

Maria Klonaris' & Katerina Thomadaki's *Cinema of the Body*
A Critical Contribution to Cinema

by Cécile CHICH

Maria Klonaris/Katerina Thomadaki,
Manifesto For A Radical Femininity, Another Cinema, Paris, 1977¹:
“Passion for Radical Creation: This Other Cinema.
Insubordination. Independence. Rupture. Autonomy [...]
I create my own images.
I invent my vision, neither ‘natural’ nor ‘normal’ nor ‘objective’, but *real*
since it emerges *from desire* and *understandable* if one forgets
what one has learnt to understand.
I unleash my introspection.
I expose my roots and my pains: childhood, desire, rebellion, oppression,
torture, old age, death.
I expose my social and archetypal colours: red, black, white, pink, gold and silver.
I perform my own mental structures and geometries.
My body image imprints the film.
I open myself to you through my own sentient and sensitive body.
My body of woman/subject.
I offer you the rituals of my identity.
Haemorrhage of identity not mediated by anybody else, but firmly embodied
by myself before you.
I am looking at you.
I am questioning you.
I give birth to an OTHER cinema.”

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A strategy of dissidence. This is what Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki, avant-garde filmmakers, film theorists and pioneers in multimedia arts, opted for as they created the *Cinéma Corporel, Cinema of the Body* in the mid-1970s².

The question of strategy has long been discussed amongst feminist scholars and filmmakers in the English-speaking world. Should a feminist cinema be a ‘counter-cinema’ or should it aim at assimilation into the mainstream? Laura Mulvey expressed her wish, in *Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde*³, for a specifically feminine Avant-garde, a ‘new language of desire’ that would include rupture and

reflexivity and 'free the look of the camera into its materiality of time and space and the look of the audience into dialectic, passionate detachment'.

In 1975, Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki created the ***Cinema of the Body*** as a matter of urgency. Freshly exiled from a patriarchal Greece traumatised by dictatorship into a post-68 Paris, the two artists had thrown themselves into an intense Super 8 film practice in order to pursue, within the privacy of their small apartment, the experiments they had started in Athens with their **Theatre of the Body**. Their first film, ***Double Labyrinth***, came from their (in their own words) 'absolute need' to make sense of experience and reinscribe themselves anew in a different socio-cultural landscape. Centered on the woman/subject's body, drawing upon the unconscious, and conceived as a 'double-mirror', ***Double Labyrinth***⁴ established the conceptual and aesthetic principles of their entire oeuvre.

With this film, and without knowing about the debates amongst English scholars, the two artists created not so much a *counter-* as a *dissident* feminist cinema. As stated in the three manifestos the artists published between 1976 and 78⁵, their ***Cinema of the Body*** is nothing less than a reinvention of film through the woman/subject and a reinvention of the representation of the gendered body through film.

First amongst the ***Cinema of the Body*** principles was an uncompromising positioning of total independence: the artists would produce, shoot, edit and project their own films, as well as star in them. Roles in front of and behind the camera were to be equal and interchangeable. And their cinema was to be opened up, 'décloisonné', encompassing different media as well as live performance.

Since 1975, this double female author has thus developed an artistic and theoretical practice situated at the crossroads of visual and performing arts, centered on the gendered body, and intermixing the many layers of their Eastern Mediterranean heritage with the technologies and contemporary debates of the West. As they themselves say, their art is, 'transcultural, intersex and intermedia'.

Today, Klonaris' and Thomadaki's oeuvre includes more than a hundred works in film, photography, video, sound, multimedia performance and installation. It has

been known in the UK since its early years when the two artists were invited to London in 1979 as part of the London Avant-Garde Film Festival at the National Film Theatre. Since then, they have participated in many film festivals worldwide, have taken part in prestigious international events, such as *Les Immatériaux* at the Pompidou Center in 1985, the London and Madrid 1992 *Edge Biennale*, the *Engel, Engel* exhibition at the Kunsthalle, Vienna in 1997; the *To Save and Project Festival* at the MoMA in New York in 2005. As I speak, they are presenting a multi-screen installation, *Quasar*, as part of *Polyglossia* at the Onassis Centre in Athens ⁶.

I personally contributed with a paper on their film performances to the 2009 conference on expanded cinema at Tate Modern London⁷. Last year, they were part of the one-year long retrospective on women's art held in Paris, *Elles@centrepompidou*⁸, where ***Double Labyrinth*** was screened on-loop in the 'Body-Slogan' section, alongside films by Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Marina Abramovic and Valie Export.

