

Review #79 : *Life of Pi* (2013)

Suraj Sharma and Irfan Khan

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZ35FhvuU>

Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* is a **miraculous achievement of storytelling and a landmark of visual mastery**. Inspired by a worldwide best-seller that most readers must have assumed unfilmable, this is a triumph over its difficulties. Beside its aspects of **thrilling adventure epic**, it is also a **moving spiritual achievement**, a movie whose title could have been shortened to 'life'.

The story involves the 227 days that its teenage hero spends drifting across the Pacific in a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. They find themselves in the same boat after an amusing and colourful prologue, which in itself could have been enlarged into an exciting family film. Then it expands into a parable of **survival, acceptance and adaptation**. The novel's French-Canadian author **Yann Martel** must be delighted to see how the usual kind of Hollywood manhandling has been sidestepped by Lee's incredibly **poetic idealism**. A feast for the eyes !



SYNOPSIS

The story begins in a family zoo in **Pondichery, a serene and picturesque city in South India**, where the boy christened Piscine is raised. Piscine translates from French to English as ‘*swimming pool*’, but in an India where many more speak English than French, his playmates of course nickname him ‘*pee*’. Determined to put an end to this, he adopts the name ‘*Pi*’, demonstrating an uncanny ability to write down that mathematical constant that begins with 3.14 and never ends. If Pi is a limitless number, that is the perfect name for a **boy who seems to accept no limitations**. Pi’s childhood unfolds in this colourful setting, beautifully filmed by **Claudio Miranda**, inflected with a hint of exoticism by **Mychael Danna**’s score and graced with the presence of a handful of excellent Indian actors, notably **Adil Hussain** and **Tabu** as Pi’s parents.

When the zoo goes broke, Pi’s father puts his family and a few valuable animals on a ship bound for Canada. In a bruising series of falls, a zebra, an orang-utan, a hyena and the lion tumble into the boat with the boy, and are swept away by high seas. His family is never seen again, and the last we see of the ship is its lights disappearing into the deep.

The heart of the film focuses on the sea journey, during which the human demonstrates that he can think with great ingenuity and the tiger shows that it can learn. This is a hazardous situation for the boy (**Suraj Sharma**), because the film steadfastly refuses to sentimentalize the tiger, fancifully named **Richard Parker**. A crucial early scene at the zoo shows that wild animals are indeed wild and indeed animals. I won’t spoil for you how those things happen. The possibilities are surprising...

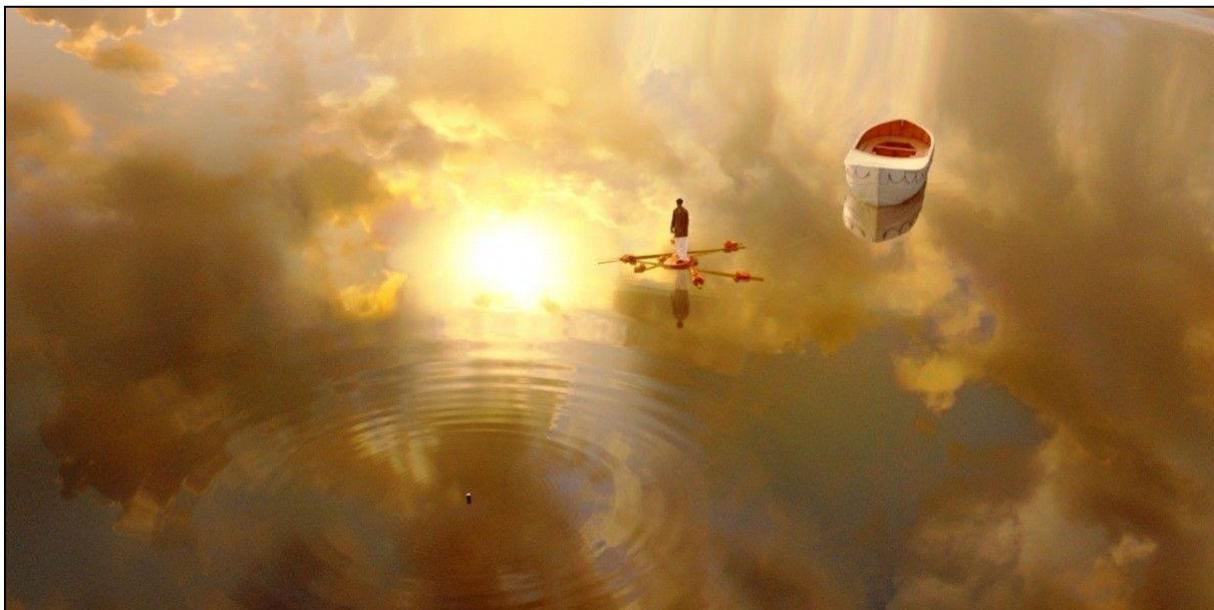
What is and isn’t real — what stories can be believed and why — turns out to be an important theme of *Life of Pi*, albeit one that is explored with the same glibness that characterizes the film’s **pursuit of spiritual questions**.

