

The Role of Spatial Manipulation in ‘The Shining’ And Its Impact on Horror Dynamic

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Abstract

In ‘The Shining’, hallways stretch too long, corners turn where they shouldn’t, and doors open into spaces that don’t quite match. This study argues that Stanley Kubrick uses spatial manipulation as a psychological weapon, transforming the Overlook Hotel into an active force that produces fear through architectural inconsistency rather than conventional shocks. Drawing on film theory, architectural criticism, and horror psychology, the research treats the film itself as primary data, examining key spaces, the hedge maze, the impossible corridors, the Colorado Lounge, the Red Bathroom, and the carpeted hallways, to show how disorientation becomes the film’s central horror strategy. The study concludes that space in ‘The Shining’ is not a passive backdrop but a dynamic, deliberately unstable system that shapes character psychology, guides viewer perception, and leaves a lasting sense of unease that persists beyond the film itself.

Keywords: Spatial Manipulation; Psychological Horror; Architectural Inconsistency; Film Space; The Shining

1. Introduction

Fear in cinema does not always announce itself through spectacle. Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) produces unease gradually, embedding fear within the very spaces its characters inhabit. On the surface, the film follows a familiar horror premise: a family isolated in a remote hotel, cut off by winter, with a father figure who progressively loses his psychological stability. Yet its most disturbing elements arise not from supernatural events or violence, but from the hotel

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itself, its corridors, its rooms, and an architectural logic that resists coherence.

Rather than functioning as a passive backdrop, the Overlook Hotel operates as a spatial force that actively shapes both character behaviour and viewer perception. Film scholars have long noted that cinematic space can exert psychological pressure on characters, influencing mood and meaning beyond narrative action (Lefebvre, 1991). Kubrick extends this principle by transforming architecture into a mechanism of psychological destabilization. Unlike conventional horror films that rely on sudden shocks or explicit threats, *The Shining* cultivates fear through spatial disorientation: corridors appear to extend endlessly, rooms seem inconsistently placed, and architectural features, such as windows appearing where they could not logically exist, contradict basic spatial logic. Critics understand these inconsistencies not as production errors but as deliberate design choices (Falsetto, 2001).

The importance of this quiet spatial wrongness lies in its subtlety. As Anthony Vidler (1992) suggests in his discussion of the architectural uncanny, spaces that almost make sense but ultimately resist comprehension generate deep psychological unease. The Overlook never openly declares itself hostile; instead, it feels slightly misaligned, creating instability that operates beneath conscious awareness. Cinema is inherently a spatial medium, organizing bodies, movement, and environments to construct meaning. In *The Shining*, space does more than contain action, it actively produces meaning. The hotel's refusal to conform to logical continuity mirrors Jack Torrance's psychological disintegration: as his mental state deteriorates, the viewer's ability to mentally map the hotel collapses as well.

This study therefore argues that Kubrick's manipulation of cinematic space constitutes one of the film's most powerful horror strategies, and it examines this claim through close analysis of the film's architecture, camera movement, and sound design.

2. Review of Literature

A growing body of scholarship supports the idea that spatial manipulation is central to *The Shining*'s horror. Reviewers of cinematic architecture repeatedly describe the Overlook's "non-Euclidean layout", a polite way of saying that its geography does not add up, and that this incoherence itself becomes horror. Literature on horror psychology reinforces this, arguing that fear grows sharper when familiar spaces behave even slightly wrong: a window where no exterior wall should exist, a corridor that loops on itself. Some scholars trace this tradition to Gothic architecture; others compare Kubrick's design to the maze-logic of psychological thrillers, or argue that the steady Steadicam movement creates a child-like viewpoint that turns the hotel into a playground of dread.

Several works directly inform this study. Amanda Bingham Solomon's analysis of the "haunted house as dark space" argues that the Overlook dissolves the boundary between who its characters are and where they are, using theorists such as Caillouis (mimicry and psychasthenia), Freud (the uncanny), Bachelard (domestic space turned hostile), and Vidler (the architectural uncanny) to show how the hotel embeds fear into its walls and erodes the characters' sense of self. Jack's descent is read as a surrender to space; Danny's visions fold past and present together; Wendy becomes trapped both physically and emotionally. The chapter concludes that this collapse of

orientation extends to the audience, who experience the same instability while watching.

