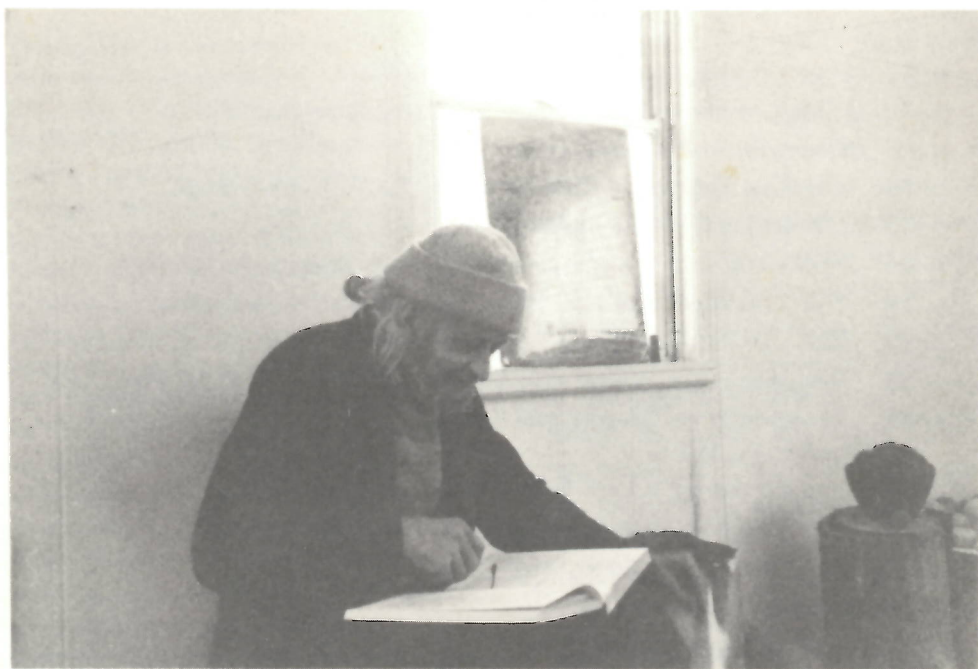


# FILM CULTURE

AMERICA'S INDEPENDENT MOTION PICTURE MAGAZINE No. 76 / June 1992 / \$5.00



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Ingmar Bergman—Luis Buñuel—and more.**

## FILM OF CHANGES: LARRY JORDAN'S *SOPHIE'S PLACE* 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 film-maker'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 film-makers, Louis Lumière and Georges Méliès. Lumière's films followed the style of documentarist Eadweard Muybridge, the American photographer who made a famous series of sequential photographs, taken with multiple still cameras, of human and animal movement. Méliès, the "magical" film-maker, 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 But his film's magic is not merely historical reference.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

in *The Silence*. In fact, he is reading the same copy of a Swedish translation of Lermontov's *The Hero of Our Time* that he was reading in the earlier film; it is almost as if he picks it up from the very page he was seen reading in the middle of that film.

Again we find an emphasis on the rejection of children and physical and psychic violence toward them in both earlier films. Furthermore they have crucial episodes of a theatrical or cinematic spectacle in which Primal Scene confusions abound. Significantly these spectacles, like Alma's witnessing of her friend's lovemaking at the beginning of the recounted orgy, are preludes to sexual intercourse. Finally the spectacles in both films evoke the penumbra of homosexual unions, such as that at the horizon of Alma's relationship to Elisabet.

*Fangelse*, the first film Bergman both wrote and directed, depicts the suicidal anguish of a young prostitute forced to hand over her baby to her pimp who murdered it and the despair of a troubled writer. At the beginning of her liaison, they discover a projector and watch the primitive one reel comedy already threaded on it. Bergman has claimed that this is a reconstruction of the first film he owned as a child. But this must be a "screen memory": for the comedy is too intimately fused to the themes of the film in which it appears to be coincidental.

