

# With Spain in our Hearts: The Political Fantastic of Guillermo Del Toro's *Laberinto del fauno* (2006) and *El espinazo del diablo* (2001)

**Christopher Hartney**

## Introduction

For a foreign language film, *Laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth* 2006 – hereafter *Laberinto*) garnered wide release in anglophone cinemas and its fame spread rapidly due in no small part to the director's masterful control of his medium, but also because of the unusual link in this film between political history and mythic fantasy. In the few years since its release *Laberinto* has made it onto some outstanding lists as one of the great films of recent times.<sup>1</sup> The Mexican cineaste Guillermo del Toro presented an apparent historical recreation – in this case the end time of the Spanish Civil War – as an event intermeshed deeply with fantastical tropes that called into question the mythology of history and the historical potentiality of the fantastic.<sup>2</sup> In *Laberinto* the general collective memory of the Spanish Civil War serves as a vitally important axis of nostalgia for del Toro and operates as the predominant chronological backbone to the film. Here I suggest that examination of *Laberinto* cannot be complete without ongoing reference to a parallel spine: the director's *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*, 2001 – hereafter *Espinazo*) which uses the Civil War as the backdrop to a ghost story with pungent Gothic overtones. The two films are strongly complementary. *Espinazo* is set in Spain 1937 during the developing period of the Spanish Civil

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. film critic Roger Ebert added the film to his top 100 list and wrote that the film is "...one of the greatest of all fantasy films, even though it is anchored so firmly in the reality of war." Roger Ebert, 'Great Movies', *rogerebert.com*, at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/greatmovies>. Accessed 10/12/09. As of December 2009 *Laberinto* also features as number 69 on the popular Internet Movie Database (imdb) list of 250 of the greatest films. See Anon., 'IMDb Top 250', *IMDb.com*, at <http://www.imdb.com/chart/top>. Accessed 10/12/09.

<sup>2</sup> I have made a more complete examination of the fantastical and mythological contents of this film with my colleague Sarah Penicka-Smith. See Christopher Hartney and Sarah Penicka-Smith, 'The Fantasy of History and High Art: del Toro's *El Laberinto del Fauno*', *Mentalities/Mentalités*, vol 23, no 1 (2009), pp. 7-27.

War and *Laberinto* in 1944 in what is clearly an end-time of Spanish hostilities. And on the director's commentary on the DVD to *Laberinto*, del Toro calls his latest film a spiritual sequel to *Espinazo*, and there are many practical similarities such as the fact that both films feature the actor Frederico Lupi as grandfatherly narrator figure. Additionally, in both films del Toro is attempting to use the fantastic to say something profound about the most significant rupture in the recent history of the hispanophone world, a Civil War that deeply affected not only Spain, but also her former colonies and more generally the world. Thus it would seem that the place of the colonial peripheries of Spain, such as Mexico (del Toro's homeland), become significant places of commentary on this central tragedy that removed Spain from developments in modern Europe for forty years. In conclusion I hope to use both films to further deepen an understanding of the place of both politics and fantasy in our overall collective mythic and historical memories, and track how del Toro continued to expand its cultural potential.

### **Within and Beyond the Political.**

The political, historical, mythic and religious all touch on a social continuum that is sometimes hard to precisely categorise. I make this statement in light of my ongoing studies of the religious life of Vietnam where the political and the religious are sometimes impossible to separate.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that commentators on the Western scene also determine that this separation is a significant problem, some going so far as Timothy Fitzgerald, who suggests that 'religion' is a category that enables academics in the West to isolate the religious from the political, and that this serves the ultimate purposes of an Enlightenment-founded social understanding of religion.

As a consequence of the reification of religion, most religious studies scholars and many historians, anthropologists and other specialists, assume and write as though religion and the state have always been two different domains of human endeavour, having some problematic but external relationship.<sup>4</sup>

In like vein, but from a political perspective, Marcel Gauchet claims that throughout the twentieth century we have become increasingly focused on the state as the location of our ultimate concerns. He suggests that we have become democrats but in a deeply metaphysical way.<sup>5</sup> I suggest here that del Toro's

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<sup>3</sup> See, Christopher Hartney, 'Colonial Disjuncture: Aspects of the Modern Religious Life of Vietnam', *Threskeiologia (The Greek Journal of Comparative Religion)*, vol. 6/7, no 1 (2005), pp. 78-111.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 11.