Biba C. Babu's comparative dissertation on *Shutter Island* and *The Shining* similarly argues that space is not a backdrop but an amplifier, a psychological device that intensifies memory, distorts identity, and accelerates mental breakdown. Using Lefebvre, Foucault, and Yi-Fu Tuan, the study traces how architecture, geography, and sensory detail (sound, colour, smell, touch) become psychologically charged. In *The Shining*, the Overlook is described as a "living memory chamber" that absorbs Jack's vulnerabilities and reflects them back at him, while Danny's psychic sensitivity turns every corner into a warning.

Jesús Lazcano López's study of the Overlook's filmic space through its sets examines how Kubrick stitched together real locations and studio sets so that interior spaces do not correspond to exterior shots. Mapping rooms, corridors, and windows against exterior images exposes spatial impossibilities that mirror Jack's slipping sanity, and the hedge maze is read as a symbolic extension of the same disorienting logic.

Beyond film-specific scholarship, broader literature on horror cinema situates *The Shining* within a genre-wide shift from supernatural to psychological horror. Early horror externalized fear through monsters (*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*), offering audiences the psychological distance of a threat that could be defeated or expelled. As the twentieth century progressed, psychological horror, exemplified by Hitchcock's *Psycho*, removed that protective distance, locating fear in ordinary human instability rather than supernatural difference. Atmospheric horror, including *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Witch*, and *Hereditary*, extended this shift by constructing fear

through sensory experience rather than action, trusting audiences to sense unease before it is explained. Scholarship on space and architecture in horror more broadly (McAndrew, 2020; Abu-Obeid & Abuhassan, 2024) confirms that setting and isolation, as in *The Evil Dead*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *Rosemary's Baby*, condition fear by shaping characters' ability to escape, while confinement (*The Descent*, *Cube*) and disorienting repetition operate on the same psychological principles Kubrick uses in the *Overlook*.

Literature on horror's broader relationship to space, setting, and architecture reinforces these film-specific readings. Horror often allows space to establish unease before any explicit threat appears, a corridor that feels too long, a room too silent, a house subtly wrong, operating beneath conscious awareness and guiding emotional response without explanation. Remote or isolating settings, as in *The Evil Dead* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, remove characters from social support, forcing confrontation with fear; even urban settings such as the apartment building in *Rosemary's Baby* achieve the same effect through claustrophobic proximity rather than distance. Architectural disruption of the domestic space, traditionally associated with safety, appears across the genre, from the fracturing family home in *Hereditary* to the static, over-familiar bedrooms of *Paranormal Activity*, where terror emerges from the possibility that danger exists within spaces meant to be safe.

Confinement and expansiveness operate as complementary strategies. Enclosed spaces such as the cave systems in *The Descent* or the basements of *The Silence of the Lambs* intensify fear by limiting movement and visibility, while open, indifferent expanses, the desert in *The Hills Have Eyes*, the suburban streets of *It Follows*, demonstrate that horror depends

not on confinement alone but on the emotional framing of space. Films built around repeating or shifting structures, such as *Cube* and *As Above, So Below*, most directly anticipate Kubrick's technique: the inability to map space mirrors psychological breakdown, and spatial instability reflects internal collapse. Across this literature, architecture in horror consistently carries emotional and historical weight, retaining traces of past violence and functioning, as in *The Haunting* and *Crimson Peak*, as a silent witness to unresolved pain.

Together, this literature establishes a consistent pattern: cinematic space in horror is not neutral. It acts, bends logic, and pushes both characters and audiences toward unease, a pattern this study investigates specifically through *The Shining*'s architecture, editing, and sound design.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, using content analysis to examine *The Shining* as its primary data source. Rather than testing numerical variables, the research treats the film itself as text, analysing key spatial features, impossible architecture, disorienting corridors, the hedge maze, the Colorado Lounge, and the Red Bathroom, to understand how they create disorientation and shape both character psychology and audience perception. A scene-based approach is used, focusing on significant sequences such as Danny's tricycle rides and the maze climax, each examined in terms of camera movement, framing, sound, and spatial continuity. Thematic analysis identifies recurring ideas such as entrapment, repetition, and psychological fragmentation, guided by concepts from spatial theory and the architectural uncanny.

