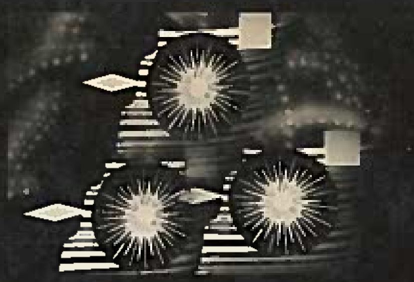
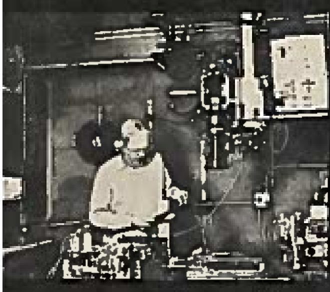
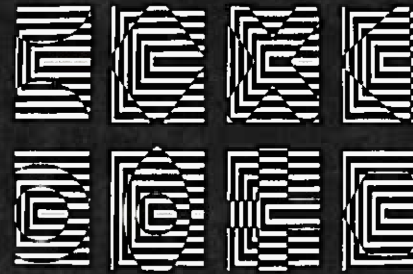
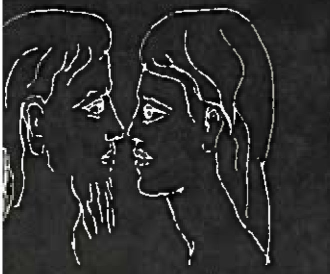



EXPERIMENTAL ANIMATION

AN ILLUSTRATED ANTHOLOGY

By Robert Russett And Cecile Starr





Jordan

hoto by Larry James Huston.)

rry Jordan uses a wide range of rustic and
llage material such as old steel engravings
nth-century illustrations to create films
a magical fluidity of movement. Probing
the interior world of the subconscious, he
process of free association to construct
and dream-like surrealistic imagery.

)34 in Denver, Colorado, Jordan was intro-
lmmaking by fellow high-school student
ge and learned basic techniques as a mem-
m club at Harvard University. Following one year of study at Harvard he left school and returned to Colorado where he became involved in summer stock theater. There, heavily influenced by the films of Stan Brakhage, he began a series of live-action films which he describes as "personal psychodramas." The following year he moved to San Francisco, where he continued his film work and became active in film societies and a variety of 16mm theater projects. While in San Francisco he discovered the work of Surrealist artist Max Ernst, which inspired him to begin his experiments with two-dimensional and three-dimensional collage animation.

From 1960–1974, Jordan, a meticulous and inventive craftsman, produced a total of eleven animated films. Outstanding examples of his personal and ritualistic form of symbolism include *Duo Concertantes* (1964), *Our Lady of the Sphere* (1969), *Orb* (1973), and *Once Upon A Time* (1974). Currently, in addition to producing animated films, Jordan is a member of the board of trustees of the American Film Institute and head of the film department at the San Francisco Art Institute.

From *Duo Concertantes* (1962–1964) by Larry Jordan, a surrealistic animated collage.

INTERVIEW WITH LARRY JORDAN

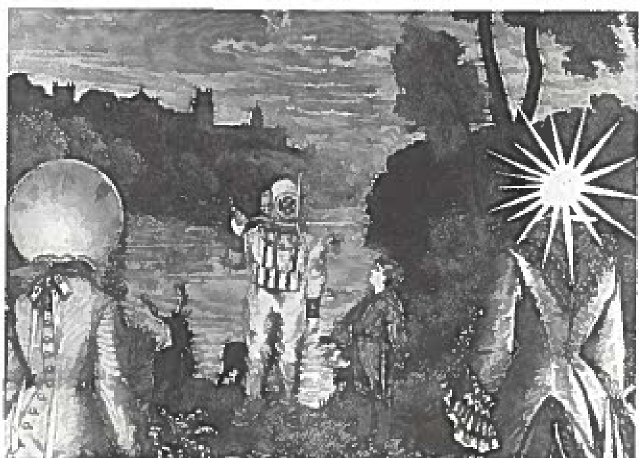
Q: Would you begin this interview by discussing why you are attracted to animation as a form of expression and how, exactly, your collage technique evolved?

