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The Spanish Civil War through the Phantasmagorical Lens of Guillermo del Toro

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Abstract

Mexican director Guillermo del Toro is probably best known for his English-language horror and fantasy-genre films. In 2001 however, Del Toro's work began to move in a new direction, with the release of *El espinazo del diablo*, a ghost story set in Spain in the final year of the Spanish Civil War. Five years later in 2006 he directed his second Spanish-language film to be set in Spain, *El laberinto del fauno*, a fairy tale narrative set in the post-war of 1944, foregrounding the horrors of life under fascism and the resistance to the Francoist regime. Given the popularizing and mainstreaming effect of Del Toro's "magical treatment", it would not be unreasonable to suspect that his ghost story and fairy tale might have produced a simplistic view of Spain's conflict. I will argue that such is not the case. Employing the refractionary lens of the phantasmagorical, Del Toro's representation of the violence and oppression of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath through the eyes of orphaned and traumatized children presents Spain as an incomprehensible and monstrous *madre patria*, a counter-narrative to any nostalgic or longed for vision of the mother country as a unified and all-embracing nation.

Key Words: Guillermo del Toro; Spectral; Fantasy; Spanish Civil War; Transnational film

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> Adults lie to themselves and to others. They endorse their concerns and inventions—the ones they all agree to (money, power, war, repression)—as real. But fantasy is frowned upon as childish. For some of us, it is not.
> Guillermo del Toro, Foreword, *At Home with Monsters*.

Through his impressive body of work to date, the prolific and multi-talented Mexican film director Guillermo del Toro, also a successful screenwriter, special effects artist, producer and novelist, has managed to cross geographic, linguistic and genre borders and has emerged as one of the most creative and successful transnational filmmakers of our generation. By 1993 Del Toro had already made his first Spanish-language feature film, *Cronos*, a vampire tale set in Mexico, but he made his name in the global market with English-language fantasy ventures such as *Blade II* (2002) and *Hellboy* (2004). He has secured his reputation in the global film scene with the following feature films in English: *Mimic* (1997), *Hellboy II:The Golden Army* (2008), *Pacific Rim* (2013), *Crimson Peak* (2015), *The Shape of Water* (2017) which won four Oscars, *Nightmare Alley* (2021) and *Pinocchio* (2022).

With previous experience in illustration and in the creation of video-games, comics, and special effects, Del Toro's credentials for making fantasy-genre films were unquestionable. In 2001 however, Del Toro's work began to move in a new direction, with the release of *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*), an eerily beautiful but disturbing ghost story set in Spain in the final year of the Spanish Civil War. Five years later in 2006 he directed his second Spanish-language film to be set in Spain, *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*), a fairy tale narrative set in 1944 also foregrounding the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. When I say Del Toro moved in a new direction I do not mean to suggest that he left behind the phantasmagorical and horror elements of his previous films; on the contrary, *Espinazo* and *Laberinto* are richly crafted within the aesthetics and technological sophistication of present-day fantasy films. What is remarkable though, is that a Mexican director, based in Los Angeles, working mostly in English and known for horror and fantasy films should have made, with *El laberinto del fauno* one of the most critically successful films to date on the Spanish Civil War and the immediate postwar period, and that he did so with a Spanish-language film on a global level. Nominated for six Academy Awards in 2006, *Laberinto* won three Oscars in 2007 for cinematography, art direction, and makeup, putting the Spanish Civil War on the map for audiences outside of Spain, especially a new generation of film viewers already familiar perhaps with Del Toro's reputation in the fantasy and horror genres, but not knowledgeable about the history of Spain and her conflicts. Historically grounded on aspects of the Civil War and the postwar resistance to the fascism of the Franco regime, both *Espinazo* and *Laberinto* have undoubtedly mapped this war in terms that have made it synonymous with Spain and the conflict her citizens had to endure. At the same time though, the fairy tale and magical elements of these films situate them unmistakably within the genre of fantasy ventures. I am interested in exploring Del Toro's use of the fantastic, the monstrous and the spectral as a refractionary lens to focus on the violence and horror of the war and subsequent fascist regime, and to highlight the importance and long term impact of resistance, particularly from the perspective of the most powerless.

