The experience of being a living witness to death often yields a fear of it. This dread drives a fixation on death that stimulates a belief that there is a way to destroy it. In the process of denying the necessity for death, many may advocate that advances in technology predicate humanity’s ability to gain ground on death. Furthermore, it may be argued that in the twenty-first century myth is being reshaped by technology, perhaps, more vitally and frenetically than at any other time in human history. The desire to answer questions—to fill life with philosophical quests and meditative images aimed at keeping humanity’s psychic pathologies at bay—is a defining aspect of mythology. One might even suggest that since the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century, science and technology have fulfilled, for many, the function of religion, which may be defined as a ritualized interaction with myth utilized to attend to the needs of the soul.

Humanity continues to pursue deep philosophical and somatic questions. This pursuit often reflects the yearning to discover that there is something transcendent that can deliver life from death. It is also a natural human drive, however, to look to technological devices in an attempt to exact some control over the physical environment. What is particularly intriguing about these devices is that they suggest a belief that the ultimate answers will arise from within the human mind. Many argue that whatever the problem, its fix is found in technology, from prosthetics to wireless devices. This desire to invest in technology derives in part from a denial of humanity’s participation in the cycles of birth and death.
As a participant in the language and imagery of myth, film mirrors the cultural soul that creates it. With its image of the tree of life, Darren Aronofsky’s film *The Fountain* can be interpreted as a meditation on both humanity’s obsession with technology and the resistance to death—a resistance that has been, in part, to blame for humanity’s mistreatment of the earth. In honoring the practice of meditation, this film presents a kaleidoscope of imagery that contemplates the technological drive and the hubris that may be caused because of it. A reflection on this film offers the seeds of a renewed mythic consciousness regarding death, life, nature and technology.

The driving voices of the contemporary technological age imply that humanity is in the process of obtaining all the answers it seeks. Traditional mystical practices of religion, ritual, art, and myth have often functioned to deepen life’s mystery and revel in ambiguity, all the while allowing the soul to simply partake in them, rather than rationalize. Science and technology have typically aimed to do quite the opposite. Those who advocate for science and technology generally prefer certainty to ambiguity. In their role as purveyors of religion’s replacement; however, they are inadvertently required to attend to the soul. In this milieu, investment of faith in technology seems to mark a return to what the ancient Greeks referred to as *gnosis*—an epistemological expansion of the mind that often occurs in mystical union with divine or cosmic knowledge. In his book, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Erik Davis expands on similar concepts as those examined in Aronofsky’s film. He writes,

We are beset with a thirst for meaning and connection that centuries of skeptical philosophy, hardheaded materialism and an increasingly nihilist culture have yet to douse, and this thirst conjures up the whole tattered carnival of contemporary religion; oily New Age gurus and Pentecostal crusaders, existential Buddhists and liberation theologians, psychedelic pagan ravers and grizzled deep ecologists. (10-11)

Davis writes directly to the intersection of spirituality, science and ecology. He suggests that as science and technology become increasingly complex, they move further toward mysticism. He argues that advances in disciplines such as quantum physics indicate science’s current orientation toward the numinous.

Apple’s iPhone® is a perfect example of Davis’ tech-gnostic relationship to technology. Record numbers of this product continue to sell. It has inspired a multitude of copycats and has sparked a smartphone revolution that has irrevocably changed the way humanity communicates. With its apps and touch technology, the product is relatively simple to use. The technological makeup of the thing, however, is not. The technology of the cell phone industry is everywhere. Words like bandwidth, pixels, megabytes, data, and script travel around—a new, familiar, and yet mildly mysterious language that few but the initiated members of the technology industry truly understand. Cursory knowledge of this technology does not inhibit participation with it. Rather, participation with this kind of technology returns a new mysticism to science and technology. One need not understand how pixels create a photograph to appreciate what might be called iPhone® magic. This kind of technology might seem enchanting to the user. Davis suggests that through contemporary practice of technology, a mystical experience of gnostic self-divination—of experiencing the mystical within the individual—is possible. He further suggests that this mystical involvement is the defining experience of the contemporary technological age. From this mythic viewpoint, interaction with an imagined technological future can become an incredibly potent psycho-spiritual practice.

