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Parallelism *Pan*ned

Throughout Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth,* Ofelia uses her imagination and fairy tales to survive in the harsh reality of wartime Spain, as she finds herself in the midst of an army command post lead by a ruthless captain who happens to be her step-father. One is never sure whether Ofelia is actually experiencing these intense fairy tale happenings, and that the film visually representing them was just to give the fairy tales a contrast over top of the war-torn surroundings and wartime themes that Ofelia is forced to confront. It leaves one questioning whether the fairy tale elements of the film are even happening; are the events merely within Ofelia's head? Tracie Lukasiewicz mentions this in passing, but she does so in a rather erroneous way; "Pan's Labyrinth presents a realistic and violent story and parallels it to an equally dark and vicious fairy tale. The two run alongside one another but do not cross paths. The characters and places of each world exist separately, connected only through the character of Ofelia" (61). She calls the fairy tale and the wartime story as two parallel worlds, and as such they do not interact whatsoever but through Ofelia's character. In this paper I will argue that the two worlds she has defined are anything but parallel, and as a matter of course these two worlds are not two at all, but one singular world. There are several points in the film that prove that the world of fantastical creatures and the world of war-torn Spain are far too intrinsically connected to be considered parallel without giving a concrete answer as to whether the former events are happening or not. I will be examining the toad scene for its effect on Ofelia's spacial and ideological connections between both worlds that suggest that they are one and the same, the Pale Man scene for its suggestion of others who came before Ofelia in the form of murals and piles of shoes to offer a perception shift on how these worlds

are the same world, and finally Ofelia's death scene and the events that precede it, as well as its implications that there is no law set in stone and no evidence to suggest that these two worlds are separate. There is only one world present in the majority of *Pan's Labyrinth*, and while Ofelia seems as though she is the only thing connecting the war-torn Spanish story of rebellion and the fairy tale princess reuniting with her true parents story, in truth she is but one of many things connecting them.

We begin first with the toad scene. The scene begins with Ofelia walking into the woods, reading what appears to be a fairy tale from the book that the faun gave her earlier as part of her guidance. She walks through the woods while reading the book, and happens upon the fig tree that the fairy tale is describing. She takes off her fancy dress that her mother had made for her in order to keep it from getting ruined, and she crawls into the tree to meet with the toad, wherein she retrieves the key for the next part of the faun's plan. There are several things to unpack here that displace Lukasiewicz' idea that the universe of the war story and the universe of the fairy tale are parallel. First and foremost we have the idea of the dying fig tree existing as a short walk away from Captain Vidal's compound. This could be any dying fig tree, yet Ofelia is shown with the book's illustration as comparing the two, looking down at the page, and back up at the fig tree to confirm an eerie match of scenery and shape. Ofelia travels through physical space within the war-torn universe to reach a lighthouse of sorts of the fairy tale world. Ofelia travels through space within one world to get to a portion of another? How does this in any sort of manner make sense? Firstly, the two worlds are not different, this is the conclusion we must first address. The two worlds are in fact the same world. They are not parallel. Parallelism means that the two worlds would never meet, yet here Ofelia is, walking through one to get to the other. The key here is not only do the universes overlap at the physical level through just Ofelia, but in this scene they overlap at the theoretical level as well. At the same time Ofelia is shown entering the bowels of the tree to meet with the toad, Captain Vidal is shown at an abandoned rebel camp site,

confiscating antibiotics. Within Ofelia's fairy tale, the toad takes up residence in the fig tree and prevents it from thriving when before, it was a symbol for the good of the creatures of the forest at large. In both of these instances the film presents examples of Karl Marx's conflict theory.

The theoretical framework for both of these scenes is pretty clear but let's start with the toad's role in it. Marx states in his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,

> At a certain stage of their development the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed, and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. (363)

The toad's role in this theoretical framework is the higher power that eventually comes in and matures in the womb of the old society, wrenching that power from the people in a manner that seeks to glean all of the resources from that society that it possibly can while giving nothing at all away. Ofelia's role then would embody that inevitable revolution against such power, seeking to dethrone the higher power. As such, opposing parties are forever in conflict over resources. In this manner the so called fairy tale world is exactly the world of the war, wherein Captain Vidal and his men represent the higher power confiscating resources such as lottery tickets and antibiotics, while the rebellion seek to usurp that power, hence the name.

