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FILM OF CHANGES

★★★★SOPHIE'S PLACE
Directed by Larry Jordan.

By Fred Camper

Larry Jordan has been making independent films for more than 30 years. Quietly, without fanfare or much public notice, often working with small crews or completely alone, he has made dozens of spectacularly beautiful films. His great theme is the celebration of the power of the human imagination; his films are full of enchanted spaces, film worlds set apart from the banality of daily living—privileged arenas in which the imagination can run free.

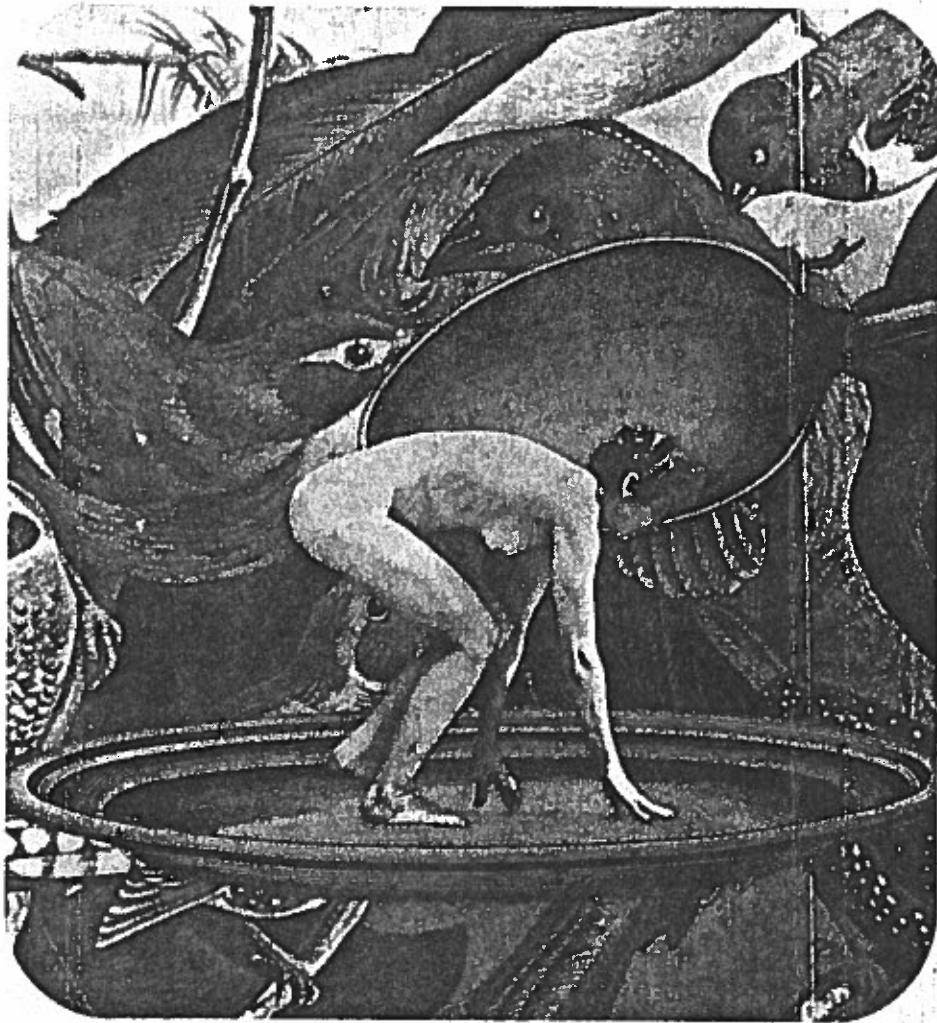
Jordan uses cinematography to give his live-action films a shadowy mysteriousness. That same quality is even better realized in his animated films, for which he is probably best known. A long string of these extraordinary animated films has now culminated in the new, feature-length *Sophie's Place*.

Sophie's Place, in the filmmaker's words, "evolved from and revolves around the mosque (both interior and exterior) of Saint Sophia in Constantinople." Static engravings of Saint Sophia, of castles, of trees and flowers, serve as settings for a spectacular variety of foreground objects that dance across the frame. Objects and figures change shape, transforming themselves via rapid montage. A huge eye and eyebrow rotate on a large bald head. Photographs of human and animal figures cavort about with a jagged rhythm.

It is a commonplace of film history that almost from its invention, cinema has tended to portray either magic or reality. This split can be seen even in the work of the first two major filmmakers, Louis Lumiere and Georges Melies. Lumiere's films followed the style of documentarist Eadward Muybridge, the American photographer who made a famous series of sequential photographs, taken with multiple still cameras, of human and animal movement. Melies, the "magical" filmmaker, based his art on fixed backgrounds that serve as the setting for foreground transformations.

