

**Smooth, Bumpy and Ghostly Rides:
(Re)Viewing the American Landscape
and Travel Imagery in Bill Morrison's
Night Highway (1990), *The Death Train* (1993),
City Walk (1999) and *Ghost Trip* (2000)**

Abstract: In this paper I analyze various ways in which Bill Morrison's travel films, *Night Highway* (1990), *The Death Train* (1993), *City Walk* (1999) and *Ghost Trip* (2000),¹ tend to challenge the concept of the American landscape through the use of cinematic conventions traditionally associated with early cinema's phantom rides as well as contemporary travel ride films and road movies. Particularly, I argue that Morrison's experimental pictures, while simultaneously drawing on and playing with selected phantom ride, travel ride film and road movie tropes, exploit the dynamics between the spectator's unique frontal perspective, visual mobilities and distant panoramic views as well as evoke a distorted experience of sensational and contemplative voyages, hence challenging panoramic perception and an idealized image of American (film) landscape intrinsically bound with the natural and technological sublime. To achieve this particular effect, the analyzed material incorporates such elements as deteriorated footage, manipulated travel imagery and image looping enhanced by atmospheric scores, slow and fast motion cinematography or more conventional traditions of abstract formalism.

Keywords: American avant-garde and experimental film, Bill Morrison, American landscape, travel ride film, phantom ride, road movie

In the history of American avant-garde, experimental and self-reflexive cinema, the name of a young New York-based multimedia artist and filmmaker, Bill Morrison, has been largely unrecognized for a relatively long period of time. Only with the release of a feature-length audiovisual symphony scored by Michael Gordon, *Decasia* (2002), and praised by Hoberman as "the most widely acclaimed American avant-garde film of the fin-de-siècle" ("The Poetry of Decay"), Morrison made his name as one of the most adventurous contemporary American directors. Since the early 1990s, he has created a number of absorbing, hypnotic and visually soaring projects as well as successfully collaborated with some influential composers, including John Adams, Gavin Bryars, Bill Frisell, Michael Gordon, Henryk Górecki, Jóhann Jóhannsson, David Lang, Steve Reich, Todd Reynolds and others, many of whom commissioned him to direct pictures to accompany their live performances

1 All the analyzed films, *Night Highway* (1999), *The Death Train* (1993), *City Walk* (1999) and *Ghost Trip* (2000), have been produced by Bill Morrison's Hypnotic Pictures.

(Morrison, “Bio/Filmography”). However, it is not merely an extraordinary audiovisual quality that renders Morrison’s works such a memorable and almost palpable viewing experience. The majority of the artist’s collage films are often distinguished by featuring rare archival material as well as found 35mm nitrate and chemically decomposing footage utilized in an attempt to “revive,” reinterpret and re-contextualize a selection of old and often forgotten cinematic narratives. Morrison’s editing seems to serve yet another historically and culturally significant function, that is that of rediscovering, resurrecting and preserving a set of deteriorating images in both physical and metaphorical sense pertaining to such philosophical notions as the human existence and mortality, history and memory, materiality and spirit, real and surreal or space and time (see e.g. Baron 128-131, 133-134; Herzogenrath 131). Often referred to as a cine-chemist (MacDonald, “Orpheus of Nitrate” 116) or a filmmaker obsessed with the concept of death and decay, Morrison accounts for the meaning of his work in the 2006 interview with Ronan and Le Cain:

The images can be thought of as desires or memories: actions that take place in the mind. The filmstock can be thought of as their body, that which enables these events to be seen. Like our own bodies, this celluloid is a fragile and ephemeral medium that can deteriorate in countless ways. The nitro-cellulose base gradually returns to the elements that comprise it: cotton, nitric acid, and camphor. The images deform and coalesce throughout the length of the film, appearing to melt, burn, drip or tear away from the base. This is a natural phenomenon. I chose only those images where this deterioration has happened over time, while stored in archives. Like the film, our bodies will eventually be reduced to what essentially forms us. What they contain is who we are: our thoughts, dreams, and memories. These will be reprised as something new, and hopefully, more lasting.... I think I’m more interested in finding beauty in the commonplace or what other people consider trash or garbage, to try to see the world in a new way. The idea that everything’s going to turn to nothing isn’t the point of *Decasia*, it’s that you can re-form things, and it takes on a new life. (Ronan, “Trajectories of Decay”)

As implied by above, the act of re-creating the found footage lies at the core of Morrison’s present-day legacy as an avant-garde and experimental filmmaker. Most of his self-reflexive narratives, usually in the form of doc-fiction hybrids heavily relying on montage of damaged celluloid materials, should be seen in terms of oblique symbolism, which continuously inspires both generations of artists and varied audiences. Interestingly, Tryon also considers them as consistent with the 1990s trend in popular film criticism exemplified by Cheshire’s famous article, “The Death of Film/The Decay of Cinema,” which has anticipated the death of cinema being an inevitable consequence of the rise of digital media (73-74). More importantly, however, the analyzed material can be seen as epitomizing perhaps the most pervasive tendency in the last twenty years of American filmmaking called perceptual retraining and defined by MacDonald as involving “the use of the film

experience to retain and reinvigorate viewer perception of cinematic space and time, and in particular, the representation of place” (“American Avant-Garde” 255). Unsurprisingly, the trend, mostly identified with the post-1970s avant-garde and experimental works by Gehr, Gottheim, Dorsky, Rudnick, Sonbert, Hutton, Huot, Benning, Lockhart and other artists, becomes particularly evident in Morrison’s travel films. Though envisioning landscape and cityscapes by means of largely spontaneous and rhythmic editing rather than stationary and often silent shots, the pictures still seem to revive the contemplative and meditative way of experiencing the travel imagery and offer “the possibility of renewed perceptual engagement and awareness” through their reliance on a series of extended and continuous shots (MacDonald, “American Avant-Garde” 255).

