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“If she had kept going down that way, she would’ve gone straight to that castle!”: Labyrinth, the Gothic body of David Bowie, and the education of desire

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"If she had kept going down that way, she would've gone straight to that castle!": *Labyrinth*, the Gothic body of David Bowie, and the education of desire[1]

Submitted: 21 Jun 2023 Accepted: 24 Oct 2023
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Abstract
This article investigates *Labyrinth* as a Gothic narrative and attempted 'education of desire' into normative channels in the context of the late Cold War and the Culture Wars of the 1980s. Particular attention is paid to the body and performance of David Bowie as Jareth and the way this engages with classic Gothic tropes of the dangerous older man. Sarah is also considered as a liminal adolescent coming to occupy a position defined by desire in a historical moment riven by anxieties around 'acceptable choices' in the context of the AIDS crisis and conservative pressure groups such as Moral Majority. Ultimately, *Labyrinth* is shown to be a productive space for the working through of issues of desire, both in its original context and, through the mapping of fan activities, throughout the 40 years since its release.

David Bowie; Gothic; *Labyrinth*; desire; Culture Wars; 1980s

Labyrinth is a film awash with desire. Desire for other people, to be other people, to occupy liminal spaces on the edge of states, or on the edge of transgression. Yet 'desire for' realisation is also regularly connected to 'fear of' what might happen should those things come to pass - a tantalising balancing act that constitutes the emotional core of the film, both for key characters and its audiences. Throughout the film, desire is presented in a number of forms with varying degrees of social acceptability in what we might think of, borrowing from Miguel Abensour, as an 'education of desire' (Abensour 1999: 125-61). Abensour's work was derived from his analysis of William Morris' utopian writings, and *Labyrinth* is clearly of a rather different order. However, what this article will demonstrate is how the principles of the education of desire can be transposed from utopian socialism to a more embodied form of desire, also under the guise of teaching its audiences to 'desire differently and better', and also under the guise of a political education under the terms of the Reaganite Culture Wars of the 1980s. True to its name, *Labyrinth* both opens up and closes off, renders visible and invisible, and twists and turns in its navigation of desire. At its culmination, rather than closing off the possibility of transgression altogether, a celebratory ending suggests an attempt to retain an openness to some, though not all, of the avenues of desire explored. *Labyrinth* therefore dramatizes the exploration of the functions and functioning of desire and shows how attempts to educate them into working in different, 'better', ways might be attempted, and what that might mean sociopolitically in the 1980s.

Connections between the education of political desire and more embodied desires might not necessarily be immediately apparent. However, as Mark Allison argues of Morris' *News From Nowhere*, "vicarious participation in its romance plot is the central mechanism by

[1] I am grateful to Samira Nadkarni for her thoughts and our discussions around this article. My thanks also go to the anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments, and to David Budgen, despite his dislike of the film.

which *Nowhere* educates the desire of its readers"; this establishes connections to the structures of desire in *Labyrinth* and the way that conversations about desire and its consummation were caught up in political discourse (Allison 2018: 56). Morris uses a romance between his narrator and the character of Ellen, structured around the theme of bridges as indicative of crossing from one place or state to another, to create reader investment in the narrative – to use romance to educate his readers politically. Similarly, *Labyrinth* uses its titular structure and the (attempted) rejection of desire for Jareth in an attempt to direct desire in particularly gendered and racialised ways that are inherently political. Potential deviance in these desires is highlighted through the Gothic coding of Jareth, and the connections made through the music and film career of David Bowie, which invite the consideration of themes such as taboo, transgression and deviance. Amid the Culture War battlegrounds of the 1980s, the desires navigated by Sarah and Jareth are explicitly political: namely, the place of women and girls within the (White, bourgeois) family home and the spaces for (and types of) desire opened up or closed off by domestic spaces and structures, both physical and ideological. Navigations of desire in *Labyrinth* are therefore informed by and operate within specific forms of White, heterosexual, able-bodied femininity; its appeal to 'desire' is in no way universal but is rather addressed to a specific imagined audience of White teenage girls entering a world of desire at a time of heightened debates about sexuality and gender roles. As Andrew Hartman notes of the 1980s context that informs the creation of *Labyrinth*, "seemingly fixed identities were being destabilised by new and increasingly widespread sensibilities about sex, sexuality, marriage, fertility and family" (Hartman 2019: 134-5). Conservative opponents of changes to the postwar sexual order, buoyed by the failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) by its deadline of 30 June 1982, sought to push US society back to their understanding of American sexual, familial, and gender roles of the 1950s.[2] The visibility of LGBTQIA+ campaign groups, part of the modern LGBTQIA+ movement following the Stonewall riots in 1969, raised awareness of alternatives to heteronormative desire, leading to pushback against that visibility from conservative forces of containment – for instance, the religious right.

Debates about the nature of the American family and the individuals within it took place within a broader political context. Elaine Tyler May argues that "the Cold War evolved into the Culture Wars… [and] the power of the nuclear family ideal did not fade away… Now the nation appears divided not between loyal citizens and suspected subversives, but between those who adhere to the 'family values' represented by the alleged golden era of the 1950s, and those who do not," a position that maps on to *Labyrinth* (Tyler May 1999: 207). Sarah is located within the bourgeois ideal but tempted by that which sits outside it, figuratively (Jareth) and literally (the romance between her actress mother and her co-star, which is more fleshed out in the novelisation than in the film). Given the context of the AIDS crisis, forcibly associated with queer communities through its initial nomenclature of Gay Related Immunodeficiency (GRID), debates over gender roles, and the failure to ratify the ERA, desire and the structures within which it occurred were of elevated concern (Altman 1982). As Keguro Macharia states, "policing love is central to establishing and sustaining claims about difference," which comes with associated hierarchies of desiring and desirability - who desires whom, how, and with what outcomes (Macharia 2015: 68).

[2] Not the actuality of 1950s life, but an idealised version of it cherished by conservatives under Reagan, with the notion of 'turning back to God' and a social order that enshrined 'traditional' values.

That *Labyrinth* attempts one thing and audiences respond in other ways is hardly surprising. Alison Stine notes of *Labyrinth* and similar narratives that while:

> The audience screams at them to choose fantasy, choose adventure, choose yourself, they go back to home and family and responsibilities every time… I didn't understand why Sarah went back from the Goblin City to be a babysitter, an ordinary teenager. And I don't think I ever forgave her (Stine 2016).

