“A BEAUTIFUL ANARCHY:” RELIGION, FASCISM, AND VIOLENCE IN THE THEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION OF GUILLERMO DEL TORO†
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Introduction

On January 24, 2007, director Guillermo del Toro gave an interview with Terry Gross on National Public Radio’s Fresh Air. In trying to interpret what del Toro did in Pan’s Labyrinth, Terry Gross made the suggestion that fantasies, like religion, are stories we tell ourselves to get through difficult times in our life. Del Toro responded by making a startling claim, one that has enormous significance for how we ought to interpret del Toro’s works:

The entire world we live in is fabricated: Republican/Democrat, left/right, morning/night, geography and borders—all these things are conceits. Borders are not visible from a satellite picture. The fact [is] that you can have a civil war where two sides kill each other, and essentially from afar they look exactly the same. They are both the same human beings. They share the same taste for food. They sing the same songs. This imagined conceit can create such horrors.

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Del Toro goes on in this interview to suggest that fantasy—at least the kind of fantasy he is interested in—offers a counter-imagination, by which he means that fantasy disrupts and reorders our vision of the world. Like everything else in life, his cinematic stories are fabricated, but they are fabrications that, in their use of horror and fantasy, subvert the established stories that dominate our lives in the modern world. Del Toro’s counter-imagination is a kind of aesthetic-anarchic uprising against the powers and principalities. For him, the fantastical imagination is a way of redescribing the world so as to give rise to an alternative politics. As an anarchic interpretation of reality, it is a form of political hermeneutics, a point to which I will return. What I will attempt to do in this article is (1) sketch the basic shape of del Toro’s “beautiful anarchy” on the basis of this interview; (2) bring del Toro’s anarchic imagination into conversation with the “theopolitical imagination” of William Cavanaugh; and finally (3) present interpretations of

2. While it almost goes without saying, “fantasy” here has nothing to do with what the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “the fact or habit of deluding oneself by imaginary perceptions or reminiscences” (def. 3a) or “a day-dream arising from conscious or unconscious wishes or attitudes” (def. 5b). In fact, there is no satisfactory “popular” definition; most tend to be either too vague or too narrow. The best definition is from J. R. R. Tolkien’s famous essay, “On Fairy-Stories,” which, though long and full of technical terms that I cannot explain here, is worth quoting in full. “Most good ‘fairy-stories’ are about the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches.... The definition of a fairy-story—what it is, or what it should be—does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of Faërie: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country. I will not attempt to define that, nor to describe it directly. It cannot be done. Faërie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible. It has many ingredients, but analysis will not necessarily discover the secret of the whole.... For the moment I will say only this: a ‘fairy-story’ is one which touches on or uses Faërie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faërie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician.” See J. R. R. Tolkien, Tree and Leaf (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 14–15. Later in the essay he says that “fairy-stories as a whole have three faces: the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man. The essential face of Faërie is the middle one, the Magical” (Ibid., 28). Tolkien’s definition is very helpful for understanding del Toro’s idea of fairy-tales and fantasy, though mostly in relation to Pan’s Labyrinth and less so for his other work. There are two main twists: the first is that del Toro infuses this “classical” understanding of Faërie with a heavy dose of gothic horror and romance; the second is that he blends the worlds of Faërie with our so-called “real” world, so that even in Pan’s Labyrinth the fantasy intersects with events in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. It is this latter element that enables del Toro to use fantasy as a vehicle for the exploration of sociopolitical themes. The political implications are more direct for del Toro, whereas they remain far more indirect and allusive in Tolkien’s view. Despite these differences, Tolkien’s definition is the most accurate conception of what del Toro is up to in his films, especially the emphasis on adventure, morality, magic, and nature. It is thus quite appropriate that del Toro was initially chosen to direct the film adaptation of The Hobbit. (Del Toro has since declined to direct The Hobbit.)

3. By “theopolitical” I simply mean that one cannot finally separate the “theological” from the “political.” Theology and politics are inseparable and they imply each other: just as a person’s theology necessarily has political implications, so too a person’s politics necessarily implies a particular theology—even if the person does not recognize what that theology may be or does not recognize the category of the “theological” at all. To speak, then, of the “theopolitical” is to acknowledge that
The Devil’s Backbone and Pan’s Labyrinth in light of this imaginative enterprise. I conclude with a brief discussion of film as “spiritual reality” and argue that, despite his rejection of religion, del Toro presents a cinematic vision that has profound significance for Christian faith and theology.

**Del Toro’s Anarchic Imagination**

Del Toro’s anarchic impulses began as a boy living in Mexico, surrounded by poverty, sickness, and death. In the aforementioned interview, del Toro describes how he turned away from his Catholic faith and toward an anarchic imagination:

> I was a choir boy. I was a member of the Virgin Mary Society. And I was this and I was that. And then, when you reach your teenage years, I discovered that the world was much wider. I started working in a place where I had to go through the morgue. One day I saw such a horrifying sight at the morgue that instantly showed me there was no real order in the universe, at least not a conscious order dictated by a guy in white robes and a long beard. It really shook me.... I saw a pile of fetuses that was about five feet tall. There was such a harrowing variety of things going on there on every level. I just realized, I guess we are on our own, so we better make the best of it. It’s this world that I saw that made me love with a passion the world that I was creating.

It would be easy at this point to suggest that he turned to fantasy in order to escape the depressing realities around him, to retreat into imagination as a way of avoiding or coping with death. But the opposite is in fact the case, both in del Toro’s own life and in his films. In terms of his own upbringing—which included a very strict Catholic grandmother with whom he lived and who filled him with fears about God’s judgment after death—del Toro states in the interview: “I was not so much afraid of death as I was afraid of where we went after death. And I truly think that horror and fantasy saved my brain from this torment. They were liberating and anarchistic things that allowed me to survive.” In other words, fantasy was not a mere “coping mechanism” to sustain him in the world; rather, fantasy re-narrated his world altogether and offered an alternative framework for life to the one presented by his grandmother. The world of horror and fantasy provided a counter-imagination to the one enforced by the Catholic Church of his

one’s theological and political commitments are mutually inclusive. For this reason, a theologian cannot claim to be politically neutral, nor can a politician claim that his or her politics are entirely atheological. (The latter, we must note, is quite distinct from the necessary claim that one’s public policy is neutral with respect to religion, since theological discourse and religious discourse belong in different categories altogether.) For an account of theology radically different from Cavanaugh but which makes a similar point about the concurrence of the theological and the political, see Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming in 2011).
childhood, which sought to justify or rationalize the horrifying things that he saw. Against that narrative, del toro allowed fantasy to liberate him from religious fear and the need to justify evil, thus freeing him to confront these realities honestly, without easy dogmatic answers.

Similarly, in terms of film, del Toro understands his use of horror and fantasy to function in this same liberating and anarchistic way. Del Toro describes two kinds of films in the interview, two ways of using the imagination in works of art:

I believe there [are] two kinds of horror films in the same way there are two kinds of fairy tales: those in favor of the “Establishment” and those against. There is, in both genres, a beautiful sense of anarchy, at their best: a destructive, iconoclastic, liberating sense of anarchy. I think that those are the movies that are completely in favor of the monster and of the experience of the monster and of making the human characters scary ones. And that’s what I tried to do in my movies.

Del Toro identifies the “Establishment” with the world that produces piles of fetuses. The Establishment is the shadow side of the universe, the destructive and chaotic powers of evil. In relation to these established powers, these horrific structures, there are two kinds of narratives, he says: one that legitimates these structures, and another that rebels against them with “a beautiful sense of anarchy.” We can state this more concretely. For del Toro, structures of evil are always political in nature. In his stories, therefore, the Establishment is primarily represented by fascism. The heroes are people who rebel against fascist power—a power embodied in particular characters. And his films, broadly speaking, are themselves politically subversive, insofar as they disrupt us with what del Toro calls the “experience of the monster,” an experience which constitutes this “destructive, iconoclastic, liberating sense of anarchy.”

