Melinda Campbell

Department of Arts & Humanities

National University

Hotels on the Border:

Cinematic Situations of Transgression and Transcendence

A young child invents a solitary game that involves transforming a hallway, a space not singled out for any meaningful activity other than passing from one part of the house to another, into a secret room. She closes all the doors and opens the linen cabinets; sheets and towels are cleared away and rearranged; she climbs inside to try out her new "bed chamber." There is just enough light to see, but the darkness in the day adds to the transformational mood. She feels special here, in her new room, a space that is all her own and invested with meaning, a real place that no one else knows about, a place for private fun and imaginary exploits. The room disappears, naturally, when any of the doors are opened, the light is turned on, or someone else enters the hallway.

Unknowingly, the child in this scenario has enacted a socio-spatial practice that produces symbolic and cultural meaning attaching to her environment. Such practices are studied in the cultural geography of spaces wherein socio-spatial relations are conceptualized as being "simultaneously a field of action and a basis for action" (Lefebvre qtd. in Richardson and Jensen 10). In their elaboration of the idea that spaces are constructed by social agents and that different spatial constructs may co-exist within the same physical space (as the little girl's magic room exists, unknown to others, in the hallway of her parents' house), Richardson and Jensen conduct an analysis of the dialectics of coercion and power enabled through the conceptualized, constructed spaces, or "spatialities," of social relations. Within their dialectical framework, they establish the relational nature of the "flows and mobilities" allowed for by the organization and dimensions of constructed spaces, which include the material structures situated in and dividing up specific geographies as well as the interpersonal dynamics facilitated through particular spatial practices. The notion that "spaces and places are not isolated and bounded entities, but material and symbolic constructions that work as meaningful and practical settings for social action because of their relations to other spaces and places" (Richardson and Jensen 11) leads to the focus of the present inquiry: a look at the hotel as a created space--a sociological construct. Hotels have historically been places not only for escaping everyday life, but also for exhibiting oneself on a social stage, for revealing true but ordinarily hidden desires, for taking a stand on life, morality, and political realities not manifest in non-communal environments. Hotels may be construed as liminal spaces that are "borderlands between the mundane and the extraordinary...places which, whilst locations of 'desire' and 'dreamtime' are also places of anxiety replete with darker images of threat and danger" (Pritchard and Morgan 764; Preston-Whyte 350).

Three important 20th-century American films prominently feature a hotel as the site for morally ambiguous and sexually charged events depicted in the plot: Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), and Joel and Ethan Coen's *Barton Fink* (1991). While all three films have a multiplicity of elements that present how hotel spaces open horizons displaying human behaviors both normal and abnormal, moral and immoral, secret and public, sane and insane, the focus here will be on how these particular cinematic efforts tell the story of transgression being the path to transcendence. The center of this focal point is the lead female character whose person, or more perspicuously, whose body, is the exact location and occasion for resolving a problematic situation or crossing over to higher state of being through violation, both physical and psychological. The hotel is, in a sense, a borderland that frames situations for moving across the line from everyday life to the novel and unexpected, to the extraordinary or significant, to the carnivalesque; similarly, the body, especially the female body, is itself an incarnated border through which the lines between life and death, divinity and mortality, propriety and corruption, and ultimately, being and not-being, may be hypostatized.

The Borders of Evil

*Faint as a climate-changing bird that flies*

*All night across the darkness, and at dawn*

*Falls on the threshold of her native land,*

*And can no more, thou camest, O my child,*

*Led upward by the God of ghosts and dreams,*

*Who laid thee at Eleusis, dazed and dumb,*

*With passing thro' at once from state to state*

*Until I brought thee hither...*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

In Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*, the action takes place on the border between the United States and Mexico in the fictional town of Los Robles, a place resembling Tijuana or Nogales. Within the narrative of the film, transgression is configured in multiple ways on multiple levels, and in each instance the offending action results in higher moral, psychological, or existential awareness. Though good eventually triumphs over evil, Welles portrays a seamy, morally ambiguous, culturally indefinite world. By dramatizing racial and cultural tensions, Welles taps into the deeper themes of justice, morality, and self-identity. Acting as well as directing, Welles delivers a masterful performance as Captain Hank Quinlan, a respected Texas cop known for a lifetime of dedication to the law; however, he circumvents the law to achieve his ends. Also crossing legal and literal borders is "Uncle Joe" Grandi, (Akim Tamiroff), a Mexican hotel owner, drug dealer, and default head of the Grandi crime family. Though he is leader of a gang of toughs, Uncle Joe seems more frightened than threatening, a foppish clown in the position of head thug who ends up being the victim of a murder rather than the perpetrator. The two other main characters are Ramon Miguel "Mike" Vargas, a heavily made-up Charlton Heston with dyed-black hair and moustache, and his bride, Susan, played by the sensuous Janet Leigh, who gives her character a believable personality in addition to filling out the role of blonde victim. The newlywed couple presents a juxtaposition of opposing elements: Miguel Vargas is an up-and-coming narcotics officer from Mexico City, and Susan is a Philadelphia-born, all-American girl. This racially mixed marriage is a transgression--a breaking of cultural boundaries, and the events that unfold threaten to destroy not just the Vargas's honeymoon holiday, but the very union that the couple represents.

