

CLOSE-UP: HELL IS FOR CHILDREN

Ed Halter on Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell*

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TWO AMERICAN CHILDREN, a girl and a boy, play inside a house crammed with the technological clutter of the twentieth century. Tangles of electric cable form a synthetic underbrush, while cathode-ray monitors perch here and there, transmitting nature programs amid a jumble of cardboard boxes, incandescent lightbulbs, and tabletops loaded with piles of tools, food, and junk. The girl wears the flowered dress of a Dust-Bowl waif; the boy appears in a smart white suit jacket, worn New Wave style over a T-shirt emblazoned with an ironed-on Superman logo. Set loose in this anarchic environment, the kids improvise scenarios of their own invention, entertaining for the camera, as if on TV. The boy belts out misremembered folk songs like some variety-show bit player while he munches on dry breakfast cereal, and then the girl sings an a cappella rendition of Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean," swaying demurely beneath a Jack Goldstein screenprint that might depict a city under missile attack.

Played by real-life siblings Janis and Donald Reading, these latter-day Little Rascals are the protagonists of Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* (1984). A 16-mm film running about twenty minutes, the work is the premier "episode" of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, the artist's ongoing, sprawling cycle of films and videos whose production stretches from the early 1980s to today. Its narrative is at once elongated and elliptical, its form radically open-ended. Over three decades, Thornton has continuously revised, reedited, and extended the project, building additions onto the cycle every few years, as if constructing a cinematic version of the Winchester Mystery House. As such, *Peggy and Fred* incorporates and reflects the transitions that motion-picture technology has undergone during its evolution, moving through 16-mm film, analog video, and digital media.

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In their mostly static camerawork and their air of directorial distance, Peggy and Fred's scenes in *The Prologue* have a Warholian quality, but without the longueurs. Thornton surrounds and intercuts them with other kinds of debris: found footage and sound collages assembled into sequences that speak an uncanny audiovisual language, evoking complex ideas just on the verge of articulation, lingering at the threshold of consciousness. Before the children are introduced, *The Prologue* opens with a striking series of shots, taken from a science documentary, of a set of vocal cords rhythmically opening and closing, fluttering like a pair of fleshy curtains. Microphotography grown monstrous, the footage has been grafted to a sound track blending exotica chanteuse Yma Sumac's multioctave ululations with snippets from Handel's *Rinaldo*, whose titular character was originally written for castrato. Film theorist Mary Ann Doane once noted that this image of "the body producing speech" unmistakably resembles an Irigarayan "singing vulva," and indeed the sequence that follows reiterates this theme. Over an off-kilter shot of a General Electric television set, with just the bottom edge of its screen visible, a stilted narrator asks the listener to compare sets of men's and women's pitch-shifted voices, noting "the pitch most people prefer" for each gender, before the film cuts to the female-male dyad of Peggy and Fred, each performing her or his own gendered role.

Even these selected details should suggest how decisively *The Prologue* diverges from the established course of American experimental film, which had, from the late 1960s up until the '80s, been determined by the legacy of structuralism—cinema's own Minimalist strain, paralleling contemporaneous sensibilities in music and the visual arts—and by a continued, if sometimes contested, veneration of Stan Brakhage's mythopoetics. The all-male trinity of Brakhage, Hollis Frampton, and Michael Snow remained the dominant ideals. To the participants in this scene, *Peggy and Fred*—punk-inflected, apocalyptic, content-maximalist—must have seemed like something created by an extraterrestrial civilization, a set of undecipherable xenolinguistic utterances. If Brakhage was about the transcendence of personal mythology, Thornton insisted on the weight of collective history. While Frampton stressed the creation of films that follow a priori structures, Thornton seemed to edit by channeling an intuitive, aleatory logic, more akin to improvised music (or, as she puts it, "It's got to look like it just fell into place"). Snow worked with wit and elegant language games, but Thornton confronted the viewer through storms of semiotic chaos and an almost Lovecraftian penchant for that which cannot be spoken. Perhaps Thornton's greatest transgression, however, would be *Peggy and Fred*'s eventual engagement with video, prefigured in *The Prologue* via Peggy's mimicking of MTV, at a time when experimental filmmakers overwhelmingly rejected electronic media,

largely on aesthetic grounds.

