

Larry Jordan

by P. Adams Sitney

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Filmmakers Filming.

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Film In The Cities
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Presented by
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Larry Jordan

All the rivers run into the sea;
yet the sea is not full; unto the
place from whence the rivers come,
thither they return again.
All things are full of labour;
man cannot utter it: the eye is
not satisfied with seeing, nor
the ear filled with hearing.

—Ecclesiastes, 7-8

Larry Jordan abandoned the most prestigious academic situation America had to offer a teenager in hope of "filling his eyes." That is his own youthful formulation. In an undated autobiographical note, which was probably written in 1958, he tells us:

"During the years 1952-1953 Larry Jordan shot his first motion picture footage. He was going to Harvard University in a mistaken attempt to fill his head. Later, having entered a season of summer theater and filmmaking (*Unglassed Windows Cast a Terrible Reflection* by Stan Brakhage) he was drawn toward filling his eyes instead; and has just recently learned that the head is filled through the ante chambers of the soul, of which the eye is one."

Then, after describing his films, he concludes: "Larry knows what his future films are likely to look like, but cannot describe the feelings which will make them or the discoveries they will make."

Since he first began experimenting with a camera at the Harvard film club in 1952, he has made close to fifty films. The variety of genres in which he has worked is almost as impressive as the consistency of his perspective. Throughout his career he seldom—perhaps never—benefited from a coincidence of his interests with the dominant movements and styles which shaped the history of the avant-garde cinema. Within what has called itself "the independent cinema" he has remained an unusually independent filmmaker. Jordan's "freedom" has been visible in his courage to allow the anachronistic impulse to become a significant factor again and again in his filmmaking. I shall offer the

argument in this essay that such anachronism is an important, if suppressed, feature of modernism. But that contention will be developed later.

For his artistic "freedom" Larry Jordan has paid the considerable price of critical neglect; and the even crueler tax of praise and recognition, occasionally, for the least challenging, the most superficially pleasant, aspects of his art. Jordan is, however, a most challenging filmmaker. Yet the challenge is now so big it is invisible: it is the body of work as a whole, the nearly fifty films which describe a convoluted pattern of inspirations, reconsiderations, extravagances, and retreats persistently elaborated for nearly thirty years. He was never an officially recognized new hope; he never dramatically changed his direction, his style, or his vision of the cinema and its possibilities; he never stumbled upon a subject matter that added its own glamour or outrageousness to his art as a filmmaker. He didn't stop making films; he didn't disappear, even though there were times he was so discouraged that he quietly withdrew his films from distribution.

Eventually he received most of the rewards available to the independent filmmaker in America: a teaching position, some retrospectives, grants, festival prizes. Larry Jordan is one filmmaker who does not rant against the social and economic system that floods successful studio filmmakers with wealth and fame and holds back from the independent filmmaker even the rudimentary means of continuing his art. He has welcomed his fate, worked consistently—and again quietly—to expand the possibilities of his own production and to improve the lot of other filmmakers. In this respect he has not been an absolutist; as an artist forced to use expensive materials, he has investigated several routes of survival.

He was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1934. The accident of destiny that put him in high school together with the filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, was significant for both of them. As novice American filmmakers they both discovered their calling at a time when the first generation of native avant-garde filmmakers were despairing of the future of their art. Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, James Broughton, Sidney Peterson, John and James Whitney were stymied after their initial explosion of invention and productivity in the late Forties. It was natural that they both turned to the dominant genre of their predecessors, the psychodrama, to form their first films. Jordan's uneasiness with that mode of cinematically dramatizing an interior crisis would seem to be reflected in the tentative and often whimsical tone of his earliest films. He was at his best when he reduced the genre to a hieroglyphic abstraction: *Man Is in Pain* (1955) survives as one of the best films of its kind; but even more than Brakhage's important *Reflections on Black*, which it appears to have influenced, it looks today as if it wanted to break out of its genre and escape from its very premises. In fact, the vitality of several of the best avant-garde films of the early Fifties

(including Christopher MacLaine's *The End* and *The Man Who Invented Gold*—Jordan worked on this latter) is intimately connected with an anguish of form, as if the very insecurity about whether or not such filmmaking was artistically viable inspired both an inventiveness within the form of the psychodrama and a thematic reflection upon it, almost from without.