ability to meld recent Spanish history with mythic and ghostly dimensions provides us with a cinematic experience where the meeting of these two categories proves immensely satisfying because the director admits to a fact of modern life: that our comprehension of state, nation, history and myth is already solidly bound in our processes of thinking about the world. It is fascinating that between *Espinazo's* release in 2001 and *Laberinto's* appearance in 2006, European intellectuals entered into a forceful debate about the very matters of the historical, religious, political and mythic legacy of Europe. When former French president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was charged with heading a constitutional convention for the establishment of a European constitution, the project came to a halt several times, mainly over the issue of religion and the state. As Paparella notes,

As it happened, the acrimonies continued till the last minute before the planned signing. The secularist liberal politicians would not compromise on this issue reasoning that a strict separation of Church and State had to be honoured thus insuring "laïcité," or secularism. This, in turn, insured that each individual's civil rights, including the right to worship and practice the religion of his/her choice, or not to practice any religion at all, were honoured. Paradoxically, they were asking that people be anti-clerical in order to protect Christianity from itself. The ghost of the Inquisition and past religious wars was duly resurrected, never mind the more glaring failed experiment of the Soviet Union, a State without religion, underpinned by a political ideology called Marxism with all the trappings of a secular ideological fundamentalism, not to speak of Nazism.<sup>6</sup>

The debate swung violently over the contribution religion had made to the rise of Europe and also the part it played in the retardation of a civil society. It was in fact a debate that focused on fractures in the collective memory of what Europe meant to the religious and the secularists alike. It is this battle of memory over a very similar field that, as I will show, adds deeper dimensions to del Toro's film making.

### **España en el corazon [With Spain in Our Hearts]**

The title for this article is taken from Pablo Neruda's 1936 work, written whilst the poet was the Chilean consul in Madrid. Events around this book highlight many of the themes I wish to address below.<sup>7</sup> This collection of politically charged verse was written to imaginatively record and counter the trauma

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<sup>6</sup> Emanuel L. Paparella, 'The EU Constitution: The Cart before the Horse?', *The Global Spiral* (July 3, 2008) published online 3 September 2008, <http://www.metanexus.net/magazine/tabid/68/id/10574/Default.aspx>. Accessed 10/12/09.

<sup>7</sup> Pablo Neruda, *España en el Corazon* (Madrid: Floricanto Press, 1992).

Neruda, Spain and the wider world were experiencing during the development of the Spanish Civil War (from July 1936 to 1939 and beyond in small pockets of resistance) and its accompanying brutalities. Neruda's edition was printed and reprinted by soldiers fighting at the front, and is but one example of a South or Central American auteur creating culture to deal with the collapse of a dream state. To some extent *España en el corazon* reminds us of an abiding ideal of what the polity of Spain should have become, and, because of the Civil War did not; a nation moving away from its feudal/monarchical and overly Catholic past to something else. This 'other' Spain was not realised until the mid 1970s after the death of the Falangist dictator Francisco Franco Bahamonde in November 1975. Nevertheless, the dream of a modern Spain was so potent it germinated in waiting, and had its part to play in moderating, argues Aguilar the eventual transformation of the fascist state into the modern nation,

In spite of all the uncertainties that surrounded the slow transformation of the Franco régime, there were many, both inside Spain and abroad, who appeared to forecast, if not the process which was to be followed, at least its final goal: inorganic plural democracy, featuring political parties and parliamentary representation.<sup>8</sup>

At a more personal level, Neruda's book was also reaction to the murder of his friend and fellow poet Federico Garcia Lorca on 19 August 1936. His fellow poet was one of the more outstanding desaparecidos, or disappeared, of the Civil War.<sup>9</sup> This dimension of Neruda's collection reminds us that the greater ideal of what Spain might become was and still is attended by issues of personal tragedy and an ongoing quest for justice, restitution or simply recognition for those who suffered. Presently, the more conservative attitude in Spain argues for leaving the past undisturbed; some argue that fascism saved Spain from decades of communist or anarchist chaos. Others, however, including many on the Left, continue to seek some kind of reparation, whether ritualistic in the way of an apology, or compensatory.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Paloma Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia: The Role of the Spanish Civil War in the Transition to Democracy*, trans. Mark Oakley (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002) pp. 149-150.

