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Pan's Labyrinth (El Laberinto del fauno)

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Abstract

This is a review of *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006).

Pan's Labyrinth, Guillermo del Toro's fantastical allegorical film about fascists in 1944 Spain, has been hailed as one of the best movies of 2007 - "movingly honest"¹ (Utichi); "a one-of-a-kind nightmare that has a soaring, spiritual center"² (Whipp); and a film in which "violence is used not for titillation but to create a world we can be fearful about"³ (Turan). It is also a film in which the logic of redemptive violence - violence necessary for the creation and maintenance of an ethical order - rules. And while mythical resonances give this movie a religious tenor, it is the images of violence, and in particular torture, that call forth comparisons to Mel Gibson's magnum opus of carnage, *The Passion of the Christ*. While not gratuitous, the images in *Pan's Labyrinth* nonetheless demonstrate how visual representations of intense violence can be harnessed to provide a form of ethical and even theological certainty that resists moral questioning - even when such questioning issues from characters within the film itself.

The story is set at the end of WWII in the Spanish countryside where Ofelia, a young fairy-tale-reading girl, is thrown into a world of resistance-hunting fascists. Ofelia's father has died and her mother has married the fascist Captain Vidal, whose sadism is rendered undeniable for viewers as they repeatedly watch him inflict bodily pain on his victims. These scenes range from Vidal using a bottle to beat in the face of a peasant to the more clichéd image of Vidal's black-gloved hand

stroking his shiny instruments as he verbally taunts a captured resistance fighter. The viewer must watch as Vidal tortures this man until his face becomes unrecognizable and his hand is reduced to a bloody stump. This realm of terror intersects with a world of fairies, fauns, and child-eating monsters, which acts both as a mirror of and an escape from the horrors of Ofelia's "real" life. The language of both worlds supports the film's oft repeated moral: don't be swayed by your emotions that tell you it is easier and perhaps more pleasurable to obey. In the "real" world, a doctor confronts Vidal with these words, "to obey - just like that - for obedience's sake ... that's only something people like you do." As the doctor walks away, Vidal shoots him in the back. Likewise in the fairy world, a faun tells Ofelia she will only be returned to her fairy kingdom if she gives him her baby brother. Ofelia disobeys the faun and sacrifices herself for the innocent child.

Throughout the film we hear the language of obedience and dissent, however we see another argument being made through the film's violent images, particularly those depicting bodily abuse. *The Passion of the Christ* uses images in a similar fashion to create a logic of not only moral and epistemological certainty, but also theological certainty: those who torture are monsters; therefore those who are tortured are good - and if the good perpetrate violence or it is committed in their name, it stems not from evil, but from the need to restore moral or theological order. In both films, watching torturers at work makes this economy of violence

unquestionable; good and evil people exist, and these images let us know for sure who's who.

A. O. Scott's review in the *New York Times*⁴ captures the tension between what we hear - don't obey, always question - and what we see - a simple moral world - in this film. He writes: "A child could grasp [the movie's] moral insights ... while all but the most cynical of adults are likely to find themselves troubled to the point of heartbreak by its dark, rich and emphatic emotions." Perhaps viewers are troubled because these emotions - evoked by its dark, rich and violent imagery - are so emphatic that the moral imperative - "don't obey" - becomes almost impossible to follow. Young Ofelia must constantly make difficult moral decisions, but the viewer does not. Through its onscreen portrayals of torture, *Pan's Labyrinth* tells its viewer with whom they should identify - Ofelia and the resistance fighters who help her - and whom they should see as moral monsters: Captain Vidal and his fascists.

The scene that follows Ofelia's disobedience to the faun and the giving of her own life for her brother's is just one example of what might trouble the less cynical viewers that Scott addresses. After murdering Ofelia, the evil Vidal emerges from a labyrinth holding his newborn son. His fascist army has been defeated and the resistance fighters are waiting for him. Upon handing over the child, Mercedes

- a woman who has helped Ofelia and almost been tortured by Vidal - informs the General that his son will never know his name and then he is shot dead.

This scene is extremely satisfying for the viewer who has watched Vidal maim and kill over the past two hours of the film; evil has been vanquished and this new hope in the form of the infant will begin life never knowing of the violence his father inflicted on others, nor the violence that ensured his own life. This latter violence - which included blowing up trains, slicing cheeks, and shooting an unarmed man - was, within the world of the film, necessary and performed by good resistance fighters, not evil fascists. By this time in the film, we no longer question who is good and who is evil because the violent images of torture have drawn this line for us. The transcendent kingdom Ofelia enters into upon her bodily death only reinforces the duality of this moral world. We come to learn that Ofelia's "disobedience" is actually part of a larger plan that proves she is on the side of the good, while Vidal is not a man who has done awful deeds, but rather is evil incarnate and evil must be destroyed, not remembered nor understood within human history.

Of course, the movie would have lost some of its punch if, instead of shooting Vidal, the rebels had taken him into custody and tried him over a period of months or even years. His son would know his name, his country would know his crimes, and his violence would be met not with violence, but with questions that

upend the logic of redemptive violence - the logic with which this film, rather than challenging, only makes its audience more and more comfortable. Like Gibson's *The Passion*, this film's images of torture provide viewers with the fantasy of a simple moral world in which good and evil are easily identifiable, a fantasy that is comforting because it gives a sense of certainty amongst the messy and confusing world in which we live our lives. For the large number of Christian groups, including the U.S. Conference on Catholic Bishops and Christianity Today⁵ who have actively endorsed this film, *Pan's Labyrinth* offers not only the dream of moral certainty, but also a form of theological certainty that succeeds not through rational argument but through tortured flesh.

The language of *Pan's Labyrinth* obsessively calls for questioning and disobedience, which only veils the way its violent imagery structures a simple moral world of good and evil, providing the viewer with the fantasy that moral certainty can be accompanied by moral questioning. It is hard to hear characters saying "question" when the images are screaming "obey!"

¹ Joe Utichi, in "Review - *Pan's Labyrinth*" in *Film Focus* (November 24, 2006): <http://www.filmfocus.co.uk/review.asp?ReviewID=20717>

² Glenn Whipp, in "A strange fairy tale, indeed" in *dailynews.com* (January 11, 2007) : http://www.dailynews.com/filmreviews/ci_4913652

³ Kenneth Turan, in Movie Review: *Pan's Labyrinth* in the *Los Angeles Times* (December 29, 2006): <http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-et-pan29dec29,0,4358680.story>

⁴ A. O. Scott, "Movie Review: *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006): In Gloom of War, a Child's Paradise" in *New York Times* (December 29, 2006): <http://movies2.nytimes.com/2006/12/29/movies/29laby.html>

⁵ Matthai 5hakko Kuruvara, "Embraced by many religions, Labyrinth allows broad discussion of faith issues," in *San Francisco Chronicle* (March 7, 2007): <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/03/07/DDGLBOFSKT1.DTL&hw=Kuruvara&sn=003&sc=884>