

An Ecopsychological Study of Darren Arnofosky's Film *The Fountain*

Nehal Ahmed Ibrahim Arisha

Introduction: The Psychology of the Search for Immortality.

The Fountain was subjected to a lot of criticism during its initial release due to the complex nature of the film that required a more critical audience. The film was criticized for its over complexity, ambiguity, the overuse of symbolism and the nonlinear narrative which made it difficult for the audience to follow the plot of the film. However, the ecopsychological perspective to address how people face death anxiety is what makes the film unique. The aim of this paper is to discuss the use of natural elements in Darren Aronofsky's film *The Fountain* to resolve existential issues through seeking immortality from an ecopsychological perspective. The desire for immortality has long occupied human beings. Ancient myths and different cultures depict various stories about people trying to live forever ¹. Even though most of the final messages of these tales are that attaining immortality will not resolve human existential issues, people still embark on journeys towards immortality in hopes that they might succeed. Zygmunt Bauman suggests that the knowledge of immortality comes from the human awareness of their own mortality (303-304). The certainty of death shapes the awareness and life choices and as such is a product of one's ability to think about one's own life.

TANWĪR: A Journal of Arts and Humanities

Online ISSN: 3062-4789

Print ISSN: 3062-4797

<https://tanwir.journals.ekb.eg/>

November 2025, Issue (3)

¹ There are a lot of examples from different cultures that discuss the concept of immortality such as the Epic of Gilgamesh from Mesopotamian culture. Greek mythology is also rich in examples of immortality seekers such as Tithonus, Orpheus and Alcesteis.

Bauman adds that the mere thought of death is belligerent. Reason and human logic are defeated facing death since its presence is immortal while humans are not (13). Freud adds another perspective in his book *Reflections on War and Death*:

We have shown an unmistakable tendency to put death aside, to eliminate it from life. We attempted to hush it up, in fact, we have the proverb: to think of something as [one thinks] of death, [meaning] our own death, [naturally] We cannot, indeed, imagine our own death; whenever we try to do so we find that we survive ourselves as spectators. The school of psychoanalysis could thus assert that at bottom no one believes in his own death, which amounts to saying: in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his immortality. (II)

Freud's justification thus puts the persistence of immortality seeker, and into perspective, pushing death aside is a main goal. The concept then gives the journey a meaning and a purpose since in most cases, the immortality seeker starts his journey with a limited scope compared to his final realizations.

About the Film:

The Fountain (2006) is an American epic film that discusses immortality as a means to overcome death anxiety. The film discusses some elements of nature as a source of immortality. Despite being titled *The Fountain*, the main natural element that prolongs life span is the Tree of Life. The plot of the film follows a nonlinear structure which unfolds in three parallel plots. The director and writer of the film, Darren Aronofsky, compares the film, with its overlapping plots, to a Rubik's Cube, as it is open to several interpretations. However, they all reach the same conclusion (Kolakowski, 1). The main plot traces the life of Tom Creo whose wife's diagnosis with a terminal brain tumor triggers his anxiety of death and pushes him not only to find a cure for the tumor, but for death as well. Both Tom and Izzie resort to nature to resolve their anxieties. Nature in this plot is part of Tom Cero's scientific research through experimenting on an unnamed botanical compound as a cure for brain tumors. Meanwhile, Izzie, his wife, resorts to nature as a coping mechanism to accept her own mortality. Another coping mechanism used by Izzie initiates the second plot of the film also involving nature. She writes a novel to express her feelings and fears. The novel is set in early modern Spain, during the reign of Isabela I of Castile. The fictional queen commissions the conquistador Tomas Verde to search for the Tree of life in Guatemala, which stands as a metaphor for her husband's trials to save her life and thus, she leaves him the last chapter of her story to complete. The

choice of late fifteenth century Spain, specifically at the peak of the Inquisition is significant, as it maximizes the effect of the clashing points of views concerning the perception of immortality. Seekers of immortality, with their queen at the front, are hunted down as heretics who are burned to death, within the same radical Catholic context that was exercised at the time. Men of religion deny physical immortality with a strong stance that throws Spain into a civil war. As for the third plot, it is set in a bubble floating in space with a nebula in the background. Tom takes the form of a bald shaman who is trapped in the bubble with a huge dying tree, trying to focus and meditate, while seeing reprised flashes from the other two plots being replayed. The bubble is a signifier of Tom Creo's subconscious mind and his journey towards accepting mortality as inescapable, while the dying tree represents his dying wife. The liberating force in the three plots is the acceptance of death as a truth of life.