Born on November 17, 1965 in Chicago, Illinois, Morrison devoted most of his career to realizing his lifelong fascination with collage and archival footage, which also stems from the filmmaking practices of early avant-garde artists, including Bruce Conner, Joseph Cornell, Ken Jacobs and others (Verrone 210). After graduating from the Reed College in 1985 and the Cooper Union in 1989, where he studied painting and animation, the artist began making short film backdrops for the New York Ridge Theater’s avant-garde productions. Simultaneously, however, he directed his first and less known pictures, such as *Night Highway* (1990), *Lost Avenues* (1991), *Photo Op* (1992), *Footprints* (1992) or *The Death Train* (1993). Morrison’s extensive work as a multimedia artist and experimental filmmaker has been recently honored by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which organized his mid-career retrospective between October 2014 and March 2015. Morrison is a fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (2000) and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts as well as a recipient of the Alpert Award for the Arts, a National Endowment for the Arts Creativity Grant (2004), the FCPA Grant (2003) and Creative Capital. He has also received two New York Dance and Performance Bessie awards for *Every Day Newt Burman* (1993) and *Jennie Richie* (2002) as well as an Obie Award for Sustained Achievement (2002) (Morrison, “Bio/Filmography”). One of his most notable projects, *Decasia*, was selected for preservation by the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry in 2013 as “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant,” hence becoming the second most recently released film to be inducted into the list (“Complete National Film Registry Listing”). Today, Morrison’s works are generally critically acclaimed and widely distributed by Icarus Films and the British Film Institute; they are also preserved in the Museum of Modern Art’s, Walker Art Center’s, and the Amsterdam EYE Film Institute’s collections.

Morrison asserts that over thirty short experimental films mostly comprised of archival celluloid strips and sometimes referred to as supernatural, “possessed” or marked by the occult aesthetics (Donnelly 120), should be perceived as images of contemporary world and have been selected for digital projection primarily due to their resonance with numerous existential issues burdening the present-day society. In the 2016 interview with Nytra, the artist claimed that the process of adapting the original cinematic material to the new media does not simply aim at escaping

“archaism” (Nytra, “My Films”). Instead, decaying nitrate prints are scanned digitally to present audiences with the stories from “beyond the grave” in some novel and unique context and perhaps in the only technologically feasible way. As suggested by Zimmerman in the introduction to Morrison’s retrospective held in Cyprus in 2015, “Morrison’s diverse filmography uses the decomposition of 35mm nitrate film as the catalyst for his existential investigation of memory, the archive, and the history of moving images” (“Decomposition / Recomposition”). In order to achieve a desirable effect, both his early and later pictures, including *City Walk* (1999), *Ghost Trip* (2000), *The Mesmerist* (2003), *Light is Calling* (2004), *Outerborough* (2005), *The Miners’ Hymns* (2011), *Re:Awakenings* (2013), *The Great Flood* (2013) and others, tend to draw on European and American avant-garde generic conventions traditionally associated with documentary, educational, travelogue and landscape films of the silent era. Often alluding to early cinema’s expressionism, abstract formalism, phantom rides’ superstructure and camerawork, the city symphony’s spatial arrangement of urban environments or the 1950s and 1960s mythopoeic films in the tradition of Stan Brakhage, Morrison employs editing, which clearly contributes to the complexity of imagery and mood conveyed on screen. Such effects as dissolves, time-lapse, slow motion, fade-outs, distorted lenses, superimposition, thick haze, unmatched cuts, etc. are also incorporated to depict another common theme prevalent in the filmmaker’s works, that is that of a trip or a ride, as well as allow him to creatively play with the continuously moving, rhythmic, indistinct and optically manipulated imagery, additionally enhanced by music. Even more interestingly, rather than expose Morrison’s concern with life and death, some of his travel films, particularly *Night Highway*, *The Death Train*, *City Walk* and *Ghost Trip*, tend to challenge and celebrate the concept of the American landscape, hereby rediscovering its beauty in a peculiar, yet hypnotizing and aesthetically appealing way.

The notion of a travel ride film, a well known form of entertainment utilized in a number of visual and film productions since the late nineteenth century, was first proposed by Rabinovitz, who traced its beginnings to Hale’s Tours of the World, a short-lived, yet popular attraction in the U.S. amusements parks and related venues of the early twentieth century designed to simulate the realism of a railroad trip and evoke certain sensory experiences accompanying it (42). Hale’s Tours, however, soon went out of fashion and were absorbed into post-war narrative cinema, where they reemerged in widescreen motion simulation rides, such as Disney’s *Trip to the Moon* (1955) or *Impressions of Speed* exhibited at the 1958 Brussels International Exposition. These and akin attractions relying on a travelogue format were successfully resuscitated by the IMAX Corporation, which employed and mastered some Hale’s Tours- and early travel ride films-related techniques like high camera angles and movements. What follows is the definition of (travel) ride films as proposed by Rabinovitz:

