

Labyrinth (1986) – Journey Into Sarah’s Subconscious



It's always fun to go back and watch the movies you grew up with. However, it can also be a laughingly disturbing experience, akin to finding out that the uncle you thought was so cool was actually an alcoholic. One of the best examples of such nightmares that have receded into the recesses of the mind is the Jim Henson/George Lucas production *Labyrinth* (1986), starring David Bowie and Jennifer Connelly. Famously known for Bowie as “Jareth,” the Spandex-sporting witch who can transform into an owl (and trap you in an Escher maze), *Labyrinth* is undoubtedly packed with Kabbalistic, Jungian and hermetic symbolism that is worth investigating.

Seemingly a childish mish-mash of various fairy tales into a puppeteer’s hodgepodge, I decided it was also necessary to include the very first *Jays-*

Analysis film analysis, and look back on my own development of thought almost a decade later. I’m embarrassed to say the writing was sub-par, and quite likely ten years from now, this present writing will be equally as lacking. So after ten years, and many reads later, let’s look at *Labyrinth* afresh.

The narrative centers around Sarah (Jennifer Connelly) on the eve of puberty and womanhood, yet still entranced by the ease and simplicity of her childhood fantasy world. Sarah’s mother has apparently run off to be an actress, which we derive from the *Playbill* issues in her bedroom. And predictably, in fairytale fashion, Sarah hates her “wicked stepmother.” Sarah’s obsession with fantasies thus derives from her inability to cope with the harsh reality of the emotional let downs of the real world. The opening scene presents her in a park/garden, where she wears a virginal white dress emblematic of Edenic purity, reciting invocatory lines from the child’s book, *The Labyrinth*. The curious feature of these scenes is her placement in front of the phallic obelisks, foreshadowing the hermetic and masonic to come.

Before delving into the inner, psychical journey Sarah will take into her own subconscious (the labyrinth), it is worth considering the classic mythological significance of labyrinths. Labyrinths have had a wide usage since ancient times, the most famous of course being the story of Daedalus in Homer, who constructs a dancing ground for Ariadne, and later is the architect of the labyrinth for King Minos in which Theseus battles a minotaur. In the Roman poet Ovid, the labyrinth is so skillfully crafted that even as the architect he has a difficult time escaping. Ovid records in *Metamorphoses* VIII:

The scandal concerning his family grew, and the queen’s unnatural adultery was evident from the birth of a strange hybrid monster. Minos resolved to remove this shame, the Minotaur, from his house, and hide it away in a labyrinth with blind passageways. Daedalus, celebrated for his skill in architecture, laid out the design, and confused the clues to direction, and led the eye into a tortuous maze, by the windings of alternating paths. No differently from the way in which the watery Maeander deludes the sight, flowing backwards and forwards in its changeable course, through the meadows of Phrygia, facing the running waves advancing to meet it, now directing its uncertain waters towards its source, now towards the open sea: so Daedalus made the endless pathways of the maze, and was scarcely able to recover the entrance himself: the building was as deceptive as that.¹



JIM HENSON (1936-1990): American puppeteer, artist, director and inventor. Henson is known for his creation of *The Muppets*, characters like Kermit the Frog, and esoteric themed 1980s children's films, such as *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*.

Henson/Lucas' labyrinth hearkens back to the labyrinth of classical mythology, as well as relating to the perennial journey of the hero on his quest to the underworld. One can see how the transference of the earthen labyrinth and abyss-like waterways can be read as an allegory of the unconscious mind, the underworld of Hades and death, as well as being associated with the worlds in which we enter in our dream state. This astral realm, intimately connected to the realm of the subconscious is the wellspring from which the archetypes of experience spring, corresponding to the archetypal forms in the outer world of phenomenal experience, as we will see below.

