

## **Goblin King in Labyrinth: An audio-visual close reading of the songs by David Bowie**

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*This article comments on the dual role of David Bowie in the film *Labyrinth* (1986) as actor and singer, in addition to Bowie's star persona, puppets as a means of alienation, and the narrative world of *Labyrinth* in the realm of fantasy and fairy tale. However, the main focus of the article is on the role the songs play in the film's narrative. In musicals, songs usually interrupt the narration, or narrative progression of the film, while expanding on emotional content or depiction. In *Labyrinth*, the sections of dance and song are not regarded as separate by the characters within the narration, although they might appear separate to the viewer. The film *Labyrinth* takes a different approach to the musical tradition, because it intertwines narration and songs. *Labyrinth* breaks away from the dual-focus mold of American film musicals (Altman 1987), as only the man in the main character pair sings. It utilises the traits of musical, but is it a musical? I aim to determine this by reviewing the genre of the film and analysing the roles and the meanings of the songs using audio-visual analysis and close reading (see Bal 2002; Richardson 2012).*

The idea for the film *Labyrinth* (1986) came to director Jim Henson in the aftermath of his feature film *Dark Crystal* (1982). He dreamed of combining live actors with the puppets of his *Creature Shop*, which had appeared and were known from the television program *The Muppet Show* (1976–1981) (*Inside the Labyrinth* 1986.) Together with his writing and conceptualisation team, Henson started to compose a story about goblins that would combine fantasy stories like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1900). For the role of Goblin King, the writers wanted a contemporary pop singer; they considered Michael Jackson, Sting, and David Bowie (*Inside the Labyrinth* 1986; see also Pegg 2004, 552), who were all at the height of their popularity in the 1980s. As director Jim Henson admits in the beginning of the documentary *Inside the*

*Labyrinth* (1986), his obvious choice was David Bowie. When approached, Bowie embraced the challenge of acting as well as writing the songs for the film.

In this article I aim to answer this question: if *Labyrinth* has narrative songs like a film musical, why has it not been categorised as such? If it is not a musical, why, or perhaps to what end, do the songs play such a substantive part of the film's narration? To fully answer the question, I will also investigate the meanings conveyed in the songs more closely. I address these questions and tasks using the methods of audio-visual analysis (see Altman 1987; Chion 1994; Gorbman 1987), and close reading (see Bal 2002; Richardson 2012). Although this article comments on many issues, my main focus will be on the role of the songs in the film's narration, and how the songs work to establish genre.

While the soundtrack of *Labyrinth* was a collaboration of Trevor Jones and David Bowie, their collective roles were clearly defined: Jones was in charge of score music, orchestration, and sound design, and Bowie concentrated on the songs. *Labyrinth* contains five songs, which are spread rather evenly throughout the film (see Table 1), and which were mainly performed by David Bowie, with the only exception being the song *Chilly Down*, which was performed by Charles Augins, Richard Bodkin, Kevin Clash, and Danny John-Jules, the four actors that voice the Firey creatures. In this sense, *Labyrinth* is not an ordinary film musical, where everyone (or at least the main characters) sing and dance (see Altman 1987, 16–27; Altman 2002, 41–51). For example, the main character Sarah (Jennifer Connelly) does not sing at all. Although the world of opera uses so-called mute roles, this is unusual in films and musicals.

Table 1. Distribution of songs in *Labyrinth*.

Scene	Narration	Time	Song	Key phrase
Opening titles	Establishing	0:00:22–0:02:45	Underground	<i>Down in the underground... A land serene</i>
Running home	Establishing	0:03:50–0:04:44	Underground	<i>Walking away... Life can't be easy</i>
Getting to know the labyrinth / Goblin Castle	Taking action and pursuing the goal	0:21:32–0:25:44	Magic Dance	<i>Babe with power... make him free</i>
Firey creatures	Interference	0:48:53–0:52:40	Chilly Down	<i>Think small with the fire gang...</i>
The mask ball (dream sequence)	Straying from the goal	1:01:15–1:06:51	As the World Falls Down	<i>In search of new dreams...</i>
Escher stairs	Confrontation	1:23:28–1:27:01	Within You	<i>How you turn my world...</i>
End credits	After resolution	1:31:53–1:36:56	Underground	<i>Nothing ever hurts again...</i>

As in film musicals, the sections of song and dance in the film are not separate from the narration of characters, although the viewer might regard them as such. It could be said that *Labyrinth* breaks away from the dual-focus mold of American film musical (Altman 1987, 16–21; see also Cohan 2002, 42–45). These imbalances make *Labyrinth* a fascinating case study.