Jordan: The technique of animation is natural to me, and has its basis in the love-hate relationship I had with the cartoons and comedies in the magic ritual of childhood. I think in slow-motion when I animate, and know how it will look on the screen. It's something I can't explain. Always there is a theme in each film, and an esthetic game: Weightlessness coupled with improvisation, heaviness coupled with progression, Bardo [see below] coupled with breaking through the flat surface of the image. The progressing from flat collage animations to more three-dimensional works with zooming images stems simply from the acquisition, after 13 years, of a reflex camera with a zoom lens, and a world, or dimension of the same world, that I could never see through an objective viewfinder before. At that point I began to invent new tools to use on the animation bench, various levels of glass through which to shoot, shades for nuances of lighting, colored filters. Color erupted. Just another phase of the eruption which began earlier on the animated flats in black-and-white—the interior world coloring up, starting to dance and sing in a different way. I just followed, like being on a train, looking out the window.

I have completed one phase of the depiction of this world I know so well and am at home in. The animated films which will follow will have a different look to them. That's all I know at present. And that's why I have put all the animated works together on two large reels, running about 90 minutes. The program is called, *Animated Works, 1959–1974*. There are eleven titles in all.

Q: Your imagery has been compared to the work of Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, and Joseph Cornell. Do you see your animated films as a continuation of the Surrealist tradition?

Jordan: The imagery in my animated films has always concerned unknown continents and landscapes of the mind. Some call this a real place. Certainly the Egyptians did, so did the Greeks (the underworld), and so do the Tibetans (Bardo). In most cases it is the world of the so-called dead. In this sense it can be a negative world. To me it is not, or has not been. (I may very possibly go to a different dimension entirely next time out, since a new phase is beginning.) To call the images "surreal" is pitifully inadequate, because the term should not be applied to art, but to life. Dali is an idiot; everyone knows that. He's a capitalist with a talent, and



From *Orb* (1973) by Larry Jordan.

cked out of the spiritual brotherhood. vay of life; the works that fall out of that :cidental.

;t influenced your work?

;es, looking back, are: Bunuel, Cocteau, ins), Dreyer, Joseph Cornell.

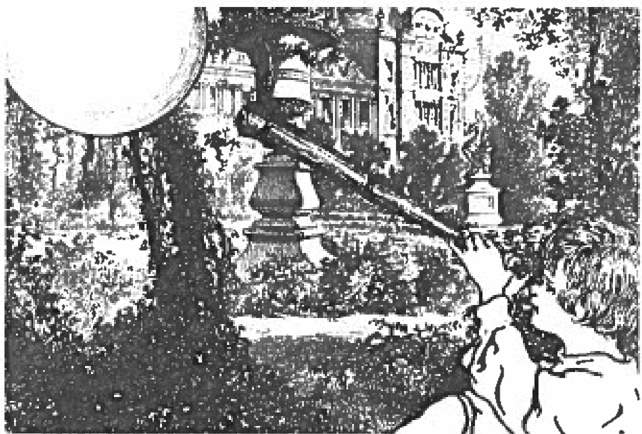
:lationship is, was, a personal one, since dead. In 1965 I spent the summer and Flushing, working on his films to com- on boxes, the craft of which he taught ıich cannot be taught. This was a close, :ult relationship, but one that was evi- / inevitable. I did not have to go through cess of breaking with the Surrealists, as Cocteau, as Joseph was the only one I , and he had already broken officially :ually altogether, ever.

nters, living and dead, were for many er to me and more influential than film- f whom (filmmakers) I had nothing in ›xcept that our work happened to run tor. I considered myself a maker of mov- w I feel like a filmmaker again, because with the problems of the medium and :h an Audience as with The Viewer, a t have for many years. . . .

