LESLIE THORNTON
by Katy Martin

"The films of Leslie Thornton have helped to define the very nature of contemporary avant-garde practice."
– Mary Ann Doane, *Senses of Cinema*

Since the 1980s, Leslie Thornton has been at the forefront of American experimental film. Her work is formally innovative and highly poetic. It is also a prescient cultural critique and an open-ended comment on key issues of the day. Thornton's art can be seen as a long-term investigation of the belief systems – pervasive, obvious, ever changing and elusive – where whole categories of people are cast as "other," less-than-human, and therefore subject to control. As evidence, she makes extensive use of found footage, intercut with loosely staged dramatic narrative. Visually beautiful – often quite stunning – her films are poignant, complex examinations of the everyday underpinnings of anxiety and violence.

To date, Thornton has completed over 20 films and videos, plus a number of installations. Major works include *Adynata* (on how China is perceived)*, Another Worldly, The Great Invisible, Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 10, 9, 8, 7…* and her epic *Peggy and Fred in Hell,* which will be shown at MoCA Shanghai. She has been working on this film since 1984, when she began collaborating with two highly imaginative children in the improvisational style of avant-garde theater. The premise is simple: two children find themselves, abandoned, in a post-apocalyptic world. As they sift through the fragments of what's left –pop songs, hymns, and broken machines – *Peggy and Fred in Hell* creates a paradox of disaster and survival, and a search for insight through play.

Leslie Thornton was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1951. She studied with filmmakers Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Stan Brakhage and Richard Leacock. Thornton's film and media works have been exhibited worldwide including at The Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Millennium Film Workshop (New York); the Pacific Film Archives, San Francisco Cinematheque, and RedCat Cinema (California); Centre Georges Pompidou, Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, and capcMusée Bordeaux (France); Museo Tamao Arte Contemporaneo (Mexico), and at many colleges and universities including Harvard, Princeton, and Brown University. Festivals include The Rotterdam International Film Festival, The New York Film Festival, and Oberhausen, Graz, Mannheim, Berlin, Austin, Toronto, Tokyo and Seoul film festivals. Her work has garnered widespread critical acclaim, with feature articles and reviews in a variety of publications including *Cahiers du Cinema*, *Senses of Cinema* (an online journal), *Film Comment, Afterimage* and *The Village Voice*. She has received the highest award in her field, the Maya Deren Lifetime Achievement Award, and she was the first media artist to receive the Alpert Award in the Arts. Thornton is Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. She lives and works in New York City and Providence, Rhode Island.

Thornton went to college at SUNY Buffalo, a vibrant center for experimental film in the early 1970s. A coherent film scene was just emerging at the time. Of course, artists such as Maya Deren and Joseph Cornell had made innovative films before then. But it was only in the mid- to late-1960s that experimental filmmaking gained a sense of community and a network of support, with showcases (such as Anthology Film Archives in New York and Canyon Cinema in San Francisco), journals (such as *Film Culture*), and experimental film courses and degree programs just starting in some colleges and universities. SUNY Buffalo was in the lead, and its faculty included Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits, who were among the most influential filmmakers of the day. At Buffalo, Thornton absorbed an approach to filmmaking that was formally radical and, in terms of content, firmly rooted in fine art, literature, and critical theory. She first trained as a painter, and later switched to film. She went on to study at Massachusetts Institute of Technology with Richard Leacock, a pioneer of documentary film. However, when she took some of the "materialist" strategies she'd learned at SUNY Buffalo, and challenged some of the basic premises of cinema verité, her film caused enough discord at MIT that she was asked to leave. In that film, *All Right You Guys* (1976), Thornton jettisoned the "fly-on-the-wall" approach to documentary, and with it, any claim to objectivity. In Leslie's film, the camera and the effects of editing were clearly visible throughout the film.

