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Steina Vasulka: In the Land of the Elevator Girls

Review by Allan Davies

In Japan there are elevator girls. Women maybe? They perform the same sort of function as does a conductor on a train. There are no tickets to be taken so they are limited to repeated welcomes and to announcing the floor attained.

As the film progresses - ingresses - the elevator doors open not on the floors of a store or high-rise, but on scenes of motion. The doors are highly stylized. The scenes are not. In a way it doesn't really matter what the scenes are. There are a variety of them. They are variously exotic or not. Most of the images are of people in motion - the sort of thing you might expect to see when elevator doors open - but what the people do does not fit whatever expectations are exploited by the repeated opening of elevator doors. They were shot in Japan.

The staging of the film is stylized. We're glad it was not made to go on ad nauseam. THE ELEVATOR GIRLS WELCOME US TO THE FILM: THE DOORS OPEN ON VARIOUS FLOORS: REPEATEDLY WE'RE WELCOMED: THE DOORS OPEN AND CLOSE: WHAT IS BEHIND THE DOORS IS NO LONGER THE EXPECTED BUT SOME OTHER SAMPLING OF JAPAN: IT ENDS.

The elevator door device is quite simple. In fact it is insistent. We respond to it as do the elevator passengers. We respond as to any unassailable given. We accept that we have to accept it.

That device of framing overwhelms the film. No other device (can we even recognize one?) is as pervasive. The only images left are those glimpses between the opening/closing doors. And those glimpses are our perceptions as they are permitted to us as if through opening/closing eyelids. They are about our perceiving. That is what they are about - at least to the extent that they can claim any of the film's substance away from the framing device.

Many of those door-framed glimpsed scenes are already internally framed - by the sides of a bridge, by pillars, by walls, by motion, by expectation, by novelty, by culture. And in some cases the opening/closing elevator doors frame another pair of opening/closing elevator doors. Elevator girls indeed!

The video - again quite simply - frames our framing. It isn't a sophisticated statement being made nor a complicated one. It is stated much more insistently than clearly. It would be more accurate to say that it is insistently suggested.

We are reminded that as the titles were revealed at the beginning they read:

GIRLS
ELEVATOR
IN THE LAND OF THE.

Let's face it. That's what the title's about. It intends to place us in the land of the elevator girls. That's what it does. It puts us there as perceiving entities. Of course the video makers make of us the perceiving entities that they want. Not really fair? But that's art.

The images of Japan offered "behind" opening and closing elevator doors are therefore an imposition and an offering. Kind of depends upon how you feel about it.

Do the doors of the elevators always open on a vulva-substitute? Is that what this is also about? On either fast-forward or rewind, the videotape becomes a sleight-of-hand card trick. Your cards are shuffled. Space is played with in any art form.

End