r I'm interested in. But being such, I see nvey more. At first I was more the *doer*, king film. That isn't enough anymore. I is seeable to me over and over again. ı either finds an audience or it doesn't. ı I can do about it. If an image honestly it will excite others', as I'm not that yone else.

antes, Hamfat Asar, *and* Our Lady Of *typical examples of your personal and ıf symbolism. What kinds of ideas and ıu concerned with in your film imagery?*

ic act in my work is of freeing the ob- ains of convention and connotation. The ;ymbolic of the Surrealist philosophy, ition, is inexplicable. The enigma is ıe Surrealists like myself who are openly ;ymbolism and allegorical inanities. My ı't portray anything in particular, but ɜs with the mechanics of this world: a ı represents in no way a psychedelic a new-born giraffe, and moves as such, to be one, not I. And I believe strongly

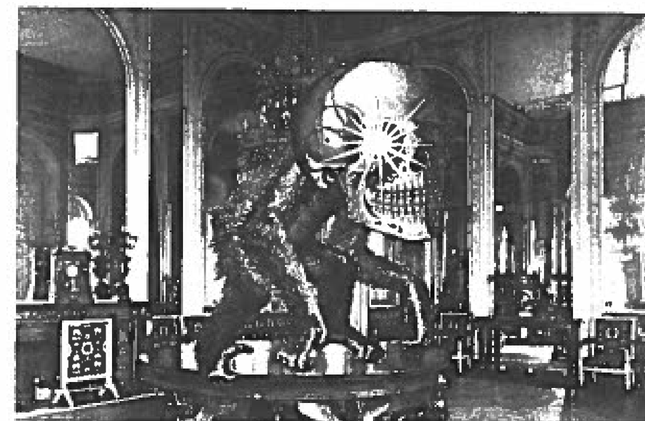


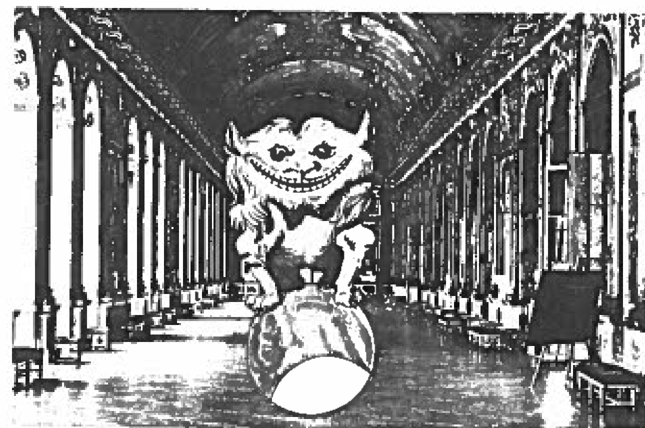
From *Once Upon a Time* (1974) by Larry Jordan.

in the process of free association in combining images, and in constructing them. I find it very embarrassing, for instance, to find in a film that the filmmaker is forcing shots, which of themselves have no real relation to his intentions, into the servitude of fulfilling his intentions. I prefer that the shots (images) construct themselves. This is not a semantic nicety. If one is patient, and sits there with ego subdued, the images come to life on their own. I admit that this is not the *modus operandi* in all my films. Sometimes I do resort to construction and invention, usually when I am struggling with a new technical process. Some of the later films, like *Our Lady Of The Sphere*, *Orb*, and *Once Upon A Time* are combinations of free and constructed imagery. The problem of the three-dimensional aspect, and the treatment of the animation stand as a French Theater with more depth than width has prompted this synthesis.

Q: You employ a wide range of unusual graphic material in your films such as old illustrations from magic, astrology, and anatomy books, nineteenth-century engravings, and turn of the century reproductions of the romantic style. What special significance do these kinds of images have for you?

