**Ultra Dogme** 

# Intervals of Light & Darkness

A Collection of New & Selected Texts on the Cinema of Larry Gottheim

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by Luise Mörke

"But of course everything is imminent in anything, with corresponding troubles and vexations, things in need of attention, bringing many bits that concern us, their pertinent worries and the accompanying worrying. Time gets intersected by the comings and goings of its dramatis personae: dog walker, truck driver, short order cook, oncology nurse, barista, florist, bank teller, dog walker, student, civil rights lawyer, electrician, figment of imagination. Real shadows are subject to the time of day, and to the position of the sun." – Lyn Hejinian, Positions of the Sun, published by Belladonna\* in 2018



Before increasing irritation with Kardashianesque body aesthetics led me to delete my Instagram account, I occasionally spent time scrolling through the infinite accumulation of cooking videos the app wanted me to watch: squishy noodles extruded from man-sized machines, strings of melted cheese forming at the lift of a fork, fluffy Japanese Shokupan topped with cloud-like heaps of cream. In these snippets, cooking seemed effortless, free from the laborious process of shopping, chopping, cleaning. Light-years away from agricultural production, poorly waged labor, or industrialized

animal farms, food was a spectacle of contained sensuality, whose appeal lay neither in its taste nor in its marvelous capacity to act as social glue, but in the textures and sounds it evoked. Foam, fluff, bounce, crunch, yum.

I think of Larry Gottheim's silent 16mm film Corn as a distant cousin of these cooking videos, haunted by obstinate family resemblances, characterized by differences. Corn captures a static, but never contained view of an ordinary moment in the kitchen, accounting for the ways in which evening sunlight falls into the room and emanating vapor textures the air. Over a duration of ten and a half minutes, tanned hands deliver corn cobs from the snug enclosure of their husks, enough for a small gathering to gnaw on for a while (and worry about skins stuck between teeth later). The hands then take the cobs away, leaving empty husks in their wake, only to return them later in an altered state, steaming and dewy after a bath in the kettle. Work, water, and heat have transformed the corn from starchy plant into menu item, a change that entails a slight adjustment of gestures: while detaching the raw insides from the leafy outsides demanded force, the softened fibers of the cooked vegetable call for decisive yet delicate handling with tongs. Carefully, one cob after another is placed on a hand thrown serving platter, slightly too small for its purpose, but such a flawless encapsulation of the aesthetics of a time (the late 1960s) and place (in North America) that Corn might as well have been called Plate. Whose work is this? Was it a gift from a friend? A thrift store find? In any case, it is the kind of object that catches the eye each day, and in the catching makes a home.

Shot inside the house, without staffage or camera movement, Gottheim's film operates on a modest scale, but opens onto a world outside the frame. The plate invites questions about its relations, the warm light hints at the summer air outside, friends that might be waiting in the garden. When cook and cobs remain off-screen for several minutes, viewers are granted enough time to imagine where they might have disappeared to and what is currently happening outside the limited scope of their view. In time, what's modest reveals itself to be sufficiently plentiful. If the mundane is a slow affair, *Corn* offers patience as a tribute to its stunning, fleeting sluggishness.

## A History of the Dividing Line: Larry Gottheim's Horizons (1973)

by Michael Sicinski

Horizons is a pivotal work in Larry Gottheim's filmmaking career, for a number of reasons. After having made seven short films, Horizons was Gottheim's first feature-length effort. In many respects it is the summation of certain tendencies in the first part of Gottheim's career, even as it introduces strategies that will define the newer works to come. Gottheim retroactively designated Horizons as the first part of his four-feature suite Elective Affinities, suggesting that it offered a gateway for understanding the major precepts of this second phase of production.

This is particularly noteworthy because unlike the following three Elective Affinities films – *Mouches Volantes* (1976), *Four Shadows* (1978), and *Tree of Knowledge* (1981) – *Horizons* is a silent film. Even more to the point, the three subsequent films find Gottheim experimenting quite purposefully with the use of sound and the relationships between sound and image. This emphasizes the compositional significance of inaugurating the suite with 75 minutes of pristine silence.



But what defines Horizons is its hybridity, the way it continues several of the formal strategies of his six previous silent films. The best known of those films tended to fixate on a particular space or object in order to allow it to articulate itself across time. *Fog Line* (1970), for example, is a single shot from a fixed camera position, showing the fog gradually lifting from an upstate New York landscape. In addition to alluding to photography itself – the image slowly "developing" onscreen – Fog Line allows painterly flatness to evolve into cinematic depth, with expansive features of the landscape (hills, fields, telephone wires) to morph in real time, from broad swaths of tone and texture into representational space.

Gottheim's intensive focus on a single location is most fully elaborated in *Barn Rushes* (1971). A series of right-to-left tracking shots taken from a moving car, the film presents images of one locale – a decaying wooden barn in a field – in dozens of visual configurations. Gottheim shoots at various times of day, with radically different available light. He shoots in different weather conditions. And he shoots the barn and field at various points of the year, allowing the changing of the seasons to envelop the barn. This single structure takes on a multitude of distinct characteristics, based on the timbre of the sky, the lushness of the field, and even the intensity of light peering through the boards of the barn.

Barn Rushes is a study of variance through repetition, showing that any given shot's formal meaning is established by its relation to other such shots. From there, Gottheim turned his procedure inside out. Instead of using a single location as his basis, describing that location by observing change over time, *Horizons* uses time itself as the organizational basis of the film. It is a landscape film consisting of four movements, each corresponding to the four seasons. Moreover, the number of shots in sequence inversely corresponds to the length of daylight hours during that season. Summer is first, with two-shot sequences (divided by green leader); then autumn, with four-shot sequences (divided by red leader); winter, also with four-shot sequences (blue leader); and finally spring, featuring three-shot sequences (yellow leader).

Many specific locations recur throughout *Horizons*, but the editing works against any sense of spatial adjacency. Instead, Gottheim asks us to observe relationships within the groups of landscapes that he has assembled. Rather than taking a given location as axiomatic, *Horizons* organizes our perception quite deliberately, with Gottheim treating each passage of landscape film as a unique formal event with its own particular forms and concepts. Where the earlier films were somewhat ontological, this

one is fictive, in the sense that every relationship in the film is forged by Gottheim, to bring out connections that, without montage, would simply not exist.



Gottheim treats the horizon line as a way to divide the frame, and while many shots are expectedly horizontal and Rothko-like, others tilt and warp the dividing line, showing hills, curved roads, barriers and embankments, or close-ups of roadside weeds that produce a "dotted" horizon line. Using this highly variable baseline, Gottheim creates groups of shots that dialectically reveal a variety of elements. Some of these relationships are formal. There are pairs, triads, and tetrads that emphasize color, tone, shape, and density. Some play stillness against movement, or slow movement against fast. Some show the horizon high in the frame, others low.

Then there are groups of shots that focus on observable spatial content: relative fullness or emptiness; flat or hilly; exterior vs. interior; flora in the foreground, middleground, or background; presence or absence of people or animals; and so on. Several sequences move us across, or into, the depicted scene, and while this may seem a purely formal matter – Gottheim's decisions regarding camera movement – they also speak to the organization of the spaces themselves, whether they are open fields,

highways, or forests. And still other edited groups suggest conceptual relationships. For example, several shots of clothes on a line are followed by sheep in a field, offering a Vertovian deconstruction of manufacture, from finished product back to the raw wool.

Horizons is a film with a structure, but it is not really a structural film. Within the overall container of the calendar year, Gottheim produces unexpected micro-events by organizing the landscape material into discrete cells. Although one could probably chart entire matrices of connections across the film, this is not necessarily how it asked to be watched. Instead, *Horizons* meets us within the seasons, a time frame all living things have in common. Inside that temporal arc, Gottheim offers small, individual bursts of observation and surprise. It is a map of casual noticing, a year filled with sudden, epiphanic conjunctions of earth and sky.

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Musical Conditions:
A Conversation with Larry
Gottheim Before a Screening
of Tree of Knowledge (1981)
and Mnemosyne, Mother
of Muses (1987)

by Ruairí McCann

On June 1st of 2022, I had the pleasure of screening two films by Larry Gottheim, *Tree of Knowledge* and *Mnemosyne, Mother of Muses*, at the Beanbag Cinema in Belfast as part of that year's Docs Ireland. It was most certainly his first screening in Belfast, and likely his first in Ireland, so it was an exciting day. I'm also pleased to say the films went down very well.

To offer up some context for the audience, I recorded a 25 minute video intro with Larry Gottheim on Zoom. I asked him about his work in general and these films and different aspects more specifically. Gottheim graciously obliged while also discussing other topics, including his new film *Entanglement* (then in the works but since completed and premiered at the 2022 edition of the Light Matter Festival in New York) and related themes. On that note, for clarification, 'the book' that is referred to is Gottheim's memoir, *The Red Thread*.

Additionally, about halfway through the interview I mention a film by Hollis Frampton and call it *Surface Tension* (1968). I meant *Critical Mass* (1971). My apologies. I hope you enjoy it despite my various lapses and mealy mouthedness. Mr. Gottheim sure does make up for it.