While del Toro himself does not elaborate in depth on how the monster facilitates this iconoclastic liberation, he provides us enough clues to develop the idea further. Put briefly, the “experience of the monster” and the scariness of his films’ characters serve to interrupt our sense of reality and thus liberate us from the Establishment. The cinematic “monster”—whether a human being distorted inwardly or a creature distorted outwardly (and thus usually symbolic of human characters or social constructs in a film)—confronts us with the truth about evil and about ourselves, and so forces us to respond. The monster interrupts us and demands a decision. It reveals the true nature of the persons and/or social structures around us and thus presents us with an existential crisis in which our response is determinative for our identity. We must simultaneously learn to affirm the monster, insofar as it presents us with a mirror of our own inner ugliness and moral ambiguity, and also reject the monster, insofar as it embodies the structures of fascist oppression. The dual nature of this aesthetic confrontation thus leads to a moment of decision; the monster initiates and furthers the maturation of the responsible acting subject. In short, the monster first liberates our vision from its
imagined conceits and illusions about the world, and in liberating our vision, the monster liberates our will so that we can live and act in the world in a new way.

Del Toro’s anarchic imagination is therefore a response to the horrific realities of death and destruction, and specifically to the social, political, and religious structures that sanction, sustain, and justify these realities. Stories of horror and fantasy provide an alternative interpretation of these realities compared to the interpretation provided by the authorities, whether political or religious or otherwise. In particular, they unsettle our presuppositions and misconceptions—not only about the world around us but also about ourselves. In the interview, del Toro states that “we live our lives sometimes believing we are immortal.... I believe it makes us better to connect with this dark side of life.” He goes on to associate his work with the “gothic tradition of literature” which “speaks about loss and fragility, but through images of horror and sometimes brutality.” He says that he subscribes to the view that “you need the one for the other to exist.” Stories of horror and fantasy are necessary, according to del Toro, as ways of understanding the fragile nature of human existence. The “established” narratives—the authorized imaginations—seek to disguise our mortality and insecurity. The right kind of film or fairy tale rebels against these false imaginations, proposing anarchistic renderings of human existence that expose “the dark side of life.” In doing so, they grant us freedom: freedom from a false sense of our immortality and need for power, and freedom for a life that acknowledges our fragility and “make[s] the best of it.”

_Theopolitical Imaginations: del Toro in Conversation With Cavanaugh_

On the surface, it is by no means apparent that an ex-Catholic filmmaker and a Catholic theologian should have much in common. As he makes clear in the interview, del Toro left religion as a teenager. For him, the problem of evil and suffering was simply too great. Furthermore, in the interview with Terry Gross, del Toro says that, “politics and religion are equally inventions for me.” Nevertheless, the views of del Toro and William Cavanaugh are remarkably in concert with each other, thus providing the basis for a fascinating interdisciplinary dialogue.

Cavanaugh is most well-known for his book, _Torture and Eucharist_, in which he explores ecclesiology and sacramentology in relation to the horrific realities of torture and disappearance in Chile under the totalitarian reign of Pinochet. In this book, he advances the important claim that torture is “a ‘liturgical’ enactment

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of the imaginative project of the state."\(^5\) The state is both the agent and effect of torture, and thus torture is “the imagination of the state,”\(^6\) implying both the subjective and objective genitives. Of course, by “imagination” Cavanaugh does not mean something that is “not real,” something residing purely in the intangible human consciousness: “Obviously there is a sense in which the state has far more reality than the ‘real’.... The state is imaginary in the precise sense of the phrase ‘make believe.’... [T]he imagination of a society is the condition of possibility for the organization and signification of bodies in a society. The imagination is the drama in which bodies are invested.”\(^7\) Cavanaugh has radically redefined the nation-state as a drama of self-realization. In its organization of human bodies, the state employs practices such as torture as essential elements in this unfolding drama of state power. The constructive theological argument in this book focuses on the nature of Christian resistance to the drama of the state as “a counter-discipline and counter-performance.”\(^8\) The liturgy of the Eucharist, according to Cavanaugh, is the alternative imagination to the pseudo-liturgy of state torture.

Cavanaugh followed Torture and Eucharist with a monograph entitled Theopolitical Imagination, which begins with the statement: “Politics is a practice of the imagination.”\(^9\) In Theopolitical Imagination, Cavanaugh extends the theme of imagination beyond torture into the political issues surrounding the state, civil society, and globalization. In each case he identifies a false imagination, a myth: the state as savior, civil society as free space, and globalization as catholicity. His argument is that what constitutes sociopolitical existence is a particular imagination. And so he writes:

>[T]he state as such does not exist. What exists are buildings and aeroplanes and tax forms and border patrols. What mobilizes them into a project called ‘nation-state’ is a disciplined imagination of a community occupying a particular space with a common conception of time, a common history and a common destiny of salvation from peril. This imagination is not a mere symbol of something more real, an immaterial ‘superstructure’ which reflects a material ‘base.’ There is no way to separate material and cultural production. The political imagination is simply the condition of possibility for the organization of bodies in a society.\(^10\)

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5. Ibid., 56.
6. Ibid., 57.
7. Ibid., 56–57.
8. Ibid., 58.
10. Ibid., 2.
Like the quote from del Toro at the start of this paper, Cavanaugh views the entire world as fabricated, in the sense that imagination is what controls and orders human society. It is not as if politics refer to reality while religion makes use of imagination; on the contrary, both are forms of imagination put into practice, and thus both are theological. The difference is that the violent, political imaginations of the state are “false theologies.”

Cavanaugh thus argues in the book for a Christian counter-imagination. For Cavanaugh, the practice of the Eucharist constitutes an alternative politics, an alternative spatio-temporal imagination. Against the notion that the state saves us from religious violence, Cavanaugh argues that the imagination of the state as savior has only led to greater violence because of a “grotesque” anthropology defined by individualism and the use of force. In the body of the church, Christ overcomes the binary oppositions between giver and recipient, between center and periphery, and opens the way for a participatory ontology of peace. Against the notion that civil society is free space, Cavanaugh argues for a notion of the church as “public space” which overcomes the dichotomies between private and public, inner (soul) and outer (body). The church is a “spatial story,” a term Cavanaugh borrows from Michel de Certeau. The church performs this story through the Eucharistic liturgy.

Finally, against the notion that globalization brings about a catholic unity throughout the world, Cavanaugh exposes globalization as a “masternarrative” that creates “fragmented subjects incapable of telling a genuinely catholic story.” Here Cavanaugh argues that the Eucharist as “spatial story” overcomes the spatial opposition between local and universal, as well as the temporal oppositions between past, present, and future. The one who consumes the Eucharist does not become a globalized capitalist consumer; on the contrary, she herself is “consumed by the body of Christ.” The counter-imagination of the Eucharist offers an alternative way of organizing “the spaces into which we walk,” such that we begin “to walk in the strange landscape of the body of Christ, while still inhabiting a

11. Ibid., 4.
12. Ibid., 92.
13. Ibid., 98.
14. See ibid., 115: “Catholic space, therefore, is not a simple, universal space uniting individuals directly to a whole: the Eucharist refracts space in such a way that one becomes more united to the whole the more tied one becomes to the local. The true global village is not simply a village writ large, but rather ‘where two or three are gathered in my name’ (Mt 18:20).”
15. See ibid., 118: “The consumer of the Eucharist is no longer the schizophrenic subject of global capitalism, awash in a sea of unrelated presents, but walks into a story with a past, present, and future.”
16. Ibid., 119.
particular earthly place.”

And so, according to Cavanaugh, within this “strange landscape” Christ continually irrupts into our earthly existence, disturbing our old imaginations with a radically new vision of reality: “Space is constantly ‘interrupted’ by Christ himself, who appears in the person of the weakest, those who are hungry or thirsty, strangers or naked, sick or imprisoned (Mt 25:31–46).”

