

## **Onerous Palpability Interweaved in Fantasy in Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth***

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### **Abstract**

Films are cultural artefacts created by specific cultures which reflect those cultures and in turn affect them. Film is considered to be an important art form, a source of popular entertainment and a perfect method for educating or indoctrinating citizens. The visual elements of cinema give motion pictures a universal power of communication. It is a form of creative expression which primarily employs visual medium of communication. It is one of the youngest art forms which have absorbed structures and forms of many other literary and visual arts. In its use of the fantastic, the film becomes part of the allegorical mode of representation. The most common understanding of the use of fantasy is with respect to escaping a brutal reality. A person's imagination can consume their realistic judgement and put them into a world of fantasy in which the person can no longer distinguish reality from a world of illusion. These motifs are exemplified by the director Guillermo del Toro in *Pan's Labyrinth*. Guillermo del Toro is a famous Mexican director, who won nine academy awards in Mexico for his first big break *Cronos*(1993), then went on to win the International Critics Week prize at Cannes. Del Toro's films are known for the detailed attention paid to creatures of a variety of persuasions, like the creepy humanoid faun played by Doug Jones in *Pan's Labyrinth*. *Pan's Labyrinth*(2006) took shape in the imagination of Guillermo del Toro as long ago as 1993. *Pan's Labyrinth* is about a young girl in civil war era Spain, who is experiencing psychological anguish of war. The film is based on a fascist camp in Spain during the Second World War.

**Keywords:** Reality, Fantasy, Guillermo Del Toro, Fascism

“When you have the intuition that there is something which is there, but out of the reach of your physical world, art and religion are the only means to get to it”

- Guillermo del Toro

Films are cultural artefacts created by specific cultures which reflect those cultures and in turn affect them. In the cinematic realm, the concept of illusion versus reality is a theme that has attracted artistic exploration. It has proven to be an enduring and significant storytelling framework in the realm of contemporary cinema. An illusion is some event or object that appears to have existence but actually does not. Reality is the true situation that exists. It is the totality of the real things. A great venue of the most popular films of recent decades characterized by the struggle between illusion and reality have a major role in both literature and film.

The theme of illusion and reality is witnessed in films from as far back as George Méliès *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), to the 1964 version of *Mary Poppins*, to contemporary offerings such as *The Matrix* in 1999. A great many of the most popular films of recent decades are characterized by a character's struggle to separate illusory worlds from ordinary reality. Examples range from Scorsese's *The Last Temptation Of Christ* (1988) to Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind* (2004). Typically the protagonist breaks re an illusory world to return to “unstimulated” reality: that is the basic pattern in countless films from *The Truman Show* (1998) to *Shutter Island* (2010). The category “illusion and reality” movies should be a fairly inclusive one. In Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) both levels of reality turn out to be real, but it should be discussed in the same context as *Source Code* (2011), *The Truman Show* and *Shutter Island* more importantly, we should include films in which illusion and reality cannot be satisfactorily separated from one another. Films such as *American Psycho* (2000) or *Lost Highway* (1997) in which, neither the protagonist nor the viewers finds it possible to understand where the illusion ends and reality begins.

Films belonging to this genre fall into two broad categories, which we might describe simply as comedy and tragedy. In the genre comedy, the protagonist is generally an innocent, in tragedies he is guilty of some crime, the memory of which he is suppressing. In comedies the illusion appears benign at first, but it is revealed to be something to be escaped. In tragic forms in contrast to this the illusion torments the protagonist, but ultimately benign illusion is bound up with his guilt over this aspect of his past; as in *The Machinist* (2004) and *The Shutter Island* the typical protagonist breaks out of the illusion and faces his past regardless of what that moment truth means for his life.

A person's imagination can consume their realistic judgement and put them into a world of fantasy in which the person can no longer distinguish reality from a world of illusion. These motifs are exemplified by the director Guillermo del Toro in *Pan's Labyrinth*. Guillermo del Toro is a famous Mexican director,

who won nine academy awards in Mexico for his first big break *Cronos*(1993), then went on to win the International Critics Week prize at Cannes. Del Toro's films are known for the detailed attention paid to creatures of a variety of persuasions, like the creepy humanoid faun played by Doug Jones in *Pan's Labyrinth*. *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) took shape in the imagination of Guillermo del Toro as long ago as 1993. He responded strongly to the horror lurking under the surface of classic fairy tales and had no interest in making a children's film, but instead a film that looked horror straight in the eye.

