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Representations of Non-Being in David Lynch's *Eraserhead*, Edmund Elias Merhige's *Begotten*, and Darren Aronofsky's *Pi*: A Comparative Analysis from Indian Philosophy Perspectives

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Abstract
Cinema, as an artistic medium, has often explored profound existential questions and deeply inquired themes such as the relationship between Being and Non-Being. This study centers on three enigmatic films: *Eraserhead*, *Begotten*, and *Pi*, known for their surreal and contemplative nature. I investigate how these films convey representations of Non-Being and examine their potential ties to Indian philosophical perspectives on existence. The discussion will encompass various elements such as narrative, cinematography, symbolism, and motifs which contribute to the exploration of Non-Being. I explore common threads and distinct approaches to the theme, providing a broader understanding of how filmmakers use their art to grapple with existential questions. The analysis deals with the notions of reality, illusion, emptiness, and the interconnectedness of all existence. Exploring how these films offer unique insights into ontological themes and the nature of existence through a comparative approach, I aim to elucidate the filmmakers' creative depictions of Non-Being and their potential connections to Eastern philosophical thought, either aligning with or challenging Indian philosophical perspectives (such as Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, and Jainism) on the human experience and the nature of reality.

Keywords: being, non-being, reality, illusion, emptiness, film narrative, self, identity, symbol, archetype

Indian Philosophy: A Brief Overview of Being vs. Non-Being Conceptions

Indian philosophy encompasses a rich tapestry of diverse schools of thought which explore the fundamental nature of reality, existence, and non-existence. While each school presents unique perspectives, there are common threads which bind them together, creating a fascinating philosophical landscape.

Advaita Vedanta, propounded by Adi Shankaracharya, is one of the major schools of Vedanta philosophy. According to Advaita Vedanta, the ultimate reality, known as *brahman*, is an undifferentiated and limitless entity beyond space and time. This concept resonates with the idea of being, representing the true essence of existence. The phenomenal world, however, is considered *māyā*, an illusory veil which obscures the perception of *brahman*. This notion of *māyā* aligns with the concept of non-being, as the material world is deemed transient and deceptive (Guénon, *Studies* 73-75). In fact, the empirical reality we perceive is an apparent manifestation of the real, but ultimately unreal. The surreal and abstract presentation in *Begotten* can be seen as an artistic expression of Advaita Vedanta's dichotomy between the illusory world and the true nature of existence. The striking visuals, with characters representing archetypes rather than specific individuals, evoke the idea of the unreal and transitory nature of life.

Buddhism, originating from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), delves into the nature of suffering and the path to liberation. Central to Buddhist philosophy is the concept of *anattā* (*anātman*), or non-self, which posits that there is no permanent, unchanging self or soul. This notion challenges conventional ideas of being, emphasizing the impermanence and interconnectedness of all things. In the film *Eraserhead*, David Lynch masterfully captures the sense of alienation through its protagonist's experiences (Olson 88). The protagonist, Henry, grapples with a distorted sense of self and his place in the world, reflecting the

Buddhist idea of the illusory nature of individual identity. Moreover, Buddhism introduces the idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which asserts that all phenomena lack inherent existence. Emptiness signifies non-being, as it implies the absence of inherent, permanent essence. The interconnectedness of all things is a vital aspect of this philosophy, where each entity's existence depends on its relation to others.

Jainism, another ancient Indian religion, emphasizes the practice of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) and the pursuit of spiritual purity to achieve liberation or *mokṣa* (Guénon, *Introduction* 83, 202). Jain philosophy revolves around the old Indian concept of *saṃsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, and asserts that every soul is inherently trapped in this cycle due to its karmic attachments. In *Begotten*, as well as in *Din of Celestial Birds* and his recent *Polia & Blastema*, Edmund Elias Merhige's portrayal of the cyclical nature of life and death is reminiscent of this concept. In his movies, exploring the journey of the eternal soul through various incarnations mirrors the idea of transmigration, where the soul continuously undergoes birth, death, and rebirth. Jainism also advocates the principle of *anekāntavāda*, which emphasizes the multifaceted nature of truth and reality. According to this doctrine, the ultimate truth cannot be captured by any single perspective, and it requires the synthesis of multiple viewpoints. This notion of multiplicity aligns with the complexity and ambiguity found in the representation of non-being in the selected films, especially in Darren Aronofsky's *Pi*.

The Indian philosophical landscape offers profound insights into the concepts of being and non-being. Advaita Vedanta's distinction between the ultimate reality and the illusory world, Buddhism's exploration of emptiness and interconnectedness, and Jainism's emphasis on the cycle of birth and death present nuanced perspectives on existence and non-existence. As I examine the cinematic representations of non-being in the selected films, I draw upon these philosophical frameworks to enrich our understanding of the complexities of human existence and the enigmatic nature of reality. Through their creative vision, the films serve as cinematic reflections on the profound ideas found in Indian philosophy. By reimagining cyclical existence, envisioning the illusory nature of reality, exploring transcendence, confronting impermanence, and embracing

pluralism, the films offer a contemporary lens to introspection and self-inquiry, echoing the Indian philosophical tradition of self-reflection as a path to understanding deeper truths.