Cavanaugh’s “theopolitical imagination” offers a point of theological engagement with the work of del Toro. Despite del Toro’s rejection of religion, both agree on important points: (a) politics is a matter of the imagination; (b) certain political imaginations are false imaginations, in that they promote violence and destruction; and (c) the proper response to such imaginations is a liberating counter-imagination, one that rebels against oppressive structures—the Establishment—in favor of new forms of life that foster freedom and openness, or to use Cavanaugh’s language, space and catholicity. Like del Toro’s view of fantasy, Cavanaugh understands the alternative imagination of the Eucharist to be politically subversive. He describes the Eucharist as a “counter-politics,” and says that, in the Eucharist, “Christians participate in a practice which envisions a proper ‘anarchy,’ not in the sense that it proposes chaos, but in that it challenges the false order of the state.”

On this point, the filmmaker and the theologian speak as one. Even though del Toro sees religion as part of the Establishment that needs to be overcome, Cavanaugh’s vision of “true religio” is a radically different conception of Christianity, one that makes anarchy and rebellion central to the Christian gospel. In other words, for Cavanaugh, the Christian vision of the world is intrinsically and necessarily political and anarchistic in nature. Armed with Cavanaugh’s re-conception of Christian faith, we can now turn to del Toro’s films.

**Del Toro’s Theopolitical Imagination in The Devil’s Backbone and Pan’s Labyrinth**

In the final portion of this paper, I will briefly examine the way del Toro’s anarchic imagination manifests itself in his two historical dramas, *The Devil’s Backbone* (*El espinazo del diablo*) and *Pan’s Labyrinth* (*El laberinto del fauno*). These two films combine virtually all of del Toro’s most cherished themes, including: child protagonists, gothic narratives (inclusive of monsters, ghosts, and other horror elements), a Spanish Civil War setting, and supernatural or fantastical images, characters, and events. Also, in *The Devil’s Backbone* and *Pan’s Labyrinth*, we find the most explicit portrayal of del Toro’s political imagination, particularly in the intersection of fascism and violence. I will begin by looking briefly at *The Devil’s Backbone*, followed by a closer analysis of *Pan’s Labyrinth*.


18. Ibid., 120.

19. Ibid., 47.
The Devil’s Backbone

The Devil’s Backbone is a political ghost story set in an isolated orphanage in the late 1930s near the end of the Spanish Civil War. The film focuses on a new arrival to the orphanage, named Carlos, who joins the dozens of war orphans in what turns out to be a godforsaken place. At the start of the film we see two harrowing images: first, a boy named Santi is killed, seemingly by another boy named Jaime; and second, a bomb is dropped from a plane, which lands in the middle of the orphanage without exploding. From the start, these two events are inextricably linked. Symbolically, the film brings together war and death, global politics and local politics. While the events in the orphanage seemingly occur in their own separate world, del Toro would have us see the orphanage as a microcosm symbolic of the political conflicts within the national macrosom.

Santi’s presence haunts the orphanage from the start, but he remains only a vague presence. It is only with the arrival of Carlos that Santi’s story becomes concrete. From the very first day of his arrival, Carlos sees the ghost of Santi almost wherever he goes, and he alone has contact with Santi. The ghost pursues him and speaks with him, not to frighten Carlos but to bring resolution to his life. The ghost does not represent fear, but rather melancholy, and Carlos is uniquely able to empathize with Santi’s sadness. As del Toro puts it in the commentary to the film, Carlos “brings with him a new set of eyes which he will see the world through.”

Carlos brings with him a fresh imagination, an openness to the ghost, and a willingness to confront the dark secrets of the orphanage.

We can contrast Carlos with Jacinto, the story’s primary antagonist. Jacinto was once a child in the orphanage himself, but he responded to the difficulties of his early life by retreating into a misanthropic isolation. He is, as another character puts it, “a prince without a kingdom.” According to del Toro, Jacinto represents “the root of fascism” in that fascism is anti-social by nature. Fascism stands in opposition to “the other.” As del Toro states in the commentary, fascists “view the world as black and white and erase what they think is black.” Unlike Carlos, who is receptive to the other, Jacinto has internalized the loneliness of his youth so that, in his self-sustained isolation, he can only destroy what is other. Fascism destroys what it cannot and will not understand. To use Luther’s classic definition of sin and evil, Jacinto is incurvatus in se—curved in upon himself.


21. Elsewhere in the commentary, del Toro says that Jacinto is not a “flat character,” but he’s a “limited” one. And a “limited character” is one that responds to situations “with violence and destruction.”

Eberhard Jüngel, “Sin disfigures what is true. Evil disfigures what is good.... By distorting itself, it distorts everything. This is what makes it into the epitome of ugliness.”23 Though Santi is the ghost, it is Jacinto who is truly ugly. In his self-distortion, he distorts the world around him; in his self-destruction, he destroys others. The contrast between Carlos and Jacinto is finally a contrast between two political imaginations: one that affirms and empathizes with what is Other—including what is strange, sad, bizarre, and even dead—and another that rejects everything and everyone but himself.24

The film adds layer upon layer to this contrast between Carlos and Jacinto—between innocence and violence, between an open imagination and a fascist imagination—building up to the final climactic moment in which, as del Toro says in the commentary, every alternative possibility for the children is stripped away until the only possible action that remains is to destroy Jacinto. At this moment, del Toro’s anarchic imagination comes fully into view. There is no happy ending; there is only the moment of existential crisis in which the boys are forced to take responsibility for the situation, for better or for worse. All the other adults have left or are dead, leaving only this group of young boys to fend for themselves and create their own future. Their only available response is to rebel against the fascism of Jacinto, and they do so in a scene of raw unsanitized intensity, in which the violence is painful to watch.25 In this act of youthful rebellion against adults, The Devil’s Backbone anticipates Pan’s Labyrinth, since both films praise disobedience. As del Toro stated in an interview with The Onion’s A.V. Club: “Pan’s Labyrinth [here we could substitute The Devil’s Backbone] is definitely a movie in favor of disobedience. I really believe that in the larger sense, not only today but at all times, you only find yourself when you disobey. Disobedience is the beginning of responsibility, I think.”26 The orphaned boys thus discover themselves in their radical act of disobedience against Jacinto. After the disturbingly violent purging of fascism from within their midst, the boys are able, at the end of the film, to walk together into the open desert, into an open future of new possibilities.


24. This contrast translates into two ways of telling a story. It makes sense why del Toro chose to use a ‘gothic romance’ narrative to tell this story, because, as he says in the director’s commentary, gothic romance finds beauty in what is typically viewed as the horrible and horrific. The gothic genre is “liberating,” he says, precisely because it celebrates the strange, bizarre, and abnormal. It “teaches us to understand otherness.” For this reason, it is the most ‘humanistic’ genre. By loving the monster, we learn to love others—including our own selves. Like the monsters, we too are nasty, ugly, and sad. The false imaginations are ones that teach us to hate the other while ignoring the ugliness within.

25. I return to the question of violence in del Toro’s films below in the discussion of Pan’s Labyrinth.

One should note that del Toro does not favor disobedience in general or anarchy in the abstract. It is clear that, for del Toro, as for Cavanaugh, a “proper anarchy” subverts a false order or a false imagination in favor of a counter-politics. Anarchy must have a concrete positive telos. Moreover, and this is particularly important in The Devil’s Backbone, the act of rebellion cannot be a solitary act. The contrast between Carlos and Jacinto is finally a contrast between a being-in-relation and a being-in-isolation. These two contrasting ontologies correspond to their two contrasting imaginations and modes of existence. It is central to the story that all of the boys work together to defeat the fascism represented by Jacinto.

Even so, in The Devil’s Backbone, a thick shadow of melancholy hangs over the boys’ rebellion against Jacinto. The movie closes in the same way that it begins, with a monologue that asks, “What is a ghost?” Various answers are given, all of which indicate that a ghost is something frozen in time. The ghost represents an unconsummated life, an existence that has not reached its proper telos. The film symbolizes the same idea in the unsettling image of the “devil’s backbone.” The title of the film refers to a birth defect resulting from malnutrition, in which the spine is bifurcated and partially exposed. Originally, it was thought to be a divine curse, hence the name. In the commentary, del Toro says that the defect is a “perfect metaphor” for the tragedy of war, which dooms these children before they are even born. Carlos and the other boys are born into an inescapable nexus of violence, and it is within the bounds of fascist oppression—that both on a global and local scale—that they are forced to assume responsibility and personal agency for the sake of realizing a future of new possibilities. In a way, the whole film, and the final scene in particular, is a kind of microcosm of Spain’s political situation (though certainly not only that). The boys embody the resistance of the Republican forces against Franco’s Nationalist army.

