

The Cosmic Cinema of Jordan Belson

"Only the fantastic is likely to be true at the cosmic level."

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

Certain phenomena manage to touch a realm of our consciousness so seldom reached that when it is awakened we are shocked and profoundly moved. It's an experience of self-realization as much as an encounter with the external world. The cosmic films of Jordan Belson possess this rare and enigmatic power.

Basic to this enigma is the disconcerting fact that Belson's work seems to reside equally in the physical and metaphysical. Any discussion of his cinema becomes immediately subjective and symbolic, as we shall soon see. Yet the undeniable fact of their concrete nature cannot be stressed too frequently. Piet Mondrian: "In plastic art, reality can be expressed only through the equilibrium of dynamic movement of form and color. Pure means afford the most effective way of attaining this."¹⁴

The essence of cinema is precisely "dynamic movement of form and color," and their relation to sound. In this respect Belson is the purest of all filmmakers. With few exceptions his work is not "abstract." Like the films of Len Lye, Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger, and the Whitneys, it is *concrete*. Although a wide variety of meaning inevitably is abstracted from them, and although they do hold quite specific implications for Belson personally, the films remain concrete, objective experiences of kinaesthetic and optical dynamism. They are at once the ultimate use of visual imagery to communicate abstract concepts, and the purest of experiential confrontations between subject and object.

In their amorphous, gaseous, cloudlike imagery it is color, not line, which defines the forms that ebb and flow across the frame with uncanny impact. It is this stunning emotional force that lifts

¹⁴ Mondrian, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

the films far beyond any realm of "purity" into the most evocative and metaphysical dimensions of sight and sound. The films are literally superempirical—that is, actual experiences of a transcendental nature. They create for the viewer a state of *nonordinary reality* similar, in concept at least, to those experiences described by the anthropologist Carlos Castaneda in his experiments with organic hallucinogens.¹⁵

E. H. Gombrich: "The experience of color stimulates deeper levels of the mind. This is demonstrated by experiments with mescaline, under the influence of which the precise outlines of objects become uncertain and ready to intermingle freely with little regard to formal appearances. On the other hand color becomes greatly enhanced, tends to detach itself from the solid objects and assumes an independent existence of its own."

Belson's work might be described as *kinetic painting* were it not for the incredible fact that the images exist in front of his camera, often in real time, and thus are not animations. Live photography of actual material is accomplished on a special optical bench in Belson's studio in San Francisco's North Beach. It is essentially a plywood frame around an old X-ray stand with rotating tables, variable speed motors, and variable intensity lights. In comparison to Trumbull's slit-scan machine or the Whitneys' mechanical analogue computer it's an amazingly simple device. Belson does not divulge his methods, not out of some jealous concern for trade secrets—the techniques are known to many specialists in optics—but more as a magician maintaining the illusion of his magic. He has destroyed hundreds of feet of otherwise good film because he felt the technique was too evident. It is Belson's ultrasensitive interpretation of this technology that creates the art.

The same can be said for the sounds as well as the images. Belson synthesizes his own sound, mostly electronic, on home equipment. His images are so overwhelming that often the sound, itself a creation of chilling beauty, is neglected in critical appraisals. The sound often is so integral to the imagery that, as Belson says: "You don't know if you're seeing it or hearing it."

He regards the films not as exterior entities, but literally as

¹⁵ Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan—A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1968).

extensions of his own consciousness. "I first have to see the images somewhere," he says, "within or without or somewhere. I mean I don't make them up. My whole aesthetic rests on discovering what's there and trying to discover what it all means in terms of relating to my own experience in the world of objective reality. I can't just dismiss these films as audio-visual exercises. They obviously mean something, and in a sense everything I've learned in life has been through my efforts to find out what these things mean."

He has been a serious student of Buddhism for many years and has committed himself to a rigorous Yoga discipline. He began experimenting with peyote and other hallucinogens more than fifteen years ago. Recently his interests have developed equally in the directions of inner space (Mahayana Buddhism) and outer space (interstellar and galactic astrophysics). Thus by bringing together Eastern theology, Western science, and consciousness-expanding drug experiences, Belson predates the front ranks of avant-garde art today in which the three elements converge. Like the ancient alchemists he is a true visionary, but one whose visions are manifested in concrete reality, however nonordinary it might be.

Teilhard de Chardin has employed the term *ultra-hominization* to indicate the probable future stage of evolution in which man will have so far transcended himself that he will require some new appellation. Taking Chardin's vision as a point of departure, Louis Pauwels has surmised: "No doubt there are already among us the products of this mutation, or at least men who have already taken some steps along the road which we shall all be traveling one day."¹⁶ It requires only a shift in perspective to realize that Belson is taking those steps.

