

Feeling for us:

An insight into how films are able to manipulate emotions

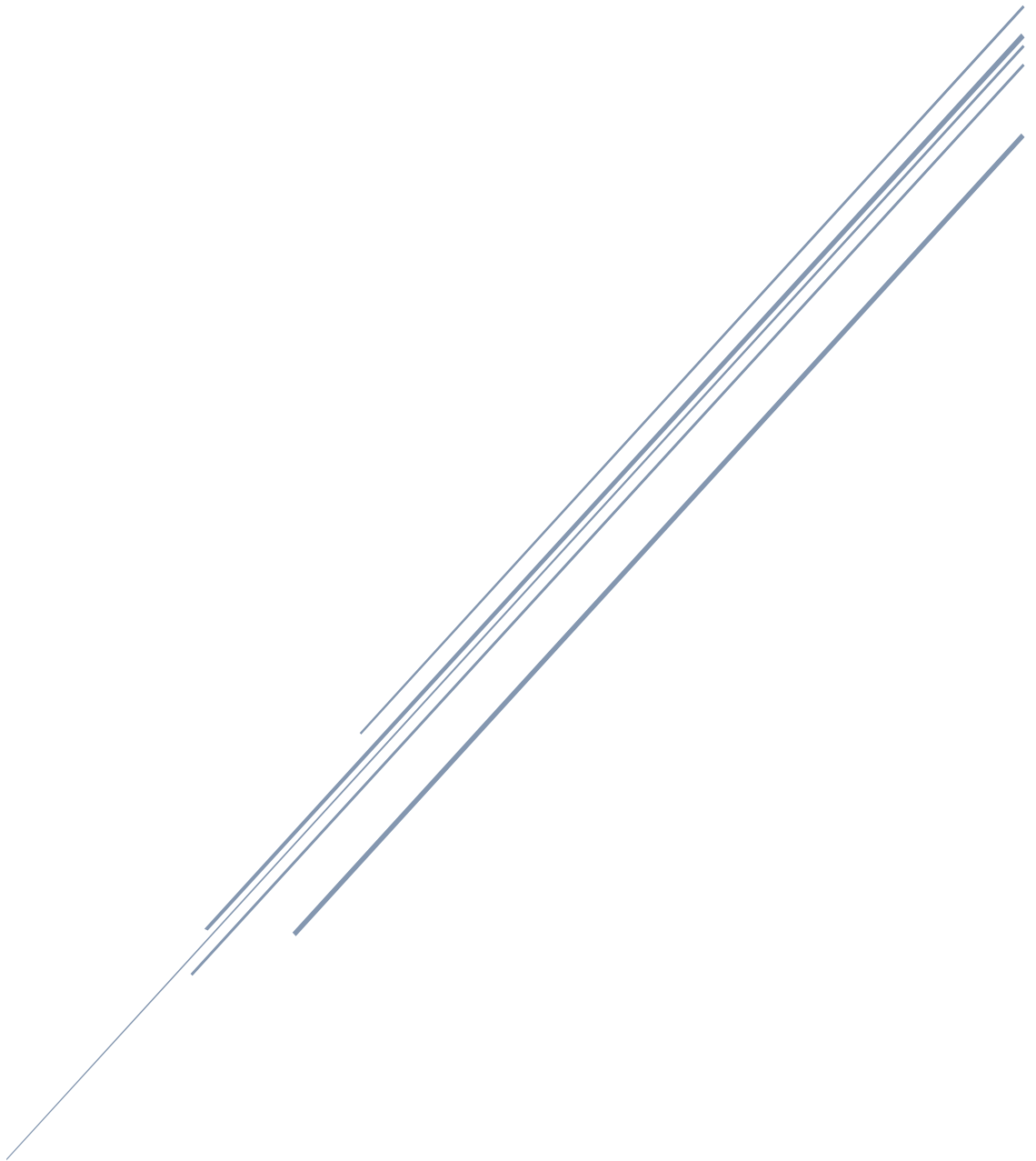


Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Chapter 1 - Anxiety	5
Chapter 2 - FEAR	8
Chapter 3 - Relief	11
Conclusion	15
References.....	17

Introduction

Articulating emotion can prove complex, for one must truly understand the intricacies of emotions, not only grasping an awareness of the tangible and visceral feelings attributed to these emotions, but also it requires an ability to comprehend how and why we, as individuals, present these emotions to an audience, in specific and differing contextual settings.

