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JACK IN WONDERLAND
TEMPORAL, SPATIAL AND MENTAL LABYRINTHS IN STANLEY KUBRICK'S THE SHINING

In 1980, Stanley Kubrick's The Shining, the adaptation of Stephen King's novel, opened in cinemas. The book and the film tell a story of Jack Torrance — an aspiring writer gone mad. Generically a horror movie, The Shining can be read in a number of ways. Leaving aside other possible readings, the text investigates the construction of multiple mazelike structures on temporal, spatial and mental levels. The film narrative sets out on a journey through these layers; effectively "sucking in" the filmic characters (and the audience) into the "wonderland" of evil twins, doubles and madness where, eventually, nothing is what it seems.

Key words: *Stanley Kubrick, horror movie, mazelike structures*

Джек в Стране Чудес

Фильм Стенли Кубрика «Сияние», экранизация романа Стивена Кинга, появился на экранах в 1980 году. Книга и фильм повествуют о Джеке Торрансе, сошедшем с ума писателе. Этот фильм ужасов может быть прочитан разными способами. Оставляя в стороне другие прочтения, в данной статье исследуются многочисленные лабиринты структур, которые выстраиваются на временном, пространственном и смысловом уровнях. Нарратив фильма задает странствие сквозь эти слои, словно бы «всасывая» персонажи (и публику) в «Страну Чудес» злобных близнецов, двойничества и безумия, где в конечном счете все оказывается не тем, чем кажется.

Ключевые слова: *Стенли Кубрик, фильм ужасов, структура-лабиринт*

Stanley Kubrick's The Shining opened in 1980 and was billed as a masterpiece of modern horror. A very appropriate tag line this might be, but, as with nearly any Kubrick film, it is much more than just an experience in genre bending and stretching. In fact it is an exercise in deception and appearances, a chilling assault on all the senses and a master class in filmmaking. Deception and appearances are part of the narrative as well as the viewing process. The characters and the viewers fall victim to what, on the surface, appears to be a typical ghost story, but eventually turns into a modern day tale of domestic violence and a disintegration of the physical and mental universe where nothing is what it seems to be.

Horror, alongside science fiction, has always been treated as a transitional and little respected genre. It remains, on the one hand, deeply rooted in the traditional, classical studio era responsible for establishing such genres as westerns, musicals, war films and gangster films, and on the other hand, it seems to be notoriously difficult to define satisfactorily as it acquires polymorphic, elusive, ambiguous and historically changeable properties[1].

The term 'horror' itself carries a meaning of extreme feeling, almost to the point of revulsion and disgust, caused by something shocking. The experience of terror from the secure position of a member of the audience, combined with a form of catharsis, generates a unique aesthetic pleasure. Horror films do not satisfy the audience's animal and aggressive nature, but rather force it to confront the 'beast within', to realize and fear internal instincts and drives.[2] The experience of limits and their transgression is central to horror films and is characterized by a specific type of symmetry, or parallelism. Horror is structured alongside certain opposites such as sanity and madness, the conscious and unconscious mind,

[1] Langford, Barry (2005), *Film Genre. Hollywood and Beyond*, Edinburgh, p. 157.

[2] Konigsberg I. (1997), *The Complete Film Dictionary*, London, p. 181.

the boundaries of life and death, or external surfaces of the body and flesh and the organs within. [3] A typical aspect of horror films is the eruption of (often) supernatural and (nearly always) irrational violence forcefully entering the normative social and/or domestic environments. The agent of this violence, 'the monster', is perceived as the embodiment or expression of repressed desires.

Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) uses some of the above themes and incorporates them within a larger framework of a discourse on domestic pathology, violence and communication breakdown. But the film also provides a certain type of aesthetic pleasure, structuring its narrative and imagery as if to create a particular sense of 'doubleness' and parallelism, reflections and repetitions.

