

LESLIE THORNTON

Essay by Thomas Zummer
Senses of Cinema, Issue 23
December 2002

Paradise Crushed, or: "...just stand in that quicksand for a moment, this shot won't take long...": Some notations on the works and life of Leslie Thornton

Leslie Thornton has long been considered a pioneer of contemporary media aesthetics, working at the borders and limits of cinema, video and digital media. Such seminal works as her ongoing series *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985-) operate in the interstices between various media-forms, often using simultaneous, interacting projections of film and video to address both the architectural spaces of media, and the imaginary spaces of the spectator's involvement. Thornton uses the process of production as an explorative process, a collective endeavor "position(ing) the viewer as an active reader, not a consumer."¹ She is a contemporary of such fellow explorers as Chris Marker, Chantal Akerman, Gary Hill, Michael Snow, Alan Sondheim and Harun Farocki, all artists who are opening up new spaces for media, re-mapping its boundaries within the projective spaces of the museum or gallery as well as within the public spaces of the cinema, television and internet transmission. Thornton's career to date has been a unique and unusual one. She was one of the first artists to bridge the boundaries between cinema and video, to explore their complicities and resistances, and to embrace their differences as positive, and even complementary, attributes. Thornton's complex articulations are both edifying innovations in media form and content and tacit deconstructions of the principles, presumptions and promises of technically reproducible artworks. Her projects are ongoing and provisional, and she had been unafraid to return to, and rework, and rethink, issues, topics, subjects. Her works have had a profound impact, and an enduring influence on an entire generation of media artists, critics and theorists.

Her work found its first location, and inspiration, in what in those times was understood as an 'avant-garde' film practice; the quoted term, suspiciously suspended, is rarely invoked in these times, but the rigor, the pure oppositional avowal, and the belief in moving imagery's elec-

tro-shock potential evinced in her work insist on its essence and instincts to be one with those of what now seems undeniable as the classical genius of, first, American, and second, transnational, non-industrial cinema, in the questioning, ransacking mode familiar since having filled one of the spaces left vacant (gaping) after modernism moved away from here.

–Bill Horrigan²

(into white)

One of Leslie Thornton's earliest interests was mathematics, a fascination that was encouraged by her father Gunnar Thornton, a nuclear physicist and engineer, and her grandfather, an electrical engineer. During the Second World War both men had—unbeknownst to each other—worked on the Manhattan Project, the top secret development of the atomic bomb. Gunnar Thornton was one of the youngest scientists working on the project. He had determined, while still a student, that an important new frontier in scientific research was probably well underway, and that it would be his chosen area of research. His professors at Harvard were evasive or noncommittal, but inference and persistence paid off, and Gunnar Thornton was brought into the project early on. His father, Jens Thornton, was the electrical engineer whose task had been to design the electrical plant at Oak Ridge where the methods of refining radioactive materials were developed. It wasn't until after the cessation of hostilities that the men discovered—through an article in a local Boston newspaper—that they had both been working on the Manhattan Project. “I had always wondered,” remarked a family member, “why, for a couple of years, these two men, who were so passionately involved in science, only talked to each other about sports when they were home, a topic they weren't even very much interested in.”

Perhaps it is within this context that, even as a child, Leslie Thornton began to develop certain insights regarding technology and ethics, language and silence, and a sensitivity and attentiveness to the contradictions, ironies, and ambivalences between localized actions and global events. How was it possible to reconcile the brilliant, gentle man she loved and admired with the revelation of the consequences that ensued in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Both images are true: he, Gunnar, was a man of character and ethics, who believed in the peaceful development of atomic energy, yet whose work had played a role in the shaping of an anxious and dangerous future. Thornton's dark and magisterial *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, in its strange divarications between promissory terror and transcendence, might be read as a profound examination of the tropologies of cold-war apocalypics, the vicissitudes of conflicting narratives, and what one might call a certain paratactics of the image. *Peggy and Fred in Hell* charts a troubled

trajectory between event and mediation, with a profound skepticism throughout concerning the favored foregroundings of technical modernity: photography's verisimilitude and the index of the photo-chemical trace as guarantor of the real, the consequent presumption of a privileged link to the true and actual, and the promise of recuperability through ever-extenuating forms of technical reproducibility. She finds suspect the naturalization of prosthetic instruments, and the political interests behind certain orders of narratological closure. Thornton has an almost tragic sense of loss, of what is incommensurate in technologies of the image, of the impossibilities and aporias circumscribed by language and in media, a sense of what is profoundly irrecoverable and unconsumable. And a very strange relation to cinema, its histories and practices.