Allures: From Matter to Spirit

Originally a widely-exhibited painter, Belson turned to filmmaking in 1947 with crude animations drawn on cards, which he subsequently destroyed. He returned to painting for four years and in 1952 resumed film work with a series that blended cinema and painting through the use of animated scrolls. The four films produced in the period 1952–53 were *Mambo*, *Caravan*, *Mandala*, and *Bop Scotch*. From 1957–59 he worked with Henry Jacobs as visual

¹⁶ Pauwels, Bergier, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

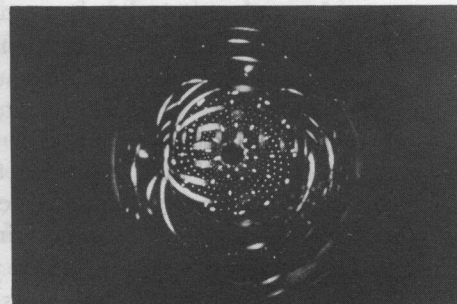
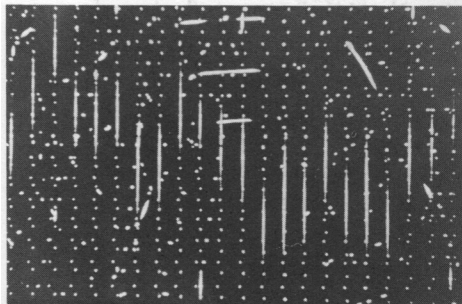
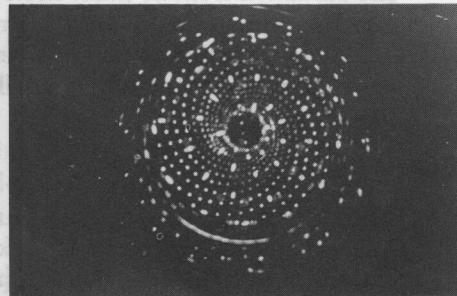
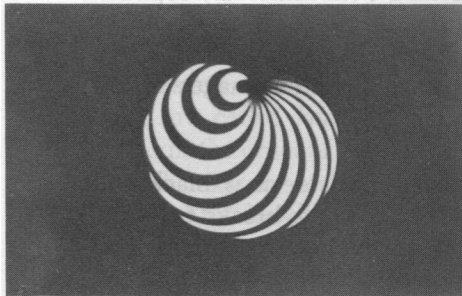
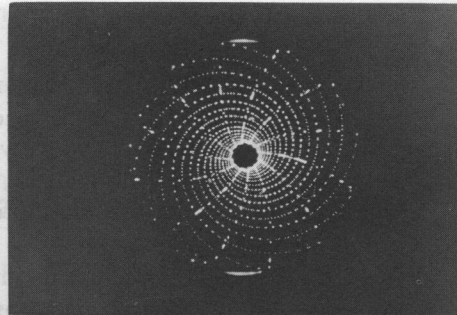
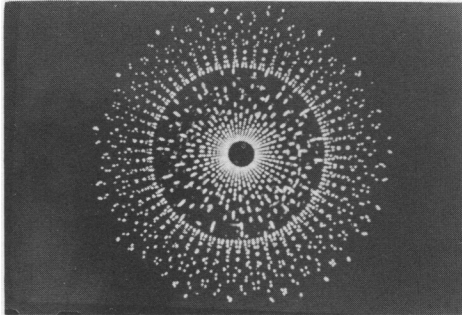
director of the Vortex Concerts at Morrison Planetarium in San Francisco. Simultaneously he produced three more animated films, *Flight* (1958), *Raga* (1959), and *Seance* (1959). *Allures*, completed in 1961, found Belson moving away from single-frame animation toward continuous real-time photography. It is the earliest of his works that he still considers relevant enough to discuss.

He describes *Allures* as a “mathematically precise” film on the theme of *cosmogensis*—Teilhard de Chardin’s term intended to replace cosmology and to indicate that the universe is not a static phenomenon but a process of becoming, of attaining new levels of existence and organization. However, Belson adds: “It relates more to human physical perceptions than my other films. It’s a trip backwards along the senses into the interior of the being. It fixes your gaze, physically holds your attention.”

Allures begins with an ethereal pealing of bells. A centrifugal starburst of pink, yellow, and blue sparks whirls out of a black void. Its points collect into clusters and fade. Bells become weird chimes; we sink into a bottomless orange and black vortex. An intricate pink mandala of interconnected web patterns spins swiftly into the distance. A caterpillar-like coil looms ominously out of infinity. We hear a tweetering electronic warble, a collection of threatening piano notes. Pink and yellow sparks wiggle vertically up the frame. Distant snakelike coils appear and fade. A tiny sun surrounded by a huge orange halo disintegrates. There are flying, comet-like petal shapes.

Oscilloscope streak-dots bounce across the frame with a twittering, chattering metallic noise. They form complex triangular and tetrahedral grid patterns of red, yellow, and blue. Out of this evolves an amorphous yellow-white pulsating globe of fire without definite shape. It vanishes and a blue, neon-bright baton rotates slowly into infinity.

“I think of *Allures*,” said Belson, “as a combination of molecular structures and astronomical events mixed with subconscious and subjective phenomena—all happening simultaneously. The beginning is almost purely sensual, the end perhaps totally nonmaterial. It seems to move from matter to spirit in some way. *Allures* was the first film to really open up spatially. Oskar Fischinger had been



Jordan Belson: *Allures*. 1961. 16mm. Color. 9 min. "A combination of molecular structures and astronomical events mixed with subconscious phenomena . . . a trip backward along the senses from matter to spirit."

experimenting with spatial dimensions but *Allures* seemed to be outer space rather than earth space. Of course you see the finished film, carefully calculated to give you a specific impression. In fact it took a year and a half to make, pieced together in thousands of different ways, and the final product is only five minutes long. *Allures* actually developed out of images I was working with in the Vortex Concerts. Up until that time my films had been pretty much rapid-fire. They were animated and there was no real pacing—just one sustained frenetic pace. After working with some very sophisticated equipment at Vortex I learned the effectiveness of something as simple as fading in and out very slowly. But it was all still very impersonal. There's nothing really personal in the images of *Allures*."