Rebecca Murray mentions that Aronofsky did extensive research to understand the world view of people who died young, consulting doctors and care givers, to understand how terminally ill patients coped with their inevitable fate. He noticed that most people who died young died alone. Their families could not deal with or recognize the tragedy of losing them. He explains that patients did not have enough vocabulary to articulate what they were going through even after understanding what was happening to them. Thus, he decided to explore and expand these emotions with his main characters Tom Creo and his wife Izzie (3). Death anxiety manifests differently for Tom Creo and Izzie. Tom Creo's character is the representation of those who were left behind. He has complex emotions that he can neither deal with nor understand. As a surgeon, he gets consumed in his research with the assumption death is a disease that he can find a cure for. In the process, he loses a lot of the time he could have spent with his dying wife. On the other hand, Izzie finds an alternative reality and meaning for her existence through the Mayan understanding about nature and the cosmos while writing her book. Considering the circumstances of Izzie's illness, the dynamic between the husband and wife creates clashes that are enveloped by Tom's grief and anger. However, Izzie desperately tries to pull him into her newly shaped world view.

The Garden of Eden:

The film opens with a verse of the Book of Genesis: "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24). Choosing to open the film with the specific verse that discusses Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden is a direct statement from the writer that immortality is not attainable and that it is not the answer to

resolving existential issues. In an interview with Peter Sciretta, Aronofsky mentions that his interpretation for the story of the fall of Adam and Eve is his definition of being human. If they drank from both trees (tree of knowledge and the tree of life), this would make them lose the essence of being human, namely, their mortality (4). It is as if immortality excludes one from being human. Thus, any trials to reach an immortal state are bound to fail.

Chaim Cohen claims that the root of the word Eden stems from a Sumerian word “edin” (plain/steppe) which is close to an Arabic word “عدن” that means fruitful or well-watered (228-9). The word thus reflects what the Garden of Eden stands for: resurrection, eternal youth, immortality, wisdom and knowledge. The image of The Garden of Eden is central to many cultures and religions as it marks the beginning of life on earth. From the religious perspective, Christianity and Judaism acknowledge the presence of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and their expulsion because of their actions. In the Christian faith, the fall of Adam and Eve separates humanity from the eternal life the Garden is associated with, and is the start of the temporal life span humans are constrained with. Genesis describes it as “out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis, 2:9). There are a lot of arguments and speculations about the exact location and whether it is located in a hidden place on earth or if it is present in another realm. The conclusion was that it could be around Mesopotamia, the Fertile Crescent, Armenia or the Persian Gulf (Duncan, 96).

The location of the Garden of Eden is discussed early in the film, in the plot of Izzie’s novel, referring to the idea of the presence of the Garden of Eden in the jungles of New Spain. During colonial Spain, conquistadors and clerics explored the lands with biblical imagery in mind. Part of the colonial argument for justifying the Spanish presence in the colonies was giving the colonial conquest a holy religious mission. A notable example of this is the 17th century Spanish historian Antonio de León Pinelo’s claim in his book *El Paraíso en el Nuevo Mundo* (1645–1650), where he proposes a religious interpretation of the biblical texts, positioning the Garden of Eden in South America, specifically in what he called Iberia Meridional, at the margins of the Amazonian basin. He interprets the biblical image of the “angle with a flaming sword” as a metaphor for the Andean volcanoes. Also, another notable figure is Cristopher Columbus, who was supported by Queen Isabel I. He made similar claims in his book *Libro de las Profecías*, believing that the new world is connected to Genesis’

description of an Earthly Paradise, suggesting the possibility of the presence of the Tree of life around the same area (121).

The historical information thus explains the firm belief of the Queen in the film concerning the presence of the Tree of Life in the colonies. The fictional Queen was trying to convince Tomas Verde with the presence of the tree through the narration of Father Avila, who got out a dagger used in Mayan religious rituals from a dead Mayan priest saying “in the center of the three (pyramids), through a lost pyramid, not lost, a hidden pyramid built on the navel of the earth, the birthplace of life. A special tree grows there, who drinks from the sap of the tree lives forever” (00:42:04-00:42:00). Upon hearing father Avila’s story of the tree of life, Tomas Verde dismisses the whole idea as “pagan yarns” (40:27). However, Isabel uses a direct reference to Genesis 3:24, with a firm tone, to prove to Tomas that the search is realistic:

The Queen: They are not yarns. Remember, our own Bible confirms it. In Genesis, there are two trees in the Garden of Eden. The tree of knowledge and the tree of life. When Adam and Eve disobeyed and ate from the tree of knowledge the Lord banned them from the garden and hid the tree of life. (40:29-43:30)

