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## Hauntology and Epistemology in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* and Juan Antonio Bayona's *The Orphanage*

### Introduction

The subject of historical memory continues to preoccupy intellectual, political and cultural discourse in democratic Spain. In the arts, the questioning and the reconsideration of history have become recurring motifs in numerous novels, plays, films, and television shows that often explore previously censored and controversial social issues in unique or innovative ways. Many works that revisit the past involve figurative or literal specters that haunt the protagonists and considerably impact their plotlines, character development, themes, and denouement. Although ghost stories have always been popular, specters have received a lot of attention in recent research about Spain and there is a growing body of criticism dedicated to analyzing their representation in literature and film. In accordance with Jo Labanyi's assertion that "...the whole of modern Spanish culture—its study and practice—can be read as one big ghost story" (1), this article analyzes the narrative function of the fantastic in two commercial Spanish language movies, Guillermo Del Toro's 2006 *Pan's Labyrinth* and Juan Antonio Bayona's 2007 *The Orphanage*, to compare how they encompass and reflect aspects of hauntological theory.<sup>1</sup> Each film utilizes popular genres (fairy-tales and horror) to offer significant insights about authoritarianism, violence, and female agency in contemporary Spain. Their protagonists interact with paranormal creatures to attain a deeper understanding of history so that they can acquire the knowledge and courage that they need to mitigate trauma and overcome a variety of hardships. Through acknowledging the epistemological implications of the fantastic, deliberate disobedience and self-sacrifice, Ofelia and Laura are able to liberate themselves from a repressive present and envisage a more optimistic future for others too.

Over the last century, ghostliness has increasingly become a focus of academic inquiry. The term 'hauntology', originally coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 study *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, refers to historical specters that influence present experience in various manners and has become a popular theoretical paradigm. In an insightful analysis of Guillermo del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone*, Anne E. Hardcastle uses Derrida and Avery Gordon's theories of hauntology to analyze the film's ghost story as an allegory for contemporary Spain's struggle to understand the traumatic legacy of its civil war. Commenting on Derrida, Hardcastle writes:

Jacques Derrida has proposed the concept of "hauntology" to describe the philosophical status of the past, viewing its traces—the traumas, the memories, the ideas, and the dead—as specters who have returned to the present.... What Derrida argues for in the term hauntology is the presence/present of the past; history as something both dead and returned to life, a state more complex and less certain than Being, but still capable of a profound influence over us. (120)

Specters often make their presence felt either out of a concern for justice or of a lingering need to resolve unfinished business. Because they do not aim to alienate or to frighten, Derrida suggests that we communicate with them, instead of shunning or brushing them aside, to appreciate their meaning. Throughout his book he argues that engaging with ghosts can lead to a more profound understanding of history, and characterizes hauntology as a mode of perception with potentially significant epistemological implications. For her part, Avery Gordon proposes that unique insights and ways of knowing can emerge through the process of investigating hauntings, which

helps to clarify the subjective relationship between social life and history (8). She also stresses the potential learning benefits of interacting with the supernatural: "...to engage the ghost, heterogeneously but cooperatively, as metaphor, as weapon, as salve, is a fundamental epistemology" (151). Derrida and Gordon each theorize that communicating with ghosts can be a productive and valuable way to bolster our search for knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Numerous scholars have deliberated and expanded upon Derrida's theories over the years. Andrew Gallix describes hauntology as an adapted form of deconstruction that became "...the first major trend in critical theory to have flourished online" ("Hauntology..."), and Colin Davis defines it as "the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (373) to suggest that hauntings can point towards "a still unformulated future" (379). Mark Fisher understood it as the manner in which the present is haunted by a nostalgia for lost futures that have never arrived, implying that specters also forecast potential liberation from the present.<sup>3</sup> Derrida calls this their messianic nature and links the ghosts with a longing or with a demand for democratic justice (74). For Jonathan Joseph, "The messianic is the spectral anticipation of the future, a waiting inspired by a deferred spirit or... the promise of a future to come and... a desire for emancipation from the present" (98). Gordon maintains that there is a transformative dimension involved in hauntings and associates the ghost with an intrinsic sense of hope or unfulfilled promise: "the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope... we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory out of a concern for justice" (63-64). Their messianic function reveals that specters not only represent the traces of the past but also convey a desire for future resolution, so they anticipate and advance emancipatory transformation in the interest of justice too. When appropriately acknowledged and granted attention, hauntings can often point toward an unformulated and potentially advantageous future.<sup>4</sup>

This article analyzes *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Orphanage* through a hauntological and messianic lens to determine the extent to which Ofelia and Laura are able to mitigate trauma through their various encounters with fantastic beings in their efforts to secure a more just future. Communing with the supernatural affords them agency, empowers them to challenge systems of authority, and, despite their physical deaths, ultimately enables them to enter into paradisiacal afterlives. As will be discussed below, Ofelia and Laura destabilize established social conventions by contesting authoritarianism and creating meaning via unorthodox methods, and their actions have messianic implications that prefigure and advocate for personal and collective emancipation from historical trauma.