Ruairí McCann: Hello everybody. My name is Ruairí McCann. I'm an apprentice programmer at Docs Ireland and I would like to welcome you to this screening of two films by Larry Gottheim. We're going to be showing *Mnemosyne, Mother of Muses*, which was first screened in 1987, and *Tree of Knowledge,* a longer work, which was screened in 1981. So just to give you an introduction to the films, Larry has very kindly taken the time out to talk about them so, first of all thank you very much Larry.

**Larry Gottheim:** Of course. This is what I live for.

To get us started, before we talk about the films specifically, could you talk about how you first got attracted to the notion of filmmaking. Somebody who knows your history, who sees the films too, knows that you have an affinity with music, with literature. But what was it about filmmaking in particular that you eventually made it your vocation?

**LG:** Well, it's a difficult question actually, because most of the major things in my life sort of happened, almost instantaneously, without my having any real explanation. I had to think about it later, and in writing the book, part of the thing in the book is connecting some kinds of autobiographical things to the films. So, I can't really tell why. I think that I was impatient. You know, I had gone from music to studying literature, getting a PHD in comparative literature, starting to teach literature, and something came to me as a desire to get involved with film. I didn't even know, really, what that meant. At that time, I didn't know anybody who was like a personal filmmaker. So, I did a few projects when I just got the camera that I think of... I mean I like them now, but I think of them as not really part of my major body of work. It seems to me now, from the perspective of the book, and also now from the new film that the number of films that I've made is small compared to, let's say, Brakhage, who's made seemingly thousands of films. So there are distinct films, going from one to the next and the next, [but] even to get some order to it, I put it into periods. Like the things that were silent, continuous shot films, of which Fog Line (1970) is among that most people know. Although I think nobody really gets it, hopefully that will happen.

And then *Tree of Knowledge* is part of a sequence of four films that are called *Elective Affinities*, but when I was making them, I was making them one at a time. I made *Horizons* (1973) as its own project and then, when I was working on the next film, *Mouches Volantes* (1976), I realised that there was some kind of deep connection

between them and that's what generated the idea. But all of the films are sort of tied together, and it's amazing to me that they have that quality because I didn't plan it. I mean we're talking about a long period of time between *Blues* (1970), the first film, and *Entanglement* (2022), the film I'm working on now. But they seem to be connected. In fact, what *Entanglement* is about is connectedness, in some way.

So there was the initial thing of just wanting to get a camera, and the films that I knew about. Of course, it was a very exciting period in New York. I mean the world, but certainly in New York. What was going on in painting and sculpture and dance and music and poetry. It was a really, very exciting period, and I was sort of caught up in that. And the thing that turned out to be very influential were some of Warhol's films that I've seen, and then there were some other film programs, so I became aware of a world of people who were making films as a single person, not as part of an industry.

The way you described it there, in terms of this sort of unplanned quality of your filmmaking body of work in general, but also just realizing in reflection this sort of structure that's there, seems especially relevant for *Tree of Knowledge*. Because there are these spur-of-the-moment elements to it, but also the documentary, the educational film that you see in the film, *Paranoid Conditions*, which was something that had to be turning over in your mind for a good period of time before you had started to make this film. So, could you give an introduction of how you started making this particular film, the process and when did you realize this was a single work?

**LG:** Well actually, not only with the films of *Elective Affinities* but all of my films after that, including my present project, there's a period of just assembling material that fascinates me, or things that are shot without having any place to put them in. And usually, in many of those films, there's a combination of material that existed before like the documentary on paranoid conditions and inside that is a documentary about the seasons of the year. So, I had saved those when I was teaching. My teaching was part of my creative work where I would sometimes show things that were interesting to me. Of course, mostly, only a few people, of the students, would be able to get it in a certain way that I was getting it. But then gradually the accumulation of that material got to come together in terms of a certain form that usually came earlier. There was a kind of a format that involved repetition. A certain structure of the film that allowed these disparate elements to come together, and in the editing there's this sort of intricate working together between sound and image in order to tie them together. So,

in some ways that happens with both of the films. *Mnemosyne*– by the way, I'm not even sure what the correct pronunciation is. I've always called it na-mos-za-nee. My German friends call it nay-mo-zee-na, but call it whatever you want cause it's Greek.



When I first came across the term or the name, I think I looked it up and I found seven or eight different ones.

**LG:** Right. But the thing is memory is really important. My interest in it was... even the title was involved with my reading about Heidegger, studying things of Heidegger, not as a really deep philosopher. I'm not a philosopher nor am I a physicist, but I'm a film artist. I'm touched by these things [and then] I get on to them in a very personal way. So, memory functions both outside of the films as what memory is, and uncovering deeper and deeper ideas of memory, but also the structure of the films involves memory and anticipation as a viewer of the film. In other words, there's memory operating because things are repeated. At least in both of these films there is a kind of repetition. A complicated thing of going backwards in *Mnemosyne*. So as a viewer–of

course, I never know what's going on in the mind of a viewer. I want the films to provide a kind of field of experience in which each person is having a different experience. Both at a certain time, overall and then if they see it again, it will be an incredibly different experience, but memory is involved in that. Remembering when you saw something before, what was it like, what was the context?

It's interesting that you mention, in terms of being a film artist and not being a scientist, and also discussing memory in that context, cause I was reading recently that in the 19th century, debates were happening over the nature of nostalgia and whether it could be classified as like a mental disorder and treated as such or was it something else. Something that also could be creative or productive.

**LG:** It's very interesting.

It's a very interesting debate. I see it in Tree of Knowledge too as well.

LG: Yes.

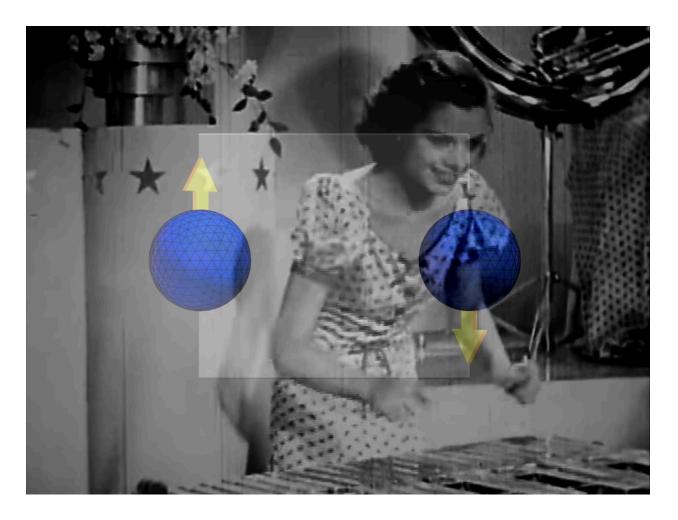
There's sort of different elements that are more instinctively placed in the film and more, you could say creative, so to speak and then there's sort of the way the documentary film functions in that film and the more scientific elements. In *Mnemosyne*, that film has this visual turbulence, the very fast and unstable cutting. The way the sound works too, with reversing the sound. I was just wondering where the impetus of that came from, because it's very different from your earlier films which were often, or at the very least a few of them, done in one shot and they have this very stable, receptive camerawork. So where did this stylistic change come about for you?

**LG:** I gotta do one footnote because you struck a bell talking about nostalgia, because there's a film by Hollis Frampton called *(nostalgia)* (1971). It's very different but it's the same idea of kind of looking backwards in the film itself, and then he's giving autobiographical information too. And I suppose he was somebody that I felt very much kinship with and friendship with, so it's not surprising.

Yeah I definitely see similar ways in terms of how he edits sound like *Surface Tension*, I think is the film, where the argument happening in it makes me think of

your work about students, and the student-made films. There's some similarities there.

**LG:** I find that because I'm stuck here a lot—I can't go out a lot and travel around and so on, partly because of Covid but also other things here so—at night, I started to watch these lectures on quantum mechanics and it's really interesting how time... I don't want to give too much away about the new project, but a lot of the concepts of quantum mechanics have, even the same words that they use, they throw back to some words that Heidegger used in a very different context. Especially about being and time and of course, what quantum mechanics is, is an investigation of the nature of reality and time and so on. And of course, Heidegger had no connection with that but yet there is a connection, somehow, at least in my mind and in my films.



So, both of those films have something to do with this rapid camera movement. Basically, I was aware of the negative side of doing things where the camera was still and there was no camera movement, or if there was camera movement it was from

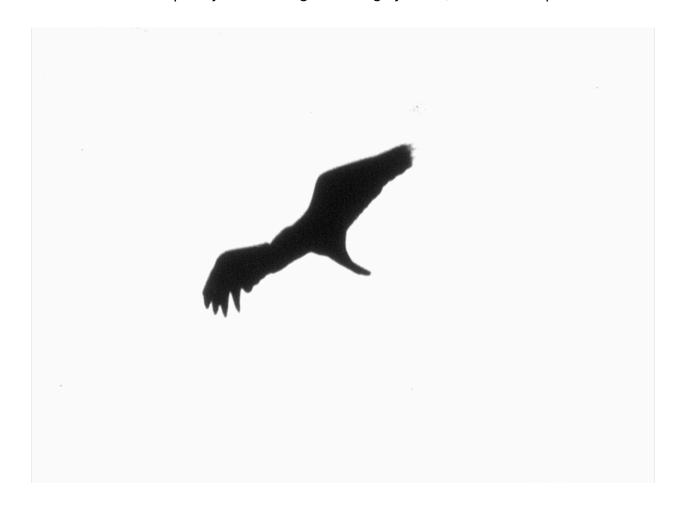
inside a car that was moving. It was almost like an inhibition to actually hold the camera and move the camera in an expressive way, and thinking a lot of Brakhage's work which, of course, overwhelmingly influences everybody but in a way, also, I was a different person. I didn't want to do that kind of camera movement. And so there was a breakthrough in the material of the apple tree in *Tree of Knowledge* where I was almost breaking through this inhibition of camera movement and going, as often the case when you go suddenly into something, you go crazy with it a little bit. I mean you do things that are impulsive and fast and so on, so that's a lot of what's going on in *Tree of Knowledge*, that the feeling—I didn't mean this is an explanation of it—but the feeling that there is something to do with mental conditions. In other words, going from static to erratically moving the camera had something to do with psychology or whatever.

