

ANIMATRIX

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Even with these errors, the plethora of information that the author provides makes up for the glitches. In the end the book makes the reader think long and hard about the working conditions that we currently take for granted such as the 40-hour work week and the two-day weekend. This is an important historical document and no animation library should be without a copy of "Drawing the Line".

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Interview With Lawrence Jordan

Patricia Kavanaugh

Lawrence Jordan began making films in 1952, and from the mid-fifties onward he became active in the filmmaking community of the Bay Area where he still resides. He was friends with many artists of the Beat era and was later seen as one of the foremost experimental filmmakers on the West coast. His artistic inspiration comes from Surrealist artists Max Ernst and filmmaker Méliès, as well as filmmaker and artist Joseph Cornell. From this inspiration, Jordan developed his own unique style of cutout animation using intricate engravings from the 19th century. His films are other-worldly and can be enjoyed and appreciated by all ages. He gave me copies of his new animated film entitled "Enid's Idyll". I watched it with my two-year old niece and my 72-year old mother and it was at that moment I realized how truly magical his films are. All three generations were captivated as we watched butterflies and heroines traveling through another realm. This interview was conducted in his studio in Petaluma, CA in February 2007.

Patricia Kavanaugh: So can you tell me a little bit about this film you're working on now?

Lawrence Jordan: Everybody asks where do you get your ideas...do you know? I don't know. (laughter) You know, they come out of the depths of everything that you are plus everything that's around you. I suppose it started about four years ago; I spent one whole winter just going through all my engravings. You know, here are shelves of books of engravings! And thinking I never see those, I'd better look through everything. I decided to pull out the really good stuff and I had stacks there on the table - I ended up with 2,800 good engravings. They're all in these drawers now over here. And a lot of it had, you know, a lot of it are books that illustrated Europe in the 19th Century and stuff like that. But there was a fair amount with characters in it and some of it was from English books and magazines of adventures probably written for teenagers. Um, you know all dramatic stuff and even violent. I guess it must have taken root there. Plus other things that are going



on in the world, I thought, I'll make a melodrama because the other thought was if I make a melodrama I can use a lot of strange sound. So maybe I can shake myself up a little bit. I'm not sure it's shaken me up because shooting for me is always such a long process. I'm shooting from a complete script this time. Sometimes I don't have a script.

PK: What about sound? Will that be done after you finish the whole film?

LJ: Yeah, I don't have any idea what the sound's going to be except for a scream here, gunshot there and so forth. But the subject matter I've never worked with really.

PK: So the other new animation films that you've made recently: "Blue Skies Beyond the Looking Glass", "Poets Dream" and "Enid's Idyll" ..

LJ: And "Châteaux Poyet".

PK: Have you been screening these?

LJ: Yes, I have a show on May 13th (2007) where I'll show the four new ones and three very early films that have never really been shown. "Blue Skies" is just out and so that'll be a premiere of that one but everything else has been shown at Pacific Film Archive. I mean you can be a filmmaker, as you know, and have a major show somewhere and not know about it if you have films in the co-op (Canyon Cinema Cooperative www.canyonfilms.com). So that happens every once in awhile, they tell me at Canyon that these films as they go into the co-op make the rounds, but I don't know until months and months later and look at the sheets that I know where they've been shown.

PK: Where is the screening on May 13th?

LJ: The show's at the Cinematheque, down at Yerba Buena Center.



PK: And will anybody else be showing films or is it just all your work?

LJ: Yeah, it's a one person show.

PK: So I just want to talk a little bit about some of your older films. I have a few questions... Let's see, in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" you got Orson Welles to do the narration. And I know you told me this story before but I don't remember the details. How did that come about?

LJ: Here it is right here, that big green book. It's a first edition of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" with, they're probably the first printing off the plates of the Dore (Gustave Dore) illustrations. Years ago I was standing in the bank in San Anselmo filling out a slip and looking out the window. I saw these two men come up outside and one of them opened this great big book, and I was looking at it upside down. I had no idea what it was except I could see they were very large, gorgeous engravings. I had been tuned in to engraved materials for the films for quite awhile. I tore up the slip and ran out of the bank and I didn't know what to do so I just came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Do you want to sell that book?" I have no idea where this came from because I didn't know whether he'd think I was crazy or what! He turned and looked at me with this strange look and says, "Yeah, I was lookin' for somebody to sell it to." I said, "I'll give you forty dollars." That was about all I had in the bank at that time, he said "OK" so I went back and got the money and I gave him \$40 before I *really* knew what it was. It was marked \$150 on the front.

