Pan's Labyrinth (2006) and the Use of Fantasy as an Alternative Interpretation of the History of Spain under Franco's Regime

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Abstract. Following the death of Francisco Franco in 1975, Spain transitioned into a democratic form of government that exhibited a similar polarization that led to the Civil War in that country in June 1936. An example of this division is the question of what to do with the memories of abuses committed by Franco from 1939 until his death. Guillermo del Toro explores this issue in his movie Pan’s Labyrinth (2006). The film tells the story of a young girl, Ofelia, who employs her imagination in order to envision a past without the oppressive Francoist step-father, Captain Vidal. This paper analyzes Del Toro’s use of fantasy as a resource to showcase an alternative interpretation of the history of Spain that challenges and subverts in most of the cases Franco’s official version of the war.

In Pan’s Labyrinth the main protagonist, Ofelia, utilizes her imagination to challenge the official history that former dictator Francisco Franco, who manipulated historical facts to hide the versions of those that fought and lost during and after the Civil War (1936-1939), imposed in Spain for a long time. This historical subjectivity brings to mind historian Julian Casanova’s difference between “traditional history” and “social history.” In his article “Los límites de la objetividad y el desafío posmodernista,” Casanova differentiates between traditional history, which is always “unquestionable” and consolidates with the hegemonic paradigms, and social history, the “other” history that tries to shed light upon versions that traditional history rejects (334). Casanova points out:

La historia social rescató a todos aquellos individuos y grupos sin historia, que nada contaban para el historiador tradicional. Sacó a la luz lasestructuras de desigualdad social y abrió todos los caminos que después transitaron la microhistoria, las historias de la vida cotidiana o las diferentes reivindicaciones culturales de la vuelta del sujeto. (334).

Casanova evaluates the empirical aspect of history and the impossibility of having just one history that is unique, and unquestionable. According to Casanova, not everybody participates in the making of a legitimate and official history. By differentiating between the social and the traditional, Casanova is already signaling that totalitarian ideologies and elite groups constantly manipulate the historiographical process. Following a similar trend, Hayden White suggests that ideologies and historical discourses are intertwined with each other, which influences how past events are to be represented as well as what is to be excluded. For White, “when either the subject matter, the aim, or the mode of representation is lacking in a discourse, it may still be a contribution to knowledge but it is something less than a full contribution to historical knowledge” (5). It is this impulse to question the manipulation of history as indisputable that Guillermo del Toro investigates in his movie Pan’s Labyrinth, which remains a controversial movie for many of its critics, particularly for its technique used to explain the past of the history of Spain. For certain critics, the ending steps away from what actually happened: the defeat of anti-francoist groups. Anne Hardcastle, for instance, assures that the ending of del Toro’s The Devil’s Backbone, a movie with a very similar ending that of Pan’s
Labyrinth’s, is problematic in historical terms: “The distortions of history that we see in the film also correspond to an erasure of the ideological fractures in Spanish society during the Civil War” (127). Likewise, Ellen Brinks points out that the endings of del Toro’s films are idealistic and reflect what could have happened instead of what actually happened during and after the Civil War: “[Del Toro’s films] can be said to alter what was in favor of what might have been, converting the subjection to cruelty into solidarity, disunity into royalty, [etc.]” (307). But what these critics have not considered thoroughly is that he changes historical facts through fantasy because he wants to introduce the possibility of change in historiography, instead of maintaining the continuity and the Francoist legacy that the main antagonist of the movie, Captain Vidal, imposes upon his subalterns. This essay argues that Ofelia uses her imagination not necessarily as a refuge, but rather as a tool to glance upon a version of reality that subverts the oppressive system of Vidal and Franquism.

