A Cinematic Alchemy: Lawrence Jordan and the Palimpsest of Cinema

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In thinking of the cross-pollination of poetry and cinema, the work of Lawrence Jordan looms large indeed. Since the beginning of his career in the 1950s, this Bay Area filmmaker has maintained a deep interest in making poetry an important part of his filmic poetics. Jordan's work is distinctive in that poetry and poetics are not just analogues for discussing his films and his sense of structure, useful tropes to draw upon in thinking about the ways meaning is formed within and between the celluloid frames. Poems and poets serve not just as sources of inspiration for Jordan; they act as prominent aspects of his films, constructing conceptual frameworks and narrative centers, and they even provide the focus for the camera's points of view. In this way, poetry is actually part of the work itself. Indeed, the interdependency of poetry and film in Jordan's work presses against the distinctions between these two art forms in such a way that each medium recontextualizes the other. That interconnection—a version of overcoming divisions in thinking and being—points to the ways that Jordan's films reveal an underlying sense that is, at its core, mystical in nature—a sense that the world itself is a shared aesthetic experience and that art reveals the ways we imbue that experience, again and again, with meaning and significance.

There can be little doubt that for the postwar generation of experimental filmmakers, particularly those living on the West Coast, mysticism was a galvanizing force; Jordan, born in 1934, is one of the most important, most productive, and most consistent artists continuing to work in this strain of contemporary American film. In a recent *Artforum* article discussing Jordan's oeuvre in light of the 2008 release by Facets Video of the *Lawrence Jordan Album,* a four-disc

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selection of many of the filmmaker's most important movies, P. Adams Sitney points out, "The mask of the mystic or magus, a guise once prevalent in the American avant-garde cinema, is now worn by only three remaining filmmakers, all of whom happen to live and work in California: Jordan Belson, Kenneth Anger, and Lawrence Jordan."[1] Jordan and these two contemporaries that Sitney names, as well as others of that generation, share with varying degrees of intensity a certain sense, in part inherited from (or at least authorized by) Maya Deren, that cinema's power lies in its ability to present the artist's interior vision in a public way.[2] "If cinema is to take its place beside the others as a full-fledged art form," Deren insisted, "it must cease merely to record realities that owe nothing of their actual existence to the film instrument. Instead, it must create a total experience so much out of the very nature of the instrument so as to be inseparable from its means."[3] This "total experience" offers a shared form of revelation and expression.

From the beginning of his career, Jordan's name has been linked most often with Stan Brakhage, and rightfully so. The two first befriended one another in high school in Colorado, and both spent barely a year at Ivy League colleges—Brakhage at Dartmouth, Jordan at Harvard—before deciding to devote their lives to making films. Although perhaps overshadowed at first by Brakhage, who made his mark on cinema relatively quickly and very decisively, the baroque, meticulous intensity of Jordan and his films has established his lasting influence on avant-garde cinema. Continuing to test the possibilities of a visionary cinema, Jordan's work crosses a range of practices. While he is best known for his breathtaking animated movies such as *Hamfat Asar* (US, 1965), *Carabosse* (US, 1980), and *The Visible Compendium* (US, 1991), all of which utilize collage and cutout techniques involving such materials as colored medieval engravings, Victorian-era illustrations, and pop images, Jordan has also made "live-action," nonfiction movies that engage the life of the filmmaker and those he knows. These latter are not exactly diaristic films, despite the fact that they draw from images of daily experiences. These films re-envision things, people, and places through the foregrounded structure and operations of cinema.

The best-known of the live-action films is *Visions of a City* (US, 1957/1978), in which Jordan's camera follows the strikingly handsome Beat poet Michael McClure as he wanders through San Francisco in 1957. Instead of showing McClure directly, the camera captures the poet's reflection among a variety of surfaces—in windows, mirrors, chrome car bumpers, even a beer bottle left on the sidewalk. *Visions of a City* offers San Francisco as a dense constellation of reflections. Throughout the film, the film stock itself is tinted reddish orange, giving it a slightly unreal surface. Jordan's cinematic images rarely present transparent illusions, never letting us forget that we are watching a film, and so even *Visions of a City* reminds us that the camera offers not a direct engagement, but always

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mediates (even as it facilitates) how we see others. We see by way of reflection and indirection. But for Jordan this mediation is not a distancing between the perceiver and the perceived; it is a form of proximity, the manner by which we can draw close. The process of perception is always subjective, and so increasing an awareness of the process of how we see things allows us to trace the outwardly displaced patterns and tendencies of our consciousness. Just as a projector throws the film onto the screen so that it can be seen, *Visions of a City* indicates that we are projected onto the things of the world, and so by looking at them we can find ourselves. Mediation is both an insertion and an investment—a balance of identification and resistance. Thus, the camera's mediation is a form of transformation; of course the diverse materials are transformed as they are synthesized within (and into) the context of a work of art. The artist, too, is transformed in working with the material, as he or she responds to an understanding of how the elements can bring forth a visionary act. That the subject of *Visions of a City* is a poet suggests this very feature, since it is the literal image of an artist (McClure) that we see variously changed, depending on what reflects back his appearance. At the very least, every challenge and obstacle in the compositional process contributes to that artist's experiential knowledge.

As elegant as Jordan's films are, they foreground the fact that they are composed, assembled, a complex of materials woven together to create new images. That so much of his work is animated makes this concern with materiality evident, but even the live-action films enact this preoccupation. Indeed, in his engagement with materials and texts, the process of composition and the act of representation are, at some level, always his focus. Yet, the transformation is not the creation of meaning within objects and materials; it is the revelation that latent meanings are ever-present. As if to uncover a magic that potentially exists everywhere and always (in much the same way that the reflective surfaces of San Francisco can bear us back to ourselves), Jordan keeps in sight the fact that art transforms things by laying bare the potential for signification existing immanently within objects.