There is a short 8mm film, a home movie, in color, taken on the island of Tinian in 1945. The film is old, and the celluloid has begun to dry and shrink and there are two places where sections of the film are double-exposed. It shows the base and airfield where Little Boy, the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima, was assembled, stored and armed. The device is seen being checked and repainted; shortly afterward it is carefully raised out of the shallow trough where it had rested, and placed on a wheeled dolly attached to a tractor. The device is covered with a canvas tarpaulin tied to the frame of the dolly. Through the succession of shots the progress of the device is traced as it is moved out of the hangar and onto the tarmac. It is quite windy, and, as the dolly moves out into the airfield, a corner of the canvas comes undone, lifting in the wind to expose the bomb. Perhaps some odd sense of security compelled the commanding officer to attend to this, and Leslie's father, one of the scientists who had transported the device from Los Alamos to the Pacific island, was ordered to sit on the bomb in order to hold the canvas secure. This strange image, captured on film, of Gunnar Thornton astride the first atomic bomb as it is driven out to *the Enola Gay*, is an uncanny premonition of Slim Pickens, riding in similar fashion in 1964, in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. In a sense there is nothing that one might do with this, no profound meaning to be disinterred from, or assigned to, the relation between these images and events. It is an ironic, and private, local occurrence inscribed within the depths of a global event, one which remains for the most part an unconsumable sort of narrative. A trace, a fragment of a story, less a prefiguration than mere coincidence, in the end, a personal and familiar story for a little girl.

It is interesting to note that such data, which make up biographical accounts, or representations of historical occurrences, is often of this order, an anomaly or detail which is not easy to reconcile or domesticate, or even to write or represent very well. Such fragments are often contradictory of other documents or memoirs, or cannot accommodate clear meaning, or are of no discernible

point, or merely not to current taste or discretion. Leslie Thornton knows this very well. She has a subtle and precise sensitivity to the problematic nature of biography, and she has addressed this issue, notably in two works—experimental biographies—of Isabelle Eberhardt, a nineteenth century writer and traveler, a spiritual/profane figure in colonial North Africa, who died in 1904 in a flash-flood in the Sahara. Whereas an historian’s or biographer’s task is to winnow out of a disordered and chaotic accretion of data, a coherent and palpable narration, Thornton chooses the opposite strategy: to allow, within the framework of media, the clash of contradictory or repetitive data, to let multiple accounts, letters, photographs, fictions, docu-dramatic reconstructions, pure speculation—by people who loved or detested or didn’t know Isabelle Eberhardt at all—appear as they are, unadorned, contradictory, and unsuppressed. The result, an hour-long video work entitled *There Was An Unseen Cloud Moving*(1988) reveals and critiques the hidden interests of convention, method, identity, and the tacit presumptions of the ‘archive.’ The work uses a heterogeneous mix of source images and film stocks, sequences shot and re-shot directly on video or transferred from film. Isabelle is portrayed by four actresses, and the incidents of her life are played out in reflexive, improvised, performative events. The result is a rich and allusive tapestry, one that is both enduringly pleasurable and theoretically astute.

The second work, *The Great Invisible*, is currently in progress, and has intermittently occupied Thornton for ten years. It is also ostensibly a ‘biography’ of Isabelle Eberhardt, although it begins well before her conception, and ends almost a century after her death. In contradistinction to the earlier work, it tampers in a much more focused and subtle fashion with narrative. Among other things, it examines the complexities of contemporary media representations of Islam, notions of alterity and conformity, the politics of the image, and the ethics of documentation. *The Great Invisible* has occasionally been shown as a work-in-progress, and the current version, approximately an hour long, is compelling and disturbing, a prescient and often humorous account of the instabilities of media, the incommensurabilities of events, and the consequences of their entwinement.

At SUNY/Buffalo, Leslie Thornton studied with Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka. Although at this point she did not make films, Thornton was already caught up in the aesthetics of avant-garde film practices, thanks in part to a rather unlikely series of weekly screenings of experimental film at a Unitarian church in Schenectady, NY, that she attended as a teen-ager in the mid 1960s. In the early 1970s Thornton began painting; by the middle of the decade she had stopped. In that short time she produced a body of works notable for their austere beauty and conceptual rigor. Thornton’s paintings organized a sensual, expres-

sionist hand into strict formal geometric mappings. These works begin with a painterly sensuality set within and against a series of structural grids, so that there is a constant tension between expressivity and the ineffable. As the physicality of painting is diminished, sensuality is reduced to a minimal mark, a trace, a spectral remainder holding place before the sublime, unrepresentable, unspeakable. Unlike the minimalists, whose concern with phenomenological reduction implied an authoritative essentialism, Thornton's practice was more troubled and problematic, engaged in a trajectory wherein painting gradually and irrevocably evacuated its presence within the visual field. Painting was a vessel incapable of the containment of the sensate. Language, gesture, emotion the random and inexplicable things and occurrences of the world were among her subjects; painting seemed insufficient. It was a matter of finding an appropriate instrument for her investigations.