Between 1956 and 1959 Jordan served in the Merchant Marine. He kept up with his filmmaking, perhaps less encumbered by worries about its success and recognition. His return from the Merchant Marine coincided with the discovery of the genre in which he had been most at home and where he has achieved his greatest success: the animated collage.

By 1965 Jordan was exhibiting a full program of his collage films. He wrote the following note for the Filmmaker's Cinematheque in New York that year:

"I believe that now is a most important time for individual spirits to shine forth and reaffirm human dignity and shine light into the depth of the human heart.

"At this moment we are surrounded by powers of darkness which are trying to lead us into war, annihilation, and death. I can only counter with these film-poem-pieces dedicated to light, love, and life.

"It may seem at first glance hard to equate your impression of the films you will see with the above statement relating to light, love and life. But I propose here to give you my most accomplished black and white films, my most congealed film-poems of the inner life, in visual terms. I have made many, many film-poems, mostly in color, which show sun, the blooming plant, the swollen suckling breast and the miracle-born babe. These films are highly personal and I have not yet reached a point in my art where I feel they will hold the same quality of enchantment for the general audience as they do for me. Someday I hope to show these visions of love in terms of color films that will satisfy both you and myself. I believe the great God who made the sun will see us through. And without darkness, we could not perceive its opposite: Light."

I have often wondered why Jordan took such pains to inform his audience of the half of his suddenly prodigious work that he was not showing publicly. From the vantage of a decade and a half later, the collages and the "film-poem-pieces" of photographed reality seem similar in structure and tone. Perhaps the not-so-apparent preoccupation with death, which is inscribed in the collages, troubled the filmmaker more than his viewers at that time.

The world of *Duo Concertantes*, *Hamfat Asar*, *Enid's Idyll*, *Pink Swine*, *The Dream Merchant*, *Gymnopedies*, and *Ein Traum der Liebenden* has less to do with "light, love, and life" than with their opposites. It is an inverted world in which the manifestation of an image never means the presence of a substance. The principles of gravity and hardness, of perspective and duration, by which we negotiate our movements in space, no longer operate in these works. Guided by their musical soundtracks, we find ourselves rhythmically suspended in a contradictory space in which images parade and flaunt their disinterest in convincing us of their logic or, more importantly, of their consequences. They are indeed "congealed," but their density is that of metaphors which have hermetically fused tenor and vehicle. That looking into this world is such a pleasure becomes, paradoxically, its most troubling aspect.

A collage is necessarily a symbolic system. Jordan has studied the magnificent collage novels of Max Ernst, and he has worked for his American heirs, Joseph Cornell and Jess (Collins). One of the inherent principles of the collage is its stasis. It cannot move. A motion is suspended within it; including the "movement" of transformation which engendered it. Perhaps, it would be better to say that the collage should not move. The several ways in which Jordan made collage films were explorations of the uncodified taboos of the medium. One has only to compare Walerian Borowczyk's *Theater of Mr. and Mrs. Kabul* with any of Jordan's important collage films. Borowczyk used the materials and methods of collage to make a cartoon. Its skillfulness and its banality are identical. It is just another cartoon, even though it is dressed up to remind us of the seriousness of Ernst's visual "novels."

The starting point of an Ernst collage must be the illustrated plate which supports the play of substitutions. Usually this plate is a steel engraving. It must have fixed, well-defined limits. It does not extend beyond the page. The collagist places his cutout images upon this backdrop. Although the cutouts usually rest on top of the base, they can be arranged in response to the engraving's detail so that they appear to stand behind, in front of, or on the same plane as any other images within the illusionary perspective of the base image.

Borowczyk displayed his pernicious professionalism when he made the backdrops of his film into a virtual infinity. His imagined city is an unbroken continuity of engravings. In this respect, he implied that the laws of the cartoon supercede the principles of collage.