Jordan's sense of mysticism lies in the complex transformative nature of his work, which intertwines autobiography and those cultural materials that shape one's understanding of the world and the self-in-the-world. Both autobiographical and cultural materials are reconceived as sites of meaning, meaning that needs to be revealed in order to be read. Although everything signifies, our attention is incomplete and sporadic within the daily routines of life and living; Cinema can reveal repressed or suppressed meaningfulness, and Jordan describes his art as being "communication from one unconscious to another rather than from one social consciousness to another."[4] Taken together, his films are records of an attempt to reveal a deep consciousness that exists outside of time. With a wry wit and an earnest intensity, he transmutes images and icons—a painted, smiling hot

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air balloon or the cutout illustration of a small boy in Victorian dress outfitted in moth wings. These new image constructs are symbolic insofar as they require viewers to think beyond private associations with any given image because their strangeness resists any easy resolution as a result of their familiar unfamiliarity. The images and juxtapositions suggest viewers seek out more pervasive and even universal meaning because it cannot be said that the images are limited to representing some specific idea that could be translated or paraphrased. In other words, they are not allegories in that they do not stand for rigid, specific associations; nor are they metaphors. The artist's interaction with found cultural materials, specific physical sites, and strategies of composition, both within a frame and from one frame to the next, all enact attempts to move from personal experience to some more transcendent possibility of awareness and existence.

In the interpenetration of personal experience and the collective experience of cinema, as well as the private and public, cultural paradigms assembled by subjective vision are represented again and again in the way that Jordan pulls from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century engravings in order to create such collage films as *Sophie's Place* (US, 1986) and *Duo Concertantes* (US, 1961–1964). Jordan is drawn to various images for subjective rather than rational reasons, and so they are likely to transmit historical specificity as much as autobiographical resonances (though in every case the original references are occluded). Because they are subjectively composed, the images are to be subjectively experienced through one's *own* understanding and aesthetic experience without deference to authorial intention. The film is an animated version of Coleridge's epic poem, with Orson Welles' well-known baritone voice narrating the lines of verse over an elegant and even at times playful revising of Gustave Doré's famous illustrations (which were first included as part of an edition of the poem that appeared in 1875). In the film, Doré's richly ornate engravings serve as the static backdrops for Jordan's interventions. Yet, given that Jordan's film seems often to be commenting on both Coleridge's text and Doré's images, we might think of the film as being essentially ekphrastic in nature.[5] At the very least, there is a clear intertextuality that is present throughout Jordan's project, which gives the work a layering effect of eras and texts, as well as language and image, all of which indicate how the polysemousness of poetry can work in terms of film images in that the signs are multiple and shift depending on how they are grouped and ordered. Indeed, every image is a sign replete with possible significations. The very structure of Jordan's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* enacts the analogical relationship that potentially exists between cinema and poetry, since both art forms are integral aspects of the film.

Throughout Jordan's film, the camera moves across the engravings, offering close-ups or a generalized kineticism that creates a tension with the otherwise frozen movement of Dore's illustrations of the famous poem. But Jordan also

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intervenes, sending images such as a nineteenth-century ballerina, mid-plié, zooming across the screen while an orb radiates waves of energy (represented by cutout squiggles) between her outstretched hands, even as Welles intones the dire words of the strange mariner relating to the wedding guest the fated tale of his crewmen's encounter with the cursed albatross. Periodically, pasted-on lightning bolts blaze from figures onscreen, and moths and butterflies appear, flitting here and there over the background. In this way, Jordan both acknowledges the seriousness and gravity of the tragic poem and yet complicates the viewer's experience (through the addition of an often wry wit) with his interjections, and yet the wit can never fully overcome the dire implications of the events described in Coleridge's poem.

One of the most striking features of Jordan's film is the layering of images and eras. Coleridge's poem was first published in 1798 as part of *Lyrical Ballads,* but it was later revised and republished in 1817 with the accompanying gloss in the margins. This is the version most familiar to modern readers and is the one that Jordan employs. In the poem, Coleridge never gives a clear idea of when the narrative is set. Doré, needing to offer some specificity in his illustrations, chose to use medieval dress to represent the characters in the poem. Interestingly, Doré's choice to make his illustrations anachronistic is echoed by Jordan's use of antiquated and even obscure images and illustrations drawn from the past—though at times Jordan's past draws from Doré's contemporary moment, creating a unique anachronistic dissonance. Jordan's interventions work sympathetically with Doré in terms of shared impulses, though the layering of anachronisms only serves to dislodge the poem from any specific era. It comes to exist across eras, thereby proving the cinema is an art form dealing primarily with time.

Since the contemporary artist echoes the Victorian artist and both are using images prior to their respective eras to create a visual text to work in conjunction with Coleridge's poem, the divisions between time periods are blurred. To complicate matters even further, it is worth mentioning that Coleridge's poem itself mainly comprises a flashback, as the Mariner explains to the young man on his way to a wedding whom the sailor has detained (as well as the poem's readers, of course) about the terrible events that led to the death of his fellow crewmen. In Jordan's film, the layering of time periods, texts, and images results in a collaborative text that comprises a simultaneity across time. This means that time in the film becomes vertical rather than a horizontal, straight line flowing ever forward. The underlying force of the intertextuality of Jordan's film undoes a hierarchical notion of tradition that gives the past the most authoritative weight. The past is not simply discarded, but it is also not simply deferred to. Jordan renders context as a text that needs to be perpetually read because it is being perpetually revised.