Thornton's art since then has continued to be both seductive and subversive. Combining theater, film, video and installation, she pries open common mainstream narratives to catch fleeting glances of other alternatives. As she completes her long-term project, *Peggy and Fred in Hell,* the arc of this film seems to posit that, instead of the apocalyptic lust for violence that is so heavily inscribed in global culture, one can achieve a more personal revelation. The hints are fleeting, contradictory, countermanded. Thornton's work in film and video, as a whole, is a sustained search for other ways of seeing. It is a provisional – but clear – statement of faith in the power of art.

Film as a Visual Language

> *"For Thornton, the conventions of narrative and montage are used as tools against themselves. The result is a unique and strangely beautiful syntax, one that poses its critique at the same time that it mesmerizes."*
>
> –Tom Zummer

By the mid-1980s, Leslie Thornton had emerged and gained widespread recognition for at least two major films – *Adynata* and *Peggy and Fred in Hell*. By then she had also formulated the major themes and strategies that she have preoccupied her ever since. In at least one important way, this continuity is quite literal: the film that is showing at MoCA Shanghai this summer is the latest version of *Peggy and Fred in Hell,* the same film she began in 1984 and is only completing this spring. It just showed in New York at

the Whitney Biennale. For the past 24 years, Thornton has been releasing short sections, which she then culls, refines, and reworks. Along the way, she has exhibited *Peggy and Fred* as an ongoing serial in venues throughout the US, Europe, and in South America. Now, what has changed is that, since 9/11, Leslie has known the work will soon have an end.

Her central themes include the use of film as primarily a *visual* language, with a non-linear, associative approach to content; and an exploration of film as a highly coded *cultural* language which – like any language – shapes how we think. These codes are pervasive, obvious yet elusive, and they change across cultures and over time. Thornton's camera work has a seductive beauty, and she interweaves the often stunning footage she shoots with a wide array of found footage – old educational and ethnographic films, industrials, documentaries, and other historic audiovisual material. She cuts these fragments – the shards of cinema – mixing and layering genres to create a sense of dislocation that opens up new insight.

Another basic theme in Thornton's work is film as a record of cultural detritus and the embodiment of a deep rooted malaise. Some of this comes from her personal biography, which is also strangely emblematic of the times. Thornton grew up, during the Cold War, in middle America in the 1950s. Her father was a lead engineer in the development of the atomic bomb. There are home movies of him at Los Alamos, New Mexico, and in the South Pacific, filled with the sort of normal personal details that are basically impossible for history to convey. Thornton's work over the past three decades wrestles with contradictions – which cannot be reconciled – between local, everyday, personal actions and monstrous, unfathomable, global effects. Then there is also the conflict between a lost hope in technology and progress, and horrific devastation.

Major Works

> *"The beauty of every image submerges the viewer in a world that is familiar yet bewildering, alien yet desirous."*
>
> – Roddy Bogawa, *Purple Prose*

Adynata (1983, 30 minutes) looks at how the West sees China. It uses as its starting point a formal photograph of an upper class Chinese family, taken around 1861 by a Western photographer. Just a decade before Thornton finished the film, China had been completely closed to the West, and the country continued to represent something quite exotic in the American imagination. In *Adynata* – which is a Greek term for the impossible, or an expression of the impossibility of expression – Thornton collects available images of the East, from the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens to brocades from Chinatown, to critique current notions of "other" as a post-colonial/colonizing force.

Like her contemporary, the artist Cindy Sherman, Leslie also dressed herself as the part, donning the elaborate costume of the Chinese aristocrat portrayed in the photograph. *Adynata* was inspired by *Orientalism,* an influential book by the late Edward Said, a Palestinian literary theorist who taught at Columbia University.

Another Worldly (1999, 24 minutes) scrambles the cues of time and place, laying techno music from the 1990s over an assortment of 1940s dance films where cabaret dancers – mostly white women – mimic stereotypes and exotic dance forms. Meanwhile in footage intercut from an ethnographic film, a Bedouine woman dances herself into a trance before an avid audience of men. Is this woman the object or the visionary? Could she possibly be a prophet – even though she is denied speech? On one level, *Another Worldly* could be seen as simply camp, pointing up race/gender stereotypes that are already glaring. On another, there is enough poetic ambiguity – the one who swoons may actually be the one who ultimately sees the light – that this film seems pivotal in Thornton's work.

