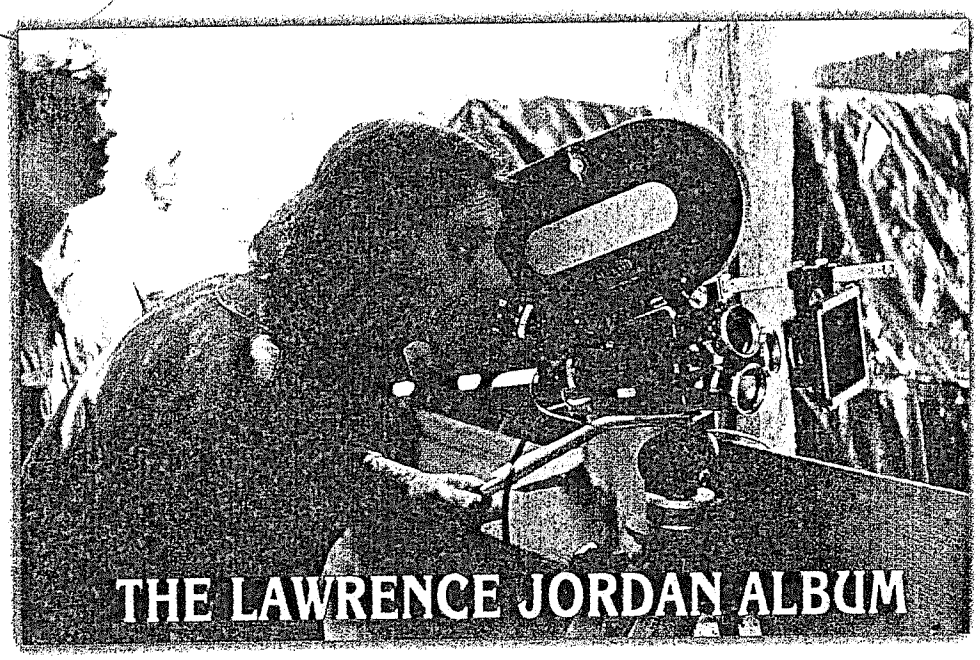
# DVD SPOTLIGHT




*Animator Lawrence Jordan at work on a 1970's project.*

## By Michael Barrett

"*I make films in the Surrealist manner, forcing inspiration as often as possible. When I am not inspired, I do not make films. I have always wanted to show the 'impossible' in my films, and to astonish the viewer, rather than entertain or tell the truth... I often operate on freely associated series of images, finding the trail as I go, not plotting, though some of the films are meticulously scripted. When I astonish myself, I put it in the film. When I don't, I leave it out.*"

The above is from the liner notes included in **THE LAWRENCE JORDAN ALBUM**, one of the more surprising and important DVD boxes of the year. Like Criterion's Stan Brakhage collection or Facets' James Broughton box, this set finally makes available to the common viewer—anyone with the Internet, a rental-by-mail subscription, a library card—the type of work previously unavailable to anyone not living in a

**THE LAWRENCE JORDAN ALBUM**

*1957-2007, Facets Video, DD-2.0, $59.95, approx. 465m, DVD-0*



VIDEO WATCHDOG
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major city with an adventurous film repertory or museum program.

Jordan was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1934 and became friends with Brakhage in high school. Attending Harvard, he was drawn to the Surrealists and became active in the university's film society, discovering the works of Jean Cocteau and Sergei Eisenstein. Then he worked for 10 years with Joseph Cornell, whose boxes salvage objects and artworks by bygone eras and re-apply them in new personal constructions. All of these influences are at work in Jordan's films.

Like Czech artist Karel Zeman (**THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE**), Jordan at first seems like the missing link between the collages of Max Ernst and Terry Gilliam's animations for Monty Python. He doesn't always make cut-out animations, though he's most famous for that, and he uses engravings and prints of the 19th century or earlier. Sometimes one recognizes the work of certain artists—eg., William Hogarth, William Blake, J.M. Whistler, Maxfield Parrish. He manipulates these "classical" images in ways intended to tickle an archetypal *frisson* in the viewers, or at least have us collaborate in the artist's serene dreams.

The first disc shows the development of Jordan's style as he adds one element, then another, to his basic aesthetic framework and works out the recurrences of his obsessions. Images are often recycled from film to film, such as the lady with the sphere for a head (it looks like a crystal ball), so that repetition and endless transformation become the key themes. By the way, there are liner notes for all the films, though some descriptions are more helpful than others.