Science fiction participates in this practice, bridging the work of the scientific mind with the soul, and contemporary technological offerings continue to blur the lines between nature and humanity’s ability to create what it imagines. One might fantasize that in this magical realm of

---

scientific technology, there is an exponentially expanding capacity to invent, and that this capacity may eventually conquer death. There are those who, as Davis argues are “…planning for the day when technology will form the ultimate escape hatch, and machines will free us forever from the clutches of the earth, the body and death itself” (141). These fantasies are often beneficial, as they can drive some of the most stimulating and altruistic ideas, but they can also rob humanity of life experience—a precarious reality that is dangerous, both in terms of psychological and ecological balance. The scientific method strives to disavow the presence of awe, driving humanity through an emphasis on action, toward a pathological need to control that which is beyond control and toward repression of the fear and anxiety that might exist under technological bravado. This is not to suggest that either the scientific method in general or technologies in particular are responsible for this psychological pathology. However, this may suggest that humanity’s participation in science and technology reflect unconscious aspects of cultural soul, particularly as they relate to physicality.

In his book *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, Ray Kurzweil considers the push toward technological singularity when he writes, “Biotechnology will extend biology and correct its obvious flaws” (323). In this scenario, he suggests, humanity will be able to preserve their gifts and be present for a time they never before considered possible. In fact, he foresees that technology will shortly reach a point when death will become unnecessary. Film—science fiction film in particular—has long analyzed these fantasies. This genre often probes humanity to question the underpinnings of these fantasies, acting as a cultural, celluloid psychodynamic warning system. Aronofsky’s film considers these questions of life and death, love and loss through the quest for the fountain of youth, which he equates with the mythic tree of life.

---

The metaphor of a tree of life that springs from the navel of the world is a powerful image that has captivated human imagination from time immemorial. It captures the essence of human experience—from acorn to full-grown being—in its strength and longevity. It is often interpreted as a symbol of eternal life, as it is cyclical. Trees shed leaves, give fruit, and often live long lives far above the average human being’s physical reach. In his book, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*, Thomas Moore amplifies this image when he writes, “The tree teaches us so vividly to see eternity in our immediate environment that it is impossible to imagine art and religion without it” (23). As Aronofsky uses the tree of life as an archetypal vehicle to probe the deeper philosophical questions of life, death, and love, he allows the audience to meditate on humanity’s technological drive and how this drive impacts the earth. The film addresses three questions: Is love dependent on physical being? What in the nature of love is eternal? and Does death bring love to an end? The film suggests that death is part of a continued cycle. It imparts a sense of immortal life and love as it charges the viewer to release expectation and trust the cycles of rebirth.

*The Fountain* draws the audience through history as it follows the lives of three characters named Thomas. The characters live five hundred years apart. They are a Spanish conquistador, a contemporary scientist and surgeon, and a futuristic techno-Buddhist astronaut. Each character attempts to save their beloved(s) from physical death. The contemporary character of Tommy, however, is central to the film. One might even call him the protagonist, though such a distinction is difficult to make in the context of this film’s contemplative narrative. A Jungian analysis of Tommy might interpret him as a symbol of the ego’s drive to control and succeed. He refuses to accept his wife’s terminal brain cancer, literally shouting that death is simply a disease like any other. He insists that there is a cure. This fantasy drives the energy he

has for scientific practice. His relationship to life and death also seems an appropriate metaphor for cultural attitudes regarding humanity’s contemporary use of technology. These Thomases situate the collective ego in the depths of its hubris, wielding technology like a weapon to stave off death.

