

Thoughts on *The Fountain*: Jason Bellamy and Ed Howard

Howard: *The Fountain* is divided into three stories, which flow into each other and relate to each other in somewhat ambiguous ways. The central story, arguably, is the tragic romance between medical researcher Tommy Creo (Jackman) and his wife Izzi (Weisz). Izzi is dying of a tumor, and Tommy is desperate to discover a miracle cure before he loses her; like other Aronofsky heroes, he pours himself obsessively into his work. Jackman also plays a conquistador, Tomás, who is searching for a mythical Mayan Tree of Life at the behest of his queen, Isabelle (Weisz again, of course), who is under the siege of a religious Inquisitor (Stephen McHattie). And Jackman also plays a bald mystic hurtling through space within a bubble of air that contains the now-dying tree. The structure of the film is ingenious, as these three stories together express the never-ending quest of humanity to defeat death, to overcome the transience of existence: the mystic is a future incarnation of Tommy, or perhaps Tommy himself, his life elongated by the tree's power, just as Tommy is the conquistador reborn in a new form. At the same time, the conquistador's tale is woven into the film as the novel that Izzi was writing in her final months, a novel that she purposefully leaves unfinished, bequeathing it to Tommy to write the final chapter. And the man in space, rather than literally being Tommy far in the future, is perhaps better understood as a symbolic construct, inhabiting an abstracted mental landscape in which he can work through his loss and his desperate desire to overcome death.

Aronofsky leaves much of this unspoken. After two films' worth (*Pi* and *Requiem for a Dream*) of stark literalism and heavy-handed symbolism, Aronofsky allows *The Fountain's* symbols and themes to be more free-flowing and organic. The film culminates with a sequence that, in some ways, mirrors the interconnected structure of *Requiem for a Dream's* finale, cutting between multiple stories and ratcheting up the pace so that images and events hurtle by at a dizzying speed. And yet the effect here is sublime. The film is about the quest for eternal life, but it ultimately leads towards an affirmation of mortal life, of the fleeting pleasures to be found in a finite existence. Tommy completes Izzi's novel by leading the conquistador to his encounter with the Tree of Life, an encounter that suggests that, if there is an eternal life to be found, it is not on the terms we would wish it. At the same time, the man in space allows Tommy to rewrite parts of his own past with Izzi, revisiting a crucial juncture and turning away from the obsession that consumed him in the final months of his wife's life. Instead of channeling his negative emotions into futile attempts to cheat death, he goes for a walk in the snow with his wife, enjoying the brief remainder of the time they have together. And finally he plants a tree over her grave, a gesture that resonates with the conquistador's fate, with the man in the bubble's fate, and with the Mayan myth of the "first father," the story that structures Izzi's novel.

Earlier in the film, the Inquisitor says, "Our bodies are prisons for our souls. Our skin and blood, the iron bars of our confinement." Though he is superficially opposed to the queen's quest for eternal life, in fact his is simply an alternative (and particularly grisly) form of the obsession, a form that rejects earthly materiality in favor of an eternal spiritual life after death. Aronofsky's film ultimately suggests that this obsession with the end of life, whether it takes shape as science or religion, prevents people from engaging with life on its own terms. Where *Pi* and *Requiem for a Dream* were about people who succumbed in various ways to their obsessions, negating their lives in the process, *The Fountain* is about acceptance, about the rejection of the dangerous obsessions that distract us from the pleasures and heartaches that make life worth living.

Bellamy: We agree on the last part, but not quite on how the film gets there. Your description of *The Fountain's* three parts suggests a level of disparity that I contend doesn't actually exist. I agree that Aronofsky leaves the unity of the film's past, present and future chapters refreshingly unspoken, and thus somewhat ambiguous, which explains why many of the film's original reviews suggested *The Fountain's* chapters are unified in theme alone. (Another popular interpretation, perhaps unduly influenced by the film's somewhat misleading trailer, suggests that the chapters should be read rather literally – presenting multiple incarnations of a love that spans thousands of years.) But while I'm hesitant to imply that a film this rich has only one interpretation, having seen *The Fountain* at least ten times, I'm as confident as ever that, structurally speaking, there's only one way to read it.