The opening shot of *Touch of Evil* is indisputable proof of Welles's cinematic expertise; if there is to be an argument for the Auteur theory in film criticism, what Welles accomplishes in this unbroken three-minute crane-shot sequence, packed with tension, intrigue, sexual energy, visual dynamism, and narrative revelation, could not be a better illustrative premise. We see the lead couple on their honeymoon, crossing the border checkpoint to enjoy a night on the town. We see--and hear--much more: a close-up on a pair of hands placing dynamite in the trunk of a car opens the action. A tracking shot of both the Vargas couple and the couple who have entered the bomb-laden convertible moving nearly simultaneously through the streets toward the border provides a view of various establishments--hotels, markets, nightclubs--flanking the street, their flashy signs advertising "borderline" activities, while music blares on the soundtrack. In the extended, 111-minute "quasi-director's cut" of the film released in 1998, Welles's instructions (written to the studio after he viewed the shorter studio cut) to use "contrasting 'mambo-type' rhythm numbers with rock'n'roll" (1) are followed to excellent effect: as the couple makes their way to the border, walking past the sundry clubs, strip joints and hotels of the border district, we hear up-tempo Latin music interspersed with jiving rock-and-roll sounds, fulfilling Welles's intention of dramatizing the conflict of cultures and the traversing of boundaries. The opening sequence finishes with a fiery explosion.

The events surrounding the lead female character, Susan, now become our venue for understanding the societal and moral issues Welles addresses. Vargas sees the explosion as an international incident and an occasion for suspension of the normal order of things. Just as Vargas and his bride are about to unite in a kiss, a sign of union enacted for the first time as a married couple in the U.S., the emergency postpones their embrace and "Suzie," as Heston's Vargas plaintively addresses her, must make her way, alone, back to the Mexican hotel to wait for her husband. As she walks back across the border to Mexico, Suzie is approached by a young Mexican who ushers her to a meeting with Joe Grandi. We sense trouble. The female character's fierce independence and lack of fear is surprising: she talks back to the Mexican crime boss and his young henchman as well. In films of this era we are used to seeing the innocent, yet sexy, blonde heroine become frightened and melt into the victim role. Suzie stands her ground, yells back at her tormentors, and returns to the hotel to await her husband.

Now alone in her hotel room, in a state of semi-undress, Suzie is again accosted: someone is shining a light into her room to spy, to threaten, to violate. Her character once more goes against type; unafraid, Suzie yells across to the would-be voyeur, discouraging him by throwing the light bulb from the hanging fixture in her room into his window. The situation of the hotel room, where one is a visitor, a stranger, allows for a narrative that shows how a woman alone might be victimized, but it also reveals how she might use the situation to assert herself in an "unfeminine" reprisal. The the plot now takes a decidedly sinister turn as the female lead is ushered into yet another hotel room--this time on the American side of the border.

At this point in the exposition, an interlude into Greek mythology may be instructive. In the cinematic efforts reviewed here*, Touch of Evil*, *Psycho*, and *Barton Fink*, an appeal to allegory adds an extra layer of significance to the real-life analogies recognizable in the plot and characters of each film. Traceable in all three is the ancient Greek myth of the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone, related in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (c. 650 BCE). The myth has many versions, but usually begins with the scene of a young girl, Kore, gathering flowers with other maidens. As she reaches to pluck the lovely, fragrant narcissus flower, the earth itself opens, and Hades, Lord of the Underworld and King of the Dead, ascends from his deep lair of death. Kore cries out and resists, but she is carried off (and later raped) by Hades, brother of her father Zeus, to her new home. Kore becomes known as Persephone in her new position as consort of Hades and Queen of the Underworld. In her grief at the loss of her daughter and anger at the violation of her youthful innocence, the powerful Demeter, the "bringer of seasons," goddess of harvested grain, green plants and life-giving nourishment, preserver of life, health, purity, and the sacred law of marriage, creates a devastating drought, threatening the end of life on earth. Eventually, Zeus persuades Hades to release Persephone, on the condition that she has not eaten the food of the dead. Although Persephone had mostly starved herself in protest, the myth goes on to tell how, because she had eaten seeds of the pomegranate, she must return to the underworld for certain months of the year, the remaining months to be spent in the joyful company of her mother.