Suraj Sharma has a gangly, likable presence, with an **emotional expressiveness** that makes him good company, and sufficient humility to not mind being upstaged by a computer-generated tiger. **Tales of lonely survival have a durable appeal**, and the middle section of *Life of Pi* confidently clears a space for itself alongside *Robinson Crusoe* and **Robert Zemeckis**’s *Cast Away* starring Tom Hanks.

REVIEW

Ang Lee is always in complete control of the story. It feels like the work of a director not only at his **most confident and creative** but also enjoying himself more than ever before !

With the flat ocean providing what is essentially a blank canvas, cinematographer Claudio Miranda and his team, who cannot be praised enough, **run wild with imagery**, such as a whale looming up through waters full of glowing jellyfish, Pi silhouetted against the drowned ship or the motionless water (*see image*) creating a perfect mirror image of the sky above. You could rip almost any shot off the screen and hang it in a gallery.



Here, the surface of the sea is like the **enchanted membrane upon which the boat floats**. There is nothing in particular to define it ; it is just... incredible. This is not a shot of a boat floating in the ocean. It is a shot of ocean, boat and sky as one glorious place.

What astonishes me is how much I love the **use of 3D** in *Life of Pi*. I've never seen the medium better employed, and certainly not in *Avatar*, which I loathed by the way, and although I continue to have doubts about it in general, Lee never uses it for surprises or sensations, but only to **deepen the film's sense of places and events**. Like **Martin Scorsese** did in *Hugo*, Lee considers each shot on **three planes**, rather than just framing a standard scene then thrusting something at the audience to justify the additional cost. But all this beauty is not merely for beauty's sake. This is most definitely a film *about something*.

Still trying not to spoil : Pi and Richard Parker share the same possible places in and near the boat. Although this point is not specifically made, Pi's ability to expand the use of space in the boat and nearby helps reinforce the tiger's respect for him. The wild tiger is accustomed to believing he can rule all space near him, and the human **requires the animal to rethink that assumption.**



The writer **W.G. Sebald** once wrote : ‘*Men and animals regard each other across a gulf of mutual incomprehension.*’ This is the case here, but during the course of 227 days, they come to a form of recognition. The tiger, in particular, becomes aware that he sees the boy not merely as victim or prey, or even as master, but as another being.

A great deal is asked of **Suraj Sharma** in his first role. For about three quarters of the film he is playing to nothing as **most of the footage of the tiger is of course CGI** – although I learn that four real tigers are seen in some shots. The effects work on the tiger is so utterly convincing – his eyes, his fur, the rippling of his muscles and the skeleton beneath his skin, his miraculous vividness – that although there is surely a real tiger used in some scenes it would take a very well trained eye, or the tiger’s own mother, to pick it the real one from the CGI one. So this is really a **one-man show for Sharma** and he blasts. His performance is remarkable, shot largely in sequences as his skin colour deepens, his weight falls and deepness and wisdom grow in his eyes. Whether screaming in fury or saying nothing at all, he never hits a false note. It’s a blazing debut indeed !

BELIEF AND MAGIC

Young Pi's existence — and also that of the gentle, professorial man he will grow into — is dominated by religion. Pi's story, the Canadian writer is told, '*will make you believe in God*', and Pi himself is infused with a godliness that knows no doctrinal limits.

The **Hindu deities** '*were like superheroes to me*', he recalls, and at a tender age he began collecting heroes from other faiths, an all-around holiness fan reluctant to declare a rooting interest in any particular team. He likes them all. After receiving a quick précis of the Gospels from a kindly priest, Pi offers up a prayer that summarizes his amiable, inclusive approach to the notoriously divisive subject of theology : '*Thank you, Vishnu, for introducing me to Christ.*' No problem ! He will also go on to **embrace Islam and study *kabbalah***. Thousands of years of conflict, it seems, can be resolved with a smile and a reverent tone of voice (!).

