

## FILM REVIEW

### Sacrifice of the Children in *Pan's Labyrinth*

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Review of *Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006. Written and directed by Guillermo Del Toro.

The 2006 film *Pan's Labyrinth* is an adult fairy tale that straddles the worlds of fable and a particularly gruesome and poignant historical moment—the Spanish Civil War. Some have called it a horror story, and indeed it contains deeply disturbing violence. Others have focused on the elements of a feminine-toned individuation story, full of fantastic creatures and more-than-natural scenery (Dovalis 2007). What makes it such a profound work of art is that while the fairy tale tells of a young girl's rite of passage, the horror story also expresses and counters our most fundamental mythic narrative of masculinity.

The film's title indicates that it deals with more than either simple fable or simple history. The labyrinth, of course, is one of the essential symbols of Greek myth. *Pan* was the goat-god of the forests who caused *panic* when he appeared, and his image served as a model for the Christian Devil.<sup>1</sup>

The Titan *Ouranos*, first ruler of the universe, heard a prophecy that a son would overthrow him. So he pushed his children back into the body of Mother Earth. One son, *Kronos*, escaped and then castrated and deposed him. Fearing a similar prophecy, *Kronos* ate his children. His Roman equivalent *Saturn* eventually came to personify Father Time, which devours all things.<sup>2</sup>

For 4000 years, or 200 generations, *Ouranos* and *Kronos*, the original patriarchs, have been our models for two extreme patterns of fathering. *Ouranos* is the classic absent father: gone, drunk, uninvolved, hidden behind the newspaper, brushing off needy children with, "*Ask your mother.*"

By contrast, *Kronos* is *overly* involved: tyrannical, judgmental, abusive. *Ouranos* neglects the children, but *Kronos* kills them with his unreasonable and unquestionable expectations. Many works of art have depicted *Kronos*, but the most famous is the Spaniard Goya's *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons*. Jay Scott Morgan describes this masterpiece:

Cover the right side of the face, and we see a Titan caught in the act, defying anyone to stop him, the bulging left eye staring wildly at some unseen witness to his savagery, his piratical coarseness heightened by the sharp vertical lines of the eyebrow, crossed like the stitches of a scar. Cover his left eye, and we are confronted by a being in pain, the dark pupil gazing down in horror at his own uncontrolled murderousness, the eyebrow curved upwards like an inverted question mark, as if he were asking, "Why am I compelled to do this?" (2001, np)

*Kronos* is the fabric of our daily lives. Benjamin Franklin equated Time, the ancient god, with money, the new one. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver* told the Lilliputians that his watch determined every action of his life. They concluded that it must be his god. Now we carry Time's temple with us continually, on our wrists.

In Hebrew myth, *Jehovah* shares elements of both *Ouranos* and *Kronos*. He is distant and unknowable, yet he regularly tests the loyalty of the Israelites, and his relationship with them is marked by the constant threat of sacrifice. Abraham, father of monotheism, would

sacrifice Isaac to pass God's test. Later, Jehovah confirmed one of the most fundamental themes in Western culture when he abandoned *his* only son. Indeed, when Jesus asked, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" he was quoting from Psalm 22. Later, the Spanish Inquisition imposed its ritual of purity, the *Auto de Fe*, or "test of faith."

As different as they and their images are from each other, these gods of patriarchy have two things in common. First, they are narcissists who won't acknowledge the needs or even the subjectivity of their children. Second, by refusing to share the abundance of life with them, they encourage sibling rivalry and establish the belief that all good things, from food to oil to love itself, are scarce and must be earned through sacrifice.

