
A TALE OF TWO MAZES:

A Sensory Ethnography of Choice, Perception, and Getting Hopelessly Lost

Marlee McGuire
Loyola International College
Concordia University

The themed maze has emerged as a distinct sector of the themed attraction industry. An indubitably sensory experience, maze-wandering combined with storytelling implicates the body in interesting ways. Meandering through a maze pushes perception into altered spheres, and the sensorium is engaged in attempts to orient yourself amidst the circuitous confusion. Participating in the theme or story that these spaces attempt to illustrate likewise brings your body into the equation. What follows is a sensory ethnography of two mazes: Le Labyrinthe Arctic Gardens, an outdoor corn maze in St. Jean sur Richelieu, Quebec, and Labyrinthe du Hanger 16, an indoor maze situated on the docks of the Old Port of Montreal. Both mazes are oriented around a central theme and story that unify the disjunctures the body experiences in the multiplicity of options, paths, and dead-ends presented by the maze. Each maze, however, draws upon different sensory awarenesses in the “orchestrated disorientation” (DeAngelis 1997: 107) so integral to the attractiveness of themed spaces: a disorientation that is refracted through the simultaneous having and lacking of choice. This essay is an attempt to walk the reader through my own sensory experiences in wandering – and getting lost in - the two aforementioned mazes.

The sheer possibility of getting lost in the multicursal maze, or merely being subject to the maze-maker’s whims in the unicursal maze, pushes the body into an unusual space. Navigating through a maze involves both mind and body, and indeed unifies

the two. As Penelope Reed Doob states, “what you see depends on where you stand, and thus, at one and the same time, labyrinths are single (there is one physical structure) and double: they simultaneously incorporate order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, artistry and chaos” (Reed Doob 1990: 1). While I myself ambulated through the two mazes that I visited, I found myself reflecting upon these dichotomies as well as what it means to not have the right answer to everything; what it means to rely upon my intuition and perception to get myself through; and furthermore what senses I was drawing upon while my sight was blunted and my body disoriented.

Le Labyrinthe Arctic Gardens is an immense – 90 000 square meters – multicursal maze constructed in a corn field on the edge of Quebecois suburbia. Three companions and I visited it on an overcast but warm early September day. After passing through the ticket booth, where you are provided with a map, you pass over a small wooden bridge into a large open space that encompasses a gift shop in a tent, a small snack stand, a series of port-a-potties, and two large wooden tables with white tarp awnings. The decoration is bare, and the colors are sparse. Apart from the odd sign or flag adding a splash of color, the visual dynamics of this space are primarily composed of the natural landscape. Once we passed through the arbour that signalled the beginning of the maze ritual, we were instructed to sit on small wooden benches around a set made up of fake lemon and palm trees, and a small white fence. After waiting a few minutes, an animator dressed as an elf popped out and explained the context of the mystery we were about to solve: a dragon has taken over the forest, holding every one hostage and charring the landscape with his fire breath. We were then given a paper talisman, and were instructed to pick up additional pieces of the talisman at the other animations – the complete set would help us to fight off the dragon when we found him within the maze. With that, we were on our way.

In an attempt to hold true to the map-less history of the multicursal maze (where you are supposed to rely on intuition, memory, and an astute sense of direction), my companions and I at first forewent the map and tried to navigate our way through with out it. In an embarrassingly small period of time, we were lost, and turned towards the map. Unfortunately, the map wasn’t terribly helpful. When everything looks the same, the twists and curlicues we attempted to follow on paper gave way

to disorientation. As I was moving through, my body felt heavily implicated in the experience. I attempted to rely on intuition, but in a multicursal labyrinth, a dead-end is a dead-end. You almost forget that you are walking, and steadily rush to every turn to see if it indeed leads anywhere. The kinesthetics of moving through the maze becomes almost an out-of-body sensation, as you try to channel some sort of higher power within yourself to viscerally pick up on the right direction.