Louis Marin, in his reading of Poussin, notes that

the legible and the visible have common spaces and borders; they overlap in part, and each is embedded in the other to an uncertain degree.

It is this uncertainty between language and the visible that appears as a constant substratum in Thornton's works, from the materialities of painting to the technical armatures of cinema, video, and digital transmission. Her early canvases were a kind of painting *in potentia*, incomplete and incompletable, wherein both grid and structure, gesture and transgression, language and image, disappear in a mutual erasure, an afterimage moving inexorably into white.

“...of necessity, I become an instrument...”: *subjectivity and reflection*

Leslie Thornton's first 16mm film, *X-TRACTS*, was made in 1975, in collaboration with cinematographer Desmond Horsfield. It is nine minutes long, in black and white, and consists of a complex and rapid patterning of sound/image segments, structured by a formal mathematical schema that determines duration, interaction and progression. In one sense it is related to works like Paul Sharits' *T:O:U:C:H:I:N:G* (1968), or Hollis Frampton's *Hapax Legomena* (1971-72), in its examination of the tacit conditions of cinema and the analogies of language. But Thornton's skepticism exceeds the fashionable critiques of the cinematic apparatus that were practiced at the time, and extends into some of the stranger territories of linguistics, cognition and rhetoric. There is a tendency to read *X-TRACTS* as autobiographical—most of the images are of the filmmaker, fragments of the body in motion, at rest, traces of presence, spaces occupied a moment ago; the voice—also hers—is soft, reflective, anxious or distracted. It is not

autobiographical in any conventional way. In an interview some years later Thornton remarked “...the relationship between the public and the private one is an important one. Maybe the ‘self’ is not that interesting—I don’t think it is—but what flows through it can be.”³ In *X-TRACTS* Thornton reflects upon cinema’s exterior conditions—its artifactuality—and effectively punctures the reflex of phantasmatic identification by foregrounding the disparities between materiality and performative aspects of cinema. Thornton’s skeptical fascination with language extends to its technically reproducible shadows, and *X-TRACTS* is a profoundly deconstructive film, in the sense that it tampers with, or throws out of gear the habitual derivations we make between perception and cognition through the intercession of a common technology. The traces of the body’s arrestment on film (the possibility of recognition or identification underwritten by a faith in the verisimilitude of the photo-chemical index) are countermanded by an editing strategy which is radically at odds with one’s investment in a narrative progression. Sense emerges, albeit in a radically different manner, in something like what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would have called a *rhizomatic* exfoliation. What Leslie Thornton does is to localize and problematize the structuring principles of mediation—sound, image, grain, context, field, frame, scan, pixel—in order to introduce a difference in our habits of consumption and cognition. Her explorations of the deep structure of media operate coextensively with innovative formal strategies, and with the given conditions of projection or transmission. *X-TRACTS* is described by Chrissie Iles, curator of film and media at the Whitney Museum, as a “missing link” between the structuralists and the introduction of a more narratological, and even emotional, tendency in experimental film practice.⁴ There is a phrase—perhaps it is actually a paragramme of disparate fragments—in *X-TRACTS*, pronounced in the quiet, reflective, voice of the filmmaker: “...of necessity, I become an instrument...” She might be speaking for all of us.

“...there were a few perfect moments...”: *tampering with verisimilitude*

In 1975 Leslie Thornton was a graduate student working at MIT, where she studied with cinema verité filmmakers Ed Pincus and Richard Leacock. She started shooting her second film, *All Right You Guys*, that year. When it was shown at MIT it caused enough of a scandal for Thornton and Horsfield to be politely asked to leave. *All Right You Guys* had tampered with some of the cardinal principles of cinema verité’s ideology of uncontrolled documentary technique: it not only allowed, but at times induced, an apprehension of the presence of the camera so that the objectivity presumed by controlled presence or willful disregard of the cinematic apparatus was problematized. The cinematic illusion of a privileged voyeurism was further deconstructed by Thornton’s formal schema of editing into a series of symmetrically timed scenes, cross-cutting

