

***The Perfect Human* and ‘modern cinema’**

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ABSTRACT

While this film has been described as ‘modern’ in terms of its style and structure, approaching the film as ‘modern cinema’ in the terms defined by Richard Rushton (2004) allows us to consider the effects of its deliberate disjunction between ‘theatricality’ and ‘absorption’, or an exhibitionistic and a voyeuristic regime.

KEY WORDS

‘modern cinema’

‘cinema of attractions’

exhibitionism

voyeurism

theatricality

absorption

In an interview with Sylvie Lin, Jorgen Leth describes *The Perfect Human* as being ‘a very modern work’ at the time of its release. Certainly, describing the film as ‘modern’ captures something of its spare elegance - its ‘isolation of persons and things in an empty space’ (Leth quoted in Lin, 2010) - as well as its innovative engagement with mainstream fiction and documentary film conventions, an experimental attitude that was very much of the moment in the late 1960s. Thinking of the film as ‘modern’ can suggest another perspective however. This is the idea of ‘modern cinema’, defined by Richard Rushton, as having something specific to do with its mode of address to the spectator (Rushton, 2004). In ‘modern cinema’ there exists a particular tension between what Rushton (following the art historian Michael Fried) calls absorption and theatricality or, alternatively, voyeurism and exhibitionism. In short, ‘modern cinema’ is where the kind of exhibitionism considered characteristic of early cinema comes up against the voyeurism most associated with narrative cinema, producing a kind of film, or a kind of spectatorship,

that is defined by its potential, by the possibilities it creates (Rushton, 2004: 244). Thinking of *The Perfect Human* as ‘modern’ in this sense then allows us to consider how, by foregrounding its act of exhibitionism, the film forces us to reconsider our expectations as voyeurs.

Though obviously staged, the film is set up to suggest ‘an observation of life’ (Leth quoted in Lin, 2010). As such, its style is presentational; it addresses the spectator directly through the voice-over narration, inviting us to ‘Look at [the perfect human]. Look at him now. [...] Look at him all the time’ (Shot 37). As such, while clearly in conversation with the conventions of observational documentary film making, the film could also be said to encourage the kind of spectatorship solicited by early cinema or, more specifically, by what Tom Gunning has called the ‘cinema of attractions’. For Gunning, what distinguishes early film up until about 1906 is its exhibitionism, its ‘harnessing of visibility’ (Gunning, 1986: 63); early films are less concerned with telling stories than they are with ‘presenting a series of views to an audience’ (64).

Certainly, *The Perfect Human*’s presentation of people moving and performing mundane tasks on screen resonates with the ‘actuality film’ that Gunning sees as playing a central role in early film production, a cinematic attraction that was increasingly anthropomorphic in nature. Indeed, as Leth himself has noted, many of his films ‘are very related to the same kind of isolation of people who are addressing the camera and doing very simple acts, like smoking a cigarette, taking off the jackets, etc.’ (Leth quoted in Lin, 2010). In underlining its overt exhibitionism however the film signals that it is highly self-aware, that the everyday actions are being exhibited, or performed, for our fascination. The man and woman themselves are glamorous, well-dressed, wearing a series of what could be considered ‘costumes’. Indeed, the woman is most insistently marked as an erotic spectacle. Shots of her rolling a

stocking down her raised leg (Shot 44) or standing smoking in a state of undress (Shot 45) recall the persistent presentation of woman as an erotic object throughout cinema history in such a way as to reflect on our cultural investment in these images.

In contrast to the voyeuristic framework of narrative cinema, where the spectator is rarely if ever acknowledged, exhibitionist cinema 'is a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator' (Gunning, 1986: 64). Similarly, in *The Perfect Human* the man and woman on screen acknowledge the spectator's gaze (e.g. Shots 16-21). However, this is not the knowing wink of early film where, as Rushton puts it, 'voyeurism is complicit with exhibitionism' (Rushton, 2004: 243). *The Perfect Human* distils the actuality film as attraction to its essence - 'perfect' people smoking, dancing, eating, sleeping and performing other banal acts in a place that liberates them from spatial and temporal determinants - and in so doing foregrounds the act of exhibition to such an extent that it forces us to reflect on our own voyeurism and its attendant expectations.

