

INTERVIEW WITH AMY HALPERN
2019

Interviewers:

Kate Brown

Arwa Sara Ibrahim

Randolph Pitts

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

How old were you when you picked up the camera for the first time?

[Amy Halpern](#)

Seventeen, and it was of course a borrowed camera of my father's, a Nikor. It was a very nice little camera, a regular-8mm.. And at the same time I also bought the splicer that I still use now, which is 16mm and 8mm since they are actually symmetrical halves. And I was thinking a lot about painting and that's why the first two or three films were highly related to each other.

PEACH LANDSCAPE and THREE PREPARATIONS are heavily concerned with composition in the frame. I had a craving for that conversation, I was never having that conversation with anybody human.

THREE PREPARATIONS is in three sections. The first one [Drops] is five hanging translucent pieces of glass in a window on 101th Street in Manhattan. The second section is Statice/Frameline. Statice is the name of the plant. It's sadly very faded, hard to see any green in the prints anymore, and the blues are, as you know, fugitive. The last one is the Cannonball Section. In Statice/Frameline there's the edging of the white coming from the right side of the frame which is totally excruciating to me, and I thought, that's what I was really doing. And perhaps other people would find it excruciating or be able to talk about the weight of volumes of light. How they screw with a frame, whether they're impinging on it, whether they're opening it, whether diagonal, which is agitating. All those sorts of things.

So that's what I was really wacked out over at the time. And I had fallen recently, fallen in love with the frame, the format that we use, the 1.37:1 aspect ratio, that sized frame. Before that, thinking about paintings, I was not particular about the shape. Like, a canvas is a canvas is a canvas. And what you're looking at is what you're looking at. And I wasn't thinking about what contained that. Or what excluded everything else. But when I started to shoot I was already heavily

thinking about that, because the great reality with any device is what's in the frame and what's not in the frame.

That's a kind of mind-blowing power, to suddenly start screwing around with. And they're kind of obscure, those films, but they seem perfectly necessary and intense to me. I didn't get a lot of feedback. Although some of the best feedback I've gotten has been from painters, but not explicitly about volumes and light and dark in the frame, the same way.

Arwa Ibrahim

PEACH LANDSCAPE especially, since it's all about light and form and the tricks that your eyes can be subject to and can play on your mind.

Amy Halpern

I think it's so shocking every time that egg shows up. Suddenly here's this egg and suddenly here's this round 3D thing and you know, and then you have to keep being reminded that what you're looking at is a bowl. And the white egg is concave actually, it's not convex. It's so interesting. So that's an eye thing, and then confounding or compounding that is the preoccupation with the film medium. So there's all that gorgeous grain, God, that grain, every time I love it. And grain and focus, because both of those things, which are our privilege of the eyes using tears (although usually when they show up and you're trying to see, that's not so cool.) But tears, and lenses, and water effects, you can do this thing the lens can do of de-focusing and halating the light or giving the light more body, more three dimensional body. And that's really still a huge kick. So yes.

Yeah, I was compelled to shoot those peaches. It was the first time that had ever happened. The other stuff that I'd been doing had all been fairly premeditated. But when I opened this I stopped in my tracks: it was a special can of peaches. I was working at Woman's Day Magazine at the time -- four years of typing every recipe that was printed. One privilege of that job was around Christmas and other times of year, you'd get these gifts. And these particular cling peaches were somebody's private stash from a company, or who knows. So I got that can of peaches, which I already had a thing for. They're sort of like a condoned baby food. But when I opened this can of peaches, they were sublime. That golden color, the taste was incredible, they were really so different from what you usually get in a can.

So I was smitten by the look of them. Smitten by the look of them in that light, which was tungsten and it had that warm glow to it also. And those golden things in the golden light, and that bowl, a Dansk bowl with a white interior and stripes of navy blue around the edges. It's that dark cobalt blue.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

Where did you shoot it?

[Amy Halpern](#)

It was in my apartment on a hundred and first street in Manhattan, between Riverside and West End. Third floor walkup, facing north. One large room, it was really great.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

So we see a lot of New York in ROLL #1 FOR NANCY.

[Amy Halpern](#)

That was across the street, well, that's the building that we grew up in on Riverside and 86th. You actually only see one of the two balls in front of the building, but that's one of the round objects that you see. That building has two balls. Wrought iron black things with white round things on top. And also in the park below that, in Riverside park.

The first scene, the Drops scene in THREE PREPARATIONS is also in that same apartment, looking out the window, looking north.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

And the cannonballs?

[Amy Halpern](#)

I've taken the cannonballs in and out of the film repeatedly because I like that section so much as an object by itself. The cannonballs are on Riverside Drive at about 89th Street near the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. And it's a semicircle of Revolutionary War cannonballs. Nearby are some cannons you can actually... it's fun to sit on them. And they all face New Jersey. So that was a very nice attitudinal physical position to be in. Astride one of these things.

Interestingly about the color, which is so important in that scene... When I first tried to have it printed when I got out here [to California], I was having a terrible

time with the film labs. They couldn't get that blue for some reason or another and I was getting frustrated and these old gentlemen at the lab, I think it was Color Reproduction Company at the time, finally suffered this young girl to come and explain to them exactly what color she wanted. So they pulled out their color timing little gels, really cool, and said, "look here they are. Show us what you want." So I shuffled some things, put them up in front of the shot and they all said, "Oh. Gunmetal blue. Why didn't you tell us it was gunmetal blue?" Well the reason I didn't is because I didn't yet realize how much of the California film business was directly descended from World War II and other American military involvements. The vocabulary, the behavior, the design of crews, the hierarchy on sets... Most offensive of course were what things were called. For example, there were some ordinary paper lanterns. These Chinese-made paper lanterns are great for a diffuse but movable light source, and were called "Jap Lanterns". Of course, they're not made in Japan, they're made in China, but never mind that. Clothespins, as I mentioned earlier, are called C47's which was the name of a paratrooper transport plane, and not some domestic item... I could go on with this vocabulary but I won't.

Arwa Ibrahim

So what was your decision to leave New York to come to LA?

Amy Halpern

Well I'd founded the Collective for Living Cinema with three guys. [Phil Weisman, Ken Ross and Lushe Sacher?]. And then with input from someone named Lushe, and Bobby Fleishner and the girlfriends of the three guys. And other people started to help out, it was really turning into something good. By then I was working in 16 mm. But I didn't have a camera. The experience that I had hoped for when I returned to New York City was that I could work, make a living, stay honest, and have somebody with the equipment say, "Hey kid, I know you want to shoot, so here's a camera, and here's how you work it, and you can borrow this for the weekend." That was my fantasy of what would occur, but that wasn't happening and I was getting very frustrated.

The Theodorakis movie, FILAMENT was shot with a borrowed camera. I had to insist that the friend who had just bought it lend it to me. It was very outrageous on my part, but the opportunity to shoot arose, and I called Ken Ross at midnight and said, "look, I know your Beaulieu is brand new but under all of the reasons that we started the co-op, I need to borrow your camera for a shoot tomorrow." And he acquiesced and that's how I shot it. But that was rare, I didn't usually have

my hands on that. So I wanted to use the equipment, and I didn't want to just be lucky. Fundamentally, when you shoot you are always "lucky". You get what you get but you want as much control as you can get over that before everything goes the way it will go anyway.

So I applied to N.Y.U. film school, it wasn't happening otherwise. And oddly got in, which was wonderful, it was wonderful. And when I got the letter saying that I'd been accepted, I called them immediately and said "Thank you." Then I said, "How do I apply for student aid?" And they said, "Oh, you're too late for student aid."

I said, "What!?. I have just, just received the acceptance letter. I work full-time. You're telling me now that it's too late to apply for..." And then I went out of my mind, really fairly. I was so furious, I mean I was furious. Outraged. Because it was impossible, and I didn't even know how expensive it was. And it wasn't as expensive then as it is now, which is impossible.

So while still flipped out of my mind, I called my parents and my father was already working out here. He said, "Hey, never mind that. Come to Los Angeles, UCLA is here." That was the other great film school in the United States at the time. And it's a state university, and was much less expensive. I think when we started, wasn't it 200 dollars a semester?

[Randolph Pitts](#)

Something like that.

[Amy Halpern](#)

Something really incredible, and you were with smart people and it was all there. So, I came out here to go to the film school. Outrageously actually because I hadn't been accepted, I just came out here to do it. But I was kind of wild. I was furious. I was just outraged that... So that's what I did, I typed here for a year and started going to a lot of screenings. And I can't remember, I must already have been a student when we started The Oasis, and I didn't know those people quite yet.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

How would you characterize your experience at UCLA.

[Amy Halpern](#)

Mixed. Heavily mixed. I mean, a dearth of instruction. Magnificent freedom to do whatever, I know nobody gave a damn or looked at it but for somebody who was already on a trajectory, which I was, it was actually better than being told what to do in lots of ways. I was sorrowful actually not to have had instruction. There was only one camera person on faculty the whole time I was there, undergraduate and graduate school, and he was a disparaging misogynist. He was otherwise insulting and he couldn't see light. I saw him set one rim light once and I was impressed and that was all he ever did. What I didn't know at the time was that he was a sodden drunk.

That was a drag. So most of what I had to learn, I learned on a set where people are not paid to tell you anything. They were not necessarily kind and they were in a rush, and rude or stressed. So it was a less kind form of education on the whole. But then one had the facilities and access to cameras, and editing equipment, and lights. And then later on, sound recording and sound mixing equipment. And so for that, I am more grateful than I can ever begin to express.

Arwa Ibrahim

Were you immediately drawn towards gaffing as a specialization?

Amy Halpern

I didn't realize it existed until I came out here. I was somehow surprised that people would let other people shoot their films. Even though, I mean, I've been watching Hollywood film since I was little and talking about all the parts and how they're made. But with the kind of films I wanted to make, why would you have someone else frame them for you? I mean, why would you, if you could have a say? And corollary to that is how things are lit. And I have always moved lights around for pleasure.

So that was just a huge surprise, it was a discovery, that not only would other people ask you to shoot things for them or, in fact, eventually pay you. But that they were desperate to have people light because most people, it turns out, don't see light well. And although I think of it as something that any child does all the time without vocabulary to discuss it or manipulate, all children are drawn to light. All children spend their time contemplating light effects, playing with venetian blinds, playing with reflections, doing this.

All this stuff is total cinema light awareness, which everybody is endowed with but they get distracted, and by the time a lot of people get to being on film sets,

either as directors, producers, writers, and I'm sorry to say, camera people, they're not all seeing light. Most camera people, good ones, of course do, that's what they're seeing. But I've been on sets with people who had good reputations and got a large amount of work who were, or seemed to me, purblind as far as lighting is concerned. So that was a surprise, that was this lacuna, actually a need for what comes naturally to me and is pleasurable. And also... because I didn't find a context either at UCLA or elsewhere, and even at The Oasis we weren't really talking about our films with each other. We were just looking at what we liked and showing it.

I never had the context or discussing my work while I was making it. Partly because I was averse, but partly because there was nobody there to do that with. Jim Doolin, a painter, who was teaching in the building next door, he I could talk to. He liked to say, "I don't know anything about film." I said, "yeah but you know about seeing, and you know about lighting, and you know about framing. You know about lots of things, compositionally."

