

Film Review: "The Face of Another" and "When A Woman Ascends The Stairs"

Each in their own way, these two films examine the theme of selfhood and identity. "The Face of Another," directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara in 1966, is based on the novel by Kobo Abe. A man who is severely disfigured in an industrial accident has a doctor create a life-like face mask for him. In the process, he begins to assume a new identity, a new existence. Initially, he considers disfiguring his wife for her abhorrence of him and for refusing to submit to him sexually, but then in his new identity decides to seduce her instead. Parallel to their relationship is the seemingly innocent but ambiguous relationship between a beautiful but scarred sister and her brother. Her appearance repels both adults and children on the street, and so she works in an institution for the insane where her disfigurement goes unnoticed. Many of the inmates are dressed in military garb and imitate the mechanical routines of military training. The sister and brother talk frequently about the possibility of another war. One of the inmates tries to rape her and she flees.

The film is shot in black-and-white, utilizing subtle contrasts of shadow and light, alternating motion with freeze frames, and at times producing *montage of* striking and unusual images. Its tone is relentlessly ominous and claustrophobic, making effective use of Takemitsu's electronic music and silences, and the tension underlying the film is not dissimilar to the horror film, although the anxiety is more metaphysical than real. At one point, the bandaged man calls himself a "monster," but he is a faceless monster, a being without identity.

The camera plays across the sterile surfaces and enclosures of the urban landscape, so it becomes clear the film is an existential meditation on man's alienation in modern life, whose vision shares as much with Kafka and Antonioni as it does with fellow filmmaker Nagisa Oshima (although, Oshima,

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perhaps, is the more politically engaged director). "The Face of Another" attempts to show to us how "masks destroy all morality and make us strangers to each other."

On the other hand, "When A Woman Ascends The Stairs," directed by Mikio Naruse in 1960, which had its San Francisco premiere at the Surf Theater, details the lonely travails of a beautiful, dignified bar maid in an occupation which emphasizes youthful beauty and feminine charm as a premium and in which the only possible escape is through marriage, finding a patron to finance one's own bar (sometimes in return for sexual favors) or suicide. Keiko, played by Hideko Takamine, confronts the various advances of a rich Osaka businessman, an overweight factory owner, and the banker whom she loves. The bar manager, played by Tatsuya Nakadai, secretly worships her, but she spurns him in her own search for love and security. Meanwhile, a number of bar maids leave to get married to customers or start their own bars only to face financial ruin.

Keiko is doubly oppressed by having to collect donations from her customers to open her own bar and being exploited or betrayed by the men who pursue her, while supporting her insensitive mother and hapless brother. The voiceover narrative lends an authentic documentary feel to the film as well as a suggestion of the yakuza or film noir genre in its unsentimental picture of the seamy Ginza bar scene. The death of Yuri, one of the bar maids, who meant only to fake a suicide attempt to fend off creditors, is a particularly affecting scene. Hideko Takamine gives an outstanding performance in the role of Keiko, who faces her disappointments and hardships with an unquestionable dignity, honesty and grace. "When A Woman Ascends The Stairs" is a sympathetic and moving appreciation of the character's resilience and strength in spite of the sexist nature of her work.

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