Pan's Labyrinth: Crash Course Film Criticism #9

Crash Course: Film Criticism
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From Georges Méliès's lunar landscape to the sands of Tattooine, movies have been transporting us to different worlds since the beginning of cinema, and a lot of these films use their fantasy worlds to comment on the real world that we all live in. *Avatar* can be read as a plea to protect the natural world, while T*he Hunger Games* takes reality TV and income inequality to their brutal extremes.

And in 2006 a movie took on authoritarianism and the violent aftershocks of the Spanish civil war, all through the eyes of an innocent young girl and the fairy tale world she discovers in the woods. Filled with original imagery and drawing on folklore and fantasy traditions, *Pan's Labyrinth* takes us on a journey to a place that is as violent and cruel as it is beautiful and compassionate.

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Acclaimed Mexican writer/director Guillermo del Toro was already an established filmmaker by the time he released *Pan's Labyrinth* in 2006. From the Gothic horror of *Cronos* and *The Devil's Backbone* to the sly humor of his comic book adaptation *Hellboy*, del Toro had built a reputation. He's known for embedding rich, sympathetic characters - especially children and otherworldly creatures - in larger than life stories. With *Pan's Labyrinth* he set out to combine these impulses to create a story that was half fantasy adventure, half historical-political drama.

Set in 1944, just after the Spanish Civil War, the film follows Ofelia, played with wonder and grit by Ivana Baquero. She's a young girl traveling with her pregnant mother to join her stepfather in the Spanish countryside. The forces of fascist dictator Francisco Franco have an outpost there, from which they hope to exterminate the rest of the anti-fascist rebels hiding in the hills, and Ofelia's stepfather, Captain Vidal, is commander of this outpost.

He's also fascism personified. Grimly portrayed by Sergi Lopez, Vidal demands absolute loyalty and sees mercy as a sign of weakness. He won't hesitate to torture or kill anyone who even might be a threat to the new Spanish government. Now, the film opens with an unnamed narrator telling the story of Princess Moanna, the long-lost daughter of the king of the underworld, and Ofelia is a voracious reader, especially of fairy tales, so whether that story is coming from her imagination or her books or is the actual truth of the film is hard to pin down at first.

But the movie does suggest that there's more to Ofelia's story than meets the eye. She escapes Vidal's outpost and discovers a fantasy world in an ancient stone labyrinth hidden in that nearby woods. There she meets a faun, as menacing as he is magical, who tells Ofelia that she may be the long-lost princess Moanna, and she has to complete three tasks to claim her birthright. The action of the film then moves back and forth between these two worlds. In one, Ofelia's mother, played by Ariadna Gil fights illness as her due-date nears while hunts the rebels, and Vidal's housekeeper Mercedes embarks on a dangerous mission to aid them.

And in the fantasy realm, Ofelia gets a key from the belly of a giant toad, reclaims a dagger from a child-eating monster called The Pale Man, and finally, after her mother dies in childbirth and the rebels storm the outpost, she steals her baby half brother and brings him to the center of the labyrinth. There Ofelia is confronted with a final choice: to give the baby to the faun as a sacrifice, or return him to the villainous Vidal. In the ultimate selfless act, Ofelia refuses them both, protecting her half brother's life with her own.

Vidal grabs the child and (spoiler alert) shoots Ofelia, leaving her for dead. As her blood drips down into the labyrinth, Ofelia is magically transported to a magical throne room. She finds herself healed, dressed in beautiful clothes, and wearing not quite ruby slippers, but definitely red shoes. Her mother and father sit on two impossibly tall thrones with a third seat for her. Her family is reunited.

And while we see Ofelia die in the real world, the closing narration tells us that she reigned for centuries in the underworld, that she was beloved by her people, and that traces of her can still be found if you know where to look. The film ends on the image of a flower opening on a branch Ofelia had once touched, suggesting just that.

Pan's Labyrinth is a film of strong contradictions, as beautiful as it is bloody. It's a fairy tale about a child, but also a violent, R rated film, clearly made for adults. Our job as film critics is to reconcile these contradictions as we construct our reading of the movie.

One way to look at *Pan's Labyrinth* is to consider it through the lens of folklore. Scholars have long suggested that fairy tales give children a framework to understand the sometimes arbitrary and brutal world of adults. In this reading the fantasy world operates as Ofelia's way to interpret the real world. I mean, think about it - here's a young girl, dumped onto the front lines of a violent conflict perpetuated by this scary man she's expected to call father, and on top of it all, her mother's in real danger.

The only way for Ofelia's mind to cope is to create a fantasy world through which she can explore and understand what's actually happening to her. And what's actually happening is downright disgusting. Del Toro rarely pulls the camera away from violence, forcing us to confront Vidal's homicidal wrath as he smashes a man's face with a wine bottle, prepares to torture a rebel, or shoots half a dozen people in cold blood.

