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Simon Popple

The Miners' Hymns
Acts of Resurrection

Lord of the oceans and the sky above,
Whose wondrous grace has blessed us from our
birth,
Look with compassion, and with love
On all who toil beneath the earth.

They spend their lives in dark, with danger
fraught,
Remote from nature's beauties, far below,
Winning the coal, oft dearly bought
To drive the wheel, the hearth make glow.

Now we remember miners who have died
Trapped in the darkness of the earth's cold
womb;
Brave men to free them, vainly tried,
Still their work-place remained their tomb.

Gresford, The Miners' Hymn. Robert Saint.
c.1934

Introduction: Themes and Contexts

‘You find nothing in the Archive but stories caught half way through: the middle of things; discontinuities’ (Steedman 2002, 45).

The film archive is a tomb, another place where the dead sleep. It is of the past. Memories are frozen in a discontinued flow, embalmed as, ‘a defence against the passage of time’ (Bazin 1960, 4). They are visited intermittently, at moments of anniversary and respectfully resurrected for public display. They are sacred, inviolable, and closely guarded. At least they used to be.

We have now learned their real value and have recognized that they belong in the here and now. They speak as much about the future as of an imagined past. They transcend the enforced reverence of the museum, the gallery, and historical

documentary, and demand to be animated in exciting and challenging ways. They sidestep the temporal and teleological orthodoxy of the historical document. They are -- and should be -- sites of contestation and creative experimentation wherein history can be reclaimed and evidential traces resurrected, performed, and creatively re-imagined. Both filmic and photographic images invite re-contemplation and a deep reflection that is both historically rooted and simultaneously present (Kuhn 2002). They are part of an increasingly liquid culture in which meaning is ‘unfixed and unfixable’ (Zylinska 2011, 141). They can and must be afforded the (dis)respect they deserve.

The Miners’ Hymns (2010) is one such reimagining – a collaborative celebration of the lives and experiences of people and landscapes central to a particularly contested history, full of often bitter memory and marginalized industrial existence. The effacement of such raw memory and tradition is something to be resisted and not to be eulogized romantically. It is decidedly not of the past, but, as Barthes suggests, essential in the creation of an emotional encounter with an anterior future (1981). These struggles matter and are played out on a universal scale and are no less prescient than when the source material was originally made. Morrison has taken up the cudgel and succeeded in transcending the natural inclination of the filmmaker dealing with the re-articulation of these ‘historical’ sources. He avoids the lionization of the Stakhanovite worker and the clichéd nostalgia of recent brit-flick attempts to represent the dignity and struggle of mining communities whose terminal decline was hastened by Margaret Thatcher’s brutal deindustrialization policy (Milne 2014).

This struggle for survival reached its denouement in the 1984-1985 Miners' Strike, the culmination of over a decade of increasing tensions between the state and an increasingly militant industry clearly cognizant of the threat to its very existence.

At the point of the strike, the national industry employed some 187000 miners and still supported confident and culturally rich communities renowned for their traditions of choral and brass-band music (Russel 1997). Yet, by the time of this film, only 4000 U.K. jobs remained and communities were decimated, landscapes remade, and the physical traces of centuries of industrial activity erased. The mining community at the heart of this film were no exception. Historically, the Durham coalfields had been one of the largest and had seen a huge explosion in exploitation in the late nineteenth century, reaching a peak in the immediate years surrounding the First World War, when nearly 170000 miners worked the coalfield. By 1994, the last pit on the coalfield had closed and the remaking of the industrial terrain was nearly complete (Turner 2015).

