No Fawning over Fauns

Can a fantasy be used as a tool to express liberation and provide social commentary on real issues? It might be tempting to immediately respond with a confident "yes," but it may not be so simple. A good film to use as a platform for this discussion is *Pan's Labyrinth*. *Pan's Labyrinth* is a 2006 dark fantasy film written and directed by Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro. Considered a sort of parable by del Toro, this film is largely inspired by themes found in fairy tales, although its serious subject matters and dark nature make it clear that it is not aimed at young children (Spelling). The filmmaker has called it a story "about a girl giving birth to herself – the way she wanted to be" (Pan's). While the question of whether or not the fantasy elements are effective in this film is a topic I would gladly explore at another time, it is the themes of disobedience and liberation in this film that must be carefully analyzed, because they are not as strong as they seem.

To provide context for this argument, it is important to establish the gist of *Pan's Labyrinth*'s story – or perhaps *stories* would be more appropriate. The first tale introduced is the story of Princess Moanna, who has lost her memory of who she is and the world she comes from, and she unfortunately becomes mortal and ill, resulting in her death. Her father, king of the underworld, believes her spirit will one day return to the underworld, and has made portals between the two worlds to make this possible. A fairy finds a girl named Ophelia, believing her to be the long lost princess, and brings her to a labyrinth where a faun gives her instructions for how to return to her home world and to immortality. This ties into the film's second story, which focuses on fascist Spain in 1944 – just a few years after the Spanish Civil War – where Ophelia and her mother, Carmen, have moved into a village to be with Captain Vidal, the new wife of Carmen. He has the duty of hunting down republican rebels, although he extends this duty to

brutally abuse them, which makes him enraged when he discovers that his housekeeper, Mercedes, has been a spy for the rebels. His anger leads to his attempts to torture Mercedes and kill Ophelia, which prompt their revolts against him (Pan's).

Throughout the story, but particularly during the final act, del Toro focuses on the theme of choice, which is an important element of both liberation and fairy tales. ". . . When I go through the years of collecting fairy tales in their original form and original publication," del Toro once explained, "I realized one of the themes that repeated itself over and over and over again was the theme of choice. Choice as a way of defining your destiny" (Spelling). A good example of these self-defining choices is found in the way he contrasts the miserable life the captain leads with the more carefree lifestyle of Ophelia, which is noticeable in the way they dress and present themselves. Del Toro elaborates on this:

> Extremes are incredibly powerful in cinema and the fact that this 11-year-old girl is much more comfortable in her skin than this fascist that hates himself so much that he slits his own throat in the mirror and negates his father's watch and does these crazy things, that gives the girl power and gives the other guy the illusion of power and the choice of cruelty. Choice is key in what we are. You choose to be destructive or you choose to be all encompassing and love-giving. Each choice defines who we are, no matter what the reason behind it is, because everybody values the reason behind the act, or the idea behind the act more than the reason (Guillen).

The theme of choice is most pronounced in the movie's moments of disobedience and rebellion. There are two main acts of rebellion in the film's final act: the first is when Mercedes cuts herself free from the captain's bondage, then uses the same knife to cut the captain's face

and stab him; the second is when Ophelia refuses to cooperate with the Faun's requirement of taking some blood from her baby brother. The first of these incidents is a clear, obvious act of literal liberation from bondage, but the liberation in the second action may not be so self-evident. Rather than following orders blindly (as her stepfather would) she makes her own decision so that she can be the person she wants to be, which shows the way del Toro values the "virtue" of disobedience. "Instinct will guide you more than intellect towards what's right for you and actually more naturally right," del Toro claims. "Disobedience is one of the strongest signals of your conscience of what is right and what is wrong. . . . Instinct and disobedience will always point you in a direction that should be natural, should be organic to the world. So I think that disobedience is a virtue and blind obedience is a sin."