For Jordan, an artist does not necessarily create the world wholly anew. Instead, the imagination combines and recombines already existing ideas, images,

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objects, and places. Received cultural materials such as myths or epic poems are structures of imagination by which one can read one's own life. In thinking of his own filmmaking in light of many of his contemporaries, Jordan has said, "Everybody claims to be a surrealist. I don't offer that claim.... If I claim to be anything, I guess I would probably claim to be an alchemist."[6] In this view, the artist does not replicate or reproduce the past, so much as re-envision its possibilities so effectively that the work enacts both a break from the past and the recognition that certain structures of feeling are ongoing. "That's what it is all about," he says of his art, "taking one image and relating it to another image so that the mind can form some kind of meaning out of the chaos of life, of images. But a symbol, a circle, you can write five hundred books about the symbol of the circle and never explain the circle. A symbol by definition can't be explained away; it just sits there and continues to radiate significance to the unconscious."[7]

The fact that his filmic symbols resist logic and rational explanation becomes the very source of the mystery of his images—yet it is the meticulousness of Jordan's framing and his composition that insists that the work is never merely random or arbitrary. Indeed, the frames of his films are so filled with constructed images and symbols that a close reading is nearly impossible. When each thing in view has meaning, a decisive interpretive explication is forestalled. Any attempt at analysis is necessarily incomplete, and in this way Jordan's animated films act like dreams.

This sense of an artist's responsibility in fashioning a symbolic order is one he shares with the artist Joseph Cornell, famous for his collages, films, and surrealist boxes, all chockablock with images and objects. Of Cornell and his process, Lindsay Blair writes, "The films, the collages, and the boxes all reach for an element of surprise, or what [Cornell] referred to as white magic, the magic that would reveal to the artist in a flash of recognition the secret hiding-places of his mind."[8] This description of the artist's motivations and desired effect sounds just as apt in describing Jordan's thinking. In both cases, the collision of elements reveals one's own subjectivity—as much for the artist as the audience. Therefore, everyone shares in the aesthetic experience of discovering meaning out of everyday materials when those materials are presented in new and surprising ways. It need not be the same meaning. The revelation is our collective drive toward meaning-making.

Jordan began making films in 1952, and from the mid-1950s to the mid-60s had a kind of apprenticeship with Cornell, which culminated in Jordan moving to New York in the summer and fall of 1965 to work as the artist's assistant. Jordan's elegant, baroque, surrealist images and materials, usually fashioned out of found images, show this continuing influence of his mentor. It should be evident already what the two image-makers share in terms of their aesthetic sensibilities. To begin with, each had found inspiration in the collage texts of Max Ernst, one of the

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foremost members of the surrealist group centered in Paris during the early part of the twentieth century.

Both Cornell and Jordan share a droll sense of humor, often displayed in the way they manipulate images drawn from the past. In part, this helps to undercut what might otherwise be read as a sentimental nostalgia, as well as preventing the work from lapsing into a cloying, self-conscious transcendentalism. But what Jordan shares with Cornell most essentially is an investment in the belief that the creation of new context for familiar materials and images—be it boxes, collages, or animated films—charges the objects and materials with a new energy and reveals some intrinsic potential for energy that can be missed by our habitualized process of looking and perceiving. The difference between the effects produced by the work of these two artists is telling. Whereas Cornell expands the two dimensions of images into a third dimension of space with the boxes, allowing images pulled from books and advertising to interact with such things as feathers or marbles or other materials—the boxes are literally image spaces—Jordan, in the movement of frames across the light of a projector, unfolds images across time. Space and time are the conditions within which we live our lives, and for that reason these a priori intuitions are the conditions most mysterious to us. Cornell and Jordan bring these back as elements for us to consider once again.

It this sense, it is the artist's task of transforming ordinary materials in order to illuminate their extraordinary nature and to reveal the visionary potential in each person that marks the mysticism in Jordan's films. In an interview, Jordan goes so far as to call this salvaging of cultural materials through art a form of redemption in that it is a "kind of working with ephemerality and mortality and there's a kind of making sense of eternal values out of very fragile, perishable goods."[9] Comments like these are what locate the way that Jordan finds within ordinary objects and vernacular illustrations the possibilities for some heightened awareness of a self's interaction with a larger collective consciousness. Fragility always brings to end the potential for entropy and destruction. Both Cornell and Jordan restore images and experiences, pulling them back to mind to save them.

Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, in her essay accompanying the retrospective exhibition catalog *Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination,* has pointed out that Cornell wrote out by hand in a scrapbook he kept from 1926–30 the following lines from the *Christian Science Journal:* "Nothing is ours to keep for ourselves. Money, talent, time, whatever it may be that we may possess, is only ours to use. This is the great law written everywhere. No one owns anything for himself alone, and no one can live to himself alone."[10] Ironically, these thoughts that so beautifully articulate the crossing point for Cornell of ethics and aesthetics are not, strictly speaking, his own; they are borrowed from another authority. He *enacts* the very principle of the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and materials in

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his scrapbook that these sentences describe by the act of citation. Jordan then directly and indirectly inherits this thinking about art and the transcendental, collective "great law" from Cornell. The fact of this transmission of aesthetics (and epistemology) from artist to artist furthers the belief that ideas circulate freely and their echoes are the very elements that illuminate some universal connection by way of the imagination.

