

Lawrence Jordan: A Mosaic of Personal Selections

Lawrence Jordan In Person

*Co-presented with the San Francisco Art Institute
and Film Arts Foundation*

Sunday, March 26, 2000 — San Francisco Art Institute — 7:30 pm

"Larry Jordan's animated films are among the most beautiful short films made today... His content is subtle, his technique is perfect, his personal style unmistakable." (Jonas Mekas)

"A dream of buzzing spheres that resonate in a universe of colliding time zones... The Disney Dimension is many light years away from the Dark Matter illuminated by the Metaphysical Magician of Petaluma." (George Kuchar)

Lawrence Jordan retired from the Faculty of the San Francisco Art Institute last May after thirty years of distinguished teaching. Jordan inspired literally hundreds of aspiring filmmakers, and he has been a pivotal figure in the blossoming of Bay Area personal or avant-garde cinema since relocating here in 1955. The S.F. Cinematheque celebrates the life work of this unique artist with four programs drawn from his body of 40 films selected by himself, his long-time colleague George Kuchar, and Cinematheque curator Steve Anker.

The H.D. Trilogy Film:

The Black Out (1992); 16mm, b&w, sound, 45 minutes, print from the maker

The Grove (1993); 16mm, b&w, sound, 45 minutes, print from the maker

Star of Day (1994); 16mm, b&w, sound, 25 minutes, print from the maker

"Larry Jordan's *H.D. Trilogy Film* (1990-1993) is a wonderful, rich film experience that combines the filmmaker's images of the women he loves with Hilda Doolittle's long poem *Hermetic Definitions*, 1960.* Rather than trying to dramatize H.D.'s last major work which would be impossible, Jordan provides a series of images of the poet Joanna McClure as she journeys through ancient ruins, primitive Mediterranean villages, and other places that inspired H.D. The combination of images, Joanna McClure's reading of the poem, and the traditional music of the Mediterranean result in a captivating film experience.

Jordan planned this work around the visual cues found in H.D.'s writings. Jordan says, 'The poem provided a source of image modality. It determined how the shots would be taken, how the style in which the photography of Ms. McClure would occur... The bottom line is that the film's premise is to trace life *in general*, but real, actually occurring life, not fictional life.' He said McClure would represent many if not all women, especially those who are no longer young.

One theme of the poem is romance blossoming for the poet who is getting older— *Why did you come to trouble my decline? I am old (I was old till you came)...* *The reddest rose unfolds, (which is ridiculous in this time, this place, unseemly, impossible, even slightly scandalous)*. The film expresses this theme in a universal way.

Again Jordan says, 'The film's concerns are not so much with 'incident' as with 'aspect'. In what aspect do we find the central character? Is she in despair (internally, since her face shows nothing of it)? Or is she in a later-life ascendancy? Actually, her existential interface with her immediate surroundings and with her deepest thoughts (the poem) form the film's deepest resonances. The visual aspect of the film, the picture on the screen, represents an interface with life's surroundings, the 'present'. The soundtrack, specifically the poem, represents the past— her thoughts and reflections, her timeless inner modality, or her past life experiences'.

Jordan's manner of showing the present is to observe McClure doing hundreds of things a traveler might do on a trip to Europe. We see her in the streets of Rome, visiting a temple of Hephaestus in Athens, basking in the sun and the wind of the Mediterranean, or simply putting on make-up, riding in a train in England (part 2), or walking in the streets of a fourteenth century Italian town (part 3). Just as important: we do not see her with the filmmaker except once in part 1 as he passes behind her in the mirror with the camera. Throughout the rest of the film she is alone in her thoughts. Even the filmmaker's single self-reflexive appearance seems to make no change in her meditations.

What makes these images special is the filmmaker's subjective way of looking at his central character. There is a sense of intimacy in the visuals suggesting that a muse inspires the artist to create this loving portrait. Since Jordan says most of the actions in the film were not planned, it seems he subconsciously chose the most romantic locations, and the best camera angles and lighting situations. On occasion he even filmed unusual incidental images of McClure, including her reflection in windows and mirrors.

The film was shot in black and white with a 16mm spring wound Bell and Howell camera. Sepia color was added to the film by the processing laboratory.

The candid quality of the images enrich H.D.'s crystalline, intensely personal lines. To achieve this documentary look Jordan says he limited his directing chores to simple instructions; he would tell Joanna to sit at a table and pour out a glass of wine, to open books, to walk in a certain direction. He says he rarely made changes in the places used in the film. One change he did make was to put a rose in the niche in a wall, an image suggested by the poem.

Jordan sees the visuals as a portrait of Joanna McClure's life during the years 1990 through 1992. The few fictitious elements added to the film were imposed on Joanna's activities in order to relate her real-life experiences to H.D.'s, as the filmmaker was already severely under H.D.'s spell throughout the filming.

When the project was begun Jordan wanted to discover if a film could show that *Hermetic Definitions* was as great a poem as he felt it to be. The result of this personal experiment is a film that is sensitive enough to enhance Hilda Doolittle's poem without overpowering it. Hopefully the literary world will discover this film and agree with the importance McClure and Jordan give to H.D.'s work." (Karl Cohen)

*Hilda Doolittle, who always signed herself "H.D.", was born and raised in Pennsylvania, though she spent her adult life among literary circles of England and Europe. She is known as an "imagist" poet, and her career, which includes numerous books of poetry and a number of densely poetic novels, is closely associated with her mentor Ezra Pound, though her writing style is not. For a time she acted in films. She was married and had one daughter. She was devoted to Sigmund Freud, was analyzed by him in 1933-34, and wrote *Tribute to Freud*, which was published in 1956. *Hermetic Definitions* was her last major poem, consisting of three parts: *Red Rose & A Beggar*, *Grove of Academe*, and *Star of Day*. She died in 1961 at the age 77.