Thesis

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MA Visual Effects

How does Guillermo del Toro utilize lighting techniques to enhance the emotional depth and atmosphere in "Pan's Labyrinth"?

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Abstract

This thesis examines how lighting enhances the emotional and narrative experience in Guillermo del Toro's film, Pan's Labyrinth. Various sources, scholarly articles, and scene analyses were reviewed to explore this subject. The findings reveal that cold, harsh lighting in the real world emphasizes oppression and control, while warm, soft tones in the fantasy realm symbolize hope and escape. Key scenes, such as the dim lighting in Vidal's quarters and the ethereal glow of the labyrinth, demonstrate how lighting guides the audience's emotions and reinforces themes of innocence, resistance, and transformation. These insights can inform future cinematic lighting techniques.

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Introduction

Cinematography is the art and science of the visual choices that carry a story to the screen of a movie. It is a combination of lighting and camera angles/positions, lens type, angle, movement, and special effects, which help to set the tone of a film. At the same time, emotions within the context of the film are also complex, as they refer to both the character's experience and the audience's experience. Rather than offer a pure analysis of how cinematographers in the approximately 30 feature films that del Toro has made employ light, this thesis seeks to expand upon the more emotional and atmospheric visuals and how the design of any visual acts to shape a viewer's experience in the case of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Pan's Labyrinth (El laberinto del fauno), a 2006 Mexican-Spanish film combining magical and historical fantasy, is set in post-Civil War Spain, mere months after the end of the conflict. The young Ofelia discovers solace and relief from the brutal regime of her stepfather, Captain Vidal, an unrelenting military officer. During this difficult time, Ofelia finds a magical labyrinth, where she encounters a faun who tells her she is the lost princess of that labyrinth. She must undertake three challenging tasks to return to her real life, placing her between her bleak existence and an imaginative world packed with secrets. This is a tale of the juxtaposition of purity against tyrannical oppression and how a wild imagination can simultaneously be a pathway to escape from harsh reality or a form of resilience.

The film depicts the loss of innocence, bravery, and imagination with brilliant visual representation. Pan's Labyrinth is almost a visual essay on the human soul under the influence of war, juxtaposing its exuberant fantastic imagery with oppressive, suffocating visuals. Under this particular lighting and visual style, the movie speaks

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its thoughts wordlessly, therefore being a very rich topic for cinematographic analysis. In film, lighting is an essential tool for conveying emotion and creating atmosphere. Directors use different lighting techniques to guide viewers' emotional responses and to build the mood of each scene. In Pan's Labyrinth, director Guillermo del Toro makes thoughtful use of lighting to deepen the emotional effect of the story, shaping the audience's perception of both the real and imaginary worlds portrayed in the film. Del Toro's choice of lighting helps separate the real world from the fantasy world, giving each setting a unique visual feel. The real world, controlled by Captain Vidal, is marked by darker lighting and shadows, which create a heavy, oppressive atmosphere that mirrors Ofelia's struggles. In contrast, scenes set within the labyrinth are often illuminated with warm, soft light, evoking a sense of wonder and escape from reality. This use of lighting reflects Ofelia's longing for freedom and her attempts to cope with the challenges she faces in her daily life.

Lighting in Pan's Labyrinth also highlights key emotional moments. Darker tones and shadows dominate scenes of fear or uncertainty, drawing the viewer into Ofelia's perspective as she encounters danger. When Ofelia interacts with the magical beings in the labyrinth, however, the lighting shifts, becoming brighter and softer. These lighting changes help convey her feelings, making the audience feel both, the hardships of her reality and the beauty of her imagination. Through this approach, del Toro uses light to bridge the two worlds and to connect viewers with the protagonist's emotional journey. Furthermore, the film's contrasting lighting styles emphasize its central themes. Scenes in Ofelia's real life are often muted and dimly lit, capturing the oppressive atmosphere of Captain Vidal's rule. By contrast, scenes within the fantasy world feature more vibrant, lively lighting, symbolizing hope and resilience. This distinction demonstrates how Ofelia uses her imagination as a

