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Taboo and Transgression in The Bad Seed, The Fly, and Psycho

By CYNDY HENDERSHOT

An eight-year-old girl commits three cold-blooded murders. Through reckless experimentation a scientist fuses his body with a fly’s. A young man keeps his mother’s dead body in his house. The horror film is a genre that operates within a framework of taboo and transgression. Following its Gothic predecessors, it expresses the most serious of transgressions—murder, necrophilia, incest—highlighting the taboo that prohibits such activities.

The Cold War period in American history was an age of taboo and transgression. The transgressive individual became equated with the communist who threatened to destroy America from within and bring about the destruction of the planet through nuclear war. As Gordene Olga Mackenzie argues, the McCarthyist witchhunt for communists encompassed those “suspected of violating mainstream sex or gender roles” (42). Transgression itself, and specifically sexual transgression, became linked with communism in popular perceptions and hence became conjoined with the threat of apocalypse. As taboos were emphasized more and more in 1950s America, the allure of transgression was heightened. The horror film expressed the interplay between taboo and transgression. By reading 1950s horror through the theories of Georges Bataille, I will articulate in my analysis the interplay of taboo and transgression in three films from the Cold War period: The Bad Seed, The Fly, and Psycho.

In Bataille’s works transgression is a desire created by the taboo itself. Discussing sexual transgression Bataille comments, “it seems to me that the object of the prohibition was first marked out for coveting by the prohibition itself; if the prohibition was essentially of a sexual nature it must have drawn attention to the sexual value of the object (or rather, its erotic value)” (Accursed 2, 48). The taboo gives the transgression a value it would not possess outside of its relationship to the taboo. In making a distinction with the animal world, Bataille argues that transgression is something unique to human existence because of human society’s creation of taboos. Taboos help to maintain order in society, but they also provide a space for transgression to develop. Bataille states that “on the one hand, respect regulates the humanized world, where violence is forbidden; on the other, respect opens up the possibility for violence to erupt in the domain where it is inadmissible” (Accursed 2, 57). The limits imposed by the taboo make the transgressive act one that is appealing. Thus, “the limits give passion the contracted movement that it did not have in animality” (Erotism 48).

Thus transgression is never a simple reversion to animality but is something that is uniquely human. As Bataille sees it, fear and horror are emotional states that inspire the act of transgression. He comments that “fear and horror are not the real and final reaction; on the contrary, they are a temptation to overstep the bounds” (Erotism 144). It is the experience of terror that allows the transgression to accrue value: “the forbidden action takes on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and it and invests it with an aura of excitement” (Erotism 48). Thus in human society as in the horror film it is the experience of fear that gives value to the transgressive act.

Bataille’s understanding of taboo and transgression is especially insightful because it does not posit transgression as an act that undermines taboo. Within Bataille’s thought transgression never represents a simple subversion of the dominant order. As Michael Richardson observes, “For Bataille the play between taboo and transgression was a complex moral relation in which neither has any privileged status vis-à-vis the other. Transgression does not ‘subvert’ the taboo; it completes and reinforces it” (9). Thus while the taboo stands as a limit that makes the act of transgression attractive, so the act of transgression reinforces the power of the taboo. In discussing erotic transgression Bataille comments that “in erotic excess we venerate the rule which we break” (Literature 139).

Bataille understands the mutual dependence of taboo and transgression within a larger framework of what he terms the sacred and the profane. As Bataille sees it the sacred is constituted by transgressive acts: “what is sacred is precisely what is prohibited” (Accursed 2, 92). The profane world is the world of taboos, specifically the world of work and reason. In the sacred world the human seeks a lost unity, a continuity that will be found ultimately only in death. For Bataille the totality one attempts to find in the sacred, a totality that always remains out of reach, is sought for “only at the price of a sacrifice” (Accursed 2, 119). Within taboo and transgression the interplay between the profane and the sacred is a dangerous one. Bataille comments that “humanity pursues two goals—one, the negative is to preserve life (to avoid death), and the other, the
positive, is to increase the intensity of life. These two goals are not contradictory, but their intensity has never increased without danger” (Literature 73–74).