Because the toad and Captain Vidal operate under the same ideological mindset, the toad can be read as a symbolic representation of Captain Vidal himself, because while he is not the root of the problem here he is most certainly an enforcer of it. One can consider the

fig tree itself as an allegory for Franco-controlled Spain, and the toad that prevents it from thriving prevents the community that it once served from thriving. So if one is to continue reading this with a Marxist interpretation of conflict theory, Ofelia is once more the agent of rebellion that represents the rebels in the film. Thusly, this is why the toad scene and the Captain infiltrating the abandoned rebel camp scene are laid over each other in the way that they are: the fig tree itself is a microcosm of a dictator being overthrown by a rebellious force tasked with doing so, and as the film plays out the same events happen to Captain Vidal being removed and killed by the rebellion forces themselves. Even the key that Ofelia retrieves from the toad is represented in the allegory, for Mercedes relieves Captain Vidal of his son and promises that he will never know his father's deeds, or even his name. It is no small coincidence that these two events coincide at the same time, as not only do the two worlds meet and run in a coinciding fashion, they do so not only through the lens of Ofelia, but through a theoretical framework as well. The two worlds are not merely parallel, but are actively interacting with each other in a similar theoretical way. A point of interest is that Ofelia divests herself of her gown in order to enter the fig tree, the gown in and of itself a reference to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* as admitted by del Toro himself. In this manner, Ofelia removes the clothing that symbolizes her status, yet while she is covered in mud within the tree she introduces herself to the toad as Princess Moanna, another way in which Ofelia presents herself as a force of rebellion; a princess who is not afraid to get her hands dirty to do the job that must be done. “In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again,” (Carroll 2), and Ofelia does so without much hesitation on her part, re-emerging covered in mud and whatever else.

Staying on the topic of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the next scene we will look at is the events revolving around the before, during, and after of the Pale Man's lair and what each symbol represents. Specifically, the idea of food and the pratfalls that it represents; the faun strictly instructs Ofelia not to partake in any of the food that is laid before

the Pale Man, but does not specifically say why. Alice is presented with multiple food items that have written on them “Eat me!” or “Drink me!” which in pretty much every case including Alice's would be cause for suspicion in and of themselves. In the case of Ofelia, she is specifically told not to partake in any food, but something seems to come over her and she does so, and almost suffers the consequences depicted in the murals behind the Pale Man. The film is sure to foreground these and presents huge red flags to ensure that the viewer does so: What is important to note is the food that she chooses to eat: grapes. What is on the plate in front of the Pale Man? The most grape shaped body part imaginable: eyes. When eyes come into play in any sort of media, one immediately must consult Hoffmann's *The Sandman*;

> A thousand eyes stared and quivered, their gaze fixed upon Nathaniel; yet he could not look away from the table, where Coppola kept laying down still more and more spectacles, and all those flaming eyes leapt in wilder and wilder confusion, shooting their blood red light into Nathaniel's heart. (10)

Such is the point of *The Sandman*, a story that commands the reader to ask such questions like what is the perceived idea and who is the I or eye we are discussing? When eyes are foregrounded, the idea must be considered that our perception needs to be shifted from what is obvious to what is implied instead of what we were focused on before. This effect within the story of *The Sandman* is used to distract, and because of this precedence with eye imagery, one can see that this is the same case with the Pale Man.

In this case the eyes are the Pale Man's, and thus the perception we must take is in regards to him. The eyes are a symbol that calls attention to perception, this is true in any symbolic appearance of them. Because we are discussing the Pale Man's eyes, we must discuss the Pale Man himself, but what precisely about him? The movie foregrounds the murals behind the Pale Man before Ofelia goes to get the dagger out of the mailbox, and these murals consist of the Pale Man eating children, further foregrounded by the shot of the

pile of discarded children's shoes. What does this mean then? Why are all of these images foregrounded? Quite simply, to debunk the idea that the Pale Man does not exist in the same world that Ofelia comes from. These foregrounded symbols present an orgy of evidence that there are those that came before Ofelia, specifically victims to the Pale Man's hunger. He is locked within this chamber, but the murals present the idea that he once was not; someone must have locked him away in this chamber, someone human, who then crafted the murals behind the Pale Man to ensure anyone who discovers him will know how dangerous he is. Who it was does not matter, because the very idea that this person and the victims who came before Ofelia in meeting with the Pale Man debunk Lukasiewicz' parallel worlds idea with the fact that more than one person connect the two worlds, not just Ofelia. This is even further evidence that the two worlds are not only not parallel, but are in fact the exact same world.