Through their surreal evocative visuals, immersive soundscapes, and abstract narratives and themes, these movies transcend conventional storytelling and serve as profound vehicles for philosophical inquiry. The films serve as catalysts for existential questioning, sparking intellectual curiosity and inviting viewers to explore the nature of their own existence and the world around them. In this way, they function as philosophical mirrors, reflecting back the viewers' own thoughts and emotions. Given this context, our analytical and hermeneutic endeavor relies on the cultural perspective expressed by Ana Agud in her philological, linguistic and philosophical introductory study which accompanies the translation of relevant to the matter ancient sacred Indian poems, as well as Greek and Latin poems (Agud 9-61). Agud's book explores the profound philosophical and spiritual concepts found in *Rig-Veda*, *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, and *Bhagavad Gītā*, which are known for their deep philosophical insights and discussions on the nature of the self (*ātman*) and the ultimate reality (*brahman*), among other topics, while also delving into the linguistic and philosophical considerations related to language, meaning, and the essence or the modes of being.

Eraserhead (1977)

Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) is a cinematic masterpiece renowned for its surreal and nightmarish atmosphere, as well as for its enigmatic and haunting portrayal of the human psyche. Its enigmatic narrative and unsettling visuals create a compelling exploration of existential uncertainty, fear, anxiety, alienation, and the blurred boundaries between reality and illusion. Moreover, conveying representations of non-being, it draws keen connections to Indian philosophical notions of *māyā* (illusion) and the impermanence of material existence, in multifaceted depictions of the invisible and various symbolic representations which resonate on psychological, emotional, and philosophical levels. The movie unfolds in a dystopian urban landscape, where industrialization and decay dominate.

The protagonist, Henry Spencer, grapples with feelings of alienation and anxiety in this bleak and eerie environment (Olson 86). Lynch's skillful use of distorted visuals and sound design creates an unsettling experience, blurring the line between dream and reality. The movie presents a dreamlike narrative which defies conventional storytelling, leaving much of its meaning open to interpretation. At its core, the film probes the human condition, often through the representation of the invisible aspects of life. The industrial environment in which the protagonist, Henry Spencer, finds himself trapped, serves as another representation of the invisible. The dark and labyrinthine industrial landscape highlights the alienation and isolation experienced by individuals in modern society. Lynch cleverly employs this setting to portray the invisible forces which control and dictate human existence, making the film's themes resonate with broader social and existential concerns. The urban decay and desolation in *Eraserhead* symbolize the impermanence of material existence, akin to the Buddhist concept of *aniccā*. The crumbling industrial landscape serves as a constant reminder of the transient nature of all things, contrasting with the timeless and changeless realm of the absolute.

In parallel to Advaita Vedanta's concept of *māyā*, which posits the phenomenal world as an illusory veil obscuring the ultimate reality, *Eraserhead* presents a reality which appears distorted and deceptive. The constant sense of unease and confusion experienced by the audience echoes the disconcerting nature of *māyā*, urging viewers to question the authenticity of the perceived reality and contemplate the illusory aspects of existence. The film explores the theme of identity and the illusion of the self through its protagonist. As Henry navigates his disturbing surroundings and interacts with peculiar characters, his sense of self and identity become increasingly fragmented (Olson 89). He experiences moments of disassociation and is haunted by nightmarish visions which challenge his understanding of reality. This portrayal aligns with the Buddhist concept of *anattā* (non-self), where the film suggests that the notion of a stable, unchanging self is an illusion. Henry's fragmented identity reflects the impermanence of individual existence, and his struggles epitomize the disconnection from the true nature of being.

The protagonist is burdened by his responsibilities, including his bizarre parental role (Olson 96). The exploration of the complexities of desire and the haunting consequences of its fulfillment bears resemblance to the Buddhist concept of *taṇhā* (thirst, craving) and its role in perpetuating suffering. *Eraserhead* explores themes of sexuality and repression through symbolic representations of the invisible. The Lady in the Radiator, with her hauntingly captivating performance, embodies both temptation and escape. Her rendition of *In Heaven* emphasizes the allure of an invisible realm, offering respite from the mundane and painful reality of life (McGowan 32). This portrayal of the invisible represents desires, fantasies, and the subconscious mind which are often suppressed or relegated to the shadows. As Henry seeks solace in this illusion, he becomes entangled in a self-destructive cycle of desire and disappointment.

Furthermore, the iconic image of the mysterious "baby," a grotesque and deformed creature, reinforces the idea of impermanence and non-being. The baby's constant crying and discomfort serve as a reminder of the imperfections and fragility inherent in material forms. Central to *Eraserhead* is this eerie and grotesque portrayal of the baby. From its mysterious origin to its nightmarish appearance, the baby functions as a representation of the invisible aspects of parenthood and the anxieties associated with fatherhood. The baby's constant wailing symbolizes the fear and responsibility which come with caring for a helpless life, further enhancing the sense of the unknown.

Lynch's use of sound and silence throughout the film plays a crucial role in highlighting the invisible aspects of human experience. The constant industrial hum and the baby's incessant cries create an unsettling atmosphere, contributing to the dreamlike and disorienting nature (McGowan 35). Alternatively, moments of silence accentuate the profound silence and existential void experienced by the characters, emphasizing their inner struggles and emotional turmoil.