The whole scene follows a very repulsive act of the inquisitor who gives a long speech about the heretics who are searching for immortality, then he ends up burning them. The inquisition thus stands as a metaphor for the death that is invading Tom Creo and Izzie’s life. Consequently, Tomas Verde’s quest to find the Tree of Life reflects Tom Creo’s quest in his lab to find a cure. All through his quest, Tomas Verde’s aim was also saving the queen and Spain from death’s bondage. The reference to the Garden of Eden in this specific scene serves several purposes. First, it sets a physical location to start the search for the Tree of Life. Second, it associates both the queen and Tomas with Adam and Eve, and the idea of the original sin. The queen gives Tomas Verde a ring, promising to be his Eve if he was able to reach immortality through finding the Tree of Life. Third, the scene associates Izzie with the Tree of Life. The female protagonist in both plots is the reason behind the quest for immortality and is providing a life purpose for the protagonist.

Historically, trees have always held a very high position as part of the eco system. They have been related to immortality ever since Adam and Eve and the idea of the original sin. The significance of a tree slightly changes from culture to culture. However, there is a shared meaning that the Tree of Life always refers to a connection between the physical and the spiritual worlds, a source of life and eternal youth, and a source of knowledge. Being a

metaphor, the Tree of Life is the central image which connects the three plots of the film. First, Tom Creo uses in his research an unnamed botanical substance, from a tree native to Guatemala. Second, the only way to save the Queen in Izzie's novel is to find the Tree of life and thus associating it with Izzie herself. This connection is further affirmed in the third plot where Tom in the bubble spends his time catering for the dying tree and having conversations with it. The image of the tree pulls the three plots together into forming one coherent entity, namely a journey to reconnect with nature and resolve Tom Creo and Izzie's existential issues. Through their journeys, the characters confront their own limitations and question the essence of their existence and the inevitability of mortality. Even in scenes where it is not mentioned directly, it is hovering somewhere in the background, especially upon mentioning the civilization of the Mayas. The Tree of Life being depicted as a source of rejuvenation, healing, and spiritual enlightenment. The image of the tree of life in the film is seen on screen as a gigantic green tree, where the tree itself is growing out of a lake of clear water, where the golden sun rays are shining through its green leaves.

Image 1: The Tree of Life - The Fountain



Immortality Through Nature:

In ancient myths, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, Immortality was attained through natural elements that could be found in secluded and protected places, with these elements being mostly either trees or water. The journey is always tough and requires a lot of effort and adaptation to the surrounding environment. Thus, immortality as a concept has always been connected to nature, with people working with or against it. On a broader level, in the past, individuals have a connection with the ecological environment they live in, where it affects

their psychology and even their physical makeup. Edward O. Wilson explored this relationship, which he calls “biophilia,” arguing that the connection between humans and nature is a result of evolutionary adaptation with a “tendency to focus on life and life-like processes” (1). He confirms that early human beings who were able to survive and reproduce had biophilic tendencies, as they paid more attention to natural patterns such as seasonal changes and cycles, animals’ behavior and vegetation. He considers the connection to the natural world as an instinctive affiliation which is both biological and psychological, that in turn shapes human emotional well-being, aesthetics and spirituality. Wilson argues that individuals experience a type of psychological and ecological deterioration because modern societies suppress these tendencies (85). The concept could be applied to Tom Creo’s research and how he proceeds with his experiments. In a scene where he reaches a hopeless level with the research on a chimpanzee who has a similar brain tumor to his wife, Tom Creo thrushes out of the room in frustration. He notices a certain pattern that the snow left on the room’s window where the light shines through that he associates with an unidentified botanical compound that his team was experimenting with (00:16:24-00:18:00). The association Tom makes, which is attributed to a “biophilic tendency,” leads to a breakthrough in his experiment, where nature had the cure that he was searching for. Thus, the immortality seekers’ journey through nature for an answer is derived by the failure of the modern world to resolve their existential issues. For Tom Creo and Tomas Verde nature is the only refuge, as Harold Searles argues, that the surrounding environment is a crucial element of human beings’ psychological existence and well-being (6).