For Bataille, what constitutes transgression is violence. Bataille comments that “violence is what the work of violence excludes with its taboos” (Erotism 42). The transition to different states Bataille perceives in both eroticism and death disturbs the calm world of work with a disruption that recalls a frightening unity. The loss of the self is paramount in both of these experiences. In discussing earlier cultures Bataille argues that all death was perceived as an act of violence, commenting, “In the eyes of primitive man violence is always the cause of death. It may have acted through magical means, but someone is always responsible, someone is always a murderer” (Erotism 47). Transgression is always an act of sacrifice, because it is an attempt to eliminate individuation in favor of continuity beyond the self. The violence of eroticism and the violence of murder are both such transgressive acts: “The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his animal or human victim... She is brusquely laid open to the violence of the sexual urges set loose in the organs of reproduction; she is laid open to the impersonal violence that overwheels her from without” (Erotism 90). Bataille’s theory provides a means of understanding the disturbing conjuncion of eroticism and violence found in horror films like Psycho.

In Bataille’s writings the interplay between taboo and transgression is increasingly understood within the framework of international politics and ultimately a means of understanding the Cold War. Jean-Michel Besnier observes that “taking the form of war, the sacred would in fact threaten man with total annihilation” (24). The invention of nuclear weapons made this scenario a real possibility. As Bataille’s friend and colleague Jean Piel comments, Bataille began to perceive the Cold War as a means of avoiding the catastrophe of nuclear war. While Bataille feared that the excess energy of the sacred might be spent in war, by the 1950s he “saw clearly that the USSR was there as if to awaken the world, and that America, actually feeling the effect of this permanent threat, began to awaken to an awareness. He had the illumination that ‘paradoxical changes’ could be established between these two forces and thus prove ‘that the contradictions of the world are not necessarily resolved by war’” (105). As Piel notes, Bataille was a “prophet of ‘peaceful coexistence’ and of unexpected developments of the competition for expansion between the two blocs” (105). Bataille’s writing and its emphasis on taboo and transgression, while purporting to formulate a universal theory of the concepts, was firmly grounded in concerns of history. Similarly 1950s horror films frequently posit universals of human behavior while operating within very specific historical concerns.

Mervyn LeRoy’s The Bad Seed (1956) is a horror film that transgresses the taboo on children murderers.¹ The film is based on William March’s novel of the same name and a play derived from March’s novel. The Bad Seed concerns Rhoda Penmark (Patty McCormack), an eight-year-old girl who is on the surface the very epitome of the well-behaved child, but underneath she is a psychotic killer. Her mother, Christine (Nancy Kelly), learns the truth about Rhoda while her husband Kenneth (William Hopper) is away on business. Rhoda kills Claude Daigle, a classmate of hers, to steal his penmanship medal, which she believes she rightfully won. Rhoda then kills Leroy (Henry Jones), a handyman who has been teasing her about Claude’s death. The film reveals that Rhoda had earlier killed an old woman to get a trinket the woman promised her after her death. Christine, having become suspicious of Rhoda’s behavior, delves into her own past, discovering that she had been adopted and that her true mother is Bessie Denker, a psychopathic killer who started her crimes at age ten. Christine believes she has passed the “bad seed” on to Rhoda. Out of guilt she gives Rhoda an overdose of sleeping pills and shoots herself. She and Rhoda both survive, but Rhoda is struck by lightning when she goes to recover the medal, which Christine has thrown off the wharf.

Controversy surrounding the making of the film highlights its status as transgressive film. Jerold Simmons argues that the Production Code, under Geoffrey Shurlock, objected to a film version of the play because of the fear that it would influence young viewers. As one Production Code reader noted, “The identification of youngsters with Rhoda... will be very complete. They will understand her effective killing of three persons who stood in her way, while at the same time, since Rhoda is a poised, charming child, they will completely miss her psychotic and tragic nature... a very dangerous combination” (4). While Shurlock continued to veto approval for the film, Martin Quigley, co-author of the original Production Code, commented on the potential financial success of the film, stating that it was “just enough off-beat to interest today’s distraught and mixed-up public” (5). Its status as transgressive film was built into the marketing campaign used to promote it. An end title to the film asked audiences to keep the ending of this “movie which dared to be different” to themselves. Secrecy, endemic to the film’s content, became part of the film’s marketing campaign as well.