3.1 Objectives

- To analyse how the spatial layout and architectural design of the Overlook Hotel contribute to psychological tension and disorientation.
- To examine spatial communication techniques, framing, camera movement, and mise-en-scène, in constructing symbolic meaning within the film.
- To investigate how architectural spaces influence viewer perception, guiding emotional responses such as fear, anxiety, and suspense.

3.2 Method of Data Collection

Primary data consists of close viewing of *The Shining* as the primary text for qualitative content analysis. Secondary data is drawn from journals, books, articles, and film reviews addressing spatiality theory and horror cinema.

3.3 Hypothesis

H0: Cinematic space in *The Shining* does not significantly contribute to psychological horror and functions only as a background setting.

H1: Cinematic space in *The Shining* is deliberately constructed as a psychological mechanism that produces horror through spatial disorientation.

4. Discussions

4.1 The Overlook Hotel as a Living Spatial Trap

The Overlook is introduced as a luxurious mountain resort, thriving in summer but sealed off entirely by winter snow, a seasonal isolation that founds the film's horror. The design

draws on real American grand hotels, particularly the Stanley Hotel in Colorado, where Stephen King's own unsettling stay directly inspired the novel. Kubrick grounds the film in this architectural authenticity before slowly destabilizing the viewer's perception of space: the hotel begins as recognizably normal, which is essential, since the horror of its later impossibility depends on that initial normality.

4.2 Architecture That Should Not Exist

The most discussed impossibility appears in the manager's office, where a large window floods the room with daylight, yet Jack's path into the office, traced through interior hallways and multiple turns, places the room deep within the hotel's core, with no exterior wall the window could logically belong to. Because windows normally function as psychological anchors, orienting viewers to the outside world, this quiet impossibility sends an unsettling subconscious message: there is no outside. The hotel becomes a sealed, self-contained world, and the viewer feels that confinement before consciously understanding why.

4.3 Corridors That Do Not Connect

Danny's tricycle rides through the hotel are constructed from corridors filmed on different sound stages, edited to appear continuous. This deliberately violates the conventions of spatial continuity, consistent screen direction, maintained orientation through turns, preventing the viewer from ever forming a stable cognitive map. The tricycle's sound design (a rhythmic clatter on wood floors alternating with sudden silence on carpet) reinforces this: the audience begins subconsciously mapping the hotel through sound, only to have that map broken when the film cuts to corridors that, by the established rhythm, should not exist. Kubrick reuses similar lighting, wall colours,

and carpet motifs across different corridors, producing a déjà vu effect without true recognition, a dreamlike sensation in which places repeat but never quite match, unsettling the viewer long before any supernatural element appears.

4.4 The Steadicam and Sound as Disorientation Tools

The revolutionary Steadicam work follows Danny at child height, making the viewer feel less like an observer and more like a silent presence moving through the hotel. Where filmmakers typically use long tracking shots to clarify geography, Kubrick uses the same technique to obscure it, a contradiction between formal clarity and experiential confusion that produces profound unease. When Danny turns to find the twins waiting in a dead-end corridor, the shock lands harder because it violates the spatial rhythm the film has spent minutes training the audience to expect. Filming from Danny's child-height perspective further makes the building appear enormous and threatening, conditioning the audience to feel lost inside the Overlook long before any ghost appears.

4.5 The Colorado Lounge and Weaponized Scale

Designed like a cathedral rather than a living space, the Colorado Lounge abandons human-scaled proportions: towering ceilings, oversized windows, and a vast, sparsely furnished floor make Jack appear insignificant when seated at his writing desk, an effect of scale dissonance that architecture has long used (in cathedrals) to produce awe and submission, repurposed here for psychological oppression. The room's hard surfaces disperse sound rather than enclosing it, making conversations feel detached; and its brightness, unusual for horror, which typically relies on darkness, exposes rather than conceals the room's emptiness, so warmth and comfort visually coexist with isolation and cold. Sparse, scattered furniture fails

to humanize the space, leaving Jack exposed rather than sheltered within it.