The film, however, attempts to dispel the fantasies of physical immortality. It considers the significance of death and rebirth through ancient Mayan myth, a subtle move from linear to cyclical storytelling. As the film continues, it slowly abandons the constructs of time, a symbol for releasing the ego’s attempts at control. Through this process, the tree becomes the film’s guiding metaphor. It becomes salvific for the characters, though not always physically. It both transcends and becomes a history where chronology is irrelevant. This spherical narrative is accomplished through the use of the same actors throughout the film’s cosmos. Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz play the characters of all three chronological periods. The choice to have the same two actors play all the characters as they travel through history leads the audience to wonder if they really are the same people. Though there are undeniable similarities between the scientist and the astronaut—in particular a tattoo on his ring finger that ritualized the pain of his wife’s death—the film never makes itself clear: Is this an instance of reincarnation, or are the astronaut character and the scientist actually the same person, and has he lived into the distant future? Either way, it is apparent that time is intended to dissolve within the environment of The Fountain’s mythical tree.

Glen Slater states that this kind of meditative experience is an aspect of the authentic encounter with the unconscious, or what one might call the numinous or the divine. In “Cyborgian Drift: Resistance is Not Futile,” he notes, “The boundaries of space and time break down in the depths of the psyche. It is not only the past but also the future that exists in the

unconscious” (182). An experience of The Fountain ushers the audience into Edenic time, a mythic time when humanity lives at peace with the earth, surrounded by trees permeated with the power of the divine. These mythic moments are a psychodynamic catalyst for the characters. Although they live, in essence, the same story, the crux of the film’s mythic heft lies in the narrative played out in the present time, between Tommy (the scientist) and his beloved wife, Izzi.

Tommy is desperate and irrationally convinced that if he can cure her tumor, he will not lose her. What is the audience to make of Izzi’s imminent death? Although she clearly struggles with the pain inherent in the knowledge that her love cannot join her, Izzi accepts that she is part of a natural cycles of death and life, and that her death does not end or destroy her life, or her love. For her, this revelation progresses as she pens her novel, engaging Mayan myth in the process. Through her exploration of the interaction between European and Mayan images of the archetypal tree, Izzi begins to understand physicality from a different point of view. As Robert Romanyshyn notes: “To displace the body which is a part of the earth by a body which is apart from it, to displace flesh by function, to wage a war with the body of life, is however, to symbolize in our departure from earth a dream of escaping death” (28). Izzi accepts this knowledge. She accepts her death, and passes gracefully, but the film’s journey toward rebirth is not complete because Tommy cannot join her in death, nor can he join her acceptance of death.

This is where the character of the conquistador and Queen Isabella enter the narrative. Izzi writes the story of Queen Isabella, who has been denounced as a heretic for searching for the tree of life, and she sends her conquistador to search the rain forests of Central America. The queen imagines herself as the new Eve and her conquistador as the new Adam. She charges him with an edict to deliver Spain from the bondage of death and ignorance. He travels to “new
Spain” to discover the tree. When he finally does discover it, he sacrifices his life to an act of new creation. Through these narrative strands, the film continues to affirm that technology cannot control the rhythms of the earth to which humanity belongs and to believe that it can traps humanity in its compulsions toward hubris—a style of consciousness that clings to the fear that surrender to death equals oblivion.