What del Toro neglects to address in his appraisal of disobedience is the consequences of her disobedient actions. In the example above, these consequences seem negligible. Yes, she does get shot, and arguably she does die, but this ultimately leads her to the magical kingdom where she's been trying to go all along. This scene distracts the audience from the first time she disobeyed the faun, which did not bode so well for her. After being too tempted by the feast from which she was ordered not to eat, she takes a few grapes and awakens the "Pale Man" monster that she was meant to avoid. This brings about the death of two fairies, and almost gets Ophelia killed herself. (One might argue that she was entranced by the magical feast and had no choice but to take the fruit, but if this were true, the faun would have no reason to command her to do otherwise – *she wouldn't have a choice*.) Her disobedience in this scene is led by hunger, one of the most natural human instincts, and this nearly leads to death, doom, and horror that all could have been avoided by making the intellectual decision to trust the magical creatures who obviously understand the severity of the situation better than she.

Returning to the matter of the captain's death, it is a fascinating choice on the writer's part to avoid ending the story of Captain Vidal the way that a Hollywood film would dispose of its villain. Consider the classical ambassador of Hollywood tradition, *Casablanca*: when the Epstein brothers were struggling to write the best ending they could for *Casablanca*, they considered what the audience would want to see, and together realized at once that the way to satisfy the audience was to show the protagonist killing the fascist leader (Curtiz). If *Pan's Labyrinth* was meant to be a liberating film, one would expect Ophelia to shoot the captain, not the other way around. She does oppose him by drugging his drink, but this merely disorients him rather than killing him. Similarly, it would make sense for Mercedes to kill Vidal since she had not only been serving him, which would have made for dramatic irony, but had also been on the receiving end of his brutality. While she does enact her revenge by cutting him, somehow her stab through his back fails to kill him. This film does not give its villain a brutal end like he deserves, but instead relieves him with a nice, merciful, clean shot through the head (Pan's).

One could argue, however, that the film's opposition to Hollywood's narrative traditions is in perfect accord with the film's focus on disobedience. Critic Jennifer Orme has analyzed this film in terms of Peter Brooks' theory of "narrative desire," referring to the will, desire, or purpose that drives the story. Traditionally, the narrative assumes that the most universal perspective from which the audience could experience a story is that of the heterosexual male. Based on a Freudian assessment of literature, Orme notes, ". . . Desire is, by definition, masculine and moves through the plot toward closure as modeled by the metaphor of male sexual pleasure: arousal, energetic movement, climax, and exhaustion of the energies that desire has aroused. The desire of women is conceived entirely in relation to male desire." Based on this understanding of narrative, one can see that the conventional way of telling the story is from

the perspective of Vidal, the masculine figure who intends to control the women around him. Even if he is viewed as a traditional antagonist, he does not provide the traditional masculine villainous role of subjecting the women to his violent (sexually violent, that is, if the Freudian aspect is to be taken seriously) desires (Orme 220-221, 229).

The rejection of the male-centric story and general male dominance does seem to support the idea that this is a sort of women's protest film. While this could be true as far as theory and theme go, it is important to remember that Mercedes did not completely rid herself of Vidal's tyranny since she merely injured him, and Ophelia similarly failed to keep Vidal away from her and the baby (and he would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for those meddling republican rebel guerilla soldiers). Furthermore, the killing of the captain is committed by Mercedes' brother, giving the masculine protector of Mercedes the victory that could have been hers. While he may have the *duty* of killing Vidal, and surely he has known many people who have been murdered, injured, or abused by Vidal, it still seems that he does not have the same level of personal motivation that Mercedes would have. From a narrative perspective, the film is lacking in sufficient cause for making the soldier the victor aside from the fact that this role traditionally belongs to the male, which makes it harder to look at del Toro's work as an expression women's liberation (Pan's).