The structure of this article is as follows: in the section *Labyrinth* and David Bowie, I will introduce some parts of the film production, elaborate more on the film's place in David Bowie's career, and how his stardom has been taken into account. In Ambiguity of *Labyrinth*'s genre, I will discuss

Rick Altman's (1987) definition of the film musical through an analysis of the scene *Magic Dance* and try to find a solution to genre question. In addition, I will discuss the relationship between the songs and the flow of narration in *Labyrinth* while also exploring the role of song in the narrative film in general terms. In *Metaphors and Motifs of Labyrinth*, I will analyse the songs *Within You* and *As the World Falls Down* from the perspective of how they bring hidden topics to light in the film. Finally, I will draw my arguments together in a conclusion.

### ***Labyrinth* and David Bowie**

David Bowie (1947-2016; born David Jones; also used the name Davie Jones in early career releases) was an unusually versatile artist: singer, songwriter, sound engineer, producer, actor, and painter among many other things. His keen interest in performance and different forms of expression made him a multi-skilled and devoted performer, and he even used his body as vehicle of expression (*David Bowie: Sound and Vision* 2002). As [Mick Brown](#) (2010) claims, Bowie made a career out of identity crises[1]. This is a rather bluntly stated and perhaps oversimplified claim; simply put, Bowie was a complex personality who utilized his body and personal experiences also in his music (see *David Bowie: Sound and Vision* 2002; *David Bowie: Five Years* 2013; Egan 2015, 308–310). Brown's view could, on the other hand, have been the way the general public viewed Bowie retrospectively, but as Bowie's official web site states:

Driven by an entirely deeper dynamic than most pop artists, *the art of David Bowie* inhabits a very special world of extraordinary sounds and endless vision. Unwilling to stay on the treadmill of rock legend and avoiding the descent into ever demeaning and decreasing circles of cliché, Bowie writes and performs what he wants, when he wants. ([Bowie](#) 2016; emphasis has been added.)

In *The British Pop Dandy*, Stan Hawkins (2009, 17–18) proposes that pop artists cannot be viewed only through the recordings they produce, because there is always a person and personality behind the talent. Hawkins introduces artists who, in his view, have internalized the Wildean idea of the total artwork, which refers to Oscar Wilde's twist of an Aristotelian idea ("art imitates life"): Wilde wrote in his 1889 essay *The Decay of Lying* that Life imitates art far more than art imitates life". Hawkins includes Bowie among those artists who live according to these principles. Hawkins (2009, 4–11) calls these artists "pop dandies" and applies defining characteristics to them, such as national identity, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. He asserts that, to an artist, performance is a theatrical act of displaying oneself, and successful pop dandies usually perform a unique and

aesthetically ritualised identity, which can in turn open the possibility of ridicule or/and misunderstanding from audiences.

In the 1960s, the mod fashion community was fascinated with appearance. This partly influenced the naturally blond David Bowie to acquire long hair and an effeminate outfit as his distinctive look when he started to discover his own identity as a performing and recording musician in London in the late 1960s, after releasing two eponymously-titled albums (see Buckley 2015, 6 & 24–28). According to Buckley (2015), Bowie drew his early influences from dancer Lindsay Kemp and artist Andy Warhol. In Kemp's dance classes while learning the secrets of mime, Bowie became aware of the bizarre, which he employed in his own performances (Buckley 1999, 44-47). Bowie was vastly attracted to Andy Warhol's idea that stardom could be concocted, which Warhol had applied to "talentless" people in his Factory studio (Buckley 1999, 107). Bowie's queer looks blurred his gender identity from the heteronormatively defined mainstream music scene, and consequently subverted the gap between gay and heterosexual cultures (Hawkins 2009, 158).

The 1970's were Bowie's most productive years, and soon he became the force to be recognised in the art rock scene with such album recordings as *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and Spiders from Mars* (1972, RCA), *Aladdin Sane* (1973, RCA) *Station to Station* (1976, RCA), *Low* (1977, RCA) and *Heroes* (1977, RCA). With performance personae like *Ziggy Stardust* and *Aladdin Sane*, Bowie effectively elevated androgynism and transvestism into aesthetic and intellectual styles. By rejecting heteronormative constraints, Bowie challenged the macho stereotype that performers of that era (and to this day) like to flaunt: he ridiculed gender norms with imaginative, gender-fluid characters, which either horrified or entertained audiences by questioning the traditional and rigid images of masculinity. Bowie revolted against the conventions of pop and rock, both in his music as well as image. (Hawkins 2009, 18.)

Japanese fashion designer Kansai Yamamoto designed the essential costumes and concepts for *Ziggy Stardust* and *Aladdin Sane*. The kabuki-style garments, quick wardrobe changes during the performance as marker of personality changes, use of Mawari-butai (rotating stage), and other loans from kabuki theatre were sufficiently alien to unsettle western audiences. (Buckley 1999, 117–118.) In the film *Labyrinth*, Bowie returned to spiky hair (with a help of a wig) reminiscent of *Ziggy Stardust* and *Aladdin Sane*. The exaggerated facial lines from kabuki make-up and surprising costume changes (see *Labyrinth* 0:32:55–0:33:05) remind viewers of Bowie's theatrical music performances. The slender, timeless male youth figure of Ziggy can be seen as analogy of Peter Pan

(Buckley 1999, 119), the boy who never wanted to grow up. With Bowie's reading, the role of Jareth is infused with a similar rebellious attitude.

