for the production of what was to become *The Film of Her*. Using different materials found in Morrison's *The Film of Her* folder, and drawing parallels between other 'moments' in the history of the avant-garde with regards to the collection (namely Ken Jacobs and Hollis Frampton's interest in those films), André Habib illuminates the ways Morrison has engaged with these films and how, in a sense, his work points to a paradigm shift in the way we envision the relationship between the avant-garde, the Paper Print collection, and the archive.

DAN STREIBLE
THE FILM OF HER (1996)

Despite its brief running time, Bill Morrison's *The Film of Her* is a cabinet of curiosities packed with fleeting glimpses of silent monochromatic movies, wrapped in an elliptical narrative about an unnamed library clerk's search for unnamed footage of an unnamed woman he has desired since seeing her on screen in his boyhood. She is an avant-gardist's MacGuffin, however, a mystery that need not be solved because the film's true purpose is to revel in the oneiric qualities of early cinema artifacts. As such, *The Film of Her* offers Dan Streible an opportunity to examine how the work of Bill Morrison has intersected with the work of film-preservation professionals in the digital era.

BENJAMIN LÉON
GHOST TRIP (2000)

The concept of the 'trip' can have two meanings: one describes a mental transformation of being (a hallucinatory state caused by drugs), while the other covers the idea of an indefinite itinerary, which is associated with the English word *road*. By its structure, Benjamin Léon argues, *Ghost Trip* (2000) literally embarks on an unknown and sinuous quest. The movie is per se a strange object; the story follows the mysterious itinerary of a man who searches for myths in a landscape of undisclosed experiences. Starting with its formal structure, this paper explores the mythical stories that are implied in the images of Morrison's film. On the one hand, the man's travelling quest that leads him to the ocean presents a symbolic meaning of purity and purification according to religious and spiritual traditions. On the other hand, this quest also functions as an attempt to re-enchant space by evoking the wilderness myth in a world in which 'hyperreality' has replaced our conscious capacity to understand and distinguish reality from the imaginary – a world in which the sign-values of our environment seem to correlate with conventional values alienated from capitalism. The key sequence, in which the driver stops in the urban metropolis of Las Vegas, shows this mental and physical alienation of bodies detached from every real emotion. As much a primitive land and space of virginal solitude as a gloomy area for conquest, the notion of wilderness instigates a series of questions about the legitimacy of the concept of original space. The film's loop structure – it opens with a soothing song of a man in a graveyard that is revisited in the last shots – allows us to think about the powers that evolve from this place that is loaded by spirits and other spectral visions. As Morrison has remarked about his film: 'The Driver of a Cadillac hearse journeys from one end of the film to the other, picking up, and finally delivering, a wayward soul. Combining verité filmmaking with a highly stylized visual design, *Ghost Trip* weaves a hallucinatory re-imagining of the American road as a state of Limbo.' Léon's essay tackles the question of how *Ghost Trip* portrays an existential void that embraces the search for the essence of things.

BERND HERZOGENRATH
DECASIA (2002)

This essay focusses on the nexus of film, time, and materiality. Film is, by default, seen as a representation of time – *Decasia* goes a decisive step further by focussing on the temporality of or in the filmic *material*.

Material culture is based on the premise that the *materiality* of objects are an integrative part and parcel of culture, that the material dimension is as fundamentally important in the understanding of a culture as language or social relations – but material culture mainly focusses on the materiality of

everyday objects and their *representation* in the media (literature, film, arts, etc.). Thus, a further and important step would be to redirect such an analysis to the materiality of the media *itself*, to put the probing finger not only at the thing *in* representation, but the thing *of* representation. The medium 'film' seems most fitting to test such an interface of material culture and media studies, since film has entertained a most complex relation to *time* from its early beginnings onward: film promised to (re)present temporal dynamics – and the temporality of things – *directly*, un*media*ted, a paradox that gives rise to the different 'strategies' of what Deleuze calls the *movement-image* and the *time-image* respectively. Such a representation, however, is not only an effect of a perceptive illusion, but also of the *repression* of the very materiality of film itself.

If such an interest in the possibilities of the celluloid had already driven much of the 1960s avant-garde (Brakhage, Jacobs, etc.), *Decasia* not only focusses on film's 'thingness', but also on its own, particular 'temporality'. Reassembled from *found footage* and archive material in various states of 'dying', this film reveals the 'collaboration' of time and matter as 'creative' *in itself* and ultimately produces a category that Bernd Herzogenrath calls the *matter-image* and that, he argues, neither Deleuze's *movement-image*, nor his *time-image* completely grasp: here, time and matter *produce their own filmic image*.