In order to analyze how Ofelia utilizes fantasy as a weapon to challenge Vidal, it is necessary to first ask ourselves how fantasy is used and represented in the movie and how such representations emphasize Ofelia’s purpose of inquiring about her past. Throughout Pan’s Labyrinth, fantasy always appears as something liminal: not completely real or fully imaginative, but as something ambivalent where both reality and fantasy complement each other. This ambivalence recalls theorist Tzvetan Todorov’s book The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre. In this book, Todorov defines fantasy in the following way:

Todorov sees fantasy not as merely imaginative, but rather as an ambivalent entity, another dimension that allows us to see beyond the laws of the world and accept the possibility that there are unknown forces that affect our rigid reality full of “natural” laws. Todorov’s theory of ambivalence thus coincides with del Toro’s definition of fantasy and his analysis of how Ofelia navigates through such ambivalence. In his own commentary of the movie, included in the 2006 edition of the DVD set, he asserts: “it could be fake, it could be all in her head, as it could be real. As the movie progresses, though, it becomes more apparent (to me) […] that it is real, that the girl truly is going through that transformation and truly has encountered these magical creatures.” By emphasizing Ofelia’s metamorphosis, del Toro is implying that the young girl uses fantasy to fight against a reality that refuses to recognize such magical creatures and thus the possibility of an alternate world. But del Toro also mentions that her transformation could have never happened. In other words, del Toro is giving us the right to choose. For del Toro, it is essential that we choose what to believe and what paths to follow, something unthinkable in Francoist Spain. Del Toro intertwines the ambivalence of fantasy with that of historical subjectivity to demonstrate that during the dictatorship there were several historical versions that were never incorporated in the official version of the country’s history.

The fantastic world offers a very useful mechanism that allows Ofelia to occupy an im-

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6 On repeated occasions, Del Toro himself has referred to The Devil’s Backbone as the “brother movie” of Pan’s Labyrinth because of their common themes, such as the forgotten history of the oppressed. The Devil’s Backbone narrates the life of Carlos and his residence in an orphanage where he enters in a dialogue with a ghost of a boy, Santi, who was murdered by one of the orphanage’s staff at the start of the Civil War. It is Carlos’s duty to bring the secret to light and avenge Santi’s death.
important role in the movie and to recuperate her status in a Francoist society that seeks to marginalize her on the basis of being both young and female. From the start, del Toro juxtaposes the fantastic with a marginal space that only Ofelia can understand. Her mother, unable to imagine a world other than a misogynistic one, advises her daughter to not waste her time with fairy tales: “ya estás muy mayor para llenarte la cabeza con tantas zarandajas.” The contrast between mother and daughter in terms of oppression and rebellion gives fantasy a subversive tone because it provides Ofelia with the possibility of analyzing her situation and of not submitting voluntarily to Vidal like her mother.

Unlike the fantasy world, the real world does not offer any alternatives. It is full of rules with a despotic man in charge. Captain Vidal measures everything with his pocket watch, a symbol of oppression that is very common in del Toro’s film. His life is intrinsically linked to this artifact that controls everything in an obsessive manner, including his son, even to the point of sacrificing Ofelia’s mother, Carmen, who is pregnant with his son: “Ese niño llevará mi nombre y el nombre de mi padre. Sí tiene que escoger entre ella o él, sálvelo a él.” Vidal is convinced that his baby is going to be a boy and uses Carmen as a reproductive agent, enforcing the male-dominated aspect of Franquism. However, an important scene is that of the dinner, in which Vidal reveals why he is killing all the anarchists in the forest:

Invitado: Sabemos que no está aquí por gusto.
Vidal: En eso se equivoca. Yo estoy aquí porque quiero que mi hijo nazca en una España limpia y nueva. Porque esta gente, parte de una idea
equivocada de que todos somos iguales. Pero hay una gran diferencia, que la guerra terminó y ganamos nosotros. Y si para que nos enteremos todos hay que matar a esos hijos de puta, pues los matamos, y ya está.

For Vidal, it is essential to keep his masculine and authoritarian genealogy through his son (and by extension, Franquism), and thus keep that traditional, undisputable history full of subjective ideologies that Casanova mentions in his essay.