When we see one of Jordan's collage films, in contrast, the limitation of the background plane is not transcended. It remains there, insisting upon the transience of the images fluttering upon it. It may have been a technical limitation that got Jordan started in this way. It is very likely that he did not have the means to record simultaneously two different rates of movement on two or three

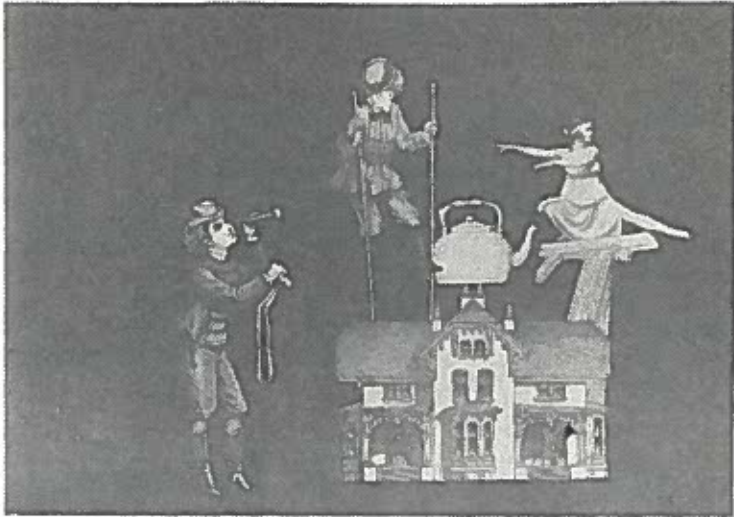
planes. If that is the case, he should be credited with recognizing that he had a unique access to an authentic collage cinema when he embraced this limitation. Harry Smith, who preceded him as a collage filmmaker exploring Ernst's cinematic implications, avoided the problem by abolishing the background plate. His cutout figures encounter one another in an ambiguous black space. Outlined shapes articulate bounded areas within that space; and in his initial project, the screen itself was shaped and outlined by a series of slides. The very repudiation of the bounded background signalled Smith's leap off of the screen and into space of the film theater.

Jordan's adherence to the stasis of the collage backdrop entailed a courageous reductivism. In acknowledging the paralysis at the core of collage art, he jeopardized his recognition, and much more critically his self-confidence, as a serious filmmaker. I suspect it was the taking of this risk that eventually insured his self-confidence. Furthermore, it was an unwillingness to take a parallel risk, or rather an indecisiveness about what risks were at stake, that led him to hold back his portraits and epiphanies for a long time.

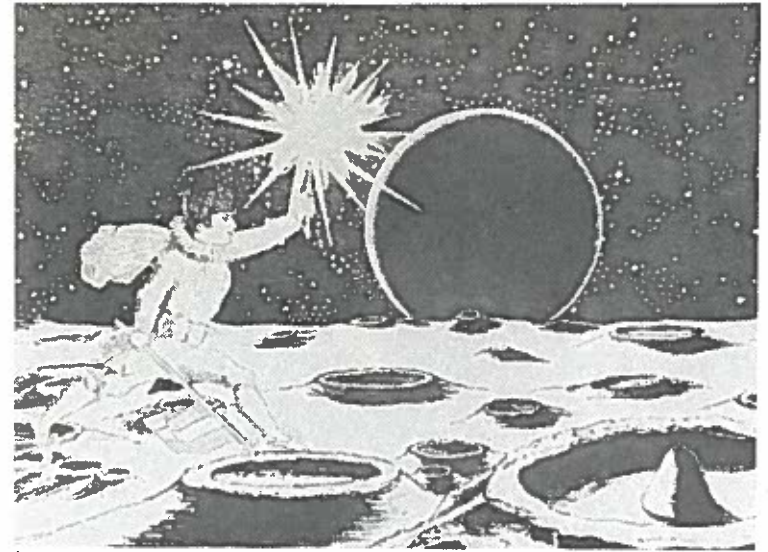
Collage or cartoon: those were options Jordan identified. In accepting the collage on its own, curiously unstable grounds, he invented a cinema very much his own. He also left himself vulnerable to those viewers who would recognize the superficial affinities to Ernst, Jess, and even Cornell, and condemn him as an imitator, the most disagreeable of all modern slurs.