<sup>9</sup> See Ian Gibson, *The Assassination of Garcia Lorca* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) and Leslie Stainton, *Lorca: A Dream of Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Spain never experienced the sort of national catharsis that South Africa did after apartheid with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (one might argue that the military coup against King Juan Carlos in 1981 and its speedy suppression confirmed that Falangism/Fascism was dead as a governmental option in Spain) but no systematic attempt to trace human rights abuses, injustices or unearth evidence against Fascist office holders took place. Interestingly moves to make restitution for events during the war have arisen in

This struggle over memory, remembrance and nationhood is embodied in issues such as that which raged over the opening of the mass grave thought to contain Lorca's body. For a significant time his family were against such a move, yet seventy-three years after his death, the opening of the grave revived debates over collective memories of the Civil War in Spain.

For years an "out of sight, out of mind" attitude has prevailed in Spain towards the 120,000 Republican sympathisers killed. Lorca's alleged grave is only being dug up after the justice department of the regional government of Andalucia intervened.<sup>11</sup>

Thus even with these two examples we can clearly see that del Toro enters a controversial arena of collective memory, wilful forgetting, and the ideals of nationhood, all of which are pitted against the tragic realities of a brutal dictatorship that morphed into an oppressive military regime. The ingredients of this national struggle are not only the stuff of history, but also myth. The Civil War already places us well within a significant ghost-scape of dead soldiers on both sides with a accompanying army of Republican martyrs both civilian and revolutionary. Nevertheless, it will serve my purposes to briefly remind the reader of the incredible force the Civil War had on the imaginations of thinkers and activists far beyond the hispanophone world.

The European Left in general rallied behind and sometimes volunteered for the international brigades that sought to preserve the Spanish Republic during the Civil War. Del Toro, in the director's commentary to the DVD of *Espinazo* takes an enthusiast's delight in explaining that volunteers for the international brigades came from as far away as China, and indeed briefly in one scene, Chinese soldiers can be seen in the background of the action. As a Briton, George Orwell's experiences as a volunteer in the war, recounted in his *Homage to Catalonia*, highlight the internecine strife suffered by the left in Spain from 1936. The crippling in-fighting that helped neuter the Second Spanish Republic was stirred mainly by Stalinist operatives seeking the destruction of all left-wing forces unaligned with Moscow.<sup>12</sup> Orwell's account remained in doubt until substantial files discovered in Moscow, and unearthed

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some unexpected places. The German Greens sought to compensate the citizens of the Spanish town of Guernica for German participation in the aerial bombing of their town by German/Nazi planes supporting Franco and introduced legislation to this effect into the Federal Parliament in 1987. See, César Vidal, *La Destrucción de Guernica: Un Balance Sesenta Años Después* (Madrid: Espasa Hoy, 1997) pp. 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> Alasdair Fotheringham, 'Lorca's Grave Awakens Other Ghosts' *The Independent* (2 November 2009), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Mariner Books, 1980).

after the Velvet Revolution, confirmed his claims.<sup>13</sup> A slightly less well-known example in the anglophone world than Orwell's work, but still capturing the poignancy of the International Brigades, is Ken Loach's 1995 film *Land and Freedom*, which focuses on the contribution of an Englishman, David Carr, to the increasingly hopeless Republican cause. The power of the film is based in part on its conclusion where Carr's granddaughter takes a stand at her grandfather's funeral to recognise his bravery and tenacity during the struggle. That is, the film celebrates the passing of a memory of the war from one generation to the next albeit a foreign war for the English. This is a trope that, as we will see, parallels powerfully with del Toro's filmic aims. Beyond these two noteworthy British examples of accounting and re-imagining the Spanish Civil War, numerous works of art, literature, cinema and new historical accounts through biography, war stories and documentaries in Spanish have sought to address the Civil War from myriad angles. None of these, however, have had the same global impact as del Toro's tales.