### ***Pan's Labyrinth***

Hauntological readings of *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Orphanage* draw attention to each film's preoccupation with the search for knowledge, historical revisionism, and messianic discourses in the name of justice, linking them thematically as their protagonists interact with spectral figures in an attempt to come to terms with various kinds of trauma.<sup>5</sup> In *Pan's Labyrinth*, most of the specters that Ofelia encounters appear in the form of fantastic creatures, projections of the psychological distress that generally stems from her problematic relationship with her stepfather Captain Vidal. Her biological father, a republican tailor, was killed during the Spanish Civil War and his replacement by Vidal parallels the victory of the Francoist forces as they solidified their control over the country. Most of the plot revolves around her attempts to defy Vidal's authority in an effort to fight against the cruelty, injustice, and violence that he

embodies. By interacting with the fantastic, Ofelia is able to mitigate many of the anxieties caused by the oppression that surrounds her every day in post-war Spain.<sup>6</sup>

Criticism of *Pan's Labyrinth* generally explores the film's combination of realistic and fairy-tale representation as a means of exposing repression in 1940's Spain, its metafictional discourse, and the impact that various kinds of trauma have had on Ofelia.<sup>7</sup> Cathy Caruth describes trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). In *Pan's Labyrinth*, such phenomena come to life as supernatural creatures that interact with Ofelia and eventually enable her to conjure up enough courage to confront her stepfather. At the outset, Ofelia and her mother Carmen move to an isolated mill in the woods that serves as a makeshift military outpost, where Captain Vidal commands a company of Francoist soldiers who try to hunt down the resistance fighters still hiding in the forest. Within this context, Ofelia imagines herself as the protagonist of a fairy tale in which she must carry out a series of fantastic tasks to prove that she is the long-lost princess Moanna of the Underground Realm. Upon completing each task, she then faces a more dangerous monster, and becomes more confident and bolder with each new encounter. In the climax, fantasy blends with reality as Ofelia defies the true monster, her despotic stepfather, which leads to her death but also verifies her identity as the legitimate princess of the underworld.<sup>8</sup>

In the first scene, Carmen and Ofelia travel through the forest on route to the mill. Carmen asks her why she has brought so many books along and declares that she is too old to believe in children's stories. However, Ofelia is unwilling to give them up and embarks on her first adventure during a brief stop when she finds a sculpted rock on the ground and places it into the eye socket of a nearby broken statue, making it complete once again. When a stick insect suddenly emerges from its mouth, Ofelia smiles and believes that she has just released a fairy from the stone. As Janet Thormann notes, this is the first instance in which Ofelia's literary imagination affords her a sense of agency, which boosts her confidence in the face of her impending encounter with Vidal.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the film she continually perceives reality in fairy tale terms and her fictionalizations increasingly enable her to overcome fear. Carmen tries to convince her to call Vidal "father," suggesting that "it's only a word" (Del Toro), but it is clear that Ofelia already conceptualizes him as an evil stepfather and refuses to do so. When she first meets Vidal, she clutches her books close to her heart, extends her left hand to greet him, and he immediately reprimands her for her lack of propriety. His obsession with decorum and disdain for books alienate Ofelia right away because she still believes that stories are significant and empowering; on the verge of adolescence, she resists the norms of the adult world that she intuitively associates with fascism.<sup>10</sup> The opening segments thus introduce several motifs that will haunt Ofelia throughout the film: the death of her father and his replacement by Vidal (an allegory for the fall of the Republic and the implementation of Francoism), her looming separation from her mother, figurative and literal censorship, and her impending transition into adulthood.

Soon after arriving, Ofelia embarks on another adventure when she follows the fairy into the labyrinth behind the mill and meets a faun, who immediately recognizes her as the possible reincarnation of the ancient princess Moanna of the Underground Realm. Ofelia doesn't really know how to react to him, for although he seems deferential, at times he appears angry, frightening, and potentially violent. Nevertheless, he is the first male creature in the film to take an interest in her, so she initially follows his counsel and plays the part of the princess. The faun

takes on the role of paternal surrogate that advises and leads Ofelia down a path of self-realization; for Thormann, his appeal is likely related to her sense of loss: “The death of the father allows the child to idealize him, and at the same time it opens a space in the symbolic for the child to elaborate a fantasy of paternity that can transmit an inheritance that the Name of the Father represents. The absent father is a hole in the Symbolic for the imagination to fill, a space for the exploration of fantasy” (178). Since the faun promises a paradisiacal inheritance if she is able to prove that she is the princess, fantasy becomes the means through which she attempts to generate self-confidence in light of her father’s absence. Much of the film’s interest lies in their extraordinary interactions as the faun decides to test her character by giving her three tasks to accomplish before the arrival of the next full moon.

