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## CH-CH-CH-CHANGES: DAVID BOWIE'S GENERIC INFLUENCE ON JIM HENSON'S *LABYRINTH* FILM FRANCHISE

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**ABSTRACT:** Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* has been a family staple for almost forty years. Steadfast in its popularity, the film was even lauded as a *cult-classic* for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary re-release. Though this newfound status has done little to alleviate the persistent difficulty of generic categorisation, instead it highlights *Labyrinth*'s awkwardness when grouped among contemporaneous fantasy or adventure films. Henson had originally intended to make a traditional secondary-world fantasy, yet during production the film would undergo a host of unexpected changes, many of which came about after casting David Bowie as the film's antagonist. The latter alterations led *Labyrinth* down a winding and transformative path, rendering the magical movie both more mature and generically anomalous for its time. Yet, when the film's trans-mediatic elements are also taken into consideration, it appears to parallel another genre in the fantastic mode that rose to popularity in print at the same period: Urban Fantasy. Leaning on recent research of both the latter and its better-known cousin, Fantasy, the following article considers Bowie's influence on the production of Henson's *Labyrinth*, as well as on its story, score, and setting.

**KEYWORDS:** Urban Fantasy; speculative fiction; setting; Labyrinth; Jim Henson; David Bowie; genre.

## CH-CH-CH-CHANGES: A INFLUÊNCIA DE DAVID BOWIE NA FRANQUIA CINEMATOGRAFICA DO FILME *LABIRINTO* DE JIM BENSON

**RESUMO:** Há quase quarenta anos, o filme *Labirinto*, dirigido por Jim Henson, encontra facilmente seu lugar em nossos lares. Em 2016, tornado célebre, numerosas revistas chegaram inclusive a tratá-lo como um filme *cult* por ocasião do lançamento da edição especial de seu 30<sup>o</sup> aniversário. No entanto, a

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estranha mistura que essa popularidade perpétua produziu também se tornou difícil de categorizar. Com efeito, embora Henson tenha feito do projeto um filme maravilhoso em um mundo secundário, mudanças inesperadas se lhe foram impostas, e, sobretudo, depois que David Bowie aceitou o papel de antagonista na história. Assim como a heroína é transformada ao atravessar o labirinto, as últimas alterações fizeram do filme algo, ao mesmo tempo, maduro e único em seu gênero. Por outro lado, quando essas mudanças são consideradas com os elementos transmidiáticos ao redor do filme, este se revela mais alinhado com outro gênero do insólito, ainda pouco estudado, que começava a conhecer algum sucesso nos anos 80: a Fantasia urbana. Assim, com as pesquisas recentes sobre a Fantasia e a Fantasia urbana como ponto de apoio, este artigo analisa a influência de Bowie não somente na produção do filme *Labirinto*, mas também no roteiro, no cenário e na trilha sonora.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Fantasia urbana; insólito; *Labirinto*; Jim Henson; David Bowie; gênero.

*“My son, wherefore seek'st thou thy face thus to hide?”*

*“Look, father, the Erl-King is close by our side!*

*Dost see not the Erl-King, with crown and with train?”*

*“My son, 'tis the mist rising over the plain.”*

When Goethe's (1853) sickly boy was describing the invisible, child-stealing Erl-King in the eponymous poem, he undoubtedly saw a figure garbed in contemporary finery and not the anisocoric eyes, spiky-blond mullet, and New Romantic style that characterised David Bowie's later interpretation. Indeed, the charismatic British icon appeared to have a transformative magic of his own that would not only humanise the villainous Goblin King, but also fundamentally modify Jim Henson's concept for the 1986 film *Labyrinth*. From the outset Bowie's presence would influence the direction of the production, causing drastic changes across the board, from setting to plot, that would render the final piece both unique and generically anomalous to contemporary critics. Yet, as I intend to demonstrate, when considered in relation to the trans-media elements of Henson's imaginary world that followed the initial cinematic release, these alterations cause the film to align not with the fantasy genre, but rather with another genre in the fantastic mode: Urban Fantasy (UF). Before being able to accurately analyse the final generic form of the film, however, it is necessary to understand the creative processes and transformations that led to it.