Pan’s Labyrinth

Del Toro has referred to Pan’s Labyrinth and The Devil’s Backbone as sister and brother, and for good reason. On a surface level, both take place in Spain with the Spanish Civil War as part of the political backdrop. Both feature innocent children protagonists—a boy in The Devil’s Backbone and a girl in Pan’s Labyrinth—as well as fascist adult antagonists. Both also have scenes of horror, though instead of ghosts, Pan’s Labyrinth explores the world of monsters. More importantly, Pan’s Labyrinth extends and deepens the themes of disobedience, anarchy, and theopolitical imagination present nascently in the earlier film.

Pan’s Labyrinth is set in Spain in 1944, right after Franco’s victory in the Spanish Civil War, and at the height of fascist repression of the Republican resistance. A young girl, Ofelia, comes with her pregnant mother to live with her mother’s new husband, Captain Vidal, the leader of the Nationalist forces. The ruthless Captain is stationed in a remote area in northern Spain where the last vestiges of the resistance remain. The area is lush and verdant, but for the imaginative Ofelia, it is also ancient, magical, and full of foreboding mystery. From the moment
she arrives, she encounters a harsh world of sickness, deception, and death in which the Captain reigns as a violent and ruthless lord. There, in the midst of human monstrosities and surrounded by war, Ofelia discovers a second world full of different kinds of monsters—one in which she is a princess, has a unique origin, and has a mission to accomplish. She accomplishes this mission through the ambiguous help of a faun named Pan, who provides her with a magical book that guides her on her adventure through three tasks—forcing her to confront a giant toad, a faceless child-eating monster, and finally the Captain himself. As with Carlos in *The Devil's Backbone*, however, Ofelia's own self-discovery both as the princess and as a responsible political agent only comes through her acts of disobedience.27

Before analyzing the role of anarchy in *Pan's Labyrinth*, it is important to note the way del Toro conceives of the underground kingdom in the film. Earlier, I described Ofelia as “discovering” this alternative reality, and the use of that word is quite deliberate. The “second world” is not a creation of her imagination; it is a world into which she stumbles as an innocent, wide-eyed little girl. The film provokes this interpretation by placing the first moment of discovery prior to Ofelia’s arrival at the Captain’s home. In other words, Ofelia encounters the magical realm before her world becomes a living hell, and thus the claim that she has simply concocted this world to escape from the war around her is incorrect.28 We would greatly

27. Space limitations do not permit me to analyze each of these tasks in depth, but it’s worth noting how the three tasks relate to the idea of anarchy that is at the heart of del Toro’s films. The three tasks reveal a progression in Ofelia as moral agent. She matures over the course of *Pan's Labyrinth*. In her first task, she demonstrates a simple obedience. She follows the faun’s instructions very faithfully. In the second task, however, she disobeys due to her childish curiosity, and she almost pays for it with her life. In the third task, she disobeys again, but this time knowingly—and while she pays with her life, she also receives new life as the princess. These varying responses to the faun correspond to the fact that Pan becomes ever more untrustworthy as the story progresses, something del Toro points out in the film’s commentary. To summarize what I see happening in *Pan's Labyrinth*, Ofelia moves from (1) simple obedience to (2) false or negative disobedience to (3) true or positive disobedience (“proper anarchy”). Del Toro affirms the right kind of obedience when it is appropriate, but as his statement in *The Onion* reveals, his intention is to chart Ofelia’s maturation via disobedience. Her disobedience in the second task is a negative form of disobedience because it is merely freedom from the rules, which is at the same time a freedom for oneself rather than for others. In other words, it is a freedom that is incurvatus in se, curved in upon itself. In her final task, though, Ofelia’s disobedience is positive, because it is a freedom for another, specifically, a freedom for her infant brother. She disobeys on his behalf, it is a selfless act of loving disobedience. This form of disobedience marks her maturity as a responsible acting subject. By assuming this critical anarchic posture in relation to the violent world around her, Ofelia becomes capable of resisting those (e.g., Captain Vidal, Pan) who seem to be more powerful on the outside but lack the strength of her political imagination.

28. A particularly egregious misreading of the film along these lines can be seen in Dan Craft’s review of *Pan's Labyrinth* in *The Pantagraph*, a newspaper from Central Illinois. In it, Craft writes: “For Ofelia, [the labyrinth] becomes her passport out of a harsh reality, signaled by the early arrival of a large dragonfly that she intuitively marks as a fairy—a fairy on a mission. Her matter-of-fact acceptance of the phantasmagorical is one of the first hints that everything that follows just might be taking place within her own fertile imagination, which has provided her with an escape hatch from the
misunderstand this story, therefore, if we were to impose an artificial dichotomy between the “historical-real” world and the “magical-fantastic” world, between an objective world and a subjective world. The world of the faun is not simply a fabrication of her young, imaginative mind—at least, not any more of a fabrication than the war being fought around her. Pan’s Labyrinth presents no real-versus-imagined dualism; rather, the distinction is between real and Real, between empirical reality and spiritual—i.e., true—reality. According to del Toro in the interview with Terry Gross, “what [Ofelia] sees is a fully-blown reality—spiritual reality. I believe her tale not to be just a reflection from the world around her, but to me she really turns into the princess.” In a way analogous to Cavanaugh’s view of the church, Ofelia’s “spiritual reality” organizes the spaces into which she walks. In a sense, she truly wanders “in the strange landscape of the body of Christ.”

29. This false distinction between objective and subjective is precisely what Terry Gross consistently applied to the film in her interview with del Toro. Gross spoke of the conflict between the Captain and the rebels as the “reality part of the film,” and later, when del Toro rejected this statement by speaking of “the girl’s reality,” she continued to misunderstand him and talk about how we often feel the need to fabricate stories in order to get through life. This forced him to make much more explicit his rejection of the hard and fast distinction between reality and fiction. Del Toro also made the especially fascinating statement that, whereas an adult “invites Jesus into her heart,” a young child “invites monsters into her heart.” There are two ways of reading this statement, as del Toro intimated. On one hand, you can view Jesus as just a subjective figment of the imagination. On the other hand, you can affirm monsters to be as real to children as Jesus is to adults. Del Toro prefers the latter interpretation.

30. Hidden in this debate over the terms “reality” and “imagination” is a political debate (related to but distinct from the philosophical debate) between realism and idealism. Ofelia’s imaginative rebellion against the fascist power of the Captain is not an “idealistic” fantasy; nor is the Republican resistance a truly “realistic” rebellion against fascism. Instead, del Toro would have us see that for both the Republicans and Ofelia, an alternative imagination is constitutive of their anarchic opposition. Neither can be categorized as simply idealistic or realistic. Not only is it unclear whose rebellion is actually the more “effective,” the film entirely subverts our traditional conception of “effectiveness.” The true measure of a person is not the quantity of their accomplishments but the quality of their imagination.

31. The full quote from the interview reads: “The girl’s reality in the movie, Pan’s Labyrinth—you should be able to read it as existing in her mind or as being a really raggedy, left-out-in-the-rain type of magical world, because she has been gone from it for so long. The movie allows you to interpret it both ways. To me, what she sees is a fully blown reality—spiritual reality. I believe her tale not to be just a reflection from the world around her; to me, she really turns into the princess.”

