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"...And She Died Happily Ever After: Fantasy and the Real in *El laberinto del fauno*."

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**"...AND SHE DIED HAPPILY EVER AFTER:
Fantasy and the Real in *El laberinto del fauno*."**

As Ofelia, the fanciful young protagonist of *El laberinto del fauno*, lay dying atop the cold stone circumference of the stairway at the heart of the faun's labyrinth, a trickle of dark red blood runs up her cheek, along the top of her lip, and back into her nose. "A long time ago," begins the narrator, "in the underground realm, where there are no lies or pain, there lived a princess (Moanna) who dreamt of the human world." The camera spirals, and tracks in toward the blackness of her eye, dissolving into a long shot of the stone castles and towers of her father's kingdom, sculpted into the vast mountainside of a deep blue canyon. The narrator continues, telling of Moanna's escape from the underground realm into the human world, where, "Once outside, the bright sun blinded her, and erased her memory." The camera tilts up, following Moanna as she makes her way up the circular staircase towards a bright white light that washes over the *mise-en-scène*, signaling her passage into in the realm of humanity, where she "suffered cold, sickness, and pain," and eventually death. This sequence mirrors that of the classic shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, when a close-up of water swirling down the drain is dissolved into a close-up of Marion's lifeless eye, the camera spiraling outward from it, just after she is viciously stabbed to death by Mother/Norman. In much the same way that this sequence illustrates Marion's life draining away, and Robin Wood's reading that the film pushes the boundaries of horror by forcing the spectator to realize "the potentialities for horror that lie in the depths of us all," the juxtaposition of Ofelia's eye with the circle of white light enveloping Moanna signals their

connection through death, and that their experience will come to subvert what one traditionally expects when engaging with a fairy tale (Wood, 149).

When one thinks of a fairy tale it is common to imagine a kind of discourse where a storyteller depicts a lengthy narrative, set in a far away realm, to a listener who, while acknowledging it as being set apart from reality in a literal sense, nonetheless understands it to be closely involved with reality in a moral or ethical sense. This is often a world where princes fight for the love of princesses, magic and mysteries abound, monsters and creatures threaten humanity, and upon completing the story one simply retreats to the reality of everyday life, satisfied with his/her fantastic escape. Many of these conventions that denote the classic fairy tale can be observed in *El laberinto del fauno*, though the film also employs numerous self-conscious references to popular cinema and fairy tale adventures. These narrative and stylistic elements call attention to the film's artificiality, and it is during its climactic moments that their subversive power is most forcefully felt. Dying from the Captain's gunshot, Ofelia drifts in and out of consciousness. This state of oscillation in most filmic circumstances can certainly be read as her "passing away," but instead, the film positions it as Moanna's "awakening", into what Jacques Lacan describes as the "fantasy of reality" (Felluga, 4). This is the realm of the symbolic order, entwined with the imaginary, which functions to mask the intrusion of the traumatic Real. Through its reflexive strategies, and its staging of Lacan's triad of the Real/Imaginary/Symbolic, *El laberinto del fauno* functions to subvert the traditional fairy tale narrative, its central project an investigation of the bleakness of humanity, the construction of reality, and the fantasies that serve as a screen separating the two.

The juxtaposition of the standard fairy tale opening (A long time ago...) with the reflexive shot of blood running backwards into Ofelia's nose is an early signifier that the film will seek to subvert fairy tale conventions. The first words of the film are the narrator's, telling of Princess Moanna's dream of the human world. Escaping her father's kingdom, which is represented as ideal in its vivid color and majesty, Moanna loses herself in the

traumatic realm of humanity, where she passes away and is reborn as Ofelia. One typically engages with a fairy tale as an escape from everyday life, into a world where evil perishes, and the good live happily ever after. *El laberinto del fauno* instead tells the story of a princess who escapes her idyllic world, suffers the cruelties of humanity, and must ultimately die so that she may return to the justice and kindness of her father's kingdom. In addition to the film's narrative twists, its visual style employs many reflexive nods to classic and obscure fairy tales. Ofelia's Victorian-style dress with pinafore is a green version of Alice's iconic garment from *Alice in Wonderland*, and the image of her entering the toad's tree, and walking down the spiral staircase in the faun's labyrinth echoes that of Alice's trip tumbling down the rabbit hole. Before crawling into the toad's tree, she reads from the Book of Crossroads that a monstrous toad has settled in its roots, causing its trunk to twist with age, and its branches to wither and die. This detail mirrors that of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale called *The Devil With the Three Golden Hairs*, in which the protagonist encounters a dried-up well in a village with a toad underneath, refusing its flow of water, and a tree that will not bear fruit or leaves because of a mouse gnawing at its roots. Moanna's ruby red slippers at the end of the film are an obvious reference to Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and the red coat she is wearing conjures images of the famous protagonist of *Little Red Riding Hood*. The film also draws a parallel between the rebels who save Ofelia's little brother during the climactic moments (after she is shot by Vidal), and the lumberjack in Perrault's famous story who saves Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother shortly after they are eaten by the wolf. Throughout all of this, Ofelia defies traditional representations of women in popular storytelling. Classical films and fairy tales function to reinforce patriarchal notions of gender, as evidenced by countless narratives that position an active, heroic male protagonist who must venture out into the world and save a passive, female damsel in distress. This is not the case in *El laberinto del fauno*. Ofelia is an active heroine, who sets out on her own to achieve her goal. Along the way, her agency pushes the narrative forward, she challenges patriarchal authority time and again and is rewarded for it, and she defies gender stereotypes when

