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Larry Jordan & the Underworld

It is impossible to begin a serious discussion about the films of Larry Jordan without referring to his incredible poetic rhythm. The images float in a time/space continuum that penetrates the veil of reality and speaks directly to the subconscious. Jordan says of his work "The imagery in my animated films has always concerned unknown continents and landscapes of the mind. Some call this a real place, certainly the Egyptians did, so did the Greeks (the Underworld) and so did the Tibetans (Bardo). In most cases it is the world of the so-called dead."

When I was an undergraduate in the film department at the San Francisco Art Institute, my life was changed dramatically by the teachings of Larry Jordan. He is, in all respects, a poet, a visionary and a magician. He approaches his art with a sacred respect that I find honorable and distinguishing. Often he would speak of objects he worked with as being "alive." His work is about entering into the mystical, or shamanic, realm where the voices of his characters can be heard. This is not a place of fantasy and delusion, but rather it is the realm where we find all the things that make us human.

In the film Masquerade, we enter the experience of death with respect and reverence. The clouds disperse and the scene is revealed. As with all of Jordan's films, the narrative is implied and

can be viewed in a variety of ways. The man is dying, it seems, and the townsfolk stand around him as if offering assistance, (or are they a threat?). Angels (or devils) stand off in the right corner and a mysterious masked woman covers a large section of the screen with her lovely, but hauntingly cold visage. Is she the cause of the dying man's pain? A heart shimmers on the man's chest, transforming & metamorphosing into various forms, and then suddenly it explodes. It is as if one can hear the man breathing his last breath as the fog rolls in again.

Masquerade is a beautiful example of the magical fluidity of movement that characterizes Jordan's films. His animation is about "seeing and living in timelessness." He considers the process of animation "an act of concentration and intense living." This is very much in keeping with the Bardo Thodol (The Tibetan Book of the Dead), in which it is said "Thine own consciousness..... hath no birth, nor death and is the immutable light." This is the light that Jordan animates with. We see, within the wonderful poetic world he offers us, a vast array of stories & mythologies to choose from.

His work follows the tenants of autonomism and classic surrealist notions. Although he would not be classified primarily as a surrealist and he generally rejects the title. Surrealism, as defined by Breton, is "pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express... the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations." Jordan's approach to his

animation is to place himself within this “true function of thought” and allow the stories, or transformations, to appear before him. This is nothing less than a shamanic activity.

Larry Jordan studied with Joseph Cornell and much of what he practices came from Cornell’s philosophy. What Larry Jordan said of Cornell’s films could apply directly to his own. He said “Cornell’s films create a timeless structure, totally unconcerned with our usual expectations of “montage” or cinematic progression. He collects images and preserves them in some kind of cinematic suspension that is hard, impossible, to describe.” In this last year, Jordan has returned to making boxes in the Cornell tradition and has been offering classes at the San Francisco Art Institute in the art of box-making. Within these boxes the silent, still, mysterious voice of the “object as being” can be heard. Jordan says “the objects move from external reality and correspond to an inner necessity. It is the unconscious made external, the objectification of desire.”

Jean Cocteau, also influential to Jordan, spoke of this principal in his book Diary of an Unknown. He said “I am more attracted by phenomena than by their results, and am primarily struck by the supernatural in nature. I am more fascinated by the underside than by the upside.”

The New York Times compared Hildur and the Magician, a live action narrative film by Jordan, to Cocteau’s Beauty and the Beast. In this film a foolish magician concocts a potion which doesn’t do the job its supposed to do and a fairy queen turns into a mortal

woman. She encounters the human realm and interacts with this strange reality. The film reaches beyond the constraints of standard narrative and speaks poetically to questions of being and transcendence.

Jordan's live action films deal narratively with the same themes that he carries through his animation. Themes of consciousness and primordial desires. The scholar Joseph Campbell says "To see through the fragments of time to the full power of original being, that is the function of art." It seems, in Jordan's films,, that we ride with him to the Bardo and partake lovingly in the "full power of original being."

Another live action film that deals with the supernatural is Jordan's The Apparition. Jordan says his intention was "to follow Agee's idea, and present an imaginary story against a background of reality. The imaginary story is of Paul and his past incarnation as a woman in classical Greek times. Jordan collaborated with George Kuchar on this film. Kuchar designed the sets. Within the film Jordan again restructures the relationship between object and dimension, as the objects in Paul's world become dream-like under his camera. Paul films everything obsessively. He films his two women, a young son of the family, the son's drawing of a sacrifice in a Greek temple, a stuffed owl on the bureau. Gradually, jogged by Paul's tension & depressions, these real things begin to move in & out of a dream state. One haunting image is the figure in a toga. The figure appears to Paul. He follows her into the woods & then the

figure disappears. Later the figure reappears, dies, comes to life, tries to talk, then dies again. Here, once again, Jordan leads us through the Land of the Dead. The journey to Bardo is haunting, mysterious, and enchanting. Perhaps it is within his animation that Jordan most distinctly claims the Underworld as his, and as a result, our territory.

Sophie's Place is considered by many to be Jordan's masterpiece. Stan Brackhage, who is Jordan's longtime friend & collaborator, said that Sophie's Place is "the greatest epic animation film ever." Jordan himself calls it an "alchemical autobiography." I find myself alchemically bonding with this film in a powerful way whenever I watch it. It speaks to my subconscious and draws forth poetic visions that in turn speak to visions within me from other, previously unknown parts of my psyche.

A hexagon shimmers and sparks into a white rose, the rose turns red, an Arab climbs the rose & rides away. A balloon hovers in and out staring at us with both curiosity & pain. Our Lady of the Sphere comes in and commands the child to slide down her beautiful blue dress onto a butterfly that transforms into a flickering sun. A man drinks from a cup. The cup becomes a place of magical transferences. Cats of all sizes appear: cougars, tigers, house cats and a very regal lion. The lion stares into the man's gigantic eyeball and a sprite flies by with a strange jellyfish-like body and butterfly wings.

Sophie's Place begins with a quote by Goethe “..transformation and again transformation. The eternal entertainment of the eternal spirit.”

The Underworld that Jordan journeys to is constantly in flux. It is a place beyond the constraints of time and represents, for me, the truest presentation of filmic space imaginable. It is a shamanic, transcendent reality. Jordan travels to the deepest corners of the human psyche and the rewards, for both artist and viewer, are infinite.