

Spaces of Horror in *Locke and Key*
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In many ways horror is tied closely to both psychological and physical space. Whether the depths of the abyss or a towering castle, a dark and lonely graveyard, or brightly sanitised laboratory, the settings of Gothic stories are both iconographic and symbolic. They often stand as metaphors for the text's themes or characters: Dr Frankenstein has his laboratory, described as a 'cell' and 'workshop of filthy creation'. Castle Dracula is isolated, foreign and mysterious – full of long passageways and closed doors. Buffalo Bill has a secret and feminised sewing room. Eleanor 'come[s] home' to Hill House. Mrs Rochester has her attic – its position in the house reinforcing its secret nature and state of mental disturbance. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's unnamed narrator has her yellow wallpaper, its 'bars' a symbol of her physical and mental imprisonment. The Castle of Udolpho is a place of confinement for Emily, and has become metonymic for the genre, although she spends less than a third of the book there (Ferguson Ellis 2012: 460). So each of these spaces represents and reinforces the character's mental state and the themes of the text.

This paper examines the use of space to construct and convey horror in Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez's *Locke and Key* (IDW, 2018-2013). I will start by examining the spectral and uncanny nature of this story, which includes markers from various horror sub-genres such as serial killers, possession and transformation. I then look more closely at the spatial tropes it uses, in particular the abyss and the haunted house. I want to argue that, despite its numerous literary markers, *Locke and Key* privileges concrete and spatial motifs of horror over literary and metaphorical ones. Rather than using its setting as metaphor, the comic instead literalises a psychological reading of horror, for example in its magic keys that can unlock thoughts, change identities, and create ghosts, amongst other things. In *Locke and Key* the motifs and settings are not metaphors for various emotional states. Instead the story concretises symbols of horror and their psychoanalytic interpretations into physical and spatial forms.

Locke and Key (Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez, IDW, 2008-13) is part literary ghost story, part slasher movie, part psychological thriller. It tells the story of the three Locke children, Tyler, Kinsey and Bode, who move to their ancestral home, Keyhouse, after their father is murdered. Here they discover that the house's doors offer a range of powers when they are unlocked with certain special keys. These include transformation of various types (turning characters into various animals or changing their gender, ethnicity, size, and even corporeality), the power of healing, power over shadows and animals, and so on. The keys have been made from a substance called 'whisp'ring iron' by various generations of the

Locke family since the eighteenth century. The iron is the physical form of demons that have entered our realm through a portal called the Black Door without being able to attach to a human soul. Soon the siblings are engaged in a war to prevent the Black Door from being opened by Dodge, a possessed character who was once their father's best friend.

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From the beginning, *Locke and Key* marks itself as horror by including established motifs and genre markers. It opens with a home invasion that ends in Rendell Locke's murder, and thus brings in elements of the slasher movie. Inaugurated by John Carpenter's *Halloween*, the slasher film was the most influential and commercially successful form of horror to appear in the 1970s and 80s (Byron: 627). It is based around a relentless serial killer and bloody violence, and Byron also notes its self-referential qualities and 'notorious prowling subjective camera, which visually positions the audience with the killer's point of view' (627-8). While a comic cannot create the 'prowling camera' effect, in Volume 1 the pages of Sam and Tyler's fight are dark and chaotic with a constantly moving view and acute angles. Panel borders are not present, and instead the heavily shadowed images are arranged as jumbled snapshots of the fight on an otherwise black page, representing the intermittent flashes of light from Sam's gunshots and the confusion of the fight.

The effect is nonetheless cinematic, as it draws on established visual tropes of the horror genre. Stephen King notes a similarity between films such as *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Birds*, whereby a 'strobe' effect is created by the use of limited light from a single source, creating Q 'a nightmare dreamscape of shifting, swinging shadows' (King 1982: 216), as on these pages. It is repeated (at a slower pace) later in the same volume (1.108-9) when Bode converses with Dodge/Echo while flicking a flashlight on and off.

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Other sub-genres of horror are also referenced. Nina Locke kills Sam's accomplice Al Grubb with his own hatchet in a splash page that could be taken from a rape-revenge movie – her torn clothes and scratched body recalling the publicity images from *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). Later in the series Kinsey kills Dodge by slashing his face repeatedly with an ice skate (4.145), and death-by-ice-skate features in horrors such as *Black Christmas* (1974/2006) and *Halloween H20* (1998). The comic is also scattered with visual and verbal references to other horror genres and titles. Dodge/Echo climbs out of well in a scene reminiscent of *Ringu* (1.110), and vampires (4.9), werewolves (4.16), and the actor Lon Chaney are all namechecked.