The first two works, "Duo Concertantes" (1964, 9m) and "Gymnopédies" (1966, 5m), present the images against music in a way that emphasizes film as a musical and surreal form, and yet a classical form, as well—as opposed, that is, to a "logical" dramatic or narrative form, notwithstanding the literary connotations of some of the images. The backgrounds are static while various objects move in the foreground, always floating and transforming. Especially popular are eggs, which

*"Duo Concertantes"*

becomes spheres, suns, clocks, heads and other circularities. In their spheres, as it were, these are famous movies, discussed in P. Sitney Adams' landmark book VISIONARY FILM: THE AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE, 1943-1978 (1979).

"Our Lady of the Sphere" (1969, 10m) adds tinted colors, changing sound effects and spatial motion: In "Orb" (1973, 5m), the bursts of color become increasingly psychedelic as the backgrounds spin, loom and recede. In the notes, Jordan says he created these color effects by matting with an animation stand, which hadn't been done before. He also observes that the sphere is both "a fixed point of reference—a perpetual traveler—and the changeable or transmutable possibility inherent in creation... If these things seem obscure, I suppose it may be assumed that in some past life I must have been an alchemist, though I do not pursue that study now, except through the visual magic of film."

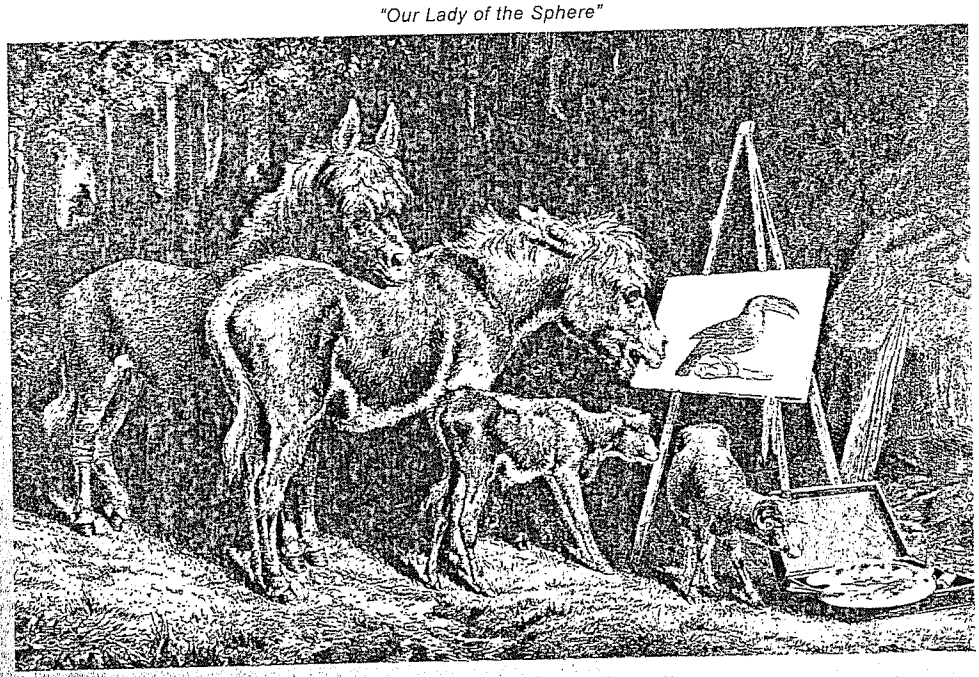
"Moonlight Sonata" (1979, 5m) returns to classical music, but not the Beethoven piece known by that name, but rather Satie's fifth "Gnossienne." "Carabosse" (1980, 5m) is another Satie film. "Once Upon a Time" (1974, 12m) finally adds the spoken word in dialogues that imply a dreamlike narrative about the search for Prince Serendip. (This derives from a folk tale that various sources attribute to Persian, Ceylonese and Indian sources, and which circulated throughout Europe from the 16th century.) There's even live tinted footage of a tarantula.