between two figures, her sister and a close female friend. In a certain sense this work was true to cinema vérité: things just happened. The reflexivity between the subjects recorded and the active presence of the camera was foregrounded, and tacitly critiqued. But the most scandalous thing was Thornton's editing. Her application of formalist principles in the aesthetic, almost musical, shaping of *All Right You Guys* was anathema to the documentarians. She eschewed or detoured all of the privileged signs and marks of cinema vérité—the camera movements, film stocks, shooting and editing styles that authorized “documentary.” It was “too heavily edited,” too “beautiful,” the artifactuality of the medium was too salient. Trinh T. Minh-ha would develop similar strategies in her film *Reassemblage* (1983), and there are affinities to the works of Harun Farocki, Chantal Akerman, Martin Arnold and Claire Denis as well. By not suppressing the disposition of editing, *All Right You Guys* became a more critical, and less palatable, film. At one point Ed Pincus described Thornton as “a primitive” for having willfully transgressed the precepts of cinema vérité.

...illogical things, mispronunciations, peculiar combinations of sound and image that are somehow startling, excessive beauty. Working with duration that seems inappropriate. The viewer has to deal with it; it stimulates the mind to cope with boredom, for instance. Generally, in culture, these discomforts, stimulations, are blocked out; they are not speakable, packagable, or they are disruptive. The closest to transcendence that we get in pop culture might be violence, the lust for violence....

— Leslie Thornton⁵

“...where are you?...” (*words fail*)

Thornton's next works (*Minutiae* [1979], *noexitkiddo* [1981], *Jennifer, Where Are You?* [1983] and *Adynata*[1984]) were less about the proclivities of language than they were about the disturbances of silence. *Minutiae* is a mapping of the unspoken entanglements of family life. The tensions and excesses of everyday life between a man, a woman and their daughter are punctuated by the raucous presence of a parrot, whose simulated speech and (in)articulate mutterings punctuate the linguistic/rhetorical spaces that they inhabit. There is an almost obsessive focus on gesture. *Minutiae* is an examination of the closest proximities of the verbal and nonverbal. (The names of the family were Peggy and Fred and Edna; two of these names were reinscribed as fictional personae embodied by two small children in *Peggy and Fred in Hell*). *Jennifer, Where Are You?* is structured by a speech-act, a constant proleptic call, a man's voice which has been edited and recut into a repetitive and pervasive presence. The insistence of this male voice,

which repeats the phrase “Jennifer! Where are you?” every 30 seconds, parodies the authority conceded to voice-overs in the cinema. The voice is patriarchal, relentless, and runs the entire length of the film. Cut-aways to a small girl, glancing at the camera as she plays with lipstick and matches, reappropriate the relation between patriarchal phonocentrism and masculine gaze. But is this small child subject to either? No. Not really. There she is, hiding in plain sight—ours, not ‘his’—a ‘purloined subject’ successfully evading subjugation through response or acquiescence. ‘Jennifer,’ whoever she might be (a cipher, a pseudonymous textual marker of gendered cinematic presence) is never apprehended, and the film, for all of its suspense, simply ends.

Adynata is an even more radical departure, and one of Thornton’s most important and influential films. It begins in an abyss of technical reproductions and appropriations, with the re-photographing of a formal photographic portrait of a Chinese family taken circa 1861. This image enters into the cinematic economy through various cuts and edits, both within the frame of the original image, and within the framing of contemporary media. The husband and children in the original photograph look relaxed and quite natural while the wife is in a fixed and stiffly formal posture, already heavily made up as an image prior to her appearance before the camera. Thornton chose this highly coded image as a point of departure for an examination of images of gender and culture, as well as for a tacit critique of Orientalism and its inherent racism. *Adynata* introduced an important disturbance into such political discourses, by dealing with the matter of thinking through problematic representations of otherness and alterity, and by opening up a complex dialogue on these issues. Traces of a Brechtian theatricality, inform Thornton’s use of a variety of formal strategies of appropriation and re-appropriation to address a long-standing, but often hidden, practice of simulation of exotica and otherness by the West. The ‘orient’ of *Adynata* is an allusion made up of mimicry and pastiche, crafted out of whatever may be put to use, to pose and portray the ‘Orient’ as an engaging narrative *topos*. That it works, that the viewer is so readily engaged in a narratological world at least as convincing as that of Fu Manchu or Charlie Chan, is a disturbing and ‘dis-orienting’ tactic used by Thornton to introduce issues of difference and multiculturalism within the frameworks of media. Photographs, pages of orientalist books, parts of Brooklyn stand in for exotic landscapes; actors, such as they are, are not naturalized within a scene, but present a glaring discrepancy, even as they mimic and reflect their sources, already naturalized representations of orientalia. At one point an ethereal, out-of-focus segment of running figures appears on screen; it is stolen, whole cloth, from *Shoot the Piano Player* (François Truffaut, 1960), and seamlessly inscribed into a radically different political/semiotic economy in Thornton’s film. *Adynata*, by deconstructing its own exemplary

dalliance with such images, opened up a crucial series of questions concerning the politics of the image and the discourses of the Other. Adynata is the name of a rhetorical term, from the Greek, for “a stringing together of impossibilities, sometimes a confession that words fail us.”⁶

