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What is anthropological about *The Perfect Human*?

ABSTRACT

Jørgen Leth has classified The Perfect Human as an anthropological film. But is the film anthropological at all? This article explores Leth's connections with anthropology and finds that he is more inspired by anthropological framing than he is by anthropological research methods.

KEYWORDS

anthropology
ethnography
fieldwork
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framing

Jørgen Leth was working as a journalist in his early twenties when he first became interested in anthropology. For a short period, he studied anthropology at the University of Copenhagen. When asked, he describes his initial interest in anthropology as methodological:

I was romantically drawn by the notion of categorizing and describing things. I was fascinated by foreign cultures, I have always been a traveler, someone who went out and looked at the exotic reality from other parts of the world. I was interested in finding some methodological tools.

(Leth in Overgaard 2004, my translation)

When looking at Leth's *The Perfect Human*, it is not anthropology's methodological tools of gathering information but rather a specific anthropologist's way of presenting anthropology that appears to be Leth's main inspiration. The anthropological presentations that have inspired Leth are not those

favoured by current schools of anthropology, but those of an anthropologist who worked almost 100 years ago, Bronislaw Malinowski.

LETH AND MALINOWSKI

The British anthropologist Malinowski went on expeditions to the Trobriand Islands in 1915–1916 and in 1917–1918, in order to study the everyday life of the islanders. Upon returning, Malinowski published three books, each focusing on different aspects of the Trobriand way of living. Jørgen Leth read Malinowski's second book on the Trobriand Islanders, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929), and was inspired by its ways of presenting another culture.

Signifying a time when anthropologists came from the West and the people studied were from an exotic other world, Malinowski's narrative distances itself very much from the people studied, describing the 'savages' as an exotic other species. Comparing the writing style in Malinowski's *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929) to the words of the narrator in *The Perfect Human*, the narrative voice appears very similar. This similarity is no coincidence, indeed Leth has confirmed that he uses Malinowski's ways of describing others as a model for his own work:

The way he [Malinowski] describes the locals has simply always been a model for me. [...] It is not really his philosophical qualities, but more his ways of presenting, that distanced way of storytelling. It is his way of viewing which I find useful.

(Leth in Leifer 1999: 144, my translation)

Consider how the narrator describes the film's project (Shots 6–8). Then, read the first sentences in the first chapter of *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*: 'Man and Woman in the Trobriand Islands – their relations in love, in marriage, and in tribal life – this will be the subject of the present study' (Malinowski 1929: 1). When comparing the words and tone of voice of the narrator in *The Perfect Human* to that of Malinowski's writings, the inspiration is clear. In fact, one could argue that the narrator in *The Perfect Human* talks and presents details just as Malinowski does throughout his 1929 book.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL SET-UP?

Does the fact that the words of the narrator resemble the narrative of Malinowski (1929) make *The Perfect Human* anthropological? It was crucial to Malinowski's work that he had spent years living among the people he studied. This long-stay approach enabled a new insight into the culture studied. While Malinowski was not the founder of anthropological fieldwork, he was one of its founding fathers, putting focus on the importance of long-stay fieldwork. This anthropological method is not one which Leth adheres to.

Today, Malinowski is still a key figure presented to first year anthropology students. His methods of fieldwork are still important to the discipline of anthropology, though his distancing ways of presenting fieldwork are no longer favoured. Much inspired by his works, anthropology today concerns itself with studying people through researching topics such as the everyday life, rituals, habits and values of a selected group of people. Despite differences

in focus, anthropology as a discipline is united in the belief that the study of humans is closely linked to a study of the environment that these humans exist in. Anthropologists thus aim to produce a *situated* knowledge showing how the people studied exist in their natural environment. Considering the importance of fieldwork then, for an anthropologist to place two selected people (actors) from a group in a closed room, give them props and explain to them how they should behave would run counter to the very principles of anthropology.

Even if the actors improvise their performance, as has been said of the actors in *The Perfect Human*, the setting and frame of these actions have already been created by Leth as the film's director. By putting two selected people in a room (Shots 31 and 37), and giving them props with which to interact, the researcher's lens is affecting any behaviour these two people may have – and any social behaviour they may have in their natural environment is lost. The only two people appearing in the film are not interacting much with each other. When they do interact they seem to be acting in very stylized slow-motion poses, very much aware of the camera (Shot 50). Thus, in this film, the two people are disconnected from any other social or cultural environment. In fact, rather than being connected to a social or cultural world, they appear isolated and boxed away from time and place in the white room. In this sense then, the film's set-up is not anthropological.

NOT ETHNOGRAPHY, BUT SOCIAL COMMENTARY

One of anthropology's much-used definitions of culture derives from a metaphor Clifford Geertz borrowed from Max Weber, namely that

man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun
[...] I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore
not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in
search of meaning.

(1973: 5)

For Geertz, culture is not something locked inside people's heads but rather visible in actions and in symbols through which members of a society communicate crucial ideals, world-views and value orientations. Inspired by anthropology, Leth may have thought of the film as a way of highlighting some of the actions and symbols used by an elite group of people at the time – the pipe, the extravagant dinner, the fine clothes and the make-up used. And above all, the film appears to be a hint at an obsession with looks and style of the time. From this perspective, Leth appears inspired by anthropology as a way of labelling and categorizing phenomena of the world. But the apparent lack of long-stay research and the lack of natural interaction with other humans in the film makes *The Perfect Human* untrustworthy as ethnography.

Just as Malimowski has been criticized for making the Trobriand Islander appear like an exotic other, so the two perfect humans in the film appear to be enjoying an unobtainable status. The viewer is invited to 'look', 'observe' and study the humans, as if they or their behaviour were for sale. The narrator appears keen to do a type of fictive investigation, cataloguing the perfect human with an observing distance. However, this investigation turns into a cataloguing of looks and all that is superficial about this special type of

human which the narrator describes as perfect. In this way, the film suggests that the people portrayed are more interested in superficial issues, looks and appearances. As a social commentary then, the film works well.

THE IRONIC STANCE

It would seem that Leth has cast the narrator in the role of anthropologist. The viewer is made aware from the start (Shot 3) that the narrator is labeling, categorizing and describing the actions of the people on-screen, and that this narrator is defining the two characters as perfect. On top of such actions as the man moving (Shot 22), the woman walking (Shot 24), the man falling (Shot 30) or the man dancing (Shot 37), the stern-sounding narrator describes the scenes. 'The perfect human is moving in a room', says the narrator (Shot 22). This way of presenting themes and concepts is very much in the vein of Malinowski's writing style. Titling the film *Anthropological* hints at an overarching aim towards the fieldwork-based, truth-portraying stance. But to an anthropologist, the very idea that it should be possible to study how the perfect human functions simply by seeing two humans alone in a white room might seem almost absurd.

All anthropologists are faced with the question as to whether they manage to portray a culture truthfully and objectively. With *The Perfect Human* Leth does not appear to be worrying about objectivity or truth. However, the narrator speaks in the tone of an anthropologist. In this way, the film manages to use anthropological presentation methods to make an observation about anthropology. Rather than being an anthropological film about perfect humans then, the film offers an ironic stance to the discipline of anthropology, which makes the viewer ponder: is it even possible to describe humans truthfully? And who is to determine what is perfect?

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