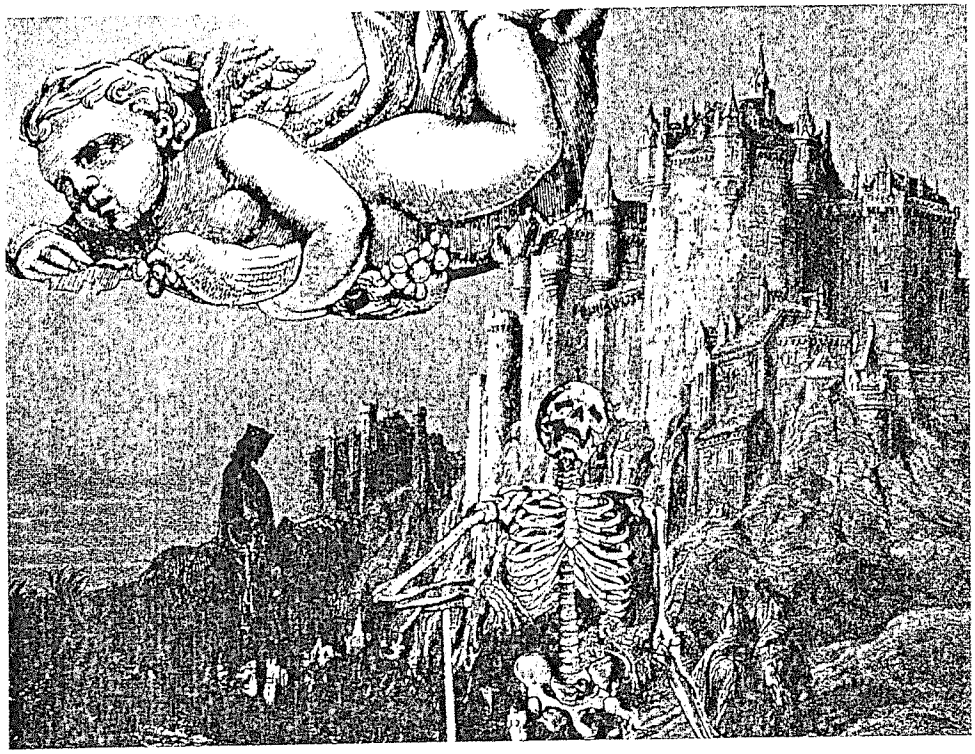
Even by Jordan's standards, "Masquerade" (1981, 5m) is unusually beautiful, startling and compact. Using a static, fully-colored tableau of a man fallen in a duel, various objects manifest that signify the life, the soul, the animating force leaving his body; there may be a pun here on "animation." The music is some kind of Renaissance lute-and-flute thing; we wish the music were identified on more of these pieces.

Most of these delicate epics run about 5m and serve as appetizers for the 42m "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1977). This work of sublimity, as opposed to sublimation, is an honest-to-goodness narrative, written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, narrated by Orson Welles, and using the famous engravings of Gustave Doré as illustration. This is perhaps Jordan's most "commercial" project, as one could imagine it being shown in schools or on PBS' GREAT PERFORMANCES. The notes on working with Welles are illuminating; basically, they worked independently.

This film is followed by the 17m "Enid's Idyll" (2004), which refers to a particular narrative without actually telling it. All the illustrations are by

*"Our Lady of the Sphere"*



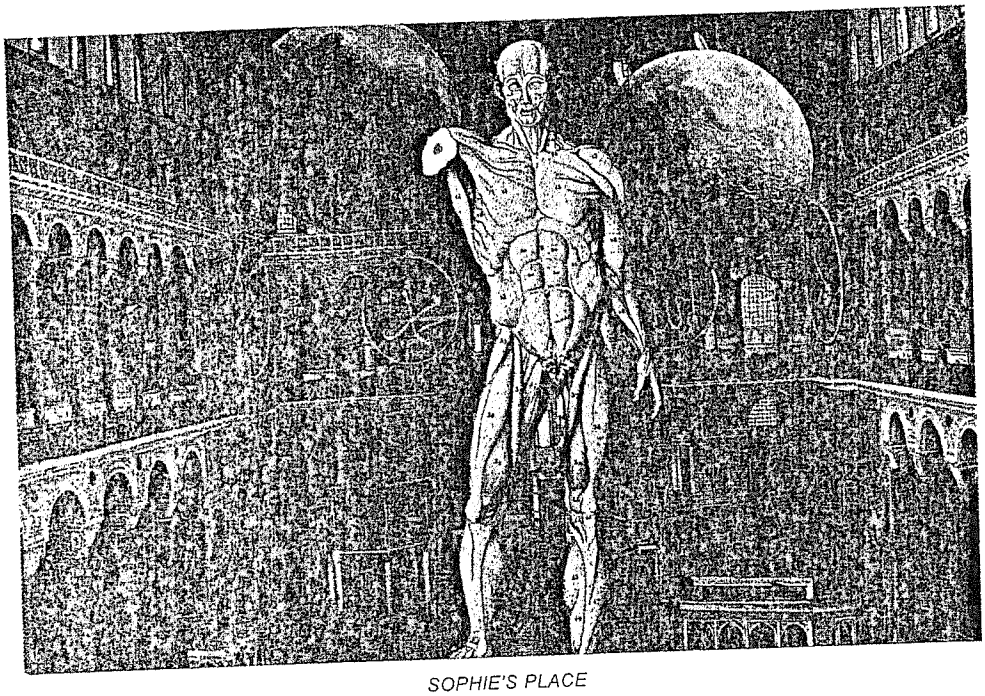


*"Enid's Idyll"*

Doré from Tennyson's "Idylls of the King," scored by Mahler's "Resurrection Symphony" because Enid dies and is resurrected.