Jordan: Use of the old engravings is always a question to anyone who has just seen one of my movies: Why? How come? What do they *mean*? Let me invent a few answers, because, aside from the fact that they're good actors, photograph well, and the original artists have paid enough attention to depth-illusion to give me an atmosphere in which to stage my visions, there are no real answers. But let us invent a few more idea-illusions: There is a tension between the old (engravings) and the new (ideas and motifs in the film process). I can't resist the nostalgia of a time when the world was more intact than it is now. There were more distinct delineations, or Spirits of Place, in the nineteenth century than there are now, and I can evoke stronger moods with material from that time, given the assumption that the viewer is susceptible to mood, and not overly demanding of story-content. The engravings are semi-works of art (the commercial art of the nineteenth century) and have an edge on expressionism which contemporary photos don't have. Perhaps there are some real answers, but it's very complicated and boils down to visual preference. Finally, the nineteenth-century imagery is already partly dislodged from mundane connotation, and gives me a head start on the surrealism "freeing" process. Psychological and archetypal questions are games for analysts, not synthesizers (artists). And a parting shot: many of the nineteenth-century engravings are, quite simply,





From *Our Lady of the Sphere* (1969) by Larry Jordan. This sequence of frames shows the effects created by old engravings and other collage material.

/e to work out of step, using beautiful
e that cannot tolerate beauty.

ited films are meticulously crafted, yet ful organic quality. Do you work from a ı basically improvise with collage?

lous crafting is an act of love. Sloppi- of sloppiness. Inspiration is 90 percent u like *all* the processes of making a film ıe wrong business. Meticulousness is an and thorough seeing and living in time- n act of concentration and intense living. are extremely sloppy sometimes, though ow that not everyone notices the missed ıey are there. In the beginning I didn't ıer. When I began to, it was a deepening n process to solve the problems of the . This process of meticulously crafting ·lutely nothing to do with whether a script In my case half the films are done with I prefer to call them) and half are done as, executed, then edited first on paper then cut. Whether or not I use a script ıy mood, 2) the subject, 3) the techniques the length of the film (size of the feeling ·gin).

being a new esthetic game to each film, t include becoming a total slave to a set ions on paper, executing each direction ıtest deviation. Another might mean that ion (*Gymnopedies*) was the law. It is ıws that give each film its style, not the of a script. Scripts, scores and post- written after the film is shot) are just . Organic qualities are a conscious part ıf film, that is the growth of a film around The laws and rules of the games I play the films. The shapes they fill out into ıle results of the genes. I do not chop ing table. Like music, which they are in e scored either before the visions are ;amera or after, and then performed for lab. At times I know all the backgrounds ·acters that will be in a film. At other ıction of material is opennded. Some- s to sit calmly before a table and com- ıes it is to sit at the piano and improvise; is to step into the dark naked and fall ıt. There is order in any mood if you ve produced a number of short visions a vague idea of the theme, and must resort to the post-script, I start writing without stopping to think or judge, letting the first image lead to the second, the second to the third, freely associating, until I have used up all the images. I make a silent print and construct a sound track for the film afterwards. There is a great deal of trust that goes on in this kind of process. To say where the order or the rightness of the ordered images comes from is an insoluble mystery, leading out of art and into philosophy. One thing I try never to do is force an image to perform a superficial (intellectual) role in the work, such as a quick shot of an eye which is not really angry to stand in for anger at a given moment where I think there 'should' be anger. I like to believe that is in my films. We hear a lot about film being the work of illusionists. True. But only *part* of the mind can be fooled. Whatever the visual process is, it is no dummy. Subliminal images register as surely as ten second shots. Therefore, artificially constructed montage sequences are nothing more than artificially constructed montage sequences that are dear to the hearts of intellectuals, fool one level of the consciousness, and leave the spirit, which knows truth instantly, high and dry. If intuition is a dubious or feared process to an artist, that artist is in trouble and will have to talk his way out of it or get a good press agent.

Q: Do you use any specialized equipment or unusual techniques to create your films?

