

Disobedience in the Face of Authority

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In the middle of the 20th century fascism swept through Europe. After the devastation of World War I, many countries were left devastated by war and hard times fell upon everybody. As a response to the resulting uncertainty people wanted strength and stability and this desire was exploited by many to set up fascist governments in countries such as Italy, Germany, and Spain. As Hitler was planning and enacting the events that would lead to World War II a civil war broke out in Spain in 1936 that resulted in Francisco Franco, a member of Spain's fascist party, claiming dictatorship. Throughout these struggles, many people faced the personal conflict of whether or not they should stand up to their country's actions or if they should stand by to avoid being harmed. Guillermo Del Toro's film *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) takes place five years after the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1944 under Franco's rule. Ofelia (Ivana Baquero), the protagonist, is brought to the camp with her mother to live with her new stepfather Captain Vidal (Sergi Lopez) who is trying to eliminate a group of rebel guerillas. *Pan's Labyrinth* serves as a parable that exemplifies how disobedience can be the morally correct course of action. Within the film, each character has a choice to blindly follow the authority of a violent government or to resist and disobey in order to make the right choice. This struggle to disobey is shown to us by Del Toro through four characters: Ofelia, Mercedes (Maribel Verdu), Dr. Ferreiro (Alex Angulo), and Captain Vidal.

When we are first introduced to Ofelia when her and her mother (Ariadna Gil) are being driven to Vidal's, Ofelia's new stepfather's, outpost. Her first act of disobedience occurs right after both her and her mother exit the car when Ofelia's mother feels nauseous due to her pregnancy. As the driver comes to check on her, she tells Ofelia to stay close to the car. As she is saying this Ofelia is in the center of a mid-shot and her mother is off to the side as Ofelia looks

away from her showing her indifference. The camera follows her gaze to the canopy of the woods above her until it pans down leaving her alone in the center of the screen in another mid-shot. She steps on a rock that she notices is a piece of a statue on the side of the road, in the woods. As she walks towards it, wistful yet melancholy music begins to play. This leitmotif expresses itself several times throughout the movie and is sung to Ofelia at her death. Playing this song at the moment of her first act of disobedience is foreshadowing of the consequences that will ultimately be the result of her actions throughout the film.

The next time we see Ofelia disobey in the face of authority is during her second task. At this point in the film the Faun (Doug Jones) has told her to retrieve something using the key she found in the first task, but she must complete the task in an hour and she must not eat any of the food on the table she sees or it will cost her life. When she enters the room, she sees the Pale Man sitting at the head of a long table filled with an abundance of food. After finding the knife she must bring to the Faun, Ofelia begins to head back but then sees the food. As she is heading out of the room she stares at the table while slowly walking and the camera starts in a full shot with her whole body in frame with the Pale Man in focus in the background as a reminder of his presence. It then quickly tracks forward to a close up of Ofelia's face looking down at the food with the Pale Man out of focus but with his head adjacent to Ofelia's in the frame. The camera pans to follow Ofelia's gaze as she looks down at the food and then back up to a close up of her face. The Pale Man comes back into focus as Ofelia looks back to the Pale Man before brushing the fairies away and taking a grape. This act of defiance towards the Faun's instructions sets up the viewer to realizing that Ofelia is not somebody who blindly follows orders. It shows us more about her character that will later make her later choice in the third task that results in her moral victory.

In her third task, we see Ofelia's final act of disobedience that shows her moral character in the face of a seemingly uncompromising authority. For the final task, the Faun asks Ofelia to retrieve her newborn brother and bring him to the center of the labyrinth. This is shortly after her mother's death and Ofelia is being kept under guard in her room while her brother is kept in Captain Vidal's room where he keeps close watch over his son. Ofelia almost makes a narrow escape with her brother, but Vidal discovers her at the last moment and chases her all the way to the labyrinth. Ofelia makes it to the center where the Faun is where she gives her final act of disobedience. In a shot/reverse shot sequence the Faun tells her that to open the portal to the Underworld where she can live as an immortal princess, she must spill the blood of an innocent. Ofelia refuses to let the Faun use her brother's blood and he becomes irate that she would give up everything for a brother that has caused the death of her mother and put her under the care of Vidal who despises her. If it were not for her brother, Ofelia and her mother would not have been brought to Vidal's outpost and they could have lived happily in the city together. Instead, because she refuses to give up her brother, Captain Vidal arrives at the center of the labyrinth and takes Ofelia's brother then shoots Ofelia. Mercedes finally finds her and sings the lullaby that is the same as the leitmotif heard earlier in the first scene of the film as Ofelia enters the woods. Her blood drips down onto the portal and Ofelia is allowed to claim her birthright as princess of the Underworld. The Faun reveals that the final task was a test and that by refusing to sacrifice someone else she proved she had the moral character that made her worthy to enter the Underworld. Through her disobedience and sacrifice, Ofelia is granted eternal life with her mother and father.