### **Myth, Nationhood and Romanticism**

On the director's commentary track to the DVD edition of *Espinaza*, del Toro, again with great enthusiasm, goes to significant trouble to list as precisely as he can the European Gothic literary tradition that inspired his film. Indeed the giant helmet that suddenly and inexplicably descends on the castle court in Horace Walpole's 1764 seminal Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*<sup>14</sup> is plot device that also sits at the heart of *Espinaza*. The helmet in *Otranto* is at one glance an untimely act of surrealism, but on another level, it introduces a powerful element of the *unheimlichkeit* (literally, 'uncanniness') or "eerie unhomeliness" as Freud would put it, to the house of the ruling family.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the orphanage in *Espinaza* is dominated and haunted by the presence in the open courtyard of an imposing unexploded bomb which similarly evokes an extremely strong sense of the uncanny throughout the entire film.<sup>16</sup> Things as they are presented seem familiar (the building does function as an orphanage, yet ultimate knowledge of what should be a familiar space has been taken from the orphans and staff as war rages about them). All the humans in the

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *Orwell's Victory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003) provides a summary of this episode of Orwell's life and his experiences with the pro-Trotsky Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, pp. 60ff.

<sup>14</sup> Horace Wapole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> The *Uncanny* investigates why the disturbing must somehow link back to what is known, he writes, '...the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is know of the old and the long familiar.' Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 28.

orphanage no longer seem in control of the environment in which they seek to find their home for feelings of the uncanny can ultimately make us homeless in our own home. In this way the unexploded bomb becomes a symbol for Spain in its unhomely civil slaughter.<sup>17</sup>

This unexploded monument of a brooding potentially explosive presence is a force in its own right. When the boy hero of the film, Carlos, seeks out the ghost of the place, a streamer caught on the unexploded missile, points in the direction of the kitchen. It seems to communicate to him. Cinematically any unexploded bomb provides something obvious to the tension of the plot as Hitchcock would have it,<sup>18</sup> but del Toro connects the bomb in the very opening scenes of the film to a greater national event and the numerous myths that emulated from it: Guernica.

Before I discuss Guernica, however, there is a more primordial connection between the two films that highlights the place of national myth and religion in del Toro's works. *Espinazo* and *Laberinto* are both stories that are done alla grottesca, playing constantly with the relationship between above and below. The contrast between Ofelia's fairytale and the adults' grappling with the Civil War make *Laberinto* a grotesque in its purest form, containing "the presence and clash, incongruity, or juxtaposition of two or more different or even contradictory elements within the same work that may result in a visual and/or psychological surprise or shock."<sup>19</sup> In *Laberinto*, the labyrinth is more than just a maze. It is an aperture into an underworld, that is, it conceals a point of descent accessed by a grotto-like opening into an even deeper alternate world. The symbol of a point of descent has a long history in Classical thinking – as many caves were seen as opening into the netherworld – and this ideal is revived in Western thinking from the discovery of Nero's cave-like Domus Aurea at the turn of the fifteenth century which ignited the grotesque movement in Europe, and the grotto, both ludicrous and fearful, challenged the European mind as a "...microcosmic container of selected physical objects that

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<sup>17</sup> The most familiar environment for us is the home. Whereas in English the un-canny means that which cannot be kenned or known, in German a much strong resonance comes from the cognate term 'unheimlich' which literally means the opposite of 'heimlich' (homely) or 'heimisch' (native). *Collins Contemporary German-English Dictionary* (London: Collins 1969), p. v.

<sup>18</sup> For an extended discussion of plots and bombs see Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), particularly Chapter 2.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Fingesten, 'Delimitating the Concept of the Grotesque', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 42 (1984), p. 420.

drew down the arcane energy of counterpart Forms in the superior world.”<sup>20</sup> In *Laberinto*, this alternation of worlds is reflected in the more earthly contentions between political forces paralleled in the Spain of 1944 by the Republican ‘underground’ and Franco’s aerial-bombing fascists. In 1937, the aerial bombing was completed not by the Falangists, but by their allies the Germans.<sup>21</sup> Their bomb pierces the underworld of the orphanage; the cellar where Santi has been killed and the seemingly fathomless well where he was drowned by Jacinto.