While *Laberinto* is not the only contemporary popular film made about the Spanish Civil War, it did have a much wider distribution and became more mainstream than any other film on the subject, thanks in large part to Del Toro's collaboration with EL DESEO, the production company of Pedro and Agustín Almodóvar. But what can be said about the current practices of global cinema when viewers through platforms like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon and the like can stream national and international films into their homes, onto the large or small screens of TVs, computers, tablets or smart phones? What is gained and what is

lost in the translations and transferences when directors, producers, actors and other film professionals now cross borders, languages, genres and markets with more fluidity than ever before in the history of film? Are historical contexts and political conflicts adequately problematized within the financial demands and cultural dynamics of transnational cinema, or are they trivialized or at best misread? Can a blockbuster movie reveling in the conventions of fantasy or ghost story genres excavate an intellectual project and engage an audience on a level beyond cliché?

Given the popularizing and mainstreaming effect of Del Toro's "magical treatment", and in light of the fact that he is a Mexican director, living in the US with no particular ties to Spain, it would not be unreasonable to suspect that his ghost story and fairy tale might have produced a simplistic view of Spain's conflict. In fact, there has been criticism in the past towards non-Spanish directors taking on the complexities of the Civil War without a sufficiently nuanced socio-political approach. A case in point is Stephen Schwartz's dismissal of Ken Loach's 1995 film *Land and Freedom* which he considers to be arrogantly simplistic with regard to the modus operandi of the anarchist resistance within the Republic. Discussing the paradoxes of film and the recovery of historical memory, Schwartz argues that *Land and Freedom* is "deeply flawed" adding that "it aggravates the […] error of analyzing the war through foreign, rather than Spanish eyes" (503). Schwartz holds up for special criticism a scene which many of the film's fans and Loach himself found to be remarkably powerful and affecting, well acted and delivered, employing professional actors alongside local villagers and drawing out masterful improvisation techniques:

> Loach himself said this setup comprised the summit of the work, when it is, in reality, 'cringe-making', in the present-day idiom. Spanish and, especially, Catalan anarchist peasants had read, discussed, and thought about collectivization for three generations, and did not need to stumble through inarticulate colloquies about it. Nor was it probable that they would pay attention to the views of outsiders, except for a handful of well-known foreign anarchists. (503)

This is a problematic argument. In the first place, analyzing the civil war from "foreign eyes" rather than "Spanish eyes" does not automatically imply an "error" or less authenticity or realism. Furthermore, Loach was then as he is today an experienced, successful director known for his political commitment and rigorous research into his subject matter. Nevertheless, whether we agree or disagree with Schwartz's critique of *Land and Freedom*, the fact remains that the subject matter of the Spanish Civil War is so emotionally and politically charged that it draws any artist into difficult territory where the best intentions can lead to representations of cliché and nostalgia (from within Spain the novel *El nombre que ahora digo*, by Antonio Soler, albeit the 1999 Premio Primavera prize-winner, in my opinion, falls into this trap). I propose that such is not the case with the two films under discussion, and that Del Toro successfully activates the radical possibilities within the popular genres of the fairy tale and ghost story.

Del Toro has explained that *Espinazo* and *Laberinto* should be considered as companion pieces (*Espinazo* as brother to *Laberinto*'s sister) in their exploration of war and fascism through the eyes of children and through a lens that blends hyper-fantasy with hyper-reality. The specter of the Spanish Civil War made itself known to him while growing up in Mexico, one of the few countries that offered support to the Spanish Republic and her refugees. In an interview in Spain just after the release of *Laberinto*, Del Toro explained that he had met many exiled Republicans in Mexico and heard their stories. He lauded the exiled Spanish community as "gente que cambió el arte y la cultura del país" and he went on to explain how Spain's recent history

began to enter his conscience:

> Una de esas raras ocasiones en que empiezas a tomar conciencia de algo que en un libro de Historia no es más que una fecha. Descubrí que la escisión entre las dos Españas existía antes y después de la guerra. Y que era una característica fundamental del carácter español. Leí testimonios sobre padres fascistas y sus hijos republicanos, que se mataron entre sí en el campo de batalla. Llevarte bien con tu padre o con tu hermano es difícil en la vida real, […] [p]ero esto era exacerbarlo a todo un país, la más grande representación de los odios más íntimos como seres humanos. (Del Toro, 2006).

