

The Surrealist Landscape of “The Face of Another”

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“The Face of Another” is a truly tantalizing story that begs the question of its audience: “In a world without consequences, is there any point in society maintaining a moral code?”. This complex question is not given a solid answer throughout the course of the film, leaving it up to those who watch to decide. Such a process of thought can leave one feeling as if they were left in a sort of fog, with nothing really tangible to guide them by. This intangible feeling is brought further along through the artful set design in this movie, as unnerving and surreal as the premise.

For most of the movie the set design is based in surrealism, as in set design that does not attempt to look realistic but rather to lend itself specifically to the mood of the piece. In “The Face of Another” most sets located indoors make use of unnaturally dark shadows to highlight specific areas of the face and make them more severe. Even outside, the lighting is dim to give the entire city a feeling of terrible dullness. Additionally, the architecture of some pieces in the set are used for theme rather than function.

For example, the booth in which Mr. and Mrs. Okuyama sit as the former attempts to seduce his wife. It is built in such a way that when Mr. Okuyama leans away, he can put a corner between himself and his wife, physically and visually separating the two and creating an uncomfortable distance. But when he leans forward and the camera moves just so, the barrier seems to vanish. Such a seat would not be found in a real cafe.

The most extreme example of this however would be in the office of Dr. Hira. His office design is one that, rather than surrealism, utilizes artifice. It is unlike any doctor’s office that

has ever or will ever exist, and it makes no attempt to pretend to be. It is also the brightest set in the movie with its unnaturally pure, white, surroundings. The glass walls floating in blank white space, marked in white patterns made specifically to align with the faces and bodies of the characters, the walls of prosthetic limbs placed carefully upon pristine stands, a single examination chair and table, no exits or entrances that the audience is allowed to travel through: only doors that seem to lead to different places, disembodied ears, distorted space, pure darkness in areas, all these things could not exist in the real world, nor would most people feel comfortable seeking psychological or medical help within such a manic space.

In fact, one could say that “The Face of Another” is a movie that progresses from surrealist set design to pure artifice. After Mr. Okuyama receives his mask, things begin to settle back into surrealism, then run full tilt back into artifice. We begin with the idea that the Yo-Yo girl can identify Okuyama by smell alone, then progress to the streets being flooded with ominous masked figures.

For one thing, the idea behind such a lifelike mask in itself is a premise on artifice.

Additionally, the story of the burned girl progresses into one of strange tragedy. Wherein her brother, as he watches her drown herself from the window, turns into a carcass stretched between meat hooks. These extreme visuals, while unrealistic, do their job in conveying raw emotion.

I really enjoyed “The Face of Another” and the creativity with which it was directed.

Everything from the casting down to the lighting contributed in such a way as to make a film that felt unnerving but dreamlike. In a sense, such direction with such a story is one of the only ways to properly convey the complexity of the philosophical question it poses.