Before leaving this excursus into mythology, a final set of connections related to the themes of transgression, sacrifice, transcendence, and salvation must be noted. Interpreters of the Demeter and Persephone myth agree that it represents the agricultural cycle, the seasonal dying and rising of plant life, and undeniably parallels numerous ancient, even prehistoric, forms of "Earth Mother" or fertility-goddess worship. This myth is the basis for the Eleusinian Mysteries (performed for over 2000 years, from around 1600-1500 BCE, until 395 CE), an annual religious pilgrimage from Athens to Eleusis ending in a secret initiation ritual, "the most sacred and revered of all the ritual celebrations of ancient Greece" (Beach, par. 1). Even though the exact nature of the sacred rites and their meaning to the participants is not fully understood, there is a consensus that this practice was an acknowledgement of the relationship of humans to nature: generation and fertility are bound up with death and the anguish that accompanies it. An important part of the ritual was the outcome: the joy, the enlightened state of being, brought about by the realization that death is not the end, and that resurrection and new life will follow what, to the uninitiated, is seen as everlasting death. There are an abundance of parallels across cultures and religions whose myths, parables, and sacred practices echo the idea that "Man receives the fertility which is indispensable to him from the hand of death," and often the stories tell of "...a mythical woman that had to die in order that the grain might spring from her dead limbs;... only by initiation into her death can man become potent and be renewed" (Otto qtd. in Doherty, para.8). Certain images and ideas from the myth of Demeter and Persephone are useful for unpacking the potent messages delivered through the female characters in the films discussed here. These are the images of the maiden's abduction by the god of death, her bodily defilement, and the mourning mother/goddess who effects her salvation through unceasing devotion to that cause. More importantly, the myth reveals a deeper meaning in what may seem to be a tragic violation, an end of life, which is that there is a transformative power in pain and suffering and that the death of one state of being enables the birth of a transcendent life, a new form of existence, or an enlightened state of mind.

Returning to *Touch of Evil*, we can now view the narrative through the prism of the myth. The female hero is abducted, taken to the "underworld" by the "dark forces" of crime and immorality (a literal sense of darkness is invoked--the blonde, fair-skinned Susan is kidnapped by dark-skinned Mexicans). She is violated and imprisoned, like Persephone, but she ultimately is released and allowed to rejoin her beloved husband, who searches for her and, through challenging the legality of the authorized system of justice, is able to free her. Having straddled the border between righteousness and immorality, *Touch of Evil* ends in the happy union of the couple, just as the myth ends with the reunion of Demeter and Persephone.

The evocation of borders, both literal and symbolic, also helps deliver Welles's final message. Susan is violated on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, first at the Mirador Hotel and then later at a hotel for transients, the Hotel Ritz, and these dual violations, as acts of unbounded transgression, break borders; she is protected neither by the alleged safety of being in her home country nor by her own husband, who stands for the law in Mexico. Thus, violence, evil, and even human sacrifice are actions that cannot be controlled through human agency in the creation and imposition of laws, limits, boundaries or borders (Pease 84). The role of the border location and, notably, the special site of the border hotel, in the film's narrative brings into view those aspects of human nature and human interaction that Welles wants to reveal as the "evil that men do." And through this revelation we can, it is hoped, come to know ourselves for what we are and come to terms with what it might take to find and cultivate our better nature.

Susan's body itself enables the crossing of a number of borders, not only as the wife in a mixed-race, cross-cultural marriage, but also as the site of infringement of the boundary between public and private life, and especially as the locus of sexual violation. Susan is victimized by those outside of the law (the Grandi gang) and by those carrying out the law (she is arrested and jailed on suspicion of illegal drug use and homicide). As she is victimized and denied the right of privacy of her person as well as her right to freedom (false arrest), a conception of true, transcendent justice is created in the mind of the viewer, who stands in for the unconscious Susan. Only the film's spectator witnesses the totality of the transgression, the full measure of injustice, that takes place in the various borderlands brought into being in the narrative: geographical borders, social borders, sexual and moral borders are all traversed so that a higher level of human interaction and enlightenment may be reached.

In a final turn of the plot, Susan has become the transgressor; now a criminal suspect, on the opposite side of the law from her husband, she is no longer the "fair-haired," upright American citizen with an unsullied past. In the first part of the film, Vargas feels the sting of racism (made plain in Quinlan's overtly racist comments) and is shamed by the behavior of his fellow Mexicans. But by the end of the film, as the personification of legal authority, Miguel's feelings of inferiority and weakness are traded for the superior power that catapults him to the role of hero. Now that Susan is imprisoned, facing serious charges, her husband has the opportunity not only to rescue his wife, but also, through the elaborate trap that Susan's victimization has ultimately become for Quinlan, to solve an international crime and salvage the image of Mexico as a culture of justice and inclusion by revealing and excising the corruption of men like Quinlan, who exist on both sides of the border. Only through Susan's travails and endured travesties can the union of this cross-cultural couple be sanctioned.

