

Who's Who in Filmmaking: James Whitney.

By William Moritz

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For openers, we must distinguish between John Whitney Sr. and James Whitney. To the general public, John may be the more famous name, since he has received many honors as a pioneer of computer graphics, and recently published *Digital Harmony* (McGraw-Hill, 1980). John's son, John Whitney Jr., is also in the forefront of computer graphics, specializing in digital simulations, many of which can be seen in TV commercials and such features as THE LAST STARFIGHTER.

To the animation connoisseur, however, James Whitney (John Sr.'s younger brother) is *the* Whitney. During his 43-year career, James made only seven short films, logging about five years of solid work on each one. In the spirit of oriental craftsmanship, James prepared all of his films by hand, and infused them with a genuine mystical sensibility. As a result, James Whitney is universally regarded as one of the great masters of visionary cinema. When he was only 27, his work was awarded a Grand Prize at the 1949 Brussels Experimental Film Festival.[1] His films are now housed in major international film archives; and, in the last decade, major retrospectives of James' work have appeared at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam, the Museum of Fine Art in Montreal, the Toronto '84 International Film Festival, and many others.

While James was studying painting and travelling in England, World War II broke out. Back home in Pasadena, his older brother, John, had constructed an 8mm optical printer so they could produce animation and special effects as a team. After collaborating with John on one short abstract film, 24 VARIATIONS, James continued to work for several years on a longer 8mm film, VARIATIONS ON A CIRCLE. This piece highlighted colored, geometric forms moving in lively, rhythmic patterns - a kind of soundless, visual chamber music.

Meanwhile, John was busy constructing both a 16mm optical printer, and a novel instrument that enabled precisely calibrated pendulums to write sounds onto the soundtrack of a 16mm film strip. The resulting sounds were "pure" electronic tones which, in the early Forties before the perfection of recording tape, shocked and fascinated audiences. John made two films using this process - FILM EXERCISES #1 and #5, while James made FILM EXERCISES #2, #3, and #4. The visual images in these films were created by shining light through flexible masks, so that the camera was filming direct light rather than light reflected from drawings. The results seem like dazzling neon apparitions, that were as novel and shocking as the accompanying soundtrack. (These FILM EXERCISES won the Grand Prize in Brussels. [2]) After 1945, James and John worked separately.

A Fascination with Eastern Philosophies

In 1943, James visited the Frank Lloyd Wright "Hollyhock House" on Olive Hill in Los Angeles (now Barnsdale Park). There, he met the young photographer, Edmund Teske, who was artist-in-residence at one of the studios on the grounds. Teske and James became fast friends, and James moved into one of the other studio residences. Both men shared a mystical bent, so they visited the Vedanta

Center where they met British celebrities Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, and Gerald Heard. As he studied Eastern philosophies, James realized that certain cosmic principles did not yield easily to verbal explanations, but could be seen and "discussed" through the abstract shapes in his films. Tensions between apparent positive/negative dualities could be particularly felt and resolved in his geometric language.

James was attracted to the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi, an Indian sage who stressed practiced self-realization and the integrity of one's whole life. Ramana taught that one must strive to be fully aware of one's total involvement with all things, for no creature - fern, flea, or flagstone - is intrinsically less worthy or possessed of less personality. Over the years, Whitney found these ideas mirrored in the talks of Krishnamurti, the paradoxes and flowing of Taoism, the ambiguities and endless toil of alchemy, the theories of nuclear physics, and the mythic psychology of Jung. The abstract language of his art became "non-objective" in the special sense of its refusal to view "things" coldly as objects.

Continually cultivating this conscious awareness of all things involved rigorous discipline. He ate well (largely vegetarian) and worked hard in order to keep himself in healthy preparedness. He rechannelled the energy of his passionate nature into inspiration for his films.

James found a suitable living space with the help of a friend, Ted van Fossen, a pupil of Frank Lloyd Wright. Van Fossen took an inexpensive, prefabricated plywood house, split it in two, and realigned it into an L-shape to embrace a garden. Huge windows on the inner side provided a continual view of the cycles of nature. Whitney, van Fossen, and Teske finished most of the house by hand, preserving the integrity of the wood grain and reinforcing the structure with brick and rustcolored tiles. If all of this seems a bit irrelevant to the study of James Whitney's film career, it is not. It is precisely this spiritual background that makes his films vibrant and exciting; and the fine consciousness of van Fossen's architecture helped James to create a series of brilliant films.