After the glowing blue baton vanishes the screen is black and silent. Almost imperceptibly a cluster of blue dots breaks from the bottom into magnetic force fields that become a complex grid pattern of geometrical shapes superposed on one another until the frame is filled with dynamic energy and mathematical motion. A screeching electronic howl accentuates the tension as galaxies of force fields collide, permutate, and transmute spectacularly. Some squadrons rush toward the camera as others speed away. Some move diagonally, others horizontally or vertically. It's all strongly reminiscent of *2001*—except that it was made seven years earlier. Elsewhere in the film rumbling thunder is heard as flying sparks collect into revolving atomic structures, from whose nuclei emanate shimmering tentacles of tweetering multicolored light. At the end we hear ethereal harp music as a pulsating sun, fitfully spewing out bright particles, reveals within itself another glimmering galaxy.

Re-Entry: Blast-off and Bardo

Re-Entry is considered by many to be Belson's masterwork. Completed in 1964 with a grant from the Ford Foundation, it is simultaneously a film on the theme of mystic reincarnation and actual spacecraft reentry into the earth's atmosphere. Also, as Belson says, "It was my reentry into filmmaking because I'd given up completely after *Allures*. Mostly for financial reasons. But also out of general dismay at the experimental film scene. There was no

audience, no distribution, there was just no future in it at that time.”

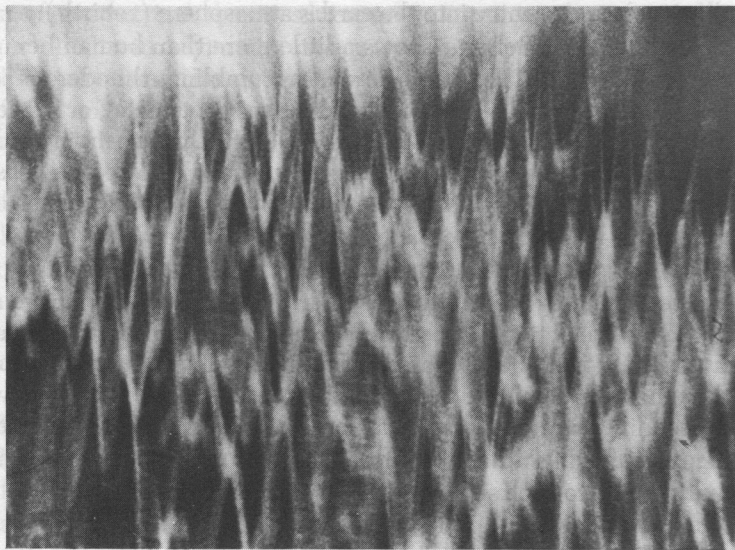
Re-Entry is chiefly informed by two specific sources: John Glenn’s first space trip, and the philosophical concept of the *Bardo*, as set forth in the ancient *Bardo Thodol* or so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a fundamental work of Mahayana Buddhism. According to Jung, *Bardo* existence is rather like a state of limbo, symbolically described as an intermediate state of forty-nine days between death and rebirth. The *Bardo* is divided into three states: the first, called *Chikhai Bardo*, describes the psychic happenings at the moment of death; the second, or *Chonyid Bardo*, deals with the dream-state that supervenes immediately after death, and with what are called *karmic illusions*; the third part, or *Sidpa Bardo*, concerns the onset of the birth instinct and of prenatal events.¹⁷

With imagery of the highest eloquence, Belson aligns the three stages of the *Bardo* with the three stages of space flight: leaving the earth’s atmosphere (death), moving through deep space (karmic illusions), and reentry into the earth’s atmosphere (rebirth).