Insofar as the comedy narrates the disturbances which keep a man from sleeping, it corresponds to infantile, nocturnal anxiety engendered by Primal Scene experiences. The film within the film has three stages: the catastrophe of the man's attempt to warm his bed, the intrusion of a thief, and the farcical pursuit of the thief by a policeman. In the initial stage the would-be sleeper accidentally burns his buttocks, douses his smoking night-shirt in a water bucket, and is frightened back into bed by a skeleton and a devil. Here the elementary displacement signals genital confusion, the substitution of pain for pleasure, and consequent punishment from creatures of the unconscious.

Both the thief and the policeman continue the idea of punishment, wielding phallic weapons, a knife and a nightstick. First the thief, frightened by a spider suspended over the sleeper, awakens him by accidentally whacking his protruding feet in his failed attempt to smash the spider, itself a displacement of frightening female sexuality. The entry of the policeman initiates an acrobatic frenzy in which the thief whirls the sleeper around his body and through his legs, comically suggesting intercourse before the policeman hurls him against the buttocks of the bent-over man, as if in a homosexual embrace. The comedy concludes with another appearance of the skeleton and the devil, scaring all three men into leaping out of windows.

A young boy who appears only once plays a pivotal role in the plot and provides further confirmation of my reading of the relevance of this film to the psychodynamics of *Persona*. While hiding in a cellar, the woman finds this boy also hiding in order to make his parents "believe he is dead and feel sorry." His father has demanded that he give up a sharp knife he uses as a toy, but hides it in the cellar. Later the heroine will kill herself with this knife. In a sense, the boy in the pretitling sequence of *Persona* can be said to be pretending he is dead. The entire film describes vengeance against the parents, in this case particularly the mother, as a variation on what Jacob Arlow has called "the revenge motif in the primal scene."

In *The Silence*, Bergman's penultimate film before *Persona*, the young boy, Johan, traveling with his mother, Anna, and his aunt, Ester, has as central a role as Bergman will permit in any of his films until the autobiographical *Fanny and Alexander*, which is of course the most explicit of the film-maker's Primal Scene scenarios. Anna, a rather cruel nymphomaniac, relishes the fact that the man she has picked up in her one day stop-over cannot understand a word she speaks. Ester, apparently dying of cancer, seems to have had a lifelong incestuous and masochis-

tic fascination with her sister's erotic compulsions. Throughout most of the day in which the film takes place, Johan wanders through the corridors of the hotel where the women have stopped. At one point he peeks through a keyhole at his mother making love. Later, after he tells his aunt of this experience, she enters the couple's room and then whines and pleads outside their door. Within the economy of the Primal Scene schema she is thus acting out part of the boy's anxiety.

I wish to concentrate on three episodes in the film which may be said to be versions of libidinal theatre. The first is the most elaborate: Johan wanders through the hotel corridors after taking a nap in bed with his mother. His cap gun, tucked into the front waistband of his shorts, bears an explicitly phallic charge. Twice he stops to stare at a Rubenesque painting of a nymph and a centaur in an ambiguous but distinctly erotic posture. Following Edelheit's "Mythopoesis and the Primal Scene," I take the centaur's fusion of man and beast as an emblem of Primal Scene confusion. It is no accident that Johan is frightened at this very moment by an elderly waiter who will later show him photographs from a funeral and grotesquely play with and eat a phallic sausage for his amusement.

Bergman subtly underlines the relationship of the painting to Anna by parallel montage. Just after Johan has stared for a second time at the naked figures, the scene cuts to a closeup of the mother's breasts as she washes after her nap. A panning movement reveals that Ester is watching her ablutions. Johan's sexual confusion gets further amplification as he wanders into a hotel room where a company of acrobatic dwarfs (there are seven in all!) play dead to his cap pistol shots and put a girl's dress on him. Again Bergman cuts to Ester watching Anna dress, suggesting the boy's temporary sexual identification with the mother in the lascivious company of the male dwarfs. One of them, dressed as a monkey, cavorts alone on a bed for his companions and Johan's entertainment until their leader angrily enters, stops them, and having

removed Johan's dress, escorts him back into the corridor. No sooner is he alone than he urinates against the wall, ending the sequence.