Visionary Films

YANTRA (1955) is named with the Sanskrit word for "holy machine," either a meditational device, like a mandala, or the great clockwork order of the universe. The film consists entirely of dot patterns - dots, like atoms, are the building-blocks of creation - that were punched into thousands of 5x7 cards with a pin, over a five-year period. James hand-developed the film, and solarized some portions for texture and exotic colors. The images enact a revelation of some primal mystery, a fascinating dynamism of seething, flickering particles that boil up to a climax of shattering vigor: creation laid bare. Then they implode with a dizzying entropy.

After his exhausting concentration on this film, James made what the Chinese call a "white wait," a period of contrasting creative activity. He studied *sumi-e* brush painting, which offers an immediate, tangible product and a chance to exploit the quick, broad gesture. In his studies for the film, YANTRA, James had already made some 150 dazzling paintings, swirled with pastel chalk gestures and splattered with gold paint. After five years of working in small scale and waiting for months to see the film projected, he welcomed a return to freer painting.

His next film masterpiece, LAPIS (1965), also consists entirely of dot patterns, but the mood is radically different. Like a single mandala moving within itself, the particles surge around each other in constant metamorphosis, a serene ecstasy of what Jung calls "individuation." For 10 minutes, a succession of beautiful designs grows incredibly, ever more intricate and astounding; sometimes the black background itself becomes the pattern, when paths are shunned by the moving dots. A voluptuous raga soundtrack by Ravi Shankar perfectly matches the film's flow, and helped to make LAPIS one of the most accessible "experimental films" ever made.

Occasionally, LAPIS is listed as a computer graphic film, which is quite untrue. The images were all created with handmade cels, and the rotation of more than one of these cels creates some of the movements. John Whitney Sr. had built a pioneer computerized animation set-up—the prototype for the motion-control systems that later made possible such special effects as the "Star Gate" sequence of 2001 [3]. James used that set-up to shoot some of his handmade artwork, since it could ensure accuracy of placement and incremental movement.

Again, after LAPIS, James made a "white wait" - this time throwing ceramics of great beauty and practicality—tea bowls, vases, and dishes that he and his friends could actually use in their homes. [4].

Ultimately, James' life itself became an exquisite artwork. He learned to live alone, and not be lonely; he learned to be silent, and not yearn for words. He could sit still for hours contemplating the subtle changes in afternoon light, or observing the social struggles of blue jays and mockingbirds. If others could not actually share the serenity of his natural life-flow, it nonetheless formed the basis of his brilliant artworks. Asian artists are expected to prepare themselves, spiritually and physically, for a sudden moment of creation. The artist must perform quickly with sure, swift strokes: Readiness and proficiency are crucial, since a trace of ink on rice paper cannot be erased, and hesitation of the brush means a blotch. James brought the distilled energy and vision of his daily being to bear on his films, ceramics, and paintings.

His final film project was to have been a trilogy and a prologue representing the four elements, celebrating the principles of the Tao - flowing with the natural grain of things. Two of these ravishing, tranquil, meditative films were finished and a third shot, but not yet edited, when James suddenly fell ill.

DWIJA (1973), the "fire" film, is named with a Sanskrit word meaning "twice-born" or "bird," since the bird is born once inside the shell and again when it breaks free into the outer world. This film is the prologue; it is meant to establish a mood, to clean out the vision, so to speak, in order that the following films may be seen fresh. Very little "happens" in the film. Over roughly 15 minutes, we see eight alchemical drawings that represent a bird (symbolic of the soul) trapped inside an alembic where a repeated process of distillation takes place. In the last drawing, the bird escapes. These images are seen over and over, just as the distillation process takes boiling and re-boiling. Sometimes, the images are in dense layers; at others, the colors overlap to "white-out" the image altogether. The film is hypnotic, relaxing, cleansing. The less you know about alchemy, the better, since the effect is a purely physical, kinetic one.

