

in praise of pan's labyrinth

the myths and monsters of Guillermo del Toro

Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* is a genre-defying allegory of the Spanish Civil War which encompasses fauns and fairies, the brutally real and the fantastic, the quest and the rite of passage. Now available on DVD, **Jerome Monahan** urges you to explore its riches.



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It's rare to go to the cinema and have little or idea what to anticipate from a film. So much that hits the screens is a shamelessly commercial product seeking to cash in on our genre expectations and franchise loyalties. So it was a particular delight to catch Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* at the National Film Theatre last November at a special performance followed by a conversation between the director and critic Mark Kermode. Together film and post-screening interview combined to create an intense experience. Kermode was rapturous in his praise of the movie and del Toro was immensely good value.

Among his expletive-laden declarations was that in his view:

making movies is like eating a sandwich of shit. Sometimes you get more bread, sometimes less bread, but you always get shit.

He didn't elaborate on the proportions of shit to bread he'd been forced to swallow making *Pan's Labyrinth*. However, the fact that the money deals on which it relied fell apart three times and he had to put **over \$50,000 of his own cash** into it to kick-start the design work, and gave up his salary to ensure the film got finished, suggests that the diet was not all Hovis. Still, such sacrifices meant del Toro could retain full control of the project, and that control definitely ensured the film's integrity.

What follows is an overview of the film's qualities and complexity. Unlike standard fantasy fare (such as last Christmas's *Eragon*, for example) this sub-titled Spanish language movie deserves prominence on Media and Film Studies courses.

Narrative

Pan's Labyrinth tells a tale from the perspective of a just pre-adolescent girl called Ofelia forced to accompany her heavily-pregnant mother Carmen into the Pyrenees where her step-father Captain Vidal is busy fighting a cruel campaign against local resistance fighters. It is 1944, and while the rest of Europe is at war, in Spain the fascists have triumphed. The world around Ofelia is a deeply threatening one. As well as the ambushes, raids and torture that characterise Vidal's conflicts with the guerrillas, Carmen is clearly in poor health. Ofelia learns that should it come to a medical crisis, Vidal is ultimately only concerned that the son he is sure his wife is carrying should survive.

Meanwhile, a mysterious parallel world has a claim on Ofelia. At a pause on the journey into the mountains, the child picks up a carved stone eye and restores it to a primitive statue near the road. This marks her out – not least for her





instinct to make things whole - and soon she has had encounters with fairies and a decidedly un-Mr Tumnus-like fawn, learning in the process that she is possibly the long-lost princess of subterranean kingdom – something that will only be proved by fulfilling **three quests**.

Del Toro structures the film so that **each 'real world' scene is succeeded by one in which magic features**. This 'checkerboard' arrangement suggests the **equality and equal validity** attached to both realms.

The significance placed on a world of fantasy creatures and myth is entirely in keeping with **a director whose own childhood was troubled by a cruel adult world and a rich fantasy life**. His upbringing in Mexico was blighted by times with his grandmother, an extreme Catholic, who insisted her grandson 'mortified his flesh' by walking in shoes containing inverted bottle tops. Del Toro also speaks of being plagued by what he calls '**lucid dreams**' – ones that would occur terrifyingly while he was fully conscious. The most relevant of these to *Pan's Labyrinth* featured regular visits from a goat-like creature that lived behind a wardrobe in grandmother's house. (Incidentally – the film's English title should strictly be 'The Labyrinth of the Faun', but it was decided *Pan's Labyrinth* was catchier.) The faun in the film is not the god Pan, but an ambiguous figure, a million miles removed from anything to be encountered in Narnia. (Del Toro was offered the job of directing *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* but turned it down, he reports, on the grounds that he did not want Aslan to be resurrected.)

Initially, the 'ordinary' and 'fantastic' worlds are kept quite distinct thanks to a variety of techniques such as **the use of colour and sound both of which are far richer in the faun's environment**. This is characterised particularly by crimsons in contrast to the cold antiseptic blues and greys that suggest the impoverished environment that Vidal creates around him. In many ways **Vidal is a vampire**, cursed by a need to live up to his military father and responsible for literally draining the life out of a succession of characters, his wife included. His continuous sporting of dark glasses against the light is also suggestive.

The distinctions start to blur; tracing the gradual coming together of the two worlds would be an interesting issue to explore in any work on the film. For example, there is **steady 'intrusion' of the rich colour palette** into the workaday world, particularly when it comes to the anti-fascist partisans that del Toro portrays in an unashamedly romantic light, as they emerge from their snug cave hideouts in dappled, pollen-filled sunlight. Much more perturbing and uncertain is the use of such sensuous colours to illuminate the barn in which a grim torture scene is played out, a scene made more terrifying by del Toro's decision **to suggest rather than show the violence**.

