

## Pan's Labyrinth

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It strikes me that this is a film that really knows how it's supposed to end; and a film where how one feels about the ending really determines how one takes the film as a whole. In this case, I find it hard to imagine someone saying that they liked the film, but that they didn't like the ending. And in fact, the film begins at the end. It begins with the final shot of the film, running backwards (the blood running back into Ofelia's body), with the narrator telling a story that begins in a classic way, like this:

Long ago, in the Underground Realm...

So I'd like to think about the film in dialogue with some reflections on narrative in general. And from there, to think a bit about how the film explores the idea of sacrifice.

The question of how narrative and story-telling relate to the real world is a question that crops up throughout the film, beginning with the second scene. The narration continues, with overlaid images, like this:

Long ago, in the Underground Realm where there are no lies or pain, there lived a princess who dreamed of the human world.

The princess, in the story, escapes into the human world, but finds that the brightness causes her to lose her memory and forget where she has come from. It then cuts to a shot of Ofelia, in a car, reading the story just narrated, that ends with the words 'her body suffered cold, sickness and pain. Eventually she died.'

Eventually, she died: these words describe the ending of every human life-story. This is the point humorously made by Margaret Atwood in her essay '[Happy Endings](#)', which reflects on the story of a couple, John and Mary:

You'll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don't be deluded by any other endings, they're all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality.

The only authentic ending is the one provided here: *John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*

And yet the story we are about to watch is told from the end; so the film itself already obeys a different logic to the one that dictates that the end of every story must be 'eventually, she died.' In fact, the film is heavily invested in the question of what makes a good death; what makes a good ending.

It is quickly revealed that Ofelia is often lost in the fairytale world, and is frequently scolded for this. The question of the value of stories comes up a few times. At a dinner party, the awful Captain Vidal publicly humiliates his wife for telling ‘silly stories’ about how they met; stories that are beneath the dignity of his gathered guests. After finding a mandrake root in a bowl of milk beneath her bed, Carmen, Ofelia’s mother, gets angry and shouts: ‘as you get older you’ll see that life isn’t like your fairytales. The world is a cruel place.’

In a sense, her words articulate the key problem of the film: the world is a cruel place, and yet children have to live in it. The question is: given this reality, what is the role of fairytales? Earlier in the film, despite her misgivings, Carmen invited Ofelia to tell a story to her unborn brother, so as to calm and soothe him: some stories have the power to act upon the world, it seems. And as the film unfolds, Ofelia’s own story-telling appears to be a way of responding to, and coping with the violence and cruelty of the world around her: her mother’s failing health, the confusing secrecy of Mercedez, the brutality of the Captain, etc.

On closer examination, Ofelia is not the only one telling stories. One of the Captain’s dinner guests tells the story of how Vidal’s father smashed his watch on the battlefield, so that his son would know the hour of his death, and that this is how a brave man dies. This story was also shut-down by the Captain. We know, however, that the Captain appears attached to this story, not just because he is continually looking at his cracked watch, but also because of his final request for his son to be told of his death. He wants to narrate his death, or ensure that his death is narrated – and this request is refused; his death will not be narrated, it will be – not an ending so much as a terminus. So the question arises as to what is the difference between this ending - ‘eventually, he died’ - and the ending with which the film begins.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various philosophers and theologians became interested in narrative as a philosophical, ethical and theological category. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur suggests that narrative is an inherent part of meaningful experience; that is, part of how we make the world meaningful is by what he calls ‘the work of narrative’.

Narrative, according to Ricoeur, is a dynamic movement that makes things whole. Life experience is, in one sense, just one thing after another. But pure succession is hard to endure, because it means that there is no wholeness; nothing that makes each moment belong to each other. In asking for a satisfying ending, the Captain is expressing his need for this kind of narrative wholeness: for his life to be like a story that could be told, rather than a series of events with a final event.

For Ricoeur, the “work” of narrative works in three primary ways:

1. It makes *one* story out of many incidents – beginning, middle and end – as Aristotle noted:

- ‘Now a whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which does not necessarily come after something else, although something else exists or comes about after it. An end, on the contrary, is that which naturally follows something else either as a necessary or as a usual consequence, and is not itself followed by anything. A middle is that which follows something else, and is itself followed by something. Thus well-constructed plots must neither begin nor end in a haphazard way, but must conform to the pattern I have been describing.’ (Aristotle in Loughlin 1996: 141)
2. It synthesizes character, action and circumstance. So narrative wholeness can include both concordance and discordance; both orderly, planned actions and disorderly happenstance. In fact, part of what makes a story the particular story it is is the way in which its protagonists response to chance:
- ‘A character may strive for resolution, harmony or peace which circumstances thwart or other characters wantonly destroy.’ (Loughlin 1996: 141)

In other words, a story is not just what a person is aiming to do, or achieving, it is what happens to them as they are aiming at various things. The narrative is both action and response, which together form a whole, rather as, say, in a game of tennis, the skill and excellence on display consists of both intended actions and skilful response to an opponent. The story of the game is both the story of what someone was trying to do, *and* how they coped with what was done, what just happened.