Bowie's success moved beyond his music in the 1980s as his film career started becoming more prominent. Bowie had acted in films before *Labyrinth*: he had a leading role in the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), which is now considered a cult classic. The role of major Jack "Strafer" Celliers in the World War 2 drama film *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983) made Bowie into an internationally recognized actor. (Egan 2015, 102; Evans 2013, 58.) So Jim Henson's idea of Bowie acting in a leading role was not far-fetched. In 1983, when Bowie was touring in the USA, Jim Henson approached him and pitched his film idea to Bowie, including artwork by conceptual designer Brian Froud and a copy of the film *Dark Crystal* (1982). Bowie found the idea fascinating and saw potential in the script. (*Inside the Labyrinth* 1986.) Although it seemed initially to be a flop, because it did poorly at the box office and received cutting reviews, the film *Labyrinth* brought new audiences to David Bowie (Buckley 2015, 81). For audiences born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this was probably their first encounter with the artist David Bowie, for it was unlikely they had been exposed to the outlandish appearances of *Ziggy Stardust*, *Aladdin Sane*, and *The Thin White Duke*, and this curious look of Jareth could be seen as a homage to them. Yet against the backdrop of bustling puppets, Bowie finds a way to express himself with fine precision (e.g., the owl-like turn in the close-up in the *Magic Dance* scene). This ability to alter his physical expression also extends to his vocal abilities; for example, he overdubbed the baby voices himself in *Magic Dance* (*Inside the Labyrinth* 1986; Pegg 2015, 137).

### **Ambiguity of *Labyrinth*'s genre**

From the beginning, it was clear to Brian Froud and Jim Henson that the film *Labyrinth* would be about goblins. As Henson worked on the story with Dennis Lee, Froud's "mood boards" would set the feel and visual language of the film (*Inside the Labyrinth* 1986). The character development took more than a year before the crew could start shooting the film in Elstree Studios in England. But this meticulous pre-work was good news for the film and eased the shooting itself, as Jim Henson's son, puppeteer Brian Henson tells:

There were some 48 puppets and 53 puppeteers in the Magic Dance scene, and to add to that mayhem, 8 to 12 little people were in harnesses jumping around. The scene was mainly improvised, for there was no choreography. The idea was just be goblin. The set looked like Swiss cheese without the puppets. (*Inside the Labyrinth* 1986.)

In the latter 21<sup>st</sup> century, puppetry transformed from an undervalued and neglected children's and folk performance genre to a meaningful art form in stage, film, and television productions (see Kaplin 1999). Jim Henson and his Muppets are a clear example of this process. With his company, Henson was able to develop new materials and production technologies for puppetry, which made an impact on the field of puppet animations, particularly special effects (Kaplin 1999, 28)<sup>[2]</sup>. Although the puppets in *Labyrinth* are lifelike in their appearance and movement<sup>[3]</sup>, the set and the lighting brings forward their artificiality, which in turn highlights the effect of alienation. This effect can also be seen in Bowie's eccentric costume and his blond kabukish wig, which turns him into a puppet-like character (see Image 1). Granted, the fantastical atmosphere of the film's world also underlines this impression.



Image 1. David Bowie in his Jareth costume and wig.

There were productions in the early days of sound films that could not accurately be classified as musicals but still employed a large amount of music and song. This is because the use of sound in films was a novelty, and the format of narrative films (and film musicals) was still fluctuating. Songs could pop up anywhere in the film: the narration would be halted by some non-essential song and dance routine and would continue after the song as if nothing had happened. (Barrios 2009, 299–300.) The development of film sound technology was also a firm step in the development of film musicals, and the immigration of film composers from Europe brought the awareness about theatrical practices such as vaudeville and operetta, which affected how the song numbers would ease their way more fluently into the film narration. Over time, film musicals developed into narrative, feature length films, which used music not only as instrument of sound engineering, but

also as foundation of motion, whether it is the dancing movement of the characters or the camera movement (see Altman 1987, 101–110).

In his book *The American Film Musical* (1987), film theorist Rick Altman approaches the definition of film musicals from the viewpoint of narration and meanings that film musicals convey. Altman introduced the idea of musicals utilising the normative narration, which rests partly on psychological motivation. Altman understands narration as a formation between two centres of action:

The American film musical has a dual focus, built around parallel stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values. This dual-focus structure requires the viewer to be sensitive not so much to chronology and progression, but to simultaneity and comparison. (Altman 1987, 16–19.)