Jordan's use of materials, culled from magazines and old books and ranging from medical manuals to classic Greek forms and Victorian engravings, is not symptomatic of nostalgia, for the reconfigurations seek to create something new out of what already exists. This salvaging—the very measure of Jordan's mysticism—creates contiguity even as context changes. In this way, the reuse of materials—and often this means the plucking of image-components from the obscurity of long-forgotten books and magazines—indicates both divisions in and a unification of moments of time. The materials are shared, but the actions and responses are individual. The world is transformed through this vision not into some fantastic dimension, but into a constellation of opportunities for acts of elevated perception. The consequent heightened awareness would be a form of illumination through which people would become more vitally alive and every object would become replete with meaning and sensuous possibility. This is no small ambition. Moreover, there is a further ethical dimension in that this awareness that Jordan strives to engender makes possible a kind of deep empathy with objects and other people since a form of recognizable identification informs everything that the artist sees. The artwork, in its enactment of the realizing of latent potential for meaning in places where it is otherwise missed, reminds people—or so goes the ideal—that meaning and identification are ever-present and we should therefore act accordingly. Since everything is possibly a symbol, everything asks something of us and rewards sustained attention with knowledge.

The assumption the postwar generation of filmmakers shared that the work took part in some transcendent reality. Brakhage, the most influential of American experimental filmmakers of this generation, polemicizes that the artist "has carried the tradition of vision and visualization down through the ages. In the present time a very few have continued the process of visual perception in its deepest sense and transformed their inspirations into cinematic experiences."[11] By way of the experiments open to film, the viewer catches a glimpse—fleetingly, partially, contingently—of the greater potential for existence that surrounds us at all times because the films allow us to see manifestations of vision. We are no longer limited to merely imagine other ways of seeing the world. In the mystical tradition, an abiding attention to the personal intuition—what Brakhage refers to as "inspiration"—is the best means for accessing a collective consciousness

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because in uncovering one's most authentic self, one partakes of the processes of imagination, and these processes are the common trait of all of humanity. The Romanticism intrinsic to this position is not only quite explicit, it is definitive.

In part, the grounding for these Romantic aesthetic ideas (and ideals) so present in Jordan's work and in the work of many of his contemporary filmmakers is the immediate legacy of surrealist cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, whose central figures—from Man Ray to Hans Richter to Luis Buñuel—attempted to recreate the world rather than simply represent it. For these filmmakers, cinema became a means for transfiguring the things of everyday life into something shocking and confrontational so as to slip the bonds of the habitual, the rational, the predetermined values that flow from bourgeois ideology. This heroic ideal of the artist as liberator is of course Romantic in nature, no matter how much these surrealist thinkers otherwise positioned themselves as antithetical to Romanticism. Yet, the surrealists sought ultimately to dismantle bourgeois complacency and to bring the associative and often confrontational images of dreams and the unconscious onto the screen to push against social conventions and middle-class repressive attitudes. In other words, it could be argued that the surrealists thought of film as depicting experience outside of the dictates of rationality and decorum so as to free individuals from ideological oppression. The confrontation of the irrationality of the onscreen surrealist images would be a catalyst for new thoughts and experiences because the unconscious would be made manifest, would become visible. Through that crisis of dialectical tension, people would be made free.

While certainly influenced by the surrealists, the postwar filmmakers sought to make of film a set of intensified experiences that would open the viewer to a greater sensitivity to the very process of perception and imagination itself, and would be less explicitly political and in some ways more spiritual in their efforts. In a seminal essay from 1962, "Notes on the New American Cinema," Jonas Mekas writes, "The new artist, by directing his ear inward, is beginning to catch bits of man's true vision."[12] We can set aside the intriguing synesthesia present in Mekas' comments (the act of *listening* offers *vision*) and still detect the Romantic and mystical tropes that he is drawing upon to characterize the work of his contemporaries and their collective attempt to express some deep, authentic way of being in such a way that the revelation liberates others. Given the prevalence of this Romanticism, it is therefore not at all unexpected that there would be a set of elective affinities that would coalesce around the generation of filmmakers that came of age in the 1950s, as well as the postwar poets; both groups shared a persistent iconoclasm. Much like the filmmakers of this era, the Beat writers and the Black Mountain poets were deeply informed by the clearly heroic stances of Romanticism and Modernism, stances characterized by a desire to recontextualize,

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if not completely dismantle, the status quo and redeem the everyday from the banalizing effect of modern life.

The deep influence of such visionary poets as William Blake and Walt Whitman on Allen Ginsberg is perhaps the most obvious and most well-known example of the ways that poets of the 1950s were internalizing through their Romantic predecessors an imperative to activate the power of the imagination in order to apprehend a reality that exists all around us. As Blake argues in his poem "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is: Infinite," and, collectively and singularly, across various disciplines and media these artists took Blake's aphorism as their mantra.[13] In his poem, Blake first explains his method for widening perception by disabusing human beings of the notion that the body and the soul are divided, that things will be achieved "by printing in the infernal method by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid." Ironically, film that incorporates a poetic sensibility, that is shaped by poetry, acts as a kind of illuminated book such as that in which Blake is interested, with the chemical processes involved in developing the film stock serving as the corrosive materials that make illuminated revelation possible. Not to mention the fact that films are literally illuminated by light—the play of light on the film stock forms the images, and these images are then cast against a screen by the light of a projector. They are, in a very real sense, illuminated texts. Given that Blake combined his engravings with lines of verse, he seems an apt analogy for thinking about Jordan's work as well.

