

KARI YLI-ANNALA:

THE ENIGMA OF A PHYSICAL RING

Attached to the ceiling, the film camera is aimed at a right angle downward and it reveals a scene in black and white. In the middle of the floor, there is a composition reminiscent of a moving Constructivist sculpture. In the centre of the rectangular base, there is a circular board revolved by a belt outside the frame area. This section is encircled by a thin band stretching as far as the borders of the frame area: it vibrates elastically while the electronic soundtrack follows its rhythm. Are we looking at a weird electronic happening or a moving studio set for an old science fiction film?

A Physical Ring by Mika Taanila is not based on science fiction films: it is based on a scientific film. The footage dates from the late 1940s and documents a physical experiment. There is no exact information available on the makers of the experiment or their goals. The filmmakers remain equally anonymous – perhaps they also conducted the experiment?

Taanila found the film in the Finnish Film Archives while he was looking for material for a screening of Finnish scientific films together with Ilkka Kippola, archive researcher. Consequently Taanila used the material to make an experimental found-footage film and installation. He retained the original title: *A Physical Ring*. Careful not to ruin the fascinating original atmosphere, he edited the piece, and provided it with a matching electronic soundscape produced by Ø (Mika Vainio, a member of the Pan Sonic duo).

FOUND FOOTAGE TECHNIQUE

At its simplest, found footage refers to the use of existing material in a film or other moving image artwork. Synonymous terms include compilation film, films de montage, collage film, archive film or library film 1). The makers of found-footage films work on their material and process it in a required direction, while maintaining a relationship to the original. Naturally, all filmmakers have their own approaches as to how the material is utilised.

In his work, Taanila has transferred the original film onto video, edited a few almost imperceptible fadeouts and added some special effects on the short film version. The flicker and the burning of the film at the end of the short film version are among the most memorable effects. In the video installation, edited with a more minimalist touch, the material is doubled, tripled or quadrupled around the viewer, depending on the number of reflecting walls. The work produces a mirror house effect of a sort, where the film material treated by Taanila takes the place of the mirrors.

As found footage, *A Physical Ring* is close to those found-footage films that researcher William C. Wees calls "perfect films" 2). In the old days, when film was widely used, found-footage filmmakers explored archives, storage rooms, flea markets, second-hand shops, refuse containers etc. Today, the situation is entirely different. Wees' "perfect films" primarily refers to films found in this way with no postproduction.

If the finders regard a "perfect film" as "perfect", they feel no need to make additions such as a soundtrack or voiceover. According to Wees, such films are "perfect left alone" 3). As *A Physical Ring* has been subjected to a series of transfers and treatments, it is not a "perfect film" in Wees' sense. Yet the original film is still present and there to be experienced, and its "perfect film" aura cannot, thus, entirely be dismissed.

"Perfect films" correspond to ready-mades in the visual arts. Set in a different context, both will evoke new meanings and content. A scientific film such as *A Physical Ring* appears different in an art context than in its original function, recording a scientific experiment for students of physics (although it is uncertain who the intended audience was). The original is also likely to contain discursive and representational emphases that may be more apparent for today's audiences than for the contemporary audiences..

FROM SCIENCE FICTION FILM TO SCIENTIFIC FILM

The decade from which *A Physical Ring* dates emphasised the unique capacity of the moving image to record events that were invisible or too rapid for the human eye. The moving image and scientific experiment had, of course, been natural partners since the early years of cinema. Special effects such as extreme slow motion, timing, microscope images and underwater shooting were known as early as the beginning of the 20th century. They revealed new, invisible worlds. Walter Benjamin, among others, wrote about the "optic subconscious" revealed by film.

In the course of its history, scientific film has also attracted interest from the cinema circles. According to André Bazin, the cinema theorist, the films screened in the international conference of scientific films organised in Paris in 1947,

depicting bronchoscopy, water molecules and skull drilling, were closer to "surrealist drama" than the achievements of Yves Tanguy, Salvador Dalí or Luis Buñuel 4). Yet it is hard to say if Bazin would even have turned up without the French tradition of combining scientific films and avant-garde. One of the most fascinating advocates of this genre was Jean Painlevé, who merged his documentary on the vampire bat with Louis Armstrong's jazz and a found-footage section taken from F.W. Murnau's vampire film *Nosferatu* (1922). And it should not be forgotten that there is an element of scientific film in Murnau's original as well, that of moving microscope images.