Rhoda is a transgressive subject not just because she is a murderer, but because she is a child murderer. Underneath her flawless exterior she harbors the transgressive desire to murder. Rhoda illustrates Bataille’s argument that transgression shows the utmost respect for the law. One aspect of Rhoda that is disturbing is her lack of ordinary flaws. While she commits the ultimate act of transgression in murder, she never violates minor taboos. Miss Fern comments on her perfect curtsy. Christine remarks to Monica Breedlove (Evelyn Varden) that Rhoda never gets her clothes dirty or her shoes scuffed. Rhoda always keeps her room neat. She displays the utmost respect for rules. Even after
committing the murders, Rhoda's greatest fear is of being caught. Her murder of Leroy is predicated on her fear that he has found the shoes used to murder Claude and will turn her in. Even after transgressing the law in the worst possible ways, Rhoda venerates it through her intense fear of being caught.

Further, the film itself venerates the taboo that Rhoda transgresses. Rhoda's death at the end of the film, which differs from the novel and play versions, indicates that Rhoda's monstrous transgression must be punished. As Simmons notes, “Using an act of God to punish Rhoda may well have been bad drama, but it did much to resolve Shurlock's doubts about The Bad Seed. God's intervention provided a fitting object lesson for those 'impressionable children'” (5). As William Paul observes, the ending was a secret not just for the audience, but was “kept secret even from the cast members and locked away in a studio vault” (278). Rhoda's transgression hence does not so much affirm a belief in the legal system, as many detective films do, but it affirms a belief in the divine. This reaffirmation of a belief in a higher power links it firmly with horror films. Yet, the fact that God himself must punish Rhoda's crimes indicates the transgressive nature of a child who kills both other children and adults.

Rhoda's transgressions, just like the film's explanation for them, exist on the cusp between animal and human behavior. Bataille maintains that only humans are capable of transgression because they live in a society built by taboos. Bataille argues that cruelty is a conscious intention “in a mind which has resolved to trespass into a forbidden field of behavior” (Erótism 80). It is the human's awareness of this trespass that defines transgression. Shurlock's concern that children might consciously choose to emulate Rhoda's behavior suggests just such an understanding of her transgressions. Yet, The Bad Seed is ambivalent about Rhoda's conscious control over her actions. Discussing the animal's killing of another animal, Bataille comments that "the apathy that the gaze of the animal expresses after the combat is the sign of an existence that is essentially on a level with the world in which it moves like water" (Religion 25). This apathetic gaze could be used to describe Rhoda's reaction after committing the murders. When Rhoda returns from the picnic and Claude's murder, she asks her mother for a peanut butter sandwich and seems primarily concerned with having missed her lunch. She tells Christine, “I don't feel any way at all.” After setting the excelsior on fire and locking Leroy in the cellar for his fiery death, Rhoda calmly returns to the house and begins playing the piano. On one level, then, the film posits that Rhoda's acts are not truly transgressions because she is not conscious of them as such. Further, the biological explanation of the bad seed works to remove blame from Rhoda.

Simultaneously, Rhoda does seem aware that she is violating the law. Rhoda pleads with Christine not to tell Miss Fern about the medal. When Christine tells her not to inform anybody else about the murder, Rhoda coolly replies, “Why would I tell and get killed?” The film wants to posit Rhoda as the scandalous, transgressive child, but also wants to pull back from the implications of that by blaming the bad seed that controls her actions and motivations.

Whereas Rhoda's transgressions are those of murder, The Bad Seed makes a connection between Rhoda's transgressions and sexual transgression. In the original ad campaign promoting the transgressive nature of the film, a poster displaying Rhoda was replaced by “ads ignoring the child and featuring a woman, clad in a transparent woman, clad in a transparent full, pink underlip that puckered with the ad campaign for the film suggested, encoded both criminal and sexual transgression. Two of Rhoda's three victims are at least potentially sexually transgressive themselves. Leroy's pedophilia is the most obvious, but the novel implies that Claude is a potential homosexual. The novel describes Claude a "pale and remarkably thin, with a long, wedge-shaped face, and a full, pink underlip that puckered with an inappropriate sensuousness" (19). Harry M. Benshoff notes that the "sensitive young man" was a typical 1950s way of expressing the homosexual male. Frequently this type of young man was "doomed from the outset" (138). March's physical description links Claude with this type of young man. In the film Mrs. Breelove suggests that Claude drowned because of his own weakness and fear. As Elaine Showalter discusses in her introduction to the novel, March's own homosexuality is complexly encoded in the story of Rhoda. Showalter argues that "William March's mask concealed a man who felt that in his creative and sexual desires he himself was a bad seed" (xiii). The connection between criminal tendencies and transgressive
sexuality was a commonplace of Cold War society. Benshoff notes that the most visible link between homosexuality and criminality in the 1950s was the direct connection between communism and homosexuality: "homosexuality became directly connected to communism both in the popular press and in the public gestalt from February of 1950, when hearings before the Senate Appropriations Committee revealed that homosexuality had been the reason for recent dismissals of government workers" (130). The film version situates the transgressions of Rhoda within a Cold War environment, specifying what in March's novel is largely ahistorical criminality.