In the first task, Ofelia must retrieve a key from the belly of a giant toad that dwells under a nearby tree and stunts its growth. In *El Libro de las Encrucijadas*, she reads about the history of an ancient civilization of men, animals, and magical creatures that used to coexist peacefully and sleep under the tree’s protection: “Al principio de los tiempos, cuando el bosque era joven, vivían en armonía los animales, los hombres y las criaturas mágicas. Se protegían los unos a los otros y dormían juntos bajo la sombra de un frondoso árbol que crece en la colina, cerca del molino. Ahora, el árbol se muere... Debajo de sus raíces ha anidado un enorme sapo que no lo deja sanar” (Del Toro).<sup>11</sup> Just as Ofelia approaches the tree, Vidal and his men ride out to the woods in search of a rebel campfire, where he finds a vial of antibiotics left hurriedly among the leaves and yells out a warning to the fugitives. The parallelism between fantastic and realistic imagery establishes a connection between two forest communities (the magical creatures and the rebels) whose survival is threatened by repressive figures (the toad and Vidal’s forces). When Ofelia descends underground to face the toad, she criticizes its gluttony and asks if it feels ashamed for killing the tree. Although it is not overtly violent, it is frightening, lives in a creepy, bug infested grotto, and literally sucks the life out of its environment. It is not portrayed as an immediate threat to Ofelia, but its grotesque representation generates a feeling of discomfort that engulfs the present and creates a sense of unease about the future. The toad is a despotic presence that exploits the tree and consumes its life force, just as the fascists threaten the freedom and survival of those who oppose their rule. Ofelia must take away its key if the tree is to live, so she sums up her courage and confidently declares that she is not afraid of it, challenging an autocratic figure for the first time in the film: “Soy la princesa Moanna, y no te tengo miedo.” (Del Toro) She then tricks it into eating some magic stones, causing it to swell up and perish, and extracts the key from its slimy innards that will allow her to continue on with her quest.<sup>12</sup>

The first task establishes the feasibility of combating repression through fantastic encounters. By reading a magic book, Ofelia learns about the ancient peaceful coexistence of humans, animals, and supernatural creatures, and her efforts to reembody the princess and vanquish the toad reflect her initial attempts to make sense of reality via a fairy-tale adventure. The key that she extracts from the slime represents her innate ability to overcome fear, which increasingly manifests itself throughout her subsequent adventures and culminates during the climax when she openly defies Vidal. After completing the first task, she returns to the mill covered in mud, is reprimanded by her mother, and happily finds out that her tardiness has really upset her stepfather.

In the second task, Ofelia must retrieve a dagger from the chamber of the Pale Man, a slumbering monster that dwells in a reception hall underneath the mill, but the faun insists that she cannot touch anything from his table if she is to escape unharmed. After finding the dagger, she disregards the faun’s advice and eats a few grapes; consequently, the creature wakes up,

seeks out his disembodied eyes and chases her, and she barely escapes with her life. The episode combines conventions derived from horror, fantasy, and myth to create a memorable and chilling sequence that underscores just how dangerous Ofelia's quest really is. Intentional disobedience and the exercise of free will are the driving forces behind her actions as she ignores the fairies' warnings and follows her intuition to find the dagger. Eating the forbidden fruit wakes up a violent monster who almost kills her, but she is able to survive and thereby takes another step forward in her journey of self-realization. This scene also horrifically recreates Captain Vidal's dinner party from a few nights before, and the malice that Ofelia associates with him is stunningly brought to life in the figure of the Pale Man, who embodies the danger that disobedience might bring about in the fascist world.<sup>13</sup> By successfully escaping in spite of his wrath, she learns that she doesn't always have to abide by the rule of the father and grows even more self-assured.

In an aggressive display of anger, the faun admonishes Ofelia for her recklessness, but later calms down and assigns her the third task, insisting that she obey his every word this time. When she agrees, he instructs her to take her newborn baby brother from her stepfather's quarters and bring him to the center of the labyrinth, where a drop of innocent blood will open the portal to the Underground Realm. Compliance, disobedience, and self-determination again come into play as Ofelia soon comes face-to-face with violence in both the fantastic and the real worlds. Vidal's room is now depicted as the dark lair of a disfigured monster who must be vanquished in order to ensure survival. Ofelia drugs Vidal, retrieves her brother and carries him to the faun, but ultimately refuses to hand him over because she is afraid that he will hurt him:

Fauno: ¡Prometisteis obedecerme sin chistar! ¡Entregadme al niño!

Ofelia: ¡No! Mi hermano se queda conmigo.

Fauno: ¿Sacrificaréis vuestro derecho sagrado por este mocoso al que apenas conocéis?

Ofelia: Sí, lo sacrifico.

Fauno: ¿Negaréis vuestra cuna por él? ¿Él, por quién habéis sido humillada e ignorada?

Ofelia: Sí, reniego.

