LARRY STURHAHN: When I said to you that I'm a storyteller and your films don't have stories, you said something you discovered was...

JORDAN BELSON: That they do have stories. Let's see, how to fill out that thought. At first my work was just translating painting-like imagery into film, and I don't think my concept of what was going on went much beyond moving forms synchronized with sound—metamorphosing. But even back then I could see that some of the imagery brought to mind associations with other areas of human activity, like science, biology, genetics.

My films are more like looking at a painting than looking at a Cinemascope screen. That my origins are in painting has brought a painting consciousness to filmmaking, and that's a different kind of picture then long shots and panoramic views and things like that. One looks at a painting and doesn't question the focus. If the artist chooses to be soft, heavily textured, smeary, or whatever, it's accepted, not held up against a standard of whether it's in focus and how much detail shows.

You have to realize the camera lies. And the fact that the photographic image is accepted as a close facsimile of reality is not so much the propaganda from Eastman Kodak as the logical culmination of the perceptual history of our civilization. Maybe it's unfortunate that film somehow got in the grip of narrow-minded people not intellectually or aesthetically capable of comprehending that reality is more than a photographic image. For them, the medium is used for storytelling, as an offshoot of theatre or literature, and the whole technology has been designed to substantiate that.

Audiences have been indoctrinated for generations with this belief, so they're no longer imaginative; they only see what's offered. The demand for new kinds of imagery is not going to come from them. But the whole underground movement has shown that there are other subjects and other ways of experiencing a movie, and that's my gripe with the industry. Otherwise I think they've built a fantastic mechanism for telling stories - a wonder, a real wonder.

But what I want is to color and show things with a different perspective. Although I don't deny them or their importance or the wonderful accomplishments of telling it as they do, I've seen years of it; I was practically born in a movie house. But looking back now after twenty-five years of experimental filmmaking, indoctrinated as I was, I

remember there were things happening on the screen which excited me, only they weren't being pursued by the filmmaker.

I remember I always loved special effects, those split-second flashes of some piece of magic -- it might be just an explosion in an animated film, but I remember they did it a lot. Yet even there animation settled for three-quarters of the work for storytelling; only the small remainder was for something with visual continuity on the screen. But I was always strangely excited, quickened by those split seconds I did see.

For all I know, that might have been the tiny crack in the spectrum which triggered the kind of work which I'm doing now. I don't know their current lines of development, but those things which they never took up and pursued have been categorized as the special effects Department. If you took my work to Hollywood, they would see it as just one big special effect from beginning to end. Having categorized it, they would push it in a drawer and lock it shut for good.

But it does require a different attitude to really see. Or it's not just some trick effect off the main line of filmmaking but a whole new idea about kinds of images that can be experienced, kinds of subjects that can be expressed, the phenomena that can be represented in this most accurate form. For example, a lot of my imagery is reproductions of or portrayals of images received in meditational States. Of course if you've never been in those places you can't verify my portrayal, but that doesn't alter the fact that it's a true phenomenon. My camera is an inner Camera which doesn't do very well when it points out at external reality. I'm trying to focus on something, bring it back alive from the Uncharted areas of the inner image, Innerspace.

A film like *Samadhi*, for example, is intended to be a real documentary representation, as accurately as it was possible to make, of a real place and a real visual phenomenon that I perceived -- just as I'm looking at you right now. Even on a superficial level everyone is willing to grant the existence of what they call phosferes.

Okay, now go deeper than those superficial things and allow that there are even deeper levels where visual perception still exists. A new language has to be developed which acknowledges and can speak from that awareness. And I think my kind of work has sort of opened up the means for doing that, a way of doing it which the storytelling film has neglected. They're just telling the same old thing over and over again, not really trying to break into more expanded areas of awareness or understanding. Bergman's a good case because he's such a beautiful filmmaker that you almost forget he's still just

telling his stories with the same old pictures, not only disallowing other aspects of reality, but not even hinting at them.