*Pan's Labyrinth* is about a young girl in civil war era Spain, who is experiencing psychological anguish of war. The film is based on a fascist camp in Spain during the Second World War. The protagonist Ofelia uses the fantastic as a space where she can escape Vidal and his cruelties. Here Del Toro uses the fantastic as symbolic of the real, in a way masking it. Throughout the entirety of the film the protagonist Ofelia is continuously suffering which eventually leads to her psychological downfall. The facts that the human mind can be so easily manipulated by traumatic experience and even rendered unable to determine reality from fiction is depicted powerfully in the film. In the film, we can see Ofelia had her dreams struck down by reality, for Ofelia it is hard to say whether her dreams have become a reality or not. Here the director Guillermo Del Toro weaves indeed very beautifully illusion and reality but the message of the film is still kept a little too easy. The present thesis attempts to explore the elements of illusion and fantasy in the film *Pan's Labyrinth* and thereby presents imagination as a weapon against the war of reality.

The illusionary elements in the film are seen in the first scene itself. In the beginning itself we are led to an illusionary world. The depiction of the story of the princess resembles a fairy tale. Ofelia is the central focus when considering the illusionary aspect of the film. The opening dialogue (by an unseen narrator) "She forgot who she was and where she came from", is an introduction to Ofelia, how deeply she is indulged in an illusionary world forgetting the reality. Even though she is a bit too old for reading fairy tales, she is addicted to it. In the next scene, Ofelia is almost instinctively led to a mysterious monument depicting a faun with a missing eye. Her careless attitude towards her sick mother reveals her escapist mentality from the real world. When she places the missing eye back to the socket, a magical insect/fairy suddenly appears. Ofelia's magical quest begins here. She tells her mother that she saw a fairy, she confirms herself the insect as a fairy even though the viewers don't think to be so. Reaching the mill she finds the labyrinth and she is much fascinated about it.

Ofelia's illusionary world develops as the film progress. It begins when the "fairy" visits her. Through this "fairy" her magic world blooms. The fairy leads her to the labyrinth and viewers too are led to an illusionary world through the eyes of Ofelia. The viewer's dilemma between illusion and real begins here. She meets the Faun in the labyrinth. When Ofelia asks about his name, the faun replies, "Me, I've had so many names, old names only the wind and the tree can pronounce. I'm the mountain, the forest, the earth, I am... I am a faun, your most humble servant Your Highness".

These can be interpreted only in an illusionary aspect. Also the Faun tells Ofelia about her past life that she was Princess Moanna of the underworld and it was the moon that bore her and the real father waits for her return but she must be sure that she has not become mortal. The Faun boosts up Ofelia's illusion by giving her three tasks to complete before the full moon to prove her worth in order to return to her kingdom. And he gives her a Book of Crossroads which helps her in the tasks. The Book plays a role of a bridge to Ofelia's journey to her fantasy world. As per the instructions given by the book Ofelia completes her first task that is to retrieve a key from a giant toad that is suckling the life of an ancient fig tree. The meeting with the toad, killing it and completing her first task, Ofelia unknowingly becomes a big part of illusion.

Having successfully completed the first task, Ofelia receives the second mission from the Faun which is to retrieve a dagger from the Pale Man with one condition that she cannot eat anything from there. But Ofelia was not able to commence the task due to her mother's worsening condition. When she tells about this to the Faun, he gives her a mandrake root to improve her mother's condition. The mandrake root works on her mother condition and her belief in magic gets deeper. The instructions given by the Book of crossroads during the second task is:

“Use the chalk to trace a door anywhere in your dream. Once the door is open start the hourglass. Let the fairies guide you. Don't eat or drink anything during your stay and come back before the last grain of sand falls”

The scene perfectly shows Ofelia's journey through an illusionary world. Also the chamber of the Pale Man and his physical features are at the peak stage of illusion. Ofelia's dangerous encounter with the Pale Man and her escape from there is one of the greatest account of illusion in the film.