The Great Invisible (1988-2002, 60 minutes) is based on the life of Isabelle Eberhardt who as a young woman fled Switzerland and a dysfunctional family, traveled to North Africa, passed as a man, converted to Islam, and gained acceptance within the inner sanctum of mystic religious circles. She died in 1904, at the age of 27, in a flash flood in the Sahara. To underscore Eberhardt's fluid identity, she/he is played by six different actors. *The Great Invisible* took over fifteen years to complete, in part because of difficulties raising money for a project that, at the time, most funding agencies claimed "had nothing to do with American interests." Thornton persisted and as part of the process, studied Arabic and Islam – which, although widely present in the US, is still largely invisible to its mainstream culture. She also traveled to North Africa.

Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 10, 9, 8, 7, 6… (2004, 22 minutes), like *Peggy and Fred*, explores the social effects of new technologies and media. Juxtaposing aerial footage of pre-9/11 New York City, scientific data on genetic mutation, audio testimony about the bombing of Hiroshima, and a home movie of her father when he was working on the Manhattan Project, Thornton creates a haunting, complex meditation on violence.

The Screening at MoCA Shanghai: Peggy and Fred in Hell

> *"[Thornton's] place in cinema history has already been assured for the sole reason that she is the author of Peggy and Fred in Hell."*
> –Bill Krohn, *Cahiers du cinema*

In *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984-2008, 90 minutes), two children play-act loosely scripted scenes where they find themselves, basically abandoned, in a post-apocalyptic "hell." In real life, the children were the artist's neighbors (Donald and Janis Reading) when she was living in a house in San Francisco. One day, they dropped by and "played"

with her new tape recorder in a breathtakingly inventive fashion. Thornton was amazed, and she then began a series of improvisational film shoots with the children that lasted for almost a decade. Over the years, she collected more than 14 hours of 16mm film footage. She turned her apartment into a funky, homemade set where the television was always on, but where otherwise the technology never seemed to work and/or was reduced to chaotic rubble.

Raised by television, Peggy and Fred inhabit an uninhabitable, pop culture terrain. As they go about their day, they mimic radio and TV. But as they hum and perform, Peggy and Fred are echoing a reality that somehow isn't theirs. Where they live is a territory that excludes them but at the same time, the one they know viscerally and where they are most at home.

"Billy Jean is not my lover,
she's just a girl who says that I'm the one,
but the kid is not my son."

When Peggy sings this popular Michael Jackson song, what does she understand from the lyrics? What does she know about the sexualized world of pop culture reflected in the song? But then again, to bypass stereotypes of innocence as ignorance – and ignorance as bliss – if she herself is the disowned kid, she may know better than anyone what the song is about.

Peggy and Fred in Hell: A Brief Synopsis

As an experimental film, *Peggy and Fred* is largely visual, and can be understood for the most part without knowing English. However, it is also full of songs and American cultural references. What follows is a brief synopsis of the film, and a guide to those elements of the movie that take place in English.

Section 1: *The Prologue* opens with extreme close-ups of vocal chords, singing, culled from an old science film. From the start, metaphorically, *voice* is the issue – or maybe, it is the lack thereof. Or maybe it is our inability to speak clearly within a cacophony of overlapping languages and divergent frames of reference. Then an education film talks about male and female vocal pitch. Then Fred sings a childish song about guns that is popular with little boys: "After they shot him, they shot him again." Peggy then sings *Billy Jean*.

Section 2: *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* is a spoof on the utopian *Wizard of Oz.* It opens with the soundtrack from a soap opera quarrel, set against a storm. Meanwhile Fred plays with the phone, and says someone is calling who wants to kill Peggy.

Fred: "It's for you…'I will kidnap you at ten o'clock.' "

Peggy: "Whoever answered that phone is getting killed.