The compound word "eraserhead" serves as a cryptic and symbolic title which encapsulates the core themes and the protagonist's inner turmoil. The meaning of this peculiar word can be explored in relation to some key scenes in the movie, shedding light on its significance within the context of David Lynch's enigmatic narrative: Henry's anxiety and alienation; the

baby and parental responsibilities; fear of repression and desire; existential uncertainty; the unresolved mystery. Expanding the analysis, the title of the movie can be seen as a representation of the protagonist Henry Spencer's state of mind throughout his nightmarish, surreal experiences. Henry appears socially withdrawn, emotionally detached, and plagued by anxieties. The title suggests a sense of fragmentation, as if parts of Henry's identity have been erased or are indistinct. This inner state is evident in several scenes, particularly when he is alone in his apartment. His anxiety and alienation are palpable, emphasizing the enigmatic nature of his character and the invisible struggles he faces.

One of the central themes in *Eraserhead* revolves around parenthood and the responsibilities it entails. The mysterious baby, which is the product of Henry's relationship with his girlfriend Mary X, is a major source of anxiety and fear for Henry. Thus the title could be interpreted as Henry's subconscious desire to erase or escape from the overwhelming responsibilities of fatherhood. The struggles and frustrations of caring for the baby, who represents the invisible aspects of parenting and the uncertainties which come with it, add depth to the meaning of the title. The title of the movie may also imply the fear of repression and the consequences of indulging in suppressed desires. Throughout the film, there are elements of Henry's psyche and desires which remain hidden and unexpressed. These repressed emotions find symbolic expression through surreal and nightmarish imagery. The Lady in the Radiator, a representation of desire and escape, adds another layer to the theme of suppressed feelings and the invisible aspects of human desires.

Eraserhead is renowned for its existentialist undertones, reflecting the uncertainty and absurdity of life. The name "Eraserhead" could suggest the erasure of identity or the lack of a clear sense of self in the face of the uncertainties of life. Henry's journey in the film is a surreal exploration of the human condition, marked by ambiguity and an absence of clear purpose. The title encapsulates this existential uncertainty and the invisible fears and questions which permeate Henry's consciousness. Furthermore, the title is cryptic and open to interpretation, much like the film itself. It represents a puzzle or riddle which remains unresolved throughout the narrative. This enigmatic quality parallels the unanswered questions and hidden meanings

present in various scenes. For instance, the pencil factory where Henry's sacrificed head is used to extract substance for making erasers adds an additional layer of symbolism and meaning to the concept of "Eraserhead" and the overarching themes of the movie. This surreal and disturbing sequence further explores Henry's inner psyche, his fears, and the nature of reality in the dreamlike narrative.

Firstly, Henry's sacrificed head being used to produce erasers underscores the notion of a fragmented self (McGowan 42-43). The erasers represent the desire to eliminate imperfections or erase undesirable aspects of oneself. In this context, the term "Eraserhead" takes on the meaning of a self which is constantly attempting to correct or erase its flaws. The act of extracting substance from Henry's head for this purpose highlights his internal struggles and the invisible aspects of his identity which he may wish to erase or alter. Secondly, the scene also reflects the burden of responsibility which Henry faces throughout the film. The pencils, which are tools for creation and expression, require the erasers to correct any mistakes made during the creative process. This symbolism aligns with Henry's anxieties about fatherhood and the overwhelming responsibility of caring for the baby and correcting the mistakes he perceives in himself and his role as a father (Armstrong et al. 330).

The pencil factory scene, like many others in *Eraserhead*, blurs the lines between reality and dream. This ambiguity adds to the overall theme of the invisible and the uncertain nature of reality. Thus the title becomes a reflection of the elusive boundaries between waking life, dreams, and nightmares, suggesting the existential surrealism which the movie expresses. It challenges conventional logic and follows the path to the subconscious, where fears, desires, and anxieties manifest in abstract and symbolic forms. The act of using Henry's head for the production of erasers exemplifies the surreal and absurd nature of challenges and uncertainties of life. Therefore, the title embodies the surreal and existential aspects of the human experience, which are riddled with unanswered questions and invisible fears. The significance of this scene is also heightened by its connection to The Lady in the Radiator. Her presence, before and after Henry's decapitation, reinforces the theme of escape from the harsh realities of life. The radiant light in her performance contrasts with the dark and

oppressive atmosphere of the industrial environment, suggesting that a different reality or realm exists (McGowan 27). On this account, the title of the movie encapsulates the protagonist's longing for escape and transformation.

Therefore, the title "Eraserhead" in David Lynch's film is meaningfully multi-layered and symbolic, reflecting the inner struggles, anxieties, and uncertainties faced by the protagonist, Henry Spencer. It encapsulates the themes of anxiety, alienation, parenthood, repression, the fragmented self, the burden of responsibility, the blurred lines between reality and dream, existential uncertainty and surrealism. Lynch's masterful use of surreal imagery and cryptic storytelling further enhances the enigmatic quality of the movie, making *Eraserhead* a thought-provoking exploration of the invisible aspects of the human experience, encapsulating the inner struggles, anxieties, and invisible aspects of the human psyche which dominate the entire narrative.