Films have the capacity to scare us; to make us cry; to make us laugh. However, what makes a truly good film stand out is its ability to leave us suspended between feelings – both joyous and sad, or angry and serene. A great film will take you by the hand as it leads you on a journey, whilst simultaneously and subconsciously manipulating your emotions like a conductor controls an orchestra. Throughout this essay, I will be focusing on three different psychoanalytical techniques and understandings which are utilised in film making, to promote particular emotions to the audience, specifically fear, anxiety and relief. Contextualising these will be three directors whose work, I believe properly elicits examples of these methods and emotions.

Unlike most other art forms, film making carries with it an ability to influence by being able to evoke and produce such visceral reactions that define film as a truly commanding and unique form of artistic expression. I aim to explore just how films are able to convey emotions and promote a synchronicity between what is shown on screen and how that correlates with what the audience feels.

The viewing experience is a fundamental part of the medium of film, which is often an under explored aspect of understanding how we engage with films. Whether an audience decides to watch from a television or in cinema, or something completely different, the significance of building a relationship between the audience and the film does not diminish. It is imperative for an audience to develop emotions that they must first engage and immerse themselves within the viewing experience as a whole.

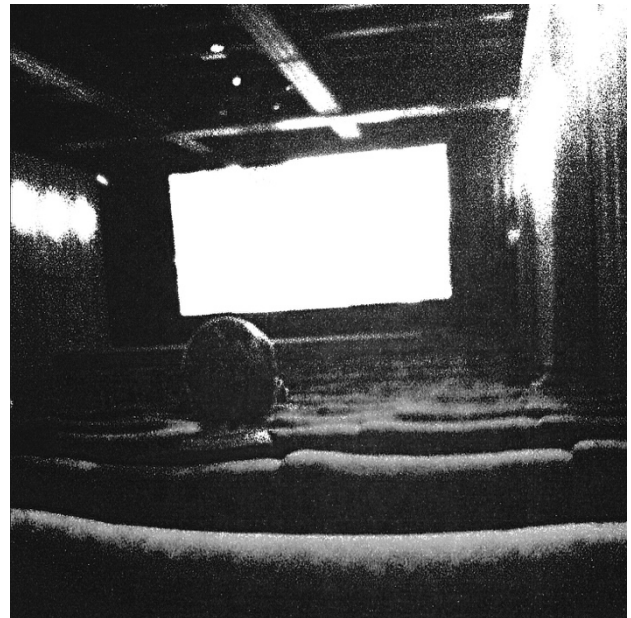
Baudry baptised “cinema as being an instrument of ideology,” by this he referred to it like a vessel, in which ideas, whether they be political or creative or somewhere in between, can be projected onto an audience (Casbier, pg. 73). Furthermore, he goes on to point out that “the ideological mechanism in cinema is the relationship between cinema and the subject,” there

is a quantifiable relationship between the level of engagement between the individual and what is being presented to them and, depending on the strength of this bond, it equates to what degree information and emotions can be effectively transferred.

Figure A represents a traditional viewing experience of a cinema. The large screen, surround sound and dark atmosphere all contribute to the viewing experience. In these conditions, there are limited distractions for the viewer so as an effect of their environment the audience is capable of reaching a higher level of engagement. A direct result of such a level of engagement, comes the heightened possibility that the audience will develop emotions which mirror that which are presented on screen.

Figure 1

To understand further how films can act as a stimulus to elicit emotions; first we must understand how an audience perceives a film. Distinguishing the audience as a spectator, which fundamentally is the classification of an individual viewing a film, is crucial in understanding how perspective influences an individual's particular understanding and reaction to a film. "You and I are referred to as spectators when we position ourselves in front of a screen and engage in watching a film" (Phillips 2003: 92). It should be noted that there is a definitive distinction between the spectator and the viewer. "Spectatorship is not only the



act of watching a film, but also the ways one takes pleasure in the experience, or not; the means by which watching movies becomes a passion, or a leisure-time activity like any other" (Mayne 1993). Spectatorship refers to the process of going to see a film and subsequently becoming invested in it. Spectators are not simply passive viewers, but rather immerse themselves in the film, taking the pleasure of watching and giving a meaning to the film.