Commission

Triggered by the 25th anniversary of the 1984-1985 Miners' Strike, the film was commissioned by David Metcalfe, Director of Forma Arts, for the 2010 Durham Brass Festival. Metcalfe wanted to commemorate the strike in a very regional, hyper-local context, with a focus on the community centred in the city of Durham and its surrounding coalfields. As he said, 'We didn't set out to make something with universal appeal, in fact it was a very specific history we were exploring' (Wonfor 2014). Morrison might have seemed an odd choice for such a specific project, but, as Morrison noted, he felt that both he and Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson were chosen for their 'outsiderness' and 'detachment' from the emotional cauldron of the

subject (Morrison 2014). As outsiders, they were inured against the immediate rhetoric of the strike whilst empathetic to the broader political and cultural themes that had marked previous projects. As Morrison noted,

I had an idea there were coalmines in England, and I was aware of the big strike in '84. But beyond that I certainly didn't know about the Gala, the banners or the miners' bands, any of this (Bradshaw 2014).

The strike had already produced an outpouring of creative responses and reflective visitations: this declining industry was already memorialized by a series of projects, including the establishment of the National Mining Museum for England in 1988 and was also part of a broader set of contested heritage narratives related to mining culture (Bailey and Popple 2013). The decline of the mining industry had become a focus for a range of artistic commemorations, which incorporated filmic and musical elements, most notably the campaigning films produced by the Test Department Collective that emerged out of the strike and later commissions, such as Opera North's *Songs at the Year's End* (2010) with poet Ian McMillan and composer Hugh Nankivell (Popple and Macdonald 2012). Test Department deployed agitprop techniques and used contemporary footage as a backdrop for its powerful performances and had made a definitive intervention with a collaborative tour involving the South Wales Striking Miners Choir in 1984. The tour featured integrated performances from the choir, band, and brass bands against a backdrop of archival footage and recent news coverage (cf. Test Department 2015). The resultant album *Shoulder to Shoulder* (1984) and films emerging from the tour have also been revisited in the DS30 (2014) film and performance that took place in Dunstan

Staithe, a former industrial site associated with coal production and commissioned for the Newcastle 2014 AV festival. *The Miners' Hymns* sits well within these traditions and was similarly intended to inhabit important spaces associated with this lost industry.

The material that formed this statement was drawn from a significant series of archival sources and was an experience through which Morrison drew a direct parallel with the lives he sought to represent as he commented that, 'there is a great affinity between coal mining and mining for film' (Morrison 2014).

PLACE Fig 15.1 HERE

Still from *The Miners' Hymns* by Bill Morrison and Jóhann Jóhannsson, '40 Years On' - National Coal Board, 1978 (BFI). Courtesy of Forma Arts.

Mining the Archive

Mining and its associated cultures have long been registered in British traditions of filmmaking and have deposited a rich archival seam. One of the first extant films, *The Day in the life of a Coal Miner*, dates from 1906 and presages a century-long focus on the industry and its associated communities. The core of the collection, the National Coal Board's (NCB) documentary magazine *Mining Review* spanned 1947 – the year the industry was nationalized – to the outbreak of the strike in 1984 (Enticknap 2012). This focus ensured that Morrison had plenty of source material to draw on from an increasingly valued set of collections held by the British Film Institute (BFI) (Russell 2012). As *Mining Review* was the official NCB mouthpiece, it was, as he said, like, 'getting the footage from the boss' (Morrison 2014). The BFI also afforded him the

opportunity to draw on a unique collection of Edwardian social documentary films produced by the Mitchell and Kenyon Company in Northern Britain before 1913 (Toulmin, Popple, and Russell 2004). The project coincided with and benefitted from a major BFI initiative, led by its nonfiction curator Patrick Russell, to curate its industrial film holdings under the title *This Working Life*, with its first focus *King Coal* in 2009. Other important archives owned by the Amber Film and Photographic Collective, The Northern Region Film and Television Archive, The Yorkshire Film Archive, and BBC North East were used to provide more regionally specific material and a broader focus on landscape and social practices.

Talking about his approach to the archive, Morrison was clear about his decision to focus on the regional films within this emergent national collection and build a series of complementary elements for Jóhannsson's score. He saw the archive as a place of work and one where he wanted to respect the purity of these source materials. He approached it without any preconceptions of what he wanted to incorporate in his film, seeing the experience as a form of excavation, saying that, 'I approach it the same way as any documentary filmmaker going out in the field- open to what I find' (Morrison 2014).