The last task confirms that the illusionary world is entirely confined to Ofelia. The Faun asks Ofelia to give him the baby so he can prick him with the dagger and obtain a drop of blood from him. Ofelia refuses. The Faun lost his patience and reminds her that he requires her full obedience, but still she refuses. At this point, Captain Vidal finds Ofelia, whom in his point of view, is talking to herself (as he cannot see the Faun, which gives a clear cut idea that the entire illusionary world is confined to Ofelia). Ofelia being shot by the captain lay bloody in the ground and drops of her own blood falls into the labyrinth, thus accomplishing the final task required for her initiation of self-sacrifice. In the last scene, Ofelia reunites her real father who sits as the king, her mother as the queen holding her little brother, the faun who looks young and the three fairies. The scene then shifts to Ofelia taking her last breath with a smile, which we can say that in her death too she is dreaming. This scene comes to a strict conclusion that there is an illusionary counterpart in the film painted by Ofelia.

If Ofelia is the weaver of illusion in the film, the entire reality is weaved by the escalating violence and repression of the post war period through the eyes of the tyrant Captain Vidal. The elements of reality focus on the Françoist regime as well as the resistance from anti-fascist guerrillas. Captain Vidal is an essence of

Fascism. Ofelia, the child-heroine, is an orphan whose father died in obscure circumstances during the Spanish Civil War. Carmen, her mother, remarried Vidal who controls her and limits her to a wheelchair. She is constantly sedated and confined to her bedroom during the last weeks of her pregnancy with Vidal's child. From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Ofelia does not want to establish a daughter-father relationship with Vidal. Moreover, it is soon very obvious that Vidal is incapable of noble feelings, and completely uninterested in any type of filial relationship with Ofelia. To Vidal, his wife is just a sort of human incubator carrying what he is certain is his "son;" it is evident that a daughter would be unacceptable. Doctor Ferreiro, the physician in the military post, says that she should have not travelled to the countryside in that condition of complicated pregnancy, and Vidal answers: "A son should be born wherever his father is". Ferreiro asks Vidal how he can be so sure about the gender of the child to which Vidal replies: "Don't fuck with me." In a later scene Vidal orders Ferreiro in front of his sedated wife: "If you have to choose...save the baby. That boy will bear my name and my father's name." The sadistic attitude of Vidal and the after effects of war is the prime focus while dealing with a realistic aspect. Carmen's reply to Ofelia's question regarding her re-marriage, "When you're older you'll understand. It hasn't been easy for me either." This explains that there is a sort of strict reason behind Carmen's decision to marry Vidal. Ofelia tells story of the blue mountain rose to her unborn baby brother. She laments of the magic rose on top of a mountain, surrounded by poisonous thorns.

"Men talked among themselves about their fear of death and pain, but never about the promise of eternal life. And every day the rose wilted, unable to bequeath its power to anyone... forgotten and lost at the top of that cold, dark mountain, forever alone until the end of time."

Ofelia's rose story unveils a big reality. The people of Spain are the men in the story, the blue rose is their political freedom and thorns around the rose are the fascist regime. Ofelia's fairy tale mirrors the tumultuous, oppressed existence of those in Fascist Spain. The regime Vidal leads is empowered by fear, which keeps citizens complacent. Throughout the film Vidal is constantly and meticulously tending a broken pocket watch. Vidal is obsessed with the passage of time; he lives by its restrictions and moreover, he is aware of time. The watch obsession also parallels his obsession with death. He knows he is just living to die, he's counting the seconds and he hates himself for it. When he charges up the hill into gunfire, calmly acknowledging that "it is the only decent way to die". Ofelia's use of the sand clock and the rules she must obey also represents Vidal and the passage of time. At the same time Vidal's tyrant nature reaches at its extreme when he brutally kills two peasants without enquiring the truth.

Mercedes is another idol who boldly faces these harsh realities. Unlike Carmen she fights every crisis without surrendering to "fate". Her act of keeping a knife hidden inside her apron reveals how alert she is since she is secretly helping the rebels. She is a strong and practical woman who lives in the realistic world. The three women characters in the film, Ofelia, Carmen and Mercedes are of



“same gender but different breed”. The three are entirely unique in their view towards life.

The two monsters of *Pan's Labyrinth*, the Monstrous Toad and the Pale Man are the real expressions of Vidal's tyranny. In reality the fig tree is her mother and the monstrous toad is Captain Vidal. Their sexual union is represented here. The entrance to the tree looks strikingly similar to a woman's vagina. The toad is the one who is destroying the fig tree. Similarly Carmen is suffering with a complicated pregnancy. Ofelia views her mother not as being pregnant but rather as she literally says “sick with baby”. This is much more consistent with Ofelia's understanding of the world around her also Vidal, the fascist (even though she tries to escape from reality).

