



Cinema Redivivus: Bill Morrison and Early Cinema's Spectral Return

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This article involves an investigation into the work of contemporary moving-image artist Bill Morrison, who resuscitates nineteenth-century visual technologies by engaging with cinematic remains, reconfiguring historical footage into evocative films where the spectral past emerges. To illustrate these issues, my investigation focuses on two films: *Light is Calling* (2004) and *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016). Whether it is footage found in archives, buried for decades in the frozen Canadian Yukon, or preserved in film canisters deep in the ocean's waters, Morrison's work displays the striking image of photochemical disintegration over the decades, while simultaneously unpacking the buried histories imprinted on it. At a time when cinema has already transitioned to digital technologies, and when many film theorists have announced the 'death' of historical cinema, I argue that Morrison continues to engage with cinema's photochemical legacy as it was invented in the nineteenth century. By using cinematic remains to revivify its historical materialities and conditions, Morrison, moreover, closely connects his contemporary work to many of the unique spectator and reception conditions witnessed at the birth of cinema in the late nineteenth century. Set against the faded decay of photochemical cinema, I argue, the apparition of historical cinema returns.



Invented at the end of the nineteenth century, the art of cinematic moving images emerged in tandem with numerous other mechanical and technical innovations of the era. However, since the first public film screening held by the Lumière Brothers in 1895 at the Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris, cinema has gone through numerous dramatic changes. Indeed, many film historians and theorists have argued that the transition from its original nineteenth-century photochemical and celluloid material form to its newer dematerialized digital configuration over the last two decades has signalled a kind of death to cinema. Ever since the mid-1990s, cinema's death has been prophetically announced, as when Garrett Stewart writes, 'Moving pictures in memoriam: 1895–1995. Since then, the digital increasingly edges out the photochemical.'¹ Having encompassed the late nineteenth century through to the early twenty-first century, just over one hundred years, Laura Mulvey notes that 'the life-span of film and photography [...] has been comparatively short, [...] beginning [with] the fixing of the indexical image, and [ending with] the perfect imitation of the indexical image by digital technology'.²

Nevertheless, even after this so-called 'death' there are several contemporary moving-image artists who continue to engage with the legacy of photochemical cinema. To that end, my purpose here is to investigate the work of contemporary moving-image artist Bill Morrison, who revisits nineteenth-century technologies by engaging with historical cinema's material remains, reconfiguring found and archival footage into evocative films where images recorded in the past re-emerge within a contemporary context. Whether the footage is found in archives or preserved in film canisters deep in the ocean's waters, Morrison's films display the striking image of photochemical disintegration while simultaneously inviting contemporary audiences to form new perspectives on historical material. Fittingly, Morrison's engagement with cinema's historical materialities also closely connects his contemporary work to some of the unique spectator and reception conditions witnessed at the moment of cinema's birth in the late nineteenth century. To illustrate these issues, my investigation will focus on two of Morrison's films. The earlier film, *Light is Calling* (2004) was created from the reconfigured footage of a decomposed film print (Fig. 1). Accompanied by an arresting score by Michael Gordon, Morrison's eight-minute film illustrates the decayed beauty of photochemical cinema. As ghostly figures materialize from and dissolve into the degenerated emulsion, the film seems to affirm André Bazin's belief that the photochemical image was formed by 'a molding, the taking of an impression, by the manipulation of light'.³ The latter film, *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016), was constructed out of footage that was found buried beneath the frozen permafrost in the

¹ Garrett Stewart, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 55.

² Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (Reaktion, 2006), p. 31.

³ André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume One*, sel. and trans. by Hugh Gray (University of California Press, 1967), pp. 9–16 (p. 12).

Canadian Yukon for almost half a century (Fig. 2). The mummified film material — which contained 372 film titles from cinema's silent era on 533 reels — was discovered in Dawson City by excavation and construction crews in 1978 and subsequently identified as 'The Dawson Film Find' (Fig. 3). With a score by Alex Somers — known for their collaborations with the Icelandic band Sigur Rós — the two-hour long film revives the found footage into a complex account that weaves between the histories of its own discovery with those of the North American frontier and early cinema.



Fig. 1: *Light is Calling* (2004), dir. Bill Morrison. © Bill Morrison.



Fig. 2: *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016), dir. Bill Morrison. © Bill Morrison.



Fig. 3: The Dawson Film Find (c. 1978). Photograph courtesy of Kathy Jones Gates.

In using cinematic remains like this, Morrison's work engages with the historical specificity of photochemical and celluloid materiality, which from around 1826 to 2005 was dominated by physical elements, organic compounds, chemicals, and mechanical apparatuses. These included flexible nitrate- and later acetate-based celluloid filmstrips, silver halides, salts, gelatin (manufactured from cow's hoofs), laboratories, and more. The materiality of historical cinema significantly contrasts with the digital image, which, film historian Eivind Røssaak writes, is 'addressed, not by light and shadow as in the photochemical process, but by computer algorithms, which carry out manipulations and alterations'.⁴ Produced from sequenced binary code, the digital image does not seem to inspire the same radiant attribution that Bazin would use to describe the photochemical image when he wrote of it as a 'veritable luminous impression in light'.⁵ If photochemical cinema is indeed dead, as several theorists and historians claim, my intention in this article is to investigate how Morrison uses its physical remnants to revivify its historical materialities and conditions. He does so, however, I would argue, by engaging with historical cinema as an already spectral form.