HANS MORGENSTERN
THE MESMERIST (2003)

Morrison's cinema has often been associated with the passage of time and death: the grim inevitable, as it were. But what about dreams and murder? *The Mesmerist* (2003) stands out as an oddity in Morrison's œuvre because it has a plot. Though it features the found art of decaying film, he takes the plot from the original source, *The Bells* (1926) by James Young, and uses decidedly modern techniques of film, rearranged fabula, abstract art, and the modern jazz of Bill Frisell, to create a different kind of film without changing the core of the story on which his film is based.

By looking at both the original film and Morrison's 'revision', Hans Morgenstern shows how Morrison has created a more profound narrative by rearranging the original film into layers and using decayed cellulose nitrate base film. By contrasting and comparing it to *The Bells*, this paper investigates how Morrison has reshaped the original film's plot, while still staying true to his abstract style. Freudian and Lacanian theories of the unconscious and the real are employed to help explain Morrison's story and stylistic choices. Also, Morgenstern describes how Morrison's editing to the music of Bill Frisell helps to clarify and to enhance his story, which still retains enough of his hypnotic style to be a distinctively Morrisonesque picture.

All in all, *The Mesmerist* maintains an integrity to the Morrison style because it still shows a concern for the unconscious. Even with its clear, plot-aware form, *The Mesmerist* can still cast a spell. Moments hardly seen in the sometimes-mutated image invite the viewer to connect with the film on a subtle level while still encouraging interpretation via the editing and a story of conflict. The strength of Morrison's cinema lies in the subtext provided by his choice of working with decayed film, which calls attention to the medium. His work with found art is purposefully sculpted in *The Mesmerist*. He relies on the natural form of aged him on nitrate film, but gives it new context. Though it is a process in decay, there is something between the sources, from the filmed image to the rot that has reshaped it, amorphous but concrete, like the unconscious.

HANJO BERRESSEM

LIGHT IS CALLING (2004)

As with all films, the films of Bill Morrison rely on two main media. On the one hand, the specific film stock that carries the images, on the other, the light that makes the images possible in the first place and thus, albeit in a different manner, might also he said to 'carry' them.

It would perhaps be too easy, however, to set up a dichotomy that sees the first medium as material and the second as immaterial, or, in a similar way, that sees the first as historical – in the way that Morrison's films rely in a fundamental way on the historicity of the specific film stock in terms of its various deteriorations, its processes of aging and the inherent changes that result from these – and the second as ahistorical.

Hanjo Berressem's essay attempts to set up a more complex relation between the various forms of media that are at work in Morrison's movies. Drawing on scientific, philosophical, and artistic theories of light and mediality, such as those of Fritz Heider, Gilles Deleuze, and Niklas Luhman, the first part of the essay will develop the notion of 'media milieus'. Drawing on this notion, the second part will address the technologics, the aesthetics, and the poetics of Bill Morrison's movie *Light is Calling*. The main theoretical reference of this part will be Gilbert Simondon's theory of the suspension of the technical object into a general evolutionary landscape. The reading of Morrison's movie will take its cue from Simondon's highly suggestive statement that '[t]he relationship between thought and life is analogous to the relationship between a structured technical object and the natural environment' (1980, 53).

DAVID GERSTEN
GOTHAM (2004)

David Gersten offers a close reading of Morrison's 2004 film *Gotham* and speculates on the idea of the modern city as a living zoetrope, one that combines film and architecture into a lived experience that may signal a shift in the nature of human nature.

Film and the modern city grew up together and not just as distant cousins, but as siblings and perhaps even as conjoined twins, sharing certain organs, vessels, and connective tissues, living within each other and intertwining in countless ways. As a reflective double of the world living within the world film constitutes a living system of storytelling, memory, and light: part myth, part man, part mirror, a tripartite within a mirror to infinity we call the city.