With *El espinazo* Del Toro creates a microcosm of the Civil War as a domestic trauma that rents asunder the most intimate structure of the family. Set in an orphanage in the middle of nowhere, most of the action and characters are situated within its walls, or just outside in the deserted and dry plains. This mise-en-scène evokes the characteristics of the Gothic genre but it also responds to the director's desire to represent the war as an intimate, family conflict. In spite of the best efforts of the benevolent adults who stand in for the boys' dead parents, who are fallen Republican heroes, the elderly and kind Professor Casares (Federico Luppi) and the co-director Carmen, (Marisa Paredes) cannot provide the refuge and care they hope to, as they are overpowered by the physical strength and malevolence of one of their own, the orphan Jacinto (Eduardo Noriega), now the school janitor. Jacinto's greed and cruelty in his relentless pursuit of the gold that Carmen has saved for the Republican cause, turn the orphanage into a site of monstrous violence and trauma. The powerlessness of these stand-in parents in the face of overwhelming force and violence is written symbolically on their bodies in the form of Casares' sexual impotence and Carmen's amputated leg. Although she obviously loves Casares, Carmen satisfies her desire with the virile but treacherous Jacinto, all the more painful for the impotent Professor Casares to bear.

As a story focused on boys, the film is marked from beginning to end by icons and symbols of masculinity: the father-figure of Professor Casares, a man of science who has in his study a collection of miscarried fetuses in jars; the unexploded bomb in the middle of the school yard, a huge phallic icon that forms part of the backdrop for many scenes, but like Casares, it too is impotent; the interaction of the boys themselves in their classrooms and in their dormitory; the constant menace of former student Jacinto; and finally the spectral presence of their dead schoolmate, Santi, (Junio Valverde) who haunts the orphanage and in particular the newest arrival, Carlos, (Fernando Tielve). Santi is known to the boys as "el que suspira" since his belabored breathing and sighing announce his presence. These representations reveal a masculinity that has become impotent, deformed, mutilated and monstrous. In her study of *Espinazo* Ann Davies considers virility as a symbol of national strength so that its dissolution into the monstrous and abject renders the masculine "unfixed, in inherent danger of collapsing in on itself" (135).

Espinazo is framed by the ghostly: at the beginning of the film the voice-over of Casares tells the viewers that a ghost is a tragic event condemned to repeat itself over and over. This accompanies a montage of images of the deformed fetuses preserved in jars of amber liquid that Casares keeps in his study, the liquid being sold in bottles to locals as a folk remedy for impotence. We also see in this initial montage images of the dead orphan, Santi, floating in the amber liquid of the cistern in the orphanage cellar, where he was drowned by Jacinto. We do not yet know, however, what these images signify. The film also closes with a similar voice-over and montage of images: Casares now, like Santi, is a ghost, having also been murdered by Jacinto. Casares repeats his

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comments about what a ghost is and adds that it is like an insect caught in amber. This voice-over and the visual montage frame the entire film so that the story is presided over by this disturbing imagery of deformed embryos and the ghost of Santi floating inexplicably in an amber-hued water. Davies reads these suspended forms as regressive bodies signaling "a return of the regressed to challenge and ultimately destroy the male virility to which they also give rise"; she further contends that

> these degenerate bodies both make and unmake the man: while the villagers might believe that they restore virility, these bodies also signal the threat of male dissolution that goes beyond the more obvious but also the more localized threat of castration. (138)

I would add that the deformed, spina bifida fetuses and Santi's bleeding and decomposing ghost are the spectral embodiment of the unrealized dreams of the young Republic, a republic whose liberal citizens were themselves considered by Francoists as a deformation of the true Spain and who were left floating in a murky past to which they were prohibited access in a postwar culture of silence and anti-intellectual mythology. Jo Labanyi's work on the ghostly and her development of a theory of hauntology in Spanish culture, drawing from Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994), gives further context for the spectral in Del Toro's films under consideration here (Labanyi, 2002). In fact she argues that "the whole of modern Spanish culture--its study and its practice--can be read as one big ghost story" (1). Through the presentation of such abject images and the cruelty suffered by the young boys at the hands of Jacinto, Del Toro deconstructs the myth of the benevolent, all-embracing *madre patria* offered by Francoist historiography, instead revealing it as grotesque, brutal and monstrous.