“...oh, no, not another one of these fortune-tellers...”: *archive, mix, and random access*

Leslie Thornton’s adaptive and proleptic *Peggy and Fred in Hell* is one of the most extreme attempts at tracing the dynamic contours of cinematic incompleteness. It is, in a sense, a kind of *perpetuum mobile*, a self-organizing generative machine. The story is minimal, ascetic: something has happened; two children survive and are observed traversing a ruined, apocalyptic terrain, interacting with the traces of technologies, the detritus of sense. Somehow television is always on, at least somewhere, and Peggy and Fred mimic and cajole, embody and enunciate traces of the world. Not necessarily their world, but ours. Seen through their eyes, everything is strange and uncanny. Is their pretense directed or improvised, their reaction spontaneous or studied? Like when they pretend to be adults: their only guide is media, they can have had no possible experience of adulthood, and so they produce a strangely and profoundly distorted map of human being, a phantasmatic imposture which is both extra- and intra-cinematic. Other things happen—interruptions, edits, transmissions, recursions. The relationships between technology, society, identity, and subjectivity that underpin contemporary media culture no longer pertain here, though they persist as enduring shadows and afterimages. Form and convention are equally under duress. There is a palpable sense of the interactive, as narrative collapses under the strain of excess labor necessary to its preservation. Regardless, we are swept along, and a new order of recognitions begins to operate. Thornton tampers, at a fundamental level, with media’s deictic structures—its spatio-temporal configurations—and duration, extent, effect, and causality are mobilized and redirected. *Peggy and Fred in Hell* may be one of the most sustainedly proleptic (anticipatory, suspenseful) works ever conceived, a hypnotic and consuming anti-narrative about narrative.

In concrete terms, *Peggy and Fred in Hell* is a continual work-in-progress. There are twelve ‘episodes’ so far, which operate within and range across different media: film, video, architecture, radio, digital media. Some sections involve simultaneous projection and transmission, and the ‘episodes’ are notoriously interchangeable.⁷

beginning and (not) ending

. . . displaced from increasingly precise measurements of time and space onto the immeasurable excesses of an instant without duration and without dimension . . .

— Paul Virilio

Darkness, having no boundary, presses against us on all sides, a terrible absence of force or shape, erasing and muting the extent and limits of our being, a contraction of whatever the mind might hold as an image. Out of this, a hole in the darkness, cinema: a ‘writing in/of light’ emerges. Cinema begins here, in and out of darkness; it is both a pragmatic necessity, and a powerful and longstanding trope, an apparition of absence around which are organized an entire register of practices and discourses. The opening words of *Genesis* establish a relation between light, speech and form that remains paradigmatic for much consequent Western thought:

“In the beginning . . . the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

The mythic enabling speech of *Genesis*, a breath penetrating the formless dark void, may be reasonably considered to be of the order of a projection, and the creation *ex nihilo* of the world occurs through enunciation, the voice, a phonic trace of being, an irreducible substrate of language. *The Prologue* (1985), the first section of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, begins here, with images emerging out of darkness and silence, a metaphor of creation, destruction, and the possibilities of speech. A child knows, instinctively, that the most accessible glimpse of the darkness that resides within the human countenance occurs when you look into someone’s open mouth; it is a hole, a dark superficiality.⁸ *The Prologue* begins here, in the dark. First, with subharmonics, a deep and almost inaudible rumble, starting in blackness, continuing over the first image: the letter “A,” an *aleph* inscribed in light on a turning wheel; the wheel is slowly moving forward, backward, forward, the first letter, “A,” silently projected on its outer surface; music begins, a mouth opens into and out of darkness, and an image of vocal chords, mid-vibrato, appears. There is a rhythmic pulsing of the luminosity—a recognizable flickering effect of the apparatus—and it is unclear whether you are looking at a vagina⁹ or a larynx, or something else entirely. The audio track is a strange and hypnotic mix of operatic arias from Handel’s *Rinaldo* and the pop-mannerisms of Yma Sumac, over ambient sound. Other image/sound configurations begin to appear, intertitles, machinery, and a bit later the image of a television screen appears within the frame, adding its visual and auditory noise to the mix. Fragments of recorded radio transmissions pierce the space, and a small child appears: Fred. He begins to sing, children’s songs, a succession of them, but he doesn’t remember all of the words; an approximation of the

sounds will do. He sings for quite a long time, snippets of various songs. He is like a small and imperfect recording device. A young girl appears—Peggy—singing, though the image remains silent for a moment. There is a loud crash, as she knocks over the table where the microphone is mounted, and the sound snaps on. She continues singing, over and over again, the refrain from a Michael Jackson song:

*“Billie Jean is
not my lover,
she’s just a girl
who says that
I am the one...
but the kid is not my son...”*

The camera moves in as her voice becomes more subdued and introspective, as if the displacements of gender and power had become more palpable and strained. Perhaps this is so for us, but it is unclear for her. There is the rhythmic sound of hammering, as the screen fades to black; the hammering lingers for a moment and ceases.

One might describe the second section, *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* (1987), as a kind of illegitimate cousin to the escapist fantasy of *The Wizard of Oz*: a tornado hits, but in this case Peggy and Fred never get off the ground. Instead they just careen around in the detritus of their own cluttered culture, doing what they can in a present-tense nightmare landscape. They can’t get home and neither can we—we’re already here. *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* is a little like crossing the ceaseless proleptic tension of Maurice Blanchot’s *Death Sentence* with the techno-science fictional delirium of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, and then transmitting the mix via the shortwave radio spectrum. What you get is something like ‘the cinematic apparatus as ambient turing machine in the hands of two children.’ Where *The Wizard of Oz* uses the conceit of a phantasmatic escapism to eventually decode, secularize and normalize the world, replacing it with another more potent fantasy—the middle American dream—Peggy and Fred, on the other hand, find themselves at the margins of this fantasy, where the dream is rent, deformed, unraveling, twisted. Peggy and Fred coexist in a flux of portents and signs, objects and fears, machines and madness. Everything is pluralized, nothing is solid; things are both different and familiar at the same time. Everything is inexplicable; everything is real.

Mythical technologies of space and time articulate a belief in the forward velocity of human

potential. Even dystopias, apocalyptic depictions of chaotic worlds, are representations that ultimately retrieve sense from nonsense and recode fear into courage for the characters who inhabit these worlds . . . the “science-affliction” aspect of Peggy and Fred does not seem to fit into this form of anxiety and resolution or pessimistic speculation, partially because it is a comedy (there is a certain black humor in the notion of a future in which technology simply accumulates rather than progresses and a Hell that is not so apocalyptic so much as untidy). The film doesn’t fit because at a formal level as well as the fictional, the space of Peggy and Fred seems to be situated in the Aftermath of intelligence, in the Anticlimax of a story or an event: Peggy and Fred are condemned to occupy an unrelieved dis/continuity, for there is no history to give time any meaning, only the sedimentation of objects around them.

— Linda Peckham¹⁰

In *Have a Nice Day Alone* (another, much later [2000], section of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*), the entire spatial field of the film is activated by a technological ‘nervous twitch’—a bizarrely beautiful and hypnotic pulsing of the surface. The image shrinks, flows, collapses, seeming to follow some strange and hidden agenda. Intermittently there is a text about speech on screen, visible through the pulse. In the background, extreme forms of vocalization—yodeling and macabre laughter—punctuate the visual space. As the image flutters, a robotic voice speaks about various conditions of speech: silence, rhythm. Language is dislocated as one finds oneself subvocalizing the texts that appear on screen, sometimes before, or slightly later than, the ‘voiceover.’ It is unclear whether the voice mimics or generates the text, as it becomes more energetic. Finally, a small child (Fred) emerges and ‘calms down’ the mechanomorphic entity. The mode of address shifts from the position of a voiceover to that of a subject or character within the film as the child interrogates the voice. No longer authoritative and exterior, the voice is engaged within the *mise-en-scène*, interacting with the child, and then withdraws into an almost reflective repose, talking to itself. It is once again a palpable experience of an “artificial intelligence”—one that is both complicit with us and utterly alien.