In *Espinazo* the dropping of a bomb on an orphanage is central to the film’s plot, with its opening scenes including an unforgettable image of a bomb falling through a rain storm. This in turn reminds us of that great image of the early phases of the Civil War: Picasso’s *Guernica*. This is perhaps the most famous painting of the century and it became instantly associated with the Civil War upon its unveiling at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in 1937. It is an assemblage of body parts, a watching bull, screaming horse, and exploding light bulb, fashioned by Picasso at the behest of the ailing Republican Government as a memorial of the destruction of the town of Guernica with Nazi assistance on 26 April 1937. The painting went on to become a symbol of the aerial destruction by military forces on undefended civilians in a century littered with such injustices.<sup>22</sup>

The underground cellar of *Espinazo*, the cave that hides the maquis in *Laberinto*, and the base of the labyrinth itself all evoke the safety of bunkers in twentieth century warfare. The darkness Ofelia encounters in her quest for her underground kingdom is benign, the inscrutable well that drags Jacinto to his death is an eventual site of otherworldly justice, but the darkness the adults create and face in their battles above ground remains destructive and divisive.

The opening scene of *Espinazo* goes straight to the heart of this national myth.<sup>23</sup> The film begins in the bomb-bay of a war plane. The bomb is released

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<sup>20</sup> Victoria Nelson, *Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Vidal, *Le destrucción de guernica*, “Mediante la ayuda a Franco, las potencias fascistas – y de manera muy especial Alemania – iban a convertir España en un campo de experimentación de una nueva forma, más brutal y destructiva, de guerra”, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II and the End of Civilization* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2008), gives a detailed account of the Western powers in their pursuit of bombing civilians throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>23</sup> As this work of cinema is not as readily accessible as *Laberinto*, I provide here a basic plot summary: In *Espinazo*, Carlos, a boy of about 11, is delivered to an orphanage for what he assumes is a brief stay as he does not yet know his father is dead. In the centre of the courtyard of the orphanage, a bomb protruding from the ground. At night Carlos wanders into the kitchen and down a spiral staircase, where he hears a ghost, who states that many

and we follow its dramatic fall downwards, it plummets and we plummet. Finally it lands, unexploded, in the courtyard. Del Toro does not dwell upon the plane's presence, but it could indeed be from the same Nazi squadron that attacked Guernica. *Espinazo* is set at around the same time (1937-1938). Thus we are led back to a question that both films hint at: what are the connections between the Nazis and the Spanish fascists? If the connection is as strong as it seems – why did Allied forces in their eradication of fascism from Europe stop with the liberation of France, but not Spain? This is part of the ongoing tragedy that both films hint at.

### **On Endings: Gutierrez and del Toro**

The two films are united by a political fantastic that, strangely, goes towards a re-writing of history. At crisis points amongst certain social groups cultural products, such as cinema, can aid in the re-imagining of history, where peripheral sections of society are relocated, in the plot, to central sections of society.<sup>24</sup> This re-imagining of history to allow peripheral groups to claim

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will die. Jacinto, a former orphan, who is now the caretaker catches him. Later it is explained to Carlos that a boy, Santi, disappeared the night the bomb crashed and ever since a ghost has been haunting the orphanage. Jacinto is aware of the existence of a stash of gold, a reserve that is connected to the Republican cause. He seduces the orphanage director Carmen in order to steal her keys and search for the treasure. Jacinto finally goes berserk looking for the gold and the orphans and staff prepare to leave. In his desperate search he succeeds in burning down much of the orphanage. An explosion kills Carmen and many orphans, leaving many of the survivors badly wounded, including Dr Casares the assistant director. Dr Casares, whose laboratory is replete with infants in formaldehyde-filled jars, goes on guard duty over the remains of the orphanage. The night after the explosion, another orphan, Jaime, tells Carlos that he was present when Santi was killed. The two had been collecting slugs in the cellar under the kitchen, when Jacinto struck Santi a blow to the head. To hide his body, Jacinto drowned the dying Santi in the fathomless well that sits at the centre of the cellar. Jacinto comes back looking for the gold and he and his henchmen imprison the orphans and then set about looking for the gold. Dr Casares is dead at this point. The orphans, meanwhile have escaped after the ghost of Dr Casares unlocks the door of their prison. They make pointed sticks with shards of glass and, after luring Jacinto into the cellar, they stab him and push him into the well. Weighed down by the gold he has found, and dragged further down by the ghost of Santi, Jacinto drowns. The surviving orphans leave, watched by the abiding and benevolent ghost of Dr Casares.

