

Morton Marcus: Is reaction to 'Pan's Labyrinth' a legacy of Disney?

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I not only thought "Pan's Labyrinth" was 2006's best film, but an instant classic. Many people didn't agree with me, and in almost all cases for the same reason: The graphic violence shocked them. When I asked why, the answer was again almost always the same: "Because the film was supposed to be a fantasy"

Now that's an interesting response. It tells me that in our communal American minds fantasies should not be graphically violent — threatening maybe, but not so much so that it approaches our shared conception of reality. Fantasy violence, it seems, should be comfortable and not upset us.

Where do such notions come from? I think I know. For the last five or six generations we have been programmed to assume fantasy is harmless because our consciousness has been smothered by Walt Disney's endless assortment of cute animals and monsters and Barbie doll characters who never bleed or more than superficially suffer.

Guillermo del Toro, the director of "Pan's Labyrinth," appears not to have known that, since the film's tension is based on the contrast between little Ofelia's fantasy world and the brutal reality of the Spanish Civil War. Which brings up a related problem: Most Americans do not know about the Spanish Civil War. In fact, we have become a nation without a sense of history, knowing neither other peoples' histories nor our own. We live in a Disney-esque world popularized by the media, and when we are confronted by different attitudes toward those assumptions we react by refusing to accept them. And so we're back to our original question: Can should? a fantasy film portray "real" life situations?

Such disparities between our expectations and others' intrigue me, as do the historical assumptions many foreign films bring with them as backstories. So Guillermo Del Toro, for example, assumed his audience had knowledge of the Spanish Civil War and its brutality.

the subtext of 'Breaking'

A similar kind of difficulty occurs when a film's storyline takes place in a milieu where the historical background is never directly alluded to or developed. Take the recently released "Breaking and Entering," about a man whose business is burglarized by a teenage boy and his gang. In time, the man discovers who the boy is, follows him home, and eventually strikes up a relationship with the boy's widowed mother. Such a bare-bones description of the plot in no way suggests the emotional depth the film achieves when it is revealed that the boy and his mother are immigrants who have been displaced by the ethnic warfare in Bosnia during the 1990s. To experience the full import of that information, the audience must know about that conflict.

Further, the boy is part Muslim and part Serb. His mother is Muslim and his father was Serbian, two groups that committed continuous atrocities against each other during the war. So the boy is caught between two identities, as the scene with his gang-leader uncle suggests. But beyond that is the tragedy of his mother and father who must have married under President Tito's injunction, which he fostered throughout his years of rule in Yugoslavia, that ethnic and religious hatred must end and everyone live in "brotherhood and unity," an idea which came to a heartbreaking end when family members who had intermarried turned against each other during the wars of the 1990s.

Unfortunately, "Breaking and Entering" merely uses the Bosnian backstory as window dressing and never delves into its ramifications. But even my few words about it should make it clear that the less we allow communal assumptions to determine our reactions, and the more we know about other people's histories, the more the most superficial film can be charged with depth and meaning.



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