This list of showcases is very short, as the complete version would take about thirty minutes to read... what is clear however is the fact that, despite being from the commonly regarded 'margins' of cinema, as the Underground and 'alternative' scenes are usually perceived, and despite the fact that they never have compromised on their independence, Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki have gained considerable international recognition, as well as a particular place in film and art history. In France, they are held up as pioneers in immersive environments and interdisciplinary practice. Their films appear in the collections of the Centre Pompidou and their photographs in the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The two artists are involved in an on-going project to restore their Super 8 films into 35mm prints with the Archives Françaises du Film, an institution which has recognised their cinematic oeuvre as part of the national heritage⁹.

This surely highlights the need for a women's film history to include artists who have inscribed themselves outside conventional forms. As the American film scholar Robin Blaetz notes, in *Women's Experimental Cinema – A Critical Framework*¹⁰, women Avant-garde filmmakers have 'fallen through the cracks of both the history of the

Avant-garde and feminist scholarship'. Yet, she says, they have the ability to 'expand the canon of both'.

If Klonaris' and Thomadaki's work has been overlooked by Anglo Saxon film and art historians, this can be explained because a/ they are women b/ their strategy of dissidence falls "through the cracks" between artforms, and also between film genres (mainstream, feminist, Queer and experimental) and c/ because historiographies tend to focus on artists of the English speaking world.

As this conference aims at reevaluating film historiography, Maria Klonaris' and Katerina Thomadaki's ***Cinema of the Body*** is a remarkable example of an opening of a new *topos* for women's expressivity. It requires us to envisage *film* in a new light: as a form of creativity that is at once mindful of its own process of creation and of its moment of, as Laura Mulvey said, 'dialectic and passionate' encounter with the viewer that makes it socially alive and relevant.

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K. Thomadaki in *Double Labyrinth* by Klonaris/Thomadaki

Launched in a decade of radical experiments, the ***Cinema of the Body*** nonetheless caused a revolution. For a start, Klonaris' and Thomadaki's films were seen as 'the first ever to give Super 8 a real artistic status'¹¹. In France, they triggered a trend of Super 8 films concerned with the body (within which the two artists remain the only women).

Mostly, this represented the first concerted effort to challenge the domination of Structuralism in the European Avant-garde. Here were films made by two women, centred on the female body, figurative yet neither narrative nor documentary, challenging the viewer's gaze and introducing media hybridity. Here were Super 8 aesthetics eschewing amateurism for a rigorously structured, subtly shot and elaborately edited film language.

Moreover, the images astounded: they were fascinating, compelling, subversive, and imbued with sensuality, tactility and mystery... Critic Nancy Huston writes in 1980: the two artists 'use light technologies up to their very limits, coupling them with their own bodies and voices [...]. This is like nothing I have ever seen before. Images of fascinating beauty, with such colours that they seem unreal, all densely and meticulously woven together through repetitive slow and abrupt motions.'¹²

From a feminist perspective too, the ***Cinema of the Body*** was disruptive. Clearly "experimental" and "expanded", it proposed neither comforting narratives nor deconstructive discourse. It provided no place for easy identifications or essentialist philosophies. It demonstrated formal innovations and triggered many questions, such as: how to reinvent the representation of the female body? What is femininity? What is gender?

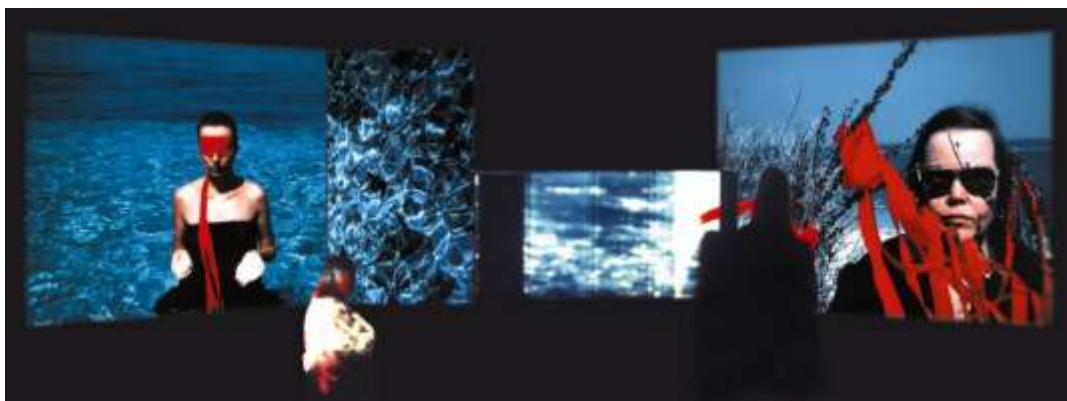
Positing the woman/subject as "whole", Klonaris and Thomadaki also claimed androgyny as inherent to womanhood; their cinema was centred on the politics of subjectivity and the poetics of intimacy; it sprung out of a desire for liberation and self-empowerment, but dwelt in the long hidden labyrinths of the imagination; it was driven by sexuality and a quest for new definitions, yet disturbingly unleashed forces that Western culture as a whole had long buried into oblivion. It showed disquieting, *uncanny* beauty and offered pure cinematic pleasure. In short, Klonaris and Thomadaki created their own, very personal language. And the viewer was invited to decipher it, in silence, at the risk of seeing her or his understanding of film being totally altered.