The identification that many filmmakers had with poetry informed the very sense of the poetics of their art form. In fact, very often the cinematic work produced during this time was referred to as "film poems." There are many reasons for this dialogue between experimental film and avant-garde poetry, not the least of which is the fact that the filmmakers of this generation eschewed the narrative structure and straightforward plotting of commercial film, creating work that was assembled through intuitive associations and meaningfully disruptive juxtapositions of images, shapes, forms of movement, and so forth. Theirs, it can be said, was a lyric rather than narrative imagination of the possibilities of cinema. During a symposium held in 1953 with Maya Deren, Parker Tyler, Dylan Thomas, Arthur Miller, and Willard Maas on the very issue of experimental film's engagement with poetry, Deren presented what she saw as the contact point of correlation between film and poetry:

> Now the short films, to my mind (and they are short because it is difficult to maintain such intensity for a long period of time), are comparable to lyric poems,

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> and they are completely a "vertical," or what I would call a poetic construct, and they are complete as such. One of the combinations that would be possible would be to have a film which as a dramatic construct, visually, accompanied by a commentary which is essentially poetic. . . .[14]

She contrasted a narrative film's concern (actions over time) with experimental film's intensification of moments of perception. Because of the density of associations and symbolism within each passing frame, in the films Deren describes, each moment necessitates interpretation rather than the unfolding of events over time. Deren's thinking in essence suggests that experimental film structures attention in terms of the local—the diverse and discrete images—rather than the general flow of story. In this way, the (primarily modernist) lyric poem and the avant-garde films of the 1950s discovered their forms with each line or each frame. No overarching architecture such as argument or plot determined an a priori shape for the art. These self-revealing, autotelic structures are what lyric poetry and films have in common. Each artist creates a new form rather than repeating already existing ones, and the form appears as the enactment of its content.

There are, however, other reasons to put lyric poetry and the visionary film of Brakhage, Deren, and Jordan in conversation with one another. Cinema, in terms of what is its mystical tradition as articulated by Mekas, Brakhage, and Jordan, has a link to poetry that is evident not only in a shared sense of structure but also in terms of its epistemology. Given the relative newness of film, at least as it might be practiced by individual artists rather than by way of studios, filmmakers needed some sort of tradition to draw upon in order to make compositional decisions based upon aesthetic values. Lyric poetry, particularly in the Modernist vein as determined by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Gertrude Stein—all literary heroes of the postwar generation of the avant-garde—fashioned a tradition that fought against the conditions of poetry's own monolithic authority; hence Ezra Pound's defining credo, "Make it new." Poetry that broke from the strictures of traditional prosody needed to find the conditions that legitimated it as poetry. For Pound, this meant breaking from the "iambic heave" in order to find a more immediate sense of poetic measure, one in dialogue with the past but not determined by it. Given that the possibilities of film were still new, Pound made an appealing figure to emulate—in his desire to recreate tradition in his own image (so to speak), Pound authorized himself. And filmmakers did emulate him, at least in the ways that they could. Beyond the seductive nature of revolution and novelty in the sometimes stultifying cultural conservatism of the late 1940s and '50s, the articulation of poetics that insisted on its own determination, its own authority, offered models from which filmmakers, largely working without a tradition specific to its history, could

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borrow. And Pound specifically focused on the power of the image, which would, of course, resonate with filmmakers.

Along with the ongoing conversation amongst filmmakers in the middle of the twentieth century about the interactions between poetry and film, the connections between poets and filmmakers grew out of specific interactions and networks of relationships. Actual points of contact, primarily in New York and San Francisco, facilitated the aesthetic sympathies flowing between and among the two fields and their respective practitioners.[15] The 1950s were an unparalleled era of discussion and dialogue across the arts, and many filmmakers spent a great deal of time with poets discussing the potential for art to transform experience at both the individual and the social levels. Some filmmakers—for instance James Boughton and Christopher Maclaine—even led dual lives as accomplished poets. David E. James has made the argument that what the filmmakers and poets had in common was that their work resisted commodification. "In the modern world," James writes, "*poet* designates a preferred medium; but the word also implies a mode of social (un)insertion. It bespeaks a cultural practice that, in being economically insignificant, remains economically unincorporated, and so retains the possibility of cultural resistance."[16] That seems entirely valid as a link between poets of word and poets in film, as does the correlation I have mentioned in terms of the development of both forms of art establishing their own contemporaneity against a more static sense of tradition; therefore, the new ideas could not be simply assimilated. As is always the case, the reasons for social formations are complex and are not easily resolved, though it is clear that some real elective affinities bound these groups together.

Most relevant in thinking about the connections between poetry and cinema in Jordan's work is his relationship to the poet Robert Duncan and Duncan's partner Jess Collins, the painter and collage artist. Jordan, as well as Brakhage, befriended the couple, both of whom were central forces in the cultural life of San Francisco. Duncan and Jess were capacious in their respective senses of history. Indeed, it is Jess who first introduced Jordan to Max Ernst's collages, an exchange that led eventually to Jordan reaching out to Cornell. And to see Jordan's work is to note immediately a relationship to Jess' aesthetic sense, since Jordan's collages—what he called "paste-ups"—are incredibly dense and vibrant assemblages of images from magazines, scientific books and manuals, jigsaw puzzle pieces, engravings, and so on, all put together seamlessly and working through a private yet no less compelling logic in their composition. Jess would also rework material in his earlier work or even in found paintings, calling these pieces "salvages." Of course, one catches echoes of Jordan's rethinking of Doré in just such a project.