32. In Torture and Eucharist and his follow-up essay, “Making Enemies,” Cavanaugh refers to Lawrence Thornton’s novel Imagining Argentina. Cavanaugh’s use of this novel fits in very nicely with del Toro’s use of fairy tales. Thornton’s novel tells the story of Carlos Rueda, whose wife and daughter are “disappeared” under a military dictatorship very similar to the kind in Chile under Pinochet—a scenario that is familiar to viewers of Pan’s Labyrinth. Cavanaugh analyzes del Toro’s film to examine the role of storytelling in an anarchic society. Cavanaugh’s analysis is particularly relevant to the film’s depiction of the faun, who serves as a sort of spiritual guide to Ofelia. Cavanaugh argues that storytelling is a powerful tool for resistance, and that it is through storytelling that people can resist the power of the state. This is evident in the film, where the faun serves as a sort of spiritual guide to Ofelia, helping her navigate the dangerous world of the faerie. In this way, storytelling is used as a tool for resistance, and the faun becomes a symbol of the power of the imagination to resist oppression.
insofar as Christ identifies himself with the poor, the oppressed, and the socially “invisible” (Mt 25:31–46).

The role of imagination in Pan’s Labyrinth is clear from the very start of the film. The superimposed text with which the film opens describes the setting in the following way: “Hidden in the mountains, armed men fight the new fascist regime. Military posts are established to exterminate the resistance.” Already we see the way an alternative imagination functions as a redescription of the world. Del Toro refers to “armed men” resisting the “fascist regime,” whereas the opposite perspective (shared by the U.S. government) might refer to “communist rebels” engaged in a guerilla war with “anti-communist nationalists.” We see a much more profound use of imaginative redescription in Ofelia’s first encounter with Captain Vidal, her new stepfather. During the trip to the Captain’s home in the forest, Ofelia’s mother tells her: “I want you to call him ‘Father.’ Do you hear me? ‘Father.’ It’s just a word, Ofelia.” A bit later, after arriving at the house and refusing to say anything to the Captain, Ofelia wanders off and discovers an old labyrinth in the garden. Mercedes, the head of the servants, finds Ofelia and talks briefly. Finally, Mercedes turns and says, “Your father needs me.” Ofelia immediately responds, “He’s not my father.” When Mercedes seems perplexed, Ofelia vehemently declares: “The Captain—he’s not my father. My father was a tailor. He died in the war. The Captain’s not my father!” Ofelia’s rejection of the Captain is the first clear instance of anarchic imagination in Pan’s Labyrinth; it is the primal act of disobedience upon which the later events build.

This early conflict between Ofelia and the Captain not only sets up the rest of the film, but it also foreshadows the film’s conclusion. After a complicated set of plot turns, Ofelia rebels at the end of the story against both the Captain and the dichotomy between reality and imagination. “Carlos’s friends are skeptical, convinced that one cannot confront tanks and helicopters with imagination and stories. They can see the conflict only in terms of fantasy versus reality. Carlos, on the other hand, rightly grasps that the contest is not between imagination and the real but between two types of imagination: that of the generals and that of their opponents.” William Cavanaugh, “Making Enemies: The Imagination of Torture in Chile and the United States,” Theology Today 63, no. 3 (2006): 307–23 (307–8). Reprinted in William Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist: A Regretful Update, in Torture Is a Moral Issue: Christians, Jews, Muslims, and People of Conscience Speak Out, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 92–112 (92–93). Cavanaugh’s description of how imagination works in Thornton’s novel applies perfectly to del Toro’s use of imagination in Pan’s Labyrinth. For del Toro, the contest is between two types of imagination, not between fantasy and reality. For del Toro, the fantasy in these stories is the true reality.

33. It is especially interesting that this line from Ofelia’s mother directly follows Ofelia’s first encounter with the magical underworld in the form of an insect fairy. Del Toro thus juxtaposes the imaginative world of fairies and the imaginative task given to Ofelia by the mother. One form of imagination is liberating, while the other is restricting. By putting these two scenes side-by-side, the film subtly illuminates the role of imagination in both dimensions of Ofelia’s life—her “real world” identity as the stepdaughter of a fascist Captain, and her (so to speak) “Real World” identity as the princess of the underworld.
faun in order to protect the life of her baby half-brother. Tragically, as a result of this final act of disobedience, Ofelia is killed by the Captain in the labyrinth. The Captain then takes his son and attempts to leave, but he is confronted by Mercedes and the resistance forces. Realizing that he is about to die, the Captain makes one final plea: “Tell him about his father, about the time his father died...” Mercedes interrupts him, saying, “No. He won’t even know your name.” At this point, a resistance fighter shoots Captain Vidal in the head. While the execution of the Captain is the empirical act of rebellion, the true act of political resistance comes in the refusal to acknowledge the Captain’s name. The film prepares us for this act by emphasizing the Captain’s anxieties about both his own father and the deep need to have his legacy live on through his son. Moreover, throughout the film, the Captain’s name is subsumed under his military title, “capitán.” In a sense, Vidal doesn’t really have a personal identity in the film. Even his title is more of a cipher. He is rather the embodiment—the imagined embodiment—of masculine power and the fascist rejection of alternative imaginative frameworks. From Ophelia’s spiritual perspective, Vidal is really the ultimate monster—the human analogue to what she encounters in the underworld.

In the same way that The Devil’s Backbone is a contrast between Carlos and Jacinto, Pan’s Labyrinth is a contrast between Ofelia and Captain Vidal. Here, again, it is a contest between two imaginations, two ways of understanding the world. The contrast is symbolized well in the two objects that are associated with each character. For Ofelia, her object is the magical book given to her by the faun. The book not only reveals her identity, but it also sets forth the various tasks that she must complete in time in order to become the princess again. The book is thus a window into an alternative imagination; it opens her up to new realities and new possibilities. The Captain, on the other hand, is always standing in front of a mirror. Like Jacinto, Captain Vidal embodies what it means to be homo incurvatus in se. He is self-absorbed, turned in upon himself, such that he can only subjugate and destroy what is “other.” These two orientations result in diametrically opposed—but dialectically linked—actions. Where Ofelia, in her first task, brings life to a dead tree, the Captain tortures and kills those who oppose him. Where Ofelia seeks to protect her baby brother at the cost of her own life, the Captain seeks to protect his son in order to further his own existence, that is, in order to escape death by making himself, in a certain sense, immortal.

The Captain’s use of torture in the film establishes the clearest point of contrast between Ofelia and the Captain. According to Cavanaugh, torture “helps to create the enemies that we need. Torture is a kind of theater in which people are made to play roles and thereby reinforce a certain kind of social imagination.... Torture

34. As just one example, Ofelia overhears the Captain say to the doctor: “If you have to choose [between the life of the mother and the life of the baby], save the baby. That boy will bear my name and my father’s name, too.”
reinforces an imaginative distancing between us and the tortured.”

This theatrical imagination in which enemies are fabricated by state power is represented well by del Toro in *Pan’s Labyrinth*. The film has two scenes of torture; more accurately, there is one actually of torture and a second only potentially. In the first, a stuttering man is beaten and mutilated within an inch of his life, before secretly finding mercy at the hands of the doctor through a lethal injection. The scene is a sort of filmic embodiment of Cavanaugh’s argument that torture is the “imagination of the state.” The stutterer represents the passive manipulable character, forced by the Captain to play a pre-scripted role in the fascist drama of the state.

The second scene occurs because Mercedes is caught helping the resistance forces. The Captain prepares to force her into the same tortured role he forced the stuttering man. He tells Sergeant Garcés, his second-in-command, to leave the room. Garcés asks, “You’re sure, Captain?” Vidal responds: “For God’s sake, she’s just a woman.” In a key statement, Mercedes then says, “That’s what you always thought. That’s why I was able to get away with it. I was invisible to you.” Vidal responds by making a disdainful comment about how Mercedes has figured out his weakness—arrogance. But the Captain completely misses the insight of her comment. What Mercedes identifies is precisely the incurved, myopic nature of Vidal’s imagination. His deformed vision of reality has rendered him incapable of affirming others as truly other. His entire existence is constructed around self-preservation, symbolized in the figure of the mirror. And while the anticipated scene of torture never happens, there is a sense in *Pan’s Labyrinth* in which the theatrics of torture function, as Cavanaugh says, to “create enemies” by making the invisible visible—albeit in a predefined role scripted by the state. Ofelia, by contrast, is able to see the invisible because of her open and other-affirming imagination.