In the course of the story Jack Torrance, an ex-teacher and would-be writer, applies for a position as caretaker in the Overlook Hotel. He arrives with his wife and son for the coming snowbound winter months. Jack has a drink problem and a history of domestic violence. His son, Danny, possesses a particular psychic power that enables him 'to shine', which means to establish a sort of telepathic contact with another person endowed with the same gift. One such person is the black hotel cook, Hallorann, who urges Danny to contact him in case of danger.

Immediately, once the family is left alone, the ghosts occupying the hotel begin to use their evil powers to influence and possess Jack. One of them is the previous caretaker, Delbert Grady, who in an act of madness killed his wife and two daughters with an axe and then took his own life. Real, or imaginary, ghosts and spirits push Jack into madness. He also becomes increasingly violent towards Wendy and Danny. Hallorann, the cook, arrives to rescue the family but Jack kills him with an axe. Then he turns against his own family, chasing Wendy and Danny through the vast corridors of the Overlook Hotel, and eventually, axe still in hand, pursues his son through the nearby maze. Luckily the boy manages to escape, leaving his psychotic father forever stuck in the maze, walking in circles.

At a glance *The Shining* has all the basic 'ingredients' of a classic horror film: there is a haunted house, or a ghost ship (the Overlook Hotel), the double (or Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde theme), a monster (Frankenstein motif), a pact with the Devil (or the Faustian bargain with the Overlook Hotel when Jack says 'I'd sell my goddamn soul for a glass of beer'), and a sort of witchcraft (the titular shining). There are various ghosts and spirits, there is violence against a woman, a psychopathic killer and the process of *monstering* itself when Jack turns from a regular husband and father into an axe-brandishing psychopath.

The narrative is also punctuated with numerous references to Greek mythology. The myth of Oedipus is reworked as a father-son conflict between Jack and Danny, with Danny in effect killing his father. Jack, a blood-thirsty beast lost in the maze, impersonates the Minotaur, whereas Danny's retreat from the maze following his own footprints in the snow turns into a clear reference to the myth of Ariadne's thread.

But the film is interesting not only because it recycles, reworks and reinvents the genre. In terms of both its narrative and its structure, *The Shining* effectively re-tells and de-constructs itself as an artefact of a specific subgenre of horror. The film changes into the experience of watching a horror film, turning the audience into the characters incorporated within the narrative and made its objects. The structural and narrative symmetry operates on a number of levels including a temporal and spatial organisation of the narrative, *mise-en-scène,* and the functioning of the principal characters. This effect is achieved through the usage of such props and themes as the maze, the mirror and the double, which are the filmic elements I am going to investigate in the following pages.

Labyrinth

Herman Kern, in his definitive study on the idea of the labyrinth, writes: "In a labyrinth, one does not lose oneself. In a labyrinth, one finds oneself. In a labyrinth, one does not encounter the Minotaur. In a labyrinth, one encounters oneself". [4] Kern, tracing the history of this idea back to late antiquity, clarifies the distinction between two types of labyrinthine structures, their possible meaning and etymology. Today the origin of the term cannot be satisfactorily explained, although it is assumed that *labyrinthos* means *house of the double-headed axe,* stemming from *labrys* — the Palace of Knossos on Crete. [5] And the structure itself may take the form of what is called the labyrinth or the maze.

Both of these have a similar level of complication but different characteristics. The labyrinth is a type of structure that, despite its complexity and length, always leads the walker to its centre, contrary to the maze, where paths intersect forming a multiplicity of the letter Y. The perimeter of a labyrinth has only one opening serving as both the entrance and exit, whereas the maze always has a separate entrance and exit.

The labyrinth is a type of static structure requiring a lot of patience and persistence on the part of the walker. The path is only superficially easier to walk, as a potential danger is that the walker may give up on his journey at any point not knowing how far (or how close) he is from the centre. The walk is linear, enforces monotony and the walker remains passive, exposed to boredom or apathy, and the space itself is characterised by continuity and a lack of surprise.