Ed Brokaw, Emeritus Professor at U.C.L.A., I'd talk to, but most people I didn't. Except for him and later, Shirley Clarke, and Bill Moritz, most of the faculty at U.C.L.A. had no interest whatsoever in "experimental" film.

Bill Moritz came and taught a class called "the design film class". He showed a bunch of fantastic films, that's how I saw David Lebrun's TANKA for the first time. The class had been invented by Ed Brokaw, was taught by Bill Moritz, and then later by Shirley Clarke. Great, something anybody, anyone should do. Which is, be in a situation where you make short films according to concept. Writers should do it, everybody should do it. But anyway... But there wasn't anybody talking about what I was doing and I wasn't articulate enough to talk about it with a lot with strangers. So, I was better off just doing.

What I found very rich was working as a set electrician on film shoots, especially bigger and bigger film ones, moving enormous light sources and taking over streets downtown – for example, with a chase scene with cop cars and people falling over -- you get to move very large light sources around.

You get to do some fantastic lighting on streets or on incredible looking people or sets. Really, a complete and utter gratification... of what you can do with your eyes. Also leaving those jobs at the end of a day (or night) I always could feel I was seeing better while I was driving; that the enhanced focus of paying attention to these tools improved one's seeing. When you could actually A-B things, try

this, and then that and see how it worked. With lighting instruments, playing with light variations as we have all always done as children, playing with a reflective plate, or a fork, or a knife, or somebody's watch, or the window, or the venetian blinds, or that tree branch.

All these things that we always do. To be on a set where there are actually tools made to do it is really the cheese. I'm still amazed not more people want to do this, actually, I'm more than amazed -- I'm astounded.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

I think light is unfortunately, I mean for me at least, I appreciate it and I appreciate it in paintings. The quality of light in paintings, but I think it's almost taken for granted in film a lot, especially in narrative film, I think that it's kind of a secondary... second thought.

[Amy Halpern](#)

Except that it's completely manipulating how you react to what you're looking at.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

Absolutely—

[Amy Halpern](#)

So, on one hand it may be disparaged and ignored but on the other hand...

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

I just think as a viewer it can be taken for granted for that reason. It's very subconscious... at least for me it can be a subconscious (influence?) .

[ask Arwa](#)

[Amy Halpern](#)

That's certainly true in how credits are given, and how the directors of photography get all the credit. They aren't all lighting cameramen and that was a surprise to me. That was almost as much as a surprise to me as finding out that people pay others to gaff; that many people whose camera work I'd admired had been relying on lighting artists whose names nobody knows. And it was a necessary part of their body of work that was not credited.

[Amy Halpern](#)

One is not in this for credit, and I was actually thinking, ROLL #1 FOR NANCY is for Nancy, my sister, who even to this moment, I think of as one of the most sublime living humans, and to please her sensibilities and her sense of humor and her austerity and her sense of analysis... and also provoke rapture in her because she's in some ways, she's so sober even though she's not sober. I mean she is a nut, but, she was my motivation, she is who I look to for a reaction. And she has odd tastes.

[Randolph Pitts](#)

I was going to ask-

[Amy Halpern](#)

Please.

[Randolph Pitts](#)

How do you think that the business pressures in the entertainment business to move from film, to video, and then to digital, supposedly necessitated by the need to produce an immense amount of material for television media, have changed lighting and everything related to lighting, in terms of the emphasis placed on it?

[Amy Halpern](#)

Depends on who's doing it. I mean, the great thing about digital cameras is they're very much easier to get a good image from. Whereas with film, if you don't expose correctly you're not going to get an image period, or you're going to get a completely inadequate image. With digital imagery... it records much more, but it's an ugly medium to begin with, so for me that's a great sadness. But people can get away with less deliberation with it as a result. So you can be sloppier. It shows, but you can be sloppier. Or if you chose a location well and you're sloppy, the exquisite qualities of the location cover it. Or in something like your pal... I forgot what the name of their manifesto was, but the idea of not using any equipment and just rolling with everything.

[Randolph Pitts](#)

Lars von Trier, Dogme

[Amy Halpern](#)

Yeah. I thought it was, I mean, it was an interesting idea to play with, but I thought it was extremely hypocritical of him to say such a thing when their fabulous film CELEBRATION is such a strong story, it has such a compelling script, it has such

fabulous actors cut loose to do really interesting things, that it doesn't matter how it looks, it doesn't matter how well lit it is. But that's an exceptional film so you can get away with it or... The great thing about it is it's liberated a lot of narratives and points of view since it's so very much cheaper to make film now.

Does that answer your question in any way? I'm also the downwind of some stupidity, but this is even before digital video. This is when people started getting personal video cameras and I had been on a set making light repairs that were obviously necessary (if you can see) and someone said, "What's taking so long, I can get this on my home camera."

[Amy Halpern](#)

Oh well, it's all film school for everybody. Should we stop this mess for a minute?

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

Sure.

[Kate Brown](#)

So, Amy, I know you played with light ever since you were a child, what drew you to the moving image?

[Amy Halpern](#)

Being a live animal, having to run, going around looking at things all the time is... Looking at cement, looking at the walls, looking at buildings. Like most people who love New York, I love New York and so the spit on pavement, and the gum, and the shit, and this... It's all beautiful. So I may want to hang out with one image indefinitely. On the other hand, I'm impatient and have, like all children, high kinetic energy. And so one wants to move and also one of the great things you can do with a camera is make people look at things that they do not look at. It's like the great thing, it is, the great thing, the camera. Because people say, look, look at this, no, no, look at this. And sometimes it's something that a person didn't think of looking at or something they don't want to look at or something they don't know how to look at. They don't know how to look at it and find it beautiful, which is teachable. They don't know how to look at it with kindness, for example. Or they just won't look at things.

I made a vow when I was very young, little, like nine, maybe, to myself as a New York child that I would never turn my eyes away from anything. Because there's a lot of ugly shit to look at. But if you have any intention of effecting anything on the planet, you have to be able to look at it, to touch it, to do something with it.

And I was really interested in being a surgeon or a doctor and helping. And if you can't look at something hideous, you're not going to be able to sew it up, clean it up, mop it up, analyze what the, discern the ugly damage from the good stuff, all that. So it sort of came out directly down to being a New Yorker in Manhattan.

Does that in any way approach your question?

[Kate Brown](#)

Yes.

[Amy Halpern](#)

That city is so gorgeous. It's just relentlessly gorgeous. Not fearful, like many people say, but where it's actually a harmonious whole. But here [in Los Angeles] what you're looking at, what is fabulous, is that nature is wrapped around everything. So even with these hideous catastrophes of buildings that people put up here, either cheap, expedient, low budget, whatever the reasons people have - or just fanciful. Fanciful's also okay but you can end up with monstrosities. Or just because you're, a vulgar, self-promoting advertiser.

All of these reasons make this town hideous and what's great about it and beautiful besides the distinct parts is the way nature, which is so ferocious even if it's mild in this town, infiltrates everything. In New York, the city itself is exclusive. The buildings, the lines, the streets, the people in the streets, the flavors of the people in the streets, the sound that's just all beautiful, beautiful and I always felt connected as a child there to the sky and to the ground into the rocks and to nature, but that wasn't a given there. Most people had no idea of the phases of the moon growing up in a city. They didn't know where to look.

[Amy Halpern](#)

(silence)

[Randolph Pitts](#)

I've always been struck by many of the titles that you use in your films and in particular THREE PREPARATIONS. On the one hand, a preparation is something that is prepared, and on the other hand it is something that prepares the viewer for the next image. But that's just me. What does it mean to you?

[Amy Halpern](#)

Well, it has all those plays in it. Definitely. I mean it was something intended to approach the issue of the frame. The frame is just so overwhelming and so it has to do with how tentative ones approach is, preparing to confront or deal with something that's profound as a frame. And I also come to this with a heavy biology background. Love the idea of a prepared slide, a preparation. That's kind of appealing, the chemical preparation, a recipe. I like that. And threes are always great for structure. Just because it's funny, I don't think of myself as very good with structure, though I like it. But it's not my first pleasure and it's not my motivating thing ever, almost ever. I can agree with myself on a structural approach to something like, for example, you can say, "FALLING LESSONS is completely a vertical tilt with exceptions."

You can say that was a structural decision, but the motivation for the film was not that, it was a combination of what you're looking at, the surrender, the things falling by. So structure, anyway, but it's striking me now as you ask that that the three part structure of THREE PREPARATIONS was, I think, pretty innate. I was thinking about it when I shot the film. And the things in our house. In fact everything in the movie is a still life. And so the idea of filming a still life has everything to do with the fact that it's a moving camera and not a still.

So in the first section you're looking at these translucent objects, lining them up with dark and light backgrounds from the buildings behind and you're moving relative to those objects to how they line up with the background. But that doesn't happen by itself. The person moving the camera or eye has to do that. It just seems like something anybody would do.

And then in the second one, STATICE/ FRAMELINE, maybe there's a little bit more like formal or I might almost say plodding in the way that it adamantly sticks you in this frame and makes tiny, excruciating adjustments, which may or may not be going anywhere, until that super dramatic thing of shoving that white strip on the right side of the frame out. But that doesn't happen either without moving the camera. None of that drama, the drama of the diagonal, the curve of the irises, foliage, that diagonal is so dramatic, but less so if it's not moving I think. And then of course the last one is totally kinetic.

The CANNONBALL SECTION is a true baby game that I played on a regular basis. [An arc of Revolutionary war cannonballs are embedded in cement near the Soldiers and Sailors Monument on Riverside Drive in Manhattan, New York, up the street from where I grew up.] It's a play between balance and rhythm. It's a

duet between the person who's trying to stay balanced on those balls and walk on them. And so there's an imposition of the rhythm of your own gravity with your balance and your momentum.

I remember early on, a fever dream that I had. It was the first year I left my parents' house, so I would have been 16 and I was listening to John Coltrane and I kind of passed out with it. The dream had to do with these enormous volumes of space, and they were heavy and difficult and menacing, not that they were going to do any actual harm, but one had to orchestrate and move these objects in space. It was a challenge. It was a serious challenge and I think that the effect of these cannonballs has something to do with grappling with these bodies in space. Even though you're not getting that close to them, they are moving down in the frame in a way that's aggressive

And actually at that time also, in terms of movement, I was definitely thinking more 2D all the time. So the flattening that you get with these round things going down was as if vertical even though, because of course it's not vertical, it's flat, but if what you're looking at, you're framing this way, then forward movement is vertical, relative to the screen or relative to the frame which is what one's context is all the time.

Randolph Pitts

THREE PREPARATIONS seems also to be a lot about depth. The First Section is in certainly a study in depth. Focus and depth and focus seem to be very significant in this particular group of films.

Amy Halpern

I would totally agree with you and since you asked earlier about the effect of digital media in terms of current aesthetics, the play of depth and focus that I could do because I was shooting moving film, with a lens, and was making a selection of the point of focus, it becomes a key element, right? Because you're looking at glowing bodies that aren't as sharp as the buildings behind them, but they are obviously the characters. You're drawn to the color and the light in those objects.