Somehow, that's what led me to start to make those connections. Now once I broke free of this inhibition then I began to work loving these certain kinds of camera possibilities that are very present in *Mnemosyne*. I mean there's certain films like *Mnemosyne* and *The Red Thread* and so on where I feel like I love those movements. I love those passages of movement which are not, no longer, just impulsive, and wild and crazy. I mean, I kind of was connected now with the camera and could do this stuff, especially on the Bolex where you could go between single frames and short bursts of film and going back and forth. I felt very comfortable with that.

Also, another thing that was involved: there were varied stages of how I would work externally. So, in some of those films, I used these graph paper scripts to sort of edit the things and then I got to use the editing table. When I got to be using the Steenback that became just as I felt the camera was part of me so was the Steenbeck part of me. It was like a perfectly wonderful thing. Now it happened that things changed, in that the film that I made in Haiti [Chants and Dances for Hand (shot in 1991 & completed in 2016)], because of low-light situations and whatever, it started to become a video project. So that project and the subsequent films, including the new film, are digital works and I feel that I've leapt over.

That's another division that's been very important. I had to come to terms, in some way, with the video technology in relationship to my mind and my body. There's a kind of nostalgia that I have for the Bolex but I gotta kind of work around that and deal with it. I mean the world changes. I know that there's a wonderful thing of so many people wanting to work in 16mm now and even getting involved with developing their own films but that's not for me. With editing, I need to have somebody, as Christian [Flemm]

was with *Knot/Not* (2019), and now I have this person Rebekkah [Palov] who's helping me with that. Because I can't deal with both the complexity of the work itself and to learn the whole complexity of these digital editing systems, so I need help there.



I was curious, with this changeover to digital, has that bodily sense of the camera and editing been completely lost. It sounds like you have a new relationship with it, but does it still feel very physical?

**LG:** It happens that there's always, starting with *Mouches Volantes* and with all of the films, something external to my own filmmaking. Like in *Tree of Knowledge*, there's the whole documentary on paranoia and within it, the material from this documentary about the seasons, which is not made by me. It's taking something from somebody else. It had an existence outside of me and I'm bringing it into my world. Even in the previous films like *Mouches Volantes* where there's a sound text that I accepted of this interview story of Blind Willie Johnson, the blues singer, told by his widow. So that, even in the new film and in *Knot/Not*, there's a very big proportion of [found] material.

In fact, in the new film, almost all of the material is coming from somewhere like on YouTube. Somewhere it has an existence already that I am re-contextualising it in terms of how I'm using it. So that I even have the problem today. I got this little Sony digital camera, which I used for some of the material in *Knot/Not*, and one of the advantages was I could carry it around. But now for the new film, I have something I want to film and it's not working with that camera so I have to borrow a camera from a friend, which he doesn't know how to use. So, I have to face these issues today.

#### Problems that never go away.

LG: Right.

I think we're pretty close to the end of our time but just as a final question, I wanted to ask you about pedagogy and cinema, about teaching, because in Tree of Knowledge you're using these two different educational films and with one in particular, the *Paranoid Conditions* film as the audience will see, you're kind of re-arranging it. I think you're kind of challenging it. Challenging the way it's trying to instruct the viewer. I was wondering, did this approach develop from your thinking about teaching. Has cinema fed into your thinking about teaching?

LG: Yeah. I mean it's very important, it's very deep. A lot of the things that I recognise are deep, they're so deep that I don't even have an understanding of them. But a lot of these films have... They're sort of about explaining. They're about science in a certain way, challenging it but yet you can't really challenge it in that the seasons are... The explanation of the seasons in *Tree of Knowledge*, you can't challenge that and say it's not true. But yet the very fact that it's kind of a structure that can be passed by education is something that I'm... I have a challenge to that. Although I don't have the answer to it. I'm not trying to make a philosophical statement but a film thing that exists not as a statement. So somehow, I'm drawn to that, knowing my own experience, my discovery of myself as a filmmaker. I was already teaching. I was teaching in the English department. I was teaching literature, when I got a camera. It was something that I never thought would be life changing. But it was connected to my teaching. The getting of these films was through this resource in the university, that's how I found that film, et cetera.

So, it's also a challenge of knowledge. I mean, I don't have a theory of what is knowledge, at all, but I feel that what is presented to us as knowledge... There's something underneath that I can't explain. That's what drove me to being interested in quantum mechanics, because in quantum mechanics there's a kind of

ambiguity in the nature of it. It's no longer like Newton, or a classical understanding of the world is replaced by a realisation that the world is not subject to that kind of analysis. So somehow, those kinds of questions lie behind a lot of my experience and my thinking, so that the films touch on issues but they're not didactic.



Another important that I did, and it was a big heavy decision that I'm always thinking about, is I had some films that grew out of class projects and especially in *Natural Selection* (1984), where I worked with a group of students for a long period of time and they shot all the material and then I edited it. And I felt that it was my film. I mean not that I don't recognise the great accomplishment of the students, but it was my film both because I edited but also because my relationship with the students was a certain kind of relationship where there was a kind of meeting of minds. A connectedness between me and the students so that I could give them freedom to film whatever was in them to film, whatever ideas they had, but it was connected to me. It was as though we were connected. So, my whole body of work does function around that idea of the pedagogue, the authority figure, and of course the authority figures are

always negative figures, like the doctor in *Tree of Knowledge*. He's a kind of negative image of myself. These characters appear who are, what I call in the book, avatars of me or avatars of each other, and some of them are authority figures.

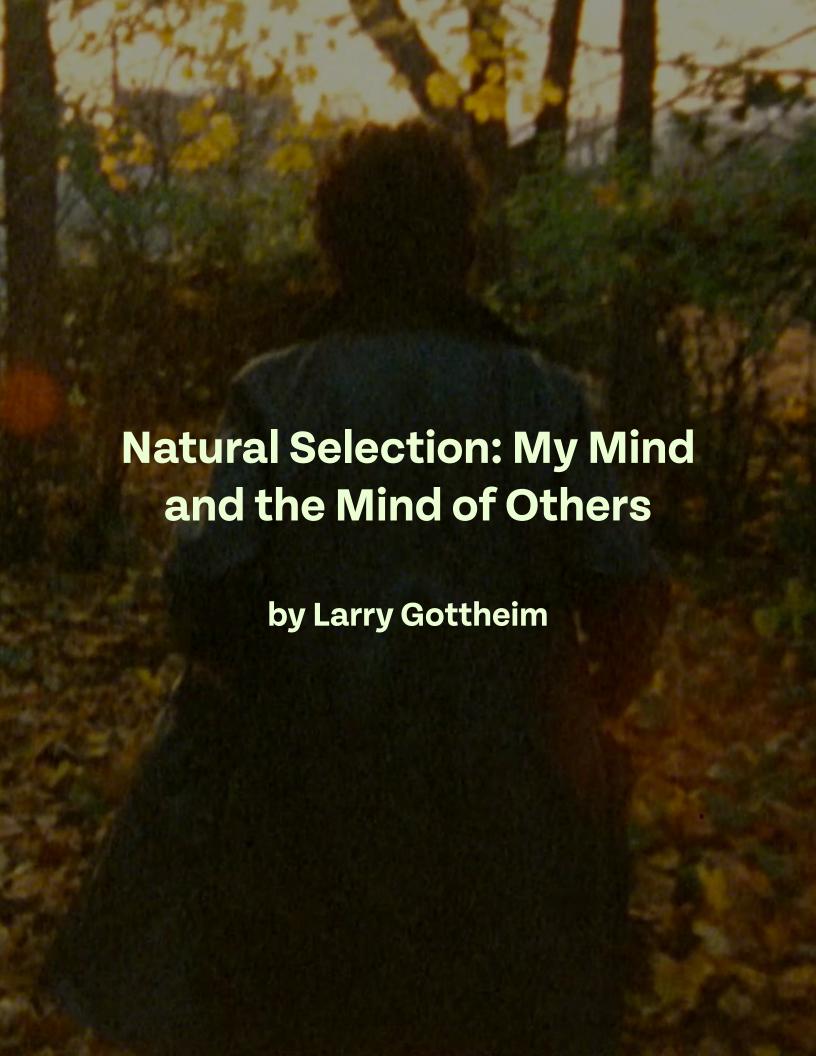
I can see that across your work, cause *Knot/Not* also has the conductor figure.