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source of power and as a means of escape from reality. As a result, the lighting in Pan's Labyrinth serves to establish the tone and convey the story's deeper meanings. Del Toro also employs certain lighting symbolism to give the narrative more emotional depth. For instance, sequences where Ofelia demonstrates bravery, curiosity, or innocence employ natural lighting. The soft lighting enhances the compassion of these moments, allowing the viewer to perceive her purity and power. In this approach, lighting becomes a narrative tool, adding layers of meaning and allowing viewers to connect with the tale on a deeper level. The harsh, shadowed lighting in scenes of post-Civil War Spain reflects Ofelia's grim reality under her stepfather's authoritarian control, evoking tension and a sense of oppression. This shadow-heavy lighting captures the fear and strict oversight she faces, visually emphasizing themes of control and suppression in her daily life. By contrast, del Toro uses softer, warmer lighting to illuminate scenes in the fantasy world, creating an inviting, almost magical atmosphere that symbolizes Ofelia's desire to escape into a realm of wonder and possibility.

This thesis will explore how del Toro's lighting techniques do more than just enhance the film visually; they are crucial to the storytelling. The contrasting lighting styles distinguishing the oppressive real world from the enchanting fantasy world shape the viewer's emotional experience, guiding them through the film's themes of courage, innocence, as well as the quest for freedom in the face of control. Through an analysis of specific scenes, this study will reveal how lighting in Pan's Labyrinth becomes a narrative device, one that draws viewers deeply into the emotional core of Ofelia's journey.

Literature Review

Cinematography, as noted by Lotman (2016), involves specific elements such as lighting, camera movement, and lenses, distinguishing it from further extensive aspects of film form often discussed in the theoretical literature. Since the development of motion pictures, directors along with cinematographers, have used lighting techniques to evoke emotions in audiences. Lombard and Ditton (1997) argue that, when used effectively, these techniques remain subtle, blending seamlessly into the film's world to create an immersive experience for viewers. Poland (2014) elaborates on the importance of lighting in filmmaking and how it is especially crucial in any film's visual narration. She goes on to explain that the theory and practice of light have evolved over time to develop three-dimensional images that should, in turn, help convey mood and enhance the telling of the story. Her work further emphasizes how lighting has played an important role in cinematic artistry since the early days of cinema and set standards for how visual elements are created to support the narrative.

A study conducted on Pan's Labyrinth by T, P. V & Pillai, G.V (2021) examined the use of lighting by Guillermo del Toro to provide deeper meaning and emotional engagement within the film. They note that the ability of light is not only to illuminate the scene but to convey the state of mind the character is in psychologically, as well as to reinforce the thematic elements of the film. In this regard, the emphasis of their research is on the symbolic and narrative functions of lighting; it shows how lighting can guide the audience's attention, evoke mood, and bring forth key objects or characters. They feel that such a strategic use of lighting enhances the viewers' experience of the cinema and drags them into the emotional and narrative depth of the film.

In the same direction, Hestand (2024) extends the importance of light to Pan's Labyrinth. Del Toro intentionally uses light to control the mood and define spaces, revealing the internal struggle of the characters. According to Hestand (2024), the harsh, contrastive lighting outside in the real world heightens the threat while reinforcing the disaster of the decision underlying the moral predicament in which the characters have involved themselves. At the same time, this is a metaphor for the inner conflicts of the characters, which develops the main idea of the film—the contrast between innocence and brutality, fantasy and reality. Thus, Hestand (2024) comes to the following conclusion: lighting in Pan's Labyrinth is not merely an element of visualization however, first and foremost, it is a narrative device that

develops the film's thematic complexity.