Digital image-making flattens all of that out. It doesn't make the discernment of focus. Everything, almost everything is in focus. The DPs who work with it well are usually using devices to impair or constrict the depth of focus because it gives you more than you want, or more than you need, perhaps. It also doesn't direct the

eye of the audience the same way. That's why I say, 'Oh, it's like reality. Yeah. It's like reality: you have to choose what you're looking at all the time.' You have to use your own discretion.

It just depends on the film. When you're subjecting yourself to someone else's film, you would like to be shown how they're seeing rather than strolling loose on your own recognizance as usual.

Any further on that?

Randolph Pitts

No, that's good.

Amy Halpern

PEACH LANDSCAPE is maybe more 3D because it has that illusion of it. The egg that appears, which is not funny, cracks me up every time. Every time, we listen for the audience, hoping that they're tracking it. I think it's funny, you're feeling yourself having this illusion, right? That is, you know it's not three dimensional, you know it's the bottom of the bowl. But what's uncanny is that the concave seems convex. The slices of peach are like limbs. It's a virginal, sexy film.

Arwa Ibrahim

Hmm. Very essential.

Amy Halpern

Kate, any thoughts?

Kate Brown

I do have questions. I'm finding it hard to do two things at once...

Amy Halpern

I'm sorry.

Kate Brown

And I'm just sitting here.

Amy Halpern

Well actually it's, do you want to cut for a second? [Kate Brown is operating camera on this recording.]

Kate Brown

Maybe you've already addressed this, but you said ROLL #1 FOR NANCY is for your sister so it has the quality of a letter. The images are for someone. Did you have that same feeling in the films that you made later?

Amy Halpern

Well, I certainly intended them for her entertainment. I mean they're not for everybody. I mean, I would like it if everybody would, but... my grandson says, 'You make boring movies.' He's interesting. He says it not infrequently and I say, well, I like them and some other people find them interesting and maybe sometime you too will find them interesting. But you can't force taste, unfortunately. No. It's fascist, so you have to invite.

There are filmmakers who stop making films out of timidity, but also I think, as Diana Wilson says, she didn't want to torture anybody anymore. Her films are delightful, but people don't have a lot of what's called sitzfleisch, they don't like to sit still, they don't have patience with something that's not a story or with something that does not immediately connect or engage with them on an emotional level or any of that stuff.

Kate Brown

Do you remember Nancy's reaction to ROLL #1?

Amy Halpern

I think she liked it but I don't remember distinctly. I mean it's important to me that she like it.

Randolph Pitts

ROLL #1 is one of my favorites of all of your films.

Amy Halpern

Huh. Thank you.

Randolph Pitts

What interests me about the film is that it has a curious quality of a narrative and then the word narrative may be sort of the term of opprobrium to you in a certain way. To me it feels like a number of different narratives going on superimposed on each other. I mean, how do you respond to that as a kind of...

Amy Halpern

It's interesting to hear. I mean, the fact that it's in the three parts, it has a structure, suggests narrative by itself. It's like an abstractly suggested narrative. But I don't make up stories. I don't impose stories on it. That is a reflex that we all have, constructing apparent narrative from any given series of images.

The film's moments are less stories, and more like: "Here it is, here it went there, oh look what it's doing now. Ooh, now they're floating." It's more like a state than a story, a mental state than a story. But you're welcome to have a narrative if you... I mean I think narrative is a reflex we have. That's what our brain does. Our brain is always trying to make order.

All these things and if it's not happening, we do it with almost no ingredients. We do that, we do it all the time. So I don't execrate thinking in stories.

But while we're talking about stories, which generally imply protagonists, it's a lot to talk about because I sincerely, deeply, and profoundly have avoided them completely. Until recently I have largely avoided shooting any people, on purpose.

The CANNONBALL SECTION, the last section in THREE PREPARATIONS has a shot at the end of it which I've cut off and put back on and taken off, oh, safely, five times between screenings and otherwise over twenty-five years. And that shot is a wide shot of the place with all of the cannonballs in it and a small child stepping out. It actually, this one shot actually has a film can with its own name on it that it would leave and go back on the film and later go back into the can. It's called the Cheap Ending. That's the name of this piece of film and I wasn't being jokey about calling it a cheap ending.

For me it was, on the one hand, pleasing and satisfying to get an ID that orients you to what you've been looking at: you have seen feet. Although they aren't a young child's feet, the child is more the age of a person doing this than I. I still felt that showing that was a cheap ending, even though it was sort of satisfying because I'm firmly committed to showing things that are first person experience for somebody. And although much of cinema is pendant from the idea of having a protagonist on the screen, who's having experiences for you that you then empathize with or react to, I'd rather eliminate the middleman. I've always wanted to eliminate that middle person and be the person who had any experience or be the person presenting that experience rather than a character.

And actually I think of the early films which you've been looking at as the unpopulated films, and then I got into populated films.

So in the earlier films, Nancy's neck was Nancy's neck, but it wasn't. I don't narrativize the presence of that person. There's also my mother's forehead and hair. The first person you see is reading and you see a forehead and bangs, but they are not the same person. You could easily conflate them. But I wasn't thinking in terms of describing or delineating a character or a person. That was not of interest to me at the time.

I've put what I do in service of people who are interested in character as a cinematographer and gaffer, but as a pursuit, it's not interesting to me. Character Development, more talk about people, more stuff of lives...that's not the part that interests me.

Kate Brown

These early films have so much to do with New York. Did it take time when you moved to Los Angeles to reorient yourself to a new subject?

Amy Halpern

No.

It actually, it's funny. The first thing I started shooting in L.A. were lots of brightly colored flowers, which is very not New York because I was working in Century City, so I'd walk about a mile and a half from where we were living past roses as big as a person's head and having just left Manhattan where you're seeing hundreds and hundreds of people everyday close-up, and you're not hardly seeing any pedestrians, even then, in Los Angeles. But you would encounter face-size flowers, obscenely bright, and varied colors. And I was indeed reeling from having left my more black and white, gray, tasteful world and then come into all this raucous color. That was a chastisement for me, because... really, I mean if there was a true reaction, it was, uh, how tasteless. And it was like, slap yourself back and say, 'Wait, nothing is tasteless in nature.'

That is an odd consideration. So this is how it is. Your job is to dig it. But it was an adjustment because this place is also very, very ugly and there are such vast stretches of ugly crap of asphalt. And I don't know why I was rhapsodizing about cement and crap on sidewalks in New York, but here, the distances are so vast. They don't seem so precious, so dear, so darling. The stretch of macadam

between here and the corner, but it's not the same gorgeousness to look at while you walk. The distances are vast. That whole business of asking someone how far it is between here and there, which to an innocent who just came out here as a non-driver and you'd say, "How far is it to get to there?" And they say, "Oh, 15 minutes." I say "Oh, 15 minutes by foot?" And they say, "Oh no, 15 minutes driving!"

It was a bad adjustment from New York City to here. Actually I loathed Los Angeles for nine years solid. I loathed living here and I did not like the lack of sincerity of the people I ran into on a regular basis. Everybody was so smiley. But what was scary about it, I mean, at first I was astounded, Wow. They smile, you smile back. And then if you look back at the person, by the time they've passed you the smiles have dropped. What was that? Showing teeth as Stan Brakhage liked to say, smiling and showing the teeth like any other wolf or wild animal. I didn't like that. I didn't like the lack of pedestrians. I didn't like the segregation, that's for sure. I was outraged, I'm still outraged, but I know it's improved and I've been patient about it, but I'm pissed off. I was furious. There was no public transportation system and there was a de facto curfew.

If you went to a movie in Westwood at night and had to get elsewhere afterwards, you were stuck there and you were free pickings, especially if you had any color on you, for the police to harass you waiting at a bus stop. No bus coming. It was demeaning to wait for a bus at 11 o'clock at night. What kind of city is that? It's disrespectful. No, I loathed it deeply, full time. Also the class shit, where I come from, I know things have changed and now the country is in a vulnerable state and people flash bling everywhere they go, flash their accomplishments, flash their beauty or their wealth. What a disgusting state. I know it's not true in New York anymore, but when I was there, you know, you don't show your wealth all the time, you're in the street with everybody else.

It's not respectful to raise your leg up (like a dog) or show off and especially, you know, this undeserved wealth thing that was just so prominent in this town where you have kids who you look at and you know they've never worked a day in their life. They've maybe never even cleaned dishes for their parents. You see kids who've never worked a day in their life driving a car that is more money than most people make in a year. It's many times what most people make in a year, and they do that without shame, without embarrassment. That was a daily horror for me, which I'm probably not over.

So yeah, no, the adjustment to the circumstances. On the other hand, the discovery of driving was fantastic. That kind of movement that you can do with wheels. That was a new one on me. I never even played with a dolly before. So being able to zoom around in a car. So what I would do, when I first got out here, every time I could get my ass in the car was driving from one end of Sunset Boulevard to the other just for those beautiful curves. Yeah, so I mean there's plenty to shoot here. I don't feel I've begun to satisfy what I can do here in terms of the images that are constantly harassing me, in the best way. And actually they don't have anything to do with what's shitty about this town. Most of them.

Randolph Pitts

The Theodorakis film, FILAMENT (THE HANDS), which we haven't talked about up until now, on the one hand is implicitly political because of who Theodorakis was and is and that whole context, political context at the time, in a different way now. On the other hand it is so beautifully abstract, as you get to enter the center section, when the hands take on the personality of their own. Tell us about your decision to make the film, your relationship to the subject matter, et cetera.

Amy Halpern

I've always really been somebody who looked at hands a lot and those rhythms are so innately potent. That's one thing Theodorakis has as a composer, which some other people have, where you can take a lyric and make it manifest melodically or harmonically. That blows my mind, because when I first saw him play his music, some of the lyrics were in Spanish (Lorca), which I also didn't speak. And other Greek poets, but even without knowing what the words were, you could follow the drama of the words from the rhythms, from the harmonies, and the melodies.

And then I saw him play. And he always performs in a black frock shirt. So his hands are naturally illuminated, which is ideal for both conducting the orchestra and also for the audience who gets to watch these amazing gestures. So I immediately knew I wanted to shoot his hands. Of course, it would seem like anybody will look at this guy and say, oh my God, those hands, those rhythms, those gestures are so fantastic. I felt like it was a sort of no brainer that it was what anybody would be drawn to do, except I somehow managed to do that.

Just lucky.

Kate Brown (or Arwa Ibrahim?)

You were talking last night about how you chose different film stocks and increasing the grain.

Amy Halpern

Oh yeah. Well, because I didn't do any lighting yet of my own except to move a desk table lamp, which I was capable of doing at the time, or move to or from a window or to block light. But I had never used lights and I knew that I was going to be dependent on stage lighting. But what's so cool about the gag of his dress is that it takes, it exploits perfectly any stage lighting that there is. But I also didn't know how much light there'd be, whether I could get an image at all. I just didn't know and I knew I would have absolutely no time to find out except doing it. So I got three different negative film stocks: Plus-X, Tri-X and 4-X, which are progressively grainier and progressively faster. So that thing that was happening with his hands glowing in the light was going to happen more so with the 4-X. So that was quite deliberate in my own, not-so-ordered way and turned out to be a correct decision.