Before I proceed into this dissertation, I want to explain how I will be tackling this analytical piece. Emotions without the context of an individual, are merely words. Isolated emotions are intangible and ephemeral and so not only will I be exploring the technical side of how film makers are able to present these emotions but also, I am going to situate myself in the position of the characters, providing a deeper understanding of the psychological process

which leads an individual to present the emotions. The reason behind why I decided to investigate the portray of anxiety, fear and relief is because these set of emotions are the foundations of many films, usually inhabiting the central protagonist, but not always. However, the execution and originality of how these emotions are presented are critical in how effective they are, and ultimately how effective the overall film is.

The films that I have chosen, I believe, act as a strong representation of effectively presenting emotions. Furthermore, you can classify these set of emotions as primordial, humans have been experiencing these most visceral of emotions since the inception of our existence. Although, the reasoning behind why one might experience emotions is entirely variable, the metaphysical emotions in their most authentic form have been lived and felt by almost everyone. The structure of the dissertation acts as a metaphor for the emotional journey which a character could travel, initially starting as anxiety, progressing to outright fear and when once, and if they defeat the negativity associated with the prior emotions, then they have the opportunity to reach a cathartic denouement, a sense of relief. A process which will be familiar yet personal to most audiences.

Chapter 1 - Anxiety

Films that encompass a central protagonist, whether it be a hero or an antihero, tend to encourage the audience to align with that particular character. The protagonist acts as the eyes for the audience to see into the world of the film. This alignment can either be positive or negative, “our emotional response to film is fostered by the experience of projective illusion...[and that] our emotional response to a character during [this experience is distinguished through] identification with the character (whether empathetic or sympathetic) and detachment (Richard Allen 2014).” In essence, we tend to mirror emotions that are presented by the characters. We can sympathise, dislike, or be ambivalent, however, whatever we feel has a correlation with the experiences and feelings of the characters, specifically if the film centres around a primary protagonist.

In Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*, the narrative amalgamates around a central protagonist called Alex. Immediately he is identified as an outcast, a technique which helps to align the spectator with the character, as audiences will tend to support so called “underdogs.” The narrative shape of a film has enormous capabilities to affect our emotions, by playing with either the fulfilment or withholding of hope and expectations, setting up narrative goals or desires that we’re rooting for; and either giving to us or frustrating our wishes for them. In *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex, an antihero, faces trials to reintegrate back into society set about after he ends up in prison for committing a crime of a violent nature. He is not a character that immediately garners the audience’s sympathy, however to portray Alex in a less pessimistic perspective, the story is set from his point of view. A unique type of slang called Nadsat is used by Alex, and by his peers, perhaps highlighting the youthfulness of the character aids in masking the severity of his senseless crimes, but furthermore, it also acts as a device to bring the viewer into his unique world, which would otherwise seem rather exclusive. Referring himself as “your humble narrator” and the audience as his “brothers,” this direct communication between the screen and the audience, eliminates any form of voyeurism by treating the viewer as an equal to Alex. Allowing for a level of sympathy which would, without the audience’s investment and belief in the character, be almost impossible to capture.



Figure 2

Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* is an excellent representation of how to deliver and portray the emotion of anxiety. Woven throughout the narrative structure of the film lay fundamental elements that seem to exacerbate the overall sense of unease and apprehension. These visual details can be compounded into the psychoanalytical entity that is semiotics.

Essentially semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and the meanings and interpretations that we attribute to them. The most prominent theory that encapsulates the sphere of semiotics was constructed by the Swiss sociologist Ferdinand de Saussure, who states that there is "no relationship between what he calls the signifier and the signified" (de Saussure, 1916: 75). For example, there is no actual relationship between the word 'fire,' which is a signifier, and an actual fire which is the signified. However, when we perceive the specific sequence of letters that spell out 'fire' our brain automatically conjures up an image of a fire. Although this process happens subconsciously, there is an undeniable cause and effect process occurring, where our minds are encouraged to make such connections. Semiotics is a useful tool in film making as it allows film makers to portray an idea, character or plot in a complex way without outright saying it.

In addition, semiotics can be used to present emotion. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the audience observe a familiar, yet distant world. A place piloted by chaos and disorder, which bears the hallmarks of a once recognizable London landscape.

