Pan's Labyrinth: Fantasy and Rebellion in Francoist Spain

By Amritha Purohit

In *Pan's Labyrinth*, Guillermo del Toro examines the boundary between fantasy and reality to expose the fascist excesses of violence, ritual, and authoritarian control during the Spanish Civil War. Through parallel figures like the Pale Man and Captain Vidal, del Toro explores how systems of power hoard resources, demand silence, and consume the vulnerable. In *Pan's Labyrinth* and Irène Némirovsky's *Suite Française*, resistance under fascism emerges as a spectrum, ranging from overt defiance to quiet moral refusal. Guillermo del Toro creates competing worlds of fantasy and reality to examine the brutality of Francoist Spain, while Némirovsky further elucidates this vision by revealing individual pockets of resistance and rebellion in occupied France.

In 1936, Generals Emilio Mola and Francisco Franco launched a rebellion against Spain's democratic Republic, igniting the Spanish Civil War. The country became deeply divided along ideological lines, with urban centers largely opposing the uprising and rural regions predominantly supporting the Nationalist cause. To support his campaign, Franco relied on military assistance from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The war eventually ended with the decisive victory of Francisco Franco's Nationalist forces over the Republican government. This victory marked the beginning of Franco's authoritarian dictatorship, which sought to completely reshape Spain's political and social order.[1] The war caused deep political, social, and cultural

[1] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, "Spanish Civil War," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed August 8, 2025, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/spanish-civil-war.

fractures leaving Spain fundamentally split between right and left ideologies, causing distrust, class divisions, and causing a "social revolution."[2]

The military rebels continued to suppress dissenters through carefully planned operations to eliminate, as Emilio Mola said, "without scruple or hesitation those who do not think as we do."[3] Historian George Richard Esenwein records a separate statement from Franco himself in The Spanish Civil War: A Modern Tragedy, writing, "The reestablishment of this principle of AUTHORITY, forgotten in recent years, demands that punishment by exemplary in the severity with which it will be imposed and the celerity with which it is carried out without hesitation or vacillation."[4] Both Mola and Franco make clear the consequence of dissent emphasizing that brutality and violence are welcome methods for creating unity.

In a 1942 speech transcribed in the New York Times, Franco emphasized Spain's transformation "from that anarchical and impoverished Spain" into a nation restored through "peace, order, mutual intelligence," reinforcing his narrative of authoritarian control as necessary for national rebirth, and lauding the effects of this unity. One of the most interesting aspects of Mola and Franco's words, perhaps, is the frankness in which they express their desire for violence. Their words evoke a feeling of inclusion within their supporters, and as a result, an othering imposed on their enemies. They assume the roles of a patriarchal, commanding ruler who promises results, regardless of the method. This climate of control and command is embodied in Captain Vidal in *Pan's Labyrinth*, who represents the brutal enforcement of Francoist ideology on a more local scale.

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[2] Jason Dawsey, "Social Revolution and Civil War in Spain," National WWII Museum, last modified July 30, 2021, accessed August 8, 2025, https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/social-revolution-spanish-civil-war.
[3] Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), [Page 146].
[4] George Richard Esenwein, *The Spanish Civil War : a Modern Tragedy* (Routledge, 2005), [Page 25].

Captain Vidal, the leader of a Francoist military outpost, is shown to be obsessed with order, control, power, and ritualized violence. During his dinner party at the beginning of the film, he sits at the head of the table, simultaneously presented with a feast while ordering the reduction of rations for commoners. He presides over the other officers, dominating the conversation. He takes up space– his elbows are spread on the table and his body language is rigid and domineering. When his wife, Carmen, leaves the table, the other officers stand up: not out of respect for Carmen herself, but the power that she has by association with the Captain.

Del Toro deliberately mirrors the structures of violence and control in both the real and fantasy realms to emphasize their shared excesses. He sets up clear contrasts between Captain Vidal, the Faun, a dominating and intimidating guide, and the Pale Man, a monster in the fantasy realm. The Pale Man and Captain Vidal serve as symbolic mirrors, reflecting systems that consume the weak and thrive on silence and submission. The scene with Captain Vidal mimics the scene with the Pale Man, who similarly sits at the head of his table in front of an elaborate feast, representing the elite's monopoly over resources, much like the upper-class families in *Suite Française* hoarding from refugees. In *Suite Française,* however, this accumulation of resources originated from a sense of survival and entitlement, whereas for Captain Vidal and the Pale Man, while it does stem from entitlement, it also comes from a disregard for other lives. Del Toro underscores their similarity through symmetrical table arrangements, long hallways, and the spectacle of control and power. The Pale Man's eyes rest in his hands, symbolizing a willful, narrow vision—seeing only what he chooses to confront—mirroring Vidal's own selective perception of power. There are images above the Pale Man of him violently consuming children; at the end of the scene, he eats two fairies, biting their heads off. The scene is purposefully grotesque, much like the obvious hypocrisy of Captain Vidal. These moments in the film critique

the moral obscenity of fascist systems by dramatizing the binary inequality between oppressor and oppressed, elite and peasant.

