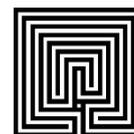


The Shining Mazes

Roberto Milazzi



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“The Shining” was the third novel published by the American author Stephen King in January 1977, and three years later a film based on the novel, produced and directed by Stanley Kubrick and starring Jack Nicholson was released. The subject of this note is a key element featuring in the film, but not in the novel, a hedge maze.¹ It plays a key role in the development of the plot, narrating the story of a family of three (Jack Torrance, his wife Wendy and their son Denny), set in and around the remote Overlook Hotel among the snowy mountains of Colorado. The position of caretaker is vacant and Jack secures the job, but is required to stay all winter long, when the extreme weather conditions prevent guests reaching the hotel.

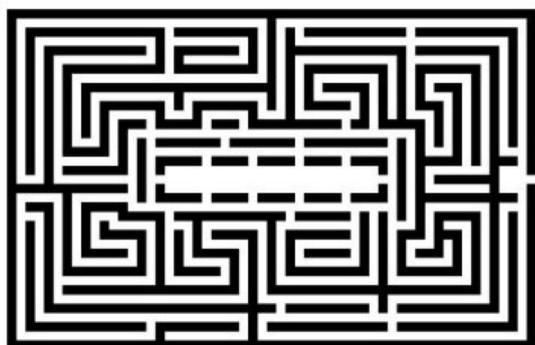
When the Torrance family arrives at the hotel we see them passing in front of the maze, right in front of the hotel, acknowledged by a plan of the maze on a notice board standing near its entrance. Later, while Wendy and Denny go outside to explore, we see Jack approaching a model of the maze set in the hotel’s lounge. Even if we may be not completely aware of it, its plan matches the one we saw earlier on the sign.



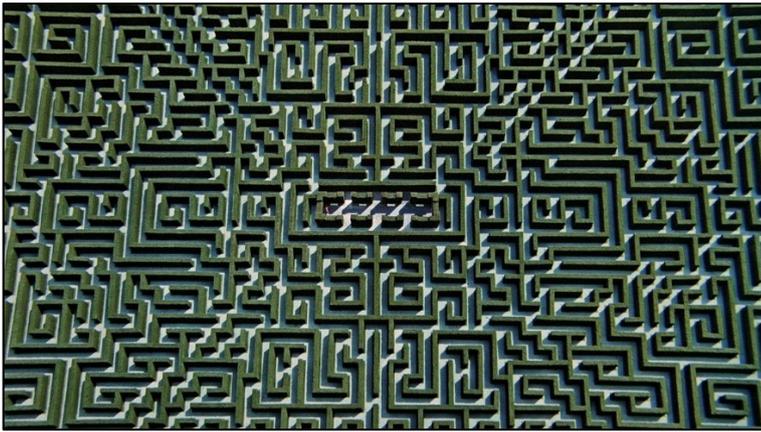
Above: the Overlook Maze sign board

Left: plan of the maze model and as shown on the sign

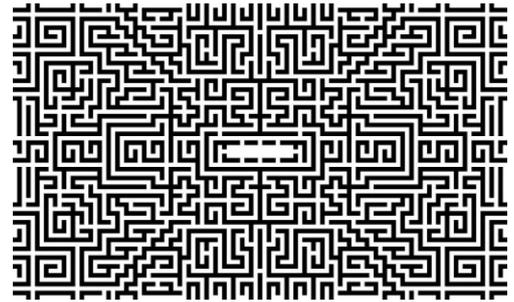
Below: Jack studying the model in the hotel



As the view shifts from an impersonal point of view to the one we assume to be Jack's own, we find ourselves drawn into what is seemingly an aerial view of the real maze, with Wendy and Denny crossing the central ‘chamber’ of the maze. We are strongly encouraged to believe so by the following sequence, where we see Denny and his mother walking out hand in hand.