Ecopsychology considers nature as a sanctuary for healing, where one identifies with nature to gain spiritual and psychological strength. Theodore Rozak explains that psychotherapy was originally explored as a cosmic relation between the human soul and the surrounding nature. Healing the soul was sought after through the healing powers of nature, following the same methodology of holistic medicine, healing the body, mind and soul (14). He clarifies:

Ecopsychology holds that there is a synergistic interplay between planetary and personal wellbeing. The term "synergy" is chosen deliberately for its traditional theological connotation, which once taught that the human and divine are cooperatively linked in the quest for salvation...the needs of the planet are the needs of the person, the rights of the person are the rights of the planet. (321)

Rozak explains that the split between the inner life and the outer world was brought about with the advent of modern western psychiatry. Thus, the goal of ecopsychology now is to bridge the

gap between the psychological and the ecological, while viewing the needs of both the planet and human being as a continuum that starts with the nonhuman world (14). Rozak's argument explains Izzie's journey towards psychological healing and the serenity she had upon her death. The connections she built with nature on all the above-mentioned levels made her understand her ties with the surrounding universe. Indulging with the Mayan civilization offered a clear perspective away from the American urban society she lived in.

The Fountain draws a lot of inspiration from the ancient civilization of the Mayas, which is reflected in the narrative structure, themes, motifs and the construction of the plot. Through the exploration of the Mayan culture, Izzie finds an alternative way to extend her existence beyond her physical presence. Mayan civilization understood the value of connecting with their surrounding ecosystems where seeking elements of nature appear in their religious rituals to cure their minds and souls. However, this kind of relationship degraded as with the progression of civilization and the urban communities started to form, and humans became detached from nature. The severed human-nature relationship resulted in another deeper level of detachment, between humans and themselves, creating a sense of loss while adding challenges to the human essence of existence. Izzie accepts her inevitable death through indulging in the Mayan culture with its unique understanding of the surrounding nature along with their interpretation of immortality and afterlife. Mayans believed that eternal life does not mean physical immortality but rather transcending mortal life into another higher realm, an idea which Izzie adopts by the end of her journey. Their mythology was constructed through a multilayered universe, consisting of celestial realms inhabited by deities, ancestors, and supernatural beings, which is reflected in the multilayered construction of the film.

The integration of the Mayan culture in the plot starts with the first scene on screen. The Mayan guard at the entrance to the Tree of Life tells Tomas Verde "Our first father sacrificed himself for the Tree of Life, come forward to meet his fate" (00:06:45-00:06:54). Thus, he draws a connection between Tomas Verde and the image of the First Father as both were seekers of immortality, and both meet the same ending, with the Tree of Life growing out of their bodies. According to the Mayan accounts, the First Father did not attain physical immortality. However, on a symbolic level the Tree of Life sprouted from his skull to create the universe and other human beings. The Mayan story of creation thus becomes part of Izzie's acceptance of her mortality when she suggests being buried in Lily's Orchard as she will be part of the trees growing in her garden. Lily, who is a friend of the family and Cero's senior at the hospital, said upon Izzie's burial:

We struggle all our lives to become whole. Complete enough when we die to achieve a measure of grace. Few of us ever do. Most of us end up going out the way we came in, kicking and screaming. But somehow, Izzi, young as she was, she achieved that grace. In her last days, she became whole. (1:10:74-1:11:33)

Lily summarizes Izzie's acceptance and understanding of her situation and considering her journey and embracing death as her road to awe. Irvine Yalom explains that self-awareness is "what makes us human" (1). Human existence is understood through the inevitable stages of life where one grows and blossoms, then diminishes and dies. It is a thought that has haunted human history for millennia (1). As Robert C. Solomon mentions "once one becomes self-conscious, he cannot go back, no matter how he denies himself, drugs himself, leaps or falls away from himself" (240). Yalom's and Solomon's words are relevant, Izzie becomes self-aware and understands the reality of her existence. She even surrenders and tries to find solace in an alternative understanding of the nature of life. Death as an act of creation is discussed as one of the ideas Izzie embraces to cope with her own mortality, which her husband eventually accepts. Through Izzie's burial in the orchard, death becomes an act of the creation of a new life, an extension of being. Her ideas are shown at a later discussion with her husband, who at this point is still clinging to a physical immortal life:

Izzie: It's all done except for the last chapter. I want you to help me.

Tommy: How?

Izzie: Finish it.

Tommy: I don't know how it ends.

Izzie: You do. You will.

Tommy: Stop it.

Izzie: Remember Moses Morales? The Mayan guide I told you about...last night I was with him, he told me about his father, who had died. But Moses wouldn't believe it. Listen, he said if they dug his father's body up, he would be gone. They planted a seed over his grave. The seed became a tree. Moses said his father became part of that tree. He grew into the wood, into the bloom. And when a sparrow ate the tree's fruit. His father flew with the birds. He said death was his father's road to awe. That's what he called it. "The road to awe." Now, I've been trying to write the last chapter, and I haven't been able to get that out of my head...I'm not afraid anymore, Tommy. I asked Lilly if I could be buried at her farm.

