DL837 BA in NEW MEDIA STUDIES

Submission Form

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‘You Have No Power Over Me’: Reclaiming the Female Narrative in *Poor Things* and *Labyrinth*

The Female Gaze, Women’s Autonomy and Power dynamics between men and women are ever-growing subjects of exploration, with vital importance on how we understand the ways gender, power, and representation influence a film’s audience, narrative, characters. In recent years, there has been a noteworthy rise in female-led narratives and female-directed films, most notably with *Barbie (2023)* and *Little Women (2019)* garnering a lot of attention due to being films made by female Director, Gretta Gerwig, ‘Cinema is obsessed with the sounds produced by the female voice.’[1] This has created an appetite within culture for stories that centre women’s experiences in various ways. There is not only artistic resurgence but political, reflected in important conversations surrounding gender equality, bodily autonomy, sexual agency, and identity, ‘media representations are the daily visual vocabulary of women’s social, political and economic disadvantages.’[2]

Within this area of cinema, there is much critique and debate regarding what is permissible as accurate representation and whether issues are being challenged or subverted. Two films which I believe have been looked as important contributions to women’s cinema are *Poor Thing (2023)* and *Labyrinth (1986)*. Though very distinct in style and era, with one film being a surreal sci-fi odyssey, and the other being a cult fantasy musical, both narratives centre around a female protagonist navigating societal frameworks catered towards men, reclaiming their autonomy which deserves further feminist analysis.

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[1] Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists*, (Routledge, 2006), pg. 45

[2] Maggie Humm, Feminism and Film, (Edinburgh University Press, 1997) pp. 4

When *Poor Things* by Yorgos Lanthimos was released, it immediately sparked debate within the audience. Many praised the film's bold and outrageous approach to discussing topics such as sexual liberation, sex workers and moral agency, 'she's captivating when she's fully in command as a sexually liberated woman,'[3] while others dismissed it harshly, 'Bella navigates through the world through her sex, and it's not empowering.'[4] *Labyrinth* did not perform well at the box office, with critics finding issues in its pacing, 'without a strong plot line to pull us through, all movies like this run the danger of becoming just a series of incidents.'[5] Other arguments, from more recent viewings, are directed towards the romance arc between the two main characters, Sarah and Jareth, played by teenage Jennifer Connelly and David Bowie, 'a creepy paedophilic musical number involving the androgynous Bowie's attempted seduction of then-15-year-old Connelly.'[6] Both films engage with and confront key feminist themes such as the male gaze, the creation of autonomy and the defeat of power dynamics – topics of which are central to the narrative yet are underappreciated in their reception.

The male gaze is a well-established theory by Laura Mulvey from her essay *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Theory*, which highlights the masculinisation of films and how male filmmakers frame female characters, *'How film is structured according to fantasies of voyeurism and fetishism.'*[7] There is an emphasis placed on the audience in the making of these films, and the part they play in the representation of female characters. *'Placing all spectators in the*

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[3] Christie Lemire, 'Poor Things', RogerEbert.com, 08 December 2023, < https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/poor-things-movie-review-2023#google_vignette> [Accessed 10 April 2025]
[4] Jeanine T. Abraham, Sitting Through '*Poor Things*' is like Watching a Perverted Student Film with a Really Big Budget, Medium, 05 February 2024, < https://medium.com/@visableblackwoman/poor-things-is-like-watching-a-perverted-student-film-with-a-really-big-budget-0849676200fe> [Accessed 11 April 2025]

[5] Roger Ebert, 'Labyrinth', RogerEbert.com, 27 June 1986 < https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/labyrinth-1986> [Accessed on 06 April 2025]
[6] Nick Schager, Review: Labyrinth, *Slant Magazine,* 03 March 2003, < https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/labyrinth> [Accessed 10 April 2025]
[7] Chaudhuri, pp. 31

'masculinized' position looking at her.'[8] The female characters are the object to be looked at, while the male characters are agents of the look. Male filmmakers have the assumed masculine audience in mind when sculpting their films, ensuring the women are amusing eye-candy to spectators. Teresa De Lauretis discusses the female spectator in her work *'Alice Doesn't'* and what the result can be for the female spectator, '*she is thus doubly bound to that very representation which calls on her directly, engages her desire, elicits her pleasure, frames her identification, and makes her complicit in the production of (her) woman-ness'*[9]. This creation of female representation by a man encourages female spectators to engage and participate in reinforcing traditional and stereotypical expectations of women. Mulvey's theory on the masculine spectator has posed many questions, such as: What about the female gaze?