Fauno: Hágase pues vuestra voluntad Alteza. (Del Toro)

This final act of disobedience, her most significant of the film, reaffirms her resolve and verifies her noble character as she selflessly gives up her birth right to protect her brother. Just as she confronts the faun, a groggy Vidal reaches the center of the labyrinth, shoots her, takes the boy and leaves her for dead as her blood trickles down into the cavern below. Becoming a martyr, Ofelia thus completes the third task, passes the faun's test and enters into the Underground Realm as the long-lost Princess Moanna. When Vidal exits the labyrinth carrying the baby, he is killed by the rebels who insist that the child will never even know his name, so Ofelia's sacrifice indirectly results in the triumph of the insurgents over the fascists and in the revision of the historical record. Disobeying tyranny via active resistance and self-sacrifice thereby become redemptive acts that guarantee her brother's survival. The culminating third task demonstrates the extent to which the fantastic imagination can empower the subject; standing up to monsters enables Ofelia to gain the confidence that she needs to fight against authoritarianism, and she is rewarded, despite her physical death, with her passage into paradise. The denouement suggests that confronting tyrants and defying their authority, even in the face of great danger, can help secure a better future and lead to redemption.

This reading of *Pan's Labyrinth* posits that Ofelia's fairy-tale quest emerges from her psychological efforts to overcome trauma. Just entering adolescence, she clings onto fantasy as a means of coping with the horrors of the real world, represented in the film by Captain Vidal and

the repressive culture of the mill. Although Vidal's replacement of her biological father mirrors the fall of the Second Republic to Francoism, Ofelia's martyrdom and entrance into the Underground Realm transforms her into a messianic figure that forecasts the eventual restoration of a more pluralistic and democratic society. Through hauntological discourse the film reimagines history, addresses various specters (fascism, death, loss, problematic father figures, alienation, violence, censorship and injustice), and reveals how fiction can empower the subject to contest tyranny and work toward a more just future. Although the viewer knows that Ofelia's fairy tale is not "real" in the traditional sense and functions as a self-defense mechanism that helps her come to terms with her new reality, her passage into the afterlife nevertheless constitutes a noteworthy triumph; as the princess Moanna, she is able to vanquish evil and dwell in a paradisiacal space that idealistically reflects what a better world could be like without fascism. Even though the end of the film does not correspond to historical reality, for the insurgents did not prevail and the Franco regime lasted for so many years, its messianic component foreshadows the eventual return of democracy and implies that totalitarianism might be overcome in the interest of justice. *Pan's Labyrinth* thereby communicates its own "nostalgia for a lost future" (Fisher) through its cinematically beautiful portrayal of Ofelia's fantastic journey of disobedience and self-sacrifice.

### ***The Orphanage***

A hauntological reading of Spanish director Juan Antonio Bayona's 2007 *The Orphanage* also elicits notable insights about history, trauma, and the search for truth. In the film, Laura and Carlos buy the orphanage where she grew up in order to start a school for disabled children. Their adopted son Simón, an HIV carrier, frequently plays with his imaginary friends and one day mysteriously disappears. Although the authorities investigate, they are unable to find him and eventually seem to give up on the case. As time goes by, Laura loses faith in the police's ability to uncover the truth, so she solicits the help of a medium in an attempt to find out what really happened to her son. After a series of paranormal encounters, she starts to communicate with the ghosts that haunt the orphanage, uncovers their tragic history, and they eventually help her locate Simón's lifeless body in a secret basement. After finding him, Laura voluntarily enters into the afterlife so that she can be an eternal mother to the orphan spirits. Like Ofelia, Laura embraces the fantastic to confront adversity and consequently transcends into a new phase of existence.

*The Orphanage* is an entertaining ghost story that incorporates many conventions typical of horror movies such as gothic imagery, unusual children, clairvoyants, spirits, sudden changes in temperature, slamming doors, disembodied voices, strange noises, a séance, and the mysterious appearance of objects.<sup>14</sup> So far critics have focused on its representations of child and maternal monstrosity, the mythological underpinnings of the plot, the influence of storytelling and the Peter Pan intertext, liminality and historical considerations, and Laura's problematic mental condition and ultimate decision to join the orphans in the afterlife.<sup>15</sup> Although undeniably commercial in nature, *The Orphanage* skillfully explores the psychological state of a distraught mother who must come to terms with the horror of losing her only son, which makes it a touching examination of the psyche that raises significant questions about trauma and the search for truth. As Tim Kroenert writes in an early review of the film, "[The] use of the supernatural to provide an allegorical exploration of Laura's grief and guilt reflects the traditional function of ghosts in literature, and gives the story a distinctive, human element" (28). The current analysis explores this human element by analyzing Laura's deliberate attempts to mitigate trauma via a

shift toward and willful acceptance of the fantastic as a potentially constructive epistemology; her transformation from cynic to believer and ultimate apotheosis enable her to find out what really happened to her son and uncover the orphanage's secret history of violence.