However, Ofelia is not the only character in the film who chooses to disobey. Dr. Ferreiro also has his own struggle. Throughout the course of the film we see his disobedience

towards Vidal and the fascist army. He uses his position as a doctor to both get close to Captain Vidal and to help Mercedes supply the rebels and treat their wounds. We first see his resistance shortly after Ofelia and her mother arrive at the outpost. As the only doctor he is assigned to treat Ofelia's mother during her pregnancy. After leaving her room, Ferreiro is spotted by Ofelia furtively handing Mercedes a wrapped package that is implied to contain medicine. Later, while Ofelia is completing the first task, Vidal finds antibiotics in the bag left at an abandoned rebel campsite. This implies to the viewer that the guerrillas are being supplied by Ferreiro. The viewer knows the risk of rebellion from an earlier scene where Vidal brutally murders two farmers who his men suspect to be rebels. It is revealed, after he disfigures and shoots them that he knew they were not guerrillas but was trying to teach his men a lesson about being thorough. If being maimed and killed is the result of being suspected of rebelling the viewer can only imagine how Vidal would react if he discovered that someone within his own ranks was supplying the guerrillas.

Dr. Ferreiro's ultimate act of disobedience comes in the third act of the film. The guerrillas had just attacked Vidal's storehouse where he keeps all the medical supplies, food, and tobacco. They escape, but one rebel is wounded and left behind. Instead of killing him like he did with the suspected rebels, the man is tied up in the storehouse and tortured. After Vidal gets his fill of sadistic pleasure from torturing the prisoner, he calls for Dr. Ferreiro to ensure that the prisoner stays alive for the next round of torture. The prisoner, who is acquainted with Dr. Ferreiro, tells him that he has already given up some information and asks that the doctor kills him. Dr. Ferreiro takes a syringe with poison and the camera cuts to an extreme close up of the syringe against the prisoner's arm as the doctor's hand is shaking wildly. The prisoner steadies the doctor's hand with his own as the doctor gently pushes the syringe into his arm giving the

prisoner a peaceful death. At least more peaceful than any other character is allowed to receive in the movie. Through his resistance of Vidal's orders, Ferreiro prevents the rebel from having to experience days of excruciating torture that would only result in a more violent and painful death. Vidal realizes what Dr. Ferreiro is up to and confronts him about his actions. He asks the doctor why he killed the prisoner and Ferreiro says that it was the only choice he had. When Vidal asks him why he would disobey Ferreiro says, "To obey, like that, for the sake of obeying...without questioning. Only people like you can do that...captain." This shows how Ferreiro, despite knowing the consequences of his actions, stopped and chose to do the only thing he believed in. Instead of following along like Vidal, he questions authority and knows when they are out of line. As he walks off, Vidal shoots Dr. Ferreiro but he is not given a bloody death like others in the film. We never see his wounds unlike the two farmers or even the prisoner who Ferreiro just euthanized. In a wide shot, Ferreiro falls to the ground on the left side of the screen while Vidal and his men stand on the right with a large space in between them. This exemplifies the opposite ends between Captain Vidal and Doctor Ferreiro. The scene can only be described as bleak in both tone and color. The colors within the shot, as well as many other shots within the camp throughout the film, are a myriad of greys, grey-blues, and black as it rains. If the actions of Captain Vidal have not set the tone for what it would be like to live under him, the color composition certainly does.

The last major character who shows disobedience is Mercedes. Mercedes is a woman who is a housekeeper and cook for Captain Vidal, but she is also helping the rebels and it is eventually revealed that her brother is one of the guerrillas. Mercedes' act of disobedience throughout the film is spying on Captain Vidal and using her position as his housekeeper, with the help of Dr. Ferreiro, to supply the rebels with food, medicine, and information. Mercedes'

first dangerous act of disobedience in the film is when she visits the rebels with Dr. Ferreiro to bring them much needed supplies. Captain Vidal, determined to kill all the rebels, decides to starve the rebels out and locks away all the food and medicine in a storehouse and beings to ration all supplies. Because Mercedes is the only other one with access to the key, she steals the second copy and tells Vidal that there is only one key which belongs to him. When she sneaks away to supply the rebels, she gives her brother the key to the storehouse. When the rebels attack, Vidal notices in the aftermath that the lock was unlocked which leads to him becoming aware of Mercedes' identity as a spy.