It is telling that the new arrival to the orphanage, Carlos, sees the ghost of Santi immediately and in broad daylight, before he enters the building. Del Toro has expressed on many occasions that the ghosts and monsters that populate his imagination are very much part of his creative world and his understanding of reality (*Guillermo del Toro at home*, 6). He therefore wanted to portray the ghosts as part of the everyday and not just as creatures that loom up from the darkness. He contends that while others look to religion and the idea of God to make sense of and persevere through the pains of life, he relies on his vampires, ghosts and monsters (Guillermo del Toro: «Mi abuela»). We will see that he uses the same domestic presentation of the fantasy creatures in *Laberinto*.

Despite the hyper-violence and destruction of lives in *Espinazo*, there is also a glimmer of hope as the surviving orphans finally band together in order to resist and ultimately outwit Jacinto. In the classroom their teacher, Carmen, tells them of early men and how they hunted together in order to protect each other. Carlos listens attentively and, inspired, asks his older classmate, Jaime, (Iñigo Garces) if he would like to share his drawings with him. Since Carlos likes to write he suggests that they might make their own stories. The young writer and illustrator coming together presents a coping mechanism in the face of trauma, "an aid to healing" as Cheri Robinson has suggested, (*Children and Trauma*) but it also constitutes an important creative act in storytelling as crucial to a fuller understanding of history. At first the taciturn Jaime refuses, but after the increasingly violent attacks from Jacinto and the annihilation of all the adults in the orphanage, Jaime finally comes to understand that solidarity is the only option in facing oppression. Jaime, the former bully, joins Carlos and the younger boys to launch their final attack on Jacinto, luring him to the cellar pool where the ghost Santi awaits. Lacerated with scars and burns, and the youngest orphan, Buho, limping on his broken ankle, the boys finally leave the orphanage with Carlos and Jaime now enacting the parental roles.

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Julian Savage sheds light on Del Toro's genius in blending elements of the horror genre with the historical in order to produce a subtle and beautiful masterpiece. He argues that while most successful horror movies rely heavily for their overall impact on the cinematic aesthetics of spectacle and sound effects, only a few exceptions achieve excellence in narrative and cinematography, where the storytelling and language are as important as the visual and sound aesthetics. He makes the following observation about Del Toro's film-making with *Espinazo*:

> In provocatively going beyond mere narrative and genre via a suggestive mise-en-scène, it imbues every detail with residual nuances that relate to other cultural objects such as poetry, literature, painting, film and by implication and explication, historical and contemporaneous issues concerning memory, family, society and the political. (2)

The presence of these "residual nuances" and exploration of other socio-political issues activate the possibilities of the conventions of genre to make more visible and more readily accessible to a new global audience the issues Del Toro wishes to shed light on. This film aesthetic is also apparent in *El laberinto*, made five years after *Espinazo* and which reflects the changes that occurred in the five years between the setting of the two films, 1939 and 1944, but also between the making of the two films in 2001 and 2006. In his commentary on the DVD of *Laberinto*, and in numerous interviews, Del Toro explains how his world was turned upside down two days after the premier of *Espinazo* at the Toronto film festival on September 9, 2001. After September 11, 2001 he felt the need to address the new atmosphere of fear and paranoia that was taking hold, especially in the United States:

> Rodé *El espinazo del diablo* hace cinco años. Aquella película se ambientaba en 1939 y ésta en 1944. Me impresiona que en cinco años, tanto en la realidad como en la ficción de esas dos fábulas, el mundo ha cambiado totalmente. (Del Toro, 2006).

Del Toro continues that if *Espinazo* was a ghost story that illuminated the Civil War, *Laberinto* was a film that focused on choice and disobedience, and he adds that

> Estados Unidos es un gigantesco imán de polarización política. Vivimos en un mundo que se está dividiendo brutalmente, y que nos exige en cada país casi una obediencia civil a lo que es bueno y es malo. Esta película dice que la desobediencia es necesaria, porque conduce a la responsabilidad. (Del Toro, 2006).

Unlike *Espinazo* with its recurrent symbols of masculinity and virility, *Laberinto* is imbued with an imagery of the feminine, the uterine and the maternal. Whereas *Espinazo* unfolds within the aesthetics of the Gothic and ghost story genres, *Laberinto* blends elements of fantasy and fairy tale narratives with the historical reality of postwar Spain in 1944.