<sup>24</sup> Two outstanding examples which have as yet received little attention from the academy are, first, Chris Mullen's *A Very British Coup* (London: Skreba Films, 1988). This 1982 novel was developed as a powerful television series in 1988 and screened, to Margaret Thatcher's intense annoyance, by Channel Four. The second example is that of Casey Bennetto's political musical *Keating!* based on the career of former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating (1991-1996). Both worked to re-write the political history of their respective societies at times when conservative forces were in the ascendant; Thatcher in the

central authority has been well-documented by Mary Douglas and such re-imaginings come with significant millenarian baggage.<sup>25</sup> In our collective memory, where it is focused on the myths and facts of The Spanish Civil War, del Toro is increasing, through the sugar of good movie making, our knowledge of the progress of the Civil War, but as he sees it and as he wishes us to see it – as small episodes disconnected from the overall progress of the war. There is indeed a sugar-coating to the plots of both films that I wish to address in a moment. There are, however, sound reasons why del Toro's two films do this. This first is that, in a Spain that is presently undergoing the sort of battle of remembrance that I mentioned above, del Toro's specific focus on details is addressing the sort of social drama that Victor Turner delineated.<sup>26</sup> That is, where divergent views appear to disrupt the continuity of a society, a social drama can act out and release tensions – in this case tensions aroused by the way in which The Civil War has been and can be remembered. Aguilar writes the negotiability of memory into this schema when she observes,

On occasions, when numerous kinds of memory openly contradict one another during a critical period in which there is a particular need for consensus and equilibrium what may happen is that, in view of a possible confrontation of memories, either a search is carried out within history itself (sometimes inventing an adequate memory, should one not exist) for an official memory which satisfied everyone... or all references to the event in question are silenced in order to avoid controversy as far as possible.<sup>27</sup>

The sugar-coating I refer to is generated by the way del Toro ends both films by leaving open a wide envelope of hope addressed to the expectation that things will improve in Spain and that the characters who survive at the end of each film will lead better lives as a consequence of their decisions during the course of the plot.

Yet this cannot be. The episodes of history del Toro chooses to highlight lead him to fashion a warped view of the Civil War. Thus the connection between the historical construction of time, often in a millennial sense, and the mythic abilities of del Toro's plots, where hope is so highlighted, becomes indistinguishable. Fictional, millennial and mythic constructions do indeed have a close corollary as Cathy Gutierrez has shown,

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U.K. and the Howard Government in Australia. In their particular attempts at rewriting history, both the musical and the television series proved extremely popular.

<sup>25</sup> See Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Aldine Transaction, 1969), pp. 96ff.

<sup>27</sup> Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia*, p. 2.

...millennialism is a form of sense-making; by foregrounding the coming end of time, millennial groups adopt a narrative understanding of history. History itself is seen as having a distinct beginning, middle, and end, with all this historical vagaries subsumed into necessary events for the plot of time.<sup>28</sup>

So, history can be read, in a millennial sense, as though every detail speaks of a coming event, rather than of randomness and happenstance. Similarly all good mainstream plot scripting should ensure that every detail introduced by a director into a film should do nothing but contribute to our ultimate understanding of the film's conclusion. That is every facet of an unveiling plot should have something of the theory of 'Chekov's Gun' about it.<sup>29</sup> The importance of endings in del Toro's two films is highlighted by the pains the director goes to ensure that hope prevails.

*Espinazo* concludes with the boys safely escaping the orphanage after they cast the gold-seeking Jacinto to the vengeance-seeking ghost of Santi who lurks in the fathomless well. By the time the audience experiences this scene, they know that the boys have a long walk ahead of them, but that spirits such as those of Dr Casares, the dead assistant director of the orphanage, are with them. Hope thus abounds. This is a sleight-of-hand by del Toro. We initially miss the point that the boys are walking into a Spain that, given this is 1937, will continue to be beset by civil strife for at least another two years and that if any of them espouse the liberal thinking of either Casares or the orphanage director Carmen, they could be shot or imprisoned in work-camps or otherwise reduced to the status of second class citizens. Despite this, the scene of boys walking away from the haunted orphanage gives us an elevated sense of their accomplishment as they have passed through an explosive event and come of age in the face of the adult duplicity of Jacinto.