## Turn and Face the Strange

Though *Labyrinth* initially flopped, earning back just over half of the initial 25 million dollars in production costs (*Labyrinth (1986) - IMDb.*), it has remained steadfast in its popularity. The 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary Blu-ray disc and cinematic re-release of the film in 2016 even saw internauts and journalists referring to the film as a ‘cult classic’ or a ‘family favourite’<sup>2</sup>. It seems that audiences still resonate with the struggles faced by fifteen-year-old, theatre-loving Sarah (Jennifer Connelly) who initially rebels against adult responsibilities and facetiously calls upon the Goblin King, Jareth (David Bowie) to take away her half-brother, Toby (Toby Froud). Although Jareth appears in her suburban home to do just that, Henson’s original concept was set completely in a fantastic secondary world, with the fairy tale adventure then focusing on Sarah’s ten-hour journey through the Faerie labyrinth in an attempt to rescue her sibling from life as a goblin. This key shift in setting, however, was but one of many radical digressions along the way. Then again, considering Henson’s work ethic, this is no surprise.

Though he was a master of puppets, Henson was not alone in pulling the strings. Instead, he believed that it was important to furnish a collaborative space in which artists and other professionals could enjoy creative freedom. As the documentary *Inside the Labyrinth* shows, while writing the screenplay, comedy writer and Monty Python member, Terry Jones, turned to the artwork of Brian Froud, the concept designer, for inspiration. The latter, given free reign by Henson, had begun to work on a bank of drawings and images of the goblin creatures once their presence in the film had been confirmed. Then, with the screenplay written and storyboarding mocked up, Froud entered a back-and-forth with the puppet creators (Wendy Froud and Ron Muek etc.) who would create 3D representations of his work. According to the puppet designers, and others involved in such processes, Froud was very open to both their creative input and any “happy accidents” that might occur along the way. In their words, “the artistry was very much a dialogue” (SAUNDERS, 1987).

In the hierarchy of creative dialogue, Henson’s word was final—though, his hand was sometimes forced. Indeed, according to an interview with the puppeteer (HENSON; PIRANI, 1986), when setting out to make *Labyrinth*, he initially intended it to be a fantasy film with a

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<sup>2</sup> Typing ‘Labyrinth’ into a search engine spews up many results such as the following article from the BBC: Luke Buckmaster, ‘Why Labyrinth Is so Memorable’, BBC, 27 June 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/-20160621-why-labyrinth-is-so-memorable>.

male lead in the same vein as *Legend* (SCOTT, 1985) starring Tom Cruise and Tim Curry, released the year before. In other words, a typical high-fantasy, in which the hero is pitted against an all-powerful villain. The release of the latter, however, forced the team to abandon the initial concept and write a new story centred around a female lead—a choice that would transmute the entire project. Dennis Lee wrote the subsequent novella, but when it was given to Terry Jones to develop into a screenplay, he found little inspiration. Instead, Jones pulled from Froud’s artwork to lend substance to the magical Otherworld. Once written, it was passed onto Henson’s creative team, made up of George Lucas, Laura Philips, and Elaine May, as well as Henson himself (HENSON; PIRANI, 1986). Together, they worked on a contemporary version of *Labyrinth* in which a much more present Jareth kidnaps Sarah’s younger brother and then tries to seduce her into becoming his queen. In this version, there were scenes of a more adult, sometimes slightly sexual, nature that, though present in earlier scripts and the novel (SMITH, 1986), were watered down in the final script.

