

Advanced Critical Thinking – Report

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“‘If I told you about her, what would I say? That they lived happily ever after? I believe they did’ (The Shape of Water, 2017). How Guillermo del Toro has Challenged the Conventions of the Fairy Tale Genre”

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The aim of this report is to analyse the genre conventions of the fairy tale and then comparing them to the work's by director, Guillermo del Toro. I will be taking three of his films, seeing how he takes established conventions such as: the role of gender, love, and escapism, and challenges them across his works. Finally, I will finish by comparing this to my own film *"The Music of Erich Zann"*, and seeing how, through challenging preconceived notions of an established format, I could have gone against the conventions of Lovecraft and how these lessons can also improve my skills as a filmmaker going forward.

"Reader's depend on fairy Tales for personal growth-not as escape but as enhancement of their own lives as skills" (Abbruscato & Jones, 2014). These words by Abbruscato and Jones go some way in explaining why the humble Fairy Tale has become a cornerstone of most people's childhoods. For hundreds of years, these simple stories of heroes and heroines facing great challenges and fighting larger than life monsters, tried to teach important life lessons in a simple and fantastical way. From the short stories of Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm, to the film adaptations from international corporations such as Disney, it could be hard to deny lives have not somehow been affected by these tales. However, there are those who wish to challenge the nature of the Fairy Tale and how it represents not only characters but also shapes people's perceptions of the world. Zipes presents a criticism of the medium, implying that the lessons being taught may be seen as repressive by showing readers what the society of the time deems as acceptable behaviour: *"...the classical fairy-tale narrative for children and adults reinforced the patriarchal symbolical order based on rigid notions is sexuality and gender"* (Zipes, 2010). Through his films: *"Pan's Labyrinth"* (Pan's Labyrinth, 2006), *"Crimson Peak"* (Crimson Peak, 2015) and *"The Shape of Water"* (The Shape of Water, 2017), one could argue that director Guillermo del Toro aims to challenge these statements by not only reviving elements from the genre's gothic origins but also modernise them by exploring sexuality and gender roles of his female protagonists, going against the more dated, repressive nature of these stories.

Pan's Labyrinth (2006)

"El laberinto del fauno" (*"Pan's Labyrinth"*), follows Ophelia, a young girl caught in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. During the film, she is told by a mysterious faun that she is in fact the mythical Princess Moana, a lost air of a magical kingdom, and to get back she must pass three challenges. The rest of the film, we follow her as she goes between the dark, gritty real world and a mysterious

mythical land as she tries to reclaim her throne. On the surface, one could argue how the traditional fairy tale laid the ground work for del Toro's film such as *"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"* (Carroll, 1865) or *"The Wonderful Wizard of Oz"* (Burton, 1900) being examples as both protagonists as are young women who escape a boring or patriarchal society to go adventuring in a fantasy world. (Derry, 2009).

However, where the other world is there to construct a metaphor for the life lesson's that a young woman must go through, as described by Hessel and Huppert: *"The convention of working through fears of the female body, the menarche, the menstrual cycle, female sexual desire and childbirth all take as their inspiration a combination of folk/fairy tale and gothic traditions"* (Hessel & Huppert, 2010), del Toro attempts to break away from this and shapes her journey as an escape from the brutal and harsh world she is stuck in. The argument is that the magical realm that she visits is a coping mechanism for Ophelia as she struggles to deal with moving away from home, the death of her mother, and to the extreme violence happening around her daily. Davies et al continues to explain this process while also explaining how this typical trait can be found in the director's films dating back to *"The Devil's Backbone"* (The Devil's Backbone, 2001): *"Characterised as orphans, without prior notion of what normality should be and with an open mind towards the unknown, these children form strong bonds with monsters that are transformed into benevolent and liberating figures that help them across their tortuous and brutal journey"* (Davies, et al., 2014).

However, what del Toro does that further distinguish his story from conventional fairy tales is that he never outright states that this magical world is entirely false. For example, the mandrake placed under the mother's bed is seen as nothing more than a game to the adults and is chucked in the fire, screaming. No other characters react to this, leaving suspicion that it could all be in her head. As well as this, during the final chase scene, a drugged, injured Vidal see's Ophelia talking to nothing, but when we go back to her viewpoint, the faun is clearly there. In stories such as *"Alice in Wonderland"*, there is a clear distinction between the fantastical and real, signified by her waking up at the end but, for *"Pan's Labyrinth"*, that moment doesn't come. Even in Ophelia's death, we still don't know whether she achieved her goal, with authors providing conflicting interpretations, such as Hubner who compares it to *"The Little Match Girl"* (Anderson, 1845), on what the ending signifies : *"While reference to the fairy tale could be seen to provide a formulaic ending to appease mainstream audiences, the ending seems to be more ambivalent than this, presenting both the magic restoration of faith and the real tragedy (the death of an innocent child..."* (Hubner, 2018).

