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of
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— *P. Adams Sitney* —

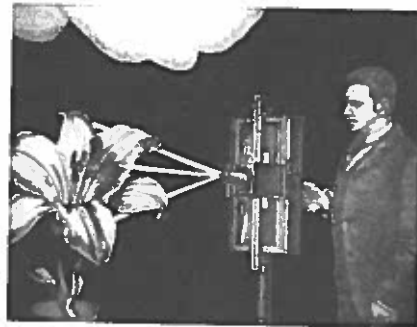
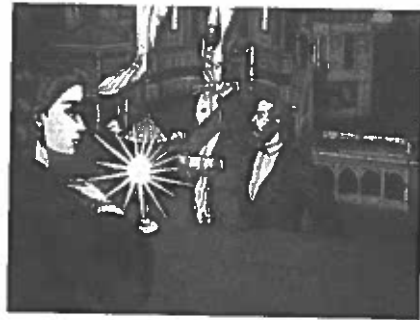


Lawrence Jordan's Magical Instructions

Lawrence Jordan (b. 1934) has produced a massive body of work that encompasses several overlapping genres and includes many of the most inventive films ever made by means of cutout collage animation, a range of lyric films that capture the spirit of his life and the lives of other California artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and films directly inspired by and incorporating poetry. At seventy-four, he completed his longest film by far, *Circus Savage* (1961/2007–2009), a twelve-hour “visual autobiography.”

Over his long career Jordan has essayed a number of strategies for avant-garde filmmakers to survive economically from their work. With Stan Brakhage he made a naïve attempt to travel around America in the mid-1950s and earn a living by showing their first works from town to town. After an initial effort to which not one person came, they gave up. But Jordan was undaunted: he founded two important showcases in San Francisco and was among the original organizers of the Canyon Cinema Cooperative, which still distributes avant-garde films after almost fifty years in operation. He drew up a plan to interest galleries in selling original 16mm prints to collectors, and he was one of the first avant-garde filmmakers to explore video sales. After selling VHS tapes of Jordan's films for many years, Facets Multimedia released a four-disc *Lawrence Jordan Album*. Its twenty-five films represent a little more than half the titles in his oeuvre.

Jordan came to his mature styles slowly. His earliest films—*The Child's Hand* (1953–1954) and *Morninggame* (1953–1954), for example—show the influence of Brakhage, with whom he attended Denver's South High School in the late 1940s, and aspects of their careers continued to overlap and coincide until Brakhage's death in 2003. At the start, apparently, Jordan followed Brakhage's lead. Later Brakhage returned the compliment, giving his unique inflection to techniques and strategies Jordan pioneered. Brakhage spent one disastrous semester at Dartmouth and dropped out the year before Jordan went to Harvard, which he too quit after a year. Together with friends from high school, they put on plays in Central City, Colorado, and then explored life among the poets and filmmakers of San Francisco and New York, until Jordan settled by himself in the Bay Area in 1955. In fact, Brakhage acted in two of Jordan's



Lawrence Jordan:

Sophie's Place (1986):

In Hagia Sophia; the projector; the two Magi or instructors; a third instructor; Balloon face

[Bottom Right] *Duo Concertantes—Centennial Exposition* (1964):
Projector

earliest works—*The One Romantic Venture of Edward* (1952–1956/1964) and *Trumpit* (1954–1956)—and Jordan showed up in Brakhage's psychodramas from the same period: *Unglazed Windows Cast a Terrible Reflection* (1953) and *Desistfilm* (1954). Marriage and family life, however, soon distanced them. Brakhage settled in Colorado and eventually moved to Canada, where he died. Jordan remained in the Bay Area but for a few long voyages as a Merchant Marine in the late 1950s, a brief stay in Mexico, and a summer spent assisting Joseph Cornell in Queens, New York, in 1965.

