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**Friday January 10th, 2020**

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

**Dir: Bill Morrison**

**Sponsor: Paul Hancocks**

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**Synopsis:** The 1978 discovery of 533 reels of film in Dawson City. - the [Dawson Film Find](#) - was remarkable. Sealed within a decommissioned swimming pool, the unearthed reels tell the story of Dawson City, the dawn of 20th century America, and Hollywood in the silent era. The film depicts how what was once native land becomes a frontier, a boomtown, and an entertainment hub, before industrial monopolies and poverty of resources eventually return Dawson City to a modest encampment.

The film utilizes a number of silent film techniques, consistent with the subject matter - intertitles in place of voice-over narration, archival sound and a prominent musical score. The image quality is not great at times, which is to be expected, and the intertitles small, But the overall impact is that of a unique piece of film history.

It's an image like the phoenix from the flames: a charred, dust-caked roll of 35-mm film balanced on a spade, dug out of the black and frozen earth. What once danced, flickered and dazzled, then was lost, now promises to light up again, spilling its treasures like Aladdin's genie. Though as viewers of Bill Morrison's necromantic digs through the film archives since *Decasia* (2002) will know, the interceding years will have left their own marks on the images, making palimpsests of these remains.

The Dawson City Film Find was turned up in 1978 when a bulldozer in this outpost in the Yukon Valley set about the remains of an ice hockey rink that had once covered a swimming pool. In fact, kids playing outside the Dawson Amateur Athletic Association, which had once also hosted one of the town's 3 movie theatres, had long reported strips of film growing out of the ground, - as had a local newspaper in 1939 - but faced with the emergence of more than 500 reels, the diggers were stopped, local archivists called in, and ultimately the thawing collection was driven at speed to Ottawa, to be divided between Library and Archives Canada and the Library of Congress.

Morrison unspools this story at pace from the end - is even able to incorporate a TV interview with himself about the project, thanks to some publicity for his in-progress excavations of the Film Find archives - because the beginning is even better: Dawson was a Klondike Gold Rush boomtown, built on treasures underfoot, and a bust town equally, trampled over then forsaken by our civilization's stampeding prospectors. It was born in sin - quickly displacing the Han First Nation fishing camp of Tr'ochëk after George Carmack and Skookum Jim struck gold in 1896 - and burgeoned accordingly as 30,000 arrived over the Chilkoot Pass 2 years later. Morrison's cast of hustlers and gawkers includes Fred Trump, Donald's grandfather, who founded the family fortune in a way-station brothel; future Hollywood theatre moguls Alexander Pantages and Sid Grauman; scandal-fated filmmakers William Desmond Taylor and Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle; and writers Jack London and (latterly) Robert Service. The party blew out just as quickly: barely a quarter of the immigrants remained by 1899 and those who were to settle down and build saw fires gut Dawson's business district every year for the first 9 years, while the town's gold mining concessions were progressively consolidated, automated, plundered.

All of this parallels the contemporaneous story of early film, with its pioneers and entrepreneurs, cogs and cycles, fads and flameouts, not least thanks to the flammability of early nitrate film. Morrison seems to punctuate his film with the burnings-down, down the years, of Dawson's

three cinemas. but there are other timelines at play too - business-cyclical, cultural, generational, civilisational. Foremost, of course, is the arc of the rediscovered footage we are watching. As it was for many of the Gold Rush speculators, Dawson City was the point of no return for the films that reached it, often two or three years after their outset, at the end of the Pacific coastal distribution line: like films lost and found in New Zealand, distributors saw no profit in repatriating the worn prints. Most, it seems fair to say, will not have been used as a swimming pool filler; they'll be getting a geological engraving at the bottom of the Yukon river.

The materials he has, though, Morrison makes sing - greatly abetted by the majestically glacial compositions of Sigur Rós collaborator Alex Somers and his brother John's sprily animating sound design. Shots from the Dawson Film Find are repurposed, remixed, made to talk metonymically about the history behind them and reflexively about the nature of their medium while Morrison narrates in silent supertitles. There are compilation sequences reminiscent of the meta cine-montages in Charlie Lyne's *Beyond Clueless* (2014), indexing particular figures or movements that recur across the found films. Perhaps the reason Morrison's sidetrack into uncovered glimpses of the 1919 baseball World Series feels flat is not so much its parochialism as its literalism, where so much of the footage gains layers of metaphor. Compare with the sequence about the invention of the newsreel - illustrated not by the same but with a montage of characters diving in and out of their newspapers.