4.6 The Red Bathroom as Psychological Control Space

In the conversation between Jack and Grady, no violence occurs, yet tension is extreme, generated entirely by the room's design. Saturated red offers the eye no visual relief, subtly raising physiological alertness, while extreme architectural symmetry (aligned sinks, mirrors, and lighting) creates an environment that feels artificial and over-controlled, a hallmark, the study argues, of horror built through order rather than chaos. The calm, formal dialogue contradicts the room's visual urgency, and Jack, framed within this rigid geometry, appears less like a person occupying a room than a figure trapped inside a predetermined pattern. Where earlier spaces overwhelmed Jack through scale, this room contains him, marking the hotel's shift from passive observation to active psychological guidance.

4.7 The Carpet Pattern as Directional Psychology

The hotel's hexagonal orange-and-brown carpet functions as more than decoration: its angular geometry creates directional lines that the eye follows subconsciously, and when filmed at Danny's tricycle-level, the repeating pattern produces a tunnel effect that makes movement feel faster and more inevitable than it is. Repetition lulls the brain into a predictive, low-alertness state, making sudden interruptions, like the twins, land with greater force. The pattern also flattens depth perception, making corridors seem longer than they are and reinforcing the sense of an infinite hotel; warm, high-energy colours add low-level physiological stress. In this way, the floor itself becomes an instrument of control, narrowing

attention and guiding movement exactly where the hotel wants it to go.

4.8 The Gold Room: Glamour with a Dead Feeling

The Gold Room appears alive and glamorous, yet its perfection feels artificial when empty, closer to a preserved memory than a functioning space. Its emotional register shifts to match Jack's needs: comforting and validating when Lloyd appears, in contrast to the exposing scale of the Colorado Lounge. Its sudden, unexplained transformation from empty stillness to a crowded 1920s party breaks the film's rules of realism, suggesting the space can rewrite itself without warning, and therefore cannot be trusted. Symbolically, gold suggests both wealth and moral corruption; it is within this beautiful room that Jack reconnects with alcohol, meets Grady, and edges toward violence, the bar functioning as a confessional space that validates his resentment rather than challenging it.

4.9 The Hedge Maze: Symbolism and Spatial Mirroring

Kubrick invented the hedge maze; it appears nowhere in Stephen King's novel, and its addition deliberately extends the hotel's twisted interior logic outward. Early in the film, Jack stares down at a scale model of the maze in the Colorado Lounge while Wendy and Danny appear tiny within it, a god's-eye composition that foreshadows his shift from caretaker to predator. Kubrick then cuts between overhead shots of the miniature model and matching overhead shots of the real maze, making the two visually interchangeable, so that the model becomes a symbolic bridge between interior and exterior space: the hotel contains a miniature maze, and the maze functions as a giant exterior version of the hotel's corridors, sharing the same underlying geometry of hallways, junctions, and dead ends. Both the maze's location relative to the hotel

and its apparent scale shift inconsistently across the film, preventing the viewer from ever forming a stable exterior map of the grounds, and this expansion mirrors Jack's psychological descent, the environment growing in proportion to his obsession and violence.

The maze also carries mythic and historical resonance: its final chase evokes Theseus and the Minotaur, with Jack cast as the hunting monster and Danny as the clever figure who outwits him, while the hotel's construction on a former burial ground suggests cycles of violence that ultimately absorb Jack rather than release him, he freezes in the maze and later appears folded into the hotel's 1921 photograph, with no clear escape. For Wendy and Danny the maze initially represents play and bonding in the snow; Jack poisons that same space into a site of pursuit. Danny survives by retracing his own footsteps, applying the same spatial literacy his tricycle rides trained him in, while Jack's rage blinds him to the paths available to him, demonstrating, at the level of plot outcome, that spatial awareness itself determines who survives the Overlook.