His use of the archive is certainly respectful but not wholly reverential and respects Sekula's call to read the archive 'from a position of solidarity with those displaced, deformed, silenced or made invisible by the machineries of profit and progress' (2003, 451). The manipulation of stock, the stripping of sound, use of slow motion and decolourization is certainly not the act of a purist. It is subtly provocative and melds past and present. It helps create a vibrant act of memorialization and a slightly disrespectful resurrection. It is, though, tempered by an abiding respect for its subjects that comes from Morrison's empathy for their struggle. As he reflected, 'I

often deal with footage that is distressed or deteriorated- in this case I did not feel like that was appropriate' (Morrison 2014). Its subjects are silent but not silenced and some of the original soundtrack was re-incorporated and sampled in the score.

The source materials were orchestrated into selections designed to evidence a 'great continuity' of approach and sustain its theme throughout the near century that the footage represents. Morrison was looking for similar shots that ran across decades, both in terms of camera setup, shot, and subject. The selection of materials was often predicated on being able to make such seamless historical transitions, Morrison noting that, 'In editing it we were really looking for how similar these shots were over time...the same setup every decade on' (ibid.). One key example is a sequence showing children running up a slagheap during the Second World War and seeming to run down the other side in the 1970s.

Structure and Approach: Acts of Resurrection

Morrison and Jóhannsson had not previously collaborated but quickly familiarized themselves with each other's work. They determined to build the project around the archival traces of the local community and to draw on its enduring musical culture. The film was initially intended as something that would evolve through a series of interactions between Morrison and Jóhannsson, with the first cut preceding the score. The tight deadline, however, dictated that the score be completed before the sequences were assembled and Morrison had to cut the archival footage to the score. This was a different way of working for Morrison and predetermined the structure of the film and its sections. Jóhannsson had seen rushes of the archival material and there had been time for discussions of themes so there was a degree of collaborative

flexibility and Morrison remarked the music was consequently easy to cut to and allowed it to be, 'married to the score' (2014).

Morrison has worked on a long series of collaborations with musicians and was a natural choice to link these deeply historical archival sources with such a specialist music commission. He understands the power of music as a form of expressive language and the eschewing of a conventional voiced narration. The removal of diegetic sound allows it to speak for itself. The music draws on references to brass-band culture, featuring brass players in the live ensemble, but is not a pastiche or a reworking of traditional music. It does locate tradition through its title, which came from Jóhannsson, by its reference to Gresford, the Miners' Hymn written by miner Robert Saint. It commemorates the 1934 disaster at Gresford Colliery in Wales during which 266 men and boys were killed in an underground explosion. Only eleven bodies were ever recovered. Gresford became synonymous with the struggle for nationalization and the implementation of safety measures and was quickly adopted by colliery bands as key part of their repertoire. It is at the heart of mining culture and is sung at the cathedral service at the end of every Durham Gala. As he later said about the score,

[...] it's a homage filtered through my own sensibilities. I try to take all these influences and create something that hopefully has resonances to this world and culture, but I didn't want to be too much of a tourist and appropriate things. (Bradshaw 2014)

The *Miners' Hymns*, 52 minutes in length, is divided into five distinct sections that match the movements within the musical score and delineate different narrative

phases. Its transitions are marked by brief fades to black and intervals of silence. The sequences draw the viewer through a series of transitions from the contemporary landscape, through the changing processes of work, leisure, strike and moves inexorably towards the celebratory gala. It demonstrates the continuities of life and struggle across the shifting historical phases of the mining life and uncovers layer upon layer of continuity and tradition now largely absent.