Eraserhead offers a compelling exploration of non-being and the unseen, as it reveals the illusory nature of reality, the disintegration of self and identity, the haunting nature of desire, and the decay of materiality. Through its surreal and nightmarish lens, the film reflects on the complexities of existence and the existential anxieties, close to nihilism, which accompany it (Southwoth 198-204). Drawing connections to Indian philosophical concepts of illusion (*māyā*) and impermanence (*aniccā*), *Eraserhead* invites viewers to confront the enigmatic nature of being and non-being, prompting introspection into the human condition and the search for meaning in an elusive and ever-changing world (Parciack 82-89). The director's refusal to provide definitive answers to its enigmatic narrative adds to the representation of the invisible. Lynch deliberately leaves various plot elements ambiguous, inviting audiences to grapple with their interpretations of the meaning of the movie. By doing so, he taps into the subconscious and challenges viewers to confront their own invisible fears, desires, and uncertainties. *Eraserhead* stands as a cinematic enigma which skillfully portrays the representations of the non-being and the invisible, exploring the human psyche and the existential uncertainties which plague individuals. Through the mysterious baby, industrial nightmare, exploration of sexuality and repression, use of sound and silence, and unanswered

questions, Lynch crafts a thought-provoking and enduring cinematic experience which continues to captivate audiences and elicit diverse interpretations. The director's ability to resonate on multiple levels allows *Eraserhead* to transcend its genre, making it a seminal work of art which remains as relevant today as it was upon its release.

Begotten (1989, released in 1991)

Directed by Merhige, *Begotten* is a visually and thematically haunting film which challenges traditional storytelling and narrative conventions. Its black-and-white, grainy imagery, ethereal atmosphere, and stark symbolism contribute to a raw enigmatic vision, which opens up a canvas for exploring profound existential themes, drawing parallels to Indian philosophical ideas of creation, destruction, and cyclical existence (Hoberman 90-91).

The film opens with a graphic and surreal depiction of a god-like figure disemboweling itself, giving birth to the Mother Earth character. This powerful and enigmatic imagery symbolizes the cyclical nature of life, birth, and death. Through the portrayal of the invisible processes of creation and destruction, *Begotten* sparks the mysteries of existence, where the beginning and the end are intertwined and inseparable (Verrone 154). The god-like figure's self-sacrifice and subsequent transformation set the stage for a narrative which explores the divine and transcendent aspects of life. The esoteric imagery portrays the invisible forces which shape reality beyond the realm of human perception (Muir 140-142). The character of God, though invisible, exerts a profound influence on the unfolding events, representing the unseen forces which govern the universe.

At the core of this visual drama, we witness the depiction of a mysterious and primal birth of a tortured, androgynous deity-like figure, referred to as "God Killing Himself." This act of self-destruction represents a form of non-being, suggesting the dissolution of the divine into the material world. Here, the film echoes the cycle of birth and death, prevalent in various Indian philosophical traditions. Echoing the Jainism's concept of *saṃsāra*, where souls are perpetually trapped in the cycle of reincarnation, *Begotten* offers a surreal depiction of a divine entity initiating its own

demise. This portrayal may symbolize the cyclical nature of existence, where creation emerges from destruction, and destruction paves the way for new creations – an eternal cosmic dance of birth and decay.

The film unfolds like a wordless, cinematic poem, devoid of conventional dialogue and plot-driven storytelling. Instead, the narrative progresses through a sequence of visceral and symbolic scenes which capture the essence of human suffering, violence, and transformation (Verrone 155). As the God Killing Himself undergoes self-immolation, various entities emerge from his remains, giving rise to symbolic representations of non-being. These representations may be seen as allegorical interpretations of Indian philosophical ideas. The emergence of new entities from the remnants of the God can be likened to the cyclic process of cosmic evolution described in Hindu cosmology. The dissolution of one form, leading to the emergence of another, symbolizes the interconnectedness of all existence – a concept integral to Indian philosophical thought.

As the film progresses, the blurry boundaries between reality and illusion are strongly acknowledged, accentuating the theme of non-being. The imagery becomes more abstract, invoking a dreamlike quality which challenges the audience's perceptions. The vivid exploration of the God Killing Himself's painful transformation and its effects on the entities which emerge blurs the lines between existence and non-existence. In line with Advaita Vedanta's concept of *māyā*, the film presents a visually disorienting experience which questions the authenticity of the perceived reality. The surreal and abstract nature of *Begotten* encourages viewers to contemplate the illusory nature of existence, where the line between being and non-being appears ever elusive.

In the film, the natural landscape takes on a dominant role, conveying an overwhelming sense of primal power and indifference to the plight of the characters. The barren and desolate environment, devoid of human intervention, accentuates the theme of non-being and the insignificance of individual existence. Portraying the cruelty and unrelenting force of nature aligns with Buddhist views on suffering and impermanence. The indifference of the landscape to this divine suicide and the subsequent emergence of new entities mirrors the Buddha's teachings on the universal

nature of suffering and the transient nature of all things. *Begotten* offers a thought-provoking exploration of non-being through its mesmerizing visuals and allegorical narrative. Revisiting Indian philosophical concepts of cyclical existence, illusion, and cosmic evolution, the film weaves a tapestry of haunting imagery which challenges conventional notions of being and non-being in a cosmic drama which is constantly unfolding (Verrone 156).

In this silent narrative, the audience becomes a witness to the enigmatic and often disconcerting events. By reducing the reliance on language, the film heightens the sense of the invisible, allowing viewers to interpret and engage with its symbolism on a subconscious level. The connection with nature serves as another representation of the invisible. The stark landscapes and primal elements evoke a sense of the unseen power and life force which permeates the natural world. At the same time, *Begotten* touches on nihilistic themes, suggesting the invisible void and meaninglessness which may underlie existence. The film employs rituals and symbolic gestures to convey its themes, adding depth to the representations of the invisible. These gestures, often mysterious and archaic in nature, emphasize the mystical and ritualistic undertones of the movie, tapping into the collective unconscious and the unseen aspects of human history and culture.

