

LESLIE THORNTON
by Katy Martin

INTERVIEW WITH LESLIE THORNTON
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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.