We therefore see a tension in the narrative between the retreat into a fantasy space of desire, as embodied in Jareth and his transgressive appeal, and the attempts to promote a more socially responsible form of desire that centres precisely what Sarah was fleeing: home, family, responsibility. However, it is essential to note that Jareth's transgression is itself, as it were, towards the accepted/acceptable end of the transgressive spectrum; as such, Jareth can function as an educative space rather than a more obviously unnerving one as he only challenges norms on one axis. Jareth might be the predatory older man of classic Gothic romance, who is also queer coded in a range of ways through the character and actor, but he does not mount a challenge on terms of race (a highly charged topic in the USA of the 1980s). As Richard Primuth shows, President Reagan "masterfully wove together fears of unemployment, recession, and inflation with racial fears and prejudices," mobilising long-standing racist ideas in American society to consolidate his position (Primuth 2016: 45). Elaine Tyler May points to a wider pattern around race, where as "communist countries stopped exposing American racism for their own propaganda purposes, the government's commitment to promoting civil rights withered," leading to a resurfacing of White supremacist groups and a lack of willingness to challenge racist housing policies and practices that structured lived experience along racially charged lines, with White suburbs (like Sarah's) defined against inner cities dominated by Americans of colour (Tyler May 1999: 206). *Labyrinth* therefore acknowledges Sarah's inner world of imaginative desire, and the potential for that to take her into spaces outside those deemed socially acceptable, then strives to get her to reject all of that and learn to love Little Brother. In the rescue of Toby, then, we see individual change: Sarah comes to accept her role within the suburban nuclear (step-)family. What we do not see is systemic change. Similar logics inform the processes of the spatial marginalisation of the unwanted that pervade the narrative and imagery of the film. This begins with Sarah's wishing away of Toby and culminates with the Junk Lady living in and scavenging from piles of rubbish outside the Goblin City. When the Junk Lady offers Sarah a facsimile of her own things, one implication is that Sarah is being offered a choice between embracing the margins (always already coded as the 'wrong choice' through its connotations of Otherness) and returning to the White, bourgeois, centre.[3] While Jareth as a character makes no challenge to racial norms, we can see how, as with Reagan's rhetoric, there are coded suggestions there for those who know how to read them. In this context, choosing the suburbs is choosing to remain within areas attracting disproportionate government funding and support in racially exclusionary ways, rather than to move to the (Goblin) city.

Development

[3] Another interpretation, made more forcibly in the novelisation, is that Sarah is being asked to choose between her 'junk', as in, toys and ephemeral possessions, and her responsibilities to her stepbrother.

The key themes of the narrative and characterisation are evident from the early stages of the script's development. In early story meetings, Jim Henson's assistant, Mira Velimirovic, noted Sarah's projected story arc should cover "girl to woman; responsibility for self and actions; responsibility of parenthood or others; acceptance of sexuality," themes that carried through into the final version of the film, rendering it a bildungsroman of sorts (Block & Erdmann 2016: 27). While these ideas were always present, they were not always the major priorities of the screenwriters (although the screenplay is attributed to Terry Jones, it went through several authors). Dennis Lee, responsible for the first draft of the film, structured most of the key components that characterise the narrative, including the romantic tension between Jareth and Sarah, and the fact that Sarah will come to "draw on the labyrinth experience for strength, without needing it as sentimental escape," whereas Jareth remains solely a figure of fantasy trapped within the Goblin City (Black & Erdmann 2016: 29). Terry Jones' rewrite added many of the iconic moments of the film, but Sarah's story was not a priority for him. It was not until Laura Phillips' rewrite that Sarah was really brought out as a character, with a tussle over emotion and humour then taking place as rewrites went back and forth between Jones and Phillips. The final treatment of the script was completed by renowned script doctor, Elaine May, and sought to retain the improvements to structure that had been made in earlier parts of the process, while enhancing both the humour and emotional centre of the film (Block & Erdmann 2016: 43).

At the heart of the narrative is, though, the experience of babysitting, the experience of being temporarily responsible for an infant. Easterbrook, Raby, and Lehmann note that "during the second half of the 20th century, parents worried about girls' irresponsibility while babysitting – for example, that they might spend all night on the phone, or neglect the children they were watching; such worries led to regulatory stories for babysitters through popular culture," something that can be seen in *Labyrinth* (Easterbrook, Raby & Lehmann 2021: 104). Easterbrook, Raby, and Lehmann go on to state that "babysitters shifted between adult and child positions as they navigated the liminal space between childhood and adulthood in their relationships with their employers and the children they cared for," showing how *Labyrinth* dramatises some central concerns at the heart of demands made of young girls (Easterbrook, Raby & Lehmann 2021: 104). Such responsibility in the face of 'hardships unnumbered' plays out through other contemporary films about or involving babysitting, such as *Adventures in Babysitting* (1987), *Don't Tell Mom The Babysitter's Dead* (1991), and even *Halloween* (1978). The labyrinth and Goblin City operate as a figurative space for the negotiation of liminal states - girlhood, womanhood, and the spaces between - and the issues that arise from the contest between these two. Central to all such considerations are difference and attitudes toward it.

Difference

Negotiation of difference is key to David Bowie's cinematic work. There is general critical agreement that Bowie's film roles are "bound by a profound alterity – a signification of difference," a theme that persists in *Labyrinth* with Jareth being both familiar and unfamiliar (Cinque, Ndalianis & Redmond 2018: 126). Bowie's performance as the seductive male lead

and gothic villain, Jareth, engages with existing ideas of Bowie, or rather Bowies – here we have the family-friendly pop star of the mid-1980s in a contemporary children's film, but Bowie is also a figure of transgression – culturally, musically, sexually. While child audiences might only have identified pop star Bowie in Jareth, older audiences would be alert to the multiplicities of meaning embedded in the body of Jareth - and as a bildungsroman, the film is aimed more at young teenage audiences, even if the puppetry and songs might seem to confuse that (perhaps explaining the film's poor performance at the box office). Awareness of the range of possible meanings only multiplies as the film, and its audiences, pass through time. Marie Mulvey-Roberts notes that the "body is a potential site of monstrosity for those who do not fit into the body politic… The monstrous body provides a battleground on which good versus evil can play out… Monsters are a rupture in the fabric of society… imperilling existence or making it merely monotonous" (Mulvey-Roberts 2016: 223-4). *Labyrinth* offers audiences the Gothic body of Jareth – a site of both tantalising sexuality and shapeshifting monstrosity, as well as a transformational/transactional space through which other bodies can be changed, as in the monstrous threat to the body of Toby. Jareth offers monstrosity and/as titillation, both the promise of future fulfilment of desire and, for culturally aware audiences, the knowledge of how Bowie's body has previously been sexualised. Threats to Toby shows how deviance can ultimately come to visibly inscribe itself in the body, forcibly marginalising those affected. The coding of desire as difference in the early scenes of the film aligns with Bernice M. Murphy's interpretation of Wes Craven's films, where threats often "indirectly arise from attitudes and actions frequently associated with the so-called 'suburban' mindset" (Murphy 2009: 147). Sarah's antipathy to conformity is apparent in her role-playing and dreams of a more glamorous life; in rejecting Jareth and choosing the suburbs at the conclusion, she rejects the Gothicised homogeneity of goblin bodies, choosing greater individuation for Toby at a potential cost to herself. Here, the lesson of the labyrinth seems to be about the 'permissible' extent of desire, the containment of fantasy before it goes too far.[4]