New York City exists in a continuous state of change. At every given instant, at every given moment, the city gives voice to our transformations. In *Gotham*, Morrison's deep meditation on this city, these voices are made present in the sphere of life, their shadows are captured and cast into the lived space of our shared stories. In perfect duet with Michael Gordon's stunning score, the city speaks in whispers and howls, revealing in its heights, depths, and fragile grounds our own heights, depths, and fragile grounds: the city contains us, moves through us, includes us, speaks for us: as we build the city, the city builds us. These evolutionary translations of human craft and human being are at the heart of *Gotham*; the metropolis imagines itself out of the human and the human bears, is born of, and borne by the city.

JAN-CHRISTOPHER HORAK
OUTERBOROUGH (2005)

Morrison is an archaeologist of cinema. His *Outerborough* references not only the earliest years of cinema history, but also perceptional mechanisms. Reworking a Biograph film from 1899, Morrison transforms the film document into a structuralist meditation on cinematic space that references American avant-garde films of the 1970s. The film is an act of Duchampian appropriation that declares itself to be art. Morrison also points to the fact that the birth of cinema coincides with the development of modern modes of transportation, both technologies radically altering human perception of space and time. Suddenly, the world becomes much smaller. In large metropolitan areas such as New York, Paris, and London, humans, architecture, and transportation are seemingly stacked over and under each other, increasing the speed of movement through space and time. Not surprisingly, both modernist art and early cinema, at least in part, embraced the resulting fragmentation of vision as a consequential modification of human perception. Yet, through early cinema and its mechanisms of perception, which emphasized

visual pleasure and spectacle, audiences were able to confront their fears of a constantly changing environment and leave the cinema unharmed. By recuperating a lost object, Jan-Christopher Horak argues, *Outerborough* reminds us of those early moments of discovery.

YASMIN AFSHAR
THE HIGHWATER TRILOGY (2007)

Morrison's 2006 film *The Highwater Trilogy* exposes the medium of film to and in its existential condition: the liquid. The exceptional states evoked by the forces of water on the image level and the material decay of the emulsified celluloid film-strip fuse the episodes in an at once disturbingly repelling and compelling way, confronting the viewer with the impotency of man to master the ephemerality of life. The film is heading 'towards disaster', incorporating a ruinous state on the brink of collapsing into chaos. The process of ruination that includes the fragile media-material itself, however, not only appears as a merely destructive force; by presenting the film strip as a testing ground for the creative agency of the material decay that produces visual effects of blisters and melting in dissonant patterns, Morrison's film calls for the refurnishing potential of corrosive processes. According to Yasmin Afshar, disaster, despite its devastating and shameful consequences for the natural and social ecosystems that it affects, is not definite – (some little) life always continues – it is a chance for reorganization and renewal, introducing a Bergsonian life-force (Bergson 1944) that transforms the incontrollable 'wet ontology' (Steinberg and Peters 2015) in these images into a point of departure for critical remembering and rebuilding. The material ecology of ruination and disaster in *The Highwater Trilogy* is thus inevitably entangled with the social and urgently calls for an eco-sensitized perspective on how we may constructively interact and relate with the ruins of the past that point to our future. In Morrison's film, the liquid therefore far exceeds a metaphorical meaning that addresses the fluidity of the moving image. As a dynamic assemblage, it invites a rethinking of conventional anthropocentric understandings of ecology as concerning merely the natural surroundings in which humans live. The natural and the social form complex networks which redefine our perspective on human and non-human agency.

WILLIAM CUSICK
PORCH (2007)

Porch is a poetic short film combining 8mm home-movie footage with Julia Wolfe's haunting minimalist score in an exploration of the changing shape of the American home, set to a libretto by Deborah Artman. *Porch* is Morrison's only film comprised entirely of archival home-movie footage, a subgenre of

found-footage filmmaking with rapidly developing theory and criticism. The impact of the evolving concept of collective memory on archival practice is considered as it relates to the appropriation of home movies into new films. As William Cusick shows, in the creation of *Porch,* the progressive programs and collaborative approach of The Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives crucially allowed Morrison to identify specific themes in their expanding archive of home-movie materials. *Porch* exemplifies the artistic possibilities for artistic and institutional collaboration in constructing representations of collective memory using home movies as a common language.