On more than one occasion, Alex and his “droogs,” break into the houses of the unassuming and innocent. Although these scenes present us with immeasurable amounts of discomfort due to their violent nature alone, it also garners the viewer with an insight into the homes of normal people, an insight which in turn brings attention to the stark juxtaposition into how people’s perception of sex, violence, drugs, profanity and obscenity differs to reality. Furthermore, this is especially exemplified when taking into consideration the decade this film was produced, the 1960’s, and the subsequent years in which *A Clockwork Orange*, both the film and the novel, were banned. Presenting these contrasting societal norms and values places the viewer into an unfamiliar environment, the familiar iconology of the London skyline only aids in intensifying this sensation of dissonance.

Furthermore, on a more macro scale we witness particular images that act as metaphors to promote the emotion of anxiety. Firstly, I want to draw attention to the statues of Jesus Christ, adorned with their crowns of thorns, which seems to mesmerise Alex’s gaze. The more obvious interpretation of this would be that Alex sees himself as sort of an untouchable figure, who has an eternal right to do as and how he pleases. Furthermore, it may not only act as a metaphor for the character of Alex but also the story of Jesus mirrors that of Alex, in the sense that we can expect a catalytic event which will either change the structure of the narrative or change the character of Alex. Due to his initial unwillingness to conform we know that only one outcome will be achieved.

Secondly, less in relation to the visual imagery but nether-the-less still an illustration of semiotics is the actual name of the film, *A Clockwork Orange*. The juxtaposition of the artificial, mechanical and man-made Clockwork and the organic, nature of an orange creates an impression of forcing something which is natural to function artificially. An image which characterises the character of Alex, as he is forced to conform to an ideal which to him seems alien and artificial. This metaphor promotes the sense of anxiety, as it provides, perhaps not quite a justification of sorts, but rather a deeper understanding of the character, which allows the audience to more easily place themselves into that particular mindset and, with that, assimilating the character’s anxieties.

Chapter 2 - FEAR

Perhaps the most primordial of emotions, fear has the ability to make us freeze in our seats or make us run for our lives. In presenting the emotion of fear, one would automatically assume that the genre of horror films would provide as a perfect platform for demonstrating this most visceral of emotions. However, horror films can be quite contrived, placing story telling on the back seat in favour for more aggression techniques to illicit an audience reaction, such as jump scares. It is with sentiment that I have decided to investigate *Dunkirk*, a film by Christopher Nolan, which uses the backdrop of World War Two to manifest a raw and terrifying portrayal of soldiers and civilians who are caught in the thick of it between the advancing axis powers and the vast empty void that is the English Channel.

Nolan's rather unique approach in making this film, places the emphasis on the events rather than the characters. Typically, films follow a protagonist as they meander through a sequence of different events, however, *Dunkirk* implements a non-linear narrative which is built around particular events which acts as pillars that the narrative is built around. The prime reason behind this is to create a sense of instability and chaos. Never giving the audience the luxury of learning and subsequently investing in a singular character reduces the audience's ability to feel comfort and takes away their opportunity to take a breather.

As aforementioned anxiety acts as a catalyst in eliciting fear, the perpetual pressure of not knowing if one will survive, a thought which will no doubt be present in all of the characters in *Dunkirk*, ascends in an unquantifiable manner which ultimately matures into outright fear. To demonstrate this development, Nolan took to implementing a sound world which encourages the audience to imagine themselves in the position of an individual who is experiencing the events of *Dunkirk*. The preference to base the film around events, forces the audience into the perspective that they are not special, like the soldiers they are seemingly all the same. Removing the possibility to identify who will make it and who will die creates a stark reality in which the audience have no control over.

Personifying this mounting emotional pressure is the sound device of Shepard tone, which produces an auditory illusion of heightened tension. 'Shepard tone, named after Roger Shepard, is a sound consisting of a superposition of sine waves separated by octaves. When played with the base pitch of the tone moving upwards or downwards, it is referred to as the Shepard scale. This creates the auditory illusion of a tone that continually ascends or

descends in pitch, yet which ultimately seems to get no higher or lower' (Hartmann, pg 146). The analogy of a barber's pole would be an appropriate representation of Shepard tone, the illusion is that the level of sound is rising however there is actually no fluctuation in pitch or tone. The effect of this is pronounced, establishing a sense of ongoing tension that appears to never pause, offering no rest bite for the audience.

Perpetuating this effect, is the seemingly lack of focus on any particular individual for a sustained period of time. Grouping together everyone into one entity which represents the embodiment of fear resonates deeply. Sharing fear, removes the possibility for it being one's mind fabricating it. A shared fear is palpable, unescapable and above all, on the surface, seemingly undefeatable.

