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## *The Red Spectre: Commentary on Modernity Through Surrealism*

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## *The Red Spectre*: Commentary on Modernity Through Surrealism

### **Keywords**

The Red Spectre, specter, Le spectre rouge, Segundo de Chomón, chomon, trick film, modernity, surrealism

### **Cover Page Footnote**

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***The Red Spectre:***  
**Commentary on Modernity through Surrealism**  
by Emily McWilliams

Segundo de Chomón's *The Red Spectre* (1907) is a highly self-referential trick film that explores how new technology, specifically filmmaking, can equally create fear and delight. Appearing at the end of the era known as the 'cinema of attractions,' *The Red Spectre* is distinct from other trick films for a variety of reasons. Chomón sets his film in a theatrical and surreal mise-en-scène resembling hell. A devil character appears and begins to perform a variety of tricks for the audience. While his tricks repeat similar motifs seen in earlier spectacle films—stop-motion, super-imposition, and transformations—there is an underlying quality about these tricks and how they are presented that indicates an early form of surrealism. The cinema of attractions has long been associated with contemporary avant-garde cinema, and this connection can be seen as being exemplified by *The Red Spectre*. The film's self-referentiality, incorporation of spectacle, and portrayal of gender determines the film as an early surrealist attempt that comments on the effects of modernity and technology in relation to the production of films.

Like other early films categorized in the cinema of attractions, *The Red Spectre* frequently draws attention to its own status as a film. Using tableau frame compositions, long takes, and direct looks at the camera, trick films imitate the style of live magic shows and invite the viewer to look (Hake 37). This self-referential quality of *The Red Spectre* is apparent immediately with the introduction of the devil. Adopting the mannerisms of a stage magician, the devil presents himself to the spectators directly by bowing and flapping his cape. The purpose of this display is to establish a connection with the audience; the presence of the devil acting as a showman is a common element of early cinema and draws inspiration from live magic shows (Solomon 596). In regards to a character's connection with the spectators, Tom Gunning notes in "The Cinema of Attractions" that "this 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 57). *The Red Spectre* in particular embraces this notion and attempts to manifest itself off of the screen. This is primarily accomplished by re-occurring looks to the camera.

The combination of looks to the camera, and the use of the space specifically, continues the pattern of self-referentiality in the film. As the devil begins to conjure the images of the women trapped in the vases, he approaches the camera and sets up his stand at a shockingly close proximity. While this is not a close-up shot in the traditional sense (the camera remains static in this case), the closeness of the subject to the audience as he performs this trick is confrontational. The devil's attempt to grasp the audience's attention is achieved in this sequence through a combination of looks to the camera, and his physical closeness in relation to the audience. Both of these techniques work in tandem to further establish a relationship with the audience.

Besides the breaking of the fourth wall in *The Red Spectre*, film-within-a-film moments are featured prominently. These moments add a surreal quality to the film and raise questions concerning the technological capabilities of cinema. Unlike Georges Méliès or Gaston Velle, Chomón never appeared in his own films (Solomon 604). However, his role as a filmmaker is present in the film through the actions of the devil character. As the devil conjures a screen (imprinted with the Pathé logo), he begins to create his own films in a sense. The devil presents to the audience a variety of moving images portraying women smiling and gesturing, as he creates and destroys these images at his choosing. These sequences point to cinema's ability to deceive audiences and produce fantasies at the filmmaker's will. As in more contemporary surrealist cinema, these tricks concerning the creation of moving images can be viewed as Chomón's attempt to exploit new technology and how it is able to trigger new sensorial experiences in the audience (Mercer 81). These moments in *The Red Spectre* also display the filmmaker's authority over the images and actions, and, in effect, over the audience.

Despite Chomón's incorporation of trick shots that were seen in other cinema of attractions films, he manages to utilize cinematic technology uniquely to present a surreal quality to his films. Chomón was renowned for his use of colour as a spectacle; having experience as an intricate film colourist in the beginning of his career, many believe that Chomón planned his shots with the colour in mind when he became a director (Batllori 97). In *The Red Spectre*, as implied in the title, a bold red dominates and highlights the shots. The muting or intensification of this colour brings the audience's attention to certain tricks, such as when the devil pours a liquid in the vases containing the trapped ladies (Batllori 98). The use of colour as a spectacle in *The Red Spectre* contributes to the film's fantastical quality that connects it to later surrealist films.

Chomón's experiments with colour and other tricks in his films are an attempt to underscore the human fascination with technology and, to some degree, the terror that it can produce (Mercer 81). The colour and tricks present in *The Red Spectre* amplify the devil's mischievous intentions. However, these elements also explore the abruptness and hyper stimulus created by the cinematic viewing experience that was later shared by contemporary surrealists (Mercer 82). *The Red Spectre* uses colours and tricks to manipulate the new possibilities available with technology in relation to shocking the audience. Their inclusion in the film contributes to the dream-like and fantastical quality of the events portrayed.

Similar to contemporary surrealists and filmmakers of the avant-garde, Chomón's films are quite modern in regards to their depiction of women and gender. The avant-garde film culture is known for providing women filmmakers a greater autonomy over their artwork in terms of writing, direction, production, and acting (at least in comparison to mainstream cinema). Similarly, at the time of the cinema of attractions, Chomón was featuring women (usually his wife) in roles that had been

exclusively restricted to men (Solomon 604). Often in magic and trick films, the magician was a male with a female assistant; the female would be subjected to the magic trick (often a disappearing act or another trick that would fragment or manipulate the body). Chomón was unique for prominently featuring female magicians in his films (Solomon 604).

In *The Red Spectre*, not only is a female magician present, but an actual battle-of-the-sexes plays out between her and the devil. After performing a variety of spectacles that involve making women appear and disappear at will—levitation and entrapment—the devil is confronted by the female magician. She expands the film's set, revealing a large group of women (presumably the same ones who appeared with the devil at the beginning of the film). One of these women approaches the devil and he places her under his cape; she emerges as the female magician who destroys the devil and reduces him to a skeleton. The winner in this fight is clearly the female magician.

Chomón's incorporation of women in a privileged position of power, as seen in *The Red Spectre*, follows the trend in his films of blurring the lines between the female form and industrialization (Mercer 87). As with his commentary on the role of technology in a changing society, Chomón looks to address through his films certain issues associated with the onset of modernity. One of these issues is the role of women in society and the transformation of their traditional activities. These issues are important in relation to cinema (and the cinema of attractions in particular) as the female body was repeatedly projected to audiences as a spectacle. Chomón attempted to place women in a more active role within his films (perhaps a reflection of the modernity of society as Chomón interpreted it). Similar to surrealist cinema and the avant-garde, the presentation and inclusion of women is progressive in *The Red Spectre*. This aspect further contributes to the film's status as an early precursor to surrealism in cinema.

*The Red Spectre* is an unconventional trick film for its manipulation of self-reflexive cinema, use of spectacles, and portrayal of gender. In many ways, Chomón's film is an early example of surrealism and uses this style to comment on the effects of technology and modernity in relation to filmmaking. *The Red Spectre* utilizes technology to shock and entertain its audience, and provides insight into cinema's capabilities, even in its initial stages.

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