As the Goblin King, Jareth is able to realise the expressed (but not really meant) desire of Sarah, the teenage girl on the cusp of adult responsibility, to have her baby half-brother taken from her by the goblins in her fantasy novel. In the initial framing of the narrative, then, viewers are presented with a nightmarish scenario where words have the power to effect actions. The shift from saying to doing marks another liminal space between childish inability and adult agency, specifically dramatised through Sarah's expressed desire and Jareth's action. To demonstrate the significance attached to this, the effects of Sarah's words, and the desires that motivate them, are coded as monstrous through the unsettling way in which the goblins arrive and remove Toby from his cot. Toby's removal by supernatural beings engages with ideas of the changeling, non-human creatures swapped for babies in a number of folklore traditions and seen as "embodiments of liminality," that stand on the "threshold between worlds" according to Audrey Robitaillié (Robitaillié 2023:

[4] Similar panics about the containment of fantasy role-playing can be seen in the slightly earlier concerns about Dungeons & Dragons and Satanism. See, for instance, David Waldron, 'Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic,' *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9.1 (2005).

1). Furthermore, changeling narratives are often characterised by ”places, times and even narrative technique [that] similarly possess an in-between dimension,“ showing how Toby (and what happens to/around him) can stand in for larger issues of liminality, becoming, and shifting between states and worlds (Robitaillié 2023: 1). Jareth's subsequent appearance in the bedroom – a classic device of the Gothic novel, the threat to the private space of the heroine – indicates both Sarah's vulnerability and her desires. Both threats and desires are then worked through as Sarah seeks to retrieve Toby from the labyrinth, a 'moral maze' indicative of the difficulties attendant on the process of navigating the path from childhood to adulthood, while she is alternately tempted and threatened by Jareth. In Sarah's ultimate rejection of Jareth and rescue of Toby, it is possible to map an attempted education of desire on the part of the film (at least in the terms of an intended reading). *Labyrinth* sets out to dramatise the liminality of Sarah's state, caught between girlhood and womanhood, through embodied desire - for freedom from domestic responsibilities being imposed as she begins to move from girl to woman, but also for the 'right kind' of romance.

Much as with the Gothic sensation novels of the late eighteenth century by authors such as Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve, and Sophia Lee, deviant desires are introduced in *Labyrinth* for the purposes of titillation, then ultimately overcome; the heroine learns to embrace home and the bourgeois self rather than the transgressively deviant Other.[5] This is framed positively in the work of Radcliffe (readers of *Udolpho* generally long for Emily's union with Valancourt while resenting the actions of Montoni and the attentions of Morano), with the embrace of the domestic framed through a recovery of estates and property that monstrous men were seeking to alienate from their rightful female owner. It should also be noted that the Gothic male villain of these narratives is usually an older man who seeks to possess the female protagonist. This is clearly apparent in *Labyrinth* with the significant age difference between David Bowie, who was 39 when the film was released, and Jennifer Connelly, who was 14 when it was made (the character is 17 in the novelisation). Jareth's interactions with Sarah are therefore overtly predatory, in much the same way as those featured in Gothic fiction such as the middle-aged Manfred's sexual pursuit of Isabella, his son's intended bride, in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). In *Labyrinth*, Sarah triumphs over Jareth at the narrative's conclusion through learning to consistently make 'the right choice' and reject monstrosity - something that would be embedded in Toby's body if Sarah chose to remain with Jareth or to return home without Toby. The 'right choice' does not entirely rule out Sarah's fantasy world, but rather insists on its inclusion in 'acceptable' ways. Sarah's welcoming of figures from the Goblin City into her bedroom at the film's conclusion restages the opening scene of Toby's abduction, though on different terms. Instead of the monstrous, threatening, penetration of private space, viewers leave the film with Sarah welcoming visitors via a fantasy space. Jareth, in his owl form, is shut out, and flies away into the night.

The role of the bedroom is important here because the key elements and characters of the labyrinth are foreshadowed in the objects in Sarah's room at the beginning of the film. The principle of shifting from a familiar to unfamiliar space is also highlighted in the books on

[5] This explains the scandal around Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806), which shows Victoria de Loredani continually indulging her desires before her ultimate annihilation by Satan (as with the end of Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), a novel that was clearly a significant influence on Dacre.

her shelf, such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.*[6] Hoggle's plaintive statement in the final scene, "should you need us…," while he is saying goodbye to Sarah, is one of the lines from the film most often occurring in fan-made memes: it constructs a safe 'us' that excludes the brooding Gothic villain, Jareth. Crucially, the deal only seems to go one way - Sarah can call on them, but no provisions are made for them to call on Sarah. Their support, on Sarah's terms, thus serves to help Sarah integrate herself more fully into heteronormative White American bourgeois culture. Audiences are therefore encouraged to believe that Sarah has now arrived at the correct balance between fantasy and reality, with the embodiment of dangerous fantasy literally 'shut out' by the closed window; attentive listeners will also have noticed that the song in the scene immediately before this, during which Sarah rejects Jareth and rescues Toby from an Escher-esque room of staircases, concludes with Jareth emotively intoning that "I can't live within you." The appeal embodied in Jareth has seemingly been overcome within the confines of the narrative.

Windows are neither doors nor walls, though – while Jareth may be shut out at the film's conclusion, those within the room, Sarah included, can still see him, even if in the moment they choose not to look at him. Such a transparent, easily opened, barrier hardly suggests that Sarah's embrace of bourgeois norms is a permanent one. Deviance-as-threat is therefore marginalised, even expelled from the inner sphere dramatized by the narrative, but only in terms of its physical presence: it remains visible, should we choose to look – and as we know, it is only ever an utterance away, if we need/desire it.[7] Evan Hayles Gledhill shows how a "repositioning of *Wuthering Heights* as a romance in popular culture occurred alongside a de-queering of monsters such as Dracula… reflecting an attempt to 'defang' the Gothic's critique of the patriarchal family model" in the postwar period (Hayles Gledhill 2018: 165). Similarly, in the 1980s, amid a pushback on the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ communities, *Labyrinth*'s Gothic flirtations simultaneously make present and render absent much of the critical project of the Gothic by offering alternatives to Sarah on terms that can never be accepted. At the conclusion, Sarah's welcoming of what might be termed 'deviance-lite' in and through fantasy space, where it can be safely contained, both suggests a coming to terms with her return to normality but also a lingering openness, albeit an openness that is itself in the process of being contained. Sarah's centring of herself privileges the centre rather than the margins, offering the potential for fantasy exploration on her terms, and constructed in such a way, as Hayles Gledhill notes, to shape the Gothic as a recuperative rather than critical space.