When a Jordan cutout moves over the surface of an engraved backdrop, whether gracefully or crudely, in step with the music or indifferent to it, it signals to the viewer, however "enchanted" (to use Jordan's word) its separation from the inflexible base, and thereby its tentativeness. It could go anywhere. The deviations from gravity and from logical causality are easy. The images move as if they were looking for their proper place, and could not find it. There is a "rhythm-bound restlessness" (that's Carl Dreyer's expression for the essence of successful cinema) in the surface movements. At times the difference between the act of making the collage and the elusive narrative the collage would make disappears. This is deliberate in *The Dream Merchant* and *Pink Swine*, which are projected just as they were assembled before the camera, without editing, without a blueprint or any preorganization. Of them Jordan wrote that he attempted: "to transmit through the eye to the heart a blood rhythm that is, in essence, a dance. Both films are also attempts to 'make the camera see correctly.'" Some aspect of this coincidence of the rhythm of construction with the depicted movement appears in all the collage films. Often it is the most exciting aspect.

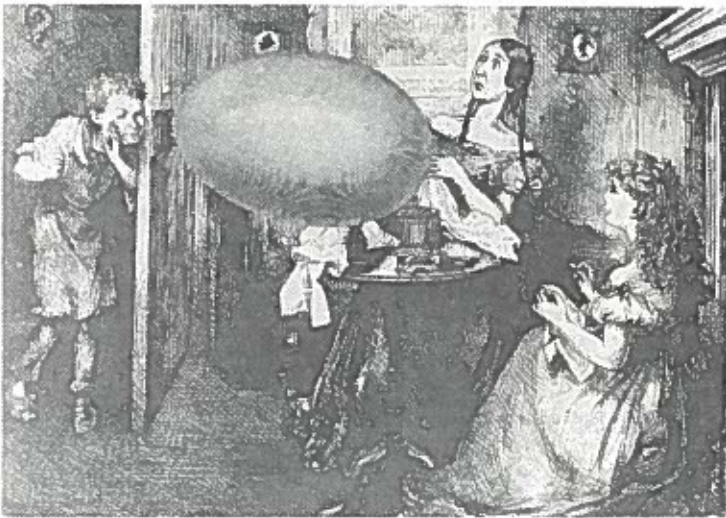
The fixed background reduces the potential of the film screen, draws it into the condition of a page, a canvas. As we resist



