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Locke & Key Production Analysis

Locke & Key, a new Netflix supernatural horror drama based on the comic book series by Joe Hill, follows the Locke family as they return to their ancestral Keyhouse mansion following the murder of their father, Rendell. Although they move into the mansion to start over, the family stumbles upon a secret darker and more powerful than they could have ever imagined: a set of magical keys that have a stake in their father's death (Tallerico, 2020). The series - reminiscent of *Stranger Things*, *October Faction*, and even *Harry Potter* - capitalizes on gloomy, ominous themes and colorful, mystical imagery to create a supernatural environment that stands out amongst Netflix's other original programming. This production analysis focuses exclusively on Rendell's murder scene in episode one of *Locke & Key*, which features Sam Lesser (Rendell's murderer and student) and Nina Locke (Rendell's wife). The scene occurs early in the episode, is set in the Locke's semi-finished living room that is covered in white sheets, and is approximately two minutes long. A variety of production techniques, including medium-close-up and point-of-view shots that highlight intimacy, vulnerability, and violent dominance - as well as soft lighting and high-pitched instrumentals - work together to create a chilling scene that feels jarring, extremely intense, and ultimately out of place in a domestic setting.

Framing: Intimacy, Vulnerability and Dominance

Whenever Nina and Rendell are filmed together at the beginning of the scene, it is always through medium-close up or close-up shots that accentuate the actor's facial features. These revealing, intimate shots work to convey a sense of closeness between the couple - as a viewer, it

almost feels like you have stumbled upon something private and off-limits. In one particularly intimate close-up shot, Rendell is seen at the edge of the frame kissing Nina's neck. Although his nose and lips are visible, the rest of his face is not. By focusing on specific parts of his body, the shot capitalizes on physical intimacy and establishes relational norms Rendell and Nina perpetuate - norms that will be ripped away from them later in the scene.

Once Sam rings the Locke's doorbell (a jarring tear in the scene's normalcy and intimacy) Nina is framed from a high angle. As Bulter (2012) suggests, filming characters from a high angle weakens their impact by making them appear smaller. The high angle shot of Nina accentuates her small, thin stature and indicates her vulnerability to the upcoming violent act. After she lets Sam into the room, the camera pans into a medium close-up shot of her working on a stained glass window. Her back is to the men, and she is unaware of Sam's intimidating glare. By confirming that Nina is physically detached from the scene behind her, this eerie shot adds to the overwhelming sense of vulnerability first signaled by the high angle shot and suggests something abnormal is going to occur.

As soon as Sam cocks his gun at Rendell, the medium-close up shot of Nina with her back to the action is flipped - her face is now the focus of the frame, with Sam and Rendell standing behind her in a fighting position. This shot is an integral part of the scene, as it beautifully captures Nina's emotions as she suspects - and processes - the nightmare playing out behind her back. The following zoomed-in close-up is a "window to Nina's soul," and invites viewers to contemplate what they would do in her position, ultimately adding tension and anticipation to the scenario (Butler, 2012). Although Nina quickly turns around to stop Sam from

shooting the gun, this action backfires. He shoots her in the leg and she falls on the ground, unable to get up.

The majority of the remaining shots are framed from Nina's perspective on the ground. These point-of-view shots (which reveal the bullet in Nina's leg and show Sam ultimately shooting and killing Rendell) offer a unique cinematic perspective and allow viewers to feel as though they are actually in the scene (Butler, 2012). The camera movements are shaky and sporadic, arguably mimicking the struggle and panic Nina feels while watching her husband being held at gunpoint. Because Nina is located on the ground and is looking up at Rendell and Sam, these point-of-view shots also function as low angle shots. According to Butler (2012), low angle shots are used to make the characters look more powerful and strong. By capturing Sam pull the trigger from this angle, he appears dominant and in-control - all attributes that compliment his terrifying, murderous actions while contrasting sharply with Nina's physical weakness and inability to interfere.

Lighting: Equilibrium and Deviance

Throughout the scene, soft light is used to establish a sense of vulnerability and normalcy. As Bulter (2012) suggests, soft, blurred light - achieved in the Locke's living room thanks to their sheet-covered windows - is "often used to make actors look younger and more vulnerable" (p. 241). While this calming light alludes to Rendell and Nina's imminent helplessness, it also bolsters the scene's jarring and tense feel by making Sam's murderous actions seem out of place. One would expect murder to occur in a setting characterized by harsh light or ominous darkness, not in a living room with airy, cloud-like illumination.

Although the change is subtle, the scene's lighting gets darker and more reminiscent of low-key light (known for its exaggerated highlights and shadows) once the violence climaxes, likely because of Nina's precarious position on the floor. According to Butler (2012), low-key light often represents oppositional values such as "abnormalcy, dynamism, and disequilibrium," all of which can be used to describe Sam's violent and unexpected behavior in this scene (p. 245). The exaggerated shadows visible when Sam shoots Rendell make the act of violence feel more ominous and unsettling, and also shroud Sam's exact hand motions in mystery - it is unclear whether Sam pulled the trigger or Rendell did, foreshadowing future storylines. As this example illustrates, lighting can be used for emotional and functional purposes (Butler 2012).

Sound: The Power of Instrumentals

Following horror genre conventions, the scene features shrill, fast-paced instrumentals that give viewers the cue to feel anxious and tense. Even though the scene would likely feel unsettling without this nondiegetic sound, it adds a subtle layer of anxiety framing and lighting cannot achieve. Unsurprisingly, the music starts out quiet and quickly becomes louder when the action reaches a crescendo (a.k.a when Rendell is shot). It is important to note that prominent diegetic sound can be heard in this scene (Sam's gun cocking and firing, Nina's deep breathing, and the shattering of her stained glass window, for example), but it does not foster the same amount of tension and fear that the instrumentals do. In other words, most of the sounds in Rendell, Nina, and Sam's world are simply too commonplace to evoke intense emotions among viewers, especially since many audiences are desensitized to violence because of high media exposure. These sounds need to be paired with something else to give the scene auditory impact, and the creepy diegetic instrumentals do the trick.

Conclusion

Using a scene of *Locke & Key* as a text, this production analysis revealed how certain shots, lighting, and imagery can create a jarring and tense cinematic atmosphere. Rendell's murder scene capitlizes on medium-close up, point-of-view shots, and high and low angles to establish intimacy, vulnerability, and dominance. By establishing these moods in this order, the shots build anticipation and flow together nicely. Soft light that slowly transofrms into low-key light as the scene becomes violent adds to the jarring atmosphre by making Sam's muderous actions seem sudden, ominous, and out of context. Unsettling, high-pitched instrumentals ultimately bolster these emotions. Applying Butler's production terms to this scene allows viewers to gain an in-depth understanding of meaningful techingues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

References

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