A good example of this in the film is the moment when Captain Vidal shoots the doctor, for his disobedience. Almost immediately, he is told that his wife urgently needs the doctor he has just killed. On the one hand, this is a case of fortune – things just happening: sometimes you act, sometimes things just happen. The Captain acts, and, unrelatedly, his wife happens to go into labour. But in another sense, this episode itself expresses a kind of fittingness or harmony: somehow it is *fitting* that the stupid brutality of his actions should immediately be exposed in this way.

3. It produces a sense of narrative time, which is different to ordinary “succession” (just one thing after another):
- ‘Thus there is a successive and a configured time; a time which “passes and flows away” and a time which “endures and remains”. The latter is the temporal totality and identity of a story, which cuts across and challenges the former, the perpetual passing away of succession.’ (Loughlin 1996: 141)

Somehow, narrative does something to time, meaning that each moment becomes part of a temporal form. Music is perhaps the best analogy: the 13<sup>th</sup> note of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata is the same as the 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> ; but it doesn't feel the same, because it is heard in relation to those notes, as if both echoing them or expanding their meaning. The identity of the piece is giving in time, as a whole, somehow: the truth of each note is only given through the whole in its temporal form. The last note is C sharp, but the meaning of that final C sharp is only discerned in its relation to everything that has gone before.

What should we make, then of the claim that narrative falsifies ordinary experience? The literary theorist Frank Kermode used the sound-image of a ticking clock to express this point. Somehow, we hear a clocks ticking in terms of a pair, the second of which answers the first: *tick-tock*. Each tick-tock is call and response, a complete unit. But clocks can also be in reality just making a succession of tick sounds. *Tick tick tick* is the sound of non-narrative time: one thing, followed by another, and another, until the clock stops. *Tick-tock* is the sound of narrative time: the interval between the sounds is affected by the relationship between the two. We hear a tick, and then listen expectantly for the tock. A story begins, the time is then structured by our awaiting the completion, the end. So which is truer? Configured, narrative time – or mere succession. Tick tock, tick tock; or *tick, tick tick tick*? Kermode points out that in modern fiction, writers/directors have felt compelled to pay attention to the tick tick; that is, to show that life does not obey the rules of our favourite narrative genres. We may sometimes want to feel ourselves to be living in a romantic comedy (or a tragic melodrama depending on our taste) but our lives unfold in a much more chaotic, confused way. There is quite a bit of *tick tick* in our lives. But even the attempt to tell a story is to begin to make a temporal form out of the individual moments, however chaotic they seem.

One might think that narrative distorts reality, because the reality, it might seem, is that the final moment of every life story is the same: eventually, they died. And people do not reliably die at the point where all the threads of their lives have been drawn together into a satisfying whole: they die because of an unexpected heart attack, or the eventual breakdown of their major organs, caused by the progression of cancer; or in an illegal airstrike, or because of the negligence of a distracted driver, or of starvation caused by a military blockade, or because an extremist flew a plane into a building in which they worked. And so on.

For Ricoeur, it's a mistake to think that narrative distorts or falsifies life, because ordinary human time is already somehow on the way to being narrative:

‘Even before we start to tell stories, that of which we tell has been storied or emplotted. Life is always-already narrative, in advance of our narration. Or at least it is virtual narrative, demanding to be narrated. It is the demand of experience to

be told that anchors narrative in life as something more than optional.' (Loughlin 1996: 142)

Centuries ago Augustine of Hippo suggested the same thing: that our experience of each moment is already a combination of memory (past), attention (the present) and anticipation (the future); that is, it is already virtual narrative. One cannot even hear a sentence without holding past, present and future together as a temporal form. Each meaningful sentence is something on the way to narrative.

Back to the film. Tee Captain disavows his own story-telling; but then his last dying wish is for narrative closure, for the last moment to be something a bit like the final semi-brieve of Moonlight Sonata: a fitting ending for the kind of man he was. And perhaps, the film suggests, it is fitting that he is refused this wish, given the kind of life he has lived: one which had no regard for the dignity of each life-story.

The point seems to be this: we cannot avoid narrating our lives. On Ricoeur's view, Ofelia is just doing, in an extraordinarily vivid way, what everyone is doing, all the time.

In the 'real world' of the film, the story that appears to be winning is one based on sacrifice, or one version of sacrifice, at least: the nobility of dying in battle, giving up one's life for the greater good. To believe that one attains nobility by dying in a certain way means that the meaning of one's life story can transcend the bare facts spelled out by the words 'eventually, he died'. It means, in a sense, to live on. This narrative necessarily picks out a greater good – the nation, construed in a particular way – to which one sacrifices one's own life.