Tommy: Oh, stop it! I want you to be with me.

Izzie: I am with you. Look. I'll always be with you. I promise. (55:45-59:25)

Tom Creo is in disbelief as he still considers death as a disease he can cure. Izzie's words "death is the road to awe" is key to the acceptance of her mortality. There is an allusion here to the Mayan creation myth, Mayan Tree of Life, and the fate of The First Father and the Mayan story of creation, which reflect the cyclical nature of life and death.

Taking a closer look at Mayan mythology, the creation myth appears in different versions in *Popol Vuh*, the anonymous Mayan sacred book. "Part One: The Dawn of Life" mentions different versions of the creation myth and how the world and human beings came into existence. Some of the stories included water or trees as the main elements from which the world was created, which resonate with most of the cultures, having both trees and water to symbolize creation, immortality, resurrection and knowledge. One of the Mayan creation myths considers the predominant state of the universe as a watery abyss and chaos from which the gods created animals and supernatural beings. Humans' creation is pictured as a deliberate act of the gods. They were often portrayed as cosmic forces such as the sun, the moon and the rain, playing a central role in the creation of the world. Some accounts mention that humans were created from clay or maize to emphasize the connection with the natural world and the surrounding environment (61-84). These myths include conflicts between the gods and forces representing chaos and destruction, and these conflicts establish world order (30-32). The story of creation is linked to the Mayan understanding of their surrounding environment, mainly of plants and of the earth. Candelaria Pérez-Martin et. al. comments on the Mayan story of human creation and how it is connected to biodiversity:

The description of the attempts of how the gods created man asserts the close relationship of the Mayan culture with plant biodiversity. In the first attempt, they used clay but, this material lacked strength and reasoning; thus, they decided to destroy it. They used wood for their second attempt: tzité ... a plant, to create woman. It narrates how these wooden beings, unable to invoke their creators, were destroyed by the gods. It was then that the gods created men from maize, which was brought to them by four animals from Pan Paxil Pan K'ayala', a place full of trees producing edible fruit...According to Mayan mythology, we descend from these beings created from maize. (272)

The Mayan story of creation depicts how humans are physically connected to their environment by emerging through the land, an idea which Izzie adopts in her search for ways to cope with her transient life.