From very early on we can see interwoven traces of the three fundamental temporal articulations of Jordan's art: a foregrounding of cinematic time in the rhythms of montage and camera movement, an evocation of timelessness, and an obsession with transfiguration. Even before Jordan abandoned Brakhage's initial fusion of neorealism with the oneiric mode of Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger to forge a more contemplative style, the poet Robert Duncan saw something in the young filmmaker that was not yet evident to most viewers of his work, and he enlisted him to read the role of the magician Faust in the 1955 performance of his masque *Faust Foutu* at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. Around that time Duncan's partner, the painter and collagist Jess, introduced Jordan to Max Ernst's collage novels *La femme 100 têtes* (1929) and *Une semaine de bonté* (1934), which eventually became the decisive influences on his animated films. Jess, Duncan, and the company of artists the young filmmaker kept in San Francisco nurtured his work and abetted his nascent interest in mysticism. During those transitional years, Jordan taught Bruce Conner to edit film, and together they founded the Camera Obscura film society (in 1957), which grew into *The Movie*, a theater devoted to showing experimental work (in 1958). He assisted the veteran filmmaker Christopher Maclaine with cinematography on *The Man Who Invented Gold* (ca. 1957) and helped collage artist Wallace Berman make his only film, *Aleph* (1956–1966). Taking one of his first films, a subjective play of the filmmaker's hand gestures (the camera held with his other hand), Jordan recorded a poem by Philip Lamantia on the soundtrack, transforming the hitherto silent work into *Man Is in Pain* (1954–1955). He shot *Visions of a City* (1956–1957, reedited 1979¹), an eight-minute film composed of images of his close friend, the poet Michael McClure, reflected in windows and off distorting metallic surfaces as he wandered around San Francisco. McClure and his wife, Joanna, along with the poet Kenneth Rexroth and his daughter Mary, were the models in the play of light and shadow that constitutes *Spectre Mystagogic* (1957). Later, Lamantia and McClure would appear with Berman and graphic artist John Reed in Jordan's visual hymn in quest of peyote, *Triptych in Four Parts* (1959), which the filmmaker called "a spiritual drug odyssey seeking religious epiphany" (as quoted in the Canyon Cinema catalogue). Aspects of Duncan's theosophy, Berman's Cabala, Reed's mystical Christianity, and Lamantia's fusion

of surrealism and Catholicism can be seen in Jordan's later films, although he never elected a sectarian religious discipline for himself. Seemingly, the closest he has come to such an attachment would be to the Tibetan Buddhism of his film, *The Sacred Art of Tibet* (1970–1972).

Like Duncan, Jordan came to look upon the artist as a shaman whose inspiration entails the reception of modes of knowledge and language beyond his experience. In "The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography" (1968), Duncan wrote:

The poetic imagination faces the challenge of finding a structure that will be the complex story of all the stories felt to be true, a myth in which something like the variety of man's experience of what is real may be contained. . . . Where Philosophy raised a dialectic, a debate, toward what it calls Truth; Poetry raised a theater, a drama of Truth. . . . We have been converted by and have now taken our faith in a truth that has been patently made-up.²

The fundamental truth of the fictive, poetic imagination is a vital principle of Jordan's cinema, in which filmmaking is a continual act of revelation. Even though he does not believe in a life after death,³ the evocation of the Underworld has been a primary goal of his imaginative work.⁴ His masterpiece *Sophie's Place* (1986), subtitled "An Alchemical Autobiography: Transformation and Again Transformation," presents the complexities of the filmmaker's life story as a truth patently made up, enacted in a theater of transformations. It conjures the magical truth of an unforeseen poetic engagement with the process of cutout animation.

In fact, cutout animation was the technical means through which Jordan reached his artistic maturity and at the same time mastered an area of filmmaking utterly distinct from Brakhage's ambitions. As early as 1959, in *The Soccer Game* and *Minerva Looks Out into the Zodiac*, he began experimenting with animation. His homage to Jess, *The 40 and 1 Nights (or Jess's Didactic Nickelodeon)*, followed the next year. Although these initial experiments in animation gave intimations of an experience of timelessness—through the play of the moving camera or foreground figures in motion against static lithographic backdrops—they were primitive exercises, unequal in depth to the rhythmic exuberance the filmmaker had already achieved in *Man Is in Pain*, *Triptych in Four Parts*, and *Hymn in Praise of the Sun* (1960). The latter, a celebration of the birth of Jordan's daughter, Lorna, as a manifestation of ancient Egyptian cosmology, represents the lactating fecundity of his wife, Patricia, as a source of floral abundance. Brakhage concurrently transformed the elements of this modest, diaristic lyric into the epic cosmogony of his *Prelude: Dog Star Man* (1961). Just as three years later, when he temporarily switched from 16mm to the more economical 8mm in his series *Songs* (1964–1969), he took Jordan's *humilis* modes as his models.

In so rapid an account of Jordan's early development, I would have passed over *The Seasons' Change: To Contemplate* (1960) were it not for the following, astonishing letter the filmmaker sent me in November 2008:⁵

I have to my own knowledge made only one truly profound film: *The Seasons' Change: To Contemplate*. In it is the discovery that the so-called "Present Moment" is existentially always the *same* moment.

