

## The Washington Post

### Ann Hornaday reviews Bill Morrison's 'The Miners' Hymns'

By Ann Hornaday | June 15, 2012

With found footage being all the rage these days — from the cult “Paranormal Activity” franchise to this year’s “Chronicle” — director Bill Morrison should be a household name. In 2002, “Decasia,” his densely layered amalgamation of vintage distressed and decaying celluloid film stock, became a sensation in the fine-art world, as both an elegy to a medium on the verge of extinction and as a bold re-purposing of an obsolete form.



In “The Miners’ Hymns,” which makes its Washington debut at the National Gallery of Art on Saturday, Morrison doesn’t indulge in the poetics of film as a material object, which has become his signature. Rather, the movie, composed of archival footage taken over 100 years in the coal-mining community of Durham County in northeastern England, plays it straight, with Morrison juxtaposing iconic black-and-white images to a stirring musical score by the Icelandic composer Johann Johannsson.

The result is a cinematic experience that, at just under an hour, casts an eerie, even ghostly spell, shifting almost imperceptibly from time and place to create a dreamlike version of geography and history.

“The Miners’ Hymns” opens with present-day shots of Durham County taken from a helicopter, with on-screen titles indicating the places where coal mines stood, now featureless parking lots and sprawling retail outlets. Moving along the coast as the tide recedes, the film then casts the audience back to the turn of the 20th century, when the region was a bustling coal-mining hub, its denizens living in treeless compounds of trim brick rowhouses. Compiled largely from archival films, “The Miners’ Hymns” depicts the work of the mines in dramatic chiaroscuro tableaux, where the coal glistens with lambent richness; up top, children slide gleefully down heaps of slag and tailings, running to the seaside where gleaners search for stray bits of precious mineral.

Morrison is an accomplished gleaner himself, which is surely why a London arts group commissioned him to make a film documenting the social history of Durham County.

The filmmaker has selected powerful, indelible images to capture and preserve a world that has all but disappeared, from the monumental beauty of enormous horses pulling coal-heavy carts from the sea to the lyrical sight of laundry drying on lines crossing tidily kept streets.

But “The Miners’ Hymns” is no sentimental exercise in idealized nostalgia: The poverty, danger and foreclosed futures of Durham are there to see, making reactions all the more complex when Morrison intercuts news footage of the pit-closure riots that roiled the community during the Thatcher era.

As eloquent a working-class portrait as any Ken Loach film, “The Miners’ Hymns” doesn’t make any explicit political points. Still, with the upheaval in Wisconsin such a recent memory in the United States, it’s difficult to watch the climactic scenes of banner-carrying workers and their brass bands proudly processing into a church for Durham’s annual Miners’ Gala as anything but another Morrison elegy — not for film, but for trade unionism itself. With Johannsson’s gorgeous score providing mournful counterpoint to the visual world Morrison has both revived and created anew, “The Miners’ Hymns” leaves the audience with the ineffable sense of being between times, landscapes and emotions. True to the sacramental suggestion of the film’s title, the feeling is a lot like prayer.