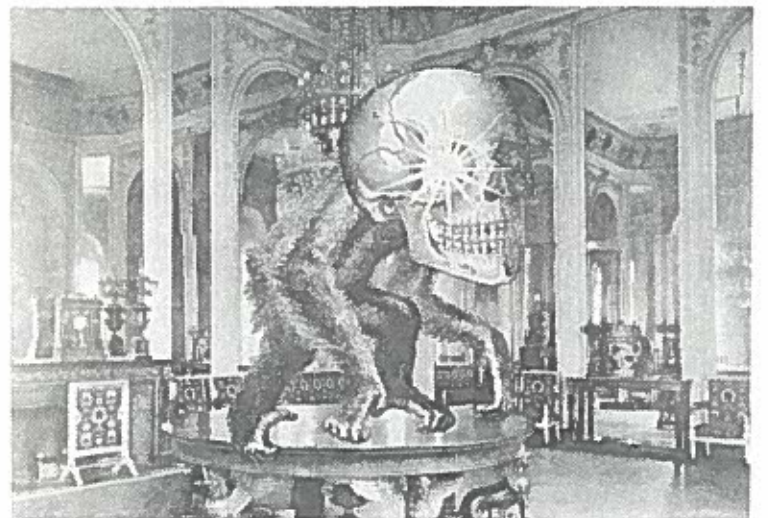
from **Carabosse**



from **Orb**



from **Gymnopedies**



from **Once Upon a Time**



from **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**

it, assured that that is not what we want of cinema, that that is not what cinema really is, Jordan's art takes over. The lovely background image in **Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway** ceases to be an intimate part of the collage; instead, it projects the mental state in which the fluctuating cutouts describe a reverie. The seascape of **Hamfat Asar** evokes a changeless nether world through which the figures hesitantly pass. It makes opaque ghosts of them. The natural scene in **Moonlight Sonata** displays a contour of cliffs over which preposterous objects can roll, through which the soul can dance. This interplay represents the vengeance of the cutout against the backdrop: from their interrelated reduction to arbitrary surfaces emerges a valorization of movement over substance, shape, matter. It is as if something—anything—had to be there to get the movement going. The materials of collage ironize the "anythingness" of these points of reference which play at effacing themselves. A similar negation occurs in the films in which a cutout crosses from one static scene to another, such as **The Centennial Exposition** or **Gymnopedies**.

The most brilliant instance of this interplay of the inflexibly static and the promiscuously mobile elements of collage is **Ancestors**, in which two backdrops alternate and a fiction of causality links the phenomena which occur on them. Here, Jordan has such confidence in his medium that he can use it to explore the boundaries of parallel montage, one of the most basic constituents of cinema. Likewise, by editing texts into images in the recent "improvement" of his first collage film, **Finds of a Fortnight**, he gets a new vitality from the discrepancy between the space of illusion and the space of reading which was once a lively issue in the aesthetics of the silent film.

Modernism and anachronism are self-evidently opposites. No artistic ideology has been as rigorously determined by a linear drive toward an absolute future as modernism. Yet even the heroes of modernism can enjoy deliberate gestures of anachronism. Picasso's various engagements with Classicism, his enthrallment with the reluctance of the human figure to disappear from his paintings, gives us the single most conspicuous instance of a dialogue between modernism and anachronism within the modernist pantheon.

Cinematic modernism has always been more hesitant and convoluted than its painterly counterpart. The intimate relationship with photography which goes back to the origin of cinema has made even the most reluctant filmmakers engage the geometry of conventional representation in illusionistic depth at one point or

another in their careers. Richter and Ruttmann, who gave us the first "absolute films" of moving geometrical planes, turned to the imagery of the exterior world and to the illusionism for which the cinema was invented just a few years after their radical engagement with film, an engagement which continues to set a standard for cinematic purity. Their careers remind us that filmmaking on the highest levels explores the depths and limitations of illusions. The logic which rejects or reduces them is co-extensive with a fascination that seeks to make the fantastic even more palpable.

The foremost theoretician of the independence of the cinematic frame from the determinations of representational time and space, that is, the Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka, has for twenty years devoted himself exclusively to creating optical/aural counterpoints of materials gathered according to the methods of realist documentaries and home movies. A contradiction? Perhaps; but if it is, it is a contradiction that points to the limitations of the theoretical discourse available to filmmakers as they struggle within the confines of their own modernism.

Jordan's affinity for the anachronistic perspective within modernism is strong and has been a part of his sensibility since he first discovered filmmaking. He has connected that discovery to the fact that he saw films by Jean Cocteau and Sergei Eisenstein during his freshman year at Harvard. On another occasion he spoke of Carl Dreyer as the one filmmaker who achieved total success in making "ghost films," the kind of transcendental drama he attempted in *The Old House*, *Passing* and *The Apparition*. In *Beauty and the Beast* and *Orphee* Cocteau turned away from the avant-garde "look" of *The Blood of a Poet* without relinquishing either his attention to the fundamentals of cinema or his independence. Similarly Eisenstein substituted an operatic, almost melodramatic pictorialism for his earlier Constructivism when he came to make *Ivan the Terrible*. That was a film that so gripped Jordan that he privately published a book of stills, which he photographed from the screen, to honor and prolong his contact with the film. In *Ordet* Dreyer strategically seduces his viewers into seeing his film as a comedy of local color in the realist tradition in order to emphasize the miracle at its conclusion. The brilliance of this, to me the greatest of all films, is tied to the ploy of using the simplest and tritest of cinematic devices, shot/counter-shot, to present the miracle. The secret "miracle" of *Ordet* is Dreyer's uncanny ability to make the one hopelessly exhausted cinematic trope into a ravishing revelation. He "resurrects" it from the tomb of convention by suppressing it for two hours during his film. He also manages to disguise the most intricate camera movement that had ever been seen until that time, a tour-de-force of "rhythm-bound restlessness," as if it were invisible.