Jordan has acknowledged both trends in *Sophie's Place*. His jaggedly moving figures are hand-colored animations based on Muybridge's photographs. But his film's magic is not merely historical reference.

If Jordan's film has a "central character," it is a red-striped balloon, which frequently has eyes, sometimes a hat. It often travels across other images, and appears throughout the film, including at the beginning and the end. Jordan has said that, for him, *Sophie's Place* is a spiritual autobiography, and it is tempting to see the balloon-face as a surrogate for him and thus, by implication, the viewer as



well, passing as it does through the film's world like a spectator at a vast circus.

The use of the moving balloon and the way in which Jordan's objects are continually transforming themselves suggest that the film can be seen as a journey. Not, however, a linear journey across space, like the cattle drives of certain great Hollywood westerns, or even the somewhat abstract mountain climb of *Dog Star Man*, a film made by Jordan's high school friend and fellow independent Stan Brakhage. Rather, a journey that progresses spatially and temporally in all directions at once: sideways, up and down, outward and inward, and also forward and backward in time. Movements within one tableau frequently change direction and type; an object drifting across the frame suddenly alternates with another object in a rapid-fire flicker. The inevitable march forward in time is frequently framed by a background of an old engraving, which evokes a past so idealized and so utterly other than the life we know that it suggests a simultaneous nostalgia for the past and awareness that the past cannot be recaptured.

One thing that is clear from several viewings of the film is that there is no readily discernible "program" or single coded set of meanings for all of Jordan's objects and symbols. Indeed, a specific decoding would be false to the filmmaker's intent. Jordan is not trying to create a secret, hieratic world that

the ordinary person cannot enter. Rather, he is using his images and symbols to evoke a variety of thoughts and emotions. Thus, there are few moments of stability in the film: the objects and backgrounds are forever changing, and there is not even a sense of a single controlling direction in Jordan's progressions. In fact, Jordan placed no time limits on himself, and his film took seven years to make. He had no predetermined plan and did very little editing after the fact. Still, the result is expansive, inclusive, and open.

The filmmaker creates enchantment with backgrounds that are carefully composed (as old woodcuts can be), and often lushly colored. Jordan himself hand-colored many of his original materials. These backgrounds provide a series of mysterious and enchanted settings for an even more mysterious drama, a drama that will yield up some of its secrets to any viewer but will never become accessible, static, or pinned down.

The sound track of *Sophie's Place* is a series of percussive tones occurring in irregular patterns. Jordan created the music himself. It is brilliantly original, for it does not try to be in sync with the images, or to mimic them, or to impose its own rhythm on them, as film sound so often does. Rather, it creates a feeling of open but empty space filled with sounds and silences, providing context for the imagery while allowing each tableau to remain sepa-

rate and pure, bathed only in its own light.

For all these reasons, Jordan's animation is the opposite of cute, bouncy art-house animated shorts and of music-controlled rock-video animations. Such films are limited to the viewer's sensory experience of them because they are banal and predictable. By contrast, *Sophie's Place* has an almost infinite depth.

Behind the continual transformations is a pattern of apparent stability that becomes change, which settles into stability that we know will be only momentary. Man, woman, plant, animal, church, castle are all envisioned as in some way interchangeable. The film's spectacular variety of objects, backgrounds, movements, colors, and transformations actually leads the viewer, in one sense, to a vast unity. I was reminded of the Baha'i faith, which sees the major religions as manifestations of the same universal essence, and seeks to integrate all into one.

In this regard, the history of Saint Sophia may be relevant, since Jordan cites it as a major inspiration for his film. The building has undergone major transformations over the centuries. First built as a Christian church in the sixth century, it was damaged repeatedly by earthquakes and rebuilt several times, always with changes. In 1453, it became a mosque. Islam, of course, seeks to incorporate aspects of Judaism and Christianity. Today, Saint Sophia serves as an ecumenical museum open to all.

Sophie's Place is not, however, a quest for the One behind the many. Rather, its variety of images is like a series of masks that are shadows, spectacles set against an unknowable darkness. We know that no object, no progression, no movement, is stable or absolute. Jordan's compositions oscillate between an illusion of depth and the flatness of a photograph. The perspectives of the backgrounds, and the shapes and movements of the objects, often suggest deep space; at the same time, a flat, pictorial quality reminds us that all is illusory. Jordan's backgrounds are forever changing; we are without ground. The world, as the philosopher Heraclitus said, is an "ever-living fire," where fire is the principle of change.

The spiderweb background serves as a metaphor for the film's whole world; the colors of each image are like illusions spun over an underlying darkness. In Jordan's world, there are no fixed principles or dogmatic truths. History, and past culture, are not absolute, but rather traditions that are ever changing and that can be reinterpreted and reinvented in anyone's imagination. The history of civilization becomes a shadow play for the eye, a perpetual dance in the mind.

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