Lost in the Labyrinth

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As film has evolved and changed, so has the way spectators view films. Spectators are having to learn how to navigate the new maze of viewership options fuelled by the boom in streaming and increasing accessibility of films outside of the traditional cinema viewing experience. Film and cinema are facing a turning point in which spectators are stuck in a labyrinth of options, both in the way they watch films, but also in the way they select them. Distractions in viewership can change how a spectator interprets and understands a narrative, much like the obstacles a person might see in a labyrinth. Modern-day cinema is turning into a labyrinth of information, distractions, and choices that the spectator must learn to navigate or else become lost.

Films and cinema as a whole are reaching a turning point, where people can more easily access films outside of cinemas. Thus, the once-controlled viewing experience is becoming incredibly variable and diverse. Most notable of the changes is the level of distraction a person might encounter while watching a movie, which has significantly increased as a film may now be watched in a busy lunch hall instead of in a dark and distraction-controlled cinema. As more viewing experiences are open to significant distraction, spectators are moving further away from the 'traditional' viewership experience which drew comparisons to Plato's cave theory. The distance is increasing in both the physical representation and mental representation of Plato's theory, as spectators are no longer sat in a 'cave' glued to the projected reality in front of them. Rather, they could be in their kitchen cooking dinner with the film on in the background (Plato 7-8). This inclusion of distraction as the first note represents film as a labyrinth, which is full of temptations and decisions that the person working their way through must undertake. However, rather than the 'temptations' being mythological creatures or a nicer-looking route, they are more like talking to friends or eating food. Thus, there are new opportunities for distraction that arise with the increased mobility of film viewership. That is not to say that distractions – or rather

temptations – are wholly negative, but rather they are becoming an ingrained aspect of modern film spectatorship. Thus, the style of spectatorship is changing.

With distraction becoming a larger aspect of modern film viewership, the way a person views and experiences the narrative of a film is significantly impacted. Thinking about suture theory and how it suggests that a movie is specifically edited together to highlight a specific perspective (which the spectator is tasked with reading,) if the spectator is constantly being distracted by something, they are missing parts of the specific editing (Sobchack 66-67). Missing aspects of a narrative or just being less immersed in it can allow for a potential breakaway from the expected reading of a narrative. Much like when approaching a crossroads in a labyrinth, the spectator has more agency over their interpretation. With increased access to films, one would expect Baudry's analogy of bourgeois individualism –the idea that increased accessibility to film allows for everyone to obtain the "ideal seat" – to be realized (Baudry 42). However, distractions are preventing the 'ideal seat' from being fully realized. Again, this is not to say distractions are good or bad. But for those who follow more structuralist or neoformalist film theory (such as Baudry,) they might be considered more negative as distractions could lead to the spectator missing key cause and effect moments within the movie, displacing them from the 'ideal seat.' As a result, the spectator may lose the breadcrumb trail that is leading them through the labyrinth (Hall 81).

On the other hand, for a poststructuralist, this new opportunity for interpretation could be seen as a positive moment. Poststructuralist theory suggests that when people watch or 'read' a narrative, there is more than just one interpretation, with three majority readings presented. The three forms of poststructuralist decoding are the dominant, oppositional, and negotiated. When these three forms are placed into the suggested theory of cinema as a labyrinth, they are

represented by the previously suggested crossroad analogy, as each spectator may choose the route they would like to take (Hall 84-86). Therefore, cinema as a labyrinth suggests that distractions might provide the spectator with more agency–or as active rather than passive. Spectators are less at the mercy of the narrative and the dominant view as presented in Baudry's apparatus theory. Baudry suggests that the viewer is passive in spectating rather than active (Baudry 40-42). The more active viewership presented through cinema as labyrinth even pertains to the ability for the spectator to alter the timeline of the movie through actions such as pausing, rewinding, and even watching at 2x speed. Similarly, one can choose to run through the labyrinth, retrace one's steps, or simply stop to contemplate which direction to go next. However, with this agency comes responsibility, because altering a narrative or narrative experience through spectator agency could lead to missing information, much like sprinting around a corner only to miss the arrow pointing in the wrong direction. Imagine watching *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, US 2004, 108 min.) and missing the initial realization Joel has that he is reliving his memories. This would leave the spectator lost for some time until the next 'clue' as to what is happening is found.