It wasn't always like this. Tribal initiation rituals symbolically killed boys to turn them into men. Patriarchy, however, conducts *pseudo-initiations*, which always include both a threat and a deal: *Submit to our authority or else. Sacrifice your individuality and your emotions. In exchange you may dominate your women and children.*

When young men go to war and enact the myths of self-sacrifice for the approval of the father, symbolic death becomes literal death. They attempt to defeat Time through heroism, to overcome death by inflicting it upon others. Psychologist Robert Moore writes, "There is no way to understand the attractiveness of war without understanding the unconscious seduction of the archetype of initiation" (2001, 87).

War allows old men to project their ambivalence toward their own unhealed and uninitiated inner selves onto actual youths. It is deferred infanticide, the revenge of the old upon the young. British officer Wilfred Owen lived these myths in the trenches of Northern France in 1918:

... Then Abram bound the youth with belts  
and straps,  
And builded parapets and trenches there,  
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.

*When lo! An angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad . . .*

*Behold,  
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead.  
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.*

(Owens, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," lines 7–16)

The narration at the beginning of *Pan's Labyrinth* explains that the girl Ophelia has left the underworld (where she had been a princess) to experience life on Earth, but the sun has blotted out her memory of it and of her real father there. Throughout the film, misty images of the moon will follow her, as if to balance the harsh glare of the Spanish sun and the polished boots of the fascist patriarchs.

By portraying Ophelia's inner quest in parallel with the quasi-historic tale of her evil stepfather, Captain Vidal, the filmmaker (Guillermo Del Toro) intends "to have the violence make you more susceptible to fantasy, and the fantasy to make you more vulnerable to the violence" (Del Toro 2006). And he is able to present the mythic background: the curse of Kronos.

A prototypical sadist, Vidal mistakenly executes two suspected *guerilleros*, and when proven wrong, is merely disgusted at the waste of *time*. He tortures prisoners and kills several other characters. He is obsessed with propriety and details, rigid in manners and dress. But he is not a one-dimensional brute. Vidal is a true Fascist, a *believer*, decisive and savage, certain that he acts for the good of the community, like the U.S. Army in Vietnam, which had to "destroy the village in order to save it."

He stands in for the dictator Francisco Franco (who, in 1944, when the film is set, was still consolidating his victory over the Republic, stamping out pockets of resistance and executing perhaps 100,000 prisoners). Franco existed within the purest tradition of Catholic repression going back beyond the Inquisition, past Christianity itself, to the

very roots of patriarchy. Vidal/Franco, in this film, *is* Kronos.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, the regular appearance of clocks and other references to the crushing weight of Time. Vidal first appears impatiently awaiting the arrival of Ophelia and her mother, checking the watch (as he does in several scenes) that his father had smashed at the moment of his own death so that his son would know the time and “honorable” nature of his demise. He is constantly annoyed at others’ tardiness. Like Jehovah, he withholds sustenance from the local people, keeping food locked in his storeroom, doling it out only along with Fascist propaganda.

Vidal tinkers with the watch in his office, a former grain mill. A broken watch would imply the greatest sin in a Chrono-logical theology: laziness, not being productive, merely *killing time*. Behind him, the mill’s giant gears replicate both the watch and his mind: he is *inside a great clock*, utterly enslaved by and forced to enact upon others the curse of Kronos.

While Ophelia longs for her deceased father, Vidal is consumed both with love-hate for *his* dead father and for the baby about to be born to his wife, Ophelia’s mother. To him, the mother merely incubates this child, who he makes clear to the doctor had *better* be a boy. And he will have no affection for the child either. This boy will have only one function, to carry on Vidal’s name. If Vidal has his way, the boy will have no individual existence.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, after its birth, the infant never receives a name.