Fred then conducts a mock televised trial, cross-examining Peggy, and then says, "All clap your hands for Amelia Earhart." Then he does a rather raunchy dance while singing, "We're gonna get down, baby."

Section 3: *Dung Smoke Enters the Palace* opens with shots of an older woman and then waves slamming against a break. The hymn, *Rock of Ages,* plays over footage of a nuclear bomb, pointing up the apocalyptic visions that are tied to Christian redemption. This is followed by a 1901 Thomas Edison film of Niagara falls. Fred then lectures Peggy on how to talk, telling her not to talk too fast. "Try to keep your voice not-fast." Then they talk about Uncle Willy, who never materializes on screen. A 1901 industrial film shot in a Westinghouse factory is intercut with Peggy visiting a duck farm. Then space age, lunar footage is combined with a religious voice-over about sin, retribution, and the blood of the fathers.

Section 4, *Introduction to the So-Called Duck Factory*. Peggy plays in a field while the title text scrolls across the screen. Fred is caught in the rain. An older Peggy recites a text about rain, worms, and feeding the fish. Later, they get into a real fight.

Section 5: *Paradise Crushed*. Text scrolls continually across the screen. It's about nothingness, the great void, and the beginning of the ages. "Then darkness came to know itself and thought outwardly in space … " Later, the sound track from a children's TV show about the world of make-believe is intercut with Peggy's imaginary tale about a heart that gets bigger and bigger. An opera is intercut with a woman's testimony about her experience in Hiroshima. There is another voice over about vocalization.

Section 6: *Have a Nice Day Alone* juxtaposes text on gesture and word choice with yodeling and other exotic forms of vocalization. An artificial voice reiterates common, banal phrases.

Section 7: *The Expiration* tells a story in text over a science film of swimming whales. Peggy appears to get eaten and have some sort of rebirth. The story ends with a tale of simple, personal apocalypse, an everyday revelation of the heart. Fred climbs out of the water.

INTERVIEW WITH LESLIE THORNTON

Katy Martin: Let's start by talking about *Adynata* and the ongoing relationship you have with China. In the film, you imagine yourself as Chinese, even though you have absolutely no Chinese ancestry! What was the inspiration for this work? Can you give us an overview?

Leslie Thornton: *Adynata* launched the fundamental direction and climate of all of my subsequent work. It is a half-hour film ostensibly about the "Orientalist gaze." It was inspired by Edward Said's book, *Orientalism,* which proposes that the West has a tendency to invent an exotic for itself, an outside, and that this exotic is a spectacle, having little to do with the cultures from which its imagery is drawn. *Adynata* sets itself up as a "guilty object-lesson;" it creates an orientalist spectacle, but in a manner so extreme, and so vulgar, as to reveal itself. It was intended to bring about a critical response, a simultaneous attraction and repulsion that provoke an instance of cultural self-awareness. There is also an emotional undercurrent to the film which is more difficult for me to extricate in language, but which runs through all of my work. It is grounded in a feeling of estrangement from language. The word *Adynata* comes from ancient Greek rhetoric, and is defined as, "A stringing together of impossibilities; sometimes a confession that words fail us." The film includes sounds and images from Western culture primarily, yet it presents itself as speaking about China. Even the 19th century family portraits that in fact were taken in China, where taken by a Western photographer, and in that sense, were already somewhat outside of the culture they are meant to represent.

On a more personal level, as a little girl I was enchanted by the image of digging through the earth and finding the Chinese on the other side, only upside-down to us. Technically this image explains gravity to a child, that we are standing upright in our own place on earth, held stationary by gravity (or symbolically, culture), even while others are standing at different angles to us. China was as opposite as one could get, since it was as inverted as could be. This placed China firmly within my imagination, and as a child who felt trapped in rural Ohio, there where two places I wanted to be – New York City and China. By the time I was a young woman starting to make films, it was an easy step to say I recognize the extent of my own ignorance, and by extension, of cross-cultural ignorance and presumption. Said's book just put it into an argument for me, and then I dismantled his argument by producing a seductive and absurd artifact that was both compelling visually and aurally, but absolutely wrong in what it purports to be, that is, a presentation of something Chinese. In the end I do not entirely agree with Said. One could say that all grand cultures reflect gaps in other cultures and that desire flows in all directions. I