Yet, one must not underestimate the effect that Duncan's thinking may have had on Jordan. Or, to put things in a different register, so as not to get bogged

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down in questions of influence, per se, we might look to what Duncan says about poetry in order to learn about Jordan's films. "Our consciousness, and the poem as a supreme effort of consciousness, comes in a dancing organization between personal and cosmic identity," writes Duncan.[17] Duncan specifically privileges poetry here, and does so in large part because poems are negotiations of and with language, and it is language that shapes a broader, collective understanding, as well as belief and human behavior in all ways Out of language we shape an individual identity. Cinema can make similar claims as being supreme efforts of consciousness since images surround us at all times—even in dreams—and indeed consciousness has become more and more visually literate with each decade as media of all forms determines and contextualizes our lives. Duncan, born in 1919 and in his maturity a pivotal figure in the San Francisco Renaissance, as well as being connected to the group of writers known as the Black Mountain poets, was an articulate and erudite polymath whose ideas spill into thinking about Jordan's relationship of materiality to consciousness. Duncan insists that a poet "is not only a maker in the sense of the maker of the poem, but he makes up his mind, he makes up a world within a world, a setting of elements into play, that carries over into a maturity the make-believe of childhood, where, too, certain mistakes led not to disaster but to fruitful pastures."[18] The ludic elements of Jordan's animation certainly bear out this connection that Duncan describes between an artist's *poesis* and the free play of imagination as the means of creating and testing the boundaries of reality. This play allows for mistakes, which in turn are opportunities for meaningful associations coming from beyond sheer intentionality. The density and layering of images, icons, and meanings taken together facilitates interpretations that cannot be reduced to specific references. In Duncan's poems and Jordan's films, the work itself establishes the conditions wherein even the audience cannot mistake the art's meaning because it is in the process of being revealed. In the opening lines of his best-known poem, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," Duncan describes the meadow

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.[19]

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The scene, Duncan insists, is both actual and "made-up" by the mind. Not merely personal and not limited to a material reality, the imagination of the meadow is "an eternal pasture folded in thought." This place—indeed perhaps any place attended by the imagination—is the fecund space of myths.

Duncan and Jordan share the idea that myths, symbolic images, and poems are not merely repositories for cultural knowledge and social mores, but are the very templates for understanding one's own self. Within Duncan's Romantic poetics, imagination and memory craft both an identity and a way of interpreting those conditions necessary for identity. Duncan writes,

> To come into such a continuum of human life in which our identity contains the past is to find a new dimension of personal life. As we drew the figures of successive stages of Eros in history, we had to do with reincarnations of Eros in writing upon writing, a palimpsest of scriptures entering our thought, to change and figure what we are then once we entertain the mere idea, and becoming the working force, in reading, of an objective reality.[20]

According to such a view, the imagination circulates within a complex situation that we might call reality, but reality is the negotiation of the imagination in response to materiality. As well as with Duncan, Jordan shares this view with Cornell. Through Duncan, however, Jordan also shares such thinking with the poet H. D., and Duncan's aesthetic apprenticeship to H. D. is well-documented. H. D. is the modernist master to whom Jordan's filmic sequence *The H. D. Trilogy* is an homage. The trio of short films responds to her later poetry and is not only a meditation on the poems but a revision of H. D.'s poetry, specifically her posthumously published collection *Hermetic Definition*. Jordan does not attempt to improve upon or simply alter the text, in that Jordan's film does not simply create a new context for the lines he borrows from H. D., but a new context that keeps the original text ever in place.

The reasons why Jordan would be drawn to H. D. are numerous, and include a shared sense between the poet and the filmmaker of an aesthetic realm that exists beyond personal experience, a realm that artists and writers tap into with their work. In her book of poetics *Notes on Thought and Vision,* H. D. writes, "[T]he world of the great creative artists is never dead."[21] Their world never dies because the great artists create vivifying conditions for the imagination that others enter into when they engage the work. Yet the world of the great artists—and H. D. mentions specifically da Vinci as one exemplar—"is never explored, hardly even entered. Because it needs an over-mind or a slight glimmering of over-mind intelligence to understand over-mind intelligence."[22] In this way, the intuited

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combination of imagination and transcendence that determines the "world of the great artists" sounds very much like Duncan's meadow. Such a world continually challenges people to move beyond the boundaries of the ego in order to discover the realm of the imagination, that space where a universal, unifying sense transmutes the individual into a representative portion of the collective known as humanity, or what H. D. calls the over-mind. Behind this desire to get beyond the self's limitations is the belief—call it a kind of faith—that imagination continually shapes a sense of how things are, and how they might be.

Jordan's *H. D. Trilogy* (US, 1992/1993) opens not with an image but with the sound of a woman's voice.[23] "Why did you come to trouble my decline?" the voice asks, and the dark screen gives way to intertitles that state, complete with ellipses, ". . . and he came with a black oud and played among them." The line, a note tells us, comes "from a dream." However, the spoken words come from H. D.'s *Hermetic Definitions.* These two instances of language—the spoken and the lexical—frame what follows within an uncertain context. We might ask if these serve as a double epigraph; yet, who then is the "you" to whom the voice refers? The initial shots of this section of Jordan's triptych (entitled *The Black Oud*) comprise first a shot of some marble columns and a piazza beyond them, as the 16mm camera pans across the scene; then, juxtaposed with a shot from overhead, the same image from what seems like the window of a building. It is only in the third shot that some specific grounding is offered in the form of a caption that informs the viewer that it is Rome in the summer of 1990. The caption appears over a shot of a side street as seen through a window—possibly a shop—with slightly parted curtains. As the words appear, a woman comes into view, and then disappears. Now, however, the camera has found its subject and follows her through a series of cuts.