When analysing how del Toro challenges the conventions of the fairy tale within Pan's Labyrinth, it comes down to his portrayal of escapism. Due to how he has framed the magical world (taking place

during the story but only viewable through the eyes of Ophelia), it leaves the audience questioning their preconceived notion of the genre. Did we as an audience see the protagonist reach her 'happy ending' or, did we see one last hallucination as she tries to make sense of the brutal world, she lives in.

Crimson Peak (2015)

Despite being marketed as a horror film up to its release, del Toro is adamant that his film *"Crimson Peak"*, in fact has more in common with a fairy tale or gothic romance than a horror: *"Crimson Peak is not a horror movie but it has more to the tone of a fairytale or a gothic romance, sort of a female-centric tale, than Haunted Mansion which is a ride and has to be fun and scary in a Disney way."* (del Toro, 2015). The notion of 'Gothic' originates from a literary genre founded in the late 18th century, with notable authors such as Franz Kafka, Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley, being some of the more infamous names associated with the genre. These are dark, twisted stories that can be identified through they're use of more mature themes and a more violent outlook on the world which, as Bowen argues, use this shock value in an attempt to reach a level of sublime, transporting the audience outside of everyday life through tales of murder, science, incest, etc. (Bowen, 2014). The fairy tale is no stranger to the Gothic genre, with some of the most famous short stories originating from this time period. Stories such as *The "Adventures of Pinocchio"* (Caollodi, 1883) and *"Hansel and Gretel"* (Grimm & Grimm, 1812), attempt to teach life lessons through a harsh, brutal reality with antagonists that present the worst of humanity, with the latter featuring a cannibalistic witch serving as a warning for children not to trust strangers. However, one theme which occurs over the whole genre, is the way in which female sexuality is controlled and demonised, as described by Talarich-Vielmas who explains how the initial prints of *"Beauty and the Beast"* (Villeneuve, 1740) were design as a way of teaching women the virtues of marriage by having the protagonist fall in love with a monster, with happiness and wealth as her reward (Talairach-Vielmas, 2010).

With *"Crimson Peak"*, del Toro challenges the notion of the sexist fairy tale, telling a story of female empowerment in which marriage is not the ultimate goal but instead leading to horror in which the female protagonist's gender does not hinder but, strengthen her. In an interview with *TIME*, the director specifically talks about the moment in which the protagonist, Edith and her husband have sex for the first time. He mentions how he wanted to move the concept of sex away from being a taboo subject and the downfall of female characters (*"Dracula"* (Stroker, 1897) for example, has the more sexually adventurous women die because of their desires), instead turning it into a moment of empowerment: *"I want to make it clear to the audience that when these two characters make love,*

it's empowering." (del Toro, 2015) He adds to this by having her male counterpart take a much smaller role in the narrative. Typically, a male of some description will play the saviour role within these tales, left to rescue a damsel who needs saving. Instead, del Toro has the male leads take a backseat role, especially Thomas who, as Musap describes, begins to fall in love with Edith, becoming more passive throughout the film and allowing Lucille, the film's true antagonist, to take centre stage: "*Thomas starts falling in love with Edith's innocence and naivety, sharply contrasted to his sister's violent nature. This moment marks the inversion of the Gothic trope of the villain, now represented by Lucille ruling over her monstrous matriarchal hell and entrapping both Edith and Thomas.*" (Musap, 2017).

Edith is not a slave to her desires and she does not need to repress them (e.g. "*Beauty and the Beast*"), in fact, they end up saving her as Thomas, who has fallen for her, admits to his misdeeds in an effort to warn her, moments before he is killed by his more dominating sister. Despite Lucille fitting the traits of the conventional gothic antagonist (incestuous, murderous psychopath), with this leading to her downfall, the way in which del Toro positions these characters is how he challenges conventions of the fairy tale, changing roles that each woman plays in the story, from damsels needing to be controlled, to the key driving forces in the narrative.

The Shape of Water (2017)

"*The Shape of Water*" follows a mute janitor, Elisa as she befriends and falls in love with an amphibian creature, desperately trying to save him from the head of the research base. Zipes has argued that, within the last eighty years, Disney have moulded what can be described as the typical fairy tale protagonist, by creating characters that are young, somewhat rebellious and have a kind of boyish charm that attracts others towards them while also having a good understanding of right and wrong (Zipes, 2015). Characters such as Prince Charming (Perrault, 1697), and various other fairy tale protagonists are all handsome, youthful men who despite the odds, come to save the damsel in distress. Even when the protagonist doesn't fit these stereotypes, such as Quasimodo from "*The Hunchback from Notre-Dame*" (Hugo, 1831), at the end of the story, it is the young attractive soldier who wins the girl's heart.