Figure 3



An accomplishment, in *Dunkirk*, that can also be attributed to the continuous inclusion of long shots, that generates a sense of isolation. Not so much a physical isolation, but an isolation of emotions, void of anything but fear. The faces of the soldiers all bear similar expressions, cultivating into a human sea of despair. The audience, gifted with the ability to observe but not participate, may not be able to empathise with the soldiers as – for the most part- they will not have experience fear on such a level, however the ability to sympathise is equally a powerful human characteristic which draws the viewer into the action, transferring the fear from the characters and onto them.

We look up to Juliet's balcony with Romeo's eyes and look down on Romeo with Juliet's. Our eye and with it our consciousness is identified with the characters in the film, we look at the world out of their eyes and have no angle of vision of our own. (Balazs, p.48)

In fact, as seen in figure 3, the only discernible features that can be made out are the soldier's eyes. Nolan litters the cinematic landscape with an abundance of bodies, making it nigh impossible for the viewer to digest all the details contained within the images. Therefore, our gaze immediately concentrates on the eyes of the soldiers; a process derived from a habitual subconscious psychology, as eyes act as a strong indicator of thoughts and emotions, which helps us gage another individual when verbal expression cannot be utilised to do so. Analysing the idiosyncrasies of ocular expression can reveal characterises of; happiness, fear, surprise and they can also help in distinguishing if someone is lying or telling the truth.

Friedrich Nietzsche's publishing on philosophy, *Beyond Good and Evil*, rather effectively highlights the importance of these shots. "If thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee" (Nietzsche, pg 146), withdrawing the chance of looking away, forces the viewer to gaze into the abyss – the eyes of the soldiers- echoing back the emotions and creating a synergy between the different individuals. Fundamentally, establishing this link can be difficult, however, Dunkirk executes it exceptionally well. Leaving the audience caught inside the immersion of the film world, hoping to see a fortuitous outcome for the characters.

Chapter 3 - Relief

The denouement, the final wave after a series of ebbs and flows, usually manifests itself with a character reaching a level of relief, overcoming the obstacles they have faced and arriving at a stage of personal triumph. This is not always the case and for some films, the ending is ambiguous, leaving the viewer with a sense of unfulfillment. When an audience watches a film, early on, they tend to side with the protagonist, attributing self-conjured ideals as to what they desire for the character. It is the director who occupies a level of power with which they can decide to either give or withhold these expectations, leaving us satisfied or frustrated.

The metaphorical emotional voyage that has been chartered through the preceding emotions that we have covered, notably a downward spiral of exacerbating feelings, I believe needs to be provided with an acceptable resolution. Enduring the emotions of anxiety and fear, and the pitfalls associated with said emotions, is no mean feat of psychological endurance and requires a degree of resilience and fortitude. A character who I believe encompasses this journey is the character of Ofelia from *Pan's Labyrinth*.

The year is 1944, the protracted war has ravaged Europe leaving an immeasurable amount of destruction, however the Allies' offensive to retake Nazi occupied Europe is underway. Set in Spain, a troop of soldiers are dispatched to an isolated expanse of woodland, in the attempt to neutralise a group of resistance fighters. Their leader, Capitan Vidal, a man equally as merciless as he is brutal, along with his new wife Carmen and eleven-year-old step-daughter Ofelia travel to this remote part of the Iberian Peninsula. Ofelia, a mere spectator to such events, unsurprisingly acquiesced to the relocation to her new home. Witnessing the Capitan's cruelty, she is drawn into *Pan's Labyrinth*, a fairytale world filled with mythical creatures.

The film, an original narrative by the Mexican director Guillermo Del Toro focuses on the juxtaposition between the baroque style, fantasy world that Ofelia escapes to through her imagination and the brutal, dark reality of 1944 war torn Spain. Only the character of Ofelia has the ability to traverse between the differing dimensions, a gift that burdens her with the knowledge that she has a greater control over the dream-like world, whilst when in reality she is powerless in helping the people that she cares most deeply for.