The achievement of Larry Jordan is not that of Dreyer, nor of Cocteau or Eisenstein. But his filmmaking is extraordinarily daring

precisely because he has set them as his measure. The anachronistic perspective is the hardest to capitalize upon. The degree to which Jordan has succeeded in this most difficult and ambiguous domain is remarkable; the persistency with which he has repeated his attempts and shrugged off the pitfalls is astonishing.

I have been concentrating on the negative aspects of Larry Jordan's cinema in order to situate its uniqueness and to underscore the seriousness of his overall project as a filmmaker. But what of the project itself? With what degree of confidence can I attempt a definition of a work that includes intimate portraits (*Hymn In Praise of the Sun*), fairy tales, both dramatic and collaged (*Hildur and the Magician*, *Once Upon a Time*), a didactic portrait of an artist (*Cornell 1965*), an equally didactic illustration of a poem (*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*), as well as the psychodramas and collage films? I have gone back to what I have written on Larry Jordan in the past, some pages of *Visionary Film* and part of a catalogue for the Los Angeles *Film Ex*, without finding any help.

The large filmic projects of Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Harry Smith, and Jonas Mekas, to name just a few, are pellucid. Brakhage has been committed to the representation of all the optical experience he can record. The most dramatic and even the emptiest moments of his life have been translated into a visual play of lights and shapes, figures and gestures. If you are familiar with Brakhage's cinema, you know that nothing is too insignificant or too transcendent for him to attempt a reduction to the optical. His may well be the grandest project the cinema has yet known; certainly it has been one of the most energetic.

Anger and Smith offer us two contemporary versions of traditional hermetica, the alchemist's dream, in which cinema becomes the tool for synthesizing all that is worth knowing or feeling. Mekas has made his autobiography into a film that will last his lifetime.

In the text I quoted from 1965 Jordan wrote of "light, love, and life" as the themes of his cinema. The images he described can all be found in *Hymn in Praise of the Sun*, which celebrates the birth of his daughter. A similar joyousness can be seen in *Big Sur: The Ladies*, where nude women dance in the voluptuous blue light of dawn and dusk on the sunporch of a cliff house. What makes the filmmaker's own affirmative words so inadequate?

There is a persistent sense of absence in Jordan's films. In this one respect his project seems to be the dialectical opposite of his former schoolmate's: where Brakhage insists upon his pres-

ence in film after film, and even veers perilously toward solipsism to cling to the optical indices of the self, Jordan withdraws. His is not the radical withdrawal which Stephen Koch eloquently elucidated in Andy Warhol's cinema (in *Star Gazer*). It is much more ambivalent.

The Old House, Passing narrates that ambivalence. I take it as no accident that Jordan plays the ghost himself. But more significant than his self-casting is the film's conclusion, in which the supposedly exorcised ghost watches his exorcisers cheerfully depart from the cemetery, blowing soap bubbles. **The Apparition** is even more direct about it. The protagonist is a filmmaker, who has made the Larry Jordan film, **Plainsong**. That directness is the film's pitfall.

Many filmmakers have created structures to undermine the authority of their own imagery. Usually they gain a foregrounding of the self as a temporal structure when they do this. Jordan's films tend to reverse this dialectic; the self is reduced to the status of an image. Even in **Big Sur: The Ladies** a mythological undercurrent reverses the dominant tones of exultation. After seducing us with the wonderful shadowy dance of the nudes, he brings them into the full light. They are both more mundane and more archetypal; in their acts of singing and combing they look like familiar women of California, but they are also Sirens. The filmmaker observes them but is not of them.