At 115m, **THE H.D. TRILOGY FILM** (1993) on Disc 2 is a non-animated work in three parts, an epic of interior monologue. The monologue is lifted from Hilda Doolittle's poem "Hermetic Definitions," which is basically read aloud in what becomes a poetry video. The poem has to do with a woman reminiscing about a lover she knew for a few months and the personal connection she feels with another poet whose work she's reading, and her various musings on the gods and myths of Ancient Greece and other cultures. The image consists of a woman in late middle age (Joanna McClure) who sits writing in her San Francisco home or walks through the streets of Rome or visits various tourist locales in England and Italy, sometimes with a young male companion. Tinted in autumnal hues, the first film is all yellow, the second orange, the third reddish. At one point we even see Jordan's reflection in the mirror as he shoots over McClure's shoulder with his 16mm camera. Sometimes light floods out the image. Often the image presents us with a literal counterpart to something in the poem but, just as often, we only see the woman walking or riding a train, presumably having Hilda Doolittle's thoughts.

I realize this won't sound enthralling to many readers and I won't say that it is. It's challenging without being especially difficult to follow (though subtitles or closed captions would have helped on some of the passages, especially with French words or ancient names), and the uninflected readings have a lulling quality that can make this particular film a cure for insomnia. The challenge lies in the nature of reflection and recollection, the way these memories and associations float in a timeless pool. To people raised on a notion of movies as action, or at least forward motion, this internalization and reflection can seem like "nothing happens." But consider for a moment that, in the typical action film, say one of the Jason Bourne movies, very little happens aside from the illusion of action through movement, often the movement of strobe-like editing. It's propulsion without progress, and we can see that action films are very often in a state of stasis disguised as constant flux.



*SOPHIE'S PLACE*

Contrariwise, a contemplative movie like this one presents "nothing" in terms of action while the soundtrack presents a state of restless passions and associations.

It's important to keep this in mind while viewing **SOPHIE'S PLACE** (1986), the 86m animated feature on Disc 3. (The title appears to be a take-off on William Styron's novel SOPHIE'S CHOICE.) The opening credits explain that Sophia was the Greek goddess of wisdom, the love of whom is embodied in the word "philosophy," and then we're off on an epic of stately animated collages whose working principle was evidently for Jordan to take what he had at hand and make it up as he went along. A woman in purple, with her back to us, peers through binoculars at various astonishing sights that often involve the transformation of balloons, coffee cups, and various geometrical and anatomical phenomena. The sphere-headed lady also reappears; either of these, or both, could be Sophia. In keeping with the Greek motif, there are classical statues. We see not only old engravings and illustrations but also photos (such as the motion-studies of Eadweard Muybridge) and even motion pictures (a dancing lady from a Thomas Edison film). In the liner notes, Fred Camper observes that the artist's method combines the cinema's twin impulses toward documentary and Méliès-like fantasy. All this dazzling plotlessness, scored by what sounds like Balinese gamelans, adds up to another meditative "nothing happens" movie, albeit in glorious colors. **SOPHIE'S PLACE** may not show up on many lists of great animated features of the '80s, but it deserves such consideration.

Jordan's own notes from the *Canyon Cinema* webpage: "A culmination of five years' work. Full hand-painted cut-out animation. Totally unplanned, unrehearsed development of scenes under the camera, yet with more 'continuity' than any of my previous animations, while meditating on some phase of my life. I call it an 'alchemical autobiography.' The film begins in a paradisiacal garden. It then proceeds to the interior of the Mosque of St. Sophia. More and more, the film develops into episodes centering around one form or another of Sophia, an early Greek and Gnostic embodiment of spiritual wisdom. She is seen emanating light waves and symbolic objects. (But I must emphasize that I do not know the exact significance of any of the symbols in the film any more than I know the meaning of my dreams, nor do I know the meaning of the episodes. I hope that they—the symbols and the episodes—set off poetic associations

*"The Visible Compendium"*

in the viewer. I mean them to be entirely open to the viewer's own interpretation.)"