The beast that Ophelia encounters in the underworld (Del Toro calls it “the Pale Man”) is surrounded by references to Kronos and child sacrifice. The piles of children’s shoes, the semicircular fireplace, and the date (1944) all evoke the Holocaust. Furthermore, his eating of the fairies (by biting off their heads), the paintings of himself on the walls, and the bulging eyeballs in the stigmata of his hands clearly evoke Goya’s *Saturn*. Rather than eating from the abundance at his own table, he prefers

to dine on the flesh of innocents. Del Toro elucidates:

... that particular character somehow came to represent the church and the devouring of children ... The words that the priest speaks at the table in *Pan's Labyrinth* are taken verbatim from a speech a priest used to give to the Republican prisoners in a fascist concentration camp. He would come to give them communion and he would say before he left, “Remember, my sons, you should confess what you know because God doesn’t care what happens to your bodies; he already saved your souls.” ... The Pale Man represents ... fascism and the Church eating the children when they have a perversely abundant banquet in front of them. There is almost a hunger to eat innocence ... (Michael Guillen, *Pan's Labyrinth—The Evening Class Interview With Guillermo Del Toro*, comment posted, December 14, 2006, <http://theeveningclass.blogspot.com/2006/12/pans-labyrinththe-evening-class.html>)

The Pale Man, like the base of the labyrinth, is *underground*. Our better nature also lives there, repressed by patriarchy, war, capitalism, and religion. Actually, so does Kronos (whose son Zeus banished him to the darkness of *Tartarus*). Indeed, Del Toro depicts the faun, that other resident of the other/under/inner world, in highly ambiguous imagery. He, like the soul, like Spain, is neither all good nor all bad. He is an archetypal presence, a hermetic psychopomp, who hands Ophelia a “Book of the Crossroads” as part of her three tests.

Together with her vertical/time-bound hourglass, this horizontal/spatial imagery makes up a cross upon which both she and Spain must suffer. Disobeying the faun’s instructions, Ophelia eats two grapes in the underworld. Like Persephone, who ate Hades’ pomegranate seeds, she becomes a resident of two worlds. She escapes the horror below, where the monster, like Kronos, would eat her. However, she must share the upper world of the Spanish *Calvary*, where, scolds her mother, magic doesn’t exist.

As she pursues her inner quest, the Republican rebels struggle against Vidal/Franco/Kronos. The horror of history and the symbolic fable merge on the question of sacrifice. To pass her final test, Ophelia must *participate in child sacrifice* and allow the faun to kill the infant. "The portal will only open," he says, "if we offer the blood of an innocent." The infant's mother has died and his father is the child-eater. Although Ophelia is actually his sister, she has become a mother figure, asked to hand her son-surrogate over to the faun. Unlike Abraham, however, her *refusal* to do so is evidence that she has passed the test; she has displayed individual initiative.

Immediately afterward, Vidal shoots her and fulfills the requirement of the death of an innocent. In dying to her old self, she steps into her new life. "Immortality," says Del Torro, "is the act of refusing . . . to give any importance to death . . . Only if you dare to die would you reach true immortality . . . The film is about a girl giving birth to herself" (2006).

In doing so, she reunites with her immortal/imaginal parents, takes on her original name (Princess Moanna), and claims her inheritance. The narrator concludes, "She reigned there with justice and a kind heart for many centuries . . ." She has left her dying physical body, blood dripping from her nose. This mirrors the opening scene and reminds us of the cyclic nature of myth.

Her personal initiation story, however, merges with a larger one that offers the possibility of breaking out of time: Both she and the Spanish resistance refuse to pass on the curse of Kronos/Franco to another generation. Vidal's death (which occurs as Ophelia's imaginal sacrifice saves the child) is a victory of the moon over the sun, the remote father god. About to be executed, Vidal gives the infant to the rebels and asks them to eventually tell the boy about him. *Their* refusal to do so implies a healing, for the child, for Spain, and for us, by breaking the generational curse. The child will live his

own life, and *Spain* will not (some day) exist as the child of patriarchy.

The rebel victory fulfills the prophecy that Kronos would be overthrown by one of his children. But it's also part of the *fable*, since, of course, this event never really happened. The movie's final scenes are pure fiction, as is Vidal. Franco was real.

