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Life of Pi

Abstract

This is a film review of *Life of Pi* (2012) directed by Ang Lee.

“He said you had a story that would make me believe in God.” So sets the stage of Ang Lee’s exquisite portrayal of Yann Martel’s epic novel *Life of Pi*. The narrative is set in motion with a middle-aged Pi recounting his youthful experiences to a Canadian writer who is desperately searching for his big break - for a story unlike any other. Upon a chance encounter with a mutual acquaintance and hearing that Pi has a story that would make him believe in God, the writer (and we viewers) are treated to a fantastical, in some ways magical, tale that encapsulates and portrays the depths of the human spirit, the positive role of religion, and the perilous beauty of the natural world.

This is an explicit, unabashedly religious film. At almost every turn, there is reflection about religion and the pursuit of God; from Pi’s childhood experiences with the world’s major religious traditions, to longing for God to reveal himself while lost at sea, the film proudly advocates the richly religious substance that so much of the book is focused on. Even more impressive is the way that Lee seems to unite all these religious experiences and show each as rudimentary to Pi’s complete spiritual formation. In a Western culture, where our religions tend to be more exclusive of one another, this film offers a momentary breath of fresh air, in the form of a more Eastern inclusive approach. Scenes that capture this interfaith dialogue, such as when a young Pi prays, “Thank you, Krishna, for introducing me to Christ,” will undoubtedly anger some religiously devout audience members, but it also speaks to an ever-growing, global multicultural view of religious harmony that is slowly gaining momentum in the West.

However, this discussion of religious inclusiveness is only a prelude to the film’s primary thrust. The bulk of the story centers around Pi’s unfortunate disaster that leaves him stranded on the Pacific Ocean in a small lifeboat. Deserted at sea with him are a hyena, a zebra, an

orangutan, and a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. As food becomes scarce, the animals quickly turn on each other until only Pi and Richard Parker remain. It is an absurd premise to say the least, but its absurdity is in some ways the crux of the earlier guarantee that this story will make one believe in God. During his aimless journey with Richard Parker, which lasts 277 days, Pi undergoes a plethora of spiritual and emotional changes. His metamorphosis is initiated by his search for God, discovering God's plan in the midst of tragedy and loss. Much could be said about this part of the film; about the twin emotions of fear and awe in encountering the Divine, or perhaps the spiritual significance of hope, or even yet, the topic of deliverance. All these possibilities, plus many more, are presented to the viewer in the film, but the real emphasis – the part of the story that would make the writer believe in God – comes after Pi's incredible journey when he is questioned by authorities sent from the shipping company to discover why the initial vessel carrying Pi sank.

Upon telling his interrogators of his miraculous voyage, they doubt his story, claiming the tale to be too fantastical, too unreal to be true. They push for the facts; the real story that can explain the events in concrete terms, void of any explanation of survival that includes tigers or imaginary islands. Out of reluctance, Pi then offers a new account of the events and of his journey. This new narrative suggests that Richard Parker – the giant Bengal tiger – and the other animals were never really in the lifeboat with Pi for those 277 days; that in fact, the animals were constructed metaphors of Pi himself and fellow survivors who killed one another.

“Which story do you prefer?” Pi asks the writer when he has finished his tale. The writer responds that he prefers the one with the tiger, because that is the better story. “Thank you,” Pi replies, “And so it goes with God.” What Pi apparently tries to demonstrate to the writer is that perhaps the “fantastical” and “religious” accounts of the Divine are better options than facing the

dark and horrendous capabilities found engrained in the human being. Pi's story does not force one to believe in God through rational means; rather, one believes in God because the other options are too unbearable. While this concluding comment from Pi – “And so it goes with God” – has prompted varied reactions and interpretations from religious, film, and literary critics alike, a theme that cannot be mistaken in the film is the treatment of anthropomorphism as an element of religion. The idea of projecting or personifying human attributes and characteristics to non-human life (as expressed early on in the film when young Pi believes he sees “a friend” in the zoo's tiger), the film suggests, is found in the very constructs of religious systems.

Life of Pi was nominated for eleven Academy Awards and deservedly won four. Lee has assembled a cinematic masterpiece that reintroduces the positive value of religion to the secular world in an imaginative way, while never straying far from the essence of Martel's novel. The film is not only thought provoking, but emotionally compelling in terms of narrative and style. As one film reviewer wrote, “Much of the joy of this film is that it maintains its overarching philosophy without skimping on narrative or spectacle. Religiously themed films tend to force their narratives to submit to their philosophies...here, however, every scene is beautiful or captivating. David Magee's script based on Martel's book draws on every emotion...and this mix of reality and fantasy is a perfect fit.”¹ It will be interesting to see if this film ushers in a renewal of explicit religiously focused, mainstream films. What would such a revival say about our cultural society? Does the acknowledgement of this film from the Academy represent a subtle shift in our contemporary understanding of religion and secularization?

¹ Omer M. Mozaffar, “Tested to find the ultimate destination,” review of *Life of Pi*, by Omar M. Mozaffar, *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 25, 2012, <http://blogs.suntimes.com/foreignc/2012/11/gazing-at-the-absence-in-a-tigers-irises.html>.