dirtying her dress, solving the mysteries of the three tasks, and eluding harm in dangerous situations. These subversive character traits and reflexive references to familiar fairy tales are not the typical “versions of alienation” (intrusions of the Real which disrupt the fantasy), as Slavoj Žižek writes, but rather, they jar the spectator from a confrontation with the Real, where he/she returns to the fantasy of reality (Žižek, 2006, 59).

In “How To Read Lacan,” Žižek offers a reading of the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and in so doing, illuminates his perspective on reality:

“What we experience as ‘reality’ is structured by fantasy, and if fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real, then reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real” (Žižek, 2006, 57).

For Lacan, the triad of the Real/Imaginary/Symbolic constitutes the reality of the subject. The Real is a natural state, in which there is nothing but need, “from which [the subject] has been forever severed by [his/her] entrance into language” (Felluga, 2). It is a state to which one can never return, though Lacan argues that the Real “continues to erupt whenever we are made to acknowledge the materiality of our existence, an acknowledgement that is usually perceived as traumatic” (ibid, 2). During the imaginary stage, the child has an illusory notion of unity with the mother. Upon seeing itself in the mirror for the first time, the child recognizes that it is separate from the mother, and thus feels the anxiety of “something lost” (ibid, 2). The imaginary then becomes the narcissistic image of the subject’s ideal, whole self. Lacan notes that this ideal self, however, “is a fantasy that the child sets up in order to compensate for its sense of lack or loss,” and can be aligned with the formation of the ideal ego (ibid, 2). Žižek further explains Lacan’s position that, “in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality: it is...the support that gives consistency to what we call ‘reality’” (Žižek, 1989, 44). The symbolic order situates the subject in language, where he/she is able to interact with and deal with others. When the child enters into language, he/she accepts the “Name-of-the-Father,” which structures the

rules of communication, and the laws that control desire (Felluga, 2). According to Lacan, the imaginary and the symbolic are “inextricably intertwined, and work in tension with the Real” (ibid, 2). In *El laberinto del fauno*, the triad of the Real, the imaginary, and the symbolic are represented by the dream of the human realm (the Real), Ofelia’s fantasies (the imaginary), and the reality of Moanna’s father’s kingdom (the symbolic).

Throughout the film Ofelia must endure the bleakness of the human realm, which is written in the cold, bluish-grey tones of the cinematography, and the tattered clothing, worn-down buildings, and desolate forest landscapes that compose the *mise-en-scène*. The film’s secondary plot line, which follows a group of rebel soldiers resisting Franco’s rise to power in post-Civil War Spain, depicts the hopelessness of the characters, as do the many gunfights and killings that take place. The human cruelty on display in these scenes is often perpetrated by Ofelia’s stepfather Captain Vidal, who throughout the film murders a farmer and his son, taunts and tortures a rebel prisoner, and shoots an unarmed Dr. Ferreiro in the back. Zizek writes that, “it is in dreams that we encounter the traumatic Real,” and because Princess Moanna “dreamt of the human world,” this realm in the film functions as a visual representation of the raw Real; as that which is “traumatic in its breath-taking intensity, something impossible in the sense that we cannot ever make sense of it” (Zizek, 2006, 49).