LS: Then, who do you make your films for?
JB: There are some films that show it's possible to have both kinds of imagery, the inner and the external, both accepted by the same audience. A film like two thousand and one for example is a very significant film. For brief moments it touched both areas, and the kind of things generally associated with my Jean and the kind of work found in the mainstream of Storytelling, starting with the rush to the Stargate, then coming to that surreal place and the Poetry of the images which end the film with the fetus. Everyone just left it up semicolon they melted in their seats and cried for more. Well that most exciting part they forgave an awful lot of dead weight. So two thousand and one merge both, but then cupric retreated from its so fast I had the feeling that maybe he was afraid to open that box.

There are many stories which move freely back and forth between the two places. And many people have come to me with ideas that would blend both elements. A film that would deal with the subjective experiences is *The Teachings of Don Juan*, for example. And I know two guys who wanted to do it, but they became so captivated by Don Juan that they went out in the desert and became magicians and forgot about making the film. Still, if you imagine making that film you'll see there are passages which call for exactly the kind of imagery that I produce.

I have become very interested in metaphysical literature in the past few years. It really turned me; it was intellectually stimulating and full of new ideas. Coming to it with this enthusiasm, I found a lot of it was filmable. And that is in just in the straight, usual sense of the word. Some of those texts would make marvelous subjects, calling for that blend of subjective and photographic imagery. If it's done well, the viewer will be fascinated because he will be drawn into it. Illusionistically convincing, composed in such a way that it impinges on the viewer's senses, like good music, it will draw him in.

The distinction between an external scene perceived in the usual way and the scene perceived with the inner eye is very slight to me. The screen is just that -- a screen. Who's to say that what you see on it is only perceived with the eyes. Sometimes I look out my window and see the whole bay, the vast distances and cities glittering, and know that it's not just an optical phenomenon, that I'm seeing with more than my eyes.

There's no piece of equipment that's good enough to show what I'm seeing, so I even question the concept that vision is purely an optical experience.

What I'm trying to say is that I've discovered a whole new realm of literature which could employ both subjective and representational imagery to tell the story I want to tell. Writers write scripts, but they leave out these kinds of experiences. Yet there's a perfectly natural place for This kind of imagery in the sort of films I'm talking about.

Take fantasy colon people can't get enough of it, but nobody's giving it to them. It's too expensive, too hard to do, requires too much creative thought. So it's parceled out in small bits. Viewers want magic and mystery and Beauty on the screen, but what they get is pretty sort of stuff.

But the audience is there. So many people have looked at my work with genuine responses that I know it's not something I'm just polishing for my own purposes. They tell me they can't understand why they're seeing on the screen what they've already seen inside of themselves. Even seeing the film for the first time, they remember seeing it before, and then they recognize the place - in themselves.

The hallucinatory aspect of imagery is certainly inherent in my work and in the ideas relevant to my work. Then I design into them pacing and tempo, a willingness to leave the picture entirely for a moment. There is need for a space to catch your breath, time to handle the climactic experience. There's modulation in the work, almost like a composer -- a Debussy would use.

These are ideas that can be used in any form of filmmaking. I want to cause the viewer to travel with the artist, even go through areas that are, in a sense, non-material places, although the sense of moving through them is very real. It can be a gigantic visual experience rather than a tepid or ordinary one. In a regular film, when you do see the screen light up, turn all golden, and then break down into shimmering particles? These are total images; the others are pretty tame.

But I get there more through symphonic music than through picture. At this moment I would say my work is more influenced by ideas that derive from the worlds of painting, graphics, and music then from the world of motion pictures. I feel more like a composer and a painter than a film producer.

LS: What do you think is the experience of music -- of sound -- as it relates to film?
JB: I don't think I would be interested in film if it didn't have sound; to tell the truth, that's what makes film more interesting than painting. I'm not interested in silent movies. It's

when the combined effect of sound and image are really inextricable that I feel I've succeeded; when they don't work together, I'm not happy. From combining two different perceptions I believe a new meaning arises. Gene Youngblood talked about it in his book and called it "Synesthetic Cinema." I'm an exponent of it, the combination of two inputs to create yet another. Pure emotions sometimes tell a story, and I'm telling a story, too.