Thornton produced three more episodes by decade's end: *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* (1987), *Peggy and Fred and Pete* (1988), and *[Dung Smoke Enters the Palace]* (1989). The shortest is eleven minutes, the longest just over twenty. Only a small portion of the footage shot with the Reading siblings appears in *The Prologue*; more material from the original shoot would be parceled out into these and later episodes, and Thornton shot additional footage with the children as the years progressed. Thornton approached her own footage as found footage, interchangeable with the science films, stock images, and bits of early cinema that fill the works; she has remarked that she shot the Readings on grainy black-and-white reversal stock so that the images would look archival even when new. In *Kansas*, the children are juxtaposed with sequences of windstorms and lightning, and the earliest versions of the piece end with a house tumbling off a riverbank into the rushing water. The sepia-toned *Pete* introduces Pete the Penguin, lifted from a silent Castle film for children, waddling forward and backward in time. *Dung Smoke* uses extensive archival film from the turn of the twentieth century, including an enigmatic series of circular and fan-shaped irises laid over rolling ocean waves, and a remarkable overhead tracking shot through a machinery-filled industrial-era factory, set to scrambled No Wavey noise. It ends by jumping forward in history to NASA footage of the lunar surface, paired with a rumbling male voice that could be a radio preacher, reading ominous biblical passages: *For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outside, but inside they are full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.*

Though Thornton had worked exclusively in film up through the mid-'80s (having begun a decade earlier while studying documentary under Ricky Leacock and Ed Pincus at MIT), *The Prologue* would be the only episode finished entirely on 16 mm. Her switch to video was not planned at the project's outset. After *The Prologue* began screening widely, Thornton needed to provide a ten-minute sample of *Peggy and Fred* for a state grant, so she edited together an additional reel of footage, at first cutting on 16 mm, then switching to three-quarter-inch tape toward the end of the process. When finished, she realized that what had begun as a work-in-progress sampler of the project's future functioned as a finished work in itself, which then became *Peggy and Fred in Kansas*. A mark of *Kansas*'s origins remains in a shot of a thunderstorm—strikingly, one of the rare color images in the early episodes—from a bad VHS dub of National Archives footage, still bearing a line of time code.

While *Kansas*, *Pete*, and *Dung Smoke* almost exclusively employ source materials shot on film,

by the early '90s Thornton had begun including new footage of the Reading children shot on video, first in *Introduction to the So-Called Duck Factory*, 1992. Later episodes would introduce a variety of digital effects—beveled text crawls, luminous graphic overlays, images rippling and flowing like liquid—into *Peggy and Fred*'s growing visual vocabulary. By the first decade of this century, the cycle would include such postcinematic artifacts as satellite weather footage, animated models of the solar surface, and computer-generated military simulations. Film and video have been combined in screenings and exhibitions of the work as well. Beginning in the late '80s, *Peggy and Fred* was shown theatrically using a hybrid of 16 mm and video by placing a series of television monitors in the audience and projecting film on the main screen at the front of the room at certain junctures, sometimes roughly synchronizing the same images in both media. Later, this setup changed to a pair of video projections flanking a larger film screen. In 2000, Thornton included some *Peggy and Fred* footage in the multimedia installation *Quickly, Yet Too Slowly* (at the CAPC, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, France), and two years later she reconfigured the cycle into another multiscreen installation, *10,000 Hills of Language* (at CinemaTexas in Austin), which she dubbed a “Peggy and Fred environment.” Eventually, the entire corpus was converted to digital format, and it has screened as a single-channel piece a number of times in the past decade. With each version of what constitutes the “complete cycle” at any given time, Thornton changes small details throughout or even excises entire episodes. As a result, multiple versions circulate of both the individual episodes and the cycle as a whole. Historically, the technological shift from film to video placed more of the power of postproduction under the control of the filmmaker, and this control became complete with the arrival of software-based editing systems. Thornton has chosen to fully embrace the creative potential that this transformation entails. There is no need for a final cut of any work when the artist operates largely outside a true commercial market—be it mainstream film distribution or the art world—that would require a definitive version to be sold. This will remain true even though Thornton is currently engaged in a project to create a limited edition of the “complete” *Peggy and Fred*, including restored prints of its film portions, for sale to institutions. Other variants could remain in circulation via small distributors, and it seems unlikely that the sale of this edition would keep Thornton from tinkering further with the ongoing antics of the Readings and the world she has built around them. *Peggy and Fred*, she has said, is a life's project.