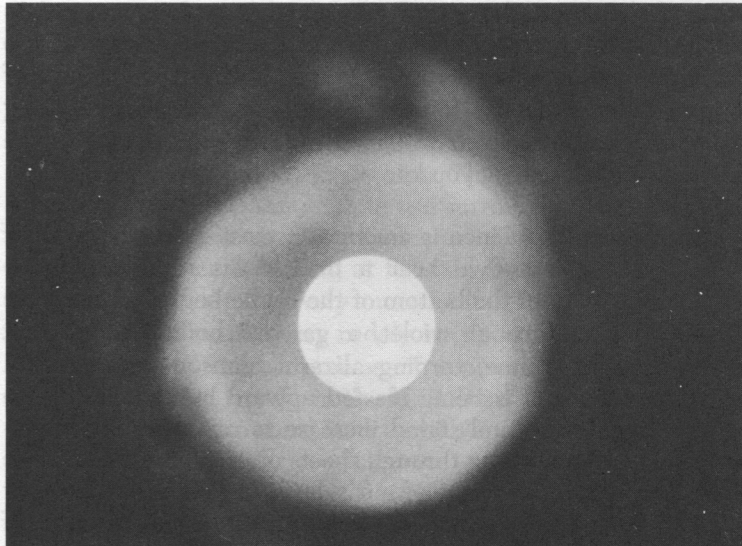
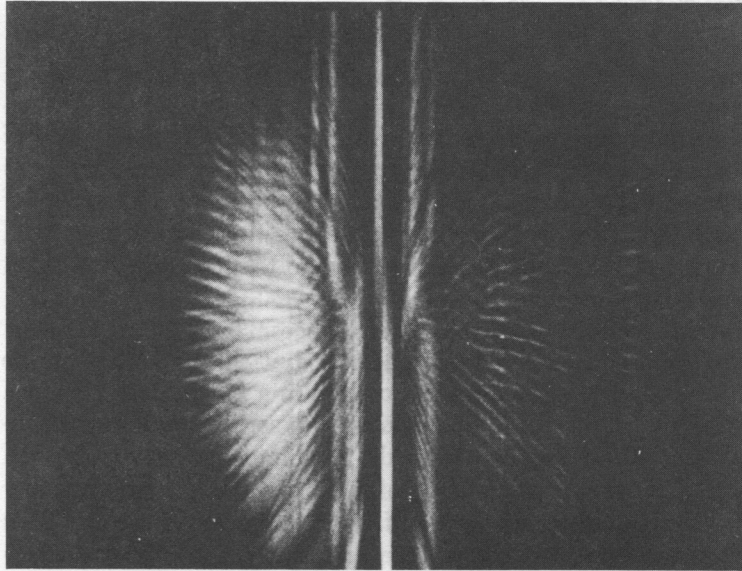
The film, says Belson, “shows a little more than human beings are supposed to see.” It begins with a rumbling thunderous drone (blast-off, perhaps). In a black void we see centripetal, or imploding, blue-pink gaseous forms barely visible as they rush inward and vanish. The sound fades, as though we have left acoustical space. After a moment of silence, the next sound is wholly unearthly: a twittering electrical pitch as vague clouds of red and yellow gases shift across the screen amorphously. Suddenly with a spiraling high-pitched whine we see a gigantic solar prominence (one of two stock-footage, live-action sequences) lashing out into space, changing from blue to purple to white to red. Now blinding white flashes, as though we’re passing the sun, and suddenly we are into a shower of descending white sparks that become squadrons of geometrical modules moving up and out from the bottom of the frame, warping and shifting to each side of center as they near the top.

GENE: Certain of your images appear in every film, like the geometrical, perspectival interference patterns. They’re quite effec-

¹⁷ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).



Jordan Belson: *Re-Entry*. 1964. 16mm. Color. 6 min. "The film does manage to transport whoever is looking at it out of the boundaries of the self."



Jordan Belson: *Re-Entry*. “. . . the next thing you know you're in heaven. You're surprised to be there. On the other hand, it's happening . . .”

tive. Do you conceive them through some sort of mathematical concept?

JORDAN: Those images in particular are derived from the nature of the device itself. But the images later in the film—the more nebulous ones, of more magnitude—they're more a question of personal vision. Discerning them, seeking them out, presents all sorts of possibilities by being receptive to them when I find them beneath my camera.

GENE: Are there other stock-footage sequences?

JORDAN: Yes. You wouldn't recognize it, but there's a shot of the earth rolling by, as seen from a camera in a rocket. I excerpted a part of that film and doubled it, so it was mirrored Rorschach-like. That's for the reentry to earth. The film leans heavily on such material. As a matter of fact, on the sound track there's actually John Glenn's radio conversation from his spacecraft to earth. He's saying something like ". . . I can see a light . . ." He was referring to Perth, Australia, as he passed over. Then it shoots past the earth and the sun and goes off into a rather ambiguous area in which you have to cross over barriers of time and space, but also mental, psychological barriers as well. It's a kind of breakdown of the personality in a way. It sort of boils out and the next thing you know you're in heaven. You're surprised to be there. On the other hand it's happening you know.

The "boiling out" sequence is among the most dramatic in all of Belson's films. Suddenly we hear a thunderous rumble that increases in intensity until the bottom of the frame begins to turn pale manganese blue and cobalt violet, a gaseous boiling cloud that surges up over the frame, turning alizarin crimson. We descend through it, as though it is being blasted upward by some explosive force far below. Image and sound increase to unimaginable intensity as though we're hurtling through sheets of space fire in a cosmic heat belt. The spacecraft is out of our solar system and into another dimension. Death has occurred; we move into the second stage of the *Bardo*.

At a corresponding point in the *Bardo of Karmic Illusions* the Sanskrit text reads: "*The wisdom of the Dharma-Dhatu, blue in color, shining, transparent, glorious, dazzling, from the heart of Vairochana as the Father-Mother, will shoot forth and strike against*

thee with a light so radiant that thou wilt scarcely be able to look at it."¹⁸

This of course could be interpreted as a supernova whose maximum intrinsic luminosity reaches one-hundred million times that of our sun. The image in Belson's film is somewhat like slow-motion movies of atomic blasts in Nevada with the desert floor swept across by a tremendous shock wave. At another point it appears as a sky of mackerel clouds suddenly set aflame and blown asunder by some interstellar force. Shimmering iceberg shapes of every hue in the spectrum dance like galactic stalactites against a sizzling frying sound. This becomes a dizzying geometrical corridor or eerie lights almost exactly like the slit-scan corridor of *2001*—except that it was made four years earlier.