Similarly in *Laberinto* the maquis lead a raid on the mill which has been taken over as a Falangist headquarters. The small detachment of fascists are defeated at the very spot where they decided to establish themselves. Again, it seems as though the good have risen victorious. Another sleight-of-hand by del Toro. The hope of the ending remains valid only as long as we do not too quickly remember the explanatory titles at the start of the film that tell the audience we are in the end-time of the fascist victory over the remaining pockets of resistance in Spain. Our hope at this small victory also remains

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<sup>28</sup> Cathy Gutierrez, 'The Millennium and Narrative Closure' in *War in Heaven/Heaven on Earth: Theories of the Apocalyptic*, eds Stephen D. O'Leary and Glen S. McGhee (London: Equinox, 2005), p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there. See, Ernest J. Simmons, *Chekhov: A Biography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962), p. 190.

strong if we forget a later scene in which the maquis hear of the victory of the Allies over Germany and suppose that Allied forces will swing down and extinguish fascism in Spain as they have done elsewhere in Europe. In this scene, in the second third of the film, we know (knowing the subsequent history of Spain until 1975) that their hope is futile, but this is mostly forgotten in the aftermath of the maquis' small victory. Sadly many of those who continued fighting against the fascists retreated over the boarder into France and remained there no doubt bitterly disappointed.

The ending of *Laberinto* is far more politically sophisticated than that of *Espinazo*. Despite the short-term victory of the maquis, the ending also focuses on the death of both Ofelia and her step-father/murderer, the Falangist Captain Vidal. Ofelia dies to be reborn in the fantasy kingdom underground, but Vidal, as the anti-hero of the film, is bound to fall. He emerges from the labyrinth carrying his newborn son. He asks the maquis to tell his son about his father when he gets older. Mercedes, his house manager and secret aid to the maquis takes the baby and replies that Vidal's son "...won't even know your name." This part of the conclusion reminds us that a great deal of the legacy of the Falangist enterprise in Spain would simply be forgotten in the aftermath of the liberalisation of the nation in the 1970s. Yet this provides a most lasting long term hope than does the quick, but ultimately pointless victory of the maquis that concludes the film.

### **The Politically Mythic**

Where *Laberinto* succeeds as a film far beyond the dimensions of *Espinazo* is in del Toro's ability to link the mythic life of Ofelia with that of the political realm. This plays itself out most noticeably in Captain Vidal's banquet which appears at the apex of *Laberinto*. The brutal Vidal explains to his subordinates that, in order to starve out the maquis, he will institute a universal food-rationing system. While one feast continues in the mill, Ofelia, starving in her bedroom, accepts the faun's challenge to confront the monstrous Pale Man. We find this creature seated, like Vidal, at the head of a sumptuous yet tainted banquet. The cinematic ploy seems to be the aligning of the fascist monster Vidal with the otherworldly Pale Man. Yet the Pale Man is not just a counter form of Vidal, but to the entire fascist enterprise, an enterprise that ultimately finds its form in one man: Francisco Franco.

Unlike her previous mythic task, where Ofelia must enter an archetypal axis mundi, the realm of the Pale Man is located just below the surface of Spain, 1944. He lives in a chamber just beyond the walls of Ofelia's room; to reach him, she need only draw a door on a wall with the magic chalk the faun provides. As she approaches, the Pale Man sits inanimate at a banquet table in

a room washed with blood. In an act of foolhardy bravery (or perhaps reckless naivety), Ofelia examines him closely. Frescoes on the wall above her head depict the Pale Man killing and devouring children, and a pile of children's shoes fill one corner in an undeniable reference to the Holocaust. Ofelia must use her recently acquired key to unlock one of three doors in the chamber's wall and retrieve the sacrificial dagger she will need for her final task. Despite being cautioned not to eat anything from the Pale Man's table, Ofelia's experience of deprivation in war-torn Spain prompts her to sample a grape. She consequently awakens the monster.

As I have noted elsewhere,<sup>30</sup> the Pale Man is a simulacrum of Franco. Consciously or sub-consciously the monster has been fashioned to have the same bald-curve of the Generalissimo's pate, and the loose skin of the monster links closely to the loose flesh of the old dictator that flabbily emerged from the collar of his military uniform in his last years. The monster is so effective as a force of horror that in part its success must play on our memories of old human monsters such as Franco. Here del Toro's art reaches its apogee: no greater monsters can be recently found than those who torn up in human blood the possible tranquillity of the twentieth century. What adds to the fear is that Ofelia is not sent to kill this monster, and the monster is not killed (unlike the great toad or the duplicitous faun). The Pale Man continues just below the surface ready to create other piles of shoes – other Holocausts – if we are of a mind to let him.

