

The Architecture of Memory: Liminality, Trauma, and Spatial Uncanniness in Kane Parsons' *Backrooms*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Kane Parsons' *Backrooms* (2026) as a cinematic representation of liminality, memory, and trauma. Originating as an internet horror phenomenon, the Backrooms developed around the idea of an endless and unsettling space that exists beyond ordinary reality. The paper argues that Parsons transforms this concept into a psychological space closely connected to the experiences of the film's characters. Drawing on Victor Turner's concept of liminality, Astrid Erll's theory of mediated memory and Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma, the study examines how the film uses space, repetition, and distorted familiarity to represent psychological experience. It argues that the Backrooms transform liminality from a temporary state of transition into an enduring condition of uncertainty, where memory and trauma continually shape the spaces the characters inhabit.

Keywords: *Backrooms*, Liminal Spaces, Memory, Digital Horror, Cinematic Space.

Introduction

The Backrooms began not as a film, novel, or established horror mythology, but as a single unsettling image circulating on the internet. In May 2019, an anonymous user on 4chan's paranormal board posted a photograph of a bleak, empty interior with yellow walls, fluorescent lighting, and dated furnishings in response to a request for images that felt "off" (Lloyd). The image was subsequently associated with the idea of the "Backrooms," an apparently endless maze of similar rooms from which there is no clear way out. What began with a single image soon developed into a wider body of internet lore through stories, images, maps, games, and fan-created interpretations. The Backrooms' appeal lies partly in the familiarity of its spaces. The rooms resemble offices, schools, libraries, shopping malls, and other ordinary environments, yet their emptiness, repetition, and lack of human presence make them strangely unsettling. As Andrew Lloyd observes in *VICE*, people have connected the image with memories of older and transitional spaces from their childhood, making the Backrooms both familiar and strange (Lloyd). The phenomenon, therefore, represents a form of digital horror in which the ordinary becomes disturbing precisely because it appears recognisable (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The image that inspired the Backrooms phenomenon.

Source: Andrew Lloyd, “The Backrooms: How a Creepy Office Photo Became an Internet Bogeyman,” *VICE*, 29 Mar. 2022.

Kane Parsons’ work significantly expanded this open-ended internet phenomenon by giving it a cinematic form. Parsons first developed the Backrooms through his YouTube work, beginning with *The Backrooms (Found Footage)* in 2022. His films transformed the original static image into an audiovisual experience of movement, sound, spatial uncertainty, and entrapment. The feature film *Backrooms* (2026) extends this process by turning an open-ended internet concept into a character-driven narrative. In a conversation with James Wan, Parsons describes the development of the project from the original short to the feature as a journey in which the idea changed in ways he had not initially anticipated (Parsons and Wan). The feature retains the central characteristics of the Backrooms while placing them within the lives of Clark

and Mary. Clark, a failed architect and the owner of a struggling furniture store, is already caught in a difficult personal and professional situation, while Mary, his therapist, carries the effects of her own past. Their encounter with the Backrooms consequently gives the internet phenomenon a psychological dimension that extends beyond its original premise of accidental entrapment.

This movement from an internet image to a feature film provides a productive context for examining how space can become connected to memory, trauma, and liminality. Existing discussions of the Backrooms have emphasised their digital origins, their uncanny familiarity, and their relationship to liminal spaces. Contemporary criticism of Parsons' film likewise draws attention to its unsettling use of familiar environments, repetition, and psychological horror (Baughan). These concerns can be further understood through the theoretical concepts that inform this study. Victor Turner's concept of liminality describes a temporary state of being "betwixt and between," in which an individual has crossed away from an established position but has not yet entered a new one (95). Wiggins' discussion of the Backrooms as a form of digital liminality is particularly useful in considering a space that appears to suspend its inhabitants indefinitely. Astrid Erll's understanding of memory as a process of mediation rather than a fixed storehouse provides a framework for considering the unstable reproduction of remembered spaces (113). Cathy Caruth's work on trauma, meanwhile, helps illuminate the persistence of experiences that return because they have not been fully assimilated (4). Anthony Vidler's concept of the architectural uncanny offers another way to understand the unsettling familiarity of the spaces depicted in the film. In *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Vidler examines the uncanny potential of architecture as a medium to make familiar domestic or built environments strange, unstable, or psychologically disturbing. This concept is especially relevant to Backrooms, where familiar architectural elements – rooms, hallways, furniture, lighting, domestic interiors—are duplicated in distorted and alien ways.

