

Found Footage Magazine: Found Footage and Collage Films, Selected Works

Gymnopédies (Lawrence C. Jordan, 1965)

By John Davis

There really is nothing new under the sun, just new ways of telling the same old stories, asking the same old questions. It has always struck me that the most engaging, if not enduring, artistic expressions are the ones that lack complete resolve, works that weave the familiar and the unfamiliar, create a friction between the mystery of personal language and the mechanics of relatable forms. Like Charon's raft maneuvering from shore to shore, it is this inexorable tension that brings us back again and again.

Lawrence Jordan's film *Gymnopédies*, like most of his non-narrative animation work (before and since), is, among other things, an opportunity to explore our relationship with the unknown. For some this is a welcome anodyne, for others a confusing and sometimes difficult journey. Within time-based visual art, when a comprehensible narrative goes missing, we often feel rudderless and unmoored, our impulses veering toward a rejection of the absurd. However, as with all compelling art forms, there is the provision of an anchor, a means for grounding us in the conventional limitations of our understanding while simultaneously easing us toward the unknown.

In Jordan's *Gymnopédies*, this relatable anchor is present in two primary ways. The first is his use of Erik Satie's titular music, the second, his appropriation of assorted printed matter. The music, with its melancholic and sweet drift draws us reassuringly into the film, guiding us through its off-kilter dreamscape. Further inside, the animated illustrations and landscape tapestries quickly become oblique allusions, juxtaposing the ornamental and the bizarre. Broadly out of context and energized with Jordan's stream-of-consciousness montage, these recognizable forms help safeguard our confrontation with the unintelligible, as we stumble and falter toward uncharted shores.

Throughout the film we sense the inner workings of the universe, both within and outside the frame. Objects move with an earnest importance, like bees in and out of the hive, symbols and signs connecting and disconnecting in whimsical yet purposeful ways—one moment terrestrial, the next celestial. Though recognizable as a language, we get no helpful translation, no key for unlocking the film's delicate and beautiful mystery. Moreover, despite whatever familiar anchors we find, no rational voice explains where we might be, why we are there, or where we are going. Deeper still, holding fast within its crepuscular atmosphere, we seek signs that might offer some

clues, any stabilizing ground for the ever strange and starkly surreal currents we find ourselves swirling within.

How then does one come to terms with these disfigured bodies and household objects hovering kinetically inside the frame, the nymphs and severed hands floating and crackling above medieval huts and faraway lands? The answer is that we can't, at least in any direct or prescribed way. The tension produced through simultaneously repelling and attracting us is its own way forward, one necessitated by our willingness to engage the subject matter on its own terms, to experience things happening without expecting resolve, to find our way back to our inner-selves, and to ultimately let go.

Jordan's use of the familiar collides with the seemingly absurd so that the film (and indeed all of Jordan's visual art) becomes a potent aid to our subconscious, hastening our understanding of the inevitable forces that oblige us all. Like a bewildering yet tantalizing summons, Jordan's *Gymnopédies* is yet another in his long list of mystical joyrides designed to assist us in reconciling universal truths from within our own universal minds.