

Anti-consumerism in Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*

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“Don't tell me the truth hurts, little girl
Cause it hurts like hell”
(*Labyrinth*)

The fairy tale nature and impressive special effects draw viewers into the visual fable that is Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*. In *Labyrinth*, Henson educates viewers about the illusive qualities of overconsumption and encourages viewers to resist the mass media and contemporary culture's messages of overconsumption. Through Sarah's education in the bildungsroman film, Henson reveals the uncomfortable truth that consumer goods fail to provide the fulfillment of genuine human relationships and have a deleterious effect on planetary ecology. Henson encourages viewers to resist mass media and contemporary culture's messages of overconsumption, reduce their consumption of consumer goods, and embrace the fulfillment of human relationships.

Henson skillfully integrates his criticism of overconsumption into *Labyrinth*'s traditional bildungsroman format. In *Labyrinth*, the protagonist Sarah, a teenager who is on the cusp of becoming a young woman, navigates the difficult life transition from childhood to adulthood. Henson describes Sarah as “at the point of changing from being a child to being a woman” and experiencing a time “of transition” (Finch 183). Sarah's education about the illusive qualities of overconsumption is part of her broader growth and development as young woman in the bildungsroman film (Buckley 13). Through Sarah's journey in the labyrinth, the challenges she faces in her quest, and her interactions with the other characters in the film including, Jareth, the Goblin king, Hoggle, Sir Didymus, and the Junk Lady, Sarah embraces opportunities to learn and mature into an adult (Arendt, 42). This process enables Sarah to boldly declare her independence when she twice exclaims “You have no power over me” to Jareth, an overpowering adult

character, after her steady move closer to coming of age in the film. By the conclusion of the film, Sarah has transformed from a girl into a young woman.

Labyrinth joins the strong opposition to overconsumption that has been growing for decades. There is strong criticism of overconsumption in other 1980s films including *Blade Runner* and *Repo Man* (Beliveau and Lewis; Bruno 64). Like *Labyrinth*, these films expose the excess amount of waste and grim realities that result from overconsumption. In the years following the release of these films, scores of films and books including the famed *Affluenza*, *Shop 'til You Drop*, and *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need* criticize the common practice of overconsumption in the West. Broadly defined, overconsumption is understood as the consumption of a greater number of goods and services than is necessary for a sensible lifestyle and level of material comfort (Humphery 22). The anti-consumerist movement has criticized overconsumption as causing the erosion of family and community connections and contributing to environmental challenges including pollution, waste, and dwindling natural resources (Humphery 23). Through its use of a visual fable to illustrate these negative implications of overconsumption, *Labyrinth* adds to existing visual and textual anti-consumerist narratives.

1. Overconsumption and Erosion of Family Connections

In *Labyrinth*, the persistent difficulties that Sarah has connecting with other people and forming meaningful human relationships are associated the overconsumption of consumer goods. Sarah's family exemplifies the middle class U.S. family's "work and spend" cyclical ideology that "undermines the daily life conditions" required for "reciprocal bonds" and meaningful relationships (Holt 8). This "work and spend" cycle is pervasive among U.S. workers who toil long hours in the labor market because they feel the pressure to keep up with rising consumption

norms (Holt 8). These norms include the customary social behaviors and mounting pressure related to purchasing larger and larger homes and acquiring increasing amounts of consumer goods. U.S. workers spend extended hours at their jobs in order to meet these norms and this leaves them with diminished free time and opportunities to connect with each other (Holt 8). As with many U.S. families, Sarah's family's large home and overconsumption of consumer goods erodes the relationships in Sarah's household.

Sarah's family's house is grand with a long staircase, lush carpeting and furnishings, and a decorative chandelier. Sarah's bedroom door is the entry point to many of the consumer goods that separate her from her family members and are associated with the erosion of her connection with her family and community. During and following her interactions with her parents, Sarah isolates herself in her lavish, richly appointed and wallpapered bedroom that contains massive piles of consumer items including jewelry boxes, a globe, and a music box with a dancer resembling Sarah. Sarah's bedroom has collections of costly books, fancy furnishings, and toys. Her bedroom features an overflowing library of books including *The Wizard of Oz* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* as well as ornate wood furniture. Some of the toys that are heaped throughout Sarah's room include representations of characters from the film including Hoggle, Jareth, Sir Didymus, Ludo, and a Fiery.