Although this collaborative spirit reigned, upon arrival Bowie was given a special position. In fact, in order to entice him into taking the role, the entertainer was practically handed the reins. According to Williams (2012), after tentatively accepting to work with Henson, Bowie read the screenplay but found that it lacked humour and considered removing himself from the project as a result. Having only ever considered Michael Jackson or Bowie for the role, Henson asked Jones to once more modify the screenplay (HENSON ; PIRANI, 1986). Jones begrudgingly acquiesced, having already made what he considered too many modifications to the original script that negatively affected the film’s narrative, such as removing the suspense and dread of an unknown villain through expository shots of Jareth in the Goblin castle (SAUNDERS, 1987). Finally, when this, the last of over twenty-five redrafts and revisions, was complete, it was sent to Elaine May for “polishing.”

May’s modifications pleased Henson so much, he decided to begin shooting her material immediately<sup>3</sup>. Bowie’s character benefited from these changes, becoming both more relatable and much more present throughout the film with various cuts and even a scene resembling a music clip for his memorable, if critically unacclaimed, song *Magic Dance* (BOWIE, 1987):

*You remind me of the babe (what babe?)*

*The babe with the power (what power?)*

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<sup>3</sup> All mentions of May’s work on the film come from Jim Henson’s Red Book, see ‘4/8-10/1985 – ‘Work with Elaine May on script.’ Available at: <<https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2012/04/48-101985/>>. Accessed: 12, juin. 2021.

*The power of voodoo (who do?)*  
*You do (do what?)*  
*Remind me of the babe.*

Of course, this was but one of Bowie's musical influences on the film. As negotiated with Henson, Bowie co-wrote all the songs with composer Trevor James and performed lead vocals on all but one (*Chilly Down*). In other words, along with an already frequent visual presence, Bowie's co-creation of the soundtrack ensures that the audience is never quite free from his black-clad clutches.

Even the royalty of Faerie succumbs to the musician's charms. In the final version of the screenplay, May had focused on developing more sympathetic characters and as a result, Jareth became much more than the one-dimensional antagonist he was originally intended to be (SAUNDERS, 1987). In fact, at the offset, Jareth, the Goblin King, was intended to be another puppet character, that is until Henson's group made the decision to use a contemporary setting and contract the singer. All of this was part of a continued effort to stylistically distance the production from various recent fantasy films, such as Henson's (1982) *The Dark Crystal*. Yet, Bowie would take this idea even further, making the character his own. Quoting Henson, "He comes into the scene very prepared – he knows his lines and he certainly knows how he sees it being played; I barely directed, outside of staging and things like that. He had the character of Jareth well in hand" (HENSON; PIRANI, 1986). As it turns out, the way Bowie saw Jareth being played was a relatable, peter-pan inspired, nuanced villain who incorporates boyish charm and yearning for love with the powerful, yet fragile, ego of a Faerie nobleman.

Clearly, Henson's original concept, like the film's protagonist, evolved within the labyrinth of production-tied apprehensions and creative collaborations, transforming from a simple fantasy in the style of the hero's quest to something greater. Yet, just as his character reigns over the labyrinth in Faerie, Bowie's influence rendered the film unique, seemingly to the point of defying definition. By all means, the film appears maladroit when placed in any of the generic categories available to it at the time. So, one wonders, just what kind of fantasy film is *Labyrinth*?

### **It's the freakiest show**

Stereotypes about fantasy abound. Often, as Diana Wynne Jones' (1996) humorous book *The Tough Guide to Fantasy Land* testifies, fantasy is reduced to its most commercial,

consubstantial consideration: fantasy-as-formula. The latter, to borrow from Attebery (1991), would typically translate as a Tolkienian medieval secondary world with one nigh-all-powerful villain, a host of mythical creatures, a naïve hero, a sidekick, and a mentor. Predictable though this may seem, such rules allow means of access for the novice writer and challenging restrictions for the experienced artist who may wish to expand upon or even subvert conventions from within. Such artistry can add fresh appeal to what would otherwise become tired cliché over time (p.10). This is most likely what Henson had in mind when he first conceptualised *Labyrinth*: “It was all going to take place in a fantasy world, and we started with a king and queen, and the king was going to rescue his baby from an enchantment” (HENSON; PIRANI, 1986). Yet, as discussed above, the final version eschewed this traditional formula, through the choice of modern character and setting.