The woman is author Joanna McClure, who was attached to the Beat writers and who was close to Duncan as well. She also was Michael McClure's first wife. It is Joanna McClure's voice that serves as the voiceover for the three sections of the trilogy: *The Black Oud, The Grove,* and *Star of Day.* Viewers of the film who happen to be familiar with the poetry of H. D. will recognize that the lines that McClure utters throughout the film are from the older poet's three-part sequence *Hermetic Definitions,* which was written from 1960 to 1961 (though not published until 1972) and was her last significant work. In fact, the titles of the latter two sections of Jordan's trilogy are direct allusions to H. D.' s poems.

In all three sections of the trilogy, Jordan's camera follows McClure as she walks through well-known places—famous ruins, temples, familiar markets—in Rome, Greece, and, in the final section, San Francisco. They are, largely, places where tourists would and do go. The familiarity of the sites allows viewers to stay focused on this woman—the audience is not distracted by the places, in other words—as she negotiates the locales, while lines from H. D.'s poem sequence

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persist in the soundtrack. Yet, since Jordan never explicitly cues the viewer that these lines are all quoted, the words likely are taken as the inner monologue of the woman represented on screen, per the conventions of cinema. Thus, Jordan presents the image of an older, female American poet walking through the sites and scenes of Italy and Greece, sites important to H. D.'s sense of history. And the poem sequence itself has to do with the discovery of a new possibility of love late in life. This suggests a narrative for the film: The figure on the screen has gone off to Europe alone (or at least we always see her on her own). The "you" could be some beloved about whom the woman is thinking. In H. D.'s poem sequence, that is the case, although the figure of the beloved flows between loose portraits of the *Newsweek* journalist Lionel Durand and the famous French writer St-John Perse. On the other hand, the film's lack of a specific reference for the pronoun could suggest that the camera (and therefore the viewer) is the one who has come to trouble the decline of this woman. The viewer accompanies this woman, who otherwise—or so it seems—wishes to be alone.

If narrative possibilities start to cohere, they are not clearly defined possibilities. The words being spoken are not reflected by the woman's face, at least not in obvious ways. Her affect is neutral, though not blank, as she takes in the sights, as she drinks wine at a café, leafing through her books, even occasionally writing in a notebook. Is she lonely? Is she content? No aspect of the narrative or the images makes the decision for the reader. It is not the visual subject matter on which the film focuses; it is the conflation of the constituent elements of sound and sight—of poetry and cinema—that the viewer is called upon to consider.

Jordan's film maintains a consistent monochromatic approach to the images—all the images are awash in a burnt umber. This saturation is keyed so high at times that much of the contrast vanishes, and sometimes the image becomes simply the color itself. In part, the saturation in its varying intensities never lets the viewer slip into some mesmeric fantasy of thinking he or she is actually seeing McClure (as opposed to seeing her by way of a camera); we are always reminded that what we are seeing is being mediated. Of course, this monochromatic wash also serves as a self-allusion in that Jordan's camera is following another poet—another poet named McClure—through city streets with the film stock tinted, just as had been the case in *Visions of a City*. Interestingly, Jordan's *H. D. Trilogy* feels far more personal and intimate than the earlier work, despite its thick allusiveness. Indeed, the trilogy of films becomes even more intimate if we think of how *Visions of a City* always keeps a distance since the principle figure is seen only indirectly. The poetry that Joanna McClure speaks is what collapses the distance.

The distance that is most collapsed, however, is the distance between the two mature, female poets born half a century apart: Joanna McClure and H. D. We might ask whether McClure is remembering the lines from H. D., and, if so,

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does *Hermetic Definitions* color everything that McClure experiences? That is to say, she experiences everything through the lens of the older woman's text, which shapes how she understands and responds to the different European locales. Or are we to take the words as now McClure's somehow, the product of her interior life? This means we have another possibility for the "you"—it could be H. D. herself whom the woman onscreen is addressing. Or H. D. could be addressing this woman across time. H. D. writes (and Joanna McClure states), "my fever, fervour, was for one not born//when I wrote this," suggesting that the addressee of the words exists in some futurity, but then this futurity is displaced with each succeeding generation: "the ecstasy comes through you//but goes on;/the torch was lit from another before you,/and another and another before that. . . ."[24] The result is that Jordan's *H. D. Trilogy* is not an illustration of the poem—just as his film of Coleridge's poem was not merely an illustration of that work—but is an engagement performed and enacted by Jordan's particular work of art. The interaction is in the formation of a mythological, aesthetic experience of time that is simultaneously (rather than serially) experienced by participants the way rites and rituals transform participants by dislodging them in time and equate them with those who have performed the same acts across the ages.