I propose a model of cinema that shifts from a technologically determinist cinema as an ongoing effort for improved cinematic realism. Ride films

are not just about what is being depicted—the sight of the destination—but are bound to how they reveal the capacity of the apparatus for summoning novel points of view, for extending the panoptic gaze, and for eliciting perceptually felt wonder at the apparatus. Ride films always present their subjects as a cinema-of-novelty-display: they transform the landscape into pure spectacle. Conquering space not only with the gaze, such spectacles foreground the body itself as a site for sensory experience within a three-dimensionally contained space. They coordinate the cinematic images with a range of other cues: visual and auditory effects may emanate from different points in the auditorium; atmospheric or environmental stimuli affect skin responses and sensations; and there may even be efforts to produce kinesthesia (or actual movement). (Rabinovitz 46)

In the same chapter, Rabinovitz elaborates on travel ride films' primary functions revolving around the idea of spectatorship seen as an active and immersive experience:

Travel ride films foreground the bodily pleasures of the cinematic experience, pleased already inherent in cinema itself and important in such bodily-oriented genres as pornography, action adventure, horror, and melodrama. But Hale's Tours carefully coordinate the spectator's physical and cognitive sensations, whereas one might argue that the standard Hollywood approach involves substantial conflict between various cognitive cues. Across the history of cinema, ride films best represent an experience unaccounted for by theories of cinema spectatorship that have generally represented movie-going as a passive experience in which spectators are increasingly drawn out of their bodies and sent into the screen. (Rabinovitz 43)

In the latter part of his discussion, Rabinovitz contends that the ongoing popularity of ride films can be attributed to their thrilling function of accustoming the viewer to new technologies at the level of embodiment and sensory activity seen as a consequence of the collapse of the nineteenth century regimes of perception, which paved the way for the rise of autonomous vision (43). Basing his hypothesis on the aforementioned theory proposed by the art historian Jonathan Crary, Rabinovitz argues that "cinema represents a complex interplay between embodied forms of subjectivity and arguments for embodiment" and such a purpose is served well by ride films, whose goal is to "dematerialize the subject's body through its visual extension into the cinematic field... [and to] emphasize the spectator's body itself as the center of an environment of action and excitement" (45). In order to trigger a sense of physical and emotional immersion as well as reinforce the "participation effect," Hale's Tours and modern simulation rides, which go back to the 1986 *Tour of the Universe* installed by Douglass Trumbull at Toronto's CN Tower, are also founded on the principles of realism expressed through the cinematographic image and the conventions of narrative (Rabinovitz 48-49). While the former employs

editing, camera movement and extended shot to reproduce a continuous flow of motion, the latter provides temporal information and visual cues within the frame, which indicate passing of particular environmental markers and features of a given landscape according to the lines of perspective.

The very idea of virtual travel, however, can be also related to the earlier concept of panorama, one of the most crucial factors, which determines, reformulates and facilitates the viewing experience associated primarily with the realistic effect of immersion. The term itself, denoting a wide-angle view or representation of a given physical space, stems from the Greek words “pan” (all) and “orama” (sight). Originally known as “La nature a coup d’oeil” (nature at a glance), the panorama was invented by the English painter Robert Barker to describe his panoramic canvasses of Edinburgh and London exhibited on a cylindrical surface. Meanwhile, the name itself was first used in 1791 in reference to circular panoramic paintings, which gave the illusion of unrestricted perspective and enabled the spectator to experience an almost infinite field of vision (Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens* 36). Barker’s invention, often considered the forerunner to the moving panorama and phantom rides, did not only become one of the first commercially successful forms of visual entertainment and a predominant model for the nineteenth- and twentieth-century landscape representations, but it also gave rise to some key concepts and conventions used in contemporary media. Some of them referred to the new modes of viewing, termed monologic (perspective, voyeuristic and panoptic gaze) and dialogic, the latter of which is usually defined as a more immersive, engaged and bodily way of looking (Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens* 42-44). The monologic gaze is quite evidently interrelated with other early and contemporary film genres and conventions, often exploiting the panoramic representations through various forms of tourist or “mobilized virtual gaze” (Friedberg, *Window Shopping* 2).

The latter concept, defined by Friedberg in her study of film as a postmodern experience as “a *received* perception mediated through representation,” is strictly based on a paradoxical combination of mobility with virtual reality or, in other words, the movement of viewing with the immobility of the spectator: “The visuality here is compensatory, in line with the paradox that I have emphasized elsewhere: as the mobilized gaze became more virtual, it grew to involve less physical mobility, and became located within the confines of a frame” (*Window Shopping* 2, *The Virtual Window* 162). Hence, the compensation often allows the viewers to experience a sequence of edited images as one single shot in the form of a fluid camera movement. Schilverbusch further suggests that the new modes of transportation and a radical acceleration of travel have affected our perception of time and space and led to the emergence of panoramic viewing, which implies a fast, scanning, deep, yet simultaneously static, restricted and superficial gaze as the screen clearly frames the field of vision (189). Taking this line of reasoning, Verhoeff makes an interesting hypothesis that “the highway panorama is in fact a prolongation of the panoramic experiences such as mediation and mobilization... by panoramic painting, circular and immobile, theatrical and mobile, and by photographic, filmic and digital panoramas” (*Mobile Screens* 46).