Ghostliness is noticeable from the very beginning of the film as Simón tells his parents that he enjoys playing with imaginary friends, but a good amount of time passes before Laura seriously considers that spirits may actually be present. The first concrete evidence of haunting stems from the séance sequence, when the medium Aurora comes to the house, is induced into a trance, and speaks to the orphanage's ghosts. She tells Laura "Cuando algo muy terrible ocurre en un lugar, a veces queda una huella, una herida que sirve de nudo entre dos líneas del tiempo. Es como... como un eco que se repite una y otra vez esperando a ser escuchado. O como la marca de un pellizco que pide una caricia de alivio" (Bayona). According to Aurora, a noticeable presence, an echo or a wound, often lingers about in the location of a tragic event because it still needs to communicate something to the living. Once she establishes contact, she learns that someone poisoned the orphans to death many years ago and covered up the crime, which left their spirits in limbo seeking consolation. For Laura, the episode confirms her suspicions about paranormal activity, reveals the identity of the haunters, and uncovers the institution's hidden history of malice and violence. Here, talking to ghosts quite literally enables the protagonists to learn important details about the past, which in turn helps Laura better understand her present circumstances.

Until this point Laura had been skeptical about the existence of ghosts, but she now starts to believe and lashes out at her husband and the police psychologist when they declare that the entire séance was probably a hoax. She accuses the police of being unable to provide her with even one clue about her son's disappearance, and asks them why she should not consider the supernatural in such trying circumstances. Laura's question marks a change in perspective in favor of an alternate way of knowing, for rationality is insufficient and cannot help them in this case. As Aurora leaves the house, she tells Laura that she must acknowledge that ghosts might exist if she really wants to find out what happened to Simón: "Usted oye, pero no escucha. No se trata de ver para creer, sino de creer para ver. Crea y entonces verá" (Bayona). After this encounter, Laura acknowledges that the house may be haunted and that the spirits of the murdered orphans might know what happened to Simón. When she admits the possibility that the ghosts are real and accepts the fantastic, she takes another step forward in her quest to find her son. Sarah Thomas elaborates:

In *El orfanato*, Laura... not only tolerates the ghosts' presence in the orphanage but also elects to live with them in death. Before doing so, however, she must learn to communicate with them, as she discovers they are her only hope for finding Simón, whether dead or alive. Gordon has written of the importance of learning to "talk to and listen to ghosts, rather than banish them," and in Laura's case this means not only understanding them as ghosts but also, fundamentally, as children. (107)

Besides focusing on literal hauntings, other recurring themes involve communicating with specters, game-playing and the disclosure of secrets. The importance of playing children's games is highlighted from the very beginning. In the first scene we see a flashback of the young Laura playing *Un, dos, tres, chocolate inglés* with the other orphans, roughly the equivalent of *Red Light/ Green Light*, which entertains and bonds the children together even after they pass away. Towards the end of the film, the adult Laura communicates with their spirits by initiating the same game inside the house, at which point they physically appear to her and eventually show her where to find her son's body. Ann Davies notes "During the extended final

confrontation between herself and the dead children, she makes contact first by following the trail of clues... and then by playing their old childhood game in which the ghostly children join in: it is only when she reverts to playing games that contact between herself and the children is finally established” (87). Playing *Un, dos, tres...* frames the narrative but more importantly becomes a way for Laura to develop a sympathetic relationship with the ghosts, which ultimately enables her to locate the hidden basement.

The other children’s game featured throughout is *Jugar al tesoro*, which becomes the key to revealing the orphanage’s deepest secrets. Play begins when the invisible friends steal something valuable, and then leave a series of material clues behind that need to be deciphered. If they are interpreted correctly and the treasure is found, the invisible friends must then grant a wish. This game takes place a few times during the movie and several truths are disclosed as a result. In one instance, Simón’s friends take some of his coins, so he and Laura follow the clues to find them locked away in a kitchen drawer inside of his medical file. This leads to the revelation that Simón knows that Laura is not his biological mother and that he believes that he will die soon, even though at this point he is still unaware that he is an HIV carrier. Afterwards, Carlos and Laura inform him of his condition, but allege that he invented the treasure hunt as a way to get them to tell him the truth about his adoption. Later, while rummaging through Simón’s things, Laura discovers a trunk that contains clues left for her by the ghosts; she follows their leads and ends up finding an unattached doorknob. Looking for its corresponding door, she wanders into the coal shed where she digs through a storage area and eventually uncovers the remains of the murdered children. Playing the game leads to the discovery and exhumation of the orphans’ skeletons, and thus provides some concrete evidence of a traumatic event that had been kept hidden from the historical record for many years.<sup>16</sup>