Created by a female double author, the ***Cinema of the Body*** is a cinema of dialectics. It emerges out of the encounter between an '*actante*' and a '*filmante*',

engaging through the camera lens in *a secret dialogue*. Set against a black background, lit strongly from the side, the *actante*, (Klonaris' and Thomadaki's term, not 'actress') is a 'woman-subject' performing, through carefully chosen objects and gestures, vital aspects of her mental identity. In these *body actions*, her body/subjectivity is the primary matter of language.

"The body is the raw material of our cinema" say the artists; through the body, "the mental image becomes spatialised thought. It is a 'philosophical state of matter', whereby the unconscious clothes itself in the appearance of the body, the *I/within* reveals itself as *I/outside*, and the language of the body materialises the language of the unconscious."

Facing the *actante*, the *filmante*, inscribes on the film her own "loving gaze" and her emotional response. The cinematic language thus originates within the "intercorporeal" relations between *actante* and *filmante* and central to it are the dynamics of gazes.



Unheimlich III: The Mothers. Multimedia projection performance by Klonaris/Thomadaki, Pompidou Centre, Paris, 1981.

Klonaris and Thomadaki drew inspiration from their own theatrical practice that favoured "drasis" (*action*) to traditional acting. They were also inspired by Artaud's ideas on theatre, and their language of gestures as signs of abstraction and mystery can also be seen as deriving from their cultural heritage with its many ancient rituals and the permeability of the sacred within everyday life. But their ***Cinema of the Body*** was also inscribed within contemporary artistic practice as alive in the West. Its concept of 'action' came from Body Art, which was thriving in Paris in the 70s thanks to artists Gina Pane and Michel Journiac.

Klonaris and Thomadaki named their ***Cinéma Corporel*** after l'Art Corporel. But unlike French Body artists they were preoccupied by mental and cinematic projection mechanisms. 'The body is the first physical screen where we project the rituals of our desire. It is [then] in the other *camera oscura*, the cinema hall, that the screen becomes a precise object, and projection a *physical* act. Projection is *corporalised*'.¹³ In relocating *body action* into film, Klonaris and Thomadaki define the performer as both *projected and projecting body*, and the woman/subject as a self-defining artist. Simultaneously a fantasmatic and demystifying apparatus, the ***Cinema of the Body*** makes of film a *projective* art for women's empowerment.

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Dedicated to the Freudian concept of the 'uncanny', the ***Cycle of the Unheimlich*** (1977-82) is a series of feature length silent films¹⁴, in which the artists' language is at its most radical and, for the viewer, most unsettling. There, the 'body' is flesh, mind, memory, image, desire, violence, liberation, language, *Eros*, *Thanatos* and *mythos*. Silence, darkness, and mystery define this world. Contrary to the iconoclastic Body artists, Klonaris and Thomadaki believe in the power of the *image*, and create in their *films/actions* an imaginary universe. Like Maya Deren and Gregory Markopoulos before them, they consider film as a visionary medium and see in its fundamental aesthetics of darkness and floating consciousness great affinity with dreaming.

Whilst we are faced with fascinating figures of enigmatic beauty who, through the effect of an intensely rhythmic editing, constantly appear and disappear in the dark, slip, slide and flit, we also become conscious of our own gaze. Looking directly into the lens, Klonaris and Thomadaki break the taboo of cinema and question our reflected and reflecting eye. We are invited to turn it inside out, precipitating a cascade of questions on perception. We are asked to suspend our belief in cinematic disbelief and consent to enter a part of the imaginary we had never dared to imagine. And as mysterious figures rise up in front of our eyes, burning in their wake any notion of 'femininity' ever seen on a screen, we need to look inwards into our own ideas on gender.