Bowie's version of the Gothic here is, in many ways, a performance based on a performance. David Shumway and Heather Arnet note how Bowie's theatricality and interpretation of self in the early 1970s was taken up by "goth culture" in the 1980s, not as a rejection of authenticity but as a reinterpretation of it (Shumway & Arnet 2007: 129). Bowie's performance as Jareth is clearly that, a performance, and one firmly marked by the parameters of its context as part of a film marketed primarily at children and adolescents. Jareth is not alone in his enjoyment of dressing up, though; Sarah also performs the role she

[6] These are identified as some of Jim Henson's favourite books by Karen Falk in the archival material added to the 2023 reprint of the novelisation (p. 225).

[7] *Labyrinth* fanfiction often imagines meetings between Jareth and an older, more experienced, Sarah.

will come to play when she acts out her encounter with Jareth in fantasy space prior to her being transported to the labyrinth, a piece of cosplay that makes her late for her babysitting duties. Sarah's stepmother suggests that "a date" would be a more acceptable reason for failing to fulfil her familial obligations, showing how the film is constructing a narrative, from the very outset, around Sarah's desires and how she is seen to be 'doing it wrong', which is to say, straying from the narrow path of acceptable heteronormativity. Once in the labyrinth, Sarah's consumption of a drugged fruit also draws comparisons with Snow White and narratives fraught with sexual jealousy. When Hoggle gives Sarah a drugged peach, on the instructions of Jareth, it prompts her to begin a hallucination. Jareth directs this by releasing magical crystal balls that float past Sarah, directing her thoughts to a music box with a dancer on top that audiences have previously seen in her bedroom. Given the longstanding use of toys as educative instruments, socialising children into later roles, we see an alignment of desires between Jareth and Sarah's stepmother, though with a crucial difference. In 'As The World Falls Down', the song that follows, Sarah and Jareth act out a hallucinatory masquerade 'date' that, again, takes her away from her responsibilities to Toby. As with her stepmother's complaint at the film's opening, retreat into fantasy takes Sarah away from reality and into spaces where it looks like she might not meet her familial obligations. The difference here is in the entry and exit to the fantasy: Sarah dreams her way into her fantasy at the beginning and the chiming of the town clock brings her out of it; in the 'As The World Falls Down' sequence, Sarah is drugged, enters it against her will, and brings herself out of it through, once again, the intervention of a clock and Sarah's attention being drawn to it.[8] On landing in the Junk Fields, Sarah notices that the peach is rotten and contains maggots, a reference to the 'degeneracy' she was presented with in the ball scene and the historic connections between fruit and female sexuality.[9]

In her final confrontation with Jareth, Sarah remembers, having failed to recall earlier, that the crucial line in her speech is: "you have no power over me." With this, Sarah is able to break through the complex network of desires between her and Jareth and return to her home; Sarah's embrace of adulthood is evident in her desire to give Launcelot, the soft toy she had jealously guarded at the beginning of the film, to Toby. Sarah's assertion of her own power, her self-control, confirms her development through the film and rejects, finally, the flirtations with transgressive sexuality entertained by the film to this point. This process, however, is complicated by merchandising for the film. Andrea Wright notes that "by making some of the characters from Sarah's world available as *Labyrinth* merchandise the buyer is drawn into her fantasy and can use their own imaginations to give the creatures meanings beyond a decorative or collectable function" (Wright 2005: 270). The lessons of the film are contingent on Sarah giving up these things, to some extent; the marketing asks audiences to involve themselves in the film by taking them up. Viewers are therefore given the opportunity to work through the film and its meanings, either internalising its dominant narrative or using the merchandise to negotiate their own spaces within it (flexibility in

[8] A clock striking at a ball forcing a girl to flee and a stepmother perceived as evil also must raise connections to Cinderella.

[9] See, for instance, historical connections between the medlar, a fruit eaten when rotten, and 'fallen' female sexuality. For a more sustained interrogation of food and connections to sexuality, see Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: Food, Sex, Identities* (London: Routledge, 2000).

approach was inherent to the videogame, which offered players the chance to choose their gender and used a 'word wheel' to offer greater choice of actions than existing control systems). This is particularly pertinent given that the characters populating the labyrinth are represented by the toys in Sarah's room, with those toys referred to by both Jareth and the Junk Lady in the Junk Fields as desirable things that Sarah should choose over adulthood and its responsibilities. *Labyrinth* therefore engages with toys as educative instruments that play a pivotal role in the life of children and engages with the liminality of the moment of when these should be given up. Space is also opened up by the film to critique how the education of these desires through toys are sometimes mismatched, with the desires prompted by the music box and its attendant fantasies of balls at strict odds with the opportunities on offer in the suburban landscape of Sarah's home. In short, the film mounts an education of Sarah's desires into following more normative (that is, bourgeois, White) channels, even as its merchandising extends opportunities to audiences to both fall in line with its intended ideological project and to get outside it into more challenging waters, albeit on conflicted and compromised terms; what follows is an exploration of how this is done and its significance.

Doing It

Thomas Geyrhalter offers a useful interpretation of the tendency of popular culture to flirt with the transgressive (an accusation that had been directed at Bowie, among others in his circle). Geyrhalter claims that "there is a constant disappointment to be experienced from a gay perspective, as these so-called radicals 'come out' as normal heterosexuals, revealing that their act, that promised more, was just an act, therefore commodifying the flirt with the sexually diverse" (Geyrhalter 1996: 223). *Labyrinth* flirts with the transgressive, mobilising Jareth as the Gothic villain whose sexuality is both appealing but also transgressive and threatening. As William Hughes and Andrew Smith note, the Gothic tends to "mobilise unpalatable if not actually taboo issues," even as the demands of the genre and the industries that circulate it demand that "these troubling things should be contained by the eventual triumph of a familiar morality" (Hughes & Smith 2009: 1). It is therefore necessary to consider what work this is doing – what anxieties are being narrated and mobilised through this film, and why.

Kelly Hurley suggests that "the Gothic can serve as a sort of historical or sociological index: if the genre serves to manage a culture's disturbances and traumatic changes, its thematic preoccupations will allow us to track social anxieties at one remove, in the register of supernaturalism" (Hurley 2002: 197). Bowie-as-Jareth is clearly more than just Jareth, or just Bowie" (Hurley 2004: 31). Jareth is a human goblin, a goblin owl, a shapeshifter, and yet another performance layered over the transgressive body and star image of David Bowie. This excess of sexuality and embodied difference is possible largely because it is itself managed; Bowie/Jareth may be many things, but his transgressions are limited in terms of race through his coding as White. The dangers inherent in the tantalisingly sexualised transgressions suggested through Bowie's Gothic performance, while offered to audiences, are also limited and contained through Whiteness and its apparent racial invisibility.[10]

[10] For more on this, see Samira Nadkarni and Rukmini Pande, 'Hannibal and the Cannibal: Tracking Colonial Imaginaries' in Kavita Mudan Finn & EJ Nielsen (eds), *Becoming: Genre, Queerness and Transformation in NBC's* Hannibal (Syracuse University Press, 2019).