The maze, contrary to the labyrinth, is a dynamic structure. It is a collection of intersecting paths presenting a different kind of threat to the walker by forcing him both into a constant state of alertness and to make endless choices, never knowing whether they are right or wrong. The walk is fragmentary, non-linear and its rhythm is permanently disrupted, therefore turning the journey into a zigzagging through the hostile interior of the maze.

The concept of the labyrinth refers to such notions as initiation, death, the underworld and reincarnation. To understand the idea and shape of the structure as well as to make the decision to enter it requires a certain level of maturity. The walker, once inside, is left alone, preparing himself to reach the centre and face his encounter with the Minotaur. This, in turn, symbolises a kind of (self)discovery. A victory over the beast forces the walker to return, thus requiring an 180 degree change of direction. Effectively, he becomes a different person, distancing himself from the past. Therefore "a walker leaving a labyrinth is not the same person who entered it,

[3] Langford, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

[4] Kern, Hermann (2000), *Through the Labyrinth. Designs and Meanings Over 5000 Years*, Munich, London, New York, p. 23.

[5] Kern, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

but has been born again into a new phase or level of existence; the centre is where death and rebirth occur. "[6]

The Shining, as a dynamic type of narrative, is structured around the idea of a maze operating on a number of levels: physical, metaphorical, temporal and spatial. First of all, there is a physical representation of the structure just outside the hotel, with its miniature equivalent found on a huge table in the vast hotel lounge. The building itself, with its numerous and intermingled corridors, echoes a multilevel mazelike structure. Kubrick 'constructs' the hotel in a contradictory manner: on the one hand, it oozes space and vastness, appears to be impenetrable and limitless. At the same time, the narrative episodes are set in only a few places, thus creating an overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia and confinement.

Behind the Overlook Hotel stands the whole tradition of mysterious buildings with its earliest antecedent, the Palace of Knossos, an elaborate mazelike building constructed for King Minos of Crete and designed by the legendary artificer, Daedalus. Since the Overlook Hotel 'has always been there', it has its own 'right' to influence the inhabitants. "The image is of the huge, empty, opulent hotel [that] functions as an embodiment of a luxurious society and high civilisation, now deserted, and haunted by its dark and violent past that lives on to destroy those who come after. "[7]

This spatial organisation contributes to the effect of cabin fever — a mental state responsible for extreme restlessness and irritability caused by a confined space and affecting individuals who have been shut in together for an extended period of time. In the opening sequence Jack mentions cabin fever when referring to a group of settlers in 'the covered wagon times' and it clearly serves as a prefiguration of what is to follow. Effectively the filmic hotel is turned into a sort of supersize wooden cabin.

The physical representation of the maze is further enhanced through the inventive use of the camera. The opening sequence stands out as a benchmark shot for the whole film. Like a God's-eye view there is an aerial shot of Jack's car, a yellow Volkswagen far below, a winding mountain road climbing through a pine forest, a long way ahead, breathtaking views of the mountains and, finally, a magnificent panorama with the Overlook Hotel in the centre.

Kubrick uses such smooth long takes throughout the whole film. Danny's travels through the corridors are punctuated by the unnerving sound of his tricycle's wheels muted by the deep pile carpet and the same wheels sliding noisily across the polished, bare floor of the corridor. The camera is always right behind or just in front of the boy. Its movement is always smooth and discreet, carefully calculated. Such sequences further emphasize the strange, mazelike nature of the place. They also contribute to the establishment of distinct, mutually exclusive mental and physical spaces occupied by the characters.

Similarly, when admiring the miniature maze placed on the table in the hotel's Colorado Lounge, the shot of Jack's look elevates him to a God-like status. Jack is able to see his family from above, he is able to control them and everything that is happening in the real maze. This shot is an equivalent to that from the opening sequence when Jack's car is observed from above by the real God. Jack's madness makes him think he can raise himself above the level of ordinary mortals, but the moment of entering the maze becomes his moment of doom. He loses control and remains trapped inside, defeated by time and space, humiliated like an overthrown tyrant.