Nevertheless, the film remains within the purview of the fantastic mode. Welcoming many genres, as Attebery (1991) points out, this mode subsumes “all literary manifestations of the imagination’s ability to soar above the merely possible” (p.2). Still, this definition is rather broad, including works ranging from Shakespeare and Dante to Buffy and Doctor Strange. To distinguish the fantasy genre from the mode, Attebery then goes to posit its existence as a middle ground between mode and formula, a constant dialectic between innovation and imitation necessitated by shifts in both genre and marketplace trends (p.10-11). Cinematic narratives follow a similar pattern. Although, as Mendelsohn and James (2012) discuss, in the 1980s the dominant tradition can be seen through the proclivity of quest-fantasy films, beginning with Henson’s *Dark Crystal* (p. 119). Yet, in spite of certain formulaic elements, such as Sarah’s quest to rescue her brother, as well as the presence of magic, goblins and other marvellous creatures, the final version of the *Labyrinth* remains distinct from the latter group. Begging the question, if Henson’s film is not to be considered simply an exception to contemporary films in the fantasy genre, that is to say one of the innovative works that pushes the boundaries from within, to what degree does it belong to a subgenre of fantasy, or even another genre in the fantastic mode?

Fortunately, in a discussion such as this, certain genres can be immediately dismissed, not only due to the impracticality of treating them all within a study conscious of word limits, but also due to their obvious and immediate incongruity. For example, just as contemporary setting annuls the High-Fantasy label, the absence of magical use of technology, such as time machines, clearly renders it impossible to define *Labyrinth* as a science fantasy, and so on. Considering the risk of venturing into what Attebery (1991) infamously refers to as territory



“rife with boundary disputes and definition wars” (p. 11) and in an effort of approaching exhaustivity within the confines of concision, I will first lean on Mendlesohn’s (2008) categorisation of fantasy texts: portal-quest, immersive, intrusion and liminal.

Again, two of these categories can be immediately dismissed. Immersive fantasy, often synonymous with secondary-world fantasy, involves the creation of a fantastic world with its own set of typically magical, accepted rules—what Mendlesohn refers to as “an irony of mimesis” (P. 59)—; that keep it removed from *our* world (the primary world), which is not the case in *Labyrinth*. Similarly, liminal fantasy tends to fall partly into Todorov’s (1970) understanding of *le fantastique*, which is to say the hesitation lying between *l’incertitude* and ambiguity regarding the veracity of the supernatural or magical incursion (p. 29-31). Essentially, the audience/reader is estranged from the fantastic, wondering at all times if the narrative perspective represents reality or madness. For this to apply to *Labyrinth*, however, the audience would have to consider the protagonist, Sarah, as being mentally ill or delusional, creating each of the goblin characters, Jareth and her trials as representations of some inner struggle or even punishment. While there is certainly a metaphorical interpretation of the story events to be made, examined below, this rather dark interpretation flies in the face of both the original concept, and the final version of the relatable, family-friendly film that Henson sought to create.<sup>4</sup> Hence, only portal-quest and intrusion fantasy remain to be considered.

Two sides of the same coin, these categories both involve crossing borders. Typically, in the portal-quest fantasy, the protagonists leave their world and cross into an outside world, often a magical otherworld such as Faerie, while in the intrusion fantasy, otherworldly elements enter the protagonist’s world, generally—but not always—a version of the primary world (MENDLESOHN, 2008, p. 114-115). In the former, the plot is driven by the main character’s quest, Sarah’s attempt to win back her brother would therefore qualify, but a crucial element prevents this: in the portal-quest fantasy “the fantastic is *on the other* side and does not leak” (p. 1)<sup>5</sup>. As such, despite Sarah being whisked into the Otherworld and her subsequent acceptance of the quest to complete the labyrinth in time, the fluidity between both worlds at the beginning and end of *Labyrinth* disqualifies it from this category.