Whiteness structures audience encounters with Jareth's body, in all its multiplicities, which are largely staged through identification with the teenage protagonist, Sarah. In design, this manifests through Jareth being consciously constructed as "representative of that innocent girl's imagination," an overdetermined space where multiple and even contradictory desires can be overlaid (Block & Erdmann 2016: 57). As Brian Froud, conceptual designer for *Labyrinth,* notes, "Jareth has the tight pants because he is many, many things that a teenaged girl relates to. He is a rock star, and he is also a leather jacket guy – a classic 'bad boy' – and he's Heathcliff and also a ballet dancer" (Block & Erdmann 2016: 57). These things, according to Froud, are kept in a state of tension until the ballroom scene, "because once Jareth becomes sexual, he's dangerous. And everybody, including the other dancers, backs away – 'Oh no, we really can't go there' – and we couldn't. But it's there all the same" (Block & Erdmann 2016: 58).[11] The transgression is essential to the characterisation of Jareth as the Gothic villain. That Jareth is White prevents the dangers he represents from multiplying uncontrollably, from straying into areas that challenge White bourgeois norms on too many fronts to be safely contained by the narrative and its imagery. In terms of the enduring interest in the Jareth/Sarah relationship, it is worth considering the teenage years as a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, a moment where the bodies of those going through it are subject to change and adolescents are encouraged to learn how to be an adult, sometimes imagining that they are and only realising that they are not when the adult world forcibly intrudes.[12] Russell A. Potter writes of another cinematic adolescent, Edward Scissorhands, that:

> Edward's true allies, however, are not the adults, who have already taken up their places within the capitalistic desiring-machines (cd players, stereos, kitchen appliances, waterbeds), but with children and adolescents, whose crisis is suddenly shown to be not domestic but fundamentally social. By re-enacting the Anti-Oedipal moment, Edward breaks open the "family unit" and discloses a cut that runs across the boundaries between the "nuclear" families in Peg's neighbourhood and the social production of desire (Potter 1992).

Labyrinth dramatizes similar concerns, though more explicitly around the historical tradition of the young heroine of the classic Gothic and the social production (and limitation) of desire within these spaces (Kim comes to desire Edward but ultimately, after the death of her boyfriend Jim, accepts that she cannot be with Edward, returning to town and leaving Edward in his Gothic mansion, alone). The Gothic novels mentioned, and *Labyrinth* (textually positioned as deriving from a novel, and ultimately turned back into a novelisation), are structured by desire, both that of the protagonists and those engaging with them.

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[11] In the novelisation, Sarah is initially eager to kiss Jareth, offering up her lips with closed eyes in the way she thinks it is done. Before they kiss, though, she becomes disgusted with Jareth and people in the ballroom looking at her, and she breaks away.

[12] ACH Smith makes this clear in the novelisation, where the description moves from "the touch of his hands on her body was thrilling," (p. 159) to "she turned her face away from his, horrified. He held her more tightly, and insistently sought her lips with his. Suffused with disgust, she wrenched herself free" (p. 160).

Labyrinth culminates with Sarah gaining the approval of the good father (her own) through acceptance of her familial role and the rejection of the dangerous alpha male, Jareth, and the hinterland of transgressive desire that he represents. When Sarah answers her returning father's question about whether she is there, her "I'm home" is a textual utterance loaded with meaning: the literal meaning of her being in the house is overlaid with her return from the labyrinth and, crucially, her acceptance of the family home as the site of a range of legitimised desires.[13] It also brings to mind 'there's no place like home', the mantra used by Dorothy to return home from Oz. This runs contrary to the beginning of the film, where the house felt like a space that was hostile to Sarah and her needs, a kind of embodiment of the Siouxsie and the Banshees lyric that "where you come from isn't always home." Her attitude to the family home, as evident in the contented utterance "I'm home," has therefore radically shifted through her time in the Goblin City. However, even these boundaries are tested, through the fact that she 'brings back' from the labyrinth a more animated set of the things that were already in her bedroom; desires are therefore activated through Sarah's "walk on the wild side," but also seemingly contained by the embrace of the domestic. Sarah learns the place of some toys by giving Launcelot, her teddy bear, to Toby, therefore completing an action she had resisted at the film's beginning. However, we never engage with a dynamic Launcelot, in the way we see other toys become active participants in the narrative through the labyrinth and the way Sarah brings them back home at the conclusion. A teddy, so indicative of infancy, is therefore left to infancy and Sarah moves herself, and the audience, into a new phase of engagement. It also appears that the home of the beginning of the film is now rendered rather differently because of the new ways that Sarah has learned to see and perceive. The fantasy space within the film offers a mode of audience engagement for the film, much as listening to Lou Reed, David Bowie, Siouxsie and the Banshees, or Marc Bolan provides a means of consuming deviance while still providing the opportunity to continue outwardly performing heteronormativity. As Hughes and Smith note, "to be queer in Gothic terms is, in a sense, to know both, seemingly to adhere to one and yet to desire the other… the tempting queerness that Gothic presents is thus that of assimilation to the alternative, acceptance of the valid claims of heterodoxies," in short, not so much the departure of the individual to the liminal margins of society, but the centring of those liminal desires and a rewriting of acceptability (Hughes & Smith 2009: 2).

Labyrinth **and Gothic Histories**

It is not only the body of Jareth that is overdetermined by the film; space is also set up as a series of references. Once Sarah reaches the Goblin City beyond the labyrinth, its set design is clearly influenced by the German Expressionist masterpiece, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920). There is no mention of this in Block & Erdmann's *Jim Henson's Labyrinth: The Ultimate Visual History* but the nature of the framing, set design, and distorted perspectives draw a clear parallel to Robert Wiene's silent film.[14] This prompts the viewer able to identify

[13] The novelisation makes it clearer that Sarah's mother has left for her co-star, Jeremy, who is represented by Jareth in a fleetingly glimpsed picture in Sarah's bedroom at the beginning of the film, so Sarah's rejection of Jareth is also a rejection of Jeremy and her mother's extra-marital affair.

[14] German Expressionism is embedded in 1980s Goth through bands such as Bauhaus borrowing from it linguistically and through iconography.

the reference (whether conscious or not) to question why it has been used, but also offers the potential for the culturally aware viewer to read that awareness backwards through the rest of the film. Julia A. Walker, for instance, addresses "the flattened perspective of… mise en scene" in *Caligari*, coming to the conclusion that this indicates a "fear of depth that recapitulates the anxieties about the Freudian unconscious that are expressed within the narrative" (Walker 2006: 618).

