Getting Lost in the Labyrinth: Information and Technology in the Marketplace

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the labyrinth as a trope in the Western tradition can hardly be overstated. Far from being a metaphor that describes just anything, it is a sign whose meaning appears in specific contexts. This article argues how the labyrinth’s triple function as visual, verbal and spatial sign—as well as its paradoxical function as unicursal and multicursal structure—makes it flexible enough to represent the paradoxical and complex nature of the modern workplace, the city, the mall and the individual subject’s position within an ever burgeoning network of relationships brought about by consumerism, capitalism, and commodification. Understanding the labyrinth trope helps people to understand the subject’s relationship to power and the very technology that we have created and in which we are trapped.

Keywords: Foucault, Information Technology, Labyrinth, Labyrinths in Literature, Walter Benjamin

INTRODUCTION

According to Attali (1999) in his book, The Labyrinth in Culture and Society, human beings are in the “process of becoming virtual nomads: working and shopping at home, navigating without a guide through networks of information and power, with fantasies of belonging to that future elite of deluxe nomads who migrate from pleasure to pleasure” (p. xxv). We live within vast and complicated networks and grids that overlap, confuse, and make dizzying connections very quickly. Our road and highway systems are just more labyrinths that we traverse daily to our places of work which themselves resemble mazes with their twisting corridors, confusing hallways, and dead end cubicles. The cityscape, the suburb, the school, the mall—all of these are contemporary labyrinths in which we live, navigate, and get lost. The virtual spaces we explore in the Worldwide Web (its name connoting a series of confusing bifurcations) is an endless series of hallways, rooms, and networking connections, calling forth the infinitely large library in Borges’ story, “The Library of Babel,” where all possible letter configurations (even the meaningless ones) were contained in one total and complete library-universe. It has become easy to become lost within the vast virtual libraries whose information we have created and collected. The labyrinth is the symbol of our creations and our imprisonment within them. According to Attali (1999), “Understanding labyrinths will soon

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become essential to a mastery of the modern condition” (p. xxv).

But why is this? Why has the labyrinth become such a pervasive modern symbol? What does it mean to describe our lives, our technology, and our information systems in this way and to use this particular trope instead of countless others? Why not a forest or a constellation? Why the labyrinth? To answer this question fully one must understand the history and genealogy of the labyrinth as well as the variety of texts in which it is featured. To understand what the labyrinth means is to understand our relationship to those things that we create. This discussion will incorporate a variety of texts including Attali’s (1999) study but also including Aarseth’s (1997), Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature; Berman’s (1982), All That is Solid Melts Into Air; Veel’s (2003) “The Irreducibility of Space: Labyrinth, Cities, Cyberspace,” Mitchell’s (1992) “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order” and Benjamin’s (2004) labyrinthine work about 19th century life called The Arcades Project as well as other works that discuss the history of the labyrinth concept. The idea is to understand what the metaphor means in terms of how it is used now in relation to how the concept has been deployed in the past. In doing this we will learn that the labyrinth is a flexible trope who’s multiple and paradoxical meanings do a great deal in helping us understand our complex relationships with each other and the machines and technology we use. The labyrinth is a dual visual and verbal symbol (triple if you count spatial) and ambiguous trope. About the labyrinth Foucault (1986) commented in his book, Death and the Labyrinth, that it was one of the “two great mythic spaces so often explored by Western imagination” (p. 80). He describes labyrinthine space as “rigid and forbidden, surrounding the quest, the return, and the treasure” (p. 80). The second great mythic space is of the metamorphosis: “communicating, polymorphous, continuous, irreversible” (p. 80). We will learn that the labyrinth actually in practice encompasses both of these spaces. It is a place to get lost as well as a place of wondrous transformation. It is both rigid and flexible, allowing creative freedom as well as imprisonment. What better way to explain our lives as moderns?

Before we discuss a history of the labyrinth and what it means to us as nomads in the information jungle, let’s consider two contemporary media texts that prominently feature the labyrinth as a site where we do business and work [located here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Now74xATr04&NR=1 and here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-N-Hte4sPl]. The first is a commercial, “SHRM Commercial Version 1” (YouTube, 2001) for the Society of Human Resource Management and the second is a commercial, “Barclays: fake,” for the British banking interest, Barclays. Both of these brief texts say a great deal about how we as subjects navigate labyrinthine networks of information.

The SHRM commercial (YouTube, 2001) begins by stating that “your most important business assets walk out the door every night,” (“SHRM commercial version 1”) and it shows a stream of employees walking outside and away from a large office building set amongst a confusing cluster of other tightly packed buildings in a large metropolitan area. SHRM states it is their job to “make sure they come back every morning” (YouTube, 2001). A man is shown guiding the employees back into the building via an escalator. Interestingly, the very building that the workers are entering morphs into a multicursal hedge maze that features the same man as guide. The man finds a way out of the labyrinth but then the image morphs again to show him superimposed on top of a labyrinthine grid that signifies a graph. The SHRM commercial concludes that their organization helps a business meet the challenges of a changing world (YouTube, 2001). A man is shown guiding the employees back into the building via an escalator. Interestingly, the very building that the workers are entering morphs into a multicursal hedge maze that features the same man as guide. The man finds a way out of the labyrinth but then the image morphs again to show him superimposed on top of a labyrinthine grid that signifies a graph.
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