



November 20, 1989

SOPHIE'S PLACE

(1986, 90 minutes, color/sound)

Film by Larry Jordan

Filmmaker Larry Jordan in person

Larry Jordan has been making independent animated 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. He currently resides in the Bay Area and is on the faculty at the San Francisco Art Institute.

"Last year [sic] Larry Jordan completed a ninety-minute animated feature entitled Sophie's Place. I believe this is the first feature-length animation made entirely alone by an American independent filmmaker. Larry Jordan thought it would take him ten years but it only took five with a year and a half to prepare the artwork. He says of the film,

'Sophie's Place is literally an in-camera film; I didn't cut anything... that's how it came out of the camera and I literally didn't know from one frame to the next what was going to happen. The rule was: I'd look through the viewfinder; whatever idea came first, no matter what it was, I had to do it -- no matter if it took six months or two days; that's what had to be done. So, I couldn't judge it...I couldn't equivocate...I couldn't say, well, that's a dumb idea.

I usually have a little game or a set of rules that I'm playing on a film. I think that's where the style for a particular film comes from. So that's the rule...walk into the studio, don't think about it any other time except when I'm working on it. I didn't know at first it was going to be an uncut film. I thought it would be like any other film...I'd get a mass of material and then I'd have the headache of cutting it. But after viewing about seven rolls, I knew I couldn't do any better cutting it. So then I began to be more careful and adhere to the guideline even more strictly: It's going to be the way it comes out of the camera.'

Sophie's Place unwinds its ninety minutes, its one hundred and twenty-nine thousand and six hundred hand-moved, hand-cutout, single frames like a masterful ballet of surreal places, silent dramas, and occurrences which seem to be born on the screen before you. He says,

'I want the film to happen on the screen; I don't want it to be a record of something that time passed -- something that happened before.'

And in this way he has achieved a ninety-minute duality: on one level the film acts itself out spontaneously and we are allowed to perceive its life -- on another level we are relieved perceptually of having to force our attention upon it and are allowed to have our own imaging and our own thinking enlivened through the filmic experience. We are given a long languorous daydream."

-Suzan Pitt, from paper presented at the First Annual Conference of the Society for Animation Studies, UCLA, 1989

"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...

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 Edwaerd 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....

....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....

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 of the mind."

-Fred Camper, Chicago Reader, Dec. 18, 1987

Next Week: No screening - Happy Thanksgiving!

Monday, December 4 -- L.A. premiere of Determinations, film by Oliver Hockenhull

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