There are numerous frameworks through which one can engage spectrality and cinema. Related to other technological inventions of the nineteenth century — whether telegraphic, sonic, or electric — cinema has long sustained a relationship to 'the spectral'. Tom Gunning, Jeffrey Sconce, and other film and media theorists have

⁴ Eivind Røssaak, 'Algorithmic Culture: Beyond the Photo/Film Divide', in *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms*, ed. by Røssaak (Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 187–203 (p. 190).

⁵ André Bazin, 'Theater and Cinema: Part Two', in *What is Cinema?*, sel. and trans. by Gray, pp. 95–124 (p. 96).

argued that the scientific and technological advances of modernity produced tandem spiritualist, occult, and ‘pre-modern’ social responses that arose in response to the uncanny nature of technology itself. Gunning writes that ‘in the 1890s, new forces became manifest, a new world of invisible, intangible energies [...] became part of everyday life’.⁶ With their capacities to penetrate physical barriers, to communicate disembodied sound across invisible wavelengths, to create illumination through unseen currents, and to mechanically reproduce worldly likenesses, new technologies like the X-ray, the wireless radio, wax cylinder recordings, electricity, photography, and cinema seemed to engender ghostly otherworlds. Thus, the invention of photography gave rise to the tandem ‘spirit’ photography movement and the invention of the telegraph influenced the rise of telepathic mediums, many of whom were women. Sconce writes that ‘sound and image without material substance [...] often evoke the supernatural’ and that, moreover, ‘the disembodying power of telegraphy [...] held a special attraction for women, many of whom would use the idea of the spiritual telegraph to imagine social and political possibilities beyond the immediate material restrictions placed on their bodies.’⁷

As one of the new nineteenth-century technologies, cinema’s ghostly qualities were enhanced by its material structure and illusionistic form; as Gunning writes, cinema’s shadowy images emerged on the screen solely through ‘projected electric light’.⁸ Such spectral undercurrents were already evident in a wide range of pre-cinematic illusionistic phenomena. Étienne-Gaspard Robertson’s eighteenth-century Parisian-based phantasmagoria, for example, succeeded in frightening audiences by projecting eerie images through candle-illuminated magic lanterns. Terry Castle suggests that ‘the technology of phantasmagoric illusion [...] provided the inspiration for early cinematography’, further noting that, perhaps because of this, ‘the ghost-connection never entirely disappeared.’ Consequently, Castle continues, ‘in various ways, the new medium of motion pictures continued to acknowledge and reflect on its “spectral” nature and origins.’⁹ Many eyewitness accounts from early film screenings corroborate this. At a Lumière screening in the summer of 1896 at the Nizhny-Novgorod Fair, Maxim Gorky wrote, ‘Last evening, I was in the Kingdom of the Shadows. If one could

⁶ Tom Gunning, ‘Animating the Nineteenth Century: Bringing Pictures to Life (or Life to Pictures?)’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 36.5 (2014), pp. 459–72 (p. 460), doi:[10.1080/08905495.2014.974946](https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2014.974946).

⁷ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 4, 25–26.

⁸ Gunning, ‘Animating the Nineteenth Century’, p. 460.

⁹ Terry Castle, ‘Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie’, *Critical Inquiry*, 15.1 (1988), pp. 26–61 (pp. 40–41, 42) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343603>> [accessed 4 September 2025].

only convey the strangeness of this world [...]. Not life, but the shadow of life. Not life's movement, but a sort of mute specter.'¹⁰

The ghostlike quality to the cinematic image created, as Gunning argues, an 'uncanny dialectic of the visible and the invisible introduced by technologically mediated images'.¹¹ On one side of this 'dialectic' several theorists claim that the evidentiary power of the photochemically registered image affirmed the reality it imprinted. Functioning as a kind of existential imprint of 'the real', Thierry de Duve would write that 'the photograph is the result of an indexical transfer, a graft off natural space'.¹² Nevertheless, such an image, Gunning argues, remained somewhat otherworldly, writing that

if photography emerged as the material support for a new positivism, it was also experienced as an uncanny phenomenon [...] creating a parallel world of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses [...]. At the same time that the daguerreotype recorded the visual nature of material reality it also seemed to dematerialize it, to transform it into a ghostly double.¹³

Because historical photochemical cinema was itself constructed out of the frames of photographic stills, the projected filmstrip worked to the same effect: it 'was radically de-materialized, no longer a tangible object, but a picture formed entirely of light'.¹⁴

Photochemical, photographic, and cinematic ontologies are therefore paradoxically situated between what appears present, factual, and real, but that simultaneously appears absent, spectral, and ephemeral. Nonetheless, because each medium imprints impressions of 'the real' — either as a fixed moment in time (photography) or as durational and across time (cinema) — each medium functions to preserve images of the past. For Roland Barthes, the photograph's engagement with the past was most evident in its formal ability to fix a moment of time into stillness, which, to him, always implied a kind of deathliness, writing that the photographic image had 'something to do with resurrection'.¹⁵ For Bazin, the photograph 'embalms time, rescuing it simply from

¹⁰ Peter Edidin, 'Confounding Machines: How the Future Looked', *New York Times*, 28 August 2005.