Here, when I should be winding down toward the end of this review, I am drawn to ask some questions. Why did Del Torro, a Mexican, choose to set his mythic story in Spain, and at this point in time? Certainly, he had plenty of examples of fascist dictatorships from his own Latin America to pick from. And why does the tragedy of the Spanish Republic, after all these years, still break the hearts of progressive people in every nation on Earth?

A few of the 40,000 men and women from over fifty countries who volunteered to defend Spain in 1936 are still alive. And far more whom they mentored to become activists in the 1960s remain deeply committed to political and cultural re-creation of the world. Spain, like no other time or place in the twentieth century, was a *place of possibility*, where one could hear *The Internationale* sung in two-dozen languages. It was a place where people crossed borders, sacrificing themselves not for religion or for a political entity, but simply to make a better world.

And their failure continues to sting the imagination. For every person who was inspired to ignore the attractions of consumer lifestyles and keep working for change, there have been others who pointed to the ultimate futility of political action, who descended into cynicism or the ambiguous benefits of a strictly inner life.

For many, Spain remains a place of memory of what might have been. Like any war between brothers, including America's, the Spanish Civil War evokes the conflict between unreconciled parts of the psyche. And because it ended so long ago, *yet still within living memory*, it retains a mystique bordering on the mythic. Like any myth, it serves as a container for

our projections, whether they are innocently idealistic, cynically disengaged, inspired through lost innocence, or moved toward the detours of art and fable.

Most Spaniards would live in abject poverty and terror from 1939 until Franco's death in 1975. And yet, Ophelia's rebirth in the underworld of the imagination (where *Time stands still*) also predicts the rebirth of Spanish democracy. Until then, the soul and the soul of Spain would have to *kill time*.

For the boy, however, not knowing his real father or mother is another kind of curse, like that of Ouranos. Similarly, avoiding discussion of Franco's crimes denied history and prevented mourning and the possibility of closure, which official Spain did until quite recently (Tremlett 2008). But that is another part of the unending story, which like any authentic myth, is continually retold and reenacted in history.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Curiously, the name *Pan* doesn't occur at all in the film. Someone in marketing changed the title for English-language audiences from the original *El Laberinto del Fauno*.
2. A longtime scholarly confusion has existed regarding both the meaning and the spelling of *Kronos*, which is used by Guthrie (1955, 39–40), Burkert (1985, 231–233), Kerényi (1979, 20–25), Wender (1973, 27), and Gantz (1993, 10–11). Some prefer to spell it *Cronus* (Graves 1996, 44, [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/143926/Cronus](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/143926/Cronus)). Campbell (1964, 153, 345) uses both terms. Beginning in the Hellenistic period, many began to confuse Kronos/Cronus with *Chronos*, the personification of Time. To complicate things further, Kronos' Roman equivalent Saturn, who was originally a positive god of bountiful agricultural harvest, presided over the Golden Age according to Virgil. But through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the pagan Saturn became identified with devouring time and began to appear holding a sinister sickle or devouring a child, as he does in Goya's painting. This fascinating transformation is described by Erwin Panofsky in "Father Time," Chapter Three of his *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*.
3. Two of Del Toro's earlier films are *The Devil's Backbone*, which also takes place during the Spanish Civil War, and *Cronos*, which speculates about reversing the ravages of time.
4. As many of the Greek heroes had epithets such as "Son of Atreus," this son would be nothing more than "Son of Vidal."

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#### ABSTRACT

What makes *Pan's Labyrinth* a great film is that it tells a girl's individuation story through fable and the inner imagination in parallel to a horrific retelling of one of the most poignant memories of the twentieth century. The deeper background to both tales is the model of fathering that modern culture has received from both Greek and Hebrew myth. Each story supports the other, and eventually they merge.

#### KEY WORDS

Kronos, Franco, innocence, Jehovah, labyrinth, myth, Ouranos, Pan, sacrifice, Spain, Spanish Civil War, curse