Altman's theory of dual focus narrative might be useful when contemplating *Labyrinth's* genre. *Labyrinth* tells the story of Sarah, a teenager at the brink of adulthood. She is pampered, beautiful, and vainglorious. As Sarah (Jennifer Connelly) is once again left at home to babysit her little baby brother Toby, she makes a wish that goblins would come and take him away. This wish sets the events of the film in motion. Her counterpart in the story is Jareth (David Bowie), the goblin king, who is egocentric, moody, and noticeably queer in his appearance. If applying Altman's theory to this format, these two main characters should be opposites. Sarah and Jareth are opposites in sex and they come from different backgrounds (she lives in the "real world" in a middle-class home, and he lives in a fantasy world as a king in a castle). But the two characters also have similarities: both are stubborn and egocentric. Despite their differences, the couples that Altman discussed all share one essential feature: they both sing (Altman 1987, 19). However, in *Labyrinth* Sarah does not sing. Her power originates from a previously written chant-like text that she cites in the beginning of the film and again in the final scene with Jareth. The only characters that sing in the film are goblins and their king. Does this suggest that singing belongs to the fantasy world, the land of the goblins, and it is a truly fantastic act?

In Altman's example of *New Moon* (1940), the main characters are introduced in a juxtaposing scene that brings out their contrasts (Altman 1987, 17–19). In *Labyrinth's* song scene *Magic Dance* (see Video 1), Sarah and Jareth both apply their own problem-solving methods (Sarah with action, Jareth with contemplation), which are paralleled ([see a table of Magic Dance scene analysis](#)). While Sarah is depicted as seemingly alone in the quiet labyrinth as she tries to find her way to the castle

with her steps as the loudest sound, Jareth is presented in a noisy and busy castle hall with baby Toby crying and goblins causing havoc. Jareth starts a conversation, which turns into a song with the goblins. Together, they plot how to hinder Sarah's journey. When Sarah is shown in the labyrinth, the set is light, airy and spacious. In contrast, Jareth is shot in the darkness of castle suffering from congestion. The music in this scene mirrors the image in various ways: singing of Jareth and goblins is shown in the castle shots (music as onscreen). When Sarah is seen in the labyrinth, the song continues playing in the background. We can hear it, but Sarah does not seem to react to it, so we can assume that she does not hear it. Hence the music is both off-screen and non-diegetic. This is a question of perspective. If we underline the song's connective role, then the emphasis is on the off-screen, but if we highlight Sarah's point of view, then the song becomes non-diegetic. Either way, the music is acousmatic (see Chion 1994, 73–74).



Video 1. *Magic Dance* scene. Source: <https://youtu.be/bcCb9MLShss>.

In *The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic*, Robynn Stilwell suggests that although diegetic and non-diegetic music might be easy to distinguish, the power lies not in their difference, but in the fantastical gap between (Stilwell 2007, 200). So could it be that this slow rippling between the two scenes is actually an attempt to appeal to the viewer and request that we choose a side and make an emotional commitment? Regardless, in this scene the main characters of *Labyrinth* are contrasted in numerous ways.

As Altman (1987, 16–27; see also Altman 2002, 41–51) emphasises the role of the main characters in the fabrication of form and the dual-focus structure, in *Labyrinth*, the main characters are also the objects of the viewer's attention, although this might be due to casting. The alternation between the male and female point of view is the starting point of dual-focus narration, as traditional narration

rests on suspense, psychology, motivation, and/or plot. While traditional narration has an Aristotelian dramatic arch, dual-focus narration advances to the resolution of differences. (Altman 1987, 20–21.) *Labyrinth* uses traditional narration as well as dual-focus narrative. Suspense is created through the different hindrances Jareth places in Sarah's path, and how she ultimately solves them. Although the dual-focus narration sets Sarah and Jareth up as a potential romantic couple, the decisive final scene between the couple doesn't offer reconciliation or heteronormative consummation, because Sarah rejects Jareth's magical world.

*Labyrinth* combines different narrative strategies as it tries to immerse the viewer in the world of goblins. At the same time, it uses songs to highlight the process of drama at the expense of the psychological perspectives. This can be observed partly in the songs' lyrics, which focus more on the narrative action in the case of *Magic Dance* than on the description of either of the characters, their emotions, or the circumstances. Therefore, I am not ready to classify *Labyrinth* as a film musical in the classical sense.

To evaluate *Labyrinth*'s genre, we have to take into account the period in which it was manufactured. In the 1980s, the traditional audio-visual media (cinema and television) were in turmoil, as personal computers were developed for leisure use in homes. People began to use television sets as their display, and computers became more user-friendly with graphic-based operating systems. At the same time, home video systems became more common, so traditional media had to develop new measures to attract audiences. One solution for attracting audiences was hybrid popular cultural texts like music videos and music television channels. Indeed, music videos could be seen as a cultural continuum to film musicals, since they were seen in various studies as cinematic miniatures during the same period (Mundy 1999, 223–224). Films like *Fame* (1980), *Flashdance* (1983), and *Footloose* (1984) used their music video likeness to augment back to the format of film musicals.

