



Immortality Lite

Ross Douthat

Two Mayan-themed movies reached multiplexes this Christmas, which might be a sign of the apocalypse—especially since it's only five years till 2012, the date the Mayan calendar expects the world to end. The Maya in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* have earned the jaguar's share of the attention, and understandably so, since they spend most of their time ripping still-beating hearts out of the chests of their enemies. But Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*, a trippy, heartfelt, baffling meditation on man's quest for immortality, has a heavy Mayan presence as well, and whereas Gibson's Mesoamericans embody decline, decadence, and the culture of death, in Aronofsky's film they stand for something else entirely. They have a message for us, it seems, a message that's at once profound and deeply urgent. I'm just damned if I can figure out exactly what it is.

The Fountain is a provocative movie, and a maddening one. Aronofsky worked for seven years to get it made—losing millions of dollars and his original star, Brad Pitt, along the way—and the finished product is at once uncompromised and sufficiently impenetrable to leave you wishing the

director had made a compromise or two. Aronofsky has produced a film about eternal life that's ideally suited to our metaphysically-muddled era—a movie that's obsessed with the big questions, but uncertain what it wants to say about them.

There are three stories in *The Fountain*, overlapping and doubling back on one another. In the present, a doctor named Tom Creo (Hugh Jackman, clean-shaven) races to cure his wife, Izzi (a radiant Rachel Weisz), who's dying from a brain tumor, and he stumbles on what might just be a cure for death. Izzi, meanwhile, has found the time to write a book entitled, yes, *The Fountain*, which is set five hundred years ago in Spain and recounts how Queen Isabella (a radiant Rachel Weisz), besieged by the Inquisition, dispatched a brave conquistador (Hugh Jackman, bearded) to the New World to find the Tree of Life. The one from Genesis, that is, the one we *didn't* eat from—though it turns out that the Maya have their own tree of life mythology, which may explain why the tree turns up inside a Mayan temple, guarded by a pack of screaming warriors and a torch-waving high priest.

Back in the present, meanwhile, Weisz's Izzi has been stargazing at

a dying sun the Maya (them again!) called Xibulba, the place where they believed their souls migrated after death. And that same Xibulba, which turns out to be buried inside a gorgeous nebula, is the destination of the spaceship in the third story, which is set five hundred years in the future and follows what appears to be the same Tom Creo (Hugh Jackman, bald) as he travels across the light-years in a transparent sphere, carrying with him an enormous, dying tree (a radiant Rachel Weisz, apparently, underneath all that bark).

If this sounds mildly ridiculous... well, it is. *The Fountain* is a naïve work of art, filmed without a touch of irony or cynicism, and without a trace of humor as well. Like anything so self-serious, it teeters perpetually on the brink of camp. The foray into Inquisition-era Spain, in particular, is a something of a hoot: the Grand Inquisitor, flagellating himself and hanging heretics upside down, is a *Da Vinci Code* extra crossed with a Mel Brooks caricature. As for the sci-fi section, well, if the sight of a white-clad, depilated Jackman floating in a zero-gravity lotus position doesn't inspire at least a stifled giggle, then God have mercy on you—you're probably one of the people who made *The Celestine Prophecy* a bestseller.

But *The Fountain* is moving even so, because underneath the spaceships and swords and Mayan temples, the story dares to be as simplistic and primal as possible: A man loves a

woman, doesn't want her to die, and will go to any lengths to keep her alive. Weisz is Aronofsky's fiancée, it's worth noting, and the mother of his child, and the way that he films her Isabella and her Izzi—as though she were the first woman on earth, and the last—suggests that he identifies with Tom Creo's obsessions, and with his fury at the knowledge that what he loves will pass away.

Identification isn't the same as agreement, though, and it's here that the film's confusions begin, with a screenplay that can't decide whether Creo's rage against the dying of the light is justified or not. In *The Fountain's* Spanish storyline, it's the evil Inquisitor who interprets death religiously (albeit with a theology that's more gnostic than Christian), as a gift that frees our souls from the prison of the body, while both Isabella and her conquistador are bent on seeking bodily immortality instead. We're meant to sympathize with their quest, I think, and hate the life-denying prelate's attempt to keep them from it. Yet the rest of the film seems to share the Mayan point of view, which is closer to the Inquisitor's take: The Maya hold that "death is the road to awe," and therefore a consummation to be accepted, if not devoutly to be wished. This is decidedly the view of the dying Izzi, whose warmth and wisdom contrasts with her husband's noisy desperation, as his quest to find a cure for cancer, and then for death, carries over into

the future-Creo's desperate need to keep his tree/wife alive long enough to reach Xibalba. He's aggressive, frantic, and seemingly missing the point; she's wise, placid, at peace with herself and with the universe. He's materialistic, she's spiritual. He's wrong, she's right.

But right about what? This is the larger problem with the film, even once you set aside its contradictions—that Aronofsky, for all his skill and passion, can't conjure up anything stronger than an unsatisfying pantheism as an alternative to Creo's materialism, and then expects us to prefer this to a living, breathing Izzi. *The Fountain* aims for an everything-is-connected mysticism, in which time folds on itself, castles become cities become nebulae, Christian iconography shades into Buddhist imagery, and women and fountains and trees blur into one another. As cinema, it's gorgeous, but insofar as this pantheism has practical implications for life after death, they're banal to the point of absurdity—at least as summed up in this pearl of Mayan wisdom that Izzi cites before she dies:

...if they dug his father's body up, it would be gone. They planted a seed over his grave. The seed became a tree...his father became

a 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.

"Together we will live forever," Izzi tells her Tom, which is certainly a hopeful sentiment, but apparently she means that they'll both live on in the birds and the bees, the flowers and the trees (near the end of the film, we see Tom planting a seed on Izzi's grave, which presumably grows up into the Izzi-tree of the year 2500). Set against this twaddle, Tom Creo's deeply modern, scientific argument—"Death is a disease," he says at Izzi's funeral, "it's like any other. And there's a cure"—has an obvious appeal, since it promises to preserve the actual person that you love, the Izzi or the Rachel Weisz, rather than just incorporate her essence, somehow, into the larger wonders of the natural world.

Don't get me wrong: Trees and birds and nebulae are nice and all. But if my love were perishing of cancer, I don't think I'd accept them as a substitute for the living, breathing *her*. Give us Izzi, or give us death.

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