In my mind, *The Fountain* has one "true" narrative – Tommy and Izzi in the present. The story of Tomás the conquistador is, as you said, a narrative imagined by Izzi for her book, which ends with Tomás's confrontation with the guardian of the Tree of Life. The story of Tom the futuristic Zen astronaut, then, is Tommy's imagined conclusion to Izzi's book. To understand how these stories fit together, we must first understand the motives for their creation. Izzi's book is her attempt to reconcile her own death. The Inquisitor represents the tumor taking over Izzi's body, claiming new territory bit by bit and charting each conquest with blood on a map. Tomás's search for the Tree of Life mirrors Tommy's relentless pursuit for a miracle cure – one man overseas, the other one holed up in his lab, both men consumed by their efforts to overcome death. Though it's never explicitly stated, I think it's fair to assume that when Izzi began writing her story she was trying to justify Tommy's absence in her final days, to herself and even to him. Eventually, though, Izzi realizes that Tommy won't find the cure, and that the only way that she can be with Tommy eternally is for both of them to believe in some kind of life after death. Hence Izzi's decision to make Tommy finish her story, because ultimately the discovery he needs to make is a spiritual and emotional one. He must come to terms with death.

At first it seems odd that Tommy's final chapter would thrust the story ahead several thousand years, giving us a somewhat new character, futuristic Tom, but in retrospect it makes perfect sense. The Tom chapter borrows from Izzi's fascination with Mayan culture, with Izzi represented by a dying tree and Tom racing to get Izzi to Xiabalba, a nebula wrapped around a dying star "where souls go to be reborn." Tom, with his tattooed ring finger, is Tommy's vision of his future self, perhaps imagined under the assumption that he will cure aging like a disease. On his arm are various tattoos that, like tree rings, trace Tom's history with Izzi. But one of the rings remains incomplete, and when Tom goes to ink in the rest of that tattoo, he imagines Izzi in her hospital bed and can't go on, can't get closure (figuratively and literally), can't accept her death.

Throughout the Tom chapter, Izzi's voice haunts him: "Finish it!" It's as if Tommy has spent a thousand years – in this case figuratively or, I suppose, literally – avoiding the end of Izzi's story. But eventually, after remembering their past once again, he gives in. "All right," he says, touching his ring finger. "I trust you. Take me. Show me." It's in that moment that Tom (and thus Tommy) realizes he's going to die. In that moment he sacrifices his scientific outlook on the world for one of faith. And so it is that Tomás, facing the flaming sword guarding the Tree of Life, becomes Tom, in a meditative pose, willing to be struck down, willing to face death, willing to believe that somehow this isn't the end. It's that acceptance that leads to "eternal life," just a different one than he was looking for – a spiritual, religious view of everlasting life, rather than Tommy's scientific view of life in bodily form.

I go into detail about this reading mainly because I think it reveals how layered *The Fountain* is, how focused, how harmonious. As we continue to talk about the film, there are recurring themes that, yes, unite these chapters. But these themes crop up in each story precisely because it's one story being told: a story of a husband and wife struggling to deal with her imminent death.

Howard: I don't think our readings are quite as different as you suggest. I agree, certainly, that the "real" story of *The Fountain* is the romance of Tommy and Izzi and their process of dealing with her approaching death. The other two stories serve as metaphorical constructs that reinforce this central story and its themes. And more than that, the two "fictional" stories within the film represent the two main characters' attempts to grapple with death through storytelling: just as Izzi writes her coming death as a mythic adventure with Tommy as her conquistador, battling futilely but bravely for her sake, Tommy tries to rewrite his own past from an imagined vantage point in the distant future. Though Aronofsky does leave room for the whole film to be read literally as a story of reincarnation that spans thousands of years, I don't think that's an especially convincing or enlightening reading. On that much we agree.