Image 2: Map to the Mayan Tree of Life – The Fountain

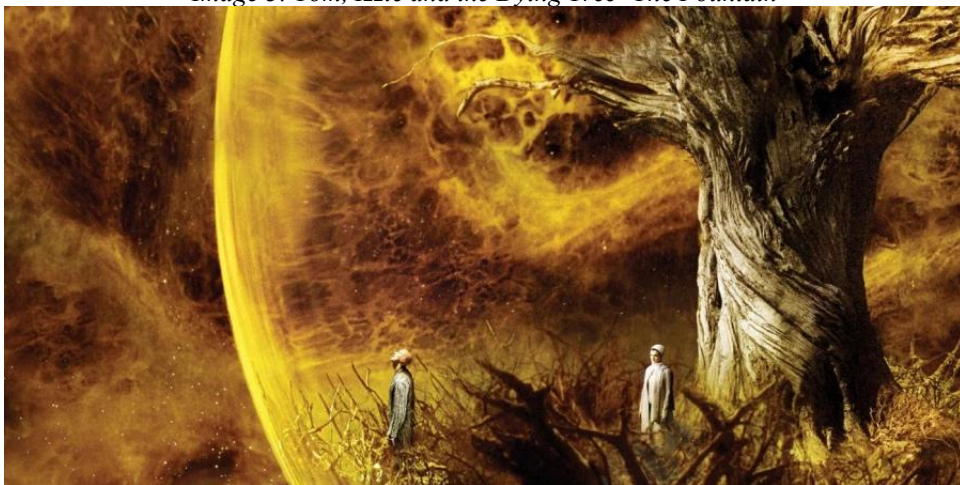


Trees held a high significance in Mayan religious beliefs and were central to Mayan cosmology since they were considered as ancestral dwelling places for the spirits, through which they could communicate with their departed loved ones. The Mayan tree of life is The Ceiba or "Yaxche", species of trees native to the lands, which is a massive and towering tree native to the region. As per the accounts of *Popol Vuh*, the gods planted five Ceiba trees in each of the four corners of the world in different colours, red in the east, black in the west, yellow in the south and white in the north. Then a fifth one was planted at the center of the other four trees so that its roots would reach Xibalba (the Mayan underworld) and its branches would reach the heavens. The central tree acted as a sacred communicator between the three realms of the Mayan universe and a channel through which the souls can travel between the realms. The Mayan temples follow a Quadripartite order to reflect the order of the Cieba trees, which can be seen in the film through Father Avila's speech trying to locate the Tree of life. The map he showed to Tomas Verde when he was trying to locate the Tree of Life had the same arrangement of the Mayan Cieba trees. However, each of the four locations had a pyramid to mark the place. The only lost location was the tree at the center, which in this case is the Tree of Life. The image of the tree was embedded into Mayan art and architecture to honor its holiness and value as a symbol. The Mayan version of the tree of life acts as a symbolic axis connecting all realms of existence according to the Mayan structure of the universe. It provided a connection between the earthly and the celestial realms as well as the underworld. It acted as the physical manifestation of the world tree signifying the cyclical existence of life and death,

abundance, and fertility. The Ceiba tree was likened to Itzamna, the Mayan god who is associated with creation, fertility, regeneration, spiritual transcendence, and wisdom.

As explained earlier, Mayans believed in a complex universe with multiple dimensions and realms. They believed in a three-tiered cosmos, Upperworld, Middleworld, and Underworld. The Upperworld was associated with celestial deities, creation, and the sun. The Middleworld was the realm of human existence, nature, and society. Xibalba or the Underworld represented death, regeneration, and the supernatural (Popol Vuh, 1-59). Xibalba has a significant role in the development of the three plots of *The Fountain*, where it is referred to in various scenes. First it is brought up, through a conversation between Tom Creo and Izzie, while they were watching a nebula in the sky, and Izzie says, “it is interesting that the Mayans chose a dying star to represent their underworld out of all the other living stars” (23:00). The idea is further explored through the bubble plot. The bubble is traveling amid the golden hue surrounding the nebula (dying star) indicating Xibalba as its destination. It stands as a metaphor for Tom Creo’s Journey dealing with the process of losing Izzie. Knowing for a fact that Xibalba is the destination indicates that Creo has no other option but to understand and accept mortality as part of life. The association between Izzie and the tree indicates that her presence has a life-giving force which makes it hard for him to accept her fate. Izzie’s presence is part of Tom Creo’s identity, that is why he feels so lost at the prospect of her death. This loss is highlighted in the scene where he eats parts of the dying tree in the isolated bubble, as if Izzie is the source of his life and gives him a purpose. The tree inside the bubble is almost dead, completely brown, with no green leaves but Tom still insists that his wife will live, whispering to the tree, as Izzie’s representation, “you will make it I won’t let you die” (8:20).

Image 3: Tom, Izzie and the Dying Tree- The Fountain



The Mayan underworld acts as a possible connection between Tom and Izzie after her death, which reflects the function it had in Mayan culture. Xibalba holds a special role in the cosmology and mythology of the Mayan civilization. There was an emphasis on the importance of the continuing presence of ancestral spirits in the lives of the living in the sense of spiritual immortality. Immortality provided a continuity of ancestral lineage, and the deceased could provide protection and guidance to the living. Mayan elites engaged in rituals to guarantee their immortality such as establishing connections with supernatural realms using hallucinogenic substances as well as bloodletting and sacrifice. However, immortality was not for everyone. It was only for rulers, warriors and elites of high social status. Common people were to have a different fate, acting as protective spirits for their descendants (139-218). *Popol Vuh* tells the story of the twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who faced death transcending to the underworld going through trials to avenge the death of their father and uncle. They then defeat the lords of Xibalba and are transformed into celestial beings. Stairs are often associated with Xibalba. It acted as a connection between the middleworld (the earthy realm) and Xibalba to allow individuals to travel between these two realms. During the Twins' encounters they ascend and descend the stairs (219-232).

Image 4: Mayan Temple in Guatemala- The Fountain



This myth is an example of the Mayan understanding of transcendence into immortality, which was used as a metaphor in the film. One example is using a picture of the temple in Guatemala with the stairs leading to where the Tree is hidden, hung on the wall of the doorway of Tom Creo's house. It is there to introduce the conversation about Xibalba in the next scene. Another example is in the battle scene from Izzie's novel, where Tomas Verde reaches the bottom of a flight of stairs that he needs to climb to reach the gate to the garden where the Tree of Life is. Tomas Verde ascending the stairways stands as a metaphor for crossing the world

of the living to a divine realm to reach immortality. The moment he reaches the gate to the garden where the tree of life is, the guard tells him “Enter to join his fate” (7:02) foretelling Tomas’ own ending.