Gunning suggests that the primary function of the exhibitionist mode is to excite an impulse as old as what St. Augustine, at the beginning of the fifth century, called *curiositas* in his catalogue of 'the lust of the eyes' (Gunning, 1995: 124). In contrast to *voluptas* (visual pleasure), *curiositas* is driven "by the lust to find out and to know" (St. Augustine quoted in Gunning, 1995: 124). The cinema of attractions caters to a particularly modern form of *curiositas* however, as it responds to what Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer identified as the alienation and fragmentation of modern urban experience and its consequent 'cult of distraction' (Gunning, 1995: 126-128 [Kracauer, 1987]). According to Gunning then, early audiences' response to film was not one of childlike *naïveté*, mistaking illusion for reality, but was based on the shock of an encounter with modernity itself; their

awareness of the inherent absence that underpins the film image distracted by the sheer force of its spectacle, even if this was only the spectacle of movement itself (1995: 129).

In *The Perfect Human*, our *curiositas* - our 'lust to find out and to know' via the act of looking - is explicitly aroused by the narrator, who could be said to function in a similar capacity to the film lecturer or showman of early cinema. He promises that we will not only 'look *at*' the perfect human, we will also 'look *into* that' (Shot 7) (emphasis mine). The narrator asks 'Who is he? What can he do? What does he want?' (Shot 37). However, as Gunning points out, 'it is in the nature of curiosity, as the lust of eye, never to be satisfied completely' (1995: 126). But unlike the cinema of attractions that aims to fulfill the curiosity it excites through thrilling spectacle (1995: 126), this film refuses the neat convergence of exhibitionism and voyeurism and its concomitant satisfactions in favour of a deliberate disjunction between these two registers.

Indeed, the questions the narrator asks, 'How does it feel to touch the perfect human?' (Shot 46) and, perhaps most pressingly of all, 'What is this human thinking?' (Shot 52), are precisely the questions that the film image cannot answer. It is at this point that the man on screen transitions from functioning as an exhibit for the scopical pleasure of the viewer to acquiring an assumed interiority or psychology, baffling even to himself ('I don't know what it's supposed to mean' (Shot 53)). In this transition from presenting an exhibit to posing an enigma, the film segues from theatricality (the presentation of a series of views) to absorption (the unfolding of a narrative trajectory). In the process, its temporal register switches from what Gunning identifies as the insistent present tense of the exhibitionist mode ('Look at him now' (Shot 37)) to the deferred resolution of narrative progression (Gunning, 2004), a

temporal shift that is encapsulated in the film's final line ('I hope to understand in a few days' (Shot 60)).

The film does not attempt to reconcile these scopic and temporal registers however. Indeed, it is precisely the disjunction between theatricality and absorption, or exhibitionism and voyeurism, that might be said to define the film as 'modern'. For, as Rushton puts it, 'modern cinema' is where 'the exhibitionist mode serves actively to disrupt the voyeuristic mode so that the spectator's will-to-look is opened out into a form of questioning; a double form or double bind that places in question the spectator's own voyeuristic ambitions and the film's exhibitionist tendencies' (Rushton, 2004: 243).

The film's intention to 'investigate' (Shot 8) the perfect human via the act of looking is revealing therefore, for in this instance the word 'investigate' holds within itself the terms of its own failure: to track or trace, from *vestigium*, trace or footprint (www.etymonline.com). This returns us to the film image as 'phantom' (Gunning, 1995: 129), bearing only a trace of 'the perfect human', a spectral vestige of whom is imprinted on its surface. In short, the film's radical disjunction between theatricality and absorption, or exhibitionism and voyeurism, confronts us with our own *curiositas* and brings us to the limits of cinema's investigative gaze.

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