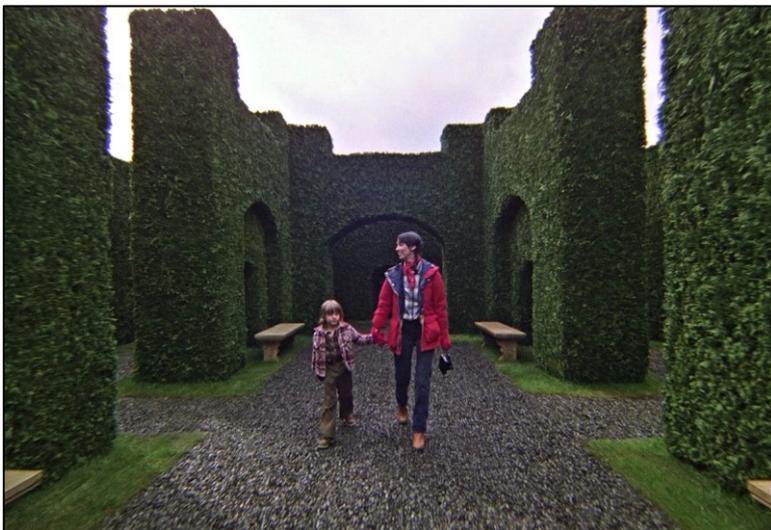


The aerial view of the maze and its plan

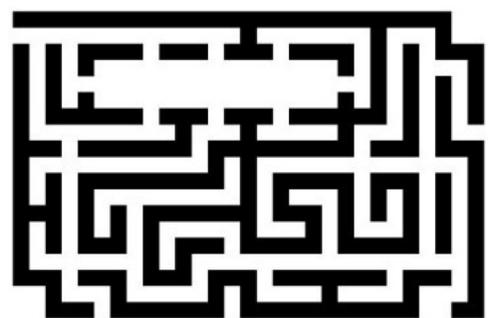


There is something unsettling in this aerial view, since it appears that Jack is seeing his wife and son walking into the model itself. But that is not the main point: until now we could perceive the hedge maze as a well-defined space of a given size, but now our vision can no longer embrace it all, its margins far exceed those of our field of view. Furthermore, apart from the approximate geometry of the central chamber, which catches our attention since we are surprised seeing tiny figures walking into it, the geometry of the maze appears not just expanded, but altered too. While the previous plan had no axis of symmetry, this one appears to be symmetrical both horizontally and vertically.²

Somehow this sequence plays both as an early warning of the increasingly obsessive attitude of Jack and of the claustrophobic situation he and his family are about to experience with the onset of winter. While watching the movie the viewer will be in no doubt that the hedge maze in the grounds of the hotel surely exists, and that its plan matches both the map on the signboard and the three-dimensional model in the hotel. However, completely fooled by the magic of cinema, the so-called *suspension of disbelief*, we could not be further from truth. The (real) hotel featured in the movie (the Timberline Lodge in Oregon) has no maze at all, and all of the interiors, and the maze in the movie were actually created in three separate locations in England.



The section of the maze used for the summer sequences (hedges at Radlett aerodrome) and its plan.



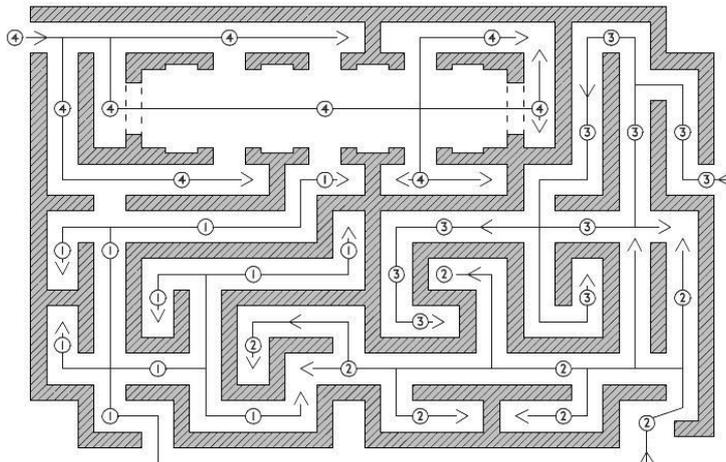
The interior shots, together with a reconstruction of the Timberline Lodge's façade, were filmed on the back lot at the Elstree studios in Borehamwood, England; the maze shown in the summer sequences was created at nearby Radlett Aerodrome, and the maze in winter was shot indoors on one of the sound stages at the film studios. The falling snow was made of polystyrene chips, the snow on the ground is actually salt and the fog was oil vapour belched out of fog machines.³



Left: the layout of the maze (wooden mock-up in the studio) used for the winter scenes



Above: Actors and film crew working on the stage set of the winter maze.



Left: plan of the winter maze set, with camera tracks, access points marked, etc.

So in the end there were no less than four different maze layouts used in the movie: one for the sign and the model, one for Jack's vision from above and another two for the scenes shot respectively in summer and in winter.

Roberto Milazzi, Turin, Italy; January 2012

Notes:

1. The novel instead features evil topiary animals coming to life.
2. Except for a strip in the middle, where we may notice the double meander motif repeated on both sides of the central chamber.
3. See <http://www.unrealaudio.net/theshining2/realoverlook.htm>

Photos are used courtesy of the producers of the film *The Shining* - maze plans by Roberto Milazzi

Editor's Note:

The origin of the 'full' design of the maze used in the movie is apparently unrecorded, but it bears a very strong similarity to the hedge maze in the Jardines del Alcázar in Seville, Spain (see the old postcard in the Labyrinthos Archive opposite).

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