Upon entering the labyrinth Sarah learns quickly that things are not as they appear – fairies bite, not bless. Doors are not where they appear and missing where they should be. In the medieval world, labyrinths were a symbol of making our way through this wayward world to heaven. In Jung, the Labyrinth is also an image of the individual's unconscious psyche. We will see Sarah fall several times in the film, deeper and deeper into the labyrinth. In "The Process of Individuation" by M.L. von Franz in Carl Jung's *Man and His Symbols*, the author explains the meaning of the labyrinth as subconscious:

The maze of strange passages, chambers, and unlocked exits in the cellar recalls the old Egyptian representation of the underworld, which is a well-known symbol of the unconscious with its abilities. It also shows how one is "open" to other influences in one's unconscious shadow side and how uncanny and alien elements can break in."²

Sarah has entered another world, an alternate from our own, which seems to purposefully mirror all the elements in her bedroom. Considering Henson's usage of kabbalistic and gnostic imagery, symbolism and tradition in his *The Dark Crystal*, it is not outside the sphere of possibility to posit a kabbalistic version of alternate worlds in the case of Sarah's psyche/subconscious. Kabbalistic scholar Gershom Scholem explains in his famous *Kabbalah* of these worlds:

The common element in all these doctrines is supposition that during the first steps toward emanation, certain abortive developments took place which had no direct effect on the actual creation of the present worlds, although remnants of these destroyed worlds did not entirely disappear and something of them still hovers disruptively among us.... Most kabbalists agreed that there is no essential break in the continuity of the influx of emanation which led to the development of additional areas of creation as well, such as the world of the intellect, the world of the spheres and the lower world. But they maintained that whatever preceded these secondary stages was part of the divine domain, which they symbolically portrayed as a series of events in the world of emanation, whereas from this point on."³

This quote gives a clue into what is going on within Sarah: In her bedroom we see Escher's maze, the various creatures that populate the maze, a small marble labyrinth, the *Wizard of Oz*, other fairy tales, and a statue of Jareth. In other words, the world construct of Jareth's labyrinth is actually a construct of Sarah's subconscious, where the transference of her pain over her mother manifests in the beastly and foreign forms of the otherworldly maze. Upon entering the labyrinth she learns quickly that things are not as they appear. In the medieval world, labyrinths were a symbol of making our way through this wayward world to heaven, which is here Sarah's journey through her own inner psychical world towards individuation.



Sarah and her obelisks.

Clearly the phallic/mason images come to the fore as Sarah travels through the labyrinth, and given Jim Henson's, Monty Python's Terry Jones' and George Lucas' penchant for such masonic myopia, we should not be surprised. However, seven years ago, I read this through your average conspiracy-theorist's goggles, and now I have a different take. The usage of the masonic and kabbalistic imagery concerns Sarah's process of leaving childhood for adulthood, and specifically puberty. Previously clad in virginal white, Sarah encounters numerous instances of bodily functions and base desires, such as Hoggle urinating and the Bog of Eternal Stench, prior to her sexual awakening. The mental process itself is conceived of as an alchemical transformation, since the body itself "transforms" as it grows through puberty.

The masked ball sequence may have a reference to *Eyes Wide Shut*-style orgy parties, and the two scenes are reminiscent of one another, but I think the most natural reading is that of Sarah's sexuality. You'll note the penis shape of many of the noses at the ball, and the hints of her dalliance with orgies, which I read as the curiosities of a person coming of age. It is certainly possible that there is a deeper reference to sex slavery and the manipulation of alter personas to follow a "programming" that leads to the type of lifestyle the models and beauty queens live in *Eyes Wide Shut*. Whether this was intended by Henson and Lucas is hard to say.



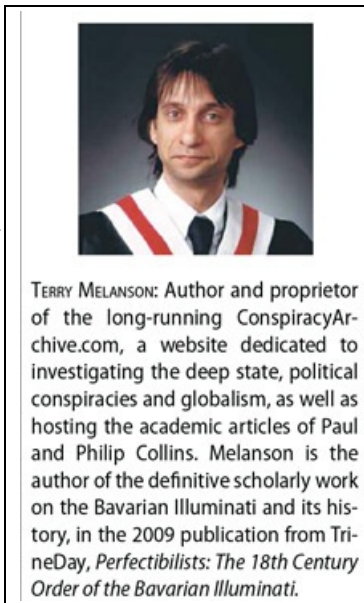
A young Bowie sketches out the Kabbalistic Sephirot.