AS *THE PROLOGUE*'S singing-vulva sequence so boldly announces, feminism in particular and questions of cultural identity more broadly provide important conceptual underpinnings for *Peggy and Fred*, though the project refuses to grant any straightforward lessons. But Thornton has addressed such concerns more directly elsewhere, particularly in her film *Adynata* (1983),

an Orientalist pastiche that collapses conventional images of the East and woman-as-other, and the video *There Was an Unseen Cloud Moving* (1988), based on the biography of cross-dressing Victorian explorer Isabelle Eberhardt, who subsequently became the focus of another ever-unfinished project by Thornton, *The Great Invisible* (1989–). The new prevalence of theory—that European-flavored, unabashedly politicized cocktail of interconnected intellectual ingredients—is one more generational shift in American experimental cinema marked by *Peggy and Fred*. The precursors of this tendency can be seen in the Marxist discourse favored by certain members of the London Film-Makers’ Co-op scene of the 1970s, as well as in the transformative effect of feminist thinking on artists’ video of that same decade. Among Thornton’s contemporaries, filmmakers Peggy Ahwesh, Craig Baldwin, and Trinh T. Minh-ha were exemplary fellow travelers in the newly opened realms of postmodernism and poststructuralism; all four can be seen as at once self-consciously extending and critiquing the history of both American avant-garde film and cinema as such. The fact that many filmmakers found themselves in university teaching positions at this time surely strengthened the desire to speak beyond the film-as-film paradigms bequeathed by the visionary tradition. The conversation, however, could be frustratingly one-sided, as ’80s film-studies academics were notorious for ignoring the existence of experimental cinema. Thornton often tells the story of confronting one well-known theorist about the failure to engage with this long-established strain of filmmaking. Her reply to Thornton: “Our job is to address the dominant tropes. Your work self-theorizes.”

Indeed, on occasion Thornton has self-theorized. In a conversation with Trinh first published in 1990, Thornton remarked, “I see my own work as a kind of ‘minor literature’—in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari talk about this, ‘like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow,’ working through that language which is given to us, in this case, that of dominant cinema and the historical avant-garde.” (Taking similar inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari, Tom Gunning would soon afterward publish an essay on the concept of “minor cinema” as the definitive mode of the ’80s generation.) The switch from film to electronic media in the *Peggy and Fred* cycle resonates with video’s rise to prominence as the theoretical object par excellence of its era, as in Jean Baudrillard’s synecdoche of the television screen for simulation, Fredric Jameson’s notion of video as the paradigmatic medium of postmodernity, or Rosalind E. Krauss’s argument that video’s “Hydra-headed” existence, its endlessly varied and heterogeneous manifestations, typifies art’s “post-medium condition.” If *Peggy and Fred* proposes its own theory of video, it is one that stresses how the cheapness and ease of reproducibility ultimately engenders a massively redundant archive, containing countless variations of the same images, an agglutination of realities so overwhelming that we must now exist inside it—not a smooth world of perfect

replication, but a heap of dodgy rubbish. Today, *The Prologue*'s overloaded tabletops call to mind messy computer desktops, and Thornton's continual reordering of film and video artifacts becomes a metaphor for the operations of greater information systems. *Peggy and Fred* may have begun looking like television, but it came to feel more like the Internet.

