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"So It Goes With God"

A boundary is defined as “the line or plane indicating the limit or extent of something,” and it comes in many different forms: physical, emotional, and social, to name a few. Yet, one can discover things that have been hidden to them by crossing these boundaries and, as a result of doing so, may also experience a feeling of profound enlightenment. Ang Lee, the director of *Life of Pi* dared to go farther than the boundary of the film’s genre. Through its use of breathtaking 3D imagery and its haunting soundtrack, the film adaptation of Yann Martel’s best-selling novel *Life of Pi* manages to push beyond the standards of an average character drama by immersing the reader in a tale that redefines mankind’s limits, capabilities, and strengths.

From the very beginning of the movie, Lee wastes no time in establishing the importance of the setting. The viewer is shown a montage of various animals residing within a zoo, yet the environment the animals live in is so spacious and peaceful that one might not believe that the animals are living in a manmade “cage” per se. The opening scene is accompanied by a rather melodious song that is coincidentally titled “Pi’s Lullaby” in the soundtrack. Before the audience is even introduced to the protagonist of the film, they are given a glimpse into his life. By doing this, Lee manages to create a bond between the audience and the protagonist and makes himself appear much more engaging as a fellow human being. The third thing the audience associates with the protagonist, besides the zoo and the lullaby, is his voice. After the writer asks if he was raised in a zoo, Pi replies, “Born and raised,” before moving on to tell the intriguing, yet comical tale of how he came into the world of Pondicherry: what he calls “the French part of India.” The origin of Pi’s namesake is also explained within the beginning of the film; he was named after a French swimming pool, Piscine Molitor, in which his uncle taught him how to swim. During one of their lessons, he explains to Pi that a “lungful of water will not harm him”, and Pi recounts that his uncle’s lessons would later save his life. This exposition is very different from the introduction of the main character in average character dramas. Usually, the audience gets to decide whether or not the protagonist is relatable after observing him or her several times within the film. However, not even five minutes into this film,

the audience becomes aware of Pi's humble beginnings and charming personality. That alone is a significant strategy Lee uses to imprint the image of a man that is not unlike us into our brains, and it makes the struggles that Pi faces throughout the movie that much more engaging.

Pi encounters his first challenge as a young boy, trying to find his place within the world he was born into. He recalls the order in which he discovered three religions: Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Being raised a Hindu, Pi recalls that he viewed the Hindu gods as "superheroes" and often found himself in awe of their power. It is by chance, that he is dared by his brother, Ravi, to go "drink the holy water" from a Christian church when they are on vacation in the mountains. The priest of the church finds Pi and offers him a glass of water before generously answering Pi's many questions about Christ, the son of God. He recounts the tale of how Jesus Christ sacrificed himself to atone for the sins of mankind. Pi discovers that he admires Christ's selflessness, and he later finds peace within himself and his surroundings through Islam. Rather than facing more tangible obstacles, as the hero of any other character drama might do, Pi realizes that his open-mindedness is an obstacle because others cannot understand his rationale behind following all three religions although he claims that he "just wants to love God." His father criticizes Pi's decision by stating that "believing in everything at the same time is the same as not believing in anything at all", and although Pi's mother attempts to defend him by claiming that Pi is "still finding his way," she does not explicitly say that she supports Pi's decision to follow all three religions.

Some may say that it is Pi's naiveté and willingness to accept everything he is told that causes his next dilemma. He attempts to feed the zoo's new tiger, Richard Parker, by hand, solely acting on the belief that animals have souls like humans do. However, before he can do so, he is reprimanded by his father and is later forced to witness Richard Parker gruesomely kill a goat as a "lesson". After that, Pi states that "the world had lost some of its enchantment." Like any other protagonist in a character drama, Pi goes through a slump where nothing seems to appeal to him anymore-that is, until he meets Anandi the dancer. Their relationship allows him to feel alive again, but his happiness is short-lived when he learns that his family will be moving to Canada. Despite Pi's protests, the family uproots itself and boards a ship to sail from India to North America. It is while they are sailing over the Mariana Trench, commonly known as the "deepest spot on earth," that the family encounters a furious storm that changes the course of our protagonist's life. The storm is so rough that it damages the ship, effectively flooding the lower decks and cutting Pi off from the rest of his family. Desperate to find help for them, he begs the other crewmates to follow him, but they only throw him into one of the ship's lifeboats. The rope that secured the

lifeboat loosens, and the boat falls into the rough ocean below. Pi, and a crazed zebra that had managed to dive onto the boat, escape the ship just before it sinks below the water. What makes this sequence of events ironic is that the water that Pi had learned to be so comfortable in is what took everything away from him. It can be inferred that the theme of the movie may be man versus nature, but Ang Lee incorporates many themes into the film. Because of this, the audience is able to choose the theme that resonates with them personally.

The next scene, and the music that accompanies it, epitomize the purpose of the genre: to elicit an emotional response from its audience. When Pi is knocked into the water, he ducks under it just in time to prevent a huge wave from crushing his skull. The camera follows him as he swims past ravenous sharks and drowning zoo animals, only pausing when the sunken ship comes into view. The lighting in this scene is eerie, and Pi's expression is conveniently hidden from the audience, but the complete stillness of his body communicates to the audience that he is shocked, to say the least. It is after Pi breaks the water's surface that we see his expression. Although one might have expected to see the devastation on his face, that doesn't stop it from making our hearts ache for him. Pi has become so relatable and charming at this point that we can only imagine how heartbreaking it would be to lose our entire family in such a terrible way. However, the acute feeling of sadness that the audience feels towards Pi's loss is brief. Once the storm passes and the sea calms, Pi and the audience are faced with their next challenge: How will he survive long enough to find his way back home? In most character dramas, while the protagonist is challenged, the challenge itself is usually realistic, with the only obstacle being the hero's own mind. Despite the surrealism of the situation Pi finds himself in—trapped in a boat with a tiger—Lee somehow succeeds in keeping the audience hooked. Although we are all aware that Pi lives to tell the tale of how he survived under those circumstances, we aren't sure how. The combination of knowledge we have and the surrealism of the film is what stops us from looking away. It is what stops us from claiming that the film is "something we've seen a thousand times."



Years ago, filmmakers were incapable of creating immersive movies such as *Avatar* or *Gravity*. Before, people would think it was impossible to have someone interact on set with an actual Bengal tiger, but Lee managed to create a world that, while we knew was not real, still succeeded in pulling us in. We didn't feel as though we were at home in our couches, watching everything unfold on a screen. No, we were on the Tsintsum when it sank, we were there with Richard Parker on the lifeboat, and we pulled ourselves to the shore with hardly enough energy to stand. When the movie ended, we were proud of ourselves and our resilience because we survived. This is the feeling that *Life of Pi* elicits from its viewers and why it was praised by many reviewers. The movie went beyond everyone's expectations and redefined its genre by using immersion. It gave us that same exhilarating feeling we experience when reading a book, except that this time, we could see, feel, and hear everything.

Works Cited

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