It's interesting, though, that you see the finale as an affirmation of "a spiritual, religious view of everlasting life," whereas I think the film is, in part, about the secular experience of death. Despite all the mystical trappings, the core of the film is much more grounded. The film suggests that the scientist and the Inquisitor make the same mistake in their certainty that the time we have on Earth is not enough, that there must be something more. Transcendence and spirituality and mysticism are elements in this story, but ultimately they are dismissed in favor of earthly materiality. The conquistador's mythological adventure and the Zen spaceman's journey are avenues into understanding the central story, but that central story is resolutely material, concerned not so much with what comes after death as what we can and should do before death. Tommy is comforted, not so much because he believes he'll be reunited with Izzi in the afterlife, but because he comes to accept that the time they had together on Earth would have to be enough. In the film's final act, amidst all the fireworks and the mystical visions, the most powerful moment is Tommy's reimagined walk with Izzi, when he leaves his work to spend the day with her. It's not the afterlife that redeems Tommy; it's life itself.

We don't know what comes after death, whether it's nothingness, or reincarnation (a possibility explored through Jackman's multiple roles), or some form of afterlife (a possibility suggested by the film's multiple representations of going into the light). But whatever it is, it's something separate and new, and since we don't know, we should embrace life, should embrace earthly existence and the people we share that existence with. This is the message of *The Fountain* as I see it. It is an agnostic celebration of life and love. This is, it must be said, remarkably close to my own philosophy about life and death, so perhaps one reason that I find this film so emotionally engaging and so thrilling is because it makes such poetry and beauty of the idea that life on Earth is, quite possibly, all we have, and that we should seek fulfillment and transcendence within life rather than outside or beyond it.

Bellamy: I think you're absolutely correct that this film confirms the need to "seek fulfillment and transcendence within life," but don't ignore that Tommy is trying to do just that by investing every waking moment in his lab. Yes, he turns away from his wife in the process, hoping to find a miracle cure at the eleventh hour, but he does so precisely because he thinks death is The End, that

when Izzi is gone there will be nothing left. Izzi, meanwhile, who no doubt appreciated the beauty of the present, is the one who is fascinated by the concept of death “as an act of creation.” So, yes, Izzi finds herself no longer terrified by death (“I’m not afraid anymore”), and thus part of her motivation for leaving that last chapter of her book unwritten is to get Tommy to accept his own mortality and mortality in general. (The Tom chapter is set far in the future to acknowledge just how difficult it is for Tommy to let go of his desire to eradicate death.) But I think we’re overlooking quite a bit if we fail to recognize Izzi’s hope for, and belief in, some kind of afterlife.

First, of course, there are Izzi’s words in the present: her stories of Mayan culture – her fascination with Xiabalba – and of the Mayan guide who believed that his dead father became the tree that was planted over his grave. Then there are Izzi’s words in the past: her oft-repeated claim that “together we will live forever”; if Tommy uttered those words, it would seem to confirm his obsessive delusion that death is a disease, but Izzi is the film’s sage. Then there’s the film’s religious imagery, from the biblical Tree of Life to the oft-repeated shot of the gold altarpiece, before which Tomás the conquistador kneels – a glassy, circular bubble set within a sunburst of gold with a Christian cross on top, which foreshadows the image of Tom’s futuristic spaceship exploding within the nebula and his eventual vertical ascent toward the heavens. Then there’s Tomás’s transformation into the hovering Tom, just before he’s struck down by the flaming sword, which always reminds me of the terrific moment in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* when Indy puts his hand on his chest and makes a solemn “leap” of faith by willingly stepping out over the edge of a seemingly bottomless chasm; Tom, I believe, is likewise showing a belief in something beyond himself. And of course there are the frequent spoken and cinematic suggestions of death as “a road to awe”; *The Fountain* frequently shows Tomás and Tommy walking down corridors toward the light.