This, of course, leaves intrusion fantasy. Mendlesohn describes the trajectory of this category in the following way: “the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled” (p. 115).

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<sup>4</sup> See Henson’s *Starlog* #109, cited above.

<sup>5</sup> Italics in original.



On the surface, this fits well: Jareth and his goblins appear in the parents' bedroom to steal Toby, then Sarah must bargain for his release and ultimately defeat him in order to return home. Nevertheless, Mendlesohn considers that the intrusive elements generally "breathe down the reader/protagonist's neck," escalating slowly until both their revelation and the narrative climax (p. 116-117). This somewhat applies to Henson's film, albeit loosely, as despite the growing danger as Sarah proceeds, she and the audience are both made immediately aware of the shape-shifting goblin king by his flamboyant entrance. Furthermore, the finality of the ending associated with the intrusion fantasy is absent in the film. That is to say, the restoration of the status quo typically occurs at the end of an intrusion fantasy, with the world turning back to normal, if any fantastic element does remain, the purpose is to escalate the hysteria and annul the latter restoration (p. 118-122). Yet, this narrative device, a staple of the horror genre, is notably lacking in the final scene of *Labyrinth*: although Toby has been returned, the status quo has irrevocably changed when the fantastic elements remain in the protagonist's world. Interestingly, this is a key area in which Smith's novel and the film differ, the former leaning into the intrusion fantasy ending where Sarah is alone in her bedroom (SMITH, 1986).

With this in mind, *Labyrinth* hardly fits into any of the aforementioned categories. Mendlesohn, however, offers up what she presents as a subcategory of the intrusion fantasy that emerged in the 1980s, she sees this "modern (nonhorror) intrusion fantasy" as mixing with elements of the fairy tale (p. 147), acknowledging that it is also known under Attebery's (1991) perspicacious "indigenous fantasy" about which he wrote almost twenty years earlier (p. 129). The accuracy of these appellations notwithstanding, the genre to which they refer is now commonly considered under the umbrella term: urban fantasy (UF). Indeed, to justify their respective categorisations, both Mendlesohn and Attebery refer to exemplary works of UF by writers such as Emma Bull and Charles de Lint. While there is still debate as to when UF began, and there are definite precursors<sup>6</sup>, the consensus is that the genre became popular in the mid-1980s. The timing here corresponds well: de Lint released his first UF novel *Moonheart* in 1984, three years later Bull published her UF novel *War for the Oaks*. What's more, the year *Labyrinth* was released (1986) coincides with the publication of the first two anthologies of UF shared-world short stories, *Borderland* and *Bordertown*, created and edited by Terri Windling, the latter writers' friend and editor<sup>7</sup>. Not to mention that at the time, Windling was also likely friends with the artist responsible for both the goblins in the film and its title, Brian Froud, who next to

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<sup>6</sup> For example, some of Fritz Lieber's work.

<sup>7</sup> De Lint, Bull and Windling (under a *nom de plume*) all contributed short stories to the anthologies.

Henson was one of the primary creative forces on the set of the film (DEROCHEA, 2000)<sup>8</sup>. Although Windling admits to being influenced by Froud’s work during her study of folklore (WINDLING, 2018), the extent to which her projects influenced the evolution of the film through Froud remains unclear. Still, the similarities are striking. So, is *Labyrinth* an UF film?

