

Beyond the head and the heart

By Emily LaBarge

“The head is the organ of exchange, but the heart is the amorous organ of repetition,” says the calm, melodic voice that narrates Alexis Kyle Mitchell’s *The Treasury of Human Inheritance* (2024), which we learn towards the end of the hour-long film is in fact the artist’s own voice. You might have guessed earlier: the same steady tone takes us through various histories of mysticism, theology, evolution, genetics, eugenics, medical pathologies, phone calls with family members, old home videos, online physiotherapy sessions, tarot card readings, meditations, and finally — in a sublime crescendo — a passage from “The Aleph,” a short story by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, in which time and space expand and collapse, repeat, reverse, play again and again, without end.

This is not unlike the time and space of the film itself, which kaleidoscopes past and present, travels — sometimes literally — along shared neuronal pathways, and gestures at a cosmic beyond. Beyond the here and now; beyond the body as we know it, and the mind too; beyond the head and the heart; beyond the soul, if you believe we have one (I do); beyond how we see the images offered to us so that we can learn the world anew; beyond what we accept as order and proof about how nothing or everything is connected — both alternatives offering radically diverse kinds of autonomy, but neither an easy way to live. *The Treasury of Human Inheritance* proposes — channels, transmits, as conscious as subconscious — a different way, an in between way, a different mode of thinking and being those lives, uneasy but stunning, in the murky space between the opposites that we so often avoid.

Even its title is manifold, depending on what you know and how you wish to read it. (What you don’t know, and how you don’t wish to read it.) The word *treasury* — with its roots in the 14th century Middle English *tresorie*, or room for treasure, stronghold for wealth, precious stones, often with royal connotations — conjures something sacred, carefully preserved or guarded, an effluence of something shining and rare, hoarded even, jealously, superstitiously, spoken of in hushed tones of awe. *Inheritance*, too, from another 14th century Middle English word, *einheritaunce*, is associated with material possession — the act or the right, god given, of inheriting something, sometimes passed down through many generations.

Mitchell’s film, precious and glittering in its own way, turns these associations around and around, revealing their dark sides and their darkling magic alike. *The Treasury of Human*

Inheritance was the name of a project, and associated publication, initiated by the British mathematician, eugenicist, and antisemite Karl Pearson in 1909 and developed extensively by his colleague, Julia Bell, for the next half-century. Their work was part of a revival of interest in Gregor Mendel, the Austrian scientist who studied biological inheritance in plants (peas, specifically), extending his ideas to hereditary traits in people. Pearson was a socialist, an atheist, a proponent of suffrage and anti-monarchy movements — and a social Darwinist who used his work to argue for superior and inferior races.

We see some of his genetic charts (or perhaps they are those of Bell, often lauded as a great success story of opportunities for women that arose during the First World War) flicker by, pages from the original *The Treasury of Human Inheritance* in Mitchell’s new *The Treasury of Human Inheritance*. The film is in part about genetic predisposition to a degenerative illness called myotonic dystrophy, but is also about other kinds of charts and journey, trails and travails: spiritual, psychic, ecological, cosmic, endless, expansive, far surpassing any corporeal body. Here, in the artist’s new treasury, with its alternative inheritance so much closer to the original meanings of the word, other schematic lineages appear as likewise still images in between Pearson’s restrictive studies: the growth of trees, the Kabbalistic Tree of Life (including one version made by the avantgarde writer Kathy Acker), Ernst Haeckel’s “Pedigree of Man” (which also appears as a tree, its naked branches snaking and gnarled), “pedigree plates” from the early American eugenics tome *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness*, and an illustration of “The Great Chain of Being” from the 1579 book *Rhetorica Christiana* by Didacus Valades.

There are other diagrams, other images still and moving, that are unfamiliar to me, but recognition is not the point so much as the overlapping patterns and structures that emerge. These are at once liberating (aesthetically, formally) and a reminder (unsettling, painful) of how pseudomorphology has in the past gained outside credence, allowing people to think differently about human life, as if it is divisible into categories, grades, preferences, condemnations.

We listen to doctors and experts describe myotonic dystrophy, hear Mitchell speak to her mother and her sister, both of whom suffer from the illness, and grasp something practical about the experiences of the disease (weakness and muscle wasting that eventually affect every part of the body) and its genetic predispositions (it is highly hereditary, worsens and

appears earlier with each generation). We sit in on online physio sessions in which the artist instructs her sister to do rudimentary but presumably lifesaving exercises; we see feet crunching over gravel as a voice dictates directions on a countryside pilgrimage; we see ruined buildings — an old police station, the modernist St Peter’s Seminary, a room with a chandelier in disarray.

Everything overlaps, everything all at once, a soundtrack, based on the looping patterns of myotonic dystrophy, jitters and stutters, wheels and cavorts, high and low, chaotic but not quite unpredictable. The celluloid itself frays and flares, turns dusky or bleached white, which we realise from the voiceover is because of how it has been produced with bodily materials: urine can be used to develop film, and the quality of the urine can be altered with the consumption of other substances — MDMA, for instance. The artist’s family is *in* the film and then the artist’s family, its genetic materials, is really and truly in the film. She is the alchemist — the mysterious tarot card that appears in one sequence, unique to the deck being used, we are told — who bridges mind and body, the head and the heart, reminding us that this is, perhaps, what art can do.

“The Great Chain of Being” illustrated by Valades in the late 16th century is just one of many proposals for order that has been equally interpreted as disordered, fluid, malleable. It shows, in this version at least, the Christian hierarchical structure of the world. God is at the top, Satan at the bottom, and in between a progression of angels followed by humans, animals, plants, minerals. But you try living without one of those last three. For the Greeks, ranking the world’s organisms was a non-religious activity but resulted in a similar outcome. But in alchemy, the great chain is not divisible into its constituent parts — though they may appear to have a fixed sequence. Rather than separation, the links imply connection, the possibility of transformation from one piece to the next, a fundamental unity — all matter is all matter is all matter. You can decide. Hold the pose as long as you want. Hope no one notices your arms wavering, your hair flapping in the breeze, your calf muscle shaking, wondering if you’re about to give up, not caring if you do, the energy moves on, comes back. Like family, we don’t really get to choose what we have in this life, but we can make whatever we want of it.

— Emily LaBarge, May 2025