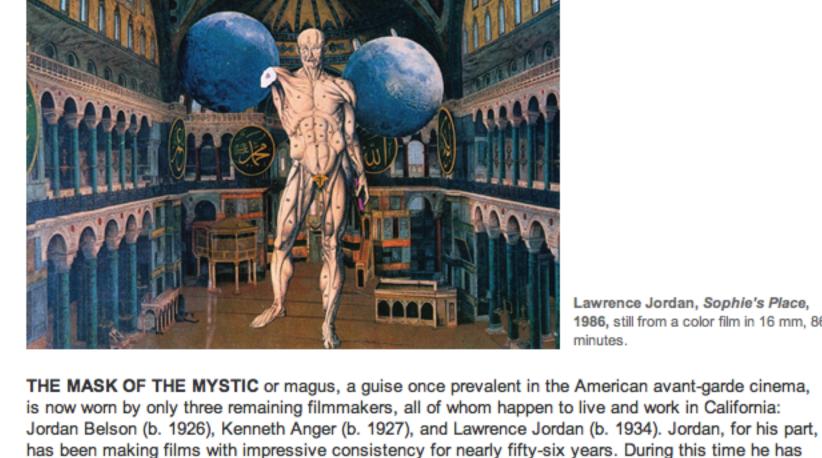


APRIL 2009

## Moments of Illumination P. ADAMS SITNEY on the films of

Lawrence Jordan



produced a massive body of work that encompasses several overlapping genres and includes many of

Lawrence Jordan, Sophie's Place, 1986, still from a color film in 16 mm, 86

the greatest films ever made by means of cutout collage animation, a range of lyric films that capture the spirit of his life and the lives of other California artists in the late 1950s and early '60s, and films directly inspired by and incorporating poetry. At seventy-four, he has just completed his longest film by far, Circus Savage (1961/2007–2009), a twelve-hour "visual autobiography." Over his long career Jordan has essayed a number of strategies by which an avant-garde filmmaker might survive via his work. With Stan Brakhage he made a naive attempt to travel around America and earn a living by showing their first works from town to town. After an initial screening, to which not one person came, they gave up. But Jordan was undaunted: He founded two important showcases in San Francisco and was among the original organizers of the Canyon Cinema Cooperative, which still distributes avant-garde films after nearly fifty years in operation. He drew up a plan to interest galleries in selling original 16-mm prints to collectors, and he was one of the first avant-garde filmmakers to

recently released a four-disc Lawrence Jordan Album. Its twenty-five films represent little more than half the titles in the filmmaker's oeuvre. If Belson and Anger had established their reputations with startling rapidity by the time Jordan even began making films in 1952, Jordan has since become by far the most prolific of the three. By contrast, Belson has made some thirty short films since 1947 and Anger sixteen.<sup>1</sup> Yet unlike Belson and Anger, Jordan came to his mature styles slowly. His earliest films—The Child's Hand and Morningame (both 1953-54), for example—show the influence of Brakhage, with whom he attended Denver's South High School in the late '40s, and aspects of their careers continued to overlap and coincide until Brakhage's death in 2003. At the start, apparently, Jordan followed Brakhage's lead. Later, Brakhage returned the compliment, lending his unique inflection to techniques and strategies Jordan pioneered. Brakhage spent one disastrous semester at Dartmouth and dropped out the year before Jordan went to Harvard, which he too guit, after a year. Together with friends from high school,

they put on plays in Central City, Colorado, and then explored life among the poets and filmmakers of San Francisco and New York, until Jordan settled by himself in the Bay Area in 1955. In fact, Brakhage acted in two of Jordan's earliest works—The One Romantic Venture of Edward (1952–56/1964) and Trumpit (1954–56)—and Jordan showed up in Brakhage's psychodramas from the same period: Unglassed Windows Cast a Terrible Reflection (1953) and Desistfilm (1954). Marriage and family life, however, soon distanced them. Brakhage settled in Colorado and eventually moved to Canada, where he died. Jordan remained in the Bay Area, except for a few long voyages as a merchant marine in the late '50s, a brief stay in Mexico, and a summer spent assisting Joseph Cornell in Queens, New York, in 1965. From very early on we can see interwoven traces of the three fundamental temporal articulations of Jordan's art: a foregrounding of cinematic time in the rhythms of montage and camera movement, an evocation of timelessness, and an obsession with transfiguration. Even before Jordan abandoned Brakhage's initial fusion of neorealism with the oneiric mode of Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger to forge a more contemplative style, the poet Robert Duncan saw something in the young filmmaker that was not yet evident to most viewers of his work, and he enlisted Jordan to read the role of the magician