The fantasy world is isolated, yet sits adjacent to the real world, sometimes blurring the line that divides them. These two individualistic worlds are not as transparent as one may be initially led to believe, in fact, the fantasy world mirrors, in a perverse manner, the genuine world with many of the characters and obstacles reimagined to provide Ofelia with a method of grasping a comprehension as to why she and her mother have found themselves in such a predicament. *Pan's Labyrinth* is fundamentally articulate in addressing to the audience that the protagonist, Ofelia, is a character that we should align with. Her resolute innocence blatantly too pure for the nefarious nature of the real world, and its equally nefarious inhabitants.

Along with underlying emotive themes running throughout the course of the film's narrative, each world presents particular and often contrasting emotions, which are amplified by the different colour tones and palettes. Implementing polarising colours to differentiate between each world helps to evoke and promote a greater understanding as to what can be expected of each location, furthermore, it indicates that these worlds cannot mix, like oil and water, they will remain separate. Del Toro utilises, in the scenes set in the real world, darker, more gloomy shades of blues and greens which personifies this plane of existence as being where evil, specifically man-made evil, is given sentience. Opposing this, in the fantasy world, where we are offered warmer colours, of reds and golds, which present these locations with the allure of being more welcoming and pleasant- at least on surface value. Indeed, it is this world that is hardest for the audience to interpret, the vibrancy of the colours suggest one thing, whilst the brashness of the reds indicates an overriding lack of safety and security.

Del Toro, in his exacting attention to detail, recognises the importance and value that particular colours can have, and in particular in how they can influence the audience.



Figure 4

The meanings that we attribute to colours are not merely coincidental but in fact are representative of how we evolved as a species. "In the evolution of the human and certain

species of other animals, the ability to see colours developed because this power was crucial for survival” (Mahnke, 1996: 11). Aposematism, a term coined by evolutionary biologist Sir Edward Bagnall Poulton, “is used to describe common phenomenon in nature: the coincidence between conspicuous colouration and unpalatability in potential prey animals” (Evans, 1990: 24). The reason why red is recognised as a symbol of danger is because in the natural world red stands out the most vividly against a green background. This is indicative that the psychology behind how we perceive colours is intrinsically ingrained into our genetic makeup. Therefore, although we can recognise that fantasy world as being a form of escapism for Ofelia, we cannot truly be satisfied as the vibrancy of its subsequent colour palette leaves us apprehensive to accepting the notion that she is now safe. However, we are not presented with any other adequate solutions to what is ever exacerbating circumstances, and so we reluctantly follow Ofelia on this journey.

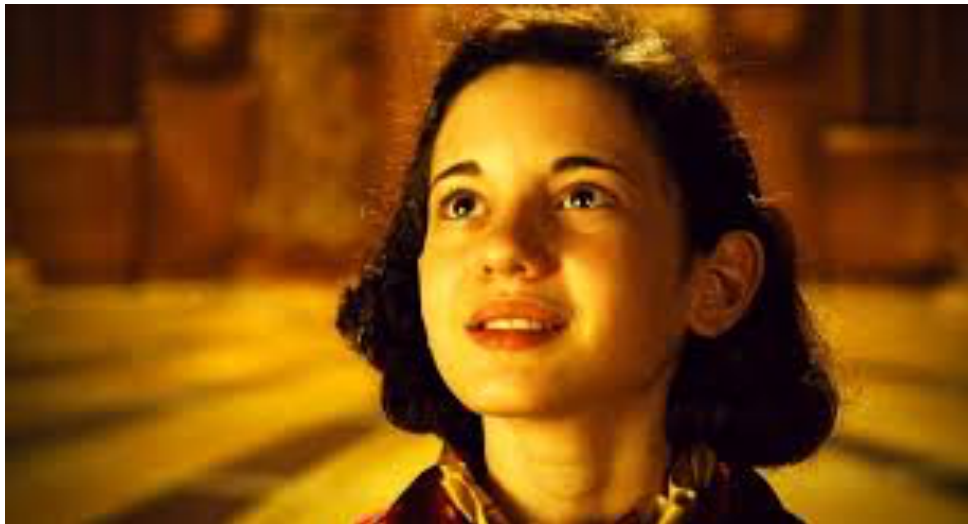


Figure 5

Reaching the climactic finale of the film, we are presented by the stark reality as to how the end will ultimately unfold. Killed by the hand that should have been protecting her – her step-father’s- Ofelia chooses against all adversity to save the people that she loves, and with that comes the greatest of all sacrifices. Subduing the evil not by violence but with love, this victory is seemingly void of celebration, the audience as only observers can’t influence the story, no matter how much they desire. Exiting the world with her last breath, she enters a new one- the world of fantasy. A palace of gold, with thrones situated on podiums, occupied by her biological father and the queen. Is this heaven? Is it a figment of Ofelia’s imagination? The answer is purposely unclear, however what is certain is that she has escaped the horrors of the world that she has left behind. A relief that no doubt brings about a sense of catharsis for the character, but regardless, for the audience it is still an incredibly poignant and