The five unresolved questions Edelheit found characteristic of the "double identification" of the Primal Scene are relevant to the depicted mentality of Johan in this episode. The questions are: "1) What is happening? 2) To whom is it happening? Who is the victim and who the aggressor? 3) How many people are involved? One? Two? Several? Or is it one composite creature? 4) What is the anatomy of the scene? If it is made up of more than one individual, which one has the penis? 5) Where am I (the observer)? Am I participating or am I excluded?" In Johan's fascination with the painting the first phase of an alternation occurs: he is the anxious observer of a composite creature and a figure clearly identified, through montage, with his mother. But in the second phase, as he joins the dwarfs watching the antics on the bed, he like Snow White has become a substitute (or rival) mother, and although he still merely observes the composite creature (dwarfed man below, monkey above), he is symbolically a participant. The troubling question "which one has the penis?" compels him to his aggressive urination, which is linked to his spying on and shooting other males with his cap pistol.

Much later in the film, while his mother is making love to a stranger, he performs a Punch and Judy puppet show for his aunt, making the frame of her bed his stage. His Punch repeatedly batters down Judy with his stick. According to the boy, Punch speaks a strange language because he is afraid and he cannot sing because he is so angry. Here we see the fear and anger of the Primal Scene observer without the fascination and excitement. Those qualities are distilled in my third example of libidinal theatre, which actually occurs in the film between the other two. Anna wanders into a Variety theatre where the seven dwarfs perform. They jump over one another in an act reminiscent of the thief and the sleeper in *Fangelse* and then form a single composite creature, a caterpillar of

interlocked bodies. Once the performance ends, Anna watches the only other couple in the theatre have sex. Later she will lie to Ester, telling her she had intercourse with a stranger on the theatre floor. In this episode Anna alternates between being an observer of symbolical and actual intercourse. Later she aggressively dramatizes her experience, fantasizing for her sister, making love to a man observed by her son, and finally having sex in front of her sister while she explicitly tells her of her hatred for her, stemming from her jealousy of Ester's relationship to their father.

A complex web of associations runs through Bergman's cinema from *Fangelse* to *Fanny and Alexander* conjoining variations of the Primal Scene with representations of theatre, cin-

ema, and fairy tales. His autobiography, *Lanterna Magika*, greatly illuminates the oedipal sources of his need to make films. *Persona* is a stranger and even more powerful articulation of those needs. Fittingly, it stresses *Fangelse* and *The Silence* as guides to its genesis and meaning.

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### EXCERPTS FROM DIARY AND LETTERS REFERRING TO LUIS BUÑUEL by Adolfas Mekas

*Diary entry—March 26, 1959*

Semana Santa—the holy Easter week. Nobody's around, everything's disorganized. Mexico at its best. Cannot reach Buñuel by phone. Left city, the maid said. I am not sure that is what she said. Her Spanish is of different kind. I think she said that Buñuel doesn't want to be interviewed. Everybody wants to interview him. I'll surprise him—no interview by me.

*Diary entry—March 31, 1959*

Buñuel is busy finishing his film *Nazarin*—in time for Cannes. He is not seeing anyone, I am told. I think it was his wife I spoke to.

*Diary entry—April 4, 1959*

Saw Buñuel at his house. Red flowers outside the house. A calm house, on a quiet street. He opened the door himself. Big, bumpy eyes. There is no question whose razor-eye it was in *Un Chien Andalou*. He is hard of hearing. Had to shout all the time. He spoke with great humility and with extreme politeness. Buñuel

mixed a drink in his little shrine by the entrance to the living room.

He has great respect for *Film Culture*, the only film magazine he ever reads. He wants me to go through his archives—select whatever I want for publication: scripts, old manuscripts, etc. "You can have anything you want, for *Film Culture*." He said he has an article also, which is quite good. But doesn't remember where it is.

His wife brought in cookies and small cups of coffee on a large tray. His son Juan came in, said hello and left. And then Buñuel made another drink.

*Letter to Jonas—April 6, 1959*

*L'Age d'Or*. Buñuel has only short excerpts from the film. There is no copy of it in Mexico. The only copy, as far as he knows, is at the Cinémathèque Française. After the war he gave the negative to the Count (the producer of *L'Age d'Or*) in France. The story Buñuel told me is this: The Count is a devout