



Film as Art

When we watch a film, we usually expect certain qualities: a narrative structure or story, actors or animated characters. But film is also an art form, a medium that can be manipulated. For Bill Morrison, celluloid film rolls are a substitute for canvases, the natural decay of these organic materials are his color palette and offer him new ways of creation where other people might simply throw the leftovers away

At the media|matter conference in Frankfurt, Bill Morrison presented some of his recent works and showed his 'classic' – the 2002 film *Decasia*. Composed of short extracts from various, mostly educational films from the Library of Congress and put together in a collage-like, seemingly unstructured composition, *Decasia* offers several black and white scenes in various stages of decay.

Some frames are color inverted, some have bubbles or scratches and some seem more or less normal with only a few hints of old age and beginning decay. The film is put together in a seemingly spontaneous composition, yet the scenes also relate to each other. Certain themes keep repeating themselves, albeit embedded in different context. Like abstract art, it offers a variety of inspiration and possibilities, not just for interested students and scholars.

For one scholar in Frankfurt, the film was inspiration enough to build an entire seminar around it (see article). Prof. Dr. Herzogenrath already contacted Bill Morrison back in 2007 with the idea of having a conference about media and its matter – like Morrison's film rolls. They kept in touch over the years and in May 2012, Bill Morrison finally held a talk at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. He gave an intriguing overview of his work and connected it to film history: The Library of Congress keeps paper copies of early films from the very beginning of cinema. It is possible to rerecord these films by taking photographs of the pictures on the paper rolls.

To illustrate this, Morrison showed the short film *The film of her*, which tells the story of these paper rolls and connects it to one particular film, or rather one particular woman, that the protagonist supposedly wanted to find again. It is unclear if the plot really happened, but the insight in film history was intriguing and the finding of those paper film rolls in the archive is history.

"I'm actually a terrible technician" – Bill Morrison

Morrison expressed his obvious passion for his profession and the artistic and creative way he works with the material in his talk. When he spoke about another one of his short films, he described it with the words "exquisitely deteriorated", implying an admiration for the deterioration process and the decayed film rolls themselves as a creative medium.

The film he then showed had only been partly decayed: out of seven film rolls, three were clean. It was fascinating to see how the decay of the film rolls changed the images and made them appear almost supernatural. As Morrison then pointed out, the decay in this case also works together with the narrative of the film and fits perfectly into the storyline, giving the decayed parts an unreal, dreamlike quality while at the same time letting the not decayed parts appear more real and more plausible in the viewer's perception.

Creating something new out of ruins

The decay makes the audience aware of the film roll as a medium. Yet at the same time, it pulls us in, even adds to the narrative or, as exemplified by the related seminar, encourages us to interact with the film on a creative level, inviting us to create something new out of decay and filmic ruins.

For Morrison, it is incredible that people still talk about *Decasia*, which was recorded about ten years ago. He called this "the afterlife of the movie" and suggested, that whatever happens with the film now is no longer related to him. His creation process is over and he has started new projects. At the same time, he is looking forward to the results of the seminar and will keep in touch with the Professor.



His next stop in Germany was Hamburg, where he presented his short films *Light is calling* and *Release* at the short film festival. Then he went back to New York for the premier of his next feature *Just Ancient Loops* on June 17th.

(Text: Carolin Schmitt)

[Detailed interview](#) and [more information](#) about Bill Morrison and his work