Sarah is tempted.

In regards to Jareth and his owl powers, in ancient mythology the owl denoted Athena to the Greeks, goddess of wisdom. In *Labyrinth*, however, the imagery seems to be similar to that of it's meaning to the Romans – mystique and bad luck. Lilith is associated with this as well, and in certain traditions and in terms of the Illuminati proper, the owl was a symbol of autonomous reason and rationality, based on the research done by Terry Melanson.⁴ While there may be some esoteric association with the "Illuminati," in Henson and company's mind, it appears to be more of a bad omen and outright witchery – not Illuminati rationalism. Indeed, Jareth is more of a witch, which in Latin is *strix*, from which comes the Italian *strega*, meaning "witch." He is the king of the goblins in the film, and in real life, witches aren't always women, and in the final sequence Jareth is revealed to be merely a phantasm of Sarah's displaced fantasies.

Sarah's desire to remain in adolescence and retain her freedom from motherhood and responsibility is due to her anger with both her mother and stepmom. She does not want to babysit Toby and instead invokes a curse in anger that the Goblin King (Jareth) would come and take him away. Bowie enters as an owl in a flurry of glitter and spandex nastiness as the androgynous, calling to mind again alchemical doctrines, where the union of opposites into one is seen as the highest form of unity, relating back to the sublime source from which all arises, the One. Sarah's fascination with his androgyny is associated with her own confused ideas about



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sexuality due to her dysfunctional family life.

This is ultimately another reference to her own confusion about the world as it is. Families break up, relationships fizzle, people leave sexual partners for new, and nothing is as it seems. Sarah confronts this apparent duality and contrariety of reality particularly as she figures out the relationship of male to female. Presuming as youth does, that it has it all figured out, she assumes she has solved the Scotty-dogs' riddles, but as a result, ends up falling even deeper into her subconscious. Ending up in an oubliette, a place of forgetting things, Sarah is tempted to forget her brother and her responsibilities.

Worth noting here is the Platonic notion of forgetting our precious existence from which we have fallen, the realm of the forms, into the lower, base existence of materiality. Sarah's fall into her own inner fantasy world is a mirror of the platonic doctrine of being trapped in the world of appearances where truth is lost for the ease and simplicity of lies and phantasms.



Bowie as Jareth in Escher's maze.

After battling a golem, the Jewish tradition of an animated mechanical man, Sarah has a staring contest with Jareth inside the M.C. Escher strange-loop maze. Escher is significant here because of the mathematical and metaphysical implications of his artwork. The mathematics and ontology of an Escher work are generally styled in the form of a Mobius strip, where the ending is in a state of eternal recurrence with the beginning. For Douglas Hofstadter in his *Godel, Escher, Bach*, this has tremendous relevance for our own psyche, as we seem to experience this same phenomena in a multitude of forms in life, from music to math to art. For the *psyche*, it raises questions of immateriality and what, exactly, consciousness is. In the Labyrinth narrative its usage is Sarah's own entrapment in her mind. Her pain and resentment has become a psychic prison from which she is unable to mature into adulthood. If Sarah does not face her own shade, Jareth, and come to accept reality, she runs the risk of enslavement in her own perpetual arrested development. Thus, the classic quest of the hero is here applied to the journey of the individual *psyche* into maturation.

¹ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Oxford University Press, 1986, pg.176.

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² Von Franz, *Man and His Symbols*, 176.

³ Scholem, Gershom. *Kabbalah*. New York: Dorset Press, 1974, pg. 176.

⁴ Melanson, Terry. "Owl of Wisdom: Illuminati, Bohemian Club, Schlaraffia, James Gordon Bennett, Jr." ConspiracyArchive. 8 March, 2009. Web. <http://www.conspiracyarchive.com/2015/04/18/owl-of-wisdom-illuminati-bohemian-club-schlaraffia-james-gordon-bennett-jr/>