However, the study of mobilized virtual and panoramic gaze can be related not only to some modern and postmodern modes of viewing, but also to somewhat rarely explored design of designated panoramas, which become subject to the viewing experience itself. In Morrison's travel films, audiences are exposed to American landscapes presented in an explicit travelogue form,² which both draws on and challenges visual and narrative conventions traditionally associated with phantom rides and modern road movies. Interestingly, certain shots, particularly aerial shots of a nightscape in *The Death Train*, highly stylized shots of a road journey in *Night Highway* and *Ghost Trip* or glimpses of urban travel imagery in *City Walk*, may be indicative, somewhat ironically, of standard cinematic conventions utilized to conceptualize natural and urban landscapes and influenced by a distinctively U.S. tradition of depicting sublime, picturesque and luminist qualities of natural scenery, which goes back to the nineteenth-century Hudson River School movement. While the aforementioned concepts, also inseparably connected with the school's strands of pastoral elegiac and scientific exoticism, were first proposed in the eighteenth-century European aesthetics and further discussed by Burke, Kant, Schopenhauer or Gilpin, they are also related to Turner's Frontier Thesis, which successfully advanced the myth that pioneering the American West has played a substantial role in shaping the national character, as well as Manifest Destiny, which stressed the U.S. primacy in exploring and expanding across North American territories (see e.g. Allen 27, Carmer 19-24, Driscoll 8-20, Nash 67-71).

This kind of approach was later adopted in twentieth century American cinematic landscapes, which frequently envisioned an infinite and immense sublime scenery. According to MacDonald, "the grand landscape epitomized by Frederic Edwin Church and the "Rocky Mountain school" (Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, Thomas Hill) became, and has remained, the literal, as well as historical, background of epic commercial films, from the earliest attempts to interest filmgoers in natural scenes to John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), *Fort Apache* (1948), and *The Searchers* (1956) to such recent popular hits as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Legends of the Fall* (1995)" (*The Garden* 274). Furthermore, Natali suggests that both Hudson River School and contemporary film depictions of American landscapes tend to share ideological and iconological scenarios associated with "sublime imperial fantasies":

Film landscapes are never purely narrative backgrounds nor simply distracting spectacular settings. They bear the traces of political projects and ideological messages. They press onto viewers' senses, memories, and fears and become part of their memory, carrying the subliminal strength

2 The term travelogue is defined in *Oxford English Dictionary* as "an (illustrated) lecture about places and experiences encountered in the course of travel; hence a film, broadcast, book, etc. about travel; a travel documentary." Gunning ("Before Documentary" 14), Peterson (197) and Ruoff (2) note that since the end of the nineteenth century, travel films' most notable formal elements have been the focus on place as their primary subject as well as the use of travelling shots, which tend to foster "the view aesthetic."

of a past, even archaic, worldview ready to come back as future progress. Like the footprints left on the surface of the moon by U.S. astronauts, Hollywood landscapes bear the footprints of the United States' recurrent manifest destiny. (Natali 100)

The statement, though to some extent simplified, may also serve as a comment on many independent and experimental productions, which attempt at, as put by MacDonald, “revivifying our sense of place in all its complexity—that is, for evoking something of the original discoverers' wonder at where we are, something of the original explorers' excitement in transforming the possible into the actual, and something of the original settlers' understanding of the practical failures of their surround—while at the same time recognizing the problematic moral, environmental, and political implications of five centuries of European involvement in the Western Hemisphere” (*The Garden* 91).

Unsurprisingly then, the focus on landscape in avant-garde and experimental cinema, often rendered with the sublime or luminist sensibility or implying some of the aforementioned ideological messages, can be seen as a rather persistent trend in the history of American filmmaking. Some influential works representative of this tendency include Steiner's *H2O* (1929), Baillie's *Castro Street* (1966), Dorsky's two-part *Hours for Jerome* (1980), Gottheim's *Fog Line* (1970), Brakhage's *Desert* (1976), Benning's *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), Mangolte's *The Sky on Location* (1982), Rudnick's *Panorama* (1982), Fenz's *Forest of Bliss* (1986), Reggio's *Qatsi* trilogy (1982-2002), Gehr's *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (1991), Hutton's *Study of a River* (1997) and many others. Morrison's pictures, however, tend to challenge the sublime and luminist concept of American landscape by means by form and content. While the former is achieved by drawing on selected European and American avant-garde traditions, primarily the phantom ride, travel ride film and road movie conventions, the latter is built with the artist's own innovative use narrative revolving around the theme of a road trip. It seems that particularly phantom rides, based on the viewer-as-passenger schema (Musser) and widely believed to have pre-dated the enduring road movie, intensified sensual illusions created by the moving panorama and produced an almost palpable spectacle of motion, which dramatized the act of visual appreciation by evoking “the uncanny effect of ghostly movement” (Gunning, “Landscape” 55). Although the genre partly continued the nineteenth-century American landscape tradition grounded in the notions of the romantic sublime and the picturesque, it also questioned some of its stylistic tropes by utilizing psychophysical sensations of movement or reversing the spectators' position and disorienting their relation to the imaged scene. Taking such an assumption, I argue that Morrison's experimental pictures, while simultaneously drawing on and playing with selected phantom ride, travel ride film and road movie tropes, exploit the dynamics between the spectator's unique frontal perspective, visual mobilities and distant panoramic views through evoking a distorted experience of sensational and contemplative voyages, hence challenging panoramic perception and an idealized image of American (film)

landscape intrinsically bound with the natural and technological sublime (see e.g. Grey 55; Verhoeff, *The West* 200).