### Down in the underground

What qualifies a text as UF is not always clear<sup>9</sup>. One reason for this is the sheer number of heterogenous texts that find themselves erroneously classified as UF by marketing departments and publishing agencies. Irvine (2012) deplores the co-option of the term by writers of ‘paranormal romance,’ as well as the retroactive incorporation of any text set in a city, blaming them for the resulting “fog of contradiction” (p. 200). Of course, this blame is not absolute, especially when one considers the shift in UF that happened during the 1990s, probably through the influence of Whedon’s (1997) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the incorporation of not only the vampire, but also detective figures, shape-shifters, tough-as-boots heroines and an increasingly monstrous protagonist from the start of the new millennium. On top of this, until recently, scholarly work on UF was made difficult due to various appellative confusions (see Mendlesohn and Attebery above), as well as what could be deemed generic tunnel-vision. The last decade, however, has seen the term ‘urban fantasy’ be decided upon by common consensus among readers (CLUTE; LANGFORD, 1997), and then be clarified by important recent studies.



Figure 1: **Urban Fantasy on the Edge.** An example of overlapping boundaries with a given Urban Fantasy text.

<sup>8</sup> Windling would go on to collaborate with Froud and his wife, Wendy, as well as move to their small village in England.

<sup>9</sup> Here, text is to be understood in the broader sense of ‘narrative’ and thus applicable to the novel, film, even video games etc.

These studies propose a few points that are of particular interest to the current discussion. For one thing, both touch upon what they consider an important taxonomic element of the UF text: genre-splicing. That is to say mixing together elements of two or more genres/subgenres. Seeing UF as one side of a genre spectrum with paranormal romance (as opposed to considering one a subgenre of the other), McLennon (2014) claims that “by attempting to categorise and understand UF/PR as a subgenre of horror *or* fantasy *or* mystery *or* romance” previous definitions have obscured the generic interplay that constitutes UF<sup>10</sup>. Ekman’s (2016) indispensable aggregate study of eleven scholarly works raises a similar point: he refers to UF as a genre in its own right, justified by the lack of a prototypal text with which to inform an eventual generic subordination (p. 453). In agreement with the above arguments, I would add that the hybrid nature of UF places it on the edge of other speculative genres. Not quite a generic outlier, it encroaches their borders and borrows their generic ingredients to various degrees to make an admixture of narrative devices and tropes that are unique to a given UF text as I illustrate in figure one. Considered under this light, *Labyrinth* could be said to pull from fantasy (through fantastic creatures, magic etc.), fairy tale (hero quest, Faerie nobility etc.), horror (nefarious creatures, growing danger, danger of madness), and Gothic (confusing, murky atmospheres, a young woman terrorized by a supernatural figure) etc. Yet, this argument alone is insufficient as similar points could be made for a number of texts that are clearly not UF.

As of yet, I have not come across a satisfyingly comprehensive taxonomic definition for UF. While elements of Clute’s (1997) original definition still hold true, specifically the notion that it is a mode influenced by gothic fantasy that increasingly features crosshatches, set in the primary world and interacting with an otherworld, typical in contemporary fantasies, his definition was superseded by common usage as Langford (1997) writes in an addendum to the online version. The newer entry states that UF now involves a version of the primary world in which supernatural beings (Vampires, Shapeshifters, Fairies etc.) interact with humans (often with some special ability). McLennon (2014) expands on this in her paradigm of seven semantic UF elements adding that the protagonist is typically female, often a monster-hunter or detective, narrated from the first-person perspective; as well as, most importantly, that UF “is a trans-media genre, utilising elements from many genres and formats” (no page). Yet, much of the above is relative to second-wave, or *post-buffy*, versions of the genre, thereby ignoring the

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<sup>10</sup> Italics in original. At risk of somewhat caricaturing her argument, for McLennon UF and Paranormal Romance exist on a spectrum based on the importance of the adventure narrative versus the romance narrative. If the romance is primary, it is Paranormal Romance, if it is a sub-plot, it is UF.

aforementioned first-wave of UF in the 1980s, texts that blend both waves, and secondary-world UF like Miéville's (2000) *Perdido Street Station*. More inclusive, Ekman (2016) argues that the genre is a "literature of the Unseen" with three distinct threads: one juxtaposes fantasy and modernity/urbanity in a primary world setting, one uses Gothic horror with settings typically hidden from the mainstream, and the third involves protagonists that would typically be considered part of a marginalised group, all of this an effort to represent the cultural aspects that may be considered taboo or uncomfortable for the reader (p. 463). Although the latter does not include the trans-media element, it does allow for the grouping together of first and second wave UF. What's more, all three threads apply to *Labyrinth*.