To emphasise the maze-like associations even the floors in the hotel are covered with materials replicating the specific look: the tiles in the reception area or the carpets in the corridors where Danny, alone, plays with his toys. Once, a thrown ball returns as if pushed by an invisible hand: a kind of invitation to enter the maze. "Come and play with us, for ever, and ever, and ever" echo in unison the two murdered daughters of the former caretaker. This patterning reinforces the feeling of confinement and inescapability: once you there, there is not any other *there*, there is no alternative space, you are in the possession of the place.

Although the Torrances physically inhabit the same space, they live in three separate mental worlds. Their communication is almost non-existent. Wendy rarely interacts with Danny. When discussing their trip to the hotel, she offers her son clich d consolation such as "It will be fun" or "It takes time to make friends. " She shows signs of maternal care, but her emotional bond with Danny is established only when they are forced to fight Jack. By contrast her conversations with Jack are filled with tension. Their spousal union is, in fact, fiction. Jack can barely restrain himself from showing his contempt for Wendy. Finally, in an explosion of violence, he blames her for all his misfortunes. And there is Danny, a boy who has nobody to play with, possesses a strange telepathic talent and talks to his imaginary friend living in his finger. This is a portrait of a clearly dysfunctional, if not a pathological family.

As the family falls apart with its individual members gradually relegating themselves to different physical and mental spaces, the process is further enhanced by the disintegration on a temporal level. Title cards inform us about the progression of time: *The Interview — Closing Day — A Month Later — Tuesday — Saturday — Monday — Wednesday — 4 p. m*. Kubrick constructs here a schizophrenic mode of perception similar to that of experiencing space. On the one hand, time is precisely communicated, on the other — does it really matter that this happened on a Monday and that happened on a Wednesday? What Monday and what Wednesday? Time is becoming less and less relevant here since the events seem to be occurring in some sort of temporal pseudo-space. Everywhere and nowhere. Now and then. Always. "You've always been a caretaker here" — says Grady to a confused Jack. Three members of one family live their lives in parallel temporal and spatial universes, rarely meeting in reality. The horror of this version of family life is the horror of time and space.

The characters walk through their own mazes, overcome their own hurdles and encounter their own Minotaur. The mythological figure, half-man and half-bull, is the symbol of the dark side of the human psyche, 'the beast within us' hidden in the depths of the unconscious mind. To enter the maze is to confront one's own primitive dark forces. The Minotaur serves as an impersonation of the collective memories of humanity, as a kind of projection of evil human selves. Kubrick shows that evil is hidden in the ordinary, in the banal and in the everyday. That real horror is invisible, because it is unfolding beneath the surface of a quiet family life.

[6] Kern, *op. cit*., p. 30.
[7] Telotte J. P. (1979), *The Organic Narrative: Word and Image in* Barry Lyndon, „Film Criticism", Spring.

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Mirror

This confusing impression of multiplicity is further enhanced by the use of the mirror, which has always been perceived as an object reflecting not only the image of the person looking into it, but also as a means of gaining insight into the human soul. Christian art used to consider the mirror as an attribute of pride — one of the seven deadly sins. A mirror reflection suggests duplicity, the existence of a shadow, the Other. It becomes a symbolic double taking power over the real 'I', unveils a different, hidden and dominant character that turns into a destructive force of the *alter ego*. Since it may also be understood as a representation of the immortal soul, the mirror and the double become a variation on the same theme.

Duplication is connected with duality and symmetry, with the equilibrium of opposite forces. There are two types of doubling: horizontal (when something is reflected by the surface of a pond, or a lake) and vertical (when the image 'on the other side' is reversed in the mirror). The opening aerial of the film clearly refers to the first type of doubling. The camera glides smoothly over the lake reflecting a small island, then it moves further on revealing a path leading to the hotel, the path that turns into the entrance into the maze.