Faust in the 1955 performance of his masque Faust Foutu at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. Around that time, Duncan's partner, the painter and collagist Jess, introduced Jordan to Max Ernst's collage novels La Femme 100 têtes (1929) and Une Semaine de bonté (1934), which eventually became

decisive influences on his animated films. Jess, Duncan, and the company the young filmmaker kept in

San Francisco nurtured his work and abetted his nascent interest in mysticism. During those

transitional years, Jordan taught Bruce Conner to edit film, and together they founded the Camera Obscura film society (in 1957), which grew into the Movie, a theater devoted to showing experimental work (in 1958). He assisted the veteran filmmaker Christopher Maclaine with cinematography on The Man Who Invented Gold (ca. 1957) and helped collage artist Wallace Berman make his only film, Aleph

(1956–66). Taking one of his own first films, a subjective play of the filmmaker's hand gestures (he held the camera with his other hand), Jordan recorded a poem by Philip Lamantia on the sound track, transforming the hitherto silent work into Man Is in Pain (1954). He shot Visions of a City (1957, reedited 19792, an eight-minute film composed of images of his close friend the poet Michael McClure reflected in windows and off distorting metallic surfaces as he wandered around San Francisco. McClure and his wife, Joanna, along with the poet Kenneth Rexroth and his daughter Mary, were the models in the play of light and shadow that constitutes Spectre Mystagogic (1957). Later, Lamantia and McClure would appear with Berman and graphic artist John Reed in Jordan's visual hymn in quest of peyote, Triptych in Four Parts (1959), which the filmmaker called "a spiritual drug odyssey seeking religious epiphany" (as quoted in the Canyon Cinema catalogue). Aspects of Duncan's theosophy, Berman's Kabbalah, Reed's mystical Christianity, and Lamantia's fusion of surrealism and Catholicism can be seen in Jordan's later films, although he never elected a sectarian religious discipline for himself. Like Duncan, Jordan came to look upon the artist as a shaman whose inspiration entails the reception of modes of knowledge and language beyond his experience. In "The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography" (1968), Duncan wrote: The poetic imagination faces the challenge of finding a structure that will be the complex story of all the stories felt to be true, a myth in which something like the variety of man's experience of what is real may be contained. . . . Where Philosophy raised a dialectic, a debate, toward what it calls Truth; Poetry raised a theater, a drama of Truth. . . . We have been converted by and have now taken our faith in a truth that is patently made-up.3 The fundamental truth of the fictive, poetic imagination is a vital principle of Jordan's cinema, where filmmaking is a continual act of revelation. Even though he does not believe in a life after death,\* the evocation of the underworld has been a primary goal of his imaginative work.5 His masterpiece Sophie's Place (1986), subtitled An Alchemical Autobiography: Transformation and Again Transformation, presents the complexities of the filmmaker's life story as a truth patently made-up, enacted in a theater of transformations. It conjures the magical truth of an unforeseen poetic engagement with the process

early as 1959, in The Soccer Game and Minerva Looks Out into the Zodiac, he began experimenting with animation. His homage to Jess, The 40 and 1 Nights (or Jess's Didactic Nickelodeon), followed the next year. Although these initial experiments in animation gave intimations of an experience of timelessness—through the play of the moving camera or foreground figures in motion against static lithographic backdrops—they were primitive exercises, unequal in depth to the rhythmic exuberance the filmmaker had already achieved in Man Is in Pain, Triptych in Four Parts, and Hymn in Praise of the

Sun (1960). The last, a celebration of the birth of Jordan's daughter, Lorna, as a manifestation of ancient Egyptian cosmology, represents the lactating fecundity of his wife, Patricia, as a source of floral abundance. Brakhage transformed the elements of this modest, diaristic lyric into the epic cosmogony of his *Prelude: Dog Star Man* (1961), just as three years later, when he temporarily

switched from 16 mm to the more economical 8 mm in his series Songs (1964-69), he took Jordan's

