

parts of those minutes, various collected and photographed images appear which invoke different problems in the perception of film. The naked film-maker, crawling through a cubicle of mirrors, creates a confusion of the actual with the reflected body. The image of a steaming hot-dog proclaims itself as a loop only when the viewer begins to perceive the repetitious pattern of a barely perceptible puff of steam, and then without any indication of a transition, the looping ends, and a fork severs the hot dog. A more obvious loop of a dog barking takes on an ambiguous dimension by the irregular alternation between silence and synchronized sound. The appearance of the frame line and surface dirt points out the filmic objectivity of an old pornographic film incorporated within *Bleu Shut*. Another allusion to the conventions of cinema is a Hawaiian number out of an old musical.

Each of these inserts, which are for the most part found objects, functions independently. There is no interweaving of imagery nor narrative continuity. Each elongates and divides the parts of the guessing game like advertising interrupting a television quiz show, but unlike advertisements, they do not have a distinctly negative relation to the game. They are of equal importance, simply reverse face. In fact, some of the intentional energy of the game carries over to the inserts, as if the audience were being called on to solve perceptual puzzles, to interpret them, and above all to construct a unity out of their diversity. *Bleu Shut* reverses the thrust of *The Great Blondino*. By fracturing the possible unities between found objects and filmed scenes and suggesting a field of cinematic perception without a center—or at best with a problematic center—it demythologizes its own ironies and at the very end almost throws the film-maker outside his own film (he does not fit within its "30 minutes"). *The Great Blondino*, on the other hand, had a mythic center where the ironies of the materials could mesh with the ironies of the narrative.

The movement between works which establish a tentative center and those which disperse or put into question their centers, observed in these two films by Nelson, characterizes all of the films I have grouped in this chapter. At times the desire for a central organization has been satisfied by a loose, picaresque development substituting for a mythic core, and just as often (but not in the case of *Bleu Shut*) the dispersed structure has been a metaphor for the apocalyptic intention of the film. Different dynamics and dimensions of irony in the films of MacLaine, Conner, Rice, and Nelson have intensified the formal alternations within individual films and within whole filmographies. These film-makers have been

grouped here not to suggest that they form a school or exhibit a regional sensibility. Far from it. Bruce Conner and Ron Rice were very independent figures who began working in film in the late 1950s when the avant-garde cinema was at its least cohesive. They simply share in their works certain patterns of responding to the void. MacLaine was another isolated artist who came at the very end of a strong movement, whose major film pointed chaotically toward the forms of the later 1950s. Nelson, on the other hand, marks the end of that period. In his hand the picaresque and the centerless film becomes a deliberate strategy for making works which respond to the new cohesion of the national avant-garde cinema of the 1960s. An enclosed picture of the historical moment we have been considering calls for a discussion of the films of Larry Jordan, even though the ironic factor, a common denominator of those I have been discussing, plays a minimal role in both his films of photographed actuality and his animated collages. His materials, subjects, and forms coincide and envision a continuous world where strong or fragile moods are never ruptured. Yet despite these thematic differences, Jordan's isolation and his artistic responses to the situation of the 1950s draw him into consideration with the men I have been discussing.

Larry Jordan's formative period as a film-maker extends throughout the 1950s. He began to make films at approximately the same time as Stan Brakhage, with whom he went to high school in Denver. Jordan appears in Brakhage's *Desistfilm* (1953) and Brakhage in his *Trumpit* (1956), both psycho-dramas. Brakhage's approach to film-making and the energy with which he pursued it was unique in the 1950s. He moved between Colorado, New York, and San Francisco, often in pursuit of the vanished centers of late-1940s film-making. He continued making and extending the form of the trance film until he forged the lyric cinema described in chapter six. He not only avoided the kind of crisis most of his colleagues faced at that time, but he even managed to keep up a frail connection between the dispersed and sometimes retired film-makers he sought out in his cross-continental movements.

Jordan failed where Brakhage succeeded in finding a convincing form within the trance film. He matured as an artist and found his authentic voice in film by gradually withdrawing from the role of the film-maker that the previous generation of avant-gardists had established as a norm. As he lost interest in reconstituting the community of film-makers and in the politics of distribution and promotion toward the late 1950s, the distinction between a finished film and a work-in-progress seems to have dis-

solved for him. In its place came a gradual involvement with the possibility of cinema to testify to the processes of its own making and with films designed to celebrate a particular occasion. When he tentatively reemerged as a publicly exhibiting film-maker at the apogee of the revived interest in the avant-garde film around 1963, he had produced a substantial body of work, radically different from his early psycho-dramas, to which it is difficult to assign dates.