Even still, the very fact that he made this movie in a way that was so oppositional creates the appearance of rebellion and freedom. One of the ways this movie "breaks the rules," so to speak, is in its juxtaposition of two types of stories that generally don't belong together: the children's fairy tale, and the political war drama, the latter of which oddly seems to take up more of the film's running time. Orme would object to the notion that the period piece takes precedence over the fantasy, however, stating, ". . . Neither the mimetic world of fascist Spain

nor the magical Underground Realm is more real than the other; this juxtaposition of congruent realities produces critiques of monologic totalitarian discourses and endorses stories of magical transformation as forms of resistance and vehicles of hope." Even in its use of fairy tale elements, this film's fantasy story is distinctly separated from other fairy tales due to its historical context, as writer Kristine Kotecki elaborates on with analysis of the film's "hypertextuality," conveying its connections to several preceding magical stories. "Set in fascist Spain - an environment highly relevant to the current 'war on terror,' according to Del Toro in his DVD commentary - this fairy-tale film's hypertextuality displays resistance to some of the constructs assumed in the 'canonical' literary fairy tales penned by Perrault and the Grimms as well as in some early twentieth-century fairy-tale films like Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950). Furthermore, while Guillermo del Toro is one among several contemporary fairy-tale filmmakers who resists replicating those fairy-tale stereotypes associated with patriarchal authority and who rely on a 'hypertextual' aesthetic, *Pan's Labyrinth* stands out among them for its overt sociopolitical framing" (Kotecki 235-236).

One could also view del Toro's filmmaking process as an act of self-liberation because of his resistance to the control of Hollywood. Indeed, by working outside of the (contemporary) studio system, he certainly had more freedom to make the film he had envisioned the way he had envisioned. This freedom did come at the cost of losing the opportunity to have better finances, and Hollywood was certainly very interested in producing the film. "We got incredibly tempting offers from American distributors who offered to double our budget if we made the movie in English," del Toro explained. "But I didn't want to do that, because then it would have become a Euro-trash production – one of those movies where you find William Hurt playing a Swiss doctor or Jurgen Prochnow playing a Russian general" (Rodriguez).

It would be nice to imagine that del Toro's creative freedom was the ultimate liberty for an artistic filmmaker, it is important to note the way that this freedom allowed the film to consume and control del Toro. There is an irony to this fact when it is compared to del Toro's depiction of Captain Vidal, who is depicted as an anal, obsessive, detail-oriented "control freak." In the audio commentary for *Pan's Labyrinth*, del Toro makes note of the recurrence of Vidal using a magnifying glass, which is one of the small details del Toro uses – perhaps hypocritically – to highlight Vidal's focus on small details. Del Toro proceeded in the commentary to describe other tiny touches, like the way the image of a faun was subtly hidden in several shots that take place outside the fantasy (Pan's). "The great thing about the movie," del Toro once said, "is that you can watch it many . . . times and every time you'll find a new little layer and a new little detail" (Guillen). The inseparable companion of that statement, however, is this one: "This movie almost destroyed me – almost killed me – and it took away 45 pounds of my body" (Pan's). While the film's story may have echoed children's stories of freedom, the film's production echoed *Pet Sounds*.

Now step back. So far, great emphasis has been placed on the potential elements of liberation lying in the details of the film, but little emphasis has been placed on the "narrative desire" of the protagonist: to free herself from reality. When the story is viewed on this basic level, Ophelia quite inarguably does liberate herself by accomplishing this task. On the other hand, there is still reason to be skeptical of the value of this freedom, which could degrade the liberty.

The first case to be made here is in her journey to freedom, which is entirely dependent on the information from the faun. Del Toro chose to focus on the faun, even in the original title of the film (*El Laberinto del Fauno*), because the faun is a creature of both nurturing and

destruction in classical mythology. "The character of the faun is essentially a trickster," del Toro explained. "So he can as easily destroy her as he can help her. . . . the faun is a parent, and the faun is a fraud" (Spelling). This leaves Ophelia without any knowledge or certainty of how much she can trust the faun. Her ignorance, one might argue, keeps her in a labyrinth all along, because she lacks the knowledge required to discern what she should do. Doesn't this blindness hinder one's freedom?