I had it for seven years; I wanted to do something on those engravings because they're so good. I thought I would do something that was just using the engravings as intermittent backgrounds or something and the more I got into it, the more I got into the poem. And the poem is not just something for people to memorize in high school, it really has a lot of resonance and depth the more you work with it so I thought, "I want to do the whole thing" and use all of the illustrations and the whole poem and everything and the only person I could think of who had that deep gravelly voice for the Ancient Mariner would be Orson Welles. But that's a pipe dream, right? So that sat around for quite awhile but I did have a full script of what I wanted to do and then I think it was the second year I was on the Board of Trustees at the American Film Institute, we were giving the life achievement award



to Orson Welles so I thought, "What the hell, take a shot." I put the packet together like you do with a cover letter and the script and what you want to do and all of that, and Xeroxes of the illustrations and gave it to him and two months later I got a note that said, "Yes, I'd like to do that" but nothing else except "Here's the number of my lawyer." So I called the lawyer and nothing had been said about money at that time. On the basis of the note from Orson Welles I got a grant from the NEA and I called the lawyer and I said, "Would he take a quarter of the grant?". He said yes.

The deal was he would have carte blanche and I would go nowhere near the recording. Edith Kramer who was the director at the Pacific Film Archive, when she heard that I was going to work with Orson Welles she said "Wait a minute, I'm going to give you an audio tape, and I think you'll know why I'm giving it to you." And I played it, and it was Welles being directed by an Englishman for a radio commercial and this little twit of a voice would throw in a suggestion and Orson Welles would boom at him, "I've been a writer for five hundred and fifty years, you think I don't!" blah blah blah. And he's just tearing this guy apart! I said, "OK Edith, I see what you mean." So what he did, he was working on a film evidently and he'd take his sound man aside during breaks and he'd work on it. So what I got eventually was a case of quarter inch tape. Twelve 15-minute tapes. He'd take two lines, a couplet, one couplet at a time and he'd work on it and usually he'd go four times on it. I could hear him get better, more solid and then he'd leave it and he'd go onto another couplet. But then he'd come to ones that everybody in the world knows like, "Water water everywhere nor any drop to drink" and he'd go up to twenty times. Then he'd say something like "That's the best I can do! Take a drink!" That's why there was so much tape. OK, one, I knew I had a lot of cutting to do. And two, I knew Orson Welles wasn't as good as he is because he was born that way, he's as good as he is because he works so hard. I finally had the ploy of cutting on the breath mark after each couplet, so the soundtrack sounds as if he can take a complex poem like "Mariner" and do a perfect reading. Of course that wasn't the case at all; it was completely cut. He seemed to know where he was going because in almost all cases, I'd use the last take.

Well, I got it cut and to begin with, I had an LP record of Sir Sedwick Hardwick I think it was, reading the poem and it was twenty minutes so I was



planning on a 20-minute film. I wanted Orson Welles to do it because I knew he was so dramatic, well his dramatic reading was 40 minutes. I was stuck with a forty-minute film which is quite different in animation from a 20-minute film.

PK: Yes!

LJ: But that's the story anyway (laughter)! All the imagery then had to be keyed to the final cutting of the voice. I hope that wasn't too long-winded but you wanted the story!

PK: You kind of touched on this a little bit, but in your process of making a film does your inspiration come out of source material like the use of the Dore engravings or the music, like your use of Eric Satie, or is it coming from some place totally separate like a dream or a poem? Or does it just vary from film to film?

LJ: I'd say all of the above. Which is not totally a cop out. What I mean is that sometimes the music must've influenced it without my knowing about it because this peculiar thing happens to me, all the way along my career in animation that often I will make a film without any idea of what the soundtrack will be and I'll have a silent print then. And I'll go almost directly to some piece of music, sometimes on a tape, sometimes on a record, or a CD and there it is. I know that the unconscious works on the project when I'm doing other things and it goes its own way and it's very regular, and it isn't perturbed by anything and so out comes the connection. Now if a dream has influenced it, I rarely know about it except in a few instances. There's one instance in the long animation "Sophie's Place" where I had a complex dream that was totally specific in that when I woke up it was all there which is completely rare, as you know. And it was about the image I had on the animation stand at the time and that film was being all done extemporaneously, totally as it came to me as I worked under the camera. And I thought, "Wow if I could do *that* it would be pretty spectacular" but it was very complex with eight things moving in eight different ways. I thought I'm going to have to give it up because it's too complex and I started to move on to something else. Then something said, "Yeah, but you could do the first thing, couldn't you? The first



movement?" Yeah, I could do that. So I started doing that and with cutout animation you know, you can just start in if you have some experience and kind of know what you're doing. Then I said, "Well, now couldn't you add the second movement in and keep the first one going?" *Yeeeahhh*, I could do that so I added that in and pretty soon I had the whole thing going. But that's the only time I can remember that a dream directly influenced the work. What other things?