Descrying Borders of Morality and Sanity

*All birth is paid for with death, all fortune with misfortune.* (Horkheimer and Adorno 11)

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* has been analyzed and critically reviewed countless times. Our purpose here is neither to dissect it in every part nor to pronounce on its place in the modernist pantheon of great directorial efforts. Rather, the focus is on portrayals of the human situation through various devices that convey difference, marginality, otherness. By looking at boundaries, artists and authors hope to bring into view a new, perhaps enlightened, conception of what exists on either side of the boundary, or even what might be envisaged in a state free of boundaries. As in *Touch of Evil*, *Psycho* begins with an extraordinary tracking shot: the film opens with an extreme wide-angle view of a modern city, and title captions indicating location and time flash on the screen as if to say: Here is one way to fill in the blanks; it could be some other city on some other day, but this is the story that will be told, a story that starts out in an ordinary way, but one that will take us to an unexpected, horrifying, revelatory place. Panning across an urban landscape on a bright afternoon in Phoenix, Arizona, like an unseen, unheard host, the camera zooms in on a particular window in a downtown building. After a second's pause, the viewer is taken through the shaded window into the darkened room of a tawdry hotel, the site of illicit lovers recovering from their lunchtime lovemaking. Again, as in *Touch of Evil*, Janet Leigh plays the lead female character, Marion Crane, and John Gavin is her physically virile but economically compromised and commitment-resistant lover, Sam Loomis. In another similarity to *Touch of Evil,* Leigh portrays the female protagonist as starting out with an attitude of strength and willfulness, which, in both narratives, is beaten down and overcome by her male counterparts. The basic plot line is that Marion, trusted office worker in a small real estate firm, is given $40,000 in cash to deposit in the bank. Thinking about what the money might mean for her and Sam, how it might give them a chance to start a meaningful life together, Marion hatches the idea, almost subconsciously, of stealing the money and driving straightaway to Sam in California. Clearly, she has not reasoned through the likely results of her plan. She is in love; she is a strong woman with strong passions.

The story of *Psycho* begins in a place of transgression, where feelings ignite and love rules. The couple's hotel room is a marginal site, not where people live or carry on respectable life activities, but nevertheless a place where desire is fulfilled and the essence of joy is tasted. As Marion gets ready for her journey to what she hopes will be "love and salvation," the viewer, for the second time, sees her in a state of undress, a foreshadowing of events to come (full nudity in the shower scene). We already see a signal of Marion having crossed a line; one reviewer has noted that Marion's brassiere and slip in the opening scene are white, but now that she has decided to traverse the border from law-abiding citizen to thief, Hitchcock has her in a black bra-and-slip outfit, signifying her slipping into darkness (Dirks). Marion is, plain and simple, a sexual being, and she is acting upon the realization of her bodily nature, for good or evil. She is not really interested in the money; she is interested in physical union with Sam.

As Marion drives out of town, she suppresses her rational fears and ignores a number of fortuitous warning signs that her deed will be discovered: the spectator, through Hitchcock's subtle manipulations, already suspects that she is headed for disaster rather than delight. Hurtling headlong toward her fate, Marion decides, almost frantically, to trade in her car, knowingly under the surveillance of the police; yet, she continues her neurotic voyage to Sam. She crosses the border from Arizona to California, day becomes night, and finally Marion is waylaid by rainfall and exhaustion. Now another hotel room will play a crucial role in her life--and death. An apparent safe haven in the downpour, the Bates Motel provides a place for Marion to stop and gather her thoughts. Little does she know, upon entering, that she has just traversed the border from relative safety and sanity to a world of psychotic mayhem. It is time to take stock of the plot through comparison with the guiding myth.

We meet Marion Crane at the time of life when she is reaching for those pleasures that precede being a wife and mother. She is not unlike Persephone's incarnation as Kore, the young maiden gathering flowers, enjoying what pleases her. Following the analogy further, is Marion's scooping up of the $40,000 in cash not unlike the gathering of the fragrant narcissus flowers in the mythical tale? If we let this analogy take hold, then down we go, along with Marion the maiden, into a different world--the underworld of darkness and death. Once Marion decides to take the money, she has already surrendered her virtue; she has moved into a new phase of her life: the dedicated woman who sacrifices her life for another--be it lover or child. Marion will soon take on the identity of Demeter, searching for lost innocence and trying to make recompense for the travesty that has usurped her. In the tale of Demeter and Persephone, the mother wanders through the countryside in search of her daughter. Similarly, Marion's arrival at the Bates Motel signals a change in the course of her actions. Marion meets and interacts with Norman Bates, proprietor of Bates Motel; things go well. He is solicitous of her situation (she is tired, hungry, and in need of a good night's sleep) and invites her to share his dinner, which he suggests be served in the parlor behind the registration desk in this lonely, off-the-road motel. Much has been written about this scene of the movie, and there are plenty of symbols to be interpreted and metaphorical connections to be unpacked: the stuffed, swooping, sharp-beaked birds of prey--artifacts of Norman's strange hobby--decorating the parlor, the paintings of classical rapes on the walls, their conversation about people who find themselves trapped. The important element here is the similarity, the deep connection, that is established between these two characters:

Marion is brought face-to-face with the logical extension of her present condition. Norman tells her, "We're all in our private trap. We scratch and claw, but only at the air, only at each other, and for all of it we never budge an inch": he is defining the psychotic state, the condition of a permanent anguish whence development becomes impossible, a psychological hell. (Wood 78)

After Norman and Marion have this little "heart-to-heart," Marion comes to a meaningful revelation: She must return the money and regain her innocence; the path she began to follow is the wrong path, leading only to the death of everything she wants. Marion has turned a corner, turning back from a realm of moral (and legal) impropriety. We can see the resolve on her face: the money will be returned, she will go home and face her life.

This is an important juncture in the film. Hitchcock has a shock in store, however, and the plot will take an utterly unanticipated turn. From the moment Marion meets Norman and we see a two-shot with Norman's reflection in the motel window (foreshadowing what we will come to find out--that he is a victim of split-personality disorder), to the next scene when they enter the hotel office and their images are framed for a split-second in a mirror, then to their awkward, semi-suggestive conversation as Norman shows Marion her room, and finally to his gallant offering of a shared meal, Hitchcock is preparing the viewer to transfer identity from Marion to Norman. They are, dialectically speaking, the same person; the function of this character transference is to embody the occasion for both transgression and transcendence.

Recalling the earlier allegorical claim that at this point in the story Marion takes on the role of Demeter, seeking a return to normalcy, another event in the myth is revelatory. In her travels searching for Persephone, Demeter, now disguised as an old woman, arrives at the town of Eleusis. She sits by a well and is approached by the daughters of Keleos, who invite her to help their mother Metaneira as a nursemaid to her young son. Demeter agrees, and as she enters their home, she brushes her head on the roof beam, filling the doorway with light:

To no one did she give greeting with either a word or sign;

She had no laughter within her, no hunger for food and drink;

But with longing pining away for her deep-girdled daughter she sat,

Till Iambe who knew her duties with jokes and by mocking induced

Queenly and holy Demeter to smile and laugh and be kind. (*Hymn to Demeter,* lines 199-203)

In another version of this myth, we get a more vivid idea of the joke that changes Demeter's mood. In this variant, Demeter goes to the house of Dysaules and is amused by his old wife, Baubo, who makes Demeter laugh by "throwing herself on her back in what is described as an 'obscene way' and lifting her skirts to reveal her 'uncomely womb.' There, dancing in her womb, is Demeter's own son Iakchos (the offspring of a joyous coupling between the goddess and a Titan)" (Carlson 3; n. 22). In her insightful analysis, Carlson claims that this incident with Baubo is a point in the myth where deeper meanings are revealed: What appears to be a tragedy, a violation and a descent into death, is in reality an opening for rebirth into a new phase of life. Baubo's gesture suggests a parody of rape: Demeter is being shown that proper understanding of life's events will uncover more profound truths. The rape of Persephone is a mere appearance of death; what actually lies ahead is the birth of a new child. Moreover, throughout the myth, what happens to the daughter also happens (symbolically) to the mother (Carlson).

An analogy with *Psycho* is irresistible. Norman, who has not only done away with his mother but actually taken on the identity of the old woman, can be seen as giving Marion a way out by displaying a case of someone being stuck in a neurotic trap of psychological weakness and dependence, giving her a reason to change her mind and save the sanity of her own life. At the close of the parlor scene, referring to his mother, of whom he has created an image in Marion's mind through his pretenses (Norman speaks as the mother in an earlier scene and pretends that she is still alive but now insane), Norman suggests to Marion that everyone goes a little mad sometimes. She realizes that what she is doing is a little mad, thanks him for this self-revealing conversation. At the end of this scene both Norman and Marion are smiling, just like Baubo and Demeter. The role of Demeter taken on by Marion will transfer to Norman since once Marion is removed, the spectator shifts her sympathies to him. If there is to be any kind of salvation or moment of transcendence, it must involve Norman, who we come to understand is both Norman and Norman's mother, in whose guise he commits a most heinous crime, depicted in the infamous shower-slashing scene of Norman slaughtering Marion. We see the last of the young heroine as the camera moves from a close-up on Marion's eye casting its dying gaze at her blood mixing with the water washing down the shower drain.