In discussing this idea, one must also look at the way in which the Pale Man and Captain Vidal are both in essence the same character: violent, reactionary, and decadent. The fact that the Pale Man's eyes fit into place on his hands, and that the sockets are highly reminiscent of stigmata, imply a Christ-like image onto the Pale Man that implies a mirroring of ideological thinking. The Pale Man is Captain Vidal, just merely stripped of all humanity. In much the same way that the Pale Man preys upon children, the Captain himself preys upon children in other ways; upon coming face to face with Mercedes and the rest of the rebels he begs them to tell the child who he was, wherein Mercedes replies that the child will never even know his name. This is in much the same way as the Pale Man, for we as the audience do not even know if he has a name or not, hence why one can only call him the Pale Man. Had Captain Vidal lived, he would have been a monster to his son in much the same way that he was a monster in his daily life. In response to Ofelia stealing and running away with her brother, he chases after her in a blind rage, and is the one to end her life. Reactionary in much the same way as the Pale Man lurches after Ofelia after she eats a few of his precious grapes.

Speaking on the grapes, one can look at the Pale Man's entire lair as a reflection of the dining room of the house; a table laden with food with a tyrant at the head of the table, subdued for the moment but ready to kill on a moment's notice.

The stigmata and the eyes that go into it on the Pale Man's hands is particularly intriguing for it is intrinsically uncanny, as is the Pale Man himself. The Pale Man is reminiscent of human, but upon lifting his hands to his face in order to see, one is cast into the uncanny valley and is uncertain about what this creature's purpose is. The fairies serve as a demonstration, as he violently devours them in front of a horrified Ofelia. Sigmund Freud defines the uncanny as such:

> The subject of the 'uncanny' is a province of this kind. It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general. Yet we may expect that a sepcial core of felling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term. One is curious to know what this common core is which allows us to distinguish as 'uncanny' certain things which lie within the field of what is frightening. (619)

With this in mind, one can see another area in which the Pale Man and Captain Vidal cross paths, and that is in brutality. Ruthlessly violent and willing to stop at nothing in order to get what they desire, both can be seen as falling into the uncanny valley as somewhere between monster and human, for while both have human guises, the actions of both carry a monstrous idea between the two of them. The entire scene in which Captain Vidal explains his torture tools to a tied up rebel soldier with a speech impediment is something that is far beyond the realm of humanity, but what takes it into that level of uncanniness is the fact that the Captain offers to release the soldier if he can count to three without stammering. Quite clearly he knew that the soldier was never going to be able to do it, and thus he plays with his torture toy like a cat with a mouse in a decidedly nonhuman way. Similarly, when Vidal is running

through his tools with Mercedes tied up, he does so in precisely the same mechanical and nonhuman way that he does with his previous victim, with the exception being that Mercedes manages to escape and cut open his mouth in the process. The visual of Captain Vidal screaming after Mercedes as his cheek is cut open is highly reminiscent of the Pale Man screaming after a fleeing Ofelia, with mouths in the same sort of gilled, wide, and bloody state. It can be argued that Vidal himself is just as monstrous as anyone that Ofelia encounters within her fairy tales, and thus perhaps all of the most monstrous beasts can be seen as reflections of Vidal himself, further tying the two worlds intrinsically together into one.

Finally, one must consider how Ofelia gets into the Pale Man's lair and how she escapes from it; chalk that opens and closes portals between long distances. Upon the door closing on the encroaching Pale Man when Ofelia climbs back into her room, shutting it behind her, the Pale Man throws himself against it with a loud bang, despite the portal being sealed shut. The two worlds in this case are much closer than one could imagine, because the Pale Man should not have been able to create such a loud bang if the two worlds were truly closed off by the portal itself. It leads me to believe that the Pale Man's lair lies somewhere underground within the labyrinth itself, and that perhaps the labyrinth extends as far as the Captain's base. Perhaps instead of traversing worlds, the chalk portals are only meant traverse vast physical spaces instead of temporal. The point of proof one must consider here is how Ofelia escapes her room upon the rebel attack on the base itself; the very same chalk outline is present on the wall as Mercedes and the rebels burst into her room to rescue her, but she is nowhere to be found. The two worlds then are precisely the same, for if the chalk circle served to put her somewhere into the fairy tale world, it would have done so. The fact that the chalk is her primary means of travel through the world implies that there is only one world, and that these portals are meant for travelling through physical spaces rather than fleeting, fairy tale ones.