This little movie has never been taken up by anyone. (It has hardly ever been shown, yet it vividly remains whole in my mind.) The one time in the '60s it was shown in a theatre, the person behind me exclaimed in derision, "action" when the plum dropped from the tree.

A profound work almost by definition is a subtle one. Even to its author. There are resonances undiminished by time. Significances seep out only years after completion. A diamond is never impatient to be discovered, nor does it ever lose its integrity.

There is nothing in *The Seasons' Change* that fights with itself. Struggle is a falsification of reality and of natural processes. There is time. There is the Moment (timelessness). And there is change or outcome. That is what the film is about.

The triad "time/Moment/change" and the elimination of anything that "fights with itself" would be fundamental principles of Jordan's aesthetic. His intensive concentration on the simple objects before him, unhindered by "a falsification of reality," unfolds the complex manifold of temporality at the core of his cinema. The opening shot of *The Seasons' Change* shows a window with a Japanese candleholder in the form of a thin, bare-breasted woman, her head turned as if she were gazing into the yard beyond with its plum tree swaying in a lively breeze. The evocation of a woman at the window suggests a dominant motif in the American avant-garde film, originating with the image of Maya Deren pressing her hands against the glass in *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). But whereas Deren built her film around the play of psychic forces in which everything "fights with itself" (to the extent that the figure of the protagonist multiplies, culminating in suicide), Jordan contemplates the window and the vegetation outside it for seven minutes, in some twenty silent shots, gently panning the camera to caress the bibelots on the windowsill or to study the play of shadows on leaves and fruit moving in the wind. Devoid of drama, *the film keeps time*.

Jordan kept returning to the imagery of *The Seasons' Change* in some of his best films: *Hymn in Praise of the Sun* replaces the statue with living flesh and moves entirely into the garden; likewise, his exuberant *Big Sur: The Ladies* (1963–1964) uses rapid, in-camera editing to show two women sunbathing on a veranda overlooking the Pacific. The most striking return to the frozen gazer at the window, however, is the animation *Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway*, the second of the two-part *Duo Concertantes* (1961–1964).

The animation methods with which the filmmaker created most of his best work for the next five decades were largely in place with *Duo Concertantes*. He moved cutout figures along the surface of some twenty-five nineteenth-century engravings for the first segment, *The Centennial Exhibition*, while operating with a single backdrop for *Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway*. The former intermittently follows the movements of a man absorbed in looking at a birdcage on a printed card as he wanders across different locations. Around him a ball bounces, shifting scale from backdrop to backdrop, while birds and butterflies suddenly appear and disappear. The alchemical machinations of archaic paraphernalia set off an eruption of shooting stars. At one crucial moment a man, hand-cranking a projector, makes a planet or moon rotate, clockwise and then counterclockwise, before winged creatures shoot out of the projector. This is the first of many avatars for the filmmaker as a magician of the cosmos to appear in Jordan's cinema.

In the exquisite *Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway*, the backdrop plate shows a woman looking through the open door of a cabin onto a lakefront. There is a dog with her. Her posture duplicates that of the candleholder in *The Seasons' Change*. The animated cutouts descending from above or manifesting on the watery horizon make visible her reverie. When a screen appears with flashing images that either fly off or fall into the water, Jordan acknowledges the mystery of gravity in the cinema. With the interplay of frozen vistas and ephemeral images, most poignant at the instant of transformation, the filmmaker found an ideal medium for the fragile synthesis of time/Moment/change.

Collage animation has been a very fecund medium for Jordan. *Duo Concertantes* is in black and white. He followed it with the monochromatic blue of *Gymnopédies* (1966) and *Carabosse* (1980), the interplay and occasional superimpositions of monochromatic fields in *Our Lady of the Sphere* (1969) and *Moonlight Sonata* (1979), the richly dissolving colors of *Once Upon a Time* (1974), and the hand-colored images of *Orb* (1973) and *Masquerade* (1981)—the latter again using a single backdrop. The pattern of progressively introducing new formal elements and then returning, refreshed, to an earlier mode recurs throughout his career.

