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Transplanting Life: *Bios* and *Zoe* in Images with Imagination

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Abstract

In this chapter, I read Braidotti's philosophical enquiries into contemporary technoscientific developments and new materialist processes of becoming mediated by the Indian film *Ship of Theseus*, which deals with complex bio- and geopolitical questions around organ transplantation. Bringing philosophy and film practice together, I argue that they are both important forms of micropolitical negotiations about the posthuman condition.

Keywords

Geopolitics, organ transplant, *bios/zoe*, becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-minoritarian, posthuman, death, *Ship of Theseus*

"As the planks of Theseus' ship needed repair, it was replaced part by part, up to a point where not a single part from the original ship remained in it, anymore. . . . Is it, then, still the same ship?" With this age-old question, Indian filmmaker Anand Gandhi opens his remarkable first feature film *Ship of Theseus* (2012). The film presents three stories, all set in Mumbai, that deal with questions of identity and ethics centered on organ transplantation. In the first part, we follow a visually impaired photographer, Aaliya Kamal (Aida El-Kashef), who is about to have a cornea transplant that will restore her vision. In the second story, Maitreya (Neeraj Kabi), a monk and activist campaigning for a ban on animal testing in India, is diagnosed with liver cirrhosis, yet refuses to take medication and receive a liver transplant. Finally, stockbroker Navin (Sohum Shah), who has just had a kidney transplant, learns about kidney tourism. Through the new technoscientific and geopolitical reality of organ transplant, *Ship of Theseus* asks impertinent questions of the "posthuman condition" described by Rosi Braidotti as

“an explosion of the concept of the human under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns” (Braidotti 2013j, pp. 1–2). In this chapter, I follow Braidotti’s philosophical enquiries into the new materialism and the processes of becoming mediated by the questions raised by *Ship of Theseus*. This encounter between philosophy and film invites us to think of both practices as forms of activism for our embodied and embedded minds in a posthuman world.

Becoming-woman: Seeing with her ears and hands

Braidotti defines posthumanism in the first instance as the new condition beyond humanism’s classical ideal of “Man” as “the measure of all things” (2013j, p. 13). With her roots in feminism, postcolonial theory, and the poststructural philosophy of Foucault and Deleuze, she proposes a material and a historically and geopolitically situated philosophy that can deal with the complexities and demands of the contemporary world. Rather than defending an oppositional, critical anti-humanism, Braidotti suggests moving beyond a dialectic position based on negation of the classical “Human” and exploring alternative and affirmative ways of conceptualizing human subjectivity as “a process of auto-poiesis of self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values” (2013j, p. 35). Experimenting with new models, new forms of the self, is central to Braidotti’s ethico-political philosophy. *Ship of Theseus* proposes such affirmative experiments related to questions of science and technology raised by organ transplantation. Each of the three stories of the film addresses another set of complex questions of posthuman subjectivity.

In the first story, we meet Aaliya who is waiting for a cornea transplant that could restore her vision. Despite her handicap, she is a photographer and lives independently with her boyfriend in an apartment in Mumbai. She captures the world in images by listening to it, directing her camera at interesting sounds; by touching and feeling its surfaces; and by the descriptions that the color sensor in her camera gives her. She says that after a cornea infection took away her vision, she was inspired by Suskind’s *The Perfume* and the possibility of having a different sensory access to the world, the possibility of accessing the world in alternative ways. Her ears and hands always tell her what to shoot and her work is exhibited successfully. She does not conform to any norm: she does not follow the visually dominated organization of the senses, and she makes her own decisions about her work even if her boyfriend describes the images that she has shot and says that he would make different choices. And yet, when she receives new corneas and regains her sight, she expects to become “a real photographer” with more access to the beauty of the world through the visual route. In fact, however, she loses her ability to point her camera at what is most interesting. Overwhelmed by the visual abundance of the city, she leaves for the Himalaya mountains and puts down her camera, now directing her senses and sensibilities inward: What does it mean to perceive the world, to be an artist who transforms aesthetically how we look at the world?

The questions that this story addresses could be seen in relation to the concept of “becoming-woman,” a concept much discussed in feminist theory. In the revised

edition of *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti takes up the issue in discussing its legacy (2011c, pp. 201, 245–62). Initially, the Deleuze–Guattarian concept of “becoming-woman” was met with much suspicion as a concept that would deny women any kind of subjectivity, and that was in favor of a general “becoming-imperceptible,” and Braidotti, as a “feminist Deleuzian undutiful daughter,” insists on keeping a critical gender perspective in reading the concept of becoming-woman (2011c, p. 278). On the other hand, she acknowledges that becoming-woman could indeed be the beginning of a nonteleological nature of becomings as processes that “aim at nothing other than transformations, redistribution, and displacement.” (2011c, p. 279; see also Conley 2000, Pisters 2007, and Colebrook and Weinstein 2008). Discussing the concept of becoming-woman in relation to Virginia Woolf, Claire Colebrook argues similarly that becoming-woman is a posthuman and postfeminist concept, a form of micropolitics that should affect both men and women and could, indeed, be considered as “key to all becomings” (Colebrook 2013, p. 436).