Both *Night Highway* and *City Walk* are 16 mm black and white shorts, often considered two companion pieces stylized in the convention of abstract formalism, that is devoid of any emotional or social relevance, yet simultaneously promoting an engaged and intellectual form of spectatorship (see e.g. Monaco 278). Interestingly, the films, along with *Ghost Trip*, use the footage shot by Morrison himself, which makes a contrast to the director's most celebrated works composed of decaying nitrate film stock. The former project, originally conceived for the opera *The Manson Family* (written by John Moran and directed by Bob McGrath), produced by Ridge Theater with Lincoln Center and accompanied by John Moran's music, simply pictures the passing highway lines during the night filmed from the upward position. Meanwhile, the latter picture is a more elaborate portrayal of the city streets shot from a moving vehicle and scored by Michael Gordon. While *Night Highway's* opening scene features white vertical scratches that, as put almost poetically by Totaro, "give way to manipulated white line fever shots which arch and curve along with the road," *City Walk's* imagery seems to contain more distinguishable elements indicative of a hectic urban life and provides the audience with brief, visceral and almost ephemeral glimpses of pedestrians, sidewalks, buildings, bridges, automobiles, etc. ("The Cinematic Poetry"). The film's narrative depicts a twelve-mile drive down the Flatbush Avenue through Queens' Jacob Riis Park, the Manhattan Bridge and, finally, Chinatown. Again, Morrison deliberately distorts footage, as shot from an automobile's back seat, by means of time-lapse and related editing techniques in an attempt to "give the impression of a stark, charcoal-like chiaroscuro black and white" (Totaro, "The Cinematic Poetry"). Totaro pinpoints that "the texture of the image at times becomes so porous it recalls Georges Seurat's pointillism," which might be interpreted, among other things, as a reminder of a metaphysical elusiveness of the human existence ("The Cinematic Poetry"). Interestingly, the films' complex classical and industrial-symphonic scores enhance a sense of movement and confusion conveyed on screen; for instance, Totaro pinpoints that *City Walk's* soundtrack forms a striking contrast to the picture's indistinct and almost hypnotic content:

In *City Walk* the music begins with an edgy guitar, and then layered with a tinkling, minimalist piano and female voicing. As the film progresses the music becomes 'thicker,' more complex, with throbbing, low end piano chording and recurring percussive guitar stabbings. This precise, staccato rhythm forms a contrast to the blurring imagery. (Totaro, "The Cinematic Poetry")

Similarly, *Death Train*, originally designed to accompany John Moran's opera *The Death Train of Baron von Frankenstein*, takes inspiration from certain phantom ride conventions, particularly in its use of immobile camera situated inside or on top of a moving vehicle. The short, however, presents a much more complex

imagery and, as pointed out by Pinkerton “draws out an extended visual analogy between analog moving picture and railroad technology, rhyming spinning reels and spinning wheels” (“Dead Alive”). The prevailing motif of a railway travel constitutes the recurring image of the whole work, which consists of found footage from the 1950s educational film, *How Motion Pictures Move and Talk*, as well as the two phantom rides, *The Georgetown Loop* and *A Trip Down Mount Tamalpais* (Strauven 254). Strauven argues that “the railway stands emblematically for the dispositif of pre-cinematographic perception” and the spectator is confronted primarily with the montage of the locomotive and the projector presented figuratively as a technological parallel:

the perforated film strip consisting of identically-sized individual frames is prefigured in the zoetrope strips and the individual images in the phenakisticope; in the case of the train the rows of windows figuratively match the film frames and the rows of wheels correspond to the perforations. In both cases the individual pictorial space can only be perceived in stasis. (Strauven 254-255)

Strauven further discusses the functions of this technical comparison, which aims to highlight the contrast between “the modern, panoramic gaze in the railway train and the optical effects generated by the viewing slits in the rotating zoetrope” and hence shifts the film’s focus to the phenomena of light and movement “consistently seen as the uncanny dimension of film, with its unexpected apparitions waiting to leap out at the seated spectator, only to turn out to be lifeless and immaterial once the projector’s lamp is extinguished” (255). The use of zoetrope’s animation inspired by Muybridge’s chronophotography is effectively combined with a series of proto-cinematographic images of the railway travel, the most evocative of which include repetitive views captured by the camera installed on top of the train passing through a tunnel reminiscent of a black hole. Other equally immersive effects involve the employment of numerous repetitions and loops made of the early travelogue cinematic material interrupted by insert shots of some circular movements of motors and pre-cinematographic optical toys. Strauven notes that such a repetitive structure, which allows to “generate rhythmic and kinetic optical stimuli,” is also manifested in the adoption of extremely short intervals between the subsequent frames within a single shot (255). As a result, Morrison presents his audience with a horror-like story, where the ride in a ghost train surrounded by largely unidentifiable apparitions remains the narrative’s central motif and the major source of suspense, thrill and excitement. The titular death train literally corresponds with some spectral qualities the phantom itself, which, according to Strauven, derive predominantly from “the relationship between movement and stasis and... the clouding-over of the visible” (256). The haunting effect is achieved primarily by means of slow lap dissolves, blurring superimpositions as well as transitions between the phantom ride’s shots of the train moving in and out of a tunnel and aerial shots of a nightscape, which also evoke a sense of a looming apocalypse.