Image 5: The Stairs to the Temple- The Fountain



The image of Xibalba follows Tom Creo’s development till the end of the film. By the time he accepts his wife’s destiny, he is seen expelled out of the bubble at a high speed moving towards the nebula with a strong light passing through him. The image alludes to his freedom from his own thoughts and anxiety that confined him to a single mindset about his relationship with his already dead wife. Flashes of overlapping scenes are seen back-to-back in a way that brings all three plots together by the end of the film:

Xibalba. We're here. We almost made it.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

Finish it.

Stop it.

Stop it!

What do you want? Leave me alone! Please, please. I'm afraid.

Will you deliver Spain from bondage?

I don't know. I'm trying. I don't know how.

You do. You will.

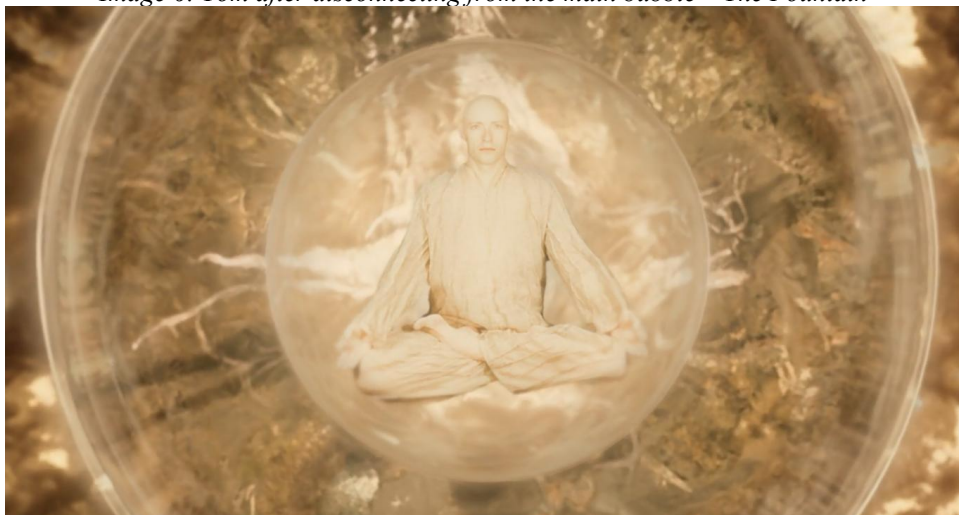
You do.

You will.

I'm not afraid anymore, Tommy. I'm going to die. I'm going to die. Together, we will live forever.” (01:17:00-01:19:36)

Izzie appears in full white attire which the audience had already seen her wearing at the beginning of the film, trying to get her husband out of his office in the hospital for a walk in the snow. Her image and parts from this scene keep recurring more than once in film, as if she is trying to invade Tom's subconscious to disillusion him, but he keeps refusing. However, in this scene there is a flash between her image and the image of the Spanish queen, connecting all the plots together. The quote not only shows Tom Creo's acceptance of Izzie's mortality, but his own as well. Instead of adding to his accumulated anxiety, Xibalba gives him a sense of relief as it marks a new phase of his relationship with Izzie. Tom mentions, “We're almost there. Through that last dark cloud is a dying star. And soon enough, Xibalba will die. And when it explodes, you will be reborn. You will bloom. And I will live” (59:29-01:01:15). Physical immortality is thus replaced with symbolic immortality. Tom Creo then writes the final scene of the story where Tomas Verde puts some of the tree's sap on his wound, which heals as a result. He then starts gulping the sap and ends up having the tree growing from his stomach echoing back the Mayan's story of creation. Thus, Tom Creo puts an end to his and Tomas' search for an eternal life.

Image 6: Tom after disconnecting from the main bubble – The Fountain



The Fifth Dimension: Time.

Time is being discussed within the context of immortality. It gets its value not through length, but through quality. The previously mentioned recurring scene within different contexts

haunting Tom Creo, shows the development of his character and where he stands in his journey and in his relationship with Izzie. It also represents his regret for not trying to spend as much time as he could with his wife. While in search of more time with her, he lost what he already had. His actions here echo Aronofsky's concept about people left behind dying alone as their loved ones feel helpless. By the end of the film, the scene is replayed but this time Tom Creo runs after her walk with her. She then gives him a seed that he later plants on her grave. The audience never knows if it was the grieving husband's own imagination or if this happened before and he now has the seed to plant to fulfill her wish. He plants the seed, bidding his late wife goodbye in an act of surrender to their fates. The moment of acceptance comes as Tom of the bubble climbs the tree then disconnects from the main one into another bubble where he ascends towards Xibalba on his way to meet his fate. This signifies the part of his life that he must go through on his own. The repeated scene reflects the Mayan belief in the cyclical nature of time, which is a key aspect of the Mayan understanding of immortality. The cycles of time are repetitive as each cycle ends with a rebirth. Thus, immortality is not achieved as an extended endless current existence in one single state, but it is a journey that continues in cycles from one state of life to another, where in each cycle one must go through life, death and rebirth to become a divine being. This idea of cyclical nature is discussed through Izzie's navigation of the Mayan culture.