Jordan: As the process of image-making deepens, the mechanics of the image-making broaden. Often a theoretical technical problem will spark a period of photographic invention. I will be off to my favorite machinist with drawings and plans, which he will straighten out for me and construct the needed part, motor, lens, or whatever. You can buy only a very small percentage of the equipment needed for individual efforts in films and must rely on a mechanic, if you are not one yourself, to make up the equipment to order. Over the years my stand has acquired some peculiar devices, most of which I decline to discuss, not because they are secret processes so much as that it is boring to discuss them. Anyone who is seriously interested in doing a thing will eventually figure out how to do it. So far I have not resorted to optical printing in the animation films, although some of the effects are identical to results obtainable on the optical printer. My interest in optical printing is theoretical. I have been instrumental in inventing a type of optical printing never before used in the industry—a front-projection system. Several of the machines were built and one is used commercially now. But I have never used it, preferring to matte images on the stand, exposing and re-exposing each frame—hand-making each frame, so to speak. There is more immediacy, more bounce, better color, and resolution to the image when it is first generation.

Q: Your animated films are an important part of the artistic tradition of personal film. What do you think that animators, working in this tradition, can contribute to cinema that is not already present in other areas of filmmaking?

Jordan: The contributions this kind of film *can* make to the body of cinema are far more extensive than the contributions it *has made*. Very few people are willing to devote themselves to experimentation. This goes without saying. However, if the material incentives were there, as say in experimental medicine, with huge grants and great prestige, you would have just as many animation experimenters. The contributions that are made by the few working in this area are hard to evaluate from the inside—by the doer. A 'contribution' is really only valuable to the user—the seer. But I will try: Time-slippage and visual-musical manipulation is the forte of nonconventional animation. In nonconventional animation the irrational, explosive force of vision is condensed to the limits, far beyond any other form of cinema. If, as in one of McLaren's films, little bursts of images occur only every ten frames, the manipulation of time and vision are being conducted at an intensity not to be found in other forms of cinema.

Experimental animation approaches the *essence* of music, without intruding into the territory of music. The reason is simple: they both happen in time, and they are essentially both nonrational, conforming to inner laws and to mathematics.

Conventional animation—animation with little stories—will not enter the realm of the subliminal, or even approach it, for instance. Instantaneous shifts and dislocations of objects in the frames are not tolerated. Sometimes grace notes are needed for the visual rhythm. However, if the expectations of the viewer of animated cinema are insolubly linked with rational progression, "story" in a literary sense, or even with recognizable mood, then the acceptance of animation as visual music is denied and the experimental is deemed esoteric. In fact it is no more esoteric than Bartok's music, or the music of Erik Satie.

The real contribution of experimental animated cinema may explode on the consciousness of the cinema public quite unexpectedly at some time in the future, when, through unforeseen circumstances, the *need* (more than the *understanding*) for irrational vision becomes manifested in a large segment of the population. Then the contributions of the meager productions in this area of cinema would loom suddenly much larger than they do today. It would be seen that visual musicians had broken the ground, but that traditions in visual, nonrational music had not yet been established. At the point where those traditions grew up, "experimental animation" would cease.

On a less speculative level, the contributions I have made are primarily on a one-to-one basis, where a student or a viewer of one of my films will 'connect' and a whole new range of esthetic possibilities will be opened up to them, and they will go off and start constructing their own personal visions in their own way. That kind of contribution is very rewarding, because it carries the "freeing" surreal quality over into life, where it ought to be.

If one understands "contribution" (through experimentation) to be that process whereby the dedicated amateur makes amazing but rough discoveries, which can then be converted, sanitized, and used by the professionals in more conventional movies, then we could say that the professionals have mercifully ignored experimental animation, and I wouldn't want it otherwise. I'd rather have the experimental animation left intact, rough but with full integrity, because I don't in the least think any process of creation is experimental—a term which denotes tentativeness. One merely looks for whatever means are necessary to produce the vision. If this is experimental, the difficulty is semantic.

(From a written interview conducted by Robert Russett, October 1974.)