PK: The music, the source material....

LJ: Oh yeah, that's a good question because the source material is a big part of how I work. In other words, I often think of it as a process of elimination. I'll look through a vast amount of stuff and eliminate 9/10ths of it. I used to say to people that I'm blessed in that I don't get visions in my head that I try to execute on paint or film because I would be doomed to failure as anyone would be. The work would be a second-hand incomplete vision. But if I meet the material halfway and let the material guide me, it's going to be real.

PK: Just to touch on the music a little more...a lot of students at UCLA struggle with finding music to match their films, oftentimes dealing with copyright issues in certain pieces of music. What was your relationship with Eric Satie's music? His music is featured in many of your films.

LJ: Do you think you could ever find anybody that had rights to Satie's music? I'd probably have to pay you thousands of dollars to do research to find such a person. Does that answer the question? Just a little bit more on that because I'm always asked about the fucking copyright! I have used music by performers who are alive but very rarely. But I have absolutely no compunction about using music by artists who are dead. They would want me to, that's what I believe! Because if I were in their position, and I were a century earlier when there was no film and I was there looking down and seeing, Oh they've got this wonderful thing now called film, couldn't I get some of my music into *that*! And I'm certainly not concerned about heirs or publishers (laughter). I shouldn't joke about that, but I think I once tried to contact the publisher of music and I didn't get any response and I've been told that yeah, they will respond most of the time and they're very amenable because



they're business people. But here's the thing, they're only interested if there's money. And of course with our films that go to film festivals and museums, there's no money! So they're not interested in interfering; it doesn't pay for them to make a fuss. The only time I ever heard that anybody had to pay something on copyright was in two cases. First when Kenneth Anger's film "Scorpio Rising" came out. He was going all around the country in little art theatres and there was money being made and so he had to give a percentage to those people who had copyrights to "Blue Velvet" and songs like that which is only fair. And then when Bruce Connor had some films on national television they had to pay a few copyrights, but that's reasonable. If you make money, you pay what you need to pay for it.

PK: What do you feel are the important links between music and animation? I remember that you used to tell me that the reason I may have had an affinity towards animation was because I was a musician.

LJ: I'm more confirmed than ever because your last DVD confirms you're a good animator!

PK: Thanks.

LJ: So, being a musician has got to add it in there. I'm not a musician, but I've always felt that working not so much in live film, but in animation that my problems were the same as a composer. They're both time-based media. You never have the whole film in front of you at one time like a painting, you never have the whole musical composition in front of you. It's moment by moment. So if you don't handle time well in a film, it's not going to work. You can be off on color, you can be off a little bit on acting, you can be off on this that and the other thing but you can't be off on the final product on timing or people just yawn and go away. That's why it's related to music, for me.

PK: I know your cutout animation style is highly influenced by the work of Joseph Cornell and Max Ernst. Was there anyone else's work then or now that has inspired your own work?



LJ: Well, the sensibility of Cornell comes into it a little bit but not the technique. And Max Ernst for the pictorial quality of working with engravings; using sentimental engravings in the service of a surreal product. But actually in the overall, I was probably more influenced by Méliès, who's not an animator but his films might as well be animation. They're in most cases so tightly structured and they move in this archaic other world of a magical happening. Those probably in the beginning, they got my juices flowing as much as anything. But I had this epiphany when I was living in Larkspur and it was about 1961. I love the work of Max Ernst. The painter Jess turned me onto his work and his collages -- I'd been doing collage work for quite awhile and I was close with Jess. He showed me the two collage novels of Max Ernst which he had copies of; at that time they were rare, you couldn't just go and buy them; Dover later reproduced them. I just flipped when he lent me these rare books and at that time had a little still photography setup at home. There were about 120 in the two collage novels and I photographed each one on black and white 2 ¼ by 2 ¼ with a Roloflex camera because I wanted the whole collection and I couldn't buy it. I would take one negative, put it in the enlarger, hit the paper and then put it in the chemicals and up out of the white paper would come this black and white image. And I was doing one after another. So I woke up from a nap one afternoon and thought, "I've been seeing a movie in extreme slow motion, one image after another" and I thought I could go find some engravings and I'd know what to do with them, I could make [them] move. That was the realization and so I started collecting and collected for about twenty years. I can't collect anymore, I don't have any room! And this stuff that used to cost 50 cents is now five or ten dollars per engraving.