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Julian Wolfreys (643) claims that 'Literature is citation. Literature is spectral.' and so this intertextuality can also be read as a kind of spectrality, where other texts haunt the one we are reading. Through this process, *Locke and Key* also marks itself as literary horror in paratextual and intertextual terms. Joe Hill is Stephen King's son, as many approaching the book will know, and he dedicates Book 5 'To Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman'. Literary namechecks also abound within the story: the first volume is entitled '*Welcome to Lovecraft*', (the name of the town), and reference is later made to the family's 'Uncle Machen' (6.163). The structure of this story is also self-consciously literary: the opening issues of the first volume are focalised through each main character in turn: Ty, Bode, Kinsey, and antagonist Sam.

Echoes of the literary Gothic are also apparent in the framing of the text. The volumes conclude with a section entitled 'The Known Keys', which are extracts from the diaries and correspondence of various generations of the Locke family. These are added to in each volume as more keys are discovered, and are visually marked as aged: written in various handwritten-style fonts on paper scraps and accompanied by illustrations of the effects of each key that range from woodcuts to photographs.

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However, alongside this constructed historical authenticity is a claim for authentic space. This is a gothic marker that appears in many texts, such as Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, which opens with a (fake) Translator's Preface that claims Q 'The scene is undoubtedly laid in some real castle'. Walpole points towards the particularity of the positioning of the described rooms and passageways as evidence of this story's 'truth'. *Locke and Key* offers a similarly authentic plan of its setting. Artist Gabe Rodriguez is a trained architect and has a clear spatial sense of Keyhouse: knowing Q 'where the bedrooms are and what you would see if you looked out the windows.' (Hill 2012 *The Guide to Keyhouse in Grindhouse*). Each hardcover volume opens with an illustration or plan of a different aspect of the house, including cross-sections, various elevations, and plans for each floor, which are republished (along with a numbered list of rooms and significant furniture) in 'The Guide to Keyhouse' in *Grindhouse*.

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At first glance, the story's content also seems to privilege the literary by drawing on traditional horror symbols and metaphors. For example, much is made of the uncanny potential of shadows, reflections and mirrors. Kinsey speaks about not recognising her own reflection (1.62, 1.81) and all the children spend a deal of

time staring at their own reflections while trying to come to terms with the violent events. The medium emphasises this through repetition and page layout, as here where Tyler imagines different versions of himself (1.10). Mirrors have special power: they can show the real rather than an illusion (for example Dodge's reflection as a decaying corpse, 1.59) and have special powers. Mirrored page layouts (1.125) and panels pairing or doubling characters are also used to underline this through format (6.147).

Many other traditional markers of horror are also present. The storyline as a whole is driven by an ancient possession, which re-enters the present through Rendell Locke's mistakes. Possession and transformation are frequent motifs, as characters use the Animal Key, the Skin Key, or the Gender Key to change their appearance. The visual aspects of the medium are well-suited to this and layout is also used to reinforce: for example the first time Tyler uses the Giant Key the panels become splash pages, changing size to mirror his enormous stature.

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In Volume 3 the Crown of Shadows is found, which allows the wearer to control the shadows, which Dodge uses to attack the children. This is a terrifying concept expressed particularly well by the medium where a menacing shadow within a panel requires the reader to search for it (3.112) rather than being alerted by movement or extratextual signs as a horror movie might.

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The visual elements of the comics medium in fact privilege shadows at various points, bringing in another marker of horror, the eyes. At many points the children, especially Tyler, are drawn with cavernous eyes (1.96, 1.76, 1.99), perhaps to evoke the horrors they have seen. Their eyes often also appear shadowed (4.75, 5.22), giving an uncanny feel to the text. Injured and injurious eyes are a common motif to both horror and comics and discussed in Waller's (1986) analysis of Christopher Lee's bloodshot gaze or my own (2014) discussion of pre-Code horror comics and analysis of 'The Vampyre'.

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When Dodge surveys the house using the Philosophoscope Key his eyes appear as ghostly red images, evoking various horror and fantasy films as shown here. Eyes also mark the Black Door, transforming from stone carvings to alert, open, yellow eyes when the gate is about to be opened (5.100-101).