Act 1

The film opens with a sweeping shot that draws the viewer from rough seashore, over crumbling cliffs, to a series of locations that mark the sites of former mines and mining communities. The physical erosion of the shoreline mirrors the decline of a centuries-long way of life. A brief series of captions, the only captions in the film, provides information of what these places once were -- the only legends that mark former pits in a sanitized and remade landscape where they have become ski-slopes, shopping centres, and football grounds. These opening aerial shots are the only contemporary elements in the film. They establish the landscape that is remade through the archive, prefiguring an ongoing series of celluloid palimpsests. The sequence ends with a shot of a shimmering field of grass that dissolves into an archival shot of a sea of faces at a gala many decades ago. The world becomes black-and-white in this instant; the frame rate reduces slowly and deliberately. We 'enter the archival footage through the land', land that is a 'wound that had healed' and becomes an 'open wound in the black and white footage' (Morrison 2014). These faces are flanked by rows of banners in a slow pan that allows each face to be contemplated in turn – these are real people, not the 'masses' of agitprop tradition, and they exude confidence and pride in the occasion. The symbols of their beliefs and culture lie

around them: political slogans on banners and colliery bands ready to play. Dressed in their finest clothes, families together, the archive draws us down the century, clothing the only discernible variable as the scene becomes more recent. Then the faces become more serious and the party becomes a wake. It closes with a poignant close-up on a child's toy revolver. Fade.

Act 2

We are now in the darkness of early morning. We see miners – men and boys – leaving for work, traversing deserted streets towards the pithead's belching smoke. Miners collect tokens and trim their lamps in readiness for the inevitable descent below ground; the music is slow and contemplative, the elements proceed at funereal pace. Men are framed within a series of metal coffins, the lift cage and the underground train, as they prepare for the final journey to the coalface where they crawl, bent double between the pit props and direct the horses that will haul the coal they are there to hew. The archive then begins to reveal the increasing mechanization of processes from men with picks and horses to vicious metal-toothed saws and sleek conveyers that mechanize and inexorably increase production. The machines slice through rock like a plough through a rich and yielding black soil.

A slow, dreamlike quality pervades these underground sequences and creates stark contrast between dark and light, man and machine. A final shot reminds us of the miner's presence as a half-naked man pushes a coal truck up a steep incline. Fade.

Act 3

We are back on the seashore where men and horses work in harness to gather sea coal washed up on the beach. This is another source of coal for beachcombers and

overground miners. Coal is collected in nets and sorted as children help to wrestle the coal from an unforgiving sea. Their labour is equally harsh and starkly contrasted with the mechanization on the cranes and trucks seen on the horizon. Children play on the spoil heaps these machines have formed, joyous and abandoned. The focus then shifts to miners' houses, gleaming sheets hang in a dark and filthy environment as preparations are made for the gala. Preparations continue as police mount barriers and traders board up plate-glass windows against the crush of the crowd. Trains arrive and revellers are disgorged, ready to celebrate. Fade.

Act 4

But this is no celebration; this is a strike and a battleground. Ranks of police traverse a pithead landscape marked by slogans daubed on walls reading 'Scabs Beware' as strike-breakers are brought in to do the strikers work, protected in armoured buses as miners protest at their betrayal. These sequences are decolourized to match the archival motif and, for the only time, Morrison draws on non-regional material as the scene shifts to South Yorkshire. Footage from the infamous and bloody battle of Orgreave in June 1984 is used to show the barbaric and mediaeval nature of the violence thrown up by the strike as miners throw stones, police baton miners, and mounted police charge unarmed men. There is no dignity in this labour. Morrison justifies this break by acknowledging that he, 'had to deal with the 1984 strike', as it was, 'the prism through which everyone was going to view it' (2014). This BBC footage is deeply controversial as its sequencing and emphasis has been a subject of ongoing contestation (Milne 2014). It is in this melee of disturbing images that we see where the filmmaker's sympathies lie, the footage the, 'most political material in the film - it tips my hand' (Morrison 2014). Fade.

Act 5

We briefly return to the world of colour as the aerial sequence is rejoined and more sites of commemoration are visited. Back to the archive, we see miners leaving work, urgent, smiling as a clarion call is sounded in the score, calling them to muster for the gala, their banners and bands to the fore. Proud people progress, their banners proclaiming their heroes, histories, and beliefs. Children join the throng – dancing ahead of the procession, across the decades to Durham and the Cathedral, where the service will be held and the banners blessed. The crowds wind through the mediaeval streets as they are drawn to the Cathedral square. The banners are brought into the church and process towards the high altar. Fade/Credits.