With *Have a Nice Day Alone*, the phantasmatic space of the screen, the familiar field within which we are accustomed to imagine ourselves, has been rendered exceedingly strange, and our capacity to invest our desires, expectations, and belief in what happens is enervated and compromised. It is as if we are carried away, swept into the uncanny fold of the work, as it punctuates extra-cinematic (off-screen) space and recursively collapses in on itself, like a—momentarily—standing wave. *Have a Nice Day Alone* tampers with some of the more unusual, and overlooked, aspects of common media: it plays upon the Z-axis, revealing lateral dimensions of cinematic/

temporal articulation (like special effects, of which it is undoubtedly some rare species, where the layers of manipulation are compressed into a palimpsest of effects that are conventionally intended not to be seen; where composite images are taken for a single surface supporting the mythology of the camera's verisimilitude; even when one doesn't buy it, one accepts spectacle in place of realism, the negative trace of credibility). For Thornton, this negativity is doubled, a switchback into cinema's phenomenality that takes up different issues of pleasure. The surface of the cinematic illusion is punctured by another illusion, and then another, so that the repetition and doubling of the phantasmatic causes its collapse and return. Thornton's work is a *deontology*—a negative theology—of cinema. *Have a Nice Day Alone* operates by revealing that the cinematic screen is a kind of 'hole,' a negative space (*mise-en-abyme*) around which various discourses and desires are organized and articulated. Media's *mise-en-scène* (literally 'casting into place') is symmetrically bonded to this invisible *mise-en-abyme* (a 'casting into the abyss' of signs and representations). It is only via the arrestment of these phantasmatic images by the engaged presence of a spectator that cinema exists. Cinema is an art of memory: turn on the apparatus in a dark, empty room, and all of the seductions, tropes, and forms of address play out, in a form of automatic solipsism; without a spectator the subject-positions engendered by the apparatus remain empty, and cinema does not take place. Leslie Thornton's works, by re-problematising the screen where these strange cartographies take place, do their part to deconstruct the media image of the world, not to show you where the 'world' really is, but to reveal that it is not at all where you think.

Recently Thornton has begun making larger scale installations related to *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, which she refers to as "environments." Utilizing fragments from already accomplished sections of this work, mixed with newly produced sections from the 30 hours of archived footage she has shot, and with new or found footage, she has constructed a series of site-specific works. Using multiple screens and transmissions, they are a natural development of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, which used simultaneous interacting film video and audio projections, which foregrounded their habitation of specific spaces. In these recent media installations she uses three registers (precisely edited loops of differing durations) which are 'mixed,' almost as one would music, producing a resonant three-month-long para-narrative work. The different loops are precisely edited and set to play in a randomized phase pattern so that no repetitions occur between the three registers of images on screen over the course of their exhibition, producing a tacitly self-editing work, an 'artificial intelligence' allegorizing itself.

Thornton's exploration of an intermittent episodic structure in *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, in her

site-specific installations, and in *The Great Invisible* are, in an important sense, one of the most direct articulations of the problematics of media's artifactuality in confrontation with its forms of transmission, dissemination and distribution. Media's strange economies, reflecting a globalized and dispersed data-space far different from the traditional projective/consumptive spaces of cinema and television, become an integral axis of Thornton's formal and conceptual working. Her works are variable, 'mixed' and dispersed across time, they punctuate a given architectural space or context, they are permeable and plural, stable within their instabilities. In this they reflect, and engage, a deep substrate of media, one which has always been the case, and which has always been suppressed: that technical reproducibility in and of itself, is both uncontainable and uncontainable, and that, moreover, it becomes, in itself, a structuring principle of subsequent media. As Leslie Thornton is well aware, this does not abnegate what of the world passes through mediation, but inflects and reflects upon that passage in fundamental ways. In this sense her works are also a tacit and critical link between both contemporary digital dataspaces and the tradition of formal, technical, aesthetic, and theoretical innovation within and between media.¹¹

(out of the blue)

There are many other trajectories one might have charted through the works of Leslie Thornton, and the constraints of time and space have attenuated or deferred many interesting directions. Thornton's films, videotapes, DVDs and installations are among the most challenging and profound of contemporary media, and there are a number of important works which were not discussed here, but which are referenced in the accompanying filmography and bibliography. One might also have made a more sustained or conventional attempt at writing a biographical profile too, were it not for the sort of discomfort one encounters in Thornton and in her work concerning such enterprises. Leslie Thornton is an intensely private person; when she commits herself to writing or to speaking in public, she is quiet and articulate, courageous and generous, and there is an undeniable force of eloquence and honesty in her discourse. She is an eccentric thinker—with a genius for thinking, and making things, that no one else could—and her works are powerful, enigmatic and revelatory. That they do not end, but merely pause or continue unexpectedly, is a gift.

We are unaccustomed to encountering the high levels of aspiration and ability pronounced in Thornton's grand projects; we're unaccustomed to an artist doing a life's work, a declaration of her stake in her own time, over time, and to tell an endless story, endlessly, a belief in the

RODEO

necessity of narration, the story winning every time...