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With *The Cycle of the Hermaphrodites*¹⁵ and the subsequent *Angel Cycle* (started in 1985 and lasting to this day)¹⁶, Klonaris and Thomadaki continue to venture through technologies and body images with a focus on the intersex body. In these cycles, both the inherent physical hybridity of the subject and the multimedia forms of the images translate the artists' notion of a "mosaic identity". The "image-matrix" at the centre of each cycle, the Sleeping Hermaphrodite of the Louvre for one, and the medical photograph of an intersex person for the other, mostly reflects their idea of a "collapse of gender"¹⁷. Nearly a decade before the Queer movement, Klonaris and Thomadaki start representing what Judith Butler calls these "identities that do not exist"¹⁸. The artists call them "dissident bodies"¹⁹.



Orlando: Hermaphrodite II, Multimedia projection performance
by Klonaris/Thomadaki, Pompidou Centre, Paris, 1983.

The projection performance *Orlando: Hermaphrodite II* is particularly representative of this sliding movement in their work. Based on the Virginia Woolf character, the piece focuses on the moment when Orlando, asleep, is in an intermediate state of consciousness and physicality between the masculine and the feminine. With a series of transvested self-portraits drawing on the aesthetics of film noir, *Orlando* clearly states the idea of androgyny as part of identity, and continues to affirm cinema as a place of complex projection of moving and still images.

Klonaris' and Thomadaki's *dissident bodies* are numerous. All of them are situated between flesh and abstraction, the incarnate and the projected, the sensible and the invisible. The core question, in all of this, is the *image*. With the technological and intellectual tools of our age, Klonaris and Thomadaki question the *icon* (as in *sacred image* and/or *image of the sacred*) – not only as a reflection of our bodies, not only as metaphor and allegory for our minds, not only as a means of challenging social understandings, but in order to reappropriate its profound inherent power for women – in all its political, philosophical and metaphysical dimensions. Their *strategy of dissidence* aims at what Griselda Pollock calls “shifting the symbolic centre”²⁰.



Maria Klonaris in *Pulsar* by Klonaris/Thomadaki

To end this short presentation, I would like to quote Marie-Jose Mondzain, a French philosopher and eminent specialist on the question of the image who has followed Klonaris' and Thomadaki's art from its inception. Here is her analysis of *Pulsar*²¹, which was screened as part of the conference and is very much an echo, in the digital age, of *Double Labyrinth*.

‘When I saw *Pulsar*, it entranced me. I did not expect this, and *time* in these images astonished me. [...] *Pulsar* is simultaneously pulse, impulse and repulse. There is a very powerful dynamic of Maria Klonaris' body and face in relation to the viewer, constantly set as far away as possible and as near as possible, caught in some sort of organic beat, in a pulsing and light circulation.

This produces a surprising inversion of another apparatus: the apparatus of the Creation, as painted by Michelangelo. In the rhetoric of his time, we can see all

Michelangelo's genius, since he sets a man, a creator in the muscular power of his gesture holding at the tip of his finger something like a vanity, at a distance and yet close simultaneously. In *Pulsar*, this classical, well-accepted, religious and aesthetic recognised order is replaced by a completely different rhetoric. Suddenly, here is set a new scene of Genesis in which a body of darkness and light, a kind of biological presence to which I was immediately receptive, pushes me back, gives birth to me, attracts me and holds me captive in its power, whereby it offers me limitless likeness in complete unlikeness. This cosmogonic presence is a woman.'

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Artists' website: <http://www.klonaris-thomadaki.net>

¹ Klonaris, M. / Thomadaki, K. (2003), *1976-2002. Manifestes Klonaris/Thomadaki*, Paris: Les Cahiers Paris Expérimental n.9, 8-9.

² See Chich, C. ed., (2006), *Klonaris/Thomadaki : Le Cinéma corporel - Corps sublimes / Intersexe et Intermédia*. L'Harmattan, Paris. Foreword by Marie-José Mondzain.

³ Mulvey, L. (1979), 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde', London: Framework 10, 3-10.

⁴ This film is the first part of the *The Body Tetralogy* which comprises the following «films/actions»: *Double Labyrinth* (1976, film, colour, silent, 55 min.), *The Child Who Peed Sequins* (1977, multimedia projection performance, 110 min.), *Soma* (1978, multimedia projection performance, 40 min.), *Arteria Magna in Dolore Laterali* (1979, multimedia projection performance, 110 min.), *Double Labyrinth-X- Double Labyrinth* (1977, film performance, 70 min), *Ouverture* (1977, projection of shadows, 20 min.).