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Freud argues that the uncanny not only relates to doubles, doppelgangers and reflections, but also to the involuntary repetition of acts. We could therefore even

read the pages of *Locke and Key*, which often repeat panel compositions within scenes, as creating an uncanny atmosphere. Repetition of panel shape and composition are used consistently (based on a random sample of ten issues, an average of three sequences of repeated panel composition and form across three panels or more appear in each issue). These sequences often go on for pages at a time, so this is a significant feature of this comic. To my mind, they privilege the physical space of the scene, representing the locations as static and unchanging spaces within which time passes (2.113, 2.29). The technique is used particularly in sequences linked with death and sadness. For example at their father's funeral (1.13-15) a layout of the same long thin horizontal panels is repeated across two pages as various family members come to comfort Tyler. Later, when Bode demonstrates his use of the Ghost Key to Kinsey, similar panels of identical composition with his body in the foreground fill another double page sequence (1.70-71).

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In addition Freud cites the uncanny potential of womb phantasies and haunted houses (Creed: 53) and so tropes of the abyss and the haunted house are of particular interest. The Well-House, Keyhouse itself, and the Drowning Cave (which contains the Black Door) are significant locations in the text. Bode releases Dodge from the well, and the story concludes in the Drowning Cave, and so the opening and concluding acts of *Locke and Key* both focus on the abyss. Edwards argues that 'The abyss became a literary feature to convey anxiety and depict remote and sublime landscapes in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels' and that it 'inspires anxiety, terror and awe.' It is sometimes used to represent transgression, and as a pole of both attraction and repulsion to characters, 'embodying an ambiguity that is central to the Gothic.' (Edwards: 4)

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The Drowning Cave in particular is a good example of horror as symbolic ordering. Creed (1993: 27) argues that the horror film is an ideological project of patriarchy, and so a common image of horror is 'the voracious maw, the mysterious black hole that signifies female genitalia which threatens to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path.' (27). This is the site of the archaic mother, representing 'the blackness of extinction – death.' (28). It evokes the desire for non-differentiation; to return to the womb, described as 'the desire to merge' which then 'gives rise to a terror of self-disintegration, of losing one's self or ego [...] the obliteration of self' (28). This seems particularly apt to this story, as the demons who come through the Black Door in the Drowning Cave have this same purpose: to merge with a human soul, or else they turn to iron.

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Critics also argue that the haunted house is a symbol of the uncanny. Doane argues that the house 'becomes the analogue of the human body' (1987: 72) and Creed reads it as another space where identity can collapse and the womb may be symbolised. Haunted houses contain cruel secrets and have witnessed terrible deeds (Creed 55) and thus are a symbolic space where three primal scenes (conception, sexual difference, desire) are played out. At first instance this seems supported by the text, as Sam Lesser's ghost tells Rufus: 'This may look like an old house, but you and Bode have it exactly right. It's a battlefield. The fighting has claimed many lives.' (4.84) The children reflect on Keyhouse's haunted qualities (for example saying: 'Nice place... For a medieval torture chamber' (1.99)), as do other characters, who ask: 'How many more people have to fall dead after visiting their house before people understand that it's *them* – them and *that house*' (5.46).

But in actual fact, although the house *is* the site of many battles, it is not in itself uncanny or haunted. Rather than Keyhouse, it is the Lockes' old home in San Francisco that is the site of murder and rape. Dodge's spirit is relegated outside the building, to the Well-House. Kinsey's awakening sexuality and relationship with Jamal begins in the Drowning Cave. Instead Keyhouse is a place where the children can literally unlock and examine their memories (using the Head Key) and heal themselves (with the Mending Key).

The temptation in close reading is to hone in on the metaphorical import of these types of motifs. Punter draws attention to the range of metaphors in early Gothic novels without clear meaning, asking what exactly the eternal castle is a metaphor *for*? He suggests that metaphor creates the uncanny: 'saying both more and less than it knows; (2007: 8) and also draws attention to the inherited and historical nature of metaphorical meaning, which is seldom created anew by a writer but instead reiterates older meanings and symbols. Hawkes also argues that metaphors have both 'normative' and 'exploratory' qualities and that they affirm as much as they challenge (1972: 88).

The uncanny qualities of the text, its mirrors, shadows, caves and haunted houses all point towards a reading of *Locke and Key* as symbolic horror – nicely woven, but nothing new. If doing this, I'd now draw attention to additional phrases in the story that invite interpretation as metaphor. For example when speaking about moving the family to Lovecraft, their mother Nina says 'They needed a few doors closed between them and what happened' (1.41). Towards the end of the series Rendell explains 'Your body is a lock. Death is the key.' (6.187), and the understanding that 'Keys turn both ways' is pivotal to the children's final victory. In all these instances 'doors' and 'locks' are used in a metaphorical sense, and the

character names can even be interpreted as referring to buildings: with Bode perhaps connoting 'abode' and Rufus often abbreviated to 'Roof' (6.31).