It's too bad about those stocks disappearing. 4-X is hard to find. That's one of the most beautiful stocks Kodak ever made. Beautiful. That dense, grain, all of those gradations.

So disappointing the film, ROMA. I have liked the filmmaker's work, but the cinematography, which won the Oscar for cinematography this year was so disappointing. If you're going to show me black and white, show me some goddamn grain. I couldn't believe that it had no visible texture in it and also all the grays go to hell, there isn't that gorgeous... I mean, that shot you see over and over again and the narrow passageway down to the gate of the family house should have been alive in those dark areas with grain. It should have been alive with the feel of what that light is in that space, the grit, you should be able to taste with your teeth. That space, that urban, but protected, but concealed, but elegant. All that stuff. I was so disappointed.

We went out of our way to see it on a screen because we, it had been praised and then the stills look wonderful. And I was astounded. Here we are. I don't know, 35 or 70 millimeter, it was a big print. No grain. Did he shoot film? Did he shoot digital? Do we know?

Kate Brown

Digital.

Amy Halpern

He shot digital then blew it to film? So, he fucked himself. And me, I felt personally disappointed to have gone out to a theater. But as you were saying earlier, you know, what is the effect of digital filmmaking? It's much easier to shoot. You know, he's a guy with a great eye and he's a great filmmaker, but he's not a DP, so he didn't have to think about what the exposure would do. The camera just took the whole thing. But without discernment. And so I admire the movie. I think it's heavily overpraised, but I think it's scandalous that it got the cinematography award. It looks digital and it's disappointing to see on a big screen. I was quite angry, not angry, angry, but you know, disappointed. I want to see grain. That's what's beautiful about film, among other things: It is these live particles that are reacting chemically to light... Better than we do. Or let's just say slightly differently than we do. That's why it enhances our vision to film or photograph. It's wasteful not to, if you have the option.

One of my first crashing disappointments was seeing Star Wars digital. What was the first one? This Binky Stinky, whatever that was, the one that was the first digital one...

Arrwa Ibrahim

- and it was awful.

Amy Halpern

What's that?

Arwa Ibrahim

We saw that in Pasadena didn't we?

Amy Halpern

On a big screen. And you go there to see something magnificent and the first titles come and he does that thing with the deep space and the things coming out of deep space. Why isn't there any grain? Because there isn't any grain. I mean, sometimes for me the best part of a thrill of a professional, conventional commercial film is the title sequence. We all have that experience, right? You have a master like Saul Bass or somebody doing a killer sequence of images and text. Sometimes they're better than the rest of the movie. Not infrequently.

But to see something come on where it's going to be text of some clever design decision, with no grain. Oh other things carry it. You know von Trier is right: a narrative can carry it. A topic of fascination can carry it. Anything with people or animals can carry it, because we find people and animals helplessly compelling. More difficult is something like yours. Your Breuer (ATLANTA CENTRAL LIBRARY) movie, where people don't fall into raptures over buildings that often, or most people don't. But certainly your film is instructive in how to fall into a state of rapture over a modern building of slab cement, it's really so cool. People need to be told this, or shown these things. But it's not a prescriptive, as they say. I do my best not to be a complete fascist because I don't demand people watch, but I wish people ... I think it's good for them. I think it's better for them to see well... Better for humanity.

[Kate Brown](#)

I have a question about these New York films. You were working full-time as a typist at Women's Day. And what movies were you seeing, if any? And where?

[Amy Halpern](#)

As much Bergman as possible, that would be the first thing. Fellini. Bergman when possible. I was very poor so I wasn't going out a lot.

[Randph Pitts](#)

What were some of the earliest independent or experimental, or abstract films that you were exposed to?

[Amy Halpern](#)

I was extremely lucky, I blundered into going to S.U.N.Y. Binghamton, Harpur College, in which, by a fluke, the first year I was there I immediately took film classes. But I was still thinking I wanted to be an architect. I was giving up on the idea of medicine. Well, that put the bullet in the head of any idea of architecture because I went to a place that had been professionally built. And it's in a place that's perpetually gray, dark gray. And it's built in salmon pink brick. It's one of the most repulsive things I've ever seen.

If you could puke from the materials decision of an architect, that's where you'd do it. And it's constantly raining. These little skinny sidewalks are constantly covered with worms. And the buildings look like ripped flesh or vomit. Terrible. But it was just a fluke that Binghamton had not just a nascent film department, but it was being taught by two total masters: Larry Gottheim, listen, he's a total

master. Let's just say he was very good. More than very good, but I don't think he would allow one to say he was a total master at that point, it was early in his shooting. But Ken Jacobs certainly was by that point.

And they both were passionate monsters about this medium. And we looked at Todd Browning's FREAKS in Ken's class. You know, the masterpieces. I don't have a genre thing with that. You know, masterpieces are in all genres. I have definitely thanked my father for that. Because he made us see all kinds of films without distinction of one flavor or another. As long as it wasn't unchaste. He didn't want me to see THE GRADUATE when I was a teenager. I'd read the book already in the house, but they didn't want us to see the film.

But in terms of any genre, including abstract, modern, foreign, all that stuff, we were seeing all those things, with less interest in so-called action films. But ... it was this fantastic glut, because I'd always imagined, since I've seen a lot of experimental work already – at The Museum of Modern Art. Because my father would either take us or just tell us to go there. “Oh, there's this really amazing movie that you have to go see.” So I would go. Mostly alone, sometimes with Nancy. But mostly alone. That was my M.O., because most people don't want to go, or they have something else they want to do. And who can wait?

And in Binghamton was this amazing moment because everybody great in experimental film, not everybody, but many people. Peter Kubelka, Stan Brakhage. Ernie Gehr was new, but he was making films there. I was there when he made SERENE VELOCITY in those horrible neon lit hallways. It was all, you know ...

But it was also related to the politics of the time. Which was that we felt at the time that it was a crisis. That the war had to be stopped, or it was the end of everything in this country. And the government was undoing every kind of freedom-oriented impulse that the population was having. And the people who were best at it were being murdered and jailed, or addicted, or just had terrible things happening somehow.

And Ken (Jacobs) would say, any intelligent conversation is subversive. You know, whether you're talking about politics, which we weren't. Or you're talking about, “Look at this”. And look what happens when you, you know --for example, as Ken would say, put a piece of ND [neutral density] filter over one eye, which enhances - suddenly you're seeing rampant 3D where you weren't seeing it before. If you have binocular vision. That was revolutionary, it blows your mind. It's these little

things that can blow your mind. So there was a continuity of that being revolutionary as much as anything else. That's what it felt like. Really felt like that.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

What other art were you consuming?

[Amy Halpern](#)

Paintings.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

-or reading or-

[Amy Halpern](#)

Paintings. I have a bad memory for words. I was reading a lot, but you know, the certain basics of stuff like Baudelaire. I can't easily put that together. Goethe's theory of light and color, that was astounding for a long time. It's still astounding to me that he would have the audacity to rely on his own perception enough to make a statement about what he was seeing. That was revolutionary. And that's what I was thinking about a lot. Like, how dare you see that and then say you saw that. It's like ... And in some cases he was mistaken technically. That's also interesting. In fact, that's gorgeous. But at least it was mistaken with full engagement. And engagement is more important than rectitude, except morally. Excuse me.

I'm fearing that I am getting ridiculous. Shall we stop for a minute, or do you have another thought? Kate?

[Kate Brown](#)

Oh I have a question, because people don't know you. What did your father— he worked in the film industry?

[Amy Halpern](#)

He was a publicist. Well at the beginning of his career he was reviewing films for the trades in New York. And so he'd usually show up in the morning, see a screening, go back to work, write about it. At lunch he would try to catch a movie at the Museum of Modern Art for his own edification. Then he'd go back to work and write. In the evening he would go to the movies. And the amazing thing is that this guy at 98 has a pretty astounding memory ... Even at 53, at 34, when I

first knew him. Whatever he was. His recall of all these films is astounding. He is a maniac.

So he ended up as a publicist writing press releases and trying to control spin on stupid things. Or shepherding movie stars to where they were supposed to make a certain something. But his own shooting was really amazing. I mean we have his footage that he shot in 8mm of my mother on their honeymoon. It's amazing camera work. I mean of course, because the best camera work is when you're in love with what you're looking at. I mean that is kind of a basic corollary.

Even if you hate it, there's an act of love that you're doing with a camera while you're shooting something. And without that component it's missing a lot. So in the case of my father, who was madly in love with my mother, who was also extremely exquisite to look at, the moves, the shots, the whole thing was ... But he didn't never get to do that in his career. Alas. But he still sees films and thinks about them all the time. And as recently as you know, as recently as last month he gave an interesting suggestion for editing something I showed him.

And not a bad one. We'll see about that, but anyway. Amazing. No, he's still engaged with the film image and how things affect you, and how ... So we were lucky. And the other good thing about what he did, was expose me and my sister mostly, because we were the ones mostly of age, and then later my brother and little sister, to a large number of very famous elements, otherwise known as actors, in a pretty wide range. So we got really really lucky in that it was very clear to us from a very early age that fame has nothing to do with quality. Like nothing to do with quality.

And I know this, you know, as a stone fact because some people who are marvelous on camera are also assholes. And other people who are marvelous on camera are fantastic human beings. And whether you've heard of them or not, it's not how you determine that. There are some terrible people, as we all know, who are compelling to look at on a camera, or elsewhere. That was a great thing to have because it also prepared me for set work. It's that and being a New Yorker, which means that everybody deserves respect in every direction at all times. And whether or not they're fancy, rich, gorgeous, too young, too old. None of that is why you should respect them: everybody should get respect.

And it made me kind of ferociously principled about that. And also indifferent to the power that people have sometimes. That's kind of a New York thing. Because

everybody's in the street there, everybody's in the street there. Or used to be when it was a town that humans could afford to live in.

Arwa Ibrahim

What was your experience as a woman with these principles working here in L.A. in an industry that is....

Amy Halpern

Pressed. Certainly. I mean I came out when I first realized I could work in film and do lighting. I thought, well there's three things I'll never work on: anything I think is sexist, anything I think is racist and anything I think is fascist. And I'm not including manipulation in film as fascism: that's part of the craft.

But I almost instantly realized that “anything sexist” ruled out essentially everything that was made. That even on a good project with a good script by a smart person with a smart director, they would cast some stupid simpy girl to play the only female lead role; dress her inappropriately and stupidly so that she looks like a moron, or helpless, or both, which is the combination that's usually desirable; given stupid things to say, or things that are inane and have no bearing on what the movie's about.

So I realized I had to abandon that particular element. Yeah. There are very few exceptions to this experience. I've worked on lots and lots and lots of movies. And I would say the predominant number of them do casting of infuriating females.

And that's just the beginning of it. You asked me a question, have I experienced on the set, of course. Has everything to do with that. But before we even get to Hollywood, I mean I was written out of the history of the Collective for Living Cinema, which I founded in New York. I was involved in naming the collective. I was involved in its founding, in its curating, in setting up the projectors, projecting, deciding on the film program for the first couple years it existed. And I was not involved with any of the guys that I founded it with ... I was not involved with any of them. And when they did the ten-year retrospective I was written out of it. But they had already ceased to answer mail. As soon as I left town it was as if I had fallen off the ends of the earth. And I initially had thought, well maybe it's personal, but it's not personal. There was never anything negative between us. There was never anything but collaboration. It's more like, I faded from the mind because I wasn't the lover of one of them. And also I wasn't a strident feminist, and I wasn't using ... I wasn't using sex to sell anything. And that makes you a little

less famous. I'm not fully sure what it was. But definitely gender and the infuriating position women find themselves in traditionally, of being bound and circumscribed, has been a large part of my experience. And in learning how to do any filmmaking as well.