The Female Gaze is a theory coined by Joey Soloway in 2016 in response to Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. *'The female gaze dares to return the gaze'* is how Joey Soloway explains their theory.[10] It would be wrong to say that the female gaze is simply a reversal of the male gaze. The female gaze is when the focus is shifted from the female protagonist being viewed by the men in their world, to seeing how the men gaze upon them and critiquing the gaze. This is seen prominently throughout *Poor Things* and *Labyrinth*. In Poor Things, Bella is aware that she is looked at by others, but she dares to look back; she questions, resists, and challenges the world around her. Bella is vocal with her interest in learning, noting her awareness of the necessity of it within society, *'it is the goal of all to improve, advance, progress, grow.'*[11] As Duncan Wedderburn attempts to teach Bella about how to behave in

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[8] ibid, pp. 35

[9] Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema,* (Indiana University Press, 1984) pp. 15

[10] TIFF Originals, *'Joey Soloway on the Female Gaze'*, YouTube, 11 September 2016, < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I&t=3263s> [accessed 05 March 2025]

[11] *Poor Things,* dir. By Yorgos Lanthimos (USA, 2023)

"polite society," Bella cannot help but be her unique self when meeting new people, *'hello, interesting older lady. I must touch your hair.'*[12]

In Labyrinth, Sarah is being observed by Jareth as she journeys through the labyrinth. Unlike Bella, Sarah has not yet gained the courage to challenge Jareth's controlling and arrogant behaviour. *'Don't defy me. You're no match for me, Sarah.'*[13] He wishes for Sarah to give in to his desire by pushing her down and making her task more challenging. For his enjoyment and benefit, he alters time and poisons her. 'So, the Labyrinth is a piece of cake, is it? Well, let's see how you deal with this little slice...'[14] Throughout her journey, Sarah is belittled and mocked by Jareth. *'Sarah, go back to your room. Play with your toys and your costumes. Forget about the baby.*'[15] Sarah, as she matures, realises that Jareth only believes that he has power over her because she is internalising the events that have transpired. She cries *'It's not fair!'* at every trick that is played on her, when she should be saying *he's* not fair.

Both Bella and Sarah realise the male characters in their story are trying to mould them into what they believe to be the 'ideal woman' within their society; Bella, a suitable wife, and Sarah, someone he can rule over. Bella leaves Duncan Wedderburn to pursue her fulfilment through education, a career, and companionship with other women, rejecting his proposal to marry and to have relations with him, 'so you wish to marry me, or kill me? Is that the proposal?'[16] When face to face with Jareth, Sarah speaks the powerful line 'You have no power over me,' a line she always forgets.[17] These words relinquish all the power that Jareth ever had

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[12] *ibid*
[13] *Labyrinth,* dir. By Jim Henson (USA, 1986)
[14] *ibid*
[15] *ibid*
[16] *Poor Things*, dir. By Yorgos Lanthimos (USA, 2023)
[17] *Labyrinth,* dir. By Jim Henson (USA, 1986)

over Sarah. His control of the fantasy world was just that – a fantasy, and Sarah could see through it.

A prominent principle of the female gaze theory is that the emphasis is not on *how* the audience views the characters but is about the space allotted for the audience to *feel* the way that the character feels. The camera often moves to mimic the actions of characters and angles are not simply chosen based on aesthetics but based on how the character feels. This is called 'Seeing Feeling'[18], a way of allowing the audience to feel the way the character does and encourages the viewer to engage intimately with the characters. The focus is also placed on the female character's emotions and thoughts, building the story around these aspects. 'It can be thought of as a subjective camera, the attempts to get inside the protagonist, particularly when the protagonist is not a cis male.'[19] Through intentional camera angles, lens styles, and more, the filmmaker can achieve this effectively. We see this prominently in *Poor Things* through the fish-lens and circular lens which is used during heightened scenes such as the Duncan ballroom fight scene (figure 1.1), and his confrontation with Bella while reading (Figure 1.2).