I made a film last year called *Chakra* in which I tried an experiment. *The Fundamentals of Yoga*, a book by Rammesh Mishra, contains a list of sounds you hear when meditating. Since I had heard some Of them. I was inclined to accept the whole list as real information:

1. *Cin nadam*: like the hum of honey-intoxicated bees; idling engine vibration; rainfall; whistling sounds; high frequency sound.

2. *Cincin nadam*: waterfall; roaring of an ocean.

3. *Ghanta nadam*: bell-ringing.

4. *Sankha nadam*: conch shell.

5. *Tantri vina*: nasal sound; humming sound, like that of a wire string instrument.

6. *Tala nadam*: sound of a small tight drum.

7. *Venu nadam*: sound of a flute.

8. *Mridamga*: sound of a big bass drum.

9. *Bheri nadam*: echoing sound.

10. *Megha nadam*: roll of distant thunder.

Well, I thought at first, I'll just trip around in here and pick out sounds that fit the images. Then, the more I read, the more I realized the listing had a certain order, from course sounds to sounds of a higher elemental order--more ephemeral. The hum of bees and idling engines have a sort of coarse granular quality to them; the echo and the sound of thunder are on a higher elevation, like smoother wave forms. And it happened that was the structure of the film visually, its imagery based on a similar found body of information:

Ascent towards Unification

Brain Center	Element Ether
Throat Center	Element Air
Heart Center	Element Fire
Navel Center	Element Water

Root Center   Element Earth
-- *Foundation of Tibetan Mysticism*
Lama Anagarika Govinda

Primitive western science divided matter into four states, the course condensed granular stuff on the bottom and the gaseous atmospheric stuff on top. Now, I notice, the most advanced of our physicists use the terms again. The grosser material -- earth-like, rock-like crystalline structures -- through temperature changes or molecular alterations of the configurations of atoms can move into the next state, which is more liquid,. And liquid, if you heat it, usually turns into vapor, and after that goes into non-materialistic or pre-materialistic states, just ions, free neutrons, or particles that have not even formed into ions.

These four states of matter are almost identical to the earth, water, fire, and air of the ancients. So equating the four states of matter with consciousness (there's already a tradition for this correlation in the diagram in the book) I used earth imagery, water imagery, fire imagery, and air imagery, building from a course to a higher state, which was the shape the film took

Then, reading about the sounds, I got all sorts of ideas because there's also a tradition of sound associated with the different states of consciousness, and this list of meditational sounds also followed that ascending order. At least it was close enough to Intrigue me to go down the list as if it were a script. It was just like you were being commissioned to come in with a script for a film by Jordan Belson to be called *Chakra* and you came in and threw this on the desk -- ten items, there it is! And the producer would pat you on the back and say, "My boy, it's the finest looking collection of astonishing dialogue I've ever seen. I love the way you've reduced it precisely to these ten levels!"

The point is that it fell on my desk this way, and I like it. So for the first image which I already had, I got a sound effects record which curiously, had the sound of bees on it (it didn't say *honey-intoxicated*, but I thought it would do because of your be maybe you're always intoxicated). I tried it out, and I wasn't sure I liked it, so I tried it several times to get over the shock of them together. And, gradually, I liked it well enough to leave it there and go on with the next one. Actually, I went right down the list, leaving out nothing -- not even rearranging them significantly.

The only difference between my film and this list is that I added a kind of apotheosis at the end, a grand chordal kind of religious sound. Up to that point I followed the list faithfully, and I was as much a witness and observer of what happened as I was the creator of it. In the end, I was very moved -- and grateful that I had put those two ideas together so they conveyed a coherent thought, information, and a strong subjective experience at the same time. That's typical of the way I work and the way I am likely to approach sound. At least that's the way I did it on that film.

