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Film Review: *The Physician*

Released in 2013, *The Physician* is a fictional film based on a novel by Noah Gordon of the same name. This film is an example of a health-based film that effectively captivates its audience by successfully interweaving plot and characters in a realistic cultural context. The plot revolves around the development of medical practices throughout the world in the 11th century and the tension that frequently existed between religion and science. The main character, Rob, is an Englishman who is orphaned at an early age when his mother dies of “side sickness,” now known as appendicitis. Shortly after, he is reluctantly taken in by the local healer, or “barber”, and raised as an apprentice. Rob develops a great interest in healing and discovers that he has quite a knack for it, including the unique ability to feel if someone is going to die by touching their chest. As he grows older, Rob desires to expand his medical repertoire and learn how to cure more serious ailments such as cataracts and side sickness. Initially, he travels with the barber to a local Jewish physician who can heal the barber’s cataracts. Then the barber and Rob part ways when Rob is encouraged to travel to the distant Persian Empire to receive the best available medical training. When he arrives, Rob’s perseverance and genuine desire to learn earn him the opportunity to study under the most distinguished healer in the world at the time, Ibn Sina. During his time there, Rob discovers the cause of the Bubonic plague and performs the first human dissection and surgery. Although the film is fictional and thus historically flawed in many ways, it is able to capture the complex relationship between religion and the development of medicine from multiple angles. From the viewpoint of a medical anthropologist, this is a good movie because it raises interesting questions about how culture and religion can shape a person’s opinions about medicinal treatments, emphasizes the need for equal and yet individualized holistic care, and highlights medical systems other than modern Western biomedicine.

The characters in *The Physician* all come from diverse backgrounds that influence whether they believe that scientific healing practices are beneficial or damaging to society. Every person is raised within a cultural context that shapes their values and motivates their actions. This cultural environment might include family life, religious influences, political economy, romantic relationships, etc. In the movie, Rob’s life is forever changed when his mother dies and he is separated from his siblings. With no real family left to take care of him, the barber becomes his new family. Family is the first and often the deepest social connection people experience in life. As the saying goes, blood is thicker than water. So naturally, many of our values and motivations stem from our family life. These early childhood experiences help us make sense of Rob’s career path and his willingness to travel across the world and risk his own life just to study medicine. His main motivation throughout the film is to learn how to cure the side sickness that killed his mother. This goal is deeply personal and emotionally-tied which encourages him to not give up even when he struggles to find satisfaction in his work.

Religion is another major component of a person’s value system which shapes their world view and, in this case, their view of medicine. Tension between religion and medical practices is a major theme of the film right from the beginning. When Rob realizes that his mother is nearing death, he immediately runs to get help from the barber. However, when they arrive back at the scene, the church officials have already gathered and performed Last Rites. Seeing the barber, the clergyman says in a threatening tone, “There is no cure for what ails this woman except the grace of God. Anything else would be called witchcraft.” The Christian church in England believed that anyone who attempted to heal people through their own power and skills was doubting the will and the goodness of God. The slow pace of scientific medical developments in England in the middle ages can be attributed to the dominant religious beliefs of the time.

The religious tensions in Isfahan in the movie were even more complicated. The city was inhabited by Muslims and Jews. No Christians lived there because they were being persecuted in the East at the time. Within the city, Ibn Sina ran a hospital where he both treated his patients and trained his students. The hospital was allowed to function and the Jews were allowed to live there because the Shah, the Emperor of Persia, permitted it. The Shah is portrayed as a powerful man who is too caught up in the pleasures of this world to be strictly tied to his religion. While the Shah tolerated the Jews and supported Ibn Sina’s work, most of the Islamic community in Isfahan greatly opposed the presence of the Jews and the medical institution. They believed that the work of the physicians in the hospital was a great sin against Allah and the cause of the suffering of the people in Isfahan, including the outbreak of the plague. Later in the movie, the unhappy Islamic community in Isfahan called upon the help of the Seljuks, a group of Muslim extremists who reside outside of the city, to drive out the Shah and the Jews so they could rebuild Isfahan as a holy and pure Islamic city. The Seljuks were extreme in that they believed that they were chosen by Allah to punish sinners and renounce all things of this world. In the context of these varying religious beliefs, the idea held by some characters that medicine causes more suffering than healing is understandable.