Time spent with a dying person is being stressed as the best choice for both the terminally ill and their family. It could be seen within the context of symbolic immortality as the shared memories will be another form of symbolic presence. The idea is discussed both directly and indirectly in the film. For example, Lily tells Tom Creo on several occasions that he needs to get out of his lab to spend more time with Izzie. Another example is when Tom in the bubble makes some ink from the tree. He then tattoos some lines on his arms which that in length and thickness, which the audience would not understand the significance of till later in the film. These lines represent the time and memories Tom had with Izzie (11:43). He stops in the middle of seeing her sick in the hospital as if his time with her stopped when she became seriously ill. At a later scene in the bubble, referring to these lines, he explains, "All these years all these memories there's been you. You pulled me through time" (01:14:00-01:15:22). His wife was his driving force to live. Her presence gave him a meaning, a purpose and provided him with his sense of direction. This is simply why he goes on this journey to search for immortality.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the film faced a lot of criticism due to the overuse of symbolism and the triptych nature of the plot that was thought to be confusing for viewers. However, the film targets a more scholarly audience who is well read into ancient civilizations. Even after almost twenty years of production, *The Fountain* is still relevant to modern issues of detachment from nature, which in turn created various existential issues. The film dramatizes the ancient concept of the immortality journey to overcome death anxiety to give an insight into the psychologies of both terminally ill people and their caregivers. It exposes their emotions in an honest and down-to-earth way as the characters navigate through their conflicting feelings to accept their fates. On a symbolic level, the image of the Tree of Life is the main element of nature that holds the three plots together to form one holistic entity. It is believed to grant immortality, while acting as a metaphor for the terminally ill Izzie. She carries the same meanings and symbolism the Tree of life carries of growth, rejuvenation, interconnectedness, family and lineage. Tom Creo and Tomas Verde are the same person with the same mission: to save Izzie from death's bondage. Driven by love and loyalty, they embark on their journey towards immortality. The end of their journeys offers a wider understanding for the cyclical nature of life and death and made them accept the transient nature of human existence on earth.

Bibliography

- Aronofsky, Darren. *The Fountain*. Universe, 2006.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*. Polity Press, 1992.
- Columbus, Christopher. *Libro de las Profecías of Christopher Columbus*. Edited by Delno C. West and August Kling, University Press of Florida, 1991.
- Duncan, Joseph E. *Milton's Earthly Paradise: A Historical Study of Eden*. University of Minnesota Press, 1972, pp. 96, 212.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Civilization and Its Discontents." *Journal of Educational Sociology*, vol. 6, no. 9, 1933, p. 568.
- Kazhdan, Alexander P., editor. "Paradise, Rivers of." *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. Oxford UP, 1991.
- Kolakowski, Nick. "Director Darren Aronofsky: A 'Fountain' Quest Fulfilled." *The Washington Post*, 24 Nov. 2006. Accessed 27 Nov. 2022.

- Murray, Rebecca. "Darren Aronofsky Talks About *The Fountain*." About.com, 20 Oct. 2006. Accessed 11 Nov. 2022.
- Passmore, Holli-Anne, and Andrew J. Howell. "Eco-Existential Positive Psychology: Experiences in Nature, Existential Anxieties, and Well-Being." *The Humanistic Psychologist*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2014, pp. 370–88.
- Pérez-Martin, Candelaria, Sigfredo Escalante-Rebolledo, Silvia Vergara-Yoisura, and Alfonso Larqué-Saavedra. "Plants of the Popol Vuh, the Sacred Book of the Maya." *Revista Fitotecnica Mexicana*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2022, pp. 271–76.
- Roszak, Theodore. *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*. Phanes Press, 1992.
- Tedlock, Dennis. *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*. Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- The Fountain*. Directed by Darren Aronofsky, Warner Bros. Pictures and 20th Century Studios, 2006.
- The Holy Bible*. Authorized King James Version, Oxford UP, 1997.