This overconsumption of consumer goods exacts a social price on Sarah and her relationship with her family. In her rush to retreat to and isolate herself in her bedroom filled with consumer items, Sarah fails to meaningfully connect with her immediate family members. Likewise, in their rush to leave Sarah with Toby, Sarah's parents are unsuccessful in meaningfully connecting with Sarah. *Labyrinth* draws on the traditional fairy-tale trope of the evil stepmother when Sarah arrives home an hour late and argues with her stepmother about how

often Sarah's father and stepmother have the opportunity to go out together (Arendt 41). While Sarah believes that her parents go out every weekend, Sarah's stepmother disagrees and believes that they go out "very rarely" (*Labyrinth*). Sarah longs for her parents to include her in their plans and spend more time considering her interests. Sarah expresses her belief that her stepmother lacks the time and concern to understand her interests when she says, "You don't even ask what my plans are" (*Labyrinth*). After Sarah repeatedly raises her voice to her stepmother, her stepmother says that Sarah treats her like "a wicked stepmother" (*Labyrinth*). These limited exchanges between Sarah and her stepmother illustrate how long working hours and pressures to keep up with social norms erode family relationships.

Henson also reveals this erosion of family relationships when Sarah and her father fail to bond with each other. Although the family's large house allows it to meet prevailing middle-class consumption norms and keep up with the proverbial Joneses, Henson disabuses viewers of the myth that these middle-class consumption norms have solely beneficial effects on family relationships. With *Labyrinth*, Henson illustrates how large homes extend the distance between family members and negatively impact familial relationships. Sarah and her father converse in raised voices along the extended staircase that separates the house's entryway from its bedrooms. In response to her father's query about talking with her, Sarah speaks to her father through her bedroom door and says, "There's nothing to talk about!" (*Labyrinth*). Sarah tells her father that he should hurry for fear of being late for his date with her stepmother and then criticizes him for leaving before he can thoughtfully speak with her. Sarah says, "You really wanted to talk to me" and "practically broke down the door" (*Labyrinth*). The family's large house and its increased physical distance between family members work to erode instead of strengthen relationships within the family. Moreover, the "work and spend cycle" ideology that pervades Sarah's family

and other middle-class families weakens familial bonds and reduces opportunities for building strong relationships (Holt 8).

The exchange between Sarah and her father also illustrates how people use consumer items as a replacement for social connections (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 4). Instead of engaging in meaningful relationships with her family, Sarah gazes at her reflection in the large mirror that is prominently featured in her bedroom and converses with her multiple and overflowing toys. The large mirror in *Labyrinth* references the mirror sequence in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* when the queen talks to the mirror instead of the other characters in the film. Like the queen who converses with the mirror, an inanimate object, Sarah appears more than content sitting amongst her consumer goods and conversing with herself and her stuffed animals; she declines to open her bedroom door to reach out to her father. With Sarah talking to a mirror and her stuffed animals instead of her family members, Sarah's relationship with her family exemplifies the ways that people use consumer items as a replacement for social connections.

It is in Sarah's parents' simple, clean, and uncluttered room, a room with few consumer goods that Toby, Sarah's infant brother, shares with Sarah's parents that Sarah begins to realize the importance of human relationships. The piles of toys and consumer items in Sarah's bedroom that isolate Sarah from connecting with her family stand in stark contrast to the dearth of consumer goods in Sarah's parents and Toby's bedroom. In Sarah's parents and Toby's bedroom, the sparse furnishings are far less fancy than those in Sarah's room and there are few consumer items other than a rocking horse and rocking chair. Sarah's parents and Toby's bedroom is relatively devoid of consumer items and this lack of consumer items allows Sarah to think clearly about the importance of human relationships. After Sarah overcomes her anger

about her stuffed teddy bear Lancelot's disappearance and realizes the implications of her wish to have the goblins take Toby away, Sarah engages with Jareth, the goblin king, in an extended conversation about the importance of her relationship with her brother.