Now, in that final touching moment when Tommy steps into the light and has his awakening, he steps into his present, joining Izzi for a walk in the snow. So, again, I agree, this affirms our need to “embrace our earthly existence.” But let’s not forget that Tom’s breakthrough about his own mortality comes only after Izzi’s death – both in the Tommy chapter, with Izzi as flesh and blood, and in the Tom chapter, with Izzi represented by the dying tree. Like you, my personal philosophy about death is that we just don’t know what happens, and I’m grateful that *The Fountain* never specifically says what the afterlife is, or even if there is one. But to me the reason Tommy’s transformation is so triumphant, and the reason Izzi, in the quasi-afterlife, smiles back at him with pride, isn’t because he accepts that he will die but because he accepts that his death may not be The End. So when I suggest that *The Fountain* has a spiritual, religious view of everlasting life, I don’t mean to imply that it’s specifically Christian, for example, just that it isn’t purely scientific. This is a film about appreciating life in the moment, but just as much, in my opinion, it’s a film about faith, about believing that death isn’t The End – or at least allowing for that possibility.

Howard: That's well-said, and perhaps I overstated the film's secular aspects at the expense of its spiritual ones. What's interesting about the film is how thoroughly it intertwines its evocations of a possible afterlife with its celebration of present-tense life on Earth. It is steadfastly opposed to the Inquisitor's form of religion, which concerns the mortification of the flesh and the rejection of earthly life; the film suggests that, whatever spiritual transcendence might be awaiting us after death, we should never live only for that moment. It's about living for what's on Earth rather than for the hope of what lies beyond. So while the film undoubtedly deals with Christian iconography and the hope for an afterlife, it essentially places the afterlife on equal footing with mortal existence. Even

the image of the tree as a symbol for transcendence suggests that the afterlife might exist within the natural world: the Mayan guide, Moses Morales, believes that his father lives on as a part of the world, his body transmuted into a tree, its leaves and its fruit, so that his memory can be spread throughout the world, carried on the wind or in the stomach of a bird. Thus when Tommy plants a tree over Izzi's grave, it's a symbolic gesture acknowledging that her memory will live on within the world, even if her physical presence is gone – regardless of what other afterlife she may or may not have moved on to.

Still, there's no denying that the film's climax is deeply mystical, in a way that preserves the mystery of the afterlife while obviously propelling its characters towards their various encounters with what comes next. The conquistador eats of the Tree of Life and is transformed into flora bursting from the soil (like the guide's father who becomes a tree, and maybe like Izzi herself once her own tree grows over and into her bones). The space traveler enters the heart of the dying star (earlier described as the Mayan underworld) and rushes joyfully into the light. Moreover, Aronofsky's aesthetic sensibility here seems to be aligned thoroughly with the magical and the spiritual. The soaring music of Aronofsky's musical collaborator Clint Mansell (who has scored all of Aronofsky's films) is achingly spiritual in its tidal pulsing, which comes to a momentary pause in sync with the imagery's temporary reduction to a single point of white light in the middle of empty blackness, presaging the explosive resurgence where Tom/Tommy hurtles towards his final moment of understanding. I think Aronofsky is tapping into mythic and religious imagery as a way of suggesting the plenitude of humanity's imaginative attempts to grapple with the essentially unknowable nature of death.

The finale is a kaleidoscopic outpouring of brilliant imagery, as the spacefaring incarnation of Tommy climbs up the tree and propels himself into the vacuum, into a separate bubble that hovers above the tree – as elegant and profound a visualization of leaving one's obsessions behind as Aronofsky has crafted thus far. The film's visual effects were crafted largely not through CGI but by magnifying and filming chemical reactions occurring in petri dishes, so that the nebulae and star fields through which this space traveler floats are actually enlargements of the microscopic processes that occur within the human body and within all life. It's appropriate that this film about the wonder and pain of material existence should imply, in its own means of construction, that the cosmic and the miniscule are unified: one can go looking for answers in the bonding of molecules or in the furthest reaches of the heavens and find the same thing.