In so rapid an account of Jordan's early development, largely anticipating the later films he selected for the four discs of his Album, I would have passed over The Seasons' Change: To Contemplate (1960)

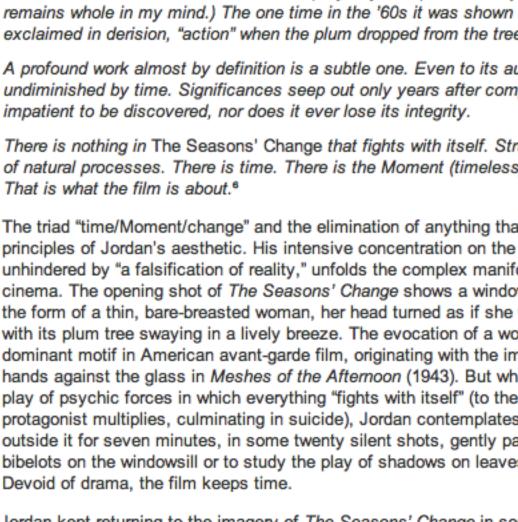
were it not for the astonishing letter the filmmaker sent me in November 2008:

In fact, cutout animation was the technical means through which Jordan reached his artistic maturity and at the same time mastered an arena of filmmaking utterly distinct from Brakhage's ambitions. As

of cutout animation.

humilis modes as his models.

I have to my own knowledge made only one truly profound film: The Seasons' Change: To



Jordan's cinema.

Lawrence Jordan, The Visible

film in 16 mm, 17 minutes.

Compendium, 1990, still from a color

decades were largely in place with Duo Concertantes. He moved cutout figures along the surface of some twenty-five nineteenth-century engravings for the first segment, "The Centennial Exposition," while operating with a single backdrop for "Patricia Gives Birth." The former intermittently follows the movements of a man absorbed in looking at a birdcage on a printed card as he wanders across different locations. Around him a ball bounces, shifting scale from backdrop to backdrop, while birds

and butterflies suddenly appear and disappear. The alchemical machinations of archaic paraphernalia set off an eruption of shooting stars. At one crucial moment a man, hand-cranking a projector, makes a planet or moon rotate, clockwise and then counterclockwise, before winged creatures shoot out of the projector. This is the first of many avatars for the filmmaker as a magician of the cosmos to appear in

In the exquisite "Patricia Gives Birth," the backdrop plate shows a woman looking through the open

The animation methods with which the filmmaker created most of his best work for the next five

exuberant Big Sur: The Ladies (1964) uses rapid, in-camera editing to show two women sunbathing on a veranda overlooking the Pacific. The most striking return to the frozen gazer at the window, however, is the animation "Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway," the second segment of the two-part Duo Concertantes (1961-64), which appropriately opens the first disc of The Lawrence Jordan Album.

door of a cabin onto a lakefront. There is a dog with her. Her posture duplicates that of the candleholder in The Seasons' Change. The animated cutouts descending from above or manifesting on the watery horizon make visible her reverie. When a screen appears with flashing images that either fly off or fall into the water, Jordan acknowledges the mystery of gravity in the cinema. With the interplay of frozen vistas and ephemeral images, most poignant at the instant of transformation, the filmmaker found an ideal medium for the fragile synthesis of time/Moment/change.

The first and third discs of the Album demonstrate how fecund this medium has been for Jordan. He

Concertantes is in black and white. It is followed by the monochromatic blue of Gymnopédies (1966) and Carabosse (1980), the interplay and occasional superimpositions of monochromatic fields in Our Lady of the Sphere (1969) and Moonlight Sonata (1979), the richly dissolving colors of Once Upon a Time (1974), and the hand-colored images of Orb (1973) and Masquerade (1981)—the latter again using a single backdrop. The pattern of progressively introducing new formal elements and then returning,