Jordan spent five years animating the eighty-six-minute *Sophie's Place*, working every morning without a plan, from a storehouse of images he had previously collected, colored, and cut out. He told an interviewer that "One rule was 'no planning ahead.' When you finish one idea, you go into the next. You simply go in the next morning and look at your layout and the first idea that pops into your head you have to do, whether it takes two days or two months. You cannot equivocate and say, 'Oh, I should have a better idea.' Equivocation short circuits your entry into the Underworld."⁶ In this statement, equivocation and the Underworld correspond to "anything that fights with itself" and the "Moment," respectively. In Jordan's thinking there is an affinity, perhaps a

symbolic equation, between the timelessness of the Moment and the unconscious, or the imagination. For him alchemy is the spiritual vehicle for change or transformation. In the same interview, Jordan remarked, "You know Harry [Smith] and Kenneth Anger were both practicing magicians, but I'm not a practicing magician. I'm a practicing alchemist. . . . I don't think the practicing alchemists ever had a codified system. Every one of them were off on their own kick. They had imagery that was like a common language and I use that language. . . . Alchemy and constructionism are two ways of saying that you take the things laying [sic] around you as detritus, as litter, and you make something that is formal art out of it. . . . I've been manipulating old imagery with new technology as part of my alchemy."⁷

The unexpected and puzzling term in the subtitle of *Sophie's Place* is "autobiography." Insofar as autobiography is a narrative in which the author delineates his or her development, the film's genre seems to be mislabeled. The overflowing phantasmagoria of winged creatures, exploding eggs, giants, floating body parts, and geometric figures in continual transformation on top of some forty backdrops stymies any reasonable correlation of the filmmaker's life to the imagery he drew from his unconscious over the course of five years. However, if we understand an "alchemical autobiography" as a version of what Duncan called "essential autobiography," we can see how the poet's discovery of an "enduring design" in what one would take to be free association shapes Jordan's film, in which the sequence of backdrops provides allusive hints at an autobiographical schema underlying the work. In a letter dated January 26, 1987, to Howard Guttenplan of the Millennium Film Workshop discussing the newly completed film, Jordan virtually repeated Duncan's subtitle:

I call it *Sophie's Place*, because it evolved from and revolves around the mosque (both interior and exterior) of Saint Sophia in Constantinople. Essentially it is an *autobiography* in animated form (as once suggested by Stan Brakhage many years ago), but a spiritual one, an "alchemical" one. It is interesting in that the film took place in a *timeless* working atmosphere, where no limits or restrictions were ever placed on how long it took to complete an idea or a sequence. No pre-plans were made; it all took place under the camera—that is, it is the reality of what happened there not a "re-enactment." [my italics]

Here the "timelessness" fundamental to the filmmaker's aesthetic occurs within the working process, and the danger of a falsification of reality is called "re-enactment."

Jordan's emphasis on the image of the Hagia Sophia proffers an invitation to interpret the film. The sacred interior provides the backdrop for two early sequences. I take them, somewhat tentatively, to correspond to moments of formal instruction in the development of the filmmaker's sensibility. The second of them might be related to his year at Harvard, where screenings of

Eisenstein and Cocteau at the film club awakened his excitement for his future métier. In *Sophie's Place*, the first projection device and screen (recalling those within *Duo Concertantes* and subsequent animations) appear within the ecclesial interior. That the Hagia Sophia never recurs in the film would support its identification with the theater of formal instruction, which ended for Jordan, as we noted, after his freshman year at college.

In thus correlating some of the backdrops to critical moments in the filmmaker's history, I am tempted to read certain other series, which seem to derive from Old Testament illustrations of the valley of prophetic vision and the Exodus as aspects of Jordan's life among the artists of the Bay Area. Particularly, the exterior view of a mosque, followed by a visionary city, coming soon after the Hagia Sophia interior fits the biographical pattern of the filmmaker's first move to San Francisco. Eventually we see the interior of a tent, located within a temporary Exodus tabernacle,⁸ in which two priests preside over a magical altar. If I might pursue the admittedly tenuous logic of this hermetic path, I would identify these priests as formative influences on the spiritual growth of the autobiographical subject, perhaps even fixing the pair as Robert Duncan and Jess. The emblematic signs of their influence are the mesmerizing stares with which they fix the ever-transforming male representatives of the filmmaker.

There is yet another, parallel, figure who emerges later in the film, in a different region, whose prolonged stare may be even more efficacious. By the same principles of chronology and influence, that figure might be said to correspond to Joseph Cornell, whose collage boxes struck Jordan as "the best work I'd seen in any of the arts, and so I was completely devoted."⁹ Working backward to the brief sequence separating the Hagia Sophia from the visionary city, we would expect to find some allusion to the often tumultuous time Jordan spent with his friends mounting plays in Central City, Colorado. Thus the boxing match of that animated scene might reflect his sometimes violent rivalry with Brakhage.