It is also apparent that the world of the fantastic has an increasing influence on its counterpart. This is seen quite early on in the film as the insect that initially pursues Ofelia following the restoration of the statue's eye, then uses the illustration in the girl's story book

to metamorphose into a fairy. But this is no Tinkerbell. Its origins are unconventional and del Toro shows the destruction of these creatures at the hands of the Pale Man later on in one of the most disturbing scenes in the film.

The fundamental overlap between the two worlds comes when Carmen suffers a near miscarriage, signalled by the sudden appearance of a blood-red womb-like shape on one of Ofelia's story-book pages. And from that point on, the inter-connections grow in both frequency and complexity. It is magic-world intervention in the shape of a mandrake that appears to bring Carmen back to health, for example; and in her first quest Ofelia goes in search of a key – echoing the store shed key that the partisans get hold of and use in a raid on the fascist's stronghold in the Mill. Later still in the movie, Ofelia escapes from the attic using the same chalk that gave her access to the realm of the Pale Man. And so the interweaving continues.

Imagery and themes

In interview with Mark Kermode, del Toro explained that *Pan's Labyrinth* can be understood as the sister-piece to *The Devil's Backbone*, a film set in an all-male setting and featuring the ghost of a murdered boy. Again, here is an opportunity for a rewarding piece of intertextual analysis, teasing out the links and contrasts between the two films. For example:

- n Both movies make use of **the supernatural** as a means of interrogating **political realities** – proving convincingly del Toro's thesis that 'the only real monsters are human'.
- n Both films are placed **inside extremely closed domestic worlds**. Of course, such narrow canvases fit the kinds of modest budget del Toro was able to command for these projects. But they also tell an essential truth of the Spanish Civil War. As del Toro explained to Mark Kermode:

...it was a household war. People that shared beds, sharing dining tables and shared lives, ultimately killed each other.

- n Both films concern **the power of the adult world has to coerce and damage children through its desire to force them into a mould**.

Del Toro has a lot in common with the English Romantic poet William Blake and his laments in his 'Poems of Experience' of children's lost innocence and curtailed freedom. At one point on the DVD commentary he celebrates children as 'having perfect personalities' which adults dedicate themselves to ruining.

- n Del Toro has also suggested that Ofelia is a synthesis of the two boy protagonists in *The Devil's Backbone*, one of whom draws, the other of whom writes. There is also a fledgling Captain Vidal in the earlier film in the shape of an ex-resident of the orphanage, now handyman, whose violence is an ever-present threat in the children's lives.

- n Both films provide the protagonists with **allies** who are prepared to sacrifice all in order to protect the young.

- n The films stand in counterpoint too. *The Devil's Backbone* is replete with male overtones. For example, it is dominated by the threatening and phallic presence of an unexploded bomb that has become embedded in the orphanage

playground. *Pan's Labyrinth*, by contrast, is dominated by uterine symbols – entrances, passages and caves that all suggest female anatomy.

Ofelia – the girl child in fairy tale

Pan's Labyrinth also features Ofelia (played by 11-year-old Ivana Baquero) the latest in a long line of youthful female protagonists to figure prominently in fairy tale. *Guardian* writer Kira Cochrane teases out the importance of Ofelia's being not quite woman, not quite child. Singling out films such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Carrie* as sharing interesting territory with *Pan's Labyrinth*, Cochrane says:

A key theme of the films is transition – the sense that these female characters stand on the brink of something (adulthood and mature sexuality) which is at once exciting, terrifying and full of possibility.

Discussing his 1986 film, *Labyrinth*, Jim Henson described it as being 'about a person at the point of changing from being a child to being a woman' and went on to explain that, for him, 'times of transition are always magic. Twilight is a magic time and dawn is magic – the times during which it's not day and it's not night, but something in between. That is what the film is about.'

And that in many ways is what del Toro's film is about too.

Central to the film was **the idea of choice**. In this Ofelia stands in complete opposition to an adult world which seeks continuously to curtail and limit her. In an earlier exchange with her mother she has to avoid getting dirty, and this anticipates the first of her quests to recover a key from a hideous giant toad in the hollow tree. She emerges from this ordeal suitably filthy, her pretty little-girl dress ruined by mud and slime;

this means she cannot attend Vidal's banquet with his fellow fascist sympathizers. Such incidental defiance becomes more apparent as the film continues.