LG: And that's what the new thing is dealing with.

Well thank you very much for your time and for making these films.

**LG:** Okay, I also feel that, thinking of these connections over distance, that I'm now connected with you and that I'm going to be connected with the audience. In a certain way, the film is a kind of medium of connectedness. So thanks a lot. I appreciate the chance to talk to you.

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From the outset I made some films with students. The film *ALA* was made with the first group of Black and Latino students who came to Binghamton under a special program. Another project was about Harpur College, made with some students in my English Department class in cinema. Almost all the imagery was made by them.

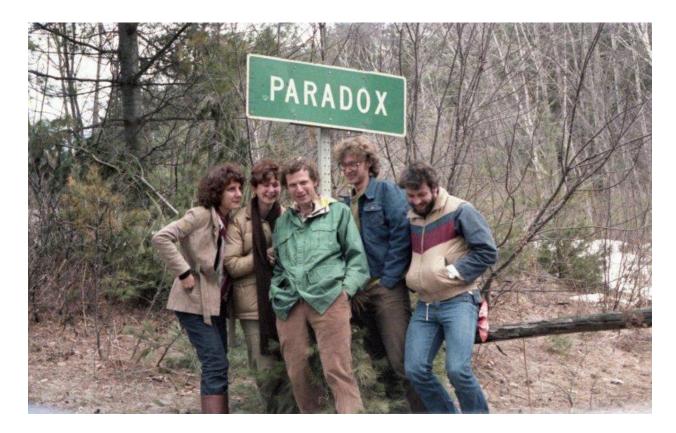
Many years later, alongside the regular filmmaking classes, I started to have some advanced production seminars. I wanted the students to be involved with the concept and development of the project. This began with a challenge. While staying for a few days at a student's apartment that had a view of the George Washington Bridge I became fascinated by the bridge. I thought of a challenge: to figure out how, using the single frame capability of the Bolex, to make a strip of film which, if held up, would show the bridge continuously, the frames lined up horizontally so the span of the bridge would be continuous over a sequence of frames. Normally film is exposed with consecutive frames on top of each other, rather than beside each other as with a still camera. This created a conceptual challenge as it would require going one frame at a time, rotating the camera in the correct position for the next frame. I wanted the students to appreciate the role of the sprocket holes and the role of the camera and projector mechanisms.

This led, by a commodious vicus of recirculation, to constructing two large wooden frames on stands. We attached gauze to them. We placed a screen behind them and two projectors would project images onto it. The images that resolved on the gauze would also show through the gauze to the screens behind. We developed ideas for film material combined with live action suitable for this situation. It became CHAPTERS FROM "THE PERILS OF SPACE," which we presented at the Collective for Living Cinema and elsewhere.

The selection of forms and subjects that were the foundation of my films was due to a series of associations and intuitive decisions coming to me without my full awareness of the implications. I now wanted to see how such a train of associations could take place with other minds, the minds of the students. So I conceived of another filmmaking seminar that would at the same time give them experience with sync sound filming, lighting, and other technical skills, as well as allow them to make contributions to the ongoing development of the project.

Train of associations.

I include this film in my own works because it represents a developing notion of "teaching" that would be a mutual adventure of discovery between me and my students. It includes material that I shot and recorded, and was edited by me.



At the start we explored interesting empty spaces in the Binghamton downtown, which was undergoing major redevelopment. Students improvised scenes in some of these abandoned locations. One was in an abandoned warehouse. There a few students struggled to improvise something to do when the camera was turned on. They seemed somewhat lost in front of the camera. They could only think of breaking the windows and eventually they climbed out a window.

These awkward actions were full of meaning for me. In *Harmonica*, the harmonica penetrates the border between the inside and outside of the car window. Windows have an important role in *Horizons* and *Mouches Volantes*. In the surveying section of *Four Shadows* the old glass of the window gives special meaning to the events outside. In the Cézanne section the harlequin figure steps out of the frame in the diagram. It is not a window but it has a similar function because it implies a plane that separates inside and outside. The impulsive actions of the student actors, breaking and then climbing out the window, related to my own concerns. The students had come up

with these improvised actions that somehow resonated with motifs that had been important in my most personal films.

Inside another abandoned building a Japanese student and his American friend read their poems in their native language. Each tries to translate the other's poem. This was their idea. Other students played with reflecting the sunlight on the performers. Some of the poetry sessions took place on the roof of this building. The students themselves came up with these ideas without reference to my particular interest in other languages and accents. Invisible threads linked their intuitive ideas to mine.

We also went to a sheep farm, where students took turns filming. Animals have a special role in my films, and this is one of the major examples. The students and the sheep naturally developed some close relationship.

My friend Alfons Schilling, the Swiss-Austrian artist, introduced aspects of altered vision in his works. He told me he had made large sculptural viewing devices that he could put over his head and see through. Each one would enable him to see in a way not possible in normal vision, for example how things would look if our eyes were wider apart than in the human head, or seen through a revolving shutter, or imaged like a pinhole camera.

He was looking for places to test out these devices. He wanted to do so in nature. We brought him into our project. He would come almost every week bringing a different device each time. He used the devices in several of the locations where we had already filmed. The students took turns filming him, usually with a moving camera, as he explored his experience from within the devices, an experience we could not share. Part of his project was the sculptural nature of these devices. In them he became a performance artist. That was all the camera could record. It could never see what he saw.

Alfons had gotten me interested in many subjects including the use of visualization in feats of memory. Another subject was the relationship of the shape of medieval and Renaissance cathedrals to the forms of music in those periods. There was a certain Renaissance aspect to his construction of these devices. They were conceptual sculptures, but they also had a formal aesthetic look as objects. I remember a gallery show of his in which the viewer would look at stereoscopic views through viewers on pedestals. They might have been able to be viewed with hand-hold viewers, but it was important for him to have the physical nature of the devices themselves be part of the artworks. The devices were reminiscent of some of Da Vinci's projects.



He was the only person who was inside the devices. What the students filmed was only from the outside. Except for the location on the roof of the abandoned building, the other locations were in nature, so the world of landscape was in the images students were filming. They were transformed by the devices Alfons was seeing into altered landscapes.

During the period when these filming sessions were taking place, we would meet to discuss various issues. The students were asked to come up with a theme for each meeting. One of the subjects that took hold was of glossolalia, speaking in tongues. Perhaps the poetry translations led to this association. For me it connected with my interest in language and the mind. It became the principal focus of the project.

Glossolalia often arises from damage to the brain. This theme also connected with my interest in physical and emotional disorders that went back to THE INNER WORLD OF APHASIA, and PARANOID CONDITIONS. We visited churches where speaking in tongues was part of the worship, and a hospital that had patients suffering from brain damage, though we couldn't have direct contact with the patients.

It was another dimension of the theme of altered language that arises in many of my films. The dislocation of language and language-like sounds was similar to the transformation of vision through Alfons's devices. In the students' effort to translate each other's poems, their difficulty was not only in their fully understanding each other's language, but of the essential essence of poetic language that can never be completely carried over into another language.

Someone told me she had attended a brilliant discussion of glossolalia by a Canadian scientist who worked with this issue. He was André Roche Lecours, who headed an institute in Montreal for the study of glossolalia. I corresponded with him and he generously invited us to come to Montreal.

Our visit to the institute began with a discussion with some of the staff. It took off from my correspondence with Roche. We asked whether we could film some of the actual work of the institute. He said there was a need for privacy for those whose utterances were going to be analyzed. They were subjects with brain damage, so we were not allowed access to them. It was finally decided that one of the students would speak in an improvised simulacrum of glossolalia. His improvised speech was entered into a computer and transcribed into a written text just as the utterances of the patients would be. Noah agreed to perform, speaking in a made-up language. He sat at a desk and performed a monologue that was completely spontaneous. His improvised performance was a parody of a professor. This would be another comic avatar of me as the professor, though as you can see from these projects my actual teaching was far different.

The speech was transferred into a computer. That was a normal part of the institute's research. A cooperative staff member played parts of the recorded speech over and over and transcribed them. The sound of the tape recorder running forward and back made a haunting sound. The backwards sound linked back to the reversal in *Mnemosyne, Mother of Muses*. Andrea, one of the students, listening to the tape playing a phrase over and over, thought it began to sound like a phrase in Swedish she had learned from some visitors. She thought it meant "I love you."

It was somehow very appropriate for this phrase to emerge at the heart of the glossolalia scene because I myself was entering a new relationship. It was a message hidden in the depths of meaningless made-up "language" transposed into another dimension. It emerged by a process of natural selection.

At the end of the semester it was agreed that I would make a film out of this material over the summer. This presented a problem because the material was really the work of the students. But it also fully engaged me. It was a challenge to figure out how to respect the students' work yet make it something that had a connection with me far beyond my role as the teacher.

The material I had to start with was material I hadn't shot. It included sound material that came from the discussions in Montreal. I didn't think that any of this could become a formal framework against which other material could be edited, as in my last films. If I succeeded this would be my first edited sound film that was not organized according to an invariant pre-existing text.