The disc is rounded out with two 17m shorts, "The Visible Compendium" (1990) and "Blue Skies Beyond the Looking Glass" (2006). The first is a collage of sounds (such as whalesong) as well as images, employing very sophisticated visual techniques that contrast paradoxically with the quaintness, just as Jordan's personal originality arises paradoxically out of others' images and music. A continual theme in his films is looking, as people and things look at other people and things, with or without visual aids. Another theme is performance, sometimes explicitly connected to the circus. Another theme is pleasure itself. And just to remind us that Jordan isn't completely escaping the contemporary, there's an eyeblink joke where a little man cries "Saddam!" over images of American gunboats.

The second short interweaves Jordan's typical hallucinations with footage of silent film stars such as Lon Chaney in **THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME**, Charles Chaplin and Jackie Coogan in **THE KID**, Mary Pickford and Lionel Barrymore in **THE NEW YORK HAT**, and other films less readily identifiable. Technically, not all of them are from silents, since images of Eric von Stroheim were culled from James Cruze's early talkie **THE GREAT GABBO**. The mambo music here is more jaunty and contemporary sounding than ever, though still passé.

Disc 4 contains documentaries and non-animation. It makes sense to discover in "Cornell, 1965" (1979, 9m) that Jordan worked for a while with Joseph Cornell, for he too appropriated and recontextualized lost images and objects, finding poignant meaning in their bygone qualities. This film consists of a few almost random minutes of footage, including poignant moments of the unsuspecting artist seen from an attic window.

"The Sacred Art of Tibet" (1972, 28m) catalogues the various manifestations and meanings of the Buddha, as explained by a narrator to give Jordan a reason to play with ancient imagery. He uses color filters, movements, frantic transitions, and multi-layered images. Jordan reports that a lama described it as an acid trip, and it does rather resemble the climax of **2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY**.

It's impossible to convey the simple beauty of "Visions of a City" (1979), eight minutes of sepia footage of city streets (San Francisco in 1957) as reflected or refracted in things: windows, chrome bumpers, bottles. One young man (poet Michael McClure) is followed for several shots, but our views are always distorted and glancing. The lovely modal

*"The Sacred Art of Tibet"*

music (unidentified) gives way to street sounds. (A description of this film at *Canyon Cinema* identifies the composer as William Moraldo.) Finally, we close on one objective shot of direct "reality," but everything heretofore has already been objective reality—reminding us of the essential surrealism of vision possible out in the streets.

"Adagio" (1981, 8m) uses Albinoni's music to intercut images of a fountain's spout with shots of a naked woman standing and posing (even in slow-motion and freeze-frame) and rapidly cut flurries of a naked man frantically running around. You need to freeze him to realize he's blowing a horn. "In a Summer Garden" (1982, 15m) shows incredibly beautiful close-ups of flowers to the strains of a pastoral rhapsody by Delius. "Winter Light" (1983, 9m) uses Vivaldi to give us sweeping pans of a misty, dawny scene of lakes, hills and sheep. The notes say that Jordan brackets these three films together as a film concert.

He also brackets the next three under the collective title "Odyssey." "Waterlight" (1957, 8m) is footage from a merchant marine ship. "Tapestry" (1988, 12m) begins by contrasting rapid, blurry closeups of flowers with stable shots of the sleeping naked artist. Is he dreaming of the flowers as the sap rises in himself? And those shots of old engravings might also be flitting through his mind. Perhaps the idyllic garden scene outdoors, complete with bobtailed black cat and birds bathing and hummingbirds feeding, is dreaming Jordan. The music seems to be a Renaissance piece with voice, drums and hautboys (oboes). The last of the "Odyssey" triptych, "Postcard from San Miguel" (1996, 10m), shows the artist writing lines from Lorca on postcards, interwoven with touristy shots of the colonial-era Mexican town and some enigmatic behavior by his friends, plus music by Fauré.

Jordan's own remarks on this trilogy: "Curiously, they are like bookends to my 45-year career in film. 'Waterlight' is one of the first I ever made, when I was a young romantic. 'Postcard' is my last film—product of an old romantic; while 'Tapestry' represents the middle of my (domestic) life, a life which I have sometimes documented on film."

Minor complaints: A handful of title cards in French on the first disc don't offer English subs, and these title cards as well as some marginal information occasionally clue us in that the sides of the image are sometimes overscanned, not as reduced as they should be. Also, this set doesn't include all Jordan's films. This means there's plenty left for a follow-up collection, which we earnestly hope will happen.