Captain Vidal's brutality is relentless: he tortures resistance members, executes farmers, and ultimately murders his young stepdaughter, Ofelia. He takes pleasure in exacting violence, viciously torturing a rebel and murdering the doctor himself. He calls the revolutionaries "vermin," metaphorically placing them below him, and enforcing a hierarchy that reduces the rebels to dirty, scurrying rodents. Both the Pale Man and Captain Vidal enforce silence and obedience—one literally eats dissenting children, the other executes and brutalizes those who disobey. Both figures preside over spaces of procedure, like banquets and trials, and hoard resources while punishing disobedience.

There is also a greater emphasis on ritual and silence: Vidal is obsessed with legacy and order, as seen through his assurance his child will be his male "heir" and his interactions with other officers and rebels, while the Pale Man's realm is completely silent and consists of terrifying rules and structures. These figures blur realms, revealing authoritarianism as a cross-world plague. They are not separate worlds, as Ofelia believes. The fantasy world reflects and critiques the real world, showcasing this metaphorical and physical excess as a hallmark of fascist control.

Del Toro continues this critique of obedience and power through smaller, intimate rituals—like Captain Vidal's shaving sequence. His meticulous shaving ritual, with its slow strokes of the blade, reflects this obsession. He also feigns cutting his own neck, indicating that his desire for violence and pain is so strong it manifests in private, becoming a simulacrum of murder. It is self-directed, having no external outlet in the scene. The mirror is covered in marks, indicating that this is a repeated action. A shaving blade, normally innocuous, becomes

dangerous and threatening in the hands of Vidal. After his face is injured, his shaving becomes laborious, symbolizing the erosion of both his vanity and authority. A similar event occurs in *Suite Française*; when affluent characters are discussing an injured woman with bandages wrapped around her head, they use language like "horrible old woman" and "hideous." She is undoubtedly a victim, unlike Vidal, yet her appearance shapes the narrative. While Vidal's injuries represent a decay of preexisting power, her injuries represent survival, and the cruelty of the elite.

Power manifests in both the real and fantasy worlds through the way Ofelia is treated: both the Faun and Captain Vidal demand submission under threat. Ofelia is caught between two hypermasculine figures—Vidal and the Faun—and must decide whom to trust, or whether to obey at all. The Faun appears to be a good character, steering Ofelia to her rightful place in the Underground Realms. He later emerges as yet another patriarchal figure, oscillating between guide and manipulator, while requesting seemingly impossible tasks for a young girl and demanding her complete, blind obedience. The tasks she must complete are tied to fear, discipline, and are meant to 'test' her, much like how Vidal tests the various people in his life, like Mercedes. Both realms are structured by male dominance and hierarchy, limiting Ofelia's freedom. This parallel suggests that Ofelia cannot conceive of a world free from authoritarian presence, even in her imagination, and that her decisions with the Faun are meant to guide her through her decisions with Captain Vidal.

Ofelia is symbolic of a widespread development within fascist regimes: the beginnings and demise of individual resistance. She defies both Captain Vidal and the Faun by refusing to hand over her baby brother, becoming more independent and breaking free, in part, of these authoritarian systems. Francisco J. Sánchez, an associate professor of Spanish literature at the

University of Iowa writes,“The public dimension of violence, that is, the use of terror as a political tool in the construction of the State, is displaced in the narrative of the film by a focalization on an individual officer who seems to represent the workings of power as a whole.”[5] Captain Vidal represents these authoritarian systems. The dichotomy between Ofelia and Vidal reveals the contrast between individualism and fascism, rebellion and authority.