It is clear that *Labyrinth*'s storyline binds it to the tradition of fantasy and fairy tale films. Contemporary cinema favoured fantasy as a genre, as evidenced by films like *Excalibur* (1981), *Clash of the Titans* (1981), *Legend* (1985), *The Neverending Story* (1984), and *Return to Oz* (1985), which were made just before *Labyrinth*. All of these films deal with fantasy, although the two former are also set in mythical worlds of the Arthurian age and Ancient Greece. The distinction between fantasy and fairy tale film is a fine line: in her thesis *Magic Code*, Maria Nikolajeva points out that the difference between the two lies in the structure of their story worlds. Where the story world of fairy tale is omnipotent and closed, the story world of fantasy is divided into realistic and

fantastic realms. In that sense, *Labyrinth* is a true fantasy film like *The Neverending Story* and *Return to Oz*, for they all have the mentioned polarisation. Therefore, *Labyrinth*'s genre is a hybrid, as it negotiates its narration through the genres of fantasy and film musical.

### **Metaphors and Motifs of *Labyrinth***

The film *Labyrinth* can be seen as a story of sexual awakening and a teenage girl's coming-of-age story. Mark Spitz (2009) reads into the ballroom dance scene between 39-year-old Bowie and 14-year-old Jennifer Connelly an intimidating amount of sexual tension. According to Spitz, no other actress ever achieved the same level of connection with Bowie as Connelly did. (Spitz 2009, 457.) The labyrinth itself can be seen a rite of passage to adulthood, or it can symbolise a sexual awakening. It can also be considered a metaphor of knowledge or a cognitive model (Shiloh 2010, 90). The idea of the labyrinth lies in problem solving, because finding the right path can be perceived as learning and acquiring the knowledge of the secret structure of the labyrinth. The answers emerge by applying various mind-sets.

The term labyrinth originates from the pre-Greek word *labyrinthos*, which means a large building with an intricate underground passage. In Latin, labyrinth alludes to *domus daedali*, Daedalus's house, which refers to the builder of the mythical labyrinth. (Shiloh 2010, 90.) According to antique myth, the Cretan king Minos constructed a labyrinth where he placed the bastard child of his wife and a bull, Minotaur. The resulting monster had a man's body and bull's head, and it devoured those who entered the labyrinth (see Reed Doob 1990, 11–13). The classical Cretan labyrinth is a structure where one winding path inevitably leads to the centre (Shiloh 2010, 89; see also Eco 2014, 52), and the Minotaur was usually positioned in the centre of the labyrinth. Although it is said that a person entering the classical labyrinth is usually nearer the solution than those deeper inside, this lucidity of structure does not reveal itself, since labyrinths simultaneously represent order and chaos, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity. Doubling and mirroring also determine the internal structure of a labyrinth. While most labyrinths constructed before modern times were centre-oriented, the opposite is true of postmodern labyrinths. (Shiloh 2010, 93–94.) According to semiotician Umberto Eco, the Mannerist labyrinth is full of alternatives, which is why all of its pathways are dead ends, except one (Eco 2014, 52–53). He also sees the labyrinth as a network where every intersection connects to others (Eco 2014, 53–55); however, in the case of *Labyrinth*,

there is no exit. In these contemporary mazes, the fear of the Minotaur has been replaced with terror of getting lost for eternity (Shiloh 2010, 94).

In the film, the labyrinth is shown on many occasions. In the beginning, it appears as a self-contained structure, and only parts of it are revealed as Sarah enters it. There are many structures inside the labyrinth: the never-ending passage, the rambling wall, the network of underground tunnels, the turf maze, a bog (which can also be characterised as a kind of maze, as nature is filled with ambiguous routes; see Eco 2014, 37), and finally inside the castle, the Escherian stairs [4]. These different parts of the labyrinth confuse Sarah in various ways, and her escape solutions differ based on the challenge she encounters. The Escherian stairs set the scene for the song *Without You* (see Image 2). This song has a focal role in the narration: it is the only song that Jareth performs in Sarah's presence. In fact, he actually sings to her. The *Within You* scene (see Video 2) functions as a prologue to the final conflict between Sarah and Jareth, in which Sarah confronts Jareth and demands her baby brother back.



Image 2. Jareth (David Bowie) sings to Sarah (Jennifer Connelly).



Video 2. *Within You* scene. Source: <https://youtu.be/gJ9BHGX58vQ?list=RDVppuD1St8Ec>.

The song *Within You* deviates from other structurally conventional songs of the film. For example, the format of *Magic Dance* is ABAB, while *As the World Falls Down* is AABAB (A for verse, B for refrain). The free-form *Within You* is founded on the melody of the first phrase (see Music example 1.).