In those few years Jordan had become one of the few film-makers to develop confidence in the artistic validity of a less formal, more spontaneous cinema. Elsewhere in America, in similar isolation, a few other film-makers had come to the same position, as we shall see in the next chapter. Later, when Jordan briefly released the films he had been making without thought of public exhibition, he put them in groups, usually combining animations with actualities: e.g., 3 *Moving Fresco Films* contained *Enid's Idyll* and *Portrait of Sharon*, both animations, and *Hymn in Praise of the Sun*, a series of "cine-portraits." Among his films are animated collages, pixilated actualities, portraits, superimposition films, and a hand-painted film. Some were edited within the camera. He described an aspect of his working process in *Film Culture*:

[Making *Pink Swine*] I got very carried away with object animation, and combining layout animation and object animation. I was moving objects at all different rates; I was setting the camera; I wasn't hand-holding it; I was using it just like a musical instrument, like playing a saxophone, pushing the button on the camera and moving the objects in rhythm. All those films [in *Petite Suite*] were improvised; they're virtually as they came out of the camera. . . . I didn't want everything to move at one particular rhythm; it all depended on what the subject material was. But I wasn't planning it. I was just letting my mind go and see what could be done in 100 ft. [i.e., about three minutes of film]. I liked the 100 foot form. The film was done before you had time to change cameras; I don't remember whether it was one sitting or not, but it wouldn't have been more than two days. You can't do a dance, one dance, in two different days, and these films are essentially dances, you know.⁵

The oscillation between predetermined and spontaneous films set in motion a spiralling intensity in the investigation of the oneiric and meta-physical dimensions of Jordan's cinema. Curiously unlike MacLaine, Conner, Rice, and Nelson, that intensity paralleled a growing frailty, so that the extraordinary series of works which represent the climax of Jordan's career, *Duo Concertantes* (1962-64), *Hamfat Asar* (1965), *The Old House*,

Passing (1966), *Gymnopedies* (1968), and *Our Lady of the Sphere* (1969)—all animations of Victorian engravings except *The Old House*, *Passing*—occupies an exquisite space and time where reverie and dream meet, delicately poised between nostalgia and terror.

Duo Concertantes has two parts, *The Centennial Exposition* and *Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway*. Both *Patricia* and *Hamfat Asar*, the two most spectacular of his animations, operate against the backdrop of a fixed scene. In the former, it is a back view of a young lady framed in a doorway looking out upon woods and a lake; in the latter, Jordan uses an engraving of a seacoast with cliffs. Time and a change of culture have given a surrealistic and nostalgic aura to Victorian woodcuts, as Max Ernst and several collagists between him and Jordan have known for five decades. Where Ernst slammed together radically incongruent images from such found material and thereby released the terrors of monstrosities and the sensual depth of inconceivable landscapes, Jordan has chosen to refine their delicacy and to push his images almost to the point of evanescence—a limit represented in several collages by the reductive metaphor of a film within a collage-film flickering with pure imageless light.

The background picture of *Patricia* returns us to the moment when the American avant-garde film found its first image of interiority, that is, to the image of Maya Deren pressing her hands against the window in *Meshes of the Afternoon* to gaze inwardly upon a double of herself chasing the mirror-faced figure. The doorway in which *Patricia* stands is both the port of exchange and the barrier between the inner and outer worlds, as Maya Deren's window and before her Mallarmé's "Fenêtre" had been. Outside, tiny images descend from the top of the screen. First an elephant comes down and slowly sinks out of the bottom, but in his downward course he deposits an object which hovers on the horizon of the lake. The discontinuous power of that horizon line to hold objects from falling down the flat screen provides the film with a frail but finely conceived tension between two illusionary gravities, that of the actual theater in which we see the film where objects must fall from the top of the screen through the bottom as if to land on the floor under our feet and the represented gravity line, the horizon, within the engraving. The manifestation of objects and their movements within the film enumerate the variations possible between these two centers of gravity.