AGNÈS VILLETTE

THE FUTURE LASTS LONG: THE ROMANOV LOST FAMILY ARCHIVES

Last May, while Bill Morrison was in London for the release of his selected works by the BFI (British Film Institute), he invited Agnès Villette to come along to a few meetings he had in town. Villette then got the chance to follow him on his search for archives for future projects. For her, it was fascinating to observe Morrison work: to witness how an evanescent frame caught while viewing archives could, years later, become part of a feature film, or how a line in an article could arrest Morrison's imagination so much that he would track the private collector to meet him in London. That line, published by the Guardian a few months before, had mentioned a forgotten archive suddenly resurfacing somewhere in Moscow. As an agent for the Russian collector was trying to sell it, extracts were available to potential clients in London. Seen from the comfort of a London office, the shaky images of the Romanov Imperial Family captured a few years before the Russian revolution, invoked the shadow of their exile and assassination and operated a strange conflagration of time, space, memory, and historical channeling. The return of forgotten and lost fractions of this historical era resonated strangely with the current Russian expansionist politics. Then, one image detached itself from the military parades and the lengthy high-society ceremonies. A group of children were jumping in a pond, splashing around, laughing, and playing. On a wooden pier, looking at them with envy, stood another child, dressed up, under the close scrutiny of his minder. Replaying the sequence, Morrison and Villette observed young prince Alexei, forbidden to play with his comrades because he was hemophiliac.

Concentrated and immersed, Villette could witness how one frame totally absorbed Bill Morrison and how, in a fraction of second, he knew exactly how that lonely child from an earlier century would reenact, through the power of cinema, the same desolation and intensity, as at the moment it was shot.

ANDREA PIERRON
WHO BY WATER (2007)

Who By Water is a short seventeen-minute film produced in 2007 and accompanied by an original soundtrack composed by Michael Gordon. In this film, Morrison worked with newsreel footage shot for the Fox Movietone Newsreels Outtakes, which are now collected and conserved in the Archives of the University of Carolina Newsfilm Library. *Who By Water* reedits footage from the same outtake and reconstructs the arrival at land and departure of a ship in the early 20th century. In between the aperture and the conclusion of the film, the camera enters the ship in order to portray its passengers either within group shots or individually. Throughout the film, Andrea Pierron argues, the various deteriorations of the film celluloid display cracks, marks, and burned holes on the stripe and thus on the recorded figures. The decayed matter interplays with the individual figures progressively veiling, distorting, or even discarding them. Thus it implies an ongoing tension between the evolution of cinematic matter and figurative processes. The unfolding gallery of successive portraits is also based on an underlying tension between individual and collective memory processes as well as between history and mythology. In other words, as the distortions impact the figures and reveal their inner evolving cinematic matter, it turn images into historical materials in the building of collective representation and implicitly conflict and reflect upon its mythological storytelling dimensions.

BENJAMIN BETKA
EVERY STOP ON THE F TRAIN (2008)

Morrison's *Every Stop on the F Train* is a short film with one of the greatest stars in the United States – Manhattan. Morrison's film grants a peculiar look at, and thereby a meticulous documentation of, the realities of Manhattan or urban life en bloc. However, as Benjamin Betka observes, a more cumbersome topic is negotiated here. As an audiovisual essay, this work does not illustrate or propel a distinct philosophical treatise as it is rather a constructive phenomenological provocation. *Every Stop on the F-Train* deals with the position of the mind as immersed (or rather manifest) in sound, vision, time, and place, which can be researched within the unique capacities of film. Playful but also rigorous, machinic but also of humble elegance, this film reworks the linked concepts of motion pictures and locomotion. It destabilizes unquestioned notions of the viewer, content, direction, and directing, thereby harnessing the deeper potential of the medium.

Object-oriented ontologies sketch a cosmos of abundant but inhuman entities. Four-folded or even hyperobjects dissolve any human-centred worlds or agendas and even mundane and beaten subway trains can argue for this

elegantly. The scheduled F-train is more than a mere container – it is rather a medium that blends commuters and the city into a humming maze.

BÉRÉNICE REYNAUD
SPARK OF BEING (2010)

As Morrison – aiming to 'merge text and form' – mimics the process of fabrication of the Frankenstein's Creature by 'stitching together' footage of heterogeneous origins, Bérénice Reynaud's essay aims to produce a meta-discourse on this process by 'stitching together' fragments of other narratives: two short stories by Jorge Luis Borges and notes on an exhibition curated about the concept of 'bachelor machine'.

As these texts pertain to the notion of 'the monstrous', they also displace it outside of the realm of the 'patent' text of the Frankenstein myth, toward issues of the circularity of the gaze, the question of who dreamt the dreamer, and the violent obsessions that mark 'the age of mechanical reproduction'.