'If you believe in everything, you will end up not believing in anything at all', warns Pi's dad, who is committed to the **supremacy of reason** and who is, as rationalists often are in the imaginations of the devout, a bit of a grouch about it. But this piece of **skeptical paternal wisdom identifies a serious flaw** in *Life of Pi*, which embraces religion without quite taking it seriously, and is simultaneously about everything... and *very little indeed*.

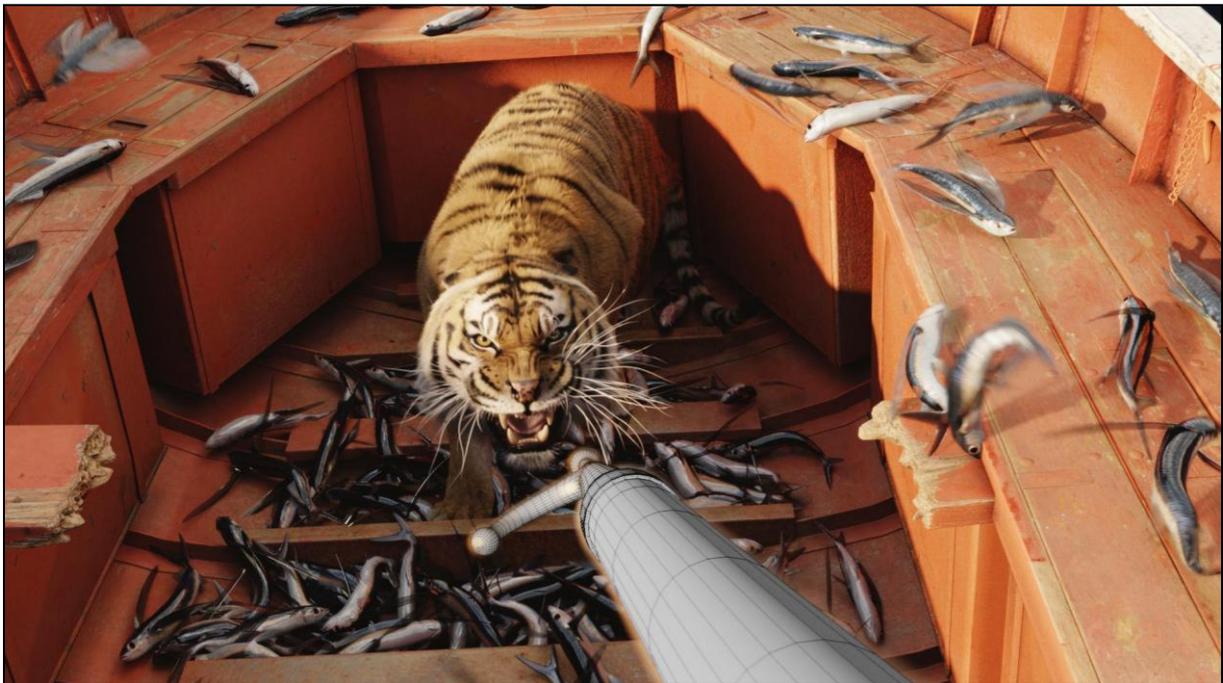
I suppose Ang Lee's purpose was not to give answers, but to **throw out questions**. The movie doesn't seem to be a film about **believing in any particular god** — it's all about **faith** as opposed to **rational science**. It's about **believing in the magic of the world**.

There's a degree of that confusing magic in Lee's direction, too. There are a number of scenes in which it is all but **impossible to fathom how they were achieved**. One of these is the sinking of the ship carrying Pi and his family, which stands proud alongside anything you might have seen in any summer blockbuster. As it goes from the flooded bowels of the ship to Pi leaping into a lifeboat, which swiftly plummets into the squalling waves thanks to a fractious zebra, then crashing about above and below the water, it's impossible to see the joins. Initially you're trying to work out how it was done, but then you're just thrilled that it was, and with such talent ! I think the film is also eventually **about the magic of film itself**. And when they come to a **floating island populated by countless meercats**, what an **incredibly poetic sequence** Lee creates there !