Music example 1. Motif A of *Within You* (transcription by me)

Music example 1. Motif A of *Within You*.

The remaining part of the song *Within You* modifies this melody with syncopated rhythms and a descending melody line after the highest tone. The modifications are made with various techniques: using the melody partly (either its beginning, the syncopated ascending line, or its end, the steady descending line), adding a larger gap before the syncopated rhythm (see Music Example 2), or changing the rhythm (e.g., by adding an extra syncopated note).



Music example 2. Motif A4 of *Within You* (transcription by me)

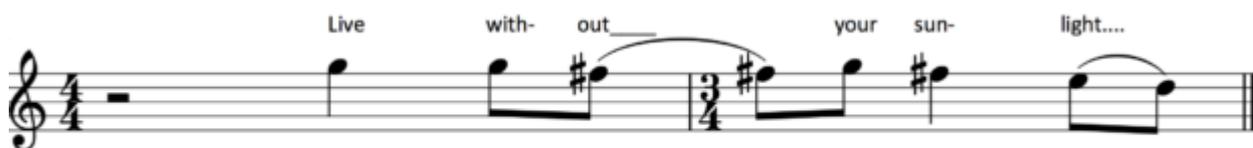
Music example 2. Motif A4 of *Within You*.

The melody line rises during the song, along with Bowie's singing register. In the beginning of the song, the starting tone of the melody is either F# or G. After four phrases, the starting tone is twice A before leaping to E, and at this point, only variations of either the whole melody or its syncopated beginning are used. The motif A4[5] (Music Example 2) can be seen as a breaking point of the song, for it is actually repeated three times, and it leads to the highest starting note, G, which is an octave higher than in the beginning. From G, the descending motif A5 (see Music Example 3) is repeated three times, and the last time is spaced for the dramatic effect of sighs. This high register starting from G sounds like it strains Bowie's voice, and with diminuendo his singing turns into sighs. Of course this could be a stylistic device or the aim, as the lyrics are tragic:

... Live without your sunlight,

Love without your heartbeat,

I – I can't live within you... (*Labyrinth* 1986).



Music example 3. Motif A5 of *Within You* (transcription by me)

Music example 3. Motif A5 of *Within You*.

The labyrinth is not the only mythical aspect in the film. Since Jareth (Bowie) is the only singing human character in the film, this elevates him and his voice to mythical proportions. In the world of ancient myths, Orpheus was the legendary musician who could charm everyone with his music and song. In his travels as a member of the Argonauts, Orpheus met the other masters of song and singing, the Sirens. Homer, in his epic *Odyssey* (ca. 700 BCE), described the Sirens singing so blissfully that those seafarers who heard them became so senselessly enchanted they were desperately drawn to their deaths on the rugged shore (Peraino 2006, 13). I find it noteworthy that these mythical tales do not tell us why the singing of Sirens is so mesmerizing; in other words, we do not know what the Sirens' song sounds like. It seems that it is a bit unimaginative from Homer and easier to only relate the reactions of Odysseus, or to tell how Orpheus used his own music to muffle the Sirens' song. Homer's *Odyssey* does not even portray the Sirens' visual appearance, but Homeric pottery and tomb ornaments repeatedly illustrate them as half human (mostly female) and half bird. (Peraino 2006, 13.)

It is commonly assumed that someone's life and personality can be heard in their voice (Frith 1996, 184–185). Singing in its corporality must be one of the most subjectively revealing traits. It has a direct connection to an artist's physicality and identity, as the voice can also be understood as part of a performance strategy, which collaborates with individual style and fortitude (Hawkins 2009, 121.) As a human being, it is easy to sympathise with the sound of one's own kind: the sound of voices. They entail their own unique, psychological content, because people use voices to comfort, amuse, and appeal. The pop voice is commonly considered more personally and emotionally expressive than the voice of singers in classical music, where the emotion and character are mainly dictated by the score. This is in part a case of sound convention and meaning-making. (Frith 1996, 186–187.)

In his book *Performing Rites* (1996), Simon Frith tackles the voice from multiple angles: as an instrument requiring skills and techniques to master it, as part of the body (i.e., as a physical phenomenon involving breathing and muscle control), as conveying a recognisable personality (colour, register, huskiness), and as a culturally coded characteristic (Frith 1996, 187–199). I agree with Frith that voice is a multilevel operator and that vocalisation utilises intersubjective communication. As a conveyor of desire, the singing voice is ambiguous, because one of its functions is to translate aural representations into many meanings (Hawkins 2009, 124).