WU MING (1977), the "water" film, uses the opening words of the *Tao Te Ching* as its title: "No Name." The full passage reads: "At the beginning of Heaven and Earth, there were no names. Names created millions of things. Without desire, there is mystery; but with desire, there are only things. All begins the same, but names make it different." This enigmatic passage suits this contemplative film. Once DWIJA has clarified and sensitized the viewer's vision, WU MING offers one of the most lucid and rewarding experiences on film.

About 17 minutes long [5], WU MING consists of one simple gesture, one action-reaction: a particle vanishes into infinity and rebounds as expanding waves (the basic phenomenon of light energy as scientists understand it). The reduction of the gently halated forms at the beginning, the searing black-on-white after-images of the central section with its deliberate grandeur and audacious simplicity, and the luminous apotheosis of the waves of color at the end - the whole serene process of emptying and re-filling - unfolds with such austere precision and geometric beauty that the viewer cannot help but surrender, awed, to the relaxing, meditative stance that it implies. When WU MING premiered in New York, Jonas Mekas wrote in the *Soho News* (May 7, 1977): "What a relief, and what a feast, to see a work where one can feel the many years of intense living, feeling, thinking. So that there is always somebody, working almost in total silence, who comes in to restore Cinema with a work that looks like it's made by gods. "

During the final stages of his illness, James arranged the footage of KANG JING XIANG in the proper sequence for editing, so that it could be finished after his death (in 1982). The Chinese characters that make up the title are philosophically ambiguous: They could mean "like an empty mirror," as well as "what is seen during a lustrous religious ecstasy." The lovely images would support either interpretation. Half of the sequences are soft and misty (this would be the "air" film); but some have a star-like scintillation, such as the splendid scarlet mandala, which can, in turn, dissolve into the white wait of the cosmos.

When James finally realized that, despite surgery and radiation treatments, he would not recover, he picked up one of his round vases, a thing of cosmic complexity, and smiling his sweet, radiant smile, said "Now I have become this."

The films of James Whitney are a precious legacy. Because they are influenced by so many mystical and scientific ideas, they can be excellent aids for explaining or discussing those subjects. Since they are abstract, they provide alternate ways of seeing - and they also stimulate discussions about personal reactions, fantasies, and interpretation. And, of course, they are supreme achievements in the art and craft of animation, which have inspired many younger filmmakers, from the "hand-made" animators Dennis Pies and Sara Petty to the computer graphic artist Larry Cuba. But, perhaps best of all, like great pieces of music, James Whitney's films can be seen over and over again, each time with new revelation and renewed enjoyment.

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Moritz is currently working on "The Spiritual Search of Modern Art" exhibit, which will open at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in November of 1986.

Filmography

DWIJA 17 min. color 16mm & video 1973. Director: James Whitney. Dist: Creative Film Society, 8435 Geysler Ave., Northridge, CA 91324. [6]

FILM EXERCISES 2, 3 & 4, 11 min. color 16mm & video 1944. Director: James Whitney. Distributor: Creative Film Society.

KANG JING XIANG 13 min. color 16mm & video 1982. Director: James Whitney. Dist: Creative Film Society.

LAPIS 10 min. color 16mm & video 1965. Director: James Whitney. Dist: Creative Film Society.

VARIATIONS ON A CIRCLE 9 min. color 16mm & video 1942. Director: James Whitney. Dist: Creative Film Society.

WU MING 17 min. color 16mm & video 1977. Director: James Whitney. Distributor: Creative Film Society.

YANTRA 8 min. color 16mm & video 1955. Director: James Whitney. Distributor: Creative Film Society.

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CVM Notes, 2011:

[1] and [2] This is incorrect; the Whitneys' award at Brussels was a prize for sound.

[3] These effects for 2001 were not done by John Whitney, but by Douglas Trumbull.

[4]. A collection of James' ceramics is at Center for Visual Music, Los Angeles.

[5] Moritz however claimed there were 2 versions of Wu Ming, one shorter than 17 minutes.

[6] Creative Film Society is no longer in business. James' films are not in commercial distribution at present, with only a few exceptions (a few old prints at Light Cone, Paris).

James' films may be studied at selected archives and museums. Restored and HD versions of Yantra and Lapis are at Center for Visual Music (CVM), Los Angeles; the other films are available for study on videotape. New prints of

Yantra and Lapis from CVM's preservation project are at Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Various archives worldwide hold older prints of some of James' films.