The moment of transcendence here, however, like much else in *Psycho*, is unpredicted: There is no "happy ending," no final outcome that is clearly positive or desirable. The pressure of further investigation of the Bates Motel after the disposal of Marion (and her body) and the grisly staircase stabbing of Arbogast, the private detective investigating Marion's (and the money's) disappearance, drive Norman's split personalities to coalesce into the single identity of the mother. In one of the most shocking scenes of the movie (and it will take a lot to shock us after the shower-murder scene), when the viewer finally sees and understands that Mother is no longer alive but is actually the poorly preserved skeletal remains of what once was Mother, the disguised Norman attempts yet another attack. This time his intended victim is Marion's lookalike sister, Lila, who, along with Sam, has come to search for Marion. Norman is finally caught in the act, and a climactic shot shows Sam apprehending Norman, knife poised for another death-by-slashing, outfitted with a grey-haired wig and granny dress. This all proves too much for the fragile, psychotic character, and Norman's identity now shifts completely to the mother persona. This is our resolution, this is the final border of sanity that has been crossed: Norman is no longer a split person, a tortured soul slipping from one frame of mind into another, alternately making sandwiches and committing bloody murder. He is one, at peace, the "final girl" that inevitably triumphs in "slasher" films (Smelik; Clover).

But there is more. The spectator is also offered a kind of transcendence. We have observed Hitchcock's masterful ability to manipulate the audience, to "play them like a pipe organ" (Kolker 164). Film commentator Jean Douchet argues that "Hitchcock's intention is to unmask reality and show it to us in *triple* form": the everyday world, the world of desire, and the intellectual world, which connects the first two. It will be transcendence not if we simply fulfill our desires, but if we understand them. With understanding comes the ability to deconstruct, defuse, even to deny desire without becoming its victim. The initial and overarching desire played out in *Psycho* is to observe the life-world of the characters--their thoughts, actions, desires, their collective fate--to see evil done and wrongs righted, to be eye witness to our own identification with the represented personae here revealed (Douchet 64-66).

Other borders than that between sanity and insanity have been broken as well: the line of gender identity and most obviously, granting even the most radical brand of moral relativism, the line between right and wrong. Hitchcock does not give us an easy road back to where we started, but because "Hitchcock's work always depicts some form of duel between Light and Shadow--between, in other words, Unity and Duality" (Douchet 72), we will ultimately wind up on one side or the other in the resolution of the narrative. Whether we end on the side of Light (which is the norm) or of Darkness hardly matters for the purposes of effecting a change in the involved viewer: if, as in *Psycho*, the end is darkness, this will all the more deliver the spectator into a situation ripe for transcendence. Commenting on the penultimate scene of the film and Hitchcock's last ghastly image, Wood confirms this idea:

For a split second, almost subliminally, the features of the mother's ten-year-dead face are superimposed on Norman's as it fixes in a skull-like grimace. The sense of finality is intolerable, yet it is this that makes our release possible: we have been made to see the dark potentialities within all of us, to face the worst thing in the world: eternal damnation. We can now be set free, be saved for life. (85)

In the dénouement, a crane hauls up the car containing Marion Crane's body from the swamp where Norman had submerged it; in one last Hitchcockian maneuver (and final mythical reference), we witness the resurrection of the dead.

Borders of the Self: Subjectivity becomes Objective

*Just as myths already entail enlightenment, with every step enlightenment*

*entangles itself more deeply in mythology.* (Horkheimer and Adorno 8)

In *Barton Fink,* written by Joel and Ethan Coen and directed by Joel Coen, a hotel is both the location for the film's narrative and the mise-en-scène for levels of human activity and modes of psycho-social interaction that press on the boundaries of ordinary life and thought. Set in New York in 1941, the plot concerns a playwright, Barton Fink (John Turturro), reeling from his first artistic success: a socially progressive Broadway play dealing with the political and existential plight of "the common man." Before he even begins to savor his ascent on the ladder of "high art," Barton accepts a lucrative offer to move to Hollywood to become a studio-contracted screenwriter despite his reservations about being able to fit his great talent into the box of crass, sensationalized filmmaking. Like *Touch of Evil* and *Psycho*, much has been hypothesized and written about this enigmatic and visually arresting movie about writing and making movies, and in a larger sense, about the creative struggle and the existential angst of the artist in the pursuit of making art. There is space here to look at only some of the turns of plot and twists of meaning to be gleaned from the film. The Coens, with a style that goes beyond the macabre camp of Hitchcock, have created a genuinely postmodern work that oozes with symbolism and is propelled by a broadly heterogeneous set of references to the Hollywood movie industry, to filmmaking as an art, to authorship in general, to the relationship of the life of the mind to life lived in the world, and, what has come to be a bit of a trademark for these brotherly auteurs, to philosophy and mythology. Closing in the focus on this last pair of allusions, however, will allow us to perceive how *Barton Fink* can be tied in with *Touch of Evil* and *Psycho* as a cinematic use of the hotel as a site for opening up, or in the case of *Barton Fink*, for dissolving, borders that are intended to keep life moving along its quotidian course, to hold reality in place, to protect the inner life from outer invasions.