When the plague struck Isfahan in the movie, it became a major public health concern that was complicated by religion. Ibn Sina advised the Shah to evacuate the city immediately, but instead he selfishly escaped with other elites on a hunting trip and then locked the city so that no one who had been infected could escape. The students in the hospital and Ibn Sina chose to stay in the city to fight the deadly disease. Rob wondered if the black bulges that were characteristic of the disease could be surgically removed without harming the patients, but the only way to know this would be to dissect a corpse. He also thought dissection might help find the cause and cure for other mysterious diseases such as side sickness. However, both the Jews and the Muslims believed that dissecting a corpse was a grave sin. Any contact with the dead or the spirits of the dead was considered a form of necromancy or sorcery which was forbidden by Allah and Yahweh alike. When Rob raised the idea of dissecting a corpse to Ibn Sina, he instantly and decisively objected because of the religious consequences. In this case, Ibn Sina valued the religious law more than the practical knowledge that could be gained by such an experiment. However, driven still by his personal desire to find a cure for the disease that killed his mother and now also his desire to find a cure for the plague that could potentially kill the woman he loves, Rob valued the benefits to public health much more than he feared the religious authority. Rob and Ibn Sina shared their respect for religious values and their concern for public health, but in this instance, their priorities differed, leading them to make different decisions on the matter of dissection. Rob’s decision to dissect a corpse against his teacher’s advice almost led to the execution of both himself and Ibn Sina. From his risky decision, they learned a great deal about human anatomy and discovered the cure to side sickness.

This film also presents a good model for holistic, individualized care in the context of early medicine. Once while instructing his students, Ibn Sina says, “We don’t treat diseases. We treat people who suffer from diseases.” While this may seem like a trivial distinction, it actually is a crucial philosophy that should be practiced by all physicians. With patients constantly coming in and out of his hospital, Ibn Sina is reminding his students to always recognize and acknowledge the person behind the disease when providing treatment. Even today, physicians struggle with this. They see so many patients in a day, a week, a year, a lifetime that they can become detached from the suffering involved and fail to provide the comfort and concern needed by the patient in addition to the actual treatment. A “disease” is simply a way of understanding a set of symptoms, or a way to ascribe meaning to a person’s condition within a medical context in order to make it treatable. Therefore, even people who have the same disease, should be treated individually based on their unique needs and values. This kind of care has been desired from physicians since the development of the earliest forms of medicine as it humanizes the experience of disease and provides comfort to the suffering person’s mind as well as the body.

Another positive attribute of this film is that it does not idolize Western medicine. Generally in the West and therefore in Western films, modern Western biomedicine is esteemed while alternative practices associated with Eastern medicine are belittled or neglected. This is a form of ethnocentrism that disregards the value of other medical practices and cultures. The film accurately shows Eastern medicine as the most advanced medical system during this time. This is a refreshing point of view that acknowledges how the advancements made throughout the world and throughout history have all played a role in the developing medicine as we know it today. Each new discovery of Western biomedicine would not be possible without the contributions made by many individuals throughout the world and throughout history. While the film depicts the superiority of Eastern medicine, it unfortunately does so by championing the foreign Englishman who comes in and saves the eastern world, rather than making a true Easterner the hero. However, it is clear in the movie that Rob could never have accomplished any of his life-saving medical feats if he had not been educated within the advanced Eastern practice.

Overall, *The Physician* is a unique story that considers the development of early medicine within communities dominated by religious ideologies. It involves all three major monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, which creates complex plot lines and conflicts. Religious values and personal motivations based on family life drive the plot of the film, and understanding the plot within these contexts helps the viewer to make sense of the different actions of the characters. The movie also illustrates the value of holistic care and alternatives to Western biomedicine, making it a good movie from an anthropological point of view.

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The barbers of medieval Europe are indeed the ancestors of today’s barbers. Even the classic white and red striped pole typically seen outside barber shops is a tradition that can be traced back to this time period. However, the original barbers performed much more than just haircuts; they doubled as surgeons who would often perform amputations, pull teeth, distribute medicine, and carry out other rudimentary medical procedures. They represented the practical, secular side of medicine at the time, since their practices did not align with the church’s dominant spiritual healing ideology. For this reason, barbers were often at odds with the church. In the movie, the barber had quite an assortment of tricks up his sleeve when it came to healing. He is portrayed as a sort of travelling circus man who sets up shop in various towns throughout England and puts on a little show to gather a crowd and attract patients. He even makes Rob into his juggler. Showing his character in this way adds some comic relief to the film, but also takes some credibility and seriousness out of his role as a healer. To the audience, the barber’s techniques are seen as unsubstantiated and somewhat brutish, largely due to his goofy lifestyle and the cultural climate of the era. However, his character is vital in that he does carry a great deal of knowledge which he passes on to Rob as his informal apprentice.