Jordan spent five years animating the eighty-six-minute Sophie's Place (on the third disc), working every morning without a plan, from a storehouse of images he had previously collected, colored, and cut out. He told an interviewer that "one rule was 'No planning ahead.' When you finish one idea, you go into the next. You simply go in the next morning and look at your layout and the first idea that pops into your head you have to do, whether it takes two days or two months. You cannot equivocate and say, 'Oh, I should have a better idea.' Equivocation short circuits your entry into the Underworld." In this statement, equivocation and the underworld correspond to "anything that fights with itself" and the

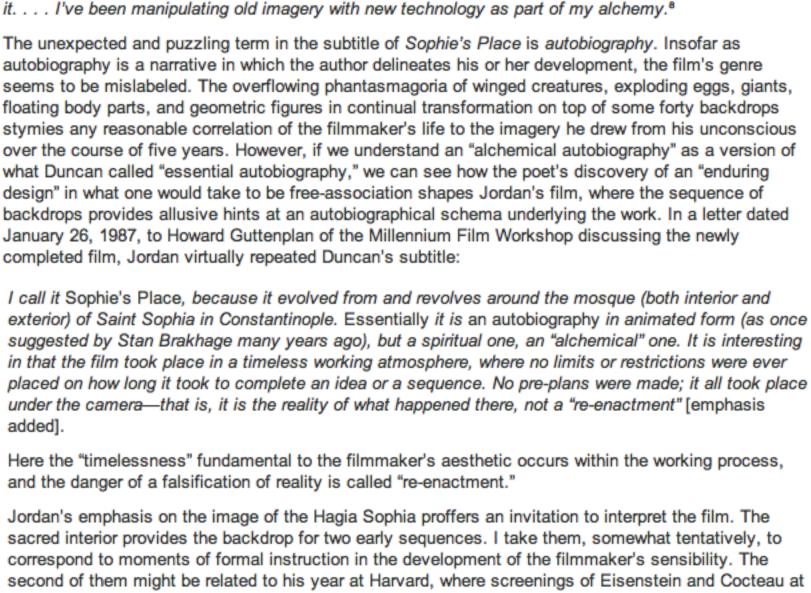
"Moment," respectively. In Jordan's thinking there is an affinity, perhaps a symbolic equation, between

You know, Harry [Smith] and Kenneth Anger were both practicing magicians, but I'm not a practicing magician. I'm a practicing alchemist. . . . I don't think the practicing alchemists ever had a codified system. Every one of them were off on their own kick. They had imagery that was like a common language and I use that language. . . . Alchemy and constructionism are two ways of saying that you take the things laying around you as detritus, as litter, and you make something that is formal art out of

the timelessness of the Moment and the unconscious, or the imagination. For him alchemy is the spiritual vehicle for change or transformation. In the same interview quoted above, Jordan remarked,

has selected animations for the first disc that illustrate the development of his technique. Duo

refreshed, to an earlier mode recurs throughout the filmmaker's career.



Lawrence Jordan, Duo Concertantes, 1961-64, still from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 9 minutes.

asserts the power of the autobiographical imagination to give a pictorial air, with the eyes upside down, to the most wonted objects. Another aspect of the filmmaker's lifelong engagement with poetry can be seen in the "H.D. Trilogy" (1990–93), which, running 115 minutes, occupies all of the Album's second disc: The Black Oud, The Grove, and Star of Day. In all three parts, Jordan follows Joanna McClure, first in Rome and Greece, then in England (with recollections of Greece), and finally to her home in San Francisco (with interludes in Italy). Like Anger, Brakhage, Ian Hugo, and Marie Menken, Jordan dares to revisit typical European tourist sites (the Pantheon, Delphi, the Tower of London), testing the power of the cinematic imagination to revitalize such ruins by making them the theater of a confrontation between the poetic self and time. In the case of Brakhage's The Dead (1960; shot in Paris's Père Lachaise cemetery) and Hugo's Gondola Eye (1963; shot in Venice), the subjective camera conjures images of mortality. In Eaux d'artifice (1953; made in the Tivoli gardens), Anger follows a fleeting figure, mediating the filmmaker's double sense of precarious identity and ecstatic dissolution. Jordan's ambition here is even more complex than his antecedents'. On the one hand, he is celebrating his relationship with McClure, even ironically echoing at the start of the sequence the reflected urban images he had recorded of her

twenty years!13

- The Seasons' Change when he wrote me the note. Collins, 60. 8. Ibid., 61–62.
- Karlstrom. 11. In the Karlstrom interview, Jordan also credits Max Ernst, Wallace Berman, and George Herms as major influences. 12. P. Adams Sitney, Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson (New

