

Pan's Labyrinth: The Labyrinth of History

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Abstract: Capturing history, or interpreting it, has meant many things over the years, ranging from melodrama-driven accounts, to brutally realist narratives to absurdist 'fragmented', 'non-stories'. This paper deals with Guillermo del Toro's use of the fantastic in *Pan's Labyrinth* to allegorise the Spanish Civil War on the one hand, but more importantly, to explore and expand the field of the historical narrative in cinema.

Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro's spiritual struggle with the representation of the Spanish Civil War was first visible in *The Devil's Backbone* in 2001. He chose the ghost-story as a natural symbol for a tragic history, one that hasn't been avenged and therefore put to rest; quite literally, it spoke of history as something that haunts the present. It was perhaps this literal quality that pushed him to look at the event again in 2006 with *Pan's Labyrinth* (*El Laberinto del Fauno*), this time with a dual purpose; first, to play not just the historical event but to explore its agents; second, in the process, to also examine the space that encompasses the event—that of the historical narrative. As a result, the film doesn't fit into any single traditional, modern or post-modern trope of history writing. With the introduction of the fantastic, del Toro has added another layer to the filmic representation of the Spanish Civil War. With this added element the film can lay claims not just to traditional and post-modern forms of representing history, but also to allegory.

As a rule, allegory refers to a story with a double meaning—a primary or surface meaning and a secondary or under-the-surface meaning; a story that can be read, understood and interpreted at two levels.¹ It is in its use of the fantastic that the film becomes part of the allegorical mode of representation. The most common understanding of the use of fantasy is with respect to escaping a brutal reality. A seminal example of this is C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* where the children approach the closet, and hence the world of Narnia, when they are trying to escape punishment in the real world. Similarly, it would be easy to imagine that in a film based on a fascist camp in Spain during the Second World War, Ofelia will use the fantastic as a space where she can escape Vidal and his cruelties, and that del Toro will use the fantastic as symbolic of the real, in a way masking it. This is precisely what he does not do. The fantastic doesn't become a stylised way of suggesting the violence, because the violence is not suggested, it is shown in detail; for instance, when Vidal deliberates on each tool of torture that he will use on the rebel he has captured. At the end of the film in particular he takes us to a point, where our willing suspension of disbelief is at its height and we are just about to feel comfortable and somewhat happy at the joyful reunion and Ofelia's success, when we are pulled back to face the dying Ofelia.

Del Toro has introduced the fabulist element for a purpose very different, and in some ways quite contrary, to the tropes of escapist cinema and literature. It is a two-point agenda: First, there are three orders that are visible in this film; Vidal's fascist group, the revolutionaries and Ofelia's imaginary world. In an interview del Toro explains that in the film everything is in threes; there are three fairies, three

tasks, three doors etc. The relationship between the fascists, the revolutionaries and the imaginary world too functions like a triangle – with the fascist group on one side and the other two on the other side. We see the revolutionaries primarily in the peripheries, and as Pedro says, they might not be able to eradicate the fascists, but they can at least make things difficult for them. Therefore, the world of the revolutionaries is defined by that of the fascists.

The imaginary world becomes another way of deterring the order created by Vidal. It facilitates and almost demands a disobedience of the existing order. For instance, Ofelia first sees the fairy when she is asked to address Vidal as father; the pressure on this new relationship seems to work as the catalyst to the desire for an alternative order. Even when she enters the dead tree to fight the frog, her dress – meant to ‘make her beautiful for the captain’ – is ruined beyond recognition; in effect, she refuses to comply with the concept of beauty as it is defined in the real world. Ofelia underscores the action of the rebels who we see mostly in the peripheries; fantasy then isn’t an escape, but an extension of the revolutionary forces. In some ways, del Toro plays on the concept of the underworld – using it to refer to the imaginary underworld as well as the political underworld.

A key similarity between the world of the rebels and that of Ofelia lies in the question of choice. In the scene where Vidal kills the doctor, we see that these two worlds are different from the fascist world primarily because they have the desire to choose something other than the absolute order of Vidal (and thereby Franco). The very creation of the alternative order is a manifestation of a choice. Just before the faun tells Ofelia about the final task that will reopen the world of Princess Moanna, he starts resembling Vidal and the fascists when he asks her never to question him or his tasks again. Ofelia not only questions him, but she also defies him by refusing to shed her brother’s blood. The biblical overtones of the idea of sacrifice link the episode to the Book of Genesis² where God asks Abraham to sacrifice the life of his only son Isaac, and Abraham agrees; in her refusal, Ofelia rejects the Christian order that was an undercurrent of the Spanish Civil War. The difference between the two worlds is made clear because in the imaginary world she becomes Princess Moanna in spite of her defiance – perhaps because of it – whereas in the real world, it kills her.