The film explicitly links the violence of Rhoda's world to Cold War society. In the opening scene, as Kenneth Penmark leaves for his secret assignment in Washington D.C., Monica tells him to try to stop a war because "I'm not ready to be turned into a piece of chalk just yet." Fear of nuclear war is the first fear expressed in the film. Further, the film alters Kenneth's profession from the businessman he is in the novel to military colonel. As critics have noted, it is Kenneth's absence that seems to make Rhoda's transgressive behavior break out. Yet, Rhoda's transgressions seem to mirror the transgressions of a Cold War military with its plans for nuclear war and very real radiation experiments on human subjects. The secrets and lies that hide behind Rhoda's perfect exterior seem to characterize her society as a whole. Rhoda's reaction to the attempt to revive Claude's body—"Oh, but I thought it was exciting!"—might be Kenneth's reaction to a nuclear bomb test, one that perhaps utilized military troops to test the effects of radiation on human subjects. It is the excelsior from the tea set that Kenneth mails to Rhoda that she sets afire to murder Leroy. Miss Fern describes Rhoda as being "like a soldier" who deserted under fire in her attempt to absolve Rhoda of blame for Claude's death. Yet, Miss Fern knows the truth and conceals it. Rhoda's admonition to Leroy—"You lie all the time!"—might be directed toward any of the adult characters in the film, as Miss Fern observes when she tells Christine that all the adults have lied. Perhaps this explains why a deus ex machina must destroy Rhoda. Because all the characters in the film are transgressors, because there is doubt expressed about the authority structures and their ability to maintain taboos, God must intervene and destroy the threat of Rhoda. Rhoda is the sacrifice because she has revealed the transgression necessary to reinforce the taboos of Cold War culture.

Rhoda's transgressions seem to mirror the transgressions of a Cold War military with its plans for nuclear war and very real radiation experiments on human subjects.

Rhoda has revealed the transgression that Bataille describes as occurring when "a man being behaves in an astounding way, in violent contrast with his ordinary behaviors and judgments—revealing an unavowable reserve side matching the pleasant, correct side, the only one we show" (Accursed 3, 123).

Kurt Neumann's The Fly (1958) more explicitly links transgression to the Cold War arms race. The film is structured as a mystery as François Delambre (Vincent Price) attempts to understand why Hélène (Patricia Owens) killed her husband André (David Hedison). François's brother, Hélène expresses fear of the present, commenting on "the suddenness of our age." After listing many recent discoveries she laments, "Everything's going so fast." George Langelaan's story, on which the film is based, opens by expressing a fear of technological change as François, as narrator, laments that telephones are an intrusion that no longer allows man to be the master in his own home (343). In affirmation of his fear, he receives a call from Hélène telling him that she has just used a hydraulic press to kill André. In the flashback when we are shown the destruction of André, we see Hélène forced to push
Francois and Philippe discover the mutated Andre, who is about to be devoured by a spider. Andre commits the ultimate transgression when he "dared to play God" in The Fly.

a button to drop the press a second time. Thus, pressing a technological button destroys Andre's life and hides all proof of his transgression. On this level The Fly operates routinely within a science fiction/horror framework of condemning radical scientific experimentation as transgressive while simultaneously lauding that very experimentation. At the end of the film Francois encourages Philippe to follow in his father's footsteps and continue "searching for the truth." Philippe takes up the suggestion in The Return of the Fly (1959) in which he repeats his father's transgression. Thus within the realm of scientific experimentation, taboo and transgression are mutually reinforcing.

The condemnation of new scientific discovery as blasphemous makes it an alluring area of pursuit, especially when the pursuit is financially lucrative, as it was in the Cold War era. When Francois examines Andre's laboratory, he tells Helene that he has been allowed in the lab only three times and each time he visited it meant profit. Francois further tells Charas that both he and Andre "have more money than we know what to do with." Thus the transgression implicit in Cold War weapons development hinted at in The Bad Seed is brought explicitly to the forefront in The Fly.

