Jørgen Leth’s 1967 experimental film, *The Perfect Human*, is a strangely detached film that coldly inquires into what exactly could even be meant by describing a person as “perfect”. What it presents as possible answers are two individuals, a man and a woman. They are ordinary enough people: white, physically attractive, capable of getting dressed, capable of moving about a room. The narrator constantly asks analytical questions about the two humans, as if he were a guide explaining an exhibit at a zoo. None of these questions are ever answered, and so the film never explicitly tells us what it thinks a perfect human to be. In a quest to delve deeper into the mysteries presented by the film, Lars von Trier challenged Leth to recreate the film five times, each with a different set of obstructions, in what came to be the film *The Five Obstructions*. Through this process, we get to see *The Perfect Human* played out in new environments, with different actors, showcasing different pieces of the original film. With this newly created context, the original film begins to reveal itself for what it truly is.

Perhaps the most important requirement of the first obstruction is that it is set in Cuba, on location. This immediately presents a significant departure from the original’s white, boundless void full of flattering light. Similarly to the original, however, our male and female perfect humans are the only ones inhabiting this space, a seemingly abandoned estate. Whereas the original takes place in an almost heavenly realm, the Cuban Obstruction is set in a very real, deteriorating space. Having the fancily dressed “perfect humans” function in this space creates some complications. The “perfect human” is now limited by boundaries of walls and windows, questions of the ownership of the space arise, but what seems to be the most significant change is
the fact that they are tethered to a precise geographical location. The film explicitly states the location as Cuba, opening with the “perfect human” smoking a Cuban cigar rather than a pipe, then showing a newspaper cover that says in big red letters, “CUBA”, and indeed the first word spoken by the narrator is, “Cuba”. Within the film the title of “Perfect Human” isn’t even used, it reflects its Cuban setting with the title of “Hombre Perfecto”.

As per the restrictions on the film, Leth did not need to address the location so intently, he simply needed to film there, but it seems as though he’s taken the location and conformed his “perfect human” model to it. The film doesn’t show rural Cuba, it shows the urban landscapes where his higher class, well mannered humans would most certainly be. Accompanying this is a number of words that the film presents such as “Havana, Rum, and Cigar”, suggesting a higher class of living. In this way, Leth’s idea of the “perfect human” seems to be a fairly satirical one. If one can serve themselves fancy food, get into and out of a suit, and dance well, then they have earned the “perfect human” moniker.

The second obstructed film, set in Bombay makes this satire even more explicit, indeed fairly horrendously so. Leth’s restriction is that he must film in the most horrible place on the planet, but not show it. What he ends up doing is filming in the red light district of Bombay, separating the “perfect human” (played here by Leth himself, by command of von Trier) from the poverty-stricken locals. In doing so he is creating a clear divide between the bourgeois “perfect human” and ordinary people. Another restriction upon this film, perhaps the most cruel, is that Leth must include the dinner scene, and so he sets up a feast for himself on the streets of Bombay as women and children who have likely never seen a meal of such caliber in their life watch him eat. One would think that a true “perfect human” would undoubtedly share the meal with these onlookers, but that is simply not the case. The “perfect human” is in no sense a
paragon of moral or ethical virtue, but indeed a kind of ideal capitalist citizen.

This obstruction makes this all the more clear with another bold decision, the lack of a woman. The “perfect human” title is not shared in this film, it refers only to the man, Leth. When looking back at the earlier films, it becomes clear that though a woman may have been included, their status was undoubtedly lower than that of the man. The man always has more screentime, the man actually has spoken lines, he certainly seems to be the true “perfect human” here with the woman acting as more of an accessory than anything.

The third obstruction truly brings this reasoning to its conclusion. As the restriction was that Leth must simply remake his original film without any manner of imposed obstruction it is certainly the most purified replication of the original as far as exploring his notion of the “perfect human”. Worth noting is the fact that the man and woman are introduced in this film simply as “the man” and “the woman”, with no suggestion of perfection.

The man is older, white haired, and following the trend of previous men, wearing a nice suit. He seems to bear a certain amount of prestige, carrying himself in a dignified manner and talking with the front desk of a hotel as if he is a valued guest. Based on the split-screen effects utilized in this obstruction we can see his desire for sex with the woman. We also see him handling a large wad of cash. He is a man with a sexual appetite and the money necessary to fulfill it, once again the capitalist ideal. He has no need for love or affection, his sexual life is in accordance with supply and demand philosophy. And so he waits for the woman whilst staring out at a twisted industrial complex.

The woman also carries herself in a dignified manner and for the first time has lines, indeed a fairly substantial monologue. However this monologue seems to merely be a declaration of her professionalism in the realm of prostitution. In accordance with the capitalist philosophy
she is the “perfect woman” as she has refined and perfected the craft of selling herself. She is in
fact so masterful in this aspect that even the “perfect man” cannot have her. She rolls down her
window, gives her monologue, rolls up the window, and she is gone.