Ofelia doesn't necessarily witness all these attacks, but Vidal's menace and sadism is so intense, the film suggests that Ofelia lives in terror in his house, which is exactly why Ofelia has invented the fairy tale half of the film. American scholar and fairy tale expert Jack Zipes writes in the Journal of American Folklore, "Ofelia wills herself into this tale...and creates it so that she can deal with forces (her mother, Vidal, the end of the Civil War) impinging on her life. What happens in the fairy tale is what provides her with the courage to oppose the real cruelty of monstrous people."

Seen this way, when Ofelia outsmarts the giant toad and extracts the key, or uses her ingenuity to outwit and outrun the Pale Man, she's actually figuring out how to stand up to the adults in her life who are ill-equipped or not willing to protect her. Del Toro's genius is to go back past the sanitized Disney version of fairy tales to their more barbaric origins. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, the fantasy world seems as merciless as the real one.

The toad is nearly as big as Ofelia and seems like it could eat her, the Pale Man bites the heads off of two little fairies in graphic detail, and the faun clearly plans to sacrifice Ofelia's infant half brother with the dagger she recovered. So, really Ofelia doesn't actually escape the atrocities of fascist Spain but she learns to come to terms with them by refracting them through the lens of these stories she loves.

Del Toro draws inspiration from a wide range of tales, novels, and films to build the world of *Pan's Labyrinth*. Everything from the early stories of Snow White and Lewis Caroll's *Alice in Wonderland* to *The Wizard of Oz* and ancient Greek myths. He even draws on the most famous Spanish novel of all, *Don Quixote*, by Miguel de Cervantes. That story also follows a protagonist whose fantastical visions help him cope with the trials of the real world.

But that's not the only way to read *Pan's Labyrinth*. Another more radical approach suggests that the fairy tale world might be just as

real as the one crawling with fascist soldiers. This reading takes its cues from what Guillermo del Toro himself has said about the film. Now, people like to go back and forth about whether it's acceptable to take into account an author's intent when analyzing a piece of film, but that doesn't mean it can't be useful, especially if there's evidence to support their ideas.

Guillermo del Toro has said that he wanted to make a film about authority and disobedience, and when you look at the film through this lens, the movie's contradictions and characters can be divided up in a different way. Some characters like Captain Vidal, his soldiers and Carmen represent authority. Vidal and his lieutenants issue commands and enforce order. Carmen obeys, even when it puts her, Ofelia, or her unborn child at risk.

Other characters represent disobedience, like, time and again, Ofelia refuses to follow the rules. She wanders off on dangerous adventures, gets her fancy clothes all dirty, and nearly dies in one terrifying sequence when she disobeys the faun and eats food from the Pale Man's table. Mercedes disobeys Vidal by sneaking food, medicine, and information to the rebels, and they're engaged in the ultimate act of disobedience: all-out war against the new fascist government.

At first the film seems to break down along clean lines: fascism and allegiance to power are bad, resistance and hope are good. But then, where does the faun fit in to all this? He's part of Ofelia's disruptive fantasy world, but he also abandons her when she dares to disobey him, and he only returns when she agrees to do exactly as he says. In the end he demands blind loyalty, just like Vidal.

Really, Ofelia's life is more often in danger in the fantasy world. It's just as dark and cruel as the world of Vidal and the rebels - and maybe it's just as real, too. So, what if the fantasy realm is not just a child's coping mechanism, but it's an actual reality within the world of the film?

The filmmaking techniques del Toro uses seem to support this view. In shot after shot the camera moves fluidly between the two worlds. He often uses trees or walls to hide wipe cuts that make it feel like fantasy and reality are connected. Sometimes del Toro even moves back and forth between the two dimensions in uninterrupted single shots, which also suggests that they're both part of a single reality.

Finally, objects from the fairy tale world sometimes show up in the real world. Things like a special key, a mandrake root, and a magical piece of chalk all make the transition. What first seems to be a film divided cleanly between fantasy and reality turns out to be much more ambiguous. As the Canadian scholar Jennifer Orme puts it, "This ambiguity is....crucial to the film's social critique of the systemic violence employed by militaristic regimes that wish to create, as Vidal says, a 'clean' and decidedly unambiguous world by destroying all that is disobedient - all that does not fit into the master narrative of totalitarianism."

Guillermo del Toro refuses to obey contemporary conventions of fairy tales as clean and safe stories for children. He refuses to draw a clear line between the real and the fantastical, and he refuses to make one reality clearly good. By doing all this, del Toro has made a film that, in itself, is an act of rebellion against unquestioned authority.

However you choose to look at *Pan's Labyrinth*, the film stands as a remarkable achievement of narrative and technical mastery. It's also a deeply tragic story. Del Toro once said "War is the ultimate act of intolerance. War gives no honor, in my mind it gives no victory and there are no winners, only losers. There's only live victims and dead victims," and few films drive home that point as elegantly as *Pan's Labyrinth*. Or *The Devil's Backbone.* You should watch *The Devil's Backbone*, too.

Whether you think Ofelia is escaping into her imagination or involved in an actual quest, the horror's of Franco's fascist regime provide the perfect backdrop for the story of innocence as the ultimate hope for the future.

Next time we'll follow a British criminal as he scours LA and his own soul in search of his daughter's killers in Steven Soderbergh's revenge thriller, *The Limey*.

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