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However, for me the more interesting aspect of *Locke and Key* is its use of phrases that sound metaphorical but in fact are literalised in the text. When Nina says 'I swear the locks in this house have minds of their own' (1.112) she is more right than she knows – the whisp'ring iron keys have both agency and power. When Kinsey realises 'Ideas can't really be killed. Not for good' (5.40) she isn't speaking in the abstract but is referring the memories and emotions that have been pulled out of her and Erin Voss's heads: which remain alive as tiny anthropomorphised characters, despite drowning. When Dodge claims 'Your father used a key on me, unlocked my thoughts and took my memories' he is, again, speaking literally (1. 139) – the Head Key allows for things to be put in and taken out of people's heads.

This literalisation creates a metatextual level of commentary on the use of metaphor in horror that relies primarily on the use of space. Taken as a whole, *Locke and Key* is a story about psychological healing and the redemptive power of horror. It rejects literary metaphor in favour of literalising the abstract processes of psychoanalysis. Doors are opened and memories are removed and put back again. Tyler literally locks up his negative emotions and memories in his head (**), but the solution to dealing with sadness and loss is not to repress or remove negative emotions. After she has removed her Fear and Tears (2.93), Kinsey injures herself (2.99) and nearly kills her friends in the Drowning Cave (3.36-51). She also and disastrously places her trust in Dodge without a second thought because she is unable to hear her Fear as it reminds her: 'You need me! [...] He's daaaanger!' (2.115). The 'key to being a complete person' is not just believing in oneself (1.80), but literally exists as an object and can be used to return a person's personality and memories, such as Erin Voss (6.176-7).

The trajectory of the story and in particular its resolution depend on this manipulation of the spiritual and physical, which transform into each other throughout the text. The demons turn into whisp'ring iron when they enter our world; just as characters' emotions take on tangible, physical form (such as Kinsey's Fear and her Tears); and, as noted, Tyler's ultimate victory over Dodge depends entirely on a spatial understanding of how he can change events through his realisation that 'Keys turn both ways' (6.150). Perhaps the most compelling description of this type comes from Dodge at the close of the book as he attempts to describe a version of heaven, or Q 'the place spirits go':

He says Q:

You ever find a cat sleeping in a ray of sun?

There's a *sound* over there. It's a *golden* sound. That's the only way to describe it. It's a *bright* sound, and it has little flecks of music in it, drifting like motes of dust.

And you just know that if you let that sound get inside you, if you hummed along with it, you'd rest like a cat in the sun.

A perfect rest.

(6.172-3)

Here the visual becomes the audible, just as throughout the text the abstract has become the physical. Gina Wisker argues that 'horror uses image and metaphor to embody what we fear' (Wisker 38). But rather than using symbolism, *Locke and Key* makes its concrete metaphors into literalisations that form the basis for its fantastic plot. I wonder if this is a strategy particularly suited to comics, which employ the static visual alongside the verbal. It crops up in other titles such as Mike Carey and Peter Gross's *The Unwritten*, where Hobbes' Leviathan (a metaphor for the will of the people) takes on literal form as an otherworldly monster. I welcome any comments on this idea or suggestions of the forms it might take. Thank you.

Comics form**

Unwritten and Leviathan

A story that begins with an 'echo' that is shown to be false.

Distrust of the verbal? 'That's history in a nutshell. A shiny paint job over a cast-iron nightmare' (6.59) – metaphor of things

Writer Iain Banks has claimed that 'any time a castle appears in any book, certainly in mine, in a way it stands for the individual ... [speaking of *The Wasp Factory*] Frank is almost literally cut off – literally insular in his perceptions.' (Cobley 26)

Williams points out that the haunted house/castle is both central to and completely unnecessary to Gothic – it can be sufficient to organise the whole narrative as G but also does not even need to be there in other G stories (39) and that G may be expressed in any number of alternate symbols. Cites Koontz 'Anything used in place of the old house should have the same qualities of it: isolation, gloominess, an air of mystery, lots of dark places, eerie corridors, and musty rooms' (126).

'A house makes secrets in merely being itself, for its function is to enclose spaces.' (44)

House in G refers both to the building and to the family line.

Thus it becomes a complex metaphor for structures of cultural power and gender

cave as a female space

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