The defining feature of the fascist world is the lack of choice and this is evident from the onset; when Ofelia and her mother reach the camp, Vidal forces Carmen to sit in the wheelchair despite her protests that she is perfectly capable of walking. This is a clear act of taking away her agency and it is this that Ofelia wants to rectify in her world. In her world, she has to be guided but she has agency nevertheless — she has to complete the three tasks, at the end of which she will be a princess. And her responsibility is larger than one would imagine; when the faun reprimands her for disobeying him in the second task, he says, “Your spirit shall forever remain among the humans. You shall age like them, you shall die like them. And all memory of you shall fade in time. *And we’ll vanish along with it.*”(emphasis added).

There is a somewhat similar treatment of Mercedes in the film. Both women become key players in their alternative orders, in fact, at times they function as heroes. Ofelia saves the ‘kingdom’ from the frog and Mercedes risks her life to bring food and medicine to the rebels. Both Mercedes and Ofelia have one very basic tool that helps them escape monsters, real and imaginary – Mercedes has the little knife and Ofelia has the chalk. So if Ofelia is a parallel to Mercedes, the imaginary world is a parallel to the world of the revolutionaries, because ultimately, both worlds have to fight monsters.

The second agenda fulfilled by the use of fantasy, the beneath-the-surface layer, is del Toro’s defiance of the laws that define historiography and the real, hence the labyrinth. The very physical structure of the labyrinth is at variance with the

decidedly straight, linear appearance of history in traditional history-writing tropes, particularly the annals as described by Hayden White, where the event is more important than the agent. "... (the annals figure) forth a world in which things *happen* to people rather than one in which people *do* things."³ In *Pan's Labyrinth*, del Toro redefines historiography as a coming together of the political and the personal. He defines the entry into the labyrinth as a journey of Ofelia discovering herself. He says:

"Unlike a maze, a labyrinth is actually a constant transit of finding, not getting lost. It's about finding, not losing, your way...I can ascribe two concrete meanings of the labyrinth in the movie. One is the transit of the girl towards her own center, and towards her own, inside reality, which is real. I think that Western cultures make a difference about inner and outer reality, with one having more weight than the other. I don't. And I have found that [the inner] reality is as important as the one that I'm looking at right now."⁴

Like Ofelia, del Toro has created a logic that isn't governed by the laws of the real world, but is logic nevertheless. The logic of exactitude in Vidal's world where every activity is preceded by a visual reference to the pocket watch is in contrast to a logic where time is measured by the moon and hourglasses. While a chronology dominates the real world, del Toro introduces multiple dimensions of time in the imaginary world which has a past where Princess Moanna lived with her father the king, a present where the faun is trying to test the princess's essence and a future that is introduced when she is invited to share the throne with her father and mother. The history that del Toro endorses is therefore more visceral, one where different layers exist simultaneously. There isn't any absolute in this version of history, it lends itself to the realm of a fluid truth as well. Therefore, the film doesn't fix history in a moment; it gives it layers of meaning. It doesn't halt or attempt to cure history in its narrative⁵ and this is most evident in the way the film ends with the image of a dying child.

The internal logic of del Toro's worldview is captured in the fact that the world where a sense of the grotesque and the baroque are in contest with the very visible neatness of Vidal's world, the former wins. Vidal is characterised by well-oiled, closely combed hair, wearing a crisp uniform and repeatedly shown shaving and polishing his boots. In contrast, physically, almost all characters in Ofelia's world look somewhat monstrous. The Pale Man, the Frog (and the yellowy mass he throws up, full of huge beetles), the Faun and even the fairies look like unappealing insects in the beginning. The allegory is most effective in the comparison it inevitably creates between the two worlds because gradually, the 'real' becomes more frightening and more grotesque than the imaginary despite the literal monsters in the latter. There is a sense of comfort about the imaginary world with reference to the horror that occupies the real world and the grotesque that under-rides it. We are as relieved as Ofelia when the faun comes back to give her another chance. What this does to the idea of fantasy is bring it to the level of the real, and one can no longer justifiably limit the fantastic to escape. Del Toro's comment therefore is on the usual gap that comes between the real and the decoding of allegory and its symbolism.

While the fantastic enhances the representation of the real, making it more nuanced, the brutality of the real is in no way diluted. A reality that so closely borders on horror requires fantastic means to comprehend it. Del Toro says this himself, "She's (Ofelia) actually articulating the world through her fantasy. So the things in her fantasy would reflect things in the real world. It's not really her way of coping with the real world, more like interpreting."⁶ And through Ofelia, we come close to actually understanding what that reality must have been like. The magical occupies the gap between the madness of Franco's Spain and us. This brings to mind Gabriel Garcia Marquez' Nobel Speech, he says, "A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes

a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable.”

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NOTES

¹ *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Cuddon, J.A. 1982. London: Penguin Books

² The Book of Genesis: 22.

³ White, Hayden, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7:1, autumn, 1980, 5-27.

⁴ <http://movies.about.com/od/panslabyrinth/a/pansgt122206.htm>

⁵ Staiger, Janet, “Securing the Fictional Narrative as a Tale of the Historical Real” in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* vol.88:2, 1989.

⁶ <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/31084> (Capone interviews Guillermo del Toro)