At least, it weaves all three threads together. Otherwise put, contemporary Sarah meets Jareth and the Goblins in the primary world; then, in Jareth's Otherworld, equal parts wonder and horror, the labyrinth is hidden from the mainstream; and finally, Sarah's opening scenes establish her as belonging to a marginalised group—that of the theatre-loving artist. Of course, the latter could be disputed. McLennon (2014), for example, doesn't include artists in her paradigm, preferring instead the more recent proclivity for crime-solving detectives. Yet, the protagonists of UF anthologies and novels published around the same time as *Labyrinth*'s release, such as Bull's (1987) Eddi McCandry, see the world through the eyes of the artist or musician which is what Irvine (2012) claims ultimately allows them to notice the magical incursion (p. 206). Sarah's loner status and love of theatre is in keeping with this trend. Furthermore, though she doesn't produce any magical powers of her own, it is the manifest power of her will in the final scene as she tenaciously rejects Jareth that causes his defeat. Finally, the film even touches on McLennon's (2014) trans-media quality through the incorporation of the scene with *Dance Magic*. In that case, Henson's film appears to mirror those UF works by Windling and her writer friends.

Although *Labyrinth* doesn't completely conform to the aforementioned generic conventions of UF, the film was not the only entry point into Henson's magical world. In line with McLennon's arguments, the popularity of UF magical worlds has inspired fans to seek out ways of remaining within them. In recent years, this has been facilitated by shifts in consumerism and technology, such as video and tape cassettes in the eighties, and later the internet, video games etc. *Labyrinth* is no different, inspiring a book, a Marvel comic<sup>11</sup>, an eponymous computer game, a boardgame, a tabletop role-playing game (RPG), an ongoing

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<sup>11</sup> Written by Bob Budiansky (1986).

yearly costume ball, and a four volume manga series<sup>12</sup> etc. Not only do the latter render *Labyrinth* a trans-media franchise, they expand upon the original work, adding new elements or filling in gaps in understanding in a way that McLennon (2014) claims “defer[...] conclusions, inviting continued consumption over a number of years and sometimes decades” (no page). This is typical of well-known, second-wave UF texts, such as *The Dresden Files* series by Jim Butcher<sup>13</sup>, perhaps explaining the film’s continued popularity. These added elements are of particular interest.

In the film version of *Labyrinth* the setting is more suburban than urban, though the same cannot be said for the manga. *Jim Henson’s Return to Labyrinth* (FORBES, 2006) centres on Toby, Sarah’s younger brother who remains Jareth’s true heir, despite having been safely rescued by his sister years before. As such, he must learn to control his new powers as a being of Faerie, all while navigating the intricate and capricious goblin court. The manga features much more permeability between worlds than the film, as well as some grittier elements and action more commonly associated with UF, such as a *punkish*, scantily clad fairy and its own otherworldly Goblin City (p. 68-75). To that end, and taking the trans-media elements into consideration, the *Labyrinth* franchise arguably corresponds in form to UF. Thus far, I have focused on the extra-textual elements that later grew out of the artistic collaboration between Henson, his productive team, and Bowie. Yet, the impact of the rockstar’s presence alone is worthy of analysis.

Henson and Froud brought fantasy to *Labyrinth*, but Bowie brought urbanity. As shown above, the 1986 film was certainly not intended to be gritty or urban, yet Bowie’s presence and status as a sexually provocative artist cannot be ignored. Bowie’s musical influence is present throughout the entirety of the film in such a way as to render difficult the suspension of disbelief: during the *magic dance* scene, the adult viewer is keenly aware that they are watching Bowie, and not Jareth, the Goblin King, singing with various non-human characters and the baby, Toby. In like manner, the undertone of sexuality and adulthood that Jareth was intended to portray are amplified by Bowie’s iconic dandyism, sexual provocation, and dramatic style (FRITH; STRAW; STREET, 2001, p. 196). In other words, his brand identity, or “Bowieness”, is such a part of his stage persona as to make disassociation from it an impossibility. This in turn, lends a distinctly urban flavour to some of the darker aspects associated with the villain.