The film also explores concepts of human agency in technology as it relates to nature. It attempts to address the issue of human limitation of science and technology. It also seems to suggest that all psychological consciousness has limits. Life is bound to its moment. As the narrative envelops the characters, the film affirms that life is found in the present. It reminds the audience that gain and loss are intimately connected, and that becoming psychologically aware often requires some kind of accompanying loss. After Izzi’s death, Tommy realizes that in his attempt to save his wife’s body, he has lost his chance to be with her. When he realizes that she is gone, and that because of his physical absence and obsession with the salvation of her physical body he has sacrificed his chance to hold her, he truly grieves. His grief shatters time. Through his pain, he comes to understand that concepts of past and future are human-made phenomenological constructs. He also recognizes that time—as a construct—only exists as he imagines it. Through this character, Aronofsky addresses issues of anthropocentrism. Tommy’s tears symbolize the pain inherent in a process that dissolves the self-centered attitude of the ego as it encounters release of control. In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram writes, “To touch the coarse skin of a tree is thus, at the same time, to feel oneself touched by the tree” (68). Life is found in both touching and being touched. Painful though it often is, it is nonetheless true that to be present in the world requires the willingness to truly participate in the cycles of the earth.
Moving circuitously along parallel narrative lines, much like a Venn diagram, the film also ruminates on the consequences of humanity’s death denial on the earth. In his paper, “On the Death of Nature,” Marco Heleno Barreto writes, “When nature, through being regarded as mere ‘raw material,’ is subjected to such an empirically irrational and self-contradictory exploitation, effective acknowledgement of the deep truth hidden in the domination drive is missed in the bargain” (259). The conquistador attempts to use the tree as material. His relationship to nature is destructive. As soon as he discovers it, the conquistador stabs the tree and drinks its milk. His action, however, violates the tree in such a way that it ushers in a violent aspect of creation. In spite of his commodification and violence—perhaps partially because of it—new life occurs. He becomes the tree. He becomes the first father of Mayan myth, and a new tree of life grows out of his body. This transformation dissolves the ego-centered consciousness of the conquistador, infusing his body with eternity. Such a psychoactive connection between the conquistador and the tree stands in contrast to the relationship of the present-day Tommy, who is virtually obsessed with the tree bark’s ability to heal, and the astronaut, who gently asks permission of the tree before he takes the small amounts of bark that keep him alive as he continues on his quest to save the tree and destroy death.

All of these threads suggest that as long as humanity continues to attempt to cheat death, it denies life. This film suggests that this fear of death is at the root of the imbalanced relationship between humanity and nature. The apprehension toward evolution is psychopathologized through an obsession with acquisition, particularly with the extension of life expectancy. This obsession is ritualized through humanity’s abuse of the earth, as symbolized by the tree in The Fountain. As the mind moves toward more abstract concepts, a natural dissociation from the physical world may occur. The danger of this kind of disconnection is that
it may continue to alienate humanity from the sensual, lived experience, and that this alienation may—at some point—become irrevocable. Again, life requires death. Our choices, however, can often dictate how these deaths will occur. It becomes clear, as Aronofsky suggests, that the human refusal to embrace death is causing the death of the mythic tree of life.

In order to return balance to humanity, a renewed approach to the death denial must surface. Again, as Davis reminds us, a contemporary notion that there is power in human knowledge has its roots in Greek philosophical thought. He writes, “Today’s technognostics find themselves, consciously or not, surrounded by a complex set of ideas and images: transcendence through technology, a thirst for the ecstasy of information, a drive to engineer and perfect the incorporeal spark of the self” (122). He suggests that before this Greek attitude took hold, humanity recognized that there is mystery to the universe. The tension between nature and technology is always present. Perhaps it is always in flux. This is why he proposes that this sense of mystery is in the process of returning to humanity via the awe that often occurs in the development of technology. Through the cyclical nature of Mayan mythology, The Fountain reflects this mystery. The characters in this film learn that though healing is not always physical, it always lies within the earth, and not in their technologies.

This film speaks to more than simple questions of technological ethics, such as whether or not the development of a cyborg will turn humanity into soulless machines. It speaks to a relationship with the earth itself and humanity’s place within it. To believe that humanity has the capacity to do away with the earthly cycles of life and death is to step dangerously close to a fantasy that continues to turn the planet into a commodity. In The Earth Has a Soul: The Nature Writings of C.G. Jung, Meredith Sabini quotes C. G. Jung who writes, “Knowledge does not enrich us; it removes us more and more from the mythic world in which we were once at home.
by right of birth” (45). Though the continued quest for knowledge is a basic preoccupation of human nature, it is just as vital to practice the release of that knowledge. As citizens of a planet that is rapidly ailing, due in large part to negligence, humanity must take a moment to discharge its obsession with answers. In the process, it must literally re-ground itself.