Carl Jung describes the final stage of the *Bardo*: "The illuminative lights grow ever fainter and more multifarious, the visions more and more terrifying. This descent illustrates the estrangement of consciousness from the liberating truth as it approaches nearer and nearer to physical rebirth."¹⁹

The images assume majestic dimensions. Seemingly millions of minute particles suggesting mesons, cosmic rays that survive in the atmosphere for only a millionth of a second, cascade in sizzling firestorms down from the top and up from the bottom in shards of viridian, ultramarine red, Thalo blue. There's a sense of unthinkable enormity. Finally we see a white sun surrounded by a pulsating red halo, which is then obscured by vapors. "The film does manage to transport whoever is looking at it," said Belson, "out of the boundaries of the self. At that very moment is when the foundation slips out from under us and very rudely we're brought back to earth. It's all very much like the process of spacecraft reentry. You're out there, free, totally free from the limitations of earthly distance, and suddenly you have to come back and it's a very painful thing."

***Phenomena*: From Humans to Gods**

Phenomena (see color plates), completed in 1965, moved Belson closer to the totally personal metaphysical experience that culminated two years later in *Samadhi*. Also *Phenomena* was the first film in which he abandoned allegories with space flight or astro-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xxxvi.

nomie subjects for a more Buddhistic exploration of psychic energies. It was primarily inspired by Buddha's statements in the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*.

The film begins with electronically-distorted rock music as curvilinear dish shapes of bright cadmium red, crimson, and cerulean blue expand frenetically. A glowing red neon coil pulsates to the music. Next we see—unique in Belson's work—a recognizable though distorted figure of a man, then a woman, images shot from television through warped glass filters. They are obscured by a hailstorm of popping confetti-like flashes of red, white, and blue on a black field. The music fades into tumultuous cheering throngs as a fiery red starburst erupts in a sky of cobalt blue, its rings expanding into individual thorny clusters.

Belson thinks of this sequence as "an extremely capsulized history of creation on earth, including all the elements and man. It's the human sociological-racial experience on one level, and it's a kind of biological experience in the sense that it's physical. It's seen with the blinders of humanity, you know, just being a human, grunting on the face of the earth, exercising and agonizing. There's even a touch of the Crucifixion in there—a brief suggestion of a crown of thorns, a red ring of centers, each emitting a kind of thorny light cluster. The man and the woman are Adam and Eve if they're anyone. I see them as rather comic at that point. At the end of course it's pure consciousness and they're like gods. The end of the film is the opposite of the beginning: it's still life on earth but not seen from within, as *sangsara*, but as if you were approaching it from outside of consciousness so to speak. From cosmic consciousness. As though you were approaching it as a god. You see the same things but with completely different meaning."

In Buddhism the phenomenal universe of physical matter is known as *sangsara*. Its antithesis is *nirvana* or that which is beyond phenomena. Also within *sangsara* exists *maya*, Sanskrit for a magical or illusory show with direct reference to the phenomenon of nature. Thus in the *Diamond Sutra* Buddha equates *sangsara* with *nirvana* since both contain "magical" elements and asserts that both are illusory.²⁰ This is the substance of Belson's film.

²⁰ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books: The Diamond Sutra, The Heart Sutra* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1958).

Suddenly and quite incongruously we hear German *Lieder* (Belson: "The epitome of the ego personality"). A gorgeous organ-pipe lumia display dances across the frame, a shifting alignment of fluted columns of phosphorescent colors similar to the work of Thomas Wilfred and more recent lumia artists such as Julio le Parc. Though Belson calls it a "gaudy juke-box lighting effect," it is far more beautiful than its predecessors: vertical shafts of white light through which move horizontal sheets of emerald, Prussian blue, rose madder, pale citron.

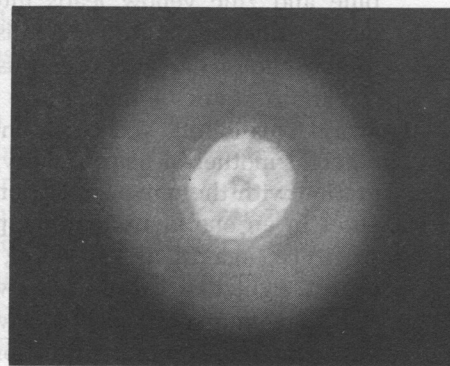
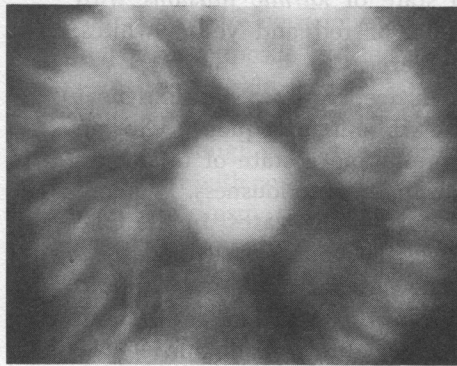
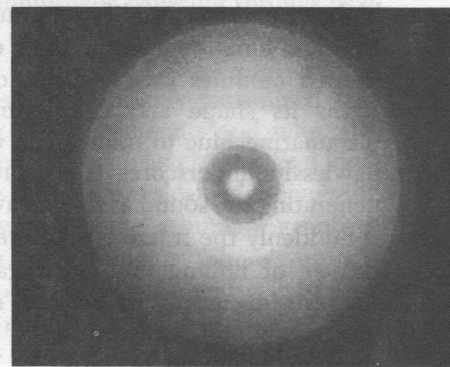
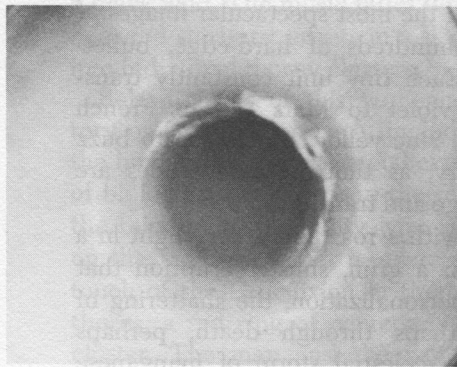
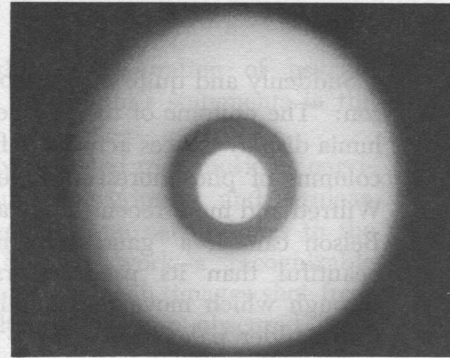
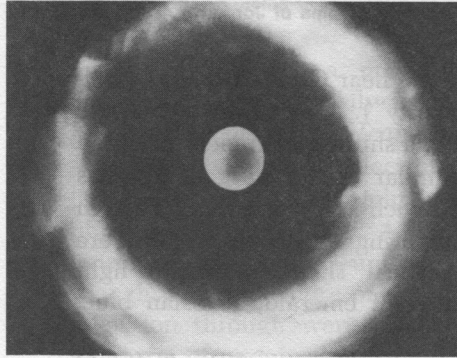
The pillars of color melt with a crackling buzz and slowly liquid blobs of pigment solidify into one of the most spectacular images of Belson's films: a mosaic field of hundreds of hard-edge, bullet-shaped modules in a serial grid. Each tiny unit constantly transforms its shape and color—from violet to Mars red to French ultramarine blue to mint green and zinc yellow. The staccato buzz flawlessly underscores the geometry, as though the modules are generating the sound as they converge and transform.