Jordan again makes the palimpsest central to his poetics, just as H. D. herself did in the copious use of references and allusions to Greek and Egyptian mythology that runs throughout her entire body of work. In the case of Jordan's *H. D. Trilogy,* the one poet is written over and entangled with the other. This gives the sense that both women are in essence the same woman—the revision is a form of reincarnation of the spirit—or, to be less mystical, of the language, the text—passing from one body to the next. The destabilization of references, as well as any certainty as to whom belong the words to which the audience listens as they watch *The H. D. Trilogy,* makes it impossible to specify the relationship between the words and the speaker, the audience and the text. The text, and the particular locales visited by McClure (as well as Jordan's camera), do not belong to one person—"Were you ever here? Were you ever in this room?" McClure's voiceover intones just as McClure gazes up at some Greek columns amongst a ruined temple, indicating a palpable absence of another's presence.[25] The locales and sites embody shared experiences and shared cultural materials. And, of course, although McClure is herself a writer, she is not the filmmaker—and so Jordan's aesthetic vision is actually the one enmeshed with H. D.'s. This resonates with Duncan's own deep identification with H. D. In Duncan's massive study/tribute, *The H. D. Book,* the poet recounts the first time he encountered a poem by H. D. in elaborate detail. A high school teacher of his began reading "Heat," one of the poet's early, imagist poems. Duncan describes the experience:

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> The patience of [the teacher's voice] voice, where hope for a communion in teaching still struggled with a resignation to institutional expediencies, the reaching out of her voice to engage our care where she cared, had a sweet lure for me. But now, as she read the poem, something changed, became more, transformed by her sense of the poet's voice, impersonating the poet H. D.[26]

What is clear in the account is that Duncan already senses (at least retrospectively) in such a way that the poem elides the distance and difference between his teacher and the poet. The two women are separate, but the poem enacts a commonality of spirit, and indeed the teacher had brought the poem to class not because it was part of the curriculum, but because it moved her and she was compelled to share it with others. This interconnection is similarly enacted in Jordan's film in the ways that he conflates Joanna McClure and H. D.

While it could be argued that Jordan is merely replicating his mentor's obsession with H. D., in reality the carefully integrated lines of influence and palimpsest only further the idea that culture is never appropriated but is rather rearranged and recomposed to prevent its decomposition and loss. If McClure and H. D. become the same woman in the sense that they participate in the same search for love, then Jordan and Duncan are part of this lineage as well. Finally, this suggests that all artists dwell somewhat consciously with an ongoing awareness of a transcendent over-mind. However, this realm is also always an action, a perpetual search from a prevailing sense of alienation and loneliness—of separation and isolation—to find that long, participatory action of belonging that defines art—a sense of belonging to an ages-spanning process of speaking the experience of being human. Jordan's innovation is to locate one of the newest forms of art—cinema—within such an ancient project by creating an avant-garde genealogy shaped by experimental poetics. What makes this experimental? That he must first create his own authority to charge the work of his predecessors with legitimacy and force so that there is room for his sympathetic magic.

Richard Deming is a poet and a theorist whose work explores the intersections of poetry, philosophy, and visual culture. He is the author of *Listening on All Sides: Toward an Emersonian Ethics of Reading* (Stanford University Press, 2008), and he contributes to such magazines as *Artforum* and *The Boston Review*. His collection of poems, *Let's Not Call It Consequence* (Shearsman, 2008), received the 2009 Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America. His poems have appeared in such places as *Sulfur*, *Field*, *Indiana Review*, and *The Nation*. He teaches at Yale University. He was the spring 2012 John P. Birkelund Fellow of the American Academy in Berlin.

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NOTES

1. P. Adams Sitney, "Moments of Illumination," *Artforum,* April 2009. Unfortunately, since Belson died in the fall of 2011, only two now remain.
2. This particular historical context is comprehensively described in P. Adam Sitney's definitive *Visionary Film: The American Avant Garde, 1943–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
3. "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," in *Film Theory and Criticism,* eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Baudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 70.
4. Paul Karlstrom, "Oral History Interview with Larry Jordan, 1995 Dec. 19–1996 July 30," *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.* www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-larry-jordan-12216.
5. Konrad Steiner offers a very insightful discussion of ekphrasis and film in regards to a number of Bay Area filmmakers in his essay "Dialogue in Lyric," included in *Radical Light,* a volume of essays edited by Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid that chronicles the history of alternative film in San Francisco (Berkley: University of California Press, 2010). Steiner never mentions Jordan, surprisingly.
6. Karkstrom, *Oral History.*
7. Karlstrom, *Oral History.*
8. Lindsay Bair, *Joseph Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order* (London: Reaktion, 1998), 203.
9. Karlstrom, *Oral History.*
10. Quoted in *Navigating the Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 36.
11. Stan Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings, 1964–1980,* ed. Robert A. Haller (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1982), 183.
12. *Film Culture Reader,* ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970), 104.
13. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake,* ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor, 1982), 39.
14. *Film Culture Reader,* 174–75.
15. For an extended look at the social formations of the avant-garde/innovative poetry and experimental film communities in the United States, see Daniel Kane's *We Saw the Light* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).
16. David E. James, *Allegories of Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 32.
17. "Towards an Open Universe," *Fictive Certainties* (New York: New Directions, 1985), 79.
18. "Truth and Life of Myth," *Fictive Certainties,* 34.
19. *The Opening of the Field* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 7.
20. *The H.D. Book,* eds. Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman (Berkley: University of California Press, 2011), 102.
21. *Hermetic Definitions* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 24.
22. *H. D.,* 24.
23. Also, Jordan's title at first glance suggests a connection to H. D.'s sequence of poems called

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Trilogy (New York: New Directions, 1973). This sequence, comprising three sections, each of which appeared in the mid-1940s, deals specifically with H. D.'s poetic response to life in London during the Nazi air assault in World War II. While that book is invoked through Jordan's title, in actuality *Hermetic Definitions* is the text to which his films are directly responding.

24. See *Hermetic Definitions,* 14; and "The Black Oud," 27'19"–28'22."
25. "The Black Oud," 19'30"; *Hermetic Definitions,* 10.
26. Duncan, 35.

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