The unconventional narrative and abstract imagery add depth to the meaning of the title, which can be analyzed in relation to pivotal moments in the movie. The opening scene features a god-like figure disemboweling itself, giving birth to the Mother Earth character. This act of self-sacrifice represents the process of creation, where the god-like figure begets life from its own essence. The title "Begotten" in this context reflects the act of bringing forth life, highlighting the invisible forces which initiate creation. As the god-like figure undergoes transformation, it dissolves into Earth, symbolizing a transcendental connection with the natural world. The title also conveys a sense of divine origin, alluding to the character's god-like nature and its role in the act of begetting creation. Through this portrayal, the film explores the invisible aspects of divinity and the interconnectedness of all life. Following the god-like figure's self-sacrifice, Mother Earth gives birth to a humanoid figure, whom she nurtures before

he is brutally murdered by cannibal beings. As this cycle of birth, death, and rebirth represents the cyclical nature of existence, the title of the movie embodies this idea of continuous renewal and regeneration, suggesting that life begets life in an eternal cycle.

Throughout the film, the primal and mysterious power of nature is portrayed through stark landscapes and elemental forces. The title "Begotten" evokes the notion according to which all life is begotten from raw and unseen forces of nature, underscoring the focus on the enigmatic aspects of existence. As the film progresses, it incorporates enigmatic rituals and archetypal symbols which explore the underlying structures of human consciousness and culture. The title connects with the idea that these rituals and symbols are borne out of the human need to make sense of the invisible forces which shape life (Verrone 156-157). The unseen presence of God throughout the film adds a layer of meaning to the title "Begotten." While God remains invisible and silent, the divine influence is felt through the unfolding events and the character's interactions. The film explores the power of the unseen and intangible in shaping the world and human destiny. The title encompasses the metaphysical exploration of the seen and the unseen, the material and the ethereal. It reflects the mysteries of existence, where the visible world is just one layer of reality, and the invisible forces underlying it are equally potent and enigmatic.

The title card ("Language bearers, Photographers, Diary makers. You with your memory are dead, frozen. Lost in a present that never stops passing. Here lies the incantation of matter. A language forever") serves as a powerful and evocative introduction, setting the tone for the enigmatic and philosophical journey which follows, in relationship to the director's exploration of creation, time, memory, and the impermanence of existence.

The first part of the title card introduces three distinct roles: language bearers, photographers, diary makers. Each role represents a means of capturing and preserving experiences, memories, and knowledge. Language bearers signify the transmission of culture and history through spoken and written words. Photographers record moments in time through visual images, while diary makers document personal experiences and emotions. Collectively, these roles emphasize the importance of memory and the act of recording life events. The phrase "You with your memory are

dead, frozen" suggests the limitations of memory as a medium of preservation. While memory enables individuals to carry fragments of the past, it is imperfect and subject to distortion. The use of the words *dead* and *frozen* implies that memories are static and unchanging, unable to capture the dynamic and ephemeral nature of life. The title card speaks of being "lost in a present that never stops passing," highlighting the fleeting and transient nature of the present moment. It draws attention to the paradox according to which the present is continuously slipping away, making it challenging to fully grasp or hold onto. This temporal aspect is a recurring theme in *Begotten*, as the film explores the impermanence of the visible world and the cyclical nature of existence. The phrase "Here lies the incantation of matter" suggests a mystical quality to the material world. *Incantation* implies a magical invocation or ritual, hinting at the ritualistic and mythic undertones which the movie employes. The material world, with its visible and invisible forces, becomes a canvas for profound and mysterious expressions. The concluding statement, "A language forever," is a potent and enigmatic declaration (Mathijs and Sexton 163). It suggests that the incantation of matter becomes a language which transcends time and speaks to eternal truths. This could be interpreted as the universal language of existence, a language of symbols and archetypes which communicates beyond the boundaries of conventional language, hinting at an underlying order which transcends human comprehension. To sum up, the title card in *Begotten* serves as a thought-provoking prelude to the explorations of time, memory, creation, and the enigmatic aspects of existence, setting the stage for the surreal and mesmerizing journey which unfolds in Merhige's cinematic masterpiece. It introduces key themes of impermanence, preservation, and the mystical language of the material world, in addition to the transient nature of human existence, the struggle to preserve memory, and the cyclical rhythm of life and death.

In addition, *Din of Celestial Birds* (2006), as well as *Polia & Blastema*, previously entitled *Stateless* (2021) round up the "thrilogy" initiated with *Begotten*. Known for its experimental and immersive cinematic experience, Merhige features in *Din of Celestial Birds* a mesmerizing soundscape, evoking a sense of spiritual transcendence and otherworldly realms. Sound plays a central role in creating an immersive

experience for the audience. The soundtrack, composed by Ben Gillespie and David Wexler, is an intricate arrangement of deep resonant tones and ethereal sounds. The auditory experience invokes a sense of grandeur and spiritual elevation, echoing the sacred music and chants found in various religious traditions. The use of sound in the film aligns with Indian philosophical notions of transcendence. In the Upanishads and other spiritual texts, transcendental experiences are often associated with the cosmic sound of *ōṃ*, believed to represent the primordial sound of creation. The auditory journey in *Din of Celestial Birds* seems to resonate with this idea, immersing the audience in an ethereal sonic landscape which suggests a connection to higher realms beyond the ordinary material world.