Josh [Gottheim's son] had been selected for a summer program for high school students at Cornell University. In preparation, the students were assigned to read Darwin's "On the Origin of Species; by Means of Natural Selection." We read this together, chapter by chapter. I had not read it before. I was struck with how poetic much of the writing was, and how much of it resonated with my own concerns. This was similar to what happened long before, when I heard Angeline Johnson's narrative, and when I happened upon a selection from Wordsworth's "The Prelude".

Darwin's writing is both a scientific discourse and one whose poetic passages often opened up dimensions seemingly beyond the essential drift of his argument. Previously when I selected external material for a film I had an intuitive feeling that something could be discovered that could lead to cinematic and philosophical ideas that would enrich the film. I assembled a selection of passages in Darwin that exemplified the concerns I was developing.

Darwin's key concept of "natural selection" was rooted in his providing an alternative to theological dogma. He demonstrated that the existence of all the numerous types of organisms was not the result of the will of a super being. Goethe's notion of "elective affinities" took chemical phenomena out of the realm of science to let them into the world of social relations, and of discourse about art. That's how I wanted the selections from Darwin to function.

The deconstruction of his text was itself a result of a kind of natural process. The structures I adopted let this happen. I didn't want things to be arranged according to a purpose. I hope this book will have some of the same result. I let my mind wander back

to these films and hope it allows readers to make their own thoughts and associations, just as I want the films to do.

There were five viewing devices that were filmed with Alfons, so I decided to make the film in five sections. Each one would have a title that came from a phrase in Darwin, Those words would resonate with the film as well as with my other films. "A distinct origin" points to the start of a process that led to each of my films. "Intellectual powers" are one side of the conflict between mental activity and intuitive feelings. The "ideas" and associations that are stimulated by the films come from processes like "manifesting" rather than pre-existing philosophical arguments. "Beautiful ramifications" are what can emerge from the experience of the films from just following the demands of the structure. It's revealing that Darwin uses the word "beautiful" in this context. "The habitual train" is the other side of this conflict, the frame of received ideas that are challenged by stepping out of the frame. It especially echoes the train in Four Shadows. "Almost endless cycles", of course, connects with the implication of forms of repetition that I have been drawn to use. It reminds me of the bicycle in Four Shadows.



Having these titles painted rather than printed confirms their existence in the realm of art. I filmed the actual page from Darwin that includes the title selection and shows it in the context of flowers. It is like the page from Loran's book in *Four Shadows* that is seen in the context of foliage.

Each of the five sections includes scenes from the Montreal material and from the students translating their poems as well as the scene of the breaking of the windows and the sheep in the snow. Each section contains footage of Alfons in one of his viewing devices.

I started with material that was external to me – the quotations from Darwin and the filming by the students. This material was accepted, as was Angeline's narrative, the Wordsworth poem and the PARANOID CONDITION film. The scene with the breaking windows, and those with the poem translations, have a certain awkwardness. I accepted that, just as I had accepted the stilted documentary about paranoia.

In my editing I wanted to honor the work of the students. I introduced the materials from Darwin during the summer, when the students were away.

I felt free to include other elements of my own. One was an interview with Arnold Schoenberg I had found on a record. He discusses the relationships for him between his music and painting. This linking of music and visual art is parallel to the linking of language translation and visual translation. Interestingly Schoenberg doesn't discuss his music, but rather his painting. He is proud of his ability to draw a straight line and a circle.

#### Once more the line.

These are interspersed with Roche-Lecours' discussions of glossolalia. I wanted to complement the role of Schoenberg with references to Beethoven. I included a recording I had made in Beethoven's house in Bonn, Germany. Beethoven would come up much later in *Knot/Not*.

Into this musical context I introduce the sound of the visitors walking on the very squeaky floor of Beethoven's house. I wanted to introduce sounds that had an element of noise into this musical context. The tour took us to a place where Beethoven's small piano was kept behind some protection. I asked if I could hear what it sounded like,

and the guide played a note that I recorded. Somehow this one note on the archaic piano has a central role in the whole film.

I like these sounds that are introduced into the normal role of language, like the sounds of Charters' wire recorder, the sound of the glossolalia scientist's recorder running forward and backwards, and the squeaky floor.



I also include images I had filmed in the mountains of New Mexico of ancient petroglyphs and colored patches drawn on rocks, a language of pictures. They are brought to mind much later by the paintings and patterns on the wall in *Knot/Not*. These are marks that have an element of written language that escapes meaning, just as the music of the apes and night creatures in *Four Shadows* have an element of singing and speaking that we can't understand.

Some viewers may have difficulty with all the talking in the film. There is a lot to keep track of. It is necessary to find one's own selection of meaningful elements in the thicket of language. This is another film where its essence does not lie in the visual experience alone. Something is hidden, elusive. It is like Alfons partially hidden in his devices, experiencing what only he can see, and we can't.

#### Partially hidden.

The pencil transcription of Noah's speech is another representation of writing. The scenes of poetic translation connect the sounds of words with the ambiguous meaning of those words. Something already hints at that in the readings of the Wordsworth poem with different accents\by the readers in *Four Shadows*. The words of the poem are invariant in the various readings but the sounds and the meanings change. The speech of glossolalia is like the voices of the apes in *Tree of Knowledge*. In his discussion Roche-Lecours speculates that there is some connection between the physiology of speech and the production of images.

Of all the screenings of the film, the most important audience was when I showed the edited film to the students who returned in the fall. They loved it. That was the best part.

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## Do These Images Give Voice?: Machete Gillette...Mama (1989)

by Ruairí McCann

"On the final rainy evening in Santo Domingo, I returned to the hill opposite La Cementera. Life was stirring across there, between us there were intervals of darkness and silence. Voices blended into hum. It began speaking to me. I saw. I listened."

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"We were travelling towards the Haitian frontier to [...] where Oriol had relatives. It was hot, peaceful and still, but I felt I was approaching a frontier as profound as those that divide the heart and mind."

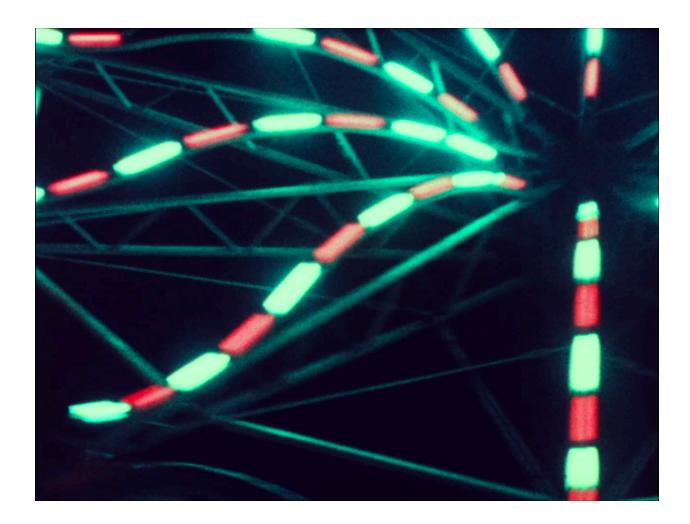
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In Scott MacDonald's *Binghamtom Babylon: Voices from the Cinema Department,* 1967-1977, former student, the programmer Steve Anker recalls an inspiring moment and lesson from one of Larry Gottheim's classes.

"Looking back, I realize that Larry had a profound impact on me during my first years at Binghamton. He caused us to think about perception, to take note of smallest details during a moment in a landscape, of things we'd otherwise barely be aware of. One large three-hour lecture class was conducted totally in the dark, and over time Larry pointed out objects in the room and qualities of light that few of us had ever noticed or thought about. That was also how he approached cinema, that it was both totally simple, yet wonderfully complex, a miracle medium that we could discover for ourselves."

For Gottheim, film, this remarkable arbiter of light, is not only able to hone our vision and makes us see anew in a literal sense, but on a deeper, intellectual or even spiritual level. It can expose and help us understand the boundary lines of perception and representation, their socially informed nature and where the limits can be bent or broken.

This tendency to trace and lope what we can see and what eludes our sight, the fact that a myriad of cultural and social factors inform images, as much as the physical process of light beaming into our eyes, is the engine behind the recently restored *Machete Gillette...Mama* (1989). This film could be slotted in the old and often fusty, twinned genres of the ethnographic film and the travelogue, but its lack of either clear paths, surface-level generalities or easy assumptions sets it apart. Instead, it materialises as an insistent, productive haze, striated with doubt and blurred lines of connection.



Shot over a period of a year when Gottheim, along with his friends and guides, Isidro, Oriel and Victor, and a 16mm camera, travelled across the Dominican Republic. Although his travels include in and around the capital Santo Domingo, he mainly moves between the communities and sugar cane fields that dot the border with Haiti, a splintered region haunted by past and ongoing eruptions of mass violence and discrimination, such as the 1937 Parsley Massacre where the Dominican army and militias, under the command of dictator Rafael Trujillo, murdered and expelled tens of thousands of Haitians. In this contested zone, Gottheim spends most of his time in the 'bateys', government-designated, but woefully neglected, settlements to which Haitian seasonal sugar workers are tied in a form of indentured servitude.