But it is the (omni)presence of mirrors that contributes to the impression of duality. In *The Shining* they are not merely props reflecting images, but also gateways leading into the world of knowledge, as if looking into the mirror should help gain access to some sort of hidden truth. It is in the mirror where Danny, talking to his imaginary friend, Tony, sees the Grady girls for the first time. Is this just an omen, or the first suggestion of a fragmented image of a child as in Jacques Lacan's *the mirror stage*? The effect of duplicity is further emphasized when Danny warns Wendy by mirror writing and backward speaking. Assuming Tony's manner of speech he mutters *redrum* while scrawling REDRUM on the door. Its sense becomes obvious to Wendy only when she sees the word reflected in the mirror.

Throughout the whole sequence Danny holds a long knife in one hand (clearly a phallic symbol) and in the other his mother's lipstick. The boy seems to be torn between masculinity and femininity, between gender loyalty to his father and emotional attachment to his mother. There are also other iconographic 'generic trophies', but further exploration of this issue exceeds the scope of this text.

Not surprisingly it is Jack who is most often surrounded/reflected by mirrors. In the most telling and significant sequence Wendy enters their bedroom with a breakfast tray. The camera focuses on Jack lying in his bed. As Wendy enters the camera pulls back and the viewers realize they were watching Jack's mirror reflection, which is the first indication that his personality is on the verge of disintegration. Soon afterwards Jack seems to be talking to mirrors instead of people. When he engages himself in a conversation with Lloyd, a barman, it is as if he were talking to a huge mirror just behind the barman's back.

Jack's encounter with Grady, the caretaker, takes place in a bright red bathroom with a line of sinks along the wall that are perfectly matched by a line of mirrors. Jack gives the impression of drowning in this hall of mirrors, where everything reflects everything else and nothing seems to be real. Also Jack's meeting with a young temptress initially appears to be a t te- -t te with a Venus rising from the bathtub ready to seduce the intruder. The woman, ready and willing, approaches Jack, who takes her in his arms and kisses her. Yet at the moment of looking into the mirror behind the woman's back he suddenly sees that she has turned into an ugly old hag, who assumes zombie-like mannerisms. A feeling of disgust flashes onto Jack's face as the illusion is gone and the truth is reflected and revealed in the mirror.

Yet another doubling occurs in a sequence when Jack tries to uphold the physical and emotional bond between father and son by talking with Danny. Apart from an obvious reference to the myth of Oedipus, Jack's conversation with his son goes nowhere as there is no real communication between them. Danny is clearly scared ('Daddy, do you feel bad?') and Jack can only feed him with a slogan ('I love you more than anything else in the world'). When Danny enters the room Jack, sitting on the bed, apathetic, his gestures tired, turns to his son. The camera pulls back and shows two Jacks: the real one and his mirror reflection. Jack talks to his son, but he also talks to his mirror double. The universe becomes kaleidoscopic, being remade and reconfigured. Is it still Jack's universe? Is it Danny's? Jack's double's universe? And what exactly is the viewer's position in this hall of mirrors?

The Shining provides a incredible parade of such images forcing the viewer to constantly verify his position within the narrative. Permanent doubling, reflecting and mirroring undermines the stability of the watching experience. But the film also turns into a discourse on the difference between mental landscapes occupied by individual characters within the narration, and, consequently, by the viewers themselves. The movie functions as a visual puzzle with images creating a deceptive and hallucinatory vision reminiscent of what can be described as *the wilderness of mirrors*, a phrase appearing in T. S. Eliot's poem *Gerontion* (1920). It was much used in the 1950s and 1960s when describing the state of confusion and so-called strange loops used in espionage and counter-intelligence. It referred to the situation when the rival sides in the Cold War planted misinformation through agents who were allegedly changing their allegiance. As a consequence, even the agents wanting to change sides were treated with much distrust since every piece of information was potentially neither true nor false.

Kubrick's film illustrates the same process happening gradually, yet relentlessly. And it concerns, to varying degrees, all the characters. Slowly but surely, the viewers realize that they are not only witnessing the slow deterioration of Jack into madness, but that his wife and son also require urgent medical assistance.