Yet, the discovery of scientific transgression is one that occurs later in the film's narrative. The film frames itself immediately as one of violent erotic transgression as Helene phones Francois and tells him, "I killed Andre. I need your help." Thus Andre's murder appears to be one within the framework of the erotic connection between Helene and Andre. Francois tells Charas that "they were completely happy together. . . . Helene was always so gentle. . . . It's impossible." Charas's first reaction to the murder is to suspect Francois because he realizes that Francois is in love with Helene. Indeed, Helene's transgression in the film is an erotic one. Because she loves Andre so thoroughly, she helps him destroy himself and takes on the burden of preserving his secret at the expense of her own life.

For both Helene and Andre, the secrecy of the scientific experiment is conjoined with the secrecy of their erotic attachment. Bataille argues that the foundation of eroticism is the sexual act. Now, this act is subject to a prohibition. It's inconceivable! Making love is prohibited! Unless you do it in secret. But if we do it in secret the prohibition transfigures what it prohibits and illuminates it with a glow, at once sinister and divine: in a word, it illuminates it with a religious glow. (Tears 66)
In several key scenes in the film, André's sharing of his scientific secret with Hélène is framed within eroticism. When André first demonstrates the device to Hélène, he uses a wedding present they were given. Bataille argues that marriage is a paradoxical transgression because "laws that allow an infringement and consider it legal are paradoxical. Hence just as killing is simultaneously forbidden and performed in sacrificial ritual, so the initial sex act constituting marriage is a permitted violation" (*Erotism* 109). The invoking of André and Hélène's wedding thus indicates that just as marriage is a permitted transgression in a society in which sexuality is taboo, so is radical scientific experimentation a permitted transgression, at least as long as it is successful.

Later in the film, the connection between André and Hélène's erotic feelings for each other and André's experiment is brought out even more clearly. After attending the ballet together, André takes Hélène to the laboratory to drink champagne as a prelude to lovemaking. André puts the champagne through the device and attempts to assuage Hélène's fears by saying that the new scientific discoveries are "wonderful facts...which brings me back to the champagne." Hélène responds by saying, "It's wonderful being married to you."

André's transformation serves as a strange echo of the intense erotic bond between him and Hélène. Bataille argues that "the final aim of eroticism is fusion, all barriers gone" (*Erotism* 129). André's physical fusion with the fly represents the type of complete erotic union with Hélène he has been seeking. Prior to putting himself through the device, he asks Hélène if she would marry him over again. Instead, he finds himself in a perverse marriage with the fly. Bataille argues that the transgressive value of eroticism lies in its attempt to achieve unity with the sacred world, a unity that would result in the obliteration of the personality, an obliteration connected with death. Bataille comments, "If the union of two lovers comes about through love, it involves the idea of death, murder or suicide. This aura of death is what denotes passion" (*Erotism* 20). The monster that André becomes and Hélène's willingness to destroy this monster at the cost of her own life embodies the couple's transgressive erotic desire for each other as well as André's desire for scientific discovery. In the story this point is made even more forcefully as Hélène kills herself by taking cyanide. André's last words scrawled on the blackboard from which he has erased his scientific formulae are "Love You."

The film suggests that the Cold War push for scientific discovery carries with it a dangerous transgressive desire. Robert Sasso argues that Bataille's theory forces us to acknowledge that "the rational, in opposing itself to the irrational, would only 'absolutely' constitute itself to the extent that it would paradoxically liberate the latter with some commotion" (44). Edward Teller justified and continued to justify the hydrogen bomb project by arguing that those who opposed nuclear technology opposed progress ("Interview" 3). However, a push for scientific discovery during the Cold War that predicated itself on a reasonable pursuit of progress in fact served to unleash irrational desire, such as is manifested in André transformed into a monstrous creature of transgressive desire.