The largest example of doubt in Lukasiewicz' parallel idea occurs during the

final act of the film, where Ofelia refuses to give up her baby brother to the faun in order to spill his innocent blood to complete the ritual. One sees the scene as she enters the middle of the labyrinth to find the faun there, waiting with the knife she had acquired from the Pale Man's lair, and the camera shifts back and forth between her and the faun in rapid succession during their conversation. As Ofelia refuses to give her brother to the faun, Captain Vidal finds her within the labyrinth. The camera shifts to his perspective, and where the faun was standing from Ofelia's perspective, there is absolutely nothing. She looks like she's cowering at nothing from his perspective, as the faun simply does not exist to him. This small change of camera throws Ofelia's perspective entirely into doubt as to whether any of the fantastical events prior in the story actually took place in reality, and its masterfully done expository function proceeds to throw the entire story into doubt as one cannot help but question Ofelia's reliability as a character. Is Ofelia even experiencing the fairy tale world at all, or is their representation in the film just a part of the film to make it more interesting instead of watching a kid play in the mud? For the sake of argument, let's assume that Ofelia is experiencing the fairy tale world and that it does in fact exist within the film, as doing anything otherwise is a crime against the special effects department for the film. That camera shift however is one that can be obsessed over, as it can be seen as an intersection of both of these worlds, despite the fact that the Captain cannot see the faun; they are both in the same space at the same time. Ofelia was drawn into the labyrinth to seek out the faun, and this occurs in both worlds of the film. Thusly, to suggest that both worlds operate entirely parallel to each other is just not true. One has to look no further than Ofelia's dying vision of her "real" mother and father sitting atop their thrones in a room of gold, welcoming her to her "real" home, while her body in the "real" world bleeds out in Mercedes' arms. Because of that perspective changing camera shift, we simply do not know if the former is actually happening or not, or if it's a hallucination brought upon by Ofelia's brain in the moments before her death. In this way, the two worlds intersect by having Ofelia exist in both at once,

as both death and rebirth occur at the same time. Julio Cortazar's short story *Blow Up* revolves around this idea of these images capturing a moment in time in which nothing can be changed yet everything can be changed: “He began to walk toward us, carrying in his hand the paper he had been pretending to read. What I remember best is the grimace that twisted his mouth askew, it covered his face with wrinkles, changed somewhat both in location and shape because his lips trembled and the grimace went from one side of his mouth to the other as thought it were on wheels, independent and involuntary” (125).

Roland Barthes discusses this sort of duality in photography within *Camera Lucida*, and as film is a type of photography, his theory of the studium and punctum of photography applies to this scene quite well. The studium acts as the status quo or base of the photograph, and something breaking it is the punctum respectively (Barthes 26). In order to examine this scene in this lens, one must begin with determining the studium in this scene. However, herein lies the genius behind the camera shift and this scene; because of Ofelia dying in Mercedes’ arms as one “reality,” and the glorious sun and gold filled room of Ofelia’s “real” parents as another, the studium and punctum become almost reversed. What one would assume is the studium in the real world and the punctum in the fairy tale world, appear to be the opposite, as the image of Ofelia’s body draining of life gives stark punctuation to the joy-filled, smiling face of Ofelia in front of her parents. But just because they appear to be reversed, this does not necessarily mean that they are reversed. The sunbeam-kissed Ofelia’s joyful grin acts as an equally poignant punctum to her pale, blood-less face of the war-torn “real” world’s studium. So how can one approach this in a manner that makes sense? This scene, and indeed this entire film, acts as a prism, in that depending on how one looks at it, the fairy tale world becomes more realistic with higher stakes at times than the “real” world, and vice versa. Such is the point of Barthes’ theory of camera lucida: “I cannot penetrate, cannot reach into the Photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface. The Photograph is flat, platitudinous in the true sense of the word” (106). The studium and

punctum are so blurred together in this scene that the line, if one ever existed, between the worlds becomes nonexistant. However this is totally irrational and impossible, as in one world Ofelia is dead, and in the other, Ofelia is alive. In one world the faun is present in the labyrinth's clearing while occupying a physical space and conversing with Ofelia, and in the other he is not. How is it possible and yet impossible at the same time?

The answer lies with Erwin Schrödinger's Theory of Superposition, or more commonly known as the famous Schrödinger's Cat dilemma. To summarize it briefly, if one were to put a cat into a box along with a radioactive element that, through a Rube Goldberg system, would poison the cat and kill it if an atom of the element decays, one would not be sure whether the cat is alive or dead until one opens the box and directly observes it. In Schrödinger's psi-function, in order to account for this uncertainty, the cat must be considered both alive and dead at the same time; an atomic superposition on a macroscopic scale:

> It is typical of these cases that an indeterminacy originally restricted to the atomic domain becomes transformed into macroscopic indeterminacy, which can then be resolved by direct observation. [...] In itself, it would not embody anything unclear or contradictory. There is a difference between a shaky or out-of-focus photograph and a snapshot of clouds and fog banks. (157)

