

*Films by Gordon Ball*

Directed by Gordon Ball

Gordon Ball DVD, 2010

\$30.00 (individual); \$60.00 (educational)

Reviewed by Kurt Hemmer, Harper College

Underground-film enthusiasts interested in seeing the “home movie” taken to the level of art film will want to check out *Films by Gordon Ball*. Allen Ginsberg scholars will recognize Ball as the editor of three essential works: *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness* (1974), *Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties* (1977), and *Journals: Mid-Fifties, 1954-1958* (1995). Ball is also the author of a beautifully compassionate memoir, *'66 Frames* (1999), a strikingly poetic memoir, *Dark Music* (2006), and the forthcoming memoir *East Hill Farm: Seasons with Allen Ginsberg*. Some Beat scholars might be familiar with Ball’s iconic photograph *Cadets Read Howl* (1991), which depicts students agonizing over Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems*. At present, Ball teaches in the Department of English at Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in Lexington, Virginia. According to Ball, VMI has been very supportive of all of his endeavors, of which VMI should be proud. As Ginsberg has said, “You can teach the dharma anywhere” (qtd. in Ball, *Dark* 63). Ball has also spearheaded the effort to award Bob Dylan with a Nobel Prize for Literature. Yet Ball might want to be remembered most as a filmmaker. His award-winning films have been screened at the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the San Francisco Cinematheque, Kyoto Cinematheque, and the British Film Institute. The brevity of his films actually work to their advantage as they do not sap the energy of the viewer like some of the longer works by Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, and Andy Warhol (all of whom Ball worked with). You can imagine these films being shown in art museums played on large television screens and examined like one might examine a painting.

Ball’s first film was the three-minute long *Georgia* (1966). He describes the origin of this film in *'66 Frames*:

[I]n late April 1966 Jonas Mekas had stepped off the train in the Charlotte station [near Davidson College, where Ball had brought him to show his films], he’d presented me with a small, strong and heavy regular 8 millimeter Revere movie camera. In just a few minutes he’d explained all I needed to know to use it—including how to superimpose, to place one layer of imagery atop another. I took it with me riding north eight weeks later with my friend Jon Mullis, and I had it in hand when we stopped in Richmond to see Jon’s ex-wife, Margaret. Within minutes upon meeting her as twilight began to fall on a warm, expanding Saturday night in early summer, I began shooting a movie.

(30)

This silent film is a disquietingly lyrical portrait of a whimsical apparition—a woman dancing in a traffic circle fountain. William Trotter calls it “[a] perfect tone poem of a film” (qtd. in Ball, Liner notes). Jonas Mekas adds that it is “an inspired portrait . . . in the vein of a single-minded lyrical love poem” (qtd. in Ball, Liner notes). Like much of Ball’s work, it simultaneously attracts and disturbs the viewer.

The shortest of the three silent films included in this collection is *Sitting* (1977), which presents the viewer with flashing images of a meditating man's hands and face before he disappears leaving an empty meditation pillow. This was the first film Ball made after a seven-year hiatus. It gives one the impression of reaching the meditative goal of releasing the ego. The flashing images are simultaneously vibrant and placid.

*Father Movie* (1978) juxtaposes images of a reserved, older man speaking to his family with later images of the domestic dwellings he once inhabited. We want to know what is coming out of his moving lips, but are doubly thwarted when we see him serenely in his coffin, a jarring smirk on his face. About this film Brakhage says, "Gordon Ball has accomplished something unique in the autobiographical genre of motion pictures. He has reconciled 'still' (as the mind would have it remembering) with 'movie' AND 'document' (in the form of 'home movies') . . ." (qtd. in Ball, Liner notes). Memory is presented as brutally ephemeral, like flowers in a cemetery.

In *Enthusiasm* (1979), the first of four films in this collection with Ball's voice-over, we are presented with beautifully filmed old family photographs. Ginsberg says the film "makes you cry for life itself" (qtd. in Ball, Liner notes). It is a touching meditation on death with Ball recalling his mother's and father's struggles with failing bodies and failing minds. Ball's halting and unenthusiastic reading of his memories suggest his desire to create distance from the pain.

The most minimalist of the films in this collection, *Millbrook* (1985) consists solely of a small fire, and the viewers become campers listening to Ball's story. In 1967, Ball and his girlfriend visited Timothy Leary's ashram in Millbrook, New York. They were not allowed to stay in the mansion, so they camped in the woods, where they took LSD and Ritalin (big mistake). They get trapped in each other's bad trips and start imagining their own deaths. Ball calls out to Ginsberg, whom he did not know at the time, for help. Just as the nightmare becomes almost unbearable, the couple is rescued by Jack Leary, Timothy's son. Rather than a romanticized tale of mind-expansion, this stark movie acts as a warning about the darker side of drug experimentation.

Ball's vision is often bleak, but perhaps his most harrowing film is *Do Poznania [To Poznań]: Conversations in Poland* (1991). Critic Stephen Finn Young writes, "*Do Poznania* is much akin to Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard (Night and Fog)*, another cautionary film with poetic parable qualities. The poetic parable is Ball's natural territory" (qtd. in Ball, Liner notes). Poznania, pronounced "Pohznawnia," is a city west of Warsaw. Shot in 1986 and 1988, this film is a poem to the Poles using pieces of conversations Ball had with the country's beleaguered citizens prior to glasnost. Images of Auschwitz and Birkenau harass our eyes like persistent ghosts reminding us of past horrors. Striking images of architecture, parks, and countryside share the screen with images of urban decay, and we hear Ball's voice-over express the harsh reality of life under the oppressive Soviet regime.

The centerpiece of this collection is another disturbing film, *Mexican Jail Footage* (1980). In 1968, Ball and a couple dozen other American youths were arrested without charges or explanations in Puerto Vallarta. Film was smuggled in for Ball's camera. "*Mexican Jail Footage* reminds me of standing by the tracks and watching a train go by—it is so strong," says filmmaker Tom Whiteside, "it lasts so long, and it is over so quickly" (qtd. in Ball, Liner notes).

Mekas calls this work “the best jail film I’ve seen,” and Robert Frank adds, “I can’t forget this film” (qtd. in Ball, Liner notes). Ball’s voice-over description of his and his friends’ tribulations are belied by the images of the comely youths in jail. The young Americans look relaxed beside their Mexican jailmates, successfully hiding their fears. Just as mysteriously as they were arrested, they are released. The viewer is left with a lingering Kafkaesque feeling of uncertain dread. “I wish [President Ronald] Reagan could see that,” says Ginsberg (qtd. in Ball *Dark* 30).

Though the tone of Ball’s work is often dim, the fact that he has created art with just minimal resources is a refreshingly hopeful example for young filmmakers. This collection also includes a candid interview of Ball on his life and works by Whiteside, and those interested should also see Ball’s website, <[gordonballgallery.com](http://gordonballgallery.com)>. Ball calls his filmmaking “technical sincerity.” He says, “[T]here is always at base an unregretful uncompromising heart and consciousness. It is negligent of all but its own earnest rhythmic awareness: and that, after all, may be what we were looking for—what one person and no other can give us” (Liner notes). Fans of Ball’s work look forward to his next little piece of sincerity.

#### Works Cited

Ball, Gordon. *Dark Music*. Longmont, CO: Cityful Press, 2006. Print.

---. Liner notes. *Films by Gordon Ball*. Gordon Ball, 2010. DVD.

---. *'66 Frames*. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1999. Print.