There is one Jewish man in England who is able to heal the blind by removing their cataracts. As the barber’s blindness worsens and his frustration increases, he and Rob visit this man to have the cataract surgery performed. Rob is amazed that curing the blind is possible and is eager to learn how to perform this operation. The Jewish man refuses to teach him or even let him watch the barber’s surgery, but on a map, he shows him the way to Isfahan, a Muslim city in the Persian Empire where he can receive the best possible medical training from the great Ibn Sina.

The confusing part about historically-based fictional films, such as The Physician, is that it can be hard to tell what is factual information and what is fabricated for the purpose of entertainment. For example, while all the other characters are completely made up or are representative of a kind of person who could have existed at the time, Ibn Sina was an actual person whose work has been very influential throughout history. While his existence is true, much of his portrayal is inaccurate. He was much more than a physician; he also wrote extensively on other topics including philosophy, astronomy, physics, theology, music, etc. Also, his demeanor was not always so calm, wise, and understanding, but rather he was generally thought of as arrogant and aloof. Furthermore, he did not die of a dramatic suicide as shown in the movie. Late in his life, he developed either kidney stones or gallstones which caused him severe abdominal pain and eventually led to his death in 1037.

In the movie, Ibn Sina runs a hospital that doubles as a medical school for his students. Their work in Isfahan is complicated by religious and cultural tensions between various groups living in the city. There is the Shah, the emperor of Persia, who was all about the fame and fortune and permitted Ibn Sina and his Islamic and Jewish students to work in his city. This did not make the Seljuks very happy. They were a group of devout Sunni Muslims who believed that the work of the physicians in the hospital was a great sin against Allah and the cause of the suffering of the people in Isfahan, including the outbreak of the plague. These fundamental differences in religious beliefs lead to major conflicts in the film and illustrate how religion and culture greatly impact the way people view medicine. Some saw it as a beneficial practice of healing while other saw it as a cause of even greater suffering.

Once while instructing his students, Ibn Sina says, “We don’t treat diseases. We treat people who suffer from diseases.” While this may seem like a trivial distinction, it actually places an important emphasis on holistic care. With patients constantly coming in and out of his hospital, Ibn Sina is reminding his students to always recognize and acknowledge the person behind the disease when providing treatment. Even today, physicians often struggle with this. They see so many patients in a day, a week, a year, a lifetime that they can become detached from the suffering involved and fail to provide the comfort and concern needed by the patient in addition to the actual treatment. A “disease” is simply a way of understanding a set of symptoms, or a way to ascribe meaning to a person’s condition within a medical context in order to make it treatable. Therefore, even people who have the same disease, should be treated individually based on their unique needs and values.

A positive attribute of this film is that it does not idolize Western medicine. Generally in the West and therefore in Western films, Western biomedicine is esteemed as the be all and end all when it comes to healing. This is a form of ethnocentrism that disregards the value other practices and cultures. It shows Eastern medicine in the Persian empire during this time period as the most advanced system, which is factual. This is a refreshing point of view that acknowledges how the advancements made throughout the world and throughout history have all played a role in the developing medicine as we know it today. Each new discovery of Western biomedicine would not be possible without the contributions made by many diverse individuals to the scientific community. While it generally focuses on the superiority of Eastern medicine, it does have an element of Western superiority since it is always the foreign Englishman who makes all the marvelous discoveries and scientific feats. However, he could never have done any of that if he had not been educated by the Easterners.

Overall, in terms of historical accuracy of the content and representations of characters, The Physician is bad. However, considering that it is not meant to be a documentary and so should not be taken as one, it is redeemed somewhat in the eyes of the medical anthropologist as it raises questions about medical advancement in opposition to religious beliefs and shines light on medical practices other than Western biomedicine.

Much of the content of the movie is historically, religiously, and medically flawed, which makes sense as it is a fictional story meant for entertainment, not a documentary. However, the way it portrays methods and ideologies of healing in various areas of the world within different cultural and religious contexts makes it relevant to many topics of medical anthropology.

A very powerful scene towards the beginning of the movie, when Rob is still a child, occurs when his mother dies. This is the first time Rob uses his “power” and is able to sense that death is imminent for his mother.

From this, he was able to thoroughly study each organ and find the cause and cure of side sickness. However, he was unable to share this information with others because he would be sentenced to death, which almost happens when someone discovers his secret. The religious-based conflicts drive the entire plot of the movie.

The introduction of the plague into the city creates a major public health issue as it begins to spread rapidly. Ibn Sina advises the Shah to evacuate the city immediately, but instead he escapes with other elites on a hunting trip and then locks the city so that no one who has been infected can escape. The medical students stay and help Ibn Sina battle this unknown infectious disease. This is when Rob wants to perform the dissection to see if it is possible to surgically remove the black bulges associated with the disease without harming the patient.