The genius of the camera shift and showing Ofelia both dead and alive is to break the rule of Schrödinger's theory wherein this indeterminacy of superposition is resolved: direct observation. One is seeing and observing Ofelia's death and also continued life superimposed upon each other to create a cognitive dissonance. In both cases, Ofelia's fate is revealed and one can imagine they would be permanent paths going forward. But the fact that in one frame Ofelia is dying and in the next frame she is smiling and happy does not necessarily mean that both cannot be happening at once. As Schrödinger claims in his Dublin lectures, these different histories are not impossible to be juxtaposed in this manner, for they are "not alternatives but all really happen simultaneously" (310). This has massive implications, for

we see this moment of superpositioned life and death on top of each other, resolving itself into two different timelines that split off from each other in opposing directions; in one world, Ofelia is dead, and in the other Ofelia survives and thrives. Ultimately this is what debunks Lukasiewicz' idea of these two worlds being parallel and only connected through Ofelia: just because Ofelia ceases to exist, both worlds do not stop. As a matter of fact, upon Ofelia's death, the fairy tale world splits completely off into its own timeline wherein Ofelia is alive and well, with her true parents and the faun, her purpose in the war-torn world of revolutionary Spain fulfilled. To suggest that that world and the fairy tale world are parallel then is a total misnomer, for if they were truly parallel, both worlds would have ended upon the death of Ofelia. Clearly this is not the case, as Mercedes and Ofelia's baby brother survive to see the death of Captain Vidal at the end of the film, and Ofelia faces her true parents smiling and laughing as the sunlight catches her hair.

So what does this all mean then? Which reality is the real reality in this film, and is there even a difference between the two? Is there any sort of separation at all? Again, Lukasiewicz argues that these two worlds and the characters that are involved in them both are totally separate, connected only through the character of Ofelia. However as I have discussed, this is not possible. I would hazard a guess that Lukasiewicz has taken Jacques Derrida at his word, once more erroneously: “Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres. I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them” (202). Because we have two genres at work in this film, the war film and the fairy tale, Lukasiewicz is operating under the assumption that because they are dealing with different subject matters and characters individually, that they are not connected at all, whatsoever. Of course if we once again turn to Derrida, we get a clearer picture on what del Toro's film is attempting to do:

> The law is mad. The law is mad, is madness; but madness is not the predicate of law. There is no madness without the law; madness cannot be conceived before its relation to law. Madness is law, the law is a madness[...]This is not an example of a general or

> generic whole. The whole, which begins by finishing and never finishes beginning apart for itself, the whole that stays at the edgeless boundary of itself, the whole greater and less than a whole and nothing[...]with regard to the whole, it will have been wholly counter-exemplary" (228).

The law of genre then is that there is no law. There is no law that says that these two genres cannot be mixed. There is no evidence to suggest that these two genres are not mixed, because in multiple instances within the film, the genres mix. As a matter of course, the only point where the genres actively stop mixing then is when Ofelia dies in the war-torn genre, but lives on in the fairy tale.

Attempting to piece together what is real and what is not within Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* is akin to being the main character of Julio Cortazar's short story *Blow Up*: in the end, if one spends too much time attempting to discern reality from reality and fiction from fiction, as well as reality from fiction and fiction from reality, one finds themselves consumed in the end by the possibilities. However, upon this examination, it cannot be denied that what Tracie Lukasiewicz defined as "a realistic and violent story and parallels it to an equally dark and vicious fairy tale. The two run alongside one another but do not cross paths. The characters and places of each world exist separately, connected only through the character of Ofelia" (61) is a misnomer because of the idea that the worlds are parallel. As a matter of course, the two worlds are in fact only one world; both the war-torn Spain rebellion tale and the fairy tale of a girl in search of her true parents take place in the same realm, with more than just Ofelia to connect them. Within the toad scene, physical space is traversed to get to the fig tree the toad resides in, implying their existence within the same plane of existence, as well as the same ideological frameworks placing them on the same ideological plane of existence. The Pale Man scene offers suggestions of those who came before Ofelia and implies that the Pale Man has been sealed away by a third party, solidly connecting both worlds as one solitary world. The labyrinth's physical presence and Captain Vidal's presence

within it connect the worlds solidly once more, and in fact the only time when the worlds truly split apart is upon Ofelia's death. As she lies bleeding out in Mercedes' arms, she is alive and well with her true parents in a throne room of gold and sunlight. While one can question whether the latter is even happening or if it is just a hallucination, the fact remains that the worlds that Lukasiewicz describes as parallel are anything but. This fact dawns upon one like the man in the picture at the end of Cortazar's *Blow Up;* a fact that cannot be denied or turned away: “he lifted his hands slowly, bringing them into the foreground, an instant still in perfect focus, and then all of him a lump that blotted out the island” (131).

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