PK: How do you know when a film that you're working on is finished?

LJ: Never had a problem knowing when it's finished. The conclusion is deeper than that. I have somewhat of a metaphysical theory that a work of art is completed in another sphere or level of consciousness before I have to do all the manual labor in this sphere to make it. So beginnings, endings, it's all the same; it's all there. However sometimes I can, anybody I think, gets off the path and you don't know where you're going for awhile or what to do next. I've found that if you realize that it's already done, well if you go back to that moment when you decided to do that film, there is a moment somewhere when you decided to do that film, that's where



you go for the energy when you don't know what to do and that usually works. Endings, what can I say about endings except that I do feel when I start to work that's it's already complete but many times there's a script. And if you're making a script you work toward that ending the whole way.

PK: Your films have always been 16mm. Have you thought at all about venturing into the digital realm, and in regards to animation how do you feel about the use of computers and digital technology versus something created very physically and shot under the camera?

LJ: Well, I've always worked on 16mm film but never worked in for instance 8mm, and there's always been the kind of specter of 35mm out there but I'd have to change all my equipment. I've slowly acquired a whole working studio of 16mm equipment and I'd have to change everything and that would be too hard and too expensive and too cumbersome and I don't know that I'd get that much out of it. Because I have confirmed with my own eyes that 16mm when handled right is as good as anything in the world. I had a film in the New York Film Festival which took place at Lincoln Center which seats 3,000 people and the screen is forty feet wide. I walked in and I said, "This isn't going to work, my image is 16 millimeters wide." "Don't worry! Don't worry!" they told me. Well, it was rock solid with full sound, there was no breakup of the image, they had the right stuff in the booth but you have to have the right stuff in the booth. That's the only place. So it's never bothered me that my image is on 16mm and everybody knows you can make very good DVDs from 16mm, it's excellent for that. I haven't tried to move up on film to a larger format. Digital and computer animation: I don't watch it, I don't think it's.. the movement comes out of a program, let's face it, it doesn't come out of the creator. I'm looking for an individuality behind the work otherwise it's just the same thing over and over, somebody going through the motions so I don't see anything in digital but then I'm an old fart! OK? You know, like everybody gets to be, you will someday too and will stick with what you like. And all the kids can go with computers; that's fine. I'm sorry but it just doesn't interest me.

PK: Do you have any thoughts about film animation programs like the one I'm in at UCLA? Do you think it's important to teach these fundamentals in



16mm and on film before moving into the inevitable computer and digital realm?

LJ: OK, I'm just projecting thirty years of teaching into something hypothetical here, but it seems to me if you took somebody who just watched twelve, fifteen years of animation on television and went to school and was thrown right into digital. Digital is OK for image gathering, I don't have anything against that...it's computer animation that is the sticking point here. That's what we're talking about. We're talking about using a programmer's program to make motion. Yet I don't know who that programmer is and I don't know what their background is except maybe it's MIT or whatever, but it isn't me. So all of this stuff is going to come out looking rather much alike no matter how different the stories or content is. If you want that kind of world, you're going to start with computers. I don't want that kind of world but everybody else seems to want that kind of world. Why they would want that kind of world is because their souls are getting smaller and there's more of a hive mentality to it, you know if everybody's in there buzzing together. I'm going the other way which is the romantic 19th and 18th century individuation. So we have this constant struggle philosophically with individuation and conformity. I'm sure many people who work with computer animation think they're highly individual, but you've got to go back to think that they aren't inventing their own musical structures when it comes to how things are able to move.

***PK:* Has anybody approached you about putting together a DVD retrospective of all of your films or is that something you've thought about doing at all?**

LJ: That's interesting, a lot of my films are on tape from Facets Multimedia, a non-profit company in Chicago and they called me last week and they want to put them all on DVD now. So we'll see how that goes. If it happens it'll be most of the major films on DVD. I was working it out and it would take four 2-hour discs to do it! The director sent me what they just did on James Brown and it's very impressive. It's a very well-packaged three disc set so I know they can do it and he seems to want to so we'll see how it goes. But I was against DVD and then Joanna said "No, I want you to have some DVDs" and she financed two films she liked: "Enid's Idyll" and "Postcards from San Miguel", one a live {action} film and one



animation. The first go at it was a nightmare. I thought you take your stuff all to one lab and they do it all, but at least in the Bay Area it doesn't work that way. There isn't one lab that can do everything right and it was a nightmare. But then I ran into some people who are actually former students who are now working in top jobs of these high-end companies, and they steered me in the right directions. So I had to go to two sound people who are experts in different ways first. And then to the best telecine transfer operation in the Bay Area which is expensive, but they can do high definition and you can't make HD DVDs yet, but soon so my original stuff is high def. And then to Video Arts where David Weissman who's just a dear person makes great copies of the DVDs and masters. I don't know how you got such a good DVD. Do you have people down there that know how to do all that stuff?