¹¹ Tom Gunning, 'To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision', *Grey Room*, 26 (2007), pp. 94–127 (p. 98), doi:[10.1162/grey.2007.1.26.94](https://doi.org/10.1162/grey.2007.1.26.94).

¹² Thierry de Duve, 'Time Exposure and the Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox', *October*, 5 (1978), pp. 113–25 (p. 118), doi:[10.2307/778649](https://doi.org/10.2307/778649).

¹³ Tom Gunning, 'Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny', in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. by Patrice Petro (Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 42–71 (pp. 42–43).

¹⁴ Gunning, 'Animating the Nineteenth Century', p. 461.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (Noonday Press, 1988), p. 79.

its proper corruption'. Cinema was consequently an imprint of a particular duration or, as he would put it, 'change mummified'.¹⁶ The dissociation between the real and unreal, between the evidential and the ghostly, increases with cinema precisely because of its relationship to motion. Unlike photographic stillness, cinema's ability to convey movement creates the impression that what was recorded in the past can re-emerge in the present. With its semblance of liveness notwithstanding, such a 'mummification' of durational time inevitably draws cinema back to the past. Gunning reminds us that Jean-Luc Godard defined cinema as the 'visualization of "death at work"'.¹⁷ In cinema, the imprinted past is revived into living animated movement and the dead return, as if improbably alive.

Issues around spectrality are thus deeply woven into historical cinema's material ontologies and, as such, implied in Morrison's resuscitation of its physical remains. It is significant that Morrison not only resurrects cinema's original material form, itself spectral in nature, but that he also resurrects the residue of historical content that was originally imprinted on the filmstrips. With this doubled perspective — positioned between material and historical remains — I would like to frame my investigation of Morrison's work by borrowing from Jacques Derrida's discourse on spectrality and 'hauntings'. Formulated in his foundational 1993 book, *Specters of Marx*, this publication inaugurated what many theorists identify as 'the spectral turn', whereby

certain features of ghosts and haunting — such as their liminal position between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality [...] — quickly came to be employed across the humanities and social sciences to theorize a variety of social, ethical, and political questions.¹⁸

Foremost is the idea that the 'spectral' encompasses a temporality that is backwards facing; that it is a temporality of returning. 'And this being-with specters', Derrida argues, 'would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.'¹⁹ This suggests the return of something that might appear to have ended, but is, in fact, enduring or unresolved. Advancing this view, sociologist Avery Gordon

¹⁶ Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', pp. 14, 15.

¹⁷ Tom Gunning, 'Ghosts, Photography and the Modern Body', in *The Disembodied Spirit*, ed. by Alison Ferris (Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2003), pp. 8–19 (p. 17) <<https://digitalcollections.bowdoin.edu/view/2270/the-disembodied-spirit>> [accessed 4 September 2025].

¹⁸ María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, 'Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities', in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. by del Pilar Blanco and Peeren (Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 1–27 (p. 2).

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Routledge, 1994), p. xviii.

writes that ‘ghosts are characteristically attached to the events, things, and places that produced them in the first place; by nature, they are haunting reminders of lingering trouble [...] in which a repressed or unresolved social violence [makes] itself known’.²⁰ Such ghosts and conditions from the past, Derrida writes, exist ‘*after*: that is, in a necessarily second generation, originarily late’ which later generations are ‘therefore destined to *inherit*’ (p. 24, emphases in original). Because the spectral is encountered only ‘after’ it already was, it is ‘a question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because *it begins by coming back*’ (p. 11, emphases in original). Derrida defines this persistence of the past as ‘hauntology’, a conceptualization of the past that formulates its return as a spectral haunting. Yet in order to re-encounter the past, Derrida argues, something must return. This process, he writes, ‘consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present’ (p. 9).

By resurrecting historical photochemical cinema — as well as the content once imprinted upon it — I suggest here that Morrison’s films function precisely in this ‘hauntological’ manner; that is, by ‘ontologizing’ cinematic remains, his films ‘return’ images of the recorded past in order to make them, once again, ‘present’. As critic Dan Schindel writes, in Morrison’s films ‘the past is both dead and present’.²¹ This is the case with *Light is Calling*, an experimental film created out of fragments from a 35 mm silent-era film titled *The Bells*, originally directed by James Young in 1926. The film — which featured the iconic actors Lionel Barrymore and Boris Karloff — was itself based on a French play titled *Le Juif polonais*, created more than half a century earlier in 1867. Set in Austria, the film revolves around the murder of a Polish Jewish traveller by Mathias, an indebted innkeeper, who kills him for the gold hidden in his money belt. Haunted by the memory of the murder, and later pursued by a mesmerist hired by the dead man’s brother to find the killer, Mathias dies at the end of the film.