⁵ Klonaris, M. / Thomadaki, K., '14 Slogans pour un cinéma de rupture' (1976), 'Manifeste pour une féminité radicale, un cinéma autre' (1977), 'Manifeste pour un Cinéma corporel' (1978). All republished in *Manifestes Klonaris/Thomadaki*.

⁶ Klonaris, M. / Thomadaki, K., *Quasar*, commissioned by the Onassis Foundation for the exhibition *Polyglossia* curated by Marilena Karra. Athens, 15th March – 30th June 2011.

⁷ Chich, C., 'The Body Projected / The Projection Corporalised'. *On Maria Klonaris & Katerina Thomadaki's Multimedia Performances and Projection Environment*', paper presented as part of the Tate Conference 'Expanded Cinema: Activating the Space of Reception', organised by The British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection, London, April 17th-18th 2009.

⁸ *Elles@centrepompidou* - Women Artists in the Collections of the National Modern Art Museum. Centre Pompidou, Paris, 27th May 2009 – 21st February 2011.

⁹ *Selva. A Portrait of Parvaneh Navai* (1981-83) by Maria Klonaris and *Chutes. Désert. Syn* (1983-85) by Katerina Thomadaki were restored as a 35mm dyptich in 2002-03. The restoration of *Unheimlich I: Secrete Dialog* (1977-79), yet again under the artists' close supervision, was completed in the autumn of 2009.

¹⁰ Blaetz, R. ed. (2007), *Women's Experimental Cinema. Critical Frameworks*, Duke University Press, intr. 1-19.

¹¹ Bassan, R., 'Pour une Ecologie des médias. Du Super 8 à l'image de synthèse', in *Bref, Magazine du court-métrage*, Paris, Aug.1998.

¹² Huston, N., 'Une inquiétante étrangeté revisitée', in *Histoire d'Elles* nr.12, Paris, Jan. 1980.

¹³ Klonaris, M. / Thomadaki, K., 'Cinema of the Body', in *Undercut / The Magazine of the London Filmmakers' Coop*, nr.2, London, Aug. 1981.

¹⁴ *The Cycle of the Unheimlich* comprises: **Unheimlich I: Secret Dialogue** (1977-79, film, colour, silent, 80 min. and 1992, multimedia projection performance, 100 min.), **Unheimlich II: Astarti** (1979-80, film, colour, silent, 180 min.), **Kha – The Embalmed** (1979-80, film, colour + perfumes, silent, 60 min.), **Unheimlich III: the Mothers** (1981, multimedia installation and projection performance, 120 min.).

¹⁵ *The Cycle of Hermaphrodites* comprises: **Mystery I: Sleeping Hermaphrodite** (multimedia installation, 1982), **Mystery I: Sleeping Hermaphrodite** (2nd version, 1983), **Orlando – Hermaphrodite II** (1983), **Gardens of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite** (1982-95, film, colour and B&W, sound, 80 min.), **Mystery III: Gardens of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite** (multimedia installation, 1990).

¹⁶ *The Angel Cycle* (1985-present) comprises more than thirty different works, including many multimedia projection performances and large scale site specific installations, amongst which: **Mystery II: The Angel Ablaze** (1985), **In the Swan Constellation** (Paris, 1991), **Shields. Photosculptures** (Paris, 1991 and Athens, 1993), **Theorem** (Athens, 1993), **Archangel Matrix** (Paris, 1996), **Vestiges/Aptera** (Aptera and Chania, Greece, 1993), **XYXX Mosaic Identity** (Linz, 1994), **Requiem for the 20th Century** (Boulogne, 1998, Angers, 2002) and **Stranger Than Angel/Dissident Bodies** (Ljubljana, 2002).

¹⁷ Klonaris, M., Thomadaki, K., (1995), 'Gender Rebels. Intersexuality and Intermedia – A Manifesto'. in *Manifestes Klonaris/Thomadaki*.

¹⁸ Butler, J. (1990), *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London/New York: Routledge.

¹⁹ Klonaris, M., Thomadaki, K., Grzanic, M. and Pirnat-Spahic, N. (2002), *Klonaris/Thomadaki, Stranger than Angel, Disidentska telesa / Corps dissidents / Dissident Bodies*, Ljubljana, Cankarjev Dom.

²⁰ Pollock, G., (1995), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts / Feminist Readings*. London: Routledge.

²¹ Mondzain, M.J., in 'Figures of Otherness and Difference in the Work of Maria Klonaris & Katerina Thomadaki', in *Klonaris / Thomadaki, Stranger than Angel / Dissident Bodies*, p. 45-55.