True to Gottheim's position as a free-floating, privileged stranger among people whose lives are unmoored and limited by toil and the loose, unspoken and rigidly enforced demarcations of a divided land, there are no contiguous sounds or surfaces, no big picture. We are given instead a pointillist rendering of a series of impressions, which

moves swiftly and sporadically, in a spray of images, ranging from a few seconds long to considerably less. There are hardly any establishing shots, and the screen is regularly engulfed in bodies caught up in a variety of activities, laborious, tender, jovial, desultory, communal and mysterious. The people that Gottheim films often notice the camera and seem to treat it varyingly with curiosity, bemusement, boredom and annoyance. In short, these are not people corralled and coerced into some pageantry for the sake of the camera, nor is there any pretence that the camera is some invisible, value-free observer. The acts and experience of watching and being watched are pushed to the forefront and perform a complex interplay.



In some ways, the narration is the film's anchor through this dizzying and distancing mosaic. Composed of Gottheim's log of his travels, it gives us an oral map and some idea of his motivations, and yet it also metastasises the film's complex web of associations and dissociations. It is, for the most part, a narration written by the filmmaker from his perspective. Its point of view is clearly of someone unfamiliar with DR, speaking with a speculative and formalist quality that is very much in the style of

Gottheim's other writings. For example, the frequent mention of 'intervals'. And yet the voice we hear is not Gottheim's, but a Dominican man called Bernardo Román, speaking in English.

On top of these two interlaid identities, there are other distortions and fissures. Moments where other perspectives feed into Gottheim's account, such as when the narrator suddenly says:

"As I returned to my hometown, Moca, I saw the line of people waiting to visit prisoners in the fort. Haunted by ghosts and memories of the Trujillo dictatorship, I visited the cemetery where my family lies."

Perhaps this is Bernardo not merely reciting but weaving in his own story, or else a description of Isidro whose own sorrowful homecoming is one of the film's major threads. It could very well be an imagined figure; the proposed musings of one of the many caught glancingly by Gottheim's lens asserting their presence, or else it is a ghost, stuck earthbound but invisible and forgotten, until the film apparatus came along to give voice to their lonesome state. Or maybe all are the case, or none. At one point Gottheim states that he is collecting images to articulate 'Haitian and Dominican realities'. This overlapping multiplicity of voices posits that the sprouting and congealing of many different possible interpretations is a way of avoiding misrepresenting these manifold realities through a form and language that is sealed-off, reductive and dehumanising.

This welter of richly disarraying images, voices and ideas ends not with a tidy conclusion. Instead the 'thread is broken', severed by a calamity and a serious encounter with state power. We are told that Isidro has been arrested following a hit and run incident which occurred while he was driving without a license in a car rented under Gottheim's name. In an attempt to get his friend released, Gottheim asks the police to list himself as the driver, which leads to him spending a day and a half in jail. While up to this point, the film has hurtled outdoors or, if indoors, in domestic and recreational spaces, suddenly we are thrust into the sterile and hostile bureaucratic zones of a police station and then the courts.

Gottheim himself finally appears on screen, as a roving, tense figure mired in this Kafkaesque situation. Until he is spat out of this nexus of power and left to wander in a state of disarray through the centre of Santo Domingo, which is undergoing extensive demolition. It is a fitting end for a work of decisive indecision. Governed by the

tumultuous vicissitudes of being a personal and a collective expression of an outsider, attempting to encompass an immense, unfolding landscape of many possible perspectives which stretch from the fraught but vivid hinterland of Hispaniola to the playful shadow boxing of two lovers.

# "Don't Fence Me In": A Conversation with Larry Gottheim and Forrest Sprague

by Devin Leong

Sharing the name with his 1987 film of the same name, experimental film veteran Larry Gottheim's book *The Red Thread* is a full account of his career from his start at the Cinema Department at Binghamton University, to his digital work in the 21st century, beginning with *Knot/Not* (2019). It would be wrong to describe the book as biography, or criticism of his own work. Though traces of both of those descriptions are present, *The Red Thread* is an artist's attempt to trace the line between his own life and oeuvre, that titular thread.

Continuing after *Knot/Not*, Gottheim began to make films that drew from his newfound fascination with quantum physics. No stranger to archival footage or scientific structures, *Entanglement* (2022) and *A Private Room* (2024) now find a filmmaker who once worked with celluloid navigating the realm of digital, scouring footage from the depths of YouTube.

I met with Forrest Sprague, experimental filmmaker and co-author of *A Private Room*, and Gottheim in his apartment in Yonkers. I spoke to the two filmmakers in the middle of one of their meetings, about to begin working on a new project together.



Photo by Devin Leong

Devin Leong: Writing your book, you were re-visiting all your films, it's almost a psychoanalysis of you and your own work. In the process of making *Entanglement* and *A Private Room*, how did revisiting all of your films impact that?

Larry Gottheim: There's something that's going on [that is] unusual. The important thing that goes on is something that I'm not actually aware of, although in my new project, I am more deliberately incorporating things from earlier films. Y'know, in *Entanglement*, there's a thing from *Tree of Knowledge*, but in this film, which is called Q&A, there's gonna be a little bit more of references to earlier films. So I feel like I'm now consciously with the book and all these new films making my whole body of work one thing.

Forrest Sprague: It's that red thread that you always talk about, that goes throughout your entire career.

**LG:** Yeah, so that's kind of the idea of the red thread, which is different from what the red thread meant when it was the title of the film called *The Red Thread*.

**FS:** When I first started working with Larry, it was right when the book was about to be published and we went and watched all of his movies together too, so it was also great to revisit those and hone in on what we wanted to take from those films and incorporate into *A Private Room* as well.

**LG:** One thing that's always on my mind is that there is a kind of philosophical thinking in the films but they are not lectures. One [possibility] I dread is that some of the films will be seen as documentary—but they're [more] like anti-documentary if anything, rather than pedantic lectures. So what I really work on, and what we work on is the actual, physical, nature of each cut, the timing of each shot down to the millisecond. It's creating a work of music: the musical work can be what the structure behind it might be, but it is an experience of a flow of sound. So my films, *our films*, they're a flow of cinematic experience, which is much more important, and often the philosophical underpinnings are what allow it to come into being.

**FS:** Also the nature of what you spoke about with the afterimage, using the amount of leader that we do, allows you to really process the shot and have that outline in your eye as you see it. Oftentimes you'll see it again and again and again, in different sections of different parts of Larry's movies as well.

You say that with your films you don't want it to be like a documentary. Your last two films didn't teach me a thing about quantum physics.

LG: Well of course.

## What about those scientific concepts attracted you structurally?

**LG:** Well that I don't know. Just like anybody, as you go through life, some things become interesting. Now for me because I'm not out there, I'm not in a distant place, I'm not out in the countryside. I'm here and looking at the screen and just life has put me into a position of being this hermit in front of the computer looking at stuff. So for years I was fascinated with quantum mechanics, of which there's a lot of stuff on YouTube and it really interested me a lot but my interest in it didn't start out as becoming a film, but then [certain aspects of] it became important. That's what we have to talk about when we get into what we're going to be working with today.

I've developed a lot of the idea when I was on this tour but it has some connection. Q: The letters are important because I found that in these quantum lectures on entanglement they would talk about two things: A & B, then they would start talking as though "A" and "B" were these people, Bob and Alice. So now in *Q&A* originally my idea was almost like a joke, because people were talking about the *Q&A*, which wasn't an expression I would think about using. I would say: and there'll be a discussion after the film. For a lot of people it's normal to [say] there'll be the screening and then the *Q&A*. So then I [thought], wow that's going to be the title of my next film: *Q&A*. I realized that the initials, [that] the Q could be quantum and A could be A.I.

That led me to a trail of stuff; the person that I was talking to [on] this stage to something about animals. I got involved in the communication of whales and elephants and so I've watched over thirty [videos] on YouTube about whale communication and elephant communication; that's going to be part of the material of the film. A big discovery I had which I can't wait to show [Forrest] is out of all of the stuff about elephants, I found one thing that I'm crazy in love with. It's so beautiful and it reminds me a bit of *Barn Rushes*.

**FS:** I think this is reflective of your obsessive precision with your films too, like when we first started working on *A Private Room* and we started out with pretty much eight hours of footage. All this stock footage, old Hollywood films, the physics lectures, and then obviously we cut down that eight hours of footage to what we basically agreed

upon as the ten best minutes of what we had there but it's the same thing with you culling through all these sort of animal footages, you leave no stone unturned when you're trying to research and I love that.

It is rare for filmmakers like you to be so curious about the digital restorations of your own films. You even sometimes prefer them to the 16mm prints. Is there a specific reason why you are so excited about these digitizations of your work?

**LG:** Well, it's obviously very important. It started with *Chants and Dances for Hand*, which started out [as] a 16mm film but then it ended up [being shot on video]. As soon as I got into the situation where I was able to get into these Vodou ceremonies and so on, it was very low light. A lot of those scenes were shot with a flashlight, I didn't have a microphone. I had a little pocket—but also what became important was that the image and sound were already on there together, whereas all the previous sound films mostly [had] separate sound elements which I adjoined together, so every shot in [*Chants*] is [video], it's in Hi-8. So, it's an analogue digital.