A part of music's enduring appeal, and part of its cultural work, is that it delineates a space and time wherein gender and sexuality lose clear definition (Peraino 2006, 7). Enjoyment and meaning making is left to the listener (which does not exclude the performer). If we take account how Hawkins (2009, 4) demands the de-naturalizing of gendered behaviour in musical performances, does this lead to elevating the meanings of a performer's gender and identity before enjoying their talent? Furthermore, if we acknowledge David Bowie's ability to challenge our perspectives on gender, could he also be challenging gender perspectives in *Labyrinth*? To the older generation of the 1960s, long hair and make-up were regarded as female features, but to the new Romantics of the 1980s, the self-serving spirit was perhaps not an atrocity for men. While *Labyrinth*'s Jareth is a male role, Bowie acts with heavy make-up and long hair extensions. Additionally, Jareth is capable of shape shifting, as seen in the beginning of the film when an owl enters Sarah's bedroom through the French doors, and Jareth enters Sarah's room through them in human form. Jareth's shape-shifting abilities are shown again after the film's final conflict, when Jareth turns into an owl before Sarah's eyes. The 1980s fashion style was rather taken with large shoulder pads that might explain Jareth's wide padded shoulders, which make his legs appear scrawny like a bird's. If Jareth

establishes himself as an entity between human and animal, his queer position deals not only with his gender identity or sexuality, but with his human status as well, or, queering humanity itself, as a familiar trait in queer sci-fi (see Latham 2002, 119–120; Merrick 2008, 216–232). David Bowie saw the role of Jareth as a continuation to his collection of characters. He said: “I think Jareth is, at best, a romantic, but, at worst, he is a spoilt child, vain and temperamental... like a rock’n’roll star!” (Hewitt 2012, 175.)

“The singing” of the Sirens is essentially an act of seduction that entraps listeners. So if we think of Jareth as a Siren, a point enhanced further by his queer birdlike appearance, it becomes evident that with each song, Sarah is lured in closer to Jareth. However, we cannot be sure whether she hears all the songs Jareth sings (as mentioned in the analysis of *Magic Dance*). Furthermore, in the end, when Sarah is in the castle, the song *Within You* presents a hesitant Jareth; he is amazed by Sarah’s capacity to solve the puzzles he has given her. The lyrics of this song appeal more to Sarah’s guilt than her desire. The only song with a Siren-like quality is *As the World Falls Down* (see Video 3), in which Jareth speaks about the Sarah’s beauty, his feats of valour and, of course, about falling in love. Sarah hears this song in a drugged state after eating a peach that has been drugged. Her drug-induced dream presents the masked ball she has always dreamed of – she is even dressed as the figurine from her music box – and her vision includes Jareth as a gallant. Although Jareth seems to bewitch Sarah for a moment by dancing with her and singing directly to her, she soon begins to doubt her surroundings and ultimately escapes.



Video 3. *As the World Falls Down*. Source: <https://youtu.be/dFyufUCTCh8>.

To encounter the song of the Sirens is to succumb to a desire that can deprive and ravage but also energise and sustain. Later readings of the Sirens accentuate the “rite of passage” aspects such as

the acquiring of covert information or the testing of faith against seductions of the flesh (Peraino 2006, 19). As Jareth seems to fail in his attempts to seduce Sarah so she will forget her quest, it becomes clear that Sarah has learned many things during her journey. She has taken steps towards adulthood and is mature enough to see that she is not ready for everything that being an adult means. There are obvious nods to psychoanalysis and Freud, for example the baby brother can be interpreted as Sarah's own innocence, which she is trying to preserve at the brink of maturity and in the presence of a highly sexualised character, Jareth (Pegg 2015, 553).

As a fantasy film, *Labyrinth* has direct contact to the myths of western culture and the mythical fantastical worlds. To its credit, the film includes references to popular culture in the form of children's film and fairy tales. Sarah eating a drugged peach can be seen as a tribute to *Snow White* and the masked ball scene *Cinderella* (Pegg 2015, 553; see Image 3).

In this section I have pointed out that *Labyrinth* did not only highlight the visual concept of the labyrinth, it also gave an audible example of being lost in the free-form of the song *Within You*. And in addition to this, both the Siren-like appearance and the voice of Jareth accentuate the feeling of getting and being lost.



Image 3. Sarah (Jennifer Connelly) dancing with Jareth (David Bowie) in the masked ball.

## Conclusion

My aim in this article was to examine the film *Labyrinth* by opening up and questioning its genre ambiguities, while also bringing forward the metaphors it contains. Narrative roles in the songs of *Labyrinth* are more action based either in their lyrics (*Magic Dance*) or in their usage as a narrative strategy (*As the World Falls Down*, *Within You*). The lyrics of *Magic Dance* talk about possible

actions to hinder Sarah's journey, and the songs *As the World Falls Down* and *Within You* are used as weapons of interference. They are the tools of a Siren who wants to lure Sarah away from her quest. Although the *Magic Dance* scene brings forward Altman's dual-focus narration, it is probably the only glimpse of his definition of an American film musical. Although the scene did not tick all the boxes for defining dual-focus narration, the greatest shortcoming is the fact that Sarah does not sing in the film. Singing seemed to be a trait of the goblin world, which places it in opposition to reality. The character of Sarah could be seen as equivalent to the audience's role: she experiences the wonders of the fantastic goblin world just as a viewer would.