This insight is reflected through the tree sap’s ability to create and destroy life. It is also reflected in the tree bark’s ability to cure disease. In The Dream of the Earth, Thomas Berry writes that, “The earth will solve its problems, and possibly our own, if we will let the earth function in its own ways. We need only listen to what the earth is telling us” (35). The astronaut whispers that the tree has propelled him through history. It is the vehicle that has allowed him to move through the cosmos. This physical movement becomes the psychological vehicle that admits the perspective he desperately needs.

Humanity has reached a point in its evolution when the possibility of radical extension of human life has caused an ethical debate as to what constitutes an authentic human experience. To me, these questions seem to be less vital than the related questions examined in The Fountain: Why does humanity feel the need to prolong life? What is the genesis of the fear? What good is any of it if the balance of nature is destroyed in the process? The Fountain suggests that answers to these questions can be found in our physical ties to nature. Through a drive for transcendence, myth returns to the tree of life, which is also the tree of death and rebirth, and the film suggests that humanity may learn this lesson by limiting the projection of the technological mind on the earth.

The end of the film frees Tommy from his attachment to the physical environment. The astronaut accepts the prospect of death. He no longer fears transformation. He reaches Xibalba, which is the nebula that the Mayans imagined as their underworld. Physically, he folds into a

lotus position and moves through space in a way that is reminiscent of passing through the Bardos in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. He becomes the Mayan first father, as his death—much like the conquistador has—becomes an act of creation. In contrast to the conquistador though, his transformation is not an act of violence. At the moment before his death, he has a vision of Izzi. He tells her that he does not know how to die. She tells him that he does, and he will. Through this process, Tommy becomes a metaphor for what C.G. Jung calls the soul’s process of individuation—the integration of psychological material through the work of meditation and analysis on material as it arises from the soul—when he accepts that to truly become conscious, one must be willing to die. To relate to the transcendent, one must face oblivion. Izzi dies; the tree dies, and through this, Tommy realizes that death truly is the road to life. The film suggests that the death of a particular style of consciousness is a first step in any process of self-discovery.

In order to be reborn, one’s current mode of living must dissolve. A balanced relationship with technology honors this. As William Irwin Thompson suggests in his book, *Imaginary Landscape: Making Worlds of Myth of Science*, “The spirit will at last be freed from the split between mind and matter. Mind will no longer be a subject figured against the ground of matter in the visual syntax of linear perspective; and as the ground dissolves it will take ‘nature’ along with it” (90). When the astronaut reaches Xibalba, he is absorbed into the star. He reaches a state of oblivion, and is transferred to the present time. Tommy is freed from death as he accepts that Izzi is reborn. He releases her when he plucks a seedpod from a tree and buries it next to her headstone in the snow. His obsession to know, to control, to grow, to become more conscious is quelled, and he recognizes that death is a part of that growth. As he buries the seedpod, he allows himself to participate in it, recognizing that however painful, things often belong in the underworld, because in that space they can germinate and be reborn.

---

Clearly, the message of this film is that technology itself is not responsible for the paralysis of psychological growth. The problem is the human attitude toward it—the fantasy that technology equals consciousness and that consciousness equals the quelling of the dark. This film suggests that humanity need not fear the dark. The dark has its purpose, and even though it is frightening, as Queen Isabella utters, every shadow is threatened by morning light. In order to experience life, one must diffuse fear, reconnect with the earth and embrace whatever occurs. Why preserve current patterns of existence which obsessively try to extend life when, as Aronofsky suggests, death is the road to awe? After all, Xibalba is not merely the underworld; it is also the place where the souls of the dead go to be reborn.

---

Works Cited


---