The young girl, Ofelia, (Ivana Baquero), travels with her mother, Carmen, (Ariadna Gil) to the barracks of her new step-father, El Capitán Vidal (Sergi López), a fanatical and sadistically cruel army officer of the Franco regime. At this moment the army is engaged in a mission to capture and wipe out the Maquis rebels who are hiding out in the surrounding forest. The film will tell the story of how Ofelia aligns herself with Mercedes, Vidal's housekeeper but also the sister and helper (or enlace) to one of the Maquis insurgents, and how she resists and escapes through the fantasy world, the horrors of the new order under fascism. The film begins at the end, with the death or birth of Ofelia, depending on how the viewer chooses to interpret the intersecting fairy tale and historical narratives. Del Toro's intention was

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to make the film ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations, as that is, of course, the hallmark of any fantastic tale. Having said that, though, the viewer's interpretation will depend upon historical knowledge of the Spanish Civil War and its outcome. As the young girl lies dying, the blood flowing from her nose stops and flows back into her body signaling a reversal in the order of things, and her decision to re-cast her life.

Del Toro states in his commentary on the DVD of the film that once he had finally created this opening scene, he could visualize and fully understand what the film meant for him. He remarks that this framing device shapes the whole narrative to mean that it is not about a girl dying but rather giving birth to herself. (*Laberinto*, Director's commentary). Just as she makes difficult and brave choices throughout the story, so too does Ofelia decide at the end what she wants her life to be and to mean. The opening voice-over montage relates a fairy tale about a princess who was lost and had forgotten that she was a princess and had, in fact, been severed from her memories. In order to return to her kingdom, where her parents, the king and queen await, she will have to go through a series of trials and tests. And so the fairy tale on fascism begins as Ofelia, reborn, climbs up through the concentric circles of the labyrinth and commences her journey of resistance to the cruelties, oppression and hypocrisy of the dictatorial regime.

The rhythm of the interweaving fantasy and reality narratives is established from the outset as the insects and other creatures from the world of Ofelia's fairy tales make an early appearance, leading her into the subterranean world of fairies, fauns, toads and a faceless, child-eating monster. As with *Espinazo*, the fantastic and magical creatures are introduced right at the beginning of the film, in daylight, as part of the mundane and the everyday—another hallmark of Del Toro's approach to storytelling. Throughout the film, scenes and ambiances from the fairy tale alternate with the real world. Del Toro describes the symbolism and imagery as exaggerated as he is interested in being able to relate the story visually as well as verbally. The color palettes and geometries of both worlds are very different and help signpost for the viewer Ofelia's intersecting journey. The fantasy scenes are imbued with the greens and blues of the forest and the rich reddish/brown tones of the earth, which also invoke the womb. There is a profusion of circular and uterine-like imagery, from the faun's horns to the magic tree, the vaginal opening and passages to the underworld and the passage to the pale-man. Even the spaces that Ofelia occupies in the real world are defined by circular shapes and curves perhaps giving her imagination access to the fantasy world, such as the round windows in the bathroom where she goes to open and activate her magical book that the faun gave her. Juxtaposed to these shapes and the warm color palette are the straight lines and angles of the captain's world, where cold blues and steely grays predominate. One of the most violent scenes in the film in which Captain Vidal murders two innocent peasant hunters, comes early on and directly follows a scene from the fairy tale realm, a juxtaposition created by Del Toro in order to create maximum shock for the viewer, as it brings both the fantasy and reality sequences into sharper focus.

At first these two worlds run parallel to each other and Ofelia moves between both, but soon they start to intersect, with characters and creatures from the fairy tale interacting with and influencing elements from the real world. Del Toro suggests this inter-relation between the two worlds with the use of vertical and horizontal camera wipes. The first one of these occurs when Ofelia is lying in her mother's bed with her head upon her pregnant belly telling the baby in the womb one of her fairy tales. The camera moves vertically through the womb and down into the fantasy world of the tale in one single, uninterrupted shot, establishing from the outset the ease with which Ofelia moves

from the real to the fantastic, but also leaving no doubt that her forays into the fantastic are also a return to the maternal imaginary. The return to the maternal is of course impossible, nonetheless it constitutes an important, imagined journey that sustains Ofelia and helps her to bear the horrors of her reality. The second example shows a horizontal wipe and serves to create the impression that the world of the Maquis deep in the forest, while part of the real world, is in fact connected to the realm of the fantastic, and by extension the feminine. The lush green of the forest and the brown, earthy cave where the rebels live are visually reminiscent of the faun's labyrinth and the feminine space of the womb, but also symbolically the Maquis, like Ofelia in her fantasy world, and Mercedes as a marginalized woman, undermine the real world with their relentless attacks on the fascist machine.