LS: Where do you find your images?

JB: Well, in a way, that's my profession. I'm a worker in images -- an image miner, a worker in consciousness. But I'm always weaving things together to produce the special effects my films have. The storylines I referred to earlier, I was glad to discover, did have meanings in many cases, as specific and precise is anything you might find in a textbook. On the other hand, in the areas where hitherto there was no language to discuss with, my works are a kind of exploration into uncharted areas. As I said, I think I'm developing a language that can talk about subjects that previously nobody had words -- or images -- for. All these things are going on at the same time. But nobody is aware of all of it, or at least I have yet to find that person.

LS: The nature of "Structuralism," maybe?

JB: Nobody understands what they mean by that word. When I saw my work described as structuralist, I took umbrage at it because it seemed to imply that the content was secondary to the total effect. Actually, I like the idea, but I don't want to give the content short shrift. For me the content is the inspiration for doing the work.

What I mean is: I wouldn't do a film if I didn't understand the meaning of it as I was going along. It is not put out, shall we say, like a bolt of patterns to look at. To me, the placement of the images and the development of them goes a certain way because they are conveying a specific line of thought or information. It's a continuity of experiences that has a non-literal meaning.

If one was eloquent, one could talk about it just as easily as showing it on the screen. But I choose to work in raw, primal, ultimate, gigantic forms. If you look at one of my films, just picking up a piece off the editing bench, you'd be surprised how much you can see that is huge and clearly defined. I don't think if you picked up something from an editing bench in Hollywood you'd find anything as gigantic, as primal. To express myself

in primal visual forms is very important to the way I work, but then I like to find nuance, too. Gigantic they are, but subtle too.

LS: You started as a painter. When you became a filmmaker you took on a great many more economic problems.

JB: I'm not sure about that. My first films were animations; I had no camera at all. I worried about my drawings and the images, but there was no investment there. When I did buy a camera it cost $50 -- a spring wound Bell & Howell with a beautifully solid registration. Although it doesn't have through-the-lens viewing or anything fancy, it takes very good pictures, and there are always ways of looking through the lens to get the set up. That is, for animation where you don't want to change the camera position or the field. Look through with a mirror, get the focus, wind it up, and then don't move it after that. So I don't think films are all that expensive to work in.

I see people spending thousands of dollars on what I consider trivial doodads: clothes, a fine car, luxuries of one sort or another. But when it comes to film, *that's* too expensive. Well, so are the other arts. Paint is expensive, and it costs a lot to buy a hunk of marble. I'd like to get that clear at the outset. I'd like to first see if it's as expensive as everyone thinks, or if it's more expensive than anything else. For me, the production cost on a five, six, or seven minute film are about $2,000, which is not excessive. 16mm equipment is not all that expensive; you can buy a used Bolex for a couple of hundred dollars. I would tell a filmmaker that if they aren't prepared to spend whatever is required in order to pursue his craft, then they better get into another craft.

In the beginning, I frequently spend months juggling the material, matching it, trying out composite edits to see how effectively the images dissolve, how they merge together. Frequently I have no idea what the ultimate continuity or content of the film is, so it's in the process of handling, or shaping, that some clue is revealed. Once that happens, then I start to structure the film according to some kind of storyline. Things that have been just pieces suddenly start to go together, so the editorial stage is really a conceptual stage. I don't think I've ever started a film where I even had a title in the beginning. Often I don't know the subject until I'm halfway through. Sometimes the path is dark but it was even darker when I didn't know the material and was waiting for the message. But, invariably, it came; and now I have a complete abiding faith that it will come. I just know; to wait for it patiently is part of the creative process. It never fails, and often it comes in the most surprising, most precise way.