4.10 The Torrance Apartment and the Collapse of Domestic Safety

The family's own living quarters, ordinarily a site of intimacy and retreat within a large institutional building, are staged with the same instability that defines the rest of the hotel: cramped and cluttered in contrast to the Overlook's cavernous public rooms, yet no more secure. The apartment's proximity to endless corridors means domestic space is never truly separated from the hotel's disorienting geography; the boundary between private safety and institutional threat is porous rather than fixed. This reinforces a pattern visible throughout the analysis, the Overlook does not simply contain dangerous spaces alongside safe ones, but steadily erodes the

distinction between them, so that even the family's most intimate space is ultimately not exempt from the hotel's control.

4.11 Elevators, Thresholds, and the Final Photograph

Vertical spaces such as the blood-filled elevator disrupt the hotel's already unstable horizontal geography, hinting at depths and histories the visible hotel does not fully reveal. Doors and thresholds, spaces that should mark safety or transition, repeatedly collapse that promise, most visibly when Jack breaks through the bathroom door. The film's final image, a 1921 photograph showing Jack already present at the hotel, collapses linear time altogether, suggesting the Overlook is not merely a location but a spatial-temporal trap that has always contained him, the ultimate expression of the film's argument that space in *The Shining* refuses to behave.

5. Proving the Hypothesis

Individually, none of these rooms rely on jump scares or explicit threats; their horror comes from how each space transforms, calm shifting into disturbing within the same physical setting. This instability supports the idea that space in the film is fluid and responsive rather than fixed, shaped by perception, desire, and vulnerability. The hedge maze extends this logic outdoors: structured and legible from above, yet as confusing as the hotel's interior once entered, its repeating paths mirroring the corridors within. Danny survives the climactic chase because he understands and adapts to the space, retracing his steps; Jack fails to interpret it and becomes trapped, demonstrating that space actively influences narrative outcomes, not merely atmosphere.

Theoretical support reinforces this reading. Lefebvre's argument that space is produced rather than simply existing

explains how the Overlook functions as more than a physical structure, actively shaping behaviour and emotion. Soja's concept of Thirdspace suggests cinematic space operates on both physical and psychological levels; Pallasmaa's emphasis on sensory perception explains how sound, movement, and atmosphere make space felt rather than merely seen; and Fisher's notion of the eerie captures how the film generates discomfort through absence and ambiguity rather than direct presence. Perhaps the strongest evidence for the hypothesis is experiential: even after the film ends, viewers struggle to construct a clear mental map of the Overlook. Individual scenes remain vivid, but the spatial structure stays confusing and unresolved, a deliberate effect that ensures the film's disorientation, and its horror, persists beyond the viewing experience itself.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study strongly supports the hypothesis that spatial manipulation is central to the horror dynamics of *The Shining*. The film transforms architecture into a psychological tool, using spatial inconsistency, disorientation, repetition, and sensory experience to create fear. Rather than relying on conventional horror elements, it builds tension through the instability of space itself. The Overlook Hotel becomes more than a setting; it becomes an active force that shapes perception, influences behaviour, and sustains unease. The film's lasting impact lies in its ability to make space feel unreliable, leaving viewers with a sense of uncertainty that does not easily fade.

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. First, interdisciplinary approaches drawing on cognitive psychology and neuroscience could deepen understanding of how the brain processes spatial inconsistency and repetition,

explaining why viewers feel discomfort even without consciously identifying spatial errors. Second, a comparative framework analysing similar spatial techniques in films such as *Hereditary*, *The Babadook*, or *The Descent* could reveal broader patterns in horror's use of space and situate Kubrick's approach within its wider influence on the genre. Third, audience reception research, through surveys, interviews, or focus groups, could clarify whether viewers consciously notice spatial inconsistencies or experience them subconsciously, and how factors like cultural background and viewing experience shape that response. Fourth, closer technical analysis of set design, camera placement, lighting, and editing could bridge the gap between theoretical interpretation and the practical filmmaking methods behind the Overlook's "impossible space." Fifth, the study itself would benefit from structural refinement, reducing repetition across sections that revisit similar ideas about spatial perception. Sixth, extending this analysis to contemporary digital cinema, where CGI and virtual production create even more fluid spaces, could reveal how spatial horror has evolved while retaining its psychological core. Finally, examining the cultural and historical context of spatial horror, reading the Overlook as a symbol of memory, isolation, and historical continuity, could connect this film-specific analysis to broader societal anxieties around space, identity, and belonging.

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