— Bill Horrigan¹²

I will conclude with the following story:

Leslie Thornton grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. Farm country, with cicadas in the summer, and a creek running through the back yard, where crayfish would build conical mud nests, and frogs and salamanders were abundant. School was a bus ride away, and there were special days when the children would visit their parents at work. For most of the kids, whose parents were milkmen, or accountants, or firemen, this was a familiar and everyday occurrence, and they would give a report on their visit the next day in class. Leslie's father continued to work in the nuclear industry. When she visited her father at work she was checked with a geiger-counter on the way in and on the way out of the laboratory, and she had to wear a white lab coat. Once she was taken into a room in the facility and shown a pool of heavy water. It appeared to be hundreds of feet deep, and it was very beautiful, like peering into stars. Her dad lifted her up so that she could peer over the edge of the well; at the bottom of the well was an eerie blue glow, called Cherenkov radiation. On the surface of the pool there was a small plastic duck floating.

Notes

1. Leslie Thornton in conversation with the author.
2. Bill Horrigan, "Leslie Thornton" in *Cinematexas Sixth International Short Film Festival*, exhibition catalog, Austin, Texas, 2001.
3. See: "If Upon Leaving What We Have To Say We Speak: A Conversation Piece" Trinh T. Minh-ha, Leslie Thornton and Laleen Jayamane, in *Discourses: Conversations in Post-modern Art and Culture*, ed. R. Ferguson, et al, (New York: New Museum for Contemporary Art/Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990) p. 54.
4. *X-TRACTS* was completed in 1975; in 2001 it was "rediscovered" and shown at the Whitney Museum's retrospective *Art of the Century* program. Almost all of Leslie Thornton's works were represented here, and she had the second largest selection of works in the program.
5. Leslie Thornton, interviewed by Irene Borger in *The Force of Curiosity: CalArts/ Alpert Award in the Arts 1994-1998*, ed. Irene Borger, Los Angeles: CalArts/Alpert Fndn, 1999, pp. 2-29
6. See: *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed., Richard Lanham, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 19—)
7. The sections, to date, are as follows:
Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue (21 minutes, b/w, 16mm film, 1985)
Peggy and Fred in Kansas (11 minutes, b/w, video, 1987)
Peggy and Fred and Pete (23 minutes, sepia, video, 1988)
[Dung Smoke Enters The Palace] (16 minutes, b/w, 16mm film & video, 1990)
Introduction To The So-Called Duck Factory (7 minutes, b/w, video, 1993)
Whirling (2 minutes, b/w, 16mm film, 1996)
The Problem So Far (7 minutes, b/w, 16mm film and video, 1996)
Chimp For Normal Short (7 minutes, sepia, 16mm film, 1999)
Bedtime (12 minutes, b/w, video, 2000-2002)

RODEO

Have a Nice Day Alone (7 minutes, video and film versions, 2000)

The Splendor (2 minutes, video, 2001)

Paradise Crushed (7 minutes, video, b/w, 2002)

8. See: *Holes and Other Superficialities*, Roberto Casati and Achille C. Varza, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994). A hole is a mathematical superficiality.

9. See: *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, Mary Ann Doane (New York: Routledge, 1991). Doane points out the resemblance of the vocal chords to female genitalia as “inescapable, and one gets the strange sense that we are witness to the body producing speech—a singing vulva.” It is difficult, Doane contends, to avoid a reference to the works of Luce Irigaray, whose project is “an extended development of a morpho-logics whereby a psychological sexuality mimics a bodily sexuality, and in which the phallus is no longer the supreme arbiter of sexual difference. In Thornton’s film, ‘documentary’ is investigated as a site for the ‘scientific’ dissection and analysis of the voice in its minutest bodily movements.” See also Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One*, and “When Our Lips Speak Together.” The mythical image of the *vagina dentata*, a toothed and talking vagina is also worth noting here.

10. Linda Peckham, “Total Indiscriminate Recall: Peggy and Fred in Hell” in *Motion Picture*, vol. III no 1/2, Winter 1989-90

11. An earlier version of this section was published in Thomas Zummer, “Variables: Notations on Stability, Permeability and Plurality in Media Artifacts” in *Saving the Image: Essays in Film and Video*, ed. Tanya Leighton and Pavel Buchler, (Glasgow: Center for Contemporary Art/Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University Press, 2002)

12. Bill Horrigan, “Leslie Thornton” in *Cinematexas Sixth International Short Film Festival*, exhibition catalog Austin, Texas, 2001

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/thornton-2/#7>