These studies have demonstrated the power of lighting in shaping the story and emotional impact of a movie and in creating a certain interpretation by an audience of particular character traits, moods, and themes. While Poland situates the importance of lighting within a historical context (2014), T, P. V & Pillai, G.V deal with the narrational importance of light in Pan's Labyrinth (2021); there is still a need to focus analytical attention on how specific lighting exposure techniques elicit emotional responses in this film. Against this background, the present study tries to fill this gap by researching how Pan's Labyrinth uses lighting as a strategy in particular ways that underscore how such a feature enhances the emotional impact and serves the thematic weight.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was conducted for this thesis. The research methods consisted of gathering data and information from online sources that other researchers have identified. The primary objective of this thesis is to explain how certain lighting techniques add depth to emotions and atmosphere in the 2006 film Pan's Labyrinth, by Guillermo del Toro. An interpretive approach was used to provide an in-depth analysis of the different lighting methods employed by the movie and how they tell the story. The secondary sources required for the topic were web articles, scholarly papers, and theses due to the overall understanding of the concept.

Furthermore, some sequences of the film were closely analysed in order to understand what the actual use of lighting methods will be. Data for this research were gathered through the critical examination and analysis of dependable materials, such as peer-reviewed papers, books, and academic theses obtained from platforms like JSTOR, Google Scholar, and others. Non-academic materials were examined to gather relevant information to provide further insight regarding the artistic and technical nature of the film. Online articles, including film reviews and interviews with Guillermo del Toro, provided insights into the artistic and technical choices behind the film's lighting. Articles and online publications on cinematography were consulted to understand the theoretical and technical basis of lighting in filmmaking, while previous theses and dissertations helped contextualize the study within existing academic discourse.

Chapter 1 – Cinematography and Emotion

Cinematography is a vital element of filmmaking, combining technical and artistic choices to influence how audiences emotionally connect with a story. Through lighting, camera movement, and framing, filmmakers guide viewers' focus and establish mood. Lotman (2016) emphasizes that cinematographic techniques play a key role in shaping audiences' empathy by influencing how characters and scenes are perceived.

Lighting is one of the most impactful tools in creating emotion and supporting a narrative. Poland (2014) notes that lighting choices, such as warm or cool tones, evoke different emotional reactions. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, Guillermo del Toro uses muted shadows for the real world to reflect the oppressive reality of Spain after the Civil War, while warm, ethereal lighting in the fantasy realm represents hope and escape. Helton (2024) argues that this contrast reinforces the film's central tension between harsh reality and Ofelia's imagination.

The technique of chiaroscuro, characterized by stark contrasts between light and shadow, is another prominent feature of the film's visual style. Hestand (2024) explains that this method heightens dramatic tension and emphasizes themes of moral ambiguity. In the "Pale Man" scene illustrated in Fig. 1, shadows intensify the menacing atmosphere while reflecting the dangers of Ofelia's fantasy world (Dylan Film Studies, 2019). This interplay of light and dark mirrors the film's themes of innocence and brutality, enhancing the narrative's emotional depth.

Camera techniques also contribute to emotional engagement. Yilmaz, Lotman, Karjus & Tikka, (2023) discuss how handheld camera movements evoke vulnerability, while smoother tracking shots convey control or grandeur. Del Toro uses framing to isolate characters in oppressive spaces, contrasting them with the openness of the labyrinth's fantasy realm. This juxtaposition visually conveys Ofelia's inner conflict and aligns with the broader themes of resistance and hope.

Beyond aesthetics, lighting in *Pan's Labyrinth* serves a symbolic function. Jones (2010) highlights how dimly lit interiors, such as Captain Vidal's quarters (Fig. 4), create an oppressive atmosphere, while the labyrinth's glowing light symbolizes freedom. DePaoli (2012) suggests that these contrasts reflect the broader struggle between authoritarianism and imagination, deepening the emotional resonance of the story.

Cinematography in *Pan's Labyrinth* demonstrates how visual storytelling can evoke empathy and highlight complex themes. Through chiaroscuro lighting, dynamic camera movement, and symbolic framing, del Toro creates a film that transcends visual beauty, offering the audience an emotionally rich and thematically profound experience.