Similar arguments can be applied to *Labyrinth*. On entering the labyrinth, Sarah is unable to progress because she cannot find a turning; it is her conversation with a friendly Cockney worm that reveals to Sarah that things are not as they seem. It is the flattened perspective that makes discerning openings and turnings in the labyrinth difficult at first glance and suggests the difficulties in navigating both the labyrinth and coming of age. This was especially salient in the 1980s amid a flurry of debates about gender and sexuality and in the shadow of the AIDS crisis. The labyrinth in this way serves as an educative space where Sarah learns lessons of perception, of the ideal of fairness and that some things are 'just how it is', and of responsibility. In short, it operates as a (reductive, inevitably) crash course in the transition from childhood to adulthood already identified as a key theme of the film. *Labyrinth* therefore attempts to educate Sarah and its viewers to 'desire properly', to turn away from the transgressive, however appealing it might appear initially, and not just accept but gladly welcome a place within heteronormative bourgeois family structures – albeit on newly negotiated terms informed by the ability to perceive in different ways as the result of educative experiences.

Panics

American culture across the twentieth century was rocked by moral panics devoted to ideas of acceptability in children and the culture aimed at them. This gathered particular pace after the Second World War, with panics around comics and rock n' roll in the 1950s, hippies and the counterculture in the 1960s, heavy metal bands in the 1970s and 1980s, and a larger scale 'Satanic Panic' in the early 1980s around music, books, role-playing games, and films. *Labyrinth* plays out the imaginative effects of being caught up in this culture. It is all too evident that Sarah's fantasies exert more influence over her than other structures of power. When she finally remembers her line at the film's conclusion, the imaginative space of the labyrinth dissolves and Sarah returns home with Toby - it no longer has any power over her. In this act of recall and dissolution, Sarah places herself in a position of authority over the textual universe, transitioning to an 'adult user' of culture from a 'childish immerser'. Rather than being unable to position herself in line with reality and her allocated responsibilities, Sarah's brush with responsibility – babysitting represented as a Gothic or, as the names Merlin and Launcelot would suggest, Arthurian quest – educates her with regard to her 'proper place'. *Labyrinth* therefore attempts to take the viewer with Sarah on this journey, rejecting the transgressive appeal/threat posed by Jareth and his labyrinth. Where this world falls down, then, is in the inability of the film to regulate the flow of desire within itself, let alone within fan communities.

Desire

Labyrinth is tonally uneven; its major disruptions centre around desire or display of some kind, though they do not carry even loads. The opening sequence where the goblins take Toby is heavily indebted to horror cinema techniques and the rendering of the homely as *unheimlich*.[15] For a film aimed at least to some degree at children, such a beginning might seem out of keeping – but then many 'children's' or 'family' films of the period contained considerably more peril and scares than they might as of the time of writing in 2023. However, this level of rupture, the sudden eruption of horror techniques in the film, is narratively justified on the grounds that it testifies to the apparent monstrosity of Sarah's desires, including her selfishness. Framed sexually, selfishness can be seen as engaging in non-procreative or autoerotic behaviours in the context of the 1980s and the Reaganite culture war around sexuality. That goblins are in the bed, transforming it into a horrifying spectacle akin to Fuseli's painting, *The Nightmare* (1781), attest to this connection between 'deviant' desires and monstrosity, as well as to the childhood myth of a monster under the bed. With the narrative development of Sarah then going into the labyrinth, it could be argued that in many ways, Sarah fulfils her stepmother's desire for her to go on a date. Sarah's transformative exposure to the transgressive Gothic figure of Jareth certainly appears to fundamentally alter her attitudes to herself, her situation, and romance. Whether this is a short-term or lasting change is left open by the film.[16]

Quests for an authentic self are a cornerstone of what we might now refer to as 'Young Adult/YA' fiction. The positionality of the target demographic makes such a strategy readily understandable. As well as textual strategies for making this point, though, there are also strategies of representation. Returning to *Caligari,* Julia A. Walker notes that it features a repeated "gesture of an outstretched, grasping hand [that] becomes a leitmotif for the quest for self-possession—a quest the film represents both narratively and stylistically as impossible" (Walker 2006: 618). *Labyrinth*, too, is a film about coming into possession of oneself, though on terms not necessarily always defined by oneself. In one particularly striking set piece, hands are used to facilitate the educative function of the labyrinth. Sarah is presented with a classic logic puzzle as two guardians block her way, each in front of a door: one always tells the truth, and one always lies. Sarah believes she has worked it out and confidently steps through her chosen door, only to fall into a hole and be grabbed by 'helping hands' that hold her in position. Confronted with a choice of being carried upwards or downwards by the hands, Sarah chooses down. This is greeted with sinister delight by the hands, which have formed themselves into representations of faces to communicate with her, and her decision lands her in an oubliette, a small prison with an opening only at the top whose name literally means 'to forget.' Here, then, it is the text positioning Sarah to be 'forgotten', dramatising classic fairy tale fears about a daughter from a former marriage being forgotten once the father has a new wife and a new baby. It also foreshadows acts of forgetting as another key theme throughout the film; on this first occasion, Sarah is rescued from the oubliette by Hoggle, at the request of Jareth, who instructs him to lead her back to the beginning of the labyrinth so that she will give up her quest to retrieve Toby – so that

[15] Among my friendship group in the 1980s, this scene was the one most often mentioned as the reason the film had been turned off. It is worth noting that, as Roger Ebert did, while the muppets are more real and scary than previously, they remain muppets, and therefore undercut the horror of the scene.

[16] Who among us has not returned from a terrible experience vowing fundamental life changes?

she will be overwhelmed and decide to just forget about the whole thing. Hoggle is, however, turned from this objective by Sarah offering him her jewellery, while she retains his as leverage. Acts of self-possession, indicated by Sarah's confident response to the door, and slightly less confident response to the hands based on her belief that she had worked out the labyrinth, result in being cast into a dungeon to be forgotten. The labyrinth suggests that self-possession is something that has to be earned through trial and error, through experience rather than just confidence alone. It also dramatises the pervasive masculine control of contemporary society, showing how structures of power are so deeply entrenched against women that it takes a significant act of overcoming to defeat them, both through individual talent and application and the construction of coalitions to facilitate success.