Morrison displaces the terrain from the filmic (metaphorical illustrations of a narrative) onto the pro-filmic (the conditions in which the footage was taken and film made), shifting the question of 'the monstrous' from the creature to the cinematic apparatus itself.

SIMON POPPLE
THE MINERS' HYMNS (2011)

The Miners' Hymns (2010) is a collaborative evocation of the working lives and landscape of the Durham Coalfields. It was commissioned for the 30th anniversary of the 1984-1985 Miners' Strike, the final act that marked the end of the coalfield and a traditional way of life. Through the use of archive and an evocative score, the film exposes key elements of that tradition and the role the archive plays in the telling of their story. Simon Popple explores the nature of the collaboration, the role of the archive, and the universality of its subject.

JOHANNES BINOTTO
TRIBUTES – PULSE (2011)

Picking up on the psychoanalytic concept of death-drive, as discussed by Freud and Lacan, Johannes Binotto examines the ways in which the film *Tributes–Pulse: A Requiem for the 20th Century* uses decomposing film material, not as a final state, but rather as a new beginning for cinema. Similar to the death-drive's capacity to transcend the common dichotomy of life and death, Morrison's film keeps the disintegrating images alive in their process of dying. Dying thus proves to be the very opposite of death: not some ultimate break but an active process, which can be prolonged, paused, and extended into eternity. Accordingly, the film's haunting soundtrack by Danish com-

poser Simon Christensen also plays with similar paradoxes. Thus, the title's 'pulse' can be understood, as the irresistible, undead beat of the drive itself, which has no other goal than its own circular movement. It is the film's pulse that connects what has before been considered opposites: past and present, form and content, depiction and depicted, birth and decay.

EVA HOFFMANN
JUST ANCIENT LOOPS (2012)

Just Ancient Loops is the result of the collaboration between Morrison and Michael Harrison, whereby the former contributed the imagery and the latter his music. The extraordinary Maya Beiser performed the multilayered cello composition.

Morrison's imagery combines decaying nitrate celluloid found-footage and high-definition CGI animation based on NASA data to juxtapose peoples' question of existence with the attempts of science and religion to provide answers.

The film is a ternary audiovisual symphony with great emphasis on the interplay between the music and the visuals. Together, the three parts – a largo *Genesis*, an allegro *Chorale*, and the largo final *Ascension* – present different views on heaven.

In *Just Ancient Loops*, the audio and visual levels are equally important and complement each other. Here, as Eva Hoffmann argues, the music is neither only accompanying the images, like a soundtrack in a film, nor are the images just expressions of the music, as is commonly the case in music videos. Morrison's imagery and Harrison's composition create, through multifold bilateral reference, a phenomenon here titled as über-*synchresis.* This signifies the allegoric self-reflexivity and syncretic reflexivity of the visual, audio, and theoretical-narrative level. The term has been elaborated on grounds of the acronym *synchresis* by the film theorist Michel Chion in order to describe a permanent correlation between music and image.

SUKHDEV SANDHU
THE GREAT FLOOD (2013)

Taking its cue from artist Roni Horn's claim that water induces a 'vertigo of meaning' that is both generative and destabilizing, this associative essay about Bill Morrison's *The Great Flood* (2013) hinges on two televisual outbursts: Celine Dion, on CNN's *Larry King Live*, taking to task the American military-industrial complex for its refusal to intervene forcefully in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; and a black gentleman, who appears in Spike Lee's *When The Levees Broke* (2006), who has been displaced from his home after Katrina – 'I'm an American. How can I be a refugee?' Sukhdev Sandhu's

essay interlaces three hydropolitical disasters – The Great Flood in 1927, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and Hurricane Sandy in 2012 – to explore the limits of quantificatory approaches to extreme environmental events and to examine shared patterns of state violence against black and working-class Americans.

The collection finishes off with an interview with Bill Morrison by acclaimed writer Lawrence Weschler, who commissioned Morrison's *Re:Awakenings* (2013), a short film inspired by the work of Oliver Sacks, with music selected by Philip Glass.

NOTES

1 'Intelligent materialism' not because it is more intelligent than other 'materialisms', but because it grants intelligence and agency to matter itself.

2 Debray further proposes – 'We speak about Earth Day. Why not tomorrow, no pleasantry intended, a day London devoted to celebrating celluloid, vellum paper, or vinyl records?' (Debray 1996, 114).

3 See Smither 2002.

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