The liberation is most cheapened, however, by the insufficiency of the resolution. While del Toro deliberately uses the magical escape Ophelia gets from Vidal (through the opening appearing in the labyrinth's dead end) to establish that Ophelia's fantasy was real, not imagined, the ending is still ambiguous[1]. It is entirely possible that, after being shot by Vidal, Ophelia's experience of rejoining her family in the magical kingdom is merely a dying vision. This reading of the film, while del Toro would not agree with it, is supported by the fact that the very same fairies who were eaten earlier in the film – this is confirmed by del Toro – are alive and well in the conclusion (Spelling).

Along similar lines, an essay by T. S. Miller compares how both *Pan's Labyrinth* and Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* handle "the charge of escapism":

> Although they trace similar paths to a solution, on first examination the films appear to take two very different positions on escapism. In comparing them, I do not mean to suggest that one provides a better or more sophisticated response: Henson's apparent answer, that it is not only entertaining but healthy to indulge in a little escapism every now and then, is in its way the more pragmatic one, and *Labyrinth* may also voice a

[1] As an aside, it may be worth consideration that the ambiguity of the ending also becomes a divisive matter in regards to freedom, in this case for the audience. The viewers are free to interpret the ending as they wish, but since they are deprived of knowing the objective truth of the matter, the film holds them in a state of ignorance.

> caveat concerning the commoditization of fantasy as a mass-market product. Conversely, the more ambitious and more ambiguous ending of *El laberinto*, I would argue, attempts to persuade its audience to accept the fantastic reading of events partly in order to elevate the status of the fantastic generally: if we do not accept that the young protagonist [Ophelia] has achieved some kind of immortality rather than simply dying a tragic death, as a story the film is quite senseless, almost to the point of nihilism (Miller).

He later adds, ". . . The labyrinth becomes the perfect emblem of escape, orienting the progress of the narrative around the concepts of getting in and getting out." In *Pan's Labyrinth*, the escape is the final act of becoming free that the film features, which makes the liberation less powerful than it might be if the conclusion was a victory rather than an escape.

It would seem that *Pan's Labyrinth* has many paths one can take in an effort to find freedom, but these all lead to dead ends. As a story about disobedience, the film is unable to reach a final verdict on its value, in spite of the filmmaker's efforts. As a women's protest film, the movie does not follow through. As an act of liberation for the artist, the film probably enslaved its director more than it freed him. Simply as a story, the ending fails to fully liberate. This film does, however, illuminate that path future films can take to feature liberation more clearly and prominently. Someday a fantasy story may be created that celebrates disobedience and rebellion *without* returning them with caustic consequences, and maybe this story will oppose male patriarchy right through the conclusion. At the very least, what this movie clarifies is not its own elements of liberation, but how movies to come can get liberation right.

Works Cited

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Pan's Labyrinth. Dir. Guillermo del Toro. Perf. Ivana Baquero. Picturehouse, 2007. DVD.

I should clarify that I used this source throughout the paper referring to it only as "Pan's," even though I am sort of citing different things. For the most part, I used it to indicate that the film itself was my source, and it seemed only natural to cite the film as a DVD since that's how I watched it. However, I pull a few quotes from del Toro's audio commentary track, and one brief quote from his introduction to the film, which could cause some confusion. Since anything I cited with "Pan's" is work created by del Toro that's on the DVD – whether it's his thoughts on the movie or the movie itself – it seems reasonable to keep it all together as one source.

Rodriguez, Rene. "Director Keeps Hollywood out of "Pan's Labyrinth"." *The Seattle Times*. 16 Jan. 2007. Web. 14 May 2016.

Spelling, Ian. "Guillermo Del Toro and Ivana Baquero Escape from a Civil War into the Fairytale Land of Pan's Labyrinth." *The Internet Archive Wayback Machine*. SCI FI Weekly, 25 Dec. 2006. Web. 14 May 2016.

You Must Remember This: A Tribute to 'Casablanca' Dir. Scott Benson. Perf. Lauren Bacall. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.

Just to be clear, I am citing a bonus feature that's on the 2003 DVD release of *Casablanca*. I'm fairly certain this documentary was made in 1992, and it is accessible on YouTube.