No accident either that the poem he recently "illustrated" with a film was Coleridge's ballad of deathlike deathlessness. Nor that **The Sacred Art of Tibet** was his earlier didactic project. In making **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner** and the **Bardo Thodol** his own, Jordan emphasized the dimensions of phantasmagoria in both. They are films about the omnipresence and instability of images. Jordan's pervading theme is not death as Dreyer knew it, not the unknowable and terrifying threshold. It is death as a medium. Jordan invents a realm in which the persistence of imagery is imagined without the continuity of the self. The attraction is not death itself, the final resolution. It is, rather, the notion of rebirth; and that robs death of its threat in Jordan's cinema.

In **Once Upon a Time** he has given us the fullest version so far of his mythology of death. The figure he once called "Our Lady of the Sphere" guides his lost royal wanderer through a visionary landscape into a new birth. The voices on the soundtrack identify the guide with the Lorelei, Teutonic Sirens. They are neither wholly benign nor wholly sinister in his tale. The reason for that may be that, as Jordan envisions it, the optical environment of death is essentially that of life. The eyes cannot be filled. Yet they are ante chambers to the one thing Jordan seeks to capture on film: the soul. Not the self, not the world, not even light, love, and life. His project is a cinema that would define the soul.

LARRY JORDAN: FILMOGRAPHY

The One Romantic Venture of Edward
1956. 8 min, B/W, sound.

The Child's Hand
1953-1954

Morninggame
1953-1954

A Man Is In Pain
1954

Trumpet
1954-1956

Undertow
1954-1956

Three
1954-1956

Visions of a City
Shot 1957, re-edited 1978. 12 min, tint, sound.

Waterlight
1957

Tryptich in Four Parts
1958. 12 min, color, sound.

The Studio: A Fable
1959-1960. Unfinished.

The Herb Moon
Shot 1960, re-edited 1978. 3 min, color, sound.

Finds of the Fortnight
1959-1960.

The Soccer Game: the Forty and One Night's, or Jess's Didactic Nickelodeon, also called Heavy Water
1960. 6 min, B/W, sound.

Minerva Looks out Into the Zodiac
1959. 6 min, B/W, sound.

Hymn in Praise of the Sun
1960. 8 min, color, sound.

Portrait of Sharon
1960

The Season's Changes: to Contemplate
1960.

Four Vertical Portraits
1960-1961. Unfinished.

The Movie Critics
1961. Unfinished.

The Monkey
1961. Unfinished.

Circus Savage
1961. Unfinished.

Enid's Idyll
1962.

Gemini
1963. 6 min, B/W, sound.
Composed of **Pink Swine** and **The Dream Merchant**.

Shomio
1963-1964.

Ein Traum der Liebenden
1964. 7 min, color, sound.

Duo Concertantes
1964. 9 min, B/W, sound.

Johnnie
1963-1964.

Jewel Face
1963-1964.

Gymnopedies
1965. 6 min, tint, sound.

Hamfat Asar
1965. 15 min, B/W, sound.

Rodia-Estudiantina
1966. 3 min, color, sound.

Big Sur: The Ladies
1966. 3 min, color, sound.

The Old House, Passing
1967. 45 min, B/W, sound.

Our Lady of the Sphere
1969. 10 min, color, sound.

Hildur and the Magician
1969. 70 min, B/W, sound.

Living is Dying
1970.

The Sacred Art of Tibet
1972. 28 min, color, sound.

Orb
1973. 4½ min, color, sound.

Once Upon a Time
1974. 12 min, color, sound.

Plainsong
1970-1973.

Fireweed
1975. 3 min, color sound.

The Apparition
1976. 50 min, color, sound.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
1977. 42 min, color, sound.

Ancestors
1978. 5 min, B/W, sound.

Cornell, 1965
1978. 9 min, color, sound.

Moonlight Sonata
1979. 4½ min, color, sound.

Finds of the Fortnight With Quality
1980

Carabosse
1980

3 films by Cornell:

Cotillion 8 min, B/W, silent.

The Midnight Party 3½ min, B/W, silent.

Children's Party 9½ min, B/W and tint, silent.

All completed between 1940 and 1966 by Cornell and restored by Jordan.

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