Near the end of the film, the doorknob reappears and leads Laura to the secret basement where she finds her own lost treasure, Simón. When she carries his body up to the dormitory, swallows a bottle of pills, and eventually regains consciousness, she demands her final wish, “deseo que vuelva Simón” (Bayona). Consequently, the lighthouse outside the orphanage starts to shine, Simón wakes up in her arms, and he claims his own wish too: “ahora que encontré la moneda, pido un deseo. Deseo que te quedes a cuidar de todos nosotros” (Bayona). Laura then looks up to see the other orphans in their beds, and as they come out to greet her, they recognize their long-lost friend and declare that she is just like the Wendy of the Peter Pan story. For Laura, the game is now over, the treasure is found, and she is reunited with the missing children in the spirit world. The references to Peter Pan throughout lend a metafictional element to the film, whereas Simón and the orphans represent the lost boys that will never grow up and Laura is the mature Wendy who travels to Never-Never Land to take care of the children.<sup>17</sup>

In the closing scene, Carlos returns to the orphanage to place flowers at a memorial for Laura and Simón on the grounds. Afterwards, he enters the house, finds a locket on the floor, and some French doors mysteriously open up before him. The implication is that Laura’s spirit now might be playing with him, and he appears to welcome the possibility by smiling. Game playing throughout the movie thereby functions both as a structural and as a narrative device that advances the storyline while it simultaneously facilitates communication with the supernatural.

Several other scenes also mirror the theme of uncovering hidden secrets. During the opening credits, children’s hands pull back old and faded wallpaper to reveal a brightly colored background with prominent words underneath. While exposing concealed information, this foreshadows the movie’s climax when Laura has to literally unpeel wallpaper in a closet to find the hidden doorway to the basement. A nearby lighthouse also appears throughout, but since it

doesn't work for most of the film the orphanage takes on the air of a gothic mansion, a dark and ominous space suggestive of its own mysterious history. When Laura passes into the spirit world and is reunited with the children, the lighthouse illuminates, symbolizing resolution and the end of her search. In another jolting scene the murderess Benigna is suddenly hit by a truck while crossing the street. After her death, the police find photographs in her house that reveal that she once was a caretaker in the orphanage, that her son used to wear a burlap sack over his head to hide a deformity, and that he had accidentally drowned in a nearby cave after the other orphans had played a practical joke on him. The photos are tangible clues that confirm Laura's suspicions and allow her to draw conclusions about tragic events that took place in and around the house. Little by little she pieces together information, acquires knowledge, and clarifies many of her doubts about the past by deciphering supernatural and concrete evidence, thereby fashioning a hybrid epistemology that admits both subjective and rational ways of knowing.<sup>18</sup>

Laura's extraordinary insightfulness empowers her to uncover and understand secrets that would otherwise remain hidden. Acknowledging hauntings and letting the spirits communicate through their games enables her to bring the orphanage's darker history to light as she seeks to learn more about her son's disappearance. The process of engaging ghosts also has messianic implications that prefigure Laura's reunion with the orphans and passage into the afterlife, which ultimately provides her with a sense of emotional closure. In sum, *The Orphanage* is both an evocative psychological thriller that destabilizes established norms and promises emancipation via hauntological discourse, and an entertaining horror movie that leaves a powerful and lasting impression on its viewers.

## Conclusions

*Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Orphanage* explore similar themes while tracing their protagonists' attempts to mitigate trauma through their various encounters with the fantastic. Their gothic settings create imposing environments in which strong female characters communicate with supernatural beings in order to overcome a series of obstacles. The buildings where each film takes place, the mill and the orphanage, are dark and repressive institutions whose norms are intentionally challenged by determined women: the mill embodies the values of post-war fascist Spain whereas the orphanage reflects the secrets, traumas and repressed histories that continue to haunt the present. Both spaces are contested by protagonists who epitomize exceptional ways of seeing and knowing: Ofelia embraces a fairy-tale quest as the means through which she can come to terms with repression and loss, whereas Laura chooses to believe in the supernatural to expose secrets and uncover an undisclosed history of violence. Their ultimate passage into paradisiacal spaces suggests that actively confronting specters can be transformative, which gives each film a messianic dimension; despite their physical deaths, Ofelia and Laura each enter into their own particular afterlife and appear to find deliverance and consolation. In both cases the act of dying is portrayed as a kind of martyrdom and/or victory, which implies that self-sacrifice for a just cause is admirable and worthwhile. An emancipatory promise of a more hospitable future characterizes each finale as each woman is ultimately reunited with lost family members.

Each movie also aligns itself with recent cultural movements that reevaluate and reimagine significant historical events that have often been misrepresented or forgotten over time. In Spain, historical memory has been a controversial topic ever since the transition to democracy, and intellectuals still debate the merits of reinvestigating many of the crimes of the past. In her concluding remarks on Del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone*, Hardcastle notes

Throughout *The Devil's Backbone* both the spectral and the historical point to the ghosts that the present-day audience must ultimately come to terms with in order to reconstruct the significance of Spain's national history. The film's cathartic, fantasized confrontation with the past shows us how a historical film can portray the ongoing emotional dimensions of (especially traumatic) historical events. (129)

Our readings of *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Orphanage* are similar. In both, the confrontations between protagonists and fantastic representations of trauma, memories, ideas, and the dead can also be understood as allegories for Spain's enduring emotional struggle with its own history. *Pan's Labyrinth* undermines the legacy of fascism by depicting a fictitious rebel victory over their oppressors, while *The Orphanage* exposes the fallibility of traditional modes of inquiry to propose an alternate method of understanding the past. Ofelia's plight reveals that principled resistance might eventually overcome authoritarianism whereas Laura's deconstructs the intentional manipulation of truth. Both films incorporate and favor the fantastic as a viable means with which to reassess historical trauma in the interest of justice.