And then there's a sense of relief—and a sense of excitement. It's like a sudden surge, a renewal of inspiration and energy. Also the task of putting it together takes on a different guise. Now the question is to put the images together in exactly the right form to convey the content. And once that starts, then lots of wonderful details get filled in—even things you didn't suspect before. Once you get the subject you start seeing the subtleties—and suddenly almost all the information finds a place within that structure. And that leads to a kind of enlightenment. You realize forces at work which you have no name for, that you cannot define, thoughts and ideas and forces which are transpersonal. Beyond any question, beyond the level of intellect, they are clearly there. And if you can believe, you can surrender to it; and the more you do, the more it happens.

Recognition is the right term for it. It's not as though I went ahead and put something there; but rather that in going ahead something was to be found. And that's fundamental to my aesthetic approach. It's an attitude of inquiry, of finding out, rather than imposing a personal and limited notion on the medium. The question is discovery and revelation rather than cool, deliberate design; the recognition is both in the material and in myself.

So I don't work with the idea of a specific audience in mind; I do these films as a projection of my own inner self—not to reach spiritual freaks, or dope fiends, or other artists. I am accepted as an artist. The artist produces works; I produce works. It isn't that I'm trying to reach or satisfy anyone. I didn't exhibit for a long time. And looking back on that, I think the reason was—unconsciously—that I wanted to stand aside, to keep myself separate from what other people were doing. Not exhibiting, not caring whether the works were seen, not doing them to be seen, probably helped me understand better what I was doing.

I'm not going to try to tell you everything I do in terms of making a new language appropriate to the expression of ideas which, at the moment, are too ephemeral and too rapid for verbal exposition. Such ideas can be better expressed through the perceptual senses rather than the intellect. It's a language in which the words, or the visual images, combined with sound contain allusions to a wide variety of phenomenological experiences, but on such a vast scale and with so many magnitudes at the same time that there's no time for analytical understanding. You just drink it in, absorbing it through what I think of as a hitherto unrecognized perceptile within all individuals—the aesthetic sense. In a physiology class when they talk about five senses they don't list this one. But

it exists, either as a total of all, or as a distinct sense all its own. It comes in everybody, like when they see the Grand Canyon and go AH!

LS so you have the feeling that aesthetic sensibility is something that's innate?

JB: Absoluely! No one is immune.

LS: What about video, the other visual form, do you see them coming closer together?

JB: Fusing. In fact, I am working now with a video artist named Stephen Beck. We got an AFI grant to do a film that, among other things, will try to overcome the separation between the two media. It's not really a question of separation, Stephen and I believe, it's a question of imagery. And I've noticed that my lab, for example, has stopped worrying so much if the image is on film or on tape. Now they freely translate back and forth: something on tape can be transferred to film, something on film can be put on tape.

For the majority of these films and the purposes for which they're used, the quality of the image is really not the most significant thing. Primarily what interests me and television is not getting the picture up to film standards, but in working with the elements natural to the medium. When it works, you don't care about the picture -- the image -- in the same way. It may no longer be sharp, but you know it may just be exactly what the picture should be. You don't stop and say: "Is that hard Edge enough?" You just take it in.

I know video is an attractive medium -- I would almost say pretty. Some people are repelled by that, saying, "Oh! The color is so icky!" But I said they haven't seen it used properly, haven't seen how beautiful the color can really be. My personal adventures in color television, which include transcending the image because of the resolution problem, is that you go right through it to something else. Again, it makes me wonder what that image is: An agreed upon immaterial substance which we take for the real thing? Or do we really look right through when we start to measure how it affects us or what we want from it? You know, just what is it? Perhaps should all end up with the breaking down of aesthetic biases, leaving you open to a whole new way of thinking about it. Anyway, it doesn't have much to do with talking about which has better quality.

Working with Stephen, I've come across what you would call pure electronic imagery. It doesn't use a camera or lenses or anything. And here no standards apply;

what you're playing is more like an instrument. And sure, sometimes they tend to be very tedious and academic and not exactly a thrill a minute. But sometimes you see just the right one. If you haven't seen that one you're inclined to be dubious; if you have seen it properly done once, then you believe forever.

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