Or one might tell a story, as does the priest at Vidal's dinner party, in which physical dying is of no real significance; what really matters is the fate of the soul after the death of the body. That way of narrating things also means, conveniently, that earthly lives can be treated as expendable, their sacrifice of no real significance. This is a religious story that supports and legitimises the political, sacrificial story: sacrifice helps to create a sense of what is higher, by position the lower in relation to it.

So, what kind of story is Ofelia narrating; more specifically, how does her story narrate death? This is where the film is dense with meaning, I think. Her fairytale – the one she constructs through the film – involves a series of tasks, which if successfully completed will open a portal back to the Underworld, where her father awaits her. The tasks will reveal if her 'true essence' has remained intact. In the end, she refuses to complete the final task, which is to shed a few drops of her baby brother's blood ('innocent blood'). As she is recognised as the rightful daughter of the King, her father, she is told that the final task was in fact her refusal to shed the blood of an innocent, and to prefer to shed her own blood instead: and, the Fawn tells her, she chose well. The nature of the task could not be perceived in advance; it is, in theological terms, only revealed as being her moment of glory eschatologically. From the perspective of unconfigured, non-narrative

time, the film ends with a woman sobbing over the body of a dead child. And yet, the film as a whole, centred as it is on this moment (beginning with it, and returning to it), is in a sense an attempt to challenge this perspective: perhaps, in her own way, Ofelia is a princess; perhaps her confused bravery, despite having no real effects on the adult world, with its weapons, really is the manifestation of her innocence in a cruel world.

There is so much in the background here that is reminiscent of the gospel narrative: a chosen one whose true origins lie in another world; a specially appointed task that must be accomplished; a renunciation of status out of love; a violent death, followed by vindication, and the beginning of a reign of justice. Even the words of the story at the beginning of the film might be slightly reminiscent of the Nicene Creed: 'her body suffered cold, sickness and pain. Eventually she died.'

But equally, there is in the background the story of the binding of Isaac, from Genesis 22: a command to offer up a first-born son. Here the film seems to have a more complex relationship to the matrix of Christian ideas in the background. Abraham, as interpreted by the New Testament, is commended for his faith: his silent obedience to God's command is a sign of faith. Ofelia, in contrast, is commended for her disobedience; her refusal of the Fawn's final demand is the thing which reveals that she has not lost her true essence: she prefers to renounce her inheritance of her kingdom rather than let her innocent brother be harmed. The Fawn, through the film, is an ambiguous figure: Ofelia herself does not know whether he can be trusted. In the end, she has to trust her own judgement, without guidance from any adult figure. As the film construes it, her deliberate disobedience, out of love, is the thing that makes her life worthy of glorification. So in this sense, the film seems to deliberately challenge what it takes to be the Christian inheritance.

In commenting on the binding of Isaac, the philosopher Immanuel Kant suggested that Abraham should have taken a similar line to Ofelia: he couldn't possibly know for sure the identity of the voice that demanded the sacrifice, but he did – or should – have known for sure that he should not sacrifice his son. And in a contest between ambiguous religious revelation, and unambiguous moral knowledge, he should have prioritised the latter: any God worthy of worship would have respected his decision. And so, like Ofelia, Abraham would have been a moral hero if he had refused what he was asked to do – as Kant sees it, at least.

Both Kant and Pan's Labyrinth seem unaware that Abraham's faith is understood rather differently in the New Testament (and perhaps differently to how many Christians construe it!). The letter to the Hebrews commends Abraham for his faith – but explains this by suggesting that Abraham believed that God could raise Isaac; that God would still provide what he had promised. In fact, all of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews chapter 11 have in common that they looked ahead to what God would do, they awaited it in faith – or, in the words of the Nicene Creed: they looked for the resurrection of the

dead. Abraham's faith, as understood by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, was a kind of hope, *not* just a willingness to obey without questioning.

Ofelia passes the test she is set by acting without hope: she has no hope to receive what she has been promised, she just refuses to act against her conscience. In this respect, she is more like the moral hero that Albert Camus imagines: someone willing to rebel against the moral indifference of the world, without hope that anything or anyone is coming to the rescue.

Of course, in the 'real' world of the film, Ofelia's actions do not save the life of her brother, at least, not in an obvious way. There is no Fawn who might actually shed his blood, and the Captain is highly motivated to protect his son at all costs. It also appears that the Captain would have been caught and captured by the rebels regardless of what happened in the labyrinth. So her bravery has no real effect, not according to the logic of the adult world. In the real world, the end of her story is just the obvious one: 'eventually, she died'.

The film leaves the viewer with the question of which way of seeing is truer. In a sense, though, this is the same kind of challenge that the Christian liturgy presents: to see a Roman execution (one of a great many) as the moment when God's chosen one entered his glory.