

Masks, Actors, and the State of Human Morality

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People are always playing some kind of role. We always change ourselves depending on where we are, or who we're around. It is easy to know how to behave morally when playing a role. We grow up being told how to act in different places. Hearing things like "Take your shoes off when you come inside" or "Be extra polite when we're at grandma's house" teaches us early on what's right. But what happens when there is no role to play? In Yasujiro Ozu's film *Floating Weeds*, he gives a glimpse into the lives of a troupe of actors, and with his unique cinematography highlights that underneath all the facades people put up there is still an underlying connection to others that humanity shares. Hiroshi Teshigahara however, paints a different picture with his new wave film *The Face of Another*, showing that humanity is nothing but a facade, and without a mask to play a part, people are left with no inherent sense of morality. Though these films present very different moods, and in the end a very different message, they both attempt to unmask humanity, the directors giving their take on the only role we all play: human.

In *Floating Weeds*, Ozu's characteristic framing and layout of his scenes highlights the façade his characters are putting on, while his intimate dialog scenes give the audience a sense of connection, casting aside the facade he's built up around them. One common tool used by Ozu throughout the film is a 'frame-in-a-frame' shot. In

these, the shot has an extra frame inside the rectangle that already is the screen. The most prominent example from the film being the argument between Komajuro and Sumiko in the rain. In this scene, with no cuts, and no camera movement, we see the two argue across a brightly lit street with rain falling between them. The still camera makes it feel like we're sitting there, as if at another table in the shop, watching this unfold in front of our own eyes. But the framing effect highlights leaves in the back of our minds that this is still set up for us to see. Small details like Ozu's tendency to move objects around between shots to maintain balance between shots never let it escape you that this is all crafted just for the purpose of being watched. The only scenes that undermine this careful crafting of what the audience sees are the dialog scenes.

Shooting dialog not in the traditional over the shoulder way, instead often having characters look toward the camera gives a sense of intimacy that over the shoulder shots lack. Instead of being detached from the conversation we are a part of it. It's these moments, particularly the scene at the end at the train tracks, that finally show these characters not in a role, simply being people. This message is furthered by the character's profession as actors, who would usually be expected to always be playing some kind of part, but are forced to disband as a troupe and go back to being people. The artful cinematography and familiar feeling dialog scenes mask, and then unravel the troupe, ultimately revealing, through Sumiko and Komajuro's reconciliation, the inherent goodness and morality in humans despite any role's they played in the past.

In contrast, *The Face of Another* shows that humans without a role to play have no morality, and are forever stuck to live by whatever morals their part demands. A

primary tool that Teshigahara uses to highlight the lack of a central moral compass is his doubling of shots. Multiple times throughout the film, he places a bandaged Okuyama in the same series of shots as his newly masked self, drawing attention to the duality of his life. Notably the two times he goes to rent an apartment, the shots are nearly identical, with a few small exceptions. We mostly see the breaking down of the mask in the last minutes of the film. After realizing his wife could see him all along for who he was, he can see that the even with a real face he was still only pretending a new set of morals, he hadn't really become a different person. He tests this out immediately afterward by sexually assaulting a stranger. Seeing that there really were no consequences, he severs his last link to humanity by killing his doctor, the creator of his mask. In doing so, he shows he has discarded his role as a masked man, and descended to the 'default' state for humanity. If a role and identity are synonymous, then it's clear how Okuyama in losing his sense of self has also lost any sense of morality tied to a role. He shows that in a state where the only role is to be human, there can be no morality.

By presenting two sets of characters with roles to play, and then stripping them of those roles, these two directors investigate the moral state of humanity. Ozu's optimistic view shows actors losing their roles also discarding their past grudges, and negative feelings, only to be left as a kind, blank human looking to find their way in the world. In contrast, Teshigahara paints a masked man with his only tie to this world being the identity of his mask. Both sets of characters adopt a certain set of morals when playing their respective parts, but only one retains any morals after the part has

been played. But perhaps it's okay whether or not morals are inherently human. Okuyama's wife says of makeup that women don't hide the fact that they wear it. Maybe in the same way she claims it's okay to not hide makeup, we can accept that morality is relative, and there might not be any underlying morality. If this is true, then we can always be free to choose to be moral; it would give anybody the choice in each moment to put on their best mask, and put their best foot forward.