36. The film closes with a final voice-over narration in which the narrator says that the princess “left behind small traces of her time on earth, visible only to those that know where to look.” Here we have the final example of imagination in the film. Again, the power of an alternative imagination belongs to those who have the eyes to see. Such people are open to new possibilities; they are open to the disruptive power of the anarchic imagination. In the same way that Mercedes was “invisible” to the captain, because he did not have the eyes to see, so too the traces of Ofelia are only “visible” to those who do have these eyes, who are able to see the Real and encounter the True, in the midst of a world of false realities and pseudo truths.

Del Toro makes the same basic point in response to the question regarding whether Ofelia’s fantasy is ‘real’ or not: “There’s a very clear instance in the movie where there is no other explanation. In my mind, the movie tries to say that if you don’t know where to look, you won’t see these creatures. Like Vidal—he’s unable to see them. There are two kinds of audiences for this movie: one that will believe it’s real and the other that will think it’s imaginary. For me, the movie is like a Rorschach test. It defines you as a glass-half-empty or glass-half-full person. Which is fine, I like the idea of that being your choice.” Ethan Alter, “Deconstructing *Pan’s Labyrinth*: Guillermo del Toro Puts Horror Back into Fairy Tales,” *Film Journal International* 110, no. 1 (2007): 15. Available online at: http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/eresearch/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003523522.
At this point, a word is in order regarding the role of violence in Pan’s Labyrinth. According to del Toro in the Fresh Air interview, “Everybody else, here or there, chooses violence. The girl chooses not to exert [violence].” Here the contrast is not only between Ofelia and the Captain, but between Ofelia and all the other characters. This also constitutes a decisive shift from The Devil’s Backbone, in which it is precisely the use of violence by the children that overcomes Jacinto. Yet, it is impossible to escape the fact that while Ofelia remains innocent from beginning to end, the film’s climax requires the execution of the Captain by the resistance forces. This raises an uncomfortable reality: despite del Toro’s contrast between the innocent characters who are open and affirming of what is other and the fascist characters who destroy the other, these two films require, at their climactic points, the innocent characters to destroy the fascist character. In other words, what distinguishes the imaginations of Carlos and Ofelia is precisely the kind of empathy and acknowledgement of the other, which they deny to those characters (Jacinto and Vidal) who are deemed to be beyond the pale.

One possible reading of these films might charge del Toro with actually advocating the use of violence to solve sociopolitical problems. Certainly, he is supportive of the Republican resistance and thought that the Allied forces should have aided them in their uprising against Franco. So while this charge might be understandable, I argue that it is incomplete because it misunderstands the nature of the film as a whole as an imaginative project in political hermeneutics. In his interview with Gross, del Toro makes the following statement: “I think monsters were created by mankind to explain the universe around them and—when we became civilized—the universe within us.” The fantastical imagination is a way of interpreting reality (rather than escaping from it), and in particular, a way of

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37. I have chosen in this article to ground the comparison between Christian theology and the films of del Toro in the anarchic imagination rather than in any characters or plot elements in his stories that resemble or call to mind characters or plot elements in the Christian narrative. A central example of this is the Christ-like nature of Ofelia. She lives a life of nonviolent opposition to the powers of sin and death, dies in the struggle to save her brother (symbolic perhaps of helpless humanity), and is “resurrected” in glory to the praise of her father, even assuming her place as the third member in a royal trinity. The myth even makes Ofelia the historical-bodily incarnation of the princess. And the film plays out as a kind of passion narrative in which her three tasks—all directly leading to her final confrontation with the Captain and her inevitable death—constitute her preordained mission. While these narrative similarities are substantial and worthy of consideration, they do not constitute the focus of this study for the following reasons: (1) these elements are unique to Pan’s Labyrinth and do not shed light on del Toro’s other films; (2) formal, narrative similarities with the New Testament Gospels are neither unique to Pan’s Labyrinth nor sufficient to demand theological engagement; and (3) these aspects of the film do not provide a basis for bringing del Toro and Cavanaugh into conversation. Moreover, one should always be cautious when trying to establish similarities between the person of Christ and the character in a story. It is important to remember that what makes Christ unique and significant for us is hidden and cannot be read off the surface of history, and consequently all similarities between the two stories, while certainly of theological interest in their own right, are not relevant to the purposes of this study.
interpreting ourselves. As a kind of imaginative hermeneutics, fantasy transposes social and political realities into a framework that makes sense of them for the sake of funding a counter-politics. Many children’s fairy tales do this in order to teach children basic morals about life. Del Toro, as a creator of adult fairy tales, has a similar but more mature intention: to expose the true ugliness of fascism, to reveal the beauty in what is normally defined as “ugly,” and to mobilize a “beautiful anarchy” through disobedience and rebellion against the Establishment. Del Toro is not promoting violence but rather the kind of radical resistance necessary to be morally responsible agents.

If there remains a problem with del Toro’s stories, it is the sharp distinction between “good” and “bad” characters. His films tend to view reality as black-and-white, though the reasons for doing so, as I have already suggested, are politically subversive in nature. Unlike the vapid oversimplification of reality prevalent in much of Hollywood today, del Toro’s films are intentionally simple: they re-narrate the world within the imaginative framework of a fairy tale. Del Toro is motivated in this re-narration by his antagonism toward fascism, defined broadly to include all ideologies that violently reject the other. Even so, his stories lack the moral ambiguity characteristic of films like The Decalogue, The Battle of Algiers, and Mystic River. The moral difficulty is located not in the inner complexity of the characters, but rather in the active struggle of the innocent protagonist to fully affirm the other over against those who would destroy the other. While his attempt to defend his characterization of Jacinto by calling him a “limited,” rather than

38. This is the reason why, according to del Toro, Ofelia’s fantasy is not a sanitized escape but rather a dark and violent articulation of the surrounding political world: “Like the girl in the film I think I used fantasy to articulate the world around me. That is why, I think, the fantasy world in the film is every bit as violent and complex as the world around her.... It is impossible to live in the world and not have a tainted imagination.” Donald Clarke, “The Terror of del Toro,” Irish Times, Nov. 24, 2006.

39. In the Fresh Air interview, del Toro says: “I tried to make the monsters as beautiful as possible—beautiful in the way nature is beautiful.”

40. There is nevertheless a very real sense in which even a nonviolent praxis remains in some sense violent. Insofar as one resists another person or entity, refusing to be co-opted by the narrative of a hegemonic power-structure, one engages in a kind of violence, even if one does not directly harm another living being. In his discussion of Slavoj Zizek, Tyler Roberts makes this point well: “There is, I think something right in describing this, and so Christian love generally, as ‘violent.’ Take, for instance, Martin Luther King’s ‘nonviolent resistance.’ Some will argue that this example in fact shows that Christian love and politics can be nonviolent. But the fact is that King’s resistance incited violence and in some ways depended on it for success. To say this is by no means to belittle or criticize his work. Nor is it to ignore the fact that segregation and racial oppression in the United States in King’s day was already inherently violent or to deny a crucial difference between using what we might call ‘active’ violence to resist oppression and, as King did, refusing such means. But King’s resistance did ‘introduce Difference’—and it relentlessly insisted on it in a way that not only demanded the ‘violence’ of change but provoked the violence of blood.” See Tyler Roberts, “Militant Love: Zizek and the Christian Legacy,” in Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love’s Wisdom, ed. Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 171–84 (180).
“flat,” character is unpersuasive,41 it is nevertheless clear that del Toro is creating movies of ideas—that is, his films have ideological depth. He is not simply telling ghost stories and fairy tales; rather, these films are entertaining fables, which are equally philosophies of life. Understood in that light, even if Jacinto and Captain Vidal are “limited” (or “flat”), they are meant to be symbolic of twisted political ideologies. One could respond, though, that this is precisely the problem. Del Toro has effectively dehumanized these characters, reducing the fascists to fascism so as to render their violent deaths morally justified. While I have sought to interpret del Toro as charitably as possible, on this point I might argue that a fully Christian imagination would have to see such characters in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ. In other words, the Christian imagination is the most radical of all, rebelling even against the all-too-human impulse to demonize our enemies. Of course, this is more of an indictment on Hollywood in general, insofar as movies today dehumanize the plot’s “evil” antagonists, thus legitimating their destruction by the “innocent” protagonists.