wanted *Adynata* to be filled with images of beauty, to be seductive, at the same time that it was absurdly "wrong," because I thought, and still think, that beauty is expansive, a rare gift, and the trick is to embrace beauty but recognize it for what it is, a surface, an attractor, not the whole story. When I made *Adynata* it was very controversial, producing shouting matches at several early screenings, because some artists and intellectuals in the audience found the beauty manipulative. This was a remnant of a Marxist critique of aesthetics that was still playing out amongst our intellectual elite. It was also called racist. My response was, and remains, that there is more than one-way to be political, and that, without any excuses, I was presenting a problematic object to the audience, one that was guilty of the very thing that it critiqued. So I welcomed the shouting matches. And I have not yet been to China.

Adynata is somewhat like a Spaghetti Western to the American eye, in that by imitating a completely foreign object, it reflects both what is interesting and attractive, and what is different about that object. Spaghetti Western's are always "wrong" to the American eye, and at the same time they are a revelation of something we take for granted and to which we are blind. *Adynata* is about a self-aware ignorance, but it is also about a self-aware attraction.

KM: Can you talk about your early work and how you began to make experimental film?

LT: I started out as a painter, doing abstract, almost minimalist paintings, but with a lot of gesture and color hidden within a surface that was at first glance monochromatic. This was in the 70's, toward the end of the reign of the original abstract expressionists and minimalists. I could see that if I continued to follow the logic of the aesthetic I had laid out, I would probably end up with a blank canvas, or at least that's what I thought at the time. As it turns out, painting has experienced a wonderful broadening, and if I'd stayed with it, I would have turned toward figurative painting, no doubt. Instead, I began to work in film, which I saw as an open-ended medium, outward looking, and embracing of the world. Painting was introverted, and I was only 21. I wanted a more risky and challenging life in front of me. Film seemed the key, and it has proven to be just that. I had been watching so-called experimental films, or avant-garde films, from the time I was 15, so I was quite aware of a non-Hollywood embrace of the medium. I first approached film by translating my painterly strategies into the filmic space and structure of time and duration. I used pre-determined music-like scores to determine my approach to shooting people in set-up situations, and then the score would also guide the editing. The cuts were like putting one stroke of color over another. I approached sound and image this way, seeing them as equally present.

KM: You gained a lot of attention in the 1980s, primarily through your epic film, *Peggy and Fred in Hell*. You have been working on this film ever since – for the past 24 years! So for years, you've been showing "unfinished" versions. Can you talk about this please?

LT: I had vague plans for a project dealing with anxiety about the changing relationship between the scale of humanity, or mankind, and the scale of technology. This grew directly out of my own experience growing up during the Cold War, in a household where both my father and my grandfather had worked on the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima. I was very aware of the paradox of what was considered a good thing, the ending of the war with Japan, and a horror, the destructive power we now held in our hands and that threatened to obliterate the world.

KM: When did you know this film would be finished, and how did you bring the project to a close?

LT: I knew something would change when *Peggy and Fred in Hell* started feeling like it was in the present, our present, and not in the future. I think that we caught up with the anxiety it embodies on 9/11. Until that time I had always thought it was like science fiction. The fiction of Peggy and Fred places two real children into an environment where you see that they are coping with what's around them. They cook, recognize and deal with external threats, entertain themselves despite the collapsed world they inhabit, and they embody hope somehow, as children. After 9/11, and as we watched in horror the response and acts of our government, I realized one day that the ongoing film was no longer in the future, in fact, it was rapidly receding into our past; it was almost quaint. I made the episode entitled *Paradise Crushed* in early 2002. The first half presents a creation story, culled from a number of creation stories from various cultures, including Navaho and Chinese. The second half introduces a complete breakdown of meaning. The images and sounds, including repetitions of things you've already seen in earlier, more coherent contexts, are now almost completely discordant, chopped out and slammed together seemingly randomly. Anguish dominates, and the children as personas begin to recede. *Peggy and Fred in Hell,* which seemed to be mostly about these children, is no longer about these children. They are suspended within and subject to larger forces. In spite of all of their creative juice, they begin to lose ground.

