

# Pan's Labyrinth

## (2006, Del Toro, Spain)

### Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL) Component 2: European Film (AS)

### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

### Rationale for study

- Critically lauded with 3 Academy Award wins in 2007 for Best Makeup, Art Direction and Cinematography. Widely regarded as Del Toro's definitive film.

### STARTING POINTS - The Beginning and the End

- 01:09 – After onscreen text detailing the time and place (1944, Spain) and the sound of heavy breathing, the low level camera pans R to L into a canted angle close-up of the film's protagonist, a young girl called Ofelia, who is dying.
- 01:47:23 – The final shot of the film. After witnessing Ofelia tragically die at the hands of her step-father, a flower magically forms on a branch and blooms. A magical insect/fairy looks on. Onscreen subtitles and the Spanish voiceover informs us that Ofelia's alter-ego (if not her actual magical identity) Princess Moanna, *'left behind, small traces of her time on earth, visible only to those who know where to look.'*

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography

- 01:23: The camera zooms into an ECU of Ofelia's eye and beyond into the black of her pupil. The male narration has a fairy tale styling and we

are literally transported, through the zoom and a cross dissolve, into the magical faery kingdom. The suggestion is of course that this world is in Ofelia's mind... *'A world where there are no lies and no pain.'* The blue filter is both otherworldly and cold – befitting the death of a young girl.

- 02:25: ELS. Stark contrast with the ethereal blue shots of the previous scenes we are in *'another place, at another time'*. The ruins of a church speak of the violence that has engulfed the hot, parched, sun-baked landscape. Ofelia's ominous entourage arrives in the region.
- 05:21: The first shot of Captain Vidal is preceded by his watch. His punctilious, preening precision is mirrored in this watch. It was his father's, a famous general, and the glass was shattered as he went into battle and died. The watch is then a symbol of Vidal's macho need to ape his father's bravery as well as evidence of his own fastidiousness. His attention to detail however involves more than just repairing watches (something we see him do later in the film) – it has a darker connotation in the torture scenes where he clearly delights in the sickening tools of the torturers trade such as skewers and pliers.
- 02:41: The first two shot. Ofelia and her mum (Carmen). Mum is sickly and pregnant. Ofelia is immersed in a fairy story. Later in the film her mum will tell Ofelia that life is not like fairy stories and that she will have to grow up.

#### Mise-en-Scène

- Del Toro has fashioned a reputation for a detailed and idiosyncratic approach to mise-en-scène. Most of his production designs originate from sketch work that he produces in notebooks. He is consequently someone who prefers the physicality of animatronics and model work to CGI. As the film received Oscars for its Make-up and Production Design we'll focus here on these areas.
- Make up: 21:11: The first close-up of the Fawn\* in the centre of the ancient Labyrinth. It is

he who acts as Ofelia's guide and Proppian dispatcher/donor. He tells Ofelia that she is in fact, Princess Moanna, daughter of the King and Queen of the Underworld. The Labyrinth is the last remaining portal between that kingdom and her current reality. In order to pass through the portal and prove that she has not become entirely mortal, she needs to complete three tasks – all of which will appear before the full moon in a magical book called the Book of Crossroads. Later he is revealed as the benign advisor of the Fairy King and Queen. However throughout most of the movie we are never quite sure of his intentions. The sinister blue light seen above certainly develops this idea of his possible malignity. The make-up and design work is clearly remarkable.

\*Pan was not a faun but it is how the English world was sold in the film. Its Spanish title is *El Laberinto Del Fauno* (The Faun's Labyrinth). Pan is a far more sexual creature from Greek myth than the more bucolic fauns. A faun appears for example in the Narnia films.

- 57:31: The standout sequence in the film is that involving the monstrous Pale Man who, woken by Ofelia's transgression, chases her from his lair. The use of make-up and CGI achieves a truly terrifying creation (see more below). This first close-up of the Pale Man who is seeing Ofelia for the first time is truly horrifying – not least because of the eerie juxtaposition of eyes in hands. The fact that the Pale Man later devours two cute fairies makes him even more detestable.
- Production Design: 04:45: The first proper hint of a gothic production design – a remnant from an older time, a ceremonial standing stone, indicates that this film will unleash primal forces that will haunt the present and derange it. Ofelia gives the stone its right eye back (having found it in the path nearby) and an insect – a very large cricket emerges from its stone mouth. The insect will later transform into a Fairy.
- 18:37: The locust that has been following Ofelia since the start of the film transforms into a friendly Fairy. Now we know the movie is a magical-realist text – having just witnessed sickeningly violent murder, we are now in the land of make-believe. Note the other worldly blue suggests that Ofelia may be asleep in her mother's arms.
- 34:49 : Ofelia completes her first task – dealing

with a giant toad that lives under a great tree in the forest. The model of the toad is particularly realistic and visceral – fitting Ofelia's descent into the mud and ooze underground. Del Toro voiced some of the sounds of the Toad himself and similar animatronics and CGI was used in the construction of the Fawn, The Pale Man and the Mandrake.