I'm sure I've left out parts of it. I could go on in great length, but I don't feel like it at the moment.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

Okay.

[Amy Halpern](#)

It's so much easier to talk about gender affronts than it is about actual films.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

Sure.

[Amy Halpern](#)

But then we'd just slide into bitching and moaning. I could tell you my favorite story. This is a favorite story of mine. This joking thing that men do on sets with women is a form of intimidation. I was very young when I went into film work, so I was very much younger. And I was a very naïve younger person. And had some sort of purist ideas of what physicality was. And this business of joking somebody out of the room, it's still done all the time. And so I realized I couldn't do what I was doing, which was to not get jokes. Or to act like I wasn't going to get a joke if I thought it was vulgar.

I realized it was hypocritical of me since I understood rather well what they meant. Because sex is great, and some aspects of it are funny. I like working with men. And I like working on sets, but to react or abreact to these affronts is divisive, and then they can say you're surly or too emotional or whatever.

I worked with a very very misogynistic gaffer once who kept saying that women all lie. And, "Oh you must be on the rag." And we were on a long show together, long enough that I said, "I defy you to guess correctly when I'm on the rag. I know when you are." - but that's because he was drinking, and had his own personal problems. He never ever guessed correctly. But this thing of humor. I made a conscious decision that I would not, not get jokes anymore. Because I said to myself, "That is hypocritical: you get the jokes, they just need improvement."

So, two easily told stories:

One of them was rigging a set. There were no talent on the stage but we were rigging in the rafters. I was the rigging gaffer. So there were grips in the air, grips on the ground, electricians in the air and we're hauling the lights up there. And because it was a set day and there was no talent or no directing around we were speaking freely and loudly. And there was some foul language, as there always is, which is entertaining and a nice release from tension and slamming your finger or whatever it is. And they were telling jokes, and someone says, "Oh no no, we can't tell that one. She's here."

And I said, "Wait a minute, what do you mean you can't tell that one? I'm crew, and I speak the language. Tell the joke, what's the joke?" So the joke was, "How do you know when your wife is coming?" That's what these grips asked. And I said, "Huh, how?" And they said, "Who cares?!" That was the answer. So rather than not reacting or getting in a bitchy state about this, because I had made a conscious decision to improve these jokes, I said, "Well, that's kind of funny. But it's not the correct punchline." And they said, "Yeah? What's the correct punchline?" I said, "Ask her boyfriend." And when I saw the grips in the rafters turn red, I thought, yes! It improved my life immensely to be able to do that.

And the next one, which has an even better line, I think, was more of a personal affront because it was private. It was a smaller show, a smaller shoot. And we broke for lunch from a meeting with all the departments. And while we were on our way to where the food was, the sound guy, whom I had barely been introduced to, who wouldn't look me in the eye, who was a very shy man, but had his shirt unbuttoned down to here; shy but also flirtatious, but hadn't even offered me a cup of coffee or anything, passed me in the hallway on our way to wash our hands. And as we passed in the hallway he grabbed me, flush to his tight little body. Like an embrace. Flush. Out of nowhere.

And my boss, the cameraman, (I was the gaffer) was right behind me. So he observed this. Now I'm a New Yorker, and I'm an older sister. And my first impulse would be to chastise, but I had made a conscious decision not to do that. And also because men are so fragile, and their egos are so easily damaged. We like them, we don't want to harm them that much, you just want to illuminate. And so I said to this guy without hitting him, and without pushing him. I said to him, "Careful! Don't turn on equipment you don't know how to operate."

And that guy owned his own Nagra recorder, and he dropped me like a hot potato. But his puny little dignity was not impaired. My boss, who is Persian and a gentleman, and a married person, did not find my behavior undignified. And I think it's one of the best lines I ever came up with. I have felt truly that I had had a walk-in, a gift from May West, who was a no nonsense person and knew how to make a joke out of something that was funny. I could talk about gender all day. But we shouldn't.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

Can you talk about your history with dance?

[Amy Halpern](#)

Yeah. Dance is a good thing to give a small person a pretext to jump around. And I was given one at an early age, I think five or six, in a dance class with a very wise person named Doris Ullman, later, Meier. Later, the last one I can't remember. She was an elementary school's friend's mother and also a dance teacher. And she would have us do the usual things you do, stretching, jumping around. But she also played fabulous music and always had us improvise for a large part of every class. And I was already improvising drawing to music, but to be liberated and instructed in this way was really quite good. It was wonderful to actually have a reason to point the weapon in that direction. And she played fantastic music, we danced to Bartok, Hindemith, this wonderful non-insipid, wonderful-to-get-intimate-with music that way and break it down that way, and also to use it as a structure to work on.

And many years passed like that. And then when I went to high school, at Julia Richman in New York City, which was a very intimidating all-girls school at the time, although public, I had absolutely no interest in gym or sports or any so-called athletics, in any way. And then I discovered that there was a dance class being offered. So I went to this dance class, and there was a ferocious teacher. And I remember thinking, "What a bitch!" although I didn't have that vocabulary then. I was 12 or 13. And then I promptly became one of her dancers. She was teaching in the public school, typing for a living at the Rockefeller Foundation, and doing pieces that were getting reviewed in the New York Times. So I became a member of her company (Lynda Gudde Dancers) for the time I was in high school.

And then at the end of that, when I went to my first year of college, came back, since I knew all the pieces very well I assisted and then became the lighting technician. And that was a very important experience for me, to be able to play

with dimmers, which I had always liked. Manipulating light as a kid, any way, moving lamps, playing with venetian blinds. The things kids do. Making shadows with things. Changing the colors of light by what it is reflected off...all the things that are normal human playful activity, I was doing. And this was a gratifying way to use it in service of her choreography, which I adored. It was very simple, it was very unaffected, very normal human movements on the whole. But exaggerated. And she also used very wonderful music.

But I wasn't interested in dance as my own form, because I find the human body maddeningly limiting. I mean it's marvelous as a vehicle, I am endlessly and daily grateful for being in one, because as far as we know that's how we get to do anything. But as an instrument it's very unsatisfactory for very many reasons, one being that the best spectator position for any dance piece is inside the body that's moving. That's clear to me from the experience both of being the spectator and of being the person doing it. The proscenium view gives you a lot, but it's not enough. Also most people watching dance don't move. And one's desire is to move the audience, to move their eyes. So for me that, once again, was not satisfying. The second simple and enormous flaw with dance for me, as a dancer thinking about continuing to choreograph as I had been doing as a natural kind of human activity, is that there is no close-up. And for me this is not acceptable for the images that I would like to work with. Because for me, as much as the wide view is marvelous, almost nothing is more marvelous than super close-up vision. Well, let's just say it's among the more marvelous things.

One foregoes that as a dancer [All my dance work was pre-video]. Another limitation is being stuck in one body your whole life, with your own body being your instrument.

The experience of watching dance is only occasionally, occasionally transcendent, but almost never. For me. Almost never. For me the best dance to watch has always been somebody drunk, but intoxicated with music who is wedded in that moment, step by step, with what the music is doing. And a little unbalanced, so it's a natural effluence, even if it's done to the music, as a dancer who is drunk might do. That for me is more interesting dance to watch than things that are prepared and arranged.

It's hard to get abstract. Problem is we look at bodies all day long. And so it's too easy to reflexively fall back into the, "Oh what a nice curve of calf, what a great looking back". We do that all day long just on animal behavior. And for me that's

almost never transcendent, it's the opposite of something that I would like to abstract. It's the opposite of where I'd like to go, the particulars of some human being, unless they're being in some way transmuted into something fantastic.

And then, transposing into film, I always was in pursuit of what I refer to as first-person vision. Which is first-person cinema, where you don't have a protagonist. You're not stuck projecting into somebody whose behavior you're watching, and may or may not approve of. One wants to be the person having that experience. One wants to give one's audience the experience of seeing what you want them to see, feeling what you want them to feel without the intermediary, without a priest. The audience is the person who's supposed to be having the religious or otherwise experience. So to have an intermediary like a protagonist is something that tortures me. And I have dabbled with it.

For example, as I mentioned, in the Cannonball Section of THREE PREPARATIONS, over the space of more than seven, maybe ten, maybe it was 15 years, I took off and put back on the last shot, which is of a child stepping out of frame. This reveals the context, but that's not a secret because you're already seeing feet and have some idea what the movement is. Referring back to a protagonist other than oneself bugged me, so I took it off, finally.

On the other hand, it (the protagonist) is an instrument of human behavior or human response. The fact is if you see two dots and then one moves a little closer, you have an emotional reaction to it. If you watch these two dots move a little bit and they have any animation at all, you're immediately going to see those two dots as characters. And that is a reflex of the mind. It's troubling. It's fascinating. It's also glorious. It's a great tool for a narrative. We will unwittingly and just automatically relate deeply to anything we see that reminds us of a person. That's just not how I like to play.

[Kate Brown](#)

Many of your films deal with gestures. It's a single move or it's almost like a quotation from a longer phrase. Can you talk about that? Does that make sense?

[Amy Halpern](#)

Totally. Totally. Sometimes it's nice that they seem to you part of a larger phrase. I don't think it's quite that ordered, but I do find gesture among the more delightful things that there are. Maybe that's secondary. Light itself is the first thing. I'm thinking, like any infant or myself, the first thing that we're entranced by is where

the glow is, or where the light falls off. These are the more delightful places to hang out.

After that, then it's movement. I think, an infant will track light early on and then they will track movement.

But watching gestures is also beautiful. And I'm not sure why it feels good. I've wondered this a long time. Does it feel good because the movements of our eyes as we track around, moving those muscles, feels good? I don't think so. I mean, yes, but no. When you're watching the screen, you are doing a lot of work.

I just think that gestures are delightful. Whether they're animal, vegetable, or mineral, things that fall... that's gestural. Anything that moves is gestural.

[Kate Brown](#)

You have an incredible affinity for animals. Can you talk about that?

[Amy Halpern](#)

I think naturally that's another thing that gets beaten out of most people by the time they're adults. Most children have innately no problem with animals. And then those of us who grew up generally uncomfortable maybe have a greater affinity with animals, because they're more reliable than people. So if you like children and animals, it's because I think, at least speaking from my experience and what I've seen, it is people who tend to like children and animals more than their peers are people that are uncomfortable and find animals and children more truthful.

Animals are, like ourselves, but maybe more so, spectacularly beautifully put together. They take up space in a more graceful way than most human beings do. They don't have issues about time, - that we know of. They don't have issues about proprioception, which we're bolloxed up with. They do present in many ways what, at least we project, is a better state of mind than our own in lots of ways. But also we can be jealous of them in a way. For example, I remember years of envy over the ability of dogs to smell and read a room. The fact that they can read in detail scenes and narratives and preferences. That they can read us that way with their noses has always made me very jealous of that sense, which is not so greatly developed in me.