**FS:** It's a digital analogue hybrid... It was short lived.

**LG:** But then, it started to be that instead of going out and filming in nature or in some other place, I was looking at the screen a lot and then I began to feel that studying the movements of things that I would find on screen was not unlike being out in some place and searching for images [to] shoot. So it seems now almost the same thing, when I find a thing on the screen it's as though I shot it and I have the same feeling about it as though I shot it.

[For] A Private Room, the only footage you actually shot was what, the elevator?

**FS:** And the child footage.

With scouring the internet for footage, do you just watch videos until something just clicks and you decide to use it in a film?

**FS:** I think you should give the clairvoyant example because I think that was the most divine of all discoveries.

**LG:** That just popped up—I mean—this is going to be an element of the new film, so I don't want to get too ahead of myself. The algorithms, you have to accept them as part

of the creative process. Unfortunately, when I get into a new area it drops out stuff from the old areas. When it randomly has some kind of 1939-1940 [film], which they're calling film noir incorrectly, I check it out and definitely will look at it. In the credits, I can tell it's going to be a crappy movie, or nothing, or sometimes I have to go really [deep] into the movie to find something.

The algorithms, when I start to get into something like A.I. or elephant communication, then it knows what you're looking for and it starts to send you a lot of that information. There are certain things that are probably gonna be similar for this film as it was for the last two films. In *A Private Room*, I select three different types of material: one is sync sound material that I like already just as it is. So if I find eight seconds of something that's a little fragment I put it away somewhere. Then there [is material] which I like as an image, the sound is of no interest.

**FS:** It goes in the image folder.



**LG:** And then there's sound only. Now what I found was that in the quantum stuff, a lot of the sound material was very good, I liked it, and ended up using some of it. Whereas in this new stuff I'm looking at, there's nothing that registers with me.

FS: Interesting.

**LG:** The physicists are much more poetic and philosophical than the biologists.

## It does come back to Natural Selection.

LG: Well there is something which I realised only the other day. [In] the film *Natural Selection*: there are several bodies of material that are in each section of the film, and one of them, the main one had to do with glossolalia. With this group of students, we got interested in glossolalia and went to [the Institut universitaire de gériatrie de Montréal] because of somebody's friend—a graduate student [who] said she had heard this amazing lecture by [André Roch Lecours]. Somehow as soon as she said that, it ignited something in me in particular, but also with the students that I was working with. So I ended up corresponding with [Lecours] and going to Montreal, which you can imagine what it would be like then, going with a group of students for a week, in Montreal.

Anyway, we met with this guy at this research centre that was studying glossolalia, mostly in the case of brain damage; people who have been in an automobile accident where part of their brain was missing or not functioning. They would be making sounds, language-like sounds, which didn't have any meaning. They were also trying to investigate the meaning [of what] they were saying. What they would do is transcribe these things and put it into a computer and then run it through the computer and try to find whether there were any patterns within it. As it turns out, this is exactly what A.I. is doing with animal sounds: both whales and elephants make these vocal utterances and now they use this advanced power of A.I. to try to find out what [each utterance] was. So what happened in this thing in Montreal, was we couldn't use the actual material that they were working on because of medical privacy rules.

One of the students offered to give a speech in his own made up language, and so he did. He made this whole speech which you see in the film and then it's transcribed into a computer and then this staff member in the facility [goes] through with a tape recorder and plays [the] section over and over again. Then it just actually happened that—that's my favourite part in the film and something that I want to put in this film; that he's going forwards and backwards with this thing that sounds like "jag älskar dig" and then one of the other students says: "Y'know I have these Swedish people visiting me and they told me how to say I love you in Swedish, and that's what that sounds like in other words." So that, something of that, I'm gonna use in the film.

On editing with Forrest: after he sent you his films, what about his work gravitated you towards them, and why did you think he was a choice person to work with?

LG: Well, initially it was just that. I loved the film that he sent me.

#### Which one was that?

**FS:** The first *Epiphany*. I sent him the first *Epiphany*, and then [Larry] wrote back almost immediately, with some of the kindest words I've heard. Then [he] told me [that] you had an idea for a movie and you wanted me to come up here, and within two weeks I was up here and already shooting the Aliyaah footage for *A Private Room*. Most of that Aliyaah footage comes from the first day I was up here with Larry.

**LG:** I think there was initially, when we first got together—Okay first of all your question, what was it about that material that I liked? I mean that's hard to say. It was both its rigour and its surprise, those elements are important to me in these films. It was very formally rigorous and yet so thought out and composed, that once the camera was set up to record it, all kinds of things happened that couldn't have been predicted, but they were allowed to happen because of that. So we just got together...

FS: Instantly!

**LG:** You had been affected by films, I was affected by that. So we got together, and then I needed somebody. [For] all of the digital films, I need somebody to help with the computer editing. It turned into something more than that, but that's how we started.

**FS:** He initially invited me up, just with two ideas. First, the song of *Im Chambre Séparée*, and then I remember you asked me to film Aliyaah for the day and that was definitely—there were elements that had not come to light yet.

**LG:** Well I think that there were some things that happened before that, although each thing was—

FS: It just sorta popped out of thin air!

**LG:** Right, but there had already been a process going on. I had this record of this German singer singing that song. The very beginning of it, "*im chambre séparée*", which I translate as "*in a private room*" and then I had a friend, a musician in Germany

(Eli Ningú). I had used one of her musical pieces as the soundtrack of *Knot/Not*, and so I told her about my fascination with the beginning of the song, and she immediately saw the ideas of *Im Chambre Séparée* as a metaphor, and so I had started to think about that in terms of wanting to use it somehow in a film. Now I think there was something more that I got involved with, but what happened is, my son who is *the* Hand of *Chants and Dances for Hand*, was living in this apartment that I had upstairs. He was living with his girlfriend and his girlfriend's sister's baby and it was a very, very tough situation. She had a condition like... whatever the condition—

**FS:** She had, like non-verbal autism.

**LG:** And plus some other psychological things. I really loved her, she was really amazing, and she would make these sounds that were really very beautiful, and that made me think: "What's going on inside of her when she's making those sounds? Is it like a language?"

So that relates to *Im Chambre Séparée*, it relates to elephants and whales communicating, so I took advantage of her being there to film. So basically we didn't know what we were looking for exactly, but I was holding her and Forrest was right next to me with the camera filming.

FS: We filmed for like an hour. —

**LG:** And almost nothing of it was usable, it was just allowing us to see what we were looking at. The same was true with the elevator material, where I had some idea that had nothing to do with that film. I was just downstairs looking at the elevator, waiting for somebody and seeing some kind of composition. I said "Let's film something with the elevator." and it was the same thing. We set up something, but we didn't know what we were looking for, but then it became an inevitable part.

**FS:** Especially with seeing glimpses of people coming out of the elevator, or you see the reflection in the metal of the elevator. That was a very important compositional part to that footage as well, the elevator doors opening, closing, the up and down buttons. It became very clear that that was gonna become a crucial element.

**LG:** Yeah but the people, my feeling was that we were waiting for people to come out of the elevator, and go into the elevator. We used almost nothing.

**FS:** Almost nothing! We shot a lot of that. Only the reflections of the people... but never any of the people.

**LG:** Even that is mostly the elevator door opening and there's nobody. Most of the elevator shots have nothing to do with people.

**FS:** It's true, only maybe two or three. It's funny how much we originally shot that ended up on the cutting room floor.



Your films [and in] in your writing, there's so much about your unconscious impulses in the edit. When editing the film with Forrest did your impulses and his clash, was there—

LG: Never.

FS: Never!

#### Never?

**FS:** Nope! We were on the same wavelength pretty much every day, and I feel like there was a very respectful collaborative process. If there was something—if I made a suggestion and he was like, "I'm not really feeling it" I would concede, and same thing if you suggested an edit and I said "Let's make the leader a little bit shorter", or "Let's insert this shot after" [Larry] would also take my suggestion as if it were just as valid as [his]. Which I found to be a very rewarding experience. The times that you would say, "Y'know you were right about that, that was a better way to do it" and the times when I would tell you "You're right that is a better way to do it". It ended up being very harmonious.

Your last three films, you did make with someone else. That process of working with someone else on digital, is it any different from working alone on the editing table?

**LG:** It did bring something into the process because, usually, when I worked on a film I wouldn't even show it to anybody. I'd do the whole thing, make the film, finish the film, and then I would show it to somebody. Then, like, very rarely, I remember showing *Horizons* where I had made the whole first part, and then showing it to a few people, whom I really respect a lot like Ernie [Gehr], for example, but none of the people that I showed it to had any clue about what was going on.

**FS:** Wow, even Ernie? Do you think that there was a change once you had the entire film finished?

LG: You mean if they were to see it now?

**FS:** I mean did you notice a reception change when it became the full feature.

**LG:** No. Well, there were certain people like Jonas [Mekas] and Joan Janhardt were basically the only people who seemed to—well there were a few other people—there wasn't nobody, but I would have a lot of incomprehension. It's only now I find it's been very different.

I never wanted to be influenced by somebody. I felt very comfortable working with—and actually that was happening also with Christian [Flemm] and with Rebekkah [Palov].

FS: Yeah, absolutely

**LG:** This sort of going through another person while I was actually working; even just working on one shot or one idea, going: "What do you think about this?" I accepted that as part of the process of going through another person.