### Editing

- The styling of the editing is conventional although a number of diegetic wipes are used or cross-dissolves to and from black – thus forging a link between the real and the fantasy world. One example of this is when Ofelia, in close up lying on her mum's tum, tells a story to her as yet unborn brother and the shot literally tracks into the womb.

### Sound

- 16:13: A gruesome murder. Captain Vidal executes two farmers (possibly rebels). The first is killed brutally with the base of a glass bottle – supposedly based on a bar fight Del Toro had once witnessed. Shot in sinister low key light this is our first insight into Vidal's brutally violent and psychotic character. Prior to this we have seen him as an emotionally cold man, austere and stiff, but this level of violence comes at the spectator from nowhere and is profoundly shocking. It is also a harbinger of the extreme violence that will follow in some scenes – in particular those involving Vidal. As with all scenes of violence it is the sound design (sweetened in post-production) that adds to the horror of the event depicted.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

### Representations

#### Gender

- There is a clear binary opposite in terms of the representation of gender at work in the film. Captain Vidal is obsessed by his father's military exploits and is equally determined that his own son (he refuses to believe the child can be anything other than a male) is born close to him. The health of his sick wife is of only secondary importance. Indeed he scolds her for discussing their romance in public and is equally dismissive of his step-daughter, Ofelia. The final scene where he tells the rebels who

will soon execute him that his son must know who he was and (a reference to his own father – what time he died) shows the final exhaustion of the patriarchy he represents, as Mercedes tells him that his son will never know who he was.

- Vidal's self-loathing (never quite able to step out from the shadow cast by his father) is most evident in the scene above where he commits metaphorical suicide by cutting his reflection's throat. The broken face of his watch (which he has just glanced at) is also suggestive of his own broken identity – an immaculate and precise mechanism but flawed. The fact that Mercedes will later slit his mouth open, and that he will be shot just below his right eye, are all mirroring scenes, reflecting the precise deconstruction of the watch face and his own.
- The main women in the film, Ofelia, Carmen and Mercedes all suffer at the hands of patriarchy. When Mercedes is caught by Vidal towards the end of the film Vidal laughs at the suggestion that he should not be left alone with her – 'She is just a Woman!' Mercedes then replies that she was able to support the rebels precisely because she was 'invisible' to Vidal. Later Ofelia is killed by her step-father for stealing his son and defying him and Carmen dies in child birth un mourned by her new husband. Only Mercedes triumphs in the end through her ingenuity and bravery and through her love for her brother. However her final scene is one of profound grief as she holds the dying Ofelia in her arms and weeps for the loss of childish innocence at the hands of a brutalising patriarchy.

### Age

- In the Pale Man's lair we see a chilling shallow focus close-up of all the shoes of the Pale Man's victims. Such an image evokes comparisons with scenes from the Nazi death camps and combined with other images such as the murals of The Pale Man devouring babies and of course the sumptuous banquet that cannot be touched we are left in little doubt that this representation of a fantasy monster can also be read as a critique of a ruling elite (perhaps the Church) which systematically and brutally crushes innocence and life. Youth is clearly at odds with the adult world in this film – fantasy is perhaps the only escape.

### Ethnicity/Nationality

- There are no multi-ethnic representations in the film which is excusable given its setting

in Northern Spain in 1944 however the representation of nationality is absolutely foreground. The Falangist's (supporters of the dictator, Franco) are aligned to corrupt officialdom, a morally bankrupt church and a sadistic and brutal military (no prisoners are ever taken – headshots to the wounded being the preferred means of dispatch – and if they are captured, they are then sadistically tortured). Vidal alone executes his step-daughter, a doctor, two farmers and an injured rebel as well as torturing and taunting a captured rebel with a stutter – 'Count to three without stuttering and I'll free you.' Our sympathies are absolutely aligned with the rebels who are depicted as compassionate and comradely – as much a simplification as that of the Falangist's as anyone who has read Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* will know. However this is not a realist film and Del Toro is clearly outraged by fascism, dictatorships, militarism, propaganda and patriarchy – all enemies of the imagination as much as anything else. As the doctor says to Captain Vidal just before Vidal shoots him: 'To obey... for the sake of obeying, without questioning, that's something only people like you can do, Captain.' The Spanish rebels are thus depicted as a significantly more humanised, freedom loving and empathetic group of democrats.

### Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- The film is a magical realist text – combining beautifully constructed but very dark fantasy sequences, some verging on horror, with a graphically violent rendering of factional fighting in Northern Spain in the early years of Franco's dictatorship.
- Del Toro has referred to this film as a very loose sequel to an earlier feature horror, *The Devil's Backbone* – itself set in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War.
- In *Pan's Labyrinth*, as we have already seen, Franco's army unit is represented as a brutalising force of occupation and its commanding officer, Captain Vidal, as a sadistic epitome of evil: cruel to everyone including his wife and step-daughter. His evident pleasure in torture is straight out of a psycho-horror film. The ruling elite who attend a banquet given by him are equally venal and corrupt and Del Toro clearly has little empathy for the priest and the organised Catholicism he represents.

In contrast however we find the guerrillas and their supporters, such as Mercedes and the Doctor, are presented as honourable and caring people. Del Toro makes it very clear with whom we are positioned to side. Indeed the narrative triumph of liberalism over fascism is literal as the movie ends with the Captain's execution by the victorious rebels and Ofelia's imaginative or real resurrection in the Underworld.

- Another motif, aside from the Gothic and gore discussed above is paganism. The moss-covered ruins of the Labyrinth and associated standing stones, and the tree beneath which Ofelia finds the toad and from which blooms her own resurrection (see above – endings) all suggest a sophisticated and elemental pagan past now acting as rare portals to the fairy kingdom.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

#### Social

- The representation of women referred to above is evidence of the social problems women faced in this patriarchal and macho era.
- A local priest, attending a meal held by the Captain, dismisses the possible pain felt by the rebels on theological grounds. His representation lacks humanity and is clearly a barbed commentary on an out of touch and complicit Catholic church: “*God has already saved their souls. What happens to their bodies hardly matters to him.*” Del Toro uses the cinematic conceit of a banquet to heighten the corruption of the local middle classes and ruling elite.
- Despite his criticisms of Catholicism as a dogma and institution it is clear that Del Toro admires the spirituality of his native religion – in a later film *Crimson Peak*, a ghost story, he commented on his belief in ghosts. The scene above is strongly redolent of a stylised heaven with its church-like setting, a rosary window flooded with golden light and a grey bearded father figure flanked by a doe-eyed mother. It is all rather stuffy and formal befitting a royal court perhaps but not a fairy domain. That said it is clearly Ofelia's (Princess Moanna's) ‘happy place’ – she has come home to a loving warm family and an adoring people.

#### Historical

- The period featured, 1944 in Spain, is intriguing to the non-specialist as it is clearly

a period where the rumblings from the Spanish Civil War are still being felt despite the war itself having finished in 1939.

#### Political

- The negative depiction of Franco's fascist forces is clearly intended to be extended to the imaginative poverty of fascism in general – in contrast to the more benign and sensitive (although hardly democratic) fairy kingdom. A more realist political representation is that of the guerrillas who are presented as resourceful and determined and egalitarian. Mercedes love of children (Ofelia and her baby brother) suggests a tenderness and a celebration of all things childish – indeed, unlike Ofelia's weak and dismissive mother, Mercedes gives advice on the handling of fauns.

#### Technological

- The key technology used in this film is the animatronics and green screen work as discussed above and its effective creation of a magical-realist production design.

#### Institutional

- Released in the UK by Optimum. Premiered at Cannes in May 2006 to great acclaim. Co-produced by a number of Spanish, Mexican and American production companies the \$19 million budget is reflected in the complex production design, period dressing and relatively large cast. The eventual worldwide box office of \$83.3 million was seen as a triumph.
- Del Toro as an effective and idiosyncratic fantasy/horror auteur is evidenced in his earlier films such as *Cronos* (1993), *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) and *Crimson Peak* (2015) as well as in his much more mainstream Hollywood work such as *Hellboy* (2004) and *Pacific Rim* (2013).
- Del Toro wrote the subtitles for *Pans Labyrinth* himself after becoming disillusioned with the translation of *The Devil's Backbone* – a film also with the Spanish Civil War as its backdrop and the informal prequel to *Pan's Labyrinth*.