The island raises another question : *Is this whole story real ?*

DEEPER ANALYSIS

Life of Pi is not only a story of human struggle against nature but also a profound tale that questions *what separates man from beast*. More interestingly, *when does man become a beast ?*



In *Life of Pi*, the narrator and protagonist Pi is placed in a life or death situation which **tests his faith and morality**. From his faith(s), Pi has developed a deep sense of morality and a **kindness towards all living things**. However, when faced with death and starvation, he is forced to abandon his morality in order to survive. When asked by the investigators to describe what events transpired while he was out in the ocean, Pi describes an extraordinary sequence of events in which he finds himself stranded on a lifeboat with several escaped zoo animals, including a full grown tiger. Towards the end of the novel, when pressed by the authorities to tell them what really happened, Pi recounts a **more realistic and far more morbid story**. The animals used in the first story all have human counterparts whose actions closely replicate these of the animals. While interpretation of this story is left open to the reader, one theory interprets the invention of the animals as a *defence mechanism* used by Pi in order to survive the conditions of being lost at sea while preserving his sense of morality.

1) **Creating illusion as a defence mechanism**

Let's have a look at the parallel nature of Pi's stories. Distinct similarities between the **story with animals** and **the story with people** are pointed out at the end of both novel and film. For example, the four animals mentioned in the beginning of the story include an orangutan, a hyena, a zebra, and a tiger. Each animal has a corresponding human character in the second story. These characters are Pi's mother, the cook, the Chinese crewman and Pi's *alter ego*, respectively. Most of these animals or people do not last long, but even in the original story **the animals do not behave normally at all**. For example, the hyena eats only the zebra's broken leg at first. There is no reason for the zebra not to have been killed outright.

In addition to the animals behaving strangely, there is **considerable anthropomorphism** used heavily throughout the story. This is a strong indicator that Pi is mentally seeing people on the raft as animals. And when you consider the things that were going on between the people on the life boat, Pi's actions make sense. Given that he has a great deal of experience with zoology it is only natural that he would choose to interpret these terrible actions performed by people as performed by animals.

Most of all, the creation of this fierce animal is a **major reason Pi was able to survive so long**. This *alter ego* enabled him to commit terrible and horrendous acts, which would be incomprehensible for his own moral persona to perform, but would in fact be natural for a wild beast such as a tiger.

Towards the end of the story, Pi poses a question which in many ways explains exactly why the story with animals was told. Pi says : *'So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?'* This question sums up the deeper **allegory of this story about faith and religion(s)**. When Pi asks this question, it suggests that he realizes that the story with the animals must be **an illusion created by him**. However, he also realizes that **such an illusion is not bad**. In fact, it **enabled him to survive an ordeal that could very easily have killed him**. He is quite literally interpreting human actions as the actions of animals, and so it is easier for his mind to comprehend the situation.

Let me rephrase the allegory behind this film : **all faiths and religions are illusions created by man**. However, those beautiful illusions, those constructions of the human mind, **are not so bad** : in fact, they even **enable men to survive ordeals during their lives**, to understand and comprehend situations better, and more generally speaking, to survive the long trip of *life* throughout the dangerous ocean of the world. Sceptic people, like Pi's father or the older Japanese questioner, look at the world **as it is**, with its *rationale* and scientific laws, while people like Pi **transcend its crude reality through poetry and magic**. Now that's rather thought-provoking for a kid's movie !

2) **Between faith and science : revealing the human soul**

The insurance company would rather accept the second, **savage tale of murder and cannibalism** offered by the young Pi recuperating in the Mexican hospital, more readily than the preposterous-sounding, first tale of a **6,000 miles trip across the Pacific ocean, through monsoon and thunderstorms**, with a hyena, an orang-utan, a zebra and a Bengal tiger, all the way to Mexico, with a carnivorous island as only stopping place for refreshment but from which he must flee because of its transmogrification nightly....

Actually, the version one chooses to accept eventually **reveals one's human psyche and personality**. The ending says : **choosing the first (or the second) version tells as much about you as it does about the God you believe in**.

3) **Moving on** or *why the Tiger didn't look back*

Many people wondered about the ending of Pi's ordeal, and **why Richard Parker did not look back at him** as it prepared to step into the forest – only forward to salvation. If the tiger is an *alter ego* of Pi, why is he not looking back at the young man on the seashore ? Pi's experience of the pas months has **sapped everything from him : his emotions, health, family** – and yet, for some reason, **he must move on toward the future or he will die mourning the past**. Human strength goes only so far. Perhaps Richard Parker is also reminiscent of faith in something bigger than ourselves and **faith in the unknown**. Pi saw the power of God in the horrific storm and it reminded him that no matter how hard he tries to understand things, *he doesn't control anything*. In a day when many movies make no sense at all, this film gives us much to consider about...