Meanwhile, *Ghost Trip*, described by Totaro as an enchanting “neo-Gothic” noiresque work, remains Morrison’s major fully representational 35 mm short road movie, which features no “decay effect” and introduces some distinctive characters and elements of the plot (“The Cinematic Poetry”). Here, the concept of a road trip is implemented on a narrative level and simultaneously distorted by the use of high contrast black and white stock, slow motion, time-lapse, fade-outs, extreme wide angle lens, unmatched cuts and image looping, which render the titular journey an almost ghost-like experience and foster “the sense of a slow descent into another dimension” (Totaro, “The Cinematic Poetry”). The opening scene presents a low angle shot of a cemetery, where an old black man plants flowers while singing “the man has arose from the dead,” possibly an ode to someone who has passed away and is about to come back to life. Interestingly, the film follows a circular structure and thus reflects an “existential limbo,” a frequent motif in Morrison’s cinematography, and narrates a story of a hearse driver (played by Slink Moss), who collects a corpse in New Orleans and transports it back to the same cemetery. Much of the plot revolves around Reverend Dennis’ across the country drive in a Cadillac hearse, which occasionally stops on the side of the road with settings, including a local grocery store, a bar and a casino, filmed rather abruptly from the perspective of the driver and his companion. To reinforce a hallucinatory funereal, the picture was shot in overexposed black-and-white, where images are either white and blown-out or black and extremely deep additionally emphasized in lighting, especially due to the use of silhouette (O’Donoghue, “Bill Morrison”; Kenny, “Beauty in the Broken”). As a result, the imagery may be reminiscent of an over-reproduced photocopy replete with haunting reflections, movements, sounds and occasional utterances suggestive of Morrison’s artistic and philosophical stance. What follows is O’Donoghue’s attempt at exploiting the interpretative potential of *Ghost Trip* concerned with transcending the physical or, more literally, raising it from the dead:

Reflections of a palm-tree-lined town in a car window allude to the perforations or soundtrack on celluloid stock. Tics of continuity (dissolves, fade-outs, time-lapse and slow motion as signals for time passing; the interplay between score, silence, direct and indirect sound; movements in space distorted by lenses and unmatched cuts) are subjected to formal play. The refrain of the mourner’s spiritual ‘And he never said a mumbling word’ may reference Morrison’s beloved silent cinema. In one scene, the driver and the hitchhiker gatecrash a funeral; might Morrison be acknowledging the death of film itself, as material artefact, artistic medium or social ritual? (O’Donoghue, “Bill Morrison”)

The twenty-three-minute footage is also the result of Morrison’s collaboration with Michael Montes, whose psycho-industrial compositions contribute to an almost supernatural quality of the titular road trip, where the material merges the spiritual on both narrative and symbolic level:

[Ghost Trip] is dominated by Michael Montes' 'soundscape,' its psycho-industrial churning deliberately echoing Angelo Badalamenti's legendary scores for David Lynch. As in Lynch's films, rising howls of sound indicate shifts between different realms of reality. This supernatural road movie follows the purgatorial drift of white men in cowboy hats—exiles, lost souls or revenants—through highways, railways, abandoned homesteads and empty beaches, casinos, cemeteries and scrublands, guided spiritually on their way by African-American singers, preachers and musicians. (O'Donoghue, "Bill Morrison")

As mentioned before, Morrison's travel films tend to challenge the concept of the American landscape by the use of cinematic conventions traditionally associated with phantom rides and modern road movies. Particularly *Death Train* seems to successfully achieve the "phantom ride effect" by incorporating such elements as deteriorated footage, manipulated travel imagery and image looping enhanced by atmospheric scores, slow and fast motion cinematography or more conventional traditions of abstract formalism. The film's attachment to early cinema representations aims to revive the turn-of-the-century encounters with the American wilderness through the lens of technology, which relies on evoking the technological sublime of a railway travel while nurturing the sublime and picturesque qualities of nature. Simultaneously, however, Morrison's picture evokes a far more uncanny effect by disorientating the spectator's frontal position in relation to the imaginary space and creating highly immersive and almost psychophysical sensations of motion, which render the viewers both contemplate and fear the moving panoramas. Gunning summarizes some major functions of the traditional phantom rides and their impact on the reception of landscape:

These films fully exploit the dynamics of their unique frontal point of view, driving a wedge between the 'phantom ride' and the distanced panoramic perception of the train tourist.... Far from a contemplative mode, this viewpoint summoned up the possibility of shock and intense sensual involvement that had migrated from the painted panorama.... If the panorama films shot from the front of the train seem to abolish the traditional reception of landscapes by accelerating the fantasy of travel into a landscape with a vengeance, one might note that the early excursions mounted by railway companies for artists also frequently featured rides on the front of the locomotive.... [T]he intensity of this experience... exceeded a simple reproduction of travel and transformed the experience of landscape.... With their front-on viewpoint, the phantom rides provide a unique realization of the fantasy of penetrating a landscape, of chasing the horizon into the depth of an ever-unfolding image. (Gunning 56-67)

Furthermore, Gunning observes that phantom rides provided a novel experience of spectatorship and redefined the role of the unseen locomotive, which "literally embodies an unseen energy that compels the camera, the film and the viewer down

the track” (58-59). In other words, the ride itself does not create a sense of separation between the viewers and the panoramic viewpoint but rather confronts them with a vanishing vantage point and hence evokes the illusionary possibility of collision:

The vanishing point, the fixed convergence of classical perspective, its point of coherence, becomes in the phantom ride a point of constant transformation and instability.... Our point of view, as stand-ins for the camera, becomes the point at which everything converges and then disappears, reversing the traditional schema of perspective.... As shaped by the camera lens, instead of offering the broad and inviting foreground, a stable viewing point on which traditional landscape staffage figures can loll at ease to gaze into the distance, the foreground of a phantom ride represents the narrowest point of the image, as well as the point of greatest velocity, the anticipated site of collision. (Gunning 58-59)