I have suggested that one way of entering the micropolitics of becoming-woman can be found on the level of aesthetics, by way of transforming the dominant forms of perception through the eye and the gaze. Accessing the world through the gaze has been quite imprisoning for women because it often reduces them to images “to be looked at” without much agency themselves, as Laura Mulvey and other feminist film theorists have demonstrated elaborately. (Mulvey 1989; Smelik 1998) And so, accessing the world differently, through the other senses—through the ear, through touch—is the beginning of a transformation process, the beginning of a “becoming-minoritarian” of perception and aesthetics. “Haptic visuality,” as Laura Marks has described it (Marks 2000, p. 164), and “affective relational aesthetics” (Pisters 2003; 2013) could be considered as forms of resistance to dominant aesthetics that could be seen as a form of becoming-woman, alternatives to dominant forms of aesthetic organization. Aaliya in *Ship of Theseus*, while situated in a modern lifestyle in Mumbai, has to pause and question the way she can perceive the world differently with her regained eyesight, questioning both perception and the capturing of perception in photos. Even her own identity is shaken, as she looks quite literally through the eyes of another. Regaining her vision asks her to yet again enter into a new process of becoming, “beyond the self” (2013j, p. 39).

Becoming-animal, becoming-earth: A fight between bios and zoe

The next section of *Ship of Theseus* brings us to another story. Now we follow a monk, Maitreya, who walks barefoot to Mumbai’s high court where he is part of a group of activists against testing chemicals on animals for cosmetic and scientific research and the horrible conditions under which they are kept. “In this age there are different ways to do research such as stem cell testing and computer simulation,” the attorney in the film argues. In a conversation with a critical friend, a young law intern Charvaka, Maitreya reveals himself as an atheist, and yet he believes in the concept of the soul. A chant that we hear expresses this postsecular idea explicitly: “There is no celestial

creator nor destroyer, no eternal judge. . . . I take responsibility for my actions and their consequences. The smallest creatures have a life-force just like mine. . . . The truth is multi-faceted, and there are many ways to reach it. . . . May my karma of ignorance be shed. . . ." For Maitreya, every molecule counts and every minute action leaves a mark on the soul, and he lives according to this extended conception of life that puts him in touch with animals and the earth on a molecular level.

Maitreya moves between what Braidotti calls "bios" and "zoe." The vital forces of life that extend beyond the human species into animals, plants, and minerals are the forces of *zoe* that Maitreya deeply acknowledges. *Bios* is the discursive and politically regulated form of life, traditionally reserved for human and organic life, which the monk is fighting to have changed. He exemplifies how "the relational capacity of the posthuman subject is not confined within our species, but it includes all nonanthropomorphic elements" (Braidotti 2013j, p. 60). Then Maitreya falls ill and is examined through an MRI scanner. When he is diagnosed with advanced liver cirrhosis, it seems a truthful step for him to refuse medication and the only thing that could save him, a liver transplant, because both these would involve the testing on animals and maltreatments that he is against. He decides to stop eating and choose death. A "becoming-animal" and "becoming-earth" are implied in this quest for truth of both material and spiritual connection to other species and elements of the world.

The young Charvaka, however, keeps on asking Maitreya impertinent questions: "What about the violence you are committing on yourself by not taking medication? How is your choice different from that of a suicide bomber who is so convinced about the fundamentalism of his political and religious thoughts?" "Do you realize that you are going to give up your life for something that is nothing more than a thought experiment?" But Maitreya adheres to his principles. Just at the moment when we think that one has to be extremely religiously dedicated (if not, indeed, a fundamentalist) to be able to make this choice, when he is on the verge of dying, he does not make the ultimate sacrifice: he accepts to eat again, perhaps even agrees to a transplant, though this is not explicit. The reasons for his change of mind are not given, and they are, in any case, not reducible to one factor. It is a multiplicity and an accumulation of choices. But one understands that the fight between *bios* and *zoe* is a very powerful one, a fight that in our posthuman condition does not have a single (religious) model. There are no easy answers in this postanthropocentric "life beyond the species." As Braidotti has argued, it implies an open-ended trans-species flow of becoming through interaction with multiple others and with many ethical and (micro)political choices to make on the way (2013j, p. 89).

Becoming-minoritarian: Globalized biopolitics

The last part of *Ship of Theseus* reveals yet another complex issue involved in the posthuman condition related to organ transplantation. We meet a young stockbroker, Navin, who has just recovered from a kidney transplant. While taking care of his sick grandmother in hospital, he learns about illegal organ traffic when a bricklayer named Shankar is brought in because of complications at just such an operation. Fearing

that it is the kidney of this man that he has received, and obsessed with the idea of doing social justice, he follows the man's trail to the Mumbai slums, with the idea of "returning" his kidney if he finds out it is a stolen one. When he discovers that he is not the recipient of Shankar's organ, he tracks down the person who did receive his kidney, a journey that leads him to Sweden. Here he confronts the European recipient with the origins of his new organ. Back in Mumbai, he finds out that the impoverished bricklayer does not want another kidney in return but prefers, instead, to receive a monthly payment, which the recipient in Sweden is prepared to make.