Jareth urges Sarah to "forget about the baby" and return to her room and "play" with her consumer goods, her "toys" and "costumes" (*Labyrinth*). Jareth offers her a crystal, a consumer good, which holds the promise of revealing her dreams. However, in Sarah's parents and Toby's bedroom, a room that is relatively devoid of consumer items, Sarah begins to see the uncomfortable truth that consumer goods such as toys, costumes, and crystals fail to provide the fulfillment of genuine human communication and connection. Sarah rejects the crystal and Jareth's recommendation that she return to her bedroom. She empathizes with Toby's plight and grows concerned that he is scared in the goblin kingdom. Although she may not yet fully understand the import of her quest, Sarah is embarking on her journey of understanding the uncomfortable truth that consumer goods serve as barriers to forming meaningful human relationships and fail to provide the fulfillment of genuine human relationships. After expressing her desire to reunite with Toby and unsuccessfully pleading with Jareth to return him, Sarah is determined to solve the labyrinth and reunite with her brother.

2. Overconsumption and Erosion of Community Connections

In *Labyrinth*, the frequent difficulties that Sarah has connecting with other people in the community and forming meaningful human relationships is associated the overconsumption of consumer goods. When Sarah's stepmother alludes to Sarah's inactive dating life, her stepmother reveals Sarah's challenges with connecting with community members beyond her family. Sarah spends her time alone in her room with her consumer items and outside with her pet, Merlin. She uses her imagination to entertain herself and does not reach out to others in her age group to

form meaningful relationships. Instead, she uses consumer items as a replacement for social connections. Sarah's challenges connecting with other people in the community are associated with the overconsumption of consumer goods in both ballroom and junk world sequences in the film.

In the ballroom sequence, a dreamlike reverie that Sarah falls into after she ingests the poisoned peach, Sarah continues her educational journey about overconsumption in her conscious and subconscious mind. The ballroom revelers, who are dressed up in fancy consumer items and costumes for the masquerade party, stare at Sarah and shake their heads at her without connecting with her. Like the revelers, Sarah is dressed in a fancy masquerade ball dress and wears elaborate jewelry. Although Sarah dances with Jareth, the goblin king, she does not communicate with him. Even the revelers have difficulty communicating with one another; they have masks, consumer goods, which physically prevent them from viewing their fellow revelers and they scarcely communicate with one another. In fact, the masquerade party revelers, with their overflowing consumer items, work in a concerted effort to keep Sarah from connecting with her brother, Toby. Dressed in fine costumes and silken gloves, they physically block her and hold her back from leaving the ballroom and connecting with Toby. The overflowing and exquisite consumer items in the ballroom sequence hinder human companionship between Sarah and the revelers, the revelers themselves, and Sarah and her brother.

With the ballroom sequence in *Labyrinth*, Henson reveals the illusive qualities of overconsumption. The ballroom and its fancy consumer items showcase the competitive consumption that pervades Western society and the common practice of "the lifestyles of the top 20 percent" becoming "an emulative target for the whole society" (Holt 12). Luxury goods, such as those in the ballroom sequence, are mass-produced, and even economically disadvantaged

members of society aspire to buy small pieces of an upper class, luxury lifestyle. Jean Baudrillard discusses this mass production of mechanically reproduced consumer goods and how it permeates Western society and culture (11). He suggests that these models of reality, endless replicas of consumer goods, become more real and valuable to people than the models' original forms (Baudrillard 12). However, despite these consumer items' purported and growing value, consumer items such as those that fill the ballroom, the fancy dresses, linens, hanging jewels, and lavish serving items, serve as barriers to forming meaningful human relationships. These items prevent Sarah and the other masquerade participants from connecting with each other.

As the clock strikes, Sarah recalls her purpose and views the mass-produced consumer items in the mirrored reflection of the ballroom. She sees that the beneficial qualities of these items are illusive because they serve as barriers to human relationships. Sarah learns the uncomfortable truth that consumer goods contribute to the erosion of human connection and she determines that she needs to exit the overconsumptive ballroom environment. Using a powerful, symbolic action, Sarah grasps one of the many ballroom chairs, a consumer item, to destroy the overconsumptive ballroom and shatter the mirror to pieces. With this action, Sarah practices resistance to overconsumption and uses a consumer item to destroy an overconsumptive environment. Sarah's understanding that consumer goods contribute to the erosion of human connection motivates Sarah to act on her understanding with this anti-consumerist action. Sarah escapes the consumer goods in the ballroom that isolate her and distract her from her human relationship with Toby and resumes her quest to find her brother.