Suddenly the frame is shattered with a roar and a fiery light in a heaven of boiling multihued gases: a grim, sinister eruption that suggests, according to Belson, "depersonalization, the shattering of the ego-bound consciousness, perhaps through death, perhaps through evolution or rebirth." This celestial storm of manganese blue and zinc yellow leads into a state of *karmic illusions* with glacial, floating, aurora borealis lights of red and yellow-whites, rainbow liquid cascades of exquisite sheerness.

Various states of matter rise above, iceberg-like, sink and float away. This is followed by an intense white-light sequence with an ethereal mother-of-pearl quality, representing a state of total integration with the universe, of blinding super-consciousness. It culminates in an enormous roaring sphere of flaming gases. In the final sequence, against a descending drone, the void is shattered by a central light that throws out sweeping circular rainbows of liquid color moving majestically clockwise, collecting together, and lashing out again in the opposite direction until the ultimate fade-out.

***Samadhi*: Documentary of a Human Soul**

For two years, from 1966 through 1967, assisted by a Guggenheim Fellowship, Belson subjected himself to a rigorously ascetic



Jordan Belson: *Samadhi*. 1967. 16mm. Color. 6 min.
"When I finally saw how intense *Samadhi* is, I knew I had achieved the real substance of what I was trying to depict. Natural forces have that intensity: not dreamy but hard, ferocious."

Yoga discipline. He severed emotional and family ties, reduced physical excitements and stimulations, reversed his sensory process to focus exclusively on his inner consciousness and physical resources. The result of this Olympian effort was *Samadhi* (see color plates), certainly among the most powerful and haunting states of nonordinary reality ever captured on film. "It's a documentary of the human soul," he says. "The experiences which led up to the production of this film, and the experiences of making it, totally convinced me that the soul is an actual physical entity, not a vague abstraction or symbol. I was very pleased when I finally saw how concentrated, how intense, *Samadhi* is because I knew I had achieved the real substance of what I was trying to depict. Natural forces have that intensity: not dreamy but hard, ferocious. After it was finished I felt I should have died. I was rather amazed when I didn't."

In Mahayana Buddhism death is considered a liberating experience that reunites the pure spirit of the mind with its natural or primal condition. An incarnate mind, united to a human body, is said to be in an unnatural state because the driving forces of the five senses continually distract it in a process of forming thoughts. It is considered close to natural only during the state of *Samadhi*, Sanskrit for, "that state of consciousness in which the individual soul merges with the universal soul." This state is sought—but rarely achieved—through *dhyana*, the deepest meditation. In *dhyana* there can be no "idea" of meditation, for the idea, by its very existence, defeats the experience. The various stages of *dhyana* are denoted by the appearance of lights representing certain levels of wisdom until the final "Clear Light" is perceived. In this quasi-primordial state of supramundane all-consciousness, the physical world of *sangsara* and the spiritual world of *nirvana* become one.

Electroencephalograms of Hindu Yogis in states of *Samadhic* ecstasy, or what in psychology is known as *manic dedifferentiation*, show curves that do not correspond to any cerebral activities known to science, either in wakefulness or sleep. Yogis claim that during *Samadhi* they are able to grow as large as the Milky Way or as small as the smallest conceivable particle. Carlos Castaneda discusses similar experiences in his report of apprenticeship to a Yaqui Indian sorcerer. Such fantastic assumptions are not to be taken literally so much as conceptually, as experiences of nonordinary psychological

realities, which are nonetheless real for him who experiences them.