A hand appears in the upper frame; then a statue appears on the horizon like the spot to which the hand pointed. In the incessant materializa-

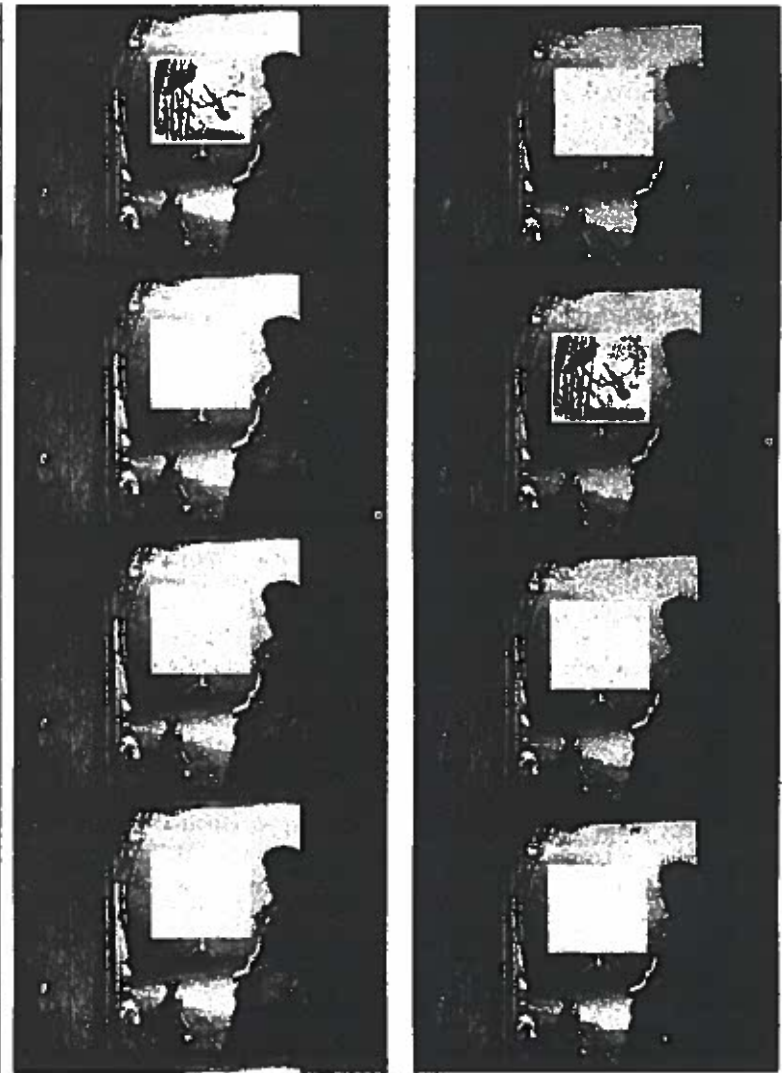
tion and disappearance off-screen or suddenly vanishing by moving of objects and creatures, the usual way of defeating the gravitational forces is by growing wings and flying off-screen, at the edges. At one point, an egg becomes a butterfly, which then breaks the hitherto established norm of separating inside from outside by flying inside the house and disappearing within.

The inside/outside distinction and its evaporation generates the central apperceptive metaphor of the film. A picture stand appears on the horizon. On its white screen a black-and-white flicker occurs; slides appear in sequence; then a bird flaps its wings in an evocation of the origins of cinema. It flies off the screen and into the illusory landscape surrounding it. In the final extensions of this trope, a swarm of bees appears on the little screen; some disappear as soon as they overreach its frame, but others escape into the landscape. These bees come inward, past the unmoving woman, and are lost within the house. To commemorate this triumph of the imagination, a star falls splashing into the lake, an egg takes wing, and Larry Jordan's most delicate film ends.

In *Hamfat Asar* (whose title joins a made-up word from Jordan's household, "hamfat," with an archaic name of Osiris, the Egyptian underworld god) the film-maker generates tensions similar to that of the discontinuous horizon in the earlier film by stretching a tightrope across his seascape. A figure on stilts crosses it repeatedly while creatures and objects float by in the background, manifest themselves, and obscure the foreground or cross and perch upon the tightrope. In the course of his crossings, he will become a bird, a train, a floating balloon.