Mercedes' ultimate act of disobedience comes after she is discovered by Vidal. When he reveals to her that he knows what she has been doing, Mercedes decides to flee to the rebels. Even though it ends up slowing her down, before leaving she goes to Ofelia's room and decides to take Ofelia with her. Once they are in the forest, Ofelia and Mercedes are captured by Vidal's men again in a scene similar in color to the one where Dr. Ferreiro died. The bleak colors as well as the rain denotes the hopelessness of their situation. Despite the hopelessness, both Mercedes and Ofelia refuse to give up hope and refuse to stop disobeying. Mercedes is kept in the empty storehouse, now torture chamber, and tied to a post while Ofelia is kept under guard in her room. The same post that the rebel prisoner was tied to and died leaning on. Vidal gives her a similar speech about his plans to torture her until he gets the information he needs. In this scene, Mercedes is tied to a post and Vidal has his back to her as he looks down at his instruments of torture. Mercedes tells Vidal that she was able to get away with what she did because women are invisible to him. He thinks that they are not strong enough to betray him like that. As his back is turned, he begins telling her about his torture and the camera cuts between him, his tools, Mercedes, and her hands as she uses her hidden knife to cut away the ropes

binding her hands. In each cut, each of those subjects are the only things in the shot. Compared to the scene where Vidal as the rebel prisoner, this shows that his stance on a woman's strength has not changed. In the prisoner's scene, Vidal does not completely turn his back to the prisoner at all. Even though the prisoner is bloodied and barely conscious he keeps an eye on him and still has a guard in the room. In Mercedes' case, Vidal is completely alone with her and he turns his back to her and is too enraptured in his speech to hear her cutting at her ropes. This shows that Vidal thinks a bloodied and barely conscious man is more capable than a woman who has shown active resistance to him. This is what allows her to continue disobeying and she does so by breaking free and disfiguring Vidal. By slicing his mouth, Mercedes makes Vidal's appearance match his monstrous actions and attitudes. Although the disobedience of Ofelia and Dr. Ferreiro result in their deaths, Mercedes' does not. As she flees, she is caught by a group of Vidal's men and is prepared to take her own life but instead her brother comes and defeats her captors. This allows the rebels to finally make an all-out attack on Vidal's camp and destroy his troops. Through her resistance, Mercedes gives the rebels the chance to finally defeat the army that is attempting to exterminate them.

These acts of disobedience can be contrasted with Captain Vidal's obedience. Throughout the film, the captain driven by continuing his legacy at any cost and by earning glory. To Vidal, the only way to achieve these goals are by complying with the ideals of toxic masculinity that is supported and perpetuated by the fascist regime that he helps uphold. This can be seen with his obsession over having a son. When he speaks to Dr. Ferreiro about the health of the baby, he acts as though having a daughter is an impossibility. When Vidal's wife is going into labor, Vidal tells the medic delivering the baby that if he must choose to save the mother or his son that the medic should save his son. To him a son is the only way he can

survive past his own life and continue his legacy. These actions, as well as his statement to Mercedes that women are invisible, show that he completely disregards women. They only useful to him by providing him with a child. Much like his beloved torture instruments they are just a means for him to reach his goal. He also aims to be glorified for his military career. While he is leading the pursuit of the rebels, Vidal tells one soldier that the only way to win glory is to die in battle. At the dinner party, a guest tells a story about Vidal's father who was a general in Morocco. He says that Vidal's father knew that the battle was lost and before his death he smashed his pocket watch so his son would know the hour of his death. This is the pocket watch that we see Vidal tinkering with in his office. Before his death, Vidal asks the Mercedes that his son know when he died, just like his father told him. In the end, he is punished for his obedience and his willingness to cause such indescribable harm to others. Mercedes takes his son away from him and tells him that his son will know nothing about him. They then shoot him while he is defenseless in front of them. Through this, he neither can carry on his legacy to the next generation nor able to win glory by dying in battle. Instead he will be forgotten.

Through these comparisons of actions of obedience and disobedience we see that moral disobedience is rewarded while Vidal's obedience is punished. Although Ferreiro dies, Ofelia and Mercedes are saved. Mercedes is able to escape with her life and helps the rebels finally defeat the army pursuing them and Ofelia is rewarded by entering into eternal life in her kingdom. The viewer cannot help but be reminded of Jesus' sacrifice through which he gives the gift of eternal life when Ofelia enters her heaven-like kingdom after sacrificing herself so others may not be harmed. On the other hand, Vidal does not receive anything for his actions and his refusal to stand up against authority and patriarchy. Unlike our heroes, he dies alone and

forgotten. *Pan's Labyrinth* is a parable for our own lives and the disobedience of the protagonists serves as a paragon for moral disobedience in our own lives.