Chapter 2 – Lighting Techniques in "Pan's Labyrinth"

Lighting plays a crucial role in *Pan's Labyrinth*, allowing del Toro to shape the film's mood, highlight emotions, and bring its themes to life. Through carefully designed lighting styles, the film draws a clear contrast between the bleak realities of post-war Spain and the magical world that Ofelia escapes into, giving each scene its unique emotional tone.

The real-world scenes are often lit with cold, dim lighting to reflect the harsh and oppressive environment created by Captain Vidal. This is especially noticeable in Vidal's quarters (Fig. 4), where sharp light and deep shadows dominate the space. In the scene where Vidal winds his pocket watch (Fig. 2), the stark lighting emphasizes his rigid and authoritarian personality, while the shadows enhance the suffocating atmosphere. This oppressive use of light mirrors the fear and control that define his world, making it feel heavy and inescapable.

The fantasy world, on the other hand, is bathed in a soft, glowing light that evokes feelings of hope and wonder. This is beautifully shown when Ofelia meets the Faun for the first time (Fig. 5). Such a light around the labyrinth creates a magical and inviting atmosphere, suggesting that this world is a place of refuge and possibility. Del Toro also uses dramatic contrasts between light and shadow, known as chiaroscuro, to bring depth and tension to certain scenes. The "Pale Man" sequence (Fig. 1) is a strong example of this. Flickering candlelight highlights the Pale Man's grotesque Fig. while shadows dominate the rest of the space. This lighting technique creates an unsettling mood, emphasizing the danger Ofelia faces in the fantasy world. The interplay of light and darkness in this scene reflects the duality of the fantasy realm—both enchanting and threatening.

Lighting also carries symbolic weight, particularly in the film's final moments. When Ofelia lies dying in the labyrinth (Fig. 3), the cold, muted tones of her reality shift to warm, golden light as she imagines herself in a magical kingdom. This transition suggests her spiritual triumph and her escape from the oppression of her real-world life. The golden light provides a sense of peace and resolution, contrasting with the

struggles that defined her existence.

Del Toro's use of lighting is essential to the storytelling in *Pan's Labyrinth*. From the sharp shadows of Vidal's quarters to the inviting glow of the labyrinth and the eerie chiaroscuro of the Pale Man's lair, each lighting choice deepens the story's emotional impact. Lighting is not just a visual tool in this film; it is a way to connect the audience with the characters and their experiences on a deeper level.

Chapter 3 – Enhancing Emotional Depth through Lighting

Guillermo del Toro uses light as a tool to enhance the emotional effect of every scene in the movie. By delicately handling the light and its shadow, he discloses the character's emotions, sets up the mood of the scene, and highlights the theme of innocence, cruelty, and the tension between reality and fantasy.

A good example is the scene when Ofelia sits in her bedroom alone after Captain Vidal captures her escaping with Mercedes (Fig. 6). The room is generally dark, with soft shadows that reflect her sadness and uncertainties in a strange and unwelcoming environment. Soft tones develop a sense of fragility and make her isolation explicit for viewers. According to Huang (2018), dim lighting can always provoke feelings such as sadness and an introspective mood, which helps the viewers get into the atmosphere and feel what the character is feeling. But it is not only moments of happiness where the use of light is clear. The warmth and affection are conveyed in acts of mercy through lighting as well. When Mercedes sings a lullaby to Ofelia (Fig. 7), the golden light of a lantern delicately illuminates their faces. Here, the lighting creates a cozy yet calming atmosphere that makes the moment of bonding between the two even stronger, therefore bringing a residual amount of peace amid violence. Warm light, states Lotman (2016), evokes a response in the form of the senses of safety and sympathy, therefore increasing the extent of engagement of an audience in scenes of mercy.