And throughout it all, Tommy himself remains earthbound and grounded, imagining, reading and/or writing about Mayan legends and transcendence in deep space even as, on Earth in his transitory form, he comes to terms with his own human-scale struggle to accept his wife's too-young death, as well as his own eventual demise. No matter how strenuously Aronofsky's images hurl the film into the cosmos, towards the barrier between life and death, there's always that anchor of earthliness: a half-playful, half-sad snowball fight; the stark white vista surrounding the plain brown rectangle of Izzi's gravesite at her funeral; the several-times-repeated flash of a younger, healthier Izzi, in a bright red dress, playing a game of tag with her husband; Tommy whispering to the back of his wife's neck, the hairs on her neck standing up at the brush of his breath, evoking the textured surface of the Tree of Life that the space traveler tries to nurture towards Xiabalba.

The most affecting and potent of these earthbound images, though, is also the most heartbreaking. Tommy, in the moments immediately after Izzi's death, assaults the hospital workers and then, desperately, tries to breathe life back into his wife, slobbering and weeping into her open mouth. It's a bleak, horrible image – and one of the rare moments in all of cinema that literally brings tears to my eyes every time I see it – but whereas I felt like the misery in *Requiem for a Dream* was often false and contrived, this moment rings true as the unthinking reaction of a man who has just lost all of the hopes to which he had been so stubbornly clinging for so long. It's one of those moments that ground the film's more fanciful excursions in concrete reality, that provide an emotional center for the film's exploration of love and loss and the hope for eternity. You described the film perfectly before, in a single word: "layered." And at moments like this, all the layers fold together into a forceful, densely packed burst of emotional catharsis, before once again splitting, mitosis-like, into multiple planes of reality and existence.

Bellamy: If we weren't before, we're on the same page now. Interestingly, though, the moment that brings me to tears each time I see *The Fountain* is a triumphant one: the moment when Tomás passes through the passageway of the temple and finds, sure enough, awe. "Behold!" he says, tears welling in his eyes, in what is easily one of my favorite moments in all of cinema. Talk about the power of one little word! It's a moment that's both specific and universal, revealing the overwhelming relief of a man who has spent so much of his life searching, a man who only in the moment that he finds what he's looking for allows his previous doubt to flash across his face, while also revealing what it means to arrive at the end of a long journey. It's a moment that at once affirms Tommy's quest for bodily eternal life while suggesting with its biblical tree that such eternity is found only through faith (which, indeed, is how Tomás got past the flaming sword in the first place). As you already pointed out, the tree doesn't give Tomás the kind of eternal life he was looking for. In essence, it kills him to create new life, which only supports your reading about the importance of embracing our earthly life. Still, Tomás's "Behold!" moment is profoundly beautiful and beautifully profound. Back when we discussed *Requiem for a Dream*, I told you that one of the reasons I'm conflicted about that movie is because, relatively speaking, I don't think it's all that challenging to evoke the emotions that dominate that film: despair, horror and revulsion. This is different. When Tomás says "Behold!" we don't just see his awe – we feel it, as Aronofsky matches the narrative's emotional crescendo with that truly magical image of the Tree of Life. It's not uncommon for films themselves to fill us with a sense of awe – that's why we love movies – but it is rare that we feel awe in unison with an onscreen character.

And while we're on the subject of favorites, I must double back to discuss Mansell's score, which is absolutely my favorite of this young century. Like *The Fountain* itself, it effortlessly sways between themes of sadness, hopelessness and loss to emotions of passion, elation and triumph without ever losing its cohesiveness; it feels just as appropriate in the conquistador chapter as in the futuristic one. It blends the strings of the Kronos Quartet with some almost tribal drumbeats and mystical choral echoes – always dripping with consequence, lingering around the characters to convey heartache, urgency and romance, sometimes all at once. But more than anything, Mansell's score is propulsive, moving us forward, forward, forward toward that fateful moment of consequence at which point, as you said, the score goes silent, leaving us floating uncertainly, as if thrust upward by a wave that just as quickly disappeared beneath us. And before we can fall, the score resumes again, in a bigger wave that propels us to *The Fountain's* peak of emotional

wonderment. It is, in a word, awesome. And as far as I'm concerned it might be the film's most significant achievement.