Like *The Bad Seed* and *The Fly*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) uses the horror genre to explore transgression and taboo within the framework of Cold War society. *Psycho* focuses first on Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), a real estate secretary, who longs to marry her boyfriend Sam Loomis (John Gavin) but cannot because of financial constraints. Returning from a rendezvous with Sam, Marion steals $40,000 she is supposed to deposit in the bank, a cash transaction brought to the office by Tom Cassidy (Frank Albertson), a vulgar client of the real estate agency. Marion then begins driving toward Sam in Fairvale, California. Overwhelmed by rain, she stops at the Bates Motel where she meets Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), a seemingly nice but lonely young man. Marion resolves to return the money but is brutally stabbed in the shower by Norman's mother. Sam, Marion's sister Lila (Vera Miles), and Arbogast (Martin Balsam), a private detective, begin looking for Marion. Arbogast traces her to the motel and attempts to speak to Mrs. Bates but is brutally stabbed by her. Sam and Lila investigate at the motel, and Lila discovers Mrs. Bates in the fruit cellar, revealing that she is a corpse and Norman has been dressing as her and committing the murders. A psychiatrist sums up Norman's state of mind, arguing that after murdering his mother and her lover, he began to be possessed by the personality of Mrs. Bates. Now, her personality has taken over.

*Psycho* represents Hitchcock's most explicit connection to the horror genre and his most blatant attempt to use transgression as both content in a film and as a marketing strategy. Christopher Nickens notes that Hitchcock conceived the idea for making *Psycho* based on the success of low-budget horror films by directors such as William Castle and Roger Corman (qtd. in Leigh 5). While these films had been labeled as "bargain basement Hitchcock," the director decided to take "the opportunity to beat his cheapjack imitators at their own game" (qtd. in Leigh 5). Hitchcock deliberately cast a pall of secrecy over the filming of *Psycho*. A commentator in the *New York Times* in December 1959 noted the secrecy Hitchcock was maintaining around his new film project: "Moreover, and again violating standard studio policy, no story synopsis will be released. The only previous example of this synopsis veto was in the case of 'The Ten Commandments' when rumor had it that the late Cecil B. DeMille refused to sanction a story synopsis—lest it give away the plot" (Merrick). Janet Leigh discusses the secrecy and sense of transgression surrounding the project. Commenting on a nude model who was hired as a stand-in for the role of Marion, Leigh comments, "I think Hitch deliberately hired the model partly to plant the seed in people's minds that this picture had
Taboo and Transgression in *The Bad Seed, The Fly, and Psycho*  

The sympathetic that the film creates for the character of Marion is predicated on her transgressive desire, a desire that exceeds that of those around her. The sympathy that the film creates for the character of Marion is predicated on her transgressive desire, a desire that exceeds that of those around her.

The screenwriter of *Psycho*, Joseph Stefano, commented regarding *Psycho* that

"I think what attracts me is the human condition that ultimately, basically, we are all alone. And that the only thing that makes fire is when somebody else who is alone collides with us in an emotional way, and then we have love. So my feeling was this story in regard to Marion was all about her love; everything she did, even to being killed, was about her love. And that made her a love character." (qtd. in Leigh 60)

Janet Leigh writes that she was drawn to the part because "I really cared about Marion Crane" (37). Many critics have expressed similar feelings for her character. In creating a situation in which the viewer is encouraged to intensely identify with a character who is motivated by erotic transgression, a transgression that causes her to break the law and die a tragic, random death, *Psycho* illustrates to us the power of what Bataille sees as the sacred. Bataille argues that "only the extremism of desire and death enables one to attain the truth." (Impossible 9). Marion transgresses the taboo on excessive erotic desire and this causes her to violate the taboo on stealing. But the money is not important. Acquisition is not at the base of Marion’s motives; expenditure is. Bataille comments that “erotic activity can be disgusting; it can also be noble, ethereal, excluding sexual contact, but it illustrates a principle of human behavior in the clearest way: what we want is what uses up our strength and our resources, and, if necessary, places our life in danger” (Accursed 2, 104).

As Marion plots to steal the money she complains of a headache. Cassidy tells her that she needs a weekend in Las Vegas, Marion replies, "I’m going to spend this weekend in bed," indicating the desire to be in bed with Sam that motivates the theft. After returning home to pack, Marion places the money on the bed, again indicating its status as signifier of her erotic desire for Sam.

