

Decasia (2002) A Review

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Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002) is a stunning sonic and visual experience. The film, consisting of about 70 minutes of water-damaged, moulded, and celluloid-corroded nitrate archive footage harmoniously swept along by Michael Gordon's soundtrack, was originally commissioned by the Europaischer Musikomat as a new symphony by co-founder Michael Gordon for a live event performed by the Basil Sinfonietta. Bill Morrison presented his film at the Cinémathèque Québécoise this past April as part of a retrospective.

Decasia has four movements: Creation, Civilization Man, Conundrum, and Disintegration and Rebirth. Morrison pieces together naturally damaged and decayed film creating a hypnotic rumination on life, death, cinema and history. The film opens with a Sufi dervish dancer, who continuously reappears throughout the film acting as our guide in a journey of fragmented memories and untold stories, captivatingly circling to the sound of brake drums scraped slowly with a metal beater. We then cut to a laboratory where racks of reels are spooling and uncoiling thousands of feet of film. Technicians inspect the newly developed stock as the camera slowly zooms into a frame bringing us into the abstracted cinematic world full of pockmarks, weaving mold, and dancing emulsion.

The footage used in *Decasia* was gathered from flood-damaged basements and crumbling archives and used stock with a film base made of cellulose nitrate commonly used for commercial 35 mm film before 1951. As we all know, this stock yields images of great clarity and intensity, but, because it is highly flammable and prone to deterioration, it is completely unstable.

For this reason, filmmakers shifted to a more reliable and safe tri-acetate. The deterioration of most of the films pre-dating 1951 is so devastating that 50% of Hollywood's films are literally rotting away and have beckoned the call of filmmakers like Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen to preserve them. In the case of *Decasia*, while its corrosion functions as a distressing reminder, a call for historical awareness of the ephemerality of the damaged filmic documents of the early 20th Century, it is also a marvel of stylistic innovation and an inspiration for poetic interpretation.

Morrison did not handle the nitrate himself. It also proved difficult for the filmmaker to find any film laboratory that would handle the toxic material. John Allen of Cinema Arts in Angels, PA., optically printed each frame because the shrunken sprocket holes of the old stock do not match those of contemporary stock. After stabilizing the material, Morrison stretch-printed the footage. Optically printing each frame two, three or sometimes four frames to slow the film down and investigate the beauty of the decay, he offers the viewer nothing less than 24 paintings each second.

The powerful visceral effect of the slow motion allows everything to appear fluid, creating landscapes of fantastic pulsing shapes. The moving palette of found images bubble, crack, twist, drip and swirl to violently screeching violins and roaring thunder of cellos and electric bass guitars. In a way, Michael Gordon's accompanying symphony both emphasizes and celebrates the deteriorated celluloid. The marching noise of intensely de-tuned violins in a continual sliding of pitches, the feedback from electric guitars

and the plunking of out-of-tune pianos give the film a ghostly aural accompaniment. Gordon's symphony is a beautiful parallel to the imagery of Morrison's visual score, suggesting that junk is beautiful and elucidating the powerful movement of the corrosion.

Decasia does not rely on explicit meaning or try to present us with the vague outline of a story but rather works on a more subconscious level of understanding. It is cyclical in form, complete with narrative craters both from the decay and the original content, as though it were influenced by the motion of the Sufi dancer and were being marched along by the searing score of the symphony. The decay on the one hand and the images of people and landscape on the other suggest an interesting clash of forces between the decay of life and life affirming itself. In one segment, the lengthy birth of a child is enveloped by a frenetic white cloud of mold. The crumbling celluloid obscures the assembled stories; the figures become faded apparitions— their purposes forgotten. However, their dreams, in the form of these degraded images, continue in a new form.

Morrison has carefully chosen footage that addresses our relationship with death and presents an analogy between human mortality and the fear that follows closely behind it. A lengthy shot of parachutes slowly descending to the earth in a murky sky of celluloid corrosion is an example of this, allowing the decayed source and its original content to interact in such a way as to create a powerful symbol. In another shot, a boxer situated at the left hand side of the frame fights off a soupy white mould blob invading from the right. He punches at the damaged area to stave off disintegration.

Though creating a link between the mortality of humans and the mortality of films, the film becomes a store-house of memories lost and reborn through the discovery of the damaged films and their newly re-contextualized form. *Decasia* initiates a model for our own relationship to our histories and speaks to the impossibility of possessing the present.