Significantly, the original French play incorporated many nineteenth-century social issues into its plot: the rise of capital, the growth of a mercantile class (with its attendant stereotypical associations between Jews and money), nation-state identities, xenophobia, and more are all implied in the fraught narrative. Attesting to the long-standing endurance of the original work, the play was translated, restaged, and filmed numerous times across many countries. This included an English play famously staged

²⁰ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. xix, xvii.

²¹ Dan Schindel, ‘Film Reels Dredged from the Sea Become an Eerie Meditation on Mortality’, *Hyperallergic*, 6 October 2021 <<https://hyperallergic.com/682181/village-detective-a-song-cycle-bill-morrison/>> [accessed 4 September 2025].

in 1871 with Sir Henry Irving, several operas including one by Gustav Mahler in 1906, and films such as one by Thomas Edison in 1913 and an Australian version produced in 1935.

Constructed out of deteriorated footage from Young's 1926 version, *The Bells* (itself a translation of the original play), Morrison's newer film extends the lifespan of the original play from its nineteenth-century origin into the twenty-first century. Using a scene from the 1926 film that features the meeting between Mathias's daughter Annette and her future fiancé Christian — the gendarme who arrives in the town on his horse and is eventually tasked to solve the murder — Morrison seemingly embeds at least part of the original nineteenth-century narrative in his new film. However, as spectral impressions of a man, a woman, and a horse appear and disappear from the disintegrating emulsion, its meaning remains mercurial and opaque. While one might interpret this new film through the lens of a romantic encounter, its content is depicted as barely visible residue. Indeed, the original narrative — with all its troubled meanings and associations — never fully reappears in the newer film. With the murder narrative elided, it is not the nineteenth-century content that returns like Derrida's revenants. Rather, I would argue, it is the decomposed materiality of historical cinema that returns. Torn loose from the original narrative, such fragments reappear as the ghostly apparition of cinema's own photochemical past.

In contrast to the absorbing formal engagement with cinema's material past found in *Light is Calling*, Morrison's later film, *Dawson City: Frozen Time*, more readily traces past histories and content imprinted on aged cinematic material (Fig. 4). The footage out of which Morrison constructed the film was decidedly disintegrated having spent decades buried in the frozen ground. Like the earlier *Light is Calling*, figures, places, objects, and events appear through the veil of decomposing emulsion while the distressed and eroded images expressively underscore the passage of time. By reconfiguring the Yukon footage into a new work, Morrison continues to revive historical photochemical material but additionally, in this case, provides a deeper focus into the specific cinematic and North American frontier histories engraved upon it. In doing so, Morrison's work uncovers a preserved historical record embedded across hundreds of films. Film critic Richard Brody writes that 'Morrison looks at the surviving films and reconstructs the extraordinary arcs of political and cultural history that are latent in them'.²² Dated from 1903 to 1929, the buried footage consisted of films that the North American film-going public would have seen in that era and yielded a remarkable diversity of silent-

²² Richard Brody, 'The Secrets of Silent-Film Footage Found Buried in the Earth', *New Yorker*, 15 June 2017 <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-secrets-of-silent-film-footage-found-buried-in-the-earth>> [accessed 4 September 2025].

era cinema, including works by D. W. Griffith and Lois Weber, as well as those starring Fatty Arbuckle, Harold Lloyd, Lon Chaney, and more. Detailed across the hundreds of hours of film were documentaries, shorts, dramas, Shakespearian plays, short-story adaptations, comedies, science films, newsreels, travelogues, ethnographies, and sports news as evidenced in such examples as: *A Trip through Palestine* (1907), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1911), *The Lake Geneva Camp of the YMCA* (1912), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1913), *Birth of Flowers* (1911), *British Canadian Pathe News* (1919), and *The World Series* (1919) (which was once considered lost).



Fig. 4: *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016), dir. Bill Morrison. © Bill Morrison.

At the same time, Morrison's reconfigured film underscores the ruthless and disruptive realities of the late nineteenth-century Klondike Gold Rush, the documentation of which is included in much of the Yukon found footage. With fidelity to silent-era cinema's explanatory intertitles, his authorial position is produced solely through written text, without any voice-over narration. Using archival footage that depicts frontier expansion — with its attendant boom and bust economies, exploitation and depletion of natural resources, and dangerous, damaging conditions — Morrison's contemporary text narrates the harsh consequences that resulted from the rush to extract gold in the Yukon. This produces a forceful counter-narrative to the nineteenth-century doctrine known as 'Manifest Destiny' which promoted the belief that westward expansion would be a 'civilizing' and positive force. Morrison's film demonstrates the contrary: as Anglo/European settlers moved westwards and as railroads and other networked technologies moved people and goods with increasing speed and mobility across the North American continent, forests were felled, land was stripped,

