

Arts (/Arts/)

A challenging score for a challenging film: 'Decasia'

By STEVE PFARRER
Staff Writer

Wednesday, March 01, 2017

Though it was filmed decades before the digital age, it can stand its ground with modern CGI effects: a boxer doing his training, pummeling not a heavy bag but what appears to be a giant, jelly-like creature, a pulsating mass into which the boxer's hands and arms disappear, then reappear.

That's just one of the surreal images found in Bill Morrison's "Decasia," a 2002 movie in which the U.S. experimental filmmaker strung together silent film segments, primarily from the early 1900s, which have degraded over the years and left the movie full of bizarre distortions, blotches and strange, glowing effects — all open to interpretation.

But "Decasia," conceived by Morrison as something of an homage to the 1940 animated film "Fantasia," is more than just celluloid. It's also the name of a symphonic composition by U.S. postmodern composer Michael Gordon, one he created in 2001 for a European music festival — and which Morrison then chose to be the official soundtrack for his film.



Film and score will come together next week at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where the Fine Arts Center will screen "Decasia" and the university's orchestra will provide a live rendition of the soundtrack. The March 8 performance is part of the annual Massachusetts Multicultural Film Festival, presented by the UMass Interdepartmental Program in Film Studies.

Organizers say the music and film are really two parts of the same whole, offering aural and visual complements to each other. Yet it's exceedingly rare these days, notes UMass interim orchestra conductor Tian Hui Ng, that one ever hears live music with a silent film.

"That's part of what's so appealing about this project, the fact we are putting these two parts together," said Ng, who also directs the Mount Holyoke College Orchestra. And in the music, just as in the film, he added, "Shapes emerge over time in ways you don't anticipate."

UMass and Smith College film teacher Andrew Ritchey, meantime, calls Gordon's score "absolutely central to the film's effect. I love the music — it's so powerful."

He points to one film segment, in which planes seem to be disgorging bombs, where Gordon's score includes a dramatic string glissando that conjures the sound of whistling bombs.

"I think to see ["Decasia"] with a live orchestra playing promises to be a really dramatic experience," said Ritchey, who will introduce the film at the FAC on March 8.

Plumbing the archives

Morrison, who lives in New York City, has frequently worked with old film archives, and for "Decasia" he reviewed hundreds of silent film clips from the Library of Congress, New York's Museum of Modern Art, a Swiss film archive and other sources, including private collectors. Most of the images date from between about 1914 and 1929, though some are from the late 19th century and others from as late as the 1950s.

Ritchey, who leads classes on silent films, film music, and other movie topics, says until the early 1950s, films were made with nitrate prints, which could be very unstable, sometimes bursting into flame or decomposing into a gelatinous mess.

With "Decasia," says Ritchey, Morrison has put together partially degraded film segments that collectively amount to "a sustained meditation on decay," particularly the way in which the degraded parts interact with the original images.

"The film is very deliberately constructed ... to give this sense of the inevitability of death," he said. "There's a cyclical nature to it. There's an image of a baby being born alongside images of death."

In fact, the film opens and closes with a clip (in pretty good shape) of a Mideast Sufi dancer spinning round and round, something of a metaphor for the film.

The images, from all over the world, vary in their degree of decay. In a sequence that appears to be from the 1950s, children are seen boarding a school bus. Then the camera focuses on the clear faces of some of the children, one at a time, at the center of the clip, while the left and right margins flicker with what looks like ice crystals.

At other times, distortion rules the day, completely obscuring any original image. Some clips bubble and mutate like a bit of psychedelia (albeit in black and white) from the 1960s. What look like giant ink blots dance over the faces of a well-dressed couple, circa 1920s. A woman in what may be a courtroom has her face and head pulled, twisted and elongated as if in some horror movie.

And in one particularly striking segment, the color and definition of a laughing woman suddenly disappear, leaving a ghostly transparent figure, like an old photo negative.

Ritchey notes that Morrison previously studied painting and animation and has brought some of that sensibility to his film. "It even feels a bit like hand-drawn animation," he said. "It's kind of a 21st century version of 'Fantasia.' "

The aural element

Ng, the UMass Orchestra conductor, says he got in touch almost a year ago with the organizers of the Multicultural Film Festival when he learned they were planning to bring "Decasia" to campus. He was eager to propose that the film, which he'd seen, be screened with Michael Gordon's score, performed live.

"It seemed like a great opportunity for our students and for anyone watching the film," Ng said.

As Ng explains, Gordon's "Decasia" has a minimalist sound, often a drone, but it's also been carefully constructed, using deliberate atonality to mirror the images of decay in the film. For each set of instruments, one-third play in tune, one-third are tuned an eighth of a note sharp, and one-third are tuned an eighth of a note flat.

"It's not so discordant that [the musicians] can't play together, but it has a very unique sound," Ng said. "This is new for a lot of students. This isn't the classical canon. It's not Beethoven or Mozart."

Ng says the piece is also a challenge for his students because it's 70 minutes long, without any breaks. "It requires a lot of concentration," he noted.

Gordon, in liner notes for a CD of the music, wrote "I set out to make the orchestra sound like it was covered in cobwebs, with instruments that had been sitting for a hundred years, creaky and warped and deteriorated, and the musicians happen to come by, pick them up and play. What would that sound be?"

At times, the instruments imitate industrial sounds that reflect the screen images, like passing trains or clanking machinery.

Ng says the score also has a very distinctive sense of space; it was originally performed in Switzerland in a converted warehouse with much of the orchestra surrounding the audience. The set-up of the FAC precludes that, he noted, but Gordon plans to attend a rehearsal at UMass at the FAC to offer suggestions on getting the best sound.

Following the concert and film screening, both Gordon and Morrison will join Ng on stage to talk with audience members about the event.

"What I really like about the film and the music is that everyone can have their own interpretation," Ng said.

"Decasia" will be screened March 8 at 7:30 p.m. at the UMass Fine Arts Center. The film is free; for additional information, visit fac.umass.edu. For information on the Multicultural Film Festival, visit www.umass.edu/film/mmff/mmff2017/index.html