Howard: If it's not the film's most significant achievement, it's certainly one of them. Mansell's score, as played by the sympathetic musicians of the Kronos Quartet and Scottish post-rock band Mogwai, is perfectly attuned to the emotions of Aronofsky's film. It's a score of big gestures that churns with slowly building emotion throughout the film, building up to the epic catharsis of the ending, matching note for note the mounting intensity in Aronofsky's images. Mansell's scores for all of Aronofsky's films have been effective, particularly the techno-industrial paranoia of his *Pi* score, but for *The Fountain*, just as Aronofsky launched himself to the next level in his filmmaking as though he was leaping towards an exploding nebula, Mansell joined his friend and collaborator by crafting the best music of his career.

That's fitting, because *The Fountain* is certainly the best film of Aronofsky's career as well (though I eagerly await the soon-to-be-released *Black Swan*). Interestingly, Aronofsky made this masterpiece not by retreating from some of the excesses that marred his first two films, but by diving headfirst into them. The film is every bit as emotionally raw and melodramatic as its successors. It's stylistically hyper and heightens its emotional stakes through frenzied cutting and bursts of gaudy imagery – though Aronofsky also seems to have learned the value of slowing down for quieter moments. Even its symbolism is in some ways as obvious and broad as in the earlier films, though the complexity of the ideas Aronofsky is exploring here, as compared to the comparatively simple psychological states evoked by *Pi* and *Requiem for a Dream*, makes a big difference.

One of my favorite of the film's symbolic constructs – and there are many, considering how thoroughly the film is constructed around parallels between its three levels of story – is the equivalence between Izzi and the Tree of Life itself. The connection is made explicit by the parallel shots of the bald spacefarer whispering to the tree, the bark of which is dotted with very human-like hairs, and the shots of Tommy kissing Izzi's neck and reassuring her. In this way, Aronofsky connects Tommy's obsession with saving Izzi to the spaceman's obsession with saving the tree. If only he can find the cure; if only he can reach Xiabalba. Following this parallel further, the way the spaceman eats from the tree during his voyage suggests the degree to which our obsessions can provide sustenance as they become the sole reason and focus of our existence. Tommy's obsession begins as a desire to keep Izzi alive, to cure her, but over time the obsession becomes its own justification: he increasingly pushes Izzi aside and pours himself into the work that he's doing for her, and then, even after she dies, he can't let go of the obsession. It sustains him, becomes his reason to live, the center of his existence, occupying the space once occupied by Izzi herself. The futuristic segment literalizes the degree to which obsession replaces love by making the tree a physical replacement for the absent Izzi. And in the end, the spaceman must leave the tree behind to reach nirvana, just as Tommy must let go of his quest against death to achieve some measure of contentment; only the conquistador doesn't abandon his obsession, and as a result meets a fate nearly as grisly as the addicts' misery at the end of *Requiem for a Dream*.

Bellamy: Good observations. Somehow I hadn't really considered that last part, perhaps because Tomás's death is the perfect climax to the film's fascination with death as a pathway to rebirth, which of course brings us to another of the film's symbolic constructs: the use of circles as visual representations of an eternal life cycle – the circle of life, if you will. Circles are everywhere in

The Fountain, most obviously in the form of Tomás and Tommy's ring and Tom's spherical space pod, but also in that glassy center of the altarpiece (which, by the way, appears to include strands of the queen's hair); in the image on Tommy's computer screen when he talks with Izzi at the lab; in the pattern of the floor at the queen's palace chamber and at the hospital where Izzi dies; in the light at the center of the map where "O," not "X," marks the location of the hidden temple; in the beam of light on the museum floor, where Izzi stands and looks heavenward before collapsing; in that tunnel of stars through which Tom's space pod ascends toward the nebula, and then beyond; in the tattooed bands on Tom's ring finger and arm; in the multiple extreme close-ups of characters' eyes; and, heck, even in the brain scans of the monkey that Tommy puts up on the light board. "Circles, he leads us in circles," grumbles one of Tomás's fellow conquistadors at their camp in the jungle. He's referring to the priest. He might as well be talking about Aronofsky.