Ofelia’s mother Carmen tells her on several occasions that she’s too old to be reading fairy tales, though it is clear that her knowledge of them serve as the basis for her fantasies, which constitute the realm of the imaginary in the film. When Ofelia meets the faun for the first time in his labyrinth, he gives her the Book of Crossroads, and tells her, “Open it, when you are alone, and it will show you your future.” He then informs her of the three tasks she needs to complete, “before the moon is full,” to test if her essence is intact and that she has not become mortal. The pages of the book are blank when Ofelia first opens it, though later, when she’s alone in the bathroom preparing for the Captain’s dinner party, the pages come alive with words and images. The book is Ofelia’s space to express her desires; the screen onto which she projects her fantasies, which she attempts to enact through performing the

three tasks. In the first task, Ofelia succeeds in tricking the toad beneath the old tree, though it is at the expense of the beautiful green dress that her mother has made for her. She and the dress get covered in mud, and Carmen scolds her for missing the dinner party, sending her to bed without supper. The Book of Crossroads explicitly warns Ofelia not to “eat or drink anything” when completing the second task, however, upon retrieving the knife from the Pale Man’s lair, she eats a grape from the banquet table, which wakes the creature from his dormancy. After snatching two of the faun’s fairies from the air and biting their heads off, the Pale Man lumbers after Ofelia, his gaunt frame atop two spindly legs, and she manages to narrowly evade his clutches. The faun similarly scolds her when he hears of the accident, telling her, “Your spirit shall forever remain among the humans.” During the third and final task, Ofelia refuses to hand her baby brother over to the faun, instead choosing to give up her sacred rights, and Captain Vidal shoots her in the stomach, leaving her bleeding in the labyrinth. In each of these fantasies, the experience is lacking (the dress is ruined), things veer horribly from the plan (the Pale Man’s attack), or something traumatic interrupts it (Vidal shoots her). Sigmund Freud writes that “if what [subjects] long for most intensely in their phantasies is presented to them in reality, they none the less flee from it” (Freud, 151). This is precisely the reason that whenever Ofelia attempts to act out the scenarios she projects into the book, they never fully materialize. Her fantasies are unsuccessful attempts at screening the overwhelming trauma of her experience of the raw Real, and they fail because, as Žižek writes, “the core of our fantasy is unbearable to us” (Žižek, 2006, 56).

Princess Moanna’s dream comes to an end when she awakens into reality, signaling her return to the realm of the symbolic. This idealized reality is the place from which she has escaped during the film’s open (fallen asleep), and the place to which she returns upon its conclusion (her awakening). The first thing Moanna sees when she revives is her father, sitting high on his throne. Freud writes that, “The human action *par excellence* is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts” (Lacan,

230). The symbolic is the domain of the father, structured by signifiers and language, and it is only when her father beckons her to “Arise my daughter,” that it is possible for Moanna to wake up, properly situated in the symbolic order.

Bathed in the soothing orange light of her father’s kingdom, Moanna stands before her parents, dressed in Riding Hood’s familiar red coat, and wearing Dorothy’s ruby red slippers. Žižek observes that in many contemporary texts, one encounters reflexive strategies that are commonly read as “brutal attempts to ‘return to the Real’, to remind the spectator (or reader) that he is perceiving a fiction, to awaken him from the sweet dream” (Žižek, 2006, 58). In this scenario, the interjection of the Real cues the spectator to acknowledge that the purported “fantasy” of the stage/film/novel, etc., is nothing more than a construct. He goes on to argue that conversely, the Lacanian interpretation of these distancing strategies posits that they function as “desperate attempts to avoid the Real of the illusion itself, the Real that emerges in the guise of an illusory spectacle” (Žižek, 2006, 59). The Real does not interrupt the text, the text itself is an eruption of the Real. This is what *El laberinto del fauno* makes clear in its final moments. The film does not stage its reflexive elements as encounters with the Real (severing one’s engagement with the film), the film *itself* is a confrontation with the Real, its reflexive strategies escalating to the point where we are granted reprieve from its properly traumatic character. This sentiment is echoed throughout Moanna’s journey, where she is thrust into an encounter with the Real (the horrors of humanity), from which she attempts to escape (through her failed fantasies), and ultimately emerges back into reality (reflexively adorned with the coat and slippers). The film further subverts the conventional experience of escaping into a fairy tale as a fantastic departure from one’s everyday reality. Instead of a narrative that comfortably whisks the spectator away into an ideal world that is temporarily threatened (only to emerge “happily ever after”), *El laberinto del fauno* situates the spectator in the realm of the Real, beset by trauma, where its protagonist has escaped her ideal world, her fantasies ultimately fail, and she dies happily ever after so that she can return to reality. Žižek writes that, “it is not that

dreams are for those who cannot endure reality, reality itself is for those who cannot endure (the Real that announces itself in) their dreams (Zizek, 2006, 57). As an unconventional fairy tale, *El laberinto del fauno* it is not an escape from reality. Reality is the spectator's respite from a confrontation with the Real, which comes to light while immersed in the dream of the film.

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