In such a disoriented state, I found myself drawing upon my full sensorium to help orient myself. For example, I found myself still trying to maximize my vision, peering through corn husks and checking the trees and flags surrounding the perimeter of the park for cues and markers as to where we were. These markers meant nil, however, as we kept trailing back to the same spot instead of getting on to the other sections of the maze. As mentioned earlier, besides the fact that the maze is humanly constructed in the senses that the corn is planted according to a preconceived pattern, the natural landscape is what forms the visual aspects of this maze. The boundaries of the maze are distinct and ominous, despite being solely constructed of fraying stalks of corn, showing the first signs of autumn decay in their yellowing leaves and husks slightly parted open. The exposed tips of corn are a burnt umber and red color, subtly asserting themselves amidst the muted green of the husks. In the repetitiveness of the landscape, color and texture enmeshed my senses and perception.

I found my ears perking up to listen for other maze-goers, and when I did hear them, found myself trying to orient my body towards them. Sounds outside of the maze were an orienting device as well: the sound of cars in the distance served as a reminder of the provincial highway that surrounds the perimeter of the maze. The distant drone also helped calm the slight anxiety that arose while we were winding through, unsure as to what point we were at on the map. While you are always sure that you could find your way out if you absolutely had to, slight moments of panic latch on each time a dead-end is reached. There was, of course, also an element of embarrassment as we asked ourselves: does everyone get this lost? Watching the ground became a steady pastime as we looked for changes in terrain to tell us if we'd been there before. The terrain, while shifting from covered in chips of wood to cracked dry sand, wasn't as helpful as the pieces of garbage left by previous maze wanderers. A dejected plastic spoon, an empty and crushed juice box, and a mini

Oreo cookie wrapper became signs to myself and my companions that we were merely trailing over the same ground once again.

Before we found our way to another animation (as had been the plan), we instead found ourselves at what was advertised on the map as the “Arctic Gardens Bar”. An eerie sight if ever there was one, the bar consists of a wooden shack in an open space where a young gentleman was serving small paper cups full of corn niblets. The labyrinth is sponsored by Arctic Gardens, a company which sells frozen vegetables in brightly colored bags in the frozen foods aisle at Quebec supermarkets, hence its namesake. From what we could assume, this small treat was an advertisement of their products. The gustatory experience of eating frozen corn in a fresh corn field, while strange and somewhat paradoxical, was delightful. After having spent a dizzying amount of time trying to find ourselves, the taste of the corn was crunchy, sweet, and rewarding.

When leaving the “bar”, we promised ourselves that we would orient ourselves and follow the map properly as we continued our voyage. A wind had picked up by this time, and I was quite taken with the way it added to the sensory dynamics of the maze. Wind ripples well through corn husks. A slight ‘thwit-thwit’ noise accompanies the imagery of the husks and leaves swaying in the air. Like a giant wave undulating, the tops of the husks flutter away from you in succession and then back again as the wind changes course. The wind hit our faces and on this particular overcast day was gentle upon the skin. We also engaged tactility by running our fingers along the husks as we walked, and occasionally disobeyed the explicit rule to not touch the husks and played within them. Soon enough, amidst our silliness, we were lost again. It was then that we were confronted with the fact that within the maze, there are no washrooms – a realization we came to when two of my companions were overcome with the need to use one. There is usually a resounding assuredness in commercial spaces that washrooms will be present, and the fact that they weren’t in this space definitely disrupted our assumptions of bodily comforts in places with admission fees.

