



Lawrence Jordan

Hamfat Asar (1965)

TRANSFER NOTE: Copied from a 16mm black-and-white negative preserved by Anthology Film Archives. RUNNING TIME: 13 minutes.

The artistic cauldron of the late 1950s San Francisco Beat scene forged filmmakers as well as painters and poets. From this melting pot, by way of Colorado and New York, emerged Lawrence Jordan (b. 1934), one of the most inventive—and articulate—avant-garde animators.

Raised in Denver by teacher parents, Jordan won a scholarship to Harvard University, where he discovered film. Dropping out, he teamed up with high school friend Stan Brakhage to start a theater in Colorado before setting his sights on San Francisco. There, between tours of duty in the merchant marine, he fell in with Michael McClure, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Duncan, Jess Collins, and Wallace Berman. Jordan founded the film society Camera Obscura with Bruce Conner and went on, in the late 1950s, to create the city's first experimental movie theater.

Jordan's gift to artist Joseph Cornell of a handmade book of film stills led to a flurry of correspondence and an invitation to become Cornell's assistant. In 1965, he moved into the sculptor's house in Queens, helping with artworks, editing Cornell's *Legend of Fountains*, and filming the older artist at work. Jordan returned to San Francisco energized by Cornell's "poetic sensibility."

Hamfat Asar dates from the same year and grew from Jordan's fascination with the collage novels of German surrealist Max Ernst. Against a backdrop of a static cliff-lined seascape, the film sets into motion a stream of whimsical Victorian-era

illustrations salvaged from books. Jordan ratchets up the tension by introducing a tightrope and a man on stilts making his way haltingly from the shore. Fantastic hybrid objects—timepieces, balloons, a steamroller-like train, mushrooms turned butterflies, and even John Tenniel's Alice—appear, float across the frame, sometimes transform, and vanish to the primal beat of drumming. At one point the entire scene bursts into flames. Tightrope gone, the man reemerges on a cloud followed by a memento mori skull and flowers.

Jordan has remarked that his collage film brought together "thoughts on life, light, . . . death and the underworld," adding that Asar is a variant name for the Egyptian god Osiris. But to tease out artist-embedded messages from the objects is not the filmmaker's point. The black-and-white cutouts act as Rorschach inkblots from which viewers draw their own "predispositions" or meanings. In a 1995 interview he mentions, with delight, a review of *Hamfat Asar* that described specific images *not* present in the film. To Jordan, the reviewer's "mistake" was evidence that his film worked.

About the Preservation

Anthology Film Archives used the filmmaker's original elements to create a 16mm preservation negative, a sound track negative, and a viewing print.

More Information

P. Adams Sitney discusses Jordan's work in his *Visionary Film* (Oxford University Press, 2002). For an overview of Jordan and the Beat scene, see *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle*, by Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna (D.A.P. / Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2005). Paul Karlstrom recorded an extensive interview with the filmmaker in 1995 for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art; the transcription is available at www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories. The four-DVD anthology *The Lawrence Jordan Album* (Facets Multimedia, 2008) surveys five decades of Jordan's work. Prints of his films are available from Canyon Cinema and the Film-Makers' Cooperative.