and coveted resources like gold and silver were mined to the point of environmental disaster and devastation. One of the most evident consequences of destruction that is perhaps unwittingly documented on the original footage was the displacement of the indigenous Hän-speaking Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation People. In little over a year after gold was discovered in 1896, the text explains, the area was transformed from 'a seasonal hunting and fishing camp' used by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people into Dawson City, a rambling and ramshackle city quickly constructed for gold prospectors. While the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, the Klondike Gold Rush spurred explosive population growth in the area. In 1897, a year after gold was discovered, there were 3500 residents in Dawson City, but by the following year there were 40,000. Makeshift housing was constructed, saloons and transient hotels quickly sprang up, as did brothels and gambling halls. Significantly, the film includes footage of properties owned by the German immigrant Friedrich Trump, highlighting the fact that the Trump family fortune originated in the operation of frontier brothels and other shady businesses. The Guggenheim family exploits are also documented in the footage, demonstrating that part of their great wealth was formed through gold mining exploits in the Yukon. Through text and image, the film details the harsh consequences of greed, of brutal land grabs, of unjust displacements, and of uneven economic development. Gold mining, the film states, 'left behind a landscape ravaged by decades of dredging and hydraulic mining'.

In a tandem nineteenth-century social history, one year before gold was first discovered in the Klondike in 1896, the Lumière brothers held the first public screening of cinema in 1895. Morrison's film demonstrates how these two nineteenth-century phenomena — the birth of cinema and the Gold Rush — become inextricably linked to each other and to the seismic economic and sociocultural shifts of the era. The frenzied pursuit of individual wealth during the Gold Rush, along with the difficult conditions prospectors endured, increased the demand for relief, which came in the form of entertainment, libations, brothels, gambling, and, of course, movies. As a consequence, Dawson City was included in the early film distribution networks. However, by the time the films reached the Western frontier, they were no longer being shown elsewhere: it was the end of the distribution line. As a result, some of the toxic, nitrate-based material was burned or haphazardly buried. But a great deal of the noxious material was thrown into the Yukon River following the destructive routine of settlers in the area who, in the springtime, the film explains, 'floated their garbage downriver with the ice floes'. The fate of these films, moving across distribution networks, consumed as entertainment, then discarded as garbage — ultimately polluting a significant body of water — points to the role cinema would play in a culture constructed around capital, consumption, gratification, and obsolescence. Morrison has stated:

The Dawson story is an incredible metaphor for America, you have the frontier and the blind pillaging of a land and its people for its resources. Then you have large corporations moving in and killing what is left of the local economy [...]. Meanwhile, movies came in to offer an escape.²³

Just as makeshift settlements like Dawson City would hastily grow around the lure of quick monetary schemes, they would just as easily decay into abandoned ghost towns when their profit-making promise ended. So too was the destiny of irrelevant or unprofitable films. Indeed, if cinema itself appears at least partially implicated in the Klondike's economy, it is not just as an escapist force, but potentially as an equally destructive and dangerous phenomenon as the Gold Rush itself. Countless examples are given throughout the film of the combustible toxicity of nitrate in cinema before the safer acetate celluloid was invented, and the film is punctuated with footage of studio and laboratory explosions. We learn, for example, that in 1914 the Edison film manufacturing plant 'spontaneously exploded', while later that year the Eclair Moving Company was destroyed by fire, and that a film laboratory exploded in Fort Lee, New Jersey in 1919.

Morrison's film powerfully implies another aspect of cinema's connection to the Klondike Gold Rush: that is, photochemical cinema's own meteoric rise across a little more than a century of production (c. 1895–2005) that is framed against its current obsolescence in a digitized world. Film historian Scott MacDonald notes that the unearthed film footage, 'which like literal gold, had been buried in Klondike soil for generations', demonstrates the manner with which 'the discovery of gold in Dawson City and early cinema intersected [...] [whereby] the sudden rise and gradual fall of Dawson can be read as a metaphor of the history of celluloid cinema itself' (p. 40).

Without a doubt, both *Light is Calling* and *Dawson City: Frozen Time* dramatize 'returns' by 'ontologizing remains' of the past, whether by resuscitating cinema's physical 'remains' or by re-presenting the historical content imprinted upon them. Harsh economic realities, unjust social histories, along with the novel circulation of new mass-mediated forms of entertainment and information are all implicitly embedded in the remnant footage that Morrison uses to structure his work. While the content depicted in these two films dates exclusively from the early twentieth century, I would like to follow Gunning's assertion that the emergence of cinema itself, along with its early production, belongs to the momentum of the nineteenth century when he writes:

²³ Scott MacDonald, 'The Filmmaker as Miner: An Interview with Bill Morrison', *Cinéaste*, 42.1 (2016), pp. 40–43 (p. 42).