After yet another slightly anxiety ridden trek, we finally started to find ourselves at the animations with ease, or at least with ease relative to the two epic journeys we had just completed. The animations were following the dragon theme articulated in the first animation, and included a crazy old woman who eats children, a witch who is hopelessly in love with the dragon, trolls warning the maze wanderers of what was

to come, and a fairy attempting to keep a lively spirit alive in the imprisoned forest. Indeed, the animations were rife with sensory references. For example, the crazy old woman did not hesitate to tell the young members of the audience how good they would taste. The witch had a series of wind chimes attached to the trees around the set, which gave off an eerie melody as the wind breathed through the maze. She was also making soup in a cauldron, and made sounds of gustatory delight as she named off the ingredients we associate with disgust. The fairy, on the other hand, tried to remind us of the pleasures of the senses brought on by the seasons, and urged the forest to not lose hope in face of their plight by delighting in them. Upon asking four of the men in the audience to join her, she then made each of them do a dance emulating the season. For example, one gentleman had to depict a snowstorm by swaying around like a storm howling wildly in winter, and another had to pretend to be a spring flower and was instructed to feel the sun on his petals by turning his hands up towards the sun.

A theme that runs through each of the animations is the burning heat caused by the fiery wrath of the dragon's breath: a heat which was causing the plants and trees to die and the forest-dwellers to lose their joie-de-vivre. This heat, we were told, would persist until we were able to fulfill the mission we accepted upon entering the forest to kill the dragon. Having completed all of the other animations, we were certain that the one we had not yet visited must be the one where we had to engage in combat. As we entered the dragon's lair, we were greeted by a young woman – the princess – who the dragon had been holding captive. She screeched that in order for the dragon to come out for battle, we had to tantalize him with sensory offerings. We contributed an apple, another maze-visitor a handful of trail mix. As soon as the dragon felt sated, he signaled his presence with an enormous roar and a cloud of smoke, which spouted out the top of a hollow tree. The dragon then popped his head out of the top, and we all held out our talismans in defense. Smoke filled the air, and the screams of the young children reverberated through the corn husks as the dragon proclaimed his lack of willingness to relinquish the forest. The princess instructed us to put together clues that we had gathered from our journey, clues which when put together formed a poem that would deconstruct the dragon's power and restore the forest to harmony. Once the poem had been put together by the fellow visitors, the dragon started to lose his power, and in a cloud of smoke, he fell to the bottom of the hollow tree, out of sight.

Both the theme and the process of going through the corn maze engaged the senses in subtle ways. While not consciously constructed to give the visitor a sensory experience, the pure experience of not having a wide scope of vision in a gigantic outdoor maze heightened my other senses and created a strangely out of body feeling while at the same time remaining highly aware of it. My hearing and my vision competed for legitimacy: at times, I was tempted to follow the sounds I was hearing, at others, I was compelled to discipline my vision to remember signals and twists and turns. Most of the time, I found myself disoriented either way. The theme that ran through the orientations were full of non-visual sensory references, and the dragon's scorching breath and the malignancies of this heat were of continual reference.

The sensory experience of the maze in the Old Port stands in stark contrast to that of the corn maze. Where the corn maze engaged the sensorium through its theme and its pure state of being outdoors, Labyrinthe du Hanger 16 acts on the body directly. Where the experience of the senses at the corn maze was focused inward, the conscious engagement of the senses at the maze in the Old Port resulted in a much more externally embodied experience. Upon entering the old industrial building perched on the edge of the city's historic district, you are ushered in to a small room and instructed to watch a short film highlighting the rules of the maze as well as the theme. In this maze, an important jewel has gone missing – and it is the mission of the maze wanderers to piece together the clues and find out who stole it. The short film, of terrible quality and terribly acted, added an element of skeptical humor to the experience as we entered the actual maze.

The maze is housed in a large industrial building, and the warehouse aesthetic permeates the entire structure. Large steel beams line the ceiling, and the dim lighting mixed with the concrete décor contributes to the visual effect. The setting is actually slightly out of sync with the story, which is supposed to be set in a mansion, although the maze creators did try to create small mansion-esque enclaves throughout. This maze is much less a process of ambulating through open spaces than it is one of passing through physical obstacles. From the outset, my companion and I were prompted to climb through a jungle of ropes, holding on to and swinging ourselves from each one. From this point, there are vinyl strips hanging from the ceiling, forming the walls and openings of the maze. There are right ways and wrong

ways to go, but of course it's impossible to tell which is which, and so we were immediately backtracking and starting over. The cohort that we watched the film with soon disbanded as we each went our separate ways. The process of walking through these vinyl strips – whose texture and scent are reminiscent of gym mats – is a directly tactile one as you pull them apart to walk through them and feel them gently hit you as you pass through. You cannot help but smell them as your face brushes by so closely to them.