Beyond media theory, Thornton related *Peggy and Fred* to two particular types of inquiry, ethnography and science fiction, in her essay "We Ground Things, Now, on a Moving Earth," published in the Collective for Living Cinema's journal *Motion Picture* in 1989. Both ethnography and science fiction, she argues, "address a problem of needing a place to play out speculation, because in one's close and real proximities, such-things-would-not-happen" since "to play out these ideas, whether they be political, moral, ethical, social or purely literary, is to play out an otherness which is not present." *Peggy and Fred* is able to provide a picture of alterity, she writes, "by working with children, because children are not quite us and not quite other. They are our others. They are becoming us. Or they are becoming other."

Overwhelmingly, the critical reception of the *Peggy and Fred* cycle has noted the work's science-fiction feel. Now, looking back on its beginnings with greater historical distance, we might compare its sensibility more precisely to that of cyberpunk. Like cyberpunk, *Peggy and Fred* jettisons any notion of technological or social progress in favor of a collapsing of the future and past into a dystopian, postindustrial present; it explores the convergence of human consciousness with electronic systems; and it raids a variety of genres for its formal devices. Something must have been in the air: Thornton's *Prologue* is roughly contemporaneous with the foundational works of cyberpunk literature—Rudy Rucker's *Software* (1982), William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), and Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985)—as well as feature films strongly reminiscent of the genre such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). Like Thornton, Gibson envisioned culture as a growing junk pile, using the Japanese term *gomi* in his 1986 short story "The Winter Market," defining it as "garbage, kipple, refuse, the sea of cast-off goods our century floats on," and asking, "Where does the *gomi* stop and the world begin?"

But unlike some cyberpunk, *Peggy and Fred* avoids any wink of satire, favoring instead a blank stare at the technologization of reality. In "We Ground Things," Thornton provides a science-fictional "scenario" for *Peggy and Fred* whose posttraumatic tone befits the last decade of the Cold War, when the theory of mutually assured destruction remained an operative political reality (it bears mention that both Thornton's father and grandfather were engineers who worked

on the Manhattan Project):

Peggy and Fred are children. Every day they go out looking for a better place to live. In the evening they come home.

They go out often.

There are no other people in the world. Something has happened to them, but Peggy and Fred are unconcerned. Their problems are more immediate: how to make avocado dip, getting lost in their own house, receiving imaginary phone calls and death threats, deciding what things are for. They are adrift in the detritus of prior cultures, cast loose in a world of post-apocalyptic splendor.

And they also watch Television. Television is part of the Artificial Intelligence network. AI keeps Television on all of the time and so do Peggy and Fred. And since the only other people they ever see are on the TV, they don't know they're not as well. They figure that people are watching and learning from and ignoring them as well. This constitutes their idea of the Social.

Though never made explicit in the cycle, the postapocalyptic setting is perhaps most evident in a sequence that appears in *Peggy and Fred and Pete*, showing the children emerging from what appears to be a desert bomb shelter. However, Thornton says that this loose narrative did not function as an actual treatment for *Peggy and Fred*, but rather as conceptual backstory, something that would inform her decisions as she filmed the episodes. "It gave me free rein," she remarks, "to shoot almost anything, through the eyes of this beholder." The process carries on into the present day, but transferred from the act of production to a seemingly endless process of editing. As *Peggy and Fred* mutates and evolves, Thornton continues to inhabit the role of the AI, investigating the remnants of human culture as a growing body of weird, raw data; assembling, disassembling, and reassembling the footage with a mysterious and unexpected logic. The outside stance of this role, both alien and alienated, has its counterpoint in the seemingly unfazed figures of Peggy and Fred, who play like strange loops at the core of the system, never completely disappearing into the clutter.

<https://www.artforum.com/print/201207/ed-halter-on-leslie-thornton-s-peggy-and-fred-in-hell-31962>