The film juxtaposes her reckless desire with Sam’s cautious desire for her. Sam represents a character who understands limited transgression, but..."
28 JPF&T—Journal of Popular Film and Television

the full erotic transgression Marion enacts. Bataille argues that lovers "tend to negate a social order that contests more often than it grants their right to live, that never yields to such a triling thing as personal preference" (Accursed 2, 159). While this statement would easily apply to Marion's attempt to negate the social in favor of her desire, Sam seems to stand for the very taboo she violates. Leigh notes that in early conversations with Stefano "he mentioned that he had always felt that Marion loved Sam more than Sam loved her" (55). Leigh replied to him, "As it stood, Sam had no problem and no commitment" (56). In Robert Bloch's novel, on which the film is based, Sam's lack of emotional involvement with Marion is made even more clear as following Mary's (Marion's name in the novel) disappearance Sam questions his desire for her: "Sometimes he wondered if they hadn't made a mistake when they planned ahead. After all, what did they really know about each other?" (84). While Sam seems to enjoy the illicitness of his desire for Marion, his feelings are not truly transgressive, because he does not seek to reaffirm the taboo through desire. Marion's intense desire to marry Sam indicates how her transgressive acts venerate the taboo they appear to violate.

Marion's flight to Sam illustrates how taboos reinforce transgression in the logic of the film. Marion encounters a series of authority figures—Lowery, the policeman, California Charlie—who suspect her but let her continue on her flight. Even though Marion practically advertises her guilt through her reckless actions, they allow Marion to go. When she asks the policeman, "Have I broken any laws?" he replies that she has not. The figures of authority seem to fuel her flight instead of causing her to stop. Only in her imagination is Marion punished for her transgressions, most chillingly when she imagines Cassidy saying he will take the money out of "her fine, soft flesh," a premonition of the sacrificial victim she will become. When Marion does become a sacrifice, it is when she encounters the monstrous double of her own erotic desire.

Critics have noted the doubling between Marion and Norman that the film presents. Raymond Bellour argues that initially upon viewing the film it appears that "the psychiatrist's commentary on Norman Bates has little to do with the love scene between Marion and Sam in the Phoenix hotel."
Marion’s transgressive desire for erotic fusion with Sam in marriage is taken to psychotic lengths in Norman’s transgressive desire for erotic fusion with his mother.

In The Bad Seed, The Fly, and Psycho, then, in a much less obvious way than The Bad Seed or The Fly highlights the operations of taboo and transgression in the Cold War. Although mention of Cold War concerns are never explicitly made, critics have read the film as implicitly dealing with anxieties endemic to the postwar political and social scene. Within the framework of Bataille’s theories of taboo and transgression, Psycho suggests disturbing aspects of Cold War society. While Bataille argued that erotic transgression was one means of
Hélène is fully aware of the implications of pushing the red button that will result in the death of the monstrous André. Norman embodies the fear of one who pushes the button blindly, bringing about random destruction of innocent victims.

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NOTES

1. Paul makes a strong argument for considering The Bad Seed a horror film. He argues that the film probably was not perceived as a horror film at the time because it was pioneering a new direction in horror: "The Bad Seed" effectively brought horror home, domesticating it by locating what is most horrible within the family. If critics have not generally perceived it as a horror film, this is nonetheless its greatest importance for the horror genre in the 1970s and 1980s. Never before had middle-class homelife been the primary locus for horror; by the late 1970s it began to seem the only place (270).

2. The novel and play versions end with Christine's death and Rhoda's survival. A friend reassures Kenneth that "at least Rhoda was spared. At least you have Rhoda to be thankful for" (217).

3. Paul notes that the film punishes both the transgressors: Christine who must repent and Rhoda for whom "only total annihilation was good enough" (279).

4. Christopher Sharrett argues that the horror film's "heritage in the metaphysical" has caused it to turn to the supernatural to establish cause and effect (55). He maintains that by the early 1960s "a wrathful God" was replaced by an apocalypse brought about by "recognizable disintegration within the human community" (41).

The Bad Seed clearly exists in a transition mode. Whereas the novel would locate apocalypse within human disintegration (even if biologically inherited), the film version represents a last gasp of a wrathful God. The critics' negative reactions to the ending indicate how metaphysical explanations for evil were on the wane even in the mid-1950s.

5. Further, the novel links Rhoda's behavior explicitly with the behavior of an animal. When Christine embraces her we are told that she "submitted to the caress with that tolerant but withdrawn patience of the pet that can never be trained to fit into the convention-
in an age “that has witnessed on the one hand the discoveries of Freudian psychology and on the other the Nazi concentration camps” (150). Corber sees the film as reflecting the postwar rise of the expert as one to tell Americans “how to organize and manage their everyday life” (188).

WORKS CITED


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