

The 19th British Silent Film Festival



The Great Flood

Friday 15 September, 4pm



USA, 2012, 80mins

Directed by Bill Morrison, 80mins

Production company: Hypnotic Pictures

Producer: Phyllis Oyama

Editor: Bill Morrison

Music: Bill Frisell

Extracts from Sukhdev Sandhu, *Sight and Sound*, April 2014:

At first, it was called the Mississippi River Flood. That didn't capture the immensity of its devastation, the Biblical ruination it wrought. In time it became known as the Great Flood. Between the summers of 1926 and 1927, 16.5 million acres across seven states of the US were submerged. More than 14 per cent of Arkansas lay beneath water. Nashville's Cumberland River stood over 17 metres. Hundreds died and more than 600,000 were dislocated, many forever.

The New York-based filmmaker is one of the world's foremost aestheticians of decay and disappearance. *Decasia* (2002) was a ghostly valentine to old nitrate films: at exactly the moment when digital media was being (falsely) championed for its stability, Morrison was creating rapturous, arrhythmic visual poetry out of the fragility of film and all its streaks, flares, bubbles and decompositional effects.

Morrison's latest project, *The Great Flood*, exists because natural disasters are visual feasts, catnip for adventurous filmmakers. Cameramen from across and beyond America travelled to the South to document the unfolding drama. Morrison includes footage of levees being dynamited with the goal of submerging small towns in order to save New Orleans. He shows Herbert Hoover, who would become president in 1929, posing for photographers.

Most of all, he's assembled a gorgeous selection of dark pastoral: plaintive landscapes full of trees rendered mobile, main streets where all that's visible are the roofs of cold-storage warehouses, empty bank buildings. As with photographs of abandoned Detroit or Cold War architecture in the Soviet Union, there co-exists here both rapture and melancholy, beauty and bathos.

With the exception of one buzzy sequence in which another 1920s is mapped out via the pages of a Sears, Roebuck catalogue – fashionable, metro-moderne, consumerist – *The Great Flood*, helped by a moody score from jazz guitarist and long-time Morrison collaborator Bill Frisell, adopts a more rueful, ruminative approach. Morrison can do this because, nearly 90 years later, what happened in 1926-27 doesn't seem as divisive or politically combustible as it once did. With the benefit of hindsight, he can even suggest that this might not have been a disaster at all; indeed, for thousands of black Americans, the Great Flood was a grand liberation, the trigger for them to throw off the shackles of servitude and head north to cities such as Chicago.

Programme note compiled by Jenny Stewart

About Bill Morrison:



Bill Morrison's work typically re-purposes archival film footage, which is then edited to the work of contemporary composers. "Decasia" (67 min, 2002), a collaboration with composer Michael Gordon, was selected to the US Library of Congress' 2013 National Film Registry. "The Great Flood" (78 min, 2013), a collaboration with guitarist / composer Bill Frisell, won the Smithsonian Ingenuity Award of 2014 for historical scholarship.

FILMOGRAPHY

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) *The Great Flood* (2013, 78 min, B/W, HD) *Re:Awakenings* (2013, 18 min, B/W & color, HD) *Just Ancient Loops* (2012, 26 min, B/W & color, 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, DVD) *Release* (2010, 13 min, B/W, HD) *Every Stop On The F Train* (2008, 5 min, color, DVD) *Dystopia* (2008, 30 min, B/W & color, DVD) *Fuel* (2007, 25 min, color, DVD) *Who By Water* (2007, 18 min, B/W, DVD) *Porch* (2006, 9 min, color, DVD) *The Highwater Trilogy*

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. "The Great Flood" (78 min, 2013), a collaboration with guitarist / composer Bill Frisell, won the Smithsonian Ingenuity Award of 2014 for historical scholarship. "Decasia" (67 min, 2002), a collaboration with the composer Michael Gordon, was selected to the US Library of Congress' 2013 National Film Registry. "Spark of Being" (68 min, 2010), a collaboration with trumpeter / composer Dave Douglas, won the Los Angeles Film Critics Award for Best Independent Film of 2011.

"What makes Morrison a great filmmaker, though, is not merely his application of restoration hardware but his brilliant exercise of symphonic software. His footage is silent. His films are not. He has a remarkably astute sense of music. The only major directors with a comparably original ear are probably Jean-Luc Godard and Peter Greenaway."

Mark Swed, *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 2014

Bill Morrison's films often combine rare archival material set to contemporary music. His work was recently honoured with a mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, NY, from October 2014 – March 2015.



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