Does cinema belong to the nineteenth century? The answer might be: just barely. Cinema, the technological display of photographic moving images, appeared in the 1890s, the result of international exchanges between inventors and industrialists. By 1900, cinema had traveled around the world, appearing in major metropolises in the Americas, Europe, and Asia as well as colonial Africa. But if the question posed were, does cinema belong to the energies of the nineteenth century, the answer must be: profoundly. The technological revolutions in media, urbanism and transportation, all of which shaped the emergence of cinema, began somewhat before the mid-nineteenth century with the rise of the railway, the telegraph, and photography.²⁴

Following this line of thought, I believe that while Morrison resurrects cinematic remnants that date mostly from the early twentieth century, he uses a technology attached to the nineteenth century and, moreover, resurrects many of the significant viewer responses to cinema itself as it emerged in the late nineteenth century. One of the most enthralling aspects of cinema, Gunning argues, was ‘the novelty of the projected moving image’.²⁵ However, the art of projection clearly had antecedents that date back to pre-cinematic forms. ‘The heritage of the projected image’, Gunning writes, ‘can be traced for centuries.’²⁶ While earlier forms of projected spectacle and ‘the craft of late nineteenth-century stage illusions’,²⁷ may have set the stage for cinema’s arrival, Gunning argues that some of the most thrilling responses to cinema as it emerged in the late nineteenth century occurred in particular because it offered an experience that was singularly unique to what had preceded it.

In two important essays — ‘The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde’ and ‘An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator’ — Gunning traces cinema’s historical early appeal through the double lens of fascination and astonishment. He writes that before it became so powerfully wedded to storytelling, ‘early cinema was not dominated by the narrative impulse that later asserted its sway over the medium.’²⁸ Instead, early audiences flocked to cinema as a result of it being ‘fascinating because of [its] illusory power [...] and exoticism’. Gunning defines this earlier mode as ‘the cinema of attractions [...] [which] dominates

²⁴ Gunning, ‘Animating the Nineteenth Century’, p. 459.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 469.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 464.

²⁷ Tom Gunning, ‘An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator’, in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. by Linda Williams (Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 114–33 (p. 116).

²⁸ Tom Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde’, in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. by Thomas Elsaesser (BFI Publishing, 1990), pp. 56–62 (p. 56).

cinema until about 1906–7'.²⁹ The awe and fascination witnessed in this early period eventually wane, especially as cinematic production consolidates around industrial models like the Hollywood studio system and continues to codify its form primarily around narrative storytelling. However, it does not 'disappear with the dominance of narrative', as the storytelling structure of D. W. Griffith gains traction, 'but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films'.³⁰ Cinema's early aesthetic force during this nascent period, Gunning argues, 'directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle'.³¹

The astounded wonderment that occurred during these first dramatic encounters with cinema as it emerged in the late nineteenth century have prompted apocryphal legends. One of the most famous details the confusion that occurred during the first Lumière screening when audience members purportedly ran from their seats, terrified that the moving image of a train in *L'Arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* (1895) was, in fact, a real train barreling towards them. Most likely this did not happen but, as Gunning argues, it is a 'well-attested fact that the first projections caused shock and astonishment' and exerted 'uncanny and agitating power'.³² The projectionist for the first Lumière screening in New York in 1896 confirms this when he reported the following:

You had to have lived these moments of collective exaltation, have attended these thrilling screenings in order to understand just how far the excitement of the crowd could go. With the flick of a switch, I plunge several thousand spectators into darkness. Each scene passes, accompanied by tempestuous applause; after the sixth scene, I return the hall to light. The audience is shaking. Cries ring out.³³

As Gunning explains, the first Lumière exhibitions

were initially presented as frozen unmoving images, projections of still photographs. Then [...] the projector began cranking and the image moved [...], the spectator is astonished by its transformation through the new illusion of projected motion. [...] It is the incredible nature of the illusion that renders the viewer speechless. What is

²⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 57.

³¹ Ibid., p. 58.

³² Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment', p. 116.

³³ Edidin, 'Confounding Machines'.

displayed before the audience is less the impending speed of the train than *the force of the cinematic apparatus*.³⁴

The magician and future filmmaker Georges Méliès, himself a spectator at the Lumière premiere in Lyons in 1895, wrote, ‘before this spectacle we sat with gaping mouths, struck with amazement, astonished beyond all expression.’ It was ‘the sudden transformation from still image to moving illusion [...] [that] displayed the novelty and fascination of the cinématographe’.³⁵ These eyewitness accounts in 1895 and 1896 attest to the power of this new mechanism and to the overwhelming uniqueness of cinema at the beginning of its life in the late nineteenth century.