The main action of the film takes place in the Hotel Earle (a specially designed set), a shabby, past-its-heyday hotel with an eerie sense of desolation--the only guests we see (even though numerous voices and cries of other guests are heard) are Barton and the tenant of the neighboring room, Charlie Meadows/"Madman Mundt" (John Goodman), a real-life "common man" who befriends Barton. The hotel room becomes a place of entrapment; Barton secludes himself here to settle into writing his studio-ordered script, but there are endless distractions and nuisances that prevent Barton's progress. The wallpaper is peeling, the glue behind it seeping down like mucus; grunts and murmurs from faceless forms fill the air, sounding more mournful than amorous; mosquitoes buzz and bite; plumbing pipes hiss. The other important feature of this room that captures far too much of Barton's attention is a framed picture, a small lithograph poster, of a girl sitting at the shoreline, peering out past the waves to the horizon. Barton fixates on this image, as if it is the only thing in the room that pleases him, perhaps reminding him of his purpose (to create art, to make the world a better place). This image plays an important part in interpreting the narrative: we will see a precise recreation of it in Barton's real world in the very last scene, and we need not go too deep to see this duality of images as a way of saying that although art may imitate life, it often turns out that life imitates art. The Coens, however, are undoubtedly doing more here than repeating such simplistic truisms. To see what that might be, a few more plot details must be unfolded.

On a visit to the studio, Barton meets William Mayhew (John Mahoney), a Faulkneresque character: brilliant writer, alcoholic, enslaved to Hollywood because his novels do not earn enough. This is a comment on the sacrificial existence artists must lead in order to follow their muse, and Mayhew indeed has a muse: his secretary/paramour/ghostwriter, Audrey Taylor (Judy Davis), who happens to resemble the girl in the picture. Just as he is fascinated with that image, Barton is attracted to Audrey, and we see him come to her defense when the threesome go on a little picnic and Mayhew, sodden with drink, knocks Audrey in the head. Later, beginning to panic because his script is due and he has nothing, Barton calls Audrey for help, knowing that she has been the "typist" of Mayhew's scripts. She comes to Barton's room to console and encourage him, and we learn that she has authored much of Mayhew's scriptwriting. Barton is repulsed by this revelation, but Audrey demurs, downplaying her role; however, she is offering to do the same for Barton. Barton is now entranced with Audrey and initiates intimacy by stroking her hair. Audrey responds with a kiss, and then, as the two begin their sexual encounter, the camera makes a strange move--away from the lovers and the bed, to the bathroom, tracking into the sink and framing centrally on the drain, "a perfect black circle in the porcelain white" (Coen and Coen). Echoing *Psycho,* the camera is then swallowed by the drain, just as in the shower scene in Hitchcock's film we follow the water mixed with Marion's blood circling down the drain. In *Barton Fink*, the sound of Barton and Audrey making love on the creaking bed, breathing heavily, along with the groaning pipes, accompanies the symbolic drain shot. In the earlier film, murder has been a substitute for sex: Norman is aroused by Marion, but he can only achieve his release, his "*jouissance,*" through an act of violence and destruction (Pease n. 30). In the Coens' film, murder follows close on the heels of sexual encounter as the narrative now takes a bizarre turn.

The next morning, Barton wakes to the sound of a buzzing mosquito; it has landed on Audrey, still next to him in bed. He swats it, but when he pulls his hand back, it is covered in blood. A shot of Audrey reveals that her entire body is bloody; she is covered in a sheet soaked with blood. It is a horrific, disgusting scene of violent transgression. We have no real clue about who did this, or even if the whole scenario is a dream. The line between the real and surreal has become totally blurred. Our view of the hotel so far in the film has been utterly subjective, from Barton's point of view. Everything that happens inside Barton's head seems to have a correlate in his surroundings, his hotel room. The hotel space has become subjectivized; the room is sweating and groaning as if it were itself a body. The events that transpire in the room are more like thought-and-image sequences in someone's head or in his dream than they are like real life. Now, at the crisis point of the film, the action continues: Barton realizes his predicament and turns to Charlie for help. Barton suggests calling the police, but Charlie dominates the situation, telling the stupefied Barton to wait in the bathroom. From there, Barton sees Charlie carry away Audrey's bloody body and passes out. Some commentators see Barton in the Hotel Earle as Barton being in Hell, with Charlie in the role of Satan--the heat of the hissing pipes, the peeling wallpaper, the elevator always going down, down, Charlie's being by turns charming and threatening, and always sweating--many images play into that idea, including the zoom down into the sink drain as we hear the sounds of Barton and Audrey having sex (Bramann). But this is not the whole story. Recalling our myth, the narrative begins when Persephone is carried away by Hades, the god of the underworld, or we may also say, Hell. The shot of Charlie's carrying off the heroine, swaddled in blood-soaked sheets, depicts just such an action. We begin to think Charlie is responsible, but then, if the events are viewed from a subjectivist or surrealist perspective, the hotel is just a physical container for the inflated needs, desires, and artistic ambitions of the hero (Barton's head in fact appears bigger than normal because of his puffy, pompadour hairdo), and Charlie is the alter-ego of Barton himself. The film leaves such options open.