***PK:* I had to take my film to a lab and my process was actually a big nightmare too because there were a lot of problems with the optical track for the audio. And then, I sat there with them for the telecine where you just try to dial in the colors because at that point you're just trying to remember, OK now what does it look like on the film print.**

LJ: People don't realize that when they see these DVDs that it is totally remastered. Shot by shot!

***PK:* It's not an easy process.**

LJ: It's not easy, but now I have four wonderful people who I can go to for each step and they make it so easy for me. It just takes a little while, it's costly and yet it's fun because now making the DVD, see it's my film, I can do anything I want with it. I don't have to exactly reproduce it on DVD if I don't want to. I can enhance it, I can make the black background blacker, I can make the titles better, I can pull things in if I want to, I can enhance the color, I can beef it up, I can make sound on the DVD a lot better than on the film. So I can make a whole different version of that work on DVD and that's a very interesting thing to do.



PK: There's definitely a niche for experimental animators and filmmakers in the festival world but it isn't a lifestyle with much income. Is that why both you and Stan Brakhage went into teaching?

LJ: Because we couldn't make a living on film?

PK: Yeah.

LJ: Oh, absolutely! On this kind of film work, how does it relate to making a living? OK, start with this: I can only do what I can do. I could never work commercially. I tried a little bit of it one time, wrote scripts, I knew people in Hollywood. I and Ed Emshweller were the token experimental filmmakers on the Board, but I came in contact with commercial producers and so forth. But I have no ability to work commercially and found quickly that I have no desire to. So I went back to my first love which is making very homely little films that are the same as painting except I use film. My individual visions. So who's going to look at that? It turns out that there's a fair network of people who will look at it, associated with museums, film societies and mostly that. It's a tiny little spectrum of the viewing public. But it's worthwhile, but you can't make a living at it. I spend way more than I take in on the films so there is a question there, why continue to do it? Well why teach anybody to do it or encourage anybody to do it? I mean, you turned out to be an animator but that's very rare of all the people I taught. There are about six or seven in thirty years that actually are animators of all the people who took [my] animation classes. *But* there are a lot of people from those classes who learned to think creatively; to conceive a project, to plan it, to outline it and to execute it. They learned to think creatively and they're doing very well in the world, very well indeed. The ones I'm still in touch with. So I would tell people on the Board at the Art Institute (SFAI) when they would say "shouldn't we be teaching the students something more practical so they can make a living?" I would say it's very practical to learn to think creatively. You can apply it anywhere. These people I'm talking about didn't start as gophers. I don't remember the young woman's name. She was pretty good at animation and she started working for a company who did some kind of either commercials or websites or something and it turns out she's the creative person in that new organization. She came back to school and told me about her work and said "I'm the Queen Bee. All these other techs are around me



and they're my servants." (laughter) And I thought, well that's pretty good. And she's the one making the money so what the Hell, that's not bad, you know. She was having a good time at it.

PK: Just to wrap up, do you have any words of wisdom for an aspiring experimental animator? Go where the money is or stick to your art?

LJ: Sure. Well my standard answer for any of this is there aren't very many fine artists in the country that make their living off of doing their fine art. I'm excluding all commercial art. So what does that mean? That means that you better have another skill that makes good money, at the right place even waiting tables can be very good money. Something where you don't necessarily have to work five days a week, eight hours a day but you can make pretty good money and you can support yourself so you can be independent. You're not doing art to make a living, you're doing art to live because that's who you are. In my case, I learned carpentry and I could make a living doing carpentry and staying in film. Then somebody over at CCA said the graduate students here want a film class. They didn't have any kind of film there, so I gave it a try and it was a whole lot easier than pounding nails so I started teaching in order to make a living. And it was great because I could just teach what I do. So that's what I would advise, and you don't have to worry about what the students are going to do with their lives. Just worry about what you're going to do with your own life. Pass the flame on. Because the reason you stay in art is to keep the spirit of the human race alive. Politicians are not going to do that, religious people are not really going to do that, who's going to do that? Artists have to do it and get kicked around a lot in the process but that's the way I see it.

PK: Well thank you so much for answering my questions.

LJ: I hope it's useable!