The uncanny is thus in conjunction with liminality, memory, and trauma in explaining the film's capacity to transform familiar spaces into psychologically charged environments (Vidler).

This paper argues that Kane Parsons' *Backrooms* transforms an internet-born horror concept into a cinematic space through which memory, trauma, and liminality become materially perceptible. The film's significance lies not simply in its depiction of an unusual supernatural environment, but in its use of architecture and spatial repetition to connect the external world with the psychological experiences of its characters. In this sense, the *Backrooms* become more than a setting: they provide a spatial form through which the boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar, past and present, and psychological and physical experience can be questioned. By bringing together theories of liminality, cultural memory, trauma, and the uncanny, this study examines how *Backrooms* reworks the familiar conventions of the liminal space and gives them a distinctly psychological and cinematic form.

Method and Approach

This paper employs qualitative close reading and formal film analysis, treating the film as the primary text and reviews, director interviews, and promotional material as secondary sources. The method examines mise-en-scène, sound, editing, and dialogue as interlocking systems rather than isolated effects. Because the film's argument is largely carried by production design, the analysis attends closely to the relationship between ordinary spaces and their distorted counterparts, including the showroom, the basement and the *Backrooms* themselves.

A selection of crucial sequences was examined for how it constructs space and character. The theoretical concepts above are applied only where the film's formal choices invite them: liminality for the threshold and its failure to resolve, the uncanny for the degraded

copies of domestic space, and trauma's belated repetition for the characters' compulsive returns. Reviews are used to establish critical context and to identify interpretive debates, and the director's published comments are used for further analysis.

Trapped Before the Threshold

The psychological premise of the film is already rich with nuances before any character interacts with the threshold. After the cryptic prologue and the title credits, the film proceeds with the narration (Later, we come to know that Mary, the therapist, is speaking with her patient, Clark):

We all have our loops. Our habits. Behaviours that keep us walking in circles. Reaching for the same solutions over and over again. Thinking each time will take you somewhere new, but they don't. And still, it's the neural pathway of least resistance. A path you made. It's the one that kept you safe when you were a child. You learned to push people away before they could hurt you. And now, as an adult, you're still stuck right where you started. Alone. (*Backrooms* 00:07:49-00:08:54)

Clark is a failed architect and the owner of Cap'n Clark's Ottoman Empire, a discount furniture store in a sleepy California suburb. His marriage is broken, his business is going under, and he lives in the store itself, sleeping in a display bed in a showroom tableau designed to look like a bedroom. The character of Clark can be seen as a man paralysed by his own failures, and the film supports this reading with spatial detail: Clark's home is a product on display, a bedroom that is also a commercial imitation of a home (Bradshaw). The character does not live in a domestic space; he lives inside a simulation of one. Vidler's concept of the 'unhomely' is evident in this showroom, which replicates an intimacy it fails to deliver (Vidler 11).

Clark's therapy sessions with Mary establish the foundation for the film's later spatialization of memory and trauma. Mary asks Clark to reenact the night at his former home,

which eventually led to his divorce. The same argument is rehearsed with minor alterations, and Clark's narrative of events changes depending on the details he is willing to acknowledge.

As the *Script Magazine* review notes, "Sometimes details are how he wants to remember them; other times they're actually how things happen" (Alexander). Thus, the therapy scene establishes the film's central epistemological premise before the Backrooms (not formally named in the film) are introduced: memory is not a stable record but a performance that alters with every rehearsal, a notion in keeping with Erll's conception of memory as a dynamic process of mediation rather than storage (Erll 113).

Mary, the therapist, plays a crucial role in constructing the narrative and fostering hope in the film's world. However, she is also haunted by her past. Her audiobook advertisement brings calm amidst the tension of the film and hints at second chances,

Do you ever feel like you're living behind glass? Watching life happen but never really stepping into it? Maybe it's time to open the window within. You can be the author of your own design because we all deserve another chance to fulfil our dreams. The moment you believe change is possible, you've already begun. (*Backrooms* 00:18:14-00:18:36)

However, this can probably be just the foreshadowing of the threshold. Mary's childhood is condensed in a single disturbing memory: the handprint she left with her mother in the concrete of her childhood driveway, which was torn down in the present day during the first scenes of the film (Schager). Mary preaches behavioural loops and the need to open windows to new paths, but her own life repeats its patterns, and the film's framing of her solitary meals and empty evenings quietly contradicts her professional optimism.