Again, the film acknowledges other strata and media, with their own rich stories: much of its more literal documentary power comes from Eric A. Hegg's astounding photographs of the Klondike Stampede. 2000 of Hegg's glass plate negatives turned up in the cavity walls of an old cabin in Dawson in 1951, and narrowly missed being scraped clean for greenhouse glass by their first finder. They gave rise to Colin Lowe and Wolf Koenig's 1957 documentary *City of Gold*, a portrait of Gold Rush-era Dawson City narrated by writer and Klondike veteran Pierre Berton which won the Cannes short film Palme d'Or that year and which Morrison credits with inventing the 'Ken Burns effect' of panning across still photos. And of course there's Chaplin's 1925 *The Gold Rush*, alongside Clarence Brown's Robert Service adaptation *The Trail of '98* (1928) a first wave of fantasias of the frontier packaged for a new generation by a now consolidated Hollywood. Morrison's field archaeology through all this is dazzling and precious, but it's also sensitive and mournful, attuned to the ravages of capitalist culture - gluttonous, amnesiac - as well as the march of time. The film is a lesson in the contingencies of remembering, the precarity of memory; its story of chance finds is underwritten by Morrison's own work in the Dawson Film Find archive, a seam of cinema still rarely explored more than three decades after its preliminary rescue. As he puts it in a supplementary interview, the materials were 'viewable but unviewed'. If a film lies in the permafrost - or sits in an archive and nobody watches it, does it record a memory?

Over the past two decades, inspired perhaps by the passing of physical film or the coming climate meltdown, film artists have increasingly taken to documenting our media flotsam and civilizational cast-offs in a mode of portentous media archaeology. The dead-architectural film - Nikolas Geyhalter's *Homo Sapiens* (2016), Salomé Lamas's *Extinction* (2018), a litany of portraits of hollowed-out Detroit - has been one obvious draw. But there are less monumental, more fleeting subjects. Thom Andersen is one of the masters of this mode - with an emphasis on the sentimental but

the radical aspects of nostalgia. His 16mm musical featurette *Get Out of the Car* (2010) evokes Los Angeles through a vernacular medley of fraying billboards, pop singles and demolished sites of cultural importance. His most recent video essay *The Thoughts that Once We Had* collates a personal scrapbook of treasured, affirmative movie moments through the prism or pretext of an illustration of Gilles Deleuze's twin books of writing on cinema with their emphasis on the cinema's historical turn from depictions of action to depictions of time. Patricio Guzmán and Ricky Panh, guardians and threnodists of their countries' memories on film, have also turned towards media – its testimonies, its elisions – in their recent films. Guzmán's *The Pearl Button* (2015) in particular echoes *Dawson City: Frozen Time* in its aqueous motifs and account of extermination at the end of the world (the indigenous Selk'nam were imprisoned on Patagonia's Dawson Island as, later, were Allende's government ministers).

Ross Lipman's *Notfilm* (2015), released on disc by both Milestone and the BFI in the mists of 2017, is another dig through layers of film history, though here the act of reclamation ironically works against the spirit of its subject matter. Structured as an extended making-of about Samuel Beckett's sole foray into filmmaking, the 20-minute Buster Keaton meta-experiment *Film* (1965), it spins a historical and philosophical yarn which connects Keaton's own endlessly modern cinema with the parallel investigations in the USSR of Dziga Vertov (whose brother Boris Kaufman shot *Film*), and with a media phenomenology inspired by the idealist, materialist philosophy of the eighteenth-century empiricist George Berkeley, Beckett's Irish forebear. Berkeley asserted the absolutism of our sensory awareness with his maxim *esse es percipi* – to be is to be perceived; it makes no sense to talk of matter independent of a perceiving mind. Beckett, with what Lipman calls his 'poetics of the void', wrote the film as a deliberately naive inversion of Berkeley, distilling an existential dread: if existence is in the eye of the beholder then bring on occlusion. Thus he diagrammed *Film* as an implacable chase movie between Keaton's O, the unwilling camera object who attempt to deflect all possible observers – passers-by, his pets, an image of God – and the relentless camera E., the ultimate observer revealed to be a mirror of his own self-consciousness.