Regardless of this juxtaposition, *Labyrinth* is not a film musical, at least not in a traditional sense. As the song scenes are spread out evenly through out the film and do not follow each other, *Labyrinth* cannot be considered an extended music video, which was a creation of the 1980s, with the release of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1984). During the 1980s it became a common practice in films to use particular representational strategies of music videos and music television, which expanded the audio attraction of the films (Mundy 1999, 227). This might explain why the soundtrack of *Labyrinth* was released six months before the movie premiere (Buckley 1999, 381–382).

Perhaps the songs of *Labyrinth* should be considered as fantasy components, thus rendering the film in the category of fantasy film. In *The American Film Musical*, Altman (1987) acknowledges that not all film musicals yield to his definition, especially if narrative content is romantic coupling. Altman suggests that as there is a difference in musicals due to their display (film and stage), which is often represented in their narrative content. He sees these musicals about musicals as subgenres of the American film musical. (Altman 1987, 129–131.) Also according to Altman, in fairy tale musicals (another subgenre to film musicals), music conveys the transition from childhood to maturity with thematic ingredients of fantasy and wish realisation (Altman 1987, 104–105). So it seems that *Labyrinth*'s genre exists somewhere in between fairy tale musical and fantasy film, or it could be seen as a hybrid of those two.

*Labyrinth* was the first film with a soundtrack that all songs were written by Bowie, not to diminish the orchestration and mood score of Trevor Jones. Unfortunately, the soundtrack did not enjoy the same chart success as Bowie's other projects, and it is seen as an aberration among his albums. In Paolo Hewitt's book *Bowie. Album by Album*, Hewitt identified the limitation of creativity as the cause of the aberration, because Bowie could not follow his own instincts and chosen muse within

the limiting subject of the film. (Hewitt 2012, 176.) Still, the references to myths of classical periods are clear, as I have demonstrated with this article.

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All links verified 8.12.2016.

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*David Bowie: Sound and Vision*. Director: Rick Hull, original music: Alan Ett, writer Rick Hull. Prometheus Entertainment, and Foxstar Productions. 2002.

*Inside the Labyrinth*. Director: Desmond Saunders, written by: Jim Henson, music: Trevor Jones, cinematography Barry Ackroyd, Rafi Rafaeli, and John Warwick, starring: Jim Henson, David Bowie, Charles Augins. Jim Henson Television. 1986. 57 min.

*Labyrinth*. Director: Jim Henson, music: Trevor Jones, songs: David Bowie, story: Dennis Lee, and Jim Henson, screenplay: Terry Jones, cinematography: Alex Thomson, starring: David Bowie, Jennifer Connelly, Toby Froud. The Jim Henson Company & Lucasfilm Ltd. 1986.

Songs (in order of their appearance in the film):

*Opening titles including parts of Underground*. Music & Lyrics David Bowie. Performed by David Bowie.

*Magic Dance*. Music & Lyrics David Bowie. Performed by David Bowie.

*Chilly Down*. Music & Lyrics David Bowie. Performed by Charles Augins, Richard Bodkin, Kevin Clash, and Danny John-Jules.

*As the World Falls Down*. Music & Lyrics David Bowie. Performed by David Bowie.

*Within You*. Music & Lyrics David Bowie. Performed by David Bowie.

*Underground (as End Credits)*. Music & Lyrics David Bowie. Performed by David Bowie.

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## Notes

- [1] This is actually an unintentional (or not?) quotation from Mike Brown's interview with David Bowie in December 14, 1996 for Telegraph Magazine (UK). See Egan 2015, 309.
- [2] For example, in the film *Labyrinth*, Hoggle is the most complicated puppet creature. Its face is technically elaborate, as there were about 18 motors that controlled all the different proportions of the face. It took four people to operate these motors from the outside by radio control. The fifth person was the actor Shari Wiser, who was inside the costume of Hoggle and could only partly control the puppet. It took from the team several hours to rehearse just to create one expression (*Inside the Labyrinth* 1986). The complexity of Hoggle could be compared to the Japanese bunraku puppets, which are considered the most difficult to master out of the non-mechanical puppets (Kaplin 1999, 33–34).
- [3] For example, *Labyrinth*'s character Ambrosius is played by a puppet and an old English sheepdog. The interchanges between an inanimate and an organic dog are extremely subtle.

[4] This refers to the artwork of Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher (1898-1972). He was interested in impossible objects, explorations of infinity, reflection, symmetry, perspective, and tessellations. The film *Labyrinth* has adapted his lithograph *Relativity* (1953), which is a study of gravity and perspective.

[5] The number in the name of the motif indicates the number of variation.