We can envy that in an animal, the fact that it can live on that level of full and deep life.

[Kate Brown](#)

Maybe I can follow up by asking a specific question about that incredible gull in THREE MINUTE HELLS?

[Amy Halpern](#)

Well I was at lunch with Randolph. It was a place that's up the coast a little bit, and I can't remember what restaurant has subsumed it by now. Maybe it's Dukes, but then it was at the Tropicana. It was then the Seal something, I don't remember. It's had lots of names over the course of time. It had an outdoor bar facing the ocean with a little table in front of this railing and you could sit there, have a drink and something to eat. And hopefully you still can because it's not tables facing each other. You're actually facing the ocean. Which you really want to do when you're there. And if you have a piece of food, there will frequently be prowling and very interested gulls who may hover and when we realized this, we went there with intent with the camera. If the gull is hovering right here in the frame like this, it's because somebody is holding beautiful food right there by the camera lens. And that's Randolph who was doing it. But then putting that with a sound, which was largely manufactured by flapping feather dusters, the sound of the wings, it's pretty persuasive.

[Kate Brown](#)

So it wasn't a zoom lens. It was very close.

[Amy Halpern](#)

It was close. It may well have been a 12mm to 120mm zoom. But we would have been full wide to get as much of it as possible. No, the bird was right here.

Seagulls are not to be messed with, as I hope you know. In the section called Reptile in THREE-MINUTE HELLS, the section called Reptile, there is a long portrait of a seagull. - I have a scar on my nose from that bird. I was close enough to have been bitten by it after I had helped it heal a broken wing or leg in my studio space. I had taken it out for the first time onto the lawn and it was in my lap and it reached up and went wonk! And drew blood. And actually I'm so grateful to this moment that didn't go for an eye, that it was just a cut on the nose. But some of the time you actually are close enough to be harmed by them. In the case of the seagull, yeah, it could have snapped a finger when it was reaching for whatever

we were feeding it. And of course with a wide lens you do get more of a spatial sense.

Kate Brown

And then one more animal question. Can you talk about Banana?

Amy Halpern

Oh endlessly. I could talk about Banana, my rabbit, who instructed me on rabbit-ness, which I had no idea of before. I had no idea how ferocious, funny, smart and deliberately provocative a rabbit can be. I had never understood any of that. I knew mythologically that Brer Rabbit was a thing and that sungura, which is Swahili for rabbit, is a trickster. Then for the Maya, the rabbit is the analogue of man. There are lots of stories in which a rabbit fools a predator. The Maya also call the little macheted-out tunnel-pathways through the woods "rabbit holes". I've heard that used. So they're close to us.

But I'd had no intimate experiences with one before and this rabbit chose me, Oddly, I was thinking of giving it to you [Arwa] 'cause I didn't need a rabbit, and your hamster had recently died. But I picked this thing up in the pet store. She jumped out of a bunch of colored little bunnies and came over to me. I would never select a white animal. I generally prefer colored animals, brown or gray or black. This was white and she had blue eyes with mascara on. She was a camera-ready rabbit, she was ridiculous. I've not seen very many blue-eyed ones. She's not an albino. She had a couple black spots and she wouldn't have had blue eyes if she was one. They offered to let me pick her up. She licked my wrist and I was instantly seduced.

But Arwa, her hamster had died. Maybe SHE needed this rabbit. But by the time I left the place, there's no way I was giving that rabbit to anybody. She owned me. She owned me, and so she was loose in the studio. My daily devotions began with wiping up the pee every day, and the poop. But it was not noxious. It was just what you did. But the benefit of having an animal loose, she would come to greet me, running to meet me when I came in the door. My god, that's why people have dogs; that's what they think they're getting when they have children. But you don't get that as a guarantee. We used to serenade my father when he'd come home, we'd all go tearing down the hall and call "Daddy".

We're talking about the rushing to meet, which was the quality of happiness in this amazing, ferocious rabbit, dwarf rabbit. She was never bigger than about that. Two and a half pounds or so and ran my life.

But we're talking about the thrill of rushing at something and how we rushed to meet my father when he would come home from work and how Nora, my little sister, and I would rush at each other with our arms like this to meet and collide or just short of colliding. And I'm realizing that that thrill, which is z-axis motion, is what we are all hooked on, at least in modern times, because we have access to vehicles and can go fast forward. And we like films that do that for us, to take us in space through things like flying footage. They've been copied and used by so many filmmakers for their movements in warfare imagery and space footage and stuff.

And the z-axis is one of the more interesting things you can do, especially if you're working on 2D material. But in 2D image making, 3D is always implicit or let's just say it is some of the time.

But about that rabbit. So there she was, camera ready and I thought, "This is too good to be true. She's all white and I can shoot white on white with her." So at that time I started shooting what I was calling White On White, with these occasional incredible looking blue eyes showing up and her feisty attitude. And she was my companion for seven years until she was carried away by a hawk. So she lived to a ripe age, although I was hoping for 10 years, which is what her vet said was possible. When she was past her prime, she'd slowed down, and so she was easily grabbed.

What else to say about this rabbit? Talk about jealousy of other animal species. So rabbits, besides having whiskers, which perceive, have spectacular ears which they can orient at will. And that is really fantastic. Because they hold still so much at the time, one supposes that they're doing very elaborate and deep listening, which is attractive and calls one out to think about that. And it's one of the things in CHESHIRE SMILE that I was playing with, with the rabbit and the cameo-beautiful young lady wiggling her ears, in like manner.

[Kate Brown](#)

Can you talk about language in your film, or your relationship to language? Sometimes your titles are a little bit offset from the film. Like there's some space between the title and the image, if that makes sense to you.

Amy Halpern

Totally. It makes complete sense that one would offset a title from a film so that in that synapse something happens that's fresh and is not spelled out for you. Because as much as there's an element of control, when you show somebody something you're really most interested in what you can elicit from them, from their equipment. So you present something that allows those spaces to exist so that they can have room to arc, one might say, between the two poles of either two images, image and sound, title and picture, etc.

I love words, but I'm also wary of them because they're fairly overwhelming. I mean some people think language is everything and without language you have no experience. I don't buy that for a second, but I am aware that language can modify your experience profoundly. Totally, in fact, if you're not careful, to the degree that it can either destroy your experience and turn it into something miserable - or make it fantastic. So I'm very wary of language.

So I don't want to see text when I'm not ready to see text. I use it sparingly on the screen. And certainly the first body of films I showed for 20 years maybe, have no titles on them. And I have debated, safely for 25 years, with David Lebrun, whether or not to cut the titles on or cut them off. Because I actually like these objects, these films, as objects of light coming out of the dark. Not mitigated or bracketed by text, because you're not there to look at text, you're there to look at, if you're there for what I would like you to look at, you're there to look at glowing things. You're there or look at grain or shapes, or dimensions.

But text, like bodies, - it's everywhere. We're barraged with it. So I try not to use a lot of it. I try to, I mean it is my normal instinctual endeavor, to remove as much of it as possible.

Randolph Pitts

We're on the topic of language. Can you talk about the glyph in ELIXIR?

Amy Halpern

Yeah, which I debated translating but it seemed too obvious. It doesn't need to be literally seen for other than what it is: it's a hand holding a fish. And it was known for a very long time, long before the [Maya] decipherment was close to complete, that the hand-holding-a-fish glyph, with the fish facing up, the tail sticking out, referred to conjuration. That was known from context because it was

in the place where a verb would be. And so they could tell by breaking it down structurally what it should be. And the context suggested it was conjuration or a sacrifice. Conjuration really.

This is an interesting story of derivation because as I say, the Mayanists who were studying this knew for a long time, or thought they knew, what it meant. But they had no idea why it would mean that. Because Maya is a culture where the metaphors are all different, right?

I mean starting with the fact that it's a barefoot culture, instead of being a decimal system, their system is of 20's, because they see both fingers and toes. Whereas we wear shoes, so all we see is 10. Even the word in Maya for "twenty" is a gloss for "human".

So it's a different mentality, a different array of metaphors. And so one day in recent times, a scholar in the field found out what the origin of the hand-holding-the-fish was. He was in the Yucatan with an informant who confirmed the meaning, and said "Well, you know how it is when you reach into a stream and grab a fish? It's like that."

The Maya are very conscious of surfaces, like what's above the water, what's below the water, what's above the world, what's the underworld, what levels of the underworld, what levels above the world. And so piercing that surface, reaching through that surface and grabbing something, is a very gorgeous metaphor for conjuring. So I just think sometimes you want to play with something below the level of what you can say.

And I'm not sure why the glass of milk (or something) is so moving. And then replacing that glass with a fish suggests the idea of conjuring something with your hand that you can grab.

At the end of the film you see the glyph again. Just before the end credit of my name, I put the possessive article (his, hers, its) in front of the hand-holding-fish glyph, so it says "her conjuration".

The famous Lintel 25 and I think also 27, from Yaxchilan, of which there's a photograph downstairs, is in the British Museum and anybody can walk up to it and be face to face with it, has that glyph and has a queen making a burnt offering. And the smoke's coming up. It's turning into the head of the snake, and

out of the head of the snake comes the head of an ancestor, who's pointing a spear at her head and she's there receiving whatever it's going to tell her. So I really liked the idea of conjuring something, even fearful.

Kate Brown

I have one last question. We've already sort of touched on this, but I wanted to talk to you more about light, and you say that everyone plays with light when they're children, but not everyone then becomes a filmmaker who becomes so masterful with light. So I'd like to know how you learned. Again, you've touched on it, but I'd like to hear how you work with lights.

Amy Halpern

First. I'd like to disavow any mastery since I don't think I will live long enough to attain anything like mastery. But I certainly am a reverent improviser with it. The more you do it, the more you see. One of the interesting side effects I've found with my chosen profession of being a gaffer on film sets is that after days and nights of lighting fight scenes, stupid robberies and terrible conversations, on the drive back home, my vision is fabulously enhanced by having only stared at light the whole day. So that's part of it.

The only thing I think that relates to the question as you phrased it, is as you say, all children do play with light when they're little. And I think part of why I still do it is because I am very stubborn and resistant and because nobody was able to intimidate me, humiliate me or threaten me out of continuing. And I think that's where most people's innate skills go, is that they are stomped out by adults.

Why aren't we more clairvoyant? Why can't I send you my regards without using a phone? You know, it should be, I think, much more attainable, technically. And there's them that can do it. You know, where if you show up they say, "Ah, you finally got here. I knew you're on your way." Without a telephone. How do some people do that? I think cause they weren't told it was creepy and weird when they were little, or bad or evil or occult or whatever pejorative was effective in that context. So I think the fact that I play with light, - I don't know why everybody else does not play with light more.

The tools come to hand when you need them. I mean you can play with something as simple as a piece of paper and anybody can do that. And then when you want to work larger or work in a professional context where you're trying to do something quickly and efficiently, then tools have been invented and can be

rented or borrowed. But that's not the special thing. It really resides in the mind and the eye of the person that's looking, and anybody can do that if they pay attention.

Was that an answer?

[Kate Brown](#)

Yes. Thank you.