Sarah also encounters the uncomfortable truth that consumer goods contribute to the erosion of human connection when she meets the Junk Lady in the rubbish-filled environment of the film. When Sarah reaches out to connect with the Junk Lady and touches her back, the Junk

Lady agitatedly responds, “get off my back” (*Labyrinth*). The Junk Lady shirks away from human connection because she has too many discarded consumer items collected on her back. These items are literally weighing on her and preventing her from standing upright. The Junk Lady is burdened by the collection of rejected consumer goods on her back, including a chair, hat, drum, cage, stuffed animal, and cooking pot. In *Labyrinth*'s junk world, there are multiple junk people who are all weighed down by the discarded consumer items on their backs. These junk people do not communicate with one another, but rather wade through the piles of discarded consumer items. The junk people do not even look at one another, and the Junk Lady rarely, if ever, maintains eye contact with Sarah.

Like the ballroom revelers, the junk people in *Labyrinth* represent the growing influence of consumerism and its resultant overconsumption on industrialized societies. Consumerism can be viewed as an ideology that plays a prominent role on “identity and social life” in Western society (Holt 5). During the 1980s, the time period that *Labyrinth* was first released, people in industrialized nations began an “intensified competitive consumption” with people spending more time working to consume material possessions and less time socializing with one another (Holt 12). The masses, including middle-class families such as Sarah's family, replaced interpersonal communications with the ideology of consumerism. Juliet Schor explains that because of the dominance of consumerism over people's time, there was an “erosion of the social fabric” (Holt 6). The junk people exemplify this erosion of social fabric with their rejection of human connection. The junk people favor collecting consumer goods over forming meaningful relationships and are representations of how consumer goods can both literally and figuratively weigh upon people and separate them from others. Similar to the ballroom revelers, the junk people illustrate how consumer goods physically prevent people from forming social bonds.

The Junk Lady and the commercials and consumer culture she represents act like a recurring interactive commercial that repeatedly advertises consumer wares to Sarah in an attempt to distract her from her relationship with her family. When the Junk Lady displays Sarah's stuffed teddy bear, Lancelot, the same toy Sarah searched for in Toby's room before being transported to the goblin kingdom, the Junk Lady attempts to convince Sarah that she is looking for material possessions instead of her human relationship with her brother. When Sarah appears somewhat unconvinced that Lancelot is the goal of her search, the Junk Lady continues her endeavor to convince Sarah that she is looking for material possessions instead of human relationships by drawing Sarah towards a junk world recreation of Sarah's bedroom. Within her recreated bedroom, Sarah suspects that she is dreaming and the Junk Lady tries to distract Sarah from her human relationship with Toby by urging her to stay in her recreated room with all of her material possessions. Similarly, when Sarah sees the *Labyrinth* book and remarks, "There was something I was looking for," and begins to connect the book with her relationship with Toby, the Junk Lady responds to Sarah "Ah, don't talk nonsense" (*Labyrinth*). Like a commercial, the Junk Lady even attempts to distract Sarah from the *Labyrinth* book by showing her a candy shop toy and says "Everything in the world you've ever cared about is all right here" (*Labyrinth*). Indeed, the Junk Lady and the commercials and consumer culture she represents attempt to persuade Sarah that material items can serve as distractions from and impediments to social connections.

The Junk Lady and all her companions in the junk world are dark doubles of Sarah and the revelers in the ballroom sequence. Just like the excess of consumer goods stifle communication between Sarah with the revelers in the ballroom, the piles of discarded consumer goods work as obstacles to the junk people's connections with one another and with Sarah.

These discarded consumer goods are what are left after the fancy ballroom party, our consumer driven lifestyle, has concluded. Even when the festivities have come to an end, the consumer goods associated with these festivities are left behind to stymie human communication and connection.

