

FILM REVIEW

Do our bodies belong to us? Exploring ethics, power, and choice

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***Ship of Theseus*, Producer: Sohum Shah, Director: Anand Gandhi. English with Hindi, Arabic, Swedish. 143 minutes, 2012.**

Anand Gandhi's *Ship of Theseus* is a visual and intellectual feat, one that is able to ask fundamental questions about our relationship with our bodies in the modern world. The film reveals how the maintenance and management – under fast-paced scientific innovation – of the able body that sees, resists internal degeneration and replaces defunct organs to live for as long as possible is more under medical control, and under the control of capital, than we think. This is a world in which organs are a part of global traffic and circulate within a system of capital flow. Gandhi raises deeply philosophical questions against the background of this material context, exploring issues related to ethics, political action and choice.

Each of the three stories that make up this film asks us some very difficult questions, thankfully without offering simplistic solutions. The central dilemma presented at the start of the movie is: if all the old wooden planks of the ship of Theseus were replaced by new ones, and the old ones re-assembled to form another ship, which then, if either, is the real ship of Theseus? The film goes on to add layer upon layer to this, and pushes us to think about the relationship between a part and the whole, and how we perceive and position ourselves in a larger system of social relations.

In the first story, the blind photographer, Aaliya (Aida Al-Kashef), navigates the city, directing her camera at sounds that arrest her. Her aim is to capture, document and archive moments as they occur around her. Despite her disability, she is able to retain remarkable control over her images. However, once she is able to see again (a cornea replacement operation restores her vision), the sudden onrush of visual stimuli in the city confuses her and she seems incapable of taking good photographs any more. It is only when she goes to the mountains for inspiration that she is able to understand what it means to stop and take stock of her surroundings with new eyes. As her lens cap accidentally falls into a stream, we understand that her eyes have been symbolically opened forever.

The second story begins with a monk, Maitreya (Neeraj Kabi), walking barefoot through the city in the pouring rain. The monk, gentle yet formidable, is on his way to a court hearing for a case against pharmaceutical companies that perform tests on animals for non-essential and cosmetic research. Through

conversations between the erudite Maitreya and Charvaka, a zippy young lawyer-apprentice also on the case, we learn that Maitreya believes that all existence – and not just all humanity – has a life force. He also believes in taking responsibility for his every action (and inaction). As we view a scene that makes us cringe – a shampoo is being tested on a rabbit which is writhing desperately – we are confronted with the possibility of accepting Maitreya's argument on fundamental ethical grounds, rather than on religious grounds (at one point, he expresses his desire to hold a dialogue with the medical community). Yet, once he realises he has liver cirrhosis, Maitreya is faced with a choice between the very principles he stands for and his life.

The third story gives us a powerful overview of the global flow of body parts today, and deserves a special mention from a bio-ethics perspective. Navin (Sohum Shah) is an unsophisticated stockbroker, the grandson of an earnest woman who runs an NGO. The tension between the two is palpable. While she thinks he is obsessed with money and does nothing to reach out to people who "need his compassion," he thinks her "revolutionary" ways are stifling and useless. (The two argue in a well-executed scene right after he helps her urinate into a bedpan in a hospital.) Things change for Navin when he comes face-to-face with Shankar, a labourer who has had one of his kidneys stolen in the course of an appendix operation. Navin, who has just had a kidney replacement operation, is deeply shaken by this. Even after his doubts about whether his own surgery was the result of a donation have been laid to rest, he launches a search for Shankar's buyer-recipient. This takes him halfway across the globe to Stockholm. The buyer-recipient is a white man who, when confronted by Navin, first evades the subject, then becomes defensive and eventually breaks down. He offers to pay Shankar more money, but Navin wants a kidney for Shankar. We realise that today, capital disperses body parts in an economy that literally steals a poor man's kidney and puts it in the body of a hapless foreigner, who has the power but not the ability to see the context in which he is placed.

This circulation, in which we rent or sell parts of ourselves that could not earlier be rented or sold (think surrogacy, clinical trials, organ and blood donation/sale, stem cell research, etc), reflects the vulnerability of our bodies to the power of capital. Such transactions are taking place in newer and newer ways every day. This trend raises a plethora of questions regarding medical ethics, the marriage of capital and science (especially

biotechnologies), regulation and the role of the State, and the larger issues relating to poverty, rights and livelihoods. Together with the second, this last story seeks to understand individual choices within the varied contexts in which they are made.

The three stories come together seamlessly at the end of the film. The movie leaves us contemplating questions related to identity, as well as the costs at which scientific advances that give us an opportunity to lead a better/longer life are made possible.

**WORKSHOP TO PROMOTE PROFESSIONALISM AND ETHICAL
PRACTICES IN MEDICINE IN INDIA:
Taking stock and setting an agenda
KOLKATA, INDIA
January 10, 2014**

Serious concerns have arisen on all aspects of medical practice: from entry to medical colleges, and post-graduation, to the quality of education and training; and issues like self-referrals and commissions paid. The questions being asked are: Have doctors lost their way in India? Why are they failing to provide the necessary leadership to address these problems and the steadily deteriorating health indices?

The Forum for Medical Ethics and the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* have already been raising awareness on ethical issues and on the need for professionalism for many years. More recently, the Global Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (www.gapio.in) has been formed to mobilise Indian doctors worldwide to enable them to achieve professional excellence and to support health developments in India.

A few of us (Drs Nobhojit Roy, Amar Jesani and Rajan Madhok, supported by many others) have explored the synergy between these two initiatives and proposed a one day workshop in Kolkata on January 10, 2014 (venue to be notified) to:

- a. Learn about the state of professionalism and ethical practices in medicine in India: where we are heading, and what is being done to address problems
- b. Share the experiences of Indian doctors overseas and explore their relevance to India
- c. Discuss the values and behaviours (the professional framework) required to address the challenges in India – and what the *global Indian doctor* should be like
- d. Discuss and develop a potential programme of work to recognise, support, and develop health leaders who can help promote these values and behaviours, and effect change

The workshop will be an informal get together of like-minded colleagues, and, subject to discussion, formal arrangements for subsequent work will be put in place. Attendance at the workshop will be limited, especially as there are no funds to support travel/subsistence. Expressions of interests from willing participants – both for the workshop, and to be a part of the network -- are invited and should be submitted to Rajan Madhok (rajan.madhok@btinternet.com) who is coordinating this. Further details will appear on www.leadershipforhealth.com.