[Arwa Ibrahim](#)

So moving from one sense to another, can you talk about your use of sound? Many of your films are silent and you seem very intentional about the use of sound at all or dialogue. Can you talk about that and folding that into your film process?

[Amy Halpern](#)

Well, definitely. I work silently on purpose. When I came to Los Angeles, it was clear to me that I was coming here to continue to make silent films, with no desire to do otherwise, because for me they're quite loud. They are visually percussive, melodic, harmonic and so they're sufficiently loud. And I cut to that, to either the internal rhythm of the shot or the rhythm I'm trying to impose on a shot. And so I don't feel the need for music or sound most of the time.

Sometimes the only sound that might be permissible would be a literal rendering of what you're seeing, but that would minimize for me the scale of the event, would minimize how it plays. I think many of these things play better silent. Gestures play great silent. Gestures are loud silent.

But I love sound and I love music and I love the way image and sound and inflect each other, which is a pretty rich vein to mine. So when I feel the need to, I certainly reach for the sound. It usually takes me a long time to figure out what that would be. My rules of thumb are not to be too obvious, and not redundant. The deliberate separating of the artifact of sound and image, which was a given at the beginning of film, still orients me to a kind of reductionist view of movies being sound plus image or image plus sound. Neither one should be taken for granted, as is easy to do in reality, or in video -in which sound is an artifact of the image.

So when one prefers to choose the sounds... like the two poles we were talking about earlier, moving them further apart to discover what tension can come between them, what kind of meaning can arise.

And then sometimes the sound is really clear to me but not clear to anybody else until I render it. That's what obligates me to make sound tracks. What was arduous for example, is that the sixth section of THREE-MINUTE HELLS, where an almost-narrative situation is off-camera, and you're looking at an almost unmoving shot on the screen of, in fact your [Arwa's] feet, in a doorway. I could hear that when I made the shot, and when I edited it.

But the shot was silent.

And then the last section [of THREE-MINUTE HELLS] that for some reason or for many reasons, not least of which is that I find the sound of bouzouki and baglama exhilarating, and I think that kind of harmonic sound which they do in Greece, they do in Russia, they do in many places in the world, that sort of tinkling deliciousness – I knew that I needed baglama there.

I had a feeling strongly that the last movement of crazy, stressful THREE-MINUTE HELLS should be something exhilarating, with a baglama hitting the high high notes and it bears repeating at this moment. I knew that I wanted bees first, because that image is so equivocal, going between swarm and water and 3D objects, which is one of the really weird things I always marvel at when looking at the jet of water that's been filmed and broken by the intermittent shutter, because water is 3D and each of these little lines looks like an entity by itself.

So I wanted bees for that, and I recorded bees. Not unlike the gag for getting the seagull to play to the camera, in order to get bees to come to a microphone, naturally, one uses some sugar or honey next to the microphone or on the microphone, which I did in the so-called beehive tomb of King Pelops in Greece near Mycenae.

They had called them beehive tombs, because they're a tall beehive shape, and to one's delight when you go into them they are cool in a hot place. The bees love to come in there. And so when I discovered this, I of course, sweetened up my microphone and tried to bid the bees to come hither, because they're droning in the room. What's really cool is the 3D sound when they come closer.

When I came back and was ready to work with the baglama player, Alex Soris, I needed to tell him what key the sound was in, as one would. So playing with a tuning fork to figure out the pitch, needless to say I was delighted to learn that these bees were singing in B. No kidding. You can't make that up. You can't.

Arwa Ibrahim

ACCESS TO THE VIEW is almost the antithesis though of that. I mean, the gesture and sound are so married in that film that it's just raw...It's just a ... raw audio, audio experience and I guess that's the opposite end of the pulling the two poles apart, right? It's just ...

Amy Halpern

Except that even you, when you saw it [ACCESS TO THE VIEW] asked whether or not it was the sound that you were seeing being made. So for me that was interesting about filming a single note being played on the bell bowl is that it really does something acoustically uncanny. It does become all that harmonic stuff and more so when he is modulating with his mouth,

Arwa Ibrahim

With his mouth, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Amy Halpern

That wasn't miked as well as I would have liked. You could really hear the "wow, wow", the shape of the note changing. I suppose we would've needed to mike it differently.

But in that film, you're seeing what is actually happening and yet you don't quite believe it. There's another one that I made which is one of the digital ones, which is online because it's part of what we made available through BREAKING THE MAYA CODE for people to see Maya art. When we were at Dumbarton Oaks there were several objects that we needed for the film about the decipherment. And one of them which we had not requested was pulled out of the case by the curator just to show us, saying, "You must see this." And she took this bowl and went like this with it and it made noise. The bowl is empty, but you're hearing "whoosh, whoosh" because the master ceramicist who did this didn't just make a fabulous-looking object with beautiful carved designs on it, but they gave it a double bottom into which they managed to put seeds, beans or pieces of clay, we don't know, in such a way that when it was fired it didn't explode. And when you

use it like this, empty, it acts as prehistoric or early historic special effects equipment.

It would have been used probably for a rain ceremony. And here's your empty bowl making the sound of water. And so when she showed that to us, I said, "well when we're set up, why don't we shoot a little live action of that for you so that when this is in its case, it can still be demonstrated what this bowl does." And so Rosey and David, Night Fire Films, agreed that we could take the time from our shoot to do that. From our footage I made this little film called MAYA DOUBLE-BOTTOMED BOWL. And when we've shown this, as we did, for example, in the Tehran International Documentary Film Festival, people were wondering where did the sound come from, not believing that it was the sound that the object was making. Once again, it's a dissonance between what you expect to see and what you're hearing. But for me, filming that very thing was interesting because it is sync sound, but it still doesn't make any sense with what you're seeing.

Yeah, I like sync sound and I like dialogue too, but there's tons of that. I feel no need to make any more. And yeah, the dialogue that's interesting to me is the dialogue between the screen and the viewer, what's going on in the head of the person watching. Also, I think attachment to words and a specific language is somewhat deleterious. Not for the medium as a whole, but to what I want to do. I'm not interested in being wedded to English particularly. So the longest film I've made, FALLING LESSONS, has text and has dialogue in it. In the Libretto, which takes about two pages of text, really none of it is that important to grabbing the film and having total comprehension.

In the movie you don't need to know exactly what the cop's saying when he says "hold it!". You don't need to hear what the mother is screaming when she's screaming. And the snide, clever or direct or sincere remarks made by the people in the screen are not literally necessary. So I don't feel wedded to that.

Randolph Pitts

I was going to ask you, and talk a little bit about THREE-MINUTE HELLS because I think it's a fascinating film. You know, we begin with a series of, to my mind compulsively repetitive gestures and in various flavors, and then we hit a section where you have this amazing underlying movement, which reminds me of, it seems like a theme in POURING GRAIN, ELIXIR, THREE-MINUTE HELLS, even BY

HALVES, one gets the sense of the movement underlying everything. And it's three dimensional, it's joyous. I mean, am I saying something that you don't feel?

Amy Halpern

Oh no, I totally do you feel what you're ... totally. I mean, I had no obligation to use a shot as deeply deteriorated as that second shot is, which has the fires and the lights of Hollywood, looking down from Mulholland. I didn't have a need or an obligation. But the way that happened with the deterioration that added additional sparkles to it and the way any dark area on a piece of film plays with grain structure exhilarates me beyond anything. And so any reference to that is absolutely right up there. Yeah, and then so yeah, I definitely deliberately used that kind of movement or incorporated or permitted it. And even the one that was more controlled, which was later in THREE-MINUTE HELLS, of the water jet, as controlled as that is, it's still uncanny. In fact, maybe it's more uncanny, what you're looking at: ongoing movement that you can't quite fathom. There's something about movement, I think about this often. Why we like music, for example. Why music is the best art form, which I think no one disputes. I don't think anybody can dispute it. It's the art form that has no barriers in terms of physical obstruction except ears, can get around physical barriers and it gets right in your head. And it doesn't need language. How amazing. You don't need eyes. Um, why is that so compelling?

Well one thing all music has in common is movement. That's one thing, if you were to try to make a reductionist definition of what's great about music, or what music consists of, it's movement, which is the opposite of redundancy, it's the opposite of predictable. Even if you have some expectation. So it's endlessly thrilling and you can rely on it in a way. I think a beat, even if it's a beat that's consistent, a rhythm that we can kind of relax on as consistent, it's still totally unpredictable. So yeah, movement's the ticket. I think any way any art form can approach what music does is an accomplishment. And actually, I've always thought of this in the films that I make, and when they were clearly only going to be silent, when I had yet no desire to make films with sound, which then grew in me, I have always thought of it as music for the eyes, always. Eye music. Those phrases have been used so much, but they're not comprehensive. But it's the right idea.

Kate Brown

Can you talk about how texture could fit into that? Like in maybe *PYTHONESS*, or *CIGARETTE BURN* with the braid in the back of the chair and the sweater and all of the textures that happen in the film beyond the actual grain of the film.

Amy Halpern

Well, I think as a person of appetites, visual... to eat, to drink, to consume... There is a form of consumption that you can do with your eyes, full time, which is non-predatory. It cannot be diminished by quantity. It is, as I said, not predatory. Anyone can do it. Anyone can have it. And that's the kind of possession that I like to cultivate in myself and would like to teach, because it's the kind of possession that can't be taken away from you - unless your vision's taken. One of the first things I remember being told that I had said as a child by my father is, in wonder, "To look is to touch with the eyes" and that's really clear. If you can look at something, then you're having it. There's no reason to have aggressive possessiveness. If you can have your way, visually, with a texture, to your delight... certainly we would like to touch that. Certainly, we'd like to touch almost everything. We would. We look at the mountains and think they look soft from a distance; we'd like to touch them. And those are sometimes impulses that are at odds with the reality of it, but we'd like to do that, I think accommodating that with texture is ...what can I say? It's right up there with the delights. And your mom's braid [Arwa Ibrahim's mother is Nancy Halpern Ibrahim] and that piece of wood, that oak table and smoke, all that physicality and textures - and then the cat. Oh, and then the translucent ashtray. All of those little things. The curve of this chair actually, which is that chair.

Randolph Pitts

I've heard you use the word "absolute cinema" as a term referring to what you do, and I think sometimes in counter-distinction to some other words like experimental or avant-garde or even abstract. And when I think about absolute cinema I think about Hollis Frampton for example, and I think about you. And I'm just curious, in the context of this conversation how do you relate to absolute cinema as opposed to the concept of experimental cinema?

Amy Halpern

Well the word "experimental" troubles me a lot as we have discussed. I find it... I mean it's attractive as an idea if you're playful, but as a moniker it's maddening because it's a disparaging term in the context of what's being presented formally. Those of us who make "experimental" film are not trying to disparage what we do. It's what it seems to be called, but it really is minimizing it and literally is

offensive. And I roll back to what Edgar Varese said, because when he was composing his unusual music, he was told that he was an experimental composer and he said "Absolutely not." He said, when I'm in my studio, then I'm experimenting. But when I come out with a work that's finished and present it, that's no longer an experiment. It is something tried, tested and totally deliberate. It's not an experiment. You're not experimenting on your audience, you're not using them as guinea pigs to see what might happen. You're doing something that you deliberately are attempting to do and taking responsibility for.