Life under Franco's fascist regime is portrayed through Vidal's words. It's a meaningless, violent, angry and repetitive routine that keeps citizens living in fear and leaders living to die. The subplot or the reality involves Spanish resistance. But both Mercedes and the doctor reject violence as a tool of resistance, but act humanely in service to others even when doing so requires paying a blood price. Vidal and his men got the “reward” for their tyrannical actions. Their cruelty didn't last too long. The rebels were able to put an end to it. Mercedes' brother Pedro who is the leader of the rebels and his fellowmen were able to defeat Vidal and his men. In the climax, the reality behind Ofelia's fairy tale is made clear. When Vidal runs behind her to the labyrinth, he sees Ofelia talking to nothing but air. Ofelia's reality behind her illusionary world can be seen here.

Also the climax of the film puts an end to Vidal's egoism when Mercedes takes his son and refuses to consider his last wish that is to tell his son what time his father died. Mercedes says that his son would never know even the name of his biological father. The death of the “Big Bad Wolf” surely gives the viewers a pinch of relief, but viewers too are not allowed to escape from the reality completely. The pain of reality continues when we see Ofelia taking her last breath. From the beginning to end the elements of reality is more shocking and puts the viewers in despair.

Cinema is a form of signification that creates the appearance of a knowable reality and hence confirms self-definition of the human subject as someone capable of knowing that reality; but in fact both reality and human subjects who appears capable of knowing that reality are “effects” of a process of significations. The cinematic image appears to spectators as if were reality, but this appearance is an illusion. In fact, the cinematic image provides an impression of reality; it is actually an image and not the reality it appears to be. Contemporary film theorists construe the film spectator as a passive observer of the image who is duped into believing that it is real. The film spectator knows it is only a film and actively participate in the experience of illusion that the cinema affords.

Clearly, the fairy tale *Pan's Labyrinth* has something to say to the “grownups”. *Pan's Labyrinth* develops a unique blend of fantasy and history. It's

more than just a fancy. These two worlds are polar opposites that repel each other to the core and through the various techniques employed in *Pan's Labyrinth*. Ofelia's fairy tale mirrors the tumultuous oppressed existence of those in fascist Spain. Del Toro, the director not only attempts to bring a feminine point of view to the Francoist regime in the film, but also draws attention to the subjects, ability to choose, a trait that was suppressed in Spanish society during Franco's dictatorship. Thus, political imposition merges with issues of masculinity and femininity, exploding and colliding in an encounter that is inevitably drenched with blood.

The entire film is thus trying to reveal all these brutal realities through Ofelia's illusionary counterpart. The monsters in the illusionary world are representations of the real life monsters. Ofelia's tasks to escape to the underworld reveal that the other world is safer than this world of harsh reality. Simply there are two parallel narratives. One narrative is the real one, a brutal reality which is difficult for a child to understand. The second narrative is just as brutal, but posed as a fairy tale. Ofelia possesses the events she witnesses or is aware of, as a fantasy. *Pan's Labyrinth* is completely filled with illusion and reality. Even though the remains of war still there, Ofelia finds herself consumed by a far different world. Her encounter with the fairy-like creature leads her away from reality into the world of fantasy. Ofelia's escapist attitude from the painful reality begins from here. She is unwilling to embrace the dark reality. Her wild imagination creates a world filled with grotesque monsters (which itself has a deep symbolic meaning to reality) to escape the horrors of everyday life in a fascist world.

The direction of the plot shifts from fantasy to reality over and over again with great fluidity. The reason that fantasy and reality are so different in this movie is to show how fantasy is viewed as a better world than that of reality. In a fantasy world anything can happen and mostly good things occur and sometimes have a happy ending. In reality, bad things are seen more often and struggle seems harder to overcome. In this movie, Ofelia overcomes her struggles through the world of fantasy. To conclude, *Pan's Labyrinth* is a rare film that combines the world of fantasy and reality to show how the worlds can co-exist with the conflicts of each world spilling into the other, thus opening up certain portals through which the contact between each world is established. Also the film is an excellent combination of a strong script, direction, acting, cinematography and use of special effects. The film has succeeded in portraying the realities of war through a fantasy world of a child.

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