The film's two main characters are already living inside repetitive structures. The early sequences and the narration establish that both characters were coping with their trauma and

memory in such a way that it feels deeply ingrained. Clark returns to the same marital grievance; Mary returns to the same childhood image. Neither has moved. The appearance of the portal in the basement does not create a new condition but rather provides structural expression to the existing dilemmas of the characters. This also aims at what Parsons was trying to do with the existing narrative of the Backrooms. He wanted to upgrade the YouTube lore and build a narrative where it (Backrooms) actually has a distinct relationship with individuals (Parsons and Wan).

Entering the Threshold

The film effectively suggests the presence of a different metaphorical realm through extended voiceovers (likely from therapist Mary's recordings) in which identity is negotiated, even prior to the protagonist (Clark) discovering them. The voiceover states, just prior to the scene, when Clark discovers the threshold in the basement:

Why did you do this to yourself? How did you get here? Your consciousness is a room full of memories that is constantly evolving. But as you walk through life, the untrained mind can start to build walls, put up barriers to protect itself from the outside world. It's a natural response, something we are often unaware of. But if gone unchecked, it can leave you feeling trapped. You can become convinced that the world outside is better off without you. That you never deserve the relationships you've had. Resigned to watch your life unfold from behind a lone window. (*Backrooms* 00:20:55-00:21:53)

Clark's discovery of the Backrooms is staged as a spatial event, where he approaches a glowing slit in the basement during a power outage and falls through into an endless series of yellow rooms. The whole scene emphasises the continuity between the showroom and the Backrooms: the similarity of the fluorescent lights, the carpet, and the institutional furniture creates a sense of uncanniness in the character's mind as well as the viewer's. These spatial specificities

resemble what Vidler describes as an architectural uncanny, in which the familiar built environment becomes psychologically unsettling precisely because of its alienation and deviation (Vidler 12). The space is not alien but uncannily familiar, a significant aspect of the original creepypasta horror: a sofa embedded in a wall, a doorway at an impossible angle, and rooms that look like bad copies of bad copies (Baughan). The horror and uncanniness arise from its unsettling familiarity. The Backrooms resemble the ordinary world closely enough to be mistaken for it and become convincingly unnavigable in the process.

Turner's concept of liminality provides the best understanding of the threshold structure in the film's world. According to Turner, the Liminal phase is temporary: the subject crosses into a 'betwixt-and-between' state, undergoes transformation, and emerges into a new position (Turner 95). The film and the overall digital discourse of the Backrooms achieve originality by portraying liminality as a permanent state. Clark crosses the wall and finds no specific or certain space for transformation. He discovers an infinite series of further passages. Wiggins' depiction of the Backrooms as an infinite state of liminality in the online series resonates even more clearly in the feature film, which emphasises the complexity of having human characters in it (Wiggins 4731).

Clark maps the Backrooms as an architect, drawing floor plans and trying to make sense of the whole space. Nevertheless, his futile efforts of mapping an unmappable space reinforce Parsons' point that the space preys on the human brain's ability to map spaces and understand them. So that returning by the same route produces the same rooms, but the route never ends. Parson also adds in that discussion with *The Hollywood Reporter*,

The Backrooms, to me, has felt aligned with what happens when someone goes through sensory deprivation on the individual level — and you go out in an empty room — and the body, the nervous system needs stimulation so badly [when] it's deprived of it. It

starts to find noise and information in the pattern of the walls and starts to take that noise more seriously than it normally would. It opens its threshold of what it's willing to accept. (Gajewski)

Clark's obsessive exploration of the Backrooms reveals his own inability to deal with the real world and, hence, digs deeper into another world. This exploration can also be considered an act of compulsive return. Caruth's description of trauma as a return of what was never fully experienced is constantly visualised in the film. Clark's movement reiterates similar spatial arrangements and does not result in any kind of advancement. The character is bound to return to the same destination perpetually (Caruth 4).