[18] Soloway, TIFF
[19] Soloway, TIFF

Fig 1.1 - *Poor Things*, dir. by Yorgos Lanthimos, (USA,

Fig 1.2 - *Poor Things*, dir. by Yorgos Lanthimos, (USA, 2023)

The audience is almost peering into the scene through a door's peephole, observing the drama from a close distance. Yorgos Lanthimos speaks on the unique camera work that he and Robbie Ryan, the Director of Photography, decided to use to heighten the emotion of scenes, *"people feel very enclosed in a kind of claustrophobic way in the frame and the 4mm was this option for us to, in certain moments to create this kind of awkward feel to the scene."*[20] By creating an uncomfortable shot, the characters' emotions are put into visible form for the audience to engage with. The tunnel-vision style view highlights two things: the tunnel vision that Duncan, the aggressor, has during his fits of rage, and Bella's experience of being in a situation where she may feel enclosed or trapped, as if the walls in the room are beginning to close in.

While *Labyrinth* does not involve as many dynamic camera angles or dramatic close-ups, having Sarah as the primary focus in shots allows audiences to focus on her. Her story and

[20] Vanity Fair, 'Emma Stone, Mark Ruffalo & Director Yorgos Lanthimos Break Down 'Poor Things' Scenes', YouTube, 18 December 2023 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpZIeS_0CRs&t=199s> [accessed 09 March 2025]

experience, rather than Jareth's, are followed through the story's narrative. We do not feel for Jareth or understand his feelings other than his desire for Sarah. The focus is solely on Sarah's personal growth and emotions, we are left to wonder about Jareth's background. The film's narrative follows Sarah's journey through the labyrinth. It has been said that the Labyrinth is a metaphor for whatever the audience desires, 'the Labyrinth is a metaphor for whatever you want it to be, but whatever that thing is, it's something we all travel through.'[21] Many see it as the trials and tribulations of growing up, specifically for teenage girls who are trying to make sense of this new world they are stepping into. Brian Henson, Jim Henson's son, who worked as a puppeteer on *Labyrinth*, acknowledges his father's deep understanding of teenage development and the emotions that kids go through in adolescence, 'That story of Sarah in that young teen age, that is so hard to understand, was someplace he was very comfortable and someplace that he was uniquely insightful.'[22] As Sarah develops, we see the change in her mindset, how she is no longer a child looking for a quick way out of her situation but is now a woman with the power to face the challenges head-on using her own judgement. We see this growth when Sarah encounters the helping hands. When faced with the option of going 'up or down?'[23], while uncertain of what awaits her by going down, she goes with her gut and opts for it, rather than asking for help or for the hands to make the decision for her.

When it comes to the idea of womanhood, one must identify what it means to understand the value of it. The line spoken by the feminist philosopher and writer Simone De Beauvoir,

[21] Robyn Hamilton, Journey through the Labyrinth: Sarah, YouTube, 19 February 2011, < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnNspjG4TH4> [Accessed 10 April 2025]
[22] Hamilton, YouTube
[23] *Labyrinth,* dir. By Jim Henson (USA, 1986)

'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,'[24] resonates with Bella and Sarah's journey towards self-governance. Their stories begin as mere children, following pathways as they're being guided. De Beauvoir speaks of women's autonomous existence in her book *The Second Sex,* detailing heavily on the influence that parents, specifically mothers, have on their daughters' development.[25] Both Sarah and Bella have difficult relationships with their mothers. Sarah's mother is no longer part of her life, but she looks up to her greatly, as seen by the pictures and treasures she keeps of her in her bedroom.[26] Bella is living in the body of her mother, therefore knowing of her physicality but little of her mind. Being raised by their respective father figures, Bella and Sarah lack the teachings and influence of their mothers, leaving them to discover their place as a woman solely from a male's perspective, 'She is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy.'[27] This male guidance conditions Bella and Sarah to be suitable for society as the men see fit, 'to make a 'true woman' of her, since society will more readily accept her if this is done.'[28] Bella and Sarah reject the expectations of their father figures; Bella leaves home and ventures off with Duncan Wedderburn while Sarah resists her father's demands for her to grow up under his terms, instead entering the labyrinth and relying on her own guidance.

On their way, they begin to gain a new sense of self, where they think outside of the confines of the males' expectations. Their sense of self and femininity is not something that was with them all along or given to them but is something they had to gain. Their autonomy is not defined by relying on themselves, but through interdependence and learning. This could not be

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[24] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. By Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Vintage Books, 2011) pp. 330
[25] ibid
[26] *Labyrinth,* dir. By Jim Henson (USA, 1986)
[27] De Beauvoir, pp. 308
[28] ibid, pp 309

done alone; Bella meets Harry Astley and Martha Von Kurtzroc, who nurture Bella's curiosity. Philosophy is introduced to Bella by Martha, while Harry teaches Bella about societal structure, class, and critical thinking. Bella's autonomy of self evolves with her developing mind, **'**I am a changingable feast, as are all of we. Apparently according to Emerson, disagreed with by Harry,'[29] Duncan sees this growth and worries that his impression on Bella is weakening as her ability to speak for herself strengthens, 'you are always reading now, Bella. You are losing some of your adorable way of speaking.'[30] He worries that she will soon leave him for better, more stimulating company that he knows he cannot offer. It is at this point that we realise that Bella's intellect has developed beyond Duncan's, changing their dynamic.