In Indian philosophical thought, birds are often associated with transcendence and the journey of the soul beyond the physical realm. The concept of *siddhis*, mystical powers attained through spiritual practice, includes the ability to transcend material limitations, such as the ability to fly. In *Din of Celestial Birds*, the title itself suggests a divine or celestial realm, a source of creation for the material existence and constantly developing consciousness. The visual language of the movie is characterized by abstract and enigmatic imagery, featuring fleeting glimpses of obscure figures and otherworldly landscapes. These evocative images evoke a sense of mystery and wonder, inviting interpretations beyond the surface narrative. This thematic exploration resonates with the concept of the unseen in Indian philosophy. In Advaita Vedanta, the ultimate reality (*brahman*) is beyond the grasp of ordinary perception, hidden by the illusory veil of *māyā*. Similarly, in Buddhism, the nature of enlightenment and the ultimate truth remains veiled from ordinary perception. *Din of Celestial Birds* captures the essence of the unseen, inviting viewers to contemplate the possibility of non-being beyond the observable reality. The immersive visuals and soundscape of the movie transport the audience into an elusive realm, where the boundaries of being and non-being appear to dissolve, leaving room for spiritual exploration and transcendence. *Din of Celestial Birds* possibly inviting us to draw connections to Indian philosophical concepts of the unseen and the transcendental, hence ponder the mysteries of existence and the potential for non-being beyond the confines of the tangible world.

Polia & Blastema presents a unique narrative which intertwines various themes, including the cyclical nature of existence, the interplay of light and darkness, and the Indian philosophical idea of the eternal soul. At the heart of *Polia & Blastema* lies the concept of the eternal soul (*Ātman*) and its journey through various incarnations. The interplay between these two characters suggests a connection which transcends time and the boundaries of individual existence. This theme resonates with the Indian philosophical concept of the eternal soul, which is believed to persist through multiple lifetimes in a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*). The director's exploration of the interconnectedness of Polia and Blastema's identities echoes the idea of the continuity of the eternal soul across different manifestations.

Polia & Blastema employs visual symbolism, particularly in the interplay of light and darkness, to convey representations of non-being. Light often symbolizes life, enlightenment, and consciousness, while darkness signifies the unknown, ignorance, and the absence of existence. In the film, these elements are used creatively to underscore the ever-changing balance between being and non-being. The use of light and darkness in this mesmerizing visual poem mirrors the concept of the manifest and unmanifest realities. The manifest world, represented by light, is the realm of empirical existence, while the unmanifest, symbolized by darkness, represents the potentiality from which all things emerge. The interplay of these two elements in *Polia & Blastema* highlights the cyclical nature of creation and dissolution, akin to the eternal cosmic dance described in Indian philosophical texts.

The film approaches the essence of individual identity and the transformative power of experiences and memories. As Polia and Blastema interact and share experiences, their identities seem to merge and intertwine. This portrayal suggests that individual identity is not fixed but rather shaped by the accumulation of experiences and the passage of time. This theme aligns with the Indian philosophical idea of *anattā*, the absence of a permanent, unchanging self. The exploration of the malleability of identity reflects the impermanence and ever-changing nature of individual existence, challenging the notion of a stable and enduring self. Throughout *Polia & Blastema*, there is a sense of longing for liberation, an inherent

yearning for two separate entities to become one, in a quest for self-discovery and the search for meaning beyond the confines of primal existence. This theme echoes the Indian philosophical pursuit of *mokṣa*, where the ultimate goal is to break free from the cycle of *saṃsāra* and attain spiritual enlightenment. Through its enigmatic narrative and visual symbolism, *Polia & Blastema* presents a unique perspective on being and non-being, as well as the eternal essence which transcends the boundaries of material existence.

Pi (1998)

Aronofsky's debut feature film examines the enigmatic world of mathematics and the human obsession with uncovering hidden patterns and truths. The movie offers a unique cinematic exploration of representations of the non-being and the invisible, bringing into viewers' attention a thematic exploration of paranoia, obsession, spirituality, and the mysteries which lie beyond human comprehension. *Pi* is an intense and visually striking psychological thriller which deconstructs the mind of a mathematician, Max Cohen, who becomes consumed by the pursuit of unlocking the secrets of nature through numbers (Thompson and Bordwell 699). Exploring the invisible is a key element in driving the narrative, as it mirrors the protagonist's descent into paranoia and obsession. Setting the stage for a comprehensive work which draws connections to Indian philosophical perspectives, in addition to the previous selected movies, *Pi* conveys a unique approach to exploring existential themes such as the quest for mathematical truth, the illusion of order in chaos, the burden of knowledge and isolation, the limitations of rationality, the desire for control and the nature of non-being, the dialectic of chaos and order, embracing non-being and the mysteries of existence.

Pi revolves around the protagonist, Max Cohen, a brilliant mathematician obsessed with finding patterns and order in the chaos of the world. This can be seen as a reflection of Pythagorean beliefs in the inherent order and harmony of the universe, which can be understood through mathematics. The Pythagoreans believed that numbers held mystical and metaphysical significance. Max is determined to uncover the ultimate

mathematical truth underlying the universe by deciphering the mathematical constant π (pi). He believes that the stock market operates on a predictable numerical sequence, representing an invisible order which can be uncovered through his numerical algorithms. This representation of the invisible highlights Max's quest for understanding and control over the chaos of existence. As Max's obsession with numbers intensifies, he becomes increasingly paranoid, feeling that he is being watched and pursued by sinister forces (Armstrong et al. 26). The film portrays the invisible presence of these alleged adversaries, leaving both Max and the audience uncertain of their true nature. This ambiguity heightens the sense of mystery and intensifies the exploration of the invisible.