Within The Threshold

In the middle of the film, the character Clark defines The Backrooms as "It's... Every place that ever was" (*Backrooms* 1:11:06-1:11:11). After an intriguing chain of sequences, Mary's childhood living room recurs in an increasingly abstracted version; the camera slowly glides downward, showing the Backrooms' ever-degrading memory of the room, eventually becoming an arched hallway. This scene clearly hints at what can be called the most significant formal achievement of the film: its way of dealing with and rendering memory as a spatial system. In the subsequent scene, characterised by a nearly Lynchian aesthetic, grotesque figures seldom move at a dining table, suggesting a lack of agency even when subjected to harm (Baughan). These sequences are an example of transforming the intricacies of memory into production design. Eric Francisco, of *Esquire Magazine*, writes in a review, "Backrooms seem to operate as a kind of echo-space for memories; it's why many places in the Backrooms look familiar but are imperfect, as our memories can't contain the full snapshot of the places or people we've seen." (Francisco) In the film, memory is depicted as an active force in the present, one that can be walked through, entered, and eventually inhabited.

A memory is always an imitation of an imitation: an imperfect reconstruction made from blurred and semi-remembered realities. Backrooms do not store memories. They reproduce them. Each reproduction is a further deviation from the original. This rationale contradicts the conventional narrative of memory and space. In *Backrooms*, the space embodies memory, and its erratic nature makes everything within it uncertain. In a similar manner, the spatial aspect of the film serves to dramatise Erll's emphasis on media as active producers rather than passive storage of memories (Erll 113). The Backrooms do not contain the past so much as they continuously generate degraded versions of it. The editing of the film during the chase, cutting through the endless identical rooms, apparently looks like a scene from a found-footage film. A kind of spatial uncanny takes over the characters and the audience, as every corridor and entrance seems to lead nowhere. The mapping of the space is absurd, for it contains no void, only an endless loop of meaningless places. This spatial uncanniness can be explained by the notion of the architectural uncanny, as proposed by Vidler: familiar architectural forms become disturbing when their expected functions, proportions, and relations are disrupted (Vidler). The corridors, hallways, and every spatial mapping only lead to more architectural and psychological ambiguity and further entrapment. The Backrooms appears to draw upon the existential and psychological anxieties of those who cross its corridors (Lattanzio).

The film's yellow light, its fluorescent hum, and its institutional furniture all work to make the space feel both manufactured and haunted, an office building that has somehow become an archive of everyone who ever walked through it. Bradshaw, in his review, talks about the loneliness engulfing the whole film and writes, "It's about people walled up in their own memories, imprisoned in endlessly remembered scenes from their past, or miserably perceived versions of their present existences in which they have become caricatures of themselves, gargoyle stars of their paralysed inner world of failure." (Bradshaw)

As the film progresses, the Backrooms begin to function as a refuge for the character Clark. He forms a home among the 'residents,' the degraded facsimiles of humans that reside in the deeper quarters, and he seems increasingly averse to leaving. The film's portrayal of this withdrawal is its most psychologically accurate manoeuvre. The Backrooms are terrifying not solely due to Clark's confinement but also because they provide him with precisely what he has pursued throughout his adulthood: an environment in which responsibility, intimacy, and the mundane expectations of other people have been reduced to furniture.

The script designates the grotesque iteration of Clark as the Lifeform. The Lifeform is discernible as the tangible culmination of Clark's self-sabotaging behaviours: the aspect of himself he has failed to address in therapy, within his marriage, or in the showroom. Clark's trajectory exemplifies how trauma cannot be resolved into a narrative when viewed through Caruth (4). He does not confront the past; he reproduces it, and the film gives this reproduction a physical form.

The echo-space is, in effect, the film's own model of cultural memory: a media environment that does not preserve the past but mediates it, imperfectly and repeatedly, in the sense that Erll gives to this term (Erll 113). Memory in *Backrooms* is neither purely internal nor external; it is the uncertain boundary between the two, a threshold that can be crossed in either direction. The barriers confining the characters are constructed from their past, and the exit from the Backrooms merely returns them to the inescapable labyrinth in the film.