Following this line of reasoning, it seems that akin to some of the aforementioned conventions, Morrison's *Death Train* does not only alter the spectators' relation to landscape, but it also invokes an almost trance-like state during which they reach into the distance while passing through and leaving behind the visible scenery. The views themselves can be referred to what Gunning calls an anti-landscape, which stands in opposition to its contemplative equivalent grounded in the Hudson River School tradition (60). Similarly, *Night Highway*, though far less complex in terms of imagery and narrative content, challenges the concept of American (idealized) landscape not only by means of exposing the uncanny qualities of the titular highway lines, but also by restricting the spectators' perspective exclusively to the subject matter, thus fundamentally questioning the distance between them and an ever-unfolding landscape. Therefore, the road trip becomes a pure allegory and celebration of the movement and velocity experienced as a head-on confrontation between the speeding highway and the viewer's vantage point, which forms a striking contrast to a sense of separation created by a more lateral and traditional view of the driver inherent in panoramic perception.

Meanwhile, a sense of detachment from the panorama is evoked in Morrison's remaining works, *City Walk* and *Ghost Trip*, where the windshield serves both meditative and disorientating functions by constantly providing conditions for instability prompted by illusionary physical sensations. However, contrary to the hypothesis that “the panoramic viewpoint corresponds to the magisterial gaze of manifest destiny” (Gunning 59), the films transform the standard cinematic representation of natural and urban landscapes through fostering the technological sublime along with a sense of immersion and dissolution as well as presence and absence. The whirling city life in *City Walk* is continuously seen through distorted lenses except for a few brief moments when the vehicle stops so that the contemplative qualities of the drive become somewhat overshadowed by those dominated by speed and confusion. Interestingly, the meaning of the route itself, according to Morrison, may be interpreted as follows: “Flatbush [a neighborhood in the borough

of Brooklyn, New York City] is a direct route through the city to nature. When you get out to the end, it is all light. It is sort of like a dissolution of the city” (Kinetz, “Urban Tactics”). Similarly, Kinetz draws a parallel between the film’s focus and the process driving seen as “squinting at the city”:

In *City Walk*, Mr. Morrison strips the city of its modernity, turning red and blue signs black and white, and blowing out many identifying details. The result is a timeless sort of street: a round woman in a striped dress who could be alive or dead; a boat that could have streamed by 50 years ago. People pass through the film, but they aren’t the point: ‘They are cogs in a whirling landscape,’ Mr. Morrison said. Instead, the film focuses on speed and scale and what it feels like to move through the city. ‘You look at a thing and squint,’ said Ms. Olinder, who is a painter. ‘You can see the structure of things more clearly.’ (Kinetz, “Urban Tactics”)

Meanwhile, *Ghost Trip* utilizes the notion of a trip as a limbo state, yet presented in a fully representational form. What distinguishes it further from the previously discussed films is that it provides the spectator with an even more unconventional viewing experience, namely with multiple perspectives based on the viewer-as-passenger schema as the camera is directed at the driver, the vehicle or the passing landscape. In an attempt to draw even more confusion, it has been installed in various places both within and outside the hearse, for instance, on different sides of the bonnet, behind the driver, at the back seat with the view at the back window as well as on the roadside. Interestingly, wherever the location of the camera is, low angle shots of the moving panoramas accompanied by audio-visual loops seem to be prevail in the whole picture, hence contributing to the complexity of mood conveyed on screen. This undoubtedly peculiar camerawork greatly enhances a sense of claustrophobia rather than that of wide open spaces traditionally associated with the frontier experience and thus corresponds with both European and American road movie conventions used to depict 1960s automobile travel:

[I]n the European films, travel in an automobile was filmed either from inside the vehicle or from directly in front of the windshield, creating (at least for Americans) a sense of claustrophobia. In the American films, automobile travel was filmed from outside the vehicle, often from above and moving along with it, creating a sense of exhilaration and freedom. The ‘wide open spaces’ of the American frontier, first depicted by such painters as Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran in the nineteenth century and marketed so effectively by American automobile manufacturers after World War II, have remained central to American thinking about automobile travel—and about freedom, which for many Americans is less a question of the ability to choose between political or even economic options than an emotion connected with the opportunity to take off in a car and, at least for a brief moment, escape from the

claustrophobic demands of family, community, and society. (MacDonald, *The Garden* 127-128)

Therefore, it seems that except for the choice of some quintessentially American settings constructed with apparently hollow “western” countryside and characters, *Ghost Trip* draws on a number of representational modes opposing some typical road movie conventions. The latter genre, as defined by Corrigan or Cohan and Hark, presents technological means of transportation as “self-descendant of the nineteenth-century train” (Corrigan 144) and traditionally places them at the center of the narrative: “The significance of technology in the road movie, differentiating its quest narratives and wandering protagonists from those of the Western, has as much to do with representing modernity, its historical achievements as well as its social problems, as it does with reiterating masculinist fantasies of escape and liberation” (Cohan and Hark 3). Laderman further suggests that “while often preserving from this literary tradition a focus on the learning experiences of the traveling hero in an unfamiliar setting, road movies rearticulate the quest motif in the ‘increasingly mechanized’ framework of automobile modernity” (13). Meanwhile, *Ghost Trip*, though seemingly following some of the genre’s fundamental stylistic and iconic features, simultaneously challenges its linear, open-ended plot and character structure, representation of travel as an explicit or implicit critique of American society or an individual’s lifestyle as well as use of the interstate highway system and vast landscape heightened with “pit stops” like diners, bars, sundry detours, motels or gas stations as the central mise-en-scène. In terms of framing devices, aerial, side-by-side or inside the vehicle traveling and tracking shots, often exploited in the road movie with the aim of conveying “a visceral sense of traveling at a hyperhuman, modernized speed” (Laderman 15), are intercut and edited so that the actual driving sequences tend to overshadow the plot itself. Moreover, while following the genre’s common use of front or side windshield and rearview mirror views, Morrison further distorts *Ghost Trip*’s frame compositions, as evident in the formalistic frame within-a-frame as well as wide and low angle shots, and thus exaggerates the camera’s presence, creating a strong sense of isolation, enclosure and confusion. Also, contrary to some major road movie’s narrative and visual conventions, the film pictures the American landscape in a largely fragmented way, which hardly evokes sublime, picturesque or pastoral qualities of nature and technology, and hence renders the protagonist’s journey seemingly aimless and devoid of purpose.