Perhaps with these concepts in mind we can approach Belson's sublime vision on a level more suited to it. We might remember also that practically everyone reading this book has in his possession an instrument that transforms energy within matter: the transistor. Belson seeks no more and no less than this. *Samadhi* is a record of two years of his search.

Samadhi was a radical departure from Belson's previous work in many ways. First, rather than ebbing and flowing in paced rhythms, it is one sustained cyclone of dynamic form and color whose fierce tempo never subsides. Second, in addition to the usual electronic sound, Belson's inhaling and exhaling is heard through the film to represent years of Yoga breathing discipline. And finally, whereas the earlier works moved from exterior to interior reality, *Samadhi* is continually centered around flaming spheres that evolve out of nothing and elude specific identification.

The various colors and intensities of these solar spheres correspond directly to descriptions in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* of lights representing the elements Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. They have two additional meanings, however: the *kundalini* moving upward through the *chakras*; and the inhalation-exhalation of the life force, *prana*. For those unfamiliar with Yoga concepts, the *chakras* are physical nerve centers located within the body along the spinal column at five or six points: one in the sexual region, one in the region of the navel, the heart, the throat, the eyes, the middle of the head, the top of the head. Clairvoyants supposedly can see them. According to Yoga theory the *kundalini*—the vital life force that animates the body—resides in a concentrated form at the base of the spine in the general region of the sexual organs. Through physical disciplines and ethical, moral strength one raises that center of life force from the lower spine progressively, in stages, toward the brain.

Thus one implication of the elusive shifting centers in *Samadhi* is a trip through the *chakras*, from the lowest to the highest. There is also the analogy with the breathing structure. When we hear Belson inhale, the spheres glow brighter to indicate that *prana*, the life force in the air we breathe, is being introduced into the bloodstream and therefore into the *kundalini*. The deep, spatial, dark areas of the

film indicate not only the stages between *chakras* but also exhalations when there is relatively less *prana*.

As it begins, a stormy field of turbulent gases collects around a central core. The serrated vapors melt into a small central “jewel” of curling pink and red-orange flames that finally fades into black silence. The vacuum created by this pause reverberates in the ears until, slowly, a deep blue filamented sphere evolves, turning with purposive elegance, glowing into cadmium orange, surrounded by a whirling halo. It becomes a blue sphere in a red universe, spewing off white-hot rings of light.

Next comes a series of solar or planetoid visions: a scintillating yellow star with six shimmering fingers; a blue-purple planet with a fiery red halo; a small central globe dwarfed by an immense corona; a dim yellow-ochre sun emanating flames that revolve like chromospheres in a plasma storm; various stellar orbs turning with implacable grace against wavering sonorous drones. Suddenly there’s a burst of white light of blinding intensity: a murky sea of deep blue gas is in huge movement; waves of unbearably gorgeous mist sweep across the void. It is obvious that contact has been made with some vast new reality.

Cinema to Belson is a matrix wherein he is able to relate external experience to internal experience. He feels that it culminated in *Samadhi*. “I reached the point that what I was able to produce externally, with the equipment, was what I was seeing internally. I could close my eyes and see these images within my own being, and I could look out at the sky and see the same thing happening there too. And most of the time I’d see them when I looked through the viewfinder of my camera mounted on the optical bench. I’ve always considered image-producing equipment as extensions of the mind. The mind has produced these images and has made the equipment to produce them physically. In a way it’s a projection of what’s going on inside, phenomena thrown out by the consciousness, which we are then able to look at. In a sense I’m doing something similar to the clairvoyant Ted Serios who can project his thoughts onto Polaroid film. Only I have to filter my consciousness through an enormous background of art and filmmaking. But we’re doing the same thing. *Samadhi* breaks new territory in a way. It’s as though

I've come back from there with my camera in hand—I've been able to film it.

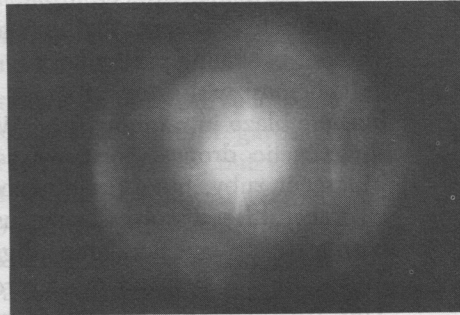
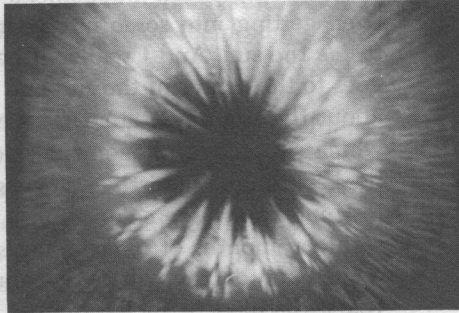
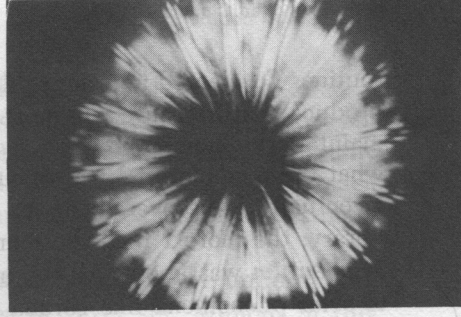
GENE: Do you feel your drug experiences have been beneficial to your work?