His quest for this transcendental number becomes a metaphorical journey, reflecting the human desire to comprehend the fundamental nature of existence and non-being. Max's pursuit of mathematical truth parallels the Indian philosophical pursuit of understanding the ultimate reality (*brahman*). In the Upanishads and Vedanta, *brahman* is described as the unchanging and eternal essence underlying the ever-changing phenomenal world. Max's search for the unchanging and fundamental truth in the chaos of numbers and patterns echoes the Indian philosophical quest for the ultimate truth beyond the impermanence of material existence. As Max delves deeper into the mathematical mysteries, he becomes increasingly entangled in a world of paradoxes and contradictions. The film portrays the tension between order and chaos, reflecting the Indian philosophical concept of *māyā*, the illusory nature of reality. Max's perception of patterns and hidden meaning in the chaos of numbers reflects the human tendency to perceive order and meaning in the midst of the unpredictable and ever-changing world.

Aronofsky weaves elements of spirituality and mysticism into the narrative, introducing the concept of the hidden name of God and the significance of the number Pi in various religious and mystical traditions. For instance, Max's search for the hidden and mystical pattern in numbers can be likened to the Kabbalistic quest for hidden spiritual truths beneath the surface of religious texts. Furthermore, Max's obsession with finding a mathematical code could be seen as a reflection of the Jewish tradition's focus on questioning and wrestling with complex theological and

philosophical issues. Jewish thought often involves deep contemplation and debate, and Max's character embodies this spirit of inquiry. This mystical dimension adds depth to the representation of the invisible, as Max grapples with the idea of unlocking cosmic truths beyond the realm of empirical knowledge. Moreover, the Ancient Greeks were known for their pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the natural world. Max's relentless pursuit of the mathematical pattern in the stock market can be seen as a modern embodiment of this Greek intellectual tradition. Max's all-consuming obsession with numbers and the invisible patterns he believes to have uncovered lead to his increasing isolation from the world around him. The invisible forces he perceives create a rift between him and others, leaving him trapped in a self-imposed labyrinth of paranoia and uncertainty. The portrayal of Max's deteriorating mental state, induced by his obsessive pursuit of mathematical truth, reflects the consequences of clinging to the illusory nature of reality. The movie could be interpreted through the lenses of Greek cultural tradition, more precisely Greek tragedy, which often features characters who are driven to madness or destruction due to their obsessions and hubris. Max's descent into madness as he obsesses over the number Pi could be seen as a modern interpretation of the tragic hero archetype, a theme present in Ancient Greek drama. In this sense, *Pi* serves as a cautionary tale, reminding viewers of the dangers of becoming ensnared in the deceptive veils of *māyā*. To the extent Max enters deeper into the realm of numbers and patterns, he becomes increasingly isolated from the world around him. His obsession with mathematical truth alienates him from his relationships, further fueling his detachment from ordinary human experiences. This isolation reflects the Indian philosophical idea of detachment (*vairāgya*), where one seeks liberation by disentangling from worldly attachments and desires. Max's burden of knowledge and the isolation he experiences evoke parallels with the concept of *jñāna yoga*, the path of knowledge, in Indian philosophy. *Jñāna yoga* or *jñāna mārga* involves seeking self-realization and transcendence through the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the true nature of reality. Max's journey, in this sense, can be seen as a modern interpretation of the philosophical quest for self-realization and liberation. On the other hand, Max's isolation and alienation from society due to his obsession with numbers can be

related to the Jewish theme of diaspora and the feeling of being an outsider. This theme is prevalent in Jewish literature and culture, and Max's character experiences a similar sense of estrangement.

As Max grapples with the complexities of mathematical truths, his journey takes on an introspective dimension. The film challenges the limitations of rationality in understanding the mysteries of existence and non-being. Max's mental struggles and his encounters with mysterious entities, like the mystical number theorist Sol Robeson, hint at the limitations of human intellect in comprehending the deepest truths of the universe. This exploration of the limitations of rationality resonates with the Indian philosophical concept of Advaita Vedanta, which emphasizes the limitations of ordinary reason and intellect in grasping the ultimate reality. According to Advaita, the ultimate truth can only be realized through direct experience and inner realization beyond the confines of rational thinking (Skorin-Kapov 19-20). Max's pursuit of mathematical truth is driven by a desire for control and predictability, seeking to unlock the secrets of the universe to gain power over the chaos of existence. This desire for control reflects the human struggle with the impermanent nature of the material world, seeking stability and certainty in the face of uncertainty. In contrast, the Indian philosophical traditions of Buddhism and Jainism emphasize the transient nature of material existence and advocate embracing non-being as a path to liberation. The concept of *aniccā* (impermanence) in Buddhism and the principle of non-attachment (*aparigraha*) in Jainism align with the exploration of the transient and impermanent nature of reality, urging viewers to relinquish the desire for control and to embrace the impermanence of all things.