Not surprisingly, one may argue that the term “sublime decay,” coined by the creative nonfiction writer and New York Times arts critic Lawrence Wechsler in reference to Morrison’s aesthetics, also lies at the core of the discussed films. By incorporating such elements as deteriorated footage, manipulated travel imagery and image looping enhanced by scores, slow and fast motion cinematography or phantom ride conventions, the analyzed material does not only envision the American landscape through distorted lenses, but also playfully evokes some traditional associations with sublime qualities of both visible and invisible wilderness, urban

life and transportation technology. While *Night Highway* and *City Walk* enhance an almost hypnotic sense of velocity in the convention of abstract formalism, which symbolizes the way humans perceive the passing views from the perspective of a speeding vehicle, *The Death Train* and *Ghost Trip* expose the uncanny dimension of light and movement in a more elaborate manner. Particularly the former project, built upon a repetitive structure and a range of editing techniques, relies on a genuinely haunting effect of the phantom ride and experiments with some conventional landscape representational modes to reproduce a highly immersive and travel ride-like feeling of descending into another, ghostly-like dimension. Similarly, *Ghost Trip*, whose representational form offers a much more varied interpretative potential, contributes to an almost supernatural and hallucinatory nature of the titular road trip through embracing a circular structure, multiple perspectives and creative montage. Naturally, the “phantom ride effect” is predominantly exploited in *Death Train* and *Night Highway*, which, while reviving the natural and technological sublime, also redefines a novel experience of spectatorship by evoking an illusionary possibility of collision and anti-landscape views. In contrast, *City Walk* and *Ghost Trip* tend to trigger a sense of claustrophobia and detachment from the passing panoramas and hence depict them in a more distinguishable, yet simultaneously fragmented, disorientating and confusing form, which questions an archetypical frontier-inspired landscape representation often encountered in contemporary road movies.

There is no denying that Morrison’s works have deserved their reputation as both original and intriguing collection of self-reflexive projects enthralled and permeated by decay. The celebration of largely disintegrating, fading and thus seemingly distressed archival film footage has brought him the worldwide recognition as one of the most acclaimed conceptual artists of the present day preoccupied with “revivifying dying film stock” (Monaghan, “Bill Morrison Revivifies”). In the interview with Monaghan in New York on November 9, 2010, Morrison commented on his attempts at disconnecting the fluidity of film and exposing its transient or contemplative nature, which creates the illusion of audience members’ concurrently entering and distancing themselves from the imagery:

Typically an audience wants to lose themselves in the movie. We enter the illusion of the moving picture willfully, and the degree to which a film is successful is often gauged by how easily it sweeps us up into its world. A film that has blotches and blemishes is not as easily entered, however. The eye seeks out recognizable forms, and strives to create continuity between them. But they are constantly being reminded that they are watching a plastic medium that has some shadows trapped from another time. And while that medium is at once unrolling before us in contemporary time, it is, on another time level, continuing to deteriorate. So the audience member is always made aware of him or herself as being just that: a viewer who has been placed in this weird limbo of at once striving to enter the illusion of the film, and being kept at bay by that which houses it. And that tension,

when successful, creates a somewhat meditative state in those who are receptive to it. So that's the real sweet spot that I try to find. (Monaghan, "Bill Morrison Revivifies")

As mentioned before, Morrison's continuous goal as a filmmaker is to experiment with various forms of spectatorship as well as to restore some inherent qualities of deteriorating nitrate-film-stock seen as the way of both preserving the past and reinterpreting it anew for the purpose of contemporary art-making. In this respect, the discussed travel films, whose reliance on a selection of decomposing images is mostly absent except for *The Death Train*, remain distinguishable from the director's works in terms of their employment of a modern-day source material and travelogue format. However, despite being devoid of any explicit signs of physical decay, the pictures still draw on the concept of "imaginary ruins" in a more metaphorical sense (Habib, "Thinking in the Ruins"). Namely, they encapsulate a vast array of influences coming from silent and post-war cinema as well as use intellectual montage, which triggers a reflection on human perception of space and time and provides a sumptuous allegory of vanishing idealized landscape forms. It seems then that Morrison's works, predominantly associated with the found-footage film, which is literally raised from the dead, have yet another, equally entrancing dimension built on the narration of a surreal trip. Perhaps it only attests to the fact that nothing can be taken for granted in the artist's "theater of decaying memories" (Skirball, "Bill Morrison's Theater"). What appears to be certain, however, is that both decomposing nitrate and travel films, often presented in the form of musical symphonies, can be regarded not only as diverse reincarnations of the past, but also as a fascinating pursuit of deconstructing Americana by means of historical and contemporary cinematic material.

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