After winding through the multicursal corridors for a while, we found ourselves at the first problem solving station. Here, we were asked to look at four images – each of the same sepia colored family portrait – and discern the item that is in one of the images and not in the others. This directly visual exercise was actually fairly difficult, and we began to feel anxious as we became worried that we were falling behind our cohort. However, we eventually obtained the answer, and tucked it into our minds as we moved on.

As you move through the maze, the colors of the vinyl strips change from a dark blue to a fluorescent orange. This came to signal to us a rise in tension, as the maze became increasingly sensory at this point. We also became increasingly aware of a mist that kept hitting our face. As we looked up towards the ceiling beams to see if the building had sprung a leak, we instead saw an employee of the maze walking on the beams overhead with a pail of water and a hose, with which he misted the unsuspecting maze wanderers. He looked pretty pleased with himself. At this point, the din of our fellow maze wanderers magnified intensely as a large group of high school students tore through the maze. While the fellow maze-wanderers at the corn maze had seemed to exist almost in another world, the enclosed space of this maze made me feel directly jostled by their presence. There was also a distinct odor generated by so many teenage bodies moving through an enclosed space, which engaged the sensorium in less delightful ways.

As we continued through the maze and solved the other riddles and puzzles, we may have gathered more clues but we got pretty lost along the way. It seemed as though we were ceaselessly passing through the same tunnels, although it was impossible to tell even as the colors of the walls changed from fluorescent orange back to blue and then back again. At one point, I attempted to orient myself by using a large "C" written on one of the steel beams along the ceiling as a mental marker,

but I soon realized that this same “C” was emblazoned upon many of the steel beams, and was not helping as an orienting device at all! As in the corn maze, I tried to allow my ears to make up for my lack of sight by listening for the sounds of the other maze wanderers and walking towards their voices and shuffling feet. Apparently, I had not learned my lesson from the corn maze – just following these auditory signals in no way means that you won’t find yourself in yet another dead end.

We realized that we were finally getting somewhere when the texture of the walls and openings changed from gym mat vinyl to the silken weave that car seat belts are made of. This change in texture and tactility was accompanied by an increasing range of obstacles, including a corridor full of light punching bags suspended from the ceiling beams that you are expected to push your body through in order to get to the other side. Each one hits you gently, and you can perceive the tactile sensation all the more deftly because your sight is further blunted and you are forced to feel your way through the corridor. There were also more rope obstacles similar to the one we had to go through at the entrance, and we tangled our way through those with glee. Numerous impediments to our footing were likewise present, as we were prompted to walk down shaky planks of wood, jump from footstool to footstool, and maneuver our way over webs of ropes. At one point, we came to an opening where a girl dressed as a maid prompted us to climb a small ladder – at the top of the ladder were two slides. One slide would bring us back to the middle of the maze, while the other, would bring us to a new section that would eventually bring us out of the maze. My companion and I looked at each other, and based on a wild, uneducated guess, took the slide on the left. This was a wrong choice. We rewound our way through the maze, and took the other slide. The slide was an interesting experience in tactility, and the kinesthetics of whooshing through was pleasant and fun. The bright red rubber of the slide was cold and hard against my body, which contrasted with the rapid heat of the release as I moved through it. I haven’t had many opportunities to go on slides in the past decade and a half or so, and I was pretty happy about having one.