Just how to live with the ghosts of the past is an ongoing discussion in Spain. *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Orphanage* purposely use the fantastic to explore and reimagine history, and so doing successfully convey memorable socio-political messages within the format of well-made and thought-provoking fantasy movies. Both films suggest that communicating with specters can help us to reconsider trauma in a new light and consequently understand the present more completely. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they make us think critically about the past while they also entertain and intrigue us, and are thus memorable and fascinating works of cinematic art.

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#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The cinematography, mise-en-scène, sound, editing, and acting in both films are extraordinary, but due to the length and thematic scope of this article it is impossible to address them appropriately here. I plan to study these formal elements more in-depth elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Hardcastle explains:

Derrida and Gordon suggest the same answer: follow and talk to the ghost, acknowledge haunting, admit that the past is still a “seething presence.” Derrida... urges us “to speak *to the* specter, to speak with it, therefore, especially *to make or to let* a spirit *speak*.” (original italics 11) Understanding ghostly matters “means that we will have to learn to talk to and listen to ghosts, rather than banish them, as the precondition for establishing our scientific or humanistic knowledge” (Gordon 23). (120)

<sup>3</sup> Fisher explains “What should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised. These spectres--the spectres of lost futures--reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world” (34).

<sup>4</sup> Another useful study that employs spectral criticism to investigate hauntings, mourning, time, and the visible and the invisible is Patricia M. Keller’s 2016 *Ghostly Landscapes. Film, Photography, and the Aesthetics of Haunting in Contemporary Spanish Culture*. Keller writes:

...the readings offered in *Ghostly Landscapes* aim to examine the cultural and political ways in which loss affectively disrupts and conditions being.... I place *Ghostly Landscapes* square in the centre of this kind of criticism, not only for its acute attention to the spectral as it emerges in and through the image, but also for its particular mode of interpretation, which engages in an awareness of what we do not see, of what is not shown, of what is lost or missing. (9-10)

<sup>5</sup> In *Pan’s Labyrinth*, Ofelia’s trauma primarily stems from her biological father’s death and her mother’s decision to marry the evil Captain Vidal. In *The Orphanage*, Laura’s adopted son disappears and she desperately tries to find out what happened to him. Both films use orphans to represent the emotional trauma and potential consequences of living in non-traditional families with problematic parental figures.

<sup>6</sup> Mar Diestro-Dópido’s 2013 monograph *Pan’s Labyrinth* provides an insightful analysis of the representation of war, amnesia, memory and fascism in the movie.

<sup>7</sup> For in-depth analyses of these themes, see articles by Clark and McDonald, Deveny, Hanley, Luckhurst, Hodgen and Thormann as listed in the Works Cited list.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Luckhurst characterizes *Pan’s Labyrinth* as a film that reflects the traumatic collective memory of the Spanish Civil War:

We might therefore situate it as a narrative emerging from the suppression of traumatic collective memory about the Civil War. After the ‘active erasure of the social memory’ in the transition from Fascist rule in the late 1970s, Eloy Merino and Rosi Song argue that contemporary Spanish culture is now full of displaced echoes of the war: ‘It is the prohibited nature of these traces that gives them their ghostly quality, so that they can function undetected, unnoticed, and banned from normal communication’ (Merino and Song, 2005: 17). (17)

<sup>9</sup> For Janet Thormann, *Pan’s Labyrinth* promotes the imagination’s capacity to recover and repair the past: “The film’s insistence on the transformative power of the imagination and its capacity to intervene in history appears with the child’s first act... The scene repeats a common motif of myth: the hero is revealed in interaction with some relic from the past, pulling a sword from a stone, for example. Identifying herself as hero, Ofelia restores the abandoned, forgotten fragment to recover the past and to repair the work of time” (179).

<sup>10</sup> Roger Clark and Keith McDonald analyze the role of textuality in Ofelia’s construction of identity: “Ofelia’s self-creation is often solidified through the construction of narrative and there are multiple examples of her (as an obsessive reader) writing and realizing her own narrative agency through texts; moreover, the film offers a meta-

textual dimension which attests to the transformative potency of fiction itself. In this way, the whole film can be seen as a celebration of storytelling as liberatory” (59).

<sup>11</sup> *El Libro de las Encrucijadas* is a magical book that the faun provides to help guide Ofelia through her through her fantastic adventures.