Control was evident in campaigns around sex education, a major topic of the culture wars of the 1980s. As *Labyrinth* was released in 1986, C. Everett Koop, Reagan's surgeon general was, at last, directed by the president to tackle the issue of AIDS. Koop, while a conservative himself, "submerged any antigay prejudices he might have had," because "he saw it as his ethical duty to respond to the AIDS crisis with both sound science and compassion" (Hartman 2019: 159). This resulted in Koop producing a report that angered conservatives through its championing of safe sex and its statement that "we can no longer afford to sidestep frank, open discussions about sexual practices – homosexual and heterosexual" (Hartman 2019: 160). While Bowie's more controversial statements about sexuality were some way behind him by 1986 (he came out as gay in 1972, which he subsequently modified to being bisexual), his star persona retained some of its earlier transgressive glitter – and, for some, its associated danger. This danger was reinforced through Bowie's recent role as one of the leads in *The Hunger* (1983), a film revolving around the loves and (after)lives of Miriam Blaylock (Catherine Deneuve), a bisexual vampire.[17] Jareth also has something of Dracula about him - the aristocrat who must be invited into the home and has the power to transform his victims into something else. In the context of the culture wars of the 1980s, with both short and long term history as, at least to the conservative right, a sexual threat, Jareth is a multi-layered character that weds Bowie's personal history to that of the traditional Gothic villain preying on young women (a scenario that unfortunately also played out repeatedly in reality in the pop culture sphere of the 1970s and 1980s).

Resisting Normativity

Up to this point, it has been stressed that *Labyrinth* seeks to dramatize a range of tensions intrinsic to adolescence through the lens of the Gothic. However problematically this quest might be undertaken by the film and its merchandising, it can still be discerned as a preferred reading of the text. As has also been indicated, though, *Labyrinth* is a driver of desire rather than just its container. David Bowie's star persona – physical, musical, sartorial, sexual – establishes the film as a hub of desire in itself and especially in fan communities. Many first-generation fan sites (c. 1990s/early 2000s) focus on the relationship between Jareth and Sarah, reimagining it and extending it in ways not explored

[17] An alternative cinematic interpretation of attitudes to Bowie's transformation into a more conventional 1980s pop star can be found in *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), dir. Todd Haynes.

in the film.[18] Many of the stories cited here are what might be termed 'self inserts,' where a range of authors (usually adopting feminine names) write stories strongly suggestive of their own desire for Jareth.[19] That authors take feminine names is no guarantee of their own gender identity (just as players of the game could choose to present as male or female), much as a description of a heterosexual or homosexual encounter in their fiction is no guarantee of their sexuality.[20] As Paul Hodkinson writes in relation to the goth subculture, "the emphasis, for both males and females, on a feminine appearance was also linked with a general acceptance and, sometimes, even veneration of sexual ambiguity… there was at times a distinct impression that non-hetero sexualities… were a transgression to be admired" (Hodkinson 2002: 54-5). Hodkinson goes on to note the conflation of "gender and sexual ambiguity" in the media and attributes the place of this in the goth subculture, in part, to the "direct influence of apparently bisexual musicians related to the scene – most notably, perhaps, goth's glam-rock ancestor David Bowie" (Hodkinson 2002: 55). That such a wealth of fanfiction was being written at least two decades after the film's initial release (and continues to be written and hosted on AO3), with desire so forcibly foregrounded, shows that the film revolves around desire, though not necessarily in a normatively educative sense (*Labyrinth* also used to be screened as an annual masquerade ball in London).[21] After *Labyrinth*, Jennifer Connelly went on to establish herself in a range of genres, in the process helping to continually direct attention back to *Labyrinth*; even in death, Bowie continues to cast a long shadow over contemporary popular music, through anniversary retrospectives as well as new 'found' releases and the promotion of his original music.[22]

Had other actors been cast in the role of Jareth and Sarah, the original box office failure of *Labyrinth* might have been the end of it; as it is, star personae both elevate the continued life of the film beyond its shortcomings – its tonal unevenness, its now somewhat clunky computer effects and puppets – as well as providing means of understanding how they actively constitute contemporary understandings of the meaning of the text. As such, *Labyrinth* is not a surface; it is, itself, a labyrinth of meanings, desires, and discussions. A veritable Goblin City, from which its viewers may or may not wish to be rescued. A desire to

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[18] See, for instance, http://www.geocities.ws/jareth_sarah/ where the vast majority of stories dedicated to the relationship are rated 'R'. See also http://web.archive.org/web/20071014063558/http://www.geocities.com/hollywood/hills/9700/labrinth.htm and most clearly http://web.archive.org/web/20010501163818/http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Saturn/5145/swahome.htm which bills itself as 'LabySmut Writers Anonymous'.

[19] See, for instance, 'As The Pleasure Sweeps Through' by Elena: http://web.archive.org/web/20010507025459/http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Saturn/5145/elena2.htm

[20] This is evident in 'A Night To Remember', which has Jareth in a same-sex encounter with another king: http://web.archive.org/web/20010506164740/http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Saturn/5145/anony1.htm ; in 'Forest Rendezvous', the gender of 'you' as the narrator is kept neutral until about half way through the story, when the narrator becomes clearly female aligned.

[21] As of the time of writing in February 2024, there are 3525 fanfic stories tagged as being about *Labyrinth*: https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Labyrinth%20(1986)/works 2365 are tagged as f/m, 251 as same sex male, and 102 as same sex female. For the masquerade ball, see https://www.timeout.com/london/things-to-do/labyrinth-masquerade-ball

[22] 2022 was the fiftieth anniversary of the release of *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*, which was widely reported. A BBC Radio 4 documentary dwelt extensively on Bowie's declaration of bisexuality (at time of writing, available here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00187c6)

resist the dominant reading of the text shows how *Labyrinth* engages with the idea of 'pedagogic erotics' and "illustrates, as it simultaneously produces, a slippage between an identificatory erotics located inside (and confined to) the family; a slippage that finds new models for identification and desire outside its bounds" (Kent 2003: 44). Kathryn Kent continues her analysis, arguing that while texts can "inevitably reproduce the discursive structures that enclose their subjects, they also interrogate and deconstruct these structures, sometimes producing through them new sites of resistance" (Kent 2003: 44). *Labyrinth* offers a means of negotiating the passage from childhood to 'successful' adulthood (with success defined by alignment with those enclosing discursive structures), but simultaneously introduce slippages in the long-running, documented, histories of fan desire for Jareth and the escape/confinement he represents (Jareth's closing statement is indicative of such slippages: "just let me rule you, and you can have everything that you want. Just fear me, love me, do as I say, and I will be your slave," though it could itself be read as a blunt statement of 'traditional' patriarchal marriage).