In the rich **director's commentary** that accompanies the film on DVD, del Toro points out the double-edged nature of Ofelia's increasing autonomy. It can be a force for good but can also endanger her and others. This is particularly apparent in the Pale Man scene, a terrifying sequence in which Ofelia exercises her self-determination twice. The first time she does so in a way that helps her gain her objective – a magic knife; the second time she chooses to eat some grapes from the Pale Man's table and thus unleashes all manner of horrors.

At the other extreme is Captain Vidal. Del Toro describes him as 'the big bad wolf' and he certainly deserves to join the pantheon of unredeemable fairy-tale villains. He is first introduced via a close-up of the fob-watch given



to him by his father. He lives his life like clockwork but his focus is never on the present: he wants to please his long dead father and aims fruitlessly to ensure his unborn son shares the same sense of duty and ruthlessness. At times of crisis he is utterly without passion. He never makes a moral choice or even seems to have a sense that there are moral choices to be made. And the choices he offers others are never genuine choices and they are always grim, as seen in the insistence that the doctor save his son even if it costs Carmen her life. The torture scene shows Vidal displaying a row of tools with which he is going to mortify the body of his victim suggesting that he will only trust as truthful information extracted with the final pair of pliers. Men, it seems, are like clocks in his hands – capable of being dismantled in a systematic way.

The depiction of violence

Most fairy tales – apart from more moralistic 19th-century versions and those filtered by Walt Disney – are full of violence and bloodshed. In some traditions Sleeping Beauty is awakened by the prince's sexual 'embrace'; in order to fit into Cinderella's tiny slipper, the wicked step-sisters are prepared to mutilate their feet, staining the snow with a trail of their blood. It is hardly surprising then, that del Toro, with his background in horror movies, opts to tell fairy tales that are robust and adult. This is confirmed by his comments accompanying the notebook illustrations for *Pan's Labyrinth's* (available at [Guardian Online](#)). He writes:

I think that all fairytales have a grim setting. Hansel and Gretel is essentially about a famished family who send their children into the woods to die. Cinderella is about a child being tortured. You can go right up to the Narnia stories, which take place against the bombing of the Second World War, or Harry Potter being an unloved orphan. Fairy tales pit harsh circumstances against a fantasy world. Pan's Labyrinth is no different.

In *Pan's Labyrinth* there are terrible scenes – but they are never gratuitous; the worst events are taken from verbal accounts of Civil War atrocities. **In the Spanish Civil War, some 500,000 died, half of whom were civilians killed in fighting, or the victims of executions.** Such a record, claims del Toro places an obligation on a film-maker to articulate the brutality involved. *Pan's Labyrinth's* violence works on a kind of sliding scale with the first horrendous interrogation of two poachers mistaken for partisans followed by scenes in which the bloodshed is suggested rather than explicit. It is as though that first scene is sufficient to inform the rest of the movie.

Captain Vidal is paralleled in fairy land by the Pale Man. The monster's facelessness is suggestive of the fascist's expressionless performance of his 'duties', whether torturing others or sewing his own face back together. The Pale Man's eyes on a plate are associated with St Lucia (Lucy) whose martyrdom is represented in Catholic art by her holding her eyes on a platter; the wounds in the Pale Man's hands are suggestive of stigmata. Together they both hint at the kind of graphic Catholic iconography popular in Latin countries, that characterised Franco's Spain, and also the extreme beliefs del Toro was taught as a child by his Mexican grandmother.

The love of monsters

Del Toro is a director much preoccupied by **monsters**. His experiences as a ten-year-old child clearly coloured his interest in make-up and special effects work that featured at the start of his career and his later directorial choices. In a very telling part of the discussion with Mark Kermod he explained his sympathies in detail:

Yes. I love monsters [...] because they represent a side of us we should actually embrace and celebrate. Who would you rather go out with at night? Dr Jekyll or Mr Hyde? Frankly, I think that everything

we try to deny about our bodies and our lives – about being fallible and mortal, that we're going to rot, and that our armpits smell, that we are imperfect, that we sin and screw up – all these are the things that actually make us human. And that's why I try to make the monsters the heroes in my movies.

Rich in allusion

Del Toro is a well-read man, and *Pan's Labyrinth* draws on a rich tapestry of literary, artistic and cinematic allusion. Ofelia's temptation at the feast of the Pale Man is the latest demonstration of an age-old folkloric motif: that mortals must never eat any food offered them when in fairyland or they will never return. Think of the consequences of Persephone eating six pomegranate seeds when imprisoned in Hades.