Sarah, upon realising that the path of the Labyrinth is not a fair game, takes value in her vulnerability. She receives help from her companions, Hoggle, Ludo, and Sir Didymus, just as Bella has with Harry and Martha. While Sarah's companions don't discuss the nature of their society, they instead help guide her through the unknown landscape of the labyrinth, of which Sarah is just a tourist. She is escorted through her confusion and panic, comforted by knowing that she is not embarking on the seemingly impossible journey alone. 'You seem like such a nice beast. Well, I certainly hope you are what you seem to be.'[31] These creatures are helping hands and mirrors for reflection for Sarah guiding her through the physical maze ahead of her and her internal journey to self-realisation. Bella and Sarah's adventures allow them to better understand themselves, uncovering the strength and power they did not know they possessed until the journeys afforded them the space to grow, 'for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world around her, the less resources she will find within herself, the

[29] *Poor Things*, dir. By Yorgos Lanthimos (USA, 2023)
[30] Ibid
[31] *Labyrinth*, dir. by Jim Henson (USA, 1986)

less will she dare to affirm herself subject.'[32] This newfound power creates distance between the young women and the men in their lives who thrive on their obedience and dependence.

A power struggle between man and woman is rarely a balanced fight; but more of a tug-of-war where a single woman is pulling against generations, systems and traditions trying to drown her out – while she just wants to be heard. Bella and Sarah both have the desire to be taken seriously, understood from their perspective and respected as equals by their male equivalents. Duncan and Jareth see this as a threat, a bruise on their ego. 'Just fear me. Love me. Do as I say, and I will be your slave.'[33] Keeping the woman in their life happy but silent is their aim. Jareth wants Sarah to simply give into his desire, discarding her own, and only when she does that will he be fair to her. With Bella and Duncan, power within their relationship has changed already with Bella's newfound knowledge and interests. With this, when their journey leads them to Paris penniless, Bella finds herself a job as a sex worker in a local Brothel. Earning an income, having relations with other men and enjoying it is all too much for Duncan, who has now lost all control over Bella's decisions and actions.

The infamous ballroom scene, as a result of Jareth's poisoning, was Jim Henson's way of visualising Sarah's realisation of what growing up requires. Dressed up in a poofy white ball gown, Sarah makes her way through a crowd of adults in mascaraed getups. Their faces peer at her, filling her and the audience with discomfort. Brian Henson has spoken on his father's behalf regarding this scene, '...the struggle of what happens when an adult man starts to respond to you. Well, everyone in the audience is uncomfortable with that, that kind of has to be true, and it's scary for her, and that's the important part about it that I think my dad was trying to do there.'[34]

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[32] De Beauvoir, pp.308
[33] *ibid*
[34] Hamilton, YouTube

Sarah comes to realise that, while she is briefly drawn to the beauty of wearing glamourous dressed and being part of the adult world it represents, her fears take over, leading her to make the mature decision to reject Jareth's advances and stay true to her own path.

Through feminist analysis, we can uncover deeper meaning within a film's narrative. This not only builds up a film's original meaning but also redefines what we once knew about the film. *Poor Things* and *Labyrinth*, before entering this analysis, had no reason to be investigated together, yet their similarities are stark. Through the female gaze, we see how the intentions behind the camera shape how the character is seen by the audience and their on-screen counterparts. We as the audience can step into the position of our female protagonist to truly feel her emotions and be part of the journey, pushing back on the theory of the male gaze, 'the action of a self-enlightened few are enough to destroy it.'[35]As we see the autonomy and self-governance of Bella and Sarah flourish, the narrative pushes forward and allows for real change to take place. This has a domino effect on how power dynamics, once unbalanced and relying on naivete, shift to allow the female voice to be heard.

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[35] Chaudhuri, pp. 33

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Other Media Used

Fig 1.1 & 1.2: Poor Things, dir. by Yorgos Lanthimos (USA, 2023)