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in Essays and Poems (New York: Library of America, 1996), 33—

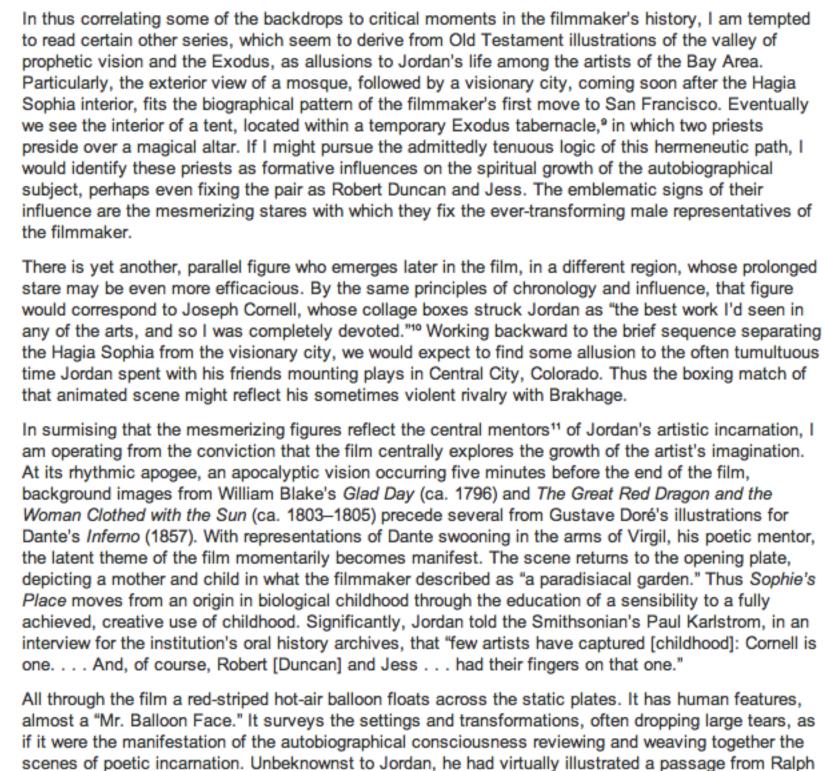
explore video sales. After selling VHS tapes of Jordan's films for many years, Facets Multimedia has

Contemplate. In it is the discovery that the so-called "Present Moment" is existentially always the same moment. This little movie has never been taken up by anyone. (It has hardly ever been shown, yet it vividly remains whole in my mind.) The one time in the '60s it was shown in a theatre, the person behind me exclaimed in derision, "action" when the plum dropped from the tree. A profound work almost by definition is a subtle one. Even to its author. There are resonances undiminished by time. Significances seep out only years after completion. A diamond is never There is nothing in The Seasons' Change that fights with itself. Struggle is a falsification of reality and of natural processes. There is time. There is the Moment (timeless). And there is change or outcome. The triad "time/Moment/change" and the elimination of anything that "fights with itself" are fundamental principles of Jordan's aesthetic. His intensive concentration on the simple objects before him, unhindered by "a falsification of reality," unfolds the complex manifold of temporality at the core of his cinema. The opening shot of The Seasons' Change shows a window with a Japanese candleholder in the form of a thin, bare-breasted woman, her head turned as if she were gazing into the yard beyond with its plum tree swaying in a lively breeze. The evocation of a woman at the window suggests a dominant motif in American avant-garde film, originating with the image of Maya Deren pressing her hands against the glass in Meshes of the Afternoon (1943). But whereas Deren built her film around the play of psychic forces in which everything "fights with itself" (to the extent that the figure of the protagonist multiplies, culminating in suicide), Jordan contemplates the window and the vegetation outside it for seven minutes, in some twenty silent shots, gently panning the camera to caress the bibelots on the windowsill or to study the play of shadows on leaves and fruit moving in the wind. Jordan kept returning to the imagery of The Seasons' Change in some of his best films: Hymn in Praise of the Sun replaces the statue with living flesh and moves entirely into the garden; likewise, his