melancholic moment. A small solace can be taken in knowing that such an ephemeral soul remained and remains pure and resolute in the face of evil. Films, such as *Pan's Labyrinth*, may frustrate the audience as they are a static viewer in a world which seemingly needs the influence of an outsider's perspective, however, the audience is gifted with the greatest influence of all- the ability to interpret and determine, on an individualist level, what actually happens to Ofelia. Persevering through such turmoil, most audiences would concur, that Ofelia deserves this form of escapism, even if the validity of it remains unclear.

Although, there may be sense of ambiguity, surrounding whether Ofelia has achieved this peace, it is clear from Del Toro's perspective as to what he believes occurs. Following immediately after the shots of Ofelia in the fantasy world, we witness a final juxtaposition of worlds, where the protagonist is lying on the cold, stone floor, and with her last dying breath the audience can witness a visible smile on Ofelia's face. Making one thing clear, that at least for the character of Ofelia, in her eyes, she has achieved peace. The gratification of this, for the audience, to witness such a moment grants us, personally, with a sense of relief- akin to that of Ofelia's.

Conclusion

If one were to imagine films as a journey, spearheaded and led by the characters who lead the audience- like a game of follow the leader- puts a spotlight on our inability as a spectator to influence the course that is being chartered. We are fundamentally passive observers gazing into a series of pre-determined events. Traversing through a landscape of emotions, the characters, highlight to us our own incapability to affect and influence the world around us, and our lack of power in producing a resolution which both satisfies us and the people that surround us.

In essence, this mirrors real life, how we are often unable to alter events which may seem unfair or unjustified. Certain invariable factors - like where we are born, where we grow up and ultimately where we will end up – all affect us, and these predetermined milestones, fundamentally, are the cornerstone to who we are as individuals.

We, like the characters in the aforementioned films, may choose to rebel against these factors and to try to break the chain of our limitations. However, just like in films, there is a subverted and seemingly imperceptible greater plan which binds us to our paths. It is with this notion that we tend to accept, sometimes reluctantly, the narrative of events and choose to support the protagonist on their journey. The emotions that the characters feel, are replicated within the audience as we are encouraged to sympathise with their powerlessness in transforming the world that they have been placed into. Ultimately, it is not whether we identify with the characters in particular, but rather the situation and territories that they find themselves in.

Throughout this analysis, we have explored different techniques that film makers can utilise to create an impactful impression upon an audience. The director, who ultimately on a physical level, is unable to interact with the audience, depends on them to contextualise what they are observing with their own personal experiences to rationalise and understand the thought processes behind individual character actions and decisions. Therefore, the relationship between the viewer and the film plays a crucial role in developing a synergy that allows distinctive emotions to be transferred. These thoughts and emotions are ingrained within the audience and it is the director who has the ability to enhance these through these specific techniques.

The audience do possess an authority, that characters do not, which is the ability to interpret and process what happens after the film reaches its denouement. We have the chance to conclude exactly what will happen to the characters after the final credits roll. Film makers may suggest particular thoughts and emotions which we can either decide to accept, and resonate within ourselves, or we can reject them completely, but what is transparent is that what makes a good film, is a director's ability to promote particular emotions in a manner which does not seem compulsorily but rather natural and is legitimised through rational thought and motivations. Subconsciously influencing the audience into a specific vein of thought, reassures the audience that they have control, but as a matter of fact the power lies with the film maker.

If this is achieved with conviction, then there is no reason why the film maker is unable to manipulate the audience's emotions. Giving the medium of film, a sovereignty over other forms of artistic expression, as once you have established an emotion, a subsequent effect occurs- which is leaving the audience to philosophise with what they have just observed and felt. An afterglow of thoughts and emotions which will continue to resonate for as long as the film remains prevalent within the audience's minds. Only films that are executed to a high degree will leave the audience with this incontrovertible sense of self reflection, encouraging them to explore thoughts and emotions which, very well, otherwise might never be contemplated on such a magnitude.

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