

# The 19<sup>th</sup> British Silent Film Festival



## *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016)

Friday 15 September, 1.30pm



Dawson City: Frozen Time (Bill Morrison, 2016) Courtesy Kathy Jones Gates/Hypnotic Pictures/Picture Palace Pictures

**Directed** by Bill Morrison, 120 mins, USA 2016

A Kino Lorber release of a Hypnotic Pictures, Picture Palace Pictures production.

**Producers:** Madeleine Molyneaux, Bill Morrison.

**Screenwriter:** Bill Morrison. **Music:** Alex Somers. **Editor:** Bill Morrison

**With** Bill Morrison, Kathy Jones-Gates, Sam Kula, Michael Gates, Bill O'Farrell.

Extracts from Owen Gleiberman, *Variety*, Reviewed at IFC Center, New York, June 16, 2017:

*Bill Morrison's haunting found-footage documentary links a gold rush to the dawn of cinema and the rise of the modern age.*

*Dawson City: Frozen Time* is a one-of-a-kind curio of a movie that captures, through a collage of photographs, silent documentary footage, and pre-talkie Hollywood film, the story of a Canadian mining town from the 1890s up through the early decades of the 20th century. But it's really telling the story of the birth of the modern age, and the remarkable thing is that the movie acquires the quality of a time machine. You don't just watch "Dawson City." You step into it to and draw back a magical curtain on the past, entering a

world of buried memory that's the precursor to our own. The film emerged out of the accidental discovery of a raw cinematic treasure trove. In 1978, in the Canadian mountain town of Dawson City, a construction worker in a backhoe was churning through the ground of what had once been an indoor swimming pool housed at the local athletic centre. There, he uncovered a pile of lost film reels, a number of them unspooled in the dirt. They turned out to be newsreels, old silent movies (in some cases, the only copies in existence of films by D.W. Griffith and Tod Browning, among others), and documentary images of the town, which director Bill Morrison, the poet-interpolator of found footage best known for "Decasia" (2002), has assembled and layered into a kaleidoscope of history. He tells the story of the Klondike Gold Rush, and the ramshackle dawn of cinema, and the surprising ways that those two things come together.

From 1896-1899, the gold rush drew 100,000 men to the Yukon, a Canadian wilderness of frigid temperatures and snowy avalanches just 175 miles south of the Arctic Circle. The vast majority of the prospectors went home empty-handed, and more than a few perished. On some level you can't help but think: The folly of it all! But what "Dawson City" records is the early stirrings of a dream of monetary democracy. There was a previous gold rush, of course — the legendary California Gold Rush — but it took place from 1848-1855, too early in the century to be filmed. In watching the Klondike Gold Rush unfold before our eyes, we bear witness to the gleam of something new: a naïve kind of avarice, or maybe a shared promise of the future. The film's extraordinary musical score, by Alex Somers, consists of haunting blocks of chords that sound like they're being played on a glass harmonica, and they lend the movie the quality of a dream.

Dawson City, built on the profits of gold (and on the prospect of further riches, which soon collapsed), sprung up as a Western town full of gambling and prostitution, and the fact that we're glimpsing the real-life version of the most mythological of all Hollywood movie settings — the "wild" West, in this case the Canadian Northwest — is the first of many metaphors that roll through "Dawson City." Much of the footage we're seeing was nitrate, which is famously luminous and flammable; those films resulted in several raging fires, and Dawson City itself kept burning down. The wealth made in the area had a lasting influence: It includes the Trump family fortune and those of the Hollywood theater impresarios Sid Grauman and Alexander Pantages. Dawson City, in "Dawson City," becomes a pipe-dream village where gold breeds the aspirational hunger of the new century, which breeds the impassioned mirror of motion pictures.

*Programme note compiled by Jenny Stewart*



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