I like the term absolute cinema because it refers to the meat of film which is what's interesting to me about it. The temporal thing, the textural thing, the movement thing, the translucent thing. I think my vocabulary is going to hell... but the absolute. So it's the medium that you're dealing with, but I don't, I would include absolutely Hollis Frampton as you suggest. Absolutely Ernie Gehr or Larry Gottheim or Ken Jacobs. But also in absolute cinema I would include Kurosawa, for all of his artifice. Not all of his films, not all of his films at all, but let's just say some of them. I would include [Raul] Ruiz, for all of his artifice and invention. I would include [Jacques] Rivette because what he does with time and conversation, even though they're heavily spoken films, but what he's doing is that abstract thing that I cannot possibly describe if I live long enough to learn how to describe what Rivette does, in terms of setting up a state of mind in which you're feeling the range of emotions, the range of thoughts, which are both excruciating and pleasurable. You're demolished and yet you're held in this state of receptivity by his magic. That's what I would aspire to as ideal cinema.

Or what Pat O'Neill does, for example. He sets up something ridiculous and then if you relax into it, it takes you some place which can only be done with film. It's a particular, not one, but it's those particular things that you can only do with film - so far. I mean obviously we're hoping for the day that I can tell you what I have in my mind and project into your back of your retina or into your skull where you can vision what I'm seeing and would like you to see.

But now we're stuck with these, ah...instruments.

Does that speak enough to absolute cinema? I like the word, although, you know, Absolut Vodka has trademarked it. I mean it's become Absolut. So absolute animation. Was it "absolute animation"? Was that the name of (Christine) Panushka's site? I'm not sure if it's still up. They sponsored for several years a

fantastic site. S-I-T-E of ... they posted classic animation called "Absolute". But that's t.m..

Randolph Pitts

A quick follow-up, and that is in many of your films, I think the viewer is in some ways challenged or encouraged to view images both in certain ways as visual abstractions and also as what they read as, literally. I'm thinking certainly of the Cannonballs [in THREE PREPARATIONS] for example, I'm thinking of PEACH LANDSCAPE. There is this interesting kind of mental realm watching those images, particularly by the way that you play with focus and movement. Do you relate to that in any way?

Amy Halpern

Totally yes. I mean that's one of the more interesting things to do with your mind. I mean we're stuck in the mundane because survival is a full time job, but thankfully for us in this period of time we don't have to hunt everything we eat, we don't have to look for where we sleep every night, we don't have to build our environments. We have few animals we have to fend off, phone calls, that sort of thing. But we can survive without spending all of our energy on it. And so, I would say starting as a child, where you're protected, is where I got this habit of pleasurable abstraction. But when you don't have to do everything else, then you're able to play mentally and take from whatever's in front of you something that would be gratifying and fruitful to ponder, something that would be good for your eyes to wander around. Somehow it feels that this enhances it.

We've barely gotten to address this issue of how the movement of the eyes around a frame is beneficial. I would like to know more. I think probably when I made those first films, THREE PREPARATIONS, PEACH LANDSCAPE, for sure, ROLL #1 FOR NANCY, those movies are really hoping for or trying to be part of a conversation about composition in a frame and what you can do in a frame by inclusion and omission. Just one of those, another thing you could spend your life contemplating. But it's also the job of every person: What do you let in and what do you omit, what do you allow in and what do you not permit in?

And when I say this, I have to really state, because I'm not a proponent of ignoring anything and I'm not a proponent of looking away from anything -deeply, I'm not. I made myself a promise when I was a child in New York City on the streets that were not always beautiful, what you were looking at, because they might include somebody bleeding or dying in front of you or starving to death or whatever...or

just pure filth - whatever it was that was troubling to look at; I promised myself at an early age of about eight or nine that I would never look away from anything, because to look away deprives you of the possible understanding you could have. It deprives you of an ability to deal with what's in front of you and in order to deal with it, and that might include omitting - you need to look at it first. You need to look at it, consider it and determine what you will or will not have. So it's a form of not necessarily abrogating reality, although that's what we all do. We choose what our reality is, how we define it ... Not to say you can exclude everything that's terrible in life. That would be a mistake also, because then there'd be no high points.

But one thing I'm interested in doing in conversation and in film is reminding people of their own authority over their own mental trajectory, so that you have the authority of your own ... you get to look at and make your own determination. Not to say "Here's a random bunch of stuff to look at", but to have the authority to enjoy something, to have the authority to not say, "Oh my, what's this about?" It's to shut that stuff up and say, "Huh, I can follow this trajectory without fear" (or with fear if that's called for).

So that's consistent from the beginning of these films, is this desire to ... a lot of people don't have the confidence of their own eyes. They need to hear a review or an explanation. They need to see a text explaining what was intended and although that can be very interesting... we don't mostly have written explanations in life. You need to develop your own ability to deduce what's in front of you. I'm digressing, but it's not really far from filmmaking at all.

Randolph Pitts

I've got one more quick one and that is the concept of conjuration came up earlier in the context of the Maya glyph film and so forth. But I see conjuration as something that we see in many of your films. For example, when we saw INVOCATION yesterday, one actually sees the substance that this person is manipulating: the hand's removed and you see it. It's incredible. It's like film FILAMENT in a certain way but very, very differently. So there's so much conjuration going on in your films. How do you see this as an overarching or consistent theme?

Amy Halpern

Yes, it is totally. I mean it is maybe the idea of the Ur art form, which is conjuration of something other than what daily life is; what people would do

around a fire at night, is "How can I bring you something else?" And that conjuration, that magic act, which is what it is in a way, the calling forth of something from somewhere else than where the people are who you're talking to, that I think is of primary interest. Why a person would want to make anything in the first place is to delight or refresh or educate, to give tools to defend themselves with, to become mentally and visually a swashbuckler within, you know, choosing.

And so yeah, it's primary for me. And as we looked at them the other day, I was actually thinking how many exactly relate to the idea of a magician or a conjurer. So certainly INVOCATION ... INJURY ON A THEME is full of magicians, starting with Shirley Clarke who says, "Don't worry, this won't hurt a bit." And with the wise words of Ed Brokaw in there and a famous conjurer himself, David Allen, who also appears in FALLING LESSONS, that's exactly what he's doing. And he was very conscious and willful doing that all the time, being more of say the Celtic School of wizard and conjurer. In his last incarnation, which I didn't film, alas, his hair had gone fully, it had been reddish, it had gone fully white and he had white hair down to here and a white beard down to there. I'm so sorry I didn't get him as that particular wizard.

And then in BY HALVES, I mean I completely think of BY HALVES as Richard Pryor doing a magic act in every single detail: the lariat act, turning into a flame with that strange thing with the woman's hair, the lights turning the audience into soup, that whole thing I think of as a magic act.

INVOCATION was my deliberately and consciously doing a choreographed hand gesture to do that. In FILAMENT I had no control. I just knew he [Theodorakis] had done that to me. I knew that he had taken me on that when I was being a spectator to it at his concert. So in FILAMENT I was doing my best to get his magic act.

It's all magic acts. In FALLING LESSONS, even though there are magic acts in it and certainly conjurations, the fact that a lot of the pragmatic, straight head presences are children hopefully makes them [and the adult audience] realize that everybody's supposed to be the magician. The viewer's the magician. The viewer's the one who amalgamates everything in their mind. They're the ones who do the real soup. So these are all just, what you might call, hints. Suggestions. Helping hints to help everybody else conjure - and take responsibility for it.

That's where that jokey line, and you know these lines, not to say they're throwaways, the character who puts an antler to his head in *FALLING LESSONS* and says "Shaman?" I mean, everybody's a shaman. Now that's partly our privileged position in history, but I think there's always been people who didn't want a middleman in their own magic life. A lot of people would prefer to have a priest or someone who'd tell them it's okay. But once you're weaned and you already had parents or somebody or art work you like or something telling you it's all right, you're supposed to be weaned enough to go out there and make your own evaluations.

Do I sound too savage? I don't mean to be unkind with this. I don't mean to be unkind with this, but I do think most people abrogate most responsibility for most things in their lives and that's reprehensible. I smile sweetly as I say this. Anything else we need to say? Oh, and I'm very happy to hear you say that you saw the 3D, that volume [in *INVOCATION*]. Because seeing volume in a 2D thing is one of the great things that I enjoy most.

Randolph Pitts

Just one more question, sorry I keep saying that. But *FALLING LESSONS* is like ... the soundtrack of *FALLING LESSONS* is like a score, and it's amazingly constructed of music and of every type of sound, and meticulously put together. It's like an amazing work. And again, this goes back to your use of sound in film and sometimes the sound has a certain disjunction with the image and sometimes it challenges the viewer to create the relationship in their mind. Can you talk a little bit about the score, particularly of *FALLING LESSONS* and how you put all that, and marry that to the film?

Amy Halpern

Well that was a film that needed sound and I heard the sound in my head much of the time while cutting it silent. Which was very troubling because it took a very long time to cut. But even the smart people that I know who I would show it to like yourself while I was working on it including David Lebrun, who would see any fine cut I got, even he said to me that he didn't ever get it until he saw it with the full tracks. Which shocked me and horrified me on the one hand. But on the other hand, it's interesting as a work process because I needed to make it audible, which it already was to me. That was difficult. But I do think of that film as symphonic sound. I think image-wise it's symphonic, this feast of faces, and also the track is symphonic, definitely. And I aspire someday to release just the soundtrack as a recording because I think it's quite a complete object by itself.

It certainly is a bespoke track. I mean it comes out of the pictures of the pictures. And it came together in interesting and funny ways. I knew I wanted Lakshmi Shankar above all to sing the end piece. It was rash of me but it was long after hearing her sing the track of GANDHI, the Attenborough picture, no?, that enormous picture. But I was a devotee of hers in concert and she would do concerts in LA at least once a year at Occidental College.

And she is someone who would make a note that could be 3D in space. That's what she would do. And we would go to a concert and watch her do this and nearly perish from lack of breathing watching her sitting there in her sari as a grandmother, whip out these forms with a compliment - tabla player, sarod player, mostly, whip out a raga, and whip out individual notes that would take up space while they were there. And there was not a lot of sound [with the picture] at the point when I showed her the movie. I finally, when I was getting close to a fine cut, went and asked her if she would give me tracks. And I went to her house where she and her four-year-old granddaughter and I watched the movie mostly silent, with one phone call interruption only, and she watched the whole thing, this is somebody who had never seen an abstract film in her life, no question. And she said "What exactly would you like me to do?"

There were a couple people who got it who were able to do that for me. Tony Dumas always understood what I needed from bass. We talked about it for years before he put those tracks down, and then Shankar recorded on top of them for me. And if I had been an adept producer, excuse me, if I had been a producer at all, I would've released that, because that was recorded in 1980 or '84 and the concept of "world music" didn't yet exist. And she had never recorded to a jazz bass before as a classical Indian singer.

Um, but being the first one up on top is not my ... you know, these things come out of time. They come out in time. Parallel to this, but not suspended from it was what Chickie [Strand] was doing with her sound track. We didn't ever talk about it. And with Pat [O'Neill] also... Shall we cut?

[Kate Brown](#)

Sure.