Conclusion: Film as Spiritual Imagination

I have argued here that del Toro’s films are exercises in anarchic imagination. His films explore the fantastical and monstrous in order to facilitate a rebellious counter-politics, which rejects established structures of violence and destruction in favor of a liberating individual responsibility. I have also argued that a similar anarchic imagination can be found in the theopolitical work of William Cavanaugh. Like del Toro, Cavanaugh conceives of state politics as a corrupt practice of the imagination, and thus he envisions a counter-imagination that will fund a counter-politics. Both del Toro and Cavanaugh advocate a positive form of anarchy, one that subverts practices of violence and oppression in favor of alternative practices of liberation.

Ostensibly, however, del Toro and Cavanaugh differ with respect to religion. For del Toro, the Christian faith is part of the Establishment, part of the repressive structures of society, which command a blind obedience and condemn disobedience. Del Toro calls this kind of obedience “an absolutely despicable cowardice” and equates it with the Captain’s cowardice in Pan’s Labyrinth.42 Yet while he rejects religion, understood as a structure of oppression and conformity, del Toro views

41. See note 21.

42. The statement comes from the interview with Gross. After referring to a Mexican police officer who said, “I just follow orders; I don’t make them,” del Toro says: “That type of obedience, where you find refuge in the corporate, or when you find refuge in the political or religious majority, is such an absolutely despicable cowardice. The same cowardice that the Captain displays by making the others non-human, so he can torture or kill them. I think that every time you turn to a truth that is not your own—confiding the guidance of your soul to somebody else’s choices—you are making a huge mistake.”
cinematic fantasy as a kind of spiritual imagination. In a USA Today article, he is quoted as saying: “The fantastic is the only tool we have nowadays to explain spirituality to a generation that refuses to believe in dogma or religion. Superhero movies create a kind of mythology. Creature movies, horror movies, create at least a belief in something beyond.” Moreover, twice in the interview with Gross, del Toro refers to fantasy and imagination as a “spiritual reality,” even going so far as to make a direct parallel between the adult decision to “accept Jesus into my heart” and the child’s decision to “accept monsters into my heart.”

Del Toro’s understanding of fantasy as “spiritual reality” becomes more clear in the “Director’s Commentary” to Pan’s Labyrinth. During the final scene of the film, he says:

Is there real immortality? Is there real magic? I believe there is. I believe they are a spiritual reality that is as tangible and as real as the objective world, as the material world. I think that we have no problem believing in them when they are disguised as religion—when people say, I feel Buddha or Jesus or Muhammad in my heart. People nod their heads and allow it to be true. But when we seek that solace, and that refuge, in fantasy, people mostly deny us that license and think it’s a childish conceit. But I think immortality is the act of refusing death, of refusing to give any importance to death.... I think that the girl really becomes immortal.

As we see in this statement, del Toro does not view this spiritual reality as a mere figment of the imagination, a pleasant story we tell children to keep them happy. Quite to the contrary, del Toro is a kind of theological realist, in that he understands this spiritual reality to have true objective significance. It is not a private mental experience but a communal imaginative praxis. In the same way that the nation-state is a “social imaginary” rooted in material existence, so too del Toro’s spiritual reality—what he calls “immortality”—is a “social imaginary” rooted in, but not limited to, material existence. If the social imaginary of the state makes possible and is constituted by the practices of self-preservation, torture,
and death, the social imaginary of del Toro’s spiritual reality makes possible and is constituted by the alternative practice of “refusing death.” One participates in true immortality, for del Toro, by engaging in an anarchic resistance to evil and death. Immortality simply is the rejection of the powers and principalities, and this rejection is possible only because people participate in the counter-imaginations engendered by the communal liturgy of fantasy. In his films, del Toro is thus attempting to articulate a kind of anarchic spiritual imagination—a fantastical vision of immortality, which facilitates a subversive political hermeneutics.

If all of this seems post-Christian, in a way that is precisely the point. Del Toro is keenly aware of the disenchantment character of modern social life. In a 2007 article, he is quoted as saying: “I think we have a responsibility to preserve our heritage of imagination. Ancient cultures valued the dream life as much as the waking life and I think we’re losing that. We’re in a losing battle for the spiritual side of mankind and the last refuge of faith is the genre film.” In other words, the disillusionment regarding institutional religion is complete; we live in a demythologized world. At the same time, however, we cannot capitulate to the oppressive social imaginations of the nation-state, the multinational corporation, or the varieties of sectarian fundamentalism. All of these imaginations reinforce and perpetuate the violent practices of the Establishment. Into this “losing battle,” therefore, del Toro comes as a prophet, proclaiming a message of freedom from false imaginations of death and offering the cinematic liturgy of fantasy as the basis for a new imagination of love, self-sacrifice, and immortality. Within a demythologized world, del Toro seeks to remythologize our imaginations. Through his genre movies he seeks to “create a kind of mythology.” In the gospel according to del Toro, fairy tales and fantasy films serve the role once played by medieval liturgies; they inculcate a new mode of existence within the community—the “kingdom of God” or “spiritual reality.” This gospel is not explicitly or intentionally theological, in that it does not maintain any doctrinal connection to the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, it comes as a post-Christian challenge to Christianity that needs to be heard by the church today: Is the Christian theological imagination for or against the Establishment? Does Christianity foster a communal praxis of shared suffering and active resistance to death? The question for the Christian church is whether it has the resources to foster a new social imagination within a post-Christian age.

The interdisciplinary engagement with Cavanaugh is fascinating for this very reason: Cavanaugh says that Christianity does have those resources, and they are grounded in the same gospel that has been so often twisted and perverted to

49. The post-Christian is by no means anti- or non-Christian. In fact, what I am suggesting here is that the post-Christian perspective might in fact be more truly Christian than institutional Christian religion.
serve anti-Christian ends. Viewed in this way, we see a striking correspondence between del Toro’s “spiritual imagination” and Cavanaugh’s “Eucharistic imagination.” For both, the imagined structures of the modern world constitute a kind of bondage to evil and death; the world into which we are born conditions us to become participants in the imaginative project of the state, with all its monstrous consequences. Similarly, both have a soteriology of liberation rooted in an alternative imagination: for Cavanaugh, the ecclesial practice of Eucharistic participation proffers a new ordering of bodies in accordance with the risen body of Christ; for del Toro, the aesthetic practice of participating in the fantastical world of fairy tales opens up new possibilities for belief and action in the world. Finally, both soteriologies are intrinsically political in nature: both see their liberative visions as having subversive sociopolitical ramifications.

While Cavanaugh’s vision is theological and so political (theopolitical), del Toro’s is political and so, I claim, theological (theopolitical), even if he does not himself see it this way. Del Toro is not explicitly or self-consciously working within a Christian idiom; nevertheless, I am claiming that his political imagination is, in essence, a theological one, when properly viewed from the perspective of faith. To put it another way, del Toro’s cinematic worlds offer a post-Christian spiritual mythology—a secularized, politicized version of Tolkien’s Faërie—that achieves in practice what the Christian gospel uniquely claims to establish. The films dramatize the liberation of the oppressed, and in the case of Pan’s Labyrinth, even the arrival at a kind of eschatological redemption. Though del Toro cannot accept the church’s specific claims to authority, he has crafted a fantastical fairy world ordered toward an analogous soteriological-ethical end. He cannot recognize this as a theological end in large part because his understanding of Christianity is distorted by his personal experience with the Catholic Church. The goal of this study has been to show that, armed with a different conception of Christianity, one can describe del Toro’s artistic vision as a distinctly—though not, on its own, sufficiently—Christian imagination.