In surmising that the mesmerizing figures reflect the central mentors¹⁰ of Jordan's artistic incarnation, I am operating from the conviction that the film centrally explores the growth of the artist's imagination. At its rhythmic apogee, an apocalyptic vision occurring five minutes before the end of the film, background images from William Blake's *Glad Day* (ca. 1796) and *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with Sun* (ca. 1803–1805) precede several from Gustave Doré's illustrations of Dante's *Inferno* (1857). With representations of Dante swooning in the arms of Virgil, his poetic mentor, the latent theme of the film momentarily becomes manifest. The scene returns to the opening plate, depicting a mother and child in what the filmmaker described as "a paradisiacal garden." Thus *Sophie's Place* moves from an origin in biological childhood through the education of a sensibility to a fully achieved, creative use of childhood. Significantly, Jordan told Paul Karlstrom in an

interview for the Smithsonian's oral history archives, that "few artists have captured [childhood]: Cornell is one. . . . And, of course, Robert [Duncan] and Jess. . . had their fingers on that one."

All through the film a red-striped hot air balloon floats across the static plates. It has human features, almost a "Mr. Balloon Face." It surveys the settings and transformations, often dropping large tears, as if it were the manifestation of the autobiographical consciousness reviewing and weaving together the scenes of poetic incarnation. Unbeknownst to Jordan, he had virtually illustrated a passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature" (1836)—the very passage I would take, in *Eyes Upside Down*, to be central to the aesthetics of the American avant-garde cinema. Emerson wrote:

Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us. Certain mechanical changes, a small alteration in our local position apprizes us of a dualism. We are strangely affected by seeing the shore from a moving ship, from a balloon, or through the tints of an unusual sky. The least change in our point of view, gives the whole world a pictorial air. . . . Nay, the most wanted objects, (make a very slight change in the point of vision,) please us most. . . . Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs, and how agreeable the picture, though you have seen it any time these twenty years!"

In rotating the eyes of the Balloon Face as the final gesture of his alchemical autobiography, Jordan asserts the power of the autobiographical imagination to give a pictorial air with the eyes upside down to the most wanted objects.

Another aspect of the filmmaker's lifelong engagement with poetry can be seen in the "H. D. Trilogy" (1990–1993): *The Black Oud*, *The Grove*, and *Star of Day*. In all three parts, Jordan follows Joanna McClure, first in Rome and Greece, then in England (with recollections of Greece), and finally to her home in San Francisco (with interludes in Italy). Like Anger, Menken, Hugo, and Brakhage, Jordan dares to revisit typical European tourist sites (the Pantheon, Delphi, the Tower of London), testing the power of the cinematic imagination to revitalize such ruins by making them the theater of a confrontation between the poetic self and time. In the case of Brakhage's *The Dead* (1959; shot in Paris's Père Lachaise cemetery) and Hugo's *Gondola Eye* (1963; shot in Venice), the subjective camera conjures images of mortality. In *Eaux d'artifice* (1953; made in the Tivoli gardens), Anger follows a fleeting figure, mediating the filmmaker's double sense of precarious identity and ecstatic dissolution. Jordan's ambition here is even more complex than his antecedents. On the one hand, he is celebrating his relationship with McClure, even ironically echoing at the start of the sequence the reflected urban images he had recorded of her former husband three decades earlier in *Visions of a City*. At the same time, they are both paying homage to H.D., whose magnificent three-part *Hermetic Definition* (1960–1961,

published posthumously 1972) McClure reads on the sound track. The fiction of the film represents McClure alone (and with a younger male companion in the middle section) as a stand-in for the septuagenarian poet, reflecting on magic, the fragility of her identity, and the painfully awkward attraction she has for a much younger man. Usually the poetry and cinematic images evoke separate, autonomous realms, but at times the images almost coincide with the text: for instance, when we see McClure drinking at a sidewalk café, we hear, "I keep remembering/ my glass of red wine"; when she is reading and lighting candles at home, we hear McClure's voice-over intone: "until I turned over these pages,/ and read *I want to light candles*." Furthermore, the camera movements through the European sites are edited to suggest both the subjective perspective of the solitary woman tourist and the view of the filmmaker, strolling with his companion, both of them appreciating together H.D.'s response to similar places three decades earlier. As such, the "H.D. Trilogy" is yet another variation on Lawrence Jordan's earlier discovery that "the so-called 'Present Moment' is existentially always the *same* moment."