Lawrence Jordan, Orb, 1973, still from a color film in 16 mm, 5 minutes.

device and screen (recalling one within "Patricia Gives Birth" and subsequent animations) appear within the ecclesial interior. That the Hagia Sophia never recurs in the film would support its identification with the theater of formal instruction, which ended for Jordan, as we noted, after his freshman year of college.

the film club awakened his excitement for his future métier. In Sophie's Place, the first projection



Waldo Emerson's "Nature" (1836)—the very passage I would later take, in Eyes Upside Down, to be

Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us. Certain mechanical changes, a small alteration in our local position apprizes us of a dualism. We are strangely affected by seeing the shore from a moving ship, from a balloon, or through the tints of an unusual sky. The least change in our point of view, gives the whole world a pictorial air. . . . Nay, the most wonted objects, (make a very slight change in the point of vision,) please us most. . . . Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the

landscape through your legs, and how agreeable the picture, though you have seen it any time these

In rotating the eyes of the Balloon Face as the final gesture of his alchemical autobiography, Jordan

central to the aesthetics of American avant-garde cinema. 12 Emerson wrote:

strolling with his companion, both of them appreciating H.D.'s response to similar places three decades earlier. As such, the "H.D. Trilogy" is yet another variation on Lawrence Jordan's earlier discovery that "the so-called 'Present Moment' is existentially always the same moment." P. Adams Sitney is director of the visual arts program in the Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton University. NOTES A selection of Jordan Belson's work, 5 Essential Films, was released on DVD by the Center for Visual Music in 2007. In 2008, Fantoma issued the splendid two-volume edition *The Films of Kenneth* Anger, which contains all ten of the films he released between 1947 and 1981, presumably leaving the six he has made since 1995 for future release. Jordan reedited many of his earliest films several times, sometimes giving them new titles or combining them into series; for instance, four films from 1958 (Madonna, Desertlight, Skylight, and

Is in Pain is usually dated 1954 or 1955, although in an "Autobiographical Note" from around 1958, Jordan wrote that in San Francisco he made "what he considered his first film, Man Is in Pain. Years later a sound track was made from the reading of lines of a poem by Philip Lamantia. The film also took

9. I am grateful to Courtney Banks at Artforum, who identified the background plate as an illustration of the mishkan. She also pointed out Blake's Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun, and corrected several errors in my manuscript.

its name from the poem" (reprinted in Larry Jordan Retrospective, ed. P. Adams Sitney, Anthology Film Archives, 1976). 3. Fictive Certainties: Essays by Robert Duncan (New York: New Directions, 1986), 6, 4, 54. Paul Karlstrom, "Oral history interview with Larry Jordan, 1995 Dec. 19–1996 July 30." G. T. Collins, "Larry Jordan's Underworld," Animation Journal (Fall 1997): 54–69. In a telephone conversation with Jordan on March 1, 2009, I asked why he had not included The Seasons' Change in The Lawrence Jordan Album. He said he might have made a mistake in excluding some short films that were "not very exciting" or that he might have been "a little enthusiastic" about

York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

34.

former husband three decades earlier in Visions of a City. At the same time, they are both paying homage to the poet H.D., whose magnificent three-part Hermetic Definition (1960-61, published posthumously in 1972) McClure reads on the sound track. The fiction of the film represents McClure alone (and with a younger male companion in the middle section) as a stand-in for the septuagenarian poet, reflecting on magic, the fragility of her identity, and the painfully awkward attraction she has for a much younger man. Usually the poetry and cinematic images evoke separate, autonomous realms, but at times the images almost coincide with the text: For instance, when we see McClure drinking at a sidewalk café, we hear, "I keep remembering / my glass of red wine"; when she is reading and lighting candles at home, we hear McClure's voice-over intone, "Until I turned over these pages, / and read / want to light candles." Furthermore, the camera movements through the European sites are edited to suggest both the subjective perspective of the solitary female tourist and the view of the filmmaker, Portrait of John Reed) became Triptych in Four Parts, which has been dated both 1958 and 1959; Man

Lawrence Jordan, Sophie's Place, 1986, still from a color film in 16 mm, 86 minutes.