"Surrealist drama" is also present in *A Physical Ring*, which fascinates the viewer with its alchemy-tuned experiment arrangements and laboratory rituals. The frame area is dominated by the wide, vibrating band, which seems to hover in the air as if it was part of a magician's show. The band is clearly the main element in the experiment, and it is the main target of the activated physical (magnetic?) forces. The box-like shape, that is in the middle of the frame in the beginning, and the band are linked by a straight stick reminiscent of a magician's wand, which the executors of the experiment remove from the floor during the session.

The short film version gives us a glimpse of the executors of the experiment, whereas the video installation only retains shadows vaguely lurking on the edges. The first person appearing on the short film has the impressive aura of a club DJ rather than a 1940s scientist. The ritual nature of the scientific routines and the elements of the magic show provide the event with some of the fascination of old sci-fi and horror films. They evoke, for example, recollections of James Whale's Frankenstein films, where the resurrection scenes included electric halos distantly reminiscent of the band in the experiment.

The original *A Physical Ring* was about the capacity of a given medium, the film, and objectives pursued through it in a given time. In order to illustrate the experiment as well as possible, the executors chose to place the camera in an unusual upper angle. According to Taanila, the hammer-like shape in the centre of the rotating disc is a "hand" measuring time, which, in turn, refers to the later intended use of the film as an objective indicator. The editing strategies manifesting the science fiction dimension further lead our thoughts to the efforts of modern natural science to pursue the invisible and the unattainable. This is the "unconscious in science", which Mary Shelley also explored when writing about Frankenstein's monster.

In her *Experimental Ethnography*, Catherine Russell states that found-footage film studies representations made through technology on the one hand, and memory and history on the other 5). Russell suggests that historical found-footage material could also be discussed as a kind of parallel universe to science fiction. Themes of this sort are likewise present in Taanila's previous works. In his *Science and Progress* trilogy completed before *A Physical Ring* – *Thank You For The Music* (1997), *Futuro – A New Stance For Tomorrow* (1998) and *RoboCup99* (2000) – Taanila dealt with associations and utopias related to industrial representations. In *Thank You For The Music*, the muzak of lifts and department stores provides a promise of a momentary paradise, in *Futuro* the UFO house transplants a promise of the happy future life into the present, and the clumsy robots of *RoboCup99* playing football refer to a futurist utopia where differences between humans and electronic creatures are to be dissolved.

THEMES OF TIME AND FANTASY

In his documentaries, Taanila has explored many themes familiar from science fiction literature. The protagonist of "The Gernsback Continuum" by William Gibson takes photographs for a project with a working title *The Airstream Futuropolis: The Tomorrow That Never Was*. He begins to see weird architectural creations, airships and human characters referred to as Art Deco futuroids. The archive material in *Futuro* also describes the associations and unfulfilled utopias related to the 1960s UFO house and, thus, also a "tomorrow that never was".

Fulfilment is a relative concept, of course, for quite a few wild utopias presented in the 1920s and 1930s have indeed become reality – in pop culture, science fiction and the associations sometimes intentionally evoked by industrial design!

The images roused by *A Physical Ring* are also kin to the fantastic imagery of science fiction inspired by the achievements of modern natural science. The stroboscope flicker in the short film version makes the rhythm pulse and accelerate, turning the band and the circle into a time tunnel familiar from science fiction films. The burning of the film that ends it brings the viewer back to reality, however, emphasising the entropy of time and matter.

In the title of his comprehensive video essay *Histoire(s) de cinéma*, Jean-Luc Godard seems to suggest that there are a variety of possible histories. By combining a film on a scientific experiment with the tradition of avant-garde cinema and video art, *A Physical Ring* takes me to the mirror house of time. The chosen methods of editing accentuate the weightlessness of the pulsing band, its nature of "removing" itself from the experiment setting. Yet the composition in the centre, the cardboard-covered floor and the shadows moving in the edges keep it linked to the reality of the experiment. The undulating, pulsing bands become an image of time and memory. The pulse makes a virtual gate

between my perception and the moving image. The recording of a scientific experiment reveals its imaginary, fantastic potential.

1) Sjöberg (2001), p. 21–22, Russell (1999), p. 238

2) Sjöberg (2001), p.16

3) Ibid., p.16

4) Bazin (1990), p. 256

5) "Its intertextuality is always also an allegory of history, a montage of memory traces, by which the filmmaker engages with the past through recall, retrieval, and recycling". Russell (1999), p. 238.

6) Ibid., p. 241

7) Gibson (1990), p. 22

SOURCES

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– An essay published in a small leaflet on the occasion of Kiasma's exhibition *A Physical Ring* 2002