Another contrast in the movie is the polarization between Ofelia and Vidal represented by geometrical figures. Whereas Vidal’s surroundings are governed by straight lines, perpendicular or parallel, especially during the dinner with the guests, Ofelia’s is filled with circles. The circles are spread throughout Ofelia’s fantasy world, whether it is the house’s bathroom or the face and horns of the faun. But the most important geometrical symbol is the labyrinth itself. In an interview, del Toro offers an interpretation of the labyrinth that helps us understand its significance in the movie:

The labyrinth is a very, very powerful sign. It’s a primordial, almost iconic symbol[…] A labyrinth is[…] a constant transit of finding, not getting lost. It’s about finding, not losing your way[…] It’s a place where you do sharp turns and you can have the illusion of being lost, but you are always doing a constant transit to an inevitable end[…] A labyrinth may have the illusion of a dead end, but it always continues. (Clark y McDonald 61)

As del Toro suggests, the labyrinth represents a desire to choose which paths to follow, which decisions to make, knowing that even after one makes a decision, the labyrinth has an inevitable end. In any case, what does matter is how to reach the center. In the movie, Ofelia has the option to choose how to analyze her past while Vi-

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7 The image of the clock is most prominent in Cronos, the first movie that del Toro made. Cronos narrates the life of Jesus Gris and his discovery of an artifact that can provide eternal life to its user in exchange for the very essence of life itself: happiness. One characteristic of the artifact is that when it’s functioning, it ticks like a clock as it sucks the happiness out of its user.
dal bases his world only on the “official” history of Franco in a straight, schematic line. In addition, circles symbolize a return to a beginning and the subversion of the empirical and methodical way of making history.

In the fantastic world, Ofelia’s first task consists of acquiring a key from a frog that lies under a tree. In this task we see how the young girl uses fantasy as a tool to reflect upon her status in a Francoist society. The book of Crossroads, which shows Ofelia the tasks to be carried out as well as her inner thinking process, tells Ofelia that near a tree there once coexisted animals, men, and other magical creatures in harmony, but one day a frog came and killed the tree, destroying the Eden-like scenery of the forest. It is now Ofelia’s task to heal the tree by killing the frog and retrieving a key that lies in the frog’s guts. As Ofelia is performing her task, it is also worth mentioning that she disobeys conventional gender norms of the time by staining her clothes with dirt, which is ironic because her mother was a seamstress. Before the task begins, Carmen gives Ofelia a dress for the dinner of that same night, but Ofelia disobeys her mother’s order to stay pretty and gets dirt on the dress while saving the tree. Ofelia’s dirty dress represents her rebellion against the female submissiveness that Vidal shovels upon her mother, who internalizes his orders and forces her daughter to follow along. Thus, as Ofelia is saving the tree and killing the frog, she is also rebelling against the submissive role of women in the movie. Ofelia prefers to get dirty and let insects walk on her back to obeying Carmen’s orders and being as submissive to Vidal as she is. Vidal is desiccating Ofelia’s mother who represents the rotten tree that is slowly decaying and is being split in half between loving her daughter and following the norms. This, in turn, represents a dying and fragmented Spain whose dictator is killing it and consuming it from the inside.

The second task is much more complicated than the first, since the fantasy world becomes more and more fused with the real one. The monster’s table is almost a copy of Vidal’s dinner table with its huge amount of food. The faun becomes more dictatorial, tells Ofelia that her mother’s sickness is no excuse for negligence, and orders her to continue with the task. The straight lines also surround the monster’s lair: the table, the chimney, and even the shape of the monster, with his elongated arms and straight legs. The close resemblance between the fantastic and the real makes this task a very liminal one in which Ofelia walks on a very thin line. In this task, Ofelia disobeys the faun’s orders for the first time and eats grapes, which are circular. However, the most important symbol is the dagger, which Ofelia gets from a locked box. This dagger becomes an important rebellious symbol because Ofelia gets it by her own judgment and because it allows her the right to choose and make mistakes, as critic Deborah Levine states, “the dagger accrues power as a symbol of liberty, strength, and justice” (123). When the faun reprimands her, he takes the dagger away from her to enforce his authority, which makes us believe that the fantasy realm is far from being just a benevolent shelter for Ofelia.

