

The film *Pi* by Darren Aronofsky centers around a brilliant mathematician and numerologist, Max Cohen, and his relentless effort to discern a universal pattern to seemingly random occurrences. At the same time that his genius is selfishly pursued by Marcy Dawson of the investment firm Lancet Percy and Lenny Meyer of a mystical Jewish sect, Max himself experiences ever-worsening headaches and hallucinations that drive him to the edge of insanity. When he finally discovers the 216-digit number he had unceasingly sought, he hallucinates his destruction of every trace of it, including the knowledge contained in his own brain. The central theme of *Pi* is the film's portrayal of two dual aspects of metaphorical blindness: clarity of insight and the inability to recognize limits that should not be crossed.

The theme of blindness is introduced in the beginning of the film with Max's first statement: "When I was a little kid, my mother told me not to stare into the sun. So one day when I was six, I did." Max was literally blinded for a time, and though eventually recovered his eyesight, the ordeal afflicted him with searing headaches that would recrudescence periodically and mercilessly. It is later revealed that Max felt an epiphanic flash of universal realization at the moment when the sun filled his eyes with an overpowering burst of white light. The film further intimates the connection between staring into the sun and headaches by ending every one of Max's hallucinations with a fade into white light. The crude, black and white appearance of the film may have been intended to portray the quality of Max's vision as he searches for the answer.

As the sun-induced burst of realization suggests, insight into the essence of the universe is one of the elements of the metaphor of blindness. Just as Max's six-year-old burst of understanding had the repercussion of intense pain, so his continued approach toward the

discovery of the ultimate pattern is accompanied by excruciating headaches of worsening severity. It is interesting to note that this same meaning for blindness is found in other works, most notably *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. In this play, Oedipus relentlessly seeks knowledge, not about a universal pattern, but, rather, about his past. Upon learning that he has unwittingly murdered his own father and married his own mother, Oedipus blinds himself so that he will not be forced to witness all of the damage he has caused. The equation of blindness with understanding is underscored by the wisdom of the sightless soothsayer who accurately relates Oedipus's history.

The beliefs which form the basis for the blindness of discovery that Max experiences likewise have connections to past thinkers. Max believes that everything—from the digits in pi to the apparent vagaries of the stock market—follows a mathematical pattern in the same way that countless philosophers—from the Stoics of the Hellenistic era to Baruch Spinoza and the Enlightenment philosophes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—posited the adherence of everything to universal natural laws. His assumption of the predictability of all occurrences demonstrates Max's acceptance of the basic principles of determinism, the idea that the progression and evolution of the universe has been set in advance, for if occurrences can be predicted, they must be predetermined. Determinism may be understood in either a religious context, which postulates that God has prearranged the future, or in a materialist context, which argues that the universe follows a set course because the interactions of molecules and atoms are themselves predictable and unvarying. It is therefore interesting that one of the groups striving to exploit Max's knowledge may be loosely defined as religious and that the other can crudely be considered materialist. (Max actually insults Marcy Dawson by calling her a "materialist," a

label which, although it was meant to execrate her ruthless greed, can more subtly be applied to the philosophical paradigm that predicates the sole existence of matter.)

The belief that the universe behaves according to a pattern relates to yet another key philosophical concept: Plato's theory of ideas. Plato proposed that all forms in the material world are but copies made from an immutable and eternal "mold" or "pattern" that exists in the world of ideas in the same way that Max believes that every event or trend occurs on the basis of a universal pattern of numbers. Plato's myth of the cave also corresponds to Max's experience. The myth describes how a group of people have lived their entire lives in a cave with their backs to its opening so that they believe the shadows they see on the cave wall to be the only reality that exists. Eventually, one person manages to turn around and leave the cave for the outside world. Although he is initially blinded by the glaring sunlight, he finds himself in the infinitely more perfect world of ideas. In the same way, some of the people around Max—most notably, his former professor at Columbia University, Sol Robeson—doubt (or, at least, pretend to doubt) the existence of a universal pattern by which all of the occurrences in nature operate. Max, however, strives to leave the cave and enter the world of nature's universal pattern, in spite of the headaches and hallucinations that the glaring sunlight of realization bring. Unlike Plato's cave dweller, however, Max finds not a beautiful world of ideas but an agonizing, maddening hell.

The myth of the cave, like *Oedipus Rex*, indicates a relationship between blindness and insight. Yet *Pi* also emphasizes another aspect of sightlessness: indifference to anything unrelated to a single, monomaniacal goal and the inability to recognize those boundaries which should not be transgressed in progressing toward such a goal. Max is blind to social grace and public presentation, as his slovenly appearance and taciturnly terse conversations illustrate. He rejects the flirtatious hints of his neighbor, Devi, and eventually even refuses to play the

calculator game with Jenna. Max ignores Sol's suggestion that he read *Hamlet* (which, interestingly, is a story about the consequences of the blind pursuit of a goal—in that case, revenge), as well as Sol's admonition that the door Max seeks is on the edge of a cliff. Max seems apathetic to even his own torment, for he continues unflaggingly despite his constantly bloody nose, his excruciating headaches, and his hideous hallucinations. This blindness to pain is emphasized in Max's hallucination at the train station. Max continued to walk forward along the trail of blood in the same way that he relentlessly advances toward the pattern in spite of its devastation to his health. He persisted in poking the brain, even after it produced a headache accompanied by an intense train sound, just as he continues to push his own mind to discover the pattern. Max's inability to cognize necessary limits to his quest is well expressed in Sol's comparison of Max to Icarus, the mythological youth who flew so close to the sun that his wax wings melted and he fell to his death in the ocean below.

*Pi* portrays the connection between two seemingly contradictory forms of blindness. One is the blindness of epiphany: the revelation of universal insight in a flash of bright white light. Max's progression toward the ultimate pattern—which is predicated on assumptions redolent of such concepts as natural law and determinism—parallels the experience of Plato's cave dweller until Max realizes that the end he seeks is anything but a perfect world of ideas. The other form of blindness—unconcernedness for social interaction and the inability to see when to stop—accompanies the first. Thus, the film expresses the strong conviction that the pursuit of an end, even an end that may seem wonderful, must always be held in check by the rational restraining forces of clear vision.