Barton admits to feeling like he has lost his mind when he confides in Charlie, but after he has wept and lamented his fate, having turned his attention away from his immediate artistic task and become utterly distracted by the harrowing events of the last few days, Barton's writing block begin to lift. Charlie departs for New York, but before going, he leaves a mysterious package--a relatively small, tied-up box--with Barton for safekeeping. After we find out that Charlie is really Karl "Madman" Mundt, a serial killer who decapitates his victims, and, in addition, that the body of a woman fitting Audrey's description has been found, the spectator is led to believe that in the box may be Audrey's head, not Charlie's small scattering of personal affects. Having denied knowledge of Charlie's whereabouts to the police investigating Audrey's death, Barton returns to his room and examines the box, but is not curious enough, or is too afraid, to open it. He begins to type, and continues to type, not stopping to eat or sleep, until his goal is achieved: he produces a finished script, seemingly fueled only by looking at the mysterious package and the picture on the wall. The symbolism here says that there must be sacrifice, even dying, before new birth can be given to a work of art, a creative effort spurred by an awareness of suffering and an acknowledgement of death.

Concurring with this idea, Jorn Bramann calls on Nietzsche's theory of art as laid out in *The Birth of Tragedy,* where Nietzsche invokes the conflicting energies and ideologies represented in Greek mythology by the gods Apollo and Dionysus to explain the nature of artistic creation. These gods embody two opposing forces: rational, ordered and sober intellectualism in contrast to non-rational, ecstatic and intoxicated instinctual (even animalistic) behavior. Bramann explains, "It is the darkness of the Dionysian experience that provokes the emergence of its opposite, the Apollinian vision of light. The serene harmony and order of the sun god is the necessary illusion that makes life bearable in the presence of life’s inescapable horrors." The Demeter and Persephone myth provides an even richer source for interpreting the enigmatic ending of the film. In the very last scene, we find Barton in the full light of day, at the shoreline of the Pacific Ocean: he has reached his final border by becoming one with it. By this point in the narrative, we are unsure whether we are in the real world or inside Barton's head. Barton has witnessed unspeakable horror on the sixth floor of the Hotel Earle. His last moments were a surreal nightmare in which the hallway became a fiery inferno with the murderous Charlie Meadows/Madman Mundt charging through the flames, sawed-off shotgun in hand, having just beheaded the elevator operator before opening fire, point-blank, on the policeman who was about to arrest Barton. Miraculously, Charlie does not enter Barton's room to kill him, but to set him free by using super-human strength to bend apart the metal bed frame to which he had been handcuffed. Barton exits the burning, smoke-filled hallway, released from harm and free to continue his life as an artist.

As the film ends, Barton is on the beach, carrying his mysterious parcel. He sits on the sand, gazes out to sea, and still seems to be living in a dream. He sees a woman walking along the beach--a woman who appears to be *the* girl in the picture that so occupied Barton in his hotel room. She sits down, looks out to the horizon, and shades her eyes: what Barton sees is exactly the same image depicted in the picture, but now he is *in* the picture--it is his reality. The ancient ritual of the Eleusinian Mysteries that celebrates the resurrection and return of Persephone to her mother involves things done, things said, and things shown: before the initiation is complete, the initiate is led through "gloomy infernal regions, with horrible images and ghostly shapes," (Beach) and then is directed to an open space full of blissful light. The culminating moment of the ceremony is when the initiate is shown the sacred objects (we still do not know what these were). By the end of the ritual, the initiate, having been put through an intensely dramatic and emotional ceremony, vicariously re-living the journey of Persephone, is uplifted and brought to a transcendent state through the realization of the mysteries of the relationship between the gods, nature, and human life. Barton has with him his "sacred object" in the package--a product of the transgressive acts witnessed at the hotel, and now, at the border of land and sea, he moves from a state of physical suffering and repressed desires to transcend completely into the nomadic plateau (Lewis and Cho 84) that the mind constructs as a new space. Through this action, the artist departs public territory and effectively enters the private, unbounded life of the mind.

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