Again there are no easy answers offered in this story. The issue of legal and illegal organ trafficking is a known fact of globalized capitalism (Geesink and Steegers 2011). Many excesses are known and the power imbalance between the rich and the poor is an important concern for the traffic in "organs without bodies." Braidotti has raised the issue of "detachable organs" in respect to the technoscientific gaze that, for instance, isolates the fetus from the mother's body, and influences (medical) decisions made about life and death (2011, p. 197). Selling or renting organs (surrogate mothers who carry the child for somebody else) is another type of "organs without bodies," an aspect of the biopolitics of our contemporary posthuman world that needs to be taken into the complexity of global transpositions. The latter involve many different encounters, exchanges, and fights between *bios* and *zoe* that ask for a new critical and creative thinking about life in this new materialist sense. As Braidotti argues, "the whole point is to elaborate sets of criteria for a new ethical system . . . not for the sake of restoration of unitary norms or the celebration of the master narrative of global profit, but for the sake of elaborating sustainable modes of transformation and becoming" (2013, p. 76).

Although Navin in *Ship of Theseus* fails to find any real answers, he does go on a search and comes out with a more profound understanding of the moral dilemmas attached to global capitalism and questions of life and death. All three stories of "organs without bodies" are connected to the ethical dilemmas of the characters that force them to become-other (in Deleuzian terms to create "bodies without organs"), to think differently about the question of organ transplantation and contemporary dilemmas, even though the questions of beauty, identity, life, and death are much older. Gandhi explained in an interview that "the three short stories evolved to fill in the three corners of the classical Indian trinity of Satyam-Shivam-Sunderam (The pursuit of truth, the pursuit of righteousness, and the pursuit of beauty)" (Wylie 2012). Gandhi has brought these stories together in a way that demonstrates profound insights into the contemporary posthuman condition that resonates in many concerns of Braidotti's corporeal, postsecular spiritualism and ethics of new materialism, creating in the process a film that is much more than simply the juxtaposition of these three, in themselves, meaningful stories.

Becoming-imperceptible: Theseus's ship

Back in Mumbai, Navin goes to a meeting organized by an NGO that brings together (families of) donors and recipients of organs. The meeting takes place in the museum of natural history, where a film screening has been organized that allows Navin to

know his donor. There are several seats in front of the screen. Besides Navin and two other people, we suddenly also recognize Aaliya and Maitreya among the audience of recipients. Close-ups of stones and minerals on the screen pull us into the earth. They are the last images of the donor, a speleologist in his last descent into a cave before his fatal fall. It is deeply moving to see how the age-old paradox of Theseus's ship gets a highly contemporary, posthuman, and new materialist significance, proposing life and death as transindividual and eco-philosophical. *Ship of Theseus* offers an "inhuman" perspective on "life beyond death," connected to a "becoming-imperceptible." As Braidotti explains, this necro-political dimension of *bios/zoe* knows many different forms. But, ultimately, "death is the becoming-imperceptible of the posthuman subject and as such it is part of the cycles of becoming, yet another form of interconnectedness, a vital relationship that links one with other, multiple forces. The impersonal life and death as bios/zoe in us—the ultimate outside as the frontier of the incorporeal: becoming-imperceptible" (Braidotti 2013, p. 137).

The speleologist in *Ship of Theseus* lives on in the flesh of multiple other human beings who, in turn, have changed, become something else, bodies with differently organized organs that scramble habitual connections and thoughts. Through filmic means, the film shows us a materialist philosophy of becoming and the need to think beyond ourselves, our species, our life, by acknowledging the complexity of our posthuman condition, proposing, as Braidotti argues, "a shared need to negotiate processes of sustainable transformations with multiple others within the flow of monstrous energy of a 'Life' that does not respond to our names, but endures through difference and by differing" (Braidotti 2013, p. 175). In an interview with Gandhi, Ekta Kapoor remarks that *Ship of Theseus* is a truly remarkable film because it is perhaps the first Indian film that offers an introspection of the human being, bringing up questions that were never addressed before in a similar way in Indian cinema where survival was always the first and foremost preoccupation (Kapoor 2013). Gandhi acknowledges that it is a privilege to introspect, but says that it is not just an elitist occupation. On the contrary, everybody has deep thoughts, can have beautiful insights, and should have access to philosophy. One might even add that introspection and philosophy are very important means for our survival in the posthuman age. Dealing with the complexities of our world asks for a radically immanent approach of the kind that Braidotti is offering and that Gandhi has transposed into cinematographic language that goes beyond stereotypical representation, stirring debates on our posthuman condition in an imaginative way. Because all our knowledge and experience is mediated in increasingly important ways, such "images with imagination" are highly needed indeed (2011c, p. 212).

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