After The Threshold

The concluding montage of the film reflects the initial scene depicting the real world prior to the emergence of the threshold. The closing shots are fleeting, barely lingering: a mute sequence where the Backrooms mimic locations from Mary's memory, her childhood home, the shelves where her self-help book was sold, and, finally, a distorted copy of Mary herself,

sitting in a room that looks like the interrogation chamber she has just left. The montage does not intend that the space is withdrawing from the world. It means the world is coming into space. The Backrooms is not a finished archive of the past but a medium in continuous production. Erll's perspective on media as active producers of memory, expressed in architectural form in the film, is once again readily apparent (Erll 113). The final montage thus demonstrates that the threshold is not just a place where the characters crossed and were affected. It is an active phenomenon that continues to be influenced by the ordinary world.

The sequence also projects the film's liminality onto the audience. The montage's images are momentary, and that is the point. The audience cannot hold them, reproducing the film's law of caricaturing reality: bad copies of bad copies. Turner's liminal subject is one that is "betwixt and between" stable categories. The film ends by putting the viewer in just that limbo: ushered out of the auditorium, still trying unsuccessfully to hold images that were already fading (Turner 95). The fluorescent light, carpeted corridors, and institutional blankness of the exit hallways of the theatre are themselves liminal spaces, between the dark interior and the street. When the audience walks down those corridors after the credits, the film's spatial grammar is already working on them: the same light, the same anonymous passage, the same sense of a space that is neither here nor there.

In the aftermath, the film successfully collapses the boundary between the fictional narrative and the real space of its reception. Behind any mundane wall, the Backrooms always exist, and the theatre exit serves as one such wall. The audience does not merely interpret the film's thesis that memory is architecture; it walks through the thesis on the way out. The threshold, which the film's characters could never complete, is completed by the viewer in the act of leaving, and yet the space goes with them. The final montage's last image, a copy of Mary trapped where she was questioned, is also a figure for the viewer: a version of the film retained imperfectly, carried into the world, and ready to be reproduced in the next ordinary

corridor. The Backrooms, the film suggests, are never fully behind us, because we carry their images into every space we enter next.

Conclusion

Kane Parsons' *Backrooms* successfully transforms an internet-born legend into a significant contemporary discourse on liminality, memory, trauma, and human experience. What began as a single unsettling image and developed through internet lore is given a more personal and psychological dimension through the stories of Clark and Mary. Rather than treating the Backrooms only as a mysterious or supernatural space, the film connects it to the characters' memories, failures, and unresolved experiences. In doing so, Parsons gives a more humane angle to an already existing digital narrative and makes the Backrooms meaningful beyond their origins as an internet horror phenomenon.

The film's most important achievement lies in its representation of memory and trauma through space. The Backrooms do not simply contain the characters' memories; they reproduce them in distorted and incomplete forms. Mary's childhood living room and other familiar spaces appear as degraded versions of what they once were, showing how memory can change through repetition and mediation. Similarly, Clark's repeated movement through the same corridors reflects his inability to move beyond his own past. In this sense, the spatial structure of the Backrooms gives physical form to psychological experiences that are otherwise difficult to represent.

The film also increases the uncanniness and complexity of the Backrooms by making them closely connected to ordinary human spaces. Their resemblance to familiar rooms, furniture, corridors, and domestic environments makes them disturbing precisely because they are recognisable but never completely familiar. This spatial uncanniness affects both the characters and the audience, encouraging them to question what makes a place familiar,

unfamiliar, safe, or threatening. The characters' different ways of coping with their past also remain uncertain and complicated. Clark's increasing attachment to the Backrooms, for instance, suggests that the space can become not only a site of confinement but also a form of refuge from the difficulties of ordinary life.

Ultimately, the uneven and constantly changing geography of the Backrooms reflects the uneven geography of memory and human experience. The idea of entering a new space only to encounter the past within that same space eventually captures the central tension of the film. Moving forward does not necessarily mean leaving the past behind. Instead, the past can reappear in unfamiliar forms within spaces that seem new. The final movement of the film extends this uncertainty to the audience, suggesting that the Backrooms do not completely remain inside the fictional world but continue through the spaces and memories carried by those who encounter them.

Thus, *Backrooms* presents liminality not as a brief stage between two conditions but as an ongoing condition of uncertainty, repetition, and helplessness. The Backrooms become a microcosm of human existence in which attempts to map, escape, or understand the space repeatedly fail. Through this spatial uncanniness, the film ultimately makes both its characters and its audience interrogate liminal spaces not only externally, as physical places, but also internally, as spaces of memory, trauma, uncertainty, and unresolved human experience.

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