<sup>12</sup> For Thomas Deveny the first task helps Ofelia build self-confidence, which is a typical stage in the process of identity construction in fairy tales: “Soy la Princesa Moanna y no te tengo miedo.” Although her initial stutter indicates trepidation, the subsequent words indicate a growing self-confidence. Lüthi believes that a battle with a monster such as dragon—or here, a giant toad—represents “ultimately the internal struggle with one’s own drives and feelings” (80)” (7).

<sup>13</sup> Janet Thormann describes the pale man as a fascist monster: “The pale man, with his sunken head and skeletal frame, conveys the deadness of an absolute and exclusive *jouissance* in a kind of emblem of Fascist power. Fantasy reproduces reality in the setting: the table is a cornucopia of food that mirrors a dinner party the Captain has held, and the hall itself resembles the shape of the Captain’s dining room” (180).

<sup>14</sup> Rodrigo González Dinamarca notes that a prominent feature of the film is the almost cliché depiction of monstrous-child figures:

Incluso, la elaboración de las figuras infantiles en las ficciones de terror ha llegado a constituir algunos clichés, como el del típico niño silencioso y de aspecto enfermizo, que juega con amigos invisibles, hace unos dibujos horribles que predicen lo que ocurrirá, o es poseído por fuerzas desconocidas; un niño que, en fin, se mueve en una esfera que para los adultos parece estar vedada... este cliché de la tradición hollywoodense tomará forma también en el personaje de Simón en *El Orfanato*, personaje que, también, hace unos misteriosos dibujos de los mismos. (93)

<sup>15</sup> See the articles by González Dinamarca, Davies, Llombart Pons, Martínez-García and Thomas listed in the Works Cited list.

<sup>16</sup> Despite *El Orfanato*’s lack of explicit political discourse, Maria Delgado associates the exhumation of the orphans’ bodies with Spain’s recent efforts to honor unidentified victims of past violence:

While *The Orphanage* does not refer directly to the Spanish Civil War or to the Franco regime... the film’s resonance for a nation still coming to terms with its recent history may in part explain its commercial success... After much debate, Spain’s *Law of Historical Memory* was finally passed by... Zapatero’s socialist government... with the result that the bodies of between 30,000 and 150,000 civilians who opposed the right-wing Nationalists during the Civil War and its aftermath can be exhumed from the mass graves in which they are believed to lie. (45)

Although the Spanish parliament gave many Civil War victims the legal right to exhumation by passing *La Ley de Memoria Histórica* in October of 2007, a debate persists regarding to what extent the government should aid in disinterring their bodies.

Sarah Thomas also relates the film’s theme of lost children to Ricard Vinyes, Montserrat Armengou, and Ricard Belis’ 2002 study *Los niños perdidos del franquismo*, which ...illuminates how the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975) systematically separated children from parents deemed unfit due to their political beliefs... In Spain’s repressive postwar years, when it was essential for Francoism to consolidate its power and eliminate opposition, many of these “niños perdidos” were forcibly taken into custody, even if they had living parents or relatives who could care for them. Many of the parents had been killed or imprisoned for their political beliefs. While initially female political prisoners were permitted to keep their children with them, this practice increasingly disappeared and a 1940 decree ordered that once the child reached the age of three he or she could no longer remain with the imprisoned mother and would be separated from her, often placed in a state-run or religiously affiliated orphanage. As a result of the law, the state assumed legal custody of many of these children; in 1944-1945 alone, thirty thousand children were placed in orphanages under the auspices of the Patronato de San Pablo, an institution responsible for prisoners’ children founded in 1943 by the Ministry of Justice. Many of these children were never reunited with their families...

That the final lines of spoken dialogue in the film refer to *los niños perdidos*, then, recall not only the Lost Boys of Neverland, but also the lost children of the Franco dictatorship. The film’s setting in an

orphanage—albeit many years after the Spanish civil war—also invites the viewer to consider secrets concealed on a national as well as personal level. Thus despite appearing to lack an overt connection to the Francoist past, *El orfanato* is nonetheless haunted by the phantom secrets of the lost children of Francoism. (110-111)

<sup>17</sup> Auba Llompart Pons analyzes the Peter Pan subtext throughout *Children of the Corn* and *The Orphanage*: “Igual que los chicos del maíz, los amigos invisibles de Simón son como los niños perdidos que viven con Peter Pan, que se cayeron de sus cunas y nadie los reclamó. Los niños muertos de *El Orfanato* fueron asesinados y nadie se preocupó por encontrar sus cuerpos y averiguar la causa de su muerte. Aquí es Laura, la Wendy de esta historia, la que intentará desvelar este misterio” (276).

<sup>18</sup> Ann Davies argues that Laura’s insight stems from her sense of the monstrous, which gives her a singular perspective originating from somewhere between the rational and the fantastic:

Thus Laura only has her agency... because of her monstrosity. Again, the other agents—Carlos and the police suggesting rationality, Aurora the supernatural—cannot quite account for Simón’s disappearance. In an ironic twist, the agents of rationality should have had the edge since Simón’s death can be rationally explained; but what appears to be required to explain *all* the events is that sense of the monstrous, which is what Laura possesses. (87)