Another example is the interrogation scene with Captain Vidal (Fig. 8), where bright and sharp lighting is used to create a fearful and tense atmosphere. The overhead light illuminates Vidal himself, so his features are more defined and menacing. Focus lighting on the captured rebel puts into view how vulnerable captured rebels are, adding to the imbalance of power in every possible context. Similarly, Poland (2014) writes that strong, direct lighting enhances tension which in turn helps viewers feel the fear and helpless feelings the rebel experienced.

In the fantasy world, light is an expression that depicts mystery and danger. In the scene where Ofelia retrieves the dagger from the underground chamber (Fig. 9), the pale, ghostly illumination of light lights it. Such lighting makes this inhuman place menacing, paralleling Ofelia's anxiety as she sets on her task. According to T, P. V & Pillai, G.V (2021), unusual lighting evokes curiosity and suspense, thereby emotionally loading moments of challenge and uncertainty.

The lighting in the final scene altogether creates an impression of peace and resolution. As Ofelia dies, the cold blue tones of nighttime make a shift for a soft shining golden glow that reflects her vision of a magical kingdom (Fig. 3). This warm light is suggestive of release from pain and freedom. According to DePaoli (2012), such color transformation visually suggests Ofelia's liberation through sacrifice. For the audience, the lighting evokes an impression that is both bitter and sweet, wherein their sadness is balanced by hope.

Guillermo del Toro uses lighting as a silent storyteller in *Pan's Labyrinth*, employing shadows, warmth, and eerie visuals to enhance the emotional depth of his characters and immerse viewers in the film's magical yet haunting atmosphere.

Chapter 4 - Creating Atmosphere through Lighting

In *Pan's Labyrinth*, lighting is used to evoke distinct emotions and set the tone for each scene, enhancing both the narrative and the audience's experience. Guillermo del Toro carefully designs the lighting to reflect the tension, wonder, and danger inherent in the story's themes.

The forest surrounding Vidal's mill (Fig. 10) is introduced with soft, filtered light that barely breaks through the dense trees. The resulting shadows and muted tones create a cold, unwelcoming environment, emphasizing the mill's isolation and the sense of unease that permeates the area. The dim, natural lighting in the forest reflects the oppressive control of Vidal's rule and the hidden resistance of the rebels. Poland (2014) notes that subdued, naturalistic lighting can enhance tension and create a sense of unease in a setting.

In the storeroom where Mercedes collects supplies for the rebels (Fig. 11), the lighting enhances the sense of danger. A single bulb emits harsh, focused light, casting deep shadows that make the space appear confined and tense. This sharp lighting highlights Mercedes, underscoring the peril of her actions and the persistent risk of discovery. Huang (2018) notes that concentrated lighting in confined spaces often heightens feelings of stress, allowing the audience to share the character's anxiety.

The banquet hall scene with the Pale Man (Fig. 1) creates a completely different atmosphere. Pale candlelight flickers across the room, casting uneven shadows that stretch and move along the walls. This cold, dim light contrasts with the vibrant colors of the food-laden table, creating a strange and unsettling environment. The lighting highlights the surreal and dangerous nature of the fantasy world. As Boggs (1978) observes, contrasts between warm and cold tones in lighting can evoke feelings of discomfort and intrigue, making the scene feel both beautiful and threatening.

In the final moments of the film, lighting becomes a tool for symbolism. When Vidal carries Ofelia's brother outside to meet the rebels (Fig. 12), bright, unforgiving light fully exposes him. This harsh lighting strips him of any remaining authority and makes his vulnerability clear. It reflects his impending defeat and the shift in power. Poland (2014) suggests that strong, direct lighting in key moments reveals a character's true state and heightens the emotional impact for the viewer. Del Toro's thoughtful use of lighting in Pan's Labyrinth gives every scene its own emotional texture. From the shadowy forest to the harsh glare of Vidal's final appearance, lighting captures the mood and deepens the audience's understanding of the story. These carefully designed visuals ensure the film's atmosphere resonates as powerfully as its narrative.