I say this had a lot to do with post-9/11, but there are two other equally important factors. I shot with Janis and Donald for over eight years, beginning when they were 8 and 6 years old. They started to grow up, and the freshness of childhood began to fade. The compromises that any society commands began to show on them, and you pick up on this in the film. The shooting itself became more painful, less joyous for all of us. This really becomes evident in the fight scene.

Equally important though was the underlying premise of the film, which I realized I finally wanted to reveal. *Peggy and Fred in Hell* is a very strange project. I don't think

there's anything else in the world quite like it. From the beginning I knew I was doing something strange. I was very turned on by the two children when I first met them. They were my new neighbors and it was love at first sight. I had already conceived of the project but intended to shoot with two adults, an eccentric couple actually named Peggy and Fred. Meeting the children changed my plans and my approach. With the adults I would have developed a loose script. But with the children that wouldn't work and I needed to invent a motivation that would allow me to shoot freely, to capture whatever might unfold between us.

I saw myself as the eye of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) entity. They were the sole survivors in a post-apocalyptic world, and I was observing them, studying them, to learn about this thing called "human," this thing that made both "me" (AI) and them. It was very important to the strangeness of the project that I not reveal this simple narrative pretense. If I had, it would have naturalized everything into a more conventional narrative. I sustained this secrecy for many, many years. At times I considered revealing the back-story, and even tried it, but it crushed the strangeness.

Then one day recently I just woke up and wrote the end, in which the entity reveals itself. It explains that it has been studying human emotion. It tells jokes and is its own judge and jury. It is completely alone, except for these children, these images of two children. It may even know enough to realize it is alone, lonely, because it has been teaching itself how to learn. So it is the-robot-that-feels, in the end, a common science fiction pretense. What is different, though, is that you don't know it was there all along, running the show. This final episode will provide closure for Peggy and Fred, in a twisted, self-reflexive act of revealing "the maker" who is also the fictional audience or voyeur, an audience of one. Of course, I am actually the one looking through the AI, and so, by extension, is the real audience. This puts us in the position of voyeurs, watching children basically being themselves, and some people have found this disturbing, by the way. I say this somewhat facetiously, but I saw what I was doing as like Andy Warhol, but with a heart.

The episode I'm describing will be called *The Eradication*, and it is still in production. Right now there is a false ending entitled *The Expiration,* in which Peggy gets eaten by a whale, and it is announced that the Apocalypse has taken place. In *The Eradication*, AI is not at all worried about the Apocalypse, it is so far beyond it. So in the end, what wins, is outside the individual. It is Culture and it is Power, especially as embodied in the media and by government. And I think that's a pretty accurate summary of how things are working today, more than ever. At least in the past, in a country like America, the cultural myth placed the individual at the center. For all sorts of reasons, some rather sinister, and some possibly necessary, that configuration is changing.

KM: Why hell?

LT: Hell is like a necessary evil, or a perhaps a void. It is paradox. For there to be good

there has to be bad. For there to be language, there has to be that which cannot be spoken.

KM: What's next?

LT: Ah. Trying to find the good parts of our culture, the generative, celebratory, present-tense parts. Also, thematically, I am heading into a comparison between Orientalism and Americana, which you begin to see happening in my video, *Sahara Mojave*. You could say that I'm looking into various pop-cultures, and finding affinities, parallels, and to the extent that I can imagine, differences. Right now I'm writing an article about Westerners who have made films about India. It's entitled, *The Extent of My Ignorance So Far*. That pretty much sums it up.