JORDAN: Absolutely. Early in life I experimented with peyote, LSD, and so on. But in many ways my films are ahead of my own experience. In fact *Samadhi* is the only one in which I actually caught up with the film and ran alongside of it for just a moment. The film is way ahead of anything I've experienced on a continuing basis. And the same has been true of the drug experiences. They somehow set the stage for the insights. I had peyote fifteen years ago but I didn't have any cosmic or *Samadhi* experiences. That remained for something to happen through development on different levels of consciousness. The new art and other forms of expression reveal the influence of mind-expansion. And finally we reach the point where there virtually is no separation between science, observation, and philosophy. The new artist works essentially in the same way as the scientist. In many cases it's identical with scientific exploration. But at other times the artist is able to focus more in the area of consciousness and subjective phenomena, but with the same kind of scientific zeal, the same objectivity, as scientists. Cosmic consciousness is not limited to scientists. In fact scientists are sometimes the last to know. They can look through their telescopes and see it out there, but still be very limited individuals."

Momentum: The Sun as an Atom

If one were to isolate a single quality that distinguishes Belson's films from other "space" movies, it would be that his work is always heliocentric whereas most others, even *2001*, are geocentric. The archetypal nature of the sun is such that Belson's obsession with it has, at times, tended toward a certain mysticism that was, no doubt, unavoidable. That he would someday make a movie exclusively about the sun was inevitable; that it would be his least mystical work came as something of a surprise.

"I was wondering what the subject of my next film would be after *Samadhi*," he said. "My whole world had collapsed. All the



Jordan Belson: *Momentum*. 1969.
16mm. Color. 6 min. "The paradoxical
realm in which subatomic phenomena
and the cosmologically vast are
identical."

routines I'd created in order to develop the state of consciousness to produce that film just fell apart. So I had to keep working just to maintain the momentum from *Samadhi*. I had no preconceived idea what the new material was about, but I was calling it *Momentum*. Eventually I discovered it was about the sun. I ran right to the library; the more I read the more I realized this was exactly what *Momentum* was about. All the material was similar if not identical to solar phenomena like corona phenomena, photosphere phenomena, chromosphere phenomena, sun spots, plasma storms—I was even getting into some interesting speculation about what goes on *inside* the sun. And I realized that the film doesn't stop at the sun, it goes to the center of the sun and into the atom. So that was the film, about the sun as an atom. The end shows the paradoxical realm in which subatomic phenomena and the cosmologically vast are identical. Through the birth of a new star is where it happens."

Momentum (see color plates) was completed in May, 1969, after eighteen months of painstaking study and labor. In one sense it's a refinement of the whole vocabulary he's developed through the years, distilled to their essence. But there are new effects inspired by this particular subject. *Momentum* is a calm, objective experience of concrete imagery that manages to suggest abstract concepts without becoming particularly symbolic.

It begins with stock footage of a Saturn rocket whose after-burners blaze in rainbow fury. We hear echoing ethereal music and slow cyclic drones. Next we see a solar image in mauves and iridescent ruby, huge prominences flaring in slow motion. A series of graceful lap-dissolves brings us closer to the sphere as it revolves with a steady and ponderous dignity. In spite of its furious subject, *Momentum* is Belson's most serene and gentle film since *Allures*. This treatment of the sun as an almost dreamlike hallucinatory experience is both surprising and curiously realistic—to the extent that one can even speak of "realism" in connection with solar images.

There's a visceral, physical quality to the images as we draw near to the surface and, with a soul-shaking roar, descend slowly into blackness: apparently the suggestion of a sun spot. Flaming napalm-like clouds of gas surge ominously into the void, which suddenly is shattered with an opalescent burst of light. We move through

various levels of temperature and matter. Belson's now-familiar techniques seem to possess a pristine clarity and precision not previously so distinct. Swooping cascades of flame seem especially delicate; fantastic towering shards of luminescent color reach deeper levels of the mind; the translucent realms of kinaesthesia leave one speechless.

Moving deeper into the mass, images become more uniform with a textural quality like a shifting sea of silver silt. Millions of tiny flashes erupt over a field of deep blue vapors. Quick subtle movements and sudden ruptures in the fabric of color seem suppressed by some tremendous force. Indefinite shapes and countless particles swim in a frantic sea of color.

"Then the film goes into fusion," said Belson. "A state of atomic interaction more intense than fission. This is supposed to take place on the sun, fusion." A blinding red fireball breaks into a multi-pointed star of imploding light/energy, flashing brighter and brighter, mounting in intensity. An image similar to James Whitney's *Lapis*—a collecting of millions of tiny particles around a central fiery core—builds up to the moment of crescendo, with all the colors of the universe melting into one supremely beautiful explosion, and suddenly we're deep in interstellar space, watching a distant flash as a new sun is born.

"The whole secret of life must somehow exist in the solar image," Belson remarked. "*Momentum* is a kind of revelation regarding the sun as the source of life. Not only in our solar system, but wherever there's a sun it's the source of life in that part of the universe. We come from it and return to it. Though we think of the sun as a gigantic thing, I think probably an atom itself is a small sun—in fact our sun is probably an atom in a larger structure. It's somehow tied up with the essence of being. If you were to think of a single form that would be the primary structure of the universe it would just have to be the solar sphere. I mean there's so much evidence around us to that effect."