The double

The mirror motif is closely linked to the figure of the double which, in a way, becomes its extension. An interesting approach to this phenomenon might draw on psychoanalysis, but as an-depth analysis of the whole film from this perspective would require a further article, I offer here only a sketchy overview of the possible readings.

The psychoanalytical approach might refer to a manifestation of a class of phenomena known as 'the uncanny' — a concept proposed by Sigmund Freud that refers to a type of experience occurring when once repressed infantile complexes are revived, or when one's discarded primitive beliefs seem suddenly to be in operation. However, it is Otto Rank, a follower of Freud, whose seminal work on the double is particularly pertinent. Rank states that

the 'double' has a lot in common with the reflections in mirrors, with shadows, with guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul and with the fear of death ... but the 'double' was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death' ... and probably the 'immortal' soul was the first 'double' of the body... . From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. [8]

The Shining explores the motif of doubling in filmic characters as well as the elements of its mise-en-scene in a number of ways. Bearing in mind the importance of his mirror reflections, there seems to be two Jacks: a contemporary man and a historical figure occupying the same space in the Overlook Hotel at different times. In the last sequence of the film, as the camera zooms in, a picture with Jack in the centre and the date, 4th July 1924, appears on the wall. He is there amongst some other people who seem to be enjoying a party. Is he a ghost in the picture? Or is he a ghost now? And who are these people? Are they the very same guests who provide the background and the buzz at the mysterious party attended earlier by Jack in the Golden Ballroom?

When Jack applies for a job at the hotel he is told the story of the previous caretaker, Delbert Grady, who went mad and murdered his family with an axe. Jack meets Grady, who introduces himself as Charles. Is this, then, Delbert or Charles Grady? Is this the same person or are there twins? What is more — Grady's murdered daughters are very much alike, although not identical twins. The sight of them standing still and holding hands is particularly eerie and this image strengthens the impression of doubling.

Even Danny appears to have his own double — Tony, who "is a little boy, who lives in [Danny's] mouth". Technically, the boy talks to one of his fingers, which then responds through Danny's mouth assuming a different, harsher, tone of voice. Tony seems to be an older, more experienced and more reasonable 'version' of Danny. Also their names, Danny / Tony, although different share a similar sonic quality. Just like Grady's two daughters, the pair, namely Danny and Tony, again reinforces the hallucinatory effect of doubling.

The interplay between all these elements, motifs and themes constitutes the skeleton of the filmic narrative. It creates a sensation of entering a physical and emotional maze on different levels without clearly set goals and objectives. The more one watches *The Shining*, the more one realises that with each and every screening the film exposes a new level of entanglement and complexity. The narrative of the plot becomes less and less relevant and what increases in importance is the feeling of entrapment in the multiverse of images and sounds. On this level of interpretation *The Shining* turns into a kind of meditation on the nature of human perception with regard to the world. Whose vision is the 'right' vision? Is there one 'right' vision? What is reality and what turns out to be a figment of one's imagination? To what extent is it a 'what you see is what you get' environment and to what extent is it a projection? And, perhaps most importantly, who is who?

The film does not provide ready and easy answers to these questions. Therefore, watching *The Shining* is rather like living through the film, like entering the brain of a filmic character and looking at the world from his perspective. If *The Shining* were only made for this one reason, it would absolutely suffice.

In 1980 Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, the adaptation of Stephen King's novel, opened in cinemas. The book and the film tell a story of Jack Torrance — an aspiring writer gone mad. Generically a horror movie, *The Shining* can be read in a number of ways. Leaving aside other possible readings, the text investigates the construction of multiple mazelike structures on temporal, spatial and mental levels. The film narrative sets on a journey through these layers effectively "sucking in" the filmic characters (and the audience) into the "wonderland" of evil twins, doubles and madness where, eventually, nothing is what it seems.

[8] Rank, Otto (1989), *The Double. A Psychoanalytic Study*, London, p. 6.