As the film unfolds, the dialectic of chaos and order becomes increasingly apparent. The pursuit of mathematical truth, represented by the mathematical constant π, symbolizes the human quest for order and understanding in a seemingly chaotic world. Yet, the film also embraces chaos as an essential aspect of existence, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between order and disorder. This dialectic of chaos and order echoes the Indian philosophical concept of Lila, the cosmic play in which the universe is constantly in motion, expressing both order and disorder. It emphasizes the idea that existence is a dance of creation and dissolution,

characterized by the ever-changing interplay of opposites (Skorin-Kapov 50). As the film reaches its climax, Max encounters the Kabbalistic idea of the 216-letter name of God, a mystical concept which represents a hidden code which encompasses all of creation. This encounter with some mysterious and transcendent dimensions of reality suggests that the ultimate truth may be beyond human comprehension, dwelling in the realm of non-being. In parallel with the Indian philosophical notion of the unseen and the transcendental, the film intimates that the ultimate truths of existence and non-being may lie beyond ordinary perception and rational understanding. The film encourages viewers to embrace the hidden aspects of existence with humility and to recognize the limitations of human knowledge in grasping the totality of reality.

The film blurs the lines between subjective experience and objective reality. The audience is immersed in Max's perspective, sharing his experiences of the invisible and the perceptual distortions which accompany his mental unraveling. This subjectivity raises questions about the nature of reality and the extent to which the invisible influences our perceptions and beliefs. In *Pi*, Aronofsky crafts a thought-provoking exploration of the representations of the invisible. Through Max Cohen's obsession with unlocking the secrets of nature through numbers, the film expands existential themes of paranoia, obsession, spirituality, and the mysteries beyond human comprehension. The ambiguous and enigmatic nature of the invisible elements heightens the psychological intensity of the narrative and leaves audiences contemplating the boundaries of perception and reality. *Pi* stands as a captivating and intellectually stimulating film which skillfully depicts the allure and consequences of attempting to unveil the hidden truths of the universe.

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, I have explored the representations of being and non-being in several cinematic works, crafted by visionary filmmakers who offer unique and evocative insights into existential themes and the enigmatic nature of existence. Each film approaches the concept of non-being in distinct ways.

In *Eraserhead*, Lynch's portrayal of existential anxiety, alienation, and nightmarish landscapes aligns with Indian philosophical notions of *māyā* and pursuits the disintegration of self and identity, portraying the haunting consequences of desire reflects the Buddhist concept of *taṇhā*, which perpetuates suffering. Furthermore, the decaying industrial landscape signifies the impermanence of material existence, aligning with the concept of *aniccā*. On the other hand, the monochrome and grainy aesthetic, coupled with its allegorical narrative of *Begotten* suggests that creation emerges from destruction, symbolizing the interconnectedness of all existence, mirroring the idea of *saṃsāra*. These techniques are expanded in *Din of Celestial Birds*, as well as in *Polia & Blastema*, in which light, shadow, and ritualistic imagery portray transcendence, drawing parallels to Indian philosophical concepts of non-being or the eternal soul and echoing the concept of the manifest and unmanifest realities in Indian philosophy, in which the intertwining of existence and non-existence emphasize that mystical experiences transcend the limitations of ordinary perception. The representation of being and non-being in *Pi* exemplifies how cinematic art can function as a profound form of philosophical inquiry. Through its portrayal of the quest for mathematical truth, the illusion of order in chaos, the burden of knowledge, the limitations of rationality, and the desire for control, the film invites viewers on a contemplative journey into the enigmatic nature of existence. Aronofsky's film reimagines key concepts such as detachment, the limitations of reason, and the dialectic of chaos and order, encouraging contemplation and offering a contemporary lens to explore several age-old philosophical inquiries about being and non-being.

One of the defining features of these films is their departure from conventional storytelling. Instead of providing linear plotlines or clear resolutions, they embrace ambiguity and open-ended interpretations. This openness to interpretation allows viewers to engage deeply in personal reflections and contemplations. Such complexity in storytelling mirrors the Indian philosophical principle of *anekāntavāda*, which posits that the ultimate truth is multifaceted and cannot be captured by any single perspective. The selected films demonstrate how artistic expression can serve as a powerful medium for philosophical inquiry. All the films analyzed explore the illusory nature of reality through distorted visuals,

surreal landscapes, and dreamlike sequences. By challenging perceptions of reality, the films prompt viewers to question the authenticity of the perceived world and contemplate the nature of appearances and deeper truths. Filmmakers like Lynch, Merhige, and Aronofsky use visual symbolism, immersive soundscapes, and abstract storytelling to evoke emotional and intellectual responses from their audience, challenging audiences to actively engage with the narrative, exploring their own understanding of the themes presented. These modes of expression resonate with the spirit of Indian philosophical inquiry, where art, poetry, and storytelling have historically been employed as vehicles to convey profound insights into the human condition or the nature of existence and, moreover, the limitations of language in describing the transcendent and the divine are widely recognized.

These films bridge cultural perspectives, revisiting or reinterpreting diverse traditions and inviting viewers to a cross-cultural dialogue. While rooted in Western cinema, these films also incorporate elements which echo the philosophical ideas of Indian, Ancient Greek and Judaic traditions, fostering a cross-cultural dialogue between East and West. Through their cinematic reflections, they remind us that the quest for understanding and meaning is a perpetual journey, woven intricately into the fabric of human existence. Ultimately, these films showcase the transformative power of art in shaping philosophical dialogue. The selected films exemplify how art can transcend entertainment and function as a medium for philosophical inquiry, expanding our understanding in shaping our perception of the world and our place within it. As art continues to evolve and intersect with philosophical thought, we can anticipate further cinematic explorations of existential themes which resonate with timeless philosophical inquiries from cultures around the world.

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