Once, the entire picture bursts into actual flames. Later a star explodes, first whitening, then blackening out the whole image. When the landscape reappears, the tightrope is gone, but the man on stilts starts to cross, successfully, as if it were there. He does not complete the passage until, at the end of the film, a cloud floats by on which he can stand.

The Centennial Exposition, *Gymnopedies*, and *Our Lady of the Sphere* use with increasing complexity numerous backdrops which are connected by the continuous movement of a foreground figure from one to the next, although that figure tends to be undergoing its own continual metamorphosis. In *Gymnopedies* he tinted the entire film a pastel blue, and in *Our Lady of the Sphere* several solid screen colors and occasionally split-screen two-color moments have a structural function in the complex animation. He alternates zooming motions, accenting first movements on the left side of the image, then on the right, and he uses cubist superim-



The flickering film-within-a-film:
Larry Jordan's *Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway*.

positions of a single figure out of phase with itself to represent new perspectives of space and depth in animation. He also uses montage to parallel interior scenes with those taking place on a moonscape. At its most complex, in a scene of circus acrobats turning into flashing stars, he employs hand-held backdrops and three different colors in superimposition with counterpointed movements on the different levels. In the middle of the film he shows a horse staring at an easel which becomes a film within a film, flickering and breaking the limits of its frame as had happened in *Patricia*. The elaborate techniques of *Our Lady of the Sphere* permit Jordan to break through the conventions of continuity he had created and then thoroughly explored in his earlier collage films. Yet he had to sacrifice the crucial tension of the slow and delicately elaborated imagery to gain the complex dynamics of the later film.

In *The Old House, Passing*, he resurrected a setting from the trance film, the mysterious house, to construct a radically elliptical narrative that attains a height of fragility comparable to the best of his animated films. According to the film-maker:

It is a ghost-film wherein the central mood revolves around a plot, rather than moving straight along a plot line. Mood predominates over plot, but plot is always there before the eye, as well as behind and to the side of it. Within the meshes of the fabric an older woman has lost a man (husband?) and a child thru a mysterious accident or disappearance. Elements (a young man, woman and child) are drawn into her which release her from the past and the dark mysteries of the huge old house and the night-walking spirit of the departed soul.⁶

In this film Jordan translated the strategies of his animated films into events in actual space and time. By using prolepsis, repetition, and shifting perspective he keeps the relatively simple narrative in an elusive state of development throughout the film, as if he were extending the conventional opening of a mystery film into a total structure. The full disclosure of the narrative is suspended, hinted at, but never achieved. The situations of the film—a couple and their child spending a night in an old house and subsequently exploring it; the old woman who lives there watching them; the ghost of her dead husband watching her and them—give rise to an ambivalence in which the distinction between observation and fantasy breaks down, and past and present interpenetrate. The reveries of *Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway* have their narrative equivalents in the slow, formally composed, chiaroscuro images of shifting and overlapping explorations, discoveries, and encounters.

As the film proceeds toward its center in the scenes of the morning after the family has slept in the old house, the simple narrative begins to repeat itself. Emotionally charged instants, such as the pursuit of the ghost to the roof or the discovery of a child's skeleton in the fireplace occur in the undramatic texture of an increasing involvement in reverie.

Rather than reach a climax, the film simply shifts to a scene of exorcism. The family visits a cemetery, where we assume the ghost is buried, and in an act of deflating the mood of mystery, they blow soap bubbles through the graveyard and leave. But even that release is framed by the perspective of the ghost who watches their departure.

The Old House, Passing makes the temporality which is at the heart of all the films discussed in this chapter thematic. These film-makers of the fifties and sixties were perhaps the first to explore the fundamental disparity between the nostalgia of the photographic image and the "nowness" of projected film. Once this chasm began to open for them, they created an apocalyptic and a picaresque form that commented ironically on that temporality. It also sought to bridge that chasm with an ontology of terror (MacLaine's desperate men, Conner's disasters, the flower thief's paranoia, Blondino's tightrope walk, and the haunting of *The Old House, Passing*) which reaches its most diminished point in the experience of harmless risk (the games of *Bleu Shut*). Risk and terror (and in Jordan's case the threshold between terror and wonder) provide the healing moment in which cinematic time and the time of its perception would coincide.

In New York during the same years other film-makers were encountering the same temporal paradox, which they took as their theme in different personal ways, creating myths of recovered innocence and its failure.