More specifically, the Junk Lady can be viewed as Sarah's dark double. When Sarah looks in the mirror, she sees the Junk Lady and the viewer is drawn to the similarities between the two characters. Just like the Junk Lady, Sarah has heaps of discarded consumer items including stuffed animals, pencils, slippers, and a printing game on her back. The Junk Lady piles these consumer items on Sarah in her attempt to distract Sarah from reuniting with her family and finding the fulfillment of genuine human communication and connection. Sarah, similar to the Junk Lady, is unable to sit upright under the weight of these goods. Like the Junk Lady in her environment of discarded consumer goods, Sarah sits in her re-created bedroom environment of consumer goods.

Indeed, the Junk Lady's reflection in the mirror foreshadows what will befall Sarah if she fails to change her consumerist perspective and attitude towards life and continues to prioritize the collection of consumer goods over the importance of human relationships. The Junk Lady foreshadows a future version of Sarah if Sarah continues to isolate herself with her material possessions. However, Sarah begins to resist this possible Junk Lady destiny when she reads the *Labyrinth* book and views the mass-produced consumer items and the Junk Lady's reflection in the mirror. Sarah says, "It's all junk" when she looks at her toys (*Labyrinth*). Sarah's conclusion that these items are junk reinforces her understanding from the overconsumptive ballroom environment that the beneficial qualities of consumer items are illusive because they serve as barriers to human relationships. When Sarah looks in the mirror, Sarah begins facing the truth

about the emptiness of consumerism reflected in her real room with all its consumer goods. In the junk world sequence, Sarah gains more evidence to support the uncomfortable truth that consumer goods contribute to the erosion of human connection.

Similar to her realization that she needs to escape the ballroom environment earlier in the film, Sarah determines that she needs to exit the overconsumptive junk world environment. Sarah destroys her music box, a material representation of herself, and throws off the junk piled high upon her back. When Sarah performs this act, she is no longer a reflection or double of the Junk Lady. She mentally and physically frees herself from the burden and weight of her consumer goods. In fact, in an action strikingly similar to Sarah's destruction of the mirror in the ballroom sequence, Sarah breaks through the mirror of her material existence to destroy the overconsumptive environment that surrounds her; the walls of her junk world bedroom disintegrate revealing the junk world outside. With her destruction of the mirror, Sarah again practices resistance to overconsumption and uses consumer items to destroy an overconsumptive environment. Sarah's deeper understanding that consumer goods contribute to the erosion of human connection motivate Sarah to act on her understanding with another anti-consumerist action. Sarah escapes the overconsumptive environment that isolates and distracts her from her human relationship with Toby and resumes her quest to find her brother.

3. Overconsumption and its Deleterious Effect on Planetary Ecology

Sarah's experiences in the junk world environment enable her to understand the deleterious effect of overconsumption on the planet. The junk world environment in *Labyrinth* provides a compelling visualization of the negative impact that overconsumption has on planetary ecology. According to Schor, one of the most serious problems facing the world today stems from the destructive effects of "consumer activity on the planetary ecology" (Holt 6). This

excess of consumer activity and its resultant waste, a North American phenomenon that is rapidly spreading worldwide, is polluting the planet and destroying its wildlife (Holt 6). In fact, Kim Humphery warns that when overconsumption is left unchecked, nature will be subject to its “final, irrevocable destruction” (5). Sarah encounters a window into this destruction when she explores the junk world in *Labyrinth*.

Labyrinth's junk world is filled with discarded consumer items commonly found in industrialized nations. The items that fill the screen in the junk world suggest the unending and overwhelming amount of waste that results from discarded consumer goods. For example, the Junk Lady is physically burdened by the collection of rejected consumer goods on her back, including a chair, hat, drum, cage, stuffed animal, and cooking pot. One junk person's back is piled high with discarded consumer items that include a cage, cooking pot, chair, rake, and wrench. Although gently used, all of these items are not junk and would be valuable to people who are not caught in the “work and spend” cyclical ideology (Holt 8). The junk world reveals what happens when people with overconsumptive lifestyles discard consumer items that could have been retained or used by others who need these goods.

In the junk world sequence, Sarah learns the dark side of overconsumption and how it is connected with the growing problem of pollution and waste. Even the colors of the junk world are dark; the gray, ashen, and muted wasteland of the junk world stands in stark contrast to the bright, verdant park in the opening of the film. The junk world represents the degradation of the environment because of the poor choices as overconsumptive consumers and the way they carelessly discard consumer items. The mountains of junk in the junk world result from societies' excess of consumer waste and the poisoning of the planetary ecosystem. In her ongoing education during her quest to finish the labyrinth, Sarah rejects and abandons the

overconsumerist junk world to reunite with her brother and embrace the fulfillment of genuine human relationships.