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<sup>12</sup> Written by Jake T. Forbes (2006-).

<sup>13</sup> Jim Butcher’s (2000) *The Dresden Files* series is ongoing, currently on its sixteenth installment.

*But down in the underground  
You'll find someone true  
Down in the underground  
A land serene, a crystal moon*

It is here, in one of the film's primary themes, that the most concrete link to UF can be made. As the above soundtrack (BOWIE, 1986 b) lyrics suggest, there is peace to be found by confronting the dangers of the magical Otherworld. In fact, Henson (1987) saw the labyrinth as a symbolic representation of navigating the universe and coming of age, an intricate road of trials on the heroine's quest. In many ways, this is the substance of first-wave UF. Windling (2011) describes the stories in her anthologies as a guide through the "sheer *anguish* of that hard passage from adolescence to adulthood" by highlighting the "real-world magics that can save us when the world goes dark," such as art and friendship (p. 4-8). Of course, early UF writers highlighted these positive elements by placing them against the backdrop of "a modern, big-city setting, with something of the spirit, the style, the buzz, the flash of eighties music and street culture" (p. 6). Though this aspect is missing from the setting, Bowie's brand supplies it to the film. What's more, Sarah's journey to adulthood allows for Ekman's "Unseen" to be hinted at throughout.

The film is less phallic than some early drafts. As an earlier version of the script shows, the ballroom scene was originally intended to represent the anxiety a 15-year-old girl might feel when faced with the possibility of a first sexual experience (PHILIPS; JONES, 1996). Indeed, Froud (2016) states, Jareth was supposed to be an amalgamation of teenage fantasy drawn from fiction and daydream, equal parts leather-clad biker, medieval knight, and rockstar, with an intentionally over-sized and therefore terrifying codpiece. Bowie represents the unseen dangers of such a fantasy, indeed Froud was all too aware of how taboo such a subject could be (WILLIAMS, 2012). Yet, just as Windling, de Lint, and Bull's stories warn against adolescent nihilism and advocate for personal responsibility, the film's message is driven home when Sarah ultimately rejects Jareth. In doing so, she claims her own power, thereby removing the power his fantasy had over her. She stops treating life as unfair and assumes her responsibilities. In other words, she takes her first steps into adulthood and out of daydream, all while holding on to the creative impulse and an element of magic, as evidenced by the fantasy creatures' presence in the final scene.



Finally, when Henson set out to make his 1986 *cult* classic, little did he know that while navigating the labyrinth he would be taking the same path as Charles de Lint, Terri Windling, and, later, Emma Bull. Like the fairy tale protagonist, from humble fantasy beginnings, his idea would grow, transform, and be rendered all the more magical with the help of the Erlking. Though originally intended to be a fantasy film for the family, early changes, as well as Bowie's iconic presence and musical influence on Henson's work transformed the script, genre, and tone of the film, making it into what would eventually become a trans-media franchise. While the form appears to mirror similar contemporary works of UF, the questioning of taboo subjects, and the attempt to act as a guide from adolescence to adulthood also captures the substance of first-wave UF. Whether this is enough to qualify *Labyrinth* as UF remains to be seen. More study on the genre is required. One thing is sure, however, just as in Windling's anthologies, Henson, Froud, and Bowie's collaboration provided a space for questioning, where the dangers that surround the path to self-realisation could be given form and faced, allowing the story to take on the role of the guide for a generation of adolescents. Even now, fans choose to enter the Faerie realm, searching for new ways to traverse the labyrinth and bring some fantasy to an all-too-urban life.

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