During the second task, Ofelia realizes that the faun is not as magnanimous as she may have thought he was and that the fantastic world can be just as dangerous as the real one, which signifies that both fantasy and reality share a despotical essence within them. While he is guiding the young girl, the faun, in many ways, shares the same characteristics of Captain Vidal’s, such as his lack of consideration towards others, and his authoritarian tendencies. For example, when Ofelia disobeys him during her second task, the faun threatens her and verbally mistreats her. Moreover, what does make the faun a truly malevolent character is when he demands Ofelia to give him her brother so that he can
puncture him with the dagger to open the portal:

El fauno: ¡Prometisteis obedecerme sin chistar! Entregadme al niño
Ofelia: ¡No! Mi hermano se queda conmigo
El fauno: ¿Sacrificaréis vuestro derecho sagrado por este mocoso, al que apenas conocéis?
Ofelia: Sí, lo sacrifico
El fauno: ¿Le daréis vuestra cuna por él? ¿Él, por quien habéis sido humillada e ignorada?
Ofelia: Sí, la niego
El fauno: Hágase pues vuestra voluntad, alteza.

This scene is very similar to the one where Vidal demands his soldiers to kill a couple of hunters whom he thought were rebels. In the same way, the faun orders Ofelia to sacrifice her brother. For a moment, the faun seems to have no sympathy towards the girl.

The most important task is the last one because Ofelia rebels against Captain Vidal and the faun by refusing to give them her brother. By sacrificing her own life to save her brother’s, Ofelia, like her mother, uses protection in a maternal way. But unlike her submissive mother, she uses her maternal instinct to fight off oppression, both from Vidal and the faun. Once again, we see the ambivalence towards fantasy suggested by Todorov when we see one version of Ofelia dying in the real world and another version being reincarnated in the underground kingdom. Once she is fully reincarnated as the princess Moana, her father tells her that she sacrificed herself instead of her brother, which was the third and most important task: “Habéis derramado vuestra sangre antes que la de un inocente. Esa era la última prueba, la más importante.” For the father, it was essential that his daughter still had that altruistic essence that Vidal tried to take away by calling Ofelia’s book of fairy tales “una mierda.” Her father’s statement also makes reference to what the faun told her about the necessity of the tasks when he first met her in the labyrinth: “Tenemos que asegurar que vuestra esencia no se ha perdido. Que no os habéis vuelto una mortal.” Now that Ofelia is fully reincarnated, the faun appears from behind a pillar and tells her “habéis elegido bien, alteza.” With these words, the faun reveals to us that his malevolent and authoritarian character was a test to see if Ofelia was able to challenge him and, in that way, break with the tradition of obedience that Franco instilled in Spain by erasing any historical reference that challenged his ideologies. Moreover, the narration becomes circular when we realize that the image of Ofelia on the ground with her nose bleeding is the same one that we see at the beginning of the movie. The circular, then, acquires the new meaning of going back to the past in order to inquire about the historical past. As with fantasy, its presence in the movie represents rebellion, imagination without limits, and the opportunity to analyze history without some authoritarian presence telling us how to remember.

The movie represents the possibility of change and the desire to trace a historical version different from the one that Franco cultivated in the minds of Spanish people. Del Toro’s desire to investigate the subjectivity of history sprouts from a tradition of critics, writers, filmmakers, and historians who try to dismantle the illusion that history is a field where only facts and the unquestionable are to be considered. By using Ofelia and her obsession with fairy tales as a background, del Toro utilizes fantasy as a resource to showcase an alternative interpretation of the history of Spain which challenges and even subverts the official version of the war during Franco’s regime.

Acknowledgment
I would like to thank Dr. Carmen Cañete Quesada for her comments and strong support during the publication process.
Works Cited