**FS:** Yeah absolutely, because you also get that feedback in real time, in a collaborative structure. If you're working alone— you're truly trusting your intuition but it's great when you can springboard ideas off each other too about where something may go.

**LG:** And also allow things to be... To have somebody that I knew would be in the same framework. I felt okay about going through it, like some kind of micro—

FS: Yeah, just the most micro edits—

**LG:** There were so many examples, like the very end of the film, where I just had this idea: let's try superimposing the two songs on each other— And then we just chose one thing and that was it.

**FS:** Yeah we just eyeballed it, we put just the two songs together, eyeballed it, and then it ended and we looked at eachother and we were like that's crazy—that's the perfect ending to *A Private Room*.

**LG:** I think that maybe some of the things, the individual edits, were more far out.

It's hard to explain what I mean, but I feel—let's say with *Tree of Knowledge*; the editing is precise and far out, but not in the same way. When I cut in something from the film of the seasons to the tree footage, that is far out, but it seems like as soon as you do it: it's obvious, it's right. Let's say superimposing the two things; a lot of the things that happened in *Private Room* are way more far out. It allows it to extend into—which I think is what I love about the film, when I think of it as "*This is the film for the future*".

It's because the association that's happening as each element goes by is so far out that by working with somebody else that's like "Yeah, yeah!"

FS: We were each other's cheerleaders, you know?

Your early film that isn't really considered by everyone to be part of the "Gottheim canon" but I actually do like, and you write [in *The Red Thread*] that you came around to being proud of it, *ALA*, has another credited filmmaker [Rodney Young].



**LG:** Thank you for that. What happened was, there was this group of students that I was working with, and then it came to the end of the semester. There was some opportunity—I can't remember, but they got some kind of support. Two of the students were able to stay on in the summer—the woman was just around and the guy would be holding up the film. There was no creative role [for] them but I wanted to credit somebody.

**FS:** I remember the first time watching that together with you too. You just had a big smile on your face and you're like "I'm so glad that it's part of my filmography now" I could sense that from you, as if you hadn't accepted it in the past. Because with all of the other movies; we essentially went through all of your films in preparation for A

*Private Room*, which was wonderful. It gave me great insight and also [to be] able to work with the beats and the themes that you yourself were looking for. After watching that one in particular, because it's a documentary, more or less—

### It is an early use of you using asynchronous sound.

**FS:** Exactly. So definitely, it has a worthy place.

**LG:** The film has a little bit of history within Binghamton, it was the anniversary of that film and then [I] got together [with] the guy who speaks most in the film. (There was just one of the students [who] had this crappy little tape recorder so the quality of the sound was really bad) He actually took this Proust course with me, but we've become friends. They just had the 50th anniversary of the African studies department at Binghamton, so they were having this whole celebration, and they invited me to go to it—which I couldn't go to—but I was really proud of that.

You write a lot about this dichotomy with an accepted structure and chance, and accepting what happens within the confines of the structure—and I've been really interested lately in Andy Warhol's films, and I think his films perfectly embody that. You have like—a reel of film, the basic structural conceit in what happens on the camera—that's the film.

**LG:** I mean that was a definite influence, there was a period just before I got a camera, and after I got a camera, where I would just devour what was going on in all the avant-garde arts in New York at that time. [It] was really an exciting time in dance, in music, in sculpture and painting, and Warhol—especially those early films—were a definite influence on those early films of mine, as well as the Lumières.

I also liked some of his later films and as I said in the book I became friends with Ondine. There was that whole way that it entered into my work, and that was one of the things that I liked about Forrest's film: the sense of the rigorous structure that allowed for things to happen that couldn't have been—

**FS:** It couldn't have been staged.

**LG:** Right, and yet, they were artistic—in other words; a worker doing something up in this quarter.

**FS:** Yeah, and then in another quadrant someone's doing something else—and it's funny because I am also influenced by the Lumières, but obviously in a more fastidious way. And definitely, the term "actuality" has gone out of style, but I do think the idea of actuality in experimental film is still present. The complete chance of it all, you never know what's going to happen, but if you set a camera up on a tripod, something miraculous will happen, even if you don't know it.

I actually watched Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* last night, which is one of the pieces you reference the most. In narrative film, in Hollywood film, is there anything you gravitate towards there?

**LG:** Well I was doing a lot of stuff, actually, when I was in Cleveland, I stayed with a friend, Jackson, who is working in the industry as an art designer. He had been out in Hollywood but he moved back to Cleveland, and so, whenever there's a film—which is happening a lot in Yonkers, as well as in Cleveland, then he gets called in to do it. He has hundreds of DVDs, so, I would be watching different narrative films with him, and one of the films I wanted to watch was *Oppenheimer*. Now I totally loathe *Oppenheimer*, I think it's a piece of shit, and—

FS: P. Adams Sitney would agree!

LG: Well, then now I'll like it. That's at least one redeeming note.

FS: Yeah.

LG: It's very interesting. We gotta talk about this.

**FS:** We gotta talk about *The Clairvoyant*.

**LG:** I did watch another film of his called *The Tunnel*.

FS: Oh, uh, by Maurice Elvey?

**LG:** Yes. It's very—it's very interesting. I mean it's not as good as [*The Clairvoyant*], but as I told you, when I showed *A Private Room* in Akron, this guy came up and he said "You know what that's my favorite film", and I thought "Oh my god!".

**FS:** Yeah. The only other person who's seen *The Clairvoyant*.

**LG:** But there's certain things in *The Clairvoyant* that have to do with this love triangle of the two women, which I never really even understood before. That's the worst part of the film.

So in *The Tunnel* which is a science-fiction film, there is also this love triangle that gets a little bit confused, and it's not good at all.

**FS:** I remember you called me up, late at night and said, "I just had YouTube recommend me this film with Claude Rains in it called *The Clairvoyant* and I think I figured out the next phase of *A Private Room*. And the next morning I showed up, and we watched it, and at that point *A Private Room* was still sort of in these various fragments that we hadn't quite figured out yet, but I recall upon seeing *The Clairvoyant*, the element of him mentioning the battery, of him being the avatar for Bob and using Alice as his electric battery, when we saw that and we had the same eureka moment that this would become such a crucial element to the film as well.

**LG:** I have a feeling this [new] film could be longer than 10 minutes.

That time in Cleveland I was thinking Cassavetes was the positive pole of which *Oppenheimer* was the negative one, and I tried to figure out why that was.

I've been thinking about this—first of all, the other day they were doing this big feature film in front of the train station and they had like ten big trucks, hundreds of people, a whole big production, big lighting thing. I was listening to the radio this morning and they were interviewing an actor, talking about whether directors talk with their subjects and he said the really great directors hardly talk at all. He gave this example, I forgot what film he was talking about, but he said there was this scene with children. The person that was being interviewed said "'I loved it, it was such a perfect thing' and I asked the director 'How did you get that performance? It's just absolutely perfect!' and the guy said 'Because I didn't tell them anything.'"

**FS:** Exactly: we didn't tell Aliyaah to do anything we just let her be and we filmed her. And some of the sounds and some of the gestures and some of her body language ended up being so perfect for the film.



To round things out, at the previous *Elective Affinities* lectures you did, you said, "I finally found my audience." With your recent tour for *A Private Room*, have you seen an uptick in the interest in this kind of film?

**LG:** Very much. I mean really a lot, and to all of the films—everything that I've shown, it was almost unbelievable, one of the greatest things was that Akron just happened because [of] doing the [tour] in the midwest.

There's some kind of program in Akron called the Rubicon Theater, and that turned out to be really, really great—and I showed *Barn Rushes*, and it was—the audience was just transfixed and it was really amazing. Actually the first screening of it I had at a major theater, at the Museum of Modern Art, when the intermission comes on it's "Oh, no!", and then they would start slamming their seats and walking out, and here, it was like a whole audience was transfixed.

**FS:** There has been such a widespread acceptance of experimental film now, especially young—among, you know, Gen Z and Millennials — obviously you've talked about it, Dorsky and Hiler talked about it, Beavers has talked about it, Ernie's talked about it, where like they have an audience now that won't heckle the movie, and that's wonderful! You know, like it also begs the question: what is the avant-garde film now?

Because all of the audience is so accepting of everything now. Even thinking about the Fred Worden retro recently, it's very interesting.

**LG:** I'll tell you about this phone call from—I have this friend Ellen Carey who's a famous photographer, and, talking about stuff she said "You gotta stand up for experimental cinema!", you know, and I feel that there is a kind of shared responsibility that the survivors—

It's a different cast of characters, a little bit, I mean some of the people died but, what I feel most happy about, proud about is, not being like this monster from the past, you know who survived, but rather like a fire brand and I feel that I have a need for each work to [have] connections with my past work—to be a challenge.

FS: Yeah, and he has this great motto that he always says: "Don't fence me in."

# **Authors' Bios**

One of the fundamental figures of American avant garde cinema, **Larry Gottheim** has composed a diverse body of work over the course of more than 50 years. His films stretch the boundaries of cinema as a vessel for deeply personal and philosophical expression and explore the rich blurred zone between the life of the mind and the material world.

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# **Credits**

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