4. Conclusion

In *Labyrinth*, Henson uses film as a site of resistance against the dominant media's support of consumerism and overconsumption. With the rising prevalence and importance of advertising and television viewing in the 1980s, media played a major role in the rise of consumerism and contributed to the "important shift in the decline of the social" (Holt 14). Advertising and television viewing greatly influenced the mass consumption in the 1980s and the weakening of social relationships (Holt 13-14). Henson's release of *Labyrinth* in 1986 supported an "ethos of ethical and responsible consumption" and worked as a site of resistance to the dominant media's messages of consumerism and overconsumption (Humphery 6-7). Sites of resistance such as Henson's *Labyrinth*, Scott's *Blade Runner*, and Cox's *Repo Man* are liminal places that offer the potential to challenge the current power structure in society (de Certeau 117). They are films that provide an alternative narrative to consumerism and overconsumption.

Through Sarah's education in *Labyrinth*'s bildungsroman format, Henson challenges the dominant media by bringing anti-consumerist messages to viewers in a visual fable. Viewers accompany Sarah as she gains the understanding that consumer goods contribute to the erosion of human connection and have a deleterious effect on planetary ecology. They watch when she acts on this understanding and embraces the fulfillment of human relationships. In the film's final moments, Sarah embraces her relationship with Toby and continues her genuine concern for his wellbeing. She reaches out to her family by openly communicating with her father. In a final anti-consumerist action, Sarah puts away many of her consumer goods. Through Sarah's journey of understanding about the truth behind the illusive qualities of overconsumption, Henson

delivers strong anti-consumerist messages to both young and mature audiences. Throughout the film and especially when Sarah looks in the mirror in both the ballroom and junk world sequences, Henson is reminding viewers to look into the mirror themselves. Using film as a site of resistance, Henson encourages viewers to reflect on their consumerist lifestyles, resist mass media and contemporary culture's messages of overconsumption, reduce their consumption of consumer goods, and embrace the fulfillment of human relationships.

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The idea is nauseating. Jim Henson is dead. David Bowie is dead. When Sara Connoll...
Labyrinth™ is my childhood, teenagehood, and adulthood all in one. I can't say that for any other movie. I guess some movies I've watched as an adult every few years or so have given me nostalgia. But a movie that can bring you back to your childhood, repetitively watching over the years? That's magical!!!! Related Questions. More Answers Below. Why is Planet of the Apes (2001) heavily criticised? What is the moral of The Labyrinth? Jim Henson's Labyrinth: Shortcuts. Edited by Cameron Chittock and Sierra Hahn; Assistant Editor: Gavin Gronenthal; Cover Art: Derek Kirk Kim Boom! Studios/Archaia September, 2018. I grew up loving Labyrinth more than I love oxygen. When I was six, I wanted to be Sarah Williams, a heavy reader with a dramatic streak claiming my independence from the pouty, glowering presence of Jareth the Goblin King. Its themes about growing up while keeping the spark of kindness, friendship, and childish silliness alive spoke to me. Boom! Even still, Labyrinth: Shortcuts was a beautiful reading experience. I devoured it happily in a single afternoon and craved more. It was such a pleasure to read and made me so incredibly happy. The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson: Essays on His Work and Legacy Beyond The Muppet Show and Sesame Street is an academic anthology on various productions of Jim Henson (especially Fraggle Rock and The Dark Crystal), as well as legacy projects from the Jim Henson Company or Muppet Studios (including Dinosaurs, Farscape and the recent viral Muppet shorts and comeback movie). The book is a follow-up to Kermit Culture, also edited by Jennifer Garlen and Anissa Graham. Jim Henson's 1986 classic LABYRINTH was a childhood staple for so many of us, with unbelievably imaginative practical effects (serious Henson magic is on display in this one), endlessly quotable dialogue, and, of course, some prime David Bowie action as Jareth, the Goblin King. That's why we're so excited that tomorrow we have a fantastic new LABYRINTH poster by Argentine artist, Julian Totino Tedesco!