The central importance of a **labyrinth** to the film is also interesting. In an interview given to *Fangoria* magazine, del Toro teases out the significance of this motif:

The labyrinth [...] was the real beginning of the idea of the film – its symbol. A labyrinth is a long transit, but you will always reach the centre. In a maze you will do twists and turns. You'll wind up in different places at different times, but the labyrinth is a very powerful image of meditation – a symbol of life, the inside of a man and his interior life. Some people even use the labyrinth as a sort of pilgrimage to the Holy land. So it is a very multifunctional symbol that was attractive to me; then I combined it with the idea of the creature that is at the centre waiting, and you don't know if it is benign or not until the end of the movie.

The commentary provides an opportunity to learn of the debts del Toro owes to painters such as Goya in the Pale Man sequence. Also cited are:

- n **The symbolist painters Arnold Böcklin, Carlos Schwabe and Odilon Redon.**
- n **Children's book illustrators** such as **Edmund Dulac** and **Arthur Rackham** whose 'big knotted primal trees' inspired the site of Ofelia's first quest.
- n **Charles Dickens** whose novels frequently describe the attempts of the old to distort the course of young lives. In *Pan's Labyrinth* Ofelia attempts to shake her step-father Vidal's hand using her left hand, only to be told off for this breach in etiquette. The exact same incident occurs in *David Copperfield* when the story's hero first meets his remorseless step-father.
- n **Fantasy films** especially Victor Erice's wonderful *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) which also uses a child's encounter with the fantastic (*Frankenstein*) as a means of interrogating the world of post-Civil War Spain. (See Derek Malcolm's Century of Films tribute at [Guardian Online](#)). Del Toro pays homage to this film, but suggests that its subtle treatment of the realm of monsters marks it apart from his own films. He says:

In my movies, I have such a love for monsters that they are manifest, they are real and there. I love them, and I would kill for monsters to be real, for them to walk down the street. I would love to meet





Hellboy and the vampires from *Blade*. I am that childish about it, and that glee is what prevents me from keeping things more ethereal. I want to see them. I'm not capable of doing movies where the monster is implied, there's just a creeping shadow and a whisper. I want them to step into the light. I love them – *Godzilla*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, all of them. And I try to do graveyard poetry with them, but they have to be part of the thing. And what I love, and what I find unattainable, from *Spirit of the Beehive*, is that capacity of a man that is occupied by something other than the fantastic and who allows the fantastic to gently seep into the reality of the girl. In my case, in *Pan's Labyrinth*, the fantasy world is as strong, real and palpable as the other world, if not more so.

n And, finally, traditional fairytale writers such as **Oscar Wilde** and **Hans Christian Anderson**.

Such riches stand *Pan's Labyrinth* in stark contrast to the kind of cynical fantasy fare as exemplified by *Eragon* (2005) – a movie which, as the writer and critic Kim Newman pointed out in BBC interview on the *Film Programme* fails because of its 'lack of attachment' to any particular culture. That is never an accusation you could level at *Pan's Labyrinth*.

I urge you to get it, watch it, spin off from it and make it the subject of a media project.

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References:

Guillermo del Toro – official site:
www.deltorofilms.com/PansLabyrinth.php

del Toro's Notebooks – including a number of pages demonstrating the early treatment of ideas that subsequently featured in the film: <http://www.deltorofilms.com/Details.php?announcementid=519>

The same sketches accompanied by a commentary by the director appear on the *Guardian* site at:
<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/filmandmusic/story/0,,1949245,00.html>

'A Feast For The Eyes' – review
<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1956884,00.html>

A transcript of the NFT Guardian Lecture
<http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,1955212,00.html>
<http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,1955215,00.html>

'What is a Ghost? An interview with Guillermo del Toro' by Kimberly Chun
(Cineaste magazine: Spring 2002 – pages 28-31)

'Pan's Labyrinth – A Maze Thing' by Ryan Turek
Fangoria Magazine #259: January 2007

Other films by Guillermo Del Toro:

Cronos (1993)
Mimic (1997)
The Devil's Backbone (2001)
Blade II ((2002)
Hellboy (2004)

del Toro has written a screenplay of H. P. Lovecraft's 1931 novella 'In The Mountain's of Madness' though he is finding it heavy work getting finance for the project – not least because it does not contain a love story or a happy ending. His name has been linked to a possible re-make of *Tarzan*.

Other films with similar themes/protagonists:

The Wizard of Oz (1939)
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032138/>

The Spirit of the Beehive (1973)
http://film.guardian.co.uk/Century_Of_Films/Story/0,4135,82693,00.html

Picnic At Hanging Rock (1975)
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073540/>

Carrie (1976)
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074285/>

Labyrinth (1986)
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091369/>

Fairytale – A True Story (1997)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy_Tale:_A_True_Story

Photographing Fairies (1997)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photographing_Fairies

Innocence (2004)
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0375233/>