Kent's emphasis on the maternal can also be used as a valuable way of reading *Labyrinth*. While the film begins with Sarah rejecting caring responsibilities and elevating ideas of her own mother (who the novelisation makes clear has left her family for her co-star, though this is left open in the film), the rest of the film seeks to educate Sarah into accepting her responsibilities. She acquires a found family, in the shape of Hoggle, Ludo, and Sir Didymus, with her shift into accepting this role in some ways signalled by her symbolically giving birth to herself: after she kisses Hoggle, Jareth causes both of them to fall down a tunnel, emerging at the Bog of Eternal Stench. After this, Sarah takes a more assertively maternal role, breaking up the fight between Sir Didymus and Ludo and performing emotional labour to keep the band of friends on the path to the film's conclusion; Jareth's role here also aligns him with the figure of the bad father, showing how he is both the threat to Sarah and a catalyst in her coming to her own adult identity in the rejection of him and the transgression he represents. At the film's conclusion, Sarah seems to be taking down some of the pictures of her mother, including the one that includes Jareth/Jeremy, having in some respects come to occupy that maternal position herself, and to have rejected key elements of performance-as-escape from her life, having, ironically through escaping into fantasy, come to a more grounded idea of herself and her familial role.

If Sarah has become a mother, though, the potential question of a father is raised. As Dale Townshend notes of father figures, "for every Gothic male who is commanding of respect and worthy of emulation, there exists a perverse, frequently queer version," a point that Townshend links back to the Freudian notion of paternal authority and parricide in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (Townshend 2009: 19). Sarah's actual father, while positioned by the film as the reasonable bourgeois head of household and ultimate source of filial investment at the film's conclusion, is only on screen for a matter of seconds. Audiences are given far more of Jareth, coded as the perverse Gothic male, who occupies a transgressive and confusing liminal space, and is ultimately far more appealing than the conventional mundanity of suburban life that Sarah sought to escape. Jareth's singing, dancing, shapeshifting, and physical appeal offer their own labyrinth of meaning, drawing on and collapsing into that of Bowie himself. Conventional heteronormative life seems to offer no such options; it is, rather, how Sarah has been conditioned to see when she enters the labyrinth – a long (literally) straight path, hemmed in on both sides by the conventions

Sarah has been taught not to question. Yet, through her time in the labyrinth, Sarah does learn to question, to see anew. Sarah proves capable of resisting Jareth's control of the labyrinth and, as a result, seems to learn how to navigate her father's control of the house more effectively by creating a space within it that balances responsibilities and her agency. As Hughes and Smith state, "even where conventional moralities and identities are proclaimed as ultimately triumphant in a Gothic text, the very fact that they have been challenged signifies that they have been interrogated and, if their boundaries have been tested, then they have equally been contemplated" (Hughes & Smith 2009: 1-2). Having returned to and apparently embraced suburban heteronormativity, it is not clear whether Sarah will be able to live within it.

Conclusion

Labyrinth dramatises and problematises key questions around the education of desire. Its impulse is to centre the appeal of David Bowie/Jareth as spectacle, even as it seeks to ward off that appeal in narrative terms through Sarah's rejection of him and escape into the fantasy space he occupies. Audiences are therefore torn between revelling in the utopian possibilities of desiring differently at a time when contemporary discourse sought to restrict their available options, or accepting the film on its own narrative terms. There is also the fact that it only really seems to be the monstrosity of the Goblin City that Sarah rejects – the transformation of Toby into a goblin. While she brings Toby back to the American suburbs, she also brings a much more visibly populated imaginary, indicative of the alternatives audiences have witnessed (and Sarah has experienced) in the labyrinth. Merchandising of the film offered audiences the opportunity to engage in similar practices at the level of enacting, and extending, the film's action. However, over and above the possibilities of play, the film acts as an educative experience for audience desires: at the beginning of the film, Sarah occupies the position of an isolated and frustrated individual, unable to fully access or understand her imaginative desires. She 'has no power over them,' and is consistently frustrated by lapses in memory and the responsibilities of the home. At the film's conclusion, however, Sarah has demonstrated her ability to fully work through her desires, to imagine herself into a non-normative community, and position herself more completely within society on those terms. As Michael Bronski notes, "while we are all Americans – and heterosexuals may be a lot queerer than they think – being 'just like you' is not what all Americans want. Historically, 'just like you' is the great American lie," a rhetorical strategy mobilised to obscure, in however partial and incomplete a way, the "overwhelming, even giddy, diversity of America" (Bronski 2011: 241). While the film might posit a return to the suburbs as an acceptance of heteronormativity and the demands of respectability, it offers gaps and slippages where alternatives can be glimpsed, where the diversity mentioned by Bronski can be seen to break through systems of containment. Part of this is down to the star power of David Bowie, as Jareth both anchors the film and threatens to overwhelm it, bringing to bear on it Bowie's history of utterances and performances that construct alternative layers of meaning. The process of overwhelming is also one of time; even nearly 40 years on from its release, Bowie is the transcendent figure associated with the film and a major source of its appeal for both casual audiences and fans. Sarah does return to the suburbs at the end of the film, and she does accept her responsibilities; this much cannot be disputed. However, Sarah has also learned different ways of seeing and of being, so it can be extrapolated that her experience of the same space will no longer be the same as before

her epiphanies in the labyrinth; Sarah has, in a sense, come to occupy a different position within the same space, a shift facilitated by new experiences, knowledge, and a greater awareness of herself. Jareth might be shut out at the conclusion but he, and the effects of his encounters with Sarah, remain visible.

Overall this hangs the idea of 'going straight to that castle'. The labyrinth, and the Goblin City beyond it, facilitate a confrontation with other ways of being, seeing, and desiring: they operate as an 'Othered' space that creates opportunities more difficult to access in the conventionally ordered heteronormative space of the suburbs.[23] The ultimate incorporation of those realisations are presented as a 'coming of age' story, a Bildungsroman where the initial stage of loss common to this structure is off camera (the departure of Sarah's mother) and on camera (the loss of existing ideas and structures of desire). If she were to go 'straight to that castle', processes of self-reflection and personal discovery are closed off; in Sarah's more elliptical route, opportunities for alternatives remain open and are presented to both her and audiences. While the film concludes with a potential move into mature adulthood (the conventional conclusion of a Bildungsroman), it is an adulthood marked by this experience in profound ways, not least of which is the continuing incorporation of the Otherness of the labyrinth into Sarah's life. As such, adulthood is shown as a continual state of becoming and external dialogue, rather than an arrived at point of being. That the film continues to offer this to audiences and fan communities decades after production is evidence of its multivalent nature. While attempting to educate desire into particular channels, ultimately the film opens up a system of waterways that audiences are invited to navigate themselves, with options ranging from going straight to the castle to lingering in backwater conduits. Desire flows through all these and, drawing on the film's climactic Escher sequence, flows at different speeds and in different directions, depending on perspective. Rather than an imposed 'desiring better' in the context of the 1980s culture wars and the AIDS crisis, then, *Labyrinth* operates as a space in which, and through which, viewers can work out their own approaches to desire.

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[23] This is not to say that the suburbs do not have an extensive queer or Gothic history of their own. See, for instance, Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

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