The rest of the maze was a repetition of similar engagements of the sensorium. Solving the mystery was a bland affair, as it was strictly visual exercise with an altogether unsurprising ending. In *Labyrinthe du Hanger 16*, the theme took a supporting role, while the maze itself created the experience for me. The dim lighting con-

trasted with the shift in color from bright orange to dark blue, and the warehouse aesthetic acted on my sensorium by shaping my perception of the experience as strange and oddly sublime. The constant tactility presented just by ambulating through the maze and its obstacles, passing through the vinyl and woven stripped openings, and being misted intermittently by a smug teenager from up above ensured that my body was always feeling at least slightly jostled. While it is far smaller than the corn maze, in terms of creating an immersive environment, it packs a little bit more punch.

Despite the two establishments both being multicursal mazes, my experience at the two was highly incongruent. While my thoughts, perceptions, and sensations at both mazes were heightened and shaped by my blunted sight, the intensity and metaphor that I attached to each sensation was different. The gentle breeze at the corn maze was a constant point of awareness for me, while the stagnant air at the indoor maze was not even a point of reflection in the two hours I spent within it. The sounds and kinesthetics of my fellow maze wanderers, on the other hand, were hardly a part of my perception at the corn maze, while at the indoor maze, they shaped my experience substantially. The heightened tactility of the indoor maze contrasts sharply with the focus I placed on the more interior sensations – like hearing – that I sensed at the corn maze. While both mazes strongly implicated my visual sense, viewing the corn maze inspired an eerie sentiment within me, while the maze in the Old Port cast my gaze within a strange sort of industrial pastiche where I felt right at home. If the nose knows, then my nose at the corn maze knew I was in a field in the middle of nowhere, and my nose at the maze in the Old Port knew that pubescent and active teenagers were sprouting their sweat glands in every corner of that maze. Tasting those corn niblets was a delightful if not strange experience; a sensory foray into taste which was absent from the Old Port maze.

So what is it that made getting lost in these strangest of spaces, a humiliating and disorienting experience to be sure, a nonetheless enjoyable way to spend two Saturday afternoons in early September? The consistent presence of mazes in Western cultural history and myth - from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the present - suggests that maze wandering has long been a fanciful if not spiritual activity. The 'labyrinthine' has emerged as an important concept in the study of literature, denoting something that is complex and conflict-

ing, often with some semblance of an important revelation at its core. Did I have an important revelation within these mazes? Certainly not, but I definitely enjoyed the disorientation and the senses that this sentiment aroused. The thing is, no matter how disoriented you become, there is this comfort that no matter what, there is a way out: it is just waiting, sneakily, to be found. While I felt as though I was making choices while inside these mazes – choices between left and right, right and wrong, intelligent decision and blighted oversight – the choices weren't really mine. My senses and I were being carried along a swift pathway, we just happened to hit a few dead ends along the way.

Carol Shields' novel, *Larry's Party*, is a surprisingly enjoyable journey through the platitudes of Larry Weller's introspection. Larry is not only a man from Winnipeg reflecting over his failed marriages and social awkwardness, he is also a maze designer, who finds immense solace and spirit within the walled confines of a maze. Interested primarily in shrubbery, it's likely that he would scoff at both of the mazes that I visited. However, the following passage, a short conversation between Larry and his second wife, Beth, brings forth an interesting metaphor through which we can examine the body and the senses within a maze:

"A maze," he told Beth, quoting from something he'd read not long ago but whose source he'd misplaced, "is a kind of machine with people as its moving parts."

"But," Beth asked, surely we don't want to be part of a machine?" Her old quizzing curiosity had revived wonderfully after weeks of insomnia and gloomy note scribbling in the British Library. Only yesterday she'd exclaimed to Larry how happy she was to be a woman who'd chosen not to run with the wolves. Today her face glowed with the afternoon's heat, and the expensive pumpkin colored sundress she'd bought in a London boutique showed off her slender, sharp shoulders - so that Larry was thinking already of their hotel room back in London, the wide double bed and its cool, uncreased sheets.