There are levels of compliance and resistance demonstrated throughout the film: Doctor Ferrerio, who, however unwillingly, helps both the rebels and the Francoists; Carmen, who chooses to completely submit to Captain Vidal, ultimately at the cost of her life; and Mercedes, who betrays the Francoists under the guise of assisting them. Ofelia chooses to resist entirely, often demonstrating her anger and frustration at Captain Vidal. Complete resistance comes from the most vulnerable character in the film: Ofelia, who is a young girl and the youngest character aside from her baby brother. The adult world fails Ofelia: Carmen is complicit, Vidal is violent, the rebels are distant. Individual resistance is highlighted by del Toro— the resistance force is present, but minor and appears to be disorganized. The most influential acts of treason are carried by individuals, often resulting in bodily harm. Although del Toro presents resistance as morally necessary yet tragically constrained under fascist rule, he also suggests individual resistance is the most important. In the final scene Ofelia decides not to shed innocent blood, resulting in her death. This idea mirrors Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of satyagraha and offers one way to understand Ofelia’s moral stance. Gandhi emphasised the need to pursue individual truth while also maintaining the ethical need to not hurt others. The last bastion of freedom, to him, was the

[5] Francisco J. Sánchez, "A Post-National Spanish Imaginary. A Case-Study: Pan's Labyrinth," Project Muse, last modified May 2012, accessed August 9, 2025, https://muse-jhu-edu.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/article/477148/pdf.

mind.[6] By refusing to kill her brother, Ofelia embodies this ethical stance, choosing the preservation of innocent life over violent retaliation, which complicates traditional ideas of rebellion as armed or forceful. Ofelia's inner rebellion aligns with Gandhi's belief that true change begins in the mind and spirit, resonating with Némirovsky's portrayal of private, mental resistance in *Suite Française*.

Suite Française, by Irène Némirovsky, also reflects on individual and personal resistance, adding nuance to del Toro's argument. Her characters find private rebellion in their own thoughts, rejecting outright conformity to the rules imposed on them. One of the most prominent examples of this is the women refusing to set their clocks to German time, opting instead to deal with the "great voids"[7] in time that this brought. Lucile, the main character, says, "Every so often something came to life inside her, rebelled, demanded noise, movement, people. Life, my God, life! How long would this war go on? How many years would they have to live like this, in this dismal lethargy, bowed, docile, crushed like cattle in a storm?"[8] Although she physically had to live with Germans, accommodate them into her life and her home, she still resisted mentally. By not becoming completely complacent, her rebellion preserves her inner autonomy and moral clarity. This rebellion meant that there was hope for a brighter future, a kind of resistance that cannot be tamed.

Del Toro's use of fantasy may paradoxically soften the urgency of real-world resistance, allowing the viewer — and perhaps Ofelia herself — to process brutality without confronting it directly. If fantasy becomes a coping mechanism rather than a mobilizing force, The Underground Realms might serve as both sanctuary and trap. However, the fact that there are

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[6] Bernard E. Harcourt, "Bernard E. Harcourt | Introduction to Satyagraha," Columbia University, last modified November 25, 2017, accessed August 9, 2025, https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/uprising1313/bernard-e-harcourt-introduction-to-satyagraha/.
[7] Irène Némirovsky et al., *Suite Francese*, 9th ed. (Adelphi, 2019), [Chapter 1].
[8] INémirovsky et al., *Suite Francese*, [Chapter 4].

also ways to defeat and vanquish fascism within the Realms means that Ofelia holds out hope for freedom within her real life too.

Though resistance may bring pain, del Toro frames its sacrifices as essential to its moral rewards. Ofelia's resistance becomes a warning and a myth—its success lies in its mere existence, in its ability to flourish within her mind. Her resistance against the Faun and Captain Vidal is costly and lonely, but del Toro frames it as redemptive: she gains her "true" family despite her death, and smiles while dying. Her death marks a spiritual or moral transcendence that stands in stark contrast to the brutality of both worlds, an end of individual resistance, rewarding but ultimately futile.

Pan's Labyrinth ultimately depicts a young girl coming to terms with her Francoist reality through the lens of a fantasy world. Even in her imagination, Ofelia cannot escape authoritarianism. Yet del Toro shows that inner rebellion—choosing empathy, preserving moral clarity—is itself a radical act. Though her resistance ends in death, it reclaims dignity from a world built on domination. Although we see Ofelia being active and making decisions in the Underground Realms, one of the only times she does so in the real world is her choice to bring her brother to the labyrinth, and subsequently sacrifice herself instead of him. Much of her decision making happens in her fantasy world, suggesting that the critical work of rebellion occurs in the mind, something that is supported by Némirovsky's novel. The decision of whether or not to obey is present throughout the film, and is the question Ofelia is forced to confront through her interactions with the Captain and the Faun. The film frames Ofelia and Vidal as opposing embodiments of individuality and authoritarianism, revealing the mechanisms of fascist control. Ofelia's resistance is not marked by force, but by her refusal to surrender her moral agency—highlighting del Toro's interest in interior defiance over physical revolt. To resist,

del Toro and Némirovsky suggest, is first and foremost to refuse to internally submit to the enemy, to internalize fascism.

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