Title
The Art of Melancholy A Selection of Films by Leslie Thornton

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8p20237p

Author
Sher, Ben

Publication Date
2008-12-01
The Art of Melancholy
A SELECTION OF FILMS BY LESLIE THORNTON
An overview by Ben Sher

“If you actually processed, consciously, all the things that are around you all the time, you’d be nuts,” said renowned experimental filmmaker Leslie Thornton. This quotation, perhaps, explains why her films sometimes induce a feeling of temporary insanity. They force the audience to process, consciously, many of the unnoticed things that surround us all the time.

Thornton, who has also taught in Brown University’s Modern Culture and Media department since 1984, showed a selection of works from throughout her lengthy career in a CSW-sponsored presentation, titled “The Art of Melancholy,” on October 15, 2008.

“I’m not going to present a thesis exactly, on melancholy,” said Thornton. “I’ll just say that I know it’s the place that I work from, and it is a kind of position regarding that which is around us, that has been medicalized and demonized. I’m just going to show you the work, and we’ll just see what we can say about that.”

Thornton began the series of screenings with a film titled Novel City (2008), which recently had its premiere at The 46th Annual New York Film Festival. Thornton made the film during her recent, first visit to China. Shot on the day of a typhoon, from the window of the Jin Jiang Motel (Mao Tse-tung’s favorite), Novel City creates a stark vision of an industrialized, economically transformed country.

Thornton has long been interested in Chinese culture and history and, perhaps especially, Western culture’s exoticized, largely offensive reappropriation of them. According to Thornton, her well-known and influential early film Adanyata (1981), which is excerpted in Novel City, “sets itself up as a ‘guilty object-lesson,’ [in that] 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.” However, despite her years of research on Chinese culture, she was surprised and disturbed by what she found during her visit. “I went through a state of culture shock that was so unanticipated and profound. I was really frozen,” said Thornton. “I haven’t traveled a whole lot, though I’ve traveled quite a bit in North Africa, and I thought that that would have prepared me to be the intrepid traveler, and it sure didn’t. I don’t know how many of you have been to China recently. If you like capitalism you’ll love being

there. If you love construction and people who look like they just saw an atom bomb explode, being pushed out of their houses, you’ll love being there. But, if that doesn’t sound attractive… it’s really scary.”

Emphasizing her ongoing interest in exploring the connections (and disconnections) of various cultures at various times, Thornton has called the next film she screened—Sahara Mojave (2006)—“a little trip to Hollywood via North Africa, circa 1900.” The film’s collage of imagery predominantly melds and juxtaposes a collection of vintage erotic North African postcards (of posed, topless women) and video footage that Thornton shot at Universal City, Los Angeles. It is accompanied by an even more dense audio collage, which incorporates—among other things—narration from an archival documentary on the Sahara and Bedouin people of North Africa, the whir of a running film projector, and tidbits of Thornton’s voice discussing the film as she shot and edited it.

“From the beginning, one of the things I’ve had to do is to focus on the narrative… that holds our perceptions together and allows us to, you know, get in the car and go to the grocery store, and actually buy groceries, and not get stuck every half block with another realization of: you see somebody happy, you see somebody sad, you see something you’re interested in, you almost get in a car accident… So you have to buckle it up just to walk down the street,” says Thornton. “One of the things I’ve done in my work from the beginning… is to just set up this kind of blank stare through which all of the material that’s been given to us, that we’re having to process, is not contextualized easily, into this narrative that helps us get down the street.”

“So we all have this narrative, it’s all stuff that’s sort of familiar… If we looked at these postcards, for instance, and they haven’t been put into a thesis about these postcards, or they haven’t been received in the nineteenth century as something in the mail, what do we do when we look at those images now?… Everybody in the room is doing something different, I’m sure. But there might be some common ground, because I am setting up a context. If nothing else, in that piece, I am setting up a context that unsettles your regard for those images, and that asks you what the context is.”

Another Worldly (1999), the next film presented by Thornton, further demonstrates the filmmaker’s interest in finding the unlikely, sometimes peculiar, similarities between different cultures and periods. Thornton started with a compilation of footage from ’40s musicals and ethnographic documentaries about the role of dance in “primitive” cultures, and overlaid them with German techno music from the 1990s (sometimes reminiscent of the music used to score contemporary horror films). The dances cohere with this “incongruous” music to a surprising extent, but they also become off-kilter and disturbing. The smiling faces of the dancers seem to reveal brief glimpses of misery and tedium. To quote one of Thornton’s critics and colleagues, Mary Ann Doane, “What are presented as norms of Western movement become invested with the pathological.”


The story behind the making of *Old Worldy* (1996), from which *Another Worldy* was edited and expanded, emphasizes one of Thornton's qualities that seems to be fundamental to her work: her desire to watch, hear, touch, and evaluate as many pieces of information that cross her path as possible. “There was a roll of film, an hour long, and it was just labeled ‘ARMY,’ and it was $15, so a friend and I bought it on the street one day. And my projector’s sound bulb was broken, so we took it home, and we threw on this German techno sampler CD that somebody sent around the same time, to be the soundtrack,” said Thornton. “It was amazing that these two cultural artifacts, one from the 1990s in Germany and one from the 1940s, America, had this sort of 4/4 rhythm. They kept finding each other.”

When Thornton began screening *Old Worldy* and *Another Worldy*, the films polarized audiences. Some complained—as they did after screenings of *Adanyata*—that her film carried the viewer away with the pleasure and beauty of offensive material. Thornton, however, argues that it is important to take into account the intoxicating pleasure inherent in some of the offensive materials that she re-contextualizes.

“I am a ‘have your cake and eat it too’ person, in my work,” said Thornton. “So I want this pleasure factor to be there, at the same time that this questioning or thoughtfulness is there, all the time. Please, take it all at once. It doesn’t have to be just one or the other. Also, I’d say I want to not be afraid to work with material that can be harsh or offensive or, you know, has been kind of hideous…I want to look at it, and look at it again, and say ‘Look at this again! Maybe a little differently. Denaturalized from its environmental context, its original purpose.’ Denaturalized.”

Thornton concluded her presentation with the first episode of *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985), perhaps her most famous work. Using imagery drawing on cultural movements from direct cinema to science fiction, the film chronicles the experiences of two children in a strange, postapocalyptic world. *Peggy and Fred’s* numerous layers of audio evoke the many disparate elements that lead to conscious or unconscious human development. In one sequence (which, like *Another Worldy*, is both oddly amusing and extremely disconcerting) Peggy sings the chorus of Michael Jackson’s “Billy Jean” over and over again. “A man’s song about a woman being ripped off, sung by a little girl who loved the song,” said Thornton. “She sang it all the time.”

*Peggy and Fred in Hell* was Thornton’s first serialized project. In addition to making several additional episodes of the film, she has continually reconfigured footage from the earlier episodes, using them in later episodes and in installation art pieces. Thornton feels that her work becomes archival material, ripe for revision, as soon as it has been “completed.” As with her incorporation of footage from *Adanyata* in *Novel City*, Thornton’s work suggests that art inevitably becomes vastly different (for the creator, for the audience) with each piece of new information that each person acquires.

Thornton cannot process all the things that are around her all the time without going nuts, but her work makes it seem as though she can process about twenty times more than most of us. Luckily, she is eager to share.


*Illustrations:* On page 1 is an image from *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985); on page 5 are images of Leslie Thornton, *Novel City* (2008), and *Adanyata* (1981); on page 6 are images from *Sahara Mojave* (2006), *Another Worldy* (1999), and *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985).