On the face of itself, *Film* is an awkward piece of work, rudimentary as a riddle and slow on gags – and Lipman explores the behind-the-scenes reasons, not least a split on-set between the amateur filmmaking intellectuals and the gruff pros like Keaton. But as the raw material for *Notfilm*, it is a treasure. Lipman first discovered and studied Beckett's film as a student (studying under the founding film theorist Rudolph Arnheim), and you could diagram his relationship to it like E chasing the reluctant O. Beckett disdained the results of his experiment; Lipman became a UCLA archivist, restored the film and tracked down its outtakes. Beckett shunned the camera (he found its gaze "a personal wound", we are told; Kevin Brownlow records his fear of undercover cameras and being stalked by press, and a summons to a meeting with the instruction "no camera or tape recorder"); Lipman deposes friends and colleagues of Beckett's and Keaton's – Jean Schneider, Billie Whitelaw, Haskell Wexler, James Karen – and plays us an illicit, under-the-table recording of a script meeting made by the film's producer, Grove Press's Barney Rosset. As film criticism, Lipman's "kino essay" is a joy, opening up both Beckett's and Keaton's works and elucidating the uncanny overlaps between them (with liberal use of Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* as well as the cameraman and the rest of Keaton's oeuvre), underpinned by Mikhály Vig's elegiac piano trio score. And it teases some of the unnerving implications of Berkeley's always counter-commonsensual philosophy with its uncanny anticipation of our post cinematic, postmaterialist attention economy, whose secrets will not survive in the snow.

## Credits

<b>Kathy Jones-Gates, Michael Gates, Sam Kula, Bill O'Farrell, Chris 'Mad Dog' Russo, Bill Morrison</b>	Themselves
<b>Writer/Director</b>	Bill Morrison
<b>Music</b>	Alex Somers
<b>Editing</b>	Bill Morrison

**USA 2016. 120mins**

## Another View

In 1978, workers digging up foundations for new construction in Dawson City, Canada, came across an unusual discovery under the earth. Buried in a former swimming pool were around 500 nitrate film prints dating back from the 1900s. The cold ground preserved many of them and they were sent to archives, allowing access to many films (or at least segments of them) thought lost. They were kept together in such a way because Dawson City

was the end of a distribution line for films back then and the distributors didn't want the prints back as it was too costly to pay for carriage all the way from the fairly remote city. So, with mountains of prints piling up in Dawson, the theatre owners and councils ended up dumping them largely in the Yukon River but a pile of them ended up in a swimming pool before it was filled up to make an ice-rink.

Although it wasn't the largest or most well preserved silent film find that has been made over the years, it is one of the most famous due to its unusual nature. It's pretty well known among film historians and archivists. The filmmaker Bill Morrison was aware of it from his studies in film, but hadn't given it much thought until later into his career making art films and documentaries largely using archive material, that he was reminded of the find. When viewing titles from the Dawson film archive and realising what was in there, he embarked on a project to make a documentary about the find. The end product, *Dawson City: Frozen in Time* is being released on Blu-Ray and DVD by Second Run after enjoying much success on the festival circuit, bagging a number of awards.

The film starts off traditionally, with an excerpt from a talk show Morrison went on about the project, a clip from the premiere of the footage in Dawson City in the late 70s and even some talking heads from the couple who discovered the reels and arranged for them to be preserved. After this introduction though, *Dawson City: Frozen in Time* becomes something far more unique. After the brief clips early on, the film's story is told almost solely through captions and archive material itself. Much of this is from the find, but there are also many photographs we learn were discovered in an equally surprising way, as well as newspaper clippings and footage from other films of the era.

The way Morrison incorporates the material is what makes it special. Using his experience in making art films, he matches the archive footage with a hypnotic score and sound design that perfectly complements his entrancing editing style. The Dawson films were severely water damaged and there was only so much that could be done to restore them, but Morrison embraces this, finding great beauty in the uniquely distorted and dissolved edges of the frames. The music/sound design enhances this even further by using software that interpreted the visual damage as sound. This, alongside the nature of the footage itself and the score, gives the film a wonderfully haunting quality, echoing the decaying and dangerously combustible nature of nitrate film.

All this would be for nothing, were the story itself uninteresting though. The tale of the find is eye-opening of course, but wouldn't make for a feature film. Morrison extends the story by matching the footage with the fascinating history of Dawson City as a whole (it was one of the first major 'gold rush' settlements), as well as charting the birth of cinema along the way. We are occasionally presented with seemingly tangential facts and imagery, but much of this finds relevance later on as the story develops. The asides that aren't connected to other narratives are still effective though in pushing us forward in the chronological timeline of the film, as well as highlighting the historical importance of some of the material that was found. That said, the different avenues taken, particularly in the film's mid-section, do slow the pace down a bit, causing a bit of a lull. Things pick up as the film moves towards the end though, culminating in a surprisingly moving and suitably poetic final 'act'.

All in all, it's a truly unique documentary that is one-part history lesson, one-part ode to the beauty of silent cinema and one-part art film. It's a remarkable piece of work with a fascinating and poignant story to tell.

**David Brook (Blueprint Film and LFS member)**

**Our next screening: Friday January 17th, 7.30pm  
Foxtrot (Israel 2017. Cert 15)**

Samuel Maoz (*Lebanon*) returns to the Society with a drama set in his homeland. His latest film is a story about the impact the constant threat of war has on the family of a soldier conscript.