Beth repeated her question. "Do you honestly think people want to be part of a machine?" More and more her face has the stretched look of someone trying to stay interested." "Yes," Larry said, surprised at the speed of his response. "At least I do." (Shields 1997: 218-219)

Technological metaphors are rife in this techno-age we are embroiled in. While it may be true that I can barely compose a text message on my cell phone, I definitely

catch myself saying that “my system is shutting down” when I am feeling a head cold coming on, and just recently muttered that “I need to recharge my batteries” while waiting for the bus in the pouring rain. The thing about these metaphors, as Larry hints, is that they are comforting. In a world where there are just so many (perceived) choices, a terrain where the senses have a plethora of options and directions in which to run willy-nilly, technological metaphors help us to neatly pack our experience into a whirring and whizzing of certainty and system centered confidence. Within a maze, there are a million ways to get lost – but there’s still only one way out. Within my two maze-journeys, I felt confused, I felt disoriented, I felt silly, I felt terribly embarrassed at being lost (apparently there are formulas to solve these things, but they were and are unbeknownst to me) – but I also felt certain that I would find my way out eventually. I could get lost here – it was a safe kind of lost – so my senses were free to do as they pleased as I just ambulated through and searched for clues and cues.

There’s something about rules, isn’t there? They shove loose ends into place, allow us to tame our wild and furtive imaginations and focus. The rules of the maze are set forth by some maze maker, usually unknown, as irritating yet as respected as the faceless names that create the crossword puzzles we agonize over during breakfast. Within a maze, you feel as though these winding twists and turns couldn’t possibly have been intentionally placed, but you know that as soon as you see a map it will make perfect sense (although, as I learned the hard way at the corn maze, sometimes these maps merely disorient you further!). As Reed-Doob states, “Once you learn the maze or see the labyrinth whole, then, elaborate chaos is transformed into pattern” (Reed-Doob 1990: 24). As a participant within this pattern, senses coagulate and the body enmeshes itself in the experience.

Dorinne Kondo, in her symbolic analysis of the Japanese tea ceremony, deftly notes: “Why, say these pragmatists, make such a fuss over drinking a cup of tea?” She responds: “at least in the tea ceremony, and perhaps in other rituals as well, it is by becoming one with the rules that the possibility of transcendence lies” (Kondo 2005: 207-208). Maze wandering is indubitably less ritualized and less ordered than the tea ceremony, but there is a preordained path which inspires, to return to DeAngelis’ term as noted in the introduction, a form of “orchestrated disorientation” (DeAngelis 1997: 107). Much like in the modern theme park, maze wanderers are

jettisoned in to a strange setting, highly removed from the experiences of every day life, and expected to rearrange their senses in wild and woolly ways – yet at the same time one is expected to do so within the orchestrated confines of the maze. Kondo's analysis goes on to note: "by its precise orchestration of sequence and the interrelations among symbols in different sensory modes, the tea ceremony articulates feeling and thought, creating a distilled form of experience set apart from the mundane world" (Kondo 2005: 208). Boundaries, then, help us to organize ourselves, and if you want to talk boundaries, talk mazes: mazes are centered, justified, and indented within impenetrable boundaries.

To be honest, prior to my two trips to the mazes, I was hoping that I would feel more of a spiritual calm while mazing (it is now a verb, much like 'antiquing'): I instead felt anything but. What I felt was far from equilibrium. The anxieties I felt while within the mazes demonstrate that I was the opposite of comfortable within these spaces, however the way in which my senses interacted within these boundaries was so broken apart from the way I usually engage with the world that it was oddly enjoyable. The simultaneity of both having choice (to go left or right, to go forward or regress) as well as the lack of choice in the overall structure confounded my habitual sensorium and caused some of my less drawn upon sensory abilities to stand at attention. The sheer unknowable enormity of these two mazes, and the themes they presented alongside, permitted my senses to interact with and yet also deviate in my own individual way from the preordained machine of the maze.

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