In her insightful essay on the Maquis and their desertion by international forces, Mercedes Camino argues that films like *Laberinto* serve to recuperate the memory of some of the unsung heroes of the war and its aftermath. As we see in this film, the Maquis did in fact operate as insurgents in forest and mountainous regions of Spain, but they could do so only thanks to the collaboration and help given to them by friends and family members (enlaces), who very often were women. They gave this help at great risk to their own personal safety and were frequently tortured, raped, imprisoned or murdered for their efforts. In this particular narrative of the war and postwar periods, it is the feminine world and the role of women which is foregrounded. The Maquis, along with Ofelia and Mercedes, are associated with the feminine, a realm of bravery, disobedience and active resistance to the masculine world of obedience, oppression and cruelty embodied in Captain Vidal. As Camino points out, focusing on characters like Mercedes and Ofelia, Del Toro "pays homage to those who supported the guerrilla, making them active and integral parts of the fight itself" (49).

One interpretation of the film is to read the fantasy tale as Ofelia's creation in order to explain to herself the inexplicable cruelty and violence of the fascist regime. A sense of mystery prevails, however, as there are enough unexplained elements from the fantasy that encroach upon the real world as to leave us asking "what was real and what was fantasy", which is the desired effect created by any fantastic narrative. It is worth remembering that Del Toro has expressed on many occasions that it is not monsters and magic that frighten him, but reality. Along these lines Kim Edwards indicates,

> [as] in Wonderland, the creatures in *Pan's Labyrinth* function as distorted reflections of and satirical commentary on adults in the real world: Monstrous as the Pale Man is, his propensity for horrendous violence is limited by magical rules and literally pales next to the sadistic unchecked war and domestic crimes of the Captain. (144).

This point is brought into focus with the juxtaposition of two similar scenes of a banquet with a faceless monster at the head of the table—it is Captain Vidal, and not the Pale Man, who is the real monster and who causes real damage to those who dare to disobey him.

Similarly the faun, an ambiguous character throughout—is he good or evil?—can be understood as the representation of Captain Vidal in Ofelia's fantasy world. This becomes clear at the end of the film when Ofelia has escaped with her baby brother in her arms, and because she is in the imaginary realm, has successfully negotiated her way through the labyrinth. In the final moments of her escape, however, the faun faces her with a knife, asking her to sacrifice her brother in order to save herself. She refuses to do this and instantly we are returned to reality where it is Captain Vidal who now faces her, with a gun. He

snatches the baby from her and shoots her at point-blank range. As she lies dying we realize that we are back at the beginning of the film and that everything we have seen could have been a flashback or rather Ofelia's attempt in the last few seconds of her life to make sense of the violence and oppression that she witnessed. As an avid reader of fairy tales, Ofelia has interpreted many of the difficult experiences in the latter part of her life through the language, symbols and formulae of this genre, blending elements of fantasy with reality. As Savannah Blitch has argued, "Pan's Labyrinth becomes a film about a girl who amalgamates a new fairy tale out of those given to her; rather than conforming herself to their often strict rules, she creates her own narrative" (5).

Alternatively, Kim Edwards has read this final scene as a disappointing return to a traditionally passive role for the female protagonist:

> ...it is unsettling that such an active, rebellious and subversive heroine is finally reduced to a traditionally passive female role: like her Shakespearean namesake. Ofelia becomes the pawn, the sacrifice, the paraclete. (146).

While Ofelia does die at the end of the "real" narrative, we should not consider her as a meaningless pawn or sacrifice. Whether we read it as real or fantastic, Ofelia's journey was characterized by resistance, disobedience and choice, in direct confrontation to Captain Vidal's world of oppression, obedience and control, and it is these character traits that allow her, in her final moments, to re-cast and understand the importance of her short life. This young girl witnessed and experienced unspeakable trauma and violence, but she chose action over passivity. She knows what the consequences of her actions will be but she chooses to defy Captain Vidal and the oppressive power that he represents and she does so at every stage of her journey and trials. To seek meaning within the realm of her favorite fairy tales does not reduce her to a traditionally passive role, rather it empowers and inspires her to resist and persevere.