However, even as spectatorship gains more opportunities for distraction, it is not always true that the spectator will actually be distracted by them, and thus they can integrate into a film more, as suggested by Plato and Baudry. If a spectator can achieve immersion into a movie and its narrative–as seen in cave or apparatus theory–then they are required to navigate the film's narrative as it is presented to them, most likely with the dominant reading (Baudry 40) (Plato 7-8). It is at this point that cinema as a labyrinth might be paired with or draw similarities to the concept of cinema as brain–mind and body.

The reason for this almost collaboration of theories is the way viewership of a narrative is ultimately influenced by each person's perspectives and individual para-texts. Furthermore, Munsterberg presents a list of four functions of the spectator's mind that are effective for the viewership of a motion picture: attention, memory, imagination, and feelings and emotions (Munsterberg 14). Munsterberg's aspects of cinema as brain directly pertains to the newly suggested theory of cinema as a labyrinth because of the mental nature of the labyrinth presented when viewing a film. To successfully navigate a complex labyrinth–the film narrative–a person would need to utilize all aspects of attention, memory, imagination, feelings, and emotion (Munsterberg 14). For a person to 'escape the labyrinth and reach the conclusion of a narrative, they need to be able to remember the turns they have taken, pay attention to any clues or hints, use creativity to interpret clues, and then apply appropriate emotions to them. Think of *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, US 1995, 81 min.) and one of the last scenes where we see Woody figure out a way to ignite the rocket on Buzz's back. Woody utilizes two methods that were 'set up' by the previous scene and without context–memory and attention–could have seemed out of place.

Furthermore, the inclusion of paratexts into the viewing experience also speaks to the confluence of cinema as the mind and cinema as labyrinth (Hall 85-86). This confluence of mind and labyrinth can also be seen when factoring in the rise of cinematic universes such as Marvel and Harry Potter. Cinematic universes create a situation where the spectator often needs to bring with them the prior knowledge and paratexts associated with previous movies to enjoy the one they are currently watching (Hall 85-86). The creation of and increased popularity of cinematic universes has in itself created its own kind of labyrinth, both a labyrinth of information and choice. This new 'cinematic labyrinth of information' requires viewers to end and begin movies in the middle of the narrative labyrinth. And if they are unable to bring the information from the

previous film where they navigated up to the point of the next movie, they will be somewhat 'lost in the labyrinth'. Furthermore, outside of the actual film creates a labyrinth of choice that spectators must navigate through.

The labyrinth of choice does not just pertain to cinematic universes but also to the general abundance of choice that spectators might experience with the accessibility of films. Most notable within the labyrinth of choice is the process of selecting a movie from a popular streaming service. When searching on a streaming service a spectator is bombarded with information and choices as to what film to watch, influenced by algorithms and personal preference. The labyrinth of choice goes from what was once a much more simple operation of choosing between a select few movies at a cinema, to choosing between thousands in the palm of one's hand. It is also through this labyrinth of choice that spectators are more likely to get 'lost' as there is more opportunity for mistakes. Mistakes can be something as simple as choosing a movie in the middle of a distinct cinematic universe by accident and being thrown into a labyrinth of information you cannot understand, simply because of a wrong turn within the labyrinth of choice.

