You are your body/You are not your body

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Abstract
This is a film review of You Are Your Body/You Are Not Your Body (2014), directed by Matt Latham.

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You are Your Body/You are Not Your Body (henceforth YAYB) is an independent film from Austin-based filmmakers Matt Latham and Nick Toti made for an estimated $15,000. Yet it offers more unexpected thrills, stimulating ideas, and pure cinematic pleasures than most eight-figure studio productions. Confidently filmed in black and white with local talent, YAYB incongruously grafts a spooky tale of a mysterious religious teacher and her followers (who seem to be able to appear anywhere from out of nowhere) onto a somber family drama, centered on the conflicts that come to the surface for four siblings when their mother dies. Most surprisingly, YAYB presents one of the most positive and compelling versions of the traditional Christian message of salvation and redemption this reviewer has seen in modern cinema and offers a far more persuasive argument for the power of the spiritual truths of Christianity than the more overt forms of cinematic proselytizing, as currently exemplified by God’s Not Dead (2013) or Left Behind (2014).

The film opens with a glimpse of the Evans siblings’ mother Dinah (Cyndi Williams) before her death, who is indistinctly humming a melody while sitting next to a window in her house. Gradually, the same song can be heard from outside, a chorus faintly singing, “Jesus, Jesus/ Jesus in the morning, Jesus in the noon-time/ Jesus, Jesus/ Jesus when the sun goes down.” Next we meet Jacob Evans (Frank Mosley), the manager of a local hardware store, giving a speech to his crew, which includes his sister Rachel (Meredith Jane McCarty), about how all his employees are a family and they need to be willing to help and be helped, like a family. Upon returning from work, he finds his mother dead. Then the film introduces Gideon Evans (Gideon Seaman) and his girlfriend, Sasha Gates (Amara Gyulai) at a wrap party for an indie film in L.A. A beautiful woman dressed in white, with striking tattoos of eyes on her shoulders, enters the room and captures Sasha’s attention, but when Sasha follows her into the next room, the woman is gone. Arriving home from the party, Gideon gets the call from Jacob that their mother has died, and the next day
he is headed to Texas for the funeral. Soon, they are joined by their sister Leah, who is somewhat
estranged from the rest of the family. It is notable that each Evans sibling has a name from the
Hebrew Scriptures, though the film does not seem to be aiming for a Biblical allegory.

From here, YAYB follows two seemingly unrelated stories: The gathering of the Evans
clan in Texas and Sasha in L.A. In an intriguing move, it is Sasha’s story that emerges as the more
significant. On a walk in the hills outside of L.A. after Gideon leaves, Sasha again encounters the
mysterious woman (literally - played by Deborah Jensen, the character is unnamed in the credits)
with the eye tattoos, who introduces herself as a spiritual teacher. The teacher offers to let Sasha
try something. It is here that the film suddenly becomes a very different experience for the viewer,
as the camera focuses intently on Sasha as she responds to the woman’s questions, which become
more and more penetrating. “How do you feel? . . . How do you feel about your life? . . . Who are
you? . . .” Sasha’s answers reflect the shapeless confusion of many who live in the directionless
tumult of the modern world. The teacher tells her, “Anxiety is your god, when in truth it is a
demon.” She tells Sasha she will destroy the demon, but she will need to break her body in order
to chase it down. She “breaks” Sasha’s body through guided imagery not unlike the kind of
symbolic dismemberment often encountered by shamans in their otherworldly journeys. The
teacher first tells Sasha she has destroyed her legs, then her arms, eyes, ears – at which the screen
then cuts to black, plunging the audience into the same darkness Sasha is experiencing. We still
hear the teacher, who follows the demon into Sasha’s mind, where the only option is to burn it
down. “Shall I burn down your mind, and with it all your feelings of sadness, of loneliness, of
fear? Shall I destroy this demon once and for all?” With Sasha’s mind and body gone, the teacher
asks, “What are you now other than pure experience? Can you be said to exist? Perhaps you do
not.” When Sasha opens her eyes, all she can muster is a beatific “Cool.”
As exhilarating as the “mental exorcism” is on screen in YAYB, the audience is unprepared for the dark turn the film then makes. Sasha, disconnected, alone, anxious, wants to be funny, but only can tell jokes in isolation. At a comedy club, she abandons her chance to perform, giving way to a clown who doesn’t even try to tell a joke – he prepares to hang himself on stage instead. The prospect of his death alone is funny enough to him. Sasha invites him out dancing, and he goes in his clown makeup; his veneer of amusement conceals who he is and what he’s really feeling. Afterward Sasha at first playfully strip him naked in a game of spin-the-bottle, but then cruelly humiliates him. His emptiness and hers are both exposed. But then the teacher brings Sasha to another performance space, which seems to become a church, where she herself is stripped naked and receives each of the audience members – her followers – with a kiss. Sasha witnesses the transformation that unconditional love and a true community can offer. It is both a kind of communion – “This is my body” – and her baptism. She kisses the teacher, and she is one of them. She is never seen again in the film, the rest of which focuses on the raw nerves that are the Evans siblings. The Evans’ encounters with the mysterious teacher and her followers only get stranger – and more undeniable - from there.

In Christianity, the body is a constant source of tension for believers. It attempts to sin, it pulls one away from a spiritual course. But it is also through Jesus’ body that salvation of the soul is possible, and it is the body that is resurrected at the End. We are all both identified with our bodies and without them, but this duality is at the heart of Christian living in the world. The film ends with a jump cut to white, with the words “YOU ARE NOT YOUR BODY” fading in in black – the mirror image of the opening of the film, “YOU ARE YOUR BODY” in white, fading onto a black screen. These bookends, as well as the choice to film in black and white, use the formal element of film to reinforce the dualism between life and death, love and hate, light and dark that
seem to be the emotional core of Sasha’s encounters with the clown and the teacher, on the one hand, and the friction among the Evans siblings, especially Gideon, on the other. But rather than follow the well-trod path in film and make a religious resolution the acceptance of an illusion or, worse, a subterfuge for evil presented as a promise of peace, YAYB makes the bold choice to ask, what if someone divine could take away your pain and suffering and offer total love? Wouldn’t you give up this world to have that?

YOU ARE YOUR BODY/YOU ARE NOT YOUR BODY can be watched online at https://vimeo.com/85260028.