

Don't look into the
sun: analyzing darren
aronofsky's pi



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Years before *Black Swan*, writer/director Darren Aronofsky exploded across the film universe with his surprisingly low-budget motion picture, *Pi*. The film is a violently pensive study of the fine line between madness and genius, as well as a warning of the consequences of disregarding human boundaries. Filled to with thoughtful metaphors, extraordinary cinematography, recurring themes, and phenomenal acting, *Pi* is a chillingly creative success to both the film industry as well as the world of philosophy. A surreal exploration into the brilliantly unhinged mind of math genius Max Cohen, *Pi* follows Max as he falls victim to an incurable obsession with finding the numerical pattern - or true answer - to the otherwise chaotic universe. Believing that this 216-digit pattern exists in all aspects of the world - in the stock market, in the numerical translation of the Torah, and in the irrational number pi - Max spirals into a deprecating insanity. He becomes utterly obsessed with the thought of understanding life and consequently becomes consumed by this pursuit of the unknowable. Paranoid and reclusive, Max at first seems like the unlikeliest of heroes to any story. Shielded from the rest of the world by three different locks on his cheap apartment door and harboring an involuntary habit of trembling violently around strangers, Max is astoundingly cloistered - to the point of hinting at a social disorder. In fact, it is perhaps this exact reclusion that eventually pushes him into madness. His reluctance to share his knowledge or ability with anyone, including Hasitic Jew Lenny (who wants him for spiritual purposes) and Wall Street investor Marcy (who, similarly, wants Max to predict stock market prices), thrusts him into a fatal attitude of self-importance and greed. His desire to keep the answer to himself drives him to believe that he is the "chosen one", as he himself claims in the film. Because of this surprising transformation into

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superiority and haughtiness, it is logical to assume that the elusive 216-digit pattern represents godliness. Not only does Lenny explain the correspondence in Jewish myth (the number is said to be the true name of God), it can be seen in Max's attitude as he comes closer and closer to discovery. He becomes selfish and arrogant ("I understand it, and I'm going to see it. I was chosen!") and begins to see himself as an actual god, higher than the rest of the characters for their clear incapability of finding the answer by themselves. However, it is also quickly evident that the pursuit is turning Max into an agonized man both physically and figuratively mutilating his own brain. He falls victim to terrifying hallucinations and becomes mentally unstable. The film depicts several scenes where Max is poking and prodding at a presumable illusion of a brain, illustrating his utterly tortured attempt to find an answer. The mutilation grows in intensity over time, and in the end, he is overwhelmed by the utter weightiness of the knowledge and is pushed into performing a lobotomy on his own brain. The ant, which seems to represent the ultimate number, is also shown several times throughout the movie - always in scenes that emphasize the importance of the pattern. For example, the ant crawls in the mainframe of Max's supercomputer, Euclid, when it crashes with the 216-digit "bug", and sits idly on the wall when Max accurately predicts the stock market prices. More importantly, the ant is also frequently shown crawling along the brain. This metaphorical proximity seems to suggest that the knowledge is within reach of the mind - and yet eternally undefinable. The selection of the ant to represent this number is interesting: while the ant is an endlessly common species, it is astonishingly ubiquitous. This demonstrates that, while the number is so clearly able to be discovered, it is its utter simplicity that

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makes it so impossible to pin down. Max's hallucinations and insatiable search converge into a vicious cycle of insanity, forcing him into a chillingly maniacal psychosis. A virtually no-budget film, Pi contributes to its exploration of genius and insanity by using a collection of remarkable visuals. Using only high-contrast black-and-white images, the movie seems to bring the audience directly into the insane, surreal abyss of Max Cohen's incomprehensible mind. At the same time, the clear disparity between black and white seems to continually contrast two opposites throughout the film - madness and sanity, good and evil, revelation and ignorance... and finally, godliness and mortality. Perhaps this thrust into insanity is a warning by a "higher being" to stop Max from trying to accomplish the unachievable - a warning against trying to achieve a godly status, which is exactly what Max is - consciously or subconsciously - attempting to do." When I was a little kid, my mother told me not to stare into the sun," Max repeats throughout the film. " So once when I was six, I did." This line demonstrates better than any other the universal tendency of humans to want to be great - to overstep their boundaries and, consequently, harm themselves by " flying too high." Max flew too high both in trying to see the sun, and again in trying to find the godly number. Because of those overambitious desires, he suffered agonizing pain and fell to insanity, and was only granted his " divine sight" for a split second. Although humans may be advanced enough to achieve a moment of clarity, the film seems to say, that is our full extent. We are neither gods nor omniscient beings; we are simply human. The philosophy of Laplace's Demon implies something similar - that only an omniscient being with the knowledge of every position and force in nature can understand the entire universe. We are not those beings. We cannot

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know the answer. And yet, the line also shows the beauty of overstepping the human boundary: " At first the brightness was overwhelming, but ... I kept looking, forcing myself not to blink, and then the brightness began to dissolve. My pupils shrunk to pinholes and everything came into focus and for a moment I understood." Though Max may have made a mistake in trying to conquer the unconquerable, for one second, he was unattainably blissful. For one split second, he could clearly see the sun and its answers. So was Max truly wrong? Certainly, he was blinded by the sun afterward for his stupidity and disobedience - but ultimately, did it really matter? After all, he had risked everything, and because of it, had seen the sun. He had understood the elusive truth and was able to retain that knowledge in his mind. He had achieved his goal of " knowing." Was such a desire so wrong? In a way, Max's tireless inquiry exemplifies the actions of today's society. Humans are dominated by similar existential desires, constantly using science and philosophy to search for a meaning in life - often destroying the " natural" state of the planet in doing so. Though countless environmentalists criticize this trait of human behavior, we are simply incapable of putting a stop to our investigation - just as Max was. In the end, we are only human. And though we may end up only seeing a fraction of the sun for the rest of our lives, we will continue to try for all eternity - for that is all we can do.