In compassing the battles over memory in regards to The Spanish Civil War, the presence of a Pale Man/Franco continues to lurk, suggests del Toro, just below the surface.

### **Conclusion: A History of Memories**

Where del Toro succeeds in his art is to bring history alive in entertainment by daring to tread on fields of memory that, even now, are ever-shifting in regards to The Civil War and by extension the wider issues of what Europe and civilization in general might mean. His ability to tell stories through the young eyes of a Carlos or an Ofelia allow him to play (in a good way?) with the traumatic divisions that arise over the ingredients of a collective memory. That is, del Toro is able to hit upon particular events that remind us of significant trends in remembered history. These standout 'events' Aguilar describes thus,

During each period of the life of a state, nation or nationality there are certain historical moments which, due to their special relevance to the present, acquire greater importance and are more likely to influence the train of events witnessed during that specific period of

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<sup>30</sup> See Hartney and Penicka-Smith, 'The Fantasy of History and High Art', p. 21.

time. Sometimes a natural selection process takes place in the memory whereby only that which has some suasive relevance to the present reemerges. We could say that the historical memory of a nation is that part of the past which... has the ability to influence the present, either in appositive sense (an example to be followed) or in a negative sense (a counter-example, a disagreeable situation which must be avoided). In the majority of cases, the revival of this memory is due to the existence of a certain analogy, real or imagined, between the present situation and the past as experienced.

The science of unveiling the inner mental mechanics of collective memory remains an inscrutable one. Michael Schudson locates collective memory mainly as an institutional manifestation: in the form of monuments, books and public holidays. If memory is found in individuals it is generational or occupational he states.<sup>31</sup> Maurice Halbwachs highlights personal memory and historical memory which is loaned from and depends on others.<sup>32</sup> His is a theory of presentism, where the past is constantly being modified by the interests of the present; and in the case of these two films our obsession with what that state should mean, mythically and religiously has clearly been on our minds. Del Toro uses his cinematic sleight-of-hand to allow us to think the more liberal forces in his films triumph. The abiding evils of closed-minded religiously-inspired totalitarianism morph into the form of his monsters, the Pale Man in particular. Thus in films such as del Toro's, Victor Turner's idea of the social drama goes some way to highlight how culture can be a kind of Aristotelian catharsis. Stories of the Civil War need to be told, but they are received eagerly by an early twenty-first century audience because they release tensions pre-existent in our society and about what our society should mean. The constant reference in del Toro's works to subterranean/subconscious realms point towards what is going on beneath surface of our appreciation of these political fantasies. The success of *Laberinto* in particular points precisely to what presently challenges us: recording in a way a history of memory through these cultural products.

There is, ultimately, correlations between del Toro's film making and what we want to see in the twenty-first century. One is a sense of justice. One might argue that Ofelia in *Laberinto* is beyond justice but the way she is subsumed into the abiding ancientness of the labyrinth at the end of the film (it looks Celtic, pre-Roman) offers us a sense of just return that is beyond the agency of any of the humans in the film. Similarly the ghost of Santi is able, through the vigilante actions of the young boys, to score his revenge against

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How we Remember, Forget and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 51ff.

<sup>32</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper, 1950), p. 51.

Jacinto. In the field of a Spain, that is still negotiating what justice means in light of the Civil War, these moves towards restitution of events strike a powerful chord. It remains interesting that a figure from the wider hispanophone world wishes to base his mythic and ghostly tales in the old imperial centre. Perhaps del Toro feels freer in discussing the Civil War than those Spanish native still caught up in the struggle of their collective memories. *Laberinto's* wider success is also helped by an ongoing examination in the West, particularly in Europe about the nature of civil society and the ghouls such as the pale man/Franco that continue to haunt us. At this level the political is well suited to being treated mythically and the political success of *Laberinto* demonstrates how film can play with, escalate and refashion our collective memories through the potential of cultural texts such as del Toro's fascinating abilities to make movies.