Findings

Conclusively, the current research has shown that lighting is one of the major determinants of emotional resonance, narrative structure, and depth of themes in the movie *Pan's Labyrinth*. From a merely technical approach to a fully integral storytelling device, lighting is fundamental to the movie direction by Guillermo del Toro. The findings have shown precisely how light and darkness distinguish the two worlds presented in the movie: the real world and the world of fantasy. The cold and harsh lighting reflects the oppressive atmosphere of post-Civil War Spain, thereby conveying themes of control, fear, and brutality. In contrast, the fantasy world is warm and softly lit, promising hope and imagination as an escape from harsh realities. This balance of light and shadow, in addition to the conscious use of warm and cool tones, symbolizes the major contrasts presented in the film: reality and fantasy, innocence and cruelty, hope and despair. Specific scenes also highlight emotional and narrative approaches to lighting, such as:

- The dull lighting in Ofelia's bedroom (Fig. 6) symbolizes her isolation and introspection, highlighting her emotional detachment from the oppressive reality surrounding her.
- The stark lighting in the storehouse (Fig. 11) highlights Mercedes' covert defiance, symbolizing the quiet resistance of individuals living under an oppressive regime.
- The flickering candlelight in the Pale Man's great hall (Fig. 1) evokes both wonder and terror, emphasizing the interplay between fantasy and horror.

• As the cold, harsh lighting transitions to warm, golden tones in the climactic moments of Ofelia's final scene (Fig. 3), it symbolizes her liberation and transformation, adding depth to the emotional resolution of the narrative.

These findings confirm that lighting is a complex and influential tool in cinematic storytelling. By demonstrating precisely how lighting techniques function toward the creation of larger emotional engagement and thematic expression, this study challenges the perception of lighting as a purely technical element, instead positioning it as a central component of narrative design.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of lighting in Guillermo del Toro's Pan's Labyrinth, analysing its influence on the film's emotional impact, narrative structure, and central themes. Through an examination of key scenes and applying cinematic theory, the research identifies lighting as a fundamental storytelling element rather than a mere technical aspect.

The analysis shows how del Toro has used lighting to represent the two worlds: cold, harsh lighting in the real world, which suggests the oppressive atmosphere of post-Civil War Spain with its themes of control and fear; in the fantasy world, warm and soft lighting instills hope and imagination, offering respite from cold brutality. Light and shadow, warmth and coolness, are in constant, playable contrast, mirroring the counterpoint of reality and fantasy, innocence and cruelty, despair and hope.

The study underscores the importance of lighting in cinematic storytelling. Beyond Pan's Labyrinth, it suggests that lighting is a vital tool for filmmakers to evoke emotions, establish mood, and reinforce thematic elements. Del Toro's approach serves as a model for using lighting to craft narratives that are both visually striking and emotionally profound.

Future research could extend this analysis to other works by del Toro, such as The Shape of Water or Crimson Peak, to identify consistent visual techniques in his films. Further studies might also examine the psychological effects of specific lighting styles on viewers to better understand how visual elements influence emotional engagement in cinema.

In conclusion, this research highlights the essential role of lighting in creating visually and emotionally impactful films. In Pan's Labyrinth, del Toro masterfully uses lighting to connect the film's visual aesthetic with its emotional core, demonstrating how light can enhance storytelling and deepen the audience's connection to the narrative.

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Fig. 1. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 2. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 3. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 4. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 5. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 6. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 7. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 8. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 9. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 10. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 11. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

Fig. 12. *Pan's Labyrinth* [Film Still] (2006) Directed by Guillermo del Toro [DVD]. Los Angeles, California: Warner Bros. Pictures

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Image List



Fig. 1 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 2 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 3 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 4 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 5 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 6 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 7 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 8 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 9 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 10 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 11 Pans Labyrinth (2006)



Fig. 12 Pans Labyrinth (2006)