50. See note 2.

51. As noted above, Ofelia is a type of both the biblical “Suffering Servant” and the ecclesial martyr. She is iconic of both the messianic figure of redemption and the faithful follower—both of whom are “obedient unto death.” Intriguingly, del Toro makes disobedience intrinsic to true obedience. This is actually faithful to the scriptural narratives of Jesus, in which it is precisely his refusal to abide by the oral law of the Pharisees that ultimately leads to his betrayal and execution. Christ was obediently disobedient. While del Toro is not engaged on this level, Pan’s Labyrinth clearly lends itself to such a reading, particularly in the closing scene in which Ofelia is honored for her self-sacrifice.

52. One practical implication of this study is that any portrayal of the Christian gospel which overlooks or obscures its radical solidarity with the marginalized and the oppressed over against the Establishment—and the Establishment can take on various forms at various times—is a truncated, perhaps even distorted, gospel that threatens to misconstrue the essence of the Christian faith. With Cavanaugh, the church must recover the “proper anarchy” that lies at the heart of Christianity. This anarchy is no “spiritualized,” i.e., non-bodily or apolitical, anarchy. It has to have real implications for real people in the context of real sociopolitical relationships. To give just one example from
We might call it an *imaginatio crucis*, in that del Toro presents a cinematically mythologized vision of both passive self-sacrificial love and active resistance against the powers and principalities.

To conclude, I do not think this analogy between Cavanaugh and del Toro is merely accidental. In November 2006, del Toro wrote an article for *The Guardian* in which he said:

> I...have a fear of reason and dogma; it gives me the shivers. But maybe my upbringing keeps getting in the way. When I showed *Pan's Labyrinth* to my friend Alejandro González Iñárritu, he said: “That’s a truly Catholic film.” And there was me thinking that it was a truly profane film, a layman’s riff on Catholic dogma. It’s true what they say: once a Catholic, always a Catholic.\(^{53}\)

My claim in this study is that, in their own ways, both Iñárritu and del Toro are correct, not only with respect to *Pan’s Labyrinth* but also to *The Devil’s Backbone*. While del Toro’s films are certainly profane and worldly in the way that all good cinema must be,\(^{54}\) his films also at the same time evince a

Cavanaugh, this means an anarchy against state torture and against the church’s complacency in the face of such torture. Cavanaugh’s point, which is mine as well, is that the truly Christian anarchy fully coincides with a material, embodied, social, and political activity. There is no sense in which the uniquely “Christian” act can be isolated from its sociopolitical implications; on the contrary, the sociopolitical engagement precisely is the Christian action. This means jettisoning any gnostic elements in our thinking that might seek to dichotomize the spiritual and the worldly. For the Christian, in light of the incarnation, the spiritual activity *happens within this concrete world* and is inseparable from it.


54. It is the conviction of this author that art should never aspire to the metaphysical; art must remain this-worldly. The goodness of a work of art depends on how fully and honestly this-worldly it is. Moreover, the adjective “Christian” is entirely superfluous in relation to art; it has no material content in addition to the “goodness” of art. In other words, what makes art “good” is also what makes it “Christian,” if we even wish to use the adjective at all: viz. that the work of art probes the concrete depths of what it means to live in this world. The attempt by some artists to create art that narrates or describes metaphysical realities is to depart from the artistic enterprise. My convictions on this issue are informed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s views in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In those letters, Bonhoeffer argues that Christianity is a “this-worldly” faith, and it is precisely its this-worldliness that distinguishes Christianity from religion: “The difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and the mythological hope is that the former sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way.... The Christian...has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself (‘My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’), he must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ. This world must not be prematurely written off; in this the Old and New Testaments are at one. ” See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 336–37, 369–70. One could argue that there is a danger in del Toro’s work, insofar as he seeks to create a “spiritual reality” in his films. My response would be that del Toro has consistently (and rightly) redefined the “spiritual” in terms of a thoroughly materialist politics. Del
profoundly theological—i.e., theopolitical—imagination. Del Toro’s movies are “truly Catholic” for the very reason that del Toro thinks they are profane and secular—viz. their praise of disobedience and anarchy. The communal resistance to the Establishment for the sake of a positive *telos* is a theologically significant action, one which ought to be a point of intersection between Christian and non-Christian communities.\(^{55}\) In the end, *The Devil’s Backbone* and *Pan’s Labyrinth* are not Catholic in the way del Toro’s grandmother was Catholic, but rather in the way Cavanaugh is Catholic.\(^{56}\) Along with Cavanaugh, del Toro has recaptured what is at the heart of the Christian kerygma: a beautiful anarchy.\(^{57}\)

Toro locates the “spiritual” within the nexus of this-worldly sociopolitical relationships. Fantasy for him is not a flight from the world but a journey into the ugly depths of human existence.

\(^{55}\) We see examples of such resistance in Mohandas Gandhi’s opposition to British colonialism, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., and more recently the People Power Revolution in the Philippines against the Marcos dictatorship. There are also many exclusively ecclesial forms of resistance, such as the French Reformed Church’s rescue of Jews during Hitler’s Nazi regime.

\(^{56}\) There is, of course, nothing confessionally or traditionally “Roman Catholic” about del Toro’s vision. I am only claiming that he has captured a broadly *Christian* theopolitical imagination through his use of the fantastical. And yet, for del Toro, a Christian imagination is a Catholic imagination—since there is no other ecclesial context in his frame of reference. I made the comparison with Cavanaugh not only because of the material similarity regarding anarchy and imagination, but also because Cavanaugh is a Catholic theologian who offers an alternative vision for what Catholic Christianity can look like. Having said this, it is certainly possible that more specifically Catholic elements are present in del Toro’s films: for example, the sacramental character of nature, the pervasive presence of the mystical and the supernatural, and the Marian archetype embodied in his female protagonists. These are just a few of the possible connections one might draw between Catholicism and del Toro’s films. I have limited my attention to the anarchic character of his imagination, but these other dimensions would be worth exploring in the future.

\(^{57}\) Certainly, the confessing Christian acknowledges that this resistance is first and foremost actualized in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Our political action is not itself redemptive. And yet, it is problematic when Christians dichotomize the objective and the subjective, so that the work of Christ becomes a past-tense fact rather than a present-tense actuality. The turning of Christ into a datum of the past tends to coincide with a de-existentializing of the kerygma and a static bibilology, which views Scripture as a record of historical facts and rational propositions. All of this needs to be subjected to serious theological scrutiny. The divisions between past and present, between the objective and subjective, are rooted in an Enlightenment paradigm that does not acknowledge the trinitarian character of Christian faith. In light of the resurrection, Christian faith confesses that the saving significance of Jesus Christ is not a past fact but a present, existential event made actual for us through Word and Spirit. More importantly, the gospel kerygma cannot be divorced from the ethical injunction to love our neighbors. The Pauline axiom that faith always works through love (Gal 5:6) is misunderstood when construed as evidence for or against a particular doctrine of justification within Protestant-Catholic polemics. It is rather a statement identifying what it means to belong to the new age of Christ. The apocalyptic irruption of Christ’s reign inaugurates a new creation in which faith active as love is the defining characteristic. While a full discussion is well beyond the scope of this essay, I take it that this irruption of Christ is not merely a one-time occurrence in the past; instead, the reality of the crucified Christ becomes present ever anew through the proclamation of the Word in the power of the Spirit. Easter and Pentecost testify to the fact that Jesus is present with us today, and that he is continually calling forth a community to respond in a faith active through love. The
In his articulation of an anarchic political imagination, Guillermo del Toro has provided Christian theology with a rich resource for future dialogue with the cinematic worlds of fantasy and horror.

proclamation of the kerygma is thus a word-event that is fundamentally inseparable from (and in fact coincides with) both the dynamic presence of Christ in our midst and the active communal obedience to Christ in the world. From this standpoint, it is not hard to see how this obedient love might then be defined as the anarchic resistance to death, as the theopolitical opposition to the Establishment. “Faith active through love” would thus describe the new social imaginary of the ecclesial community in its daily encounter with the crucified and risen Lord. Put differently, the mission of God and the mission of the church must be understood in a thoroughly apocalyptic-theopolitical manner. For more on Galatians 5:6, see J. Louis Martyn, Galatians, The Anchor Bible 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 472–74.