So the title of “Perfect” seems to be one given to an individual who is not necessarily
happy, not necessarily righteous, but simply in compliance with the tastes of a higher class.
Refinement, elegance, and properness are what is required to be a “perfect human”. With this
declaration Leth is exposing a sad truth of what people think to be perfection in a society that
values success, prestige, and money above all else. This is why Claus Nissen’s expression is
always so vacant and uncaring in the original Perfect Human, he is perfect at the cost of his
happiness. The “perfect human’s” essence is perfectly encapsulated in the third obstruction, “the
distant look, the loss of soul, the distant look.”

Two very recent films, Shane Carruth’s Upstream Color and Harmony Korine’s Spring
Breakers, both address very complicated notions of property and theft. They both contain acts of
thievery, interesting relationships between individuals and their property, and questions of what
property really is. French anarchist-philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon once declared that,
“property is theft”, suggesting that the act of ownership is in and of itself an act of thievery. As
he is thinking from an anarchist’s perspective, we can see his logic: to claim ownership is to
deny the possibility of ownership to another. He was one of the first thinkers to stir the pot on this complex conundrum, but Carruth and Korine, being the modern intellectuals they are, have provided a considerable amount of food for thought.

Before delving in, it would be prudent to give a definition to the term property. By my understanding property is inherently tethered to the world of politics and economics. It may be overly idealistic or even romantic to think this way, but I’m of the belief that one’s mind and body are not individualistic pieces of property. Property must hold value and I believe that it is simply unreasonable to assign value to a human being. Surely it is a fact that such placements of values have occurred in the past, but I refuse to accept that a slaveholder’s ethos can be given any kind of respect or credibility. A plantation owner had no more ownership over his slaves than a warden does over his prisoners. While I assert that the physical body and indeed the mind cannot be considered property, this does not make them invulnerable to acts of theft or even treatment as commodities.

*Upstream Color* seems to work fairly well according to this logic. One of the earliest characters to be introduced, credited as the Thief, sustains himself off of the property of others. He subjects his victims to the influence of a mind altering parasite which makes them completely susceptible to suggestion. We only see him work through his process on one mark, but we can assume by his calm and calculating demeanor that he has done this many times before. He coerces Kris into handing over all of her financial assets: her equity, her hidden stash of coins, and likely much more. However he doesn’t claim her identity, what’s occurring isn’t exactly identity theft. While he does leave his victims in a state of mental and financial ruin, at the end of the day he is nothing more than a petty thief, only concerned with the financial.

The individual that further complicates matters is the Sampler. After the Thief has
finished his con, the Sampler lures the broken, parasite ridden hosts to his farm. Here he extracts the worms from their bodies and supplants them into his pigs. In doing this he gains a strange kind of access into the lives of those who previously held the worms. When he reaches his hand out toward a pig, we see him transported to the space of the human to which each pig is connected. Here he is able to observe their lives from a strange voyeuristic perspective. It isn’t clear exactly how he achieves this, but it clearly has something to do with the connection that the pigs and the humans share. When Kris’s pig’s offspring are taken away, Kris instantly reacts with maternal instinct. She and the pig are somehow spiritually or emotionally connected, perhaps their souls are linked. While it is cruel to make such a distinction, a pig can be property, as is seen when a fellow farmer makes the Sampler some offers on his pigs, but he’s not interested in making a profit, he’s interested in, somehow, playing God. Through the strange pig-human connection, he has a strange property-like claim on the people he watches. It is likely due to this possessive claim and breach of privacy that Kris ultimately murders the Sampler.

In *Spring Breakers*, James Franco’s Alien is situated in an interesting position of property and thievery. He owns a massive collection of guns and weaponry which he affectionately refers to as “my shit”, but it’s unclear exactly how he’s amassed this fortune. It seems to be that the only way a person like him could have even possibly undertaken such an endeavor would in fact be through thievery or, more tailored to his nature, thuggery. He certainly didn’t earn his fortune through the traditional means of ownership, he likely took it through brute force, just as the girls rob the chicken shack at the beginning of the film. He also seems to be the kind of person who assumes that by bailing four young girls out of jail, he claims some degree of ownership over them. He never acts aggressively with them, but is somewhat authoritative, perhaps paternal, in his desire to keep them around.
The girls are able to flip the scenario around on him when, being shown all of “his shit”, they take his guns and place him in the subservient position. They commit their own act of thievery and almost turn him into their property, insofar as they force him to into a sexually submissive position. In making him fellate the barrels of their guns, their claiming a kind of physical ownership over him.

The relationship between property and theft is clearly not one that’s easily defined, especially when bearing in mind the postulate that people are not and cannot be property. Various moral and ethical quandaries arise out of the juxtaposition, such as the property status of animals in relationship to humans. Thankfully these films, and surely the works of future filmmakers, explore the issue in new and interesting ways.