The way that "*The Shape of Water*" directly challenges this convention is by having the narrative role of the monster and stereotypical protagonist archetype swapped, showing a clear break in the preestablished formula. While stories, such as "*Beauty and the Beast*", have played around with this trope, with a dashing hero serving as the antagonist and the Beast serving as a cursed antihero, del

Toro doesn't abide to the typical 'Frog Prince' dynamic where the beast is transformed back into a young, attractive man. Instead, he states that he not only wanted to revolutionise the fairy tale but, also present the story as one where the love between the two main characters is more fractured but genuine:

“an antidote for cynicism, a variation of Beauty and the Beast where beauty is not perfect and will remain imperfect and the beast remains the beast. Emotion is the new punk – the idea of a love more generous than romantic love.” (del Toro, 2018).

Throughout, characters make no attempt to hide their confusion and disgust with Elisa's choice, with Zelda's reactions even been played for comedy. However, despite this, she sees nothing wrong in her choice and chooses to embrace the monster, eventually shedding a tear when learning that they must part.

This clear juxtaposition between the typical antagonistic role that the monster fits with the genre, (presenting it as not only a hero but a legitimate love interest) is where the director challenges the convention of the fairy tale. Despite having an amphibian appearance and animal like mannerisms, he presents the beast in such a way that as an audience, we not only believe in the romance with a human woman but, we support it. Then, compare this to Strickland, who is arguably the true monster of the film. The archetype of the clean-shaven, soldier who holds up the values of the American people fits the typical convention of the dashing protagonist. del Toro instead flips this notion on its head, making him represent the worst aspects of their society (racist, sexist, etc), and presenting him instead as a blood thirsty beast as opposed to the literal monster in the narrative: *“The script is flipped, with the film featuring a man with the looks of a classic, square jawed protagonist; only he's the actual monster here, murderous and literally rotting alive. Normalcy isn't the thing that's being threatened here, it's what is doing the threatening” (Downey, 2017).*

Conclusion

When discussing how Guillermo del Toro has challenged the fairy tale, one could argue that he takes the typical conventions that have defined the genre and inverts them, taking what may have dated and restricted them and presenting in a more liberal, contemporary way.

He takes the concept of the fantasy worlds and blurs the lines between reality and the imaginary while also implying there use as a coping mechanism in a brutal, dangerous time. He evolves the

gothic fairy tale heroine from being a slave to her gender and brings her into the modern day by creating a film in which women are in full control of their destinies. Finally, he takes the typical monster-damsel dynamic and flips it by creating an unconventional love story in which the beast is our hero and the archetypal hero character has instead been shown as the inhuman monster. In doing this, the director has not only created a signature style, taking the elements that make the fairy tale genre familiar but having a more mature approach, updating them to fit modern audience tastes.

It's this rebellious nature to the given normality and outlook on inverting conventional characters and storytelling, that makes del Toro a huge influence on personal projects. With future films, there will be a greater emphasis on taking the preconceived notions of genre and opinions on subjects, looking at them from an outsider's perspective, observing old patterns and themes which may seem outdated in the modern day, and finding creative, modernized ways to challenge them.

One reason that "*The Music of Erich Zann*", was seen as disappointing was because it made little effort to push boundaries and go against genre norms. Based on Lovecraft's short story of the same name, the film attempted to be a faithful adaptation, not showing the monster and having everything be mysterious and psychological instead of a typical ghost story. However, as the story is nearly a century old, what scared people back then is much different to today, leaving the film slow and with very little of impact happening throughout. Del Toro is an admirer of Lovecraft and his work, with many of his creatures taking the aquatic, amphibian shape that a lot of the author's antagonists did but, as we've seen with "*The Shape of Water*", he also challenges these roles and the conceptions of what a monster is. "*The Music of Erich Zann*", arguably, should have taken steps to challenging the conventions by not only updating the horror and the setting to fit a more contemporary audience but, also finding more interesting ways to display the horror of the hotel it was set in (using more surrealist, visually striking approaches rather than simplistic dream sequences).

The aim going forward isn't to revolutionise or innovate but instead to act as a commentary, challenging my own personal beliefs and tastes as a filmmaker and using this to grasp a better idea of not only the contemporary film watching audience but, also widen my perception of storytelling and the world around us.

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