Despite the Republicans' call to action with "no pasarán", the reality is that the Nationalists prevailed and they did pass. The Republicans lost the war and suffered enormous hardship and oppression in the postwar period, but these films, and I would suggest a film like *Land and Freedom*, do not present a utopian, idealized version of the past, rather they ask us to consider the importance and legacy of those who resisted. As Savannah Blitch reminds us

> The fantastic thrives upon in-betweens and suspension of disbelief […] Del Toro's film is driven by the becoming of its two main characters, Ofelia and Mercedes, which means that what is of most interest to the story is that they end beyond where they began, not necessarily where that point specifically is. (Blitch).

For all its phantasmagorical elements, the film ends with the truth of historical reality: Ofelia, like so many of her countrymen and women, was murdered, but her understanding of her short life and her violent end was that bravery and resistance matter. Her life was defined by action, agency and disobedience so that she stands metaphorically for all those who were captured, tortured and murdered and whose family members continued to keep their memories alive in the postwar period, albeit in silence and behind closed doors. By the end of the twentieth century, however, the voices of second and third generation families of tortured and murdered Civil War Republicans began to clamor with ever more force and conviction that the past must be revisited and interpreted and that the disappeared must be unearthed, reclaimed and honored. Since the passing of the Ley de memoria histórica in 2007, the opening of mass graves and the identification and claiming of

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victims has become a reality for many families.

Ofelia, the protagonist of *Laberinto*, and Carlos and Jaime, the protagonists of *Espinazo*, are associated throughout both films with the hermeneutical agency of history: reading, writing, drawing, and telling stories in defiance of a corrupt and oppressive power. As far as Del Toro is concerned, this reckoning with the past is necessary for the citizens of any society that will function as a democracy, but in the case of *Espinazo* and *Laberinto*, it is the children and the supposedly powerless housekeeper, Mercedes, who best exemplify the urgency of disobedience. Del Toro firmly believes that filmmakers and story tellers who create fantasy or magical worlds have an obligation to harness the radical potential of imagination and make their audiences think:

> Me encantaría haber reflejado en *El laberinto del fauno* el pacto de silencio que el mundo hizo para ignorar lo que pasaba en España. ¿Qué habría pasado si los aliados hubiesen parado a Franco? 1944 era un momento muy propicio para hablar de monstruos y de opciones. Y hoy los que vivimos un mundo imaginario tenemos la responsabilidad de mantener la imaginación y la libertad vivas. (Del Toro, 2006).

Despite the fact that Del Toro set out to make a ghost story about war and a fairy tale about fascism, his representation of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath through the eyes of children and from the perspective of those who operated and survived from the silence of the margins works against a nostalgic or flattened out portrayal of Spain and her opposing factions. On the contrary, as Paul Julian Smith has suggested, Del Toro "has been able to make use of an extraordinarily handsome mise-en-scène in such a way as to reinforce rather than reduce the horrors of history" (Smith). In Del Toro's Civil War films, Spain bears down as an incomprehensible, ghostly and monstrous *madre patria* presenting a counter-narrative both to the idealistic representation of Spain's Republicans as part of a "belle epoque" and to the nostalgic Francoist vision of the mother country as a unified, peaceful and all-embracing nation, a vision still held by present-day pro-Francoist sympathizers.

The paradox that exists within the dynamics of transnational film is that global audiences can access through the large screens of the cineplex or through the small screens of their devices the most banal, sensational or simply entertaining visual culture, but they can also view more complex, marginal or fractured representations of global culture. For today's generation, the grandchildren and great grandchildren of Francoist oppression, and for the integrity of history, one cannot overstate the importance of films, documentaries and stories which shed light on the lives and deaths of those who were relegated to silence for over forty years, whether in mass graves, behind walls in their own homes or surviving in the forests and mountains. Both *Espinazo del diablo* and *El laberinto del fauno* through a highly creative blending of the phantasmagorical with reality engage the audience in an ethics of commitment. They make important contributions to Spain's recent political and philosophical move to recuperate historical memory, and they pay special homage to the voices and actions of the most marginalized and silenced members of the struggle, voices which very much resonate today.

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