Although twenty-first century viewers are more desensitized to the unique qualities of moving images, many critics’ responses to Morrison’s works echo a similar sense of astonishment, writing that the films are ‘ravishingly, achingly beautiful’, ‘transfixing’ and ‘breathtaking’, and ‘wondrous [...], a complete astonishment’.³⁶ These descriptions underscore the mesmerizing and intoxicating effects of Morrison’s work, whose own production company is called Hypnotic Pictures.³⁷ The sensoria ignited by his work could well be matched by the pre-cinematic illusionary events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries described by Gunning as ‘a theater of the senses, dedicated to the hallucinatory effects of light, movement and transformations, combined with unearthly music’, or, indeed, by those first extraordinary experiences with cinema in the late nineteenth century.³⁸

Indeed, much of Morrison’s contemporary work is conceived to be projected in front of a live audience in theatrical settings with live musical accompaniment. Live performances — which featured, in the case of his film *Decasia* (2002), a ‘55-piece live orchestra with film projection’ — have taken place in Brooklyn, Los Angeles, Venice, London, Berkeley, Copenhagen, and countless locations around the globe.³⁹ While such communal and live screenings have become increasingly rare in the digital age of

³⁴ Gunning, ‘An Aesthetic of Astonishment’, p. 118, emphasis added.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

³⁶ Lawrence Weschler, ‘Sublime Decay’, *New York Times*, 22 December 2002, Section 6, p. 44; Deborah Eisenberg, ‘After the Gold Rush’, *New York Review of Books*, 16 August 2016 <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/08/16/dawson-city-after-gold-rush/>>; and Kenneth Turan, review of *Dawson City: Frozen Time*, *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June 2017 <<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-dawson-city-review-20170615-story.html>> [both accessed 4 September 2025].

³⁷ The connection between cinema and hypnotism is also apparent in Morrison’s film *The Mesmerist* (2003), which was made using the 1926 film *The Bells* one year before using it to make *Light is Calling*.

³⁸ Gunning, ‘Animating the Nineteenth Century’, p. 468.

³⁹ Bill Morrison, ‘Decasia LIVE’ <<https://billmorrisonfilm.com/decasia-live/1>> [accessed 4 September 2025].

streaming, Morrison's films revive the public and collective experiences of historical cinema.

Is this nostalgia at work? I would argue that the economic and historical narratives exposed in *Dawson City: Frozen Time* counteract any sentimental attachment to the social histories of the past. But the unadulterated awe in which the beauty of the photochemical image is displayed in that film, as well as in *Light is Calling*, link each to a specific kind of cinephilia that has arisen, in large measure, by the ontological transition from cinema's original photochemical composition to its current digital format. This transition has been pronounced by several film scholars and theorists as an existential rupture, one that is predicated upon the loss of the indexical photochemical image, which, Mulvey writes, was the 'trace of whatever comes in front of the lens', and subsequently 'derived from the chemical reaction between light and photosensitive material'. In contrast, the digital image, Mulvey argues, breaks 'the material connection between object and image that had defined the earlier history' such that 'these images [have thus] lost their "natural magic"' (p. 19). Film theorist Mary Ann Doane concurs, writing, 'a certain nostalgia for cinema precedes its "death". One doesn't — and can't — love the televisual or the digital in quite the same way.'⁴⁰ Cinephilia is certainly at play in Morrison's work; it is hard not to be enthralled by light- and silver-derived images that are resuscitated from found and archival footage. Keeping in mind the theoretical arguments offered by Mulvey and Doane, I would argue that Morrison's alignment with cinema's specific ontologies and histories detaches his work from any kind of simple nostalgic sentimentality.

In many ways — as is evident in the exuberant critic responses to his work — Morrison offers contemporary viewers the ability to *re-enact* the kind of fascination with moving images that Gunning argues so distinctly informed audiences in the nineteenth century when they first encountered cinema as a new and thrilling phenomenon. Morrison does this, in part, by engaging with one of historical cinema's most unique ontological and organic qualities that so distinguishes it from the digital: it physically decays over time. Unlike digital code, and more linked to biological matter in this way, photochemical cinema deteriorates from exposure to physical elements, to weather, and to the effects of time. Contemporary audiences bear witness to the organic decay of the cinematic material in Morrison's work (*Fig. 5*). Decay is a powerful phenomenon that traces and lays bare the organic process of time. German sociologist Georg Simmel reminds us that it is 'the effect of *nature* on which rests the significance of the ruin'.⁴¹ Morrison's

⁴⁰ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 228.

⁴¹ Georg Simmel, 'Two Essays', *Hudson Review*, trans. by David Kettler, 11.3 (1958), pp. 371–85 (p. 380), emphasis in original, doi:[10.2307/3848614](https://doi.org/10.2307/3848614).

films embrace the organic effect of time and decay on photochemical material with purpose and intention. Indeed, I would argue that it is in the very display of cinematic decay that powerfully links his work to the early, pre-narrative conceptualization of the ‘cinema of attractions’. Such ‘attractions’, Gunning has pointed out, would often be something of a precise ‘*cinematic nature* [...] in which *cinematic manipulation* [...] provides the film’s novelty’.⁴² Fittingly, in an interview with film historian Scott MacDonald, Morrison stated:

Early on, I came to feel that it was powerful to show that the decay visible on the films was a byproduct of time, the result of an organic process. This seemed more interesting than hand manipulating individual frames myself. Whatever manipulation I might do was not as interesting to me as what happened organically.⁴³