PLACE Fig 15.2 HERE

The Miners' Hymns (2010) by Bill Morrison and Jóhann Jóhannsson performed at Easington Social Welfare Centre, East Durham, United Kingdom, 2014. Image

Credit: Colin Davison, Courtesy of Forma Arts.

Performance and Afterlife

The Miners' Hymns premiered in March 2010 with two performances in Durham's magnificent cathedral, the spiritual home of the local mining community and the focus of the annual miners' gala. The subsequent tour of local and regional miners' clubs and broader international exposure struck resonant chords, and what could have been an insular and partial project, became a universal statement about the

dignity of community and the nature of industrial life. It was commercially released in 2011 and was toured again in 2014 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the strike.

The premiere was a potent and emotional event and Morrison clearly felt that emotion, reflecting that it, ‘was very moving for me to see how these images connected with people’ and that there was a strong, ‘self-reflexive feeling at the premiere’ (2014). The accompanying tour website records the deeply emotional responses to the film from members of the audience and are characterized by the powerful relationship between the archival footage and the potency of the score. The lack of commentary and original dialogue is seen as adding to the emotional impact of the work.

The potency of the Cathedral and the Gala are integral to understanding the film and its quasi-religious allusions. The space itself, though, is not used as a religious site, but as a social space at the heart of the community and a location of tradition and history. The same is true of other spaces in which the film was initially shown, within the habitus of the miners’ hall and local social spaces. As Morrison noted, ‘every room is different, every crowd is different’ (2014). Thus, each new performance draws on the space and audience to create a differently orientated and nuanced experience. Variations in tone, orchestration, and ambience mean that every live experience is a different kind of resurrection, a different type of memorialization. The fluidity this affords means that the film has a rare transcendence and can translate into new and perhaps unexpected contexts. Different forms of habitus intersect and interact and a set of contextual materials was produced by Forma to provide specific references for different audiences and provide a basis for recording the memories unleashed by the film.¹ Its commercial release on DVD by the BFI reflects the

importance of the live experience of the film by including highlights from the live premiere performance in Durham Cathedral.

In trying to explain its broader appeal, Morrison reflected that it was perhaps its narrow, regional focus, which enabled international audiences to recognize their own relational contexts and to forge a deep empathy for the universal nature of the experiences it depicts. He felt that, ‘the more detail you reveal in a way, the more universal it becomes’ (Morrison 2014). Any initial fear on his part that the film would not be understood beyond its immediate locale was groundless and it garnered broad international plaudits; the New York Times reviewer describing it as, ‘an elegant, elegiac found-footage work’ (Dragis 2012).

Conclusion

‘These are a string of beautiful images fit together to a beautiful score that has a truth’ (Morrison 2014).

The Miners’ Hymns exists as a site of resurrection and contemplation; it is, in Morrison’s own words, ‘a long form poem’ to the ‘rich heritage’ of the Durham coalfield (Morrison 2014). It respects the communities and traditions it features, the landscapes they inhabited, and the culture they defined. It is evidence of the reinvigorated potency of the archival sources that predominate in this text. As such, it is not, as so many films dealing with this contested history, a nostalgia piece, but a living and fluid testimony and an emotional and performative document. It is a secular requiem mass that respects tradition and mourns a lost way of life. It represents a distinctive approach to the use of the archive and shows how artists can make interventions that both respect and challenge the sanctity of their sources and question

orthodox uses of these materials. It operates as a potent exemplar of how the archive can be mined to 'bring amnesia and forgetting out into the open' (Lorenz 2004). Seen by some as form of heresy, the reinterpretation of these sources and their incorporation in an ongoing historical journey are its lasting legacy.

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¹ Available at <http://theminershymns.com>