Another aspect outside of the individual film narrative that can lead to a person becoming 'lost within the labyrinth' is the rise of narratives being written throughout multiple films or episodes, rather than seeking a conclusion within each episode or film. If the narrative is written throughout multiple films or episodes and it is suddenly canceled then it leaves the spectator stuck within the labyrinth with no way out other than to simply imagine the route. Among a variety of good examples of this is the movie *John Carter* (Andrew Stanton, US 2012, 132 min.) which was written as a movie franchise. However, after not meeting monetary expectations, it was canceled, leaving spectators stuck on the final cliffhanger scene. Furthermore, this problem

has become more prolific amongst TV shows and the growth of streaming services as they seek to create the next big thing to draw in subscribers, but without the budget to complete the narrative if it does perform poorly.

It is with this concept of getting 'lost within the labyrinth' that there is a need to find the ideal position for the spectator to ensure the best chances of 'escaping' the labyrinth. As previously mentioned, the more active position of spectators in 21st-century cinema has led to more appreciation for different kinds of perspectives and conclusions to be drawn from one film and its narrative, akin to there being more than one exit to the labyrinth. However, it is worth noting how the differing exits are not just created through individual perspective, but also through the level of attention the spectator can give to a narrative.

It is through increased attention that the viewer is then able to find 'hidden doors or passageways' through the narrative – and thus the labyrinth – that may unlock new information, perspectives, and conclusions. A notable example of how this is utilized is through the inclusion of easter eggs within Pixar movies, which are what highlight it as being one large cinematic universe rather than lots of individual narratives. *Toy Story* (Lasseter 1995) being the pioneer of Pixar's new form of digital cinema is a good example of how these little 'easter eggs' create a cinematic universe and can unlock new plotlines through additional attention. In *Toy Story* (Lasseter 1995) one of the scenes is set in an arcade-style restaurant called "Pizza Planet" and the main characters – Woody and Buzz – get there via a delivery car. It is the Pizza Planet delivery car that has become one of the most significant easter eggs in digital cinema as Pixar has included a Pizza Planet delivery car in all of their movies after *Toy Story* (Lasseter 1995). These smaller details have also potentially become a way for filmmakers to maintain and encourage the

attention of the spectator, as the spectator wants to be able to ‘unlock the secret tunnels of the labyrinth’ by spotting these smaller details.

Cinema as a labyrinth presents and suggests a viewing experience that draws similarities to that of cinema as door, in collaboration with aspects of cinema as frame. The door and frame similarities are derived from the way cinema as labyrinth presents the spectators as the victims of the film. However, not quite the helpless victims as presented by cinema as frame, but rather with more agency like in cinema as door (FT 20, 41-42). Cinema as labyrinth concerning secret doorways and tunnels utilizes formalist and Eisenstein’s montage theories to further the meaning within a film at a higher level of attention past what is the new distracted baseline attention level (Eisenstein 266-267).

Labyrinth theory leans into door and more structuralist theories to present what might be the baseline attention-viewing experience expected for a 21st-century viewer (Hall 84). Film and the narrative provided by the filmmaker what is most likely the dominant viewership is the ‘map’ to the labyrinth which a spectator can choose to use or it can be just a simple suggestion for the viewer to navigate their way through the movie. Thus, in cinema as labyrinth theory, the spectator is neither a ‘victim’ nor a ‘guest’ to the narrative but rather takes on a role more similar to that of a player, with the filmmaker being the ‘game maker’.

Overall modern 21st century cinema is evolving away from the traditional viewing experiences and more towards easy access and more distractions. The traditional viewing experience is considered somewhat of a luxury because of growing accessibility. Cinema of Labyrinth encompasses both the change in viewership of a film, but also the growing change in decision-making around viewership through the suggested concepts of the ‘labyrinth of choice’ and ‘labyrinth of information’. A film can be a complex labyrinth for the viewer to navigate and

travel through, or the provided ‘map’ – dominant reading – can be utilized to create a viewing experience more like that of traditional viewership. As viewership continues to evolve so do the labyrinth's parameters and thus, filmmakers and viewers alike must do what they can so that they do not find themselves ‘lost in the labyrinth of cinema’.