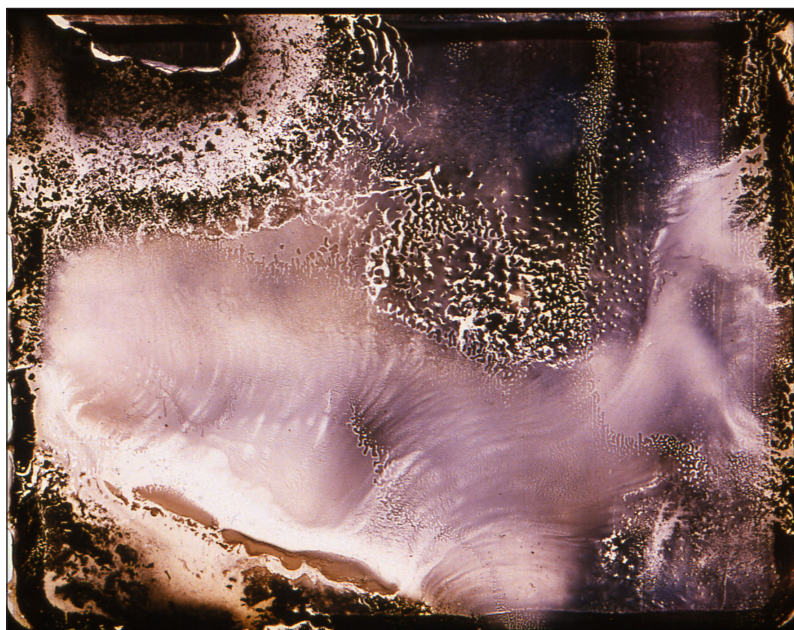


Fig. 5: *Light is Calling* (2004), dir. Bill Morrison. © Bill Morrison.

Accordingly, the primary ‘attraction’ of ‘cinematic manipulation’ in Morrison’s work — its distinct ability to decay — is already a component of its singular ontology, the very result of its own organic ‘cinematic nature’. By inviting organic processes to function independently of artistic involvement, Morrison’s films engage with participatory

⁴² Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attractions’, p. 58, emphases added.

⁴³ Scott MacDonald, ‘Orpheus of Nitrate: The Emergence of Bill Morrison’, *Framework*, 57.2, (2016), pp. 116–37 (p. 125).

ecological modalities that extend beyond human mediation. This invites contemporary audiences to experience historical material with new complexities and perspectives.

Morrison's work emerges at the end of the twentieth century, during the rise of digitization and at the very moment when photochemical cinema's 'death' is announced. The astonished and awe-inducing encounters that occurred when cinema emerged as something new and novel in the nineteenth century become at this later moment, in the twenty-first century, the astonished encounters with cinema in a state of ruin, at this the moment of its death. In this way, Morrison's body of work addresses the end of photochemical cinema by re-presenting its ghostly remains. This kind of spectral encounter can begin, Giorgio Agamben writes, 'only when everything is finished'.⁴⁴

I would like to conclude here with another consideration of endings, one defined by Derrida as a 'joyous death watch'; that is, the mournful celebration of something that no longer has a future, but that in its very ending can be a point of entry into something else. Derrida identifies this kind of death in Maurice Blanchot's 1959 treatise 'The End of Philosophy', writing that

a funerary note already echoed here — crepuscular, spectral, and therefore resurrectional. [...] Its very process consists of visibly heading the march at the moment of its 'disappearance' and its 'putting in the ground', it consists of leading its own funeral procession and of *raising* itself in the course of this march, of hoping at least to right itself again so as to stand up ('resurrection', 'exaltation'). This wake, this joyous death watch of philosophy is the double moment of a 'promotion' and of a 'death of philosophy', a promotion in death.⁴⁵

By resuscitating cinematic remains, Morrison engages twenty-first century audiences with the original and powerful nineteenth-century reactions of attraction and astonishment. But the emergent, energetic fascination with cinema at its birth has transformed into a kind of 'joyous death watch' at the moment of its death. If, as Gunning argues, the early reaction to film projection was not panic but rather astonishment at the very '*force of the cinematic apparatus*', then Morrison returns cinema's decayed remains to us as an equal force of astonishment.⁴⁶ Bearing all the evidence of time and decay, Morrison shows us the state of photochemical cinema as a

⁴⁴ Giorgio Agamben, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living among Specters', in *The Spectralities Reader*, ed. by del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, pp. 473–77 (p. 475).

⁴⁵ Derrida, *Specters*, p. 43.

⁴⁶ Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment', p. 118, emphasis added.

ghostly remnant. Born in the nineteenth century and disappearing in the twenty-first century, his work meditates on cinema's own metanarrative: its birth, its death, and its afterlife. Set against the faded glory of photochemical cinema, Morrison's films revive the astonished spectator by inviting them to encounter cinema's return as a gorgeously fossilized ghost.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

