

Into the depths of Franco's Spain: Pan's Labyrinth (El Laberinto del Fauno)

A film by Guillermo del Toro

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All too often, fantastic films are a disappointment, telling us nothing about reality or patronising us with infantile escapism. It was a relief, then, to find that *Pan's Labyrinth*, by Mexican director Guillermo del Toro, is a serious piece of work, making profound use of its fantasy.

It is set in Spain, 1944. The Civil War is over, although resistance to the fascists continues. The heavily pregnant Carmen (Ariadna Gil) is travelling to meet her new husband, the Falangist Captain Vidal (an excellent performance by Sergi Lopez). With her is Ofelia (Ivana Baquero), her daughter by her first marriage. Ofelia travels with armfuls of books of fairy tales. Doctors think Carmen should not travel, but Vidal insists "a son should be born where his father is."

Vidal is hunting the resistance. A stickler for punctuality and military formality, he wants his son to be born in Franco's "new Spain"—which he will create by brute force if necessary. "The war is over and we won," he says, and he is determined to kill all resisters to prove it. The fascists' sadistic repression is brought out in some terrible and violent sequences, such as Vidal beating a poacher to death with a bottle.

Vidal's concern is his unborn son. If there is a choice, he tells the doctor, "save the baby." Vidal has a watch with a broken face, carried by his father in Morocco. His father broke the watch as he died, so his son might know the time of a brave man's death. Vidal is determined to create a mythology of such heroism as part of the building of fascist Spain.

This creation of fascist mythologies is an important use of fantasy within the film, and is repeatedly contrasted to reality. Vidal, bristling with machismo, fails to notice that his trusted housekeeper Mercedes

(Maribel Verdu) is spying for the resistance. She was invisible to him because she was a woman, she says when finally discovered. As he plans to torture her she surprises him by resisting. Vidal is similarly uncomprehending when he discovers that Dr. Ferreiro (Alex Angulo) has not simply obeyed his orders.

He fails to understand why his heroic fantasies are opposed and resisted.

Vidal's fantasies are contrasted to Ofelia's, who imagines a world of lost glory—set in a nearby labyrinth of the film's title—in an attempt to escape the repression around her. She creates an underground realm where there are no lies. A princess fled to the world above, where she aged and died. The portals of the underground realm, though, remain open for her spirit. To accomplish this return to a world of truth is Ofelia's task.

But because every twist and development of Ofelia's fantasy world is intimately bound up with and shaped by her experiences, she can never escape life's horrors. Her fantasy world begins to mirror Spain's brutal reality. The characters she has created such as the Faun, played by Doug Jones, become ever more sinister. Ofelia confronts monsters, but is unable to triumph over them unequivocally. Reflecting her feelings of impotence, her fantasy tasks are dangerously beyond her. In the hall of the pale man, a chillingly vile Jones again, she barely escapes with her life. And eventually the two worlds meet.

The sources of Ofelia's fantasies are not elaborated. The film owes debts to Lewis Carroll, Jan Svankmajer and Federico Garcia Lorca, amongst others, and there are borrowings from many mythologies and fairy tales. Ofelia's final vision, though, has a definite religious

quality. The reward for passing the final test is her elevation to a throne alongside her father and mother.

Del Toro's apparently sincere use of redemptive imagery stands in stark contrast to the actual role of the Catholic Church in Spain. But he does indicate this with the presence of the priest at Vidal's dinner, offering ecumenical support for the fascist persecution of the resistance. And in the end, it is the reality of fascist Spain that triumphs as Ofelia becomes another victim of Vidal.

An important theme is memory. Remembering the Franco era is a burning issue in contemporary Spain. Del Toro's representation of fascist determination to crush all opposition to demonstrate its victory and the attempts made to recall that opposition have great significance at a point when Franco's heirs are trying to prevent discussion of such questions. Every detail here is aimed at historical memory, from Ofelia's refusal to forget her real father to comments about Vidal's father serving in Morocco, the scene of some of the Spanish military's worst atrocities.

It is a film of great hope and optimism, of defending the imagination under difficult circumstances ("Magic does not exist—for anyone," Vidal tells Ofelia at one point). This is no small thing. The film ends with a narrative that the princess left only tiny traces of her presence on earth for those able to see them. A single flower blooms on a stunted tree. From the period shown in the film, many opponents of Franco were forced to go underground. The film's determination to defend and even honour their memory, even in small details, is praiseworthy indeed.

Similarly, portraying the brutality of Franco's regime deserves acknowledgement when his heirs today are trying to equate the actions of the fascists with those of their opponents and defending Franco for having "saved" Spain.



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